


Raptor Aces

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PART 1

Squadron Home Base

Chapter 1

Descent from the Heavens

Up here in my cockpit, I float with the gods – embraced by rushing air and the throb of my engine. I am a lord of the universe. Beneath me sprawls the common world, and running along its surface, a terrified slobe.

I sense his fear from my hundred meter altitude. It excites me! It spurs me on to my best effort. The slobe tries to flee as my airplane bears down on him, but the attack dogs force him back onto the landing strip. He looks toward my approaching aircraft. Terror vibrates up to me.

“Get down, you idiot!” I shout.

The slobe can’t hear me, of course, but he does hit the pavement. He’s flat on his belly now, hands covering his head. I bear down on him.

Ground turbulence is fairly severe, bouncing my aircraft in unpredictable ways. Through it blows a strong cross wind. I maneuver the plane into a crab angle, and the ground whips by sideways. A mad joy has me in its grasp.

Then I take my plane out of its crab angle and into a sideslip. I tweak the stick and rudder pedal to keep my flight path straight. My port wing dips low, toward the boy. He glances up at me then looks back down, as if trying to sink into the pavement. I hold my breath ...

The tip of my wing misses the slobe by a tight margin.

Excellent!

Then I am over empty pavement. I ease my plane out of its cross-controlled slip and bring the landing gear toward the surface. Air turbulence buffets me. It’s going to be a brutal landing – I know it, I know it.

I implore the gods: *Don’t let me stumble now.*

They hear me, and my upwind tire kisses the pavement followed by an equally gentle contact from the downwind wheel, then the tail wheel drops down. A true greaser!

Raise flaps, adjust ailerons, light, balanced pressure on the brakes. I am at the turn off, then on the taxiway. I pull onto the grass and shut my engine down. The world becomes silent. A final perfume of exhaust graces the air then drifts away into the perfect morning.

Chapter 2

Catastrophe.

Parked in a neat row close by, the aircraft of my flight mates crouch like tigers aching to roar into action. Sunlight glints on their metal surfaces. I struggle to free myself from the restraining harness, as the hilt of my squadron leader's dagger is caught in the webbing.

My flight mates rush toward me, silk scarves fluttering behind like angel's wings. I love all ten of them ... and the eleventh one, as well – my rival who is winging through the sky alone. He'd chosen to be far off when I did my slob dive so as not to break his concentration, but now he's coming. I can see him, a tiny spec off in the sky.

The others are not yet aware of him. They call me "Eagle-eye" when I sight things before they can. Sometimes, only half jesting, they call me "Ghostie," when I see things they insist are not really there.

Katella, my faithful wingman, arrives at the head of the pack.

"Good work, Dytran!" he shouts. "That was well inside a meter."

I grin, but am not altogether pleased. This is an excellent result, but it can still be beaten – not that I'd ever expected to leave a skid mark on the target's back, as my brother had accomplished four years ago.

The others arrive. Bezmir and Sipren hoist their little movie cameras.

"We've got it all here," Sipren says, "clear shots, from both sides of the runway."

"Glad to hear that, boys," I say, "because I'm sure not going to try it again today!"

They all laugh. It seems an ideal moment. The ring of guys in their tan flight suits surrounding my plane, broad smiles on their faces and golden scarves tied around their necks, the wind tousling their hair. Everything captured in a day of bright perfection and swirling air.

I get the restraints unfastened. Everyone makes way as I jump out of my plane. As always, I feel a bit of shock when my feet touch the ground. I seem to be stepping out of a glorious reality into a much lesser one. Helios must have felt this way when he exited his sun chariot.

"Beltran's coming!" several boys cry at once.

Off in the cloudless sky, like some winged silver deity, an airplane approaches the landing strip.

"Better get back to your posts," I say.

We take off at a run. Then I drop back so as to observe the group I have commanded for the past year. They dash on ahead – all of them fine and athletic. We are the best the Fatherland can offer. We've been through so much together since we were chosen to form the Raptor Aces squadron of the National Youth League Air Corps.

Pride swells my chest. I exalt in the power of my body. I am tall and dramatic, with good looks to match. The wind rustles my golden hair. Of all the world's racial types, I am at the apex!

Then I think of him – my rival in the sky. Beltran is not fair complexioned nor outstandingly tall. He lacks for masculine beauty. But there is cold steel inside him that awes me with its strength. Despite our many differences, he is my brother of the air, in many ways closer to me than my real brother who is serving in the great Eastern conflict.

As I jog along, a single thought troubles my mind: Will I still be squadron commander in the fall?

When the officers pick next year's squadron leader, they will look at many attributes, and the respect of one's comrades is a key factor. Should I win today, I'll take the admiration of my peers with me into the selection procedure. The brewing restlessness in our ranks will be quelled, and I will emerge as undisputed leader. It makes the risk of this unauthorized "game" well worth it, in my mind.

There Beltran is now, turning onto final approach.

My squadron mates position themselves along the runway on opposite sides of the prone, quivering slobe boy. Sipren and Bezmir ready their cameras for the photo finish. The next moments will determine the future for all of us ...

Bel flew the aerobatic routine somewhat better than me, and the simulated bomb run had gone my way – but none of this is decisive. It is the death-defying "slobe dive" that will determine everything. Whoever comes closest to the target, without harming it, will win the day.

If I lose ... the other boys would still respect me, of course, but there would be a shift of allegiance toward Beltran. All year he's chafed as my deputy squadron commander. Not that he was ever insubordinate, but it's clear that he longs to take over my position. Well, now is his chance. The two dogs bark with excitement, as if recognizing the approach of the supreme master.

Bel's technique is awesome!

He is flying toward the runway in a crab angle, as I had done. He makes it look like the easiest thing in the world. I almost feel myself up in the plane with him, my hands on the controls contending with the crosswind and the ground turbulence.

Bel enters a flawless sideslip. As I stand in the grass beside the runway, I adjust my body to replicate his efforts, stick left, rudder pedal to the right –

I turn my gaze to the slobe boy sprawled along the pavement on his belly. He is about our age, early seventeen or so, and he's whimpering with terror. I feel an icy stab of contempt. The racial inferior!

Then an unwelcome thought intrudes: Just how brave would I be in the same situation? If I'd been kidnapped at dagger point and forced to endure airplanes buzzing down on me, could I be any more heroic than this sniveling lad?

But this is an improper thought process. He is a slobe – just his misfortune to be born one. I am of the Master Nation, and pity for the lesser peoples is weakness on my part. I square my shoulders against the wind. Anyway, when this is over, I'll pay the boy a half dozen crowns from my own allowance. That's a good day's wage for a slobe.

Beltran's port wingtip is scarcely half a meter above the pavement, knifing down the centerline with deadly precision – he'll clear the target by bare centimeters. He is going to beat me!

The movie cameras whine at high speed to capture the victory. The world begins to pull away from me as I tumble backwards into a void. I can feel the commander's stripes being ripped from my uniform.

I twist my head toward the slobe. All our eyes are riveted on the target now. He isn't whimpering any longer. Then the unthinkable happens –

The slobe pushes himself upward.

“Get down!” I shout.

Everything seems to move in ghastly slow motion. In his final instant, an expression of fierce triumph scorches across the boy's face. Then the wing strikes him, flipping him down the runway. A collective gasp explodes from my squadron mates.

Bel's starboard wing hits the pavement, sheering off the end. The plane slams down onto its landing gear and goes into a vicious, screeching ground loop. The tortured machine pitches forward, shattering the prop on the concrete, then it crashes back onto its wheels.

The engine dies with a belch of acrid smoke. The aircraft sprawls broken and lifeless, like a slaughtered beast.

“Ahhhh!”

Katella writhes on the grass beside me, a splinter of debris jutting from his shoulder. A blood stain spreads on his jumpsuit. The rest of us are stunned into inaction, as if the earth has cracked open and revealed a vision of hell to our dumbfounded eyes.

Chapter 3

Time of Decision.

The explosion brings us back to our senses.

We cringe away from the fireball rising out of Beltran's airplane like some evil genie. A massive fist of hot air strikes us. Beltran is running our direction, leading a string of curses. His scarf blazes behind him.

The lads all rush to help. Bezmir and Sipren unsling their first aid kits as they run. Even the dogs join the mad dash.

“Medics,” I shout, “one of you get over here!”

Bezmir stops in his tracks. “Yes, Commander!”

He trots back and kneels beside Katella.

“Hang on, friend,” he says. “I'll get you fixed up.”

Bezmir tries to sound confident, but his face is ashen, almost as pale as Katella's – and mine, too, I suppose. I leave him to his work and join the crowd around Beltran.

“Everybody stand back,” I say. “Give him room to breathe.”

They all move away, only Sipren remains to tend a gash over Bel's left eye. I look my deputy commander over. Except for the cut and some blood oozing from his nose, Beltran seems to be all right. The fire has not embraced him, thank heaven.

I think to speak with him, but quickly change my mind. The look of fury in Beltran's good eye silences me. His mouth is clamped shut, and a tight knot bulges at the jaw hinge. His dark hair bristles like a wild boar's. Now is not the moment for discussion.

I turn my attention toward Bel's aircraft. Flames swirl above it sending aloft a foul-smelling tornado of smoke and ash, like a torch lit by the Devil himself. I can almost see a demonic hand thrust up through the pavement grasping the flaming carcass.

Now that the danger is over, the full realization of our predicament crushes me in a death grip: two men injured, one airplane lost, damage to the runway – all valuable State assets. Everything my fault.

Wasn't it my inspired idea to hold these "games" today? Hadn't I disregarded all objections? I wanted to challenge Beltran, and he rose to the bait. The rest of the squadron simply overcame their doubts and went along.

Katella, especially, spoke out against this madness. Why the hell didn't I listen to him? And now this. I am the worst kind of fool!

Then there is the slob boy ...

As if compelled by an unseen hand, I find myself walking toward the grass alongside the runway where he has been thrown onto his back. As I shuffle along, wind hisses in my ears like a venomous snake. I am preparing to cross a barrier; on this side is my whole previous life, on the far side crouches the terrifying future.



I look down at the lifeless boy. He seems very small and oddly undamaged, considering what he's been through. There is little blood, and a trace of the triumphant smile remains on his lips. Except for his unnatural stillness, he might be taking a nap.

For all the talk about glorious death and sacrifice for the Fatherland, I've never seen a corpse before – though I've always shouted for blood louder than most. The reality is so different from the swaggering words.

"Why did you do it?" I murmur.

Moments pass, still as the grave, just me and the slob boy. The sun beats down and the hiss of the wind retreats to the corners of my mind ... Then a harsh voice intrudes.

"That little bastard tried to kill me!"

I turn to see Beltran at my side. A dressing covers his wound, and his face has been cleaned. Blood splatters the front of his flight suit. The others are joining us now, except for Katella who remains lying alone beside the runway.

"Can you see all right?" I ask. "Is your mind clear?"

"Good enough." Beltran gestures toward the dead boy. "No thanks to him."

He turns toward the others.

"Can anybody tell me why he did that?" he says. "Right this minute he could be walking around free. He'd have a story to tell his grandchildren – and there'd be plenty of them. These slobs breed like rabbits!"

His voice is shrill, with a note of hysteria. No doubt Beltran has made his own assessment of our situation and is as scared as I am. The others look on with long

faces – impossible to believe that they are the same lads who greeted me with such enthusiasm only minutes before.

I address Bezmir. “How goes it with Katella?”

“I took the splinter out and staunched the bleeding,” Bezmir says. “He should be all right til we can get him back.”

We stand around awkwardly for a minute, everyone afraid to suggest any course of action. Finally Albers speaks up.

“What are we going to do, Commander?” he asks.

“What else?” I say. “We fly back to home base and report this incident.”

“No!” Beltran shouts. “That’s the worst thing we could do.”

I look at him, shocked. Even within the relaxed discipline of our squadron, his outburst is crossing the line of insubordination.

“Forgive me, Commander,” Beltran says. “I am ... understandably upset.”

“Of course,” I say.

Beltran steps back a few paces, so as to address everyone as a group.

“It’s this way,” he says. “We all know it was stupid to come out here, but we can’t change what’s happened. We have to adjust to the situation.”

“How can we do that?” Grushon asks.

Beltran draws in a deep breath. He looks toward me for a moment, then back to the others.

“We hide the body and report to home base that I crashed on my own,” he says.

The lads all gasp with surprise, but some also nod agreement. I can’t allow this to go on.

“Nobody will believe that you, of all people, crashed out while the rest of us landed safely,” I say.

“Why not?” Beltran shoots back. “Anyone can make a mistake, and the wind is very unpredictable today.”

I shake my head, but say nothing. Beltran’s logic is sound, and it silences me.

“But the kid will be reported missing,” Albers says. “Maybe some witnesses saw us pick him up.”

“My cousin is in the secret police,” Sipren says. “He’ll make sure the slobes don’t cause any trouble.”

“There’s the answer,” Beltran says.

More heads nod approval. To my discredit, I find myself mulling over Beltran’s proposition. Could we actually pull it off?

Possibly. If we all kept to the story, if Sipren’s cousin proved efficient – if nobody got curious and started poking around this auxiliary airfield looking for bodies.

And then what?

The secret police would have something on me. To this point I’ve avoided entanglements with them. The secret police have always been somebody else’s problem, now they’d be my problem. How would I have to repay the “favor” they did for me? And a lie would be at the center of my life. Even if everyone else forgot about today’s events, I would always know.

How would Stilikan, my elder brother, handle this situation? Right this moment he is serving in the great Eastern war against the slobe empire. He is battling the toughest men the enemy can offer, shouting defiance into their faces – not

terrorizing unarmed civilians like I am. He is a true hero, while I am sliding downhill into moral cowardice.

I could never dishonor myself with such falsehood. I glance at the dead lad ... I could never dishonor my victim like that.

“Well, what do you say, *Commander*?” Beltran asks.

His tone is borderline disrespectful, especially the way he pronounces “commander,” as if I’ve lost my right to hold the position. He fixes a hard glance on me with his good eye. The other eye is swelling shut, giving a grotesque aspect to his face.

Everyone else looks toward me eagerly. It is obvious that they support Beltran. Dead moments pass while I flounder in a sea of doubt. Then I shake my head.

“I’m reporting this incident to the wing commander,” I say. “I’ll take full responsibility. Perhaps things will go easier for the rest of you.”

“Damn!” Beltran cries. “So now we lose everything!”

He tears the charred scarf from his neck and hurls it to the ground. He stalks away a few paces, then turns back toward me. Pure hatred shoots from him like a thunderbolt.

All discipline vanishes as I lose control of the squadron. Four of the lads, led by Grushon, close in on me. Rage twists their faces into ugly masks. Others stand by, uncertain. I can’t see what Bel is doing.

I brace myself for an attack. Then –

“Listen to me, you sons of bitches!” Katella shouts.

The violence that was about to leap out at me slithers temporarily back into its hole. Everyone pivots toward Katella. He has propped himself up on his good arm and is staring at us with tight-lipped anger. Absolute stillness, frozen in time.

Then we begin walking the several paces to where he is lying. Our movements seem absurd, like a bunch of kids off on a frolic. The sense of unreality makes my head spin.

“What is it?” Beltran demands.

“Dytran is our leader,” Katella says, “and he’s right! As soon as I’m recovered, I’ll kick anybody’s ass who says otherwise.”

We all gape with astonishment at the usually mild-mannered Katella. He doesn’t look so mild now. He thrusts out his chin defiantly.

“That includes you, Beltran.” His voice is low and ominous now. “One way or another, I’d get you. Believe it.”

Bel clenches his teeth and fists. I fear that he’s going to attack our wounded comrade, and I prepare to rush to Katella’s defense. But then the lethal moment passes.

“All right, have it your way, Katella,” Beltran says. “You never were too smart.”

Relief floods over me. The boys all sag, as if they are puppets with cut strings, or corpses dangling from the gallows. Beltran jabs a finger at Katella.

“And maybe I’ll take you up on that ‘ass kicking’ sometime – when you’re fit.”

Katella nods, but says nothing further.

“Let’s get the hell out of here, boys,” Beltran says.

He stomps off toward the airplanes. Most of the others follow him in an insubordinate group, without waiting for my order. As they pass the dead slob boy, they utter various epithets.

“Fool ... bastard ... subhuman scum!”

But I perceive the real truth about him. We have witnessed the death of someone who is far stronger and braver than us.

Albers remains, standing awkwardly to the side like an orphan. Bezmir has also stayed to assist Katella.

“Are you all right to walk?” Bezmir asks.

Katella manages a grim smile. “Of course, never better.”

His face twists with pain as we help him to his feet. I speak quietly into his ear.

“Thanks, wingman.”

“To hell with all that,” Katella replies. “Just get me a morphine shot!”

He and Bezmir move slowly away.

“Put him in my plane!” I call after them.

Then I turn to Albers.

“Run on ahead and bring me my flight jacket, will you?” I say.

Albers looks surprised, but he obeys my order – doubtless the last one I will ever give. He trots off after the others.

Then I am alone, keeping vigil by the corpse with the sun and wind. The boy is dead while I still walk the earth – but who is really the superior being? Such thoughts have never before entered my mind, but now they swirl around like dark waters.

When Albers returns, I place my flight jacket over the slobe boy’s face and upper body. The jacket stares back, its squadron leader’s badge mocking me.

I come to attention and salute my fallen enemy. Then I walk off toward my plane.

Chapter 4

Grim Return.

The flight back to home base is very grim. We take off from the grass alongside the runway in no particular order. Once in the air, we do not keep formation. Everyone simply flies as he pleases. We are no longer a squadron, and I am no longer the leader.

Even from a great distance, I can still observe smoke rising from the airplane wreckage. My whole future burns on that funeral pyre.

Katella sits in my rear cockpit trying to appear brave and stoic, but I know that he is suffering a great deal. Beltran pilots Katella’s plane with an attack dog occupying the rear. He has no business getting behind the stick with only one good eye, but I did not think to admonish him. He would not have listened in any case.

The kilometers drone past as familiar landmarks slither beneath my wings. I experience none of my usual exhilaration, no sense that I am a god of the sky. For all the thrill it gives me, I could be flying a garbage lorry. I’ve always felt a bit of

contemptuous pity for those who are confined to the earth. Now I want to join them and bury myself away.

A disturbing thought is taking hold of my mind. The other lads are clearly more of Beltran's persuasion than of mine. Only Katella is completely on my side, and we are both occupying the same airplane. What if we were to crash and be killed? That would solve many problems for the others, wouldn't it?

As squadron leader, I possess the only radio. I use it to contact home base, informing them that we have two injured pilots among us. I consider mentioning the slob boy, but restrain myself. The news will keep, if I am alive to tell it.

My plane had stood unattended for some minutes while I'd kept vigil with the dead boy. Plenty of time for somebody to sneak an incendiary device under the cowlings or sabotage the controls. I'd not bothered with a pre-flight inspection – any number of things could have been done to my aircraft. Any moment something could go terribly wrong.

The idea scares me at first, but then I get used to it. Actually, I wouldn't mind crashing out too much. By the time home base comes into view, I am positively hoping that my plane will go up in a quick, surgical fireball.

But nothing happens.

A perfectly routine flight, even the nasty cross winds have died down. A smooth landing.



Medics hustle Katella off to the infirmary, but Beltran refuses to go with them.

"I must report to the wing commander first," he says.

I can't help but admire Bel's fortitude. His face looks terrible, and blood is seeping through the bandage. He could have justifiably retired to the hospital, leaving me to confront the music alone. But his sense of honor will not permit that.

Or maybe he just wants to make sure that I keep my word about taking full responsibility for the disaster. I don't know. I can't think very well anymore.

Everyone has landed now, and we all stand together in an uncertain knot alongside the runway, staring at the ground. Nobody says a word. The wing commander's adjutant arrives in a staff car and demands our immediate report. Bel and I climb into the back seat for a very quiet ride to Headquarters.

A troop of Junior Youth League members is marching about the parade ground near HQ – the 10 to 14-year-old set – all crisp and neat in their camouflage uniforms, waving flags and banging drums, just as we did a few years ago. When I was new to the League, I'd marched with as much snap and enthusiasm as they were displaying. Now, their efforts just seem tiresome, ridiculous, even.

Bel gives a sarcastic snort. "Bunch of little twerps!"

A victory rally will take place here in ten days, one of several around the country, and preparations are under way. There will be marches, displays of weaponry, military drills. The district Party boss will speak along with some government officials from the capital.

There are rumors that the Great Leader himself might appear, taking his valuable time to visit this easternmost province of our country. The prospect of seeing him in person has kept all of our throats dry for days now, but we are being

stupid. The Magleiter couldn't possibly set aside his command responsibilities at this critical point in the war just to see us.

The "little twerps" will probably be among the Youth League contingent strutting in the parade. We were to have participated in the flyby – along with the other two squadrons of our training group. Well ... the ceremonies will be doing without the Raptor Aces, I'm certain.

As we walk past the Junior Youth League members, they snap to attention and salute.

"They want to be just like us," Bel mutters.

We enter the HQ building, trailing the adjutant like a couple of whipped dogs, and walk by the awards case for past heroes of the Youth League Air Corps. Stilikan's photo occupies a place of prominence – squadron leader, junior group commander, 1st place honors in numerous competitions.

I lower my eyes and quicken my pace.

Chapter 5

Facing the Music.

It couldn't have taken me long to give my report, but it seems as if hours have dragged past – me standing ramrod straight, sweating under my flight suit, the red squadron leader's piping weighing it down like iron chains. Beltran standing beside me, motionless as a rock, his good eye staring at the portrait of the Magleiter on the wall behind the wing commander's desk.

The wing commander is a man past forty who seems to be going to pot. His gut now bulges undeniably, and his face is turning jowly. A year ago he'd seemed much more trim and fit.

I keep nothing back from my report, except for the foiled conspiracy to hide the evidence. That unsavory detail is no longer important. When I finish speaking, a profound quiet grips the room. Then a fly buzzes past my ear and lands on the wall, clambering up the Magleiter's portrait.

The wing commander's face is grim. He looks toward Beltan.

"Do you concur with this report?" he asks.

"Yes, sir," Beltran replies, "except for one point."

"Oh?" The commander raises an eyebrow. "And what is that?"

"Squadron Leader Dytran stated that the games were entirely his idea," Beltran says. "He implied that I was compelled to join in."

"And such was not the case?"

"No, sir," Beltran says. "I was very anxious to participate. Had Squadron Leader Dytran not suggested the games, I would have done so myself."

"Oh ... I see."

The commander is looking at his folded hands on the desk, gathering energy for his retort. I brace myself for a blast of anger, threats, curses.

But he just sits there for an unbearable amount of time in his precise blue uniform. He's worked hard to gain his rank, and now two young idiots – from his top training squadron no less – are putting it all in jeopardy with their indiscipline. His wrath promises to be monumental.

He looks up. Instead of the expected rage, his face is loaded with fatigue. I don't think I've ever seen a more tired looking man in my life.

"You lads are a major disappointment," he says.

I feel as if struck by a physical blow. Of all the things he could have said, this is the worst. Beltran does not appear to share my humiliation.

"Permission to speak freely, sir," he says.

The wing commander moves back in his chair, his hands slide off the desk top into his lap.

"Granted."

"I admit the error of our actions," Beltran says. "We all knew that such activities are not permitted. The killing was unintentional, however, and ... "

He shoots me a glance, looks back to the commander.

"It was only a slobe, sir! He nearly killed me and Katella. The Fatherland could have lost two loyal national comrades because of him."

Silence returned to the room. Then:

"Is that all?" the wing commander asks.

"Yes, sir," Beltran replies.

The commander gets up and moves to the window, hands behind his back, looking out at the Junior Youth League members exercising on the parade ground. More unbearable seconds drag by. Then he turns on us, red-faced. It is almost a relief to bear the full brunt of his wrath.

We are a discredit to the Air Corps, he says, we've betrayed the trust placed in us, we've disobeyed explicit orders. He is particularly ashamed of me, brother of one the most highly honored Air Corps graduates. What the hell was I thinking when I set up the games?

I expect all this, painful as it is, but then the wing commander says something that opens up a whole new vista of shame. Before the Great Leader took power and banned further racial defilement, he says, slobes and national comrades had mixed for generations. This left a slobe minority here in our eastern province – but the opposite is also true, a community of national comrades is cut off in the slobe empire.

Now that the war is on, what will happen to them? News of any oppressions here will be conveyed there. Spies are active, everybody knew that. What vengeance will be taken upon our isolated comrades and our prisoners of war?

I think of Stilikan and of all our other brave soldiers and airmen serving the Homeland in the war of national survival. I've added to their hardships with my stupidity! If someone fired a pistol into the back of my head at this moment, I wouldn't care too much.

"I regret that we did not consider this adequately, Commander," Beltran says, "but the war will soon be over. After we have won, we can take vengeance for any injury done to our national comrades."

Beltran's nerve astonishes me. He's got permission to speak freely, however, and since our cause is already doomed, he must figure we have nothing to lose.

When the dressing down is finally over, the adjutant returns with military policemen. They escort me to the barracks and take Bel to the infirmary.

Chapter 6

Confinement.

A week of chilly tension follows as Bel and I endure barracks confinement.

We keep to our separate cots reading or napping, with half the room sprawled between us. Or else one of us ventures outside to do exercises. Trips to the bathroom are timed so that we do not chance to meet each other there. Only when our meals are delivered do we have to come into anything like close contact, but that's just long enough to pick up our rations and retreat to our separate ends of the barracks.

So much camaraderie had enlivened this place over the school year. All the Raptor Aces shared the big room, eating together, horsing around together, talking about girls and airplanes. Now everything is silent and dead. Sometimes at night, I try to imagine my squadron mates sleeping around me, but this only makes me feel more lonely.

And always the same recurring dream:

We're chasing the slob boy through the orchard where he'd been working. We've unsheathed our daggers and are shouting threats, demanding that he stop – everything just as it happened in real life. Only this time we don't catch him. He makes a sharp turn and disappears, as if into thin air. We all glance around, baffled.

“Oh well,” I say, “it looks like we can't hold the games today after all!”

I wake up to intense relief and joy. Then reality sets in with redoubled fury.

For a while, I suffer from paranoid fears that Beltran will slip over to my bunk at night and smother me with a pillow. Then I think he might fly into a rage some dinner time and attack me with a fork. Finally, I just resign myself to the tense standoff that my life has become.

But, through it all, I never doubt the rightness of my decision to make a truthful report.

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Then one morning, without the slightest fanfare, Bel closes the book he's been reading and looks over at me from his bunk.

“I'm telling you, Dytran,” he says, “the wing commander is going soft.”

Aside from a few grunts and monosyllables, this is the first thing he's said to me during the whole week. I scarcely know how to respond.

“Why makes you think that?” I manage to say.

“All his talk about ‘honor’ and ‘obedience,’ it’s misdirected,” Bel says. “It applies only among ourselves, not to the inferior races. How can one act ‘dishonorably’ toward a subhuman?”

I glance around the barracks for any prying ears, but the room is vacant, as it has been all week.

“You’d almost think he was half slob himself,” Bel says. “Have you ever noticed his profile? It’s not exactly what you’d expect from a racial comrade, is it?”

“I’d be cautious about remarks like that,” I say. “Determinations of racial purity are made by the Party. They must deem him to be acceptable.”

“Ah, spoken like the blue-eyed golden boy!” Bel says. “How did you get so blond, anyway – too much time in the sun?”

“I’d remind you that our Great Leader has dark hair, like most of our people,” I say.

Bel laughs. Then he rises from his bunk and saunters toward me with that easy, though aggressive style of his. I stand to meet him, uncertain if he is approaching as comrade or foe. He stops before me, hands on hips, looking boldly up into my face. I am half a head taller than him, but this imparts no sense of physical superiority. I try to remain impassive as I await his next move.

“Friends again?” he says.

He thrusts out a hand. After a moment’s astonished hesitation, I take it.

“Y-yes, always,” I say.

The thick cord of tension that has been choking us abruptly snaps. I resist the urge to flop down onto my cot with relief.

“You made an honorable decision back there,” Bel says. “I respect it.”

“I ... thanks ...”

Bel grins at my astonishment. His face is much improved from its injury, and his eyes are sharp, like a hawk’s.

“Of course, we must deal with the consequences,” he says. “Our butts are truly in the sling, aren’t they?”

He turns and walks toward the main window, leaving me alone with my roiling emotions. After I’ve had a few moments to collect my wits, I join him at the window where he stands observing outside events through binoculars. The issue poisoning our relationship has been abruptly resolved. The speed of it makes my head turn.

I know from experience that Beltran will never mention it again. And I would rather die than do so myself.

“Looks like they’ve pretty much finished the construction work,” he says. “A film crew, or something, is out there now.”

He hands over the binoculars. The gesture is casual, routine. More than anything else, it signifies the end of our estrangement. I train the binoculars on the main runway alongside which a wooden review stand has been erected, flanked by tiers of bleachers.

“They got that up in record time,” I say.

More bleachers run along the far side of the runway. There must be seating for thousands of people out there. Workmen hustle about. Atop the review stand, a large movie camera is grinding away, recording the preparations for the newsreels. The camp tents of the growing Youth League contingent appear in the distance, like pointy white mushrooms.

In my mind, I am out there on the review stand under the bright sun, amid the fragrance of aviation fuel and fresh-cut grass. A breeze wafts by carrying the spirit of adventure. It tousles my hair. I lower the binoculars, and the drab barracks comes back into focus.

“Let’s go outside,” I say.

“Sure.”

We exit to the assembly ground in front of the barracks. In happier times, the whole squadron stood out here for roll call – ramrod straight, eyes focused on the promising future. This spot had seemed to be the gateway to the whole world.

Now Bel and I are forbidden to venture beyond its confines, although nothing tangible restrains us. We could slip away easily enough, particularly at night, but I would rather be shot than betray the trust that has been shown me. I’ve already betrayed enough trust.

The outdoor brightness hurts my eyes, and I shade them with my hand. The abrupt change of lighting does not seem to affect Bel, however. He walks to the far edge of the assembly ground and stands looking out toward the runway. He conveys a sense of barely restrained motion, like a horse chomping at the bit.

“Anything new out there!” I call.

“Naw.”

Then the drone of airplane motors enters the morning air. The old thrill takes hold of me again.

We look skyward to see the approach of the Blue Ice training squadron. The “Blue Eyes” squadron as Bel sarcastically calls it because of its disproportionate number of racial apex types. They are lined up in parallel rows with a single aircraft flying point. Toward the back of the formation, some planes form themselves into something like a hilt. The arrangement is meant to be a flying dagger, apparently.

“Damned goof offs!” Bel says. “Our formation was a lot better than that.”

“Yes, I believe it was,” I say.

We’d spent many hours practicing our own formation for the rally – the stylized eagle of the National Salvation Party, with me flying as the proud, right-cocked head. But nobody would see it now.

“I should be in command of that squadron,” Bel says, jabbing a finger at the Blue Ice. “I’d make sure they flew straight!”

“That would have been best,” I say, too low for Bel to hear.

But he’d been ill with severe influenza when the three squadron leaders of our training group were picked last year. There’d been an epidemic at that time with numerous deaths around the country. He’d not been cleared to fly again until three weeks after we’d settled in to our new posts, and it had taken him quite a while to get his edge back.

I experience a sudden flash of insight. Now I know why he remained standing while Sipren had tended his wound – why he came to stand before the wing commander rather than retreat to the hospital. Whatever might be coming, he is determined to confront it on his feet. He’d been lying down when his great opportunity came and went.

Beltran walks back toward me.

“Don’t get me wrong, Dye,” he says. “It’s been an honor to serve as your deputy. I admire you more than anybody I know.”

Again I am astonished by his praise; another flash of insight comes to me. This is a morning for insights.

“But you hate me, too, don’t you?” I say.

Now it’s Bel’s turn to look astonished. Then a little smile creeps over his face.

“You always were the smartest,” he says.

“Well, I don’t know about that ...”

“It’s true,” Bel says, “all your big, poetic words and fancy ideas. Maybe you were a philosopher in some past life, wandering the streets of Athens – ”

He stops talking abruptly. I can almost hear the wheels turning in his head.

“That’s who we are,” Bel says, “Athens and Sparta! We should be helping each other from our own power bases – loyal rivals. You know, pushing each other to our best efforts.”

“That’s ... very interesting,” I say.

“Think about it, Dye. With a whole world to conquer, Athens and Sparta turned on each other. How dumb was that?”

For a supposed philosopher, I can’t think of an answer. Instead I jerk a thumb back toward the barracks.

“I hope they don’t move anybody in with us for the rally,” I say. “Bad enough we can’t go ourselves without listening to somebody else talk about how great it was.”

Chapter 7

Unscheduled Visitors.

We spend the next hour outside doing calisthenics, observing the rally preparations and talking about our predicament. It is not a good one.

The Raptor Aces squadron has been deactivated “until further notice,” and the other boys sent home. Our planes have been transferred to another air base where more “trustworthy” people will be flying them.

Bel and I are confined to barracks until the disciplinary hearing, which would have already taken place were it not for the rally. But once the marching and speechifying are over, after the Party big shots drive home in their luxury automobiles, we will be facing a panel of senior officers.

And then what?

At very least, our dream of becoming fighter pilots is over. We planned to join the Air Force reserve next year as “poolies.” Meaning we’d be attending our last year of high school and flying with the Raptor Aces while receiving further military instruction. Once we graduated, we’d be in the regular Air Force as fighter pilot trainees.

But all this is a dead letter now. The Air Force has no use for insubordinate fools. No, once we become of age, it will be the infantry for us – riflemen slogging through the mud instead of elite warriors soaring in the sky. We both feel the odds

are good that we'll spend the intervening time in a labor camp, only to receive draft notices on the day we get out.

Then again, with the war dragging on longer than expected, there is talk of lowering the draft age. So, perhaps the stay in the labor camp won't be so long after all. This is very cold comfort.

"Hey, what's that?" Beltran says.

A powerful rumble is coming from the east, the sound of big airplane motors.

"Must be one of our bomber squadrons!" I say. "They're practicing for the air show."

"Yeah." Bel directs his binoculars skyward. "The flying barn guys are coming all right."

I look off toward the approaching formation, but cannot make out much detail yet, despite my "eagle eyes." The big planes are flying at perhaps 3,000 meters, though it is hard to gauge just how high they actually are.

I feel the old camaraderie begin to return – me and Beltran standing shoulder to shoulder, gazing up at the sky which is our true home. How many times before had we done this while observing our squadron mates flying aerobatics and simulated bomb runs? I experience an almost unbearable ache for the heavens.

Can I ever go back?

If, by some miracle, I am allowed to take a place in the sky again, I will never, ever do anything to endanger my position there. I'll accept any role, even the humblest crew member of a transport plane. Just give me a chance to prove my worth! I imagine myself piloting one of the approaching bombers, looking down at the mundane world, at the blond-haired boy admiring my progress.

I witnessed a flyby of a heavy bomber squadron last year, maybe eight months after the war started, and I was thrilled by the power of the "flying barns." The roar of their massed engines spoke to me of unstoppable purpose.

These engines are different, however. There is more of a shrieking racket to them and less the bellowing tones of the sky gods. The bombers must be a new model, I reckon, to be presented at our air show for the first time. What better place to unveil a new facet of national power?

But this explanation does not satisfy me. These aircraft have an alien feel to them, a quality of being not right, somehow. Of course, I tell myself, bombing planes are supposed to look hostile by nature, even so ...

I watch with growing unease as the aircraft go into a shallow dive. Even without the binoculars, I can tell that they are big, ugly brutes painted in camouflage with four engines apiece. They move fast and ominous, like Valkyries coming to choose the slain. Fear begins to grip me, I recognize the aircraft model now.

"I don't believe it!" Beltran lowers the binoculars, his eyes wide with shock. "They're –"

The wail of air raid sirens cuts off his voice. I snatch the binoculars and jerk them up to my face. We stand together, like roebucks gaping at the headlamps of an approaching lorry. The enemy aircraft close in – at least thirty of them. All other reality drops away. The world becomes mayhem and ear-splitting explosion.

They hit the main runway first, casting bombs down the concrete in a deadly row. The bleachers shatter like match sticks. The review stand remains, with the

cameraman filming the carnage until he, too, is blasted to eternity. Shock waves rumble under our feet.

The binoculars glued to my eyes lend an air of unreality to the scene, as if the hunk of metal and glass is somehow protecting me from danger. The scene is horrible and sublime all at once. It has an undeniable, lethal beauty. A gigantic explosion rips the air as the fuel storage tanks go up. I yank my eyes away from the flash.

“Where’re our fighters!” Beltran shouts.

No resistance anywhere, the enemy owns the sky. The main aircraft hangar goes up in a fantastic ball of flame and debris. A foul, burning stench of death washes over us; then a vast suction, pulling the air from our lungs.

Beltran rushes to the middle of the adjoining field, shaking his fists at the sky.

“Damn you!”

The enemy planes have exhausted their bomb loads. They are crisscrossing the area now at low altitude, their belly gunners strafing the ground – like obscene, giant insects mocking our impotence. A row of parked training aircraft blows apart under the machine gun fire.

One of the bombers is coming straight for us.

“Over here, Dye!” Beltran shouts.

He runs to an air raid trench and flings himself in. I think to follow, but simply can’t get my legs to carry me there. Besides ... I rather prefer it where I am. As the shrieking, pounding aircraft bears down on me, blotting out the world, I feel a strange serenity. This is how a warrior should meet his end – on his feet, facing the enemy.

“Come on, you bastards!” I shout.

The belly gunner opens fire. Bullets stitch along the ground toward me. The plane’s vast shadow passes over an instant before the bullets arrive. I feel their heat and power ...

Then the bomber is past me, firing a salvo into the barracks. Shattered glass flies around like Christmas sparkle.

The enemy squadrons are regrouping now and heading back the way they came, as if they are performing some leisurely, peacetime maneuver. The din of airplane motors fades into the distance. All is quiet now except for the hiss of fire and the screams coming from the Youth League encampment.

I feel that I am rising from this earth and will soon disappear into the upper regions – as if I’ve been freed from the confines of my physical body. I do not know how much time goes by.

Beltran rises, Lazarus-like, from the air raid trench and drifts toward me through the smoke and haze. His mouth is slack and his eyes glow with astonishment. He runs his hands over my body, examining my uniform ripped by bullets and flying glass.

“There’s not a scratch on you,” he says.

The sensation of being touched by another human brings me back down to earth. I summon my power of speech, my jaw strains into action.

“We must help,” I say.

We run toward the destruction, heedless of our orders to remain under barracks arrest.

Chapter 8

Bloody Aftermath.

HQ is heavily damaged with many casualties lying about the wreckage. A choking combination of smoke and dust fills the air amid the wails of wounded men. The ruined lobby is too difficult to navigate, so we run around to the shattered window of the wing commander's office.

We find him sitting in a chair, dazed and covered with plaster dust from the wrecked ceiling. Somebody is binding up a wound on his arm. We rap our knuckles on the window frame.

"Wing Commander ... sir!"

He obviously doesn't hear; maybe the explosions broke his ear drums. The medic notices us, though, and he points us out. The wing commander slowly rotates his head toward the window. The eyes staring from the plastered face are huge and bloodshot. They contain no recognition.

"I don't think he's with us anymore," Beltran mutters.

"You lads go make yourself useful," the medic says.

"Is that a direct order on the wing commander's behalf?" I say.

"Get going, dammit!" the medic snaps.

"Yes, sir!"

Our adherence to protocol is absurd under the circumstances. But we must hang onto something in this new and hideous reality.

The next hours pass in a nightmare blur – dragging bodies from the wreckage, giving first aid to the wounded, transporting them to hospital. I sorely miss Bezmir and Sipren with their advanced medic skills, but they have been sent home with the rest of our former squadron.

The corpses we handle are nothing like the slob boy with his nearly unmarked appearance and defiant smirk. These dead are horribly maimed – charred, disemboweled, limbs and heads torn off, faces distorted with agony. Blood and stink is everywhere. My stomach heaves, and I am grateful that I have skipped breakfast.

The Youth League encampment is the worst. The enemy struck it with anti-personnel bombs of a particularly vicious type. The boys had nowhere to hide and were simply cut to shreds by millions of razor sharp bomb fragments. We stack their bodies like cord wood and haul away the screaming, mangled wounded.

The flagstaffs that had festooned the encampment are mostly cut down, their once proud banners covered with gore. Here and there a tattered flag still waves in useless defiance.

A party of Youth League survivors assists us in the ghastly work. Their eyes are haunted and their faces so pale that they almost seem transparent. Many of them are crying at the sight of their lost comrades.

"My God, Bel," I say, "we were like them only a few years ago."

Beltran nods. His face is also pale, like that of some avenging death god, and his piercing eyes gleam with hate.

“Look at all this,” he says. “And they’re going to stick us in a labor camp? What sense does that make?”

He smacks a fist into a palm.

“Let me at those slob bastards!”

Thank heaven the infirmary has not been hit, but just about everything else has been. The enemy knew exactly what targets to strike and what ordnance to use. Some lousy spy must have tipped them off.

And they’d also known when to attack – just before the victory rally while attention was diverted from defense and when large numbers of non-combatant personnel would be on base. Clearly, our system of air raid shelters and anti-aircraft protection is inadequate, and we’ve paid the price. Nobody ever thought this base would come under attack.

Stupid, arrogant fools!

The sun is going down as we stumble back to our barracks. I am numb from all the horror I’ve witnessed; years seem to have passed in this single day. So this is war? A far cry from the uplifting experience we’d been taught to anticipate. Where is all the glory and the cheering, the marching bands?

My whole consciousness narrows down to a single thought:

Please let the plumbing be intact!

If I can just discard my filthy, blood-soaked clothing and spend time under a hot shower, maybe I can get through this day with some of my sanity. But the fates decide otherwise.

Our barracks has been converted to a hospital overflow facility. The cots are all taken by the less severely wounded, except for our two beds which have been shoved into a corner. The strafing has destroyed the hot water tank and damaged the plumbing. Bel and I have to content ourselves with a miserable cold water scrub taken out of buckets.

I can’t bear the thought of spending a night under the same roof with so many moaning, suffering people, so I haul my bedding outside and hunker down under a tree. Bel soon follows.

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Three days pass, and things begin returning to “normal” – whatever that means any longer. The barracks starts emptying out as the walking wounded limp away, and the hot water is restored. Bel and I seem to have been forgotten. At least I have plenty of time to reflect on our perilous new situation.

We are located in the eastern region of our country, closest to the battle front – but the front has advanced a great distance into enemy territory, beyond the range of bombing aircraft. Such planes require sophisticated bases far behind the combat zone. I recognize the aircraft type from our studies of enemy models and know that it does not possess extreme range capabilities.

Only one conclusion can be drawn from this: the enemy is getting closer.

Such is not the case, if you believe our war reports. In these dispatches, our troops are still advancing, pushing the enemy ever farther back into the remote,

barren corners of his vast empire. We've already taken the most valuable areas, according to the reports, and soon the war will come to a triumphant conclusion.

The reports are lying, obviously. What else is our government lying to us about?

Needless to say, the victory rally is cancelled – officially, “postponed until further notice” – along with all the others around the country. I feel a bitter, unworthy satisfaction that I will not be the only one missing out on the spectacle.

Morning of the fourth day since the raid, the wing commander's adjutant enters the barracks and takes a position standing beside the open door. His left arm is confined to a sling, and his face shows some evidence of battering. Otherwise, he is his old spit-and-polish self.

“Looks like we're in for it now,” I mutter.

“Yes, the goddam court martial at last,” Bel says.

We stand by our cots awaiting the appearance of the military policemen who will haul us before the panel of judges, but no police come. Instead, the adjutant looks directly at me and salutes.

What did he do that for – is he mocking us?

Then the wing commander enters. He seems much reduced from his former self. His physical injuries are slight, but his bearing is uncertain and hesitant now. Clearly, he is not the man he was before the raid. His face is grim; he bears a sheet of paper in his hand. Something about that paper terrifies me.

He moves across the room, holding out the paper like a venomous snake. My stomach becomes an icy lump as I pray that the sheet is nothing more than a summons to the “goddam court martial.” But it is a radio message transcript. My hands tremble as I read it.

Next thing I know, I am flopped down on my cot with no idea how I got there. I must have blacked out momentarily ... my legs gave way. Tears are streaming down my face.

“My God, what happened!” Bel cries.

He wrenches the paper from my fingers and reads the evil message written upon it. Stilikan, my elder brother, has been killed in action.

Chapter 9

Sad Journey.

It is a day to encounter grief-stricken mothers. The first one approaches me on the train station platform where I stand waiting for transportation home to attend my brother's funeral.

My brother's funeral – what a terrible weight those words carry! All my life, Stilikan has been there for me; I never knew a time without him. But now he is gone. I'll never see him again in this world.

The thought that he might not survive the war hadn't entered my head; it was simply too preposterous. He'd been like a basic law of the universe, ongoing, unchanging. But now he'd been snuffed out ... forever and always.

At moments like this, when the grief seems more than I can bear, I look for some diversion to take my mind off my suffering. I find it this time with a war poster that has been stuck onto a column over layers of commercial advertisements.

The poster shows a heroic figure holding aloft a shield adorned with the National Salvation Party eagle. Behind him, visible between his strongly braced legs, reposes a peaceful little town with a church spire. Sharp lines of power accompany his bold stance. He is protecting the village, and by extension our whole country, from violent onslaught.

Desist!

The artwork isn't bad, as far as such propaganda goes, but the tone seems wrong. It is overly defensive, as if the enemy is already pounding at our gates. It is a departure from the usual aggressive images of our troops surging ahead or of medieval warriors swinging swords from behind similarly emblazoned shields.

But maybe the enemy really is at our gates. Haven't I seen their aircraft raining destruction upon us – haven't I carried away the mangled corpses? Or maybe I am in such a gloomy state of mind that everything looks defeatist to me. Then:

“Bastard!”

A shrill voice pulls me out of my musings long enough to see a small, gray-haired woman striding my direction.

“Excuse me?” I say.

“His name was Piotra, you swine!”

She slaps my face with surprising power for such a tiny woman. I stumble back, unable to comprehend the dreadful turn of events. The weight of my duffel bag nearly unbalances me.

“You murdered my son!”

She flutters toward me like an avenging harpy, I don't even think to defend myself. A railway station police officer does that for me, grabbing the woman from behind. She fights hard, nearly breaking free. The policeman raps his billy club expertly against her skull, and her resistance ceases.

“Don't worry about this one, lad,” he says. “A stretch of forced labor will calm her down.”

“No ... let her go,” I say. “Just wait til I catch my train. Please?”

The cop looks doubtful.

“There's no problem with it,” he says. “We need to keep her sort in line.”

“It's all right.” I rub a hand over my stinging face. “No real harm's been done.”

Piotra's mother is conscious again. Her eyes blaze with hatred, and tears fill them now.

“We did not mean to kill your son,” I say. “He chose to fight us. He was ... a hero.”

My train arrives. I do not look back as we pull away from the platform.

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Sitting in the train car, staring out the window, the full weight of misery presses down on me again. I've already lost the sky, and now I've lost Stilikan. My mind brings both of them together in a single, aching memory.

It was a glorious day with lots of fresh breezes – I was, maybe, eight years old and Stilikan twelve. We were flying our toy glider planes in a meadow of spring flowers.

“I’ll be a real pilot someday,” Stilikan said. “What about you?”

“Yes, me too!” I said.

I could almost hear the roar of planes overhead. The sky radiated possibility; a wonderful future seemed open to us.

Now the future has arrived, and it isn’t so wonderful.

The incident at the station had been a welcome distraction, almost. It had taken my mind off Stilikan for a while, and it had been an actual relief to endure some kind of punishment for my stupidity and arrogance.

If slapping me brought the poor woman a bit of peace, then the episode was worth it. I hope the cop is a decent sort and let her go as I’d requested.

So, now the face of our victim has a name – Piotra. This is a very common slobe name; in fact, we refer to the enemy generically as “Piotra.” In turn, they refer to us as “Mag” – short for “Magleiter” and, less flatteringly, for “maggot.”

But was “Piotra” his actual name? Or was she using the generic version, telling me that her son represented the fighting spirit of the entire slobe nation? Well, if all the enemy soldiers possess that boy’s courage and fortitude, we truly have the devil to pay.

How bright the world seemed to be only a short time ago! It is still bright, at least on the surface, as a glorious spring day passes outside my window – the neat little towns, freshly planted fields, woods and hills. A scent of vitality penetrates the rattling old train car. Difficult to believe that a war is raging behind the peaceful facade.

The last time I took this train home was during Christmas break. That was supposed to be the Christmas when our troops came marching back to us, grasping victory in their hands. The victory hadn’t come, of course, but hopes were still high that we’d triumph by spring – this spring.

The army was so sure of an early triumph that no one thought to issue our men with proper clothing, and they were left to the mercy of the harsh slobe winter. A big push was on to fill the gap, and people were donating their winter coats to the war effort. I was proud to contribute as well – not just my old coat, which I’d outgrown, but also my brand new one. People shivering in thin attire were a common sight on any street. I rather preferred the chill; it allowed me, in a small way, to share the hardships of our combat troops.

I’d been glad to see family and old friends that Christmas, even if Stilikan couldn’t be there ... as he would never be there for me again. I was a proud “Yuliac” back then, as we members of the Youth League Air Corps are known, half way through my second year at the elite Leadership High School which only the brightest and best could attend, regardless of their financial status.

A high point of my trip home was the stay in my old bedroom with its comforts and privacy. It was a welcome change from the communal barracks life with my Raptor Aces comrades. Even so, I was glad to get back to the school routine.

We began each weekday with a brisk, 3-kilometer jog or bike ride to our morning classes where we all excelled, even among so many other bright students.

Afternoons and weekends were for flying. All of us lived at the barracks, even the local boys who could have stayed with their families in town – and Beltran, who had no other home. He is an orphan, raised by the State, and we Raptor Aces are the only family he knows.

I was so happy then. How had everything gone so horribly wrong?

The exhaustion of the past few days is catching up with me. I close my eyes and try to nap away the hours until my destination. The aisle seat next to me is empty, thank heaven, as I have no desire to talk with anyone. As an added boon from the gods, my sleep is untroubled by dreaming.

When I awake, the train car has filled up. Every seat is now taken, including the one beside me which is occupied by a woman of perhaps forty. She'd been attractive once, you could tell, but now her face is creased and downcast. Her hair is graying, and her eyes have a hollow, tragic look.

I try to manage a smile and a nod. She looks at me with understanding.

“You’ve also lost somebody in the war, haven’t you?” she says.



And finally my own mother.

The first thing she says to me as I enter our house is: “My God, Dytran, you look 10 years older!”

Then she is in my arms, weeping. I hold her there a long while, caressing her hair. It is thinner now and more streaked with gray than the last time I’d seen her. Was that only five months ago?

I look around at the comfortable, good-quality furnishings of our living room. Thank heaven, everything looks exactly as I remembered. With so much of my world coming unhinged, at least I can rest my eyes on familiar surroundings for a while.

But then my gaze turns toward the back parlor. The larger furnishings have been moved out of it, replaced by a narrow table. Chairs fill the rest of the room with a number of folded ones at standby for the overflow crowd.

Mother finally stops crying and draws away. She pulls a handkerchief from her apron pocket to dab her eyes. I leave her to her private grief and walk alone into the back parlor.

The table is strewn with flowers, and amid them is a black-draped portrait of Stilikan. Inside the picture frame, my brother stands proud and smiling in his Air Force uniform, as if he were still alive and unafraid of anything the world could present. Tears well up in my eyes, and I have to divert them.

Then I glance back toward the table, at the urn standing beside the picture frame. Mother joins me.

“Look how they sent my boy back to me.” She gestures toward the cremation urn. “I can never see his face again.”

I put my arm around her shoulders. I want to utter comforting words, but none come.

“Ah, my two young lions,” Mama sighs. “How could you have gotten such a father?”

Chapter 10

Stilikan.

I pass the night keeping vigil by Stilikan's remains. Candles offer dim illumination to the parlor; an electric bulb in the hallway provides the only other light on the ground floor. Our house settles around me, quiet except for Mama's soft weeping upstairs. Finally, sometime after midnight, her crying ceases. I twist myself around in the easy chair I've dragged in from the living room. There will be no sleep for me before the dawn.

It is a night for disturbing thoughts and memories.

First off, how did Piotra's mother know that I would be on the train platform this morning? True, some ghastly coincidence might have brought her there at the same time as me, but that didn't seem probable. A spy tracking my whereabouts is the more likely explanation. Perhaps it is the same one who tipped off the enemy about our air base.

Lucky for me it was only her that showed up and not some suicidal terrorist with a knife concealed under his coat. I would have been stabbed right through, like Papa was.

Papa ... I'd scarcely given him a thought for years. I was just 10 the last time I saw him. He'd always terrified me – a big, burly man with angry eyes. There seemed to be a vast store of rage inside him always ready to come vomiting out.

He'd never struck me, though, and sometimes he almost doted on Stilikan, his obvious favorite – if a man like that could be thought to favor anyone. But there was always this tension between him and my brother, as if things could get out of hand at the drop of a pin.

I was just scared and tried not to be noticed. By and large, Papa was content to ignore me – until toward the end. He'd begun pushing me and was verbally abusive more often. Maybe he thought I was getting big enough to start smacking around.

Mainly it was Mama who had to bear the brunt of his abuse, especially when he was drunk. Thankfully, he was gone much of the time, either working long hours at the mill, drinking with his pals, or doing whatever. Probably other women were involved. For all his shortcomings, he was a "handsome devil," as Mama put it.



On that particular day, Stilikan and I were out running with our gang – actually it was Stilikan's gang – and planning an attack on the local slobe boys. These alien kids were "trespassing on our territory," as Stilikan put it, and he'd decided to push them out.

"We have to teach them a lesson now," he said, "or, next thing you know, they'll take over everything."

This hardly seemed likely as there was only a small slobe community in our town. Mostly they'd come to do the dirtiest jobs in the mill where Papa worked.

Papa hated them, though, and even the government said they were a lower race from us, so it only seemed natural that we had to keep them in line.

Stilikan had already been accepted at the National Leadership high school for the next year, and he wanted to make sure that things were in order before he journeyed to the eastern provinces.

“We have to let them know that it’s our park,” he told us, “they can use it only with our permission.”

“When do we give them permission?” one of the boys asked.

“Never!” Stilikan replied.

He was still rather small and wiry at this time, not having begun his growth spurt yet. Even so, he easily commanded the respect and loyalty of the other boys. They all stood around in their crisp Youth League uniforms listening to him give orders. I hadn’t joined the first level of the Youth League yet, so I just wore a civilian outfit.

We found the slobe kids playing football on one of the fields at the park. We could have used another playing field but decided that we didn’t want any company.

“Tear ‘em up boys!” Stilikan shouted as he led the attack.

The battle was quickly over; they outnumbered us, but we had Stilikan on our side. Fists flew and tussles went to the ground. I got a puffy eye and skinned elbows for my trouble, but the outcome was never in doubt. The slobe kids took off at a run, with us close behind. When we reached the edge of the park, Stilikan halted our pursuit.

“Don’t show your ugly faces here again!” he shouted after the retreating enemy.

The usual schoolboy nonsense followed – back slapping and congratulations. We all thought we were wonderful fellows. We played a triumphant round of football. As usual, I had to content myself with being a “reserve player” meaning that I never got to take the field.

Then we headed for home.

Stilikan and I turned down the lane to our house, leaving the others behind. I began to come down from my exhilaration a bit. While the fight was going on, I was as determined as anybody and I celebrated with the rest when we drove them off, but now I didn’t feel so excited. Was this really necessary, I wondered?

“They weren’t bothering us,” I said, “and there was plenty of room at the park for everyone.”

“Twerp!”

Stilikan smacked the back of my head.

“Stop that!” I said.

“You’re too young to remember how bad it used to be,” Stilikan said. “Back before the Great Leader took over and all the riff raff was treated as good as any racial comrade – back when there were no jobs and we were really poor.”

That was true enough. The National Salvation party had been in power for over five years, and I scarcely remembered a time before them. Mostly I remembered that Papa was home a lot more and there were many arguments about money. But now that our country was building up its defense forces again, there were plenty of jobs – even the slobes could find work.

"There'll be a war, sooner or later," Stilikan said. "Then we'll show this human garbage what's what! I just hope I'm old enough to fight."

"Me too!" I said in an excess of patriotic fervor.

"You?"

Stilikan tried to smack my head again, but I dodged out of the way.

"What could you do against the slobe hoards?" he said. "At the sound of the first shot you'd run home crying."

"I would not!"

"The big hero, eh?" Stilikan said. "I'll just leave you alone out here with the slobes, then we'll see how brave you are."

He took off at a run and dodged down a narrow side street.

"Hey, come back!" I yelled.

But he was gone. He could take any number of alleys and lanes back to our house; I'd never catch him, even if I could run faster. I looked nervously up and down the street. Everybody was inside now for dinner, and only a scary little wind shared the outdoors with me. It blew along bits of rubbish and howled around corners like the voices of lost ghosts.

What if the slobe kids were lurking about? Maybe they had followed us, just waiting for us to split up so they could pick off the smallest and weakest of the lot. I felt a whole world of danger pressing down on me.

Then I straightened my shoulders and began walking. Maybe I would get beat up; there didn't seem to be much I could do to prevent it, but at least they wouldn't find me cringing! I turned down the lane where Stilikan had gone, half expecting to see a gang of enemy kids there. But it was empty.

I walked for a minute or so, neither looking left nor right and especially not behind me, as much as I'd wanted to. Be brave, I told myself.

Then somebody leaped out of a doorway and grabbed me.

"Boo!"

I practically jumped out of my skin – it was only Stilikan.

"Don't worry, Little Bro," he said. "I wouldn't leave you to the savages."

He wrapped an arm over my shoulders and led me off toward home.

"As long as I'm around, you're safe as spades," he said.

"Yes ... but you're leaving in the fall," I said.

"Hey, no problem," he said. "If somebody gives you a hard time, I'll come back and kick their butt right quick."

He turned serious, and all the mischief was suddenly out of him.

"Believe that," he said. "If anybody hurts you, I'll get them – no matter how far I have to go."

I felt safe and reassured with my big brother's arm around my shoulders. Maybe there really was nothing in the world that could harm me.

"Me, too," I said. "If anybody ever hurts you, I'll chase them down and smash them!"

I realized what a dumb thing this was to say. What could possibly happen to Stilikan that he'd need me to handle for him? I expected him to smack my head again, instead he just squeezed my shoulder. This sort of faraway look came into his eyes.

"On a day like this, I feel I can take on the world," he said.

Dinner was waiting when we got back home. Papa was seated at the table behind his heavy, stoneware beer mug. Mama poked her head in from the kitchen.

“Where have you boys been?” she said.

She strode toward us, a worried, scared expression on her face. She examined our dirty faces and skinned elbows.

“We’re all right, Mama,” I said, “really.”

“What were you up to?” she demanded.

“Shut your mouth, woman,” Papa said. “What does it look like they were up to?”

He fixed his eyes on us. I could tell by the meanness in them that he was well on the way toward being drunk. A nasty little smile curled his lips.

“You were out fighting them slob brats, weren’t you?” he said.

“Right ...” Stilikan said.

Papa grinned, and that peculiar, joyless chuckle rumbled in his throat.

“Glad to hear somebody’s showing those little bastards what’s what,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” Stilikan said.

“Now go wash up,” Papa said.

We retreated to the bathroom. Over the noise of the water taps, we could hear a fierce confrontation going on. Papa was roaring out his usual list of complaints – Mama was trying to “cut his balls off” with her constant whining. He couldn’t stand listening to her any longer. Without her around he’d be “free as a bird.” And so on. We’d heard it all before.

Stilikan’s eyes were cold and steely as he washed himself in the sink. His mouth was clamped shut, and tight bunches of muscle protruded from his jaw line. He said nothing.

When we returned to the dining room, things had calmed to a tense, angry silence. Mama was seated now in her usual spot, and a beef roast lay on the table, ready to be carved. Stilikan and I took our places. I hoped fervently that the storm had passed, that Papa would not explode again, that he’d eat quickly then leave for his customary night at the saloon.

Things almost seemed back to “normal” when suddenly, and without any provocation, Papa reached over and slapped Mama hard.

