

A close-up, high-angle shot of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in detail. The flag is slightly wrinkled and appears to be waving in the wind.

LAST STAND

A horizontal strip showing a dramatic, fiery sky with orange and yellow clouds, suggesting a battlefield at sunset or sunrise.

WARLORDS



WILLIAM H. WEBER

Last Stand: Warlords

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Writing novels can be a solitary journey, but no author can ever pretend they do it all by themselves. I'd like to take a moment to thank a few people who not only offered their valuable expertise, but also put up with my stream of never-ending questions. I've striven to accurately capture as many of the details in the story as I could. If there are any mistakes, they belong to me.

A hearty thank you to John Alex Groff and H. Rossi for helping with the military side of things. Gary Stevens deserves another. After the launch of the first book, he contacted me and his input and suggestions since then have proven invaluable. Thanks as well to Alfred Dearen for the information on permanent magnet generator windmills. Special mentions go out to Stephen Myers, PJ, Damian Brindle and to everyone who read and commented on an early draft of the manuscript. I feel truly blessed that each of you has offered your time and energy to help make this series shine.

Last Stand: Warlords

Tormented by a past he can't forget, John Mack is about to face the toughest fight of his life. The tiny town of Oneida, Tennessee, still reeling from the Chairman's violent overthrow, stands in the crosshairs of Russian and Chinese armies threatening to push across the Mississippi river. With the United States fragmented and on the brink of military collapse, John will need to dig deeper than ever to defend his loved ones from enemies both foreign and domestic.

Previously in Last Stand: Patriots

Following the EMP that brought America to its knees, the Mack family fled to their cabin and what they hoped would be safety. But that short-lived tranquility was shattered when armed men from Oneida killed Tim Appleby and kidnapped John's wife and kids. In his attempts to free them, John stumbled upon a group of local Patriots determined to free Oneida from the grip of a newly arrived tyrant—a man who referred to himself as the Chairman. But Oneida's new leader wasn't the man he claimed to be. A fifth columnist sent by Russian intelligence, the Chairman was sent to control the vital railway that ran through the town. John's next discovery was even more disturbing. The United States was at war with Russia, China and North Korea, their forces already pushing up against the Mississippi river. A daring attack on Oneida narrowly managed to overthrow the Chairman's tyranny, but for John and his new allies, the battle has only just begun.

Quick Reference

Abbreviations

APC: Armored Personnel Carrier

GPS: Global Positioning System

HE: High Explosive

IED: Improvised Explosive Device

IFV: Infantry Fighting Vehicle

JTAC: Joint Terminal Attack Controller

MBT: Main Battle Tank

Characters

Captain Bishop: Company commander, 101st Airborne

Colonel Higgs: Frontline commander

Colonel Edgar: Logistics officer

Dan Niles: Waste management

Devon: Young security guy

Dixon: Soldier at the front

Dr. Trent Coffey: Doctor at Pioneer Community

General Brooks: Head of forces in Oneida

General Dempsey: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Henry: Ham radio operator

Huan Wei: Chinese prisoner of war

Jang Yong-ho: Camp Commandant

Jerry Fowler: Former employee at Y-12

Moss: Head of security

Ray Gruber: Vice Mayor of Oneida

Robert Rodriguez: Electronics specialist/radio operator

Shelley Gibson: Water purification

Vehicles and Weapons

Abrams M1A2: Main battle tank (USA)

Bradley: M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle

M777 howitzer: 155mm towed artillery (USA)

Type 99 & 96: Main battle tanks (China)

ZBD-08: Infantry fighting vehicle (China)

M1097 Avenger: Humvee mounted with eight Stinger missiles

M163: An M113 APC mounted with a 20mm M61 Vulcan rotary cannon

M6 Linebacker: Bradley converted to carry four Stinger missiles

AT-4: Disposable anti-tank weapon

Javelin: Fire-and-forget anti-tank missile

RPG: Rocket-propelled grenade

AK-47/74: Assault rifle (Russia)

BK9: Nine-inch Combat Bowie Knife

M249: Light machine gun (USA)

M4 Carbine: Assault rifle (USA)

QBZ-03: Assault rifle (China)

RPK: Light machine gun (Russia)

Weatherby Mark V: Hunting rifle

Winchester Model 70: Hunting rifle

Chapter 1

The convoy roared south along U.S. Route 27 doing nearly eighty miles an hour. Moss was at the wheel of the lead vehicle, a late 70's model Ford pickup decked out with flames along the side and a skull and crossbones on the hood. Seated next to him was John Mack, feeding 5.56 rounds into the magazines of his AR-15 and having a hard time of it.

"Moss, your lead foot's gonna put us in the ditch."

Grinning, Moss eased up on the accelerator a touch. "Aye, aye, Mayor."

All in all there were a dozen pickups in the group, each bristling with armed men. Many of them were sitting in the bed, holding on tightly as the pickups swerved left and right to avoid rusted cars abandoned along the highway.

They were heading to liberate Huntsville, Tennessee, a small town just south of Oneida. It hadn't been more than three or four days since they'd executed the Chairman and his fellow Spetsnaz agents. Just enough time to begin the initial stages of reorganizing and figuring out what to do next. There was so much on the list and all of it needed to be done yesterday. But no longer was America simply reeling from the devastating effects of a super-EMP. Foreign troops were on US soil attempting to cross the Mississippi river, perhaps the country's last line of defense.

Since the Chairman's death, John had given his radio operator Henry the job of getting the news out to as many of the surrounding towns as possible. Rodriguez continued to recover from his wounds, and every day his spirits rose. He was anxious to get back into the fight, but John insisted he rest up until he was back at a hundred percent.

The Chairman's communications vehicle in Oneida had come in handy as a means of warning the neighbouring towns. In many ways, however, it was hard to say whether the message was getting through since no one knew the identity of the people on the other end. Were they friends of the republic or more foreign agents?

"Three minutes," Moss announced, clutching the wheel with both hands.

John nodded, rolled down his window and held three fingers in the air, all the while trying to fight the buffeting wind. In the side mirror, he saw the signal being passed from one vehicle to another the same way it would be if the men were patrolling on foot. Clear communication was vital in any combat situation, especially when trying to maintain radio silence or noise discipline.

Huntsville was set to be the first town they would liberate but also one they didn't have a lot of intel on. The plan was simple enough. Roll in, scout around and get a sense for whether the inhabitants were more interested in shaking hands or putting a hole in someone's head.

