

OUT OF THE LOOP

Ben knew the instant he put eyes on Paula Preston that she was going to be big trouble.

"I am the only remaining official from the United States Consulate left in this city," she told him, sticking out her chin. "What happens here in North Africa is my business."

"We're not from the United States of America," Ben said.

"Of course, you are. Where is the American flag? Why aren't you flying it?"

"I am Ben Raines, Ms. Preston. Commanding General of the Armed Forces of the Southern United States of America. The SUSA."

"You're what?"

"You don't know what happened in America, do you?"

"We've been cut off here for years with no electricity, no communication. We knew there was some sort of civil war, but. . ."

"The SUSA won. The United States is broken up into four sections now, Ms. Preston. I have nineteen battalions here in Africa. We're stretched out over the entire continent."

"I fear that Field Marshal General Bruno Bottger has you outnumbered, sir. Even with your nineteen battalions."

"The Rebels are always outnumbered, Ms. Preston. We're used to that."

"The . . . Rebels? The Southern United States of America and the Rebel army? Then you fly the stars and bars of the Confederacy?"

"No. We do not. We fly the stars and stripes, Ms. Preston. We just don't have as many stars as before."

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6 A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.

-Machiavelli

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The loading for the long voyage had begun.

A dozen ships, heavily laden with equipment and supplies, had already set sail, half a dozen tanker ships with them, filled to overflowing with fuel for the Rebels' vehicles. They would loaf along until the rest of the convoy caught up with them.

Ben's One Batt would be the first Rebels to set sail, and the first ashore in Morocco . . . after Ike's SEALs went in to check things out.

Ben paced the docks all day, day after day, until his ship was ready to go and his One Battalion was on board. He stepped up the gangway and turned to look back at Ike and the other Batt Corns, standing on the dock. He tossed them a very sloppy salute; they returned the salute in like manner. Ben turned away and stepped on board.

The deck was filled with lashed-down vehicles, from pickup trucks to Hummers to deuce-and-a-halves. Many of the Rebels would sleep in the trucks on the way over.

The factories in the SUSAs had been working overtime for a year, gearing up for this voyage, working around the clock producing bullets and grenades, boots and bras, field rations and mortar rounds, uniforms and socks, notepads and maps, spare parts for every piece of equipment the

Rebels used, headgear and bandages,

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and ten thousand other articles that the Rebels would need long before this campaign was over . . .

This ambitious campaign to Africa that no one, including Ben, had been all that anxious to undertake.

But it had to be done. The Nazi, Bruno Bottger, had to be stopped; he could not, must not, be allowed to grow any stronger, to establish any further inroads in territory.

Ben looked down at the docks as the lines were freed and his eyes caught those of President Cecil Jefferys, staring up at him. Ben lifted a hand in farewell and his long-time friend returned the gesture. Both of them knew this campaign might take a year, it might take five years.

No one knew.

For the Rebels were sailing into the unknown.

Nineteen oversized battalions were sailing, each with their own backup of tanks and artillery; thousands of combat-ready men and women under the overall command of Ben Raines.

Dr. Lamar Chase, die Rebels' Chief of Medicine, walked up to stand at Ben's side as the tugs began to ease die big ship away from its slip along the docks.

"How's Cooper?" Ben asked.

"Already suffering from seasickness," Lamar said with a smile. "It's going to be a long voyage for Coop."

Cooper, Ben's driver.

"I'm sure Jersey is giving him a very bad time of it."

"Naturally."

Jersey was Ben's diminutive bodyguard, part Apache Indian.

"Beth?"

"She had her head stuck in a book about Africa when I passed by her a few minutes ago.

Beth, the statistician of the team.

"Anna?"

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"Should be in school and you know it. However ..." The doctor quickly held up a hand. "... I know she would have defied you and stowed away had you tried to insist on that."

Anna, Ben's adopted daughter. Eighteen years old, beautiful, and one of

the most deadly guerilla fighters ever to put on a uniform. Ben had found the dirty-faced little waif in Europe and taken her in.

"Corrie?"

"Fiddling with her radio equipment."

Corrie, Ben's radio tech.

Corrie, Jersey, Cooper, Beth, Anna: Ben's personal team.

The huge engines of the ship began grumbling; Ben could feel the vibration under his boots.

Chase pointed. "Another ship moving away from the docks."

"That'll be Therm's Headquarters Batt. Ike's 2 Batt will be shoving off a few minutes behind Therm. The rest will be moving out in numerical order after that."

Chase glanced at Ben and smiled but said nothing, knowing Ben's reply had been automatic. Dr. Lamar Chase had been through all this before. Lamar had been one of the original few to follow the dream of the Tri-States philosophy of government. He had been there when the dream was born, and had survived the federal government's almost successful attempts to smash it into oblivion.

But the dream would not die; the philosophy lived on and grew and flourished despite everything the federal government did to kill it. And the government did much to kill the dream, including character assassination of many of the followers of the Tri-States philosophy, false accusation of crimes, bankrupting followers by punitive measures through the IRS, and sometimes

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even killing a too-vocal follower of the Tri-State movement.

The biased and left-wing controlled press did their part, too, in attempting to destroy anyone who did not roll over and kiss the ass of Big Brother Government. Anyone who spoke too loudly against the government was called a whako, a gun-nut, a right-wing conspiracy freak, and if anyone dared join a group that had the courage to speak openly against the government, the press called them government haters.

Finally there was what was called the Great War among the nations of the world, followed by a devastating worldwide depression. In America, there was a revolution by followers of Ben Raines and the Tri-States philosophy of government.

Then there was anarchy all over the world; that is, anarchy in every area not controlled by the force that had become known as Ben Raines Rebels.

But through it all the Rebels prevailed, until finally they formed their own nation: the Southern United States of America, the SUSANA. And with the emergence of a new nation came the mightiest army on the face of the earth: the Rebels.

Ben Raines and his Rebels had roamed all over North America, clearing the nation of gangs of lawless punks and thugs and street slime. They

had helped hundreds of thousands of American citizens, who either could not or would not help themselves, to stand up and face reality and start the process of rebuilding. And for that, the Rebels had received very little in the way of thanks. They had traveled to many countries of Europe, helping to restore order in that part of the world. Now they were on their way to Africa to see what surprises that huge continent held in store for them.

"Ben," Lamar Chase broke a long silence between

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them. "This could prove to be the costliest campaign in terms of human life the Rebels have ever been on."

"I know, Lamar. Believe me, I know. I vacillated a dozen times on this decision."

"Let me explain, Ben. I wasn't speaking in terms of combat alone ..."

Ben looked at him.

"We're going into a hotbed of exotic diseases; diseases that the men and women of the CDC-when there was a CDC-were fighting day and night to find cures for. For weeks, I've had my people studying everything they could find on Africa, trying to stock up with as many types of vaccines and medicines as I could think of. Ben, before the Great War and the revolution, you spent some time in Africa as a mercenary. What was your impression of the country?"

Ben Raines had never denied his employment with the CIA, sometimes working as a mercenary for the Company. "A land of many contrasts, Lamar. Some parts of it lush and beautiful, some harsh and totally unappealing. Personally, I never liked Africa. And I'll be honest with you: if Bruno Bottger and his people were not there, we wouldn't be sailing for that continent."

"Ben, I've known you for a long time. I've seen you risk your life dozens of times to save people of all colors. So I know that hesitation isn't based on race. What is it?"

"Some writer, some philosopher, once wrote that it is always five minutes to high noon in Africa. People much more intelligent than I have tried to figure out what he meant by that. I think he meant that somewhere in Africa, at any given time, it's showdown time; a crisis is about to explode. Lamar, there are hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects in Africa. There are old hatreds between tribes that go back countless

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centuries. And we're not going to heal those rifts; no white man has ever managed to come close and I'm not even going to try. If these people want to kill each other off, let them. I don't care. I'm going to deal with Bruno Bottger and once that is done, we're out of there as fast as we can board ship and get gone."

"But we are going to try to form some working relationship with various countries?"

"I'm going to make a very perfunctory effort, Lamar. Look, you don't understand African politics. I can make a deal with the ruling government of some country today, and before the ink is dry, some of the other tribes in that country will immediately begin plotting against it. In a week or a month or a year there will be a coup, or an attempted coup, or an assassination, and the agreement won't be worth the paper it's written on. I've seen it happen too many times."

"So we just do what we can for the people, the Band-Aid solution, if you will, and walk away?"

"That's about it, Lamar. They've got to work out their own internal problems."

"While countless thousands die from hunger, disease, and warfare?"

"They've been doing that for centuries, Lamar. Seems to me the more technology we pour into that continent, the worse it becomes. A few benefit, the masses suffer. Maybe it's time to say, 'We're out of here. Somebody will be back in a hundred years. I hope you've solved your problems by then. Don't call us. We'll call you.' "

"And the continent continues to be exploited."

"Of course. The U.S did, France did, Germany did, Belgium did, England did. Every nation that ever ventured there had a hand in raping the country and screwing the people."

"Because of the greed of various nations."

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"And the ignorance of the people who were in power at that particular time."

Lamar looked at Ben for a long time, then slowly shook his head and turned, walking away without another word.

Jersey strolled up to stand beside Ben. "Dr. Chase looks pissed, boss."

"It's the way of the world, Jersey," Ben said. "The strong exploit the weak. The educated often take advantage of the uneducated and less fortunate."

"I'm glad I missed that conversation," she said. "On a lighter note, Cooper says he's dying and wants somebody to witness his last will and testament."

"Cooper will be dying for a couple of weeks," Ben said. "And as soon as his boots touch soil, he will be miraculously cured of his seasickness. It never fails. Just leave him alone and let him wallow in his self-pity."

"Which he does so well," Beth said, walking up.

The ship just then gave a great lurch and somewhere forward Cooper cried, "Oh, my God. I'm dying!"

Jersey sighed. "It's going to be a long trip."

The Rebels cleaned equipment, sharpened already razor-sharp knives, read books, studied maps of Africa, played various card games, and caught up on sleep during the sea voyage across the Atlantic. Cooper managed to make everybody miserable with his constant moaning about being sick . . . until a group of Rebels threatened to keelhaul him if he didn't shut up about it. Cooper suffered in silence after that . . . except when around the Team.

And everybody got caught up on their shots.

"I have never received so damn many shots in all my life," Ben bitched one calm sunny morning, as he stood in line on the deck with his team, waiting to get stuck in both arms. "My ass still stings from those damn shots the other day."

"Oh, shut up, Raines," Dr. Chase chided him. "I'm saving the best for last."

"I'm not sure I want to know about it, you damned old quack," Ben responded.

Lamar chuckled at Ben's antics. "I have never seen a man so goosy about taking shots, Raines."

"I wouldn't be if you sadists would cool it with the square needles!" Ben fixed his long-time friend with a hard look. "And what is this crap about 'saving the best for last?' "

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"Oh, you'll see, Raines," Chase replied, a wicked look in his eyes. "You'll see."

"Seeing is one thing, you old fakir. Feeling is quite another."

Chase walked away, chuckling.

"What the hell's he talkin' about, boss?" Jersey asked.

"I don't know, Jersey. But you can bet your boots it isn't going to be pleasant."

"What were those shots they gave us in the butt yesterday?" Anna asked. "My rear end still hurts."

"I asked one of the medics," Beth said. "She just smiled and said it might help if I was real careful and didn't stand in swamp water for too long."

"What the hell does that mean?" Corrie asked.

"Who knows?" Cooper said. "I know only that when we get through, if there's a way to catch a plane back, I'm going to take it. You can bet on that."

"How many more of these damn shots do we have to endure?" Ben asked a passing doctor.

"Only a few more, sir," the doctor replied. He smiled. "Tomorrow is the last one." Then he hurried on.

"I didn't like that smile worth a damn," Jersey said. "Those doctors are about to spring a surprise on us."

"It's all for your own good, my precious little cactus flower," Cooper needled her.

"Stick it up your kazoo, Cooper," Jersey told him.

"Women to the left, men to the right," a medic yelled from the front of the line. "Women step behind that canvas and drop your britches."

"Aw, shit!" Jersey hollered. "My ass still hurts from yesterday!"

"What you need is some tender loving care," Cooper told her. "And I am just the man for the job."

"What you're going to get is a rifle butt in the teeth, Cooper," Jersey responded. "I hope they break the damn needle off in your arm."

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"Now, now, my beauty," Cooper smiled. "WHA-HOOO!" Cooper yelled as a medic jabbed a needle into his upper arm and popped the vaccine to him.

"I just wish I knew what lay in store for us tomorrow," Ben muttered through clenched teeth.

"The last one, General," a medic said, popping the needle into Ben's arm.

"I suppose I should take some comfort in that," Ben said with a grimace as the medic pressed a piece of cotton against his arm.

"Hold that there for a few seconds, General. That's it. Move along, please."

From behind the canvas, Jersey yelled, "What the hell did you just jab me with, you blacksmith? A friggin' railroad spike?"

The next morning, Ben looked up from studying maps, as Lamar Chase approached.

"What do you want?" Ben demanded.

"I will spare you the indignity of having the troops watch their commander sink to his knees, Raines. Stand up and pull up your shirt."

"Why?"

"Just do it, Raines. Don't argue. This shot is very important."

Ben stood up and pulled up his shirt. "What is it?"

"A combo." Lamar swabbed Ben's stomach with alcohol and opened a small black case.

"Did you take one of these things, you old goat?"

"We all did, Raines. Untense your stomach muscles. That's it. Now this

is going to hurt you a lot more than it does me."

"Thanks so very much." Ben grunted as the needle went in, then a burning sensation overwhelmed his stomach area. "Jesus H. Christ, Lamar," he groaned,

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grabbing hold of the edge of the small desk in his quarters.

"Not very pleasant, is it?"

Ben sat down in a chair and groaned, both hands holding his stomach. "What was that?"

"A combination of vaccines, Ben. Well, I've done all I can do to protect us ... including boosters for us all. Probably overkill, really. But we don't know what we're heading into, do we?"

The pain had lessened in Ben's stomach and he exhaled in relief. "For a fact, Lamar. What all have we been inoculated for?"

"Oh, typhoid, tetanus, hepatitis, meningococcal meningitis, anti-rabies, anti-venom. The pills you all started taking several weeks ago and will take every day for as long as we are on the continent are for malaria. Let's see . . . well, we all took some experimental shots for dengue fever. I don't know whether they'll work or not, but they damn sure can't hurt ..."

"That's a matter of opinion," Ben interrupted.

"Oh, shut up, you big baby. Let's see, what else? Well, you all got some pretty heavy duty shots of gamma globulin. You received some shots that will help-supposedly-in warding off some afflictions as elephantiasis, hydatid disease, leishmaniasis, schistosomiasis ..."

Ben held up a hand. "I don't want to hear any more about it, Lamar. I don't know what the hell you're talking about anyway. I only hope you do."

"Trust me."

"Do any of us have a choice in the matter."

Lamar smiled. "Actually, no."

From the restored Port of New Orleans in the nation of SUSA to Africa is not an overnight cruise. With the ships heavily cargoed, the trip took days. Luckily the

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seas were unusually calm and the voyage uneventful. . . except for an occasional case of seasickness and a whole lot of bitching from Cooper.

The Rebels on each ship exercised daily to keep the kinks out of their muscles and to give them something to do ... and to bitch about.

Ben worked on deck whenever possible, even though his quarters were private, airy, and very nice.

Beth spent much of her time studying books out of the cases she had brought with her on Africa. On the voyage over, she was boning up on Morocco.

One sunny morning she sat down beside Ben, the team gathered around her, and opened a map. "Where are we going to land, boss?"

Ben stuck a finger on the map. "Right there, Beth. Tangier." He looked at the date on his watch. "In two days. The battalions will start stretching out immediately. Ike and his 2 Batt will travel across the top of North Africa to Egypt. We know that the northernmost part of Libya is relatively secure. Israel took care of that . . . with some assistance from Egypt. Egypt is secure and prospering. We confirmed that when Israel finally opened up lines of communication with us."

"How about those other mideast countries that were sworn enemies of Israel?" Corrie asked.

"So far as we have been able to determine, they have been neutralized," Ben said. "They are no longer a threat to anyone."

"So we don't worry about them this run?" Cooper asked.

"I don't think anybody will ever again have to worry about those terrorist nations," Ben said softly. "Not for a long, long time."

"So we're taking the west side of the continent?" Jersey asked.

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"That's it, gang. When the battalions have stretched out west to east, we start working south."

"What's the time factor on this, General Ben?" Anna asked.

"There is no way of determining that, Anna. We might be over here for years. I won't even make a guess. Hell, we might be tied up in North Africa for months fighting our way through highly organized resistance. Then we still must face our main opposition."

"Bruno Bottger," Corrie said softly.

"Yes. Good ol' Bruno and his Nazis. Jesus, I wish I could have killed that son of a bitch in Europe."

"We gave it a pretty good shot," Jersey reminded him.

Ben sighed. "Yeah, we did. Well, better make sure you've got all your gear together. Forty-eight hours is going to pass pretty quickly."

After his team had left, Ben sat for a time, deep in thought. Then he folded his maps, tucking them away in a waterproof map case, his other papers going into a briefcase. Then he went in search of the SEAL team who would be going in first.

Forty-eight hours was ticking down toward jump off time.

"Looks peaceful enough," Lamar Chase remarked, standing beside Ben at

the rail. The doctor lowered his binoculars.

"SEALs have determined the docks are secure," Ben replied. "They also reported that the city itself, at first glance, does not appear to hold any hostile forces. But the team leader also said he has a very goosy feeling in the pit of his stomach about the situation."

"Well, if that's the case, you can't lead your people in, Ben."

"Watch me."

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WMiam W. Johnstone

"Listen, you hard-headed ..." Lamar bit the remark off, knowing there was no point in arguing with Ben. He sighed and shook his head.

"1 Batt into the landing craft," Ben said to Corrie, standing by his side.

She immediately transmitted the orders and the Rebels began going over the side, climbing down into the landing craft that were tucked in close to the huge ship.

Ben stuck out his hand and Lamar shook it. "Break a leg, Raines," the doctor said.

"You wish," Ben replied with a smile, then went over the side and seconds later was in a landing craft, his team right with him.

The landing craft pulled away from the ship and into the channel, beginning a circling/holding pattern until all the other landing craft filled with Rebels were ready to go.

Ben, Jersey, Corrie, Beth, and Anna were carrying CAR's, Cooper was carrying a SAW (squad automatic weapon). Every Rebel was heavily laden with equipment, for no one had any idea how long they might have to hold the dock area before supplies could reach them.

Ben cut his eyes to his team. Jersey was calmly chewing gum, her expression bland. Corrie was listening intently to the SEAL team chatter on the docks. Anna was adjusting her battle harness. Cooper was talking softly with Beth. Ben smiled. His team had been through this many times.

"Ship is signaled 2 Batt is ready to go," Ben was informed. "All 1 Batt personnel in landing craft."

"Take us ashore," Ben ordered. "2 Batt will hold until my orders."

"Yes, sir."

"General Ike says for you to watch your ass," Corrie told Ben.

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"Tell fatso as big as his ass is, it's in far more danger than mine," Ben responded.

"Right, boss," Corrie said. "You know I'm going to do that."

Ben laughed as the landing craft headed for the shoreline.

"The SEALs are coming under fire," Corrie reported.

"I wondered when that would come." Ben looked at the coxswain, who was looking back at him. "Put the pedal to the metal, son. Get us ashore."

"Yes, sir."

The young coxswain was not used to commanding generals being in his boat and was just a tad on the nervous side. Ben moved to his side and patted him on the shoulder. "You're doing just fine, sailor."

"Thank you, sir. Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Would you please get your ass down behind cover?"

Ben laughed at the expression on the young sailor's face. "You mean it wouldn't look good on your record if I got killed while riding in your boat?"

"Something like that, sir."

Ben chuckled and moved away, rejoining his team.

"Boss?" Cooper said.

"Yes, Coop?"

"You know I'll follow you through the gates of Hell, don't you, sir?"

"I know that, Coop."

"But I have got to draw the line at one thing."

"What's that?"

"I refuse to ride a goddamn camel!"

Cooper had such a serious expression on his face, Ben and his team howled with laughter, breaking any slight tension.

The dock area drew closer.

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Ben was the first one out of the landing craft and onto Moroccan soil-or concrete and wood to be more accurate, since the coxswain put the craft into a slip right up against the docks.

Ben and team ran to a row of large metal shipping containers and crouched there. So far, they had received no hostile fire in their direction.

"1 Batt coming in," Corrie reported.

"Tell them to spread out left and right and secure the port area," Ben ordered. "If an unknown points a gun at them, drop him."

But whoever had been attacking the small SEAL team cut and ran when hundreds of Rebels began pouring all over the port area and spreading out.

"SEALs report a number of shadows fading back and disappearing into alleyways and buildings," Corrie said.

"That means they'll probably be setting up to ambush us and take pot shots. Tell the first platoon to work forward and start putting some rifle grenades into those buildings. Pour it on. Let's see what happens."

When the first several dozen or so 40mm grenades dropped in through the broken windows and open doorways and exploded, there was a mass exodus of those who had met the Rebels with hostility. They were

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wearing a mishmash of clothing, varying from long hooded robes to tattered military uniforms.

"All right, people," Ben said. "Let's clear the port area so Ike's 2 Batt can land."

An hour later, Ike strolled up to Ben: a great big teddy bear carrying a CAR, battle harness bulging with full magazines and grenades. A very dangerous teddy bear.

"Any casualties, Ben?"

"Not a one. You?"

"One guy slipped and broke his ankle. It's pretty bad. I'm sending him back home. He's out of it."

"Well, somebody has to keep the ladies happy back home. It's a dirty thankless job, I'm sure."

Ike laughed. "Those who attacked you . . . any idea who they were or if they were acting alone or part of an organized resistance?"

"We took two prisoners, but so far, they're not talking."

"Civilians giving you any trouble?"

"What civilians, Ike? We haven't seen the first sign of a civilian-man, woman, or child." He turned to Beth. "What was the population of this city before the war, Beth?"

"Just about three hundred thousand, boss."

Ben cut his eyes to Ike just as Dan Gray walked up; his 3 Batt was ashore. "So where did the people go? What happened to them?"

"How far in have you pushed?" Dan asked.

"A few hundred meters. Past several streets. Nothing." He opened a map and spread it out on the hood of a beat-up old car of indistinguishable make. "Dan, start spreading your people up this road." He jabbed a

finger at a spot on the map. "Up toward Medina. Take it slow and careful and investigate each building and alley."

"Right, sir."

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The former British SAS man went trotting off, yelling at his platoon leaders and company commanders.

"Boss," Corrie said, "Therm is hollering about coming ashore. He was supposed to follow us. He wants to know what the hold-up is."

The former hippie-turned-warrior was in command of headquarters battalion; actually a short battalion about the size of several companies, designated 19 Batt.

But Rebel companies were several times larger than the old regular army companies. Rebel battalions were pretty much self-contained, with armor and artillery rolling with them. In the short run, Rebel battalions did not have to call for armor and artillery; they already had it available.

In support of the 19 battalions, there were additional armor and artillery companies separate from them, as well as air. But it would be several weeks before the helicopters and planes arrived on the scene, and another several weeks before the additional armor and artillery companies would arrive and come ashore.

"Tell Thermopolis to keep his pants on," Ben said. "I don't have any need for his HQ people just yet. Tell him to stay busy sharpening his pencils. He'll have plenty to do in a very short time."

"Advance teams are finding large groups of civilians," Corrie reported, after acknowledging the radio report. "French-speaking, mostly. With Arabic and various Berber dialects."

"Get the interpreters ashore," Ben ordered. "ASAP." He looked across the wide street, then consulted his map. "We just crossed the Avenue des Forces Armees Royales. We've got a long way to go to reach the business district. When the interpreters get here, ask the civilians if there are any creepies around."

"Sergeant Broussard managed to get his Cajun French

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through to them," Corrie said. "They said no. They didn't even know what a night person was."

"Thank God for small favors," Ben replied. "At least we won't have those bastards to contend with."

"Dr. Chase is throwing a fit," Corrie reported. "Demanding to know why he must remain on board ship."

"For his own good," Ben told her. "We can't bring the MASH units ashore until we find a place for them. Tell him there have been no wounded to care for, so just calm down." Ben looked around. "Dan's 3 Batt is moving out. Tell West to bring his 4 Batt ashore and start spreading out to the south. Let's go talk to some of these civilians."

"Marauders from the south is all they can tell us, General," an interpreter told Ben. "The same bunch who attacked us."

"Marauders? Damn it, marauders didn't kill off an entire city, Lieutenant. What happened to the people?"

The lieutenant talked with the resident for a few moments, then looked up at Ben. "He says thousands fled when the Great War started. Then poisonous gas came and killed thousands more. For several years, the city was calm, life was hard, but people survived, then the marauders became coming in out of the south. He says there are only small pockets of people all over the city. He thinks there are much larger numbers of survivors south, in Casablanca."

"Do you trust him, Lieutenant?"

"No. Not at all, General. I get the feeling everything he's said is a lie."

"For what reason?"

"I don't know, sir. But he's lying. I'd bet on that."

"Talk to some of the others and let me know your feelings then. I'll be around."

"Yes, sir."

Outside, clear of the dimness of the ground floor of

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the building, which had held a slightly unpleasant odor of stale grease and unwashed bodies, Ben took several deep breaths and leaned up against the side of a wrecked old pickup truck.

"What's up, boss?" Jersey asked.

"I don't know, Little Bit. But something is definitely wrong about this city."

"You remember what Dr. Chase told us about the danger of rabies in this part of the country? And to be real careful about approaching stray dogs?"

Ben cut his eyes. "Yes. So?"

"Scouts report not one sign of a dog, cat, or rat anywhere."

"That's what the people have been eating."

"Right."

"Food might coax them out of hiding."

"But do we really want them to come out of hiding, boss?" Cooper asked.

"Cooper, you're an asshole," Jersey told him.

"No, wait," Ben said. "He's got a point. We start bringing out tons of food, we could easily provoke riots. But, if we ignore the situation and

move on, would we rather have thousands of starving people at our backs?"

"So we're peacekeepers and humanitarians after all," a familiar voice came behind Ben.

Ben turned to look at Lamar Chase. "How the hell did you get ashore?"

"I walked on water, Raines. How the hell do you think I came ashore? What are you going to do about this situation?"

"Lamar, we don't even know what the situation is as yet. We haven't had time to assess it. It's dangerous out here. Where is your security?"

"I have a SEAL team all around me. You forget I was Navy before I had the misfortune to meet you. Any more stupid questions?"

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"I suppose you brought a team of non-combatant doctors with you, to get in everybody's way and add more confusion to an already confusing day?"

"Certainly, I did. Now stop with all the questioning and point out where you would like us to set up."

"We don't have a place, Lamar. You were told that. We've only pushed in two blocks or so from the docks."

"Fine. So we'll set up right over there in that building." He turned and pointed.

"Oh, goddamnit!" Ben said. "Go ahead, you old crocodile. But don't blame me if you get caught up in a riot."

"Why shouldn't I? You're in command, aren't you?"

"Sometimes, I wonder," Ben muttered.

Chase wandered off with his security team to set up a temporary hospital. Ben looked at Corrie.

"Tell the cooks to set up their mess tents and get to cooking. Bake some bread. That aroma should get the people out of cover."

"This could get scary, boss," Beth said. "Starving people could easily riot."

"I know, but we've got about an hour to get ready for any trouble. Corrie, have our people set up defense lines. Get any French-speaking Rebels up here on the double. We'll have four entrances to this area, and only four. We can't let more people in here than we can safely control. Bump Georgi and have him start bringing his 5 Batt ashore and Therm's HQ Batt as well. Therm can set up on the docks and I want Georgi with me. Tell them to hurry it up. And tell the cooks don't start fixing anything with pork in it, or we'll damn sure have a riot."

"It's my opinion that if people are starving, they don't have the right to be very damn choosy," Anna said coldly.

"Veil, personally, Anna, I feel the same way about it."

William W. Johnstone

Ben smiled. "But let's not tempt fate our first day in the country."

Ben walked around, inspecting the defense posts. "All people on the defense posts put on face shields," he ordered. "If the people get ugly, they'll probably start with spitting and throwing rocks," Ben told each defense post. "No Rebel life is to be put in danger. If a person points a weapon of any kind at you, drop them on the spot. If they rush you en masse, don't hesitate to open fire. Because I damn sure won't hesitate."

Georgi, the big Russian bear, stormed ashore with his 5 Batt and added part of his people to the defensive line, others in spot locations all around the area, and kept the remainder inside the loose circle with Ben, the mess areas, and the impromptu hospital.

"You people can go play with the fish now," he told the SEAL team who were protecting Doctor Chase. "Crazy bunch of people," he muttered, as the SEALs wandered off, looking for something to get into.

"Well, hell, Georgi," Ben said. "Look who set up the training for them-Ike."

"I know, Ben. That should explain it all. Ike is still as nutty as the day I first met him."

Ben didn't tell Georgi, but Ike felt the same way about the Russian. However, that didn't keep the two men from being good and close friends. They just were wary of each other's tactics in the field.

"A few groups of people are approaching the first checkpoint," Corrie said. "They appear to be unarmed and showing no hostile intent."

"Damn wogs," Georgi growled. "I don't trust any of them."

Ben hid his smile at the Russian's use of the old highly derogatory term for Arabs.

"Thieves and beggars, all of them," Georgi summed up his opinion of the population.

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"I should have left you back in the SUSAs, Georgi," Ben said with a laugh.

The Russian chuckled for a few seconds, the vocal expression of humor sounding much like a rumbling engine of a tank. "Ages-old intolerances surfacing, Ben. Pay no attention to me. My father was in this area when I was just a boy. He brought all his prejudices home with him. Personally I have nothing against these people-yet," he added in typical Georgi Striganov fashion.

"Guards asking if it's okay to allow the first bunch in," Corrie questioned.

"Let them in," Ben said.

"Tell them to check their camels with the attendant," Georgi said, then

grinned, cutting his eyes toward Ben.

Ben laughed and clasped Georgi's arm. "Let's go to work, you grumpy old bear."

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"We did not know who you were, General," a civilian wearing a tattered old business suit said to Ben in perfect English. "So the people ran away and hid."

"Who shot at us upon landing?" Ben questioned.

"Raiders from Rabat and Casablanca. Thieves and murderers and brigands. They control the entire coastline all the way down to Agadir. Other gangs have control of Marrakech."

"Why don't they have control of this city?" Ben pressed him.

The citizen shrugged his shoulders. "They did for years. But now," he grimaced, "what is there to control? No food. Starving people reduced to eating rats. Disease and no hope and no help from anyone. Spain is in the midst of the worst civil war in that nation's history. No help there. Algeria and Libya could best be described as a no-man's land. South of Tarfaya is the same. I am told the airport at La'youn is still, for some strange reason, untouched by the hordes of gangs."

"Still operational?"

"As far as I know. It is not safe to venture outside the city, General. Those who do, never return."

Ben talked with the man a few more minutes then told him to go get something to eat and then get in line for a check-up and some shots.

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"I have not seen a doctor in years. Merci, General, for everything."

Chase had been listening to the last part of the exchange and as soon as the citizen had left, he stepped up and sat down.

"Lamar. I thought you'd be happily sticking needles in people."

"No joking, Ben. This is serious."

"What's the matter?"

"What isn't? This place has more diseases than a research lab. I've sent out a memo to all company commanders to warn their people to avoid intercourse with the natives at all costs. I have never seen so damn many venereal diseases in all my years as a physician."

"AIDS?"

"Rampant. There are bugs out there I didn't even know existed. I'm having a fully stocked mobile research lab flown in as we speak."

"Whatever you want, Lamar. You're the boss when it comes to medicine. You know I'll back you up a hundred and ten percent."

"I want a directive from you warning the troops about the venereal threat on this continent."

"You've got it. I'll draft it immediately."

"There is no cure for many of these strains, Ben. If they contract one of the bad ones, they're dead, and toward the end, it's horrible. There is no hope for them."

"I understand."

"Ben, I don't think you do. I want you to come with me and look at something. There are a few doctors left in the city, but they've had no medicines for years. But they have isolated the bad cases. Come on."

"So you haven't stayed inside the safe zone?"

"Of course not. Come on."

Ben kept his expression bland during the short tour

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of the clinic, but inwardly he was badly shaken. Standing outside in the warm sunlight, he removed his surgical mask and said, "It would be far better if those people in there could be gently assisted into death."

"That's being arranged as we speak, Ben," Lamar said.

"Good. You're sure this virus is not airborne?"

"Yes. My people are sure of that." Lamar sighed. "Ben, we can help these people in the short run, but when we pull out? ..." He shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of helplessness.

"I'm certainly open to suggestions, Lamar."

"Ben ... I don't know the answer. Hell, we can't even adequately feed and take care of the medical needs of the people in America."

"And here?"

"Put a Band-Aid on it and hope for the best, I suppose. There really isn't much more we can do."

Ben nodded his head. "I'll get the warning out to the troops about sexual encounters with the locals."

"Do that, Ben. I can't stress how important it is."

Back inside what was being called the safe zone, Ben was pleased to see how well-behaved the locals were, patiently standing in line to receive food, then medical attention.

He had Beth take down the warning Chase had asked for. She would radio the ship and they would type it up and make copies for distribution among the troops.

When that was done, Ben wandered down to the docks, his team with him.

Therm and his 19 Batt were ashore, and Rebet and his 6 Batt were about to come in. Equipment was being off-loaded: HumVees first, then APC's and tanks, followed by huge tanker trucks. Several miles from the shoreline, out of sight of land, and perhaps unfriendly eyes, huge tanker ships waited. Several others had left the SUSAs days before the main

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convoy. They would travel around the Horn and come up on the other side of the continent and then track south, supplying those Rebels on the east side of Africa with fuel.

Thousands of Rebels were now ashore. Ike was already swinging his 2 Batt around and getting ready to move east. Dan would follow, then West, then Georgi, as other battalions came ashore to take their place. Ben had figured that the sight of so many well-armed Rebels would take all the fight out of any guerilla group or gangs of thugs that might have resistance on their minds; Ben had figured correctly. Scouts reported that bands of armed men and women, gangs of various sizes and strengths, were leaving the city and heading south post-haste, deserting the city like rats from a sinking ship.

Ben glanced as Therm strolled up to stand beside him. "Well, you told me you always wanted to visit Africa, Therm. Here we are."

"Some people maintain it's the beginning of humankind, Ben."

Ben grunted his reply to that.

Therm laughed at Ben's expression. "I think I'd better change the subject."

"I think that would probably be best, Therm."

"Where do you want my 19 Batt?"

"When we get cranking, I want you right in the middle of the line, between and very close to two battalions. I don't know which ones that will be as yet. But you're going to be getting reports from east and west, so you'll stay busy. And take Emil with you."

"Somehow I knew you were going to say that."

"You're the only one who can control the little con artist. And we both know that when the chips are down, Emil and that idiotic bunch of his will fight like devils."

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"Okay, Ben. There's some of my equipment coming in. I'll see you around."

"I certainly hope so. Take care. And tell Rosebud hello."

Ben walked up and down the docks for a time, stopping when Ike approached.

"I figure three days until we get enough equipment ashore for us to start pulling out, Ben. All the battalions will be ashore by dusk, and I've ordered floodlights to be set up so we can unload around the clock."

"I know that Bruno has something of an air force. I just wonder if he might try an air attack."

"I doubt it, Ben. His spies back stateside will have told him we have a pretty good air defense system. Besides, that would be a long jump for his people unless they had refueling capabilities. And our satellite pass-overs have never shown anything even resembling that."

"So you think we should keep our little secret under wraps for a while longer?"

"I do, Ben. No point in opening that package until it's necessary."

"I agree. Besides, we don't have that many."

"Yet," Ike said with a smile.

"Yeah," Ben returned the smile. "Yet."

Both men left the topic at that. Neither felt comfortable discussing it openly, for only a few dozen people outside of those directly involved even knew of the project. It was probably the best kept secret of the past one hundred years. Not even Ben's team knew.

The men separated, Ike leaving to check on when his tanks would be off-loaded and ready to roll off the docks, Ben to just wander around.

Ben walked down to the slip where one of the cargo ships carrying his battalion's big boys was docked and was pleased to see a row of main battle tanks lined up

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and engines rumbling. Just behind the tanks, towed howitzers were lined up, ready to be hooked up and pulled away. Ben glanced at his watch. The off-loading was running hours ahead of schedule.

Ben walked over to a tank commander. This was a combat zone, and she did not salute. "We're ready to roll, General. Just waiting for some fuel trucks to join us."

"The staging area is not yet secure," Ben told her. "It's being readied now. You should be rolling off the docks within the hour."

"Yes, sir. Looking forward to it."

"Radar reports nothing in the air within five hundred miles in any direction," Corrie said, after listening to her headset.

Ben smiled. The Israelis were standing true to their word and had stood down their air force until the offloading was complete. They would take no part in this North African campaign, unless Ben asked for their help-and that was something he had no plans to do at the present time.

The Israelis had stabilized the mideast region for which Ben would be forever grateful.

But the Israelis were very anxious to join Ben when he reached the

northernmost lines of the territory claimed by Bruno Bottger and his Nazis. Ben smiled at that thought. It would probably have taken World War IV to keep them out of it. Mention Nazi to a Jew, and he was ready to fight.

However, that campaign lay months in the future; no point in thinking about it now.

Ben's growling stomach told him he had missed lunch, and he waved to his team. "Let's go get something to eat, gang. We're just in the way down here."

* * *

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Ben stood by the side of the highway and watched as the battalions rolled out, heading east. Ike's 2 Batt was spearheading the drive, followed by Dan's 3 Batt, West and his 4 Batt, and Georgi and his 5 Batt. Ike had nearly two thousand miles to travel before he could turn and begin the push south.

The column was miles long and moving slowly over very bad roads; roads that had not been maintained for years.

When the last vehicle had passed Ben's location and disappeared into the dust, Ben rode back into the city and up to Dr. Chase's headquarters and into his office.

Lamar looked up from a mass of paperwork he was wading through, bitching all the time. He threw a pencil down on the paper-littered desk and stood up. "Glad to you see, Ben. I'm about to go nuts with all this paperwork. Let's take a walk and get some air."

Chase disliked paperwork almost as much as Ben did.

Outside, Chase said, "We've got a handle on things here, Ben. We're gradually beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

"The overall condition of the city's residents?"

"Poor. Very poor. But there isn't much more we can do. When we pull out, they'll go right back to near starvation."

"We can't support the world, Lamar."

"I know that, Ben. All we can do is prop them up and move on. How long before Ike reaches the eastern borders?"

"Two/three weeks. That enough time for you?"

"Plenty, for what we can do. Still no word from that Nazi bastard down south?"

"Not a peep."

"Do you find that strange?"

"Not really, Lamar. He'd be a fool to launch any sort

of ground attack against us here, while we're thousands strong. Besides, he knows our satellite passes would pick up any massive ground movement. He wants us close to his home territory, where he'll have the advantage of knowing the terrain and keeping his people supplied. The man is an arrogant bastard, but not stupid."

"Supplies will be a problem for us, won't they, Ben?"

Ben shook his head. "Not really. There will be times when fuel might get dicey, but that's about it. The advance teams we sent over pinpointed dozens of underground fuel depots that had never been touched. Once we get down to Bruno's northern lines, we'll set up positions and slug it out for a time, feeling each other out."

"Of course, that's several thousand miles away," the doctor pointed out.

"Several thousand very difficult miles, old friend."

Lamar glanced at his watch. "Well, I'd best be getting back to this damnable paperwork."

"Tell me when your people have done all they can do with what they have, Lamar."

Lamar nodded. "Tell the truth, we've just about reached that point now. We've already shut down and packed up several MASH units on the outskirts of town. Planes will be coming in tomorrow with medical supplies for the push south. We'll be ready when you are."

Back in his CP, Ben opened a map of Africa and looked at the outline of the continent, as he had done at least twenty times a day for weeks. He smiled, thinking: Nothing on the map has changed.

"And not much will have changed once we've gone," he muttered. "At least not for any length of time." He closed the map and stood up. "To hell with it! We'll do the best we can. No one can logically expect us to do more."

"I've wished the few doctors in the city good luck and left them medicines and vaccines," Lamar said to Ben. "I closed the last aid station yesterday afternoon. We're ready when you are, Ben."

"We'll be pulling out in one hour. Ben smiled. "But you knew that already. You just wanted an excuse to come up to the front of the column hoping I'd invite you to join the spearheaders, right?"

"Screw you, Raines!" Then the doctor laughed. "Only half true. I did want to come up for a moment, but I have absolutely no desire to ride up here and invite somebody to put a bullet up my butt."

"That would take a hell of a marksman considering the size of your skinny old ass, Lamar."

"That's it, Raines!" Chase said in mock affront. "I refuse to stand here

and be insulted by die likes of you. Good-bye!" Lamar turned away, then paused and looked. "Take it easy up here, Ben."

Ben smiled at Lamar and the doctor returned to his HumVee and was gone.

Ben walked to the big nine-passenger wagon that had been shipped over and got in just as the lead tanks were pulled out. He smiled at his team and winked at his adopted daughter, Anna. He looked at Cooper. "Okay, Coop. Let's head soudi."

39 Five

"What's going to happen to those residents back there?" Jersey asked, as Cooper pulled into place in the column.

"I don't know, Jersey. The land around the city isn't worth a damn for farming. But the country did have a hell of a fishing industry before the Great War. You saw the fishing fleet, rusting and rotting dockside. They're either going to have to cope, adapt, or move."

"Or starve," Cooper added.

"That is certainly an option for those who decide to stay," Ben agreed.

"Not much demand for exotic carpets in the world right now," Beth said.

"We didn't get to do much sightseeing," Cooper said.

"Personally, I didn't want to," Anna spoke up. "And neidier did very many of the troops I spoke widi."

"You didn't do much wandering around either, boss," Jersey stated.

"No, I didn't," Ben admitted. "I guess I didn't care to view what I consider to be a hopeless situation. Not any more than I had to, that is."

"What's the next major city?" Cooper asked, turning his head and directing the question at Beth.

"Rabat. Ribat al-Fath, originally. It used to be some

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sort of religious retreat, according to this visitor's guide."

"Big city?" Corrie asked.

"Over half a million before the Great War."

"Wonder how many now?" Anna asked.

"Maybe a hundred thousand," Ben answered her. "And fly-overs report the population is in bad shape. Then it's Casablanca."

"I saw that movie one time back at Base Camp One," Anna said. "I enjoyed it."

"I think everybody loves that movie, Anna," Ben told her.

Beth opened a map. "Then we go to Safi and then cut across to Marrakech.

Right, boss?"

"That's the way I've got it figured, Beth. Then we'll backtrack and see what's happening in Essaouira and then down to Agadir. We'll follow the coastline highway all the way down to Laayoune and then cut across the Western Sahara to Bir Meghreïn, in Mauritania."

"Faraway places with strange-sounding names," Jersey said in a quiet voice.

"That's a line from an old song, Jersey," Ben smiled the reply. "Hadn't thought of it in years. But you're right."

"They're not going to make it, are they, boss?" Corrie asked. "The people, I mean."

"The strong will. The weak will die. If they're left alone, and they probably will be, the strong will soon revert back to many of the old ways. They lived for hundreds of years in that fashion. The younger, smarter ones will leave, go to Europe or America." Ben waved a hand. "But hell, I could be way off base in my think-ing."

"Scouts are reporting there's been one hell of a slaughter in the towns and villages along the way to Rabat," Corrie said abruptly. "The gangs of punks and

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thugs and insurgents and what have you took the women and young girls and then killed everybody in sight before pulling out. Scouts think it started late yesterday. It's pretty grim along the way. The carrion birds are having a feast."

"We've all seen it before," Ben said quietly. "I've been expecting it. Corrie, get the flatbeds with the earth moving equipment up here. We're going to have to scoop out some mass graves."

"Again," Cooper said.

"Yes. And I'm afraid it won't be the last time we do it."

Asilah and Larache had been spared the slaughter, but the next town down the coast, Ksar el Kebir, took the full force of the outlaws' savagery.

"The Great Fortress," Ben said, speaking through the mic in his gas mask. Ben and team stood just inside the first houses and shops of the old city. "That's what this city used to be called."

"Didn't help them much," Anna said.

Bodies lay everywhere in the twisted and grotesque final throes of death. Black carrion birds were busy ripping out dead flesh and pulling out yards of intestines. Huge bloated flies hummed all around the Rebels.

"The fleeing gangs couldn't have killed everyone," Ben said. "Bump the Scouts and find out where the survivors are."

"They're hiding in little pockets all over the city," Corrie informed him. "They want us to move on and leave them alone."

Ben didn't change expressions. "Do they want us to bury the dead before

we go?"

Dr. Chase had driven up from his position in the center of the column and was looking strangely at Ben.

"They want us to go," Corrie repeated.

"Mount up," Ben said. "Let's go."

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"Ben . . ." Chase said.

"Mount up!" Ben ordered. "I'm not going to nursemaid these people. If they don't want our help, that's fine with me."

"Not everyone feels that way, General," the voice came from behind Ben.

Ben turned around. A man and a woman stood looking at him. A nun and a priest.