“Bitch!” he said. “Don’t ever tell me what to do.”

Mama cringed away and covered her face. Papa turned his attention toward me.

“What are you looking at?” he snarled.

He thrust out a hand. I sat frozen with horror as the gigantic fingers reached for my throat.

Then Stilikan was at him. In one violent motion, my brother jumped out of his chair, seized the beer mug, and shattered it against Papa’s skull. Papa fell out of his chair, pulling the table cloth with him. Food and dishes scattered over the floor.

Stilikan grabbed the carving knife and shoved it under Papa’s chin.

“Touch them again, and I’ll cut your head off!”

I was paralyzed with shock. In an instant, the huge terrifying presence that had dominated our family was reduced to cringing impotence. And I’d never heard Stilikan use such violent language before.

“You little ...” Papa tried to speak, but a jab with the knife shut him up. Blood oozed.

"I mean it, *old man*," Stilikan said.

His voice was low, measured, and it carried more threat than the loudest shout could have done. He moved away, allowing Papa to get up.

Papa towered in the middle of the room, stunned, wiping a hand over his throat. He gaped at his smeared fingers with astonishment, as if the blood must belong to somebody else. He rolled his hand into a fist and took a menacing step forward. Stilikan held his ground, knife at the ready. I tried to join him, but Mama grabbed me and held fast.

Papa scanned the room malevolently, waves of anger radiating off him. He seemed to turn into storm of hate and violence, swirling in the middle of our house like a dark tornado, baleful eyes glaring out of a skull face.

"Damn you all!" he bellowed.

Then he was out the door with a house rattling slam.

"Lousy coward," Stilikan said.

He turned toward Mama. Raw contempt etched his face.

"Well ... what now?" he said.

She could only stare back at him with wide, terrified eyes.

Come morning, Mama found the courage to visit a lawyer and file a divorce petition. Then she swore out a complaint with the police – not that they would do much if it came to that. Stilikan and I went with her. The night before, Stilikan had ground his Youth League dagger to a razor edge and he kept it close. He also carried a sturdy bat, supposedly to play whacker ball later, but that had never been a game he enjoyed much.

I was never so scared in my life. Any moment I expected Papa to jump out of some doorway and attack. There was no doubt in my mind that Stilikan would try to kill him if he showed up. I felt no loyalty at all for Papa, but I was terrified for my brother.

Papa kept away, though. He was probably out drinking, carousing, or beating up somebody who was unable to fight back.

For the next weeks, Stilikan insisted that Mama come to school with him. She sat crocheting on a courtyard bench where he and his friends could keep an eye on her during classes. Some of the boys found this arrangement to be amusing, but Stilikan quickly silenced them. He gave one kid such a pounding that the school issued a 10-day suspension. That suited Stilikan fine, as he could guard Mama more easily that way.

Then, one night, a rock crashed through an upstairs window of our house. Wrapped around it was a note from Papa full of blood-curdling threats. Stilikan looked at it scornfully.

"We've seen the last of him," he said.

Sure enough, Papa quit his job at the mill and moved out of the province so as to avoid paying child support. Money became very scarce for our family. Both Stilikan and I took delivery boy jobs to help out. Our customers were sympathetic, and the tips we received were always the best. Mama sold her crochet work, did laundry and cleaning, took in borders. We got by.

Then, just as Stilikan was preparing to leave for high school, we learned that Papa had been killed in a barroom fight – more of an assassination, really. Somebody had settled an account by sticking a knife into him while he was

drinking a mug of beer. Soon afterward, a large cash settlement arrived. Papa had maintained a life insurance policy with Mama as beneficiary.

Give credit where it's due, I've always thought. This was a fine thing, but why did he have to wait until he was dead in order to be decent? Mama had always been skillful with money, and shrewd investments brought us a good measure of prosperity.



I spend the rest of the night wandering the old pathways with Stilikan, until dawn pokes through the windows. He needn't have worried about missing the war. The evidence of that is right before me, on the table.

Then I hear Mama coming down the stairs. I rouse myself and go to my room to catch some sleep before the funeral service.

Chapter 11

Mournful Gathering.

The memorial service is dignified and well-attended. Mama's relations are all there, and several of Papa's, too. Our neighbors and local friends are well represented; I regard them with nostalgic affection, especially those who tipped me and Stilikan so generously when we were delivery boys.

They sit hunched together in the parlor chairs looking gray and much older than I'd remembered. Their conversation is woeful – in respect for Stilikan and in fear for themselves. Not a one of them doesn't speculate when the Death Angel will come for the young men in their own family. Some have already received a visitation.

Just one of our former gang is able to come. He's had an arm blown off at the front and now holds an administrative post with a nearby training regiment. The rest are on active duty or have been killed. The only other military person at the service is Bekar, Stilikan's wingman and eyewitness to his heroic death.

Bekar was injured in that final battle, as evidenced by the plaster encasing his left leg. He sits in a wheelchair with the living room overflow crowd during the service. His sister occupies a chair next to him. Her mouth is clamped into a tense line as if she is outraged by the whole situation.

They are staying at a local hotel and will be leaving tomorrow for the victory rally in the national capital. The rally had been postponed due to the air attack on our base, but it is going ahead now under tightened security.

I want desperately to speak with him, to learn of Stilikan's last hours, but I can't leave Mama's side. She appears to be in a state of near collapse, leaning against me in her chair. When she stands, I keep a tight hold on her arm.

I find myself glancing back while the clergyman drones his words of tribute. Bekar keeps his gaze fixed to the floor, mostly. When he looks up, his eyes bear a

sunken, haunted look. He knows something that he is keeping to himself; I am certain of that.

It isn't until after the internment at the cemetery that I am able to approach him for a few words. He invites me to call on him that evening at the hotel.

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The sister answers my knock. She stands in the doorway, wordless, looking over my Yuliac dress uniform with obvious disapproval – but also a hint of interest. I'm used to getting interested looks from girls. In a different situation, I might also be interested.

“Let him in already, Gyn,” Bekar says.

She steps aside, and I enter the main room of the suite. The open door to the sitting room reveals that a cot has been made up in there. I feel Gyn's eyes on my back as I approach Bekar, who is sprawled out on the double bed. I offer him a salute.

“Oh, forget all that!” Bekar says.

He extends a hand; I clasp it.

“It's a pleasure to finally meet Stilikan's 'little bro,’” Bekar says. “Aren't you the spitting image?”

“Uh ... thank you,” I say.

“He talked about you a lot, Dytran. He was very proud.” Bekar reaches for a packet of cigarettes on the side table. “Every time one of your letters came, I got the full run down.”

He offers me a cigarette. I manage to shake my head in refusal.

Bekar sighs. “I just wish the circumstances were better.”

My mouth is trembling, and tears start rolling down my cheeks. I wipe them away with the back of my hand. A melancholy, sympathetic little smile moves across Bekar's face. He strikes a match.

“Do you have to smoke in here?” Gyn says.

Bekar shakes out the flame. “All right, Sis, be that way.”

“You shouldn't be smoking at all,” Gyn says.

“Tell you what, Dytran,” Bekar says, “let's you and me go outside. There's a park nearby I'd like to visit and ...” he shoots Gyn a gently mocking look, “have a cigarette.”

I nod. “Yes, I'd like that.”

Gyn begins to assist him into the wheelchair.

“May I help?” I ask.

“I can manage,” Gyn says. “I'm used to this.”

“That's right,” Bekar says, “she's a volunteer nurse at our military hospital. Don't you feel sorry for those poor blokes getting manhandled by her?”

Gyn looks irritated.

“Just kidding, Sis.” Bekar gives her a peck on the cheek. “You know I love you.”

She smiles for the first time, showing a cute little dimple on her cheek. She is quite attractive, actually. I can't help smiling a little myself.

Bekar is settled into his wheelchair now.

“Lead on Dytran,” he exclaims. “Let's paint the town red!”

“Don't stay out too long,” Gyn says. “We have to get an early start tomorrow.”

“Yes, mother,” Bekar replies.

Gyn opens the door for us, and I maneuver the wheelchair into the hallway.

“You watch yourself, Dytran,” she says. “I see boys like you all the time at the hospital. They come back from the war ...” Her voice trails off.

“I will, thank you,” I say.

She watches us from the doorway until we turn the corner to the hotel lobby.

“That’s my sister for you,” Bekar says, “always looking at the bright side. You know, she’s been bossing me around since we were kids, and I’m three years older!”

The moment we leave the hotel, Bekar lights up a cigarette. He inhales deeply and blows out the smoke with satisfaction.

“Ah, I needed that!” He takes another drag. “What I could really use is a drink.”

“We can stop by a tavern,” I say.

“That’s tempting ... better not, though,” Bekar says. “Alcohol doesn’t mix with my medications.”

He raps his knuckles on his cast.

“I’ll be wearing this damn thing for a while yet. The doctors say I might be good to fly again, but my tap dancing days are over.”

“You were a tap dancer?” I say.

“No, but if I was, I wouldn’t be any more.”

“Oh.”

I suppress a chuckle. Somehow, it doesn’t seem proper to laugh at Bekar’s misfortune, however light he is trying to make of it.

“I hear you’re in some trouble about a slobe dive,” Bekar says. “There was a fatality?”

“Yes,” I say. “They granted me a week’s family leave, but as soon as I get back, it’s a disciplinary hearing.”

“Sorry about that.”

“It’s my own fault,” I say. “I knew the activity was banned. I was just trying to show up my deputy squadron leader.”

Then another thought occurs to me.

“And I was trying to prove that, just maybe, I was as good as Stilikan at something,” I say. “He’s the unofficial Yuliac slobe diving champion, you know.”

“Yes, he mentioned that,” Bekar says.

“What did he say about it?”

“He said it was the stupidest thing he ever did,” Bekar replies. “He said that he should have saved his efforts for the real enemy – the ones who can fight back.”

“Oh ... they can fight back all right,” I say.

The mention of Stilikan casts a melancholy pall over us. We wheel on in silence through the last long shadows of the day. I can’t see Bekar’s eyes, but I’m pretty sure they have that haunted look again. He fairly sags in his wheelchair. Even the smoke rising from his cigarette appears to sag, if such a thing is possible.

Finally, we get to the park. It’s the same one where our gang ran off the slobe kids all those years ago, on the day that Stilikan overthrew Papa to become the real head of our family. A host of memories crowds up.

I try to shove them out of my mind, but how can I do that when I see them playing out in the shadows? I mean, I can actually see them – me, Stilikan, the other boys, friends and enemies. All of us are here again in our earlier versions.

This place holds no ghosts for Bekar, however. The greenery and fresh air seem to perk him up.

“I have an idea,” he says. “How would you like to go to the victory rally with me tomorrow?”

“How?” I ask. “Don’t participants need an invitation?”

“I have an invitation,” Bekar says. “Front section among the ‘honored wounded,’ and I can bring an attendant.”

“What about Gyn?”

Bekar waves a dismissive hand.

“That’s the last thing she wants to do. You heard how she was talking.”

“Well ...”

“It’ll help us both a lot,” Bekar says. “We’ve been down in the dumps, haven’t we? If all that excitement can’t cheer us up, nothing can.”

I struggle to shift mental gears. Up until this moment, the future seemed to be nothing more than a dark tunnel leading to nowhere. Any thought of enjoyment had seemed totally alien, wrong even. Is it possible that something worthwhile can still happen to me?

“You wouldn’t have to do much,” Bekar says. “Just wheel me around and make sure I don’t fall on my face when I’m using my crutches.”

“Very well,” I say, “let’s go.”

“Capital fellow!” Bekar claps me on the arm.

He lights another cigarette. Dusk is beginning to settle in, making the tip glow more prominently. Bekar’s face seems to glow as well. He is really smiling for the first time since I’ve met him. He almost looks like a kid now. We are all still kids, actually.

“Ah, in this light, seeing you,” he says, “it’s almost as if Stilikan is with me again.”

I fairly glow with pleasure myself. I like Bekar a lot. It’s easy to see why my brother respected and trusted him so much. I think of Katella, my own loyal wingman, and how he’d backed me up against all odds, when it really counted.

This seems a perfect moment of camaraderie. I can’t bear the thought of ruining it. But it has to be done. I have to find out.

“I ... need to know exactly what happened to Stilikan,” I say.

Bekar tenses. The smile vanishes from his face. As much as I hate to do it, I press on.

“And I think you need to tell me, Bekar. I’ve seen that look in your eyes – something terrible is eating at you.”

A long pause as the world darkens around us. Bekar’s arm flops onto the wheelchair armrest, the cigarette tumbles from his fingers. I am steeling myself to repeat the request when Bekar finally speaks.

“Yes, you’re right,” he says.

An enormous tension seizes me from the gathering darkness, balling my fists and clamping my jaw. I fight an impulse to run away.

“Just promise me that you won’t tell your mother,” Bekar says. “I couldn’t stand it if she knew.”

I jerk my head into a nod. “As you wish ... you have my word.”

Chapter 12

The Final Battle.

“Tear ‘em up boys!” Stilikan shouted over the radio.

The fighter squadron dove out of the sun onto the bomber formation like hawks after a gaggle of fat pigeons. The enemy fighter escort rose to meet them while the bombers jettisoned their loads and turned back toward home. Machine guns and canons fired, the voice of war howled through the sky.

Stilikan blasted an enemy fighter. It exploded into a fireball. He shot up another one, then pulled away so that Bekar could finish it off. Bekar pressed the firing button on his stick – machine guns mounted in wings rattled his plane, the 20 millimeter canon in the nose jolted him with its recoil. The acrid smell of cordite filled the cockpit like a lethal perfume.

The enemy fighter shuddered under the assault and began to burn. Then it flipped over and started going down. The pilot bailed out.

“Good work, number 2!” Stilikan’s voice crackled over the radio.

Bekar grinned. Nothing could stop him today! These slob pilots weren’t bad, but no real match for Stilikan’s aces. And Stilikan had let him score the victory when he could have taken it for himself. That was so much like him – share the glory, conserve his ammo so as to keep fighting as long as possible.

With all the inflated egos around the Air Force, it was great to serve with a commander who led through sheer competence.

More enemy fighters tumbled from the sky, their pilots blasted to pieces or incinerated in their cockpits. Two parachutes bloomed. Number 10, one of the new guys in the squadron, dove after the parachutes, meaning to kill the men hanging from them.

“Disengage, number 10!” Stilikan shrieked. “Goddammit, disengage!”

Number 10 swooped away from the helpless men dangling under the silk – one could easily imagine the poor bastards’ relief. Everyone knew of Stilikan’s hard and fast rule against shooting bailed-out enemy pilots, but this idiot must have had his blood up and didn’t remember.

“When we get back, your ass is mine,” Stilikan said in the cold, measured voice that portended great threat.

Bekar knew exactly what that meant. It wouldn’t be the first time Stilikan used his fists to “reeducate” insubordinate pilots. But after he’d knocked the guy down, that would be the end of it. There would be no official action, not for a first offense. And once they’d been reeducated, nobody ever committed a second offense.

The last few enemy fighters were hightailing it back home now, skimming low over the ground trying to shake off pursuit.

“Let’s get the big ones,” Stilikan said.

He closed in on the stern of a large, twin-engined bomber. But before he could shoot, a gun in the tail of the bomber opened fire, raking his aircraft with bullets.

Stilikan pulled away.

“Watch it guys,” he said, “these bandits have stingers!”

This was a worrying development. During his time at the front, Bekar had witnessed a steady improvement in enemy equipment and tactics. Now they had up gunned their standard medium bomber.

But another development was of more pressing concern.

“You’re trailing smoke, Number 1,” Bekar said over the radio.

“I know, I’m losing oil pressure,” Stilikan said. “Number 3, take command. I’m returning to base.”

“Yes sir!” Number 3 replied.

All around, the squadron was taking the measure of the bombers, altering tactics so as to avoid the new tail guns. Soon the big planes started to fall.

One of them directly below Bekar had not been able to dump its full bomb load, and, hit by a torrent of shells, it went up in a gigantic explosion. A piece of wreckage punched through the fuselage of Bekar’s aircraft, striking his leg.

“Ahhhh!” Bekar shrieked.

Unimaginable pain erupted throughout his body, he was lost in a bright wilderness of agony.

This is it, I’m going down!

In the glare, he could see the faces of his mother and father, and sister Gyn. Then the girl he wanted to marry but had been too shy to ask. His plane was heading down, he wanted to give it full throttle, a death dive into the ground. Anything to end the terrible pain.

“Pull up Number 2, pull up!” It was Stilikan shouting over the radio.

Instinctively, at the sound of the commander’s voice, Bekar eased the stick back. His plane leveled out.

“How bad are you hit?” Stilikan said.

“It’s my leg, sir,” Bekar said.

The pain had abated somewhat, replaced by the vast numbness of shock. Bekar struggled to remain conscious. Stilikan was flying beside him now.

“Stay with me,” Stilikan said, “we’re heading back.”

“Aye sir”

“Don’t pass out on me now!” Stilikan cried. “Use your medical kit.”

Bekar fumbled the morphine syringe out of his medical kit and stabbed it through his flight suit into his injured leg. Sharp pain blasted through him followed by blessed relief. The agony retreated into the puffy clouds, replaced by a glow of well being.

Wouldn’t it be nice to just go to sleep and forget this world of suffering?

“Take the inhalant!” Stilikan ordered.

It was like the voice of God coming over his headset. Bekar could never have disobeyed. He pulled a capsule out of the medical kit and broke it under his nose. He breathed in deeply.

An instantaneous burst of awareness struck him, as if a mighty hand had slapped his face. He was fully alert to everything around him now, his mind absolutely clear. He felt his heart race. His upper body seemed supercharged, while his lower portions were numb.

What was in that capsule? If the enemy couldn't kill him, these drugs certainly could.

He looked to his left and saw Stilikan's plane flying quite nearby. Stilikan was staring at him intently. Bekar managed a feeble thumbs up. Stilikan shot one back.

They flew on for some time together, until they'd crossed the battle lines into "friendly" territory. Bekar noted that his fuel consumption rate was much higher than normal. A fuel line must have been damaged in the explosion.

And all the while, the smoke streaming from Stilikan's plane was getting worse. Then open flames began shooting from the engine.

"I'm bailing out!" Stilikan radioed. "Return to base immediately – that's an order!"

He pulled his airplane into a graceful, slow-climbing left turn. Then he flung back the canopy and jumped out over the right wing. He made it look easy. As he floated beneath his parachute he waved jauntily, as if he was having a wonderful time. Bekar circled around, taking careful note of the location. Then he radioed an "airman down" report.

Despite Stilikan's order, Bekar loitered in the area as long as possible, until his fuel became dangerously low. His engine quit near the base, forcing him to glide into a dead stick landing.

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

It is fully dark now, and the street lights are on. One of them casts gray illumination over Bekar's face. The face is pale, the eyes dead. Bekar fumbles a cigarette out of his pack, and I light it for him.

"What happened then?" I hear myself ask.

"One of our ground units found him about two hours later ... but a partisan band got to him first," Bekar says. "Those bastards are thick as flies behind our lines, and ..."

He swallows hard, takes a deep drag from his cigarette. Then his words come rushing out in a torrent.

"They killed him, Dytran! Tied him to a tree and butchered him like an animal. Thank God he was cremated – his mother couldn't stand seeing him the way he was!"

He is crying freely now. I grip his shoulder and try to offer whatever comfort I can. My own tears have all been used up. Bekar's story holds no surprises for me as I had already guessed the general content much earlier.

All that remains in my heart is a black pit filled with hatred. I recall the face of the slob boy lying in the grass, grinning up at me. I want to stomp my boot into it!

Bekar regains control of himself.

"Well ... that's the full story," he says. "I'd like that drink now, if you don't mind."

Chapter 13

Rally for Victory.

I stand beside Bekar's wheelchair in the front rank of the section, the best possible place on the whole airfield. Around us are many more of the "honored wounded" standing on crutches or sitting in wheelchairs. They sport bandaged heads, plastered legs, arms in slings. Most are only a few years older than me, some not even that, but they all seem of an entirely different generation.

None of these combat veterans looks too badly hurt, and all their injuries are in mentionable places. Soon the men will be good as new, or almost. In no way would I question their heroism or their right to attend the rally, but I can't help wondering how it would look to bring some of the most severely mangled Youth League members here.

What would the cheering crowd make of that?

At night, those shattered boys march through my dreams on the stumps of amputated legs, trailing intestines. An endless stream. I fall in line with them, moving across the bloody plain toward a barren tree looming on the horizon. A howling, swirling wind, like a tornado, lurks behind us, urging us on.

As the tree draws closer, I can make out a figure tied to its trunk. It is ... no, it can't be ...

Goddammit!

What am I doing here, idle and useless to my country? Any fool can push a wheelchair. My dear brother has been murdered, and I am doing nothing about it.

I want to find some slob and beat him to a pulp, but there are none here, of course. That hag who attacked me at the railway station – I should have snapped her arm like kindling!

No ... save it for the real enemy.

They are far to the east, prowling the woods in their partisan bands, looking for defenseless victims. Lousy cowards! I should be out there hunting them down, tying them to trees, ripping their guts out. I should be keeping the promise I made to Stilikan all those years ago on the streets of our hometown.

Bekar notices my agitation. He reaches over and grips my arm.

"Pretty good show, eh?" he says over the blaring music and the roar of thousands.

I nod.

There are lots of healthy Youth League members here today, marching in their crisp uniforms, banners snapping in the wind and drums rolling. They believe they are immortal, just as I did when I was their age and strutting around in formation. Pack of young fools!

Army units rumble past in the latest tanks and in lorries towing artillery pieces. We all swell with pride at the display of military brawn. Soon these men will be reporting to the war front where the enemy will taste their steel.

Armored cars swarm by like a pack of wolves, then armored personnel carriers with open tops and eight large wheels instead of the usual tracks – stealthy models designed for sneaking up on the enemy. A dozen infantrymen grin at us from inside each one.

I want to rush out to them and beg, “Take me with you!”

Fighter planes prowl overhead, circling the airfield like diligent hawks. No sneak attack will find us unprepared today.

After these manly displays come rousing speeches by the Party big shots, exhorting the troops to “maximum effort,” and “devotion to the Fatherland.”

How many of these pot-bellied heroes have sons in combat? Precious few, I’d reckon. Fine for our best young men, like Stilikan, to make the ultimate sacrifice while their own kids get draft deferments or “serve” in cushy administrative jobs far back from the fighting. There is no blinking at the fact – rot had taken hold in our state.

Insulated at my school and within the Raptor Aces, I’d scarcely noticed it. But out in the wider country I cannot avoid seeing and hearing about the rot. It is in the hushed voices of the mourners at Stilikan’s funeral, in grim conversations on the street, in the smug appearance of Party leaders zipping by in their fancy cars.

The corruption and abuse of power are everywhere – ordinary people survive on the slim calories from their food ration cards while the well-connected dine at fancy restaurants. People wear last-year’s tattered outfits while the leaders strut about in tailored uniforms – on and on.

The grumbling comments almost always end with the lament, “Ah, if only the Great Leader knew!”

But the Magleiter can’t know. He is too busy commanding our military effort from his headquarters far to the east, while those governing in his name corrupt our state. Well, one day this war will end, and he will return to clean out the rats’ nest. I want to help in that effort.

Why didn’t I notice all this crap before? Because I was a stupid kid, that’s why. But I’ve “aged ten years” over the past weeks, as Mama put it, and I no longer embrace idiotic fantasies.

Bekar sits in his wheelchair, bored and glassy-eyed. It’s easy to imagine what a fighting man like him must think of the “heroic” speeches issuing from the review stand. I look upon him with warm affection. In many ways, he seems to compensate for the elder brother I have lost, just as I serve as a kind of Stilikan replacement for him.

He is smoking quality cigarettes that few can afford these days. His family is well off, so he can purchase such luxuries on the black market. And he also possesses a generous heart. He brought along a supply of cigarettes and chocolate which he passed around to the other veterans. We gained our front row spot by these means, though I’m certain this was not Bekar’s motive.

I owe so much of my recent education to him. As on the train yesterday ...

We sat at the back of the coach on a hard wooden bench. Not very luxurious, but it did offer extra room for Bekar to stretch out his leg. We'd brought some cushions, so we weren't too bad off. An elderly couple snoozed in the seat ahead of us, and across the aisle lay a rope coil piled over with luggage. This seemed as safe a place as any for a discussion.

You had to be careful about what you said and to whom you said it; pretty much anyone could be an informer. Letters, phone calls, private conversations were all subject to intrusion. And forget about sending a telegram unless you had only the brightest, most mundane things to say. I felt a moment of hesitation. Could Bekar be trusted – how well did I know him, anyway?

I pushed the thought out of my mind. For months Bekar had covered my brother's back, protecting him from enemy fighters. He'd been with Stilikan near the end, still covering for him despite being severely injured. If I couldn't trust Bekar, then the world was truly an evil place, and I was better off making a quick exit from it.

So, ignoring the oath of silence I'd been forced to swear, I told him all about the air raid on our base in full detail. How had they managed to reach us?

"Those bombers must have been stripped-down," Bekar said, "extra fuel, less armor plate, fewer guns and crewmen."

"They still had the belly gunners," I said. "One of them almost shot me."

Bekar grinned and slapped my leg.

"Don't let that happen! Gyn would be really mad. You know, I think she likes you."

"Uh ... well ... that's nice."

I felt my face redden a bit. Bekar's grin widened, then he turned serious. He lowered his voice.

"And the slobes took back a lot of ground in the northern sector," he said. "You heard about that?"

"The information service mentioned a 'limited strategic withdrawal' in the north," I said.

Bekar grunted sarcastically.

"It was a lot worse than that," he said. "Piotra kicked our butts and 'strategically withdrew' us hundreds of kilometers."

"I-I didn't know."

"Things have settled down," Bekar said, "and the northern sector isn't all that crucial, anyway. The big issues will be determined in the south. There's a huge buildup taking place there on both sides. All hell is going to break out soon."

He lit a cigarette then cracked open the window which increased the noise level inside the car. He leaned in close to me and lowered his voice further.

"It's like this, Dytran, we win through or we're finished. Either way, you can forget the 'conquering living space' talk. We'll have to negotiate a peace. If we do well in the next campaign, we can get a better deal. If we lose ..."

He let the thought trail off. I swallowed hard. Things were far worse than I'd imagined. Bekar's remarks were a direct contradiction to the official story, borderline treason, actually.

“And you can forget all the ‘inferior race’ crap, too,” Bekar said. “Piotra is an intelligent, capable enemy worthy of respect. He doesn’t quit. We still have the edge, but he’s catching up fast – and we’re badly outnumbered.”

He took a deep drag on his cigarette and blew the smoke out the window.

“We pilots are beginning to understand this, but the foot soldiers still buy into the Party line. Can’t say as I blame them, the poor devils have nothing else to hang onto.”

“Well ... what about their eastern border?” I said. “There’ve been reports that a war might break out there, too.”

“We’re all counting on that,” Bekar said. “If the slobes face a two-front war, they’ll have to make peace with us. Or, at least we hope so.”

That was the end of our conversation for quite a while. We both remained silent with our own thoughts. Mine turned toward the final letter I’d received from Stilikan.

His earliest letters from the front were loaded with typical banter, high spirited and teasing – the written equivalent of smacking the back of my head. But over time the letters became much more somber. The last one was downright depressing, filled with sarcastic commentary. I’m surprised it got past the military censors.

One remark was particularly striking: “As I told you before, Little Bro, everything is a pee cave.”

At the time, I thought it was just a crude joke. It conjured up an image of a dark, smelly location where people went to urinate. But now I wasn’t so sure. Could “pee” actually be an initial? Was he trying to say, in coded language, that everything was a “Plato cave?”

I remember him talking about Plato’s cave during one summer break when he was home from school. I didn’t pay much attention, he was always trying to impress me with his far-ranging knowledge. But I do recall that Plato’s cave was a realm of illusions where prisoners saw only the shadows of things while convinced that they were actually viewing reality.

Is that where we are all living?

Chapter 14

The Unimaginable.

A spectacular air show climaxes the rally. Dive bombers hurtle from the sky, sirens wailing, to drop their dummy loads with lethal precision. Medium bombers make simulated ground attacks. Mock dogfights swirl overhead. Transport planes drop paratroopers. Once the men land, they take up battle positions around the airstrip. The crowd’s roaring complements the mighty voice of aircraft engines.

I cheer my lungs out with all the others. It is impossible to believe that anyone can beat us with such power at our disposal.

“That’s what we need!” Bekar cries. “Piotra will never know what hit him!”

A squadron of fighter planes scorches by at low level. Their noise is deafening. Their pulsating heat washes over us like the breath of warrior gods. The pilots inside the sleek, lustrous machines wave to us. I wave both my arms in reply and yell my head off.

My heart leaps out toward my lost dream. If only I hadn't screwed up my life – if only I could earn a place among those heroes!

Bekar maneuvers his body in sync with the fighters. His hand grasps an imaginary control stick, his foot presses an invisible rudder pedal as his wheelchair becomes a fighting machine of the sky. His face is hard and determined, his eyes stab the distance like a bird of prey's. This is the face he showed the enemy. Thank heaven he's on our side.

All is throbbing airplane motors, heat, and exaltation.

Then everything abruptly calms. The fighters swoop back to altitude and resume their patrol. The big planes land and taxi away. The paratroopers gather up their silk and trot off the airstrip. The crowd in the grandstands grows silent, and the men around me became thoughtful. Time seems suspended in the bright, warm afternoon.

What will happen next – what could possibly top this magnificent display? We exchange expectant glances, light cigarettes, munch the last of our chocolate bars.

Then a solitary transport plane appears in the east. It moves with stately, unhurried grace, demanding that the whole world adjust to its rhythm. Fighter planes take up position on its flanks.

We all watch with stunned disbelief as the aircraft draws nearer. I've seen the plane many times in newsreels, everybody has, but never have I expected to see it for real. A collective gasp shoots through the multitude.

"It can't be," Bekar murmurs.

But it is. The Magleiter's black and white personal aircraft is coming in for a landing! An electric thrill shoots through the crowd. People try to surge down from the bleachers, but a large contingent of security troops appears to hold them back.

The Great Leader's plane is on final approach to the runway now, dropping from the sky like God himself. The fighter escort breaks off and heads back to altitude.

"Oh man, this is incredible!" Bekar cries. "Help me stand up, will you, Dytran?"

I assist him out of the wheelchair and give him his crutches. All around us, others are doing the same. Every man who can get to his feet is standing at attention with as much soldierly bearing as he can muster. I give my uniform tunic a hurried inspection, adjusting the belt and brushing away a tiny piece of lint. I straighten my cap.

The Magleiter's plane is taxing to a stop now. A delegation of Party big shots and military brass rushes out to greet him. The crowd in the grandstands holds its breath. The tension is almost unbearable ...

Then the door of the airplane opens and the Great Leader emerges. A thunderous roar bursts from the crowd like a sexual climax.

HAIL! HAIL!

Growing in power, arms outthrust.

HAIL! HAIL!

A kind of madness seems to take hold of the people. They transform into something akin to wild animals. Nothing rational exists in their cries.

Those in my group also yell HAIL! at the top of our lungs. But our shouts are less hysterical, less like a primitive beast roaring for blood. Perhaps it is because we've already seen enough blood. The military band starts playing the national anthem, but it can scarcely be heard over the tumult.

Despite the lines of security troops standing shoulder to shoulder, each man gripping the belts of the ones beside him, a frenzied group of women breaks free and tries to charge onto the landing strip. Members of the band drop their instruments and rush to intercept them.

"Damn," Bekar says, "I wish the girls would chase after me like that!"

The men closest to us laugh. The joke quickly circulates throughout the ranks. It breaks the tension, preparing us for whatever is going to happen next.

The Magleiter is walking with his entourage now. Somebody presents him with a large bouquet of roses. He cradles the flowers in one arm and thrusts the other arm aloft in recognition of the thunderous ovation.

Somebody thrusts a pair of binoculars into my hands, and I train them on the Magleiter's face. It is warm and smiling, brimming with confidence – the very spirit of our nation. The Magleiter seems to fairly drift over the ground toward the review stand, borne along by the cheers of the multitude. The lesser men trail behind him like sparrows following a mighty eagle.

The binoculars disappear from my hands and move on down the line.

A burst of patriotic love seizes my heart, all my cares vanish. The Magleiter is going to mount the review stand and speak to us. I will listen to his voice in person. If only Stilikan could be here!

Then an incredible thing happens. Suddenly, impossibly, the Great Leader veers away from the review stand and begins striding directly toward us. The flunkies jostle among themselves to keep up with him.

An amazed gasp shoots through our ranks. I wrench myself to attention with enough force to nearly dislocate my spine. On both sides of me range the honored wounded, their faces proud and hard. I feel great pride myself, but also a sense of unworthiness to be included among them.

The Magleiter arrives at the far end of our assemblage. He hands the flowers off to an aide and begins inspecting the honored wounded, looking into the eyes of each man as he moves slowly down the line. A pressure wave seems to precede him, heralding the approach of an unstoppable force. Cameramen in National News Service blazers hover around, recording his progress.

I keep facing rigidly forward, but my eyes are glued to the Great Leader. As when I'd confronted the corpse of the slob boy, I feel a huge turning point in my life approaching. My throat is bone dry, and my lips feel like paper. I fight the urge to run my tongue over them.

Then the Magleiter is standing directly before me. He appears smaller and older than in the newsreels, worn down in service to our people, but still powerful and unyielding. His eyes bore into mine, piercing all the way to my soul.

I am falling backwards into an abyss. Only the eyes hold me steady, offering me salvation. They enlarge until they dominate the universe. The Magleiter's hand grips my shoulder.

"Stand fast, young man," he says. "The Fatherland needs you."

Then he is gone, moving down the line to the others. I feel my body trembling. My hands are cold as ice. In moments I am going to pass out. Bekar whispers harshly in my ear.

“Breathe, for God’s sake!”

How long have I been holding my breath? I blow out the suffocation and inhale deeply. Power surges through me. The fainting spell passes. I am a new person – reborn, cleansed of all my sins.

I am no longer afraid.

Chapter 15

To the Reckoning.

One more time I sit inside a passenger coach, gazing out the window as our beautiful country rolls past. This is the final train ride of my journey. At the end of it lies the reckoning before the military tribunal. The prospect had frightened me before, but now I feel serene. Whatever happens, I will not cower.

The Great Leader is in my dreams now, his stern, fatherly presence displacing the mutilated boys and the tree of execution. All night, I feel him watching over me. I sense the raging, swirling wind nearby, but he defends me from it.

During the day, the knowledge of his existence gives me renewed purpose.

The past weeks have been a time of unbearable loss, I would have welcomed death many times, but now I possess the strength to keep going. It was no accident that I was at the rally; there were simply too many “coincidences” that had brought me face to face with the Magleiter.

What if Bekar had been too ill to attend the funeral? What if Gyn had succeeded in talking him out of going to the rally – didn’t he say there’d been a “battle royal” over the issue? What if the men, delighted with the chocolate and cigarettes, hadn’t insisted that we move to the front rank? Bekar had only been able to purchase the black market items at the last minute.

And what of the Great Leader putting aside his heavy responsibilities and flying off to the rally? What inspiration motivated him?

My rational mind tells me that this is all just super-charged emotion. But the Magleiter did not speak to my rational mind; he probed deeper, to my very core. He seemed to know my innermost fears and longings. He told me to stand fast, and, by God, I will.

He never did address the crowd. After reviewing the honored wounded, he entered an open car and left the airfield. Those in the grandstands had to content themselves with a glimpse of him driving past acknowledging their salutes. He flew all the way from the war front just to speak words of encouragement to me.

And there is Gyn now, too ...

I didn't really need to accompany Bekar to his home. He'd hooked up with others from his town at the rally, and he could have ridden the train back with them. But it's not much out of my way, I said, and I'm in no great haste. So, I prevailed upon him to visit for a day with me and Mama before we headed to his town.

Naturally, I wanted to spend more time with him, but mostly I wanted to see Gyn. For all I knew, it might be a very long time before I looked upon a pretty girl again. Bekar easily guessed my motivations. He approached the subject indirectly, using our mutual admiration for Stilikan as an opening. He was a fighter ace; he knew all about stealthy approaches.

"Stilikan was the finest man I ever knew," Bekar said. "He was more like a brother to me than a commander. All of us felt that way about him."

"Yes ... he was great," I said.

"And let me tell you this, Dytran, you're cut from the same cloth."

I couldn't have felt more honored if he'd presented me with a gold medal. A melancholy smile moved onto my face. Bekar's grin was mischievous, however. He poked an elbow into my ribs.

"Who knows?" he said. "If things work out with Gyn, maybe we'll be brothers, too, huh?"

He must have enjoyed watching me blush. My complexion is so fair that it's quite easy to see the red.

We catch Gyn at a bad time, though. We've only been in the house long enough to drink half a glass of beer when she returns from her shift at the military hospital. She looks tense and exhausted; drops of blood splatter her uniform.

"Did you boys enjoy your little romp?" she says by way of greeting.

Her voice holds a sarcastic edge.

"That's right, Sis," Bekar replies.

She eyes me with the same odd mixture of reproach and interest that she showed the first time we met. I chide myself for wearing my Yuliac uniform. It seems to be the focus of her disapproval.

"If you'll excuse me a minute," she says, "I need to clean up."

She leaves the room. Bekar rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

"All hail the conquering heroes, eh, Dytran?" he says.

We finish our beer and begin another. I check my watch. The next train east will be leaving soon. I'd considered taking the later one so as to maximize my visit, but that doesn't seem like a good idea any longer.

Gyn returns wearing a lovely pastel summer dress. She seems like a whole other woman now – someone you want to wrap your arms around and draw in close. Her face still bears its serious expression, though. She must have witnessed something very tragic at the hospital. I know how things like that can prey on a person's mind.

She tries to lighten up in the course of our discussion, but my visit remains tense and awkward. I am glad when the time comes for me to leave. I grip Bekar's hand in farewell.

"Good luck at the hearing," he says. "You'll be in my thoughts, always."

"Thanks."

"I'll walk with you to the station," Gyn says.

She turns to fetch her handbag. Bekar grins and shoots me a thumbs up.

The train station is only a few blocks away, I wish it was much farther. I wish that I could think of something to say to this beautiful girl. But we just walk along in silence until we reach a tiny park near the station. The patch of green looks bright and wholesome, accented by Gyn's summer dress. She pauses.

"So, what happened at the rally?" she asks.

I grope for words that can describe my experience.

"It was wonderful, Gyn. The Magleiter himself appeared. He reviewed the honored wounded. He spoke personally to me!"

I expect some expression of amazement, or at least a bit of surprise. But Gyn only nods gravely.

"I don't think it's true," she says.

"W-what's not true?"

"Any of it." She looks down and smooths her dress. "I mean, if we really were the 'master race' wouldn't we have won the war already? But it's dragging on and on."

I am too stunned to reply. Gyn looks up into my face.

"I'd rather not go inside the train station," she says. "I want to remember you out here."

"All right, Gyn. Thanks for coming with me."

She kisses me on the cheek. I can see a tear running down her own.

"I meant what I said last time, Dytran. Watch out for yourself."

"I will."

Then she presses her lips to mine. Her body flows up against me, a perfect fit. Impossible joy and longing surge in my heart ...

Then I am alone, floating into the train station. I don't stop floating for a long time.



I arrive the next morning a few hours before I have to report myself in. I occupy the time with desultory wandering. First, a visit to my high school, which is closed now until the fall. I should be returning then to complete my studies, but who knows where I'll be come autumn?

I stand a while in the courtyard, gazing up at my old, third-story dormitory room – the one I vacated so as to reside at the airbase barracks with my Raptor Aces comrades. I think of the naïve, idealistic first year student who once lived up there. He'd been so convinced that he knew everything important about life. He was a fool.

Then a walk along the winding little streets, so much like the ones of my home town – a tavern for a glass of beer, a small café for lunch. Conversation in the tavern is boisterous, in the café quiet and subdued. The rhythm of everyday life. I am already a stranger to it.

I pass through the gate of the airbase with fifteen minutes to spare.

I feel myself already confined, as if I am in a labor camp working away the time until my draft notice arrives. But maybe that won't be too bad. If the war is still going on, perhaps I can volunteer early for service in an anti-partisan unit. I'll

spend my days in the dark eastern forests stalking the bastards who murdered my brother ...

Our barracks has been cleared of wounded men. Only Bel remains, sprawled on his cot amid a clutter of reading material, studying a book. He glances up as I enter.

“Dytran!”

He fairly bounds across the room and seizes my hand. “Good to see you, boy!”

“Thanks, Bel,” I say with more than a little surprise. “It’s good to see you again, too.”

He steps back and places his hands on his hips.

“You’re a changed man, Dye,” he says. “Something’s happened to you – something good, I think.”

I gesture noncommittally.

“Found a girlfriend, huh?” he says.

“Well ...”

Beltran laughs. “All right, I get it. You can tell me about her later.”

This is a Bel I’ve almost never seen before – relaxed and friendly, confident in himself. The quiet, resentful, borderline insolent person who’d been my deputy commander for the past year is absent.

But then the moment passes. Bel turns somber.

“You’ve got some time to get ready,” he says. “We have to report to the new wing commander in an hour.”

“New wing commander?” I say. “What happened to the old one?”

“He’s out, along with many of the senior officers,” Bel says. “Heads have rolled since the air raid.”

“But he was only in charge of our training squadrons,” I say. “He had nothing to do with base defense.”

Bel shrugs. “Who can say? I told you he was going soft.”

This news unsettles me. The old wing commander was a known quantity, a man with a reputation for fairness. This new commander could be anybody. If our prospects were dreary before, what are they like now?

I glance down at the jumble of reading material on Bel’s cot. The usual things – aircraft manuals, flight instructions, tracts on racial theory – and a Youth League pamphlet: *Our Flag and Our Nation*.

“Where’d you get this?” I ask.

“Oh, a troop of the little snots marched past here yesterday,” Bel says. “The leader gave me that. He said I looked depressed and could use a ‘positive message.’”

I open the pamphlet:

The black ground of the National Salvation Party banner represents the darkness of ignorance and racial defilement that plagued our nation when the Party was founded.

The red, stylized eagle represents courage, virtue, and the pure blood of the master race.

The eagle spreads a white diamond of enlightenment and racial purity wherever it flies.

Illustration: NSP banner

After seizing power, the Magleiter adapted the NSP banner for our national flag. The long stripe in the middle represents him. The top stripe represents the original founder of the NSP, who was martyred by enemies of the Party.

Illustration: National flag

The lower stripe represents the co-founder of the NSP who has retired from active service to become the Party's chief philosopher...

Bel chuckles.

"I like that 'martyred by enemies of the Party' routine," he says. "The Magleiter knocked the guy off, all right, and a good job of it, too."

I glance uneasily about the room. "That's not the official line."

"Whatever," Bel says. "At least the 'chief philosopher' had enough sense to quit while he was ahead. Did you see that moron in the last newsreel? He looked like a fish with its guts pulled out!"

I do not want to continue this discussion. My sensibilities have been elevated above such vulgarities.

"Yes, well ... I'd better get ready," I say.

My rational mind knows that Bel's comments are most likely true. But the hidden part of me, the part the Magleiter touched, believes anything the Great Leader chooses to say. I do not try to explain this to Bel. He would not understand.

Chapter 16

Change of Fortune.

We leave the barracks and head across the air base toward HQ. It is a glorious spring afternoon perfect for a stroll with one's girlfriend, but not for the grim journey that we are undertaking. Dank overcast would better suit our purposes. We do not exchange a single word but simply march along, as if to our execution.

The base no longer seems like a prison camp; rather, it now appears to be the freest, most beautiful location on earth. A few puffy clouds grace the sky, and a light breeze plays about. It is ideal flying weather. Grounds men are mowing the grass alongside the taxiways releasing a fresh, green fragrance in the process. A transport plane is taking off from the main runway. If only I could climb aboard it and escape my troubles!

But every step is taking me closer to my personal reckoning.

Much of the bomb damage to our HQ building had been repaired. As we enter the main door, workmen are scurrying about completing various tasks. I am struck by the bare appearance of the lobby. Its furnishings were destroyed in the air raid and have not yet been replaced. Where the Yuliac awards case once stood, only a blank corner presents itself now. The awards themselves have been erased from this world, like my brother.

The new adjutant meets us. He is a hard and tight-lipped man who looks as if he is keeping a bad temper in check. His demeanor seems to foretell unfavorable events. The old adjutant was an officious sort, puffed up with a sense of his own importance; I'd never liked him much, but now I rather miss him.

The three of us walk together down a hallway to the wing commander's office, our steps echoing on the bare walls. The adjutant precedes us through the office door and takes a position off to the side, arms behind his back, legs slightly spread. Bel and I enter the room and jerk ourselves to attention, offering our best salutes.

"Squadron leader Dytran reporting, sir."

"Deputy squadron leader Beltran reporting, sir."

The wing commander rises slowly from his chair and acknowledges our salutes. I can see immediately that he, too, is a hard man – quite different from our reserved, easy-going former commander. He is tall and ramrod straight. The look in his eyes is forceful, like that of the Magleiter in the portrait hanging behind him.

"At ease," he says.

We assume a more relaxed posture, though we are far from being truly "at ease." The wing commander steps from behind his desk and approaches us, limping slightly as he walks. He extends a hand to me.

"Please accept my personal condolences for the loss of your brother," he says.

I take the hand with considerable astonishment; it is solid and powerful. The face looking into mine, while still handsome, is pocked with tiny indents, as if its owner has sustained injuries from an explosion. I'd seen such faces after the air raid.

"Thank you, sir," I say, bowing my head.

The wing commander gestures toward a manila folder and some papers spread across his desk.

"I was just going over Stilikan's records. He was one of our finest."

He moves back to his desk. Bel and I exchange confused glances. Things are not going the way we expected. Does a tiny smile flicker across Bel's face? The wing commander resumes his seat.

"You do recognize the gravity of the situation, don't you?" he says. "And the possible consequences?"

"Yes, sir," I say. "We are prepared to accept the judgment of the court."

The wing commander looks toward the adjutant.

"That will be all, thank you," he says. "Close the door on your way out."

"Yes, sir."

The adjutant departs.

The wing commander shuffles the papers back inside the folder and moves it to the far reaches of his desk. He uses his good right hand to do this. His left hand is immobile; his entire left arm seems withered, as if it has endured severe injury.

“I was thinking of the overall situation of the Fatherland,” he says, “and of the consequences should we lose this war.”

“We shall not lose!” Beltran cries.

I can’t keep the shock from my face. This is rank insubordination! The wing commander’s eyes glisten.

“That’s right,” he says. His voice is quiet and tinged with menace.

“Please forgive my outburst, sir,” Beltran says. “I was out of line.”

The wing commander nods, and the danger passes.

“When I see young men like yourselves, my faith is renewed,” he says.

I cannot grasp where this situation is heading, so I just blank my mind as much as possible and wait for whatever might come next. I am instinctively drawn to the wing commander, but cannot allow myself the luxury of thinking that he is on our side.

“These are harsh times,” the commander says. “There is no room for soft attitudes.”

He glances at the closed door, then back towards us.

“If it was up to me, I’d drop the charges against you,” he says, “but it isn’t my decision. Certain ... traditional elements in the command structure want to make an example out of you two.”

He strokes his chin with his good hand. His manner softens a bit, as if he is recalling some youthful failures of his own.

“Of course, what you did was stupid,” he says, “but to be young is to be stupid, isn’t it? I think you’ve already learned a hard lesson.”

“Yes sir, that’s true,” I say.

“Permission to speak freely, sir,” Beltran says.

I feel myself cringe. What will come out of Bel’s mouth this time?

“Granted,” the wing commander says.

“With the war entering a critical phase, isn’t there some service we can render the Fatherland?” Bel says. “What good will it do to keep us in detention?”

“My own thinking exactly,” the wing commander says. “So ... myself and a few others have persuaded the authorities to offer you an alternative.”

He rises from his desk. Despite his disabilities, his presence is truly commanding.

“Here it is, lads,” he says. “There is great need for support aviation in this war – artillery spotters, couriers, ammunition delivery – that sort of thing. Should you agree to a tour of duty at the front in this capacity, all charges against you will be dropped and your records will be expunged.”

I can’t believe what I am hearing.

“A-and, what of the others, sir?” I ask.

“This same offer applies to all members of the Raptor Aces squadron,” the wing commander replies.

A stunned silence fills the room. Bel finally breaks it.

“What about fighters, sir?” His voice is almost a whisper. “Can we qualify for those, too ... eventually?”

“Of course,” the wing commander says. “Perform your duties honorably, as I’m certain you will, and fighter training can be your next step – along with promotion to officer rank. This bump in the road will be forgotten.”

My whole life is flipping over right in front of me. I seem to be staring up from the bottom of a deep, open grave. High above, a rescuing hand reaches down toward me.

“Perhaps you’d like to talk this over,” the commander says, “give me your answers tomorrow?”

“No time required, sir!” Beltran comes to attention and salutes. “I volunteer.”

I give my own salute.

“Reporting for duty, sir!”

And that was that.

PART 2

The Battlefront.

Chapter 17

Feverish Preparations.

The following weeks race by in hectic activity. The barracks fills up with returning squadron members, and our planes are flown back from the air base where they'd been transferred.

I can scarcely control my emotions when my airplane, #Y-47, is restored to me. Never had I expected to see her again. I run my hands over the gleaming metal fuselage, the wings, the shapely propeller. I know every rivet and curve.

Jealousy takes hold as I think of another pilot flying my beautiful aircraft, as if he's defiled my fiancé. The guy left a wad of chewing gum stuck to the rim of the cockpit – some good-luck ritual, probably. I tear off the gum and fling it away.

"It's just you and me again, girl," I murmur.

I embrace the cowling, its sheet metal still radiates warmth from the engine, and kiss it with a passion equal to that I'd felt for Gyn.

There are eight of us now from the original Raptor Aces: myself and Bel – then Sipren, Albers, and Bezmir, who all arrived on the same day. My heart leapt with joy when Katella turned up the following afternoon, recovered from his injury and in fine spirits. He reminds me so much of Bekar, in both his physical appearance and his genial personality.

Grushon and Orpad arrived last. I was not overjoyed to see these two, as they were part of the gang that threatened to attack me during the slobe diving incident – Grushon was the leader, in fact.

I consider a "reeducation" session with them, Katella offers to help, but I decide to let the sleeping dog lie. They both offer profuse statements of loyalty, and they observe exact discipline at all times. We'll just have to see ...

Four of the boys do not make it. Maybe their parents intervened, or maybe they just had enough of the Raptor Aces. Their absence is the topic of some speculation, but we soon move on to other things. Four volunteers from the Blue Ice training squadron take over their spots. I don't know these new lads very well, and I don't really want to as I have other plans for them.

Wonderful excitement and purpose fill our lives. Air Force instructors work us hard – advanced navigation training, emergency procedures, night flying, rough field take offs and landings. I love it all, no matter how exhausting.

Each moment I spend flying is a gift from heaven. Every time I step out of my plane onto solid ground, I feel naked and diminished. I want to live in the sky. Thank God I've been allowed to return!

Then, on a particularly busy day – while I am in the middle of a preflight inspection, examining Y-47's rudder assembly – a startling intrusion occurs.

"So, how does it feel to lead the first squadron of youth volunteers?" a feminine voice asks from over my shoulder.

I spin around to see a young woman dressed in a National News Service blazer holding out a microphone and smiling broadly at me. Behind her, a movie camera is grinding away on a tripod attended by two guys in similar blazers. I'd been concentrating so much on my task that I'd not even noticed their approach.

"W-what?" I say.

I must look like an idiot. The girl laughs and signals to the lead cameraman, who shuts off his infernal machine.

"Sorry to startle you," she says. "Didn't they tell you we were coming?"

"No, I ... I don't know."

A vague recollection arises from my memory – one of the instructors mentioning that some "pain in the ass" film crew would be coming to the base. I'd filed this away as totally useless info, but now I have to deal with the situation first hand.

"We're doing a special feature on the Raptor Aces," the girl is saying. "We're naming it: *Youth Answers the Call!*"

"Youth answers the call?" I say.

I can't grasp what is going on. Am I supposed to be some sort of movie actor now?

"Yes," the girl says, "it has a good ring to it, don't you agree?"

"Well ... "

"Please say you like it, Dytran. I thought it up myself, you know. This is my first big project."

Bel approaches, eyeing the movie camera suspiciously.

"What's going on?" he says.

"Uh, this is my deputy squadron commander, Beltran," I say. "This is ..."

"Ket," the girl says, extending a hand toward Bel. "Pleased to meet you."

Now that my initial shock is over, and with attention turned away from me, I am able to observe things with a little detachment. I can see that Ket is a real "knockout." She is tall and fair with a lovely, intelligent face. The standard dark blazer she wears cannot disguise her excellent figure. She is, maybe, 20 or 21 years old. Just enough to have learned some interesting things about life.

Odd, I've scarcely thought about women at all lately. And when I do, it's always about Gyn and our goodbye kiss in the park.

Bel is obviously swept away. The intense glower that so often covers his face is completely gone now, replaced by a radiant smile. If there was ever love at first sight, this is it – at least on his part. But Ket's manner is strictly professional. No doubt, she is used to being worshipped by every male she encounters, and Bel is only one of the crowd.

She withdraws her hand and looks back toward me. "So, Dytran, when can we do an interview?"

Her attitude seems to change, becoming warmer and more intimate. Is it possible that she is coming on to me, just a little? Bel seems to think so, judging by the darkening expression on his face.

“We’re pretty busy today,” I say. “We’ll be practicing rough field take offs and landings out by the auxiliary airstrip.”

“I know,” Ket says, “we’ve already placed cameras out there.”

“So, you’d better take it up with the wing commander,” I say. “As far as our availability, I mean.”

“I’ll do that,” Ket says.

She extends a hand to me. It is warm and firm, and it seems to remain in mine a tiny bit longer than necessary.

“Goodbye Dytran, I’ll be in touch ... goodbye Beltran.”

She walks off. The cameramen folds up their tripod and follow in her wake. Bel and I screw our eyeballs back into place.

All right, things need to be said. There are way too many competitive pressures between Bel and me already without adding Ket to the mix. We are heading into real danger soon, and we cannot afford any friction – especially not about an older woman who probably has a list of boyfriends longer than my arm.

“Look,” I say, “as far as this movie thing is concerned, it’s all propaganda b.s. to me. We’ll just have to play along.”

“Uh huh,” Bel says.

“They’ve already assigned us roles,” I say, “but that doesn’t mean we have to stick with them afterwards.”

Bel looks confused. “What are you driving at, Dye?”

“As soon as we leave for the front, I’m dividing the squadron into two flights,” I say. “You’ll be in charge of one of them.”

“So, I’ll be your deputy, like before.”

I shake my head.

“No, not like before,” I say. “The two flights will be completely independent. You run yours any way you see fit. You won’t be taking orders from me.”

Astonishment replaces the confusion on Bel’s face.

“Why on earth would you do that?” he says.

“Because I need you,” I say, “and you need me. This is the only way it can work – Athens and Sparta, remember?”

Bel does not seem able to absorb what he is hearing. I try to smooth the way for him.

“I don’t suppose it matters a whole lot,” I say. “We’ll all be flying independently and getting orders from whoever’s in charge out there, but ... why don’t you take over the new lads, and one of the medics, too.”

Finally Bel understands. A smile explodes over his face, his eyes flash with pride.

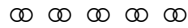
“By God, Dytran, you’re the best!” He seizes my hand. “You’re the ... best!”

I try to shrug off the praise, but Bel won’t allow it.

“I’ll never forget this,” he says. “You can count on me – always. You’ve got a friend for life.”

“In it to the end, huh?” I say.

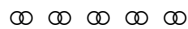
“In it to the end!”



As Ket stated, cameras are out at the practice area, grinding away as we make treacherous landings on the open fields. At first I find this to be distracting, and my performance suffers. Ket distracts me, too. I keep seeing her face, and my hand on the controls still tingles from her touch. But I overcome all this.

I am flying in for a particularly dangerous landing – dropping over trees onto a small cultivated field. The wind does not favor this approach, but the furrows are running my direction. If I try to land against them, the result will likely be a catastrophic nose dive into the ground.

Only my objective matters, all other considerations vanish – who I am, thoughts about girls, the “pain in the ass” camera crew standing off to the side. My airplane wraps itself tight around me until we are one being. I drift down ...



The others fall into an exhausted sleep immediately after lights out. Only I remain awake, and Bel. I can see the little pen light he uses for night reading glowing from his cot across the room.

We two are already “blooded” war veterans, old men, almost, compared to the others. They seem like young children enjoying their peaceful rest, without a care in the world. Maybe this is why I feel such distance from them. That and the fact that we aren’t performing as a coordinated unit any longer but as individual pilots.

And there is the harsh memory of the slobe diving incident. Distrust tinges my feelings now. Only Katella retains my highest regard – and Bel, too. Despite his early attempt at treachery, he’s come around to reveal himself as a person of courage and depth.

I tried to get him of the hook with the wing commander, but he voluntarily jumped back on, preferring to state the full truth rather than accept my whitewashed account. And it took great strength of character to overcome his bitterness and reconcile with me.

I respect him a lot, but mixed in with this is a strong measure of wariness. I hope that granting him his own power base will solve a lot of problems. Or maybe it will only make things worse ...

Sleep is coming on now. My thoughts drift to the partisan bands infesting the battle front, the blood of our heroes staining their cowardly hands. My airplane hovers above them like a bird of prey, directing an artillery barrage onto their heads. I can hear their screaming. The swirling wind begins to roar.

The Great Leader will watch over my dreams again tonight, Gyn too. And now Ket.

Chapter 18

The Grind Continues.

The last few weeks before our departure bring an almost unbearable work load down on us. Every day that we manage to endure is its own triumph. Our instructors seem to delight in pushing us to near collapse.

“Pansy” is the worst of the lot. He’s received this nickname because of his frequent references to that particular flower. As in:

“Where do you pansies think you’re going, a goddam tea party? Every slob out there wants to shoot your butt out of the sky!”

or:

“I wouldn’t pay half a crown for the whole bunch of you pansies!”

or:

“What’s the matter, pansy, feeling a bit tired? The enemy’s not gonna give you any beauty rest, so don’t expect me to.”

Like the wing commander, he is a combat veteran, and he has the scars to prove it. The face he presents to us is stern and unyielding, but he has another face, too. I saw it once as he was observing us preflight the aircraft. He stood on the grass looking thoughtful and reserved, his eyes were tinged with sadness. He noticed me watching him, and the steel came back.

“Hurry up there, pansy!” he shouted. “Get the lead out!”

We fly every day, and many nights, too, regardless of weather conditions. We march in formation shouting patriotic slogans, we learn advanced first aid techniques, we do calisthenics. On and on.

Through it all, the filming of our “docudrama” continues. The cameras are always grinding away – when we fly, when we eat, when we stand at attention with Pansy shouting in our faces. Movie cameras, still cameras, any kind you want. I half expect to see cameramen in the barracks lavatory. The production staff sets up a dark room and editing lab in one of HQ’s unused office suites, and they work there all hours of the day.

I have to take one of the movie cameras aloft in my rear cockpit one day. The operator refuses to wear his safety harness and constantly jostles around, maneuvering his camera this way and that like a machine gun. The set up is throwing off Y-47’s weight and balance, forcing me to make constant trim adjustments. I feel a demonic temptation to invert the plane and pitch the guy out.

After this experience, I pull rank and make sure that somebody else takes up the cameras in future.

There are compensations, though. Ket does all the personal interviews herself, speaking with each of us in turn, per the wing commander’s schedule. I have the pleasure of being interviewed twice. The first one is very brief, but the second is longer and much less hurried.

I scarcely remember the questions she asks, they are all just propaganda clap trap intended to impress the viewing audience. But when the camera switches off, she carries for a little private conversation. This movie is her big break, she says. Her father has Party connections and got her in at the National News Service. But once there, she is on her own in a male-dominated industry.

Nobody wanted to bother with the Raptor Aces project. Her male colleagues are interested in war reporting, industrial documentary, and the occasional plum: a report on the Great Leader. So, our story fell to her by default, and she intends to make the most of it. We will launch her career into the big time.