Contrary to appearances, this wasn't a guns-blazing kind of operation. At least it wasn't supposed to be. The intent was to see if the people of Oneida could reach out and help a neighbor in need, even if that neighbor didn't know he needed the help.

The edge of Huntsville came into view and Moss slowed the convoy down to a crawl. John lifted a pair of binoculars to his eyes and scanned ahead. On the right were a series of mobile homes. The broken windows and general disrepair told John there might not be anyone living there. Absent too was any sign of a barricade. Sure, U.S. Route 27 was four lanes wide, not including the shoulder, but a school bus pushed onto its side would have done a better job than nothing.

Moss shook his head. He had that nervous look on his face, like he was expecting an ambush or maybe something worse. John couldn't blame him. On patrol in Iraq, you learned quickly that when civilians weren't on the streets or heading to market, the odds were better than none that an ambush was waiting up ahead.

They continued south at a cautious pace, the men in the back of the pickups scanning right and left. They were still on the outskirts of town, but John had anticipated reaching some type of blockade manned by people he could speak with.

"Either these folks have skipped town altogether," Moss said, "or we're about to get a nasty surprise." His hands remained clamped on the wheel so tight his knuckles were turning white.

Soon a used car lot named Hot Wheelz came into view. On the other side of the street homes stood in the center of large properties. That was when a hand-painted sign along the highway caught John's eye.

It read: *Welcome to the Independent State of Scott.*

He glanced over at Moss, who was shaking his head.

"That mean anything to you?" John asked him.

"I know you spent most of your life down in Knoxville," Moss said, "so I don't expect you to know it, but the folks around here are pretty feisty and independent-minded. The State of Scott goes back to the Civil War. Scott County was named after General Winfield Scott, hero of the war with Mexico in the 1840s. Well, in 1861 these folks weren't interested in leaving the Union like the rest of Tennessee and voted instead to secede from the Confederacy and form their own independent state. Hence the State of Scott, as it's been called. Heck, they only repealed the resolution sometime in the mid-1980's. These folks do things their own way."

It wasn't until the convoy rolled right into town that they spotted the first barricade. The body of a wrecked eighteen-wheeler lay sprawled across the road. On top of it, a structure of sheet metal and other debris helped to create some cover for the men standing guard. The first thing John noticed was the look of fear on their faces at seeing such a large group of armed men rumbling toward them. Moss pulled to a stop about a hundred yards short, while John fished out the white pillowcase from his gear. Opening the door, he planted a foot on the unseasonably hot September asphalt and waved the pillowcase around in wide circles.

The rest of the convoy stayed back while Moss drove ahead, stopping less than twenty feet from the barricade. A scrawny old man draped in dirty overalls moved out from behind cover. "This is a peaceful town, I'll have you know. We like to mind our own business and I suggest you all do the same."

John introduced himself. "We're not here to steal from you," John told him.

"Name's Nathaniel," the old man said. "But only my mother called me that, God rest her. Folks around here call me Nash. And let me tell you, if I thought for a second you boys were marauders, we wouldn't be sitting here chatting."

"I suppose we wouldn't," John conceded. "Listen, Nash, we've been trying to reach your people on the radio. To warn them about the men claiming to be from the federal

government who probably showed up after the power went out.”

The old man snickered. “Oh, them.”

Part of John had hoped that he'd been wrong, that the Russian agents had skipped Huntsville. The population wasn't more than a couple thousand at best, but the railroad which cut through Oneida did pass through here, so maybe that was reason enough for the enemy to want the town. “They're not who they claim to be. I know they probably showed up with fancy papers, but they're—”

“Y'all are from Oneida, aren't you?” the old man asked and, as he did, other figures began to emerge from behind the barricade.

John nodded.

A toothless smile creased his weathered features. “Oh, we got your message loud and clear. I think it's best if you come into town and meet Boris.”

Chapter 2

“Boris?” John asked.

“Boris. Morris. Damned if I remember what he said his name was. Certainly wasn’t Tom Smith. He’s no American and that’s all that mattered. Anyway, bring your men in, we owe you a debt of gratitude.” The old man spat on the ground and fixed John with a crooked stare. “I gotta say, that little sniff test you gave us worked like a charm.”

There was a cold, deadly look in a man’s eyes when he was luring you into a trap. The people gathering around John now didn’t have it. The old man hopped into the driver’s seat of a truck and led them into downtown Huntsville. But using words like downtown to describe what John was seeing was beyond an overstatement. In truth, Main Street, Huntsville was little more than a strip of small shops, gas stations and doublewides, leaving John hard pressed to find a building taller than a single story. Even the mayor’s office was a bungalow that bore an uncanny resemblance to a funeral home.

Following close behind in a snaking column was the convoy of pickups from Oneida. The men’s hackles were up and perhaps it was best that way. None of them, including John, were entirely sure what they were getting themselves into. The only thing that helped set their minds at ease was the firepower they could bring to bear if things went sour.

The old man pulled into the parking lot facing the mayor’s office and that was when John saw it. An imposing oak tree to the left of the building. The last of the pickups pulled in and stopped. The men in the truck beds stood, many shielding their eyes against the sun to get a better look.

“They weren’t kidding,” Moss said, leaning into the steering wheel.

John opened the door and stepped out, his AR at the low ready position.

The old man was out too, pointing at the tree. “What’d I tell you? There’s Boris and his friends.”

Four bodies hung from one of the oak’s stout branches.

Secretly, John had hoped he might get a chance to interrogate Boris and perhaps gain some valuable intel; an opportunity they’d missed with the Chairman.

“What happened?” John asked, realizing only after how foolish the question probably sounded.

“What do you think happened, son? We hung those commies.”

The Russians weren’t communists, but John wasn’t going to start splitting hairs. “I see that. I guess what I meant was, how did it happen? There was a terrible battle in Oneida when we ousted our imposter and many innocent people lost their lives.”

“Like I told you,” the old man said. “Once we got your radio signal, advising us about the invasion and the fifth communists—”

“Columnists.”

“Pardon?”

"Fifth columnists," John said, elbowing Moss who was doing his best to stifle a giggle. "Never mind. What happened after you received our warning?"

Nash worked his toothless jaw as though he was still finishing dinner. "The townsfolk, we had a secret meeting. See, this Boris and his men tried to take our guns, but that ain't how things work in the State of Scott."

