

Adios . . .

The cockpit glass shattered. The noise was deafening.

Boris had the presence of mind to reach for the control panel to shut off the electrical system, hoping to prevent a fire, just as the HIND made a nosedive among the branches toward the jungle floor. One of his machine guns began to fire, out of control, blasting the ground rushing toward him with a spray of armor-piercing bullets.

"Dear God," he gasped, watching in horror what awaited him upon impact while the last remaining blade of the main rotor chewed through everything in its path.

Just before the nose of his ruined HIND slammed to the ground, something caught, jerking him forward against the restraint of his seat harness, suspending him and what was left of his chopper a few feet off the ground. His head lolled over until his chin touched his chest. When he blinked open his eyes, excruciating pain throbbled in his neck and head and down his back. He was hanging from the pilot's seat, trapped in the safety harness, staring down, unable to turn his head or lift it.

He saw the shape of a man wearing fatigues, holding some kind of rifle with the muzzle pointed up at him.

The soldier spoke to him in English. "Looks like your bird broke its wings, Nazi."

"Help me," Boris stammered.

"I'm gonna help you, asshole. I'm gonna help you all the way to your grave."

"Who are you? Why are you aiming that gun at me?"

"My name's Ben Raines and I'm aiming this rifle at you because I'm gonna send you to hell, where you belong."

Boris heard the hammering of gunfire, and felt his body being jerked back and forth in his flight harness. Then all went black around him and, mercifully, the pain disappeared and he felt nothing.

"Adios, asshole," Raines said.

2 THE ASHES SERIES by William W. Johnstone

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2: FIRE IN THE ASHES

3: ANARCHY IN THE ASHES

4: BLOOD IN THE ASHES

5: ALONE IN THE ASHES

6: WIND IN THE ASHES

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5 Prologue

As the country began to slowly pull itself out of the greatest economic and social collapse in world history, Ben Raines found himself to be the most hated man in all of America. That really didn't come as any surprise to Ben, for right after the collapse Ben had gathered together a small group called the Rebels—a mixture of political/militia/survivalist oriented men and women— and told them, "We're going to rebuild. Against all odds, we're going to carve out our own nation. And we're going to be hated for our success."

As it turned out, hate was not nearly a strong enough word.

Ben and his Rebels first went to the northwest and settled in what would forever be known as the Tri-States and the Tri-States form of government. The philosophy was based on personal responsibility and common sense. It soon became a hated form of government for those living outside the Tri-States, for liberals and other left-wingers didn't want to be responsible for anything they did, and they didn't appear to possess any common sense.

"Of course, that isn't entirely true," Ben once said in one of his rarely granted interviews with the press. "But that's the way it seems to those of us who believe

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that government should stay out of the lives of its citizens as much as possible."

In the Tri-States, if you got careless and stuck yourself in the face with the business end of a screwdriver, you didn't sue the manufacturer of the screwdriver for damages . . . you learned to be more careful in handling tools.

Common sense.

Ben Raines realized that not everyone could, or would, live under a system of law that leaned heavily on common sense and personal responsibility. From the outset he estimated, correctly as it turned out, that no more than two or three out of every ten Americans could live under a Tri-States form of government. People who came to live in the old Tri-States did not expect something for nothing . . . and that was wise on their part, for they damn sure weren't going to get something for nothing.

In the Tri-States, everybody who was able worked at something. No able-bodied person sat on his ass and expected free handouts from the taxpayers . . . that just wasn't going to happen. You might not like the job that would be found for you-and it would be found very quickly-but you worked it or you got out.

Criminals discovered almost immediately that in the Tri-States they had very few rights. All the rights belonged to the law-abiding citizens. If a criminal got hurt during the commission of a crime, he or she could not sue for damages. If he got killed, his family could not sue for damages. And in the Tri-States, a lot of criminals got killed during the first years. The Tri-States was not a friendly place for criminals . . . and it didn't take them long to discover that. The residents of the Tri-States didn't have a problem with drugs; the penalty for selling hard drugs was death; when caught, after a very

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brief trial, the criminals had a choice, hanging or firing squad. Consequently, very soon drug dealing in the Tri-States dropped off to zero.

Life was so good in the Tri-States that the central government, once it got back on its feet after only a few years, couldn't stand it and moved against the Tri-Staters. It was a terrible battle, but in the end the old Tri-States, located in the northwest, was destroyed.

But Ben Raines and his dream lived, and Ben gathered together the survivors of the government assault and declared war on the government... a dirty, nasty, hit and destroy and run type of guerrilla warfare.

Eventually, the entire United States collapsed inward and Ben and his Rebels, now hundreds and hundreds strong, were able to move into the

south and set up a new government. This time it was called The SUSA: The Southern United States of America.

It was a struggle for a few years, and one time The SUSA was overrun by rabble from outside its borders. But the Rebels beat the attackers back and rebuilt their nation-larger and stronger and more self-sufficient than ever before.

The Rebels were now the largest and most powerful and feared fighting force in the free world, so much so that the Secretary General of the newly reorganized United Nations met with Ben Raines and made a bargain with him: \bu deal with a few trouble spots around the world, especially with Bruno Bottger and his band of Nazis, and we'll recognize The SUSA as a free and sovereign nation.

The two men shook hands, sealing the deal, and Ben took his Rebels and sailed off to Africa. . . .

9 One

Ben and his Rebels were ready for the big push southward. The hundreds of replacement troops, all fresh from The SUSA and green as a gourd when they had deplaned weeks back, were now combat tested and hardened. In the weeks they had been in Africa they had seen sights that toughened them mentally; they had learned what every experienced combat soldier learns: you shove the bloody, awful sights into a secret part of your brain and close and lock the door . . . and keep on doing your job.

Ben's 501 Brigade was halted on the Cameroon/Gabon border, just north of Bata. The other brigades were stretched out across Africa, all the way over to Mogadishu, Somalia. They waited for Ben's orders to move out.

Ike McGowen's 502 Brigade was just to Ben's east, on the Congo's west border. Thermopolis's 19 Batt, which kept up with everything going on, and not just concerning the Rebels, was in the center of the ten brigades. Pat O'Shea's 510 Brigade was on the coast of the Indian Ocean, almost twenty-five hundred miles away from Ben. Doctor Lamar Chase, the Rebel Army's Chief of Medicine, was traveling with Ben's brigade. The brigades had traveled several hundred miles since

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re-forming, and so far had seen only limited action, most of it coming from gangs of thugs.

All that was about to change.

For the past week, Ben and the Rebels had made good time, considering the condition of the roads-in some cases, almost non-existence. Ben and his 501 Brigade had traveled south through the western portion of Cameroon and found very little resistance. They had seen thousands of human skeletons, their deaths brought on by war, sickness, starvation, and Bruno Bottger's deadly laboratory-concocted virus that he unleashed on the population.

But the animals had made a miraculous comeback. The Rebels saw dozens of prides of lions. They saw leopards and hyenas and wild dogs, and what appeared to be thousands of different species of birds. Scouts reported

all sorts of animals ahead of the main force.

"Gorillas," said Cooper, Ben's driver. "I want to see some gorillas."

"Go look in the mirror," Ben's diminutive bodyguard, Jersey, told him.

Beth, the statistician, looked up from the tattered travel guide she was reading and smiled at Ben, then returned to her reading.

Corrie, the radio tech, was busy yapping with somebody about something, her headset on, and didn't hear the exchange. She probably wouldn't have paid any attention to it, anyway, for Jersey and Cooper had been hurling barbs at one another for years.

Anna, Ben's adopted daughter, squatted in the shade of a large bush, sharpening one of her knives, which was already razor sharp. The young woman, taken in by Ben during the Rebels' European campaign, was in her late teens, and deadly. She had been orphaned while just a child-when the Great War swept the

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globe-and had fought for every scrap of food while growing up. Ben had seen something worthwhile in the dirty faced waif, and taken her in to raise during her formative teenage years.

That was Ben's personal team. They had been together for a long time, through good and bad times.

"Bruno's people have pulled back, Boss," Corrie announced, removing her headset. "All the way across Africa. They packed it up and headed south."

"They didn't do it because they're afraid of us," Ben said, rolling a cigarette. He looked at her. "Were they in a hurry when they hightailed it out of here?"

"Didn't seem to be. Scouts report they left nothing useable behind." Corrie paused for a moment. "Just a lot of dead people," she added.

"Is anyone reporting any action at all?" Ben asked. "Anywhere?"

"Nothing, Boss."

"This will slow us down to a crawl," Ben said. "I want every bridge, every mile of road, checked for mines. If the village or town is deserted, it's probably filled with explosives. Do we have anybody left in South Africa . . . or what used to be called South Africa?"

"Not any more," Beth told him. "The last batch of our people that we sent in about eighteen months ago just got out alive a few weeks ago."

Ben nodded in understanding. He lit his hand-rolled cigarette and frowned, silent for a few heartbeats. "Bruno's going to bug out," he finally said. "Bet on it. He's going to buy some time by sacrificing his troops and then bug out through the southernmost ports, taking his top people and his best troops with him. That's the only thing that makes any sense. He knows he's finished here in Africa . . . he can see the end in sight.

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He's anything but a stupid man. Arrogant as hell, but brilliant in his own right."

"Where in the hell's he going to bug out to, Boss?" Cooper asked.

"My guess would be South America," Ben replied. "The last word we got was that there wasn't a stable government in any country down there. Corrie, tell Mike Richards to send some people into South America. See what they can dig up."

"Will do."

"No point in pulling out until we've got a few miles of road cleared. Have the Scouts or any fly-bys found any useable railroad tracks?"

"Negative, Boss. Bruno's people destroyed miles of track and blew the railroad bridges."

"We can expect the same all the way down," Ben said. "And for the roads to get worse. We're in for some slow going." Ben opened his map case and pulled out a map of Gabon, studying it for a moment.

"We'll avoid Libreville," he said. "We don't need to use the port, and all we'll find is trouble there. Place is filled to overflowing with sick and dying people." Ben shook his head. "Doctor Chase and his people say there is nothing we can do for them. Nothing at all. Except let them die in peace," he added softly.

"Bruno's virus?" Anna said, standing up and sheathing her long-bladed knife.

"Not so much that," Ben replied. "But that is certainly a part of their trouble. Chase's people say just name a disease, they've got it."

"When are the Israelis going to join us?" Cooper asked.

"They're not," Ben said. "They're fighting on three fronts. We just got word that a dozen or more Arab resistance groups formed up and began attacking. The

Israelis have their hands full. I wished them good luck and told them we'd handle this. Corrie, radio everyone to stand down and relax. We'll make this push south slow and careful."

The Rebels pushed off two days later and advanced thirty miles. Then they waited for two more days before pushing off again, and again they advanced thirty miles. They met no resistance anywhere along the twenty-five hundred mile front, running east to west. Bruno Bott-ger's troops had definitely bugged out to the south . . . how far south was still up for grabs.

"But we've still got hundreds of gangs roaming around," Ben cautioned.

"Ranging in size from twenty to a thousand."

"You think a small bunch of punks would attack us?" Ben was asked by a young sergeant. The sergeant was fresh from The SUSA, and his combat experience was sparse. "It would be suicide for a small gang to attack a full brigade."

Ben's XO, John Michaels, opened his mouth to tell the young sergeant to get back to his squad and not to bother the CG with stupid questions.

Ben held up a hand. "I didn't say they were smart gangs, Sergeant," Ben told him. "Although we don't ever want to underestimate their intelligence . . . many of them are very cunning. Just like criminals in every country in the world. If they would use that intelligence for something constructive, they would be useful and productive, helping out their country and the people. But they never do that. They think they're smarter than everyone else. If they hit us, and I think they probably will very soon, they'll come at us with ambushes and sneak attacks, hit and run. So, heads up, son."

"Yes, sir," the young sergeant said, and got the hell out of that area.

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The hundreds and hundreds of men and women in the miles long column mounted up and moved slowly on to the south.

"Boring," Anna said, looking out the window of the big wagon as they proceeded on at about fifteen miles per hour. The roads were in terrible shape. In many areas of the sprawling continent, roads were no more than a faint memory.

"Scouts report the bridge is out about five miles ahead," Corrie said.

Ben lifted a map, studied it for a moment, and then cursed. "There are no highways at all to the west, and it would put us fifty miles out of the way to head east to the next crossing. And on these miserable excuses for roads it would take us two or three days to travel that distance." He sighed. "Get the engineers up here, Corrie."

"Right, Boss. They're on their way."

"It'll take some time, General," the officer in command of the detachment of combat engineers told Ben. "The rest of the day and part of tomorrow, at least. That's a hell of a section blown out."

Ben nodded. "Fix it."

"Yes, sir." The combat engineer started yelling orders to his people.

Ben glanced at his watch. 1300 hours. The column had made lousy time since pulling out that morning. At this rate it would take them several months to reach the south part of the continent. And that would give Bruno more than ample time to throw up a front that would be tough to punch through.

Ben sighed and shook his head as he looked around him. The terrain would be perfect for an ambush. "Corrie, no one moves more than a few yards

away from this

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cowpath they call a road until the area has been checked out."

"Right, Boss."

"Scouts out east and west."

"Done, Boss."

Ben smiled as he leaned up against the big wagon and began rolling a cigarette. Corrie always stayed about two steps ahead of him. The team had been together for so long that each member knew how the other would react, and in most cases orders were routine, given out of long habit.

"Any towns or villages close by?" Cooper asked.

"Why?" Jersey asked. "You planning on going in and checking out the night life?"

"I thought I might buy you a nice present," Cooper came right back at her.

"The best present you could get me would be to lose your voice for about a year or so."

"Oh, my little desert flower," Cooper said, feigning great personal pain. "You know you don't mean that. Just the thought hurts my heart. You'd miss me like the flowers would miss a gentle rain."

"Blahh! Yukk! Barf!" Jersey said. "That's disgusting, Cooper." She made an awful face and moved around to the other side of the vehicle, muttering, "Guy gets worse every month." But out of Cooper's sight the awful face vanished, and she smiled. She and Cooper were good and close friends . . . they just liked to stick the needle to each other.

The first section of the Bailey Bridge was hauled up and off loaded. The engineers were laying it out when the mortar rounds began falling. Two members of the combat engineers were killed and half a dozen wounded in the first barrage.

Ben and his team left the road and jumped for the

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cover of thick brush that lined both sides of the old highway. "If they hit that new wagon, I'm gonna be really pissed!" Cooper said, setting up his SAW-Squad Automatic Weapon.

"You better hope one of those rounds doesn't land on your ass," Jersey told him.

"That would irritate me, too," Cooper replied.

"But only very briefly," Jersey replied.

The first span over which the engineers had to build a new temporary bridge was about fifty yards wide . . . but it was right in the center. The second section that had been knocked out was on the other side, the connecting span.

"I figure about a hundred meters from our position," Ben said. "Give that to the tank commanders, Corrie."

"Right, Boss."

A minute later the main guns of the battle tanks began howling and roaring. The first few rounds were short, the range quickly corrected, and then the tanks began laying down a field of fire that virtually destroyed everything on the other side of the sluggish river.

"Cease fire," Ben ordered, looking up into the sky. "Here come the gunships."

The gunships began strafing the other side of the riverbank with machine gun fire and rockets. They worked back and forth for a couple of minutes. Ben bumped the flight commander on his two-way and gave orders for them to back off. "Scouts find a place to get across that river and check it out," he said.

"Chopper pilots reporting no signs of life over there," Corrie said. "But plenty of dead bodies."

"Good," Ben said. "Throw them in the river and let the crocs have them."

"Are there crocodiles in that river?" Cooper questioned.

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"Probably," Ben told him. Ben didn't know if there were any crocs in the river . . . but he'd bet there were. Either way, the river was certainly going to be ordered off limits for swimming.

About five minutes later, after the firing had stopped and the area was quiet once again, Doctor Lamar Chase, the Rebels' Chief of Medicine, came walking up. His driver had brought him as close to the head of the column as she could, then Chase had hoofed the last several hundred yards. Chase and Ben had been together since the very beginning; their friendship spanned many years. The doctor stood for a moment, watching his doctors work on the wounded, then turned to Ben.

"You think those troops that ambushed us were Bruno's men, Ben?"

Ben shook his head. "No. It would really surprise me if they were. Probably just one of the many hundreds of gangs that prowl and slither around this continent. Scouts are checking it out now."

"I certainly hope you cautioned them not to fall out of the damn boats," Chase warned. "There are probably crocs in that river."

Ben cut his eyes, grunted a non-committal reply, and continued to watch the Scout teams as they cranked the outboards and headed for the opposite shore.

"One of the wounded just died," Corrie said. "The others are going to make it."

"Who died?" Ben asked.

"Major Larsen."

"Shit," Ben muttered. He sighed. "Bury them off the road in the brush. Deep and well. I don't want animals digging them up. Get a chaplain up here."

"OK, Boss."

Major Larsen had been with Ben for years, starting out with the Rebels when he was just an enlisted man

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in his teens and working his way up through the ranks. He was well-liked by everyone, and would be sorely missed.

Chase looked at Ben's face for a moment and said, "Watch your blood pressure, Ben. These things happen."

"My blood pressure is fine, Lamar."

"Then what's wrong?"

"This damn country."

Chase grunted in response, frowning as Ben began rolling a cigarette.

"Of course, wait until we hit South America," Ben said. "Then we'll really get bogged down in certain areas."

"Is that where we go next?"

"Probably. You can bet that's where Bruno's heading ... if he makes it out of Africa alive, and he probably will. The bastard has more luck than a leprechaun. He can't go back to Europe, that's for sure. He's the most wanted man on the continent."

Chase waited for Ben to continue, sensing there was more. He was right.

"The Secretary General warned me that we might go to South America when we finished here." Ben shrugged. "It was all part of the deal we made."

"A deal that isn't worth the paper it's written on or the handshake that sealed it," Doctor Chase said. "You don't believe for a minute the federal government outside The SUSAs will keep their end of the bargain. Do you?"

Ben smiled. "Of course not, Lamar. I wouldn't trust a liberal out of my sight. But it bought us some time. Much needed time."

"They don't believe you'll use nuclear and germ weapons against them, Ben."

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"Then they don't know or understand me at all, La-mar. I will personally push the buttons that let the birds fly if they invade us. Those crybaby assholes had damn well better understand that. And don't think for a second Cecil won't do it ... because he damn sure will."

Chase studied Ben's face for a few seconds. "Yes. Cecil will push the buttons. I'm sure of that. But do you think The SUSAs will be invaded? Do you believe the federal government will really take that chance?"

Ben lit his hand-rolled cigarette and was silent for a few heartbeats, letting a very slight breeze slip the smoke away.

When he spoke, his words were low. "Yes, I do, Lamar. But I'm still undecided as to whether it's going to be an all-out assault or a guerrilla, hit and run attempt."

"What do Mike's people have to say about it?"

Mike Richards was the Rebels' Chief of Intelligence.

"That some type of action against us is being planned, but they're unable, so far, to break into the inner circle and pin anything down."

"Doesn't leave us much to go on, does it?"

Ben smiled. "Not a whole lot, Lamar. Except we know it's coming. But not when or how."

The two men stood in silence as the wounded combat engineers were transported back to a clearing to be worked on in a MASH facility.

One of the medics walked back to Ben and Lamar. "One is going to lose a leg, I think. The others will be back on limited duty before long."

Lamar thanked the medic and the young woman nodded and walked away. No one saluted in a combat zone.

"I am beginning to truly hate this place," Ben said. "I know I shouldn't, but I do. Not the people, at least not most of them, but the place."

"If it'll make you feel any better, Ben, the country

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doesn't thrill me all that much, either, even though much of it is quite beautiful."

"Scouts found several alive over there," Corrie said. "They're bringing three of them across now."

"Do they speak English?" Ben asked.

"Oh, yes, sir," Corrie replied. "They sure do. They're Americans."

21 Two

The three men had suffered only very minor wounds, and those had been attended to. They were all in good physical shape, strong, and certainly appeared very healthy. Ben studied the trio for several moments before speaking. He did not like what he was thinking.

"How'd you boys get to Africa?" Ben finally asked.

"Greyhound," the bigger of the three popped back.

"Oh," Ben said with a smile. "A sense of humor. That's good. You're damn sure going to need one. Now, I'll ask again-how did you boys get over here?"

"Plane," the older of the three volunteered.

"When?" Ben asked.

"Six, seven months ago," the same man replied. "I'm not sure. Time sort of runs together over here."

Ben silently and certainly agreed with the man about that. "Go on."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Who paid you to come over here? How many of you came over? And why?"

"Keep your damn mouth shut, Leon," the first man to speak said.

"Screw you, Jimmy," the younger man said. He looked back at Ben. "Two battalions."

"Mercenaries," Ben said.

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"Yes, sir."

"All Americans?"

"Most of them, yes sir. But other nationalities mixed in there, too. A few Canadians, half a dozen or so Germans and Russians. Some English."

Ben again studied the three for a moment. They were dressed in cammie BDUs. Because of the way they were dressed he couldn't threaten them with punishment as spies, and they probably were well aware of that. "Who's paying you?"

This time, the bigger man spoke. "That we don't know, General. You can believe it or not, but it's the truth."

Ben believed him. But he also had a damn good idea who was paying the men. "More mercenaries coming over?"

"Yes, sir," the third man said. "I can tell you for a fact that recruiting has been going on for a long time."

Ben nodded. "And a long time is ... how long?"

"Over a year, General."

There were a lot more questions Ben wanted to ask, but he would save them and turn the man over to Intelligence for more interrogation. Ben hoped they would be honest, for if his Intel team sensed the men were lying it could get very nasty when they hauled out the drugs. Not painful, not physical torture, but the men would tell the truth . . . bet on that.

"What happens to us now, General?" the youngest of the trio asked.

"You'll be turned over to our Intelligence section for further questioning. I urge you to cooperate with them."

"In other words," the big one said, "here come the needle and the drugs."

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"In other words," Ben replied, his smile rather grim, "you're right."

"We're over here fighting for money, General. Not for any political philosophy or cause. They won't need to use drugs on us. We'll tell them what they want to know ... as much as we can. Which isn't much."

Ben believed that. He was reasonably sure the men had been recruited by a third party. That was the way it was usually done. The money men (in this case, he was sure it was the fast-growing and decidedly socialistic government outside The SUSA) staying anonymous in the shadows.

Ben waved for the guards to take the prisoners away, and then shifted the camp chair around and stretched his long legs out in front of him, away from the field desk in his tent.

"Going socialistic again," Ben muttered. "But this time, worse than before."

He poured a fresh hot mug of coffee from the thermos and shook his head and sighed, remembering all too vividly the bad days in America, before the collapse, before the terrible germ war that wiped out every government around the globe, even before the nationwide taxpayer revolt that cost hundreds of Americans their lives as hardworking citizens hard pressed by the government had protested the amount of money extorted from them every year by the government . . . and in many cases, at least in the minds of many, the money carelessly pissed away by the congress.

Ben sat in his tent and sipped his coffee, recalling the smooth and highly effective actions of the insidious gun-grab folks who worked until they finally got their way and all handguns (except those in the hands of selected citizens-the suck-ass types) were seized by fed-

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eral agents and carefully handpicked and trained members of the military.

Ben recalled even before then, when the nation was morally sliding into

the gutter.

"Morally we were bankrupt," Ben muttered, after taking another sip of coffee. "Many Americans were happy and content to be playing among the turds and the puke in the sewers."

And Ben knew the nation was definitely morally bankrupt in the years before The Great War and the collapse. There was filth and perversion every day on the television, and in the movies. The same garbage-and in many cases much worse-could be found in cyberspace, on the information highway called the Internet.

Liberals and many members of the press screamed about freedom of speech and said that to interfere would be a violation of The Bill of Rights.

But Ben had grave doubts about that.

A few years before the entire world fell apart there had been a rash of schoolyard killings: kids killing kids for no apparent reason. The hysterical gun-grabbers had howled that it was the availability of guns that caused the kids to kill. But Ben and millions of others who applied common sense to everyday living knew that was pure horseshit: nothing but mealy-mouthed, out-of-touch-with-reality liberals making excuses for deviant and otherwise totally unacceptable behavior.

Ben stirred restlessly in his camp chair as old memories came flooding back with startling clarity-vivid images of him, years back, sitting in the den of his home trying to watch television, but instead seething with anger at the TV news commentators and movie and TV personalities (all of them so left-leaning and liberal that it pained them to have to give a right hand turn signal), excusing the behavior of dope dealers, violent crimi-

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nals, gang members, and degenerates . . . and especially talking about the Bible being passe.

Ben had listened to those types espouse their views that the Bible didn't really have to be followed . . . not to the letter. If a certain passage of scripture didn't please the reader, well, he could just ignore it and go on to another passage that better suited the reader's life-style.

Ben had always wondered, often as he recalled, what The Almighty thought about that.

Ben was not an overly religious man, but he certainly believed in God, and he did read the Bible: he carried a Bible with him in the wagon and read it often, taking a great deal of comfort in the words.

He recalled a radio interview he'd done with a talk show host one time, just a few months before The Great War and the collapse. The interviewer was one of those who believed that only the police and the military should own guns, and no civilian should be allowed to carry a concealed weapon . . . except for certain select individuals-he would never say who those selected people might be. But Ben knew: people who gave lots of money to the whiny, I-want-to-run-your-life and

Give-me-something-for-nothing party. The interviewer placed the blame for many of society's ills solely on guns . . . but never, ever on the people holding the guns.

Ben had finally lost his temper with the left-winger, and the interview turned decidedly nasty. The ratings for that show were the highest ever made.

Ben smiled as he recalled that long ago TV show. That had been a fun interview! He had succeeded in making the left-wing, liberal prick angry, and the man had lost his cool. He had been good at doing that.

Ben's smile faded. Now the city where the station had

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been located no longer existed, except in the ashes of memory. Those wonderful people the interviewer had so staunchly defended had turned the streets into a battleground, as punk gangs fought for control . . . until the Rebels came along and killed them.

Jersey's voice cut into Ben's memories. "Deep in thought, Boss?"

Ben looked up and smiled. "Yes, I was, Jersey. For a fact."

"Pretty good memories?"

"Some of them, yes. Others not so great." Ben sighed and was silent for a couple of heartbeats. "Dwelling in the past is a sure sign I'm getting old, I guess."

"That's bullshit, Boss," she said, sitting down on a trunk as the rest of Ben's team walked into the big squad tent. "We all have memories we unlock and look at from time to time. Nothing wrong with doing that."

"What's bullshit?" Cooper asked.

"The Boss says he's getting old," Jersey told him.

"Naw," Cooper said, as Anna took Ben's cup and refilled it from the coffee thermos. "When you get too old for the field, Boss, we'll tell you."

Ben looked at each member of his team. With the exception of Anna, the others should be married and settled, possibly raising kids of their own, not stomping all over the world laying their lives on the line in places most people never heard of ... or really cared about.

"Actually, I was thinking about how the world got into this mess in the first place," Ben said, thanking Anna for the coffee refill.

"From what I've been able to read and from what I remember," Beth said, "and from what you've told us, America had turned into something pretty close to a cesspool. I can't believe some of the things I read in

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the old newspapers. Morals, ethics, honor, faith in God, had all taken a nosedive."

Ben nodded his head in agreement. "That's right. Worse than a nosedive. America was taking a bath in the sewer, and enjoying the filth it wallowed in."

Anna looked up and made a face at just the thought. "That is sickening, General Ben."

"Anybody ever thought that maybe God had a hand in all the destruction?" Cooper asked.

Jersey cut her dark eyes to him. "Yeah, Coop. I have. Many times. I think we all have."

"I sure have," Corrie said. "I think maybe He did it because He was so disgusted. He sure had reason to be all bent out of shape."

"Boss?" Cooper asked, looking at Ben. "You ever think that?"

"Oh, yes, Coop. He certainly may have had a hand in destroying what He created, and forcing us to start all over. He told us it would never again be done by flood."

"But the government outside The SUSAs is going right back to the old ways," Beth said. "Does that mean it might happen again?"

Ben waited a moment before replying. When he spoke, his voice was low. "It might, Beth. It just might."

29 Three

Before the team from Intelligence could start their work on the three American mercenaries, the men decided to tell all they knew ... or so they insisted. Intel believed they were holding a lot back, but what they did say was enough for Ben to fit another piece of the puzzle in place. There were still gaps in the overall mystery, but Ben felt he should talk to Cecil Jefferys back in The SUSAs and warn him that the government outside their borders was planning some sort of move against The SUSAs.

"We're just beginning to get whispers about that, Ben," Ben's longtime friend and President of The SUSAs said, "I was going to give you a bump in a few hours. Of course, we both knew it was coming eventually."

"Yes, that we did, Cece. I think it might be best if you had a little chat with somebody in power."

"I'd do just that, Ben. But nobody really knows who makes up the shadow government."

"Everything is really still all that screwed up in the new capitol?"

"That's being kind. To be blunt, it's a royal fuckup. The people we felt we could trust are out of the loop ... or just out, period. And I mean all the way out. There

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have been half a dozen little power plays since you left. Sometimes it's weeks before we learn of the full magnitude. And there's something we learned just hours ago, and it's unbelievable. The announcement just came down the line. The upcoming national elections have been postponed."

"Postponed? For what reason?"

"The bottom line seems to be security concerns."

"Oh . . . that's bullshit!"

"Of course it is. But that's die word-die party line, you might call it-the central government is putting out. And you know who they're blaming. . . ."

"The SUSA."

"Right. Those in power are claiming The SUSA is planning to move against die New Democracy . . . as it's being called by the press. Bless their little pointy heads."

"The New Democracy?"

"That's it. Really catchy phrase, isn't it?"

"Sounds like something a bunch of silly ass liberals would dream up."

"You got it."

"Next we'll have a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage."

"I'm sure."

"Where are we heading, Cece?"

"Well . . . the military outside our borders is just not strong enough yet to tangle with us . . . but they're slowly building to that strength. Now that die main force of the Rebels is out of the picture-so to speak-thousands of miles away, I think the people-certain types of people, that is, and you know the breed as well as I do-living outside our borders will be used for cannon fodder."

"Those 'give me something for nothing, I want the

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government to take care of me cradle to grave, politically correct, I'll sue you for the slightest slur' types will attempt a swarm across our borders, and mercenaries will be right behind them, with the new military backing up the second wave."

"You nailed it right on the head." Cecil laughed. "Of course, I had no doubt that you would. I'll keep you up to date. You take care now, Ben, and I'll see you."

"Do that, partner."

Cecil Jefferys was the first black man elected to such a high office in America . . . and it had taken the separation of the nation and the men and women of the South to accomplish it.

Cecil and Ben had been friends for many years. Cecil had left the grueling life in the field to enter politics after a heart attack nearly killed him during a campaign.

Ben walked outside and stood for a moment. His mind was already busy adding up the troops he could take back to The SUSA when it was time to go . . . if the job here wasn't finished. Ben had guesstimated that this campaign might take anywhere from a year to as much as five. Ben now felt he would be leaving Africa with his 501 Brigade and several other brigades as yet unchosen in a matter of weeks, not years.

Might even be days.

He walked back into his tent and opened a map case, spread the map out on a table, and began studying it. He found a port in the country of Congo, just south of where the Rebels were now stalled. The small city had an airport that would be just large enough for the planes coming over from The SUSA to use. He put the map away and stepped outside again, to stand in silence for a moment.

Ben knew the day was coming when he would have

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to leave the field. He also knew that he would know when that time came. There was certainly no way to hold back the clock. He would voluntarily, without being asked, retire as a field commander. Nobody would have to tell him he was through, too old.

"Deep thoughts, General Ben?" Anna asked, suddenly appearing at his side. The young woman could move like a ghost, and kill just as silently and with just about as much emotion.

"Oh, just thinking about when it's time for me to retire, Baby."

"You can bet that won't be anytime soon, Daddy Ben," Anna said.

Ben smiled at that. She had just recently begun calling him Daddy Ben, but only when they were alone. Any other time it was General Ben. "Soon enough, Baby. I'm no spring chicken. . . ." He chuckled. "I'm an old rooster."

"Sure, you are," Anna replied, sarcasm dripping from the words. "Can't hardly get around anymore. I'd better start looking for a cane for you to use."

Ben's team, never too far away, was listening in silence to the exchange between the two, and they began to chuckle.

"Yeah, he's such an old goat, Anna," Jersey called. "I think we ought to get him a wheelchair."

"You're probably right, Jersey."

"Maybe one with a motor on it," Beth suggested.

Ben braced himself and tried to hide his grin. But he just couldn't pull it off. He started smiling. He knew he was in for it now.

"Maybe we should contact the engineers," Corrie suggested. "See if they could come up with a wheelchair with a machine gun mount on it."

"Hey, that would be neat," Cooper said.

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Lamar Chase strolled up with his security team, and Ben sighed. Now he really was in for a ribbing. "What's the joke, boys and girls?"

"The old rooster," Anna said, jerking her thumb toward Ben. "Says he's getting old."

"I've been telling him that for years," Chase replied, peering at Ben. "So you finally admitted you're too damn old for the field, hey?"

"I admitted no such thing," Ben quickly said. "But none of us is getting any younger."

"My, what a profound statement," the Chief of Medicine came right back. "I shall have that matted and framed, and carry it with me at all times."

"You, of all people, should not talk about aging, you old goat," Ben told the man. "You're so ancient you remember The Great Depression. My father was just a gleam in his daddy's eyes back then."

The shadows were beginning to gather. Soon it would be dark, and when night falls in Central Africa it does just that ... in a hurry.

Down by the river huge portable floodlights had already been set up so the combat engineers could work through the night laying down the Bailey Bridge.

Ben did not expect another attack by Bruno's people or by any of the many roaming gangs that were terrorizing the land, but he was taking no chances. He had ordered the guard doubled and there were choppers in the sky, the gunships slowly moving in a huge circle.

"What you doing over here, Lamar?" Ben questioned. "Aside from irritating me, that is?"

"You need irritating, Raines. What is the word from back home?"

"How would I know?" Ben asked innocently, with a very sneaky smile.

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"Because I know you've been talking with that other old rooster, Cecil Jefferys, that's how. Now give."

"How do you know that?"

"A little bird landed on my shoulder and told me, Raines. Now what's going on?"

Ben held nothing back from his team, never had, never would. As a matter of fact, Corrie usually knew what was going on before Ben did.

"Things have taken a turn for the worse back in the States, Lamar. As we knew they would."

"That bad, Ben?"

"I think it might be even worse than Cece is telling me."

Lamar nodded, looking up as a very sweaty and very dirty combat engineer came walking up.

Ben turned to face the engineer.

"We've just about got everything wrapped up. We'll be ready to take vehicles across in a few hours, General."

"Good deal. You're in command of this detachment now, Captain. I'll put the paperwork through promoting you to major." Just as soon as one of my team tells me your name, that is, Ben thought. There was a time when he knew the name of every officer in his command. But those days were long ago and far away. Once there were a few hundred men and women in the Rebel army. Now there were thousands.

"Thank you, sir," the engineer said.

"You earned it."

The man walked away and Ben turned to Beth. He opened his mouth to speak, and she said, "Adam Mat-son, Boss."

Ben smiled. "Thank you, Beth. See that the paperwork on his field promotion gets through pronto, will you?"

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"Will do, Boss."

"What next, Ben?" Lamar asked.

"We secure a port and an airport. Probably in a few weeks. Then we'll start the drive that will end Bottger's reign of terror once and for all."

"And a new reign of terror, if that's the right word, will be about to erupt in America?"

"I'm not sure if terror is the right word, Lamar. Millions of people want to live under what the leaders outside The SUSA are calling the New Democracy. But the rub comes when other millions say they don't want any part of it, and by God they won't live under it."

"Are you about to give me a lecture, Raines?" Lamar asked, a smile

playing on his lips. "If you are, kindly save your breath and my ears."

Ben laughed at the expression on his old friend's face. "I wouldn't dream of doing that, Lamar. What would be the point? You haven't changed your mind about anything in fifty years."

Lamar did his best to work a hurt expression on his face. He couldn't pull it off. "I don't have to stand here and be insulted by you, Raines. I'm leaving. Goodnight."

"Be careful, you old goat," Ben told him.

"Blow it out your ass, Raines," the doctor called over his shoulder.

"That isn't very professional, Lamar. Not coming from a man of your stature and advanced age," Ben called.

The Chief of Medicine flipped him the bird and kept on walking.

Ben's team laughed at the exchange between the two men. They'd seen and heard it all before, dozens of times.

Ben's eyes caught a shadow of movement at a corner

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of a parked vehicle. He blinked a couple of times. Stared at where he was sure he'd seen movement. Nothing. But he was certain he'd seen something out of the ordinary.

A monkey that slipped into camp? That would be about the only thing that could slip through the Rebels on guard. Unless . . . pretty farfetched, he thought, slightly shaking his head, but certainly possible if someone had done some careful planning-and that was something to be considered.

"Gang," Ben said in a low tone. "I think we're about to be hit, and hit hard. Corrie, pass the word to the troops." He deliberately turned his back to the shadows and faced his team. "Do it quietly. No one gets in a hurry."

"OK, Boss," she replied in an even voice. "Will do."

Cooper got up and stretched nonchalantly, scratched himself, then wandered off a few yards to the bed of a truck. Ben knew that was where he kept his SAW and extra 200 round containers of 5.56 ammo.

Beth placed a hand on her CAR and continued sitting on the tailgate of a truck. Jersey was staring into the darkness that had dropped over them as suddenly as death. . . . probably bringing a lot of that with it. Jersey stiffened just a bit, and Ben felt certain she had seen something moving in the darkness.

Anna had not moved from her crouch beside a Hum-Vee. But her CAR was held in a position where she could bring it to ready in an instant.

"Tunnels," Anna whispered just loud enough for Ben and the team members close to hear her. "The bastards used tunnels and holes in the ground. This was carefully planned out by someone with some sense."

"The first ambush failed, so they waited until dark,"

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Ben said. "They must have been nearly roasting in those holes and tunnels."

"Too bad they didn't," Corrie remarked. "That would have saved us a lot of trouble."

"I heard that." Cooper spoke from a few yards away. He was standing close to his SAW, ready to grab it and hit the ground when the action started.

Ben shifted positions, walking over to the bed of the truck to stand close to Anna. He had left his CAR in the tent and carried only his holstered 9mm.

"There can't be more than a handful of them," he whispered. "Not unless they've been digging tunnels and holes for days . . . which is certainly possible," he added.

"They must've hidden when our choppers came close, then crawled out of the brush and started digging the instant they left," Beth whispered.

"That has to be what happened," Ben said. "This is going to involve a lot of grenades and very close work on their part. Pass that word, Corrie."

"Right, Boss."

"We're going to take some casualties," Ben said. "It's going to get real nasty in a hurry."

The moments dragged by. Five minutes passed with nothing happening. Ben began to wonder if he had been wrong; had he really seen movement? Was an attack imminent? Or was his imagination running wild?

"Intelligence on the horn, Boss." Corrie's whispering broke the silence. "One of those meres finally broke. The jungle on both sides of the road is filled with hos-tiles. Several companies at least."

"Shit," Ben muttered.

"The camp's as ready as it can be," Corrie added, after a few second pause.

Ben thought about walking over to his tent to retrieve

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his CAR, then rejected that idea. This fight was going to be eyeball to eyeball, and a pistol would be easier to handle. In short, it was going to be a real bloodbath.

"All patrols in?" Ben asked.

"Everybody's in camp," Corrie answered.

"OK. Everyone holds his position. No moving around. If it moves, shoot it."

"Orders given, Boss," Corrie said, ten seconds later.

A few heartbeats later, the huge encampment erupted in gunfire and the screaming of the wounded.

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Enemy troops began pouring out of the ground on both sides of the camp like ants out of a rotting tree. The darkness was filled with running shapes. Ben did not have to give the order to fire. The Rebels had a horde of screaming enemy troops right on top of them, and literally in their faces. Hundreds of Rebels began firing at very close range, most of them using pistols, one in each hand. Machine guns and grenades were useless to both sides this close.

Ben had dropped down to a kneeling position and was picking his targets; not a difficult task, for the enemy was bunched up all around him.

"They're after The Boss!" Cooper yelled. "Has to be. The attack is too concentrated."

"Get those fuckin' flares up," Ben shouted.

Cooper was right: the main thrust of the attack was at the center of the encampment, where Ben had his CP. Only lighter probes were being conducted north and south of his location.

The night skies suddenly sparked into harsh light as flares were sent up and popped into illumination. Ben lifted his 9mm and shot an enemy soldier in the face. The man was so close Ben could smell the body stink of him.

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He shifted his boots to face another soldier and put three rounds of hollow-points into the man's belly and chest. The soldier screamed and fell against Ben, dead, almost knocking Ben off his boots.

Anna jumped onto the back of an enemy soldier and grabbed the man's hair, jerking his head back. She cut the man's throat with one hard swipe of her knife and rode him down to the ground. Rising to her feet, the young woman drove her knife into the belly of another of Bottger's soldiers and twisted it savagely. The man howled in pain, his scream silenced when Anna kned him in the balls and ripped her knife from him. The man fell forward on his face, his legs jerking as agony tore through his body just before death claimed him.

Cooper had left his SAW and was taking a deadly toll of the enemy, a 9mm in each hand.

If that one enemy soldier had not gotten careless, Ben thought as he banged away with his pistol, the sneak attack might have turned into a disaster for the Rebels.

Then Ben had no more time for any thoughts other than staying alive. The

enemy soldiers came in another rush, and everything was confusion as the Rebels battled hand-to-hand with knives, clubs, entrenching tools, pistols, and their bare hands.

For a few moments, it was a wild, savage, deadly scene in the African night. The enemy troops had, for the most part, ceased their yelling, and the battle was silent except for the grunting of men and women locked in combat and the moaning of the wounded.

The intensity of the battle began to wane as the enemy troops began to realize their sneak attack had failed: many faded back into the jungle's hot, humid density and slipped away. Those who stayed and fought, died.

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For those caught up in the deadly brawl, the attack seemed to last for hours ... in reality, it lasted only a few minutes.

"Keep those flares up and going east and west of us," Ben ordered. "I don't think they'll try again, but they might."

"They sure might, General," a medic called, kneeling beside a wounded soldier. "They're popped up on something. Some sort of speed, I think. This man is incoherent, and his vital signs are racing . . . his heartbeat sounds like an M-16 on full auto."

"We've taken casualties," Corrie reported. "Mostly wounded. So far, the death count is low."

"Any other brigade get hit?" Ben asked.

"Negative, Boss. Not so far. I'm still checking on that. But I think we're the only ones."

"They were after you, Ben," Ben's XO, John Michaels, said, walking up. "This was very carefully planned. No advance teams were hit, and they were all over this area. It was well planned, all right."

"We captured lots of their wounded, Boss," Cooper called. "Fifty and counting. What do you want done with the really seriously wounded among them . . . those that the docs are sure aren't going to make it?"

"Give them a shot to ease their suffering and help them along their way in peace. We'll scoop out a hole for them in the morning. Turn the rest over to Intelligence."

Ben turned to his XO. "We'll probably be doing some shifting around very soon, John. I haven't set a date for it yet, but I'm pretty sure I'll be heading back to the States with my brigade."

The XO arched an eyebrow in surprise, but Ben could not see it in the darkness. "Oh?"

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"Conditions are getting a little rocky outside The SUSA."

"I knew they weren't good," his XO replied. "Do we fight again over there?"

Ben sighed. "We might, John. We just might have to do that. I hope not, but it's looking as though we'll have to fight for our nation."

"Again."

"\es. Again. Those bastards outside The SUSA can't say I didn't warn them."

The brigades mounted up and moved out the next morning, after engineers scooped out a hole for the dead soldiers and dumped them in. A much more dignified service was held for the Rebels' own dead. Intelligence had told Ben, just before the brigade moved out, "White officers commanded the troops that hit us last night. Americans, for the most part. A few Europeans. They're all being readied to ship back to The SUSA . . . including the three we took prisoner yesterday."

"Good, I want to be able to hold them up and point them out to the powers-that-be outside The SUSA. I want to see the expressions on their faces when I do that. . . especially after the prisoners have spilled their guts about who hired them. And they will tell us everything they know," Ben added, a deadly grimness behind the words. "Bet on that."

The miles-long column pulled out, heading south, and hit no more trouble as they crossed the bridge and stretched out. Advance patrols and eyes in the sky reported no signs of the enemy. Fly-bys indicated that the port where Ben was heading appeared useable, and the small city itself looked to be almost deserted.

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"I still haven't seen any tigers," Cooper bitched as they rolled along . . . crawled along might have been a better way of putting it, for if the column averaged twenty miles an hour they were doing well.

"For the umpteenth boring time, you halfwit ninny," Jersey told him from the second seat in the big wagon. "You're not going to see any. Lots of lions, no tigers."

"Tarzan fought tigers over here in his movies," Cooper came right back.

"Give it up, Jersey," Corrie told her. "It's hopeless. Hell, Cooper's hopeless."

"I think he needs professional help," Jersey said. "Of course, I've thought that for years."

Beth looked up from her reading of old travel brochures and smiled. "I know we've got a long way to go before we get there, but Point-Noire used to have a population of over half a million, and fly-bys say it's almost deserted. What happened to the people?"

"Bottger probably killed them all," Cooper said.

"Half a million of them?" Jersey questioned. "I don't think so, Cooper." Then she frowned. "Well. . . maybe you're right, as much as I hate to admit it."

"He might have used the gas on them," Ben said. "Or a form of

experimental gas while his scientists were working all the bugs out of it-so to speak. We'll know when we get there, I suppose."

"I don't understand why he's killing off all the people," Jersey said.

"Cuts down on the resistance problem, Jersey," Ben told her.

"And damn sure helps to keep the rest of the people in line."

"I can see where that certainly would," Jersey replied.

"Says here that there are over forty ethnic groups, each with their own language," Beth said, reading from

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the travel brochure. She winked at Anna and added, "And Cooper, here's something for you-watch out for the Gaboon viper."

"The what?" Cooper asked.

"It's a snake, Coop. The largest and heaviest viper in all of Africa. Grows to a length of about eight feet, and can weigh up to twenty-five pounds. It's very deadly. Likes to crawl into sleeping bags at night and snuggle up to the sleeper."

"The son of a bitch wouldn't snuggle up to me for very long," Cooper said. "I'd be out of that sleeping bag before it could open its mouth." He shuddered and made a terrible face. Cooper hated snakes of all types, sizes, and descriptions. "Jesus, I don't even like to think about that."

"Relax, Cooper," Beth told him. "This snake is found in central Africa, in the tropical rain forests."

"Of course, Coop," Ben said, "there are all types of poisonous snakes here in Africa. For instance, the one you'd really better look out for is the spitting cobra."

Cooper shook his head and cut his eyes to Ben for a second. "I read all about those nasty things. They spit venom that can blind you."

"Always keep your sun shades on, Cooper," Jersey told him.

"Protect your eyes."

"If I do that, how the hell am I supposed to see at night?"

"Carefully, Coop," Jersey told him with a straight face. "Very carefully."

After a moment, Cooper slowly held up his right hand and gave Jersey the bird.

Beth covered her face with the travel brochure to stifle her giggling as Jersey and the others burst out laughing. The laughter lasted only a few seconds. Corrie

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suddenly held up a hand as her headset began crackling with transmissions.

"Scouts report the town just up ahead is populated. Lots of sick and dying. No apparent gunshot wounds. The interpreter is trying to make some sense of it all now."

"How many people?" Ben questioned.

"Several thousand. They're not unruly. Just sitting and waiting to die. The Scouts' words, Boss."

"Are the Scouts in protective gear?"

"Gas masks only."

"Halt the column, Ben," Doctor Chase's voice popped over a speaker. "If the Scouts haven't dropped dead or started showing some signs of sickness in thirty minutes, we'll proceed into the town . . . the advance party of medical people wearing full protective gear."

"You're the boss on this, Lamar," Ben replied. "It's your call from here on in." Ben then gave orders to halt the column.

"Some of Bottger's gas?" Cooper questioned.

"Probably," Ben said. "But it might be starvation or some natural cause. It's all up to Chase's people now. Corrie, tell the troops to unass their vehicles and stretch. Double the guards."

"Now we wait," Anna said.

Ben nodded his head, "Now we wait."

47 Five

Chase's bio/med team entered the town and got their equipment ready. Several of them took the Scouts into their mobile lab to check them out while the others began inspecting the town and the residents, checking the air and the water and the soil.

It did not take the bio/med team long to determine that the air was fine to breathe but the water had more germs in it than a city garbage dump. They were nature's bugs, not man-made. The people were not contagious, and posed no threat to the Rebels.

The bio/med team gave the column the OK to enter the town.

"Bottger's gas cause this?" Ben asked, stepping out of his vehicle and looking around.

"We're running analysis now, General. But if I had to make a guess I'd say yes."

"What has the interpreter been able to find out?"

"Just that one day everybody felt fine, and the next people were getting sick and dying all around them. Whatever it was, it touched everyone with violent nausea, uncontrollable diarrhea, and high fever . . .

breathing became very difficult and then death came to most. Those who survived are very weak, but we think they're going to make it."

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"Bottger's crap," Ben said.

"Probably."

"What can you do for the people?"

"Well, actually very little, sir. Give those who are dying a shot to ease them on their way out. That's about it."

"Do it," Doctor Chase said, walking up and catching the last part of the report.

"Yes, sir."

Chase turned to face Ben, then grimaced and said, "Why should I tell you, Raines? You'd just turn around and tell Corrie. I might as well start giving all orders to her from the outset. Besides, she's a lot easier on the eyes than you are." He turned to face Corrie. "You know the drill, dear-no drinking of the water, no petting of animals, no fraternization with the locals. See that those orders are passed up and down the line promptly, please."