She already knows about our circumstances, the slob diving incident and all that, though she assures me that none of it will appear in the documentary to tarnish our image. By way of making conversation, I tell her about the air raid, keeping my remarks very general and within the bounds of my secrecy oath. She does not seem particularly interested.

Then, very casual like, I mention the victory rally and my encounter with the Magleiter.

“You met the Magleiter ... face to face?” she gasps. “He actually spoke to you?”

Her mouth drops open, and her eyes are wide. It would be a comical expression on a less beautiful face. I bask in her astonishment.

“Yes,” I say modestly. “It was a high point of my life.”

“I should say so, Dytran! What an amazing experience that must have been.”

Of course, I feel proud to tell her about this; it distinguishes me from the rest of her male admirers. But I have absolutely no idea how important my off-hand remark will become later on. She gets over her amazement and resumes her professional demeanor.

“Well, thanks for your time, Dytran. This has been most interesting.” She glances at her watch. “I’ve got another interview scheduled, have to go.”

“Good luck with it,” I say.

She walks rapidly away, granting me a quick backward glance.

There is a hard, driving edge to Ket, a sense that she doesn’t mind stepping over people to get what she wants. But I am too enraptured to pay much attention to that. I’m in love with her, like all the others.

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Then there are the physical exams along with a whole slew of inoculations.

“Why so many needles?” Albers complains as we stand in line for yet another injection.

“I just got a physical a few months ago,” Bezmir says, “why do I need another one?”

“They want to make sure we’re healthy enough to get shot,” Beltran says.

The comment is lost on the others, but I think it’s hilarious. I am already developing the dark humor necessary to get me through the coming ordeal. And our service at the front will be an ordeal, no question about that.

The babies among us who still think it’s going to be a lark are in for a rude awakening. As I look down our line, I can’t help but recall the procession of mutilated Youth League members who used to haunt my dreams until the Magleiter expelled them.

The official news outlets have dropped their stupid cheeriness. Gone are the stories about non-stop victories and the inherent superiority of our fighting men – how any one of them is worth ten of the racially-degraded enemy soldiers. No more talk of triumphant returns by Christmas.

The propaganda themes are now about honor and sacrifice for the Fatherland. We are defending civilization from barbarian hordes. Our cause is just. The road ahead is fraught with peril, but we are destined to succeed. The alternative to victory is annihilation and a new dark age.

How difficult it must be for the heroes at the propaganda ministry to shift gears like this. But our casualty rate is simply too enormous to conceal. The flood of wounded men cramming into every hospital speaks a different language than that of non-stop triumph. It is a rare family that does not count dead and injured among its young men.

How does Mama feel about all this, I wonder? She'll never get over Stilikan's death, and now her only remaining son is also going off to the war.

I'd reported for duty without giving her a moment's thought; my only regret was that Beltran had beaten me to volunteering first. I think about Mama now, though. I can see the tired face, the premature gray hair – like the other bereaved mothers I've seen, like Piotra's mother. I want to embrace her and say that everything will be fine.

She'll be proud of me. I'll exact justice for Stilikan.

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Three days before our scheduled departure, we assemble on the parade ground – along with a batch of regular recruits – to take the soldiers' oath. The cameras roll as we raise our right hands and repeat after a senior officer:

I swear by God this sacred oath: That I shall render loyal service to the Magleiter, leader of our nation and supreme commander of the armed forces. As a brave soldier, I shall always be ready to give my life for this oath.

An eerie silence follows. We all realize that we've crossed a point of no return.

The frenzy of activity stops now. Our instructors move off to abuse new batches of trainees. Pansy softens enough to wish us all good luck. Our airplanes receive well-earned maintenance, and we enjoy the luxury of sufficient rest.

We move into the calm before the storm.

Chapter 19

Youth Answers the Call!

The camera crews run off to other assignments, and the film editors return to the capital to finish their work on Youth Answers the Call! Soon, audiences in theaters across the nation will be watching our story. Only Ket and one or two others remain. She invites me to a "special preview" of the movie before she, too, departs for the capital city.

"It's only a rough cut," she explains, "but I think you'll get a good idea of what the final production is going to be like."

"Sure," I say, trying to conceal my excitement – not about the movie, but about Ket.

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It is already getting dark when I arrive at HQ. The place is largely deserted, and a National News Service car is parked out front with somebody snoozing behind the wheel. I enter the building and make my way toward the production company office suite. As always, I feel a jolt at the sight of the blank corner where the Yuliac awards case once stood.

The office suite is cleared out now, except for a few folding chairs and a battered, camouflage-painted projector that I recognize as the one we used to watch training films with. A white bed sheet spread taut across the far wall serves as a movie screen.

Somebody is threading a reel of film into the projector while Ket looks over his shoulder. She isn't wearing her standard blazer now but is dressed casually in loose-fitting blouse and slacks. As always, her hair and makeup are perfect.

She turns toward me as I walk in.

"Dytran!" she says, a bit too brightly. "How good of you to come."

How good of me to come? I'd have walked barefoot over broken glass to see her. She looks genuinely pleased, though, in an almost childish way.

"Please sit down," she invites, "we'll only be a minute."

This is a Ket I've never seen before, nervous and unsure of herself. The strong, take-charge woman I've grown accustomed to seeing must have left on holiday. Of course ... she is showing her pet project to its first audience, baring her soul, as it were. She's feeling a lot of pressure, as indicated by her strained smile and fidgeting hands.

I determine to compliment her efforts with glowing language, even if the movie itself is horrible.

I sit down on one of the folding chairs and look about the vacant office with approval. My concern had been that Ket would invite others to the screening, a whole room full of us ogling her like kids at a toy shop window. This arrangement is much better.

The projectionist finishes threading the film, and things get better yet.

"That's fine, thank you," Ket says to the guy. "Why don't you go rest in the car? We've got a long drive ahead of us."

"Sure thing, Ket," the guy says.

He glances my direction. Do I detect a little smirk on his face? Then he is out the door.

"Well, I guess we should get started," Ket says. "The finished movie is going to be longer than this – we're cutting in some stock footage. And there're the shots we took yesterday – some really good stuff. And your wing commander gave the most extraordinary interview this afternoon. I haven't decided yet how to work it in ..."

Her voice drones on, nervous and edgy. If anyone else talked like this, I would be annoyed. But anything Ket has to say is all right with me. Finally, she switches on the projector and turns out the overhead light.

Then, to my great pleasure, she takes a chair right next to me. My fears that she'd remain standing in the back of the room prove unfounded. I settle down to watch the film, leaning a slight bit in her direction. The old projector rattles away.

Then a magnificent aerial vista appears – the Raptor Aces squadron maneuvering among towering cumulus clouds. I edge forward in my seat,

momentarily forgetting Ket's presence. I recognize the scene. It was filmed from the back of my own airplane.

"This is fantastic!" I cry.

"Y-you like it, then?" Ket says.

"It's wonderful," I say without a trace of exaggeration. "I love it."

Up on the screen, we continue our stately progress among the clouds, like glorious knights of the air. Then other flying shots of us cut in, including a close up one of me in left profile.

I remember this incident well. I'd turned and shouted at the cameraman in the back of Katella's plane to get the hell away from me. That part has been deleted, though. There is no sound, but in my mind I hear a thunderous musical score.

"The sound track goes in later," Ket says. "And there'll be voice over narration, too."

We've landed now and are taxiing our airplanes into a neat row. Then a low-angle shot of us running. We assemble in line and snap to attention, eyes right. There's me at the end, looking direct into the camera. I recall being bothered by a large pimple on my cheek that day, but from this angle it isn't visible.

"Here's where the title fades in," Ket says. "Youth Answers the Call!"

No question about it, Ket and her crew really know their stuff. They've transformed the daily grind of our training regimen into something dramatic and exciting. I almost feel nostalgic for those long days of physical exhaustion and verbal abuse from Pansy.

Our various interviews are cut in amongst the action sequences. All of us look impossibly young, brimming with enthusiasm and bravado. I know why. We're talking to Ket, though she's remained discreetly off camera.

As the movie progresses, Ket draws closer to me. Then her hand is in my lap, her fingers interlace with mine. Then my arm is around her shoulder. It is all excellent and natural – a fit accompaniment to the wonderful images being projected on the wall.

Time seems suspended in a perfect world, I hope fervently that the movie will never end. But it does. Only blank light shows against the bed sheet now. I turn toward her.

"You did great –"

She fairly lunges at me, like a jungle cat. Her mouth crushes against mine, her tongue probes. I rocket into an impossible realm of erotic ecstasy. She seizes my crotch and grinds hard. Unbearable pain and pleasure shoot through me.

Then she pulls away, giving my lower lip a final, sharp little bite.

"Ow!"

She stands up into the glaring beam of the projector, towering above me like some warrior goddess. The film stock has run its course and is flapping around loosely in the spinning reel.

"Just a little something to remember me by," she says.

She moves to the projector and switches it off. After a moment of darkness, the overhead light comes on. I remain in my chair, shell shocked. I move a finger to my lip, it comes back with a smear of blood. Ket begins packing up the reel.

"I know how you boys feel about me," she says. "You all think I'm some big 'woman of the world,' don't you?"

She looks questioningly at me. Her gaze is bold and direct, every trace of the insecure little girl has vanished.

“Well ... we ...”

She gives a small, tinkling little laugh. Lots of men would kill to hear it.

“Let me tell you, Dytran,” she says. “I’ve never been with a man before. Nobody seemed worthy ... until now.”

A wicked little smile crosses her lips.

“Don’t look so surprised,” she says. “You’re a virgin, too, right?”

I feel my face burning; I must look like a human beet. Ket laughs again.

“We could learn a lot from each other,” she says.

She shoves the reel into its can and replaces the lid. I want to say something worldly and sophisticated, but I just sit rooted in my chair.

“Uh, don’t you have to rewind that film?” I say.

“I’ll do that later.”

She places a card on the projector stand.

“Here’s my business card,” she says. “My home address and phone are on the other side. Write when you have a chance, and call me when you get back?”

“I-I will ...”

She is at the open door now. “Goodbye, Dytran. Best of luck to you.”

Her rapid foot steps fade down the hall. I move to the projector on legs that are not quite as strong as they should be. I pick up the card and study it reverently, like a piece of holy scripture.

When I stumble out of HQ, automobile tail lights are disappearing down the road toward the main gate. The night is turning windy, and a storm seems to be brewing up – but to me, everything is gloriously perfect. I make it back to the barracks on autopilot, scarcely paying any attention to the route. My whole being is taken up with Ket.

Beltran is the first to greet me.

“What happened to you?” he says. “You’re grinning like that slobe kid that tried to kill me.”

I only grin wider. Even Bel looks beautiful this evening.

“Nice busted lip you’ve got,” he says, “a real improvement.”

Chapter 20

Final Day.

We have little to do but loaf during our last day on base. Our kit bags are packed and our final letters home written. My squadron mates have recovered their strength from the previous days of rest and are anxious to leave at first light tomorrow.

As for myself, I am consumed by thoughts of Ket. Memories of her bold advances torture every moment. I feel ready to kill in order to be at her side again. I actually find myself wondering how I could desert and chase after her. This is

madness, of course. Deserters get the firing squad. But maybe that wouldn't be so bad, if only I could be with her again.

Finally, I meander over to the maintenance area. Perhaps the sight of aircraft can take my mind off Ket for a while.

A vast, curved ceiling arches overhead as I walk into the hangar. As always, I have the sense of entering a cathedral or some other holy place when approaching the aircraft inner sanctum. Everything is new and clean, rebuilt since the raid. The air carries the scent of machinery and lubricant – the fragrance of adventure.

The mechanics are off in a corner now, enjoying their lunch break. Our airplanes stand about the hangar, resting uneasily on their landing gear. They seem anxious to get moving, too. All of them sport radios now along with fresh coats of camouflage paint. A few are minus their engines, which would be in the workshop receiving final overhaul.

I pause by Y-47. My airplane looks proud and aggressive in its new livery.

“What’s the trouble, lad?” someone asks.

I turn to see the crew chief striding toward me. He is a squat, muscular man of about 40 dressed in standard coveralls.

“No trouble,” I say.

The crew chief pauses and looks up into my face.

“Oh, you’re the squadron leader, ain’t you?” he says.

His manner becomes a bit less defensive, but not quite friendly. I am stomping on his turf uninvited, after all.

“Yes,” I say. “Just thought I’d stop by to thank you guys for all your good work – keeping our butts in the air these past weeks.”

I’ve struck exactly the right cord. The crew chief’s eyes gleam with pride.

“Just doing our job,” he says.

“So, will you be going with us tomorrow?” I ask.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He gestures toward the airplanes. “You don’t think I’d leave my babies at the mercy of you hotshots?”

We enjoy a good laugh. Like crew chiefs everywhere, he believes that the planes actually belong to him and that we fly them only with his indulgence. We pilots would disagree, but ... whatever works.

After this, the mechanics judge me to be an “all right fellow” and they treat me to lunch from the vendor wagon. Afterwards, I watch them prep our “babies” for the long eastward journey.

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I return to a wonderful surprise at the barracks. Bekar is sitting in the chair beside my cot, thumbing a magazine. I fairly run to him from the doorway.

“Bekar! When did you get in?”

He rolls up the magazine and sets it on my night table.

“About fifteen minutes ago.” He shakes my extended hand. “Good timing, Dytran.”

He grasps a cane and thrusts himself up out of the chair. His leg is covered with a less bulky walking cast now.

“Ah, you’re getting better,” I say.

“Slow but sure,” Bekar says. “I’ve still got to wear this damn cast for quite a while, though.”

“What does the doctor say?”

“One of Father’s surgeon friends checked me out,” Bekar says. “He’s some big shot medical school instructor.”

“And?”

“He said the military doc did good work under the circumstances, but with some extra surgery I can get back pretty much full use of my leg.”

A burst of joy shoots through me.

“Great!”

“Yes,” Bekar says. “I asked if I could tap dance afterwards, and he said ‘probably,’ and I said – ”

“I know,” I interrupt. “You said: ‘Good, because I could never tap dance before.’”

Bekar laughs. “Guess I’ve worn that one out, huh?”

I grip his arm in comradely fashion.

“You’ve made my day, Bekar. That’s wonderful news!”

Then I ask the big question.

“So ... did Gyn come with you?”

“Glad you asked.” Bekar says. “She’s in your lavatory freshening up.”

I nod. Bekar puts on his mischievous smile. I brace myself for some innuendo type comment, but he only gestures to the wider room.

“I wish she’d hurry and clear out,” he says. “We’ve got some exploding bladders here that need to be taken care of.”

I look toward the lads sprawled on their cots. I haven’t even noticed them before in my excitement. Katella and Beltran are not among them, which had makes the group easier to overlook.

“Do you guys know who this is?” I say.

“I’ve already made their acquaintance,” Bekar says. “They were suitably impressed.”

Everyone is munching on chocolate bars. Then a chocolate bar appears in my hand, too.

“Eat up, Dytran,” Bekar says, “you’ve lost weight.”

“Thanks!”

I tear off the wrapper and bite into the chocolate. It is the real thing, creamy and wondrous, nothing like the ersatz crap available with ration cards these days. It must have cost quite a bit on the black market.

The flavor wafts me back to a simpler time – when I still believed in the fundamental justice of life, when Stilikan was yet with us. I’ve not tasted anything like it in ages. Of course, Bekar offered me chocolate during the victory rally, but I’d refused to take it. I was still punishing myself for my screw-ups back then.

Bekar picks up the magazine from my night table and slaps it into my hand.

“Brought you a present, Dytran.”

I unroll it – the latest issue of Struggle, the Party’s weekly news publication – and stare at the cover.

“What?!” I gasp.

“That was my reaction, too,” Bekar says.

The Magleiter is on the cover, looking solemn and dramatic. His hand grips somebody's shoulder as he looks deep into the person's eyes ... it's me! A caption along the bottom reads: *A new leader from a new generation.*

I flop down onto my cot, nearly landing on a half empty box of candy bars. I whip open the magazine to the lead story. There it is: Ket's name in the byline along with a small photo of her. She looks very professional in her News Service uniform, but her eroticism cannot be fully concealed.

And there I am, too – several pictures worth – flying my plane, jogging at the head of the Raptor Aces, giving orders. I am the very image of youthful authority, like a scaled-down Alexander the Great. The story begins:

Join the Magleiter in welcoming a new generation of leadership to the Fatherland's service. Dytran commands the first squadron of Youth League Air Corps volunteers headed for duty at the front. His brother, Stilikan, one of the Air Force's top fighter aces ...

"So, who's this 'Ket' babe?" Bekar asks.

I look up. Bekar does not seem pleased.

"She works for the National News Service," I say. "She's making a documentary movie about us."

"Uh huh."

"I didn't know anything about this, I –"

Gyn appears on the scene now, exiting the lavatory to the appreciative glances of the boys. I stand up.

"Gyn!"

"Hello, Dytran."

All heads swivel as she passes. She wears another pastel summer dress. It is impossible to image her wearing anything else. She is beautiful, wholesome, delicious. She gives me a peck on the cheek and I catch a whiff of summer fragrance.

"How nice to see you again," she says.

Her manner is polite and formal. I want to grab her into my arms, like in the park, but restrain myself.

A frown creases her face. "You've been hurt."

"Huh?"

She gestures toward my injured lip.

"Oh, that's nothing," I say, raising a hand to my mouth. "It'll be fine in a day or two."

Gyn nods curtly, as if she knows exactly how I got the injured lip. Was that Ket's real intention, to warn off other females?

"Well ... let's go for a walk, shall we?" Bekar says. "Or, in my case – a hobble."

"Sure," I say.

"I'll meet you boys outside," Gyn says.

She walks out the door, skirt swishing. Every head turns to follow her, as if attached by invisible strings. Bekar picks up the box of chocolate.

"Who's the most important one here?" he asks in a low voice.

"I don't know ... him, probably." I gesture toward Sipren.

My own indifference surprises me. Before the slobe diving incident, I would have spoken with great pride about the members of my squadron. Now, they seem a mere footnote to my real mission in life, which is gaining revenge for Stilikan.

Bekar walks stiffly with his cane to Sipren's cot and sets the box on it. He pulls out a chocolate bar.

"Here's an extra one for you, mate," he says. "See that the lads who aren't here get some too, all right?"

"I will, thanks," Sipren says.

Gyn is standing on the edge of the assembly area gazing out at the main runway. Closer in, a wheelchair waits beside the door. Bekar flops himself into it.

"Could you take me to the training division?" he says. "I want to see if they need a temporary ground school instructor."

He gives his cast a frustrated smack.

"I've got to make myself useful somehow."

"Sure thing," I say. "That sounds like a great idea."

Gyn moves in to join us.

"Maybe you can show Gyn around while I'm talking with those blokes?" Bekar says. "And later I thought the three of us could have dinner in town ... if that's all right."

"Good idea," I say. "Count me in."

He'll be treating us to a top class restaurant, I am certain, the type of place that only Party big shots can afford these days. No ration card stew for us. Yet he'd asked me if it was "all right."

I know what he meant by that. As squadron leader, I should really be spending this last night with my boys – taking them out for beer, bucking them up with a fine speech. But, frankly, I don't care much about that sort of thing, not now, anyway. Maybe things will change after we reach the front.

Their betrayal during the slobe dive incident has cut me very deep. Everybody knows this, Bekar, too. The love and camaraderie I once felt for my squadron mates has gone up with the smoke of Bel's wrecked plane. I'll miss only Katella tonight, but he'll understand my absence.

I grasp the wheelchair handles before Gyn can beat me to it and start walking. Bekar keeps up a pleasant chatter about sports, the latest movies, the weather, but Gyn remains cool and distant. What happened to the warm, passionate girl in the park?

I know what happened to her. She's seen the magazine article and the picture of its author. She, too, is asking, "Who's this Ket babe?"

I seems wise to redirect things into a more positive channel.

"When are you going to have the surgery done, Bekar?" I ask.

Gyn stiffens.

"Well ... the doctor has to wait a while yet," Bekar said, "then he can go in and rearrange things. It'll take more than one surgery."

"So, a few weeks, then, a month?" I say.

Bekar clears his throat.

"Longer than that, actually," he says. "Once this cast comes off, I should be able to fly again. I'll be going back to the front."

"Oh ... I see."

"I decided the Fatherland needs me a lot more than the dancing club," Bekar says.

We continue walking amid an awkward silence until we reach the training division headquarters. Thank heaven, it isn't too far.

"Why don't you wait out here, Sis," Bekar says. "We'll only be a minute."

"All right," Gyn says.

We enter the HQ building. The place is fairly busy with much coming and going. Bekar insists on propelling the wheelchair himself now.

We approach the adjutant's desk and request an audience with the commandant. One is granted for twenty minutes later.

"Ah, enough time for a cigarette," Bekar says.

We wheel to the nearby canteen and find a vacant table. The whole place is pretty vacant, actually. Bekar speaks in a low voice just the same.

"You know what's behind this magazine article and your documentary film, don't you?" he says.

"What?"

"They're conditioning public opinion to accept a lower draft age," Bekar says. "Seventeen will be the minimum soon. And after that, who knows?"

This is a troubling statement. I don't know how to respond. Bekar takes a thoughtful drag from his cigarette. He blows a large smoke ring, then puffs a small one through the middle of it.

"Judging by the way she wrote, I'd say that Ket's in love with you, Dytran."

He gives me a solemn look, all of his friendly banter has departed.

"I hope you make the right choices," he adds. "There's a lot more to life than just getting your rocks off with some hottie."

I feel myself beginning to wither under his disapproval, but I rally quick enough.

"Thanks for the free advice," I say. "I'm certain it's worth every farthing."

He holds my gaze a moment longer, then he softens. His old grin returns.

"You're right," he says. "Who the hell am I to tell you what to do?"

He reaches over and grips my arm.

"See you in while, huh?"

"Sure, Bekar."

I get up to leave.

"Oh, and one other thing," he says.

"Yes?"

"When you do go all the way with that special girl, Dytran, make sure it really is 'all the way.'"

He mimes placing a wedding ring on his finger.

Chapter 21

Pensive Stroll.

Gyn is not waiting outside the building where I'd last seen her, and for a moment I fear that she has left us. Then I spot her standing fifty meters distant watching fighter planes take off from the runway on a training mission.

She makes a quiet and pensive figure out there by herself. The sky shines above her an almost painful blue, void of clouds except for wisps of high, icy cirrus. The fighters leap into the air like predator birds eager to rip and kill. The breeze plays through Gyn's long, auburn hair and tugs at her skirts. She does not notice my approach.

She is flawless out here on the summer side of existence, a girl that any man would desire to make his own. I feel a pang of something akin to guilt. How can I lust after Ket while this ideal woman stands right here before me?

But why torture myself with such thoughts? The odds of my returning alive and whole from the front are not favorable. I have no delusions about that. It is better to just go with whatever comes my way during this final period of freedom.

This idea rings hollow the moment it occurs to me, though. Why does everything about girls have to be so complicated?

Gyn turns toward me. Her smile is melancholy and distant.

"It's beautiful out here, in its way," she says. "I can see why you love it."

"That's true," I say, "but it's nothing compared to the sky."

"Ah ... the world of manly action. You were born for it, Dytran."

"I wish I could take you up there, Gyn – sometime when this is all over."

I take her hand. The motion seems right and natural; she does not pull away.

"Shall we go for a walk?" I say.

"Sure, Dytran."

We stroll off together. In the distance, a repair crew is hammering on a bomb-damaged building, but the racket only highlights the glorious afternoon. Summer scents fill the air. Everything is fine for a while, but without Bekar's continuous banter, the situation starts to become awkward. Gyn's hand feels a bit rigid in mine, and I regret taking it so impulsively.

She is hard to read. What woman isn't? Maybe her mood has nothing to do with me, but probably it does. I decide to tackle the issue that must be simmering below her quiet surface.

"You saw the magazine?" I say.

"Yes. Bekar picked up a copy in the train station when we got here. It was quite a surprise."

"I was surprised, too," I say. "I had no idea she was going to write something like that."

Gyn nods. What the hell did that mean?

"I haven't read the whole thing," I say, "but it seemed pretty blown up. I didn't recognize myself."

"It's not hard to figure out," Gyn says. "You're the type of boy that girls just naturally want to see as a hero. Ket is no different."

Ket, the name had been uttered. I try to put things in perspective.

"She's very ambitious," I say. "She wants to build her career around the Raptor Aces story."

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Dytran."

All right, I won't. Gyn relieves me from the burden of changing the subject.

"This war must end soon," she says, "before we lose too much of our substance."

"It will," I say. "Once the current operations are successfully carried out, the Great Leader can bring the war to a favorable conclusion."

She gives me a skeptical glance but says nothing.

"Why ..." I say, "Field Marshal Angrift himself has just announced a major new victory."

"Do you really believe that, Dytran?"

"Yes," I say. "The Magleiter must know what he's doing."

She gives a sarcastic little laugh – very unbecoming.

"If the Magleiter knew what he was doing, we wouldn't be in this mess," she says.

I hear my breath whistle in past my teeth.

"Be careful what you say, Gyn! That kind of talk is treasonous."

She looks up boldly into my eyes. "Will you inform on me, Dytran?"

"No ... of course not."

She withdraws her hand from mine and gestures at the military atmosphere around us.

"Open your eyes, Dytran, the Great Leader has created everything – the war, the weapons, the dead and mangled boys. We're living inside his mind."

Gyn's remarks shock me, but I am not really surprised. From the moment I saw her tight-lipped disapproval at the funeral I knew that she was a dissenter. It hadn't mattered to me then, but that was before I'd met the Great Leader face to face.

"The Magleiter hates all this all as much as we do," I say. "He never wanted this war."

Again the cutting laugh.

"He wanted a war, all right," Gyn says. "He just didn't get the one he planned on."

There is nothing I can say to get through to her. How could she possibly understand my feelings?

"People just keep going along with the madness," Gyn says. "Me, too. I've been going along since I was a child – the Youth League Maidens and all that. Father had business interests to protect, so I had to be the ideal National Salvation Party rag doll."

"What can an ordinary person do?" I say. "The NSP controls everything."

Gyn stops walking and faces me directly.

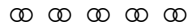
"There's plenty we can do, Dytran. A whole lot of us are planning things right now."

A huge, black viper slithers into the perfect day, threatening us with poisoned fangs. Gyn seems like a totally different person. There is nothing soft about her now; she stands before me cold and hard, like an ice statue.

A great weariness is coming over me, my eyes burn. People disappear into concentration camps for saying far less than Gyn just did. When you come right down to it, she is talking like a race traitor. Why is she telling me all this?

Because she trusts me, as I trusted Bekar.

"Please don't tell me anything more," I say. "The less I know, the better."



When we return to training HQ, Bekar is waiting outside in his wheelchair.

“How’d it go?” I ask.

“You’re looking at the new ground school instructor,” he says. “I begin as soon as the orders come through.”

“Congratulations!” I say.

Gyn wraps her arms around his shoulders and kisses his cheek.

“That’s wonderful,” she says. “Why don’t you keep with it until the war’s over? You’ve already done your share at the front.”

“Oh, let’s not go through that again, Sis,” Bekar says. “Come on, I want to celebrate.”

Chapter 22

Night on the Town.

The restaurant Bekar takes us to is very classy with excellent food, a good wine list, and neatly dressed waiters. He belongs in a place like this with his charm and elegant manners. Smoke from his top quality cigarettes blends with the atmosphere. He’s already pressed several cartons of these cigarettes on me to take to the front “just in case.”

Of course, his father is a wealthy businessman, and Bekar receives a generous allowance; so he can afford such luxuries. But he’s also earned a spot here, as evidenced by his Air Force uniform and his injured leg.

Not so the Party hacks.

There are plenty of them here with their rosy cheeks and tailored uniform tunics buttoned tight to hold in their pot bellies. Parasites. Five of them, accompanied by beautiful girls, sit at a nearby table drinking champagne from ice buckets – no rot gut booze for them.

“I’m telling you, Dytran, there’s no justice in this world,” Bekar says. “See those women at the next table? Talk about pearls before swine.”

“Well, they have to survive, somehow,” I say. “And I’ve noticed one of them looking our direction.”

“I’ve noticed that, too,” Bekar says. “Damn this cast!”

Gyn gives him a disapproving look. “Please watch your language.”

“Oh, all right, Sis.” He turns toward me. “She thinks I’m supposed to be a f... monk, or something.”

I smile; Gyn doesn’t seem very pleased, though. The waiters serve us an excellent meal, and I enjoy it to the full. When will I eat so well again, I wonder?



As we sip after-dinner drinks, a band starts playing dance music. I look over at Gyn. Throughout the meal, she’s remained cool and distant. Sure, she’s implied that Ket was no big problem, but her frosty demeanor speaks otherwise. Also, she

might be worried that she confessed too much during our walk – and Bekar’s insistence that he’ll return to combat could not have brightened her mood. I want a thaw in relations.

“Come on, Gyn, let’s dance,” I say.

We head to the floor with several other couples. Gyn is a good dancer, but her style is too formal. She feels rigid in my arms and keeps more distance than is necessary. I’m not the world’s greatest dancer myself, and her stand-offish attitude does not bring out my best performance. I’m glad when the number ends.

We return to the table where Bekar is on his second brandy. A warm, friendly glow attends his face.

“Well, that was very nice,” he says. “Join me in a drink, Dytran.”

A waiter places a whisky in front of me. The ice cubes tinkle merrily, in contrast to my deflated mood.

“Thanks.” I take a healthy swig.

One of the Party hacks from the next table approaches. He is younger than the rest, a minor official of some kind, no doubt, but he is plenty puffed up just the same. He bows to me and Bekar.

“May I ask the lady for the next dance?”

Bekar looks up at him with an amused little smile and shrugs.

“I’d love to,” Gyn says.

She gets up quickly and heads to the dance floor with him.

“Looks like she’s sending you a message,” Bekar says.

That’s true enough, and I’ll admit to feeling a pang of jealousy. But Gyn’s manner on the floor betrays her bravado – she is obviously not getting off on the guy. I catch her glancing my way to see my reaction. I grin and finish my drink. I am not going to play the game.

“Why don’t you ask that girl at the next table to dance?” Bekar says. “She keeps ogling us.”

I look over just as she averts her eyes. Things are starting to get raucous at their table with free-flowing booze and loud talk.

“Naw,” I say.

“Come on, do it for me,” Bekar says. “I can sit here and fantasize.”

“I don’t want any trouble with those Party slobs,” I say. “Besides, why would I settle for hamburger when steak is available?”

I nod toward Gyn on the dance floor. A broad grin spreads across Bekar’s face. He hoists his drink in salute.

“Capital fellow!”

Gyn returns from her dance, and we order another drink. Bekar is getting a bit tipsy.

“Make this the last one, all right?” Gyn says.

“Sure thing,” Bekar says. “Got to stay sober so I can drive – the wheelchair that is!”

This seems very humorous to him, maybe with less alcohol it wouldn’t be quite so funny. I am in a good mood myself, but not so much as to be unaware of the changing atmosphere. The room is taking on a harder edge, fueled by the constantly flowing alcohol. Conversations are louder and more slurred, the laughter grows more challenging.

“Yes, let’s finish up,” I say. “We’re getting an early start tomorrow.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Bekar says, raising his glass.

Another Party man approaches. This one is a bit older – a big, mean-looking guy who makes little show of respect. Worse, he seems more than a little drunk. He is second in the hierarchy of the neighboring table, I figure, behind the silver-haired man with the reptilian smile.

“Would mademoiselle honor me with the next dance?” he says.

“Oh ... no thank you,” Gyn says. “We’re about to leave.”

He glances at me and Bekar with something bordering on contempt. Damn, if he doesn’t remind me of Papa! He looks back toward Gyn.

“Then perhaps you’d care to join us at our table,” he says. “We’ll see that you get home safely.”

He takes hold of Gyn’s elbow. She recoils.

“The lady told you she’s not interested,” Bekar says. “So why don’t you bugger off?”

The Party man’s face darkens. “And just who might you be?”

I am on my feet.

“He’s a fighter ace,” I say, “and I’m on my way to the front myself. So why should we be impressed by a puss bag like you?”

He lets go of Gyn’s arm, his mouth popping open like a beached fish. Then his rage starts to build, but not enough to try an attack. The Party might be behind him, but my fist is a lot closer. The silver-haired man intervenes.

“Hey!” he cries sharply.

The slob looks toward him. The silver-haired man snaps his fingers, and the slob retreats to their table without further prompting.

“Well, on that friendly note,” Bekar says, “I suggest we get the hell out of here.”

He drains his glass. I do the same. As I knock my head back, the silver-haired man catches my eye. He gives me a cold smile. I do not know who he is, but I have the uneasy feeling that I will be seeing him again.

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I accompany them back to their hotel. Bekar leaves me and Gyn on the sidewalk out front.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he says, “I’ve got to go take a mean piss.”

He grasps my hand.

“So long, Dytran. We’ll see you off tomorrow, if they let us.”

He propels his wheelchair through the glass doors and onto the lobby elevator.

“That’s my brother for you,” Gyn says. “Always to the point.”

“Yes, there’s only one Bekar,” I say.

The night is fast advancing. It is time for good-byes. As usual, I can’t think of anything to say. Gyn picks up the ball.

“There’s so much uncertainty these days,” she says. “The whole world is being cut from under us.”

“Yes, that’s true, I’m afraid.”

Gyn sighs. “I don’t want to fall in love with you under these circumstances, Dytran ... but I am.”

She is tearing my heart. I want to take her in my arms and say that everything will be fine, that I love her, too.

“Gyn, I – ”

She presses a finger against my lips.

“Please don’t say anything more, right now. Just come back safe to me.”

She replaces the finger with her lips. Then she disappears inside the hotel.

Chapter 23

The Adventure Begins.

Dawn casts feeble light over us as we approach the railhead. A cacophony of bird song fills the dank air. Flat cars loaded with our partially disassembled aircraft stand at the siding along with a boxcar loaded up with spare parts and other equipment. A second boxcar awaits the Raptor Aces.

The crew chief and his assistant stand nearby, looking relaxed and confident. We pilots try to look confident, too, and older than we are. We peer into our boxcar’s gloomy interior.

“Ah, the lap of luxury!” Katella says. “I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be a very long ride.”

Everyone laughs, a bit too heartily. We are all anxious to leave, but our enthusiasm is tempered by the knowledge that we are leaving our youth behind us – or at least the others are. Mine has abandoned me some time ago.

We’d been roused up very early and marched to the siding after a hurried breakfast. We’d scarcely had time to use the lavatory or grab a quick shower. Now we hang around waiting for the loaders to finish their jobs.

“Careful there!” The crew chief shouts at some poor conscript who is trying to secure one of the planes to a flatcar. “You’re putting too much stress on the airframe!”

He walks along the track inspecting each one of his “babies.” All the while the birds keep up their infernal racket. I’ve always hated listening to them in the semi-darkness. Do birds make so much noise in full daylight?

I’ve never liked early rising. There is always unpleasant business to attend at that time. People get up early for emergency situations, or because they can’t sleep during the night, or because they go off to jobs they hate.

A little chug chug switching locomotive appears and couples itself to our cars. Thank heaven, its racket blots out that of the birds. The crew chief, finally satisfied with the shipping arrangements, climbs into the equipment boxcar with his assistant. The lads wait for me to enter our boxcar first, but I step aside and gesture toward the open door.

“After you, gentlemen,” I say.

Beltran remains with me while the others climb aboard. I speak to him softly.

“Now’s as good a time as any to make the announcement,” I say.

Bel nods. I take a final look around the gloomy morning atmosphere, then I board.

The lads have spread themselves along the far wall of the boxcar with a gap in the middle – space reserved for me and Bel. The four Blue Ice boys sit together on the right side of the space, toward the front of the car. So, the squadron has already divided itself. The two groups talk and laugh among themselves.

Bel and I stand before them side by side. The train jolts to a start nearly unbalancing me. Beltran grasps my arm to keep me from falling over. I feel oddly humiliated by the gesture.

“All right, everybody, listen up!” I say.

The banter stops, all eyes look up at me. I pause a moment to contemplate the decision I am about to announce. I am giving up half my command – a squadron that held together for an entire year is about to break up.

But what of it? The squadron has only been a children’s game, and we are headed for the life and death maelstrom now. I resume speaking.

“When we get to the front we won’t be operating as a squadron any longer. We’ll go to our separate assignments and answer to whomever is in command. I have decided, therefore, that we need to break into smaller, more manageable units.”

I look toward Bel. His eyes are impassive, his stance a formalized “at ease.”

“From now on,” I say, “the Raptor Aces will divide into two equal flights. I will command one, and Beltran will command the other.”

A confused chatter runs through the boys. I raise my voice above it.

“Those in my flight will answer only to me,” I say. “Those in Beltran’s will answer only to him. The two commands will be totally independent.”

“I’m staying with you, Dytran!” Katella pipes up.

“Did I give you permission to speak, airman?” I say.

“No ... sir.” Katella lowers his eyes to the rough floor planks.

“The personnel assignments are as follows,” I say. “The former members of the Blue Ice squadron are now in Beltran’s flight.”

Four blond heads draw together in excited whispering.

“In addition, Commander Beltran will require a medic,” I say. “Is there a volunteer?”

Bezmir and Sipren both shoot up their hands. I instantly realize my mistake; I couldn’t have better undermined my authority better if I’d planned on it.

Katella stares daggers at the two medics. I turn toward Bel.

“Commander Beltran, select a volunteer,” I say.

Somehow I manage to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

“Bezmir, report to my flight!” Bel snaps.

Do I detect a little empathy in his manner, or is it a note of triumph?

“Yes, sir ... thank you, sir,” Bezmir replies.

He is obviously embarrassed, though not so much as to wipe the grin off his face. I want this episode to be over, but my final act as squadron commander obligates me to address inquiries.

“Are there any questions?” I say.

“Yes, sir,” Katella says. “What will our flight be called?”

Odd, I’ve never given this any thought. There is only one possible answer, though.

“Mine will be named ‘Athens Flight,’” I say.

I look toward Bel.

“My flight will be named ‘Sparta,’” he says.

I turn back toward the lads. “Anything else?”

Silence – impossible to read.

“That will be all, then,” I say.

So, my squadron has broken apart along its fault lines. The Spartan flight gravitates toward the front of the car while my Athens boys move toward the back. An empty space yawns between us.

This is a natural move as the Blue Ice lads were already sitting toward the front. It was just a matter of them sliding over a little. But I cannot help feeling diminished by the arrangement. Katella shares my insight.

“Looks like Bel has taken pride of place,” he says quietly in my ear.

“I think he just wants to get there first,” I say.

We chuckle mirthlessly. I think we are both right.

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After a creaky 10 kilometer trip, we arrive at the main rail yard for more waiting. Cars are added to our train. The little switcher engine chugs away and is replaced by a big, cross country locomotive.

All the while, I keep a sharp lookout for Bekar and Gyn, but the only people in sight are yard workers or military guards. The security wrap is on us, and even Bekar’s charm does not seem able to penetrate it.

Then, just as our train is pulling away, I see them standing behind the guards. I wave to them. Bekar waves his cane back in a jaunty salute and Gyn calls out to me with silent words:

“I love you! I love you!”

Chapter 24

Long Ride East.

The hours grind past as we approach our eastern frontier – the old eastern frontier, that is. Our new border now thrusts deep into the former territory of the slobe empire. The open door of our boxcar provides us with glorious summer views and aromas. Temperatures remain moderate.

We have plenty of room, so we make the most of it, stretching out on our bedrolls to nap, read, or compose letters. Conversation remains at a minimum as we each keep to our private thoughts.

I’d barely slept the night before and am just drifting off with visions of Gyn before me when our cozy little world comes to an end. At the last station before the old border, a squad of infantry, complete with duffels and battle gear, clambers aboard and takes over the middle of the car. Athens and Sparta retreat to our respective sides to make room for them.

The intruders are all privates, except for one sergeant who is the “old man” of the group. He is, maybe, 24 but with a hardened aspect that makes him look much older. They bring their rough soldiers’ humor with them.

“Hey, they’re robbing the cradle, now!” one of them says, waving a hand toward us.

Bel stands defiantly, but before he can say anything, the trooper fronts him off.

“Did you bring extra diapers, sonny?” he says. “You’ll need them at the front.”

The soldiers all laugh. Bel turns crimson.

“Why do you mock us?” he demands.

The laughter stops. Bel is building into a towering rage, worse than anything I’ve seen before. The trooper gazes up at him with icy contempt. He’s killed men with his bare hands, you can see it in his eyes. Bel is not intimidated, though. I fear that he will attack any moment. I open my mouth to call him off, but curb myself. I am no longer Bel’s commander.

Then I think: *If that soldier kills Bel, wouldn’t that simplify things for me?*

I boot the unworthy sentiment out of my mind and stand up.

“Hey, guys,” I say, “aren’t we all on the same side?”

Heads swivel toward me. I compose my face into what I hope is a friendly smile. A tense silence ensues, then the sergeant pokes the trooper’s arm.

“Go easy on the kid, eh?” he says.

The soldier nods and turns toward his comrades. Their laughter and jesting resumes. Bel’s complexion begins returning to normal. He walks back to the Sparta corner and plops himself down.

I approach the sergeant.

“We’re going to the front for support aviation duty,” I say.

“Yes, we saw your planes on the flatcars,” the sergeant replies. “Welcome to the war.”

His manner is easy and friendly; he reminds me of Bekar in a way. His face is unnaturally aged, though, and he regards me with weary sadness. I’ve never seen so much sadness in anyone’s eyes.

I return to the Athens realm and wedge myself into our now restricted space.

“Well done Dytran,” Katella says. “You should be a diplomat.”

“Right,” I say, mustering as much sarcasm as possible.

“I mean it,” Katella says. “Once all this is over, keep it in mind.”

Yes, a comfortable post in some consulate sounds pretty good about now. Nice clothes, elegant ladies, banquets ...

I sum up my mood in a single word. “Crap!”

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The kilometers clack by under the wheels of our groaning boxcar until it is time for the evening rations. The soldiers aren’t bad sorts. They mingle with us of the Athens flight and even share the choice food they’ve obtained during their leave time. They also dispense comradely advice.

“Let me tell you, boys,” one of them says, “it’s all nuts out there. Just concentrate on keeping alive and getting back in one piece.”

“The slobes are no pushovers,” another one adds. “They’re putting up one hell of a fight! They’re animals, all of them.”

“God help us if those savages push us back into the Fatherland,” a third one says. “It would mean the end of civilization.”

We are all shocked at such blunt talk, but we say nothing.

Their conversation among themselves deals with the usual things – women, getting drunk, their “bastard” officers at the front. Hatred for the enemy, fear of army discipline. Not a word about our mission to civilize pagan lands or the joys of being a member of the master race.

A dominant theme runs through everything like a red thread: the second front.

Their hopes run high that another war will soon break out on the eastern frontier of the slobe empire to relieve the pressure on them. They constantly strain their ears for any word of it in the news; magnify every report of a border clash into a full-blown invasion. The tiniest rumor can raise their spirits to the heavens or dash them into a pit. They yearn for, pray for, and wager on the opening of a second front.

Beltran chooses not to join our camaraderie, and his Spartans have to follow suit despite their longing glances at the bread and sausages we are consuming. The soldier who had taunted Bel earlier tries to invite him over.

“No hard feelings, lad,” he says. “Come, have some sausage.”

Beltran mutters something about not feeling well. The rifleman shrugs and turns his attention elsewhere. Fine, there is more for us to eat now. I hope that Bezmir is particularly hungry. Sipren must understand my thinking, judging by the furtive way he nibbles his portion.

I am not surprised at Bel’s attitude. Conflict is built into his nature, and there will always be something for his resentment to gnaw on. I just don’t want it gnawing on me.

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Everyone sacks out early. It is a warm night, and we keep the sliding door open. Summer fragrances waft over us along with the beat of the wheels and smoke from the troopers’ final cigarettes. An occasional foul note of burnt coal from the locomotive adds itself to the mix. My bedroll is next to Katella’s on the edge of our group. The others, especially Sipren, know better than to try cozying up to me.

It is a time to be philosophical.

“Who’d have thought it would come to this?” I say. “Why did we have do something like that slobe dive?”

“Because we could,” Katella replies.

That is a true enough answer, but not a very satisfying one. My attempt to find a deeper meaning to this incredible string of cause and effect seems doomed from the start. I roll over and look toward the Spartan corner. As usual, Bel has his pen light on for some late reading.

I wonder how the world looks to him. How would it look to me in his shoes? What would I be thinking now if I had no family and no girl waiting for me back home?

He was raised in State orphanages and, as far as I know, he’s never had a girlfriend. He isn’t ugly, but he isn’t all that attractive either with his swarthy complexion and bristling hair. And his gruff personality puts women off in any case.

Girls of our generation are taught to prefer the fair-haired types, like me. Why would I object to that? On the contrary, I've bought into it big time, strutting around with the confidence of a minor league god. I deserve the best of everything by virtue of my looks.

It wasn't until I met Bel that my sense of superiority began to waver.

Beltran may lack "the look" but he possesses a tough, determined character along with consummate flying skill. He never holds anything back, nothing scares him. Other males are drawn instinctively to his leadership.

It's true that many more girls look at me than at him, but what does that matter behind the stick of an airplane, up high in the world that really counts? There, Beltran is the greatest. He is better than me, I fear.

But now is not the time for such ramblings – not while Stilikan lies unavenged within his cremation urn. Once I've inflicted harsh punishment on his murderers, then I can think through other issues.

Chapter 25

A Warm Reception.

Days of monotony drift by as we slowly traverse the captured eastern territories, like a caterpillar inching along the surface of an alien planet. All around sprawls a vast wilderness of abandoned fields, burned houses and barns, destroyed villages. In many areas giant thistle type plants, two meters high, overgrow the once productive farms.

This is supposed to be our nation's new "breadbasket," but it looks more like a wasteland. Seeing it, I understand the reasons behind our constantly shrinking food rations back home.

"The slobes didn't leave us much when they pulled out," the sergeant observes, "and their partisans keep our settlers from cultivating the fields."

Yes, the partisans, I have business with those people.

The sergeant has taken a shine to me – perhaps because, like him, I am well educated. His men are rough country or small town guys and can't have provided much intellectual stimulation for him. Or maybe I remind him of a younger relative. Or maybe he appreciates the fine cigarettes I dole out from my stash, the ones that Bekar pressed me to take along "just in case."

Who knows? I'm learning that friendships arise quickly in war time.

Our train makes frequent stops, often because partisans have blown up the track ahead of us. We carry our own repair crew and extra rail, so these delays are usually not serious. Sometimes we pull over to allow faster, more urgent trains to pass. We wait on a siding while a priority express, laden with heavy weapons and equipment, roars past behind a powerful locomotive.

Our locomotive is a gasping, wheezing relic. We lost our original engine some time back when it was requisitioned for more urgent cargoes. We are slowed further when an armored "fortress car" bristling with guns is attached to our train.

The soldiers in our boxcar express approval at this addition, but what really cheers them up is the presence of our airplanes overhead. Pairs of fighter bombers streak back and forth, or single light planes, like our own, hover around, ready to call in ground attack support at a moment's notice. When the sky is empty, the soldiers grow uncomfortable.

"We owe you flyboys a lot," the sergeant says, "even though we hate to admit it."

"Yes, you guys have saved our bacon more than once," a rifleman agrees.

"An airplane in time saves my behind," another jokes.

We all find this to be hilarious, except for Bel and his Spartans who never join in our banter. They keep to themselves at all times, tightening their bond. Clearly, we are not part of their "us" group.

At least we have ample opportunities to get out of the boxcar and stretch our legs. We are cautioned not to venture far from the train, though. Partisan bands could be lurking anywhere.

During one of these "piss stops," the sergeant and I are relaxing near the front of the engine smoking cigarettes. I've dropped my previous objection to smoking and indulge myself now and then. Why not?

I am reminded of a cartoon I once saw in a magazine:

*A guy is standing before a firing squad; he is offered a last cigarette.
"No thanks," he says, "I'm trying to quit."*

It has been some hours since our previous stop, and I am glad for the chance to unwind myself. The weather is not too hot, and the sky is a vibrant blue. I've changed into clean underwear and socks and am feeling somewhat refreshed. Things are about as good as they are likely to get in this vast, alien landscape.

Then a grim sight intrudes.

Coming slowly toward us from the east is a train as decrepit as our own, but it carries a much different cargo. A flatcar hitched in front of the locomotive is jammed full with standing men.

"What the hell is that?" I say.

"Slobe prisoners," the sergeant replies. "Those in front are the human shields, in case the partisans try to attack."

The flatcar nears. Its occupants stare at us through sunken eyes. They are ragged, filthy, starved. Many appear to be wounded. I instinctively lower my cigarette out of view so as not to torment them further. Stone-faced guards keep watch over the prisoners with submachine guns.

The engine labors past, then more flatcars, all with similar loads. Each car bears several prostrate men – corpses apparently, or nearly so. A foul odor of death and filth attends the procession.

"That's inhuman!" I say.

The sergeant spits on the ground.

"Do you think they treat our men any better?"

An hour passes and we still haven't moved. The prisoner train has sucked out whatever pleasantness we'd tried to find in the day. The wasteland spreads around us like a hungry wraith, pulling our minds to the far horizon.

None of us Raptor Aces have ever seen such an endless expanse before. My squadron mates huddle together in little clumps as if to reassure each other. The sergeant is all the reassurance I need. His hardened face and slit-down eyes present an impassive barrier to the agoraphobic dread gripping the others.

“When I’m on leave, I can almost regard the enemy as being men like ourselves,” the sergeant says. “But when I’m back at the front, Piotra is nothing more than a wild beast that must be exterminated.”

Never have I felt more like a green, pampered youth. I am simply not qualified to comment on this observation.

“Out there we all turn into savages,” the sergeant continues. “We truly believe that we’re facing subhumans. Such belief is the only way to survive.”

I light another cigarette to cover my agitation, though I am a bit light headed from the previous one.

Finally, a second train comes into view from the east. This one carries our own wounded men – box car after box car, some festooned with prominent red crosses. The sergeant spits again.

“Why do they paint those stupid crosses?” he says. “The partisans just use them for target practice.”

I can see tiers of bunks inside the cars, each one holding a casualty – another young man to recover and return to the fighting, or else live out the remainder of his life disabled. Some of the less severely injured men sit by the open doors.

“What are you doing out here?” one of them calls to us.

“You’re headed the wrong way!” others yell. “Get the hell out while you still can!”

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Finally we get moving. At the next junction we turn due south and continue at, what is for us, blistering speed until long after sunset. Then we turn an easterly direction again and slow to our usual crawl.

To the north, massed artillery thunders. Our train sometimes rocks from the concussions. Crimson flashes along the horizon like the fires of hell. We Raptor Aces observe the spectacle with a mix of horror and fascination. The veterans remain stoic.

“Looks like Piotra’s taking back some more of his farms,” a rifleman mutters.

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The last morning of our journey dawns. The land is now of a more familiar type – woods, fields and rolling hills, even some intact farms and villages. Clearly the enemy did not have time to follow their “scorched earth” policy here with the thoroughness we’d seen on the open steppe.

The soldiers remain their usual selves, bantering, cussing, bellyaching. It is impossible to tell how they feel about our impending arrival. But among us Raptor Aces, a lessening of tension occurs. Finally, the long trek is ending and we can get on with our missions. We have a purpose again. Even Bel lightens up.

He looks rather out of place sitting among the fair-haired boys of the Sparta flight. I’ve often wondered if I shouldn’t have taken the former Blue Ice squadron members myself and given Beltran the others, except for Katella. That way I could

start over fresh, get rid of Orpad and Grushon who had once turned on me so viciously.

But I hadn't done that. It seemed like cowardice to dump my problems onto Bel. And I respect the common wisdom: *keep your friends close and your enemies closer.*

Until now, our two flights have remained segregated, even during the piss breaks. This way the units can develop some group cohesion. Bel seems to have made good progress with the Sparta flight. Even the shared sacrifice of refusing to accept food during our first night serves to weld them together. When they move, it is as a team. Bel speaks for them in all matters.

My personal circle includes Katella, the sergeant, and a few riflemen. I've scarcely given a thought to the other pilots in my flight. Katella has pretty much taken over as second in command, and the others speak to him if they have any concerns. As much as I dislike admitting it, I care little about the others. My desire is that I will not have to deal with them much at the front.

I am surprised when, just as we are nearing our depot, Bel moves back to sit with me.

"Hello, stranger," I say.

"Hello, Dye."

"I'd have thought you'd stay up there so you could arrive first," I say.

Bel grins. "You know, I considered that. But a couple of seconds won't matter much, will it?"

"No, I suppose not."

He looks toward Katella. "How's it going?"

"All right," Katella says.

"My butt's a bit numb, otherwise I'm fine," Bel replies.

Despite this awkward try at humor, the tension between them is obvious. The hatchet from the slobe diving incident does not seem to have been buried yet. Bel turns back to me and lowers his voice.

"I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate all this," he says, "and that you can count on me in any situation."

"Sure thing," I say, "thanks."

"I mean it," Bel says, "any situation. I'm not a BS-er, you know that."

I hold up my hand.

"Athens and Sparta," I say, "in it to the end."

"Damn right!" Bel clasps my hand.

The train halts with a screech of its overtaxed brakes

"Well, lads," a trooper says, "here we are, safe and sound!"

A massive explosion rocks the train, thrusting us upward like a child's toy. We crash back down as a sheet of flame roars through the car. The world becomes an inferno of screams, gunfire, and burning flesh.

"Partisans!" somebody yells.

Somehow, I get to the door and fling myself outside. Others drop nearby, some cut to pieces by gunfire before they can touch the ground. Bullets whistle over my head, and I hug the earth for dear life.

The heavy guns of the fortress car opened up, adding to the hellish racket. Soldiers around me fire their rifles from prone positions. The war god howls for blood amid the stench of fire and explosives.

Then it is over, as quickly as it began. Silence, except for the crackling of flames and moans of the wounded.

Somebody rolls me onto my back.

“My god, Dytran! Are you all right?”

I open my eyes and Beltran blurs into focus. He seems unharmed, thank God. I am lying in a pool of blood, but it’s somebody else’s.

“I-I’m ... alive,” I say.

Chapter 26

ZOD.

When I regain some of my faculties, I am able to take in the full extent of the disaster. A charge hidden beneath the rails by some partisan saboteur blew the front of our boxcar to smithereens, along with the car ahead of us. Other partisans opened fire from the woods, then melted away before our ground units could engage them.

The carnage is unspeakable – a horror show of blood and mangled bodies even worse than the one presented by the air raid. I’d only been an observer to that attack, but here I am one of the victims myself.

The entire Sparta flight has been killed, except for Bel. Many of the soldiers, including the sergeant, also died in the holocaust. By some miracle, the Athens flight survived. Our position tucked into the rear of the boxcar proved to be our deliverance.

Elsewhere along the train, several of our aircraft are riddled with bullets. I do not know how extensive the damage is. But with only seven pilots remaining, there should be enough serviceable planes for everyone.

I am taken to the infirmary. Except for ringing ears and a few nasty scrapes, I am judged to be “well.” But after this experience, I wonder if I’ll never be well again.

Lying in the blood pool had been the worst part. I can still feel the hot, terrifying substance clinging to my skin, even though I’ve been scrubbed and clad in fresh clothing.

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My head is still throbbing from the train depot catastrophe when I fly my first mission – an ammo drop to a forward infantry unit. Y-47 has taken some bullet strikes, though not in critical locations; she is quickly patched and deemed fit for service, as I am.

The trauma of the explosion, the screams and gunfire, have taken possession of my mind, along with the stench of blood and death. I need to get these frightful apparitions out – focus only on the mission.

And it is a difficult one that exceeds my aircraft's design parameters.

The loading personnel jam Y-47's rear cockpit full of ammunition and grenades. They sling pylons filled with more ammo under each wing. They even give me a belt of machine gun bullets to wear around my neck like a prayer shawl.

"How much does all this stuff weigh?" I ask one of the loaders, a draftee scarcely older than myself.

"Beats me." He shrugs. "Just get it where it needs to go."

I have no time for even a rudimentary weight and balance calculation. The soldiers need this ammo, and if it costs my life to get it to them, so be it. Never have I felt myself to be such an expendable commodity, like a sausage wrapper.

I rumble down the bumpy grass strip, building up speed for take off. My plane is overweight and unbalanced, which adversely affects ground handling. My once docile machine becomes a potential death trap requiring every milligram of my attention. One miscalculation can put me into a vicious ground loop.

And once I get in the air – if I get in the air – will the imbalance force me into a deadly stall / spin out accident? All thoughts of the train depot horror flee my mind, replaced by total concentration on my task. The engine roars with extreme effort as I build up speed.

A line of trees draws closer, soon I'll have to lift off or face a collision with them.

"Come on, girl!" I shout. "Let's get out of here!"

I bring the stick back; we chug into the air. The trees draw closer, but I dare not increase my angle of attack lest I go into a stall. Steady ... steady ... brass it out.

I am over the trees!

Control pressure is heavy, and I adjust trim to reduce the strain. Suddenly, my aircraft noses up, and the stall warning begins to screech. I lower the nose, the plane starts going into a dive. I pull back on the stick and the stall warning howls again. We are on the verge of a lethal pilot induced oscillation. Panic seizes my brain.

Concentrate! Feel the aircraft!

Push the stick forward, then back slightly – we are nosing down again. Pull the stick back, then forward slightly – we are climbing, though not as steeply as before. Repeat the maneuvers – again, again. Adjust trim.

Finally we smooth out into straight and level flight. A gigantic vise of tension releases its grip on me. I mutter the time-honored pilot's dictum:

"Piece of cake."

Climb gently to 1,200 meters and focus on navigation. Give my pounding heart a chance to slow down.

The airfield is still in sight, so it is easy to orient myself. The geography below is not difficult to read – the same gentle hills and forest we'd seen from the train. Creeks and railroad tracks make for good reference points. Battle scars are evident here and there, but the landscape is generally intact.

I begin to relax a little. Maybe I'll survive this mission after all. Something like my old joy of flying returns. I am at one with the sky again, melded with my

aircraft into a single being. I have the air to myself, no sign anywhere of friend or foe to distract me.

Some low cumulus lies directly in my flight path. I consider flying over or around it but reject the idea. A detour would consume precious time and fuel, and I am reasonably confident that I can handle the whiteout conditions. Besides, I doubt if Bel would shrink from this challenge. And if he can do it, so can I.

I review my zero-visibility flight training: Trust the instruments and avoid the temptation to overcorrect the controls. Ignore any false cues from my non-visual senses.

Delicate wisps reach out for me like strands of cotton candy. Behind them looms a solid wall of cloud. I thrill at its approach. For the first time since the blood bath at the train station, my face breaks into a smile. I enter the cloud, and all is cool dampness tingling my skin.

The white backdrop enters my mind, and I summon an image of Gyn's face upon it. Again I see her deep brown eyes gazing into mine and the little dimples that appear in her cheeks when she smiles. My own private cinema in the sky!

What would it be like to wake up beside her some morning, I wonder? Just lie there watching her sleep, following her gentle respiration. She senses my eyes upon her and snuggles close. I wrap an arm around her and our breathing harmonizes its rhythm. I slip a hand under her nightgown, her breast is soft, yet firm ...

The wonderful fantasy keeps me from obsessing about my flight attitude in the zero visibility. Overloaded as I am, any abrupt maneuvers could have fatal results.

But the plane wants to fly straight and level, so don't hinder it. Periodic scans of the instruments to make sure that all is well, an easy hand on the stick, gentle feet on the rudder pedals. Just let it flow. Minutes of near contentment drift past.

Then, unbidden, Ket's face appears before me. She wears a frenzied, almost savage expression, and her blond hair is disheveled. Her breath blows hot on my face. I feel her hand grinding my crotch and her teeth biting my lip. My eyes widen. It all seems so real! Ket is taking things farther now; she is loosening my belt –

Suddenly, brutally, I exit into searing blue sky, and my daydreams flee back into the clouds. Unease grips my heart now, for below me sprawls absolute destruction.

Conflict of unimaginable ferocity must have once raged beneath my wings. The whole area is charred and barren. Massive shell craters disfigure the ground. Everything is brown and dead, not a speck of greenery survives – at least none that I can see from my altitude. The ruin spreads out in a rough circle and must be eight or nine kilometers across.