"The survivors are frightened," the nun said. "They don't know who you are. They've just been through a terrible ordeal."

"Won't you stay and help us, General?" the priest asked.

"Get these people some protective gear," Ben ordered. "Have your doctors check them out and bring them up to date on everything, Lamar. We'll start burying the bodies."

Father Joseph and Sister Mary had been checked out and brought up to date on their shots. They both had taken hot baths and were dressed in clean clothes when they met with Ben about two hours later. The sounds of earth-moving equipment gouging out pits in the ground grumbled throughout the edge of the city. Rebels were working in the city, gathering up the bodies and trucking them to the mass grave sites. The chaplains that traveled with each battalion were offering up prayers for the dead.

"You're Americans, aren't you?" Ben asked, waving the man and woman to chairs in the makeshift CP.

"Yes. We've been here since before the Great War," the priest replied.

"Are there more Americans in this area?" "Several hundred, at least. At last count." "You're both educated people," Ben said. "There

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must be shortwave equipment in this city. Why didn't you start transmitting, sending out trouble calls. Somebody would have rescued you. We would have if we'd received a signal."

"This is where our work is," the sister replied. "We have people who depend on us."

"If there are Americans here, why didn't they make an appearance in Tangiers?"

"They're mostly concentrated in Casablanca," the priest said. "About two dozen or so are in this immediate area."

"Religious people?"

"Only a few. Most are business men and women who were trapped here when the Great War erupted around the world. During the past couple of years, nearly a hundred have fled the southern part of the continent, getting away from Bruno Bottger and his Nazis."

"We assume that is why you've come to Africa," the sister said. "To fight the Nazis?"

"That is correct, sister," Ben replied. Ben looked at the priest and the nun. Both had told Dr. Chase they were in their mid-fifties, but time had not treated them well. Chase had told Ben the pair were not in good health. "And to do what we can for the people on the way down to the fight."

"It's a noble gesture, General," the sister said. "God will surely reward you for your efforts."

"For saving lives or for killing as many criminals and Nazis as I can?"

Both the priest and nun frowned, the priest opening his mouth to speak, then thinking better of it.

"Do you feel up to leading a patrol to where the Americans are hiding?"

"Oh, yes!" the sister said. "We can do that now."

Ben motioned to a Rebel and the soldier led the pair

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away. Ben stood up and looked at Corrie. "This bunch should be a sight to see, Corrie."

"What do you mean, boss?"

"Isolated for a decade and never made the first effort to communicate with the world outside of this area."

"That does seem strange, doesn't it?"

"Very. Hell, they could have thrown a bottle with a note in it into the ocean and it would have reached us years ago." Ben walked to the open window and sniffed. "The stench of death is fading. Our people are working fast." Ben didn't ask what the tally of the dead was. He just knew it was high.

"I guess punks are the same all over the world," Jersey said, walking into the room. "I've talked with some of the survivors. Their stories are pretty damn grim."

"Any idea where they've taken the women and kids?"

"To sell to slavers," Jersey said, a sour expression on her face. "It's a booming business."

"History repeating itself, I suppose," Ben said.

"Who are they selling the people to, boss?" Cooper asked.

"I don't know, Coop. People of very low moral fiber, to be sure." He glanced at Corrie. "Have there been any reports of our people being fired on here?"

"Negative, boss. The city is clear of any resistance. At least so far," she added.

"I have a strong hunch the gangs have gone," Ben mused aloud. "But they should have reached Casablanca by now and done their dirty work. Yet our flyovers show the city has not been touched. So where the hell did they go?"

"Maybe hidden along the highway setting up an ambush for us?" Cooper suggested.

Ben opened a map. "That would be an incredibly stupid move on their part. Yet," he muttered, "you never know. You just never know ..."

45 Six

Ben asked the Americans if they wanted transport out of the country. The only two who elected to stay were the priest and the nun. Ben did not argue the point with them, saying only, "It's very doubtful that we will ever be back this way."

"We're doing God's work, General," the priest replied. "We'll stay."

"Your option," Ben said. "We'll leave you with medical supplies, plenty of food, and wish you good luck."

The Americans were driven to Tangier and put on board a ship readying for the voyage back to the SUSA. The Rebels pulled out of Ksar-el-Kebir the next morning. No one mentioned the priest and the nun.

The Rebels stayed with a secondary road that ran along the coast instead of following the main highway which cut inland and offered too many great places for an ambush.

Kenitra had met the same fate as Ksar-el-Kebir, although not nearly as bad. In Kenitra, the citizens had banded together and made a stand against the hordes of thugs and punks and malcontents who always surface after a disaster of any kind. With the Rebels bearing down on them from the north, the gangs could not afford the luxury of a prolonged battle with citizens, and had cut out for parts unknown.

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By the time the Rebels arrived, survivors from Rabat were trickling in. The rampaging gangs had struck Rabat in full force just a few hours after leaving Kenitra, and while Rabat was a much larger place, the citizens there were not as prepared as those in Kenitra and had suffered terrible casualties.

"We'll be here for awhile," Chase told Ben.

"Take as long as you need, Lamar. We're in no hurry."

"Oh, I will, Ben," the chief of medicine said with a smile. "Count on it."

Ben and his team and a unit from his personal platoon of Rebels took a couple of days to tour part of the city, but soon gave it up and returned to their quarters. It was too depressing, for the city, once a thriving place of over half a million people was rapidly falling into decay and ruin. Most of its citizens were barely hanging on at the very edge of survival.

The museums and finer homes had been looted, the libraries sacked, the books ripped apart and burned.

There was not a dog or cat or rat to be seen anywhere in the city.

"The people ate them," Ben said. "That is why I forbid any mascots to be brought along."

Ben and his team checked all the embassies and consulate buildings, in search of anything that might tell some sort of story as to what happened. They found only looted buildings and rat-chewed bits of paper.

"Nothing," Beth said one hot and humid afternoon. She threw a wad of paper back to the floor of the embassy building.

"Same here," Anna said. "It's almost as if time just stopped for these people."

"Maybe it did," Ben mused aloud. "Perhaps the end came so quickly they didn't have time to do anything except run or die."

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"But if they were killed," Cooper asked, "where are the bones?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't know, Coop. Eaten by animals, maybe."

"Or eaten by . . ." Corrie shut off that thought before the words could leave her mouth.

"Yeah, Corrie," Ben said. "I gave the same thought some consideration."

"Shit!" Cooper breathed, a disgusted grimace on his face.

"But we have no proof of that," Ben quickly added. "And probably never will."

"I doubt it's something the survivors would be willing to talk about," Beth said.

"I damn sure wouldn't admit it," Anna offered. "I was hungry many times back in the old country, but ..." She made a disgusted noise and walked outside.

"Let's see what the intel boys and girls have managed to put together," Ben suggested.

"We're getting there," a Rebel intelligence officer told Ben later that morning. "But it's slow going, piecing together paper that has been shredded."

"You have anything?"

"Food riots, for one thing. People running in blind fear, for another."

"Running in fear . . . from what?"

"Don't know, General. But it seems there was a general panic. And this was after the Great War . . . several weeks after the war. We're sure of that. That's about the only thing we're sure of at this point."

"It'll probably turn out to be one of those mysteries that will never be solved," Ben said. "And we have had a few of those over the years."

Ben returned to his CP and spent the rest of the day doing paperwork. That evening he met a few of the

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Americans who had remained in the city and assured them they would be granted safe passage back to America.

None of them impressed Ben very much and after they had left, he dismissed them from his mind.

Jersey and Anna strolled into his office later that evening and Anna plopped down on a battered old couch. "It's boring, General Ben," she announced.

"Typical teenager," Ben said with a laugh. "You have to be entertained all the time."

"I agree with her," Jersey said. "And I'm no teenager. So far, this has been a milk run."

"Well, it has been boring," Ben agreed. "But that can't last forever. These gangs number in the thousands. They don't dare try to slip into Bruno Bottger's territory; he'd shoot them on sight. We've got them between a rock and a hard place. Sooner or later, they've got to turn and fight. Probably before we reach the Senegal and the Niger rivers. And there, folks, is where I suspect we're really going to hit some hard fighting . . ."

The other members of Ben's team had wandered in and were listening.

"... Those countries have been cut up into sections-tribal hatred, warlords, dissident army factions. You name it, and we're going to run into it."

"So we had better enjoy this more or less calm while we can, huh, boss?" Cooper asked.

"That's about the size of it, Coop." Ben cut his eyes to Corrie. "Did those additional water and fuel trucks arrive?"

"They just pulled in, boss."

"Good. We'll sure need them. Once we pull out of here, it's fifteen hundred miles to the next port. That's at Nouakchott, in Mauritania. And there is a lot of desert between here and there."

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"And not many people?" Anna questioned.

"Not many, Anna." Again he looked at Corrie. "Any word from Nick Stafford's 18 Batt?"

"He's running into the same thing we are," Corrie replied. "Starving people and looted towns. It's the same thing all across to Ike. Somebody really did a number on North Africa."

"South of here we're going to see starving people by the thousands," Ben said, then added grimly, "Or find the bones of thousands."

"What the hell is with this country?" Coop asked. "I mean, I can understand up here, it's desert. The land's no good. But south of here, it's fertile."

Ben stood up and walked to a window, gazing out for a moment. "You don't really want to get me started on that, Coop. So let's just call it bad land management."

The Rebels did what they could in Rabat, then moved on down the coast to Fedala, better known as Mo-hammedia. Then down to Ed Dar el Baida, better known as Casablanca. There they almost got caught up in their first food riot.

"Put warning shots over their heads!" Ben ordered, as the mobs of starving people surged toward the Rebel column. "Now!"

The mob paused, hesitated for a moment, then began moving toward the column again. Additional Rebel tanks rumbled forward; armored personnel carriers joined then. The mass of starving humanity stopped.

"Have the interpreters tell them we have food and medical care," Ben said. "But if we don't have order, we'll move on."

The local, who had joined the column at a village just north of the city, said, "They might take that the wrong way, General."

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William W. Johnstone

"If they do, and they rush us," Ben said, with menace in his voice, "I'll put a lot of them out of their misery. Be sure and tell them that, too."

"Would you really do that, General?" the interpreter asked, worry in his words.

"You want to find out?"

"Ah . . . no, sir."

"Then advise the people to settle down."

The interpreter spoke quickly and the mob began slowly backing up.

Several males stepped out of the mob, rocks in their hands. One drew back his arm to hurl the stone and the muzzles of several Rebel machine guns swung in his direction. The citizen suddenly had second thoughts and the rock dropped from his fingers.

"That's better," Ben said. "I just knew we could reach some sort of peaceful resolution to this altercation."

The interpreter cut his eyes to Ben and whispered a small prayer under his breath.

"Did you say something?" Ben asked.

"I thanked Allah for sending us such a benevolent commander of the relief column," the local answered quickly.

"I just bet you did," Ben muttered. "All right, Corrie. Tell the troops to unass the vehicles and throw up a defensive perimeter. Once that is done, get Chase and his wonder-workers up here and have the cooks start cooking."

"Yes, sir."

The battalion was split along two streets, one, the Blvd. Ambassadeur Ben Aicha and the other along the Blvd. Moulay Ismail, both near the port.

"Quietly get the Americans gathered in one secure location," Ben said to a Scout standing nearby. "Without using bullhorns and certainly without attracting a lot of attention. I certainly would not want to be accused

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of favoritism or discrimination. That wouldn't do at all."

The Scout hid his smile. "No, sir. Of course not. Right away, General."

"Really, now, General!" came the decidedly American woman's voice from the side of the deuce-and-a-half. "These people are desperate and starving and you threaten them with guns and brute force."

"Oh, shit!" Ben muttered.

Her name was Paula Preston and Ben knew the instant he put eyes on her she was going to be trouble. He climbed down from the bed of the truck and faced the woman.

"You figure it's any of your business, lady?" Ben demanded.

"I certainly do, General." Paula stuck out her chin. "I am the only remaining official from the United States Consulate office left in this city. So that makes it my business."

"We're not from the United States of America," Ben informed her.

Paula blinked-stared at him for a moment. "Of course you are!"

"Sorry, Miss Preston, but we're . . ."

"That's Ms. Preston, General."

"Of course. How silly of me. Ms. Preston, naturally. And if you ever marry, there will be a hyphen somewhere in there, right?"

"What do you mean you are not from the United States? Where is the American flag? Why aren't you flying it?"

"I am Ben Raines, Ms. Preston. Commanding General of the Armed Forces of the Southern United States of America. The SUSA."

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Paula blinked about half a dozen times, opened her mouth, closed it, finally managed to ask, "You're what?"

Ben sighed. "You really don't know what has happened in America, do you?"

"We've had bits and pieces of information, General. But for the past several years, we've been virtually cut off here. There isn't a piece of electronic equipment to be found anywhere in the city. All that was looted years ago. All the portable generators were taken. We have am/fm radios, of course, but no electricity and no batteries. We knew, of course, there was some sort of civil war in America. You mean? ..." She tailed that off.

"Yes. The SUSA won."

"Well . . ." Her tone was much more subdued. "I mean, where is the United States Military?"

"Rebuilding. Slowly. The United States is broken up into four sections now, Ms. Preston. The Western United States of America, the Eastern United States of America, the Northern United States of America, and the Southern United States of America."

"That ... is difficult for me to comprehend, General."

"I suspect that in a few years, perhaps as soon as a few months, Eastern and Northern will become as one. There is talk of that now."

Paula looked around her at the Rebels. "This is ... well, a rather small force, General."

Ben smiled. "What you are seeing now is just a small part of one battalion, Ms. Preston. I have nineteen battalions over here. We're stretched out the entire top of Northern Africa, west to east. Working our way south."

"Toward a fight with Bruno Bottger, General?"

"Yes. How do you know about him?"

"Refugees, General. I fear that Field Marshal General

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Bottger has you outnumbered, sir. Even with your nineteen battalions."

"The Rebels are always outnumbered, Ms. Preston. We're used to that."

"The . . . Rebels." She nodded her head. "The Southern United States of America and the Rebel army. Then you fly the stars and bars of the Confederacy?"

"No. We do not. We fly the stars and stripes, Ms. Preston. We just don't have as many stars as before." Ben motioned to a Rebel. "Get Mis. Preston and the rest of her group to a secure area, please. Corrie, inform Dr. Chase of their presence."

"You have women in combat roles, General," Paula remarked, after looking for a moment at the Rebels.

"Yes. The SUSA is virtually discrimination-free."

"You have African-Americans in positions of high authority?"

"The President of the SUSA is a black man, Ms. Preston. Cecil Jefferys. The vote was overwhelmingly in his favor."

"I am very confused, General. I thought ..."

"I know what you thought, Ms. Preston. A lot of people jump to conclusions and make that mistake. Look, go with the sergeant here, and get cleaned up, some hot food in you, and then checked out by our doctors. We'll talk more later, all right?"

"Certainly, General. I look forward to news from home."

"Outside of the SUSA, Ms. Preston, I'm afraid it's pretty grim."

"Why am I not surprised at that news, General?" For the first time since their introduction, the woman smiled . . . sort of. "We'll talk at length later, sir."

"Certainly."

Ben watched Paula lead the small group of Americans away, following the Rebel.

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"Boy, is she in for a shock," Jersey said.

"Yes," Ben replied. "She sure is, Little Bit. A very drastic shock."

"She'd be very attractive if she was cleaned up and did something with that mop of hair," Beth remarked.

"I hadn't noticed," Ben replied, then looked at his team in mock surprise when they all burst out laughing at that statement.

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Beth had been correct: Paula was a very nice-looking woman. Ben guessed her to be in her late forties. She was dressed in clean army camo BDUs (which were too big for her), and she had cut her hair (or somebody had done it for her). She seemed somewhat subdued as she sat down in the chair Ben offered her in his hurriedly cleaned out and very temporary HQ.

"You feel all right?" Ben asked.

"What? Oh. Yes, thank you. It's just that I'm not used to being clean and well-fed, that's all. I have an appointment with the doctors in an hour. They've set up one MASH unit for the Americans alone."

"We're Americans, Ms. Preston," Ben reminded her gently. "And I am a firm believer in looking out for our own. Anyway, I am told that a great many more Americans than anticipated are coming out of the woodwork, so to speak."

"Yes. There are a great many among the newly arrived refugees. And some of them are mercenaries."

"Oh? That is interesting. American mercenaries?"

"A few. I would say, from the reports I just got no more than an hour ago from locals, there are perhaps a dozen or so. The rest are Europeans."

"Armed?"

"Well . . . yes."

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"Uh-huh," Ben said with a smile. "All of them white?"

"Why . . . yes, as a matter of fact, they are. Is that something of importance?"

"Oh, it might be, Ms. Preston. It just might be."

"I'm ahead of you," Jersey said, standing up. "I'll alert Coop and the others." She walked swiftly from the room.

"That is a, well, very attractive young lady," Paula remarked. "In a . . . savage sort of way. And I don't mean anything derogatory by that, General."

"I'm sure Jersey wouldn't have been offended. She'd probably think it was funny. She tends to scowl at times when she's around people she doesn't know. And for her size, she can be very intimidating. As for her complexion, she's part Apache Indian."

"Ah . . . Native American."

"Anyone who was born in America is a native American, Ms. Preston."

Paula opened her mouth to come back at him for that politically incorrect remark. Cooper stepped into the room. "I think we've got trouble, boss."

"Yeah, so do I, Coop. Get set up."

"What do you mean, General Raines?" Paula asked.

"Get under that old desk, Ms. Preston," Ben told her bluntly. "And stay there."

"I beg your pardon!"

A spray of bullets from an automatic weapon ripped into the building, knocking plaster from the walls and sending up clouds of dust. Paula let out a squall of fright and hit the floor, quickly crawling under the desk.

"You were right on the money, boss!" Jersey yelled, sliding into the room on her belly and crawling over to a window. "They're Bruno's people and the bastards are all over the city."

"How many, Jersey?"

"They're battalion size, boss. And it appears they've

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hidden weapons and plenty of ammo all over the place. Looks like we're in for a fight."

"Well," Anna quipped from her position at a far window. "I did say I was getting bored."

"Our people are pinned down in small groups all over this section of the city," Corrie called, after talking with platoon leaders. "But as it stands now, Bruno's people haven't produced any heavy weapons."

Ben waited until another twenty seconds of gunfire ceased, coughed at the dust falling all over everybody, then said, "Anna, you and Beth bring that Big Thumper over here to the front window. Start spraying those buildings across the street. We've got to have some relief. Coop, how's it looking from the rear?"

Cooper had his SAW (squad automatic weapon), ready to bang and he nodded his head. "They're back there, boss. But so far they're staying low and quiet."

Anna and Beth began hammering at the building across the street with 40mm grenades, many of which sailed through the windows. Those enemy troops who had taken up positions in buildings began exiting out the back, straight into the machine-gun fire of two main battle tanks. At least two squads of Bruno's Nazis went down in five seconds, torn to bloody pieces.

The tanks reversed their turrets and bulled their way through the buildings, taking up positions in front of Ben's HQ.

"Tell one of them to cut down the alley and take out that building directly to our rear," Ben said.

Three minutes later, the MBT was tearing the building apart with 120mm HE cannon fire.

All around the section of the city occupied by Rebels, tanks and APCs were rushing to the aid of trapped Rebels, and making very short work of Bruno's people, who really had only two options, since they could not run: surrender or die.

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Most chose death.

The fight was savage and relatively short once the Rebels recovered from the shock of the unexpected attack from what they assumed to be hungry refugees. Recovery for the Rebels did not take long.

When the last holdout had been killed, and the area declared safe and secure, several prisoners were brought to Ben. Paula had crawled out from under the desk and had been escorted over to a MASH tent, where Rebel doctors had resumed business as usual. They were accustomed to working with battles raging all around them, but this time the refugees had panicked, forcing the doctors to call a halt to their examinations and shot-giving.

"What gave us away, General?" a man who had identified himself as a captain asked, standing in front of Ben.

"Just a hunch, Captain."

"What will happen to us now?"

"I don't know yet what I'm going to do with you."

"I demand ..."

"You demand nothing!" Ben shouted at him. "You're all in civilian clothing. I could shoot you as spies and be in full accordance with the old Geneva Convention concerning treatment of prisoners captured during wartime. So don't waste your breath telling me what you demand."

"Are you going to shoot us, General?" the captain asked, in a much less harsh and demanding tone.

"I doubt it. I probably should, but I probably won't."

An expression of great relief passed over the captain's face. He had very quickly realized that he had pushed Ben over the line.

Ben asked the captain a few questions. Each time the man responded by his name, rank, and service number. Ben finally looked over at the guard. "Find someplace to lock them up until I can decide what to do with them."

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The prisoner gone, Jersey asked, "What are you going to do with them, boss?"

"Probably keep them locked up here for a month with an arrangement to have them turned loose at the end of that time. I certainly am not going to shoot them. Corrie, alert all the other battalions as to what happened here and to be on the look-out for infiltrators."

"Right, boss."

"I must be getting old and careless," Ben mused aloud. "I've never underestimated an enemy. I should have anticipated something such as this."

"Yeah, you're real ancient, boss," Cooper said sarcastically. "You want me to order up a wheelchair for you?"

"\eah, General Ben," Anna said. "And I wish you'd stop with all that drooling. Maybe we should have a nurse with you around the clock."

Ben turned first to Cooper, then to Anna, and after a moment, started laughing. "All right, all right. Enough. I get your point. Well, Bruno probably, and I stress 'probably,' won't try this tactic against us again. But we can't be sure. From now on, everybody stays on low alert at all times." Ben stood up and stretched. "Let's go prowlsome."

The charm that Casablanca once held was forever gone. The city that once boasted a population of over two million had been looted and savaged so many times it was nothing more than a mere shell of what it had once been. And it had once been quite impressive. Casablanca had once been the economic capital of the nation. It had been the center of trade, industry, and finance. And it had been a major port handling goods of all kinds.

Now it was a dying city, and of the people who were left, many were sick and terribly malnourished.

Ben and his team walked the streets for a time, but it was not pleasant. Every window at ground level in the

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stores and shops had been smashed by looters and rioters. The stench of death lingered everywhere, hanging over the city like a stinking shroud.

Lamar caught up with them, and motioned for Ben to join him by the side of his vehicle.

"What's up, Lamar?"

"Ben, we're perhaps seventy-two hours, max, away from a major health problem here. There are hundreds of dead bodies rotting in houses and shacks all over the city. We can't use fire, we'd have to destroy more than half the city."

"So it's up to the Rebels to remove the bodies and dispose of them?"

"That's what it comes down to, Ben. And it has to be done quickly or we're going to have real problems on our hands."

Ben glanced to Corrie and she nodded and got on the horn.

"Do you want the troops who do the job in full protective gear, Lamar?"

"I want them buttoned up, Ben, using air tanks. I'll issue them gloves . . . the new cut-resistant type. I just got them in."

"This is that serious, Lamar?"

"Yes, Ben," the doctor said very somberly. "It's that serious."

"What are you holding back from me, Lamar?"

"You've all been inoculated, Ben. It's just these poor damn refugees are bringing all sorts of bugs, and with the troops handling rotting bodies, I want them buttoned up. If there was anything else, Ben, I'd level with

you."

"All right, Lamar. We're going to be here for awhile, aren't we?"

"Yes. We certainly are, Ben."

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Rebel teams began clearing the city of dead rotting bodies within an hour after Ben and Dr. Chase spoke. Doctors worked with the team, ordering some of the shacks in the city carefully burned... with stacks of dead bodies inside. Ben didn't ask why the selective burning, but he had his suspicions. They spelled: Cholera.

Black stinking smoke spiraled into the sky as the shacks began going up in flames.

"How come we have to do this?" Cooper asked. "How come those living here didn't do it?"

"I guess many are afraid to touch the bodies, Coop," Ben replied. He shook his head. "I really don't have an answer for you."

"Always us," Jersey added her two cents into the conversation. "It always comes down to us doing the dirty work."

Ben couldn't argue that. She was right.

"Because we will do it," Beth said.

"Are any of the troops bitching about it, Beth?" Ben asked.

"Oh, no. They just do as ordered, boss. Fight, march, or burn or bury the dead. It's a job."

Anna looked around her at the shacks that butted right up against what had once been enormous wealth. "What a shithole," she said.

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Ben didn't argue that, either.

When he got back to his CP, he found Paula Preston pouring over a stack of old newspapers that someone had found on board ship and brought ashore. The papers had been used as packing material before leaving the port in the SUSA and these had been left over.

"Catching up on the past few years, Ms. Preston?"

"Please call me Paula, General," she said, looking up.

Ben noticed she was wearing new glasses-army issue. Chase had seen she made all the stops.

"All right, Paula. That'll make it easier. I'm Ben. I really hate formality, especially in the field. Are the stories in those papers shocking to you?"

"Somewhat, yes. So much has happened in America in such a relatively short time." She fixed him with her new magnified gaze. "You and your,

ah, Rebels have been busy, haven't you?"

"Very."

She pointed to the stack of old newspapers. "Those reporters don't think very highly of either you or the SUSA, Ben."

Ben smiled at the woman. "Our system of government works, Paula. While the states outside of the SUSA flounder about, struggling to get on their feet, so to speak, the SUSA is functioning smoothly, with full employment, the lowest crime rate in the world, factories, farms, ports, railroads, stores, shops, and a smooth-running government that is truly made up of and for the people. That's why those hanky-stomping reporters don't like us. We didn't crawl out of the ashes of destruction, we came out heads high and working together."

She returned his smile. "Hanky-stomping, Ben? What a unique expression. I assume you mean liberals?"

"That's right, Paula. The people who did more to screw up America than any other group."

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"I can see we have hours and hours of delightful discussion about politics ahead of us, General."

Ben grunted noncommittally at that, not knowing exactly what the woman had up her sleeve. But he had a hunch, and the thought didn't thrill him all that much.

Again, she pointed to the stack of newspapers. "There is nothing about China or South America in those papers, Ben."

"We don't know much about what is happening in South America, Paula, except that nations there are embroiled in civil wars. As for China ..."
He shrugged his shoulders. "We don't know what the hell is happening over there. You probably know more about die Mideast than we do."

"The Israelis settled their difficulties with those Arab nations who wanted war with diem."

Ben chuckled. "I just bet they did. And settled it per-manendy, too."

She frowned. "War is not always the answer, Ben."

"In their case it was. And for them it was inevitable. And I could have told die rest of world what the outcome would be. We've signed an alliance widi Israel. They'll be joining us in die fight against Bruno Bottger."

"That does not come as any surprise to me. I certainly can't blame diem for diat decision."

Ben leaned forward, putting his big hands on die old, beat-up table diat was serving as a desk. "What did you mean, Paula, by the statement 'we will have hours and hours of delightful discussion ahead of us?' "

"Just diat, Ben."

"I'm staying in Africa, Paula. You're going back to America on die next ship out."

"No, I'm staying here."

Ben leaned back in his chair. "Oh? You mean here in Casablanca?"

"No. I'll be traveling widi you."

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"The hell you say!"

She smiled sweetly at him. "I have twice spoken to President Jefferys and to Secretary of State Blanton, General. Also to the leaders of the EUSA, the NUSA, and the WUSA. They all thought it was a very good idea for me to stay and assess the political climate here. President Jefferys, who seems to be a very nice man, by the way, and an extremely intelligent one, said he would be speaking with you shortly about his decision."

"Oh, he did, did he?"

"Yes."

Ben muttered under his breath.

Paula frowned and gave him a very odd look. "I beg your pardon, Ben? Surely, I must have misunderstood. Did you just refer to your president as an asshole?"

"What the hell are we going to do with her, boss?" Corrie asked, after Paula had left the CP.

"I have no idea. I ought to send her over to Therm and let him deal with her."

"Then she'd have access to Emil," Jersey said. "You really want that?"

"Oh, God, no." Ben sighed. "Well, I guess we're stuck with her." He paced the room for a moment, then turned to his team, his face brightening with a smile. "We could always sneak off in the night and join the Scouts up ahead."

"Sure, General Ben," Anna said. "And an hour after we were reported missing, every 'copter and plane in North Africa would be up looking for us, in addition to hundreds of troops and eighteen highly pissed-off batt corns."

"Well, it was just a thought."

"Speaking of Thermopolis," Corrie said. "I just spoke with him. The subject was Emil Hite."

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"Do I have to hear this?"

"Yes. Emil and his followers are now wearing the traditional dress uniform of the French Foreign Legion, complete with kepi."

"Where the hell did they get those?"

"Therm says he thinks they brought them over from the SUSA."

"Where the hell did they get them over there?"

"I don't know. But Emil is quite a sight to see, so says Therm."

"I hope we're spared that sight."

"He's carrying a sword," Corrie added with a smile.

"I don't want to hear any more."

Laughing, the team left Ben's office and Ben stood by the window for a time, staring out. Then he smiled, thinking about Emil and the many antics the little con artist had pulled over the years. Ben's smile widened when he thought about the thousand miles that separated them.

The last American leaving Casablanca shipped out on the evening before Ben's 1 Batt was due to pull out of the city, heading for Marrakech. There were several dozen Europeans sailing with the Americans. They chose not to return to Europe, preferring to take their chances in America instead. Scouts had reported that Safri was burning out of control, deliberately set ablaze by the gangs after looting the city. The Rebels would head for Marrakech, then over to the coastal city of Essaouira. After that? ... it all depended on what the Scouts, working far ahead of the main column, reported back.

Ben had placed Paula Preston in the center of the column, with the medical personnel. She and Dr. Chase had hit it off from the first, and it kept her out of Ben's way.

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William W. Johnstone

The Rebels did not see one living soul between Casablanca and Marrakech. They passed through a few long-deserted villages, and occasionally spotted the bleached bones of animals and humans, but nothing else.

"Scouts are reporting farming going on in the Haouz Plain," Corrie reported. "And the city has a home guard that have successfully battled the gangs. They've also kept the population down to a controllable level, one they could manage to feed, to one degree or another. But they're desperately short of medical supplies."

"What kind of shape is the airport in?"

"Clear and ready for traffic. Six clicks west of the city. Scouts are there now."

"Head for airport, Coop."

"On our way, boss."

"Scouts have home guard directing us around the city," Corrie said.

Ben said, "Corrie, have the Scouts alert the commanders of the home guard and the officials of the city that the airport will be where I'll set up my CP. I would like to meet with them as soon as possible."

"Right, boss."

"And the city's doctors, as well."

"Ten-four, boss," Corrie said, a smile curving her lips. She had already done all that. Corrie knew how to stay a few steps ahead of Ben. The team had been together so long, they could usually anticipate the other's moves.

As the column began approaching the far outskirts of the city, there were burned out hulks of vehicles and houses either burned or pocked with bullet holes.

"I don't see any brass twinkling in the sunlight," Beth observed.

"They're picking it up for reloading," Ben said. "By now they must be desperately short of gunpowder and lead . . . and everything else needed for survival."

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They were, as Ben soon discovered.

A CP had been set up for him about half a mile from the airport, in a reasonably clean and undamaged building. MASH units were swift in setting up, and the cooks were at work within half an hour after the column halted.

Planes started coming in within the hour, off-loading medical supplies, clothing, and food.

"We could have held out for perhaps another month, General," the commander of the home guard told Ben, speaking in French-accented English. He was a former army officer, born and reared in the city. "Six weeks max. We're nearly out of everything."

"Who is supplying the gangs, Colonel?" Ben asked.

"Bottger," the colonel was quick to reply. "The Nazi bastard's goal is to control all of Africa. And the truth is, he isn't promising so much that he can't deliver. He may be a first class son of a bitch, but he's a smart one."

"What is he promising those who follow him?"

"Food, medical care, and certain of the more intelligent of them high positions in the governing of their respective nations. And it's working."

"The bastard is smart, isn't he?"

"Or he has very good advisors."

Ben shook his head. "No. I've fought Bottger before. He runs the show,

be assured of that. He's very intelligent, but also very arrogant. And that arrogance is going to be his downfall."

"I would very much like to be there when you kill the man, General Raines."

"Perhaps you will be, Colonel. Who knows? But one thing is for certain."

"Oh?"

"I didn't travel all the way to Africa to shake the bastard's hand."

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While supplies had dwindled to the critical point in the city, the residents were in far better physical shape than their counterparts in the other North African cities Ben and his 1 Batt had visited.

"When the Great War came, everyone raced off to the port cities seeking a way out," a local doctor explained to Ben. "They became grossly overcrowded with not enough medicines or food. The sanitation systems were overworked and either poorly maintained or not maintained at all. And that is fertile ground for disease." The man shrugged his shoulders. "You saw what happened."

"Yes, we certainly did. So that's what they were fleeing from. Well, that's one mystery solved." He looked at the doctor. "But won't the same thing happen here should thousands try to flood your city?"

"No, General. We won't permit it. We've reached maximum capacity. It's a terrible thing to say, but some of us have to survive to rebuild. We've already sent out hundreds to the smaller towns to start over, and so far, it's working to a satisfactory degree."

"I know the feeling, Doctor. Believe me, I do. It's hard to turn people away."

"But sometimes necessary."

"Very much so."

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The citizens of Marrakech had not allowed their city to turn into a slum or be looted by vandals and thugs. In the face of everything that had happened, they had maintained order and their dignity and pride. That had helped pull them through the years of bad times.

In every space available, someone was growing a garden. On the outskirts of the city, chickens were being raised in huge numbers. The people of Marrakech were not going to be defeated; they were going to pull out of the ashes of war and prosper.

The airport stayed busy around the clock, huge cargo planes bringing in supplies for the once-beleaguered city. The railroad leading to the city was useless, for vandals had destroyed miles of track, rendering it inoperable.

"How about Essaouira?" Ben asked the colonel. "I've not yet sent my Scouts over there."

"Forget it," the colonel was blunt. "It's been looted and sacked so many times it's only a hulk of what it used to be. Pirates used it for a time, but even they finally abandoned it and moved on, some of them moving on down the coast to Agadir. South from there ..." He shook his head. ". . . I don't know. We lost radio contact with the Canary Islands a long time ago. I don't know what is happening there. Probably pirates have taken over the islands. That would be my guess. But. . . who knows for sure. Allah, alone."

"Then I guess Agadir is next on our list of scenic places to visit," Ben said with a smile.

"You'll have a fight on your hands there, General."

"It helps to break the monotony, Colonel."

The Rebels took a secondary road from Marrakech over to Agadir and were met by Scouts miles from the city.

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"We've got a fight coming, General. Pirates occupy the city, and I have never seen a scummier bunch anywhere."

"How are they armed?"

"Light weapons, mostly. We didn't see any heavy stuff."

"Civilians?"

"Women, mostly. Only a few kids. The women are, well, where I was raised we used to call them road whores."

Ben smiled. "I get the picture. Well, I suppose we'd better get busy. We came here to take out the garbage, so let's do it."

"Take out the garbage," Paula repeated, walking up with Dr. Chase. "What an insensitive phrase to use when one is about to wage war against another human be-ing."

Jersey, who had been eating a candy bar, looked at the woman, wrapped up her candy bar and stuck it in her pocket, belched, and walked off.

Ben turned his head to hide his quick grin. Jersey did not much care for Paula Preston. She was fond of referring to her as "That whiny liberal bitch."

"That young lady does not like me," Paula said. "And I cannot imagine why."

"You're a politically correct liberal," Ben informed her. "That's why."

"I certainly am," she replied indignantly. "And there is something the matter with that?"

"Paula, this is neither the time nor the place to discuss it. I am about to start an assault on that town."

"Aren't you going to ask them to surrender?"

Ben sighed. "No, Paula. I was not planning on asking them to surrender."

"Well!" she huffed up. "I think . . ."

"Lamar, would you please take this woman to the rear

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of the column?" Ben had lost his patience. "We are about to move in and if those pirates in the town have mortars, it's going to get very dangerous up here."

"Of course, Ben." Lamar took Paula's arm and gendy but firmly led her away.

"That woman is a fruitcake," Beth muttered.

"Yeah, boss," Cooper said. "How come we always get stuck with the yoyos?"

Ben smiled, his quick burst of temper fading as rapidly as it came. "I suppose the best answer to that is the one the prostitute gave when a customer asked her how she ever got in the business." Ben chuckled. "Just lucky, I guess."

The pirates had no stomach for a fight against professionals. Before the Rebels could even move into position, die pirates were scrambling for their boats and attempting to head out to sea.

They didn't get very far.

Rebel helicopter gunships had been hovering just out of sight and sound of the small city. When die pirate ships were just out of the harbor, the pirates thinking they had gotten clear, the gunships swooped in, low and fast and deadly, machine-gun and cannon and rocket fire rocking and rolling. The harbor became a watery grave for the pirates, who learned a hard lesson about the Rebels diat day: They gave no quarter and asked for none. War was not a game to them ... it was a profession.

"Send teams out to scutde those boats still floating," Ben ordered. "Clear die harbor. We're going to need it."

"We've got a few prisoners," Corrie said, after acknowledging Ben's orders and transmitting them.

"Bring the officers to me."

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The pirates, Ben surmised, had spent their youth watching too many old pirate movies; they obviously envisioned themselves as real swashbucklers: Earrings in both ears, bandannas around their heads, tattoos on every available patch of skin.

"They all speak English," Jersey informed him.

Ben looked at the pirates and then laughed at them. "Which one of you is Tyrone Power and who is Errol Flynn?" he asked.

The four men scowled at him.

Beth came in and laid a piece of paper on the table Ben was using for a desk. Ben read it, his expression changing into a deep frown. He glanced up at the men. "Which one of you gave the orders to slaughter the civilians before you tried to sail out?"

The pirates all grinned. One hawked up phlegm and spat on the floor.

Ben nonchalantly lifted a pistol from his desk and shot the spitter in the knee. The pirate hit the floor, howling in pain, both hands holding onto his bloody and ruined knee.

The others started jabbering in a mixture of languages, all pointing at the other.

"It's a slaughterhouse in town, boss," Cooper said, stepping into the room. He gave no more than a cursory glance at the man screaming on the floor. "These bastards killed all the old people. Shot them, hanged them, and killed them in other ways too disgusting to mention."

"Kids?"

"Only a few kids in town, boss. Some of the older people left alive said most of the kids were seized along with the young women several months ago and sold."

"Any idea where?"

Cooper shook his head.

Paula stepped onto the porch of the home. She heard

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the squalling and rushed into the house. She pulled up short at the sight of the man writhing in pain on the floor. "My God!" she blurted. "What's happened here?"

"I shot him," Ben told her. "And I'm about to hang these others. What do you want, Paula?"

"You're going to hang them?"

"Yes. You want to watch?"

"You're not serious!"

Jersey laughed at her.

Paula's eyes narrowed in anger. "You can't just hang these men, Ben. Not without a trial."

"You wanna bet?"

Ben thought Paula would barf all over her combat boots when he hanged the pirates, including the man with the busted knee.

"Eased his pain," Ben said, looking at the pirate swinging from a makeshift gallows. "All right, let's prowl the town and see what we have."

Death.

The elderly had been shot and hanged and burned alive and tortured to death and killed in every manner a criminal degenerate mind could dream up ... for sport, their bodies left to rot under the sun. The stench was overpowering.

"Get the troops into protective gear and clear these bodies from the streets," Ben ordered. "Before Dr. Chase starts jumping up and down and screaming."

"I do not jump up and down, Raines," Lamar said, walking up behind Ben and team. "However, I might raise my voice from time to time."

"Where is Paula Pureheart?" Ben asked.

Chase sighed, feigning great patience. "The lady had a very gentle upbringing, Raines. She is just not accustomed to your crudeness and vulgarity."

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"Yeah, Lamar. Right. Her ancestors came over on the Mayflower and all that."

"That is probably true, Raines."

"Mine were here first," Jersey said with a smile. She put one hand on her hip and with great British affectation, said, "I'm quite the lay-dy."

Chase could not hide his grin. He shook his head and said, "What a bunch of characters. Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do. Good-bye."

Lamar gone to oversee the setting up of his MASH units, Ben said, "Okay. Let's find me a temporary CP. Down by the port area. We're going to have ships coming in shortly with supplies and more water trucks. Not long after we leave here, we're going to have one hell of a long, dry pull ahead of us."

Agadir had once boasted a population of over a hundred thousand. Now there were approximately five thousand people left in the city, mostly older women.

"Any able-bodied man was taken and sold," Rebel intelligence told Ben.

"And no idea where?"

"None, General."

"What about the Canary Islands. Anything firm yet?"

"Not really. We know it was a haven for pirates for a time. Then for some reason-as yet unknown-the pirates left the islands. They didn't leave much behind them."

"No communications at all from the islands?"

"Nothing. Not a peep. Flyovers show many of the cities and towns on the islands have been destroyed by fires. We don't know if they were deliberate or accidental."

"But the flyovers can detect nothing that would pose a threat to us."

"That's correct, sir."

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"Very well. Thank you." The briefing over, Anna asked, "We going to visit those islands, General Ben?"

"Not this time, Anna. We don't need them for any base, and if they don't pose any threat there is no point in going."

"No people over there?" she asked.

"Heatseekers show very few of them."

"So where do we head next?"

There are lots of towns and little villages between here and Laayoune, Anna. And then . . . we're in the desert, into Mauritania and crossing the Tropic of Cancer."

"Not much along the way, huh?"

"Not much. Not once we get away from the coast." Ben looked out the window: black smoke was drifting lazily toward the blue of the sky. The troops were burning the bodies, for the flatbed trucks carrying the earth-moving equipment had not yet reached the main column. They were about a half a day behind, accompanied by tanks and a company of heavily armed Rebels. Many of the bodies were so badly decomposed Dr. Chase took one look and ordered them all burned immediately.

"I wonder if it's going to be this way all the way down to Bottger's territory?" Corrie asked, standing with Ben by the window.

"Worse, probably. The further south we go the more populated the land. What about the other battalions?"

"We seem to be catching the worst of it, boss. All the battalions are reporting burying or burning bodies, but not as many as we've found. Ike says Egypt was a piece of cake, no trouble at all there. He's going to hug the coast through the Sudan and Eritrea."

"Nothing new after we received that report?"

"Nothing new."

"Supplies?"

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"Ships have docked and off-loaded. Shoving off shortly. Planes in and out with no trouble."

"Miss Priss is about to make an entrance," Jersey called from the open door.

Ben smiled. "Be sure and show her right in, Jersey."

Jersey muttered something under her breath and Ben laughed aloud.

Paula Preston entered the room and marched up to Ben. "General, I need to make a report to my government."

"Of course, Ms. Preston. Corrie will be only too happy to get an up-link for you. That is, providing your government has managed to allocate enough money for radios. The last report I got was they were very busy sending federal agents out into the countryside gathering up weapons from private citizens."

Paula stared at him for a moment. "Sarcasm is not necessary, General. I am very much aware of your contempt for my government."

"I really doubt, Ms. Preston, if you fully comprehend the depth of my disdain."

"Perhaps we can discuss the merits of our respective governments at some later date, General."

"Anytime, Ms. Preston. Corrie, see if you can get through to, ah, her government, please."

"That should prove to be a good trick," Corrie mumbled.

"I'm sure you'll succeed, dear," Paula said to her.

"Only if they have enough sense to find the on/off switch . . . and flip it in the right position," Corrie popped right back.

Paula sighed with the great patience of a career diplomat.

Ben laughed at the expression on her face.

It was turning out to be a very interesting trip.

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A vast emptiness stretched out before the column, seemingly void of any living thing. The Rebels had left the looted and burned city of Laayoune behind them, after doing what they could for the few thousand residents left.

It was almost unbearably hot, and to make matters worse, the Western Sahara and the bordering nation of Mauritania were in the grip of a long drought, and the sun burning every living thing. The Rebels had removed their shirts and stripped down to T-shirts in an attempt to cool off during the day; at night it was sometimes downright cold. During the day, no vehicle air-conditioning could be run because of overheating.

"Goddamn miserable country," Jersey bitched. "Why in the name of God would anyone in their right mind willingly choose to live here?"

"You were raised in the desert," Cooper said. "I thought you liked this?"

"That's what you get for thinking, Coop," Jersey came right back. "What was that last village we passed through?"

"Guelta Zemmur," Beth told her, fanning herself with a magazine.

"We're in Mauritania now," Ben said. "Crossed the

border a few miles back. Bir Moghreïn is a few miles ahead."

"Which used to be called Fort Trinquet," Beth injected.

"A French Foreign Legion outpost?" Cooper asked.

"I guess so. The brochure doesn't say."

"What does it say?"

"Not a whole lot. One paragraph stating that there is nothing there."

"How far to some vestiges of civilization?" Jersey asked.

"About a hundred and thirty miles," Beth replied. "Give or take twenty or so."

"And that would be? ..." Anna asked.

"Zouerate."

"Is there anything at ... whatever you called it?" Corrie asked.

"Not much."

"What a shithole," Jersey muttered.

There was even less at Bir Moghreïn than the travel brochure mentioned—nothing but the skeletons of a few dozen long dead humans, their bones bleached white.

"This place gives me the creeps," Cooper said, looking all around him.

"For once I agree with Coop," Jersey said.

"What do you think, Doctor?" Ben asked the Rebel doctor who had been inspecting the bones.