"Certainly, sir."

Chase smiled. "It's so nice to see that someone in this team knows something about military courtesy." He turned and strolled off before Ben could retort, chuckling as he walked.

"Somebody must have put thumbtacks in the old goat's oatmeal this morning," Ben said. "Feisty old bastard."

Lamar Chase was definitely too old for the field . . . Ben knew it, and Lamar knew it. But he was in excellent health and showed no signs of slowing down. As long as he could keep up, he would stay in the field. Like Ben, when it came time for him to leave the grinding world of combat campaigns, he would know, and would do so voluntarily. He would not have to be told. Both Ben and Chase knew that day was coming for them, but neither of them liked to dwell much on it.

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"Let's see what we've got in this town," Ben said. "As if we didn't know," he added.

Death, suffering and hopelessness, Beth wrote in her journal as the team walked along. And: Nearly all of Africa is the same. No matter where we go we see the same thing. Bruno Bottger is not responsible for everything that has happened to these poor people, but he is certainly to blame for most of it. He is an evil, immoral man, probably insane, who must be destroyed . . . no matter the cost.

She carefully noted the name of the town, dated the page, then closed the journal and tucked it away in her rucksack and buckled the flap.

Ben was also keeping a journal, and it was surprisingly very similar in content to the one Beth was keeping.

The other members of the team felt the same way as Beth and Ben about Bottger, as did the entire Rebel army. They had all been pursuing the rotten bastard for too long-over thousands of miles and two continents.

It was time to bring it to an end.

"Gas masks on," Ben ordered. "The smell is going to be tough."

That order did not have to be repeated, for the odor was very foul.

"Corrie," Ben said after only a few minutes of walking through the human suffering, "get the engineers up here with their equipment. We have to get these bodies in the ground. Many of the dead are rotting. We've got to get these dead buried, and do it damn quick."

No matter where the Rebels looked there were rotting, maggot-covered bodies. It wasn't a matter of the living not caring: the survivors were just too weak to bury their dead. They just did not have the strength.

Wild dogs and hyenas had made their way into the town to join the birds of prey in dining on what ap-

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peared to be hundreds of bodies. There was plenty of dead and rotting flesh to satisfy even the most indiscriminate of appetites, and hyenas and vultures were neither picky nor dainty eaters.

The birds of prey did not seem to mind the Rebels walking among them as they ripped and tore off strips and hunks of flesh. The hyenas were another story: the savage animals with their bone-crunching jaws presented a clear menace.

"Try to chase them off," Ben ordered. "They're only doing what they were put on earth to do, as disgusting as it is. If they won't back off, shoot them."

After a dozen of the hyenas were shot, the rest began backing away, reluctantly, from the dead, long enough for the Rebels to toss the bodies into the beds of trucks. If the bodies didn't fall apart when they were picked up. Then it got really interesting for the Rebels-interesting being a totally inadequate word.

"Jesus Christ, Ben," the XO, John Michaels, said after a few moments. "We came over here to fight, not to be subjected to this."

"I know, John. I know. I'm not real thrilled about it either, I assure you."

"Then why are we doing it, Ben? We sure as hell don't have to."

"Because there is no one else to do it, John. If there were no living watching us-many of them relatives of the dead, I'm sure-I'd have the

bodies scraped up into a pile and use the town for a funeral pyre."

The XO shook his mask-covered head. "Sorry, Ben. I'm just blowing off steam."

"I know you are, John. And I understand your frustration. I feel the same way. Believe me, I do."

"What a fucking, thankless, miserable job for these

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young men and women," John replied, his eyes on the Rebels struggling with the rotting bodies.

"It wasn't all that thrilling an experience for the dead, either, John. Especially when you take into account they didn't know why it was happening to them ... or even what was happening to them. But as long as my Rebels are handling the dead, their officers are going to stay with them and witness all the horror of it. I want us all to understand what manner of men we're fighting."

"I believe they will all know that, Ben, to the fullest extent."

"So they shall, John. I want them to know the stink and the rot and the total evil of Bottger and his dream, so when they move against that son of a bitch and his men there will be damn little pity or compassion shown."

"I think we can both be sure of that, Ben." John looked into Ben's eyes and shuddered inwardly. He felt as though he were gazing through the fiery, smoky gates and into Hell itself.

This last leg of the campaign is going to be a brutal, bloody bastard, the XO thought. There won't be a survivor left from, the other side-not unless they give it up right now and beg for mercy. John had been with Ben for a long time, and he had witnessed firsthand how lowdown, mad dog mean Ben could be when he got pissed-and right now he was plenty pissed.

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After the last of the bodies had been buried, and the few remaining survivors cared for as well as could be, Ben ordered his force out of the small town and southward once again.

Ben was somewhat apprehensive about traveling in Gabon. Most of the country was densely forested, and teeming with all manner of wildlife. However, Ben's main concern was the roads, which were continually muddy and in poor repair throughout the interior.

The natives were another concern, as the initial settlers of Gabon-the Pygmies-were still present and reported to be very savage, with no love for any of the white race.

A later group to arrive, the Bantu Fang, were also reported to be hostile to whites, and legend had it that some still practiced the ancient art of cannibalism.

Due to reported heavy concentration of natives friendly to Bottger, Ben

and his column bypassed Libreville and went inland a bit as they crossed the low-lying mountains toward the Gabon-Congo border.

The farther south Ben traveled the more sour his mood became. Gone was his former jocularly. He was grimmer, more determined than ever to catch the evil Nazi after seeing what he had done to the people of

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the town. In all Ben's years of fighting against some of the worst trash on the planet, he had never seen anything like what he had witnessed the last few weeks.

John Michaels had picked up on his new mood earlier, and now his personal team began to notice the change in him. As their wagon moved down the rutted and partially destroyed road, Cooper glanced sideways at Ben, then into the rear view mirror to catch Jersey's eye.

Jersey always rode directly behind Ben. As she looked at him in the mirror, Cooper inclined his head in Ben's direction and gave a tiny shrug. She stared at the back of Ben's head for a moment, then leaned forward, putting her arms on the back of the seat and resting her chin on her arms.

"Boss?"

Ben glanced at her, then back up the road. "Yes, Jersey?"

"You were saying the other day you thought Bottger was going to bug out to South America."

"Yeah."

"If he's going to leave, what's he waiting for? He's obviously planted plenty of gangs in our path to the south, and he's brought in meres from all over the world to harass and plague us, so why doesn't he just jump a plane and take off?"

Ben didn't answer at first. He made himself a cigarette and lighted it, thinking about her question. After a few moments, he said, "I don't really know, Jersey. Obviously that would be the smart thing to do, and Bottger, as evil as he is, is certainly very intelligent."

Cooper looked at Ben. "You think maybe he's already flown the coop, Boss?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't think so, Coop. I have this gut feeling he's still in the background, somewhere

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up ahead of us-like a spider at the center of its web, pulling on the strands to trap its victims-waiting to see how his plans play out."

Ben took a final puff of his cigarette and snubbed it out. "I believe Bottger is vain enough and megaloma-niacal enough to want to be here to see us destroyed ... crushed under the weight of his thousands of gangs

and meres. I think he'll wait until the last minute to leave, until he's absolutely convinced he has no chance of winning this little war, before he hightails it out of Africa."

Anna joined in the conversation. "General Ben, if Bottger is as smart as you say, why would he continue to hold to an obsolete doctrine like that of the Nazis?"

Ben smiled ruefully. Anna had grown up in Europe, decades after the Nazis had been defeated in the second World War. The only knowledge she had of Hitler's failed Third Reich was what she had read in old textbooks, written by liberals who gave scant credit for the benefits of early Nazi rule.

"Anna, don't believe all that trash you read in those old books. The Nazi form of government is incredibly efficient, as are all dictatorships. When Hitler first came to power in the old Germany the country was in ruins, physically and economically. His first project, after consolidating his power politically and rendering his political enemies impotent, was to have the state take over all business and industry. After he got those back on their feet, using slave labor, he undertook to shore up the old German money, which had become so inflated it took a wheelbarrow full to buy a loaf of bread, when bread was available, which wasn't too often."

Anna's forehead wrinkled. "Then you're saying the Nazi form of government is good?"

Ben turned in his seat to look at his adopted daugh-

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ter. "No, Baby. What I'm saying is that a dictatorship, with everything under the control of the central government, is very efficient. Things work, products are produced, and the monetary system is stable. But other, more important things are lost, like personal freedom and individual rights. If the dictator is personable and charismatic, like Hider was at first, the people hardly notice the erosion of their rights . . . especially if another group is made to take most of the abuse like the Jews were in Germany."

"But, from what I've read Hitler was a crazy man."

Ben nodded. "Crazy like a fox, dear. At first, his ideas took Germany from being a third rate country to being the most powerful in the world. He took a tiny country, about the size of New England in the old United States, and positioned it to take over almost half the world, and he did all this in a matter of six or eight years. If his mental illness and almost total obsession with eradicating the Jews hadn't crippled his decision-making power, he might very well have pulled it all off."

Anna shook her head. "From what you say, General Ben, the Nazi form of government sounds a whole lot like socialism, or communism."

Ben smiled. "I'm proud of you, Anna. You cut right through the bullshit in all that liberal propaganda in those old textbooks to see the truth. The only real difference in socialism and Naziism is that the communists profess they are doing it for your own good when they take away your

rights and force you to work for the state. The Nazis were more truthful, and said they were doing it for the good of the state." He shrugged. "The end result was the same ... no individual rights or freedoms were allowed."

Beth chimed in. "So you think Bottger is in this for personal power?"

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Ben frowned. "I don't know, Beth. It could be the man sincerely believes the best way out of this mess the world has gotten itself into lies in the Nazi form of government. I don't want to make the same mistake the liberals do, of branding everyone who doesn't think like

I do a charlatan. Bottger may believe his way is the best, and I'm perfectly willing to let him do whatever his country wants him to do. The problem is, he's trying to force his way on the rest of the world, and that I will not allow, at least not without a fight."

As their wagon bounced and rocked over the rutted road, weaving to miss the larger chunks of broken concrete and felled trees, the radio under the dash squawked.

Ben grabbed it and clicked the send button. "Raines here."

A familiar voice came out of the speaker. "Ben, it's Ike McGowen."

Ike McGowen, ex-SEAL and leader of Batt 2, Ben's second in command and best friend, was leading Batt

2 on Ben's left flank, and was traversing south through the Congo.

"Go ahead, Ike."

"These roads over here on your eastern flank are giving the armor fits. The battle tanks and half-tracks are having a rough go of it. If it's not the jungle, it's rivers and plains. They're lagging behind the column a good distance."

Ben glanced out the window at the torn and battered countryside. "Yeah, Ike, and from over here on the west coastal areas of the country, it doesn't look like it's going to get better any time soon."

"Do you want us to hold up the troops and wait for the armored units to catch up?"

Ben stared out the window for a moment before an-

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swering. He knew it wasn't safe to put his troops in jeopardy without armored support, but if he slowed the advance any more it would take them too long to get to the southern coast of Africa and finally engage Bottger's force. Every day that they delayed Bottger was getting stronger, with more reinforcements coming in from his friends in the old US.

"No, Ike. Keep 'em moving. But pass the word to the troops to keep their eyes and ears open for ambushes. We'll just have to use the Apache gunships and PUFFs to make sure we don't run into any surprises. We need to keep the heat on Bottger's army as much as we can, partner. Otherwise, I wouldn't want you to risk it."

"We'll turn up the heat and ratchet it down tight, General, you can count on that. Ten-four, McGowen out."

"I always know I can count on your guys and gals, Ike. Raines out."

Cooper cast a worried glance at Ben. "Boss, our armor isn't keeping up, either, and we're hanging our butts out a mile here without it. What happens if we run into a superior force?"

Ben smiled grimly. "Then we'll kick the hell out of it the old-fashioned way, man-to-man combat."

His eyes lit up as he spoke, for in spite of all the high-tech weaponry he commanded Ben Raines was first and foremost a combat infantryman at heart. He felt that the current war would be won by the fighting force that had the most heart, the stronger will to win not by who had the most deadly weapons.

Ben's 501 Brigade made as much distance as they could southward through Gabon, encountering scattered resistance and a few short-lived firefights from roving gangs, but nothing of any note for almost a week.

They crossed into the Congo and traveled a few miles

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inland from the Atlantic Ocean until they were almost at the southernmost city in the Congo.

As their wagon crested a small hill Cooper called out, "Town ahead, Boss."

Beth held up her travel brochure. "I think that's Pointe-Noire," she said. "Just past that lies Angola, and part of Zaire."

"And the fly-bys report Pointe-Noire is deserted?" Ben asked.

"Yes, sir," Jersey said from the back seat.

Ben double-clicked the mike. "Raines calling Michaels."

John Michaels, Ben's XO, answered immediately. "Michaels here."

"John, we're approaching Pointe-Noire. It's about two clicks ahead. Fly-bys say it's deserted, but I want the troops ready for anything. I don't want to be surprised by an ambush, especially since we can't count on our tanks to bail us out. Pass the word for the column to spread out laterally, going into the jungle on the inland side and along the beaches on the seaward side, to approach the town from both sides. My squad will take the middle and go in straight down the main street."

"Will do, Boss. Be careful."

"Watch your own ass, John."

"Will do, Ben."

Ben hooked the mic, then glanced right and left. The jungle, never far away, seemed to narrow down on their left as they approached Pointe-Noire. On their right was the ocean. The effect was almost as if they were entering a tunnel.

"Like rats in a maze, only one way to go," Ben muttered to himself.

"What's that, Boss?" Cooper asked.

"Nothing, Coop, just thinking out loud." He waved

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a hand back and forth. "See the way the natural terrain funnels us into the main part of town? It'd be a great place for an ambush, especially if the troops had time to really dig in and prepare for our coming."

Jersey leaned forward to look at the speedometer. It read fifteen miles per hour. "As slow as we've been going, they would have had plenty of time to get ready for us."

Cooper turned a pained expression on her. "Hey, backseat driver, if you think you can go any faster on these roads and still have kidneys left to pee with, be my guest."

Ben smiled. "Okay, children, enough bickering." He took his M-14 Thunder Lizard from the clamps on the dash. "Get ready, gang. I have a feeling the dance is about to begin."

Jersey smiled. "I can't wait to hear the music, Boss."

"Ready, Boss," Cooper said.

"Let's do it, Coop."

The column entered the outskirts of Pointe-Noire.

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As Cooper slowly drove the nine passenger wagon down the main street, Ben glanced over his shoulder at Corrie. "Corrie, keep in constant touch with the other squads, and have them stand by their radios. At the first sign of trouble, I want everyone else notified immediately."

"Yes, sir. You really think this is a trap, don't you, Boss?"

Ben nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"Why, General Ben?" Anna said. "I don't see any evidence of gangs or punks hanging around. The place looks totally deserted."

Ben smiled. "Call it a gut feeling, Anna. I'm like an old firedog who can sense there's a fire before he can smell the smoke."

He turned in his seat to look at Beth.

"Bedi, get out your guide book and tell me about Pointe-Noire. What can we expect to find?"

She thumbed through the pages of her old copy of a Central Africa guide book. After a moment, she started to read.

"The city started out as a center for the petroleum industry." She stopped reading and looked up. "Hey, Boss, that may be why Bottger was so interested in this

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town. Plenty of gasoline and diesel fuel for his tanks and aircraft."

Ben nodded. "You're probably right, Beth. Go on."

She continued. "The city is divided between the modern section near the water and the African section to the east, called the Cite, with the airport area to the south. Avenue de Gaulle is the main drag in the modern section, stretching for three kilometers eastward from the railway station through the center of town. The main attraction for tourists is the beautiful beach, which is only a fifteen minute walk from the Avenue de Gaulle. The lagoons around the coast abound in swordfish, barracuda, tarpon, tuna, and skate."

Ben turned back around and cradled his M14. "Well, I doubt we'll have time to enjoy the fishing."

As in almost all coastal towns in that part of the Dark Continent, the outer buildings were small, one or two story shacks, some made of corrugated tin roofs with driftwood serving as walls. The floors were for the most part dirt, and there were few sanitary facilities, with rancid ditches serving as communal latrines.

"God, how did the people stand living here?" Jersey asked, with a grimace. "Reminds me of parts of the reservation."

Cooper grunted. "Probably didn't have a hell of a lot of choice in the matter."

Ben nodded. "Like most cities in the so-called third world, there wasn't much of a middle-class. The residents here were either desperately poor, to the point of daily starvation, or fabulously wealthy."

He pointed several blocks ahead, to where multi-story condominiums and office buildings could be seen shimmering in the heat haze of the noonday sun, overlooking the beach much as the high rent district of Miami Beach did in the states.

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"The have-nots lived like this, while the haves lived in opulence in those dwellings up ahead."

"No wonder so much of the third world chose to support communism."

"It is easy to see why," Ben said. "Kind'a like how the slaves in America in the eighteen hundreds turned so solidly to religion. Promise the poor folk a greater reward on down the line, and they'll put up with almost anything in the here and now."

"\eah, like the soldiers told my ancestors, 'Move on over to those nice reservations and everything will be just grand'," Jersey said.

"The difference is, your ancestors fought a war and lost. These people never had a chance to fight for their rights," said Beth.

"That's where you're wrong, Beth. People never have to take what's offered to them. They always have the option to leave the system if it doesn't work for them, or to fight for what they think they deserve," Ben said.

"Like the way we've set up The SUSA," Corrie added.

"Right," Ben said, nodding. "If you want freedom it's there for the taking, but no one is going to give it to you free. You have to work to support it, and sometimes you have to fight to preserve it. As a famous science fiction writer once said, Tanstaafl."

Anna raised her eyebrows. "Tanstaafl? What is that?"

"There ain't no such thing as a free lunch," Ben said, smiling. "It always has a price, and if you're not willing to pay that price, then you don't deserve the freedom."

The group was silent for a few moments as the wagon cleared the first collection of hovels and shacks and began to make its way into nicer neighborhoods, where the houses on the sides of the street were larger and more lavish. There was still no sign of habitation.

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"Hold it, Coop," Ben said, putting his hand on the driver's arm.

Cooper stiffened and slowed the big wagon to a crawl. "What is it, Boss? You see something?"

"No. It's what I don't see that's bothering me. Quick, Corrie, radio the others that this is definitely a trap, and to proceed with utmost caution."

Corrie didn't bother to reply to Ben as she grabbed her shortwave and began to repeat his message to the other units in his brigade.

"Come on, Boss." Jersey said. "What gives? What are you basing that on?"

"Look around you, gang. What has been present in every town we've been through?"

After a moment, Cooper snapped his Fingers. "Bodies! There aren't any dead bodies lying around."

"Right," Ben said. "No one can tell me half a million people were either

killed or forced to leave suddenly, and someone took the time to bury all the corpses. No. Someone has cleaned up the area so we wouldn't be suspicious, so we'd walk right into their trap."

Jersey said, "Hold on tight, people. I just saw a flash in the window of that house on our left. Looked like either a telescopic sight or binoculars reflecting the sun."

"Okay, team, activate your combat mikes and put on your helmets. It's time to go to work," Ben said.

Combat mikes were small, two-way radios that consisted of an earpiece and small speaking tube that curved around just in front of the mouth. They enabled the team members to keep in contact and coordinate their attack. The helmets were bulletproof kevlar that would stop all but very large caliber rounds.

Ben readied his Thunder Lizard. "Coop, when I give

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the word, cut the wheel toward that house and let's take out the garbage . . . Now!"

Cooper spun the wheel to the left and gunned the big engine. The wagon lurched forward as if it had been kicked in the butt and raced across a lawn toward a large, two story, Mediterranean-style house.

After a few seconds flashes began to appear in the windows, and a stream of bullets crashed into the wagon, pinging off the armor-plated metal and making dull thumps off the bulletproof glass.

When the wagon slowed as its huge tires spun on the grass of the lawn, Ben jerked his door open and dived out of the vehicle, to land rolling on the ground. As soon as the wagon passed he jumped for cover behind a large palm tree in the center of the yard.

He popped the safety on his M-14, elevated the muzzle to point at the roof, and pulled the trigger. The rifle slammed back into his shoulder and chattered and roared. Bullets raked the roof with murderous fire, causing two men to scream and tumble to the ground to land spread-eagled on the lush, green lawn below.

The wagon made a full turn and, with engine still racing, crashed up onto the porch of the house. Ben's team members jumped from the vehicle and in perfect coordination spread out to assault the house.

Corrie and Beth crouched low and ran around the porch to the left, ducking under windows as they ran, popping keys off frag grenades and throwing them into the windows as they passed.

Jersey and Anna did the same thing, running to the right.

Cooper stood in the middle, in front of the huge, main double doors of the house. He watched as the team all threw their grenades into the windows, counted to three, and then he cut loose with his SAW.

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Within seconds the doors to the house were blown to splinters. Cooper stepped to the side, his back against the front wall just as four frag grenades exploded almost in unison.

Red hot shrapnel whised as it spread throughout the first floor rooms of die house, making men scream in terror and then groan in pain as their bodies were shredded where they stood.

When Ben saw the front door crumble under the assault from Coop's SAW, he yelled into his mike, "Into the house, now!"

He scrambled to his feet and sprinted toward the house in a low crouch.

The barrel of a rifle came out of an upstairs window and opened fire on him, stitching holes in the lawn as the bullets made a path directly at Ben's running form.

A shell slammed into die right side of Ben's helmet, the hammer blow kicking his head to the side and knocking him to the ground, semiconscious.

As the team streamed through the front door Anna looked back over her shoulder and saw Ben sprawled on the ground.

"Daddy Ben!" she screamed as she ran to squat next to him. Widi one hand she aimed her CAR at the window and sprayed it with fire while she grabbed his collar with the other and dragged Ben to the relative safety of the front porch.

While Corrie and Beth cleared out the downstairs rooms, advancing through thick smoke and smoldering flames from the grenades, Jersey and Cooper ran up the stairs side by side, their weapons jerking and bucking as they fired ahead of them.

At the head of the stairs Jersey pointed Cooper to the right, and she turned to the left. At the first doorway

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she paused to shuck an empty magazine onto the floor and then slammed another into her CAR.

Without exposing herself she stuck the barrel into the doorway and sprayed the inside of the room, eliciting two quick screams followed by thumps as bodies hit the floor.

Cooper dropped his SAW to the ground when it clicked on an empty chamber, and pulled two 9mm automatic pistols from holsters on both hips.

He dived through the door, hitting the ground in a roll and coming up firing with both hands.

Automatic rifle fire buzzed over his head, stitching holes in the wall behind him as he shot two gunmen in the chest at point blank range, the bullets punching small holes in the front of the men's shirts and blowing out larger holes in their backs as the slugs exited. One of the

men was blown backward through the window behind him, to fall screaming out of sight. The other was thrown back against a wall, where he slipped to the floor, leaving a blood trail down the expensive wallpaper.

Within minutes it was over, and the first building was cleared of hostile forces. There were ten men dead, and two wounded severely but able to talk.

The team assembled on the first floor, where Anna was standing next to a couch where she had laid Ben. Her back was to him, and she stood with CAR at port arms, ready to kill to protect him should anyone survive the assault and come her way.

Upstairs, Jersey spoke into her mike. "Jersey clear."

Cooper, as he popped a fresh magazine into his 9mm, said, "Cooper clear."

Beth and Corrie also checked in with their own 'clear' messages.

Anna looked over her shoulder at Ben, who was shak-

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ing his head and trying to sit up on the couch. "Anna clear, but Ben's hit."

The team rapidly assembled in the living room, the two prisoners made to lie face down in a corner with Cooper standing over them, nervously looking over at Ben to see how serious his wounds were.

A large bruise was beginning to form on his right temple area, and a small trickle of blood ran down his cheek where the edge of the helmet had made a gouge.

He looked around at his friends. "Good work, team."

Jersey placed a hand on his swollen face. "You okay, Boss?"

Ben smiled. "Yeah, but I must be getting old and slow to get clipped like that."

Beth shook her head. "Sure, Boss. In the old days you could've outrun that bullet."

"Good thing it hit you in the head, General Ben," Anna said in a low voice, her lips curved in a slight grin. "The hardest part of your body."

Ben stood up, swayed a moment, and had to grab the arm of the couch to steady himself. Then he said, "Cor-rie, get on the horn and tell the other squads what happened."

He turned to Cooper, "Coop, bring those two over here and we'll have a quick field interrogation."

While Corrie was in the wagon, talking to the other squads, Ben faced their prisoners. They were both black men with ritual scars on their faces, indicating membership in some local tribe.

"You men understand English?" Ben asked.

The prisoners glanced at each other and then back at Ben and shook their heads, eyes downcast as they stared at the floor with defiant expressions.

Ben looked at Cooper and winked so that the men

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couldn't see him. "OK, Cooper. They can't tell us anything. Shoot them."

The men jerked their heads up, terror now on their faces. "No ... no ... we'll talk," one said with the singsong accent of a Bantu who has been taught English by missionaries as a child.

Ben paced in front of the prisoners, who were sitting on the couch surrounded by his team, weapons at the ready. "What is going on here in Pointe-Noire? Where are all the citizens, and who are the forces opposing us?"

The older of the two began to speak. "When General Bottger's troops occupied the city, maybe three months ago, those who resisted were killed."

He paused, eyes searching Ben's team's faces to see their reactions. When he got no response, he continued. "Most of the others ran away during the night, back into the jungle. Soon, all that were left were sympathizers, whores, and soldiers. General Bottger told us you would be coming. He offered much money to those that would stay and fight when you came."

The man shrugged. "What were we to do? The alternatives were to be killed by him or to go into the jungle to die of swamp fever or be killed by animals or other tribes. We had no real choice."

"How many men are we facing?"

The second man said, "There are four, maybe five thousand men in the city. Almost all of the buildings are occupied, and the others are . . . how you say . . . booby trapped."

"Are the men professional soldiers, or mainly citizens, like yourselves?"

"There are a few soldiers, but most are men like us, who were forced to fight."

Ben grunted. He didn't for a minute believe these

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men were forced to fight. He figured they were men who took the easy way out, cooperating with Bottger because it gave them power over their fellow citizens of Pointe-Noire. Most were probably lowlife punks who were criminals and gang members before Bottger arrived, and probably a significant number had been prisoners in jails who took his offer to fight for money.

Ben turned away, "Coop, do what you can to dress their wounds and stop

the bleeding. Then we'll assemble the team and discuss our options."

After the prisoners were tended to, Ben addressed the rest of his group. "Corrie, get on the horn and call the other units. We'll call in the PUFFs and P51Es to attack the city, bombs followed by strafing runs. Then we'll have the gunships come in and do low-level strafing of what's left of the buildings. I want the city leveled."

"What about the non-combatant civilians?" Beth asked.

Ben's eyes were hard. "There are no non-combatants left here. Anyone who stayed has chosen sides . . . the wrong side, as they're soon going to find out. Tell the squads to stay out of the city for now, and to pop green smoke grenades so the bombers will know they're friendlies, and to avoid them."

"And after that?" Cooper asked.

Ben gave a fierce grin. "Then we go door-to-door and house-to-house and finish the job!"

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Ben and his team popped a green smoke grenade in the front yard of the house they had just raided, then gathered on the roof to watch the show.

Four PUFFs, twin engine assault planes known officially as AC47s, each with 20mm Vulcan cannons, 6 barrel Gatling guns, and four pairs of 7.62s, roared in low over the city from different points of the compass.

Small arms fire began to appear in windows of buildings and houses, some of the tracer rounds making orange trails in the late afternoon light, arching toward the PUFFs as they dove at several hundred miles an hour. Their engines screamed but couldn't drown out the ratcheting chatter of the Vulcan 20mm cannons as they rained destruction among the structures of the city.

Walls, windows, then entire buildings seemed to almost disintegrate under the murderous fire from the aircraft before they pulled up in unison, barrel-rolling to dive again and again on the dying city.

Soon hundreds of figures could be seen running for their lives from houses and skyscrapers, trying to escape the thousands of rounds of molten lead bringing death and destruction their way. Some of the men stopped in the middle of streets, aiming their pitiful rifles at the

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birds from hell, to die torn asunder by the rounds from the PUFFs' cannons.

After several strafing runs the planes' cannons were empty, but they continued to dive, spraying the buildings that remained partially intact with their Gatling guns, which sounded like swarms of angry bees buzzing toward unlucky men caught out in the open.

Bricks, mortar, stucco, and wood all splintered and disappeared in a fog of destroyed walls. The planes, guns empty, dipped their wings at Ben's troops as they departed.

Through binoculars, Ben could see the few survivors who remained shouting with joy and waving their rifles in the air, as if they had somehow caused the planes to leave.

Moments later, the chup-chup could be heard as the Apaches approached, the assault helicopters with twin-mounted 40mm cannon and deadly M60 machine guns. Flying lower and slower, these choppers were able to target smaller groups of hostiles, blowing them apart as they flew sideways down narrow streets and alleyways.

Suddenly, one of the Apaches, evidently hit in the tail rotor by small arms fire, belched smoke from its engine and began to auto-rotate down to a bumpy landing.

Ben's knuckles turned white on his binoculars as he watched his ship go down.

Immediately, two other ships took up station on either side of the fallen bird, hovering low off the ground, giving massive supportive fire until the pilots and gunners could escape the wounded chopper and climb on board the others.

Ben let out breath he hadn't been aware he was holding as he saw his men make it safely out of the hot zone and into the other choppers.

After a moment, he said, "Corrie, radio the Apaches

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and tell them to back off and head back to base to refuel. It's time for us to go in and clean out the trash, and I want them back in time to provide air support for the operation."

"Gotcha, Boss. You want me to bump John Michaels and have him tell the troops to move out?"

As usual, Corrie was one step ahead of Ben. It continually amazed him how she seemed to anticipate his every thought.

Ben turned to address his team. "Yes, and tell him to take care. It's going to get sticky. There're bound to be pockets of resistance that the gunships missed." Ben took a deep breath. "Okay, guys and gals, let's mount up and go kick some ass."

As his team members grinned and started for the stairs he added, "I also want you all to be wearing the new, lightweight kevlar vests we got in last week. I notice most of them are still in their plastic pouches."

"Aw, Boss," Cooper moaned. "Those things are hot. They make my skin itch, and chafe my armpits."

"Yeah," Jersey added, "and they squash my-

Ben held up his hands, his expression serious. "That's enough, soldiers. That wasn't a request, if you get my drift. It was an order, and I expect it to be obeyed. I'll cut you some slack and let you not wear them when we're not in actual combat, but for this type of mission where

we're going door-to-door and we know we're going to come under fire, I want those vests on. Com-prende?"

The team members nodded and walked toward the wagon, their heads hanging like children being forced back to the table to eat their vegetables. Ben shook his head, smiling at their backs.

He had pulled a lot of strings to get as many of the new vests as he could, and had more on order. He felt

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they were the coming thing in wartime technology. Amazingly lightweight, the vests could be worn under uniform shirts and were hardly noticeable. Their attraction was they would stop anything up to a 9mm bullet, and most shrapnel would be rendered non-lethal. He hoped to soon have enough for all of his troops. Currently only squad commanders and officers were fully equipped, with the first issues going to his scouting teams, who saw the most intense combat of any of the troops.

As Ben and his team stood next to the wagon putting on their vests, Anna said, "General Ben, I don't feel right using this vest when all the troops don't have them."

Ben cocked an eyebrow at her. "Oh? Why not?"

"I was reading in the old Declaration of Independence of the United States where it said all men are created equal, so why do some of us get to use the vests, and others not?"

Ben shook his head. "I thought you understood history better than that, Anna. First of all, the phrase 'all men are created equal' meant that under the law of the new country all persons would be treated equally, with none having preferential treatment. It certainly did not mean all people were born with equal abilities or chances, as the whiny, liberal crybabies used to try to say. Hell, anyone who has ever taught school or been a leader of any kind knows people are all different, with varying degrees of competence at different tasks. Now, as to why some of the troops, notably squad leaders and officers, get the vests and the so-called grunts do not, it's because no matter how much each person is worth as an individual certain members of an army, are much more valuable to the war effort than others, especially during wartime. Personally, I hate to see any of our boys

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or girls die, but I have to be honest with you. There are some I'd rather lose than others. Do you understand?"

She nodded, staring at the ground as she zipped her vest up.

He smiled and patted her on the shoulder. "I know you do, but it was a good try, anyway, even though it didn't get you out of wearing the vest."

Cooper and Jersey and Beth laughed. Cooper said, "I was trying my best to think of some reason not to wear this damned thing, but leave it to

Anna to come with the excuse that if everyone doesn't have one no one should."

Ben narrowed his eyes at the group. "Yeah, we're gonna have to watch her, all right. She's sounding more like a Democrat all the time. Next she'll want to share our rations with the enemy, since it's obviously poverty caused by our success that's making them so hostile."

She punched Ben on the arm hard enough to spin him half around. "I am not a Democrat or a liberal, Daddy Ben! You take that back, or I'll bash you even if you are my father."

Ben held up his hands, laughing. "OK, OK. I apologize for calling you such dirty names. Now, can we get going before the war is over and we've missed it?"

Ben glanced at the sky. "We only have about three more hours of daylight, and I don't want us crawling through rubble when it's dark, so I figure the rest of today and tomorrow. We should be able to start moving south again by day after tomorrow."

Anna scolded her, "Don't rush him, Jersey. This is the only part of the trip I like, the combat part. The traveling is boring."

"She doesn't sound much like a tree-hugging liberal now, Boss," Beth said. "More like a warmongering radical, as the left-wingers used to say."

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"That's my girl," Ben said, throwing his arm around Anna's shoulders and giving her a hug. "Radical, and proud of it!"

Ben was off in his prediction of the time it would take to cleanse the town of hostiles. It was more like two-and-a-half days. There were more pockets of resistance than he had expected, and the Rebel Army's losses were slightly higher than anticipated.

By the time he and John Michaels met on the southern city limits, Ben's mood was even worse than before the battle for Pointe-Noire. "I'm really getting tired of this country, John."

Michaels nodded, looking around at the ruined and leveled city behind them and at the dozers making huge depressions in the red dirt of the area for the bodies of those they had killed. "Me too, Ben. Bottger has a lot to answer for. We lost some good men and women to this trash that he paid to detain us."

Ben clenched his teeth. "Oh, he'll pay, all right, John. I'll promise you that, even if I have to chase him all over the world. From this moment on, he's mine!"

John knelt in the dirt and unfolded a map of the country and laid it on the ground in front of them. He pointed a finger at the left side of the paper. "Here we are at Pointe-Noire, the southernmost city in the Congo. It's about a hundred klicks due south until we get to the Congo River on the border of Angola." He looked up at Ben. "That hundred klicks is through Cabinda, which has some of the thickest tropical rain forest in the entire country."

Ben nodded. "Yes. It's going to be a logistical nightmare to get our

heavy equipment through that area. What do you suggest?"

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"We can't head to the east over into Zaire, 'cause we'd be bunching up with Ike and his 502 Battalion. I think we ought to send most of the heavy tanks and dozers and a good portion of the troops by boat down the coast, to where the Congo empties into the Atlantic at the town of Soyo. From there, most of Angola consists of a plateau elevated three to five thousand feet above sea level, rising from a narrow coastal strip, until you get to the desert in the south. It should be pretty easy going for our heavy stuff."

"You're right, John. As thick as that jungle is, there's no need to wear out our troops trying to cross it." Ben hesitated a moment, rubbing his chin. "I'll take four or five squads, loaded light so we can make good time, and we'll traverse the area from here down to Soyo."

John objected. "Wait a minute, Ben. I figured I'd do the dirty work and go through the jungle, and let you take a break on the ship."

Ben shook his head. "No I'll take my people, and we'll make sure the jungle isn't hiding any Bottger secrets."

"How long do you figure it'll take you to traverse the hundred klicks?"

Ben shrugged. "Depends on how thick the forest is, how much resistance we face, and how many rivers we have to cross. Ordinarily, we can cover thirty klicks a day, on foot. I figure we'll be lucky to average ten in this hellhole."

Michaels nodded. "Okay, I'll bivouac the men here for four days while we load the ships, and then it'll take us four days on the water to get to the Congo."

He stood and held out his hand. "I'll meet you at Soyo in ten days, partner, and if you're not there by then I'll come looking."

Ben took his hand. "Keep in touch, pal. I'm counting on you to send in the war birds if and when I need

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them. I'll bump you on the regular channel using the Beta filter transmission if we need air support. Otherwise, give the troops a rest. I have a feeling Angola is going to be a hot spot, and they're gonna need to be sharp."

"OK Ben. See ya soon."

Ben walked back to his team and stood in front of them. "You guys had better turn in early tonight. At first light we're taking off for a hundred klick jaunt through the rain forest."

"Great," Cooper said, a sour expression on his face. "Just what I need, a trip through dense jungle filled with all manner of snakes, spiders,

and other critters whose only goal in life is to sink their fangs into my hide."

Jersey glanced at him. "Don't worry, Coop. You'll have three girls to protect you from the big, bad, animals. We'll make sure nothing hurts you."

He smirked. "That'll be the day!"

Ben walked toward a nearby partially destroyed house. "I'm bunking in here tonight. I'd suggest you all join me. It'll probably be our last night to sleep under a roof for a couple of weeks."

That night, visions haunted Jersey's sleep. She tossed and turned, sweating as she moaned and groaned. She saw Cooper lying on the ground, covered with snakes, screaming. She tried to run to him, but she was waist-deep in water, and waves were breaking over her head. The harder she struggled, the farther she got from Cooper.

She could hear Ben calling in the distance, "Jersey, where are you? Jersey, answer me!"

She tried to call out for help, but when she opened

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her mouth nothing came out. She was mute, and couldn't make a sound.

Suddenly, she was standing next to Cooper and two large, black men-whose faces were covered with scars and whose heads were covered with leopard skins-began shooting automatic weapons at them.

The last vision she had before her screams woke her up was of her and Cooper reeling under the impact of hundreds of bullets.

Jersey jerked upright in bed, to find Beth holding her shoulders. "Jersey, are you all right? You were crying, and then you began to scream."

When she tried to speak, she croaked. Finally, she was able to whisper. "It's OK, Beth, I just had a bad dream."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, thanks. Go on back to sleep."

"OK."

After Beth turned over and lay back in her sleeping bag, Jersey sat there for a moment, staring into the dark. Her visions had never been wrong before. Were she and Cooper going to die in the jungle?

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Ben and his people had made better time than he thought they would. Dusk was falling on the tropical rain forest of Cabinda, and they had already covered fifteen clicks through the dense jungle. Though the tops of the trees were so thickly interwoven that they formed a solid roof through which even sunlight could barely penetrate, the vegetation at ground level was less thick, and for the most part fairly passable.

They had seen no signs of habitation by hostile forces, and were beginning to relax.

"This is going to be a cakewalk," Cooper said, a smug expression on his face.

"What do you mean?" Ben asked from the front of the column.

Cooper spread his arms. "Just look at these trails. I had no idea the rain forest would have this many trails going through it. Hell, I thought we'd be slashing our way through thick jungle vines and stuff with machetes, like on the old Tarzan movies."

He was right. They had all been amazed to see how the trails ran through the thick undergrowth, spiraling off in all directions, making their trek much easier than anticipated.

Ben nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean. I'm even

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more surprised that we've seen no sign of any of Bottger's allies."

"Maybe he thought we'd just skip this area and head straight for Angola, where our Intelligence has shown he has a high concentration of his New World troops," Beth observed from back in the group.

"That very well could be," Ben agreed.

Jersey cast an eye toward Cooper, who was walking up ahead with a jaunty air about him. "I think Coop is more relieved that we haven't seen much indigenous wildlife than he is by the absence of hostile forces," she said, referring to Cooper's well-known aversion to wild critters of any kind, especially snakes or spiders.

"You got that right, Jersey," Cooper answered. "And I'm not ashamed to admit it, either. I have absolutely no use for anything that has no legs, or more than two."

As he finished speaking a rolling peal of thunder and a brilliant flash of lightning lit up the late afternoon sky. Suddenly the heavens opened, and the heaviest rainfall any of the group had ever seen began to fall.

As they scrambled to get their ponchos out of their packs, Ben yelled over the roar of the falling rain, "See, Coop, you should never tempt the gods by saying how easy things are. It just gives them a reason to crap on you with something unexpected."

Cooper looked up, unable to see Ben through the rain even though he was only five feet away. "You're right, Boss. Next time I open my big mouth, feel free to stick a boot in it."

Jersey piped up, "Does that offer hold for the rest of us, too?"

"In your dreams, girl, in your dreams," Cooper added.

"Mount up, team. Let's try to get another klick in

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before full dark. Then we'll make camp, if we can find some trees heavy enough to block off the rain."

They had traveled only another hundred yards when they came to a small stream swollen by the sudden downpour into a raging river, complete with white caps from the driving winds.

Anna punched Cooper in the shoulder. "Boy, Coop, when you jinx us, you really do it good."

Ben turned to Corrie. "If you can keep your radio dry, try to bump the other squads and tell them to go on and make camp now. It doesn't look like we're going any farther until this rain stops and this river slows down a bit."

"Right, Boss. Beth, come over here and hold your poncho over me, and I'll get on the horn right away."

For security reasons Ben had the four platoons accompanying him spread over a kilometer or more so that any ambush wouldn't be able to catch them all at the same time. His own contingent of roughly a hundred soldiers was behind them in die jungle, out of sight in the pouring rain, with his Acting XO, John Watson, bringing up the rear of his column.

Jersey walked over to stand next to Cooper, who was standing on the river's edge, watching the fast-flowing current.

"Care to go for a swim, Coop?" she asked, playfully giving him a little shove toward the water.

He stepped back to avoid her, tripped over a log in the knee-high grass, and fell onto his back in the mud.

"Damn it, Jersey," he snapped. "Look what you've done. Now I'm all wet."

She threw back her head and laughed out loud. "You've been all wet ever since I've known you, Coop."

Suddenly, he screamed and began to roll and thrash about in the weeds. After a moment he jumped to his

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feet, his arms spread out, hollering in terror and looking at his chest. A six-foot long Gabon viper was hanging down his front, its fangs imbedded in his poncho, writhing and coiling in anger.

"Holy shit!" Jersey cried.

She whipped out her combat knife, and with one quick slash severed the head from the snake's body, allowing the lower five feet of the reptile to fall squirming to the ground.

"Get it off! Get it off!" Copper yelled, unwilling to touch the vicious looking head that was still attached to his poncho.

"Oh for Christ's sake, Coop, get a grip," Jersey said as she stepped up and plucked the viper's head off him. Being careful not to touch its fangs, which were dripping with venom, she cast it into the rushing stream, where it was rapidly swept away.

Cooper leaned over, his hands on his knees, breathing rapidly, gasping for breath, as he hyperventilated in fear.

Jersey, feeling sorry for what had happened, walked over to stand next to him, nudging his thigh with her boot to get his attention.

"I'm sorry, Coop. I didn't mean for that to happen. I was just joking with you."

Still unable to speak, Cooper merely nodded.

Jersey's eyes glazed over for a moment, remembering her dream of the night before where she had seen Cooper covered in snakes. Was the dream a premonition, brought to her by her Apache ancestors, as had so often happened in the past? Was the rest of it going to come true, too?

Suddenly apprehensive, she swung her CAR around to hold it at port arms. "Boss," she called, "listen up. I've got a bad feeling about this place."

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Ben looked up from where he was erecting a small pup tent under the overhanging limbs of a giant tree. He had learned over the years to trust his team members' instincts. Without hesitating he reached for his M-14 Thunder Lizard and called, "Heads up, people."

The team members, well-trained to act on orders without hesitation, scrambled to find cover, readying their weapons as they dove behind trees and bushes.

Just as Cooper straightened up, grabbing his SAW, Jersey saw two black men wearing leopard skins on their heads step from cover twenty feet away.

She swung her CAR around, but before she could pull the trigger the two men opened fire with AK47s.

The deep, guttural roar of the rifles on full automatic drowned out the sound of the rain as bullets stitched across Cooper and Jersey's bodies, spinning them around and throwing them into the river. They were immediately swept out of sight by the current.

Ben, Beth, and Corrie opened up with their weapons, blowing the two hostiles into pieces as they were cut down in seconds. From the bushes and foliage surrounding the campsite, Ben's remaining team began to come under murderous fire.

Without being told, Corrie got on the horn. "The eagle is under heavy fire. Watch your asses, there may be more out there!"

Dropping her radio, Corrie thumbed the safety off her CAR and began to return fire, sweeping the bushes around them with deadly accuracy, grinning through tight lips as several bodies fell from cover to lie

writhing and dying on the ground.

The semi-darkness was lit with flickering flashes from the weapons as the sound of the rain was buried under loud explosions of M-16s and the louder, deeper roar of Ben's Thunder Lizard.

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When his first magazine was empty Ben rolled to his side, next to his pack, spilled out several white phosphorus grenades. He jerked the pins on three of them at once and lobbed them in different directions.

The grenades exploded with tremendous impact, lighting up the entire area with blue-white light and setting even the raindrenched jungle around them on fire.

Six men who had been near the grenades stood up, screaming, their clothes, hair, and even their skins on fire from the deadly, clinging, white phosphorus.

As the team cut them down the other hostiles in the area began to retreat, not having expected such vicious response to their trap.

As dark shapes could be seen running away, a phosphorus flare exploded in the sky, illuminating the entire area with daylike brightness.

John Watson-taking John Michaels' place while he brought the boats down the coast-and reinforcements, could be seen surrounding the fleeing assassins. They cut them down as soon as they showed themselves.

In minutes, it was over. Ben's platoon had lost seven men, while the attackers had been wiped out to the last person. Since Ben had ordered no prisoners were to be taken, several of Michaels's troops walked through the area, dispatching any wounded hostiles without a second thought. Single gunshots could occasionally be heard in the distance.

Watson came over to approach Ben, who was standing at the river's edge, shining a light along the shore.

"You OK, Ben?"

"No, John, I'm not. I may have lost Jersey and Cooper."

Watson bent down and studied the ground. "I don't see any bloodstains. Are you sure they were hit?"

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"I saw the bullets tear into their ponchos. They were thrown backward so fast they didn't have time to bleed before they were in the water."

He pitched a stick into the river and watched it float rapidly away. "And even if they somehow managed to survive, that current will have them miles away by now."

"Do you want us to send a search party?"

After a moment's hesitation, Ben said, "No." He turned and started to

walk away. He paused and said, "If they're alive, they'll make it back to us. If they're dead, then it's something I'll have to find some way to live with."

"What are you going to do?"

Ben shrugged. "Jersey and Cooper know we're headed south toward Soyo and the Congo to meet up with John Michaels and the rest of the brigade. If it's humanly possible, they'll join us there."

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Jersey and Cooper somehow managed to hang on to each other in the swirling waters of the raging river. After floating for several miles on the twisting, roiling current, they were finally thrown exhausted onto a riverbank on the southern side of the water.

They lay there for a while, breathing heavily, coughing up foul river water, trying to get their strength back.

Finally, Cooper rolled over to tap Jersey on the shoulder. "Hey, girl. You OK?"

She looked at him and shook her head. "If I don't catch some fatal disease from this stinkin' water I'll probably make it. How about you?"

He glanced down where he was holding his left shoulder with his right hand. "Got a minor flesh wound in the shoulder. The boss was right about those vests. If it hadn't been for them, we'd be dead meat."

Jersey felt her chest gingerly. "Yeah. Even so, I feel like I've been kicked in the chest by a mule, or several mules, even."

Cooper tried to stand, then sat back down heavily as his face paled and he became dizzy.

Jersey reached into a pouch on her belt and pulled out a small first aid kit. "Here, Coop. Let me put a tight

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bandage on that wound. You've probably lost more blood than you think."

He grinned and pushed her away. "Don't you try to mother hen me, Jersey. I'm OK." He tried to stand again, and fainted dead away.

When he woke up he saw he had been dragged under the leaves of a large banyan tree and was lying propped up against the trunk with a large bandage on his arm. "Whoa, Nelly, what hit me?"

"You dummy. You passed out when you tried to get up. I told you you'd lost a lot of blood but, typically, you didn't listen." She snorted through her nose. "Men!"

He began to shiver, and said through chattering teeth, "Thanks, Jersey."

He wrapped his arms around his shoulders and continued to shake. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"Hell, you're no more trouble than you always are." She hesitated, watching him shiver. "Now it looks like you're going into shock."

She got up and went off into the jungle, returning a few minutes later with four long sticks. She stuck them in the ground in a square and pulled off her poncho and fastened it to the poles, forming a makeshift tent over them.

"You didn't happen to hang onto your pack, did you?" She asked.

He shook his head. "No, did you?"

"No." She thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Take off your clothes. They're wringing wet." She began to unbutton her shirt.

With a weak grin, Cooper said, "I know you've lusted after me all these years, but this is not the time or place to consummate your desires, Jersey."

"Shut up, you asshole! You're in shock and I need to

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get you warm. The only way to do that is to use what we have available, which in this particular instance is body heat. We're gonna have to lie against each other with the wet clothes over us to generate some heat."

He shook his head. "I don't expect you to sacrifice your dignity for me."

"It's not for you, you jerk. It's for me. I don't want to have to carry your fat butt all over the jungle until you get well. Now get those clothes off and lie down."

He sighed. "OK."

As she lay naked against him and pulled their clothing over them, she said, "And don't get any funny ideas, Romeo. I can still break your arm if I need to."

"Don't worry," he shot back. "My interests lie in the direction of women, not lethal weapons who haven't worn a skirt in ten years."

As Jersey wrapped her arms around Cooper, she smiled. As long as he could joke like that he was going to be all right. Though she would never admit it, she would have been heartbroken if he had been killed. Life just wouldn't be the same without Cooper to make fun of.