The entire place seems wrong, even in the midst of a battle front. I immediately dub it the *Zone of Destruction* or *ZOD* for short. Yes, *ZOD*, the opposite of *GOD* – the very face of war. Its frozen spirit reaches up for me.

Its appearance is so unexpected and so horrific that it seems to be not of this world, as if the overwhelming violence it endured has blasted it into an alternate reality. The impression is enhanced by a blurry patch on its edge, just before the more normal landscape resumes.

I shake my head and look again. The blurry patch is still there, like a smudge of motion in a photograph. What is it? A more important question – does it exist at all, or am I simply losing my mind?

But to hell with such questions! I have a job to do. Men are waiting for me, scanning the air for my little plane, wondering if their ammo will hold out until I get there. I focus my attention on my task and push all other considerations out of mind.

Still, I experience a powerful sense of relief when I exit ZOD, as if I've returned from the grave.

Chapter 27

Missions Accomplished.

At last the landing field comes into sight, identifiable by a large national flag spread on the ground and by men frantically waving their arms at me. I circle the area, reducing my altitude gradually, then I go into a gentle final approach.

This landing is going to be tricky. Under more normal conditions I'd lower the flaps, but I dare not steepen my flight path. Just come in long and low – the field looks big enough. Thank heaven there is only a light wind.

My concentration is so intense that, at first, I do not notice the hot bullets flashing past. The slobes are shooting at me!

I look desperately around. The fire is coming from a patch of forest off to starboard. Well, nothing for it now – just keep to my flight path and hope for the best. Sweat is pouring off me, dripping under my goggles into my eyes. My hands are ice cold. The ground reaches up for me. Soon I'll be rolling upon it or flipped over into a pile of wreckage ...

Touchdown!

I taxi to a halt and switch off. Without the engine racket in my ears, the pop of gunfire is quite distinct. I jump from the cockpit and fling myself onto the ground, discarding my machinegun bullet shawl. I begin crawling away from my plane as fast as possible.

The shooting stops, but I remain where I am, face down, hands over my head. I feel an odd sense of guilt for abandoning Y-47.

"It's all right now," somebody says.

I look up to see an Army captain towering above me. He offers a hand.

"Ah, they're sending us the young ones now," he says when I've regained my feet.

"Yes, sir," I say. "Youth League air squadron commander Dytran reporting, sir."

"Forget the 'sir' routine," the captain says. "We're glad to see you, boy."

Troopers are unloading Y-47 and hurrying off with the cargo. They look gaunt and hard-bitten, as if they have not bathed nor eaten properly in a long time. Their eyes burn with a feverish glow.

“Tell them to send us more ammo – a lot more,” the captain says. “Partisans have stopped the supply trucks from getting through.”

“Yes, s ... , Captain.”

“Better yet, I’ll tell them myself,” the captain says. “Fly me back with you.”

“Uh, I don’t know if I have enough fuel to carry a passenger,” I say.

“No problem there,” the captain says, “we salvaged some fuel from the last plane.”

He gestures toward a wrecked aircraft at the far end of the field. It is a high-winged machine, better suited to rough field work than my low wing monoplane.

“He didn’t make it, unfortunately,” the captain said.

From among the trees, where bullets had been fired at me earlier, a merry little jingle in our language now blares from a loudspeaker:

*Ain’t it hard to be the master race
when Piotra’s standing on your face?
Hey boys, slip and slide!
Dig them graves and jump inside!*

“They’re at it again,” the captain says. “You’d think they’d come up with a new song already.”

We are quickly refueled and airborne, but not until after I’ve taken a stiff drink of brandy, at the captain’s insistence, so as to “calm my nerves.”

And they do need calming. The strain of this first day of combat operations is grinding me down. Even so, the uneventful flight back perks me up a little – until we reach ZOD. The blurry patch is still there, but it seems to be shifting now, as if it is being reflected by a constantly moving mirror. My unease returns.

“What’s that over there?” I ask the captain over the intercom. “That blurry section along the edge.”

“It’s all crap!” the captain replies.

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The moment I roll to a stop at home base, the captain jumps out and runs to HQ. His arguments must be persuasive, for I make my next ammo delivery to his unit. Fortunately, they’ve secured the landing field and my arrival is free from enemy fire and propaganda songs.

Then I make a third ammunition drop, to a different unit. By this time I am flying on autopilot – the one in my brain. I scarcely know what I am doing any longer but merely function on instinct. The sector of my mind that is not totally numb understands the value of the rigorous training we’d undergone the previous weeks. I give Pansy silent thanks. You have to be part robot to endure the routine.

I do not know where the other Raptor Aces are sent, or what their missions are. I am outside the chain of command. Officers from the “real” Air Force issue the orders without consulting me. On one flight over ZOD, however, I pass Beltran going the opposite direction. We waggle our wings at each other by way of greeting.

The sun is going down when I complete my last mission. I experience an abrupt shift from functional awareness to near total collapse the moment I climb out of the cockpit.

“Rough day, lad?” the crew chief asks.

I nod, too exhausted to say anything.

The crew chief pats Y-47’s fuselage as if he is stroking the flank of a thoroughbred horse.

“She’s a good one,” he says. “I’ll take over now.”

I stumble to our barracks where I take a hot shower, an unheard-of luxury for the troops in the field, but one that we pilots can enjoy – if we survive the day’s missions. When I get to the bunk room, it is already lights out. Inert lumps occupy the cots, except for the one next to mine where Beltran is reading by the dim illumination of a table lamp.

He looks up from his book as I tumble into bed.

“How’d it go today, Bel?” I say.

“Didn’t you attend a debriefing?” he asks.

“Was I supposed to?”

“Yes,” Bel says, “you’re the squadron commander.”

I stretch out on my cot, bones in my spine crack.

“That doesn’t matter,” I say, “the officers order me around just like the rest of you.”

Bel looks directly at me; his face is calm and matter-of-fact in the low light. He doesn’t look tired at all, damn him.

“It matters to me,” he says.

“I don’t believe it!” I say, too loud. Some of the lumps shift position on their cots. “What do you want me to do, blow my foot off so you can be the ‘official’ squadron leader?”

A not altogether pleasant grin comes over Bel’s face.

“That would be a start,” he says.

“So I missed the debriefing,” I say. “What are they going to do, shoot me? That’s sounds pretty good about now.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Bel says. “It doesn’t go with your charming personality.”

He closes his book, and a thoughtful expression comes over his face.

“You know ... I’ve been thinking,” he says. “It must be fate at work. The gods have decreed that I should always be your subordinate.”

“Right. So who’s the drama king now?”

Bel chuckles, then he turns deadly serious.

“Orpad bought it today,” he says.

I jerk up onto my elbows.

“What!?”

“He crashed on take off,” Bel says, “his first mission, too.”

The dreadful news breaks through the shell of my fatigue like a battering ram. Bezmir, and now Orpad, two of my old squadron mates, killed on the same day! Lads I had almost considered to be brothers at one time – until they betrayed me.

I flop down onto my back. Maybe I can mourn for them later, when I’ve had some rest.

“Did he suffer much?” I say.

“He was dead when they pulled him from the cockpit,” Bel says. “It was a stall-spin accident.”

“Oh ... God. I nearly spun out myself today.”

“Join the club,” Bel says.

“How about the others?”

“Albers took some ground fire, but he’s all right,” Bel says.

So, since the morning we’d been reduced by half. Quite a day’s work for the enemy.

Part of me is dying from exhaustion, but another part is too wired up to sleep. I know how Bekar must have felt under the influence of two powerful and contradictory drugs.

“Tell me,” I say, “did you notice anything strange about that blasted area we flew over?”

“It’s lovely,” Bel says. “I’ll build a vacation home there after the war. Land ought to be cheap.”

“I’m serious, did you see anything?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know ... a blurry spot or something.”

“Seeing things again, Ghostie?” Bel sneers.

“All right, fine.”

I turn away, giving my blanket an annoyed rustle.

“Why don’t you shut off that damn light already?” I say.

“Is that an order, Commander?”

“Whatever.”

Actually, I prefer having the light on. Because when Bel switches it off a minute later, I can feel the warm blood starting to pool around me again. I summon up the presence of the Magleiter to ward off the nightmares.

Chapter 28

Downward Slope.

The weeks grind past into autumn, and our schedule never slackens, except for the occasional day when it rains too hard for us to fly. We are the jacks of all trades.

We do ammo drops and courier runs, with recon flights and mail deliveries thrown in. We often transport wounded men on our return to base. We even fly some artillery spotting missions, Beltran’s favorite assignment for which he always volunteers. I’ve flown a few artillery spotting missions myself and was never so scared in my life with the ground fire popping all about, praying that the next round didn’t blow me away.

I won’t admit this terror to Bel, though.

After our bloody initiation, we suffer no further deaths. A few of us sustain injuries from ground fire or rough landings, but nothing serious. Katella receives a minor shrapnel wound in his right shoulder.

“At least I’m balanced now,” he jokes, referencing the earlier injury to his left shoulder.

Around us, the front crackles and sparks. Fierce combat flares up in our sector for a day or two, then dies down. Artillery pieces duel, then fall silent. Enemy fighter aircraft appear to joust with our fighters before vanishing as quickly as they came.

Piotra is keeping us on edge but has not launched any major operations; and we lack the strength to go on the offensive ourselves. Our troops are dug in and have all they can handle with the enemy army before them and the partisans behind.

Elsewhere along the vast front, the situation is grim. The offensive everyone expected to hit our southern sector hasn't come; instead, the enemy struck north again, pushing our forces back to within 140 kilometers of the old frontier. They use their advanced positions to launch bomber strikes against our Homeland.

No amount of propaganda can disguise the fact that we are losing the war. The once solid front is now distorted. The southern sector is dangerously exposed on two sides. We should be retreating to more defensible positions, but orders have come through to "stand fast."

The destruction brought to our cities screams loud and clear about the growing catastrophe. I thank God that our home is in the western area of our country, out of bomber range. Gyn, too, is safe – for now.

And what of Ket? She is a moving target. There is no telling where her next assignment will lead. In my mind, she has taken on an air of invulnerability; nothing bad can happen to such an extraordinary person. But I'd thought that about Stilikan, too.

There is much perplexity on our side. By all logic, the slobes should have attempted to recover the cities and rich farmlands of the south rather than the relatively barren steppe of the north. And amid this bafflement runs a sigh of relief that the Death Angel is spreading its wings over those other poor devils and not us.

Myself, I never blame anyone for being smart, and the enemy strategy seems very intelligent to me. Why expend precious resources against strong opposition when they can make up ground elsewhere at relatively low cost? And the air raids against our country must bring joy to every slobe heart – and despair to our own.

Anxiety infests our ranks. No one speaks of glorious victory any longer. Nobody boasts of achieving our "place in the sun." Faith in the Magleiter remains strong, however – an almost mystical belief that, somehow, he will get us out of this mess.

Question is: will we still be alive to benefit from this miraculous deliverance?

Mostly the talk is about fear for loved ones being killed in the air raids, about cherished homes being destroyed, about women and children left to fend for themselves in the smoking ruins of our cities. This topic far overshadows discussion of the "second front" that everyone longs for so much. Faith in the second front is vanishing anyway, replaced by a grim fatalism.

And always the gnawing certainty that the hammer will fall upon us next.

I try to close my mind to all such chatter and focus exclusively on my mission. But one night, the constant drumbeat of fear talk weighs heavily upon me, robbing me of sleep. I leave my cot and wander outside to the porch.

Above me vaults a fantastically clear sky loaded with stars; a single cloud puff covers the sliver of moon, diffusing its light. I inhale deeply, trying to draw some of

the serenity into myself. I hear someone else exiting the barracks. It's Katella. He takes up position beside me.

"It all seems so beautiful now," I say.

"Yes." Katella gestures toward the heavens. "Looking at that, it's hard to believe in anything else, isn't it?"

The ground is silvery gray. I can see the trees of the nearby forest patch. Closer in, a single tree with a pronounced crook in its middle bends backward as if in awe of the celestial glory. Unguarded words come to my lips.

"I'm sick of all the whining talk," I say. "We are the ones who started this war, and now it's coming back to us with a vengeance. What did people expect?"

Katella says nothing about my treasonous comment, but I think I detect a slight nod. He returns to the barracks. A few minutes later, I follow.

By a turn of fate, I am assigned to the same airbase where Stilikan served. We were supposed to go up north, as I learned from a gabby clerk at HQ, but were diverted here when the northern offensive overran our positions there.

Stilikan's old squadron transferred out some time ago, but many among the ground crew remember him and speak in glowing terms. I hear Bekar's exclamation repeated in various ways: "Aren't you the spitting image!"

The partisans who murdered my brother are nearby – I know that in my innermost being. At night, I feel their presence on the edge of my dreams, can almost smell their unholy stench. In the daytime, I look for them below my wings. I feel drawn to them like a moth to a flame. Will I smother that flame or be consumed by it?

Hell, I'm not offended by the idea of irregular forces operating behind our lines. How would I react if an invader came to my country? I'd be out in the forests, too, fighting back any way I could. But what they did went far beyond military necessity. It was sadistic, cold-blooded murder.

They'd had a high-value prisoner in their custody whom they could have exchanged for any number of their captured comrades. Or they could have handed him over to their regular troops as a POW. But they didn't do that. Instead, they chose to exercise vicious blood lust upon a helpless victim.

Why?

I yearn for an opportunity to confront those savages with a gun in my hands. One afternoon, quite unexpected, it comes to me.

Chapter 29

The Chasm Breaks Open.

The wet, stormy day and a half during which we'd been grounded comes to an end leaving clear skies and fresh breezes in its wake. The intense heat and humidity of the false summer are gone. During this break in the action, we enjoy plenty of sleep and catch up on our letters home. Now we are starting to get bored. We want some action, fools that we are.

The six of us sprawl on chairs outside our barracks, like tourists at a health spa sunning ourselves – except that we wear flight suits instead of swimming trunks, in anticipation of the day’s assignments. The weather is superb, with a touch of fall color in the trees. It almost seems like old times, back before things got complicated with the world and with my comrades.

Our barracks is a small, rather shabby, affair, tucked off to the edge of the base near a patch of woods with a disused air raid shelter. We are off the beaten track, sort of an afterthought to the main life of the base. A telephone keeps us in touch with HQ, but the cheap aluminum wire transmits a barely audible signal. More often than not we receive our orders in person.

The mail has been held up for quite a while, but now a mass of it comes pouring into our laps. We all receive letters, except for Bel. This is typical; he never got mail at school, either. He pretends not to care, but I’ve often seen him glancing over people’s shoulders, trying to read their letters on the sly.

“I wish something would happen, already,” Bel grumbles into his open book.

He’s reading an official National Salvation Party text on racial theory.

“Like what?” Katella says, looking up from his letter. “A visit from Santa Claus, maybe?”

His voice carries an edge, as if he’s trying to goad Beltran. This is not very wise. Bel doesn’t take the bait, however.

“Sure,” he says. “If he’s got an interesting mission for me, I’ll take it.”

“How about a one-way flight home?” Sipren says.

“In a box,” Grushon says.

We all laugh. Now that we are “battle hardened veterans” we have a right to enjoy such dark humor. Beltran is not amused, however, and sticks his head back into his book. Katella begins to say something else, but I wave him off. Bel is in one of his moods, so best to leave him alone.

Beltran is often in a moody state. He is a white crow among us, out of sync. Whatever amuses us seems to irritate him. He projects the attitude that those around him simply don’t “get it,” whatever “it” is.

He’s always been like this to an extent, but since we’ve been at the front, this characteristic has gotten worse. I think I know why – the loss of the Sparta flight has hit him very hard, forcing him deeper into the lonely regions within himself.

But he never mentions his lost command, that is not his way.

And he seems to have no humor at all, which deprives him of an important safety valve. Once, when we were joking about the things that attracted us to aviation, Bel threw cold water on the fun. Orpad, the shortest one among us, said that flying made him feel taller. Katella said that it took his mind off his crabby girlfriend back home.

When it was Bel’s turn, he simply stated: “Flying distinguishes me from the common people.”

I turn back to my letter from Bekar. Like the man, it is bright and optimistic. He is out of his cast now, he writes, and is “limping around with authority.” Ground school instruction is going well, and he is trying to arrange some flight tests to see if he can handle a fighter plane. Further details to follow.

Then the letter from Gyn. It is sweet, flowing with concern, and with lots of meaning just below the surface. From a girl who “doesn’t want to fall in love,” but

is. My heart aches for her gentle presence. If only I could look over and see her in the chair beside me, instead of Bel with his nose buried in that goddam book!

My letter back to her will be equally circumspect. It will nibble around the edges of giant issues that cannot possibly be addressed under these circumstances. When will I be able to see her again, hold her in my arms, feel her warm lips on mine? I place her letter back into its envelope with a sigh loud enough to draw notice from my comrades.

“A real heart breaker, eh?” Katella says.

I shoot him a ‘mind your own business’ look. Katella holds up the letter he’s reading.

“My girl is trying to bust my nuts, as usual,” he says.

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy,” Bel mutters.

I open my next letter ... love from Mama. She mentions the walnut cake she’d sent, made from quality black market ingredients. It arrived earlier and has already been wolfed down by the Raptor Aces.

Finally, the letter from Ket. I wanted to open this one first, but forced myself to wait. As I read my other mail, the cream envelope rests on my lap tempting me with its bold, backhand script. It radiates a curious warmth. Ket’s fingers have caressed this envelope intimately, as they’d caressed me during that one, incredible evening.

Well, maybe not “caressed,” exactly – more like “seized.” After a final bit of hesitation, I open the letter. Like Ket, it is blunt and to the point:

Dearest Dytran,

I trust that all is well with you – I can’t bear to think otherwise. Am traveling a great deal on assignment these days and haven’t been home much. I hope you’ve written to me. I look forward to reading your letters when I get back.

The prize is waiting for you, Dytran. Come claim it whenever you’re ready.

Bye for now.

XXX! Ket

p.s. I think you know what the prize is. Do I need to spell it out?

No need to spell it out, Ket. Your meaning is very clear, even to a thick-skulled male like myself. Hot arousal collides with the most intense frustration imaginable.

“What’s the matter, Dye?” Katella says. “You look like somebody slugged you in the gut.”

I look up into a row of grinning faces. On my other side, Beltran is peering over my shoulder.

“Do you guys mind?” I say, stuffing the letter back into its envelope.

“It’s that News Service girl, isn’t it?” Sipren says. “God, what I wouldn’t give to hear from her!”

The others laugh; my face begins to redden. Fortunately, a courier arrives just then and rescues me from the awkward situation. We all glance up from our chairs at the dapper figure with his cap tilted at a rakish angle and a briefcase chained to his wrist.

"I've got a priority run," the courier says. "They told me to find a pilot."

I pull my shred of rank.

"I'll take you," I say. "Hold on a minute."

I step inside the barracks and place my mail in the drawer of my side table. Then I reconsider. Violating the personal storage space of a comrade is the ultimate taboo, but the temptation of the cream-colored envelope might prove too much for that pack of hyenas out there. So, I slip Ket's letter into one of my flight suit's exterior pockets – the one closest to my heart – and zip it securely in place.

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We are using the "big boy" paved runway instead of our usual grass strip which still has large mud puddles on it. Just before we climb into Y-47, the courier holds up the attaché case chained to his wrist. His other hand rests on a small automatic pistol holstered to his belt.

"You know how this works, don't you?" he says.

He takes his hand off the gun butt long enough to point at a cord running out of the case.

"Yes," I say, "we've all been briefed."

If, for some reason, the courier cannot deliver his message, he is to pull the cord and set off an incendiary device. This bit of fireworks will destroy whatever papers are inside the case. Should he be unable to do this, I am to pull the cord so as to prevent the contents from falling into enemy hands.

"It's just a formality," the courier says. "I've gone seven months without a mishap. When I'm along, you're safe as spades."

I flinch.

'Safe as spades' was one of Stilikan's pet expressions. I've never heard anyone else use it. Where did this guy pick it up?

"Uh, did you know ... by any chance ..." I say.

"Yes?" the courier says.

"Oh, never mind," I say. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I jump into the front cockpit. Somehow, mentioning Stilikan's name at this moment seems to be bad luck. I don't know why. We are all developing morbid superstitions.

Just concentrate on the task, I tell myself. Get that damned message delivered.

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It feels good to be back in the air, and on a "milk run," too. No pile of hand grenades lurking in the rear cockpit ready to explode, no white-knuckle take off and landing. Just smooth flying through bright skies. Even the approach of ZOD does not dampen my spirits overmuch.

These courier runs are taking up much of our schedule lately. With the enemy breaking our radio codes as fast as we can change them and the partisans cutting our land lines, we are increasingly forced into such hand-delivered communications. This suits everyone fine, except for Beltran.

He yearns for the days when artillery roars so that he can fly as a spotter. He'll dodge in and out of the ground fire pinpointing enemy positions, calling in the

coordinates for our own guns. These artillery duels seldom last long, but Beltran is pumped up for days by a brief period of spotter duty.

“When are they going to let us have fighters?” he grumbles constantly. “I’m tired of these flying sewing machines!”

A voice crackles over the intercom. “They’re at it again down there,” the courier says.

Yes, I can see the discharge of big guns off to starboard. I can sense their thunder behind the roar of my engine. Maybe Bel will get his wish today.

I review my selection of emergency landing fields, just in case we have to vacate the sky in a hurry. We carry no parachutes – too much bulk and weight; besides, we generally fly too low for them to be of much use.

And parachutes are fair game for both sides these days. Anyone dangling beneath one is a sitting duck. Stilikan’s chivalrous attitude toward his rival airmen is laughably outdated in the current ‘war of extermination.’

“Impressive view up here,” the courier observes.

“Right.”

We are flying parallel to ZOD now. One could call it ‘impressive,’ though I can think of other, more accurate, terms – strange, creepy, evil.

Neither of us sees the enemy fighter plane diving out of the sun, like a hawk onto a pigeon. A torrent of bullets slams into us.

Y-47 bucks and jerks like a wild stallion. I nearly lose control. An ear-splitting howl explodes through the intercom, then dies. The enemy fighter screams past, so close that I can feel the heat of its engine. Up ahead, it begins turning around to make another run at us.

I am numbed with shock, as if a huge chasm has split open, exposing the inner workings of hell to the bright day – a moment as terrible as when Beltran crashed his plane over the slob boy.

Maybe that prior experience has steeled me for this one. Snapping out of my paralysis, I push the stick over hard and slam the throttle to the firewall. We head toward the earth in a power dive.

Down, down, escape into low altitude!

Smoke vomits from the engine, nearly blinding me, and the controls feel dead. A large hole blown through the port wing gapes at me.

The fighter is behind me now, firing his guns. I jink my plane to make myself a more difficult target. Then the ground rushes up, I am flying along it, power off. Bullets tear up the dirt around me.

I am moving through a narrow channel between two swathes of forest, bleeding off speed, lowering ... then a touchdown that is almost absurd in its precision. Y-47 bumps along the surface, finally crashing against a tree stump and ground looping to a halt.

I fling off my harness and tumble out of the cockpit, grabbing my emergency pack along the way. I dash into the cover of the woods as if pursued by all the demons of hell.

The fighter plane circles above for a while, then departs for other pastures of death.

Chapter 30

Lair of the Beast.

The world becomes silent, except for the ringing in my ears and the distant rumble of big guns. I loiter in the forest trying to regain my grip on reality – whatever reality is anymore. By some miracle, I have suffered no major injuries.

Get away, now! my interior voice shouts.

But the secret message is still in the airplane and I must ensure its destruction. The courier himself is obviously slain; his body sprawls twisted and bloody in the rear cockpit. Against every survival instinct, I depart the forest cover and approach the wreck of my aircraft.

My beautiful Y-47!

She's all twisted and bent now, her prop broken, wings shredded by gunfire, and blood running down her fuselage. At least it is a fighting death and not some ignominious training accident. I come to attention and offer a salute to the plane and to the courier whose luck has finally run out.

He is, literally, shot to pieces. When I reach into the rear cockpit for the briefcase, his hand comes out with it, dangling from the chain like an obscene good luck charm.

“Ugh!”

I fling the case away and vomit my guts out onto the poor, violated flanks of Y-47. I collapse to my knees. The world spins and starts to fade, then comes slowly back into focus.

A single thought keeps me from fainting – Partisans!

I am down here alone, cut off. Any partisan unit in the area would have seen my crash landing. Or else that fighter pilot could have radioed them. The partisans work hand in glove with the regular forces.

“It looks like one of the bastards escaped,” the pilot would say. “Go finish him off, guys.”

I wobble back onto my feet and force myself to confront the horror in the rear cockpit again. The stench of gore and explosive nearly forces me into a swoon.

Get a grip, Dytran!

I work the pistol out of the courier's gun belt. The thing is slick with blood. I grope around the belt and pat down the pockets, no indication of more ammo. I wipe my prize as clean as possible on the grass.

I pop out the ammo clip. There are six bullets within, five for any partisans that might show up, and the last one for me. I will not repeat Stilikan's mistake – assuming that others are as honorable as myself. They won't tie me to some tree, not alive anyway.

I recover the briefcase. Thank God the courier's hand no longer dangles from the chain. I do not wish to find out where it has tumbled. The case itself has taken a round near the top which has shattered its locking device. The demolition cord protrudes from the bottom.

What should I do?

Is the incendiary charge still intact – and if so, how powerful is it? Will it set off a blaze that will draw attention to my position? The explosion can no longer be contained by the damaged briefcase. If I pull that cord, I might just set myself on fire.

I pry the case open and withdraw a medium-sized manila envelope stamped in red with:

TOP SECRET
Commanding Officer's Eyes Only

The envelope is thin, only a sheet or two inside. I can tear the paper into bits and bury it, or swallow it, if necessary. But before I can do anything, voices intrude. No ... I don't really hear them, I feel them on some level beneath conscious hearing.

Get away from the plane!

I stuff the envelope into my flight suit's interior pocket and beat a quick retreat to the forest. I fling myself prone into the underbrush and aim the pistol back into the clearing. Moments later, partisans emerge from the far stand of woods and approach the wreckage of my airplane. I fumble the little binoculars out of my survival pack for a better look.

There are fifteen partisans, including two women and a few boys who appear to be younger than myself. The rest are hard-bitten men, raggedly dressed, unshaven. They seem like a pack of hungry wolves come to feast on the carcass of Y-47. Everyone is heavily armed.

Their apparent leader is a large, bearded, ferocious-looking brute hefting a submachine gun. His peasant's cap is pulled low over one eye, concealing much of his face. He roves his single exposed eye over my aircraft, taking in the dead courier. Then he looks out across the clearing toward my position. A dark wave of evil accompanies his gaze, reaching corroded fingers for me.

My heart leaps into my mouth, a cold fist slugs my chest. And I know, with greater certainty than I've ever experienced, that he is the one. The man who ordered my brother's murder.

A grim ancestral voice roars in my ears, demanding vengeance. Stilikan's blood cries out to me from the ground. My teeth clench so hard that they seem about to break. I chamber a round into the pistol with a sharp clack-clack!

Then I regain control of myself. Fool! I'd never hit the bastard at this range. Thank God for the artillery explosions, or somebody might have heard me cock the gun.

Yes, the artillery ... it's louder now. I scarcely noticed it earlier above the tumult of my emotions. The partisans halt their examination of Y-47 and glance skyward. Then the leader makes some hand gestures; two groups of four detach themselves from the main body and head toward opposite ends of my woods.

So, this is their game, comb through the trees and snare the fugitive. Well, two can play at it. I'll maneuver to intercept the group on my right. With any luck I can ambush them and take out one or two. I'll pick up a fallen submachine gun and –

But the gods of war have other plans. They send an artillery shell hurtling our way, like an express train roaring through the heavens. A long moan, changing to a whine, then a scream. The partisans dive to the ground as the shell explodes in the trees behind them. The earth shakes under my belly.

The leader is the first one back on his feet, yelling in the harsh slob language and waving his arms. The people he'd sent after me return to him on the double. Then they all melt away the direction they'd come.

Another shell explodes in the area, then another and another. I hug the ground for dear life; shrapnel whistles past my ears. I feel a mad exaltation along with my terror. Then the maws of the big guns direct their fury elsewhere. Things become, relatively, calm once more.

Against all odds, I've been granted a reprieve. Whose guns were those, anyway, ours or the enemy's? It hardly matters.

If I had any sense I would take maximum advantage and run off. But I must know where the partisans went. If they have a base camp nearby, I need to find its precise location so that I can direct an attack against it ...

I need to kill the leader of that band and any of the others who assisted him in Stilikan's murder.

I hump my way across the open area, pistol at the ready, and enter the far stand of woods. This is taking a huge risk, but the last thing the partisans expect would be pursuit from their intended victim. So, an element of surprise favors me. The forest is dense and marshy, an easy place to get lost. I pull out my compass and guide myself in as direct a line as possible.

I don't have far to go. After a slobby period of stepping over fallen trees and negotiating underbrush, I suddenly emerge from the woods into a ghastly open area. ZOD!

The shock pulls the air from my lungs.

A vast silence assaults my ears, a howl of emptiness. Confronting ZOD close up is far worse than seeing it from the sky. Up there I can determine its limits, but from here it seems to go on forever – a desert of nonexistence that appears to be in motion, somehow, like a sluggish whirlpool of nothingness. Here and there a poisoned vapor hugs the ground.

The fetid odors of the forest are gone, sucked away into the void. The rumble of artillery becomes subdued, as if I am hearing it from a great distance underwater.

I shrink back into the woods and peer out from a place of comparative sanity. I look all directions through my filter of underbrush. There is no sign of the partisans, as if they've vanished from this earth. My own mind seems to be slipping away into the vacuum. Panic gnaws at me; I fight the impulse to run.

And then, I detect ... the blur.

When I look directly at it, the blur disappears into the blasted landscape. But when I turn my head and use peripheral vision, it wavers back into view. What on earth is it – is it even of this earth?

Maybe it's a camouflaged tunnel entrance of some sort, an underground escape route for the partisans. Where else could they have gone in this barren wilderness?

For a foolish moment, I consider trying to enter the blur myself, but that would be suicide. If the partisans are anywhere around, I'd be a sitting duck wandering out into that wasteland. No, I'll have to come back later, in force.

I slink away. ZOD laughs at my impotence.

Chapter 31

Revelation.

My initial progress toward home base is swift and sure, driven by the fear of partisan bands. I've flown this route so often before that navigation poses few difficulties. An occasional compass reading keeps me on course, and I don't bother with the little paper map tucked inside my flight suit. The map in my head is sufficient.

I keep to the forest edges and the empty fields, avoiding places that might contain settlements, hoping fervently that one of our patrols will appear. But none does. I am alone in the alien wilderness.

I give a wide berth to a farmhouse. Smoke curls from its chimney, and it is clearly occupied. A large barn and some outbuildings stand nearby. The farmstead seems out of place in the middle of so much emptiness. I see other abandoned buildings along my route and am tempted to stop for a while. But I press on.

A swift moving river, perhaps 30 meters wide, halts my advance. From the air, it is just a little ribbon, a check point from which to orient myself. But close up, it presents a substantial barrier. It rushes through the woods at the bottom of steep embankments. The little canyon seems to be far deeper than is necessary.

I know there is a bridge upstream and am sorely tempted to use it. Maybe it is even guarded by our own men ... but maybe not.

And, if partisans are about, wouldn't they be keeping an eye on that bridge? How can I hope to cross unnoticed? Tall, blonde guy wearing an enemy flight suite – a pretty bad disguise. So, I make my way down the embankment and search for a point to cross the river.

After some time of stumbling through underbrush and shore mud, I find one. The river at this spot passes over a sandbar which seems to extend most of the way to the opposite bank. If I am careful, I just might make it across without getting fully soaked.

I step into the water, wincing as it floods over my boot tops and soaks my feet. Then I pause as a frightening thought occurs. If this is the best place to ford the river, won't the partisans know about it too? Might they be watching right now from the opposite side, aiming rifles at me, waiting for me to reach the midpoint so as to be the easiest target?

To hell with all that, Dytran, get moving!

I take another step and pause again. What if the water is deeper than it looks – what if I have to swim for it? I'll be soaked clear through with a cold night coming on. Should I strip off my flight suit and try to hold it up out of the water?

No time for that.

I plunge ahead.

My fears about snipers and water depth are quickly joined by another anxiety – the current. It tugs at me, constantly forcing my progress farther and farther downstream. And the water is frigid, as if it is running off a glacier. It rises up to my waist, freezing my genitals.

I am staggering on the very edge of the sandbar, looking at the deep eddies of a drop-off, when I finally gain the other side. I slosh onto dry land again, teeth chattering from the numbing cold of the water.

“Piece of cake.”

I ascend the embankment, stopping only long enough to pour the water out of my boots and ring my socks semi-dry.

My trek resumes. Now that I am out of immediate peril, the day's accumulation of fatigue and horror starts to drag me down. I feel a strong urge to stop and rest and, maybe, not bother to get up again. Just lie on my back, facing the pristine sky, and wait for whatever might come along.

I might have done just that except that a strange, glowing presence seems to be moving ahead of me, urging me to keep going. No ... it isn't really there, not so you could see it, but I sense it somehow – an almost erotic manifestation.

It is, doubtless, just my overwrought mind going down some weird survival channel. Still, I dare not challenge its command, for if I do, all will be lost. So I keep moving steadily through the hours, despite my numbed brain, aching legs, and wet, clammy flight suit.

My guide needs a name, so I gave it one – Ket. Yes, that's who it is!

Her letter glows inside my pocket, spreading warmth throughout my tired body. Images of her beauty flood my mind. She stays ahead of me for while, then moves to my side, holding my hand, her long fingers stroking my palm. My other hand grips the pistol.

Ket whispers into my ear, words of love and lust that I cannot quite make out.

But as dusk approaches, I know that I have to be stopping soon. The partisans own the night, and I need to find concealment. Even my guide realizes this and vanishes as mysteriously as she had appeared.

I am fairly confident of my location, as I've just passed the scummy pond I've seen so often from the air. But a final check would be in order before the light becomes too dim. I reach inside my flight suit to get the map nestled there; my fingers touch the manila envelope.

Damn! I've forgotten about the dispatch. Idiot!

I've been wandering about for hours carrying a top-secret message, all ready for anyone who cared to read it. The atmosphere ratchets up its burden of paranoia. I can almost feel enemy hands wrapping around me, seizing the document I have so foolishly allowed to survive.

I slip inside a stand of trees. I need a place to spend the night, and this one is as good as any I am likely to find. I pull the envelope out of my flight suit. It stares up at me, cold and severe, with its **TOP SECRET** warning stamped in blood red.

The thing is oddly terrifying, like the paper that bore the message of Stilikan's fate. It has already cost a man's life, and my beautiful airplane, as well. My duty is to destroy it immediately, tear the paper up and bury it in the muck. Or I can burn it. Nobody will see my damp little fire in this concealment.

But something about that envelope compels me to read its contents. Ever since the crash, my brain seems to be operating on some weird, intuitive level that defies all logic. But reading the dispatch could be considered an act of treason. If the partisans catch me, they can force me to reveal secret information.

I glance down at the pistol. No, the partisans will never take me alive. So, without any clear idea of what I am doing, I tear open the envelope with my trembling hands and read its contents in the dying light.

To: Division Commander

From: Army Group HQ

Subject: Reprisals for partisan attacks

Select any villages of your preference. All men to be shot, all women and children to be burned with the houses.

Signed,

Army Group Commander

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

I dare not leave my area of concealment. Yet I cannot stand to be around that cursed message, either. I dig a small hole, tear the paper to bits and throw them inside. Then I set them afire, then bury the ashes. I move as far away from the grave as possible and try to get some badly needed sleep.

But it won't come. Whenever I start to drift off, I see the flames of hell and of doomed villages. I hear the shrieks of burning children, worse than the cries of the butchered Youth League members after the air raid. A constant roaring, as of a powerful wind, fills my ears.

I try to summon the Magleiter to banish these images, but he doesn't come. In fact, I am quite certain that he is actually bringing the horror to me. The revelation banishes all peace.

An unbearable thought tortures my mind: How many other death warrants have I delivered in my airplane – how many children have already burned with my help?

There is no way I can undo the harm!

I can make sure it never happens again, though. At least that much is in my power. I'll simply make sure that others run the courier flights from now on. I am the squadron commander, aren't I? That still counts for something. And nobody would object, except for Bel, maybe. Courier flights are greatly preferred over ammo drops and the other assignments.

But that would be a dishonorable evasion. I'd be a coward sending others to do the filthy work that I shrink away from myself ... Maybe I could put a bullet through my foot ... another cowardly evasion.

This is war, you spoiled brat! A harsh, uncompromising voice bellows in my head. What did you expect? Right this minute, they're murdering your national comrades with their air raids. They're not human. Kill them all!

But I can't accept that. The slobes are human, all right, just as much as we are – for all our mutual crimes.

My desperation grows, hemming in my mind, until only a single way out seems possible – suicide. A blast from the pistol would liberate me from all responsibility and redeem my personal honor ...

But an image of Mama's grief-stricken face floats up into my consciousness, and I know that I could never subject her to that. Then I hear the voice of Stilikan in my mind:

"You think too much, twerp!" he cries, smacking the back of my head. *"Try to feel more. Believe and trust – obey the Magleiter's will."*

Yes, he'd actually said things like that to me when we were kids. I wonder if he still felt that way toward the end of his life. Judging by his final letters, I'm inclined to doubt it. And what were his thoughts when they tied him to that tree – when he confronted the brutal face of hatred and revenge?

Pure, unreasoning hate had murdered Stilikan, the same monster as in the dispatch I'd burned. That partisan leader ... what was he like before the atrocities started? Was he a normal man before the hate took over? The hate that we brought to this cursed land.

Damn him! Whatever else happens, I will kill that man and all the others who are responsible for Stilikan. I am part of the vicious cycle now.

Chapter 32

Death Storm.

An exhausted morning finally arrives, bringing with it a breakfast of cold emergency rations and a gulp of tepid water from my flask. I've gained nothing from my restless night, have no idea how I will conduct myself when I get back to base ... if I get back to base. If the partisans don't catch me first.

I resume my journey. With any luck, I might be able to arrive by nightfall.

But luck is a rare commodity today. Twice I have to find concealment as groups of men pass by. The first group appears to be laborers, the second one seems less benign – hunters perhaps, or maybe partisans going about incognito under the bright sun. And I have to give a wide berth to people working in the fields. Much of the farmland in this area is abandoned, but some of it is still under cultivation, which complicates matters greatly.

This is supposed to be 'conquered territory,' but I feel no security at all traversing it. Our forces are merely a thin crust on the surface of this foreign land, like an egg shell. Beneath it, other forces hostile to us roil and hiss.

I increasingly seek the protection of trees. Up here in the hills, the woods lack the fetid swamps that choke the lowland forests, and traversing them is not too

difficult. In another situation, I might enjoy strolling among such tall, stately trees, but they only appear to me like sentinels of doom now.

I remember reading an article about the great slobe forests that we would be developing for our own use after the war. The article spoke of the vast tonnages of paper, building materials, and decorative woods that would flow into our country from this inexhaustible resource. The profits from this industry would be immense.

Right.

My progress is slow, and I have already resigned myself to another night in the outdoors when the boy appears. He is standing stock still, hiding behind a tree. I might have bypassed him were it not for the supercharged senses I've developed since the crash. As it is, the corner of my eye catches a glimpse of him. I drop into a fighting crouch and whip out my knife. The lad bolts.

"Hey!"

Fear drives my quarry on, but I quickly narrow the gap. I leap the final distance and bring him down.

Kill him! The savage voice roars in my head.

I raise the knife high, targeting a spot on his back that leads direct to the heart ... then I lower the weapon.

I roll the boy over and clamp a hand over his mouth. His face disappears, except for a pair of frantic eyes gaping up at me.

"Keep quite!" I snap.

I touch the knife blade to my pursed lips, then draw it symbolically across my throat.

"Get it?"

The boy can't have understood my words, but he grasps the meaning of my gestures well enough. He nods, all the while his eyes bore into mine. I feel oddly ashamed, as if I've defeated an unworthy opponent. Stilikan had toppled gigantic Papa before threatening him with a knife, while I am confronting a mere child.

"All right, on your feet." I take my hand away.

The boy rises slowly, glancing around himself like a frightened doe. I brandish the pistol under his nose.

"Don't even think of running," I say.

He nods again and holds up his hands, uttering something in the slobe language.

"I don't know what you're saying, so shut up."

The lad appears to be around twelve with long, disheveled hair and clothes that are too small for him. What is he doing out here, anyway? Is he a homeless refugee, a vagabond? Is he a herding boy out looking for a lost goat?

And why the hell did I have to find him?

Well, I can either stand here all day asking unanswerable questions, or I can go. One thing is certain – I can't leave him behind to inform on my whereabouts.

I gesture ahead with the pistol. "Get moving!"

The boy starts walking briskly.

"Not too far ahead," I warn.

We trudge along through the next hours – the boy first, with me following a short distance behind trying to watch out in all directions. My pistol and knife are always close to hand.

Of all the useless complications! I'll have to keep an eye on the lad all day, lest he run off. And come night, I'll need to restrain him. Thank God for the various items in my emergency kit. These include a length of sturdy cord and a bandana, useful to bind and gag. Come tomorrow, if I am still alive, I'll free the lad when the airbase comes in sight.

I toy with the idea of bringing him in. If he has no family on the outside, he can be our servant – clean our barracks, do our laundry and so on. In return, we'll make sure he has food and a decent place to live. He could survive. In a tiny way, this will help to make up for all the others, the burned ones ...

But the whole idea is ludicrous. Considerations of that sort have no place in this cauldron of brutality. The higher ups would never let us keep him, and if they did, the lad would only run off at the first opportunity to inform on us – or else slit our throats as we slept. It is kill or be killed here, or at least try to keep out of the way of the killing as much as possible.

The route takes us over high ground which offers frequent views of the road below. The road leads directly to the airbase, and I am sorely tempted to use it. No ... it is more prudent to stay up here, farther away from notice.

The lad's back is constantly in my field of vision, the target I once considered stabbing. Now and then, he glances back over his shoulder, doubtlessly hoping that I've vanished into thin air. I toss him a strip of jerky and some dried fruit.

“Eat up!”

He needs no prompting, but wolfs the food down without delay.

I am weary and footsore, many hazardous kilometers remain to my destination. All sorts of random thoughts start playing through my mind.

For instance, who is this boy, and where did he come from? Is a mother anxiously awaiting his return? He is younger than the slob boy who'd attacked Bel's airplane, but I can't help seeing them as one in the same. They blend into a single, universal, enemy lad – one Piotra.

Years seemed to have passed since the slob diving incident, so many twists and turns bringing me here. And all because of one foolish decision. I've read that the most advanced reasoning portions of the human brain do not fully mature until a person reaches his early 20's. I am yet seventeen, can I be blamed for being an ass?

Blame! Such concepts fade to insignificance in these alien surroundings. The very trees and grass seem unnatural. Human beings are snuffed out wholesale here – shot from the sky, blown up by artillery, burned in villages ...

My luck suddenly turns when I spot something down on the road.

“Hold it!” I command. “Get down!”

We crouch in the high grass and peer out toward an armored personnel carrier stopped on the road below. It is a stealthy, long-range model with eight wheels instead of clanking tracks, similar to the ones I'd seen at the victory rally. With its camouflage paint, it blends in well with the background, but my eyesight – more keen than ever – has picked it out.

It is one of ours, originally, but it might be in enemy hands now. From this distance I can't tell. The partisans are experts at using captured equipment and uniforms to bait traps for us.

"Come on!" I beckon.

We make our way downhill, taking advantage of the high grass and every other bit of cover. The wind favors us, rustling through the grass and disguising our movements. The boy is very skilled at this subterfuge, moving along with the cunning of a snake. Maybe he has done this before, in service with the partisans.

Despite the life and death circumstances, I find my thoughts wandering back to when I was twelve. Stilikan was home from school that summer, and we played a similar game, creeping down a hill to surprise the "enemy" lurking below. The age difference between me and Stilikan was about the same as between me and this boy, come to think of it.

Suddenly, a realization of the war's futility and waste slams into me like an armored fist. Here I am, five years later and half a continent away, still playing this game. Between then and now lies a vast killing field piled high with our best young men. And for what – so the slobes can teach us the limits of our arrogance?

Perhaps these bitter thoughts distract me too much, or maybe the wind rushing through the grass dulls my hearing. I do not notice the man sneaking up behind us until I hear the sharp cock of a gun. I spin around, groping for my pistol.

"Hold it, flyboy," a harsh voice says.

A boot knocks the pistol out of my hand.

I squint up into the sun. A man dressed in camouflage is standing among its rays pointing a rifle at me. The barrel seems as big as a howitzer's.

"W-who ...?" I say.

"I'm your fairy godmother," the man says, "who else?"

He speaks our language with no trace of enemy accent. The coiled spring inside me loosens a tiny bit.

"We've got a live one, Captain," the man calls out to somebody.

A second man, also dressed in camouflage, strides into view. His bulk obscures the glaring sun and I can make out his face clearly. It is hard and sharp with piercing blue eyes. Blond hair bristles on his skull.

"Good work, Eagle-eye," he says.

For a moment, I think he is addressing me with my old squadron nickname. I almost utter some absurd reply.

The captain looks down at me. I must be a contemptible sight, sprawled helplessly in the grass, gaping up like an idiot.

"You going to lay there all day, sonny?" he says.

He offers me a hand. I take it and am yanked to my feet by an iron grip.

"Thank you, sir," I say.

The captain is no taller than me, but he seems more powerful by an order of magnitude. Next to him, I feel about as strong as a rag doll. Perhaps my state of weariness contributes to the impression.

Now that I'm over my initial fear, I am struck by the captain's resemblance to Stilikan. He could almost be related to us, but his face bears a cruel edge that my brother's never had.

"What's with the kid?" The captain asks.

He jabs his gun barrel toward the slob lad, who is standing fearfully nearby with his hands above his head.

“Oh, I found him a way back,” I say. “I was keeping an eye on him.”

The captain nods. “Good move. Every one of these little snots is an informer.”

More men in camouflage are standing around now, all of them tough and hard as brass. Clearly they are one of our “anti-terrorist” commando units – men whose primary job is to track down and exterminate partisans. Men I need to know.

“We’ve been told to watch for a missing courier pilot,” the captain says. “Is that you?”

“Yes, sir. Youth League air squadron commander Dytran reporting, sir.”

My announcement is greeted by sarcastic chuckles from the men.

“Yuliac babies!” somebody sneers.

“What about the courier?” the captain asks.

“He was killed, sir. An enemy fighter jumped us.”

“And his dispatch?”

“... destroyed.”

The captain nods again. Thank heaven he does not question me further about the dispatch. He gestures to one of his men.

“Radio the airbase. Tell them we’ve got the prodigal, all safe and sound.”

“Yes, sir.”

The trooper runs ahead to the personnel carrier.

“All right, we can take you back,” the captain says. “Let’s go.”

I tromp down the hill beside him. My relief at my deliverance is so profound that I almost seem to be floating. The commandos tread around us like predator cats ready to pounce at an instant’s notice. Thank God they are our side!

I need to tell them about the partisan band, lead them back to the spot where I discovered it. I wonder what the protocol is. Should I speak directly to the captain or wait until I get back and submit my report through channels?

I determine to speak with the captain once we’re inside the APC and on our way. I don’t think my superiors will fault me for that. And what if they do? Anything that brings faster justice to Stilikan’s murderers is worth trying.

Eagle-eye nudges my arm. “Here, you forgot something.”

He returns my pistol to me butt first.

“Thanks, sir.”

I take the gun. The thing has an odd, tingly feeling, as if it knows it’s been handled by a master who really appreciates its destructive powers.

“Don’t shoot yourself with it,” Eagle-eye says. “Ammo’s expensive.”

I tuck the gun inside my flight suit trying to keep a grin on my face about the supposed joke; I’m not certain he’s really joking, though.

We gain the road and walk up to the armored personnel carrier.

It is a fearsome brute, open at the top. Its armor juts in aggressive angles like that of some prehistoric monster. A small turret in front houses a machine gun while another heavy machine gun pokes out the back, blocking access to the doors. This second gun is a field addition, I reckon. At least the vehicle at the rally didn’t have one.

The vehicle is already sinister enough, but a logo painted on its flank adds to the effect. It shows a dark, whirling cyclone with a skull peering out from its

interior. The skull sports ruby-red eyes. The words, Death Storm, appear beneath this illustration.

The whole thing is worked into the camouflage, and I don't notice it until I'm right next to it. The effect is quite startling.

"You like the artwork?" Eagle-eye asks.

"Uh ... yes, sir," I say, "very much so."

More sarcastic chuckles from the men.

I glance off to the right where the road starts to bend. A second APC lurks against the trees. Its position is such that I wasn't able to see it from the hill. It is even more highly camouflaged, with greenery attached along its flanks, like a rolling tree.

The slob lad is still with us, I notice with some surprise. He seems like an intruder from some other lifetime.

"Run along now!" the captain barks, gesturing down the road with his gun barrel.

The slob boy looks toward me with soft, brown eyes that remind me of a puppy dog's.

"Yes, go on!" I say. "You're free."

The lad takes off at a run.

Men are clambering up the side of the armored vehicle now. Then it is my turn to ascend. I hope that I can get up there without embarrassment. I seize the handholds and pull myself to the top. So far, so good; I feel a shred of dignity returning.

A shot rings out. I jerk my head around. Down the road, a tiny heap indicates where the slob boy is lying.

"Nice shot, Eagle-eye!" somebody yells.

The scene has an unreal air. It does not involve me, does it? The boy is far away, dehumanized, while I am here safe.

Just climb aboard and keep your mouth shut.

But this is wrong! Honor demands that I take it personally. I drop to the ground and stride up to Eagle-eye.

"Why the hell'd you do that?" I shout.

He turns a look of amused contempt toward me, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. A swirl of wind envelops him, wafting away the smoke.

The captain grips my shoulder and spins me around.

"It's not all pretty blue, flyboy," he says. "Down here, there're no limits."

PART 3

A New Reality

Chapter 33

Hero's Homecoming.

The ride is tense and ugly. Although the vehicle is crowded, there remains a chilly vacuum around my corner. I've offended the squad's code, and they are ostracizing me for it. Thank God they've already radioed ahead that I am "safe and sound." Otherwise, I might be lying out in the road with the slob boy.

I discard my original plan. I'd thought that I might be able to accompany them on a raid, but that idea seems beyond foolish now. I'll save my report until I get back to the air field, if I get back.

I am reasonably confident of that. Still, I feel a sensation of fear and dread as never before in my life. Even the terror of the shoot down or the railway depot ambush does not match it. Those were military actions against legitimate targets. This murder is something quite different. It is the face of pure evil.

But I need these men in order to exact vengeance for Stilikan. Perhaps I can make it up with them, utter some cruel jest, apologize for being so unreasonable:

"Hey guys, you shot that damn kid before he could polish my boots!" I might say. "You know how it is with us 'flyboys,' we're all a bit soft in the head from too much altitude."

I even have a supply of Bekar's premium cigarettes in my emergency kit. I can pass them around. They never fail to win friends.

But I can't bring myself to do any of this. For the first time ever, I question my place in the world. What the hell am I doing here? How can any of this horror be considered devotion to the Fatherland?

We are still a kilometer from the air field when the vehicle abruptly stops.

"Time to get out!" somebody says.

The captain grips my arm and speaks harshly in my ear. "Don't ever let us find you again, kid."

I am fairly heaved over the side, almost landing on my face in the gravel road. I straighten my flight suit and begin walking with as much dignity as possible. Every moment I expect to hear a shot ring out, feel a lethal impact against my spine.

But nothing happens. The armored personnel carriers turn around and go off the direction they had come.

I pass through the sentry posts and enter the air field. First order of business is a report to the wing commander, then a glorious hot shower and something to eat. A couple of nasty blisters have developed on feet grown unaccustomed to long treks, and I want to have the infirmary look at them. I pray that there will be no flying assignments for me today.

As I crunch along the gravel path toward HQ, a vast weariness is taking hold, only part of which is physical. My spirit is exhausted, too. After taking care of my immediate needs, I still have to face the brutal issue of the courier flights. I don't know what to do; my brain is hardly functioning any more. I wish I was back home curled up in my comfortable bed, with Mama downstairs baking pastries and brewing real coffee.

Something up ahead on the right catches my eye.

What the hell?

A movie camera, complete with a two-man crew, is grinding away on a tripod. Its long lens jabs at me like a rifle barrel.

"Don't look into the lens!" a cameraman yells. "Look off toward the left."

I am too astonished to react. Here is another scene of unreality, as if I've stepped from one mad house into another.

"Look off to the left!" the cameraman repeats urgently.

I swivel my head leftward to see a crowd approaching – Bel, Sipren, other pilots and ground crew, even the wing commander. A man with a portable movie camera on his shoulder strides among them; another man brandishes a microphone like a club.

And near the back – crisp in her News Service blazer, tall in her platform shoes – is Ket.

"By one of war's unpredictable turns, our crew is on hand to witness a hero's homecoming," the man is saying into his microphone. "Youth League Air Squadron leader Dytran was given up for lost but has now returned safe and sound to the arms of his national comrades ..."

As the man drones on, my gaze turns toward Ket. I couldn't look elsewhere if I wanted to, and I sure don't want to. Her eyes direct an irresistible, electric-like current into mine; a broad smile creases her face. She purses her lips into a kiss. She seems like a fantastic visitor from some other universe.

Then the crowd surges around me, slapping my back, shaking my hands, saying what a helluva guy I am. For a moment, I fear they will hoist me upon their shoulders.

"You're one lucky bastard," Bel whispers in my ear. He, too, is gazing off toward Ket.

"Tell us how it feels to be back," the newsman says.

The microphone is shoved into my face.

"Uh ... it feels great," I say. "I never thought this airfield was so beautiful."

Everyone laughs and applauds. Apparently I've stumbled upon the right words. The newsman asks me more questions, and I mouth replies. I scarcely know what I am saying. Somebody thrusts a bottle of wine into my hand, I take a healthy swig to cheers and applause.

Then the little celebration breaks up and people return to their various duties. The movie cameras switch off.

“Report to me when you’re finished with ... them,” the wing commander says.

He gestures toward the newsreel people. His face wears a tired, sardonic little smile.

“Yes, sir.”

He drifts away with the others, leaving me alone in a temporary void. Then –

“Welcome back, Dytran.”

It’s Ket. She is standing close to me; her body gives off incredible warmth. She is bursting with vitality in this land of murder.

“Ket, what are you doing here?”

I can’t focus my eyes properly. Ket seems to give off an obscuring glow, and the wine has hit my famished system hard.

“Oh, Dytran ...”

Her hands reach for me, then drop to her sides. She looks toward her colleagues, who are avidly watching us. They begin to busy themselves with other things.

“We were in the area on another assignment,” she says. “I persuaded the director to divert here for a follow-up on the Raptor Aces.”

I nod dumbly, still unable to get a clear view of Ket. She is like some goddess hovering before me.

“Dytran, I was so afraid ... you were missing and so many of the others were already killed. Then the radio message came from the commandos – it was like the sun came out again. I ...”

She brushes a tear from her perfect face with the back of one hand. My heart is breaking on her behalf.

“We’re leaving soon,” she says. “Can I talk to you alone?”

“Yes, of course, Ket.”

She leads the way to a group of News Service vehicles, including a large van into which men are loading equipment. I feel myself to be back on my trek, following her perfect image to salvation.

Ket approaches one of the men – the same guy who operated the projector a hundred years ago, back before I’d left home for this horror exhibition.

“Give me five minutes,” she says. “I’ll owe you one.”

“Sure, Ket.” The guy looks toward me. “Nice to see you again, Commander.”

His voice carries an undertone of admiration and, perhaps, a tinge of regret. Maybe he would have liked it better if the “homecoming hero” hadn’t showed up after all.

He and the others move away. Ket enters the vehicle’s back door.

“Come on, Dytran,” she beckons.

I step inside, and she shuts the door behind us. Instantly, she is upon me, her body pressing against me, her mouth seeking mine, her breath coming in hot gasps. My fatigue vanishes amid a raging torrent of desire.

“Oh, God, Dytran, I thought I’d lost you forever.”

She crushes her mouth against mine again. After an eternity, she withdraws it.

“I wish you could take me right now.” Her voice is soft and husky, irresistible. “I want you to take me ... I love you so much.”

Her face glows in the dimness like a beacon from heaven. Her body is magnificent perfection in my arms.

"I love you too, Ket," I manage to say. "You're all that kept me going these last two days."

"Really?"

"Yes, I wouldn't lie to you about that."

Moments drift by. I feel her deep breathing; her heart beats against my chest. We almost seem to be one life, here in the darkness. Then she injects a note of fearful urgency.

"You have to get away from here before it's too late, Dytran. So many are being killed now!"

"What makes me so special?" I ask.

"You're a hero back home. *Youth Answers the Call!* is a huge success. Did you see the magazine article?"

"Yes, I did."

"The readers loved it," Ket says, "And the footage we got today – people will eat it up!"

Right here in my arms, she is changing from a pliant, love-struck girl into a hard and calculating professional woman.

"I never thought this airfield was so beautiful," she says, lowering her voice to imitate me. "What a fantastic line!"

I could use another great line but can't think of anything to say. Ket picks up the slack.

"We have excellent connections with the Propaganda Ministry, Dytran. We can arrange for you to come home on a 'good-will tour.' And after that ..."

A lightning flash goes off in my mind. I can see the way forward now – out of this hell hole and onto the bright highland of true service to our nation.

"I'll do it!" I say. "And after that, I want fighters."

"Fighters?" Her voice has become small again.

"Yes. We were promised fighter training if we did well in this assignment. I think we've all proved ourselves."

"You want to come back here ... as a fighter pilot?"

"No, not here," I say. "A home defense squadron, protecting the Fatherland from air raids."

"I ... uh ..."

"Come on, Ket. People will really 'eat it up,' won't they?"

She draws back a little.

"Why ... yes they would."

"Then you'll help me?"

A knocking comes at the door.

"Sorry Ket," a muffled voice says, "we have to get going."

"Just a minute, please," she answers.

She withdraws from my arms and begins straightening her clothes.

"Very well, Dytran. I'll see what we can do."

"Thanks, Ket. You're ... the most incredible woman I've ever known."

Her smile fairly lights up the darkened surroundings.

"What a sweet thing to say, Dytran."

She gives me a final peck on the lips. "Hold that thought until we meet again."
She opens the door just wide enough to slip herself through, then closes it behind her.

Chapter 34

Reports.

Again I am shell shocked by Ket's abrupt departure, as I was after the showing of Youth Answers the Call! Her way of making an exit cannot help but impress; it leaves a vacuum behind her.

I am alone in the semi-darkness with the cameras and other equipment. I get the strange impression that I am inside a weapons cache. In a way, these things are weapons – coercing people psychologically rather than through brute force. The door opens wide, admitting late afternoon daylight and a male face.

"Sorry, Commander," the guy says, "time to go."

I like the sound of "Commander," there is genuine respect behind it. I exit the van as if I am stepping into some lesser reality. Moving from a Ket space into the outside world is even more jarring than leaving my airplane for solid ground.

Guys start throwing more equipment into the van. I see nothing of Ket, just a News Service car driving off toward the main gate. I watch it go for a while. Is Ket looking through the window back at me – or is she already absorbed with the latest calculations to advance her career?

Bel's voice intrudes: "So, what happened, Dye."

I turn toward him. He's got hands on hips and a smirk on his face. How long has he been standing here?

"I got shot down, that's what," I say.

"Oh?" His eyes widen with mock surprise. "I thought she was happy to see you."

"I ..."

The full meaning of Dye's remark sinks in. I feel my face start to redden.

"Dammit, Bel, why don't you learn to mind your own business?"

Bel laughs. "Oh, you meant shot down by the enemy fighter – the lesser of two evils, don't you think?"

"That's very clever, Bel. You should try getting downed yourself sometime."

"Not on my agenda, sorry."

Bel takes my arm and begins walking with me.

"You know, everybody else believed that you'd bought it," he says, "but something told me you were all right."

"Really?"