The doctor stood and looked at Ben and Lamar Chase, the chief of medicine, who had just walked up to stand alongside Ben. "Disease and starvation would be my guess. Possibly bad water. There are no broken bones on any of these remains. No bullet holes in the skulls; skulls have not been smashed."

Rebels had been testing the water supply; what there

was left of it. "Water's bad," they replied. "It's been contaminated."

"Well, let's get the hell out of here," Ben said. "We've got a long dry pull ahead of us."

There were about five hundred people left in Zouer-ate, and they were all in bad shape.

"Used to be almost twenty-five thousand people living here," Beth stated

softly.

Lamar had been observing his doctors check over the people. He left the tent and walked over to Ben. "About twenty percent of these people are dead and don't realize it," he said. "They are too far gone for us to be of any help. Ravaged by disease, lousy diet, bad water. If the others remain here, they'll all be dead within a year. There is just nothing we can do."

"Very few babies and young children," Ben observed.

"Most were miscarried or stillborn," Lamar said. "Those that weren't, died within a few days or weeks of birth. The mothers just weren't strong or healthy enough to carry them to full term."

"And you suggest we do ... what?"

"Nothing. If the people insist upon staying here, we'd be wasting time and supplies."

Ben looked at the commander of the engineer company that traveled with the column. "Can you get the locomotive running? That's the only way we can get them to Atar."

"Providing Atar wants them," Chase injected.

"I think we could get it running," the engineer replied hesitantly.

"Corrie, have you received anything out of Atar?" Ben asked.

"Nothing, boss. Flyovers show it's not much better than this place."

"Damn!" Ben said.

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Another Rebel walked up. "The people say they don't want to leave here," he said. "They're firm about that."

Ben shrugged. "All right. We can't force them and I won't stay here and nursemaid them. Let's get the hell gone."

"Just like that, General?" the familiar voice of Paula Preston reached Ben.

Ben turned. "Yes, Ms. Preston. Just like that. We don't believe in helping people who don't want to help themselves. That is part of the Rebel philosophy."

"I see."

"I doubt it." Ben turned his back to her and said, "Mount up. We're out of here."

Atar was like a beautiful garden flourishing in the middle of nowhere. There were gardens on every patch of ground that would grow anything, and the date palm groves were well kept. When Ben told the local militia commander of the situation in Zouerate, the man merely shrugged.

"We know," he said, and let it go at that.

Ben did not press the point. It was not his country and certainly none of his business.

The commander was a former army officer who, before the Great War, was stationed at the military base in Atar, and who still wore part of his old uniform, with the rank of colonel on the collar. He sensed Ben's plight and smiled apologetically. "At this stage, General, we can only help those who will make some sort of effort to help themselves. To do more would be a waste of our time and our precious resources."

"I agree wholeheartedly, Colonel. I think you and I are going to get along. How about joining me for some hot food and conversation?"

"It would be both a pleasure and an honor, sir."

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The airstrip at Atar was long enough and in good enough shape to handle cargo planes. The town had several doctors, and all the people needed was medical supplies, and that did not take long. Considering all that had happened, the citizens were in relatively good shape.

The Rebels soon shoved off toward Nouakchott, on the coast.

The colonel had warned Ben that conditions in the capital were grim: "Ahundred, a thousand times worse," to use his words, than before the Great War. And Ben knew from studying old reports that they had been dismal even then.

When it became the nation's capital back in 1960, it was an extension of the old walled city. The city was originally designed for about fifteen thousand people. By the time the Great War came, the population had swelled to about half a million. The colonel had told Ben the population now was probably over a hundred thousand.

But it was nothing more than a place for people to come and die, and the stench could be smelled for several miles.

Ben studied the Scouts' reports on the city for several minutes, after listening to taped transmissions from the pilots doing flyovers.

"Corrie, what do the ships' captains say?"

"They've had to beat back boarders," she reported. "Finally they had to leave the harbor and head out to sea to avoid being overwhelmed."

Ben glanced at Dr. Chase. "Give me your opinion, Lamar. It's going to be a medical decision ... at least in part."

The chief of medicine grimaced. "The humane thing to do, the moral thing, the right thing, I suppose one could say, would be to enter the city and start seeing people. But we're going to lose troops if we do that."

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How many looters and thieves did the sentries have to threaten, warn, and finally shoot last night?"

"About a dozen."

"Multiply that by about a hundred thousand and you have the story."

"Your autopsies showed what, Lamar?"

"The people are ravaged by disease. TB and cholera are rampant. The water is bad, they have no sanitation facilities, bodies are rotting in the streets. Rabies has reached epidemic proportions. If we did manage to get in without losing five to ten percent of our own people attempting to beat back those rioting for food, we would only be prolonging the inevitable. It's my opinion that in a year, it's going to be a dead city . . . no matter what we do."

Ben nodded his head wearily and looked at a Scout. "Can you get us around the city, without getting too close?"

"Yes, sir. We've found a route that misses the city by miles. We won't get anywhere close to it."

"All right," Ben said with a sigh. "Let's head for Senegal. There is nothing we can do here."

"Wise decision, Ben," Lamar said, and headed back to the center of the column.

No one had much to say for an hour after by-passing the city. It's not easy to leave over a hundred thousand men, women, and children to die, not even for the battle-hardened Rebels of Ben's 1 Batt. But the Rebels realized they had no choice in the matter. The situation in Nouakchott was hopeless.

The change in landscape was subtle at first, but there was a definite change as the long column crossed over into Senegal, heading for the city of St. Louis, which

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was once the capital of Senegal and Mauritania, until the countries officially split in the 1950s.

There was a good port on the west side of the island, and the airport was usable, after some cleaning up. Scouts radioed back that the situation there was nothing like what the Rebels had found in Nouakchott.

"Let's radio the city we're on our way in," Ben said.

The first roadblocks the Rebels encountered were miles from the city, manned by some sort of home guard: the first line of defense against the roaming gangs. The home guard was protecting their fields, which were planted with vegetables of all sorts.

"Day and night, General," a well-spoken, middleaged man who was commanding this detachment said. "The people try to steal what is not theirs to take. We don't want to shoot them, but warning shots no longer have any effect." He shook his head. "We have to survive."

"I understand," Ben told him. "And if you let one in, soon there will be

one million storming the gates, so to speak."

"That is correct, General. And then no one will survive. We are strong enough to keep the hordes out, but not strong enough or well armed enough to go out into the countryside in force to hunt down and kill the gangs."

"We can help you solve that little dilemma," Ben later told a group of civic leaders, after the problem was repeated to him at a meeting. "But let me make one thing very clear: we are not peacekeepers, ladies and gentlemen. When we go after an objective, we don't play war games with rules. We smash the enemy, we grind them down into submission, and we take damn few prisoners."

That was met with broad smiles and affirmative nods.

Ben returned the smiles, thinking: Now we get down to doing what we do best. "Consider it done," he assured the group.

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* * *

"We hunt them down," he told his company commanders, "and we kill them. We take prisoners only as a last resort. We will not offer them surrender terms. The only thing to do in this country, and probably every country we visit, is to rid them of the gangs that are the major stumbling blocks toward their rebuilding. We came here to help those who have the desire to help themselves. So let's do it."

The Rebels trapped the first bunch of thugs and hoodlums in the ruins of a village about thirty miles from the city. After the helicopter gunships did their thing with rocket and machine-gun fire, the Rebels moved in and finished the job. They took no prisoners but did leave two very frightened gang members alive, cowering among the torn and mangled dead.

Ben stood over the two men and stared down at them. Through an interpreter, he told the men that if they wanted to stay alive, they'd better run far and fast, don't ever come back, and warn other gang members if they wanted to live, to do the same.

The two men took off running and did not look back.

"Count the dead," Ben ordered.

Nearly two hundred were tossed into a shallow mass grave scooped out by 'dozers.

The Rebels moved on.

With Mike Stafford swinging his 18 Batt around north to south near the border, and moving west, Ben and his 1 Batt working east, the gangs could either go north into the desert, or south. Or they could stand and face the Rebels and make a fight of it ... and die.

Most chose to run south.

All over the top of North Africa the same scene was

being repeated. The gangs of criminals were meeting a force unlike anything they had ever encountered. A force of savage warriors who seemingly operated without rules, killed without emotion, and took very few prisoners. Bruno Bottger had not warned them about the Rebels.

Within two weeks, the area between St. Louis and Matam was declared clean of gangs . . . and the residents slowly began moving out of the crowded cities and towns and back into the countryside, in an attempt to pick up their lives and begin anew.

Ben and his 1 Batt headed south, toward Dakar, hugging the coast, while Mike Stafford and his 18 Batt worked south toward Bakel, following the river that separated Senegal and Mali.

Dakar, Ben was warned, was a mixture of gangs and decent citizens, all trying to survive through the hard times: the former through criminal activities, the latter by legal means.

All that was about to change with the arrival of the Rebels.

"The Yoff Airport is in pretty good shape, all things considered," Ben was told, after receiving reports from Scouts and from flyovers. "A day's work and we can have it up and operating. The port is in good shape."

"Gangs?"

"About a hundred different gangs operating out of the city. Protection, extortion, slavery, strong-arm stuff- you name it and they're doing it. And doing well with it."

"Will the locals work with us in bringing a halt to it?"

"Doubtful, General. Just like the old days back in the States, they're scared to cooperate."

"Well, then," Ben said with a smile. "I guess we're going to have to show them how it's done."

The Scout laughed. "Somehow, sir, I just knew you'd say that."

"Yes, I know who the hoodlums are," the merchant spoke through an interpreter. "Every one of them. All of us along this block know their identity. But if we cooperate with you, they will kill our families. No, sir. I cannot do it."

"They can't kill your families if they're not alive," Ben told the man.

The merchant stared at Ben for a long moment. "That would be the only way this city will ever know peace and prosperity again, General."

"That's the way we operate. We don't play games with criminals."

"They have guns and grenades," the merchant said, but Ben could tell he was wavering.

"We have bigger guns and more powerful grenades."

The merchant suddenly smiled. "I will do as you ask, General. And so will the others along my block."

The back door suddenly burst open and Jersey and Cooper threw a young man inside. He slid on the floor on his face. He was butt-ugly before he hit the floor, so the slide really didn't hurt his looks any.

"You will die for this, you coward!" he hissed at the merchant.

The interpreter told Ben what the punk had said and Ben kicked the hoodlum in the face with the toe of his

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boot. Several teeth abruptly left the young man's mouth and went bouncing around on the floor.

A policeman stood by watching the scene very nervously. The local police, those that weren't on the take, were largely ineffective.

Ben smiled down at the hoodlum who was looking up at him, blood leaking from his mouth. "Oh, I don't think so, bub."

There were three Rebels in every store along a five-block downtown area, both sides of the street. They had slipped in earlier and taken up positions. Two were armed with M-16's, the CAR version, the third armed with a pump-action, sawed-off, twelve-gauge shotgun, loaded with 00 buckshot, three-inch magnums.

A prearranged hand signal had been settled upon to warn the Rebels when a gang member entered the shop. It wasn't a long wait for Ben, Jersey, and Anna, in the back room of one shop. Ben's company commanders did not like the idea of him being right in the middle of things, but he was the boss, and they knew better than to argue with him.

Ben didn't need the hand signal to tell him a punk had entered the store. Ben could smell the bastards from a hundred yards away.

Jersey listened to her headset for a moment, then whispered, "Corrie says gang members are entering every store along the way. Guess the shopkeepers were leveling with us: this is collection day."

"This is the day they get sent right straight to hell," Ben returned the whisper.

Anna smiled, a strange savage moving of the lips. The young woman could be almost bloodthirsty at times. But, as Ben often had to remind himself, she grew up fighting gangs of punks and hoodlums and other types

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of human slime. She hated punks just as much as Ben did, and that was saying a mouthful.

Ben clicked the shotgun off safety.

The punk facing the shopkeeper shook his fist at the man and the two with him laughed. Then the punk jerked out a pistol. Ben didn't have to understand the language to know the shopkeeper was being threatened and cussed. Ben stepped from behind cover and gave the hoodlum a full load of 00 buckshot.

From a distance of about fifteen feet, the load of buckshot nearly took the thug's head off. The impacting lead knocked him out the front door. He sprawled in front of the store in a pool of blood.

Jersey and Anna stepped around Ben and gave the other two bursts from the weapons. They joined their friend outside, in front of the store.

All up and down the block the sounds of shotguns and M-16's could be heard, roaring and clattering. It lasted for no more than a minute, then a strange silence followed.

Ben stepped past the shocked shopkeeper and walked outside, looking up and down the street. Rebels were dragging bodies out of the stores, dumping them unceremoniously in the gutter. Several Rebel deuce-and-a-halves appeared. Using local help, the bodies were tossed into the covered beds of the trucks and hauled off to the mass grave that had already been scooped out of the earth, well outside the city.

Ben carefully rolled a cigarette and lit it. The shopkeeper appeared by his side. "Friends of the dead thieves will stop by for a visit later tonight. They will attempt to burn my shop in retaliation for this."

"We'll be here," Ben assured him.

"Others will be back tomorrow," the shopkeeper persisted.

"We'll be here then, too," Ben said.

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The shopkeeper smiled. "Is this the way they do it in America?"

"No," Ben told him. "But it's the way we do it in my part of America."

The Rebels stayed in the city for ten days, Chase and his medical personnel keeping busy seeing people, Ben and his people keeping busy dealing with punks.

At the end of the week, the Rebels had brought the reign of lawlessness and near anarchy to a stop, putting nearly two thousand punks in mass graves.

New city officials had been elected in fair elections (replacing the old corrupt officials-some of whom had been promptly hanged by extremely irate citizens, after very short and highly emotional trials) and the police force had been completely revamped.

Rebel political officers had worked closely with the local hierarchy and trade agreements had been signed establishing trade between the SUSA and the country of Senegal.

Gangs of punks, thugs, and various other types of human vermin had fled the city in droves after the first seventy-two hours of retribution,

knowing if they stayed their future was going to be very short, with a very abrupt cessation of life coming at the end of a rope or a bullet.

For the first time in years, Dakar was a peaceful city.

"Your concept of justice is rather harsh, General," Paula said to Ben on the evening before the column was due to pull out. She had poured a mug of coffee and seated herself across from him. It was the first time she'd had anything to say to him in a week, which suited Ben just fine.

"But it works," Ben said shortly, hoping to end the conversation before it could get started.

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His remark didn't faze her. Paula stared at him for a moment, then sugared and creamed her coffee and slowly stirred it. "If what I've seen so far is your method of dealing with the poor unfortunates who are forced into a life of crime, I don't want any part of it."

"I can arrange for a plane to pick you up in the morning," Ben said quickly.

She didn't blink. "Forget it. I'm here for the duration. I am going to report you to the United Nations, General."

Ben laughed. He wiped the tears from his eyes and said, "Lady, I don't care who you report me to. Send out as many reports as you like."

"Oh, I have, General. I have sent dispatches to all the major newspapers outside of the SUSA. They are sending reporters ASAP."

"Are they, now?"

"Yes. I want the world to see the conditions here in Africa and especially your methods of dealing with unfortunates."

"Oh, my!" Ben smiled at her.

"You think it's funny, don't you?"

"Sort of, Ms. Preston. Tell me, who is going to provide food and water and shelter and protection for these guardians of the Constitution?"

"They're bringing everything they need," she said smugly.

"Are they, now?"

"Yes."

"Well, that takes a real load off my mind. My goodness, I was worried about their welfare. I certainly wouldn't want anything to happen to any of them. I don't know if I could endure that."

"Your humor is grotesque."

"Thank you."

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"My God, General, I didn't mean that as a compliment."

"Oh? Well, sorry about that."

She narrowed her eyes and stared at him for a moment before realizing that he was putting her on. She sighed and took a sip of her coffee. "I'm beginning to believe you cannot be insulted, General."

"It's been tried by the best, Ms. Preston."

"I can just imagine. Whatever happened to Ben and Paula?"

Ben smiled. "You got all stiff and formal on me, Ms. Preston."

"For that, I apologize, Ben. But I won't apologize for calling the press in."

Ben shrugged his indifference. "I think most of them know by now they'll be on their own here. I won't nursemaid them."

"Those two or three reporters who write favorably of you probably won't be along on this trip."

"I know. I've been advised of that."

"You were advised? . . ." She spoke softly and let that trail off into a moment of awkward silence. "Then you knew all along that I had alerted the press?"

"Sure."

"And you just let me ramble on?"

"Why not?"

She flushed. Cleared her throat. "Does anything happen in the Rebel Army that escapes your attention?"

"Not very much, Paula. Tell your reporter friends to link up with us in Banjul, Gambia. I'll have my people alert them when the airport is secure and they can come in. I've already had the ship captain who is bringing their vehicles and supplies over alerted to hold off attempting to dock until he receives word that the dock area is safe and secure. He'll lay a safe distance offshore until he gets word." Ben pushed back his chair and

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stood up. "We'll be pulling out of here at dawn tomorrow. Nice talking with you, Paula."

Ben walked away and Dr. Chase sat down, a smile on his face.

"What are you grinning about?" Paula asked.

"You'll learn not to try to get sneaky with Ben Raines, Paula. The man invented the word."

"I'm beginning to think you're right, Lamar."

Lamar's grin faded and his eyes grew serious. "Paula, warn your reporter

friends not to cross Ben. Ben doesn't like the press, and he believes strongly that the press has no business anywhere near a war zone. He's not going to cut them any slack. If they get into trouble, they're on their own. I've gone over the list of reporters Ben's people intercepted from your State Department transmissions. As far as I can tell, they're all a pack of whiny left-wingers who pee their lace-trimmed drawers at the sight of a gun and fall into a foaming fit of indignation when some punk gets shot. Paula, he's shot reporters for filing a biased story."

Paula's smile quickly faded at that. "You and Ben think quite a bit alike, don't you, Lamar?"

"Quite a bit, Paula. We've been together a long time."

"These men and women will report what they see."

"Will they, Paula?" Lamar questioned. "Or will they report what they want to see?"

"Well, we're beating the rainy season," Ben said, when the column was about an hour's drive from the Gambian border. "But not by much."

"17 and 18 Batts are reporting the roads are in really bad shape," Corrie said. "Slowing them down to about ten miles an hour, tops."

"They'll get worse, much worse," Ben warned. "The

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rainy season is not far away. And when that happens the roads will turn into a quagmire of red mud."

None of the team asked how Ben knew that. They did not inquire into Ben's past . . . although all knew that Ben had done contract work for the CIA as a young man just out of the service, and some of that work had been in Africa.

"The column's going to have to stop," Corrie announced. "There is some sort of old military truck stalled in the road ahead."

"Let's get out and stretch our legs," Ben said, opening the door and stepping out onto the road.

He leaned against the big wagon and rolled a cigarette. All around him lay creeks and swamps, foreboding looking even in the midday.

A strange stillness lay over the land, and Ben puzzled about that, for this area was known for its chattering monkeys and squawking parrots.

"Jersey," he said softly.

"Yeah, boss?"

"Tell Corrie I said to put everybody on high alert, but to do it quietly and easy. I've suddenly got this real bad feeling about this place."

"You are not alone, boss."

Corrie quietly issued the orders and the Rebels began unassing from the trucks, nonchalantly appearing, but all the while they were seeking out the best defensive positions along the road. Tank commanders were talking on another frequency, ready to button up and swing their turrets, staggered left and right.

Ben reached into the big wagon and pulled out a rucksack containing several dozen filled magazines for his CAR and for his team. He had already picked out a good position in a ditch just a few yards from the road, and with his eyes had told his team where they were going when trouble started.

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Jersey stepped close and stuck a stick of chewing gum into her mouth. "Wagon's going to get full of holes, boss."

"Better it than us," Ben said with a smile. He cut his eyes to Cooper. "What's Coop looking so worried about? An ambush is nothing new for any of us."

"He's worried about his recently acquired collection of filthy magazines. He picked diem up back along the way. Really nasty ones. They're in the truck right behind our wagon."

Ben chuckled. "These real juicy magazines, hey, Jersey?"

"Filthier than any I've ever seen him read. And Cooper has some real gross magazines."

Before Ben could reply, Anna said in a whisper, "Movement in the swamp, in front and behind us."

"I wonder who they are?" Beth questioned, getting ready to jump into the ditch in front of them. "Gangs usually aren't this smart."

"We'll question any prisoners we take," Ben replied.

"If we take any," Anna said.

"There is always that to consider," Ben agreed.

Out in the swamp, someone got anxious and rose up from behind a log. A Rebel stitched him with a burst from his M-16 and the fight was on.

Ben and team jumped for the ditch.

"Well, crap!" Beth said, from her position on the far left side of the line. "I landed right in a pile of shit!"

"Probably monkey shit," Ben told her.

"Thanks a lot," Beth replied.

Then there was no more time for talk as the as yet unknown enemy opened up from both sides of the swamp.

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These were not undisciplined gangs of punks staging the ambush. The

Rebels knew that within a few seconds. These were trained soldiers. Or, as Ben thought, they had been at one time.

But as highly trained as they were, the ambushers could not match or withstand for long the withering fire from the Rebel column.

The first wave of ambushers died before they could make ten yards toward the road. The dark swamp water soon became stained with their blood.

In less than one minute, the Rebels in the long column probably blew ten thousand rounds of various types of ammo at the ambushers. The swamp became thick with bodies of the dead and the dying and the close still air was soon acrid with the smell of gunsmoke.

The ambushers pressed the attack for another couple of minutes, then abruptly broke it off, fading back into the swamp and the stunted trees.

"Hold your positions," Ben ordered, Corrie repeating the orders the instant they left his mouth. "Where the hell are the gunships?"

"On their way."

"Tell them to strafe everything that moves on either side of the road."

"Right, boss."

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Helicopter gunships, which had been circling the city of Banjul, some miles away, began roaring overhead, machine guns clattering and rockets tearing up the swamp.

Still more ambushers died in the air assault.

"Tell the tanks to strafe the bodies in the swamp with machine-gun fire," Ben ordered. "I don't want some dying asshole to take a Rebel with him with his last breath."

.50 and 7.62 caliber machine-gun fire ripped the swamp for a full minute before Ben ordered a halt. "Wounded?" Ben asked.

"Two wounded, minor. No Rebel dead," Corrie reported.

"Good. Now shove that damn stalled truck off the road and let's get the hell out of here."

While the vehicle blocking the road was being shoved off into the swamp, Corrie said, "Two prisoners, boss. They just crawled up out of the swamp. Both of them hard hit, not expected to make it."

"All right. We'll hold up while intel gets what they can from them. Then toss the bodies back into the swamp."

"Done," Corrie responded.

"The Scouts near the city yet?"

"As close as they dare get. The city is jam-packed, to use their words. The dead are piled up in rotting stacks outside the city. The residents try to burn the bodies, but are usually not entirely successful. They

get the top of the pile, those underneath rot. There are absolutely no sanitation facilities; they were pretty lousy before the war, when there were about fifty thousand people here. Now there are about ten times that number."

"Damn!" Ben said. "Got any more good news?"

"The city is a breeding ground for disease. Not even the gangs of punks want anything to do with it."

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"This is why the people back up the road looked at me so strangely when I said our next stop was Gambia. I should have pressed them for details. All right. We'll bypass Banjul; give it a wide berth. We'll hold up just inside the Guinea-Bissau border and wait for Nick to catch up. He's supposed to be in Bansang late this afternoon or early in the morning."

"Right. I'll bump him now. Oh, the two prisoners just died without saying anything."

Before Ben could reply, Chase came walking up. "What's this about Banjul, Ben?"

Ben very quickly summed up what Corrie had told him.

Chase nodded. "That ties in with what a doctor told me back in Banjul. But he said it was all rumor. He could confirm nothing."

"Bypass it, Lamar?"

"I don't think we have a choice. We can't save every human being on the continent. It's a noble thought, but impossible for us."

"Corrie . . ."

"I know, boss. Tell the captain of the ship bringing the reporters' supplies to push on, or sail on, whatever sailors do, down to the port of Bissau. Tell the charter plane bringing in the press to hold off until we are sure the airport can handle them."

"That's right, Corrie."

Chase looked at both of them strangely, then said to Ben, "She can read your mind? God, poor girl!"

The going was so slow through the tiny country that many times the Rebels chose to walk alongside or behind the trucks rather than endure the torturous ride.

"What a choice," one Rebel was heard to say. "Blisters on my feet or blisters on my ass."

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Ben only smiled when he heard that. He knew that the time for a

commander to really start worrying was when the troops stopped bitching.

Despite the terrible roads and the slow going, Ben and his Rebels make it across the tiny country without further incident. As to who was behind the failed ambush, Ben never found out. The Rebels had gathered up many of the weapons used by the ambushers and they were in good shape, and, as Ben was quick to point out after looking at several of the bodies, so were the boots. Good gear can tell an experienced field commander much about a unit.

Nick Stafford and his 18 Batt reached their objective without running into trouble, and they reported that while Bansasang was no paradise, the people there were making a great effort to climb out of the tragedy of war and resume some degree of normalcy. Nick and his people would stay for a few days, his doctors seeing, as much as possible, to the needs of the people. Nick and his 18 Batt would then have to travel east over to Basse Santa Su before cutting south and eventually make it into Guinea-Bissau . . . which used to be known as Portuguese Guinea. The other battalions were keeping pace with Ben's 1 Batt, although the west-to-east line would appear very snake-like on any map.

Ben's Scouts reported that the city of Bissau was coping, and while the citizens had suffered at the hands of gangs, the gangs had fled upon hearing that the Rebels were fast approaching the city. The reputation of the Rebels was quickly spreading all over the continent. Ben knew that eventually the hundreds of gangs would band together under one leader and make a stand of it-they would have no other choice.

During a rest break, Paula found Ben and sat down on the ground across from him. "I've just spoken with

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some of the reporters. They think you're deliberately stalling to keep them out of the country."

Ben screwed the cap back on his canteen. "I don't give a damn what they think, Paula. I did what I did for their own safety. If they haven't got enough sense to understand that, to hell with them."

"You really hate the press, don't you, Ben?"

"I don't have much use for a lot of them. But hate? . . . No, I don't hate them. What I hate is to see the press going right back to being what they were before the Great War. Those outside the SUSA, that is," he added with a smile.

"What do you mean?"

"They were biased then, they're biased now. It was the press I believe, who, back before the Great War, coined the phrase 'hate groups' to describe many, if not all, of the militia groups that sprang up across the country. I knew many people who belonged to various militia groups, and very few of them hated the government. They disliked the direction the government was taking, which was to the left. They were opposed to the government wasting billions of taxpayer dollars each year. They knew that many departments and agencies of the government were not necessary. They disliked the big bloated bureaucracy the federal government had

become. They disliked the fact that government was snooping around in the private lives of its citizens. If one got his or her news solely from the national press, the average citizen would think every member of a militia group, or a tax protest group, or any kind of group who had the courage to speak out against government was evil. The evening news and the broadcast news magazines-so-called-became a joke to millions of Americans . . . and I include myself in that group. There was no fairness, no balance, no presenting of both sides of every story. Now to be honest about it,

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some of the militia and other protest groups were filled to overflowing with nuts and cranks. But not the majority. The majority were decent, honest, working, tax-paying men and women who felt they had no voice in the running of government . . . which they didn't."

"There was always the ballot box, Ben."

"It wasn't working. In the last national election before the Great War and the following revolt by citizens, only about forty-eight percent of eligible voters bothered to vote. That's how bad it had become in America. Many people just gave up, believing, correctly to some degree, that their vote didn't count and didn't matter in the long run. They believed, again correctly to some degree, that big government was going to do what big government wanted to do, and to hell with the millions of Americans who were opposed to it. Revolution was inevitable, Paula. If the politicians had not been so far out of touch with the average citizen, they could have seen it coming. Should have seen it coming."

"But the war came instead."

"It sure did. And right on its heels, open rebellion by Americans who simply refused to go back to the old ways."

"America never really recovered, did it, Ben?" she asked softly.

"It recovered just fine for us, Paula."

"A few weeks ago, you said you felt that sometime in the very near future, or words to that effect, that the EUSA and the NUSA would soon become as one. Do you really believe that?"

"Oh, yes. I know that talks were underway even before we sailed. I'm not supposed to know that, but as you have stated, very little escapes my attention." He smiled. "And we have a very good intelligence network."

"I'm sure you do. And will the SUSA ever agree to return to the Union?"

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"Doubtful. The eastern and northern sections of the country are going right back to the old ways just as fast as die liberals can steer them. And that is something we will never do."

"What if, once America is reunited, the leaders try to force the SUSA to

rejoin the Union?"

"They won't. The politicians might bluster around and poke out their chests and talk tough, but that's all it will be. They know better than to attempt to use force against us."

"Why? Nearly your entire army is over here."

"Paula, I won't hesitate to use germ warfare against any enemy of the SUSA. And I have the stockpiles and the delivery systems ready to go."

"You wouldn't do that!"

"The hell I wouldn't, lady. Those of us who conceived and followed this dream worked too damn hard and sacrificed too damn much to see it destroyed. That will not happen. Do you know what MAD means?"

"I can but assume you are talking about the old cold-war term meaning Mutually Assured Destruction?"

"That's right, Paula. And you be sure and remind your asshole press buddies about it. I say remind, because they already know. If the United States ever does become united again, and I suspect they will, probably sooner than I think, and tries to move against us, I will defend the SUSA down to the last missile, the last canister of airborne sickness and death, and the last drop of Rebel blood. I will destroy any country who elects to wage war against us."

Paula visibly paled under her tan. "I have never heard such a deadly warning behind any person's words."

"You've got that right. And I mean every word of it."

She stared at him for a few heartbeats. "You say the press knows of this?"

"Sure. But they think I'm bluffing."

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"And you don't bluff, do you, Ben?"

"Not when it comes to the SUSA."

"But Ben, the people who live outside the SUSA won't be the ones who make war against you . . . if war ever comes," she added.

And Ben knew with those words, his lingering suspicions about how much Paula really knew had been confirmed. On the same day they'd met, while she was being checked over by Rebel doctors, Ben's intelligence people had slipped into the basement at the consulate office. They had found extensive shortwave equipment, a huge portable generator, and fuel to last for years. They had found medicines and emergency food . . . among other things.

The next day, the consulate offices had been gutted by a fire, everything destroyed. Again, Ben's people had gone there while Paula was out. The fire had been set by someone. No doubt in Ben's mind who had set the fire: Ms. Paula Preston.

What Ben didn't know was who she was really working for. He did not believe she was working for Bruno Bottger, for his people back in the States had checked her out and she was indeed an employee and official of the State Department, and she had indeed been stranded over here shortly after the Great War ... or somebody fitting her description had. There was no way to really check that, for her fingerprints had been on file in Washington and that city no longer existed. Her family-mother and father-had lived just outside Washington; they had been killed when the nation's capital went up.

Ben and his intelligence people felt she had been in contact with the state department all along, and that probably some of the so-called "refugees" were also state department employees. If that was true, and he

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felt it was, what was her game? What the hell was she up to?

"They support the administration of their respective governments, Paula," Ben finally answered her. "And they have rejected the Tri-States philosophy of government. Which is certainly their right," he added.

"Which means? . . ."

"They would probably support a war against the SUSA. Most of the people, that is."

"I hope a civil war never happens, Ben."

"You better do more than hope, Paula. You'd better pray it doesn't."

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Mike Richards, head of the Rebel Intelligence, had at first balked at going to Africa, but in the end he relented and had been with Ike's 2 Batt. He joined the column at the border and immediately pulled Ben to one side.

"Paula Preston is a ringer," he said flatly.

"Yeah, Mike. I finally put that together the other day. I've had my suspicions since day one. Who does she work for?"

"State Department. Been with them since she got out of college."

"Something about to pop back Stateside, Mike?"

"Not anytime soon. But there are rumors of some sort of action being planned against the SUSA."

Ben was silent for a moment. "Mike, am I so hated my enemies back home would align themselves with Bruno Bottger in an attempt to defeat or kill me?"

That startled even Mike Richards, something that was not easy to do. "Jesus, Ben ... I haven't even considered that."

"Well, consider it, Mike. Tell your people back home to start digging."

"All right, Ben. I'll get right on it. But what a monstrous thought."

"Not so much, Mike. Left-wing liberalism is a form

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of socialism. Socialism is a first cousin to fascism. It really isn't that far a jump between the two."

Mike smiled and took the makin's Ben offered. He rolled a cigarette and lit up, then said, "There are many people who would argue that connection, Ben."

Ben shrugged. "Both of them are a form of people being dependent on the government and the government being all powerful in the lives of its citizens. People can argue that all they want to, but it's true."

Mike wandered off to the communications truck and Dr. Chase walked up.

"I just spoke with a doctor in Bissau via shortwave, Ben. Things are not that bad there. They're desperately short of supplies, but morale is high and they've maintained a fairly decent standard of life, considering the circumstances."

"Why do some people just give up and others fight for life, Lamar?"

"Ben, don't get philosophical on me while we're standing by the side of this miserable road sweating and slapping flies and mosquitos. Hell, I don't know." La-mar squinted his eyes and stared at Ben. "What's really on your mind, Ben?"

"You like Paula Preston, don't you, Lamar?"

"Well . . . she's all right. We get along. But I don't believe she's the shrinking violet she would like people to think. Why she insists upon maintaining that charade, I don't know. Why are you asking about her?"

"She's a ringer, Lamar."

"Explain that, please. I'm a physician, not a cryptologist."

"She's told so many lies since she joined us I'm surprised she hasn't tripped over one."

"You know this for a fact?"

"Oh, yes, Lamar. For a fact. Mike just had her checked out back Stateside ..."

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"I thought I saw him skulking about."

"Yeah, he's here."

"Tell me about Ms. Preston."

Ben brought him up to date as they walked, being careful to stay on the

road, for it was marsh and swamp on both sides. Since the ferry across the Rio Cacheu over to Cacheu had not run in years, the longer route was the only option left. The column would have to travel the road east to Incore, then down to Sao Vicente, finally into Bissau.

"You actually think there will be a war waged against us, Ben?"

"I thought we were talking about Paula Preston?"

"Oh, to hell with her. We can feed her false information and have her and whoever the hell she's working for so confused they won't know up from down."

Ben laughed at his old friend. "You're getting feisty in your advanced years, Lamar."

"Damn right, I am. Are we going to have to fight on American soil, again, Ben?"

Before Ben could reply, Corrie came running up. She paused for a moment to catch her breath, then said, "Boss, I just got this flash from Base Camp One. The EUSA and NUSA have rejoined ..."

"That answer your question, Lamar?" Ben said, a grim expression on his face.

". . . It's now the United States of America, boss," Corrie continued. "And they are working on the WUSA as we speak. They're leaning toward reuniting."

"Son of a bitch!" Lamar cursed.

"I suspected it was coming," Ben said in a calm voice. "I just had a hunch it was."

Mike Richards came panting up. "Goddamnit!" he cursed. "I just heard. Is it true?"

"It's true, Mike. Calm down. Take a deep breath. It will take them months or a couple of years, or more,

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to work out the political angles. Hell, you get a bunch of loud-mouthed politicians-especially a gaggle of liberals-together and all they'll be able to agree on is to disagree. They'll be enough hot air expelled to heat a major city for a year."

Lamar laughed and Mike grinned. "You're probably right, Ben," Mike said. "I lost my cool there for a moment."

"Cecil knows what to do," Ben assured them both. "Believe me, he does, and he will. Right now, let's get this show on the road and get to Bissau. I want to get a link set up with Base Camp One. Cecil and I have a lot to talk over."

"Not to worry, Ben," Cecil's voice was strong over the thousands of miles that separated the two good friends. "They know better than to make a move against the SUSAs."

"They do right now, Cec. Down the road is another matter. How about our friends in the NUSA and the others?"

"We have no politico friends in the newly reunited USA, Ben. They've all been replaced; some of them forcibly."

"That doesn't surprise me one litde bit. Have any of them asked for asylum in the SUSASA?"

"Quite a few, and I granted it."

"Good. What about any type of armed forces?"

"They have no navy or air force. But they are building an army as quickly as they can. And with their economic situation as bleak as it is, they're having no problem getting recruits."

"I can just imagine. And many of those men will have combat experience and make damn good soldiers. And thousands of them will have a very strong hatred for us."

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"That's true, Ben. But it will take them months to put any type of army together. They're having to start from scratch. They have few weapons and are having to build the factories to manufacture the weapons from the ground up. They have no missiles-none, zip. They have no bombs of any kind and no delivery system if they build bombs."

"Two years, Cec. That's how I figure it. But two years max before they'll be capable of launching any type of effective attack against the SUSASA."

"I agree, Ben. But there is something else we've got to think about."

"Bruno Bottger," Ben said quickly.

"Right. You can bet he's already heard the news and has his political people working around the clock trying to come up with some plan to offer the USA aid."

"If this entire scheme wasn't hatched in his sick brain to begin with."

"There is that to consider."

"I have and I think the Nazi son of a bitch is behind it all, Cec."

Cecil had the key open when he sighed, the sigh very audible over the distance. "I think you just might be right, Ben. Needless to say, our intelligence people are very red-faced about this matter."

"Tell them to stop kicking themselves. This caught all of us off guard. Good God, Cec, we've got the best intel system in the world. They've done a superb job over the years. They can't be expected to nail down everything. All right, ol' buddy, here it is: I want infiltrators moving ASAP ..."

"I've got them ready to go, Ben. At the very first sign of aggression, they'll start knocking out vital facilities in enemy territory."

"Good, good."

"I've placed the SUSA on low alert and beefed up

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our border crossings. We're monitoring every transmission. We're stockpiling supplies."

Ben laughed and let Cecil hear the laughter. "Hell, Cec, I'll stop worrying then. You've got a handle on it."

"Ben, I've just been notified that the new President of the USA wants to talk to me. I'll break off and get back to you just as soon as I find out what's up."

"Ten-four, Cec. I'll stay close to the radio. Good luck."

"Watch your ass over there, Ben."

"You can bet on that. Talk to you soon. Eagle out."

Ben stood up and walked around the room for a moment, deep in thought. He stopped and turned to the crowd who had gathered to hear what Cecil Jefferys had to say. "Corrie, advise the batt corns of the situation. But tell them I don't want to even think about a meeting just yet. There really is no point. We simply don't know enough to warrant that. Cecil's got everything under control back home. We've got a job to do over here, so let's concentrate on that for the time being."

He put his gaze on Dr. Chase, sitting on the corner of a deck in the old office building on the edge of the airport. "Lamar, give me your first estimates of the health situation of the people here."

"Pretty good, Ben, all things considering. We're getting supplies in from Europe in a couple of days: enough vaccines to last us for a long time. Those countries have really come through for us."

"Good, Lamar, good." He looked at each of the company commanders. "Any trouble in town?"

"Not a bit," one told him. "General, the press is due to arrive this afternoon. What the hell are we supposed to do with them?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"The ships have docked, waiting to be unloaded," another CO said. "You want us to see to that?"

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"Hell, no!" Ben said emphatically. "That isn't our job. I didn't invite these people over here. Let them take care of their own mess."

Lamar turned his face away so Ben could not see his grin. Ben was determined to get off on the wrong foot with the press. Lamar was always amused at that, for Ben had a marvelous relationship with the press back

in the SUSA, occasionally writing columns for them when he was home. There were several reporters traveling with the Rebels, constantly moving from one battalion to another, and they wrote and sent dispatches back home. But the difference between the national press and the press from the SUSA-at least one of the differences-was that the local people never had to have their columns censored. The local press knew there were always going to be accidental killings of innocent civilians-that was war-and they didn't dwell on it and blow it all out of proportion, pissing and moaning with every sentence. Not so with the press outside of the SUSA, and Lamar often wondered when that changed. His father had told him that the press was respected and trusted-for the most part-during World War Two. So when did it change and why?

Lamar shook his head, mentally laid the problem aside-if it was a problem-and returned his attention back to Ben.

"I've said this before, but it bears repeating: we've got the gangs on the run; we're pushing them south, and that is making our primary job of seeing to the needs of the people a lot easier. But sooner or later the running has to stop and the gangs are going to stand and fight."

"The sooner the better," Jersey griped, and the people in the room burst out laughing.

"Keep your pants on, Jersey!" one of the CO's called.

"Oh, don't tell her that!" Cooper yelled.

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The last thing anyone saw of those two for about an hour was Jersey chasing Cooper out the front door, threatening all sorts of pain and suffering upon his body.

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The press was two days late in arriving, due to the big news Stateside about most of the country reuniting. They started raising hell within moments after their charter plane landed at the Bissau airport. They were very unhappy about their vehicles and supplies having not been unloaded. Several of the big-shot news anchors, from the Big Three Networks, demanded to know why their equipment had not been unloaded.

"It's your equipment," several Rebels told them several times within the span of about twenty minutes. "You unload it."

That attitude did not do much to improve strained relations between Ben Raines and his Rebels and the nation's press. Not that Ben cared.

The press finally contracted with some locals to offload their equipment and that was completed just about the same time Ben and his 1 Batt was due to pull out. They had done all they could for the residents of the city.

Ben had yet to meet with any member of the press, even though they had repeatedly asked for a meeting.

Ike had radioed Ben, telling him if he sent any of the press over to his sector he'd strand them in the middle of hostile territory the first chance he got.

"They don't want to travel with Ike anyway," Mike

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Richards told Ben on the day before the battalion was due to pull out.
"They want to get some dirt on you."

"I'm sure of that. You going to stay with me on this next run?"

"Not on your life. I'm gettin' out of here today. Press types give me a pain in the ass. They always ask the dumbest questions."

"I wish I could go with you," Ben said wistfully. "Sooner or later a half a dozen of them will corner me somewhere and bombard me with questions."

"Good luck."

"Thanks a lot. Keep in touch."

"I will. From a distance."

Ben watched the chief of intelligence walk away. There was no telling where Mike would pop up next. Even though he should have his butt parked behind a desk, he had spent too many years in the field to be content with paperwork.

"We're lining up the column now, boss," Corrie said. "Where do you want the press?"

Ben sighed. "Oh, hell, Corrie. As much as I want to, I can't stick them at the rear of the column. They'd get lost or ambushed. I'd get the blame for sure. Put them in the middle of the column. Hell, we might as well get used to baby-sitting them."

"Right." She didn't tell Ben she'd already done that, knowing that would be his final decision. Corrie was one of the few people who knew that in many cases, Ben's bark was a lot worse than his bite. He didn't like the press, and wouldn't hesitate to inconvenience them, but he didn't want to harm any of them. Well . . . most of them.

There were three news anchors that Ben had absolutely no use for at all. Stan Travis, Marilyn Dickson, and Ford McLachlan. Those three had been up-and-comers just before the Great War, being groomed for

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the anchor spots on the big three networks. All three were one-hundred-percent left-wing democrats, sobbing and pissing and moaning every chance they got about guns in the hands of private citizens, the use of deadly force by the police, the death penalty, and anything else that smacked of conservatism.

Ben's feelings for the three news-people came very close to open hatred. And he made no effort to hide it.

Before dawn, on the morning of the pull-out from Bissau, Ben was standing beside his vehicle when the three news anchors walked up.

"Well, General," Ford said. "We meet again."

"How wonderful for you," Ben said acidly.

Jersey gave Marilyn Dickson a very contemptuous look and spat on the ground.

Marilyn fixed Jersey with a haughty gaze and then ignored her.

"Nice to know you ladies are going to get along," Ben said, deliberately antagonizing them both.

"It came as quite a surprise when we learned you were allowing us to accompany you, General," Stan Travis said.

"I'd rather have you with me than have to waste time hauling your asses out of trouble."

"We are perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves, General," Marilyn said.

Jersey laughed at that.

Ben verbally stepped in before Marilyn allowed her ass to overload her mouth and Jersey popped her . . . something Jersey would do in a heartbeat. "You people ready to pull out?"

"We're ready whenever you are, General," Ford said. "What's the next stop?"

"We'll travel from here over to Mansoa, then Bam-

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badinca, with stops along the way. Wherever the people need us."

"Looking for trouble along the way, of course," Marilyn stuck her lip into it.

"We're always ready for trouble, Ms Dickson," Ben answered evenly, although if she could have seen his inner thoughts concerning what he would like to do to her neck she would have run shrieking into the jungle. "We're an army, not a pack of wimpy-assed left-wing liberals who faint at the mention of a gun."

Marilyn curled her lip at him and walked off. Jersey pranced along silently behind her for a few meters, doing a pretty good imitation of a prima donna carefully avoiding the mud puddles.

Ben's team laughed at the sight. Marilyn stopped and glanced behind her. Jersey was standing innocently, a smile on her face. "Go away," Marilyn told her.

"With pleasure, lady."

Marilyn minced on, with Jersey once more resuming her imitation.

"Amusing, in a crude sort of way," Stan said.

"That's us," Ben said cheerfully. "Crude. Awfully crude."

Ford looked at Ben for a few heartbeats, then smiled faintly. "Come on, Stan. We'd better get ready to move out. Wouldn't want to be left behind, would we?"

The press walked off and Jersey rejoined the team. "Twenty-five of those buttholes to put up with. How long will they be with us, boss?"

"The duration, I guess."

"Wonderful," Jersey said. "Sometime between now and then that bitch is sure to stumble and fall on her face right in the mud."