Dawn broke the next morning with sunshine and no further rain. Jersey came awake to find Cooper spooned against her, his left arm circled over her and his left hand clasping her naked breast.

She jerked upright, saying, "Hey, watch the hand!"

He came suddenly awake, blushing crimson. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize ... it must have been instinct."

She stood, pulling her clothes from the pile covering them. "OK, just

don't let it happen again."

He rolled over, his back to her, and began to pull his pants on.

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"Don't worry. I need my fingers so I can eat." He looked up. "Speaking of which, what's for breakfast?"

She turned, her shirt hanging open, unaware of the alluring picture she made. "What do I look like, your cook?"

"You don't happen to have any chocolate in your pouch, do you?" he asked.

She grimaced. "No. I ate mine on the trail yesterday, and hadn't had time to replace it before we were attacked."

He grinned, pulling a large Hershey bar from his first aid pouch. "Ta-da! I've still got mine."

She turned and began to button her blouse. "Well, hooray for you."

She didn't tell him the sight of the chocolate was making her mouth water.

He reached over her shoulder to hand her half the bar. "Here. And Jersey, thanks for last night. You saved my life."

She took the bar and began stuffing it in her mouth, mumbling, "Hell, it's only worth about half a stick of chocolate, anyway, so now we're even."

He grinned at her back. "You want great white hunter to go and hunt us down some real food?"

"Oh, you in the mood for monkey brains?"

He shook his head. "No, but I see a tree right over there that has some kind of large, red and yellow fruit hanging on it. How about I shinney up the tree and pick us some?"

"Yeah, that sounds good." She pointed to the east. "Over there are some bananas, or probably plantains. I'll pick those and start a fire, since they taste terrible if they're not cooked."

After they ate, they sat warming their hands over the

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fire. "What do you think we should do next?" Cooper asked.

"Well, the boss probably thinks we're dead, won't send a search party. I think we should head due south as fast as we can, and try to meet up with the team at Soyo."

He nodded. "Me, too. Any chance our combat mikes are still working, after soaking in the river all night?"

She frowned. "I doubt it ... maybe after they dry out. But their range is only a few miles. I think we're way farther away than that."

He stood and began kicking dirt over the fire. "OK, partner, let's mount up and head south. We got a rendezvous to make."

They made good time through the rain forest. The canopy of tree limbs over their heads was almost seventy feet high, but the undergrowth at ground level was relatively sparse, since sunlight couldn't penetrate the overhead leaves and cover.

They had little trouble finding trails that ran in a generally due south direction, and were slowed only by the need for caution, so as not to come upon a hostile force unawares.

As they trotted along at a slow jog Jersey said, "You know, Coop, I had a vision the other night about what happened to us."

Starting to breathe heavily from the heat and humidity, Cooper asked, "Oh. Tell me about it."

Moving easily, as if running were as natural to her as walking, Jersey was hardly puffing at all.

"I saw you with the snake, and then I saw us getting shot. At first I thought I had a vision of my death, but then I remembered that's not possible."

"You mean you can't foretell the manner of your

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death?" gasped Cooper, sweat running freely down his forehead.

"Yes. The medicine men used to say the Father in the Sky would not put that kind of burden on mankind, especially since man could do nothing to change his visions."

Cooper held up his hand. "Wait a minute."

He stopped in the middle of the trail to bend over, hands on knees as he caught his breath. "So the visions aren't always accurate . . . sometimes you can change what you see?"

"Yes. For instance, if a brave saw his people being defeated in an upcoming battle, he could try to persuade them not to fight, or to pick a different place to attack." She shrugged. "My visions have always been erratic, probably because I am not full-blooded Apache. My blood's been diluted by the genes of the unbelievers, the white eyes."

Cooper pulled his canteen out and took a hearty swig, then sleeveed sweat off his face. He took a long look at Jersey. "No offense, but I think the dilution was a good thing for you. Most of the Apache women I've seen in old pictures look like their parents mated with buffalo or something."

Jersey arched an eyebrow. "Oh, so you think I'm pretty?"

He smirked. "I didn't say that, girl. I just said you didn't look like a buffalo . . . that's a big difference from saying you're pretty."

He cocked his head to one side and stared at her some more. "More like .

. . not completely unappealing is how I'd put it."

She shook her head and gave him a light punch on his good shoulder, making his arm smart and throb. "You butt-lick male chauvinist pig."

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He grinned. "That's me. Oink, oink."

Without another word she turned and began to jog down the trail again, this time at a considerably faster pace.

"Crap," Cooper exclaimed as he took off after her. "I knew I should have kept my big mouth shut."

They had run only about five hundred yards when Jersey suddenly stopped, held up her hand, and she slipped out of sight into the brush next to the trail.

Cooper unslung his SAW and stopped in his tracks, squatting down low so as not to be seen. After a moment, Jersey walked softly back to him, her finger to her lips.

She whispered, her mouth close to his ear, "I smelled food cooking up ahead. After I stopped I could hear voices."

"What were they saying?"

She gave him a withering look. "I don't know. I don't speak a lot of Bantu. How about you?"

He shrugged. "What do you want to do?"

She took her CAR in her arms, and as quietly as she could chambered a round.

"That's the way we have to go, so let's join the party and see what's cookin'."

Cooper readied his SAW, and side by side they walked around the bend ahead and toward a small campfire in a nearby clearing just off the trail.

There were three natives sitting on their haunches, eating something with their hands from small, homemade bowls. An iron pot filled with what smelled like stew was boiling on the fire.

The men were chattering in a singsong dialect that sounded like Bantu. Their eyes got wide, and they shut up as Jersey and Cooper approached. Jersey began talk-

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ing to the men in English, but they all shook their heads, indicating they couldn't understand.

She glanced at Cooper, then began talking in French, of which Cooper couldn't understand a word.

Evidently at least one of the group spoke the language, the second

language after English in most places in Africa. He nodded and began talking rapidly back at her.

Jersey frowned and said another few words. She looked at Cooper and said, "I asked him to speak slowly. It's been years since I studied a little French in the reservation school."

After a few more minutes of conversation the men began to visibly relax, as did Jersey. She put her M-16 on safety and slung it back behind her shoulder.

"It's OK. They're local farmers, taking a lunch break before going back to tending their crops."

"What do they say about the presence of hostiles?"

She shook her head. "They said there aren't any organized soldiers, just roving bands of thieves and cutthroats and gangbanger types. The soldiers all pulled out of this area a couple of weeks ago."

She walked up to the campfire, said a few more words, then bent over and took a bowl from one of the men and dipped it in the pot, filling it with what looked like a mixture of okra, rice, and chunks of some whitish meat.

"They said dig in. They've got plenty," she called back over her shoulder to Cooper.

"What is it?"

"What difference does it make? We're burning a lot of calories here, pal, and we need protein. Besides, it's mainly rice and okra, with some pepper seasoning, tomatoes, things like that."

Reluctantly, Cooper helped himself to a bowlful. After

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scooping it out with his fingers as the men were, he ate a handful. "Ummm, not too bad. Kind'a slimy, but okra always tastes like that to me. Pretty spicy too-almost like mandarin Chinese food from back in the states." He chewed some of the meat. "What is this meat? It tastes like chicken?"

She grinned at him. "Part of it's tree snake, and the rest is python."

Cooper almost choked, and he gagged and coughed. "What! You let me eat snake when you know how I hate them?"

She shrugged. "All the more reason to eat them, Coop. After all, that's what they try to do to you. What better revenge could you have?"

He thought about it for a moment, then began to eat again. "OK, I see your point. But just don't tell me there are spiders in here. That would be carrying things too far."

Between mouthfuls Jersey said, "They say we've only got about another sixty-five klicks to the Congo river. Other than roving bands of punks

and gangsters, we shouldn't have any problems."

He looked up over the rim of his bowl. "See if you can get a doggie bag of this stuff to take with us. I think I'm developing a taste for it."

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After watching Jersey and Cooper fall into the river, and spin around under the impact of dozens of machine gun bullets, Ben was only able to sleep fitfully.

Alternately angry and sad, he vacillated between morose sorrow and murderous rage at the fate of two of his best and oldest friends.

As he tossed and turned in his sleeping bag, he felt it would have been different if they had been killed while defending the SUSA from domestic enemies. Then their deaths would have meant something.

But to be mowed down in the prime of life in some godforsaken country halfway around the world, fighting to protect people who didn't give a rat's ass about them or their way of life, was an irony he had trouble dealing with.

He crawled out of his tent shortly before dawn, shaved, and dressed with full war pack, taking extra ammunition and magazines and stuffing them in every available pocket. He went to John Watson's tent and called softly, "John . . . wake up, John. I need to talk."

Watson pulled back his tent flap and stared out at Ben with bleary, red-rimmed eyes. "What is it, Ben? Are we under attack?"

"No, calm down. I just wanted to tell you I'm gonna

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take off for a day or two. I plan to travel with the Scouts, to get some firsthand experience with the tribes we're doing battle with, to see if I can find out why they've sided with Bottger."

Alarm showed on Watson's face. "You can't do that, Ben!" he whispered hoarsely. "It takes a special kind of soldier to be a Scout, and besides, you're too old."

Ben's eyes turned cold and harsh, causing the hair on the back of Watson's neck to stir. "John, I'm still Commander in Chief of the Rebel Army. Don't presume to tell me what I can and can't do!" he said, voice ringed with steel.

"I'm sorry, Ben. I didn't mean it that way, but at least take some of your personal team with you . . . for protection."

"It's not me that's gonna need protection, John. It's the enemy. You'll take over command until I return. If you have any questions or doubts about what's best to do bump John Michaels, or Ike McGowen if you can't get hold of John. They've both got sound military minds, and will give you good advice."

"When will you be back?"

"When I've killed enough of the bastards to get Jersey and Coop out of my mind."

He gave a half-salute, "See ya' later, partner."

Seconds later he disappeared in the darkness, headed south into the jungle.

In less than an hour, with dawn minutes away, he passed two Scout sentries, moving so silently in the dense undergrowth they weren't aware of his presence until he walked into the Scout camp.

Each Scout unit, depending on its specific operational orders, consisted often men, usually commanded by a sergeant.

This unit was under the leadership of Sergeant Bob

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Malloy, a six-and-a-half-foot giant of a man with whiskers tough enough to strike a match on, shoulders as wide as a carbine, and not an ounce of fat or a whit of mercy in his body.

Ben squatted next to his sleeping bag and touched his shoulder. Malloy came instantly awake, and with a lightning fast movement brought the tip of his K-Bar knife to Ben's throat.

"Oh, it's you, General." Malloy shook his head, then stared around the camp. "Where are my sentries, and how did you get past them?"

"They're still out there, Sergeant, but don't blame them for not seeing or hearing me. I was sneaking past sentries when they were still in diapers."

Malloy pursed his lips. "OK, General. What's up?" Malloy leaned up on one elbow, holding up a hand as one of his men, hearing voices, aimed his M-16 at Ben's back.

"I want to run with you for a while. You'll remain in command, and I'll just be one of your men for a day or two."

Malloy's forehead wrinkled. "I don't understand, General. What's going on?"

Ben hesitated for a moment, then spoke quietly. "Did you ever lose some of your men, Sergeant, men who were very close to you?"

Malloy nodded. "Yeah, but that's all part of the gig."

"I know, but last night I lost two of my closest team members, people who have been with me from almost the beginning of this war."

Malloy's eyes narrowed. "And now you've got the killin' rage, huh?"

Ben was glad to see the man understood. "Yeah. I want some blood, some revenge, and I want to do it personally, not at long range."

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"And you'll follow my orders? 'Cause I don't hanker to get me or my men killed on account of your taste for revenge."

"Yes, I'll follow your orders, Sergeant. If you doubt my ability, ask your sentries how I got by them."

Malloy rolled out of his sleeping bag. "OK, Boss. So, how about you gettin' the fire started and fixin' us some coffee while I scrape some of this hair off my face and brush my teeth?"

"Yes, sir," Ben answered with a mock salute.

Malloy scowled. "And don't call me sir! I ain't no officer, I work for a livin'!"

Ben grinned and began to build a fire and make coffee.

Malloy's team accepted Ben at face value. They had all had the killing rage before, and knew that only blood for blood could cure it. Otherwise, it would eat at a man and make him a danger to himself and his compatriots.

Over coffee and cigarettes the men asked Ben how the campaign in Africa was going. He told them what he knew, which wasn't much, since the other brigade commanders hadn't reported in for several days.

"Overall," he said, "I think Bottger's on the run. We haven't encountered any of his army for a week or more now, just local tribesmen he's hired to do his dirty work."

Malloy nodded, taking a final puff of his homemade and pinching off the fire. "Yeah, I think he's pullin' back for a final stand somewhere . . . probably where he'll have a tactical advantage, in the mountains or highlands so he can force a fight where our planes and helicopters won't be of much use."

Ben looked at Malloy, seeing him in a new light. "That's pretty astute, Bob. What makes you think that?"

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Malloy shrugged. " 'Cause it's what I'd do if I was gettin' my butt kicked by an army that had me out-manned and outgunned and had control of the air."

"That so?" Ben asked.

"Sure. I studied up on the old Viet Nam war. Hell, the Americans had better everything, and all the gooks had was the jungle and the sense not to take us on in a head-to-head fight. Every time they did, we kicked their ass. But in the jungles, where our tanks couldn't go, and our planes couldn't see to bomb or strafe, it was a different story."

Ben grinned. "Maybe we're wasting your talents as a Scout, Bob. Maybe we ought to have you in headquarters, in tactics."

"Oh no, Boss. I'll go AWOL 'fore I'll take a desk job." He looked around at the jungle on all sides. "This is what I like to do, what I live to do."

"Yeah, General ... I mean Boss," a lean, muscled Latino named Juan said from the other side of the fire, "if Sarge hasn't cut at least one throat by noon, he figures the day's wasted."

Ben laughed with the others. He was in. They considered him a team member, and would allow him to work with them without any trouble.

Ben's chronograph watch showed just after nine in the morning when he heard a double click on the combat mike all members of the team members wore.

Bob was on point, as was the Sergeant's right, and the double click was his signal that hostiles were ahead.

The team was spread out laterally in the jungle. Each man could barely make out the men on either side of him, only if he knew where they were. The Scouts were masters of camouflage, and blended into the jungle like chameleons on a leaf.

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A single click followed shortly, which meant hand-to-hand-knives, not pistols or rifles.

Good, Ben thought, just the way he wanted it. To get up close and personal, to reach out and touch someone, as the old commercials used to say.

He eased forward through leafy elephant ear plants and other low-lying bushes until he came upon a clearing. There, in the center of the open space, were about fifteen black natives. They were not farmers or 'civilians', for each man had an AK47 or some other type of automatic weapon next to him.

They were sitting on their haunches, eating rice and meat out of a pot, scooping it out with their fingers and then licking it off.

There didn't appear to be any sentries posted, so Ben assumed they felt they were safe in this area. That's probably the same thing Malloy figured, and why he didn't want to use any weapons that would reveal their presence. These soldiers evidently had colleagues nearby.

Ben readied himself, picking out his targets. He figured he could get the two nearest his position before they got off a shot, if he was quick enough and a little bit lucky.

When Malloy clicked the mike again the entire team rushed the group around the fire. It was eerie, because they made no sounds--no yelling or screaming--just a deadly quiet rush of death.

Ben made it almost to the first man before he even looked up. As his eyes rose to see Ben rushing him and his mouth opened to scream, Ben gave a quick forehand slash with the knife laid back along his wrist. It sliced through skin, tissue, and windpipe cartilage, catching a little as it nicked the man's neck vertebrae.

Other than a soft bubbly moan as the man choked

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on his own blood, no sound escaped before Ben was past the already dead man and headed for his next target. He didn't have time to check and see if the others were being successful. That was what being part of a team meant. You had to trust your fellow soldiers to do their duty, as you were doing yours.

Ben's second target had time to raise his AK47 and point it at Ben before he could get to him. Out of range of his K-Bar, Ben threw himself sideways in a spinning, jumping karate kick.

His combat boot caught the AK47 just in front of the stock and knocked it from the man's arms. The native spun around, caught himself, and drew a wicked looking machete from a scabbard on his belt.

He and Ben circled each other, each slowly waving his blade back and forth, looking for an opening. Out of the corner of his eye, Ben saw Malloy aim a pistol at his man.

Ben called out softly, "No, Bob. No noise. I can take him."

The rest of the team, done with their grisly handiwork, settled around in a circle to watch, wondering if the middle-aged general had it in him to take this tribesman-twelve inch knife against thirty-six-inch machete.

The man quickly stepped in, making two short, fast slashes with his machete. Ben caught the first on the knuckle guard of his knife, and slipped the second to the side.

As the man stumbled, off balance, he half turned away. Ben dropped the knife and stepped in and with a spinning Rik-hand blow, drove his middle two knuckles into the man's temple, fracturing his skull and killing him instantly.

The Scout team made no comment, showing they had known Ben could handle the situation without any

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problem. They began to gather weapons and ammunition to stash it all in the jungle, where it couldn't be found and used against The Rebel Army.

Malloy had managed to capture his man alive, and began the interrogation. Though it made him uncomfortable to watch the torture, Ben sat through it with no expression on his face. He knew the enemy would do much worse to any Rebel soldier they captured.

Malloy found out there were in fact many more soldiers, nearby and to the east. He radioed their location back to Michaels at headquarters, then turned to his men.

"Do you want to wait for the whirlybirds to come in and blast 'em, or do

you want to have a little fun ourselves?"

The vote was unanimous.

The ten Scouts and Ben then managed to sneak up on and attack from all sides a force of approximately one hundred native soldiers.

This time, there was no effort to be silent. After all Malloy's forces had taken out the sentries that were posted, they gathered in a circle around the force and simultaneously threw fragmentation grenades into the midst of the soldiers.

As these exploded they rushed the group, screaming loudly, some with old Confederate Rebel yells, others with Indian type yelps. The Scouts had weapons on full automatic fire, with magazines taped back-to-back for quick reloading and shotguns on straps around shoulders.

The battle was over in less than five minutes, with only one Scout wounded. He took a slug through the fleshy part of his flank, and protested mightily when Malloy told him he would have to return to base for medical treatment with the choppers when they arrived.

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After the Apache and Huey gunships did arrive, they expressed their disappointment at being kept out of the action. They picked up the wounded Scout and Ben, who decided he had satisfied his killing rage and could go back to being a CG again.

Just before he boarded the chopper, each of the Scouts took his hand.

Malloy said, "Boss, any time you get tired of all the bullshit that comes with being a leader, you're welcome to come visit me for a little . . . break."

"Thanks, Bob. I may just take you up on that," Ben said as he climbed into the Huey. "Take care, guys."

Back at the base, John Watson was much relieved to relinquish command to Ben, and Ben's team was so furious with him they would hardly speak to him for several hours.

They finally calmed down when he explained why he did what he did, and promised next time not to go off having so much fun unless he took them with him.

It was six more days before Ben and his troops arrived at the north bank of the Congo River, which served as the border for, and ran between, Cabinda and Angola.

John Michaels had already had the engineers build pontoon bridges across the river, so Ben and his men just walked across.

"Hello, Ben. You have any trouble getting here?" Michaels asked.

Ben's eyes clouded. "Just the first night. We were attacked by some native forces, and we lost Coop and Jersey."

Michaels threw his head back and stared upward. "Shit!" He shook his head, "That's too bad. Confirmed kills?"

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"No. So I plan to leave a small force of men, including paramedics, here for at least a week in case they make it this far."

Michaels nodded. "Will do. I'll arrange it with Doc Lamar. We'll leave some Scouts to protect the medics, and a couple of gunships with crew. That way, if they make it they can join us down south later."

"What have you found out while waiting for us to get here? Any news?"

"Plenty. Come on over to my CP tent and I'll fill you in."

Ben turned to Corrie. "See that the team gets food, and any medical attention they need. We'll bivouac here tonight and get some rest before proceeding."

Michaels had a map spread out on a folding table when Ben entered his tent.

He pointed to the northern half of Angola, on the eastern coast. "I sent some P-40s and P-51s on recon flights to see what's going on south of us."

He looked up into Ben's eyes. "The pilots all report the same thing. There is very little sign of life in the whole of Angola. Thousands and thousands of bodies- human, animal-practically all warm-blooded mammals have been affected."

"What does Doc Chase say?"

Michaels shrugged. "He says he can't be sure, but it looks like some sort of bacterial warfare agent, anthrax probably. He says if it was gas it would have killed all life-birds, insects, everything. If it was viral it would not have affected both animal and human species, so that pretty much leaves anthrax or something like it, the doc says."

Ben nodded. "No sign of hostiles?"

"Ben, I'm tellin' you, nothing bigger than a lizard is alive in the entire country, at least as far as the southern

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edge of the desert. That's as far as my planes could get and return without refueling."

"What do you hear from the other brigade commanders?"

"They all seem to have made better time than we have. Ike McGowen and 502 is already on the Angola-Zambia border, almost to Botswana. The rest are spread out across the continent."

Ben's forehead wrinkled and he looked puzzled. "But why has it been so easy?"

"I don't know, but most of the other commanders say their only resistance has been native troops. It's as if Bottger has pulled his army all the way back to South Africa, leaving only the dregs of his African troops to hold us up."

Ben struck the table with his fist. "But he knows we'll blow right through them. Hell, even his seasoned troops and meres couldn't stop us."

Ben thought for a moment, then said, "Let me see those aerial photos again."

As he looked at the thousands of dead bodies, he began to smile a tight-lipped smile. "Of course. He used the bacterial agents, not knowing we'd already been vaccinated against them. He hoped to let the bacteria decimate our troops, then form a counter-offensive after we'd been weakened by the African troops and his bacterial agents."

Ben looked up at Michaels. "The fool has made a fatal error, John. We're here on his doorstep, and we're at practically full strength, converging on him rapidly instead of being strung out across half the continent."

Ben laughed. "If his Intelligence is any good, the bastard's probably sweating blood right about now."

John nodded, smiling. "I bet you're right, Ben. We'll be in the asshole's face within a week."

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Ben stretched. "How about some grub? My team hasn't eaten since this morning."

"The mess tent's set up and ready. Then you and your people can get some sleep, and we'll make our plans in the morning."

"Right. By the way, does Soyo have an airfield that can handle C-130s?"

"Sure, why?"

Ben grinned, but there was no mirth in it. "Because I don't plan to waste any time slogging our way across Angola or risk some infection that Dr. Chase hadn't planned for. I want those transport planes here as soon as you can get them here. We're gonna cross Angola in style, at twenty thousand feet. We'll land just past the Angolan desert, then roll on into Namibia and Botswana at the same time the other battalions do."

Ben walked to the door of the tent and paused. "We'll present our friend Bottger with a line of troops and materiel stretching all the way across Africa, and we'll push his butt into the sea."

"Or crush him where he stands," Michaels added.

"You got that right, partner. Now, where did you say that mess tent was?" Ben laughed. "Suddenly, my appetite is much better."

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General Mabota had his mixed-blood Bantu tribesmen spread out along the

banks of the Zambezi River in Zambia, more than three hundred of his best fighters, armed with Soviet-made AK47 rifles, mortars, grenade launchers, and hand-held Russian rocket launchers.

Word had come to Bottger from one of his New World Order mobil command posts in central Zaire that the clever Rebel general, Ben Raines, was pulling battalions back toward the sea coast. The Nazis had no idea what sort of bizarre strategy was behind this move by Raines and his Rebel army. It did not seem to make any sense.

But one thing Bottger had learned from his previous encounters with Ben Raines was caution, for it seemed General Raines was always able to second-guess moves made by the Nazis and their paid assassins and mercenary groups in Africa.

Bruno Bottger prided himself on his knowledge of military strategy and guerilla tactics, yet it seemed he was one step behind this American Rebel general in virtually every engagement the two armies had. Raines had some sort of uncanny ability to predict where Bottger would attack him, and the Rebels' ability to move through jungles and high plateaus, crossing riv-

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ers like the Zambezi with relative ease and unbelievable speed, made it difficult, if not impossible, to corner him, even with a force far superior to his in number.

Almost all the Rebel brigades had the same knack for eluding pursuit, even by warlords commanding jungle tribesmen from the regions where these battles were being fought.

This was troubling news when Bottger hired Mabota to recruit new fighting men from the hundreds of Bantu tribes spread across the Republic of Zambia and neighboring Zaire.

Word had spread quickly through the jungles about how many tribesmen had been killed by forces under the command of General Raines in northern Africa, and now, as Raines appeared to be concentrating his forces in the central and southern part of the continent, tribal elders were counseling their young fighting men to decline the money Bottger and his Nazis were offering to join the war on their side, a thing called The New World Order.

However, the money Bottger offered was too much for Mabota and his tribesmen to ignore, even after the Nazi commander told him all these things about the Rebel Army and how difficult they were to fight.

Bottger said they came from some part of the old United States, called The SUSA, and they were friendly toward the new country formed after the final war- The Southern United States of America with a president frequently seen on television worldwide, Cecil Jefferys. That Jefferys was a black man made no difference to Mabota. He had been betrayed by black leaders in Africa before, and knew that the color of a man's skin meant little if his heart were in the wrong place.

These things were already known to Mabota when he

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was contacted by Bruno Bottger to join the fight to drive the Rebel armies out of Africa. But things had not gone well. The commander of the Rebel armies outwitted Bottger too often, and often out-fought his soldiers.

Mabota smiled inwardly. All this would change now, with his army of mercenaries and experienced jungle warriors joining the fight. This General Raines, whoever he was, was about to be taught a lesson in real jungle guerilla warfare when one of his prize brigades tried to cross the Zambezi River here-if Mabota's Intelligence was correct, he was certain of victory.

The jungle river bottom was quiet, save for the occasional call of wild animals echoing through the rain forest. Elephants and hippos could be found all along the length of the Zambezi River, but Mabota knew they were relatively harmless, unless you managed to get between a mother and her calf, or disturb them during mating season.

Mabota spoke to Binda, his most trusted lead scout.

"You are sure this is where they will cross? We have been waiting for so long."

Binda nodded. "This is the only place where the tanks and heavy trucks will not be swept downriver on their portable floating bridges. The current is not strong here, and the river is narrower."

An ebony-skinned tribesman came running along the riverbank with his rifle cradled in the crook of his arm. He kept to the shadows below leafy palms to keep from being seen, to keep the light from the sun reflecting off his gun barrel from warning enemy scouts of his presence. He wore a camouflage shirt and sandals, an odd combination of the Western World and Nazi dress along with his native garb.

But what did it matter what a seasoned soldier wore? Mabota asked himself. How many of the enemy could

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he kill with his AK47 and other Russian materiel? This was what Bruno Bottger was paying for with his mercenary money . . . the very highest death toll possible to the Rebels. The head of the Nazis wanted General Mabota's men to kill them all, leaving no survivors.

"They come now," Binda said. "Lozo is running to bring us the news."

"Spread the word. Tell everyone to wait until they begin to set up their floating bridge. Then I will give the signal. The mortars will pound their tanks and trucks to pieces. This will be a short fight. The rockets will destroy their flying helicopter gunships. Bruno Bottger and his government will be most pleased."

As he said this he heard a noise from the skies.

Off in the distance the hammer of a helicopter gun-ship's blades reached

Mabota.

"Here come the helicopters," he said, turning east. "Let our Zulu mercenaries train their rocket launchers on these Rebel metal birds, but only after the engineers try to set up the bridge."

"We have our mortars and launchers well hidden in the forest canopy," Binda said. "The Zulus from Zanzibar were trained by Bottger's best men. They will not miss."

Mabota, the self-styled general of a group of bandits and raiders from Zambia, plus half a hundred or so Zulu mercenaries, were good at their specific jobs.

He had every confidence his army would easily defeat this force. But as he thought about what he'd heard regarding this General Ben Raines and his 501 Brigade, he had experienced some doubts.

Engaging 501 of the Rebel Army was Bruno Bottger's responsibility, and the money being paid to Mabota and his Bantu people was to eliminate only those attempting to cross Mabota's territory.

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The hammering of the gunships grew louder. "They are near us now," Binda said.

Lozo trotted up to the edge of the riverbank where Mabota and Binda were watching the predicted crossing place.

"They come. The singing birds made of metal are in the sky as we speak . . . you can hear them."

"Take your position," Mabota snapped, training his field glasses on the rain forest skies, where the sounds of helicopters could be heard.

"Only three of the chopper gunships," he said to Binda, adjusting focus with his thumb and forefinger. "We could shoot them down easily now, but we must wait for the tanks and the trucks. We do not wish to turn this army back into the jungle, or to the high country plateaus. It is very important that we crush this brigade and destroy it completely. Bottger says that bunch has been nipping at his flank for many months."

"They come," Lozo promised, taking off into the jun-gle.

Mabota thought about what he knew regarding The SUSA-eleven states in the former United States who banded together and sent forth this Rebel army to put down the Nazi movement-their focus now on Africa, where Bruno Bottger commanded forces loyal to The New World Order.

Things had gone well, according to news broadcasts on television and radio, until General Ben Raines showed up in various regions with his Rebel army. They were good fighters, well trained, heavily armed, and determined. It was no wonder they'd been able to defeat so many tribal warlords in other African states so easily.

Of course, Mabota thought, those other warlords were not as good as I am. Most of them knew little of modern weapons,

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thinking the old rifles they had were adequate to the task of defeating Ben Raines and his troops.

But that would soon change, Bruno had promised, now that he had new equipment and helicopter gun-ships from the Soviets, and more modern tanks. Some were on their way to Zambia now, along with officers to train Mabota's men how to use them.

"The battle will soon begin," he said to Binda. "We will be victorious. We will quickly earn the money Bottger has offered us to eliminate this nuisance."

The first thundering blast of mortar fire and the hiss of a rocket launcher announced the attack on the Rebels.

A huge helicopter gunship, hovering above the river, was struck by a Soviet-made missile from a hand-held launcher. The helicopter exploded with a mighty roar, becoming a ball of flame, an inferno ablaze in the sky until it came apart in pieces, surrounded by a fireball so large it reached from one side of the Zambezi River to the other, igniting palm leaves and limbs as its highly explosive fuel sprayed the forest canopy when the tanks ruptured.

"Yes," Mabota whispered, watching from his camouflage net where he directed his men in the attack on the elusive enemies of The New World Order. This was going to be simple, as easy as he'd told Bottger it would be if he paid him the right amount of money for his brave jungle warriors to join the fight.

Now the tanks were coming. The huge, canvas-backed trucks began to unload sections of the portable bridge even as one of the Rebel force's helicopters was shot down. Mabota could hear the clank of steel tracks moving through the jungle toward the river. The Rebel sol-

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diers were firing back into the forests beside the river, but they had no targets, were simply spraying bullets in all directions.

They were fools, not the good soldiers Bottger said they were, continuing with their bridge building as if they could cross over any time they wished. Their Intelligence was very poor, for they did not know Mabota's army was hidden all around them now, waiting until he gave the order to launch a full-scale attack.

"Give the signal for the mortars to fire," he said to Binda.

Binda spoke softly into the walkie-talkie, speaking in Swahili so the enemy would not understand even if they somehow could scan their radio transmissions. "They have their bridge completed, and now the tanks will try to cross."

A mortar sent a shell speeding into the turret and steel tracks of a

tank midway across the floating bridge crossing the Zambezi. The tank burst into flame. Then its payload of shells exploded, blasting the bridge sections into fragments. Flying steel ripped through the jungle undergrowth, shredding everything in its wake just as the tank's fuel caught fire.

"You see?" Mabota said to Binda.

"Yes. Our plan is working."

Mabota smiled broadly. "And because I was expecting them to send scouts ahead to see if all was clear, our deception was perfect. We let their scouts think the way was open, when our Zulus could easily have ambushed them in the jungle."

"You are a great general indeed, Mabota. All of Zambia will soon know of our glorious victory over the Rebels."

A sudden burst of automatic weapons fire came from behind them, from the wrong place.

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Mabota jerked his head around to see where the shooting was coming from.

"What was that?"

Binda was just as puzzled. "I do not know, General. We have no warriors there. ..."

Seconds later a chorus of heavy bore automatic rifles burst to life in the jungle. Men were screaming in agony, and fear, as the gunfire continued.

Mabota frowned. "Something is wrong. Go and see what it is, and who is doing the shooting."

Binda was clearly frightened. "It must be a group of the Rebels. How did they slip up behind us?"

Mabota wheeled on Binda. "That was your responsibility, to see this did not happen. You were ordered to post lookouts at our rear and our flanks."

"But I did, General. They are good men. . . ."

"Not good enough," Mabota snapped. "Those are the cries of our wounded."

"But it cannot be," Binda protested as he watched Lozo and his younger brother, Miloa, stagger from a stand of trees clutching their bleeding bellies without their weapons.

Mabota tasted fear on his tongue. "The Rebels have tricked us," he said. "This is not possible!" he screamed, his heart hammering in his chest.

Shadows moved all around Mabota's command post now, and he knew they did not belong to his warriors. His heart was pounding, and sweat was running down his forehead and into his eyes. He could smell his own fear-sweat, and then he heard the mortars slow their rhythmic firing toward the enemy. And another sound came from the skies, more of the

deadly helicopter gun-ships approaching the river.

Mabota turned again to Binda. "Your carelessness may get all of us killed," he yelled, jerking his 9mm

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pistol from its holster. "I trusted you to make certain no enemy soldiers could get behind us! You betrayed my trust!"

He aimed for a spot between Binda's dark brown eyes and pulled the trigger of his automatic Steyer. Seven shots barked in rapid succession from the muzzle, hard to hear above the thumping of the helicopter gunship's blades as he screamed, "You betrayed me, Binda! You betrayed all of us!"

The back of Binda's skull was torn apart as the bullets passed through his brain. Bits of hair, bone, and brain tissue flew away from his head as he was lifted off his feet, landing limply on the jungle floor below the camouflage netting covering the command post.

"Traitor!" Mabota cried, ejecting the spent clip from his pistol. He felt no remorse for having killed his longtime scout and friend. Mabota felt nothing at all. The general of an army could not afford emotions when he uncovered a traitor in his midst.

More automatic rifle fire came from the jungle undergrowth behind his soldiers' lines. He shoved a fresh clip into his gun, cupped one hand around his mouth, and yelled an order to turn and fight the enemy approaching from the rear.

As he prepared to shout his orders in the Bantu tongue, a bullet from a CAR-Colt automatic rifle-entered his chest, cracking open his rib cage. He staggered backward, feeling incredible pain shooting through his entire body. He tried to move, to run for cover, but his arms and legs would not obey his commands.

He slumped to the ground on his knees as though he meant to pray, still holding his 9mm in his right fist. A thousand strange thoughts passed through his mind at once, and he feared he might be dying.

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When his knees would no longer support his weight, he went to the ground face-first, his vision blurred.

He opened his eyes, but his vision blurred as helicopter gunships began to strafe the positions his men held along the banks of the Zambezi River. All around him his soldiers were screaming, dying. Everything had gone wrong and Binda, his lead scout, was to blame.

A fuzzy shape appeared above him. He blinked in spite of his terrible pain. He saw a hazy apparition.

"You must be General Mabota," the figure said softly, smiling as if they were at a formal tea at the embassy, showing rows of even white teeth.

"Before I open you up for the ants and hyenas to begin feeding, I want you to see, that your little ambush did not work as well as you'd hoped."

Mabota could barely hear the words with the chopper blades thumping over the river and the banging of guns, yet he understood that the phantom speaker seemed to be enjoying himself when he told him his plan had failed. And now, he meant to kill him.

He tried to speak. "How . . . did . . . you . . . know?" he gasped, finding it hard to breathe.

"All too simple, General. You did the most obvious thing, trying to attack us where we'd be forced to cross the Zambezi. Any child could have figured this out."

"What? A child?"

The apparition gave him a mirthless smile. "Enough talking, General. We have a river to cross, as soon as we annihilate every soldier you have . . . those who haven't already run away to hide in the jungle."

A hand came down suddenly, and Mabota felt a blade tear open his flesh. His eyelids batted closed, and he began the long sleep of his Zambian forefathers.

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Colonel Marsh wiped the blood off his hands, using the pants leg of his fatigues. He stared down at the corpse of General Mabota, his thickly muscled ebony body still quivering with death throes.

The jungle and river bottom still rang with battle sounds, the chatter of machine guns and the occasional roar of a diesel engine as another tank maneuvered its way across the float bridge after the damaged tank was towed away. A pontoon supporting the bridge in one spot was damaged, but still able to provide flotation until it could be repaired, she hoped.

Bob Warren, his aide, came walking into the shadows provided by the camouflage netting, his CAR rifle dangling from his right shoulder by a strap. He nodded to Marsh as mosquitos swarmed around them. He batted the bugs away from his face as a mortar thudded close by.

"We lost one Apache, and just one tank," he said, staring at the dead guerilla leader briefly.

"Yeah." Marsh sighed. "But the tank was one of our Abrams. It shouldn't have been the first to cross, and I want to know who the hell's responsible."

"Probably Duckworth, seein' as he's in charge of armored lineup."

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Bob's southern accent was thick, easily recognizable even in the dark when he couldn't see his face.

"I'll have his ass." Marsh said it bitterly, for an Abrams tank was too precious for his weakened unit to lose now.

"One of the M48A3s broke down at the head of the column," Bob said. "One track sheared a gear, or some-thin'. I heard somebody talkin' about it."

"That's no excuse," Marsh snapped. "We can't afford to lose a single Abrams."

Bob tried to change the subject. "This must be the big bad General Mabota, the bastard who was gonna destroy us before we got out of Zambia, accordin' to the secretary to Zambian President Chiluba."

"That was him. He isn't going to win any more battles after today."

"He's an ugly bastard. Biggest head I ever saw in my life, an' flat as a board. So much for all the bullshit we heard about him bein' the toughest warlord we'd face crossin' Zambia. Him an' his Zulu mercenaries just sat here waitin' for us like ducks frozen to a lake."

"Our Intelligence from Mike Post warned that Mabota would have Russian pocket rockets. That part was right. I hate it we lost Jimmy and his Apache chopper. Jimmy Stone was a helluva good soldier, and one of the best gunship pilots in any battalion we have."

"I know," Bob said. "I liked Jimmy a lot. General Raines ain't gonna be happy to hear we lost him."

"Ben understands the casualties of war better than any man on earth. He'll understand. We could easily have lost a lot more good soldiers to Mabota if he hadn't been so stupid, to set up for us here."

"He wasn't too much in the smarts department, that's for sure. A river is the first place we expected him. Can't figure how come he wouldn't know that."

Marsh watched another fifty-five ton Abrams com-

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mence the crossing, teetering dangerously when it came to the weak spot in the bridge.

"These African warlords are smart in many ways, but they haven't had much experience in modern warfare. We had him badly outgunned, too, if it hadn't been for those rockets Bottger sent him. The one that hit Jimmy sounded like our TOW Dragons, the way it hissed. I was pretty close to the spot where it was launched."

"I got a glimpse of the rocket that got our Abrams. Just like our HEAT antitankers, only maybe a little weaker. Dave Boyd an' Sammie Watkins were inside. Good Armored Division men, only Sammie never was feelin' just right after he got bitten by that poisonous snake. Said he felt sick to his stomach all the time after that."

Marsh watched the tank crawl out on the far river-bank as the blasting gunfire died down along the Zambezi River valley. A pair of APCs entered the bridge when the tank was clear.

"We've all endured a lot of hardship on this campaign," he said, a note

of sorrow in his voice he couldn't control. "We've lost a lot of good friends in Africa, and it isn't over yet. Ben thinks Bottger will come at him hard when he sees Ben's forces pulling back toward the coast. Let's hope he does. Ben and everybody else has worked hard to make this appear to be a retreat, or a pullout."

"O'Shea radioed in from 510. They aren't meetin' any resistance to speak of."

"They haven't gotten out of Zaire into Angola yet. That's where Ben expects things to get tougher. We'll be facing some of The New World's best troops and war machinery in Angola, if Ben is right."

"General Raines is nearly always right."

Marsh gave Bob a faint smile. "That's why he's in

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command of the Rebel Army, Captain Warren. He knows more about guerilla war than any soldier in uniform. His record speaks for him."

"I'll say. Ten years or more of civil war, and now this here African campaign for SUSA. So many before this one, too. We've seen our share of battles, in nearly every place anyone can think of."

"Ben believes in what we're doing. The concept is what he is fighting to protect, where people must take responsibility for their own actions, and that includes paying the price if they break the law. I agree with Ben," he said, after a moment. "Society isn't to blame for what had happened before the war. It was people-liberal politicians-and a bunch of damn civil rights legislation that let a criminal get better treatment than some individual who's honest and works for a living. I'm glad all that has changed in our part of the world."

The chatter of an automatic rifle crackled from a spot in the jungle, and someone screamed. Upriver, the deadly whisper of a grenade launcher warned of the explosion immediately following the launcher's noise. Trees and undergrowth were ripped to shreds, and there was more screaming following the concussion of the grenade.

Marsh could see shadowy figures running away from the river. What was left of General Mabota's mercenary army was in full retreat.

Then it seemed the battle sounds virtually stopped, with only a rare gunshot or two along the river's edge. Only the hum of the helicopters' rotors filled the silence, and the rustle of forest leaves from the downwash of the props sounding quietly in the background.

"Looks like it's nearly over," Bob remarked.

Marsh was watching one of his Scouts, Sergeant Pe-

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ters, make his way through a dense rain forest grove with a prisoner.

Peters held a gun to the back of the man's head, shoving him violently a couple of times when he slowed down.

"Why is Peters bringing this guy in?" Marsh asked, thinking aloud. "We aren't taking any prisoners. Those were Ben's last orders."

"Maybe Sergeant Peters thinks this guy knows some-thing real important," Bob said. "He wouldn't be bringin' him to you, otherwise."

"Maybe." Marsh hoped Bob was right about his guess, that a reason existed for bringing in a prisoner.

Sergeant Peters ushered a slender black boy wearing faded green fatigues and sandals over to the command post. The kid looked frightened, his hands clasped behind his neck as Peters had ordered.

"Got somebody for you, Colonel," Peters said around a plug of chewing tobacco. "Listen to what this boy has to say. He speaks real good English, like most of 'em here in Zambia we run across."

The boy said nothing at first, looking at Marsh with a strange expression on his face.

"Speak up, asshole!" Peters growled, "or I'm gonna put a big tunnel through your head."

Peters was well known for his penchant for violence. He seemed to enjoy the killing, and he was one of Jackie's most reliable Scouts.

Scouts were made up mostly of the same kind of men who were known as LRRPs in Vietnam, pronounced Lurps. The letters stood for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols, and the Rebel Scouts were made up of the most violent trouble-hunting men and women on the face of the earth.

Like the LRRPs, the Rebel Scouts prided themselves

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on being the elite of the elite when it came to murder and mayhem.

"Many soldiers from New Order come soon," the boy stammered, his English accented by his Bantu upbringing.

"How do you know this? And which direction are they coming from?" Marsh asked.

"General Mabota says so. Big German come to talk to him, and he say sending many soldiers from another place this week. Come down from the north, he say."

"Was the big German's name Bruno Bottger?"

"I did not hear his name," the kid replied quickly, his arms and lips trembling with fear the minute he recognized the body of General Mabota lying behind Marsh and Bob. Mabota was no longer quivering, or breathing, and the flow of blood had slowed when his heart finally stopped beating.

Marsh judged the boy was probably only fifteen or so, and it would be a shame to execute him, as his orders said he must. But he needed to know if he knew anything else of importance to the Rebels.

"What else did General Mabota or this German say?"

The young soldier's eyes went askance for a time, then he looked up. "General Mabota say you all die when big airplanes come. He say we stay other side of Zambezi River after next week, when airplanes come with bombs."

"On the other side?" he asked.

The boy nodded.

"But that was based on his belief that he'd be able to stop us here," Marsh said.

Now the young teenage soldier shrugged. "That's what General Mabota say to us. We go across and not come back until after big bombs. We hide in jungle."

Peters spoke. "Can't trust what anybody told

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Mabota," he said, " 'specially if it was Bottger. Bottger wouldn't mind droppin' bombs or napalm on his own hired mercenaries, if it suited his purposes. He ain't got no loyalty to nobody, even these boys who fought on his side."

"That's true," Marsh said.

He turned to Bob. "Radio General Raines with the information we just heard. Encode it with the Beta filter transmission. Ask the general what he thinks this means, if it's propaganda. He may want to change our orders."

"I'll get it off right away," Bob said, wheeling to leave the canopy netting.

"One more thing," Marsh added. "Inform him that we have cleared the crossing, and that General Mabota is dead. We'll continue across, unless we get different orders."

"Gotcha," Bob said, taking off in a trot for the truck hauling their specialized radio gear moving with the column to the bridge.

Marsh glanced up at a pair of Apache gunships hovering up and down the river at low altitude, making sure no enemy soldiers with rocket launchers got close to the bridge while the battalion was crossing. The choppers were equipped with twin 40mm cannons and M60 machine guns, making them deadly war machines during an assault.

All week they'd been expecting to sight Hind M24 D&E Russian helicopter gunships, the best attack helicopters the Nazis had in Africa. But nothing had been picked up on radar, not even a spy plane or a fighter.

"Are you done questionin' him?" Peters asked, punching the rear of the boy's head with the muzzle of his Beretta 9mm.

"No more questions," he said.

Peters jerked the young mercenary around by his shirt

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collar, and before Marsh could utter a word Peters's gun exploded three times at the base of the boy's skull.

Pieces of the soldier's face flew off as the slugs exited through his nose and one eye socket. A shower of crimson went splattering over the ground as the boy tumbled forward, landing on his chest, his pulverized features scarcely resembling those of a man.

Marsh did not flinch. In his years with the Rebel Army he had seen death in every possible form. In the beginning it had bothered him a little, especially when one of his own soldiers was killed in action. But no longer.

But that was long ago, when the global conflicts first began, and now he was hardened. He was the commander of a crack army strike force, and there was no room for sentiment of any kind. He had a job to do, and he was damn good at it.

"Make sure the mop up is complete," he told Peters as he prepared to walk down to the floating bridge to have a word with Sergeant Duckworth about losing a valuable Abrams tank.

"Don't you worry none," Peters replied, heading back into the jungle. "There ain't gonna be none of the sons of bitches left by the time we're done. By the way, Commander . . . nice job cuttin' up that General Mabota. Couldn't have done no better at it myself."

The remark caused Marsh to pause, and to look back at what he had done to Mabota.

After a moment, he shook his head. "Screw it," he said out loud. "I don't have time for this shit!"

He turned and walked rapidly toward where his troops were gathered. "Duckworth, I want your sorry ass front and center, now!" he yelled.

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Ben and his team, along with several hundred men of his unit, were in the lead C130 transport flying over Angola.

Grabbing the intercom mike hanging over his head, Ben said, "Captain, could you descend to as low an altitude as you're comfortable with for a while? I'd like to see what the countryside looks like below us."

A tinny voice answered, "Sure, General, 'cept I'm worried about SAM missiles. These birds are big and slow, and make a tempting target for any hostiles down below."

"Don't worry about that, Captain. My Intelligence assures me there are

no hostiles, and damn near nobody else, left alive in Angola to fire on us."

Beth grabbed her ears, a pained expression on her face as the big aircraft went nose down in a rapid dive. "Jesus, it feels as if my ears are going to explode."

Anna handed her a stick of chewing gum. "Here, Beth. Chew this. It'll make you swallow and equalize the pressure in your eustachian tubes. That'll stop the pain."

"Thanks."

Ben leaned to the side and stared out the small porthole sized windows in the C130. Hair on the back of

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his neck stirred, and gooseflesh appeared on his arms at the sight below.

As far as the eye could see were thousands of buzzards and other carrion eaters, feasting on the millions of carcasses spread over the landscape below. As they rose and flew and settled again, it gave the appearance of giant waves on a black ocean, roiling in the wind.

He turned to Dr. Lamar Chase, sitting on the hard bench next to him. "Doc, are birds immune to anthrax?"

"Yeah, usually. Why?"

"Take a look out your window."

Chase turned his head and peered below for a moment, then turned back to face the interior of the aircraft, his face pale. "Dear God, I hope I never have to see anything like that again."

"Well?" Ben asked.

"It seems that the particular bacterial agent Bottger used, whether it be anthrax or something similar, affects only mammals. Birds, reptiles like crocodiles and monitor lizards and snakes, and insects don't seem to be affected."

Ben shook his head. "I guess it's a good thing. Otherwise, those bodies would be there for years, fouling the environment irretrievably."

Chase glared at him through red-rimmed eyes. "There is another possible benefit. If the carrion eaters consume the bodies, perhaps the bacteria won't have time to form spores, and someday the area will be suitable for human habitation again."

Ben's eyebrows raised. "What do you mean?"

Chase leaned his head back against the wall of the airplane. "In World War II the allies spread anthrax bacteria over some islands near the Scottish coast that were inhabited by Nazis. The bacteria formed spores,

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which can last for hundreds of years in the right climate and then reawaken, so to speak, to become infectious once again. After the war it took over twenty-five years and hundreds of millions of dollars for the government to eradicate the infection and make the islands livable once more. And that was only a few hundred square miles of area."

He pointed over his shoulder. "There you have millions of square miles of land that may never support mammalian life again."

Ben shook his head. "More and more for Bottger to answer for. The man must be a maniac to unleash something like that, which he must know can't be controlled, on this land."

Chase shrugged. "What does he care? The only inhabitants are black people, and we know how he feels about anyone who isn't up to his elitist standards."