"Yes," Bel says, "it was the strangest feeling. 'You just wait,' I told the others, 'Dye's humping his way back to us right now.'"

I give him a doubtful look.

"It's true, go ask anybody," Bel says. "They'll tell you."

It's impossible to read Dye's intent. Is he being sincere, sarcastic, affectionate, hostile? I think probably some mixture of them all. Everything between us has always been a mixture.

"Thanks for your confidence," I say.

"Sure thing. They can't kill us off so easily!"

Bel's lighthearted manner tones down a few notches.

"Too bad about the courier," he says. "The guy seemed like a decent sort."

I stiffen.

"Something wrong?" Bel asks.

"Uh ... just some aftershock, I'm afraid."

Bel nods sympathetically. We walk in silence toward the HQ building. Yes, the courier was a decent sort, but the message dangling from his wrist like a poisonous snake certainly wasn't.

I feel a strong urge to tell Beltran about it. His reaction is impossible to predict, though. I'm certain that he would not report my "treasonous" act of reading the message, but what would he think of its contents? He might not be upset at all, which would be even more horrible. He might even approve of the extermination order. I don't want to find out.

We reach the HQ building.

"I'll just leave you here," Bel says. "Hot food and a shower will be waiting for you."

"Thanks, Bel."

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My report to the wing commander does not take long. I locate the suspected partisan lair as accurately as I can on the reconnaissance photos and offer to accompany a raid against it – provided that it is not conducted by the *Death Storm* anti-partisan unit.

"And why this exception?" the wing commander asks.

"I disagreed with ... some of their methods," I say. "Their leader indicated it would be unwise for me to encounter them again."

"Is that so?"

"Yes sir. I have no reason to doubt his word."

The wing commander lets the matter drop, thankfully. He indicates ZOD on the recon photo he is holding.

"Can you tell me anything more about this 'camouflaged entryway' you saw?" he asks.

"No, sir, only that I've caught glimpses of it from the air as well. None of my other pilots can verify the sighting, however."

"There's no indication of it in this photo," the wing commander says, "nor in any of the others."

"Yes sir, but I am certain that it exists just the same."

He nods, rather unconvinced, in my opinion.

"And what is your interest in all this?" he asks.

"My brother, sir. I believe this partisan group was responsible for his murder."

The wing commander's brow furrows. Again, the weary look comes over his face.

“It’s not my place to set conditions,” I say, “but it would be best if I accompanied the raid. From all indications, I am the only one who can find the entryway.”

“Very well,” the wing commander says, “I’ll pass your information on.”

Suddenly, a tremendous racket comes thundering through the closed door. Shouts, whoops, gunfire. Are we under attack? The phone on the wing commander’s desk jangles, and he snatches it up.

“That’ll be all, Dytran,” he says.

“Yes, sir.”

I salute and leave the office.

In the hallway extreme agitation reigns, and outside the HQ building is pandemonium. Everyone not presently flying seems to be converging on the parade ground, yelling, cheering, and firing guns into the air. Men tumble on the ground in playful wrestling matches.

A man runs past me, heading toward the mayhem. I grab his sleeve.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“The second front, boy!” he shouts. “It’s finally started!”

He breaks away and runs to join the others.

“We’re going home!” somebody yells.

Others take up the chant: “WE’RE GOING HOME – HEY HEY! WE’RE GOING HOME!”

Every fiber of my being wants to believe this. I want to rush off and join the celebration. But I’ve covered such hysterical ground before, and where has it gotten me? If the news is true, it will keep.

I walk off toward the barracks.

Chapter 35

Becalmed.

The world becomes eerily quiet during the next week as both sides suspend military operations. The whole front is like a ship becalmed on the ocean. Even the partisan attacks cease.

The reports are true, no inflated rumors this time. Full scale war is raging on the distant borders of the slobe empire. Their eastern enemies have taken their measure and are looking to settle old territorial disputes.

Best of all, the bombing raids on the Homeland have stopped. Many civilians have died in these raids, including Sipren’s mother and little sister who perished during a horrific fire bombing that erased their entire city. And this on the day before the de facto truce started. It seems the enemy wanted to send us a final message.

Sipren is something of a “white crow” himself now, quiet and distant. He, too, has aged ten years very quickly. The rest of us offer what sympathy we can, while inwardly rejoicing that our own families have been spared.

We fly only occasional reconnaissance missions now, with observers in our rear cockpits snapping photos. Their reports confirm a rosy scenario – the enemy is pulling back.

High-winged monoplanes are preferred for this work. We only fly reconnaissance when none are available. Our technique is to go into a steep bank so as to get the wing out of the way. While this is amusing for us, the observers are unappreciative.

A radio message arrives from Ket:

We're working on it. Will let you know soon.

Hope flares in my breast. Is it really possible that I will see her again?

Peace negotiations must be taking place, everyone reasons. The slobes can't handle wars on two widely separated fronts, and they'll want a quick settlement with us. Sure, we'll probably have to give back much of the land we've conquered, but so what? We're going home!

Discipline on the base relaxes. Officers walk with a new bounce in their step, their customary scowls brighten. Uniforms have less formality now – caps askew, ties loosened. An armored infantry unit parks their vehicles on one end of our base while its men go off on R&R.

About the only military operation that occurs on these quiet days involves the Death Storm anti-terrorist commando. They went tearing off to liquidate the partisan band I'd reported without waiting for army backup. They apparently did not want to miss the fun before an armistice comes into effect.

They would have had trouble convincing higher command to assign more troops, anyway. Everyone, from the top leadership to the lowliest rifleman, has "second-front fever." Any excuse to avoid combat is good enough.

Besides, the commando considered the guerillas to be only a small "freelance" bandit group operating outside the well-organized partisan effort. Destroying them would be a simple matter.

But underestimating the slobes seems to be a major flaw in our national character. The enemy ambushed the commando and inflicted heavy casualties. In return, the commando managed to kill some partisans, but none of the enemy casualties fit the description of the leader.

I saw the official account; the wing commander had obtained it for me somehow. In the thick of the fighting, the partisans simply vanished, "as if into thin air," the report said. But I know where they went.

I am deeply disturbed by this account, though not because of the loss of our men. To my discredit, perhaps, I find myself hoping that the one called "Eagle-eye" is among the slain.

What bothers me is that the beast of a partisan leader still walks the earth, and my opportunity to settle accounts with him is slipping away. How can I face Mama, knowing that Stilikan's remains will lay in their urn forever unavenged?

On one level, I know my desire for retribution to be futile, self-destructive even. In this roiling cesspool of violence, what is one more occurrence of inhumanity? Just let it go.

But I can't let it go. The world – my world – is out of balance and needs to be set right, whatever the cost.

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Beltran is the naysayer among us. He will have none of the optimism that infects everyone else. True to form, he chooses a moment when we are all in a particularly good mood, kicked back in our chairs relaxing on the barracks porch, to express his misgivings.

Or maybe we aren't so jolly. With the strain of constant flying removed from us, the old knives are starting to come out. Anyway, Bel pulls his nose out of his book on racial theory and asks no one in particular:

“Do you really think we'll get off so easily?”

A pause, then I take the bait. I'm sitting right next to him, after all.

“Well, it makes sense the slobes will have to make peace with us,” I reply. “They can't handle full scale wars on two fronts.”

“Sure, they'll eventually have to make peace,” Bel says, “but what's the big rush?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Look at the map, Dytran,” Bel says. “They can afford to lose a lot of territory in the East before they have to transfer their main force there.”

The front feet of Katella's chair bang down onto the wooden planks.

“So, what's your point, Bel?” he says.

“The point is, they'll want to improve their negotiating position,” Bel says. “Before they talk serious peace, they'll hit us with everything they've got.”

He smacks a fist into his palm hard enough to make me flinch.

“If we had any sense, we'd strike first!”

Katella waves a dismissive hand.

“We can always count on you to look on the bright side, Bel. I think you were born with a thundercloud over your cradle.”

The rest of us shift uncomfortably. Bel is an orphan, illegitimate most likely, and jokes about his birth seem very out of place.

“Whatever,” Bel says. “But we need to think about getting out of this mess once the fireworks start.”

“What fireworks?” Katella snaps. “All reconnaissance shows the enemy pulling out.”

“Believe that if you want, but I say it's all deception,” Bel replies. “You never were too bright, Katella, judging by that girlfriend you picked.”

Now the line has definitely been crossed. Katella is on his feet.

“Maybe it's time we settled our unfinished business,” he says.

Bel remains seated, chair leaned back against the wall. He looks up at Katella innocently.

“What's that?” he asks.

“I think you know.”

“Oh, yes,” Bel says. “You were going to ‘kick my ass,’ as I recall.”

Katella moves in, fists clenched.

“Here's a man with serious intentions,” Bel taunts. “Can I get out of my chair, or are you going to sucker punch me first? Maybe you could actually win that way.”

I watch, fascinated, along with everybody else. Which one would triumph in such an evenly matched battle? After so much enforced inactivity, this is a chance to see some real violence!

Katella steps back. "All right, Bel, stand up."

Beltran drops his chair to all four legs and begins to rise. We gape at the spectacle like a row of baboons, an almost electric thrill runs through us. Then I come to my senses.

"Knock it off!" I stand up and thrust myself between the combatants. "Save it for the enemy!"

The two glower at each other. Katella with hot anger and Bel with a cold, empty stare that chills me to the core.

"Quit yanking his chain!" I scold Katella. "He's entitled to his opinion."

Katella starts to reply, then clamps his mouth shut. I turn toward Beltran.

"And cut the 'stupid' comments, already. Katella's as smart as any of us."

"Yes ... *Commander*," Bel says.

The standoff continues a bit longer. Katella disengages first.

"Very well, Dytran," he says. "Excuse me if I go inside. The air out here isn't too good."

He stomps into the barracks and smacks the screen door closed behind him. The rest of us resume our seats.

"You know, he's right," Beltran says. "The air out here is a lot better now."

Nobody laughs.

"Come on, Bel," I say. "Let's just hang together for a while longer. This will all be over soon."

"You, too, huh?" Bel says. "Buying into the sugarplum vision?"

He returns to his racial theory book, a little smirk creasing his face. Before long, the others find excuses to get out of their chairs and head inside, leaving the two of us in sole possession of the porch.

I feel suddenly exhausted, as if all the woes of the universe are pressing down on me. I am sick of being here on the ass end of the world; I'm tired of breaking up fights. I don't want to lead anybody or be some goddam cinema hero. I want to be home again ... with Gyn.

She is warm and beautiful, and she sees things clear, as I am finally starting to. Long ago she perceived the downward path we are on, beginning with the National Salvation Party and its fantastic, hate-filled philosophy that bears no relation to the real world – the crimes against the slobes, the unwinnable war, the "master race" getting its head handed to it on a platter.

All of this leading to the death of Stilikan and vast numbers of others. I've grown to hate the Party with its legion of parasites bloodsucking our people.

And who is the Party, really? Aren't we all taught that the Party is the Magleiter and the Magleiter is the nation? But I simply can't believe that he is to blame for the mess we are in. Any time the thought tries to enter my mind it is blocked by an image of the Great Leader's hypnotic eyes boring into me, keeping him above all reproach ... like God.

Why am I feeling like this, anyway? A few minutes ago everything was fine. It's Bel's fault, him and his gloomy predictions. I wish Katella had shut him up!

No, that is just an evasion. I actually share Bel's misgivings, but he's destroyed the hopeful assumptions that lived alongside my doubts. Like everyone else, I yearn to believe in a favorable outcome. But where has such groupthink brought us? Groupthink has made our nation stupid.

I look over at Bel sitting next to me. He is such an admirable person in so many ways. He is intelligent, brave, honorable, and highly competent – the best pilot in our squadron, if I am truthful about it. But there is something unsettling about him, too, as if a crucial element of his character is missing. I wonder what he'd be like if he'd been raised by a normal family instead of in a State institution with its constant drumbeat of hate and paranoia.

Not that there wasn't plenty of that in the Youth League, but at least I had Mama to keep me from going too far off the deep end. She and Stilikan presented a family bond stronger than any external force could possibly be.

Bel turns my direction and says something so unexpected that I can scarcely reply.

"You'd best give me all the fancy cigarettes you've got, Dytran."

"... W-why?" I say. "Did you take up smoking?"

Bel shakes his head.

"I think the less you know, the better, for now," he says. "How many do you have left?"

"Oh ... about five cartons."

"Good," Bel says. "I'll need whatever else you've got, too – anything that girlfriend of yours might have dropped off."

I think of the can of real coffee Ket left for me, and the box of chocolate bars. They are still waiting, unopened, in my locker. I've thought of breaking them out when our orders to return home arrive.

"What's all this about?" I say.

"It's about Athens and Sparta," Bel replies. "Now, I said you could count on me, so why don't you shut up and give me your stash? ... Sir."

Something about his gaze brooks no argument. Later that day, outside the view of the rest, I hand over my treasures. I feel as if I'm giving Bel a lot more than just material things.

Chapter 36

Creature in the Forest.

An uneasy calm maintains itself in our group, while underneath it the bad blood simmers. Why can't Katella get along with Beltran, I wonder; why is he always egging for a fight? He is such a mild-mannered person otherwise. It must be clear by now that I've long since made peace with Bel, that I do not hold the slob diving incident against him. But Katella can't seem to let it go. Why?

Come to think of it, Katella has always held something against Bel, in a quiet, sullen way that never got out in the open. But his attitude has hardened a great

deal since the slob dive. Is he jealous of me and Beltran; does he feel left out, somehow? Just thinking about these prospects exhausts me.

I need to get out of here – go home and get on with my life, away from these guys. I am sick of this place and its stifling inactivity. Above all, I am tired of hanging around the barracks and want to get into the air again.

But then the thought of a courier flight comes to mind and I settle down quick. Boredom is far preferable to another horror mission. I am almost grateful, therefore, when Bel approaches me the next day with a mysterious proposition.

“Meet me outside,” he says quietly. “I want to show you something.”

He leaves the barracks by himself. A minute later, I grab my jacket and follow.

Autumn chill is in the air; the trees are turning to magnificent golds and reds. The scent of fallen leaves wafts from the nearby woods. For an instant, I almost feel like I’m back home.

No, Dytran, you’re still in this lousy place.

I glance around for Bel and spot him standing some distance off gazing out over the runway, just as he did this past spring at our home base before the air raid began. I walk up to him.

“So, what’s all the mystery about?” I ask.

By way of answer, Bel turns and starts walking briskly. I follow alongside. All right, if he doesn’t feel like talking, that’s fine with me. But where are we going?

To the far end of the base, apparently, where the vehicles of the motorized infantry unit are still parked. The men haven’t returned from their leave yet, and their trucks, halftracks, and armored cars stand in neat rows as if their drivers have just stepped out for brunch at some tea room.

“Bunch of clowns,” Bel mutters. “They don’t want to admit there’s a war still on.”

It does seem to be an unprofessional display, a rather sad testimony to our lack of dedication. But who am I to criticize? I’ve had a bellyful of this war, like everybody else.

A lone sentry stands guard over the vehicles. He and Bel exchange nods. Then Bel turns sharply and heads for a stand of trees.

“Would you tell me what’s going on already?” I say with some exasperation.

“Sure thing,” Bel says.

He quickens his pace and enters the little wood. I follow, unenlightened, in his wake. But my ignorance doesn’t last long.

“There it is,” Bel says, “our ticket out of here.”

He indicates an armored personnel carrier parked under the trees as innocently as a family sedan at a picnic ground.

“W-what the hell are you talking about?” I say.

“I’m talking about the enemy offensive,” Bel says. “When it gets rolling, we’d better look to our own escape, nobody else will.”

To say I am caught off guard would be a rank understatement. I couldn’t be more astonished if my own dear Papa had returned to life and stood beneath the colorful trees.

I approach the APC cautiously, as if it is some terrible alien god emerged from the nether regions. It is as large as the one used by the commandos, enough for a dozen occupants, but this is a half track design with tank-like treads in back and

conventional steering wheels in front. I lay my hand upon it, half expecting the machine to disappear like a mirage, but it remains before me, cold and lethal.

“But ... you can’t just take off with this thing,” I say.

“Why not?” Bel says. “I’ve learned how to drive it while the rest of you were sitting around reading letters.”

“That’s theft of government property!”

Bel gives a caustic laugh and gestures toward the vehicles parked outside the copse.

“A lot of ‘government property’ is going to get blown sky high pretty soon,” he says. “If we’re lucky, the enemy won’t spot this one.”

“But – ”

“Face it, Dytran, we’re a non-priority. When the fighting begins, we’re on our own.”

“That’s not true, I’m ...”

I almost said: “I’m a hero back home,” but the absurdity of it sticks in my throat.

“It is true,” Beltran says. “Nobody gives a damn about us, we’re not regular military.”

Now that I am over my amazement a little, I have to admit that Bel is talking sense. I am not ready to give up my objections, though.

“What about that sentry out there?” I say.

“The relevant people have been paid off,” Bel says.

“How?”

“With your stash,” Bel says, “and with my allowance, which I’ve been saving up for years.”

He takes an aggressive step forward.

“Look at me,” he says, “I’m no pretty boy. What did I have to spend money on, huh?”

I wipe a hand over my face. It seems unnaturally cold.

“Well, there it is,” Bel says, moving back a step. “You’ve got two choices, Dye: either go along with it or turn me in.”

I don’t answer.

“Three choices, actually,” Bel says. “You can just ignore the whole arrangement, but I don’t think you’ll want to do that once the shooting starts.”

“You know I wouldn’t turn you in,” I say.

Bel cocks an eyebrow, as if he doesn’t fully believe that.

“All right, then,” he says, “let’s go back.”

He leads the way out of the copse. I follow along dumbly.

Neither of us talks for a long while. Bel’s plan is incredible, paranoiac. But it also makes a lot of sense. One thing you can say about Beltran, he doesn’t trifle with you. In all the time I’ve known him, he’s never said or done anything frivolous.

We are most of the way back to the barracks when Bel speaks.

“Tonight, after supper, I’m going to start a row with Katella,” he says.

“What the hell for?”

Bel waits a moment for me to calm down, like an adult with a petulant child.

“Because I need an excuse to leave the barracks,” he explains calmly. “I should stay near our transport.”

“Well, in that case.” I fling up my arms. “Far be it from me to object!”

“Just listen, please,” Bel says. “I’m serious.”

“All right, go ahead.”

“You break up the fight before it goes too far,” Bel says. “I’ll act all offended. ‘To hell with you guys!’ I’ll say and storm out with my blankets.”

“You’re going to live out there in the woods?”

“Not for long,” Bel says. “It’s coming, Dytran, I can feel it.”

He pauses and looks down at our feet.

“It’s like an electric current running through the ground.”

I don’t want to accept this idea, but, by heaven, there does seem to be a vibration under our feet.

“When the hell breaks loose, your job is to get the others to the transport,” Bel says. “I’ll handle the rest.”

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That evening, as we sit around the barracks digesting our supper, Bel shoots me a meaningful glance. I understand what he wants. I get off my cot and saunter into the lavatory.

I stand before my favorite sink examining my face in the mirror. Funny how you stake out ‘favorite’ things, even in a lowly barracks – favorite sink, favorite window, favorite spot to leave your boots. It’s just a way of keeping sane, I suppose.

My face looks dry and pale, but at least the pimples that bothered me occasionally during the summer have not recurred.

I turn my head from side to side. Which profile looks best, I wonder? Left, I think, but Ket prefers to photograph me from the right. Ket. God, if only she was here now! Or, better still, if I could go where she is. Memories of our last encounter flood back in an erotic rush. I’m back in the darkened van with her.

“Take me!” she cries.

I tear off her clothes, she yanks me out of my flight suit with one sweeping motion...

Wafted away as I am by self-worship and sexual fantasy, I am unpleasantly surprised when the sounds of violence intrude. The fight must be on. I take another moment to preen my hair, then walk to the door.

Out in the bunk room, a battle royal is going on. Bel and Katella grapple on the floor, punching and tearing. Neither one seems to have an advantage. The others cheer them on, except for Albers who stands off to the side.

“Break it up!” I stride across the room and grab hold of Bel. “Help me you guys!”

The others join the break-up effort. Soon we have the combatants separated, but they both continue to struggle and curse at each other. Bel flings off his restrainers long enough to throw a wild, looping punch. It doesn’t reach Katella because my face is in the way. The blow catches me square on the cheekbone.

“Ugh!”

Bright lights explode in my head. I stumble back and sit down hard on a cot. Everyone gapes at me, stunned, including Bel. All becomes silence as I nurse my injured cheek. Then Bel wrenches himself away from the group and rages across the room to his own space.

“To hell with you guys!” he shouts. “I’m out of here!”

He flings a duffle on his cot and stuffs in some items from his locker. Then he tears the blankets off his bed. With these things in hand, he stomps out the door into the darkness.

“Are you all right, Dye?” It’s Katella speaking.

“Uh ... yes, I think.”

I dab at my injury. The face I’d been admiring in the mirror is going to have a nasty bruise. I am going to look a lot worse than Katella, come to think of it.

“Should we report him to the wing commander?” Albers asks.

“No, just let him go,” I say. “It’s obvious he didn’t intend to strike me.”

Actually, I’m not sure that’s true.

“I hate that son of a bitch!” Katella snarls.

“Why?” I ask.

“Because he exists on the same planet with me, that’s why,” Katella says.

Chapter 37

A New Direction.

True to his plan, Bel does not return that night. I think of him out there nestled against the cold steel of the APC or lying on the ground with nothing but dry leaves for a mattress. Autumn is closing in with colder nights, and I do not envy his bravado.

I thought it would be a relief to get rid of him for a while, but I rather miss his surly presence in the cot next to mine. His glowing pen light has been oddly reassuring in the darkness. He is similar to a low-grade headache, something you’ve gotten used to and feel a bit confused by its absence. I have difficulty sleeping that first night.

Bel is just being an alarmist, though; anyone would agree with that. It won’t be long before he returns to the barracks, his scatter-brained plan forgotten.

At least, that’s what I try to tell myself. In the back of my mind gnaws the suspicion that he could be right. My apprehension keeps growing throughout the next day, making me edgy and curt. Anyone who dares speak to me is at risk of getting snapped at.

Nobody says a word about Bel, almost as if they’ve guessed that a method is behind his ‘spontaneous’ act. Beltran is just not the type who does things on the spur of the moment. He’s the most controlled person I’ve ever known – along with Stilikan.

When I walk outside, I feel the electric current throbbing under my feet. Or is it just my overactive mind vibrating? Without Bel to keep me grounded, my imagination is running wild. But isn't he the one who first noticed the current?

Until now, there has always been some rock solid person available to help me endure times of distress – Stilikan, Bel, Bekar – even the image of Ket leading me through the wilderness. But now I am alone and exposed to all sorts of eerie sensations. Katella is a great friend, of course, but I seem to have outgrown him. He just can't offer the support I need.

The fear of impending disaster grows heavier throughout the day, perching on my shoulder like a vulture grown fat on carrion. But then, late afternoon, a message arrives from Ket. I happen to be moping around HQ when it comes in. I am handed the transcript:

Dytran – all is arranged. Orders coming soon.

The band of tension crushing my skull abruptly relaxes, and the vulture fades away like smoke from burning leaves. I feel reborn. The ominous vibrations under my feet abruptly stop. The ground is soft and peaceful now, like a feather bed. I fairly drift across it toward the barracks.

The unimaginable has happened. I am going home – as a hero no less. And no more courier flights, ever! I strut proud and strong through the glorious day, like some sky god who has deigned to visit the earth. Where the hell is that movie camera when I need it?

When I get to the barracks, the lads are lounging on their bunks whiling away the time before dinner, except for Katella who is just slipping into a fresh pair of trousers. Everyone flinches when they see me come in. They must be wondering who will be the target of my foul mood this time.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen!” I say with a heartiness that surprises even me.

The lads exchange confused glances.

“What happened, Dye?” Katella says. “Did you take a whiff of laughing gas?”

“Nothing of the sort,” I say. “I'm just delighted to see all your smiling faces.”

Everyone chuckles, and the tense atmosphere begins to dissipate.

“Well, if that's the case,” Katella says, “let me drop my pants again so you can see my smiling rear end.”

“I'll forgo that pleasure, thanks,” I say, popping open my locker door.

The interior stares back at me, empty and accusing. Why did I give Bel my chocolate and coffee? This would be the perfect evening to break them out. Brew up a big pot and sit around talking about our coming trip home. Stuff our faces with candy. We could bring some out to Bel in his lonely vigil and sing Christmas carols.

Then again, are all of us be going home for the goodwill tour or not? Maybe the orders concern only me. The radio message is maddeningly vague on that point. I'm fairly confident that Ket wants all of us to go, but maybe not. And even if she does, will she be able to arrange it? Higher ups in the Propaganda Ministry will have the final say.

Another question: What should I do if the orders don't include my squadron mates? Should I make a stand and insist that they be included? Orders are

orders, and I'll have to obey. But that doesn't mean I can't protest or try to alter them, besides ...

Why am I always beating myself up? Ninety nine percent of the things I worry about never come to pass, so why get upset about this? Only one thing is certain – if I remain in the barracks much longer, I'll spill the beans for sure. It is not yet time to share the joyous news.

So, instead of hanging up my jacket, I close the locker door with authority.

“Think I'll get some more fresh air,” I say. “See you guys later.”

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This night is far more restless than the one before. The strain of keeping my mouth closed is wearing me out. I want to flick on the lights, jump atop my bunk and yell at the top of my lungs: “We're going home!”

I want to traipse over to HQ and camp by the radio so as to receive our orders the moment they come in. They'll come tomorrow, right? They have to come tomorrow!

And if this anxiety isn't enough, nonstop thoughts of Ket torment me. I can almost see her face hovering above mine in the darkness, feel her passionate breath, inhale her subtle, maddening perfume. Ket has her mind fixed on one thing, and she's determined to get it.

How will I handle that situation?

Sure, we all talk big, but none of us have “gone the distance.” We're just novices in the romance field. Katella tried to consummate things with his girlfriend before leaving home, but she flatly refused, shoving her bare left hand into his face and saying:

“No ring, no fling.”

Well, Ket is ready for a fling. Her incredible sexuality is like a time bomb, primed to go off the moment she sees me. Will it be too overwhelming – will I be a limp noodle at the crucial moment?

And what about Gyn? How can I possibly square things with her?

There I am, beating myself up again. We are nowhere near home, and I'm already embroiling myself in girl trouble. But maybe Ket has changed her mind by now, maybe another suitor has finally caught her interest. Then we could be just friends, sort of business associates. That would be for the best.

No it wouldn't!

I toss the blankets aside. The sheets are hot and damp. Sleep won't be coming tonight, so I may as well get up. I dress quickly, making minimum noise. Only once, when I bang my locker door too hard, does anybody stir in their cot. As a rule, we Raptor Aces are very sound sleepers.

I pause halfway through buttoning my shirt. I'm starting to think of us as a unit again, I realize. Is the deep estrangement I've felt toward my squadron mates finally easing, will we rediscover our old affection for each other?

Well ... I'll just have to see about that.

Two cigarettes remain from my once hefty stash. I fumble them out of my nightstand drawer along with a pack of matches, and head outside.

Dawn can't be far off now, though I haven't bothered to consult my watch. Soon it will be time for the birds to begin their awful cacophony. But perhaps many of them have already migrated and the noise won't be too bad.

I walk a short distance from the barracks and light up a cigarette. Smoke curls against a backdrop of glowing stars. I've never seen such a starry sky before; it's brilliant, crystalline, a heavenly host gazing down at our poor human affairs.

I've heard people say that they feel "small" under such a sky, but I don't feel diminished. In all the universe's vastness, there is nothing quite like me; the stars are casting their light upon a unique work of creation. Besides, the sky is my true home. I am not really one of the earthbound. Time drifts past. I finish my cigarette and light up the second one.

A bitter note enters my musings – Stilikan. I'll be leaving this area soon, and I've not been able to avenge his murder. Why have I been such a fool? I should have sucked it up and gone with the Death Storm commando on the partisan hunt – tell them something, anything, to get into their good graces long enough to achieve my aim. But no, I had to put cowardly conditions on my involvement.

Where did I think I was, at some goddam church picnic?

I fling down the cigarette butt and grind it under my heel. My mood has turned savage. Even the sky appears to share my anger, judging by the fierce red sunrise glowing in the east.

Hold on ... that's no sunrise flickering on the horizon. It's the herald of a gigantic artillery barrage!

I observe, fascinated, as the display unfolds. It's far more spectacular than all the heavenly glory shining above me. I can hear the muffled thunder of the guns now, and the current of war throbs beneath my feet.

The horizon flames like the end of the world approaching. Chaos reaches out to embrace me, and I begin to respond. The experience is terrifying, sublime.

Then a new sound intrudes, also from the east – the rumble of massed aircraft engines. I snap out of my reverie and run, shouting, into the barracks.

"Air raid!"

Chapter 38

The Storm Breaks Loose.

Bedlam, fear, the thuds of bodies tumbling off cots.

"What the hell?" someone cries.

"Form up, on the double!" I yell over the mayhem.

Somebody lurches toward the main light switch.

"Don't touch that!"

My warning is too late. I hear the click of the switch. The fool is going to make us a perfect target!

But nothing happens, all remains dark, swirling chaos. Then penlight beams pierce the blackness, lockers clang. I wrench the telephone from its hook. Totally dead. We've been cut off – partisans!

Figures move toward the door now, clutching boots and clothing. I slam the receiver down hard enough to nearly rip the phone unit off the wall.

“Wait here,” I say, “and turn off those damned lights!”

I grope to my locker and pull out the little automatic pistol. It feels cold and impotent in my hand. If partisans or enemy troops are in the area, this gun will be poor defense. I make my way back to the huddled mass at the doorway.

“All right, let's go to the shelter.”

They start to jam their way out en masse. I imagine an enemy machine gunner outside aiming at the door, just praying for an easy target.

“One at a time,” I say, “keep low.”

My voice sounds firm and strong, commanding instant obedience. I feel a brief thrill of authority, but this is quickly overshadowed by apprehension. I follow my boys outside, crouching low, ready to hit the dirt any moment.

Thank God, nobody is waiting for us!

The horizon flames with increasing violence, and the roar of approaching aircraft is louder. Toward the periphery of the base, I can see numerous small fires burning. Partisans must have lit them to guide the bombers in. I move to the head of the procession.

“Give me a light.”

Somebody thrusts a penlight into my hand. We move into the small wooded area where the air raid shelter is concealed.

“Wait here.”

I walk toward the shelter alone, trying to keep as silent as possible, grateful for the rising noise level to cover my approach. I'm almost there now, eyes fixed on the dark entrance. A single partisan hidden inside with a submachine gun could kill us all without working up a sweat.

I spread myself flat on the ground and crawl the last few meters, straining my eyes and ears for any sign of the enemy. The entrance gapes at me like the maw of a subterranean beast. I fling a stone at it – no reaction. I flick on the penlight and toss it aside, nothing. Either no enemy lurks within, or else he's too shrewd to fall for my amateurish diversions.

The roar of bomber engines is much louder now, sirens begin to wail. Soon we'll be blown to bits if we don't get under cover. Urged on by this idea, I retrieve the penlight and shine it into the depths of the shelter. A pair of eyes glistens back at me.

“Ah!”

I jerk the pistol trigger several times, but no shot fires. I've forgotten to chamber a round! Whatever night animal that owns those eyes does not wait for me to correct my error. It takes off like a rocket, brushing past me on its headlong flight. I roll away onto another hissing, scrambling creature of some kind.

“Ugh!”

Then I'm on my feet again.

“Come on!” I call.

The lads rush toward me. There is just enough light now to make out their wide and fearful eyes. We clamber into the shelter and hunker down. The place is big enough for a dozen occupants, so we have plenty of room to sprawl out if it is to serve us as a grave.

The bombers arrive with their hellish cargo.

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Who knows how long the raid lasts? My squadron leader's watch that I had been so proud of lies on my nightstand waiting to get blown to smithereens. Nothing in this world would compel me to go back for it. Uncounted time passes while the bombs dance above us.

Most of them seem to be dropping a fair distance off – hitting the main base facilities, tearing up the runways, demolishing the hangars and the parked aircraft. I can't see what's happening, but my experience from the first bombing raid provides me with a general account.

Then the explosions draw closer. A catastrophic blast sends a torrent of dirt and concrete fragments showering down on us from the ceiling. My head seems about to explode from the concussion.

"There go the barracks!" somebody cries.

I flick on my penlight, the beam cannot penetrate the choking dust. We are all coughing. Then another bomb goes off nearby, and half the ceiling caves in. Screams, sobs, voices calling out for their mothers. I want to scream along with them but control myself somehow.

Be brave, Dytran, an urgent voice shouts in my head. *You're the leader!*

More explosions rock our shelter, more ceiling comes down upon our heads. I'm torn between hugging the ground and rushing outside. The fear of being buried alive nearly trumps the terror of being exposed to the blasts...

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Then the war gods finally move off, leaving us shattered in their wake.

"Help, I can't move," somebody moans.

No one else speaks, but voiceless terror fills the shelter.

"Everyone stay calm," I say. "We'll dig you out."

I'm not certain that I don't need digging out myself. Somebody is pressed up against me – Katella.

"Come on," I say.

Forcing a path through the dirt and rubble, we make our way out of the shelter and stretch ourselves out along the ground like corpses coming back to life. The air revives us a bit, although it is polluted with smoke and death.

"You all right?" I say.

Katella nods and tries to speak. Finally, a choked "Yes," exits his mouth.

I can scarcely hear it through the ringing in my ears.

"Let's get the others out," I say.

We slither back into the ruined shelter and begin digging with our bare hands, pulling out chunks of earth and concrete. From the far side of the cave in, other hands do the same. Finally, we break through to our trapped comrades.

Albers, thinnest of the lot, is the first one we pull through the little tunnel we've dug, followed by Grushon and Sipren. All of them are battered and shaken but free of major injuries.

We exit the bomb shelter tomb into a fresh nightmare. Dawn is in full swing now, its dim light augmented by numerous fires. Our barracks, or what's left of it, flames nearby. A bomb crater occupies most of its former location. And through it all, the siren continues to wail.

No bird song disturbs the ambiance. Small arms fire crackles around the base as infiltrators try to finish off what the bombers started. We can see a group of them nearby, creeping slowly toward us.

"Damned partisans!" Katella snarls.

I cock my pathetic little pistol. It's all that stands between us and the advancing enemy. I count seven of them now, all heavily armed. For the first time, I remember Bel.

"We have to get to the far end of the base," I say, "where they parked the armored vehicles."

"What for?" Katella says.

"Bel is there," I say. "He's got an APC for us."

Under different circumstances the look of amazement on Katella's face might be comical.

"An APC?" he says. "Why, that ..."

"Just shut up and get out there," I snap.

But getting there is a gigantic problem. The base must be swarming with partisan invaders now. And the ones nearest us have fanned out, obstructing every possible route.

"Follow me," I say.

I begin moving through the tall grass toward the trees on our right. If we can just avoid detection, we might be able to –

One of the partisans spots us and opens up with his submachine gun. We all hit the dirt.

Harsh shouts in the slob language. The scattered partisans reunite and begin walking toward our hiding place, crouching low, guns at the ready. My choices narrow to a grim pair – wait to be killed, or surrender and be tortured.

Albers seems ready to cry out and beg for mercy. The fool!

Or I can go out like a man. The decision isn't hard to make. It seems to be the most natural thing in the world, as if I'm deciding for somebody else. I prepare to leap to my feet, gun blazing. Can I take down one of them before they cut me to pieces?

But then the blast of a heavy machine gun adds its voice to the mayhem. The partisans tumble over like human bowling pins, their cries brief and horrific.

A voice calls to us from the trees: "Get over here!"

It's Bel.

We scramble to our feet and run toward him like a troop of orphaned puppies.

Chapter 39

Flight.

Bel glowers down at us like some death god from behind the armored personnel carrier's machine gun.

"Somebody take over this gun position," he commands. "The rest of you get in and keep low."

The others hesitate, awed by the sight of the massive APC. It must seem like a visitor from another planet to them. It does not surprise me, of course, neither does the fact that Bel has survived the bombing raid. He seems the very image of confidence perched atop his armored steed.

I'm about to urge the lads forward when a blast of gunfire nearby provides the necessary motivation. We hurl ourselves up the side of the roofless vehicle. Nobody bothers trying to open the rear doors.

Bel watches us scramble. His face displays pride and assurance, mixed with a bit of contempt, I think. He knows that he was right and all of us were wrong. He knows that we owe him our lives.

My own emotions are a seething cauldron. Moments ago, I was prepared to leap into the arms of eternity, now I'm back among the living. I don't feel at home in my body, as if I'd already left it and am enduring a forced reunion.

I was the undisputed leader then, now I'm just one of the pack. Gratitude wells up in my heart, along with a burst of love for Beltran. But beneath it all, the sour taste of envy resides. I grasp for a shred of power.

"I'll take the gun," I say.

"Go ahead," Bel says.

Is that a tiny smirk creasing his face?

He drops down into the driver's seat and fires up the engine. The beast roars into life. With a grinding of gears, we lurch forward. Underbrush and small trees give way; soon we are out of the woods and heading for the border of the airbase.

I look down at Bel sitting almost directly below me. He's got a submachine gun across his lap, and he handles the big steering wheel with authority as he gazes out a portal in the armor plate ahead of him.

"Where're we going?" I ask.

"West," Bel replies. "Like everybody else."

I twist around in the little gun turret. Behind me, the lads are sprawled out on the floor and benches, heads below the armored gunnels of our rescue ship. Cans of diesel fuel share the space with them along with some knapsacks. Two more submachine guns dangle from the metal walls.

"Hang on to those knapsacks, in case we have to get out quick," Bel shouts. "And don't shoot yourselves with those machine pistols!"

Katella hands me up a knapsack. It's surprisingly heavy. As I shoulder it on, I feel the impression of hand grenades against my back. Where did Bel get all this stuff?

A more important consideration, how do I operate this machine gun? My only experience with such weapons came in a training film we'd seen back home, flashed through the same projector that had shown Youth Answers the Call!

What fun it had seemed at the time – just pull the trigger and blast the hell out of everything. I try to remember the correct procedures from the movie.

“You know how to work that thing, Eagle-eye?” Bel calls up to me.

“Y-yes ...”

“Shoot anything that moves. They won't be our guys.”

A diabolical racket fills the world – explosions rock the airbase, gunfire rattles an accompaniment. But the siren abruptly halts like a choked scream. We're approaching one of the auxiliary gates now. Shadowy figures move about the guard shack.

“Shoot!” Bel commands.

My hands remain frozen.

“Shoot!”

Then the machine gun explodes, throwing shock waves through my body. I feel a mad exultation amid the chaos. Pieces of the guard shack fly about, the shadowy figures disappear. Time seems suspended.

Then I stop firing as a training film admonition enters my brain – Do not overheat the barrel.

“Damn!” Bel cries. “That's showing them.”

Something bounces off the APC – grenade! An explosion. Shrapnel plasters the armor but cannot punch through. Another grenade arches through the air above us. I watch with fascinated horror as my death approaches. Events screech into slow motion.

But then Katella flings out his arm and bats the grenade in mid air, as if he's playing on a handball court. The little bomb tumbles over the far side and goes off, rocking our machine. But it does not stop our progress.

We're at the gate now, crunching the barrier under our treads. I spin the machine gun around and fire a parting burst at the trees.

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After the chaos at the base, the rest of the morning seems almost placid, but the sounds of war are everywhere. Massed artillery continues to thunder, and the roar of aircraft fills the sky. We keep to narrow secondary roads which Bel selects from a map spread beside him. Trees often arch over us, providing cover from marauding aircraft.

There are lots of aircraft, and, judging from the sound of the engines, they are not ours. But the trees and the low-lying clouds provide us some protection. Occasionally, Bel pulls off the road to seek better cover. Progress is slow, and we have no radio to monitor. Our little island moves along uninformed of the broader situation.

“What about the other armored vehicles?” I ask at one point. “Did any survive?”

Bel shakes his head. “The slobes hit every one.”

He doesn't add the phrase, “like I said they would,” but I know it's there just the same.

Unlike the relatively quiet APC used by the commando, this is a clanking half-track with a deep-throated engine. It is meant to haul grenadiers behind a tank assault, and stealth was not a consideration in its design. If there are partisans in the immediate area, they cannot fail to hear us coming. Hopefully they've committed all their manpower to the assault on the air base and other fixed targets. Bel seems to pick up my concern.

"Sorry about the noise," he says, "the motor pool was fresh out of limousines."

I've got my machine gun, though, and that makes all the difference. Until now I've been a helpless victim. The enemy has blown up my train and shot me out of the sky while I've been unable to fight back. But now things have changed.

I stroke the gun barrel as if it is the flank of a beautiful woman. As if it were Ket.

God, if only our orders had come through sooner! We'd be safe now instead of wandering through this nightmare. My whole being aches for the Homeland, and for Ket ... and for Gyn.

But I'm not being fully truthful. There is a part of me that prefers things the way they are. A warrior strain has come to the fore, turning me into something hard and ruthless. I recall Bekar's startling transformation when he flew his wheelchair fighter at the rally.

In any case, there isn't much I can do about the situation. The enemy offensive is going to unfold without asking my opinion.

Late morning, Bel pulls over and shuts down. The world becomes quieter. Even the artillery booming in the distance seems more subdued. The roaring engine has been rattling my kidneys for hours, and I need to "take a mean piss," as Bekar would put it. But this has to wait a while.

"Keep an eye on things, eh?" Bel says. "We won't be long."

"Sure, Bel," I reply.

The others climb out, using the doors this time and taking the submachine guns with them.

"You there, Sipren," Bel orders, "top off the fuel tank."

"Yes, sir," Sipren answers.

He reaches back inside and grabs a can of diesel. I catch his eyes for an instant, then he looks away.

Everyone heads a short distance into the woods, including Sipren after he's finished his refueling task. Bel conducts a lecture on small arms operation. I can hear him clearly from my post in the machine gun turret.

"Don't make rocket science out of it," Bel says, "any idiot can fire one of these."

We've all had sharpshooter training before, but that was with precision rifles, not these weapons of wholesale killing. Bel's voice drones on, I catch snippets of his remarks as I scan the area for signs of the enemy.

"Here's the safety ... fire short bursts ... drop the magazine like this ..."

I half expect to hear practice rounds being fired, but Bel is too smart to attract unnecessary attention to us. This lads have to get by with a quick overview.

They exit the forest. Bel hefts a submachine gun, as do Albers and Grushon. Albers seems an odd choice to entrust with a gun; I'd have thought Bel would choose Sipren instead. Then again, Sipren has not been himself lately since his family was massacred in the air raid. And, of course, Bel would not arm Katella.

Beltran clambers aboard alone and approaches my position.

“Sorry there aren’t enough submachine guns to go around,” he says. “Here’s something for your pop gun, though.”

He hands me two little clips for my automatic pistol. I don’t know whether to be grateful or insulted.

“Thanks.”

I tuck the clips into a pocket.

“I’ll take over a while if you need to make a pit stop,” Bel says.

“Thanks,” I say again.

I step down from the gun position and Bel effortlessly takes my place, as if he’s the one who truly belongs there.

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As I stand urinating against a tree, I feel oddly humiliated. So, Bel is even deciding when I can take a leak! A paranoid fantasy plays through my mind in which the APC drives off, abandoning me.

But it waits. I climb back behind the machine gun, and we start rolling again.

Chapter 40

At the Bridge.

Afternoon arrives as we continue our roundabout journey along the back roads. Albers sits in front beside Bel now, navigating from the map. Grushon, flanked by Sipren, rests his back against the rear doors, submachine gun at the ready. Katella positions himself as far away from them as he can and is crowded up next to me.

It’s a cozy arrangement, one that leaves no doubt as to who’s in charge. And it sure as hell isn’t Dytran.

We’re all in this together, I reason, just get through it.

But the situation fills me with unease. Bel has pulled off a coup; he and his supporters are armed, while my closest friend isn’t. Albers, weakest willed of the lot, has been cleverly won over. Bel has entrusted him with a gun and has granted him the supposed authority of being navigator. Bel doesn’t need him in the front seat, though. A sack of potatoes would be a more useful load.

Katella and I exchange glances; he clearly shares my misgivings.

Maybe I’m just being paranoid. How could anybody exist in this nightmare world without being paranoid? And if it wasn’t for Bel’s “coup,” I’d be lying back at the airbase riddled with bullets. Still ... what would it take for Grushon to shove his gun into my face and tell me what’s what?

Even after all this time, the slobe diving incident still gnaws at me. I’ll never forget the look of hatred on Grushon’s face when he and the others closed in on me. I’ve often wondered if Bel would have called them off if Katella hadn’t

intervened first. I've never dared ask him. I know he wouldn't lie, and the truth might be more than I can handle.

Well, if I don't like the current arrangement, I can always get out and walk. My "pop gun" would be fine defense against the partisans or any regular troops that might appear. And don't forget the hand grenades in my pack. I could always blow myself up when the time came.

The gloomy woods and overgrown farmlands we traverse promote these thoughts. We are adrift in an alien wasteland. We will have to depart these tributary roads soon. We're approaching a river and will need a stout bridge to bear the weight of our APC. I lean down to speak with Bel.

"How much father?"

"A few more kilometers," he replies.

"Until what?" Albers asks, but we both ignore him.

Shortly afterwards, we make an abrupt turn toward the north. Our period of relative safety is coming to an end, I know.

Bel knows it, too. His hands grip the wheel hard; his jaw tightens.

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We come to the main route and the whole world changes. Every imaginable type of military vehicle clogs the road – tanks, armored cars, APCs, trucks. Staff cars bearing high-level officers are stuck in the backlog, despite heated threats issuing from their occupants. Everyone is headed west in a nightmare logjam. Worst of all, the sky has cleared, and bright sunlight illuminates the disgraceful spectacle.

Columns of battered troopers march along the shoulders, some of them hurl mockery at the staff cars.

"What's the matter, Colonel, did Piotra break up your tea party? Hey! Your fancy uniform's wrinkled Thanks for getting us into this mess, Pop!"

The officers can only glower back at the insolence. I feel zero sympathy for them. A gigantic catastrophe is unfolding, and people need to get blamed. Why not the pompous fools in the staff cars? Any officer worth his salt would be out trying to control the mayhem, not add to it. I fanaticize about blasting one of the cars with my machine gun.

We force our way into the traffic jam behind a tank and before a truckload of infantry. The men in the truck curse furiously at us, but Bel ignores their ire.

"Sipren, Albers, go see what you can find out," he orders.

The lads exit and walk off in opposite directions along the road.

Now that Albers is out of the way, I feel a barrier start to come down between me and Bel. It's time for sincere talk.

"Thanks for saving us back there," I say. "We'd all be hash without you."

"Hey, no problem," Bel says. "I had nothing better to do."

"You sure called things right."

Bel grins, his face brightening our little world. I reach down my hand and he slaps it in boyish salute. For a moment, it seems like old times. But the glow is already starting to fade; the tank ahead of us revs its engine, sending a miasma of diesel fumes our way.

"God!" Bel exclaims. "How long do we have to put up with that?"

Sipren and Albers return; their news is not hopeful. Every soldier they've spoken to tells an identical story – total surprise, countless enemy breakthroughs, collapse all along the line. Overwhelming force thrown against us, and no effective resistance anywhere. Piotra is not far behind, but nobody knows exactly where he is.

Enemy assault teams infiltrated past our strong points in the first hours of operations, and their infantry advanced skillfully behind. Then came the armored fist. Our brilliant senior officers did not realize the scale of the attack.

“Incompetent cowards,” Bel mutters, casting a venomous glance at the nearest staff car. “With leaders like them, no wonder we're getting creamed!”

The brigadier general sitting in the back seat keeps his eyes fixed rigidly forward. He must be one of the politician generals, attaining his rank by currying favor with Party big shots. The NSP armband he wears attests to his true allegiance.

I am discouraged by the reports, but hardly surprised. The story of defeat is etched on the face of every man strung out along the road.

We continue to crawl ahead with the steep riverbank plunging down to our right. The bridge is in sight now where the river makes a sharp curve leftwards. Men and machines jostle each other for a place on the span. Overmatched military policemen try to keep order, but their efforts are ignored. All is shouting, cursing, the rumble of engines and distant artillery. Then a new sound intrudes.

“Enemy planes!” somebody shouts.

They hurtle toward us like angels of death, a whole column of them flying low. They open fire with machine guns and cannon. Spent shell casings tumble away, glistening like Christmas tinsel in the sunlight. Rockets streak down at us.

I spin my machine gun around and open fire. Back along the line, others do the same, but their efforts are quickly silenced. Vehicles explode under the rain of shells and rockets, others careen off the road, men jump for their lives amid a chorus of screams.

Katella yanks at me hard. “Come on, Dye!”

He throws himself over the edge. I am still reluctant to abandon my gun and fire another burst at the approaching aircraft. Déjà vu as a line of bullets stitches along the column toward me – as happened during the air raid back home. There is a fascination to the spectacle.

I've outgrown my death wish, however. I know that I can't luck out a second time. I jump clear of the APC and hang suspended in mid air. It is a moment of strange perfection.

Then Earth rushes up and I hit it hard. I tumble down the slope amid a cascade of bodies, while behind me, our vehicle goes up like a Roman candle. The world does not seem big enough to contain all the noise. Machinegun bullets and cannon shells pepper the dirt around us. Albers takes a round; his head disappears in a bloody mist, and his torso thuds to the ground at my feet.

I gape at him, rigid with shock. Then I'm moving again, picking up Albers' submachine gun and grabbing the knapsack out of his dead fingers. Another person seems to be performing these actions, while I observe the horror from afar.

All around me panicked men are scrambling down the embankment toward the river, including the brigadier general who is moving with more speed than seems possible for his comfortable bulk.

“Hey, puss bag!” a trooper shouts.

He fires his carbine. The general falls onto his back, an amazed expression on his face and a blood spot spreading across his crisply pressed uniform. Again I freeze. The trooper points his rifle at me, I await the bullet. But then he thinks better of it and moves off. More gunshots ring out, other officers go down.

We are inside a brutal spiral of violence. The vortex is here now, but it’s shifting inexorably to our Homeland, erasing us in its wake.

Katella is running alongside me while the slaughter continues on the road above us. The roar of heavy guns and exploding rockets is unceasing. Blasted vehicles tumble down the slope, crushing anybody in their path. A wave of panic carries me along.

Finally, I regain some self control. I stop my headlong retreat and glance back up the slope. Bel is up there. He is injured and sprawled out on the ground. Sipren is attending to him.

“To hell with them.” Katella grabs my elbow. “Let’s go!”

I almost start downhill again, but manage to restrain myself. I pull out my pistol and extra clips.

“Take these.” I shove the items into Katella’s hands.

Then I’m moving uphill, past an avalanche of terrified men and tumbling debris. Katella reluctantly follows. As we near the top, I can see a dive bomber hurtling toward the bridge, sirens screaming.

“Get down!”

From my position in the dirt, I swivel my head up to view the attack. The plane releases its bomb and pulls away sharply. The pilot inside me feels the pull of massive G force. I see the bomb hurtling with lethal precision. It is beautiful in the afternoon sky. Then I duck my head back down; a monstrous explosion makes the earth heave like an ocean wave.

Another dive bomber descends, then another. The bridge is blasted to smithereens; its carcass crashes into the river below.

The gunfire and explosions finally stop, the aircraft buzz away. They must have exhausted their ammo. They’ll head back to base now for refueling and rearming where the pilots will congratulate each other for showing those Mag bastards what’s what. Then they’ll take off on another massacre mission.

The air is foul with the hissing stench of fire. I get to my feet and stride over to where Beltran is sprawled with Sipren examining his ankle. Bel looks up at me; his face is an utter blank, as if he cannot comprehend what has happened. He seems oddly smaller than I remembered.

“Report, medic,” I say. “How severe is the injury?”

“It’s a bad sprain, sir,” Sipren replies, “no broken bones as far as I can tell. His knee took a severe jolt, and he might have a cracked rib.”

I glance at the devastated road above. There is no future for us that direction.

“Is he all right to move?” I ask.

“Damn right I am,” Bel says. “Help me up!”

His old self reappears, pugnacious and defiant.

“Let’s get going,” I say. “I know where to ford the river.”

“Yes, sir,” Sipren says – he’s under my command again.

He and Grushon stoop to assist Bel. Grushon’s back is toward me, his machine pistol dangling from its strap around his shoulder.

“I’ll take this,” I say.

I deftly relieve Grushon of his weapon before he knows what’s about. Then I take his knapsack and pass both items to Katella. Bel observes my slight of hand with an ironic little smile.

“Well done, Commander,” he says.

I’m in no mood for sarcasm.

“You hump Bel’s knapsack,” I tell Grushon.

“Yes, sir.”

He’s under my control again, too.

Bel hands his knapsack to Grushon but retains his submachine gun which dangles around his neck like some lethal jewelry piece.

“Don’t shoot yourself with it,” I say.

Sipren and Grushon pull Bel to his feet. He places his arms over their shoulders for support. We begin moving downhill.

Chapter 41

Lost.

We are at the tail end of a mad, retreating procession. Ahead of us, men are scrambling across the river as best they can. Some try to form human chains or concoct safety lines; many simply plunge in and take their chances with the current. The water is frigid, as I well remember from my previous soak. There will be drownings and deaths from hypothermia, I believe.

Most of the soldiers seem to have fled the opposite direction – to the far side of the bridge. The river narrows upstream, and crossing might appear easier there. Good. The fewer panicked men we have to deal with, the better.

We make our way downstream toward the fording which I discovered on my last trek through this area. I consider telling the troopers of its location but reluctantly decide against it. Best to keep as far away from them as possible. All discipline has broken down; those men are no longer soldiers but desperadoes capable of anything. They’ve already shot numerous officers – why shouldn’t we be next?

To them, we’re just pampered “pretty boys” dressed in Yuliac uniforms that reek of the NSP. And the NSP is not highly regarded today. Besides, our knapsacks are tempting booty. At very least we could be relieved of them at gun point, if not executed outright.

Katella jabs an elbow into my arm.

“Well done back there, Dye!”

I grunt noncommittally. I’ve heard all the “well dones” that I care to. Katella hefts his submachine gun.

“With this thing in my hands and you back in charge, I feel I can really kick butt,” he says.

“Forget about kicking butts,” I say. “Let’s just get ours out of here.”

Katella grins. He hands over my pistol and extra clips.

“I won’t be needing these any more, Commander.”

I shove the items into my jacket pocket. Katella moves in close and jerks a thumb over his shoulder.

“That bunch is slowing us down,” he says. “Why don’t the two of us move on ahead?”

I stop walking.

“There’ll be no more talk like that, Airman!”

I’m using the Stilikan voice, low and ominous.

“Yes, Commander,” Katella says.

I glance back at our comrades. They’ve fallen some distance behind and are struggling to make their way over some tangled roots and underbrush. Yes, it would be a lot more convenient to just abandon them ...

I dismiss the shameful thought.

“What have you got against Bel?” I ask. “He saved our lives back there.”

Katella lowers his eyes. “You wouldn’t understand, sir.”

“Go bring up the rear, Katella. See that nobody jumps us from behind.”

“Yes, sir.”

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At last, we arrive at the crossing. It’s a lot farther than I thought, difficult to spot from this side of the river. I actually walk right past it and have to double back. I call a halt.

Grushon and Sipren lower Bel to the ground. He is pale with exhaustion and pain, but he has not uttered a word of complaint. I admire his determination. He badly needs rest; we all do. Once we’re across this barrier we need to find shelter. A dangerous idea is taking shape in my mind, although I cannot yet admit to myself that it is there.

At least we are adequately provisioned. In addition to grenades and ammo clips, our packs contain plenty of combat rations. Again, I experience a pang of anxiety – how did Bel obtain all this stuff?

As if the army is going to investigate petty theft in the midst of all this chaos!

“How are you feeling, Bel?” I ask.

A bitter smile crosses his lips.

“Never better. How the hell do I look?”

I try to grin, but it doesn’t sit well on my face. I lower myself to my haunches beside him.

“There are some abandoned farm buildings on the other side of the river,” I say. “We can hole up for a while until you get your strength back.”

Bel nods. “Sounds good, Dye, unless the enemy gets there first.”

“Well ... let’s hope otherwise.”

I stand and stretch myself. Tortured bones snap back into place. The air is better up here, above the dark pool of resentment surrounding Bel.

“All right, lads,” I announce, “twenty minute break! Then we cross this sucker.”

We rest silently, each keeping to his private thoughts. Bel removes a knife from his knapsack and digs compulsively at the ground with it, as if trying to punish the earth for his misfortune. Katella and I are the de facto guards, scanning the area for any trace of the enemy, machine pistols in hand.

Then it's time to go.

Katella enters the water first. He is an almost comic figure – naked below the waist, holding his clothes and boots in his arms along with his extra knapsack, his skinny rear end glistening in the late afternoon sun.

“Damn, it's cold!” he protests.

“Keep moving!” I yell. “Watch out for the current.”

He shuffles on, uttering a sharp cry when the water contacts his genitals. Then he's moving with alacrity through the waist-deep turbulence. We all observe him, scarcely breathing, until he slogs out on the far bank. He fairly runs the last few meters.

“All right, you guys are next,” I command.

Bel hobbles into the water, flanked by Grushon and Sipren. His assistants yelp at the frigid contact, but he remains stoically quiet. They move on.

I'm alone on this shore now, covering our retreat with my submachine gun. Katella is right, the gun gives you an outsized feeling of power. But what good is power when the enemy has vastly more than you?

I wonder if partisans are observing me. There could be an enemy battalion concealed in those trees without me knowing it.

I glance back toward the river. The trio is almost half way across now. Some distance upstream from them, a mighty tree has tumbled into the water, a mass of flotsam tangled in its branches. I wonder idly how long the tree has been there. Did it fall some time ago, undermined by the current, or did a recent explosion knock it down? I don't remember it from my previous expedition. Then again, fallen trees were the farthest thing from my mind then.

Forget that! my inner voice chides. *Keep a sharp lookout!*

I scan the woods with painstaking care, straining my eyeballs for any trace of the enemy. I have never felt so alone in my entire life. Then I look back toward my comrades. They reach the opposite bank, and it's my turn to go.

Nothing has prepared me for the frigid water. It is much worse than when I crossed the last time. The cold autumn nights have left their mark, and who knows where this damnable stream originates? It could be vomiting out from a subterranean lair of the dead. The water is an ugly brownish-yellow.

I move quickly, trying to still my chattering teeth. I want to cry out obscenities, but the enemy might be listening. Worst of all, there is no one covering my back. Were there partisans on the shore behind me, my friends could not reach them with submachine fire.

Why didn't Bel obtain a sniper rifle? He seems to have remembered everything else.

I'd thought that I would have an easy time crossing, but my strength is waning fast. What's wrong with me? A painful cramp is developing in one calf; my knees ache horribly and both my feet are numb with cold.

Still, I'm making good progress. I imagine my comrades on the far bank pulling me in like a snagged fish. Just a few steps more, then a few more after that.

Upstream, the fallen tree can no longer contain the mass of flotsam backed up behind it. Its branches release their burden, and it comes my way in a ghastly, rotating mass. Corpses!

I quicken my pace, nearly losing my footing on the sandy bottom. A half dozen bodies are heading right for me like a welcoming committee of the damned. They roll about in the swirling current doing their mad dance. Is Albers' headless torso among them?

Don't panic!

I'm practically running now. A corpse brushes against me, almost knocking me over. Its dead face rolls over in the current and gapes up at me, burning a nightmare image into my memory. Then the body swirls away. The last bit of my sanity follows it downstream.

I lumber along, a mindless savage. Breath gasps in through my mouth. The water is mid-thigh now, then knee deep. Katella sashes out and escorts me the final distance.

I flop down on the shore and cover my face with both hands. My comrades stand around me, uncertain. I manage a feeble moment of bravado:

"Piece of cake."

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I try to reassemble my shattered dignity as we continue our march. I can't help asking myself how Bel would have handled an encounter with those waterborne corpses. He'd have taken it in stride, I conclude, regarding the bodies as nothing more than a potential hazard, like any other wreckage.