Ben walked back to the wagon, chuckling as he walked. He hoped Ms. Dickson never got too close to

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a large mud puddle while Jersey was around. Although, that would be quite a sight to see . . .

There was nothing left of Mansoa. Not one building remained of the village. The Rebels pushed on to Bam-badinca, or rather, what was left of it. It too, like Mansoa, had been destroyed. In Bambadinca, Ben's 1 Batt linked up for a day with Nick Stafford's 2 Batt. The two huge battalions would travel together south down to Mampata. There, Nick would veer off to the east and Ben would continue south.

"Starving and sick people," Nick told Ben. "It's been a depressing run so far."

"I've got a hunch it'll only get worse the further south we go," Ben said.

"Says here there is excellent food in Mampata," Beth read from an old travel brochure. "French food."

"Not anymore," Corrie called. "Scouts report the town is in ruins. Looks as though it's been deserted for a long time. Water is still good though."

"Where have the people gone, General?" Ford McLachlan asked, standing a few feet away.

Since the question had been posed in a civil tone of voice, Ben answered it civilly. "I don't know, Ford. All my battalions have run into the same thing." Ben's eyes narrowed as a gaggle of press types strolled up to join Ford, including Marilyn Dickson and Stan Travis. "Gangs might have driven them out or killed them, or taken many of them to sell in the newly flourishing slave trade. They might have died from disease or malnutrition; probably a lot of them did. Many of them fled to the cities . . . and died there."

"And many of them were forced to turn to a life of petty crime in order to survive and your troops shot

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them down like rabid animals and killed them," Marilyn ran her mouth.

Nick quietly slipped away from the growing crowd and beat it back to his battalion. He had seen Ben lose his temper a couple of times while dealing with certain press types, and it was not a pretty sight.

Ben ignored the woman's comments. "Other than the explanation I just offered, I don't know what happened to the people. I can add this: for several years we have had rumors-those rumors now confirmed- that after the Great War, millions of people died here on the African continent." He cut his eyes to Marilyn. "Long before we arrived."

"General," a reporter that Ben did not know asked, "Who is paying for this massive military operation of yours?"

"The SUSA is covering part of the cost," Ben replied. "The newly formed United Nations and participating countries is picking up the rest of it."

"But you are not here as peacekeepers, officially sanctioned by the UN as such?" another asked.

Ben shook his head. "No, we are not."

"You are here primarily to deal with the growing threat that Bruno Bottger and his army presents to the free world, is that it?" another asked.

"Yes. That is our primary mission."

"But General Bottger says he would welcome the press in his country," another reporter stated. "He says he will show that the nations under his control have prospered, and there is no rampant starvation there."

"Feel free to go anytime you wish," Ben came right back. "But by all means, ask the general if you may travel unescorted throughout his territory, asking questions of anyone. How about doing that?"

"The general says there are still many gangs prowling

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the countryside, and that would be dangerous for us," the reporter replied.

Ben laughed, devoid of humor. More and more, his suspicions that Bruno had a large hand in what was happening back in America were being confirmed. "I could have told you that would be his reply. A few years back, the dictators of Libya and Iraq-to name two countries-basically said the same thing. If you care to recall."

"Are you comparing General Bottger to those dictators, General?" Marilyn asked.

"Bruno Bottger is worse than Hitler ever thought about being," Ben told the crowd. "Hitler is the man's idol. Bear in mind, I've fought this bastard off and on for years. Believe me, I know him far better than any of you. The man is the personification of evil."

"But we only have your word for that," another liberal jackoff popped.

"Oh, shit!" Jersey muttered under her breath.

Several more knowledgeable reporters quickly stepped away from the reporter who had just let his ass overload his mouth.

Ben held his famous temper under control . . . sort of, and for a moment only. He smiled at the young man, guessing the reporter to be in his very early to possibly mid-twenties-probably just out of college, with his head crammed full of socialistic bullshit from egg-headed professors who had never had a firm grip on reality in their entire life. "That is correct to a degree, sonny-boy," Ben said softly, the crowd straining to hear his words. "You only have my word. But that remark tells me you know nothing about world events, and probably very little about anything else. My advice to you would be to keep that flapping blow-hole of yours closed until you have the ability to see and report, fairly, both sides of every story."

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Ben turned to Corrie. "Tell the troops to mount up. We're out of here."

Ben turned and walked off without another word.

Jersey fixed the mouthy young reporter with a gaze from her dark obsidian eyes. There was a lot to be read in that look, and most of the reporters read it accurately. Unfortunately, the young man, Alex Marsh, was not yet worldly enough to understand he had just implied that General Raines was a liar.

Not a very smart thing to do.

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The Rebels passed through many small villages on the way south to Mampata, but most were long deserted and falling down.

"Where the hell did all the people go?" Cooper asked, as they crossed the bridge over the Rio Corubal River and headed for Quebo. At Quebo, they would cut south once more and cross over into the Republic of Guinea.

The Rebels had found no signs of mass graves, and since leaving the north, no signs of mass slaughter in any of the villages along the way.

"I don't know, Coop," Ben replied. "What I do know is we're less than a month away from the rainy season. And when that hits, we're going to be slowed down to a crawl and worse, we're all going to be miserable."

"Says here," Beth said, lowering the travel brochure, "that in some parts of Guinea, the rainfall can be torrential from May to September, with many roads closed during that period."

"If it gets too bad, we'll just hole up," Ben said.

"And then, Jersey," Cooper said with a grin, "you and me can play house."

Jersey told him to go commit an impossible act upon his person.

"I just can't figure Mampata," Anna said. "Not a

skeleton to be found, not the first sign of any fight. But the people were all gone. It's weird."

"Here's something just as weird," Corrie said. "Scouts are reporting that Quebo is deserted. Not one sign of life."

"Damn!" Ben whispered. "Corrie, signal we're stopping. Tell the Scouts to hold up."

That done, Corrie asked, "Bad feeling, boss?"

Ben shook his head. "Not really. I don't know. Maybe. Hell, I just don't know what's going on. And these mysteries about deserted villages and missing people are beginning to bug me."

Cooper stopped the big wagon and Ben got out, waiting for the HumVees carrying his company commanders to come to the front of the column.

"I want everybody in full body armor," he told his CO's. "Button up. Heads up."

Ben looked carefully all around him. It was perfect country for an ambush. For a few seconds, Ben thought it might be *deja vu*: a halted column, then ambush. But nothing happened. "All right, people. Let's move out."

A few miles north of the Guinea border, the guerrillas sprang from their ambush, cutting the column in half.

The Rebels jumped from trucks and hit the ditches, taking up defensive positions. They didn't know who they were fighting, but whoever it was had opened the dance; now it was time to pay the fiddler.

"Any of our people take hits?" Ben shouted to Corrie, over the *ratde* of gunfire.

"Half a dozen. I don't know how bad."

"How about the reporters?"

"None of them hurt. Just scared."

Bullets sang their deadly song as they passed over the heads of the teams, the lead slamming into the side of the big wagon. The nine-passenger wagon was bullet-proofed, but the exterior was really taking a beating.

Then somewhere out in the mangroves and marsh the ambushers opened up with heavy machine guns, the gunfire coming from both sides of the road, all up and down the stalled column.

"Mortars," Ben ordered. "Lay the pickles to them. WP and HE. The tops of that marsh grass will burn, so let's give them some fire and create some smoke for us. If we stay on this road, we're going to get creamed. If this keeps up, we're going to have to get out there among 'em and mix it up."

Within thirty seconds, the thunk of mortars could be heard and the ground on both sides of the road exploded, the willie peter igniting the tops of the grass. The WP arched upward, then returned to earth and struck cloth and burned into living flesh of the ambushers. Through the thick smoke and gunfire, muffled screaming could be heard.

The Rebels had set up their big .50's and were pouring out the lead. The tank commanders had swiveled their turrets, lowered their main guns, and were roaring out death and mayhem. The Bradley Fighting Vehicles and APC's were hammering out 25mm rounds from their chain guns. The sound was nearly overpowering and conversation was impossible.

The lightly armed ambushers soon realized that if they continued the attack, they would die. They broke it off and began fading away into the marsh and swamp.

"Cease fire," Ben ordered, and gradually the sound and fury died away. A sullen, smoke-permeated silence settled over the land.

"CO's want to know if they should press the attack," Corrie asked.

"No," Ben said. "Hold their positions. It's the attackers' country, their land, not ours. They know it, we don't. To follow would be foolish."

"We've got some dead," Corrie announced.

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"Bodybag them and put them in trucks until we can clear this fucking swampy area. Ask Chase if the wounded can take the ride out of here."

Seconds later, "Affirmative, boss. But not for any extended length of time."

"All right, let's get these flattened tires changed and mount up and move out. Goddamnit!" Ben cursed. "I hate not knowing my enemy. See if we can drag some prisoners out of that swamp. Maybe we'll get lucky this time."

A dozen miles down the road, the Rebels came to a village, the buildings still standing, but the homes and few businesses devoid of human life.

"Check it all out for booby traps," Ben ordered. "Then see to the wounded ASAP." He looked all around him at the still and silent village. "Damn, I hate mysteries. I never did like mysteries. They bug me."

"Who attacked us back there, General?" a reporter asked, walking up.

"I don't know. We did take some prisoners and they're being questioned now. Maybe we'll find out, but the odds are we won't."

"What will you do with the prisoners after you've questioned them, General Raines?" Marilyn Dickson asked. "Shoot them?"

Ben sighed. "I doubt it, Ms. Dickson. We'll probably patch them up as best we can and leave them behind."

"It was our understanding that the Rebels always executed their

prisoners," a reporter said.

"Whoever told you that is full of shit," Ben said bluntly. "If we're dealing with murderers and rapists and child molesters and the like, yes, we sometimes do execute them. But these men today are soldiers, following orders from someone. They'll be treated as fairly and as decently as is possible, under the circumstances,

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and left behind. Now if you will all excuse me, I have things to do."

The Rebel dead were buried in a local cemetery, with simple military honors, in unmarked graves. The Rebels had learned to do that because many times, depending on the enemy, marked graves were opened and the bodies desecrated and mutilated.

Ben explained that to the reporters.

"How awful!" a woman exclaimed.

"We are not well liked," Ben said simply, then turned away and walked off.

Ben did not hear Marilyn Dickson say very sarcastically, "I simply cannot imagine why that would be."

But Jersey heard her.

On the way to Conakry on the coast, where they were to resupply before traveling on to Sierra Leone, the Rebels passed through a dozen villages, all deserted. The town of Boke was a shambles, ravaged by war, and so was Boffa, a town south of Boke. The Rebel doctors attended to the few people that remained, mostly the very old, the sick and the dying, and then they moved on after leaving them food. There was little else they could do.

The highway, and it was stretching the imagination to call it that, missed the town of Coyah by a few dozen miles as the Rebels turned west heading for the city of Conakry.

"A mass of humanity, to use the words of the Scouts," Corrie told Ben. "But they are making some effort to cope."

"Gangs?" Ben questioned.

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"Negative. They split a few days ago when they learned we were on the way."

"I hate to ask, but how many people are we dealing with here?"

"About half a million."

Ben groaned. "Damn! Is the airport functional?"

"Affirmative. Once we chase the people off the runways. They're camped all over the place."

"All right. Tell Nick to send us half his doctors and Paul Harrison and Mike Post to do the same. Tell them to share some of their medical

supplies. Thank God we do have ample vaccines and medicines."

"The airport is on the main road into the city," Cor-rie reminded him.

"I'll set up a CP there."

"The SEALs went in with the gunships and set up a defensive line along with the Scouts. So far no one has made any serious attempts to breach it."

"We'll be there by midafternoon. The ships?"

"Standing by well off the coast. The people in the city are hungry, boss. It could get touchy. Probably will."

"We'll handle it," Ben said. "One way or the other."

"We have shooting trouble with starving people, that will be just what the press is waiting for," Anna said.

"I know," Ben said softly. "But I won't lose a Rebel to a goddamn mob when I can prevent it."

The column arrived at the airport just in time. Huge mobs were gathering all around the runways and the Scouts and SEALs, as tough as both units were, were about to be overrun by the screaming mobs.

Tanks began to circle the airport as Rebels by the hundreds jumped from trucks to set up defensive lines. The mob paused.

"The gangs had surrounded the city, General," a Rebel SEAL told Ben. "They cut off the people from food; took it for themselves."

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"Here's an interpreter, General," a Scout said, walking up leading a very reluctant-appearing man with him.

"A sound truck is being readied right now," Ben told the man. "You tell these people food is on the way. It will be handed out in an orderly fashion. If they try to breach our lines, we will open fire."

"The people are starving, General!" Stan Travis shouted the words. "You can't shoot starving people!"

"Get this son of a bitch out of here!" Ben ordered.

Stan was led away without protest. He knew better than to offer any resistance.

Ben turned to the local. "Tell the people to clear the runway. We have planes coming in. Tell them I want about fifty volunteers, men in good physical shape, to help unload the ships that will be docking very soon."

The interpreter climbed up onto the truck and took the microphone. The speakers howled in feedback and the scared locals looked wildly all around him. The volume was adjusted and he received a nod to go ahead.

Whoever the interpreter was, and Ben never did find out, for as soon as the man finished speaking, and got a chance, he jumped down from the bed of the truck and disappeared into the crush of humanity. But he had done

his job. Within moments, the mobs had settled down and were backing up.

"That was close," Anna said.

"Too damn close," her adopted father replied. "Cor-rie, tell the troops to keep gently pushing them back. No rough stuff, just be firm. We've managed to round up a dozen English-speaking locals, they'll assist. We've got to get these runways clear of people and trash."

Ben turned to a Rebel SEAL. "How did the port look to you, Chief?"

"As far as we could tell without going in there, General, the harbor is clear. Of course, there is no harbor

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master and the tugs are long gone. It's all up to the captains if they want to chance it."

"We'd have smash-ups for sure. Hell, there wouldn't be a dock left. How about small boats?"

"Plenty of those."

"We'll off-load that way. Corrie, tell the ships to anchor as close in as possible. Set up defensive lines at the port ASAP and get the trucks down there ready to receive supplies." He turned to the SEAL. "Can you find us a good distribution site in the city, Chief."

"No problem, General."

"Now we have to find people to captain the small craft . . ."

"We'll take care of that," a Scout quickly volunteered.

"Have at it," Ben told her.

The SEAL looked dubiously at the female Scout, but said nothing. He knew the females who made the spec ops units had no slack cut for them because of gender: they could either cut it, or they were washed out. There was no such thing as preferential treatment in the SUSAs, civilian workplace or military. No quotas, no such thing as affirmative action. If one was qualified to do the job, they got hired. If they weren't, they hit the boards.

"Found a CP for you, boss," Cooper said, walking up with a group of Rebels. "It's in the old main terminal building. Just right."

"Okay, Coop, thanks." Ben looked slowly all around him. The crowds had almost disappeared, only a handful of diehards remaining. Ben's eyes narrowed as Stan Travis walked up with a small group of reporters.

"Travis!" Ben barked at him. "I have a word of warning for you. Take it to heart. If you ever, ever, interfere with me again, I will not hesitate to shoot you stone dead on the spot. Do you understand that, mister?"

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"\es, sir," the reporter said. But he could not keep the hate from his words.

"You better understand it. I don't have the authority to order you home, but I can damn sure banish you from this column, and I will, mister, I will."

Ben turned away and began the walk over to the main terminal building, his team with him. He knew he had not heard the last from Stan Travis.

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The small boats began bringing in food, including fifty pound sacks of rice and dried beans, later that afternoon. There were only a few instances of trouble, and the Rebels, with the help of some ex-Guinea army personnel who had volunteered to work with the Rebels, quickly handled it without any bloodshed.

Ben was impressed with the work of the ex-military personnel and told his people to see about making them into some sort of militia or police. When asked, the men quickly agreed, and the first steps toward order were taken. The rebels outfitted them with uniforms and weapons and radios.

"The people are really in pretty good shape, except for the miserable diet, or lack of one, they've been forced to endure," Dr. Chase told Ben, over a glass of bourbon in Ben's CP the next evening.

"Supplies holding out?"

"Oh, yes. We're fine there. Those countries in Europe who agreed to help with this project have really come through."

"I just wonder how long they'll continue coming through after the reunited states start putting the pressure on them?"

"You think that will happen?"

"I think it's a possibility."

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Chase shook his head. "I'll argue that with you, Ben. If the reunited states tried to halt a humanitarian mission such as this one, there would be a howl from every capital around the world."

Ben smiled at his long-time friend. "You're probably right, Lamar. I just don't trust those people. I have a very deep-seated dislike for liberals."

Lamar finished his bourbon and stood up. "I have a very deep-seated dislike for politicians in general. Bastards thrive on bureaucracy. I think if a kid of mine said he wanted to grow up to be a politician I'd drown him."

Ben sat for a time after Lamar had gone. The gangs the Rebels had been pushing slowly southward could not keep running. They had to stop, turn around, and make a stand somewhere. Unless . . . Ben frowned. Well, that

was a possibility. If Bruno was behind the gangs to some degree he just might allow them to cross over into his territory and use them for cannon fodder, thereby saving his troops. The more Ben thought about that, the more he felt that might be the case.

Ben picked up the just decoded communique from Base Camp One and reread it. Mike Richards's people had been busy and had done well. Paula Preston was indeed working for the new government of the reunited states. Her parents had been lifelong, highly dedicated workers in the left-wing of the democratic party. And Paula had been in lock-step with their socialistic ideology ever since she had reached the age of comprehension.

They had trained her well.

But if she was such a dedicated worker, and so trusted, why the hell did her masters (that was the way Ben viewed people who gave their hearts and minds to the left-wing) leave her in North Africa? What the hell was the point in that?

"Oh, shit!" Ben muttered, sitting straight up in his

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chair. "Of course. That has to be it. It was so obvious I didn't see it."

They must have known that Ben and his Rebels were planning to come here. Must have known that the Rebels had been gearing up for this mission for a couple of years.

But that didn't necessarily mean the leak came from Ben's HQ. Those working on the mission back in Base Camp One had known of it for just as long, setting up supply lines, lining up ships and planes, working out logistics, and doing the hundreds of other things that went with such an operation.

But that still did not explain the "why" of Paula being left over here. Mike's people had found that other state department personnel who had survived the Great War had been either brought back Stateside by their government or managed to find their way back.

So what was the real story behind Paula's staying?

As much as Ben hated to even entertain the thought, his mind kept returning to one conclusion: Bruno Bottger.

But would an avowed socialist work for a fascist? Really give her heart and mind to such a philosophy?

"Sure seems as though that happened in this case," Ben muttered.

"Ike on the horn, boss," Corrie broke into his thoughts.

Ben walked to the radio and picked up the mic. "Go ahead, Ike?"

"Ben, we're doing a lot of good work with the people, but the gangs keep running away toward the south. It's almost as though they want us to follow them."

"I think they do, Ike. I think Bruno is behind this whole damn scenario."

"They're not going to be able to flank us, Ben. Not

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in any strength. We've got eyes in the sky every moment. They'd pick it up. So what's his plan?"

"What's your estimate of the gang strength, combined?"

"A hundred thousand or so, and that's probably figuring on the low end."

"I agree that's low. Say . . . the equivalent of seven or eight divisions."

"All right."

"That's a hell of a buffer zone, Ike. Especially with long-range artillery laying back and giving them support."

Ben could almost hear Ike sigh. "Well . . . that's the way I had it figured, Ben. But what is the point of Bruno allowing us to get all these hundreds of thousands of people well and healthy . . . Oh, shit!" he suddenly said.

"That's right, Ike. He's got people scattered throughout the starving, hundreds, maybe thousands of infiltrators, ready to rise up and take up arms when we do butt heads with the bastard. He's had several years to recruit, promising them all sorts of things in return for their support."

"And we have no way of knowing who they are so we can flush them out."

"That's right."

"We'll be fighting on two fronts."

"If we're both right in our assumption. But I could be way off base. It's still pretty early and things are iffy at this stage."

"Well, hell, Ben. Even if the gangs are not affiliated with Bruno, we've still got to fight them at some point. And with that many of them, we'll be held up and sure to take casualties."

"Unfortunately, you're right."

"Any word on the ringer?" He meant Paula.

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"Ike, I think she's working for Bruno."

"Son of a bitch! How do you figure she got hooked up with him?"

"Through the people who ramrodded the reunification of the States back home."

There was a long pause from hundreds of miles away as the full impact of

what Ben had just said struck home to Ike. "Ben . . . are you serious."

"Yes, I am, Ike. I . . ." He cut his eyes to Jersey, who had just been handed a slip of paper and had stiffened as she read it. She motioned to Ben to cut it short. "Back in a few, Ike. I think we may have a little trouble here."

"Okay, Ben. Take it easy."

"What's up, Jersey?"

"Intel says something's in the wind. There is some unusual movement among the locals in the city and we've got several hundred people all moving toward the airport in small groups."

"Any sign of weapons?"

"All of them carrying bundles about three feet long."

"My, my," Ben said with a grin. "You don't suppose they're going camping this late in the evening, do you?"

"I kinda doubt it, boss."

Ben glanced at Corrie. She nodded. "Everybody's on alert."

Ben picked up his CAR and looked around the large room. Cooper had set up his squad automatic weapon and had placed extra two hundred round magazines close by. Anna and Beth had taken up positions at the rear of the room, facing away from the runways. Corrie picked up her CAR and smiled at Ben.

"Rock and roll," she said.

"Indeed we shall," Ben replied, just as the first sounds of gunfire reached their ears. "Cut the lights."

The room was suddenly plunged into darkness.

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"Groups of people swarming all over the airport," Corrie spoke calmly. "One large group attempting to cross the runways."

"They won't make it," Ben said softly, just as Rebel .50 caliber machine guns opened up.

Portable lights set up all around the area clicked on and the harsh beams showed dozens of men either lying very still in darkening pools of blood or flopping around in twisted pain on the runways.

"Fools," Ben muttered.

A face filled with hate suddenly appeared in a window and Ben leveled his CAR and squeezed the trigger. The face dissolved in a spurt of blood and shattered bone. Another face took its place and Ben's CAR bucked in his big hands. The top of the man's head splintered apart and gray matter splattered.

Cooper's bi-podded SAW began yammering and a line of figures went down in boneless sprawls as the 5.56 rounds stitched them from left to right in the center of the body.

"It's heavier than anticipated," Corrie shouted over the rattle of battle. "A large contingent of reinforcements coming in from the north."

A man suddenly shoved a weapon through the smashed window near Corrie and without changing expression she one-handed lifted her CAR and pulled the trigger. The 5.56mm rounds took the man first in the throat and then left a hole-pocked, bone-splintered, and bloody trail from his chin to the top of his head as the CAR rose on full auto.

"Asshole," Corrie was heard to mutter.

A grenade sailed through a smashed window and without hesitation Anna scooped it up and hurled it back outside. "Hit the floor!" she shouted.

Ben and team hit the brass-littered floor just as the grenade exploded outside the CP, waist-high about

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three feet in front of a group of charging infiltrators. The shrapnel shredded living flesh and the torn bodies were flung around like puppets with a madman manipulating the strings.

With their ears still ringing from the concussion, Ben and team rose to their boots and once more took their positions. But the attackers had shifted their attack away from the small cluster of buildings-which included Ben's GP-and seemingly were concentrating on attempting to overrun Rebel positions around the airport.

Bad mistake on the part of whoever was in charge of the enemy operation.

Ben and his team could hear the battle raging all around them, but for now, their part of the airport complex was quiet except for the moaning of the wounded outside.

"My God!" came the call from outside. "Is it all right to come in there?"

Ben recognized the voice as belonging to Stan Travis. "Come on. Stay low and get on the floor as soon as you enter the building."

Jersey jerked open the door and Ben could almost see her smile in the darkness as Marilyn Dickson came crawling in on all fours. He braced himself for what he was sure was going to be a very caustic comment from Jersey.

She didn't disappoint him.

"Damn," the diminutive bodyguard said sarcastically. "Looks like a big-assed crab crawling in."

Stan Travis came crawling in right behind Marilyn, then Ford McLachlan, and finally came Paula Preston, bringing up the rear.

"Four big-assed crabs," Jersey said.

"Your people told us this area was secure!" Marilyn squalled indignantly.

"Funny thing about war," Ben said calmly. "Things

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can and often do change very quickly. Get over against that wall to your left, people. And stay down. You'll be reasonably safe."

"You mean it isn't over?" Marilyn asked.

"I doubt it, lady," Ben told her. "It'll probably break loose again in a few minutes."

Ben cut his eyes, which were accustomed to the dim light, to Paula. The woman did not appear to be frightened or upset. Ben had him a hunch that Paula would stand up to a spitting cobra and face it down. She was one hell of an actress, probably trained by the CIA at The Farm down in Virginia . . . years back.

Paula felt his eyes on her and met his gaze with a level gaze of her own.

She knows I'm onto her game, Ben thought. Hell, it was only a matter of time before she figured it out. It just might get real interesting after this.

"Here they come!" Corrie called. "They've split their forces. I just got a flash from Lieutenant Scott. They took a prisoner and the prisoner blabbed. They're after you."

"My, my," Ben quipped, seating a fresh magazine into the belly of the CAR. "All this great big fuss over little ol' me. I'm flattered."

Ben could hear Marilyn's snort of derision at that. Marilyn shrieked as a burst of automatic gunfire shattered what was left of some of the windows and splintered the wall behind her, sending bits of plaster and wood raining down on her head.

"I believe they're really going to get serious about it now," Anna said.

"I think you're right, baby," Ben told her, and that got him a sharp look from Marilyn. "She's my daughter, Ms. Dickson," Ben explained the familiarity.

"Your daughter!" Marilyn blurted.

"Yeah, lady," Anna told her. "But right now, we don't have time to explain our family tree."

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"Daughter?" Ford muttered. "I didn't know that."

"I didn't either," Stan said.

"But she's just a child!" Marilyn exclaimed. "She couldn't be over

eighteen years old!"

"Yeah; something like that," Ben agreed.

"Something like that?" Paula got into the conversation. "You mean you don't know how old your own daughter is?"

"Not really," Ben admitted.

"That's disgusting!" Ford said.

"Well, I can come within a year or so," Ben replied, keeping one eye on the outside for any sign of movement while he had a good time putting on the reporters.

"Where is the child's mother?" Marilyn asked.

"Damned if I know."

"You mean you deserted her?" Paula asked.

"Well, not exactly."

"You . . . you beast!" Marilyn said.

Anna started laughing softly and the civilians cut their eyes to her dim shape. "We had them going there for a while, didn't we, General Ben?"

"We sure did, baby."

"Heads up!" Jersey put an abrupt end to the game. "Here they come."

"Stay out of the way, you people, and get belly down on the floor," Ben ordered the reporters. "And stay there."

Bullets ripped through the shattered windows and tore into the walls. The reporters hugged the floor as Ben and team returned their attention to the attackers, coming in human waves out of the darkness.

"I think they're serious this time," Ben muttered, raising the stock of his CAR to his shoulder.

Then conversation was impossible as gunfire roared.

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A piece of torn-off wood or plaster slammed into the side of Ben's helmet and the force of it knocked him a half step to the side. He shook his head to clear it and looked up just in time to see a man trying to climb through the remains of the window. Ben gave him a quick burst of 5.56 rounds at very nearly point-blank range, the lead taking him in the upper chest and shoulders. The attacker screamed in pain and fell back, his weapon, an AK-47, Ben observed, dropped inside the room.

Another man climbed partway into the room and Anna shot him in the face, knocking him back outside into the gunfire-sparked darkness.

Jersey was staying busy with her CAR, spraying the movement-filled night with pain and death.

Beth cursed and stuck the muzzle of her CAR into a man's face just as he leveled his weapon, preparing to give the room a burst. The 5.56 rounds dissolved the attacker's face into a mass of blood and he was dead and cooling before he hit the outside ground.

Cooper was rapidly clearing his perimeter of all living things with his SAW.

Corrie was firing her CAR from the hip and talking into her headset at the same time, steadily receiving reports from all over the airport.

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The attack broke off as suddenly as it began, the darkness-shrouded enemy running away, disappearing into the night.

"Hold positions," Ben ordered. "No pursuit."

Corrie instantly relayed the orders.

After a few seconds, Ben said, "Give me some prelims on casualties."

"Checking now," Corrie said. "Be another minute or so."

"Is it all right to get up now?" Ford asked from his position on the floor.

"Not yet," Ben told him. "A couple more minutes."

"But you're standing up," Marilyn protested.

"I never got down there."

Marilyn muttered something under her breath, too low for Ben to hear, but he had a pretty good idea of the content. He smiled in the darkness.

"Half a dozen wounded, no dead," Corrie reported. "We have a number of prisoners."

"And we won't get a damn thing out of any of them. Okay, people. You can get up. But don't go outside and stay ready to hit the floor again."

"Why won't you get anything out of them?" Marilyn asked, brushing herself off.

"Because they don't know who they're working for," Ben replied.

"What do you mean?" Stan asked.

"Just that. They're mercenaries. Only the people at the top know who's paying them."

Vehicles were being pulled around to Ben's CP, headlights on bright, illuminating the area all around. The bright beams picked up dozens sprawled in death and several trying to crawl away, too seriously wounded to stand up. Rebels were already moving among the dead, gathering up weapons and ammo. The weapons would be given to the newly formed police of the city. The bodies of the dead would be tossed into the beds of

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trucks, trucked away and stacked up in a field away from the city, and buried in a mass grave at first light. The wounded would be taken to the MASH tents and treated. Then they would be turned over to the civilian police. What happened to them after that was of absolutely no concern to Ben.

But it was to the press. "What will happen to the prisoners?" Ford asked.

"After we've treated them, they'll be turned over to the local police."

"And then?" Marilyn asked.

"I don't know. This isn't my country. It's theirs. Ask them."

"I shall."

"You do that. And while you're doing that, ask who is paying these mercenaries to attack us. And find out why they're so interested in killing me." Ben turned away from her and met the eyes of Paula Preston. He held his steady gaze on the woman until she dropped her eyes. "I'd like to know. Wouldn't you, Paula?"

The question seemed to startle her. "Ah ... of course. Yes. Certainly."

"I thought you would." Smiling, Ben walked outside. He had planted the seed. Now he would wait to see how his garden grew.

There were no more attacks against the Rebels while they were in Conakry. The prisoners the Rebels captured that night knew nothing about who was in charge beyond their immediate officers. The Rebel doctors tended to their wounds and then turned them over to local authorities. If the press ever found out what might happen to the prisoners, they did not inform Ben as to their findings. Ben suspected the locals told the press to go suck an egg ... or words something along that line.

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Ben prepared to pull his 1 Batt out and continue south.

Next stop, the country of Sierra Leone.

Nick's 18 Batt was only a day's drive away from the west coast of Africa, his doctors seeing to the needs of the people in Mamou and Dabola, and Paul Harrison's 17 Batt a day's drive from Nick east at Kouroussa and Kankan. Ike was a continent away in Somalia, in what he described as the shithole of the world. There weren't that many people left in Ike's sector, for a decades-long civil war, drought, famine, and disease had just about wiped out the entire population of the country. Ike reported that the wild animals were once more reclaiming the land.

"You sure you people wouldn't like to travel with Ike for a time?" Ben asked the press, a hopeful note in his words.

"Thank you, no," Marilyn replied, speaking for the entire group.

"It was just a thought."

Ben and his 1 Batt moved out just as the rainy season struck the land with full fury.

"Shhittt!" Jersey summed up the feelings of everyone as she stared out the window of the big wagon at the silver torrent hammering at the countryside.

"How long is this mess supposed to last?" Cooper questioned.

"Months," Beth informed them.

"Double shit," Jersey said.

"Well, we can take some consolation in the knowledge that it isn't that far to Freetown," Ben said.

"The country is a mess," Corrie said. "Civil war still raging all over the place. Same with Liberia, the Ivory Coast, and Ghana."

"It's going to be heads up time for all of us from now on," Ben warned the team. "We'll be under threat of attack every hour of every day for our food, our sup-

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plies, our equipment and our weapons. We're not going to be able to let down for an instant, for any reason."

Anna muttered under her breath.

"What'd you say, Anna?" Ben questioned.

"I said, 'then why bother with it?' "

"Because it's on the way," Ben replied. "We can't very well avoid it."

"Well, we don't have to stop except to bivouac," Anna persisted.

"And that may be all we'll end up doing," Ben told her.

"Even with the press along?" Jersey asked.

"I think the press is going to get very weary of being shot at, Jersey. And if several of them get wounded, or killed . . . well, we'll just have to wait and see."

"Won't make any difference," Anna said. "If they see one hungry child or sick person, they'll immediately start pissing and moaning and demanding we do something."

Ben didn't reply, but he silently agreed with his adopted daughter, and knew the team felt the same way. They'd been putting up with liberal reporters for years and could just about predict their every move . . . or thought.

The reporters from the SUSAs, on the other hand, realized that fate often dealt good people a lousy hand in this card game called life, and sometimes one just had to look away and keep on walking, for there reaches a point in the human condition where any kind of help is only a stop-gap measure; a Band-Aid on a sucking chest wound. Giving a tetanus shot to a person who is dying of starvation is a waste of time, money,

and supplies. Realists understand that; idealists never will.

Beth jumped in verbally between Ben and Anna, before Anna could say more. "This month we're going to have twenty days with rain-of the monsoon type, remember-next month twenty-five days, and the next

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two months it will rain every day. Isn't that something to look forward to?"

"You're a real bringer of joy, Beth," Cooper said, squinting his eyes, trying to see through the deluge that hammered at the wagon.

"I do try!" Beth replied brightly.

"I roger that," Corrie said, then leaned forward. "Boss, flybys confirm that the bridges connecting Lungi and Freetown have been destroyed."

"Damn!" Ben muttered. "How about the city itself? Are we getting any last minute reports out of there?"

"Nothing since last week, when we intercepted that radio transmission about Freetown being under siege and not being able to hold out much longer."

Ben rode in silence for a few slow miles, the only sound the drumming of the heavy rain on the roof of the big wagon. Finally he sighed and said, "We'll bypass Freetown. We already knew that Lungi has been sacked and looted so many times there is nothing left. Corrie, bump the Scouts and advise them to avoid Freetown." He opened a map. "Where are the Scouts?"

"Waiting on the north side of the Little Scarcies River."

"The bridge still intact there?"

"Affirmative to that."

"Tell them to hold the bridge open for us and wait for us there."

"Yes, sir. A reminder that what is left of Kambia is a ghost town."

"Yes. I remember that transmission. Cooper, stay on this road, the Port Loko highway. We're not going to get within a hundred miles of Freetown. I'm not going to get us involved in some damn civil or tribal war if I can avoid it."

"The press is going to love this news," Jersey warned.

"Fuck the press," Ben said. "I'm going to tell them

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when we stop that if they wish to go to Freetown, they are certainly free to do so ... on their own."

Cooper cut his eyes to Ben for a second. "They just might take you up on that, boss."

"I sure as hell won't make any attempt to stop them."

The weather probably had much to do with it, but the column came under no hostile fire on the way to what was left of Kambia. The column picked their way through the ruins of the town, seeing no signs of life, not even a dog or a cat, and continued south toward the Little Scarcies River.

"Nothing happening here, General," the Scout in charge of the detachment told Ben when they arrived late that afternoon. The roads were terrible and getting worse the further south they went. "We haven't seen anybody."

"As soon as we get some shelter up, you people will be relieved so you can relax a bit. Thanks, gang."

"No sweat, General."

That evening, the cooks prepared only coffee and kept huge urns of it hot all night. The Rebels, including Ben, ate field rations. There was no point in cooking, for by the time anyone carried their trays or mess kits away from the mess line, the food containers would be filled up with water.

And the rain continued to come down in silver/gray sheets with no signs of abating.

"Screw this," Ben abruptly said, when the column was only a few miles from Port Loko. "Corrie, tell the Scouts to hold up and wait for us. We're going to get out of this damned rain for a change."

Port Loko had been the scene of many battles, that was evident by the bullet and shell pocked buildings, but there were enough structures left standing to afford

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some welcome shelter from the rain and for the cooks to serve up a hot meal.

The Rebels took turns standing naked in the rain, soaping up and rinsing off, then the welcome feeling of dry clothing, at least for a short time. Then a hot meal. Even if the beef was canned, the potatoes were fresh, the bread just baked, and the gravy hot and good.

But what bothered them all, even though it was mentioned in quiet whispers, was the absence of people.

"Scouts report they found a boneyard," Corrie told Ben softly, after moving to his side. "Just outside of town. Hundreds of skeletons. Men, women, and children."

"Let's go take a look." Ben struggled into his poncho and picked up his CAR.

"All of them shot, General," the doctor said, standing up from his inspection upon Ben's arrival. "You can see the slugs in some of the skulls."

"Tribal warfare," Ben said softly, squatting down and sticking the muzzle of his CAR into a gaping eye socket. He shook the skull and the slug rattled about. "Probably. But I don't imagine we'll ever know for

sure. How many you estimate here, Doctor?"

"Five or six hundred, give or take a hundred. Hard to tell the way the bones have been scattered by foraging animals."

Ben stood up. "Well, at least here we know what happened to the people. Perhaps never the why, but at least the what."

Ben walked off, muttering about ignorance, butchery and barbarism. For once, the press had nothing to say as they gathered around in the rain, standing silently, filming the scene for their viewers back home.

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At Port Loko Ben told the press about the conditions in Freetown. "Any of you who wish may go to Freetown if that is your desire. I won't stop you."

"You will provide escort?"

"No. I will not."

A silence greeted Ben's statement, then a few members of the press protested. But the older hands said nothing. They understood that Ben was under no mandate to provide them security. He had not asked for the press and considering that, Ben and the Rebels had been very accommodating thus far.

Four members of the press stood up, one stating, "We feel it is our obligation to visit the city and report on the events here."

"Good luck," Ben told them.

The four press types took their crews and pulled out the next morning. They were never heard from again.

From Port Loko, the column crossed the Rokel River and headed for Moyamba Junction. The Rebels found a few people still in the town and the doctors went to work. Ben and team, trailed by several members of the press, walked around the town during a break in the rains. There wasn't that much left to see in the battle-ravaged town.

"General," Stan Travis asked, as they strolled along.

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"How many people would you estimate have died on this continent since the Great War?"

"Stan, I have absolutely no idea. But I would guess several million at least. Perhaps as many as ten times that number. I doubt that anyone will ever really know. And we really don't know what has happened in Asia, China, South America, or what used to be known as Russia."

"Do you plan to visit those areas?" Marilyn asked, in a surprisingly civil tone of voice.

"Yes, if I live that long, Ms. Dickson. Of course, a lot hinges on what happens back home."

"You're speaking of the reunification of the States, General?" Ford asked.

"Yes."

"Your section is the last holdout," a reporter Ben didn't know stated.

Ben smiled as they continued strolling along through the deserted town. "The SUSA is a sovereign nation, sir. We have our own constitution and bill of rights, both patterned after the original documents; indeed they are almost identical-except ours give the law-abiding citizen a lot more rights. We will not rejoin the Union."

"Under any conditions, General?" Alex Marsh asked. It was the first question he'd asked since Ben got all over his case miles back.

"We are a separate nation, Mr. Marsh. We intend to remain that way."

"The United States of America might use force in order to preserve the Union, sir," another reporter said.

"They might, indeed," Ben replied, never stopping his walking. "But when they do it will be the end of America as any of you know it."

"Is that a threat, sir?"

"That's a fact, son. A fact."

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* * *

Within twenty-four hours, newspapers all across the reunited USA hit the streets with the glaring headlines: GENERAL RAINES PROMISES WAR IF USA USES FORCE AGAINST SUSA.

SUSA THREATENS WAR AGAINST AMERICA

WAR TALK BETWEEN SUSA AND USA DEEPENS TENSIONS

WAR LOOMS ON HORIZON

"Horseshit," Ben said, after hearing the news. "The only way there will be a war is if the reunited states start it. We won't."

"You think the reunited states really want a war with us?" Anna asked.

"Some politicians do. But they won't be the ones to fight it. They never are. Cecil says a recent poll shows the people outside the SUSA fairly evenly split about it... which sort of surprises me. You would think after suffering through the worst war ever fought on American soil and several years of all sorts of deprivation, the last thing any of them would want would be more war. It shows how much the rest of the nation hates the South . . . and how much they hate me."

"And our way of life," Beth added.

"Oh, yes. Let's don't forget that. They hate it because we have full employment, almost zero crime, a laidback way of life,

easy-to-understand laws, a workable healthcare system, no bureaucracy . . . and that's just hitting a few points." Ben laughed aloud as the column rolled along through the rain.

The Rebels had passed through towns of varying sizes and had seen few signs of life. The old festering tribal hatreds and years-long civil war had just about wiped out the population except for the towns along the coast, which the Rebels had decided to avoid. Rebel analysts

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had concluded that at the present rate, the country would be finished in a few more years.

Ben studied a map for a few moments, then folded it and stuck it back in a map case. "We've got to be resupplied with food, water, and medical supplies. But Liberia is out of the question for flights in or out or for docking facilities along the coast. The country's been torn apart by civil war for a decade or more. Fly-bys show the old international airport at Monrovia unusable. Docking facilities are nil. Warlords have been controlling the country for years and have wrecked it. That's why we're taking the northern route, and will link up with Nick Stafford and his 18 Batt. We'll crawl along the top of the nation until we reach the border of Cote d'Ivoire, the old Ivory Coast. That will probably be the most stable country we'll find anywhere. And won't that be a relief."

"Then we travel south to Abidjan?" Cooper asked.

"Right. We have no choice in the matter. It's our best bet for a port and they have a good airport."

"But getting through Liberia is going to be a tad hairy, right?" Jersey asked.

"I think you'd be safe in saying that."

Ben spat out a mouthful of mud and wiped his muddy face with an equally muddy hand. All in all it was a futile gesture.

"Shit!" he cursed, then wiped a sleeve across his face. That helped.

Ben's 1 Batt had linked up with Nick's 18 Batt between Foya and Kolahun and within minutes had come under attack from a large force, pinning down the Rebels and splitting the columns. The roads were a mess: tanks bogging down every few miles, trucks getting stuck along with them. Everyone in the column was

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soaked through and through, with mud all over them. Several thousand highly pissed-off Rebels were in no mood to fuck around with anybody.

Ben was under a deuce and a half filled with supplies, on his belly in the muddy road, his team left and right of him.

"How many damn people hit us?" Jersey asked. "The two columns together must be five miles long. That's a hell of a force."

"Somebody's throwing everything they've got at us," Ben said, raising his voice to be heard over the hammering rain and the yammer and clatter of weapons on full auto.

Cooper cut loose with a burst from his SAW and out of the corner of his eyes, Ben saw three or four figures fold up and go down.

"Stupid bastards," Cooper said, his words just audible over the sounds of weather and battle.

"18 Batt just dragged a wounded prisoner in," Corrie said, working her way close to Ben in the mud. "They say the man is nothing but skin and bones. Doctors say the prisoner is suffering from malnutrition. The prisoner says all they want is food."

"Tell the doctors the bastards might be hungry, but they're still strong enough to pull a fucking trigger," Ben replied.

A wide grin split Corrie's mud-streaked face. "I will relay your message."

"You do that."

A long burst of gunfire kicked up mud and water and small stones very close to the truck, flinging the debris into Ben's face. Ben wiped his face and cussed, then out of sheer frustration, he leveled his CAR and gave the brush and jungle close to the road a full magazine of 5.56 rounds. He doubted he'd hit anything, but the

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action made him feel better. He ejected the empty and fitted a full magazine into place. He waited.

"Nick's 18 Batt coming under what appears to be a suicide charge," Corrie said. "They're holding."

A couple of minutes later, the sounds of battle faded, leaving only the drum of rain. "Maintain positions," Ben ordered. "No pursuit. Scouts out."

Five minutes ticked past without a shot being heard. Corrie said, "Scouts report the enemy has withdrawn. They left their wounded behind."

"Ask the Scouts how the dead and wounded are fixed for ammo."

"Scouts report all weapons and ammo were taken by the enemy."

"They're low on ammo as well as food," Ben said, crawling out from under the truck. "Bet on it. This was a desperation attack."

Ben began walking toward the front of the column, his team slogging along with him on the muddy road, the mud clinging to their boots in great globs, making their feet appear to weigh fifty pounds each.

"The enemy," Ben said, "at least this bunch, don't have rockets. We didn't sustain a single rocket hit. Corrie, ask Nick if they received any grenades."

"Not a one," she quickly reported.

"Whoever they are, they're out of nearly everything. Okay. Let's get

this show on the road. There's a village or town just up ahead. We'll patch up the prisoners and leave them there. The Scouts should be near the town now."

"They're stuck in the road just outside of the village," Corrie reported. "Both vehicles mired up to the axles."

"Wonderful," Ben said wearily. "All right. Tell them we'll be along as quickly as possible. How about our wounded?"

"Two dead. Five wounded."

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"Let's get moving." Ben stamped his feet, trying to dislodge the clinging mud. "If at all possible."

It wasn't much of a town, but most of the buildings were still standing and the doctors quickly set up shop and began working on the wounded . . . Rebel wounded first, then the enemy. That was a Rebel rule, adhered to hard and fast, without exception.

