

TALES OF THE RANCH – SEEING JAHANNAM

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Thank you for taking the time to read it. Enjoy

PROLOGUE

"Hell is empty and all the devils are here." William Shakespeare

Inside the Occupied Slovakian Republic

His strength wouldn't carry him very far at a time, but still he ran. The underbrush caught at his already torn pants, ripping new holes in the thin fabric and tearing at his diseased skin. But at that point, he didn't care. He had tasted freedom for the first time in years and it washed over him like a wave at high tide. But even the increased adrenaline didn't help him move much further than a hundred meters before being so out of breath he was forced to stop and catch his breath by leaning on a large tree. But he knew he needed to keep moving and walked forward at even a slower pace. He was barely a shell of the man who started out his journey some years before. Originally overweight and out of shape, the only reason he had lasted this long was the fat he carried around for many years. And even then, it only helped him somewhat.

A noise to his rear spurred him on. Voices carried through the forest; searching him out and ringing in his ears as loudly as a gunshot. At least they didn't have dogs looking for him, but he thought he heard one of them as well. He took off at a jog once again and continued running west and towards supposed safety. If he remembered correctly, there was a town nearby where he might seek shelter and relative safety. But safety meant many things to many people.

A root from a tree tripped him up and he fell face first into the mud. The cold mess stuck to his tattered clothing and his face, but he thought it might help conceal him. However, the yellow jumpsuit he had on was a clear indication to his location and even at night would show up very well against the dark background of Eastern Europe. He picked himself up once again and went forward, ever forward.

The dog was heard louder now. An attack dog. The same dogs the guards used to sic on the prisoners of the camp and cheered them on as they tore a man to shreds. Sometimes as an example to the other prisoners even remotely thinking of defiance, sometimes just because they could. The dog was heard barking and straining at the leash as he caught the scent of the man and continued to lead the search party towards him. But he would not give up that easily. He looked around for a place to hide, but knew the dog would find him easily no matter where he was hiding. So he continued to run as fast as he could.

But the guards were in far better shape than he was. Daily physical training kept them in decent shape and they weren't that far from the camp anyway. The dog caught a stronger scent and moved the pursuers in a different direction towards the path of the man. They stopped very briefly at the spot where he had fallen in the mud before continuing on the "path" the dog could smell rather than see. They ran a little faster knowing victory was within their grasp.

A fleeting glimpse of the yellow suit was seen and a shot rang out along with an order in Arabic. These guards had been brought in special from the former nation of Syria to run the camp and their regional dialect showed in their speech. The shot didn't hit the man and he ran slightly faster. Considering slipping the dog off the leash, the handler decided not to and the guards ran a little faster to catch their prey. It wasn't as much of a chase as it was just catching up to the man. Eventually they got close enough to have a decent shot and engage the running form.

The man was hit once in the shoulder by the AK fire from the guard and fell to the ground once again. He knew he was at his end. He could run no further. But he also knew he could at least stand one final time. There was a remote possibility of them sending the dog to end their work and save another bullet, but even then, he would die on his feet. He stood and watched as the guards came closer. But even at the end he would resist. He was not going back to the camp, no matter what. He would resist and force them to kill him. *Better to die out here than to go back to the camp where I will eventually die anyway, just slower*, he thought as he watched the four approach him with a look of hatred on his face.

"Where did you think you were going?" asked the leader in Arabic. The man didn't understand it, even after being around the language for three years. "Did you think you would escape?"

The second man walked up and smashed at his ribs with the plastic folding stock of the AKM. In his weakened state, the man crumpled to the ground. But he knew they would only take him back to the camp to die slowly. He strained to stand once again and was rewarded with another hit to the head. It almost knocked him out entirely, but he managed to remain conscious throughout the affair. He was feeling the strength slip away from his body. His mind became cloudy, but a strange primordial thought rang through his head. A thought of boldness. A thought of freedom. A final thought of defiance to his captors. A final thought to stand up and face them like a man. He attempted to stand only to fall over to the laughing of the guards. But strength returned to his limbs for one final time. He managed to grab hold of a nearby branch and pull himself up. The thorns picked at his skin and blood flowed freely from his palm. He wobbled unsteadily, but he was standing once again.

He was feeling weak, but strong and alive at the same moment. Feelings of his impending doom shot through his body. But he also knew that with increased resistance, his death would come quicker. He shot the guards a look of anger and direct hostility in hopes they would end his life sooner rather than later. Some would call his actions suicidal, but he knew it was something to be discussed with God later on and he was sure He would understand.

"I may die here, but I will die free!" said the man very proudly in Slovakian as he straightened up. Strangely the pain from the gunshot wound didn't hurt any more. Whether from shock or just from knowing his death was impending he wasn't sure. But there was no pain in standing tall. But the guards had other plans.

The leader of the group had enough of the situation and walked forward while pulling his Glock pistol from the holster flapping at his waist. He strode up to the weakened man, cocky and sure of himself and pointed the muzzle right between his eyes. The former prisoner's expression never changed from what he was still feeling even as his body was beginning to die.

“Infidel pig,” said the leader as he pulled the trigger to the rear and the striker engaged. He wasn’t close enough to be covered by the blood spatter coming from the man, but was close enough to see the wreckage of the bullet immediately after. “Let’s go. It is cold out here and we have wasted enough time on this garbage.”

“What of him?” asked a second guard and motioned with his head towards the now dead prisoner.

“Leave him to rot,” said the leader as he paused for a moment. Typically they brought the prisoners back and left them in the middle of the camp for several days as an example to the others about resistance and escape. But this time, they decided not to. There would be little need to in two weeks as the camp population would no longer need that kind of encouragement. They had orders in hand and only needed another supply shipment before taking care of that problem and moving on to another camp.

As they turned to leave, the dog turned back and strained at the leash. He was intent on something in the general area of the man and the handler pulled at his chain. The dog was still intently looking at the area where the man was lying and around the woods. It sensed something in the local area, but its brain could not determine what it was. The handler looked at the area and could only see the dead man lying in the moonlight, his night vision ruined by the flashlights they had on earlier. He snapped at the chain and pulled the dog away from the area.

The dog looked once more before taking his position beside the handler and going back to camp. He stopped once and looked back, much to the annoyance of the handler. “Let’s go crazy dog,” he said and tugged at the leash once again.

What he didn’t know, but the dog sensed, was danger lurked in the woods nearby. As the guard team departed, two sets of eyes watched intently from a nearby clump of trees. It had tried to “tell” the handler by changing its normal behavior, but he was new and didn’t know what the dog was alerting him to yet. The eyes continued to watch with rage as the four Islamic Union troops walked away, wishing for the world they could have stopped the madness to their front.

Soon, very soon, they would have their time.

CHAPTER 1

Date/Time: 11 March/1709

Location: 30,000 feet over Hungary

The two F-15I Active-Eagle fighters continued to bore holes through the sky as the pilots waited for a mission from the orbiting AWACS aircraft, safely behind the front trace of the battlefield. But the pilots didn't want to continue burning fuel waiting for something to happen. They wanted some action. Being young and brash, they still didn't know the horrors of war up close. They saw it from the computer monitors in the cockpit and the heads up display graphics as opposed to seeing your enemy's face when that primal instinct of survival kicks in and someone goes home in a flag draped coffin. Captain Wyatt "Hank" Williams was in the "driver's seat" of the lead aircraft and radioed the controller once again.

"Oreo, this is Kansas Flight, arriving at Point Floss and continuing to orbit. You have any traffic for this unit?" he said very bored into the radio. He was sitting at three "kills" with the green stars painted under his name under the canopy and he wanted to fill it to at least five to get that coveted ace title.

"Negative Kansas, no new taskings. Continue to orbit," said the unknown controller.

"You might think they would send up something today," observed his wingman, Second Lieutenant Mike "Dazzle" Coffee. By "they" he meant the IU.

"They've been quiet for a while. Maybe they are planning something big," said Williams.

"Whatever, I'm ready to rumble as it is," said Coffee.

Williams chuckled at his young and eager wingman. While not an older man by any means, he had been in theater almost a year and was preparing to get promoted to Major soon. As soon as the brass got off their backs and signed the appropriate paperwork that is. And so they continued to fly in the long figure eight pattern, waiting for the chance to engage any aircraft that came their way.

"I don't think we're going to make it back to England," said the co-pilot of the B-52I bomber. It had been on a low level bomb run (actually it had been launching cruise missiles for deep strikes into the Balkans and Turkey) when it was hit and damaged by anti-aircraft fire from a previously unidentified post on the ground. The fire had been effective enough to rip into their fuel stores and weapons bay and the aircraft was still flying along on hopes and wishes. They had gained altitude soon after being hit and the pilots knew they were a sitting duck for any kind of aircraft

the IU would send up. They could make it to an alternate German landing site, but their primary base in England was out of the question.

“Let’s see what is available,” said the pilot as he changed the frequency to the AWACS control net.

“Oreo Command, Oreo Command, this is Basher 3 on emergency channel Bravo,” said the pilot.

“Basher 3, this is Oreo, state nature of emergency and send data,” said the controller.

The pilot sent the encrypted data transmission with his aircraft stats, course and other critical information before replying. “Oreo, this is Basher 3, be advised, we were on missile run near Arad, Romania when we were struck by anti-aircraft fire. We have climbed to 20,000 feet and declared inflight emergency. Limited fuel and primary systems out. Request emergency divert to nearest landing field, tanker support and fighter escort. How copy?”

“I copy Basher 3, stand by,” said the controller as they reviewed the data. She put the information into the computer and saw the aircraft should stay in the air long enough for an emergency landing in southern Germany. While there were several other bases nearby, they were not as secure and still under threat from IU ground and air forces. And the B-52 type aircraft were to be preserved if at all possible. “Basher 3, stand by for incoming packet.”

The B-52 pilot saw an incoming packet of information and fed it into his computer. He saw his projected course change and saw it was within the limits of the fuel remaining. Barely, but within the limits. “Oreo, I copy landing at Landsberg Air Base. Diverting from flight path at this time. Also repeat request for fighter escort.”

“Copy, standby,” said the controller as they looked at the nearest fighter cover available. She switched frequencies and called up the nearest flight. “Kansas Flight, Oreo. Be advised, I have new tasking for you.”

“Oreo, Kansas Flight, go ahead,” said Williams.

“Roger, switch freqs to Channel Bravo 5 and come in contact with Basher-3. Be advised, it is a B-52 type aircraft hit by ground fire that needs escorting to Landsberg Air Base. Divert to following location and form up for escort,” she said after transmitting the data to the fighters.

Williams looked as the navigation screen changed and gave a heading and altitude adjustments for him to form up with the wounded bomber. While it wasn’t an engagement with enemy fighters, it was certainly better than continuing to complete endless figure eight tracks in the sky. “Kansas Flight copies, diverting from established patrol route.”

“We heading somewhere else boss?” asked Coffee.

“Yeah, we get to play nursemaid to a bomber that got hit,” said Williams. “Switch to Bravo 5.”

“Copy, Bravo 5 and divert from path,” said Coffee as he switched the radio over to the emergency frequency.

“Basher 3, Basher 3, this is Kansas Flight on emergency channel Bravo 5,” said Williams.

“Kansas Flight, this is Basher 3, go ahead,” said the pilot of the B-52.

“Roger, we have been tasked to escort you to alternate landing site and are enroute to your location. Be advised, ETA nine minutes,” said Williams.

“I copy nine minutes. Switching to channel Charlie 7 to clear emergency bands,” said the B-52 pilot.

Williams and Coffee once again switched their radios to the frequency where they could coordinate efforts without tying up the emergency channel. The fighters pushed up their speed slightly to make it to the bomber in enough time to make a difference. “Basher 3, ETA four minutes, we have you on radar.”

“Roger, four minutes,” said the B-52 pilot.

Williams could see the aircraft on the internal radar set, but had yet to notice it visually. The newer B-52 models had some stealth enhancements to their design, but still presented a rather large target on radar when compared to the B-2 and B-1 models. Their overtake speed would be a problem in the next minute and Williams backed off on his throttle slightly. He could see the bare outline of an aircraft in the distance as a trail of black smoke marked its progress across the sky. As they got closer, the smoke grew darker and the bomber had considerable damage.

“Dazzle, pull back on your speed and go to hi-cap. Basher 3, I’m going to give you a look over,” said Williams.

“Copy that,” said Basher 3.

Williams pulled his fighter up and over the bomber making an external check of the aircraft to determine if it was even possible to land.

“Basher 3, be advised, you have serious damage to the bottom near the bomb bay. Landing gear area seems to be okay. Two engines are trailing smoke and your rear rocket launcher is bent. I wouldn’t attempt to fire anything from there,” said Williams.

“I copy last, Kansas Lead. We are on internal oxygen and two engines out. But we are hanging on,” said the pilot.

“We’ll get you to safety,” said Williams as he took up a position to the rear with his wingman. Oreo continued to call in contacts, but nothing moved towards them at the moment and other flights were dispatched to the calls. It was boring work playing nursemaid to the wounded bomber, but they both knew it was important work.

“Turn to heading 310 for intercept. Be advised, two fighters in escort,” said the ground station to the flight of four IU Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft currently “in the weeds” preparing to attack the bomber. The newer models had radar absorbing skins which made them extremely hard to detect until it was far too late to react.

“We copy, preparing to climb,” said the lead pilot. “Wolf 3 and 4, take the fighter on the left. Wolf 2, you and I will take the one on the right.”

He received acknowledgements from the other three aircraft and prepared to climb as soon as they came into range of the radar guided missiles. The bomber could be dealt with at their leisure, but the fighters were a different matter. They could spoil your day if you were not careful and the FNC fighters that were this far out were the more advanced designs. But his Typhoon was a match for anything the FNC could throw at it and only the best pilots qualified for the program.

“Wolf flight, climb now!” ordered the Major as he pulled back on the control stick and turned on his radar. Three targets were immediately illuminated by the on board systems and he let two missiles fly at the fighter. He could see six more smoke trails fly past him as the other fighters also fired.

“Dazzle! Break left now!” yelled Williams as his radar warning receiver screamed at him about the inbound missiles. “Basher, dump chaff and dive!”

He yanked on the stick while hitting the chaff and flares button, leaving behind a large cloud of the radar reflecting material for the missiles to home in on. He saw a large cloud appear behind the bomber as well and hoped it would be enough for them to escape. The G forces applied against his body as he grunted to keep the blood flowing to his brain as he yanked the fighter around the sky and towards the threat. He saw three of the missiles going after the chaff and the fourth still coming towards him. He yanked the controls once again and applied the afterburner to jink away from the missile and hit the chaff button once again. The last missile veered off course and headed for the cloud and exploded as the proximity fuse detonated.

“Oreo! We are under attack! I need vectors!” demanded Williams.

“Kansas Lead, be advised, they just popped up on the screen. Four Typhoon types coming from your six o’clock and climbing. Basher 3, descend and hit the gas! Kansas Lead, be advised, negative contact with Kansas 2,” said the controller on the frequency and as surprised as the pilot. She could hear her counterparts vectoring in additional fighters to the location. “We have

two additional flights coming to your location. ETA seven mike on four Swiss Hornets and nine mike on four NESA Tigersharks.”

“I won’t be alive seven minutes from now!” yelled Williams as he looked around and saw the plume of black smoke where his wingman should have been. Three of the four missile trails led right into the cloud. He looked back around and found four targets in his Heads Up Display. Luckily he was armed with the latest variant of the AIM-120 missiles which required little time to lock onto the targets. He fired two missiles at the right targets and dove towards the ground to avoid a shooting solution from the remaining two. Going nose to nose with four fighters might not have been the smartest thing he could have done, but his main job now was staying alive long enough for the bomber to escape and worrying about his own hide. If he could keep them occupied long enough, the remaining fighters just might get here in time.

He watched as a fireball erupted as one of his missiles hit one of the Typhoons. However, the second one missed and continued on, striking the ground in an explosion. He made the pass towards them with all four aircraft firing their cannon at each other. However, the 27mm cannon on the Typhoons firing at a slower rate than M61A1 Vulcan cannon on the F-15. But Williams was only attempting to break up the formation of the fighters rather than actually down one. He did score a hit on one of the aircraft as he saw the tracers hit the aircraft as they passed each other.

He yanked back on the stick again, now having the speed and control factors over the Typhoons. They were all turning back towards him in an attempt to bring the front of their aircraft online and fire more missiles. But he got into position first on one of the enemy fighters and fired an AIM-9Y missile at the retreating fighter. The missile roared off the pylon of the right wing and tracked in as it should on the Typhoon. Williams saw flares being deployed from underneath the aircraft, but the missile ignored them and went straight for the afterburner plume from the two engines. It exploded and showered its target with the explosive rod making up the warhead of the missile. Williams saw the aircraft was in trouble as fires were burning in the engine compartment and the ejection seat fired away from the craft.

“Oreo, two down! I really could use some help up here!” exclaimed Williams as he brought his fighter back around to pick up speed once again. The remaining two were attempting to position themselves behind him, but his sudden Split S maneuver ruined that chance and set him up in firing position once again. But the inbound IR and radar seeking missiles ruined the chance of him making a shot until he dealt with that problem. Again he popped flares and chaff and pointed his nose at the missiles to jink away at the last possible second. He watched as one of the missiles went for his flares, but the other kept coming. He yanked on the stick and hit the afterburner just as the missile came into view. He barely escaped the warhead’s destructive power, but still caught some of the flak as the alarms started blaring at him.

He rolled level and saw he was hit in the right wing. While he was trailing fuel, he could still make it to an emergency divert site. And his EPU was out, but the primary systems were still online and working. The radar warning receiver stopped working as well. The missiles on his right side still showed their full capability and he decided to press the fight.

“Oreo, this is Vampire Flight of four Swiss F/A-18 aircraft. We will be in AIM-125 firing range in two minutes. Have Kansas and Basher turn on their IFF,” said the accented voice over the radio.

“Kansas Lead, Basher 3, ensure your IFF is operating,” said the controller.

“Oreo, this is Basher 3, be advised, IFF not operating correctly,” said the bomber pilot.

“I copy. Kansas, ensure your box is working,” said the controller.

“Roger, it’s on,” grunted Williams as he yanked back once again and another Typhoon came into view. He had another snap shot with his cannon and fired as the aircraft crossed his nose. He was rewarded with another hit. Smoke started trailing from the left engine and the aircraft disengaged from the battle to save itself.

“Hank, be advised, one of the two aircraft is extending and leaving the battle area,” said the controller as she focused in on vectoring him onto the remaining fighter.

“Oreo, Vampire Lead. Be advised, we cannot make out the identity of Kansas Lead. We cannot launch our missiles,” said the Swiss pilot.

“I copy,” said the controller. “Hank, what’s your status?”

“One vee one at this time. I’ve got this,” said Williams as he pulled towards the last Typhoon. But the enemy pilot was having none of that and reversed in an Immelman turn back towards him. They both broke contact to replenish their speeds and attempt to look for an advantage on the other. Williams broke back towards the Typhoon at the same time and attempted to line up a missile shot, but the Typhoon broke once again and dove towards the ground. Williams attempted to follow, but found he couldn’t keep up as the enemy aircraft had built its speed up quicker than he had. He put the F-15 back into a shallow dive and started building his speed once again. He pulled the aircraft into a long looping turn and saw the Typhoon bearing down once again.

He managed to snap the fighter over and away from the firing solution of the enemy aircraft, but the Typhoon fell into a trail pattern on the rear of his aircraft. No matter the maneuver Williams tried, the fighter stuck on his tail like it was tied to it. But Williams had one more maneuver in mind that could put him into a firing position. He disabled the angle of attack limiters in the fighter and yanked back on the stick all while putting the throttle into full military thrust. He had plenty of speed built up for the planned tactic and it started going off without a hitch. The famous Pugachev’s Cobra caused the fighter to look as it was beginning a climb, but in reality was still flying forward with its nose pointed high. The Typhoon was not able to slow fast enough or bring its guns online and sped by the fighter just as the nose started to come down.

Williams heard the distinctive growl of the Sidewinder lock tone in his headset and fired another missile at the retreating Typhoon. He watched as it went towards the retreating fighter and

exploded just above, breaking the aircraft in two. No parachute was seen from the fighter and Williams now concentrated with bringing his aircraft speed back up to acceptable levels.

“Oreo, this is Hank. Be advised, clear skies at this time. Give me a vector to Basher 3,” he said confidently in the radio.

“Kansas break now!” yelled the controller into the microphone just as she discovered the inbound missiles heading for him. But it was too late. The AA-21 radar guided missiles homed in on his aircraft and exploded; fired at the extreme range of the retreating Typhoon in vengeance for his wingmen that had been downed. Launched “over the shoulder” from the retreating Typhoon, he hadn’t pointed his nose and allowed the missiles to lock on after launch. Since it didn’t show the classic attack profile, the controller on the AWACS didn’t detect the attack until the missiles showed on radar far too late.

Williams was thrown forward in his seat from the double explosion to his rear. His aircraft began screaming all kinds of warnings at him and letting him know it was dying quickly. He checked the gauges quickly and found they were all telling him the same thing, to bail out and bail out quickly. He didn’t hesitate for a moment and grabbed at the ejection handles and prepared himself for the violent ejection from the aircraft. The rocket motor below the seat accelerated him quickly after the inertia locks had pulled him into the seat. He felt like his head was going to fly through his bottom from the increased G forces, but just as it began, it was all over. But even as he fell, his parachute wasn’t functioning correctly and he was freefalling towards the ground. He struggled to get clear of the ejection seat and use his emergency reserve chute as he fell towards the ground. He could see the flaming remains of his aircraft falling from the sky as it had exploded after he ejected.

“Vampire Lead, this is Oreo. Be advised, target is a single fighter extended from the area. Are you in range?” asked the controller on the AWACS.

“We are. Stand by,” said the Swiss pilot as he locked up the aircraft and let an AIM-125 missile fly at the retreating fighter. While a stealthy design, the damage caused during combat had caused the strict tolerances of stealth technology to cease to work properly. The IU fighter showed on radar clearly as the Swiss pilot watched the display and datalink from his missile. Although designed for bomber type aircraft, it homed in on the aircraft plodding along at five hundred knots and in a straight line. The IU pilot never knew what hit him as his aircraft was blotted from the sky by the one hundred pound warhead that detonated over the top of his aircraft.

“Oreo, this is Apollo Flight. Be advised, we have joined with Basher 3 and are enroute to Landsberg Air Base,” said the pilot of the lead F-20C Tigershark aircraft.

“Copy last, break, Vampire Lead. Was there a chute from Kansas Lead?” asked the controller.

“Negative, we did not see a chute,” said the pilot.

“Roger, can you make a pass and check?” asked the controller.

“Copy last, we will check. But it is growing dark and we might not see him. We will check with our IR viewers,” said the pilot as he radioed to his flight in German to look for the American pilot.

Date/Time: 12 March/0943

Location: Northeast of Brezno, Occupied Slovakia

“Not again! Amber’s going to kill me!” gasped Technical Sergeant Heath “Magnet” Bates as he clutched at his chest.

“Stay still! Rowdy, this is Kodak! We need some help over here! Magnet took a hit!” yelled Sergeant Major Scott “Kodak” Carlson as he started aid on Heath.

“Bad? We’ve got our hands full over here with another squad!” yelled Captain Dave “Rowdy” Lawson.

“If you can find the time!” said Scott as he paused and sent another three rounds towards the advancing IU troops. “Why does it always happen like this?”

“And to think he volunteered to pick up the slack for my brother!” said Staff Sergeant Heather “Trouble” Davis as she led a target and sent a round downrange from her designated marksman rifle, scoring a hit. Instead of continuing her fire, she darted over and picked up the H&K machine gun from beside Heath and started sending rounds downrange. There was something psychological about facing a machine gun and the IU troops took a moment to think about pressing their attack.

“Pure luck...and I’m never buying a lottery ticket ever!” said Captain Rick “Badaa” Jones between shots. “All units! This is Badaa. We need to shorten and consolidate the lines. Evac is inbound and we need to get these guys off our backs! Rowdy, fall back one hundred meters to your right and prepare to cover our move. We’ll cover you!”

“Rowdy copies!” yelled Dave in the radio and sent another burst at the attackers before displacing and moving to the rear.

“Okay! I’ve got the hole plugged and the chest seal in place!” yelled Scott as he finished applying the dressing on Heath’s chest. He quickly rechecked the rear bandage and saw it was holding. He saw an additional wound on his knee and slapped a quick dressing on before gathering up his carbine and getting ready to pull Heath to safety. “Moving!”

“Roger! Go!” yelled Rick as he and the others started putting down a wall of lead for the IU soldiers to cross. Scott quickly threw Heath over his shoulders and ran backwards, being covered by the two teams. Once he was in place well behind Dave’s team, he called Rick back. “Badaa, I’m in place. You can move.”

“Rowdy, we are preparing to move!” said Rick after hearing the radio message.

“Got you covered!” said Dave as they started picking targets in the distance and placing fire on them. He saw Rick and Heather preparing to move, but just as they did so, the IU started attacking once again, pinning them in place. He placed effective fire on the human wave type attack heading their way along with the others in his team. The IU charge faltered then stopped. But Rick and Heather were trapped.

“Rowdy, get on the horn and see about that air support they promised!” yelled Rick as he continued to put fire downrange.

“Saturn Base! Saturn Base! This is Renaissance Six Bravo on emergency channel Delta-Six! Come in, over!” yelled Dave into the communicator.

“Renaissance Six Bravo, this is Saturn Base; prepare to authenticate,” said the controller at the other end of the radio, sounding quite bored.

“Send it Saturn Base!” yelled Rick over the gunfire.

“I pass you Lima Seven,” said the controller.

“I pass you Alpha Six Yankee! Be advised, we are under assault from approximately forty, that’s four zero IU troops at our supposed lightly defended target! Request immediate air support!” yelled Dave.

The controller sat up as they had heard the gunfire this time over the radio. “Roger, send location!”

Dave input the data into the communicator and sent it on its way to the satellite. The controller took note of their current location and sent a reply.

“Sir! Team Renaissance is in trouble! Current location approximately five clicks west of Objective Camelot,” said the controller.

“What kind of engagement?” asked the Major in charge.

“Sounds like a large one! Squad sized element taking on a platoon!” said the controller excitedly.

“We have anything in the area?” asked the Major.

“Two Brazilian AMXs coming back from a bombing mission and the two Piglets tasked to cover the ex-fil,” said the controller.

“E-T-A?” asked the Major.

“The Brazilians can be diverted on station in about four minutes. The choppers and A-2s are still fifteen minutes out,” said the controller.

“Divert the AMXs and find out their ordnance state. Tell the A-2s to head that way and cover the choppers with some other aircraft on call. We should have some fighters nearby that can cover,” said the Major.

“Rio Flight, this is Saturn Base, do you read me, over?” asked the controller without any further ado.

“Saturn Base, this is Rio Flight, authenticate Mike Four,” said the accented voice over the radio.

“I authenticate Nine-Five-Golf,” said the controller.

“Go ahead with message Saturn Base,” said the pilot of the lead aircraft.

“State fuel and ordnance remaining,” said the controller.

“Fuel is fifteen minutes of loiter time, seven of strike time on low level. Ordnance is full cannon loads, two Sidewinder missiles and four Hellstorm multimode missiles per aircraft. My wingman has one two-fifty kilo bomb remaining as well,” said the pilot, taking stock of his ordnance.

“Roger divert to following coordinates and come in contact with J-SOD Team Renaissance. Be advised, team is under heavy attack and is getting pulled away from their extraction zone. How copy?” asked the controller.

“Frequency?” asked the pilot.

“Emergency Channel Delta-Six,” said the controller.

“Copy all Saturn Base, diverting from established heading at this time,” said the pilot. The controller put out the word on the computer networks of the team in trouble and started looking for additional assets to bring to bear if needed. But the bad weather recently had grounded a lot of aircraft even though they were supposed “all weather” attack models. However, it did give the maintainers an opportunity to perform critical maintenance on the aircraft and replace parts which had been ignored for far too long. But the FNC kept the pressure on the IU somewhat with limited bombing strikes and raids.

“Team Renaissance, this is Rio Flight on Delta-Six. Do you read me?” asked the pilot.

“Copy, I pass you Alpha-One for authentication,” said Dave into the radio before firing another shot at an IU infantryman trying to get to better cover.

“I pass you One-Lima-Papa. I have your position as listed on incoming packet,” said the pilot as he transmitted the data to Dave’s communicator. He received it after the two devices linked up.

“I copy last. Our position has changed and is now approximately four hundred meters west of that location. Sending new coordinates now,” said Dave as he sent the new coordinates to the aircraft.

“How may we be of assistance?” asked the pilot.

“Be advised, we have thirty IU infantry trying to surround us. I am sending the free fire zones at this time,” said Dave and sent the information in another packet to the pilot.

“I have received your transmission. Can you confirm the two locations?” asked the pilot.

“Roger, team is at location one, landing zone and security element is at the second location. Everything else around that location is fair game,” said Dave.

“I copy, we are one minute out approaching from the northeast,” said the pilot as they could see tracers in the distance flying from both sides. “Rio 2, we will perform look only pass and pick our targets.”

“I copy leader,” said the wingman in Portuguese. The two aircraft flew in low at the treetops and looked for the largest formations of IU infantry. The special operations team seemed to be in a good position with good cover, making their job easier.

“Team Renaissance, can you mark the most significant targets?” asked the pilot.

“Roger, marking with red smoke and white phosphorus,” said Dave as he got back onto the internal radios. “Team, mark the biggest targets with red smoke and Willy Pete!”

The team grenadiers loaded the appropriate rounds into the launchers before sending the grenades downrange to the intended targets. The white phosphorus has the added effect of wounding some of the soldiers and was clearly marking the remainder of the group. The AMX aircraft screamed by overhead and pulled up to begin their attack run. However, the IU must have figured out the targeting plans of the FNC team and started scattering away from the areas under the red and white smoke. However, the aircraft were quicker and bore down on the scattering infantry before many of them got away. It was a cannon only pass, but the rounds had the intended effect and broke up the attack and made them seek cover. Another pass launched two of the Hellstorm missiles on larger groups, against trying to wound them and break up the formation. The missiles had the intended effect and the attack against the team was stalling.

“Team Renaissance, can you mark a target for a bomb?” asked the wingman.

“Roger, following coordinates would be good,” said Dave as he found the largest formation of surviving infantry. Between the aerial onslaught and the continual fire from the team, the back of the IU security platoon was being broken. Dave found what appeared to be one of the few remaining officers in charge of the attack and plotted his location before sending it to the aircraft. The wingman acknowledged the transmission and plotted the coordinates into the bomb under his wing. The ordnance took the inputs and dropped free to navigate to the intended GPS location on its own.

The flight time didn’t take long and the five hundred pound bomb went off as advertised in the middle of the group, effectively destroying any further command and control. Sergeants and Corporals still had the leadership role on their men, but decided to remain in place and harass the FNC team more than try to overwhelm them. A Senior Sergeant took the lead of the platoon and started trying to regroup his forces before looking for an advantage.

The AMX aircraft made two more passes before having to divert back to their planned landing location. They had just enough ordnance remaining to protect themselves and little more. The remaining team members quickly reloaded and waited for the next charge.

“All Renaissance units, stand by. Forces are preparing for an additional charge,” said Rick over the radio.

The IU forces, still shocked at the aerial assault, were content for the moment to fire at the forest to their front. And even though it was not aimed, it still gave the defenders pause for thought and kept their movements to a minimum.

“Anyone not engaged?” asked Rick over the radio.

“Blue team!” said Master Sergeant Tim “Fluffy” Daniels over the radio. He was leading Staff Sergeant Amy “Feisty” Kerns, Sergeant Johnny “Junior” Thompson and Technical Sergeant Stu “Mac” Donaldson. They were supposed to be guarding the landing zone, but when their team was in trouble, they knew they needed to disregard the security and go to help. A landing zone could always be secured again, but their members in the unit couldn’t be replaced.

“Negative, need you to secure the L-Z!” yelled Rick into the radio as an IU fire team emerged from behind their cover and moved forward.

“You need us more there!” protested Daniels over the radio.

Rick thought about his options for a moment and decided it would be better for the team to flank the enemy and help roll them up instead of sitting useless at the landing zone. “Go to our left flank and start placing some fire on the teams. Get them diverted away from us so we can move closer.”

“Roger, on the way,” said Tim as he and the three started heading towards the gunfire. They moved cautiously until seeing the camouflage uniforms of the IU moving this way and that looking for an advantage. Apparently the IU had the same idea and had sent a squad to the

Americans flank to try the same maneuver. However, Daniels and his team got into position first and were able to ambush the team in relatively open ground.

“Badaa, this is Feisty. We have one squad trying to flank you on your left side. We’ve got them occupied, but cannot move forward,” said Amy Kerns over the radio.

“Can you hold?” asked Rick.

“Absolutely,” said Amy as she fired another round at an advancing infantryman. Her shot was dead on and the man collapsed.

Rick looked at the group to his front and knew they needed some form of cover to be able to depart the location. The A-2A Piglets arrived on scene and were immediately put to work by Heather Davis attacking the largest of the formations. But under the cover of the trees, the fire wasn’t as effective. But it did have the effect of stalling the attack and giving the two teams the opportunity to move back. Scott was assisted by Rick in moving Bates behind the lines and setting up a defensive perimeter near the landing zone. One of the two A-2s was tasked to the other team in contact and was given targets by Donaldson. Lucky for them, the ambush had claimed half the IU squad and the well placed munitions by the attack aircraft diminished their number to two remaining. The IU infantry retreated to regroup with the remaining squads as the American team fell back to the landing zone once again.

“Looks like they have a pause for thought. Rowdy, get your team back this way,” said Rick.

“Roger, moving,” said Dave as he retreated amid the gunfire from the remaining IU infantry. However, enough cover stood between the two groups that the gunfire was randomly smacking the trees. They managed to fall to within sight of the landing zone and join up with the two other teams. The A-2s continued to attack targets of opportunity as the teams fell behind the nearest cover and waited for the IU to advance once again. The distinctive sound of a CH-53 was heard over the gunfire as it came in fast for a landing. Bates was loaded first with Carlson and the remainder of the team threw packs inside and were assisted onto the ramp.

“Raven 1-4, this is Fanta flight lead. Be advised, team is heading your way,” said the pilot of the lead A-2.

“Raven 1-4 copies,” said the pilot over the radio. “Everyone on board?”

Dave and Rick both jumped on at the same time after seeing their teams were safely aboard and counting noses one last time. They gave the flight engineer manning the rear machine gun a thumbs up and he relayed it to the pilot.

“Guns, light that sucker up!” shouted the pilot over the intercom as he prepared to lift off. The gunner at the cargo ramp unleashed the GAU-19 machine gun at the trees surrounding the rear of the aircraft spreading death in a beautifully violent stream of red tracers. The door gunners swept their quadrants with GAU-2 miniguns as well just in case the IU had flanked the aircraft

somehow. They didn't seem concerned with wasting ammo as the saying went "ammo is cheap, life isn't."

After they were out of range of the ground fire, Rick discovered he had two additional wounded members. Reggie "Burnout" Nicholson, a member that had joined the team after the Eris mission, and Daniels had both been hit during the fall back to the landing zone. Nicholson had taken a round to the thigh and Daniels took a grazing shot along his shaved scalp. While bloody, it hurt more than anything as he waved Scott off to check on Nicholson and held a bandage in place. The flight engineer came over and handed Rick a headset to talk with the pilot.

"Thanks for the timely assist," he said.

"No problem, we aim to please. Got your boss on the radio," said the pilot.

Rick switched the headset from intercom to the radio setting and called out over the radio.

"Badaa, this is Warbucks, sitrep?" asked Major Thomas "Warbucks" Dayfield after Rick identified himself.

"Warbucks, this is Badaa, be advised, three W-I-A, one critical. Need immediate ambulance upon arrival and surgeon standing by," said Rick.

"Who?" asked Dayfield.

"Magnet took another hit to the chest. Burnout took a round to the thigh and Fluffy took a grazing shot to the head. Be advised, all are stable for the moment," said Rick after seeing Heather finish the IV on Bates.

"Objective?" asked Thomas.

"No go on the objective. It was a supply depot," said Rick. "Get the air force to bomb that puppy."

"We'll pass it on," said Thomas. "Also, ambulance will be waiting at the landing pad."

"Roger that," said Rick. "Anything else?"

"Negative, just get back in one piece," said Thomas as he signed off.

It was another typical mission for the teams of the 14th Special Operations Battalion in the service of the North American Union during World War Three. The teams had been together a long time and had fought through the Fall as well as the invasion of North America. And after the invasion, had served their country and the Texan Armed Forces defeating the Islamic Union on North American soil and going on to liberate much of Europe after the invasion.

The invasion of Normandy and France was one of the largest military operations outside of D-Day in World War Two ever seen in Europe. And not unlike the previous landings, the world held its breath for three days after bad weather had set in preventing the massed follow on forces needed to expand the beachheads. But the initial invasion forces held onto the beachheads by their fingernails and sheer tenacity in knowing they couldn't fail. The combined will power alone was probably the only thing that kept them alive until relief arrived and the forces moved inland. And after which, the forces started rolling southward in France towards the Iberian Peninsula and eastward towards Germany and the Benelux region. The forces had a hard time getting past the Pyrenees Mountains, but managed to force amphibious landings to the rear and waited out the IU defenders dug into the mountains. After their surrender, Spain and Portugal fell rapidly to the advancing armies of the Free Nation Coalition and the nations celebrated their liberation from the tyranny of the IU. Gibraltar was once again fortified and a crossing of that straight was in the works where the forces would start to roll up North Africa.

The remainder of France and the Benelux region fell somewhat rapidly to the FNC, but Germany was a hard nut to crack. The IU had dug into the heavy industry areas of the western part of Germany and made the Allies pay for the advances easily done so far. However, the country was finally liberated and the Allies moved east into Poland and the Czech Republic. But the advances were stalling somewhat since the supply routes were growing longer and harder to maintain. The Allies called a general halt for the winter as it gave them time to resupply, rest and refit units. They made some limited gains on the eastern front, but mainly took the time to catch their breath after a mad dash across Europe. But the time was coming for the liberation of the remainder of Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

The remainder of Western and Central Europe was liberated and the Swiss finally had relief from the years of isolation. The Swiss Armed Forces quickly joined the side of the FNC and started attacking the IU at their borders, mainly moving south into Italy where they made good progress. The Swiss soldier was a well trained, formidable fighter which held himself in good account on the battlefield. Russian forces had finally finished their civil war and the democratic victors were ready to catch their breath and join in as allies of the FNC. The Allied leadership knew the balance of the war would quickly fall into their laps with the addition of the Russian military and were eager to get them involved in attacks on the northern flank of the Islamic Union.

But even as the IU was putting up a determined defense, their gains had been too much and too fast. They had a hard time securing the remaining land they had conquered and partisan groups kept the rear areas in disarray. They were in a headlong retreat back to Turkey and the relative safety of the Middle East. But even as they were defeated on the battlefield, they still ran a defense which prohibited the Allies from performing an end run to the rear and capturing Istanbul and the Bosphorus Strait and forcing a general surrender in Europe before the next stage of the campaign. So the Allies continued to perform limited attacks in Eastern Europe and in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains while building forces for a large scale attack in the spring when the weather broke. The winter had been one of the harshest on record and the cold injuries almost outnumbered the combat related wounds.

But in getting ready for a massive attack, they needed intelligence. Which was where the members of the 14th Special Operations Battalion came into play. Operations Group (OpGrp)

Alpha of the 14th Special Operation Battalion was a unit within the North American Union Armed Forces that was tasked with the reconnaissance of areas behind the lines. The unit had its origins in the Texan Armed Forces, but had been transferred to the North American Union since the members were predominately from those States aligned with it. The original Ranch residents and those that had come after them had all joined the unit and later were assigned en mass to a new section, the SDR.

Surveillance, Detection and Reconnaissance was a new concept combining the old US Army Long Range Recon Patrols, USMC Force Recon, USAF Combat Controller and US Army Special Forces. Known informally by pronouncing the letters as “cider,” the mission was highly critical to the war effort and sought after by new recruits. The news releases and press the team got from missions often made them seem larger than life and they shunned the publicity. This partially came from shying away from keeping a low profile they had been doing for several years at the Ranch prior to joining the Texan Militia. Teams were sent by two, four, eight or sixteen and sometimes even larger far behind enemy lines and provided recon of large geographical areas, detection of targets and surveillance until they could be struck by Coalition warplanes, artillery or conventional forces. Sometimes, the unit would take out the targets if it was deemed too hazardous for a conventional raid as they retained the knowledge and experience of fighting since almost the beginning of the Fall. And they were exceptional at their jobs.

The current mission the teams had been on was to locate and mark a suspected divisional headquarters for the IU forces in the old nation of Slovakia. However, they didn’t expect to run into the company of troops guarding a supply depot and had made contact with one of the patrols. While the mission to find the headquarters would be taken up by another team, the Ranch residents would lick their wounds and continue to soldier on until the enemy was defeated and their families could be safe again.

Little did they know another mission was already being identified. Only thoughts and conversations over a large map table, but the mission would impact the entire group and shock them deep into their souls.

CHAPTER 2

Date/Time: 13 March/0626

Location: Southwest of Ružomberok, Occupied Slovakia

“Wyatt Oscar Williams, Captain, Texan Air Force, serial AF32888721, born 9 February 1984,” said Williams as he recovered from another blow to the face from his captors. The handcuffs he was in were tight against his wrists and he could feel the swelling in his eyes already.

“You are a terrorist that flies airplanes and bombs innocent civilians,” said the interrogator as he lit a cigarette.

“Wyatt Oscar Williams, Captain, Texan-” started Williams again before he was punched in the face once again.

“Admit you were bombing innocent civilians and I will stop,” said the interrogator as he rubbed at his sore hand. They had already been interrogating him for over an hour.

“I will give my name, rank, serial number and date of birth as prescribed by international conventions,” said Williams weakly.

“Conventions your country has chosen to ignore by bombing innocent civilians and murdering my people,” said the interrogator as he motioned for a guard to strike him again. The blow made Williams fall out of the chair and onto the floor. The guard followed up the strike with a kick to the midsection. “Tell me what I want to hear, sign the confession and all this will stop.”

“Williams, Wyatt Oscar, Captain...” he managed to say weakly before a coughing fit took over.

“You were bombing innocent civilians in Hungary and destroying national landmarks,” said the interrogator.

“Williams...” he managed to say before getting another kick in his stomach.

“Your forces are preparing for another attack, no?” asked the interrogator.

“I’m a simple pilot, I do not know such things,” said Williams.

“Your pilots are officers, yes? They tell officers more than enlisted in your military?” asked the interrogator.

“No, they keep secrets about such things,” said Williams.

“They would tell you this, I believe. You are a pilot. An elite officer that flies fighters. I know few in your military get the opportunity to do such things,” said the interrogator. “I will stop hurting you if you will answer my questions.”

“Wyatt O. Williams, Captain-” he started as he sat up to face his captors. Another flurry of punches and kicks took place and he was left groaning on the floor of the room.

“Perhaps he does not know much,” said the Lieutenant Colonel in Arabic observing the interrogation. He and a Major were standing in an adjacent room watching in a camera.

“He knows something,” said the Major. “Each and every one of them knows something.”

“And it is worth breaking him for it?” asked the Colonel.

“Each and every piece of information we get is valuable,” said the Major. “This is just the beginning and necessary for the second part of my plan.”

“Very well. Clean him up and start over,” said the Colonel.

“I will break him,” said the Major. “But it will take time.”

“He has been tough. Most infidels tell us something by now,” said the Colonel. “Perhaps drugs would be appropriate.”

“We can soften him up first,” said the Major. “It is critical to my theory.”

“And when you are done with him?” asked the Colonel.

“What do you wish us to do with him?” asked the Major.

“He will be of no use to us. Send him to one of the prison camps in Romania,” said the Colonel.

“He is talented. He shot down three of our best fighters by himself. I think we have much to learn from him,” said the Major.

“Do what you feel is right,” said the Colonel as he departed the room.

The Major looked at the pilot still lying on the ground and tried to determine the best way of breaking him. The location they were in wasn't your typical prison camp, however, it had been the closest military installation to the downed pilot. But still, all the “required” items for an interrogation were here and available. So he decided against the physical means of gathering information and decided on a different approach.

“Remove him and put him in a holding cell,” said the Major as he entered the room.

“You wish to stop the interrogation?” asked the interrogator. The guards were already dragging him off towards one of the small holding cells in the building.

“For the moment,” said the Major. “I believe for now the psychology of his capture should be on his mind. We will let him sit alone and in thought for a little while and play the recording for him.”

The guards picked up Williams off the floor and drug him from the room to the small holding cells. The insides were cramped and offered little comfort from the beatings he was taking. At a hundred and twenty centimeters cubed, there was little room to do much more than sit down. Williams was tossed inside and the steel door latched behind him with a loud bang. As he was recovering from the beatings, he started to think back to his survival training and tried to make plans for an escape. As he was thinking, he could hear voices from the outside. Little more than whispers, he strained to hear what they were saying. To his surprise, the voice was in English and was without an accent. It started repeating the same message over and over.

“You are without hope. Your so called friends and countrymen have abandoned you and will not rescue you. There is only one chance for your continued survival. Work with your friends in the Islamic Union and you will be treated well. We are your friends, not your enemies. Work with us and you will be sent home. We are a peaceful nation that does not want this war. We are your friends and wish to be at peace with your country. We will help you survive and see your family again if you let us. Your country will not try to rescue you. But we are your friends and will help you...”

The message repeated back as Williams tried to get comfortable in the cell. The message was slightly louder than the beginning but still at a whisper level. He didn’t need to strain to hear it, but it was blocking the thought process in his brain. As he tried to think of a way of escape, the message blocked any successful attempts at doing so. Knowing he needed to be rested in order to escape, he tried to get comfortable enough to sleep in the cold dark cell. But the message continued eating at his brain as he tried to doze off.

“Nothing more than a supply depot,” said Captain Dave Lawson.

“How was the mistake made?” asked Major Thomas Dayfield.

“Apparently the unit was supplying one of the communications battalions for the corps. So there were enough antennas around to make it look like a command post,” said Captain Rick Jones.

“Good enough answer although I don’t like the fact we took three casualties on this mission,” said Major Darren “Snoopy” Thompson.

“Between that and the fact it was guarded with a whole lot more troops than they briefed on,” said Master Sergeant Tim Daniels.

“Yeah, a full company of troops makes for a pretty exciting ex-fil,” said Sergeant Major Scott Carlson.

“The Air Force did hit it not long after you guys left. Bomb damage assessment seems to think they’ll be out of commission for at least a month,” said Darren. “At least that was a successful part.”

“Okay, anything else?” asked Thomas before finishing up the after action report.

“Better air assets next time maybe?” asked Staff Sergeant Heather Davis. “Like on call air assets.”

“We’ll look into it, but the problem is the weather is keeping most of them grounded for the moment and none of the brass was to risk them until the offensive starts,” said Thomas. “I did object and used colorful language, but was given my coloring book and crayons with orders to shut up.”

“Nothing else then,” said Dave as he picked up his carbine and prepared to leave.

“Kodak, Badaa, hang tight for a moment,” said Thomas as the remainder of the group prepared to leave, shower and get a meal in before hitting the sack. After the remainder of the teams filed out, the two were left with Darren and Thomas.

“Scott, I hate to break it to you, but you’re probably going to be reassigned,” said Thomas as he handed over the official message from higher headquarters. “Senior Enlisted Manager for the Combat Medic Course at Camp Colby.”

“What? Why?” demanded Scott as he read the message.

“Apparently they want to cycle in combat medics into the schoolhouse in Kansas. And your name was at the top of the list by both service time and by combat time. Headquarters is holding off on the decision until I spoke with you,” said Thomas. “Badaa, I know it puts you without a team member and a medic, but headquarters promised us pick of the litter on a replacement.”

“And I get stuck breaking in a wet behind the ears rookie?” asked Rick.

“We might be able to work out a transfer from another unit,” said Darren.

“And rob someone else’s medic?” asked Scott. “That’s not fair!”

“The decision is yours to make. I’d suggest you take a little time to think it over before coming to a decision,” said Thomas.

“Has my performance been lacking lately?” asked Scott, wondering why the sudden reassignment.

“Absolutely not. You are still performing at the top,” said Darren.

“Bad ratings?” asked Scott.

“Your performance reports are firewalled to the max,” said Thomas.

“Slower than usual?” asked Scott.

“A tad, but still quicker than the rest of the conventional force,” said Thomas.

“So why the sudden transfer?” asked Scott.

“Because the instructors at the school are not up on the latest combat lifesaving applications. Most if not all of them have never seen combat and only practice it in the rear with the gear. The program is trying to rotate combat medics into the staff and get some real world experience in what works and what doesn’t. You know far better than anyone you can only learn so much from a book,” said Thomas. “I’d feel a lot more comfortable with knowing I had a medic trained by one of the best rather than one that learned from the book the entire time.”

“Trying to get rid of me?” asked Scott with half a grin.

“No, I’d love to keep you, but let’s face it; you are probably the most skilled combat medic on the planet. Each and every person you train there saves five lives here. I hate to use the old saying of big picture, but you know it applies,” said Thomas.

“I’ll think it over for a little while and get back to you,” said Scott, who resisted the opportunity for advancement, but knew the fact he was getting a little long in the tooth to be playing the combat game. He had been feeling a little slower than normal and a little more tired after the missions they had been going on and knew it was probably time to pass the torch off to a younger member. But still, he felt loyalty to the group of men and women he had fought with since the Fall so many years before and would have a hard time letting go. “Any chance of getting a phone call through to Gwenn? I’d like the opportunity to talk it over with her.”

“I think that might be arranged,” said Darren. “Go ahead and set it up from the comm shed.”

After Scott left, Rick was left behind with the two others. “Okay, what’s the real deal?”

“There is no real deal. He was being transferred, but I managed to get headquarters to hold off on that and leave the decision to him. I had to call in more than a few markers just to get them to agree to that,” said Thomas.

“I hate to lose him,” said Rick.

“I know and I do as well. But yes, he is a tad slower now and I believe he’s served his time for God and country. I also think putting him in that school will ultimately help save lives. He’s not going there as just an instructor, but as the head enlisted member in charge. He’s the one that gets to dictate the training schedules and methods. And ultimately, I think that would be best for all concerned,” said Darren.

“When you put it like that, yeah, it does make sense,” admitted Rick. “How long until he has to give you an answer?”

“Headquarters didn’t say, but I can stall them for a few days,” said Thomas. “Can you get the phone call worked out?”

“Sure, I’ll let the commo guys know it has a priority,” said Rick as he prepared to leave.

“One more thing. If I know Scott like I think I do, he’ll accept the position. Here’s a listing of eligible candidates to replace him,” said Thomas as he handed over several folders.

“Any one of them stick out in your mind?” asked Rick.

“I didn’t take the time to look. It’s your team, your decision,” said Thomas with a wave of his hand.

“I’ll let you know,” said Rick as he departed.

“So what was the real story on your headquarters call about the mission?” asked Darren as they departed and headed towards the chow hall for dinner.

“I was told to shut up and color as mentioned beforehand,” said Thomas.

“And?” asked Darren since he knew there was more to the story. Thomas typically kept his emotions to himself, but Darren knew him well enough to know there was trouble brewing inside his skull.

“I was informed Cider teams are paid to get information about the enemy. And as such, are paid to die if they have to in order to get that information. I promptly informed him my people were not expendable and had a few choice words about the decision making process before I slammed the phone down,” said Thomas.

“Keep that up and you’ll never be promoted,” laughed Darren.

“As if I care about that?” asked Thomas, getting slightly angry again at the phone call. “As long as the mission gets done I could care less if I’m a buck private or a Field Marshal.”

“God help us all if you were a Field Marshal,” laughed Darren to ease the tension.

“I don’t particularly care for our new Colonel. He seems to think people are more or less numbers on a paper rather than living, breathing troops. His comment about the three casualties? ‘Well within mission norms.’ I just about had my mouth hit the ground and had to leave the office,” said Thomas, finally letting the root of his problem out in the open for Darren to see.

“Three was a bit much for what we expected. We’ve taken that many before, but on far riskier missions in targets we knew were well defended,” said Darren.

“Which infuriated me even more. Apparently there was intel about the location, but was dismissed beforehand,” said Thomas.

“We need a better line of intelligence coming out. Want me to put out some feelers?” asked Darren.

“Way ahead of you on that. I’ve got Hermann working on that already getting us some additional under the table assets lined up,” said Thomas.

“And the Colonel?” asked Darren.

“Will just have to live with it,” said Thomas. “As long as I keep everyone alive to the best of my abilities. But what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him will it?”

“We will take casualties again, you know that,” said Darren.

“I know, but if we can mitigate the unknown aspects of the missions, we can still get the job done without exposing ourselves to danger,” said Thomas.

“I’ll give you that,” said Darren. “Except for Murphy.”

“Which can and will pop up when we don’t want him,” chuckled Thomas.

“You think Scott will accept?” asked Darren.

“Yeah, he probably will. He’ll resist, but I think he’ll go along with it,” said Thomas as they entered the chow hall tent and started figuring out what was for supper that night. All conversations of the teams, missions and current gripes were dropped as they were in mixed company and such things needed to be conducted in private.

But Darren knew there was more to what was being said than met the eye. He had already dealt with their new Colonel in the 1st Brigade and knew there were some troubled times ahead. The Colonel, recently arrived from North America had been put in charge of the Brigade by an old friend who wanted to see him promoted. His service had been filled mainly in headquarters jobs starting in the US Army and ending up in the North American Union Armed Forces with more staff jobs. But his friend knew the only eligible Colonels for promotion were coming from combat assignments and saw his friend needed that experience to be eligible. So he had snagged

the Brigade Commander position for the Colonel when the old commander was promoted even though he knew his friend had never commanded a combat unit before.

The Colonel realized this fact as well, but did little to fix the problem and rely on his staff of veterans. He tended to look at the mission briefs on paper, units on the maps and figures on spreadsheets rather than relying on the hard earned experience of his counterparts. Lucky enough, he had a good staff and had plenty of experience in the units he could and should have relied on, but tended to ignore the advice given and went with computer models and simulations instead. He also had no idea what to do with the Special Operations Battalion under his command. While assigned to the various staff jobs, he had worked around the special operations force on many occasions, but was envious of their experience and the awards and promotions that came as a result of their operations. Furthermore, he didn't care at all for the fact they tended to believe they were better soldiers than others. He relied on his own experience from the staff position to decline, accept and create missions rather than trust in the Major assigned as the battalion commander. And the missions coming out of headquarters these days were getting riskier and outright dangerous.

Not that the missions were not dangerous enough as it was, but taking on a combat seasoned infantry company of one hundred plus people with twelve operators just didn't make sense. It was if the Colonel believed in the press reports and how the operators were portrayed as ten feet tall and bulletproof. He knew otherwise and was bound and determined to show them they were not as great as they thought they were by giving them more and more missions that were generally unachievable or in direct contravention to their actual operational chain of command through the Joint Special Operations Division (J-SOD) which typically assigned their missions. The J-SOD had attempted to work with the Colonel on several occasions as well as limiting his involvement, but replacements for base guard duty, leaves and rest and relaxation time were administrative issues they couldn't interfere with. The missions they turned off as best as they could, but the 14th rarely had the opportunity for any down time as they would come off a mission and be put right on base details without any time off. Additionally, any mission which directly affected the Brigade could be tasked to the Cider teams. And the Colonel brought up more than a few missions for them since he assumed command.

The entire unit was supposed to have been rotated back to France or England for an extended rest and refit period, but that had been held up as well as other units suddenly had more of a priority even though they were further down the list. The entire unit was starting to show the signs of fatigue from continuous service since the invasion. And fatigue causes mistakes. And mistakes cause death. A situation Thomas felt completely unacceptable and let it be known he didn't care for it one bit. In his own fatigue, he was starting to come unraveled at the mismanagement of his unit.

But most of all, the Colonel didn't care for the Battalion Commander, this Major Dayfield. Since the 14th was only a battalion in name and Thomas was the ranking Operations Group commander, the billet fell to him. There were four Op Groups assigned in the Division, small company sized formations which didn't fall into the normal Army structure. Op Group Alpha was Thomas' unit and he was filling the Lieutenant Colonel's billet until such time as his promotion came through. Thomas had his initial mission brief with the Colonel and went away

more confused rather than with a clear sight picture of what was to be expected of him and his unit. What Thomas didn't realize was the outgoing Brigade Commander had sung his praises to the highest extents and pushed for his promotion through the Division and Corps. But the new Commander had put a hold on the promotion until such time as he felt it was needed, which was probably no time soon. Since the 14th was only about eight platoons of individuals, it didn't typically meet the size requirements for a Lieutenant Colonel, the only fact the Colonel put forward in his non-recommendation for promotion. Plus, Thomas had informed him the Brigade was only there for administrative support rather than operational control during his initial briefing; a simple fact the Colonel detested and didn't like to be reminded of. He felt any unit under his Brigade was his and his alone and the fact the 14th received orders from another directorate entirely chaffed at his very being.

Plus, the Cider teams were starting to be broken up somewhat. It was past time for some of the older members to move on since they had spent their time and needed to be replaced by younger members. But the replacements they were getting in were far from the same caliber of men and women they replaced. It appeared the administrative controls the Brigade had were being worked as any member being sent to the 14th had to go through the Colonel. And typical members which might have been turned down were accepted and put forward into the units. The team leaders were having a hard time trying to break in the younger troops and the missions were slightly more hazardous until they could work out the training issues. The Battalion was taking slightly higher casualties in recent times due to the problems the newer members caused.

But Thomas kept these problems to himself and continued performing the missions as they were dictated. The J-SOD managed to keep the strategic mission rate low since they also saw the problems and had addressed it with their chain of command, but the Colonel had political connections and getting him removed was going to be a problem. It wasn't an easy task, but they all hoped he would spend enough time in the billet to get the "combat" time he needed before being moved on to bigger and better things. At least things that didn't involve the direct supervision of combat troops so they hoped.

It was a dark period in the time for the members of the Ranch as they hadn't been affected by political decisions until now. But they soldiered on, doing their job and hoped it would all end somewhat soon and the Colonel would be sent on his merry way.

"Tom, the hospital called," said Amy Kerns as she came walking up. Thomas saw she hadn't even gotten the chance to head to the showers after the mission debrief and taking care of the administrative side of the mission.

"Are our guys out?" he asked.

"The doctor said he needed to talk to you in person," said Amy. "Said it was important."

"Okay, I'll be on my way," said Thomas as he grabbed his carbine and walked the distance to the small field hospital that served the base camp. They had a surgeon and medical staff assigned to the unit, but he regularly worked in the hospital while they were in garrison. He walked in and

attempted to track down the doctor but kept getting bounced from station to station. He finally found him near the post-op ward tent.

“Hey doc,” said Thomas as he finally caught up with the surgeon that took care of their unit.

“Major,” said the doctor. “Thanks for coming down.”

“How are my people doing?” asked Thomas.

“Nicholson took a round to the leg that took a little delicate surgery to correct, but nothing life threatening. He’ll be down for a little while as it heals. Daniels’ head wound was superficial and nothing a few stitches didn’t take care of. We’re going to keep him overnight to make sure there’s no brain trauma, but initial signs for that are negative,” said the doctor.

“And Bates?” asked Thomas.

“He’s stable for the moment. Pretty torn up but he has Sergeant Major Carlson to thank for saving his life. We’ve moved him into the recovery ward,” said the doctor.

“He going to be okay in the long run?” asked Thomas.

“He’s going to pull through this okay barring any unforeseen problems, but he’s incapable of recovering enough for combat duties,” said the doctor as he looked at Heath’s chart once again.

“He’s pulled through these kinds of injuries before,” said Thomas.

“He may very well have, but I took the liberty of doing a comprehensive check this time and what I found scares me,” said the doctor.

“Such as?” asked Thomas.

“The previous lung puncture shows significant signs of scarring and not healing correctly after the first injury, which was probably caused by his lack of rehabilitation and refusal to stay in the hospital. Same goes with the gut shot he took last year. I can see the previous wound to the left knee is causing some additional problems although he refuses to admit it. This current wound to his right knee is significant enough to threaten his mobility fifteen years down the road. The shoulder injury has popped back up. And now the latest puncture in the other lung can develop into something quite serious if not treated correctly since the other lung is having a hard time compensating for running both right now. In short, he needs serious down time to rest and most importantly, to let it heal correctly,” said the doctor.

“Best case?” asked Thomas.

“A year of rehabilitation at a minimum, but probably more like eighteen months. And preferably in a Stateside hospital where they have specialists for this sort of thing,” said the doctor.

“Worst case?” asked Thomas.

“You plan a ceremony to discuss the positive contributions he made to this unit and hand his wife a folded flag,” said the doctor earnestly.

“Do what you have to do doctor,” said Thomas who knew better than to argue a medical prognosis from the man they trusted with their lives. While he turned a blind eye to many injuries that should have received longer rehabilitation, when he put his foot down, there tended to be little arguments. “Can he receive visitors?”

“Yes, he has been asking for you and his wife,” said the doctor.

“Write up your report and we’ll send it up,” said Thomas.

“I cannot stress the fact enough that he cannot be cleared for combat duties again. At least not for a long time. He has to be made aware of the ramifications of trying to sneak back in. He will never be at one hundred percent ever again. He will probably get the use of seventy-five percent at most out of his lungs and maybe sixty percent out of his right knee if we rehab it correctly,” said the doctor.

“He won’t like that,” said Thomas. “At least put that option out there for him. Gives him something to strive for.”

“That would be lying to him. No doctor on this planet would clear him for combat duties again with his list of current and former injuries,” said the doctor.

“He’s the kind of guy that needs a goal to push towards,” said Thomas. “A lie, but a little white one at that.”

“You guys are all the same,” smirked the doctor. “Action junkies the whole lot of you.”

“No, just wanting to get the job done and go home,” said Thomas.

“He’s on the flight to Germany in two days for further treatment and on to North America after that,” said the doctor.

“You think the hospital at Fort Carson will be okay? Puts him close to home,” said Thomas.

“And close to the mountain warfare training center,” said the doctor as he knew very well where Fort Carson was close to.

“That too,” said Thomas. “He can still help train. You pen him up in a hospital for a year and he will go completely crazy.”

“The higher altitude won’t help in his recovery. I’d prefer sea level myself, but Colorado Springs might be okay. However, not up in the mountains. He heads to San Antonio first and

gets further treatment,” said the doctor. “After that, I can suggest it to the attending physician. But only, and I stress only after his lungs have healed enough to permit good oxygen transfer.”

“Thanks doctor,” said Thomas and knew it wouldn’t be an easy sell to Heath to let him know his days in a combat rated unit were over. He would discuss that issue with Amber first and let her break the news as it might come better from his spouse than his commander. He headed towards the “waiting room” of the field hospital and saw Amber waiting anxiously.

“How is he?” she demanded as soon as she saw Thomas.

“He’s going to pull through okay,” said Thomas.

“But?” asked Amber as she knew there was something else.

“He can’t come back. The doctor won’t clear him for combat duties again,” said Thomas.

“Then we’ll find one that will!” protested Amber.

“Amber, listen to me. He cannot go back out. The previous injuries are starting to cause some serious complications and even impacting the mission. You’ve seen it yourself he’s started getting slower and is not as strong as he once was,” said Thomas.

Amber bit her lip as she looked away. Heath was typically a fast runner, but she had been coming in before him on most runs in the past few months. She also saw he didn’t have the strength or stamina like he once did, but was afraid to bring the subject up. “I didn’t want to say anything.”

“None of us did,” said Thomas. “And since he was able to keep up relatively speaking we turned a blind eye to it. But the doctor just gave me the complete prognosis.”

“So how long in rehab?” asked Amber.

“A year to eighteen months,” said Thomas.

“Heath can do it sooner,” said Amber. “I know him well enough to know that.”

“He pushes the envelope this time and he ends up in a casket,” said Thomas and immediately regretted speaking that way to Amber. She was being protective of her husband, although in generally the wrong way.

“No hope?” asked Amber and knew Thomas was under a lot of stress lately.

“The knees are bad enough to where he might not be able to walk in fifteen years, both lungs are shot out and his shoulder keeps popping in and out. You’ve seen that yourself. Only so many times Scott can pop it back into place,” said Thomas.

“What do I tell him?” asked Amber as she stared absentmindedly towards the camp.

“The truth,” said Thomas. “And make him understand he needs to let himself heal this time.”

“He’s a little stubborn,” she chuckled slightly.

“And wives aren’t?” laughed Thomas. “I’m going to get him reassigned to Colorado after his rehabilitation and hospital time is done.”

“When can I see him?” she asked.

“He can receive visitors. It’s better coming from you and I cannot stress the importance of this. He has to know how serious it is this time,” said Thomas.

“I’ll talk to him,” said Amber as she retrieved her carbine and headed towards the recovery tent of the hospital. After checking in at the desk, she headed down and saw he looked pretty bad from the blood loss as well as the injuries he had sustained. But he smiled as he saw her approach as he always did.

“Hey,” he said weakly.

“Hey babe,” she said with a smile. “Should have ducked.”

“Took another for the team,” he said weakly and put the oxygen mask back on.

“Quite the bullet magnet aren’t you?” she smiled at him.

“I’m not going to be cleared for combat again am I?” he asked after removing the mask once again.

“No,” she said and shook her head as a tear formed in her eye.

“Saw it coming,” said Heath. “Knew after the doc kept shaking his head.”

“But Thomas is going to try to get you close to home,” she said with a smile.

“Would like to have you there,” said Heath.

“My place is here, you know this,” she said and kissed his hand.

“I know,” he said and took a breath from the oxygen mask. “Just like to spend some normal time with you.”

“What’s normal since we’ve been married,” she laughed.

“Knew I could get you to laugh,” he said and took another breath from the mask.

“You need to get better this time,” she said and held his hand. “I want to grow old with you sitting around on our porch at the Ranch. You have to slow down this time sweetie.”

“Knew that the last time,” he said weakly. “But thought I could still help.”

“Heath Allen Bates, the world will turn without you,” said Amber and immediately regretted it.

“Just want to serve,” said Heath.

“And you will. I’ll make sure Dad calls in a few favors from the staff and gets you assigned up near him. That way you can have that porch ready for when I come home,” said Amber.

“Tell Tom there’s a guy coming up in S and T that looks promising,” said Heath and took another breath. It wasn’t good to be talking this much, but he knew it needed to be said. “Name is Wallace, good to go.”

“I’ll let him know,” said Amber as she saw a nurse coming over.

“I’m sorry ma’am, he needs his rest and visiting hours are almost over,” she said politely.

“Bye love,” she said and kissed him on the forehead. “I’ll come by before they ship you out.”

“Love you baby,” he said and squeezed her hand gently. Amber left the room before he could see her start to cry. Her husband wanted nothing more than to serve his country in a front line unit and this was being taken away from him. She saw how unfair it was and the fact they were behind the lines on a useless mission that could have been performed by the Air Force grated at her even further. She walked outside the tent and heard a voice from behind her.

“He doing okay?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah, trying to get back into the thick of it as suspected,” she said and wiped a tear from her face. “Too stubborn to realize it can kill him.”

“We’re all like that, including you,” he said with a chuckle.

She laughed in return and sniffed back her emotions once again. “He told me to tell you there was some kid named Wallace coming through Selection and Training you should take a look at. Said he was good to go.”

”We’ll take a look,” said Thomas. “How are you holding up?”

“Me? I’m fine,” she replied and saw the disbelief on his face. She knew Thomas about as well as any man besides her father and husband and knew he saw right through the façade of her trying to be brave. “How would you feel if Sharon was lying in a hospital bed and you couldn’t do anything to help her?”

“Hey, he’s got the best doc on the planet looking after him,” said Thomas.

“But it’s my husband,” she said and another tear streamed down her face.

“Come here,” said Thomas as he took her into a hug and let her shed her emotions for a minute. She cried briefly, but spent the remainder of the time sniffing back her emotions and thinking at least her husband would be safe. “What time is it in Colorado?”

“Umm, a little after seven,” said Amber after looking at her watch and wiping back a tear.

“You think your dad is at work yet?” asked Thomas.

“Should be,” she replied.

“Let’s go get him on the VTC and let him know Heath will be coming in soon,” said Thomas.

“That’s kind of misuse,” said Amber.

“Maybe a little,” smiled Thomas. “But for a good cause.”

“Okay, if you insist and cover my behind,” smiled Amber in return.

“Won’t be the first time,” he chuckled as they departed and went back to their compound and to the communications area. The tech on duty wasn’t a fully trained and qualified member of the SDR teams, but he had one glaring attribute, he was trained by one of the best in the business.

“Dial up Camp Dugger please,” said Thomas to the communications technician.

“One moment sir,” said the tech as he started inputting the numbers into the system. He didn’t need to look them up as the teams used the gear frequently enough that he had it memorized. While it was a minor misuse of government equipment, they all turned a blind eye since it gave them an opportunity to speak to their families as well. “Okay, we’re synched up, let me ping them and see if anyone is around.”

He hit the “call” button on the console and waited for a response. The terminal at the other end was always manned although sometimes it was someone they were unfamiliar with. However, a familiar face appeared on the screen.

“Tom! How are ya?” said Ryan Meeks with a friendly smile as his face came onto the screen.

“Pretty fair, and you?” asked Thomas.

“Getting along,” said Ryan. “Hey Amber. Hey Rookie. See they’re keeping you around.”

“Can’t get rid of me old man,” smiled the tech. He had been trained by Ryan prior to coming overseas and had been handpicked by the 14th prior to his arrival after an alert from Ryan. Ryan had told the teams he was one of the best he had ever seen and they could do far worse than the young man sitting in front of the console.

“Something going on?” asked Ryan.

“Magnet took another hit,” said Thomas.

“Bad?” asked Ryan.

“He’ll pull through, but needs significant rehab this time,” said Thomas.

“Coming back to us again?” asked Ryan.

“Probably so after he gets released from Brooks,” said Thomas.

“Want me to grab George?” asked Ryan.

“If you would be so kind. He isn’t out in the field or anything is he?” asked Amber.

“That old fart never leaves the office these days,” laughed Ryan.

“And yet we see you shining a seat with your butt in the commo center,” laughed Amber.

“Got me,” laughed Ryan. “He was getting ready to take out the new class we just got in here. Heading up in the hills for some boulder climbing exercises.”

“Good class?” asked Thomas.

“About like them all, headstrong and full of piss and vinegar. Wants to go save the world all at once,” said Ryan as he grabbed a small radio and called George Taylor. After speaking for several moments, he turned back to the video camera. “Should be here in a couple of minutes.”

“Good deal, how’s everything else going?” asked Thomas.

“That little one of yours is getting to be a handful. Terrible twos,” laughed Ryan.

“And gosh darn it, I’m missing it,” chuckled Thomas.

“Exactly what Sharon said, but used some other words to describe her feelings and your lack of attendance in assisting the upbringing of your youngest,” he replied.

“I’m sure I’ll make up for lost time when I get back,” said Thomas.

The conversation turned to small talk until the arrival of George Taylor on the screen. He looked a bit older and grayer, but his eyes were still sharp as a hawk's.

"Thomas, Amber...what's going on?" asked George. "Is Heath okay?"

"I'll let Amber fill you in," said Thomas as he motioned for comms tech to give the two some privacy. "George, Ryan, we'll catch up another time."

Thomas and the tech removed themselves from the immediate area as Ryan did the same half a world away. Amber plopped herself into the seat in front of the camera and got comfortable.

"Amber..." said George.

"Hey Dad," she sighed. "Heath took another shot to the lung."

"Bad?" asked George.

"Gonna disqualify him from combat duties," she said.

"How long?" asked George.

"Permanently from what the doctors say," said Amber.

"Honey, this is what? His sixth or seventh trip to the hospital?" asked George.

"Yeah, but he's always bounced back!" she protested.

"His luck can only hold out for so long," said George. "Maybe it's time for a job in the rear with the gear."

"I know..." she said and her voice trailed off. "But this is his life and what he loves to do!"

"I think he loves you more," said George. "And you know I'll keep him safe waiting for you."

"I know," she said and sniffed once again.

"Something else going on?" asked George.

"The unit has some issues right now. The new brigade commander isn't exactly panning out like we thought he might. Thomas is under some pretty good stress right now," she said.

"Taking a toll on all of you?" asked George.

"We all look up to him, so yeah," said Amber. "Wasn't like this before."

“All units go through some rough patches,” said George. “And I called in every marker I could trying to get that pretentious hoo-ha assigned someplace else. Unfortunately, I’m just a simple Sergeant Major assigned to a backwater training school.”

“You’re more than that Daddy,” said Amber.

“But that doesn’t matter. Keep your heads up and your tails clean and it will work out, I promise you,” said George.

“Enough of my problems,” said Amber. “How are Mom and sis?”

“Your Mom’s doing good. And will be worried sick about you when I hit her with this news. Your poor husband has seven Purple Hearts now and you still have yet to be wounded. Call me crazy, but the numbers will catch up with you eventually,” said George.

“I’m a firm believer in not sticking your head up when you don’t have to and shooting before the other guy can get a shot off,” said Amber as she repeated the advice given to her by her father some years before.

“Seems vaguely familiar,” he laughed. “Your sister is doing okay as well. Misses Stu tremendously, but is bearing it well.”

“I’ll be in her same boat soon enough,” said Amber.

“When is Heath getting shipped out?” asked George.

“He’s going to Germany first then heading for San Antonio. It would be nice to see some family when he arrives; even if it is in laws,” she chuckled. “So please don’t give him a hard time.”

“I haven’t given him a hard time since before the wedding!” protested George.

“And right before we shipped out to Texas and after North Carolina and before we went to Iceland, Britain, Europe and before he came back over the last time,” she laughed.

“So a father trying to make sure his daughter is okay is a bad thing?” asked George.

“No, it’s what makes you my daddy,” she smiled at him, her spirits momentarily uplifted.

“I’ll see about getting a ride down there,” said George. “We have flights going out of Peterson and Buckley to that area fairly often.”

“If you don’t mind,” said Amber. “And make sure he takes it easy this time. I want a husband when this war is over.”

“The same could be said about my daughter,” said George, the father in him still coming out.

“This is the life I chose,” she said. “And I could turn my back on it about as easily as you.”

“Your mother always said we were a lot alike on the inside,” he smiled.

“Don’t tell Mom,” laughed Amber. “She still thinks I’m coming home to pop out grandkids.”

“When it’s over, I expect a whole house full,” laughed George.

“Hey, I’m going to get off here. Tying up the satellite lines for personal chat is frowned upon highly, especially by our new commander. Give my love to Mom and Misty and everyone else we left behind,” said Amber.

“Will do,” said George. “But one more thing.”

“Sure,” said Amber.

“Well, two things,” said George. “First, take care of yourself. Second, help Thomas out as much as possible. The burden of command will get heavy after a while.”

“I will,” she replied. “On both accounts.”

“Bye, bye little girl,” said George. “Love you.”

“Bye Daddy,” she said and not even trying to argue the “little girl” point. “Love you too.”

Amber cut the connection and headed out to find Darren Thompson, Dave Lawson and Rick Jones. She knew the three of them knew Thomas as well as anyone and probably needed to be made aware of what her father picked up. Amber and her father were close enough to be able to read each other’s emotions and she knew he was saying a lot by not saying much. He had picked up on the stress Thomas was under and mentioned it. And to Amber, that meant her father was concerned. And if he was concerned, she knew the rest of the team needed to keep a watchful eye out as well.

CHAPTER 3

Date/Time: 15 March/1117

Location: Joint Special Operations Division Headquarters, Prague, Czech Republic

“No joy sir. We have to assume he was captured,” said the Senior Master Sergeant Pararescue Jumper on the J-SOD staff.

“How can we assume that?” asked the Colonel in charge of the rescue attempt.

“We’ve had teams crawling all over the place down there. They think they found where he landed, but there are vehicle tracks all over the place and at least two dozen different sets of footprints,” said the PJ. He had been injured in a rescue attempt in Poland and had not fully recovered enough to get back on the job. His job at the headquarters was to advise the staff on the capabilities of the various PJ units assigned to the J-SOD. “With the amount of enemy troops in that area, we have to assume they snatched him up almost as soon as he landed.”

“Any indication of where they might have taken him?” asked the Colonel.

“Not really sir. We are taking a look at the aerial recon photos of the area, but we don’t have anything definite yet,” said the PJ. “The local Aussie intel unit seems to think he was taken to a possible camp near Ružomberok. Not sure about that though.”

“What kind of camp?” asked the Colonel.

“Supposedly an abandoned staging facility,” said the PJ.

“Keep looking. We’ll get some additional teams on it,” said the Colonel as a way of dismissal. He thought about the downed pilot and needed a location to start a rescue from. There were several special operations teams close by that could perform a rescue if needed and all they needed was a location and reliable intelligence. In the meantime, he would put more human assets on the ground in a search and found the 14th Special Operations Battalion was nearby. They had been pulled from the rotation a lot lately since they were being over tasked by their parent unit with useless details, but this kind of milk run should be a walk in the park for them. He drafted a message to send to them and put it out to be sent with the daily traffic to their command center, hoping the Major in charge would see it as a somewhat easy tasking.

As he sent out the message, he never knew what chain of events he was putting into motion and what the eventual outcome would be.

“Eat, food,” said the guard in broken English as he tossed a small portion of rice and a small piece of mutton. Some of the rice spilled out of the bowl onto the dirty floor and the piece of mutton bounced onto his leg.

Williams looked up as the steel door slammed back shut with only a sliver of light coming in through the gap in the top. He was hungry, certainly, and knew he needed nourishment if he was planning any sort of escape. Scraping the rice off the floor, he picked it up and looked at the dirt on the outside. But hunger took over and he gobbled it down without thinking. Doing the same with the mutton, he knew he needed more than the simple items to survive. And water, he needed water. He had been dehydrated before and knew it wasn't something he wanted to go through again. He knew it would be some time before they brought by the small cup of water, more to keep him alive than nourish him, and tried to think of ways of escaping once again.

The message started, blurring his thoughts once again as the soft voice spoke to him. He knew it was all propaganda, but also knew the longer he listened to it, the more apt he would be to believe it. He knew it was untrue, but it kept eating away at his brain as the tone would waver from time to time and get his attention once again.

Suddenly he heard footsteps in the hallway and the door was opened. Two guards pulled him out and half walked and half drug him back into the interrogation room. After getting inside, they commenced to beating him once again. No questions were asked; no points were made. This was purely hatred being shown as the fury of their attacks was relentless and they showed him no mercy. As he curled up in a ball, a thought formed in the back of his mind. While he had given the token attention to pass the course during his pre-deployment training, the Texan Armed Forces Code of Conduct came into his mind as sharp as he had seen it on the overhead projector. It was little different than the US Code of Conduct, but added in an important seventh article.

“I am a Texan, proud of a strong heritage. I will continue to survive and remember that my country will not let me down and will do all they can do to rescue me.”

As the beating continued, this verse flashed into his mind as he attempted to protect his face and knew his armed forces would eventually free him. A kick landed on the side of his head jolted his thoughts back to the present as he was dazed enough to lower his guard for a moment. Suddenly, the door to the room flew open and yelling was heard in Arabic. The guards paused for a moment before one last kick was delivered to his midsection. Williams groaned on the floor until he was moved slightly and gentle hands tried pulling his away from his face.

“No, please let me look,” said a voice in accented English.

Williams resisted, but was confused. The man seemed sincere in his attempts to help and he let his guard down slightly and uncovered his face. An IU Major was looking down at him with concern on his face.

“Please, let me see what damage they caused,” said the yet to be identified Major.

Williams pulled his hands away and brought them down to his sore midsection. After looking for a moment, the Major barked an order at one of the guards and they quickly retreated away. Returning, they handed over a green box with the Red Crescent on top. The Major opened the first aid kit and grabbed a package before ripping it open. He barked another order at the guard and sent him scurrying off before gently dabbing the gauze on Williams' face.

"This may hurt a little," said the Major as he tried to clean the cut.

"Who...who are you?" asked Williams weakly as he winced from the touch of the gauze.

"I am Major Caleb Aziz," he said and grabbed at another package. "This will hurt. It is...I do not remember the English word."

The Major dabbed the iodine pad on the cut as Williams grunted once again. "It hurts!"

"It will clean the wound," said Aziz as he used the pad sparingly on the smaller cuts and finished up with the gauze. "I am sorry for the guard's behavior."

"Thanks," said Williams as another man entered the room. Apparently he was a doctor of some sort since he started poking and prodding at Williams to see if anything hurt. Aziz provided the translation.

"He is doctor and asks if any of this hurts," said Aziz. Williams nodded at selected points as the so called doctor felt his midsection. After completing his examination, the doctor said something briefly to Aziz and was rewarded with a nod in return. He departed the room and the guards picked up Williams and sat him in a chair. A cup of water appeared in front of him and a pack of cigarettes was set on the table.

"Drink, it is water," said Aziz. "You want smoke, no?"

"No, I don't smoke," said Williams as he grasped at the metal cup and saw the water inside. It looked clean enough to drink and he felt the liquid wetting down his dry throat. The guard refilled it from a pitcher on the ledge in the room and Williams drank down the next cup.

"I am sorry for the behavior," said Aziz. "But we must return you to your cell."

"Okay," said Williams simply as he resigned to going back to the small box they were keeping him in.

"I have no medicine to give you. Unfortunately, your bombers destroyed the convoy that was transporting medicine to one of the hospitals nearby," explained Aziz as the guards picked him up by his arms to take him back.

"Did they now?" asked Williams.

"Yes, it was meant for the civilian hospital. You fly bombers, correct?" asked Aziz.

“I am required to give my name, rank, service number and date of birth,” said Williams as they led him down the hallway.

“I understand,” said Aziz as they crammed him back into the cell where he continued his solitude and the message started playing once again. He knew it was too early to start any form of serious interrogation based on sympathy, but Aziz also knew he had just planted the seed of doubt in the mind of the Texan prisoner.

“So we are facing at least two battalions in strength at Objective Casio as well as the armored regiment from Objective Omega,” said the Brigade S-2.

“Can we hold them in place if needed?” asked the Brigade Commander.

“Absolutely. They are sitting at approximately seventy percent strength and don’t have the typical armor support of a normal infantry battalion,” said the S-2. “They may be closer to the eighty percent mark, but not anywhere near one hundred percent.”

“But they still hold the commanding terrain,” said the Colonel.

“Not really sir. The problem that faces us is the front. We have a limited amount of maneuver room and could only feed two companies at a time through the lines,” said the Brigade S-3.

“We could move forward with three, but it won’t be easy,” said the Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the 2nd Infantry Battalion, responsible for holding the front at Objective Casio, better known as the Slovakian city of Ružomberok.

“The terrain favors maneuver and should be forced with two. If you try to cram three into that narrow corridor, you face problems getting your units to maneuver,” said the Colonel.

“But we can do it. We’ve done it before,” said the Lieutenant Colonel.

“Unacceptable risk,” said the Colonel. “Statistics and simulations show you could take serious casualties.”

“How about a recon of the area?” asked the Lieutenant Colonel commanding the 1st Battalion.

“We could conduct another in depth recon of the area,” said Thomas Dayfield. He normally kept quiet during these meetings, but this remark was intended for him.

“No, we have the data we need from the intelligence assets for the moment,” said the Colonel. “Best to wait until closer to the start of the spring offensive.”

“Even though the IU is showing signs of digging in further and we could take this objective beforehand? It could give us a better position when we start the offensive,” suggested the Brigade S-3.

“No, your orders are clear. We are to conduct limited attacks within that sector mainly keeping the IU off guard,” said the Colonel.

“And still getting casualties in the process?” asked the XO of the Brigade.

“Well within acceptable norms,” said the Colonel.

“The city of Ružomberok commands a crossroads that can and will help when the spring offensive starts. It would be better to have that in hand before mounting any kind of offensive,” suggested the Commander of the 1st Battalion.

“No, it’s too risky,” said the Colonel.

“How about a little further west at Hrboltova instead? The river narrows out enough to ford and puts us into a position to flank Ružomberok prior to the offensive,” suggested the Commander of the 3rd Battalion.

“We have limited bridging assets and if they are destroyed, they will be hard to replace,” said the Colonel.

“But does give us a decided advantage when it comes to Ružomberok,” said the 1st Battalion Commander. “And that kind of edge would be critical for Ticonderoga in the spring.”

“Gentlemen, I won’t even push it forward to the Division. The potential losses of an operation to seize that target are enough for me to think it’s a bad idea. When the time is right, we’ll strike, but not before then,” said the Colonel. “Since there’s nothing else, we will adjourn.”

The staff meeting broke up and Thomas was on his way out when he was stopped by the aide to the Colonel. He was brought over and kept standing for five minutes until the Colonel acknowledged his presence.

“Your unit is tasked with relieving a company from the 1st Battalion. They are due to rotate back to the rear for R and R,” said the Colonel.

“I was led to believe our unit was next on the batting order for R and R,” said Thomas.

“That unit was hit by artillery fire the other day and needs some down time to get over the shock,” said the Colonel.

But Thomas knew better. The artillery fire was less than five minutes of a barrage and hit no closer than five hundred meters of any positions of the 1st Battalion. In fact, the commander

even joked about the poor shots the IU had been afterwards. “Sir, you are using my unit to replace a conventional unit?”

“Yes, unless you feel your unit is inadequate to the task,” said the Colonel.

“I think overqualified would be a better answer sir,” said Thomas.

“So they are better than the troops they are replacing, or so you suggest,” said the Colonel.

“With all due respect sir, my unit is better than the conventional infantry. This is like using a Ferrari to replace a Volkswagen for a trip to the supermarket,” said Thomas.

“You have your orders Major, were there any questions?” asked the Colonel.

“Yes, when is my unit going to get some stand down? We’ve been passed over three times already and my troopers are starting to fatigue,” said Thomas.

“Are you complaining about being a little tired? Well Major, that’s just war for you. Everyone is a little tired and we probably won’t sleep until it’s all over,” said the Colonel. “I’ll let you know when your unit will rotate back to the rear.”

“And what do I tell my people?” asked Thomas, suddenly starting to get angry.

“To suck it up and drive on like we all have been,” growled the Colonel. “You are dismissed.”

Instead of trying to sway the Colonel’s decision as well as losing his temper himself, Thomas wisely walked away. The urge to punch the Colonel in the mouth would do his unit little good and he knew there would be consequences, although most people would have felt it justified. As he walked out of the Brigade Headquarters, the S-1 caught up with him.

“Tom, I’m sorry. I tried to sneak your unit in, but the Colonel preempted the orders,” said the Captain.

“Thanks for trying Dan. When can we expect to be back into the rotation?” asked Thomas.

“The Colonel dropped you down to the bottom...again,” said the Captain.

“Are you serious?” demanded Thomas. “Eight more weeks and we might get a week off?”

“I’ll keep trying to sneak something in, but the Colonel has it in for you. I don’t know why, but he does,” said the Captain.

“That’s mismanagement and abuse of power if I’ve ever seen it!” exclaimed Thomas.

“Listen, best advice is to lay low. Maybe he’ll forget about it and I can sneak you in,” said the Captain.

“He’s as likely to forget about me as he would a case of herpes,” said Thomas. “I’m thinking of heading to the Division and file a complaint.”

“Which won’t do any good. He’s buds with the inspector general,” said the Captain.

“An audience with the Division Commander then,” said Thomas. “I’ve got to do something!”

“Listen, the S-3 says the 1st Battalion isn’t facing significant IU threats. It’s still more or less on the front, but you won’t have to fill any missions right then,” said the Captain.

“And filling a foxhole instead,” said Thomas.

“I put in a call to the 1st Battalion commander. He understands what is going on and will be putting your unit on ready reserve,” said the Captain.

“It’s something, but not nearly enough to help out. And you and I both know that,” said Thomas. “Listen, my people are starting to show serious signs of fatigue and everyone else in this Brigade has rotated back to the rear except us. We’ve been on the go for the past six months straight and it’s wearing at my patience. I might understand if the rest of the units were in constant contact each and every day, but this is getting ridiculous!”

“You could try pulling some strings through the J-SOD,” said the Captain.

“I might,” said Thomas, thinking over the idea.

“I’ve seen it as well and certain parts of the Division staff have seen it. But since our Colonel has political influences, it’s a hard sell getting him replaced or any of his orders getting countered without a good reason,” said the Captain.

“And all the while my troops get wounded and possibly even killed without getting any rest?” asked Thomas. “Is that not a good enough reason?”

“As he said, it’s within norms. However, I don’t agree with it. But until you take massed casualties which garner the attention of the higher headquarters, they continue to ignore the problems,” said the Captain and immediately regretted it.

“I have to take massed casualties in order to get some relief?!” growled Thomas.

“Not like that Tom, but until something happens that gives the General a reason to can the Colonel, this will go on. So far he’s done nothing to earn replacement,” said the Captain.

“Sorry, I should have known you weren’t saying that. I’m just a little tired,” said Thomas.

“We’ll get you some relief as soon as possible,” said the Captain. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, the replacement for Scott Carlson? Anything more on that?” asked Thomas.

“Nothing yet. Give me some time to work it,” said the Captain.

Thomas wandered away from the staff meeting, still fuming over the current on goings concerning his unit. The troopers were starting to show fatigue and making minor mistakes. And while they had been relatively safe, minor mistakes could turn to major ones before long and he would end up writing a letter to one of the families in his unit explaining why their son or daughter gave their life on the altar of freedom. Or someone will be writing Sharon to explain the same thing, he thought as he moved towards their compound. His mood must have showed as he went through the gate and was seen by members of his team.

“Getting bumped back again, aren’t we?” asked Major Mark Williams as he and the remainder of the leadership were waiting.

“Yeah,” sighed Thomas. “And filling in for a company from 1st Battalion so they can get some R and R. Apparently they were the victims of a near miss of an artillery barrage the other day.”

“We knew it was coming,” said Command Chief Master Sergeant Greg Henry. “Don’t beat yourself up over this.”

“I cannot understand for the life of me why or how that man gets away with what he does!” exclaimed Thomas, who felt a little more comfortable with the friends around him.

“It’ll get noticed eventually,” said Darren.

“Hopefully before someone gets killed,” said Thomas and immediately regretted it. The 14th had taken casualties along the way, some were close friends, others those that joined along the way. But as the unit was one large family, all losses were mourned heavily by the unit.

“Keep training and working things out. The strategic missions coming from the J-SOD aren’t as bad as they have been,” said Mark.

“You think someone up there noticed it as well?” asked Dave Lawson.

“Probably so,” said Mark. “They have to notice the increased mission reports coming from the tactical level and how we aren’t exactly getting a break.”

“Point being, we are overtasked and getting fatigued,” said Thomas. “There are limits to every unit, including this one, and we are getting close to the stage of making dumb mistakes.”

“This is 1st Battalion’s staging area,” said Mark as he pointed at the map. “Pretty good ways away from where the active shooting is. Gives us a chance to reconsolidate and work in some of the new guys. It’ll be training, but at least we can get some quality sleep in.”

“I know, but nothing would beat getting some quality time behind the lines where we could sleep in if we wanted to,” said Thomas.

“Patience,” suggested Mark. “Anyway, when do we move?”

“You know, I was so mad I didn’t even ask,” said Thomas. “You mind? I’m liable to start lopping off heads if I go back up there.”

“Yeah, I can handle it,” said Mark as he departed. He also saw the signs of stress in Thomas and wanted to do whatever he could to help out. But Thomas typically took on a lot and internalized his problems. Getting him to open up wasn’t easy. Getting him to release some of the minor jobs he took on was almost impossible. To get him to admit defeat though was like making the earth stop spinning. But they would help out as best as they could along the way. As he reached the headquarters, he stopped by the S-3 office to find out exactly when they were supposed to move.

“Hiya Neal,” said Mark as he went into the small office in the trailer.

“Hey Mark,” said the S-3. “Sorry about the rotation FUBAR.”

“I’m not going to say it’s okay by any means,” said Mark with a slight edge. “An apology the first time was okay, the second time got old, the third time was unacceptable. This time it gets to be downright personal and borderline criminal.”

“We can’t...” he started to say and looked off to the side where another member of the staff was working. He nodded his head and they went outside to speak in private. After getting out of earshot, the S-3 took out a cigar and lit it up. “I can only say I’m sorry, but I know that doesn’t help. But our hands are tied here.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Mark.

“Listen, I’ve got people in my own office spying on me which is why I’m out here talking to you. Anyway, the informal orders, no paper trail mind you, are that your unit sees no down time as long as our conventional units are in direct contact with the enemy,” said the S-3.