But who can say? Anyone can be heroic when he's not in the thick of things. Bel had two comrades with him and another one guarding his back, while I was totally alone.

My mood is foul and defensive. It improves a bit when we reach the devastated farm toward dusk. The last time I passed by here, the farm house was still intact, now it is gutted by fire. The barn is still fairly undamaged, though, and we choose to settle in there. We climb into the hay to sleep.

Despite his injuries, Bel insists on taking the first watch.

Chapter 42

Found.

Bel has started a good recovery by morning. Fortified with nutritious combat rations, his ribs, ankle, and knee solidly bandaged, he looks worlds better. Probably better than me. My night's rest was tormented by images of Albers' decapitated body lying at my feet. Of all the horrors I've witnessed, his death is the worst.

Three of the original Raptor Aces are now slain – Bezmir, Orpad, Albers – along with the Blue Ice lads. I cannot help wondering who will be next. Bel seems to have insight on my torment. We are the only ones in the barn now, as the others are out prowling the farm.

“So, Dytran ...” he says in an offhand way, “did you see what happened to Albers?”

“Did you?”

Bel shakes his head and pats his injured knee.

“I was too busy with my own problems. I must have passed out for a bit.”

I hesitate. The last thing I want to do is talk about Albers, but I know the necessity of getting it out in the open – the same way it was necessary for Bekar to talk about Stilikan’s murder.

“He took a round,” I say, “probably a 30mm cannon shell. There was ... nothing left of his head.”

Bel turns a shade paler. “Ohhh, that’s bad!”

The barn is silent for a long moment; finally, Bel interrupts it.

“Albers didn’t really belong with us. He wasn’t tough enough for fighters.”

“That’s true,” I agree.

Although a competent pilot, Albers was too indecisive and meek to handle combat situations. I realize that we had all regarded him lightly, treating him with borderline contempt, sometimes. I regret that I ignored him back in the APC, but how was I to know it would be my last contact with him?

“At least he had the brass to show up,” Bel says. “Not like those four who stayed behind. They’re probably laughing their asses off at us right now.”

“Could be.”

But somehow I doubt that. The draft age has been lowered, and the lads might well be in an infantry unit getting ground under with the other foot soldiers.

“What’s our next move, Commander?” Bel asks.

“Like you said, we keep going west. Maybe we can reconnect with some of our own people.”

Bel grunts derisively. “Yes, didn’t that work out great the last time? We’re lucky ‘our people’ didn’t shoot us on the spot.”

Bel speaks truths I don’t want to hear. I do not respond.

“I’m telling you, Dye, we’re better off on our own. The glorious army has degenerated into a mob.”

“That may be,” I say, “but if the partisans find us, a bullet from our guys would seem like a tender mercy.”

Bel’s mouth tightens. It’s his turn to acknowledge cruel facts now. He opts for a change of subject.

“You’d make better progress without me,” he says.

“What?”

“You heard, Dye. Why don’t you move on? In a day or two, I’ll be fit to walk on my own.”

“In a day or two, this place could be crawling with the enemy,” I say.

“Not much we can do about that, is there?” Bel says.

“I’m not leaving you, Bel, so don’t say anything more about it!”

My voice is more severe than I intended. Is it because I actually did consider abandoning him at one point? But I rejected that course of action, so why do I feel guilty? Besides ... well ... damn it!

“Very well, then,” Bel says, “you’re the one in charge.”

“And cut that out, too!” I snap. “I didn’t blow up the APC. You had your moment in the sun.”

I’m being grossly unfair and know it.

“Sorry, Bel, I-I didn’t mean that – ”

“Yes, you did,” Bel replies coolly. “It’s all right, Dytran, I don’t hold it against you.”

I’m angry enough to smack him. If he wasn’t all crippled, maybe I would. But some words of wisdom arise in my memory from, of all people, my father:

“Don’t ever get mad at somebody for speaking the truth.”

Of course, the context was totally different. Papa was only defending some perverse opinion he was expressing. Still, my anger vanishes like a soap bubble.

It is replaced by a flash of insight: I’ve never really had a father, just a violent, terrifying drunk who lived with us for a while and abused Mama. I’ve been looking for a replacement all my life – Stilikan, Bekar. And now Bel?

The idea is absurd. We are the same age, he’s no father figure. But he does have the infuriating older brother superiority that Stilikan so often displayed. Yes, like it or not, Beltran is my brother ... and, therefore, he deserves to be let in on my secret plans.

Without thinking about what I’m doing, I begin to tell him.

“Stilikan wasn’t killed in combat,” I say.

“Oh?” Bel’s eyebrows go up in surprise.

“He wasn’t even injured, and he bailed out safely. I learned that direct from his wingman.”

A dark frown creases Bel’s face; his eyes burn at me from within it.

“What happened to him, Dye?”

“The partisans got him – that’s what happened,” I say. “They tortured him to death.”

The dreadful words have exhausted me. My knees feel weak, and I plop down onto the straw. Everything’s happened so fast! A moment ago I was in tight control.

Bel grips my arm. The pain and sympathy in his eyes only worsen my anguish.

“Oh, my God,” he says. “Oh, God ...”

Steely hate rises in my heart, giving me renewed strength.

“The bastards who did it are not far from here,” I say. “Their base is out by that large ruined area. I saw them when I was shot down.”

“And you want revenge, don’t you?” Bel says.

“Yes – more than anything in this world.”

Bel releases my arm and reclines back into the straw.

“This sure is something to consider, Dytran.”

Shouts coming from outside wrench me out of my misery. I seize my gun and dash out the door.

Grushon and Sipren are dragging somebody toward the barn. It looks like a girl, maybe fifteen or so, but it's hard to tell the age of these slobes. A small boy follows along, clinging to her. Katella brings up the rear, machine pistol at the ready.

"What the hell's going on?" I say.

"We found them hiding in the cellar of the house, sir," Grushon says.

"That's wonderful!" I take my anger out on the ground, kicking up a spray of dirt. "Just what we need!"

"Yes, sir," Grushon says.

The little boy is clearly terrified by my outburst. He clings more tightly to the girl and stares up at me with the same wounded fawn look I'd seen in the last slobe boy – the one killed by Eagle-eye.

My fury abates. I try to recall the handful of phrases we learned during training.

"Does anybody know some slobe talk?" I ask. "Can we find out who these people are?"

To my utter amazement, Katella approaches the girl and begins speaking the enemy language to her. He sounds fluent. The girl replies in clipped phrases. She is frightened, but her manner carries defiance.

Katella turns toward me.

"This is their family farm," he says. "They are the surviving children."

I gather my wits to commence an interrogation.

"What are their names, how old are they?" I ask.

Another exchange in the harsh slobe language, Katella translates.

"The girl, Trynka, is almost sixteen. Pomi is nine."

I gesture toward the burned house. "What happened here?"

Another exchange. The slobe girl's face twists with hatred as she speaks.

"Some of our commandos did this last week," Katella says. "They also killed their mother."

Giant hands crush my skull in a death grip. A violent trembling comes over me.

"Dammit to hell!" I cry.

Katella takes my arm and speaks in a low voice. "Dye, what's wrong?"

I inhale deeply and force myself to stop trembling.

Don't appear weak in front of the others!

But the guilt I feel is overwhelming. Those commando bastards! The only reason they came out here was because of me. Why didn't I keep my mouth shut about the partisan lair?

"I'm all right," I say, but know that I don't sound convincing.

It's not hard to figure out what happened. The commandos expected an easy victory over the partisans, but they got a hard fight instead and lost some of their own men. When they came back this way, they took out their rage on the available "targets." They did not include this atrocity in their report.

The girl is talking again, spitting words into the morning air.

"What did she say?" I demand.

Katella hesitates.

"Tell me."

“She says that when the enemy army gets here, they’ll cut off our genitals and feed them to us.”

I recoil with shock and rage.

“We’ll see about that!”

I take a step toward the girl, hand raised, aching to slap her down. But the blatant cowardice of the act restrains me. I glance back toward the barn. Beltran has braced himself up in the doorway and is watching us. I turn back toward Katella.

“Ask this ... young lady what happened to their father.”

Katella speaks to her. She replies with a torrent of words. Her anger and hostility have increased even more.

“Their father was taken away by the partisans,” Katella says. “They executed him.”

“What for?”

“They charged him with being a collaborator,” Katella says.

I feel a stab of sympathy for the kids, but it does not overcome the suspicion I hold then under.

“Keep an eye on them,” I say. “See if they’ve got anything we can use – particularly a cart or wheelbarrow for transporting Bel.”

“Yes, sir.”

They all move off. The girl favors me with a backward glance of lethal intent.

Who can blame her, considering the similarity of my appearance with that of the commando captain who killed her mother? That s.o.b.!

But she holds animosity against the partisans, too. Is there some way I can turn that to my benefit? I reenter the barn. Bel has left his post at the door and is sprawled out in the straw.

“What are you going to do with them?” he asks.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Well, don’t spend too much time worrying about them,” Bel says. “They’re just slobes.”

I turn on him.

“Why don’t you knock that off, already?”

“You’re not going soft on us, are you Dytran?”

“My butt’s as hard as yours,” I shoot back.

“Glad to hear that,” Bel says. “As long as you don’t get too sentimental about the inferior races.”

The sympathetic intimacy we’d experienced only minutes before is gone now.

“Do you still believe that nonsense?” I say. “In case you haven’t noticed, these ‘inferior people’ just rolled right over us!”

“Of course I believe it,” Bel says.

“Why?”

“Because I’ve got nothing else,” Bel says without hesitation. “Just my race and my flying ability.”

I’m too astonished to reply.

Chapter 43

Alliance Attempt.

Common sense and the Party line direct me to shoot the slobe kids and move on. But I'm disgusted with such "common sense," and following the Party line has only led us to disaster. Besides, Katella seems to like the girl, judging by the way he acts around her – unless my perception of such things is totally dead.

Beltran's remark still ring in my ears as I walk toward the house. Actually, it makes a kind of warped sense. At least he has some sort of belief to hang onto in all this lunacy. Bel has always been an NSP loyalist, and faith in our "racial superiority" is the central tenet. Any contrary evidence is battered down with slogans and hysteria. Yet I've never heard anyone make such a justification before.

But who am I to judge? Wasn't I as much of a pea brain with the "mystical awaking" I experienced as the Magleiter gazed into my eyes? The recollection of that spooky incident makes me shudder now.

And how would the world look to me in Bel's place – raised in orphanages, no family, no girl? I can't imagine how I would have turned out were it not for Mama and Stilikan. Even Papa was a great teacher in his way, showing me the type of man that I would never want to be.

But I have more pressing concerns. The Homeland is far off, and we are adrift in enemy seas like bits of wreckage from a torpedoed ship. I cannot afford to delude myself; our chances of getting back on our own are near zero. Sooner or later, the enemy will pick us up. I pray it's their regular army that finds us and not some stray partisan group. There must be men of honor within their army's ranks – men who will treat prisoners decently. At least, I hope so.

If Bel's analysis is correct, and I have no reason to doubt it, peace will soon be declared. The slobes have improved their negotiating position with this offensive, but they will need to transfer their main forces east before long. Our side will be desperate to end hostilities, at almost any price. Then will come prisoner of war exchanges. I can only hope that we are among the survivors.

But I must complete my mission before I can even think about getting home.

Katella is in the basement with the two slobes. He's fired up his little solid-fuel burner and heated some rations which the kids are devouring. Everyone freezes when I appear on the stairs.

"As you were," I say.

I descend the steps amid total silence, as if I am some demonic presence intruding into the world of humanity. As I cross the dirt floor, the boy stares at me with wide-eyed terror. I follow his gaze down to the NSP badge stitched to my jacket. I notice that Katella has removed the badge from his own jacket.

"That's not a bad idea," I say. "Lend me your pocket knife, Katella."

He hands over the blade. I peel off my jacket and begin working at the badge's stitches. They are tough but widely spaced and give way quickly to the knife point. The slobes go warily back to their meals.

"So, how do you know their language, anyway?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

“My heritage, sir,” Katella replies. “There are slobes among my ancestors, and the language got passed down.”

“Oh ... I see.”

Katella examines my face, looking for some indication of disapproval, I think. I keep my eyes fixed on my work.

“There are a lot of people like me,” he says. “It wasn’t a big deal until the NSP took over.”

Things begin to fall into place in my mind.

“Is this why you dislike Bel so much?” I ask.

“Yes,” Katella says. “That smug little NSP lap dog! If he had his way, ‘racially defiled’ people like me would be shot.”

I want to defend Bel, but I can’t really deny the truth of Katella’s statement. He peers into the stove flame, chewing on his resentment.

“It’s bad enough I have to conceal my background without him rubbing the Party line into my face all the time,” he says.

This is dangerous territory, issues that we cannot afford to confront under the present circumstances. A change of subject is urgent.

“So, what do you think we should do with our captives?” I ask.

“What does Bel think?”

“I haven’t asked him,” I say, “but it’s likely he’ll favor harsh measures.”

Katella’s hand moves reflexively toward his machine pistol.

“You can tell ‘His Honor’ that if he tries to hurt either one of them, he deals with me,” Katella says. “And it won’t be a fair fight this time.”

Back into lethal territory. I sidestep again.

“You haven’t answered my question. What should we do with the captives?”

“We leave them alone,” he says. “We clear out. Don’t you think we’ve harmed these people enough, already?”

“They’ll inform on us to the enemy troops. You know that, don’t you?”

“What are they going to say?” Katella snaps. “There are some Mags headed west? The enemy knows that already, for God’s sake.”

“I tend to agree with you, Katella.”

My NSP badge is free from the stitches now. I squat down and place it in the flame. It flares up, popping sparks. The slobes jerk back in surprise. I feel oddly unmoved by my heresy.

“Inform Trynka that I know the man who killed their mother,” I say.

It’s Katella’s turn to jerk back with surprise.

“That doesn’t seem like a smart move, Dytran.”

“Go on, tell her, word for word.”

Katella wipes a hand across his mouth, then he begins speaking. His words are like an electric shock to the girl. Her lips curl back in a snarl. She tries to rise, but Katella restrains her. She spits on the floor.

“Now tell her this,” I say. “When I find him, I will punish him severely.”

Katella translates. A torrent of angry words issues from the girl.

“She asks why you’d do that,” Katella says.

“Because he injured me, and because I want to benefit her.”

Katella appears baffled. I lean in close.

“Listen, Katella, you know me better than anybody. You know I never talk b.s. Try to get that through to her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Another exchange. Katella talks at length, the girl makes a brief reply.

“She doesn’t believe you,” he says.

“Can’t blame her for that,” I say. “But I’ve got something more immediate she can believe in.”

“What’s that, sir?”

I glance around the wretched little room. With its dirt floor and walls, it’s more like a grave than a basement. An apt setting for what I am about to propose.

“I want her to help me find the man who killed her father ... and my brother. We will take revenge on him together.”

“The partisans killed Stilikan?” Katella gasps. “I didn’t know that.”

“You know it now,” I say. “Translate, please!”

I’m having trouble controlling my emotions and raise my voice louder than I wanted to.

Katella speaks; the girl remains silent and wary. Then she looks me over with a new thoughtfulness, as if regarding me for the first time as something other than just a Mag savage. Then she gives a sharp nod.

“She agrees,” Katella says.

“Good,” I say. “But before we decide on anything definite, I want to hear her story – all of it.”

Chapter 44

Trynka’s Story.

Trynka’s family had lived on the same land for generations. She did not know anything else besides the neighboring farms and villages. The same routines went on year after year, until the war came. Then the atmosphere became electric with news of invasion and desperate battles. Some of the young men in the area were drafted into the army. Many others disappeared into the woods so as to avoid military service.

Many spoke with favor about the “liberators” coming from the west, certain that the oppressions of the current regime would finally be thrown off. But as the war ground on and reports of Mag atrocities came filtering back, such talk ceased, replaced by a bitter determination to oppose the invaders.

A huge battle raged nearby in which an entire slobe army was wiped out. The flash of artillery fire turned night into day, and the sky blackened with smoke from burning tanks and incinerated corpses. The ground shook, and a horrible stench of death covered the land. Aircraft screamed overhead, like demons from hell, spitting destruction.

Finally the battle ended, and the invaders continued eastward, sweeping the remnants of the slobe army before them. All that remained behind was a vast

wasteland where nothing could survive any longer, a horrid place that everyone avoided. “The Barren,” as it came to be known – ZOD.

Things settled into a new routine. Occupation troops set up shop, and a Mag airfield was constructed where an old army base used to be. For a while, it seemed as if things might actually improve.

Then the killings started.

Any pretext was sufficient – troops murdering farmers for not handing over their food stocks quickly enough, commando units gunning down anyone who looked like a “terrorist,” soldiers violating local women and shooting them afterwards. Then came the “punishment actions” that wiped out whole villages in retaliation for real or imagined resistance.

The young men hiding in the woods emerged to link up with the regular army, or else they joined the myriad partisan bands springing up across the occupied territory. These partisans evolved into heavily armed, disciplined units that wrested large areas from our control. Most of them were under the direct command of army HQ, but some retained their independence. One such freelance group was the “Omzbak Avengers.”

Omzbak hailed from a village somewhere north of the Barren, and he enjoyed a fearsome reputation. His band was small but far-ranging – and totally ruthless. Six of the Avengers, including Omzbak and a female partisan, visited Trynka’s house one evening. They turned a pleasant dinner hour into a nightmare.

Omzbak was a large, brutal-looking man who exactly matched the description of the partisan leader I’d seen when I was shot down. He spoke the indictment to Trynka’s father:

“You’re under arrest for suspicion of collaborating with the enemy!”

“How have I collaborated?” the father protested. “The Mags come, they take food – what can I do about it?”

“That’s for the People’s Court to decide,” Omzbak said.

Two partisans yanked Trynka’s father to his feet and began dragging him toward the door.

“No!” the mother shouted.

She rushed to her husband’s side; the female partisan seized her.

“Shut up, bitch, or you’re coming with us, too!”

She slapped the mother hard, and the poor woman fell sprawling. Then the partisans dragged Trynka’s father out into the night.

Her mother lay wailing on the floor, Pomi cringed in a corner. A vision of hell had visited the little family.

“Be brave, Pomi,” Trynka told the little boy. “Watch out for Mama.”

Then, without thinking about consequences, she took off after her father’s abductors.

She followed them for many kilometers across countryside shrouded in damp, misty moonlight – always keeping just far enough behind to elude their notice. They were not expecting anyone to follow them, she reckoned, which aided her efforts.

Finally, after a trek of several hours, they reached the Barren.

Trynka’s nerve almost failed at this point, but she steeled herself to keep going. She flattened herself in the underbrush and observed the others enter the blasted

zone. They were approaching an indistinct area that seemed to glimmer oddly in the starlight and moon beams. Trynka dared not follow, as the open ground offered no chance of concealment.

An extraordinary thing happened next. Two partisans seized Trynka's father by the arms and rushed with him toward the blurry spot, stepping in a complex zigzag pattern.

The three of them abruptly disappeared! Trynka could not believe her eyes. But then another partisan did the same maneuver, and another – each vanishing in turn. Finally, Omzbak himself entered the mysterious blur.

Trynka was now alone with the sinister Barren sprawling before her. She wanted nothing more than to run for home. But what was at home? Just a woman driven mad and a broken family stripped of its head. She approached the spot where the others had begun their zigzag and repeated their maneuvers ...

She found herself in a confused state, wandering through an area that seemed to be tilting at crazy angles. Papa had once taken them to a "fun house" at a carnival in the district main town, and she had experienced a similar disorientation wandering its confines. But that had only been a game, this was deadly real.

Normal laws of space and time seemed altered, she could not be sure of which direction she was going, or if she was even moving at all. She heard voices, but they could be coming from anywhere – or nowhere.

Help! her mind screamed, but there was no one to help. Blind panic groped for her.

Trynka clamped her eyes shut. Papa had taught her that in times of great stress, always to do three things: stop, get control, act.

Papa! Papa!

She didn't know how much time passed. The darkness helped to ground her in this terrifying new world; the panic beats of her heart slowed. Finally, she opened her eyes.

She was in an underground passage of some kind, though the exact location of the walls could not be determined. They might be just beyond her touch or a long distance off. The voices seemed to be coming from directly ahead now, and she walked toward them.

She could not clearly see the path ahead, but she could detect a firm surface under her feet. She moved cautiously along, trusting that the ground would not suddenly give way. She seemed to be viewing only the shadows of reality.

Then she found herself staring into a large room. It's appearance was so sudden that she almost cried out. Inside the chamber was her father and the partisans who had brought him to this evil place. Other people, who must also have been partisans, stood about. Two men were facing her father and talking in turn.

She recognized them! Both were shiftless bums who had once worked at their farm. Father had dismissed them because of their laziness and because they were stealing things. Now they were bearing false witness against him.

The allegations made Trynka's ears burn. The men were accusing her father of conspiring with Mag agents, of selling information to the enemy and betraying loyal patriots. They said he had profited from selling food to the invaders.

It was all lies!

Her father was an honorable man. He had good relations with everyone from the common people to high government officials. But the common people had been driven off, along with the government officials, leaving only the scum of the earth behind – like these two. They had guns now, and membership in the most feared partisan band; they could do whatever they liked.

Trynka could no longer bear such injustice. She opened her mouth to speak, but at the same moment, her father turned his head and looked directly at her. His eyes bore incredible agony, they widened when they saw her.

His mind screamed a voiceless warning: “Run!”

The she was running. Headlong through the passageway with no idea of where she was going. Somehow she got outside the nightmare world and kept running, running ...

The following day, her father’s body was discovered lying in a field with a bullet through the head. A sign hung around his neck: “I collaborated with the enemy.”

Trynka’s mother was completely broken by these events. She remained in a fog of madness, mumbling to herself and staring off into space with haunted eyes. She never spoke a coherent word again. Trynka and Pomi cared for her as best they could during her final months of insanity as the farm declined and starvation began to set in.

Then the commando arrived last week. After setting fire to the house, they shot Trynka’s mother in cold blood, laughing like hyenas as they riddled her body. Considering the woman’s tragic state, it was almost an act of mercy.

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The basement is silent now; Trynka’s words soak into its clammy walls and disappear. I feel a chill running through me, as if a ghostly hand is tickling my spine. How could this slip of a girl endure so much tragedy? Everything that’s happened to me since I’ve got here seems like a Sunday picnic in comparison.

I think of Mama. How could I possibly bear to see her murdered before my eyes? The rage I feel against the commandos and the partisans nearly chokes me.

“There you have it, Dytran,” Katella says. “Are you satisfied?”

“Yes ...”

Katella gets to his feet. He appears oversized in the cramped little space. His head nearly reaches the ceiling.

“Well, since you’re both going out there to deal with this Omzbak fellow,” he says, “count me in.”

Chapter 45

Departure.

We are all prepared to move out, knapsacks on our backs, weapons in hand. Katella, Trynka, and Pomi stand with me on one side of the farm yard. Across from

us, Bel sits in a little pushcart with his submachine gun cradled in his arms. His eyes are narrow and suspicious. Grushon and Sipren flank him.

It's time for the parting. We are sitting ducks here at this farm and must get away quickly.

After so many months together, the last of the Raptor Aces are about to go their separate ways. I don't know how I feel about this, don't know what to say. My emotions have been numbed ever since I arrived in this accursed land. So, I just begin speaking, hopeful that the right words will come to me.

"My friends," I say, "it's been an honor to serve as your leader, but the time has come for us to part."

Sipren and Grushon glance at each other; Bel's steely gaze remains fixed on me.

"A small partisan band has its lair nearby," I say. "It's more of a bandit gang, actually, operating outside the main partisan organization. They have murdered not only my brother, but also the father of these two."

I gesture toward Trynka and Pomi. Trynka's eyes blaze; she knows what I'm saying, even if she does not understand the exact words.

"Trynka has been to the partisan hideout before," I continue, "and she's agreed to guide me there so that I may exact justice upon those criminals. Katella has pledged to accompany us. Since I cannot, in good conscience, ask the rest of you to join this mission, I release you from my command and wish you the best of luck on your journey home."

Absolute silence, as if the world has stopped in its tracks. Even the little breeze swirling around the farmyard has ceased. I prepare to dismiss the assembly when Beltran pipes up.

"You won't get rid of me so easily," he says. "I'm going with you, Dye."

He looks toward Sipren and Grushon.

"What about you two?"

They shift uncomfortably and stare at the ground.

"Either come with us and strike a blow for our Cause," Bel says, "or head off on your own."

I hold out my pistol and extra ammo clips toward the two.

"You may have these," I say. "Along with your grenades, you can defend yourselves until you can scavenge more weapons."

Sipren gazes off toward the uncertain west.

"My family has sacrificed much for the 'Cause,'" he says. "Mother and little sister are already slain. I wish to see Father before he dies from grief."

"We share your anguish," Bel says, "but you cannot avenge their deaths without our help – or the death of an heroic national comrade who was murdered by those swine."

He fixes a penetrating gaze on the two.

"Decide now," Bel says, "all in, or all out."

Sipren and Grushon draw together in a silent conference. They soon come to a decision. Grushon speaks for both of them.

"We're in," he says.

Again, I am impressed by Bel's leadership abilities. He's persuaded two doubters to join our expedition and has made it seem like their own idea. But what he does next downright astonishes me.

He jabs a finger at Trynka and lets loose a torrent of words in the slobe language. My jaw drops. Katella grips his machine pistol and steps closer to Trynka.

“What did he say?” I whisper at Katella.

“He said that he’ll kill them both if they betray us,” Katella replies.

He yells at Beltran in the slobe language. Bel glares at him scornfully, then looks off in another direction.

“What the hell was all that?” I ask.

“I think you know what I told him,” Katella says.

Chapter 46

Along the Blood Trail.

Trynka knows the byways and forest trails well. We make good time, despite our injured comrade. Bel’s little cart is designed for rough service over narrow tracks, and it does not hinder us overmuch. The ride cannot be very comfortable for him, but he doesn’t complain.

We rotate pushing duty, except for Katella who doesn’t seem inclined to assist Bel. I do not ask him to make the effort. My turn comes around, and I drop back to relieve Grushon.

“Your jacket’s missing something, isn’t it Dye?” Bel asks by way of greeting.

I look down to the bare spot where the NSP badge used to be.

“No sense advertising who we are,” I say. “We stick out enough already, don’t you think?”

“If the enemy catches us, they’ll cut our throats with or without the badge,” Bel says.

“Thanks for the reassuring words,” I say. “Now let me ask you a question, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure thing Dye, shoot.”

But before I can open my mouth, he pipes up again.

“You’re wondering how I learned to talk slobe, right?”

“Something like that,” I say.

Bel shifts uncomfortably as I begin pushing the cart. He must find the situation to be humiliating. I know I would in his place.

“In the early years, there were slobe kids living with us at the State home,” Bel says. “Even after they got expelled, there were slobe-speaking workers around. I learned the language from them.”

“What for?”

“Don’t you think it’s wise to know the enemy?” Bel answers.

“Well, yes,” I say. “But why didn’t you tell anybody you could speak the lingo?”

“I knew there’d be a war eventually,” Bel says, “and I didn’t want to be stuck with noncombat duty as an interpreter.”

“You thought like that ... even as a little kid?”

“Sure,” Bel replies, “didn’t you?”

Why am I still surprised by anything Bel says or does? I should have deemed him to be unfathomable a long time ago. I opt for a change of subject.

“Thanks for coming along,” I say. “I really appreciate it.”

“Somebody has to pull your butt out of the fire when the time comes.”

“You’re very good at that, Bel. There should be a special medal just for you – the ‘Saving Dytran’s Butt’ award.”

Bel chuckles; he seems pleased by my backhanded compliment. Time to skate out on thin ice.

“It wasn’t really necessary to threaten the slobes,” I say. “They understand the risks.”

“Just so they know where they stand,” Bel says. “We’d be fools to trust them too much.”

Our discussion is interrupted by a sharp command from Trynka. People are coming, she says. We melt into the trees and lay low while she deals with the passersby.

From my position in the underbrush, I see her and Pomi approach a small group of men who are moving toward them along the trail. They talk for a while. Trynka shows them the pail of berries and mushrooms we’ve gathered as a cover for her presence here. She points the opposite direction from us toward some supposed berry patch.

Trynka is really quite pretty when her face is not twisted into an angry snarl. I can see why Katella is falling for her. And she has a determined air that reminds me a lot of Gyn.

Gyn! My chances of seeing her again are about as good as my flying off to visit the moon. Still, she is always in my thoughts as we march along this blood trail. I can hear her soft, melodious voice in my ear, feel her lips pressing against mine. I want to melt away with her into the deep forest.

But then Ket pushes me hard from behind and I come out of my reverie.

The men Trynka is speaking with have a cautious look about them; after all, enemy stragglers or bandits might be lurking about these woods. But the men also project strong confidence. They know this is their country again, purged of the detestable Mag.

The little conference breaks up and the men depart. We get moving again.

“Did you catch anything they said?” I ask Bel.

“Yes. They said army patrols are combing these woods.”

This is unpleasant, though hardly surprising information. I can only hope that our subterfuge continues to work for a while longer. Just until I make it to the partisan hideout!

“Remember that ‘Ghostie’ blur I saw from the air our first day?” I ask. “The one you laughed at me about?”

“What of it?”

“It really exists, Bel. We’re headed for it now.”

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Our company is still divided along its fault line, as indicated by our uniforms. Bel wears his NSP badge on the left breast, as do Sipren and Grushon who are

under his sway. Katella and I have discarded ours. If we can all just hang together long enough to “strike a blow for the Cause” as Bel put it!

I am convinced that we will make it to our destination. My moment of revenge is no longer a distant fantasy. In my heart, I know that I will finally confront my enemy face to face.

Does he know I’m coming? Has the savagery of his life endowed him with the intuition of a wild beast? What kind of man is Omzbak?

He’s a capable leader, no doubt. He’s survived nearly two years as our foe. Even our most vicious commandos could not defeat him and his followers. So what chance have we to overcome them?

We seek justice, and that has to give us power, or else the entire world is upside down. Besides, the commando has already killed some of the partisans, and the band was never large to begin with.

Another thought occurs: does Omzbak want to continue living in a peaceful world? From what I saw of him, he is not a young man; he had a previous life long before the war. Perhaps he knows that he cannot go back to it. The hate and violence he’s reveled in for so long might be too thick a morass for him to escape. My speculations end as a patrol of enemy soldiers appears.

“Get down!” Trynka commands.

We sprawl on the ground. Fronds of underbrush camouflage the cart. The soldiers are approaching in a cautious group, spread out on both sides of the trail. Helmets conceal part of their faces; what I can see of them is hard and cold.

Their commander is a lean, tall man who looks to be carved out of a scythe handle. He wears an officer’s cap, and his face displays the typical slob racial characteristics that we are taught to despise. These attributes are supposed to render him “inferior.” I invite anyone who believes that to confront him, man to man.

My earlier confidence vanishes into the trees. We cannot avoid detection, I am certain. These men, in their unhurried progress, will eventually find us. What then? Should we fight or surrender? Bel has taken off his machine pistol’s safety and has his finger on the trigger. Whatever I might choose, Bel will start a battle that can have only one outcome.

The enemy soldiers draw closer. It’s only a matter of time now. A feeling of immense sorrow comes over me. Oddly, I am not afraid to die, only regretful that I am departing this life before I can accomplish my aim.

Trynka is whispering into Pomi’s ear. The little boy nods. Are they set to betray us?

Suddenly Pomi cries out. The soldiers crouch into combat position, guns at the ready. Pomi cries out again. The leader yells something back. Trynka whispers a final command into the little boy’s ear. Pomi raises his hands over his head and begins walking through the underbrush toward the soldiers. He is weeping freely.

The soldiers begin to relax at the sight of the little boy. Some of them break into grins and laughter. Their commander silences them with a sharp look. He lowers himself to Pomi’s level and takes the boy’s arms in his big hands. He speaks to Pomi. The little boy shakes his head and utters monosyllables through his tears.

The interrogation continues for another minute or two. Then the soldiers move on. Pomi is entrusted to the care of a squat, grizzled sergeant. As they depart, the boy chances a backward glance at us.

“What went on there?” I ask Katella

“The kid’s a good liar,” Katella replies. “He said he was lost and that his whole family was killed by the Mags. He told them there was nobody else around here.”

Trynka looks off the direction the soldiers went. She wipes a tear from her eye and mutters something.

“He’ll be safer with them,” Katella translates.

Chapter 47

First Encounter with the Void.

Per usual, Trynka walks well ahead of us on the trail so as to sniff out potential dangers. Sipren is the “tail end boy” for now, keeping an eye on the path we have already traversed. The rest of us hang together, humping along silently with our private thoughts. Grushon pushes the cart.

Suddenly, Trynka rushes back to us and speaks hurriedly with Katella. Then she moves back up the trail.

“What’s going on?” I say.

“She wants us to capture the person coming our way,” Bel replies for Katella.

Katella nods agreement but does not look Bel’s direction.

“All right,” I say, “Katella, Grushon – take positions across the trail. Sipren stay with me.”

I give Bel a stern look. “No shooting except on my order.”

“Aye, aye, Commander,” Bel says.

In moments we have our little “surprise party” organized. From my position crouched low in the underbrush, I hear Trynka’s voice getting closer, along with another, huskier, female voice. I can see Sipren’s head poking above the greenery, and I motion him to get lower.

Trynka appears, walking beside a tall, rather gaunt woman. The woman carries a rifle slung over her shoulder. A revolver hangs from her belt along with a big stick grenade. I’m certain that I’ve seen her before – among the partisans who came to inspect the wreckage of Y-47. We’ve made first contact!

Trynka stops walking and offers up her bucket to the partisan woman. Beside this fearsome warrior, Trynka appears to be only the merest wisp of a little girl, completely harmless and innocent. The woman reaches inside the bucket for a handful of berries.

I signal my boys; we leap from concealment. Too late, the partisan realizes the situation and tries to resist. But we’ve already relieved her of her weapons. A hard right from Grushon knocks her flat.

“Stay down there, bitch!” he snarls.

She tries to move, and Grushon cocks back his leg to deliver a kick.

“That’s enough!” I say.

He looks up with pure savagery etched on his face. I’ve seen that expression before, when he was getting ready to jump me during the slobe diving incident.

“Yes, sir,” he says, reluctantly.

He steps away, allowing the partisan woman room to writhe back to full consciousness amid the carpet of spilled berries.

“Check her for ammo,” I say.

A rough search of her pockets and cartridge box reveals several clips of ammo for the rifle and thirty-six rounds for the revolver. Bel takes possession of the grenade. It’s a “potato masher” style bomb with a big explosive charge inside a thin metal canister – an offensive weapon that kills by percussion rather than shrapnel.

“Better check her boots,” Bel says.

We pull off her boots and a small, double-edged knife clatters to the ground accompanied by a curse from its former owner.

“Same to you,” Bel says.

“That’s a pretty little toy,” Grushon says, kicking the knife away.

I examine the rifle. It’s one of ours, originally. Standard infantry issue, modified for sniper duty – extra machining on the moving parts, precision trigger, and a powerful little scope.

At the factory, gun barrels of unusual straightness and accuracy are identified for development into sniper weapons; we have clearly obtained one of these. I speculate as to who the original owner might have been.

“Shouldn’t that go to our best shot?” Bel asks.

This can only mean me, “Eagle-eye,” who topped every one of our shooting competitions.

Yes, I like the feel of this rifle very much – excellent balance and workmanship. It has dignity, a respect for the skilled person wielding it. This elegant weapon has little in common with our submachine gun death sprayers.

Still, I am reluctant to give mine up. Its brute killing power commands a respect of its own. Bel is right, though ... as usual. I hand my machine pistol to Sipren. This leaves the revolver. Trynka eyes it hungrily, but I direct that it be given to Grushon. We all have stingers now.

“Let’s interrogate the prisoner,” I say.

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She identifies herself only by her partisan alias of “Comrade 19” and will not tell us her real name or where she comes from. Trynka is annoyed, but these details are unimportant to me. I prefer not to know much about Comrade 19. I only want to learn what she knows about Stilikan’s death. Did she play a role in it?

But first, Trynka extracts details from the prisoner about her current circumstances. Beltran and Katella position themselves on opposite sides of me providing instant translation. Only rarely do they disagree on minor points.

Since the “glorious army” has liberated this region, Comrade 19 has decided to leave the partisan band with hopes of resuming a normal life someplace where nobody knows her. A year ago she was gang raped by the Mag and left for dead. But she didn’t oblige them; instead, she made her way to Omzbak’s Avengers,

where her brother was serving, in order to wreak havoc on the enemy and their collaborators.

She is proud of her “patriotic service.” During her year with the partisans she helped to “glank” numerous enemies. This term, it is explained to me, refers to what one does to eradicate vermin – including those who walk on two legs. Her biggest regret is that her brother was captured during one of their raids and subsequently executed.

Now she wants this period of her life to be over. She desires to “feel human again.”

I’m not concerned about her desires. I cut directly to the point:

“What do you know about Stilikan?”

Katella translates my question. At first Comrade 19 seems to not understand; then realization enters her eyes along with revulsion and terror.

“Ah, the beautiful young pilot,” she says, “like a god, almost! I thought he was a gift from heaven. We could exchange him for our captured comrades, including my own precious brother.”

“Then why didn’t you?” I demand through clenched teeth.

She stares at me for a long moment. I can barely curb myself from slapping her down.

“He looked much like you,” she says. “He could have been your brother ... he was your brother!”

“Tell her to answer my question!” I’m practically shrieking now.

Katella grips my arm. “Calm down, Dye.”

He fires a torrent of slob words at the prisoner. She nods wearily. Then she grabs a handful of her thin, gray-streaked hair and practically shoves it in my face.

“See this?” she says. “It used to be jet black – my pride and joy. Even the bastards who raped me could not harm it. But since that cursed day, it’s been like this.”

She flings the tress defiantly back over her shoulder.

“You aren’t the only one who’s suffered, young man. Not long ago, I could have charmed even you.”

I realize for the first time that Comrade 19 is a fairly young woman, attractive once. Youth and beauty have been torn from her, leaving a terrible void.

“It was Omzbak who butchered the pilot,” she says. “He had the devil inside him that day, and we were all too cowardly to oppose him.”

She spits on the ground.

“I’ll never forgive that swine for what he did! Three days later, my brother was hanged in a public square. He should have been back safe among us.”

She turns on me, eyes flashing with hate.

“Do you know how they hanged him? Very slowly, using piano wire.”

I am unmoved by this grisly detail.

“Who else ... who else helped to murder Stilikan?”

“The deputy commander,” Comrade 19 says. “That goddam cobbler is as evil as Omzbak himself.”

“Where is he?” My voice croaks; it seems to be coming from somebody else.

“Where would he be?” Comrade 19 says. “Down there with Omzbak, of course. Those of us who still have a shred of humanity are leaving.”

She locks her eyes onto mine. The hatred fades from them, replaced by animal cunning.

“You want to kill him, don’t you?” she says.

“Yes!”

“I can help,” she says. “I’ll take you to that cursed place. We will avenge both of our dear brothers.”

I am too astonished to maintain my harsh demeanor. I must look like I’ve been slapped by a dead fish.

“Omzbak deserves to die,” she says. “He wants to die, I think. He is weary of befouling this world.”

I mull the proposition over. Comrade 19 might be just the person we need, or she might betray us at the first opportunity. Her look becomes even more cunning, like a perverted fox.

“He was a decent sort at one time,” she says, “until his family was massacred in one of your ‘punishment actions.’ Let’s send him off to join them.”

She leans toward me and speaks in a low, ominous voice.

“Do you want to know why Omzbak killed that pilot?” she asks.

By breathing halts. I manage a jerky nod.

“He said your brother looked like the commando leader who murdered his family.”

“Ohhh.” My breath escapes in a prolonged groan.

Everything falls together into a completed circle of evil. I finally understand ...

The silence drags on. Trynka fills it.

“You don’t recognize me, do you, ‘Comrade?’” she says. “I recognize you, despite your ugly hair.”

Comrade 19 stares hard at Trynka. “No, child, I don’t. Should I?”

“Then perhaps you recall invading our house and taking my father away,” Trynka says. “Perhaps you remember slapping my mother down. You were very brave that night.”

Recognition dawns in Comrade 19’s eyes. “Why, you’re –”

Then Trynka is upon her, stabbing the twin-edged knife deep into her heart. The blow is so violent that Comrade 19 falls backward, as if struck by a cannon ball. She is instantly dead, eyes staring upwards in shock.

“Bitch!” Trynka shrieks.

She stomps the inert body; Katella drags her away.

“Bravo!” Bel cries. “One less of those scum we have to deal with.”

Chapter 48

Pause.

We pause a full day so as to encourage Bel's recovery. He insists that he can "tough it out" as is, but I'm having none of it. There's no telling what rigors lie ahead, and I want him as fit as possible.

I would never admit this to anyone, but Bel's incapacity has rattled me to the core. Up until now, I've always considered myself to be "the man in charge," with Bel as a testy subordinate and threat to my position. But now I'm starting to appreciate his true worth. He is as important to me as my right arm.

Trynka finds us a little cabin on the edge of some woods to hole up in. She explains that it was used by woodcutters, goatherds, or anybody else who might require a night's lodging on the trail. But that was back when this was still a productive area. Now the cabin is abandoned, like so much else in this wasteland. The place is comfortable enough, though; it's even got some blankets stashed away.

We all need some down time before the coming ordeal, but there is another reason I've called a pause. On a deeper level of my consciousness, I'm hoping that something will occur to abort this crazy mission. I am experiencing increased feelings of dread. It was easy to get carried away about things earlier when it was just me, but now others are involved. Their lives hang by the thread of my obsession.

If Comrade 19 is right, then a prolonged life might be more of a punishment for Omzbak than a quick death would be. And any death I bring him will be quick. Many nights I've lain awake with thoughts of torturing him the same way he tortured my brother – but in my heart, I know that I am incapable of that.

Maybe I should just leave him alone in his tormented world to face the wrath of those he's wronged. He would seem to have no lack of enemies, and even the authorities will want to be rid of him. They know he's too much of a loose cannon to fit into this time of peace.

But I can't call off the mission; it has sunk its hooks too deeply into my mind. Justice must be served, whatever the cost.

The others seem to have their own misgivings, judging by their somber looks and quiet demeanors. We still have plenty of high-nutrition combat rations, but we have all reduced our calorie intake, as if we are fasting to prepare ourselves for some esthetic venture.

Sipren is a cause for concern. His mood swings could pose a danger to us. Toxic thoughts roil in his mind, and they burst out randomly. He asks unanswerable questions.

"What about our guys killed in the fighting?" he'll say. "What about our people slaughtered in the bombing raids?"

What about them – will more violence bring them back? I can't dispute with him, though. It's too easy for me to talk. How would I feel if Mama were among the slain, or Gyn, or Ket? There are no answers, only more hate. I consider leaving Sipren behind, but he would be a worse threat to us if he were captured.

How will it be, I wonder, to look into Omzbak's eyes and pull the trigger? Will he know who I am and why I'm taking his life? I have a pilot's perspective. You don't know the enemy you are trying to kill. You shoot at him from a long distance, or he shoots at you.

How will it be to kill somebody up close in cold blood – am I up to the task?

Katella and Trynka spend all of their time together talking and gazing into each other's faces. She already speaks a bit of our language, and Katella practices with her. He's become a sort of combination boyfriend and language tutor.

They also busy themselves with patrolling the area. We all take turns at this, except for Bel who stays indoors resting his injuries, on my express orders.

Without his books to occupy him, Bel spends many hours staring up at the ceiling, as if he's unraveling the mysteries of the universe in his mind. In the late afternoon, when only the two of us are in the cabin, another of his astonishing remarks comes out of thin air.

"You know, Dye," he says, "I've come to regret killing that slob boy with my airplane."

"Yes, me too," I say. "His name was Piotra."

"That figures," Dye says. "He was a fierce enemy, all right. How did you find out his name?"

"From his mother. She attacked me in the railway station when I went home on leave."

"Oh."

Moments of silence pass. No one intrudes on our intimacy.

"I hated Piotra a long time because he destroyed my dreams," Bel says, "but now I can appreciate his ... beauty. He had true honor and courage."

"We thought we were entitled to humiliate him because we were so 'superior,'" I say. "He taught us otherwise, didn't he?"

Bel nods sadly. I gesture to the enemy world around us.

"They have all taught us harsh lessons," I say.

A while later, Katella enters with Trynka. I should leave so as to take his place on watch, but I make it a point to be in the cabin whenever Katella is there. Another flare up between him and Bel is the very last thing we need.

As usual, tense quiet maintains itself between them. Katella busies himself with cleaning his machine pistol. Bel lies on his back, appearing to doze. Then he chooses to break the silence.

"You're very good at their language, Katella," he says, "better than me. Not a trace of accent, either."

"Uh huh," Katella says.

He doesn't look up from polishing the barrel of his submachine gun. His body stiffens, though. Trynka, who had been lounging nearby, draws closer to him.

"I learned to speak it at the State home," Bel says. "Where did you learn?"

Katella's hands stop their polishing routine; he looks up fiercely at Bel. Hairs bristle on the back of my neck as an alarm siren wails in my brain. Bel's manner is not hostile, though, and his words carry no insinuation. He gazes at Katella with frank curiosity.

"You must have figured it out by now," Katella snaps. "I've got 'racial inferiors' in my family tree. Do you have a problem with that?"

Bel studies him for a long moment, then shakes his head. A coiled spring in my chest abruptly relaxes.

"I've always wondered what you had against me," Bel says. "I thought it was because I'm poor and your family is well off."

"I don't care about your background." Katella gestures toward Trynka. "I care about other things."

"I can see that," Bel says.

Silence takes over. Bel shifts uncomfortably on his straw mat.

"Dye, you have to let me get up," he says. "If I lay here another minute, I'll go stir crazy."

"Sure thing," I say, "go take a little stroll."

He gets to his feet and tests his injured ankle. He seems pleased with the result.

Katella watches Bel steadily, but the anger is gone from his eyes. Thank God he says nothing further. Bel, too, seems to want the matter dropped. He turns my direction.

"Best if we carry no secrets to wherever it is we're going," he says, "right, Dye?"

"You don't have to explain anything to me," I say. "You volunteered to help; that's all that counts in my book."

A melancholy smile crosses Bel's lips.

"I've often told myself that I would have stopped Grushon and the others from hurting you," he says. "But the truth is, I don't know what I would have done if Katella hadn't spoke up."

"I ... appreciate your honesty," I say.

Bel walks out the door with a slight limp and disappears. Katella gives his gun a final buff, then sets it aside. I return to my brooding thoughts.

Bel's remark is actually comforting in it's way. The infallible Beltran, always so sure of himself, has admitted to a moment of doubt. If he'd meant for the others to clobber me, he would have said so. But the answer he gave leaves a better option for me to hang onto.

But what can it matter now? Compared to all the horrors we've endured at the front, what does a little ass kicking among friends amount to?

A few minutes later, Sipren bursts in.

"Somebody's out there!" he says.

"Stay here, Sipren," I say, "and keep the girl with you."

I grab my rifle and dash outside, stooping low to take advantage of the natural cover. Katella follows in my wake.

Grushon and Bel are crouched behind some bushes, looking off toward the north.

"Did he see us?" I ask.

"Don't know," Bel says, "we only just spotted him."

I make out a vague figure walking in the distance. Bel hands me his binoculars.

I raise them to eye level. I catch a glimpse of a man passing through the underbrush. He carries a machine pistol. Clearly, he's a partisan scout. Can I pick him off from this distance? Maybe, but the gunshot would alert the world of our presence.

The man moves away and disappears. I have to assume that he's spotted us. I've been expecting something like this.

"Katella, Grushon," I say, "go tell the others. We're pulling out."

"Yes, sir."

They trot off toward the cabin. Bel looks at me quizzically.

"What's the plan, Dye?"

“We need to be gone well before nightfall,” I say. “Omzbak will be paying a visit then.”

“Maybe we should stick around and prepare a welcome for him.”

I shake my head emphatically.

“He could outflank us from any direction,” I say. “A fight in the open where he can maneuver would be disastrous – especially in the dark.”

“Good point, Dye.”

“Let’s face it,” I say, “he’s better at this than we are, and he knows the terrain.”

“What’s our next move, then?”

“What do you think, Bel?”

I give him time to churn this over. He doesn’t need much.

“We infiltrate Omzbak’s hideout while he’s away.”

“Exactly!” I say. “We set a trap for the SOB where he least expects it, in his own rat’s nest.”

Bel strokes his chin thoughtfully.

“I don’t think he has many people left,” I say. “Comrade 19 said they were all deserting. Why would she lie about that?”

“She was a tough one, all right,” Bel says. “I’m thinking it’s too bad she isn’t coming with us.”

“Yes ...”

I feel extreme annoyance at myself. Trynka had mentioned a female partisan slapping her mother – I should have made the connection and protected Comrade 19 from her wrath. But how would that have worked? Trynka is so consumed by hate that she could never have cooperated with Comrade 19.

Is she the only one motivated by hatred? There seems to be a broader lesson here, but I don’t have time to think it through right now.

“It makes sense that Omzbak will use his whole force to attack us,” I say. “Or maybe he’ll just leave one or two behind.”

“In the ‘blur?’”

“Yes. Think on it, Bel – the war’s over here, their alertness will be low. If we play it right, they’ll never know what hit them.”

Bel ponders for a while, squinting off into the distance with those hawk eyes of his.

“Better to give him a double surprise, don’t you think?” he says. “Some of us go in, the rest stay outside.”

The audacity of this plan is pure Bel. Divide our forces in the face of the enemy?

“Yes, that might be just the thing,” I say. “I’ll infiltrate with Trynka and –”

“I’ll set the trap outside,” Bel says. “We’ll be the ones with the freedom to maneuver, then.”

“We’d better leave that job to Katella,” I say, “somebody who can run like hell if necessary. You come inside with me.”

Disappointment flashes across Bel’s face.

“That would work best, right?” I say. “Besides ... I need you with me.”

A little smile replaces the chagrin on Bel’s face.

“Agreed,” he says.

Quiet settles over our discussion. The plan seems about as complete as we can make it at this point.

When we return to the cabin, Trynka is gouging some letters into the dirt floor with a stick.

“What the hell is she doing?” I say.

“She wants to leave them a message,” Katella says.

“Tell her to stop!”

Katella speaks to her. A brief argument ensues, then Trynka begins rubbing out the marks. I’ve had time to reconsider my order, though.

“No, tell her it’s all right,” I say.

Katella speaks to her again.

“Are you sure about that?” Bel says. “Won’t that tip them off?”

“Perhaps,” I say, “and it might spook them a little, too. If the band is disintegrating already, maybe this will help speed things up.”

Bel looks doubtful.

“Let’s work on his mind,” I say. “He doesn’t know who we are, does he? He must have made lots of enemies.”

“All right,” Bel says, unconvinced.

Trynka is gouging the floor again.

“Give me that stick,” I say. “I want to add my two farthings’ worth.”

Under Katella’s guidance, I craft the final letters. Then I toss the stick aside.

“There,” I say, “that should get the bastard thinking.”

Chapter 49

Eastern Debacle.

Editor’s note: *The following introduction is taken from the papers of Field Marshal Angrift, former Army chief of staff. Shortly before his suicide, Angrift entrusted these papers to an aide with instructions to make them available to “all interested parties.”*

And now I depart this life in the only fashion that might redeem a shred of my personal honor. It is easy for me to go, and I leave my countrymen with a final admonition:

DOWN WITH THE CRIMINALS WHO HAVE LED US TO THE ABYSS!

Do not despise this sentiment just because it issues from one of the worst offenders. I freely admit guilt for my part in the debacle that is overtaking the Fatherland. Of all persons, I should have known that our course was moving toward disaster, but my head was turned by material rewards and a field marshal baton – and by the unquestioning faith in the Magleiter that has distorted so many of our minds.

As bizarre as it sounds in the light of subsequent events, I once believed that the Magleiter was sent to us by God to restore the Fatherland's greatness. I cannot forgive myself for this wicked error.

It was clear from the start that our attack on the slobe empire was a criminal enterprise. Aside from the fact that it seized territory which has never belonged to us, it also sought to enslave, if not outright exterminate, the population of the conquered areas.

Those of us who knew the full scope of the Magleiter's intent had our own rationalizations. The rest of our people had to make do with lies churned out by the propaganda machine – the absurd contentions that we were “defending ourselves” and “righting historical wrongs.”

Worst of all was the claim that our foes were primitive subhumans that we could easily dominate and dispossess. We were the Master Race and could do all things! Ask any combat veteran how easy it was to dominate these “subhumans.”

Our invasion was a naked grab for territory and resources, nothing else. And now it has backfired. Unless divine providence favors us with extraordinary dispensation, the enemy will roll over our defenses and exact terrible revenge upon the Fatherland. I pray for the success of the Empire's eastern foes, but I know in my heart that they will fail, as we have. Then comes the reckoning.

An objective reader of these papers will conclude that the only way to bring down the Empire was by using a two-pronged approach:

1. A massive military campaign to destroy the enemy's armed forces
2. An outreach to the population to get them on our side

Many of us in the military high command counseled this approach. We reasoned that, given the well-known brutality of the slobe regime, many people would welcome a change of government. We could play on the multi-ethnic nature of the Empire so as to swing important segments of the population into our camp. Even a modest improvement in their living conditions would have been enough to gain their loyalty.

We lacked the resources for a prolonged war of attrition. Victory had to come fast, or not at all. And victory was impossible without help from the disaffected elements within the slobe empire.

There is ample historical precedent for this approach. Consider the demise of the Roman empire. Any band of barbarian raiders crossing the frontiers was quickly joined by slaves fleeing Roman captivity and by other alienated people, thus magnifying its power. The internal contradictions of the Roman empire brought it down.

A similar fate overcame the Spartans when their oppressed population was liberated by the Thebans. The Spartan warrior elite simply faded away when deprived of its serfs. Also the Aztecs of Mexico when their subjugated tribes ran off to join the Spanish conquistadors.

To this must be added the fantastic hubris of the American Confederacy provoking a war with the much stronger North while, at the same time, clutching the viper of slavery to its breast – millions of exploited inhabitants eager to join the Northern invaders at the first opportunity. It was only in the closing weeks of the conflict that the Confederacy hit upon the idea of freeing slaves who agreed to fight for it, but this half measure came far too late.

The leaders of the slobe empire made no such error. They responded to our invasion with an immediate reduction of oppressive measures against their own people. Political prisoners were let out and mobilized for battle. Appeals were made to religion, patriotism, ethnic pride. They offered a far more appealing alternative to the population than we did.

For, from the beginning, the Magleiter insisted on a “war of annihilation.” We were to crush the enemy with unrelenting brute force. Any inhabitant of the slobe empire was a racial inferior who needed to be subjugated. Thus, NSP ideology trumped common sense. The results of this insane policy are obvious:

The formerly disunited population rose up against us as one, creating a deadly partisan movement behind our lines. The resolve of the enemy’s regular forces stiffened, enabling them to rebound from their early defeats and overwhelm us. The slobe empire could, thus, take full advantage of its manpower superiority – variously estimated as being three or four to one.

Worst of all, our soldiers became brutalized, turning into criminal accomplices of the regime. Mass murder, rape, and destruction of property became such common occurrences as to be scarcely noted.

Were I the “true patriot and a man of valor” that the propagandists made me out to be, I would have put a bullet through the Magleiter’s head before this doomed enterprise ever got started. Now I can only pray that a better man than me will perform this service for our people.

May God protect the Fatherland!

PART 4

The Darkness

Chapter 50

Hero's Homecoming.

Omzbak knew the enemy was dangerous now.

The scouting report from Comrade #1 had been inconclusive. Number 1 had spotted four outsiders dressed in strange uniforms, boys really, hanging around an old wood cutters' hut.

It did not take a crystal ball to determine that these punks were enemy stragglers – support troops of some kind, probably. The Mag were scraping the bottom of their manpower barrel these days; underage and overage soldiers had become a common sight.

The lads made a tempting target. Omzbak was of a mind to stage one last ambush before the enemy cleared out of this area and his Avenger band completely dispersed. But he was weary of all the killing. He knew from bitter experience that no amount of bloodshed could erase his pain.

He decided to ignore them. Let the army handle stragglers; it's what they were paid to do. But then a far more disturbing piece of news made its way to him. Another of his scouts reported finding Comrade 19's body lying in the woods. She'd been stabbed through the heart and relieved of her weapons.

So, these foreign boys were not so harmless after all. Omzbak was certain they were responsible for the killing. Didn't one of them have a long-barreled rifle, like the weapon Comrade 19 prized so much? He'd doubtless obtained it when they killed her.

Outrage boiled up in Omzbak's heart, nearly choking him. Comrade 19 may have been a deserter, but she'd served loyally for an entire year, striking terror into the enemy. Her murder cried out for vengeance!

Only eight members of his band remained. The others had either been killed fighting the Mag commando, or else they'd run off. No matter, Omzbak was confident these veterans would be more than enough to handle a few boys. That night, he led seven of them on a raid to the wood cutters' hut.

Omzbak disliked leaving only a single guard back at the hideout, two would have been better. But the way things were these days, he couldn't rely on anyone to hold the fort without him. Now that the enemy was purged from these districts, the temptation to flee into the night was simply too great.

Omzbak reasoned that a single man, alone and isolated in the hideout, would be less likely to take to his heels than two would be. One man's fear and cowardice would play off the other one's, and soon they would run away together.

Only Number 1 could be fully trusted, but he would never miss out on a chance to kill. Besides, Omzbak needed him at hand to help control the rest. Number 1's glowering presence bringing up the rear would intimidate them into obedience.

The Avengers drifted like a death vapor through the woods and marshlands, as they had done so many times before on other missions. Omzbak felt the old blood lust returning as they closed in on their quarry. Pure malice kept him moving in the dark.

God damn them to hell! he kept repeating in his mind like a religious mantra. These Mag were all the same, regardless of their age. Every last one had to be glanked.

The bullet wound in his thigh had not completely healed, and frequent stabs of pain accompanied his progress. Good, the discomfort kept his hate focused. He'd got the wound during the fight with the Mag commando. The bastards had caught them by surprise last week and succeeded in killing several Avengers.

It was simply not possible to camp permanently in the hideout. The psychological pressure overwhelmed his men eventually. The women could endure it better, for some reason, but nobody could stand the hideout for too long in one stretch. So, they'd been at one of their above ground camps when the Mag caught them.

But the enemy had taken heavy losses, too. Omzbak grinned at the recollection of "Egelai," as the enemy medic had called one of the wounded men. Omzbak had surprised them in the bushes. After dispatching the medic with a bullet through the head, Omzbak used his practiced butcher's hand to gut Egelai like a hog. He could still hear the s.o.b. squealing out the last of his life!

Number 1 interrupted Omzbak's bloody trip down memory lane.

"We're almost there, Chief," he said. "I first caught sight of them from this spot."

Omzbak grunted. "Comb the area for sentries."

"Aye, Chief."

Number 1's voice conveyed genuine pleasure, as if he was about to attend a birthday party in his honor. He'd certainly come a long way since the time when he was the meek village cobbler, drunk more often than not. He'd become a lean, hard killing machine who hadn't touched a drop of alcohol in nearly two years.

Omzbak and Number 1 were marked men; everyone understood this. They both had so much blood on their hands and had outraged the central partisan command so much that there was no going back for them. The others must have thought they could blend into the wider world and resume normal lives. Omzbak had his doubts on that score.

They were nearing the objective now.

They'd found no sentries, and the cabin itself was dimly illuminated with flickering light. The worm-eaten door wasn't even secured. This was going to be like spearing fish in a barrel!

Omzbak considered lobbing grenades through the windows, but he preferred to see the faces of the people he was killing. The unholy rage was upon him; he crashed his bulk through the door, spraying submachine gun fire –

The place was empty. Two candles sputtering in the corners were the only sign that people had once been here. And a single word gouged into the floor half a meter high:

JUSTICE!

The letters had an oddly chilling effect, even on Omzbak's stone heart. He and his men stood around in grim silence gazing at the floor, as if additional words might suddenly appear by magic. Omzbak ground his teeth.

So, he thought, his Avengers had attracted avengers of their own. He was not surprised; it had a kind of symmetry. Then again, this could be just youthful bravado with no serious intent behind it.