The Rebels played by no rules other than their own. They were bound by no convention or treaty. Just another reason why so many around the world, who had studied the Rebels, did not want to tangle with them.

Ben stuck his head inside a small house and almost burst out laughing. Marilyn Dickson and Paula Preston were sitting on the bare floor in a side room, out of sight of the male reporters, who were behind the house, naked, soaping as they stood in the rain. Both of the women were covered head to feet with mud.

"Enjoying the trip, ladies?" Ben asked.

Marilyn solemnly lifted her right hand and gave him the finger.

Ben laughed at her and walked on.

"Hoity-toity bitch is human after all," Jersey remarked.

"I think she is, Jersey."

Ben turned into the building Lamar Chase had set up for a hospital. Lamar looked up from his inspection of a case of some sort of medicines, carefully packed against breakage. "We lost one of our people, Ben. The other four will make it. But we're going to have to hole up here for a couple of days."

"Suits me, Lamar. How about the prisoners?"

"A couple of them will make it. The others died."

"Other than their wounds, what about their physical condition?"

"They're very malnourished. I don't know what they've been living on, but it hasn't been very nutritious."

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Finally out of the rain, Ben rolled a cigarette.

"Don't smoke in my hospital, Raines," Lamar warned.

Ben ignored him and lit up.

"Asshole," Lamar said.

"You smoked for forty goddamn years, Lamar, and smoked more cigarettes in a day than I do in a month. So shut up about it."

"The older you get the more difficult you are to get along with, Raines. You're becoming an insufferable prick."

"So sue me."

Lamar gave him the middle finger and walked off to see to the patients.

"Two rigid-digits in one day," Ben muttered. "Must be something in the air."

"Some raggedy-assed people in what's left of field clothes approaching the town, boss," Corrie said. "They're under a white flag and do not appear to be armed."

"Probably part of the bunch who attacked us. All right, let's go see them."

Raggedy-assed is right, Ben thought, as he approached the group, standing under the awning of a building at the edge of the small town. Their clothing was tattered and torn, and most wore some sort of sandals made from old tires.

"We need food," one of the men said, speaking in near-perfect English, only slightly accented. "We are hungry."

"And what will you do after I've given you food?" Ben replied. "Go back to making war on your own people?"

"What we do is none of your business," the man said, his tone a bit more harder and demanding. "This is our country, not yours. You were not invited here."

"That's right. And we're only passing through. We

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help whenever we find sick civilians. But we won't help either side of warring factions."

"We can take all the food and all your guns, if we want to." The man's eyes had turned hard and mean.

"You can try," Ben said softly.

The man pointed a ringer at Ben. "This is the only warning you will get. Share with us or die while you sleep!"

"Hit the trail," Ben told him. "If you don't understand that, it means carry your ass on away from here."

The man's face suddenly became a mask of rage, and for one quick moment, Ben thought the guy was actually going to try to jump him. The man fought his temper under control and managed a smile. "Soon we will be the best-equipped and best-fed army in the country. Then we will march on the capital and seize power. And you will all be dead, your flesh eaten by animals and your bones scattered."

"Fuck you!" Ben told him, using the words that are almost universally understood.

"You have made the greatest mistake of your life," the guerrilla told Ben. "But you will not have long to regret it."

Ben yawned in his face.

The guerrillas wheeled around and marched off through the rain into the tangle of brush and jungle.

"They'll be coming at us soon," Ben said. "So let's get ready to meet them."

"Ah . . . look, boss," Jersey said, cutting her eyes.

Ben looked. The guerrilla leader was standing at the edge of the forest, giving him the middle finger.

"Must be my day for it," Ben muttered.

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"If they do attack us," Nick said to Ben later on that afternoon. "They have got to be just about the dumbest bunch in Africa."

"Dumb and desperate, Nick. Little men with big ideas."

Tanks now encircled the town. Two battalions of Rebels were dug in, waiting to throw their considerable firepower at the enemy.

"What's the latest from the other battalions?" Nick asked, after unwrapping a stick of gum and chewing for a moment to soften it up.

"Just like us. They're all reporting more and more hostile encounters with guerrilla groups the further south we go. I'm betting the going will get slower and slower from this point on."

"You think Bruno Bottger is behind this bunch making noises at us?"

Ben shook his head. "No. I think this bunch is a holdover from the early days of the civil war in this country. They've been having at each other since before the Great War."

Nick looked at him. "You think they even know there has been a worldwide war and collapse?"

Ben chuckled at the thought. "Hell, Nick. The pos-

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sibility is remote, but they might not know. I hadn't thought about that."

Lamar Chase strolled up and stepped out of the rain to stand under the awning with the two men. "Our people are going to make it. Only one of the prisoners is still alive and I don't hold out much hope for him."

Ben glanced at the chief of medicine, surprise in his eyes. "One of the medics told me his wounds were not that severe."

"The medic was right. It isn't his wounds alone that are killing. His entire system is shot-to use a non-medical explanation. He doesn't have the strength to fight off this latest attack on his body. But don't waste your time feeling a bit sorry for him; I sure as hell don't. All the man does is lie there and cuss us all."

Nick stopped chewing his gum. "Why, Dr. Chase?"

"We're capitalists, he's an avowed Marxist-this entire bunch attacking us, or threatening to attack us is. One of those goddamn People's Liberation Army groups, or some such shit as that."

Ben grunted his disgust. He knew from long experience that anytime some group used the "Peoples"-what-ever in their name, they were more than likely communist.

Chase looked out at the pouring rain. "They'll hit us tonight, won't they, Ben?"

"In all likelihood, yes. I don't believe they have the strength or the firepower to launch another daylight attack. Today was a desperation move on their part; hoping to take us by surprise."

"The prisoner told me we can expect a lot more of this as we move across this nation."

"He's probably right, Lamar. But we'll be two battalions strong as we roll-or slip and slide, as the case may be-across what's left of this country and into Cote d'Ivoire. According to intel there isn't a guerrilla group

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in the country strong enough now to do us much damage. But they'll sure try."

Cooper came running through the rain, sliding to a halt under the awning. "We found another mass grave, boss, about a thousand meters behind the town. The rain washed away the thin covering of dirt over the bones."

"Men, women, and children?" Nick asked.

"Yes, sir," Cooper said.

Lamar shook his head in disgust. "Centuries-old tribal hatreds. It's pathetic."

"Maybe something good will come out of it, Lamar," Ben opined.

"I'd like to know what," the doctor demanded.

"The animals are making a comeback. That's something."

Lamar stared at Ben for a moment to see if he was serious. He was. The doctor walked off into the rain, back to his makeshift hospital, muttering under his breath.

Ben smiled as he watched his old friend walk away, a heavy security guard around him.

"Boss, we've got everything at our disposal trained to bang," Cooper said. "You really think this ragtag bunch will attack us tonight?"

"I do, and they will. Bet on it. They've got to have our supplies or they'll die. They have no choice in the matter. It's going to be short and savage and bloody. They'll be fighting to the last round they have. When it comes, don't let up."

"It'll be this way all across this screwed-up country, won't it?" Cooper asked.

"I'm afraid so, Coop. And as I have warned, worse the further south we go."

"You want to go view that mass grave?" Cooper asked.

Ben shook his head. "No. I don't. I imagine we'll be

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seeing a lot of mass graves before we butt heads with Bruno. And then when we've kicked that bastard's ass, we'll be uncovering mass grave sites all over the country he's occupied. And you can tattoo that on your arm." Ben looked up as the rain diminished somewhat. "Come on, gang. Let's walk the town."

With two battalions ringing the town, any attack the guerrillas made-without benefit of mortars, heavy artillery, or rockets-would be nothing more than a suicide charge on their part.

But he knew the guerrillas would try. And he also knew they would fail; probably the Rebels would wipe them out right down to the last man.

Ben walked the lines of defense, stopping to speak to Rebels often, even if it was nothing more than to say hello. It was a great morale booster for the troops, and besides, Ben enjoyed doing it. But every time he did it, he always felt a little sad afterward. He used to know every man and woman in his command; could call them by name. Now he didn't even know everyone in his own battalion.

It always flung him back in time a few years, back to when the government thought they'd wiped out all those who believed in the Tri-States philosophy of government; back to when Ben and a handful of others took to the hills and the mountains and the swamps and the plains of America and challenged the might of big government.

And they had won. By sheer determination and cussedness and the belief they were right, they had defeated the forces of what had become a left-wing government

Now look at the Rebels, Ben thought, as he strolled along in the light rain. The most feared fighting force on the face of the earth. And the SUSA the most pro-

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ductive and stable government anywhere in the world. And the most hated.

The tour of defenses completed, Ben walked back to the small building he was using as a CP and sat down. He cleaned his CAR and his sidearm, and busied himself for a time filling spare magazines. Darkness would come soon, and with it, a suicide attack.

"Scouts report movement in the brush," Corrie called. "Enemy appears to be getting into position for an attack."

"How many of them?"

"At least several hundred."

"No surprises?"

Corrie knew what he meant. "Nothing but light arms."

"Claymores in place?"

"Affirmative."

Ben glanced at the open door; or rather, where the door used to be. About an hour until dark. "Pull the Scouts in."

"Scouts returning. No dead, no wounded."

Ben nodded. Any hits would have been rare among the Scouts, for Rebel Scouts were among the most highly trained of all Rebels. They could move through any type of terrain with the silence and stealth of ghosts, usually leaving behind them a trail of dead enemy troops, throats cut in silent kills. The Scouts were not a large force, but they were highly effective, and among the most feared of all Rebels.

Both of Ben's grown kids, Buddy and Tina, had been Scouts, working their way up through the ranks, before taking command of a battalion.

And Ben suspected that in another year or so, Anna would join the legendary Scouts. She had already dropped a couple of hints to that effect. Ben would not stop her if that was her choice, but neither would he

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ask that any slack be cut for her. That's the way it was not only in the Rebel Army, but in the Tri-States itself. You pulled your own weight and didn't ask for favors. If you couldn't cut it, you admitted it and backed away. There was no stigma attached to it; you were just assigned to another job.

"Scouts back home," Corrie said.

"Everybody take turns taking a leak," Ben ordered. "Then everybody button up. It's gonna get real hairy pretty damn quick. How about the clinic, Corrie?"

"Secure as we can make it."

"The press?"

"We put them in with Chase and his medical people."

"Good enough." Ben looked around the room he and his team would defend. "Positions, everybody. Let's do it."

Ben and Cooper took the rear of the house. Anna was at a side window, Beth at the other side. Jersey at the front, facing the outer circle of the Rebels' perimeter. Corrie would stay with the radio unless things got real dicey.

Ben took a sip of water and munched on a candy bar. Jersey stuffed several sticks of gum into her mouth. Anna was cold as an ice cube ... as usual. Combat was her forte, and she made no apologies for it. Corrie was busy yakking softly with someone. Beth waited, no expression on her face. Cooper was behind his SAW, waiting.

A few tentative shots came from the brush and jungle. The Rebels did not bite. They waited.

"Give them about a minute of mortar fire, all the way around," Ben ordered. "High explosive and willie peter. That should give them something to think about."

The brush and jungle around the encircled town began erupting in flashes of fire and white phosphorus. Screams of pain from badly wounded and burned men shrieked out of the drizzling rain. Several wounded and

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bloody men ran screaming out of the brush directly into the close kill radius of a Claymore. The blast shredded the men into a mass of bloody chunks and stilled their agony forever.

Ben had ordered the main guns on the tanks dropped to their lowest elevation. "Give the jungle some HE and anti-personnel rounds from the tanks, Corrie," he ordered.

The ground began trembling as the main guns began pouring out the rounds. Some of the anti-personnel rounds contained small grenades which either burst on contact or in midair. Other HE rounds were filled with shards of steel; both rounds were highly lethal ... as the guerrillas in the brush and jungle found out. The 120mm rounds were cutting trees in two and sending the guerrillas running in all directions. Many of them made the mistake of running toward the Rebels. That was the last mistake they ever made as the dug-in Rebels opened up with everything at their command . . . which was plenty.

Within minutes the outer ring around the town was littered with the dead and the dying and what was left of the guerrilla force was fading back into the jungle. They had had enough, and Ben did not believe they would be back.

"Hold positions," Ben ordered. "We'll count the dead in the morning. Stay heads up, but I think it's over."

The Rebels stayed on alert all during the long night, but no more attacks came. When dawn broke, they began counting the dead. Ben stopped them at two hundred and fifty dead.

"We've broken the backs of the guerrillas. Take the weapons of the dead, scoop out a grave for the bodies, and shove them in.

"It's over here."

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The column moved slowly across the top of what was left of Liberia. The route was yoyoish: north to Voin-jama, south to Zorzor and Gbarnga, then north to Ganta, then south to Saklepea and Tappita, then east to Tobli. They finally crossed over into Cote d'Ivoire and brought the column to a halt in Toulepleu, where they were met by a small contingent of army troops. Since the engagement with the guerrilla troops, several weeks past, the Rebels had encountered no more trouble.

A smiling army colonel walked up to Ben, saluted smartly, then extended his right hand.

Ben returned the salute, then took the hand while the colonel's men cheered.

"It is so nice to see a friendly face, Colonel," Ben said.

"Welcome to our country, General Raines. We have been following your progress with much interest. Following as best we could, that is."

"Well, we only had a couple of minor run-ins with guerrillas in Liberia."

"The People's Army of the Democratic Front? Or some such nonsense as that?"

"That's the one."

"A pack of idiots, the lot of them. Collectively, they

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have managed to destroy their country and cause us no small amount of grief in the process."

"We saw very few people on our way across Liberia, Colonel."

"Many fled the fighting." He shook his head. "But many more were slaughtered in ethnic cleansing. Isn't that such a polite way of describing genocide, General?"

"But it's politically correct, Colonel."

Both men started laughing at that and a new friendship was born on a rainy afternoon.

"Come," the colonel said. "We can start our journey to the capital in the morning. Right now, let's get you and your people settled in and fed and rested."

"And while we're doing that, you can bring me up to date on what Bruno Bottger is doing."

The colonel cursed for a moment. "That bastard!" he spat out the word. "He sent people into this country in an attempt to subvert our political process. We hanged them all."

Ben looked at the man and smiled.

"Those we didn't shoot," the colonel added.

"They've managed, in the face of great adversity, to correct many of the woes that faced their country for several years," Ben said to Dr. Chase that evening. "Also, just before the Great War, many of the French businesspeople returned. And that helped."

"I wonder why they moved the capital from Yamoussoukro back to Abidjan?" Nick asked.

"Probably 'cause no one could pronounce it," Cooper said from across the room.

"Go back to reading your girlie magazines, Cooper," Jersey told him. "This is an intelligent conversation. That lets you out."

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Cooper gave her the bird and she returned two of them.

"All right, children, calm down," Chase chastised the pair.

"You're a fine one to talk," Ben told him.

"I'm older," Chase popped right back. "That gives me special privileges." He smiled, pushed back his chair, and said, "And with that, I bid you all a good night."

His security people were waiting just outside the door, and they trailed along a few steps behind him.

"I don't think we've got much to fear in this country," Ben said. "But nonetheless, we'll post our own guards to augment the one provided by the good colonel." He smiled. "I'll sleep better."

His team all laughed at that. Everybody in the Rebel army knew that Ben Raines required less sleep than anyone; he had been that way all his life. Just a few hours' sleep was all he needed. And despite being middle-aged, he could keep going far beyond many men half his age. His team knew, too, that Ben never slept deeply. Any unnatural sound would wake him instantly.

The colonel did not try to hide any illness or hunger as he and his security force led the column south toward the capital. Whenever Ben

signaled for a halt, whether for an hour or for several days, he never hesitated.

"With the addition of the medicines and food you are providing, maybe we have more than a fighting chance to make it," he confided in Ben one afternoon. "We've been spending most of our resources on defense . . . fighting to keep the communists out of our country."

"And you've done a good job of it," Ben complimented the soldier.

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"At the expense of our people. I will tell you a hard truth, General. We are almost out of everything. The fight with General Field Marshal Bottger-or whatever that bastard is calling himself now-has just about wiped us out. When we heard the news about your coming to Africa, the entire country rejoiced. I must warn you that once we reach the capital, there will be a holiday and a parade in your honor. I hope you do not take offense at us for doing so."

Ben clasped the man's shoulder with a big hand. "Colonel, that will be wonderful."

The colonel sighed with a relief that Ben did not fully comprehend. "That is a load off my mind, General." He looked at Ben for a moment and with a straight face said, "We were afraid you would be offended. Americans are such strange people with very weird customs."

No liberating army ever received such a welcome as the Rebels received in Abidjan. The people turned out by the thousands, lining the highways and streets. They were dressed in their finest and their sincerity touched even the most hardened Rebel.

"We've made another friend in Africa," Ben radioed to Cecil after the parade and a short first meeting with the president of Cote d'Ivoire. "Not that you didn't know that already."

"He contacted me, Ben," Cecil replied. "I told him you would assess the situation and we'd start trade talks after I talked it over with you. The parade and holiday was already planned long before you reached the country. The president at first wanted to cancel the event, thinking you might take it the wrong way."

"It was wonderful, Cec. It touched us all. You've started the surplus grain ships moving this way?"

"That's affirmative, Ben. They should dock within a

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few days. I ordered them loaded as soon as I spoke with the president. I knew you would approve."

"I certainly do, ol' buddy. Get some businesspeople moving this direction ASAP to assist in the rebuilding of this nation. This is an important port and we want to always be welcome here."

"Will do. A flight will be leaving within 48 hours. I've spoken with the French and they pledged their full support. They're working with us in a way they never worked with America before ... at least not in my memory."

"You're the politician, Cec. I'll leave all that up to you and your cabinet. I'll just fight the wars."

"I think you're getting the better end of it," Cecil said wistfully. "How about our little surprise? You ready for them yet?"

"Not yet. Keep them under wraps until I bump you. Is everyone fully trained and combat ready?"

"You bet. Rarin' to go."

Thousands of miles away, Ben chuckled. "Won't that set Bruno's fascist ass on fire?"

"I certainly hope so. Literally as well as figuratively. What do you have on tap for tomorrow?"

"Meeting with trade people. Which is why I want some help over here. What the hell do I know about oil-palm kernels and coffee, cocoa, and bananas?"

Cecil was still laughing when he signed off.

Many of the younger Rebels spoke French, since in the SUSA school system, the studying of foreign languages was a requirement, not an elective subject. In the SUSA, kids began taking foreign language courses in the early grade school years. Since Cote d'Ivoire was one of the French-speaking countries in Africa, the troops got along easily with the residents.

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By the end of the first week, the Rebels had been completely resupplied and the Ivoirians were unloading emergency food and medical supplies from the recently docked freighters sent by the SUSA, the French, Germans, Britons, and a few other aligned countries.

Back in the States, Cecil reported that the government of the newly reunified states was furious with the Europeans for aiding the Rebels. The reunified states were unable to send anything in the way of aid since they were just barely producing enough to feed themselves. Instead, the politicians were stressing the importance of being politically correct, teaching sensitivity training, enforcing new and highly restrictive gun-control laws, kissing the butts of criminals, and all that other important stuff that liberals love to jam down the throats of everyone ... or stick up the ass of citizens, whichever orifice would accommodate the foolish babblings of the reunited states' left-wing nincompoop politicians.

Ben toured the city of Abidjan and was impressed. It was clean and functioning. The streets and highways were well maintained, considering the country had been all but isolated for years.

After being resupplied, Nick and his 18 Batt left the city and headed back north, to travel the far north of Cote d'Ivoire just south of Burkina Faso. Paul Harrison's 17 Batt was traveling through Burkina Faso, and Ben had been warned that his troops would find death, sickness, desolation, and civil war there. Many of the refugees had tried to settle in Cote d'Ivoire but had been driven away; the country could just barely feed their own-and the several million refugees who had fled across the borders and been allowed to stay-on very meager rations. Cote d'Ivoire just could not handle any more.

"It was a hard and cruel thing for us to do," the

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president explained. "But our own people's safety and security must come first."

"I fully understand that," Ben told the president. "What about Ghana?"

The president wagged his right hand from side to side in a very European gesture. "They are doing not quite as well as we here in Cote d'Ivoire. But they are surviving and resisting that son of a whore Bottger's advances. They will be very grateful for the medicines you bring and the doctors to see the sick. Ghanaians are still a very friendly people. I doubt you will experience any trouble."

"Togo?"

The president frowned and shook his head. "Togo is a no-man's land, and has been for years. It is a country ripped apart by civil war. All we really know about Togo is that it is a place to avoid if one values his life."

"But unfortunately for us . . ." Ben trailed that off.

"I know. You must go. And it is a fine and noble mission you are on. You and your people will be in all our prayers, General Raines."

Ben smiled. "We'll take all the help we can get, Mr. President."

It was only about a hundred kilometers from Abidjan to the Ghana border; the roads were in good shape and the column made good time. When they reached the border, Ghanaian border guards were waiting to escort them to the capital of Accra. Doctors were waiting with the border guards and after a brief conference with Dr. Chase, the convoy rolled on. To save time, the medical supplies would be off-loaded in Accra and the Ghanaian military and civilian doctors would then spread out across the country, seeing to the sick and the needy.

The column stayed on the coast road and the towns

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and villages they rolled through were in good shape and the people appeared to be in pretty good physical shape.

"We won't tarry long here," Ben told his team. "Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana are working closely together to reach some sort of normalcy. The supply ships have docked and are being off-loaded as we speak. Everything is orderly and without trouble. Togo is where the fighting starts."

"Why don't we just avoid the damned country?" Anna asked.

"Personally, I wish we could, but we can't," Ben told her. "We're going to help the civilians where we can, and fight the various guerrilla factions when it can't be avoided. Luckily, Togo and Benin are small countries. We'll stay along the coast, avoiding the interior. But Nigeria . . ." He shook his head and sighed. ". . . That's where we're going to get bogged down and have to start slugging it out."

"When will we be able to resupply by ship?" Cooper asked.

"Good question, Coop. I don't know the answer. Maybe in Cameroon. Certainly not before then. But the other battalions are making do with air drops and landings when the airports are useable. So shall we. Hell, we've had it easy compared with some of our people."

"So quit your bitchin'," Jersey told Cooper.

"Who's bitchin?'" Cooper cut his eyes to Jersey. "I'm asking a question, that's all. Go back to daydreaming about men and close your mouth, will you?"

Cooper was safe to pop off to Jersey as long as he was driving, and he knew it. However, Jersey had a long memory . . .

"Save your fighting for when it's needed," Ben cooled the situation. "And believe me, it's going to be needed."

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The pair ignored him, as he knew they would, because their quarreling was all in fun. They'd been picking at each other for as long as the team had been together.

"You got a fat mouth, Cooper," Jersey said.

Cooper pursed his lips and made loud kissing sounds.

Jersey feigned gagging.

Ben smiled and the convoy rolled on.

"Where's all the lions and elephants and apes and stuff?" Cooper asked.

"Mostly in the interior, Cooper," Beth answered. "We might get to see some animals in Nigeria. Right, boss?"

"It's a good possibility," Ben replied.

"Cooper thinks he's going to see Tarzan come swinging out of the trees," Jersey said.

"I can be Tarzan, my precious desert blossom," Cooper replied. "You can

be my Jane."

"What a disgusting thought," she popped right back.

"Can any of you visualize Cooper in a loincloth, swinging through the trees with chimpanzees?" Corrie said with a laugh.

"Now you're hurting my feelings," Cooper said, doing his best to maintain a wounded expression.

"Cooper," Jersey said, "I don't believe your feelings could be hurt with an axe."

Ben tuned the kibitzing pair down to a low murmur in his mind and stared out the window. He knew the closer the convoys drew to Bruno Bottger's territory, the fiercer the fighting would become. The easy run for the Rebels was about to come to a halt.

Abruptly.

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Ben and his 18 Batt spent exactly one day in Ghana's capital, Accra, before pulling out and moving on, heading for the war-torn country of Togo. Ben had been advised in Ghana that when the column reached the border, the good roads would vanish. The Rebels would find bridges blown, highways reduced to rubble, and civil war raging all around diem.

"Togo and Benin have been at each other's throats since the Great War," Ben said aloud, as the column neared the border. "Their forces have killed each other off in record numbers. When Lome was sacked and burned the capital was moved to Togoville. The Ghanaians retaliated by destroying Porto Novo so the capital was moved up-country to some place, which we will, hopefully, avoid."

"Abomey," Beth said.

"That's it."

"It's about seventy-five or so kilometers from the coast," Beth added.

"Thank you," Ben said.

"Scouts report a welcoming committee of sorts waiting for us at the border," Corrie said. "About fifty or so strong. No tanks. No mortars or machine guns that the Scouts can see. Just light arms."

"Slow the column. Tanks up and spearhead," Ben

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ordered. "We'll give those at the border something to think about."

The main battle tanks soon rumbled past, the commanders talking with the advance party of Scouts on another frequency. At a hand signal from Ben, Cooper gunned the engine and pulled in behind the last MBT.

"This is not going to make our security people happy," Beth said,

twisting in the seat and looking behind her.

"They'll get over it," Ben replied.

"The border guards ran away," Corrie said. "Scouts are taking down the barricades now."

"I thought the sight of the MBTs might have a sobering effect on them," Ben told her.

The column rolled on across the border and entered the country of Togo. The roads immediately became cracked and bumpy, in many instances the hard surface missing altogether.

"Lome just a few miles up the road," Corrie said. "What's left of it, that is."

"Says here," Beth said, reading from a very tattered tourist brochure, "that Lome is a city of half a million. And it was West Africa's financial capital. The way to say good-day in Mina-which is spoken by about a third of the population-is Sobaydo. "

Drizzle from the gray skies abruptly changed to a torrential downpour, sheets of slashing silver slowing the column down to a crawl as the roads worsened.

The team rode in silence for a few minutes. On the roof of the big wagon the hammering rain was making normal conversation all but impossible. Then, as abruptly as it began, the rain tapered off to a quiet steady fall.

"Scouts nearing the city," Corrie reported. "Seeing signs of some habitation. The few people they're seeing

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look like walking dead . . . near starvation. Scouts want to know if they should locate a CP for you?"

"Yes," Ben said softly. "We came here to help the people. So let's try. And have the Scouts check out the airport and port facilities, if any. Corrie, we'll pull the column over now and wait for a report."

Ben unassed himself from the wagon and walked back to where Chase's vehicle was pulled over, motioning for the chief of medicine to get out and join him. The men walked over to what remained of some sort of small business and stood under a sagging awning.

"I've ordered a halt here, Lamar. Do what you can for the people."

Lamar stared at Ben for a moment. "Band-Aids on a sucking chest wound, Ben."

"I know. But at least we'll leave remembered as helping when and where we could instead of as some conquering army."

"We're going to need a hell of a lot more food than we're carrying."

Ben sighed. "I know. Two cargo ships are paralleling us a few miles off shore. They're filled to capacity with supplies. If at all possible,

they'll dock."

"All right, Ben. Find my people a secure location."

"Will do."

The city of Lome had been looted and savaged and shelled and fought over numerous times and finally burned. There wasn't a hell of a lot left.

Engineers started working on the airport and promised to have one runway opened ASAP. The port had been wrecked, with dozens of small craft having been sunk in the harbor. Emergency supplies would have to be off-loaded at sea and brought in by small boat. A very slow process.

The people who remained in the ruins of the city were a pathetic lot, sick and starving and existing with-

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out hope. They had been eating rats and snakes and just about anything else that walked, crawled, or flew ... including, in some cases the Rebels found, each other.

As soon as word spread about the Rebels being there to help, not to make war, the refugees began pouring in from the countryside. And it took less than twenty-four hours for that news to spread.

Lamar Chase's makeshift hospitals were soon very nearly overwhelmed, many of those brought in were near death, and far beyond any medical help. They were given shots to ease their suffering and placed under whatever shelter could be found to get them out of the rain and to die in peace and some sort of comfort . . . young and old alike.

Surprisingly, there was very little trouble from the gangs that roamed the countryside. They stayed far away from the ruins of the city.

"They know better than to start trouble with us," Ben told Cecil one afternoon. "They know they're directly responsible for all this human misery and know I've ordered them shot on sight. And I will do so, cheerfully. How is the press outside the SUSA reporting all this?"

"They're not saying much, Ben. We're intercepting the reports from the press traveling with you and they're filing human interest stories. I think many of them are seeing a side of the Rebels they didn't know existed."

Ben chuckled, but it was without mirth. "Yeah. When they first showed up, they looked at us, and treated us, as if we were a bunch of blood-thirsty pirates, second only to Attila the Hun."

"One screw-up and they'll be right back looking at us in that manner."

"Would that bother you?"

"Not one little bit." Ben signed off just as Dr. Chase walked in.

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"Scouts report the gangs are gathering about halfway between here and Notse, waiting for us," Corrie said. "At the junction."

"What strength?"

"About five hundred so far, but several thousand are in position to move in very quickly."

"What junction?" Chase asked.

"The bridges over Lake Togo have been destroyed. We're going to have to head north, then take a secondary route into Benin. What kind of arms, Corrie?"

"Light arms, mostly. A few heavy machine guns. But Scouts report they do have some mortars."

"Ammunition is going to be critical for them," Ben said. "Unless Bruno is supplying them, and that is something we must always take into consideration. Personally, I think he is supplying them, using them for cannon fodder in the hopes they'll get lucky with some ambush. All the other batt corns are reporting the same thing: small bands of guerrillas constantly harassing them. There is too much of a pattern developing here for it to be coincidence."

"Then we've going to have to contend with the threat of ambush from here on in," Chase said.

"Every day, Lamar. I told you it would get worse the further south we went."

"So you did, Ben. So you did."

"And there is something else: we're going to have to be constantly alert for guerrillas to be mixed in with the civilians we stop to help. And . . ." he sighed, ". . . no matter how careful we are, some civilians are going to get caught up in the cross fire, and get hurt or killed."

Lamar's sigh matched that of Ben's. He opened his mouth to speak, then obviously thought better of it and closed it. He shook his head in frustration and walked out of Ben's CP. He paused in the door and looked

back. "We'll have done all we can do with what we have in another day and a half, Ben. I'm shutting down a couple of outlying clinics now. We'll be ready when you give us the signal."

"How many people? ..."

Lamar cut him off abruptly. "They're dying, Ben. There is nothing we can do for about forty percent of them except make them comfortable and ease the transition into death. Babies are dying because their mothers are dry and can't nurse them. Why in God's name do people continue to have babies in the middle of a fucking famine when hundreds of others are starving to death all around them?"

Ben did not offer any reply, knowing that in all probability, Lamar was not finished.

"You give the orders you have to give, Ben," Lamar said. "And you don't feel guilty about it. You are not obligated to carry the ills and the woes and the goddamn stupidity of the people who inhabit this world on your shoulders, and by God, neither am I. Good night."

"Anybody got anything to add to that?" Ben questioned his team.

"The Lord helps those who help themselves," Anna said, laying aside an oily cleaning rag. She closed the bolt on her CAR and walked out the door, hurrying to catch up with Dr. Chase.

Ben smiled, very thinly. "Corrie, advise the company commanders we'll be pulling out in about thirty-six hours. We'll have done all we can do here."

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"Every battalion meeting resistance," Corrie said, as the column put Lome behind them and were advancing north toward the junction at Notse.

"It's begun," Ben replied. "Cooper, pull over so Corrie can establish an uplink. When that's done, Corrie, ask what type of uniforms the enemy is wearing and if there are any whites leading the groups."

The column waited until the portable dish could be set up and Corrie could check with each battalion. "No standard uniforms, boss," she finally reported. "Some are wearing ragged remnants of uniforms but most are in civilian clothes. There are a few whites who seem to be in command."

"Bruno's advisors," Ben said. "He's either sent some of his own officers up to train and take command, or he's hired mercenaries. Probably the latter. All right, Corrie. Thanks. Let's get this show back on the road."

The column rolling once more, slowly on the nearly nonexistent highway, Ben said, "Bump the Scouts and assess the situation at the junction."

"Scouts report a slow troop build-up all around."

"So this is not going to be an ambush?"

"Doesn't look that way."

"And they're being obvious about it," Ben questioned.

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"No longer making any attempt to conceal their movements."

"Odd," Ben muttered. "They have no tanks, no artillery, only a few mortars and machine guns, and they're setting up to go head to head with us. That makes no sense."

Ben opened his map case and carefully went over a map of the region. There was no other route open to them. Ben could not ask for reports from eyes in the sky because the helicopters were all grounded because of the unpredictable weather. Anyway, most of those assigned to Ben had been forced to return to Ghana because there were no other safe landing areas for them to refuel and have maintenance done.

It was all ground work for the Rebels now.

"When we get within range of the junction," Ben said, "we'll set up artillery and pound the crap out of the enemy positions. But we'll be alert for any flanking movements or an attack from the rear. I think that's what they've got in mind. Just as soon as the Scouts report us able to fight our way through the junction, we'll make a run for it and smash through. If my hunch is right, we'll catch those attempting to flank us and come up behind us flatfooted and can put some breathing room between us."

"One hour until we can be in any sort of effective range," Beth reported, doing some calculations without being told.

"Good enough. Let's keep our fingers crossed that I'm right about this. Corrie, tell the Scouts they're going to have to act as FO's."

"Right, boss."

"My company will face north with the artillery, the others will set up left and right and take up rear guard positions."

"Advising now," Corrie replied.

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"It's a pretty good bet that those coming up from behind and flanking will be lightly armed. They're having to move too fast over lousy terrain to be carrying anything heavy. Maybe a few mortars, but that's all. When we stop, I want every mortar and Big Thumper we've got ready to bang ASAP."

Corrie was talking to the company commanders even as Ben was speaking. The team had been together so long each member could practically sense what the other would do. With Ben and Corrie, it was almost as if they were hooked into some sort of invisible mental link.

"Forty-five minutes," Beth said.

"Scouts reporting heavy concentration of enemy build-up nearly complete at junction. They're dug in tight."

"In a few minutes, they're going to wish they'd dug those holes a lot deeper," Ben said.

"We have movement behind us," Corrie said. "Scouts who dropped back report a large concentration of troops moving slowly. Maintaining distance. Their vehicles are old, and of various makes, but chugging right along. Scouts have counted fifty trucks, most of them deuce-and-a-halves. All filled to overflowing with troops."

"Say a minimum of seven hundred and fifty troops coming up behind us." Ben smiled. "Tell my XO to take over, Corrie. And alert my company we will be falling back to engage the enemy . . . sort of."

Corrie hesitated.

Ben chuckled. "Load us up with rocket launchers and claymores and several Big Thumpers. Cooper, there is a small town just up ahead the Scouts have checked out and found deserted. That will be perfect for an ambush. You pull off there. Get on with the orders, Corrie."

"Ten-four, boss."

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Corrie ordered the column on, with no break-off other than Ben's company. She was asked if she wanted several of the tanks with the column to join Ben in the ambush.

"No," Ben said. "We'll handle this. The rest of the column has their orders. Carry them out."

Cooper cut off the road and parked the wagon behind what remained of a building. The other vehicles peeled off and ducked in behind buildings or crashed through the brush and vegetation around the town and disappeared.

"Some of those trucks will have to be winched out when this is over," Ben said, unassing himself from the front seat of the wagon. "And we'll probably lose half a day or more doing that. But what the hell? Nobody here has any pressing engagements elsewhere, do they?"

The team laughed at Ben's sometime odd sense of humor and began unloading weapons from the supply truck that always followed Ben's vehicle. Anna took her Big Thumper, Cooper his SAW. Corrie, Beth, and Jersey swapped their CARs for regulation M-16's with bloop tubes. Ben pulled out his old M-14 and a rucksack filled with magazines. Then they quickly followed Ben into the deserted old remains of what had once been a store and took up positions. A rusted old soft-drink sign was still attached to the front of the building, above the front awning. It creaked on rusted braces in the warm light wind.

The monsoonal rains had not yet begun their daily pounding of the earth and only a very soft drizzle was falling.

Within a very few minutes, the Rebels had all taken up positions in and north and south of the town. The vehicles were hidden and the brush and other vegeta-

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tion that had been smashed or driven down by the heavy trucks pulled back and secured in place.

The village appeared to be deserted, just another civilian casualty of war.

It was a death trap for the unsuspecting.

"Enemy column's ETA twenty-five minutes," Corrie said.

Ben nodded his head and rolled a smoke. "Tell the people to grab a quick smoke if they want to. Piss now if they have to. Smokes out in five minutes and everybody in position."

Ben rolled a cigarette, lit up, and asked, "Corrie, Scouts are certain the enemy convoy has no recon working forward?"

"Positive, boss. They're rolling along pretty sure of themselves."

"Somebody fucked up," Ben muttered. "They didn't do their homework; didn't study the tactics of their opposition. Bad mistake."

"They won't make another one," Jersey said, chomping on a wad of gum.

"Very true, Jersey," Ben said, after blowing a smoke ring and watching it disappear in the wind that silently sang through the glass-smashed windows. "If we're careful and don't spring the trap too soon. Corrie, tell the troops north of the town to be sure and knock out the first several vehicles. The commander of this force will almost certainly be in one of those vehicles. And we don't want to give them a chance to radio what's happening. Lots of 'if s' involved here."

"Enemy convoy has increased speed," Corrie said. "Fifteen minutes."

"They're getting anxious," Ben replied. "Bad move on their part. Shows another sign of lack of professionalism. They're going to roll right into this."

"They won't roll out of it," Anna said grimly.

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Ben looked at his adopted daughter. Anna was as cold as ice, as usual.

Ben cut his eyes to Beth, looking at him. She shrugged her shoulders and smiled knowingly. Anna was a warrior, pure and simple, through and through, but one who would always pick the right side, Ben was sure of that. Her years of struggle to survive as a child against the evil of the forces of the nearly overwhelming numbers of warlords and gangs back in her home country had seen to that.

Anna had laid out a long belt of 40mm grenades, filled with anti-personnel grenades. She sat back and waited.

Ben checked his old M-14, known affectionately as a Thunder Lizard, and slipped the fire selector to full auto. It was a punishing weapon to hold and fire at full auto, but it laid down a devastating field of fire.

Cooper had his SAW bi-podded, an extra canister of ammo nearby.

Ben's team was ready.

"Ten minutes," Corrie said.

Ben took his position by the window-or what was left of it-nearest the south wall. He stayed well back from the window, in the shadows, and would remain there until the ambush was sprung.

All around the battle-scarred little town, the Rebels waited, silent and motionless.

"Five minutes," Corrie said softly.

The rain continued to fall, but it had been reduced to only a drizzle.

Finally the Rebels could hear the truck engines as the enemy convoy approached the town.

"Showtime," Cooper said, pulling back the bolt on his SAW, chambering a round.

The Rebels in town would let the first fifteen or so trucks in the convoy roll on through. The Rebels in

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position on the north side of town would start the ambush. At the first yammer from machine guns, the first crump of grenades, the first whoosh from a rocket launcher, the entire stretched-out company would open up on the unsuspecting convoy. And the quiet, gray-sky, drizzly day would turn into a death trap.

"Play with the big boys," Ben muttered, his eyes following the first truck as it passed through the town, "and you're very likely to get your nose bloodied."

Jersey was the only one of the team to have heard the quiet words, she cut her dark eyes to Ben and smiled.

Ben winked at her.

Then the enemy convoy stopped before the first truck could clear the northern edge of the small town.

"Crap," Ben muttered. "Now what?"

"What is the matter?" a white man yelled, jumping from the fifth truck in the packed-up-close column.

"The engine is overheating!" came the shout from the lead truck.

"I don't give a damn if it blows up," the white officer yelled. "We're too close now to stop. If the engine fails, we'll leave the truck and spread the men out among the other vehicles. Now get that goddamn thing moving."

"All right, all right! Keep your fucking pants on, will you?" came the insolent reply.

"The officers certainly have a great deal of respect for each other, don't they?" Jersey whispered.

Ben smiled his reply.

"Now what's wrong?" the first white officer yelled after a few seconds. The enemy column had not moved. The waiting Rebels could hear the sound of a grinding starter.

"The truck won't start. I told you the engine was overheating. Now it's locked up, I believe."

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"It isn't locked up, you idiot. Oh, never mind. We can't wait. Push ..."

The sound of an engine bursting into life cut off his words as the lead truck's motor roared.

"Finally. Roll it, roll it!"

The truck's engine died. The sound of it was so clear it was heard up and down the street.

"Oh, good God!" the officer yelled impatiently.

The starter began grinding.

"Hell with it," the officer shouted. "Everybody out and the second truck push that vehicle out of the way. We're wasting too much time. Move it, goddamnit, move it!"

"Colonel!" another voice entered the conversation. "Colonel!"

"What is it?" the now identified commander shouted.

"Something is very wrong here."

The colonel paused for a heartbeat, looking slowly all around him. He shook his head and yelled. "What are you talking about?"

"There are tire tracks leading left and right off the street. They disappear into the brush and jungle."

"Tire tracks?"

"Yes, sir. From heavy trucks. Colonel, they're all up and down the street. Just look, see for yourself."

"Now it gets interesting," Ben muttered. "I hope everybody is on their toes."

"I don't see any damn tracks!" the colonel yelled. "Where are they?"

"You're looking at the hard pack in front of that old store. Move left or right where the earth hasn't been packed down by years of parking. You'll see them. It's all very strange."

"The man is an idiot," Ben muttered. "I would have put the tracks together immediately."

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"Oh, very well. I'm looking." The colonel began walking slowly south, mumbling about a waste of time.

Ben lifted his Thunder Lizard.

"By God!" the colonel yelled. "I see them. It's probably just ..." He paused. His training as a soldier finally kicked in and jogged his

brain. "Oh, shit!" he shouted. "Ambush!" he screamed. "Ambush!"

Ben shot him and the gates of Hell swung open, inviting all who would enter to step right up.

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The colonel was slammed back by the heavy rounds from Ben's M-14. He fell on his back in the mud and did not move. Anna cut loose with her Big Thumper and the two trucks that were parked directly in front of the old building exploded in flames and death and the screaming of wounded men. Cooper shifted the muzzle of his SAW and opened fire on the third, parked south of the burning trucks, before the soldiers who were under canvas in the bed could leap out and run for their lives. The 5.56 rounds hammered out pain and death. The others in Ben's team sent grenades from their bloop tubes into the parked enemy column at almost point-blank range.

The Rebels lying in wait north of the town did not have to have a signal to know what had happened. They were moving instantly, working closer to the north edge of the town, throwing up a defensive line left and right of the highway.

The jaws of the death trap had been sprung and the dangerous, predatory beast caught in the snare could not free himself and had no place to run even if it could. Those caught could do nothing now except die.

From front and back and both sides, the Rebels hammered out death by bullet, grenade, and rocket. Many of the trucks caught on fire and the fumes from the

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fuel tanks exploded. The ammunition and mortar rounds they were carrying exploded and lead and shrapnel was flying in all directions. The din was deafening and the smoke teared the eyes. The wounded were screaming and the sergeants and officers were yelling orders which could not be heard five feet away and conditions were so confused and disorganized no one would have paid any attention to them if they could be heard.

The Rebels methodically picked off any of the enemy who tried to flee the scene of destruction and death. Ben ended a burning man's race with death with one round from his M-14. The man was enveloped in flames from his feet to his hair and was running in blind agony.

The smell of burning and cooking and charred human flesh and hair was thick in the damp air, clinging close to the ground, offensive even to those who were long accustomed to the smell of death.

The carnage seemed to go on for hours, when actually it lasted less than five minutes. Five minutes to snuff out hundreds of lives. Ben was reminded of the old saying: "You pays your money, you takes your chances."

The ambush was almost one-hundred percent effective. Perhaps twenty or twenty-five men escaped into the brush and jungle, running in sheer panic to escape the death trap.

"No pursuit," Ben ordered, his voice strange in his head after the

yammering of combat.

Automatically, Ben ejected the nearly empty magazine from the belly of his Thunder Lizard and slipped in a full one, clicking it into place. He walked to the door and looked out through the swirling smoke, staring impassively at the sprawled bodies and those few who were wounded and trying to crawl away. A few were crying out for help in English, others were calling out

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in a language Ben did not understand, but he was reasonably certain the vocal content was the same.

Ben slung the M-14 and pulled his canteen out, unscrewing the cap and taking a long drink of water. He was conscious of eyes on him. He searched the death scene until he found the man who was staring at him.

"Water, please," the man called.

Ben walked over to him and knelt down. The man must have taken at least eight or ten rounds in the chest and belly; he was soaked in blood. Ben pulled the wounded man's canteen from his web belt and unscrewed the cap, holding it to the man's lips. Water to a man gut-shot is dangerous, but what the hell? Ben thought. This guy will be dead in a few minutes. The blood staining his lips was pink and frothy-lung shot.

"You are the devil, Ben Raines?" the man gasped out the question.

Ben smiled. "That's me."

"You live up to your reputation, General." Then the man closed his eyes, shuddered once, stiffened, and died.

Ben placed the canteen on the ground next to the man and stood up. "I've been called worse," he said to the dead man, then turned and walked away.

Some of the Rebel deuce-and-a-halves were able to back out of the brush and jungle without getting stuck in the soft earth. Rebels were already using them to wench out trucks that were mired up.