“Which the conventional units are perpetually in contact and not due to be rotated back to the rear any time soon,” said Mark. “But more to the point, we are perpetually in contact as well, a whole lot more often and taking far more casualties than the line units. Which makes that order completely illegal and way out of line.”

“Which has been reported up and bounced right back in our laps,” said the S-3.

“Explain,” said Mark as he crossed his arms.

“We have some channels heading upwards, the IG, the Division Commander, the J-3, so on and so forth. Problem is the Division Chief of Staff controls all aspects of the meeting on high and

just so happens to be a friend and former classmate of you know who. Additionally, the IG happens to be the one that helped sway the decision to get him assigned here. He needs combat time to get promoted and will only get there here. What we can hope is he is relieved by the spring offensive and we get someone in here that knows what they are doing,” said the S-3.

“That’s the most moronic thing I’ve heard!” protested Mark.

“It may very well be, but the problem is we are not in direct combat at this time. So his inadequacies of command are not showing up right now. If the shooting starts, yes, they come to light. But right now there is no reason for the Division commander to replace him,” said the S-3.

“So this entire Brigade has to take significant casualties in order for someone on high to realize he sucks and has about as much business being in charge as my cat does?” said Mark with a slight rise in his voice.

“We certainly hope not,” said the S-3. “The XO and I are attempting to get him up to speed on the tactical aspects of the job. Mostly the fact we should be running the operations. Problem we run into is he believes the training he got back when he was a butter bar still applies today. Way different world of war now and way different methods of doing things. Something he flat refuses to come to terms with.”

“The Division Commander has to see it at the sand table exercises you guys pull,” said Mark.

“He does, but again, until we start filling body bags he cannot be replaced. He has significant political connections in North America,” said the S-3.

“And I thought we were a non-political military,” scoffed Mark.

“For the most part we are,” said the S-3. “Unfortunately, some have refused to change from the ways in place prior to the Fall and accept the reality we need combat leaders and not managers these days. And he has slipped through the cracks.”

“So why the down on us anyway? We should be making him look good,” asked Mark.

“Have no idea to be honest with you. He’s had it in for your unit since day one,” said the S-3. “Nothing I can put my finger on, but I think it has to do with the fact you guys do get publicity and promoted generally faster than normal officers.”

“So we get blasted for doing our jobs?” asked Mark.

“Appears so,” said the S-3. “Again, this is a guess of mine.”

“Okay, I can’t sit here and talk about this all night with you. I understand your pain, but understand ours as well,” said Mark.

“We do feel your pain and it’s been addressed,” said the S-3.

“Anyway, when do we rotate up to the line?” asked Mark.

“Tomorrow at 0700. Movement by truck,” said the S-3.

“Okay, we’ll be ready,” said Mark.

“Again, I’m sorry,” said the S-3 as Mark was departing. Mark just shook his head slightly and headed back towards the encampment without saying another word.

CHAPTER 4

Date/Time: 18 March/1422

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“How long are those guys up there for?” asked Chief Warrant Officer 3 Stephen Garcia.

“Supposed to be a week I think,” said the communications specialist inside the secure center.

“You have a look at this?” asked Stephen.

“No Chief,” said the tech. “Just deciphered it as was required.”

“Okay, get on the horn and get me transport up to 1st Battalion’s area,” said Garcia. “And let Captain Shannon Parsons know I’m heading up to the line for a while and request she mind the store.”

“Roger that sir,” said the tech and started looking up numbers to call. He sent one of the orderlies to find Captain Parsons who was currently injured to let her know she was nominally in charge of the unit while Chief Garcia was away even though she outranked him. She was currently working the night Officer In Charge since she was still on light duty from having her appendix removed.

Stephen headed out and saw a vehicle was heading towards him. As it came to a stop, he wavered before tossing in his bag into the back. “You heading for 1st Battalion?”

“Yes sir,” said the driver. “Convoy was about to leave when your guys called us.”

“Can’t beat that timing,” said Stephen as he jumped into the passenger seat and sped back to the waiting convoy of supplies and replacements. The convoy got underway almost immediately and set off the main brigade operations area and headed northerly direction towards the encampment and staging area of the reserve battalion at the moment. Stephen knew it wasn’t exactly down time per se, but the troopers of his unit were getting a needed break away from the Brigade leadership and the endless details they managed to find for them. He had also seen Thomas starting to break down under the strain of leadership and had quietly made calls of his own to his contacts in the intelligence circles he dealt with. However, there had been nothing back yet.

They eventually ended up at the encampment area and were checked by the guard post at the entrance. While the convoy was friendly, nobody was taking any chances with the security and the M2 machine gun continued to point at the vehicles as they pulled up one at a time, had their identity and movement orders checked and were given a cursory inspection before being allowed to proceed. Stephen was lucky that he was only fourth in line and the driver got directions to the unit before dropping him off near the area where the infantry fighting vehicles were located in

camouflaged positions as well as the tents for the members. Retrieving his bag out of the back, he headed towards the first tent and was rewarded with members of the unit inside already.

“Hey Steve, what brings you to these parts?” asked Chief Warrant Officer 2 Ashley Scott, one of the other intelligence specialist assigned to the unit. “I thought you were with the detail that was supposed to stay behind and man the command center.”

“Got some info that came in from J-SOD that Tom needs to look at. Is he around?” he asked.

“He’s at the Battalion CP right now, but should be back at any time,” said Ashley.

“Keeping you guys busy?” asked Stephen.

“Been catching up on sleep. The Battalion Commander knows what we’ve been through lately and has kept us out of the rotation as much as possible. We’ve only been up to the line once since we got here,” she replied.

“Nice to know someone cares,” said Stephen. “While it’s not R and R, it’s something.”

“Sure could use some down time away from here though. A lazy day with some good French wine in the Rivera? Or even some good Italian wine on the beaches in Sicily?” chuckled Ashley.

“I’m detecting a pattern of wine,” laughed Stephen. “Or is that whine?”

“Don’t get much good stuff ‘round these parts,” laughed Ashley and ignoring the barb. “What kind of info did they send?”

“Something about a pilot that got shot down and they want us to recheck the area he was in. Happened reasonably close to our AO,” said Stephen.

“Easy enough,” said Ashley as the field phone in the tent rang. She answered it and listened as the message was relayed. “Okay, also Stephen Garcia is here to speak with you as well...okay, I’ll let him know...how long...okay, we’ll send him over...out.”

“Tom says he and the Battalion Commander are going up to troop the line and they’ll be there for a while. He said you can tag along if you like or wait around,” said Ashley.

“Nah, I’ll head up there with him,” said Stephen. “Where do I need to wander?”

“I’ll grab someone to show you,” said Ashley as she headed out of the tent with Stephen in tow. They headed down two tents before stepping inside. “Where’s the rookie?”

“Jill, important people to see you,” said Staff Sergeant Nancy Dugger from her cot.

“Didn’t know I was important,” chuckled Stephen.

“You’re not, but Jill doesn’t know that,” laughed Nancy.

“Not sure I know how to take that,” laughed Stephen.

“Yes Chief?” asked Jill as she approached.

“I need you to run this gentleman over to the CP and link him up with Tom,” said Ashley.

“Will do,” said Jill as she scampered to grab her rifle and gear. She was putting on her helmet as she returned. “Ready?”

“I’m following you,” said Stephen as he motioned with his hand towards the opening.

“I’m not sure that’s wise,” said Nancy with a semi-straight face.

“I think I can find my way to the CP,” said Jill.

“You got lost on the way to the chow line,” remarked Nancy.

“You’re my sister, what’s that say about you?” asked Jill.

“I’d say it’s a good thing you were adopted,” deadpanned Nancy.

“Much as I’d like to continue hearing the family feud, I don’t want to keep Tom waiting,” laughed Stephen before Jill could retort.

“It’s a good thing for Nancy, I was about to let loose,” said Jill as she kicked at Nancy’s cot on her way by and jiggled it enough to cause Nancy to make a mistake in the letter she was writing. She earned a growl in response and left before anything further could be done. They walked through the encampment area and arrived at the Command Post before being challenged by a sentry. And while Stephen was on the authorization list, Jill was not so she left him with the sentry and returned to the tent to continue the poke and prod match with her sister. The sentry called over a roving patrol and had Stephen escorted into the central area of the Battalion command post area where he caught up with Thomas.

“You want to head out with Colonel Jacobson and me to the line?” asked Thomas as he shook Stephen’s hand.

“I don’t know if they pay me enough to be going towards the gunfire,” laughed Stephen.

“I would hope your intel weenies aren’t as bad as mine,” laughed Thomas as he turned to Lieutenant Colonel Micah Jacobson.

“I’m not sure I can even find mine when the shooting starts,” laughed Jacobson. “Chief, good to see you again.”

“You too Colonel,” said Stephen as he took the offered hand.

“Ready?” asked Jacobson.

“No security escort?” asked Thomas.

“Nope, makes for a larger target,” said Jacobson. “The IU forces see someone with an official entourage they might think it’s someone worth taking a shot at. And as much as I like the action, I’d prefer a quiet trip of you two, the Sergeant Major and myself.”

“Always said you were a reasonable guy,” observed Thomas.

“Now if I can only find my Sergeant Major...” said Jacobson.

“Right behind you sir,” said the Sergeant Major. “And ready to go.”

“Sneaky one my Sergeant Major is,” laughed Jacobson.

“Be glad I agreed to this trip sir,” chuckled the Sergeant Major. “Without me, you officer types would probably end up somewhere in Albania.”

“You have this kind of insubordination with your enlisted folks?” laughed Jacobson who got along great with his senior enlisted member. And although it seemed like insubordination, while they were away from the remainder of the troops, a little back and forth was okay just to keep the spirits of all involved up.

“No, generally it’s far worse,” laughed Thomas.

“I didn’t get that impression from Chief Henry,” remarked the Sergeant Major as they departed the command post.

“You haven’t seen him away from everyone else,” laughed Thomas. “Or when the girlfriend puts a whipping on him. You think he’s tough? Come watch a redhead destroy him with nothing but a look.”

“My wife is a redhead,” laughed the Sergeant Major. “I know better than to cross her.”

“My wife isn’t a redhead, but has the temper associated with them,” chuckled Thomas.

“Don’t all wives?” asked Jacobson.

“True,” said Thomas. They were approaching the front trace where the 1st Battalion had two Companies forward and two in reserve. Before they got to the edge of the line, Thomas took the report from Stephen and looked it over. “Nothing significant here so to speak. Should be a cakewalk from the looks of it.”

“True, but they want us out there pretty quickly. J-SOD seems to think he hasn’t been moved to one of the larger camps yet,” said Stephen.

“Can’t do anything until they pull us from here,” said Thomas as he handed the papers back.

“I’m under the impression the J-SOD will be making that request before long,” said Stephen.

“Okay, as soon as we get replaced out here we’ll send out six teams,” said Thomas.

“Want me to get the planning done in advance?” asked Stephen.

“If you don’t mind,” said Thomas. “We don’t have access to what we need up here.”

“I’ll take care of it as soon as I return,” said Stephen. “Anything heading back to Brigade this afternoon Colonel?”

“Probably so,” said Jacobson. “Check with the S-3 when we get back.”

“Will do,” said Stephen as they approached the first dug in positions for the armored vehicles assigned to Alpha Company. The infantry were seen in their fighting positions to the left and the right with one up and one down. They were challenged and heard the distinctive sound of an M-4 safety being turned. After answering correctly, they were admitted to the area around the track by the Platoon Sergeant of Second Platoon.

“CP called and said you were on your way,” said the Sergeant First Class as he slung his M-4.

“Anything new to report Sergeant?” asked Jacobson.

“Nothing in particular,” he replied. “The IU replaced a company of troops this morning and rotated the old ones back into the city.”

“Were they in the open long enough to get some fire on them?” asked Jacobson.

“Not direct fire no. The Captain passed along the request to Brigade for artillery but by the time the old man got around to approving it, the targets were gone,” said the Platoon Sergeant.

“Typical,” said Jacobson. “Is your Lieutenant around?”

“He’s getting some down time sir,” said the Platoon Sergeant. “Over by Track 3.”

“Everything okay with him?” asked Jacobson.

“I’ve got a green Lieutenant on his first trip up to the line,” said the Platoon Sergeant. “To say he hasn’t gotten a wink of sleep since we’ve been here is an understatement.”

“Is he coming along okay otherwise?” asked Jacobson.

“Decently so sir,” said the Platoon Sergeant as they began heading up the line. “He’s a little hesitant, but relies on the NCOs and the Company Commander to help out. Just green.”

“Not a problem I hope?” asked Jacobson.

“No, he’s got good instincts. Just getting him to act on them is a work in progress,” said the Platoon Sergeant. “Just takes time as you know.”

“That it does,” said Jacobson as they came to the second Improved Bradley Fighting Vehicle in the platoon and were challenged once again. After giving the correct password, they were admitted to the area and continued checking on the line as well as the troops involved. While it wasn’t necessary, it was a leadership function that the troops saw the commander care enough to come by and check on them in the cold misery of the long Eastern European winter.

“I see they haven’t changed the defensive positions around the bridges since we did that recon,” observed Stephen after staring at the area with his binoculars. The bridges over the southern side of the city were just barely visible around the edge of the city as were the defenses.

“Not that we can tell,” said Jacobson. “They move around the front trace defensive works from time to time, but the bridge defenses are fairly static.”

“You actually saw the unedited report?” asked Thomas.

“I did,” said Jacobson. “The Brigade S-2 and I go back a ways and I get some nuggets from time to time.”

“Dangerous to keep the static positions like that. When the spring offensive kicks off, some artillery and precision munitions right on top of their heads will allow you to walk right across without breaking a sweat,” remarked Thomas.

“Surprised they haven’t rigged it for demo yet,” observed the Sergeant Major.

“I’d say that will change once we start moving troops forward for the offensive,” said Stephen.

“I would have done it already,” said Jacobson. “But that’s just me.”

“Suppose we could be glad you’re on our side,” chuckled Thomas as they approached the Second Platoon’s area and again were challenged. This time an M1A3 Abrams tank was seen through the concealment in its firing revetment. “Wasn’t expecting the armor yet.”

“The Company Commander moved around the tanks and dispersed them between the company. They have slightly better fields of fire here and up on the hill compared to where they were before. Even though they are split up, the platoon commander and sergeant know their business and I agreed to it,” explained Jacobson.

“No matter what, it’s helpful to have sixty tons of armor wrapped around you in battle,” said Thomas. “We could learn a lesson from the tread heads.”

“Not real subtle and sneaky though,” laughed the Sergeant Major.

“Nobody ever accused me of being subtle,” laughed Thomas. The Sergeant Major and Stephen went over to talk with the tank crew who was currently outside their vehicle. Jacobson motioned with his head to Thomas to step away from the group for a moment.

“I heard what happened to your unit in the relief rotation,” he said. “Sucks.”

“Sucks isn’t a word I would use. It’s borderline criminal,” said Thomas.

“I’m trying to keep you out of the rotation as much as possible up here and my company commanders all know about it as well. They are understanding and are taking it for the team to get you guys some rest,” said Jacobson.

“We’ll do our time if needed,” said Thomas.

“I know and I know you guys will troop through,” said Jacobson. “But no more than twelve hours up here while we’re on the line at a time.”

“I’m not asking for special favors, Micah,” said Thomas.

“There’s more to it than that,” said Jacobson. “The problem you run into is not a darn one of you know how to operate a Bradley in combat conditions. You can drive it on a controlled course probably, shoot the gun if someone points it in the right direction, but other than replacing the infantry dismounts, I really can’t use you.”

“So you had to keep some of your folks back?” asked Thomas.

“No, I took infantry from other companies that have been getting up to speed on the systems since we paused the offensive. They’re green and nowhere near proficient enough to go into combat, but they are capable of staying alive. So your being here actually decreases the effectiveness of this battalion,” said Jacobson.

“I knew we wouldn’t cover the numbers we replaced, but I hadn’t realized others had to cover more,” said Thomas. “That doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“The Colonel should have known that as well. If he did, it’s gross negligence; if he doesn’t that’s gross incompetence. I know the S-3 and XO would have brought it up though,” said Jacobson. “But he went through with it anyway.”

“So we’re not being rotated up because it puts your battalion at risk,” said Thomas. “To think all our training counts for nothing.”

“Just a different type of training and yes, you can replace the dismounts with no sweat,” said Jacobson. “Listen, your guys and gals are out there getting us valuable information that will end up saving my troopers lives when the spring offensive starts. And if you’re fatigued and demoralized it takes away from the ability to do so. So I’m not asking you to come up here every once in a while; I’m telling you that’s the way it will be. When we rotate back to the rear we have nothing to do except sand table exercises, PT and looking at each other. When you guys rotate back, you have more missions to accomplish. So it’s weird being forward deployed to get some rest, but you will get some rest while you are under my watch.”

Thomas didn’t say what he was thinking, but knew Jacobson was correct. “It is appreciated.”

“Least we can do,” said Jacobson. “It isn’t much, but it is a chance to get caught up on sleep.”

“Sleep isn’t the issue,” said Thomas. “Removal from the front is the only thing that will help.”

“My guys in Charlie Company were pretty happy about getting bumped up in the relief. Until they found out the situation behind it. They volunteered to stay so you guys could take your turn, but the Colonel took my head off when I suggested it,” said Jacobson.

“Tell them I appreciate it when they get back,” said Thomas.

“You’re a pretty popular guy with the troops,” said Jacobson. “Maybe that’s why the old man is bringing the heat on you and your guys.”

“Then he can take it out on me, relieve me, do whatever he wants to. But my troops need to be left out of this,” said Thomas forcefully.

“Okay, not just you specifically, but your unit is pretty popular with the troops as a whole. My guys tend to think fondly of those that help them in a bind,” said Jacobson.

“I’ve thought about jumping the entire chain of command and getting an audience with the Division Commander or his ADM,” said Thomas.

“Probably a bad move,” said Jacobson. “If it fails, you’ll be in way more hot water and potentially get yourself relieved.”

“Then Darren takes over and I’m completely comfortable with him running the unit,” he replied.

“And what happens to you?” asked Jacobson.

“I suppose I get rotated into another unit or sent back Stateside,” said Thomas.

“Where you would end up going out of your mind being away from the action,” said Jacobson. “It’s not your style and you belong here. Some folks were born to do this and you happen to be one of them. Just hang in a little longer and he’ll move along.”

“Hopefully before the spring offensive,” said Thomas.

“Most certainly,” said Jacobson as the Sergeant Major and Stephen returned. They finished checking the line and headed back to the laager to the remainder of the battalion. Thomas and Stephen headed back to the tent area where the remainder of the unit was currently lazing around and getting rested.

“We’re headed back to the line tomorrow morning at 0700,” Thomas announced.

“Some reason we aren’t doing the normal rotation?” asked Darren.

“Jacobson says because we are getting a break. He’s understanding of our current plight,” said Thomas. “And promised us only twelve hours on at any given point in time.”

“That’s not exactly fair to the rest of the guys up here,” said Darren.

“The rest of the Company Commanders decided it was a good plan as well. They know when they get back they are on a normal PT and training schedule while we are doing our primary job. So they know us getting a little more rest than usual is okay,” said Thomas as he repeated what Jacobson had told him on the line.

“Sucks we have to be forward deployed to get some rest,” said Darren.

“That’s what Micah said as well,” chuckled Thomas.

“What’s going on with Stephen?” asked Darren.

“Some tasking from J-SOD to poke around for a downed fighter pilot. They seem to think he might be somewhere in our sector,” said Thomas.

“Going to pull us from here?” asked Darren.

“I’d imagine so,” said Thomas. “They want an in depth recon of the area.”

“Like finding a needle in a haystack,” observed Darren.

“Yeah, but we need to try,” said Thomas.

“Anything else?” asked Darren.

“Nothing critical,” said Thomas as he put the current tasking from the J-SOD out of his mind and focused on their more immediate problems. However, the mission would end up coming back to the forefront in record speed once they found out what the stakes were.

“Orders are clear sir, we have to pull the 14th out of 1st Battalion’s area and back on mission status,” said the Brigade XO.

“Can’t this wait until the end of their rotation?” demanded the Colonel.

“I’m sorry sir, but you know the J-SOD taskings trump our local orders,” said the Brigade XO.

“What’s the point of having a unit under my command if I’m not allowed to command them?” thundered the Brigade Commander.

“We are allowed to administratively task them and operationally as long as it doesn’t interfere with what they get from J-SOD,” said the XO and immediately regretted it.

“You don’t think I know about the command structure?” asked the Colonel angrily.

“My apologies sir, that was not my intent,” said the XO.

“So we have to pull them off the line?” asked the Colonel.

“The tasking they got was clear,” said the XO.

“Fine, send up a company from 3rd Battalion to replace them,” said the Colonel disgustedly.

“Wilco sir,” said the XO.

“What’s the mission for anyway?” asked the Colonel.

“Apparently a fighter was shot down somewhat close to our sector and the J-SOD wants some boots on the ground looking for the pilot,” said the XO.

“And they have nobody else that can check?” asked the Colonel.

“It’s our sector sir and the 14th has the most familiarity with the area,” said the XO.

The Colonel didn’t say anything else as he waved the XO away and went back to the upcoming exercise the Division Commander had planned. He was desperate to make a good impression and had the inner track on the “enemy” troop movements provided by his friend at the Division Staff. He continued to stare at the computer generated map and come up with plans on his own instead of getting his staff involved.

Little did he know events were already set in motion that would expose his weaknesses in the command of a combat unit.

CHAPTER 5

Date/Time: 19 March/1944

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Honey, I’m home,” announced Captain Michael Parsons as he barged into the command tent area and found his wife sitting by a communications terminal.

“If you’re expecting dinner to be ready, it’s over in the brown bag,” she deadpanned and pointed at the box of field rations.

“I’m gone for what seems like an eternity and this is the welcome I get?” he said.

“What did you do to earn anything else?” grinned Captain Shannon Parsons.

“I was a good boy,” he laughed.

“I prefer it when you’re bad,” she said with a wink. “But not until the doc clears me.”

“Have to have a chat with the lad,” laughed Michael and collected a quick kiss. It seemed unusual for family members to serve together, but since neither were in a position of authority over the other, the military turned a blind eye to the practice. “Anything happen?”

“Just those orders from J-SOD. Stephen and I have been working on the details, but we’re kind of short on information,” said Shannon. “Tom around?”

“Headed to headquarters to report back in. Hopefully he only gets the staff duty officer,” said Michael. “He’s grumpy enough as it is.”

“He’s having a rough time,” said Shannon.

“As are we all,” said Michael. “How long until we hit the field again?”

“Depends on the intelligence we get. Unfortunately, J-SOD doesn’t have a whole lot so Stephen is working his contacts right now. And Ashley could help in that regard since she has some folks she knows as well,” said Shannon.

“Want me to grab her?” asked Michael.

“If you’d be so kind,” said Shannon. “But please limit the grabbing.”

“Only to you sexy woman,” he laughed and retreated towards the tent area passing by a roving patrol of the on sight security. Being that the 14th has special intelligence facilities and equipment, they had their own section of the Brigade encampment area fenced off with their own

guard force of selected military police. He followed the fence area and went behind the indirect fire bunker where the tent was located to find Ashley and get her help with some of the contacts she had made in the intelligence circles. Lucky enough, he had caught her just as she had finished dumping her gear and before she hit the latrine area for a much needed shower. "Shannon and Stephen could use some help."

"Sure, what kind?" she asked.

"They are a little short on the intelligence for our upcoming mission and were wondering if you could do that voodoo you do so well in talking to your contacts," he replied.

"Before or after the shower?" asked Ashley.

"Not sure," he stated.

"I'll swing by on my way," she said as she collected her towel and ditty bag. And her ever present rifle and web gear. She headed into the headquarters area and found Shannon looking over some older intelligence reports she had pulled from the central data archives. "Mike said you guys needed some help?"

"I'm gonna beat that husband of mine," said Shannon. "It could have waited until you finished with a shower."

"Meh, I'm here already. Tell you what, I'll put out the messages to see who's up and about right now and head for the showers. If they respond while I'm gone, ask them politely if they can hold on for a few minutes," said Ashley.

"Sounds like a plan," said Shannon as she relinquished the terminal. Ashley quickly started typing out messages to her various contacts and sending them via email and instant message over the secure communications terminal. It didn't take long and she departed for the latrine, hoping all the hot water hadn't been used by the others already.

"I put in a call to Hermann the German hoping he might shed some light on the situation," said Stephen as he reappeared from another terminal.

"How's he doing?" asked Shannon. *Major Hermann Graf* of the *Bundeswehr* was one of the more frequently used back channels for information used by the unit. While he wasn't the top intelligence officer in the German Army, he had a knack for finding little tidbits of information that proved extremely valuable in the long run. And in quid pro quo fashion, they often did him favors when he asked so the relationship between the two was extremely sound.

"Didn't get to talk to him. His assistant said he was out for the evening and would try to let him know we called," said Stephen as he handed over an email he had printed out. "And this came in on the official inbox."

Shannon took it and scanned over the contents. "Tom's not going to be happy."

“He knew it was coming, but thought we had a little more time to get things settled,” said Stephen. “As a minimum get a replacement before shipping him out.”

“Want to let him know?” asked Shannon.

“No, let’s let Tom know first,” said Stephen and if by magic, Thomas Dayfield appeared behind them catching them by surprise.

“Let Tom know what?” he asked.

Stephen handed over the email that was ordering Scott Carlson to the Combat Medic School at Camp Colby in Kansas. With orders to leave within two days. Thomas looked them over and handed them back without saying a word. They knew he was slightly upset since Brigade had promised him some time to find a replacement and for Carlson to make a determination. And while Scott had made the choice to head to the school, he had only decided that morning and it hadn’t been reported yet. So the Brigade Commander had made yet another decision for the unit which would leave them shorthanded at best or having a member that was unfamiliar with the team tactics at worst. And Rick Jones’ team would have to be pulled from the rotation to get the new member up to speed before going back into the field. Dayfield headed over to the terminal and checked his email without saying anything else, not finding anything of note.

“Let Scott know please,” said Thomas as he sat back with a sigh. “And let Rick know the search for a new member is on the front burner for him.”

“Roger that,” said Stephen as he departed to find both the individuals. Shannon came over and sat down next to Thomas and spoke in a low voice so the others in the center couldn’t hear her.

“Problems at Brigade?” she asked.

“About had my head taken off because we got pulled from the line. I had the whole guilt trip of ‘your unit isn’t special and now another has to pay’ blah, blah from his majesty laid on me. It didn’t work of course and I bit my tongue, but that man just aggravates the life out of me,” said Thomas. “And it’s not helping that you guys are paying the price.”

“We know there’s nothing you can do about it,” said Shannon.

“But I should be able to,” said Thomas. “Not exactly effective leadership when you watch your own unit start breaking down from the inside.”

“Ever hear of the old saying of this too shall pass?” asked Shannon. “It works in this situation as well. He will move on eventually and we’ll still be here.”

“Hopefully before we get anybody else hurt or killed,” said Thomas.

“We know our jobs and are good at our jobs. We can troop through this,” said Shannon.

“I know, but it’s way past time for you guys to get some down time,” said Thomas. “I’m going to call in some favors and see what strings I can pull.”

“Be careful doing that,” said Shannon. “If the Colonel gets wind of it, he’ll flip his wig.”

“I really don’t care at this point,” said Thomas. “You guys are worth the beatings I take.”

“Tell you what, Steve, Ashley and I have our contacts looking into any information they can find about this upcoming mission. Why don’t you head for the showers and get cleaned up while we get things organized here. Sound like a plan?” she asked.

“You’d make someone a dandy wife,” he chuckled.

“I think I already am,” she laughed heartily.

“Okay, let me know when you start getting a more coherent picture of what it is we are doing and where we happen to be looking,” he said and departed the center. After she made sure he was gone, she started placing calls to another of her contacts that could help with her commander’s and more importantly her friend’s current predicament. Lucky enough she was able to get through on the first try and relayed the message and request. After a couple of minutes, she was told to call back in an hour so everything would be in place. Ashley came bouncing back into the center feeling worlds better and still toweling at her wet hair. She found one of her contacts had already responded and was waiting on her for a video teleconference. She pinged the station and was rewarded with a face on the other end.

“Hey Chief,” she said and continued drying her hair.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” asked the Chief Warrant Officer on the other end.

“Nope, just got out of the shower,” she replied.

“You’re a tease,” he laughed.

“Tease how?” she asked.

“Making me think of you in the shower,” he laughed.

“Not very proper of you,” she smirked.

“The same could be said of you,” he laughed. “I’m sending a data file with what we know about the downed pilot. Sorry to say it isn’t much, but it’s all we have.”

Ashley turned to the laptop next to the VTC console and logged into her secure account, finding the file waiting for her. After opening it and skimming over the contents, she was less than impressed. “Not much here.”

“We honestly don’t know a whole lot. He’s not been reported to the Red Cross yet, which isn’t unusual, but he also isn’t in one of the major POW camps either. Or if he has, our assets haven’t gotten us word on it yet,” said the Chief.

“How long before you’d hear something?” asked Ashley.

“Sometimes we get word from our agents before the Red Cross, sometimes after. One way or the other, we tend to hear word in a week or so,” said the Chief.

“And he’s been missing for how long?” asked Ashley.

“Nine days tomorrow,” said the Chief.

“Okay, so we have a general area?” asked Ashley.

“We think he landed somewhat close to your sector. And the PJs think he might have been taken once he landed, but aren’t certain so we sent the request to the J-SOD for someone to look around. Your unit happens to be closest,” said the Chief.

“We’re planning an in depth recon, but more specifics would be best,” said Ashley.

“I’d love to help, but I can’t give you what I don’t have,” said the Chief.

“Too bad, because I was going to describe my shower,” said Ashley with a grin.

“Oh, now that’s just wrong,” he laughed. “Seriously though, if I hear anything I’ll send you what we get. But I have to say it’s probably not going to be much.”

“Whatever you can get will be good,” said Ashley.

“Okay, I’ll beat the bushes and see what I can come up with,” he replied. “Anything else?”

“Nothing I can think of,” said Ashley. “I owe you for this.”

“Dinner when you finally get on some R and R?” he asked with a wink.

“I think that might be arranged since you have gone out of your way to help us in the past,” said Ashley. “Least I can do.”

“Okay, if you ever do get rotated back to the rear, give me a call,” he replied knowing they had been skipped over several times in recent memory.

“Will do, take care now,” said Ashley.

“You too,” he said and signed off. She checked with her other contacts and found another had gotten back. And had little different information than the first report. Stephen cross referenced it as well and found most of the reports had generally the same information.

“Not going to be easy,” he remarked.

“It never is,” she replied. “You already plan out the recon areas?”

“More or less. Depending on the situation, I figure he’ll try to head back towards our lines, so that gives us a pretty large area. Crossing off the hard terrain that he probably won’t try to go through, that brings it down from impossible to ridiculous,” said Stephen.

“When are we heading out?” asked Ashley.

“Day after tomorrow at the earliest,” said Stephen. “Gives everyone a chance to get prepped and go over the mission plans.”

“Okay. I’ll give you a yell if I get anything different,” she said and started heading back towards the tent area. She was stopped at the doorway by Shannon.

“You mind sending Tom back over? We’ve got a VTC scheduled for him,” asked Shannon.

“Sure thing,” said Ashley as she headed towards his tent. Entering in, she found the remainder of the team finishing the cleaning they had started and were snacking on various items since they had missed dinner due to the convoy back to the Brigade area. “Hey Tom, they need you for a VTC over in the command center.”

“They say what it was about?” he asked after looking up from the letter he was writing.

“No, sorry,” she replied.

“Okay, thanks,” he replied and put away the paper and pen. Grabbing his carbine, he went back to the intel center for what would probably amount to a useless teleconference with whomever was calling him. After entering, he saw Shannon already speaking with someone, but he couldn’t see who with the privacy screen up. He waited until Shannon was finished speaking with a “here he is” and got up from the seat. She motioned Thomas to sit down.

“Who is it?” he asked quietly enough that the monitor couldn’t hear him.

“Someone important,” said Shannon and motioned with her head towards the monitor. He took a seat and was rewarded with something he wasn’t expecting.

“Hey baby,” said Sharon Dayfield with a smile on the other end of the camera.

“Sharon! Hey! How are you?” he stammered and gave her a smile. His youngest, Hope Dayfield was sitting on her mother’s lap.

“I’m good, how are you?” she replied.

“Absolutely perfect now except for not being at home,” he smiled. “Where’s Angel and Brent?”

“With Uncle George for a minute,” she chuckled. Thomas looked and saw the monitor was in secure mode which meant Sharon had to be in the Camp Dugger intel facility.

“How did you get access to the intelligence facility?” he asked.

“Oh, I happen to know some folks that let me in. Had to bribe them and flirt with the guard, but you know how persistent I can be,” she grinned.

“I think it’s worth the hassle,” he laughed in return. “How are you doing?”

“Oh the usual,” she replied and spent a couple of moments filling him in on the small details of life beyond the combat zone. She was eventually joined by his other two children who spent some time with Daddy and he with them. It warmed his heart slightly seeing his children well and growing and he swore they had grown a few inches since the last time he saw them. And Hope, who he had never seen in person, was getting huge and into the “terrible twos” causing her mother problems. Thomas felt a little guilty being so far away and not helping, but he didn’t let it show with his children. Eventually they said their goodbyes and went back to Uncle George and Uncle Ryan, much to their protests, and Sharon came back on the monitor.

“So how are you really doing?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” he replied. “Missing you and the children.”

“Uh huh,” she said. “I know that look you’ve got right now.”

“I promise,” he said.

“Thomas Brent Dayfield, you cannot hide what’s going on behind that thick skull of yours from me. What’s happening?” she asked crossly.

“Just feel a little guilty that I’m not around helping you raise our children,” he replied.

“No, it’s more than that,” she observed. “Something is going on with you.”

“Just not having a fun time at work right now,” he said evasively.

“People getting hurt more?” she asked.

“A few more than usual,” he replied.

“Not getting the support you need?” she asked.

“An understatement,” he sighed and explained the current troubles with the Brigade Commander since he couldn’t hide it from her. After a minute of explaining, he let out another sigh.

“Honey, you’ve worked for some bad people before, right?” she asked.

“From time to time,” he replied.

“And what did you do then?” she asked.

“Worked through it. But it’s a little different when I’m in charge of a combat unit that can and will take casualties if they are fatigued,” he replied.

“Are they good soldiers?” asked Sharon.

“They are and I trust them,” he replied.

“Sometimes things happen out of your control and you have to leave it up to God,” she said.

“I don’t like that theory myself,” said Thomas.

“You’ve done an admirable job bringing everyone this far. And don’t say they did it on their own because they needed the leadership you’ve provided so far. So I can only say to hang in there and continuing slaying the dragons you can and going around those you can’t,” she said.

“Still though, I’m the leader and should be able to do more!” he protested.

“You took the good with the bad when you signed up. I told you before you left it was your decision and you needed to go. Has anything changed?” she asked.

“Well, no, but-” he started to say and was cut off.

“But nothing,” she started. “Would you rather be at home reading about it in the papers?”

“Well, no,” he replied.

“So take the bad with the good and press forward,” she said. “Sorry for the tough love today, but sometimes you need someone to give you a reality check.”

“You’re good for that,” he chuckled.

“And other things,” she laughed. “Nice to see you smile and laugh a bit.”

“Haven’t had enough of it lately, but seeing you and the kids helps,” he smiled.

“I have this funny feeling that something will happen that will change your entire perspective. It always does,” said Sharon.

“Let’s hope so,” said Thomas.

“Just don’t let your temper get the better of you before then,” she warned him.

“Me?” he laughed. “Would I ever do something like that?”

“Absolutely!” she exclaimed with a laugh of her own.

“You have little faith in your husband,” he laughed.

“I have all the faith in world when it comes to my husband but also know his temper well enough to know how close you are to losing it,” she smiled.

“I love you baby,” he said without finding any other retort.

“And I love you more than my own life,” she said with a smile that uplifted his spirits.

“As much as I’d love to spend the entire evening with you on here, I probably need to clear this line. So awesome to see and talk to you,” said Thomas with a smile.

“You probably need to thank a couple of your friends, Shannon specifically,” said Sharon.

“She’s a good mother hen when she needs to be,” laughed Thomas.

“Well, did it help?” asked Sharon.

“No matter if it’s a second or an eternity, seeing you always makes me happy,” he smiled.

“Awww, you’re adorable,” said Sharon with a laugh.

“I was being serious,” he said crossly.

“As was I,” said Sharon. “You are the most wonderful man in the world and even adorable at times. So to use that description is not a bad thing.”

“Love you,” he said and kissed his hand and put it on the monitor.

“Love you right back,” she said and did the same. “Take care please.”

“Always do,” he said. “Bye.”

“Bye,” she replied and the connection was cut after another second. Thomas sat for a moment before getting up and finding Shannon. “Thanks.”

“You needed a little perspective in life,” she remarked. “Did it work?”

“Sure did,” said Thomas.

“Michael has the advantage of having me around to vent to. You don’t like for the rest of us to see your emotions so I had to think of someone that you would open up to,” said Shannon.

“Sharon was the perfect choice,” said Thomas.

“And that youngest of yours is adorable,” laughed Shannon. “The only reason I made the call.”

“She sure is,” laughed Thomas. “Looks just like her momma.”

“She does although Sharon says she is just as stubborn as you are,” laughed Shannon.

“My wife has no room to talk about anyone being stubborn,” he laughed.

“She calls it the curse of the Dayfield,” laughed Shannon.

“It’ll be nice to be able to finally meet her and see for myself,” said Thomas.

“Well, once the spring offensive starts, I’m sure it won’t be long,” said Shannon.

“We can hope,” said Thomas. “Care to debrief me about the plans?”

“Not tonight. First thing in the morning is okay, but tonight you get to enjoy the conversation you just had and relax for a bit,” said Shannon.

“Pushy broad aren’t you?” laughed Thomas.

“Ask Michael, his tent is that way,” she said with a serious tone and pointed towards the door.

“Again, thanks,” said Thomas.

“Anytime,” said Shannon who deeply respected Thomas both as a person and as her commander. And seeing him in his current state was not doing anybody good. She asked Amy Kerns if she would mind keeping an eye on the center while she went to track down Darren, Rick and Dave Lawson. The tipping point had been reached and she knew those three would be able to help more than anyone else with Thomas’ current situation.

CHAPTER 6

Date/Time: 20 March/0922

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Tom? Hermann is on the line for you,” said Second Lieutenant Holly Meredith. Recently given a field commission for bravery during a high risk mission, she was just now returning from the hospital from the injuries she had received.

“About time,” said Thomas as he went to the telephone and picked up the handset. “Hermann, I was about to think you had run away.”

“*Nein mein Kamerad!*” said Hermann with a jolly laugh. “Sometimes even I get some time off. *Und* the lovely *Frauen* at the General Staff needed my specific attention last *nacht*.”

“You devil, you,” chuckled Thomas. “Were you able to find out anything?”

“Other than the official reports from most of the other intelligence circles, *ja und nein*. I found something curious, but it has not been confirmed,” said Hermann.

“Such as?” asked Thomas.

“A report from some friends in an Australian intelligence unit,” said Hermann. “I was hoping to get more confirmation before sending this to you.”

“Hermann, sometimes your curious tidbits turn out to be pure gold,” said Thomas.

“*Ja*, which is why I have already arranged for you to meet them,” said Hermann.

“Figured as much,” said Thomas. “Are they reliable?”

“They have been right far more than wrong even when it goes against the official estimates. I use their analysis from time to time,” said Hermann.

“Okay, can we get a teleconference going and you can introduce us?” asked Thomas.

“*Nein*, but I have you scheduled for a trip to see them,” said Hermann. “They are an Australian unit, but on a French base.”

“Why can’t they send the report to us and schedule a conference call?” asked Thomas.

“The report was done on a Prism 3D system. The only one you have available is the one in your Brigade Headquarters,” said Hermann. “You require further explanation?”

“No, I get it,” said Thomas. “Location?”

“Near Makov,” said Hermann. “I have arranged for a helicopter ride to the location.”

“So how did you come across this intel? Was it passed forward?” asked Thomas.

“It was, but since it is in your sector geographically speaking, your own brigade intelligence discredited it based on an old recon you did of that area,” said Hermann.

“How old?” asked Stephen.

“Four, maybe five months ago. Far before the unit pulled into that area. Some mission you were on observing the bridges in Ružomberok,” said Hermann.

“Which is pretty out of date,” observed Thomas.

“But was accepted as new because someone put a new date on it,” said Hermann.

“And who can we could thank for that?” asked Thomas.

“My friend, why do you ask such questions when you know the answer,” said Hermann.

“Right, when is our little class trip planned?” asked Thomas.

“Tomorrow the helicopter will be there at around eight,” said Hermann. “You can take six people maximum.”

“Okay, thanks for setting everything up,” said Thomas.

“I know your unit best,” said Hermann. “And I know this is something I believe you would be suited for.”

“Thanks for the endorsement,” said Thomas. “We’ll be in touch.”

“*Tschüs!*” said Hermann as he ended the call.

“Okay, you, Shannon and me; who else?” asked Stephen as he had arrived for the last part of the call. “Six maximum, so let’s be selective.”

“Leave Shannon here in case we get further intel. And I’ll say Amber since she can charm any opposition that gets in our way. We have anyone who speaks French?” asked Thomas.

“Nancy does,” said Stephen. “Speaks it the best from what I understand.”

“She’s a good scrounger as well,” said Thomas. “Let’s grab Tim, he’s good as grabbing stuff that isn’t nailed down.”

“Take some barter material?” asked Stephen. “And how about Junior?”

“Might as well,” said Thomas. “Make it a bit profitable for us if we can. Junior sounds good. He never gets to take trips anyway.”

“Easy enough,” said Stephen. “I’ll let the others know.”

“Thanks Steve,” said Thomas as he wandered away from the group and away from almost everyone. He had this feeling in the back of his mind there was something else Hermann was setting them up for. And as they trusted him, it wasn’t a bad thing. But Thomas couldn’t quite put his finger on what exactly it was.

“He has been in our custody almost ten days and we have learned nothing yet,” remarked the Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the camp they were currently in.

“These things take time, sometimes weeks, sometimes longer,” said Major Aziz.

“Sometimes it is not worth waiting for,” observed the Colonel. “We do not have the proper facilities here to accommodate such interrogations.”

“We could be in the middle of the desert and find a suitable location for an interrogation. It is as much psychological as it is physical. No, where we are at is fine,” said Aziz.

“You think this theory you have will work?” asked the Colonel.

“I think it has merit and we have nothing to lose,” said Aziz.

“Sometimes tricks aren’t as good as brute force,” said the Colonel.

“Those are the old days. Psychology is just as critical in this as physicality. Think about what the Americans did after the September 11th attacks. While waterboarding seemed cruel, it was very effective in gaining information since the individuals had the perception of dying. And the basic psychology of the instinct of survival kicked in and they broke quickly. So yes, the psychology is just as important as the physical,” said Aziz.

“Have you spoken to him very much?” asked the Colonel.

“Not as often as you would think. The bond between captor and captive needs some time to nourish. In fact, I was planning on visiting him today,” said Aziz.

“I will be observing your interrogation techniques,” said the Colonel.

“As you wish,” said Aziz and turned to a guard. “Bring the prisoner.”

The guard left and returned a few minutes later with another guard carrying and dragging Williams to the interrogation room. He was sat in the chair and left unbeaten this time. He entered the room and Williams turned slowly to look at who had entered. Aziz put a pitcher of water on the table and a cigarette ashtray. “Drink.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Williams as he poured a cup of water and quickly drank it down. He refilled it two more times before slowing his pace.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” asked Aziz as he pulled his lighter and cigarettes out of his pocket. It was yet another psychological ploy that would show the American he was on equal footing as the Major and had a choice. Although there was nothing further from the truth.

“Your lungs bud, but it’s bad for your health,” coughed Williams as the water was clearing his throat and causing the mucus to form once again.

“This war is bad for my health, my friend,” said Aziz.

“That much is certain,” said Williams as he knew the bruises were still there from his beatings.

“Have you written your family yet? The Red Cross allows mail from prisoners to go to their families,” said Aziz.

“No,” said Williams.

“Would you like to write your family?” asked Aziz.

“I will only give the required information under international conventions,” said Williams.

“I am not asking for military secrets Captain,” said Aziz. “I am asking if you want to let your family know you are alive. We have notified the International Red Cross as to your status, but they surely would want to know you are alive.”

“I will not write anything that can be used against me,” said Williams.

“I would not want you to write anything about what has happened to you. Yes, a few of the more barbaric guards got out of hand, but have I not put a stop to that?” asked Aziz.

“Better accommodations might be in order,” said Williams.

“We are not exactly set up for that here,” said Aziz. “In time you will be transferred to another facility that is better set up for prisoners. But until the random bombing of vehicles on the roadways stop, we cannot guarantee your safety.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Williams as he finished the water and filled another cup.

“So, do you wish to write your family?” asked Aziz.

“No,” said Williams.

“They are probably worried about you,” said Aziz sensibly.

“I’d rather not for the moment,” said Williams.

“So be it,” said Aziz as he stubbed out the cigarette and lit another one. “Texas is an interesting place. I once lived in America when I was in college and visited Austin. That’s where the Alamo is, no?”

“No, San Antonio,” said Williams.

“Ah yes, thank you,” said Aziz. “Intriguing place the Alamo. Defenders willing to give up their lives so easily over a simple building.”

“I don’t want to talk with you about anything,” said Williams.

“I have to interrogate you, it’s my job. But since you have made it clear that you have no desire to speak of anything other than your name, rank, identity number and birthdate, I have no choice but to engage with other talk. I have to justify my pay in some way,” said Aziz.

“I know how this goes, you start talking about home and it forms a bond between us. Or so you think and it gets me to talking. Not going to happen,” said Williams.

“No, I have to justify spending several hours attempting to get information. My superiors would rather see you beaten, but I do not think such barbaric tactics work as well as some do. So let us talk of simple things. Have you been to the Alamo?” asked Aziz.

“Yes I have been to the Alamo,” said Williams, relenting for a moment.

“An interesting place for certain,” said Aziz. “Very brave men. You visited for pleasure?”

“All Texan children learn about the Alamo. It’s taught in schools,” said Williams. The information wasn’t a military secret and as long as the beatings weren’t going on, small talk was okay, or should be okay he thought.

“And you went with your school?” asked Aziz.

“Yes,” said Williams.

“Fascinating,” said Aziz. “Our schools do not teach military history.”

“It’s not military history,” said Williams.

“It was a great battle, no?” asked Aziz.

“A battle yes, but part of the revolution in Texas,” said Williams.

“But not military history?” asked Aziz.

“No, just shaped the way our State was formed,” said Williams.

“I will confess, I was hesitant to visit Texas,” said Aziz. “I thought, quite stupidly, I would be gunned down by some horse riding cowboy just for being an Arab as soon as I got off the plane.”

“Might have saved me some trouble if they had,” chuckled Williams.

“That is not a polite thing to say,” said Aziz.

“It’s not polite having me beaten,” said Williams.

“These things happened before I arrived and again, I put a stop to them. There are other forms of interrogation, drugs for example, that produce far better and faster results,” said Aziz. And after he said it, Williams immediately looked at the water pitcher with horror on his face.

“No Captain, these drugs are to be given intravenously,” said Aziz as he poured a cup of water from the pitcher and took a drink.

“I’m not so sure,” said Williams.

“We would have you tied down if this was the case. The drugs cause involuntary spasms in the arms and legs. You are safe,” said Aziz. “For the moment.”

“I’m not sure about that either,” said Williams.

“The drugs are generally a last resort since they have some complications associated with them. I believe prisoners are more valuable alive than dead. Or at least without drugs clouding their brain. This is why I did not agree to them in your case,” said Aziz. “To keep you safe.”

“Funny how I don’t feel very safe,” said Williams.

“I will be honest, I would like information from you. This is my job, just as you have your job. But at the same time I cannot justify torturing you senselessly since it will just increase resistance to getting the information and in turn, take more time. So perhaps in time you will learn to trust me and learn that some secrets are not worth the trouble and giving some information can change the conditions you are living in. Perhaps we can talk as equals one day without the threat of torture hanging over either of our heads,” said Aziz.

“That just doesn’t make me feel any safer,” laughed Williams.

“You are safer here than in many other places,” said Aziz.

“I’d rather be at home safe myself,” said Williams.

“As would we all,” said Aziz. “I have a wife and children to think of.”

“Shouldn’t have started this war then,” said Williams.

“As with all wars, there are complications as to who the aggressor was and who the victim was. From our perspective, we were the victims,” said Aziz.

“We didn’t invade an entire continent after the Fall,” protested Williams.

“Does Iraq not count? Or Afghanistan?” asked Aziz.

“Because of terrorism!” protested Williams.

“Of which I abhor,” said Aziz. “Mindless brutes that attack innocents. I am a professional military officer and do not agree with their tactics.”

“Enough people do,” said Williams.

“I would rather not talk of such things as it will only lead to a confrontation between us. Let us speak of Texas once again,” said Aziz.

“I’d rather not,” said Williams.

“I went to college in Ohio myself. The Ohio State University,” laughed Aziz. “Must remember to add ‘The’ onto it. And I must confess, I still enjoyed watching your American football up until the Fall. Did you play football?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Williams. “I’ll give only-”

“I am not asking for military secrets. Is there any harm in discussing sports?” asked Aziz.

“I’d prefer not to talk,” said Williams.

“We cannot sit here and look at each other,” said Aziz. “And I am sure you are lonely in your cell. None of the guards speak English either.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Williams.

“So did you play sports when you were young? Football?” asked Aziz.

Williams slumped back in his chair, unsure of the tactic being used on him. He fully expected to get beaten or drugged eventually. But perhaps there was the potential for his captor to see him as a person rather than a file full of information. There was no harm in discussing sports.

“I did in school, yes,” said Williams.

“A most interesting game that I never learned all the rules for. At some points, it appears to have no rules, yet other minor infractions are dealt with harshly,” said Aziz.

“Everyone in Texas plays football at some point,” said Williams.

“I did not know that,” said Aziz.

“It’s like a religion on Friday nights there,” said Williams.

“A religion?” asked Aziz.

“It is sarcasm,” said Williams. “Some people’s live revolved around high school football.”

“Ah, as we were about the real football,” said Aziz. “Soccer you call it.”

“I played that too,” said Williams.

“Did you now? I was a midfielder myself,” said Aziz.

“I played back,” said Williams.

“How simple this would have been had we played a few games of football instead of killing each other,” said Aziz. “All matters settled on the pitch.”

“Let me out and I’ll see if I can arrange it,” said Williams.

“You Americans,” laughed Aziz. “Even in the face of adversity, you keep your humor.”

“Worth a try,” said Williams.

“Indeed,” laughed Aziz. “Well my friend, as much as I’d like to continue our talk, I have other matters to attend to.”

“Time to beat some other prisoners?” asked Williams.

“No Captain, you are my only prisoner here,” said Aziz as he nodded at the guards and gave a command in Arabic. “See? You learned more from me than I have from you this session.”

“Sure,” said Williams as he was escorted from the room back to his tiny holding cell. After he was tossed inside, he wondered if he had crossed any lines of impropriety by talking with his interrogator. He would be mindful the next session not to speak as much as he had today.

Back in the interrogation room, the Colonel had come inside and stolen one of Aziz’s cigarettes. “Is this what you call an interrogation?”

“It is the way things are done. We talked of small things, home, sports, places he has been and nothing of military importance. It helps build the bond between us and opens him up to giving even more information in the future. Surely I got more information out of him than constantly beating him,” said Aziz.

“He would have given us military information had we beaten him,” remarked the Colonel.

“Which would be of dubious value,” said Aziz. “He would tell you anything you want to hear before long just to make the beatings stop.”

“It is more gratifying,” said the Colonel.

“Again, he is a skilled pilot that shot down six of our aircraft. Three of which were our most advanced fighters by himself. We have much to learn from our young Captain,” said Aziz.

“Headquarters grows impatient,” said the Colonel.

“You have the ability to stall them,” said Aziz. “My theory will be proven correct.”

“You are hoping so,” said the Colonel.

“I know so,” said Aziz. “Once a certain point is reached, I will implement the final phase of the interrogation and he will spill everything he knows.”

Date/Time: 20 March/0838

Location: 3rd French Regiment encampment, near Makov, Slovak Republic

“Daddy, put another quarter in the machine!” exclaimed Amber as the helicopter wound down after landing on the French encampment. “Don’t let it stop!”

“Who’s idea was it to bring her again?” asked Thomas with a laugh, knowing Amber loved helicopter rides. And a general milk run behind the lines where no contact was expected on landing made the excitement even better.

“You sure you want the answer?” laughed Stephen. “Nancy, you think you can communicate with the locals and find the Australian unit?”

“Sure,” said Nancy and went towards the French ground crew. After speaking to several people, she gave up on trying to ask the ground crew and stopped a passing officer on the roadway adjacent to the helicopter pad. She learned quickly he spoke English and didn’t want her using French any more than necessary.

“It is two hundred meters past the water tower on this roadway,” he said pointing.

“*Merçi*,” said Nancy and gave a quick salute since they were in a formal environment. “He says it’s two hundred meters past the water tower on this road.”

“Should be easy enough to find,” said Thomas. “Steve? Ready?”

“Yep,” he replied. “You guys going to scavenge?”

“As long as it isn’t nailed down,” said Tim Daniels. “How long are you going to be gone for?”

“Not sure exactly,” said Thomas. “We’ll make radio contact at eleven hundred no matter what.”

“Sounds good,” said Tim. “Okay folks, let’s get to stealing.”

Thomas and Stephen traded a laugh as they headed down the roadway. Being on a French base was a little unusual since all the signs were in three languages, but they eventually found a small compound with an Australian flag flying outside. They were met at a checkpoint and had their identities verified before being pointed towards the intelligence facility. There was another checkpoint where they were stopped and the Australian soldier guarding the facility called inside for someone to make contact with the Americans. Shortly a soldier exited the connex type facility and came to the post.

“Hello. Can I help you...Major?” asked the man in a very Australian accent. The AUSCAM uniform he wore told his true national identity.

“Hi, I’m Major Tom Dayfield from the 14th Special Ops Battalion, North American Union. We’re here about a briefing for a downed pilot,” said Thomas. “Hermann the German sent us.”

“Ah, yes, do you have your identification?” asked the man.

Thomas pulled it from the badge holder he wore around his neck while in base camp. The man looked over it and over his face before deciding he and the ID were valid.

“You going to vouch for your mate?” asked the man.

“With his reputation, I probably shouldn’t,” laughed Thomas. “But sure.”

“Please come in,” said the man who wore the Captain’s insignia.

“Didn’t expect to see any Aussies around these parts,” said Thomas as they walked into the building. There was a weapons rack next to the door where Thomas and Stephen cleared and set their carbines down into the slots.

“Oh, King and Country and all that noise. Might as well stop ‘em here as opposed to in the backyard,” said the still unidentified man as he locked the door behind them.

“Sensible,” said Stephen.

“Very...I’m Captain Andy Martin of the Australian Defense Force and this is my merry band of mystics who try to decipher what odds and ends are picked up,” said the Captain.

“Tom Dayfield and this is Stephen Garcia,” said Thomas.

“You formal?” asked the Captain.

“Not so much Andy,” said Thomas.

“Works out great. Round here, we are a fairly informal bunch,” said Andy.

“I forgot I have a rank some of the times. Other times the rest of them forget it as well,” said Thomas with a laugh as he nodded at Steve.

“Wait a second. You guys are Cider, right?” asked Andy.

“Yeah, that would be us,” said Stephen with pride.

“We use your reports to support some of our own analysis from time to time. I thought I’d seen your name before,” said Andy.

“Normally it’s in the police reports,” laughed Stephen.

“Nice job on that bunker in Germany. I always wanted to know more about that mission. Sometime, we need to discuss it over a beer,” said Andy with a laugh at seeing the two were fairly down to earth.

“I didn’t know you guys were in this area,” said Thomas.

“Our Regiment has been chopped to the 2nd Freedom Guards Division for Operation Ticonderoga. We were moved forward last week in preparation for the spring offensive,” said Andy. “Care for a spot of tea or coffee? We only keep the coffee around for Yanks like you who insist on being uncivilized and forgo our splendid tea.”

“Didn’t we throw some of this off a boat once?” laughed Steve.

“Yes, tea would be fine,” said Thomas knowing which would be better.

“If you don’t mind, we’d rather you make your own. The chaps in here tend to get into fist fights over the amount of sugar and cream put in,” laughed Andy.

“Got it,” said Thomas as he walked over to the stand where hot water was ready. He put two bags in the cup and poured the required amount of water in before dipping the bags and continuing the small talk. Steve grabbed a cup of coffee and decided Thomas was the wiser for getting the tea. It was a horrid blend.

“How long you guys been in country?” asked Thomas.

“We’ve been preparing to come to Europe for a long time. Ever since the Royals evacuated England and came down under, we’ve been planning to get them home. But this unit in particular has been here since the invasion of Iceland. Originally planned, we were heading for North America, but you all settled that bit before we got there,” said Andy.

“That must have been some story,” said Stephen.

“Which one?” asked Andy.

“The evacuation of the Royal family,” said Stephen.

“Oh, right. I don’t believe they expected to be riding a tramp steamer to Oz, but they got there and stayed out of our business for the most part. But I do give the two boys their credit, they joined the Defense Force with no reservation. And it’s a shame about the Queen, but she was given full burial honors in Queensland,” said Andy.

“Your unit has been around the block a few times if I recall,” said Stephen as he took another sip of the coffee to be social.

“Started off in Iceland and have been in combat ever since,” said Andy.

“Where were you at in Iceland?” asked Thomas.

“We went in to Keflavik with the Texan 1st Infantry Division. Only a battalion of troops, but the rest of the regiment followed afterwards. Went into Ireland with the AFNAS 3rd Armored and after that put on our colors again,” said Andy.

“I didn’t know the Australians sent contingents of soldiers prior to Normandy,” said Stephen.

“We wanted to keep it low key. Since we weren’t technically at war with the IU, they weren’t targeting our shipping and it kept us safe. We used the uniforms of Texas and the AFNAS instead of our own. Surprise for them when we showed up on the beaches of Normandy,” laughed Andy.

“Right on,” said Thomas as he put in some sugar and cream into his tea.

“You might make a right proper bloke if you keep it up,” laughed Andy as he watched Thomas doing the same thing he had done right before they came in.

“Trust me, that’s about as civilized as he gets,” laughed Stephen.

“You all aren’t from Texas are you?” asked Andy.

“Nope, Colorado,” said Thomas.

“Talk about uncivilized. Those chaps brought in some evil devil water and called it mescal. Horrid stuff compared to gin,” laughed Andy. “But down to business shall we?”

The three moved over to the large map of the continent and looked over the area. The Prism 3D screen came up on the overhead and Andy began his briefing.

“Your pilot was about right here when he tangled with a flight of Typhoons coming out of the Serbia area. Long story short, he and another were escorting a damaged bomber back into friendly lines. They snuck up on him, got his wingman before they knew he was there. He fought them off to give the bomber time to escape. They did manage to land in Landsberg without crashing, so he did his job.”

“Anyway, he managed to take out three before the final one got him. The locator beacon was picked up here right after,” he said and pointed at different areas of the map. “We had satellite photography of the area, but weren’t able to download for a time because of technical difficulties. Afterwards, we analyzed the data and found this in the local area.”

Other pictures, satellite photos were pulled up on the screen by another member of his staff. Even from several hundred miles in space, the resolution was exceptional and the two could see the distinct camouflage pattern in the Texan flight suit. At least a squad of IU soldiers was surrounding him and several vehicles were nearby. The pilot had his hands on his head and looked defeated.

“How come all this was on the photography?” asked Stephen.

“Your guys have been keeping the cameras on the entire time it’s over Europe. Makes sorting through the data a little harder, but we’ve picked up things we might have missed otherwise,” said Andy.

“Okay, and after?” asked Thomas.

“It took us a while to track down the location they went afterwards, but we think we managed to find where they went,” said Andy as more pictures were brought up. It looked to be the same vehicles pulling up to some form of camp. Both the Americans saw the distinct outline of what could only be a prisoner camp. Stephen saw the date stamp on the picture and commented.

“These are over a week old. How come it took so long to get to us?” he asked.

“The technical problems of downloading the photos from the recon bird. And because we generally look at every outhouse, barn and fenced in cattle pen in all of Eastern Europe,” explained Andy. “I don’t have that large a staff.”

“And your guys get us good info. I wasn’t implying you sat on it,” said Stephen.

“Plus, we made contact with the Brigade Intelligence in that particular sector and passed on what we knew. Problem is, they weren’t sure if this was your pilot, so it was discredited,” said Andy.

“Hermann explained that as well,” said Thomas.

“Right, so we never caught sight of him on this pass and the vehicles had since disappeared. But we managed to cross reference this with some later photos and came up with this,” said Andy as another picture came up. It was nighttime and the shot showed the computer enhancements, although in black and white. A hooded figure was seen being led from one of the buildings in what looked to be the administrative part of the camp to another building. The shot was oblique and the resolution not so great, but it appeared to be possibly the same man.

“What’s this area?” asked Thomas.

“Appears to be some form of camp. Maybe a prisoner camp,” said Andy.

“Not a standard troop camp?” asked Stephen.

“Probably not. Double fenced in area, guard patrols and towers. It all fits into the standard IU prisoner camp,” said Andy.

“Where is this specifically?” asked Thomas. He was rewarded with a precise location. “You’re kidding me? This close to the lines?”

“We found that strange as well,” said Andy with a moment of thought before continuing. “But there was further activity after these photos. Apparently an additional unit was sent in from Arad, Romania.”

“What kind of unit?” asked Stephen.

“We aren’t sure, but it amounted to less than a heavy platoon of troops,” said Andy.

“Best guess?” asked Thomas.

“The area we think they were dispatched from is the South Industrial Zone of Arad,” said Andy.

The area which he referred to was the known prisoner area of Romania. Prisoners from all over the region were sent there to include all military prisoners. It was also one of the larger concentration camp areas for Europe.

“If what you’re saying is correct...” said Thomas.

“We doubt very seriously the IU would have kept a concentration camp open this close to FNC lines,” said Andy. “So that’s why it wasn’t included in the intelligence packet.”

“What else then?” asked Thomas.

“Not sure,” said Andy after a pause. “The liberation of the camps has become a little more commonplace and one of my guys came up with the theory they are spreading them out and making them smaller. Which still doesn’t explain the close proximity to the front lines, but one of the ‘could be’ scenarios we have.”

“And the unit from Arad?” asked Stephen.

“Just where they originated from,” said Andy. “Could have been something besides their death squads.”

“We did an extended recon in this area about two months ago. Didn’t pick up on it then,” said Stephen. “Is it new?”

“I saw that report and you came within maybe three or four clicks of the area. Best we can tell it’s been there at least ten months and we honestly haven’t tried chasing it down any further. But again, they are low key. No vehicles to speak of except a few light utility vehicles. Reasonably light guard force, maybe two platoons at most. No significant thermal images. Doesn’t really stand out as being interesting,” said one of the analysts, joining the conversation.

“Except now,” said Thomas. “What’s the chances the pilot was only held here temporarily?”

“Could have been, we aren’t sure. But either way, this is a decent place to start looking. Go in and bag a few of the officers and get them to talking,” suggested Andy.

“Not sure they would let us just stroll in,” said Stephen.

“Who says the rest will have the ability to complain?” asked Andy.

“He makes a valid point though,” said Thomas. “Best lead we have and J-SOD isn’t being helpful with any further information.”

“You want my boys and girls to get you a detailed target analysis?” asked Andy.

“Yeah, sounds good,” said Thomas. “Also an in depth look at the local forces capable of responding to said camp. I know the forces around Ružomberok are tied up for the most part, but you guys know we travel light and even a reinforced platoon can give us a spot of trouble.”

“I’ll see what we can dredge up. But for the most part, you guys know better than we do as to response times and units. You have the ability to disappear far easier,” said Andy.

“Normally I’d agree with you, but if this is a prisoner camp, we have to secure it and await follow on forces,” said Thomas. “Or at least some way of getting them back to our lines.”

“Sounds like a fairly large raid,” said Andy.

“Which is why we could use the additional info on the response forces,” said Thomas.

“Right,” said Andy. “We can have you an initial analysis in about twelve hours with a detailed regional scope analysis in about twenty-four. Is that acceptable?”

“Perfect,” said Thomas. “Just send it through our organizational S-2 inbox.”

“Got the direct address?” asked Andy.

“Can I use your terminal?” asked Stephen.

“Yes, please,” said Andy as he nodded for the analyst to relinquish the computer. Stephen sat down and started typing in the address as well as the instant message communicator. He received replies almost immediately.

“Okay, you have the link for the inbox and our IM system,” said Stephen.

“Great,” said Andy. “Like I said, we can have you something by tonight.”

“Can’t say how much we appreciate this,” said Thomas.

“You going in to get him?” asked Andy.

“If it pans out, we certainly will try,” said Thomas.

“And if it happens to be anything else?” asked Andy.

“We’ll mark it and call in bombers,” said Thomas. “No sense in risking our necks for a supply warehouse if it turns out he isn’t there.”

“And if it is something else entirely?” asked Andy.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” said Thomas.

“Right,” said Andy. “If there is anything else that we can help with, please feel free to ask. Makes the lads around here feel important and all.”

“You’re the only unit that’s passed on the information that has anything further than he was shot down. That’s pretty important,” said Stephen.

“Hermann the German helps us and we help him. He’s the only one that expressed any interest in the story,” said Andy.

“He’s a popular guy,” laughed Thomas. “We do appreciate it.”

“As do we,” said Andy. “We get your intelligence assessments from time to time and use them accordingly. And a few get a little hairy from what I can tell.”

“Nothing we can’t handle,” said Thomas.

“Good deal,” said Andy. “Need a ride back to the heli pad?”

“Nah, we’d rather walk. Gives us the opportunity to figure out if there’s anything on this Frog base worth stealing,” laughed Stephen.

“Nothing worth mentioning although their rations are decent,” said Andy. “And just so happens you pass right by a supply yard.”

“Oh, do we now?” laughed Stephen.

“It’s best we have some dumb Americans to blame rather than our own people that are normally doing the stealing,” laughed Andy.

“I knew you Australians were sneaky,” laughed Thomas as he shook Andy’s hand. “It’s been a pleasure and thanks again.”

“No problem at all,” said Andy and shook Stephen’s hand as well. And finally added in the most Australian phrase of all. “G’day now.”

Stephen and Thomas departed the compound and were heading back down the road towards the helicopter pad. They noticed the supply compound that had been mentioned and decided they would enlist the help of the remainder of the group before going inside the unguarded area. As they continued down the road, a truck started passing them.

“Hey soldier boy, looking for a good time?” asked Amber from the passenger side.

“Do I want to know where you got the truck?” asked Thomas.

“Nope soldier boy, that kind of information costs you a dollar,” she laughed.

“Right,” laughed Thomas as he and Stephen were hoisted up into the cargo area by Specialist Johnny Thompson and Nancy. “Nice truck.”

“It’s a rental,” said Johnny.

“I’ll bet,” laughed Stephen. “Unlimited miles?”

“And full coverage contract,” he laughed in return. They arrived at the UH-60 Blackhawk and backed the truck towards the aircraft, being guided in by the copilot. After parking, they started unloading the supplies.

“Two cases of hooch for our pilots,” said Tim as he handed over the cardboard cases.

“And we thank you very much,” said the copilot as he took the offering and placed it in a secure area of the aircraft. “Fuel truck is on the way, should be here in a few.”

“What else?” asked Thomas.

“Case of wine for Ashley so she’ll shut up about it. Got a couple crates of ammo, another two cases of liquor, some med stuff, few of cases of rations and some batteries,” said Tim.

“How much did it run you?” asked Thomas.

“How much did what run me?” asked Tim.

“I’m going to jail eventually,” laughed Thomas as they finished unloading the acquired supplies into the Blackhawk and strapping them down. While they didn’t really need any more ammo, rations, batteries or medical supplies, Tim usually walked away from most places with a case of something. And this time with an unguarded supply area, he had hit the jackpot. He wished Hermann had been able to get them a larger helicopter like a CH-53 and they would have taken the whole truck with them. After they unloaded, Tim returned the truck to the immediate area outside the ramp, parking it in a normal spot so it didn’t look out of place. As the group returned towards the chopper, a voice was heard from behind them.

“Amber?” said the voice in a heavy accent. Amber set into stone as the voice called from her past although she didn’t turn around at the sound.

“Amber? Do you not remember my voice?” asked the voice. She finally turned and saw what she was expecting, but not expecting.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“Are you not happy to see me?” asked Thomas Villier, her ex-husband.

CHAPTER 7

Date/Time: 20 March/1009

Location: 3rd French Regiment encampment, near Makov, Slovak Republic

Amber stood, quite shocked at the turn of affairs. She always knew there was a chance that her ex-husband had survived the Fall, but never expected to see him in the middle of East Europe.

“Should I be happy to see you Thomas?” she asked coldly.

“This is not the welcome I expected from my wife,” he said crossly.

“Ex-wife. I gave up, no, you gave up any marriage rights you had a long time ago,” she said coldly.

“I do not remember getting any papers in the mail,” he said trying to charm his way into the conversation and hopefully warm her up to his presence.

“Had I been given an address to mail them, I might have sent them to you. But as it stands, you decided to run out on me, leave me alone and in the dark and never let me know where you were going. I had no way of tracking you down and you flat out abandoned me!” she snarled through gritted teeth.

“I was young and did not know any better. I am sorry for what I did and want to right the wrongs from before,” he said.

“The time for that is long since passed,” she said coldly. “I didn’t know if you were dead or alive. And I know you didn’t know if I was either. Furthermore, I know you didn’t care. You didn’t care enough to come looking for me or take me with you at the least.”

“I cannot make it right, I know, but at least allow me to apologize,” he said.

“So apologize and be done with it. Then get out of my life...forever,” she said coldly.

“Like it or not, we are still married,” he said in return.

“Like it or not, we got divorced many years ago. It never went through the courts, but I can flat guarantee you one thing bud, you ran out on me and that counted as abandonment. Straight up grounds for any divorce in the world,” she said coldly.

“Are you married again?” he asked.

“Yes, to a loving man who doesn’t run out on me,” she said. “Apologize and leave. I never want to see you again.”

“Is he a good man?” he asked, avoiding the issue at hand.

“The best...are you going to apologize?” she asked.

“Can I meet him?” asked Villier.

“An apology, then disappear,” she said through gritted teeth once again.

“I would like to meet him,” he said, still avoiding the request.

Amber rolled her eyes and turned to walk away. She was caught as he grabbed her by the arm and spun her around. “You do not turn your back on me!”

Before she had the chance to react, she saw Thomas Dayfield swoop in, apply a pressure point which made him release his grasp and pushed him away. Villier attempted to move back in, but was diverted by Dayfield and pushed away once again. Dayfield stood between the two and had a look of pure evil on his face. Villier was taller and had a heavier build than Dayfield and figured with his recent training he could put him on the ground and get Amber to listen to reason. He was quick on his punch aimed at Dayfield, however, was unsuccessful as the teams had learned and constantly practiced the Krav Maga learned during their specialized training and kept up frequently since then. They already had a good base of fighting techniques learned from Amy Kerns and Kristy Garcia years before, but it had been honed by the specialized defensive techniques learned since then.

Dayfield countered the punch with a block and landed several punches of his own before kicking out Villier’s leg and sending him to the ground. Villier got back up, seeing red and resumed his attack with brute force instead of technique. Dayfield countered his attack by again blocking his attempt to grab him and pushed forward in a clothesline technique which put Villier on the ground again. He slammed in hard on the ground and got the wind knocked out of him, but saw as Dayfield resumed his normal stance waiting to see what move he would make. By this time, Villier was hopping mad and almost out of control when he got back up to resume his attack once again. His attack was two pronged as he swung hard right with a haymaker which was blocked, but immediately followed with one from the left.

But Dayfield saw him telegraphing his moves and countered the second punch before bringing in both the arms to the center and doubling them over. He swung the arms wide around and flipped Villier over his back slamming him on the ground hard before landing a stomp to his midsection and backing off once again. He backed off in hopes the latest blows would have brought him to his senses, but saw Villier getting back up once again after a pause to catch his breath. However, this time it turned even worse for the cause as Villier grabbed for the pistol holstered at his waist.

Dayfield moved in just as he was bringing it up and caught the pistol in both his hands, twisting it slightly and making him released his grip involuntarily. While breaking the grip on the pistol was fairly easy, he wanted to make sure he went down for good this time. He pulled the offhand over to the side and swung him hard in the opposite direction which landed Villier on the ground

once again. But this time, Dayfield didn't release his grasp and rolled Villier from his back to his stomach and locked the arm in between his knees and gained control of the pistol. He pointed it at the back of Villier's head while pulling in his left hand into a pain compliance grip. Villier knew enough about unarmed combat to know he needed to tap his hand on the ground to be released. But that only worked well in training.

"No taps outs in the real world *ami*. You draw a pistol on me and you pay the price," growled Dayfield as he used the rear sight to rack the slide of the Sig pistol on his boot heel and chambered a round before placing it against the back of Villier's head.

"It hurts!" exclaimed Villier followed by several curses in French. By this time, his squad had seen the fight between the two and had headed over to intercede on their comrade's behalf. However, they were intercepted by the remainder of the Cider team who assumed defensive stances of their own. Even though they had superior numbers, the French squad took the smart way out and decided to sit out the battle between their squad mate and the American Major.

"Give me a reason I don't kill you right now?!" growled Dayfield.

"We are allies!" he strained as Dayfield tightened his hold.

"You attempt to shoot me, that made you my enemy," growled Dayfield.

"I only want to speak with my wife!" protested Villier.

"You laid a hand on my teammate. She wants an apology," said Dayfield.

"Apology for what?" grunted Villier.

"For putting her through what you did! Do it! Now!" barked Dayfield. He saw Villier was hesitating and applied even more pressure on the wrist, causing more pain.

"I am sorry Amber!" he said.

"Louder! And what for!" barked Dayfield.

"For hurting you! I am sorry!" he screamed at the top of his lungs.

"And what else?!" demanded Dayfield.

"For abandoning you and leaving you to fend for yourself!" he screamed in pain.

"And is she your wife?" growled Dayfield.

"Yes," said Villier and Dayfield applied more pressure. "No! No! No!"

"She divorced you, get over her, leave her alone and get on with your life!" growled Dayfield.

“I will!” said Villier.

“Say it! Now!” barked Dayfield once again.

“I will leave you alone Amber!” he cried as the pain was getting to be too much.

“I’m going to release you. If you even attempt to do anything stupid, I will kill you where you stand. Got it?” asked Dayfield. “Got it?!”

“*Oui!* Yes! Yes!” yelled Villier.

“Now get up and leave here,” said Dayfield as he released his grasp and backed off his opponent. Villier slowly got off the ground and cradled his left arm that had been in the arm bar. He had second thoughts on resuming his attack, but saw Dayfield was ready for any move he was about to make. He looked at Amber once again, the pain immediately recognizable in his face before turning to leave. He walked away slowly before turning once again and seeing the complete lack of emotion on her face. Often in his life he wondered what might happen if he was to ever come face to face with her again. One question finally answered.

“Are you okay?” asked Thomas calmly after Villier had departed the area.

Amber looked at him with a shocked expression on her face. She had seen Thomas be aggressive before, especially on the battlefield, but never the uncontrolled violence he had just showed to the entire group. It was like another person had taken over Thomas at that point in time and had been the channel for her hostility.

“Why did you do that?” she asked quietly after finally being able to speak.

“I saw how he hurt you. You are a friend and furthermore, like family to me. I’ve wanted to do that to him for a long time,” said Thomas calmly.

Amber looked at him and realized she would have followed him to hell and back carrying a five gallon bucket of gasoline. There really was nothing else that could have been said right then except “thank you.”

“It was my pleasure,” said Thomas as the remaining squad had departed the area to check on their comrade. A French officer was seen walking up to their group along with three French Military Policemen.

“I do not know what happened here, but I want you off this French base immediately,” he said in flawless English.

“As soon as our aircraft is refueled, we will be gone,” said Thomas and handed over the service pistol he had taken during the fight.

“Never to return either. If you set foot on this base again, you will be arrested,” said the French Major as he took the pistol and cleared it.

“You and whose army is going to do it?” said Thomas coldly and got the same look on his face he had right before the most recent confrontation.

“It is best you do not return. My troops might take matters into their own hands,” said the Major, backing off slightly.

“We can and will take care of ourselves. You best tell your people to avoid us in the future. We do not like leaving unfinished business out there,” said Thomas.

“This is our base and our rules. We may be allies, but you are our guests here. You should act like it and be grateful for our help,” said the Major.

Before Thomas was able to react, Nancy came over and took the Major off to the side. She spoke in French as to be completely understood.

“Major, you do not understand. The woman over there, my friend, was abandoned by that soldier before the Fall. She was his wife and he left her in Germany to go to his own family. She had to find a way of getting back to America on her own and back to her family during the Fall. You lived through the Fall and understand how hard it was for some people to get back to their families, especially after being separated by an entire ocean,” said Nancy sensibly.

“I was not aware of any previous dealings with the two. But your Major should not have become involved,” he said in French.

“It was better for my Major to get involved. My friend is fairly passionate and might have killed him had she gotten the opportunity,” said Nancy.

“And we would have been forced to deal with that,” said the Major.

“Nothing was hurt here except for some pride. And your soldier did elevate matters by drawing a weapon,” said Nancy.

“I will deal with that problem,” said the Major.

“And I will calm our Major. We are scheduled to leave within a half an hour. I will keep him near the aircraft,” said Nancy. “It is best for us both.”

“I am serious about what I said, I do not want him or any of you on this base again. I will be going to my commander and informing him of this incident and requesting your unit be declared off limits on this base,” said the Major, trying to gain the upper hand.

“You might want to remember which unit this is and what we did to help free your country both before and during the invasion. And was decorated by your President for doing it. Things to remember before making claims we are not welcome here,” said Nancy coldly.

“You have a half an hour to be off my base,” said the Major and walked away.

Nancy walked over to Thomas and the remainder of the team which was waiting for word of what she had accomplished.

“Haven’t seen you that irate and snap that quickly since you stopped smoking,” laughed Tim.

“I was kind of a bear at that point, wasn’t I?” Thomas chuckled.

“It wasn’t easy on any of us to quit smoking after the Fall,” said Tim. “Well?”

“He says we have to be off the base in the next half an hour. Guess we don’t get to see what the French have for chow on their line after all,” said Nancy.

“Was he at least understanding?” asked Stephen.

“I think the term might be arrogant,” said Nancy. “I can understand why the French get a bad name now. But the resistance we worked with before weren’t bad at all.”

“Different kinds of people,” said Rick. “We have chow on the chopper?”

“Yeah, we brought out a couple of extra cases,” said Thomas, surprisingly calm.

“Might as well eat here. The birds will be finished in about twenty minutes,” said Tim as he meandered over to the helicopter and grabbed a case of rations.

“Someone you know?” asked the pilot to Amber.

“I thought I did at one point in my life,” said Amber without explaining who he was.

“He hurt you?” asked the pilot.

Amber flashed her eyes at him letting him know he heading into territory he didn’t belong in. The pilot knew well enough to leave it alone and make sure the helicopter was okay to fly back to the forward areas and drop the team off. He wanted to know more, but also knew they didn’t need to be spending any more time on the French base than was necessary due to the confrontation. The fuel truck drove up and he busied himself helping with hooking up the fuel lines as the team ate in silence and were eyeballed by every French soldier that passed by.

Eventually everything was complete and the crew did a quick pre-takeoff check and told everyone to strap in. As the engines were starting, Amber looked across the small cabin and saw Thomas with a neutral look on his face. He glanced at her long enough to see her mouth the

words “thank you.” As they lifted off, Amber didn’t look out of the chopper as she normally did. She was leaving a piece of her past behind, hopefully for the last time.

“Sir, General Girard from the French 3rd is on the phone for you,” said the Aide to the 2nd Freedom Guards Division commander.

“Which line?” asked the Major General.

“Line three sir,” said the Aide.

“Got it,” said the General and pushed the button for the correct line. “Hello General, it’s General Chambers here...okay...yes, I do have a Major Dayfield in my Division...oh...oh really...right...okay...well, I don’t know why he was on your base...you know those special operations types, they pop up in unusual places...well I’m sure if there was a confrontation he has an explanation...banned from your base...right...again, I’m not sure...I’ll check into it of course General...well, no I don’t think that’s necessary...a court martial isn’t a good idea until I can at least hear both sides of the story...of course I’ll be fair...I would hope you would check into it from your end too...no, I don’t think a minor spat between our two forces will cause any great harm...yes, of course I’ll look into it...yes, absolutely...do you have a copy of their movement orders...okay, can you send a copy here...right...Hermann Graf...okay, I’ll check into it and take care of it...yes, you too.”

The General paused for a moment after ending the call and waited for an email hit his computer, a scanned copy of the movement orders in question. He was unsure of why Thomas Dayfield was on a French base when his unit was staged forward, but he would certainly look into it. While it wasn’t unusual for the Cider teams to end up in some unusual places, that far behind the lines wasn’t entirely usual. He hit the intercom button for his aide. “Contact 1st Brigade and find out what Tom Dayfield was doing up at the French 3rd Infantry today.”

“On the way sir,” said the voice over the intercom.

“Belay that, can you track down a number for me? For a Major Hermann Graf in the German Army. Says here he’s a shift commander in the *Heer* Headquarters in Berlin,” said the General.

“Sir, it’s DSN 668-2100, extension 313,” said the Aide without hesitation.

“You recalled that pretty quick,” observed the General.

“We’ve uhh, met sir,” said the Aide.

“I’d bet,” said the General as he dialed up the number. Reaching the central military switchboard, he was put through to his extension.

“*Drei ein drei, Major Graf,*” announced the voice in German.

“*Sprechen zie English?*” asked the General.

“*Ja*, Major Graf, how may I help you?” asked Hermann.

“My name is Major General Chambers and I’m the-” started the General before being interrupted from the other end.

“Commander of the North American Union 2nd Freedom Guards Division. How may I help you sir and I must say, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” said Hermann.

“I’m assuming that’s a good thing?” asked the General.

“Yes of course sir,” said Hermann. “You are well known and highly respected in our forces. *Oberst* Kaufmann speaks highly of you.”

“How is that old dog?” asked the General, a moment of pleasantries before getting down to business. “Haven’t heard from him in a while.”

“He was wounded a couple of months ago in an IU attack. But he is recovering nicely,” said Hermann. “I can pass along your regards if you wish.”

“Regards nothing! Where is he at?” asked the General.

“At his home in Weisbaden on medical leave,” said Hermann.

“I might plan a side trip during the next conference,” said the General.

“He said you were one of the best maneuver commanders in the FNC,” said Hermann.

“Coming from him, that’s a compliment. The guy is like Rommel reincarnated,” he replied.

“Without the political baggage of course,” laughed Hermann.

“Obviously so,” laughed the General.

“I’m certain you didn’t call to catch up about old friends *Herr* General; how may I assist you today?” asked Hermann.

“Not to put too fine a point on my question, but do you know Major Thomas Dayfield?” asked the General.

“It is hard to find many soldiers in the FNC that do not know who Major Dayfield is, *Herr* General,” said Hermann evasively.

“Let me rephrase then, do you know Major Dayfield personally?” asked the General.

“*Jawohl*, Thomas Dayfield is a friend of mine,” answered Hermann.

“You do understand I’m calling you directly to ask you these questions instead of going through your superiors?” asked the General.

“*Jawohl*, I understand,” said Hermann.

“So explain to me why you signed off on travel orders to a French base please,” said the General.

Hermann was silent for a moment and wondered exactly what had transpired while Thomas was getting his briefing. He had not heard anything from his friends in the Australian intelligence outfit, so this was unusual.

“Yes *Herr* General, I signed off on travel orders for Major Dayfield and five others to go to the French 3rd Regiment base of operations to receive an intelligence briefing. There is an Australian unit on the base that had some information that I believed he would have found useful in his upcoming mission,” explained Hermann.

“Why go there? He has a good intelligence center,” asked the General.

“Because their briefing was on a Prism system *Herr* General,” said Hermann.

“Of which his Brigade Headquarters has one as well,” said the General.

“Indeed,” said Hermann before continuing. “I believed it was best to get the briefing from the horse’s mouth as you might say.”

“Which can just as easily have been done through a Prism briefing and a video teleconference at the Brigade Headquarters,” said the General.

“It could have sir,” said Hermann.

“But for reasons that you aren’t or more likely don’t want to tell me, you didn’t want them to use the Brigade for that,” said the General pointedly.

“It is complicated *Herr* General,” said Hermann evasively after a brief pause.

“Make it uncomplicated. I like simple things,” ordered the General.

“The report I received from the Australian unit is contradictory to most of the intelligence reports that have come through so far *Herr* General. And even though I found it to be a good lead, your 1st Brigade Commander decided it was not verified and dismissed it. I have a feeling about this report *Herr* General and it could lead to the discovery of the downed Texan pilot in your area of

operations. However, since the Brigade Commander was unwilling to entertain the notion that the report might have some validity, I ensured Major Dayfield got a proper briefing,” said Hermann. “And I authorized the travel documents to the French base to get it.”

The General sat quietly for a moment as he digested what he had just been told. The Colonel had been foisted on him by higher headquarters even though his experience commanding a combat unit was zero. However, he had also attempted to get him up to speed and one of the lessons he had harped on was never to dismiss an intelligence report without at least following up on it no matter how far out it was. But it appeared he was dismissing the report for some reason, which might have been valid, but should have reported it up just in case. He had received the request from J-SOD for the 14th to conduct an in depth recon of the area in question and the various reports about the downed pilot. But had not received, to his knowledge, any report from an Australian unit. “How sure are you about this report?”

“I could not get the information verified *Herr* General, but it is one of the only leads we have at the moment,” said Hermann.

“And you typically need two sources before up channeling,” said the General.

“Normally, yes,” said Hermann.

“And nobody else would validate it?” asked the General.

“Most other intelligence services gave it the token glance before seeing it was out of their sector. The J-SOD relied on your 1st Brigade for the validation,” said Hermann. “And since they wouldn’t validate, J-SOD wouldn’t approve the report for dissemination.”

“And why wouldn’t 1st Brigade validate?” asked the General.

“They used an old report as evidence to the contrary *Herr* General,” said Hermann.

“How old?” asked the General.

“Last November,” said Hermann, completely throwing several people under the bus.

“My God, that’s five months ago!” exclaimed the General.

“Which is why I felt it prudent for Major Dayfield to get better information,” said Hermann.

“He and his unit have been conducting front level recon missions at least twice a week. I see the reports myself!” exclaimed the General.

“They have, but for this specific report, the Brigade used an old analysis of the target area. Specifically the Ružomberok sector where your Brigade is on the lines,” said Hermann.

The General sat quietly once again. He knew there was trouble in the 1st Brigade. And he also knew the Colonel didn't care much for Dayfield even though the reasons weren't so clear. But to deny him potential information prior to a mission was bordering on negligence of his command duties. "Hermann, do you consider Thomas Dayfield a friend?"

"*Jawohl Herr* General, he is a friend," said Hermann.

"Then you do not discuss this conversation with him, period," ordered the General.

"I do not understand," said Hermann.

"Here's what you are going to do instead. If you get intelligence that you feel is necessary for him to complete a mission, you send it directly to him. And you courtesy copy my Division S-2. No more of this back door nonsense, understand?" asked the General.

"Understood sir," said Hermann.

"You have a lot of friends out there Major?" asked the General.

"I have a few acquaintances here and there," said Hermann.

"My own Aide knew your number off the top of his head. That says you have more than just a few acquaintances," observed the General.

"I may have more than I let on," Hermann laughed. "I am in the information business *Herr* General and the more information I get, the better I do my job."

"Ever think of transferring to our Army," laughed the General.

"No, I am happy in my new service. But you ask for a specific reason sir," said Hermann.

"Yep, get whatever information you can and send it Dayfield's way. I know I cannot task you with such an order, but I can make the request and a favor owed," said the General.

"I believe I can do that," said Hermann. "I have already given them what I have. But I can dig up whatever else might be out there."

"And if it's not too much to ask, could you request that Australian unit come to my headquarters to give me the same briefing they gave Tom Dayfield?" asked the General.

"I think that can be arranged," said Hermann.

"I won't hold you back then," said the General. "And in case I forgot to mention it, thank you."

“It is a pleasure *Herr* General,” said Hermann. “Thomas Dayfield is a credit to your Division as well as the Coalition as a whole. And a good friend, so helping him, even under the table, is the least I can do in this situation.”

“And it is appreciated. Have a good day Major,” said the General.

“And to you *Herr* General,” said Hermann as the call ended. He certainly had his work cut out for him, but having a favor owed from a Major General was certainly something nice to have in his back pocket. Hermann turned and started tasking his staff with gathering whatever information they could in the Ružomberok sector as well as the adjacent areas. He wanted a complete and thorough report to send to Thomas and the Division S-2 and wanted it quickly.

After the call, General Chambers sat in thought for several minutes thinking of his current predicament. Again, he knew there was tension between Dayfield and the Brigade Commander, but didn’t know what had happened after his arrival. Instead of jumping to conclusions and taking Dayfield’s side, he would let things play out a little further before digging into the matter if he needed to. The 14th was an extremely valuable asset to his Division and he knew the leadership was one of the reasons they performed as well as they did. So keeping the peace might require his intervention at some point, but not right then. However, he did have some concerns that needed answer.

“I need the mission taskings for the 14th that came out of the J-SOD as well as any administrative paperwork you happen to have on hand. And I’d like to see the intelligence reports from the 1st Brigade in the Ružomberok sector as well,” he said over the intercom.

“Roger that,” said the aide over the intercom.

“And also, if any unusual requests for supplies or support comes from the 14th direct into the Division, they are granted by my authority,” said the General.

“Roger that sir,” said the aide.

The General sat back in his chair and continued giving the situation some thought. And what his probable course of action could and maybe should be. He would run into serious political opposition from the NAU leadership if he relieved the Colonel without proper cause, so for the moment things would continue as normal. In thinking of the situation, he had completely forgotten about the incident on the French base.

Date/Time: 21 March/1633

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“You sure you don’t need me to stick around?” asked Sergeant Major Scott Carlson just before he started towards the chopper to take him to the airfield to get on the cargo transport to England and then the big ticket home. Although accepting the assignment to the school in Kansas, he still

had lingering reservations about leaving the unit. He had already made his rounds of the family he was leaving behind and got to Thomas last, but certainly not least. The helicopter in the background was ready for flight, but the Texan crew also knew Scott personally and knew it wasn't easy for him to let go.

"Brother, you've served your time in two separate services, three if you count the Texan Army and in too many battles to remember. You've earned your place in the rear with the gear," said Thomas.

"I know, I just feel like I'm abandoning the team you know?" he said.

"You aren't abandoning anything. You've stuck with us through thick and thin, good and bad. Now's your chance to get back Stateside and train up more Scott Carlson's. You know I'd love to keep you, but you are a far more valuable asset teaching others your trade. You are the best combat medic I know and it's far past the time you taught others how to save lives. I've hoarded you long enough," said Thomas.

"It's been a pleasure serving under you for my last combat assignment," said Scott.

"No, it was my pleasure serving *with* you for your last combat assignment," said Thomas.

"I can't really think of anything else to say," said Scott.

"Well, don't get all mushy and start crying. Those Texas pilots will think you're not so tough," said Thomas with a laugh as he shook Scott's hand and gave him a hug afterwards. "Give Gwen my regards."

"Will do. And I'll give Sharon the letter personally," said Scott. And right before he left, he snapped up one final salute. Thomas was surprised by the act and snapped a salute that would have made the Old Guard proud. They held it there for a long moment before they both let them go at the same time. Scott turned without saying anything else and darted for the chopper as the rotors were starting to turn. The entire group was watching as the elder member of the team moved on to better things and a more secure location. They felt as if a family member was departing and in some regards, one was. But Scott had served his time and knew he needed to be replaced by a younger member. But he could still teach and when offered the chance to train at the school for combat medics, he reluctantly took the offer after conferring with several team members at the base.

But his legacy would live on in the hundreds of recruits he would teach to perform the lifesaving applications he had learned the hard way in the two way shooting gallery. And they would be better for it as their skills would increase tenfold by learning the lessons from a tried and true combat veteran. Thomas had a feeling he would end up with another medic before long talking about "Old Man Carlson" when they arrived and would be happy knowing they were taught by the very best.