John smiled. "Moss here told me all about that."

"Folks here like to do things their own way. We hid the best guns and handed over busted-up .22s and target shooters. You gotta give 'em something so you don't rouse suspicion."

John glanced over and noticed none of the corpses seemed to have any bullet wounds. "But how did you—"

"Heck, we did what any good southerner would do. We killed 'em with kindness," Nash said as he slapped his knee and let out a hearty burst of laughter. "Seriously though. We threw a banquet and before we ate, everyone stood up to sing the national anthem. Any red-blooded American knows you don't sing the anthem before eating. You say the Lord's prayer. Well, when they went along with it, that was our first hint they might not be who they said they were. Then we watched their lips as they pretended to sing the anthem. I think they got as far as 'dawn's early light' before they started lip-syncing worse than that Britney Spears girl. Anyway, by that point we'd seen more than enough and gave 'em a great big serving of arsenic mash potatoes."

Nash was swollen with pride as he relived the moment.

"You folks did well," John told him. "I only pray that more towns hear our message and do the same. I just wish we'd been able to question them first."

The muscles in Nash's face squished up. "I can't imagine they'd have anything useful to say."

"Maybe not, but if you heard our broadcast then you understand we're at war now."

Nash removed his ball cap and swatted away a fly. "Still find the whole business hard to believe. How're things at the front?"

"These last couple of days communication has been sporadic," John told him. "I'm expecting to hear something tonight." John paused. "If they manage to cross the Mississippi, foreign troops are sure to head into Huntsville to hold this section of the rail line, you do know that? You think the folks here would consider relocating to Oneida? If it comes to that, every warm body will count."

Nash looked skeptical. "Well, that ain't my decision to make. I can speak with the mayor and we can put it to a vote, but I'll tell you right now it's doubtful anyone's gonna wanna leave the State of—"

"Scott," John finished. "Yes, I had a feeling you might say that."

"Don't think we'll forget the debt we owe you folks. How does a banquet sound?"

John and Moss exchanged an uneasy look. The memory of arsenic mashed potatoes was still too fresh to make the idea sound inviting. "We'll have to respectfully decline, I'm afraid, Nash." Then John had an idea. "But there might be something we could use."

"Name it," Nash said, spitting.

"Do you have any horses you can spare?"

Chapter 3

Two hours later, the convoy was heading north along U.S. Route 27 back to Oneida. Along with them were two trailers with three horses each.

“Really, John, horses?” Moss said. “Don’t we already have enough mouths to feed?”

Oneida was already stabling six horses for patrols in much the same way they were used under the Chairman. But John had a plan for this next batch.

“Without enough working tractors, we’re gonna need to return to some of the old ways of cultivating the land.”

Moss ran a hand through his mohawk and shot him a doubtful glance. “Didn’t those old-timers use cattle instead of horses?”

“They did, but unlike oxen, horses won’t get stuck in poor or muddy soil. They can also be used to work hillsides that are too steep for a tractor. It’s worked well for the Amish all these years, so it can’t be that bad. Besides, if push ever came to shove we could always butcher them for their meat.”

Moss’ gagging made John laugh. Horse meat was tough, salty and certainly not a first choice. But Moss wasn’t thinking about the future. With foreign armies gobbling up vast stretches of the country, there might come a time in the near future when Oneida found itself surrounded and cut off. To most, World War II and the German siege of Leningrad was little more than a distant memory, but if there was one thing John paid attention to it was the lessons from the past.

From September of 1941 to the winter of 1944, the Wehrmacht had surrounded Leningrad and cut the flow of supplies in or out of the city. Almost a million civilians had died during the siege, many of them reduced to eating rats, horses and sometimes each other. Then the intense cold of winter froze the water pipes, leaving no clean drinking water. The hard earth also meant the dead, who couldn’t be buried, now littered the streets. Loved ones who’d passed away were hidden for fear their corpses would be eaten by scavenging humans. This was the face of war you rarely heard about in the news. A reality John prayed he could keep the people of Oneida from ever experiencing.

They reached the outskirts of town to find a group of men manning a checkpoint, many of them armed with AK-47s taken from the captured supply trucks. This was by far the most ubiquitous assault rifle in the world, and the weapon of choice among guerrilla fighters. In Afghanistan, for example, the rifle could be purchased for a few hundred dollars and could take a beating and continue firing. Another draw was the stopping power of the large 7.62 caliber bullet. At first John had wondered why the weapons crates they’d found in the Russian supply trucks had been loaded with the older 47 model rather than the newer AK-74. Then it dawned on him the Russians had likely sent over thousands of surplus weapons in the same way they tended to supply

their Third World allies with slightly outdated tanks and APCs. This was only one more symbol of how overnight America had been turned into a Third World country.

Next to the men standing guard at the checkpoint others were making sandbags, but filling them with dirt and soil.

“Isn’t there an old sand pit not far from here?” John asked Moss, who nodded.

“Five or six miles east, sure. I think Standard Construction ran it. You stand on the lip and you can just make out the Birch coal mine. Why do you ask?”

John looked pensive. “Sandbags filled with soil just don’t have the same stopping power. When we were attacked on Willow Creek that was all we had access to and far too many brave souls paid the price. After we get back, I need you to head over there with half a dozen men today and fill a few pickups with the stuff.”

Moss sighed. It wasn’t exactly a glamorous assignment. “All right, boss, will do.”

John rubbed his temples, trying to massage away a growing headache. There was so much to do, and not nearly enough time to do it.

•••

A few minutes later Moss pulled into Oneida’s mayor’s office. The building wasn’t large. The single-story brown brick structure with the words Municipal Building over the front archway served as not only John’s headquarters, but the Mack family home.

As the men from the convoy dispersed, John pushed through the front door. “Hi, honey, I’m home,” he called out as he entered.

Henry Chamberlain, the new communications guy, poked his head out of the radio room. With his chiselled features and wavy brown hair, he reminded John of a movie star from the 40s. Kirk Douglas? No, too short. The question was surely going to torture John for the rest of the day. Where was Google when you needed it?

“I’ll bet you’re gonna ask me next why dinner isn’t ready,” said a grinning Henry. “I feel so inadequate.”

John laughed and patted him on the shoulder. “I’m sure you can whip up a mean macaroni and cheese, but you weren’t the honey I was looking for.”

“Ah, shucks. Diane’s in the back.”