"How many people did we lose?" Ben asked, as Cor-rie walked up to stand beside him.

"None. Five wounded. None of them seriously."

"We lucked out again."

The rest of Ben's team joined him and stood watching as the dead were unceremoniously dragged off the road and tossed into ditches. They would not be buried. The wounded-those the medics thought might have some

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chance of making it-were patched up and carried to huts and houses. The dying were given a shot to ease the pain and left alone to wander off into that long sleep.

Several times Ben heard the whispered words among the wounded: "That's the devil himself over there."

Ben ignored the comments and walked away, over to where his own wounded lay, being treated. Their wounds were not serious, certainly not life-threatening, and all five would be up and ready for limited duty within a few days. He chatted with the wounded for a few moments, then walked on.

"The animals and the carrion birds are sure gonna have a fine time here when we leave," Jersey remarked.

"That they will," Ben replied. "But I don't believe the dead will notice."

"Those enemy troops at the junction have fled, boss," Corrie reported. "Running away in all directions."

"Somebody caught up in the ambush kept their cool and was professional enough to get off a radio message. With the element of surprise gone, those at the junction wanted no part of us. Good. Just maybe we can get out of this country without another fight."

"I wouldn't bet any money on that," Anna said, standing nearby.

"No," Ben replied. "I don't think I would, Anna. We're going to have to be heads up at all times from now on. Corrie, how many of the enemy trucks are serviceable?"

"Maybe half a dozen."

"Load all the collected weapons, ammo, and what supplies we can salvage from the ambush into them. Let's get out of this damn place ASAP."

His team knew what he meant: the awful smell of deadi hung everywhere and clung to everything; especially the odor of burned human flesh. And the after-

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noon rains had not yet come to wash and cleanse the earth. It was time for a lunch break, but no one wanted to eat here.

"Corrie, tell the companies ahead of us to hold up at the junction; wait for us. We'll be pulling out of here within the hour-hopefully."

"It'll be about forty-five minutes, boss."

"That's even better. Damn, this place stinks!"

A medic walked up. "General, the one white who survived the ambush wants to talk to you. He's hard hit and probably isn't going to make it."

"All right. Lead the way."

The officer looked to be in his early forties and had been hit twice in the chest and twice in the belly. The doctor attending him met Ben's eyes and shook his head, then walked away. Ben knelt down beside the man.

"An honor, General Raines," the dying man whispered. "You are truly a worthy foe. You might even be a match for Field Marshal General Bottger."

"How many damn titles does that nut have?"

The officer smiled: a bloody curving of the lips. "Whatever suits him at the moment, General Raines. But he pays well and while he might be just slightly insane, he is a brilliant field commander."

Ben didn't argue that. He knew Bruno Bottger's tactics well and knew he was not a commander to take lightly.

"Then you are not one of Bottger's regulars?"

"No. I'm Austrian by birth. A professional soldier by the grace of God."

"You'll fight for whoever pays you the most money." It was not a question.

"That is correct. Politics does not interest me at all."

"How many men can Bottger field?"

"Several hundred thousand regulars and several hun-

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dred thousand natives who joined him after he arrived on this shithole of a continent."

Ben smiled faintly. "Does he have an air force?"

"Yes. Jet fighters. Not that many but he has training programs and factories working around the clock as we speak. All of the south of Africa is his new homeland, so he'll be ready for you and your Rebels, General."

"I'm sure he will be. What happened to the people of South Africa, the white population especially? And I'm talking about all the whites south of here?"

"They fought us. We killed off most of them. Pity, they were good fighters, too. There are still many of them left, but they're disarmed and helpless. They know that if they oppose us, they die. It's just that simple. Once you disarm a nation, the citizens are virtually helpless."

"Yes. That's what the liberal politicians in the United States tried to do."

"But you and your people, among others, rose up and fought them."

"Tooth and nail."

"You were better organized, General. Despite the efforts of government enforcement agents. Oh, I followed your exploits carefully. I always admired your courage and tactics."

The man's voice was growing weaker.

"You will face growing resistance the further south you go, General." The dying officer coughed up blood and for a moment, Ben thought he wasn't going to be able to continue. He fought for breath and settled

down. "And then from the Congo River south you will meet Bottger's legions. And he will stop you eventually. Oh, you might push him back a hundred miles or so. Two hundred miles, perhaps, if you're very, very lucky. But this is one fight you cannot win. But you will be a

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very worthy foe for him, and he will respect you for that."

Ben said nothing. He waited.

"You might be able to strike some sort of deal with him, General. Have you given that any thought?"

"No."

Again, the dying man smiled that bloody grimace. "No? I thought not. Widi you, it is all or nothing, correct?"

"Something like that."

"I would keep a deal in the back of my mind, General. I really would."

"I don't make deals with thugs."

"So I have heard, General." Weakly, the man lifted a bloody hand and saluted Ben. "Good-bye, General Raines. I'll see you in Hell."

The officer closed his eyes and died without a shudder or another word.

"Could be," Ben said, rising to his boots. "It sure wouldn't surprise me."

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Ben's company joined the others at the junction and cut east toward Abomey. On the way to the border, Scouts reported seeing patrols of enemy soldiers, but there were no further attacks against the column while they rolled through Togo.

At the Togo/Benin border, the column halted. There were no border guards.

Ben got out and walked toward the raised barrier at the crossing, joining a group of Scouts.

"Looks as though no one's been here for a long time, General. No cigarette butts, no discarded ration containers, no nothing. It's strange,"

"Corrie, is Nick meeting any resistance?"

"Nothing," she reported. "He's waiting at the border crossing at Ouake. It's deserted. No signs of life."

"Paul's 17 Batt?"

"They're still in Burkina. About seventy-five miles from the border of Nigeria. They're reporting no trouble."

"Mike's 16 Batt?"

"Waiting at the Mali/Niger border. Taking a break. No trouble."

Ben was silent for a moment. He rolled a smoke and lit up. A couple of minutes passed before he spoke. "Get

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a link set up, Corrie. I want a report from every battalion."

The portable satellite was set up and Corrie spent the next half hour talking over hundreds of miles. Then she reported to Ben.

Ben sat for a moment by the side of the road, which had been swept for mines and cleared. "For several days, every battalion stretched across Africa was under either full attack or hit and run actions. Then suddenly, nothing. We know there are small patrols out watching our movements, Scouts from every battalion have seen them. It's a coordinated effort; you can bet with certainty they are not acting independently of each other . . ."

The rains came thundering down in a gushing torrent, preventing Ben from finishing his thought. Tents and tarps had already been set up and Rebels scrambled for cover. Ben and team, Dr. Chase with them, ran for the squad tent that had been set up for him. Corrie set up her equipment on a folding table and sat down. Portable generators were cranked up and the coffeepot was filled up and turned on.

"Tell the cooks to set up and get busy," Ben ordered. "We're going to be here for at least the night."

Ben did not have to order guards out. That had been done within seconds after the column had halted. Now tanks began moving into position around the camp and several hundred yards away from the center of the encampment, perimeter bangers were being strung and claymores carefully placed.

Within minutes, the camp was as secure as human hands could make it.

"Scouts are five miles inside Benin," Corrie said, raising her voice to be heard over the drum of heavy rain on the canvas above their heads. "Nothing. And the road just stopped. They're facing brush and forest."

"Shit!" Ben cursed. "We're going to be forced to cut

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south and take the coast road. Exactly what I didn't want to have to do. Or else cut north for a hundred or so miles and take the highway over to Savalou. If we're attacked by any kind of force along the coast highway, we could be in serious trouble. We could be forced back, or surrounded on three sides with the Atlantic at our backs and no place to run. We would then have to be evacuated by sea, leaving all our equipment behind. And that just might be what the guerrillas have in the back of their minds and to hell with Bottger's orders."

"But we don't know for sure, right?" Dr. Chase asked.

"We sure as hell don't, Lamar."

"About fifty or so civilians approaching from the Benin side," a guard called. "About a third of the bunch are kids."

"Check them out carefully for weapons," Ben said, walking to the flap and pulling it back.

"Time to go to work," Lamar said, rising from the camp chair.

"Get a translator in here," Ben ordered. "Pump them for information."

For once Lamar didn't argue with Ben about bothering his patients.

Ben walked out seconds behind Lamar and looked up the road, Benin side. He knew after only a glance there was nothing to fear from this bunch. They were some of the most emaciated looking people he had yet seen in Africa. And he also could tell, even from this distance, that several of the kids being carried in the arms of their mothers were dead.

Ben stepped back into his squad tent and returned to his portable desk. Anna remained at the opening of the tent, looking at the pitiful sight. Ben studied her in the dim rainy light. There was no expression on her lovely face. She had not only seen it all before, she had lived with it for years, struggling for survival in the old

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country, before Ben picked the little waif out of a lineup of street hoodlums and took her under his wing.

Anna stepped out of the tent and slogged away through the mud, heading away from the border crossing. Ben thanked Beth for the mug of steaming coffee she placed in front of him and turned on the lamp, powered by the portable generators. He opened a map case and selected a map.

He suppressed a groan as he studied the route along the coast. Then he laid the map aside and shook his head. They would not take it. Too risky. They would head north to Savalu, then south to Dassa-Doume, northeast to Save, and enter Nigeria that way. If, and it was a big If, the bridge over the Oueme River was intact. If it had been destroyed? . . . Well, they would find out in a few days, or a week, it all depended on the roads.

"Refugees coming out of the brush by the droves now," Cooper called from the flap of the tent. "Several hundred of them."

Ben again walked to the open flap of the squad tent and looked out into the rainy afternoon. Cooper was sure right about the numbers of people: hundreds of them, probably about a third of them children.

Ben turned away from the open flap, then hesitated for a couple of heartbeats before looking back. Something had caught his eyes, something that aroused suspicion in his mind. But what? Ben looked more closely. He could see nothing in the knot of ragged people that would present a danger.

The knot of ragged people.

The knot of ragged people . . . that thought nagged at him. Yes, that was it. Why were they all so bunched up? He'd never seen starving, sick people so tightly bunched.

"Something is wrong here, Coop," Ben said. "I don't

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really know what it is, but something is very wrong about that crowd of people."

"They sure are bunched up tight, boss," Beth said, peering around Ben from inside the tent.

Corrie had heard the exchange and was alerting the company.

To the untrained eye, it would appear that nothing was happening within the compound. But plenty was happening. Tanks were slowly swinging their turrets and gunners were taking their places, manning .50 and 7.62 machine guns, inside and out of the massive MBTs. Rebels were quietly pulling back bolts on their weapons, chambering rounds. Cooks were laying aside large spoons and ladles, removing huge pots from the fire, and moving closer to their weapons.

"If my bread burns, I'm gonna be pissed," one cook mumbled irritably.

"Give that stew another stir or two," another cook called from across the mess tent. "I don't want it sticking."

Ben had cleaned his M-14 and put it away, back into its hard-shell case. Anna had seen what was going on and slipped in the back flap of the tent. She handed her adopted father his CAR and a canvas magazine pouch.

"This tent is likely to be shot all to pieces," Ben said. "Everybody back out of here and head for good cover. I'm pretty sure the center of that knot of refugees is filled with guerrillas."

"Gonna be a lot of dead civilians," Cooper muttered.

"I hate people who use innocents for cover," Anna mumbled darkly. "They are sorry excuses for human beings."

"I agree, baby," Ben said. "Now get your butt out the back of this tent. Move!"

Ben and team exited out the back and circled around,

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away from the border crossing. They took cover in a ditch that was half filled with water.

"Shit!" Jersey said, bellying down in the muck and the water.

"You could always come live with me, my pretty little horned toad," Cooper said. "And we could retire from the army and raise little Indians."

"Horned toad!" Jersey exclaimed. "I can't believe you called me a horned toad. \bu have sunk to a new low. Cooper, have you ever seen a horned toad?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Come to think of it, you remind me of one."

"Handsome devils, aren't they?"

Jersey made a gagging sound and dropped the subject. Cooper just could not be insulted.

The refugees had crossed the border and were still all bunched up. The Rebels at the crossing were herding them toward the MASH tents. But the MASH tents had been evacuated of all medical personnel and those civilians who had been lined up had been pushed aside, the Rebels getting them out of harm's way as best they could.

"Combat boots," Anna remarked from her position next to Ben. "I can see some of those in the center of the refugees are wearing combat boots."

"We can't do a damn thing until they break from the civilians and open the fight," Beth bitched.

"Steady," Ben cautioned in a low voice. "They've got about fifty or so yards to go before they can do anything. If they broke free now, the damage they could do to us would be minimal."

"It's gotta be a suicide team," Cooper said. "Nothing else makes any sense."

"I have to agree with Cooper," Jersey said. "Will wonders never cease."

"They're all clear of the old checkpoint now," Corrie

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said. "They'll be near the center of the compound in a few seconds."

Ben could see those fifty or so guerrillas-perhaps more than that-in the center of the frightened refugees, now pushing them into a faster pace. One woman carrying an obviously starving child fell and those behind her moved to one side to keep from stepping on the woman.

Suddenly there was a burst of shouting from the center of the refugees and about seventy-five men leaped from the now disorganized groups and began running in all directions, frantically pulling weapons and grenades from under their ragged coats and shirts.

The men and women and children who made up the refugees began screaming in fear and shouting in their own tongues and running in all directions, preventing the Rebels from opening up with any type of effective fire.

"Select fire and pick your targets carefully!" Ben shouted, pulling himself up onto one knee in the muddy ditch. "Watch for human bombs. This is a suicide run."

Anna reached up and grabbed hold of Ben's web belt and pulled him back down into the cover of the ditch. "That wasn't too smart, General Ben," she chided him. "You trying to get shot up so you can go back home?"

Ben glanced at the young woman and smiled. "Thank you, Anna. I have been properly chastised."

"Look out!" Corrieyelled, just a second before a half-dozen guerrillas jumped into the ditch.

One landed beside Ben and Ben clubbed him with his CAR. The clubbing seemed to have no effect on the man. The guerrilla's eyes were wild-looking. Ben jammed the muzzle of the CAR into the man's open mouth and pulled the trigger, blowing out the back of the man's head and splattering Jersey and Cooper with blood and brain and bits of bone.

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Another guerrilla had wrestled Anna down into the ditch and was trying to drown her in the foot or so of water. The man suddenly screamed and lost his grip on her throat, both hands going to his belly. He arched backward and Ben could see the upward rip in his belly where Anna had used her razor-sharp knife to get the man off her.

In the split second Ben observed all this, Anna came sputtering to her knees in the muddy water, the obscenities flying from her mouth. "I lost my fucking weapon!" she shouted, and began groping in the water for her CAR.

Ben did not have time to see if she located the weapon. Another guerrilla jumped on his back and rode him down. Ben could not understand why the men were not using their weapons, but didn't have time to contemplate that question. He reached up and grabbed the man's neck and twisted and jerked, throwing the infiltrator off him.

Corrie turned at just that second and shot the guerrilla fighter in the head with her 9mm. Things had gotten so close-in pistols were more practical than rifles.

Somewhere in the circle that made up the Rebel compound there was a terrific ground-rattling explosion and seconds later a bloody part of a man's shin and ankle and booted foot landed near the edge of the ditch. One of the guerrillas, rigged as a human bomb, had set himself off. Parts of the man had dropped all over the compound. Ben did not have time to assess the damage done, if any, but judging from the sound of the explosion, the man must have had a massive amount of explosive wired to his body.

Ben had pulled his 9mm from leather and holding his CAR in his left hand, not wanting to lose it in the muddy waters of the ditch, was picking close-in targets and pouring the lead to them. He did not have to look far for the

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enemy, for they were all around him, with more guerrillas pouring out of the brush all around the compound.

Those who had been hidden in the brush, probably in tunnels, didn't get very far, for they were running smack into claymore kill zones, the deadly anti-personnel mines set up all around the compound. Those lucky enough to escape the claymores were running into machine-gun fire from Rebel posts set along the outer defense perimeter. But enough guerrillas

were making it through.

"It's gonna get nasty," Ben panted the words.

"It's done got nasty, boss!" Cooper yelled, pulling himself off a dead guerrilla he had killed with a knife.

"Enemy troops approaching from the road!" Corrie yelled. Her headset was still working, although it was twisted and the microphone dangling. "I can hear but can't communicate," she added.

There was no time for Ben to worry about who might be coming up or down the road, for half a dozen guerrillas were making a suicide run toward the ditch, one of them very bulky around the chest and waist. Ben suspected the man had wrapped explosives around himself. Even at a distance of many yards, Ben could tell the man was hopped up on something: a powerful local brew or some sort of dope to give him courage. Didn't matter which, he was running straight for Ben and his team.

Ben leveled the 9mm and started putting rounds into the running man. Ben put round after round into the bomber, but the slugs didn't seem to faze him. Finally one of the slugs must have hit the detonator, for the last thing Ben would remember for a long time was a tremendous flash of light.

Then . . .

Nothing.

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Ben awakened with a terrible headache. Throbbing. Some little man was inside his noggin beating on a bass drum. Ben opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground, and the ground was wet. Come to think of it, Ben was wet all over. Took him awhile to understand it was raining. Ben tried to sit up and when he did, his head felt like it weighed a ton and would fall off his shoulders at any moment. He did not try to get up; just sat on the wet ground and let the rain pound on him for a few more minutes.

During that time he looked around him. He did not know where he was. And that was not all. He did not know who he was.

And that frightened him.

Then memory started returning to him in tiny fragments, snatches of sudden remembrance, bursts of recollection. The fight at the border. Infiltrators among the scared and sick and starving refugees.

Ben suddenly was very thirsty. He tilted his head back just a bit-he didn't want it to fall off-and swallowed some of the rain, a few drops at a time. Tasted good.

Then he remembered he was wearing a canteen. He felt for his canteen. Gone. So was his web belt and with it, his pistol and knife. He reached up and felt of his head. His helmet was gone and there was a cut, a long

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gash really, running down the side of his head from the top to just above his left ear. Must have been a hell of a piece of shrapnel that hit him, traveling at about nine hundred or so miles per hour, give or take a few hundred mph.

He looked around him. No familiar landmarks. He was nowhere near the border and the compound.

The compound. It must have been overrun. But that would have taken one hell of a large force. So ... knowing that because of the monsoonal rains and lack of bases for fuel and maintenance, Ben had no eyes in the sky to pick up on troop movement, Bruno moved his guerrilla forces up to the border, scattered them all around, probably in tunnels, and waited.

Ben looked down at his feet. At least he still had his boots. But what the hell happened to his web belt, his battle harness? He didn't know; might never know. He looked at his watch. The date couldn't be right. He blinked, looked at it again. Almost an entire day and night had passed. Impossible. But there it was. Almost to the hour.

He'd been out for twenty-four hours.

Ben was suddenly hungry. Ravenous.

He felt in his right-side cargo pocket, found a candy bar and ate several bites. Then he got immediately sick and puked it up.

Concussion, he thought. And a bad one. Or maybe his stomach just rejected the richness of the chocolate.

He struggled to his feet and swayed for a moment. He fought back the feeling and spread his feet. The swaying stopped. Ben's sense of direction had always been superb and that much was still working ... he was reasonably certain of that. He felt sure the border was . . . that way, he concluded, turning and facing the west. He started walking, very slowly, still slightly unsteady on his feet.

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A hundred yards on and he saw the first of what he knew in his heart would be many, many dead. It was a Rebel sergeant who had been with Ben for several years. Ben carefully knelt down and first removed the man's dog tags, sticking them in his pocket. Then he took the sergeant's web belt, which still had a holstered 9-mm pistol hooked to it and two full magazines for the pistol, two canteens, a small first-aid kit, and a sheath knife. He went through the man's pockets and found two survival bars, a compass, and a small waterproof container of matches.

Ben stowed them in his cargo pockets and walked on. There was nothing he could do for the man.

After walking for about another three hundred yards, he rested for ten minutes, then forced himself to move for another several hundred yards. During his second rest stop, he noticed a body in a depression in the earth about fifty feet away. Animals had been eating on it. He wondered if there were hyenas around? He had no desire to tangle with a pack of hyenas. Ben walked over to the body. Another Rebel. Ben knelt down and forced himself to remove the battle harness from the man. He tried to keep from looking at what was left of the man's face. Birds had pecked his eyes out and something had eaten out the softness of throat.

Ben didn't know the man's name, but he had been a medic and still had his first-aid kit with him, the strap looped over one shoulder. Ben took that and the man's holstered pistol and spare magazines. The medic had two ration packs in a rucksack. Ben slung the rucksack and removed the man's dog tags. Now he had two pistols, four canteens, a well-stocked first-aid kit, and something to eat. He pulled the man's poncho from him and then moved away from the body and walked on for about a hundred yards until he found some thick brush. He took a stick and poked around under the brush,

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not wanting to come nose to fangs with a large venomous snake . . . something Africa has plenty of.

When nothing slithered out, Ben crawled in. He was very very tired but wondered if he should sleep. A moment later, that decision was made for him. He didn't wake up until four the next morning.

He crawled out of the brush, stiff and sore, and stood in the silent pre-dawn hours. Then he squatted down and using a flashlight that had been hooked onto the sergeant's battle harness, rummaged around in the first-aid kit until he found a bottle of aspirin. He shook two out and then ate one of the candy bars. This time he kept it down. Then he took the aspirin and walked on. He had to change direction because of a swamp and several yards later, literally stumbled onto the dirt road that he knew paralleled the main highway. About two miles separated the two. Ben guessed it was a logging road.

"Well, I'll be damned," he muttered. He sat down on the side of the old highway and took a drink of water and wished for a hot cup of coffee and a smoke. In that order.

The sky began to lighten and Ben found himself looking at a dead man. Another Rebel. Ben took the man's dog tags and battle harness. He did not have a rifle, but did have two full magazines for his 9mm in a web pouch. He also had a rucksack filled with food, grenades, a small gun cleaning kit, and several packs of cigarettes. Ben sat by the dead body and smoked.

Then he walked on as the sky changed from silver gray to full light. He passed several more dead Rebels and stopped at each one to remove the dog tags. The bodies had been stripped of everything except underwear; even their socks had been taken.

Ben's head had stopped throbbing, and he was experiencing only a slight ache. He knew he was going to

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have to stop and clean out his wound sooner or later, and that was not something he was looking forward to.

The carrion birds were beginning to circle ahead of him, off to his right, and Ben knew he was not far from the ambush site. Ben found what appeared to be a path through the brush and took it, reaching the main highway. He stayed in the brush for several minutes, listening and

watching. He could detect no sight or sound of human life, but he could smell the unmistakable odor of the dead.

Staying in the brush, Ben cautiously made his way toward the border crossing. As he rounded the curve, now only about a hundred yards from the east edge of the Rebel encampment, he braced himself for what his eyes would soon see and his mind be forced to register.

Still in the brush, Ben came to a halt at the almost unbelievable sight in front of him: what appeared to be hundreds of naked or near naked bodies lay swollen and bloated everywhere. They had been stripped of everything the guerrillas might possibly use. The vultures were feasting on the bodies, flies covered what the carrion birds had ripped out and not eaten.

Ben was forced to sit down on the edge of the road for a moment in an attempt to regain his composure. Many of the dead had been with him since the beginning of the dream of a new nation.

Now they were gone.

He willed himself to rise, to walk slowly toward the horrible scene. On the way he picked up a large stick and began whacking at the buzzards. Some of them were so bloated from eating dead human flesh they could not fly. They just waddled away a few yards and stared at Ben balefully.

Many of the vehicles were gone, taken by the guerrillas. Just about as many had been burned, destroyed during the fighting, which must have gone on for hours,

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perhaps all day, the Rebels fighting to the last person. Wisps of smoke still drifted out of the hatches of many of the tanks. The commanders, or the last person alive, knowing the tracks had been blown off, disabling the MBT, had pulled the pins on grenades, killing themselves and destroying the interior of the tanks rather than let them fall into enemy hands.

Ben stood for a moment, literally trembling with rage at the awful sight that lay all around him in the African morning.

He forcibly willed himself to calm down.

He pushed personal survival ahead of his emotions.

He began slowly walking the encampment, checking each bloated body, gathering dog tags, looking for anything that the enemy might have missed that he could use to survive . . . and Ben was going to survive. Somebody was going to pay for this, and when Ben found them, they would pay the ultimate price. He would write their names in their own blood across Southern Africa.

As he walked, turning over bodies when he was forced to do so to make a visual, Ben found small articles that the enemy had missed; articles that he could use in his own quest for survival and revenge.

He found ration packets that were still sealed, first aid, supplies, bottles of pills that the Rebels had to take every day to ward off local diseases. He picked up 5.56mm rounds as he walked, putting them in his

pockets; the same with discarded magazines. Even though he did not have a rifle, he'd get one. Somewhere.

Ben picked up several small bottles of water purification tablets. They would be indispensable when he started out on his own. A mess kit, a tiny one-cup coffeepot, heat tabs, waterproof containers of matches, an entrenching tool, a machete, a small camp axe.

He walked on.

A numbness, a deadness of soul, began to overtake

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him as he beat away the carrion birds and looked into the face-if the body had a face-of the dead. He soon realized he could not take all the dog tags. There were hundreds of dead. He emptied his pockets of the weight he did not need, leaving the metal identification tags and neck chains scattered on the muddy ground.

And he cursed the knowledge that he did not have the means to bury his friends.

He found signs where larger animals had dragged off bodies into the brush, and he cursed again.

He could not find Dr. Chase. He could not find any of his team.

But he knew that meant nothing. They might have been dragged off into the brush to be eaten later. They might have been taken prisoner. They might have been badly wounded and staggered off to die alone in the mud and jungle as Ben had done, he supposed. He still had not been able to figure out exactly how he came to be several miles from the encampment. Maybe he never would. To hell with it. He had more important matters confronting him to worry about that. He was alive, and he intended to stay alive.

He found a walkie-talkie under one of the trucks and a fresh battery pack. But he could not find a rifle.

In a rucksack, he found several pairs of clean socks that would fit him. But he could not find a rifle.

In another rucksack he found clean underwear that would fit him. No rifle.

Then in a burst of remembrance, he recalled that just before he was hit, Anna had dropped her CAR into the muddy waters of the ditch and up to the time he was dropped into blackness, she had not found it. Maybe? . . .

He located the ditch and began carefully searching the muddy, bloody water, pushing his hands deep into

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the muck. Then he smiled as his hands touched metal. Found it!

He pulled out the CAR and stepped out of the ditch, walked to what remained of a tent. Enough was left to provide him some shade. Then, he

took down the CAR and carefully cleaned and oiled the weapon, then reassembled it. It worked just fine. Ben was back in business.

He slung the weapon and once more began prowling the encampment. He found a pup tent, ground sheet, and blanket. He continued to pick up and carefully wipe off each 5.56 round he saw. A couple of grenades. An unopened package of flashlight batteries. Other small but important items that could help keep him alive. He found a small hand mirror; probably from a woman's kit.

He found a roll of toilet paper and continued his prowling among the dead.

He did not attempt to count the dead. There were too many. Ben's 1 Batt had been destroyed. He would have to rebuild, and he sure as hell planned to do just that.

He found signs that the enemy had used rocket launchers in their attack.

He kicked a carrion bird away from a woman's body and beat the ugly flesh-eating bird to death with his heavy stick. He did not dare use his rifle or pistol for fear the shot would be heard by the enemy.

Ben noted that the civilians who had been used to hide the first wave of attackers were dead. Men, women, and children.

He returned to the tent lean-to and began putting together a pack. Then he hefted it. Heavy, but he could carry it.

Then he steeled himself and opened his head wound. He almost lost consciousness but managed to maintain some degree of alertness, albeit through a cloudy haze

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of intense pain. He inspected the wound with the tiny mirror, cleaned it and closed it as best he could, then bandaged the gash. He gave himself a shot of antibiotics and then sat for a time, letting the waves of pain dissipate while he gathered his strength.

Ben ate a portion of a ration pack, took two more aspirin, and began filling magazines with the rounds he'd found. After a few minutes, he realized he was once more hungry and finished the ration pack. That's when he smiled and knew he was getting better.

Ben made one more walking tour of the carnage and found about fifty more 5.56mm rounds that he'd missed. He knew there were many, many more in the churned up mud, but he didn't want to take the time to grope around hunting for them.

Besides, he had things to do.

And people to track down and kill.

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Ben headed north, choosing that direction for several reasons. He did not want to plunge deeper into enemy territory by heading east, and he had a strong suspicion that his was not the only Rebel battalion to have been hit by Bruno's guerrilla forces. If the latter was true, Ike would stop the advance for a few days, and Ben just might, might, be able to

hook up with Nick's 18 Batt, which was a couple of hundred kilometers north of Ben. That was a long shot, but Ben felt he had no choice in the matter.

About five miles north of the ambush site, Ben found two more Rebel bodies in a ditch. They had managed to get this far before collapsing and dying from their wounds. Ben left their weapons and took their ammo pouches and rucksacks, which contained food packets and grenades and other small items. He walked on. He would inspect the rucksacks when he stopped for a rest period further on up the road. He did not want to tarry anywhere close to the bodies, for they were badly bloated and had been eaten on by small animals and carrion birds. Their faces had been gnawed and pecked and torn at so badly Ben could not recognize either Rebel.

Ben came to a small village, stopping a couple of hundred yards from it, ducking into the brush, and squat-

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ting for a time, inspecting the tiny settlement. He could detect no signs of life. Staying off the road and in the brush, Ben approached the village cautiously. His caution was needless, for the village was deserted.

Ben prowled what was left, and found nothing that he might use, which was just as well, for he was overloaded as it was. He walked on.

The road north was a secondary road, not paved, and in very bad shape. That was yet another reason Ben chose to head north: the road was fine for walking, but would have been hell on vehicles.

Ben stopped to rest, choosing a spot deep in some thick brush, after poking around in the brush with a long sturdy walking stick he had picked up just north of the ambush site. When nothing growled, slithered, or came charging out, Ben crawled into the brush and promptly went to sleep, for he was still in a very weakened condition.

He awakened two hours later, and ate part of a ration pack. He took another antibiotic pill and crawled out of the thicket, walking back to the road, about a hundred yards from where he had rested. He headed north.

He walked at a leisurely pace, for he was in no condition to push himself physically. Ben figured he was making about four miles an hour, and he stopped whenever he felt fatigued. Several times that day he turned on the walkie-talkie but could receive nothing. The silence came as no surprise.

The afternoon rains came, and Ben slogged on: a solitary figure on a lonely road.

With about an hour of daylight left, Ben came to another tiny deserted village. He chose the hut furthest from the road, almost in the brush, and spread his ground sheet and blanket. Then he ate part of a ration pack while he brewed a cup of coffee in the tiny one-cup pot, using a heat tab. When the coffee was brewed, Ben

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enjoyed a cup of coffee and a cigarette. Then he carefully cleaned his

CAR, his pistols, and in the last rays of light, went through the two rucksacks he had taken from the dead Rebels in the ditch.

Another roll of toilet paper, which was a good find. Water purification tablets. Malaria pills, another good find. Several more grenades. Ration packs. Half a dozen full magazines of 5.56mm rounds.

Ben put the contents of both rucksacks into one, and then carefully buried the empty rucksack. He did not want a team of guerrillas to find it, put two and two together, and be on his trail. He was in no shape for a fight. Yet.

Ben slept soundly and well, awakening about two hours before dawn. After seeing to his morning toilet, and then standing outside the hut and listening for several minutes, Ben brewed another cup of coffee and ate a small breakfast. He took another antibiotic pill and packed up, carefully smoothing out the dirt floor of the hut, obliterating all signs of boot tracks. Outside the hut, Ben sat down and changed socks, carefully rubbing his feet for several minutes and sprinkling a bit of foot powder between his toes. Then he laced up his boots and once more headed north.

At noon, he came to the river and was relieved to find the old bridge still standing. But he did not immediately cross it. He squatted in the brush and watched the bridge for half an hour. There was no movement, foot traffic, bicycle, or motor vehicle. When he was sure there were no guards on the bridge-something he found very strange-he hurried across and then rested on the other side; the jog across the bridge had tired him. While he was resting, the wind changed, bringing with it the unmistakable odor of death. Ben followed the scent to its source. He found about a hundred ci-

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vilians, men, women, and children, lying in a depression in the earth. They had been lined up and shot.

"Centuries-old tribal hatreds," Ben muttered. "Ethnic cleansing. No wonder I haven't seen any people."

He walked on, even though he was very tired. He wanted to put a couple of miles between himself and the stench of rotting human flesh before sitting down to rest and eat a bite.

When he could no longer smell decaying human flesh, Ben struggled out of his pack and sat down just off the road. He ate a high-energy bar and sipped some water, taking another antibiotic pill after eating, then he picked up his pack and moved back into the brush. The rains were due to begin at any time, and Ben just did not feel like slogging through the mud and pouring rain.

He found a place that was nearly surrounded by thick head-high brush and strung up his lean-to under the low branches of a tree. He laid out his ground sheet, covered his blanket with another piece of a ground sheet, and crawled under the cover and promptly went to sleep.

The heavy rains awakened him once, but after looking around him and seeing and sensing nothing, he went back to sleep. He woke up with about an hour of daylight left, heated up water, then dumped in the contents of a soup packet. While he ate his soup and lunched on crackers, he

heated up a cup of coffee and enjoyed that with a cigarette. Then he took his malaria tablets and crawled back into his blankets. He was asleep in a few moments.

The sound of voices woke him.

He couldn't understand the language, but instantly guessed they were not friendly. He looked at the luminous hands of his watch. 0430. He had slept the night through and felt good. Ben knew he was well on the

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way to full recovery. He wasn't there yet, but he was getting closer each day.

Then he heard the sound of a vehicle and was out of his blankets faster than a snake, speed-lacing his boots. He picked up his CAR and moved silently through the brush to within a few yards of the road. The vehicle was a HumVee—a Rebel HumVee. But it had come from the north, not the south. He knew that really proved nothing, but he had a suspicion that Nick's battalion had come under heavy attack. He hated to think that Nick and his 18 Batt might have suffered the same fate as Ben's 1 Batt, but it was something that had to be considered.

Ben wanted that HumVee. For one thing, he was tired of hoofing it, and for another the HumVee might be radio equipped with the gear necessary to up-link with a satellite and talk to everyone. The walkie-talkie Ben had was an old squad type with a very limited range.

"What the hell is the matter?" a very authoritative and demanding voice yelled. "And speak English, damnit. Stop all that gibber-jabber."

"We lost his trail, Captain," one of the men spoke out of the darkness. "About two miles back. But we know he's a Rebel by his boots."

"It just might be that bastard Raines," the obviously white voice said, softening in tone. "He was not identified with the other dead. The son of a bitch has more lives than a room full of cats."

"Many got away, Captain," he was reminded. "They vanished into the brush and can move like ghosts. Those who pursued them never returned."

"I know all that," the captain snapped. "All right. Get in. We'll backtrack to where you lost his trail and pick it up again at first light."

Now or never, Ben thought, raising the CAR.

He took the two enlisted men first, then shifted the

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muzzle and shot the officer, one of his rounds taking the man in the side of the head. Ben slipped out of the brush and inspected his morning's work. The two enlisted men were still alive, but not for long: the rounds had taken them in the chest and throat. Ben picked up their weapons and laid them on the hood of the Hummer, out of their reach. He moved over to the officer and knelt down. The man was dead. Ben removed the man's web belt, which had a pistol attached to it, and laid it beside the weapons he'd taken from the enlisted men. One of the enlisted men was dead and the other had lost consciousness.

Ben dragged the bodies, one at a time, off the side of the road and into the brush. Then he quickly broke his own camp and stowed his gear into the Hummer. He was delighted to see a case of field rations behind the front seat and other gear piled in the back. There were four full five-gallon fuel cans in the cargo space in the rear.

Ben got behind the wheel, cranked the engine, and sighed with satisfaction. The fuel tank was full. He dropped the Hummer into gear and moved out. He was back in business.

Ben drove for ten miles, then at a crossroads, pulled off the road and parked behind what had once been a store and a residence. The sky was beginning to lighten and he wanted to inspect the gear in the Hummer.

He sat for a few minutes behind the wheel, knowing he was grinning like a schoolboy and couldn't stop. Hell, he didn't want to stop.

He unassed himself from the Hummer and did a careful inspection of the old store and adjoining building. Both were deserted and showed no signs of having been occupied for a long time. There was nothing left in either building; they had been looted many times.

Behind the store, sitting on the back step, Ben heated

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a cup of coffee and while that was heating, ate a full ration pack and could have eaten more. He was rapidly regaining his strength. Pulling the bodies off the road had not sapped him as he was afraid it would. He took his daily medicine, then drank his coffee and smoked a cigarette while he watched the sun break the horizon. Then he began his inspection of the interior of the Hummer.

One of his bullets had punched through the thick plastic of the rear side door and penetrated the radio. It wouldn't even turn on.

"Well, so much for that," Ben muttered. "I can't have everything I wished for."

Then he began rummaging through the other gear. A full case of field rations on the seat, another on the floorboards. Ben didn't have to worry about anything to eat for a time. A five-gallon sealed can of drinking water, with the date it had been factory sealed stamped on the can.

"Issued for his white troops only, I'll bet," Ben muttered, but he was glad to see the full can of water. It would last him for a long time if he was careful, and he certainly intended to be careful.

Ben found blankets and a tent. A portable stove and several cans of fuel for it. A rucksack filled with grenades. Then he smiled when he found a Heckler & Koch HK11A1 machine gun, chambered for the 7.62 round. This weapon could also take the 5.56 round and the lighter old Russian 7.62 round by replacing the barrel, bolt, and feed mechanism. But there were no spare parts for the weapon so this machine gun would take only the heavier 7.62 round. Which suited Ben just fine. There were five full one-hundred round cans of belted ammo in the Hummer.

"Playtime is over, boys," Ben said. "The Eagle is back in business."

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Eagle had been Ben's code designation for a long time.

Ben found the tool kit and removed the front panel from the radio. The bullet, or as it turned out, bullets, had made a mess of the radio. It was beyond useless. Ben removed it from its brackets and carefully hid it with some junk in the old store. Removing the radio would lighten the load in the Hummer by about fifty pounds.

Ben found some clean socks and some dirty underwear. He kept the socks. He found a pair of new boots that were several sizes too small for him but he kept them anyway. He just might run across a Rebel who needed some boots. He found a map case and inspected it. The maps were far more up to date than the ones the Rebels were using. He found roads he didn't even know existed. More importantly, he found enemy troops' positions and hidden food and fuel depots clearly marked.

"Thank you very much, Captain," Ben said, carefully folding the maps and slipping them back into the waterproof case. "You've been a great help."

Ben laid several grenades on the seat beside him and stowed the rest. He squatted down and drank some water, while planning his next move.

Which was easy enough. "Keep moving on," he muttered. He was bound to run into some Rebels sooner or later.

He once more tried the frequencies on his walkie-talkie. Nothing. Which was what he expected.

Ben cranked the engine and pulled out onto the road. Might as well keep going, he thought. It isn't as though I have a lot of choice in the matter.

With a full tank of fuel and the extra cans, Ben knew he could travel about five hundred or so miles, give or take seventy five. But now that he had the locations of hidden fuel depots clearly marked on the maps he had,

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as long as he could evade the enemy, he just might keep going for a long, long time.

Of course, he might round the next bend in the road and run smack into an enemy patrol.

"Pays your money and takes your chances," he muttered, and drove off into the unknown.

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Ben stayed on roads that ran along the border with Togo, and ran through no towns that were on the map. He passed through tiny villages and saw perhaps a total of a hundred people, all of them looking as if they might fall over dead from starvation or disease any moment. Ben did not stop. There was no point. There was nothing he could do.

By midmorning, the dirt road came to an end, intersecting with the main highway between Savalou and Djougou. Now it would get dicey.

Ben backed up and into the brush. He got out the map case taken from the officer he'd shot and rummaged through the papers, finally finding a map of Djougou. A population of thirty thousand before the Great War. No telling what it was now. It might be only a few hundred or a few hundred thousand. But there was a fuel depot there and he would need fuel.

Ben smiled. He felt an old familiar recklessness take him. He just might be able to bluff his way in and out. Hell, what did he have to lose?

He studied the map again. He was about a hundred kilometers from Djougou. The road appeared to be in fair condition, so he should reach the small city about 1500 hours, right in the middle of a driving monsoonal rain. That would work to his advantage ... he hoped.

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"Okay, Raines," he muttered. "Let's have a go at it."

Just before the compound was overrun, Ben had changed into regulation BDUs, and given his tiger stripe fatigues to the laundry crew to be washed. So he was wearing the same type of field clothing as Bruno's officers. The collar insignia denoting rank was different in the two armies, so Ben was going to have to depend on his age and good deal of bluff to get through any checkpoints he might run into. Ben was very good at intimidation, so he wasn't too worried about dealing with inexperienced enlisted men and junior officers. He just hoped he didn't run into some field-sawy senior sergeant along the way. He didn't feel there was much danger of that, since senior sergeants seldom manned checkpoints.

It was a needless worry. Ben did not run into a single checkpoint on the way to Djougou. About fifty kilometers from the city, the rains came thundering down and Ben drove on into the small city without a hitch.

Ben had memorized the way to the fuel depot, but naturally he got lost in the twisted street. He came up on a group of young soldiers, several whites and several blacks. Ben brazenly stopped and waved one over.

"Sir!" the young soldier said in perfect English, coming to full brace in the rain.

"The fuel depot," Ben barked. "Where is it?"

The young soldier gave good instructions and added, "But you might have trouble getting someone to assist you, sir."

Ben fixed the young man with a hard look. "Do you really think that I will have very much trouble?"

The young soldier took a deep breath. "Ah . . . no, sir. No, sir. I really think not."

"Thank you," Ben told him, returning the salute. "Carry on."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

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Ben filled up at the depot, swiped four more full five-gallon cans of fuel, stowed them in the rear cargo space, and was gone from the small city, having done it all in just about twenty minutes.

"It just takes a little bit of nerve, that's all," Ben said, leaving Djougou behind him. "And a lot of blind luck," he added.

About fifteen miles north of Djougou, Ben ran into his first checkpoint. It was manned by two tough-looking African soldiers, both of them wearing some sort of tribal marks cut and tattooed into their cheeks. They were both surly and arrogant-acting. Ben pulled his sidearm from leather and held it in his right hand, out of sight. The 9mm was on full cock and ready to bang. He unzipped the thick upper plastic of the door and peered out at the men.

"Yes?"

"Get out of the vehicle," one ordered.

"I don't think so," Ben told him.

The man lifted his rifle and Ben shot him in the face, the man dying without a sound. The second guard whirled around and Ben put two 9mm rounds in the man's chest. The guard sat down hard on the muddy ground and looked at Ben, a very surprised expression on his face. Then he toppled over face first in the mud.

Ben couldn't leave the two where they were. Any enemy tracker with half a brain would know Ben was heading north. He scrambled out of the Hummer and laid both dead men across the wide hood of the Hummer. He looked up and down the highway. No vehicle in sight. Ben pulled back out on the road and headed north, feeling just a bit conspicuous with two dead men lying across the hood. About a mile up the highway, he came to a nearly overflowing and fast-running creek. He stopped on the bridge and dumped the bodies into the water. They disappeared from sight. Ben got back

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into the Hummer and continued on his way, knowing with a sick feeling in his stomach that if Bruno's men were working openly here, Nick's battalion had been overrun and scattered.

How many more of Ben's battalions had suffered the same fate?

Ben was afraid to even guess.

Bruno had carefully suckered Ben and his Rebels on, lulling them into a sense of false security. He had used the rainy season to finish moving massive numbers of troops north and had probably had the tunnels dug and supplied long before Ben and his battalions had sailed from the States.

Ben had always said he could never afford the luxury of selling Bruno short, and damned if he hadn't done just that.

And Ben's people had paid the ultimate price for his own short-sightedness.

The Rebels' years-long unbroken stretch of luck had run out.

Ben's face had tightened with rage with those thoughts, his big hands gripping the wheel turning white-knuckled.

He willed himself to calm down. Take it easy. Anger wouldn't solve anything now. He had to keep a cool head. He forced himself to find something positive to think about and concentrate on that.

Miles went past in a torrent of warm rain and worsening highway. Ben had to slow his speed. He did not want to break down now. He drove on a few more miles. Where in the hell were the people? Where had they gone? Had Bruno's horrible plans of massive genocide reached this far north? Could any human being actually be that callous?

Ben was a long-time student of history. He knew the answer to that question the instant it formed in his brain.

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Hitler was Bruno's idol; Bruno considered Hitler to be the greatest man who ever lived.

Yes. Bruno was perfectly capable of killing millions of people, and that's what he had done. He had used old tribal hatred among the African people to practice massive genocide. And those who carried out Bruno's orders had aligned themselves with the Nazi bastard. So the Rebels weren't just up against several hundred thousand of Bruno's troops. They had walked right in and placed themselves against about a million troops- more or less.

Well, there was only one thing Ben could do about that: survive. Rebuild. Plan. Be smarter than Bruno. Be meaner than Bruno.

And the latter was something Ben could damn sure do.

Fifteen miles up the highway, Ben came to half a dozen burned out Hummers and deuce-and-halves and several Rebel tanks. His worse fears were being confirmed: Nick's battalion had fought one hell of a fight, but had finally been overrun by sheer numbers.