CHAPTER 8

Date/Time: 22 March/1047

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Okay, so let’s put two teams here,” said Thomas as he pointed at the map. “One more here and one in this area. I don’t want any more than two teams approaching that compound at the same time and spooking the opposition. We have the intel that happens to show the guard force has dogs so this could get a bit tricky.”

“I don’t like dogs,” said Mark Williams.

“You like my dog,” chuckled Darren.

“Okay, I don’t like *their* dogs,” laughed Mark. “But Tom’s right. If they are smart and using dogs out on a detection screen, it could make an approach a lot harder.”

“Just have to go slow,” suggested Michael Parsons. “Who’s up in the batting order?”

“For the moment, your team, Bill Meyer’s and Dave’s with Shaun Hanson filling in for Burnout if that’s okay,” said Thomas. “Carmen Ford’s team is already down two, so stealing another won’t hurt her in the long run until she can get back healthy.”

“Shaun’s okay, I can deal with that,” said Dave Lawson. “He’s worked with us before so he should slide right into the rotation.”

“And the fourth?” asked Darren.

“Either you or Tim,” said Thomas. “If he’s mission capable.”

“Doc cleared me this morning,” said Tim Daniels.

“Okay, Darren, your team is on backup, but I’m considering putting you in here,” said Thomas as he pointed at the map again. “This looks to be the only road in or out and probably could use some surveillance.”

“Sound play, but with Tim just coming off the med listing, why don’t we swap his team for mine?” asked Darren. “Plus, this area here looks inviting for an ORP.”

“Looks to be some thick brush and briars in that area,” said Mark as he looked over a previous mission report. “Nasty stuff.”

“Which makes it more inviting for an ORP,” said Tim. “I can handle babysitting a roadway. Say two in and two out. But honestly, let’s send in two teams for that. Get a better rotation that way and a little better security.”

“Doesn’t sound like a bad idea boss,” said Darren.

“Shannon isn’t cleared yet so Holly, are you back in the saddle?” asked Thomas.

“I probably need some range time and really need some pro work with the equipment. And I’m really in need of getting into shape. I don’t want to say no, but honestly, I’d be more of a hindrance rather than a help in my current state,” said Holly.

“Nothing wrong with admitting you aren’t back in the groove yet,” said Darren. “Pull one from your team and slide him in. You and I can’t be out at the same time anymore, but it doesn’t say members of your team can’t go out. So Ashley takes lead, Grumpy or Tattoo, Sister and Junior. Pretty solid team in my opinion.”

“Ashley? You can handle that?” asked Thomas.

“I was born to cowboy up!” she exclaimed.

“Gender confused?” laughed Mark.

“I can be a cowgirl too, yee haw!” she laughed. “Sure, we’ve practiced this before. Which one do I get?”

“Call it Grumpy,” said Thomas. “He can handle the thumper.”

“I like my thumper,” said Ashley.

“Fine, I won’t mind carrying a carbine for a change,” laughed Greg Henry.

“Let’s hold off on that for the moment,” suggested Mark. “We’ve got other teams ready to go. How about putting in Bobby Rivera and his team instead of screwing around with team alignments?”

“I want a few of the good teams as the ready response in case things go south,” said Thomas.

“Which I’d prefer having your team backing us up,” said Darren. “Mark has a point.”

“Okay, let’s put Bobby in place of Ashley. Sorry, no rodeo for you cowgirl,” said Thomas. “But you’ll be on ready reserve for the moment.”

“Still need someone to round out the equation,” said Ashley.

“Can’t swing my way into this one can I?” asked Stephen.

“As a relief team yes, but we still need one of you intel weenies on the ground here deciphering what we are getting from out there,” said Thomas. “And you’re filling in on Rick’s team until we get a replacement in.”

“How about the new guy? Josh something? You know who I’m talking about, right?” asked Ashley. “New guy that was assigned to Bill’s team for a while.”

“You mean Josh Wolfe that’s been in the unit for five months now?” asked Darren with a laugh. “That the new guy you’re talking about?”

“He’s been here that long?” asked Ashley.

“Yes,” laughed Thomas. “And he’s without a team at the moment, so sure, plug him in. That gives you Jeff, Wolfe and Jill. Kind of on the young side, but they’re okay.”

“You ever think we’d be in such medical trouble?” asked Michael.

“Don’t remind me,” said Thomas. “Speaking of, you get those files reviewed yet?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a couple of names I’ll send to you,” said Rick.

“Pick one and send it up,” said Thomas. “Your team, your choice.”

“I’ll have it this afternoon,” said Rick.

“Airflow?” asked Darren.

“Need to work it with J-SOD,” said Thomas. “And let’s see if we can get some on call air support like Heather suggested. Or as a minimum the Brigade or Division artillery on priority.”

“Okay, ready reserve?” asked Darren.

“My team, Rick with Stephen, Mark, Ashley...who else?” asked Thomas. “How about Joel Tucker and Cliff Morris to round out to six teams? And let’s call Justin Smith and see if he can put two squads on alert for us.”

It still amazed everyone that even with the stress of the job getting to him, Thomas could still remember exactly which teams were up and which were down. But the writing was on the wall. Minor injuries that went long untreated and zero down time was taking its toll. Members were getting injured far more frequently than they should have and the teams were suffering by having to swap around to get the job done.

“They are picking up some additional taskings themselves, so two would be a stretch,” said Michael. “Maybe a squad from him and a platoon from one of the down companies?”

“Which means I’ll have to ask his highness for help,” grumbled Thomas.

“We can’t pull that many teams from the alignment,” said Dave.

“Yeah, I know,” sighed Thomas. “Okay, I’ll make the request. Grab everyone else we’ve mentioned and start planning. I should be back in a half hour. Doesn’t take that long for someone to say ‘no’ you know?”

“Everything looks right,” said Darren. “I’ll handle the airflow.”

“I’ve got supplies,” said Tim.

“I’ll send out runners to gather everyone up and start mission planning,” said Mark.

“And I’ll go beg for help,” said Thomas. “See you in a bit.”

Thomas headed across the encampment for the Brigade Headquarters and got a ride from a passerby in a utility vehicle. Getting dropped off, he nodded politely at the guards at the entrance and was admitted quickly since they knew who he was. Heading inside the command area, he was searching for the S-3, but was intercepted by the Brigade Commander before he reached the station.

“Aren’t you supposed to be out on missions?” asked the Colonel.

“We just finished mission prep and team alignments. We’ll start sending them out probably tomorrow and finishing up tomorrow night,” said Thomas.

“We pulled you from the line because you got taskings from J-SOD. Now another Company has to pull your weight on the line because of some simple task of looking for a downed pilot. I would have thought you took your duties a little more seriously,” said the Colonel.

“It’s not exactly like heading out the front door into the yard. It does take proper planning and coordination before teams can go behind the lines,” said Thomas without losing his temper.

“And why are you here?” asked the Colonel.

“I came to coordinate the request Brigade and possibly Division artillery in case any of our teams get into trouble. And to request a platoon from one of the down battalions be put on standby as a ready reserve,” said Thomas.

“Your unit can’t handle the requirements? You have sixty-four people assigned, that leaves plenty for a reaction force,” said the Colonel.

“Sixty-two since Sergeant Major Carlson and Sergeant Bates are gone,” corrected Thomas. “Bates is being medevaced for long term treatment. And of those remaining, I have eleven down for injuries and put ten teams on mission leaving me eleven for the J-SOD reserve. Which

technically is below the minimums for that mission, but J-SOD has been made aware and we can pull a team out of the field for immediate redeployment.”

“About Carlson, I’ve taken the liberty of finding a replacement,” said the Colonel.

“Captain Jones was reviewing the packages and submitting a name this afternoon,” said Thomas.

“Since you and Captain Jones decided to drag your feet in choosing a replacement, I decided the matter for you. The S-1 has the information on the troop being assigned,” said the Colonel. “As for your other troop, make the request through the proper channels.”

“We’d like to have a little more say in who goes where,” said Thomas.

“Well, I suppose we could put in a request for another medic,” said the Colonel.

“Which will take up to six weeks to process and in the meantime, we are stuck without a medic,” objected Thomas.

“One way or the other, you can have a body now or he goes back into the pool for reassignment,” said the Colonel. “Your decision.”

Thomas quickly thought about the situation and whether or not it was wise to go without a medic in the time it would take for a replacement. For certain, he would take the body, but he was unsure if the man would be able to be brought up to speed before the next mission. There could always be more team swaps until the new medic was brought up to speed so Thomas figured it would be best to take the man for the moment and evaluate him when he got there.

“We’ll take him for the moment,” said Thomas. “And the artillery and ready reserve?”

“Artillery will be on an as needs basis and will go through normal protocols for requests,” said the Colonel. “Ready reserve...I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you go ask the Battalion Commanders themselves and see if they are willing to help? See if they want their tired and worn down troops to support you or not.”

Thomas knew if he made the request himself he would have no problems getting the manpower he needed. He was on good footing with the commanders and shouldn’t have any issues getting help. “I’ll have to contact Division Aviation for helo support.”

“Fine,” said the Colonel. “As for your eleven wounded, are they lagging behind?”

“If any of my troopers get put on medical hold, it’s because they are too wounded to perform missions. Most of them avoid that listing since they’d rather be out in the thick of it and the doc has a hard time keeping them in one place long enough to recover properly,” said Thomas. “And that means the eleven that are wounded are bad enough to warrant being black listed.”

“We have base details that need to be accomplished,” said the Colonel. “It’s not too much to ask your troopers to do their fair share is it?”

“I think they are already doing more than their fair share sir,” said Thomas through gritted teeth.

“If you say so,” said the Colonel.

“And it does beg the question, when are we going to be replaced and get some R and R? We’ve been passed over four times now,” said Thomas.

“Everyone gets their turn Major,” said the Colonel. “Yours will come eventually.”

“The unit is overdue for some R and R in the rear,” said Thomas.

“Other units have priority. We’ve all seen combat since we’ve been in Europe,” said the Colonel.

However, Thomas knew the Colonel had been nowhere near combat since his arrival. The entire unit had only been in minor skirmishes kept at the Company level since his arrival save what the 14th had been doing. Thomas knew there was no reason to fight him on it and decided to hold off until he could speak to the J-SOD in private about the decision. *Maybe an extended “training” in the rear would be a change of pace. Call it training, but it gives my people a break from the lines for a change,* he thought. *Talk to them about it after the current mission is over and find a replacement company to fill in for a couple of weeks.*

“Was there anything else?” asked the Colonel.

“Negative sir,” said Thomas. “And if there’s nothing further from you, I’ll coordinate the artillery and air support and speak with the S-1 about the replacements.”

“Yes, let the S-1 know exactly how long your medical hold troops will be down for. I mean, maybe a change of pace in doing some minor base details might do them some good and get them outside for a bit,” said the Colonel.

“I’ll get right on that,” said Thomas as he snapped a quick salute and departed after it was returned. Heading to the S-3 section, he requested the Brigade put a battery of artillery on alert for possible action and gathered the current frequencies they were using. And stopped by the S-1 to get the information on Scott’s replacement as well as letting him know about the medical hold situation. And letting him know to start looking quietly for a replacement for Heath. The S-1 just shook his head and let Thomas know he would continue feeding other squads into the details as long as he could and suggested Thomas pay the doctor a visit to update the profiles with a zero duty descriptions to avoid the base detail listing. Thomas already planned on doing that as soon as he got through with the Battalion Commanders. He was given the name and serial of the newly assigned medic on the team, which generally told him nothing, but Thomas would work his contacts and see what information they could dig up before the replacement got in theater.

He departed the Brigade Headquarters, still angry from his dealings with the Colonel and headed for the 4th Battalion area. Finding the battalion command post, he again was admitted without being checked and entered to find one of the leadership. He found the commander, XO and S-3 going over a map of the area.

“Hey Tom, what brings you down here to our area?” asked the Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Curtis Reese. “You don’t look happy.”

“Oh, just got back from Brigade and you know what fun that always is,” said Thomas.

“Fun is not quite the term I would apply to it,” laughed Reese.

“Well, the Colonel says I need to come down here and beg for your troops since I’m short right now and could use a ready reserve,” said Thomas.

“How many do you want?” asked Reese and not specifically in the form of a question, but offering up as many as Thomas desired.

“A platoon should cover it I think,” said Thomas.

“That’s all? Shoot, I’ve got a whole company sitting around on their behinds waiting for something like this,” said Reese.

“Nah, a platoon should do it. I’ll be arranging chopper assets in case you are needed,” he said.

“You’ll get my best,” said Reese.

“I don’t want to leave you shorthanded,” said Thomas.

“For crying out loud, are you serious? You never ask us for anything and since you’ve come in here hat in hand asking for help for a change, you’re going to get the best I’ve got,” said Reese.

“How about Reyes and his band of misfits in the recon platoon?” asked the XO.

“Perfect,” said Reese. “Oh, you’ll like him Tom, he’s a beast. But no headhunting.”

“Would I ever do anything like that?” asked Thomas with a laugh.

“Yeah, you would,” laughed the S-3. “You sure you don’t want two?”

“I mean, if you guys want to designate two in a rotating schedule that works,” said Thomas.

“Andrews,” said the S-3.

“Andrews is still getting his replacements up to speed. Caldwell?” asked the XO.

“Caldwell...no. Same issues as Andrews,” said Reese and thought for a moment. “Goodman.”

“Yeah, he will do nicely I think,” said the XO. “You need them for planning?”

“Send them and their platoon sergeants over to our compound say at around 1500 or so. Mark Williams can brief them in on the role,” said Thomas.

“And you say we are getting chopper assets?” asked the S-3.

“Gotta work that when I get back,” said Thomas. “But enough for a reinforced platoon.”

“Heavies?” asked the S-3.

“Standard weapons assortment,” said Thomas. “Just in case we get into trouble.”

“Which translates into ‘more than likely we will get into trouble because that’s what we do’ from one Major Thomas Dayfield,” laughed the XO.

“I don’t happen to go looking for trouble,” protested Thomas with a laugh.

“You go to Brigade Headquarters,” said Reese. “Which means you look for trouble.”

The small group was silent for a moment before laughing at the thought. “Okay, you guys got me. They are good to go?”

“We could do some squad swapping, but I think Goodman and Reyes will be fine,” said Reese.

“Okay, got some coordinating to do, so I have to run,” said Thomas as he shook the hands of the XO and S-3 before leaving.

“Let me walk you out,” said Reese. And once they were out of earshot, he asked the question. “Okay now seriously why are you here?”

“Because our dear Colonel thought I would have to beg for help instead of just asking. He’s got it in his head that you guys don’t like me,” said Thomas.

“Well, we don’t” said Reese with a straight face. “Okay, I can’t say that without laughing.”

“Nice to be loved,” laughed Thomas.

“You ever need anything, and I mean anything, you give us a holler,” said Reese.

“Two weeks R and R would be good,” said Thomas.

“Okay, something we can give you,” laughed Reese. “Seriously though, all the battalion commanders know what you’re going through and we’ve all spoken offline about it. And each

and every one of us will help you with anything you ask. And when I say anything, that includes if you get into hot water and need some character witnesses.”

“I won’t get into hot water,” said Thomas.

“You’re closer than you think. Word around the brigade campfire is the Colonel is looking for any reason to can you. One misstep and you’re history,” said Reese.

“What?” demanded Thomas.

“Rumors mainly, but more than a couple of the staff up there recognize a witch hunt when they see it. And the Colonel is looking for anything to get rid of you,” said Reese.

Thomas was stunned and couldn’t think of anything to say. He just stood there open mouthed at the information he had just received.

“It’s a like a ton of bricks hit you, I know. But let me tell you one more thing. Each and every battalion commander, XO, company commander, Sergeant Major and First Sergeant is ready to go to bat for you if you need it. We’ve all talked and all came to the conclusion individually that we’d risk our own careers backing you up if push comes to shove. If you’ve never seen an entire brigade revolt, stick around and see what happens if he fires you,” said Reese.

“I won’t have you guys risking your necks for me!” protested Thomas.

“You mean the same way you risk your neck each and every time you go out there while we are sitting back here snuggling in our cots? You’ve earned our respect and admiration for the way you’ve trooped on through this whole thing. And you know what? If that means we take a few risks ourselves, then so be it. And I’m reasonably certain the old man at Division will have to take a hard look at what’s going on if every battalion in 1st Brigade decided to sit it out,” said Reese. “So however unofficial this is, you have our support.”

“I can’t ask for that,” said Thomas.

“It’s not asking. We came up with this on our own,” said Reese. “So your charge is not to give him any reason to get rid of you. Keep your nose clean and run your unit like you have been.”

“I can’t make any promises. We aren’t exactly rule followers,” said Thomas.

“And most don’t care what happens behind the lines,” said Reese. “But while you are here, you have to endure. And I mean that. Your unit needs you. This Brigade, shoot, the whole Division and Coalition Forces as a whole needs you. You’re too valuable to lose.”

“I’m just a single person,” said Thomas.

“You’re a bit more than that Tom,” said Reese. “Even if your humility won’t allow you to think otherwise, you are more than just a random dude.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” said Thomas.

“You deserve it,” said Reese as he shook Thomas’ hand. “Be careful.”

“Not sure I know how to do that,” chuckled Thomas.

“Learn,” said Reese. “And quickly.”

Thomas departed the area with a million thoughts pouring through his head. He had no idea what was going on in this situation and most importantly, why the Colonel had it in for him. He had never crossed paths before in his career and had been respectful from the beginning with him so he had no personal history that he knew of. He continued to wander towards his compound, the thoughts of the conversation still cascading through his mind.

CHAPTER 9

Date/Time: 22 March/1301

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

Thomas reentered the compound still lost in thought over the revelation from earlier. He only knew of one way to command and had continued to do it that way since it worked. And being under the microscope meant he would have to be more mindful of the decisions he made. He saw Mark over by the map shaking his head and went to find out what was going on.

“Something wrong?” asked Thomas as he looked at the map.

“We got the initial assessment from the Aussies,” said Mark. “Great stuff and we really need to keep those guys happy for continued contacts in the future.”

“So why are you shaking your head?” asked Thomas.

“The Colonel isn’t exploiting some of the things he should. Look here? See this valley? You take that valley and it provides a darn good jumping point for encircling the troops to the south and west by linking up with the Division coming east from Nitra. You can move south continually to this point and maybe beyond Zvolen. Whole lot of options he isn’t considering that are generally low risk, high reward,” said Mark.

“Still have to get past Ružomberok,” said Thomas.

“Okay, see this village here? Černová? Only two companies dug in here guarding the approach to the bridges. You take those two out and it opens up the lines to head into Ružomberok. And from there you can either surround and siege Ružomberok or move past down the valley,” said Mark.

“That was brought up at the last staff meeting,” said Thomas. “The Colonel shot down the idea since it was too risky.”

“This entire war is too risky,” said Mark. “But it puts the Brigade in a far better position for Operation Ticonderoga when it starts. There is practically nothing behind them for thirty miles besides some small garrison troops at selected villages. And even if the Brigade dug in this valley, we provide the anvil for the Division coming east to hammer the retreating troops.”

“Maybe you should be in charge of the Brigade,” chuckled Thomas.

“Not for love or money,” laughed Mark. “I’m a foot slogger by nature.”

“We get anything further on the target?” asked Thomas.

“Nothing really ground breaking. Some thermals of patrols and better photos to include some possible internal layouts of the buildings,” said Mark as a knock was heard on the door.

“Enter,” said Thomas, not looking away from the file he and Mark were looking at.

“Sir! Sergeant Jamie Collins reporting for duty,” announced the mid 20s looking Sergeant upon entering the building.

“Were we expecting replacements?” asked Mark.

“More or less, you have orders assigning you here?” asked Thomas.

“Yes sir! I’m to be assigned to the 14th Special Operations Battalion, Op Group Alpha,” said the Sergeant. They both noticed he gave a little extra emphasis on the “sir” portion of his speech. He handed over his ID card and a sheet of paper officially assigning him to the unit.

“I just got the notification you were coming a couple of hours ago,” said Thomas after comparing the identity with the name he had received from the S-1.

“Sir, I was informed three days ago of my reassignment. It’s taken me a little time to get this far forward,” said Collins.

“Figures,” said Thomas. “He’s Scott’s replacement.”

“You’re a medic?” asked Mark.

“I’m a linguist and a medic, sir,” said Collins.

“What’s your language specialty?” asked Mark.

“Arabic sir,” said Collins. “Specifically the Iraqi dialects.”

“Helpful,” said Thomas. “You bring everything in?”

“Sir, just my ruck, weapons and sustainment load. The rest of my gear comes in sometime in the next few days,” said Collins.

“Where are you coming from?” asked Thomas.

“Just finished Selection and Training, sir,” said Collins.

“And before that?” asked Mark.

“I was in the 19th Support Battalion sir,” said Collins.

“You have lunch yet?” asked Mark.

“No sir,” said Collins. “I’ve been on the road the entire morning.”

“Okay, we’ll get you bedded down and fed, then have our initial talk,” said Thomas as he picked up a field phone to call someone to fetch the new member.

“You have your personnel folder?” asked Mark.

“Yes sir,” said Collins as he dug out the thicker than normal envelope from his assault pack and handed it over. Mark sat it off to the side so they could review it later. Staff Sergeant Heather Davis appeared without knocking on the door.

“You rang...Major?” she said after seeing they had unknown company. While she would have typically resorted to first names, she was proper for the time being.

“Yes, this is Sergeant Jamie Collins and will be assigned to your team. See he gets a bunk and gets fed,” said Thomas.

“Meet and greet time?” asked Heather.

“We’re in the middle of something here. Say about an hour and a half,” said Thomas.

“Roger that,” said Heather. “Come on Sergeant, let’s find you a place to stow your stuff.”

He collected his pack and snapped up a sharp salute before leaving. Thomas had seen the very proper military type before, but for some reason, he just wasn’t getting the vibe from this soldier. However, proper military courtesies took over and he gave a quick salute before the trooper left. After his about face, they two quickly departed and the door closed behind him.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” asked Thomas.

“Let’s check that personnel file and put in a call to one of our contacts,” said Mark as he pulled a pocket knife and slit open the yellow envelope containing the records. Thomas went to a nearby telephone and called a contact they used from time to time.

“Blake? Tom Dayfield here...yeah, got a new guy in and need your networking abilities...Sergeant Jamie Collins...ummm, 90-324-7392...new guy who just got out of Selection and Training...19th Support Battalion before that...yeah, just what the personnel folder won’t tell us...just whatever you can dig up...okay, we’ll be here for the next couple of hours...yeah, we got that stuff you sent down...tell your Dad he needs to lessen up a bit on that hooch, it’s a sneaky little devil...sure, sure, anytime you want to come down you know you’re welcome here...talk to you in a little while,” said Thomas as he hung up the phone. “Blake Niles said he’s going to take a look. Find anything useful so far?”

“Yeah, the 19th Support Battalion was only the last unit he was assigned to. He was in four units before that and bounced out of each. Letters of Admonishment and Reprimand for

insubordination...non-judicial punishment for assaulting an officer...performance reports have him firewalled to the max on duty performance, but gave the lowest marks possible for teamwork and military bearing...here's a citation for bravery during a raid by IU special forces in Manchester...received a Bronze Star for personally taking out a squad by himself...more memorandums for insubordination...he's a wild card," said Mark.

"How did he end up here?" asked Thomas.

"Last commander hacked off on his application to Cider after he applied. Went through the application and Selection and was accepted although the file says the committee was 'reluctant' to send him forward to the Training portion. Got high marks for individual tactics, but low marks for teamwork. Passed, but at the last of his class," said Mark, handing over the documents he had already scanned over.

"You passed last of our class as well," chuckled Thomas.

"Yeah, but I'm an old fart so I had a good excuse," laughed Mark.

"Anything else revealing?" asked Thomas as he scanned over the documents himself.

"Nothing that stands out in my mind. After the interview, we'll know more. Maybe he's just a misunderstood child," laughed Mark.

"Aren't we all," said Thomas as he reflected on the situation he was in. "I'm going to use some back door channels trying to get us a relief unit in here. Any ideas?"

"I'll have to check to see who's been sitting on their duffs for a while," said Mark.

"Quietly," said Thomas as Rick entered.

"Okay, jokes over," said Rick.

"Joke?" asked Thomas.

"You are not saddling me with some wet behind the ears, snot nosed rookie with a bad attitude. No way this is going to happen," said Rick.

"Word travels fast," said Mark.

"This isn't a joke?" asked Rick.

"No, he's your new guy," said Thomas.

"He's not the one I picked out!" objected Rick.

"I know and I just found out this morning," said Thomas. "At least give him a shot."

"I'll give him a shot of something all right. Kid comes barging in already causing problems within my team dynamic," said Rick.

"What happened?" asked Thomas.

"He saluted me!" protested Rick.

"Well, as a minimum he should have smacked you in the face first," deadpanned Mark.

"We ain't that formal as you well know!" protested Rick.

"He's young," laughed Thomas. "He'll learn."

"Background?" asked Rick. He was handed the personnel folder by Mark and started scanning it before a dark look came over his face.

"Oh, you'll have fun with that one," chuckled Thomas.

"I've already got Heather which has her own issues and you saddle me with him?" asked Rick.

"Just give it a shot first," said Thomas. "If you don't mind."

"Not feeling the love here," said Rick.

"You've still got Stephen until he gets up to speed," said Mark.

"And no medic," said Rick.

"Steve's pretty good," said Thomas.

"I trust you'll take it under advisement if he doesn't work out?" asked Rick.

"Only after, and I do mean after, he's been properly evaluated," said Thomas. "And I mean a legitimate shot to show whether he's capable or not."

"Still not feeling the love," said Rick.

"Get with Frank and schedule some range time and Darren for tactics," said Thomas. "And speaking of, I'm pulling Darren's team from the mission and sliding in Ashley instead."

"Okay, something happen?" asked Mark.

"I have my reasons," said Thomas.

"Won't argue with you," said Mark. "You mind fetching Ashley after you go back to sulk?"

“Yeah, I’ll find her,” said Rick as he gathered the personnel folder for further review. He departed the area to further study the folder and start getting to know his new troop.

“You have this feeling the Colonel scraped the bottom of the barrel to find a replacement for Scott?” asked Mark.

“I have this feeling this was in the works long before we got the message saying Scott was going to be reassigned. It was a foregone conclusion he was getting shipped out. It takes a minimum of a week to get a replacement assigned and that’s using our channels that cut the red tape. So yes, this child was on the radar long before we got him,” said Thomas.

“You think it was intentional?” asked Mark as he looked through the computer.

“Probably so,” said Thomas.

“Okay, Ranger Company out of the Pacifica 3rd Mech Infantry Regiment has been begging for some field time. That’s McMackin’s outfit isn’t it?” asked Mark.

“I think so,” said Thomas. “Good guy.”

“You wanted an idea on a replacement, there you go,” said Mark. “J-SOD coordination should be a cinch and I don’t think McMackin would object.”

“As long as he doesn’t mind the transfer of authority,” said Thomas.

“Happens all the time,” said Mark. “Want me to track down the info?”

“Yeah, please,” said Thomas. “Also, you have two platoon commanders and their sergeants coming over at 1500 for a briefing. They’ll be our ready reserve while we’re out.”

“You get the transport lined up yet?” asked Mark.

“No, not yet,” said Thomas.

“Look, something is going on behind that thick skull of yours. Why don’t you take a little bit of time to sort things out while I work this?” requested Mark.

“Okay, contact division and ask for the choppers. Also, let them know we are going to be requesting to be on call for some artillery support if needed,” said Thomas.

“Will do,” said Mark as Thomas departed to sort through the emotions of what he had gone through that day. Once he had left, Mark made another phone call before calling Division and requested Darren come to the center. After several minutes, Darren appeared.

“Hey Mark,” he said.

“Hey man, Tom pulled your team from the mission and put in Ashley instead,” said Mark.

“Why?” asked Darren.

“Not sure and he wouldn’t tell me,” said Mark. “But when he came back from Brigade, something had changed in him. He’s more reserved and is in deep thought over something.”

“Wouldn’t say what?” asked Darren.

“No, but you might be able to get him to open up,” said Mark. “Maybe after supper when he’s had some time to sort through the thoughts.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” said Darren. “Are the infiltration routes in place?”

“Yeah, starting day after tomorrow at 0400 and going for the next six hours,” said Mark. “We tried earlier, but J-SOD couldn’t get the aircraft sooner.”

“Batting order?” asked Darren.

“Tim and Ashley first to secure the ORP followed by Bobby, Bill, Dave and Mike. Infil here, here, here and here,” said Mark as he pointed at the map. “Ashley and Tim are heading out together and the other four teams have separate assets.”

“Sound like a plan,” said Mark.

“So no ideas about what’s going on in Tom’s head?” asked Darren.

“Nothing I know of,” said Mark. “Let me make a couple of calls and see what I can dig up.”

“It’d be appreciated,” said Darren.

“You know, we just got a supply shipment in,” said Mark.

“Yeah, that’ll work,” said Darren. “Any ice to be had?”

“I’m sure someone can find some to steal,” said Mark.

“Okay, any changes, let me know,” said Darren who departed and saw Thomas over by himself. He wasn’t sure what was going on, but he did see something that he didn’t like. He walked up behind Thomas and found yes, he was doing what he shouldn’t be. “Are you serious?”

Thomas had heard someone approaching from behind him and wasn’t surprised when they objected. He took another drag on the cigarette before turning. “My body.”

“Sharon would skin you alive if she caught you doing that!” protested Darren.

“Give me a break will you? It’s been a long day already,” said Thomas.

“Where did you get that anyway?” asked Darren.

“One of the MPs,” said Thomas as he took another drag.

“It helping?” asked Darren.

“Making me feel guilty,” said Thomas and added a sour face and stubbed out the remainder on the ground. “And reminding me why I quit.”

“Nine more seconds off your life,” said Darren.

“All sorts of bad things happening today,” said Thomas.

“Want to talk about it?” asked Darren.

Thomas sat in silence for a moment thinking about it. Darren was probably the closest thing he had to a brother in the world and was always the one he could vent to. But this time, he kept it inside. “No, not yet.”

“Plenty of us around here to talk to if you change your mind,” said Darren.

“I know and I’m grateful,” said Thomas. “But for now, I still need to make up my own mind about what’s going on and what to do.”

“Well, in any case, I have a briefing for you tonight,” said Darren.

“Such as?” asked Thomas.

“If I told you it wouldn’t be much of a surprise would it?” said Darren with a laugh. “After supper, make yourself available for a briefing.”

“I’ve got nothing planned,” said Thomas.

“Until then,” said Darren as he went back to the command center to see if Mark needed any help. It was apparent Thomas has some significant internal trouble going on and whatever Darren could do to help he would.

CHAPTER 10

Date/Time: 22 March/1948

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Okay Tom, time for your briefing,” said Darren as he found Tom after he had gotten done with the evening dispatches.

“What kind of briefing?” asked Thomas.

“It’ll take too long to explain, just come with me,” said Darren.

“Is it serious?” asked Thomas.

“Could be,” said Darren.

“All right, lead the way,” said Thomas. They departed the command center and headed into the center of the compound where the supply containers surrounded their small rec area. And it appeared Darren had already prepared the “briefing” by putting a case of beer on ice in a cooler. Additionally, the makeshift fireplace they had made from an old drum already had a fire lay inside and was ready for a match.

“This kind of briefing huh?” asked Thomas with a shake of his head.

“Yep, a briefing of Coors Light, your favorite, a fire and forgetting about the war even for a short time tonight,” said Darren.

“Three is the limit,” said Thomas.

“Okay, fair enough,” said Darren as he grabbed two out and handed one over. They caught up on small talk while sipping on the cold beer and hoping to forget about the war for a while.

“Hear about Nicole?” asked Darren as they sat on the redneck engineered chairs made from old wooden pallets and looking at the stars.

“No, something wrong?” asked Thomas as he sipped at the beer.

“Blew out her knee during parachute training and they removed her from flight school. Tore just about every tendon in her leg and pretty much broke her heart,” said Darren.

“Surgery?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah, but it’s one of those things they say can’t really be fixed well enough for her to fly,” said Darren.

“That sucks,” observed Thomas.

“She’s heading back out to Colorado. Probably looking for a job at Camp Dugger,” said Darren, referring to the recently renamed North American Union Camp near the Ranch. Renamed for Mike Dugger after his death in an airstrike prior to Operation Phoenix.

“They going to discharge her?” asked Thomas.

“Probably when it’s all said and done. She’s desk bound for a minimum of a year with the surgeries and all,” said Darren.

“Going to get the surgery at the hospital at Carson?” asked Thomas.

“Probably. And still gets full pay while she’s laid up,” chuckled Darren.

“Maybe I should blow out my knee,” chuckled Thomas. “Get paid to sit around a while.”

“You would go out of your mind not doing anything and furthermore not being able to go and do like you are used to,” chuckled Darren.

“Okay, I’ll give you that,” said Thomas with a laugh. “How is she otherwise?”

“Apparently somewhat serious about a boy,” said Darren, not realizing the boy was twenty-four years old and more of a man than a boy. But when it came to his daughter, each and every one of them was a “boy.”

“Is that good or bad?” asked Thomas.

“Well, I haven’t met him yet, so that’s bad. And the fact I haven’t met him and given him the mean father speech is even worse,” said Darren with a laugh.

“Couldn’t stay young forever you know,” said Thomas, worried about the day Angel started dating.

“She’s always wanted to be a grown up, that’s for certain,” said Darren, taking a sip out of the can. “But apparently Janet put the brakes on him already.”

“How’s that?” asked Thomas.

“Told him her daddy was a decorated special forces soldier and was an ill-tempered old cuss when it came to his daughter,” he laughed. “And told him I only negotiated from the end of a gun.”

“And how did he take it?” asked Thomas with a laugh.

“About like any other typical male in his early twenties would. He didn’t listen,” laughed Darren.

“Nicole’s got a good head on her shoulders. She’ll be fine,” said Thomas. “You know, I’ve never asked something about your family. Through thick and thin, there are some things I just don’t know about you...”

“Janet and I were real young when Johnny was born. She was 15 and I was 16,” said Darren as he knew the question Thomas was about to ask. “So yeah, I know the whole boys will be boys thing.”

“I think Nicole knows how to be proper,” said Thomas with a chuckle. “She’ll be okay.”

“But it’s not your daughter! My baby girl is getting serious about some boy? I might have to go AWOL to have a chat with him,” laughed Darren.

“We’ll cover for you,” said Thomas with a laugh. “But no jury in the world would convict you as long as they are fathers with daughters themselves.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” said Darren as he handed over another beer. They sat in silence and fed a few additional pieces of wood into the fire. The air was a bit chilly, but not uncomfortable.

“This is about the time I would say ‘it don’t get no better than this bud.’ But that’d be fairly cliché,” said Thomas with a chuckle.

“Get your mind off work for a bit?” asked Darren.

“It did and I know that’s why you brought me out here,” chuckled Thomas.

“Was it that obvious?” asked Darren.

“Kinda figured you guys were up to something,” said Thomas.

“You needed a break,” said Darren.

“We all need a break,” said Thomas.

“A few days of stand down would be in order for everyone,” said Darren. “Fatigue is setting in and we won’t be worth a darn for the spring offensive if we don’t get some relief.”

“I’m working it,” said Thomas. “Trying to bring in a relief unit through the J-SOD if I can.”

“And the leave will still have to be approved through Brigade,” said Darren.

“Working that as well. I’m calling in a few favors,” said Thomas.

“Anyone in particular?” asked Darren.

“General McMackin,” said Thomas. “He owes the unit a favor for that job we pulled in France.”

“You mean when we stole those steaks for his unit?” asked Darren.

“That very same one,” said Thomas.

“Kind of a flimsy favor. We are talking about getting a unit in here to replace us and getting pulled from the line. That’s normally a pretty big deal,” said Darren.

“Normally, but he has a Ranger unit that’s a little green that he says wants some field time,” said Thomas. “So it works out for us both.”

“You’ve already talked to him?” asked Darren.

“Not yet, but I don’t think he would avoid my calls,” said Thomas. “Nice to have friends in high places even when they can’t help in our current predicament directly.”

“And what did the Colonel say?” asked Darren.

“Our dear Colonel hasn’t been told yet,” said Thomas.

“Well, it seems like you’re covering all your bases,” said Darren.

“I’m not asking for anything more than ten days, maybe two weeks if I can swing it. The rest of the Brigade has rotated out, but it just seems our number keeps slipping down the chain,” said Thomas. “So I bring in the Rangers to replace us and it doesn’t give him any excuses.”

“Shouldn’t that is,” said Darren.

“True,” said Thomas. “But with a hack from the J-SOD, it should go through just fine.”

“But then again, leaves are administrative and anything administrative has to go through Brigade,” said Darren.

“I’ll call it advanced training in something or other,” said Thomas.

“And in a spot that’s typically R and R?” laughed Darren.

“Pretty close to one,” laughed Thomas.

“Taking a big chance here,” said Darren. “But it is appreciated.”

“It’s the least I can do,” said Thomas. “And you guys deserve it.”

“Otherwise, what was going on in your head today? Feel up to talking to it yet?” asked Darren.

Thomas hesitated for a moment before finally letting someone know about the conversation he had earlier with Lieutenant Colonel Reese. Explaining the situation to Darren, it was like lifting a dark cloud from his mind. Darren took a moment to absorb the data Thomas had given him before replying. “Kind of knew that already.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?” demanded Thomas.

“Not like that Tom,” said Darren. “It’s not a secret that the Colonel doesn’t like you and the next logical step is getting rid of you or at least trying to. I mean, I never thought it through to a conclusion, but the facts support the argument.”

“Reese says it’s only rumors,” said Thomas.

“Perhaps,” said Darren. “But there’s always a little truth to rumors and that’s why you pulled me from the mission and kept me close. In case something happens, I’ll be right there to pick it up.”

“You’re too smart for your own good sometimes,” said Thomas.

“Don’t hear that too often,” chuckled Darren.

“It sucks,” said Thomas. “I’ve busted my butt and bent over backwards for that man. And for what? So he can turn around and fire me? I’ve done everything the military has asked of me and a whole lot more and this is the thanks I get?”

“I don’t think it will come to that,” said Darren.

“With that man, I’m not sure,” said Thomas as he finished the beer before crushing and throwing the can against a nearby crate. “It’s like the laws of common sense aren’t working when he’s around. This unit can and probably will get him promoted out of here a whole lot quicker if he’d just leave us alone!”

Darren fished another beer out of the ice before handing it over to Thomas. “Well, this latest mission should get him some good press. Maybe that’s all it will take to get him promoted and out of here.”

“Maybe,” said Thomas. “But that’s on the Division Commander.”

“And rumor has it he’s looking to try to get him out of here as well,” said Darren.

“Yeah, heard that myself,” said Thomas.

“Look, I can’t tell you what to do except to keep doing what you are doing. It’s worked so far and the rest of us are happy with the way things run around here. So don’t go thinking you have to change the way you do business because you are looking over your shoulder,” said Darren.

“That also happens to be the exact path that’s probably giving him ammunition to get rid of me. Hope you’re ready to move up in the world,” said Thomas.

“I think he’d rather keep you in place,” laughed Darren. “I know I’d probably be just as bad if not worse than you are.”

“Mark needs to get warmed up then,” laughed Thomas.

“With the way we act? That new kid will be in charge before long,” laughed Darren.

“I forgot I was supposed to do my meet and greet with him today,” said Thomas.

“I’m sure the world won’t stop turning if it’s delayed by a day or so,” said Darren.

“Principle of the matter,” said Thomas as he sipped on the beer. “Last one.”

“Same here,” said Darren. “Just can’t swig like I used too.”

“None of us can,” laughed Thomas. “Hell getting old isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, can you describe how it feels?” laughed Darren.

“If you weren’t my best friend, I’d probably have throat chopped you by now,” chuckled Thomas. “Or worse.”

“Like Amber’s ex?” laughed Darren. “That story is one for the record books.”

“I don’t remember a whole lot of it except I think I threatened a French officer with bodily harm if he didn’t back off,” laughed Thomas.

“Who hasn’t threatened the French at least once?” laughed Darren.

“I’m kind of surprised I haven’t been briefed on that by the Colonel yet,” said Thomas.

“He probably doesn’t know,” said Darren.

“Let’s hope it stays that way. Assaulting an enlisted member, even a French one, has some serious consequences involved. Like the kind that get you fired,” said Thomas.

“Better you than Amber. I’d be willing to bet pennies to dollars she would have left him for dead instead of just a twisted arm and wet pants,” said Darren.

“Wet pants?” asked Thomas.

“You didn’t hear?” asked Darren. “Apparently the gentleman was leaking when he departed the scene. Or at least according to Stephen he was.”

“I didn’t notice,” said Thomas.

“Well, even if it isn’t true, it’s a funny side note to the story,” laughed Darren.

“True,” laughed Thomas. “It was justified though.”

“A lot of the things we do are justified,” said Darren. “As long as the end result is good.”

“I keep telling myself that,” said Thomas. “But wondering what God will say.”

“You’re not going to get philosophical on me are you?” asked Darren.

“Nah, just wondering about the end result,” said Thomas. “Wondering if we ever really will make a difference through all this.”

“I think so,” said Darren. “Give it time to think objectively and when you aren’t under the impending threat of removal. I’m sure you’ll see it’s worth it.”

“Hope so,” said Thomas as he took another sip. “Do me a favor though.”

“Sure,” said Darren.

“Don’t tell Sharon I was smoking,” said Thomas.

“Our dirty little secret,” said Darren with a laugh.

“This just sucks,” said Thomas repeating his sentiments from earlier.

“So are you ready to give in and call it quits? Let the Colonel brush you aside?” asked Darren.

Thomas’ immediate reply was describing where the Colonel could go and what he could do with himself when he got there. And something he might find hard to accomplish through ordinary means, but was followed by a simple “I don’t quit.”

“So persevere,” said Darren.

“If I make a misstep, I’m gone,” said Thomas.

“You think you have any friends at Division, in J-SOD or in other services?” asked Darren.

“Yeah, I do,” said Thomas.

“And none of them would go to bat for you?” asked Darren.

“Actually Reese said the battalion leaders would support me no matter what and refuse orders coming from him if I get relieved. Not sure how much faith I’d put in that though,” he replied.

“See? There are some willing to stand up for you. I know the rest of us would in a heartbeat if something happened,” said Darren.

“I don’t want you guys putting your careers in jeopardy over me,” said Thomas.

“You’ve always believed in us making our own choices and sticking to them, right?” asked Darren. “And in turn, living with the consequences of said decisions?”

“I know the point you are about to get at, but one man isn’t worth it,” said Thomas.

“You’re more than a man you know?” asked Darren. “Oh, I know how corny that sounds and a simple way of looking at it, but you are a symbol and an inspiration to plenty of folks. I know more than a couple of people around here that would have packed it in already if you weren’t around to keep them up. Shoot, since the Fall, you’ve kept most of us alive, motivated and healthy, so what’s changed about the situation?”

“Point being, a whole lot of people look up to you and put you on a pedestal. A hero to look up to. Now I know you aren’t a hero or larger than life, but that’s because I’ve known you for years. And I know you shun that sort of thing anyway, but the principle applies that you are seen as a rock by those outside our unit. They see you as an effective leader when others are paper tigers. Call it crazy, but folks fight better knowing you are around or helping them. And that goes for this brigade and the entire division. Shoot, maybe even the Corps, I don’t know.”

“But overall, we believe in you no matter what and will trust your judgment to get us through whatever comes our way. And if for some odd reason you get canned, not a darn one of us will step up and I could almost guarantee the S-1 won’t know what to do with all the voluntary withdrawal forms he’ll get. Because to a man and woman, the entire team here, and likely a lot in the other teams, will resign their position in Cider over that kind of thing. And generally speaking that sort of thing gets noticed by those on high,” said Darren.

“And the whole lot of you get tossed into a conventional infantry outfit,” said Thomas.

“Get more sleep that way,” said Darren with shrugged shoulders.

“I can’t let you guys do it,” said Thomas.

“And if you aren’t in a leadership position, who’s going to stop us?” asked Darren.

“I would normally say you, but I know where you stand,” said Thomas.

“We stand with you. And if it’s in Alaska guarding a radar site, so be it,” said Darren.

Thomas paused for a moment and took another sip of the beer. Darren could see the wheels were turning in his brain and thinking things through to the logical conclusion as he tended to do in most cases. "I'd advise against it, but people make their own decisions."

"I've been trying to tell you that!" exclaimed Darren with a laugh.

"I'm a slow learner," laughed Thomas.

"If there's anything I've learned, it's the opposite," laughed Darren.

"Okay, stubborn then," laughed Thomas.

"Nail on the head," said Darren as he turned slightly and offered his can. "To stubborn."

"To stubborn," said Thomas as he popped his can against Darren's and sipped. "Foam!"

"Yep," said Darren with a grunt. "Right up my nose."

They both started laughing at the unintentional comic relief they both had brought and finished up the cans in their hand. Thomas felt a little better about the situation and also knew there were probably more than just his team that he could count on. They heard a voice behind them and someone digging in the cooler.

"Can't believe I wasn't invited," said Rick as he took a long pull on a can he had retrieved.

"We were trying to have a romantic interlude here," said Darren.

"I'm sure my showing up won't break up the bromance," said Rick as he grabbed two more beer and handed them over. "Don't make me drink alone."

"Three was going to be our limit," said Darren.

"And yet you still have another eighteen in this cooler," said Rick. "Don't make me put the peer pressure of you two old men."

"I'm sure one of the two, or both of us could take you down," said Thomas.

"Yep, right after you finish your beer," said Rick.

"You don't argue with logic sometimes," said Darren as he popped the top on another can.

They started chatting about the little things in life before yet another voice was heard behind them. "Seems like our spot's already taken," said Greg Henry to Brian Holmes.

"Pity," said Brian. "Guess we'll have to join them."

“We were discussing how many cans we could crush on Rick’s skull before it knocked him out. Want to get in on the pool?” asked Darren.

“I’m not sure if there’s enough beer in the world for that,” laughed Brian.

“Collins, you can come over, we don’t bite,” said Thomas as he noticed the new member of the team watching from a short distance.

“I didn’t know if it was private sir,” said Collins.

“What exactly is private?” asked Darren.

“That thing you’re going to be if you keep it up,” deadpanned Thomas as the others laughed.
“You want a beer? Come on over.”

Jamie hesitated before joining the group, but remained quiet since everyone here was a senior NCO or officer and he wasn’t sure how to act. But he listened in on the conversation and learned a little more about the unit he was currently assigned to.

“Anyone see a ‘no girls allowed’ sign anywhere?” asked Ashley from behind them and carrying one of her newly acquired bottles of wine. She had Amber and Heather in tow and grabbed another seat before she even got an answer. And Michael and Shannon Parsons were seen behind them coming towards the ever growing group.

“Only if you get rid of that ridiculous bottle of wine and have a beer,” remarked Thomas.

“Blech! We’ve got good French wine here,” said Amber as she stole some of the ice from the cooler and put it in a bucket for the bottle of wine. “You guys keep your crap beer.”

“I swear, Ashley is the only person in this theater that has her own wine bucket, glass set and corkscrew,” laughed Greg.

“Just because I appreciate the finer things in life doesn’t give you a reason to be a hater,” she smirked and sniffed the cork after removing it. “And it’s got a wonderful nose.”

“I don’t recall ever sniffing a bottle cap from a beer, have you?” asked Brian.

“Something to be said about the simple things in life,” laughed Thomas.

“Kind of like Ashley’s brain?” said Rick with a grin.

“The same brain that got Tim to steal me a case of wine?” she asked.

“Only, ‘to make you shut up about it’ in his own words,” laughed Thomas.

“Better wine than whine I always say,” said Heather as she accepted a glass.

“Dis a white man only pah-tay?” asked Jeremy Baines as he wandered up with Reggie Nicholson. Nicholson had recently been released from the hospital and was still on crutches.

“Did you miss Mike and Shannon?” asked Greg.

“I mean like real black folk,” said Jeremy with a straight face.

“A real black man is gonna take some young buck behind the storage shed and teach him a few lessons in manners,” said Michael.

“As soon as you find one, come get me,” said Jeremy as he fished in one of the random coolers for a beer. The group all laughed at Michael’s expense as he made a scene of grabbing Jeremy and lifting him off the ground in a bear hug. And Michael got the last laugh as the can of beer had built up enough pressure to spew all over Jeremy when he opened it.

“And this is where I’m supposed to say ‘where de white women at’ right?” asked Reggie as he found something to lean against and set his crutches off to the side. He was handed a beer by one of the other members, thanking them since it meant he didn’t have to move.

“Ahem, did you miss us?” asked Jill Dugger.

“I mean like girls that can’t beat me up,” said Reggie.

“That would be about all of them right now, hop-along,” laughed Michael.

“You could try the 19th Support Battalion. I hear they have a lot of little girls,” said Nancy.

“Hey, I was in the 19th,” said Jamie and the group got quiet.

“Yeah, we know,” said Nancy with a hint of a smile. Jamie had a look of confusion on his face until it hit him. The rest of the group was trying not to laugh out loud until he got the joke.

“Oh, ha ha ha,” said Jamie sarcastically and the group broke out in laughter.

“Took you long enough,” laughed Amy.

“Word travels fast about my former unit,” said Jamie.

“We have no secrets here,” said Darren.

“But apparently you do have a whole lot of dudes with long hair,” said Jamie with half a grin and attempting to get in a barb on Nancy in retaliation.

“Okay, that was weak,” said Nancy and added with a sweet smile. “Kind of like your arms.”

Jamie blushed up at the prod and couldn't think of anything in retaliation at the moment. He conceded defeat for the moment as the rest of the group gave a chorus of "ohhhhs" and "woos" at him. He gave a polite nod to Nancy with half a smile on his face.

"You have fun with that one Rick," laughed Thomas. "He's off to a bad start letting little Nancy get the better of him."

And the group grew a little larger as more and more people came over carrying coolers and seating from wherever they could find it. The conversation turned from work to the little things in life and stories to tell for the younger troops that hadn't been with the unit very long. Laughter and smiles were contagious that evening and for Thomas it put the thoughts of his current situation out of his mind for a little while as he laughed at a story being told by Bill Meyers about something Stephen had done on a mission. Everyone roared at Stephen's expense as he held up his hands and attempted to get his side of the story on record, much to his failure. And for a brief moment in time, the entire group forgot about the war and the troubles they were having and enjoyed each other's company as if they were sitting back at the Ranch in Colorado.

And for that brief moment in time, only they existed in the world and not a care was had.

CHAPTER 11

Date/Time: 22 March/1001

Location: Camp Colby, Republic of Kansas

Sergeant Major Scott Carlson approached the gate shack by the roadway where he had been dropped off by a local farmer that had given him a ride from the bus stop in the town of Colby. A uniformed MP stepped outside to see who was coming forward and stood a little straighter since he saw it was someone with some rank. “I.D. sir?”

Scott handed over his NAU ID card as well as his FNC badge and copy of orders assigning him to Camp Colby, located somewhat close to the city of the same name in Kansas. The MP’s eyes opened a little wider when he saw the office of assignment.

“Apologies Sergeant Major! We weren’t expecting you for another month!” he stammered.

“It’s okay troop,” said Scott. “Can you point me towards the in processing station?”

“If you can wait for a moment sir, we’ll arrange for transportation,” said the MP who noticed his partner was already putting in a call for someone to pick up the new highest enlisted member of the camp. Scott noticed he was attempting to hide the minor refuse inside the gate shack hoping the new Sergeant Major wouldn’t notice. The other gate guard came back out a moment after hanging up the phone.

“Transportation is on the way Sergeant Major. Can I get you anything?” asked the younger man.

“No, thank you though,” said Scott who was slightly uncomfortable with all the pomp and circumstance. He was already starting to miss the informal atmosphere of the SDR teams. A commercial type truck came rolling up to the gate in short order and a female Specialist came over to introduce herself.

“Sergeant Major? I’m Specialist Waverly,” said the young female. “I work in the command section of the camp and I’ll get you squared away.”

“Roger that,” said Scott as he went to pick up his bags. However, he was interrupted as they snatched away the two bags as well as his carry on. He decided it was best and headed over to the passenger seat of the vehicle and hopped in.

“We’ll get you to your quarters sir to give you a chance to get settled in and then head over to see the boss,” said the Specialist as she started the vehicle.

“Actually, let’s go see the boss right away. I’m okay for the moment,” said Scott.

“Roger that Sergeant Major,” said the Specialist as she turned the wheel and headed back into the camp area. Scott saw several formations of troops out running and several individuals heading into what could be classrooms. The barracks area looked neat and most of the grounds were in good order. Short of mass chaos spontaneously erupting in the camp, it appeared everything was squared away for his arrival.

But he also knew they weren’t expecting him for another month so this was the way it was always kept up. Not that it was a bad thing, but it didn’t give him a lot to do in his new job or at least he briefly remembered what Command Sergeant Majors were supposed to do or thought they were supposed to do. He wondered exactly why he was picked for the assignment and sighed as they arrived at the headquarters.

“We can leave your bags here Sergeant Major,” said the Specialist as she opened the door for him. He grabbed his small pack that served as a carry-on bag and headed inside the building. Like something from a movie, the people inside stopped momentarily and looked at their new Sergeant Major. They stared for an uncomfortable moment before resuming what they were doing although still sneaking peeks when they could. A Sergeant First Class came up and introduced himself as the NCOIC of the staff and herded him towards the commander’s area. As they arrived, the Specialist hung up the phone and requested he have a seat, the commander will be right with you. He grabbed a seat as provided and a newspaper as well as a cup of coffee immediately appeared beside him by another member of the staff.

Scott was nervous about the meeting. He was under orders to report directly to the commander of the combat medic school at Camp Colby in Kansas although he hadn’t seen his family yet. He was dressed out in his complete formal service dress along with the numerous awards and decorations he had received in the U.S. Army, Texan Army, the North American Union Armed Forces as well as several foreign awards. And it was an impressive sight to behold. The old U.S. Army Special Forces Tab with scroll was only slightly below the SDR tab with the combat action scroll on his left shoulder and his rank which nearly touched the bottom of the tabs. His right shoulder announced his combat unit patch as well as the years of service running from the bottom of the sleeve. His “salad bar” of decorations ran the full length of his left breast and was partially covered by the lapel of his sage uniform tunic. The badges of master parachutist and combat medical badge were displayed properly on his left pocket and the master freefall badge on his right pocket along with the expert badges in rifle, shotgun, pistol and machine gun. Underneath that badge was the North American Union Unit of Freedom Award with its distinctive gold border. In short, he looked like a walking sales catalog for a military clothing sales and a recruiting poster soldier.

But the reason he was nervous was the fact everyone kept eyeballing him like a piece of meat as they knew he was getting ready to be the senior enlisted member in charge of the medical school there. And they would glance at top ribbon on his rack of the Distinguished Service Cross he had earned during the Icelandic invasion. And in looking over the ribbon, they wondered what kind of man he was as well as what they would be expected to do. He read through the current newspaper and sipped at the coffee while he waited for the Lieutenant Colonel to get done with his current meeting. Finally after several uncomfortable minutes, the female Specialist approached him.

“Sergeant Major? The Colonel will see you now,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Scott as he stood up and went over to the door. He knocked twice as dictated by regulations and stood by as he waited for the announcement to enter the room.

“Come in,” said a fairly friendly voice from the interior.

Scott entered the room and snapped to attention before giving a formal salute and announcing his presence. “Sergeant Major Scott Carlson reports as ordered sir!”

“Have a seat Sergeant Major, please,” said the Lieutenant Colonel after looking him over and sizing the man up. He noticed he was being sized up as well by Carlson. An eye patch covered his left eye as well as a prosthetic limb on his lower left leg and a missing finger on his left hand. His uniform was simple as he was not wearing his full service jacket right then. He returned the salute and set him at ease. “Coffee?”

“Thank you,” said Scott and immediately turned towards the small pot.

“No, allow me,” said the Colonel. “Black, right?”

“Yes sir,” said Scott since the man had obviously done his homework.

“Please stop being so formal. I should be calling you sir,” laughed the Colonel.

“Thank you sir,” laughed Scott nervously.

“Okay, I’ve had the chance to go through your service record,” he started and handed over the cup of coffee and getting right down to business. He took a seat across from Scott and not behind the desk; a fact which did not go unnoticed by Scott. “And frankly, you are overqualified for this position.”

“I am sir?” asked Scott.

“More or less, but the fact is, we need your experience around here. But I’ll get to that here in a minute,” said the Colonel. “You just finished your leave?”

“Haven’t been on leave yet sir. I was instructed to report directly here,” said Scott.

“The message that was sent instructed your losing unit to afford you thirty days of leave,” said the Colonel. “You just got off the plane?”

“Practically sir. I flew into Topeka and took the bus to Colby. A local gave me a ride in from there,” said Scott. “The message never got relayed that I had extra time.”

“I’m not surprised with that pompous brigade commander of yours. He’s about as worthless as a football bat from what I understand. Had the opportunity to meet him a while back and got the distinct impression...well, anyway; I shouldn’t be talking bad of my superiors and all that. We’ll get you on leave as soon as we are done here,” he stated as he turned to the intercom. “Please have the paperwork for Sergeant Major Carlson’s leave typed up immediately. Thirty days starting tomorrow.”

“On the way sir,” said a voice over the intercom.

“No sense in you being this close to home without seeing your family. And I think you have earned the right for a little rest,” said the Colonel. “From the looks of it, you’ve been around the block a few times.”

“Been a few places sir,” said Scott. “And you look like you’ve seen some stuff out there as well.”

“I was at a battalion aid station in England when the IU decided to drop some artillery fire in on us,” said the Colonel.

“A Lieutenant Colonel at a battalion aid station?” asked Scott.

“I was a Major at the time and working on the actual battalion surgeon who had been hit by a rocket attack earlier. Took my eye, part of my leg and a finger. I have some nerve damage in my left hand so my days of emergency surgery are over. But I can still teach so they promoted me and sent me to several schools before I ended up commanding here since the school was in shambles,” said the Colonel.

“Roger that sir,” said Scott.

“Now I bet you are wondering why you are here instead of the Special Operations Medical Course in Wyoming,” said the Colonel getting down to business.

“The thought crossed my mind sir,” said Scott, thankful the Colonel seemed like he was down to earth.

“Frankly, you are here because I requested you. You were earmarked for Wyoming, but I intercepted you and got you reassigned,” said the Colonel. “Took a bit of finagling, but eventually reason gave well to military necessity.”

“Oh,” said Scott.

“Frankly, I need you around here Sergeant Major,” said the Colonel.

“Please, call me Scott,” said Scott.

“Okay, Scott it is,” said the Colonel. “I could have had any number of senior enlisted combat medics, but I wanted one with special operations experience. You guys spend a lot of time behind enemy lines and doing things that are generally above your level of training so to speak. Not to say you do a bad job of it, far from it as I saw plenty of Joes coming back you guys had patched up that would have died otherwise. So while you guys may not have been trained for it, your expertise in combat related injuries far surpasses the normal line medic.”

“Now I’ve seen too many of the combat medics out there today will only do what they have to do and have no initiative to go any further. They leave the heavy work to the surgeons, sometimes with good reason, but we need combat medics that know how to diagnose, treat and repair if the need arises. I need combat medics leaving this school prepared for the worst and able to function in more than just a lifesaving capacity, but in a capacity of being able to treat simple things without having to send them behind the lines each and every time someone gets a paper cut. I need them to be able to perform these items under fire and save lives.”

“Your job is to train them in ways not covered in the training manuals. Or make suggestions to change to that level of training. You have unlimited access to change the training course as long as it doesn’t get too deep. But I want these folks leaving this class to be able to assist a surgeon in combat and even do some basic procedures if the need arises. You guys out there in Cider and other special operations units know far better what the line medics are lacking; so now is your chance to fix the problems. I’m building this school basically from the ground up and you are an integral part of that. I’m getting rid of the dead weight around here and getting in people that not only know their business, but have been out there doing that kind of job under fire. And I’m starting a rotational period where our instructors get back out into the field every three months to learn what the current trends are and what the folks on the line are doing. We’ll incorporate those lessons learned into the course upon their return. This class will be dynamic and we will do our best to keep up with the current trends,” said the Colonel.

“I’ll be able to make changes to the curriculum?” asked Scott.

“Within reason,” said the Colonel. “I mean, I don’t want them to be able to perform brain surgery, but I do want them able to stitch someone up and keep them on the line as opposed to sending them back to a battalion aid station. I saw too many easy problems coming into my patient rooms that could have...should have been treated by a talented medic. And I’ll let you be the judge of what level they need to be at. But keep it realistic.”

“And about the combat portion of the combat medic?” asked Scott.

“Simple enough,” said the Colonel. “These folks need infantry skills in order to survive in the real world so to speak. While there are some combat skill related subjects, they mainly rely on what infantry training they learn in basic training to get by. And when they get to their units, they are fairly unprepared for the two way shooting range.”

“So we need a better combat skills training program?” asked Scott.

“Have a look at what we are doing first then we’ll see where we can improve,” said the Colonel. “Higher headquarters is already aware that we might be requesting to make the course longer.”

“I’ll need access to the course training guides,” said Scott, thinking this might not be a bad assignment after all.

The Colonel nodded to his left at a stack of books on a nearby counter. “Figured you might ask for them so I had them ready. Additionally, I’ll need your eyes on our instructors here and keeping them in line. If they start slacking off, I’ll send them packing and get someone in here that is willing to teach others how to save lives.”

Scott already had formatted a plan in his mind as he knew more than most what the medics in the combat units were lacking. Being Special Forces by trade, he always attempted to bring them to a higher level in the field, but only on a limited scale. Now he would be able to go from the ground up and mold them into what he wanted and knew the units needed. Thomas had it right that he would have a far larger impact here than he originally realized.

“And I have free reign to make changes to the staff?” he asked.

“Again, within reason,” said the Colonel. “I’m betting you already have a list of names you’d like to bring on board here?”

“I’ve got a few in my mind that have been put out over the years for medical reasons. Some will come if I ask them to and like you sir, they can teach as opposed to fighting,” said Scott.

“I’ll have my folks check into the administrative side of that,” said the Colonel. “Can you get me a list of names and known addresses before you leave?”

“Names, yes. As for addresses, not sure on many of them,” said Scott.

“Well, one thing the Army is somewhat decent at is keeping tabs on its former soldiers,” said the Colonel. “We’ll try to track them down.”

“Anything else sir?” asked Scott.

“Physical training requirements were somewhat lacking when I got here as well,” said the Colonel. “I’ve already got a bunch of gym equipment and specialty gear on order, but we need a good program put together for the students that not only strengthens them, but trains them for conditions they will see in combat.”

“I have a few things in mind I can come up with,” said Scott.

“And I will be out there with you guys. Just because I’m missing half a leg doesn’t mean I can’t or won’t lead by example,” said the Colonel.

Scott was already seeing he was going to enjoy this assignment. While he would miss the action out in the field and the camaraderie of working with people he considered his family, he saw the Colonel was giving him a lot of latitude as well as being a positive example of leadership in action. He sipped the remainder of the coffee before replying.

“I’ve got my work cut out for me then,” was all he could really say at that moment.

“You were my first choice and came highly recommended by plenty of people in high places in the NAU, strike that, pretty much every North American military. Believe it or not, you’re close to being a household name. People know and respect you which is why I had to pull in quite a few favors to get you assigned here,” said the Colonel.

“Nice to know I’m infamous,” chuckled Scott.

“We’re going to change the way we do business and you’re going to be a big part of helping accomplish that,” said the Colonel. “And if there’s no further questions, I’ll get you on your way and ready to start your leave.”

“I appreciate it sir,” said Scott as he stood and went to the pile of books. Not only were the training manuals for the current school there, but ones from the United States, the AFNAS School and the Pacifica academy. Also were translations of the Russian school and the Cuban training program.

“Figured we’d take a look at what other schools are teaching to see if we are missing anything. Nobody has the cornerstone on smarts and I figure we can share and share alike,” said the Colonel. “But under no circumstances are those materials to sneak their way into your bags when you leave tomorrow. You can poke through them tonight, you can jot down some ideas while you are on leave, but I need you relaxed and refreshed when you come back next month.”

“Understood sir,” chuckled Scott as he had intended to take them with him.

“And I mean that Sergeant Major,” said the Colonel with a smile. “I don’t care how impressive your salad bar looks or how mean you can be. I’m meaner and more stubborn than you.”

“Roger that sir,” laughed Scott. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll get to my quarters and arrange for the rest of my personal gear to get shipped here.”

“Cindy, would you please escort the Sergeant Major to his quarters and help show him around,” said the Colonel into the intercom once again. “I’ll meet up with you at dinner at the mess hall. It’s lasagna day and our cooks do it up pretty good.”

“By your leave then sir,” said Scott as he stood and saluted. The Colonel returned the salute and stood to shake his hand. His grip was firm although not a finger breaker.

“We’re going to make this place into the premier combat medic school,” he said.

“Absolutely sir,” said Scott as he collected the materials and was met by the female clerk. He was led to a desk where he quickly signed off on about a dozen forms indicating he was now assigned to the School and was about to depart on thirty days of leave along with two travel days to and from his location. While he knew it would only take one day to get to the Ranch, it always was smart to go for more. When he finished signing and initialing all the forms, the clerk led him outside where she hopped in a UTV and he put his bags in the back. They headed towards the barracks area where he found he would be in in a small villa by himself. However, most of the creature comforts of home were there as he saw the small kitchen had a gas range and a full sized refrigerator. But in the middle of the living room was a woodstove much like the ones they had used overseas. A television and normal living room furniture completed the area.

“What’s with the woodstove?” asked Scott.

“The power here gets a little quirky in the winter. The woodstove is a just in case thing,” said the Specialist. “There is a woodpile out back.”

Scott nodded and headed into the bedroom to drop his bags off. He noticed a queen sized bed along with real sheets and pillows. After having lived in a tent for quite some time, he was going to have to get used to sleeping with four walls and a mattress. “Does any of the staff have families that live here?”

“The Colonel does and a couple of other instructors,” said the Specialist. “Would you be considering bringing your family here?”

“Don’t know yet,” said Scott. “For visits, certainly. Living here I’m not so sure of.”

“Not many like being out in the middle of nowhere like we are,” said the Specialist. “I can let you freshen up and come back to get you for dinner.”

“Thank you Specialist,” said Scott.

“My pleasure sir,” said the Specialist and departed the small cabin. Scott looked around the cabin again and got a feel for where he would call his temporary home once again. He started taking his clothing out and getting settled into the quarters, thinking he might enjoy this assignment a little more than he gave it credit for originally.

Date/Time: 24 March/0354

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Got everything?” asked Thomas as he helped put in Tim Daniels’ pack into the Blackhawk.

“Yep, we’ll be expecting the rest to come wandering in today,” said Tim as he shook Thomas’ hand and retrieved his carbine.

“We’ve got everything ready in case you get into hot water,” said Thomas.

“When do we ever get into hot water?” laughed Tim as the engines started and the rotors were turning and starting to push the air downward.

“Good luck,” said Thomas and waved at the remainder of the two teams on the helo. The rotors were turning faster and Thomas jogged away from the wash. In moments, the Blackhawk had enough lift and took off slowly into the sky, heading out over the encampment and shutting off the running lights as it went eastward.

“Get to do this three more times,” remarked Darren as they waited until they couldn’t hear the helicopter anymore and headed back into the command center.

“Wish I was out there with them,” said Thomas.

“You’ve got your own battles to fight here,” said Darren.

“Not the fight I want,” said Thomas.

“It’s the fight worth fighting,” said Darren.

“You’re not helping,” laughed Thomas.

“You are beyond help friend,” laughed Darren. “Breakfast?”

“I’d rather sleep,” said Thomas. But Darren knew he wouldn’t catch as much as a five minute snooze until all the teams were on the ground and secure.

“Come on,” said Darren. “I hear the cooks are trying Eggs Benedict this morning.”

“Baldy at it again?” asked Thomas.

“Who else would think of something like that in this place?” asked Darren with a laugh.

“We’re on the dark side of the moon,” said the pilot over the intercom which indicated the fact they had crossed the front rtace. “L-Z coming up in ten minutes.”

“Got it,” said Tim over the headset. Tim flashed both his hands at the remainder of the teams in the cabin as they readied weapons and gear.

“Five minutes to L-Z,” said the pilot as the door gunners started scanning to the left and right as the helicopter lowered its altitude to barely above treetop level. “Three minutes.”

Night vision equipment was put on and turned on as the cabin was now bathed in an eerie green glow. Looking out the doorway, the pilots were coming into the area with as much speed as they could manage out of the engines, not slowing even though they were fairly close to the primary landing zone. Suddenly Tim heard “Pull up! Pull up!” through the intercom and saw tracer fire pass the aircraft as it climbed for altitude.

“Infantry unit on the ground, primary L-Z is busted,” said the pilot.

“Go for the alternate,” said Tim as the tracers were rapidly falling behind them. Lucky enough, they were moving too fast for the IU patrol to get a good bead on the black helicopter and managed to escape with only a few rounds hitting the aircraft.

“Took a round I think, tail rotor temps are rising,” said the copilot.

“Can we proceed?” asked the pilot.

“Rising steadily, but we can make the alternate L-Z,” said the copilot.

“Roger, seven minutes to alternate L-Z,” said the pilot as he nosed the aircraft back over and headed back for the treetops. “One minute.”

The teams in the back got in position to rapidly exit the aircraft once they hit the landing zone. It was something they had performed countless times in both practice and in real world scenarios.

“Thirty seconds,” was the call as the team chambered rounds into their various weapons. In the last ten seconds the helicopter made a massive deceleration of speed by pitching the nose up and throttling up the engines. Once they were in the small clearing, the aircraft came to a hover five feet off the ground as the teams dismounted by tossing packs off and following them to the ground. They fanned out in a semicircle on both sides of the helicopter as it rose into the sky once again and departed the area. Time in the landing zone was exactly four seconds as it disappeared back into the sky.

After it departed, the teams removed their earplugs and listened to the sounds in the landing zone, listening for anything out of the ordinary. Conducting a Stop, Looks, Listen, Smell or SLLS, check, they didn’t hear, see or smell anything out of the ordinary and prepared to move. Shouldering up their packs, they departed the area into the relative safety of the nearby woods where they felt far more comfortable in their ability to disappear.

“Rotor temp is rising,” said the copilot. “Getting close to red.”

“Nine minutes to friendly lines,” said the pilot. And as soon as he finished the statement, a warning tone was heard in the cockpit right after a thump in the rear of the aircraft.

“Past redline, we’re losing oil pressure too,” said the copilot as additional warning lights came on and screamed in protest.

“Send out the mayday call,” said the pilot. “We’re going to have to put her down.”

“All stations, all stations, this is Boulder Five, mayday, mayday, mayday. We are going down. Tail rotor damage with semi-controlled descent. Sending flight path and coordinates via secure data channel Bravo Two. Mayday, mayday, mayday,” heard Shannon in the command center over the radio.

“Boulder Five, this is Camelot Base, authenticate Charlie Two,” said Shannon over the radio.

“Boulder Five sends Whiskey Four Whiskey,” said the copilot.

“Roger, we have your databurst and will alert teams for rescue,” said Shannon.

“Much appreciated Camelot,” said the copilot. “Final landing coordinates being sent now.”

“Go get Major Dayfield and Thompson,” ordered Shannon to a nearby orderly. The Private dashed out of the center over to the mess tent where he found the two in the middle of eating.

“Sir, Captain Parsons requests your presence immediately!” he exclaimed.

Without prompting, Thomas and Darren grabbed their weapons and dashed back to the command center, chewing the last bit of food as they ran. Once inside, they were joined by the pilots of a MH-47H Chinook that had been put up temporarily on the base in anticipation of the missions they would fly that day.

“Boulder Five, the chopper that was taking in Ashley and Tim’s teams, went in here,” said Shannon as she pulled up a map of the area. “They are requesting rescue.”

“Were they able to deliver the teams?” asked Darren.

“I believe so,” said Shannon. “They sent a databurst stating the primary LZ had enemy troops nearby and were proceeding to the secondary. The time works out for a successful insertion, so I might imagine so.”

“What do we have available?” asked Thomas.

“We’re a Chinook, we’ve got plenty of space,” said the pilot.

“Okay, get your helo warmed up. Get me Rick and his team, plug in Stephen and Darren, you mind the store,” said Thomas as he turned to the orderly. “Go wake my team and Captain Jones. Let them know it’s for a SAR mission.”

“Go preflight the bird,” said the pilot. “I’ll stick around for the mission brief.”

The orderly, flight engineer and copilot darted out of the command center again as Darren came up and spoke quietly to Thomas. “Let me take this.”

“No, I need to do this,” said Thomas.

“Let me take Rick’s place then,” said Darren.

“I want you here in case anything goes wrong,” said Thomas.

“Got it,” said Darren as the members started appearing pulling on uniforms and gear while still shaking the sleep off. After they all arrived, they were given the impromptu briefing by Shannon about what happened and where they were.

“Looks to be about ten clicks behind the lines,” observed Rob Davis who had been released back to his team the day before.

“Partial wooded area,” said Thomas. “Can you guys get into one of these clearings?”

“This one looks marginal, but doable,” said the pilot as he pointed at the pictures of the area. “About a half a click away from where they went in.”

“Pretty close for a rescue,” remarked Rick. “A downed chopper is bound to draw attention.”

“True,” said Thomas. “Have them head...here, four clicks to the east.”

“Any wounded on the crew?” asked Stephen.

“Databurst didn’t include that,” said Shannon. “I’ll see if they’re up on their survival radios yet.”

“Okay folks, assault packs, weapons and ammo, leave the rest of the goodies behind. Brian, grab some demo for the downed chopper in case we can approach. Meet at the helicopter pad in fifteen minutes,” said Thomas. The members headed for the doors to load up on ammo and grab packs. Heather was about out the door when she was stopped. “Trouble.”

“Boss?” she asked after turning around.

“Grab a med kit, you just got promoted to medic,” said Thomas.

“I’m not trained,” said Heather. “Why not grab that new kid?”

“He’s never even been off this base before,” said Thomas. “No.”

“If there are wounded, which there always are in crashes, we’ll need a trained medic,” said Heather reasonably.

“Grab him and Fred Stone,” said Thomas after thinking her idea had merit. They departed the center together as Thomas grabbed his pack, body armor and the remainder of his gear before departing back to the center.

“Got them on the radio,” said Shannon. “They’ve been advised of the rescue location and will be heading that way. They have two wounded so moving is going to be slow.”

“Add two to the names listing. Jamie Collins and Fred Stone,” said Thomas.

“The new kid? He hasn’t even been evaluated yet,” said Shannon.

“Trouble made the case for a medic, so pressure under fire,” said Thomas.

“Could be a hindrance,” said Shannon.

“I’ll toss his butt back in the chopper myself if that’s the case,” said Thomas.

“Happy hunting,” said Shannon.

“Be back in a flash,” said Thomas as he departed.

“He’s taking a huge chance with that kid,” remarked Darren.

“Tom’s a smart guy and knows what he’s getting into,” said Shannon.

“True,” said Darren. “Have you notified brigade and J-SOD of the mission?”

“J-SOD yes and was given a green light. And I’m kind of waiting on brigade,” said Shannon.

“You think they would pull us back?” asked Darren.

“I don’t know and that’s specifically the reason I won’t ask yet,” said Shannon.

“Smart girl,” said Darren. “I’m going out to see them off. I’m on the radio.”

“I’ll let you know if anything changes,” said Shannon who continued to monitor the situation and prepared the briefing for the Brigade.

After arriving at the chopper pad, Darren took Thomas off to the side once more. “You sure about this? You and the new kid?”

“Positive Darren,” said Thomas over the whine of the now starting engines.

“Be careful out there,” said Darren.

“I always am,” said Thomas as he boarded the helicopter. The rotors started whirring faster, making the distinctive deep base whooping sound the Chinook was renowned for. And for the second time that morning, he watched a helicopter fly off the base and disappear into the growing daylight. Once it had left, the radio in Darren’s ear went off.

“Brigade says put the mission on hold,” said Shannon. “The Brigade Commander has to be advised before it can proceed.”

“Too late, they’ve already departed,” said Darren who knew that any time wasted during a rescue increased the chances of the crew being captured or killed. And as these crews were the ones that often flew into dangerous situations to pull the teams out, the least they could do was go in and get them.

“Want me to recall them?” asked Shannon.

“You sure we have the proper frequencies for that aircraft?” asked Darren.

“Power spike just reset our equipment,” said Shannon after a moment’s pause. “Will be at least ten minutes before we can reestablish secure communications.”

“Too bad,” said Darren more to himself than to Shannon as he knew that in ten minutes, the chopper would be behind the lines or close to it. He couldn’t hear the aircraft any longer and slowly walked back towards the command center, hoping, as always, the teams would come home alive, safe and unscathed.

CHAPTER 12

Date/Time: 24 March/0617

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“They did what?!” demanded the Brigade Commander.

“Sir, a helicopter that was inserting the Cider teams went down behind the lines. The remaining forces here went out on a search and rescue mission,” said the orderly.

“On who’s authority?!” thundered the Colonel.

“They got approval from J-SOD sir. And actually, that type of mission is in their standing orders from J-SOD,” said the orderly. “We asked them to hold until you were briefed, but they stated they were having communications problems with the helicopter and the mission departed before they could reestablish the link.”

“Oh, I bet they very well did!” exclaimed the Colonel. “Get Dayfield up here now!”

“Sir...Major Dayfield is leading the mission,” said the orderly meekly. He saw the Colonel turning about eighteen shades of red upon that announcement.

“Get the senior officer in the 14th up here right now!” screamed the Colonel. The orderly departed back to the operations section where they had already passed on the message and were waiting the arrival of Major Darren Thompson.

“You called it sir,” said the orderly as he pulled a five NAU Credits out and passed them over.

“Work around someone long enough and you start figuring them out,” said the Captain.

“Why would he stop a mission like that?” asked the orderly. “It’s a rescue.”

“I honestly don’t know,” said the Captain. “Just bad blood I suppose.”

“Not cool playing with the lives of those pilots,” said the orderly.

“Sometimes I don’t think he cares as long as Tom Dayfield doesn’t get in the spotlight,” sighed the Captain. “And of course, I never said that.”

“Said what sir?” asked the orderly.

“Quick learner,” said the Captain as Darren entered the facility. “And the Christian has arrived in the Coliseum.”

“Not so sure he isn’t a lion sir,” said the orderly under his breath.

“Brigade is requesting your progress,” said Shannon over the radio.

“Let them know we are behind the lines,” said Thomas over the headset.

“And also made the request of why you are on the mission,” said Shannon.

Thomas didn’t answer as he knew anything he said would be completely out of line and insubordinate. He focused on the mission at hand and switched back over to the intercom. “How long?”

“L-Z coming up in three minutes. We have the locators of the pilots. They are about fifteen hundred meters away from the L-Z,” said the pilot.

“Get us in close and we’ll fastrope in,” said Thomas.

“Roger that,” said the pilot as he slightly adjusted course. “Want us to wait at the L-Z?”

“Negative, go into circle pattern above small arms range, we’ll call you when we are in the clear,” said Thomas as he clicked off the intercom. “We’re fastroping in! Two minutes!”

The flight engineer had already prepared for that possibility and had hooked up the long static lines just after they were airborne. She opened the back ramp as well as the side doors as the ten individuals prepared to slide down the ropes and into hostile terrain. The helicopter slowed down although not as quickly as the Blackhawk from earlier and eventually started hovering near a small clearing in the trees, barely big enough for the two ropes to reach. He lowered the helicopter into place and came to a hover as a large and inviting target.

“Go, go, go!” announced the flight engineer and kicked out one of the rope bags herself. As soon as the bags were deployed and the lines looked to be untangled, the teams started sliding down the ropes to the ground with a second pause between them. Once all ten were on the ground, the helicopter immediately applied power and rose out of the clearing.

“Can you get the ropes back in?” asked the pilot.

“Gonna take a minute or two,” said the flight engineer as she was already steadily lifting the heavy ropes back inside.

“If we can’t get them all back in before the pickup, cut them,” said the pilot.

“Got it,” said the flight engineer. As the ropes were well over fifty pounds apiece, she was glad her daily workouts kept her in good enough shape to pull them back in. But it was a tedious and tiresome job as she had to deal with both.

On the ground, Thomas checked his communicator and found the signal from the downed pilots was strong. Using hand and arm signals, he pointed the team and sent them towards the signal. While he couldn’t get a triangulation, if they continued in their straight line bearing, they would encounter them before long.

After two hundred meters traveled, Heather put up her hand in the “hold” sign and peered forward intently. She could hear something in the background quietly working its way through the woods near to where they were. She slowly pointed in the direction she heard the sounds coming from as she was joined by Rick.

“More than a single group,” she whispered. “Hundred fifty meters or so.”

“The crew?” asked Rick.

“More than that,” said Heather.

“Warbucks, Badaa, we have hostiles out here,” said Rick over the radio.

“Size and location?” asked Thomas.

“Unsure, but approximately hundred fifty meters to our ten o’clock,” said Rick.

“Press forward, quietly,” said Thomas as he spread out the remainder of the teams into a short skirmish line. Being new, he put Jamie Collins and Fred Stone on rear security as they pressed forward.

Jamie was just about to jump out of his skin. He had barely been assigned to the unit for three days and was already out on missions prior to even being evaluated. He hadn’t asked to be on this mission and wondered why they had picked him when they had other competent and qualified people that could have gone. He continued to look behind them expecting to get shot at any given point in time. His plan had completely backfired on him as evidence of where he happened to be at right then and there. Small arms fire to their front jarred him back into reality and almost caused him to send a shot off himself. The team hit the ground as three weapons were heard firing to their front.

“Sounds like an MP7, a Mk 18 and a pistol,” said Heather. “To our front, seventy meters.”

And calls in Arabic were heard from the location they had heard the sounds from before. A minimum of a squad and maybe even more were heard returning fire on the downed crew and attempting to destroy them in place.

“Badaa, set up a base of fire here on their flank. I’ll take my team up the right and try to get into position to cover the pilots,” said Thomas.

“Got it, moving,” said Rick as his team heard the instructions and were bounding forward into place. They started seeing individual IU infantry through the trees, but wanted to get a bit closer before opening fire. After covering another fifty meters, they found cover and the command of “open fire!” was given. They managed to catch six of the IU infantry exposed and hit them in the first two volleys.

“Fifteen IU soldiers to our front, fifty meters and beyond!” called Rick over the radio.

“Check your nine! Another squad coming in!” yelled Thomas as he noticed another IU squad coming in from the left of Rick’s team. He and his team quickly started laying down fire on the new squad and pinned them down for the moment. Amber saw a member of the group on a radio and fired a grenade from her launcher that hit right in front, killing or wounding three of them. As the squad was now leaderless, the Cider team had the opportunity to go on the attack and hopefully push them back around towards the remaining IU squad.

Rick’s team was effectively pinned in place while Thomas was attacking through. And although deadly, the fire being placed on them was random and meant more to keep them in position rather than kill them. The weapons fire from the helicopter crew position was silent for the moment as the IU squad to their front was regrouping.

Thomas managed to get the additional IU squad to retreat back towards the remainder of the forces and started pushing forward to line up with Rick, more gunfire was heard from the chopper crew position once again as targets of opportunity presented themselves to the crew. After they got on line, Thomas’ and Rick’s teams covered each other in bounding forward attempting to keep the IU pinned in place so the crew could be retrieved. When they got closer, Thomas turned to instruct Jamie and Stone to move forward. But by the time he had turned to yell, he caught the two out of the corner of his eye already moving towards the downed crew.

“Keep pressing them forward,” said Thomas over the radio as he fired another string of shots at the IU forces. His magazine went empty and he announced “I’m out, reloading!”

“Got you covered!” said Amber as she took another two shots at an infantryman that had exposed just enough of his body for her to make out a target. A split second later she heard Thomas call “I’m up!” as he resumed firing. Her own rifle ran dry as another infantryman popped up to her immediate front and after she had fired a single shot. Without hesitation, she immediately transitioned to the H&K P30 at her waist and fired another three rounds into the man. “I’m out! Reloading!”

“Got you covered!” yelled Thomas as the IU squads appeared to be in some sort of retreat. They were firing wildly behind them attempting to keep the Americans from advancing further in a hasty retreat.

“No targets!” yelled Rick.

“Move forward and set up a skirmish line beyond the pilots!” yelled Thomas as he and Amber bounded forward and were followed by Greg and Brian once they were in position. Once they got past where the crew was located, Thomas instructed Amber to “hold here” and went to the crew where he found Jamie already at work on the injured door gunner.

“Compound fracture in the left tibia and a sliced artery Major. Artery is clamped, but I’ve got to get a splint on it before we can move,” he said as he finished off the IV line.

“Time?” asked Thomas.

“Three minutes to set,” said Jamie. “Four max.”

“The rest of you okay?” asked Thomas.

“Broken wrist on that one, those two have bumps and bruises,” answered Jamie without being prompted and even though he hadn’t been addressed.

“Need help?” asked Thomas.

“I need to wake up and find myself in Nebraska,” said Jamie. “You want to help, get the stretcher ready.”

Arabic commands were heard in the distance as another attack was coming soon. “Warbucks, we’ve got another attack coming in,” said Rick over the radio.

“Make it faster than three minutes,” said Thomas as he bounded back to the line. They heard noises coming from the right of their position and an IU fire team had snuck up towards the aircraft crew and were preparing to fire.

“Cover!” screamed Thomas as Jamie immediately went into action, drawing his pistol and firing triple taps into two of the infantry that had snuck up on them. Two in the chest and one in the head were perfect strings of fire as Thomas engaged the other two out of Jamie’s field of fire. However, he and the remaining IU fired at the same time with Thomas getting a round in the body armor for his troubles.

“You okay?” yelled Jamie as he scanned the area.

“Little sting,” said Thomas as he felt inside but found no blood on his fingers. Jamie quickly went back to finishing up the splint and hauled the pilot onto the stretcher. Thomas recovered and got back on mission of securing the pilots and his teams.

“You and you! You will carry him to the L-Z! Got it?” he instructed the other door gunner and copilot and to the injured pilot he instructed “You stay in front of us!”

“Got it,” said the copilot as the IU attack was resuming.

“Major, we’re ready to move!” shouted Jamie.

“Break contact!” yelled Thomas. “Badaa! Get your team back!”

“Roger, moving!” yelled Rick as they headed back as pairs and the IU infantry were seen through the trees once again. After fifty meters, he called to Thomas “in position!”

“Moving!” said Thomas as his team bounded back as well. The IU wasn’t moving forward as quickly as they could have and the distance was growing between the two groups. However, Murphy made an appearance as he was supposed to as the copilot caught a round in the pelvis and dropped to the ground screaming.

“Major, we’ve got a problem!” yelled Jamie as he went over to diagnose the latest wound. Not that it needed much as the femoral artery had been hit as evidence from all the blood spurting out. “We need to hold!”

“Leave me!” screamed the copilot.

“Not on your life!” yelled Jamie as he ripped into his medical kit once again. “And lie still!”

“I’m dead, I know this, now leave!” yelled the copilot.

“You aren’t dead until I say you can die, now shut up!” growled Jamie and grabbed the two large hemostats from the proper pouch. “Need a minute Major!”

“We may not have a minute!” yelled Thomas as he came back to see what the problem was this time. “Hold the line!”

“Hold him down!” ordered Jamie as he attempted to clear away the clothing and the blood to get the hemostats in place. Thomas did his best to restrain the copilot as Jamie worked as quickly as possible under the circumstances. Thomas could already see he was very talented and worked quickly under pressure.

The IU seemed to sense the withdrawal of the troops was being held up for some reason and pushed forward once again. The attack seemed to be stronger as they had gotten reinforcements from the remainder of the company they had been attached to earlier. Two full squads pressed the attack towards the American team, desperate to stop them.

“Smoke!” yelled Rick and the two grenade launchers thumped out the grenades that started spewing out yellow smoke after impacting to the front of their line. Two additional high explosive grenades were launched into the front just to give the IU something to think about. Sporadic gunfire was heard as the IU forces attempted to flank the American team once again and catch them in a crossfire.

“Ready!” yelled Jamie as he finished clamping the artery and preparing a folding sked. He managed to muscle the copilot onto it and get him strapped in. Stone had taken the copilot’s place on the stretcher and was prepared to move.

“Move!” yelled Thomas as he sent fire down their right flank where he spotted yet another IU team. He managed to hit one and caused the others to take cover and momentarily halt their advance.

“Warbucks, this is Boulder Four, we have yellow smoke approximately two hundred meters from the L-Z,” Thomas heard the pilot of the Chinook say over the radio.

“Copy Boulder Four, we are behind the smoke by seventy meters coming in hot. Two critical casualties coming in first. Clear for landing,” said Thomas.

“Can you confirm none of your guys are beyond the smoke?” asked the pilot.

“Negative, we are all north of the smoke,” said Thomas.

“Light it up Erin!” Thomas heard over the radio. Suddenly a GAU-19/B .50 caliber minigun was heard from above as shells started striking the ground to their front as the helicopter roared overhead. Several IU attempted to engage, but the helicopter managed to clear the area before being hit significantly.

“Get clear Warbucks!” called the pilot over the radio as the minigun continued to spew out death to the advancing IU infantry. The teams fell back and saw Jamie, Stone and the injured already waiting at the clearing.

“We’re in position!” called Thomas over the radio and fired off a full magazine into his front. The remaining team members started dumping rounds in an attempt to forestall any attack the IU could make. The Chinook came in and flared for a landing with Jamie, Stone and the door gunner carrying the wounded out before they touched the ground. After depositing the copilot, Jamie turned to Stone and instructed him to finish loading the crew as he was going back to help. Before Stone could object, Jamie was already running back towards the treeline. However, he was prevented from moving further since the remainder of the teams came bounding out while firing and moving. Since they were in the open, they made a mad dash towards the helicopter.

But Jamie was unfamiliar with the tactics and hesitated while waiting for the IU to appear. He felt like he needed to cover the team, but was wrenched around by Rick as he passed by, the last in line.

“Get on board you idiot!” yelled Rick as the IU gunners started firing through the trees hoping to score a hit on the large helicopter target. Jamie and Rick both dove onto the ramp of the helicopter while the flight engineer started sending a steady stream of .50 caliber bullets towards the trees. Greg and Rob Davis joined her as well with their own machine guns in helping to cover the withdrawal. The engines roared as the pilot pushed the throttle to full power and lifted the large helicopter off the ground. The sudden lurch cause Rob to go off balance and almost

roll off the ramp as they gained altitude. However, he was grabbed at last moment by the flight engineer and hauled on board.

“Thanks!” he exclaimed.

“No problem,” she replied.

“I love you!” he exclaimed in the heat of the moment.

“I get that a lot,” she grinned and started closing the ramp.

“Thanks for the help,” said Thomas as he donned a headset.

“Least we could do, besides, my flight engineer loves the big guns,” laughed the pilot. “We heading back to your brigade?”

“Yeah, set frequency 126.5 sideband bravo,” said Thomas.

“Okay, it’s set,” said the copilot. “Seventeen minutes out.”

“Archangel, this is Warbucks, come in,” said Thomas as he called the hospital.

“Warbucks, this is Archangel, go ahead, over,” said the voice on the other end.

“Archangel, this is Warbucks, be advised, we are inbound with two critical casualties and one routine casualty. E-T-A your location will be approximately twenty mike. How copy over?” said Thomas.

“Warbucks, can you give nature of injuries?” asked the doctor as he came on the line.

“Standby,” said Thomas. “Hey Collins!”

Jamie didn’t hear Thomas when he called as he was attempting to get another IV started in the copilot so Thomas called again. “Hey new guy!”

“What?” asked Jamie as he turned around.

“Doc is on the radio, needs you to tell him what the injuries are,” said Thomas as he handed the headset towards him. However, Thomas could see he was busy and went over and put the headset on so he didn’t have to stop what he was doing. He finished up getting the IV into place and took the vital signs of the copilot and relaying them before going to the door gunner and taking his. He also relayed the further injuries to the crew as well as blood type so the surgical team would already have additional units set when they arrived.

“Pretty good for not having any formal training in our group,” said Thomas as he took a seat next to Rick.

“Except for being an idiot and standing there when the chopper was on the ground,” said Rick.

“One minor point,” said Thomas.

“Still not liking him,” said Rick. “He saluted me and calls me sir.”

“Better than what we call you,” laughed Thomas. “Everyone else okay?”