Ben got on the intercom and told the captain he could resume his previous altitude. Then he turned to Corrie. "Bump Michaels and make sure his scout planes have checked out our landing sites just south of the Angolan desert, and that there is no sign of the anthrax infection there."

"Sure thing, Boss. But why worry? We've all been inoculated."

Doctor Chase wagged his finger at her. "Corrie, my dear. One must never assume that what killed all those people and animals down there is the same strain we've been vaccinated against." He shook his head. "I, for one, sure wouldn't want to take it on faith that's the same bug Bottger used in Cameroon, not without running a lot of tests first. In fact, given a choice, I wouldn't set foot in Angola unless I was wearing a Racal biohazard suit."

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Corrie nodded. "In that case, neither would I, Doc Lamar."

She bent over her radio, shielding the mouthpiece with her hands to try to block out some of the noise from the four big engines of the C130 as she spoke to Michaels.

Chase turned to Ben. "Any word of Cooper or Jersey yet?"

Ben's lips were pressed tight. "No, but I don't expect to hear for another twenty-four to forty-eight hours, at least."

Chase nodded. "I feel sure they're all right, Ben. Jersey wouldn't let anything happen to Cooper, nor he her. For two people who fight all the time, there is a real deep affection between them."

Ben lips curved in a slight smile. "I'd give anything I own to hear them going at each other again. I miss it."

Looking at his watch, Ben said, "OK, team. We've got another four hours of flying time, so break open your rations and try to get some food and water down. We may not have much time to eat and drink after we unload."

Anna looked at him. "Why? Are you expecting trouble?"

"We're gonna be close to the border of Namibia, and I have a sneaking suspicion that's where Bottger is going to draw a line in the sand. He can't pull his troops much farther back and still keep us out of flying range of his base in South Africa."

"So you feel that the action is going to heat up as soon as we near the border?"

He nodded. "If not before. Remember, we're not exactly dealing with a man who has both oars in the water."

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It's hard to predict how an insane man will react. But it's certainly what I'd do if I were in his situation."

Anna lay back on the bench. "In that case, I'm going to try and get some shut-eye. I don't want to miss any of the action later."

Chase pointed a finger at her. "First, young lady, do as Ben says and put some protein and fluids into your system. Remember, here in the tropics you can become dehydrated very rapidly, and you can't very well fight if you're suffering from heat exhaustion."

Anna gave him a mock salute. "Yes sir, Doctor." Then she grinned and popped open a MRE packet. "Talk about false advertising," she said, reading the label. "This says Meals Ready to Eat-Pork and Beans."

She turned up her nose. "I doubt if there's enough pork in this package to register on a microscope."

Beth held up her packet. "I think MRE stands for Monkey Rations, Extraordinare."

Mike Post, getting into the spirit of the game, showed his bag of spaghetti and meatballs, saying, "Mine is Morgue Remains, Entrails."

Ben shook his head, laughing. "Okay, gang, enough is enough. When they said an army travels on its stomach, they definitely weren't referring to MREs. Just eat 'em and shut up about it."

It was just under three hours later, thanks to favorable tailwinds, when the big birds landed in southern Angola, just beyond a large expanse of sand dunes and desert scrubland. They hadn't seen any bodies for over a hundred miles, so Doctor Chase said he thought it was safe to put down.

As the C130s were being unloaded of men and materiel, Ben met with John Michaels to discuss their plan of action. They went into the CP tent and spread a map of Africa on a table, then bent over it together.

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"John, I think we should just mount the troops in an offensive line and

drive straight south, curving a little to the west toward the area around Johannesburg and Pretoria. If Bottger has a command post in South Africa it'll probably be in one of those two areas."

Michaels nodded. "I agree. I've heard from Ike and the 502, and he's moving south fast, just inside Zambia near the Angolan border. The only resistance he's faced so far are renegades and punk gangs, no real army or organized forces at all."

Ben looked up. "Did you warn him to stay out of Angola?"

"Yeah. He says there're quite a few dead bodies in eastern Zambia too, probably due to crosswind contamination of some of the anthrax bacteria from Angola to the east."

"Either that or sick animals traveling across the border before they die, and infecting others."

Corrie stuck her head in the tent. "Excuse me, Boss. Colonel Marsh is on the horn, and wants to speak to you."

Ben took the radio and said, "Hey, Colonel. How are things going for you and the strike force?"

"Pretty well, General. We've totally destroyed General Mabota and his so-called army. They tried to take us as we crossed the Zambezi, just like you and I discussed."

"Did you suffer many casualties?"

"We lost an Abrams and an Apache."

"Damn! We can't afford to lose many of those."

"Tell me about it! One of my men is now spending most of his time walking, since he can't sit down after I chewed his ass off about it."

Ben chuckled, feeling sorry for anyone who got on Marsh's bad side. "OK, Colonel. I know you'll be careful. Where are you now?"

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"Just across the Zambezi, on the south side in northeastern Zimbabwe. We heard some strange stuff from a prisoner we interrogated yesterday. He said Bottger told Mabota's men not to go across the river into Zambia after they killed us. Do you have any idea what he was talking about?"

"Yeah. Bottger bombed Angola with bacteriological warfare bombs. The bastard killed just about every living thing in Angola. Evidently, if Mabota had eliminated your battalion Bottger was going to follow up with an air strike against Zambia, and do the same thing there."

"Jesus! There must be seven or eight million natives in Zambia, General."

"Not to mention the wildlife in the rain forest. If he spreads much more anthrax around, he could upset the ecology of the entire world by essentially killing the rain forests here," Ben answered. "I guess he didn't dare try, since your air support was still intact. Guess he

didn't want to risk losing what few long range aircraft he has to you. You may have saved the world, Marsh."

"Well, General, right now I'd settle for a shower, and some sleep."

"You doing all right, Marsh? You need any reinforcements, or materiel?"

"No thanks, General. Like I said, we haven't lost that many troops, so I'll keep pushing my men hard south through Zimbabwe. I hope I get to that son of a bitch Bottger before you do. I want to have a few words with him!"

Ben laughed again. "I sincerely hope for his sake he never gets to meet you, Marsh. But you be careful. I have a feeling Bottger's going to make a stand soon, and that means you may be up against some of his New World troops in Zimbabwe, instead of the African troops you've faced so far."

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"We'll kick their asses too, General."

"Don't underestimate his troops, Colonel. They won't be near as easy as the Africans, and they'll have air support and maybe even heavy tanks and artillery, too."

"Yes, sir. I'm not overconfident, but I know my men, and nobody-especially jerk off, self-styled Nazis-can stand against our troops. I guarantee it, General."

"OK, Marsh. You take care, now. Our entire force is moving together in one large pincer movement, so try to keep in touch with Mike Post. He's in charge of coordinating the movement of all the battalions so nobody gets their toes stepped on."

"You got it, General. Marsh out."

Ben handed the radio back to Corrie. "See if you can raise Cecil Jefferys, Corrie. I need to check with him and see what the situation is in SUSA."

While Corrie made the connection, Ben and Michaels spent a few minutes discussing their upcoming tactics with the other brigade commanders who were fighting their way south toward Bottger's command post, somewhere in South Africa.

After a few minutes she handed Ben the microphone. "President Jefferys is on the horn, General Ben."

"Cecil, how are things going stateside?"

Jefferys's voice sounded tired and stressed, as if he hadn't been getting much sleep. "Not good, Ben. My Intelligence tells me a major coup is possible outside our borders."

Ben nodded. "I warned you something like that was inevitable, Cece. There is just too much jealousy among the other states about The SUSA. They can't stand our brand of freedom. It becomes like an infection, and if left alone will spread through their areas and undermine their

leadership. Once people see how well true

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freedom and independence from government bureaucracy and interference work, they're gonna want some for themselves."

"Well, you were right, Ben. Some of that seems to be happening as we speak. There are reports of near riots in some of the cities of NUS and EUS, and of people revolting by not paying the high taxes and fees the governments there are imposing to pay for their welfare programs. Just as in the old USA, the number of people working to support those who elect to live on the dole is getting smaller and smaller, and taxes are getting higher and higher. The workers are getting fed up, and quite a few are migrating south to join us."

"They won't stand for that very long, Cece. Has your Intelligence picked up any indication of buildup of the armies of your neighbors?"

"Yes. I wouldn't be surprised to come under attack within the next few months. What have you found out over there?"

"There is evidence some of the people in America are supporting Bottger with mercenaries and materiel." Ben gave a low chuckle. "I guess they want us tied up over here so we can't be of any assistance to you if they decide to confront you head on."

Ben could hear Jefferys sigh over the radio. "Well, try to wrap it up as soon as you can and get back here, Ben. I have a feeling the kettle is going to boil over sooner rather than later."

"You take care, Cece. Remember, the easiest way to kill a snake is to cut off its head. Keep your security tight against assassination attempts."

"Will do, Ben. See you soon, I hope."

"Raines out," Ben said and handed the radio back to Corrie. He spoke to Michaels. "John, let's mount up

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and get going. You heard Cece. We need to finish Bottger and go back home as soon as we can."

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Jersey lay next to Cooper, her arms wrapped around his shivering, sweating body. She had treated the wound on his left shoulder as well as she could, boiling river water to wash it and sprinkling antiseptic powder on it from their small first aid kits.

It hadn't helped. His entire left shoulder and arm were swollen and inflamed with infection now, and pus was forming in the hole in his shoulder.

Last night he had started having chills and high fever, so she took his

clothes off once again and lay next to him, trying to keep him warm in the chilly night air.

He mumbled and moaned in his sleep, almost delirious at times, rambling on in a disjointed speech about her and the other team members. At one point he rolled over and began to try to kiss her, his arms around her, his body reacting with evident lust.

Ordinarily, she would have decked him, but from his words it was obvious he was incoherent, thinking her someone from his past. She gently disengaged his hand from her breast and made him roll back over, speaking softly to him, trying to soothe him back to sleep.

As they lay there she began to have real doubts they would make it back to the team. By her reckoning they still had almost ten clicks, about eight miles, to go to

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reach the Congo River, then not telling how far from the coast they had wandered.

When morning came Cooper's fever finally broke, and he fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Jersey gently untangled herself, covered him with his clothes, and went searching for food. In case there were hostiles in the area she left her rifle and took only her K-Bar combat knife, not wanting to make any sounds which might give away their position.

Next to a small water hole she found a family of feral hogs wallowing in the mud. She managed to catch and kill one of the smaller pigs. She took it back to their camp, built a fire, and soon she and Cooper were eating roast pork on a stick.

He sliced a generous hunk off the steaming meat, and as he gnawed on it, looked at Jersey. "I was pretty bad last night, huh?"

She smirked. "No more incoherent than you always are, Coop. Hell, most of the time you talk nonsense, even when you're not sick."

He looked sheepish. "Uh . . . did I say anything . . . incriminating?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Oh, is there something I should know? Some deep, dark secret you're afraid you might have blabbed about in your delirium?"

He smiled, "Yeah, I'm a sissy boy. I don't like girls."

Jersey, thinking of the night before and his naked body, blushed scarlet red and quickly looked down at her meat.

Cooper caught the look and became worried. "Uh-oh. What's that mean?"

"What?"

"That look. I saw you blush. What's going on? Did I say something last night?"

She shook her head. "It's not what you said, it's what

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you did. While I was lying there, trying to keep you warm and stop your shivering, you . . . uh . . . you made it quite obvious that you do like girls."

He turned pale, then he blushed as red as her. "Oh no. I didn't-"

She looked up quickly, a disgusted expression on her face. "Of course not. You were the one who was delusional. I wasn't, so that couldn't happen."

He looked relieved. "Thank God."

She smirked, "But there was something said about a lady, if I may use the term loosely, named Candy, I believe."

"Oh shit. I didn't . . . go into any details did I?"

Jersey went back to eating her meat, "No, not much. Just something about whipped cream and strawberries, and putting them in non-traditional places."

Cooper blushed again and looked away. "Uh, Jersey, I was out of my mind. You got to promise me not to mention this to the team when we get back."

"I'll see," she said, looking smug. "It depends on you, Coop. If you treat me with the proper respect-"

"Forget it, it's not worth that." He stuck out his lower lip in a pout and went back to gnawing on his pork. "Just tell the whole world, see if I care."

Before she could reply they heard a branch snap fifty yards off to their right, and a flock of parrots flew screaming from a nearby tree.

Jersey and Cooper froze. Then both slowly moved so that their weapons were within easy reach.

Cooper spoke low, still eating his pork. "I think we have company."

"No shit, Sherlock. Now what are we going to do about it?"

"On three, I'll grab the SAW and roll to my right into

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the brush. You take the M-16 and roll to my left. If we separate, there's less chance they'll get both of us."

She took a quick look at his swollen arm, and the trickle of blood running down his skin.

"No deal. We're not separating. You can't handle the SAW, not with your

shoulder like that. When we get behind cover, give it to me and you take the 16."

"No-"

Her voice became firm. "Don't argue with me, Coop."

After a moment, he nodded, reluctantly.

Jersey glanced right and left, dien whispered, "Now, one . . . two . . . three!"

On her command they dove into the heavy brush next to their camp, grabbing their weapons as they rolled to the side.

Cooper grunted in pain as he fell on his wounded arm, dragging the heavy SAW with him.

As they scrambled behind a thick tree their campsite erupted with machine gun fire. Bullets sprayed the fire and the places where they had been sitting, sending showers of sparks and flames in the air.

Jersey handed Cooper the M-16 and picked up the SAW, straining under its weight. In one quick motion she jacked the ejector lever back, stuck the barrel around die tree trunk, and pulled the trigger.

The gun exploded in her hands, rocking her back on her haunches, spraying molten lead into the area where the shots had come from earlier.

Two men screamed and fell from the bushes, bodies riddled with bullets, blood pumping to soak into the humus and soil of the jungle.

Firing one-handed, Cooper began to pepper the adjacent bushes and trees with bullets, sweat running down his face as the CAR kicked back against his shoul-

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der and caused blood to begin to ooze from his left arm.

Another scream from the distance, and a black man ran from cover, firing his AK47 from the hip, shouting and yelling in some dialect neither Cooper nor Jersey could understand.

Jersey took aim and cut him almost in two with a burst from the SAW, blowing him backward out of sight among the bushes.

After less than thirty seconds, all sounds stopped. The clearing was covered in a low cloud of gunsmoke, and Cooper and Jersey's ears rang, deafened by the loudness of the firing.

They waited for five minutes, watching for any sign of life across the clearing. There was none.

Cooper said, "Cover me," and slowly crawled on hands and knees to circle around behind their attackers.

Jersey lay on her stomach, the SAW out in front of her, sights trained

on the bushes near the bodies. After a moment she heard a low whistle, their team signal that all was clear.

She picked up the SAW and walked from behind the tree, finding Cooper standing over a pile of bodies, the M-16 on his shoulder, his face pale and sweating.

He looked up at her. "It's cTver. We got them all," he managed to say. Then his eyes crossed and he fainted, falling on his face in the soft dirt.

It took Jersey almost an hour to revive him, during which she redressed his arm, applying a pressure dressing to help stop the bleeding.

"Did I leave you again?"

She smiled, watching the surrounding jungle so they wouldn't be surprised again. "Just for a short while."

She cut her eyes back to him. "Do you think you can walk, or am I going to need to carry you to the river?"

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He struggled to his feet, face pale and sweating. "That'll be the day, girl. Let's go."

She carried the SAW in her right hand and slung the M-16 on its strap over her back. Placing his right arm over her shoulders, she half carried and half supported his weight as they made their way slowly through the jungle.

It was late in the day when they finally came to the banks of a wide, slow moving river.

"This has to be the Congo," Jersey said, glancing at her compass to see which way they had to turn.

Cooper inclined his head to the right. "The coast lies that way, to the east. Just put the sun at our backs, and let's make tracks."

She shook her head. "No can do, sport. You're about ready to drop, and I'm tired, too. Let's make camp, and let's hope we can make the crossing at Soyo by tomorrow night."

He took his arm from around her and flopped to the ground, leaning back against a tree trunk after first making sure there were no snakes or spiders on it.

He looked up at her standing before him, shoulders slumped, exhausted and sweaty. "I know why you want to make camp here."

"Oh? Why is that, pray tell?"

"You just want another night to lie next to this magnificent body of mine, to worship at the altar of my manhood."

Jersey threw back her head and laughed. "Boy, you're getting delusional again. If I wanted to worship at the altar of your manhood, I'd need a

magnifying glass." She arched an eyebrow. "Don't you remember, Coop, I've seen all you've got? There are no secrets between us any more, so don't try to bullshit me."

He waved a hand at her. "Don't remind me. I'll prob-

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ably never live this down, assuming I somehow survive the night."

She arranged their weapons next to them as darkness fell suddenly, as it does in the tropics.

"Don't worry, Coop. Your secrets are safe with me . . . as long as you don't piss me off, that is."

His eyes closed and he snuggled back into her arms, wrapping them around him and holding them as he began to shiver when the temperature dropped.

Jersey noticed his body temperature was sky high, and she gave a short, silent prayer that he would be okay.

She was thirsty and hungry, but didn't dare make a fire, as she knew there were bound to be hostiles this close to the river. She would have to worry about getting some safe water and food tomorrow.

It promised to be a long night, and an even longer day tomorrow. She knew if she didn't get Cooper some medical care soon, the infection would turn septic and enter his bloodstream, and he would die.

She fervently hoped that wouldn't happen. Life just wouldn't be the same without Cooper to spar with. No one else on the team had his quick wit when it came to verbal jousting.

Jersey realized for the first time in their long association just how much she treasured Coop's company.

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Bruno Bottger's gaze passed across the assembled New World field commanders. No one knew his eyes were brown, that their blue color was due to contact lenses. Nor did any member of his staff know his brown hair was dyed blond to hide an ancestry he despised, for his mother had been Jewish.

A Nazi could never be considered pure if he admitted to Jewish lineage, and even though the great Hitler had a similar background, Bruno meant to take his genetic secret with him to his grave.

An underground room serving as his headquarters outside of Pretoria, South Africa, had been fortified against any form of aerial bomb or rocket attack, with a highly specialized air purification system to guard against the anthrax spores Bruno's New World planes and rockets had previously released in Cameroon.

Bottger's anger showed, his cheeks a flaming red below a shock of his dyed blond hair.

"General Raines and his 501 Brigade have marched through western Cameroon, Gabon, and Cabinda as if he were in some kind of festival parade. I want to know what the hell is being done to halt his advance."

Bottger stared directly at Colonel Walz, his officer in charge of attack helicopter air support for the New

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World Brigades assigned to stopping the Rebel army in Cameroon. Walz had sixteen Hind M24 gunships at his disposal, based in Pretoria.

Then Bruno turned his hard glare upon General Li-gon, the germ warfare specialist who had engineered rocket heads for launching deadly anthrax spores his medical research team had developed for release in enemy territory.

General Ligon spoke first, looking nervously at Walz as if asking for some help in convincing Bottger it wasn't his fault Raines had not been stopped in Cameroon.

"They have clearly been inoculated with some sort of anti-bacterial serum. We've heard they were working on one at SUSA. Apparently . . . obviously, they have perfected a vaccine like ours now. No human could walk through that part of Cameroon without developing anthrax, unless they had been immunized, as our soldiers have been."

Ligon paused to wipe sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief. "We dropped enough active spores there and in Angola to wipe every human and animal out of the entire Republic-which it has done quite successfully among the native tribes. The entire western sector is full of rotting corpses and skeletons. We have aerial photographs showing bodies by the thousands. Animals are dead, both wild beasts and domesticated livestock. Virtually every warm-blooded creature there has perished, yet General Raines marched through both sectors without mishap. It can only be that they have a new serum. They must have been immunized before they came to Africa."

Muscles worked in Bottger's thick neck. "Then your plan has failed, General. And you have failed our cause. The New World Order will not tolerate incompetence."

General Ligon shrugged, his eyes darting back and

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forth between Bottger and Walz, as if pleading for understanding.

"We had no way of knowing. They are defeating our Intelligence sources there . . . unmasking our very best undercover agents, killing them off. How can I be expected to produce a germ weapon when we don't know if these Tri-State soldiers have the correct vaccine and have already been immunized against our anthrax mutation?"

Bruno knew what General Ligon said was true. New World spies were turning up dead all over the Western Hemisphere, all killed in the most

brutal ways. It seemed the Rebel soldiers and undercover agents had special training in all forms of interrogation, and to make matters worse the soldiers under General Ben Raines were highly skilled in battle. Efficient, too damned efficient, and virtually unstoppable.

Bruno eyed Colonel Walz again. It was abundantly clear the colonel had no better explanation for his failures.

"And what of the HIND strikes, Colonel?"

Walz glanced down at his hands, folded on the table-top. "We have lost five M24s to heat-seeking rockets, and the Rebels anti-aircraft gunners are crack shots. The Rebel's 502 Brigade, commanded by an Ike McGowen according to our sources, is on the Congo, evidently moving south like Raines and the 501 Brigade."

He waved at a topographical map of the region as he talked. "The area is heavy jungle, making McGowen's forces almost invisible from the air, hindering the effectiveness of any type of air strike. Our fighter planes are roughly equal in the air to their PUFF twin engine assault planes, the AC47s. However, fighter planes do not function well in the jungle. If they fly low and slow

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enough to strafe or bomb ground forces, they are exceedingly vulnerable to the Rebels' SAM missiles and hand-held rocket launchers."

He loosened his collar, beginning to sweat under Bottger's steely, unrelenting gaze. "And those damned Apaches they have are more maneuverable at low altitudes than our M24s, allowing them to drop below the rain forest canopy and pop up behind our pilots to knock them down with their forty millimeter cannons and twin mounted machine guns."

Bottger slammed a fist onto his desk. "Damn it, men! Don't you have any good news for me?"

Walz nodded rapidly, grinning weakly. "Yes. Our ground forces report some success with our own handheld rocket launchers. We were told a force of Zambian mercenaries was able to blow one of the Rebels' Apache helicopters out of the sky with a Russian ZIP rocket. It was during the engagement on the Zambezi River--"

"I remember the report, Colonel," Bruno snapped. "They shot down one Apache gunship just before the Rebels destroyed General Mabota's entire army."

He shook his head and turned his back on his two officers, staring at the map on the wall. He began to stomp around the room, waving his hands in the air as he talked, perhaps in unconscious imitation of his hero, Adolf Hitler.

"These fools who call themselves generals in Africa, leading bunches of primitive tribesmen who don't know the first thing about technical warfare, are a waste of our time when we try to train them with modern weaponry. They seem to neglect even the most simple maintenance procedures, using the equipment until it stops working, then discarding it and heading back into the jungle."

He turned to look at the two officers, spreading his

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hands, making an effort to sound reasonable. "It is simply more proof of white supremacy, gentlemen. These stupid Africans are nothing more than naked savages who don't belong on this planet any longer. Their usefulness has passed, and when they no longer serve any of our purposes during this campaign we will annihilate them with viral and bacterial devices."

He pointed at the map of Africa. "This is a very fertile country that will serve New World Order agricultural and mineral needs. These ignorant natives will have to be eliminated completely in order to develop Africa as it should be. Perhaps of far more long range importance, we stand for white racial purity, and ultimately these blacks must be ... removed from the world's genetic pool."

He turned from the map to lean both hands on his desk, staring intently at the two generals sitting before him.

"At some point, after we rid this continent of Ben Raines and his Rebels, we shall undertake a viral destruction program to be initiated as soon as we pull out of Africa for a time. It must be cleansed of all black natives, and even these damned white Dutchmen in South Africa, for they contain their own racial impurities. Our New World will be designed for peoples with no genetic imperfections. We have viruses and bacteria that will do the job nicely. Cleanly, so to speak."

Ligon glanced at Walz, who gave a small shake of his head, warning him not to interrupt. Ligon ignored him and decided to speak his mind.

"That could be dangerous," General Ligon warned.

Bottger turned to him, staring as if he couldn't believe anyone would question his plans.

"Viruses have a way of mutating, surviving in many

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new forms," Ligon continued, sweat forming on his forehead and running down his face.

"Remember the HFV virus back in the eighties and nineties? It mutated from a green monkey virus into one that almost wiped out the entire world before a vaccine could be found."

Bottger growled, "What does that have to do with us?"

"We might face the same thing here," Ligon continued. "A mutant virus could potentially form here if we drop the wrong types of viral rockets in these warm climates. New host creatures could show up, and we would have nothing to halt their spread."

He shook his head, almost pleading with Bottger now. "Herr General Field Marshal, I strongly suggest another method. We could become victims of our own weapons if a new mutant virus for which we have no preventative drug or serum spreads to other continents which we inhabit."

Bruno's anger returned. "First, General Ligon, we have to stop this brazen bastard Ben Raines and his armies."

He walked around to stand behind his desk, glaring at General Walz and General Conreid, his commander of ground forces in the south, as he spoke. "We don't seem to be doing well at the task."

Walz blushed and looked away, while Conreid bristled and started to speak, to make new excuses for his failure to control Raines' Rebel armies.

Bottger held up his hand, cutting him off. "I will organize an all-out effort to crush him before he enters Botswana and Zimbabwe, or Namibia. They appear to be coming at us in a strange pattern, with some battalions moving toward the Atlantic coast while others come straight for us from the north. There is surely a

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means to Ben Raines's madness, for he has proven to be a worthy adversary. We must find a way to strike his flank. Locate a weak spot, so we can break his armies apart a few at a time. By concentrating our best equipment and most highly trained soldiers on a specified target, there is no doubt we will be victorious."

"Colonel Marsh's unit," General Conreid suggested, snapping his fingers as the idea occurred to him. "You called it a strike force, I believe. We could send fighter planes and helicopter gunships over Zambia."

He stopped to consult a sheaf of papers in his hand. "She has just crossed the Zambezi River, according to our latest intelligence reports. That means she's headed into either Botswana or Zimbabwe."

Bottger nodded, as if the idea appealed to him. "And just how would you attack this strike force, General Conreid?"

"As soon as the Rebels are located Walz could send our bombers over them, dropping napalm and Agent Orange, or a nerve gas, perhaps even the old reliable mustard gas, since the anthrax bombs have failed. He could follow up with the attack fighters and HINDs. Then I will order a march on them with an armored division and infantry wearing gas masks."

The general came to attention and practically clicked his heels together, standing ramrod straight. "I can personally assure you that with a well-orchestrated air and land assault, we will wipe this strike force off the face of the earth."

For years, Bruno had trusted General Conreid's instincts, for he was a proven military tactician with a number of solid victories around the globe to his credit.

"Can you devise such a plan?" Bruno asked.

General Conreid nodded. "Of course."

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"How long will it take to designate the number and type of aircraft and ground forces, and the weaponry?"

"A day. Perhaps less." He glanced at Walz. "If Colonel Walz agrees to cooperate with me on it."

Bottger fixed Walz with a steely stare. "That will be no problem, I assure you."

He looked back at Conreid. "But only one day? I want diis attack well thought out-"

"I've been working on it for the past few days, waiting to mention it to you until I was sure of its success."

"Finish it immediately," Bruno said, slamming his hand down on the desk. "Bring it to me the very minute it is ready in every detail. And I want an estimate of how long it will take to get our forces in place for an attack on the strike force. We'll pay back this bastard Colonel Marsh, for his one-sided victory over General Mabota-if it can be called a military victory to crush a Zulu warlord armed with weapons he scarcely knows how to use."

"I'll notify you later this afternoon," Conreid said. "I'll have every detail specified."

"Good," Bruno declared. "I respect your military judgement, General. Devise the plan."

Colonel Walz cleared his throat. "We have ten HINDs located in Namibia. At least a dozen fighter planes ready to fly. They could be launched behind a triad of bombers dispatched from our airstrip here, bombers carrying the gas and napalm. One of our air surveillance reports indicated this woman's battalion only had three Apache gunships in flying condition. They abandoned five more in eastern Zambia, and we presume it was because they were unable to fly. Three, or even four Apaches, should offer little resistance. We will control the skies above Battalion 12."

Bruno rubbed his angular chin. "We must find them

first. In those rain forests it can be difficult for a spy plane to get us anything."

"We have an informant west of the Zambezi River," Walz said after a moment of thought. "A local Bantu tribesman. We supplied him with a radio. I'll see if we can contact him to find out if he has seen any Rebels. From the air it may be easy to hide from us, but moving heavy tanks and other armor is impossible without making noise or leaving signs. The Bantu will know if they are there, and in what direction they are moving."

"Get us that information," Bruno said. "Do it now. We have wasted enough time as it is."

Colonel Walz pushed up from his chair and walked quickly to a security door. A pair of armed guards let him out.

General Ligon spoke again. "I will see what our napalm bomb inventory is like, and I'll check on the nerve gas. However, I am quite sure this Rebel army will have gas masks. They always seem to be well equipped."

"Get moving on it," Bruno told Ligon, his mind on other things, wondering about Ben Raines and where he was now.

Raines was an enigma, according to all reports. He had a sensitive side, and even kept adopted children along with him on many campaigns. But he was a predatory hunter when it came to fighting enemy soldiers in the field, and his own brigade was widely known for cunning and ferocity in battle. It could be an interesting meeting if the two should happen to meet on a battlefield, a game of deadly chess.

General Conreid stood up. "If that is all, I will prepare the final touches on my battle plan for both Botswana and Zimbabwe, and we will strike this bastard wherever he may be," he said, his face without expression.

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"Nothing more," Bruno replied. "Get back to me as soon as you can."

Conreid left the underground meeting room, and now Bruno was alone with his thoughts. He was confident that his leaders could come up with a smashing blow for his New World forces against Battalion 12. But what of Ben Raines and all the other brigades moving across Africa?

Bruno wished he could look inside the mind of General Raines to see what the Rebel commander had up his sleeve with all these strange movement patterns across central and southern Africa.

There was a Special Forces brigade led by Jerold Enger in Namibia now, heading north and searching for Raines and his 501 Brigade, who were supposedly somewhere in Angola. Perhaps Major Enger would radio a report soon. General Ben Raines was the key to Rebel successes. If he could be assassinated, or killed during battle, the Rebel armies would fall apart. . . .

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Jersey came awake with a start, her hand reflexively reaching for her 9mm pistol on the ground next to her. She strained her eyes in the early, pre-dawn gloom, trying to see what had awakened her.

She jumped as a howler monkey in a nearby tree gave out another high-pitched scream, calling for its mate.

Damned monkeys, she thought, between them and the macaws, the jungle was never quiet. Traveling in Africa was a lot like living in a large city back in the states-after a while you got so used to the noise you never

noticed it, unless it wasn't there.

Relaxing again against Cooper's back, she laid her pistol back down on the ground and put her arm around him.

He must have broken his fever, she thought, noticing that he was no longer shivering and shaking and his body temperature seemed more normal to her as she lay against him, spooning him from behind.

The darkness rapidly lightened and dawn came, bringing with it a little welcome heat, relief from the chilly night air. As the daytime animals and birds began to stir, getting up for the day and making noise and calling back and forth, Cooper moved.

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"Wake up, soldier," Jersey said, starting to unwrap her arms from around him.

He grabbed them, holding on tight. "No, not yet," he mumbled, still half asleep. "Just a few minutes more."

She relaxed against him again. "Okay, just a few minutes, you lazy slugabed."

He chuckled, low in his throat. "I'm not lazy, I'm just enjoying the way you feel against me, and the way you kept me warm all night."

Jersey's voice got harder. "You're not coming on to me, are you, Cooper?"

He stiffened, turning his head to look back over his shoulder at her. "Hell no. Do I look that hard up to you, girl?"

"OK, then." She paused. "Then I guess I'll let you live another day."

"I was just commenting that you were nice to cuddle with, no sexual innuendos intended."

"Well ... I can't say I didn't enjoy it, too," she answered, her voice getting softer. "Sometimes, the sleeping bag in a tent routine gets kind'a old."

"Tell me about it! And the weeks that go by with no time for any social life . . . I'll tell you, Jersey, war is hell."

"Coop, did you ever think about just chucking it all and going back to SUSA, becoming a normal citizen, and starting a family?"

"Sure, all the time. I guess that's what we're all working toward, except for the Scouts, who'll be the only ones disappointed when this is all over. But as long as the world's in the shape it's in, that would seem like the coward's way out."

"Me, too. Sometimes I fear I'm going to end up forty years old, a gray-headed little old lady, still fighting in

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this damned war with no husband, no kids, sleeping every night with my M-16 by my side instead of a good man."

"\eah. There doesn't seem to be any end to it, does there?"

"No, and from the way Cecil Jefferys is talking, when we finish with Bottger here and go back to the states there's going to be more civil war there."

He snuggled back against her. "In that case, let's just lie here all day and let someone else fight the war."

She squeezed him for a moment, then pulled away and said, "I'd love to, Coop, but we've got to get you back to base and get that wound taken care of, or the war is going to be over for you sooner than you want."

She crawled out from under their pile of clothes and stood up. Cooper started to turn over, noticed her nakedness, and turned away so she could get dressed in private.

As she pulled her clothes on he slipped into his pants and shirt, moaning as the movement fired up the pain in his left shoulder.

"You all right?"

"Yeah, it's just that every muscle in my body is aching. It feels as if I'm turning to stone a little at a time."

"That's the infection. I think it's spreading through your bloodstream, causing sepsis."

He tried to stretch, finding his left arm and shoulder were so stiff he couldn't raise it above his head without a fiery pain shooting up into his neck and head.

He glanced up at her, pain in his eyes. "Maybe you'd better go on without me, and come back for me when you get to Soyo and the rest of the troops."

"Not likely, partner. You know we never leave a team member in the field. It's just not done."

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"Jersey, I'm serious. I don't know if I can go on much longer, and I don't want to slow you down."

"What you want doesn't matter, soldier. I'm senior to you by a couple of weeks, so I give the orders here. So, off your ass and on your feet, Coop. We got places to go and people to meet, and we're burning daylight."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, giving her a mock salute.

They gathered up their gear, Jersey carrying both weapons on straps over her right shoulder and Cooper's right arm draped over her left shoulder, and began to walk west. They followed the river as it wound toward Soyo

and the coast.

The underbrush was thicker near the water, so they curved inland a bit to make the walking easier. Their pace was significantly slower than on the days before, with Cooper barely able to walk and completely unable to jog.

They stopped a couple of times, to let Cooper rest and to pick bananas and other fruit from trees when they found them. Most of the fruit was partially rotted, but they were so hungry that they wolfed it down, anyway.

Cooper gave a halfhearted smile as he chewed on a rancid, blackened banana. "Be a hell of a note if my bullet wound didn't kill me, if I got food poisoning instead and died from it, wouldn't it?"

"Just don't start puking on me, that's all I ask," Jersey said. "I don't mind half-carrying your lazy butt, but I draw the line at wiping vomit off your face."

Suddenly, two black men appeared out of the brush on the trail ahead of them, with AK47s leveled at Cooper and Jersey.

The pair spoke rapidly in what sounded like the singsong syllables of Bantu, motioning at Jersey with their rifles.

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Cooper said, "Do you speak English?"

He was met with blank stares and upraised eyebrows.

"How about French?" Jersey asked in her highschool French, trying to smile and look disarming and non-threatening.

The natives just scowled and motioned again with their rifles, the ritual scars on their cheeks showing them to be from one of the warrior tribes, the ones that usually sided with Bottger and his troops in the civil wars in Africa.

Jersey took her arm from around Cooper's shoulder and slowly, so as not to draw the men's fire, lowered her weapons to the ground.

As she bent low, she whispered out of the side of her mouth to Cooper, "On my mark, create a diversion, faint or something."

Cooper glanced at her, eyebrows raised, knowing without asking what she planned to do. That was one of the advantages of fighting for many years alongside the same team members—you began to think alike and act in unison, often without saying a word.

"\bu can't take them both on by yourself," he whispered back, while continuing to stare at their enemies. "I'll take the one on the right, you get the one on the left," he said, smiling at the men and nodding his head, as if agreeing with their orders instead of planning how to kill them.

The two men shouted angrily, aiming their ARs at the pair and jerking the barrels up and down.

Jersey straightened up. "I think they want us to quit talking and hold up our hands. Give them a good show, partner."

Cooper bent over partially, a grimace of pain and distress on his face. He raised his right arm, pointing at

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the swollen, red area around his left shoulder, showing he couldn't raise it.

The natives stared at him for a moment, then grinned. One of the two looked at his partner and shrugged. When Jersey saw that, she knew it was now or never. She could tell the hostiles had decided to kill them.

As they raised their weapons again Cooper took a step forward and stumbled, falling slightly toward the men, holding his arm and crying out loudly.

Both men cut their eyes at Cooper, giving Jersey a chance to pull her K-Bar from its scabbard unobserved.

In one lightning fast movement she flipped it in the air, grabbed it by its blade at the point, and threw it at the man on the right.

The razor-sharp knife turned slowly over three times, as it was supposed to, and then imbedded itself up to the hilt in the native's throat.

He screamed and fell back, his AK47 firing into the trees as his finger tightened on the trigger in a death spasm.

His partner, eyes wide with fear, pointed his rifle at Jersey. Before he could fire Cooper straightened, took one quick step, and launched himself in a headlong dive at the man.

Cooper hit his target just above the knees, bending him over so that his AK47 fired harmlessly in the dirt over Cooper's back.

He and Cooper fell to the ground, and he began to beat Cooper on his back with the AK47, all thoughts of Jersey forgotten.

Jersey took two quick steps closer to them as they grappled, leaned to her left, and flashed out her right leg in a spinning side-kick.

The toe of her boot caught the native on the fore-

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head, snapping his head back and making him drop the AK47. Cooper rolled to the side, exhausted by his attack and sickened by the pain coursing through his left arm and shoulder.

Jersey stood there, feet planted firmly on jungle humus, waving at the native to get up and come and get her.

The man grinned slowly, gingerly feeling the egg-sized knot on his forehead where she had kicked him. He climbed to his feet and held his hands out at his sides, fingers forming into claws, baring his teeth in a snarl.

He was well over six feet tall, making Jersey wonder for a moment if he were one of the famous Watusi tribe, known for their height and for eating cows' blood mixed with milk.

Jersey spoke softly. "Come and get some, big guy. I promise you a dance you'll never forget as long as you live . . . which I figure will be about thirty more seconds."

Evidently figuring his size and strength would overwhelm her, the man charged straight at Jersey, not even bothering to feint one way or the other.

As he reached for her throat, yelling in triumph, she stepped quickly to the side, spun on her heels once, and hit him in the forehead again with a rik-hand-her fingers curled into her palms and her fist swung with a straight elbow, like a hammer on the end of a string, and with the same effect.

The native was knocked to one knee, where he stayed, trying to uncross his eyes and to think past the throbbing pain in his forehead.

Jersey stepped behind him and swung a hard, place-kicker type kick at his butt, the toe of her shoe catching

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him in the balls and lifting him to his feet with a horrible, animal-like scream.

As he turned, holding his crotch, moaning and crying, probably for mercy, Jersey drew back and swung a knife-hand strike with the side of her hand just under his chin, crushing his larynx.

His head snapped back and he grabbed for his throat as he sat down hard on the ground. He gurgled and tried to breathe through his broken windpipe, to no avail.

After a moment his eyes widened in fear, frothy blood bubbled from his mouth, and he died.

Jersey immediately went to where Cooper lay on the ground, holding his left shoulder and cursing. "Damn, that hurt like a bitch!" he snarled through gritted teeth.

"I told you to let me handle it, dummy."

He looked up, grinning through his pain. "If I hadn't saved your butt, you'd be wearing about a dozen AK47 slugs as jewelry right about now, girl."

"Bullshit! I could have taken him, easy."

She inclined her head toward the dead body lying on its back behind her. "Hell, I didn't even work up a sweat on that bastard."

Cooper shook his head. "That's typical. The man saves the maiden, and gets no credit whatsoever."

Jersey smiled as she examined Cooper's arm, trying to stop the fresh bleeding his exertions had caused. "What makes you think I'm a maiden?"

Cooper snorted in pain at her prying fingers. " 'Cause you're too ugly to have ever had a man."

Jersey, instead of getting angry, just grinned and tightened the bandage on Cooper's arm tighter, making him moan again.

"That's where you're wrong, Coop."

He stared at her for a second, then shrugged. "Well,

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that is why God invented alcohol-so ugly girls could get laid, too."

Jersey laughed and turned away. She went over to the dead men and began to go through their packs.

"What are you looking for?"

"A couple of canteens filled with water, and food, real food, of any kind. You need protein to hold off that infection, or you're never going to make it to the base."

"Bullshit," he said, as he struggled to get to his feet. "Don't pretend you're doing this all for me. I know you, too well for that, lady. You're just looking for chocolate, 'cause you're probably going through withdrawal from not having your daily candy bars."

"Bingo," she said, pulling two canteens out of the men's packs. She pitched one to Cooper and she immediately took the other and began drinking from it.

Cooper used his shirt to wipe the mouth of his canteen, "You'd better watch out who you drink after, Jersey. Remember, this is the continent where eighty percent of the population has HIV."

After wiping the canteens spout for about thirty seconds, he finally put it to his lips and drank as fast as he could swallow.

After a few moments Jersey found some tins of canned meat, a couple of hunks of cheese, and a bag of cooked rice. She spread the bounty out on the ground and she and Cooper ate their fill, watching over their shoulders in case the gunshots had brought any more hostiles.

When they were finished she walked toward the river.

"Where are you going?" Cooper called.

"I've got to go powder my nose, you oaf. Some of us, even in the most difficult conditions, remember what it's like to be a lady," she said.

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Cooper looked over at the two men she had killed with her bare hands and snorted.

"Watch out for crocs. This part of the Congo is full of them, and they're not too particular about what they eat."

After a moment Jersey came running back into the clearing. "Hey, Coop, this is our lucky day."

Cooper looked down at his swollen, throbbing shoulder, "Oh? Is that so? I'm wounded and probably dying, and we're God only knows how many miles from our lines in jungle filled with hostiles . . . now just why do you think it's our lucky day?"

"Because these two assholes must have come here in a boat. I found one pulled up on the bank over there in the bushes."

"Holy shit," he said, "that means no more walking."

"Even better," she said, "the river flows toward the coast, so we won't even have to row very hard."

"Jersey, for once you've outdone yourself." He walked to her and put his good arm around her shoulder, sweat running down his face from his fever. "Take me home."

After two hours on the river, letting the current do most of the work, Jersey and Cooper came to the port of Soyo. When they saw the helicopter still on the edge of the river and the medical team camped out around it, they began to shout and call out.

Soon, the medics were helping Cooper out of the boat. Within minutes they had an IV going and were pouring massive amounts of antibiotics into his veins.

One of the young men said, "I don't know, Cooper. We may have to operate on that wound. It looks pretty bad."

Jersey put her hand on her pistol and stepped to Cooper's side. "No one touches that arm except Dr. Chase."

Now, unless you want to see one pissed-off, crazy female, you'd better get us to him, pronto!"

The medic blanched. "OK . . . OK." He turned to the helicopter pilot and said, "Let's go, Sarge. We need to get this man to General Raines's camp as soon as we can."

"Sooner," Jersey said, patting her pistol, "sooner, if you know what's good for you."

As the medics loaded Cooper's stretcher onto the chopper, Jersey grabbed

one of the Scouts by the arm.

"Hey soldier, you got any chocolate in your duffel bag?"

Cooper raised his head and said, "Better give it to her, son. She gets downright nasty when she hasn't had her chocolate."

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Moving carefully along the Atlantic coast jungles in western Namibia, Major Jerry Enger checked his maps and aerial recon photographs with Tomo, his best Zulu tribesman and scout, looking over his shoulder.

Like its geographical counterpart in North America, the African southwest is desert country, with Namibia taking its name from the Namib, the great swathe of desert that stretches the length of its eight-hundred-mile-long Skeleton Coast. This Namib desert is one of the driest places on earth.

Scattered mountain ranges run north to south, and punctuate the landscapes of the central plateau and southern steppes. Only along the rivers on the northern border with Angola does the jungle grow lush and thick, fed by the waters of the Kunene River on the Angolan border.

In the northeastern corner of the country, in the Caprivi Strip, there is thick jungle, courtesy of the Okavango, Zambezi, and Kwando Rivers that flow from the north.

It was here in this hot, humid, sweltering jungle brush that Enger and his men searched for Raines and his elusive 501 Brigade, just north of the Namibian city of Ohopoho.

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In the heat of the jungle, the men in Enger's Dark Horse Brigade were sweating profusely. Enger had reliable information from Bottger's Intelligence agents that the dreaded 501 Brigade led by General Ben Raines was to the northwest of him in southern Angola, moving steadily south toward the New World headquarters in Pretoria.

Someone had to stop them. Enger saw it as his chance for his finest hour as a mercenary for The New World Order—to halt the Rebels and defeat them soundly. He had little faith in the stories the natives had told of what fierce warriors Raines and his men were, putting them down as excuses by the natives for their lack of success against the 501 Brigade, and nothing more.

"We move northwest right here," he told Tomo, his chief Zulu leader of mercenaries from Zanzibar, pointing to a river shown on the map running west toward Angola.

"Send several dozen of your best men to scout the way. Have them fan out on both sides of this river."

Tomo spoke English with a British accent. He was huge, very muscular, so dark that his skin looked like black satin while he was sweating. He was a weapons expert, if any Zulu could be called an expert with modern weaponry. He understood the Soviet-made portable rocket launchers, and

trained his most trusted men how to use them accurately. And Tomo was a fierce fighter with an AK47 or in hand-to-hand combat. He could be counted on to take a deadly toll in any type of confrontation with soldiers from the Rebel armies.

His warriors, of the Herero tribes, were traditional allies of the Germans and had been since the 1800's when the German farmers first colonized Namibia.

"River be best way," Tomo said. "It flow north, toward

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Angolan border. We go slow. Maybe no cross over into Angola if we no find Ben Raines in Namibia."

"Why is that?" Enger asked, for Tomo seemed worried about something in Angola.

"Many die there, get sick in Angola. Bleed from mouth and nose and ears. Die in three or four days. Thousands are dead, rotting in the jungles and villages. "

"The damn Rebels have let loose some kind of germ agent we don't know about?"

"No, Major. It be anthrax. General Field Marshal Bottger order it be dropped from airplanes. Kill all jungle animals, all lions and elephants, all Bantu tribes living in small villages in Angola. My scouts say bodies be everywhere. Nobody alive in Angola but birds and lizards, they say."

"We've been inoculated against our own anthrax bombs and rockets. It won't bother us."

"I don't know what this mean . . . inoculated. But all are dead in Angola. Maybe Raines and his men dead, too. I no think my men will go into Angola."

"We're immune to it. The shots they gave us in the butt in the last six months keeps us from contracting anthrax. I heard this from General Ligon himself, so stop worrying."

Tomo wagged his head, uncertain. "A Zulu no understand this thing, the needles, how so many people die from anthrax and we do not die because of the needles. Missionaries say same thing about the Slims disease, what you white men call AIDS, but many still die in spite of needles. My men are frightened. They say they no go across into the Angola where everyone die."

Enger was frustrated over the Zulu's ignorance of medicine and germ warfare. Trained by the old East

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German army specialists in these matters, he had no patience with

ignorant savages who were incapable of understanding things even when they were properly explained.

"Promise your men the shots. The needles make it safe. They will not get sick."

"They still be afraid," Tomo said. "Some refuse to take the needles. They say it be a bad thing. Some say needles cause Slims disease, maybe also cause anthrax." The big man shrugged, as if to say such things were beyond him.

Enger couldn't have cared less if they lost a few Zulus to anthrax. He held his tongue. Tomo and a few more had agreed to the vaccinations, and his European mercenaries were all inoculated against the anthrax spores. Tomo's scouts had to find Raines so his location could be pinpointed for aerial strikes. He could not allow them to refuse his orders.

"Spread them out on both sides of the river until we get to the border into Angola. Maybe Raines and his 501 Brigade have already crossed over into Namibia, if the anthrax didn't get them. We'll find him, and call in air support and some armor when we do."

Enger wanted to sound very sure of their success, to help convince Tomo and the others to follow orders.

Tomo turned away from the map, swatting mosquitos away from his fierce looking black face. "I tell my scouts what you say, Major. We go as far as border, but not cross into Angola."

Enger watched the giant Zulu walk soundlessly into the tropical forest, gathering his scouts in a small clearing where vines dangled from towering limbs surrounding an open space near the shallow river. The river would be infested with crocs and poisonous snakes. He

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thought it was best to let men who knew the jungles go ahead of his Special Forces column.

With over two dozen Russian-made Spider Rocket launchers in the hands of the best trained men in Dark Horse Brigade, Enger felt confident they could handle any sort of engagement with Ben Raines and his Rebel soldiers, even if it came down to close-quarters fighting.

Enger prided himself on the combat training he'd given his men. Most were armed with razor-sharp bayonets or machetes, sawed-off automatic shotguns, and .45 caliber pistols and grenades. His demolition squad had Trictoff Soviet land mines to lay in Ben Raines's path if they found his armored machinery moving toward South Africa and New World headquarters.

And with a heavy rain forest canopy to hide them, Enger and his Dark Horse soldiers would be hidden from detection from the skies. He had ordered all his tanks, cannons, and motorized equipment to hold their positions along the coast to wait for coded instructions I sent by radio.

Tomo led more than a dozen Zulu soldiers across a shallow spot in the river, the water only reaching their waists. A huge croc slithered off one muddy embankment, and in the same instant Tomo shot it in the head |

with a single round from his Steyer automatic pistol.

The fifteen-foot croc began twisting, rolling over in the water thrashing its tail, leaving a trail of dark blood in the brown waters flowing toward the Atlantic. These saltwater crocs were the most aggressive of their species and it had happened more than once that a croc hidden below the surface of some river had lunged out to grab a man and pull him under to his death.