John was walking down the long hallway which divided the building in two when Diane emerged from what had become their living room. The look on her face was a mix of concern and relief.

“I really don’t think you should be going out on these missions, John.”

“Not even a kiss first?”

Diane slid her arms around his waist. Her hands travelled up and down his back. She was searching for wounds.

“I’m fine,” he told her. “You can give me a full physical later if you’d like.”

“Yes, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?” She grew quiet for a moment. “You think I’m being a worrywart, John, I get that, but it’s just the people in this town elected you mayor, but you’re not exactly the kinda guy who leads from the rear.”

“What are you saying?”

Their eyes locked. Dim light trickled in from outside. Even after all these years she was still stunning.

“I’m saying, who’s going to lead them if something happens to you? You’re always lecturing others about mitigating risk and then you run straight into the line of fire.”

“I’m a complicated creature,” he said, removing his tactical vest. “What can I say?”

Diane smiled, tiny crows' feet forming at the corners of her eyes. "So how did it go?"

John undid his gunbelt next along with the leg strap and hung it in a cabinet he was using as a makeshift weapons locker. "Surprisingly well. Seems our signal's getting out. By the time we got there, the folks in Huntsville had already taken care of the Russian agent and his men."

"By taken care of you mean they were shot?"

"No, the townspeople hanged them. Hey, did you know Huntsville had a hanging tree right next to the mayor's office?"

Diane swallowed hard and shook her head.

"Moss said it's been around for decades."

"You're not thinking of setting one up in Oneida, are you?"

"Maybe. It would look good, don't you think?" John said, teasing. "Worst case, we could set up a scaffold right outside the kids' bedroom."

Diane giggled. "You sick man. Sometimes I wonder about you."

His mood darkened. "I'm kidding, although I hope it never comes to that."

"One thing at a time, John. You've been in charge less than three days and you're already talking about hanging people."

"I'm just saying now that people are free here, we're still gonna need to make sure folks obey the laws."

"There are plenty of prison cells," Diane told him. "Trust me, the kids and I should know."

A flash of guilt spread across John's face.

"It wasn't your fault, honey. You need to stop taking responsibility every time something bad happens."

He nodded. She was right, as always.

"There is someone you should talk to though."

John undid the laces of his boots and slipped into a more comfortable pair of sneakers. "Oh, and who's that?"

"Your daughter. Ever since the Chairman hauled Emma in for questioning..." Diane's voice trailed off. "Well, she hasn't been the same."

"Can you blame her? She saw you strapped to a chair after you'd been beaten. She probably expected the two of you were about to be killed, or worse."

"I don't know what she thought. But since then she's gone into that shell of hers."

A couple of years ago, Emma had developed a fixation on her weight. It didn't matter how often people told her she was beautiful, she'd become convinced she was fat. John suspected her complex had originated when a boy at school Emma had had a crush on had asked her when she was going to lose her baby fat. It was a stupid and insensitive comment, but the germ had been planted and no amount of telling her otherwise seemed to make a difference. Soon she'd begun withdrawing into herself, spending hours in her room starving herself while she sketched on a notepad and wrote short stories. There was talent there for sure and perhaps it was one of the few things that made her feel good about herself. John wasn't a shrink and never pretended to be. All he knew was that whenever she felt depressed the sketchpad would come out.

"All right," John said. "I'll have a conversation with her. Where is she?"

Chapter 4

John had to knock three times on the door to Emma's room before she invited him in. She was sitting in one of the beds they'd brought over from Tobe's Motel and Restaurant on Alberta Street. She glanced out the window, sketching a tree whose leaves were turning yellow and red. Her arms looked thin like the twigs on her notepad. Dark circles ringed her eyes.

"Honey, when's the last time you had something to eat?"

Emma glanced at the window and then back at her sketchpad. The edge of her pencil traced a branch. "I'm not hungry. Mom's already been after me and I told her the same thing."

John sat down on the edge of her bed, wondering where to start. "It's gonna be fall soon, so you'll need to add some more color to those leaves."

"This is only a sketch. The color will come later."

"I see." John glanced around the room. The floor was littered with other drawings his daughter had done. One of them was a woman in a chair with her face full of cuts and bruises. "You know, I can't undo what happened to you kids and to your mother."

Emma didn't look up. "I know, Dad. It's not your fault. It's no one's fault. We live in a crappy world filled with bad people."

"We do, honey. But not everyone's bad. In fact, it might surprise you how many good people there are out there." He drew in a deep whistling breath. "When's the last time you saw Brandon?"

"He came and knocked earlier, but I was busy. I think he's digging a trench now."

"Not a trench. He's helping dig foxholes. There's a chance enemy soldiers might swing through here on their way to D.C. The Chinese, Russians and North Koreans wouldn't have sent the Chairman ahead of time if Oneida wasn't worth holding."

"That's why I'm drawing."

John's face squished up. "I don't understand."

"They've already taken most of the country. If the army gets beaten along the Mississippi there'll be no stopping them. So there's no point in worrying."

"I never took you for a quitter, Emma."

She must have sensed the disappointment in his voice because she stopped and tightened her grip on the pencil.

"I'm not quitting, Dad, I'm being realistic. Maybe no one has the guts to say it straight to your face, but if those soldiers and tanks start heading this way, we're all gonna die."

"I didn't ask to be put in charge of this place. You know that as well as I do. We owe it to each other and to everyone else to hold out as long as we can. After the Chairman's men came, part of me was sure the three of you were already dead or at least long gone. That little voice kept telling me I'd never see you again. I should give up wasting my time and keep myself and Brandon safe. Sometimes that little voice

makes so much sense, but that's when you need to question it the most. Listen, Emma, I'm gonna bring you something to eat and after that I want you to think about ways that you can contribute. There's nothing wrong with being creative, but I'm the mayor now and I can't very well order people to fetch and purify water and plant crops while my own daughter is sitting in bed drawing."

Emma looked up at him with hurt and anger. "You think I'm wasting my time, don't you?"

"I think you're hiding."

A tear ran down her cheek.

"We miss you," John said, pulling her into a tight hug. Emma's arms remained limp by her side.

His entire life John had been about getting things done. If an objective needed to be seized, he would get there or die trying. He'd fought insurgents in Iraq and organized the defense of Willow Creek Drive, but for some reason, getting through to his own daughter seemed the biggest challenge of all.

Just then, a brisk knock came at the door.