“Stephen took a graze and that’s it. Couple of stitches and he’ll be back at it,” said Rick.

“Couple of folks took some hits to the vest, but no injuries other than bruises.”

“Like that?” asked Thomas as he pointed at Rick’s vest. The path of a bullet was seen through one of the pouches and the round itself embedded in the armor.

“Cutting it close I’d say. Felt something hit, but didn’t realize it until now,” said Rick. “You took one too?”

“Yeah,” said Thomas as he plucked the round out of the armor. “Another bruise and another keepsake for the jar.”

“You’re too sentimental,” laughed Rick.

“We got real lucky,” said Thomas. “That was at least a platoon.”

“Mad skills on my part, but you believe in luck,” laughed Rick.

“We’re back over friendly lines,” said the flight engineer.

“Thanks for the help,” yelled Thomas in return.

“No problem. And can you please let your troop over there know I don’t want to get married?” she replied and pointed at Rob Davis.

“Rocky!” yelled Thomas across the compartment.

“Boss?” he yelled in return.

“You annoy this nice lady again and I’m going to let her throw you out of this chopper!” yelled Thomas in return.

“Roger that boss,” yelled Rob with a grin and a thumbs up.

“She says you’re ugly anyway,” said Thomas.

“Now I know you’re lying! Can’t be me and be ugly!” exclaimed Rob as the stress of the rescue mission and being shot at yet again was wearing off the teams.

“I didn’t say he was ugly, but I’d at least like to get to know him first,” she laughed.

“He’s annoying and will pester you to death,” said Heather.

“He can’t be that bad,” she said and looked at him again.

“I know better than most; he’s my brother,” laughed Heather.

“Got it,” laughed the flight engineer and started preparing the helicopter for the landing at the hospital. While the pad wasn’t designed for the large Chinook, it had a talented crew that could just barely make it fit as long as they were careful. They flared out over the pad and gently touched down right in the center with about two feet to spare on all sides. The surgical staff swarmed over the ramp area and were assisted by Jamie in unloading the two critical casualties. Before he hopped off the ramp, he was stopped by Thomas. “Catch up with us back in the compound!”

“Roger that!” he yelled in return over the sound of the rotors.

“Good job today!” yelled Thomas and gave him a thumbs up. Jamie didn’t say anything but ran along with the doctor already looking over the copilot and briefing him on the condition.

The chopper lifted back off and headed the short distance to the helicopter pad near the compound. They came in for a landing and shut down the engines before the teams unloaded.

“Okay folks, debrief in twenty,” said Thomas and was met as he departed the helicopter by Darren and another man he recognized as the senior MP on the base. “Hey guys. Scott, what brings you out here?”

“Tom, you’ve been ordered to report to the Brigade headquarters,” said Major Scott Kinsley.

“Am I under arrest?” asked Thomas.

“No, the Colonel just wanted to make sure he had your attention,” said Scott. “This wasn’t my idea by any means.”

“He could have just said please,” said Thomas. “Okay, let me get done with debrief.”

“I’m afraid he said immediately,” said the Major.

“Right,” said Thomas and grabbed Rick to let him know he would have to handle the briefing. He departed with the two in a MP marked vehicle for the drive up to the headquarters. Upon arrival, the staff got eerily silent at his appearance and parted as he walked towards the commander’s office. Like something out of a movie, everyone stopped and stared as he walked

through the room towards the office. Once at the door, he handed of his carbine to Darren with a very knowing look and knocked twice per regulation.

“Get in here!” thundered the Colonel from behind the closed door. Thomas looked at Darren with an entirely different expression before he opened the door and closed it behind him.

“Uh oh,” said Darren.

“What?” asked Major Kinsley.

“You got a few more of your troops around?” asked Darren.

“Do I need more?” asked Kinsley in a worried tone.

“You might want to call in your crime scene unit,” said Darren. “It’s about to get ugly.”

CHAPTER 13

Date/Time: 24 March/0902

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“How dare you mister!” bellowed the Colonel after Thomas came to parade rest in front of his desk. “How dare you go running off on some mission without my authority!”

“Excuse me?” asked Thomas.

“You heard me Major! You do not, I repeat not go running off on some half planned out mission without submitting your request through me! Do you understand me?!” thundered the Colonel.

“Pardon me sir, but our standing orders from J-SOD specifically list search and rescue as a primary mission when the aircraft crew happens to be in our area of operation! And in this case, they weren’t just within our area, they were on a mission from us!” growled Thomas in return.

“And you come into this office, unshaved with a dirty uniform! Where is your pride in what you are doing?! Perhaps if you took a little more consideration with your personal appearance you would at least look like a better leader!” exclaimed the Colonel.

“I’ve been up since 0300 this morning sending off two of my teams on a mission. And went out at 0530 on a rescue mission per my standing orders from a way higher authority than you! And as soon as I land, you yank me in here for God only knows what so forgive me if I haven’t been able to clean the blood from the copilot off my hands yet! Furthermore, I’ve got more teams leaving in the next hour and I would like to be there for them as well. You know, it’s a leadership thing like you should be doing!” said Thomas in an elevated voice.

“I don’t answer to you in leadership abilities!” thundered the Colonel.

“You want to sit here and talk about how this unit happens to be under your command but you don’t even care enough to get up and see your only special operations capable unit off when they leave for missions? You think a unit like mine gets managed from behind a desk?!” said Thomas in as close to a yell without being called it.

“You just shut your mouth until I’m through with you! I cannot believe for one second that with all the teams in your unit you were the only one available! And you go running off like a scalded dog without even consulting your leadership! I cannot even begin to comprehend what goes on in that mind of yours...” said the Colonel and continued berating Thomas in a very loud manner and listing what he considered the significant flaws in his decisions and leadership to that point. He finally started to rise out of his seat while Thomas was attempting to make sense of why he was being briefed over a simple rescue mission in which not only did they get the crew back alive, but both the teams with barely a scratch even though having a pretty close call. The Colonel continued droning on and on and suddenly it reminded Thomas of those old Charlie

Brown cartoons where the teacher would continue talking to where nobody could understand her. But something inside Thomas finally gave way. His dam had finally broken and he was at the end of his emotional rope with nothing more to lose.

“Enough!” he thundered back and slammed his fists down knuckle first on two piles of folders on the Colonel’s desk. With a look of pure evil, he stared at the Colonel and dared him to continue with nothing but the look on his face.

“Excuse me?” asked the Colonel in a quieter tone.

“You heard me,” said Thomas through gritted teeth. “Now I’ve had about all the verbal abuse I’m gonna take today from you so you had best listen good and hard to what I have to say. Frankly, I don’t work for you and when it comes down to who I pick and who I do not for my missions I get the choice, not you! I get tasking from J-SOD, of which SAR is one of them and I do not, repeat *do not* have to consult with you on. Period! That is way outside your lane Colonel and how dare you even think of trying to tell me who you think should be going when you haven’t the first clue about special operations in the first place! So I will not be berated by you any further nor have you question my intelligence in anything in which you are entirely incompetent with in the first place!”

“So you’d best understand me clear as a bell right now. I went on that mission today because I was the obvious choice! I led that mission to rescue that downed aircrew! And the decision was mine and mine alone! And now you want to sit up here with your dead ass Velcroed in that chair trying to question my competence when you won’t even take long enough to come down and see the teams off this morning like a good leader should have?! How dare you even think you have one iota of standing to question the job or my performance of such! Especially in light of how worn down and fatigued this unit happens to be right now!” said Thomas as his voice was elevating through the entire speech. Before the Colonel could respond, Thomas cut him off.

“You might as well go out and buy sixty-three saddles and strap them on us Colonel, because you are riding this unit straight into the ground! So don’t think for one second that I don’t know what you’re doing here! You may have it in for me and that’s fine, but you had best leave my troops out of this! They have been forward deployed since October without a break! And while every other member of this brigade had rotated out at least twice, you, and you alone, keep slipping us back down the order! So let me make myself perfectly clear, I don’t care how tired and how many times indirect fire land five hundred meters away from other troopers out there! My people get shot at almost each and every time they go behind the lines! And yet you feel we aren’t doing enough so you assign us to these pissant details like base cleanup and relieving a normal line infantry company that’s already been ahead of us twice in the relief rotation! So I’m not sure short of dying how much more we have to do to make you happy! And again, whatever personal issue you have with me needs to end with me because my troops are tired, fatigued and ready to break at any point in time!”

“So let me make one thing perfectly clear to you, Colonel. You have absolutely zero authority to tell me how good of a job I am doing! And furthermore, these needless details being assigned to my unit will stop! Period! I don’t care if you are buds with the IG at Division! I’ll go straight

up to Corps with everything you have done to this unit as well as how grossly incompetent you are in this position! So get this through your head that you will order in a relief team when we complete this mission of looking for the downed pilot! You will be removing us from base details due to the fact that we are constantly on a state of alert! You will approve the award I'm getting ready to put forward for Sergeant Jamie Collins and you will say nothing about it? Got me?" thundered Thomas.

"How dare you-" started the Colonel in a low voice after he managed to close his mouth.

"How dare you Colonel!" said Thomas through gritted teeth once again. "Your actions are borderline criminal in nature and I can flat guarantee if you went into a court martial proceeding you would end up being found guilty of gross incompetence and criminal negligence. And damn your political connections when it comes to that. Because I can promise you right now, if one more of my people gets seriously injured or killed while on a mission and you aren't brought up on charges, there is nowhere on this planet that you can hide from me. And I'll skin you alive and bury you where nobody will find you," growled Thomas in a low voice.

"I should have you arrested!" exclaimed the Colonel after he managed to regain the ability to speak once again.

"Go for it! Because I cannot and will not take this any longer! And if a court martial is where I get the opportunity to let the world know about the things you've been doing to my unit, then so be it! I may very well end up in a prison cell where I spend the remainder of my days during this war. But no matter what, if one more of my troops gets seriously injured because of fatigue and your incompetence, I will not hesitate to destroy you," growled Thomas as he was leaned over the desk on his knuckles. And the Colonel saw the look in his eyes of sheer and utter sincerity. The Colonel had never had anyone talk to him this way and it frightened him slightly since he knew Dayfield was more than capable of making good on his threats.

"You can't threaten me!" he said in a low voice once again, but the fear showed through slightly.

"That's not a threat Colonel, that's a promise. And one I will keep no matter how much time I spend in jail or if I end up at the end of a noose," growled Thomas.

And the two sat locked eye to eye for what seemed like an eternity. But the stare down was interrupted by the intercom buzzing and the Colonel quickly answering "what?"

"Sir, General Chambers is on the line for you," said the voice on the intercom.

"We aren't done yet," said the Colonel as he picked up the phone and punched the button for the call. "Yes sir, Colonel Woodson here...yes sir...yes sir, the 14th went in this morning...yes sir, I believe they made it out okay...yes sir, Major Dayfield led the mission...actually sir, he's here in my office right now...yes sir."

"The General wants to speak to you," said the Colonel and put the phone on speaker. "You're on speaker phone sir."

“Dayfield, you there?” asked the General through the speaker phone.

“Yes sir, right here,” said Thomas in a far calmer voice than he had been using.

“I was going to let your Colonel pass this on to you, but since you are available, I’ll let you hear it from the horse’s mouth,” said the General.

“Yes sir?” asked Thomas.

“Awesome work out there today boy! I can’t say this enough! You took how many teams out with you?” asked the General.

“Two teams plus another pair sir, ten total,” said Thomas.

“We had a Predator do a flyover just as you were getting yanked out. Did you know there was an entire enemy company out there during that rescue?” asked the General.

“I thought it was a platoon sir,” said Thomas.

“Even taking on a platoon with ten guys is gutsy. And I got off the phone with the hospital right before I called here and they said both the copilot and the door gunner are going to live. Is that Scott Carlson’s handiwork?” asked the General.

“Sergeant Major Carlson was reassigned sir. That’s our brand new medic,” said Thomas.

“Carlson’s gone? I wish I would have known so I could be at his sending off,” said the General.

“It was kind of short notice sir,” said Thomas and glared at the Colonel.

“Well, whomever it was, you best be putting that soldier in for some form of decoration. Doctors said they would be dead if it wasn’t for what they did,” said the General.

“Funny sir, the Colonel and I were just talking about that,” said Thomas.

“Well, good. You probably should put yourself in for some kind of award as well Tom, but you won’t do it. Maybe you could consider something Colonel?” asked the General.

“I’ll look into it sir,” said the Colonel.

“Well, no matter what, you should be proud to have a unit like the 14th and a commander willing to go out and kick some tail like Dayfield. Puts your command in the spotlight with the brass...hold on, just got an email here from the Corps Commander. ‘Please pass on my congratulations to the units directly involved in the rescue this morning. An example of heroism and tenacity for us all.’ Not too bad coming from the top dog himself,” said the General.

“We appreciate the compliments sir, but no heroics involved. Just doing the job we are tasked with,” said Thomas.

“You should learn to take a little praise now and again son,” said the General.

“Work in progress General,” said Thomas.

The General laughed and finished up the call. “Let your folks know how proud I am of them and I want them to keep doing the great work they have been. If we had a whole Division of folks like yours, we’d probably be in Tehran by now. Colonel, we’ll see you at the sand table exercise this afternoon.”

“I’ll see you then sir,” said the Colonel as the call ended.

“Are we done here?” asked Thomas in a very cold voice.

“You are dismissed,” said the Colonel. Thomas turned to leave and started opening the door. “Excuse me Major, but don’t you salute superior officers?”

“If there was one in your office, I’ll be glad to,” said Thomas coldly as he shut the door behind him softly. The entire staff stood with open mouths and shocked expressions on their face as they had heard nearly the entire exchange save the portion where Thomas started threatening physical violence. He collected his carbine from Darren and departed the headquarters with all eyes following him the entire way.

“Ever hear of the Christian eating the lion, Captain?” asked the same orderly from that morning.

“It has been nearly two weeks,” said the IU Lieutenant Colonel. “And what are you going to speak with him about today? More sports or perhaps swap recipes this time?”

“He is near to breaking,” said Major Aziz. “Trust me. He has learned that I am not some evil monster that will hurt him physically when he does not give me information. And this is the bait I will use to get him to speak.”

“It is pointless,” said the Colonel.

“It is my theory approved by headquarters,” said Aziz and turned to the guards. “Bring him.”

The two guards disappeared and brought Williams back into the interrogation room. The limited water and food intake was already showing as his injuries received in the beatings had not completely healed and his skin showed a distinct paleness.

“I have some bad news Captain,” said Aziz as he entered the room.

“The Cowboys lose the Super Bowl?” asked Williams.

“No,” said Aziz with a sigh. “I have attempted to protect you so far in hopes you might consider helping us at some point. But some officers in this command see my kindness as weakness. I may not be able to protect you much longer.”

“I’m still not giving you any information,” said Williams.

“I was not asking for it,” said Aziz. “Although plenty of American prisoners have done such things before, I do not believe the information you give us is entirely accurate.”

“So why keep me here instead of a normal prison facility?” asked Williams.

“To protect you,” said Aziz. “I will be honest, I have enjoyed our talks and it has given me a sense of...I don’t remember the word. To remember when you were young again?”

“Nostalgia?” asked Williams.

“I think that is it,” said Aziz. “I enjoyed my time in America before this war. Well, before all the wars really and have enjoyed some fond memories that you helped me remember. However, my superiors grow tired of our chats and believe I am stalling. They would prefer to beat you senseless and take whatever information you give.”

“So go for it,” said Williams.

“No my friend,” said Aziz as he lit a cigarette. “Such methods only lead to unreliable information. Or out of date information. It serves nothing more than to desensitize the guards which can cause more problems in the future.”

“So why protect me?” asked Williams.

“Because I think you do have knowledge that can help us,” said Aziz. “Of this I have made no secret. But the information should be given freely and without inducement.”

“I’m not willing to betray my country,” said Williams.

“And I would never ask you to,” said Aziz.

“So why the talk today?” asked Williams.

“To warn you that my superiors are growing impatient and I may be forced to end my talks with you soon,” said Aziz.

“And I go back to the beatings?” asked Williams.

“More than likely,” said Aziz.

“I stood up to them before,” said Williams.

“But for how long? I put a stop to it quickly,” said Aziz. “This time they will be unrelenting.”

“I’ll take my chances,” said Williams.

“Do not put yourself through this,” begged Aziz.

“I can’t betray my nation,” said Williams.

“Anything would be helpful,” said Aziz. “It could help me stall them for at least a little while.”

“I cannot,” said Williams.

“I understand,” said Aziz. “Just that you know and have been warned that my superiors believe physical torture is necessary to extract information from you.”

“So be it,” said Williams.

Aziz did nothing more than nod at the guards who took him back to his cell. Once inside the cramped container, Williams heard the soft speaking in the background once again and started to feel dread. He knew he had withstood the torture before, but wasn’t sure how long he could hold out under sustained torture. He could give Aziz something simple. Maybe not critical military secrets, but at least something to forestall the beatings he might take otherwise. As he sat alone in his cell, he wondered if he made a big mistake in not saying something and if he might get another chance to.

Date/Time: 24 March/1023

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Hey boss, got the after action report ready for your review,” said Rick as Thomas came into the command center after his meeting.

“Great!” exclaimed Thomas. “You think I’ll need to add anything?”

“I’m not sure,” said Rick, slightly puzzled at the exclamation. “I think we about got everything.”

“Need to make sure it’s good to go since it’ll be used as the basis for Collins’ decoration,” said Thomas. “Specific instructions from the Division Commander himself.”

“Really?” asked Rick.

“Yeah, got to talk to him today. And specifically said we should decorate him. Actually, he said to tell each and every one of you what a fine job we did out there today and we even got props from the Corps Commander!” exclaimed Thomas. “Did I miss any of the teams going out?”

“Just missed one and we have two more,” said Mark who was also puzzled by the chipper behavior from Thomas.

“How long? I really need a shower,” said Thomas.

“About forty-five minutes,” said Rick.

“Cool, let me grab a change of clothes and a shower and we’ll head out,” said Thomas who disappeared out the door.

“Okay, what’s going on?” asked Rick after he departed.

“He might have finally cracked,” said Darren.

“Sorry?” asked Mark.

“He had a knock down drag out with the Colonel. The entire command section heard it. Or most of it at least,” said Darren. “And when he came out of the meeting, he’s been a little off.”

“Like good off or bad off?” asked Mark.

“Not sure yet,” said Darren. “I’ve only seen him like this one other time.”

“Which was?” asked Mark.

“You weren’t there, but Rick was. Do you remember when we went to the Gable Retreat during the Fall and picked up the Duggers, Carlsons and Ashley?” asked Darren.

“Yeah,” said Rick with a little puzzlement.

“Remember how we got them out of there?” asked Darren.

“Vaguely,” said Rick.

“Okay, remember what Thomas did specifically to get us out of there?” asked Darren.

“It’s kind of hazy...wait...oh...oh, no,” said Rick. “You mean he pulled a gun on the Colonel?”

“No...I mean, I don’t think he did,” said Darren. “But when he left the meeting, it reminded me of how he was in the aftermath of the Gable Retreat.”

“Long story short, Tom held a gun to Morgan Gable’s head for about a half an hour while we packed up the families to get them out,” said Rick. “Not a lot of folks know the particulars of that story since Tom is kind of embarrassed about it. But that’s the gist of what happened.”

“And today when he left the Colonel’s office, he had that same neutral expression on his face. I heard most of what he said and let me tell you something, it wasn’t pretty. There were a couple of times I could hear him talking, but couldn’t make out the words. But I’m pretty certain the Colonel threatened him with arrest at one point,” said Darren.

“Over what?” asked Mark.

“Not sure,” said Darren. “It was right after Tom said something to him.”

“You think he finally broke?” asked Rick.

“I don’t know,” said Darren. “Or he just went past the point of caring.”

“Both of which can be bad for us,” remarked Rick.

“Agree,” said Mark.

“We really need to keep a close eye on him,” said Darren. “The three of us, we’ll talk to Amber and Dave and Mike when they get back.”

“Should we report this?” asked Mark.

“No, not until we know more,” said Darren. “I mean, his point of ‘give a darn’ might have been passed and it could be a good thing.”

“I’d really like to know what went on in that meeting,” said Rick. “Fly on the wall you know?”

“From what I could hear, which was most, it got really one sided. I know he slammed something at one point. Probably his fists since they were a tad red when he came out. But let me go on record with you two in saying he fought for us in there. Basically told the Colonel we were done doing details, replacing line infantry and for him to arrange for R and R for our unit as soon as we complete this mission,” explained Darren.

“All of which could be good for us,” said Mark.

“But bad for Tom,” said Rick. “He basically drew a line in the sand with the Colonel if what Darren says is correct.”

“He’ll have to mind his manners over the next bit,” said Mark.

“Guys, I really wish you could have been there,” chuckled Darren in retrospect. “The entire staff practically had a glass against the wall during that meeting. Never saw so many people in my life herding around a water cooler if you’ll excuse the cliché.”

“Hey guys, we have anything to drink?” asked Thomas as he popped back in with his ditty bag, fresh uniform and towel.

“I think we have some beer,” said Rick with a puzzled look on his face.

“No goofball, like a soda or something?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah,” said Rick who retrieved a Diet Mountain Dew out of the small fridge.

“Diet huh?” asked Thomas. “Well, gotta watch my figure I suppose.”

And with that comment he disappeared back out of the tent and was quickly followed by the three peeking out the doorway. He was headed in the general direction of the shower taking sips of the soda along the way. And instead of walking with a purpose as he normally did, his stride would be considered “moseying” by any onlooker.

“Okay, this just got weird,” said Rick. “Did anyone else think it was a little reckless to grab that new guy and bring him without any formal immersion and training?”

“I did think it was a little odd, but the kid seemed to work out okay,” said Darren.

“But still, he took a huge chance on sending him out like that,” said Mark.

“Definitely not the way Tom usually plays things,” observed Darren.

“Ya think? I know I’ve not known him as long as you guys, but I’d say I know him well enough to know he’s a little off kilter at the moment,” said Mark and the rest got very quiet afterwards.

“I think I’ll go track down Amber...” said Darren after the silence became unbearable.

“And I’ll see if Greg and Brian are about,” said Mark.

“I’ve got to hold the fort down here, but I’d say the sooner you find them, the better,” said Rick.

“If he comes back, just keep him occupied,” said Darren.

“I’ll tie him down if I have to,” said Rick. “I know it’s Tom and I know we shouldn’t be worried. But you know, I might be a bit worried.”

“Next couple of hours when the recon data starts coming in will be the key,” said Mark.

“That should tell us whether or not he’s lost his marbles, I agree,” said Darren.

“Okay, you guys head out and start talking to folks,” said Rick. “Meet back in a half hour for the last teams going out.”

“We’ll be back then,” said Darren as he and Mark departed the center. Rick sat in thought for a few moments and tried to determine whether or not he should be worried. He had known Tom a long time and knew that he suppressed a lot of his feelings. *Perhaps the Colonel has finally broken the dam and his emotions are all coming out and this is his way of dealing with them,* thought Rick. *Could be a good thing, but most certainly can be a bad thing as well. We’ll have to keep a close eye on him to figure this all out.*

Date/Time: 24 March/1422

Location: Coalition Simulation Facility, Prague, Czech Republic

The Coalition Simulation Facility was a state of the art battlefield simulator put in by the Free Nation Coalition not long after liberation of Prague. The massive computer controlled simulations had the ability to go from Virtual Reality simulations of the individual rifleman up to Theater Level battles with multiple Corps on both sides to control. It generally had a Red Team Commander which represented the opposing force, or OPFOR and a Blue Force Commander which represented the friendly forces. Or it could simulate one or the other through its advanced logic computer “brain” by learning from the past simulations. And had the ability to predict millions of variables in the battlespace through inputs from the master controller. It typically was used for Battalion level engagements or higher, with the majority of the time being spent fighting imaginary battles and learning the hard trade of warcraft by killing 1s and 0s instead of actual blood being spilled. In keeping with tradition, it was still referred to the “sand table” although it represented something far more advanced than any of them had ever used before.

And today, another Brigade Commander was being put through his paces as the simulation was running steadily and the exercise was not going well for the Colonel. After his initial attack has stalled, he has hesitated on committing his reserves into the fight and was now in danger of being overrun by the “Red Team” aggressors. He had to hold the important high ground he had started from in order to force a stalemate and not lose ground. His attack had already stalled out due to his predictable tactics and the two lead battalions had been decimated.

“Commit the Cider Group here,” he ordered his S-3. “Plug in that gap on Objective Broom.”

“Sir?” asked his S-3.

“I need them to hold this line while we attempt to flank the attackers from the north. Get them in position here,” he said and pointed at the key terrain. As this was a simulation, the times could be speeded up for unit deployments in order to see the eventual outcome.

“Cider in place sir,” said the S-3. “Encountering heavy artillery and rocket fire. Reports coming in of a major attack with tank support.”

“Get 2nd Battalion’s Alpha and Charlie Companies moved north to hit the flank,” ordered the Colonel. Again time sped up and almost immediately slowed.

“2nd Battalion reporting significant resistance sir. The Companies were ambushed and have been pinned down,” said the S-3. “Reports coming in from Objective Broom. Cider has been overrun and has to retreat.”

“No retreat, get the companies to pull out of the ambush and back to Broom!” yelled the Colonel.

“Companies are pinned in place, IU armor is sweeping behind them and attempting to encircle. Reports coming in from Broom, positions have been lost with heavy casualties in the defenders. Might I suggest we pull back the remains of 3rd Battalion and attempt to set up a defensive line here?” asked the S-3 as he pointed at the map.

“Negative, order the remains of 3rd Battalion to link up with the remains of 1st Battalion and hit Broom from the south!” said the Colonel. And the time sped up once again.

“Reports from 2nd Battalion, those Companies are surrounded and cut off. Remains of 1st and 3rd Battalion reporting heavy infantry and anti-tank resistance from the woods. They cannot move forward,” said the S-3 after the attack plan was implemented and stalled yet again.

“Move 4th Battalion into position to attack!” yelled the Colonel.

“Okay, pause the exercise,” said the Assistant Division Commander for Maneuver, or ADM as he was called in the NAU. “Well, we can all go away from this seeing a textbook case of how to kill an entire friendly Brigade. In another fifteen minutes simulation time, your reserve battalion is about to roll into an armored ambush and probably get dismantled by the two IU battalions coming in from their ready reserve. Exceptional work in killing off three thousand men and women. Let’s go from the start shall we?”

The exercise was rewound on the computer simulation system and the beginning dispositions of the forces from both sides were seen. “Okay, right here is where you lost it. You should have committed your reserve force right here and pushed through,” said the General.

“I was trying to hold them back in case we were hit in the flank,” said the Colonel.

“The Red forces were pulling back along this line here,” said the General as he pointed at the screen. “Had your reserves been committed then, they wouldn’t have had the opportunity to pull back around and hit 1st and 3rd Battalions and pin them down. They were in the wide open spaces when they got hit instead of holding the high ground here where they could direct their fire.”

“And then you hesitated pulling them back to regroup even after your S-3 suggested it. Which caused you to lose significant ground as well as taking a whole lot more casualties than you

should have. And by then, the Red Team had been able to regroup, get their reserves in place and counterattack,” said the General.

“And when you sent in the two companies in here,” said the commander of the Red Team, a Brigadier General assigned to a different Division. “It was too obvious. Had you sent them another five kilometers to the north, you would have been able to catch us moving into position and might have been able to save your initial starting point.”

“And why did you feed your Cider troops into the line?” asked the Division Commander who had been silent up until this point.

“I needed the hole in the line filled,” said the Colonel. “And they were the obvious choice.”

“You sent in a special operations force to occupy normal foxholes?” asked the Division Commander. “With a whole battalion in reserve?”

“The terrain was suited more for infantry,” said the Colonel.

“You’re missing the point. That’s not what they are designed to do,” said the ADM.

“They’re shock infantry, I know, but still infantry,” said the Colonel.

“But not exactly where they should be committed. You had the location of the Red Team headquarters before this all started. Why not insert them before the battle and take the leadership out of play? Or as a minimum distracted while you went on the offensive,” asked the Division Commander.

“I’m not sure if they are capable of doing that mission. So instead I ordered the brigade artillery to fire several volleys as the attack started,” said the Colonel.

“You may not be sure, but I’m reasonably certain the Cider team could have pulled it off. I’ll tell you what, let’s see,” said the Division Commander. “Simulate adding the Cider element to the mix.”

The simulator operator added in the attack by the Cider teams just prior to the main attack. Even with the horrid dispositions of the attacking force, they were able to accomplish the objective and capture the key terrain before the Red Team could react since their leadership was out of play.

“Your Cider team should have been committed right there. Instead you tried to make them into normal infantry which is not what they are designed to do,” said the ADM.

“Let’s say I don’t trust my specific Cider teams to that mission,” said the Colonel.

“Okay folks, give us the room,” ordered the Division Commander. The remainder of the exercise participants exited the room and the internal cameras were turned off. “You obviously have something on your mind. Spill it.”

“I’m losing a lot of faith in Major Dayfield’s ability to lead his unit,” said the Colonel.

“Specifics Colonel, you bring an accusation like that, you need specific instances,” said the General. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, but I’ve known him longer and know what he’s capable of when he puts his mind to it just like we saw this morning.”

“It’s the picking and choosing of the missions he wants his unit to participate in. I know he receives his orders from J-SOD, but when not being actively tasked, we can exercise a limited amount of Opcon. And he doesn’t like some of the missions we assign to him and protests when he feels like it,” said the Colonel. “In my opinion, he’s insubordinate, a loose cannon and will end up getting more of his troops injured and killed if he’s allowed to continue in command of that unit.”

“You realize in all the past commanders, you are the first to bring such things up to me?” asked the General. “Everyone else has been ecstatic about the results he gets them.”

“Sorry sir, but I don’t see it that way,” said the Colonel. “He basically demanded time off a few days ago. Specifically told me he needed to be bumped in the R and R rotation because his troops were fatigued and got pissed when I wouldn’t do it.”

“When was the last time he had any down time?” asked the General.

“I don’t recall exactly, but it wasn’t that long ago,” said the Colonel.

“If he’s asking for it, even demanding it, you should take it under advisement. His unit is in almost constant contact while the remainder of your brigade has been able to get away from the fighting this winter. Things like this should be taken into account when the R and R schedule comes up,” said the General.

“I’ve got battalions always in contact as well General,” said the Colonel. “I can only let a so many go at a time and they need some rest as well.”

“I agree, but while your other battalions can rotate back from the line and at least be able to sleep in something other than a track or a foxhole, his unit is still heading behind the lines,” said the General. “Now if it’s a matter of relief for your Cider teams, I can make arrangements.”

“With all due respect sir, it seems like you are already taking their side in this matter,” said the Colonel. “Which is why I’m hesitant to bring it up.”

“I don’t take sides, but again, when you have a record like Dayfield’s the accusations of incompetence and insubordination just don’t seem fitting,” said the General as he realized the Colonel was intentionally being vague about a great many things in the conversation.

“Maybe the past commanders didn’t care. Maybe they just didn’t know how to deal with it. But I know this for certain, I’m not sure he is capable of command,” said the Colonel.

He isn't the only one that folks are having concerns about his leadership abilities, thought the General. "Would you like a new Cider group to replace his?"

"No, I won't pass off my bad units on someone else and I wouldn't want someone doing it to me. I'll deal with it if it comes down to it," said the Colonel.

"I'm not sure his Op Group would qualify as being a 'bad unit' by any means," said the General.

"Honestly sir, I'm closer to this than you are," said the Colonel.

"And I recognize and appreciate that. Look, you've spent almost your entire career in non-combat roles and jobs. Special Operations Forces are a unique bunch of individuals that don't fit into the conventional army mindset and it's something some commanders have a hard time understanding. Tell you what, I'll send down a representative from the J-SOD to help bring you up to speed," offered the General.

"I've had my command brief with them already," said the Colonel.

"Maybe a refresher and a more in depth look would help," said the General.

"Not sure it will help with people like Dayfield running around," said the Colonel.

"Okay, if it doesn't work out, I'll consider a wholesale transfer of his unit to another brigade. Sometimes folks don't mingle well and it appears you two have some significant problems. I won't hide the fact that Tom Dayfield gets results that I like and I would be seriously hesitant to replace him due to the fact thus far he has an exemplary record. Sound fair?" asked the General.

"Again sir, I wouldn't want him being a problem elsewhere," said the Colonel.

"I don't imagine you are catching my point. I will not allow you to relieve or replace Major Thomas Dayfield unless he is caught completely red handed in a criminal act worthy of a firing squad. Is that clear enough?" said the General with a tone.

"Understood sir," said the Colonel.

"Now you will listen to what the J-SOD rep has to say and you will take his advice concerning the application of the Cider teams under your brigade. That is a non-negotiable topic of conversation for you. The Cider teams greatly enhance the abilities of your brigade and of this division as a whole and are the best force multipliers we have," said the General. "They don't fit into the normal paradigm of how units should operate, but generally get results we can't get through conventional means so they are afforded a lot of latitude when it comes to the job. And the 14th has proven themselves time and time again in high risk, high reward operations that have come off without a hitch. So you'll understand my reluctance to relieve him without cause. And I mean something serious."

“Yes sir,” said the Colonel.

“Get the report from this exercise and review it. And for God’s sake, get your staff more involved here. You inherited an outstanding staff and good battalion commanders from your predecessor, use them and their abilities and stop making all the decisions,” said the General.

“Yes sir,” said the Colonel.

“A good General is made by the ability to have good staff and getting positive results. And having good field commanders that get results. And people like Dayfield get noticed by way higher leadership than you or me. Something to consider that the results of the units under a commander often reflect on the commander himself around promotion times. Understand?” asked the General.

“I understand sir,” said the Colonel.

“We’ll redo this exercise in two weeks and I had best see significant improvement over and beyond what you displayed here today,” said the General.

“I will sir,” said the Colonel and took his leave.

After he left, the General knew the battle between Dayfield and the Colonel would come to a head sooner rather than later. He considered getting the swap made right then and there, but knew Thomas was involved in a mission currently and trying to swap administrative and logistical chains in the middle of a mission would be disastrous at best. He would reassess the transfer once they completed the search for the downed pilot and probably move ahead to see if that helped cool the heat that Dayfield had coming on him from the Colonel. If it continued to happen with another unit in place, the evidence would point towards the Colonel as being the problem, but they wouldn’t know until it happened if that was the case.

But one thing was certain. He would have to keep a far closer eye on the Colonel if and when they went into combat. He had staged him forward ahead of more competent brigade commanders in an attempt to get up to speed as quickly as possible. But so far it appeared that plan of action wasn’t working as he hoped it would.

CHAPTER 14

Date/Time: 24 March/2111

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

If anything, Thomas was a creature of habit for certain things in his life and a disruption of certain habits would completely throw him off kilter. And one of those was his nightly shower before getting the last assessments and turning in for the night. While he was in the field, it didn't seem to bother him, but when in base camp, it was something he had to do. After finishing rinsing off, he checked the newly acquired scratches and cuts from the last mission and reminded himself to put some antiseptic and band-aids on them before going to bed. And the new bruise from the round that hit him that day. There weren't any cracked ribs, but he would still be a bit sore. He grabbed the towel from the hook hanging outside the stall and dried off before wrapping it around his waist and stepping out. Grabbing the shaving kit from his ditty bag, he had that feeling he wasn't alone.

"I am in the right showers, correct?" he asked Amber who was sitting on the bench.

"Yep," she replied.

"These are the male showers?" he asked again.

"Sure are," she said simply.

"Might you be in the wrong place then?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Nope, I'm right where I'm supposed to be," she said.

"Amber, I'm sure there is a completely logical reason why you are here," he said.

"I need to talk to you privately," she said.

"How did you know I was here? Or alone for that matter?" he asked.

"I'm a recon troop by nature. I stalked you from the tent and tactically made sure the facility was clear before dynamic entry and popping my behind down on this bench," she replied.

"Mind if I shave at least?" he asked.

"If you must," she said. "But honestly, I think you look better with a beard. Or at least a few days growth. Like maybe four or five days, trim it down with a number 1 clipper."

"Amber..." he said in the tone he used to get her to move on.

“So Darren came to see me today,” she started.

“Okay, he sees lots of folks,” said Thomas as he applied the shaving gel.

“He’s concerned about you,” said Amber simply.

“Why?” asked Thomas.

“He said the meeting with the Colonel didn’t go so well today. But since he doesn’t know everything that happened and you had changed when you left the office, he was concerned about your mental state,” said Amber. “So he came by to ask me to keep an eye on you.”

“He didn’t think to talk to me first?” asked Thomas, somewhat irritated.

“Darren Thompson is the best friend you have around here, be glad he cares enough to have your close friends looking out for you,” said Amber.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with me,” said Thomas.

“The pressure gets to everyone eventually. And Darren said you snapped on the Colonel today. But he also said you stood up for us, so the ends justified the means I suppose,” she said.

“That remains to be seen,” said Thomas. “And he asked if I was okay?”

“Not really,” said Amber. “He asked your closest friends to keep an eye on you to make sure you were doing okay. I felt honored to be included in that small club.”

“Yeah, I’ve got my own entourage,” laughed Thomas.

“Seriously,” she replied.

“Normally, that’s me saying that to you about now,” he chuckled and applied the razor again.

“Look, I’m a direct person and when I want to know something, I ask,” she said and the door opened with Martin Watkins starting to walk in. “Excuse us.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Martin as he quickly closed the door and departed.

“You were saying?” asked Thomas.

“I’ll get to the point,” said Amber. “Is everything okay with you?”

“I feel like everything is okay,” he replied.

“Darren and Rick both said you were a little off when you got back. And the decision to take that new kid on the mission was risky,” she explained.

“I think he turned out to be okay,” said Thomas.

“But it was a huge risk,” said Amber. “There were plenty of other medics you could have, and probably should have picked before someone who wasn’t even vetted by his team leader.”

“Okay, but I wasn’t expecting to take on an IU Company out there,” he reasoned. “I figured it would be a milk run and he got a little field time under his belt.”

“I figured that was your thought process,” said Amber. “And I do think the risk ended up paying off in the long run as he saved those guys lives.”

“So was it a bad decision?” asked Thomas.

“Not bad, but it was a whole lot more risky than what you typically take,” said Amber as they heard yelling from the adjacent female showers followed quickly with a “get out!” from both Holly Meredith and Heather Davis.

“Probably should have just asked Solo to wait,” chuckled Thomas.

“Yeah, hindsight and all,” said Amber. “Anyway, they said you weren’t exactly acting like yourself when you got back from the meeting and got a little reserved today.”

“It wasn’t exactly a pretty meeting,” said Thomas.

“Want to talk about it?” asked Amber.

“No,” said Thomas. “I lost my cool with the Colonel and that’s all anyone needs to know.”

“Darren said it was a little more than that,” said Amber.

“I didn’t know he heard everything,” said Thomas. “And since I threatened bodily harm or death on a senior officer, I turned up the gas on my own pot.”

“You what?!” she exclaimed.

“I…” he started and caught himself. “Darren didn’t tell you?”

“No, he didn’t mention anything like that!” she exclaimed and the door poked open once again and Martin was seen peeking around the facing.

“Give us a few minutes please,” said Thomas.

“This is the guys shower, right?” he asked and saw Amber sitting on the bench.

“Informal conference room and counseling session for the moment. You mind heading folks off trying to get in?” asked Thomas.

“Sure,” he replied with a bit of confusion and closed the door.

“So are you the counselor or the counselee?” she asked with a wink.

“Not sure yet,” he chuckled.

“Anyway, he did *not* mention you threatened to murder the Colonel. Just said things got a bit heated between the two of you,” said Amber.

“Let’s keep that between us shall we?” asked Thomas.

“He did say the Colonel threatened to have you arrested,” said Amber.

“And now you know the reason why,” explained Thomas.

“So back to the big picture, we just want to make sure you’re okay,” said Amber.

“I feel fine,” he said.

“And looking fine as always,” she laughed. “Those nice arms and sexy butt.”

“Probably not the best environment to be saying that,” he laughed.

“Like it’s the first time I’ve come in on you in the shower,” she laughed.

“I’ll give you that,” he laughed. “Listen, I’m perfectly fine. I just had a whole lot of thoughts running through my head when I got back and tried to act normal. I’m guessing that was a massive failure since I was a little over the top. But tell the guys I’m perfectly fine.”

“I’m not sure they will agree,” said Amber.

“Okay, I’ll tell them,” he said.

“Actually, Darren asked me not to talk to you about it,” said Amber.

“Following rules again aren’t we?” asked Thomas.

“A trait learned from my leadership,” she said with a grin.

“I can’t argue on that point can I?” he laughed.

“Nope, backed you in a corner for the first time,” she laughed. “But seriously, this conversation is just between us, okay?”

“As in you aren’t to tell anyone about my death threats either,” said Thomas.

“No, what goes in the shower, stays in the shower,” she said with a wink.

“Hopefully so,” said Thomas. “Now please turn your back so I can at least get pants on.”

“Awww, I paid a quarter for this show,” said Amber with a laugh.

“Nope, that kind of show costs you a dollar,” he said.

“Touché,” she laughed and turned around while he pulled on some PT pants and underwear.

“I’m decent again,” he said.

“I’m not sure you are ever decent, luring an innocent girl like myself into the shower,” she said.

“Need I remind who came in on...never mind,” he laughed. “I appreciate the concern.”

“It’s the least I could do,” she said. “You’re a true friend Tom and I don’t say that about a lot of people. And you have other true friends in this unit. Just be happy friends care enough to be concerned with your mental well-being.”

“I know and I am very happy,” said Thomas. “I’ve about got everything sorted out between the ears so I’ll be back to normal before long. I promise.”

“You have been a little more short tempered as of late I noticed. First my ex, the French Major and now the Colonel,” said Amber. “Not really like you.”

“Did they all not have it coming?” asked Thomas.

“Well, I didn’t say that, *especially* with my ex-husband,” she exclaimed. “Just haven’t seen you lose control like that in a while.”

“I think you’re worth it,” said Thomas.

“Nice to hear,” she laughed.

“C’mon kiddo, let me get you a chocolate milk before bed,” he said and gathered his items.

“I prefer the strawberry milk myself,” she grinned. “Speaking of beverages, Ashley is probably going to kill someone when she gets back.”

“Why?” asked Thomas as they headed for the door.

“Seems Rob Davis decided to reward the Chinook crew today with the remainder of a case of wine. Coincidentally, the same type of wine that Ashley had stashed under her bunk and was saving,” explained Amber. “Well, he did leave her one bottle at least.”

“Got used for a good purpose,” said Thomas. “They saved our bacon.”

As they exited the showers, a small group was waiting outside the showers and looked slightly annoyed at the delay. “Is the counseling session over?” asked Martin with annoyance.

“Had to spank her a few times, but she’s promised to behave now,” said Thomas.

“Not sure there are enough spankings for that,” said 1st Lieutenant Joel Tucker.

“I’m a good girl!” protested Amber.

“Barging into the men’s showers and making me walk in on Holly and Heather in the women’s showers on accident? Sure,” said Martin and the group had a laugh. Thomas and Amber departed the area and headed for the command center.

“Anyway, about the wine. He specifically gave it to that flight engineer,” explained Amber. “Along with a rose he got from Lord only knows where.”

“Do you ever question where we get stuff from?” asked Thomas.

“Nope,” said Amber. “Just happily take it.”

“Did it work?” asked Thomas.

“He got her contact info, so yeah,” laughed Amber as they entered the command center. Shannon was going over some latest information about the site and had received some data from the teams on the ground already. Thomas noticed Jamie Collins was sitting over at an unused desk going over the standards and procedures regulation for the unit, a controlled item that was their “bible” of how the teams operated as well as the tactics and techniques they used in the field. He also had about a half dozen old mission reports on the computer and was cross referencing the regulation with the after action reports where the tactics had been learned and implemented in situations where the students could come off dead.

“Hey Tom,” she said. “One last data dump before bed?”

“Yeah, whatcha got?” he asked. She spent the next two minutes outlining what they had learned as well as additional information coming in from Hermann. Thomas spent a few moments looking at the newest photos from the site as well as the composite images they had received. He compared two side by side and asked for a second pair of eyes on the two.

“Tell me if this looks like a pattern or not,” he said. “See this small mound here? And there’s another one here and here. I’d be willing to bet those are fighting positions dug in between the towers. See how they are almost exactly between the two?”

“Maybe,” said Shannon.

“No, it really is,” said Amber as she took a scale marker and drew a line on the printed photograph. “Exactly two hundred meters, give or take a meter or two. And look here,” she continued and drew two lines from the towers into the mound. “Exact distances again.”

“Well, I’ll be,” remarked Shannon.

“And if you look closely, there are less discernible features here, here and here. All lined up between the towers in the camp,” said Thomas.

“I did find it strange they had two hundred meters between the towers with nothing else guarding the place,” said Shannon. “Trying to put me out of a job Tom?”

“Nah, just figured it out myself,” said Thomas. “I’d bet when they start getting closer in, they will find more in about the same spots as these. Do we have any enhanced radar images of the site? Satellite or otherwise?”

“No, but we can ask,” said Shannon as she typed out the request and sent it to the Australian intel unit as well as their findings on what appeared to be fighting positions.

“We need some good resolution because it appears there might be a path right here,” he said.

“That’s kind of stretching it a bit,” said Shannon. “It’s not regular enough for a path.”

“No, but it picks up here and here as well,” said Thomas.

“Could be,” said Shannon. “And that’s why we have folks on the ground. I’ll tell you what, I’ll package it up and sent it to the teams. They can take a closer look at it from the ground.”

“I knew you got paid the big bucks for a reason,” said Thomas.

“Hey you looked at them for ten seconds and noticed something I completely missed after a couple of hours,” said Shannon. “Give yourself a raise.”

“Go ahead and send the data into the team box for download,” said Thomas.

“You don’t want to send it direct?” asked Shannon.

“Ping them to let them know there’s an important download, but the file would be too big if they happen to be closer to the compound,” said Thomas.

“Good point,” said Shannon as she started marking the appropriate pictures, scanning them and preparing the file for upload. The satellite uplink would allow the teams on the ground to download the file at their leisure but the base message would let them know it was important.

“Should be ready in about twenty minutes,” said Shannon.

“Anything else?” asked Thomas.

“No, nothing yet,” said Shannon. “Just initial observation from the teams. They haven’t gotten any closer than five hundred meters yet.”

“They find anything worth mentioning?” asked Thomas.

“Maybe some infrequent patrols, but nothing major,” said Shannon. “There doesn’t appear to be a minefield surrounding the compound, so that’s very helpful.”

“Mines can ruin your day for certain,” remarked Thomas and nodded at Collins with a questioning look on his face.

“Came in and asked for it as well as the secure computer files to cross reference. Said he needed to get ahead of the game,” said Shannon. “And keeps saluting.”

“On his own?” asked Thomas.

“I would assume so,” said Shannon. “Most folks don’t do that until they start training.”

Thomas wandered over to Collins who was engrossed in one chapter and looked up the cite on the computer, going through two files before he found what he was looking for. “Doing some light reading?”

“It’s obvious I just need to get up to speed sir,” said Collins.

“Most folks start reviewing it after the formal instruction and as they get deeper into their immersion training,” said Thomas.

“I have unusual learning habits sir,” said Collins. “I have to read about it first so I can visualize it in my head as it’s being taught. Only way I learn sir.”

“You did pretty good out there today without being formally trained and were reacting like you should have been without being prompted. And the Division Commander singled you out for an award. So we’ll be putting you in for a decoration,” said Thomas.

“I honestly don’t want any awards sir,” said Collins.

“That makes you little different than the other sixty-four members assigned to this unit,” said Thomas with a chuckle. “We all try to refuse them, but we get them forced on us.”

“I don’t need recognition,” said Collins. “Just want to do my job and get home.”

“Son, when one Major General Chambers says you get an award, it’s a foregone conclusion you will be receiving said award,” said Thomas. “He’ll probably want to pin it himself.”

“Like I said sir, I have a job that needs to be done and did what I had to do today,” said Collins. “I’m still not certain why you took me on the mission, but as long as I was there, I had to give it my all in order to keep from getting killed.”

“And for a first time out, you did a good job,” said Thomas. “I’ll leave you to your reading, but I did want to let you know one more thing.”

“Sir?” asked Collins.

“We’re fairly informal around here, stop saluting everyone,” said Thomas.

“Not used to it sir,” said Collins. “Normally I am required to salute.”

“Unless it’s a Colonel or better, we don’t salute,” said Thomas.

“I’ll keep that in mind sir,” said Collins.

“Okay, keep up the good work otherwise and don’t stay up too late. You’ve got training tomorrow,” said Thomas and ran into Darren on his way out. “I was coming to find you.”

“Good tracking skills,” laughed Darren. “And there’s something I need to talk to you about too.”

“I need you to set up Collins for some training tomorrow. Basic range time and team tactics to include the kill house,” said Thomas.

“Rick beat you to it,” said Darren. “They start at 0800 tomorrow.”

“Okay, and what else?” asked Thomas.

“Mark got a job offer today,” said Darren. “Actually, the both of us did, but I already declined.”

“What kind of job?” asked Thomas.

“Cider rep up at the Corps,” said Darren. “They wanted experienced Majors and above, but nobody in a command billet already which counts you out.”

“For the moment,” laughed Thomas.

“Yeah, for the moment,” laughed Darren.

“Has he accepted it?” asked Thomas, not angry at someone moving up.

“He’s thinking it over and wants to talk with you about it,” said Darren. “But he also said he wants to finish this mission before going.”

“I’d advise him to take that,” said Thomas. “It’s a good position and we could certainly use good folks up there networking.”

“He’ll feel like he’s abandoning the unit,” said Darren.

“Is that why are you sticking around?” asked Thomas.

“Nope, creeping into your job slowly,” laughed Darren.

“It’s yours,” laughed Thomas.

“As stated before, no,” laughed Darren. “Want to come observe the training?”

“Probably a little later, I’ve got some other stuff to go over,” said Thomas.

“Okay, we’ll be at the range in the morning and the shoot house in the afternoon,” said Darren.

“I’ll find you eventually,” said Thomas. “Oh, and set Collins up for my initial meeting, say tomorrow evening.”

“Almost past that point already,” said Darren.

“Never too late to make a bad first impression,” said Thomas.

“You still not getting good vibes?” asked Darren.

“Let’s say I don’t trust some folks not to sabotage this unit from within,” said Thomas.

“Completely understand,” said Darren. “Night.”

“See you in the morning,” said Thomas as they headed back to the tent. “Amber?”

“Yes?” she replied.

“Thanks,” said Thomas and pulled her in with a side hug and a squeeze on her shoulder. She took his hand and squeezed back letting him know she was welcome and the unspoken message that she appreciated all he did for her as well. They headed into the tent where Brian and Greg were playing a game of chess, very badly from the looks of it.

“No, it can only move two up and one across!” protested Brian as he moved Greg’s Knight back to its starting point.

“I thought that was the pointy one here!” objected Greg as he pointed at the Rook.

“You’re impossible,” said Brian.

“Takes a skilled mind to play chess,” remarked Thomas after a laugh.

“Well, that omits everyone in this tent except me,” said Brian dryly.

“Oh really?” asked Thomas. “Want to put your money where your mouth is?”

“Bring it on Gramps,” said Brian and started putting the pieces back in starting position.

“I thought I was playing!” protested Greg.

“The checkerboard is over there for the less skilled,” said Brian. “Or play Go Fish with Amber.”

“I like Go Fish,” she exclaimed.

The group had a laugh as Thomas sat down at the table and got ready to play. And passed the remainder of the evening in idle chitchat. However, Thomas’ mind wandered to his teams on the ground and how they were doing.

“Got a message and a file from command,” said Captain Bill Meyers quietly in the objective rally point for the teams on the ground. “Got some further intel about the site.”

“Anything good?” asked Michael Parsons who had just completed his initial survey on his way from being dropped at his landing zone. They had arrived and been challenged by Stu Donaldson before being allowed into the small encampment in the thicket of thorns and brambles. And although from the outside it looked uninviting, on the interior it opened up a little bit into a decent sized space. Crawlspace under the brush were already in place and the teams were using them to get in and out of the location.

“Looks to be fighting positions here, here and here,” said Bill. “And they think it’s a pattern of them being between all the towers.”

“Sure looks that way,” said Michael. “Need to be careful.”

“They also think there might be a patrol path here,” said Bill as he pointed at the circled areas Shannon had indicated on the photos. “So we need to confirm.”

“Kind of slim on that,” said Michael.

“They appear to do some long range patrolling, so it could be spot on,” said Bill. “From Bobby’s initial sweep of the area. Some tracks, but not enough to indicate regular use.”

“You passed it up?” asked Michael.

“Yep,” said Bill. “Got a thank you note.”

“We have anyone out at the moment?” asked Michael.

“Dave and his team and Ashley and hers,” said Bill. “I sent them a message and they are pulling back to get the file.”

“I thought Ashley was going to be tasked with just watching the roadway,” said Michael.

“I considered it, but that might be better if we rotate our groups through that while on the ground. I know it wasn’t Tom’s intent, but she and that team are capable. A little young, but youth sometimes can overcome,” said Bill.

“Do we have anyone watching the crossroads?” asked Michael.

“Not yet, we were waiting on your team,” said Bill. “It’s complicated, but we’ve worked it to one team at the road, one team up here and two on site. Yours was the last piece of the puzzle.”

“Sounds good,” said Michael. “You heading out soon?”

“Four hours,” said Bill. “As soon as Dave’s team gets back, mine’s out to the roadway. Eight hour rotations with four hour overlaps.”

“Sounds complicated, but as long as it works,” said Michael who was nominally in charge. But being equal within a group of equals, he always took the inputs of those around him. “When are we scheduled?”

“Sixteen hours,” said Bill. “We weren’t sure how long it would take you to get here so we skipped over you in the rotation which is why we aren’t watching the roadway.”

“We can go sooner,” said Michael.

“Nah, rest up,” said Bill. “Everyone needs some sleep.”

“I won’t argue,” said Michael and turned to his team who were resting at the moment. “Get some shuteye; we’re heading out in sixteen hours.”

“Twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep?” asked Staff Sergeant Willy “Guns” Perez.

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” said Sergeant Nate “Baldy” Clark.

“Twelve hours if you two would shut up,” said Nancy Dugger who was almost asleep already.

“How does she do it?” asked Bill.

“Go to sleep so fast?” asked Michael. “Still haven’t figured it out.”

“It’s a neat trick if you can pull it off,” said Bill.

“I’ll market and sell the secret when I find out,” chuckled Michael as he went over to find a bed for himself. As they were in camp, they would hot bunk between the teams. He found an unused sleeping bag and climbed in, pulling it over the top, but not zipping it up. Cradling his carbine, he already was thinking of the mission they would go on the next day and get more information to possibly plan a strike if the target was valid.

CHAPTER 15

Date/Time: 25 March/0244

Location: West of the enemy compound, southeast of Ružomberok, Occupied Slovakia

“Possible contact,” said Ashley into her radio microphone quietly as the crashing was heard to her front. It sounded like a single individual running through the woods heading somewhat towards their position. “Negative, positive contact. One individual.”

She was paired off with Jeff Holmes right then and listened at the unknown individual was panting heavily and stopped for a quick break near a tree. They saw him leaned over and propped himself against the large tree gasping for breath after sprinting from what they assumed was the encampment. Suddenly shouts in Arabic were heard in the distance from where the man had come from and his head jerked around at the sound. He started jogging again, only going forward about thirty feet before getting tripped up on a root and falling onto the muddy ground. They saw him look himself over before getting up and looking behind himself once again. A dog’s barking was heard as well and the man started forward in yet another slow run.

“Sister, Catman, he’s heading for your position,” said Ashley as quietly as she could. A fire team of IU soldiers was seen running past them being led by the K-9 unit in front as it strained at the leash with the sounds to its front. One of the IU soldiers raised his rifle and fired a burst at the fleeing figure shouting a command in Arabic.

The IU team sprinted towards the man and slowed as they approached. Flashlights were turned on from the group of soldiers illuminating the man as he was attempting to stand, struggling as the gunshot wound was already taking its toll on his body. But even as they approached him, he suddenly stood straight up and faced them with a look of dignity. More Arabic was heard and Jeff provided the translation. “They are asking where he was going,” he whispered. They saw one of the soldiers move forward and hit the man with the butt of his rifle, knocking him to the ground once again. He attempted to stand, but was rewarded with another hit from the rifle in the head. They could see him bleeding from the gunshot wound as well as the head through their night vision.

The soldiers were laughing at his attempts to stand up again as he clumsily fell down after an attempt. But something inside him kept moving his body upwards and he grabbed at nearby branches to pull himself up. He faced the guards yet again with a look of sheer determination and will and one of anger. Speaking in a foreign language they couldn’t understand, he stood tall as another of the soldiers approached him and pulled his pistol from his holster. He got within five feet of the man and spoke before pulling the trigger, hitting the man right between the eyes and killing him on the spot. A short conversation in Arabic was had before the group started to move back to the compound. However, they were stopped as the dog turned and started searching intently towards where the man had been. It appeared to be focused in on exactly where Jill and Josh Wolfe were currently hiding under some bushes.

But they caught a lucky break and the handler pulled at the chain and brought the dog back to his side. The dog turned once again before they departed, causing the handler to give a command in Arabic and tug him back to his side for the trip back to the compound. Ashley and Jeff watched and listened intently as the group was finally far enough away not to cause a problem. "Clear."

"Safe," she heard Jill say over the radio.

"Check him," said Ashley. Jill and Josh "Catman" Wolfe moved forward to the body lying on the ground. Checking his carotid artery, they felt no pulse after ten seconds of trying. The head wound was evidence enough that his life had been ended prematurely.

"Our guy?" asked Ashley.

"No," said Jill as she removed her patrol pack and pulled a night vision camera out of one of the pouches. She snapped several photos of the man from the front and side to send in to command to see if it might be possible to identify him from records. His face was already pale and not from the lack of blood and he appeared to be in bad shape even before the incident.

"Mark the spot and we'll come back in the daylight to get better photos," said Ashley.

"Roger," said Jill. "Contact report?"

"Got it, R-V here," said Ashley as she slid the small keyboard out of her communicator and started typing out the initial incident report. Sergeant Jeff "Duck" Holmes moved out thirty meters and set up a listening post while Ashley quickly typed out an initial contact report, making it understandably short with the promise for an extended brief when the sun came up.

"Hard watching a murder right in front of your eyes," remarked Jill after approaching and sending the pictures to Ashley via her communicator.

"I feel for you," said Ashley. "Sometimes we have to hold ourselves in check because of the larger mission at hand."

"I hope we get the chance to even the score in a big way," said Jill as she continued to observe the dark woods.

"Give it time," said Ashley and sent the initial contact report.

"Sunshine's team was in contact, but the gunfire wasn't directed at them," said Dave Lawson after receiving the communication from Ashley.

“What happened?” asked Master Sergeant Roberto Rivera, better known as Bobby or his call sign R-2.

“Looks like they stumbled across a patrol chasing someone from the camp. Here’s a picture, but it’s not pretty and they verified it isn’t the Texan Pilot,” said Dave as he handed over his communicator to the others.

“Yellow suit? Prison issue?” asked Amy Kerns.

“Pretty good guess,” said Dave. “It seems our suspected compound might be the place we are looking for after all.”

“Guy doesn’t look like a concentration camp victim though,” said Tim Daniels.

“Could have been overweight to begin with,” said Amy. “Lost weight while he was there.”

“Or just a normal prisoner,” said Tim. “Won’t know until we get a better assessment.”

“Go ahead and send the initial report to command,” said Michael.

“Looks like Ashley already did,” said Dave as he checked the message.

“Tom?” said Shannon Parson at the base camp and shook him gently. “Tom?”

“Hang on,” said Amber and rolled out of her bunk with a grunt. She leaned over and whispered in his ear and his eyes popped open immediately.

“You have to teach me that trick,” laughed Shannon.

“Sharon told me about it before we left,” said Amber as she rolled back into her bunk. “Said he was impossible to get into the land of living by conventional means, but this works.”

“Thanks,” said Shannon. “Tom, you wanted to know if we got anything significant.”

“Yeah,” he said and wiped at his face and walked outside to keep from disturbing the others. The night air was chilly and he zipped his jacket up. “Something happen?”

“Ashley’s team made contact, but they didn’t get engaged,” said Shannon as she handed over a computer tablet with the contact report.

“We know who this guy is?” asked Thomas followed by a yawn.

“Not good enough resolution to send to J-SOD and the intel outfits. Ashley says they will head back after daybreak to get better photographs,” said Shannon.

“There were undetected?” asked Thomas.

“It appears so except the K-9 unit that kept trying to pull them back,” said Shannon.

“They continuing on mission?” asked Thomas.

“Don’t see why they shouldn’t,” said Shannon.

“Okay, assessment?” asked Thomas.

“First evidence that we have that this is a prison camp as a minimum. Way too close to be coincidental and the yellow suit implies he was a prisoner of some sort. However, doesn’t look emaciated enough to be a concentration camp victim,” said Shannon.

“Agreed,” said Thomas. “Send a reply for them to continue and stay safe.”

“Roger that,” said Shannon. “Head on back to bed.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” he yawned and went back into the tent and crawled back into his sleeping bag. He was back out within moments of putting his head on his pillow.

Date/Time: 25 March/0630

Location: IU Internment camp, southwest of Ružomberok, Occupied Slovakia

“Have we determined how the person escaped?” asked the Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the facility. He had been woken up after the patrol had discovered the missing prisoner, but had waited until the morning for the full briefing.

“It appears he created a hole in Building 7 and escaped through there. He was able to get below the fences and into the exterior before the tower saw him,” said the Captain who was in charge of the site security. “He made it to the woods before the towers were able to engage.”

“I told them the trees needed to be cut back further,” said the Colonel.

“It was determined it would draw more attention to our location,” said the Captain.

“And the guards that were supposed to be watching the camp?” asked the Colonel.

“They were asleep at their posts and have already been arrested and are awaiting transport to Budapest for trial,” said the Captain.

“I want one to remain to serve as an example to the other guards,” said the Colonel.

“Yes sir,” said the Captain.

“Are you taking care of the other problems?” asked the Colonel.

“Yes sir, the hole will be sealed up today and the fence will be anchored once again. However, I do not believe the additional anchoring will be necessary since we will be leaving in two weeks. Plus, I believe another example of ten random individuals in the camp will entice the others to not resist so actively,” said the Captain.

“Yes, ten should be sufficient,” said the Colonel. “Find ten of the most healthy and deposit the bodies back into the buildings so the people will see for their own eyes.”

“Yes sir,” said the Captain.

“And Captain, I do not expect any further incidents of this sort while we are here,” warned the Colonel. “I will not tolerate complacency or incompetence in the guard staff or its leadership.”

“Yes sir,” said the Captain and left the office. He instructed his second in charge to pick one of the guards that had been arrested at random and to be publically executed as an example to the remainder of the guard force. He also made plans to pull ten of the prisoners out of the buildings at random to serve as examples to the remainder of the prisoners what the punishment for escape was. If they knew they would never leave the internment facility alive, they would all have tried to escape.

“Yep, it’s a DFP,” said Bill Meyers after he and his partner Staff Sergeant Aaron “Mongo” Harper had returned from a close in observation of the compound.

“So the intel was right?” asked Staff Sergeant Adam “Crash” Neal.

“Appears to be, Sunshine and her team found the same thing,” said Meyers.

“Good catch by command,” said Harper.

“Okay, we’ll back off and send in another report,” said Meyers.

“What was the banging about earlier?” asked Neal.

“They were patching up one of the buildings as best as we can tell. We couldn’t get in close enough to tell for certain, but one had a new piece of plywood on the back,” said Harper.

“I’ve got lead,” said Staff Sergeant Katie “Bear” Shepherd as she shouldered up her rifle and waited on the remainder of their team to file in behind her. But before they set off, they heard the PA for the camp in the distance. They turned and tried to key in on what was being said and slowly advanced forward attempting to hear what was going on in the compound. They reached a point where they could observe the camp, but still be out of sight from the guard towers and the positions on the ground.

“What language is that?” asked Harper.

“Czech, Slovak, not sure,” whispered Meyers.

They were not close enough to get a recording of what was being said, but they could see the goings on in the camp and ten figures in yellow jumpsuits being brought into the center of the main area. Shepherd attempted to get the camera zoomed in, but they still were out of position as the figures lined up behind one of the structures just out of their view.

Suddenly, a single pistol shot was heard, followed by another and another all the way to ten shots. A figure was seen strutting out of the compound once it was all over and the bodies were seen being carried to the ten buildings within the compound. Wooden bars on the doors were seen being lifted off and the dead bodies being tossed inside.

“Please tell me you’re getting a recording of this,” said Meyers.

“Yeah, I-” started Shepherd and let out a string of curse words that would have made a sailor proud and her mother blush. “It’s not recording!”

Meyers immediately snatched it out of her hands and found the unit’s record button was damaged and would not engage. “Doesn’t matter, our reports should be good enough.”

“Sorry sir,” said Shepherd meekly.

“Not your fault Bear,” said Meyers. “Things that can break often will when you need them the most. We have our four statements; that should be good enough.”

“Next time we need to bring the recorder units for the rifles,” said Harper.

“Yeah, lesson learned,” said Meyers. “We need to report this immediately.”

“I’ve got lead,” said Shepherd once again as they slinked back away from the view of the compound and into an area they could send up the report.

Williams was in his cell and received a visit from three of the guards. He was hauled out of the cramped space and taken into the interrogation room where they tossed a yellow jumpsuit at him.

“You wear,” said a guard in heavily accented English. Williams started putting it on over the top of his flight suit but was stopped. “No, wear only.”

“I am wearing it only,” said Williams as he continued to pull it on over his flight suit. However, he was stopped by the punch to his midsection before he could continue. He doubled over and coughed as the air was sent out of his lungs.

“No! Wear only!” said the guard again.

Much as he wanted to play further games with the guards, he saw they were in no laughing mood and decided not to tempt fate at that point in time. He stripped off his flight suit and put on the jumpsuit, leaving his flight suit behind him. But before being escorted back to his cell, he received another visitor who entered the room. Major Aziz barked at the guards who grabbed the dingy flight suit and departed, leaving the two alone.

“I am sorry Captain, but you have left us little choice. My superiors are not willing to wait any longer and have decided other measures are necessary,” said Aziz.

“Other measures?” asked Williams.

“They do not believe you have information that can help us,” said Aziz. “So they have decided to treat you as any other political prisoner in our territory.”

“Not sure I like the sound of that,” said Williams. “Especially after hearing gunfire outside.”

“Please, I beg of you, give me something to stall them! Just a little piece of information no matter how insignificant you believe it to be! Something I can use to help you!” begged Aziz.

“I can’t,” said Williams.

“They may physically torture you once again!” exclaimed Aziz. “Of this I am sure!”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it,” said Williams.

“Anything!” said Aziz.

“I just can’t,” said Williams. “I won’t.”

“I am sorry friend,” said Aziz as another individual came into the room. He appeared to be a member of some rank as Aziz jumped out of his seat when he entered. The new man started barking off something in Arabic and pointing at Williams and back at Aziz. Aziz attempted to start speaking, but was cut off as the senior individual barked yet again and the guards returned

to the room. He got into Aziz's face and yelled before turning to the guards and pointing at Williams. They came over and grabbed both arms and started dragging him away.

"What's going on?!" demanded Williams.

"They are taking you to the main camp!" exclaimed Aziz.

"I'll talk!" said Williams. "Don't let them kill me!"

"I cannot stop them Captain!" said Aziz and was restrained by another guard. He yelled in Arabic at the guard, but was not released. They drug him from the room down a corridor and out the front door of the building. The sunlight was blinding to him after being cramped up in the cell and in the ill lit interrogation room. But this was his chance to escape or at least die trying. He wrenched his arms out of the hold and made it five feet before being hit by a copy of the Taser. His muscles went into involuntary lock and he hit the ground without breaking his fall. They gave him the full five seconds of riding the bull before the clacking on the device stopped. He moaned and the guards decided another shot for good measure would be in order. After the second dose of the electrical shock, they picked up his limp body and half drug him past the gated area and into the main camp. As they entered the first area, the guard escorts doubled as others readied their weapons just in case there was trouble. They went to the first building, removed the bar on the door and tossed him inside the dark interior. Closing everything up, they headed back out of the compound before locking and double checking the protective barriers keeping the occupants inside.

Williams groaned and rolled over, trying to adjust to the dim light creeping in from small gaps in the wooden walls. He sensed he was not alone, but couldn't see anything in the dark yet as his eyes were still affected by the brief exposure to direct sunlight. There was a foul smell inside and his nose involuntarily twitched. A voice came from his right side as he lay on the floor.

"*Haló?*" asked the female voice.

"Yeah, I'm alive," said Williams as he grunted, trying to roll over towards the voice.

"*Kto ste?*" asked the female voice. It sounded younger.

"I'm sorry, but I don't speak your language," said Williams as he tried to sit up.

"You are...American?" asked the voice.

"Texan," said Williams as he managed to sit up and look at the voice finally. In the dim light, he could see a younger girl in her early teens.

"What is Texan?" she asked. "I no understand."

"Texan...from Texas," said Williams.

“Oh, *kovboj!*” she exclaimed. “Ummm, cowboy? This correct, no?”

“Not everyone from Texas is a cowboy darlin,” he drawled and felt for additional injuries.

“Sorry?” she asked.

“Nothing, who are you?” he asked.

“My name is Dana,” she said very formally. “What is your name?”

“Hank,” he replied, wondering who this person was and if she was a plant by the guards to gather intelligence information from him.

“You soldier yes?” asked Dana.

“I’m a pilot,” said Williams. He knew that little tidbit of information wasn’t really a bad thing since the IU knew it already.

“I no understand,” said Dana.

“I fly airplanes,” said Williams.

“Oh,” said Dana.

“What a young thing like you doing around here darlin?” asked Williams.

“I prisoner here,” said Dana simply.

“Okay,” he said and tried to look around. His eyes weren’t adjusted yet so he focused back on the skinny girl to his front.

“You hurt?” she asked.

“No, I’ll be fine,” he said although his entire body felt like it was on fire from the Taser.

“Why you here?” she asked and moved slightly closer.

“I was shot down,” he drawled.

“Sorry?” she asked.

“They shot me...never mind,” said Williams. “What is this place?”

“The guards say it Jahannam. We in Slovakian Republic,” said Dana.

“Jahannam doesn’t sound too bad. Kinda pretty,” said Williams.

“It bad place,” said Dana with some fear in her voice.

“How’s that?” asked Williams as his eyes adjusted to the darkness just a little more. He started seeing the stick thin figure of the young girl sitting in front of him. Glancing around, he started seeing the death and misery around him as victims of the IU concentration camp were becoming clearer and clearer. His 20/10 eyesight showed the sharp detail of those around him.

“It mean hell to Muslims,” said Dana with some sorrow.

“Just what is this place,” said Williams with some fear creeping into his voice.

“You believe this will work?” asked the IU Lieutenant Colonel.

“I believe after five to seven days he will tell me anything I want to know,” said Aziz.

“You did not pursue your real talent in life,” said the Colonel.

“Which is?” asked Aziz.

“Theater,” said the Colonel. “You were very convincing before we took him out.”

“I still must have him believe I am concerned for his wellbeing,” said Aziz.

“We have about two weeks before this camp is closed permanently. Can you break him by then?” asked the Colonel.

“I believe a week will be sufficient. While he was cramped in the holding cells here, his reaction to being placed in with those vermin will give him more than enough motivation to tell me what I want to know. Again, the psychology is important here,” said Aziz. “He can stay there and die like the rest of them or live in a cell at one of our main internment facilities until the war is over. When given a choice after experiencing the worst, why would a man not choose better?”

“And if it does work?” asked the Colonel.

“It is but a single man. We will need to do it again, but on a larger group next time,” said Aziz.

“So be it,” said the Colonel. “And keep me informed.”

“I am out of a job for the next week and I planned to brief headquarters on what I have learned so far. I would like to go to Budapest and report on my progress,” said Aziz.

“You have my authority,” said the Colonel. “When will you depart?”

“I will arrange transport and leave in the morning,” said Aziz.

“You sure about this?” asked Michael over the communicator.

“Positive,” said Bill Meyers. “We saw them herding what appeared to be prisoners into the compound, shooting them and then tossing them back into the buildings.”

“Sunshine? You think you saw the pilot?” asked Michael.

“I couldn’t get a good look at him, but Sister scoped him out. The individual had the right build, complexion and hair color, but we were seven hundred meters away,” said Ashley.

“Sis, you positive?” asked Michael.

“As close to one hundred percent as I can be,” said Jill. “I’d say we have a valid target.”

“And this was after the gunfire?” asked Michael.

“Approximately forty-five minutes after,” said Ashley.

“Where’d they take him?” asked Michael.

“Southwest most building in the prisoner compound. He appeared to have been stunned before they tossed him in, but again, we weren’t positive,” said Ashley.

“Okay, both of you get a base report typed out and sent into the uplink. As soon as you get it sent, start making your way back here,” said Michael.

“No more observation?” asked Ashley.

“Negative,” said Michael. “I think we’ve seen all we need to see and I’d say Warbucks will be pulling us out sooner than planned.”

“Start working the extraction,” said Thomas after he read the reports from Ashley and Bill as well as the comments from Michael. “We’ve got enough hard data to plan a strike.”

“Already working it,” said Mark.

“How long?” asked Thomas.

“J-SOD is checking schedules,” said Mark. “They’ll get back to me in half an hour.”

“One more thing from J-SOD; we need someone fluent in Slovak. Probably Czech as well. Preferably some folks with special ops experience or infantry as a minimum. Maybe even former guerrillas would work,” said Thomas.

“Czech, Slovak and infantry experience being sneaky, got it,” said Mark. “You just want one?”

“A couple would be good, but I’ll settle for whatever they can get on short notice,” said Thomas. “Oh, and please make sure the guy is fluent in English as well. Not like that Polish dude they saddled us with up in Gdansk.”

“English as well,” chuckled Mark. “We’ll get on it.”

“Sounds good,” said Thomas. “Speaking of, if you want that job, you should take it.”

“Darren told you?” asked Mark.

“He mentioned it last night,” said Thomas. “Hey, if you stick around, I’ll be happy. But I’m also open minded enough to know you could be very influential in a position like that. And in turn, that benefits not only us, but all the Cider units in the Corps.”

“And to think I abhor desk work,” he chuckled.

“You make a decision yet?” asked Thomas.

“No, but honestly I’m leaning towards it. This game is for you young cats and I’m having a hard time keeping up,” he laughed.

“You’re only like three years older than I am,” said Thomas with a laugh.

“Makes a huge difference let me tell you,” laughed Mark. “Either way, I’d like to finish this one out no matter what. If it is a prison camp, that’ll be a nice way of going out with a bang.”

“I wouldn’t let you miss this for the world,” said Thomas. “You’ll need a team.”

“I’ll pick one out as soon as possible,” said Mark. “We’ve got enough down teams for me to put one together for the most part.”

“Okay, everything is falling into place,” said Thomas.

“Want me to start working the brief for Brigade?” asked Mark.

“You mean J-SOD?” asked Thomas.

“Technically it’s Brigade that will have to hack off on this. It’s within their sector and too close to the front according to the new regulations we got. So J-SOD can’t officially let us go without Brigade approval,” said Mark.

“Right,” said Thomas. “Yeah, go ahead with initial plans for that since you know how the Colonel is about his briefings. Add intel, logistics, additional units involved and service and support. You know he loves that stuff.”

“Got it,” said Mark.

“Good training anyway for a future staff weenie,” laughed Thomas.

“Yeah, about that,” laughed Mark. “They best let me continue to pro fire. I’ll go completely out of my mind if I can’t fire a shot every couple of weeks.”

“We’ll send in a team to toss some grenades at you from time to time as well,” laughed Thomas. “Okay, I’m heading over to see Rick’s team at the shoot house and I’ll be on the communicator. When you get airflow set for the extraction, give me a yell.”

“Roger that,” said Mark as he started in on the initial briefing for Brigade to sign off. Thomas grabbed his weapon and took the short ride over to the shoot house where Rick and his team were evaluating their new member and in turn being evaluated by others. He entered the facility and headed for the control room where cameras were positioned to show how the team did on entry. Thomas arrived at the end of a scenario and heard the four individuals shout “clear!” as they finished shredding targets.

“Well?” asked Thomas. Having a new member meant he had priority in the shoot house and for range time. As well as a priority on training ammo.

“He’s a natural. Good instincts, good tactics and learns quickly. He seems to have a built in radar that’s allowing him to see what everyone else is doing around him,” said Darren as he went over the video of the last engagement. “See here where he moves just a half step to the left to clear Heather’s field of fire?”

“Was that where he was supposed to be?” asked Thomas.

“No, he was supposed to stay put, but somehow realized that he needed to move a foot left to make room for her coming in behind him,” said Darren.

“Run it again,” said Thomas. “With special targets.”

“You sure about that?” asked Darren.

“You think he’s ready?” asked Thomas.

“His shooting is dead on accurate. But it’s the first day you know?” asked Darren.

“I trusted you on the first day,” said Thomas.

“Kid does have some moves,” said Darren. “You want to play?”

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t,” said Thomas.

“Okay, if you trust it, so will I,” said Darren.

By special targets, Thomas meant live people sitting in the room as the “hostages” while the entry team came in with live ammunition. Normally the entry team didn’t know about the targets in advance which would possibly give them a moment’s hesitation before pulling the trigger. It was an old tactic that increased the trust between unit members and a sure tell if someone might freeze up at the wrong moment. It took several minutes to rearrange the furniture and targets and to reset the door for another controlled breach. Outside the team prepared for another entry and stacked up outside the door. Thomas, Darren, Frank and Greg all sat in different spots in the room, two of which would be in Jamie Collin’s sector of fire. They heard the announcement on the radio with a countdown before entry. A split second after the countdown hit “One!” the door exploded inward and the simulated flashbang grenade was tossed in with the team right on the heels of the minor explosion. Jamie was the first person through and started engaging targets without any hesitation of the live targets in the room. In about four seconds, it was all over with the calls of “Clear!” coming from all four members.

“Not bad at all Badaa,” said Thomas. “Go ahead and get your team ready for the walk through.”

“Anybody dinged?” asked Darren.

“Nope, all good here,” said Frank.

“Felt a whiz, but that was Trouble cutting it a bit close,” said Greg.

“How are his weapons skills?” asked Thomas after looking at the shredded targets from Jamie. From the appearances, they were okay in the house, but longer range was a different matter.

“Very sound. Not much improvement needed and we could slide him into a grenadier spot without any trouble,” said Frank who had evaluated him on that portion.

“Plug them in?” asked Thomas.

“Maybe a milk run or two before moving forward. Way different environment in training as compared to where the targets shoot back at you,” suggested Greg. “But he has shown he knows what to do when getting hot lead tossed at him already.”

“Can’t argue with that logic. The current recon missions would be okay I think,” said Darren.

“I just pulled the recon missions,” said Thomas and explained the reports he had gotten earlier.

“So that’s why you are trying to get him up to speed quickly,” said Darren.

“We’ll need everyone that is healthy and can shoot straight for this mission,” said Thomas.

“We do okay?” asked Rick as he came in after his walk through.

“Looked perfect,” said Thomas. “No additional holes.”

“Kid is pretty slick,” admitted Rick. “If I can only get him to stop calling me sir.”

“You comfortable with him?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah, I think he’ll be okay. He has good instincts and good tactics,” said Rick.

“If I told you to go out on a mission tomorrow with him, would you have a problem with that?” asked Thomas.

“I think he’d be fine,” said Rick. “We’ve got a little more ironing out of the minutia and give him a call sign, but for the moment, it’s like Scott never left.”

“Darren, Frank, you two ready to sign off?” asked Thomas.

“He’s good in my book,” said Darren.

“Kid is a better shot than Rick,” said Frank. “Qualified expert on the first string.”

“Okay, Rick is back on mission ready status for the moment,” said Thomas who had learned to trust the instincts of the people around him.

“Filled in pretty quickly. You thinking what I’m thinking?” asked Greg as they walked down the corridor to exit the facility.

“That our dear Colonel put him here because of his checkered past hoping he would throw a wrench into our team alignments?” asked Thomas. “The thought crossed my mind.”

“And it backfired,” said Greg. “For the moment at least.”

“I still want my one on one time with him. Being a commander and all I should get to know my troops a little better,” said Thomas.

“You already do anyway,” laughed Greg.

“I just think there’s more than meets the eye to our newest member,” said Thomas.

“I’ve learned to trust your gut feelings,” said Greg. “This afternoon?”

“Before dinner I think. Let me have the lad as an appetizer before my main meal,” laughed Thomas. “Around 1730 or so.”

“And if there are some underlying issues?” asked Greg.

“We can deal with them,” said Thomas.

“And if not?” asked Greg.

“We can deal with that too,” said Thomas, thinking about the new mission they were about to go on. It was unusual performing a hostage rescue this close to the front lines, but that would actually work out better for them logistically as it wouldn’t be that far for them to go for medical help the prisoners would probably be in need of. Planning out the idea in his head, he and Greg went back to the command center to start getting all the details in place before the briefing.

But as with all missions, there would be some unforeseen circumstances. Only this time they would come from a direction they didn’t expect.

CHAPTER 16

Date/Time: 25 March/1731

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

Some things never changed in the military. If one was to reach back far enough into history, they would find the bureaucracy of evaluations, manpower reports, justifying logistical requests and all forms of documentation and paperwork in military service. And as things had not changed in the 21st Century, Thomas sat at his small desk going over several reports and requests to be sent to Brigade, Division and the J-SOD. It was a small office of sorts, more of a closet really, but a place where Thomas could come in and shut the door from time to time. A knock on his door was heard just as he was finishing a manpower report.

“Come in,” he said without looking up from the paper. The door opened and Jamie Collins was seen peeking around the door.

“You asked for me sir?” asked Jamie.

“Yes, come on in and grab a chair,” said Thomas. “Let me get this finished up if you don’t mind. Has to be filed today.”

“Roger that sir,” said Jamie and took a seat opposite of Thomas’ desk. He shifted uncomfortably in the chair as Thomas finished up the duplicate reports to be sent to the Brigade and J-SOD. Everything appeared to be in order and he put it into the outgoing box before leaning back in his chair.

“Normally I meet folks before they start training and before missions. Kind of slipped up the timeline with you,” said Thomas.

“I wasn’t expecting to be sent out as soon as I was sir,” said Jamie.

“But you proved yourself under fire. And did it very well I might add. Those two men owe their lives to you,” said Thomas.

“The medical field has always intrigued me sir,” said Jamie. “But when I was drafted, I was assigned to be a supply troop. Not the best of jobs.”

“An important one though,” said Thomas. “Logistics win wars, not tactics.”

“Suppose so sir,” said Jamie.

“You getting settled in otherwise?” asked Thomas.

“Yes sir,” said Jamie.

“Finding anything difficult? Training schedule okay?” asked Thomas.

“It’s okay so far sir,” said Jamie. “Lot of information packed into a little time.”

“Captain Jones said some nice things about you. Said you were about the best he’s seen come out of S and T yet,” said Thomas. “And I generally listen to what my team leaders have to say and he said he was comfortable going back on mission ready status.

“As in active missions, sir?” asked Jamie.

“As in real behind the lines work in surveillance, detection and reconnaissance,” said Thomas.

“I understand sir,” said Jamie. “Just seems sudden.”

“You feel like you need more training?” asked Thomas.

“No,” said Jamie. “I mean, you can’t ever be trained enough so to speak.”

“Most people that get here can’t wait,” said Thomas. “But you almost seem reluctant.”

“I wouldn’t say reluctant sir,” said Jamie.

“So find another word,” said Thomas.

“It’s different pace of life than I’m used to. More challenging I suppose. But I don’t mind a good challenge every now and then,” said Jamie. “But it seems sudden, that’s all.”

“We do a lot of challenging things,” said Thomas as he found the path that led into the intent of the meeting. There were several questions that begged for answers of the NCO sitting in front of him. “But the challenge I have to ask about is the one, or rather the many you had prior to coming here.”

“I’m not…” started Jamie and his voice trailed off. “Not really sure what to say.”

“The truth is always a good start,” said Thomas with a wave of his hand.

“The truth…” he started and his voice trailed off once again. “I’m not sure you want to hear the truth of the matter.”

“Our unit is built on trust of each other. And that trust was gained by some in the immediate aftermath of the Fall and others by being in this unit for a while. And with that trust came complete and open honesty with each other. We all know our dirty little secrets and are honest and open about them with each other. And no matter how nasty, blunt and hurtful it may be, the truth always comes first with us. So if you are telling me truth and trust will be an issue, I’ll see

to it right now that you're reassigned to another Cider unit or more likely a regular infantry unit," said Thomas bluntly.

"That's not exactly what I had in mind sir," said Jamie.

"So lay it on me. Why are you here?" asked Thomas again very bluntly. "It's a simple question that needs an answer. Your file is filled with all sorts of indicators of someone who really shouldn't be here. A maverick who spurns authority in any shape or form. You know Cider is built on teamwork, so the most important question I ask is why are you here?"

"I'm here sir, because I never expected to make it this far," said Jamie.

"Explain," ordered Thomas.

"Well sir, I was drafted as you can probably tell from my records and assigned to a conventional unit. I honestly didn't want to be drafted because I don't think we should be here. In Europe specifically. I couldn't get a medical deferment since I'm as healthy as they come so there were no other options for me. Anyway we kicked the IU out of North America and should have stopped there. I mean, I'm from Nebraska and the IU never came that far inland so I have a hard time seeing the big picture so to speak. I'm not entirely sure why we happen to be in Europe since the IU isn't a threat to us anymore. So after I was drafted, I did what I had to in order to do my time and get back. But I'm not sure why we're here," he explained.

"Your evaluation reports have you listed with high marks in performance and efficiency. So it's hard to imagine someone who doesn't want to be here would have been that good of a soldier. And being that you applied and passed S and T means you put in some hard work," said Thomas.

"I applied for Cider since I thought it would be a quick path to getting out. It was basically the easiest way for my last commander to get rid of me without having to go through all the trouble of a failure to adapt discharge," said Jamie. "My commander gave me the option to apply and signed off just so she could get rid of me."

"Yes, we know," said Thomas and saw the expression on Jamie's face. "Oh don't act surprised Sergeant, you'd be amazed at what information we can find out."

"I'm surprised, but I know I shouldn't be," said Jamie. "I've heard stories about how Cider, your unit in particular, can find out just about anything."

"So what else? Why not request a dismissal from training?" asked Thomas.

"Because I don't quit sir. I know that makes me an enigma, but once I start something I just don't quit. I would prefer to be dismissed by the cadre than admit defeat," said Jamie.

"And it would have bounced you back into a normal unit as well," stated Thomas.

“That too,” said Jamie. “So I did what I had to do and hoped the cadre would recognize I wasn’t fit for Cider duty and give me the option of getting out. Per the regulations, you are given the option of voluntary dismissal from service if you are involuntarily opted out of S and T.”

“It backfired,” said Thomas.

“As I realize now,” said Jamie.

“So why are you here?” asked Thomas.

“Because I passed and I won’t quit,” said Jamie.

“And will this be a problem?” asked Thomas.

“I’d prefer just a simple discharge sir,” said Jamie. “As long as we’re putting it all on the table.”

“Which I think would be in order. Frankly, I don’t want you here if you aren’t willing to be a team player and build trust with us so you’ll get your wish and I’ll sign off on your discharge. We’ll sign it as a humanitarian deal or something and go from there,” said Thomas.

“I hear a ‘but’ in there sir,” said Jamie.

“No, there won’t be conditions so to speak. But I will say I won’t leave Captain Jones short-handed while we get a replacement. So until he gets a new member to replace you and is up to speed, you will, and I repeat that with some emphasis, *will* continue to troop on and serve at the discretion of myself and the other leaders in this unit,” said Thomas.

“Like I said sir, I don’t quit,” said Jamie.

“Not good enough for me,” said Thomas.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say,” he replied. “But I will give it one hundred percent while I’m here and will do what’s required.”

“We don’t give it a hundred percent, we give it everything we have and then reach deep down and give it a little more. Furthermore, we may not like what we happen to be doing or can’t see the big picture here, but we still soldier on,” said Thomas.

“Hard to soldier on when I’m not even sure we should be here,” said Jamie. “And I think that ends up making me more of a hindrance than a help.”

“You may not like the fact you got drafted or the reasons why we are here or maybe even have a little pacifist streak in you. But the simple fact is you volunteered to go to S and T, however unofficial it may have been, and made it through before getting dropped in our laps. And until I can get a replacement for you, that’s your problem, not mine. And let me go ahead and tell you, the better you perform while you happen to be occupying a bunk here gives us more motive to

get you out because you asked. And if that means you have to put your personal feelings in check and be a team player, then you best learn how to play well with others because you do not want to be the one known as the person who can't be trusted. Such people can find themselves cut off, alone and their leadership quite unreasonable to whatever concerns they may have," growled Thomas, finally losing his temper after being reasonable.

"Again, I don't know why we're fighting. Or what we happen to be fighting for," said Jamie.

"We are fighting because our political leaders deemed it necessary to eliminate the IU threat not only to the North American nations, but to the European ones as well. And seeing that there are formal agreements in place, it's not our place to question," Thomas said through gritted teeth.

"Again, I won't quit and will do what is necessary to get out of here," said Jamie.

"As we all are doing! You think any of us really want to be here? I've got a daughter I've never met, Sergeant Taylor-Bates just sent her husband home where he will be hospital bound for at least a year if not more, Sergeant Nicholson has been with his wife for exactly three weeks since they got married. You think you're the only one that's doing what is necessary to get out of here?" thundered Thomas going back to his former days as an NCO. He rarely had to use it and never had to use it on his own unit members, but lessons learned about dressing down a junior member came back in full force as he took a breath and continued.

"Not a single one of us want to be here! But guess what? We *are* here! And while we happen to be here, we will continue until our political leaders think it's time to come home! You may very well question the reasons why, but it's not your place to say we should or shouldn't be here until you get back to the States, run for office, get yourself elected and start making policy for the military! So until said time you actually can influence policy, you *will* serve to the utmost of your abilities and beyond if the mission calls for it, *will* be a team player and most importantly *will* start to trust those around you with your life! Because that's exactly what's happened when you got assigned here! You put *your* life in *our* hands! So you better start warming up to the idea that we are *not* stuck with you, but like it or not *you* are stuck with *us*! Am I making myself perfectly clear?" demanded Thomas who had risen out of his chair and was over the desktop.

"Crystal sir," said Jamie who had also risen and assumed the parade rest position.

"Now do you have any pressing questions or concerns that need to be addressed?" he asked.

"Negative sir," said Jamie.

"Are we going to end up having a talk like this again?" asked Thomas in a calmer voice.

"Negative sir," said Jamie.

"Believe it or not, we are in the business of saving lives. Each mission we do helps save lives to include those of your precious family back in Nebraska. I'm not going to give you the song and dance about how we should be here, but we are here because some people just can't fight for

themselves. And that's something to take and internalize while you happen to be here, however long or short that may be. I will get you discharged as soon as possible, but until said time, start thinking about others instead of your own personal woes that brought you here," said Thomas.

"Roger that sir," said Jamie.

"Dismissed," said Thomas and did something he almost never did with members of his teams. He rendered a quick hand salute before sitting down and ignoring the young NCO to his front. Jamie quietly left as Thomas fumed over another report on his desk. Not being able to concentrate after the conversation, he started reading it from the start and attempted to focus. He hadn't noticed Greg had come into the office.

"You are a grumpy old bastard," he chuckled.

"Now is not the time," said Thomas, not looking up.

"And they say I'm the mean one," said Greg.

"I'm about ready to hurl you out of my office," remarked Thomas without looking up.

"Out of your closet?" asked Greg.

Thomas finally pushed the report away since he couldn't find the concentration needed to look it over. Taking a deep breath and letting out a big sigh, he thought about the young NCO that had departed so recently. "You would have thought the psychological screening would have caught his aversion to authority as well as the war."

"I did some checking on that myself once I heard about the troops checkered past. I called up some of my contacts at the schools and found out they knew about it already," said Greg.

"And they failed to mention this?" demanded Thomas.

"The guys I talked to thought he might end up 'growing up' by the next stage of training. That's their words, not mine," said Greg. "And since he never did anything bad enough to get tossed, they kept passing him on to the next phase of training hoping he would get better."

"And it obviously didn't happen," said Thomas.

"Some folks end up not working out in the long run," remarked Greg.