Ben didn't stop. There was no point. The scene before him told it all in silent volumes.

Ben steeled himself and drove on.

He had not faced the thought that his team might be among the dead, and he refused to do so now. His team was as slippery as quicksilver. If there was just one chance in a million that they survived, they did. That was something that Ben had to keep believing. He had to.

He drove on through the monsoonal rains. Came to another battle site. More wrecked and burned out Rebel tanks and trucks. Rotting bodies, bloated and eaten on by wild animals and carrion birds.

Ben kept his eyes on the road and drove on.

The bodies had been stripped of everything, right down to their

underwear. It was obscene.

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Ben began looking for a place to hide for the night. It would be dark in about an hour. He came to what was left of a village and slowed, giving it a visual. He finally stopped and backed up, pulling in behind some falling down huts and houses. The rain had actually picked up in volume, limiting vision to only about a hundred or so yards. The fat raindrops were hammering out and flattening the tire tracks of the Hummer.

Ben took a chance and walked out onto the highway, looking at the village from the road. The huts he had parked behind completely shielded his vehicle. There was no danger of being spotted from the sky. Ben had not seen an enemy plane or helicopter since the fight at the border.

He found a dry spot in the hut directly in front of his Hummer and settled in for the evening. His thoughts were dark and ugly as he fixed his supper.

All right! Ben finally calmed himself down enough to think rationally. All right. Enough of this. Now think, Raines, damnit, think.

Not everybody was killed. Perhaps no more than forty percent of the two battalions had been hit.

So where did the survivors go?

Did they run off into the brush and jungle to form small hit-and-run guerrilla groups?

Maybe.

Were they captured?

That was a possibility that certainly had to be considered.

If they were captured, where were they being held?

Ben smiled, a cruel curving of the lips.

He damn sure knew how to learn the answer to that. But the person he questioned was not going to be very happy about it.

He ate his supper, heated his coffee, took his daily

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medication, and smoked a cigarette. Then he went to bed.

Tomorrow he would take a prisoner and learn the truth. One way or the other.

The soldier looked up at Ben through very frightened eyes. He had never seen such a savage look in all his life. One instant he had been standing guard at an intersection, the next instant something had struck him on the head and now he was trussed up like a pig awaiting slaughter.

And who was this savage-looking man squatting beside him, holding that

razor-sharp knife?

"You speak English?" Ben asked.

Ben had dumped the sentry into the back of the Hummer and driven twenty miles up the road before pulling off into the brush and hauling the soldier out for questioning.

"Yes, sir."

The sentry had been careless. Over-confident. Too sure of himself. The few victories had filled him with a false sense that all was well.

All was not well.

Ben Raines was alive and on the warpath.

"How many prisoners did you people take? And you'd better give me a straight answer when you open your mouth." Ben held up the knife. "The thumb on your right hand gets cut off first."

The soldier believed him. There was not a doubt in his mind kept this barbaric-looking man meant every word. So great was his fright, the soldier peed in his underwear.

"We took some prisoners. But not very many. They were transported south to a prisoner of war camp."

"How far south?"

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"Several hundred miles."

"Will they be tortured?"

"Certainly not, sir! Those are orders from the General Field Marshal himself. All Rebel prisoners will be treated fairly and humanely. I have seen those orders with my own eyes. I swear it."

Ben believed him. Bruno had sense enough to know that if Ben learned any of his people had been tortured, Hell would be a luxury vacation spa compared to what Ben Raines would do ... and Bruno knew even if Ben was dead, that crazy ex-SEAL, Ike McGowan would do the same, and if those two were dead, Dan Gray, that nutty Englishman, the former SAS officer, would take up the slack, and so on down the line.

What Bruno did not really understand was: scratch one Rebel, and they all bleed.

"Give the exact location where they're being held."

"I don't know the exact location, sir. I swear before God and my mother's grave, I don't know."

Ben believed him. The soldier was too young and too frightened and there was a ring of sincerity in his words.

"How many battalions were hit?"

"About half of them, I think, sir. But I don't know for sure. I do know that many of the attacks failed and we lost a lot of native soldiers. The main thrust of the attacks were concentrated in the west. We were ordered, at all costs, to either kill or capture General Ben Raines. He . . ." The soldier's mouth dropped open and he paled under his tan. He had suddenly realized just who was questioning him. "Oh, my God," he gasped. "You're General Ben Raines."

"That's right, boy. I'm the devil in person."

The soldier's eyes were suddenly filled with fright. He, too, had heard Ben referred to as the devil. And he obviously believed the rumor.

"And whether I send you right straight to hell with

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this knife," Ben held up the big-bladed knife, "or let you live, depends on you."

"How do you mean, General?" The soldier's voice was filled with panic.

"On whether or not you tell me the truth."

"I swear to God, General. Every word I have spoken was the truth. I would not lie to you. I am not that big a fool."

"Perhaps not. But you would lie to save your life, wouldn't you?"

"Who wouldn't, sir?" the soldier replied honestly.

Ben chuckled. "Good reply. Now tell me everything you know about the number of prisoners taken, where they are held, and anything else you know that I need to know." Ben held up the knife. "And don't lie."

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The soldier could tell Ben little else, and he did not believe the young man was lying to him.

"You'll be able to free yourself from these ropes in a few hours, if you work at it," Ben told him.

"Yes, sir."

Ben left the young man trussed up on the dirt floor of the hut and drove off toward the south, deliberately allowing the soldier to see what direction he was taking by circling around and driving past the door of the hut. Ten miles down the highway, he cut off onto an ill-defined old logging road and circled around, almost getting stuck half a dozen times. He returned to the highway an hour later and fifteen miles north of the hut and headed north toward Natitingou, Nick's last known reporting site. But as he approached the town, Ben could not go a mile without seeing signs of a terrible battle.

There weren't so many Rebel bodies, but dozens of vehicles and several tanks and APCs.

The soldier Ben had questioned had told him that standing orders were to carry off and bury their own dead, leaving the Rebels behind as a form of intimidation to any locals who might get it into their heads to come out of the brush and fight Bruno's forces. Ben guessed that made sense, in a weird sort of way, since

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Bruno's people had killed millions already, and those few natives left were slowly starving to death or dying of disease and most were too sick or weak to fight off a gnat.

About twenty miles south of the town, Ben cut off the main highway onto another highway that angled toward the northeast, but not before stopping at a wrecked deuce-and-a-half and finding one full five-gallon can of fuel somebody had overlooked. He topped off his fuel tank and drove on. The bed of the transport had been filled with dead Rebels, stripped down to their underwear. They were so bloated it was impossible to make out their features.

But where in the hell were the hundreds of Rebels who had escaped the battles?

In the brush and jungle, living off the land, hiding out until they could regroup, probably. They would stay well away from any highways.

But would the survivors head back west, or head east? Neither, he finally concluded: they would make their way north. Some among them would have managed to establish and maintain communications with other battalions during the fight, and would know that not all battalions had been hit. They would try to connect with those battalions.

Ben came to a sliding halt at a tiny village about forty miles north-northeast of the highway he had exited. His eyes had found a graveyard filled with makeshift crosses. He parked the Hummer behind a falling-down hut and walked through the drizzle to the graveyard. He could see dog tags hanging from the rickety crosses, the markers held together with rope and twine and strips of cloth.

The first dog tags he looked at belonged to Nick Stafford. The commander of 18 Batt had died fighting beside his people.

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Ben walked through the graveyard, looking at the dogtags; he knew many of the people who were buried there. Several doctors. Nick's XO.

Ben shook his head and walked back to the Hummer, wondering who had buried the fallen Rebels.

He didn't know and probably never would.

"Shit!" Ben said, filled with rage. He pulled back onto the highway.

The town of Kerou was nearly deserted, except for a few old men and women who were barely clinging to life. But Ben found an old fuel dump on the outskirts of town and topped off his tank, after he had searched for nearly an hour among the hundreds of barrels to find one that was half full.

It was dark when Ben finished at the dump and he drove about five miles outside of town and made camp in the burned-out ruins of what had once been a nice home.

He had seen no signs of Bruno's forces and the fuel depot appeared to have been used up and deserted. That could possibly mean that Bruno's people, when they pulled out, had no intention of returning.

But which direction had they gone?

Ben had him a hunch they headed back toward home.

He didn't know why he felt that way, but the hunch was strong.

But not so strong that he could afford to let down his guard and become careless.

"Shit!" Ben said, as he poured a cup of coffee and dumped in the contents of a sugar pack from his accessory pack. His thoughts were of Nick. A damn good battalion commander, well liked and respected by his troops.

Cold in the ground.

"Valhalla just got another good soldier," Ben muttered.

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Sleep was elusive for Ben that night. He managed a couple of hours and was on the road just before dawn. He was flagged down about halfway between Kerou and Banikoara by a priest and two nuns, all three wearing the rags of their faith.

"You might kill me for asking this," the priest said, before Ben could say a word. "But I am not afraid of death. I know you do not shoot wounded men ... or so I have been told. We have a badly wounded soldier in that hut over there." He pointed. "Can you spare just a little medicine?"

"I'm an American," Ben told the priest. "My name is Ben Raines."

The jaws of all three religious people dropped open. They crossed themselves. The priest said, "Yes. You fit the description. Are you aware there is a great reward out for your capture?"

"No. But that doesn't surprise me any. Take me to him. Sorry I can't give you a lift. The vehicle is packed with supplies."

"It's only a few hundred yards, General," a sister said. "Follow us."

The Rebel was hard hit and dying. Ben felt it was some sort of miracle the man was still alive. For the first time, Ben was able to hear some of what had happened.

"Don't bother changing bandages or giving me anything, General," the Rebel sergeant told Ben. "It would be a waste of precious supplies. I've had it and I know it. Just listen if you will."

Ben nodded his head.

"I prayed to God some officer would come along so I could tell my story.

I guess God answered my prayers."

"I guess He did," Ben said.

"We never really had a chance, General. They came at us by the thousands. First it was suicide squads all mixed in with refugees. Then they came at us in what

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seemed like thousands; may have been thousands. It was hand to hand most of the time. Artillery was useless, so were mortars. Everything was close up."

The sergeant paused for a moment to catch his breath. Ben waited.

"But we must have killed hundreds of them, General. Hell, I know we did. There were bodies stacked up like cans of beans in a grocery store. Still they kept coming. They'd climb over the dead and keep coming. It's . . . like they were all popped up on something. Maybe some local dope. I don't know. General? Is 18 Batt finished?"

"Nick's dead. I found his grave among others."

"Yes, sir. I saw him fall. We were among the last to get hit. Between the two of us, we must have killed at least a hundred. How about your battalion, sir?"

"We were overrun, Sergeant. We took a lot of casualties."

"Your team?"

"I don't know. I prefer to think of them as missing."

The sergeant closed his eyes and smiled. "But we gave them hell, didn't we, sir?"

"We sure did, Sergeant."

The sergeant never opened his eyes again. An hour later, he died peacefully in his sleep. Ben had never left his side.

Ben rose to his boots. "I have a shovel in the vehicle. I'll get it."

"No need," the priest said. "We have locals waiting about a mile from here. In the bush. We'll see to his burial. The locals won't come out as long as you are here. They're afraid of you."

"I'm not here to hurt them, Padre."

"I know that. But they don't."

"Can I leave you anything? I can spare some food."

The priest smiled and shook his head. "No. Thank you. But we'll make it. You have a long way to go. The

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sergeant said something about a 17 Batt just across the border in Niger. The bridge is still standing at Malan-ville. And my people tell me it isn't guarded."

"Any word on where Bruno Bottger's Nazis went?"

"They pulled out. Where, I don't know. But except for roaming patrols, they're gone."

"I guess I'd better go. I still have not been able to make radio contact with any of my people."

"The sergeant didn't have any type of communications equipment with him when we found him. Sorry."

"I am, too, Padre." The men shook hands, Ben nodded to the nuns, and got back on the road.

Banikoara was a burned out town, with the stench of death hanging everywhere. Ben soon discovered why that was: part of Nick's 18 Batt had made a last stand in die town, and Bruno's troops had thrown everything they had at the Rebels, finally overrunning them after what must have been a fierce hand to hand battle.

The bodies of Rebels littered the streets. And they had all been stripped of everything, right down to their underwear, and some had even been stripped of that.

Ben stopped at every shot-up and disabled vehicle until he found one that had two full fuel cans. He filled his tank and stowed the second can in the cargo space of the Hummer and left the city of the dead behind him.

He cut over to the main highway at Kandi, no more than a wide spot in the road, with few stores and the remnants of one hotel, the Baobab 2000. Ben saw a few people, but they showed no great interest in him and he had no desire to stop and exchange pleasantries with them.

It was a hundred kilometers from Kandi to Malanville on the border. Halfway to the border, Ben pulled over at what remained of a lone store set in the middle of

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nowhere and tucked the Hummer inside the store. Doing that was easy: half of the back wall was missing.

Paul Harrison's 17 Batt had been working just across the border in Niger. Paul's last report was that the capital, Niamey, was in ruins and he was moving on and would wait for Ben's column to line up south of his at a town with the unpronounceable name of Dogondouctchi.

Ben had a hunch that 17 Batt had met the same fate as his 1 Batt and Nick's 18 Batt.

He wondered how many other battalions had been hit by Bruno's forces, and how many Rebels had been lost?

He would know something for sure in the morning, but in his heart, he

already knew.

Ben found the first of many dead bodies of Rebels he would see that day just past the bridge over the Niger River at Malanville ... or rather, what was left of them. They were from Paul's 17 Batt. They might have been part of a Scout team, but Ben couldn't be sure: the bodies had been stripped and were unrecognizable. Every weapon, every piece of usable equipment, every uniform had been taken.

Ben drove on toward Dosso. There he connected with another highway that would take him Birni Ngaoure, change routes again, and into Dogondouctchi. Ben figured the mileage at just about a hundred and seventy-five kilometers from the bridge over the Niger.

He used a siphoning pump that was in the tool compartment of every Rebel vehicle to top off his gas tank from a shot-up Rebel deuce-and-a-half he found in the ditch and drove on. Ben did his best to keep his eyes from the naked bloated bodies in the cab of the truck. But he couldn't keep the smell from his nostrils.

On the outskirts of Birni Ngaoure, Ben found the

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first signs of what a fierce battle Paul's 17 Batt had waged with Bruno's troops. The town had been destroyed by mortar and towed artillery, the heavy bombardment finally aiding Bruno's troops in overrunning and killing what Rebels were left in the besieged town.

The sergeant the priest and nuns had found had been correct: the Rebels must have taken a terrible toll on the enemy troops, fighting right down to the last person standing, or able to pull a trigger.

And written on the bullet-pocked wall of a building were these words, scrawled in indelible ink: 17th HAD IT. 16TH UNDER HEAVY ATTACK. 15TH OVERRUN. 14TH HOLDING BUT NOT FOR LONG. It was signed Lieutenant James Preston and dated.

Ben had met Lt. Preston several times.

Ben shook his head and walked back outside just as the rains came ripping down. He drove on into the town. A dead town. Not one person could be found . . . at least not alive.

Ben looked into a bullet-pocked HumVee and saw a walkie-talkie on the floorboards. He almost turned away from it, thinking certainly it was useless, or booby-trapped, it was in such an obvious place.

Ben fashioned together several long sticks and backed away from the Hummer, crouching behind part of a wall. He began poking at the walkie-talkie, moving it around, turning it over. Nothing happened. Somehow the enemy troops had missed spotting the radio.

Ben retrieved the radio and put it on the seat beside him in his Hummer, then topped off his tank with a siphoning pump. Then he drove away from the town, stopping a few miles outside of town by the banks of a river. He got out, extended the antenna and keyed the talk button.

Nothing.

Ben looked at the walkie-talkie and grimaced. "Try

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turning it on, Raines," he muttered in disgust. "That always helps."

"This is Eagle," he said, after setting the frequency. "Anyone out there interested in talking to an old bird whose wings have been clipped just a little?"

Ben came very close to weeping from relief when a voice came back. "You bet, Eagle. Keep your location to yourself. Too many radios in the wrong hands ..."

Then the frequency was jammed up with voices as Rebel communication techs came on, all trying to talk at once. Ben leaned back against the side of the Hummer.

"Well," he said to the waters of the river and the rain that drenched him. "At least we're still in business."

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It would have been useless to set the walkie-talkie on scramble, for Bruno's people were surely monitoring and with the stolen Rebel equipment could listen to every word. Ben and the radio tech-wherever he was- talked in nonsense and baby talk until both knew the approximate location of the other. The location was determined by using the first, second, third and fourth letter of each word spoken, depending on how the word was positioned in the sentence and then spelling them out. That was something the Rebels had worked out years back.

It shocked Ben to learn he was talking with the communications people of Jim Peter's 14 Batt, located some hundred miles to the east.

So where were 15 and 16 Batt?

The tech hundreds of miles away did not reply, and from the silence, Ben knew.

Wiped out.

Where was Jim Peters?

Dead.

Buck Taylor of 15 Batt?

Badly wounded.

Mike Post?

Dead.

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Dead.

Jackie Malone of 12 Batt?

Badly wounded.

Greenwalt of 11 Batt?

Dead.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Ben exploded in plain English.

"Nobody else got scratched, General," the tech replied in kind. If the Commanding General wanted to talk without using the code, the tech sure as hell wasn't going to tell him he couldn't.

"Calm down, Ben," Ike's voice took the place of the tech. "Save your anger. You'll need it later. I have your location. Sign off for now. I'll talk to you later. Check in now and then. Hang loose."

Ben was left with a hundred unanswered questions, but Ike was right. No point in getting this close to linking up only to have some roaming patrol of Bruno's close in on him.

Ben made a camp, fixed something to eat, heated some coffee, and was rolling a cigarette when several dozen Rebels came walking up the road, as nonchalant as if heading for a church dinner on the grounds.

"Howdy, General!" a sergeant called, waving. "Damn, but it's good to see a friendly face. We intercepted your transmission and put the code together. Hell, we were only about half an hour away."

They had rations of their own and a dozen or more vehicles hidden away in the bush, about two miles away. That was good news. But then they dropped some really good news on Ben.

"We've been talking in bursts with dozens of other Rebel units scattered all around," the sergeant said. He was the sergeant major of Paul Harrison's battalion. "Maybe three hundred or so, with plenty more Rebels in small teams all over the damn place. But they must

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be without any type of communications except for squad radios."

"I have one of those in the Hummer," Ben said. "We'll try to contact them in a minute. What have you heard, Sergeant? How bad is it?"

"It's bad, General." He hesitated. "Almost all of your 1 Batt was wiped out. Maybe a hundred/hundred and fifty got away into the bush and jungle."

"Any word on my team?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Dr. Chase?"

"Not a peep, sir."

"Then you know about those battalions that got hard hit." It was not a question.

"Yes, sir. We lost some fine people."

"That we did, Sergeant Major. That we did. Ther-mopolis and his HQ Batt?"

"They didn't get attacked."

"Get the short-range walkie-talkie out of my Hummer and let's start getting this new brigade organized."

"New brigade, sir?" a young Rebel questioned.

"Yes. You people are now part of my new 1st Brigade. Get cracking."

"Yes, sir!" The young Rebel was wearing a grin a charge of C-4 couldn't dislodge as he rose to retrieve the walkie-talkie.

By the time darkness began covering the land, slightly more than four hundred Rebels had been located. He had again spoken with Ike, who had told him there had been no word about Dr. Chase and his doctors from 1 Batt or Ben's team.

Buck Taylor, commander of 15 Batt, and Jackie Malone, commander of 12 Batt had been seriously wounded. Jackie had already been airlifted out and had undergone emergency surgery and was on her way back to the States. A rescue team was bringing Buck out now.

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Ike confirmed that they had lost at least six battalion commanders and at least five thousand troops-that number would probably go much higher.

One of the Rebels who had joined Ben just before dark shook his head at Ike's assessment and said, "Try about fifteen thousand dead-at least."

Ben looked at the Rebel for a couple of heartbeats. "Go on," he prompted.

"I talked with a guy from 16 Batt who had talked with one of the survivors from 14 Batt. 14 Batt got hit hard. They lost probably two thirds of their people. A couple more people from 14 Batt confirmed that."

Ben passed that word along to Ike.

"13 Batt got creamed, too, General," another Rebel said. "My cousin's with 13 Batt . . . communications. And that was my job with 15 Batt. My cousin stayed on the radio until they were overrun. His last words to me was, 'God help us all. They've wiped us out.' "

Ben passed along that information to Ike, and then signed off. He sat for a few seconds in silence, then asked, "What about the artillery with the battalions? Did the enemy haul it off?"

All the Rebels gathered around smiled at that. One said, "Yes, sir, they did . . . some of it. But most of it's gonna be worthless to them. When we saw it was nearly over for us, and we were going to be overwhelmed, we either booby trapped the barrels to blow or destroyed the breech. They got a lot of vehicles and weapons, but damn little else."

SOP for the Rebels.

"Not many officers got away, right?"

"No, sir. Practically none of them. A few got captured. Most died fighting."

"All right. Sergeant Major, post the guards and set up a relief schedule. The rest of you get some sleep."

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"We'll be moving out as soon as those few survivors from the south join us tomorrow."

"Where will we be heading, General?" a Rebel asked.

"I don't know," Ben replied honestly. "Not yet. But we're not whipped. If any of you are thinking that, put it out of your minds. We're going to regroup and come back meaner than ever. It'll take us a while to get re-supplied and get used to the new reorganization. A couple of months probably. Ike's got every available ship loading around the clock and heading this way. We just had a setback, that's all. Now get some sleep."

After the camp had settled down for the night, Ben sat off by himself, drinking coffee and thinking. Out of nineteen Rebel battalions, he had lost seven or eight. But he wasn't sure how many troops had been killed. It would take several weeks for the final numbers to be tallied.

Bruno Bottger had won the first round, but the fight was a long way from being over. The Rebels surely suffered a bloody nose and a black eye and some bruises. But Bottger had not destroyed the Rebel spirit. If anything, in the long run he had probably strengthened it. For Ben knew his Rebels. And sadness over their losses would soon be replaced by a cold vengeful anger. The Rebels wouldn't come in as great numbers as before, but they would come back with revenge on their minds.

And when the two armies finally did meet head to head on the battlefield, Ben had a couple of little surprises in store for Bruno Bottger.

But that was in the future. There was a lot of work to be done before that happened.

Ben crawled into his blankets and went to sleep. Tomorrow he would start rebuilding his army.

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"That's everybody who would answer our calls and a hundred more who just straggled up or down the road and found us," the sergeant major told Ben at mid-morning. "I'm sure there are more Rebels out in the bush, but they don't know we're here."

"All right. Once we get reformed and spread out again, they'll find us. Get the column lined out. We're heading for Niamey. We'll get the airport cleaned up and ready to receive traffic. We have to start somewhere. Might as well be there."

There weren't nearly enough vehicles to comfortably carry all the troops, but the Rebels managed without complaint, packed in the beds and hanging onto the sides and riding on the fenders and running boards. Many had to be left behind. But as the convoy made its way slowly toward Niamey, they came upon Rebel vehicles that had suffered only slight

damage. Ben left crews working on those vehicles after making certain the trucks had enough fuel to make the trip back to pick up those left behind and then on to Niamey.

Paul Harrison's last report was that Niamey was in ruins, and he sure had pegged that right. Part of the city was still burning. Bruno Bottger had adopted a scorched-earth policy. Ben and his troops arrived at the airport at midafternoon-in the middle of a downpour-and immediately began clearing runways. Some of the trucks turned around and headed back, to pick up those that could not make the first run to the city.

Ben did not attempt any communication with Ike. They had agreed that if Ben came under attack on the way, he was to get on the radio. If Ike didn't hear from him, Ben had made it and help would be on the way by noon of the next day. Either landing or circling. So the Rebels didn't have time to waste.

Wrecked vehicles were shoved off the runways by deuce-and-a-halves while other Rebels formed lines and

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walked the lengths of concrete, picking up debris. The electricity had not worked in the city for years, so there were no runway lights. But the transport planes would be bringing in portable generators with the first flights. At dark the Rebels stopped working and ate some supper. To a person they were not in the best physical shape; many of them were near exhaustion. But the runways had been cleared and the planes could land.

They began landing at noon the next day. The first half-a-dozen planes contained troops, and Ike was the first one off. He ran over to Ben and the two men grabbed each other in a bear hug.

Ike finally pulled back and wiped his eyes. "Tell your people to stand guard, Ben. They must be worn out. My people will off-load the planes. \fou got any coffee?"

Ben laughed. "No. We used the last of it this morning."

"I can fix that in a hurry."

The next two planes brought in cooks, doctors, and supplies. They were followed by more huge cargo planes, packed with supplies and weapons.

A pot of coffee made for Ben and Ike, and huge vats of coffee made for the troops, handed out with sandwiches that had been quickly made by the cooks within minutes of landing, Ben looked at Ike.

"All right, Ike. Give it to me straight, and don't pull any punches."

"Greenwalt, Gomez, Peters, Post, Harrison, and Stafford, all dead. Taylor and Malone badly hurt and on their way back to the States." Ike stuck a stub of a cigar into his mouth and chewed it for a moment. "We lost between fifteen and twenty thousand Rebels, Ben. It will be weeks before the final numbers are crunched. 11, 12, and 13 Batts were almost totally wiped out. The other battalions that were hit suffered at least fifty percent losses . . . some higher."

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"How many officers and senior sergeants made it out?"

"Only a handful of each."

"Well, we're looking at a complete reorganization. How about Bruno and his people-where are they?"

"They pulled out, heading south. Ben, we must have killed a hundred thousand of Bottger's people. I'm serious. We destroyed the equivalent of five full divisions. I don't have to tell you how Rebels fight."

"We didn't hurt him, Ike. He used African troops for cannon fodder. I doubt if he lost a hundred and fifty of his own people. And we've still got the gangs of punks between us and Bottger."

"And what's left of his African army."

"Yes. What does Cecil have to say?"

"He's speeding up the training at our bases. It's about all he can do. He let out a whoop when I told him you were still alive and on the warpath."

"My team and Dr. Chase?"

Ike shook his head. "We've got them MIA, Ben."

"Well, if any team can make it, my team can. And that old crotchety bastard, Lamar Chase, is hard to kill. I'll say no more about it." Ben shook himself like a big shaggy dog. "Ike, get on the horn and advise all Batt Corns to hold what they've got. No further advance. I want teams of Scouts out right now, penetrate as deep as they think is safe, burrow in, and keep their eyes wide open. I want Indian talkers with the Scouts and the same with communications at all times. That ought to thoroughly confuse those Nazi sons of bitches."

Ben took a bite of sandwich. "I figure we'll stand down for two to three months, Ike. It'll take that long for fresh supplies to reach us and for the troops to get used to the new reorganization. And that will put us just about out of the rainy season." Ben looked at his

long-time friend. "We're going to brigades, Ike. Ten of them. It's past time for it."

"I agree, Ben."

Ben forced a smile. "It's my army, I can designate a brigade to be any strength I damn well please."

Ike laughed and clasped his friend on the shoulder. "I'll get right on it, Ben."

After Ike had left, Ben sat for a long time, staring out the broken window.

His thoughts would have caused Satan to cringe.

Ben was up long before dawn, as was his usual custom. He dressed and walked down to the mess tent, pulling a mug of coffee from one of the huge urns. These cooks were new to Ben, and he to them, and they were just a bit in awe of him. He ignored the quick and curious stares (one does not stare directly or for very long at the commanding general of the Army) and took his coffee to one of the folding tables that had been set up, choosing one in a far corner of the big tent.

Ike came in a few minutes later and filled a tray to overflowing with food and sat down across the table from Ben.

Ben smiled at the food piled on the serving tray. "Not too hungry this morning, hey, Ike?"

"I am kinda off my feed, Ben," Ike replied in all seriousness. "The strain, I guess."

Ben shook his head at the amount of food the ex-SEAL could consume and sipped his coffee. "I'm sure that's it, Ike."

"Have you settled on brigade designations yet, Ben?"

"Yes. To keep the confusion down to a minimum we'll start with 501 and run through 601. Unless you've got a better way and I'm sure open for suggestion."

Ike shook his head. "Sounds good to me. You checked with communications this morning?"

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"No. You?"

"No. I'm the 502nd Brigade?"

"Yes."

"Were you advised about the refugees lining up outside the airport during the night?"

Ben looked up from his rolling of a cigarette. "No. How many?"

"Only a few at first. It's up to about a thousand now. But they're very subdued and not causing any trouble. They're a, well, really pitiful bunch."

"I can imagine. We'll do what we can for them. That's part of the reason we're here."

"We'll have planes coming in every twenty minutes starting at first light." Ike suddenly pushed his tray from him. "Aw, shit, I'm not hungry. I haven't been able to eat since the attacks. I fill up my tray, take two bites, and lose my appetite."

"The attacks weren't your fault, Ike."

"I keep tellin' myself that, Ben. But I just can't convince myself of it."

"We'd all better be glad Bruno didn't push the offensive. I still can't understand why he didn't. He damn sure had it all going his way."

"Maybe he was afraid of getting flanked from the east, Ben."

"I don't think so, Ike. If you have swung around, using 2 through 10 Batts, Bruno could have poured more troops in behind you and had you all in a box. The rest of the battalions sure couldn't have done you any good. He probably didn't count on taking us by as much surprise as he did and just didn't have an adequate number of troops in position. That's my guess. But who knows why that crazy son of a bitch does anything?"

Rebels were beginning to arrive at the tent, picking up trays and forming a line. Both Ben and Ike left the table to give the troops more room and walked outside. A runner from communications walked up.

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"About three hundred or so Rebels have been located," she said. "Thirty or so from each of the battalions that got hit. They're spread out over a five/six hundred mile stretch. Teams have gone in now to lead them out and trucks are ready to roll at their signal."

"Thank you," Ike said. The runner backed off and entered the mess tent. "They'll be more showing up, Ben."

"But only a few more," Ben said softly.

"You can't know that for certain, Ben."

"You're an eternal optimist, Ike. But I hope you're right."

"I'll get things rolling, Ben."

"See you later, Ike."

Ben got him another mug of coffee from the mess tent and returned to his temporary CP. He sat down behind a folding table and turned on the lamp, the electricity provided by huge generators that hummed all around the airport. He began mapping out the new brigade designations and all the other many details that went along with that. The Rebel army did not have to call and wait for artillery support, or combat engineer help . . . each battalion, and now brigade, carried all that with them. The same with armor.

Ben noticed the shadow entering the room, but paid it no mind. The security that Ike had put around him was so tight a flea could not get through it.

"Hi, General Ben," the familiar voice said. "Good to see you?"

Ben jerked his head up from his work.

Anna stood in front of the table, smiling at him.

"I'll tell you what I remember about the fight," the young woman said. She had taken a long soapy shower and was dressed in freshly laundered BDUs. Her short-

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cropped blond hair was clean and shiny with health. And she was on her

second plate of food. "Just a tremendous explosion. When I woke up, it was night and I was facedown in a ditch. I didn't know it at the time, but I was about a mile from the camp. I was in some sort of daze and my head hurt something awful. I had lost my rifle but I still had my sidearm. It was real quiet. I mean, not a sound. I sat there for a time, trying to get things straight in my mind. Then I must have passed out. I woke up just about the time it was getting light in the east. I felt better and my head didn't hurt so bad. I knew about where I was. I went back to the campsite and just stood there for a time. I don't know how long. Maybe an hour. Maybe longer. I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. General Ben, there were bodies everywhere ..."

"I know, baby. I was there the next day. You didn't see any of the team?"

"No. There was no one left alive. I don't know what happened to the team. We were all in the ditch fighting when I ... well, whatever it was that happened to me."

Ben pointed to his cot. "There's your CAR. I went back and fumbled around in the ditch until I found it."

"All right! Still works okay?"

"It works just fine. Go on. What did you do after leaving the area?"

Anna finished her coffee and Ben poured her another mug. "I didn't leave immediately. I walked around the entire camp, trying to find Jersey and Cooper and Beth and Corrie. They weren't among the dead. I looked at so many dead people I got numb. But there were no enemy dead. And I know we killed hundreds of them before we got overrun. Well, until I got knocked goofy. I learned later the bastards carried off

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their dead and left ours stripped to rot under the sun and be eaten by those damned big birds.

"Anyway, I found a full canteen and some field rats and took off walking. Turned out I was walking the wrong way for several miles. I guess I was still in some sort of daze after seeing all those bodies of friends. About two hours after leaving the area, I found two dead Rebels in the brush. I took one of their weapons and all their ammo and canteens and whatever else was in their rucksacks. I didn't inspect either one until later. Turned out they were full of food and grenades and other survival stuff. It was a lucky find. I finally got my bearings and started heading north. Two days later I hooked up with two guys from Nick Stafford's 18 Batt. They were heading south. One of them was badly wounded. He died the next day. And me and G.A.- that's his name-we just kept on walking . . ."

"G.A. is here now?" Ben asked.

"You bet. He's a squad leader. Was," she corrected. "He's got his shit together, too, believe me. I don't think I would have made it without him."

"Does he have a last name?"

"Armstead."

Ben wrote that down on a pad. G. A. Armstead didn't know it yet, but he

was about to become a platoon sergeant. "Go on, Anna."

"There isn't that much more to tell. We found other Rebels along the way and hooked up with them. Then we found two trucks that had been abandoned. I don't know why. Fuel tanks were full and they ran just fine. So we piled in and kept traveling north. Here I am."

"And I am glad to see you. You go get outfitted now then get some rest. I'll see you at lunch."

She leaned over the table and kissed her adopted father on the cheek and with a smile, was out the door with the boundless energy of the young.

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Ben leaned back in the chair. If Anna made it clear, there was a chance the others in his team did, too. He could only hope.

Ben finished the prelims on the upgraded brigade and walked over to the communications shack, giving the recommendations and wants to the officer in charge to be transmitted to Cecil, back at Base Camp One.

The 501st Brigade was now official.

Ben grabbed a Hummer and drove over to the tarmac, watching the huge cargo planes come in. They were circling in the sky like huge prehistoric birds. The Rebels had cut the waiting time for them down to ten minutes, then it was touch down, unload, and back in the air again.

Most of the huge cargo planes would head back to a port to await the arrival of ships from the States. The ships were sailing at flank speed to get to a western port to unload much needed supplies: carrying everything from cases of underwear to tanks.

Ben drove over close to the MASH tents. The doctors were seeing refugees as fast as they could, and still the lines stretched as far as the eyes could see. The hopeless cases were placed in the rear of the tents, under tarps rigged up to give them some shade from the sun and shelter from the rains . . . the men, women, and children lay on blankets on the ground, most without make a sound of complaint, human skeletons waiting to die.

The fires from the destroyed city of Niamey still smoldered and burned in the distance. The airport was some 12 kilometers from the city.

Ike drove up and got out of his Hummer, walking over to stand by Ben's side. "Just talked to Cecil. Five hundred new troops are on the way over from the States. Five hundred more in a few weeks. We'll incor-

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porate them into all brigades, moving some seasoned troops around."

"Any more stragglers?"

"Several hundred, Ben. I told you there would be more. And there will be more still to come. And no, there is no word about your team and Dr. Chase. I'm sorry."

"I am too, Ike. But I won't start putting together a new team until I'm

certain-one way or the other."

"You've got Anna back. That's a good sign."

"I think so."

"Well, I drove out to tell you that Buddy is on his way in, with a couple of other batt corns. Excuse me, brigade commanders. Be here in about two hours."

"Thanks. The new designations will take a little getting used to. I still slip myself."

"Forty battalions. A lot of batt corns, Ben."

"I know. A lot of lieutenants promoted to captains, a lot of captains promoted to major, and a lot of majors promoted to Lt. Colonel. And I haven't even begun a list yet. And I want some recommendations from you."

"I can work some up pronto."

"Good. Do that. This is going to take a lot of strain off us, Ike. I should have done this a long time ago."

"I stopped by the MASH tents," Ike said, after a moment of silence.

"So did I."

"Ben, I never realized just what kind of monster Bruno Bottger is until we got over here. He must have killed millions of these people."

"Yes. And enslaved many of those left."

"I wonder where the mass graves are?"

"I doubt if his people bothered. He's been over here for some time now. The animals and birds ate what didn't rot and then scattered the bones." Ben cut his

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eyes. "You did notice the animals have made a dramatic comeback, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," Ike replied drily. "They seemed quite well fed."

"Now you know why."

"Intel says Bruno has set aside huge chunks of land for the animals to live on. Absolutely no hunting allowed."

"Yeah? That's wonderful. Hider played the harmonica, too. But I still don't have to like the son of a bitch."

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Ben began meeting with Batt Corns, a couple a day, until he had met with them all and lined out the new brigade designations. They handed in lists of people they felt should be promoted. Ben had their files pulled stateside-many files the Rebels carried with them had been lost during

the battle-and carefully went over them. Slowly he laid out the new battalions, companies, platoons, and their leaders.

A few days drifted into a few weeks, and still he had heard no news, good or bad, about his team and Dr. Chase and several of his medical staff. But he refused to give up hope, for stragglers were still coming in all up and down the line, in tiny groups of two or three and occasionally the lone Rebel.

Ben interviewed each of them, seeking news of his team and of Dr. Chase.

One of the last Rebels to come wandering in had news.

"They were all hit, General," the tired Rebel said, holding a mug of coffee between his dirty hands. His clothing was nearly in rags. "And hit pretty hard, but still able to function. The only one I didn't see with some sort of wound was Dr. Chase. He was helping Jersey get away from the battle. Several doctors were with them, and they were all bleeding and limping. We were

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all being pushed back, just about a couple of minutes before being overrun. I'm pretty sure your team and some of the doctors got away. I was the last man standing in my squad when I cut out. I'm not ashamed to say I ran."

"No one is blaming you for that," Ben said. "And no one in their right mind ever will. Which direction did my team take?"

The Rebel took a sip of coffee, his brow furrowed in thought. "North, I think, General. But they could have turned in any direction outside the camp. Those of us who got away scattered like wild geese without a leader."

Ben smiled and patted the man on the shoulder. "Glad to have you back, Sergeant. Oh, by the way, you're a lieutenant now." Ben saluted him. "You owe me a dollar. Now get out of here and get checked out."

The stunned Rebel walked out of the CP in more of a daze than when he came in.

Ben looked at the mound of paperwork on his desk and grimaced. He shoved it aside and stood up. Time for a break.

He waved aside his driver and decided to walk. He had been sitting behind the desk for several hours and needed to get the kinks out of his muscles. Security fell in behind him as he strolled the area.

He paused to let a dozen huge flatbed trucks rumble by, each one loaded with a tank or an APC. The trucks had been to some port, where ships were coming in daily, bringing thousands of tons of supplies and instruments of war.

Ben figured another six weeks and everything would be lined out, the brigades ready to march.

He walked over to the runway and watched several planes land, each one bringing in fresh recruits from the States. The young men and women just out of AIT. "Going to be a hell of a culture shock for you, boys and

girls," Ben muttered. "Leaving the peace and order of the SUSA for this place."

"Move, damnit!" he heard one of the sergeants shout at the new troops. "Get your asses in gear. We got a war to fight. Move like this in combat and the ants will be eating your eyes."

One of Ben's security people chuckled and Ben smiled and turned to look at him. "Does that bring back memories, Corporal?" he asked.

"Sure does, sir. I landed in Europe some years ago, fresh out of AIT. And scared shitless."

"I hope you learned to stay scared."

"Bet on that, sir. Bet on it."

Staying scared and cautious was the only way to stay alive in combat.

"PUFFs comin' in, sir," another of his security team said.

Ben turned and looked. Half a dozen Spectre gun-ships were lining up for landing. The planes were flying birds of death, equipped with all sorts of weapons: chain guns, cannon, fifty-caliber machine guns, rockets. When they began circling an enemy position, a single Spectre could spew out enough firepower to wipe out anything within an area the size of several football fields, from an altitude of five thousand feet.

Many still called them: Puff the Magic Dragon.

And Ben was keeping several very deadly secrets to himself. And would, until his troops began the assault against Bruno's new homeland.

Bruno Bottger was in for a very large and deadly surprise.

Ben walked on, coming to the MASH tents. The line of refugees seeking medical aid was much smaller now, but the lines of dying behind the tents was not. It was a sight that no one, not even the most hardened of combat veterans could ever really get used to seeing.

Ben turned away and began walking toward the center of the massive encampment. With the addition of the new troops from the States, his brigade, the 501st, would be up to full strength. A few more weeks and all the tanks and artillery would be ashore and in place. Then he would have to shake it all down and line it all out before he could take to the road.

The other brigades were ready to roll, but Ben's 501st had incorporated many-if not most-of the survivors from the eight battalions that had been hard hit by Bruno's surprise attack. It was taking some time, but Ben knew they were right on schedule. It was not something you could rush. Not when each person's life depended on the man or woman next to them.

The several-mile walk had gotten the kinks out of Ben's muscles, and he felt much better. He turned away from the scene of organized chaos and began the walk back to his CP, and the stacks of paperwork that awaited

him there.

"If Bruno had any kind of air force we'd be in trouble," Ben muttered. But he knew-and that was confirmed fact-that Bottger really had no air force to speak of, with the exception of helicopter gunships and a few fighters-no bombers. Bruno had concentrated on building up a mighty army of ground troops . . . and he had damn sure done that. And Ben knew better than to sell Bruno's people short. They were excellent troops. The Rebels were going to be outnumbered twenty to one when they began their offensive.

But then the Rebels were always outnumbered. That was nothing new.

Back in his CP, Ben settled down to wade through more paperwork. He missed his team all the time, but this was when he missed Beth the most. Bedi could cut through paperwork in one tenth of the time it took Ben.

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And this was something he couldn't hand over to Thermopolis. The ex-hippie turned warrior had his hands full with all the hundred of details with the new brigade designation.

Ben sighed and stood up to get another mug of coffee. It was then he noticed Anna standing in the door to his office, smiling at him.

"What are you so happy about?" Ben asked.

"Search helicopters found the team and Dr. Chase and those doctors who fled with him. They're all alive."

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Ben ignored his Hummer and ran over to the como shack, almost scaring the communications specialist half to death when he burst into the room.

"Where are they?" Ben asked. He calmed himself. "My team, Dr. Chase?"

"About three hours away, General." The tech stood up and pointed to a spot on a wall map of Africa. "They were spotted right there."

Ben stared and shook his head. "Never more than twenty-five miles from the original battle scene all the time. I'll be damned."

"Yes, sir. Your team was all hard hit. They couldn't be moved."

"But they're all going to make it?"

"According to the medics on board the choppers, they're all up and walking around, General."

Ben patted the soldier on the shoulder and smiled. Then he stepped out of the building and sat down on the lowered tailgate of a pickup truck. He exhaled a couple of times, then slowly built himself a cigarette. Anna came running up, accompanied by half a dozen other Rebels, all of them original members of Ben's old 1 Batt and survivors of the battle.

Ben held up a hand. "They're all okay. Be here in a few hours. That's all I know. We'll all have to wait."

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The knot of Rebels was all grins as they walked away. Anna stayed, plopping down on the tailgate beside Ben. She looked disapprovingly at the cigarette in Ben's hand.

"Don't say a word about it," Ben warned.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"I'm sure."

"So when the team gets here, we'll be ready to shove off, right, General Ben?"

"In about six weeks, Anna."

She unwrapped a couple of sticks of gum, stuck them in her mouth, and chomped for a few seconds. "That will put us out of the rainy season, right?"

"Just about."

"And then we can start kicking Bruno Bottger's ass, right?"

"That's the plan."

She hopped down from the tailgate. "I'll be at the airport."

"I'll see you over there in about an hour."

Ben finished his smoke and began walking toward the runways, his security team falling in behind him. The area in and around the airport had become a staging area, with hundreds of thousands of tons of supplies stored and stacked everywhere and more coming in every day. Ben looked up at the sky. Huge transport planes were circling, bringing in more supplies and equipment and troops from the States.

In another week, Ben could start shaking down his new brigade and about a month after that, they would be rolling south.

At the airport, his new XO, John Michaels, came running up. "Is it true, General? Your team and Dr. Chase were found and all okay?"

"It's true. They'll be arriving here in about two and a half hours."

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"All right!" He shook Ben's hand and walked away, smiling.

Ben sat in the shade of a deuce-and-a-half and waited. Occasionally an unsuspecting Rebel would walk past, give Ben a startled glance, and move quickly away. But the news of Ben's presence had spread quickly and most at the airport gave him a wide berth.

Anna strolled up and sat down on the grass beside him. "General Ben?" she finally broke the silence.

"Yes?"

"What's the final tally on Rebels lost in the assault?"

"Just over fifteen thousand."

Ben and Anna sat for a time in silence, watching the planes land and take off. They watched as the final contingent of fresh troops from the States deplaned stiffly after their long ride and line up on the tarmac.

"That new bunch fills us out, doesn't it?" Anna asked.

"That's it, baby. We'll start shaking down in a couple of days."

"And then?"

"We cross Nigeria and cut straight south, through Cameroon."

"I'll be glad to get this show back on the road. What about transportation for us?"