Enger turned to Captain Walter Zahn, an East German, his second in command of the brigade.

"Let's move out," Enger said.

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Columns of men in camouflage uniforms began walking into the dark shadows beneath the forest canopy, AK47s cocked and ready.

Enger hoped they would find Raines and his 501 Brigade this side of the Angola border, so there wouldn't be any problem with Tomo's natives. He hoped Ligon was wrong, and the anthrax wouldn't kill Raines and his troops. He wanted that pleasure, and the glory that would follow, to be all his.

Enger was weary after days of slow progress through jungles along the river. Tomo had nothing to report, only empty forest and hundreds of crocs sunning on the riverbank. As the sun set on their third day marching toward the border of Angola, while he was becoming more convinced than ever they would never find the Rebels, the staccato distant machine gun fire startled him into a battle-ready state.

"Fan out!" he cried, waving his arm to direct his men into the jungle. Enger knew the sound of the American weapons all too well. Tomo, or one of his scouts, had stumbled into an ambush somewhere upriver.

Now machine guns began to blast from all directions, accompanied by the occasional explosion of a grenade, their noise filling the rain forest like peals of thunder. Men were screaming in pain and yelling in fear when the thump of a mortar being fired suddenly echoed from a bend in the river, followed by a terrific blast.

A New World soldier ran into the river shallows, spraying machine gun fire back and forth to the west. He fired until his clip was empty, unaware that a giant croc was swimming toward his splashing sounds, undulating like a snake in the water, using its tail to push it forward.

Another mortar round boomed in the jungle, fired

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at Enger's troops from some position he couldn't see. He did see the croc leap out of the water to grab his soldier by the leg, jerking him off his feet until he sank out of sight where he'd been standing, below white foam and bubbles.

One of Tomo's Zulus staggered out of the forest with blood pouring from his belly. Half of his face was missing, so that when he turned his head

one side of a grinning bloody skull was showing. The Zulu fell to his knees, shrieking in agony as blood pooled around him.

Another of Tomo's scouts came back downriver in a limping run with a bloodstain darkening the leg of his fatigues. He ran a few steps more and toppled over in jungle undergrowth, but now the sounds of battle raged up and down the river, and one man's cry was lost in the thunder of guns, mortars, and exploding grenades.

Enger turned to his radio engineer. "Call for air support. Give them our coordinates. And tell the bastards to get it here fast."

"Yes, sir," stammered a Belgian mercenary named Klaus, taking his radio out to begin transmission to Pretoria, where most of the HIND M24 helicopter gunships were stationed in the south. They would then check their maps to find the nearest M24s to Enger's position and relay the coordinates.

Enger prayed they weren't too far off, for they were in a desperate situation here. Only a chopper could maneuver along this twisting river to get any firepower directed at the enemy positions.

"Black Horse Brigade calling HQ. Send in the HINDs at-" His coordinates were drowned out by a mortar blast ripping trees and vines apart in front of Enger.

A rocket hissed from far upriver, following the river's course from a hand-held launcher. The Rebels' Dragon rockets were unusually accurate for short distances.

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However, they needed heat to sense a target, and Enger wondered why the rocket had been fired when they had no tanks or aircraft to attract them to a hit.

Very quickly he saw the Dragon explode at a site where his men set up a mortar. The concussion of such a powerful explosion shook leaves and vines above Enger's head.

"Make sure they understand we're under fire!" Enger shouted to Klaus. "Tell them to get their asses in the air right now or we'll be shot all to hell. And warn them these Rebels have rockets!"

Another thudding blast made the ground under Enger's boots tremble. Upriver, men screamed at a spot where trees were blown out of the ground by the roots.

"Damn," he whispered. Tomo was one of the best African scouts in The New World Army and he'd been fooled, tricked into an ambush.

Machine gun and small automatic weapons fire crackled all over the jungle, from all directions, nonstop. With his forces surrounded, Enger knew they had encountered a very large Rebel force, and he was puzzled how Tomo had missed some indication that they were there, setting a trap for them.

A grenade launcher sent a ball of fiery death into a squad of Enger's

riflemen, blowing them out of their hiding places. Bits and pieces of bodies, uniforms, weapons, boots, and caps came flying into the air.

"How the hell?" Enger asked himself, listening to Klaus radio instructions to someone at Pretoria. The gunships would arrive too late.

A wall of muzzle flashes lit up the forests on both sides of the river as the Rebels advanced toward Enger and his troops. It seemed nothing could stop so many guns firing in unison.

"Pull back!" he cried when it was clear he and his

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brigade could not hold their position without taking huge numbers of casualties.

A Zulu tribesman ran headlong into the forest, retreating as fast as his legs could carry him until a bullet struck him in the back. The front of his camouflage shirt disintegrated in a splash of blood and tissue and fabric when the high velocity slug passed through him.

"Ayiii!" he cried as blood bubbled from his throat after the bullet ripped open his lung. The Zulu fell in mid-stride, disappearing into the undergrowth.

Enger wheeled around, for now bullets were whizzing past his head, shredding palm leaves, striking the bark on rubber trees with a resounding crack.

Major Jerry Enger took off, running for his life, leaving his men to fend for themselves, ignoring the cries and pleas for help coming from his embattled soldiers.

Apparently, quite by accident and without Tomo being aware of it until it was too late, they had run headlong into the Rebel 501 Brigade and General Ben Raines.

Gone from Enger's mind were all thoughts of glory and victory . . . now all he was concerned with was survival, getting away from Raines and his men, who did indeed fight like the devils the natives said they were.

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Captain Boris Dahn flew the coordinates relayed by radio from Pretoria, checking his instruments. Luckily, his squadron of HIND helicopters had been bivouacked in the Namibian city of Ohopoho, and didn't have far to fly.

His radar showed nothing and yet he was close to the reported site of the Rebel attack in the jungle areas along the Kunene River. The throb of the twin turbines on his HIND M24 forcing the blades through the air filled his ears. His heat sensors showed nothing other than scattered jungle wildlife. It was as if the battle had never taken place.

"Red Leader One. Nothing on my screen."

Boris led a squadron of five, Russian-built helicopter gunships. His pilots were experienced, seasoned veterans of close jungle air wars, and

they understood conditions in Africa and the terrain. Equipped with HUDs-Heads Up Displays-for targeting an enemy, the M24s were good airships capable of quick maneuvers and heavy firepower.

They had twin mounted machine guns and dual forty millimeter cannons, but their real power came from side-mount, heat-seeking rocket launchers capable of destroying even a heavily armored Abrams tank.

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"Red Leader," a voice crackled back over his headset. "No sign of anything, and I am already at the river."

Eric Strauss was a top gunship pilot, Dahn's best helicopter marksman, the most experienced flyer in the squadron.

"Check back with air control in Pretoria about those coordinates. I may be mistaken, or my readings may be off. I can see the river and no sign of anything."

"I don't see a damn thing, either. I'll change frequencies and verify."

Boris trusted his instruments. The HIND choppers were as good as any modified Apache gunship. An M24 was reliable as hell, instrument accuracy beyond anything the Soviets had ever built. But when they had parts failures it was virtually impossible to repair them . . . General Bottger was having more and more trouble securing parts.

"Red Leader One. This is Red Five. I see smoke. Look to the west, where the river turns."

Boris did see smoke curling from a part of the rain forest north of the river.

"That's it. Zero in. Watch for anti-aircraft fire. I've got nothing on my screens." He reset his HUD and touched the zoom button.

He was concerned about his ships being easy targets for the hand-held rockets Enger had reported the Rebels had. Boris's ships were painted in brown and sand earth-tone colors, perfect camouflage for the desert and savanna terrain that made up ninety percent of Namibia. Who would have thought they'd be called to provide air support over the only small jungle area in the whole damned country?

The thump of rotors changed when Boris swung toward the smoke. Something was wrong. No Rebel brigade would push through this jungle without air

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support. His intuition was quivering, telling him to beware, so he kept an eye on his radar screen, looking for dark blips representing airborne Apaches or fighter planes.

"I've still got nothing," he said, pressing the radio transmit control button with his thumb while keeping the stick and throttles in proper position.

"My screen is blank," Red Five reported.

"Nothing here, either," Red Two radioed. "Not so much as a blip on any of my displays. Maybe we got here too late. It may be over for Dark Horse."

"There has to be something," Boris assured the others. "I can't believe we don't see any air traffic."

"They may be down low. They can do that, so the trees block them from our radar."

Boris knew all too well how low an Apache gunship could hover and not show up on a radar screen. In numerous battles in the skies he'd seen them appear as if out of nowhere. Apaches had a smaller rotor span, allowing them to hide in tiny open spots in the jungles.

"Keep on looking," he said, growing nervous.

A Rebel force wouldn't be moving toward Pretoria without air support of some kind, unless this was a small, recon group scouting the way for an armored battalion. The lack of air support made him wonder. Dark Horse had radioed they were under heavy attack. So where the hell was the Rebel army?

"Red One!" a voice cried, Eric's voice. "I've got a hot spot on my scope. They've got something with infrared trained on us ... targeting me!"

"Drop down!" Boris said.

The vapor trail of a GTA missile left a thick sector of the forest canopy. "Watch out! Avoid! Make a ninety west turn!"

The ground-to-air rocket struck Eric Strauss's HIND

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and the aircraft exploded, an expanding fireball ripping the helicopter gunship apart at less than a thousand feet of altitude, showering the forest below with burning fuel and shredded metal.

Boris trained his ATG rocket launcher at the spot where he saw the missile rush from the trees. He set the parameters and centered the markers on his HUD before he squeezed his stick-mounted trigger.

The whoosh of a mounted rocket was followed by its vapor trail away from the M24, causing his craft to swing to the left slightly as a right-side launcher fired. His gaze remained fixed on the HUD screen projected before him on his windshield, awaiting a hit.

An explosion and fire near the river announced the arrival of the rocket. Trees burst into flame as they disintegrated like kindling wood, and the distant roar of the concussion was loud enough to be heard even above the rotor's noise.

"A miss, Red Leader One," someone said into the radio from another HIND. "They had a heat shield in place. We hit a damn piece of sheet metal with an infrared homing device planted on it. We were tricked. The rocket was fired by remote control. There is no one down there. Repeat, we blew up an unmanned launcher."

When an explosion of rocket fuel or any other ammunition did not follow the hit, it was painfully obvious the New World airmen had been fooled. A smoldering crater in the jungle floor was all he had to show for firing a valuable rocket.

"Damn it all," Boris hissed. "They have tricked our best deep sensors again. The Russians insisted the modifications would work."

He watched what was left of Eric Strauss's gunship go

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down, twisting like a wounded duck, a flaming, wounded duck crashing into the rain forest below.

"There is nobody down there, Red Leader One. They set this whole thing up to draw us in, a fire burning in the jungle and an infrared beam coming from a worthless piece of tin and a remote rocket launcher."

It was information Boris didn't need to be reminded of, for he had quickly come to the same conclusion himself.

He gave the air around them a quick visual inspection. When the Rebels gave them something like this to shoot at, it was most often a trap of some kind.

"Poor Eric," another voice crackled over the radio. "He will be missed. He had more air kills than any of us in the squadron. He was my instructor."

Boris ignored the expression of sorrow by one of Eric's fellow pilots, sensing that even now some sort of ground missile might be trained on his squadron. Yet his instruments gave him nothing. There was absolutely no indication that he or his men were being targeted by any radar-controlled missiles. Where can the bastards be? he thought, twisting his head from side to side, hoping to see something his sophisticated Russian instruments had missed.

"Red One! Red One! I've got a blip behind us!" It was Hans Rutger's voice from Red Four guarding their rear.

That was one of the M24's faults-their radar sensors could not cover a blind spot directly behind the aircraft. Boris swung his chopper around in a sweeping, diving turn, dropping lower out of the flight pattern to avoid a collision with one of his own aircraft.

And suddenly there it was, a flashing marker on his HUD, followed by a warning chirp that his M24 was being targeted by some infrared device.

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"Down! Down!" he cried into his headset. "They have a marker on me!"

He changed pitch suddenly on his rotor blades and dropped like a stone to less than a hundred feet above the treetops, his prop wash causing the jungle below him to swirl madly, driving monkeys and birds into

flight in every direction.

"Red One!" Hans cried into his helmet earphones. "I have a GTA locked on me. . . ."

Hans's voice broke off the instant a resounding boom thundered above Boris's M24. He looked up when the aftershock of a direct hit made his chopper sway, forcing him to use more thrust to hold his position above the trees, for his ship was hovering dangerously close to the highest limbs.

Hans Rutger's HIND was engulfed by fire. The tail section and rear rotor snapped off, looping away from the body of the flaming craft as though it had a flight path of its own, dropping toward the jungle in perfect arcs driven by the tail rotor.

Boris caught a brief glimpse of Hans-his helmeted body swaddled in a blanket of flame flying upward, turning head over heels while still belted into the pilot's seat, his arms flailing helplessly until he was cut in half by a spinning blade on the main rotor separated from the shaft by the explosion.

Then all was fire and noise where Hans Rutger's chopper had been only seconds earlier. Flaming wreckage fell across the rain forest, narrowly missing Boris's rotors and almost taking his chopper down with it as it fell.

Another blip showed on Boris' HUD, and his warning system chirped faster, louder, screaming a warning to the frightened pilot.

One of the Rebels was trying to train a rocket on

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him, even at an altitude that should have hidden him from a laser beam.

"Got a hot spot!" Boris shouted. "I have no choice but to put down now!"

He fully understood the consequences. Crashing in die jungle treetops at least offered a slight chance he might survive.

"Red One! I have a hot spot!" The voice belonged to the pilot of Red Three.

"Go down! Go down!" Boris bellowed into the microphone as he cut the throttle on his own chopper, hoping it would drift slowly into the treetops and catch somewhere among the tree limbs without exploding.

He saw a fireball erupt off to his left while he was going down. Red Three came apart like a child's toy, and the clap of the explosion was accompanied by a scream transmitted over the radio. Then the scream ended abruptly as die helicopter's fuel tanks exploded into a secondary fireball.

Boris felt his M24 strike an object below. Then the machine tilted crazily and main rotor blades began to chew into leafy limbs and jungle vines, shaking the cockpit as though he were in an earthquake. The tail section twisted upward, and then the cockpit glass shattered. The noise around him was deafening.

He had the presence of mind to reach for the control panel to shut off the electrical system, hoping to prevent a fire, just as the HIND made a nosedive among the branches toward the jungle floor. For some reason one of his machine guns began to fire, out of control, blasting the ground rushing toward him with a spray of armor-piercing bullets.

"Dear God," he gasped, watching in horror what awaited him upon impact while the last remaining

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blade of the main rotor chewed through everything in its path.

Just before the nose of his ruined HIND slammed to the ground, something caught, jerking him forward against the restraint of his seat harness, suspending him and what was left of his chopper a few feet off the ground.

Something in his neck had snapped. His head lolled over until his chin touched his chest. Then, wondering if he might be dying, he lost consciousness.

Boris blinked his eyes open. Excruciating pain throbbled in his neck and head and down his back. Someone, some voice, was talking to him. Was this a dream? Was he still alive? How long had he been unconscious?

He found himself hanging from the pilot's seat, trapped in the safety harness, staring down, unable to turn his head or lift it. He saw the shape of a man wearing fatigues, holding some kind of rifle with the muzzle pointed up at him.

The soldier spoke to him in English. "Looks like your bird broke its wings, Nazi."

"Help me," Boris stammered.

"I'm gonna help you, asshole. I'm gonna help you all the way to your grave."

"Who are you? Are you one of Enger's troops? Why are you aiming that gun at me?"

"My name's Ben Raines. I'm sure as hell not one of you. I'm aiming this rifle at you because I'm gonna send you to hell with it, where you belong."

The name Ben Raines was vaguely familiar, although Boris was too badly stunned by the crash to think clearly.

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The pain in his neck and back was excruciating, making his vision blur and consuming his thoughts.

"Adios, asshole," Raines said.

Boris Dahn heard the hammering of gunfire, and felt his body being jerked back and forth in his flight harness. Then all went black around him and, mercifully, the pain disappeared and he felt nothing.

When Jersey and Cooper, his arm in a sling, entered Ben's CP tent, their team members gathered around, slapping Cooper on the back and hugging Jersey.

Anna said with tears in her eyes, "We're so glad to have you two back. We never gave up hope you would make it."

"We might not have, if Ben hadn't left that medical team with the chopper at Soyo," Jersey said.

She glanced at Cooper. "Coop was in pretty bad shape by the time we got down the Congo."

"Yeah, if it hadn't been for the way Jersey took care of me, I would have been a goner for sure," Cooper added.

A voice from the tent's doorway boomed out, "Speaking of wounds, I want to see you in my hospital tent right away, young man."

Doctor Chase was standing in the doorway with his hands on his hips, a grin on his face. "And as for you, young lady," he said, pointing a finger at Jersey, "one of my medics says you threatened him with a gun."

Ben looked at her, his eyebrows raised. "Is that true, Jersey?"

"No, of course not . . . I just told him I might be a little perturbed if he started cutting on Coop's arm before Doc Chase had a chance to look at it."

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"That's not the way he tells it," Doctor Chase said, winking at Ben. "Now come on, Coop, let's go take a look at that arm before it falls off."

As he walked toward the door he called back to Jersey. "And you-in my tent later for a full physical. No telling what you might have picked up running around in the jungle like that."

After Doctor Chase and Cooper left, Ben poured Jersey some coffee, "Tell us about what happened. Did you see any more hostiles?"

Jersey nodded. "Sure, Boss, but could it wait just a little while? We haven't had anything to eat but rice and rotten fruit for three days."

Beth and Anna both rushed to her side. "Come on, we'll take you to the mess tent."

Ben held up his hand. "Corrie, stay a few minutes. I need you here. I want to bump Cecil Jefferys in the states."

"Sure thing, Boss."

After the others had left, Corrie got on the radio. It took her twenty minutes to establish a connection with Jefferys's office, then another ten minutes while they transferred her back and forth to his new CP.

An impatient Ben Raines asked, "What's taking so long, Corrie? Trouble with the equipment?"

"No, sir. It seems there was an attempt on Jefferys's life."

"What?"

"Yes, sir. He's in a hospital facility. They wouldn't tell me where, 'cause security's still pretty tight and they didn't want to transmit his location over an open line."

"Damn! Things are heating up in the states faster than I anticipated."

Ben shook his head, pacing around his CP tent, thinking out loud.

"Corrie, we're gonna have to finish up

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here as quick as we can. I'm afraid if we don't get back to the States soon to give SUSA some support, the NUS and EUS are going to join forces and attack Cecil. I don't know if he has the wherewithal to survive a combined assault without our forces backing him."

Just then, the radio buzzed. After talking for a few minutes, Corrie handed the transceiver to Ben.

"Cecil Jefferys is on line, Boss."

"Cece," Ben said, "how are you, and what's going on over there?"

"I'm fine, Ben, thanks. I was very lucky. One of my bodyguards took a bullet that was meant for me. I just got a nick in the arm."

"So, do you know who's behind the assassination attempt?"

"Yes. We captured one of the team of assassins. Before he managed to kill himself, he talked. You were right, Ben. The NUS and EUS have officially joined together, under one leader, and they're going to call themselves The NEUS."

"Any idea who came out on top?"

"No, we were just getting to that when he killed himself with a cyanide pill hidden in a molar."

"So, they must not believe us when we say we will not be conquered without bringing complete devastation to the States."

"You know how the old liberal establishment thinks as well as I do, Ben. They simply cannot believe anyone in his right mind wouldn't want to be under their socialistic leadership. They evidently think all the people living in The SUSA actually want their government protection and handouts."

Ben nodded, even though Jefferys couldn't see him. "Yeah, I discussed that with some reporters from there not too long ago. They're unable to comprehend why

anyone would risk his life to remain free of governmental intrusion. Hell, they're still convinced that most people abhor violence and private ownership of guns, so the thought that our citizens live with us of their own free will is anathema to them."

"Ben, how long until you're done over there?"

"No more than a couple of weeks, I'd guess. All of my brigades are moving south, facing very little organized resistance so far."

Ben grunted. "Of course, that's soon going to change as we get closer to Bottger's headquarters. I have a feeling he has pulled all of his New World Order troops back to provide a final front to protect him and his other leaders somewhere in South Africa."

"In that regard, my Intelligence sources here have been tracking quite a few long range transmissions between the headquarters of the EUS and NUS and Pretoria, South Africa."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. If I had to make a guess, I'd give you two to one odds Bottger has his headquarters either in or near the city of Pretoria."

"Thanks for the info, Cece. I'll radio my brigade commanders and tell them to start tracking their forces toward Pretoria. That should give us some quick response, increased opposition from more professional troops, if Bottger is headquartered there."

"OK, Ben. I have to go now. The security types have decided it's time to move me again, to someplace more secure. They feel another assassination attempt is on the way."

"You take care, Cece. SUSA needs your leadership now more than ever. Raines out."

"Thanks, Ben. You, too. If they're trying to kill me,

it's only logical to assume you're high on their hit list, also. Watch your back, old friend. Jefferys out."

"Corrie," Ben said as he handed her the radio transceiver, "see if you can get John Michaels in here. We need to discuss a strategy for ending this African campaign as soon as possible."

Five minutes later Michaels walked through the door, followed by Cooper, Jersey, Beth, and Anna.

"I see you must have eaten your fill," Ben said with a smile to Jersey and Cooper.

"Fruit and rice, especially rotten fruit, is highly overrated as an energy source," Cooper said with a scowl.

He glanced at Jersey. "Not to say that Jersey isn't a wonderful cook, who'll no doubt make some man a wonderful wife some day, but I hate sharing my portions with maggots and worms."

Jersey gave him a look. "Well, after nursing a layabout, lazy man who pretended his wounds were worse than they really were, hunting and gathering all our food by myself, and defending said lazy brute from the forces of evil all day, I feel I can be excused for not coming up to his culinary expectations."

Cooper gave her a bow. "\bu're excused, and your nursing skills and self-defense skills are above reproach. In fact, I highly recommend to all and sundry that if they ever get stranded and wounded in the jungle they have you as a companion, my dear."

"OK, team. Let's get down to business for a while," Ben said. "Cecil Jefferys tells me the EUS and NUS have joined forces, and he fears an attack before too long and perhaps even a coup in the US. That means we have to get this unpleasantness in Africa over with as soon as possible."

Michaels nodded. "Things are going well with the other brigades, Ben. From the east coast over in Mozam-

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bique to the central areas of Zimbabwe and Botswana, all our forces are moving very rapidly to the south. They all report resistance has been minimal at best, except for Colonel Marsh, who for some reason has come under fairly severe attacks recently."

Ben grinned. "Couldn't happen to a more competent commander. If I know Marsh, he kicked some butt."

"Yes. He's suffered only minimal troop losses, but his losses of materiel have been slightly higher than the other commander's."

Ben got up from his desk and walked to a bulletin board where he had tacked up a map of Africa. He put his finger on the area surrounding Pretoria.

"I have fairly reliable information from Cecil's Intelligence sources that Bottger is most likely headquartered in Pretoria, or somewhere close to it."

He turned from the map to face Michaels. "I want the rest of the battalions to turn and concentrate their movements to heading for Pretoria."

"That shouldn't be a problem. Ike's 502 Brigade is just a few hundred clicks behind us, running down the Angola-Zambia border. He's not facing much resistance. It seems the native warriors who usually fight for Bottger are afraid to travel too close to Angola, because of the anthrax deaths there."

Ben nodded. "Good. How about the others?"

"Thermopolis's 19 Batt is still tracking south through the middle of the country, toward the middle to eastern Zimbabwe."

"How about Pat O'Shea and the 510?"

"They started on the coast and have come straight south, from Somalia, through Kenya, and are now about halfway down Mozambique. He states he's had relatively little opposition, other than native gangs and a few small bands of meres."

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Ben studied the map for a moment. "John, I want everyone to curve their brigades to make a path straight for Pretoria. Ignore anything else. If Bottger's there we'll cut the head of the snake off, and the body will die."

He glanced at his team members, sitting around watching him. "That was one of the weaknesses of the old Nazi regime, and has no doubt been copied by Bottger. The leaders were all too paranoid to have well trained men in place to take over in case they were killed or cut off. If we can isolate or destroy Bottger, his whole army will disintegrate through lack of secondary leadership."

"OK, Ben. Anything else?" Michaels asked.

"Yeah. When you talk to the brigade commanders, tell them to let the troops know it's going to get a lot tougher the closer we get to Pretoria. Bottger will have stationed his best troops and most modern equipment close by his headquarters, to protect himself."

Michaels was making notes on a small pad as Ben talked. "What are we going to do next, Ben?"

"I plan to take the 501 to the east a bit, to avoid the worst of the desert country in Namibia. We'll skirt the desert by traveling on the central plateau, heading south at high speeds over the grasslands. When we get to Windhoek, about in the center of the country, we'll take a hard left to the east and head toward Botswana. If we angle slightly south, we'll pass just below the worst of the Kalahari desert."

Michaels frowned. "Boss, that's going to leave us awfully exposed. That country is nothing but grass plains, veld, and desert. There'll be absolutely no cover if we come under attack."

"I know, but it can't be helped, John. If we take the safe, long way around, all that we're fighting for back

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home may be lost. We're gonna haul ass across the open country, travel a lot at night, and depend on our air superiority to keep us safe. Let the troops know there'll be damn little sleep for the next week or so."

"Yes, sir," Michaels said, still frowning as he left the tent to radio Ben's orders to the other commanders.

Beth looked up from some old travel brochures which she had been reading while Ben and Michaels talked.

"General Ben, it says here that Namibia is the driest place on earth, and takes its name from the Nambib, a great swathe of desert along the

eight-hundred-mile-long Skeleton Coast. It also says the central plateau savannas you told John we're going to cross are at an altitude of five thousand feet!"

"That's right, Beth. That means the troops are going to have to carry all our water with them, and the fatigue factor is going to be high at that altitude. In fact, the only free flowing rivers in Namibia are at the extreme northern and southern borders, with practically no water in between."

He stood up and pointed to the map on the wall of the tent. "In addition, as we progress farther east, toward Botswana, we'll run into the Kalahari sandveld, thousands of acres of red sand dunes, well vegetated with thornbush and high grass, but no surface water at all. We'll probably have to use the C-130s to transport our water to us as we travel then, 'cause it will be impossible to carry enough water with us for the entire journey."

Cooper shook his head. "All in all, Boss, it sounds like a delightful trip we're embarking on."

"It won't be fun, that's for sure, Coop. Especially if we come under air attack, as I expect us to when Bottger

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realizes our entire army has turned toward his headquarters in Pretoria."

"You think he might get a little excited, Chief?" Jersey asked.

Ben grinned an evil grin. "To say the least, Jersey, we'll certainly get his full attention."

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Major Marcus Cheli, commander of a New World Special Forces Unit with two Bantu scouts showing them the way through impenetrable jungles in Zimbabwe, was growing increasingly wary.

Their informant west of the Zambezi River in Zambia radioed that Rebel Battalion 12 had suddenly turned southeast at the Chizarira National Park area and headed into the heart of Zimbabwe. Immediately, the entire battalion simply disappeared.

Aerial recon had found nothing, no trace of a huge armored battalion with Abrams fifty-five ton tanks and the main battle tank employed by the Rebels-the M48A3-which was usually protected from the sky by Apache helicopter gunships.

Cheli's small Cessna recon planes had found nothing to report other than a sea of green jungle, apparently undisturbed by an army passing through it.

Nothing so large was capable of vanishing like this- an entire brigade-although the Russian spy plane had been shot down by a missile before it could cover enough of northern Zimbabwe to be absolutely sure there were no military units moving through the rain forest.

Moving as quickly as he dared northeast from the

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Zimbabwe city of Bulawayo, where his forces had been stationed, into northern Zimbabwe, Cheli had been charged with finding the Rebel strike force.

His instructions were clear, and he was told not to bother to return if they weren't carried out to the letter. He was ordered to send coordinates for a massive air strike against Colonel Marsh and his strike force by forces being gathered in Pretoria, to be commanded by General Conreid and Bruno Bottger himself.

It was a huge responsibility, with close scrutiny by Bottger and Conreid, and Cheli did not intend to fail. Leading a squad of fifty-four Special Forces soldiers, some armed with handheld Soviet rocket launchers, Cheli followed his native Zimbabwean Bantus along a quiet stretch of river, staying in contact with them by two-way radio equipped with scramblers.

Nala, a towering Zulu giant, moved west of the river, using all his jungle skills to keep from being detected. Okobe, a wiry Bantu from near the abandoned stone city of Great Zimbabwe, had been a lion hunter most of his life, and his cunning and knowledge of this jungle more than made up for his limited use of English.

Cheli pushed the transmit button on his radio. "Anything yet, Nala?"

A short crackle of static, then a whispered voice. "No, Major. There be nothing."

Cheli frowned, sleeveing sweat off his face, irritated by a spider bite swelling on his forearm. He hoped like hell the spider, whatever it was, wasn't poisonous.

"Damn! Where the hell can that Marsh bastard be?" He said this to Captain Schmidt, his XO, walking through the jungle beside him.

"No telling," Schmidt replied, his red beret soaked with sweat, his face encircled by swarms of mosquitos lured to the sweaty camouflage greasepaint on his face,

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as if they savored the taste of it. His AK47 hung loosely under his arm by a strap. "An armored battalion cannot simply disappear. If nothing else, we should be able to pick up their helicopters when they leave the ground."

"At least we oughta be able to hear 'em," Cheli agreed as he wondered about Okobe moving along the opposite bank of the river, following an overgrown trail through the forest that had once been used by loggers and nomads harvesting sap from rubber trees.

"Yes, we should," Schmidt said, almost stumbling over a twisted mass of vines crossing the abandoned road.

Cheli changed frequencies and spoke into the mouthpiece. "Do you see or hear anything, Okobe?"

Okobe was positioned more than a mile upriver from the column, allowing him plenty of time to warn Cheli if he sighted the enemy.

More static. "No," Okobe answered in a hoarse voice. "No men. No soldiers."

"Any tracks? Anything at all?"

A silence, lasting too long. "See one footprint in river mud. Be a big boot. Some man cross over. Not be afraid of crocs."

They had seen dozens of giant saltwater crocodiles basking in sunny spots along the water's edge. These reptiles were very aggressive and territorial, not shy like the inland crocs found in fresh water. A few had made threatening charges toward some of Cheli's men.

"I wonder why someone wearing a heavy boot is out in the jungle here," Cheli said, shifting the weight of his AK47 to the other shoulder and asking Schmidt, "crossing a damn croc-infested river in boots?"

"A Scout, perhaps," Schmidt suggested. "The Rebels may be having as much trouble with recon as we are. This forest canopy is too thick for reliable air recon,

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thus they are left with the same choices we have . . . making an ID from the ground."

Cheli pushed the transmit button again. "Who could it be, Okobe?"

This time, Okobe's voice came back quickly. "Soldier. Jungle people don't wear big boots. Wear sandals. He not from this place, I sure."

Cheli warned, "Keep your eyes open. Let me know if you see even one more track. Or anything else."

Before Cheli could turn off his radio and put it back in his belt, he heard Okobe speak.

"Okobe have bad feeling. Somebody be watch me. I hear voice of spirits tell me to go back."

The major scowled. He spoke to Schmidt. "These superstitious bastards aren't worth the gunpowder it would take to kill them. They're afraid of their own damn shadows."

Schmidt didn't sound so sure. "Perhaps his senses have picked up something, only he doesn't recognize what it is yet. Bantus know the jungle, its sights and sounds. I wonder if he has seen or heard something he couldn't quite identify."

Cheli put the radio away. "Let's keep pushing. General Field Marshal Bottger and General Conreid are expecting to hear from us, and I damn sure don't want to be the one to tell either of them we haven't found a friggin' thing."

"Sadly, it would be the truth," the captain replied. "But no one wants bad news, I suppose. In this case, the bad news is that we haven't found a trace of Marsh's strike force . . . just that one bootprint where a man who isn't a native crossed over this section of river."

"No," Cheli answered, shaking his head. "The bad news is that if we don't find that Marsh bastard and radio his coordinates back to General Bottger, you and

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I might just as well jump into that river and let the crocs eat us, 'cause it'd be a better way to go than if we have to tell the general we failed."

He looked sideways at Schmidt, an ironic smirk curling the corners of his mouth. "In fact, if we do fail, I intend to just keep traveling north until I can find someplace to hide where he'll never find me."

Dusk made the forest so dark Cheli couldn't see much of anything. All day they had marched northeast and found nothing to report to Pretoria. Bottger and Conreid would be furious, and even with nothing to report Cheli knew he had to radio them with the bad news.

"These men are tired," Schmidt said. "We should call a rest stop and let them eat their provisions."

Major Cheli nodded. "I'll radio Nala and Okobe that we're stopping for an hour."

While Captain Schmidt passed the word along their column, Cheli made a radio call to Okobe.

"Okobe, we're stopping for an hour. Let me know if you see or hear anything."

Half a minute passed without any reply, with only dead air on the radio. "Come in, Okobe! Answer me, if you can hear me!"

Again, more silence. Perhaps Okobe, being on the stupid side, had turned his transmitter off. Cheli switched to Nala's frequency and said, "Come in, Nala. We're stopping for a while to rest."

When he got no answer to his call to Nala, something twisted in the pit of Cheli's stomach. Schmidt came walking up with a pint bottle of vodka.

"I can't raise Nala or Okobe. I know something's wrong," Cheli said, sleeveing sweat off his forehead.

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Schmidt took a hurried sip of vodka, glancing at the thick vines and undergrowth around them. "Perhaps someone got to both of them before they could warn us."

Cheli's face paled. "What kind of man could sneak up on a Bantu in the jungle without him knowing it?"

When Schmidt shook his head, sweat running down his face, Cheli suddenly grabbed him by his shirt with both hands, sticking his face in close. "Tell the men to form a defensive perimeter right now!" Cheli snapped.

He released Schmidt's shirt and swung his AK47 around on its strap, where he held it with whitened knuckles, jacking back the loading mechanism to chamber a round. "We could have visitors any minute-" His voice was suddenly drowned out by a wall of machine gun fire coming from all directions, winking muzzle flashes accompanying the deafening blasts from thirty or forty guns.

Men began screaming all around them as Cheli hit the dirt on his belly, searching for a target with his AK47, finding so many that he simply pulled the trigger, spraying bullets back and forth.

Schmidt fell down beside him. "Son of a bitch! They have us surrounded!"

Cheli was momentarily angered by something so damn obvious coming from a seasoned soldier like Schmidt. "Start shooting!" he yelled as his magazine ran dry.

Schmidt sent a burst of fire into the forest. "But I can't see them, Major!" he yelled. "It's too damn dark!"

Cheli slammed a new mag into his rifle. "Spray 'em. You'll hit something!"

Now a fierce battle raged back and forth, guns blasting from both sides amid screams of agony and shouted

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warnings when someone spotted an enemy in the hazy darkness.

For five minutes or more the gunfire seemed endless, and Cheli's ears were ringing from all the noise, his nose stinging from the heavy cloud of gunsmoke hanging in the humid air like winter fog. The heaviest enemy gunfire came from the far side of the river.

Schmidt raised his eyes above a clump of ferns to get a better look at where he was shooting. At that instant his head snapped back. Cheli saw the back of the captain's skull split open. Blood and brains and hair flew from a giant hole below the rear hatband of Schmidt's beret.

"Auuugh!" Schmidt cried, flopping over on his side, staring at Major Cheli with three eyes . . . what appeared to be three eyes in the dark . . . with one centered between the pair he was born with.

Blood squirted from the hole in his forehead, cascading down his surprised face before he collapsed limply in a patch of deep grass, one foot quivering.

Cheli swallowed back bile. Somehow, they had allowed themselves to be surrounded by a Rebel force. His troops were taking a beating. Dozens of men were dead or wounded along the jungle trail.

Shadows moved through the forest upriver, and then came the sound of pistol fire, the heavy thud of clubs, the occasional glint of an axe blade where Rebels were attacking his squad at close quarters.

"Damn," he whispered, unable to look at his dead friend's bloodied face. Cheli started shooting at the shadows until yet another clip was empty.

While he was reloading, something struck the back of his head with tremendous force. He fell over on his face, releasing his rifle, too stunned to move. Through a fog he saw a pair of feet walk away from him, and

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then he noticed blood running down his neck. His skull throbbed with pain.

He tried to push himself up from the grass and vines until a wave of dizziness and nausea weakened him too much. He fell back down with his face resting on the stock of his AK47. Cheli found he was paralyzed, completely unable to move.

He felt sleepy, and closed his eyes to escape the agony of a wound somewhere on the back of his head. The battle sounds around him faded to silence as he was dimly aware he was losing consciousness.

Major Cheli opened his eyes, discovering that night had passed and a brilliant morning sun beamed through openings in the jungle canopy. How long had he been unconscious?

Very slowly, he raised his head, blinking furiously to clear his brain. What he saw all around him gripped him with a terror such as he had never known. Dead bodies, swarming with flies and feeding ants, lay everywhere.

His skull ached fiercely when he turned to look in another direction, the jungle trail behind him. More bodies, more flies and ants. He had never seen so much blood in his life. His shirt was covered with dried blood, and hundreds of ants were crawling over him ... he could feel them moving on his neck and back and shoulders, and feel their stinging bites.

Clouds of black flies hovered above him, buzzing, some clinging to his cheeks and filling his nose so that it was hard to breathe.

Cheli happened to glance toward the river when he heard a splash and other noises. Five or six big crocs were dragging the bodies of his men toward the river.

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Then, to his horror, he saw a huge croc crawling in his direction. "Oh, no," he whispered, a feeble, dry sound.

A sight just as terrifying awaited him on the riverbank, where two long stakes had been driven into the mud. Atop one stake was Okobe's severed head, his sightless eyes staring at Cheli. On the other stake, Nala's ebony head was also aimed at him, his jaw hanging open, flies swarming around it, crawling in and out of his mouth.

The Rebel army they'd encountered had left a message for anyone who

found the battle site. The severed heads would soon be only fleshless skulls after the flies and ants fed, grinning at all who happened to pass this way.

The giant croc, at least fifteen feet long, came cautiously closer, scenting Cheli's blood. He tried desperately to get up and run away, but he was too weak to hold his head up any longer and let it fall back on his rifle.

He could hear the croc hiss, and the slither of its powerful claws moving through grass and ferns and vines. He caught a glimpse of rows of needle-like teeth as the creature opened its jaws.

"Please, no," he gasped, panting, fear causing him to tremble from head to toe. He was about to be eaten alive by a crocodile, the worst form of death he could imagine.

The croc grabbed his arm between its teeth, biting down as it shook its massive head. Cheli felt the bone in his forearm break, and he heard it crack. He shrieked in agony, struggling to free himself as he was being dragged slowly toward the river.

For some reason the croc let go momentarily. Then Cheli felt its teeth tear into his side just below his rib-cage.

He screamed again, the noise echoing back and forth

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among the trees before he was pulled down a muddy embankment, then submerged beneath the water, strangling off the last sound he ever made while the croc began to twist violently, jerking pieces of his flesh away from his body, taking him to the bottom to stuff him under a log until his flesh rotted enough to become an appetizing meal.

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"Tell General Field Marshal Bottger that General Dorfmann is here from Berlin. I must speak to him at once."

Bruno Bottger heard the voice through a crack in his office door leading to the secured waiting area in his underground bunker, where his private office was protected from air attack.

Why is Dorfmann here? he wondered, cringing inwardly.

Dorfmann commanded the Gestapo in New Germany. The New Nazi Party now governed most of what had once been Europe, held in an iron grip by Nazi forces. Their takeover had been swift and unexpected, and the Rebels were already making plans to return to Europe.

Dorfmann answered only to Kaiser Wilhelm II, political leader of New Germany. Bruno feared only one thing from Dorfmann . . . that he might discover his racial impurity, his Jewish mother, even though Bruno had made certain all her birth and death records had been destroyed. Dorfmann was tenacious, always digging to expose enemies of the New World Order.

While Bruno held a higher military rank and commanded The New World Order Army, he continued to worry that somehow Dorfmann would discover his dark

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secret, even though Bruno's New World forces were more or less politically independent of New Nazi Germany.

No one told Bruno Bottger what to do, quite simply because he had held the power, the military might, to crush anyone who stood in his way . . . until this upstart Rebel army led by General Ben Raines came to Africa.

Raines was proving to be a more difficult adversary than Bruno had thought in the beginning. Among the worst bits of news, Raines' forces Battalion 12, headed by that bastard Colonel Marsh, had wiped out one of Bruno's elite Special Forces squads in Zimbabwe.

The Rebel troops killed them down to the last man, including the squad's commander, Major Cheli, a feat Bruno had thought was impossible. Cheli had been among his best recon specialists in difficult terrain. To take him and his Bantu scouts by surprise implied an expertise in jungle warfare Bottger could only envy, and fear.

Bruno's trusted bodyguard, Rudolf Hessner, stuck his head through the doorway. "General Dorfmann is here from Berlin to see you."

"Show him in."

General Dorfmann entered the expansive office where an old Nazi flag adorned Bruno's back wall. Dorfmann saluted, his stocky, muscular body still fit even though he was well past the age of fifty. He wore a copy of the old Nazi uniform, as did all New Nazi soldiers, right down to the knee-high, black leather boots and bill cap.

Bruno merely nodded, not returning Dorfmann's salute as a show of superiority. Neither did he stand up behind his desk. He gave Dorfmann a casual stare.

"What brings to you Pretoria, Herr Dorfmann?" he

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asked, feigning indifference, as if whatever it was could hold no significance to him.

Without being asked Dorfmann took a seat across the desk and removed his cap, pushing a hand through his naturally blond hair, pale blue eyes riveted on Bruno.

"A matter of great urgency," he said in his heavy German accent. "Word of several military defeats for The New World Army has reached Berlin. This Rebel Army has the Kaiser worried, wondering if they will turn toward New Germany sometime in the future."

"I do not intend to let that happen, Herr Dorfmann."

Dorfmann nodded, plainly unconvinced. "We have learned a great deal about this General Raines from a man who fought him in the western hemisphere. That mercenary army was soundly defeated by Raines. These Rebels grow stronger, acquiring more equipment and more followers. Their so-called Manifesto continues to attract people from all over the world."

"I've heard of this Manifesto," Bruno said, suspecting there was more behind Dorfmann's unexpected visit. He was, after all, Gestapo, not a military field commander. Bruno still wondered why Dorfmann was here, and if he posed a threat to him.

"It has tremendous appeal to the oppressed, to starving men who believe in the foolish tenets of democracy. SUSA has been built on these principles. But Raines has military power as well as gilt-edged promises to offer believers, and now it appears he has too much military strength for you to contain him. As I said, the Kaiser is worried."

Bruno gave Dorfmann an empty smile. "Tell the Kaiser not to worry. All is going according to plan. I am luring Raines and his army across the continent toward South Africa. There we shall cut off all his sources of

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supply. He is doing exactly what I had hoped he would do."

Bottger yawned, as if bored by the conversation. "I have pulled my most effective troops back to the South African borders, in order to attack Raines after his supplies are no longer forthcoming."

"But the losses. We hear of so many of your defeats at the hands of the Rebels lately--"

"Soldiers must be expendable to serve the cause, General Dorfmann. Most of the men we have lost to Raines have been these simpleminded African natives-- Bantu tribesmen, and especially Zulus. They are continually at war with each other, and when I offered the most powerful of the tribal warlords a handsome sum of money to fight for our cause the greedy bastards accepted, as I knew they would. They die quickly, and willingly, believing they are making themselves rich. Very few live to collect the wages I've offered, and those who do will be exterminated when we unleash the balance of our chemical and germ weapons on them as we pull out of Africa to cleanse it ... after we destroy Raines and his Rebels."

Bottger waved a dismissive hand, as if the deaths of the natives meant less than nothing to him.

"As you know," Bruno continued, "our ultimate goal is racial purity on this planet, as it was when the great Adolph Hitler unified most of Europe. Had it not been for the damned American intervention against the Fuh-rer, we would live in a perfect world where no genetic impurities exist."

Dorfmann glanced over his shoulder. "May I close the door so we can speak privately?"

Bruno felt adrenaline rush of fear course through him, making his heart

pound like a trip-hammer. Was

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Dorfmann about to reveal something regarding his own racial mix? Had he discovered Bruno's Jewish lineage?

"Of course, General. Close the door if you wish." As he said it, Bruno pressed a hidden button under his desk, to alert Rudolf of the possibility of trouble.

Dorfmann got up and closed the door gently. Bruno noted he was carrying a Luger in a holster belted to his waist. Dorfmann sat back down, giving Bruno a piercing look.

"You mentioned racial purity before," Dorfmann began. "I wanted to inform you of something, in strict confidence, of course."

"Of course," Bruno said, sensing the direction Dorfmann was headed, wondering how much Dorfmann suspected, and how much he actually knew.

"There have been rumors in high circles having to do with you."

"High circles? Who do you mean? And what are these rumors?"

Dorfmann continued to stare at him coldly. The Gestapo was a place for men with ice in their veins, and Dorfmann fit this mold perfectly. He would have served Hitler well, Bruno thought.

"The Kaiser himself has mentioned it to me, as has General Borgdahl. Someone was looking into your past . . . for reasons I do not know. It seems nothing can be found about one side of your German family. There are no records concerning your mother. It is as if she did not exist. The Kaiser and General Borgdahl wonder if you can explain this, and give me some information about your mother so I can inform those who need to know."

Bruno tensed, but tried not to show it, reaching for a desk drawer. General Borgdahl was head of Schutztaffel, the Black Shirts, a death squad enforcing policies

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within New Germany by means of executions, killing enemies of the State.

Bruno began a well-rehearsed story he'd told German officials before. "My mother was a simple woman. A peasant from Bavaria. She was born at home, and never registered with the government because the family was so poor, simple farmers who did not understand The Order."

As he spoke he took a counterfeit file from his desk, containing forged records of the birth and death of a Gertrude Fest, his fictitious mother.

"I did, however, finally locate a few documents in the basement of a building in a small village in Bavaria. Here are my mother's documents, those I was able to find."

He tossed the file in front of Dorfmann, waiting, assuming a bored smile, as if he were totally unconcerned about the inquiry and Dorfmann's veiled threats.

Dorfmann, his gaze still fixed on Bruno, did not bother picking up the file. "Come now, General Field Marshal Bottger. Those records are false."

"False? Explain yourself." Bruno sat up straight in his chair. He was not used to his word being questioned.

"Your mother was not Gertrude Fest. I know who she was, or should I say I know what she was?"

"You must explain, and please tell me who else you have told about whatever you suspect."

Dorfmann smiled wickedly, enjoying himself. Bruno's right hand moved closer to the Steyer automatic pistol he kept in the same desk drawer.

"As you say, there are no records. However, I did find an old woman who knew your mother from childhood. I searched for a good many months to uncover this information."

"What information?"

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Dorfmann's smile broadened. "That your mother was a Jew."

Bruno knew what he had to do, what must be done. "I will deny it, of course, since it is not true."

"But it is true, Herr Bottger. I took down a statement from the old woman myself. Your mother was Gertrude Goldman, not Fest as you have claimed. She was even the daughter of a rabbi."

"Utter nonsense. The old woman is lying."

"No. She gave me exact details as to your birth, when and where. However, all records had been removed. I'm quite sure you removed them personally, so no one would know of your genetic weakness . . . impurity, shall I say."

"Have you informed the Kaiser or Borgdahl of these false charges in order to defame me in Berlin?"

"Not yet. I want to strike a bargain with you. I am sure you will agree."

"What sort of bargain, Herr Dorfmann?" Bruno asked, sitting back in his chair, relaxed now that he had decided what was to happen.

"I want to leave New Germany and join your army. In the end you will control most of the world, in my opinion, unless this General Raines is your undoing. I wish to be on the winning side when these wars are over."

Now it was Bruno's turn to smile. "You would become a traitor, Herr Dorfmann?"

"You know precisely what I mean. Calling me a traitor is using the wrong word. You are German, even if you are not of pure blood, fighting for New Germany as well as your New World Order. It is simply that I wish to be a part of what you are doing."

"And you'll use blackmail in order to do it?"

"Again, you have used the wrong word."

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Bruno pulled out his Steyer, aiming it across the desk. "I call it blackmail. Where is this statement you were given by the old woman?"

"I left it in Berlin for safekeeping, a form of insurance policy. I am surprised that you feel it necessary to point a gun at me." Dorfmann's eyes showed no fear, as though he was confident of his position in this tendered bargain.

"Where in Berlin, Herr Dorfmann? Your life hangs in the balance."

"In a bank safe-deposit box. Only one person has the key."

"And who might that be?"

"You don't really expect me to tell you, Herr Bottger. I would be at your mercy. And I know you won't shoot me, either."

Bruno felt sure he could locate Dorfmann's safe-deposit box and open it, using force if necessary. Few people in New Germany would challenge him, not even the Kaiser himself.

"Then I must inform you of your terrible mistake, Herr Dorfmann. You have misjudged me, thinking I could be blackmailed. I will find your safe-deposit box, and destroy the statement you were given. But you will not be here to see it happen."

Now Dorfmann drew back, his cheeks paling. "You cannot think you will get away with killing me."

"I'm quite sure of it," Bruno replied.

As Dorfmann fumbled at the flap covering his Linger, Bruno pulled the trigger on his nine millimeter automatic.

Seven hollowpoint slugs tore through General Dorfmann. His body jerked in the chair seven times. Blood splattered all over the floor of Bruno's office,

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just as Rudolf Hessner came rushing in with his pistol in his fist.

Dorfmann slumped to the concrete floor, making a wet sound when his body landed in a growing pool of blood, groaning, his legs quivering in death spasms.