"Shouldn't happen that way. I mean, we're in a combat zone and can get this sort of information reasonably easy. There is no reason whatsoever that the rear echelon guys shouldn't be able to pick up a phone and get the same information," said Thomas. "And at least we don't have to try to figure out a name for him."

"You already got a call sign in mind?" asked Greg.

“Yep, Outcast,” said Thomas. “Fits perfect.”

“Want to pull Rick’s team from mission ready status?” asked Greg.

“As much as I’d love to, we just can’t right now. But make sure he knows to keep a close eye on Collins as well as giving him an even shorter leash,” said Thomas.

“You think he’ll come around?” asked Greg.

“Doubt it,” said Thomas. “Once those feelings are set, it’s hard to get rid of them.”

“I dunno, we are kind of a fun loving unit and all,” laughed Greg.

“That’s because we’re all certifiably insane,” chuckled Thomas. “Start using our back channels for a replacement for him. I don’t trust our Colonel so do this informally.”

“I’ll poke around,” said Greg. “Want to grab a bite to eat?”

“I’m still a little angry and I’ve got these reports to sign off, let me cool off for a few more minutes and we’ll go,” said Thomas.

“Deal,” said Greg as he departed the office. Thomas started scanning the report once again, but his mind was still wandering to the conversation he had just had. Trusting in Mark Williams’ ability for the moment, he signed off the report and filed it away before going on to the next one.

Collins sat on the edge of his bunk continuing to think of the conversation he had just been a part of with Major Dayfield. And continued going over what had been said and the agreement he had informally made. If being a good soldier would get him out of the European Theater quicker, he certainly would put all his effort into accomplishing that goal. But he was slightly worried over the situation he had put himself into if he didn’t perform up to standards. His mind started working in overdrive into the countless possibilities that awaited him while in this assignment. It was a relatively simple task to have a training accident or something to happen behind the lines during a mission. And generally as all units took casualties, it would just be part of the process.

But he also knew a lot about the 14th as their exploits had been well documented and knew they were a lot closer than most units due to the fact that many of them had been with each other since the Fall. And knowing such made him the outsider in their close knit community. So in order to get out quickly, he had to meld quickly whether he liked it or not. His thoughts continued to go back to how he ever had it so wrong to think it would be easy to get dismissed from Cider.

“Hungry?” asked a female voice from the side as he continued in thought.

“Sorry?” asked Jamie.

“Are you hungry?” asked Heather.

“No, thanks though,” he replied.

“Everyone gets barked at from time to time,” said Heather.

“Happens a little too frequently with me,” said Jamie.

“I’d like to say I was always the perfect little angel. But I still get my butt chewed when I act dumb. But I learned to change the paradigm of why I get briefed,” said Heather.

“Not easy to do with me,” said Jamie.

“I’d say it’s easier than you probably think. I don’t question why or why not, just remember that none of this would have happened had someone not invaded Europe and in turn North America,” said Heather.

“I’m not sure that we should be worrying about others when the threat is no longer a concern of ours,” he said.

“You honestly think the IU would have stopped at just one invasion? Or not used nukes in their next attempt? You think our being here makes our homes more or less safe?” asked Heather.

“Dunno, but not for me to decide,” said Jamie.

“Which is very true and the sooner you learn that valuable lesson, the better,” said Heather.

“Trying to make me feel worse?” he asked with a wry smile.

“I doubt after the ripping you got I could do that,” she chuckled.

“Word travels fast,” said Jamie with a frown.

“We have some thin walls around here. The entire camp heard the exchange...well, at least the one side of it,” said Heather.

“Which will make me a pariah in these circles,” said Jamie.

“Not necessarily so,” said Heather. “Trust is earned from both sides of the equation.”

“How will you guys ever trust me knowing I don’t support the reasons we are here?” he asked.

“For the same reasons you will trust us to get you back alive,” she replied. “We’re here to survive and get back home. Sure we have a job to do, but overall, survival to get back to our families and loved ones is the primary objective.”

“That’s kind of a simplistic way of looking at things,” said Jamie.

“Doesn’t have to be complicated you know,” she stated reasonably.

“Suppose not,” he said.

“And if you want to continue feeling sorry for yourself and your predicament, you might as well do it on a full stomach. C’mon, let’s grab some chow,” she prompted with a nod of her head.

“Might as well,” he said and collected his web gear and carbine. The thoughts continued to cascade through his mind, but he knew there was finally light at the end of the tunnel. But at least one member was willing to look past his personal issues with the war and attempt to welcome him into the fold.

Date/Time: 26 March/0127

Location: west of the enemy compound, near Ružomberok, Slovak Republic

“Everyone set?” asked Michael Parsons as the teams were geared up and preparing to move towards the landing zone for their exfil. One team was still missing as they were keeping an eye on the crossroads in case anything was to spring up at the last moment. They would join the group after they got underway at an established rally point and continue to the LZ.

“All set,” said the other team leaders in turn as they got into formation. Michael did a quick head count just in case and scanned the area to make sure they didn’t leave any obvious signs they had been there. Of course, the area had been walked and crawled over, but after several days, the grass would start going back into place and the area would take on a more natural look.

“Giggles, lead off,” said Michael as he patted Nancy Dugger on the back. Her call sign Giggles went all the way back to when they were first assigned to the Texan Militia and had followed her through her career.

They had traveled almost a kilometer when the radio came alive from Tim Daniels’ team that was overwatching the main roadway. “Token, stand by, we’ve got a lot of traffic down here.”

“Heading towards the camp?” asked Michael in response.

“Negative, looks to be heading straight up the hardball,” said Tim.

“Will it affect our ex-fil?” asked Michael.

“You could say that,” said Tim. “Appears to be at least a battalion in travel formation.”

“Copy, keep an eye on it,” said Michael as he grabbed the satellite antenna to contact command. It took several moments for the device to link up, but he finally got a carrier signal and reached the command center. After explaining the situation to Holly Meredith, he concluded with the statement “Request pick up at alternate Bravo.”

“Stand by,” said Holly as she checked the schedules. “Also, can you get Fluffy up on the radio for possible targeting info?”

“Stand by,” said Michael as he quickly reconfigured the device to allow direct communications between the command center and Tim. The patch took several moments but finally the three individuals were linked up.

“Fluffy, this is Casper,” said Holly.

“Go,” said Tim.

“Can you get targeting coordinates for artillery?” she asked.

“Roger, the column is between target reference points Quebec through Tango on the planning maps. Targets are a mix of armor, infantry fighting vehicles and standard cargo trucks. Request a mix of airburst and delayed action along the entire hardball. I can adjust,” said Tim.

“Roger, standby,” said Holly and pulled up the Brigade command nets. Before communicating, she asked Brian Holmes to contact J-SOD to coordinate the aircraft to the new landing zone and sent a runner to find Thomas.

“Bear Cave, this is Camelot, over,” said Holly on the Brigade frequencies.

“Camelot, this is Bear Cave, go ahead,” said the on duty controller in the Brigade headquarters.

“Request artillery strike on target of opportunity,” she relayed.

“Standby,” said the controller. “Go ahead and send request Camelot.”

“Roger, adjust fire on forces on ESR Tombstone at T-R-P Quebec, Romeo, Sierra and Tango on Camelot Opord 21 dash Alpha. Target is battalion sized formation in road travel configuration. Request immediate time on target with delayed action and airburst rounds. We can provide adjustment,” relayed Holly.

“Stand by Camelot,” said the controller. “Be advised, request is being made to Grizzly-6.”

“Standing by,” said Holly as she looked up the frequency for the Brigade artillery so Tim would be able to communicate directly with them. She passed the radio frequencies over the satellite net and Amy Kerns immediately started getting another radio set up.

“Camelot, Grizzly-6 is requesting additional information about the unit in standard SALUTE format,” said the controller.

“Fluffy, can you give us a SALUTE?” asked Holly.

“Size, battalion in open. Activity, moving up MSR Tombstone. Location, between TRP Quebec and Tango, Uniform, appears to be mix of Tango-90 armor, Bravo-Tango-Romeo and Bravo Mike Papa vehicles and cargo trucks ranging from half ton to flatbed type. Time, now. Equipment, as described,” said Tim patiently.

Holly relayed the information to the command center and waited once again. The controller came back on after a brief pause. “Grizzly-6 requests unit identification.”

“Be advised, team cannot identify specific unit, they are five clicks out,” said Holly.

“Standby,” said the controller and paused to relay the information. “Camelot, Grizzly-6 has authorized time on target with two batteries of mobile guns. He also orders your team gather damage assessment and unit identification upon completion. Contact Nomad-6 on channel Charlie-4 to coordinate.”

“Copy, thanks,” said Holly and relayed the information. The artillery unit had already been alerted by the Brigade command post and was waiting on Tim to coordinate.

“I’m never going to get a good night’s sleep around his joint,” said Thomas as he wandered in.

“The teams sighted a new battalion moving into Ružomberok,” said Holly. “It’s a target of opportunity, so they want to hit it with some artillery. Brigade just cleared it.”

“Nice of them,” said Thomas. “Which team is in contact?”

“Fluffy,” said Holly. “Brigade requests they do damage assessment as well as identifying the units involved.”

“No,” said Thomas. “Assessment fine, but I’m not asking four people to walk into a battalion that just got mud stomped by the brigade guns and ask who they are.”

“I was going to suggest only,” said Holly.

“If, and only if, they can get in undetected,” said Thomas. “But either way, keep Fluffy on the ground and have Token and the rest head to the alternate LZ. Something like this is too important to pull them for and we can arrange additional aircraft to pick them up.”

“Brian was working the airflow,” said Holly.

“Aircraft unit has been notified and there are no problems in diverting,” said Brian.

“What type? We’ve got twenty folks on the ground,” asked Thomas.

“Chinook, same aircraft that took us in before,” said Brian.

“Mighty nice of them,” said Thomas. “Probably hoping for more wine.”

The radio came alive between the artillery fire direction center (FDC) and Tim on the ground. They had coordinated the targets and they heard the FDC announce “shot, over.”

“Splash, drop one-fifty and fire for effect!” announced Tim over the radio as the shell had gone over the target by one hundred fifty meters. The brigade howitzers opened fire on the convoy, sending delayed action high explosive shells and airburst up and down the convoy for two minutes of rapid fire. The vehicles attempted to get off the roadway, but found their path blocked by large ditches on either side. Tim continued to shift fires onto the largest concentrations of IU forces attempting to get away from the attack

“Nomad, switch to DPICM, hit all three target reference points with three volleys and one more of HE,” requested Tim.

The remaining rounds fell onto the position before switching over to the Dual Purpose Improved Conventional Munitions, a shell which contained submunitions that would spread the destruction over a wider area. The twelve M-109A7 self propelled howitzers fired thirty-six of the DPICM shells before a final volley of high explosive onto the targeted convoy.

“Fluffy, this is Nomad-6 Charlie, fire mission complete,” said the controller in the FDC.

“Roger, will provide damage assessment in five mike,” said Tim. “Nice shooting.”

“Our pleasure, Nomad-6 Charlie standing by,” said the controller.

“Fluffy, this is Camelot,” said Thomas over the satellite radio.

“Send it,” said Tim.

“Roger, I want you to stay on the ground and assess the intentions of that convoy. You can attempt to make positive identification on the specific unit, but at no risk to your team. How copy?” asked Thomas.

“Acknowledged,” said Tim. “How long?”

“We need to know if the convoy was reinforcing Casio or was passing through,” said Thomas. “Link up with Token and fill up on supplies before they leave.”

“Roger, we’ll contact you in six hours,” said Tim.

“Stay safe, Camelot out,” said Thomas.

Date/Time: 26 March/0409

Location: IU Eastern Command, Budapest, Occupied Hungary

“Sir? There is a problem in the Ružomberok sector,” said a Captain after completing a phone call and reading over the dispatches.

“What happened?” asked the Lieutenant Colonel in charge of the night staff.

“It appears the two relief battalions moving in were hit by artillery fire and airstrikes while still in road travel formation. They are still gathering the figures, but it appears we have lost upwards of a Company’s worth of equipment and personnel and the support company assigned to each suffered heavy casualties,” said the Captain. “One was hit last night by coalition fighter bombers and this battalion was hit a few hours ago by artillery fire.”

“They were to replace our battalions in the sector?” asked the Colonel.

“Yes sir,” said the Captain. “Part of the relief in place for the forces in the area. They were being moved back to consolidate prior to the Coalition spring offensive.”

“I know the units moving in,” said the Colonel after looking over the dispatches that had preceded the phone call. “Certainly not our best troops.”

“Our intelligence has informed us they believe the spring offensive is still some weeks away. It was a calculated risk by the General Staff that we move these units in while we still had the chance to provide relief and reconsolidation to the remainder of the units on the front,” said the Captain.

“Can they still do the relief?” asked the Colonel.

“They are still assessing the situation, but it appears they will be at approximately sixty to seventy percent strength when the final figures are sent,” said the Captain.

“What is required in that sector for a proper defense?” asked the Colonel.

“At least two full strength battalions with one preferably being armored and an additional infantry battalion as garrison,” said the Captain. “Along with the usual indirect fire and attack helicopter support for that size of a formation.”

“A full regiment of troops?” asked the Colonel.

“It secures vital rail and road bridges in the area,” said the Captain. “But we’ve managed to get by with two battalions as a screening force with plans of moving in additional forces if and when

needed. Most of our troops have spent the winter behind the lines resupplying and training for the spring offensive.”

“Enemy dispositions?” asked the Colonel.

“The FNC is facing us with two battalions and one in reserve on the front. The fighting is limited to minor skirmishes and artillery exchanges,” said the Captain.

“A full brigade opposing us presents a problem,” said the Colonel.

“It does sir, but apparently the brigade commander facing us is content to sit back and limit the fighting,” said the Captain.

“Do we have a dossier on him?” asked the Colonel.

The Captain handed over a folder with the known information on the opponent. “Sir, he was on the North American Union planning staff until recently. He was transferred in as part of a political move to ensure his promotion, at least our analysts believe this.”

“Has he been in combat before?” asked the Colonel.

“Nothing we can find sir. He was in Iraq before the Fall as part of the American transition team, but since that time, has spent his time in North America,” said the Captain.

“Do we believe him to be a threat?” asked the Colonel.

“From what he has done so far, no,” said the Captain.

“How come?” asked the Colonel.

“He is not bold and does not exploit the mistakes of our commanders. When the unit arrived to oppose us, there was an opportunity to move closer to the city. The balance of forces was to his advantage and had he pressed, we might have lost the city then. But he made no move to strike against the city and displace our forces,” said the Captain.

“So he is not brave?” asked the Colonel.

“He is cautious from what we believe. Intelligence thinks he prefers to plan out every detail of the operations prior to implementation. From messages decoded by our intelligence units, he manages all portions of the engagements and has his staff do little of the thinking,” said the Captain.

“Certainly different from the commander he replaced,” said the Colonel as he continued to read through the dossier. “The last commander would have reached Budapest by now had he still been in command of this brigade.”

“Allah works in mysterious ways,” said the Captain. “We could move in additional forces from the Prievidza sector.”

“They are responsible for countering any actions made by the Germans,” said the Colonel. “And that commander is competent and aggressive enough to attack as soon as he sees the troops pulling back. Best to deal with the devil we know.”

“Sir?” asked the Captain.

“How long were they to be on the line?” asked the Colonel.

“Two weeks sir,” said the Captain.

“And intelligence does not believe the offensive will start in that time?” asked the Colonel.

“No sir,” said the Captain.

“Then we deal with the devil we know by limiting forces in this sector on the assumption that this opposing commander will not strike. Contact the garrison commander and instruct him to consolidate the remains of the battalions and utilize them as necessary. And remind him he will get reinforced after the two battalions on the ground are able to rest, resupply and receive replacements,” ordered the Colonel.

“Do you wish to alert any other units to be prepared to move forward if necessary?” asked the Captain.

The Colonel looked over the map where the units were off the lines at the moment and selected two additional battalions. “Alert these two units in case they are needed. They are four and six hours away respectively which should be ample time to move in if we receive indications of an impending attack.”

“Yes sir,” said the Captain.

And a brief window would be opened. Neither side knew the ramifications of the decisions that had been made or were about to be made on both sides of the equation, however, war is often about chance and seizing an opportunity. And one person in particular was about to seize the moment and take a large gamble with his own future.

CHAPTER 17

Date/Time: 26 March/0847

Location: southwest of Ružomberok, Occupied Slovakia

Michael counted noses while his teams boarded the MH-47H Chinook helicopter at the landing zone. It was a little risky getting picked up in the daylight, but the crew made sure there was fighter coverage in the area prior to accepting the mission. Four F-16G fighters were flying cover overhead in case the IU sent up any aircraft to intercept the transport. Master Sergeant Bobby Rivera was the last as he helped his team on board and nodded at Michael.

“That’s it,” said Michael as he was hefted on the ramp by two other members. The flight engineer got on her headset and let the pilots know it was time to depart. She kept sweeping the area behind the chopper with her minigun until they were high and fast enough to avoid most ground fire. Michael was handed a headset by the flight engineer.

“Looking a little light on some folks Captain,” said the pilot.

“We left a team behind to observe a convoy that we helped the artillery hit last night,” said Michael. “Not sure when they will get picked up.”

“We’ll come back and get them if we need to,” said the pilot.

“Any trouble coming in?” asked Michael as the aircraft banked hard to the right. They were flying slightly above the tree top level and Michael swore it was below in some places.

“Negative, had a minor divert because they set up a random triple-A battery, but nothing else,” said the pilot. “We’ve got about seventeen minutes before we’re out of Indian country. Go ahead and relax and enjoy the ride.”

“Not sure I know how to relax in one of these things,” laughed Michael.

“Best roller coaster ride out there,” said the pilot. “And they pay you to ride it.”

“Thanks for the lift,” said Michael as he went back into the compartment where many of his team were already asleep on the aircraft. He got into one of the seats and strapped in as the aircraft made a sudden jump in altitude and back down again. He was already going over the mission report in his mind although they all would sit down together once they arrived and take an initial report. And he fully expected Thomas to start planning a strike against the compound and rescuing the prisoners.

“We’ve got the initial brief ready,” said Mark Williams.

“All pretty in PowerPoint?” asked Thomas with a chuckle.

“Oh yeah with graphs and numbers and catchy phrases galore,” laughed Mark. “In seriousness, I’ve put down everything except execution. I assume you have a plan you’ve been thinking of?”

“Actually I do,” said Thomas as he explained briefly of the idea in his head. “A lot of things have to fall in line, but I think it’s entirely possible.”

“I like it,” said Darren. “But it does have a whole lot of coordination.”

“Easy to do,” said Thomas. “And this kind of thing gets noticed at higher levels. Maybe even gets someone promoted and out of here.”

“One could hope,” said Darren.

“All we need is the on site intel and boots on the ground perspective,” said Thomas.

“They should be here in about a half an hour,” said Mark. “As for the vehicles, how are you planning on pulling that one off?”

“General McMackin’s Rangers,” said Thomas. “He wants some field time, so something like this should be right up their alley.”

“Not as glamorous as taking place in the assault, but we couldn’t pull it off without them,” said Mark. “You think he’ll bite?”

“I think he would jump at the chance,” said Thomas. “This is the kind of mission most guys dream about being part of even if it is on the fringes.”

“A whole company?” asked Darren.

“Maybe,” said Thomas. “I was thinking a platoon for LZ security and another one for the raping, robbing and pillaging.”

“Which means we could use all our assets in the strike,” said Mark.

“That’s the idea,” said Thomas.

“If it falls through with his Rangers?” asked Darren.

“Make a formal request through J-SOD. Someone will jump at the chance,” said Thomas.

“If it gets approved by Brigade,” said Darren.

“Any reason to think it won’t?” asked Mark.

“I wouldn’t imagine so,” said Darren after thinking for a moment. “Like Thomas said, this is a pretty high profile kind of mission that gets you noticed. I seriously doubt the Colonel would deny this sort of thing.”

“You have a lot of faith in common sense,” laughed Mark. “Which Battalion?”

“Jacobson’s outfit,” said Thomas. “For some reason they are rotating back up to the line again. So either him or Reese. 1st and 4th both are entirely capable of doing this and they are both on the line with the 3rd backing them up.”

“Three battalions up right now?” asked Darren.

“Part of Division’s strategy of keeping the IU on its toes,” said Thomas.

“And puts the forces for your plans right in position where they need to be,” observed Mark.

“I know,” said Thomas with a grin.

“Oh, we’ve got a sneaky one here,” laughed Darren.

“Still convinced I’m out of my mind?” asked Thomas.

“Absolutely!” exclaimed Darren. “But that just makes you fit in with the rest of us.”

“Nice to know I’m appreciated,” laughed Thomas.

“You did have us a bit worried,” said Mark. “You were far, far too giddy when you came back from Brigade the last time.”

“I’m not sure I’ve ever been referred to as giddy before,” laughed Thomas.

“Sir, the chopper is back over friendly lines,” said the communications tech.

“Thanks Walt,” said Thomas. “While we’re waiting, let’s review what you have so far.”

“How old are you anyway?” asked Williams. Since Dana was the only person in the building that spoke any English, he was trying to keep up his own morale by having a conversation with someone other than his captors. While he still wasn’t sure if she was a plant, she was entirely too thin for his liking and certainly an odd avenue for an interrogation.

“I am *štrnást*’ umm, fourteen,” said Dana.

“Fourteen years old?” exclaimed Williams.

“Yes,” said Dana. “I do not know day, maybe umm, fifteen?”

“How can they do this to kids?” muttered Williams under his breath.

“I sorry?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Williams. “It’s the end of March sometime. Not sure myself.”

“My ummm, *narodeniny*, I am no sure word,” said Dana. “When I fifteen.”

“Birthday?” asked Williams.

“*Áno*! Birthday is umm, April ten,” said Dana.

“I hope for a happy birthday,” said Williams.

“Thank you very much,” said Dana.

“Is there any way out of this place?” asked Williams as he walked through the central aisle and looked over the building. It didn’t seem that sturdy and escape should have been easy.

“No escape,” said Dana as she moved with her new Texan friend.

“Why not?” asked Williams.

She took Williams by the hand and led him back towards the entrance. On the left, the body of the person executed was seen near the door. Williams hadn’t noticed until that point since many of the occupants of the prison didn’t move much. “He’s dead!”

“The guards ummm, *vystrelit*? Shoot is word?” said Dana.

“They shoot people trying to escape?” asked Williams.

“No escape, eh, shoot to stop escape,” said Dana.

“As an example?” asked Williams.

“I no understand,” said Dana.

“To keep you from escaping,” said Williams. “A lesson to others?”

“*Áno!* Yes, a lesson,” said Dana.

“Harsh teachers,” said Williams more to himself as Dana didn’t have a good grasp on the English language, but enough to make small talk. “Where did you learn English?”

“In school some,” said Dana. “And from song on radio.”

“English by Britney Spears,” he chuckled.

“You know Britney Spears?” asked Dana opening her eyes wide.

“No,” he laughed, the first sincere time since his capture. “Your English is okay.”

“Thank you very much,” she said.

“Why are you here?” asked Williams.

“I help...ummm, fighter is word I think, fighter against Muslims,” said Dana. “My family help...ummm, give fighter sleep? This correct, no?”

“You gave them a place to rest?” asked Williams.

“Fighter sleep in house, yes?” asked Dana.

“I understand,” said Williams.

“My words are correct?” asked Dana.

“Mostly,” said Williams. “I got the gist of it anyway.”

“I sorry, I no understand,” said Dana.

“Yes, your words were mostly correct,” said Williams.

“Thank you very much,” said Dana.

“So they tossed you in here for helping the resistance,” said Williams. “Cordial of them.”

“Please speak slow, I no understand,” said Dana.

“Talking to myself darlin,” said Williams.

“No, I here,” said Dana.

“I meant...never mind,” he chuckled. “How long you here?”

“Eh, seven...ummm months,” said Dana. “My family dead, I come here. Mother, father and their mother and father, dead.”

“I’m sorry,” said Williams.

“I sad mother and father dead,” said Dana. “But was long time.”

“Still sucks,” said Williams and knew she probably didn’t understand the American idiom.

“Yes, bad,” said Dana who got the context. “You escape, no?”

“I might,” said Williams. “If I can scope this place out.”

Another victim asked Dana a question in Slovak. She spoke back and forth for several moments until the adult shook his head. She provided the best translation she could. “He say please no escape. They shoot more.”

“You all will die here anyway,” said Williams. “Go out on your feet.”

“I no understand,” said Dana.

“Ummm, stand, pride, fight?” asked Williams.

“People no strong Jahannam,” said Dana. “No...run, no fight.”

“Better to fight and die than let yourself be killed,” said Williams.

“People fight, ummm other camp,” said Dana. “Guards shoot them.”

“Sometimes you take your chances,” said Williams.

“Guards shoot all people you escape,” said Dana.

“I’ll take you all with me,” said Williams.

“We come you?” asked Dana.

“Why not?” asked Williams.

“All people here?” asked Dana.

“Sure, we carry those that cannot run,” said Williams.

“All people Jahannam?” asked Dana.

“Yeah,” said Williams.

“There five...*stovky*...ummm hundred, yes?” asked Dana.

“Can’t be more than fifty in here,” said Williams.

“All camp, five hundred,” said Dana.

“Can’t rescue everyone,” said Williams.

“All escape, no escape, understand?” asked Dana.

“All or none, got it,” said Williams. “But if I can escape, I can bring back help.”

“You bring Texas cowboys to help?” asked Dana.

“Yeah, I’ll bring some cowboys back,” he chuckled.

“And they take us from here?” asked Dana.

“Yeah darlin, they’ll take everyone from here,” said Williams.

“To umm, home?” asked Dana.

“Sure,” said Williams.

“If you go, they shoot people,” said Dana.

“I’ll be sneaky,” said Williams.

“I no understand,” said Dana.

“I’ll...never mind,” said Williams. “How often do they check, umm count people?”

“When food bring,” said Dana. “Count for food.”

“So every day?” asked Williams.

“Every three day,” said Dana.

“You get fed every three days?” he exclaimed.

“Food three day, yes. Water here every day,” said Dana and pointed at a small tub that looked to barely contain enough for twenty gallons.

“I can see why this is hell,” said Williams.

“Very bad place,” said Dana.

“Camelot, this is Fluffy,” said Tim Daniels over the secure satellite link.

“Fluffy, this is Snoopy, go ahead,” said Darren from the other end.

“Roger, we managed to get close enough for unit identification,” said Tim. “The unit involved in the arty strike was the 3rd Battalion of the 29th Infantry Regiment.”

Darren turned to Stephen Garcia who was already putting the data into the computer to see what it spit out. It took several moments, but finally came back with the file on the unit.

“Looks to be a Class C reserve formation from Turkmenistan originally. Part of the strategic IU reserves. No major combat noted on the file,” said Stephen. “Not a whole lot here.”

“Class C?” asked Darren knowing that was generally young conscripts that hadn’t seen much if any combat or training time.

“From what we can tell, the 29th just came in theater about two months ago. Again, no engagements that are noted, no leadership dossiers, not a whole lot except who they are and where they came from,” said Stephen.

“Fluffy, you positive on those markings?” asked Darren.

“Sending the unit identifier now,” said Tim as he uploaded several pictures they had taken after moving in as close as possible. They had caught the remains of the convoy after they had taken the remaining troops towards Ružomberok and the wounded to the nearest hospital. The team had snuck in just after sunrise and before the IU had come back out to start recovery operations.

The pictures came through on the datalink and Stephen looked them over. “Sure enough, it is the 29th Infantry. Are all the markings the same?”

“Fluffy, can you confirm all vehicles are from the same unit?” asked Darren.

“From what we could tell, affirmative,” said Tim. “We had a brief window this morning, but weren’t able to stick around long.”

“Any current activity?” asked Darren.

“Recovery operations,” said Tim. “Looks like they are loading the vehicles that can be salvaged up on flatbeds and rolling south. Unknown destination.”

“And you confirmed at least a company?” asked Darren.

“Maybe a bit more, but at least that much,” said Tim.

“Roger, stand by for further instructions, but keep monitoring the situation while I contact Warbucks,” said Darren.

“Roger, we’ll be on the move to an alternate observation position,” said Tim as he cut the connection. While secure, it was still a radio link and something the IU could potentially home in on. And knowing such, he got his team ready to move away from their current position and into another that had already been identified prior to making the call.

Darren found Thomas observing some contact drills with Rick’s, 1st Lieutenant Joel Tucker’s and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Cliff Morris’s teams. He had already gone through his round with Tucker observing and was now in the process of being the observer. The drills went through fairly well, but there were always minor details to hone.

“Cliff, if you move another fifteen meters to the left, it opens up the possibility of a flank ambush,” said Thomas.

“It does, but not in every situation. It puts me out of position to support the far right teams in a wooded environment,” said Morris.

“True,” said Thomas. “But in a open environment, it can set that kind of thing up nicely.”

“Got it,” said Morris. “Want us to run it again?”

“You guys comfortable?” asked Thomas.

“We’ll run it one more time in a simulated open environment and work that extra space,” said Morris. “Just to see how much of a time difference it is.”

“Okay, from the start then,” said Thomas as he turned to Darren. “Something good?”

“Could be,” said Darren as he handed over the observation report from Tim. There wasn’t much and Thomas scanned it over quickly.

“Works very well into the strike plan,” said Thomas.

“Better than we hoped,” said Darren. “We planned on having front line troops opposing the diversion attack, but I’ll take Class C troops any day of the week.”

“Are they reinforcing or replacing the garrison in Ružomberok?” asked Thomas.

“Unknown,” said Darren.

“Can we get Fluffy into position to determine that?” asked Thomas.

“Not quickly no,” said Darren. “It’ll take at least a day and a half if not more to get them in position to observe.”

“You have an idea I see,” said Thomas.

“Sure, keep Fluffy in position to observe ESR Tombstone. Insert another team in to where they can observe Ružomberok. We can see the troops moving in, Tim can see them moving out if they do. Should be simple and we have a helo at our disposal,” said Darren.

“And by ‘we’ you mean your team?” asked Thomas with a chuckle.

“Kinda thinking of that boss,” laughed Darren. “I haven’t got to play in a while.”

“I was thinking Cliff or Rick,” said Thomas.

“Cliff is still getting his team back up to speed. Rick still has the new guy,” said Darren.

“Which you hacked off as being mission ready,” said Thomas.

“I’d like this, but will defer to your judgment,” said Darren.

“I honestly need you around here for planning,” said Thomas.

“You have Mark,” said Darren.

“Which will probably be gone soon,” said Thomas and thought about the request. “I’ll let you two flip for it.”

“Sounds reasonable enough,” said Darren. Thomas called over Rick and explained what the situation was and if he was volunteering to go behind the lines. He quickly consulted his team and found someone with reservations.

“Behind the lines sir?” asked Jamie.

“Yep, normal recon mission. Should be a cakewalk,” said Thomas. “Never mind, I’ll send Darren’s team.”

“Hold off a second,” said Rick and grabbed Jamie by the arm and led him away. Thomas couldn’t hear the conversation, but it was decidedly one sided and Rick came back alone. “We’re all on the same page.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Thomas.

“Trust me, we’re on the same page and young Mister Collins will be fine,” said Rick. “You said yourself you wanted a couple of milk runs for my team. This qualifies as a milk run.”

Thomas looked at Darren who just shrugged his shoulders in reply. Thomas paused for thought about it and decided he would trust both his leaders. Taking out a commander's coin he had earned years before, he showed them the heads side and flipped it in the air. Darren called the "tails" position, but the coin came to a bounce on the heads side.

"You positive?" asked Thomas.

"When do we leave?" asked Rick.

"You two work out the airflow and insertion. Have Trouble alert the aircrew," said Thomas as he heard the Chinook coming in for a landing bringing back the teams from the recon mission. "See how quick you can get in."

"Got it," said Darren as he, Rick and his team left the area. Thomas headed for the chopper pad where he saw his team departing the aircraft as the rotors were still winding down. Once they were clear, Michael came up to Thomas.

"We got good intel and enough to plan a strike," said Michael.

"Way ahead of you for the most part," said Thomas. "We've got everything planned out except the on site execution. We need your input for that."

"Fluffy still okay?" asked Michael.

"Yeah, he called in about twenty minutes ago. Seems the arty strike took out at least a company if not more. Plus identified the battalion as a Class C formation," said Thomas.

"That's good, right?" asked Michael.

"Works great in the plan," said Thomas. "Have your guys get cleaned up and grab a bite to eat. We'll do debrief in two hours."

"Roger that," said Michael.

"Hey Mike?" said Thomas before he could rejoin his teams.

"Yeah?" asked Michael.

"Great job out there," said Thomas with a thumbs up. Michael grinned and nodded his head at the announcement before letting the teams know the timeline.

Date/Time: 26 March/1111

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“You guys get cleaned up and fed?” asked Thomas to the assembled teams.

“Yep, let’s get this show on the road,” said Dave Lawson.

The briefing started in the crowded room from the moment they inserted to the moment they lifted off. Several comments were made in the reports as additional details were recalled and marks were made on the maps where positions were found in the defenses.

“Easy enough to approach,” said Staff Sergeant Nate Clark. “Depending on the infiltration site, it’s an easy march from about any direction.”

“But that’s the problem,” said Bill Meyers. “Being that it’s in a valley, we’ll have to come in from over at least one of the ridges to escape detection like we did on our infiltration.”

“Were your routes clear on the way in?” asked Mark.

“Yeah, no long range patrolling activity that we could see. It looks like another IU example of attempting to be inconspicuous as possible by limiting activity around the site,” said Sergeant First Class Wade “Gramps” Hamm, a member of Master Sergeant Rivera’s team. While almost the same age as his team, he had the look of a man years older and had been saddled with the call sign “Gramps” from his first day in training. But when it came to applying his special skill of long range precision fire, he was only equaled by Frank Zimmer and sometimes even better as the two regularly competed on the long range courses.

“But there were exterior patrols?” asked Mark.

“Yeah, but no frequency pattern we could find. Which certainly isn’t a good thing,” said Michael. “Random patrols means we need to dedicate a team to overwatching the exterior in case they are out. At the very least split them into pairs.”

“Agreed,” said Thomas. “How many per patrol?”

“Four mostly,” said Rivera. “Although twice we saw three.”

“Guard force total?” asked Thomas.

“Eight towers, two apiece, for sixteen, six DFPs on the exterior with two apiece for twelve, two more DFPs covering the entrance with four apiece for eight. Four at the gate, at least one external patrol of four, and two patrols at times, so add that to eight,” said Michael as he consulted the tally sheets. “Round it up with an officer and NCOIC to fifty per shift. Appears to be twelve hour shifts, so a hundred maybe?”

“Hundred man guard force?” asked Mark. “A few more than we anticipated.”

“Where’s the barracks?” asked Thomas.

“Right here as best as we can tell,” said Ashley joining the conversation and pointing at a larger building in the compound. “That seemed to be where they headed once they were off shift.”

“Command staff?” asked Mark.

“Appears to be a staff of twenty or so,” said Rivera. “Not all are armed, some with sidearms, but mostly without.”

“Hundred twenty as a minimum,” said Mark. “Tough nut to crack.”

“Maybe,” said Thomas and looked over the map. “If you take the tower and DFPs out of play initially, that takes almost a quarter of the guard force out of play. Add the two roving patrols and that’s another eight. Shift times?”

“Appears to be between 0500 and 0700. No set time,” said Michael.

“Whoever is in charge of the guard force is smart,” said Mark. “Internal patrols?”

“Not inside the inner compound except for count times,” said Rivera.

“Every day?” asked Thomas.

“No, more random. Like four buildings one day, five the next. Not really a set pattern,” said Ashley. “It seems like the feeding times since they deposited a bag in the ones they went into.”

“Tough nut boss,” repeated Mark. “I’m going to up the guard count to one-fifty. Makes sense not to have everyone out at once. Fifty on duty with fifty to replace. Another twenty for a reaction force, another twenty on staff. Makes sense.”

“Yeah,” said Thomas as he looked over the map yet again. “Still think this is doable?”

“Sure,” said Michael. “I mean, like you said, you take the towers, DFPs and the gate out of play initially, pin down the guard force in the barracks and keep lobbing grenades in, this shouldn’t be that hard. The other facilities should be easy to take down with teams of four.”

“We had planned on ten teams,” said Mark. “Forty against one fifty?”

“Forty of ours against one fifty of theirs? I’ll take those odds,” said Meyers.

“How about if you add in the Ranger element to keep the barracks pinned?” asked Mark.

“That’s forty of them keeping at least fifty otherwise occupied. Your idea of taking the towers out with the anti-tank rounds has merit, but that’s three teams with two going twice. Another team for the patrols as we only have twenty-four to assault.”

“We’ll add two more teams,” said Thomas. “Thirty-two on the assault plus the forty Rangers. Three external for the towers, one for the roving patrols. But we still have the DFP angle to take care of.”

“External teams could take them down,” said Rivera. “Quiet like.”

“Any radio communications you detected?” asked Mark.

“No,” said Technical Sergeant Jennifer “Monster” Holden. “Nothing we could detect on any frequencies that the IU typically uses. Which means they may be using an unknown frequency or they have field phones set up.”

“I’d say both,” said Jill Dugger. “The guards going out had small radios on their gear, but the guards going to the DFPs and towers didn’t. So that means they are either in place already or have phone setups in the towers.”

“Makes sense,” said Rivera. “And it only takes one to get the word out.”

“Okay, let’s take a break and come back to this. I’ve got some thinking to do, but I want every capable team back in the briefing room at say 1500. We’ve got enough manpower on the books right now for thirteen teams, but let’s plan on a dozen.”

“You want Tim’s and Rick’s teams planned into this?” asked Mark.

“For the moment, yes,” said Thomas. “So the following teams or team leaders in the dining tent at 1500: Token, Snoopy, Gadget, Chaos, Rowdy, Sunshine, R-2, Doodle, Blaze and mine. Gadget, go ahead and pick your team if you haven’t done so already.”

“Already have some ideas,” said Mark. “I’ll finalize it by 1500.”

“Like Mark said, this is a tough nut to crack. But it can be cracked. And I want any and all ideas for this brainstorm session this afternoon. You guys know better than anyone what is going on there so this is something we will do. And we will rescue whoever happens to be in that compound in addition to the Texan pilot. We owe it to those people to get them out and to safety so this plan needs to be bulletproof. And we will not fail,” said Thomas.

CHAPTER 18

Date/Time: 26 March/1502

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“We have everyone?” asked Thomas as he went to the front of the chow tent and looked out over the forty members of his unit. And actually counted a bit more than forty as others had come in to help if they could even while being on the injured list. He saw the team leads nod that they had everyone and Thomas commenced the briefing. He spent several minutes outlining the basic plan as well as adding in the most recent intelligence they had discovered. As well as the trouble locations they had in the plan. Once he was completed, he opened the floor to discussion.

“It’s big,” observed Shannon Parsons.

“And a lot of it hinges on getting those bridges intact,” said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Cliff “Doodle” Morris. “Aren’t they wired?”

“Not yet,” said Thomas. “Plus, we have a team getting into position as we speak to observe what could be a replacement of the defenders in Ružomberok. Badaa and his team left two hours ago and will be getting into position in the next couple of hours. Fluffy and his team are already in position to observe ESR Tombstone to see if any units pull out. Additionally, at least one of the units that pulled into Ružomberok is a Class C reserve formation.”

“Which makes it far easier for our guys to break through the lines,” remarked 1st Lieutenant Joel “Blaze” Tucker. “Are the bridges the only objective?”

“Our main objective is to get the prisoners out. Whether or not Brigade and Division want to hold what they get after we get back through the lines is up to them,” said Thomas.

“Why would they give up a good position like that?” asked Dave Lawson.

“Not saying they would,” said Thomas. “But honestly that part of the operation would be out of our purview anyway. So let’s focus on the parts we can handle.”

“So I was thinking about those DFPs between our meetings,” said Jill Dugger.

“Okay,” said Thomas. “And?”

“Well, we have good GPS coordinates on all of them as well as the ones near the gate. Is there a possibility of an air strike?” asked Jill. “If we could get aircraft assets to take out some of those guard towers and posts, it’d make our entry a lot easier. We can take them all out, but it puts most of us out of position to do the assault.”

The tent was quiet for a moment before Nancy spoke. “Don’t mind her, she’s a rookie.”

“Perhaps you should have a little rookie in you too,” said Thomas after thinking for a moment. “It’s not a bad idea by any means.”

“We’d have a hard time getting approval for fighter types. Most are grounded right now for the spring offensive,” said Michael Parsons.

“We would only need a couple,” said Darren. “Maybe a couple of F-15 types with small diameter bombs. I’m sure the Air Force can kick a couple loose for this kind of operation.”

“Fragmentation hazard to the camp?” asked Corporal Chris “Dutch” Chang, a member of Rivera’s team.

“Shouldn’t be,” said Dave Lawson. “They could set them to delayed fuze which would take out the positions, but decrease the risk to the camp.”

“And immediately after the bombs go off, you implement the second part of the plan for taking out the towers. Like in the first ten seconds or so. Less than ten seconds between reloads so you take down the entire perimeter defenses in less than thirty seconds,” said Bill Meyers.

“And in that thirty seconds we’ve also started taking down the guard patrols and get the Rangers into place to keep the barracks occupied,” said Darren.

“Unless we drop another bomb or two on the barracks,” suggested Nate Clark.

“The precision of that would have to be perfect,” said Cliff Morris. “No space to play with if it drops off course. We have another building between it and the camp, but I’m not sure we should take a chance on that.”

“Easier than having to dig them out,” said Staff Sergeant Shaun “Corndog” Hanson.

“No, Doodle is right,” said Michael. “I would suggest using the same method against the barracks as the guard towers. But the fence in between makes that hard to do.”

“And we can’t very well evacuate a camp by parading them by that hornet’s nest of angry soldiers. We need something to take it down,” said Darren.

“Willy Pete?” asked Jeff Holmes. “Fire it up and I’d be willing to bet they won’t want to stick around. And that means either they stay in place and burn up or come out the doors into the line of fire from the Rangers.”

“That would work,” said Darren. “Have to be some good shots with the grenade launchers.”

“Speak for yourself Doc Holliday,” said Amber. “Some of us can actually hit what we aim at.”

Laughter caught the group as Darren shook his head at Amber. “However, we should make sure those Rangers can hit what they’re aiming at.”

“And it’ll have to be some good coordination. Whichever way they set up, we’ll have to be very mindful of crossfire,” said Dave Lawson.

“They keep the guys pinned while we assault the other buildings. Once we’re clear, we can go help until they surrender,” said Bill Meyers.

“Only problem there is we can’t get into a standoff situation. We have to get that building clear before we start evacuations,” said Thomas. “And we’re talking ten minutes or less. The quicker we get the administrative area cleared, the quicker we get the inner compound done, the trucks on scene and back to friendly lines. So honestly, I’m looking at ninety minutes tops from the first shot to the roll time for the convoy.”

“Not a lot of time boss,” remarked Dave.

“Going to be a minimum of a half hour drive back to Černová, probably forty-five minutes or more. The more time we take means the more time the IU has to mount a counterstrike and roll in relief forces. Lucky enough this back road coming out here only has a token defensive line near Černová itself. And the road doesn’t lend itself to a good route to bring in reinforcements, but works well as our escape route,” said Thomas.

“And we’re sure the conventional guys can capture the bridges we need and open a hole in the line?” asked Michael.

“I couldn’t see why they can’t,” said Thomas. “Of course, this happens to be war where the unexpected always occurs. So we need an alternate plan of getting out.”

“Choppers,” said Darren immediately. “The clearing is large enough for Super Stallions and Chinooks. Each one can carry forty to fifty apiece, maybe even more in a stretch. Even if we have two hundred prisoners in the camps that should be easy to get done.”

“That’ll take the Brigade Commander pushing it,” said Mark.

“We’re gift wrapping him a mission that can and will put him on the radar scope and possibly a fast track to that promotion he wants. I think he’ll see the light,” said Darren, who hoped he would see the light although he held his reservations in check for the moment.

“No other land routes out?” asked Ashley.

“Nothing except ESR Tombstone that runs right smack dab into the middle of Ružomberok. And as much as I’d like a nice drive through the country, I’m not sure the IU would be so polite as to wave us on through after we steal a bunch of their trucks, destroy one of their prison camps and have our conventional forces attack their front lines,” said Thomas.

“How many choppers?” asked Mark who would coordinate that aspect.

“Call it ten Super Stallions,” said Thomas. “Conventional are okay.”

“Let’s make it twelve,” said Mark.

“I think ten, that’s eight plus two spares,” said Thomas.

“You know helicopters, half of them will go down,” laughed Mark.

“Okay, you win,” laughed Thomas. “Anything else glaring about the overall plan?”

The room was silent as everyone looked at the maps and couldn’t determine anything better. And seeing that it was fairly solid, Thomas moved on into the details of the plan for assignments, roles and responsibilities, weapons outlays, times and taskings. Every detail was ironed out and the teams went away happy with what had been accomplished so far. The only hesitation was the fact that Rick and Tim were out of position and they had key roles in the plan. But being that their job was relatively simple, that portion was added as they two teams could be brought up to speed very quickly.

“Nothing else?” asked Thomas as he concluded the meeting. “How long will it take to type everything up?”

“Maybe an hour?” said Mark. “Two tops.”

“Want to set the meeting with the Colonel for this evening?” asked Thomas.

“How about tomorrow? We’ll have a better feel for the defenses around Ružomberok by that time,” suggested Darren.

“Good point, schedule the meeting for 1200 or as soon after. That’ll give him twenty-four hours on the ground and enough time to evaluate the situation,” said Thomas. “Everyone else start prepping to go in.”

As the meeting broke up, Nancy Dugger was leaving and already getting her mindset ready for what she would have to accomplish during the mission. Her job would be reasonably simple...in fact the entire mission was reasonably simple in nature she thought. There was a lot of coordination that would be required beforehand, but the overall job was going to be easy. As she walked towards her tent area, she heard her name being called from behind her.

“Nancy, let’s talk,” said Jill as she caught up with her sister.

“Yes?” she asked as they walked away from the group.

“It needs to stop,” said Jill.

“What needs to stop?” asked Nancy.

“The whole ‘I’m dumb because I’m a rookie’ thing you keep spouting off,” said Jill. “It’s gotten old and I’m well past that stage.”

“I’m only kidding,” said Nancy.

“And you’re the only one that continues to do it. I’ve fought my way into this unit, passed S and T and have made some pretty good contributions if I say so myself. And I’ve been here for well over a year. I’m not the dorky little sister you left behind because I wasn’t old enough to join Cider. I’ve become a good soldier in my own right,” said Jill forcefully.

“Well, I didn’t think the world was going to stop turning because you get a little butt hurt over some comments,” scoffed Nancy.

“It’s more than the comments. It’s my own sister not giving me the respect she gives everyone else including the people that arrived after me! And being arrogant with more than a few people around here. So you need to knock it off Nancy and I mean it,” said Jill with a growl.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Nancy with a roll of her eyes.

“You know, Mom told me a story about how Dad thought you couldn’t hack it enough to go to the Scout Sniper school. About how weak he thought you were and would wash out pretty quickly. But said he changed his mind after the Battle of North Wilksboro and got you the assignment. Me? I had to fight to get into that school after S and T and passed with flying colors, even higher than you did! And I’ve had to prove myself twice as much since arriving since I didn’t have the advantage of being here from the start. And I’d say I’ve done just as good as you in every mission I’ve been on. So exactly what the hell do you think gives you the right to continue to disrespect me other than the fact you think I’m inferior and just want to demean me?” demanded Jill.

Nancy was quiet for a moment as Jill had struck a nerve. She was correct that her father had initially objected to her assignment to the school. But had later changed his mind after he saw she was capable under fire and tougher than he gave her credit for. And Nancy knew her own sister had proved her mettle under adverse conditions and had become a valuable team member in her own right. And she certainly wasn’t the skinny sister she had left behind when the 14th Special Operations Battalion had been started. “I didn’t realize it hurt.”

“Come on, really?” asked Jill.

“No, seriously,” said Nancy. “I...just never moved past you being my little sister and all.”

“Yes, it hurts,” said Jill.

“I’ll promise to be more mindful of what I say,” said Nancy. “Yes, you are a valuable team member and yes, you have proven yourself to be capable under fire.”

“All I ask is that you don’t dismiss everything I say just because I’m younger than you,” said Jill.

“I won’t,” said Nancy. “You didn’t have to bring up Dad you know?”

“I needed something to grab your attention,” said Jill.

“That’ll do it,” said Nancy.

“Still friends?” asked Jill.

“Yeah, we should hug or something,” said Nancy.

“I’d prefer to mud stomp your silly butt instead,” said Jill with a smirk.

“Whenever you start feeling froggy, we’ll go a few rounds,” said Nancy with her own smirk.

“You may be a little bigger, but I’m just as strong and fast,” said Jill.

“Something like that,” said Nancy. “I really am sorry.”

“I do love you cause you’re my sister. Just don’t have to like everything you do from time to time,” said Jill.

“Comes with the territory of family,” said Nancy. “So all is forgiven?”

“Yeah sis, I still like you,” said Jill with a roll of her eyes.

“Who’s getting sassy now?” said Nancy as she swatted her sister in the stomach with the back of her hand. It stung and hit a lot harder than a playful tap.

“Owww,” said Jill as she bunched over, but still managed a punch on the exterior of Nancy’s thigh. Nancy went dead leg for a moment and almost toppled over before catching herself.

“Everything okay?” asked Thomas as he walked by.

“We’re good,” said Nancy. “Just a little informal counseling.”

“Looks to be mutual,” he chuckled.

“You always said two way counseling was the best method,” said Jill.

“Next time, the training mats are over by the weight pile. And put on some headgear first,” he suggested and continued walking towards the command center.

“When we get through with this mission, it’s on,” said Nancy.

“Bet your butt it is,” said Jill.

“Camelot, this is Badaa,” said Rick over the satellite radio link.

“Badaa, this is Volley, go ahead,” said Shannon Parsons on the other end.

“Roger, in position and beginning observation,” said Rick. “Sending coordinates through databurst this channel.”

“Copy last, stay safe,” said Shannon. “Camelot out.”

Rick hit the send button on his communicator and sent the team’s coordinates in an encrypted file to the command. He and Jamie had moved a kilometer away from their observation position to send the transmission since the detection equipment from the IU was getting better as the war progressed. They slowly approached the position after fifteen minutes and were challenged and admitted by Rob Davis.

“Already got some activity,” he announced.

“What kind?” asked Rick.

“Looks like the unit that got hit is marshaling in Ružomberok,” said Rob. “No destination yet, but they appear to be moving somewhere.”

“Okay, go ahead and get some down time,” said Rick.

“Trouble and I are already set up, we’ll take the first shift,” said Rob.

“Okay, sounds good,” said Rick and turned to Jamie. “We’re down for the next four hours. Go grab a nap.”

“Just like that?” asked Jamie. “No security?”

“Trust me, there’s plenty of security around here,” said Rick.

“This part of that building trust thing Major Dayfield talked about?” asked Jamie.

“That’s Warbucks while we’re on missions,” said Rick as he pulled his poncho liner out and curled up in it. “And yes, something like that. Grab a nap, you’ll be glad you did.”

Rick started getting settled in on the cold ground and heard Jamie muttering to himself “go grab a nap the man says; not like we’re ten miles behind enemy lines or anything” and grinned to himself. This first mission would be a serious training event for Jamie and hopefully Rick would start to show him that yes, they knew what they were doing and he was more than welcome to join the club.

“Never did ask who your team was,” said Thomas as Mark finished typing up his report.

“I grabbed Fred Stone, Carmen Ford and Stephen,” said Mark.

“Papi begged you enough?” asked Thomas with a chuckle.

“Poor guy was sitting there like an abandoned puppy looking at me while I checked the status boards for who was up,” said Mark. “Yeah, I couldn’t leave him behind.”

“We’ve got to get him his own team back when everyone is healthy,” said Thomas. “Got a lot of rank for a single team.”

“Not like there is much choice in the matter. I grabbed who was healthy,” said Mark.

“Who’s your marksman?” asked Thomas.

“I put Ford on it. She’s had the DMR course before and is over on the range with Gramps and Demo getting up to speed on the 465,” said Mark.

“She’ll be okay?” asked Thomas.

“I think so,” said Mark. “I debated going without one since we aren’t on the support element, but you know, things always change.”

“I would love to have enough teams healthy to be able to do entire swaps,” said Thomas. “Or at least get everyone healthy enough.”

“Yeah, about that,” said Mark. “You work the relief yet?”

“Already got the request in through J-SOD for the two week training. I ran it through Cam Martinez and he said he’d push it. He knows the situation here,” said Thomas.

“I sent in the request for the job and got hired on the spot,” said Mark. “No interview, no nothing, just straight told my report date.”

“Soon?” asked Thomas.

“I got them to hold off until this mission was over and told them I couldn’t give them an end date. They accepted it and told me to contact them when I could shake clear,” said Mark.

“You’re gonna be missed,” said Thomas.

“Which opens my team position to Stephen if he wants it,” said Mark.

“Yeah, that sounds okay,” said Thomas. “Nice to have you around for one last trip.”

“Wouldn’t miss this for the world,” said Mark.

“When is the next check in from Badaa?” asked Thomas.

“Should be in three hours,” said Mark.

“Okay, I’m going to grab a bite to eat,” said Thomas.

“Sounds like a plan,” said Mark. “What are they serving anyway?”

“Beef Wellington and the normal fixings,” chuckled Thomas.

“Baldy at it again?” asked Mark.

“No, I honestly have no idea what they are serving,” said Thomas.

“Okay, if you can give me like five minutes to finish this up I’ll wander with you,” said Mark.

“Something important?” asked Thomas.

“Just a routine data dump from the Australians,” said Mark. “Nothing had changed.”

“Fair enough,” said Thomas as he went to his small office and continued writing a letter to Sharon as he often did in his spare time. Although on this specific letter he was writing to Hope. He knew Sharon would read it to her and hoped it was helping make up for the lost time with his youngest child. Again, he remembered they all were sacrificing a lot by being away for the war and he hoped all the children, wives and husbands could understand why their loved ones were away for so long.

Date/Time: 26 March/1940

Location: IU Regiment Headquarters, Ružomberok, Occupied Slovak Republic

“Sir, just that you are aware of the risks involved,” said the IU Colonel into the phone as he spoke to his superiors. He was commander of the garrison in Ružomberok, a regiment in name, but currently two battalions of raw conscripts.

“We had to pull back the other units to rest and refit. Intelligence believes the offensive will start within a month. And when they return, you will keep the two units there to augment your forces,” said the IU Major General on the other end of the line.

“That does not set my mind at ease sir,” said the Colonel.

“You feel their training was inadequate?” asked the General.

“Right now they might make a good garrison at Yazd,” said the Colonel, referring to the site of one of the Russian nuclear attacks during the Fall and was considered a less than desirable posting for any member of the IU. “I have platoon and company commanders that have led little more than a sheep herd to the market and conscripts that barely know which end of the rifle the bullet comes out. If the Americans are to attack right now, they will capture this city.”

“Intelligence does not believe they will strike,” said the General. “Your opposition has been content to sit idly by during this winter and they feel he will not do anything rash in the meantime. We are only talking about two weeks Omar and I have ordered two additional battalions on alert in case of trouble.”

“I would feel better if you staged one forward,” said the Colonel.

“Those same battalions are four and six hours away respectively. And that’s from the time of notification to move,” said the General. “We show no indications of an impending attack nor preparations for one and I would find it hard to believe the infidels know the specific units that were moved in.”

“They were hit by artillery fire that was being directed. I have this irrational fear that the Coalition has commandos behind the lines watching us like a hawk,” said the Colonel.

“It is not irrational,” said the General. “But we did detect a surveillance drone in the same area prior to the attack, so it might not be a ground team.”

“I’ve lived as long as I have by not going with the ‘might’ and ‘might not’ sir,” said the Colonel.

“So if you were in charge of the enemy brigade and knew we had Class C troops opposing you, what would you do?” asked the General.

“If I was in charge of that brigade and knew this particular Class C formation was in front of me, I would be planning a siege of Budapest right now sir,” said the Colonel. “But as a minimum, I’d increase probing of the lines.”

“I understand Colonel. If the enemy starts probing, I will alert the two additional battalions and have them move into your sector. Is this acceptable?” asked the General.

He Colonel paused for a moment and knew he had gone as far as he could. Having two additional units on standby was better than not having any at all. “Yes sir, this is acceptable.”

“You are a skilled and experienced regiment commander. Take this opportunity to try to get them trained. I have this feeling they will be needed before long,” said the General.

“If I had three months, unlimited resources and could take them to a proper training ground, I might get them into some form of fighting order,” said the Colonel. “It would help if I could have an experienced training team sent in to assist.”

“I will send in a mobile team first thing in the morning,” said the General.

“Thank you sir,” said the Colonel.

“Do the best you can,” said the General as he ended the call.

“Begin the deployment of the new battalions first thing in the morning and replace the forces on the line,” said the Colonel to his aide.

“Yes sir,” said the Major.

“And I want a training plan for the leaders, company level and higher,” said the Colonel. “And plan on using a training team to assist the platoon level and lower at the unit levels.”

“Yes sir,” said the Major.

“And let’s start getting our new troops into fighting order. They will be woken at 0400 and perform physical training before breakfast,” said the Colonel. “They will earn the right to eat.”

“It will be ordered sir,” said the Major as he departed to get the orders implemented. The Colonel sat back in his chair and started considering ways of shortening and consolidating the lines with the decreased amount of troops he currently had. But still giving the impression to the Coalition the defenses were as strong as ever. It would not be an easy task.

Date/Time: 26 March/2230

Location: Southeast of Ružomberok, Occupied Slovak Republic

“Badaa? You in the land of the living?” asked Heather as she gently shook him awake.

“Yeah,” he whispered as his eyes popped open and he wiped his face.

“Rocky and I need to call in the report,” said Heather.

“Okay,” said Rick as he started getting up.

“I’ve got a stove ready to heat up some food if you want,” said Heather.

“Okay, wake Outcast and get ready to move,” said Rick.

“You want to review the report?” asked Heather.

“Anything significant while we were asleep?” asked Rick.

“Nothing that we could tell. The defensive forces appeared to be packing up for a move, but they are still in position,” said Heather.

“Nah, go ahead and send it,” said Rick.

“Okie dokie,” said Heather as she went over to wake Jamie. He had barely fallen asleep an hour before being his first official mission behind the lines and the fact they were more or less surrounded by two battalions of troops. He jarred awake and immediately grabbed for the pistol at his side.

“Hold on stud,” said Heather as she put her hand on his. “You’re among friends.”

“Something happening?” asked Jamie.

“Yeah, you’ve been tasked to make coffee,” said Heather.

“What?” he asked.

“Rocky and I are heading out to send the report,” said Heather. “You and Badaa are up for a shift. The stove is ready to heat up some coffee and food.”

“Got it,” he said and started getting up. Rick was already starting the small stove and putting a small pot on top to heat water. Jamie went over and peered through the thermal and night vision cameras at the city below them. He swept the city of Ružomberok increasing the magnification on both not seeing anything.

“Coffee?” asked Rick as he finished with the small French press and poured himself a cup.

“Creamer and sugar?” asked Jamie.

“You serious?” asked Rick.

“I guess not,” said Jamie as he went to his pack and retrieved his canteen cup. “I didn’t hear or see the stove.”

“That’s because we’re sneaky like,” said Rick as he poured the remainder into his cup and sipped on his own. “There’s more hot water to heat up your rations.”

“Where?” asked Jamie.

“Cat hole over by the packs,” said Rick.

“No wonder I didn’t see it,” said Jamie.

“We aren’t dumb. And are far enough out of town not to attract major attention our way so digging a small cat hole and putting a stove in the bottom isn’t going to hurt,” said Rick.

“I’ve got a lot to learn,” said Jamie as he sipped at the coffee and went back to the observation. About an hour into their shift, his communicator started buzzing, alerting him with an unusual code.

“Right on time,” said Rick. “I’ll be back.”

“What is it?” asked Jamie as he acknowledged the message.

“Your communicator finally synched up with the perimeter sensors we have out,” said Rick. “It’s probably Rocky and Trouble coming back. Stay here and I’ll check.”

Rick disappeared into the undergrowth, moving quietly for a larger framed individual and Jamie moved his carbine to the front and started checking the area where they were. After several minutes, he reappeared with Heather and Rob in tow.

“You didn’t tell me we had out perimeter alarms,” said Jamie.

“I didn’t think to,” said Rick. “Any time we are on an extended observation, we put them out and they will sync up with the communicators. We get the alert codes letting us know one or more was set off.”

“How did you know it was them and not an animal?” asked Jamie.

“The alarm code,” said Rick as he pulled his communicator out and dialed into the messages. “This said it was motion as well as magnetic. So unless the local deer population had taken to wearing armor, it had to be humans.”

“Speaking of, we saw a nice buck on the way out,” said Rob.

“Good sized?” asked Rick, the eternal hunter.

“For this area, yeah,” said Rob. “Too big to pack out though.”

“A shame,” said Rick. “Did they send any instructions back?”

“Just to continue on mission,” said Heather.

“Okay, grab some shuteye,” said Rick. “Outcast and I will take the overnight shift.”

“Okay, can we expect breakfast in bed?” asked Heather.

“Yep,” said Rick. “Served without the plate.”

Heather chuckled and attempted to find Jamie’s poncho liner. After looking around, she gave up and asked him. “Where’s your poncho liner?”

“I put it back in my pack,” he said. “Was I not supposed to?”

“Normally we hot bunk out here so just two are out,” said Heather.

“I didn’t know,” said Jamie.

“Relax rookie, it’s your first class trip,” chuckled Heather as she dug into her pack and pulled hers out. Jamie wasn’t sure why everyone else was acting nonchalantly about the whole affair since they were, again, behind the lines where the chances of reinforcement or rescue were all but nonexistent. There were only a few miles separating them from about fifteen hundred IU troops that would love to bag a coalition special ops team and they were laughing about deer and breakfast in bed. He wasn’t sure if this was the norm in the unit and had a whole lot to learn about the way they operated that wasn’t covered in the manuals or training. And like millions of soldiers before him, he had a lot to learn there was the book method that got everyone on the same page and the small details that each team learned and used with each other.

Date/Time: 27 March/0344

Location: Southeast of Ružomberok, Occupied Slovak Republic

Sergeant Jamie Collins was having a rough time on his first official mission. After the excitement of the infiltration, the movement into their position and finally doing little more than watching the city where there was little to no activity was finally taking its toll. And the fact he had only about an hour of sleep in the previous twenty-four meant he was finally getting groggy. He attempted to shift in position, got up and move around, drank a cup of cold instant coffee and did everything humanly possible to stay awake.

He attempted to write out some of his notes and observations on his communicator but found the task only tired him more and more. But the sleep monster finally caught up with him as he dozed off with his head tilting back.

And he awoke to a piece of cold steel pressed against his throat.

CHAPTER 19

Date/Time: 27 March/0344

Location: Southeast of Ružomberok, Occupied Slovak Republic

“If I was an IU soldier, you’d be dead right now,” whispered Rick as he removed the hand crafted blade from Collin’s throat and the hand from his mouth. He had placed it with the unsharpened tang against his throat as he wanted to teach a lesson and not significantly harm his newest member. “Now wake up.”

Jamie was frozen for the moment, but finally relaxed slightly after getting the largest scare of his life. He sat up straighter and apologized.

“I don’t need to hear I’m sorry. Sorry out here gets people killed,” said Rick.

“I understand sir,” said Jamie as he shook his head and woke up fully.

“No, I don’t think you do,” said Rick. “You see those two sleeping behind us? They trust you to have their backs while they sleep. And you nodding off means it puts them and yourself at risk. So do us all a favor and don’t put us at risk.”

“Yes sir,” said Jamie.

“If you’re tired, why didn’t you say something?” asked Rick.

“I didn’t want you to think I couldn’t hack it,” said Jamie.

“Are you serious?” asked Rick. “Try admitting your faults for a change. It’ll help the rest of us bring you up to speed quicker.”

“I don’t want to bring the team down,” said Jamie.

“We move at the lowest common denominator,” said Rick. “And if that means we have to slow down a tad while you are speeding up, then that’s what we do. Normally we’d have about a month of exercises and shakedowns to get you up to speed. But factors outside our control dropped you in our laps and we have to soldier on.”

“Because someone thought I would be a screw up?” asked Jamie.

“Honestly, probably so,” said Rick. “I mean let’s face it, with your record you would be the last kid picked at the dodge ball game if we had a choice in the matter.”

“Nice to hear some honesty,” said Jamie.

“Don’t expect anything less with this unit,” said Rick. “Of course many of us have known each other long enough to know what they are thinking without having to say a word, so you have a ways to go in that regard.”

“Major... Warbucks promised me a discharge when we find a replacement for me and get them up to speed,” said Jamie.

“I know,” said Rick. “And he’ll make good on that promise if and when he can.”

“But I have to troop on in the meantime,” said Jamie.

“You might even learn to like this job,” said Rick. “No matter what your personal feelings are about the war or why we’re here, this job can be fun and exciting.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” said Jamie.

“Look, I’m not going to convince you that what we’re doing it right or whether or not we should be here. But I personally feel the reasons we are here are important. I’ve got a wife and two daughters at home I’m fighting for and the more time I spend over here, the better chances we have of not getting invaded by the IU again. I fight for them and the people alongside me; many of which were with me through the Fall. And I never thought to question whether we belonged here or not because I saw firsthand how radical Islam can get out of hand quickly and needs to be nipped in the bud,” said Rick.

“It’s just,” said Jamie. “I don’t know, a conflict of seeing what we are doing here and whether or not we should continue going at it alone.”

“Each country we’ve liberated has in turn raised an army to help us fight so we aren’t alone. So it’s not only helping liberate them, but helping make sure they can stand on their own before we move on. I know you’ve seen this already, but everyone is pitching in,” said Rick.

“Just doesn’t seem like an end in sight,” said Jamie.

“Hey, nobody in this unit has all the answers of why we are here or if we should be. That’s a personal decision only you and you alone can answer. I mean, you’ve spent a good majority of your service way behind the lines away from most of the action. Sure you had that IU raid in England, but you have yet to see the action up close and personal. And let me tell you, it ain’t pretty,” said Rick. “And it gives me resolve to continue after seeing some of the things I have.”

“Maybe,” said Jamie. “Maybe I could be wrong. But I just don’t feel it right now.”

“All we ask is you keep up your end of the Cider bargain until we get a replacement that I’m comfortable with. Warbucks is a man of his word and will get you out if you want it,” said Rick.

“I won’t slack off sir,” said Jamie.

“Stop calling me sir on missions,” said Rick. “Badaa is just fine.”

“Is that foreign?” asked Jamie.

“No,” chuckled Rick. “Stands for big, dumb animal.”

“There’s a story there I suppose,” said Jamie.

“I’ll tell you over a beer sometime,” said Rick. “You going to be okay now?”

“Let me stretch my legs a bit and I can make it until shift change,” said Jamie.

“Don’t wander too far,” said Rick.

“I’ll try not to get lost,” said Jamie. “But if I end up in Nebraska, it’s not my fault.”

“So you do have a bit of a sense of humor?” chuckled Rick.

“From time to time,” said Jamie. “I’m still unsure of when is the appropriate time for it to pop out is, but I guess I’ll learn.”

“Don’t know if appropriate has ever applied to our unit before,” said Rick.

“I figured that out the first day,” said Jamie as he went back to his pack and grabbed a ration. He didn’t want to fool with the small stove and came back and ate it cold.

“Looks like some activity,” said Rick. “Mark down the time, appeared to be the lights in the temporary barracks are coming on.”

“Got it,” said Jamie as he quickly annotated it in the log. “Just lights?”

“For now,” said Rick. “Early morning for our IU friends.”

“Is it the new guys or the ones already there?” asked Jamie.

“Looks to be the new battalions,” said Rick as he adjusted the night vision camera and zoomed in for a closer look. While they couldn’t tell what was happening inside, they did see plenty of lights on inside the compound. “Okay, we’ve got folks rolling out of the buildings getting into formation. Looks to be in company sized formations.”

“Got it,” said Jamie as he tried to keep up. But the small keyboard wasn’t helping.

“Write it down and transfer it later,” suggested Rick.

“Right,” said Jamie as he grabbed a notepad and scribbled down the information.

“And appears they are doing some early morning PT,” said Rick.

“Can I take a look?” asked Jamie. Rick relinquished control of the device and Jamie peered through it, adjusting it several times. “Lot of people.”

“Not as many as a full battalion though,” said Rick as he scribbled down his own observations.

“Want me to send what I have already?” asked Jamie.

“No, before we send out the morning status update, I collect them then,” said Rick as he pulled out the 40 power spotting scope. While after dark it wasn’t easy to use, there was enough light coming from the compound that they were able to get a decent view. Jamie set the device up on the small tripod and got it focused in.

“They aren’t very in shape from what I can tell,” he remarked.

“Let me have a look,” said Rick. Jamie shifted out of the way and went back to the night vision which had less magnification, but was easier for observation purposes. “You’re right, they don’t seem to be very into it.”

“Mark it down?” asked Jamie.

“Yeah, that kind of information can be important,” said Rick. “If the troops on the line aren’t as physically fit as others, it can give our guys the edge.”

“Little things they don’t teach you in school,” said Jamie.

“Lot of things you don’t learn,” said Rick. They continued watching until each company was eventually led away on a run from the open area they had been in. While it was close to the front lines, it was far enough away that direct observation from Coalition lines wasn’t possible. Otherwise, indirect fire and airstrikes would be a possibility.

“An eight minute kilometer?” asked Jamie.

“And not everyone finished,” said Rick. “See the stragglers?”

“Yeah,” said Jamie.

“And they are going for a second loop,” said Rick. “Seriously out of shape. Now for more lessons here. How does that help us?”

“Us specifically or the big picture?” asked Jamie.

“Both,” said Rick. “Use that space between your ears.”

“Well sir, it helps in the big picture because like you said, they might not be good fighters if they’re out of shape. I mean, less ability and agility on the battlefield and less able to move from one position to another, right?” asked Jamie.

“Go on,” said Rick.

“And it also indicates a potential lack of discipline in the units. A unit that doesn’t meet minimum standards in one area like physical fitness might slack off in other areas as well,” said Jamie. “So the leadership might not be enforcing standards like he should which in turn translates into lack of performance on the battlefield.”

“Okay,” said Rick.

“As for us in the little picture...I’m not sure,” said Jamie.

“If they happened to detect us, what are our escape options?” asked Rick.

“Generally we move to a pre-designated landing zone and get pick up. If in range of friendly forces we can request artillery and air support or even conventional coverage if possible,” said Jamie. “At least that’s what the book says.”

“But evasion is primary, correct?” asked Rick.

“Yes of course,” said Jamie and caught on to what Rick was saying. “And since we are in better shape, we can move faster than they can keep up. Got it”

“Little things like that are what we pick up on these missions,” said Rick. “The things drones, recon photos and intercepted communications can’t tell us. You can have a front line unit with all the fancy toys in the world and would never know they don’t even know how to operate them correctly or are out of shape if it isn’t for teams like ours.”

“I understand,” said Jamie. “It’s still kind of amazing that we have millions of Credits worth of equipment right here, but still needs a pair of human eyeballs.”

“Can’t replace the human brain,” said Rick. “Even if Trouble tries to prove otherwise.”

“I heard that,” said Heather from under the poncho liner.

“Been awake long?” asked Rick who knew she was awake when he made the comment.

“No,” she yawned and checked her watch. “I could get two more hours of sleep.”

“Nothing is stopping you,” said Rick.

“Too cold,” she said with a shiver.

“We might have to shift camp today for a better water source,” said Rick.

“I was thinking about that last night,” she said and uncovered herself and sat up. “There’s a point about three clicks away that might have a better source. But puts us out of position to observe the east side of Ružomberok.”

“Not digging it,” said Rick. “We’ll stay put and work with what we’ve got.”

“I did see a seasonal stream on the map during planning,” said Jamie. “Maybe seven hundred meters down the ridge here.”

“Where?” asked Rick.

“I can show you, but I’d rather wait until first light,” he replied. “Better for light discipline.”

“Good point,” Rick. “Okay, looks like they are finishing PT. We’ll wait until after daybreak to send out the report. But go ahead and type your report.”

“Yes sir,” said Jamie. “I mean, Badaa.”

“Pitiful,” remarked the IU Colonel after seeing the new battalions finish their first physical training session. “Absolutely pitiful.”

“They must start somewhere sir,” said his Major aide.

“They are starting someplace below zero I’m afraid,” said the Colonel. “It is worse than I imagined and I pray constantly we are not attacked while they are here.”

“We will get them into shape,” said the Major.

“I’m not worried about physical conditioning. At least this isn’t my primary concern,” said the Colonel. “That can be fixed reasonably quickly. I am more worried about how they would perform under fire if and when it comes to that. And the fact I must throw them onto the lines without sufficient training and replace good troops is not setting my mind at ease.”

“Two weeks is all sir,” said the Major.

“Two weeks for the infidels to strike and we spend the remainder of the war in a prison camp,” remarked the Colonel with a sigh. “If we are lucky that is.”

“I don’t believe it will come to that,” said the Major.

“You have your beliefs,” said the Colonel. “And I have mine. I have tempted fate since my regiment was destroyed at Normandy and I do not know how many more chances I will get before I find my luck has run out.”

“It is as Allah wills,” said the Major.

“I’d prefer to give Him more options,” chuckled the Colonel. “Do we have the training schedule for today?”

“The units will replace the battalions on the front lines and the commanders will be meeting at 1300 for your initial training,” said the Major. “However, I took the liberty of scheduling them at separate times in order to keep some in place on the lines.”

“A wise decision,” said the Colonel. “Come, let us prepare for morning prayers and breakfast. I feel we will have a long day ahead of us.”

Date/Time: 27 March/0759

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Okay, data dump from Badaa is coming in right now,” said Stephen as the data was being retrieved from the satellite uplink. “Looks like he wrote a novel.”

“We gotta teach that guy how to do talking points,” said Mark.

“You think about what you just said,” laughed Darren. “You’ve already turned into a desk pogue. Next thing you’ll be complaining about the job interfering with your tee time.”

“Training for my new job,” laughed Mark in return. “And if I had my clubs, I’d be all over a golf course right now.”

“And as I recall, you played golf once or twice before the Fall,” remarked Thomas.

“I don’t think what Darren did counted much as golf by any stretch of the imagination,” laughed Brian. “You weren’t kidding, six pages of intel.”

“Hold on, a supplemental report is coming in,” said Stephen. “Okay, Rick says the forward battalions are in the process of swapping out right now. They are doing a relief in place and the units are heading towards the south of Ružomberok.”

“Are they getting into road travel configuration?” asked Thomas.

“It doesn’t say,” said Stephen. “But he does say he will send an update as soon as possible.”

“Let Fluffy’s team know so they can keep an eye out,” said Thomas. “Speaking of, has he reported in?”

“Due in...” said Stephen and rechecked the satellite link. “Just came in...doesn’t appear to be anything out of the ordinary.”

“No traffic?” asked Mark.

“A few supply convoys of three to five vehicles. Couple of random patrols,” said Stephen. “Doesn’t look like anything significant.”

“Okay, let us know when Rick or Tim report in,” said Thomas and turned to Mark. “Go ahead and finish the brief. Go on the assumption those battalions are moving.”

“Way ahead of you on that,” said Mark. “I finished it up accounting for them being there or being gone so we’re ready to go with either.”

“That’s a good staff weenie,” laughed Darren.

“I hate you,” laughed Mark. “Still on for 1300?”

“Yeah, the S-3 said we were on the schedule. So you, me, Darren, Mike and Stephen will make the brief. And as soon as we’re out, we start making calls to coordinate,” said Thomas.

“Piece of cake,” said Mark.

“Let’s hope so,” said Thomas.

Date/Time: 27 March/1323

Location: 1st Brigade Headquarters, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“So while there is some risk to the conventional attack on Černová, the risk appears to be minimal as the units in place now are Class C forces and undermanned as it is. And we would only need 1st Battalion to hold them until we cross the Vah River and get the prisoners back across our lines,” concluded Thomas. “Time from the first shots fired to crossing the bridges for all elements will be four hours as a minimum, with special considerations and unexpected delays taking that out to six hours.”

The Colonel sat back in his chair and looked over the report finalized by the 14th after both Rick and Tim had called in the report of the two battalions moving south. And the Colonel had been unusually receptive to the briefing, not asking any questions as they went through the timeline of the diversionary attack, the attack on the camp itself, support requirements, airflow, projected munitions expenditures and even went so far as anticipated casualties from a brief simulation run by Major Hermann Graf at their request right before the meeting. The Colonel skimmed through

the annexes and appendixes of the report quickly scanning the briefing. He had been unusually quiet and even polite during the briefing. So Thomas immediately went on guard wondering if he was being set up for something.

“Good brief and looks like you covered about everything,” said the Colonel at the end and closed the binder jacket. “But there are some questions I have.”

“We’ll do our best to answer them sir,” said Thomas.

“Okay, so you are positive this is an IU prison camp?” asked the Colonel.

“From what our recon teams could determine, yes. It follows the classical pattern we’ve seen so far, although this one is slightly smaller than the ones in Serbia and Romania plus you have Captain Meyers’ and Chief Scott’s reports of seeing prison issue clothing as well as the execution of ten personnel,” said Thomas.

“Yes, about that,” said the Colonel. “Captain Meyers’ report stated they did not see the executions directly. And Chief Scott’s report stated they positively identified the pilot from seven hundred meters? I am unsure of whether to believe that or not.”

“Sir, I’d trust Sergeant Dugger’s identification at seven hundred meters more than I would most people’s at seven feet. And Meyers’ report did say they took in bodies to each of the buildings after the executions,” said Thomas.

“Were they dead for certain?” asked the Colonel.

“Captain Meyers stated for a fact they were,” said Thomas.

“But no pictures, no video, nothing along those lines,” said the Colonel.

“Malfunction in the recording system sir,” said Michael.

“I just have their word to go on it?” asked the Colonel.

“They have no reason to lie,” said Thomas.

“I wasn’t insinuating they did,” said the Colonel. “But for such a large and complex raid, I would be trusting two individuals and what they thought they saw as opposed to something I could point to in photographs or video and say for certain.”

“And the photographs taken of the other dead individual?” asked Thomas.

“Happenstance maybe?” said the Colonel. “One dead man wearing yellow outside of an IU installation doesn’t mean he came from there.”

“Where else would he have come from? And the malnourishment and signs of disease?” asked Thomas.

“Perhaps an underground fighter,” said the Colonel. “And he didn’t look as malnourished as many of the victims we’ve seen so far.”

“An underground fighter wearing yellow?” asked Thomas.

“I can’t speak for him now can I?” asked the Colonel. “Point being, your team cannot for certain say he came from that camp. Sure, it’s assumed he came from there, but they didn’t observe him escaping did they?”

“Pretty huge coincidence if he was out for a midnight stroll Colonel,” said Thomas.

“The point being is there is no absolute proof,” said the Colonel. “Nothing but pictures of a dead man as well as their word he came from that camp.”

“You’ve used our intelligence reports that were nothing more than verbal and written statements before Colonel,” said Thomas. “And it came through then.”

“Which is why I give you the benefit of the doubt today,” said the Colonel. “But didn’t you recon this area some months ago?”

“We did sir,” said Darren. “My team specifically.”

“And didn’t catch any hint of it then?” asked the Colonel.

“We were doing an initial recon of this sector sir,” said Darren. “And the buildings at the time weren’t getting much attention. It’s pretty far off the beaten path and without the typical signs most of these camps have. But the structures look almost identical to other camps we’ve seen so far in the European Theater.”

“Specifically?” asked the Colonel.

“The layout of the two fenced zone, the towers and defensive positions, a separate admin area and prisoner compound. Compared to other camps we have on file, it’s identical although scaled down,” said Darren.

“And identical to other installations as well. We have guard towers here and even double fenced compounds like your own for example,” said the Colonel.

“However, theirs have two machine gun positions sir. One facing out and one facing in. The only time you do that is if you not only want to keep someone out, but keeping something in as well,” said Michael.

"I'll give you the fact the layout is similar," said the Colonel. "But it could be a number of things other than a prison. A training facility for prison guards for example."

"And the possible sighting by Sergeant Dugger?" asked Thomas.

"If I recall, our own intelligence dismissed a report that the Texan pilot might be there somewhat recently," said the Colonel. "What exactly keyed you in on this place?"

"A report from the Australian intelligence platoon assigned to their 2nd Regiment," said Thomas. "The information was passed through J-SOD."

"Ah yes, they were the ones that passed up that particular theory," said the Colonel. "And we dismissed it on the basis of a recon you did previously. So I found it unusual that suddenly it would become an item of interest again."

"The Australians gave us an in depth briefing on the location and the circumstantial facts fit the theory the pilot was taken there," said Thomas. "And since he hasn't shown up anywhere else and has not been reported to the Red Cross, it seems like they are keeping him below the radar. And this camp has the best lead at the moment."

"But again, the initial brief," said the Colonel as he flipped to the intelligence portion. "Here it is, the assessment was made from a satellite recon photos that were several days old when they got them. Who was to say he wasn't moved in the meantime?"

"It's a possibility, but unlikely with Sergeant Dugger's sighting," said Thomas.

"And it doesn't appear there is much activity at this camp," said the Colonel. "Interesting they picked up anything at all."

"This camp has avoided most detection since it remains low key with minimal traffic," said Michael. "During our mission, we only saw six total vehicles entering and leaving."

"Which doesn't sound like much of a prison camp," remarked the Colonel.

"Doesn't need to have a large footprint sir," said Thomas. "Other than the guard force and the prisoners, not a lot of infrastructure needed."

"I thought you were on a large scale recon mission, not specifically looking at one location," said the Colonel. "And I'm still not convinced this is anything more than a relief barracks for the defensive forces in Ružomberok."

"With yellow prison jumpsuits and a standard prison camp configuration?" asked Thomas.

"A training facility then," said the Colonel. "And let's just say I was to authorize this and it turned out to be some sort of infantry staging area and there were several companies of troops in that facility. Your forty personnel going up against several hundred?"

“We could make alternate plans in case it didn’t turn out to be what we thought it was. But again, all evidence supports the prison camp theory,” said Thomas.

“What kind of alternate plans?” asked the Colonel.

“Emergency ex-fil covered by air assets sir,” said Thomas.

“Those are hard to get right now,” temporized the Colonel.

“But you or General Chambers could push the issue and get a flight of A-10s or a couple of gunships dedicated to the mission in case it went south,” said Thomas.

“Again, many are grounded. The most assets that are being used right now are the heavy bombers that are launching cruise missile strikes deep into occupied territory,” said the Colonel.

“For a mission like this? I’m sure the Air Force would break some fighters loose,” said Thomas. “Our plan actually calls for two F-15 types with GPS guided bombs.”

“I saw,” said the Colonel. “But again, I’m not sure this is what you say it is. I mean, intelligence from a third party that was discredited, a supposed identification of the pilot in question from a half mile away, a dead man in the woods that we don’t know where he came from and supposed executions that were never really seen so to speak. It just doesn’t add up into something I would feel comfortable pushing to Division as a viable plan. When would you want to go anyway?”

“In seven days,” said Thomas.

“You want to pull off an operation of this magnitude in a week?” asked the Colonel.

“Most of the forces are already in position. The aircraft assets only need twenty-four hours to get up to speed, the Rangers can be here tomorrow and as far as hospital units, those can be alerted by you or Division,” said Thomas.

“There is more to it than that,” said the Colonel.

“What timeline do you think would be appropriate then sir?” asked Thomas.

“I’ll be honest, I’m not sure if I ever would approve a mission like this,” said the Colonel.

“May I ask why sir?” asked Thomas.

“Because something of this magnitude needs to be planned out as a minimum at Brigade level. Probably higher since it involves other services as well as entire other nations services. And furthermore, we need better intel from this location before mounting some kind of strike. At least something I can take to higher and show them,” said the Colonel. “Plus, I’m not sure about the forces that moved in. You are assuming they are all Class C soldiers. But the report here

indicates your team didn't get a good look at the entire convoy. So it could have been just a select portion of that battalion, like plus up troops. No, for the moment, I don't think this should go forward."

"Would you like more in depth analysis and another recon?" asked Thomas.

"The point keeps coming back to why have a prison camp this close to the lines in the first place? It's unusual to keep it this close to the spring offensive," said the Colonel.

"It crossed our minds as well sir," said Thomas. "But being that the offensive is still some weeks away, they probably kept the facility open until the last minute."

"Again, an assumption," said the Colonel. "Too many assumptions here."

"You see assumptions, I see analysis of data we've collected," said Thomas.

"Assumptions that could prove to be disastrous," said the Colonel.

"Minor risks worth taking if this does turn out to be a prison camp," said Thomas.

"Risks that are unnecessary this close to the offensive," said the Colonel.

"And if it does turn out to be a prison camp?" asked Thomas.

"Then we will liberate them when the offensive comes around," said the Colonel.

"An assumption of your own sir," said Thomas. "The IU has not left many of those camps for us to liberate when we're on the move. They murder the prisoners and move on, typically leaving nothing but dead bodies for us to find."

"Again, I cannot be certain this isn't a training facility or a relief point of some kind," said the Colonel. "You've done a good job as an initial analysis, but this requires a more in depth look."

"Can you give us the room?" asked Thomas. The Colonel nodded his permission and the remainder of the group moved out. Once they departed, Thomas motioned at a chair. The Colonel waved his hand and Thomas took a seat.

"Colonel, I understand your concerns over this mission, but we've attempted to think of every possible scenario and outcome in this mission. We've done high risk missions before with little chance of success and come off clean. And I would evaluate this mission as having a far better chance of success than some of the others we've done," said Thomas.

"I understand and appreciate what you might have done in the past, but you are talking a major assault and significant risks with over a thousand soldier's lives," said the Colonel.

“Which has a good chance of success right now in a very brief window. The IU is rotating forces back to prepare for the offensive and sending Class B and C forces forward to hold the lines until it starts. If there ever was an opportunity to do this and potentially even take Ružomberok now is that opportunity,” said Thomas.

“And run the risk of the Division not being able to support our move?” asked the Colonel.

“I would think the General would take that into account and be able to push the Division forward to keep up with you if you made a breakthrough,” said Thomas. “And if you could even get halfway down ESR Tombstone, it puts you in a far better position for the spring offensive.”

“Again, there are risks,” said the Colonel.

“This is also the kind of mission that can get noticed by higher and earn significant rewards for nearly everyone involved. Including yourself sir,” said Thomas.

“I do this job because it’s what’s required of me; not for promotion or rewards,” said the Colonel.

“I understand,” said Thomas and not believing it for a moment. “I’ll make the request again. Let us do this. I understand we have some issues between us, but this mission is worth putting aside our differences and moving it forward. If we don’t do this, we condemn those prisoners to die by our inaction.”

“If there are any prisoners,” said the Colonel.

“What do we have to lose by sending it forward as a minimum?” asked Thomas.

“And again, the battalion attack against Černová is a large risk, your supposed prison camp could turn out to house a battalion of enemy troops and your entire team ends up dead. Is that what you want?” asked the Colonel.

“I think you’ll find us a little harder to kill than you think,” said Thomas.

“That might be the case, but I still can’t approve this mission,” said the Colonel. “And that has nothing to do with you personally, I just believe the risks are not worth the reward.”

“Freeing prisoners and rescuing that pilot isn’t reward enough?” asked Thomas.

“And again, you assume it’s a prison and assume that Texan pilot is there. And I just can’t commit without more confirmation,” said the Colonel.

“Would you like me to send a team back in for further intelligence?” asked Thomas.

“No, I’ll get additional assets from here and higher,” said the Colonel.

“We’re the most familiar with the territory,” said Thomas.

“I understand and appreciate that. But perhaps you are not thinking objectively about it. It appears you are focusing in on this particular spot. Maybe a new set of eyes on the situation would help give me reason to reconsider this mission,” said the Colonel.

“The Class A units may have rotated back by then,” said Thomas.

“That’s a chance we will have to take,” said the Colonel.

“Sir, now is the best time to strike. Right now we have the opportunity to secure the bridges, raid that camp and rescue those prisoners,” said Thomas as one last effort.

“And I feel otherwise Major,” said the Colonel. “I’ll get another Cider team in here to evaluate it further so again, I can make an informed decision. Until then, why don’t you expand your scope and check the surrounding areas. There is a slim chance this pilot might still be out trying to make his way to friendly lines. Send some teams out on a sector level recon and see if you can’t dig up anything.”

Thomas stood and collected the binders containing the briefings as the meeting was pretty much over. They had given it their best shot and for some reason, the Colonel was not going to approve it no matter how much they had done. “Colonel, I think this is a huge mistake on your part. We’ve planned, staffed and gift wrapped this mission for you and all it requires is you to pull the trigger. I can have my teams on the ground in ninety-six hours and a strike less than twenty-four afterwards. Lieutenant Colonel Jacobson has the best Battalion in this Brigade, maybe even the whole Division, and his troopers could capture those bridges with their eyes closed and one hand behind their back. Your own staff can work out the remaining logistical details that we might have missed and all the air support requires is your signature. You are missing a huge opportunity to take a probable prison camp intact and rescue these prisoners before the IU can kill them. And even if it does turn out to be some sort of relief facility, you could have bombers on standby to take it out of play prior to the offensive. We have a narrow window of opportunity here and cannot let it pass.”

The Colonel sat back in his chair and looked at Thomas. Thomas could see by the look on his face his mindset against the mission hadn’t changed and no matter what, it wasn’t going forward. He finished the briefing with a simple “thank you Major” and gave him a quick hand salute and pulled a folder out of a stack to review it. He ignored Thomas as he finished securing the binders in a bag and didn’t acknowledge his departure. Thomas closed the door behind him and shook his head slowly at the members waiting for him to emerge.

“Just like that?” asked Michael.

“Just like that,” said Thomas.

“No reason other than what we heard?” asked Darren.

“You know the reason why,” said Thomas.

“Playing with people’s lives because of a personal grudge isn’t cool,” said Stephen.

“I know,” said Thomas quietly as he tried to think of a way through this. He had no idea what to do at this point and departed the headquarters without saying another word.

CHAPTER 20

Date/Time: 27 March/1533

Location: IU Internment camp, southwest of Ružomberok, Occupied Slovakia

The guards stepped through the center aisle and counted the members of the building they were in, coming up with forty-seven total. The gas masks they wore hid their faces from Captain “Hank” Williams, but he watched him like a hawk in case there might have been an opportunity to escape. When they were done counting, a burlap sack was dropped on the floor and they departed, closing the door behind them. Williams heard them put the bar in place to keep the door from coming open and footsteps lead away from the building. The food that was left behind was passed out but would barely feed half that number for a single meal. Many of the prisoners had a hard time eating since the lack of nutrition had taken its toll on their bodies and their teeth. The hard bread wasn’t easy to chew, but many forced it down as best they could. Williams could see Dana chewing mindlessly at the small piece she had received and finished it before taking in a half a cup of water. He looked at the portion he had in his hand before going to her.

“Take it,” he said and attempted to hand it to her.

“No, you eat,” she said and pushed his hand back.

“Dana, you need it more than me,” he said and held it out for her.

“But you get sick,” said Dana. “You eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” he said although feeling starved. The fact a fourteen year old girl was slowly withering away in front of his eyes when she should be looking forward to the best parts of her life grated on everything decent in his mind and soul. And he had no misgivings about trying to sustain her until they could be rescued. And even if he went hungry himself, he had already grown protective of the young girl in front of him.

“No, you food, you eat,” she said. “You food for escape.”

“How did you know I was planning to escape?” he asked.

“I, ummm, see, yes? See you *oči*,” she said and pointed at her eyes. “You escape and help all people Jahannam, yes?”

“Maybe,” replied Williams.

“Must eat, must food for escape,” said Dana. “You eat.”

“I can’t let you starve!” he objected.

“I am dead here,” she said. “No live Jahannam.”

“Don’t say that!” he said forcefully. “Don’t you dare give up!”

“I no understand,” she said.

“You do not speak of dying! You need to live! You have your whole life to go! Understand?” he asked as he took her by the shoulders.

“I no live long,” she said.

“Yes you will,” he said. “Listen, my people, my friends will come. They know I am a prisoner. They will find me and help all people here. All people Jahannam. Understand?”

“They come?” asked Dana.

“Yes,” said Williams and gave a reassuring smile.

“They take all people Jahannam home?” asked Dana.

“They’ll take you anywhere you want to go,” he said.