"Come in," John said, expecting Diane, certain she must have been listening at the door.

When the door swung open, it wasn't Diane at all. It was Henry and the tension on the young man's face was unmistakable.

"Sir, I have Colonel Higgs on the radio. He needs to speak with you right away. Says it's urgent."

Chapter 5

John left Emma in her room and strode down the hallway to the radio room. Before the EMP this used to be Oneida's Controller's office. Her name was still on the door. Sandy Brown. Her now-useless Compaq computer and flat LCD screen had been removed along with her files to make room for the radio equipment.

The ham radio brought over from the Patriot camp served as their main link to the outside world. SIGINT signals intelligence and control board equipment had been salvaged from the Chairman's communication vehicle, which they'd parked out front and could operate if the need arose.

Henry wasn't ex-military like Rodriguez. He'd been a ham radio enthusiast living in a cabin on the outskirts of town when the grid went down. The folks around here were more accustomed to living off the land than the people in the big cities and so the transition hadn't been nearly as difficult. Frequent water-boiling advisories and downed power lines after heavy storms tended to do that.

Every day Henry would pass by the infirmary where Rodriguez was recovering and the two of them would discuss what needed to be done and the best way to configure the equipment. Eventually both of them would be working side by side, vastly increasing their ability to reach out to neighboring communities. If more towns nearby could follow Huntsville's lead, then it would surely help weaken the enemy's grip.

Henry hovered over John as he lowered himself into the chair and put the headphones over his ears. Leaning forward, John depressed the actuator on the mic stand and spoke.

"Colonel Higgs, this is John Mack. I trust you have some good news, over."

Crackling static sounded before the colonel's choppy voice came through.

"John, we've been under intense shelling and aerial attack for three days now," the colonel said, the rattling boom from explosions audible in the background. "We're not the least bit surprised since artillery barrages before an attack are a typical component of Russian military doctrine. You know your military history, John, so I'm probably not telling you anything you didn't know. And if the Chinese are anything like they were in Korea, then it won't be long before they attempt to swarm our lines of defense with waves of massed infantry. Make no mistake, we're giving it back to them as good as we're getting it, but without GPS and Blue Force Tracking, we're fighting blind. It's like World War II all over again."

John would have laughed if the thought hadn't sickened him.

"Those geniuses in the Department of Defense were so anxious to get the armed forces networked," the colonel continued, "they never gave much thought to what would happen if that network was hacked or destroyed."

"I'm relieved the line is still holding," John said. "Is there anything we can do?"

"That's part of why I'm calling, John. We have a supply train set to come through Oneida tomorrow on its way to the front."

John's jaw dropped open. "But I thought—"

"Me too, but apparently our military engineers have been reclaiming older diesel locomotives and sending them west filled with men and supplies. You have no idea how many beans, bullets and bandages it takes to keep our men fighting, not to mention the fuel. Anyway, when the shipment comes through tomorrow, I need as many able-bodied men and women you can send me."

The news stopped John cold. There was so much that needed to be done here in Oneida just to keep the town's head above water, the thought of losing the most able-bodied part of his labor force was tough to stomach. Of course, on the flip side, if foreign armies broke through, then Oneida's troubles would only pale by comparison.

"I'll see what I can do," John said, feeling that knot in his gut begin to squeeze tight. "I'll send as many as I can spare."

"Much appreciated."

It sounded as though the colonel was getting ready to end the conversation, but John wasn't through.

"Colonel Higgs, what's your plan in case they break through?"

There was a long silence.

"We have a reserve armored force hidden away to block any holes."

"Is that it?"

"What more can we do?"

"Maybe it's time we do like the Russians did in WWII. Create a defense in depth with a series of strong points designed to slow and weaken the enemy as they advance. Their supply lines must already be stretched to the max. Any losses they suffer would be difficult to replace." More silence and now John was beginning to wonder if the colonel had stopped listening. "We also need to make sure we're not fighting the battle on their terms. We need to go low-tech, pass orders using handwritten notes, light signals to launch our fighters. If the Millennium Challenge war game the armed forces conducted in 2002 taught us anything, it's that an army with a technological advantage can be defeated using asymmetric warfare."

"I'm very familiar with the Millennium Challenge."

"Then you know the Joint Forces Command reset the wargame when Lieutenant General Van Riper's unconventional tactics were working. Listen, I'm not trying to step on any toes here, Colonel, believe me. All I'm saying is it sounds to me like we need to think outside the box. It's how the Celts destroyed three entire Roman legions in the Teutoburg Forest."

"John, I've heard what you have to say, but I'll tell you right off the bat, I'm not prepared to turn our nation into another Iraq. Americans fight insurgencies, we don't become them."

Henry tapped John's shoulder. "You've only got a few more seconds before they can pinpoint the signal."

The colonel was still talking. "I don't care what technology they have. No one can stand toe to toe against the might of the US military. They've got a weakness and we're gonna find it."

"Time's up, John," Henry said nervously.

"There's something you're forgetting, Colonel," John said. "We're not the Romans anymore. We're the Celts."

That was when the signal went dead.

John leaned back in the chair and rubbed the corners of his eyes.

“That didn’t seem to go very well,” Henry said.

“A train is coming through town tomorrow and he wants men and women shipped to the front.”

“Really? So they’re holding them off then?”

“For now,” John replied. “But I’m worried the army isn’t adapting fast enough to the new reality. The military spent the last few decades moving from a bulky Cold War model capable of fighting two conventional wars at once to a smaller, more nimble and high-tech force. Problem is, once you pull the plug and lose access to the satellites that tie it all together, you lose the nimble and all you’re left with is the small.”

The corner of Henry’s mouth curled into a half grin. “Have you been speaking to my girlfriend again?”

John tried to return the gesture, but wasn’t able to.

“It’s hard for any bureaucracy that large to change overnight,” Henry said.

“I know,” John replied. “Especially when that means accepting the fact that you’re not as strong as you used to be. Trust me, Henry, as I grow older, I understand this more and more. The front needs soldiers and support personnel, I have no argument there. I just can’t help feeling that with the way things are being run, I’d only be sending these men and women off to their deaths.”

Chapter 6

John's rather unsettling conversation with Colonel Higgs was still replaying in his mind as the conference room began to fill up. It was situated across the hall from the radio room and featured a long oval table with ten chairs. Two battery-powered lanterns gave the place an ominous feel John found rather appropriate under the circumstances. On each of the four walls were stickers and Post-It notes with the various projects they needed to get underway.