"Our new wagon is due to arrive here in a few days. Built especially for us in the SUSA. It's supposed to be state of the art."

"Cooper will like that."

"Captain's chairs for all of us, sliding doors for you people. Doors that slide on ball bearings and can be kicked open easily in case of emergency. Radios built in for Corrie with a permanent up-link so we can talk to anybody, anywhere. Four-wheel drive on demand, custom-built from the ground up. Armor-plated with glass that will stop a 7.62 round."

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"You don't suppose they'll have to be sent back to the States for treatment, do you?"

Ben laughed and ruffled the young woman's short hair. "I don't think so, baby."

"I hope not." She stood up and brushed herself off. "I think I'll walk around some. I'm too antsy to sit still."

"Have fun."

Ben dozed off there in the shade of the deuce-and-a-half, sleeping lightly for twenty minutes or so. When he awakened, he rinsed his mouth out with water from his canteen and rolled a smoke. A little while later, he heard the whapping sounds of the helicopters coming and stood up, walking over to the helicopter landing pads. He stood and watched his team and Dr. Chase jump from the choppers.

No, they wouldn't have to go back to the States for any treatment. They were all right.

Ben waited until they were all showered and dressed in clean clothing and checked by the doctors at the hospital before visiting them all. He had hugged them all at the airport before doctors had shoed them all

into ambulances.

"Well, gang," he told them, pulling out a chair and sitting down at the table. "You tell me what happened, then I'll tell you my story. And start with how in the hell we got separated. I'm at a loss there."

"I saw you get hit, General," Cooper said, after exchanging glances with the others and receiving nods to go ahead. "We all did. It was a big piece of shrapnel, I guess. Tore your helmet off and we figured took part of your head with it. Blood was everywhere. We didn't have more than a split second to look. The enemy was all over us. Then Anna got hit and went down to her knees. When I looked again out of the corner of my

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eye, she had gotten up and was wandering off, like she was in a daze . . ."

"I was, I guess," Anna said. "I don't remember any of this."

Jersey picked it up. "We were all hit by that time and down to sidearms and throwing grenades. Then Dr. Chase and some of his medical people can running up and dragged us out of there. I don't know what kept him from getting killed, boss. He was yelling and cussing and calling Bottger's troops a bunch of goddamn savages and he had a pistol in each hand and his doctors were throwing grenades. We turned to look for you, and damned if you weren't gone. You had just disappeared."

Ben chuckled. "I must have crawled off into that thick brush behind the ditch."

"Whatever you did, we couldn't find you," Beth said. "Just about the time we cleared the compound and made it into the bush, Bottger's troops made their final rush and overwhelmed any who were left. We all had our packs on and full rucksacks on a strap, plenty of water, so we just kept walking. We were all hit, but none of us real bad, just bloody as hell. And pissed off," she added grimly.

Corrie said, "Some of the doctors got minor wounds, but Dr. Chase didn't get a scratch on him. That man must lead a charmed life."

"He'll tell you it's all due to clean living," Ben said.

"Damn right, I will," Lamar said, walking into the room. He had been standing in the door, listening. "Well, now it's your turn, Ben. What happened to you?"

Ben quickly brought them up to date and for a time the group just sat there, drinking coffee and staring at each other.

Beth broke the silence. "We passed through several villages. The people had all been killed."

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Ben nodded his head. "Genocide. We figure Bottger's killed millions of Africans, men, women, and kids."

Lamar cursed under his breath for a moment, then pulled out a chair and sat down. "I like the new brigade plan, Ben. Not that you needed my approval to do it, mind you." He grinned. "Good to see you, you old

warhorse."

The two friends grinned at each other for a moment, then Ben's grin faded and he asked, "Sorry about your doctors, Lamar. The replacements are just about all in from the States."

"They were good people. Take Bruno Bottger alive, Ben."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I want to castrate the son of a bitch with a very dull knife."

"Lamar!" Ben drew back in feigned shock. "You're turning into a vicious man, you know that?"

"Screw you, Raines," the chief of medicine said, pushing back his chair and standing up. "Let's just get this show on the road." He bent down and looked more closely at the long scar on Ben's face, faded now with healing and the sun. "Good thing that hunk of shrapnel hit you in the head. That's the one place on your carcass that's the least likely to get damaged, considering it's empty most of the time." He walked quickly out of the room chuckling, before Ben could retort.

Things were back to normal.

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Ben's team was declared fit to return to duty-limited at first-and the team was back together. A few days after their return, Ben's personal vehicle was brought in and Cooper and Corrie spent the next several days going over it. Although it had less cargo space than their old wagon, it was much more state of the art and much more comfortable riding. To avoid standing out even more than it did, the big wagon was painted olive green.

Rebel Scouts had penetrated deep into Nigeria and reported that Bottger's troops were nowhere to be seen. They had pulled back and appeared to have stretched out in small units, west to east from Gabon over to Kenya.

And the Scouts also reported that millions in Nigeria appeared to have died from Bruno Bottger's practice of genocide. They also warned to be on the lookout for wild animals, who were making a fast and very dramatic comeback. There were prides of lions seemingly everywhere one turned. And while no Rebel Scout had been attacked by a lion, it would be a bit disconcerting to come face to face with a large lion while walking through the bush.

Ben called for one more meeting with his brigade commanders to map out and finalize plans before the

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ten brigades jumped off in their offensive against Bottger's army.

"First of all," Ben said, standing up to face the ten brigade commanders, "let me say that both Jackie Malone and Buck Taylor are well on their way to recovery. But their days in the field are over. They will remain stateside and take over command of training bases. The bodies of several batt coms who were killed during Bottger's assault

have been recovered and sent back to the States to be buried with honors. The bodies of the other officers and men were buried with honors near where they fell. Most were unrecognizable.

"All right, let's admit we took the worst beating we've ever suffered and learn from it and put it behind us. I don't know what we could have done to prevent it. Bruno just simply outfoxed many of us ... myself included. But we'll all try to ensure something like that will never happen again. But don't ever underestimate the intelligence of Bruno Bottger. The man is surely insane, but brilliantly so.

"We've got a lot of green troops with us now. But I suspect by the time we reach Bruno's first front, they'll be well on their way toward becoming seasoned hands. At the very least the barfing at the sight and smell of rotting bodies will have ceased. Once we hit Bruno's first line of defense, nursemaid time for green troops will be over." Ben looked at the nine brigade commanders, included among them his son, Buddy, and his daughter, Tina. Tina sat beside the ex-mercenary, West. Someday, when there were no more wars to be fought, they planned to marry.

"We're better equipped now than we've ever been," Ben continued. "Practically everything we have is state of the art or has been upgraded. Including one very large surprise I don't intend to show Bruno until we get almost nose to nose."

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The brigade commanders all smiled at that. Ben picked up a long pointer and moved to the huge wall map. "All right, folks. Let's get down to it."

The ten brigades, numbering forty battalions, plus Therm's 19 Batt, were lined up and ready to go. Scouts had prowled all over the country south of the brigade line for a hundred and fifty miles, mapping out the best roads and where bridges were still intact, and where there were no bridges, the best place to ford the stream or river.

And they reported that while millions had died under Bruno Bottger hideous plans of genocide, there were still thousands and thousands who were in desperate need of help.

Dr. Chase had elected to stay with Ben's 501 Brigade. When Ben told him what the Scouts had reported, the Chief of Medicine merely shrugged and said, "We'll do what we can."

Meaning that in his opinion, unless the Rebels wanted to leave behind men and equipment and be prepared to stay for years, teaching the people the right way to deal with the land and keep it productive, Chase and his people would fix them up now, and they would starve later anyway.

"I know, Lamar," Ben said. "But what else can we do?"

"Nothing," the doctor agreed. "But I don't believe for one minute Bruno managed to kill off a hundred million people in Nigeria alone. That's a lot of people to kill, Ben. Say he did manage to kill off ten percent, and that's probably high, and say starvation and disease another twenty-five percent. That still leaves sixty-five million people. Where are they? What happened to them?"

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Ben held open his hands. "I don't know, Lamar. I know only what the Scouts report."

"Unless some terrible plague swept the land," Lamar mused aloud. "And that is certainly possible. But it seems as though we would have heard about it."

"The old tribal hatreds surfacing, Lamar. Beth told me this morning that in Nigeria alone there are over two hundred and fifty tribes speaking over four hundred dialects and oftentimes the tribes don't get along."

Lamar shook his head. "The Bible must be wrong. The Tower of Babel surely must have been here."

Ben laughed as Lamar walked off, to make one final check of his medical people before the brigade pulled out in the morning. Ben knew that despite Lamar's crusty talk, the man felt deeply about helping the people of this continent, and would work tirelessly to do all he could.

Ben walked to the door of his CP and stepped out. The convoy was getting in position to roll out at dawn. The skies were no longer filled with planes and the runways were quiet. The last generator would be loaded just moments before the convoy pulled out and the airport would be dark once again.

Ben wondered if it would ever be lighted again.

His team was lounging about outside, taking in the coolness of approaching evening. It was the first evening in months that it had not rained.

"All set to go, gang?" Ben asked, walking over to them and squatting down.

"Settin' on ready, boss," Cooper said. "I do like that new wagon. Handles like a dream. It's got a huge V-8 diesel mill that packs some power."

"What's the top speed, Coop?" Ben asked.

"Spec sheet says about sixty-five miles an hour. But we won't have to worry about that on these roads."

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"For a fact. Everybody used to the new brigade designation?"

"Five-oh-one leads the way," Jersey said with a grin.

"There you go," Ben returned the smile. He stood up and walked a few yards away from the group, looking around at all the activity a bit longer before returning to his CP. There he folded and put away the last of his maps, zipping the waterproof case closed. He checked all around the room. It had been stripped bare in preparation for tomorrow's move.

Ben decided to walk over to a mess tent for some chow and then hit the sack. It was early yet, and going to sleep now would mean he would be up hours before dawn, but so would half the camp, packing up the last of equipment and supplies, striking the mess and MASH and the last of the supply tents, and getting the troops ready to move.

Ben began the walk over to the mess tent, his team falling in behind him. Now that his own team had returned to full duty, the security teams that Ike had assigned him had returned to other duties.

"Maybe we'll get to see some lions and tigers this time," Cooper ventured.

"Lions, maybe," Beth told him. "Tigers, no. Wrong part of the world."

"Tarzan fought tigers here," Cooper insisted.

"Shut up, Cooper," Jersey said. "You'll strain your brain. With any kind of luck, you'll be kidnapped by a gorilla." She frowned. "Although the gorilla would probably turn you loose in a few minutes."

"You'd miss me terribly, my little love blossom," Cooper told her.

Jersey made gagging sounds. "There goes my appetite."

"You'll get it back by the time we reach the mess tent," Corrie said.

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"Only if Cooper doesn't insist on sitting with us."

"I must," Cooper said. "The sight of your lovely face thrills me."

"Oh, God!" Jersey moaned.

Ben smiled and walked on. It was good to have the team back.

Ben was the first one up, as he knew he would be. He also knew that at the first whisper of sound, Jersey would be up, wide awake. Ben dressed quietly in the dark, gathered up his gear, and walked outside. He smiled. Jersey was sitting on the side of her cot, pulling on her boots. The other team members would only be seconds behind her.

At the mess tent, breakfast was not quite ready, but the huge urns of coffee were ready to serve. Ben pulled a mug and sat down, his team following suit. Ben looked up. To his surprise, Dr. Chase was walking in, his security people close behind him. The doctor drew a mug of coffee and sat down at the table with Ben.

"I went to bed too damn early," Lamar bitched.

"You just want to get on the road, you old vagabond. Admit it, you've got ants in your pants."

"I'll admit nothing of the kind. I am a home-loving man, longing to be around the hearth, with kith and kin."

"You also tell enormous lies, you old goat."

"There is nothing to compare with being insulted at this ungodly hour of the morning."

"You just want to get deeper into Nigeria and see if you can find out what happened to the people."

"I will admit there is some truth in what you say. But it was no more than a lucky guess."

"Well, if no one slips and breaks a leg, you'll be able

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to pack up what little is left to do and be ready to move on time."

"I should be so lucky."

"Yeah, you'll probably hold us up for three or four hours."

Lamar gave Ben a very dirty look. "I'm not going to sit here and be insulted by the likes of you, Raines. I'm going to take my coffee and return to my quarters. There, I'm going to take sandpaper to several needles, break off the points, and await the time when you need booster shots."

"You sure are a vicious old man, Lamar," Ben said with a smile.

"Wait until you need a shot. Then you'll see how vicious I really am." But Lamar couldn't maintain a straight face and he finally walked off laughing.

"All right, guys, let's grab something to eat," Ben told his team. "Then we'll load up what's left and move to the head of the column before traffic gets so bunched up we'll never make it."

Already, Rebels were beginning to line up at the serving area, where mounds of scrambled eggs, bacon, pork chops, beef steaks, fried potatoes, gravy, biscuits, fresh fruit and plenty of cold milk and hot coffee were waiting to be consumed. And consumed it would be, with very little scraps left. Whenever possible, Ben insisted on hot meals and plenty of food for his troops, for there would be days, perhaps weeks ahead of them, when everyone would be subsisting on field rations. But this would be the last of the fresh milk for awhile. Powdered milk would be available from here on in, but even ice cold, it did not taste as good as whole, fresh milk.

Ben finished his breakfast and had another mug of coffee, while he was waiting until his team was through. Beth had a huge thermos filled with coffee, then it was back to the CP for a final check, load up, and pile in.

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Cooper expertly guiding the big wagon through the seemingly impossible unorganized maze of traffic to near the head of the column. There, the team unassed the wagon and squatted or sat on the ground, out of the way.

Slowly the long, long line began to take shape. One by one the generators that lit up the encampment ceased their humming and the lights began winking out, the portable generators loaded onto trucks. Miles of cable were rolled up. The mess tents were struck. The encampment went dark.

Ben stood up and brushed off his clothing. "Let's mount up, gang. We've got a long way to go. Nigeria is a big country, and it just might be full of surprises."

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The convoy passed through village after village without seeing one living soul. It was baffling to Ben and frustrating to Dr. Chase and his medical team, especially those who were assigned to the mobile research lab which had joined Ben's 501 just before leaving Niamey.

Scouts had found a dirt/shell road that led to Ar-gungu, Nigeria. There, the Rebels found wild animals and half-wild dogs prowling the streets, and the streets were littered with hundreds and hundreds of skeletons-men, women, and children.

"Not shot," Chase's doctors reported to him. "We can't find any evidence of trauma."

"Get what samples of flesh still remain on die fresher bodies," Chase ordered. "And run every kind of test you know how to run on them."

"Scouts reporting that Sokoto suffered the same fate," Corrie said. "Skeletal remains everywhere. But we're getting radio transmissions out of Jega. Desperate calls from Paula Preston."

"From w/io?" Ben blurted. "Paula? I thought she was dead."

"So did everybody else. Seems she's got a bunch of press types with her."

"How the hell did they get to Jega?"

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"Don't know, boss. I can't make much sense out of anything she says."

"Well hell, that's normal, Corrie. Liberals never did make any sense . . . even before the Great War."

Corrie ducked her head to hide her quick smile. "What do you want me to tell her?"

"I know what I'd like to tell her. Oh, hell! Tell them we'll send rescue choppers down to get them ASAP. Get out to the airstrip and stay put."

Ben stood for a few moments, leaning up against the big wagon. Sudden and very dark suspicions began clouding his mind. He turned to Corrie, but not before he noticed Dr. Chase looking at him very strangely.

"Corrie, where was Paula just before the assault?"

"Well . . ." Corrie hesitated. "Let's see. She and the rest of the press had left us some time before and were traveling with another battalion. I'm not sure which one it was now."

"Find out if you can, please."

"Will do."

"And find out just how the press managed to escape being slaughtered . . . although I have a pretty good idea." He turned to Lamar. "It was a plague that struck this land, Lamar. I'm sure of that. A man-made plague, sent by Bruno Bottger."

That remark shook the doctor. "Germ warfare, Ben?"

"You bet. Bruno had to test the killing bugs somewhere. And he wanted to get rid of all who opposed him. The bugs worked and he got rid of the people."

"Monstrous!" Lamar stared at Ben for a few heartbeats. "But what has all this got to do with Paula Preston?"

"She's tied in with it somehow."

"But she's a screaming left-winger, Ben. Our intel verified that."

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"I know. But don't forget she's still tied in tight with Bruno. Our intel verified that, too."

"Where the hell is Mike Richards when we need him?"

Ben smiled. "He's over in Addis Ababa making goo-goo eyes at dancing girls or something like that. Is this place safe to bivouac near, Lamar?"

"Oh, yes. If it was a man-made germ that killed these people, and I'm not convinced of that, it was short-lived. My people checked the safety of the area first thing." The doctor hesitated for a heartbeat. "Just don't drink the water until we've done a few more tests. I've passed that word through the ranks."

"Thanks for telling me," Ben said drily.

"Oh, it wouldn't kill you," Lamar said brightly. "But it might give you the shits." The doctor walked off toward the mobile research trucks, chuckling.

Ben sat down on the fender of a deuce-and-a-half and rolled a cigarette. It had been puzzling him for weeks why no trace of any member of the press had been found . . . except those from the SUSAs, they had all been killed. That had been confirmed. But no sign whatsoever of the press who lived and worked and were a part of the political movement outside the SUSAs.

Now he thought he knew why that was.

And it was a terrible thought.

But one that really did not surprise him.

Ben shook his head and sighed. But no, he thought, not all of them were guilty of collaborating with Bruno Bottger. He couldn't believe that. But Paula Preston and Alex Marsh and Marilyn Dickson, yes, he was now 99 percent certain they were in some sort of cahoots with the man.

And the thought of it made him slightly ill.

Ben had known for years that he was probably the most hated man-in some circles-in America. He

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could live with that. So far he hadn't lost any sleep over it. But for those left-wingers to hate him so much that they would get in bed with a monster such as Bruno Bottger was beneath contempt.

But it looked as though they'd done it.

"Jesus Christ!" Ben muttered under his breath, the words too low for his team to hear. "How far down can people sink?"

Pretty damn low, was his conclusion.

Ben's mouth was suddenly very dry from disgust and rage. He unscrewed the cap from one of his canteens and took a sip of water. It helped, but not much. He unwrapped a stick of gum and chewed it. His mouth lost its bad taste.

". . . Used to be a fishing festival held here," Corrie was saying. "A big event. Fishing around this part of the river was banned for the rest of the year."

"I sure would like to see some lions and tigers," Cooper said.

"No tigers here, Cooper," Beth told him, for about the umpteenth time. "Lions yes, tigers no."

"They were in all the Tarzan movies," Cooper insisted.

"Oh, shit, give up, Beth," Jersey urged. "Cooper has a mind like a steel trap-one that is rusted shut."

"That locks in all my knowledge, my beautiful little sun-baked flower," Cooper responded.

"Stick it up your kazoo, Coop," Jersey told him.

Corrie walked up to Ben. "No survivors anywhere in the town, boss," she reported. "Or for several miles around in any direction."

Ben nodded his understanding and stood up. "We'll have to wait for the official report from the mobile research team, but I'm pretty sure it was a man-made bug that killed these people."

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"Then he could use it on us just as easily," Corrie stated softly.

"He won't do that," Ben told her. "He knows we've got nuclear capability as well as massive stockpiles of nerve agents, and he knows we have the delivery systems to annihilate him," Ben's smile was not pleasant. "And he knows I'll do it. Corrie, tell security to bring Paula Preston, Marilyn Dickson, and Alex Marsh to my CP immediately upon landing."

"Right, boss."

The two reporters and whatever the hell Paula Preston was were scared and could not hide it. Alex Marsh was sweating and trembling, Marilyn Dickson was bug-eyed with fear, and Paula kept blinking her eyes and wiping the palms of her hands on a moist handkerchief.

"Interesting game you three were playing," Ben opened the dance. "Fortunately for me, very unfortunate for you it didn't work out as planned."

"Whatever in the world do you mean, General?" Marilyn managed to squeak.

"Yes. What are you accusing of us?" Alex asked, his voice breaking.

"Oh . . . consorting with the enemy and espionage will do for starters, don't you think?"

"You can't prove any of those charges!" Marilyn blurted.

Ben smiled. "Not, 'what are you talking about?' Not, 'I didn't do anything.' Just, 'you can't prove it.' That just about says it all, doesn't it?"

"The Union must be restored!" Alex finally found his balls and shouted the words.

"Even to the point of getting in bed with some low-life scum such as Bruno Bottger?"

"You talk about someone being low-life scum?" Mar-

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ilyn said. "You are one of the vilest men to walk the face of the earth. You . . . you . . . filthy beast!"

Ben chuckled. That phrase reminded him of one of his favorite Cary Grant movies, but he couldn't recall the name of it. "Very convenient of all you press types to get away just before the assault. How'd you manage that?"

The three of them stood silent before him. They said nothing.

"Let me guess," Ben said. "Paula here had a radio. Set on a scrambled dark frequency straight to Bruno. It's possible it's just a receiver. He alerted you when the attack was to take place and you simply walked out of camp and got clear. Maybe he even had vehicles waiting for you. I don't know. But you sure as hell didn't hoof it from the attack site to Jega."

The three said nothing.

"I don't know how many others are in on this with you, maybe none of them. Maybe all of them. But nevertheless, they're all homeward bound as I can arrange it. I can't risk spies wandering around our camps."

"You have no proof to back up any of these accusations," Marilyn said, her words dripping with hatred.

"Oh, but I do," Ben corrected. "My intel people back home have now directly linked you and Marsh here to the takeovers outside the SUSA and the recent overthrow of the government. Paula here works for the intelligence section of the state department. Always has. She's the only real pro in the bunch. The rest of you are just whiny left-wing liberals-of the worst type: the pukey kind."

"May we sit down, General Raines?" Paula asked.

"Certainly. I'll even have coffee or water brought in for you, if you like."

"That would be very nice. Thank you. Coffee for me."

"And for me," Marilyn said.

"Give me liberty or give me death!" Alex suddenly shouted.

"Oh, sit down and be quiet, you silly twit," Ben told him. "If you were interested in true liberty you wouldn't be a fucking liberal looking for big government to solve all your problems. At least know something about history and politics before you start flapping that foolish mouth."

"Bring him a glass of water," Paula said. "Coffee makes him very nervous."

"Goodness, we certainly can't have that," Ben muttered.

With Paula and Marilyn sipping their coffee and Alex gulping at his water, some of it running down his chin- or what passed for a chin-Paula said, "I can't speak for the others. I'm not qualified to do so. I can only speak for myself."

"Go ahead," Ben said. The entire conversation was being recorded by a technician in the next tent, which butted up against Ben's CP.

"Bruno swore to us that he would never commit genocide. He said it was all sorts of diseases that were responsible for the deaths of so many people here in Africa."

"You've met him?"

"Yes. Many times since his arrival in Africa."

Ben cut his eyes to the reporters. "You two met him?"

"No," Marilyn said. "Only his emissaries."

"And you all believed him?"

"Yes," Paula said. "Up to a few weeks ago."

"What changed your mind?"

"Survivors of the germ attack. Something is wrong with the . . . germs, or gas, or whatever it is he uses. Something is out of balance. I don't know. I'm no scientist. But it drives people mad. Many of them have

survived and are hiding in the bush, some in the cities. Thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands. It . . . distorts their features. Makes them bug-eyed. Their lips are enlarged, tongues are slightly swollen, faces all puffy. Great open sores all over them. They're . . . hideous."

"Good ol' Bruno," Ben muttered. "Always good for a laugh." He cleared his throat. "Then where we are, here in Argungu, might be filled with these . . . people, waiting to come out of hiding and pounce on us?"

"I would imagine so."

"Oh, goody," Ben said. "That's just fucking wonderful. Excuse me. I feel I just might need to alert my people now. I'll be back."

He was back in a few moments. Outside, the encampment had gone into action. Ben sat down and fiddled with his empty coffee cup. When none of the three before him would speak, Ben said, "Somebody better talk to me."

"Only a few people involved in the recent takeover back home know anything about our alignment with Bruno," Marilyn spoke in a low voice. She was crying, tears running down her face. "None of us knew Bruno was . . . well, such a monster."

"I told you he was!" Ben said, suddenly very exasperated with the whole situation. "I told you all about Bruno Bottger. All of you."

"We didn't believe you," Paula said, her misery very evident in her voice. "I mean, well, we had to take into consideration who you are, your reputation, and what you represent."

Ben just didn't feel like pursuing that line. He was suddenly very weary of years of fighting the overt evil of the world and the covert evil of a bunch of half-assed do-gooders back in the States.

"What are you going to do with us?" Alex asked.

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Ben sighed. Shook his head. "I don't know. I probably should shoot all three of you."

"We didn't know the assault was coming!" Marilyn almost shouted the words. "As God is my witness, we didn't know. All we knew is that we were contacted and told to get out; get ready to come to South Africa. That we would be picked up and taken out of harm's way."

Lying, Ben thought. They're all lying. They knew. The rest of the reporters probably did not know, but these three did. They knew all along what Bruno planned to do. Or at least had a pretty good idea. The other members of the press were being questioned. Ben would wait until he talked it over with his intelligence people before making up his mind what to do with these three. But he already knew he couldn't shoot them. The liberal press outside the SUSA would have a field day with that.

"You three have just confirmed what I have suspected all along about the left wing of your political party," Ben said softly. "I have long felt that you people are totally ruthless; that you will do anything to gain power. I felt that was true before the Great War, and I certainly feel that way now. The end justifies the means, right? You people are much more vicious than I have ever been. Back before the Great War, you used government agents to harass and sometimes-and as the end approached-oftentimes kill any citizen who attempted to break away from your Orwellian dictates. Any citizen who formed a tax protest group, any citizen who refused to pay more than what they considered their fair share of taxes, any citizen who joined a militia or survivalist group, any citizen who dared to loudly protest the government's giveaway programs, any citizen who spoke or wrote too harshly about you liberal cocksuckers was setting themselves up for all sorts of trouble. You hated and feared the military, yet sent our young men and

women all over the world directly into harm's way for 'humanitarian reasons.' You goddamn liberals make me want to puke. Jersey!" Ben shouted.

She stuck her head into the tent.

"Get these assholes out of my sight and keep them out of my sight until I decide what to do with them."

The trio gone, Ben sat alone for a time in the silent confines of the big tent. He wasn't really all that concerned about the new left-wing government outside the SUSA making any moves against the SUSA. The newly self-appointed leaders of the left were fully cognizant that Cecil would throw open the gates and introduce them to a taste of Hell if they tried an assault against the SUSA. But he felt that another civil war in the States would come in time. It was inevitable: the left just couldn't leave well enough alone. They weren't content with half a loaf; they wanted the whole bakery.

He sighed. But that was in the future. Perhaps the near future, but not something he had to worry about right at this moment.

"Boss," Beth stuck her head into the tent. "There are a bunch of, well, people, I guess you'd call them gathering all around the edges of our perimeter."

"Refugees?"

"I don't know what they are. They look like something out of one of those old sci-fi movies. I mean, they're really weird-looking."

"Survivors, if that's what you choose to call them, of Bruno's germ warfare." Ben stood up and picked up his CAR. "Well, let's go meet our new enemy."

Ben was accustomed to traveling with an oversized battalion and forgot momentarily he was now commanding an oversized brigade. The encampment was huge. Ben was, for a moment, lost. Then he got his bearings (with Beth pointing the way) and was off and running.

Ben reached the outer ring of the encampment and slid to a halt. He stood and stared at the people who were gathering around, pointing and grunting and slobbering. Some of them were naked, others dressed in rags. Still others were dressed in the skins of animals. "Good God!" Ben said.

"Their bite might be infectious," Dr. Chase said, jogging up to stand by Ben's side. "It might be more than that," he added. "It might be lethal."

"Wonderful," Ben said. "I think I'd rather be facing a horde of Night People."

"What do we do, General?" a Rebel called.

"Nothing, yet," Ben told his people. "Pass that word, Corrie. Don't fire

on these people unless they attack us."

"Well, they're about to do just that," Cooper said, running up holding his SAW. "They're working themselves up into some sort of frenzy."

Ben couldn't argue that. The mob of misshapen and deformed men and women were jumping up and down and making all sorts of disgusting sounds.

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"Everybody into gas masks!" Ben shouted. "Drive them back with tear gas and pepper gas. Get into masks and start tossing the gas-now!"

Within two minutes, the air was thick with choking, tearing, and eye-burning gas.

"See if your people can grab a couple of those . . . poor bastards," Lamar said, his voice muffled through the mask.

Cor rie relayed the orders just as a few of the maddened natives rushed the outer defense line and were clubbed unconscious. They were dragged inside the line, tied hand and foot, and carried over to a MASH tent.

Lamar wandered off to oversee the testing of the survivors of Bruno's experiment in germ genocide.

The mob dispersed, the hideously deformed men and women running and crawling and staggering blindly away.

"They'll be back," Ben said. "And the next time, we'll have to shoot them. So just get yourselves ready for that." Ben drove over to the mobile field lab, one of the units parked behind a MASH tent.

"Pus," Lamar said to Ben. "And don't come any closer. Their brains are filled with pus. Nearly all thought process has been virtually destroyed. Except one: survival."

"Are they infectious?" Ben asked.

"Oh, yes. Not fatally so, but it would be a nasty wound and difficult to heal. The wound would be much like the bite of some snakes and spiders: the flesh would rot around the wound. These people are walking dead, Ben. Killing them would be an act of mercy."

"Easy for you to say," Ben muttered under his breath, then turned and walked out of the lab.

"Ben!" Lamar's sharp voice halted him on the steps.

Ben turned around to face the doctor.

"You have to look at it that way, Ben. Pass that word

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to the troops. It's an act of mercy. These people are much lower than animals. Much lower. Animals are driven by instinct. . . and I believe, some limited ability to think. These people cannot think, they cannot reason, and they don't have millions of years of instincts to rely upon."

"All right, Lamar," Ben said. "I'll pass the word."

The troops didn't like the idea of shooting at insane people any more than Ben did, but all realized they had no choice in the matter.

Ben walked over to where Paula, Alex, and Marilyn were being held under guard. He stared at the trio for a moment, disgust very evident in his gaze, then said, "I'm not going to harm you, so you can relax. As soon as we can get to some sort of airstrip that will handle the traffic, I'll put you on a plane and ship your butts back stateside. I'm sending all the press back home. Thanks to you people, I don't know who to trust."

"We did it for our country," Paula replied.

"Your country?" Ben questioned. "No lady, you did it for power. You people just can't stand the prosperity of the SUSA and the success of the Tri-State philosophy of government. You people didn't seize control of the government out of compassion for your fellow man. It was a power grab, that's all it was. But I don't have time to discuss it now, and really have no inclination to do so. For now, you people just sit tight. We've got a little minor skirmish to handle here. We'll be on our merry humanitarian way in the morning."

"After you've slaughtered these poor unfortunate survivors?" Alex asked.

Ben laughed at the young man, the mood more scornful than humorous. "Jesus, you liberals really don't know up from down, do you? First you send out frantic radio calls to come rescue you, then when we haul your scared asses out of harm's way, you criticize

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us for doing the only thing we can do with the people who were threatening you. I guess I should feel sorry for you. But it's rather difficult to work up any sympathy for a bunch of people who crawled into bed with the enemy and tried to have me killed."

Ben left the trio sitting in the tent. He closed the flap and turned to the guards. "If they try to escape, let them."

The sentry in charge of the guard unit smiled. "Yes, sir. With pleasure."

Back at the easternmost edge of the defense line, a company commander said, "If they rush us, General, they're gonna get slaughtered."

"Oh, they'll rush us," Ben replied. "You can bet on that. They're no longer . . . human. You have to think of them in that light. Even though what's happened to these people is not in any way their fault, it's all come down to us or them. Keep that foremost in your mind."

"Yes, sir. If you say so, sir."

The buck always stops here, Ben thought, as he walked away to another defense point. Well, my shoulders are big enough to take the load.

Ben walked the eastern perimeter, stopping to chat with troops along the way. It was easy to see from the look in their eyes and the expression on their faces that none of them liked what they were about to do, but

they would do it. They would do it simply because they had no choice in the matter.

It started with a low rumble in the distance.

"What the hell is that?" a young Rebel asked. He was one of the new replacements, fresh from the peace and tranquility of the SUSA.

"The crazy people," a platoon sergeant told him. "That's hundreds of bare feet slapping the ground. Hold your fire until I give the word."

"Yes, Sergeant."

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Ben met the sergeant's eyes and the combat-experienced noncom arched an eyebrow in a silent expression of, We'll see.

Ben checked his CAR and waited. This was as good a place as any to stand and fight.

"Ah, General," the noncom said. "Wouldn't you like to back off a few hundred yards?"

"No," Ben told him.

"Yes, sir. As you wish, sir." The noncom looked at Jersey and received a hard look that said, Mind your own business, buster. That's the boss. He can do whatever in the hell he wants to do.

The rumble grew louder.

The gunners behind .50 caliber and 7.62 machine guns chambered rounds and waited.

"Are we going to face this all the way down to Bottger's territory, General?" the noncom asked.

"Probably," was Ben's reply.

"Shit!" the sergeant mumbled and returned his attention to the front.

"Hundreds of them," Corrie said, after acknowledging a report.

Ben saw several Rebels cross themselves and mouth a silent prayer. He turned around for a few seconds and met the gaze of one of the chaplains traveling with the brigade. The man smiled and nodded his head.

"Get behind some cover," Ben told the chaplain. "The troops will need you alive when this is over."

"And you won't?" the chaplain retorted.

Ben turned around and put his back to the man. Yeah, he thought, but I have to give the orders, padre. I can't show any signs of weakness or indecision. Like ol' Harry said, "The buck stops here."

"There are kids in that mob!" a Rebel shouted, looking through binoculars.

"Stand firm!" Ben shouted.

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Several Rebels were openly crying as they lifted their weapons, silent tears running down their tanned faces.

"There is no hope for these people," Ben shouted. "Their brains have been destroyed. Rotted away. They cannot be cured. They're walking dead."

Then the mob was around the curve in the road, several hundred yards away.

"Jesus Christ!" the lookout called. "They're foaming at the mouth like rabid animals."

"Fire," Ben gave the orders. "Fire, goddamnit, fire!"

The quiet afternoon blew apart.

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Dozens of tanks and APCs opened up with their mounted machine guns. All around the defensive ring, in the spots where the maddened natives were attacking, hundreds of Rebels cut loose with automatic weapons fire. It was carnage, a slaughter. Still the rush of the insane continued. Still the Rebels cut them down.

The crazed mob almost reached the defensive line. Almost. But the deadly fire chopped them down until the howling mob had been reduced to a moaning mass.

"Cease fire," Ben called.

"What the hell do we do with the ones that are still alive?" the noncom who had stood near Ben asked.

"Finish it," Ben said, a deadness to his tone. "That's all we can do."

The sergeant cut his eyes to Ben.

"Sometimes, Sergeant," Ben said, "my job sucks."

"Yes, sir," the noncom said. "Mine, too."

"Finish it!" Ben shouted the order. "Move out there and finish it."

"But, sir," a young Rebel fresh from the States said. "The kids? . . ."

"Finish it, goddamnit!" Ben roared.

Noncoms and officers began shoving very reluctant troops outside the defensive line and pulling out sidearms to finish off the wounded.

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Ben stood behind the ring of tanks and trucks and hummers and watched. He kept his face expressionless. Only his eyes moved. Lamar Chase came up to stand by his side.

"It's the humane thing, Ben," the chief of medicine said. "They would have had nothing in front of them except more madness and a slow, very

painful death."

"I want the chaplains to be very aware of that, La-mar."

"They know. I informed them. And they are ready to counsel the troops."

"Some of these kids are growing up pretty damned fast."

Lamar said nothing.

The commander of the Rebel Army and the chief of medicine stood in silence, shoulder to shoulder, as the gunshot-filled minutes ticked past. Ever so slowly, the gunshots began to diminish, until they became only an occasional sharp crack in the afternoon.

"Get some of the trucks with scrapers on them up here," Ben ordered. "Scoop out a grave for those . . . people. Be careful handling them. No one with any open cuts should touch any of the bodies."

"Right, boss," Corrie said, her voice unusually soft.

"Only experienced troops handle the bodies," Ben added. "Order the young replacements to fall back. I think they've seen and done enough for one day."

"Right, boss."

"Lamar, why didn't this bug kill the animals, too; make them crazy?"

"Because it didn't reach very many of them, Ben. It's short-lived and was concentrated in the cities."

"But the animals later ate contaminated flesh."

"Yes. But animals have a digestive system different from ours. They can eat things that would kill us on the spot. Until we get our hands on a sample of this

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bug and break it down, that's all I can tell you. All right, Ben?"

"All right, Lamar. Come on, let's walk the camp."

Many spots around the huge protective ring had not even seen any of the maddened mobs. They had not fired a shot. Others had dozens of bodies stacked up in front of them. Trucks with scrapers were moving out, to gouge holes in the earth for mass graves.¹

Ben stopped and watched as a young replacement rushed off behind a truck, a tad green around the mouth. Sounds of retching quickly followed. "Corrie, tell the cooks to fix only coffee and sandwiches for this evening. I doubt that many people will have much of an appetite."

"Right, boss."

"I hope this experiment of Brunos was confined to only a few areas," Ben said. "I would really hate to have to go through this all the way across Nigeria."

"I think this was the first one," Lamar ventured. "A test case. After a fly-over and observing all the bodies, they concluded it worked and then went for the cities."

"Bruno's troops must have run into this on their way back after the assault," Jersey said. "Why haven't we intercepted anything about it?"

"I think they headed across the lower part of Niger and were picked up by chopper. But only the white troops and a few ranking black officers," Ben added. "The local troops-those that survived the attack on us-scattered. They might have run into some of these . . . people. I hope they did. I hope they ran into large groups of them."

"Boss," Corrie said.

Ben cut his eyes.

"Paula Preston hit one of the guards on the head with a club and escaped. The other guards let her go."

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"Good. I hope she runs into some of Bruno's handiwork. How is the guard?"

"He's all right. Got a sore head, that's all."

"How about Marilyn Dickson and Alex Marsh?"

"They made no attempt to escape."

"Paula's a pro," Ben said. "She figured the odds and decided they were better if she broke and ran for it."

"But she was going back stateside," Lamar pointed out.

"To face a very uncertain future," Ben said. "Her masters might not condone failure."

Lamar sighed. "Her masters. Interesting phrase, Ben. Whatever happened to the old Democratic party that my parents belonged to?"

"It died when the left wing took over."

"I guess it did, Ben," the doctor replied. "Hell, I know it did. I saw it happening, you saw it happening. Why did so many intelligent people continue to vote them in?"

"Something for nothing, Lamar. No cares, no worries, no woes. Big Brother will take care of any little problem you might have. Hungry? The state will feed you and don't worry about working. Just be sure and vote along party lines. That's all we ask. A subtle form of civilized communism, you might call it. The state is almost everything to everybody all the time. Hell, nobody has to make any choices. The state does it for you. Nobody controls their own destiny. The state controls it. Nobody has to think very much. The state does all the thinking for you. You're right, Lamar. Many of us saw it coming, but couldn't do a damn thing about it."

"They'll be coming after the SUSAs next."

"Eventually, yes, I think they will. And they will be able to overrun us by sheer weight of numbers. But when I see the end is near for us, I will give the orders to leave North America a smoldering ash heap. And

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out of the ashes the strong will emerge and start all over. The Tri-States philosophy of government will never die, Lamar. Too many of us have seen that it works. Millions now see that a very limited form of government is the best form of government. No, Lamar, the philosophy we started will never die."

Lamar was silent for a moment. He finally sighed and said, "A smoldering ash heap, eh?"

"That's right, Lamar. MAD. Mutually Assured Destruction. The liberals don't think I'll do it." He smiled faintly. "They don't know me very well. Because I will personally press the button that lets the birds fly. I will never allow our people to be forced to return to that degenerate, immoral, irresponsible, and undisciplined do-your-own-thing-if-it-feels-good form of government. We've proven over the years that millions and millions of good decent hardworking people don't want it, and I'll be damned if they'll have to live under it against their will. Not again. Never again."

"Seems as though I heard a form of this same little speech from you about a decade ago, Raines," Lamar said with a smile.

Ben smiled. "I guess you did, Lamar. I think we were standing outside the ruins of an American city."

"That we were." The doctor cleared his throat. "Well, I've got work to do. I can't spend the rest of the day standing around listening to your speeches. See you later, Raines."

"All right, Lamar. Corrie, double the guards tonight. Tell them to stay heads-up. Tomorrow, we'll get the hell gone from this place. Early."

"Right, boss."

Ben walked off a few yards to stand by himself for a moment, as much alone with his thoughts as he was ever allowed to be.

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"There's gonna be a civil war back home," Cooper said. "Again."

"I think you're right, Coop," Jersey replied. "I think the folks back home are looking at one. And it's just around the corner."

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Ben was alone in his tent, working at his field desk, the gas light bright against the darkness. Jersey and the others were outside, chatting with some Rebels from the 4th Battalion who had walked by. He heard an odd noise and let his right hand close around the butt of the 9mm Beretta on the desk. He turned just as Paula Preston was stepping through the slash she had made in the rear of the tent. Her eyes were wild and her left arm was a bloody mess.

"You're pretty good to get past the guards, Paula. Either that or awfully lucky."

She grunted at him and slobber leaked from her mouth.

"Well," Ben said, "so much for Chase's theory about it not being fatal. Some of the mob got to you, huh, Paula?"

She shook her head. "No," she managed to speak. "I got caught during" She grunted and slobbered for a moment. ". . . No. Can't think clearly. I found a wrecked helicopter outside Jega. A canister. I opened it. Very stupid of me. It was the bug. Spilled on me. I thought for a time . . ." She coughed up blood and pus and yellow slobber and fought for breath. "... I might be immune. About two hours ago I knew I was dying.

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But I had . . . one thing to do before I died." She lifted the knife.

"Kill me?" Ben asked with a smile.

She slobbered and nodded her head. "That's right."

"You'll never do it, Paula."

"We'll see."

"You hate me that much?"

"The country . . . must be made whole again. Under a central government."

"Hell, Paula, killing me won't accomplish that. The philosophy is too firmly entrenched now. So why don't you just be a good girl and go on back out into the bush and expire quietly?"

She screamed and jumped. Ben lifted the pistol and put a half a dozen rounds into her chest, throat, and face. Paula fell to the floor, dead a few feet from his boots.

Jersey and the others burst into the tent. "Jesus," Jersey said.

"How the hell did she get in here?" Cooper questioned.

"She got lucky," Ben said. "Check outside and see about the guards. She might have killed one."

"What do you want done with the body?" Anna asked, just as Dr. Chase jerked back the flap of the tent and stepped in.

"Dump it in the pit with the others," Ben said. "And get some room deodorizer and spray around, will you? Stinks in here."

The miles-long column headed south, toward Minna, about two hundred miles away. There was an airport of sorts there, and at Minna, Ben would be rid of the reporters. They were grumbling and griping about being sent back, but they were not doing it to Ben's face.

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Ben had told them about Paula, but he doubted that many believed him. Not that he really gave a damn whether they did or not.

Ben had ordered the Scouts not to venture too far, now that those infected were returning in droves to the towns and cities. Too much risk involved for them.

"Why didn't they attack the Scouts when they were ranging out a hundred or so miles from us?" Cooper asked, as they drove along.

"I don't know, Coop. Maybe those infected were still hiding in the bush. I just don't know."

"Pride of lions crossing the road," the Scout's voice came through the speakers. "Slow it up. They aren't in any hurry to get across. Hell, one just sat down in the road to scratch himself. Big bastard. Halt the column."

"It's their country, now," Ben said. "That's about the only good thing to come out of this tragedy."

"Look over there!" Anna said, pointing. "That's an elephant! There's several of them!"

"They're just ambling along," Jersey said. "Without a care in the world."

"Let's just hope we don't run into an irritated rhino," Ben said. "That'll really make your day."

"Are there any in this area?" Corrie asked.

"There probably are now. Animals can recover quickly if given just half a chance."

"Okay," the Scout's voice came through the speakers. "He scratched himself and wandered on."

Ben lifted his mic. "How close did you get?"

"Not too damn close, sir. This was a big pride. We watched them through binoculars."

Laughing, Ben hung the mic just as Cooper moved out.

"There are gorillas in this country, too," Beth told them, reading out of an old tourist pamphlet. "In the southeastern part of the country."

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"Oh, boy!" Coop said. "I want to see one of them."

"Odds are you won't, Coop," Ben said. "They're secretive animals, staying mosdy in the thick forests and high country. But on the off chance that you do come face to face with a silverback, don't run. Just stand very still."

"While the pee runs down his leg," Jersey said.

"Probably," Cooper agreed without argument.

"They'll chase you if you run?" Anna asked.

"So I've always heard. And usually catch you."

"Village just up ahead," the Scouts reported. "And there are more of those damn crazy people waiting for us."

Ben lifted the mic. "Everybody button up tight," he ordered. "We're going to roll right through this village and nobody stops for anything. If they get in your way, run over them." He hooked the mic and said, "Shit! It's going to be a long trip down to Bruno's battle lines. Hang on, gang, here we go!"