“Take me Texas?” she asked with a briefest hint of a smile.

“I’ll adopt you myself,” replied Williams.

“A-dopt?” she asked with a puzzled look.

“Yes, even take you Texas,” he said. “As long as you live, understand?”

“I like see America,” she said with another half a smile.

“My friends will come, I promise,” he said reassuringly.

“I believe you,” she said.

And right then and there, nothing that had happened before had given him more resolve to be resistive of the IU’s attempts to gather information. Through the beatings, the torture and the talks with Aziz, nothing had solidified the defiance to the IU as much as a simple teenage girl he had never met before. Aziz’s plan had backfired in a huge manner as he didn’t expect the element of children to be thrown into the mix. And there was nothing he could do, no amount of torture, no psychological ploys he could muster and nothing short of taking his life that would ever get Williams to give him any information. And as he continued to think of the current situation, a deep scowl grew over his face.

“Are you, umm, mad?” asked Dana.

“Sorry?” asked Williams.

“Your *oči*,” she said and pointed again at her eyes. “They are mad.”

“A little angry, yes,” said Williams.

“You mad me?” asked Dana.

“No darlin,” said Williams. “You’re a child and this shouldn’t be happening to you.”

“I no understand,” said Dana.

“I can’t explain easily,” said Williams. “But no, I’m not mad at you.”

“This happen many Slovak people,” said Dana. “Many place like Jahannam.”

“I won’t be happy until every one of them area dead,” said Williams.

“I sorry?” asked Dana.

“When I get out, I will not be happy until everyone that did this is dead,” said Williams. “I will kill every last soldier I can until it’s over.”

Dana didn’t understand everything he said, but knew he was not happy about the people in the camp and their treatment. She was unsure of how to respond and gently patted him on the hand as a way of acknowledgment. “You good man.”

“Thanks,” said Williams as he took her hands in his. “And I swear I will help you when we get out. Do whatever I can to get you home or America.”

“Thank you,” she said with another hint of a smile. But she wasn’t sure his friends would arrive before she had withered away. She felt weaker than normal and didn’t know if she had the fight left in herself to continue on. It would be easy to just let go, but Hank’s being there gave her strength for the moment. But she didn’t know how long it would last.

Date/Time: 27 March/1821

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Did you get the airflow worked out for the two teams?” asked Thomas as he mindlessly chewed his supper. They were dining in the main Brigade area that evening since the stove had gone out in their compound.

“Yeah, one bird though so they will make two pickups,” said Dave. “They are heading out tonight around 2300.”

“Okay,” said Thomas simply as his mind was filled from earlier with the meeting and how it had taken a complete U-turn from where they thought it would end up. And for some odd reason, he just didn’t trust the Colonel to make good on his promise to get additional teams in to check the site out. He was unsure of which direction to take at this point and was thinking through every possible route to a conclusion. He had already requested a meeting with the Division Commander or the ADM and had been informed they both were unavailable for over a week. And yet his mind kept coming back to the simple fact that the mission should not have been denied at the local level. While the Colonel had some decent concerns, there was really no reason not to allow it to proceed and it left Thomas even more confused than he had been in a long time.

“Mind if I pop a squat guys?” asked the Brigade S-3 as he came up holding a tray.

“Not sure how popular Brigade types are around these parts right now,” said Michael with a tone. Shannon put her hand on top of his in a non-verbal way of asking him not to go any further with his comments.

“Listen, I know and that mission was bulletproof. Maybe a couple of minor changes, but overall it was a good plan. Better than what I could think up anyway,” said the S-3.

“Grab a seat Neal,” said Thomas. “While we still like you; for the moment at least.”

He sat down at an open chair and grabbed his cutlery set out of a folded handkerchief. After getting everything set up, he prayed briefly and set to eating. “I actually came over for other reasons than to mend fences.”

“Oh?” asked Dave Lawson.

“What did the Colonel tell you after we left today?” asked the S-3. “And have you pushed this up to Division yet?”

“I called up the Chief of Staff and was told I couldn’t get an audience with the Division Commander for the next ten days,” said Thomas. “Even when I said it was urgent, there just wasn’t room on the schedule to get me in. Same thing with the ADM.”

“So you did try?” asked the S-3.

“Of course I tried,” said Thomas. “This is too important for some staff wiener to not sign off just because he has a personal problem with me or this unit.”

“I tried back door channels myself,” said the S-3. “At least trying to get you a meeting. Problem is the ADM is off at a meeting for the next week and I got the same line. The General is out of

pocket for a few days in London. Plus I was told to route the request up through the Colonel. I tried some back door channels, but it appears the Chief of Staff has cut off my avenues.”

“Which won’t get you far with the Colonel,” said Thomas.

“Right,” said the S-3. “So during your private meeting, what came out?”

“Before or after he said no again?” asked Thomas with a tone.

“Seriously,” said the S-3.

“He said he was going to bring in additional Cider teams to scope the place out,” said Thomas. “Said we were not being objective about the situation and suggested we go on a sector level recon looking for the pilot instead.”

“I was afraid of that,” said the S-3. “And that’s not what happened after you left.”

“And what did happen?” asked Darren.

“Two things. He made some modifications to your mission report. Altered entire sections of it and passed it up to the J-2. They accepted it as gospel and filed it away,” said the S-3.

“Are you serious?” said Thomas.

“As a heart attack,” said the S-3. “I got eyes on it before it went out and basically the entire theory of this being a prison camp was tossed out and supposedly your report identified it as a training facility or a staging ground.”

“No way,” said Thomas. “Now isn’t the time to pull a joke like this.”

“You know me better than that,” said the S-3.

“We can replace the report with the original copy,” said Thomas. “Send it direct.”

“You remember who got the J-2 into that position?” asked the S-3.

“You’re telling me our report, our initial and signed report, will be tossed because that fool happens to be friends with our Colonel?” asked Thomas. “Is there anyone at Division Headquarters that isn’t covering for that idiot?”

“Pretty much,” said the S-3.

“This is a freaking nightmare,” said Thomas.

“That’s not the worst part or the reason I came to see you,” said the S-3.

“Drop the other shoe,” said Thomas. “Can’t get any worse than it is.”

“He revised the bombing list and put that location as a target,” said the S-3.

“He what?!” demanded Thomas.

“Listen, I tried to talk him out of it along with the XO, but he nearly took our heads off when we spoke to him about it. It’s on the bottom and might not be hit at all. At least not for a week, maybe not for a month, but it’s on there, plain as day,” said the S-3.

“You’re joking, right? This is a sick joke?” asked Thomas.

“I really wish I was. He’s got it stuck in his head that this is some sort of training facility and what you saw were enactments and the single dead body outside just happened to be a random person who stumbled across the compound. So instead of getting further intel, he scribbled it on the bombing list as an ‘as can’ basis,” said the S-3.

“And you let it go forward?” asked Thomas with anger welling inside him.

“I tried to file it on the bottom, but he sent it to Division himself,” said the S-3.

“That’s tantamount to murder!” objected Thomas. “There are probably innocent people there that will die if they bomb it!”

“I know,” said the S-3. “And we mentioned that as well. That’s when he came unglued and threatened to fire us for picking sides.”

“Picking what sides?” asked Darren.

“He’s got it in his head that the Brigade is lining up on different sides. Ones that support Tom and the others that support him. And he thinks we are taking your side in every matter that comes along,” said the S-3.

“That’s ridiculous!” objected Thomas. “The guy deserves his own room in a mental ward!”

“Ever since that meeting you two have where you had the knock down drag out, he’s been like that. Suspects everyone and everything of being against him. So our normal micromanaged lives got even worse,” said the S-3.

“And this has been bounced upwards?” asked Darren.

“We can’t yet,” said the S-3 and stopped Thomas before he interrupted. “We have nothing concrete to go on yet. He hasn’t done anything that would ensure he gets relieved from the top so we are stuck for the moment.”

“Except for ordering a bunch of innocent people to their deaths in a bombing raid!” growled Thomas. “I guess that’s not concrete enough is it?”

“There has to be another validation from another source. You know this,” said the S-3. “Plus your altered report supports his position.”

“I don’t know how much more validation is needed?!” said Thomas in an elevated voice. “And forging an intelligence report is criminal!”

“No sense in announcing this conversation to the entire chow tent Tom,” said the S-3.

“It’s the principle. The Australians suspected it, we verified it,” said Thomas a little calmer.

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way,” said the S-3. “Not according to the Colonel at least. The Aussies thought the pilot was there, you never got a solid confirmation on it according to the report he put forward.”

“Listen, I’m not going to allow you to continue playing devil’s advocate here,” said Thomas. “The situation is completely unacceptable.”

“I’m not trying to play devil’s advocate,” said the S-3. “And I can’t believe you would think that to start with. But what I am telling you is the process that’s going on right now.”

“A process that’s about to get a bunch of people killed,” said Thomas.

“And if he takes this Brigade into combat there will be a lot more people that are going to wind up getting killed,” remarked Dave.

“We’re doing the best we can, but he thinks he can run everything by himself,” said the S-3. “And is failing miserably at them all. He’s got another sand table coming up so hopefully the Division Commander can see what’s going on for himself. The last one didn’t go so well and they had a private mentorship lesson after. One thing for certain, he didn’t pull any punches about his dislike for you.”

“That was the same day we had our chat,” said Thomas. “I’d expect his emotions to be elevated after the conversation we had.”

“I’d like to know, but then again, no I wouldn’t,” said the S-3.

“No, you don’t,” confirmed Thomas.

“Listen, I just thought I would give you a heads up as to what wheels were turning right now. So if there is any way you can get confirmation of what’s going on at that site, get it. Route it up through J-SOD or another independent intel facility and get it on record,” said the S-3.

“We’ll do what we can, but being that it’s within the Brigade sphere of influence, I’m not sure how much credibility an independent source will have,” said Darren.

“Just get it on record, okay?” requested the S-3. “Trust me, if that bombing happens, you guys need to make sure you are in the clear on this. Your original unaltered report needs to be on file in a place he can’t touch. Understand?”

And they immediately knew they would end up taking the fall for any actions that happened at that camp if it was bombed and it turned out to be a prison camp. They had to have an official record they suspected it was a prison camp as well as documentation they had expressed their concerns with the Brigade Commander as well as J-SOD. The meeting they had that day would be on record, but Thomas knew he would need to write out a detailed memorandum expressing everything that happened in that meeting to include the private portion.

“You honestly think he would try to pin that on us?” asked Darren after the group thought about what was just said.

“I honestly don’t know, but I wouldn’t put it past him,” said the S-3. “He’s a political cat and I can guarantee you there would be an investigation into your unit as a minimum just to protect him. The XO and I will cover you from our end as best as possible, but again, you need documentation somewhere off this base.”

“Thanks Neal,” said Thomas as he had heard enough and it had ruined his appetite. He dropped the fork down on the plate in disgust and sat back in his chair. There wasn’t anything else that could be said at that moment so Thomas rose to leave.

“If I can help, let me know,” said the S-3 as Thomas departed without saying goodbye. He mindlessly dumped the remainder of his tray into the trash can and headed out into the main Brigade area. Knowing he probably was not himself right then, Dave and Darren tagged along behind him, keeping a watchful eye, but maintaining their distance so he could sort through the revelation he had just been a part of.

As they departed the mess hall, Darren could see Thomas had his mind in full gear and was running through everything that had transpired over the previous eight hours. They wandered aimlessly towards the recreation area near the center of the camp. While there weren’t a great amount of morale items in the Brigade encampment, people tended to find things to amuse themselves. Several dozen homemade picnic tables were occupied with various service members playing cards or board games, writing letters or just talking. A nearby makeshift basketball court seemed to be getting a pretty decent sized crowd watching the two teams go at it. However, Thomas saw several of his group sitting at one table playing Spades and wandered aimlessly towards them.

“I’ve got six!” announced Amber with a huge grin.

“You think maybe you could have some sort of poker face?” asked her partner 1st Lieutenant Carmen “Chevy” Ford with a scoff. “Or at least bid your hand like you know what you’re doing? And of course wait for them to bid since they have to go first.”

“Oh, trust me,” said Amber with the same silly grin. “You could say my hand is *guaranteed!*”

“So much for no table talk,” said Willy Perez with a roll of his eyes. “I’ve got five and a P.”

“I’ve got four and a strong P,” said Nate Clark as he shuffled the cards in his hand.

“Nine?” asked Willy.

“Nobody goes nine,” said Nate. “Eight, ten or go home.”

“You’ll get set,” warned Amber with her silly grin.

“Ten for two,” said Willy after looking over his hand again.

“Six!” announced Amber once again.

“Board,” said Ford indicating the minimum number of tricks they would take at four.

“But I just said six!” protested Amber.

“We’re going board,” said Ford with an annoyed look. “I can’t support anything.”

“Fine, I’ll carry you then,” said Amber.

Thomas wandered over to the side of the table with Amber and looked at the cards in her hand. Besides the big joker, he saw nothing that would indicate anything close to the numbers she claimed. She led off with a Queen of Hearts and it went downhill from there.

“Thought that Queen might walk,” said Amber as the next suit was led and she played her hand. By the time Spades had been broken, it was a complete disaster with Nate and Willy having taken all the tricks. Nate led off with a low Spade which forced Amber to play the only one in her hand, the big joker.

“Great, I’m out of spades now,” said Amber with an annoyed look on her face.

“Amber!” growled Ford. “You’re not supposed to announce that!”

“I’m spade tight,” said Willy.

“I’m out,” said Ford and tossed her hand on the board.

“Wait!” said Amber.

“Amber, spade tight means he has nothing left but spades. You used yours so they are automatically going to take the remainder of the books,” said Ford with a sigh.

“Oh,” said Amber. “So that means we don’t get any more?”

“Thought you said you knew how to play,” said Nate with a laugh as he added their two hundred points. “And that’s game ladies, 624 to oh, that’s a nice number of minus 51. Five Credits from the both of you please.”

“Can I keep mine to buy a new partner?” asked Ford.

“Well, I know the rules at least,” said Amber as she passed over the five credit bill. “Want to play again?”

“Nope, losers walk,” said Willy as the next pair came in trying to take the current winners off the table and a new game was started.

Thomas had a slight smile form on his face at the scene as he started wandering around the area once again, still deep in thought. As with every war before them, entertainment was always found in some way or form and he ended up stopping near a female NCO picking at a guitar and adjusting the tune. Apparently she finally got it the way she wanted and started playing a song and a small group formed around her. Thomas saw she was very talented both singing and on the guitar. She was covering an older song he hadn’t heard in years. He listened to the lyrics as she sang along.

“Make a statement,” sang the woman. “Take a stand.”

The song gave Thomas a moment of pause and he intently listened to the remainder of the song, his head clearing for the first time in several weeks.

“Come along with me, come along and you’ll see what it’s like to be free,” sang the NCO. “Come along with me and I’ll ease your pain.”

Darren and Dave had quietly joined Thomas, listening to the song and enjoying the good vocals and outstanding guitar work until she was done. Neither noticed the intense look that came over Thomas’ face as the song came to a conclusion. The group that had appeared cheered and clapped for the woman who politely bowed to the group that had gathered. As always, entertainment was where you could find it and good entertainment was in short supply sometimes. But this had been a treat for everyone that had stopped by.

“Very well done Sergeant,” said Thomas.

“Thank you sir,” said the woman with a slight blush and a smile. She hadn’t played in front of anyone higher ranking before as she had just rotated into theater two weeks before.

“And how come you aren’t touring with the USO?” asked Thomas with a smile. Even in the aftermath of the Fall, the Uniformed Services Organization had reorganized and supported the troops overseas like they had since their inception in the last World War. Through thick and thin, they did their best to bring cheer to those so far away from home and their loved ones.

“Cause I want to help people sir,” she said with a grin. “I can only do that by fighting.”

“Rock on trooper,” said Thomas with a grin in return. “And thanks.”

Thomas turned to find Darren and Dave standing behind him. He knew they would probably be keeping a close eye on him as he had been under a lot of stress lately; but they saw the fire had returned in his eyes and knew something inside had finally given way.

“Orders?” asked Darren as he knew something big was up.

“Get the teams together,” said Thomas. “We’re going behind the lines.”

CHAPTER 21

Date/Time: 28 March/0132

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

The Blackhawk helicopter came in for a landing and set down on the pad outside the Cider compound. Since it was late at night, the crew decided they would leave it there overnight and take it back to the main helicopter pads the next morning instead of waking more people than was necessary on a low pass over the camp. As the rotors were winding down, both teams started dismounting and were met by a member of the leadership as usual.

“Glad to see you guys made it back safe,” said Darren.

“Little bit longer trip for some,” said Tim as he shook his hand. “Where’s Tom?”

“Asleep,” said Darren.

“Everything okay?” asked Rick as they departed the pad and headed for the command.

“Oh yeah,” said Darren with a grin. “Everything is just dandy.”

“Seriously?” asked Rick.

“Yeah, absolutely,” exclaimed Darren. “I sent Tom to bed early and told him I’d see you in.”

“Okay, what’s the deal here?” asked Rick. “Because now you’re getting all giddy like he was a few days ago.”

“He finally snapped,” said Darren with a grin. “Just let it all go.”

“That’s not setting my mind at ease,” said Rick. “Or has everyone else lost it along with him and I’m missing out on the party?”

“I think you’ll like what happened,” said Darren. “Do your data dump at the command center and hold off on your after action. We’ve got an early morning meeting planned so get cleaned up and off to bed with you guys as well.”

“What kind of meeting?” asked Tim.

“One that you guys are gonna like,” grinned Darren.

“Okay, I’m seriously going to start worrying,” said Rick. “Last word we got was the mission was cancelled by Brigade. Did he change his mind?”

“No,” grinned Darren.

“Tom pushed it to Division and they signed off?” asked Rick.

“Nope,” said Darren. “Let’s just say we’ll enjoy being cell mates.”

“We’re going at it alone?” asked Rick.

“More or less,” said Darren.

“As in mutiny and the whole nine yards?” asked Rick.

“I wouldn’t specifically categorize it as mutiny per se,” said Darren. “There’s extenuating factors involved of which I’ll bring you up to speed on later.”

“Is it worth the risk?” asked Rick.

“I personally think so,” said Darren. “But this one will require your personal choice in the matter. He’s going to let everyone make a choice in the morning.”

Rick stopped walking towards the command center and looked at Darren. He wondered what exactly had transpired while they were behind the lines and decided it might be best to wait for the meeting as Darren was not being very forthcoming with the information. He went into the command center and plugged his communicator into the computer, letting it download all the files they had created from the mission. The teams waited their turn to do the same thing and they were instructed to clean up and hit the sack as they had an early morning meeting planned.

“You sure you don’t want to clue me in on what’s going on?” asked Rick as he made sure his team was finished and cleared from the command center.

“Tom, Mark, Michael, Dave, Bill and I had a head shed last night,” said Darren. “Long story short, the mission was shot down by the Colonel and he turned around and put that facility on the bombing listing because he thinks it’s a training facility or a staging ground. So Tom finally snapped and made the decision to go at it alone. He gave us all a choice and said it was up to us whether we wanted to go or not. How many of us backed out?”

“Not a one of you I suppose,” said Rick. “Just like I won’t.”

“So you see why it appears we’ve lost our minds?” asked Darren.

“Because you have,” laughed Rick. “And I’d be pissed if I missed this trip.”

“General McMackin will be here in the morning after the meeting and I’ll be planning a trip up to see Colonel Jacobson and Reese after our initial team meeting,” said Darren.

“Don’t I get to play?” asked Rick.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find yourself in this neck deep before it’s all over,” said Darren.

“Sometimes it feels good to get in a little trouble,” said Rick. “Okay, meeting is at 0800?”

“0830,” said Darren. “Grab a shower and some sleep. Especially the shower part.”

“New kid did okay, not great and we had a counseling session while we were out, but he’s just green and needs some more time,” said Rick.

“I trust the bruises won’t show?” chuckled Darren.

“Nah, not like that,” chuckled Rick. “Mark’s knife got a workout though.”

“Caught him napping?” asked Darren.

“First mission and he finally crashed,” said Rick. “We’ve all been there, but I think our normal corrective tool will work yet again.”

“Hope so,” said Darren. “See you in the morning.”

“Yep, later,” said Rick as he walked back to his tent and Darren to his. And although he needed to rest, Rick’s mind was going a thousand miles an hour over the information that had been shared by Darren. And the conflict within that disobeying an order was against the principles they stood for. But also knowing the facility was on the bombing list kind of tossed that out the window as he trusted the men and women he served with and the information they gathered. He continued his thoughts well into his shower and lying in bed, his mind a speeding train as he drifted off to sleep.

Date/Time: 28 March/0830

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“We have everyone?” asked Thomas as he looked out over the assembled teams in the chow tent. The cooks had been asked politely to leave so the meeting could take place. Thomas saw nods around the room and walked out in front of the group.

“As most of you know, Brigade turned down the mission to raid the prisoner compound yesterday. Furthermore, some of us learned last night that our analysis of the target location was altered to remove the prison camp portions and made to look like a normal staging facility or training camp. It was sent to Division and signed off as gospel by the J-2,” said Thomas.

Quiet murmurs and several people saying “what” were heard throughout the tent. Before it could get out of hand, Thomas continued.

“Now that’s not the worst part,” he said. “The worst part is that facility has been put on the bombing list to be hit sometime between now and when Operation Ticonderoga starts.”

Again, murmurs were heard and whispered conversations erupting between the gathered members in the tent.

“Have you pushed this up to Division?” asked Ashley. “We saw it for our own eyes!”

“I have requested an audience with the Division Commander, but he is unavailable for the next ten days. The ADM is out of pocket for at least a week and the Chief of Staff refuses to take any calls unless they are coordinated through the Colonel first,” said Thomas.

“We have to do something!” objected Carmen Ford. “What about J-SOD? Can they help?”

“No,” said Thomas. “Being that it’s in the Brigade sphere of influence, they can’t and won’t even touch it.”

“Corps then!” objected Ford.

“Not even a consideration,” said Thomas. “If I can’t get into see Division, how likely do you think I’ll be to get into see anyone at Corps?”

“There has to be an avenue we can take!” objected Staff Sergeant Katie “Bear” Shepherd.

“There is,” said Thomas. “Which is why I’ve called everyone here today.”

The room got quiet as Thomas was ready to make his announcement. Outside of a half dozen people, nobody knew what he was going to say. But they also trusted him to know a way through this situation as he always seemed to have an answer.

“We go alone,” said Thomas simply.

“What do you mean alone?” asked Sergeant John “Rooster” Tyson.

“I mean we do this without approval from Brigade, Division or J-SOD,” said Thomas.

“You mean as in what I think it does?” asked Ashley.

“Yep,” answered Thomas simply.

“Mutiny,” said Master Sergeant Bobby “R2” Rivera.

“I’d like to call it defying orders myself,” said Captain Michael “Token” Parsons.

“We could be shot or spend a really long time in jail for this,” remarked 1st Lieutenant Joel “Blaze” Tucker. “And as much as I like you guys, but I’d prefer not to be cellmates.”

“Which is why I’m calling you all here this morning,” said Thomas. “This is an all-in or nothing approach. I’m not going to order anyone to go on this mission. I am asking for volunteers only and if one stays back, none of us go and take our chances with trying to get into Division. This is a huge decision on everyone’s part and I cannot and will not try to sway you one way or the other. I know the hard work and dedication each and every one of you have put in over the past five months. And in that five months, we’ve seen our comrades wounded, killed and pushed to the breaking point without any end in sight. But for the first time in those five months, I feel good about what I’d like for us to do. But again, this choice will be yours and yours alone.”

“I will break here and let everyone have a couple of hours to think it over. But one thing is for certain, I will not force a decision one way or the other. And I will not tolerate peer pressure. This is an individual decision that can and just might follow you around for the rest of your lives so that’s something to think about before coming to a decision. You can talk to me in private or through your team leads on your decision. Nobody will think any less of you for saying you want to drop out and that kind of information will be confidential if you decide. So we’ll meet back here in two hours and I’ll let everyone know then,” said Thomas.

Quiet murmurs were heard once again in the tent and whispered conversations were going back and forth. However, one voice finally spoke up before people started leaving.

“I don’t know about any of you, but I’m all in on this crazy train,” said Corporal Chris “Dutch” Chang. “I know I’m relatively the new kid around here, but I saw for myself what was going on there. And if they put it on the bombing list, then we need to do something about it. And if that means defying orders to go in and get them, then I’ll take my chances with a trial and let them tell me I was wrong for doing the right thing.”

After he sat down, another voice spoke up, the group turned slightly to see Staff Sergeant Heather “Trouble” Davis standing up to address the group.

“We are a unit built on trust. And again, I can’t speak for everyone, but I trust the Major to see this through to the end. And I’ll trust each and every one of you to see this through to the end as well. We know what will happen if that place gets bombed. We know there are prisoners there, some of you saw that first hand. So I trust those that did see it to give us good information,” she said. “And furthermore, I feel like I can trust each and every one of you to let us know in public which way you decide to go on this. We don’t do things in private here, we never have and I hope we never have to. But one thing I know for certain I trust in my fellow teammates to make this decision right here and now. I, for one, am in.”

The crowd started speaking in agreement with Heather’s words and the conversation started getting slightly out of hand. Thomas got the meeting back in order before continuing.

“I’d be more than happy for everyone to speak their minds, but I cannot let you all come to this decision without thinking it over. So again, we’ll break here and everyone thinks about this before coming to a decision,” he said. “Two hours from now we’ll meet again. Also, if anyone gets cold feet during the prep, we’ll call a halt to it then as well. We can cancel this all the way

up to the moment we fire our first shot so don't think once you are committed you can't back out. All in, none in," he concluded.

After he finished, the gathered teams quietly got up and wandered off, some in pairs, others in entire teams discussing the matter. But each went away thinking of what had just been said and what their ultimate decision would be. Rick saw Sergeant Jamie Collins by himself after the meeting looking out into the compound and wandered over to him. "Well?"

"Well what sir?" asked Collins.

"Major Dayfield's words are true," said Rick. "Nobody will think differently if you back out."

"I'm in," said Jamie without hesitation.

"Just like that?" asked Rick.

"Does it need to be complicated?" asked Jamie. "I might not feel the reasons we are here or whether I should be here are good, but this seems to be a mission that tends to be what Cider does. So why not?"

"Your choice," said Rick. "Just wanted to make sure nobody would think differently."

"Okay, answer me this then," said Jamie. "If we had someone else in charge of this Brigade, would the mission have been approved?"

"Our last commander would have wanted to lead the charge," said Rick.

"Would he have altered our intelligence reports?" asked Jamie.

"Never," said Rick.

"So besides this current Colonel being shady, what changed?" asked Jamie. "If we had one single person different in the chain of command, we'd be sharpening knives right now."

"Interesting way of looking at it," said Rick. "Especially since you haven't been here that long."

"I've been here long enough to hear the griping and complaining," said Jamie. "And I've worked for some bad commanders before. So it's not an unknown situation for me."

"Didn't realize we were that vocal," said Rick.

"Maybe not you in particular," said Jamie. "But I tend to listen to those around me. And word around the campfire is this Colonel has it in for Major Dayfield and this unit. And you should know by my file that I love annoying leadership so this is right up my alley."

"Well, when you put it like that," laughed Rick.

“Overall, Major Dayfield seems like an okay guy who wants to do the right thing. I can accept that. And everyone around here tends to look up to him. Now I don’t know him well enough to know exactly why, but I figure they’ve got a good enough reason for it. So I can trust them and, in turn, to trust him to know what we’re getting into,” said Jamie.

“He is a good man as well as a good commander,” confirmed Rick.

“And one other reason,” said Jamie. “If this thing goes south, it’s my ticket out of here.”

“The real reason surfaces,” laughed Rick.

“Caught me,” laughed Jamie finally feeling a bit more comfortable around his leadership.

“Raiding a prison camp thirty clicks behind the lines without approval? Sounds like the fun you mentioned before. So why not?”

“Okay,” said Rick. “Just that you realize what you are getting into.”

“I don’t think I’ve known what I was getting into since I signed my application for Cider,” grinned Jamie. “So that’s a moot point.”

“Join the club,” laughed Rick. “Okay, we’ll see you at the meeting.”

“Sir?” asked Jamie. “Thanks for talking straight with me so far.”

“You’re an adult,” said Rick. “It’s the least I can do.”

As Rick headed off to find Heather and Rob Davis, Jamie silently thought about what he had just committed himself to. While he wasn’t entirely comfortable with the decision, he made the gut call that this was what was best for him. For some strange reason, he felt deep down like this was the right thing to do and most importantly, the right thing for him.

Date/Time: 28 March/1049

Location: 1st Battalion Command Post, opposing Ružomberok, Slovak Republic

“You understand what I’m asking here,” said Darren to Lieutenant Colonels Reese and Jacobson in the private area of one of the command tents.

“Yeah,” said Reese. “And I hope you can give us a couple of moments to let it sink in.”

“Sorry,” said Darren.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” said Jacobson. “You are pissed and rightfully so.”

Darren wanted to comment further about the request he had made of these two commanders in front of him. The entire conversation was off the record, but they both could end up tossing him as well as Thomas away for a long time if they went to the proper authorities. Several more moments of uncomfortable silence passed until Reese finally spoke.

“You know, I love Tom to death, but he needs to be careful trying to make battalion level plans like this,” said Reese. “There’s a big hole here.”

“Yeah, I noticed that too,” said Jacobson.

“Such as?” asked Darren.

“Well, if you look here,” said Reese as he pointed at the map. “It shows Micah’s units hitting Černová and mine keeping the rest pinned down. Problem is who backs him up?”

“Sorry?” asked Darren.

“As in who fills in on the line?” asked Jacobson. “Curt’s right. You have to get at least two companies from another battalion to cover us while we hit the bridges. I’d say three, but you can get by with two.”

“Can’t cover it with some of yours?” asked Darren to Reese.

“I suppose I could, but for something of this magnitude you really don’t want to spread yourself too thin,” said Reese. “Look at it this way; if the IU sees my guys abandoning their positions, they have the ability to counterattack and throw the entire attack off. So you really need someone else to come fill in.”

“And we happen to have 3rd Battalion sitting behind us pretty much bored out of their minds. I mean, if I was planning something like this, I’d probably be asking for help from them to help fill in the gaps here and provide some direct fire overwatch from their positions,” said Jacobson.

Darren saw they were on the verge of committing, but hadn’t received a hard yes from either of the men. “So you are saying someone should contact 3rd Battalion and see how they would react in an operation like this?”

“Or if I was doing something like this, I’d probably make the request of someone who knew the commander a little better. Like say another battalion commander,” said Reese.

“So a plan like this is doable?” asked Darren.

“More than doable,” said Reese. “Your recon of the town makes it a cakewalk for the most part. Look, you have Class C units that are already undermanned and probably ill trained holding that line. There were originally two full strength Class A companies with front line equipment holding the approaches to Černová. Now, maybe four platoons and they probably don’t have the best stuff. You hit it hard with two companies in the front, one on the flank and it’ll fold easy

enough. The other company heads towards Ružomberok and keeps the other forces there pinned so they can't interfere with the assault."

"And these defenders are already thrown off by some indirect fire keeping their heads down. They go through the only avenue of retreat they have which is across the bridge. They can't go east since the terrain closes up and your two reserve companies beat them as they move in the open. So south is the only way. Send two companies across the bridges one at a time to roll up the other side, these two turn left and hit Ružomberok from the east. My battalion keeps the other forces occupied; they can't move forward, they can't retreat without exposing their flank to the scrubs from 1st Batt," said Reese.

"And if they head west, it opens up them up to the 4th here," said Jacobson pointing at the map. "Curt puts in a company here and it's like shooting fish in a barrel even for his notoriously inaccurate slackers. If they stay in place, we dismantle them from the east. This is like a basic butter bar exercise."

"And honestly, we could end up taking Ružomberok in the end. There aren't any reserve forces anywhere nearby that we know of that can react in time. So realistically with the brigade pushing behind us, we could move twenty to thirty kilometers or more up this valley before the IU could react," said Reese.

"Hypothetically," said Darren. "But hypothetically we only need a single set of bridges."

"You do know what you are requesting is a court martial offense?" asked Reese.

"For us?" asked Darren. "Yeah, I know. For you guys? Call it targets of opportunity and a recon in force. Both of which are covered in your standing orders."

"Darren does have a point," said Jacobson.

"Which covers us," said Reese. "Now what about you guys?"

"Sometimes things in life are not so simple. And if breaking the rules to do the right thing means the right thing gets done, so be it. I'll take that to court," said Darren.

"Look, we like you and Tom. Actually, I like most of the folks in your unit," said Reese.

"You're a good group of folks and I'd hate to see each and every one of you guarding a warehouse in Iceland or worse."

"We came to the decision we would accept whatever came. But Tom is putting it forward to the teams that will go in as an all-in or no-go proposition. Either everyone goes or we take our chances with trying to get into see the Division Commander or ADM," said Darren.

"When would you guys know?" asked Jacobson.

“We had the initial meeting this morning and the follow up was...actually, should be done by now,” said Darren as he checked his communicator. He had a message waiting in the system which was a simple “100%” text. “Looks like we’re all in.”

“How are you getting the prisoners back to our lines?” asked Reese.

“Compartmented,” said Darren. “Sorry, but you know how it is. But we do have plans.”

“As long as we don’t have to roll up that road,” said Jacobson.

“So can I count you guys in?” asked Darren.

“Thought that was already evident,” chuckled Reese. “I’m in.”

”I’ve been staring at that town for nearly four months,” said Jacobson. “I could use a change of scenery. Just the bridges in Černová will be a piece of cake. Anything else I can’t promise.”

“Just long enough for us to come barreling down that road,” said Darren.

“And what happens if we get cut off or ordered back?” asked Reese.

“I’d hope for communication problems. Saw a report the other day about those darn sunspots interfering with communications,” said Darren. “Look, we’ll need four hours to make it back, six at the outside. Can you hold everyone off that long?”

“Four hours?” laughed Jacobson. “I thought this was going to take at least until lunch.”

“We’ll work out the commo stuff in another trip. We’re still dealing with a small problem of our own, but should have it settled by this afternoon,” said Darren.

“One other thing,” said Reese. “There’s an arty battery here that could cause problems.”

“Can you work the brigade red legs to hit it?” asked Darren.

“Maybe,” said Jacobson. “Let me work that angle. I’ve got some favors I can call in and I think I know of a way of getting them for extended firing.”

“Let me know if we can help,” said Darren.

“You’ve got your hands full as it is,” said Jacobson. “Let us worry about the little things. Anything else we can help with?”

“I could use some visitors in jail after this is all over,” laughed Darren. “Frank will end up being all mopey after a while.”

“Speaking of, where’d he run off to?” asked Reese. “I saw him come in with you.”

“He’s out working with Micah’s designated marksmen,” said Darren.

“Okay, but one final thing,” said Reese. “We’ll keep our ear to the ground and if we think Brigade gets wind of what’s going on, we’ll send you a message alerting you. It’ll be a standard supply request form for say...t-shirts and socks.”

“T-shirts and socks,” repeated Darren. “Got it.”

“Be careful,” said Jacobson. “Your guys are too valuable to lose.”

“We will,” said Darren as he collected his carbine and went to find Chief Master Sergeant Frank “Demo” Zimmer. “On all accounts we’ll be careful.”

“Room! Ten-hut!” announced Mark as General Ted McMackin, Commander of the Pacifica 16th Armored Calvary Regiment walked into their command center.

“As you were, please,” said McMackin as he waved everyone down. “I know you all aren’t that formal around here.”

“General, great to see you,” said Thomas as he strode up and saluted. “Thanks for coming down on such short notice.”

“Tom, you’re looking well,” said the General and returned the salute. “And it was no problem. You were cryptic enough on the phone to rouse my curiosity.”

“Please, come on in the office,” said Thomas as he led the way through the somewhat busy command center. Members were going over files and pictures, discussing small details of the upcoming mission and reading through the intelligence estimates. There were at least twenty people inside the center and it made it slightly crowded.

“Let’s take a walk instead if you don’t mind,” suggested McMackin. “I’ve been cooped up in a tac vehicle for the better part of three hours so stretching my legs sounds about right.”

“The General is always right,” laughed Thomas. “Let me grab my rifle.”

“You always carry in base camp?” asked McMackin who had left his sidearm in the vehicle.

“Never know when you might need it,” said Thomas. “And I’ve stayed alive as long as I have by being a little paranoid and prepared.”

“You’re smarter than some folks give you credit for,” said McMackin who returned to his vehicle after exiting the tent and retrieved his gun belt.

“Don’t ask anyone around here,” laughed Thomas. “They all buy into my dumb act.”

“I’d say there are a lot of words that could be used to describe you,” said McMackin. “Not sure I’d add dumb anywhere on the list.”

“Don’t ask my wife,” laughed Thomas. “Nice 1911 you have there.”

“A gift from my old Squadron,” said McMackin as he removed the pistol from the holster, cleared it and handed it to Thomas. “They had a guy build it and send it over.”

Thomas verified the chamber was clear and dropped the slide. It had custom grips and was smooth as silk. Thomas pulled the trigger and said “oh, that’s nice.”

“I’d like it back before it ends up in your pocket,” chuckled McMackin.

“You can’t bring out toys like that around us without the thought going through someone’s head” chuckled Thomas as he handed it back over. “And I wouldn’t show it to anyone else.”

“You seem in good spirits,” observed McMackin.

“Clarity is a wonderful thing,” said Thomas as they wandered into the compound. Coming around the corner, they saw Dave Lawson and his team practicing entry on one of the supply connex boxes they had converted into a training room. It looked almost picture perfect, but Thomas heard Dave going over the entry with his team and had them repeat to shave more time off if they could.

“Teams are looking good,” said McMackin. “So, about that call.”

“Sir, you know me well enough to know I’m a pretty blunt guy,” said Thomas. “So I’ll just go out and make the request. I need your Rangers.”

“Okay, they’re yours,” said McMackin.

“That simple?” asked Thomas.

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll explain specifically what for,” said McMackin.

“Kind of a problem sir,” said Thomas. “I can’t go into detail as to why.”

“A man comes up and asks for an entire company of my best troops probably needs to explain enough to make their General happy,” said McMackin.

“We have a mission planned and I could use their unique talents,” said Thomas.

“And this mission would be?” asked McMackin.

“A raid against an enemy compound,” said Thomas.

“One in particular?” asked McMackin.

“Yes,” said Thomas.

“Tom, I might not have known you as long as some have, but generally you’re a bit more open about things like this. Now for some reason you don’t want to tell me what’s going on. I’ve got Rangers that I need some field time for and they are yours if you want. But you have to give me something here,” said McMackin.

“I specifically need them for three tasks,” said Thomas as he explained the requirements for the Pacifica Ranger Company.

“Okay, securing a RON site is easy enough. A platoon for emergency J-SOD taskings is perfectly fine by me. But the last one has me confused,” replied McMackin after giving the requirements a pause for thought.

“Let’s just say this one is not going to be by the book,” said Thomas.

“I trust you aren’t getting me into anything illegal?” asked the General.

“I would never implicate you,” said Thomas without giving a direct answer.

“You are probably one of the best field commanders we have out here and I’d say you’d be in line for my job in a just world. And again, you’ve never gone out of your way to ask for any special favors although God knows we all probably owe you a few. So my Company will be chopped to you if you ask,” said the General.

“This isn’t an official request,” said Thomas.

“It’s the unofficial requests that generate positive results. I know my Regiment would be sitting around with nothing to eat and no ammo if it wasn’t for the enterprising officers and NCOs making unofficial requests behind my back,” said the General. “But only under one condition; I want a full mission brief.”

“I’d like to call in a favor on this for no questions asked,” said Thomas.

“This isn’t like breaking into a warehouse and stealing a few thousand steaks for my guys, otherwise you know I’d say yes in a heartbeat. But under the circumstances, you know I can’t chop an entire Company of troops to you on your word alone. You have to be a tad smart to get to General although some of my counterparts try to prove otherwise from time to time, but

something gives me the impression this mission isn't sanctioned," said McMackin. "Correct me if I'm wrong."

"You aren't entirely wrong," said Thomas who was taking a large gamble right then.

"Brigade or Division?" asked McMackin.

"Brigade," said Thomas.

"Your Brigade Commander doesn't recognize the fact you can, and often do, make him look good. Such things can get a man promoted if used correctly," said the General since he knew exactly what Thomas was referring to.

"Something to be said about mentorship from higher levels," said Thomas.

"I know your Division Commander is trying, but when politics enters the war common sense takes a backseat. And common sense says he'd be running a Stateside administrative post where he could do little damage," said McMackin.

"It's sad when other nation's services know about our problems," remarked Thomas.

"I was the Red Team leader at the last sand table exercise," said the General. "It was apparent he wasn't fit, or maybe ready, to lead your Brigade into Ticonderoga. He has a good staff and a dynamite XO if he would only unleash them to do their jobs. And he doesn't realize they are the ones that get his stars and that comfy posting back in the States. Speaking of which, you're dead. I killed you and your entire unit the last exercise."

"Well, that's comforting," said Thomas.

"He fed your unit into the line as normal infantry. I thought your Division Commander was going to have a stroke on the spot," chuckled the General.

"It's happened before," said Thomas and explained the two trips they had made to replace normal line infantry at the front trace.

"That's about as stupid a decision as I've ever heard," said McMackin. "Not speaking bad about your superior officer or anything, so forget I said that."

"He really has no clue of how special operations work," said Thomas, saying more than he should at the moment. But he had known the General for some time and felt comfortable opening up a little to him and releasing some of the built up anger.

"I'd say that's the case for a lot of senior officers. Most just let the teams run a little wild and are generally happy with the results. Yours on the other hand..." said the General.

"Trust me, we know," said Thomas.

“So I would imagine you put together an airtight mission against a high value target that he canned for some reason or another,” said McMackin.

“There’s more to it than that,” said Thomas and finally broke down and briefed the General on the forged intelligence report as well as the prison camp. And further explained how the facility had been put on the bombing list because of the altered intelligence report. McMackin stood silent for a moment and thought about what was just said.

“I can get you in to see the Division Commander in six days,” said McMackin. “He needs to be made aware of what’s going on.”

“I would have figured Generals could call each other up for something like this,” said Thomas.

“Typically we can,” said McMackin. “Unfortunately, he’s in London for the next few days and out of pocket. No communications. Your Chief of Staff is running things right now.”

“And that’s a second problem,” said Thomas as he explained the informal contacts the Colonel had all around the Division as well as the Corps. “General, I hope you can understand why I’m hesitant to talk with you about this. This can come back on us hard if the wrong people get wind that we’re talking out of school. I know there’s open door policies and whatnot, but it will end up bad for us in the long run.”

“So you think going off on a mission that isn’t approved will change anything?” asked McMackin. “Other than probably get you tossed into jail?”

“If I save those people and that pilot, I’ll accept what comes my way,” said Thomas.

“You realize I should be trying to talk you out of this?” asked McMackin. “Or even order you not to proceed any further?”

“I’d hope it won’t come to that,” said Thomas.

McMackin looked away for a few moments and considered the predicament he was in. He only had one side of the story, but also knew Thomas was a man of integrity that had always given him good information and most importantly the truth. And he also knew that if Colonel Woodson was to lead this Brigade into combat operations, a lot of soldiers would end up dead because of his incompetence and micromanagement. And he noticed that there was a lot of bad blood between the two at the last sand table. But most importantly, McMackin had a little maverick streak in him as well as a risk taker and one that pushed the boundaries of orders as far as he could just to get the job done.

“I’ll tell you what,” said McMackin. “You give me the complete brief on what’s going on and I’ll think about it.”

“I’d prefer not to beg,” said Thomas.

“I think that’s the least you owe me,” said McMackin. “And ‘I’ll think about it’ doesn’t mean I report you automatically like I probably should.”

“Something to be said about verbiage,” chuckled Thomas. “Okay, let’s head back to my closet.”

“Closet?” asked McMackin.

“What the guys affectionately refer to as my office,” chuckled Thomas.

“You don’t seem like the type that likes to plop his butt down at a desk,” said McMackin.

“Unfortunately, bureaucracy rears its ugly head and I’m forced to shine that seat from time to time,” laughed Thomas.

“Doesn’t get any better with more rank,” chuckled the General.

“I’d like to stay a Captain then,” said Thomas. “My team leads don’t have that much to do except go out and play.”

“Get an aide,” suggested McMackin. “I’d be swamped if she wasn’t out there forging my signature on at least two-thirds of the trivial stuff that hits my desk.”

“I said about six months ago we needed an administrative section,” said Thomas. “We’ve got commo, supply, MPs, medical and cooks, but no admin weenies.”

“Did you make the request?” asked McMackin.

“We did,” said Thomas. “And was informed my unit was already over authorized manpower with the addition of said non-shooters.”

“They are regular Joes?” asked McMackin.

“For the most part,” said Thomas. “We let them play with the cool toys and take chopper rides every so often so they are probably a little happier than most Joes and Janes out there.”

“And yet no admin folks to keep things running smoothly,” remarked McMackin. “He’s a hoot isn’t he?”

“You have no idea,” sighed Thomas as they entered the control center. Thomas grabbed a laptop with the appropriate files and the briefing they had given to the Colonel and they went into the office and closed the door. Thomas went through everything they had on the mission and General McMackin sat silently observing until the end.

“Looks pretty good except there is a glaring hole,” he remarked and gave the same answer that Jacobson and Reese had done earlier. As well as the same answer they had. “Now the real

question is with you thinking of going at this alone, you still need this battalion assault on this town here. And if you're asking me for my Rangers, chances are you've already gotten someone on board for that."

"Perhaps," said Thomas.

"Tom, you're talking half a combat brigade if not more defying orders," said McMackin.

"And we're talking about a Colonel that put a prison camp on the bombing list because of a personal grudge as well as significantly altering an intelligence report and sending it forward as gospel. You know what will happen if we bomb a bunch of innocent civilians over here? Or when it comes out in the wash that our intelligence was used for the targeting? He's got political connections out the wazoo and I can flat guarantee you that this will hit the lowest level possible. And that particular hangman's noose ends right here at this unit," said Thomas.

McMackin sat back in his chair and skimmed over the mission report as well as looking through the plans for the raid. And he also knew that if General Chambers hadn't gotten the chance to relieve Colonel Woodson yet, there was significant political influence that wasn't permitting him to do so. And he also knew that if, or more likely when, the bombing occurred, the Free Nation Coalition would take a significant publicity hit and plenty of people would be scrambling for cover. And they would go after the lowest possible person without hesitation which would happen to be Thomas and his unit.

"What are your current orders?" asked McMackin.

"The Colonel wants us to do another sector level recon," said Thomas.

"Would that require the use of my Rangers?" asked McMackin.

"I don't think so," said Thomas.

"Are you sure?" asked McMackin. "Because I could have the leadership here in about four hours and the entire unit ready to roll in less than twenty-four."

"Well, now that you mention it, I could use some extra help," said Thomas as he saw exactly where the General was going with his question.

"Now officially, I have to say that your planned mission here should be put on hold until you get the opportunity to brief your Division Commander," said McMackin. "And I'll tell you what. I'll make that statement official in exactly one week from now when I swing down this way again. In one week, we will sit down and have a counseling session where I state that you should trust your chain of command and not put yourself at risk."

"I understand in one week's time you will officially tell me this is a bad idea," said Thomas.

“And off the record, we haven’t liberated but maybe a handful of these camps with the victims still alive. If we get the opportunity to get one, we should be snatching it with both arms,” said McMackin. “Unofficially of course.”

“Of course sir,” said Thomas.

“And I unofficially saw that my Rangers are to take part in the assault itself,” said McMackin.

“They have a key role,” said Thomas. “I’ll need the commander, XO and senior platoon leader here as quickly as possible. To discuss supporting us on an official sector level recon.”

“Officially of course,” said McMackin.

“I can’t say how much I appreciate it,” said Thomas.

“They’ll be here as soon as I can make a call,” said the General. “Look, you’ve got a good mission planned with a reasonably high chance of success. You’ve thought out just about every aspect except the assault on the town itself and if that Battalion Commander has any sense about him, he’ll pick it up as well. And since that town is covered by undermanned Class C units, the chances they take it with the bridges intact are extremely likely. As long as they haven’t rigged them for charges yet.”

“Doesn’t appear they have,” said Thomas.

“Then it’s a cakewalk,” said McMackin. “Unofficially of course.”

“Completely off the books,” confirmed Thomas.

“You sure you don’t need some stars backing you?” asked McMackin as he opened his own communicator and relayed the orders for the Ranger Company leadership to make its way to the Brigade encampment. After receiving an acknowledgment, he closed the communicator.

“This one needs to be on me and me alone,” said Thomas.

“I understand,” said McMackin. “Just make sure you don’t get into hot water.”

“I’m already past boiling,” said Thomas.

“Well either way, if you need a friend at court, you know you can give me a call. I’m not sure how much influence I have being from the Pacifica Forces, but having a General in your corner, no matter which nation, can be advantageous,” said McMackin.

“This is something I have to face on my own,” said Thomas. “But the offer is greatly appreciated.”

“Just something to keep in mind,” said the General. “You have any chow around this place?”

“Oh certainly,” laughed Thomas. “Finest cuisine this side of the Rhine.”

“Field rations and bug juice?” laughed the General.

“Actually, we have an aspiring chef in our unit that helps create some decent food for a change. It’s not easy getting the special requirements for the spices he wants, but we’ve managed to keep him happy,” laughed Thomas.

“You have your own personal chef,” chuckled the General. “And you Cider guys complain about how rough you have it.”

“Have to have something to look forward to when we get back from missions,” said Thomas.

“Can’t argue with that,” said the General as they entered the tent assigned as the recreation and dining facility for the 14th. Staff Sergeant Nate “Baldy” Clark was finishing up on the long term field rations and pronounced them ready for consumption. After taking a few bites, the General nodded his approval and took additional bites.

“Is he critical to your team?” asked the General.

“Sir, with all due respect, you can’t steal him,” laughed Thomas.

“I thought Cider was voluntary. Now wouldn’t you rather be in a nice comfortable, in the rear job at my headquarters doing something you love like cooking Sergeant?” asked the General.

“I think I’d rather not sir, I’m not used to friendly fire,” said Clark. “With all due respect.”

The General had a good laugh at his own expense and thanked Clark for his dedication to his unit and furthermore, to his cooking abilities. He got the opportunity to meet some of the younger members of the unit that had rotated in since he last saw them and had a relaxing lunch with a unit he held in high regard, no matter how many orders they planned to break in the near future. Once everything was finished, he grabbed his personal items and escort team and headed back out to his vehicle. After getting in, Thomas approached and handed over two sealed envelopes.

“What’s this?” asked McMackin.

“Two copies of the original intelligence report before it was altered as well as memorandums of record from the individuals that were in the meeting where the Colonel was briefed,” said Thomas. “The S-3 suggested we get copies out to places the Colonel can’t reach. And I’m assuming you have another friend that can take that second copy. I trust the future of this unit to you and ask that you hold onto it to use appropriately if something happens.”

“You already file with J-SOD?” asked McMackin.

“We did, along with two other places,” said Thomas without saying specifically who. “But I’d much prefer to have more than a few copies out there just in case.”

“Being paranoid again?” chuckled the General.

“It’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you,” grinned Thomas as he saw Darren pulling back into the compound. He got a thumbs up as Darren got out of the vehicle. “Looks like everything is in place.”

“Except your aircraft,” said McMackin.

“Working on that,” said Thomas.

“You keep your tail out of trouble,” ordered McMackin.

“I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if I wasn’t in some sort of trouble,” said Thomas as he saluted the General.

McMackin laughed and returned the salute before shaking Thomas’ hand. “I will be back in a week to discuss how officially I cannot support what you are doing.”

“I’ll make time on my schedule sir,” said Thomas. The vehicle departed and Darren joined Thomas after waving at the General and saluting the staff vehicle.

“We get them?” asked Darren.

“Yep, their leadership will be here in a few hours,” said Thomas. “How did the briefing go?”

“A couple of minor changes to the plan,” said Darren as he outlined what had happened and the minor changes to the plan.

“The General picked up on the same thing,” said Thomas.

“Reese and Jacobson are working this for us,” said Darren. “Also gave us a stop everything code in case someone gets wind of what we’re doing.”

“It’ll go bad for a lot of people if the wrong folks get involved,” said Thomas as he thought about what had just happened. He was not only breaking more than a few regulations with this mission, he was involving a whole lot more people, some of which could withstand the pressure, others that could claim deniability like the General. But one thing was for certain, doing the wrong thing had never felt so right before in his life. From going AWOL during the Fall and everything they had done so far, this was the biggest leap he had ever made. And was taking a huge risk on the future of so many people while doing it.

CHAPTER 22

Date/Time: 28 March/1420

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Looks like everything is covered except the bombing portion,” said Darren. “We have any contact in the fighter community we can get to help?”

“No,” said Mark. “Unfortunately, none that can stick their necks out for us.”

“I was thinking of something bigger and an under the table favor,” said Thomas.

“How big?” asked Darren. “And what kind of favor?”

“Like big. And like a ‘we helped rescue you’ kind of favor,” said Thomas.

“Which we technically didn’t,” said Darren as he knew immediately what Thomas was referring to. “And that’s a big favor.”

“The unit is still in England I think. They switched airframes, but last time I know they specifically were in theater,” said Thomas. “And they are flying missions through this area nearly all the time. Asking them to put a few extra GPS guided bombs on board wouldn’t be that taxing of a request.”

“Have to check schedules,” said Darren.

“I’m sure they have a better ability to do that than we do,” said Thomas.

“And I think that pilot took a liking to you,” laughed Darren. “I mean, being heroic enough to save her from certain death was obviously enough to cloud her judgment.”

“I wouldn’t ever use that kind of thing,” protested Thomas.

“I’ll see about setting up a VTC,” said Darren as he walked over to the computer station. After a couple of minutes, he came back and gathered Thomas. “You got lucky for a change.”

“She’s on?” asked Thomas.

“Was doing mission planning,” said Darren as he nodded towards the station. Thomas wandered over and knew this was the most absolute point of no return for him. Getting aircraft assets was a huge line to cross and this was the total commitment.

“Good afternoon ma’am,” he said as he sat down.

“Well, this is a pleasant surprise,” said the woman on the other end with a smile. “Thought you had forgotten about us.”

“Nah, just been busy,” said Thomas.

“As I happen to read about from time to time,” she chuckled. “This is probably not a social call is it?”

“No, sorry,” he said with a shake of his head.

“You forgot you were invited to dinner didn’t you?” she asked with a laugh.

“My wife would kill me for going to dinner with a pretty lady like yourself,” he laughed.

“Flattery will only get you so far,” she said with a wink. “How can I help you otherwise?”

“Doing any missions here soon? I’m not asking for specific times and dates, but around the morning of the 5th would be good,” he asked.

She turned and checked another computer nearby and found the data she was looking for.

“Seems like there is a mission on that exact date. Why?”

“You on the schedule?” asked Thomas.

“Not supposed to,” she replied. “We’ve got a later mission.”

“Any chance of putting in a good word with the crew for us for an under the table favor?” he asked. “Of course, nothing that would compromise the primary mission.”

“Perhaps, the copilot on that crew thinks pretty highly of my offensive systems officer,” she replied and added with a laugh. “But for other than professional reasons of course.”

“Could we work something out?” he asked.

“Depending on the situation, we might even be able to bump the crew,” she replied.

“You can do that?” asked Thomas.

“With the right incentives. I’ve got a milk run on the next mission so swapping for one going over the enemy lines isn’t asking for a lot,” said the woman.

“So if you were able to…” he started and outlined his plan. She thought about it for a moment before asking the important question.

“Why?”

“It’s for a mission and that’s really all I can say,” said Thomas.

“You can normally get air support if you want,” she replied.

“Not for this,” he said in a lower tone.

“Where at?” she asked without asking the obvious question.

“Near Ružomberok and specifically around the 0400 timeframe” he said. She turned and checked the plans again and returned to the screen.

“As fate or luck would have it, the mission plans have an egress route about a hundred miles from there which makes for a fairly easy divert if we needed to. But it goes through an hour earlier. You snooping in our planning files?” she asked with a laugh.

“Actually no,” said Thomas with a laugh. “Can you do it?”

“It’s not adding anything significant to our payload. It’s a normal cruise missile launch into Greece so the load out would be simple,” she replied.

“They don’t question you putting additional munitions on board?” he asked.

“Not if it’s on the flight plan. The same flight plans that I happen to have behind me,” she winked. “This is a pretty big favor.”

“I know,” he replied. “And we’ll certainly be even.”

“Oh no mister,” she laughed. “Dinner is certainly on the table at this point.”

“I’m not real comfortable with something like that,” said Thomas up front.

“I know you’re married and so am I,” she replied. “So bring a chaperone if you want. Just something socially outside of work for a change where normal folks can talk. No romantic candlelight dinners or anything like that. Just wouldn’t mind getting to know you better.”

“I think that’s reasonable,” he said. “Might be a while though.”

“I’m patient,” she laughed. “I mean, it did take you a while to look me up.”

“You’re horrible,” he laughed. “So you’ll do it?”

“Can’t see why not,” she replied. “But if you blow me off, I will hunt you down.”

“Okay,” he laughed. “I’ll send the mission prep and coordinates in an email.”

“I’ll give you a yell if there are changes,” she replied.

“Okay, I’ve got to get back to planning. Talk to you later,” he replied.

“Bye,” she said and switched off the connection. Thomas returned to the remainder of the group where they were continuing to plan the small details of the mission.

“We’re on,” he said to Darren.

“That easy?” Darren asked. “Must have made quite the impression.”

“Gonna cost me dinner,” said Thomas.

“Cheap for what we get out of it if she comes through,” said Darren.

“Just doesn’t feel right,” said Thomas.

“Oh, I know you will control yourself. You could have bedded down a dozen women by now, but have remained a good boy. Remember that General’s aide that kept hanging all over you at that embassy dinner?” laughed Darren.

“I was trying to forget,” laughed Thomas.

“Well, it’s not every day you have a former Miss New Mexico flirting it up with you,” laughed Darren. “Being a dirty old man and all at least.”

“Lest I remind you who the oldest is here?” laughed Thomas.

“That would be Mark,” laughed Darren. “Nice to see you back in form.”

“Might not be for long,” said Thomas. “This is the kind of thing that gets you tossed into jail.”

“We’ll send you some lipstick and panty hose,” laughed Darren.

“How are you going to do that when you’ll probably be my cell mate?” laughed Thomas.

“Can’t think of better company,” remarked Darren. “We seem to have everything settled for the moment.”

“How are we getting there?” asked Thomas.

“More favors,” said Darren and briefly explained. “Shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Seems easy enough,” said Thomas. “Mission goes on the night of the 4th and into the 5th. Have to have everything set by then.”

“Simple enough,” said Darren. “I’ll start arranging the air assets.”

“And I’ll talk to Micah again,” said Thomas.

“And I’ll work the logistics,” said Mark as he joined the conversation.

“And the advanced team?” asked Thomas.

“Rick and his team,” said Darren.

“With a new guy? I don’t think so,” said Thomas.

“Has to get broken in at some point and establishing an ORP isn’t taxing,” said Mark.

“No, Mike Parsons and his team goes in twenty-four hours in advance and waits for the Rangers,” said Thomas. “And that’s not up for debate. Rick stays on the support element. Because until we’ve had a chance to properly break in the newbie, we aren’t taking any chances.”

“I’ll let my team know,” said Michael as he joined the conversation.

“Get with R2,” suggested Thomas. “His team had some good locations scouted for an ORP on their way in.”

“Got it,” said Michael as he went to find Rivera and his team.

“Tom?” asked Shannon Parsons. “The compound gate called. Said you have a visitor.”

“Where’s he from?” asked Thomas.

“The MP says he was sent by J-SOD, a Czech Corporal,” said Shannon.

“Oh right!” said Thomas. “I forgot we made that request.”

“Want to send him in?” asked Shannon.

“No, we’ll send someone out,” said Thomas. “Sister, want to go grab our Czech liaison?”

“How much grabbing do I need to do?” asked Jill with a wink.

“Be proper for company,” said Mark.

“You guys are a bunch of killjoys,” sighed Jill as she departed.

“Seems like the entire unit has had their spirits uplifted,” remarked Darren.

“Being bad can be good,” said Thomas.

“We going to let our liaison know the details?” asked Mark.

“Nope,” said Thomas. “He will only know we are going on a mission behind the lines where his translation talents might be needed.”

“Who’s he going to be assigned to?” asked Rick.

“Let’s place him with Ashley,” said Thomas. “She’s on support as it is.”

“And when we secure the compound, we bring him in,” said Darren.

“Sounds simple enough,” said Thomas.

“Did you check him out?” asked Jill as she approached the gate.

“Yes ma’am,” said the MP at the gate. “He has approved orders and identification.”

“Okay, let him through,” said Jill who was unused to being called “ma’am” especially since they were about the same age. One of the prerogatives of being Cider was accelerated promotions.

“Yes ma’am,” said the MP and opened the chain link gate and allowed the individual to come in. He was dressed in the digital woodland camouflage that had been adopted by many of the European nations after their liberation and carried a battered looking M-4 and a pack that had seen significant service.

“Hi, I’m Sergeant Jill Dugger,” she said and stuck out her hand.

“My name is Zdenko Horak. I am a Czech Corporal in the Brno Guards,” said the man as he walked forward into the camp and accepted the handshake.

“Zee...what?” asked Jill Dugger as he approached.

“Please, just call me Zee. It is less confusing that way,” said Zee as he smiled at her.

“Okay Zee, what are you doing here?” asked Jill.

“I was told to come here as you needed an English and Slovak speaker for a mission,” said Zee.

“Yes of course,” said Jill.

“My apologies for being held up,” said Zee who had a very good command of English.

“I’m sorry?” asked Jill

“I was held up by your headquarters in Prague and missed the helicopter flight yesterday. I have my identification and orders if you wish to see them,” said Zee.

“Yes, thank you,” said Jill.

Zee pulled a small pouch from his pack and handed over the paper copy of his orders in Czech and English as well as his FNC issued ID card. She looked over the identification before holding it up to the light to see if the hologram was valid on the card. Seeing the pattern of the globe (which bore a passing resemblance to the old UN logo) and FNC in both Roman and Cyrillic lettering, she decided the card was valid. She also checked his English version of the orders and saw his assignment to be the liaison to the 14th Special Operations Battalion with the required signatures and stamps.

“Okay Zee, it looks like you are valid. Stand by while I sign you in on the visitor listing,” she said and took the clipboard from the MP. After getting everything signed onto the sheet of paper, she led him into the compound to the control center. “Your English is excellent.”

“I learned it while I was in college in America before the Fall and serving with the *Freie Bundeswehr* while in England. While we had some Czechs escape the continent, we did not have enough to form our own unit and were assigned as a Company to the Second Battalion of the German First Brigade. It was not the first time we Czechs have served under German leadership,” he said with a smile.

“You were part of the German First Brigade?” asked Jill. The unit was absolutely fearless and had been awarded too many unit citations for bravery in battle to list.

“Yes. We went in with the invasion in Normandy and have been with them ever since. I joined the newly formed Brno Guards Regiment after the FNC liberated my country,” said Zee.

“Nice to have you around,” said Jill as they stopped at the entrance and a lock box. “No weapons allowed inside, sorry. You can leave them here.”

“You don’t trust me?” asked Zee.

“We don’t know you yet,” she said.

“Reasonable,” said Zee as he handed off his rifle and pack. Strapped to the outside of the pack was a stockless pump action shotgun with the door breaching style brake on the front. And like something out of a movie, he kept handing over weapons. A full sized pistol from his holster and a compact revolver from his back. A derringer from his left pocket. He finally took off his web gear that also contained the large field knife, grenades and spare magazines. From his boot he removed a small knife and from his left arm, a short stiletto in the British pattern. His cutlery didn’t end as he handed over a folding knife from his right pocket. Attached to the other side of

his pack was a homemade machete although shorter and stouter than standard with evil looking teeth on the back. He finally topped it off with the multi-tool out of his cargo pocket.

“Ya think you’re carrying enough there chief?” asked Jill with her eyes popped open.

“Just don’t look in my backpack,” Zee chuckled.

“Should we?” asked Jill.

“I have two kilograms of C-4, spare grenades, both high explosive and smoke. A hatchet, but I believe you Americans call it a tomahawk. One miniature anti-personnel mine and some det cord,” said Zee.

“Expecting trouble?” asked Jill.

“No, but that is when trouble typically finds you,” said Zee. “We Czechs do not like to go around unarmed and prefer to fight our way out of trouble.”

“More like fight your way into trouble,” said Jill as she looked him over and wondered what other surprises he might literally have up his sleeve.

“I have given you all my weapons,” said Zee knowingly.

“Just wondering,” said Jill. “But let’s take your pack over to the bunker.”

Without argument, Zee took the pack containing the explosives over to the nearby bunker and laid it on the opposite side facing away from the compound. After returning, he found someone had joined Jill outside the center.

“Hello, I’m Major Thomas Dayfield,” said Thomas. “I’m the commander here.”

“I am Corporal Zdenko Horak, but please call me Zee,” said Zee as they entered the center after the handshake.

“I’m glad you showed up,” said Thomas.

“Again, I would like to apologize for my late arrival,” said Zee.

“Actually we had forgotten about the request,” said Thomas. “So technically, you’re on time.”

“Indeed sir,” laughed Zee. “If I may ask, why am I here?”

“We have a mission planned behind the lines. Have you had any training?” asked Thomas.

“I was with the Czech Underground until I escaped to England and joined the *Freie Bundeswehr*. And I have worked with the reconnaissance section of the 1st Brigade during the liberation of my country,” said Zee.

“Your English is excellent,” said Thomas.

“Thank you sir,” said Zee. “I also speak Slovak, German and can get by in a little bit of Polish if it is needed.”

“I would think all we would need is Slovak,” said Thomas.

“May I ask what the mission is sir?” asked Zee.

“We will be raiding an IU compound,” said Thomas. “I cannot tell you any more until we are on the ground near the site.”

“I understand sir,” said Zee.

“But there is a chance there will be Slovak civilians there,” said Thomas. “Which is why we might need your translation abilities.”

“Yes sir,” said Zee. The phone from the gate rang again and Thomas learned the Ranger leadership had arrived as well.

“Jill? Can you take him to meet Sunshine and her team?” asked Thomas. “I’ll have to put off anything further for the moment as I have another meeting I must attend to. But I would like to say welcome to the team and it’s an honor to have you working with us.”

“The honor is mine sir,” said Zee with a polite bow.

“Sergeant Dugger will take you to meet Warrant Officer Scott. You will be assigned under her team for the duration of this mission. We’ll get together later and go over some other items, but until then go ahead and grab some sleep and the meal tent is always open,” said Thomas.

“Thank you sir,” said Zee and saluted. “Until later.”

Thomas rendered a quick salute and headed outside behind the two. Heading to the gate, he found the four Rangers waiting at the gate in a vehicle for someone to arrive.

“Check your wallet troop,” said Thomas as he strolled up.

“Sorry sir?” asked the MP.

“You’ve got Rangers at your gate,” said Thomas. “Best keep one hand on your wallet.”

“Too soon for the Ranger jokes Major,” grinned the Captain who was Company Commander.

“They ready to sign for?” asked Thomas.

“Yes sir,” said the MP. “Just needs your signature.”

Thomas scribbled his signature on the entry log and the gate was opened yet again. The vehicle drove in and parked near the gate and the four individuals dismounted and walked to Thomas.

“Captain Lyle Brown, Pacifica Rangers,” he said and snapped up a salute.

“Major Tom Dayfield, NAU Cider,” said Thomas as he returned. “First, we aren’t that formal so that’s the last salute you need to give unless it’s got birds or stars around here.”

“Fair enough,” said Brown. “This is my XO, 1st Lieutenant Austin White, my senior platoon leader 1st Lieutenant Devin Black and the Company First Sergeant Freddy Silver.”

“This isn’t a joke?” asked Thomas.

“No sir,” laughed the Captain. “And we even have a Green as a squad leader and two more folks named Gold and Grey.”

“My folks are going to have a lot of fun with that,” laughed Thomas. “You make it in okay?”

“Sure did sir,” said Brown. “And got the chance to talk with the General before we got here.”

“Over a secure link?” asked Thomas.

“Absolutely,” said Brown. “And he filled us in on a few of the things.”

“Like how much is a few?” asked Thomas.

Brown nodded his head away from the group and stepped away. Thomas joined him and they were out of earshot from everyone else. “Enough to know some of your troubles. But he says this is worth doing and he’ll cover for us as best as he can.”

“So you know how deep this goes?” asked Thomas.

“Pretty much,” said Brown. “As do the other three. And I’ll say General McMackin told us that this was important and that we should ignore the obvious...shall we say irregularities in this mission and give you all the support you need.”

“And you’re okay with that?” asked Thomas.

“For a mission like this? Are you kidding?” asked Brown. “This is like a dream come true.”

“It’s entirely voluntary,” said Thomas.

“Major, we’ve got an entire Company of Rangers that’s been sitting around doing nothing since we got into theater. Odd job here and there, but nothing significant. We’re starved for something like this,” said Brown.

“Fair enough answer,” said Thomas. “Let’s get you inside and go through the plan.”

“Sounds good sir,” said Brown as they put their weapons in the locker and headed inside the control center. Thomas got the briefing once again and went through it with the Rangers with a few questions here and there. It was straightforward work for the most part and the questions were detail oriented instead of poking at the main plan.

“So a platoon to steal trucks and a platoon for LZ security?” asked Lieutenant White. “I was under the impression we were playing a larger role in the assault.”

“We’ll definitely need your teams to cover the barracks,” said Thomas. “And the trucks to transport whomever we get out. Overall, those two are the most critical portions of the entire mission if you ask me.”

“Because you can’t get anyone out of the compound without bringing them past that barracks,” said First Sergeant Silver. “Willy Pete and HEDP?”

“That’s what we called for,” said Thomas. “So your grenadiers need to be on point.”

“How about some Gustav rounds as well?” asked Lieutenant White.

“Certainly can’t hurt,” said Brown. “Knock the windows out, toss in some thermobaric rounds and that place gets dismantled.”

“Your call on what you want to carry,” said Thomas.

“And the fence?” asked Brown.

“Line charges,” said Thomas. “We’ve got some if you need them.”

“Pretty straightforward,” said Silver.

“Yep, should be a cakewalk, even for you Rangers,” concluded Thomas.

“Anything Cider can do, Rangers can do just as well or better,” said the Captain Brown with some professional pride.

“Except use three syllable words and have social graces?” laughed Thomas.

“Well, you got me there,” laughed the Captain. “Okay, so where are the trucks at?”

“Right here,” said Thomas and pointed at the map. He brought up the satellite image on the computer and zoomed in. “Nice out of the way spot, almost zero security, we’ve only seen a squad on site for security and a nice clear area back to where we’ll be.”

“Except this checkpoint here on the road,” said the Captain as he zoomed back out and pointed at the IU checkpoint about halfway between the camp and the supply point.

“Leave that to me, but be ready to take it down just in case. And the checkpoint only has a squad as well,” said Thomas.

“Only takes one person to sound the alarm,” said the Lieutenant Black.

“Which is why you should do it real quiet like,” said Thomas. “I thought sneaky was a term associated with Rangers.”

“Not most I know,” laughed the Captain. “However, here’s the suggestion. You have a full platoon at the RON site and one dedicated to doing what Rangers do best. How about we drop that to two squads and put another two squads with the assault team here. It won’t need more than twenty people babysitting you while you nap and that gives us more manpower and resources to bring back additional assets. I’ll even leave the platoon leadership with the two squads so it bumps up to twenty-four.”

“Trying to travel light,” said Thomas. “But you do bring up a valid point. We aren’t sure of the total numbers in the camp, so more assets would be helpful.”

“Gives us a squad to guard against ambush, and five squads to go in and cause mayhem in that parking lot,” said the Lieutenant.

“And one squad can be dedicated to assaulting that checkpoint just in case,” said the Captain.

“That actually sounds pretty good,” said Thomas. “But can you cover the building with just two squads? Could be a hornet’s nest.”

“They have limited entry and exit points,” said White. “If we’re firing up the windows, that should limit the exits and there don’t appear to be that many doors and windows to begin with. So twenty-four guys, three sides without crossfires, eight per. Piece of cake.”

“But this building does concern me,” said Brown as he pointed to another facility. “We have to go right past it to get in.”

“Two of my teams are taking it down in the initial stage,” said Thomas. “And hitting this one, two more here and three at the main facility. Two teams on the exterior as support taking out the roving patrols and towers and one team on backup.”

“Risky, but they pay us the big bucks for that,” said Brown.

“And your other two squads will be on backup for our assault, so I need guys with good close quarters experience,” said Thomas.

“I can handle that,” said Black. “My platoon is dedicated as hostage rescue so that fits in perfect with this mission.”

“Pick your best squads, we’ll only get one shot at this,” said the Captain.

“And your other two squads we can dedicate to taking down site security and the checkpoint. This is way too easy and I thought you were going to challenge us,” said the XO.

“Still behind enemy lines boys,” said Thomas.

“Emergency ex-fil in case things go south?” asked the Captain.

“Best place we’ve seen so far is to swing west of Hrboltová and cross the river near this bend here,” said Thomas as he pointed at the map. “Most of the town of Hrboltová was destroyed and was used by the IU as a training camp in urban assault although they don’t keep a security detachment there. And most of the defenders are linked into Ružomberok as it is and should fall back when the attack happens. Cross and link up with the battalion holding the lines there.”

“No bridges?” asked the XO.

“No, the IU dropped them before we pulled into this sector,” said Thomas.

“I hate river crossings,” said the Captain.

“You see Major, he’s like a cat and doesn’t like to be wet,” laughed Black.

“I think I’ll use you as a canoe,” shot back the Captain. “Back to my only concern. This checkpoint is pretty much going to be a show stopper if it’s not taken down and quickly.”

“Have your backup plan to take it down, but trust me, I’ve got plans that will render that checkpoint a moot point of conversation,” said Thomas.

“Okay, I trust you sir,” said the Captain. “Timeline?”

“Once we secure the camp, we’ll send the go codes through the communicator. If we fail, you are clear to begin E and E and head west back to friendly lines,” said Thomas.

“How long are we talking here?” asked the XO.

“The camp shouldn’t take more than twenty minutes to take down,” said Thomas.

“It’s a big camp,” observed the Captain.

“Only hitting a small portion of it,” said Thomas.

“Okay,” said the Captain. “Can we get copies of the intel reports and pictures?”

Thomas turned and handed over a portable hard drive as he knew they were going to ask.
“Everything we have is on here.”

“Nice to work with professionals,” remarked the Captain.

“One of two things,” said Thomas. “We can work the airflow from your base of origin or you can pre-stage here. We’re working through J-SOD channels so it’s expected at any time.”

“Chopper?” asked the Captain.

“Or Osprey, not sure yet,” said Thomas. “Depends on what J-SOD can scrape together.”

“Will you be able to explain how ninety Rangers showed up at the same time?” asked Brown.

“Honestly, probably not,” said Thomas. “We’ll have you stage out of your base then.”

“The two squads as a minimum need to be here to integrate with your folks on the assault and do some rehearsals,” said Brown.

“Yes, of course,” said Thomas.

“Can you accommodate the extra personnel?” asked Brown. “We’ll call it some joint force training and get the General to sign off on movement orders.”

“Won’t be a problem,” said Thomas. “Bring your own sleeping bags though.”

“Okay, they’ll be here by tonight,” said Brown. “I’ll send the message while we’re heading back so everything should be ready by the time we return.”

“We’ll have the two squads in place twelve hours ahead of everyone else. I’m sending in a single team twenty-four in advance to establish the ORP. The chopper assets already are here and the infiltration routes and LZ is already established, so that’s a cinch,” said Thomas.

“Go time?” asked Brown.

“0300 on the 5th,” said Thomas. “The other portion of the exercise kicks off at 0400 and we’re rolling out of the compound by 0600 and back in friendly lines by 0700.”

“Not cutting it close or anything are you?” chuckled White.

“Mitigating factors are forcing us to move quickly,” said Thomas.

“We completely understand that,” said the Captain. “If there’s nothing else, we’ll head back to camp and start getting this planned out.”

“Appreciate the assist on this one,” said Thomas.

“For this kind of mission?” asked the Captain. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“We’ll send word in the next twelve hours on airflow,” said Thomas. “If you have logistical needs, let us know and we’ll see what we can whip up.”

“I think we’re okay for the moment,” said Brown. “But we’ll let you know.”

The individuals shook hands and the Rangers departed to get back to their base. Thomas headed out and tracked down Darren to find out the status of the airflow. “We got everything?”

“Yes and no,” said Darren. “As the mission goes lifting us and the Rangers in is reasonably easy. Hard part comes from our little subterfuge in getting our teams in somewhat close proximity. We’re filing plans with Brigade for a sector level recon, right?”

“That’s what it will say, yes,” said Thomas.

“So forty plus troops are getting dropped off in somewhat of the same location, right? Kinda looks a little odd you know?” said Darren. “We should be more spread out according to the aerial taskings when we go in. Ingress routes, LZs, the whole nine yards.”

“You have a solution, right?” asked Thomas.

“Okay, typically we file the finalized flight path and LZs in the mission plans. But the actual ingress routes and LZs are handled by J-SOD for our missions after coordination through intelligence cells,” said Darren.

“Which Brigade would come up with being their sector and all,” said Thomas.

“So we get flight paths approved through J-SOD which typically come from Brigade, right? We get a duplicate set we send to J-SOD and download them into the communicators. Once we’re airborne, we can sync up the devices and download the new flight paths,” said Darren. “Two ingress routes, one we get from Brigade and one we actually use.”

“Can the Australians plot the course?” asked Thomas who knew another intelligence unit needed to sign off on a flight path.

“I wouldn’t imagine they would turn us down,” said Darren.

“Make the call,” said Thomas.

“Want to see about some additional assets?” asked Darren and briefly explained.

“That’s a big request,” remarked Thomas.

“Yeah, but they are up there nearly all the time,” said Darren. “And getting some time on a couple of them isn’t a huge favor to ask.”

“If, and only if, the coordination doesn’t interfere with your training time,” said Thomas. “The Ranger squads will be here this evening and you need to integrate them starting about as soon as they hit the ground.”

“We’ll need access to the live fire ranges for that,” said Darren.

“By a twist of fate, the schedule for the ranges suddenly cleared and we have full access to everything for the next few days,” said Thomas.

“Computer glitch?” asked Darren.

“Something like that,” said Thomas. “Actually Amber is now implicated in our little conspiracy. It’s amazing what she can get by batting her eyes.”

“Okay, I’ll start getting teams lined up,” said Darren and paused before leaving.

“I know,” said Thomas who read his thoughts.

“If we go, we go out in a bang at least,” said Darren.

CHAPTER 23

Date/Time: 28 March/2100

Location: 1st Battalion Operations area, north of Ružomberok, Slovak Republic

“Ladies and gents, I’ve called you here today to talk to you about a sticky situation we’re in. I’d like for you to hear me out before you make a decision and nobody will think less of you if you back out. But this is something I need all your support on as I can’t order you to do it. But having said that, this is an all-in or nobody goes situation,” said Lieutenant Colonel Jacobson. He had his gathered Company Commanders along with his S-1, S-2, S-3 and S-4 in the tent in an impromptu staff call.

“With skimpy information like how, how could we resist?” asked the wisecracking commander from Bravo Company.

“The mission will be one of the utmost importance. The Cider teams have identified what appears to be a prison camp to the south of us and have decided to liberate it. They are moving forward as we speak and will strike before long. The problem is the enemy facing us at Objective Casio. They can and will ruin that team’s day if they aren’t preoccupied. So folks, we are going to preoccupy them along this sector,” said Jacobson. “And to make his plan work, we need to secure the bridges in Černová.”

“How are we going to do that sir?” asked the commander from Alpha.

“By limited attacks within our sector. We’ll call it reconnaissance in force,” said Jacobson.

“Using all four companies isn’t specifically recon sir,” laughed the Alpha commander.

“No, but we need to get and keep the attention of the IU until that raid is successful. After they capture that camp, we move forward to secure convoy routes out of the camp,” said Jacobson.

“And this isn’t coming from Brigade I take it?” asked the S-3 who would have known in advance had Brigade ordered the operation.

“Not yet. It’s my intention to inform him after we’ve started probing the lines,” said Jacobson.

“Risky,” observed the S-3. “But we did get the report that the regular forces rotated out a few days ago and were replaced by undermanned Class C units. Might be a prime time to move forward a tad and see whose still around.”

“You said it’s for a prison camp?” asked the commander of Delta Company, the “Angry Dolphins.”

“Tom Dayfield thinks it is,” said Jacobson.

“I’m in,” said the Delta commander.

“So am I,” said Bravo. “Dayfield’s boys and girls have always gotten us good intel in the past. If he said there were space aliens up there, I’d believe it.”

“Liberating a camp is pretty justifying for what you are proposing,” said the S-2. “I’m in.”

The remainder of the officers agreed on the mission, except the S-3. He had a worried expression on his face about it, however, didn’t publically dissent. Jacobson noted the look and decided to speak with him after the meeting.

“Folks, don’t spread the word that far into what we’re doing. Tell who you need to and that’s all,” said Jacobson.

“Colonel, we should be telling everyone about this and showing them pictures of the camps liberated in the rest of Europe. It’ll give the units more of a fighting spirit and make them mad as hell. I can flat guarantee you my unit will fight harder if they know why they are fighting and possibly dying,” suggested the Alpha Commander.

“I’d rather not have word get out on this, but you do what you feel is necessary in your individual units,” said Jacobson, leaving the matter up to them.

“Orders sir?” asked the S-4.

“Start getting supplies on hand now. Double the bean, bullet and Band-Aid load of everyone and get enough fuel for an extended fight. Normal requisition, but put out a favor to the Brigade S-4 to keep it on the down low. He owes me a favor and remind him of that fact,” said Jacobson and turned to the additional staff members with instructions.

“And how do we pull off our recon in force?” asked the Bravo commander.

“Here is the idea I had about what we could do,” said Jacobson as he motioned the commanders around the map and started going over the plan hatched in his head after being briefed by Thomas. The commanders and staff saw it was a good plan, but added in their concerns and refinements along the way. In the end, changes were made and the plan set to memory. After it was all said and done, each of them went away to their individual units and sections and prepare for the fight to come. After they all left, the S-3 remained behind with Jacobson.

“It’s risky what you’re proposing here,” said the S-3.

“You see a hole in the plan?” asked Jacobson.

“No, the plan is solid. I’m worried about the aftermath,” said the S-3.

“How so?” asked Jacobson.

“The Colonel will skin you alive for acting out of order and against his direct supervision of the fight. This is a Brigade objective and should have at least another battalion in support,” said the S-3. “And support from the rear.”

“4th Batt is going to keep the eastern defenders covered under direct fire,” said Jacobson. “And 3rd Batt is sending forward two companies to fill in.”

“Okay, so we are keeping the IU occupied, I see that, but you are stretching his orders to the limit here,” said the S-3.

“We are allowed recon per his standing instructions,” said Jacobson.

“And as Captain Smith put it, a battalion level assault isn’t specifically a recon,” said the S-3.

“You think we shouldn’t help Dayfield or his team?” asked Jacobson.

“It’s not that. I’m worried about you exceeding your orders and getting canned by the Colonel. You aren’t his favorite and he’ll be looking for an excuse to fire you,” said the S-3.

“That’s a chance I’m willing to take as long as Tom and his merry band of marauders capture that camp and rescue the victims,” said Jacobson.

“All this without Brigade Commander approval?” asked the S-3.

“We have authority to hit targets of opportunity,” said Jacobson. “And this is a reconnaissance in force probing the front trace.”

“This isn’t specifically targets of opportunity,” said the S-3 and repeated the concerns of his comrades. “And a battalion level assault is hardly a recon in force.”

“I think they are and we will be probing,” said Jacobson. “I’m tired of just sitting around looking at targets we should be smashing.”

“We kind of like you around here sir. We’d rather not get you replaced by one of his staff lackies. You’re a good commander and we’d very much like to keep you out of trouble,” said the S-3.

“Trouble finds you when you least expect it. You want to hold back an opportunity to liberate a concentration camp because the Colonel thinks we should stay in place?” asked Jacobson.

“Absolutely not! But just be careful that you don’t go exceeding his standing orders,” warned the S-3.

“I trust you’ll keep me on a short leash?” chuckled Jacobson.

“We’ll lie, cheat, steal and pillage to keep you in place sir. Just don’t give the Colonel any more excuse to relieve you than is necessary,” said the S-3.

“He’s got us all so scared of being relieved not a darn one of us will do our jobs correctly. He micromanages our units to the point where we can’t run them ourselves. It’s past time I started acting like a combat commander and stopped acting like a lap dog waiting for his direct supervision of my unit. We hold the IU in place here through limited attacks along the western edge of the city,” said Jacobson with resolve. “And we will capture those bridges in Černová.”

Date/Time: 2 April/1500

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

The previous four days had been a whirlwind for the teams and the Ranger squads. They had practiced, discussed, rehearsed again, discussed, made minute changes and had gotten the assault coordination down in record time. It was one thing to bring a conventional unit up to speed, but when working with professionals, the time decreased significantly and the tasks became far easier. And the overall mission gave the teams the passion to do everything right the first time and each time afterwards. The teams gathered in one last meeting prior to moving the units forward and were seated in the dining tent yet again.

“Token, you’ll take your team and get situated on the ground...here,” said Thomas as he pointed at the map. “You comfortable with that?”

“Best place according to Gramps,” said Parsons. “We’ll eyeball it from ground level, but for the moment, it’s a nice camping spot.”

“You’ll be on the ground for thirty-six hours before the main body gets there and twelve hours before the Rangers. You want another team?” asked Thomas.

“No, four of us will do,” said Michael.

“I don’t want you putting yourself in danger. If you start getting activity in that A-O, you bug out and reassess from another location,” said Thomas.

“Only puts us four miles away from the camp, but you know we’ll be careful,” said Michael.

“Okay, main force landing zones will be here, here, here and...here,” said Thomas as he pointed at the map. “We should be able to converge on the site within a few hours of each other if all goes according to plan.”

“Murphy factor?” asked Darren as he looked at the various taskings on the helicopter and tilt-roter aircraft.

“Three hours at minimum for the first teams, nine hours max on the others. Give it a three hour spread either way to be safe,” said Thomas. “The main Ranger force will be dropped in here, about eight miles from their objective.”

“Easy road march,” said Captain Brown who had returned to iron out the final details.

“You’ve only got eighteen hours between your insertion and the strike,” said Thomas. “Will that be enough?”

“Shouldn’t be an issue at all,” said Brown. “We move in eight hours prior and in position by two hours prior to go time. We hit the site at 0130 and get out on the road by 0245.”

“What kind of airlift are we expecting?” asked Cliff Morris.

“Pave Hawks and Ospreys,” said Darren. “Teams will be split as we can.”

“Any air support?” asked Joel Tucker.

“Nothing past the initial strike,” said Thomas. “There may be some on call stuff, but we aren’t counting on it.”

“So we’re all alone,” remarked Bill Meyers. “About normal for us.”

“With no back up forces either except for the Ranger platoon here,” said Thomas. “They might be the opportunity for the 1st Batt to slide us some help, but again, we aren’t counting on it.”

“How did I get ordered into this again?” laughed Meyers.

“Bear made you do it,” laughed Tim Daniels as he took a prod at Staff Sergeant Katie Holmes. At barely five-four, she was the smallest person in the unit, but she made up for her lack of size in sheer tenacity and outperformed everyone when it came to the job. But being the smallest, she ended up being the butt of many jokes.

“Yeah,” she said with a laugh. “Pointed my finger right in his face and growled at him.”

“Did someone get you a ladder first?” asked Specialist Josh Wolfe.

The room laughed at the comments as Thomas moved to intercede before things could get out of control.

“Okay, so Darren has already configured the communicators with the flight plan changes. Once your airborne and away from the camp, let the pilot know and download the file into their nav system,” said Thomas.

“Except for us, right?” asked Brown.

“Except for you,” confirmed Darren. “Your infiltration route doesn’t go through us, so we didn’t have to modify anything on your part.”

“Got it,” said Brown.

“Okay, the strike goes down as soon as the DFPs are out of play,” said Thomas. “Sunshine, Doodle and Fluffy, your teams take out the towers in the first ten seconds with all out of play in twenty. Sister and Junior will need to take second shots to get them all. And then concentrate on the roving guards if they are out in the aftermath. You’d best bet once they see what happens to their towers and DFPs they will be confused, so use that time to your advantage. If you have to stalk them, do so but at little risk to yourselves and they will move in a clockwise pattern. Once the perimeter security is taken down, collapse back on the administrative areas and contact Snoopy, Chaos, Token or myself and find out where we can best use you. If we’ve got our hands full, make contact with the Rangers and assist in covering the barracks.”

“The rest of us stage to the north and wait for the first shots. Rush the camp and take the administrative area. Snoopy and Blaze, you get Building 1,” said Thomas as he pointed at the first building in the compound. “Chaos you get Building 2. Token and Badaa, Building 3. R2, you get Building 4. Rowdy, Gadget and my team will take the main administrative building, Building 5. Chaos and R2, if you run into trouble, let us know and we’ll give help as soon as we can shake free.”

“The main Ranger forces goes and commits grand theft auto and brings the convoy up the main road into the camp and wait for our all clear signal to come in. We then organize whatever prisoners we can find into the transports and wait for the all clear from Černová and move out. If we don’t need the trucks, we’ll destroy them as we leave. The convoy will roll out with Rangers in the lead and trail with teams in the mix as a reaction force,” said Thomas.

“Rangers lead the way!” shouted 1st Lieutenant Black from the Ranger.

“There’s one in every crowd,” laughed Joel Tucker.

“Easy there Blaze,” said Thomas with a grin. “They get all moody when you don’t tell them how great they are every five minutes. Besides, these are Hollywood Rangers from California.”

The group howled at the comments and the Rangers held up their hands in surrender. However, they knew by sitting in this tent they were considered equals and had seamlessly integrated into the plans for the raid. And since professional ribbing was expected between two groups of professionals, they went with it and would get in their barbs when they could.

“Okay, questions?” asked Thomas.

“When can we expect to hear from the 1st Batt guys?” asked 1st Lieutenant Cliff Morris.

“Unsure, but if they haven’t captured the bridges by 0800, we’ll check the alternate plan of helicopters. Gadget has airflow on standby and will be underway within fifteen minutes of

getting the call. Arrival thirty minutes after being airborne and we hot load them and get them back out,” said Thomas. “The area in front of the compound can handle two Stallions at the same time, so that’s a hundred people per load.”

“And when do we break it to higher?” asked Mark, not realizing Corporal Zdenko Horak was in the briefing and didn’t know about the unauthorized nature of their mission.

“Should we until it’s all said and done?” asked Rick.

“It’s a valid question,” said Thomas. “And the answer will be ‘play it by ear.’ I’m not sure if we might need support but I’m sure word will get out fast. So we’ll address that one once we’re on the ground.”

“Fair enough answer,” said Mark.

“Anything else?” asked Thomas. Everyone knew their roles and responsibilities and needed no further training at the moment. Heads were shaken around the room and he pressed on. “Okay, we’ll do final PCCs and PCIs by noon tomorrow and shakedown at the same time. We’re going in light so don’t burden yourself with a bunch of extra gear. Two days in and out.”

As the meeting broke up, Thomas made his way through the crowd to Zee who was about to leave. He caught him at the door and managed to stop him.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been able to speak with you yet,” said Thomas.

“It is understandable Major,” said Zee. “Officers often have many tasks they must accomplish.”

“True, but you’re our guest here and I should have taken the time,” said Thomas.

“I have the time now,” he grinned.

“Grab a seat,” said Thomas as they went to an unoccupied corner of the tent. “Have you gotten up to speed on your role?”

“I’m still unsure of my exact role,” said Zee. “But I understand the mission.”

“We don’t have anyone who speaks Slovakian so it’s a glaring hole in our plan,” said Thomas. “And if, more likely when, we make contact with the prisoners, we’ll need someone with your talents to help.”

“I understand,” said Zee. “I do have one question though.”

“If I can answer, I will,” said Thomas.

“One of your other Majors asked about contacting your higher headquarters. Exactly what did he mean with that question?” asked Zee.

Thomas paused before answering. But since Zee would be risking a lot along with his teams, he deserved an answer. “It’s complicated and the more information you know, the more of a risk it is to you personally.”

“I do not understand,” said Zee. “Is this not a mission to save prisoners?”

“It is,” said Thomas. “But there are complications.”