"I was listening over the intercom," Rudolf said quietly, lowering the muzzle of his automatic. "But you did not say the code word to come in and kill him."

"Take his body to the lower level incinerator and cremate him. Wipe up the blood. Contact whoever flew him down here to Pretoria and tell them that General Dorfmann has not kept his appointment with me. Tell them I'm very concerned. Inform all guards to say that General Dorfmann has not been seen entering the compound. If he has a driver waiting, go up there and summon him to the lower level. You can say the general has asked to see him at once. Then kill him and put his body in the incinerator along with Herr Dorfmann."

Rudolf bent down to lift Dorfmann's legs, then he hesitated. "He is still breathing."

"What does it matter, Rudolf? Put him in the incinerator, anyway."

"I'll have to get a body bag to carry him down. If I drag him he'll leave blood all over the hallway and stairs."

"Do whatever you must," Bruno said, too bored now to bother with details, putting a full magazine back in his Steyer. "Make sure you take care of his driver and any aides he brought with him. If you need help, ask Johann to come with you."

"I won't leave anyone alive who came here with him," Rudolf promised.

As Rudolf left to get a body bag, Bruno gave Dorfmann a final glance. The head of the New German Gestapo, the only man in Germany who could discredit

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him for being part Jew, would be dead in a matter of minutes. Now, all Bruno had to do was fly to Berlin and locate Dorfmann's deposit box. Then he would have Rudolf kill the old woman who gave the statement to Dorfmann about his mother, and destroy the paper. His secret would remain buried forever. Ultimately, he would have to execute Rudolf, for overhearing what Dorfmann said about his mother being a Jew.

He put his thoughts back on General Ben Raines and his slowly advancing Rebel army. It was not true that Raines was falling into Bruno's trap, as he'd told Dorfmann. Somehow, Ben Raines was overcoming every obstacle Bruno put in his path, marching straight for Pretoria.

He wondered briefly if Raines knew of the location of his headquarters in Pretoria. No, it was one of his most closely guarded secrets, only members of the highest command level knew where his bunker was. There was no way Raines could have discovered its location.

Bruno did not like being the hunted instead of the hunter. Something had to be done to halt the Rebels. He reached for a two-way radio on his desk.

"Give me General Conreid," he said gruffly into the mouthpiece.

A clear voice answered moments later. "Yes, General Field Marshal."

"What has come of the strike against Colonel Marsh's unit?"

"We have been unable to locate them so far, sir. I am sorry."

"What the hell is happening? An entire armored battalion with air support cannot vanish into thin air."

"It is far more difficult to find them in the jungle. We are doing the best we can. Major Cheli evidently

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found them, but was unable to report their coordinates before he and his command were . . . ah, eliminated."

"Do better, General Conreid, or I will be forced to remove you from command and find someone else."

"I understand, sir," he said, sudden fear in his voice. "We are taking new measures even as we speak. I have sent Major Hans Schultz and a considerable force to the last coordinates reported by Major Cheli before we lost contact with him."

"Let's hope he can succeed where Cheli failed, or I may have to make some personnel changes in my command structure, General, starting with you," Bruno snapped, clicking off, tossing the radio on his desktop in frustration. He wondered what could be done to halt these damn Rebels soldiers. Nothing was working as it should. . . .

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Major Hans Schultz rode in his specially equipped armored personnel carrier down twisting jungle roads. They were deep in northern Zimbabwe, in a tropical rain forest where a report from a Zulu mercenary from Zanzibar claimed the sought-after Rebels were creeping through the heavy undergrowth at a snail's pace, hidden from the air by a canopy of trees so thick that aerial photographs showed nothing. But the Zulu insisted an armored column was traveling an old road used by game wardens in Cubango Province to halt ivory poachers years in the past.

Since the area was near Major Cheli's last reported position, Schultz decided to investigate the Zulu's claim.

Schultz had halfway expected to find the Rebels farther south, perhaps as far as the Matobo Hills, as he led his armored brigade north past the abandoned city of Great Zimbabwe, whose carved soapstone birds and monoliths had been abandoned and given over to the baboons, yet they negotiated this difficult terrain with their Bulldog fifty ton tanks and lighter Minsk twenty-two ton tanks without sighting the enemy.

But now, as they crept into the rain forests of the northern plateaus and high mountain ranges, where an entire squad of General Field Marshal Bottger's Special

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Forces had been wiped out, he knew they were on the verge of engaging a Rebel army. He could feel it in his bones.

"This heavy jungle has its advantages," he told Captain Hinz, his aide.

Fritz Hinz drove the APC, fighting the steering wheel over rough spots, through narrow openings in the vines and trees and brush.

"How is that, Major?" Hinz said without daring to take his eyes off the treacherous jungle trail. "I can't see a hundred yards in front of us most of the time."

"They can't hit us from the air, Fritz. No helicopter gunship on earth can navigate through these limbs and vines, not even their Apaches in the hands of their very best pilots. We will be safe from air-to-ground rockets."

"We have the same disadvantage, Major. We can't get our HINDs through, either. Nothing can fly through this, not even a hummingbird."

The clatter of heavy steel tank tracks moving in front and behind them was a comforting sound, Schultz thought. With ten of his smaller Minsk tanks in front of them, and twenty-seven much heavier Bulldogs bringing up the rear with big 105mm cannons and .50 caliber machine guns guarding trucks and APCs filled with infantrymen-more than three hundred of General Con-reid's best, the Praetorian Guard-he was ready for the Rebels even without air support.

"The Rebel commander we seek chooses not to fight us in the air, Fritz. There are staying under every bit of jungle cover they can find because Marsh has so few gunships. I suspect his Apaches are being transported on trucks."

"Perhaps that is why they're moving so slowly, Major. If they are here, they have not covered much ground since defeating Major Cheli's forces," Hinz said.

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Schultz nodded. "General Conreid says our best estimate is that Marsh has only three Apaches left."

"But they have a number of Abrams tanks, according to the report General Conreid gave you, and three times as many of the American-made M48s. They are said to be very maneuverable and quite fast, although we have never actually faced them in battle."

"We shall give them their ultimate test, Fritz."

"The report says General Field Marshal Bottger is angry with General Conreid for being unable to locate the Rebels in his sector. Let us pray the Zulu's information is good, or we will be peeling potatoes somewhere ... or worse."

Schultz picked up his two-way radio, turning to the frequency used by his scouts. "Come in, Beta Group. Have you spotted anything yet?"

A moment was needed for a voice to answer. "Nothing, Major, only more of

this damn hot jungle. There is one thing, however I don't know what it means."

"And what is that?"

"Before there were hundreds of howler monkeys and parrots and macaws and that sort of thing scattering away from us. Now the jungle appears to be empty. It's very strange."

"Perhaps the wildlife hears us coming," Schultz suggested, "or they may hear the tanks from the strike force approaching from the north."

"Could be, Major. Only time will tell."

Schultz thought about what his Scout said, how the jungle seemed to be empty of animals. "This may be what we've been looking for. Stay on the alert. Let me know the minute you see anything at all."

"Will do, Major. Right now we can't see a damn thing at all. You'll be glad to know this road is widening out

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about a mile ahead of our column. The going will be easier for our tanks."

Schultz gave some thought to the possibility that Rebels planting land mines had scared the monkeys and birds away. But his scouts should have found at least one or two of the mines by now, unless only the large, heavy-load variety were planted. A man on foot would not set one off. Could they be pushing ahead into a mine field? he wondered.

Later, as Fritz negotiated a low muddy spot in four-wheel drive, Schultz decided against it. His scouts were too clever not to have noticed some sign of mines being planted.

The earthshaking concussion of a Minsk being blown to bits caused Major Schultz to stiffen in his seat. "What the hell was that?"

Fritz brought the APC to a sudden halt. "Either a mortar or a land mine has blown up one of the Minsk. The turret and cannon went flying into the jungle, and the body is on fire. The fuel and cannon shells will explode any second now."

Before the words left Fritz's mouth, a mighty secondary explosion rocked the jungle. A ball of flame curled upward into the rain forest treetops, setting some of the upper branches on fire.

"Dear God," Schultz whispered when a Minsk tank just in front of the first to be hit erupted in steel shreds amid the roar of a rocket strike.

"Handheld rocket launchers!" he cried above the clap of another explosion. "Pull off into the jungle!" he shouted into the mouthpiece of his radio, instructions to all tanks and trucks. "Take evasive action at once!"

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A Minsk swerved off into a tangle of vines, where it struck a land mine almost immediately. The tracks blew off in sections as the body and turret convulsed.

Schultz turned around when an even louder explosion came from his rear. A huge Bulldog fifty ton tank disintegrated when it drove over a mine only a few yards off the roadway. The Bulldogs had a weakness-armor plate too thin to protect their underbelly-and when a heavy charge was set off underneath it, the tank came apart like a tin can.

"Son of a bitch!" Schultz cried. "There are mines all over the place."

Following the first crippling blast under the Bulldog, a secondary explosion of its 105 millimeter shells scattered fragments of the tank like shrapnel, cutting down trees, pulverizing every plant in its path, igniting even the greenest vines and bushes when sprays of flaming fuel covered them.

Suddenly the thump of mortars being fired sounded from off in the jungle. A mortar shell landed somewhere at the rear of the column, and Schultz heard men screaming.

Another rocket sizzled into a Minsk across the road from Schultz's APC. The turret went spinning away like a hat blown in the wind, surrounded by fire and smoke, but the sound was lost when more mortars and cannons went off. Some of his gunners were taking aim at the enemy, and the pounding of shells landing in the rain forest was like sweet music.

Fritz glanced over his shoulder at the major. "Where shall I drive?" he yelled to be heard above the battle sounds crashing and banging from all directions.

"Stay here!" Schultz replied in his loudest voice. "It could be a mistake to move now!"

A Bulldog tank, moving deeper into the jungle, struck

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a mine, and despite its great weight appeared to leave the ground as the charge went off under it. Scraps of flaming metal flew up to the highest treetops before the armored vehicle fell off its tracks and axles, engulfed in smoke and flames, the men inside screaming in agony as their flesh literally melted in the intense heat of the flames.

The chatter of machine gun fire filled brief pauses in the exchange of cannons and mortars. Somewhere to the north another explosion announced a rocket strike on a tank.

They are too heavily armed, Schultz thought, and we drove right into their trap. He recalled what the scout told him about the absence of birds and monkeys in the forest. He should have known then that something was wrong, and called a halt until the scouts found out what it was.

A mortar shell fell very close to the APC and the concussion shook its frame, interrupting something Schultz was listening to on the two-way radio, a command to infantrymen from the back of the column.

"We must get out of here!" Fritz cried. "We'll take a hit any time now if we sit still!"

"Wait. We will gain an advantage very soon, I feel sure, and I must be here to direct our return fire."

"We may not be alive, Major!"

"Nonsense. Bottger's Praetorian Guard is spreading out into the jungle. It won't be long until the advantage is ours. Stay where we are!"

"Yes sir . . ." Fritz's voice was drowned out by a rocket striking a Bulldog tank very close to them. A peal of thunderous noise almost deafened Schultz for a moment, and Fritz hunkered down in his seat, covering his ears with his hands, his face gone pale with fear.

Schultz hit the transmit button on his radio. "All

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units! Move deeper into the jungle! Attack all enemy mortar positions at once!"

The roar of diesel engines followed the major's order, and soon more than a dozen tanks were moving, crashing through deep undergrowth, crushing small trees and bushes in their path. But only moments after Schultz gave the order he realized his serious mistake, when moving tanks began to explode, running over even more heavy land mines.

"It can't be . . ." Schultz said under his breath, watching his powerful armored fighting machines being blown to pieces to the north and south of his position. "How could they have known exactly where to put them?"

"We must move!" Fritz yelled. "We are a sitting duck right here. Please, Major."

"Shut up, you yellow bastard!" Schultz replied, his rage growing as more of his tanks blew up.

"But sir--"

"I said shut up. And remain here!"

Fritz had tears in his eyes when he looked into the back seat. "We will be killed, sir, and I have a family, a wife and two sons."

"You are a soldier, you insolent fool! And now I discover you are also a cowardly one."

"I have no wish to die, sir. If we move carefully to some place out of sight, perhaps they won't target us."

"You idiot! I must be able to see in order to direct our battle plan."

"Sir, our battle plan is failing. These Rebels are destroying us."

Schultz refused to accept what his eyes and ears told him, that every word Captain Hinz said was true. His tanks were easy targets for rockets

and mortars, and

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whenever they moved they encountered more land mines.

"I must not fail General Conreid or General Field Marshal Bottger!" he snapped as the noises from pitched battle grew even louder.

Explosions were occurring up and down his entire column with increasing frequency. Schultz knew Fritz was right to be afraid of their present position in the APC. It was only a matter of time before a rocket or a mortar shell found them, and it was all too clear this engagement was about to be lost.

"All right, Captain," he said, slumping back in the seat as more garbled orders crackled on his radio. "Find some cover for us, but don't go too far."

Fritz started the motor and ground gears. Pulling forward, he inched across a tangle of vines toward a thick clump of small rubber plants that would hide the APC.

Schultz heard more machine gun fire, and then a chorus of screams. Were the fearless Praetorian Guardsmen being cut down by enemy fire?

Fritz guided the APC over a bump, striking something with the left front wheel.

"What was that?" Schultz asked.

"I don't know, sir," Fritz stammered as the left rear wheel passed over the same bump.

A banging noise filled the inside of the armored vehicle, and at the same time Major Schultz felt a powerful force lift him up off the rear seat, slamming his head into the roof.

"No!" Fritz shrieked, before the explosion drowned out every other sound.

Yellow fire swept across Major Schultz's face, his chest, and arms and legs. He tried to suck in a breath of air, but when he did he inhaled a mouthful flames.

He tried to scream and spat fire when he did, but

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there was no sound, and it was as if his mother had turned out the lights in his bedroom, the way she did when he was a boy. Everything went black and silent, and now he felt and heard nothing.

The war was over for Major Hans Schultz and the Praetorian Guardsmen.

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General Conreid came into Bruno's subterranean office, his face a ghostly white. He saluted smartly and stood at attention until Bruno spoke to him.

"What is so important that you told Rudolf you had to see me right away?"

Conreid took a deep breath. "I have bad news, General Field Marshal."

"I guessed as much. It must have something to do with your armored division tracking the strike force."

"I'm afraid so," Conreid replied. "I sent one of our best field armored commanders, Major Schultz, and almost fifty of our Minks and Bulldogs. Three hundred men from the Praetorian Guard went along as infantry support. ..."

"And?" Bruno was growing impatient, although he had already guessed what Conreid came to tell him. He stared at the general, drumming his fingers on his desk, daring Conreid to give him the bad news he knew was coming.

"We engaged the enemy in southern Zimbabwe-"

"It does not matter where! Get on with it!"

Conreid swallowed hard, and his hands, pressed to his legs, were shaking. His eyes flicked around the bunker, afraid to look at Bottger.

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"They destroyed us. Every tank was immobilized or blown to bits. Five men escaped on foot in the jungle. One of them just radioed me with a full report. The Rebels were equipped with anti-tank rockets and heavy mortars. Major Schultz is dead, and so is everyone else. However, I was told the Rebels captured Captain Klaus, commander of the Praetorian Guard Unit. I suppose they intend to question him."

Bruno momentarily closed his eyes, fighting back the urge to use his Steyer on General Conreid. Incompetence could not be tolerated.

Bruno leaned his head back, staring at the water-stained concrete ceiling of his bunker. He sighed. "They will interrogate Klaus, probably with drugs, wanting to know about our fortifications here at Pretoria so the information can be sent to General Raines. It is quite clear this bastard Raines intends to storm our headquarters. There is no other explanation for the curious movements of his battalions."

"I agree," said Conreid. "They move back and forth to confuse us, but every Rebel battalion seems to be moving toward South Africa, toward Pretoria."

Bruno glanced at the map on a nearby wall, with its colored pins showing the locations of Raines's battalions spread across the African continent. Their movements of the last few days had altered, so that all of his forces were now headed straight for Pretoria and the headquarters of Bottger's New World Order troops.

"There seems to have been a shift recently in Raines's troops movements. Their intelligence must have found out where we are headquartered, for

all of his forces are now coming directly toward us," Bruno said.

"I agree, General Field Marshal. Somehow they have learned of our location in South Africa, but it is hard

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to believe they know about our underground fortifications."

Conreid spread his hands, trying to put the best face on the disturbing news. "Perhaps they only know our general location near Pretoria, and not the extent of our preparations."

"Will this Captain Klaus talk if they torture him?"

"That. . . would be difficult to say. He is a brave soldier, as his record shows, but virtually any man will crack under the right amount of pressure." Conreid was sweating profusely under Bottger's questioning. "As we know from the past, these Rebels are experts in the use of drugs and psychological questioning to gain information." He shook his head. "I don't know how long Klaus will be able to hold out without telling them everything he knows."

Bruno settled back in his chair. "So your brilliant strategy has failed us, General Conreid. You assured me you could find your objective and crush them soundly."

Bruno's voice rose until he was almost shouting as he became more agitated. "Instead, you tell me we've been handed a crushing defeat, losing fifty valuable tanks and their support vehicles." He slammed his hand down on his desk, sending papers and files flying to the floor.

Conreid nodded, having some difficulty finding his voice for the moment. "Somehow, they were expecting us at a particularly difficult spot to defend. The survivor who radioed me said it was deep jungle, and that land mines had been well placed in the most strategic and damaging areas."

"Your tanks were drawn into an ambush?"

"It would seem so. Schultz was a brilliant field commander, and I'm at a loss to explain it. I can only offer this, and it will seem a weak excuse. Colonel Marsh has

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virtually no air support, thus his troops stay in the deepest jungles where our air superiority is of no use. If we could have put the HINDs on top of them, this disaster would not have happened. Colonel Walz had air recon over the area, and he found no trace of an entire Rebel unit in either Botswana or Zimbabwe. We found out where the strike force was from a Zulu mercenary. Walz could give us nothing at all."

"Then it would seem I have incompetent men directing our aircraft and our armored divisions," Bruno told him as his anger multiplied. He leaned forward and slammed his fist on the desk again.

Conreid flinched, but said nothing as Bruno fixed him with a steely-eyed stare. "You have failed me miserably, General. I will not tolerate

failure. I find I'm surrounded by incompetence, by idiots! In the days of the great Nazi regime under Adolf Hitler, both of you would have been shot for failing our cause. Hitler would not have tolerated this!"

"I understand, General Field Marshal. I simply did the best I could, devising the best plan feasible to destroy an army that will not come out in the open to fight. The Rebels stay hidden, leaving us with no choice but to ferret them out of their jungle hiding places. I could think of no other way without cover from our airships. We had to go in after them, to try to halt their march on Pretoria."

Bruno's jaw clamped. "Instead, you led our men and materiel to total destruction!"

"I cannot deny it. I have served you and The New World Order as faithfully as I knew how. Until we were confronted by this band of Rebels, I enjoyed a great many successes in the name of our cause. But Marsh does not fight with military strategy. It is as if he always

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does the thing we expect least from a well-trained army. I can offer you no other explanation."

"What the hell will stop him from marching all the way to our doorstep, General?"

For the first time, Conreid smiled, albeit weakly. "If he gets this far he will be forced to come out in the open. If he turns west to come at us across northern Botswana, he must then face the Kalahari Desert in the south. His tanks will break down in the sand. We can direct air strikes on him until he has been wiped out, down to the last man."

"But what if he stays to the east, coming down through Zimbabwe, following the rivers the way he has in the past?"

"He and General Raines and his other brigade will still have to cross the Transvaal. When they do, we will blow them off the face of the earth. There will be no places to hide from our bombers and rockets, and our anti-aircraft gunners will knock their Apaches from the skies."

Bruno wondered, tapping a finger on his desk. He stared at die map without seeing it as his mind wandered to the past. What was happening now was all too much like events that had happened in Europe many years ago. . . .

The weakling United Nations Secretary-General, Moon, had branded him a neo-Nazi fanatic and a major threat to world stability. Bruno had raised a massive army to realize his dream of reviving The Third Reich in the post-apocalyptic world. He had formed an elite Minority Eradication Force in Switzerland, and almost 250,000 veteran troops to prepare for war against Ben Raines and other SUSA armies.

After several months of bloody fighting, Bruno had called for a meeting in Geneva. There, he had made

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his racial position clear-the lands he controlled would be his empire forever, and he vowed to fight to the death to defend it, an empire where he would allow no Jews or blacks or any other minorities. By then, his army had risen to almost 3,000,000 men.

And it was in Geneva where Bruno had related that his scientists were developing a serum which caused infertility, which he planned to introduce to the drinking water supply in Africa and Asia, to thin the world's minority populations.

When the talks grew ugly Bruno's men staged an attack and captured President Blanton, with a motive-to fake his rescue and win global sympathy. Ben Raines had exposed his plan before he could put it into action.

Since then, he and Raines had become sworn enemies.

Bruno had given Raines an ultimatum: be out of Europe in twenty-four hours, or all-out war would commence. Bruno had no choice but to back up his threat and attack, when Raines ignored the ultimatum.

Bruno's empire, called the New Federation, all but collapsed. He was driven back across Germany, with high casualties, heading for Russia. Raines cut him off, and Bruno was forced to stage his own suicide, leaving his second in command, General Henrich, to show Raines a body said to be that of Bruno Bottger.

While this delaying tactic was going on Bruno took a hundred thousand of his men and escaped to Africa, to start over.

All this, because of Ben Raines-being forced to quietly rebuild a powerful army, equipped with the best weaponry on earth while in hiding in Pretoria, biding his time until he was ready.

And now, Raines was coming after him again. And again, it seemed nothing could stop him.

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Bruno came out of his reverie and spoke to Conreid. "Tell Colonel Walz I want a meeting tonight. Inform General Ligon. Perhaps now it is time to put our germ and chemical weapons to better use from the air. We will see if General Raines and his Rebels are fully prepared for a new type of war."

Conreid seemed relieved now that Bruno's anger had passed and he was thinking rationally again. "I will summon Walz and Ligon. I agree. The time has come to put everything to the ultimate test. We cannot withstand any more huge casualties or our weapons stock will be seriously depleted. We have superiority in the air, or so Walz has led us to believe. Let's test the Rebels in the skies."

Bruno pored over his maps, then studied recon reports, though they were few and probably grossly inaccurate. He had given up letting others plan what his New World Order armies would do, deciding he could devise his own defense and counterattacks.

Rudolf Hessner looked on from a chair across the desk as did Colonel Walz, General Ligon, and General Conreid, who had arrived only moments ago for the meeting.

"They'll come from three directions," Bruno said, talking to himself as much as to the others. "One fork, led by Raines himself and his 501 Brigade, will come from the west, across the southern tip of Nambia, either along the Adantic coast or across Great Namaland." He pointed a finger to a spot on the map.

"Our latest reports have Raines turning east. Evidently he is taking the more direct route toward Pretoria, and is planning to cross the Kaokoveld plains in order to make better time."

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Rudolf Hessner spoke up. "That is correct, Herr General Field Marshal. Latest reports show Ike McGowen and the 502 Battalion were slowed in their passage through the Congo area by its dense jungles and constant attacks by our native and mercenary forces. They are quite a ways behind Raines and his 501 Battalion, and should pose no immediate threat to us ... if we can slow or defeat Raines as he crosses the high desert plains of Nambia."

Colonel Walz nodded. "We will be able to see Raines's troops coming from the air. Namaland is fairly open. Not many places to hide tanks or APCs as they cross the veld, so they will be very dependent on their air cover, both for defense and to attack our forces in advance of Raines's arrival. Our radar will pick up their aircraft as they approach. We can set up anti-aircraft batteries west and north of Johannesburg to limit their effectiveness. We'll put them in deep bunkers so they can't be taken out by smaller rockets carried by Raines's fighter planes."

"Good," Bruno said, moving his finger to the Republic of Botswana. "I know Ben Raines . . . the way his mind works. He'll send a force of some kind across the Kalahari, probably with strong air support, fighters and helicopter gunships. Here is where we'll meet him head-on in the skies, with tank battalions to back us up."

"A very good idea," General Conreid said. "We can put a few anti-aircraft cannons in fortified sand pits near Serpwe, where there is enough rock to protect them. Sending tanks out into the Kalahari will be something he won't expect. However, our Minsk's can do well in sand or snow."

Bruno looked at Colonel Walz. "Can we give this area enough air support, Colonel?"

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"Of course, General Field Marshal."

Now Bruno turned to General Ligon. "The Kalahari would be a good place to drop nerve gas bombs on Raines and his troops. We know from previous failures in Cameroon and Angola that they are impervious to our anthrax agents. Mustard gas and tear gas will force them into protective gear which will slow them down significantly in the desert heat."

"I agree," Ligon said. "Our inventory contains well over five hundred mustard gas canisters, and over twice that many of the tear gas bombs. If we drop the right number of both on the forces coming across the Kalahari they will suffer immeasurably in the desert heat, and with the prevailing winds in their faces the gas will linger for long periods of time."

"I want the bastards to suffer," Bruno hissed, returning to his map. "Now all we have to do is prepare our defenses and plan for attack in Zimbabwe."

He pointed to the small country east of Botswana, just below Zambia. "From the positions where he was last sighted, I feel that the elusive bastard will come at us from western Zimbabwe, using the jungles and rivers as cover, since he seems to be afraid to come out into the open and fight."

He faced his generals. "Any ideas on how we might at long last defeat the strike force?"

"Napalm," Colonel Walz suggested.

"Yes. I like the idea of using Napalm there," Conreid agreed quickly.

"It will set the jungle ablaze," General Ligon agreed. "If we score direct hits they will be cooked alive, and then we can go in and mop up with tanks and infantrymen."

"I hope you are right in your assessment. Marsh has

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been a thorn in my side for some time now, and has defeated us at every turn."

He turned back to the map. "The other forces converging on us are not an immediate threat. Raines's brigades to the east, traveling down the coast through Mozambique and eastern Zimbabwe, are far behind. If we can defeat them, it will be a crushing blow to the Rebel forces, and they might even decide to give up on their mad scheme to drive us from Africa."

Bruno's eyes glittered with a mad gleam as this thought was uttered. After a moment of reflection, he looked up. "Make these preparations, gentlemen. And be sure of one thing. If any of you fails to carry out his assignment, I will personally see to your execution."

"Do not worry," General Ligon said as he got up from the table. "Our chemical weapons will not fail if they are delivered properly."

Colonel Walz nodded when he stood up. "Rest assured they will be delivered correctly by my aircraft, General Field Marshal Bottger. I will not fail you."

General Conreid got up last. "I will redeem myself for what happened in Zimbabwe. This, I promise you."

"Then get started," Bruno said evenly, looking around the group with hooded eyes. "This will be the final defeat of all Rebel forces."

"We intend to make certain of it," Walz said, turning on his heel to be

let out by Rudolf.

One by one his officers filed out of the room, leaving Bruno alone with Rudolf. Rudolf came over to the table with a question on his face.

"Keep a close eye on General Conreid," Bruno said, keeping his voice low.

"Do you suspect him of treason?" the muscular Rudolf asked, frowning.

"Perhaps. Perhaps he is only a clever fool. I may have

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been blind to his shortcomings. Report his every movement to me, and if he makes a mistake in these preparations, or if he talks to anyone who may be suspicious, I want to be informed."

Rudolf smiled, a chilly smile. "Then, if you wish, I will kill him for you and make him suffer a terrible death."

Bruno shook his head. "If he is a traitor, or even merely a fool who has led our soldiers to their deaths, that is exactly what I have in mind for him."

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At three-thirty in the morning, Ben met with a ten member Scout squad in his CP tent.

"Captain Dominguez, are you and your men ready, and are you clear on what I want?"

Captain Raul Dominguez stood ramrod straight in front of his general. "Yes, sir! My team is going to do a night drop into the town of Tshane, just south of the Kalahari. We are to infiltrate the town, silently, and set up a radio link to the 501. Our orders are to watch for any aircraft or other sizable contingent of forces out of Pretoria and to let you know soonest, so as to prevent a surprise attack."

Ben eyed the Scouts, the toughest, meanest fighting men in the history of warfare. They had the dirtiest job in the army—to go out ahead of the battalions and find out what the commanders faced ahead of them. These men were used to being on their own in enemy territory, and they thrived on it. Aside from Intelligence gathering, they were experts on infiltration, assassination, and other techniques for sowing fear and terror in the hearts of the enemy. They had been remarkably effective in every campaign Ben had fought.

"Remember," Ben advised. "We need you primarily

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for Intelligence on this trip. Try to keep the killing and mayhem to a minimum, Captain."

Dominguez smiled with his lips, but his eyes were ice cold and deadly. "I'll do my best, sir. We won't kill anyone unless it's absolutely necessary to carry out our mission."

"OK, men." Ben walked up to each of the ten men and shook their hands one by one, wishing them good luck.

As they filed out of the tent, Beth looked at Ben and shivered. "Boss, those men give me the creeps. Their eyes are . . . dead."

Ben nodded, "Yeah. I'm certainly glad they're on our side, Beth."

The Huey transport chopper, specially rigged to fly almost without sound, hovered at five thousand feet just outside the city limits of Tshane. Any lower, and the residents would be able to hear the chopper's engines.

The pilot looked back over his shoulder and gave Raul a thumbs up signal.

Dominguez nodded and turned to his men. "Show time, gents. Let's fly!"

He dove headfirst out of the door, followed closely by his team. They were all wearing black T-shirts and jeans with black greasepaint on their faces, and their parachutes were made of black silk so as not to be seen against the night sky.

Within minutes the team was assembled on the ground and had their chutes folded and packed. Each man carried a CAR, a 9mm automatic pistol, and a razor-sharp combat knife. These weapons were almost superfluous, as each man was as deadly in hand-to-hand combat as a ninja.

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The scouts lined up behind Raul and jogged over two miles of hard-packed sand toward Tshane. The city was small, consisting mainly of adobe and brick houses, with few larger buildings.

There were no lights showing at this early hour as the team ran silently through the deserted streets. On the southern side of the city, Raul found a three-story building which looked like an abandoned store of some sort.

He used his knife to pry the lock off the door and ushered his men in, CARs at the ready in case there were inhabitants.

Finding none, Raul stationed three men on the roof and two in each of three rooms facing south, toward Pretoria. He set up radios in two of the rooms and instructed his men to keep their combat mikes on at all times.

Each of the men carried 70X100 power Bushnell binoculars, and there was one 100 Power telescope which was set up on the roof. After they were settled in, Raul instructed them to break out their rations and eat and drink plenty of water.

"It's gonna get plenty hot in this building when the sun comes up, men, so keep up with your fluids. We may have a long wait until something breaks."

Ben Raines looked out the back of the lead vehicle as his army caravan drove south at high speed across the kaakoveld of Namibia.

"Jesus, would you look at that," he said.

The other members of his team who were riding with him all looked out the rear windshield of the big nine passenger SUV Cooper was driving.

There behind them, rising from the hundreds of ve-

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hides and transports following them, was a huge dust cloud, looking like a bank of river fog as it rose in the bright sunlight.

"Bottger's planes sure as hell won't need radar to find us," Jersey said, "all they have to do is follow the dust."

"That's the thing about veld country," Ben said. "The large expanse of flat, dry land, covered with minimal amounts of buffalo grass, is excellent for our vehicles to traverse. The problem is we're visible to anyone within twenty miles or more, and there's no place to hide or take cover in the event of an attack."

"Let's hope our scout planes give us enough warning to radio for air cover should we need it," Cooper said, glancing in the side rearview mirror as he drove.

"Oh, I have no doubt we'll come under attack at some point on our journey," Ben replied. "It's just a question of whether it'll be from native and mere forces or from the big guns of Bottger's specialized armies."

Ben's 501 Brigade had started out early that morning, just prior to dawn, and had already covered over two hundred miles, traveling at an average of forty to fifty miles an hour. Even the big Abrams tanks were able to make forty miles an hour, though it was rough on the drivers and gunnery officers, who had to be relieved every few hours due to the shaking and bumping of the large vehicles over the rough terrain.

Ben, as usual, insisted on being in the lead car, over Michaels' objections. He said it was good for morale for the men and ladies of his command to see him out front, "riding point," as he put it.

Michaels wasn't convinced, being afraid Ben would be killed in the event of an attack by Bottger's army. Ben told him he could never ask any of his men to do

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that which he was not willing to do himself, and that settled the argument.

From the banks of the Kunene River, they coursed due south southeast toward the city of Khorixas, just below the Etosha National Forest. Game along the way was plentiful, and they saw dozens of the so-called desert elephants, rhinos, and lions roaming freely.

Nambia's big game animals had virtually been hunted to extinction in the old days, but since the war, with the resultant marked reduction in

population, the animals had started to make a comeback.

Beth called out, "Look, there's a herd of black-faced impalas. My guide book says they were endemic to the Kaokoveld, and only recently have begun to come back in large numbers."

Herding next to the impalas were several giraffes, with young animals tagging clumsily along behind, looking terribly awkward with their spindly legs and ridiculously long necks.

As the brigade roared across the veld, herds of zebras and the tiny Damara dik-diks were also frightened into stampedes. Ben had his sub-commanders caution their soldiers against shooting any of the wildlife, unless needed for food.

Ben pushed his troops on through Khorixas without stopping, since Intelligence had information there was a large contingent of natives there who were less than friendly to any white men, especially Rebels.

Due to the impending emergency back home Ben had decided to cease his earlier efforts to help the leaders of African villages and towns, get rid of the punks and gangs that had arisen since the war, and to go straight for Bottger's headquarters to try to end this African campaign as soon as possible.

Fifty miles to the south was the smaller city of Brand-

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berg, where he called a halt to the caravan and let the troops get out of the transport vehicles for a much needed rest and some hot food.

Mess tents were set up and food and drink and a two hour rest period provided, so the troops would be fresh when the attack that Ben suspected was coming arrived.

As Ben's team finished their meal and laid out sleeping bags in the shade of a building, Anna said, a smile curving her lips, "I'll move my sleeper over here, so Jersey and Coop can bunk next to each other, like they did in the jungle."

She cocked her head to the side, "Is that OK, Coop?"

Cooper never hesitated. "Sure, it's OK by me. Jersey and I are thinking of setting up housekeeping together when we get back to the states, isn't that right, Jerse?"

He managed to give Jersey a wink where Anna couldn't see it, to let her in on the joke.

"Sure," Jersey said. "I've agreed to do all the house-cleaning and cooking and hold down a job, and all I ask of Cooper is that he let me sleep with his hunky body at least three times a week. If he does, it will make my life complete," she said, staring at Cooper adoringly.

"What!" Anna shouted. "You've got to be kidding!"

"As a matter of fact, we are, you nosey little brat," Cooper said,

scowling. "And any more teasing from you, Anna, and I'm going to take you over my knees and spank your behind."

Anna looked aghast. "You wouldn't dare!"

Jersey put her hands on her hips, arching an eyebrow. "If he won't I will, girlfriend."

"OK, OK, I'll keep my mouth shut about your sojourn in the jungle."

Ben laughed. "If you do, it'll be the first time you've kept your mouth shut about anything since I've known you, Anny."

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With that, the team lay down and grabbed some much needed shut-eye for the remainder of the two hour rest period.

Later on, when they were about halfway from Brand-berg to Windhoek, Corrie's radio squawked.

"Corrie here, go ahead."

"Michaels here, Corrie, put Ben on and hurry."

"Ben here, John. Go ahead."

"I just heard from Captain Dominguez and the team of Scouts we parachuted into Tshane in Botswana."

"What did he say, John?"

"Several squadrons of planes took off less than an hour ago, heading out of Pretoria. A group of fighter planes is headed this way, followed thirty minutes later by some medium range bombers."

"Bombers?"

"Yes, sir. And the troubling thing is, the bombers were carrying canister bombs under their wings instead of the high explosive types we would expect."

Ben thought for a moment. "Then it sounds like Bottger is going to try to drop either biological or chemical agents on us, while the fighter planes keep our air support busy."

"Yes, sir, those were my thoughts. But since they must know their biological weapons have failed against us in the past, my bet is on chemical agents-nerve gas, tear gas, mustard gas, those kind of things."

Ben sighed. "The man is truly crazy. Okay, alert our air cover to their plan, and let's halt the column and get the troops in anti-gas gear."

"You want the full Racal suits? That's going to be brutal in this heat."

"There's no help for it, John, it'll be a lot less brutal

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that dying in convulsions or having the boys' skin peel off from the mustard gas."

"Oh, there was one other message."

"Yeah?"

"The Scouts said another contingent of planes flew off more to the east, probably headed toward Colonel Marsh and the 12 Bat."

"I'll have Corrie bump Marsh and let him know what's headed his way. Were those planes also carrying chemical bombs?"

"No, sir. The scouts said it was mainly HINDs and some older MIG fighter-bombers, and it looked more like napalm and HE type bombs on the MIGs."

"And Marsh has very little air support to counter the attack. He's down to just a few Apache choppers. Can we lend him any of ours?"

"No, sir. Not if we're going to have to fight both fighters and bombers. We wouldn't stand a chance of stopping the bombers if we divided our forces."

"Damn! Well, Marsh will just have to make do with what he has. At least he's got the jungle for cover. Maybe he can spread his troops out and hide, to minimize the effectiveness of the napalm."

Michaels chuckled. "Did you ever see Marsh hide, from anything?"

Ben laughed, too, trying to visualize the tough commander being afraid of anything or anybody. "No, John. I can't say as I have."

"I'll alert our air cover and troops while you try to get hold of Marsh and warn him of what's coming. OK?"

"That's affirmative. Raines out."

"Michaels out."

Ben looked over at Corrie, who was bent over her radio, talking hurriedly, a frown on her face.

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"You get hold of Marsh yet, Corrie?"

"No, sir. I'm having trouble getting through to him. I can't tell if his radio's down or if we're being jammed by Bottger's forces."

Ben stared at her. "Corrie, if we don't warn Marsh, they'll hit him with napalm, and turn that entire area into a raging inferno. We've got to get through."

"I'm doing the best I can, Boss. Believe me, if there's any way to get a message to Marsh, I'll find it."

"Good. Now, Coop, break out the Racal suits and anti-gas masks. We've got trouble headed our way, too. I want our troops spread out in a defensive line, not all bunched up along the road. That way if some of the bombers do make it past our air support, they won't have a concentrated target to aim for."

"Yes, sir. I'll get right on it."

"Corrie, see if you can bump Colonel Holland, head of our air support team."

A few minutes later, Ben was talking to Colonel Jerry Holland, leader of the small squadron of jet fighters and overall commander of air support for the 501.

"Jerry, have you been informed of what's coming?"

"Yes, sir. I just got off the horn with John Michaels."

"What do you think?"

"I think they'll come in low and fast. Since they don't know we're aware of their approach, they'll probably fly on the deck, about five hundred feet or so to avoid our radar, and come straight at us, hoping to hit us by surprise."

"What are your plans?"

"I'm gonna take my squadron up high and try to keep the sun at our backs, so they won't see us up there. The MIGs they're flying have terrible air-to-air radar, so when we dive on them from twelve o'clock high it'll scare the hell out of 'em."

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"What about the Apaches and Huey gunships?" "I'm gonna spread them out wide, keeping them about five miles off, out of sight. Once the fighters pass, the choppers will deploy in a defensive line between us and the old prop-driven bombers. Since the bombers are much slower than the MIGs, the choppers should be able to handle them before they get close enough to drop their loads."

"Sounds like a good battle plan, Colonel." Holland chuckled over the mike. "As you know, sir, they all sound good. It's the execution that's a bitch." "Right on, Jerry. Good luck up there. Raines out." "Thank you, sir. Good luck to you. Holland out."

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"Jesus, Boss," Beth said, "these Racal suits are hot. I feel like I'm in a sauna."

"It can't be helped, Beth," Ben answered, his voice muffled by the plastic-faced hood of the orange protective suit. "I figure the MIGs are less than ten minutes away, and they'll be followed close behind by the bombers with their cargos of nerve, mustard, and other noxious chemical bombs. If Holland and his air support team doesn't manage to stop them, these suits will be the only things keeping us alive."

Cooper spoke up. "Yeah, Beth. I don't mind a little sweat if it'll keep us from being all curled up in the desert, with expressions of horrible agony on our dead faces."

"OK, OK, you two. Can't a girl complain a little without getting a lecture around here?"

Ben nodded, though the helmet of his suit prevented her from seeing the gesture. "Sure, Beth, complain all you want. Just don't break the seals on your Racal until the last plane has been downed."

Ben had his men spread out in a horizontal line, weaving back and forth across the dry veld grasses so as not to give the hostile air force any groupings to aim for. Some of the vehicles were parked in shallow depres-

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sions on the desert-like plain, but most were out in the open.

The troops, all of whom were wearing either Racals or the older, less effective rubber suits and gas masks, were spread out behind the vehicles, lying on their bellies with weapons trained on the skies. The lucky ones were able to hide underneath the troop carriers, out of the brutal African sun in this driest of all places on earth.

Soon, even the thickness of the Racal helmets couldn't hide the muted roar of the MIGs' jet engines as they raced toward Ben's troops at seven hundred miles an hour.

"Get ready, Coop," Ben said.

Cooper squatted down behind the M60 fifty caliber machine gun mounted on a special pivot on the fender of the big SUV Ben's team was behind.

The other team members jacked back the levers on their M16s, shoving shells into the chambers and aiming over the vehicle's roof at the oncoming sounds.

As the line of black dots appeared over the horizon, rushing at them at just over five hundred feet of altitude, a number of slightly larger dots dived out of the sky above them.

"Corrie," Ben said, "tune into Holland's tactical frequency on the radio and put it on a speaker. I want to hear this."

"Right, Boss."

After a moment of her tweaking her dials, Holland's voice could be heard above the roar of his engines. . . .

"Bandits at six o'clock low, men. Dive, dive!"

The jet engines' whine became a scream over the

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speaker as the fighters dove on the unsuspecting MIGs below.

"Johnny," Holland said, his voice as calm as if he were directing his men in a routine training mission, "take the end MIG on the left. Bill, you target the end MIG on the right. I and the rest of the squadron will hit the middle of the pack."

Two of the planes could be seen to dip their wings as they dived, turning to flank the oncoming MIG squadron.

The rest of the Rebel jets headed straight for the center of the group of fighters below. The chatter of Holland's cannons and the explosion of rockets began to roar over the radio, and the two groups of planes merged in the distance.

Holland's planes dove into the squadron of MIGs, scattering them like quail, sending two to the veld in tumbling, rolling balls of fire in the initial attack.

The other MIGs turned wings over and climbed straight up, afterburners blazing as they tried to escape the chattering ruin of the jets' guns and rockets.

"Sammy, Sammy," Holland shouted, "watch out on your six-you've got a bogey on your tail!"

Another voice could be heard. "Not to worry, Sammy. This is Joe Bob, and I've got your bogey."

A line of two Rebel jets with a MIG between them could be seen spiraling off to the side, the lead jet jogging and jerking side-to-side to escape the MIG's machine gun fire.

Seconds later, the rear plane opened up and blew the MIG out of the air.

As the MIG crashed to the ground in flaming wreckage, Sammy's jet dipped its wings in thanks and took off to find another target.

Two more MIGs went down, trailing smoke, and one

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of the Rebel fighters exploded, brought down by a MIG ATA missile.

"Goddamn!" a voice shouted. "The bastards got Marcus!"

The tac-frequency chattered for a few minutes as the pilots warned each other of danger and Holland gave instructions to others about where to attack, occasionally calling out "Good shot," to one or another of his men as they downed more of the MIGs.

"If those MIGs keep using dieir afterburner jets like that," Cooper said as he peered over the sights of his M60, "they aren't going to have enough fuel to get back to their base."

Ben chuckled, thrilled at the sight of the air-to-air combat. "That's the last thing on the pilots' minds right now, Coop. All they're thinking about right now is how to get away from us."

As larger dots appeared over the horizon, flying low as the MIGs had been, Anna pointed her finger. "Uh-oh, looks like the bombers are making their appearance."

Just as she spoke the bombers started to climb, trying to get to an altitude where they could safely drop their bombs without being caught in the explosions.

As they climbed, the bombers were joined by darker, smaller shapes arching in from either side and slightly higher altitudes, flames visible from them-side-mounted Gading guns on the choppers.

"All right!" Ben shouted. "There come Holland's Apache and Huey gunship choppers. They're pouring the lead into the bombers, making them scatter as they climb."

Holland's chopper pilots could be heard communi-

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eating over the radio as they picked their targets and sighted the bombers in with their Gatling guns and M60 machine guns, manned by men strapped in the open cargo doors of the Hueys.

"Without the air support of the MIGs, those old, slow bombers are sitting ducks for the Apaches," Cooper said.

Ben's team, and his troops scattered out behind him, watched in awe as Holland's air force destroyed the MIGs, one by one, and as the Apaches and Hueys blew the bombers out of the sky.

Of the ten bombers in the assault, only one managed to get past the choppers, and it was coming straight over Ben's area.

As the bomber passed overhead, Cooper pulled the trigger on his M60, leading the plane and watching as his tracer bullets curved toward the bomber's belly.

Two large canisters separated from the airplane just before Cooper's tracers locked on and blew one of the plane's engines into scrap metal. The plane went into a slow roll until it was upside down, diving, wings waving as the pilot tried to regain control, until it crashed in a giant fireball several miles beyond Ben's troops.

The canisters exploded when they hit the ground, sending waves of yellowish mustard gas billowing up into the desert winds, to be blown directly toward Ben and his troops.

As the cloud approached them, several of the choppers swooped down and used the prop wash from their rotor blades to disperse the cloud, blowing it to where the twenty knot desert winds could whisk it away.

Ben stood and saluted as the choppers roared past overhead. "I've never seen a braver thing," he said. "Those pilots aren't wearing any protective gear. If that

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gas had gotten into their cockpits, they would all have been killed."

"One thing you can say for the air force-they're not short on cojones," Cooper said, as he, too, waved at the pilots as they passed.

Ben motioned Corrie over to him. "Did you ever manage to get hold of Marsh and warn him of the aircraft headed his way?"

Corrie frowned. "No, sir. I assume something must be wrong with his radio equipment, or they're so deep in the jungle they can't pick up my transmissions. I got no answer at all."

"God help them, then. If Bottger's airplanes catch them by surprise, they could wipe out the entire command. O.K., people."

"We're burning daylight, and I can't wait to stand face-to-face with Bottger in Pretoria."

"I wish I could be there when he finds out his air attack failed miserably," Anna said.

Ben smiled. "So do I, Anna, so do I."

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Colonel Marsh had been careful to avoid the city of Bulawayo, the capital of Zimbabwe, staying to the north and east in the denser jungle areas. Since he was short on air support and his troops were exhausted following the battle with General Schultz, he wanted to keep them well hidden until they had time to rest and regroup.

As he led his troops through the jungles, he mulled over the history of Zimbabwe. There had been both tragedy and drama in the struggle between Europeans and Africans for this land that later came to be known as Zimbabwe.

In the early days, the San-bushmen traveled the country, leaving behind a rich legacy of rock paintings on outcrops all over the land. These hunter gatherers were overwhelmed and defeated by the arrival of the agricultural Bantu peoples, one group of which built the medieval town the rebel forces were approaching, known as Great Zimbabwe. The stone ruins of Great Zimbabwe were at first considered a place of great mystery because European discoverers refused to attribute their creation to Africans.

Marsh thought that was typical European smugness- to think only whites could build great cities-and part

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of the reason people like Bottger could still survive and find followers in this more enlightened age.

The Shona people who built Great Zimbabwe and several other great cities such as Khami, whose ruins lie near Bulawayo, were overcome and defeated by the Matebele tribes, who used the Shona peoples as their slaves.

The Matebele, in turn, were defeated and conquered by the early white settlers who came in search of gold and diamonds-such as Cecil Rhodes

from Britain, who later named the country after himself, calling it Rhodesia.

Marsh shook his head as he walked with his men through the dense jungle undergrowth. Such is the vanity of all men, to think they can conquer and not fear being conquered themselves.

Finally, on the outskirts of Great Zimbabwe, with its surrounding granite hills and massive stone monolith sculptures and stone dwelling places, he decided to give his troops a break and camp early, a few hours before dusk.

Captain Bob Warren found the CO. in his tent before dawn of the next day, as more ammunition and arms were being unloaded to the troops from the trucks accompanying their march.

"Our radar is clear," Warren said.

Marsh sat up, pushing his mosquito netting away from his bunk. "Keep the trucks under heavy guard," he said sleepily. "I don't want the local natives to get their hands on any of our materiel. The bastards would probably use it against us."

He hesitated as he rubbed his face, trying to come fully awake. "I haven't heard from General Raines. Some sort of radio problem, I hope."

"Should we wait?"

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"No. We proceed according to plan until we are notified of a change. Ben will get word to us, even if he is maintaining radio silence. Bottger may have broken the code on our scramblers by now."

"I'm emptying several trucks and plan to leave them behind. We're running short of all manner of supplies, including gasoline."

"I know. This keeping to the denser jungle trails has its tactical advantages, but it plays hell on keeping our line of supplies open."

"If we don't get in touch with Raines soon and arrange a rendezvous with the supply planes, we're gonna be in deep shit. And, let's hope they have parts for our Apache gunships and can get them to us soon."

"We almost don't have a chopper left without some sort of problem."

"I'm well aware of the problem, Captain. Just empty the damn trucks and leave the worrying to me. I'm good at it."

"We haven't seen any sign of mercenaries or any New World soldiers. The skies are clear. So maybe you shouldn't worry, Commander."

"Worrying about my soldiers is my job. Get the trucks going and stop trying to make me feel better. No one will rest easy until we are re-supplied and moving again."