If there was one thing John had learned navigating through the council meetings back on Willow Creek Drive—a time that seemed decades ago now—it was that the voting system they'd used to decide policy had crippled the committee's decision-making process. As a result, one of his first acts as mayor had been to select several department heads. His second was to let them know that he and he alone would have the final say. John would listen to their advice and take that into consideration, but gone was a time when he would be forced by raised hands to make life-or-death decisions.

At least that had been his goal when the people of Oneida had elected him mayor. But here he was, only a few days later, forced once again to put more innocent lives on the line.

The department heads were all present along with a handful of their aides who stood with their backs against the wall. John began the meeting by relaying the details of his conversation with Colonel Higgs. A deathly silence settled over the proceedings. Everyone wanted to do their part, but who among their friends and fellow neighbors in town would be asked or even sent to defend the line along the Mississippi?

Moss was in charge of security and fire rescue and John turned to him first. "I'll need a list of names. All able-bodied males and females between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five."

"But that could be as much as thirty to forty percent of the population," Moss protested. "Who will defend us against gangs of raiders or—"

"Forget raiders," Dan Niles spat. "We need folks to keep the town from drowning in its own filth." He was a large, red-faced man whose breath wheezed in and out of him like a broken accordion. John had chosen him to head the waste management department. With nearly two thousand residents, Oneida would need a way to clear garbage and dispose of human waste.

"We're not going to send all of them," John replied. "Only as many as we can spare. But our contribution to the war effort will be more than just soldiers and sentries. The colonel mentioned the difficulty they were having keeping the troops fed and armed. I think I have a solution."

Diane stared at him from across the room with a knowing grin. He'd put her in charge of food management and this next part was going to affect her directly.

“You’re killing us with suspense, John,” Shelley Gibson said. She was a strikingly beautiful engineering student from the University of Tennessee who had been home for the summer holidays when the EMP hit. John had put her in charge of the water department.

John tapped the pencil against the table three times. “Soybeans.”

For a moment, no one said anything. Diane was the first to speak up. “Excuse me?”

After that everyone broke in at once. For a moment, the resistance in the room made John feel like he was talking to Colonel Higgs again. There was nothing more frustrating than the way people opposed anything that was different before giving it a fair shake.

“All right, settle down,” he said, but to no avail. A second later he slammed his open palm against the table’s cherrywood finish. “Hear me out before you go rushing to judgment. I’m not sure if any of you know, but soybeans used to be the number one cash crop in Tennessee. The state has over a million acres planted and nearly fifty million bushels harvested last year alone. It’s a crop we can use for food and eventually for fuel. Did you know that each acre of soybeans can make fifty-six gallons of biodiesel? That’s fuel we can use to run cars, the trains that travel through our town, the military vehicles that help to defend us and it might even help us turn the lights back on.”

Now the room was dead quiet and John knew he had their attention. “There’s plenty of land around Oneida we can use to cultivate, but I’m thinking there may be a better way.”

“John, I know at least three farmers in the area who grew soybeans,” Dan said.

“That’s exactly where I was going,” John told him. “Why start from scratch when there may be farms that, until recently, were already operational?” He turned to his wife. “Diane, that’s something I’ll need you to look into. I also stumbled upon a cannabis farm not far from here.”

“I feel a Rob Ford moment coming on,” Ray Gruber blurted out to gales of laughter. Ray was one of Marshall’s trusted lieutenants who John had commissioned as vice mayor. It was Ray’s job to take over running the town if John was away or if something were to happen to him. A thin, sinewy man in his mid-forties with a thick Tennessee accent, Ray was sharp-witted and always the first to smile.

John cracked a smile. “Sorry to disappoint you, but no one’s getting high,” he told them. “As some of you may know, there are hundreds of more productive uses for the stuff. Making nets, ropes, textiles. Hemp seed oil can also be used to create paint, varnish and maybe even light lamps.”

“I’m still dreaming of being able to take a hot shower,” Shelley said, her normally silky blonde hair looking matted and dull.

Now the energy in the room had changed.

John turned to Diane. “A shed at the pot farm also had books on hydroponics, which I’m sure you and your team can use to increase the yield.”

A worried look clouded Diane’s features. “The only problem, John, is that we’re approaching fall. The best time to plant soybeans is in the spring.”

John nodded. “Then we’ll need to build a greenhouse. Because crops being fed hydroponically can be packed closer together, a greenhouse a hundred feet by thirty feet can produce as much as one acre’s worth. If need be come winter we can heat the space with wood stoves.”

Diane and the people under her all seemed to slump at once.

"I never said this was going to be easy. In the coming days and weeks we're gonna be overworked and undermanned. I know that as well as anyone, but giving up isn't an option." The words no sooner left his mouth than John thought of Emma, who was likely still in her room, staring out that window, drawing. It was a horrible feeling trying to convince people to forfeit their innate human desire to sit around doing nothing when a member of your own family was perhaps the guiltiest of all. Diane must have sensed the change in his expression because she gave him a look which said, *Don't worry, we'll sort her out.*

"We also need to start collecting diesel engines salvaged from trucks in and around Oneida to power the pumps and to act as a generator for the town," John added, muscling through the concern he had over his daughter's recent behavior.

Ray, the vice mayor, stuck his hand up. "I'm afraid our power problems won't be solved for good until we build around five or six permanent magnet generator windmills each capable of generating forty-eight thousand kilowatts. It'll mean building a large bank of twelve-volt batteries inverted into the town's substation. But the real pain's gonna be finding the inverter, rectifier, fuses and other components we need to transform AC power to DC then back to AC at the proper load so we don't fry everything. I think at least some of those pieces can be found right here in town. Blades from the props of grounded Cessnas at the Scott Municipal airport as well as the motors from treadmills over at Hal's gym. The rest we might be able to scavenge from hardware stores in the area."

"The Ace Home Center on Industrial Lane has practically been stripped bare," John said. "That aside, a windmill is a great idea, Ray." This was a good example of how bringing a group together to share ideas was better for everyone.

John was no sooner finished thanking Ray when a member of Moss' security team with curly brown hair named Devon poked his head into the conference room.

"Mayor, can I see you for a moment?"

John nodded. "Of course." He turned to the others in the room. "Why don't you all take the next few moments to think about what's on our plate going forward and how each of your teams are going to make them happen." He left, trying to put on his best smile, but knowing all the while that being summoned from an important meeting could only mean one thing: trouble.