“If you do not believe I need to know the answer, I can accept that,” said Zee.

“It’s not that you don’t need to know,” said Thomas with a sigh before explaining the mission wasn’t approved in any way, shape or form and some of the reasons why. Zee took a moment to let the information sink in before replying.

“This makes it simple,” said Zee.

“Simple?” asked Thomas.

“A mission to rescue prisoners?” asked Zee. “Who would not approve such a mission and why would they not approve it knowing the atrocities that are being committed?”

“It’s complicated,” said Thomas.

“I understand,” said Zee. “But I believe what you are doing is a good thing. Perhaps you are out of order by not following your instructions, but I believe freeing those prisoners who face certain death otherwise is a good thing. I believe you Americans have a saying of let the chips fall or something like that. In this case, let the results of the mission speak for themselves.”

“I have brought you on board for a mission that is technically illegal,” said Thomas.

“We are saving lives,” said Zee. “What is illegal about that?”

Thomas didn’t say anything else as it was a simplistic look at things, but true nonetheless. “I wanted to make sure you were aware.”

“When this is all over, I will go back to my unit,” said Zee. “And I will go back knowing someone put aside the regulations to accomplish a good thing.”

“Fair enough answer,” said Thomas as he shook his hand. They spoke for several more minutes about where Zee had been as well as the units he had served in as well as the training he had received. Eventually, Thomas had other pressing matters and had to end the conversation. Zee returned to the tent where he found the team he was assigned to as well as the other they shared the tent with cleaning weapons and readying gear. He decided it was as good a time as any and broke apart his M-4 for cleaning as well as his other weapons. His rifle has received a paint job two days prior to better blend in with the environment and he had been issued all new clothing

and gear in the unit's camouflage pattern. And they had provided him with an issue red dot sight, an IR laser, brand new magazines and a flashlight since his carbine hadn't come with one. As well as plenty of proficiency rounds to get it sights in and bring his marksman ship level up. The rifle didn't need more than a simple wipe down and oil, but it helped pass the time. He removed his pistol next and started breaking it apart.

"Is that an IU Glock?" asked Rob Davis as he pulled a patch through the barrel of his machine gun and checked it against the light.

"Yes," said Zee. "I took it from the first IU officer I killed."

"Nice memento," said Rob.

"And quite easy to find replacement magazines and ammunition while behind the lines," said Zee. "As an insurgent, we were at the mercy of the IU supply lines."

"But you have an M-4?" asked Jill Dugger.

"Weapons from the Americans that you have provided," said Zee. "Our own weapons industry is not back into production yet and we are using the standard carbine. Speaking of which, who do I give the items to when we are done?"

"What items?" asked Ashley Scott.

"The gear I was provided as well as the scope and things on my rifle," said Zee.

"Did you sign for them?" asked Rick.

"I did not," said Zee.

"Then don't worry about it," said Rick. "If you were picked by J-SOD to help our unit that means you're on a list to help in the future. Next time you come to play, bring that stuff with you so another unit doesn't have to provide it."

"You give this freely?" asked Zee.

"Least we can do to help," said Rick. "You're a part of the team so you need what we have."

"I thank you," said Zee.

"Let's have a look at your rifle," said Rick as he sat down his own carbine. After making sure it was clear, he checked the actions and broke down the weapon. Reaching into his footlocker, he pulled out several armorer's tools and started taking out the fire control group.

"May I ask what you are doing?" asked Zee.

“Your trigger feels like its got fifty pounds of grit inside,” said Rick as he carefully removed the hammer and spring and worked the next pin out. “I’m fixing it.”

“You are qualified to do so?” asked Zee.

“Been doing it for years,” said Rick as he reached inside his footlocker again and pulled out a small plastic bag. The installation of the new trigger was fairly simple and Rick function tested it before handing it back. Zee himself checked the work and his eyes opened a bit wider.

“This is very nice!” he exclaimed. “What did you do to it?”

“Installed a new fire control group,” said Rick. “Special build for our type of units. Better springs, more polished surfaces and just better quality.”

“It is outstanding!” remarked Zee. “Thank you.”

“Got another one of those in your box of goodies?” asked Jamie Collins.

“Yours bad too?” asked Rick.

“I honestly don’t know,” said Jamie as he handed over his carbine for Rick to check. And replaced his as well while he had everything out.

“Why aren’t all of ours like this?” asked Jamie after checking for himself after Rick was complete. “And why was mine crappy?”

“Because they give you a basic rifle when you are assigned and let us do the specialty work at our level,” said Rick. “Most everyone in the unit does have this.”

“I mean like everyone in the coalition?” asked Jamie.

“Price,” said Rick. “It’s more than double what a normal one costs. So when you are talking about all the forces, it gets a little expensive.”

“We get all the cool toys,” remarked Jamie.

“We sure do,” said Thomas two tents down as the same observation was made by Darren about what Rick had done to Thomas’ pistol.

“That new trigger is something else,” asked Darren as Thomas put together his issue Smith and Wesson M&P pistol.

“It’s a company out of California. Actually makes it somewhat desirable now,” said Thomas as he handed it over to Darren.

“Thought you wouldn’t ever give up your Springfield,” said Darren after checking it out and handing it back.

“Too much of a pain to find spare parts,” said Thomas. “That stupid pin broke again and I didn’t want anyone trying to chase down another. So I finally gave it up, grabbed what felt okay and shipped the XD back to Sharon.”

“But kept it in .45 I see,” said Jeremy Baines. “Should gotten a Glock my friend. You’d still be using what you brought.”

“Never felt right in my hands,” said Thomas.

“That old 21 was a monster for certain,” said Darren.

“I told Zee about our problems,” said Thomas.

“What did he say?” asked Darren as he broke down his own issue pistol, a Sig P226 designated by the New England States Alliance as the M28. Darren also had the problem of not being able to find parts for his original CZ-75 and had made the switch for ease of maintenance.

“He was completely in after that,” said Thomas.

“Lot of extra people know,” remarked Darren.

“We know this won’t be a secret forever,” said Thomas.

“In twenty-four hours it’ll be moot,” said Darren. “We’ll mostly be on choppers by then. Speaking of, you need to get to bed. Early morning for you.”

“Yeah Dad, go to sleep so the kids can sneak out the window,” said Amber with a grin.

“I always knew you were a bad girl,” said Thomas.

“I do a really good innocent act though,” said Amber. “Heath made it to the States. Dad emailed me and let me know.”

“San Antonio?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah,” said Amber. “Dad was able to go down and meet him.”

“He doing okay?” asked Thomas.

“For the most part,” said Amber. “Missing the action and already trying to sneak out of his hospital bed. I wrote him and told him to keep his butt there or else.”

“I’ll do what I can to get him assigned to Camp Dugger when it’s all over,” said Thomas.

“From your prison cell?” she asked with a wink.

“You’ll be there with me,” said Thomas.

“No, they’ll send me to the bad girls prison where I’ll be the only innocent girl locked up with all the other bad girls,” said Amber and stopped immediately and hoped the remainder of the group missed what she had said. However, she saw the stifled laughs and knew she’d been caught.

“Yeah, this conversation can go real wrong at this point,” laughed Greg Henry.

“I sometimes say things without thinking first you know?” asked Amber as she blushed up.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” laughed Darren along with the others. They could hear the rest of the teams in their tents having conversations and laughing as they started packing, cleaning weapons and getting equipment ready for the mission. It seemed like the entire unit had new life breathed into it and reminded Thomas of the days prior to the arrival of Colonel Woodson when they would laugh and have a good time at the little things that happened. And it thrilled him to see his unit back in good spirits for a change. But he knew it was true of what had been said. Sometimes being bad was really good.

Date/Time: 2 April/2105

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Why are there so many extra aircraft on the helicopter pad?” asked Colonel Woodson as he finished the daily paperwork for the evening.

“The 14th is heading out on that sector recon sir,” said the S-3 as he collected the files.

“They are?” asked the Colonel.

“You signed off on the missions yesterday,” said the S-3.

“Oh, yes I did,” said the Colonel. “How many teams are going out?”

“I don’t recall exactly sir,” said the S-3. “I believe about ten.”

“Can he still fill his emergency J-SOD taskings?” asked the Colonel and by “who” he meant Thomas Dayfield specifically.

“I would assume so sir,” said the S-3. “Normally they let us know when the 14th can’t.”

“Normally?” asked the Colonel.

“As in always sir,” said the S-3. “I’ve never seen them not courtesy copy us.”

“Do you have the number for J-SOD ops?” asked the Colonel.

“I can track it down,” said the S-3 and disappeared. He returned a moment later with the number. “That’s the control center.”

“Thank you,” said the Colonel as he picked up the phone. “Go ahead and file the rest and get out of here. We’ve got a busy day coming up. I want to practice for the next sandtable.”

“Roger that sir,” said the S-3 and departed. The Colonel dialed the number and it rang several times before someone picked up.

“J-SOD Ops Center, Sergeant Peters,” said the voice on the other end.

“Hi, this is Colonel Woodson, 1st Brigade Commander with the 2nd NAU Freedom Guards. Can I speak to the watch officer?” he requested politely.

“Stand by sir,” said the controller and turned to the Major in charge. “Sir, it’s Colonel Woodson from the 2nd NAU Freedom Guards and he would like to speak to you.”

“What’s he want?” asked the Major who knew exactly who Woodson was.

“I don’t know sir,” said the controller. The Major picked up another line and dialed the quarters for the J-3 and hoped he hadn’t turned in for the night. The phone rang twice before he answered.

“Sir, Colonel Woodson from the 2nd Freedom Guards is calling,” said the Major. “Would you mind taking the call?”

“What’s he want?” asked the Colonel.

“We’re not sure sir, but we’d prefer you deal with him,” said the Major.

“Right,” said the Colonel and sat up from reading a book. “Put him through.”

The Major instructed the controller to patch the call through to the J-3 and hung up the other line. It took several seconds, but the patch was complete. “Colonel Woodson, we’re putting you through to Colonel Powers, our J-3. Sirs, are you on?”

“Yes, I’m on,” said Powers.

“I’m here,” said Woodson as he heard the controller click off.

“How can I help you Colonel?” asked Powers.

“I didn’t expect them to wake the J-3,” said Woodson. “The watch officer would have been sufficient to answer my questions.”

“I was just doing some light reading so you didn’t wake me,” said Powers. “And typically we like to help folks with your rank and above with me as a minimum. So what can I do for you tonight Colonel?”

“I had a question about Op Group Alpha from the 14th Special Operations Battalion’s current tasking,” asked Woodson.

“If I recall, they are on a sector level recon. And if memory serves, you signed off on those mission orders,” said Powers.

“Yes, I did,” said Woodson. “I was wondering if they can still maintain the teams for emergency J-SOD missions.”

“They are below minimums with what you approved. But we talked to Major Dayfield specifically about it when he submitted the mission plans and took it into account,” said Powers.

“But he’s below your requirements,” said Woodson.

“The 14th is, yes,” said Powers. “And we brought in a platoon from the Pacifica Rangers to take up the slack.”

“You aren’t concerned he overtasked his unit?” asked Woodson.

“You signed off on the orders Colonel,” said Powers. “Shouldn’t you have noticed he fell below the emergency taskings?”

“I...didn’t know until now,” said Woodson.

“Yes, we were made aware and yes, General McMackin from the Pacifica 16th Regiment approved the replacements and gave over Opcon to us,” said Powers. “Actually, he was thrilled his units got into the rotation.”

“I didn’t realize there were additional forces on the base,” said Woodson.

“Yes, they should have been there this evening if I recall and setting up shop in the 14th’s compound,” said Powers. “No other taskings except the emergency operations. I mean, Op Group Alpha has been on the go without a break for six months, so it’s the least we can do.”

“Dayfield requested it?” asked Woodson.

“No, I specifically approved it after he informed me he would be completing your local taskings. And only for the duration of his recon,” said Powers. “Speaking of, we can order the entire

company in to assist with their missions while they take some time in the rear to refit and rest. I believe they are a tad overdue to refit and receive replacements.”

“That won’t be necessary Colonel,” said Woodson. “We plan to rotate them out soon.”

“You can send the request for replacements direct to me,” said Powers. “I can see to it personally they get relieved.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” said Woodson and changed the subject. “I didn’t realize I had Rangers under the Brigade at the moment.”

“They aren’t under your Brigade,” said Powers. “They specifically fall under J-SOD for Opcon and Adcon during that time.”

“But they are on my base,” said Woodson. “And doing taskings that would normally fall under a unit which falls under me.”

“J-SOD taskings Colonel,” corrected Powers. “And furthermore, just because they happen to be on that patch of land your headquarters is camped out on doesn’t mean they belong to you. Those are Pacifica Forces under the direct control of J-SOD and used as I see fit.”

“A courtesy call might have been in order,” said Woodson.

“Colonel, I can send teams to any base in this theater I darn well feel like under J-SOD missions without having to call you or anyone else. And furthermore, many of those missions are classified so I *really* don’t have to call you or anyone else. You just feed them, water them and give them a place to sleep and go about your merry way,” said Powers. “But you’ve had your inbrief with us and know exactly what you can and can’t do.”

“I just called to find out if Dayfield couldn’t support your emergency tasking,” said Woodson.

“Major Dayfield is an exemplary commander that lets us know the status of not only about his Op Group, but the other three assigned under the 2nd. And reminds us of how many are on the sick list and how many mission capable teams he doesn’t have because his injury rate has gone up in recent months since he is forced to toss green teams back into the field with minimal immersion training and refit times,” said Powers.

“He is complaining to you?” asked Woodson.

“Not in the least,” said Powers. “He’s way too professional to talk out of school. But it’s not like I can’t see exactly what’s happening so I’ll do it for him. And I feel it’s way past time to let you know that it’s way past time to get his unit in the rear like the other three Groups that have rotated back twice in the past six months.”

“That’s an Adcon issue that you have no control over,” said Woodson. “I say when they can rotate back and I have other units with priority.”

“You are correct,” said Powers. “But training is a tasking I can create for them to get them off the line. And there isn’t a darn thing you can do about it Colonel. So you best consider doing the right thing before I make that decision for you.”

“You can’t order me to relive that unit!” protested Woodson.

“You are correct,” said Powers. “But I surely can task them with training.”

“Not without going through me as well as Division!” protested Woodson.

“I can do that,” said Powers. “I’m sure General Chambers would be delighted to hear one of his units has been skipped over in the relief for six months straight.”

“Listen Colonel, I didn’t call to discuss this matter,” said Woodson. “I called to make sure you were informed about the inability of the 14th to perform its emergency missions.”

“I was duly made aware,” said Powers. “As you should have been. You get the same manpower reports I get and can do simple math to discover they are way below mission capable rates because of injuries and overtasking by their parent unit. You approved the current missions, I needed teams on standby for our taskings, so I got approval from General McMackin for his Rangers to stage from your base, on J-SOD orders as a reminder, to complete said taskings.”

“I see,” said Woodson.

“Now was there anything else you’d like to discuss tonight Colonel?” asked Powers.

“No, thank you for your time,” said Woodson as he hung up the phone. Powers sat back down after pacing back and forth during the phone conversation, at least to the limits of the phone cord. And he thought about the conversation he just had and hoped he didn’t put Dayfield in any more of a bind than he already appeared to be in. But they had seen the mismanagement of his unit from afar for the past few months and decided to do something about it. Picking up the phone he dialed a number to the operations center.

“J-SOD ops, Major Hammond,” said the Major.

“Brent, you busy tonight?” asked Powers.

“Not really sir,” said the Major who recognized his voice. “We’ve got a couple of missions underway, but nothing significant until early in the morning.”

“Okay, if you can find the time, I want you to come up with a relief for Op Group Alpha of the 14th. Call it a training course in...whatever you want to be creative with,” said Powers.

“Training class in underwater basket weaving, got it,” said the Major. “Location and how long?”

“Call it two weeks and the location I don’t really care. Just someplace far away from the front where they won’t have to worry about wearing body armor and carrying weapons. Western Germany, France, Spain, England, some place like that,” said Powers. “Draft a request to General McMackin requesting his Ranger Company fill in for them while they are gone. Have everything ready for me in the morning please.”

“Roger that sir,” said the Major. “I’ll have it in your email in the morning. Do we want to pull them off their current tasking?”

“No, just get in touch with their command center and find out how long they will be on this one,” said Powers. “If it’s more than a week, I’ll consider pulling them early.”

“I’ll take care of it,” said the Major. “Have a good night sir.”

“You too Brent,” said Powers as he hung up the phone and laid back down. He continued thinking of what was happening and decided to talk to the Major General in the morning about the conversation he had with Woodson and the decision he had just made. He thought it might be better that a two star going direct with a two star to explain why they were being pulled as well as what had been happening. He had watched for far too long and decided it was time to take action.

CHAPTER 24

Date/Time: 3 April/0230

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Be careful,” said Thomas as he helped Michael’s team into the Pavehawk helicopter.

“Don’t know any other way to be,” grinned Michael Parsons. “We’ll see you in a bit.”

“Keep the lights off for us,” said Thomas as he shook his hand and moved to the others. He was immediately followed by Shannon Parsons.

“You keep your skinny behind out of trouble,” she warned her husband.

“You know it baby,” he said and got a quick peck on the lips as the engines were starting to speed up. They backed away from the pad and removed their headgear as the rotors blew the dust towards them prior to lifting off. As always, they watched it as he turned off its lights and headed out across the base and out of sight and earshot.

“Wish I was going with you guys on this one,” said Shannon. “The doctor cleared me this morning you know.”

“Too late in the game for team changes,” said Thomas. “And I’ll feel better knowing I have someone like you back here helping coordinate.”

“I don’t like sitting around in the rear,” said Shannon.

“It could be an early promotion for you by the time this is over,” chuckled Thomas.

“I’m in this up to my neck as well,” said Shannon. “Who do you think arranged for half the stuff you guys are getting?”

“I’m not sure they have married couples prisons,” said Thomas in knowing the first official steps towards the highly unauthorized mission were being taken.

“We’ll figure out a way,” laughed Shannon. “I got a strange call from Major Hammond at J-SOD a few hours ago.”

“Brent Hammond?” asked Thomas.

“Yep, wanted to know when we were going to be done with this front level recon,” said Shannon. “I told him I’d have to get back to him in a couple of days.”

“Did he say why?” asked Thomas.

“He said we’re being scheduled for a training class in advanced unarmed combat techniques and urban escape and evasion,” said Shannon. “In Frankfurt. I’d never heard of them before.”

Thomas chuckled as he heard the class names as well as the location. “Good ol’ Brent.”

“Care to let me in on the joke?” asked Shannon.

“It’s a relief period for us,” said Thomas. “Advanced unarmed combat techniques and urban escape and evasion are what he calls his R and R times. Getting drunk, picking a fight and then avoiding the town patrols and police.”

“Oh really?” laughed Shannon. “Sounded official at least.”

“Did he give you any more details?” asked Thomas.

“No, just said we were being scheduled,” said Shannon.

“Okay, we’ll have to see how that one plays out,” said Thomas. “But I have this feeling we probably aren’t going to do that by the time this is all over.”

“We’ll see,” said Shannon. “I don’t know if anyone told you, but we’re all proud of you taking a stand to do what is right.”

“Someone had to,” said Thomas. “And my career is pretty much over as it is. You don’t see anything higher than where I’m at when you threaten serious bodily harm on a senior officer.”

“You didn’t?” asked Shannon with a scoff.

“Sure did,” said Thomas. “Only a few folks know, but I’m figuring it’s a matter of time before the truckload of bricks comes down on my head. So I’m going out with a bang.”

“Might as well feel good about it and giving them a good reason to do it,” said Shannon.

“I can accept that,” said Thomas.

“I wouldn’t say it’s all over yet,” said Shannon. “The Lord works in mysterious ways and sometimes the end we think is coming is the furthest one away.”

“You’re a pretty thoughtful gal, you know that?” chuckled Thomas.

“Gotta do the thinking for two you know,” she laughed.

“There is that,” laughed Thomas. “And poor Mike isn’t around to defend himself.”

“He wouldn’t do it,” said Shannon. “He knows better than to argue.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” laughed Thomas. “You going to be in charge of the command center while we’re out?”

“Yep,” said Shannon. “Holly and I both are going to be on duty.”

“Who’s taking the night shift?” asked Thomas.

“Shane Butler,” said Shannon. “He’s good to go.”

“He ever worked it solo?” asked Thomas.

“No, but he knows the most important thing,” said Shannon.

“Which is?” asked Thomas.

“How to say go get Captain Parsons right now,” she laughed.

“Not sure if he needs to know anything else,” he laughed in return. “Okay, I’m gonna go grab some more sleep. Let me know if they run into trouble.”

“I learned a long time ago how to say go get Major Dayfield, so I’m covered,” she laughed.

“Night,” he laughed in return and headed towards his tent.

“Nothing on thermal,” said the copilot.

“Quiet out,” observed the pilot as he dodged a tree. “Ten minutes.”

The door gunner flashed his hands at Michael letting him know how long until they were at the landing zone. Michael nodded his head in return as the team started preparing their equipment for when they landed. Weapons were loaded and packs moved towards the doors although they kept a hand on them as the helicopter was moving violently on the terrain avoidance.

“Looks like someone’s having fun,” observed the copilot as flashes on the horizon indicated a bombing strike or artillery barrage. They had just crossed a ridge and the horizon opened up.

“That’s Nitra,” said the pilot as they ducked back down into the next valley. “It appears the Australians are having some target practice at the IU’s expense.”

“Two minutes,” said the pilot as he avoided yet another large tree. He raised the aircraft slightly since the trees seemed to be taller in this area. The door gunners were already watching the

ground intently for any signs of enemy troops, but their landing zone was far away from any known IU troop formations. But it never hurt to be careful so they kept a close eye out.

“L-Z in sight,” said the pilot.

“Negative on thermal and night vision,” said the copilot.

“Looks clean,” said the pilot. “Twenty seconds.”

He brought the helicopter in and pulled up on the controls and brought it into brief hover in the small clearing. Michael and his team needed no prompting and dumped gear and themselves right after, dropping the four feet to the ground and taking a knee. The helicopter immediately powered up and departed the area picking up speed as it headed out over the trees and out of sight. After they listened for any activity, the team quickly donned their packs, night vision and got into formation. “Know where we’re heading?” asked Michael.

“Nine point three clicks that way,” said Nancy as she pointed in a northerly direction.

“Take lead,” said Michael as they headed away from the landing zone. They had an important task ahead of them and were entirely alone, cut off from support if they made contact. As they started heading off, Michael sent a quick text through the satellite communications letting the command center know they were on the ground, safe and were proceeding towards the objective rally point. He dropped the communicator back into its pouch and started scanning the area intently around him, looking and listening for anything out of the ordinary.

“Team is on the ground ma’am,” said the communications tech. “Proceeding on mission.”

“Nothing further?” asked Holly Meredith.

“No ma’am,” said the tech. “Basic infiltration message.”

“Okay, thank you,” said Holly as she went to Shannon at another station. “They’re in.”

“That pilot must have gone in at full speed,” said Shannon. “I wasn’t expecting it for at least another fifteen minutes.”

“Some don’t like being in Indian country,” said Holly as she dropped to the floor and started doing some crunches.

“Getting back into form?” asked Shannon. “I saw you on the weight pile and running earlier.”

“Hospital visits suck,” said Holly as she rolled over and started a set of pushups. “I’m way out of shape and nowhere near where I should be.”

“You’re lucky to be alive,” remarked Shannon.

“Three AK rounds in the gut,” said Holly. “And I had to fight my way back here.”

“Guys like scars though,” laughed Shannon.

“Guys don’t like girls that have more scars than they do,” chuckled Holly between sets.

“Well, most of the guys I know don’t care,” said Shannon.

“Most of the guys you know are in this unit,” said Holly with a laugh.

“Okay, I can’t argue that point,” laughed Shannon. “Four months down, but you seem to be getting back into it hard.”

“I can’t sit around like this,” said Holly. “But for sure I thought I was a goner.”

“Chalk up another win against death to Kodak,” said Shannon. “Wonder how he is?”

“Probably hating life,” chuckled Holly. “Bored out of his mind.”

“I hope they let him go on leave when he got there,” said Shannon.

“Not everyone is as evil as some folks we know,” said Holly as she completed the set and stood back up. “I’m sure they took it into account.”

The phone rang from the gate area and one of the orderlies answered it. He spoke for several moments before reporting to the two. “The gate said there are a bunch of Rangers outside?”

“The ready team,” said Holly. “I’ll fetch them.”

She grabbed her carbine and headed out to the gate where a half dozen trucks were waiting and an individual waiting with the MP. She went to the small shack and made contact. “Hi, I’m Lieutenant Holly Meredith, NAU Cider.”

“Lieutenant Mark Blain, Pacifica Rangers,” said the man as he extended his hand.

“You have orders from J-SOD?” she asked as she shook his hand.

“Yep,” he said and handed over several copies of the orders. She quickly scanned and found it had all the information she needed. She quickly authenticated a copy, signed and handed it to the MP at the gate.

“Your folks have unrestricted access now,” said Holly. “We didn’t expect you in the middle of the night.”

“We had a traffic fubar,” said the Lieutenant. “The French Regiment was pulling out of garrison and heading this way.”

“Got it,” said Holly. “You can park your vehicles over by those connexes. If you want to come with me, I’ll show you our elegant guest quarters.”

“We were told the presidential suites were available,” chuckled the Lieutenant.

“Yeah, about that,” laughed Holly as they headed into the tent area. She took the Lieutenant and showed him the four tents where his group would be staying and gave him a brief tour of the compound. By the time they finished up, his troops had already gotten bedded down and had discovered the dining tent on their own. Holly took him into the control center and let him know Thomas would be available in the morning for a meet and greet as well as letting him know they would contact J-SOD to let them know they were in position. He was introduced to Shannon as well as the other controllers and showed where he could use the computers.

“I didn’t expect the royal treatment,” said the Lieutenant.

“We try to take care of our guests,” said Holly.

“It shows,” said the Lieutenant. “I’ll be turning in now. Seven hours on the road is a killer.”

“I can understand that,” said Holly. “If you need anything else, give us a yell.”

“Will do,” said the Lieutenant and departed the control center.

“Seemed nice enough,” remarked Shannon.

“Kinda hot,” grinned Holly.

“Professional,” warned Shannon with a tone.

“Oh stop Mother,” laughed Holly. “I was professional.”

“Maybe he’ll compare scars with you,” laughed Shannon.

“Not in my current shape,” chuckled Holly as she dropped for another set of calisthenics.

“He appears to be good motivation,” observed Shannon.

Date/Time: 3 April/0748

Location: Southwest of the Prison Camp, Slovak Republic

“Looks clear,” said Nancy Dugger over the radio as she checked the area one last time. She and Nate Clark had checked one half the potential objective rally point while Michael Parsons and Willy Perez had checked the opposite side.

“Any signs of recent activity?” asked Michael over the communicator.

“Negative,” said Nancy. “Not even game trails.”

“Is it going to be big enough for our party?” asked Michael.

“I’ve got concerns over the western edge,” said Nancy. “Not very good defensive terrain over in that portion. But it’s doable.”

“Standby, we’ll come to you,” said Michael. Several minutes passed before the pair was seen silently moving towards their location. Nancy stood up and waved them over. “What are the concerns with the west side?”

“Just not very defensible terrain,” said Nancy. “Uphill slope, no natural cover, limited vegetation. Just not feeling it boss.”

“Want to move?” asked Michael.

“Half our group can be here with no problems,” said Nancy. “It gets better as you go. So either we bunch everyone up or we find another spot.”

“What are the other places?” asked Michael.

Nancy retrieved a map from her cargo pocket and showed him the two other locations that had been identified in advance. “Gramps said these two were viable. Half here, half there. Put the folks that will be assaulting that side of the camp in one, the main body here.”

“You think Warbucks would go for splitting the group?” asked Michael as he noticed the other two locations were on the other side of the camp.

“Additional security, but less of a jump for the teams going to the east,” said Nate.

“Smaller groups, less chance of detection,” said Nancy. “It’s worth suggesting.”

“Not until we’ve scoped them out,” said Michael. “Bearing?”

Nancy quickly did a magnetic course and got her bearings. “One-thirty-five for two clicks, change to eighty-five for five clicks, then due north for two point five.”

“Let’s call in and let them know,” said Michael as he prepared a message. However, he knew the leadership would be up and about so made a voice call instead. “Camelot, this is Token.”

“This is Camelot, go ahead,” he heard Frank Zimmer’s voice say.

“Roger, need to get in contact with Warbucks, Snoopy or Gadget,” said Michael.

“Standby,” said Frank. Darren came back on the line after a brief pause.

“This is Snoopy, go ahead,” said Darren.

“Roger, primary ORP is not looking good. Not good defensive terrain for the western approaches. We’re requesting to check secondary ORP 2 on mission planning,” said Michael.

“Go grab Tom,” said Darren as he pulled up the mission planning maps and checked the reference. He found the other ORP they had in mind, although it was further away from the compound in the long run. “What’s your thinking here?”

“Giggles had the idea of splitting the force. Main body at primary, eastern group at the ORP 2 or 3. Additional security, but less chance of detection,” said Michael.

“I’ll have to run that by Warbucks,” said Darren as he saw Thomas come into the control center. He quickly brought him up to speed on the situation and the idea that was brought up.

“I’m not sure I like splitting up the group,” said Thomas. “But it isn’t a bad idea. Have they checked the secondary sites?”

“Not yet,” said Darren. “They just called in.”

“It’s not a bad idea, but the western approaches butt up against this ridgeline here,” said Thomas. “What’s the chances of an IU group tromping over that ridge in the amount of time we’ll be on the ground? And furthermore, the terrain at the secondary sites is a lot easier to patrol. Might be a higher chance of detection.”

“The initial teams never saw indications of a patrol that far out,” said Darren.

“No, but it doesn’t mean the forces from Ružomberok don’t get a wild hair and start patrolling that area,” said Thomas. “And two groups doubles our chances of being detected, even in the short time we’ll be on the ground.”

“Same amount of detection if we have a large group tromping all the way around that compound when getting into position for the attack,” said Darren. “Additional movement, additional fatigue, additional chances of detection.”

“Both places are risks,” said Thomas. “But we planned on the Rangers being in position on the north side of the camp. That means they will all be on the eastern side.”

“We pull our own security,” said Darren as he followed the line of thinking. “Your call.”

“What do you think?” asked Thomas.

“I think splitting the forces might be better in the long run,” said Darren. “It’s a more direct approach to the compound from both directions. We split Token’s team into pairs; one secures the primary and waits for us and the other secures a secondary.”

“So the Rangers and the support teams on one side, the assault force on the other?” asked Thomas.

“We’ll have to redo the navigation in the next couple of hours,” said Darren.

“I’d say we take the risk of keeping everyone together until we move to strike,” said Thomas. “The terrain might not be conducive to a defense, but being that it’s against some pretty tough terrain makes it less risky in my opinion. But I leave the call up to you.”

Darren thought through the different options for several moments before coming to the decision. He wondered why Thomas was leaving it up to him, but figured he had a good reason.

“Let’s stick to the plan,” he said over the radio to Michael. “More risks involved with the two groups. We’ll make the primary work for us.”

“Roger that,” said Michael. “We’re in position and will be waiting the Alamo element.”

“Copy that,” said Darren. “Mission is still on schedule. Next check in will be 1200 local.”

“Roger, Token out,” said Michael. “They want us to stay.”

“We can make it work,” said Nancy.

“Splitting the teams means we can’t mutually support each other,” said Michael, seeing Thomas’ reasoning even though he hadn’t talked with him. “We’ve got a plan and a timeline, radically changing it this late in the game isn’t that easy or smart.”

“True,” said Nancy.

“You’re going to be a team leader one of these days,” said Michael. “You need to start thinking on that level as well.”

“I think I’ll be content to be the underling,” she chuckled.

“Closer than you think,” said Michael. “Okay, Guns and I will take first watch.”

“Sleep,” said Nancy as she shrugged off her pack and started setting up the base camp. She and Nate started scavenging the area for natural concealment for their packs and created small shelters to sleep under. It didn’t take long and before long Nancy was snuggled up underneath her shelter wrapped in a poncho liner sleeping soundly.

Date/Time: 3 April/1037

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“So you did realize you went below mission requirements?” asked Colonel Woodson who had summoned Thomas to the headquarters.

“As I annotated in the mission plans I submitted to you for approval. And spoke to J-SOD about once you signed off on them,” said Thomas.

“I didn’t realize you were going below your standing tasking from J-SOD,” said the Colonel.

“I made sure it was the first thing in the remarks sir,” said Thomas.

“You shouldn’t be ignoring your mission requirements,” said the Colonel.

“You specifically instructed us to complete a sector level recon for the pilot. And it’s a huge sector that requires most of my available teams,” said Thomas.

“I did instruct you to do that, but not disregarding your other requirements,” said the Colonel. “And now another unit has to pick up the slack for you.”

“Actually, the Rangers have been begging for something like this,” said Thomas. “And J-SOD thought it would be a good idea since it gives their teams a chance to work with some units that have got some time in the field. So I’m having my folks on the injured list work them up. We’re trainers as well as doers sir.”

“But it still comes back to you being derelict in your basic duties,” said the Colonel.

“If it’s that large of a concern, I’ll cancel out some teams heading out and send the Rangers back to their base,” said Thomas.

“You’re trying my patience today Major,” warned the Colonel.

“We’re just doing as ordered sir,” said Thomas innocently. “You instructed us to go on a sector level recon and I submitted plans for same to include the warning we would be below emergency J-SOD numbers. You signed off on the plans to include accepting the risk which also included the need to contact J-SOD to make them aware. So I did what was indicated in the mission plans and contacted J-SOD. And in turn, they alerted the Rangers to pick up the requirements.”

“I never intended for you to overtask yourself!” exclaimed the Colonel. “You should have made me aware of overextended your unit!”

“I did sir,” said Thomas. “Being that I’m already down to thirteen capable teams, and that includes three teams that I’ve had to piece together from healthy bodies, I’m having a hard time keeping up with your mission requirements as well as J-SOD taskings. But the very first paragraph in the remarks section clearly states we would be below minimum numbers and I would need to coordinate with J-SOD for replacements. You signed said mission plans so I could assume you read the remarks and accepted the fact I was required to contact higher.”

The Colonel pushed himself away from the desk and crossed his arms. “You realize what you did could be construed as dereliction of duty?”

“You approved it sir,” said Thomas with a smile.

“Don’t get smart with me Major,” said the Colonel. “You’re skating on thin ice right now.”

“I’m not sure how,” said Thomas. “You approved the missions and all the risks associated with them. Now, sure you can relieve me, but as you are one of the parties, this investigation goes to the Division Commander. Are you entirely certain you want to take this case, as well as my personal appearance, before him?”

The Colonel was silent for a moment as that revelation washed over him. He unfolded his arms and pulled himself back to his desk. “You think you’ve backed me in a corner, don’t you?”

“Actually, I know I have,” said Thomas with a chuckle. “If you’d read into my personnel file, you’d know I was a cop before the Fall. And knowing the law came second nature to me. So when I got reactivated, I made sure I was up on the rules and regulations as well as those for formal investigations in case it was ever needed. And I’m pretty well versed in current military law and proceedings at this point. I’m not sure how you would bring a case of dereliction up since we acted on your approved orders and being that you accepted the risks and our need to coordinate with J-SOD for emergency taskings.”

The Colonel glared at Thomas. “There’s always the matter of threats of bodily harm and death.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about sir,” said Thomas.

“The last private meeting we had,” said the Colonel.

“Still uncertain as to what you are talking about,” said Thomas. “Can the Colonel remind me of specifically what was threatened?”

“You know what you did,” growled the Colonel.

“I don’t remember such things being said,” said Thomas. “At least not from my end.”

“I see,” said the Colonel. “This is a good game you are playing Major. But it can and will end up biting you in the butt if you aren’t careful.”

“I don’t play games sir,” said Thomas. “I’m tasked to do a job and do it to the best of my abilities. I haven’t got the time or patience to play games.”

The Colonel continued to glare at Thomas and gave him a disgusted “dismissed.” Thomas departed the office once again without saluting and closed the door gently behind him. The Colonel retrieved the recorder he had hidden behind a picture on the desktop and shut it off, not getting any information he could take to higher to get Dayfield relieved. In fact, the recorder mainly implicated himself as being out of touch with the orders and missions he signed off as well as taking major risks with overtasking his teams. His anger grew as he thought about the discussion he just had and how he was never able to gain the upper hand in the meeting. There was some minor insubordination from Dayfield, but nothing that the Division Commander would act on without a simple verbal counseling to Dayfield and keep him in position. And his anger came to a climax when he threw the recorder against the file cabinet opposite of him, shattering it into pieces.

Date/Time: 3 April/1430

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Token and his team are in place and waiting for you,” said Thomas to Lieutenant Black of the Rangers. “You’ve got the frequencies programmed into your communicator?”

“Everything’s good Major,” said Black. “We’ll give him a call a click out.”

“We’re off twelve hours from now,” said Thomas. “Good luck, stay safe.”

“See you in a bit sir,” said Black as he entered the Chinook. The very same aircraft and crew that had already performed a couple of missions so far. The rotors started turning and Thomas headed over to the second chopper where Darren was seeing off the two other squads.

“Not long for us,” said Thomas as they walked back to their utility vehicle for the trip to the compound. Being that the numbers associated with the missions were higher, it required the use of the larger helicopter pad that Brigade used.

“You get the easy ride,” said Darren. “Osprey in and out.”

“I’m not fond of Ospreys,” said Thomas.

“I know,” laughed Darren. “That’s why it was assigned to you.”

“I hate you,” laughed Thomas. “What are the split times again?”

“First out at 0220 with a thirty minute spread,” said Darren.

“I’m a little nervous,” said Thomas. “I think the Colonel might suspect something is up.”

“How could he?” asked Darren.

“I don’t know,” said Thomas. “But you don’t get to that rank by being stupid. And he is anything but.”

“We haven’t gotten any of the stop messages from our friends,” said Darren.

“Doesn’t mean he doesn’t know or suspect we are doing something highly illegal,” said Thomas.

“Put it out of your mind,” said Darren. “We can always pull it at the last second.”

“I really hope we don’t have to,” said Thomas. “For the sake of everyone in that camp.”

CHAPTER 25

Date/Time: 4 April/0219

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Be careful,” said Thomas to Darren and his team who were on the first helicopter flight out. Michael Parsons had reported several hours before that the Rangers had made contact and were now bedded down at the site. And the only thing left were the Cider teams to depart from this location. The additional Ranger forces were staging from their base and the aircraft were already in place. And they had received a message from their special asset confirming the mission on.

“As long as we don’t put Solo in the lead, we’ll be okay,” said Darren.

“See you in a bit,” said Thomas as he shook Darren’s hand and the engines on the Pave Hawk were spinning up faster. Thomas headed out to see someone he didn’t expect.

“Colonel,” said Thomas as he walked towards the staff vehicle.

“Major,” said Colonel Woodson.

“Something I can help you with sir?” asked Thomas.

“You mentioned that I never see my troops off,” said the Colonel. “Here I am.”

“Right,” said Thomas with a bit of confusion. The chopper lifted off and headed out over the camp while Thomas saw Darren wave from the passenger compartment. He waved back along with the Colonel.

“Where are the rest of your troops?” asked the Colonel. Since his attempt to provoke Dayfield the day prior had ended in failure, he would try a different approach. As the old saying went, he would kill him with kindness and give him all the rope he wanted.

“Over by the hanger and a few of them are boarding another aircraft sir,” said Thomas. The two strolled over to the teams where they were loading into the next aircraft. The next aircraft was an Osprey and the generator cart already had power running to the aircraft. Thomas stood back as the Colonel received a less than cordial response from the members as they boarded the aircraft. While not disrespectful, he could feel the chill in the air as he shook their hands and helped them on the ramp of the aircraft. Thomas received a puzzled look from Rick Jones as he was the last on board and received a quick shrug of shoulders in return. He reminded Rick to be careful as he always did and pressed on to the next helicopter that was loading.

“Your troops don’t seem to be carrying that much,” observed the Colonel. “I thought you would be out for a week.”

“You’d be surprised at what you can cram into a three day pack,” said Thomas as he paused and the Osprey taxied out to the main area for a takeoff. “We travel light and one of the most critical tactics we have is to be able to run faster than the enemy can chase if it comes down to it. Since this is a normal recon, we aren’t taking the normal equipment we would be using for an in depth surveillance mission. So there’s more room for food and bullets.”

“Why three teams in one aircraft?” asked the Colonel.

“Efficiency,” yelled Thomas over the aircraft. “Saving fuel is a priority right now and that bird will make three drops. But we do have one bird only taking a single team in.”

“Why not put it in with the others?” asked the Colonel as the Osprey jumped into the sky and headed out away from the compound.

“Different ingress route,” said Thomas as they approached the Pave Hawk with Bill Meyers loading his team. “And well away from the other L-Zs.”

“We’re proud of what you are doing,” said the Colonel as he shook Meyers’ hand.

“Thank you sir,” said Meyers.

“Stay safe Chaos,” said Thomas as he shoved his pack into the helicopter.

“Always do,” said Meyers as the Colonel was shaking the hands of the rest of his team. Again Thomas got a puzzled look and returned another shrugged shoulders. The engines were starting up as they made their way to the next helicopter.

“What’s Chaos?” asked the Colonel.

“His call sign,” said Thomas.

“Why Chaos?” asked the Colonel.

“When Bill was fresh out of S and T, the missions he led bordered on controlled chaos. They didn’t look pretty from the outside, but they tended to work pretty well. So we started calling him Chaos since he operated way outside the bounds of what most of us consider normal. And that’s saying a lot for us,” said Thomas.

“And that’s not a risk?” asked the Colonel.

“We don’t have a nine to five job delivering mail Colonel,” said Thomas. “Our job has risks and creates chaos. But it’s how we deal that chaos that sets us apart. And Captain Bill Meyers is a fine team leader that gets results no matter how out of control he seems.”

“Still, a leader should be careful not to cross the lines of accepted tactics,” said the Colonel.

“Everything we do is outside the lines of accepted tactics,” said Thomas. “It’s what’s kept us alive for as long as it has.”

“I don’t like the way you operate,” said the Colonel. “I’ve never made a secret of that. We have to have order and discipline in this military to win. And in that order and discipline means tactics we all can use.”

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way in our world,” said Thomas. “We use tactics that nobody else will and that makes us unpredictable. And that’s why we win. The IU we go up against can’t figure out what we will do next. It creates confusion, chaos and messes up their tactics meaning they have to adapt on the fly. And when they don’t have the training and ability to adapt, they lose.”

“I still think units like yours just don’t fit into what this Army should be,” said the Colonel.

“Most commanders let us run a little wild and are happy with the results we bring,” said Thomas, echoing the comments made by General McMackin several days before.

“I’m not like,” said the Colonel and paused. “Most commanders.”

“You’d be surprised at how innovative we are and what we can do when we put our minds to it,” said Thomas. *And your head would explode if you knew what we were up to right now...*

They paused their conversation to help load the next helicopter taking the teams of Mark Williams and Tim Daniels. Again, a cold reception and again Thomas had to shrug his shoulders.

“I...” started the Colonel. “I was never in combat arms. You know this of course, but it doesn’t mean I can’t learn. I know I have a lot to learn about the way your forces operate and I might be willing to loosen the leash slightly when you get done with this one.”

You had your chance four months ago, thought Thomas. And I have every reason to doubt your sincerity this time. “I’ve got to get my team ready.”

“Whether we have personal problems or not, I don’t like writing home letters to parents and spouses grieving over the loved ones they’ve lost,” said the Colonel. “So since there’s nobody here to say it to you, stay safe out there.”

Thomas was surprised at the outstretched hand, but took it out of courtesy. He boarded the MV-22C Osprey as the engines were spooling up and Greg Henry came over.

“What did he want?” asked Greg.

“Said he wanted to see us off,” said Thomas.

“Probably out there poking holes in the fuel lines right now,” remarked Greg.

“I called him out on it during a meeting,” said Thomas. “Guess I made him feel guilty.”

“Yeah, I believe in unicorns and pots of gold too,” said Greg as the crew chief came over and instructed the two to have a seat for takeoff. The engines ran up faster and the Osprey taxied out a short distance before leaping into the sky. The interior red lights were on and the aircraft was picking up speed and transitioning into airplane mode as they headed out away from the camp. They would travel up the lines before making the ingress and were gaining altitude for a cruise before lowering down to terrain avoidance.

After they reached somewhat of a decent altitude, Thomas motioned to the crew chief by tapping on his ears and pointing at the spare headset hanging from the rear bulkhead. The crew chief passed it over and pointed at an unused jack near the rear of the cockpit. Thomas waded through the gathered teams and plugged in the headset and made sure the crew was not communicating before he started talking.

“Hey Butch,” he said.

“Hey Tom, problem?” asked the pilot.

“Yeah, flight path change,” said Thomas.

“Where to?” asked the pilot.

Thomas synched up his communicator with the aircraft and downloaded the appropriate file. The pilot accepted the input and the tracking path on the heads up display showed the new course.

“Takes us quite a ways away from the flight plan,” observed the copilot.

“It’s approved by J-SOD,” said Thomas.

“Let’s authenticate it. Not that I don’t trust you, but this is unusual without preapproval,” said the pilot. The copilot put the request into the system and had the navigation system uplink to the Joint Special Operations Division Headquarters to verify the flight plan change. It took several seconds before the computers synched up and finally agree that yes, the flight path change was valid and the pilot could divert without any problems.

“What’s the deal Tom? This is highly irregular since we haven’t been over this flight path yet,” asked the pilot. “Typically we get a few days to go over the path and check everything out.”

“Call it a mission change,” said Thomas.

“Do I want to know?” asked the pilot.

“Probably not,” said Thomas. “The less you know, the better.”

“Why do I get the feeling I’ll be testifying at your court martial,” laughed the pilot. “But if J-SOD approved it, I can’t say anything.”

“Call it a favor owed,” said Thomas.

“Shoot, we aren’t even close to breaking even on those. We owe you guys a whole lot more than this,” said the copilot.

“You’ve pulled our behinds out of the fire before. I’d say we are even,” said Thomas.

“I’ve got a few flight crews that would beg to differ,” said the pilot. “We like our nice comfy beds in the rear with the gear and this being behind lines stuff is for you knuckle draggers.”

Thomas laughed but also knew the pilot enjoyed the lifestyle of heading into danger areas and flying to the backyard of the enemy. If the choice came down to flying a normal cargo route between North America and Europe and doing what they were doing, they would pick the latter hands down every time. And it was something that went appreciated by the troopers they supported on the ground.

“Who checked out the route anyway?” asked the copilot.

“The Australian intel contingent with their 5th,” said Thomas.

“Good guys,” said the pilot. “We’ve used their stuff before. Okay, we’ll trust you. Diverting onto new path and checking new E-T-A...shows twenty-seven minutes to landing zone. Wait, only one landing zone now?”

“Yep, new mission,” said Thomas.

“And I probably don’t want to know, right?” asked the pilot.

“Nope,” said Thomas. “We’ll have UAV feed for the L-Z available ten minutes out.”

“Called in a few favors?” asked the pilot.

“One or two,” said Thomas.

“Must be important,” said the pilot. “Sixteen minutes to Indian Country. Head on back and get strapped in.”

“Thanks Butch,” said Thomas.

“Anytime,” said the pilot as he got back to the job of keeping the MV-22 in the sky. He knew the mission was probably important. He checked the additional aircraft assigned to the mission and saw they too were going on diverted flight paths. And all were carrying members of the

14th Special Operations Battalion towards the same generic point. He knew something was up, but Thomas was right, the less he knew the better.

“Thermal shows no significant presence in the area,” said the pilot on the MH-60P helicopter.

“Check the sync on your box,” said Darren as he pointed at the computer. A synch request was flashing in the lower left corner. The copilot selected it and saw a Predator drone was available to utilize.

“Unusual,” said the pilot as he challenged the unmanned aircraft and got an immediate reply. The two aircraft synched up and additional feed was seen on the screen and in the flight crew’s visors. “Looking good for thermal and IR. How much can we use this?”

“It’s yours,” said Darren. “Send requests for new taskings through your box.”

“Try the enhanced radar,” said the pilot. The copilot sent the request and was immediately rewarded with a new picture as the Predator changed surveillance systems. “Go to composite, offers the best resolution.”

“After we get dropped off, you can let it go back to scheduled taskings,” said Darren.

“How did you get your flight plan changed without us finding out as well as having a drone available for us to use during the infiltration?” asked the pilot.

“Ever see what you can get for a good steak these days?” laughed Darren.

“I’d typically give up my firstborn child for this kind of intel on every mission much less a steak dinner,” said the pilot. “Should be twenty minutes give or take.”

“Thanks Chuck,” said Darren.

And all across the Slovakian front, members of the 14th converged on the same geographic area. While five helicopters and tilt-rotor aircraft would be noticed by the IU as heading behind the lines, they were lost in the terrain avoidance of the pilots in question once they reached the front trace. IU radar operators attempted to pick them back up, but were unsuccessful in doing so. And one by one, they came started dropping their cargo of personnel and material a few miles apart.

Date/Time: 4 April/0533

Location: Southwest of the Prison Camp, Slovak Republic

“Token, this is Warbucks, approaching yours,” said Thomas over the radio.

“Warbucks, this is Baldy, state direction and number in party,” said Nate Clark.

“Approaching from heading three-zero-five, twelve in party,” said Thomas.

“Copy, three-zero-five with twelve. You copy Alamo 1-6 Golf?” stated Clark.

“We copy all, out,” said the Rangers assigned to that sector. Thomas moved his group forward once again and was challenged after traveling approximately four hundred meters.

“Halt, advance one and be recognized,” said the voice in a well-covered and concealed position. Thomas stepped forward another fifteen feet and was challenged. “Dorito.”

“Toshiba,” said Thomas in return. He saw the Ranger appear in the early morning haze and walk towards him.

“Camp is behind us about two hundred meters,” said the Ranger.

“Any other problems out here?” asked Thomas.

“Negative sir,” said the Ranger. “Seen some nice deer though.”

“Not hunting season right now troop,” chuckled Thomas. “I have twelve in my party.”

“Roger that,” said the Ranger as he and Thomas counted the teams as they passed through. Sergeant Randy “Razor” Mahoney was the last in line and passed through towards the rally point and Remain Over Night site.

“Thanks Ranger,” said Thomas.

“No problem sir,” said the Ranger as he returned back to his covered position and to his vigil of keeping an eye on his fellow troops. Once inside the perimeter, he could see a few signs of occupation, but not many at all and nothing that would be noticed by the casual observer. He saw a couple of people in a small depression and headed towards them. Inside were Michael Parsons, Darren Thompson and Ashley Scott. He told his teams to disperse and start setting up their small shelters for the time they would be in the camp.

“Made good time,” said Michael as he shook the hand of Thomas.

“Didn’t have far to go,” said Thomas. “Status?”

“We’re still waiting on Badaa and his chalk and Chaos,” said Darren.

“Problems?” asked Thomas.

“No, just not making good time,” said Darren and pulled out his communicator. “Here’s Badaa and company about five clicks away and Chaos is over here about three.”

“No other issues coming in?” asked Thomas.

“A little confusion on the pilot’s part and Gadget’s didn’t want to divert onto the new flight path even with the authentication. But after they contacted J-SOD directly, he changed his mind,” said Darren. “Relatively new crew that doesn’t know spec ops doesn’t play by the rules.”

“Everything else okay?” asked Thomas.

“Yeah,” said Darren. “Everyone is getting fed and sleep. Was that who I thought it was on the pads when we departed?”

“The Colonel?” asked Thomas. “Yeah.”

“What did he want?” asked Darren.

“Wanted to see us off,” said Thomas and got a strange look from Darren. “I know, I have no idea what got into him.”

“Probably should check your pack for a bomb,” chuckled Darren.

“We had a chat while we were loading teams,” said Thomas.

“Oh?” asked Darren.

“He recognizes the fact he has zero clue about us or our job,” said Thomas. “And said he would think about shortening the leash when we got back.”

“And you actually believed this?” asked Darren.

“Of course not,” said Thomas. “But he actually seemed human for a change.”

“Thinking of scrubbing?” asked Darren.

“Crossed my mind,” said Thomas. “Then I remember he put this place on the bombing list.”

“Less than twenty-four hours,” said Darren. “You want to catch some sleep?”

“Nah, I’ll hold off until everyone is here,” said Thomas. “But you head on if you want.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” replied Darren with a yawn. “Hell getting old isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know,” grinned Thomas.

Darren left with a chuckle and headed over to his shelter he was sharing with Frank Zimmer. Thomas headed around the camp area and saw his people as well as the Rangers were very well concealed. He was joined by Amber during his brief check.

“You can go ahead and grab some sleep,” he stated.

“No can do boss,” said Amber. “We’re in the field and where you go, I go.”

“You don’t have to,” said Thomas.

“You’re like my good luck charm,” said Amber. “I’ve never been wounded since we left Colorado and I have to think there’s some reason for that. You’re the only logical choice so the closer I keep you, the luckier I am.”

“At least I’m good for something,” he chuckled.

“And besides, I sleep better with you next to me,” she grinned.

“Glamour...” he said in that tone.

“Relax,” said Amber. “You know I get serious when it counts.”

“That you do,” said Thomas as he completed his rounds of the area they were in. He did see the issues Michael and his team had with the western side, but since they weren’t going to be in position that long, it was a risk he was willing to take. He heard Meyers and his team calling in for approval to approach the site and returned to the small depression that seemed to be their unofficial command post during the trip. After getting approval, he was identified and challenged into the perimeter like all the other teams had been. Thomas didn’t have to wait long as the single team finally approached and made contact.

“Remind me to swiftly kick Snoopy where it hurts the most,” said Meyers as he sent his team to start building their own shelters.

“Problems?” asked Thomas as he shook his hand.

“Humping over that ridge wasn’t a simple infiltration route,” said Meyers. “Otherwise, it was a quiet trip except for Mongo getting attacked by a rabbit.”

“What?” asked Michael.

“We were about two clicks away from the L-Z when a rabbit jumped out of the bushes close to Mongo and ran right in front of him. I thought the kid jumped about five feet in the air when it skittered over his feet,” laughed Bill.

“When we’re done, I’m requesting permission to go back and find that little bastard,” said Staff Sergeant Aaron “Mongo” Harper.

“Hopefully that’s the last surprise we get this mission,” chuckled Thomas. “Did Zee do okay?”

“Yeah, he’s a natural,” said Meyers who had taken Corporal Zdenko Horak with his team since they were the lightest loaded aircraft. “Quiet as a mouse and good fieldcraft.”

“Make sure he gets hooked up with Sunshine,” said Thomas. “I’m not sure where she’s at, but hang on to him until we get up and about.”

“Sleep schedule?” asked Meyers.

“What you can, when you can,” said Thomas.

“I can handle that,” said Meyers. “Are we being rotated into the guard schedule?”

“Since the Rangers are helping on the assault, we’re keeping a team on standby to help out,” said Thomas as his communicator buzzed and he checked the incoming text message. “Looks like the rest of the Rangers are at their ORP.”

“I’d say they get the easy job on this one,” said Meyers.

“Highly critical though,” said Thomas. “And yet they are the ones heading out on the open roads. We have the advantage of the forest.”

“I wouldn’t want to be sitting in a truck waiting for Achmed to stop us,” observed Meyers.

“Kinda figured,” chuckled Thomas. “Go get some sleep.”

“Roger that,” said Meyers as he headed to his team and helped them settle in.

“We can disappear pretty easily when we want to,” remarked Thomas as he looked around the area. With a few minor points, the entire group was able to disappear under the natural shelters they had built. Other than random bumps in the area and the shelters he could look directly into, they would not be noticed by the casual observer.

“Yeah, kinda keeps us alive,” said Michael.

“Who’s up next on the watch rotation?” asked Thomas.

“I was going to have Doodle and his team,” said Michael.

“We don’t have a set rotation?” asked Thomas.

“We aren’t going to be in position long enough for that,” said Michael.

“True,” said Thomas as he heard Rick and his team calling in. “Those guys are moving way too fast for my tastes.”

“It’s daylight and they probably don’t like being out,” said Michael. “We might have made the infiltrations earlier.”

“Hindsight,” said Thomas as he saw Amber yawn. “Would you go get some sleep?”

“Nope,” said Amber.

“You are stubborn, you know that?” asked Thomas.

“Did he of all people just call me stubborn?” she asked Michael.

“I’m not getting in the middle of this,” chuckled Michael.

“Fine, as soon as Badaa gets in, we’ll head to bed,” said Thomas.

“Oh baby,” she replied in a husky voice. “I can’t wait.”

Thomas scoffed at her with a shake of his head. “At least get the shelter ready.”

“Already done,” said Amber.

“Right,” said Thomas as they waited for the final teams to approach. Once they were in position, he knew they all needed rest for the raid. He wondered if everything else was ready to go and whether the attack on Černová would go down as planned. As he didn’t want to communicate directly with Jacobson or Reese, he had to trust in the two to come through for him. After they started the raid, he would be able to communicate freely with them and get updates, but for the moment he had to leave it to chance which he was entirely uncomfortable with.

“We have everything ready?” asked Lieutenant Colonel Jacobson.

“I’ve worked out the ruse for the brigade guns,” said the S-3. “And as long as we can get a battery suppressing their guns and the other two batteries to hit the planned targets before the Colonel pulls the plug, we should be okay.”

“It’d be nice to have them all the way through,” said Jacobson.

“It’d be nice if we all don’t end up in jail before this is over,” said the S-3.

“Have a little faith,” said Jacobson.

“I’ve got all the faith in the world,” said the S-3. “But still get that worried feeling this might not end well.”

“Sometimes doing the right thing requires a little bit of wrong,” said Jacobson.

“There’s not exactly anything ‘little’ about this sir,” chuckled the S-3. “Just one request though if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” said Jacobson.

“Don’t let me be cell mates with the S-3 from 4th Battalion,” said the S-3.

“Not a friend?” asked Jacobson.

“No, he’s a good enough guy,” said the S-3. “Just that he cheats at cards.”

Jacobson let out a chuckle and saw that even his S-3 was getting in the mood after being hesitant about the mission. They had sat staring at the same real estate for far long than they should have and it was past time to start acting like a combat unit instead of being timid and just watching. He knew it could turn out wrong for him and his unit, but stood by his original gut instinct that this was the right thing to do.

CHAPTER 26

Date/Time: 5 April/0128

Location: IU Vehicle Maintenance and Supply Area, southeast of Vlkolínec, Slovak Republic

The two Rangers were stealthy in their approach to the manned gate at the IU transportation area. There were two guards evident and appeared to be two more inside the small guard shack dozing off at the desk inside. The Captain noticed the guards at the gate were not particularly paying attention to the surroundings and were warming themselves by a fire in an old barrel by the gate, holding out their hands over the open flames with their rifles slung on their backs. Through the night vision, he saw the two Rangers raise their M-4 carbines up and take aim. The suppressors on the end of the muzzles did their job as the shots barely registered over the two hundred meters from where they were at and the main gate. The two guards were immediately hit and fell to the ground, dead from the head shots. The Captain watched as the two immediately darted to the shack where the door was flung open and the process was repeated.

“Move the assault team now,” ordered the Captain as he continued to watch. The single foot patrol was also taken down by suppressed gunshots as he heard the support element taking them out of action on the perimeter fence. The Captain watched as the twenty members of his assault team headed into the compound to the two facilities with the teamwork often practiced but until this point, not applied in an actual combat situation. The doors were opened and the teams entered the respective facilities in tactical formations. After what seemed like an eternity, the radio came alive.

“Building 2 clear,” said the leader of the second assault team and was followed in fifteen seconds by “Building 1 clear” from the leader of the first assault team.

“Copy, move to the maintenance buildings,” said the Captain.

The two teams exited the buildings and crossed the yard to the large maintenance buildings where they again entered and cleared the building only to find it empty after an exhaustive search. Exiting the building, there were several maintenance docks that needed to be cleared and again the search turned up negative.

“Odd they don’t keep the mechanics here,” observed the XO.

“Probably kept in town,” said the Captain. “I prefer this to be nice and easy myself.”

“Docks clear,” came the announcement over the radio.

“Roger,” said the Captain and turned to give the orders. “Start phase two, get the trucks ready to go. Sergeant Ramirez, get your squad to the gate and set up overwatch for our guys.”

The remaining Rangers sprang into action as they had rehearsed and gone over time and time again in the planning. The two members that had taken out the gate had already donned the hats and jackets of the IU members at the gate and had taken their place as the “guards” on duty. While they had the AKs slung across their back, suppressed M&P pistols were available in case anyone came calling in the middle of the night. A single squad backed them up and set up defensive positions inside the gate in case there were complications the two Rangers at the gate couldn’t handle. As the remainder of the platoon entered the yards, they fanned out to perform their assigned tasks in the neat rows of ten trucks apiece. Doors were heard opening on the trucks and bolt cutters were removing the chains wrapped around the steering wheels to lock them in place.

“What’s the punishment for grand theft auto in the IU?” asked the Corporal as he snipped another of the locks holding the steering wheel in place and pulled the chain through.

“They cut your hand off,” said the Sergeant that was keeping watch in case there was additional security they hadn’t discovered.

“Not fair,” said the Corporal as they dashed to the next vehicle. “How am I going to slow dance with my girl with only one hand?”

“The same way that hippy with the medical deferment is dancing with her right now,” said the Sergeant. “Five more to go.”

Down the line, another Sergeant was checking the vehicles and was approached by the Captain. “Is it going to take long to hotwire these things?”

“We happened to get lucky sir,” said the Sergeant. “What we have here are copies of the Deuce that requires no keys except the steering lock.”

The Sergeant flipped the ignition key over and showed the Captain the setup in the cab. The interior panel came to life as the lever was thrown although he didn’t start it yet.

“So we’re going to be way ahead of the timeline?” asked the Captain.

“Appears that way sir,” said the Sergeant.

“They fueled up?” asked the Captain.

“Appears most of them are for the moment,” said the Sergeant. “Looks like the fuel pump is still in working order as well and has power. So if we need to top them off, we can.”

“Charges rigged on what we’re leaving behind?” asked the Captain.

“Fourth Squad is working that,” said the Sergeant.

“Okay,” said the Captain. “Head over to the gate and make sure everything is wide open for us.”

“Huah sir,” said the Sergeant as he hopped out and grabbed his Ranger buddy to head to the gate.

“Never expected a mission behind the lines to steal trucks,” said the Company First Sergeant. He was completely unwilling to stay behind on a mission of this magnitude and was paired up with the Captain for the job at hand.

“I can only say finally,” said the Captain. “After sitting on our butts for the past six months and getting passed over for big missions, we needed this. We’re way ahead of the timeline.”

“Want to leave early?” asked the First Sergeant.

“The recon of this area didn’t indicate if they got many late night visitors,” said Brown. “And traffic on the secondary roads we are using is extremely light. Either we stay here and risk detection or head out on the road and risk the same thing.”

“Can’t fight our way out of here easily,” said the First Sergeant. “And even if we are discovered on the roadway, we still have assets that can get us away easily.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Brown. “We’ll pull up short of the checkpoint on the roadway. There’s a curve in the road about six hundred meters away. Keep from going around the curve and get the assault team ready just in case. And wait there. We’ll make it look like a convoy that’s stopped at the checkpoint at least.”

“I’ll let the teams know,” said the First Sergeant as he went to find the squad and platoon leaders.

“Captain, got an idea,” said the Platoon Sergeant of the assault team.

“Let’s hear it,” said the Captain.

“We’ve got a couple of armored vehicles here that we might want to consider using as a lead and trail vehicle. It looks a whole lot less inconspicuous having some sort of security vehicle up front and in back than a bunch of unguarded trucks barreling down the road,” said the Sergeant.

“They work?” asked the Captain, knowing this was a maintenance area.

“Not sure yet,” said the Sergeant First Class. “Want me to check?”

“We’re close enough to leaving to turn over the engines, go for it,” said the Captain. The Sergeant departed and jumped through the rear of the IU copy of the BTR-70. Moments later, the engine was heard rumbling to life after the starter cranked several times. The vehicle was put in gear and moved forward about fifteen feet before coming to a stop. The engine was left running to warm up and the Sergeant repeated the process in the second vehicle only to find it dead. A third vehicle, a BRDM-2 copy fired to life and was pulled forward as well. Again, he left the engine running and ran back to the Captain.

“Good to go sir,” said the Sergeant First Class.

“Great idea Sergeant. Put the BRDM in the lead and the BTR in the rear. Assign a fire team to each,” said the Captain as more vehicle engines were coming to life in the compound and turned to the Lieutenant. “We’re wearing out our welcome, let’s get ready to hit the road.”

“Roger that sir,” said the Lieutenant and went to notify the individuals of their assignments. In all, he had sixty personnel that were taking part in this portion of the operation and would be taking out twenty-seven of the IU vehicles in the raid they had just completed. It was bothersome to be heading out on IU controlled roads, but the Captain knew Dayfield would need the transport if all else failed and they needed to get the prisoners back to friendly lines.

Date/Time: 5 April/0228

Location: 1st Brigade Encampment area, near Babín, Slovak Republic

“Sir?” asked the orderly sent to wake Colonel Woodson. “Sir?”

“Yeah,” he replied as he woke up.

“Sorry to wake you sir, but we have a request for brigade artillery support from 1st Battalion,” said the orderly.

“They have targets?” asked the Colonel as he looked at the clock. “This early in the morning?”

“The S-3 stated the IU defenses in his sector appeared to be getting ready to swap out this morning. Colonel Jacobson is requesting control of the brigade guns so he can hit targets of opportunity,” said the orderly.

“He doesn’t have targets at the moment?” asked the Colonel.

“Negative sir,” said the orderly. “He thinks they may be moving in the next couple of hours and would need immediate control to hit targets of opportunity.”

The Colonel thought about the request and also knew for targets of opportunity, they would continue waking him every time something appeared and a request was made. As he was still fatigued from the night before where he saw off the Cider teams, he needed uninterrupted sleep. “Fine, give control over to Jacobson, but I want us to monitor the situation,” said the Colonel as he quickly signed the request form.

“Yes sir,” said the orderly as he departed the small quarters and returned to the command post.

“Let 1st Battalion know they have approved control of the brigade guns. And send the message to the red legs to let them know to be ready,” said the shift commander after reading the request.

“Yes sir,” said the orderly as he went to the controllers and the orders were relayed.

“Looks like it worked,” said Jacobson as he read the approved message.

“Best lie I’ve come up in a while,” grinned the S-3. “I knew the Colonel would not want to keep getting woken up for requests.”

“How long do you think we’ll have them?” asked Jacobson.

“There’s no telling,” said the S-3. “We’ve got initial volleys planned on three different targets at the same time as well as the mortars.”

“Stand to?” asked Jacobson.

“In a half hour sir,” said the S-3. “Gives folks plenty of time to wake up and eat.”

“Get on the landline to Reese and let him know we are on schedule,” said Jacobson.

“Yes sir,” said the S-3. Jacobson looked at the map once again and saw his dispositions. He had a good plan that had been ironed out by the leadership and knew the chances of success were high even with the lack of coordination with the individual units and with higher headquarters.

Date/Time: 5 April/0238

Location: IU Vehicle Checkpoint, north of Vlkolínec, Slovak Republic

“It appears there is a convoy stopped ahead sir,” said the driver of the utility vehicle as it pulled around a bend in the road towards the final checkpoint before going to the prison camp.

“Stopped at the checkpoint?” asked Major Caleb Aziz as he yawned. His trip back to the prison camp had been delayed and they had left late last night since the coalition aircraft tended to ignore single vehicles on the roadways at night. Insurgent and special operations teams were still a threat, but they tended to go after the trucks carrying supplies and other targets of opportunity rather than single vehicles carrying two personnel. And since the vehicle looked more like a commercial type, it tended to get overlooked.

“I do not know sir,” said the driver as he pulled in behind the last vehicle, a BTR armored vehicle. “It is either a long convoy or they have stopped before the checkpoint.”

“Go see if there is any enemy activity in the area that caused them to stop,” ordered Aziz.

“Yes sir,” said the driver as he opened the door and headed towards the rear vehicle. He left his rifle behind as it was a friendly convoy and hopefully the trip would be quick. Aziz halfheartedly watched as he approached the tactical vehicle before it looked like he stumbled and

fell in the roadway. And out of the corner of his eye he caught movement of a person approaching his side of the vehicle.

“Do not move,” ordered the voice in Arabic. Badly accented Arabic as it was and he saw the individual was not wearing IU camouflage. And if he needed any more convincing, the suppressed M-4 rifle pointed at him was certainly not what he expected to find.

Aziz knew he needed to act quickly. The soldier was close enough to strike with the door and hopefully give him enough time to jump into the driver’s seat and escape whomever and whatever he had stumbled into. He grabbed the handle and swung the door as hard as possible and saw it hit the rifle snapping it out of the way. Without even stopping to see if it had worked, he immediately tried to get over the center console and behind the wheel to escape. But he suddenly had extreme pain in his body as the three shots from the other soldier he hadn’t detected slammed into his body. He still attempted to get into the seat, a basic instinct of survival until the driver’s door was opened and he was yanked out of the vehicle. He saw an American looking down at him and attempted to grab at the pistol at his waist. He had just cleared the holster when the final shot was delivered to his head.

“Ruger 6, this is Remington 2-7 Delta,” said the Ranger as he checked Aziz and didn’t find a pulse.

“2-7 Delta, go ahead,” said Captain Brown over the radio.

“We had a vehicle approach from the rear and had to take it down. Light tac vehicle, two soldiers, one of which is an IU Major,” said the Ranger.

“Grab whatever intel you can and ditch the vehicle and the bodies on the west side of the road,” said Brown. “Conceal it as best as you can, but don’t waste time.”

“Roger,” said the Ranger as he was already digging through the vehicle and had retrieved the attaché case in the back seat. He quickly emptied the pockets of the Major before two more Rangers tossed the dead bodies into the rear cargo area. “Left side of the road, cover it.”

“Got it,” said another Ranger as he got behind the wheel. He drove the vehicle off the roadway and into a small clump of trees where it was generally out of sight for the moment. The Rangers continued their vigil of watching the roadway and waited for the checkpoint ahead of them to get taken down.

Date/Time: 5 April/0247

Location: IU Prison Camp, Slovak Republic

“Everyone is in position,” whispered Dave Lawson as they observed the enemy compound. After getting as much rest as they could before the raid, they had moved out at different times and arrived in position to strike at the same time. The last piece of the puzzle was still coming

and Thomas knew everything hinged on that one asset. Without it, their chances of success went down exponentially.

“This is Catman, patrol on the east side,” reported Specialist Josh Wolfe. “Four individuals, clockwise pattern on the path.”

Thomas didn’t acknowledge the transmission as it was meant as an alert more than anything, especially to the other teams nearby. The minutes and seconds ticked away as finally his communicator came alive almost right on the dot of 0300.

“Basher 8 calling Team Renegade. We are beginning orbit pattern above your pos, standing by for ordnance drop,” said the pilot from the aircraft that had just appeared on their radio.

“Basher 8, this is Renegade 4 Bravo, authenticate Victor Four,” said Heather. “Voice sounds familiar. We know who this is?”

“Basher 8 sends Mike Alpha Golf, prepared for GPS guided ordnance drop on pre-coordinated targets, over,” said the mystery pilot once again.

“Proper authentication,” said Heather and looked at Thomas.

“Give them the go,” said Thomas as he peered at the camp.

“Basher 8, this is Renegade 4, you are cleared to drop ordnance,” said Heather, still puzzled about the type of aircraft and how it just so happened to be overhead. But she suspected Thomas was behind it as he hadn’t shown any kind of emotion at the idea. There was a pause until the pilot came back on the radio.

“Basher 8, clean drop on twelve GPS guided munitions,” said the pilot.

“Copy, do you need bomb assessment?” asked Heather.

“Negative, just here for the assist,” said the pilot.

“Roger, appreciate the help,” said Heather.

“*Feisty Belle Two* on egress at this time, we’re even now,” said the pilot of the B-52I aircraft after finishing the bomb run. Major Shelly Wilson gave her aircraft’s call sign as opposed to the “Basher-8” call sign they had been using. She wanted the team on the ground to know they still appreciated the rescue from Germany before the invasion and were glad to help out in any way they could.

“Roger that, tango for the assist,” said Heather as the aircraft was heard leaving the area. “You believe in karma?”

“No such thing. It’s all calculated and preprogramed,” grinned Thomas as they patiently waited on the ordnance. He wasn’t sure how long it would take for the munitions to arrive and saw another patrol preparing to head out of the gate area. But they could do little more than wait.

And while Thomas sat patiently waiting, yet another group was on the ground waiting as well. Although a lot more impatient than Thomas and his group. The convoy of stolen vehicles sat waiting by the side of the road, each member getting nervous as the seconds passed by. They had already been there for nearly a half hour and each passing moment meant another IU patrol that could happen upon them and spoil everything. Or a passing coalition aircraft could take serious interest in the nearly thirty vehicle convoy.

“Okay, I don’t think Dayfield’s plan is going to work and I’m getting a tad nervous just sitting here like a lost tourist. We’ve already had one vehicle stumble across us and I do not like sitting here just waiting for an armed convoy to pull up,” said the Captain from the lead truck. “Get Second Squad ready to take down the checkpoint.”

“Sir, I’d standby,” said the senior RTO. “I’m hearing radio chatter on his freqs and I think he has some help headed our way.”

“What kind of radio chatter?” asked the Captain and before the answer could be given, the two GBU-53/B precision munitions hit the small barracks building as well as the checkpoint itself, obliterating the facilities and leaving charred remains behind. The explosions cause the group to jump slightly since they weren’t expecting something so dramatic.

“Not quite what I was expecting,” remarked the Captain. “Move your squad forward and check out for survivors. But we are not taking prisoners, got it?”

“On the way,” said the Sergeant First Class as his squad bounded forward to check the remains of the checkpoint. The remaining Rangers kept a close watch on his progress.

“Dayfield went all out to throw this party,” observed the Captain.

“The guy never ceases to amaze sir,” said the driver of the vehicle.

“I think the best part is still to come,” said the Captain. “If he can pull it off.”

As the bomber was making its way out of enemy territory, Thomas and the rest of the team had been propelled into action. The ten small diameter bombs had made direct hits on the defensive

emplacements around the camp and his team stood ready to start taking out the guard towers. They were the delayed action types and actually buried themselves somewhat before exploding and completely destroying the positions and whatever happened to be inside them. And each and every one of them had hit right on target as programmed.

Just prior to the bombs arrival, Technical Sergeant Stu “Mack” Donaldson trained in on the tower to his front with the M-3 “Carl Gustav” recoilless rifle and waited for the operation to kick off. A 60 year old design, a copy had been put into production by the Coalition Forces after the North American invasion due to the simple fact it worked exceptionally well and nothing had ever been able to replace it in the variety of roles it performed. He waited patiently for the go signal along with five other pairs around the compound, the HEDP round already loaded and ready to fire.

The explosions at the DFPs caught the teams off guard, but only momentarily as they pulled out from behind their concealment, quickly dialed in the range and elevation before squeezing the trigger. Nearly all six shots went off at the same time and the delayed fuze on the warhead enabled the round to penetrate the walls prior to detonation. The six towers in the first volley came apart completely and appeared to have been decapitated by some metal eating monster.

“Safe! Reload!” said Jill Dugger from another position as she didn’t pause to admire her handiwork on the first tower. Specialist Josh Wolfe quickly flipped open the rear breech and Jill tilted the barrel to help the expended casing drop from the weapon. As soon as she felt the weight change, she pushed it back down as Wolfe was inserting the new round, closing the breech and locking it in place.

“Up!” he yelled and slapped her helmet. She quickly took aim at the second tower that was starting to show signs of life, aimed and squeezed the trigger once again with the same results as the remainder of the towers.

“God I love this thing,” she remarked and dropped the launcher on the ground where it would be retrieved after the raid. Even though the concussion from the blast hit fairly hard, the results generally made it worthwhile. She pulled up her M-465 rifle from its sling and prepared to move in the direction of the patrol they had seen earlier. Wolfe needed no instructions either as he pulled in his M32 H&K machine gun and went left to cover her as they went forward to track the patrol they had seen earlier.

Six of the eight guard towers were targeted in the initial volley and quickly taken out of play. Frank Zimmer saw one of the gunners in the remaining tower appear and start to swing his machine gun towards the camp. A quick shot stopped the gunner just as he was beginning to pull the trigger. Frank looked to see if anyone else appeared to take the weapon, but the tower blew apart as the next round from the anti-tank launcher hit dead center and blew the walls out. The remaining tower was hit a split second later and the defenses around the camp were now

silent except for the main administration area. Machine gun fire liberally raked through the remaining facilities, keeping the IU troops inside pinned down. The patrol that had been set to leave the administrative area had been targeted and engaged as the first bombs went off by Bobby Rivera and his team. Their shots were dead on as Sergeant First Class Wade Hamm engaged the wounded survivors with his M-25, putting them down for good.

“What go on?” screamed Dana as the explosions kept rocking the building they were in.

“Sounds like a rescue!” shouted Hank. “Tell everyone to get on the floor!”

Dana turned and yelled in Slovak for the members to get down on the floor and lie as flat as possible. They moved slowly towards the floor as holes appeared in the wood at some places where fragments were peppering the buildings. The message to get down was being relayed to the other buildings and Hank hoped it would reach them before they got hurt.

Thomas led the teams towards the gated area and attempted to attach a small charge to the lock holding the fence together. Fire came from one of the administration buildings causing him to take cover until it was engaged by one of the machine guns and the rifleman disappeared out of view. He saw the line charges being sent over by the Ranger element on the east side of the compound and knew the seconds counted if they were to keep to the plan. The charges went off in a thunderous explosion and opened a large gap in the fence where the Rangers would keep the barracks occupied.

Now clear of the offending gunfire from the first building, Thomas and the clear teams moved towards the front gate and put a breaching shotgun against the padlock that was securing the chain link gate. One shot was all that was needed to dismantle the lock and the teams ran into the compound towards the administrative building. The defenders were starting to wake up now and began to fire from windows. Grenadiers took aim and sent their projectiles towards the openings and ceased the fire after the explosions. Standard hand grenades were tossed inside as well after letting the spoons fly and cooking them off for the three seconds. Additional screams and moans were heard afterwards, showing that not all the defenders were hit by the smaller grenades from the M-203s. The Rangers rushed in among the teams and started hitting the barracks facility with the white phosphorous grenades and high explosives and were not concerned with ammo preservation in the initial volleys as the machine guns and riflemen liberally raked the two story facility from end to end. The additional Carl Gustavs were brought into action as the thermobaric bombs were sent into the windows and massive explosions started ripping the facility apart from the inside.

Additional teams fanned out as they made their way into the compound in well-rehearsed movements. Captain Bill Meyers and his team headed towards their intended target and shot at the windows while on the run. When he saw the glass shatter, he knew it wasn't reinforced and pulled the pin on a grenade as he ran towards the doorway. Tossing in the grenade as he passed by, his team ducked as the explosion went off and blew out the remainder of the windows in the corner office. Teams started stacking up next to doorways and removing the doors whether by breaching shotgun or explosives. Entry teams tossed in additional grenades and quickly followed the explosions, bringing death with them as they had caught the camp by surprise.

Thomas and his team stacked up beside the door to the main administrative building. Greg came forward and hit the door hinges with the shotgun once again but found it was slightly more sturdy than the gate. “Charges!” screamed Thomas as they backed away from the door. Amber came up and quickly put a ribbon charge along the doorframe until they were stopped by gunfire from an adjacent building. Amber suddenly dropped face first as she was hit. The remainder of the teams poured fire on the openings from the building and launched several grenades into the windows. Thomas went over and checked on Amber, finding her vest had stopped the round.

“You okay?” he yelled.

“Owww,” she grunted and rolled over. She slowly grabbed her rifle and got her bearings while Thomas grabbed the remainder of the charge and placed it on the door. Attaching the two detonators, he scampered away while grabbing Amber to help her to the side.

“Fire in the hole!” yelled Thomas as he hit the button on the detonator and the door disappeared into the building. “Rowdy, take point!”

“Got it!” yelled Dave as he moved his team towards the entrance. As with all plans, small complications were had from time to time and this was a scenario they had practiced before. In a seamless move, Dave and Technical Sergeant Jennifer “Monster” Holden pulled the pins of two grenades and let the spoons fly before letting them cook for two seconds and tossing them inside. The explosions added to the smoke already coming from the inside after they detonated and Dave and his team were right on the heels of the explosion heading into the interior. Thomas, Amber, Greg and Brian came in afterwards and provided rear security while Dave and his team swept the individual rooms. The facility was quite large and Mark’s team was brought in to help sweep although at the risk of the reduced security on the exterior.

Thomas and his team swept an adjacent corridor and found several of the IU soldiers waiting for them. After tossing in grenades and flash bangs, they rounded the corner and engaged the disoriented soldiers. Thomas’ Mk 18 fired at the targets and even the suppressed rounds sounded extremely loud within the confined hallways of the building. Each target was hit by multiple rounds as Amber joined him at his side and engaged as well as they moved in a very fluid motion up the hallway.

In the adjacent corridor, Dave Lawson and his team entered yet another room that served as the command center for the small camp. They saw the communications equipment inside had been damaged in the initial attacks as they faced a window towards the exterior of the compound. As he entered on the heels of another flash bang grenade, he saw an IU soldier on the floor grasping his head from the extreme shock of the grenade. Two rounds put him out of his misery as Dave didn’t stop to admire his handiwork and swept left towards the opposite corner. Holden had come in a split second afterwards and engaged the additional members of the small force with her Sig P229 as the SAW she carried wasn’t as easy to use in room clearing. She saw the IU Lieutenant Colonel attempting to complete the task he had started of getting the radio to life and fired two shots before continuing to engage the next two targets.

“Clear!” she stated as she finished her movement to the back of the room and no additional targets were found.

“Clear!” stated Dave as they both started a tactical reload and dropped the partial magazines into dump pouches. “Team exiting!”

“Roger, clear!” stated Staff Sergeant Shaun “Corndog” Hanson from the exterior and saw movement from the front. “Hold! Hold! Hold!”

He engaged the two IU soldiers as they came out of an adjacent room and right into the waiting muzzle of his Mk-18. Three shots apiece in a classic Mozambique drill ended their short lived journey into the hallway as he shouted “Clear!” once again. The fire team regrouped once again and continued their journey down the hallway to the additional rooms.

As Dave and his team were clearing the other wing, Thomas and his team were coming to the end of theirs. Rooms were seen off to the side and swept as they continued deeper into the facility. Eventually they found the temporary cells that had housed the Texan pilot during his interrogation period.

“Storage?” asked Amber after she swept the last one.

“See the food bowl? That’s a holding cell,” said Thomas as he glanced back down the hallway. No other doorways were seen and the hall dead ended.

“I wouldn’t even put a Chihuahua in here!” exclaimed Amber.

“And you see why we’re here,” said Thomas as he got on his radio. “Rowdy, Gadget, status?”

“Got two more rooms boss,” said Dave. “Three minutes.”

“Clear on my end,” said Mark.

“Warbucks and company are clear, heading back to the entrance,” said Thomas and headed back down the hallway. Sporadic gunfire was still heard from outside as the battle was coming to an end. “Snoopy, report.”

“We’re down to the last building,” replied Darren. “We had trouble getting R2 into position, but we’re getting ready to assault. And we’re still waiting on word of the external patrol, but no significant opposition at the moment.”

“Casualties?” asked Thomas.

“One of the Rangers took a hit, but is fine. Nothing else to report,” said Darren.

“The barracks?” asked Thomas.

“On fire and quiet,” said Darren. “I’ve got two teams and the Rangers keeping an eye.”

“Copy that,” said Thomas as they came around a corner and found Mark’s team waiting. Two single rifle shots as well as two brief bursts of machine gun fire were heard from the exterior of the camp. One additional shot which sounded like a pistol was heard before the report came in.

“This is Sister, external patrol is down,” they heard Jill say through the radio.

“Last room is cleared,” announced Dave.

“Administrative building cleared. Teams coming out,” said Thomas into the radio as his team finished the building. Rivera and his team were moving preparing to enter the last building when the personnel inside started tossing out rifles and pistols. The Rangers and the Cider teams surrounded the building with aimed weapons as the IU staff started exiting the building with their hands raised. Some were wounded and helped their counterparts along as they came out and surrendered to the attacking FNC team. They knew they were not supposed to surrender until the prisoners were all dead, but they knew it was a foolish errand to try anything like that with the massed weapons pointed at them.

“R2, sweep and clear,” ordered Thomas as the IU guards were ordered in Arabic to lie face down on the ground. Rivera entered the facility and cleared it in record time, calling the all clear over the radio. “Team Sunshine, collapse on the admin area. Fluffy and Doodle, set up a watch on the roadway and wait for Ruger 6 to make contact.”

The remainder of the internal teams were busy treating the IU wounded as well as cuffing those that were still capable of defending themselves. They put the remaining IU soldiers in a small area by the gate with a fire team of the Rangers watching over them. Mark Williams got on the radio and contacted 1st Battalion and advise them the camp was secure. He got in contact with Lieutenant Colonel Jacobson directly and was advised they were still on time for their diversionary attack. Thomas contacted Rangers with the convoy and gave them the all clear signal and orders to proceed to the site.

After getting the items set in motion to guarantee success of the mission, they went to the gate to the main compound and saw it was locked as well. Shotgun blasts destroyed the two locks and the teams entered the gate to the compound, weapons at the ready and were preparing to start kicking in doors to the buildings within the compound. They knew they contained prisoners and knew they needed to remove the heavy boards which locked the buildings from the outside. But they weren’t taking any chances with hidden IU forces and teams prepared in case additional violence would be needed that morning.

The first two at the door went silently to the two sides and prepared to lift the board holding the door closed. Rick and Jamie picked up the board, flung it to the rear and immediately back off from the front as the door slightly cracked. They held their weapons ready and challenged the building. Zee quickly joined the group and was prompted to instruct the occupants to come out.

“You inside the building! Come out with your hands up! We are an American rescue team and are here to take you home!” yelled Rick. The phrase was repeated in Arabic and Slovak towards the building by Jamie and Zee after the English phrase didn’t seem to garner any response. Movement was heard from the interior as feet shuffled towards the door. The wooden door was slowly creaking on the rusting hinges from the breeze that blew in in the eerie silence in the compound. The teams held their weapons at the ready, but were unprepared for the sight at the doorway as the occupants finally started stepping out in the dim light of the still operational lights of the compound.

The rescue team couldn’t help but stare with open mouths at the face of hell as it slowly emerged.

CHAPTER 27

Date/Time: 5 April/0327

Location: IU Prison Camp, Slovak Republic

The figures started coming out of the wooden buildings slowly and held their hands over their eyes. While the ballpark type lighting wasn't especially bright, the sudden light was almost blinding to those who were not used to it. They moved forward as a snail's pace, not only because of the lack of nutrition or the weak muscles, but because they were unsure of what had just happened and didn't know if it was safe to come out. But anything was better than waiting in those stifling buildings just waiting to die. Dana saw the rest of the group departing and decided anything was better than waiting around. She stood and got into line and moved towards the blinding light. It hurt her eyes, but it was the first time she had been exposed to direct light in several months.

Dana looked outward and saw soldiers watching them with painted faces. But she didn't know who the soldiers were as they had on uniforms she was unfamiliar with. They held their weapons ready, but not in a threatening manner. While the brown, green and black colors on their face hid most of the expressions, she could see disorientation, horror and rage showing on the ones she swept her eyes over. They appeared to not know what to do with the situation as it stood. She saw Hank sweep past her and go towards the group of soldiers.

"Captain Wyatt Williams, Texan Air Force!" he exclaimed.

"Halt!" shouted Rick. "Type of your first car!"

"Chevy Z71," said Williams as he remembered he would be challenged after being in captivity.

"Name of your favorite teacher in high school?" questioned Rick.

"Miss Hensley," answered Williams.

"Where was your father born?" asked Rick.

"Dallas Texas," answered Williams.

"Show us your tattoo," ordered Rick. Williams pulled up the sleeve on his shirt and showed the tattoo he had received before coming to Europe.

"He's clear," said Rick after switching on his weapon mounted light and verifying the pattern.

As the question and answer was going on between the two, a few of the remaining victims started making their way over to the first soldier they could find and spoke in Slovak to them. But it appeared none of them spoke Slovak. The group of soldiers did not appear to know what

to do. Dana saw they were still bewildered at the sight of so many of her countrymen coming out of the buildings. They started backing up slightly towards the gate which spurned the survivors onward even faster at their liberators. Suddenly a man came away from their group and yelled in Slovak to them.

“Please, my friends! Please stop! We are not here to hurt you, but my American friends are alarmed at your condition! Please stop where you are at!” yelled Zee at the approaching masses.

“Who are you?” demanded one of the members of the survivors in a hoarse voice.

“I am Zdenko Horak of the Czech Brno Guards! Please, stop where you are at! We will tend to you soon!” yelled Zee as he saw others starting to open additional buildings.

“Leads on me now!” yelled Thomas. As soon as the group was gathered, he asked the question “What do we do and how do we treat these people?”

“We give them a little food and water, but not much. It can and will shock their system and potentially cause death,” said Jamie.

“Are you kidding me? They are starving!” objected Mark.

“No, it’s the truth. They need medical help and limited amounts of food until they can get to a hospital,” said Jamie.

“How much are we talking about here?” asked Thomas.

“Enough to cover the palm of your hand and maybe a half a liter of water,” said Jamie.

“Are you serious?” asked Rick.

“Anything more than that could kill them,” said Jamie.

“He’s right” confirmed Staff Sergeant Aaron Harper. “We need to keep them in one place and limit their food and water for the moment. A little is okay, but not a lot.”

“Jesus,” said Thomas under his breath. “Okay, go ahead and get the additional buildings open one at a time. Zee, you go with the teams and make contact with the victims coming out. Make sure they know we are here to help and not to try to wander off.”

“Yes sir,” said Zee as he accompanied the additional teams into the compound. There were only ten buildings and precautions were taken at each as they opened the doors and explained the situation. But it didn’t take long as the victims came shuffling out into the area. Some relatives were reunited after a long wait and others asked for help bringing out those that couldn’t walk on their own. Rick and his team went back to the first building to attempt to help. Teams were sent towards the remaining administrative buildings to locate blankets and whatever supplies they could find to help.

“Got any food?” asked Williams to Rick as he passed by.

“Yeah,” said Rick as he grabbed a ration out of his bag and handed it over. Williams immediately turned to find Dana. She was leaned against the building shading her eyes from the light, the first time she had seen it directly in several months. He had to help her open the plastic packages, but for the first time also in several months, she had real nourishment entering her body. However, before she was able to consume everything, she was stopped by one of the Cider troops.

“You’re the American pilot, right?” asked Jamie.

“Texan,” corrected Williams.

“I know how hard this might be, but she can’t have a lot of food right now,” said Jamie.

“Say what?!” demanded Williams.

“Sorry sir, but it could shock her system and cause her to die,” said Jamie.

“She could die anyway!” objected Williams.

“Listen, only a few bites, nothing more,” said Jamie. “Trust me, I’m a medic and they trained us for this possibility. You want to keep them alive? Stop feeding them anything they want.”

“You can’t be serious?!” demanded Williams.

“I wish I weren’t,” said Jamie and meaning it. “But we have to get these people into hospitals where they can slowly get back to health by increasing their doses of food a little at a time.”

“Fine, you tell her!” remarked Williams and went off to find someone in charge. Jamie found Zee and asked him to speak to her about it. After a brief conversation, she handed back the remainder of the items in the ration after consuming half the main meal. As Zee took it with a sorrowful look on his face, she asked a question in Slovakian.

“She asks if she can share the rest with others,” said Zee. Even though he knew of the horrors and the stories of the camps after fighting in the underground for many years, this was the first time he had seen it up close.

“Tell her just a little to everyone,” said Jamie and went off to find his leadership and let them know the bad news.

Zee translated the request to Dana who slowly nodded her head and started passing out a bit of the ration to those within immediate arm’s reach. They slowly chewed the food and sat with their gaze still looking a thousand miles away.

“Are you in charge here?” asked Hank as he found Thomas.

“I am,” said Thomas. “Major Thomas Dayfield, 14th Special Ops.”

“Captain Wyatt Williams,” said Hank and immediately demanded “What’s the deal with not giving these people any food? They’ve suffered enough!”