Captain Warren wheeled and left the tent. Rows of transport trucks, many of them dented or otherwise damaged by the battles they had fought

crossing central and southern Africa, sat near the campsite with drivers waiting.

"I hope Ben wants us to keep moving this direction," he said to himself, swinging his feet off the cot. "It would be a help if he sent word to us about what's going on in the other sectors."

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"Colonel Marsh!"

He heard the voice and peered outside. "Yes, what is it?"

A private, whose face was sweating and flushed, stammered, out of breath from his run to the tent.

"Cap'n Warren said to get you real quick. He says radar picked up lots of planes on their way here."

"Oh shit!" he said. "And here we are out in the open out of the jungle, caught with our pants down."

He followed the boy toward the radar tent, buttoning his pants as he ran, cursing himself for being so foolish as to camp next to this stone city on a hill above the jungle.

"Captain Warren, what've you got?"

"Looks like a squadron of planes headed straight toward us. Luckily, they're flying high enough to be picked up on our radar, or we'd never have seen them coming."

"How long do you figure until they're here?"

"Hour, maybe an hour and a half at the most."

"Damn! That doesn't give us enough time to get back down the hills into the jungle and under cover."

The private, who had followed Marsh into the tent spoke up. "Colonel Marsh? I have an idea."

He whirled around. "Well, private, what is it? Speak up. We don't have a lot of time."

The boy pulled a folded piece of paper from his hip pocket. "Maybe we could take cover in the city. There's a huge amphitheater area surrounded by stone walls over thirty feet high."

Marsh arched an eyebrow. "How do you know about that?"

"I couldn't sleep last night, so I took this brochure from the house where they used to let the tourists in,

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before the war. It had these maps, so I did a little exploring on my own."

Marsh snatched the map from his hands. "If this works, son, you'll get a field promotion to lieutenant. Now where is this place you're talking about?"

The three of them bent over a table where Marsh spread the map out.

The boy pointed. "Right here. It's called the Great Enclosure. It used to be called the House of the Great Woman, and was probably the residence of the queen mother and the royal wives. It's a huge, elliptical structure about as wide as a football field, and it's surrounded by a massive outer wall that's about thirty or thirty-five feet high and fifteen or twenty feet thick."

"Jesus," Marsh said, "the place is huge. This map shows a circumference of over eight hundred feet."

He turned to Warren, speaking rapidly. "Get moving, Captain Get all our troops and as many of the trucks and Apaches inside as you can. The map also shows some high towers inside where we can set up our M60s and other machine guns and a couple of SAMs. We may just make the bastards sorry they attacked, after all!"

Marsh never found out why-headwinds, misdirection, or what-but the aircraft arrived over two hours after Captain Warren picked them up on radar.

By then Marsh's strike force was ready and waiting. All of the trucks and supplies and Apache helicopters were arrayed behind the thirty foot high and seventeen foot thick stone walls, and the many towers within the Great Enclosure bristled with M60s, SAMs, and even some old, fifty caliber, water-cooled machine guns.

As the planes attacked the position, Marsh calmly gave the order to fire, and hundreds of machine guns and M16s and even a few .45 automatics opened up on the aircraft.

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The first plane in, a MIG with large, pointed napalm bombs on its wings, was engulfed by thousands of rounds of bullets and burst into flame, disappearing in a giant fireball so hot that virtually no wreckage fell to earth.

"Jesus!" Marsh exclaimed to Captain Warren when he saw the explosion. "That MIG was carrying napalm."

He nodded, his face grim. "I wonder if the others are, too."

His question was answered moments later when two planes made it through the fusillade of bullets to drop cluster bombs of napalm on the enclosure. Because of the height and thickness of the ancient stone walls, the strike force survived the firebombing without injury to men or materiel.

As more and more planes tried to penetrate their defenses without success, until finally the last bomber had been shot down, Marsh looked

at Warren. "Captain, find me that private. I want to personally shake his hand and pin his sergeant's stripes on his shirt. He saved all our lives."

Warren shook his head. "Just think, Colonel, if we'd camped in the jungle like we usually do, we'd be barbecue by now."

"You're right, Captain. We would never have survived the napalm without these stone walls."

He leaned over to pat the wall, saying, "Thank you, Queen Mother, for giving us sanctuary in our time of need."

Two hours later, Marsh was resting in his tent while Captain Warren made sure the troops and materiel were ready to march south.

A gruff voice called from just outside the tent flap.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sergeant Peters, sir. I've got a prisoner for you."

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He walked to the opening and peered out. Sergeant Peters, the lead Scout, was holding a man wearing a tattered New World Order officer's uniform by the shoulder. Peters held a gun to the man's spine.

"What is it, Peters?" he asked.

"I caught a spy," Peters said, marching the officer through camp to the tent.

The man stood up straight, almost clicking his heels as he came to attention. "I am not a spy," he said in a heavily accented voice. "I am Captain Helmut Gruber, pilot in the New World Order Air Force. My serial number is-

"Why are you bringing him to me?" Marsh asked, interrupting the man as he buckled on his Beretta.

"Because he's got a story to tell. I had to bang him on the head a few times to refresh his memory."

The German officer was bleeding from cuts on his forehead and left cheek.

"I'd say you banged him a little too hard, Sergeant. But go ahead and tell me what he had to say."

Peters pushed the muzzle of his pistol against the man's spine. "Tell the commander what you just told me," he growled. "An' don't leave out no details, or this gun is liable to go off accidental."

The officer was clearly frightened. "I must protest this treatment of a prisoner of war, Commander. It's completely against the Geneva Convention."

"In case you forgot, Heinz, or Helmut, or whatever your name is, your leader Bottger never signed any treaties, certainly not any protecting

the rights of prisoners."

"Be that as it may, Colonel, we're both reasonable people, civilized people, and again I must protest--"

"Protest this, Heimi," Peters said as he held the pistol against the officer's head.

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Marsh nodded toward Peters, speaking to the German. "I guess you'd better tell me what Peters wants, Captain, before he blows your brains all over my tent."

When the German officer hesitated Peters slapped the barrel of his gun across the rear of his prisoner's skull. Gruber winced and bent over, clutching the back of his head.

"Speak up!" Peters snapped. "Don't force me to hit you no harder."

Gruber sighed, and began talking. "General Field Marshal Bottger has many cannons and tanks set up in southern Zimbabwe and northern South Africa. They are well hidden, between here and Pretoria, waiting for your arrival just in case you are to escape our air attacks."

"When was all this done?" Marsh asked.

"Recently, in the last few days. Since you defeated Captain Schultz the Field Marshal has been obsessed with killing you," Gruber said as more blood from the new wound to his head trickled down his neck. Peters was good at getting information this way, Marsh remembered.

"Can you show us where these tanks and cannons are set up?" Marsh asked.

"They'll kill me if they see me show you where," he said, stuttering in his awkward use of English.

"We're gonna kill you if you don't show us," Peters warned him.

"I do not want to die," the German begged.

"Just one way to keep from it," Peters continued, after a glance in the colonel's direction. "Start talkin', and start showin' us where them guns are bein' hid."

"I'll show you," the man said softly, touching the blood on his head and shoulders. "I do not want to be a traitor, but I want even less to die."

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"What else has Bottger been up to?" Marsh asked.

"He's been offering a lot of money to the natives, men who have no money, to show him where your battalions are. Some of them, in spite of their dislike for Germans, take the money. They have many hungry children and wives to feed."

"How about you, Fritz-you got any children?" Peters asked.

"\es, two, a boy and a girl."

"The only way you're gonna live long enough to see 'em again is to cooperate with us. You show us where them cannons are hid, an' maybe we'll let you live."

The officer nodded quickly, despite the pain it caused when he moved his head. "I'll show you. Just stop hitting me with that pistol."

Marsh held up a hand for Peters to stop pushing the prisoner. "We won't shoot you if you show us where Bottger is putting the guns."

"I'll show you. I'll show you," he said again.

Marsh turned to Peters. "Take him to the mess tent and show him some maps. Have him point out where the gun batteries are hidden. I'm sure they've put antiaircraft guns in place, as well as anti-tank rockets and gun emplacements. Mark them well on the map."

"Why mess with all that when we can just avoid the areas?" Peters asked.

Marsh turned to the flatbed trucks carrying their Apache helicopter gunships. "Because tonight, we'll give our pilots the coordinates and let them drop a few firecrackers on Bottger's new traps."

"We've only got four that can fly, and one is developing some heating problems in this desert country," Peters said as he, too, looked at the trucks bearing the partially dismantled Apache gunships.

"It'll be cooler at night. I'll have our flight com-

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mander get the Apaches ready. Remember, get the exact coordinates as best you can. We don't have many rockets to spare. I hope we can get in touch with General Raines soon for replacements. We can't fight Bottger with bows and arrows."

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Bruno stood in their underground War Room in Pretoria, his hands clasped behind him, listening along with the others while radio transmissions came back from the night attack on Rebel Battalion 12.

A fleet of ten MIGs carrying napalm and nerve gas was only minutes away from the battle zone in the jungles of southern Zimbabwe, where native Intelligence gatherers had reported Malone's battalion was camped.

Unless his forces could halt Colonel Marsh there, nothing would stop him from marching straight across the border into the Republic of South Africa, headed for Pretoria. It was beginning to sound like this was a real possibility, as more grim reports came back to the War Room.

Colonel Walz seemed particularly uncomfortable. His M24s didn't have the range to partake in this attack, and thus the MIGs were his only hope of

hitting Marsh at his distant campsite.

His old MIG fighter planes were from a mothball fleet in Austria, some of them barely able to fly, their machine guns in various states of disrepair with a limited supply of ammunition.

When he had acquired them from his Russian friends at the start of the war in Africa, Bruno had only meant

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for the MIGs to serve as a last resort, or for the destruction of easy targets without heavy anti-aircraft artillery.

And, to make matters worse, the Avgas jet fuel for the MIGs had been dangerously low when he ordered Walz to send them after the Rebel strike force. Walz warned that roughly half of the planes might not have enough fuel to make it back to Pretoria.

Bruno had shrugged, indifferent to his air leader's whining. At that point, with Rebel battalions closing in from all sides, he couldn't have cared less for the lives of a few pilots.

The war against the Rebels, one that he was once certain he could win, was going badly. Adding to his building fury, this would be the second time Ben Raines and his ragtag, freedom-spouting armies had defeated him—first driving him out of Europe, and now his hold on Africa was being seriously threatened by these inferior mongrels.

Across the room, Walz almost shouted into the radio, "Come in, Fighter Squadron Six, come in!"

A storm of static followed Walz's orders. Then another voice spoke to the War Room. "Fighter Squadron Six. We can see the signs of the strike force now. We're on final approach. The idiots seem to have made camp out in the open, on a hilltop, not in the jungle, as was reported. The Apache helicopters are still on the ground, not even warming up yet. This should make our attack much easier, Colonel Walz. We'll be launching rockets the minute we have range, then we'll swing in a wide circle and let our payloads of napalm go down."

Bruno was satisfied. The MIGs had arrived. "Tell the squad leader to split. Send one group directly over the Rebel position on the hill at five thousand feet, out of range of their smaller gun batteries. Send the others in

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a wide circle to come from the opposite direction. We'll destroy Marsh and his men, and we shall blow their Apache helicopters to pieces while still on the ground."

Walz spoke to the fighter squad leader. "Split your forces. Send half your planes in a circle to come from the north. Keep the others at five thousand feet. Release the bombs. Dump everything you have all over his camp, then strafe the surrounding area with machine guns to kill any

troops that try to get away on foot. Fires from the napalm will be your cover."

"Yes, sir. We're dividing now." A hesitation. "Scorpion group climb to five thousand. Release your pay-loads on anything you see moving. Black Widow group follow me to the north in a wide circle. Then hit them with everything you've got."

Bruno leaned back against a desk behind him, watching two giant radar screens. "At last," he said savagely, feeling the adrenaline rush through his arms and legs. "Now we'll see how well this bastard can take a pounding."

He smiled, with no humor in his eyes. "Welcome to South Africa, you asshole. I hope your drawers are the first to catch on fire. A napalm bath is what you've needed all along. Goodbye, Colonel. You gave us a good show, but it's over now."

General Conreid looked relieved. "With Marsh out of the way we can concentrate our tanks and infantry on Ben Raines to the north and west."

Colonel Walz still seemed doubtful, rubbing his chin while watching the radar screens. "We haven't gotten rid of Marsh yet, General."

General Ligon came to Conreid's defense. "This will be over very soon, Colonel. Napalm is quite thorough when it comes to destroying a target. These Rebels won't escape our napalm fires, and even if some of them

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do the nerve gas will drop them like flies. I predict there will be no survivors."

No survivors, Bruno thought. A twenty-year dream was about to come true. With Ben Raines and his Rebels out of the way, no force on earth could stand between Bruno and global domination, a triumph rising out of the ashes of a total annihilation of the Tri-States military machine.

In less than five minutes the radio crackled again. "Beta Squadron. Captain Gruber has been shot down. There are three of us left. We are turning back at once."

Bruno glared at Colonel Walz. "Tell them their orders are to stay and fight. I'll have them executed by firing squad if they disobey a direct order from me!"

Walz's hand trembled slightly holding the microphone. "Go back. Engage the enemy. These are orders from General Field Marshal Bottger himself. Your MIGs are only minutes from destroying Marsh and his battalion. Do not give up now, for I am sure the tide will turn quickly in our favor."

"But Colonel, they are blasting us out of the sky. Marsh's forces are camped in some sort of stone city on a hilltop, as Captain Gruber said. They are behind large rock walls which our machine gun bullets can't penetrate. Their anti-aircraft batteries are in massive stone towers above the city, and are unapproachable."

Walz felt as if he were going crazy. All his beautiful plans were coming

to nothing, all because of a few cowardly pilots. "Drop your napalm, you idiots! Burn them out!"

"Colonel," the voice continued, and even over the radio Walz could hear the scorn in it. "Haven't you been listening to me? Marsh's forces are in a stone city, walled in like a fortress. Stone does not burn, Colonel. Repeat, stone does not burn!"

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"Do not talk back to me, Captain! I order you to go back and finish the fight, to the last man, if need be!"

"But sir, I repeat, we can't find anything to shoot at, our napalm has no effect, and the Rebel ground batteries are chewing us to pieces every time we pass over the stone city."

"Turn and fight!" Walz bellowed. "You are soldiers of The New World Order. Where is your courage, your commitment to our great cause?"

"We all have plenty of commitment, sir, but our aircraft is not equal to theirs. This was a trap. We were lured into a crossfire between their ground-to-air rocket launchers and their cannons. They were waiting for us."

General Ligon turned to Bruno. "Tell them to turn back, General Field Marshal, while we still have some MIGs left. If the assault has failed, we can still use them as a final defense against Raines and his 501 Batt when they get to the border of South Africa."

Walz, sweat pouring from his forehead, nodded, showing his agreement. "Yes, General Field Marshal. I still have Captain Kohl in reserve with his HIND M24s, and they can be ready to attack at first light tomorrow."

Bruno nodded, for the idea sounded good enough, and even if the last M24 pilots were lost ultimate victory would be theirs at last. "Give the order, Colonel Walz. Radio our pilots to take evasive action and come back to Pretoria, away from Marsh's camp."

He turned his back on his advisors to hide his disappointment in the night's raid, and walked to his desk.

"Once Captain Kohl's HINDs attack Marsh tomorrow morning, then General Conreid's ground forces can begin to advance. We'll wipe out the strike force, down to the last man."

Walz spoke to the pilots. "Move away from the stone

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city at low altitude. Come back to Pretoria, and you can live to fight another day."

There was no answer. Nothing but static filled the underground bunker.

Walz scowled. "Answer me, damn you! Come in, anyone."

As silence continued, interspersed with bursts of meaningless static, Bruno shook his head and started toward his private chambers.

He spoke over his shoulder. "I shall see you gentlemen in the morning, after breakfast, when you can apprise me of the results of Captain Kohl's attack."

He stopped just before leaving the room. "And gentlemen, you had better have something positive to say to me."

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Corrie called out, "Boss, I've finally managed to bump Colonel Marsh. He's on the line now waiting to talk to you."

"Great," Ben said as he reached for the mike. "Raines here. How goes it?"

"It goes as well as can be expected in this god-dammed hothouse the Africans call a jungle."

"We've been trying to reach you for the past twenty-four hours. Trouble with your radio?"

He heard a low chuckle over the airwaves. "Yeah. A friggin' lizard had crawled into our long-range radio transceiver and shorted out a couple of resistors. Once our radio tech found the problem, it was relatively easy to fix."

"Good. We wanted to warn you that our Scouts had seen some aircraft headed your way. Did you make contact yet?"

"Yes, sir. And we survived more through luck than skill. They were carrying napalm, and if we'd been in the jungle instead of in the stone city of Great Zimbabwe, we'd have had our geese cooked by now."

"Lots of great military minds have said luck plays a greater part in the outcome of war than military planning. Guess they were right, huh?"

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"Yes, sir. Speaking of luck, we apprehended a prisoner who gave us some good information. It seems there are quite a few Minsk tanks up ahead of your position, waiting to ambush your battalion."

Ben pursed his lips, a puzzled expression on his face. "That's strange. Our scout planes haven't picked up any signs of tanks ahead. Are you sure of your source?"

"Yes, sir. He says the tanks are dug into bunkers and camouflaged very well to blend into the desert sand. I'll give you the exact coordinates and let your men check it out again."

"OK, that'll be a big help. I'll send Captain Holland and his PUFFs to take a look. How about you? Do you need anything?"

"Just about everything you can imagine, General. We're down to less than two days fuel supplies, low on ammunition, and our Apaches have about enough fuel for one more mission. We need anything you can send."

"I'll radio supply and have a couple of C130s airdrop you everything you

need within four or five hours. That good enough?"

"Excellent, General. I'll give you those coordinates now, and also give you ours for the airdrop. Good luck with those tanks."

"Thanks, Marsh. What's your next move?"

"We also found out about some anti-aircraft batteries and cannons up ahead of us. We're gonna send out a little sortie with the Apaches and see if we can't draw those good ole boys back here into a little surprise I've got cooked up for 'em."

Once Ben had the coordinates he needed, he had Cor-rie radio supply headquarters and tell them to get the supplies Marsh needed to him, soonest. Then he called

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a meeting with Colonel Holland to discuss Marsh's information concerning tanks up ahead of his 501.

While Ben was meeting with Colonel Holland, Marsh sent the leader of his air support team, Captain Sparks, on his night mission.

Captain Dana Sparks kept his Apache flying at less than three hundred feet above the ground. Two more Apaches flanked him on the right, and one on the left.

Reading his instruments, checking for the coordinates the prisoner had given them, he realized they were very close to the cannon batteries. He expected to see New World choppers on his scope any second now. The thumping of the Apaches' rotors would quickly alert the enemy to their approach, even if they had managed to stay low enough to avoid their radar. At times, even the most modern mechanized warfare came down to basics, the quickest eye, the keenest ear.

With four rocket tubes mounted on each Apache, Dana and his men could deliver one hell of a damaging blow to New World gun emplacements before they were finished with this mission. And then things would start to get hot in the night skies over southern Zimbabwe.

Dana knew they could count on determined pursuit by a fleet of HINDs, which was exactly what Colonel Marsh wanted-to draw as many enemy helicopter gun-ships toward their anti-aircraft batteries as possible.

"Target on my HUD, Red Leader" a voice said into Dana's helmet earphones. "Somebody's coming up. At least six blips. Now I have two more."

"Go!" Dana ordered, twisting more forward thrust out of the Apache's stick-mounted throttle. Every man in the squadron had been assigned specific targets.

The hammering of rotors grew louder. Dana put the

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nose of the ship down, flying as low as he dared at his speed. Now he had a target on his HUD. He primed the rocket launch tubes and tried for a fix. A bleeping noise came faster, until a single electronic tone announced a target fix. He fired one rocket tube and watched its vapor

trail shoot away from the ship. The rocket guidance system, built into the nose cone, would do the rest.

More rockets left the gunships to Dana's right and left, a flash of crimson followed by a trail of white marking the passage of each deadly Spider across dark terrain below.

A brilliant burst of fire and smoke lit up the night in front of Dana's Apache, followed by the thunder of a terrific explosion.

"Bingo!" Dana cried into the radio. "A direct hit on some sort of munitions stores."

Another blast erupted from the ground, fingers of flame shooting skyward, turning the undergrowth into a wall of fire and smoke.

"Gotcha!" a pilot's voice crackled into Dana's headset. "I don't know what the hell I hit, but it sure does make one real pretty blaze!"

The patter of distant machine gun fire with tracers leading through the darkness came straight for Dana's helicopter squadron from the forest.

"Go down!" Dana said. "We're still too damn high."

But as he said this he saw the tracers pass high over the cockpit of his chopper. The enemy gunners were shooting at shadows.

A volcano of flame shot upward from another spot in the jungle where the rain forest ended abruptly near a dried up lake, the start of the desert. Dana saw and heard one of the Spiders score a hit, in a place he hadn't expected to find the enemy.

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"Nice shootin'!" he exclaimed. "Whoever fired that baby gets a gold star by his name."

More tracer bullets and machine gun fire sizzled over the tops of the low-flying Apaches. Dana, as squad leader, decided it was time to empty all tubes and get the hell out of there before a ship went down. They had damn few to waste.

"Fire all rockets!" he shouted. "Let the heat sensors pick a target for us. We're gettin' the hell outta here. Those shots are gettin' closer and closer."

Spider rockets whooshed away from the Apaches almost in unison. Dana felt his airship sway when the ignited rocket fuel pushed them out of the launchers.

Following a precision drill his team had practiced since he'd formed the squad, the Apaches peeled off one at a time at very low altitude, swinging back toward battalion headquarters.

"Looks like we all made it," a voice said over the radio. "Don't know what the hell we hit, but it sure made a big bang."

"We've got gunships behind us," another pilot warned. "We can't count on

this picnic being over 'til we get back to camp and set down."

Dana wasn't all that worried about the enemy aircraft. They were low to the ground, hard to detect on older targeting mechanisms like those found in the HINDs.

His main worry was fuel. His gauge showed barely enough to get back to base and safety, and flying this low used fuel at a prodigious rate.

He tapped on the gauge, hoping the needle would move. When it didn't, he silently crossed his fingers and began to whistle a tune to make the time pass faster.

He prayed he and his squad had enough gas left to lead the New World pilots over the hidden gun batteries Colonel Marsh had positioned for a crossfire.

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He couldn't wait to see the HINDs come falling out of the sky like so many raindrops.

Marsh is one hell of a commander, he thought. He was born with a military mind.

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Captain Tristan Kohl had four blips on his radar screen, all flying very low over tropical forest, heading north back toward where that infamous Colonel Marsh was reported to be camped-where his boyhood friend and flight training companion, Helmut Gruber, had been reported lost earlier that day during the napalm attack. God only knew what had happened to him and the others on that mission. None of the planes had made it back to camp to report on the sortie.

Flying at the front of the formation, he spoke into his radio as he gripped the M24's stick with the throttle wide open.

"Beta Leader Five. I have them on my screen. Four airships. Choppers, probably Apaches. Activate rocket ignition when you can confirm a hit"

"They are too low, Beta Five!" a voice replied from another M24 HIND flying outer wing in their V-shaped formation. "I have no fix. Repeat. I have no fix."

In this tropical country the heat from the ground, even at night, was often enough to throw off the heat-seekers of their rockets if the target aircraft were low to the ground, and these crazy Americans were flying so low their landing wheels must be hitting treetops.

Kohl knew the Apaches were capable of quick ma-

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neuvres and dangerously low flight, if their pilots knew what they were doing. It was hard to bring one down from the air with the older Soviet

rockets they had on board the M24s-small missiles with an out of date guidance system relying solely on heat which often misfired at a vapor trail or followed the wash of a turbine engine instead of the flying ship itself, allowing smart pilots to make sharp turns to avoid their rockets.

While the Soviet-made rockets were excellent for ATG-air-to-ground firing-they stacked up poorly against the more advanced Rebel rockets with their computerized guidance systems.

Most frustrating of all, the Apaches somehow made false echoes on The New World's best screens, causing rockets or cannon fire to go wide.

"Let them have a taste of machine gun fire," Kohl commanded, flipping switches on his twin-mount M60 machine guns. These big guns required visual targeting, a difficult task while flying an M24 in hot pursuit, and the Russian brand M60s frequently jammed due to rust in this humid tropical climate.

Colonel Walz knew about the problems aboard the HINDs, and still he ordered them into battle with the Apaches as if pilots under his command and their HINDs were expendable. And as the war lengthened it seemed no one in the high command cared about New World army disadvantages, or about badly needed repairs to planes and helicopters.

Many of the air wars they fought now were like suicide missions. Too many good pilots had been killed since the Rebel armies came to Africa, and too many of Tristan Kohl's friends would never see Germany again because of Walz and his lack of maintenance protocols.

The chatter of machine gun fire came from a ship to Kohl's left as they sped over the dark forest below.

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Kohl's altimeter read less than a thousand feet, and the Apaches appeared to be hundreds of feet lower, making them far more difficult targets for machine guns, cannons, or rockets.

He admired the nerve of the Rebel pilots for flying so low, and at night. He knew, as good a flyer as he was, he would never have the courage to attempt maneuvers such as the Rebels performed routinely.

But with twelve gunships in his squadron, Kohl felt the sheer weight of numbers would give them the advantage tonight. Silently, he prayed he wouldn't be one of the M24s shot down during this engagement, yet he had to stay out in front of the formation to show his men he had courage in battle. He could not lag behind . . . his pride would not allow it.

"One of the blips has turned around!" It was Kruger's voice over the radio. "It is coming back toward us___"

"I don't see it!" another pilot yelled. "Give me a mark! I can't pick it up on my screen!"

Kohl recognized the terror in Gustav Cline's voice despite heavy static through his headset, a common failing of HINDs when the humidity was high which caused all manner of electrical quirks in the guidance

systems and in their radios.

"Something has been fired! I can see its burn trace. Go down!" Kohl said, feeling his palms grow wet with sweat on the controls.

"It's a rocket!"

"Evade, evade now!"

Several members of the squad sent their M24s down to low altitudes to escape the Rebel missile. Kohl took a quick glance at an M24 when it nose-dived out of formation, swooping down toward the jungle.

"I'm getting sometitiing on my warning system-"

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Lieutenant Kruger scarcely got the words out of his mouth before his chopper exploded, sending an aftershock across the rest of the flight formation.

Kohl watched Kruger's helicopter gunship go down in a ball of flames, coming apart as it spiraled toward the earth, leaving a plume of smoke and flames in its wake.

"Fire! Fire! I've got a target!"

Cline fired one of his rockets. A finger of orange flame marked its passage away from his chopper.

Kohl watched the rocket shoot away from Cline's gun-ship with his heart in his throat. David Kruger was already among the dead from this helicopter engagement, and the fight had only begun. He wondered how many more of his comrades would die.

"I'm hit!" a crackling voice shouted. "One of my rotor blades is-" His cry ended with a terrific explosion off to Kohl's right.

A HIND burst into flames, flipping nose-over-tail amid an inferno. Oddly, the helicopter's machine guns were firing as it went crashing into the treetops below. Then one of its unlaunched rockets detonated, blasting trees out of the ground in a rapidly spreading circle.

Kohl took a deep breath. He saw an Apache making straight for his squad's formation-a suicidal move for a helicopter pilot at this altitude.

Kohl fixed his targeting sights on the Apache and pulled a trigger on a rocket. The swish of exploding, burning rocket fuel made a faint sound above the staccato of his rotor. A fiery vapor trail left one launching tube. Then the Apache gunship suddenly disappeared on his screen. It was not possible, and yet he had seen the blip vanish himself.

"Where is it?" he cried just as the rocket he launched went sailing into a black hole in the rain forest.

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"It is gone! I don't see it!" someone exclaimed. "A big chopper cannot

simply vanish like that."

Kohl's rocket ignited a stand of trees, brightening the night sky briefly. He had missed the Apache completely and it did not make any sense-how could an airship be there at one moment, and then disappear entirely in a matter of seconds?

It was not logical, he thought. Did these Rebels have some kind of new weapon, making their aircraft invisible? Or were their pilots simply that good at the controls?

"I'm hit!" a slurred voice screamed from Kohl's headset as one of the choppers to his left disintegrated in flames, twisting out of the sky in looping arcs. The HIND went out of sight, exploding upon impact, setting more trees aflame.

A split second later Kohl saw a flash of light off to his right. A HIND was struck by a rocket and it went down like a flaming ball of heavy metal, dropping straight down into the forest with a bang.

/ am going to die tonight, Kohl thought. How is this possible, against only four enemy helicopters ?

"Beta Leader!" a voice said. "We are flying over batteries of anti-aircraft guns. They are shooting rockets up at us, and cannons are spitting lead all over the jungle below."

Kohl looked beneath his guriship. The trees were alive with flashing lights, a twinkling, staccato pattern of death, and the distant boom of cannons could be heard above the whine of his turbines and the hammering of his rotors through the air.

Tracer bullets illuminated the pathways of cannon and machine gun shells, lighting up the night sky like the fireworks displays during Oktoberfest back home.

"I am hit. Going down!"

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Kohl did not recognize the pilot's voice. His squad was taking a terrible beating ... it was almost as if they had been lured into a nest of ground-to-air rocket launchers and anti-aircraft gun batteries.

Something struck the underbelly of his chopper, and a pain began in his left foot so intense that Kohl unconsciously let out a yell, leaving him gasping for air. His boot went flying past his face, slamming against the roof of his gunship cabin.

The chopper tilted crazily, driven out of control by the impact from a cannon round.

Blood sprayed the cockpit, and Kohl noticed in the dim lights behind the control panel that his entire left foot was missing, blown off just above his ankle by a Rebel cannon. He seemed strangely detached from his circumstances, almost as if it were all happening in a dream.

Perhaps it is a dream, he thought dazedly, hoping against hope this

wasn't really happening to him.

Air pressure fell in the cabin and a map, clipped to a visor above his head, was sucked out of a hole in the M24's steel-plated floor. An involuntary scream came from his throat.

He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth, fighting back the pain racing up his leg. And now he had no foot with which to control the rudder or the speed of the tail rotor.

He felt the chopper begin what felt like an auto-rotating ground-spin although his altimeter said he was still three hundred feet in the air. His mind would not function properly, due to the pain and his massive blood loss. His vision became blurred, and he couldn't focus his eyes.

He rubbed at his face, seeing another M24 break into pieces far to his right, blanketed by flames and smoke.

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Kohl's radio crackled, but there was no voice from the pilot being shot out of the skies, only static as his last message never made it to his squadron leader.

The drum of anti-aircraft guns became a rhythm from the dark forest, pounding, blasting away as Kohl's HIND began a slow descent he could not control.

"Son of a-!" Another pilot attempted a radio message in the last seconds of his life, before his chopper was hit by a hail of Rebel cannon fire.

Kohl's life flashed before him-his childhood in Holland, and his enlistment in the New Federation Army headed by a blond giant named Bruno Bottger. Bottger had made so many promises to his new recruits, promises of a better world and an easier life for all who followed him.

Then came the collapse of his Nazi-style regime, after a bitter war across Europe. Everyone believed General Field Marshal Bruno Bottger was dead. Then he had surfaced a few years later with his New World Order, headquartered in Pretoria, South Africa, proclaiming he had millions of followers and a better equipped army to fight against Democratic tyranny.

Tristan Kohl had wanted to believe in this New World Order, as so many others had.

His M24 circled closer to the earth, out of control because he had no foot to guide it. Sheets of pain ran up his thigh to his belly, and he felt nauseated.

"Swing toward the east!" a voice cried, garbled through the radio by the sounds of cannon fire and machine guns.

Yes, Kohl thought. Turn this helicopter toward the east, toward the jungle where the Rebels have no guns.

Using the stump where his foot should have been, he placed bare bone and bleeding flesh on a rudder pedal and twisted the throttle.

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When his exposed, shattered bone pressed down, stabilizing the rudder, the pain almost caused him to black out.

The turbines responded with a roar, lifting the HIND just in the nick of time. Kohl ignored the white-hot pain in his stump of a leg to keep pressure on the rudder pedal.

He saw darkness underneath him, with treetops moving and waving in the wind like waves of an ocean marking the spot where beaches touched the sea. Only, there was no beach within a thousand miles, only thick jungle and rain forest.

With all his might he kept his concentration on the task at hand, getting his damaged airship out of the range of the anti-aircraft batteries before a cannon, or a rocket, shot him down.

His mind wandered to the report he was given concerning the commander of this Rebel strike force.

What was his name? The churning of chopper blades above him prevented him from remembering, for the moment. Was it Malone? Marsh?

"I am going down!" someone shrieked into his headphones, a voice heightened by hysteria he could not recognize.

/ will not go down, Kohl promised himself. I will stay in the air, no matter what.

An M24 to his right blew apart, pieces flying, chunks of metal sucked into the downdraft of his rotor blades.

"Oh no!" he gasped, feeling his gunship shudder in midair when something struck the tip of a swirling blade.

He fought the controls with all his strength, but with a nagging sensation that he was losing consciousness due to the blood loss from his stump. The HIND would not obey his commands when he tried to steady it.

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"Goddamn you, Bottger!" he snarled, "making us fly these goddamn Russian antiques! Screw you and this stupid war! We can't win it in these flying buckets. . . ."

It all went beyond his control when a fragment of a torn M24 sheared off one of his rotor blades. Tristan Kohl's HIND flipped over, flying upside down until it was driven into the trees below, in the jungles of southern Zimbabwe.

The explosion destroyed three Bantu tribesmens' straw and bamboo huts, and started a fire that threatened the entire village.

Tristan Kohl was killed instantly. He would never again drink beer and dance with the pretty liebfrau at Oktoberfest, or watch the colorful

fireworks of the national holiday.

He lost his life to Bruno Bottger's dream of worldwide conquest.

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Bruno was summoned from his private office by Rudolf. "You are needed in the War Room, sir," Rudolf said.

"Is something wrong?" Bruno asked, rubbing his eyes sleepily. "Is it morning already?"

"No, sir. It's around midnight."

Bruno sat up in his bed, eyes wide, staring suspiciously at his aide. "What has happened?"

"Captain Kohl and his M24 squadron were attacked at the anti-aircraft batteries we set up on the border with Zimbabwe by four Apache helicopters from Marsh's Battalion 12."

Bruno's face lit up with anticipation. "Good, the bastard finally outsmarted himself. If I'm not mistaken, Captain Kohl has twelve M24s under his command. Did he completely wipe out the strike force squadron?"

Rudolf Hessner hesitated. He knew full well the danger a messenger placed himself in when delivering bad news, especially to a leader as unstable as Bottger. "Not exactly, Herr General Field Marshal."

"Well, what happened, Rudolf? Surely four Apaches couldn't defeat twelve M24s, led by our best air commander. Out with it, man!"

Again Rudolf hesitated before answering. "I'm afraid

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Captain Kohl took off after the Apaches, and was led north into the jungles of Zimbabwe, where Marsh had set a trap. He had anti-aircraft batteries set up in the jungle, and annihilated Kohl's command to the last man and last M24."

"What?" Bruno bellowed, leaping out of bed to grab Rudolf by his shirt front.

"I'm afraid Colonel Walz's M24s, as well as his MIGs, have failed you, sir. Walz says they have all been downed by rockets or GTA missiles. He asked to speak to you immediately."

"All of them? All twelve of the HINDs?"

"I did not ask him for a number, sir. He said his helicopters ran into some kind of unexpected difficulty."

Bruno released Rudolf's shirt and began to pace around his bedroom, muttering to himself for a moment.

Rudolf was afraid at first that the news had caused his leader to lose his mind, until Bruno turned and stared at him with eyes glittering with

hate.

He pointed his finger at Rudolf, as if aiming a gun. "If Walz has failed us I want him executed, Rudolf."

"When, sir?"

"I will give you a signal. Then, you take him down to the lower level. Tell him you have something to show him. And get rid of him."

Bruno began to pull his dress uniform on, still talking over his shoulder at Rudolf. "His incompetence has cost us countless lives and almost half our flying machines. He is an idiot, and I was a fool to have trusted him."

"Shall I incinerate his body?"

"Of course. As far as the others on my staff are concerned, he deserted us. We'll say we don't know where he is, and brand him a traitor to the cause. You can say you saw him leaving in a jeep after you talked to him."

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"Yes, sir. You give me the signal, and I'll make certain it is done in accord with your wishes."

Bruno walked over to Rudolf as he was about to leave through the door.

"You are a trusted associate, Rudolf Hessner, and you will be rewarded when The New World Order is in place."

"I am grateful for your trust, Herr Bottger. It is not misplaced. I would give my life for the cause, and for you, as you must know by now."

"Of course. Your loyalty has never been in question, and you have performed valuable services for me. It will not be forgotten."

"I understand, Herr Bottger. I fear you have entrusted men with no courage to lead your men in battle. Colonel Walz has always been suspect."

"As is General Conreid."

Rudolf nodded. "General Ligon believes in his germ warfare weapons. However, he has trusted others to deliver them. When the time is right, I will also get rid of him."

"You have a keen understanding of what is needed, my trusted friend."

"What is needed is good military leadership."

Bruno scowled, his eyes boring into Rudolfs. "And you do not feel I have given my best tactical knowledge to our effort?"

"You have, Herr Bottger. It is the others who have failed you."

"Alas, this is true. I chose the men I thought would lead us to victory."

"It would seem they are leading us into a series of defeats against the

Rebels."

"Let us not forget that these Rebels are quite clever when it comes to tactics."

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"Surely, Herr Bottger, they are not more clever than someone like you?"

"Of course not."

"Then the solution seems to be simple. Get rid of the leaders who are costing you glorious victories."

"You are right. I have entrusted the wrong men with too much responsibility."

Rudolf gave him a weak smile. "In particular, I believe it was wrong to trust Colonel Walz with our precious aircraft. He has no vision, no plan, only a frontal attack directed at enemy positions."

"Yes. A schoolchild could have done exactly the same thing in our behalf."

"Should I kill him now?"

"Wait, until I find out the extent of our losses. However, I doubt the outcome will suit me. If Walz has sent our last remaining MIGs and M24s into a losing battle, he must be ... eliminated."

"I will do it. Just give me the killing sign, and I will take him down to the lower level."

"It is where he belongs. We have lost so many brave pilots who were willing to give their lives for The New World Order. They followed the orders of a fool without any fighting skills or knowledge of military strategy."

"So it would seem, Herr Bottger."

Bruno reached for the doorknob. "Just in case things are far worse than we believe, have Alexis prepare my helicopter for takeoff."

"Where would you have him take us?"

"Merely tell him to fill all tanks with fuel. I will not retreat or abandon our compound until it is clear we have no other choice."

"Alexis will be informed."

Bruno strode out into the concrete corridor leading to the War Room. A voice inside his head warned that

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incompetent men had again cost him the chance to smash the Tri-States Army, and Ben Raines.

He should have been more careful, picking the men who would command his air and ground forces in Africa. It was all too clear that he should have seen to every detail himself.

Well, he promised himself, he would not make that mistake again.

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Ben and his team were leading his 501 Batt forward, even as Colonel Holland and his squadron of jets were forging ahead, seeking out the Minsk tanks at the coordinates given to them by Marsh.

As they drove, leading his column of troop carriers and tanks and armored cars, Ben had Corrie put Holland's tac-frequency on the radio speaker so they could listen to the air battle as it raged. . . .

Holland's voice came on above the static, squeaky and tinny on the small speakers of the radio.

"Johnny, you see anything yet?"

"Not yet, Cap'n. But I'm flying at ten hundred feet. If you want us to pick anything out of that desert down there we're gonna have to get on the deck and fly low and slow."

"Roger that, Johnny," Holland answered.

"Billy, you and Joe Bob follow Johnny and me down to the deck. Keep your eyes peeled, men, 'cause I have a feelin' we're gonna draw some fire from the krauts down there."

"Roger, Cap'n," Billy answered.

"We got your six, Cap'n," Joe Bob said in his soft Texas drawl. "If those boys stick their heads up, I'll be on 'em like a tick on a coon hound."

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"Ten-four, Joe Bob. Johnny, let's drop on down and say howdy to the Germans."

"Gotcha, Boss," Johnny answered. "I'm on your tail, so don't hit the brakes unless you want some company in your cockpit."

The whine of the big Whitney-Pratt engines climbed in pitch over the radio as the two lead planes dived to five hundred feet, flying over the coordinates of the hidden tank group to try to draw their fire so they would reveal their position.

The rattle of the tanks' 30 caliber machine guns could clearly be heard, even over the radio as the planes flew above the tanks.

Several loud metallic thuds were heard, and Johnny's voice broke the radio silence, sounding strangely calm. "I'm hit, Cap'n. Took six thirty cals through my cockpit plexiglass."

"Johnny, you OK?" Holland asked, sounding worried.

"Sure, Boss. A little plastic in my cheek and a bit of blood on my flight suit. Otherwise, I'm flying strong, the bird is sailing okay . . . seem to have missed the engines."

"I got 'em in my sights, Cap'n. Look out, you sand lizards, Joe Bob is deliverin' the mail!" Joe Bob yelled as his engines screamed and he dove, twin Gatling guns chattering their song of death.

Holland called out, "Let's kick these pigs and get some air under us, Johnny. We'll make a high circle and come back at 'em with the Vulcans."

"Ten-four, Boss. I got the pedal to the metal," Johnny answered as he tilted the nose of his plane at the sky and pushed the throttle forward.

"On your six, Joe Bob, there's a Minsk to your left at

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ten o'clock. You take him, and I'll get the armored personnel carrier at three o'clock."

"Roger that," Joe Bob drawled in his laconic manner.

Thirty seconds later, he gave a whoop. "Whoa, Nelly! Take that and scratch one Minsk. Did you boys see the size of that fireball? Hell, he must've been loaded to the gills with HE shells, probably some phosphorus too!"

"Good shootin', Joe Bob," Holland said, his engines screaming in the background. "Now quit posing and get your butt out of the way. I've got some mail of my own to deliver ... air mail!"

The roar of Holland's cannons could be heard, deeper and louder than the chatter of his machine guns, as he dived on the tanks below.

A double explosion came over the radio, just as Billy yelled, "Hot damn, Boss! You got two with that strafe. Good shootin'."

"Get outta my way, boys," Johnny said, "I'm gonna stand this bitch on her nose and make some sausage down there."

As his engines whined, Billy said, "Pull out to the left when you're done makin' barbecue, Johnny, 'cause I'm in your wake and I'll pull out to the right."

"Ten~four, Billy boy," Johnny said before the droning roar of his cannon drowned out his words.

Two more explosions could be heard as the two PUFFs completed their dives and pulled out, spreading apart like the petals of a desert blooming flower, leaving fireballs and black, greasy smoke billowing behind them.

Holland said, "Good work, men. You can cook for me anytime. I count six tanks burning or destroyed, two more with treads off and disabled, and three armored personnel carriers blown back to Germany."

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"Hey, boss man, looks like the rest of the tanks are goin' home. Guess they don't appreciate SUSA hospitality."

"You want us to follow them and finish the job, Cap'n?" Joe Bob asked.

After a moment, Holland answered, "Naw, let 'em run back to papa with their tails between their legs. I'm gettin' low on fuel, and I don't see a gas station on this particular block. Guess we'd better head for home."

"I sure hate to leave this party just when it's gettin' interestin'," Joe Bob said, disappointment in his tone.

"There'll be more parties, gentlemen, that I can promise you. Now, pull in behind me and let's boogie."

Ben smiled at the chatter of the men under his command. He liked to work with men who enjoyed their jobs.

It was about fifteen minutes later when the PUFF squadron buzzed low over Ben's column of troops and tanks.

He had Cooper fire off a green flare, signaling a job well done, and the planes tipped their wings as they passed.

After the planes passed, Ben had Corrie radio the other squadrons that they were going full out for Pretoria, and the devil take the hindmost.

He looked over his shoulder as Cooper sped over the bumpy veld grasslands as fast as their SUV could go. "Okay, team, heads up. There are bound to be stragglers from Bottger's New World Army up ahead, and there may even be ambushes by forces small enough to have been missed by the fly-bys, so keep a full metal jacket in your weapons, and keep 'em locked and loaded for trouble."

"It's about time we see some action," Anna grum-

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bled. "I'm getting bored with all the other people having all the fun lately."

Jersey shook her head. "I'll never understand you, girl. Killing isn't fun . . . well, almost never, that is. It's serious business, and not to be taken lightly."

"Oh, I'm not taking it lightly, Jersey. It's just that riding around this barren wasteland gets old after awhile. It's action I want, not necessarily killing."

Beth looked up from the travel brochure she was reading. "It looks like we'll be crossing the border into Botswana before long."

Ben said, "Tell us about it, Beth. What's Botswana like, as opposed to Namibia?"

"It says here Botswana is larger than France in area, but held only a million and a half inhabitants at the time of the war."

Cooper snorted. "Probably a hell of a lot less now, that's for sure."

"It also says Botswana has Africa's largest population of elephants, between thirty and eighty thousand, and with the wilderness havens of the Okavango Delta, the Chobe National Park, the Moremi Game Reserve, and the Kalahari Desert, it was known as the ultimate safari destination before the war ended all that."

"Tell us more about the Kalahari, Beth. What are we going to be facing heading southeast toward Pretoria?"

She turned the page and read to herself for a moment before continuing. "The Kalahari had its origin as a great inland basin, which filled with sands blown in over the ages as the ancient lavas that once covered southern Africa slowly eroded. Kalahari sands now extend from Congo and Angola right down to the Northern Cape Province of South Africa, and across the continent from Namibia to western Zimbabwe. Kalahari sands underlie more than eighty percent of Botswana."

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Although often called a desert, most of it is grassland with scattered bush and trees, except in the extreme southwest. Water is so scarce that the native word for rain and the name for the country's currency are the same-pula."

"So, we won't have high dunes and massive sandpits to contend with on our journey?" Ben asked, leaning over the back of his seat to look at Beth.

"No, sir. Not according to this map. It looks as if we'll pass south of Ghanzi and the central Kalahari National Park, if we head straight southeast toward Tshane."

Ben turned back around. "That's where we're going."

As Cooper pushed the big SUV to its limit, Ben's team slowly pulled away from the column of tanks and personnel carriers following them.

After about an hour of steady travel across the flat bushland, scattering occasional wildlife, Cooper began to slow the vehicle. The change in speed brought Ben, who had been lightly dozing in the front seat, fully awake.

He rubbed his eyes, turning his head back and forth to see what caused Cooper to slow down.

"What's going on, Coop? We got trouble?"

Cooper shook his head. "I don't know, Boss. Caught something out of the corner of my eye a minute ago . . . maybe I'm just spooked, but I got a funny feeling something out there ain't right."

"Keep a sharp eye. Coop thinks something's-" Ben started to say, when he was interrupted by Jersey's shout from the back seat.

"There, over to the left ... I saw a reflection-

Suddenly all hell broke loose. Two hundred yards off to their left a camouflage netting was thrown back from over a shallow gully in the sand.

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An M60 machine gun was pushed up on the lip of the gully on its tripod and immediately began to stutter and fire. The heads of several soldiers popped up at the same time, pointing AK47s and firing as fast as they could.

Hammer blows of 60 caliber bullets rocked the SUV, cracking the front windshield, punching holes in the left front fender and down the side of the vehicle.

Smaller dents puckered the thick metal but didn't penetrate as the AK47s found the range.

"Ambush!" Ben shouted, as Cooper jerked the steering wheel to the right and floored the accelerator, slamming the big wagon around in a sliding turn.

Both left side wheels blew out as the M60 slugs tore holes in their rubber, and the SUV lost balance and rolled three times, finally coming to rest partially on its side, its roof toward the enemy, engine smoking and ticking after it stalled.

Inside the SUV, Ben braced himself against the side-wall and popped his seatbelt, almost falling into Cooper's lap when it let go.

"Everybody okay?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder into the rear seats.

Anna stammered, "I think so."

"I'm all right," Jersey answered.

"I'm good to go, but the radio's had it ... smashed to pieces," Corrie piped up.

When Beth didn't answer, Ben leaned back over the seat to see if he could locate her in the jumbled equipment and supplies that were thrown all over the rear of the vehicle.

Beth was lying on her side with her eyes closed, blood streaming from her nose, and her left arm was cocked at an impossible angle, apparently broken just above the wrist.

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"Shit!" Ben shouted. "Beth's down! Jersey, see if you can check her out."

More slugs pounded into the roof of the SUV, which was made of reinforced steel to protect against strafing by airplanes and helicopters. Even the large 60 caliber bullets couldn't penetrate the double thickness of the top of the wagon.

Ben tried to open the door, which wouldn't budge. He lay back and kicked out with both feet at the same time, finally popping it open.

He scrambled out of the door, reaching back inside to help Cooper, who grabbed his squad automatic weapon as he tumbled out of the door and fell to the ground.

While Ben pulled the rear door open, Cooper crawled to peek around the front fenders of the SUV, bringing his SAW to his shoulder when he saw enemy soldiers crawling out of the ditch two hundred yards away and running toward them.

He sighted down the barrel, braced himself against the recoil, and pulled his trigger on the machine gun. Dozens of slugs exploded out of the barrel, kicking it up and to the right as it slammed back into his shoulder, rocking him back on his heels as he knelt in the hot sand of the veld.

Four of the attacking troops went down immediately, screaming in pain as the bullets tore into them, spinning them around to fall backward, dead before they hit the ground.

Within seconds the remaining troops had scrambled back under cover of the ditch, but kept up a steady stream of fire with their AK47s.