He'd inflicted much bloodshed over the past two years – not all of it justified or necessary. Omzbak understood this now, but when he'd been in a killing frenzy, nothing could get through to him. Like the time they'd captured that enemy pilot, when he'd almost had a mutiny on his hands ...

"Let's get out of here!" he ordered.

Whatever might be behind the word on the floor, Omzbak knew that he was treading on a path of no return. In his mind, he journeyed back to its beginning.

Chapter 51

Nightmare Vision.

Omzbak strode purposefully along the forest trail toward home. His mission to the neighboring village had not been successful, but it was still good to be a strong man in the prime of life, walking in the fresh air. Ordinarily, he'd have brought his son along, but with things the way they were these days, it was better that he remain home to keep an eye on his mother and the young ones.

The boy would make a fine butcher someday, following in his papa's footsteps. Omzbak was a third generation butcher, highly respected in his village. His meats were top quality, his scales gave honest weight, and his sausages – made from traditional family recipes – were renowned throughout the whole district.

So well did his neighbors think of him that twice they'd prevailed upon him to serve as village headman. He'd enjoyed the largely ceremonial job and got on well with the Party cadre who was the real power in town.

But times were difficult now. The war had brought a hard edge to everything. The occupation forces were commandeering food supplies for themselves, and good meat was getting hard to find. So, he'd jumped at the opportunity when he learned that a farmer in another village had prime hogs for sale.

If he could close a deal, he planned to hire wagons to transport the animals back to his home village. He knew that he could make a huge profit on the pork but reminded himself that the war would be over someday. He did not want to be vilified as a profiteer who took advantage of his neighbors in their time of need.

When Omzbak arrived at the point of sale, however, he discovered that the hogs had already been requisitioned by the occupation forces. The poor farmer could only shrug with regret for the profit they'd both lost. There was nothing for Omzbak to do but turn around and go back. He'd left home shortly after dawn, so there was plenty of daylight remaining for the 15 kilometer hike.

He did not wish to be out after dark. Bands of guerrilla fighters were organizing in the area, and they operated at night. Anyone found outside after curfew without official leave was liable to be shot. The growing effectiveness of these partisan groups was evidenced by severed telegraph lines, blown up railway tracks, and by the summary executions of enemy collaborators.

Most recently, partisans had attacked the Mag garrison at Railway Junction K, inflicting heavy casualties before melting back into the woods. This bold action had put the whole district on edge. Everybody wondered what would happen next.

Omzbak wasn't too worried about violating curfew, though; it was his son that troubled his thoughts. The boy was rapidly approaching military age. All he talked about was running off to join the army, or else finding a partisan unit where he could perform his "patriotic duty."

What could Omzbak say about this? He hated the old government and was among those who welcomed its demise. Things had become intolerable over the past few years as the authorities appropriated more and more food from the peasants to pay for the crash industrialization program. Anyone who resisted the thefts or the forced collectivization of farm land ended up in a labor camp – or worse.

He'd hoped that the invaders would liberate them from this oppressive yoke and improve the lives of ordinary people. After all, the foreign army hailed from the much admired "Golden West" with its high level of culture and technology – the land of automobiles, stylish clothing, and flush toilets.

But things were starting to work out differently. The Mag were proving themselves to be cruel masters.

Of course, strict policies had to be followed during wartime, but the Mag seemed to be crossing the line of military necessity more and more often. What was a virile young man like his son to do? What would Omzbak have done during that stage of his life?

He'd always been one to get along with others and avoid conflict; it was good for business. His imposing bulk, strengthened by years of muscling around animal carcasses, had been sufficient to deter any potential aggressors. But things were radically different when he was a young man. The world had been turned upside down since the invasion ... literally.

He shuddered at the memory of his journey into the "Barren."

What on God's earth had motivated him to visit that cursed place? He'd always had a native curiosity, but the small world of his butchering trade had provided little opportunity to indulge it. After the great battle had devastated the area south of his village, though, Omzbak could not restrain himself.

He'd never witnessed an act of violence more serious than a tavern brawl. What would the aftermath of such a huge killing rampage look like, he wondered? Some devilish need to know took hold of him.

So, one day when business was slow, he left his son in charge of the shop and journeyed to the wasteland alone ...

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The moment he stepped out of the forest and into the Barren, an overpowering sense of dread came over him. The place seemed to be not of this earth. The vast explosion of hate, violence, and suffering that occurred here seemed to have summoned up forces of evil from the nether regions.

All right, you've seen it, a voice inside his mind said, now go back!

But he couldn't go back. Some evil power seemed to have him in its grip, leaving him no more freewill than a side of beef hanging in his store room possessed. He continued walking through the ravaged landscape like a robot without full control of himself.

The place was void, a null entity. Omzbak's simple vocabulary could not possibly describe the environment, only that it was wrong.

Not a single living thing survived around him; a deadly silence filled the air. Hardly any evidence remained that a battle had occurred here. The blasted war machines had been hauled away and the corpses of men removed for burial – at least some of them. Omzbak sensed the presence of others lurking beneath the surface, eager to suck him down into their realm.

But that was just his imagination playing tricks, wasn't it?

Were he a more articulate man, he might have said the battle here had ripped open a kind of portal to another world ... but not exactly. More like it had parsed the evil out of the wider reality. The area was a distillation of wickedness.

A donkey had kicked his head when was a young boy, which had left his eyes permanently out of alignment. With both eyes open, his vision was a slightly blurred double image. When he was using his butchering implements, he always pulled his cap down over one eye so that he could see clearly trough the other one.

Both his eyes were open now, and they relayed disjointed visions. Ghosts seemed to be observing him on the periphery, fleeting images moving just beyond actual sight. He resisted the urge to pull his cap down, as he wanted to experience everything the Barren had to offer.

Then he saw a blurry spot directly ahead, something that shouldn't have been there. He closed one eye and the blur disappeared. He opened both eyes and the blur reappeared. He repeated the experiment with his other eye, identical result.

Go home, you damn fool!

But Omzbak was too fascinated by the spectacle to break off now. He approached the blur like a moth heading toward a candle flame. The blur vanished. He turned left and took two steps, the blur reappeared. He repeated this oblique process until, by trial and error, he gained the entryway. He took a final step into the Barren's interior ...

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Omzbak shook his head to dispel the image. Some things were better left alone.

He left the forest trail and entered the main road toward home. It was not much more than a dirt track, really, but wide enough for two large carts to travel side by

side. So lost in his thoughts was he that he did not even notice the large armored vehicle approaching. It suddenly appeared from around a bend, coming straight toward him like some primordial beast.

For such a monstrous vehicle, it moved quietly. A second machine rounded the bend behind it. Omzbak stepped into the brush alongside the road and faced the intruders. He felt certain that they'd shoot him in the back if he tried to run.

The first machine passed, nearly brushing against him. He caught a glimpse of a frightening picture on its side – a dark tornado with a skull peering out from it.

Mag soldiers looked down at him from the open-topped vehicle, shouting what must have been insults in their foul language. One of them aimed his finger at him like a pistol. Omzbak could see that he was one of the “blond heroes” the Western invaders were so proud of – the racial type that proved they were superior to everything else in God's creation.

Omzbak would never forget that face and the contemptuous sneer creasing it. The man was obviously the leader of this gaggle.

“Bang, bang!” the man shouted to the laughter of his comrades.

“This is your lucky day, Pop!” another one yelled in broken slobe.

Omzbak averted his gaze so as not to antagonize the brutes further, but after the second APC passed by him, he looked up again. At first he could not comprehend what he was seeing, and when he did, all color drained from his face. Human scalps were dangling from the rear of the vehicle!

No!

He began running down the road, scarcely aware of what was happening. He continued running past the point of exhaustion, his heart pounding and legs trembling as they carried his great bulk toward home. At some point his endurance gave out, and he collapsed, fainting on the road.

When he came back to consciousness, he could see smoke in the distance, catch the scent of death in it.

No! No!

He began running again, until his heart seemed ready to burst out of his chest. His extreme efforts brought him to a vision of hell.

The corpse of his son sprawled in the village main street, brutally scalped. The bodies of the other village men, similarly mutilated, lay scattered around him.

Shock held Omzbak in its grip as he reeled toward the smoking ruin of the village storehouse. Lying within it were the charred bodies of his wife and his two daughters, along with all the rest of the village's women and children. A sign nailed to a tree read:

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Unbearable grief and horror convulsed Omzbak. He wrenched his knife from his belt and raised it high, determined to plunge it into his heart and join his loved ones in death.

“Omzbak, no!” somebody wailed.

Through his tears, Omzbak saw the village cobbler sitting on the ground nearby. The man's face was also streaked from weeping, and ashes covered his head where he'd flung them in his grief.

"You must help me avenge them," the cobbler said.

He gestured to the charred bodies among which his own family lay.

"I was sleeping it off in the woods when the Mag came," he said. "God damn them! Why didn't they take me instead?"

He got to his feet awkwardly, like a dead man rising. He removed the knife from Omzbak's slack hand as if he were prying a toy from the grasp of a little baby.

"From now on, I'll get drunk on their blood," he said.

Then Omzbak was moving again, headed toward the Barren with the village cobbler. Already, in his feverish mind, Omzbak had rechristened the man as "Comrade #1," and himself as "Avenger Omzbak." They descended into the blur which was now their true home.

In time, others would join them.

Chapter 52

Embrace the Blur.

We follow an arching path toward our objective so as to avoid bumping into the partisans. I reckon they will make a beeline from their hideout to our cabin, and I do not like the odds of engaging them in a running fight. Bel agrees – or rather, this is all his idea. Bel is the real leader of this expedition, despite his confinement to the cart.

He objects to being wheeled along "like a baby," but I want him to be as fresh as possible when we enter ZOD. Later, we'll ditch the cart.

I recognize his superiority in this situation. He knows more than I do about ground operations – all those books he's read, the combat veterans he's spoken to, not to mention his masterful handling of the APC. And beyond that, he is simply more geared for fighting than I am. Service to the Homeland has always been my top motivation, but I think the joy of conflict is the main thing for Bel. He's got the killer instinct.

Katella takes his turn with the cart pushing duties. The truce between him and Bel is holding – superseded, even, by a grudging respect. Thank God! They confer in low voices as Bel advises Katella about the role of "exterior force commander."

Judging from what Trynka has told us, the partisans will enter the hideout individually or in small groups. Our exterior force is to hide until enough of the partisan have entered, then ambush the remaining ones. The surviving partisans will either remain inside to face our "interior force," or go back outside to take on Katella and his crew. In either case, we can attack them from both front and rear.

It seems like a good plan, but experience has taught me that even the best plans can go off the rails with amazing speed. The biggest problem is that we don't know

how many fighters remain in Omzbak's band. Will he appear with more than we can handle – has he left sentries behind?

If only Trynka hadn't killed Comrade 19! We might have got some answers to these questions.

I have to stop thinking of Omzbak as an inhuman monster and see him as a cunning, rational leader. I must get inside his head. What would I do in his place?

If my command was falling apart, as Comrade 19 indicated Omzbak's is, then I would be hesitant to leave anybody behind to guard the hideout. They simply couldn't be trusted not to run away. Only the deputy commander could be relied upon, but I'd want him with me so as to help maintain control of the others.

Besides, I'd be fairly confident that no enemy could find his way into my lair, especially not now that the Mag regular forces have retreated. So, by this line of reasoning, the hideout will be unguarded when we arrive. I know the logic is thin, but it's all I have to go on. It is within the realm of "acceptable risk," as Bel puts it.

As always, Trynka scouts ahead along the trail, leaving me behind among my countrymen. I can see that they are beginning to get scared, except for Bel who remains his usual enigmatic self. I know that I'd be scared in their place, too, but I feel only a grim sense of purpose, an almost religious zeal for the task ahead. I am an instrument of divine vengeance; later will come time for fear.

The realization of what the others are doing for me penetrates my self-absorption. Every one of these lads is risking his life to help me win justice for my brother. Were it not for their allegiance to me, they could have surrendered to the army patrol. They could be in a POW camp right now, waiting for the prisoner exchange. But they chose this dangerous path, instead.

I feel a burst of love for them all – Katella, Bel, Sipren, even Grushon. The final traces of my resentment over the slobe diving incident blow away into the dank forest air. These are my true brothers now; I owe them more than I can ever repay. No one asks about the tear I brush from my face, but I think they understand.

The sun is going down when Trynka returns to us.

"We're here," she says simply, as if announcing our arrival at a church picnic.

"Get rid of this damn cart!" Bel snaps.

While the others are disposing of the cart, Katella and I accompany Trynka to the edge of the woods and peer out to a large open area. I recognize the place. The forlorn wreckage of Y-47 greets me like a specter from the past. Thank God, the courier's body has been removed from the rear cockpit.

"Ohhh," Katella says, "you were lucky to survive that one, Dye!"

"Yes ..."

I struggle to keep memories of the horror at bay, but I can't suppress an image of the courier's severed hand dangling from the briefcase chain.

"Hello, *Dytran*," the hand says, "*long time, no see.*"

I shake my head to dispel the ghastly image.

"Stay here, Katella," I say, "I'm going with Trynka for a closer look."

He talks with Trynka. She seems reluctant to leave his side.

"We haven't got time for this," I say. "If we don't all trust each other, nothing's going to get done."

Katella tries to sooth Trynka's concerns. I know – I look a lot like the bastard who killed her mother. How could she not be wary of me? It's time to make a trusting gesture myself. I pull out the automatic pistol and hand it to Katella.

"Show her how this works," I say. "Tell her not to use it without my express order."

"Sure, Dye."

He gives Trynka a brief lesson on the pistol's operation. When he's finished, I present her with the extra ammo clips.

"Here's some more punch for you," I say.

Trynka looks at me for a long moment. The hostility I'm used to seeing in her eyes has lessened, replaced by something akin to friendliness. She is softer now – quite attractive, really. I can't help becoming a bit aroused.

Stop that, dammit!

Here I am, in a life and death situation, and all I can think about is hitting on this foreign girl. Well ... at least it proves that I'm still alive. I exchange my rifle for Katella's submachine gun.

"If anyone comes after us, shoot them on sight," I say.

"Yes, sir."

I turn toward Trynka.

"Let's go."

We move across the open area, keeping as low as possible. Trynka is good at this, maneuvering silently through the plant cover. Again I feel oversized and exposed compared to my stealthy companion. We enter the forest on the other side and work our way through the marshy paths.

I know what's on the other side of the trees, but it's a terrible shock just the same when I view ZOD again. It's all there, just as I remembered – the deathly silence and inertia, the overpowering sense of wrong, the sensation that the land is moving at the same time that it is standing still.

Trynka stiffens. She is clearly sharing my emotions about this place. We hunker down in the underbrush on the edge of the trees. I strain my eyes for the blur, but I can't find it in the general void.

"Can you see it?" I ask.

Trynka understands my question; she shakes her head.

Several minutes drag past, and we still haven't located the blur under the moon and star light. We seem to be at an impasse. A terrible thought creeps into my mind: what if the partisans have no intention of attacking the cabin, what if they're still around? Maybe my basic assumption is wrong. An icy lump forms in my stomach.

I'm about ready to return to Katella when a man suddenly materializes out in the ZOD, as if from thin air. I practically jump out of my own skin. Trynka stifles a cry.

We sink ourselves deeper into the underbrush as another man emerges, then another. Soon, there are eight figures standing in the moonbeams. I cannot make out their faces, but the huge figure at their lead can be none other than Omzbak. They head off swiftly in the direction of the woodcutter's cabin.

I am surprised on two counts. First, the location of the entryway seems to be different from the last time I was here. Trynka was also looking in another direction for it. So, we were both mistaken – or else the entryway has moved.

Also, I'd assumed that Omzbak would leave earlier to take advantage of the last daylight, but he's waited until after dark to commence his raid.

What else am I wrong about?

Trynka grips my arm and speaks awkwardly in our language: "We now go."

But I am reluctant to depart. Why didn't I hang onto the rifle? Maybe I could pick Omzbak off from this distance.

Yes, and then what? The others would counter attack on terrain they know much better than we do. We'd be sitting ducks, even if I managed to hit Omzbak, and the muzzle flash would give us away like a neon sign.

Trynka's hand on my arm is oddly pleasant, but it's high time to leave.

"Let's get back," I say.

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We are ready to commence operations. Beltran and Katella have staked out ambush positions for the exterior force while Trynka and I have finally located the hideout entry. I am now able to see the blur for brief periods, wavering in my peripheral vision. I'm not sure if Trynka can see it at all. I can only hope that she will manage to lead us inside somehow.

Such advantages as we enjoy are the result of blind luck. Had Trynka and I begun our observations only a bit later, we would never have learned the position of the entryway. And we would not know the size of Omzbak's force. This vital information came to us through an extremely narrow window of opportunity. If only our luck continues!

Bel moves about with scarcely any trace of limp. He appears so well recovered that my objections to his leading the exterior force seem unfounded. I don't change the command structure, though. My reasons are purely selfish. I am placing myself in a position of extreme danger, and I want Bel at my side. The fear is taking hold.

"Exterior force is in position, sir," Katella announces. "All present and accounted for."

I peer out over the moonscape. Although I know the locations of Sipren and Grushon, I can see no trace of them, so good is their camouflage.

"Excellent work, Commander," I say. "Carry on."

"Yes, sir!"

Katella salutes and moves away. Our strict adherence to military protocol seems rather peculiar, but it helps to take our minds off our growing apprehension. Katella drops to the ground and disappears from view.

Bel nods approvingly. "With any luck, we'll catch those bastards by surprise."

"Right ... well," I say, "I suppose it's time we took our own positions."

"Yes, sir," Bel replies.

A trace of irony tinges his voice, as if he is mocking our strict formalism. How can he keep so calm, I wonder, does he think this is some sort of game?

Trynka is to lead me and Bel inside the hideout and familiarize us with the areas she'd seen during her former penetration. Then she will go back outside and join the exterior force. If necessary, she will lead them inside as well.

We approach the blur together. I flank Trynka on the left, Bel is on her right. My former, petty self would have objected to this arrangement, insisting that I should hold pride of place on the right side. But I am far beyond such considerations now.

The plan appeared reasonable enough when we discussed it by the light of day. Now, it seems beyond the realm of stupidity. How can this half-baked scheme possibly work? I bite my tongue to keep from crying out. A powerful vibration that I have felt since first stepping onto ZOD becomes even more pronounced.

But it's too late for second thoughts. Trynka grips our hands tightly. We enter the blur in the gap between heartbeats. I am immediately disoriented. The ground seems to go mushy under my feet, and I am no longer certain which way is up or down. Only the strong grip of Trynka's hand keeps me anchored.

The way ahead is a dark smear; we fall into it. A pinpoint of light appears in front of us, and Trynka makes a sharp turn. We continue our headlong rush until a second point of light appears, another wrenching turn. The violent maneuvers continue until we finally break through into the netherworld ...

Everything is cockeyed here, tilted at strange angles. Time and space are different, as if I've stepped into some alternate reality that does not apply in the surface world. I struggle to keep panic from choking me. The vibration has reached a maddening intensity. Thank God, Bel is here!

Only he isn't. Through my tunnel vision I can see Trynka gaping at her empty right hand.

"Damn!" she cries.

"Where is he?" I can hear the terror rising in my voice.

"You ... wait," Trynka says.

Then she is gone, leaving me alone in this nightmare world.

Chapter 53

Strange Obsessions.

Don't panic, Dytran! my interior voice cautions.

I want to push it away, give myself over to pure, screaming fright. I don't know where I am; I can't see. Claustrophobic pressure squeezes me like a vise, but there is nothing tangible around me. I clamp my eyes shut and try to will my thundering heart to slow down before it bursts.

An unknowable amount of time passes while I struggle to keep my sanity. At last, the roaring in my ears begins to abate, and my heart calms to a more human rhythm. I'm here, wherever that is, and I'm safe. Nobody has tried to attack me, at least not yet.

I open my eyes and the world is slightly less bizarre. I'm in a tunnel, I think, though I can't see any walls. The way ahead is blurry, but at least the ground is

solid under my feet. I have the oddest sensation that I'm not really seeing things as they are, but only the shadow of reality ... I'm in the pee cave!

The knowledge hits me like a sledgehammer blow, and a new burst of terror assaults me. I whip my submachine gun into combat position, cock the bolt and throw off the safety.

Hold it!

Trynka will soon be returning with Bel – I must believe that. Their sudden appearance could startle me into firing at them. I force myself to lower the gun and click on the safety. I feel naked and exposed to attack from every direction.

This is what you wanted, isn't it? my inner voice sneers.

"No!" I reply out loud.

Quiet, you damn fool! Somebody might hear you.

I cower under the admonition like a dog threatened with a belt, but I can't keep a sly little smile off my lips. I've done something bad and have gotten away with it! I'm much too clever to get caught. Papa will never find me with his ham-sized fist.

Papa ... he's dead, isn't he? Maybe I will meet him down here. He can tell me about the time somebody stuck a knife into him when he was guzzling beer. You could say that Papa really got the point that day. I wonder how that moment of truth was.

What the hell's wrong with me? My mind is working like a mad man's. I have to get a grip on myself – only I don't really want to get a grip. I rather enjoy the effect this place is having. It's relieving me of all the civilized burdens I've been lugging around my whole life. I deserve a break from these restrictions, don't I?

I begin to devise a poem:

Elegy to the Nether Regions

*Here I stand among the dead
Visions squirming in my head
I shall not leave til blood's been spilt
Daggers buried to the hilt!*

My inner voice laughs sarcastically. *You sure as hell ain't no poet, Dytran!*

"Shut up!" My brain shouts back.

All right, I'm leaving.

I feel a cord snap in my mind, as if the final link to the outside world has been severed. I am truly alone now with ... this place. Icy panic presses in, then retreats.

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I'm feeling much more comfortable now. What was I so scared of, anyway? It was just unfounded, childish fear – like the time when I was four and accidentally broke the sugar bowl. I hid in the pantry so that Papa wouldn't find me. He never

came after me, though. He just gave Mama a good smack for being “so damn careless” and leaving out the good china where I could get at it.

That was very bad of her, wasn't it? Papa was right to slap her.

I shake my head to dispel the evil thought.

“Come on, Bel, get here before I lose my mind!”

There is more definition around me now, tiny details visible in peripheral vision. My eyes are adjusting to the surroundings; my brain is adjusting. It's sort of like how you get used to a dark theater when you enter it during a horror movie.

Is that a large chamber up ahead ... on the left? Maybe I can find Papa in there. He's got some real explaining to do. It's time for a father & son chat. I begin walking toward the chamber when figures suddenly appear at my side.

“Uh!”

I jerk my machine pistol up and press the trigger. Nothing happens – the safety is on.

“Careful!” Trynka bats the gun barrel aside.

My face burns with shame. I might have killed my best friend, my true brother. Thank God he seems unaware of my stupidity. He looks shell-shocked, just as I must have appeared when I first entered this place. He's still holding tight onto Trynka's hand.

“Close your eyes, Bel,” I say. “It makes things easier.”

Bel shuts his eyes tight. He gropes his free hand toward me, and I grasp it with my own. Trembling vibrates up my arm from him. I know exactly what he is experiencing.

Then, sooner than I would have thought possible, the trembling ceases. Strength enters Bel's grip, and his eyes pop wide open. Wonderment glows on his face.

“Ohhh,” he says, “this place is ... weird.”

He seems much younger, somehow, like an awestruck kid watching his first magic show. For a moment, I glimpse the person he might have become had not harsh circumstances intervened – before the abandonment, the orphan homes, before this terrible war. To my feverish mind, Trynka seems the embodiment of all that is feminine and nurturing. I want her to enfold Bel in her arms and make all his pain disappear.

But this is only a fantasy. The real Trynka is hard and determined. She presses a finger to her lips and begins walking. Bel and I follow in her wake. We are all comrades in arms now.

Chapter 54

First Blood.

As the partisan band made its way back to the hideout, two of its members melted away into the woods. Or they thought they were melting away. Omzbak and Number One detected their absence almost immediately.

“You want I should go after them, Chief?” Number One asked.

His face glowed with the lust to kill. He was enraged by the disappearance of the Mag punks and would like nothing better than to take out his frustration on somebody else.

But Omzbak reasoned that more of his shrunken band would desert if he tried to punish the traitors. It was better to rid himself of the faint hearted, anyway.

“Forget it,” he said, “just keep a close eye on the rest.”

“Aye, sir.” The disappointment in Number One’s voice was obvious.

The band continued its advance through the darkness, like ghouls returning from a night of robbing graves. Omzbak cocked his machine pistol with maximum noise. The others could not fail to hear and take it into account if they were considering their own escapes. Then he eased the safety on as quietly as possible. Let them wonder ...

Omzbak’s thoughts turned toward the recent series of strange events. Were they all just coincidences, or were they related somehow?

First came the shot-down plane with its dead courier. The pilot had obviously escaped with the secret papers. They should have tracked him down, but the artillery barrage intervened.

Besides, it had not been so easy to go about in daylight any longer. Mag patrols notwithstanding, the Avengers had made enemies among the local population. It was not out of the question that some disgruntled farmer might report their presence to the Western invaders.

Then there was the commando raid two days later. That was a near thing. Had the Avengers not managed to slither back into their hideout, they could have all been killed. Omzbak himself had stopped a bullet for the first time in his partisan career.

Worst of all, he’d failed to get the commando leader. Omzbak could have sworn it was the same man who’d pointed his finger at him two years ago as a mock gun. The man who dangled human scalps from his vehicles, the one who had murdered Omzbak’s family.

Omzbak would have traded his soul in order to punish that beast. But this was a silly notion; his soul had gone to the devil long ago.

The closest he’d come to exacting revenge was the time that Mag fighter pilot parachuted down – the one who looked so much like the commando leader. Omzbak went insane and could scarcely remember what he’d done to the poor bastard.

Afterwards, when the darkness lifted from his mind, the mangled corpse and the blood splattered all over himself told the story. That and the evil leer of Number One who was also covered with blood.

“This will bring a curse upon you, Omzbak!” Comrade 19 proclaimed.

Well, maybe it had. At very least, it got him into trouble with the main partisan command. He’d violated their strict rules – high-value Mag prisoners were to be traded for as many captured partisans or regular soldiers as possible. This policy had been surprisingly effective. Due to their massive casualty rate, the Mag were desperate to get back elite personnel and were willing to postpone their blanket death sentences for partisan captives.

The regional commander actually sent people to arrest him, but Omzbak escaped their clutches. Somehow he managed to keep his band together, despite their condemnation of his actions.

High command soon turned its attention elsewhere, though. Planning for the great offensive had taken urgent priority. The partisans were to play a crucial role in this effort, and who had time to worry about some minor leader's infractions?

Omzbak regretted the whole episode, but what the hell could he do about it now? Since the destruction of his family, he was only a shell of his former self – one that had been filled up with hate. It would soon be time to leave this painful world, he hoped.

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Trynka leads the way into the large chamber. At least, it seems to be large. But for all I know, the place could be anything from living room to concert hall size. She halts abruptly and motions us back, practically shoving us away. A rock outcrop appears by us; Bel and I wedge ourselves behind it.

I hear a man's voice, loud and challenging, and my heart leaps into my throat. I try to peer around the boulder. Bel yanks me back.

“Stay here.”

Trynka answers the voice. Her own voice is small and frightened, like a young child's. I know her well enough to recognize that the effect is bogus. The male voice barks again, Trynka makes a trembling reply.

“They know each other,” Bel whispers.

My perceptions seem divided, as if my eyes are operating on different planes of reality. To one part of my awareness, I am firmly concealed with only drab rock in front of me. With another part, I can see Trynka standing out in the open. The effect is dreamlike.

A man approaches her. No ... “approach” is not the right word. He materializes right next to Trynka, like a genie popping out of a bottle. Bel grips my arm tighter, willing me to silence.

The man is a gaunt, hardened figure with a rat-like face. He's pointing a machine pistol at Trynka who has raised her hands in surrender.

Trynka nods toward her hip pocket; the man withdraws the little automatic pistol from it and tucks it into his own pocket. Then he pats her down with his free hand, all the while keeping his gun aimed at her heart. He seems to enjoy the search, judging by his crafty leer. He finds the extra ammo clips and adds them to his booty.

My finger twitches on the submachine gun trigger. If only I could get a clear shot!

The situation takes a horrible turn. The man slings his gun over his shoulder and pulls Trynka brutally toward him. His hands rip at her shirt. Trynka makes no sound, but her eyes blaze with hate. She tries to push him back.

Then it isn't Trynka and some unnamed partisan struggling in the murk – it's Mama and Papa. He's tearing off her clothes. He's going to kill her, and Stilikan isn't here to stop him!

I move out from behind the stone.

“Hey, you!”

Papa gapes at me with astonishment. His mouth pops open to say something, but I'm in no mood for conversation. My gun speaks for me.

The initial burst strikes his chest. Mama is holding onto him, though, and he doesn't go down. Then she pushes him away. My second burst knocks him flat.

I feel the wrath of God coursing through my veins. I am an instrument of divine retribution! I stride to the fallen man and fire the rest of the clip into him. The body jerks comically under the impact of multiple hits.

"Stop!" somebody shouts.

Who is that fool yelling at me? The world is turning into a narrow, black tunnel. The gun is hot in my hands. I yank out the spent clip and shove in another. I prepare to start blasting again.

I feel a sharp impact on my chin; light explodes inside my skull –

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Next thing I know, I'm lying on the ground with Bel towering above me. Trynka is shouting at him. Then she lowers herself beside me and takes my head in her arms. She utters soothing words.

"I-I'm sorry, Dye," Bel says. "I had to do something ... you went nuts!"

He looks away, ashamed.

"That's twice you've popped me, Bel. I'm beginning to take it personal."

Trynka starts to admonish him again.

"Just help me up, please," I say.

She assists me to my feet. The madness has passed, and I can think more clearly again. I'm back to reality – whatever that means in this bizarre place.

The partisan is a bullet-ridden mess. Odd, the sight does not bother me at all. I feel detached, as if somebody else is responsible for the carnage. Trynka is relieving him of his weapons, including the automatic pistol. It is smeared with blood again, as it was when I first took it from the courier.

That pistol sure gets around, all right, like a whore at a convention of NSP big shots.

"Who is this bastard?" I ask.

Bel does the translating for us.

"He used to work on our farm," Trynka says. "He's one of the men who betrayed Papa."

She spits on the corpse. Then she turns toward me.

"You did well, Dytran. Thank you."

"Sure thing," I say, "you're most welcome."

My reply is absurd. I'm grateful that Bel does not translate it.

"I've shown you everything I know down here," Trynka says. "I must get back to the others."

"Very well, carry on," I say.

We follow her back the way we came until we reach a dim, circular glow in the murkiness. It seems to flash at slow intervals.

"Exit when the light is strongest," Trynka says. "Move quickly, straight ahead. Close your eyes if you need to."

"Will do," I say.

She reaches up and wraps her arms around my neck. She kisses my cheek. I couldn't be more surprised if the dead partisan suddenly got up and embraced me. She pulls away and gives me the oddest look – a mixture of awe, fear, and I'd almost say ... love.

She looks toward Beltran and becomes all business again.

"Farewell, comrades," she says, "may God see you through these perils."

She composes herself and steps toward the glow just as it reaches maximum brightness. She is instantly gone, as if she never existed. Quiet settles over our subterranean world like a burial shroud. Bel promptly lifts it.

"We should get out of here, too," he says.

I spin on him.

"No way in hell!" I'm shouting quite loud. "Papa ... I mean ... Omzbak hasn't showed up yet."

Bel shakes his head. He's got his hands on his hips and is wearing his most steadfast expression. His thrust out chin dares me to take a swing at it.

Maybe I'll do just that!

"You're going around the bend, Dye. Is this worth losing your mind over?"

"Who are you to say that?" I cry. "Where were you when Stilikan took Papa down? He was just a skinny kid, and he had to fight for all of us!"

"What are you talking about, Dye? It's me – Beltran, your squadron mate. Don't you know me?"

"Of course I know you! You ran over Piotra. What did he ever do to you, anyway?"

"Oh, my God ..." he says.

The defiance drains out of him. He looks very tired now, and smaller than he was.

"I don't know what this place is," he says. "I only know it was a mistake for us to come here."

I'm still very angry, almost enough to hit him, but I hold myself back. Could there be something to what he's saying?

"We've jumped out of one trap and into something worse," he says. "Remember when I told you about the vibration in the ground, just before the offensive?"

"Yes ... what about it?"

"It was coming from here, Dye. This is an evil place."

"Nonsense!" I say. "You seem perfectly normal. You're not 'going around the bend,' are you?"

I begin walking back toward the great chamber.

"It's because I don't want anything here," Bel calls after me. "It can't get a hold on me – not yet, anyway."

I spin back around. "What do you want, Bel?"

"I want us to survive. Trust me, please."

"No way!" I shoot back. "You want to know what I think?"

"You think too much, Dye; you see too much. Let's get out of here!"

You think too much – that's what Stilikan used to tell me. Back in the days when our family was still together, when ...

I can't believe it! In place of the dark, glowering lad, it's Stilikan standing back by the glowing circle. He's proud and strong in his blue uniform; his face wears a smile of almost unbearable sadness. He's holding out his hand.

"Come with me," he says.

I take a step toward him. "W-wait, please ..."

Muffled sounds penetrate from the outside. Gun shots.

Chapter 55

Ambush.

Omzbak and his men entered the clearing with its crashed enemy aircraft. Moonlight glittered on the wreckage and stabbed into Omzbak's eyes. It was an unpleasant sensation, as everything up here had come to be. Omzbak longed to return to the sympathetic embrace of his hideout, his true home. His wounded thigh ached furiously.

He'd sure been given the runaround by those Mag punks tonight, and he needed time to replenish his energies. Imagine, he'd almost taken seriously the "warning" those delinquents scrawled on the cabin floor! He must be getting old, he'd be jumping at his own shadow next.

They navigated through the patch of marshy woodland and came out by the edge of the Barren. Even after two years of coming here, Omzbak felt a thrill of dread shiver up his spine. He repositioned his cap so that it no longer covered one eye and stared long and hard out into the void.

"Something wrong, Chief?" Number One asked.

"The entryway," Omzbak said, "it's moved again."

Number One cursed under his breath. "It's been hardly a week."

Omzbak wondered what this could mean. Shifts in the entryway's location were happening more and more frequently, as if the Barren was reshaping itself somehow. Months used to pass without any changes. Exactly what this could mean was beyond his power to imagine.

"Come on," he ordered.

As they moved along the periphery of the woods, Omzbak kept a sharp lookout over the Barren's surface. Repeatedly he scanned the same areas, hoping to see some indication of the tell-tale blur, but the vista remained stubbornly blank. Then –

"Over there," he said. "I see it!"

Yes, the entryway had indeed moved. It was now fifty or sixty meters from where it had been earlier tonight. Omzbak led his men along the edge of the forest and maneuvered as close to the entryway as possible. Then he brought them out onto the inhospitable surface. The moment he left the woods, he felt the steady throb of the Barren's power vibrating up through his boot soles.

Then, as they were almost at the entryway, he received a nasty surprise.

"I won't be going in with you, Chief," Comrade 15 said.

“What?”

Omzbak spun around and took threatening steps toward the man until they were face to face. Comrade 15 stood unmoving, machine pistol at the ready. He was even taller than Omzbak, though extremely thin.

“That’s goes for me, too, Chief,” a second man said.

“Me, too,” said another.

Four of Omzbak’s men now stood together against him. Only Number One remained on his side.

“It’s nothing against you, Chief,” Comrade 15 said, “but the war’s over for us.”

“Yes,” another man said. “We did our share.”

Omzbak surveyed the grim, silent wall of men facing him. They were all ready to fight, so a violent response on his part would be suicidal.

“You should get inside, Chief,” Comrade 15 said, “before things get nasty.”

Omzbak knew he was beaten, but he couldn’t resist a parting shot at his spineless followers.

“You think it’s that easy, huh, just walk away?” he said. “Remember what happened to Comrade 19.”

“Whoever did that is long gone,” Comrade 15 said. “Besides, there’ll be four of us looking out for each other.”

“Really?” Omzbak sneered, gesturing toward the surrounding darkness. “And you must have lots of friends out there, too.”

“I aim to find that out for myself,” Comrade 15 said.

He took an abrupt step forward and thrust his face down into Omzbak’s, his eyes blazing angrily. Omzbak jerked back with surprise.

A bullet struck Comrade 15 in the temple, splattering blood and brains everywhere. An instant later, the sound of a gunshot arrived.

“Get down!” Omzbak shouted.

Comrade 15’s body had barely hit the ground before the others joined it in the dirt. Off in the distance, Omzbak spotted four figures coming toward them. His tactical mind made rapid calculations. The approaching enemy did not have the fluid, practiced movement of experienced troops; they seemed like amateurs.

“You three, go flank them on their left,” he commanded.

The men, who only moments before were defying him, instantly obeyed, making their way back toward the tree line.

“What about us, Chief?” Number One asked.

“We go inside, that’s what,” Omzbak said.

Number One barked a malicious laugh. “Yes! Let them go meet their friends.”

Automatic weapons fire punctuated the night, along with the sharp report of a rifle. Muzzle flashes joined the star glimmer. Omzbak scrambled to his feet.

“Let’s go!”

Ignoring the discomfort in his injured thigh, he led the way into the blur.

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

“Back to the room!” Stilikan cries.

“W-why?” I ask. “I thought you were taking me home.”

Stilikan grabs my arm and starts to pull me along. Only then do I realize that it is actually Bel who is giving me orders.

"I'll have you know I'm in command here," I protest.

"Shut up, or I'll pop you again!" Bel says.

We're almost back to the big room when Bel dives to the ground, taking me with him. We peer back toward the way we'd come.

Two figures materialize at the flashing light. I cannot make out their faces. One is of medium height, and thin. The other, with its towering bulk, leaves no doubt as to who it is – Omzbak!

I leap up. "Hey!"

The submachine gun barks in my hands, spraying a torrent of death toward the two figures. Something's wrong. The men should have fallen, but they are completely unharmed. How could I have missed?

"Get down!"

Bel drags me to the floor and rolls with me behind an outcrop. Bullets come our direction, but are absorbed by the stone with dull thuds. I shove a fresh ammo clip into my gun but hold my fire. There is simply nothing to shoot at.

A dead silence sets in. The explosions have cleared my thinking, and the last of my Stilikan fantasy departs.

"How the hell did I miss them?" I say.

"I don't know," Bel says. "They looked like sitting ducks."

It's a baffling mystery. I'm aware that my own perceptions may not be reliable, but Bel has also been deceived. His face is hard and alert, his eyes are sharp. He does not have the look of someone given to hysterics.

The truth dawns on me. I didn't hit them because they weren't really there. This is the pee cave where things are not as they appear; we see only the shadows of things. So, while I wasted ammunition blasting at phantoms, the real men were someplace else preparing to take us out.

The enemy does not suffer from such illusions, though, as indicated by the accuracy of his gunfire. He's had a long time to familiarize himself with the deceptions of this place. Yet again, Bel has saved me from ruin.

"Where are they?" he says. "Can you see them?"

I peer along the passageway. It is indistinct, blurred. There seem to be any number of rock projections and indents where the enemy might be hiding.

"It's an illusion," I say. "They aren't where they seem to be."

"I figured something like that," Bel says.

Then the worst possible thing happens. Three figures are materializing by the flashing light.

"More partisans."

"Damn!" Bel snarls.

Then we can see who the figures really are – Trynka, Katella, and Sipren.

"Look out!" we shout together.

The three figures drop down as a hail of bullets comes at them. Bel and I shoot back, aiming as best we can at the origin of the gunfire. A deadly fight takes place over the heads of our comrades.

"This way!" I shout.

They crawl toward us; Trynka and Sipren are dragging Katella between them. At last, the enemy ceases firing. We pull our comrades behind the outcrop.

It is clear that Katella has been slain. A smear of blood trails his body, and numerous bullet wounds have pierced him. Sipren's face is ashen, and Trynka is crying wildly.

"Katella! Katella!" she wails.

I wrap an arm around Trynka and try to console her. Her tears soak my shoulder. My own anguish threatens to overwhelm me – Katella, dead! My oldest comrade taken from me. I feel weak, unmanned.

You'll all die if you aren't strong. Snap out of it!

I can't afford the luxury of grief ... not now. I grab Sipren with my free hand and shake him hard.

"What happened out there?"

"T-they got Grushon," Sipren says through trembling lips. "They just ... opened him up like a ripe watermelon."

Another stab of anguish assaults me. My stomach heaves at this awful description, and I try to avert my eyes from the even more awful reality lying nearby.

"Did you get any of them?"

"Katella shot one at long range ... the entryway moved," Sipren says. "He tried to get the leader but hit another one instead. The others ran into the woods ... after they killed ..."

His voice trails away, and his eyes stare into distant horrors. I can't press him further, he's on the verge of collapse.

"It's all right now," I say. "Settle back and close your eyes."

Trynka's sobbing has lessened now. Bel murmurs soothing words to her in the slobe language. Quiet begins to settle onto our nightmare world.

My comrades have brought the sniper rifle with them. I grip its cold lethality and peer out to the unknown.

"I'll avenge you, boys," I mutter. "Count on that."

Chapter 56

The Flameless Hell.

Matters settle into a grim deadlock. The enemy seems content to wait us out. He is trying to use the environment against us, I reckon, and seeks to grind us down at no cost to himself.

The strategy is working. Sipren appears to be shell shocked, gazing off into space and refusing to talk. Thank heaven nobody is injured, as I don't think he's capable of performing his medic duties. Trynka is prostrate with grief; there is no way of telling how she'd react to renewed fighting.

An exhaustion that is more than physical is dragging us down – it's a mental and spiritual disorientation. We are so stressed by our surroundings that we are

wearing out. This could have fatal consequences. The Enemy does not suffer from such limitations, at least not as much. This is his domain.

I force myself to regard Omzbak and his deputy as a depersonalized “other.” If I think of them as the torturers and murders of Stilikan, I’ll lose my head and do something foolish. I cannot afford that.

The second man is the deputy commander, I’m convinced. Who else would stick with Omzbak after the whole rest of the band has run off?

In our group, only Bel looks rock solid, but even he is having trouble keeping alert. He is constantly blinking his eyes and shaking his head.

“We have to stay sharp, no matter what,” I say.

“Agreed,” Bel replies. “It’s getting tough, though.”

I shift my position on the rock floor.

“Where do you think they’re hiding?”

“Judging by the direction of the gunfire, I’d guess somewhere over that way,” Bel says.

He gestures off to our right. The area once seemed to be little more than a vague blur, but now I can make out more details. I’m beginning to see everything better.

I can tell now that there really isn’t a separate passageway. Everything is all one large, spherical space around which there are many niches, ledges, and outcroppings. Jagged stalagmites, some as high as four or five meters, thrust themselves upward in places.

A dim glow of unknown origin illuminates the place, obscuring any view of the ceiling. The overall impression is savage, horrid – like a vision of Hell without the flames.

“There must be some way to outflank them,” I say. “I’ll go look for it when my vision adjusts better.”

“Go for it whenever you’re ready, Eagle-eye,” Bel says.

I flinch at the sound of the common nickname, but I push the association aside. I am nothing like that scum who murdered the slob boy, I must hold onto that. I am not a monster. I have to be ice cold.

My eyes continue to adjust, and I can make out our surroundings better all the time. I can certainly see Katella’s body well enough. Someone has pulled his jacket over his face, and Trynka clings to him. Quiet sobs wrack her own body.

A hot stab of guilt penetrates my ice coldness. Katella had been my wingman, my oldest and most faithful comrade. He’d backed me against the whole squadron even though he was severely injured. Yet I’d grown distant from him, taken him for granted. My relationship with Bel had seemed so much more interesting and important.

Why did he have to die like this before I could tell him how much I valued his loyalty and friendship? As is so often the case, Bel seems to read my thoughts.

“I miss him, too,” he says. “I’m glad we became friends toward the end.”

I feel a need to punish myself further.

“Look what’s happened,” I say. “I didn’t want any of this.”

“Who does?” Bel replies.

“Everything is my fault.”

“We all volunteered,” Bel says. “You didn’t force anybody.”

“But the losses!”

“What did you expect during a war, Dye?”

“The war’s over,” I say. “We could have surrendered to that army patrol. We could be waiting for the POW exchange right now.”

Bel gives me an irritated look.

“Perhaps,” he says, “or they might have shot us on the spot. Have you considered that?”

“Well, no I ...”

One thing about Bel, he never helps you to feel sorry for yourself.

“Let’s just finish what we came here to do and then get the hell out of this place,” he says.

He looks off into the distance, signaling the end of the conversation.

More time passes. Who can say how long? Time seems to move differently down here. The *malaise*, as I’ve come to call it, makes further inroads on my mind. I feel my mental processes slowing down. I know that if I don’t get moving soon, I’ll become totally immobilized.

“All right, I’m going now,” I say.

I abandon my machine pistol and seize the rifle.

“I’ll cover you from here,” Bel says.

I crawl away from our enclosure, half expecting a hail of bullets to greet my maneuver, but nothing happens. Rifle cradled in my arms, I maneuver to the next outcrop, then on to another. I’m not far from our position, but I can no longer see it. Or maybe I could see it but am looking in the wrong direction.

Everything is a lie here. You have to look beneath the surface to see the real things. That being the case, I should not head off to our right, as logic dictated, but should follow a leftward path.

I dodge between the outcrops and stalagmites, keeping a sharp eye out for the Enemy.

The ground is rising. I follow it until I’m walking on a broad ledge with sheer rock face on one side and a panorama of the flameless Hell on the other. Cover is abundant on my ledge, and I make good use of it, hunched over in my stealthy progress.

Am I going the right way? My sense of direction, usually quite good, is of little help. But I am developing another sense of navigation that is exclusive to this domain. I continue on my way, trusting to luck and intuition.

The high path takes me round and round; vertigo threatens me, but I shut my mind to it. I’ve given up any attempt at logic and rely solely on my “Ghostie” eyes to see me through. The flameless Hell tries to amuse itself with my mind. Various fantasies attempt to intrude, but I let them pass like water through a sieve.

The rifle is solid and true in my hands. I grasp it tight, as if I am holding onto my very soul. It represents reality in this land of smoke and mirrors. My progress is slow and torturous, I have lost sight of my comrades. I am adrift in an alien world.

Then, just as I am about to give up hope ... I find the Enemy!

They are below me, perhaps 100 meters away, but who can judge distances in this place with any confidence? I can only see one man, actually, the deputy commander. Black hatred surges in my heart. My teeth grind so hard that they seem ready to shatter.

Forget all that – ice cold!

So, where is Omzbak? Perhaps he is resting up from his long round trip to the woodcutter's cabin. Maybe he is lying somewhere out of sight. If I wait long enough, he should appear.

But I can't wait. The malaise is draining my energy by the moment. In this confusing atmosphere, my chances of hitting my target are not outstanding to begin with, later on they will be nonexistent. Another thought intrudes: What if Omzbak isn't there at all but is sneaking up alone on our position?

There is no time to squander. Through my rifle scope, I can see the deputy leaning against the rocks of their little fortress, arms crossed over his chest. He's in the crosshairs, this should be an easy shot.

Then I pause. I thought I had as easy shot the last time, too. Is the man really there, in my sights, or is he somewhere else? I close my eyes and rely solely on instinct. I feel my rifle shifting position.

Images of Stilikan flash through my mind. I see him running in the field of spring flowers, battling with Papa, flying his fighter plane. I hear my own little boy voice assuring him: *"If anybody ever hurts you, I'll chase them down and smash them!"*

My finger tenses on the trigger.

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Number One waited eagerly for the order to attack, aching to get more Mag blood on his hands. But the Chief had ordered a delay.

"We'll give them time to stew in their own juice," he'd said. "They'll fade soon enough; then we'll jump them."

The Chief had then lain down to rest his injured leg and had left him to stand watch. Despite his impatience, Number One understood that this waiting strategy was sound. He was well aware of the exhaustion and bewilderment the hideout imposed on people when they first entered. He'd experienced these symptoms himself when he and the Chief had sought refuge here.

In his mind, he journeyed back to the events which had brought him to this strange place ...

He'd been carousing in a neighboring town that night. He recalled the riotous dice game, the free-flowing alcohol, the money he'd won which purchased the disgraceful tryst with the bar girl. And finally, his stumbling progress through the night until he collapsed in the woods amid a drunken stupor.

He returned shame-faced to his village the next day, fearing a tongue lashing from his wife. Instead, he found ... the unspeakable.

If only he'd been there! If only he'd known of the attack; somehow, he could have protected his family. He would never forgive himself. He'd taken a good woman for granted, and his three wonderful children, as well.

But all those family responsibilities had been too much for him; they'd held him back from the life of excitement he'd always craved. The frustration drove his constant drinking – or so he'd told himself.

Well, he was getting plenty of excitement now, wasn't he? He'd trade all of it just to glimpse his precious family once again. So vivid was his longing, that his loved

ones actually seemed to appear before him, wavering in the dim light. Tears of joy sprang from his eyes.

A bullet struck him in the chest, penetrating his heart.

His final thought: *I'm coming!*

Chapter 57

Pursuit.

The gunshot roars in my ears like the voice of God on judgment day. The man tumbles over. The fatigue that has been oppressing me vanishes amid a burst of triumph.

Yes!

Joy surges through me as I chamber another round. I pray fervently that Omzbak will reveal himself next. And moments later, he does appear, rolling along the ground like some bloated leach. I shoot but cannot hit the moving target.

I fire again, but Omzbak is up now, retreating into the dimness. Below me, all turns into swirling chaos. I hear Bel's voice.

"Over there! He's getting away!"

Bel rushes across the hellscape firing bursts from his machine pistol; he carries my abandoned weapon slung over his shoulder. Trynka accompanies him, howling a battle cry. Even Sipren has regained his power of movement and is running along with the others.

I descend from my ledge and follow them. My sense of distance is still badly distorted, and sooner than I'd thought possible, I am standing with the others beside the man I have just shot. His face wears a rapturous expression, as if the death I've given him is a joyous event.

"Pig!" Trynka spits on the corpse.

So, I have finally struck down one of Stilikan's murderers. I feel oddly unfulfilled, though, as if I have slain someone of no consequence. Maybe it's that idiot grin on the man's face, mocking my achievement.

"Omzbak went off that way," Bel says, gesturing toward the left.

"Uh-huh," I say.

I can't take my eyes off the dead man. Here is the second enemy I've killed – unless you want to count all those children burned to ashes by the death orders I delivered in my airplane.

"Come on, Dye!" Bel's voice snaps at me. "You've got to lead us, we can't see well enough."

I look over at my comrades. Bel's fierce, determined glower matches the red NSP eagle on his jacket. Trynka's eyes blaze with hatred. Even Sipren is animated and fierce. Then something in the periphery of my vision grabs my attention – it's Omzbak, moving along the ledge I have vacated, far advanced from my previous position.

“Follow me!” I command.

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Something akin to fear possessed Omzbak as he hurried along the ledge. The sensation rather surprised him, as fear was among the emotions that seemed to have died on that horrible day two years ago.

But he felt it now. He was being pursued by an enemy of astonishing capabilities, who could see well enough down here to pick off Number One with a single shot – the tall blond kid. Omzbak cursed himself for underestimating his opponent.

Well, he still had an ace up his sleeve, and this time he would not fail.

Along with his fear came a gnawing curiosity. Who were these people chasing him, and how did they get in here? He knew that one of them was a girl. She'd be a local, probably, but who?

Then something clicked in his mind, a memory of a farmhouse they'd once raided. Two children, a young boy and an older girl, were present when they'd apprehended the collaborator. Comrade 19 had had to get rough with the mother when she tried to interfere.

Of course – that must be who the girl was! She'd settled the score with Comrade 19 and learned from her how to penetrate the hideout. But what of the others?

What would motivate a group of Mag toughs to throw in with her? The usual way those bastards treated local girls was to rape and then shoot them. But they were all operating together like a military unit. Why?

He'd not gotten a close look at the enemy, but that tall blond one seemed familiar somehow. No ... he was just another Mag vermin, probably getting his rocks off with the girl. Or maybe he was somebody Omzbak didn't want to recall.

No matter, whoever the blond might be, he'd meet his end soon enough, along with all the rest. Where Omzbak led, there would be no return. Before the sun reached its zenith today in the outside world, all scores would be settled.

He thought of his deputy commander, his oldest and most reliable comrade. He sorely missed Number One's capabilities, but he felt no sense of personal loss. Sympathy was another emotion that had died two years ago. Besides, Omzbak had seen the look on Number's One's dead face, and he envied it.

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We move for an indeterminate time along a wide ledge with jagged cliff face on our left and sheer drop offs to our right. I catch glimpses Omzbak ahead. He seems to be moving with some difficulty, favoring one leg. Despite this handicap, he maintains his lead. He knows this route better than us and is taking maximum advantage.

Occasionally, he turns and fires a burst from his submachine gun, but he's out of effective range. I respond with rifle shots. He's moving too erratically and taking advantage of the natural cover too well for me to score any hits.

We must not let him out of our sight! Our big advantage – Omzbak does not possess a rifle. His lethality is limited by the range of his machine pistol.

Who is this man I am trying to kill?

I have chased him into the very bowels of the earth, risking my own life and expending those of my comrades in order to get him. He's taken on almost superhuman dimensions, a perverse force of nature. Yet, he almost seems a pathetic figure, trying to escape our vengeance on his game leg.

I have no room for pity in my heart, though, only a cold-blooded desire to rid the world of this monstrosity. He's the man who murdered Stilikan; that's all I need to know. Once I have finished with him, God can sort out the mysteries.

The ledge abruptly narrows, leaving space for only a single person to cross. This narrowing seems to run about 25 meters. Beyond it, I can see Omzbak scrambling away.

"I'll go first," Bel says. "Cover me from here, Dye."

"Yes ... go ahead."

Bel ventures out alone onto the ledge, crouching low, submachine gun at the ready. I aim my rifle toward Omzbak's retreating figure, thinking to hurry him along with a shot. I decide against the risk of startling Bel out on the narrow path.

Bel reaches the other side and takes up position behind an outcrop. I motion toward Trynka.

"You next."

Moving with the subtle grace of a mountain cat, Trynka makes her way rapidly across and joins Bel.

Sipren looks pale as death as he scopes the way ahead; his lower lip trembles with fear. I think to order him to remain behind, but he gathers his pluck and ventures out onto the ledge. Then he, too, is across.

Now it's my turn – the last one, just as it was at the river crossing. Similar feelings of fear and paranoia assault me as I step onto the narrow shelf. I try to ignore them, but they worm their way into my skull with terrible persistence.

What if Omzbak does have a long-range weapon stashed up there? What if he's drawing a bead on me right this instant from hundreds of meters away? Why didn't I send my rifle ahead with Trynka? At least my comrades might be able to cover for me.

From inside my airplane cockpit, great altitudes do not disturb me at all, but here, with the abyss yawning close by, I am terrified. A stone tumbles underfoot and my heart stops dead. I grip the rock face for dear life.

"Keep going, Dye!" Bel shouts. "Just a few more meters."

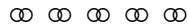
This place is screwing with my mind. I'm no mountaineer, but I know that I could handle this situation better in the normal world. More paranoid thoughts barge in: what if there is another partisan lurking behind us in the shadows? I dare not look back and keep my eyes focused straight ahead.

But what if there is an enemy behind me? Maybe the man with the ghastly smile isn't fully dead, after all – maybe he's back there, lust for revenge burning in his shattered heart! Whatever presence of mind I still have is deserting me fast.

Then Bel has a firm hand on my arm and pulls me onto the wider trail. My fears vanish.

"Let's go," I say.

Omzbak is farther ahead now, but I can still see his figure in the distance. I pick up the pace, more confident in my own abilities and eager to make up for my poor showing on the ledge. I widen the gap between myself and my comrades.



I cannot adequately gauge the passage of time or the distance I am going, but the way is easier now. The path is wide and solid and is sloping downhill. I am in danger of running too fast and force myself to slow down.

Then I come to an abrupt halt. Ahead, the trail descends into the opening of some sort of cave or tunnel. The orifice gapes at me like the toothless mouth of an old witch. It is, perhaps, three or four meters across; I cannot tell accurately from here. It is high enough for a tall man to enter unbowed, as Omzbak is doing now.

I see him moving toward the opening; then he is instantaneously gone, as if he has been plucked from existence. I run as close to this opening as I dare, then crouch down behind an outcrop to wait for my comrades.

Chapter 58

Dissension.

The vibration that permeates this whole domain is much stronger here. It seems to be originating from that hole downhill from my position, like some beckoning, demonic voice. It seeks to capture my mind.

This increased energy brings more light with it. What should be a pitch dark cavern is filled with green-tinted illumination bright enough to read under. The light seems to be coming from everywhere and nowhere. I shudder to be alone in its presence and am greatly relieved when my companions arrive.

“What the hell are you doing?” Bel says by way of greeting. “We could have broke our necks back there; we can’t see as good as you.”

“Sorry, it won’t happen again,” I say.

“Yes, well ...”

Bel’s voice trails off as he takes in the ghastly vista ahead. The Hole gapes at us like the very maw of damnation. A strange, reddish glow within it flickers and sparks.

“What is that place?” he says in an awe-struck whisper.

“I don’t know. Omzbak went in there.”

Evil vibrates in the air, intimidating all of us. Trynka has lost her mask of hatred. Without it, her face is childlike and frightened. Sipren seems to be on the edge of panic.

“I’m not going in there!” he cries.

“You don’t have to,” I say. “Stay put.”

“Let’s get out,” Katella whines. “This place is ... sick.”

“Stay calm,” Bel says. “We’re all with you.”

This mollifies Sipren a little, but his eyes remain wild and fearful, like a rabbit’s caught in a snare. Bel leans in close to me and speaks in a low voice.

“He’s right, Dye.”

The remark strikes me like a cold slap.

“That doesn’t sound at all like you, Bel,” I say. “What happened to the fearless leader?”

“Maybe I’ve learned a few things.”

“Like what?”

Bel glances at Sipren, then back at me.

“I think it was the danger that first attracted me here,” he says, “like a drug, almost. But now ... all I know is that our lives are precious. If we’re to die, it must be for a better reason than this.”

He gestures toward the Hole.

“Leave that savage alone.”

“We’d get caught out there,” I reply. “They’ll likely shoot us – you said so yourself.”

“It’s a chance worth taking,” Bel says. “It’s a chance you need to take, Dye, before you go over the edge.”

I feel a powerful urge to lash out at Bel. Who does he think he is speaking to me like that? ... But I also know that he is talking sense. Trynka has figured out the situation. She grabs my arm.

“No!” She points toward the Hole. “That way!”

“Give it up Dye,” Bel says. “It’s not worth it.”

Omzbak seems tantalizingly close now. If I can just keep going a bit longer, I can get him! But another part of me knows that Bel is right. Trynka grips my arm tighter and penetrates me with a fiery gaze.

I am paralyzed with uncertainty. But one thing needs to be done, whatever the final decision is.

“We can’t turn our backs on him,” I say. “He could be waiting just inside there, ready to come after us.”

“Let’s leave him a calling card, then,” Bel says.

He pulls the stick grenade off his belt.

“Give me that,” I say. “I can throw farther than you.”

“The hell you can!”

“Don’t argue with me, Bel. Just give me the damn thing!”

I hold out my hand. Bel glowers at me for a moment, then he slaps the grenade into it.

“Have it your way, Commander,” he says.

Unbelievable! After all that’s happened we’re still engaged in a stupid power struggle. But I have no wish to dominate Bel. I only want to spare him from a dangerous undertaking that should rightfully be mine.

The grenade feels odd in my hand, like some lethal toy or kitchen implement. I can understand why it is dubbed a “potato masher.” My experience with it is limited to a training film we once saw. All I know is that you unscrew the bottom cap, yank the cord and throw the thing before it blows up.

I look off toward the Hole. With the added leverage of its throwing handle, the stick grenade has a longer range than our other, more compact grenades. Still, I don’t think I can hurl it the necessary distance from this position. Another outcrop some distance ahead and to the left might be close enough, though.

“I’m going over there,” I say. “Cover me.”

“Right,” Bel says.

He readies his machine pistol and nudges Sipren hard.