“I know they have, but my medical experts tell me they can’t have a lot of food right now. I’ve not come this far to watch them die because they ate too much,” said Thomas reasonably.

“You’re kidding?” asked Hank.

“I wish I was,” said Thomas. “But until we can get them to a hospital that’s equipped to deal with the trauma their bodies have gone through, I will take the advice of my medics.”

“It’s just...” said Williams and his voice trailed off.

“I know,” said Thomas. “And I wish it wasn’t that way. But unfortunately, it is what it is.”

“In any case, thanks for rescuing us,” said Hank.

“It’s no problem,” said Thomas. “You look like they worked you over pretty good. Let me take a look at you real quick.”

“It’s nothing serious, these folks have seen worse,” said Hank as he held up his hand.

“Look, we just rescued you, might as well let me have a look at you,” said Thomas as he pulled out his aid kit.

“You a medic?” asked Hank.

“Nope, but I read a pamphlet sitting in a doctor’s office once,” said Thomas as he used some water to douse a rag and handed it over to Williams. “Clean your face.”

“You sound like my mother,” chuckled Hank as he used the bandana to wipe off the dirt and grime from his face. “What’s going to happen here?”

“We’ll be sticking around until we get a medical unit on site. After that, we head back to friendly lines,” said Thomas.

“I thought we were well behind the lines,” said Hank.

“Not as far as you might think,” said Thomas. “There’s a battalion level attack that’s about to happen that will open the lines for us to get through.”

“Lot of coordination for a simple pilot,” said Hank. “Not that I’m ungrateful.”

“Well, it’s not just for you. And we aren’t even supposed to be here,” chuckled Thomas.

“What do you mean you weren’t supposed to be here?” asked Hank.

“This mission wasn’t sanctioned and we were ordered to stay away. Our Brigade Commander said this was a training facility for the IU and were planning on bombing it,” said Thomas. “But we’ve worked some under the table deals to get you guys out.”

“Would have killed a lot of innocent people doing that,” said Hank.

“Hence why we’re here,” said Thomas as he cleaned the scratches and cuts with prep pads and added in some antibiotic. He put some smaller band-aids over the scratches and finished up.

“I think what you’re doing is a great thing, no matter what. In Texas, we’d call disobeying orders to save these people downright honorable,” said Hank.

“They deserve to be able to live their lives in peace. I can’t leave them until that’s guaranteed,” said Thomas.

“I’m sure they would thank you for it if they spoke English. But you can see it on their faces already,” said Hank.

Thomas looked over the group and saw through the skeletal faces. They had a look of hope for the first time in several years. A few of them caught his glance and smiled at him, probably for the first time in many years. And in that smile was salvation. There was nobody on this planet that was going to move the unit away from this camp until the victims were far behind the lines in hospitals and receiving the care they so desperately needed.

“IU!” exclaimed Williams as he saw the trucks pulling towards the camp.

“Relax cowboy, they’re expected,” said Thomas as he went towards the lead vehicle. Captain Brown hopped out as they pulled to a stop.

“Looks like we missed the party,” he said as he observed the dead IU soldiers and those still in custody waiting by the administrative building.

“This is a party you’d probably prefer to miss,” said Thomas as he looked back into the camp.

Brown looked past Thomas and saw the roughly five hundred former prisoners within the compound. His mouth came partially open as he couldn’t avert his gaze and Thomas head him whisper “Sweet Jesus, what is this?”

“How many trucks did you bring?” asked Thomas.

“Twenty-five,” said Brown after taking a moment to compose himself and finally being able to answer. They walked towards the inner fence because Brown had to see it up close just to believe what his eyes were seeing. “My God Major, I just don’t have the words.”

“Nobody does,” said Thomas. “Nobody gets left behind, understand?”

“How many do you have here?” asked Brown.

“Around five hundred,” said Thomas. “So twenty per truck and you guys escort them out.”

“What about you guys? How are you getting back?” asked Brown.

“Some I’ll send with you guys if you have the room. I’ll have them ride on the bumpers if I have to; I don’t care. The rest of us will walk out and either call for helicopter pickup or cross the lines,” said Thomas.

“I think I’ll join you to make room,” said Brown. “I can have the XO get them out.”

“No can do Captain,” said Thomas. “I need someone to get these people to safety. Your Rangers need their leadership because this will not be an easy task so you have to go with them and see this through to the end. I’m tasking you with getting these people to safety.”

“My God Tom,” said the Captain breaking his normal controlled discipline and staring at the scene before him. “How can people do this to each other?”

“I really don’t have an answer,” said Thomas. “I am asking myself that very same question.”

“Okay, when do we load and go?” asked Brown.

“We’re waiting on a call from 1st Battalion in Černová. As soon as the planned route is clear, you will load and go,” said Thomas.

“Do we start loading now?” asked Brown.

“No,” said Thomas. “No sense in getting them loaded up just to wait. Lieutenant Colonel Jacobson will hold those lines open for as long as it takes to get these people to safety. I can flat guarantee that. But we have to give him the opportunity to open them up.”

“I’ve got medics and food we brought out, we can help,” said Brown.

“Only a small portion of food and water,” said Thomas. “Our medics have already evaluated the victims and they just can’t sustain anything serious right now.”

“Jesus,” whispered Brown once again. “I’d pay for an entire Thanksgiving banquet right now if I could whip it up.”

“Medics say the shock could kill them,” said Thomas. “And as much as I’d love to agree with you, I want these people to live.”

“After this, I’m not sure there is anything in this world they don’t deserve,” said Brown. “Was the pilot here after all?”

“Yeah, he’s going to be okay I think,” said Thomas. “He’ll need to be evaluated as well, but other than a couple of dings and scratches he appears to be okay.”

“Okay, I’ll rally my guys up and get the trucks positioned where we can load them quickly. And I’ll get a good head count,” said Brown.

“Thanks Captain,” said Thomas.

“Normally I’d thank you for getting us involved,” said Brown. “But after seeing what I’ve seen today, I’m not sure the nightmares will fade for the rest of my life. Having said that to say this, I’m glad you stood up for what’s right and did what you had to do to rescue these people. Normally I would never condone disobeying orders, but sometimes rules have to be broken in order to do the greater good.”

“I might need you to testify to that fact at my court martial,” said Thomas dryly.

“Just have your lawyer show the jury pictures of this camp,” said Brown. “Won’t a darn one of them convict you if they have any heart at all.”

“No matter what, we appreciate the help,” said Thomas as he shook Brown’s hand.

“It is truly our pleasure,” said Brown as he headed off to start getting the convoy ready and the head count. Thomas grabbed Zee and sent him with Brown to help with translation in case they needed it with the refugees. Thomas sat down and reflected on what could possibly be the end of his career in the military and would possibly be looking at jail time for what he had done. Pausing briefly to look at the victims once again, he made the decision in his mind that no matter what would come in the aftermath, it was all worth it.

“The man there,” said Dana pointing. “Who?”

“He’s the commander of the troops involved here,” said Williams who had returned to be with her until the end.

“I no understand,” said Dana.

“Ummm, in charge, the leader, understand?” asked Williams.

“Yes, he bring soldiers here?” asked Dana. “Save all people?”

“Yes,” said Williams.

“I would like say thank you very much him,” said Dana.

“I’m sure you’ll get your chance,” said Williams.

“And say thank you very much Hank,” said Dana.

“My pleasure darlin,” said Williams as he took her in a hug. “And I’ll do everything I can to get you to America.”

“Promise?” she asked.

“Swear on my life,” said Williams.

“Thank you very much,” said Dana. She didn’t understand why the tear rolled down his face as this was a happy time for the victims of the camp. After years of oppression, they were finally free. She attempted to stand up, but was still weak from the months of malnourishment and toppled over. Williams shot up and attempted to help her, but she gently brushed his hands away. “No, I stand by me. Stand is correct?”

“Yeah, you stand darlin,” said Williams as another tear rolled down his face. She made it up on the second attempt although being a little wobbly as the food in her stomach was already causing a bit of problems. But he helped her over to the gate of the compound where Thomas was standing and getting a report from Mark.

“Major?” asked Williams. “This little lady has something to say.”

“Hello, my name is Dana,” she said formally and stuck out her hand. Thomas reached out and took it gently. “Thank you very much for save people Jahannam.”

“Jahannam?” asked Thomas.

“Arabic word for hell,” said Williams.

“You are very welcome Dana,” said Thomas who couldn’t find anything else to say right then.

“I say for all people Jahannam, thank you very much,” said Dana. “And thank you very much take Hank home.”

“It is our pleasure,” said Thomas, still unsure of what to say. There were very few moments in his life he could be rendered speechless, but this surely was near the top of his list. *What can I say to someone who has had to endure the unthinkable,* he thought. *What am I supposed to say? That everything is okay? That they will be fine even though they will bear the emotional scars from this for the rest of their lives? I cannot even begin to imagine what they went through and it certainly puts my own troubles into perspective as being minute and petty. And to think the Colonel wanted to bomb this place when these people can now live.*

“Same thing happened to me,” said Williams.

“Sorry?” asked Thomas.

“Finding the right words,” said Williams.

“I don’t think there are ever words to find in this situation,” said Thomas.

“Did you capture an IU Major named Aziz?” asked Williams.

“Not sure,” said Thomas. “Although I don’t recall seeing any Majors.”

“He’s the one that put me in here,” said Williams. “I’d like to make sure that information gets its way into the right hands for a tribunal after all this is over.”

“Most rank we found was a Lieutenant Colonel that was killed in the assault,” said Thomas.

“You’re free to check the dead if you’d like.”

“I’ve seen enough death for the moment Major,” said Williams.

“I’d like to say that as well, but I have this feeling this won’t be the last time I encounter this situation,” said Thomas.

“Do me a favor would you?” asked Williams.

“Sure,” said Thomas.

“Don’t leave any IU prisoners next time,” said Williams coldly.

Thomas politely nodded, trying to get his emotions into order and wait for the remainder of the operation to go through. After setting out additional security, there was nothing left to do but wait. Time seemed to stand still as all they could do was wait.

Date/Time: 5 April/0500

Location: 1st Battalion Area of Operations, North of Ružomberok, Slovak Republic

“Commence firing with Battalion mortars on the forward defensive lines. Request the brigade guns open fire,” said Lieutenant Colonel Jacobson. “Have Alpha and Bravo move forward to contact. Charlie moves in support to the left and shifts direction to hit the flank. Delta Company moves in trail east to counter any moves from Ružomberok. Send a message to 3rd Battalion to move up.”

“That’s a pretty narrow front for three companies,” reminded the S-3.

“Charlie can go in column formation while Alpha and Bravo spread out. Delta can spread out after the three have passed,” said Jacobson.

The orders went out over the radio to the individual companies involved in the fight. Reports came in of the movement forward to meet the expected enemy resistance. With this probe, they were only looking to tie down the IU and keep them from interfering with the attack on the concentration camp. Minutes passed as the companies moved towards the IU lines covered by the high explosive fire from the mortars assigned to the battalion. The radio came alive on the command net with reports from the lead units.

“Sir, Alpha Company reports light resistance in sector Smokey. Charlie Company reports IU forces are retreating from their assigned positions and falling back under mortar and direct fire,” said the S-2 after receiving radio reports.

“Shift Charlie Company’s direction to support Alpha,” ordered Jacobson. “Had Delta moved yet?”

“Delta is moving forward as we speak. Zero actions yet from their position,” said the S-3.

“Sir, Alpha encountering mainly infantry resistance. Armored vehicles have been destroyed,” said the S-3 NCOIC.

“Bravo Company?” asked Jacobson.

“Still no contact with IU forces,” said the S-2.

“Keep the artillery fire going,” said Jacobson. “Get Red Legs on the horn and let them know we have more targets of opportunity in the open.”

The reports continued to pour in from the Companies and Platoons actively engaged in the fight around Černová. The troops in contact were making good headway when a new report came in.

“Sir! Charlie Company says the IU is retreating from the northwestern edge of the town. There is a gap between the city and the defensive line!” yelled the S-3.

“Get Charlie in there immediately!” ordered Jacobson. “Get them between this line here and the city. Cut off that escape route and we won’t be bogged down by urban fighting!”

“Sir, Bravo reports resistance from their sector,” said the S-2.

“Can they hold the IU in place?” asked Jacobson.

The S-2 relayed the question over the radio and received an answer in short time. “Sir, they can hold them in place. They will have a hard time moving forward, but they can pin them down.”

“Hold off on pushing forward in that sector. We want to keep them away from the city,” said Jacobson. “Pin them in place and let Alpha threaten their flank. Get Delta in position to keep a counterattack from Casio.”

“Sir, 4th Battalion reports the defenders are falling back from their sector!” announced a controller. “Colonel Reese is moving the lines forward.”

The Bravo Company commander watched as his attack was being stalled by stubborn resistance in his sector. While they could keep the IU pinned in place, he knew they needed to move forward and secure the right flank of the attack. He located the largest concentration of infantry he could find while the Improved Bradley Fighting Vehicles continued to locate and fire on targets on the IU lines. Getting alongside of them, he looked right and left and made up courage to get the troops motivated.

“Everyone listen to me! Everyone! We have a special operations team up there in the mountains fighting to secure a prison camp! They are depending on us to break through! We are not going to let these people to out front slow us down or stop us! We are going to push forward! We are going to smash through this line and get up there and help them! We are the only hope they have of getting out alive! Now we can sit here and do nothing or we can move forward and help them! Which is it going to be troops? Sit here or help our brothers and sisters in the mountains? Are we going to let these bastards to our front slow us down and keep murdering innocent people or are we going to kill them instead? I’m going to go kill them before they kill me! Now who’s going with me?” screamed the commander of Bravo Company as the attack had bogged down in his sector. He rose up and yelled, firing his carbine from the hip in the direction of the enemy lines. He didn’t take the time to notice whether or not his troops had followed him. He was a man on a mission, leading by example and motivating those within his command to go with him. He was pulling them towards the fight, not pushing them.

And the infantry within the sound of his voice rose up screaming like madmen and women as they had been charged by this simple act of bravery and defiance of the enemy defenses. Even those that hadn’t been within the sound of his voice took courage from those who had heard the words of inspiration. Rising and yelling, they pressed forward and closed the gap with the IU and started attacking the targets within their sector. All across the front, they continued rising as the mechanized vehicles and tanks continued to pour on the support. Victory or death, they pressed forward into the cauldron to take the fight into the enemy foxhole.

“We have a request from Brigade about the status of the fighting,” said the S-3. “Apparently they heard of our little recon in force on our internal nets.”

“Brief Brigade we are in contact and further details are coming,” said Jacobson.

“Sir?” asked the radio operator.

“Mushroom them,” said Jacobson, meaning “keep them in the dark and feed them crap.”

The radio operator passed on the brief message before receiving a reply. “Sir, Grizzly-6 is demanding an update.”

“Repeat the last status report,” said Jacobson, eyeballing the map. “Move Alpha forward to maintain contact here and have Charlie start to roll up the flank.”

“I never believed they were stretched this thin here,” said the S-3 after relaying the orders. “Looks like Dayfield’s intel was right after all.”

“Status on Bravo?” asked Jacobson.

“Sir, Bravo is pushing forward. The Exec says the commander is personally leading the charge! IU forces are unable to disengage or press forward,” said the S-3 NCOIC.

“Barracuda-6, Barracuda-6, this is Grizzly-6. I want a status update now!” demanded the Colonel over the loudspeaker radio in the command post on the battalion command net.

“Keep everyone moving forward. The goal is to get the bridges as a minimum. If we can destroy the IU units, do so, but for the moment, focus on getting to the western edge of the city and specifically the bridges,” said Jacobson as he took his time getting to the radio. “Grizzly-6, this is Barracuda-6, repeat last.”

“I want a status update now! You had no authority to attack in that sector!” yelled the Colonel in the radio.

“Sir, we were presented with targets of opportunity during a recon in force and struck same per your standing instructions. While doing so, we managed to breach the lines and pushed forward,” said Jacobson. The last heavy rounds from the Brigade guns fell before the S-3 NCOIC gave his report.

“Sir, Brigade Red Legs says they’ve been ordered to stop firing,” said the NCOIC.

“You and 4th Battalion have pushed past Phase Line Timex! You had no authority to do so!” yelled the Colonel.

“And in the meantime opened a gap in the lines! We have pushed the IU away from Černová and are rolling them up!” yelled Jacobson in return. “And now you take away our artillery support?”

“You are not authorized to strike any further!” yelled the Colonel.

“Sir! We have counter battery fire from the remaining IU gun. It’s hitting near our mortars and they are displacing. Brigade hit it with three volleys, but there is one remaining!” shouted a staff member.

“Move the section and flatten it with counter-counter-battery fire!” yelled the S-3 for his commander. Orders were passed and the battalion mortars started firing another volley traced back to the remaining IU howitzer. “See if there are any air assets in the vicinity to assist!”

“Barracuda-6! I want you to stop all operations right now!” yelled the Colonel over the radio.

“Sir, repeat request for brigade guns firing on target reference points golf through papa. Two volleys each and repeat fires!” yelled Jacobson in exasperation. “Give us control of the batteries and we can hit targets of opportunity!”

“Negative! No further fires from brigade assets will be made available until you cease offensive operations!” yelled the Colonel.

“Keep firing with battalion mortars! Do not, I repeat do not let up on the IU forces in the open!” ordered Jacobson with a growl before getting back on the radio. “We have the opportunity to take Ružomberok right now! The enemy forces are in complete retreat! We are not, I repeat not going to lose this opportunity by holding in place. We will push forward until either the city is liberated or the units in contact meet heavy resistance!”

“You are disobeying my direct orders!” exclaimed the Colonel.

“Sir! Bravo Company reports the lines have broken in their sector! They are moving to exploit!” yelled the S-3.

“Grizzly-6, be advised, we are rolling up the defensive lines around Černová and have the opportunity to take Objective Casio right now! We need additional support to complete the encirclement and press forward! Request two additional companies from 3rd Battalion be attached to my unit and Brigade and Division artillery support so we can press forward,” said Jacobson with a pleading tone in his voice.

“Negative Colonel! Do not move forward! In fact, you will fall back to Phase Line Timex until such time as I have been properly briefed on the plan of action! Do not pursue IU forces and-” the Colonel was saying as the radio fell silent. Jacobson looked at the radio set and saw the LED panel was dark, indicating it had been shut off.

“Power spike sir. Been happening lately. That and sunspots. Calls are being dropped, so on and so forth,” said the S-2 with a shrug of his shoulders and a gleam in his eyes. “And I believe that last message was garbled by those very same sunspots.”

“A shame,” said Jacobson as he thought about the implications of his actions right then. He decided in a split second he was past the opportunity to pull back gracefully and decided right then to press forward. His staff took a moment to comprehend what just happened and decided their own fate.

“Sir! Defenses on the eastern side of the city are collapsing! IU units are abandoning their position and retreating to the south! 4th Battalion is in pursuit!” yelled a staff member.

“Western defenders are pulling back to the next defensive screen! Bravo is moving to force them away from the city! Alpha has destroyed the opposing company and is moving forward to the bridges! Zero defenders at the bridges!” yelled another.

“Artillery fire has ceased from the remaining IU gun. We got it!” shouted the S-2.

“Sir! We have four French F/A-18s and two US F-15s on call for airstrikes! They’ll be overhead in five and eight mike,” shouted the Battalion S-3 Air as he had located several aircraft within striking distance.

“Barracuda-6, this is Alligator-6. Be advised, I have the bridges in sight and am moving forward. We will secure northern and southern ends until Bravo can catch up. Orders? Over,” said the Alpha Company commander over the secondary battalion radio net.

“Barracuda-6, this is Chewy-6. Be advised, I have a clear line of approach towards the west side of Casio. I can make a dash towards Casio Prime and capture same from the west side along with pursuit of enemy forces. I need instructions, over,” said the Charlie Company commander.

“Barracuda-6, this is Blackjack-6. Be advised, we are continuing to move to exploit the breach in the lines in the west. Expected link up with Alligator forces in the next ten mike,” said the Bravo Company commander with sporadic small arms fire in the background.

“Barracuda-6, this is Dolphin-6. Be advised, zero, I repeat, zero resistance inside the city outskirts. All forces have moved to the east and towards 4th Batt’s area, over,” said the Delta Company commander.

“Orders sir? Since we have no contact with higher?” asked the S-3. The battalion had just claimed their loyalty to their commander. They all had switched away from the primary nets and gone to the alternate frequency after hearing the Brigade commander on their net. When a radio net was compromised, they all knew to go to the alternate frequency. Furthermore, they didn’t like fighting and dying for nothing and they had the IU on the run. Falling back from ground already taken was madness to them. They decided right then they would stand together and hang for their actions, come what may.

“Press forward and encircle the city. Set up defensive lines, but do not pursue any further than five kilometers or best defensive terrain until we get additional support. Keep the battalion mortars firing at targets of opportunity. Have Alpha and Bravo Company continue to roll up the south lines and have Charlie go to the bridges with Delta watching their flank. Give the Hornets

over to Alpha Company and give the Eagles to 4th Battalion. When Alpha and Bravo get through to the main bridges on ESR Tombstone, have them hit the defenses in the flank and pin them in place where Charlie can beat them up,” said Jacobson.

“It’s a large area to hold with just our battalion,” said the S-2. “And we still need to sweep the city.”

“Get every person capable of bearing a rifle up there into the fight. Have the infantry forces press the fight and have the support troops sweep the city. Contact 3rd Battalion and see if they want to slip us some support under the table. Plus, we need to make sure that secondary road right here is secure so we can get Dayfield and his bunch to safety. Also, send a message to Division stating the actions which are taking place,” said Jacobson. *Tom, I really hope you know what you’re doing. I just stretched my neck out wide for you,* thought Jacobson as he saw to the disposition of his forces.

Date/Time: 5 April/0549

Location: IU Command Post, Ružomberok, Slovak Republic

“We are under attack by at least two battalions with artillery support!” yelled the IU Colonel into the radio handset. “They are destroying my forces!”

“You have to hold until relief can arrive!” exclaimed the IU General. “We will send out the alert, but you have to hold that position for four hours until they can arrive!”

“These illiterate goat herders you saddled me with can’t hold for four minutes, much less four hours! I need aircraft and artillery support!” yelled the Colonel as another round of mortar fire landed nearby. He was in a reinforced bunker, but it wouldn’t stop the advance of the coalition forces rapidly moving towards him.

“You have to hold! That is a vital crossroads!” shouted the IU General.

“Perhaps the General might have thought about that when I expressed concerns earlier!” yelled the Colonel. “I told you we were stretched too thin here!”

“Calm yourself Colonel,” warned the General. “Can you organize the defenses?”

“My units have completely broken down! There is nothing but confusion and fright guiding them at this present moment!” exclaimed the Colonel.

“Defend it down to the last man,” ordered the General. “We will attempt to get you support.”

The Colonel didn’t respond and tossed the handset down on the table in disgust. Various reports were coming in and none of them were improving the overall situation.

“Sir, the Americans have attacked on both sides of the city. All forces are under attack by direct fire and aircraft. They are retreating in disarray!” exclaimed his aide.

“We will set up a defensive line here,” said the Colonel as he pointed to an area within the valley itself. “Contact all units and order them south.”

“Sir! That will mean we give up the city!” exclaimed his aide.

“The city is lost already,” said the Colonel. “We can hold this area until the relief forces arrive. Get a vehicle and leave to start setting up the defenses as the units come in.”

“And you sir?” asked the aide.

“I will attempt to organize what we have left into a rear guard battle,” said the Colonel. “Go my friend. It is my time.”

“Get clear when you can sir,” said the aide as he grabbed a rifle and darted out with several people in tow. A light utility vehicle was heard roaring away as the Major left to set up a defense well away from the city they were supposed to defend. The Colonel looked over the bleak situation once again and knew he couldn’t influence anything from looking at a map in his command post. He would attempt to organize the defenders on the eastern side of the city and hopefully forestall the coalition attempts to seize the bridges and allow his forces the opportunity to escape. He had held off on placing explosives on the bridges until closer in to the spring offensive and he saw the ultimate folly of that decision at this time.

They traveled by foot, seeing soldiers along the way and instructing them to head to the bridges to defend the approaches. He found a Lieutenant running and saw the fear in his eyes as his entire platoon had been wiped out by a mad infantry charge from the Americans. The Colonel ordered him to oversee the defenses at the bridges and to stop the units from fleeing the battle. He was unsure if the Lieutenant would heed his orders, but he needed to gather more troops to make any sort of defense tenable. The Colonel and his party went east for three more blocks before catching the attention of an advancing Bradley. The machine gun in the turret sputtered several bursts their way causing them to seek immediate cover. From behind a wall, he saw the infantry dismounting the vehicle and advancing on his position.

Reaching into his pocket, he knew his war was finally over. He found his handkerchief folded in the cargo pocket and removed it. Tossing out the rifle, he instructed the group with him to toss out their arms as well.

“Sir, we are supposed to defend the city at all costs!” objected the Operations Officer.

“If you want, you may choose death by engaging the enemy,” said the Colonel as he nodded around the wall. “Go on, die for nothing!”

The Major looked at him and peered around at the advancing fire teams. He also saw the remainder of the group had already tossed out their weapons. While he was brave, he had no

desire to become a martyr for his nation and tossed his weapon out as well. The Colonel stuck his hands in the air and walked out from behind the wall waving the handkerchief over his head. For him, the war was finally over. From North America to England to Europe, he had finally reached his breaking point and saw the futility of continuing to fight. As he walked towards the soldiers still advancing, he knew he had given Allah another choice in the matter and would live to see his family yet again.

“Light defenses at Casio Prime,” said the S-3. “Units are in retreat and fighting a halfhearted rear guard action.”

“Can we capture the bridges?” asked Jacobson.

“Affirmative sir,” said the S-3. “We have small pockets of resistance mainly away from the bridges at the moment.”

“Bypass them,” ordered Jacobson. “And get the bridges.”

Orders went out as the units started bypassing the small pockets of resistance. They were opening themselves up to attacks from the rear, but would accept the risk as long as they could get to the bridges and get them intact. The lead platoon from Alpha Company had already darted through and cut off the retreat of the defenders, setting up defenses facing both directions. It wasn't long until Delta Company had made their way through the outskirts of the old industrial area and linked up with Alpha.

“We've got the bridges!” exclaimed the S-3 after the link up had been made.

“Remaining IU forces?” asked Jacobson.

“Retreating to the east and south!” said the S-3.

”Move no further than five clicks out and set up a defense,” ordered Jacobson. “Let Brigade and Division know we've captured the bridges. Disregard...prepare a message to Division, I'll talk to the Colonel myself.”

He got back on the Brigade frequencies and was instructed to standby. He still had units in contact, but the S-3 and XO were handling the fight as the pockets of resistance were being located and taken out or collected after their surrender. When the Brigade Commander got on the line, he got an earful as well as the repeated orders to return to the start point. Jacobson was never able to get in a word edgewise to let him know they had captured the bridges intact.

Date/Time: 5 April/0555

Location: IU Prison Camp, Slovak Republic

“Sound like the fighting is dying down,” observed Darren.

“Sure does,” said Thomas. “And we lost contact with Jacobson.”

“You think they failed?” asked Darren.

“I don’t know,” said Thomas. “I wouldn’t think so. He would have contacted us otherwise.”

“You want to chance a move?” asked Darren.

“No,” said Thomas. “Not yet at least. We’ll wait for contact.”

“I’ll set up some additional defenses just in case,” said Darren.

Thomas nodded as Darren went off to set additional teams up for the defense if it came down to it. They had no idea what was happening north of them at the current moment and Thomas wondered if the operation would be a failure.

CHAPTER 28

Date/Time: 5 April/0602

Location: IU Prison Camp, Slovak Republic

“Time to notify Brigade,” said Thomas as repeated attempts to contact 1st Battalion had gone unanswered. As the operation had been done on the fly, Thomas had no alternate frequencies to which to contact Jacobson and had no idea what was happening to his north. They had not heard the distant firing in a while, but still were unsure if it was safe to move the victims towards the lines or not. After getting in contact with Brigade, he requested to speak to Colonel Woodson.

“Renegade 6, this is Grizzly 6, make it quick. I’ve got a lot on my hands right now,” said the Colonel after he came on the net.

“Request information on the status of the fighting around Casio and Černová,” asked Thomas.

“Renegade 6, how were you aware of the fighting at that location?” asked the Colonel.

“Be advised, we were aware of the fighting because it was to open a lane for us to pass through the lines with liberated prisoners,” said Thomas.

“Specifically what liberated prisoners?” asked the Colonel.

“Be advised sir,” started Thomas and took in a deep breath. “We struck at the IU compound identified during the previous recon missions and have since liberated the prisoners that were being kept here. Barracuda 6 was supposed to be keeping safe lanes open for my forces to bring back the liberated prisoners. Over.”

The radio was silent for a few moments as the Colonel digested what he had just been told. The Brigade S-3 later described his face as turning “the angriest shade of red I’d ever seen” before getting back on the radio.

“You mean to tell me you violated orders and struck that facility?” asked the Colonel as his voice was rising.

“Affirmative sir,” said Thomas. “And liberated nearly five hundred prisoners.”

“You are on an unauthorized mission Major!” yelled the Colonel over the radio.

“Roger that,” said Thomas. “But we need to know the status of the bridges at Černová. Also request medical response to this location along with a security element if possible.”

“We can’t send any units forward until the lines are secured,” yelled the Colonel. “We have no idea what is going on right now since 1st Battalion is out of contact! I need time to determine what is going on and make plans accordingly!”

“Sir, we have our own transport! We can get them back to our lines, but we have to know the status of the fighting near Černová! These people need attention now and not after you’ve planned and staffed it to death!” growled Thomas into the radio.

“There are IU units around Casio! That’s all we know! And we cannot move until we get a clear picture of what’s happening!” exclaimed the Colonel.

“You wait much longer and these people could die!” shouted Thomas.

“That’s your problem Major since you decided to go off on your own creating missions,” said the Colonel. “Now you will secure that location and prepare for additional attacks by the IU. No, disregard last. You will leave that location and make your way back to friendly lines. We cannot and will not send help until we are absolutely certain the routes are secure and the plans are completed.”

“You are ordering us to leave an area we just liberated?” asked Thomas.

“On an unauthorized mission, yes. We cannot and will not support you out there and you will return to friendly lines!” shouted the Colonel into the radio.

“Sir, we cannot and will not leave until these people have received medical attention and proper security has been established at this location,” growled Thomas into the radio. “And I cannot and will not leave this area until medical units and security is on site!”

“Your choice Major, but it’s your ass for this decision. Stay if you want, but you will not be receiving any additional assistance from us,” said the Colonel.

“You are hanging us out here to dry!” objected Thomas.

“Again, this wouldn’t be the case if you had not disobeyed orders. Grizzly 6 out,” said the Colonel as he ended the radio transmission. He slammed down the radio handset, cracking it in the process and walked towards his office. He had lost complete control of his Brigade in the space of four hours and had no idea what to do in this instance. He had no idea what was happening on the front and had no idea of why Dayfield would have liberated that camp on his own without authority. And the more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

“Do we have any idea what’s going on?” he thundered to his staff.

“From what we can tell, we have captured the bridges in Černová as well as Ružomberok. There’s still fighting going on in Ružomberok but it’s limited to small pockets of resistance. We don’t have a clear picture yet sir, but based on some radio communications we’ve heard, the city has been surrounded and 1st Battalion is setting up around the bridges,” said the XO.

“We know that for a fact?” asked the Colonel.

“Negative sir,” said the XO. “Just what we’ve been able to piece together and from aerial assets. We have a Predator doing flyovers right now.”

“And?” asked the Colonel.

“It appears the IU is retreating up ESR Tombstone and setting up defenses here,” said the XO and pointed at the map. “If we have 1st and 3rd Battalions set up defenses around Ružomberok we could push 4th Battalion through into this valley and get to them within a half an hour and destroy the remaining forces. 3rd Battalion can assist by setting up facing the east, 1st Battalion to the west.”

“No, not until we are certain it’s entirely safe and we plan this out. Get Dayfield and his unit out of that camp immediately though,” said the Colonel.

“Sir, what about those prison camp victims?” asked the S-3.

“They will be okay on their own for a little while until we can properly create a plan of action,” said the Colonel.

“Sir, they could die if we leave them,” said the XO.

“You have your orders Colonel, now execute them! Get Dayfield and his bunch out of there immediately. Give the order to withdraw and arrest him on sight when he returns to this side of the lines. Additionally, inform the 1st and 4th Battalions deputies they’re now in charge of those units. Lieutenant Colonels Jacobson and Reese are also relieved for violating orders. Their units will stand by and set up defensive lines wherever they happen to be! Now get it done mister or call your replacement!” said the Colonel forcefully.

The XO gave the orders, but also started forming a message to send to the division staff. He knew if the victims of the camp were left on their own, they would surely die. He didn’t know Thomas had already sent a message to the Division as well as the J-SOD informing them of the liberation and begging for help. He additionally didn’t know Jacobson had sent a message off to Division as well and had received instructions. None of the units involved should have bothered since the Division Commander had been monitoring the radio conversations the entire time.

“Get me a chopper ready to go to the 1st Brigade command post,” ordered General Chambers from his command post.

“Sir?” asked the aide.

“Get a security detachment ready to move now. And get the staff assembled, we have work to be done,” said the General as he grabbed his sidearm and holstered it. Grabbing his jacket, he finally had a reason to do what he had wanted to do for a while now. He read the dispatches

from the Brigade Executive Officer as well as the one from Thomas as he climbed into his vehicle. An additional dispatch was brought out as they were rolling away detailing the orders to arrest Dayfield on sight as soon as he returned to friendly lines.

Dayfield, you really stepped into the crank this time. You couldn't leave well enough alone and had to be a cowboy, thought the General as they rolled away and headed towards the helicopter pad where his personal Blackhawk already had the engines started and were waiting his arrival. He thought highly of Thomas, but at the same time, insubordination within the ranks could not be tolerated. He formed a plan to deal with him as they headed towards the helicopter pad for the trip to 1st Brigade.

“Well?” asked Darren.

“We were ordered back to friendly lines,” said Thomas.

“And just leave these people here?” demanded Mark.

“That was the order,” said Thomas simply.

“And you told them in no uncertain terms where to go?” asked Darren.

“I did as much,” said Thomas. “Listen, we’re in direct contravention to the orders we received. I alone am responsible for that. If you feel the need to replace me and follow orders, let me know.”

“I ain’t moving anywhere either,” said Darren, followed by agreement from the other gathered officers and NCOs.

“We could all be shot for mutiny for this,” said Thomas.

“I am not leaving these people to fend for themselves,” said Mark.

Nods and agreements came from around the group. Nobody was ready to give up this area. They had fought for it and it belonged to them. And nobody was going to just up and leave the victims of the camp until they received the help they needed.

“Listen guys, I have no idea what’s happening around Černová,” said Thomas. “We’ve lost contact with Jacobson after the initial attack and we aren’t hearing anything coming from that direction. And we’re now past the window for the secondary plan of helicopters coming in. And with the status of Černová unknown, I’d rather not bring them in here through possible anti-aircraft defenses as it is. I’m not comfortable moving anyone until we’ve got a clear picture of what’s going on and I’m open to suggestions at this point.”

“Hold up here until we get a better idea of what’s going on in Černová or we get instructed to move by Jacobson,” suggested Darren. Nods of agreement were seen around the gathered leadership as that seemed to be the wisest course of action for the moment.

“Okay, let’s start putting out security elements and get target reference points identified. We probably won’t get any air and artillery support, but it’s better to have something ready just in case. Consolidate ammo, break out the rest of the anti-tank weapons and have the Ranger element serve as a reaction force along with Gadget, Badaa, Token and Chaos. Snoopy, orient our defenses to the north and east with listening posts on the south and west. Rowdy, I want you to work up an emergency load plan for the victims here and we’ll take them either north or east depending on which area an attack comes from if we have to evac in a hurry.”

“Have everyone water up and get some chow in them, it might be a long day,” said Thomas. The team leaders went about to setting the plan in motion as Thomas worried about the aftermath of the unauthorized mission. He already planned on his defense at the court martial and would accept it readily as long as the members of the camp survived. Some things in life were worth accepting punishment for.

Stress eventually gets to everyone. And Colonel Woodson was feeling the effects as he had never felt them before. His entire Brigade was out of his immediate control at the moment, his special operations teams had gone off on a mission they were unauthorized to perform and he had no idea what the status of the main target in his area of operations was at the current moment. His carefully laid plans and career path were currently being scattered before his eyes as each passing second showed more and more of his incompetence in commanding a combat unit. He had been told by his friend it would be an easy task and he likely would never see combat before getting the required time for promotion and moving on. And everything he had worked for in his career was quickly falling apart in front of his eyes.

And he knew Dayfield was at the bottom of it. Knew it deep down in the depths of his soul he was the reason it was all falling apart in front of his eyes. From day one he had done everything in his power to break Dayfield. But he had never bent, had never broken and was still adamant to resist everything that had been done to him and his unit. And somehow he had gotten his fellow commanders in on a plot to destroy him. He had done something to convince Jacobson and Reese to follow in his mutiny against the lawful authority. And the more he thought about the situation as it stood, the more clouded his judgment became and the further down the abyss he traveled. Until he reached that proverbial rock bottom and he reached a snap decision; a very unusual occurrence for a man that tended to think and plan everything through with every possible tangent before acting.

And in that snap decision and clouded judgment, he checked the map, grabbed a piece of paper and wrote out the six digit grid coordinates before walking over towards one of the controllers

that typically dealt with the artillery units. There was not a single moment's hesitation as he moved forward to the controller.

"I want the Red Legs to fire on these coordinates," said the Colonel as he handed over grid coordinates to a command post controller. "Airburst and DPICM; four volleys each with all batteries."

"Yes sir," said the controller as he looked over the message and prepared to reach the artillery unit on the radio. Since they had been ordered to cease fires supporting the battalions in contact, they had patiently waited for further missions. The S-3 came over right on the heels of the commander after he walked away and looked over the coordinates and checked them against a map quickly. The controller was just beginning to speak to the artillery unit when the S-3 stopped him.

"Belay that last!" he yelled. "That's friendly forces!"

"Sir?" asked the controller.

"I said belay that! Did you send the coordinates yet?" asked the S-3 and garnered the attention of the Colonel as well as the XO.

"Negative sir, I was about to send them," said the controller, confused since he had orders in hand from the Colonel.

"I said fire that mission soldier!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Relay that target and tell them I want them to fire on that grid with all batteries!"

"You have lost your mind!" yelled the S-3. "Do not relay those coordinates! That's the 14th's position and you'll be dropping it right on top of them!"

The controller looked quickly at the map and indeed it was close to where the 14th had sent their last coordinates. He looked at the Colonel with horror on his face and spoke into the microphone "Nomad 6, belay last mission. Do not fire! I repeat check fire!"

"Bear Cave, this is Nomad 6, I copy check fire," said the FDC from the artillery unit who was slightly confused since they didn't even have a target yet.

"I said send it!" yelled the Colonel and tried to snatch the microphone from the controller. However he was intercepted by the XO who pulled him back.

"You are relieved!" yelled the Colonel. "I order you to send that fire mission!"

"You touch that radio and I'll break your arm!" said the XO to nobody in particular, but putting out the threat to everyone.

“I said fire it!” screamed the Colonel as he tried to barge his way into the radio. However, he and the XO got into a shoving match until they were interrupted by a loud booming voice.

“What in God’s name is going on here?!” demanded General Chambers as he came into the command post and the personnel parted to give him full view of the two.

“I’m trying to get artillery fire for my troops!” said Colonel Woodson.

“Negative sir!” said the XO. “He’s attempting to dump a bunch of HE and DPICM on top of that prison camp that the 14th is at!”

The General strode over to the controller’s station and held out his hand for the targeting coordinates for the strike. “It’s okay son, let me have them.”

The controller passed over the piece of paper and the General checked for himself on the map. And rechecked the numbers one more time before turning to the Colonel.

“Has the 14th departed that location?” asked the General.

“I ordered them to,” said the Colonel.

“No sir!” said the S-3. “They are waiting on medical units and word the routes are clear into Černová to move out!”

“You ordered an artillery strike against friendly troops?” asked the General as his voice rose.

“I thought they were clear sir,” said the Colonel. “I ordered it personally.”

“You did?” asked the General as he turned to the rest of the staff. “How many people in here knew the 14th was still at those coordinates?”

Hands slowly went up around the command post and nods were seen as well. “How is it you are the only one in here that doesn’t know the status of your own units?”

“I...must have been mistaken General,” said the Colonel. “I thought I heard them call in clear.”

“You are one sick bastard,” said the General. “Status of operations around Ružomberok?”

“Sir, 4th Battalion had the defenders pushed away from the east side of the city. 1st Battalion has taken Černová as well as the bridges and is in the process of rolling up the western defenses and we believe have captured the Casio Prime bridges. The IU forces there are in complete disarray and retreat to the south and east,” said the S-3.

“Can 1st Battalion pursue?” asked the General.

“Probably sir,” said the XO. “Communications were cut off after they were ordered to cease operations around Casio.”

“I’d bet they were,” said the General. “What were the last instructions?”

“To cease all offensive operations and pull back to Phase Line Timex,” said the S-3.

“You mean give up all the territory they had already gained?” asked the General. “Were the casualties in that Battalion prohibiting further movement forward?”

“The casualties are light sir, seven KIA and twenty WIA. The seriously wounded have been evacuated and the lightly wounded are helping hold the line from the last we heard,” said the S-1.

“Less than thirty casualties out of an entire battalion during an assault?” asked the General. “And the wounded are staying behind?”

“According to the Battalion Sergeant-Major, most are refusing to leave and continuing to fight,” said the S-1.

“And enemy forces?” asked the General.

“Aerial assets are showing the IU forces starting to dig in here and here,” said the XO who had decided not to show any loyalty to his commander right then since it was costing lives. “If we don’t get to them in time, they’ll be dug in deeper than a tick and impossible to get out without massive support. The terrain closes in and favors a defender. If we can hit them before they get fortified, we can push them up the valley or at least claim this area for our own defense.”

“Can you get there before they get dug in?” asked the General.

“Maybe sir. We can have 1st Battalion continue to sweep up this valley should knock them back and there really isn’t any more defensive terrain to speak of for thirty kilometers. 3rd Battalion can surround the city and push the defenders back and provide support for the Service Company Colonel Jacobson ordered to help clear the city. The 4th Battalion can hold the line and we can order the 2nd to move forward to reinforce,” said the XO.

“Why is a support company clearing the city?” asked the General.

“Because that’s all they have sir,” said the S-3. “They have no significant support at the moment and have to get anyone up to the line to help out.”

“Why not push forward with both battalions?” asked the General.

“The terrain on the opposing side of the river needs at least a battalion to secure it properly. We’d open up our flank for an attack,” said the XO.

“So why can’t you have the 4th Battalion move to the opposing side of the river and set up defensive lines and have the 3rd push through the city. And have the 1st chase these units up that valley kicking their tails as they go?” asked the General.

“We’d need for the entire Division to move forward for that,” said the XO. “And it gets a bit more complicated.”

“Such as?” asked the General.

“The forces from Prievidza can move against our flank,” said the XO. “There are gaps in the valley here and here which would need a minimum of two companies to secure them.”

“And?” asked the General.

“If I may be so bold sir,” said the S-3. “There is no reason to stop in this valley since there is nothing but token resistance until we hit Banská Bystrica. And even then intelligence thinks there is only a garrison battalion of Class B units that were lumped together. We don’t hit anything of significance until Zvolen.”

“And we have the AFNAS 24th and the Australian 5th Brigade at Nitra,” said the XO. “With a little push, they could break through and do an end run to link up with us west of Zvolen. We surround the city and block off any retreat of the IU forces in the area. That’s about two divisions worth of troops sir.”

“Not going to be easy forcing this division down that valley,” said the General seeing where the plan was going and the real leadership in the command post.

“The roads are more than capable of pushing a battalion at a time,” said the XO.

“And what else?” asked the General.

“Push the combat forces down quickly and have the Dutch battalion hold Ružomberok and the French 3rd hold the three passes in the valley with its battalions. The fourth battalion from the French 3rd stays with the Dutch. They are already tasked to us for Ticonderoga and are in position right now. You can keep the rest of the Division intact until we get out of the mountains here at Banská Bystrica. 3rd Cav goes east and strikes towards the east of Zvolen and counters any moves by the IU there. 2nd Brigade continues south and lays siege to the city, 3rd sets up to the west and our brigade continues south and turns west to meet up with friendly forces or comes in and threatens Nitra from behind,” said the XO.

“Or you could coordinate the British 7th Armored Brigade and get them to help. Have them strike to the north of Nitra as a ruse then while the IU is moving to counter, have the 24th and Australian 5th smash through and encircle them as well,” said the S-3. “The Brits pin the defenders from Nitra in place and the 24th becomes the hammer to their anvil. They escape to the north and get caught in the pocket we are forming. The Australians continue east and meet up with us...here in Levice.”

“And you happen to know all these forces are in position already?” asked the General. He knew the answer as a similar plan had already been discussed at his recent conference.

“More or less sir,” said the XO. “Most are already at the front like we are and the Corps Commander can get them pushed. The British 7th is refitting, but is here at Trvana and could be underway in about four hours after the warning order.”

“And you know this for a fact?” asked the General.

“The Operations Officer is an old friend of mine and told me the same three days ago,” said the XO. “This could work sir. But as a minimum we can push down the valley to Banská Bystrica.”

“You are talking a Corps level operation on the fly,” said the General. “Probably even more.”

“We might not get another chance like this sir,” said the S-3. “Most of the units on the line right now are Class B and C forces. Their Class A units are bogged down around Prievidza countering the Germans or went south into Hungary to refit.”

“And you think this will work?” asked the General.

“It’s risky, but I don’t think the IU would know what hit them if we got the forces underway in the next four hours or so,” said the XO. “They are not expecting an attack of this magnitude for several weeks.”

“Neither are our forces,” said the General.

“But every unit is sitting at one hundred percent or better and most have been positioned forward,” said the S-3. “We’ve been waiting the entire winter and the thought of having to smash our way down this valley when Ticonderoga starts is not something I am looking forward to. But if we go now, we can at least get to Banská Bystrica and capture this sector without having to deal with defenses dug in all along the valley.”

“Risky, but very bold,” said the General and turned to one of the controllers. “Get me II Corps on the line.”

The controller started looking up numbers and finally got through to the II Corps command post. With a “standby” he handed over the handset to the General. “Radio sir, call sign is Stingray-6.”

“Stingray-6, this is Wild Card-6, I need Stingray-6 Actual on the line...I don’t care, drag him out of the meeting...sir, Wild Card-6 here, we’ve broken through the IU lines at Objective Casio...my 1st Brigade in contact is moving to the south of Ružomberok and moving down that valley towards Objective Citizen...roger that sir, I have my division getting ready to move as we speak...request immediate support of operations in the area and prepare for incoming packet on...” said the General and paused to look at the XO. “You thought of it, you name it.”

“Operation Renegade,” said the XO without hesitation.

“Fitting,” said the General. “We’ll get an incoming packet on Operation Renegade to your office in thirty minutes...we very well could surround everything north of the 571 like we talked about at the conference...we’ve got most of the units involved that we planned for except the plan calls for the British 7th as well...roger that sir, I’ll need you to coordinate with assets in V Corps...I’d recommend mobilizing all units in the corps, we have a slim opportunity here and the passes in the mountains can close if we don’t exploit this moment...roger that General...I’ll be heading back to my command post after I get done here...I confirm Operation Renegade is a go from our end...Wild Card-6 out.”

“You are now in charge of this Brigade. You will get it moving south in this valley. And you will catch up to those IU forces and destroy them before they dig in. Once we get out of the mountains it’s the kind of terrain we need for maneuver warfare. Don’t get bogged down in city fighting. Bypass the urban areas or concentrate on encircling them. We don’t stop for nothing and I’m going to start getting the additional brigades moving behind you. You are now the tip of the spear for this offensive! Understood?” asked the General.

“Yes sir!” said the XO and the staff was energized in passing the orders that had been given.

“Get the J-3 on the line and make sure this Brigade gets all the support they need. I want any units moving towards those two battalions smashed with everything we’ve got! Keep hitting them as hard as possible and get the other Brigade’s tails in gear to move forward. Get the Air Force on the horn and start getting some aircraft assets ready to support this move. Alert the French and the Dutch to move forward,” said the General to his Aide. “Colonel, you have a half an hour to get everything you briefed me on up to Corps. Send it straight through and courtesy copy my command post.”

“Roger that sir!” said the XO turned over the operations to the S-3 while he formatted the plan quickly. The S-3 resumed offensive operations with the 1st and 4th Battalions who had suspiciously come back on the radio nets and got them moving south as well as the other battalions moving into positions as ordered.

The General happened to notice there was still one person to deal with in the command post. He saw Colonel Woodson standing off to the side and watching his XO.

“Why are you still here Colonel?” asked the General.

“In case I can help,” said the Colonel.

“Negative,” said the General. “You are relieved.”

“Sir, I made a mistake!” objected the Colonel.

“A mistake?” asked the General and his voice rose. “A mistake?! Colonel, you have a battalion out there that risked a little bit, kicked major butt and took that town! That battalion commander,

hell, the entire 1st Battalion is full of hard chargers! They saw an opportunity to take some ground and shattered the IU defensive lines! And you wanted to relieve him for showing a little initiative? And you have a special operations team that kicked major tail and secured what we think might be a concentration camp and you want that commander relieved as well? Your XO just came up with a plan to rupture this sector and possibly the entire front! And let me guess, you'd probably want to relieve him too, wouldn't you?"

"And furthermore, you wanted to drop artillery fire onto a friendly unit?!" thundered the General. "That is a criminal act Colonel! Mistake or not I can't have a commander with a significant lapse of judgment like that! You would have killed your own troops!"

"Sir! Colonel Jacobson attacked without permission! Major Dayfield raided that camp without permission. They both lied and used back door channels in a hugely risky assault that could have turned out wrong in so many ways!" objected the Colonel.

"And both kicked major ass in the process! They both achieved their goals, captured a strategic crossroads and liberated a prison camp with little casualties! And without your help I might add! Now they are sitting out there waiting to be supported and you were trying to drop artillery fire on their heads? You ordered your troops to halt when they had the enemy force on the run? You also cut off the artillery support to a unit in contact and ordered your troops to give up ground they had already paid for in blood? Those all are criminal acts worthy of a firing squad! I need leaders in this division and Dayfield, Jacobson and your own XO just proved they have the fire needed to lead this brigade all the way into Tehran and beyond! They showed leadership, innovation, initiative and tenacity in the face of the enemy and came off victorious! I want tigers leading these men and women, but unfortunately, you are just a polecat stinking up my Division!" yelled the General.

"So you are relieved Colonel!" thundered the General as he enunciated each word. "Your personal effects will be shipped to you! Just get out and report back to II Corps!"

CHAPTER 29

Date/Time: 5 April/0857

Location: IU Prison Camp, Slovak Republic

“I’m starting to get a bit worried here,” said Darren as it was far too quiet.

“Yeah,” said Thomas. “I’m thinking we need to take the utility vehicle here and head down to do some recon towards Černová.”

“Who?” asked Darren.

“Let’s say Blaze and his team,” said Thomas. “Have them scout ahead and see if the routes are clear. If they are, we load up and head in.”

“Got it,” said Darren as he went off to find Lieutenant Joel Tucker and his team. Before he could find them, a sound caught his attention. Like distant thunder, it was rolling in and most of the team took notice. Several streaks were seen crossing the horizon heading south.

“You hear and see that?” asked Darren as he returned to Thomas.

“Yeah, artillery,” said Thomas.

“That’s the big stuff,” remarked Dave Lawson.

“MLRS,” said Mark Williams. “Division assets.”

“But not hitting near Ružomberok,” said Dave. “That’s up the valley.”

And as they were discussing theories, four F-16 fighters came in at nearly treetop level screaming past them, loaded for bear. Everyone on the ground scrambled for cover, but the fighters passed them by continuing west over the next ridge.

“Something going on?” asked Dave after he picked himself up off the ground.

“I don’t think Jacobson could have arranged fighters,” said Thomas.

“Something big,” said Dave. “Are those tank guns?”

“Sure sounds like it,” said Darren.

“Are we missing a party?” asked Dave.

“Or it’s an early start to the 4th of July,” said Mark.

“Gunner! Target! Sabot! Two tanks! One o’clock, 3100 meters! Left tank first!” shouted the tank commander on the M1A4 Abrams tank as they came upon the relief column heading for Ružomberok. Luckily enough, they had advanced warning of the approaching IU column and were able to get into hasty firing positions while the enemy battalion was still in road travel configuration.

“Identified!” yelled the gunner.

“Up!” yelled the loader after shoving the 120mm shell into the breach and locking it.

“Fire!” shouted the tank commander.

“On the way!” shouted the gunner and engaged after locking in on the target. The round traveled almost too fast for them to see, but the aftermath was catastrophic for the IU T-120 tank. The depleted uranium shell penetrated the armor with ease and hit the on board ammunition and propellant causing massive secondary explosions that ripped the turret completely off the vehicle and nearly hitting the tank to its right.

“Target! Sabot! Right tank! 3050 meters!” yelled the commander.

“Identified!” yelled the gunner.

“Up!” yelled the loader as he finished reloading the main gun.

“Fire!” yelled the commander again and the main gun was fired once again at the second tank. Its fate was sealed not unlike the first one the first one as the remainder of the armored platoon was firing on targets still traveling in road formation. Intermixed with the main battle tanks were the M2A6 Improved Bradley Fighting Vehicles that added to the carnage with their TOW-2B missiles as they fired on the distant armored targets. Before long, most of the IU armor had been decimated and all that remained were the BTR-80 and BMP-2 clones that were charging forward attempting to get in range of their own missile systems. But the Abrams and Bradleys made short work of the charge with the 120mm HEAT rounds and the 25mm Bushmaster cannons. The battle lasted less than ten minutes between the armored forces before they were destroyed and burning, spewing black smoke across the battlefield.

“Load and carry HEAT,” ordered the tank commander.

The loader on the Abrams spun the shell out of the ammo storage rack and loaded the high explosive-anti-tank round. Not the best choice for the main battle tanks of the IU, but decent for the remaining infantry fighting vehicles that were attempting to escape. There were few armored

vehicles left to engage and those that did were quickly dispatched by the advancing coalition forces.

“Infantry in the open!” shouted the gunner.

“Engage with coax!” ordered the commander as he opened the hatch and engaged with the M2A1 machine gun as well. It wasn’t the first time Ma Deuce had been fired in anger in the European Theater and like its predecessors over the past seventy plus years, did the job very well. The Bradleys continued to roll forward until they were able to unload their infantry squads and get them into the fight as well. Being supported by both the armor and the infantry fighting vehicles, they advanced rapidly and broke the spirit of the remaining IU infantry.

“Looks like they’re surrendering!” shouted the commander. The infantry dismounted the Bradleys and took up covered positions ordering the remaining IU forces to surrender. Lieutenant Colonel Jacobson watched from a distance as the remains of an IU battalion quickly threw down arms and held up their hands. He looked upward as another flight of F-16I Super Falcons joined in the pursuit of the retreating forces and screamed up the valley looking for targets of opportunity. They were followed by a slower moving flight of A-10C aircraft heading south and loaded for bear. The victory was complete and all that remained was to collect the prisoners and tend to their own wounded.

“Prepare for the pass through of 4th Battalion,” he ordered the S-3.

“He’s on the radio sir,” said the S-3 who was amazed at how far they had gotten before encountering significant IU forces north of Liptovská Osada.

“Barracuda 6, this is Furball 6, over,” said Lieutenant Colonel Reese over the radio.

“Furball 6, this is Barracuda 6, go ahead,” said Jacobson.

“Looks like you guys had quite the party,” said Reese forgoing the call signs.

“Might have saved some for you,” said Jacobson. “Predator assets show another battalion in this valley. They were advancing, but seemed to have stopped for a moment after hearing about what we did to their friends. Aircraft are hitting it right now trying to keep them from digging in.”

“Figures you 1st Batt guys would leave the hard work for us,” laughed Reese over the radio. “Did our friend make it out?”

“Not sure,” said Jacobson. “We got pushed through by Wild Card 6 so I’m not sure if they ever left their location.”

“What happened to Grizzly 6?” asked Reese.

“He’s out of position,” said Jacobson. “I talked with 6 Alpha, but he wouldn’t elaborate.”

“Did Tom make it through okay?” asked Reese.

“Last I heard the camp was secure,” said Jacobson. “And he was waiting on word to roll out.”

“Roger,” said Reese. “You following us when you get done cleaning up?”

“You’ve got 3rd Batt on your heels,” said Jacobson. “We’ll follow them.”

“See you in Bystrica,” said Jacobson.

“Stay safe,” said Reese. “Furball 6 out.”

“Casualties?” asked Jacobson.

“Five KIA and seven WIA,” said the S-1. “We have medevac inbound for the WIA.”

“Equipment?” asked Jacobson.

“An Abrams in Charlie Company threw a track and the crew is repairing it right now. Two Bradleys from Alpha and one from Delta were hit and will need to be pulled back for repairs. The crews out of two of the Bradleys managed to escape,” said the S-4.

“That’s it?” exclaimed Jacobson.

“Caught them with their pants down Colonel,” grinned the S-3.

“Still worried?” asked Jacobson returning the grin.

“Only when we see the city limits for Budapest,” grinned the S-3.

“Do we have a resupply coming in?” asked Jacobson.

“Affirmative sir,” said the S-3. “Following 4th Battalion.”

“Get everyone topped off with ammo and gas,” said Jacobson. “We’ve got a ways to go.”

“Renegade 6, this is Vegas Control, over,” said a voice over the communicator.

“Who is Vegas Control?” asked Amber.

“That’s Division,” said Thomas. “This is Renegade 6, please authenticate Romeo Five.”

“Renegade 6, I pass you Seven Victor Two. How copy?” asked the voice.

“I copy, go ahead with message Vegas Control,” said Thomas.

“Roger Renegade 6, be advised, medical and security convoy is rolling towards your location at this time with expected E-T-A of three-zero mike. They will be coming up southbound secondary road from Černová. How copy?” asked the controller.

“I copy, convoy rolling with E-T-A of three-zero mike on southbound secondary roads. We will be standing by,” said Thomas.

“Roger, lead vehicles will have daily blue placard on the front bumper,” said the controller.

“Copy, blue daily placard,” confirmed Thomas. “Anything else?”

“Negative at this time,” said the controller. “Stand by on this net for further.”

“Copy, Renegade 6 standing by,” said Thomas and ended the conversation. “Pass the word to Fluffy and Doodle that we are expecting a convoy of security and medical coming up the secondary road. They’ll have blue daily placards.”

“Got it,” said Greg as he relayed the radio instructions.

“Okay, I want our medics to start some basic triage. Start separating the victims into groups by medical need so when the docs get here they’ll know which to treat and evac first,” said Thomas.

“On it boss,” said Mark Williams as he called out for the medics to fall in on him.

“Go ahead and get the prisoners ready for transfer and get the generic EPW cards filled out. Separate out the wounded and make sure the med folks coming up the road have a proper escort,” was the next assignment from Thomas.

“I’ll get that,” said First Lieutenant Carmen Ford.

“Papi, go ahead and get the intel we gathered so far ready to turn over. They didn’t say, but I’d be willing to bet there’s some intel weenies in that convoy,” said Thomas.

“Easy enough,” said Stephen Garcia.

As the group departed on their assignments, Darren came up to Thomas. “I’ve got a task for you as well.”

“Sure,” said Thomas.

“Have a seat and relax for a moment,” said Darren. “You’re waiting on the other shoe to drop right now. Just take a deep break or something.”

“Got it,” chuckled Thomas although not feeling like relaxing.

Date/Time: 5 April/1141

Location: IU Prison Camp, Slovak Republic

The teams were watching as the medical unit worked diligently to get the camp survivors prepared to move and administered first aid to the more seriously ill to keep them comfortable until suitable transport could be arranged. Two platoons of Military Police had arrived with the medical teams and had relieved the Cider troops and Rangers on the security element. An additional team of Slovak translators had arrived making the job far easier to determine the illnesses and precisely who some of the victims were. Thomas had contacted the Division Command Post to let them know the transfer of security had taken place and was told to stand by for further. So again, they waited for additional instructions and quietly watched the medical professionals help the victims.

A small convoy of two armored security vehicles and a light armored utility vehicle came up the secondary road and entered the parking area. The security vehicles came to a stop, but the utility vehicle headed straight for Thomas. As the utility vehicle came towards him, Thomas saw the Major General Chambers in the front seat. As the vehicle came to a stop, the General hopped out and walked towards Thomas.

“Sir! Op Group Alpha reporting!” said Thomas although not saluting this close to the front lines. The General nodded his acknowledgment and started looking over the camp and the former prisoners. He didn’t say a word to Thomas and slowly walked around with Thomas in tow. After seeing what he needed to see, he walked back and started observing the medical personnel working on the former prisoners. After a deep sigh, he finally said the reason he was here.

“You did good work rescuing these prisoners and liberating this camp,” said the General.

“Thank you sir,” said Thomas.

“We’ll discuss your insubordination and disobeying orders at another time,” he replied simply.

“Yes sir,” said Thomas as he knew it was coming. “Colonel Woodson ordered my arrest when I made contact with friendly forces. I’d like to surrender myself to you, sir.”

“You shouldn’t worry about him,” said the General.

“I don’t understand sir,” said Thomas. “He called a halt to the operations before we got a chance to move out and ordered any unit in contact to arrest me on sight.”

“And I pushed 1st Battalion forward along with the rest of the brigade close behind. I can’t spend too much time here since I need to get back to the command post,” said the General. “The entire division is on the move south.”

“I understand sir,” said Thomas, but didn’t get an answer to his question.

“Colonel Woodson was relieved of his command and Lieutenant Colonel Ellis is in charge now,” said the General and answering the unasked question. “So specifically, you need not worry about Colonel Woodson as you are *my* problem now.”

“Yes sir,” said Thomas and noticed the emphasis on *my*.

“And here are my orders,” said the General. “You will return your forces to 1st Brigade’s encampment area and specifically your compound. You are to remain on the Brigade encampment area with the only exception being of J-SOD emergency missions. You and your unit will wait there until I, that’s me specifically, call for you. The Ranger force you used here will be released back to General McMackin and sent back to their base of origin when you get to your compound. Are my orders clear?”

“Yes sir,” said Thomas.

“And I do hope you understand the ramifications of failing to heed what I just said Major,” said the General. “I expect you to follow said orders without question or hesitation. Understood?”

“Yes sir,” said Thomas.

“Dismissed,” said the General as he climbed back into his vehicle and departed with his security escort. Darren saw they had finished their talk and came over to Thomas.

“Okay, what’s the deal?” he asked.

“We’re to turn this place over to the MPs and head back to camp,” said Thomas.

“And?” asked Darren.

“And from there we are locked down on the brigade encampment until called for except emergency J-SOD taskings,” said Thomas.

“That’s it?” asked Darren.

“It’s not over,” said Thomas. “Not by a long shot.”

“Nothing else?” asked Darren.

“I’m turning over all day to day operations and command decisions to you,” said Thomas.

“He relieved you,” said Darren as a statement rather than a question.

“No, but I’m doing it anyway,” said Thomas. “Look Darren, I’ve jumped from the frying pan and into the fire on this one and I cannot continue to command right now. You and I both know it, so as the deputy you will assume command until this all plays out.”

“I won’t accept it,” said Darren.

“You don’t have a choice,” said Thomas. “I’ll make it official when we get back.”

Darren turned as a convoy carrying engineers came up the road and would prepare to demolish the camp, burn the buildings and mark the large mass grave site. Several intelligence specialists were already taking as much of the paperwork and computers as they could back to be reviewed and hopefully provide insight for future missions. Photographs and video were being taken of the camp for posterity as well as potential evidence at military tribunals once the war was over. Like all wars before this one, those that started it and did such heinous acts would be held in account of their actions. Ambulatory busses came into the compound and started loading the last groups of victims for transport to the nearest hospitals where they would start the long process of rehabilitation. Darren watched as the individuals went about their duties deep in thought over what had just been said.

“I don’t want it Tom,” said Darren.

“We all have to do things we don’t want to do from time to time,” said Thomas.

“Not like this though,” said Darren. “We just rescued five hundred prisoners and you should be rewarded for it. Giving up your command isn’t a reward.”

“It’s inevitable,” said Thomas. “Look, as a friend I need you to do this.”

“A friend wouldn’t make this request,” said Darren.

“So it’s an order then,” said Thomas. “First I’ve probably ever given to you.”

Darren was silent as it was true. From the time they had enlisted in the Texan Militia all the way to the current moment Thomas had always outranked him. But in all that time Thomas had never given an order directly to Darren. They had always been equals until that specific moment.

“I don’t have to like it,” said Darren.

“But you just have to do it,” said Thomas as he completed the phrase and stuck out his hand. Darren took it and shook it slowly, the gravity of the moment sinking in finally.

“For the record, I’m not sure I ever would have been strong enough to do what you did prior to this mission,” said Darren.

“I happen to think you are,” said Thomas. “Which is why I’m trusting you with the one thing in my life besides my immediate family that I care about the most. At least until this is settled.”

“Stop making this so hard,” said Darren.

“You think this is easy from my end?” asked Thomas.

“Doesn’t make me feel better,” said Darren.

“I trust you without hesitation. Through thick and thin, you’ve always been there by my side supporting me or working alongside me. I’m just asking for one more time,” said Thomas.

“This is only temporary. Then I’ll be right back at your side,” replied Darren.

“We’ll see what happens,” said Thomas. “We need to coordinate with the MPs and turn the camp over entirely. I’ll collect everyone up and get ready to move if you want to talk to them. We’ll use the trucks the Ranger stole so at least we won’t have to walk.”

And with that, Thomas walked away leaving Darren to assume the responsibilities of command of the unit. And Thomas felt like he left a piece of himself behind.

EPILOGUE

“It’s God’s job to judge terrorists. It’s our job to arrange the meeting.” Attributed to several sources

Date/Time: 10 April/1204

Location: Coalition Military Hospital, Brno, Czech Republic

Captain Wyatt “Hank” Williams made his way up the middle of the aisle in the hospital looking at every bed he could as he went through. The patient listing showed her to be here, but he hadn’t found her yet. He finally stopped by a nurse’s station and was directed into another wing. After looking through a dozen more beds, he found her asleep. In the light she looked deathly thin and the IV lines running into her arm didn’t help improve the look. He took a seat beside her bed and just sat, waiting for her to wake up and thought about the strange turns life often took and how he had come to genuinely care about someone he had known less than a month.

Dana Baláž woke to find him sitting next to the bed, deep in thought and oblivious to the fact she was no longer sleeping. “Hank?”

“Hey,” he said after the pleasant surprise. “How are you?”

“I tired,” she said. “Thank you very much.”

“I’m heading into Germany to a different hospital for a while, but I wanted to come by and see you before I went,” he said.

“You leave?” she asked with a touch of sorrow.

“Only until I get better,” said Williams.

“I no see you again,” she said sadly.

“Oh yes you will,” he replied. “My unit is moving to Brno, so I’ll be able to visit as much as I want in the future.”

“You come see me?” she asked.

“Absolutely darlin, until you get better for certain,” said Williams. “And even more after that.”

“I no understand,” she said as his English was too much in her groggy state. She was on medicine being fed into the IV line and it wasn’t helping keep up with his rapid speech. But Williams had anticipated this and brought along some help. Zee had been patiently waiting in

the hospital speaking with others until he was summoned by Williams. He translated what had been said so far to Dana who smiled at Williams after she learned he would be nearby.

“I also have a surprise,” said Williams.

Dana found it easier to go through Zee for the translation and asked what it was.

“I talked to my parents and found they happen to have a spare bedroom in their house,” said Williams and the message was translated.

“Yes?” asked Dana.

“And I also spoke to the interim Slovakian Government here as well as my superiors. It seems that the paperwork for getting refugees to America is surprisingly easy as long as you have a sponsor already waiting for you,” said Williams.

Zee translated the statement and Dana’s eyes started growing a bit wider as she knew what was coming. “Yes?” she asked excitedly.

“So you’ll need this,” said Williams as he withdrew a Slovakian-English translation book as well as a conversational English textbook written in Slovakian out of the small bag he had and handed them to her. She took them and looked at the covers and back at him quickly.

“Yes?” she asked.

“And if you want, I will make good on my promise of taking you to America. Now they ended up moving to Oklahoma so it isn’t Texas, but it’s the next best thing,” said Williams and the message was translated.

“Yes!” exclaimed Dana causing a nearby nurse to shush her to keep from disturbing the others in the ward. She followed up the exclamation with a simple “I go America!”

“That’s I will go to America,” said Williams with a smile.

“Yes, my English umm, *potreby*?” asked Dana and looked at Zee.

“Needs,” said Zee as he translated the Slovakian word into English.

“*D’akujem*, my English needs work,” said Dana. “But Hank help?”

“As soon as the war is over, absolutely,” said Williams.

“Thank you very much,” she said with another smile, breaking the record in ten minutes of all the times she had in the past seven months.

“And one more thing,” said Hank as he reached into his bag and withdrew a cupcake that had been baked by a member of the hospital kitchen staff. He had already spoken to the doctor and they had decided a little cake wouldn’t hurt and after all, it was her birthday. He sat a candle on top and lit it with a match, setting in on the tray in front of her. “Happy birthday darlin.”

Dana looked at the candle slowly burning and back at Hank with a smile on her face. Tears dropped down her thin cheeks as she never thought as recent as two weeks before she would see this day. She let out a string of Slovakian and Zee translated.

“She said you already have given her the best gift she could know. You gave her life and taught her to stand and fight for it. And have given her a new home and family. She said there will never be a way of repaying you,” said Zee.

“You get better, that’s payment enough,” said Williams with a smile and Zee translated it.

“You now brother, yes?” she asked.

“Soon enough, yes,” he replied. “Blow out your candle.”

She didn’t understand the phrase, but understood enough to know what she needed to do. After a gentle puff, the candle went out and Hank cut the cupcake into quarters and attempted to grab a fork to help her.

“No, I do,” she said and shifted in the bed to a more upright position. The nurse came over and inclined the bed, smiling at the joyous scene to her front. Dana took the fork and daintily took a piece and chewed with a smile on her face. After swallowing she asked another question in Slovakian to Zee who translated.

“She asks where your fork is. She said she cannot eat it all and must keep her figure,” he said.

Hank looked at her and saw the mirth in her eyes and saw that underneath it all there was still life and the ability to have a sense of humor. A tear rolled down his face once again as he remembered the horrors she had dealt with and yet was already bouncing back. She had a long road ahead of her, but knew this was an important first step in the healing process.

“You tell her I’ll force feed that entire thing to her,” he laughed and wiped his face. Zee translated with a laugh and they all three giggled at the comments, although both Zee and Hank taking a small piece in the minor celebration. After finishing up, they talked for a few more minutes and Dana even gave her new book a try, learning a few new words in the process. But Hank glanced at his watch and saw he needed to be going soon to catch the transport to Munich where his own rehabilitation would commence and get him back into fighting form. He attempted to lean over for a hug from his new sister, but was brushed away.

“No, I stand,” said Dana as she grunted and slid halfway off the bed. He attempted to help once again but she shook her head and waved her hand at him. “No, Hank teach me to stand.”

She finally got out of the bed and he leaned over and gave a hug to his new sister. It would take some time, but eventually he would see to it she was sent to North America where she could begin a new life free from oppression and people that would do the most unthinkable things to each other. As they said their goodbyes, he left with a newfound fire inside of him as he had never seen the horrors of war up close and personal like this. He was surprised at how something as simple as a young girl could change one's perspective on the war. And in that, he found more than enough reason to continue fighting until all were free.

Date/Time: 10 April/1347

Location: 1st Brigade encampment, near Babín, Slovakia

It had been quiet in the aftermath for the members of Op Group Alpha of the 14th Special Operations Battalion. The main Brigade areas were being moved south towards Sielnica where the town had been liberated and the new headquarters could be established. There was still a lot of work to be done and Thomas attempted to keep the teams busy by getting the equipment in his own compound ready to move. The fighting had reached a lull again as the conventional forces oriented themselves for the expected IU counterattack as well as continuing to prepare for the theater wide offensive that was planned. But no missions had come from J-SOD and everything was quiet on the Brigade and Division fronts. But as with all things, there was sometimes calm before the storm.

"Tom?" asked Shannon Parsons as she finished a phone call. "They need you and Darren at Brigade Headquarters. General Chambers requests your presence."

"Got it," said Thomas as he collected Darren along the way. He had just finished talking with the acting Brigade Commander who had dropped by to see if everything was getting taken care of. While being courteous to Thomas, there was a distinct aloofness about his manner and Thomas turned over the brief tour to Darren to limit the discomfort he appeared to have. They walked the short distance to the Brigade headquarters where they were pointed into a small room where the Division Commander was already waiting.

"Sir, Major Dayfield and Thompson reporting as ordered," said Thomas and snapped up a salute along with Darren. The General looked up from reading a file, the after action report from the mission, long enough to acknowledge the two and rendered a quick salute.

"Dayfield, you crossed the line big time on this mission," said the General as he finished looking over the report and set his reading glasses off to the side.

"I know sir," said Thomas, knowing what was coming next.

"You disobeyed direct orders not to engage and misled your commander to believe you were on a normal recon of the area," continued the General.

"That I did sir," said Thomas.

“And furthermore, you used brigade level assets as well as entire other services and branches to get the job done. Completely circumventing the typical request channels by calling in favors from so called friends,” said the General.

“We needed those assets to pull off the mission,” said Thomas.

“As well as causing an international incident on a French base prior to your mission. Of which I received a personal phone call from their General and had to cool him down,” said the General.

“He assaulted one of our people first sir,” said Thomas. “We were defending ourselves.”

“The simple fact you pulled off this entire circus is amazing,” said the General.

“Thank you sir,” said Thomas.

“That wasn’t a compliment, but rather a statement of fact. Your team could have been killed and could have cost the lives of every one of the prisoners in that camp,” said the General.

“But we weren’t sir and we managed to liberate a prison camp as well as rescue the downed pilot,” said Thomas.

“Which doesn’t excuse your insubordination or integrity issue,” said the General.

Thomas wisely didn’t react to the implication due to the fact he knew it was true. There was an uncomfortable pause as Thomas attempted to see the path through here. But he knew this path only ended in one place.

“Major Thompson, you spoke with Colonel Ellis already?” asked the General.

“Yes sir,” said Darren.

“Then you are dismissed. Please see to your teams,” said the General as he returned the salute from Darren and shifted his focus back to Thomas after Darren departed the room.

“You have nothing to say for yourself?” asked the General.

“Sir, Colonel Woodson had ordered that facility onto the bombing list since he discredited and altered our intelligence reports. And had that happened, we would have ended up killing five hundred innocent people. I couldn’t let that happen and didn’t have the opportunity to consult with you directly. So I ordered the mission to proceed,” said Thomas.

“That bombing list ends up at my desk. And furthermore, most of your unedited intelligence reports end up on my desk as well. I knew there was some controversy so the bombing request never went forward,” said the General.

“I didn’t realize that sir,” said Thomas.

“You act as if I have no clue of what’s going on in my Division son,” said the General. “I do happen to keep my ear to the ground and knew there was trouble brewing between you and Colonel Woodson. And I had planned on doing something about it before the spring offensive, but you obviously just couldn’t wait and went off playing cowboy.”

“I apologize sir,” said Thomas. “I attempted to schedule a meeting, but you were away at the conference and the Chief of Staff blocked additional attempts to schedule something.”

“I realize there were some...shady dealings within my own staff,” said the General. “But I’ve got those under control and my *new* Chief of Staff understands the way the game will be played. And furthermore, I think you underestimate how serious I take things like this. If one of my officers commanding a battalion equivalent came to me directly with a problem, you’d best bet I’d look into the matter personally.”

“I understand sir,” said Thomas. “I just didn’t think I had enough time.”

“Well, while we’re on the subject of time, you obviously had plenty of time to coordinate brigade artillery, other nation’s intelligence assets, J-SOD aircraft assets, getting an entire Ranger Company assigned under your unit, getting at least one if not two Battalion Commanders to stage a Brigade level assault and last, but certainly not least, had a B-52 bomber under your direct command. And yet you still didn’t have the time to come see your Commanding General in person?” asked General Chambers.

Thomas didn’t say anything more as he knew there was nothing he could say to change that fact he had misled the Colonel into believing the unit was on an extended recon of the area. He had ignored the orders to avoid the prison camp when the Colonel had issued them and pressed forward with the mission of securing the hostages. He had caused an incident on the French base defending one his own. He had called in markers to get the aircraft assets and intelligence. And last, but certainly not least, he had ignored the Colonel’s orders to leave the camp since he knew the Colonel would attempt to steal credit away from his own unit at a later time. Thomas’ stubborn streak was showing out considerably lately and he knew by doing so would get him in a lot of trouble. But his pride made him ensure the 14th get the credit they were justly due.

“Well?” asked the General in a slightly annoyed tone.

“Sir, I did what I had to do and any blame needs to be laid at my feet. The unit liberated a prison camp and stopped some of the exterminations of the Slovakian people. We saved a Texan pilot as well as almost five hundred victims. The 1st Battalion in assisting us also opened a breach in the IU lines and captured not only a strategic crossroads, but a good portion of ESR Tombstone. And that was directly due to the intelligence we provided. And helped encircle the IU forces at Prievidza and got us out of slogging through those mountain passes.”

“Yes, I am guilty of ignoring orders and misleading the Colonel to get the job done. Yes I am guilty of using personal relations to get the job done. And yes, I am the one ultimately

responsible for the conduct of my unit and giving the orders which led us on that mission where we got the job done. If that makes me a bad commander, than I accept whatever punishment you have to give me. I request you leave my troops out of it since they had nothing to do with it and were just following my orders. I'll take the punishment you have for me as it's justly due, but spare my troops," concluded Thomas.

"You didn't just cause your unit to disobey the Colonel," said General Chambers. "But practically an entire Brigade followed your example in insubordination. And that officially qualifies as a mess in my world."

"I understand sir," said Thomas.

"I'm not so certain you do," said the General. "I had to explain to Corps as well as the Field Marshal why one of my brigades went rogue and started an attack. Now provided they were pretty darn happy with the results and I had to lie and call it a recon in force that got a little out of hand just to cover the other leaders that decided to follow in your insubordination. But the principle applies that five thousand men and women took it upon themselves to start an operation without any additional coalition forces backing them up. And you and I both know word will eventually leak out that this wasn't a sanctioned operation by any means. Now, you're damn lucky I happened to be back when I was because without the rest of the Division, this could and probably would have faltered and failed."

"So, what am I going to do with you?" asked the General as he rose and stared at the pictures on the wall with his back to Thomas. "You have proven yourself to be one of the most valuable and capable combat leaders in this entire theater, but I cannot let something like this just pass by without doing something. No matter what. People depend on their leaders to make good, sound decisions and adhere to the chain of command, even when they don't agree with them. You take that staff out there for example. They supported Colonel Woodson even though many did not agree with him. And even though I was forced to relieve him, the fact they had the discipline to continue working for him says a lot."

"So there is a lesson to be learned here today," said the General as he turned back to Thomas. "And that lesson is to be mindful that your next commander might have you tossed into the stockade if you cross the line of impropriety. Understand?"

"Yes sir," said Thomas as right then and there he knew he had lost his command. He had suspected it when Darren had been sent out early, but now knew for certain he would be removed from the friends and family he had fought with for so long.

"And you understand this will require additional administrative actions on my part concerning you?" asked the General.

"I understand sir," said Thomas.

General Chambers slid across a piece of paper to Thomas as well as a pen. Thomas saw it was a reprimand for his conduct both before and during the mission. He read through it quickly and

signed above his name acknowledging receipt. It wasn't very flowery, but the words struck home to Thomas and he felt his heart sink.

"The S-1 has some additional paperwork for you to sign," said the General. "Dismissed."

Thomas gave a quick salute which was returned and walked to the door. It seemed to be the longest walk of his life knowing he would have to go back to his unit and face the shame of what he had done and led them into. And furthermore, face the fact he had failed in his mission of command. When he opened the door and walked through, he found something he wasn't quite expecting.

All his teams were inside the Brigade headquarters administrative area along with a good portion of the Brigade Staff, General McMackin, Lieutenant Colonels Reese, Jacobson and the 3rd Battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel King. Also present was Captain Brown from the Ranger company along with his First Sergeant and Executive Officer as well as Major Hermann Graf peeking from behind the group and Captain Andy Martin from the Australian intelligence unit. As soon as he cleared the doorway, shock hit his face and the new Division Chief of Staff bellowed out for the group to come to attention. Boot heels clicked together as the General's Aide began reading from a piece of paper.

"Attention to orders! By order of the Commanding General of the 2nd Freedom Guards Division and the Governor of the Sovereign Republic of Colorado dated 9 April, Major Thomas Brent Dayfield is hereby selected for promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. For his heroism, leadership and continued dedication to the men and women of the 14th Special Operations Battalion, 1st Brigade, 2nd Freedom Guards Division and Free Nation Coalition as a whole, Thomas Dayfield is being awarded a rank consummate with his abilities and will continue to serve as Commander, 14th Special Operations Battalion should he accept this charge. Furthermore, the 14th Special Operations Battalion is hereby awarded the Meritorious Unit Award with Valor device, sixth oak leaf cluster, as well as the reauthorization of the Governor's Unit of Freedom Award for its role in the liberation of an IU prison camp near Ružomberok in Occupied Slovakia. And by Executive Order, the 14th is authorized to emplace a battle streamer for the dates of the raid on its unit guidon."

"Major Dayfield, do you accept the roles and responsibilities of the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and continued services as the office of Commander, 14th Special Operations Battalion?" asked the General as he had appeared to the side of Thomas.

"Yes, sir," Thomas finally managed to say as he was completely shocked at the turn of events.

"Thomas Dayfield," said the General as he removed the rank patches for Major from his uniform and slapped the Velcro patched for the new rank in its place. "You are promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Your leadership and dedication to the war effort, although highly irregular, enabled this coalition to displace the IU at two different strategic locations as well as surrounding two divisions of enemy troops. And your unit, partnered with the Pacifica 19th Ranger Company, rescued five hundred prisoners that would have faced certain death otherwise.

These actions show you are and have been ready for promotion and for the responsibilities associated with this office.”

“And on a personal note, God only help you if you ever think of doing something stupid like you did with your next commander. Because you just might find him slightly less understanding and forgiving than your previous one. After talking it over with the Corps Commander, we came to the realization that units like yours just don’t fit into conventional chain of command and offer capabilities that are unique and should be carefully employed. So in order to ensure the effective use of it in the future, all Special Operations Battalions currently in service of the North American Union Armed Forces will be placed under the direct administrative and operational control of their appropriate Division Commanders. Your units are strategic level assets and needs careful application to guarantee the many successes yet to come.”

Smiles broke out around the room as they all knew the General was a former Army Ranger and understood the capabilities and roles of special warfare troops. They knew there would be no further mismanagement of their unit as long as he was in direct control of the Battalion. While their missions would still come from the J-SOD, there would probably be a radical turn in the other “administrative duties” the units were currently performing.

“Your promotion was long overdue and I found the Colonel was holding it up. And as all your peers are Lieutenant Colonels, it should only be fitting you join them in the same rank. Wouldn’t you agree?” asked the General.

“I know better than to argue, sir,” said Thomas with a grin.

“I highly doubt that,” said the General with a smirk and laughter broke out in the room. “Give the man a round of applause and some congratulations folks, he’s earned it.”

The group went to at ease and gave a long round of applause to Thomas. He blushed slightly at the attention he received since he didn’t care to be in the spotlight this much.

“Additionally, there’s a Sergeant James Collins in this room, correct?” asked General Chambers.

“Um, yes sir,” said Jamie and raised his hand.

“Don’t keep me waiting son,” said the General.

Jamie made his way forward, unsure of why he was being singled out. He approached the General and assumed the position of attention.

“Now we don’t have the official citation for this yet,” said General Chambers as he received a decoration box from his aide and pulled a Silver Star from the box and pinned it on his uniform tunic. “But I did read the after action report from the rescue mission for that downed helicopter and you saved the lives of the two crew at great risk to yourself. Those men are lucky to be alive today and I’d like to share the entire Division’s gratitude for your heroism. You keep up the good work son.”

“Just doing my job sir,” said Jamie as he saluted the General.

“Colonel Dayfield’s been rubbing off on you, hasn’t he?” chuckled General Chambers. “No need to be modest; you’re a fine replacement for Sergeant Major Carlson.”

“Thank you sir,” said Jamie as he shook the offered hand and posed for a quick picture.

“Okay folks, those that can, come tag on the new rank of Lieutenant Colonel Dayfield. And come congratulate this fine example of a soldier,” said General Chambers as he led the applause.

Thomas was lucky in the fact there weren’t many officers around that carried the same rank, so the tacking on of his new rank wasn’t as punishing as it could have been. A line formed to shake his hand as well as congratulate Jamie for the award he had earned. Darren eventually made his way through the crowd for a handshake and a hug.

“You knew, didn’t you?” asked Thomas with a grin.

“Yep, that’s why Colonel Ellis came by earlier to set this up. But you wouldn’t take the subtle hint to go away so he had to act the way he did,” said Darren.

“No kidding,” said Ellis as he punched the new rank onto Thomas’ tunic. “We liked to never have gotten rid of you.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t say anything,” objected Thomas with a laugh.

“And spoil the fun?” asked Darren. “The General said you needed to sweat a little.”

“And I hope he did,” said the General as he reappeared. “Now, I’ll overlook the rest of your shady dealings since it resulted in a great victory for this Division and helped cause a rupture in the lines. But you used up eight of your nine lives on that raid Colonel. You want something next time? Just ask for a change.”

“Yes sir,” said Thomas. “I will use official requests from now on.”

“Again, I highly doubt that! Listen up folks,” laughed the General and raised his voice to speak to the entire room. After he started speaking, the group became quiet and he made his announcement. “As my first official order as your new direct commander, I have cancelled the planed training in advanced unarmed combat tactics and urban escape and evasion that was set up through the J-SOD. And have instead ordered the members of this unit to prepare to move out at 0800 the day after tomorrow for two weeks of R and R at a place of their choosing in the European Theater. Afterwards, they will have four additional weeks of refit and replacement training at Combined Forces Command at RAF Brize Norton.”

“Six weeks off the line sir?” asked Thomas.

“We’ve got other units that can fill in. Contrary to popular belief, even the mighty 14th can be replaced from time to time. And seeing that I happen to have a Ranger Company somewhat handy, we won’t miss you while you’re gone,” said the General.

“Best lock up your valuables if you’ve got Rangers around General,” called Bill Meyers from the back of the room.

“I heard that Captain Meyers,” said the General with a smile. “I’d love to stick around, but I’ve got to get back to my headquarters. Make sure you sign the paperwork for your promotion so you can start getting paid.”

“Roger that sir,” said Thomas who took the extended hand and shook it. He saluted one final time and the General and entourage departed the facility for the helicopter ride back to his command post. Something caught Thomas’ eye and he wandered back into the conference room where the briefing had taken place and found the reprimand was still sitting on the table. However, the page had been ripped in half with a note at the bottom of “shred file.” Thomas decided to help the General out and took the paper outside. He pulled the cigarette lighter from his pocket, an ever present item since before the Fall, and burned the two piece of paper and stamping out the ashes after they had completed burning. He happened to see Jamie Collins off looking over the encampment, lost in thought over something. He heard Thomas approach and turned his attention back to the present.

“Congratulations Colonel,” said Jamie and shook his hand.

“And congratulations to you as well,” said Thomas. “You told me once you had no idea why we were fighting. You ever find the answer to that question?”

“I think I have sir,” said Jamie.

“You come to this realization suddenly or by scientific deduction?” asked Thomas.

“Sometimes the lessons in life have to be learned the hard way,” said Jamie, thinking back to whom he was before and what he had become. It sometimes took the horrors of war to shock someone into seeing how wrong their perception of the big picture was.

“And the proposal I put to you before we left?” asked Thomas.

“If it’s all the same to you, Colonel, I think I finally found a home,” said Jamie.

“A home where?” asked Thomas.

“A home here in this unit. You all are certainly different from the others I’ve been in before. More like a family rather than a military unit. Of course, I’m still kind of like a crazy cousin nobody invited to the family reunion,” he chuckled.

“It’ll take time to get you fully accepted, but I think you made good strides in making a lasting impression,” said Thomas.

“Good or bad sir?” asked Jamie.

“That’s going to be up to you in the long run,” said Thomas.

“So you accept me in your unit?” asked Jamie.

“No and I don’t have that choice in the matter. They are the ones that accept you in this unit,” said Thomas as he swept his hand back towards the headquarters facility. “You impress them, you impress me. That’s how it works around here.”

“I’ve got a hard road to travel I suppose,” said Jamie.

“We’ve all been down that road. And we all have tough journeys from time to time. But I think you’ve already taken that first step on this particular path,” said Thomas.

“Getting philosophical on me sir?” asked Jamie with a smile.

“Nah, I think I saw it in an episode of *Frasier* before the Fall,” chuckled Thomas.

Jamie chuckled at the remark and looked out at the camp once again, thinking of the steps he had already taken. Thomas saw he probably needed more time for reflection and turned to go back inside where the teams were debating the locations of where to do their R and R as well as warning Captain Brown to keep his, and furthermore the remainder of his Rangers, hands off their equipment and gear while they were gone.

“Sir, one last thing,” said Jamie as Thomas reached the doorway.

“Yes?” asked Thomas.

“We fight for the ones that can’t fight for themselves,” said Jamie answering the question not only to Thomas, but most importantly to himself.

Afterthoughts by the author on “*Tales of the Ranch – Seeing Jahannam*”

The idea to write this short story originally popped into my head after watching an episode of Band of Brothers one night. It was a shocking episode and one that told the true tale of the heroes of World War II. I tried to imagine myself and how I might react if I was to ever liberate a concentration or prison camp and came to the deduction I have no idea how I might feel. However, I believe this is a story that needs to be told and I attempted to imagine the feelings I might have in that situation. Grief, anger, desperation...shock. These are all feelings I might have if I was to be put into the situation I described in the story. It's hard to imagine what I might feel in that situation, but I hope I can convey even the smallest amount of feelings those brave men had during World War II. And even though this story is fiction, this is the same tale of how war can bring out the best and the worst in mankind. How, when unchecked, religious fervor can be twisted into Satan's work. And how war is, without pun, pure hell.

Is this a possibility in future warfare? Absolutely so as history has shown it is not only possible, but highly probable. One does not need to look past the concentration camps of the Nazi regime during World War 2, the genocide in the Balkans and Africa and the chemical weapons attacks on the Kurds and Shiites in Iraq to see men will do anything to annihilate a people or ethnic group. And in war, it is far too easy to see how humans can slip and hide behind “duty and country” far more than normal times. Truly war brings out the worst in us all.

But we can also see from our characters war can bring out the best as well. Those saved from the concentration camps in World War 2 saw their rescuers as heroes and I believe them all to be heroes of the first order. No medals, citations, awards or payment of any kind could ever hope to compare with the feelings of liberating a people from certain death. Of bringing hope to the hopeless. Of being the rescuer to those in despair. Of being the angels of God in bringing life to those without any hope of life.

This story is far darker than the ones I have written before, but it serves as a lesson. A lesson to always be on guard to those who would do this. To be on guard to national leaders who persecute those who believe differently than others. But above all, to be on guard in our own lives against things like this, lest we slip behind our own beliefs to do something this hateful in God's eyes. The Nuremberg Trials showed us anyone is capable of doing this and not just those who think they were civilized beforehand. The Germans in World War 2 believed themselves to be a civilized nation, however, only in their own eyes. Is it possible for any one to slip into something like the horrors detailed in this story? I believe deep down inside anyone is capable of doing something like this. Either in direct support or turning a blind eye to it when it does happen.

While this story is somewhat entertainment, I believe it serves as a greater lesson to us all. A chilling reminder this can and does happen both before and during our lifetimes and probably will again in the future. The genocide against a specific people that is. Honestly, wars with genocide will continue until God decides it is time for them to stop. But until that time, we must all be mindful of the consequences of war and the horrors it brings and fight to stop them before they get out of hand.

As always, credit and appreciation goes out to the staff of Timebomb2K and Survival Monkey for keeping the sites well maintained and operational for amateur writers like myself. And to the readers who put me behind the keyboard in the first place. I appreciate all the support you continue to give and hope I live up to your expectations after a long vacation from the keyboard.

Grand58742

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