Chapter 7

John was being led to the infirmary, that was all he knew, and the first thought to cross his mind was that something had happened to Gregory. His son was so desperate to prove his worth that John could easily imagine him biting off more than he could chew.

“Who got hurt, Devon? Will you at least tell me that much?”

“It’s too complicated,” Devon said as the two of them marched down the sidewalk.

Weeds and dandelions pushed up through the cracks in the concrete and every day the streets smelled more and more of waste and garbage. Oneida was slowly becoming an urban relic from the mid-1800s.

Devon marched along at a good pace. No older than twenty-two or twenty-three, he had the physique of a man, but the face of a boy, with rosy cheeks and eyes that sparkled. He had been one of the Patriots who had helped free the town. Charging in repeatedly under heavy fire, Devon had retrieved four wounded men from the battlefield. The Patriot militia didn’t have any formal way of honoring heroic acts and so John had set one up. They’d called it the Medal of Daring, a recognition bestowed on any member of the community who went above and beyond the call of duty. It was fashioned from spent 5.56 shell casings and a piece of fabric belt. Devon wore it on his chest with pride in spite of its humble creation.

A moment later, the two men arrived at the infirmary. John went in first and entered a dimly lit room. A handful of security personnel were milling about, whispering to one another. All eyes were on a man with shredded clothing and a battered face, lying on a cot. A nurse named Samantha Hill was dabbing his forehead with a wet cloth.

“What happened?” John asked. “Was there an accident?”

Reese was in the corner of the room, leaning back in a chair against the wall. He knocked a cigarette out from a pack with Russian writing on it and lit the tip with a Zippo. Righting his chair, Reese stood and made his way to John.

“I don’t think you should be smoking in here,” John told the sniper. It didn’t matter that Reese and his Remington 700 had played such a vital role in removing the Chairman, not to mention in saving Diane’s life. This was a hospital.

“I don’t know how those Russians smoke these things,” Reese said, examining the pack of Belomorkanal cigarettes. “Why couldn’t those supply trucks we hijacked have been filled with Marlboros? Is that too much to ask?” He dropped the lit cigarette at his feet and put it out with the tip of his shoe. “Our friend here isn’t from Oneida,” Reese told John, pointing to the man. “Stumbled into one of our patrols hobbling through the forest. By the looks of him he hasn’t eaten in days.”

“Is he American?” John asked.

“So far as we can tell. Says his name is David Newbury, that he’s on his way to find his wife and kids. He lives in Oak Ridge, but was in Little Rock, Arkansas on business when the Chinese, Russian and North Korean units stormed the city.”

“Oak Ridge? That’s near Knoxville. What’s he doing this far north?”

Reese shook his head. "Wondered the same thing myself. I believe he was moving by night and trying to stay off the main highways. Must have got himself lost. Navigating using stars isn't something you can learn off the internet. Says he was a member of a survivalist forum, whatever that means, and thought he knew what he was doing."

John agreed. The man's desire to learn survival techniques was commendable, but trying to use things you'd only seen on a webpage made about as much sense as performing surgery after watching *Grey's Anatomy*.

"Any word on what happened to Little Rock?"

"Seems the Chinese practically razed it to the ground. Wasn't much resistance 'cept a few pockets of citizens, according to him. I guess most of 'em didn't know the military had pulled back to the Mississippi. Poor souls." Reese shook his head, the muscles in his face tightening with the thought.

"Did you run him through the test?"

"Oh, yeah, our friend here can name every state in the Union along with each of their capitals. Also knew who Garth Brooks was and could name every member of Lady Antebellum."

John smiled. "Who's Lady Antebellum?"

"Either he's the real deal, John, or a Russian whiz. He's even got his Southern drawl down pat."

"Fine," John answered, growing impatient. "So he's the real deal. Now why did you summon me from an important meeting to tell me all of this?"

"Turns out the enemy's taking people from territory they capture and sending them to special camps."

John's gaze tightened on Reese.

"Our man here, David, spent nearly a month in one near Jonesboro before he was able to escape while on a scavenging detail."

"A what?"

"The enemy has groups of prisoners emptying homes of non-perishable goods in the cities they conquer. He managed to slip out a back window and make a break for it. But I have a good idea how those savages operate. You pull something like that and they'll do what they did in East Germany and North Korea. Kill your entire family, and if that's not an option, then ten strangers they pick at random."

"Is that it?"

Reese shook his head. "They aren't throwing these people in camps to keep 'em under control. They're forcing them to work, most of the time without food. The drinking water is contaminated. People are dying in the hundreds everyday. The ones who survive are put through gruelling 're-education' programs. Apparently the Chinese and North Koreans wanna make communists out of us. The Russians don't seem to agree, but aren't raising much of a stink so far."

John wiped a hand down his face. "So what are we supposed to do about it?" he yelled, drawing the eyes of those around them. "You're talking about a heavily fortified camp behind enemy lines."

"I know, John. There's nothing we can do. I'm just relaying what the man said."

That pressure was pushing down on John's shoulders again. A forced labor camp just west of the Mississippi filled with Americans sent there to die. It was like something out of World War II. He knew it wouldn't be too long now before the enemy got the power back on in the territories under their control and then put people to work

pumping out tanks, bullets and planes. Before long, America's own industrial might would be turned against her. Once that happened, they wouldn't stand a chance.

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John was on his way back to the meeting when he saw the department heads shuffling out. Moss was among them and John pulled him aside and filled him in on David Newbury's story.

"You think it's credible?" Moss asked. "I mean, it wouldn't be the first time false news was sent our way to destroy our resolve. Those Chinese are great at head games."

"I thought of that," John said. "Either way, there's nothing we can do about it now. But we need to step up our defenses. The last thing I want is anyone in Oneida being carted away to some forced labor camp."

The sun was directly in Moss' face, highlighting the creases of tension rippling his features. "None of us want that. I've already established horseback patrols and checkpoints along every road in here."

"We'll need more, plenty more. I wanna turn this town into an impenetrable fortress."

The muscles in Moss' face tensed and then relaxed. "So what do you have in mind?"

Chapter 8

John unfurled the map on the desk in his office. Assembled around him was a somber group. Among them were Moss, Reese, Devon and a rather cheerful Vice Mayor Ray Gruber, the latter's sleeves rolled up, showing off his thin, veiny arms.