Ben managed to get Jersey, Corrie, and Anna out of the wagon, then crawled to look over Cooper's shoulder.

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"What's our situation, Coop?"

"Looks like about twenty or twenty-five men about two hundred yards away, hunkered down in that dry wash over there. They've got good cover, and at least one M60 along with automatic small arms, AKs, I think from the sound of them."

Ben looked back over his shoulder. "Damn, we've separated ourselves from the rest of our troops and materiel. They're not even in sight yet over the horizon, which means they're at least several miles back."

"Boss, the radio's had it. I can't even get static."

"How about our combat mikes?"

"Still operational, but Michaels doesn't answer, so he must be out of range."

"Anna," Ben said, "How is Beth?"

Anna was bent over the floorboard of the vehicle, her head and upper body inside as she worked to free Beth from all the debris covering her.

"Unconscious, Ben. Probably only a mild concussion, since her pulse is strong and her breathing is steady. Broken left wrist, and maybe some internal injuries that I can't determine yet."

"Damn! See if you can get her out of there, while I try to figure some

way out of this mess."

Jersey crawled to the rear of the wagon and stuck her M16 around the corner and fired several short bursts into the soldiers across the sand, just to let them know she was there.

"Looks like a Mexican standoff, Chief," she called, firing another burst. "If we can keep them from attacking, the cavalry should be here before too long."

"Yeah," Ben agreed, easing his head up to look over the top of the vehicle. "Michaels can't be too far behind us."

From across the way a deep rumbling vibration be-

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gan, and black diesel smoke could be seen to rise in a dark cloud.

"Uh-oh," Cooper said. "I don't like the sound of that ... I think they may have a tank over there, or at least some big vehicles, maybe an APC."

As the camouflage net moved, a sand and brown colored APC began to pull out of the ditch, a soldier in the open top behind a post-mounted 50 caliber machine gun.

He opened up with the fifty, sending sparks and chunks of metal flying off the SUV as he raked the roof and fenders with bullets.

Jersey cursed as she pulled her head back just as the tire she was behind began to disintegrate under the impact of hundreds of slugs.

She smirked, calling out, "Hey, Anna, come on down here. We got some of that action you've been hankering for all day."

Anna nodded. "Yeah. Jersey, do me a favor, will you? Next time I say I'm bored, just kick me in the butt and tell me to shut up, okay?"

Jersey laughed. "You got it, girl."

"Ben, I don't mean to rush you or anything, but what the hell are we going to do now? Our M16s and my SAW aren't going to make a dent in that APC, and it looks like the troops over there are lining up to use it for cover as it heads toward us."

"Do we have any LAWS or TOW-Dragon anti-tank missiles in the SUV?"

"Not a one," Corrie replied. "We had to take them out when we packed the Racal suits in. There wasn't room for them with all the germ and chemical warfare gear."

"Wait a minute, Boss," Jersey said. "I have an M203 grenade launcher in there somewhere. Maybe we could

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use it to lob some HE or phosphorous grenades over there. The range is about a hundred to a hundred and fifty yards."

"Crawl in there and see if you can find it, Jersey. The grenades won't put the APC out of commission, but maybe it'll slow it down enough until we can get some help from Michaels."

Jersey handed her CAR to Corrie, who took her place behind the rear of the SUV and started to fire intermittently at the APC as it climbed out of the ditch, knocking two soldiers to the dirt who were walking behind it.

Ben stuck his CAR over the top of the wagon and began to fire his Thunder Lizard from the shoulder, making the man in the turret duck for cover as his rounds pinged off the armored steel of the big vehicle.

Moments later Jersey jumped down to the ground, the M203 in one hand and a flare gun in the other. She handed both to Ben, along with a satchel of grenades and flares.

Ben took the flares and loaded a red one in the pistol, aimed it skyward, and let it go with a loud bang. The flare arched into the sky, then exploded in a red fireball high in the sky.

"Maybe that'll let John know we need some help up here," Ben said, as he bent to affix the M203 to a spare M-16 from the wagon.

He crawled up on top of the SUV, ignoring the shells ricocheting around him as he elevated his barrel at forty-five degrees to get the maximum range and fired a fragmentation grenade at the APC.

It exploded twenty yards short of the vehicle, sending a geyser of sand and dirt into the air, but causing no damage to the personnel carrier.

As the APC and its following troops pulled closer, the

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grenades began to land on or very close to the vehicle, but still were not strong enough to slow its advance or to do any real damage.

Finally, Ben was down to two fragmentation grenades and one white phosphorous grenade.

He shook his head. "Looks like we're down to the bottom of the barrel, team. Any ideas?"

Cooper thought for a moment, then said, "Not a one. . . ."

After he heard it, Ben grinned. "Hell, Coop, I've got one."

Ben quickly reloaded the M203 with a white phosphorous grenade.

This time, the white phosphorous exploded just above the APC, sending flaming sheets of burning phosphorous into the interior of the APC through the turret opening on top.

Two soldiers scrambled out of the APC, the phosphorous clinging to their skins and clothing, which were burning brightly as the screaming men ran for a few yards and then fell to the ground, their flesh bubbling and melting under the white-hot heat of the chemical.

Ben and Cooper and Jersey and Corrie then dashed toward the remaining troops, their CARs blazing and chattering as they poured hundreds of rounds into the enemy troops.

Corrie took a superficial wound to the left thigh, making her stumble, but not knocking her to the ground.

Jersey's kevlar helmet was hit dead center by a round, snapping her head back and dazing her, causing her to stand still halfway to the APC and look around, as if she didn't know where she was.

The battle was over in less than two minutes, with all the enemy troops either killed, wounded, or surrendering to the small band of warriors.

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Half an hour later, when a Huey gunship helicopter arrived with John Michaels riding in the rear, manning the M60 machine gun, Ben and his team were sitting in the shade of their overturned SUV, with eight prisoners standing before them, hands on heads.

Michaels jumped down from the chopper and ran over to Ben.

"We saw your flare and called in the Huey, but it looks like we were a bit slow."

Ben grinned. "Yeah, my team has everything under control now."

Then he grew serious. "However, we do have some minor injuries. Beth has a broken left wrist and nose, Corrie has a flesh wound to the thigh, and Jersey is still a bit addled. Could you airlift us back to the main force so Doc Chase can take a look at them?"

"But there's no need to hurry," Cooper added, looking over at Jersey, who was sitting with a dazed look still on her face. "This is the first time since I've known her she isn't talking at full tilt. I'm kind'a enjoying the silence."

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Bruno's defenses were crumbling. Ben Raines's 501 brigade had finally been joined near the city of Tshane in southern Botswana by Ike McGowen and his 502 brigade.

Together they were marching through Botswana, and had broken through a perimeter of tanks and howitzers, destroying most of the big 105 millimeter New World artillery bunkered north and east of Pretoria.

Marsh's strike force and two more armored Rebel units were pushing across the southern savannas and miombo woodlands and massive granite domes, or dwalas, of lower Zimbabwe, heading straight for Johannesburg virtually untouched and unopposed.

There was silence in the underground bunker's War Room while Bruno and two of his top commanders listened to frantic radio reports from all fronts.

Air support for Bruno's embattled troops was virtually nonexistent now,

with only a few HIND attack helicopter gunships still airworthy, and most of his MIG fighter planes had been downed by rocket fire or grounded due to mechanical problems and lack of parts to repair the ancient engines.

"I fear the end is near," General Conreid said. "There is nothing we can do to stop them."

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General Ligon nodded his silent agreement as an artillery brigade commander north of Pretoria called in his damage report.

"The men are deserting! Running for their lives! Shells are falling all around us!"

"Cowards," Bruno hissed, his jaw clenched. "No one can win a war with an army of cowards."

"They are being shelled to pieces," Conreid said, "and in places it has come down to hand-to-hand combat. Our ammunition supply trucks bound for Petersburg were hit from the air. We lost everything. They control the skies completely now in the northern sectors. There is nothing we can do. Before long our anti-aircraft gunners and rocket launchers here at the compound will be shooting at their fighter planes and B17 bombers. I'm sure the Rebels know where we are by now, after tracking our radar and radio signals. They'll be trying to blast us out. General Raines will have us completely surrounded, with our backs to the sea."

Bruno's rage had reached its full boiling point. "We had every opportunity to whip these modey Rebels and their mongrel gene pools of inferior races. Field commanders made poor choices. They lacked conviction that this war could be won. Fear has been our worst enemy, gendemen, fear of a mere mortal calling himself a general. Ben Raines is no better and no smarter than anyone else. He is, at best, fearless. And when he faced indecisive cowards on the battlefield he won engagements easily."

General Ligon turned away from a map of South Africa, where pins denoted bunkers and artillery and tanks guarding the outer reaches of The New World Order compound in Pretoria.

"If I may say so, General Field Marshal, most of our

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men have fought with great courage. The Rebels have an uncanny knack for knowing our weaknesses, and they came to Africa well prepared and with the best military equipment, most of it salvaged from the old United States. We have battled them with what were primarily inferior Soviet-made aircraft and rockets. The Southern United States of America has devoted technical resources to developing and maintaining modern weaponry, and General Raines has access to whatever he needs in the way of arms and supplies from SUSAS-

General Conreid interrupted. "I agree completely with General Ligon. However, it goes beyond that, in my opinion. These Rebel soldiers have a will to win which I fear may be lacking in our troops. It is a state of

mind they possess, not just better weapons. They believe strongly in their so-called manifesto-granting so many liberties, punishment of the most severe kind for those who break their laws. While I believe it is a concept meant for desperate, hungry people, it seems to have instilled the Rebels with more than determination. They see themselves as a part of something larger than a country or a region. Calling it a unified spirit is far too simple. It defies all logic how committed they are to their political cause and beliefs. They have marched through our best offensive and defensive efforts with scarcely a pause, hiding when we have the advantage, reappearing where we least expect them to be, striking our flank at its weakest spots. I'm not sure what we could have done differently that might have stopped them. Even our anthrax spores were useless against them, no doubt due to inoculation, and they were apparently prepared for our gas deployment. They marched right through everything we dropped on them."

Bruno passed a meaningful glance to Rudolf Hessner, near the sealed door into the War Room. In addition

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to his Steyer-Hans 9mm automatic pistol Rudolf always carried a lightweight Valmet Oy M62 assault rifle with a telescoping stock, dangling from a strap over his shoulder, a Finnish gun he preferred over an AK47, due to its smaller size and tremendous firepower.

Bruno turned his attention back to General Conreid and General Ligon. Colonel Walz had already been dispatched to the downstairs incinerator immediately after the failure of the air strike against Battalion 12 in southern Namibia.

Two low-ranking radio operators sat at consoles against a far wall, changing frequencies to bring in reports from New World armies. A third officer monitored radar screens suspended from the ceiling, watching blips from various radar installations all across South Africa. None of the communications officers were armed.

"Are the two of you suggesting we surrender to Raines?" Bruno asked, doing his best to disguise the anger in his voice when he spoke to Ligon and Conreid.

General Conreid took his gaze from one radar screen. "It would seem the best choice, General Field Marshal. In point of fact, we are putting up very little resistance now."

Bruno fixed General Ligon with an icy stare. "And do you agree, General Ligon?"

"What other course do we have? Our soldiers are deserting the front. We have no aircraft to speak of with which to launch a meaningful counterstrike. Colonel Walz has disappeared, apparently deserting us, and thus we have no one to direct what few planes and helicopters we have left. The colonel hasn't been seen for several hours, and I am certain he has made his escape from South Africa by now."

"Walz was an idiot!" Bruno snapped. "Most of our losses are a direct result of his military incompetence."

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For a fleeting moment Bruno considered telling Li-gon and Conreid what had been done with Walz-that he was now merely a pile of ashes, along with the Gestapo's Dorfmann and his driver.

Bruno decided not to waste his breath, or any more valuable time. Alexis and three carefully selected assassins from his Praetorian Guard, men who had been with him since the days of the failed New Federation in Europe, had his American-made Huey chopper fueled and ready for a quick escape to Madagascar.

It was loaded with gold bullion, and Bruno planned to fly low over the Indian Ocean and across the Mozambique Channel to avoid being picked up by Rebel radar. In Madagascar he had another cache of gold and silver and an additional, hand-picked squad of bodyguards waiting for him.

There, backed by new allies forming in western China with millions in gold behind them, Bruno Bottger would try again to wipe Ben Raines and his freedom-spouting legions from the face of the earth.

He spoke to both generals again. "Someone has betrayed us to the Rebels, someone very close to me. From the beginning of die Rebels' campaign in Africa they have known where we are, the location of our headquarters in Pretoria. There is a traitor in our midst. I can come to no other conclusion."

Ligon spread his hands. "Surely you cannot believe it is one of us?"

Bruno did not answer him, waiting, casting a glance toward General Conreid, his eyes hooded and suspicious, as if he suspected everyone on his staff.

"Me?" Conreid asked. "You actually believe I could betray our cause, a cause I have risked my very life for?" His voice changed pitch, climbing as he almost whined in his attempt to convince Bruno of his innocence.

"Tell me it is not so, Herr General Field Marshal. I gave up a comfortable life in New Germany to come with you to Africa. How can you think I am a traitor to The New World Order?"

Bruno sighed, briefly enjoying the discomfort his highest commanders felt. "I do not know the traitor's identity," he said after a lengthy pause.

"Perhaps it was Walz?" Ligon suggested. "He deserted us at a time when we needed him. Surely this points the finger of blame at him-"

"Yes," Conreid said, nodding emphatically. "It must have been Colonel Walz who gave the Rebels the location of our headquarters."

"I don't diink so," Bruno replied.

"Then you must believe it is one of us," Ligon said after a furtive look in Conreid's direction. "But as you said, you do not have this traitor's identity."

"The solution is really quite simple," Bruno told them as he took a step backward-to be out of the way when Rudolf began firing. "The real

traitor will not admit to what he has done, and as we are rapidly losing this battle to Raines and his damn Rebel soldiers there isn't time to ferret out the culprit. And in point of fact, it does not really matter."

"It doesn't matter who betrayed us?" Ligon asked. "I find that preposterous."

General Conreid stiffened his spine. "I can only assure you I have never given any information to our enemies. I swear this to you."

Bruno looked at Rudolf and closed his right fist, the signal Rudolf had been waiting for.

Rudolf raised his Valmet assault rifle, pulling the stock tubing from its telescoped position. Then he squeezed the trigger, aiming for General Ligon first.

The thunder of an automatic stream of bullets filled

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the War Room. General Ligon was slammed against the wall, with blood spouting from a dozen holes in his chest and thorax. His eyes bulged in their sockets while empty brass cartridge casings fell to the concrete floor, making a hollow sound.

With scarcely a pause, Rudolf unleashed a spray of slugs into the face and chest of General Conreid. After terrified glances back over their shoulders, the radio and radar operators, made a dive for the floor.

Conreid went into a curious back-flip over a desk littered with maps. The roar of Rudolf's machine gun was deafening in the confines of the sealed room.

General Conreid toppled over onto the floor with pieces of skin dangling from his bloody, mangled face, and neck. He fell with a soft plop in a pool of his own blood. Conreid groaned once, and then lay still.

Bruno inclined his head toward the cowering communications officers.

"Kill them, too," he whispered, making a turn for the door with his Steyer in his fist.

A staccato of gunfire blasted back and forth across a tiny space beneath the radios and radar screens. Three men were turned into bloody pulp in a matter of seconds by a hail of hot lead. Only one of them remained alive long enough to scream as he was dying.

Rudolf reloaded his machine gun. "Alexis and the others are waiting at the heliport," he said. "We should go now."

"Is the way to the bunker's exit clear and safe?" Bruno asked while checking the cartridges in his Steyer.

"Yes, Field Marshal. Gunter killed the guards on the other side of the door with his knife before I came in, but there are guards on the upper level who will have heard the shooting. Gunter will be waiting for them on the stairwell if they try to climb down here. We will kill

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the other guards as soon as we reach the top. Your personal APC is outside. Jules is behind the wheel."

"Let's go," Bruno said. He stood back so Rudolf could open the door bolts, wondering if this might be a better time to get rid of Rudolf by placing a bullet in the rear of his skull. His aide and bodyguard was the only one left who knew about his Jewish mother, having overheard what Herr Dorfmann said when he came to Pretoria to inform him of the statement the old woman had given him. But at the moment, Bruno reasoned, Rudolf might be more valuable to him alive. There could be more shooting between the underground War Room and the heliport, and Rudolf was an excellent marksman.

Rudolf, with his back to Bruno, tripped back the heavy bolts and peered into the hallway with his machine gun leveled.

"All is clear," Rudolf said softly. "Follow me and I will lead the way to the stairwell, where Gunter is waiting for us."

Again, Bruno considered killing Rudolf, for Gunter would believe him if Bruno told him a shot from Ligon or Conreid had ended Rudolf's life. It was better to wait, he decided, following his loyal bodyguard out into the hall. He would have ample opportunity to kill Rudolf Hessner, after he was no longer needed for protection.

Ben Raines was enjoying his reunion with his oldest friend, Ike McGowen, commander of the 502 Batt and Ben's second in command of the Tri-States forces.

When Ike had finally caught up with Ben's 501 Batt, Ben had greeted him with, "I don't believe it, Ike. You actually look like you've managed to gain weight on this campaign."

Ben fingered the skintight jacket. "I guess we're gonna have to have a tailor ride with the 502 to keep letting out your uniforms if you're gonna keep this up."

Ike shrugged. "Wouldn't be a bad idea, Ben."

Ben laughed, then asked Ike to tell him about how his campaign had progressed.

Ike pulled a candy bar out of his pocket and sat in a chair in Ben's CP tent. "Wasn't too bad, over all. Had a bit of trouble in the northern part, which is wet, very flat, and covered with rain forests-which as you know are virtually inaccessible, due to the lack of roads. Moreover, I had to keep a close watch on the troops because of the elephants, lowland gorillas, and especially the friggin' monkeys, which must have numbered in the thousands. The little bastards kept us awake twenty-four hours a day with their screeching and howling."

He paused. "Do you have anything to drink around here? This chocolate is making me thirsty."

Ben instructed Cooper to see if he could round up some coffee.

Ike continued, "Once we got to the central plateau it was smooth sailing. The area is a succession of rolling, green plateaus. About the only problems we had were in crossing the many rivers that cut deep gorges in the soft dirt of the hills and valleys. As you know, the roads in the central part of the Congo are among the best in Africa, and much better than in Zaire, the old Belgian Congo. What's more, the altitude of fifteen hundred to twenty-four hundred feet keeps the climate almost bearable."

"How about the natives? Did you face much resistance?"

"Some, especially from the pygmies. They were a constant menace, and I even had a few casualties from blow-gun darts."

He laughed, making his belly bounce. "Can you imagine, in this day and age, a soldier getting a purple heart for a wound from a blowgun?"

"Did you have any trouble with the other tribes?"

"Yeah. The Kongo and Teke tribes were quite ferocious, and seemed to be particularly loyal to Bottger and his ideas. The Vili and M'Bochi, on the other hand, were peaceful as could be."

As Cooper arrived with coffee and served it all around, Ben said, "I'm glad to have you with me again, old pal. We're getting closer to kicking Bottger's butt out of Africa, and I wanted you to be in on the finish."

Ike nodded. "Me, too, Ben. I hear from Intelligence there are some AA batteries and artillery battalions up ahead that are in need of a good housecleaning."

"Yep." Ben walked to a map on the wall of his tent

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and pointed his finger at the area just above the border to South Africa, in southern Botswana. "Bottger has his last line of defense set up in a ring, running east and west along the South African border, just about fifty klicks from his headquarters in Pretoria." "Have the flyboys softened 'em up for us?" Ben smiled. "Yeah. Colonel Holland just got back from his second mission over the area. He said there's practically no air support left in The New World Order Army. He and his men pounded the batteries and AA pretty good. He said it looked to him as if quite a few of the troops were abandoning their positions and deserting to the south."

"I'll bet that's pissin' old Bottger off plenty bad." "I hope so," Ben said. "And soon as you finish your coffee, we'll mount up and go see what we can do about clearin' 'em out once and for all."

Ike upended his cup, drank it down in one gulp, belched, then said, "Let's ride, partner!"

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The Huey sat inside a concrete bunker which hid it from view at ground level. The bunker was encircled by an electric fence. A multicolored camouflage net covered the aircraft when it was not in use.

As Jules drove Bruno's specially equipped APC toward the bunker, with Gunter manning a .50 caliber mounted machine gun on the roof of the armored vehicle, everyone could hear the whine of the Huey's turbines. Alexis was ready to take off the moment all were on board the craft.

Jules stopped at a guarded gate in the fence. A pair of Bruno's Praetorian Guardsmen blocked the entrance with AK47s at the ready.

The chopper would hold twelve men and a heavy pay-load of gold bullion, already secured in unmarked cargo boxes in the center of the Huey's belly. The gold represented all the wealth in South Africa, taken from bank vaults in Johannesburg and other cities when Bruno's armies invaded helpless countries across the African continent after he was driven out of Europe by Raines and his Rebels.

Bruno considered the treasure the fruits of war, a generous reward waiting to be taken in Africa after his

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humbling defeat in Europe when the New Federation collapsed.

Rudolf stepped out first when the APC ground to a halt. He gave their surroundings a quick inspection.

"All clear," he said, and Bruno was next to depart from the vehicle, casting a worried look at the sky.

If any Rebel recon aircraft had flown over, even at a very high altitude, a squadron of Raines's Apaches might be waiting for them to lift off and head for the ocean, turning them away from Cape Town and the Cape of Good Hope, where Bruno had initially planned to leave a false trail on Rebel radar before Alexis swung toward Madagascar.

Bruno, Gunter, Jules, and Rudolf hurried past the guards to the narrow stairway down to the heliport, a pad just large enough to allow the Huey's blades to turn.

Alexis was the best chopper pilot in the service of New World armies. If anyone could make it away from Pretoria without being picked up on Rebel radar, it was Alexis.

The two Guardsmen followed them down to the aircraft. A side cargo door was open, ready for everyone to board. Alexis sat at the controls while Bruno climbed in to take the co-pilot's seat.

"How does it look?" Bruno asked as the others entered the Huey. He buckled his seat harness, waiting for Alexis to give him an answer.

"We will make it," Alexis replied, twisting the throttle, adjusting the

rotor pitch. "There have been a few flyovers, very high, probably recon planes getting a fix on our compound for their bombers. We won't be here by the time anything heavy shows up."

"Hold on a moment," Bruno said to Alexis. He slipped his Steyer pistol out of its holster and beckoned

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the two heliport guardsmen over to the side door of the chopper.

The two men walked up, both saluting sharply.

"Yes, General Field Marshal. Is there something else you want us to do?" the senior of the two asked, his eyebrows raised.

"Yes, son. I'm afraid you have one more sacrifice to make for your Fuhrer. You have to die to protect my secret."

As the men's faces registered bewilderment Bruno aimed the Steyer and shot them both in the face, blowing them backward to land sprawled awkwardly in death, the surprise still showing on their ruined faces.

Alexis turned a horrified glance on his leader. "Why did you do that?" he yelled over the noise of the Huey's engines.

"No one must know of my escape, or that I am still alive," Bruno yelled back. "It is imperative that I be given time to cement our relationship with the Chinese, without interference or being hounded by Raines's men searching the world over for me."

He holstered his Steyer and pointed out the front plexiglass windshield of the Huey. "Abandon the plan to fly toward Cape Town," Bruno said. "I fear we've run out of time to leave a false trail. Fly directly for the coast. Stay as low as you can. We have to take a few chances now."

Alexis nodded and yelled over his shoulder to the others in the Huey. "Lift off!"

The Huey roared, its powerful engines lifting it slowly out of the tight space enclosing the chopper pad. As the craft rose above ground level, a whirlwind of sand and dust scattered from the sides of the open-topped bunker.

At barely a hundred feet off the ground, Alexis swung the Huey toward the eastern coastline, flying so close

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to rooftops within the city of Pretoria that even Bruno felt a trace of concern.

To take his mind off the danger while flying so near the ground he glanced back to the cargo area, where ten locked iron boxes held his millions in newly-smelted gold bars. It would be more than enough, combined with capital from his new allies banding together in China, to

purchase more tanks and planes and choppers from the world's black markets, and the Chinese had promised him millions of soldiers to fight for his New World Order.

A new beginning lay before him, more full of power than ever, on another continent. Ben Raines had won the battle in Africa, but the war to control the globe had just begun. Bruno would be forced into hiding for a time in Madagascar, planning his move to China while he acquired more war materiel. But when he resurfaced, it would be as a far more formidable foe with a larger, better-equipped army.

He turned to Rudolf and pulled him close so the others wouldn't overhear. "Did you arrange the bodies as I ordered?"

"Yes, sir," Rudolf answered. "I dressed one in your spare uniform and put your dog tags on his neck. The other I put in one of my uniforms, with my dog tags on him. Then I poured gasoline on the bodies and ignited them."

Bruno nodded. "Good. Then with any luck Raines will think I committed suicide, or was killed by mutinous officers before they deserted. If he accepts our little charade at face value, as I suspect he will since none of the guards in the bunker have been left alive to tell him different, he will not be looking for us to surface somewhere else. That should make my ... rehabilitation with the Chinese that much easier."

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He relaxed back against his seatbelt and peered out the window at the scenery passing below.

The residential section of Pretoria passed underneath the ship in a blur as Alexis gave the Huey full throttle. Propwash bent small trees and bushes below them, blowing shingles off some of the roofs. The throbbing hammer of the Huey's turbine-driven blades filled the cockpit and cargo space, making it impossible to talk until Bruno put on a helmet with a headset connected to one worn by Alexis.

"Are you picking up any aircraft on radar?" Bruno asked as he inspected the scope himself.

"Nothing yet, General Field Marshal. We are still too low for their radar. What we have to watch for is an enemy plane or helicopter above us. If they spot us from the air, we could be shot down. This Huey is no match for an Apache gunship, and if they have rockets, we may have a problem. An Apache is much faster, and I'm sure you know we can't outrun a heat-seeking rocket equipped with a computer guidance system."

"How can we avoid them?" Bruno asked, seeing his escape plan in potentially grave danger.

"We will fly right against the coast, up to the Mozambique Channel. If we stay low on the beaches, their radar can't pick us up from an inland station." The pilot grinned. "At times we will be flying so close to the ground you'll be able to reach out and pick buttercups."

"Just don't make any mistakes," Bruno said. "Our lives, and the hope for a New World Order, are in your hands now."

Alexis frowned as they flew toward the distant skyline of a small coastal town on the Indian Ocean named Maputo, little more than a fishing village since the wars had begun destroying its local economy.

"I was told Colonel Walz has deserted us. I find it so

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hard to believe. He was a dedicated soldier, as far as I knew. It wouldn't be like him to abandon us."

"He may have been a traitor, Alexis. I have been given bits of information that tend to show he may have cooperated with Ben Raines and his Rebels."

"Colonel Walz?"

"Some men crack under pressure," Bruno said. "He cost us a great number of aircraft and human lives. He may have been, as you say, a dedicated soldier. However, he lacked the skills to win battles against the Tri-State's aircraft. And I have good reason to suspect he betrayed us, although I won't reveal my sources to you now."

Bruno caught Rudolf's eye and winked. "All in good time perhaps, but a far more immediate task is to reach our hidden compound in Madagascar. The fate of our cause rests with you, Alexis."

"I will not fail you," he promised, crossing a semi-arid part of the southern Transvaal with the Indian Ocean in sight, spread across the horizon.

Unable to bear looking at the ground as it passed seemingly just feet below the landing gear of the Huey, Bruno watched the clear skies above them, hoping they would not see any enemy aircraft. He let his mind roam ahead of them and their journey across the Mozambique Channel.

He closed his eyes and remembered a stretch of quiet, tropical rain forest on the east coast of Madagascar where a very old, stone-walled villa was hidden deep in the jungles-on a failed coffee plantation abandoned half a century ago by an Englishman who contracted malaria. The villa was a perfect spot to begin planning for the future of The New World Order. All he had to do was get there.

They flew across sleepy Maputo, attracting hundreds of stares from curious local fisherman and farmers. Rows

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of old wooden wharfs passed beneath the Huey, and then Alexis turned sharply north to hug the forested coastline, dropping down to less than a hundred feet above empty beaches and coral shoals, well out of sight from anyone, unless there happened to be a pilot of another aircraft above them.

Bruno checked his watch. They were hours away from the safety of

Madagascar, and in a powerful but heavily loaded, slow-flying Huey they would make easy targets for Rebel fighters or Apache gunships.

While it sounded impossible, what Bruno and his precious shipment of gold needed was to be able to hide in the sky in a giant green helicopter. If anyone could pull it off, it was Alexis.

The ocean far below was calm. As the helicopter and its valuable cargo got farther across the Mozambique Channel, Bruno finally allowed himself to relax.

"We'll make it now," he said.

Alexis was watching his radar screen, staring at it with a frown on his face.

"Some sort of aircraft is following us, General Field Marshal. It has been back there for several minutes. It's too small to be much more than a recon plane."

Bruno's gaze was suddenly glued to the scope. "I see it, a tiny blip on the screen."

"It isn't a jet or it would be closing on us, and it does not mark like a chopper. My guess is that it's some type of propeller-driven recon plane who picked us up when we left the coast."

"They may only be interested in our destination."

"Perhaps. If that is the case we can fool them once we reach land in Madagascar. I can land some place on the west coast, one of the islands. There will be no place

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for the airplane to land, and very soon it will run low on fuel. When this craft disappears to find fuel, we'll climb back up and fly across Madagascar in the dark of night without lights. Madagascar is a very large island. Once this plane loses us, it will never find us again."

"Good," Bruno said, although a voice inside his head warned it could be dangerous for Ben Raines to know he had headed in the direction of Madagascar. His charade with the burned bodies would all be for naught. Somehow, Raines found a way to pick up Bruno's trail no matter where on the planet he went.

He let his thoughts return to the matter of Rudolf Hessner and what should be done about him. Rudolf was now the only man left who knew about Bruno's Jewish mother, having overheard what Dorfmann said. But who better to send to Berlin to find the key to Dorfmann's bank box? Rudolf was very thorough. He would find the key and the old woman's sworn statement, no matter how long it took. And the beauty of the plan was that the idiot was slavishly loyal, to him and The New World Order, and thus could be trusted to do exactly as he was told.

There will be plenty of time to execute him after he finds the paper, Bruno thought. With all his gold to protect he needed someone he could trust while they were in Madagascar. It did seem odd that he would

consider killing a man he trusted so completely. However, it was much too dangerous to leave anyone alive who knew the truth about his mother.

"The blip is gone," Alexis said, ending Bruno's ruminations regarding Rudolf. "The airplane has turned back. It was probably low on fuel."

"Excellent," Bruno remarked, settling back in his seat with a cold smile on his face. "Ben Raines can't be sure Madagascar was our final destination, if the recon plane

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reports our direction to him. They may believe Madagascar was only a fuel stop for us, once they discover some of us have escaped from Pretoria ahead of their assault. Hell, Raines won't even be sure who was on board, and if my trick with the bodies works, he may believe we were only some deserting generals making their escape. Once we land at the villa we'll cover this ship with netting and move plants into the clearing Sergei made for our landing pad. No one will spot the chopper or the clearing from the air."

"I hope the clearing is large enough," Alexis said. "This big bird needs plenty of space. We could lose the tip of a blade coming in."

"I gave Sergei the measurements," Bruno replied. "I assure you everything will be in order when we get there."

He hoped every detail had been attended to, and that there had been no mistake with the landing area measurements. He did know that if Sergei had made an error it would be the last the man ever made. The penalty would be swift and violent death.

"It will be dark. When we get close I will radio to have the landing lights turned on."

"Sergei confirmed all preparations had been made. The marker lights are in place, and he awaits our coded signal to turn them on."

"Good," Alexis grunted, returning his attention to the Huey's controls.

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Ben Raines, his CAR still smoking, stood in the middle of a street with his team, looking ahead over numerous bodies of the last of the troops known as Bottger's Praetorian Guard.

Ben shook his head, turning as Ike McGowen walked up, his M16 dangling from a strap around his shoulders.

"Ike, I can't believe the fanaticism of Bottger's people. We had them boxed in, completely surrounded, and offered to let them surrender."

Ike smiled bitterly. "They'd have none of it, I suppose?"

"No, they fought and died to the last man. And for what? To protect some raving lunatic with megaloma-niacal dreams of world conquest."

He shook his head again. "What a waste--so many good soldiers giving

their lives for that monster."

"Have you found his headquarters yet?" Ike asked, looking around the small city square where the Praetorian Guard had made their last stand.

Ben pointed straight ahead, to an opening in a small, square one story building made of reinforced concrete. "I suspect it's in there. That's the place the soldiers were guarding so faithfully."

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Ike said, "Then let's go flush the bastard rat out of his hole."

Ben readied his CAR and nodded to his team to proceed.

Cooper and Jersey were the first to enter, dashing in and jumping immediately to the side with their backs to the wall, ready for more fanatical guards to open fire.

There was only silence, and the stench of burned flesh and gasoline permeating the dank air of the underground bunker.

Ben stood at the head of the stairs leading down beneath the ground.

"I have a bad feeling about this, Ike. You don't suppose he pulled a Hitler and committed suicide, do you?"

Ike shook his head. "Not a chance. The man was too egotistical to ever kill himself. If he's dead, trust me, it will have been by someone else's hand, not his own."

As Ben started down the stairs Jersey caught Cooper's eye, and they jumped in front of him and led the way into the underground lair.

On the way they found at least ten men, all with machine gun bullet riddled bodies, lying where they had fallen, most shot in the back while at their stations.

"Jesus," Jersey whispered. "Someone's taken out the leader's staff, and evidently they weren't expecting it when it came."

Finally, as they approached the main room of the bunker, the stench of burning flesh became so strong they could barely stand it.

They entered the room, noticing the large, scorched Nazi flag on a far wall and the massive oak desk with top secret stamped files, most burned beyond reading, lying on the desktop.

"This must be the war room, Bottger's main resi-

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dence," Ike said, wrinkling his nose at the all pervasive odor.

"Yeah," Ben answered, and pointed to a far corner. "And look over there."

They walked over and stood over the badly burned bodies, noticing the multiple gunshot wounds on the chests of the victims. The uniforms were burned to ash, with only the metal epaulets and medals remaining, partially melted.

Cooper squatted next to the bodies and pulled out his knife and used the point to pull the dog tags from where they had melted into the flesh of the corpses.

He handed them over his shoulder to Ben.

"One reads Bruno Bottger, and the other says Rudolf Hessner," Ben read. "Our Intelligence says Hessner was Bruno's right hand man, his aide-de-camp and personal bodyguard."

Jersey snickered. "Doesn't look like he was very good at his job."

Ben pursed his lips. "You were right, Ike. These men didn't kill themselves. Someone took them out with a machine gun of some sort, then poured gasoline over the bodies before they left."

Ike nodded. "Looks like Bottger was killed by some people high up on his staff, who then must have deserted and run for their lives when they knew the end was near."

Corrie was standing in the corner, talking on her handset. When she finished, she said, "Boss, I just got a report of a Huey flying from the city, toward the east coast and Mozambique. The recon plane had to turn back when it ran out of fuel and couldn't determine the final destination of the chopper, whether it turned back into the interior or headed out into the Mozambique Channel, toward Madagascar."

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Ike smiled. "That sounds like our culprits, Ben. Probably some generals who wanted to make an escape when Bottger wouldn't listen to reason and surrender when all hope was lost."

He turned and started to walk toward the door.

"Hold on," Ben said, a frown on his face.

"What is it, Ben?"

"I've got a funny feeling, Ike. This is just too pat. I can't believe anyone as paranoid as Bottger would let himself be caught unaware by some generals—who would never be allowed in his presence carrying machine guns in the first place."

He shook his head. "No. I think this is an elaborate stage set, organized by Bottger so we would think he was dead and wouldn't pursue the escapees."

"You mean you don't think these bodies are Bottger and Hessner?"

Ben's lips curled up in a sneer. "I very much doubt it, Ike. I think Bottger and Hessner were the occupants of that chopper, and furthermore I don't think we've seen the last of our little Nazi."

Ike spread his hands. "But Ben, what can he do even if he is alive and

well, as you say? Hell, his army has been destroyed and he's running like a dog with his tail between his legs, with only the clothes on his back. How much of a danger can he be?"

Ben stared down at the corpses, still smoking as they lay on the concrete floor.

"I don't have all the answers yet, Ike. But you mark my words. Bottger is not a man to take defeat lightly. He'll be back, and when he reappears I'm gonna be there to knock him down again."

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Bruno slit his eyes and groaned as he came awake. Raw pain prevented him from opening his eyelids fully. A black man wearing a white smock looked down at him, applying some sort of white ointment to his burns with a piece of cotton.

"Ah, you are awake again, Mr. Bottger." The man had a British accent, and the lilting tones of someone to whom the British language was not native.

For a moment Bruno couldn't remember anything clearly—an explosion, a fire, his uniform and face consumed by flames while men were screaming . . . while he was screaming, rolling in the damp grass following the crash when a rotor tip caught a tree limb as they were landing.

He groaned again as the memory of the Huey turning over on its side and the roar of exploding fuel brought him fully awake. He vaguely remembered trying to put out the fire consuming him and his clothing, knowing in his heart he was surely dying, being burned alive, rolling across the ground to try to smother the flames.

And later, in a room somewhere with this same black man, a doctor Sergei had summoned from one of the villages to help survivors of the fiery crash.

"Tell . . . me . . . again what happened," Bruno

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croaked, his voice not his own. He felt woozy from the morphine, yet the pain was still unbearable, intruding on his thoughts, causing him to sweat, which in turn increased the pain even more in a terrible cycle of agony.

"Your helicopter crashed while trying to land. Only three of you survived. You are covered with second and third degree burns, Mr. Bottger. However, it appears you will live. There will be a great deal of scar tissue. I'm giving you everything I have for the pain you must be suffering, although I'm sure it is not enough."

The doctor hesitated, his forehead wrinkling in concern for his patient.

"I am not fully trained in burn treatment when the burns are so extensive, I fear, and there is none of the expensive equipment available here locally to repair tissue damage this severe."

Bruno tried to move his hand to grab the doctor's arm, but almost

screamed at the pain the movement caused.

"Who are you?" he managed to croak through a throat that felt as if he had gargled ground glass.

"My name is Mati Ghanna. I was educated in India, and our medical training was sorely lacking in many areas. There are but a few doctors in Madagascar, and I doubt any of them has the knowledge to do more for you. I hope you understand. Madagascar is still a primitive country in many respects, and we are lacking in much of what modern medicine can provide. I can only do the best I can for you."

"Who else survived?" Bruno asked, trying to speak while moving his charred lips as little as possible.

"A man named Jules. The other is Rudolf."

"I must speak ... to Rudolf immediately. Or to Ser-gei."

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"I'm afraid Rudolf is still unconscious, as is Jules. Sergei is here, standing outside the door."

"Send . . . him in."

"As you wish, Mr. Bottger."

A door opening, then closing. Sergei's face appeared above Bruno's bed, a wrinkled face below a mane of curly blond hair.

"The gold," Bruno whispered. "What. . . happened to the gold in the chopper?"

"It is safe, General Field Marshal. Some of the bars melted down. We stored it in the basement room with the other gold and silver."

"And only Jules and Rudolf survived?"

"Yes, and they are as badly burned as you are. Jules may not live, the doctor said. The chances are fifty-fifty for Rudolf. The burns are quite bad for all three of you."

"How badly . . . am I disfigured? Tell me the truth."

Sergei's face showed concern. "You will require extensive reconstructive surgery. Your face is covered with burns . . . the skin was melted almost down to the bone. The doctor says there will be extensive scar tissue."

"Give me ... a mirror."

"I would advise against it, General Field Marshal. It is not something you would care to look at now. It would be best to wait until time has healed some of the worst wounds."

"Get me a mirror!"

Moments later, he gasped, then screamed in horror at what he saw peering

back at him from the mirror.

He lay in bed in the darkened room. Three weeks had passed since the crash. A small mirror rested on a night table beside the bed. His brain awash in the glow

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of morphine, he tried to think logically despite the constant throbbing of pain from head to toe. And to remember bits and pieces of things Sergei told him over the past few days, when he was conscious enough to listen to and understand what was said.

Ben Raines and his Rebels had taken Pretoria, killing or capturing all New World soldiers. All of Africa was under the Rebels' control, with new governments being established in most African countries, according to short wave radio broadcasts.

Once again, Bruno's attempt at world domination had been smashed by Raines.

Jules was dead. Rudolf Hessner was recovering. The site of the helicopter crash had been covered with jungle plants, and as far as Sergei knew no one was looking for them here.

Sergei, on Bruno's orders, had executed the doctor and taken his supply of morphine and other painkillers. Bruno's recovery would be slow, and it could be months before his pain lessened to any extent.

Since there were no rehabilitative facilities in this country, he would be forced to do it on his own—the constant exercises to prevent contractures of his joints and skin, the debriding of dead and injured skin inch by inch, with only the most minute amounts of morphine to dull the terrible agony having his skin pulled off little by little caused.

They were hidden away in the villa. He was alive, but badly scarred and partially blind. His blue contact lenses had melted during the fire. The gold and silver was secure in a vault in the villa's basement. For now, he was safe here. And he still had a fortune in precious metals.

Very slowly he reached for the mirror and held it up to his face. What he saw resembled a monster, a disfigured creature from someone's worst nightmares. His

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face and skull were masses of angry red granulation tissue and newly forming white scar tissue. He had no hair, no eyebrows or eyelashes, and a twisted piece of skin for a nose. His ears had been burned almost completely off, leaving only ridges of tissue surrounding holes in the side of his head. His lips were crusted flaps of burnt skin, and part of his tongue was missing. When he spoke his words were slurred, and his food had no taste at all.

To make matters worse, his genitals were mutilated beyond repair. He could urinate, though at the cost of incredible pain, but would forever be without sexual function. He would never father a child to carry on

his dynasty.

"I'll get you, Raines," he said. "The next time I swear I will destroy you. You haven't heard the last of me...."

He tossed the mirror on the floor, hearing it shatter below the bed. Staring at the ceiling, he vowed to make Raines pay for what had happened to him.

For the present he was in hiding, a distorted caricature of a man, a hairless mass of scars and twisted flesh that would be frightening to anyone who saw him now. Surgery to repair his face would require years of grafting, and a specialist who knew what he was doing.

He could afford the best doctors in the world. Price would be no object. And as his physical appearance changed, so would his circumstances. He would contact Wu Sing in China very soon, and begin forming his plans for an alliance with Wu Sing's secret warrior society.

They could begin buying weapons, hiding them in parts of Mongolia, awaiting the day to launch a new attack on SUSA and the Tri-States.

"I'll be back, Raines!" he promised, his voice like the roar of a wounded lion.

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Ben and Ike were conferring in Ben's new CP in an abandoned building in Pretoria.

"Do you really think it's that serious?" Ike asked.

"Yeah, Ike. Cecil Jefferys bumped me last night. He says he has definite intelligence that the NUS and EUS have cemented their alliance, are now calling themselves the NEUS, and plan to try to attack The SUSA before we can get our troops back to back him up."

"Damn! What are we gonna do?"

"I'm going to pack up the 501 and as much materiel as our C130s can handle and rush back to the States. It may not be enough to win if they start a war, but I can damn sure slow them down until you and the rest of the Rebel Army can get back by ship."

"I don't like this, Ben. Why can't I go with you?"

"Because, old friend, I need someone with your exceptional organizational skills to remain here to make sure the troops and supplies get moving as fast as possible. I'm gonna need you there as soon as you can possibly make it."

Ike narrowed his eyes. "There are some corners I can cut to speed up the process. I was hoping to give the men a short rest, but I guess that's out of the question now."

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Ben nodded. "They can rest on the voyage back to America. That, along

with the time it takes you to get the ships loaded, should give them at least a couple of weeks."

"How about air support?"

"Captain Holland has assured me he can get the PUFFs and fighters over there in less than a week, using air-to-air refueling and some of the island bases still friendly to us. Unfortunately the choppers can't be refueled in the air, and will have to be carried over by ships."

"Hey, we didn't bring all the Apaches and Hueys with us to Africa. There are still some older models, and some that needed parts, in the States."

Ben snapped his fingers. "That's right. I had forgotten that."

He turned to Corrie. "Corrie, get on the horn to the base in Corpus Christi where they repair our helicopters and tell them to get cookin'. We're gonna need them ready to fly within forty-eight hours."

"Yes, Boss. I'm on it," she said, as she reached for her radio microphone.

"And tell them to double the security on the base, just in case those assholes in NEUS think of it, too."

"What are you going to do about Bottger, Ben?" Ike asked.

"Nothing for now. I've got to get home to help Cece out first. Everything else has to take a backseat."

He grinned. "Besides, as you said, without any money or troops, what harm can he cause?"

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Bruno lay in bed while Sergei adjusted the dials on a radio sitting on a nightstand beside the bed. Sergei looked up as he found a garbled speaker's voice on the dial. Radio transmissions in Madagascar were subject to weather conditions and the strength of the signal, and thus were frequently plagued by static and overriding of other signals.

"They said an announcement was forthcoming from a station in Johannesburg," Sergei said. "It is a special broadcast to be given by General Ben Raines. It's being relayed all over the continent of Africa. The speech will be translated into all Bantu dialects as well as English."

Bruno's fists closed despite the pain in his badly burned hands. He stared blankly at the ceiling while the static crackled from the radio's speaker.

"We have a message from General Raines," someone announced.

A deeper voice began speaking.

"As advocates and supporters of the Tri-States philosophy, we believe that freedom, like respect, is earned, and must be constantly nurtured and protected from those who would take it away. We believe in the right of every law-abiding citizen to protect his or her life, liberty, and personal property by any means at hand, without fear of

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arrest, criminal prosecution, or lawsuit. The right to bear arms is essential to maintaining true personal freedom.

"We believe that politicians, theorists, and socialists are the greatest threat to freedom-loving peoples, and that their misguided efforts have caused grave injustices in the fields of criminal law, education, and public welfare.

"Therefore, with respect to criminal law, an effective criminal justice system should be guided by these basic tenets:

"Our courts must stop pampering criminals.

"The punishment must fit the crime.

"Justice must be fair but also swift and, if necessary, harsh.

"There is no perfect society. Only a fair one.

"Therefore, with respect to education, education is the key to solving problems in any society, and the lack of it is the root cause of a country's decline.

"An effective system of education must stress hard discipline along with the arts, sciences, fine music, and basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. It must teach fairness and respect. It must teach morals, the dignity of labor, and the value of the family.

"Therefore, with respect to welfare. Welfare-we prefer workfare-is reserved only for the elderly, infirm, and those who need a temporary helping hand.

"And the welfare system must also instill the concept of honest work for honest pay. Instill the concept that everyone who can work must work, be forced to work if necessary.

"It must instill the concept that there is no free lunch, and that being productive citizens in a free society is the only honorable path to take.

"And that racial prejudice and bigotry are intolerable in a free and vital society. No one is worthy of respect

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simply because of the color of his or her skin. Respect is earned by actions and by deeds, not by birthright.

"There are only two types of people on earth . . . decent and indecent. Those who are decent will flourish, and those who are not will perish. No laws laid down by a body of government can make one person like another.

"A free and just society must be protected at all costs, even if it means shedding the blood of its citizens. The willingness of citizens to lay down their lives for the belief in freedom is a cornerstone of true democracy. Without that willingness the structure of society will surely

crumble and fall into the ashes of history.

"Therefore, along with the inalienable right to bear arms and the inalienable right to personal protection, a strong, skilled, and well-equipped military is essential to maintaining a free society.

"A strong military eliminates the need for allies, allowing the society to focus on the needs of its citizens.

"The business of citizens is not the business of the world unless the rights of citizens are infringed upon by outside forces.

"The duty of those who live in a free society is clear, and personal freedom is not negotiable.

"In conclusion, we who support the Tri-State philosophy and live by its code and its laws pledge to defend it by any means necessary. We pledge to work fairly and justly to rebuild and maintain a society in which all citizens are truly free, and are able to pursue productive lives without fear and without intervention."

A pause. Bruno turned his face to the radio.

"This is how we live. We hope the continent of Africa will be governed that way someday." Raines continued. "For too long the people of Africa have been dominated by a man calling himself Bruno Bottger, and a political system he has named The New World Order. As of this

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date, The New World Order no longer exists on the African continent. This period of Nazi-style government has come to an end. Elections will be held, and the people of Africa will be free to govern themselves. Bruno Bottger and his army of Nazis have been defeated. \bu have nothing to fear from him now. He has either been killed or driven from Africa, and his soldiers are prisoners of the Rebels."

Bruno raised his head off the pillow, his face a mask of hatred and pain. "To hell with you, Raines. I'll be back, and I'll be stronger than ever!"

A final message came from the radio. "Men like Bottger are the root of all evil on this planet. And we pledge, if he is still alive and hiding like the true coward he is, to hunt him down like the jackal he is, as well as all others who oppose the freedom of mankind. Africa is free, and we intend to make sure it remains that way forever."

Bruno slumped back on the mattress, his teeth gritted behind fire-scarred lips. Though he was concerned that Raines might not believe his staged death, he felt sure no one knew where he was at the present.

"Don't be too sure of yourself, Raines!" he hissed.

Sergei switched off the radio. Bruno closed his scabbed-over eyelids, planning for the future. Raines felt sure his victory was complete, Bruno thought. / will prove him wrong.

"The next time we meet on the battlefield, Raines, you will face total

annihilation. Enjoy your brief moment of triumph, you arrogant bastard. When I arise from these ashes it will be with one purpose ... to destroy you. And I will!"