“Make yourself useful.”

My comrades train their weapons on the Hole. At the first shots, I begin running like a madman.

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My objective seems impossibly distant, stretching farther away with each step. Every moment, I fear an answering burst of gunfire will cut me down in my tracks. But finally, I reach the outcrop. I dive headfirst behind it.

The racket of gunfire ceases, but my pounding heart makes up for it. To my utter amazement, Trynka is crouching beside me.

“What are you doing here?”

She gives me a defiant look, and I quickly realize that any reprimand is useless. Do I expect her to dash back the way we came?

I unscrew the bottom cap of the stick grenade. An almost decorative little porcelain ball with a cord tied through to it drops out. It seems fantastically out of place in this bizarre environment.

The porcelain ball looks like the chain pull of our old parlor lamp, the one with the frilly shade that stood beside Mama’s chair. I can remember her doing crochet work in that chair, adjusting the lampshade this way and that to get the best illumination. Once, when I was quite young –

“Well?” Trynka’s voice interrupts.

I crash back from my recollections.

“Cover me!” I say.

I yank the porcelain ball. At the other end of the stick, inside the explosive charge, a fuse sets into motion.

I stand up to the accompanying roar of gunfire from my comrades and throw the grenade with all my might. The thing spins end over end, like a drum major’s baton, toward the Hole. I drop back down beside Trynka.

An explosion. It seems to be coming from far away, in a different world. It gathers power – another explosion, and another. Flames belch out of the Hole and tumble toward us like an ocean wave accompanied by a ghastly, inhuman shriek. The sound fairly freezes the marrow in my bones. Trynka begins to scream; we are all screaming.

Then silence, except for the sparking and hissing at the Hole’s entrance. Who made that horrible screech – Omzbak, or some primordial specter haunting this place? It’s all too much for Sipren. He springs to his feet.

“Let me out!” he cries.

He starts running back the way we came. Bel tries to tackle him but fails.

Suddenly, the whole situation becomes crystal clear to me. Stilikan is calling from inside the Hole, urging me on to blood vengeance – Trynka has already decided to answer the call from her slain father.

Bel and Sipren are of another world; they have served loyally and must now be released. The last doubts vanish from my mind.

“Take him out of here, Bel!” I shout. “Make good your own escape.”

Bel is on his feet now, crouching behind the protection of the rocks.

“Come with us!” he cries.

“No!” I yell back. “Get going. That’s an order!”

Bel looks off toward the fleeing Sipren, then back at me. Even in the poor light I can see the rage on his face.

“I’ll do that ... and damn you to hell, Dytran!”

Then he is gone, scrambling over the uneven ground after Sipren.

I look toward Trynka. We two are the damned; the road to salvation is not open for us. I pull a little fragmentation grenade from my pack.

“Come on!”

Trynka and I run toward the Hole, zigzagging to confuse any gunfire coming our way – none does. Trynka fires short bursts from her machine pistol to cover our progress. I yank the pin out of the grenade, keeping a firm grip on the safety lever.

When I am within throwing range, I hurl my grenade and pitch myself forward onto the ground. Trynka dives down as well; we roll behind some rocks. The grenade goes off. I fear that more flames will wash over us, but nothing comes out of the Hole. It is silent as a tomb.

Chapter 59

Into the Abyss.

Omzbak stumbled away to nurse his injuries – and they were substantial. The blast from the first enemy grenade had somehow ignited the air, sending a sheet of flame roaring over him and causing painful burns. The flames had also detonated the booby traps he’d set, and the explosions, magnified by the fire’s power, had shattered one ear drum and partially blinded him in one eye.

His insides felt twisted and bruised, as if they could stop functioning any time and leave him dead as a slaughtered hog. He had difficulty breathing, but mortality puffed plenty of its own frigid breath down his neck. He coughed and spat out a bloody glob.

Curse those Mag! Who was that blond one – the expert sniper and grenadier? He seemed to have the very devil inside him.

You know who he is, said a voice inside his feverish brain. But Omzbak did not want to listen.

He still had two grenades and extra clips for his machine pistol. He wasn’t through yet; victory was still possible. He moved deeper into the Inner Zone, toward the horror at its core. Should his enemies follow him there – God help them all.

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We enter a sinister world of negation. The surroundings on this side of the maw are not much different from the area we have just departed, only there is less – less sound, less color, less substance. The light is dry and brittle, as is the air. It’s as if somebody has rubbed an eraser over everything. We almost seem to be moving in a world of two dimensions, like figures in a newspaper comic strip.

The immediate area is blackened and charred, testimony that a fire has raged through. There is no sign of Omzbak, except for some bloody sputum on the ground. I regard it with deep satisfaction. So, the bastard was waiting here to ambush us – and he’s injured. My potato masher must have given him a nasty surprise.

I have finally struck a blow against Stilikan’s prime murderer! No ... I must not think of Stilikan, until final justice has been done.

Trynka is much too close. She’s almost nestled against me, making us a perfect target.

“Go there!” I command.

I point to an area behind and to the left of me. She obediently drops back, leaving the point position to me alone. We move cautiously ahead, guns at the ready. I keep my eyes peeled for any sign of Omzbak, but I know he’s not around.

I’m gaining a sixth sense down here, or maybe more than six. A darkness is entering my spirit, shutting some things down but also bringing increased awareness. It’s the darkness of ZOD, the darkness within me and Omzbak – in everyone, I think, just waiting for an opportunity to take over.

I glance back at Trynka.

She is my sister in revenge. Yet she is much more than that. A powerful attraction is developing with us. A great spark seems to jump the gap between her and me. It is supercharged by our mutual blood lust. Trynka feels it, too. Her eyes are locked on me. Strange thoughts and emotions are gaining control of us. Visions of blood.

Get a grip, Dytran!

But I don’t want to get a grip. My thoughts turn toward the men I have killed, savoring their destruction. My only regret is that they did not suffer adequately. It would have been so much better to gut shoot them and enjoy the hours of their agony until they finally perished. How pleasant it will be tying Omzbak to a tree and skinning him alive.

Except, there are no trees down here. Tie him to a rock then. Spill his guts out!

We enter an area of fantastic distortions. Tormented rock formations twist above and around us, as if some giant hand has torn the earth in a fit of rage. The rocks are a stark white, as if they are composed of salt or powdered bones. Other rocks have been moved along the floor, leaving tracks behind them. The landscape dips into tortured gashes. Piles of stone debris are everywhere. And piles of something else ...

I can make out the blasted hulks of military vehicles, hundreds, maybe thousands, of them. They lie in heaps like the carcasses of massive animals – tanks, trucks, armored cars. I recognize some as our own, the majority are alien models. A foul stench of death issues from them. I can imagine skeletal arms thrusting themselves out of the ground nearby. Or am I imagining?

We give these ghastly heaps as wide a berth as possible.

Trynka is closing the distance between us again, and I do not shoo her away this time. She is very attractive. I’d noticed this before, of course, but she had been Katella’s girl, so I’d tried to ignore her charms. But now they are all here, just for me.

Thoughts of bloody revenge become tangled in my mind with an all-consuming sexual lust. Death and copulation become one.

Never in my life have I missed anybody as much as I now miss Bel! This evil place is taking over my mind. It's mixing the worst aspects of my personality in with its own perversions.

I can understand this process well enough, but I can't do anything about it. Worse, I don't want to do anything about it. Without Bel, I have lost my moral compass.

Please come back – hurry!

But he's not coming back. I have sent him away, just as I sent away everything else that's good during my pursuit of vengeance ... except for Trynka, that is. She is pressed up close to me now. She seems small and vulnerable, but also very strong – stronger than me in some ways. Her body pulses with vitality.

We approach a stone archway. It's more in the shape of a vast, prehistoric animal hunched over and grasping for victims. Its crevices and outcrops offer plenty of concealment for an ambush, but I know that Omzbak is nowhere near. We can avoid the archway, but choose to cross under it instead, hand in hand. It vibrates power down on us.

I sense a much greater power lurking somewhere in the distance ahead – the driving force of this whole underground world. It draws me to it like a magnet, yet repels me at the same time. Trynka murmurs something in my ear. I cannot understand the words but know her meaning quite well. Her tone is husky and sensuous. She is filled with carnal lust, as I am.

There is no trail of any kind, we move through a vast open area under pale green light. Ahead of us and to the left is a large outcrop, a mini-mountain, almost. In the center of it gapes a large opening. By mutual consent, we move toward it. We peer inside; we enter.

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Within is a scene of preternatural wonder never glimpsed in the world above. The floor is the usual barren rock but the ... sky is filled with celestial glory. It appears to hold every star in the universe. It sucks my breath away!

High above us is a gauzy blur of exploding nebula, in the middle of which is a huge red glow, like the eye of God gazing down at us. On the horizon glows a shimmering ring of green light reflected in what appears to be placid waters. The whole vista is beyond human capacity to appreciate. I have never seen such marvels in my life. Time seems to be suspended.

It's a lie, Dytran – the pee cave.

I know that.

It is all just a reflection of my own mind, my deepest longings for beauty and meaning, everything corrupted with evil. Yet I stand in awe before it.

Trynka moves toward me in the greenish glow. Her lips press against mine, and I respond eagerly. We grope for each other like savages, carried away by mutual lust ...

But it's wrong! Real love does not belong in this cursed place.

“No – ” I tried to protest, but Trynka’s hunger silences me.

She crushes her mouth against mine, bruising my lips. Unimaginable desire surges through my body. Compared to this, my episodes with Ket have been chaste, Sunday school type events. Ket’s image appears before me; then it is carried off on a hot wave of arousal within which I am rapidly drowning.

We claw at each other with frantic urgency. I pull back.

“We can’t ... not like this!”

But I can’t control myself, even though I know this is wrong. I want it because it’s wrong!

Chapter 60

Confrontation.

Omzbak staggered forward, each step taking him farther into an area he had not seen since his first intrusion nearly two years ago. Some potent force was getting hold of his mind, lending strength to his faltering efforts.

He moved along a narrow trail skirting a canyon. The “canyon” was actually just a long gouge, perhaps 75 meters in depth and about as wide at the top, with steeply sloped banks plunging to the bottom.

At the far end of this wound in the ground, towering like a wrathful god, swirled the “War Tornado,” as Omzbak had dubbed it – a black, churning funnel with lightning flashing along its crown where it merged into tortured clouds.

The cone boiled with terrible power, like an eruption from hell itself. It was the blackened soul of something beyond the ability of human beings to comprehend. Omzbak recoiled from it, and was attracted at the same time.

“I’m here,” he said.

Such a phenomenon would seem to generate a great deal of sound, but Omzbak could hear little through his one good ear other than a low hissing noise.

He did not know where the dreadful twister originated, but he knew where it ended – at the center of the Barren. The whole devastated area revolved around it. Nobody dared remain in the Barren long enough to detect this motion, but Omzbak had felt the tornado’s pull underfoot the very first time he’d entered.

For all its awesome force, the War Tornado seemed weaker than it was – narrower and more erratic, as if the energy sustaining it was beginning to wane. Could it be that the ending of hostilities in the world above was robbing it of motive force?

Omzbak didn’t know; he could scarcely articulate the question. His whole world was winding down, so why not the tornado? He examined his injured body, the burns on his arms and hands, his tattered clothes. He spit out another bloody glob.

He was much reduced from what he’d been, but his curiosity was still intact. The previous time he’d visited here, he’d been too frightened to approach the War

Tornado. He'd merely gaped at it from a distance before fleeing back to the world of the living. But that was when he still had a life and a family worth returning to.

It was time to investigate further.

Step by painful step, Omzbak drew closer to the tornado until he was almost right beside it. The whirling force stroked him; his hair stood on end. He could see through the outer mantle now and behold the fearsome core. It flashed and hissed a violent red, like the blood of a million slaughtered men.

He stretched out his hand to touch it. Would the dreadful power tear him into atoms? He paused his hand, then reluctantly withdrew it. He craned his neck to view the apex, but it was obscured far above him among the clouds and lightning.

Maybe this apparition had some answers for him. If he dared to behold its source, he might experience a revelation, learn the reason behind all his suffering.

He advanced a few more paces and looked straight down. Beneath the swirl was a bottomless abyss, a void of total nothingness – no answers, not even any questions. Omzbak shook his head with rueful acceptance.

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A huge roaring in my ears blanks out all thought. I am no longer a rational person but a wild beast. We tear at each other's clothes; we sink to the floor, biting and scratching. Trynka's flesh throbs and writhes under me as the moment of obscene consummation approaches.

Trynka is shrieking like a banshee. I howl along. We're never coming back from this unholy coupling –

Above us, a harsh male voice intrudes: "What is this?"

My heart nearly stops from the shock. Terror shoves aside my raging lust. The whole universe implodes; my spirit, far gone in its flight toward damnation, hurtles back to me.

I grope for my rifle, but a boot is pinning it down. A gun barrel points in my face and a dark figure glowers down at me. Only then do I recognize who the intruder is. I struggle to my feet and confront him.

"Damn it Bel!" I cry.

Trynka stares up at us. Her face is flushed and disoriented – as if she's just awakened from a nightmare. She beholds her nakedness with astonishment, as if she's viewing the body of a stranger. She grabs her discarded clothing to cover herself and sidles away. My own clothing is mostly removed, leaving nothing to the imagination.

"Better pack it away, Dye," Bel says.

I hurriedly yank my clothes back on.

"What are you doing here, Bel?" I try to cover my humiliation with anger. "I told you to get out."

He barks a sarcastic laugh.

"Good thing it's me instead of Omzbak. What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, it's ... this place."

My ire melts into desperate gratitude. Bel's loyalty is far more than I deserve. I feel unworthy to be standing in his presence; I should have stayed groveling on the floor.

"Why didn't you keep going?" I say. "Where's Sipren?"

A light seems to go out in Bel's fierce eyes.

"He's gone."

The words hit with a terrible finality.

"W-what happened?"

"He stumbled ... where the ledge narrows ... he went over," Bel says. "He was too far ahead, I couldn't stop him."

He seems on the verge of tears. I wrap my arms around him.

"Hang on, Bel. It's just you and me now."

For the first time ever, I feel stronger than Bel; he fairly sags in my arms.

"Why'd he have to run like that?" he says. "I-I couldn't get to him, Dye. He was ... I couldn't get to him!"

Moments pass; I try to pour some strength into him, as much as my poor capacity allows. Finally he rallies and pulls away from my embrace. The old Bel starts to reassert himself.

He glances about the surroundings.

"What is this hellhole, anyway?" he says.

"What do you mean 'hellhole?'" I gesture to the magnificent surroundings. "Can't you see?"

"All I can see is that you need a reality check," Bel says. "This is the worst place I've ever been in my life."

I look upwards. Everything is as I first saw it, gorgeous and seductive. I know it's an illusion, but I still cannot see past it.

"Let's just get out of here," Bel says. "Do you know where Omzbak went?"

"You mean ... you're coming with us?" I say.

"Zip your fly already," Bel snaps. "Represent the Fatherland with some dignity!"

I adjust my clothing as ordered.

"How did you find us, Bel?"

"You were making enough noise to wake the dead," he says. "How could I not find you?"

I nod, too late to be embarrassed about that. Then I ask the question I really want answered.

"Why'd you come back, Bel?"

"Somebody has to be here who's got his head on straight," he replies.

Trynka rejoins us. She's fully clothed again and, if she is humiliated by our tumble, she isn't showing it.

"Let's go," she says.

She moves toward the exit, but I hesitate.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Bel says.

We leave the glow cave, as I've named it, and reenter the wider enclosure. I take a backward glance, and my blood freezes. The glorious vista has departed, replaced by a scene of utter desolation. The brilliant stars are gone, and a swirling mist has taken their place. The glowing eye is still there; only now it is deep scarlet and it throbs with malice.

I turn away from the evil thing. "That eye!"

"Yes, I saw it," Bel says.

My awe for Bel's capabilities nearly overwhelms me. How did he have the courage to enter that place alone and confront two people screeching like devils?

And he navigated to the glow cave by himself through the erased landscape, with no one at his side to buck him up – and right after Sipren had been killed, too.

“Look at all those rocks!” Bel says. “Omzbak could be hiding anywhere.”

“He’s not here,” I say. “I’d know it if he was.”

“One of those ‘Ghostie’ things, huh?”

“Something like that,” I say.

Bel looks around the landscape, unconvinced.

“Where is he, then?”

There’s only one place he can be. I point to a large crack in the rock face some distance away.

“He’s in there.”

Chapter 61

Enemy in the Valley.

We encounter more piles of wrecked vehicles and other war debris – cannons, rocket launchers, small arms – all twisted and corroded into grotesque shapes. Also more of the tortured white rock formations. We cannot avoid passing one at close quarters, and I can see that it is composed of bone fragments, pressed together in a death marble. Here and there, a larger bone protrudes. Trynka wretches at the sight. I’m grateful for my empty stomach.

We approach a towering crevasse in the rock wall. From a distance, it appears to be quite narrow, but closer up we can see that it is wide enough to admit all of us side by side with room to spare.

“That looks like a trap,” Bel says. “Omzbak could be just inside waiting to ambush us.”

“He isn’t, though,” I say.

Bel gives me an unbelieving look.

“He’s nowhere close,” I say. “Trust me on that.”

“Trust you,” he says, “like back there? I’m away ten minutes and you’ve already got your dong out ready for action.”

“It was a lot longer than ten centimeters ... I-I mean minutes.”

“See what I’m driving at?” Bel says.

“Oh, forget it!” I say. “Just wait out here.”

Trynka moves to accompany me, but I wave her off. Bel is going to see that I’m right about this. He’s not the only one who can barge into strange places alone. To further display my confidence, I sling the rifle over my shoulder.

“Tough guy, huh?” Bel says. “Better take this with you.”

He shoves the extra machine pistol at me. I think to refuse, but am actually quite pleased to get it.

“All right, have it your way.” I take the gun with seeming reluctance.

I begin walking through the crevasse, which must be a good ten or twelve meters deep. It looms high above me like the entryway of a cathedral. There is a

religious awe about it – the sort of dark faith that speaks of blood sacrifice and the soul’s most evil secrets. Bats should be fluttering around its highest regions, but nothing can live there.

I grip the submachine gun more tightly. I feel a strong urge to turn around and flee, but force myself to go forward. I keep my eyes fixed rigidly ahead.

Then I step into another phase of reality, if “reality” has anything to do with this bizarre world. The first thing to catch my eye is a deep cut sprawling before me in the rock floor. It is not unlike the sharply banked valley of the river near the bridge.

Towering at the end of this valley is something beyond imagination.

“Good God!” a voice behind me exclaims. “What is that?”

It’s Bel, of course, who has kept right behind me in the passageway. But his voice is a bit different. A low hissing in the air distorts all sound. His face is drained of color, as mine must also be.

“I-I don’t know, Bel ... ”

But I do know what it is. I’ve seen it before – when Papa stood glaring at us in the middle of our house, his chin bleeding where Stilikan had cut it; enveloping Bel’s destroyed aircraft; on the flank of the commando’s APC; swirling around Eagle-eye when he killed the slob lad.

“It’s the Death Storm,” I say.

Trynka has joined us now. She, too, is overwhelmed by the sight, her mouth hanging open and eyes wide. I point to the raging, sparking apparition at the end of the valley, perhaps 250 meters distant. I’m surprised to see that my arm is not shaking.

“That’s where Omzbak is,” I say.

We stand unmoving, as if cemented to the rock. The manifestation swirling before us seems to be the source of all terror and violence – an entity that mere mortals cannot approach. But Omzbak has approached it; I know that much. He’s brought me here as the final act of this tragedy, to see if I can endure its ultimate truths.

I don’t know. It’s really up to Bel whether I can endure it or not.

Bel wipes a hand across his mouth; his lips must be paper dry, as mine are. I half expect him to turn around and go back the way we came. Instead he says:

“All right ... let’s go get him.”

He starts walking, but I remain rooted to the spot. He’s several paces ahead when Trynka finally draws me out of my inertia. I begin moving.

The path is scarcely more than a meter across, to our left plunges the Valley of Death’s steep bank, to the right is sheer rock face, and ahead of us swirls the great hissing funnel of smoke and evil with lightning flashing along its top. It’s a hungry monster; it is both cause and result of the horrors raging in the world above.

Yet I also know that, fearsome as it may be, the cyclone is losing power – like a plate twirling atop a long stick in a stage performance. When will it topple off?

Bel’s strong back goes before me, a rock-solid support in my ordeal. He’s got a slight limp now; the rigors of this day have taken a toll on his injured leg. His determination humbles me. Ahead of him swirls the Death Storm with its crown of lightning, enough to cower any lesser mortal. But he advances.

What a man of excellence Beltran is! On his own, with precious little help from me, he's managed to fling aside the straightjacket of anger and resentment that constrained him for so long and has stepped out into his full potential. His nobility shines forth like a beacon. He's a true champion of the Fatherland – loyal, brave, steadfast.

And what of me?

Have I ever troubled my mind with a single unselfish thought? Why bother, I'm a "national hero." Just watch the movie if you don't believe it.

I'm a spoiled brat, if the absolute truth were told, pampered and given respect I haven't earned. While Bel was struggling with rejection and loneliness, I was preening in front of a mirror, wondering which profile the girls would like best. While the NSP's poison was curdling Bel's spirit, I was content to ride the crest of the lunacy as a "racial apex" leading man.

I know that I'm being too hard on myself, another of my many faults. But I'm not exaggerating about Bel. He's a valuable asset for the Homeland and will be sorely needed for the trials ahead. I've been blinded by the pursuit of vengeance. How many more must die because of my obsession? I'm tired of all the sacrifices.

A large rock obstructs the middle of the path ahead. Bel walks to the left of it. His foot dislodges a cascade of pebbles, and he nearly skids down the embankment.

"Careful!" Trynka and I cry together.

Bel glances back at us. "Piece of cake."

Unbidden, a moment of absolute clarity explodes in my mind. As if by the light of a thunderbolt, I can see the full extent of the system that has corrupted us all. The NSP system. Stilikan was a victim of it, and Bel, and me, and Trynka – and Omzbak, too. All of us were pounded into corrupted shapes by that system, like those piles of military wreckage.

I'm sick of being a victim! I want to struggle out my own straightjacket and emerge a free man. I want my mind to be cleansed of all brutality and error. I don't want to kill Omzbak any longer; he's not worth the risk, and we have far more in common that I'd ever imagined.

I have ... forgiven him.

I stop walking. Trynka looks up quizzically into my face.

"You're right," I call after Bel.

He pauses and turns slowly toward me. A smile begins to spread across his face. Trynka instantly grasps the situation.

"No!" she cries.

I look toward her. She seems tiny – yet, at the same time, very strong. She is beautiful and frightening.

"Yes," I say.

I want her to leave with us, but I can't make that choice for her. I look to Bel again.

"Let's go back," I say.

Bel replies with a Bekar pet phrase. "Capital fellow!"

He starts walking toward us. Then it isn't just Bel any more; it's Bekar and Stilikan, too, and Gyn and Ket and Mama – it's every worthwhile thing in my life returning to me.

He comes to the rock again, only this time, he passes on its other side. Too late, I spot the tripwire.

“Look out!”

His foot catches the wire. Our eyes lock in a moment of terrible understanding.

Explosion and blinding flash. The ground gives way and we are tumbling down, down, past cliff face and crumbling rock. After an eternity, we hit the floor of the chasm.

Chapter 62

The Final Act.

I lie on my back at the bottom of a scree slope, stunned and disorientated. What is this place – how long have I been here?

The world is a crazy, rotating kaleidoscope. My head feels too big, and it throbs with a maddening, ringing noise.

Things start to blur back into focus. I move slowly; my whole body screams with pain, but it still works. I seem to be whole. I grope for my machine pistol, but it’s gone. So is my rifle.

Trynka is at my side. She brushes a hand over my face. She, too, seems to have escaped major harm.

“Bel!” I call. “Where are you?”

I force myself up to my knees, looking frantically for my brother. The chasm sprawls about me like a vast, open grave ... Finally I spot him lying some distance away among the rocks. I scurry over to him.

“Ohhh!”

I can see that his injuries are terrible; he’s taken the main force of the blast. He lies staring upwards, his chest rising and falling erratically. I grip his hand in mine and cradle his head with my other arm.

“It’s me ... Dytran.”

The vacant eyes flicker with recognition. He squeezes my hand faintly.

“In it to the end, huh?” he says.

Tears spring into my eyes.

“I love you, Bel.”

He smiles up at me. His face is young and innocent, free of all suffering. Then his features go slack, the hand loosens. I feel his noble spirit depart his body and soar out of this evil place – toward the heavens which are its true home.

“Bel!”

I am sobbing freely now. My heart has been ripped out. I am naked and abandoned in the valley of death.

Some one is tugging at me.

“Come!” Trynka urges.

She pulls me to my feet.

Again, I experience a split in my perceptions. In one view, I observe Bel's body moving farther away as I stand up. In another view, I seem to be hovering over everything; I see all three of us from a bird's eye perspective. Trynka and I are walking toward an area of the slope which is somewhat less steep than the one we have tumbled down. She intends for us to climb out, apparently.

We can't leave him here! I want to protest, but nothing exits my mouth. I'm an automaton being led by the girl. I cannot form ideas in my numbed brain.

A burst of gunfire snaps me out of my paralysis.

Bullets tear along the ground right beside me. I jump out of the way. Another burst drives Trynka against me. A huge, dark figure is glaring down at us from the top of the slope – Omzbak!

Beyond his hulking presence, towering in unholy rage, is the Death Storm. Its lightning forms a demonic halo for Omzbak's head.

"God damn you!" I shout.

Another blast of gunfire hits the slope right in front of me; stone fragments fly. One of them grazes my face, and I feel blood trickling. The bastard is toying with us!

Trynka pulls out her tiny pistol and fires repeatedly at Omzbak, but there is no hope of hitting him at this range. He does not even bother to move. He seems to be the very god of death himself standing up there with the cyclone twisting behind him. It is howling with increased strength now, as if in celebration of Bel's death.

"Coward!" I yell. "Fight me man to man!"

No answer, except for a low, evil rumbling. He's laughing at us.

"Do you hear me, Papa! Get down here!"

He brandishes a stick grenade in his right hand, like the death god's royal scepter. I look desperately around for any sort of cover, but there is none. I try to shield Trynka with my body, but she slips back around. We'll face the end together.

Omzbak gazes down at us, like a cat tormenting helpless mice. He waves the grenade tauntingly. I cannot make out his face clearly, but his whole body radiates contempt.

"Lousy coward ..." I try to shout, but my voice has lost whatever power it had.

Omzbak yells something back at me. Trynka translates:

"I know you!"

Omzbak's free hand moves toward the grenade. He'll be unscrewing the bottom cap now, soon the little white skull will drop out. I try to gauge where he will throw the bomb, prepare myself to roll the opposite direction – but I know it's useless, I'd just be rolling into a blast of gunfire.

I see him yank the grenade string in a wide, dramatic gesture.

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During the seconds before the grenade went off, the faces of every one of Omzbak's victims flashed before his eyes – in particular, the fighter pilot whose courageous brother had pursued him to this place. What a magnificent son the lad would make!

He looked off toward the War Tornado and pressed the grenade against his belly.

Here's another one for you.

Chapter 63

Retreat.

The instant the grenade goes off, the cyclone roars with increased fury. Its lightning bolts crackle and flare; blinding illumination assaults us, then retreats.

Omzbak's corpse tumbles over the edge in suspended time, like a slow motion horror movie sequence. It bounces down the slope, leaving a bloody smear, then thuds to the bottom. It lands too far away for me to get a good look, and I have no desire to look.

Trynka starts to utter a victory cry, but it strangles in her throat.

I have no sense of triumph – only the weary knowledge that the final act of this tragedy has, at long last, played out. My grief over Bel allows no other emotion to intrude.

“We go now!” Trynka says urgently.

She leads me across the chasm until we reach Bel. I lower myself down to my poor slain brother lying among the rocks. His face wears an expression of peace that it never had in life.

I look up at Trynka. “We can't leave him here.”

She understands what I am saying well enough. She points toward the steep path we must ascend and shakes her head. I know she is right. This valley will have to serve as Bel's final resting place.

Trynka comes to attention, clicking her heels together military fashion. She snaps a final salute to Bel. I get to my feet and do the same. Then we depart together. I do not look back.

Trynka leads us up the precipitous scree slope. For every meter we ascend, we slip back half the distance. My legs seem to be working on autopilot with no direction from me. Finally, we make it to the top. Trynka exits the valley of death first, then pulls me up behind her.

I look toward the cyclone. It appears to be losing power, and the lightning at its crown flashes with less intensity – as if in recognition that it has devoured its last victim. The sight fascinates and horrifies; it's a manifestation of pure hate. Trynka yanks my arm.

She takes us back along the route that brought us into this cursed region. The evil influences that once hindered us fade into the shadows, as if in awe of Trynka's determination. Mama once told me that women are stronger than men in certain ways. I didn't think much of that comment then, but now I see its wisdom. If left to myself, I don't know if I'd have the will to continue.

All the while, the light is getting dimmer. Everything is starting to fade. The whole place is shutting down, dissolving. By the time the trail narrows, we need the illumination of my pen light. Thank heaven it wasn't destroyed in my tumble down the slope!

We venture out onto the steep ledge where Sipren fell to his death. I wonder idly if I will tumble off myself. But Trynka keeps a firm hold on my hand. I can almost hear Sipren beckoning to me from the infinite depths.

We're practically running now – past the bone pillars and heaps of military equipment. The bouncing flashlight beam that's leading us turns yellow; it weakens so much that we can scarcely see the way ahead any longer.

"Hold it!" I say.

I fumble extra batteries out of my pocket. When I drop out the old ones from the flashlight, the world around us grows very dim. Creaks and groans fill the air, the whispering of ghosts. Everything seems to be imploding. Finally, I get the new batteries installed and a bright beam shows us the way again.

We move rapidly down the wide ledge as the sepulcher presses in on us from all sides. A horrid thought intrudes:

We'll never get out of here.

Trynka looks up at me. Even in the dim light I can see the worry in her eyes. We continue moving through the limitless space. Already, the new batteries are starting to fade, and I have no others.

But then the dimming flashlight ray glints off two bright, metallic objects – the spent shell casings from my sniper attack. I know where we are now.

"This way!"

I lead us to the spot where I first ascended to the ledge. Despite the rapidly diminishing light, it's actually easier to navigate now. The strange power that had dominated this place is losing its grip, and the spatial disorientation is lessening.

Before long, we are at the exit – or what used to be the exit. The circle of light is barely visible now, and its flashes are erratic, like a dying heartbeat. Trynka grips my hand and heads straight for it. We slam into a rock wall.

"Ugh!"

We fall to the floor, but are soon back on our feet.

Where is the circle of light now? Only a blank rock face stares back at us. We glance around desperately. After all we've been through, we're going to be trapped here? The injustice of it strikes me a hammer blow. Trynka begins to cry.

"This can't happen," I say. "Come on – again!"

I switch off my penlight. The nightmare world is pitch black now. Trynka grips my hand; I can hear our hearts thundering in the darkness. Then, a tiny flashing glow appears on the rock face. I propel myself toward it head first. I'll either win through or fracture my skull ...

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We emerge into blinding daylight. I raise a hand to shield my eyes. The first snowflakes of the year land on my skin, pinpoints of soothing wetness. Trynka sighs with relief and pleasure, her face raised to the glorious sun and its attendants of vast clouds.

"Aaaah!"

She pulls in a great breath of air, then blows it out. I can almost see the evil miasma of the lower regions exit her lungs.

We scurry off the surface of ZOD and enter the woods. We cross through them to the clearing where my airplane lies. I make my way to her and fall on my knees, unable to continue.

I cling to the port landing gear of Y-47. Her wing overarches me like a mother's loving arm. My poor, shattered aircraft is the final link to the world of dreams and hopes – to my lost brothers. My tears run hot.

Trynka speaks to me urgently and tugs at my clothing. She must want me to leave this place, but where would I go? My homeland is impossibly far away, and my fate is here. After a while, she gives up the effort. She moves a short distance away and sits among the high grass, leaving me alone with my sorrow.

Chapter 64

Harsh Welcome.

The day advances. The sun begins to warm the world and melt the thin layer of snow, but I am shielded from its rays by my aircraft. If only I could drift away forever, into the sky where I belong. Bel is waiting there.

I hear Trynka scramble to her feet. Then a metallic clack as she cocks the automatic pistol. Is she going to shoot me?

She is yelling at somebody in the nearby woods. I open my eyes to see a squad of enemy soldiers emerge from the trees. They are grim, lethal men in brown uniforms – hardened killers. Trynka is beckoning to them while she keeps me covered with the pistol.

So this is it ... finally. I unwind from my fetal position and prepare to confront the enemy. I begin to rise.

“Stay down!” the commander shouts in our language.

I drop to a seated position and assume as dignified an expression as I can. The commander approaches Trynka and snatches away her pistol. They exchange rapid fire remarks. I can't be certain, but he appears to be the man we saw on our trek to the hideout. He possesses the same whip-like toughness and hard face.

Trynka seems to be offering explanations, but the leader isn't buying them. He turns a cold, dispassionate look my direction – the same look a carp might receive just before getting stuck with a fisherman's spear. The commander gestures to one of his men.

The trooper advances, cocking his rifle. He aims it at me. I fight to remain steadfast – they will not see me cower. I prepare to shout my final words of defiance:

Long live the Fatherland!

But Trynka throws herself between me and my executioner. She is speaking furiously. She flings her arms wide to cover me, exposing her own breast to the gun. The trooper backs away, his face reddening.

“Halt!” the commander shouts.

He waves his arm. Both Trynka and the soldier retreat. The commander approaches and squats down beside me. He's so close that I can smell the leather of his gun belt. He brings his face close to mine. It is the face of death.

"Your girlfriend says that we should not disgrace our glorious victory with an act of cowardice," he says in a heavy slobe accent. "What do you think of that, Mag?"

"She's not my girlfriend," I say.

He glances at Trynka, then turns back toward me.

"I believe she would disagree with you on that, Mag."

"My name is Dytran, sir, commander of the Raptor Aces Youth League aviation squadron."

"An aviator, huh?" he gestures toward Y-47. "That would explain your affection for that wreckage."

He withdraws a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and lights one up. It's a potent slobe variety with a long cardboard filter. He offers me the pack.

"Cigarette?"

"No thank you, sir, I'm trying to quit."

The commander gapes at me with astonishment, the cigarette nearly drops from his lips. Then he bursts out laughing.

He turns toward his men and says in our language, "Little Blondie here's got some brass!"

The soldiers laugh along with him – a cruel, mirthless chatter. Then the commander turns back toward me; he's all business again.

"She claims that she captured you," he says. "Somehow, I doubt that."

I do not reply.

"So, tell me, what really happened?"

"If you're going to kill me," I say, "why don't you get it over with?"

I hold the commander's eyes steadily with my own. I want him to know that he's shooting a better man than himself, someone who knows how to die for his country. He gazes back at me with cold appraisal in his otherwise dead eyes. His face is unyielding, pocked with little scars. Why does it have to be the last thing I will see in this world?

Then something like an amused little smile crosses his lips; a bit of life flickers in his eyes. He pinches my cheek and follows it with light slap.

"Don't worry, lad, we'll save your pretty face for the girls back home."

He rises and barks orders to his men. They yank me to my feet and hustle me away. I glance back toward Trynka. She looks very sad.

Chapter 65

Stages of Captivity.

I join a long column of my defeated countrymen on a trek to captivity. For several days we march eastward, always more of us joining in, silent and

downcast. Alongside our procession, slobe troopers watch over us with their machine pistols. Most of them are stone-faced and impassive, others look as if they're dying for an excuse to open fire.

But there are more sympathetic guards, too. Occasionally, one of them tosses us some cigarettes or bread. We devour these items without ceremony.

We receive mixed reactions from the settlements we pass through. Sometimes our guards must protect us from the wrath of the townsfolk, other times the civilians merely gaze at us quietly as we shuffle past. Powerful emotions confront us everywhere – anger, hate, pity, contempt.

Finally, we are loaded onto trains. My group occupies a flat car, not unlike the one I saw crammed with slobe prisoners on my way into this hellish country. We chug for added days through a landscape turning colder by the hour. Some of us don't survive.

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I spend the winter months in a prisoner of war camp, taking part in its crash reducing plan. Altogether I lose 20 kilograms of body weight, and my skin takes on the texture of dry paper. My hair starts falling out; on the rare occasions when I actually get to wash it, many strands come away in my fingers. But I can't complain – millions of others have suffered far worse.

I appear to be an animated dead man, beyond caring what happens to me. This isn't really the case, however. I'm still alive, but my humanity is buried deep out of harm's way. I've given up all hope for the future, but perhaps this is the only way to preserve hope. I dare not think about those back home – Ket, Gyn, Bekar, Mama. So many dear to me have already died, and I can't bear the thought of further losses. So I bury my affections away where they can slumber in peace.

Among us captives, faith in a POW swap withers as the months drag past, and talk turns to escape. Escape to where, I wonder? We're in the middle of a frozen wilderness; besides, I know that I cannot avoid the fate I've worked out for myself. I must see things through, wherever the path leads.

Our captors know we are trapped and don't bother themselves overmuch with guarding us. They even turn a blind eye toward the little shortwave radio somebody has managed to sneak in. A group of us huddles together in one of the freezing huts passing the headphones around. From the Homeland propaganda broadcasts and from other news sources, we learn the enormity of our nation's defeat.

When the slobes found themselves embroiled in a two-front war, they sent peace feelers our direction. They stopped bombing the Homeland as a "goodwill gesture" and began redeploying troops away from our forces – or so we were led to believe. Bel was right, though; it was all deception, along with a willingness on our part to be fooled.

Peace delegations were meeting in neutral territory when the offensive began. Our forces, taken completely by surprise, cracked under the assault and fled for their lives. Their headlong retreat did not stop until they reached the river barrier a scant hundred kilometers from our old frontier.

There, our shattered army dug in its heels and put up an organized defense. The slobes then withdrew their main forces so as to deal with their new enemies in

the east, and our war finally ended with an uneasy truce. The wretched strip of land we occupy is hardly the “living space” we were promised, but it is enough to guarantee another war, in my opinion.

Our propaganda heroes make much of the slobes’ “treachery” for attacking us in the midst of peace negotiations. As if our unprovoked invasion two years earlier had modeled the highest moral principles!

The slobe empire – which we’d been told was tottering toward extinction, which contained vast resources that should be ours by right of conquest – proved to be a ferocious and indomitable enemy. Its people, dismissed as nothing more than “a cesspool of mongrel races,” rallied to overcome our best efforts at subduing them. And now, we are paying the price for all this hubris.

Piotra learned a lot from us. His lumbering, inefficient army was forged into an awesome fighting machine by the blows it received from our superior, if overmatched, military. It rallied from the edge of defeat to become masters of the situation.

We prisoners are all deeply depressed by these broadcasts, though we already knew the general facts. Thank God the Homeland has been spared invasion – for now.

“You look very young,” one of my companions, a grizzled infantryman, says. “What unit did you serve with.”

“I was in the Children’s Crusade.”

He nods and says nothing further. It’s too cold to think about anything but surviving the next five minutes.

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Then one day, just as the first signs of spring are emerging in the frozen wasteland, glorious news arrives: We are going home in the next prisoner exchange!

There is nothing of the wild joy that greeted the announcement of the second front, only resigned gratitude that we have managed to survive the ordeal thus far and apprehension that we still might not live long enough to see the Fatherland.

Many of us don’t believe the announcement, chalking it up as some enemy trick. Or else we’re convinced that everything will fall through at the last minute.

But the slobes increase our rations a few days before our announced departure. They scrub us up, and we are gone over by doctors and dentists. The dentist is a jovial type who can speak some of our language. He practices it as he pokes around in my mouth.

“So, how was your vacation with us, my friend?” he asks.

“Very enjoyable,” I say.

He chuckles, then sighs wistfully.

“Ah, if only I could go with you! There must be need for dentists in your country, right?”

“One would assume so,” I mumble around his probing fingers.

“Don’t you think it’s time we moved on from all this hatred?” the dentist asks.

“Absolutely,” I say.

With his little mirrors, he shows me serious cavities in two of my back teeth. He'll be happy to yank them out for me, he says. Shouldn't hurt too much, despite the lack of anesthetics.

"No thanks," I tell him.

I'd rather see if a dentist back home can save the molars.

They pack us into railway cars and ship us westward. My previous trip across this sprawling landscape seems almost luxurious by comparison, but we are fed semi-adequately and let out now and then to stretch our limbs. Our constant grumbling seems unfounded. What did we expect, a private club car?

At the cease fire line, we are unceremoniously kicked out and herded onto another train – our train! The comfort level is scarcely better than on the slobe transport, but it seems as if I'm riding on a cloud. I experience the first stirrings of renewed life inside me, but I still dare not allow myself to believe that the long nightmare could be ending.

We arrive at the same town where I attended high school a century earlier. I flew airplanes back then and thought of myself as one hell of a fellow. Actually, it's only been several months since I've last seen this place.

A wilderness of bomb craters greets our approach to the railway terminal. Our train groans and screeches over the patched up tracks.

Chapter 66

Back Home.

We jump down from the train and shamble off toward the station to be processed. The brick and mortar station has been eradicated, and a billowing white tent stands in its place, as if from a traveling circus. The rail yard is a gloomy landscape of cinders and uncleared debris.

It's early morning, judging by the gray light and the chill in the air. We pull our tattered coats more tightly about ourselves.

The railway yard is a madhouse of confusion. As quickly as we vacate our train cars, other men are replacing us – slobe POWs taking the trip back home. A good many civilians are mixed in with them, our native slobes who are fleeing the Fatherland.

Who can blame them for that? They certainly have no future here. I've seen the empire they are escaping to, though, and the future doesn't look so bright there either.

Our two columns unavoidably converge. We brush against men as ragged and emaciated as we are. I avert my eyes to avoid seeing a mirror image of myself. Something strikes my right cheek, a gob of spit. I turn to see a small woman glaring back at me from the slobe line – it's Piotra's mother. She curses at me as she moves off into the distance.

I raise my hand to my face.

"Let me take care of that," someone says.

A man reaches over from my left and daubs my face with a snow-white handkerchief. He looks impossibly healthy and well-fed, and he wears a News Service blazer.

“Thanks, friend,” I say.

“Don’t mention it.”

He folds the handkerchief and stuffs it into the pocket of his jacket. I recognize him now. He’s the same guy who ran the projector for Youth Answers the Call!

“How come I keep running into you?” I say.

The man laughs and pulls at my arm, removing me from the column.

“You don’t have to wait in line,” he says. “We can fast track you through.”

He leads me to a less congested area of the yard and toward a secondary entrance of the station tent.

“Any medical concerns?” the man asks.

“Just a couple of bad teeth that need work,” I say.

“No problem, we’ll take care of that right away,” the man says.

I look warily around for movie cameras. There aren’t any, thank God. Pictures of our defeated, half-starved troops returning home must not be considered the best newsreel footage.

“Ket’s going to be very pleased that you’re all right,” the man says. “You know, she waited here for days hoping you’d be on the next train. The boss finally pulled her off on an assignment.”

Ket! The name rings out to me like a clarion call from the lost world. I’ve scarcely given her a thought for months, so certain I was that I’d never look upon her again.

“When is she coming back?” I say.

The man grins at my obvious eagerness.

“Hard to say. It’s one of those drudge assignments out by the cease fire line. Could be quite a while.”

I nod. My disappointment is keen, but I am also relieved. I don’t want her to see me like this. In a few weeks, I might actually resemble a human being.

“You know,” the guy says, “she could twist the boss around her little finger if she’d be ‘nice’ to him, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes ... I know what you mean.”

“Ket won’t do it, though. She claims that she’s saving it for somebody very special. Wonder who that is, eh?”

He elbows my ribs. I don’t know whether to be complimented or take a swing at him for his cheekiness. I decide to let it pass. Anyway, I’m so worn down that he might mistake my best punch for a puff of wind.

Inside the railway station, military officials sit at long tables speaking with the returnees, filling out whatever documentation that needs to be handled. The News Service guy approaches the ranking officer and speaks a few words. The officer looks toward me a moment, then waves us on.

In front of the terminal, all is devastation – blasted buildings, piles of rubble, a faint scent of death in the air. The street has been cleared and patched, though.

A large black car awaits at the curb. To my exhausted brain, it appears to be a hearse. Then I notice a government flag attached to the fender and a badge on the door identifying it as a Propaganda Ministry vehicle.

“This will take you to the hotel where you can get cleaned up,” the News Service guy says. “Then the doctors will want to see you. I’ll make a dentist appointment for this afternoon.”

“Thanks,” I say.

Groups of bedraggled men are leaving the station now and piling into trucks. They’ll be going to an army barracks to recuperate. No limousine ride or fancy hotel for them. The News Service guy is just opening the car’s rear door when a familiar voice calls out:

“Dytran!”

I look over to see Bekar standing by one of the trucks. He’s leaning on a cane and waving joyously with his free hand. Sunshine seems to burst into the dreary morning.

“Bekar!”

I turn to the News Service guy. “Give me a few minutes, all right?”

“Sure thing.”

I make my way to Bekar as quickly as I can along the crowded sidewalk. As soon as I reach him, he throws an arm around me in a half bear hug.

“My God, there’s nothing left of you!” he cries.

We pull away but still hang on to each other’s arms.

“Thanks, Bekar, that really makes my day.”

“Sorry, it just slipped out,” he says. “Don’t worry. Those Propaganda Ministry boys will fatten you up quick.”

I look back toward the limo.

“Yes, they’ve got plans for me,” I say. “I think they want to turn me into a bloody hero.”

“Well, who deserves it more than you?”

Bekar is keeping up a sunny face, but I know it pains him to see my wretched condition.

“I heard at the base that you might be on this transport,” he says, “so I ran my butt here as fast as possible.”

“Not bad for a guy with a cane,” I say.

Bekar chuckles, then a note of melancholy enters his voice.

“I can see you’ve been through hell, Dye. You can talk to me about it when you feel the need.”

“Thanks.”

“Talking helps a lot ... I know.”

But I don’t want to think about all the horrors I’ve seen right now. I feel like a man climbing out of a grave – I want more of that feeling.

“How’s Gyn?” I ask.

There, I’ve uttered a magic word from the world I never expected to see again.

“Oh, she’s fine, but ...”

“But what?”

“It’s her hospital,” Bekar says, “all hospitals, really. The sick and wounded are just flooding in. She’s working brutal hours, every day.”

I can’t help feeling a twinge of conscience. With all this backlog to deal with, doctors will be making a house call for me today.

“She’s a strong girl, Dye. I think she’d make a good fighter pilot.”

I crack a smile. It feels good to smile again.

“I’m serious.” Bekar lowers his voice a bit. “The way things are now, we need all the help we can get.”

He looks off toward the limo.

“Well, I don’t want to keep your friends waiting.”

“Friends, eh?” I grip Bekar’s hand. “I know who my real friends are.”

On that note, our reunion draws to a close. Bekar watches me climb into the hearse and depart.

We drive through a city of the dead. Being so close to the eastern border, it was bombed many times. The old “student quarter” with its myriad of cafes and pubs is obliterated. The downtown area is nothing more than towering hulks of gutted buildings. I avert my eyes from the debacle.

We arrive at a little resort hotel on a lake west of town. The pleasant surroundings provide a jarring contrast to everything I’ve grown accustomed to.

Chapter 67

Hollow Celebration.

After residing a few days at the resort, I am transferred to a luxurious hotel suite in the capital city. I’m gaining weight. My two teeth have beautiful gold crowns – a kind of souvenir of my war service – and my hair is thickening out. Looks like I’m going to live after all.

But the inactivity is not all good. Thoughts of the horrors I’ve experience haunt my waking hours, and a new nightmare is terrorizing my sleep. In it, I fire my rifle and bring down a fleeing slobe boy.

“Nice shot, Eagle-eye!” somebody yells.

Purpose is what can banish these horrors from my mind – progress toward worthwhile goals. If I don’t move, I will be overwhelmed. So, I begin to move. Although my body is temporarily restrained, my mind is beginning to make plans.

Clearly, I have been assigned a key role in the government’s propaganda effort. It is not a role I would have chosen for myself, but it seems to be part of the complex fate that has been working out for me ever since the slobe diving incident.

In any case, I plan to make the most of it for my own ends – and for the interests of my country.

I’m being groomed for my public debut at the “Great Homecoming Celebration” to be held soon in the capital. Propaganda Ministry officials show me a speech manuscript and request my input. I add some introductory comments but leave the main text alone. Now is not the time for me to make waves.

“This speech is excellent as is,” I say. “It expresses my deepest sentiments.”

During my debriefing, I tell my handlers about the fate of the Raptor Aces squadron – eliminating any references to Omzbak and the pee cave. Nobody will ever hear that story, except for Bekar, perhaps.

In this edited version of events, the Raptor Aces all perished while fighting partisans in open country. I alone survived to be discovered by an enemy national who held me at gunpoint until an army patrol came on the scene. I manufacture this last detail so as to help protect Trynka from retribution. My story is going to be made public and will surely be picked up by the slobes. It's all I can do for her.

Throughout my narrative, I focus the spotlight on Beltran – the great hero from humble origins who rescued us during the airbase attack. A true leader and loyal comrade who died heroically serving the Fatherland, steadfast to the end. They'll build a martyr legend around him; soon he'll be as famous as the Magleiter himself. I'm sure Bel would like that.

And if he doesn't ... well, consider it to be the last of our many disagreements.

Posters with my general likeness are appearing everywhere, trumpeting the admonition spoken to me by the Magleiter:

Stand fast young man! The Fatherland needs you.

It's not too bad a resemblance, although a bit over dramatic. And the hair has been darkened to give the image a more "universal appeal," according to Ket who helped supervise the poster's design. The idea is that every patriotic young male can visualize himself in the picture carrying our banner to victory.

Blondes like me were never that common to begin with and are even rarer these days. The slobes frequently made a point of executing any "racial apex" types that fell into their hands, thus thinning the ranks of the fair-haired and blue-eyed. My hair color would have been a ticket to an early death were it not for Trynka's intervention.

Also, the brawny arms and torso of the poster figure bear little resemble to me in my still emaciated state. The Propaganda Ministry has me on a special diet, however, so as to fatten me up as quickly as possible – like a lamb for the slaughter. I have no doubt that, if I don't play my role perfectly, I will soon join the ranks of the honored dead. An unfortunate "training accident" would be the most likely story.

Ket is still out on assignment, but her letters arrive frequently. I've made my displeasure at her exile known to the Propaganda Ministry representatives. Hopefully, this will help free her from the tyranny of "the boss" and get her career moving again. I owe her a lot. I often ponder how things would have turned out if I'd been able to make the goodwill tour she arranged.

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The day of the Homecoming Celebration arrives. At my suggestion, Bekar shares a place of honor with me atop the magnificent review stand with its bunting of national flags and Party banners. Black is the dominant color wrapping around us, like crepe on a funeral bier.

The Propaganda Ministry boys liked the idea of including Bekar. As Stilikan's wingman, he has the credibility to help build the legend of the "Golden Brothers" aviation heroes.

Playing the game properly has brought me surprising power. Without consulting Bekar, I've arranged for a team of top surgeons and therapists to work on him after the rally. He won't leave the capital city until his leg is fully repaired. If the

services of his hometown doctor are required, then that man will be transported here as well.

Maybe Bekar will consider this to be high-handed of me, but I owe him a great debt on behalf of Stilikan, and I want it paid as soon as possible.

We stand together on the vast platform along with top Party officials and military brass. Field Marshall Angrift is notably absent. He “died heroically” during an inspection tour at the front. I wonder if that is the real story.

Spring breezes play about us promising renewed life for our nation if we are able to reach out and grasp it. I am dismayed, though not really surprised, to behold the silver-haired Party man we encountered at the restaurant the night before I left. I somehow knew that I’d see him again. We exchange cool nods of recognition.

The Magleiter will not be joining us today. The official word is that he’s far off at the cease fire line supervising our “impregnable defenses.” I think he simply doesn’t want to be here. This event does not commemorate the great victory he promised. He’s trying to distance himself from the debacle – let the lower level Party hacks smooth things over with the people.

Bekar and I exchange some private words after the National Military Band has finished its serenade of the review stand and marched off. This is the first time we’ve had a chance to talk since he arrived in the capital.

“They told me about the little ‘operation’ you arranged for me,” Bekar says.

“I hope you’re not too put out,” I say.

“A little,” Bekar says. “Gyn couldn’t be happier, though. She said I’d find no end of excuses to avoid surgery if left to myself.”

“Is she here now?”

Bekar shakes his head. “Not yet. She’ll come when they’re ready to put me under the knife. She’s very anxious to see you, Dye.”

“I’m anxious, too.”

I would have loved to see her today, but I am also relieved that she is not here. She might misinterpret my actions as being less than honorable.

Below us, the procession resumes. Following in the band’s wake comes a long column of “returned heroes” marching with great dignity, acknowledging the onlooker’s cheers. They wear fresh uniforms, but these do not disguise their gaunt appearance. The crowd is joyous, yet subdued in its welcome.

I join the cheers and applause, mindful, as is the crowd below me, that each returned hero represents many others who will never come back.

An army unit appears next, rumbling by in wheeled APC’s like the ones used by the anti-partisan commandos. The unit must have been brought here from the ceasefire line and will be rushed back as soon as the parade is over.

Then more returned heroes march past, more regular units and military bands. Senior officers in splendid uniforms accompany the formations.

How many of these senior officers are incompetent Party hacks, I wonder? I recall how ordinary soldiers gunned down such charlatans during the disaster at the bridge. It would be unreasonable to expect them to do such things again, however – unless they have a leader.

I make an extraordinarily dangerous comment to Bekar. He can be trusted, though, and no Party hack is within earshot.

“How would all these people react if they knew what’s really going on?” I say.

Bekar frowns, conveying the message that I should watch my words.

“Don’t be an idiot, Dytran,” he says. “People don’t want to be enlightened.”

The procession ends, and the speeches begin. They are all variations of the same bombastic rubbish: We owe everything to the Magleiter who has seen us through these perilous times to national salvation; our future victory is certain; all treachery against the Fatherland will be repaid many times over – and blah blah blah!

Finally, the Party big shots have all shouted themselves hoarse, and it’s my turn to speak as a “representative of the Fatherland’s heroic youth.” I take my spot at the microphones and strike a suitable pose for the News Service cameras which are grinding away off to the side. I look out over the crowd. They have gotten restless from all the drivel they have been forced to listen to.

“Please join me in a moment of silence for all of those who cannot be with us here today.”

My voice booms over the loudspeakers, like an admonition from on high.

“Let us remember those who are closest to our hearts, along with all the rest of our fallen heroes.”

Absolute quiet ensues as thousands of heads bow in reverence. I feel an almost mystical bond with my suffering countrymen, with our betrayed and defeated nation. I think of Stilikan, Bel, and my dear comrades in the Raptor Aces. It is a truly sacred moment. I want to end it with a call to action:

“Arise and fight back!” I want to shout. *“Our ‘Great Leader’ is a death god, and we are his sacrifices!”*

But that would be suicidal. Instead, I launch into my prepared speech which differs little from the earlier ones. It’s all lies. My camouflage feathers remain firmly in place.



Later that day, in recognition of my “stellar achievements,” I receive a commission as an Air Force first lieutenant. The News Service cameras are on hand to record this honor, and Bekar himself pins the aviator wings on my chest.

And come spring term, I’m to be fast tracked into a spot at the National Military Academy. I’ll be studying and flying again, only this time it will be in real military aircraft. My fighter pilot dream is coming true.

Epilog

Our Uncertain Future.

My existence is bracketed by two forever-young men who are my greatest heroes – Stilikan and Bel. I must prove myself worthy of their sacrifice.

They were both superb leaders. Stilikan proved that repeatedly, and so did Bel, when I let him. I’m glad that he was leading at the end where he belonged, even though the results were tragic.

I bear a heavy responsibility to him and to all my lost comrades of the Raptor Aces squadron.

I'd convinced myself that I was seeking justice for Stilikan, but it was simple hate and lust for revenge that drove me on. Had I kept the motivation clear and honorable, things might have turned out differently. But who can tell? In the chaos of war nothing predictable happens.

All my actions, no matter how noble I tried to make them, were twisted and poisoned by the world of the Magleiter. I do not excuse myself, nor anybody else, but we are only humans trying to operate in an inhuman system. I cannot change the past. The future is another matter.

The same bloodthirsty fools who led us into the abyss still control our nation. They strut and beat their chests like mighty conquerors; they point to our new "Eastern Rampart" on the river. Behind it, they claim, our army is building an invincible defense against the slobe hoards. Some rampart! More like the Eastern Sieve.

Our army has been bled white. We've lost nearly an entire generation of young men. The long, meandering river is defended by a hodgepodge of troops – boys as young as 14, men over 50, and the occasional soldier of appropriate age who has been worn down by starvation, disease and wounds. They all hold their posts like clay pigeons strung out in a shooting gallery.

Only our Air Force remains a potent weapon, though it, too, is badly depleted. We need decades of peace to recover our national strength but are unlikely to get them.

The vicious stupidity of our occupation polices played a huge role in the disaster. Mass executions, deportations, our settlers grabbing the best farm land – children screaming in the burning villages. Millions of potential friends became bitter enemies. We failed the test of history.

The slobe army is applying the lessons it learned from us in the new conflict. Already it is halting the advance of its eastern enemies and is starting to grind them down. Within a year or two, it will be back to settle accounts with us.

And above all this horror, like a bloody colossus, towers the "Great Leader." Everything that's happened is his doing. I know that now. Without him and his Party henchmen, we'd still have our national honor. Stilikan, Bel, and millions of others on both sides, would yet walk among us. I try to forgive myself for being such a fool, for seeing deliverance within the Magleiter's gaze when the only thing there was a mountain of corpses.

Things have to change before it's too late. The Magleiter must go, along with his fantastic, hate-driven philosophy. The whole NSP must be uprooted like a noxious weed and thrown into the bonfire. Our best and brightest people must be released from prison or urged to return from foreign exile. We need every true patriot to help defend the Homeland.

I wish to do my part. I'm a national hero, the "Pride of the Fatherland," and the youngest commissioned officer in the Air Force. I have a popular following and friends in high places. Already I've exercised some of my new power. My intervention was sufficient to free Ket from exile and get her a nice promotion. Her former boss reports to her now.

I need to fashion myself into a weapon that will help destroy this regime which has led us to disaster. I have Gyn to help me, or at least hope to, and many others must share our desire for change. I steel myself for the future, but questions from the past still haunt me.

Why did Omzbak spare me at the end? In my mind, I've gone over every possibility. I think the most likely reason is that he wished to deny me the "satisfaction" of killing him myself. He was already badly wounded, what better way to punish me than to deprive me of my goal?

Or, perhaps he actually regretted what he'd done to Stilikan. Maybe he had enough humanity left to understand that his actions were evil and had to be atoned for. Or maybe he just wanted to die – as Comrade 19 indicated.

There is a final possibility. Late at night, when I am on the verge of sleep, it arises in my mind.

"I know you!"

He detested what he'd become and, in some inscrutable way, he wanted to spare me from giving in to hate and violence, as he had done. By putting his saga to an end, he freed me from the burden of hostility I'd been carrying.

But who can say what the full truth is?

All I know for certain is that I must hold fast to honorable notions of right and justice. The commando captain, the silver-haired man, the Magleiter himself – they and many others must answer for their crimes, but I cannot afford to hate them. Hate will destroy me, as it almost did before.

I am the final Raptor Ace. The four lads who did not join our expedition were scooped up by the infantry and marched straight through the meat grinder at the front. My lost squadron, the brave men I met serving in the war – Stilikan, Bel. Their beloved ghosts trouble me, but I must put them to rest and think only of the tasks ahead. The Fatherland needs me, and I must not fail.

For right this moment, though, it is good just to relax in my easy chair, legs stretched out and a mug of real coffee in my hand. Today is my 18th birthday, a milestone I never expected to reach. I feel immensely older – a world-weary old man in a young man's body.

I gaze out the window toward the east where so many events shaped my life. Ket will be here soon with her cameramen to conduct an interview with me, and after that...

If nothing else, the future promises to be very interesting.