"Why do I feel like I'm at an AA meeting?" Ray asked, laughing like he always did at his own joke.

Reese was puffing on one of his vile Russian cigarettes and doing a horrible job keeping the smoke out of people's faces.

"There are four main avenues into town," John began. "From the west along State Route 297. North and south along Highway 27 and east along State Route 63. The approaches from the west and south run across the New River. That's where most of the fighting is likely to occur. Those bridges need to be mined and heavily defended. I'm talking explosives at least six hundred meters before and after the crossing as well as foxholes overlooking the approaches. We'll also need some forward observers to —"

"Why not just blow them up?" Ray asked.

"Not a good idea," Moss said. "Cause if we destroy the bridge then we lose the ability to funnel the enemy into a kill zone." He turned to John. "With the equipment and weapons we have we might be able to hold off some lightly armed infantry for a while, but the minute tanks, fighting vehicles and airpower join the party, we won't stand a chance. We're gonna need artillery support as well as some anti-tank weapons or we might as well swing the door wide open and invite them in. Declare Oneida an open city, like they did for Paris in 1940. And as for those IED's you mentioned, what the heck are we supposed to use for explosives?"

Moss was making some excellent points and John was glad because it meant he was thinking. The unfortunate reality was that John didn't have all the answers. Trying to battle a powerful army with AR-15s wasn't nearly as realistic as he'd thought before his time in Iraq. There was a common perception in the States that an armed population could give an invading force a real run for their money. The simple and rather unpopular reality was that this couldn't be further from the truth. Sure, guerrilla bands could descend from the hills, shoot up a convoy of lightly armored trucks and disappear, but anything stronger and bullets had a nasty habit of bouncing off.

The battle of Najaf at the beginning of the Iraq invasion offered a perfect example. Two armored cavalry regiments, including John's, had rolled in and immediately come under heavy fire. The only real threat had been from shoulder-fired RPGs as well as mortar rounds fired by Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Even then, thousands of enemy fighters were overwhelmed by American firepower.

One particularly bold tactic employed by Bradley crews was to cut their engine and fake a stall. The smell of blood was often too much for the insurgents to bear and more than once they rushed the vehicles with little more than AK-47s, forgetting that

even if the stall had been real, the Bradley's 25mm chain gun worked perfectly well. Needless to say, the carnage was often unbelievable and reinforced the silliness of facing any kind of tank without the proper weapons systems.

The rank smell of battle wafted past John's nose as his mind returned to Moss' question. "Tennessee is coal mine country, isn't it?" he asked.

Reese's eyes lit up when he saw where John was heading. "Sure is, and I don't know why I hadn't thought of it before."

"Thought of what?" Ray asked.

"Some of those mines must have dynamite and ammonium nitrate fuel oil stored somewhere on site," Reese answered, stubbing his cigarette into an ashtray. "Once we get our hands on it—"

"Then I can show you how to make an IED," John said.

Ray let out a nervous laugh. "I feel like an insurgent already."

"Sorry, Ray," Moss said. "I'm afraid you won't be the one getting your hands dirty."

John agreed. "You're my eyes and ears when I'm away, Ray. I need someone to oversee the defenses and make sure things are going to plan."

"Well, I already got my men filling sandbags," Moss said defensively.

"Yes," John replied. "I saw that and I have an idea. We need to establish a series of successively stronger defensive points to weaken and demoralize any enemy who approaches the town. A defense in depth. The outer ring around the city will be mirrored by an inner ring. Inside that we'll have the buildings of Oneida as our last line of defense. HESCO bastions should form a tight perimeter wall. They're easy enough to create with fence wire and sturdy cloth sacks sewn together. We'll also need a tractor with a backhoe to fill them with sand and rocks. In town is where the fighting will be the fiercest. We'll need loopholes cut into walls for concealed firing positions and buildings reinforced with sandbags."

Moss was looking overwhelmed with the amount of work still to be done.

"As Hitler's armies headed toward Moscow," John reminded them, "Stalin ordered men, women and children to dig anti-tank ditches that stretched for miles around the entire city."

"I don't think we have enough people for that," Reese said, searching for his pack of Belomorkanals.

John sighed. "I only hope that none of these preparations are necessary."

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After they were done, John headed to the kitchen pantry to grab a can of beef stew for lunch. The old days of heating it in a microwave were gone, maybe for good, and the prospect of firing up the old-fashioned stove oven they'd installed seemed daunting. He pulled a spoon from the drawer and decided to eat it cold. He was two spoonfuls in when Diane appeared.

"I thought you were working on irrigation systems?" he asked her, pleasantly surprised.

She smiled. "I was gonna ask you the same. Aren't you supposed to be turning Oneida into Fortress Europa?"

"Wouldn't that be nice?" he replied, laughing.

"Cold lunch again," Diane observed.

“No time for creature comforts. Besides, I think I’m developing a taste for cold beef. How’s Emma? Has she eaten today?”

Diane gave him a look that said, *Your guess is as good as mine*. “I take it your conversation didn’t go over as well as you thought it would.”

“It’s a little hard to explain why the mayor’s barking orders right, left and center while his own daughter’s doodling in her bedroom.”

Diane crossed to the pantry and started searching for something to eat. “She’s traumatized, John. Maybe a little patience and understanding is in order.”

“I have been patient. We’ve all been traumatized. I saw Brandon’s sister Natalie out earlier lugging around buckets of water. All that after losing her father.”

“Yes,” Diane said, “and I commend her for it. But Tim Appleby was killed right next to Emma. She saw it happen. Had Tim’s blood on her face.”

John grew quiet. As a soldier overseas, he’d seen far worse sights. There were things the human mind wasn’t meant to see or experience, things that were disturbing enough to make a combat vet call out in the middle of the night. He could still see the faces of his men, dead because of orders he had given. Rescue missions launched to retrieve a single soldier that left half a dozen more dead. The few versus the many. John had thought those were equations he’d only need to make while deployed overseas, but ever since the EMP, he’d been put in that terrible position on a daily basis.

Perhaps seeing the distress on his face, Diane came in and hugged him. “I don’t envy you right now, John. It’s a tough spot to be in and I know how you take on too much responsibility for the people around you. Give Emma another couple of days. If she hasn’t come around by then we’ll try something else.”

John nodded absently, still seeing the faces of those young men, a ghostly cemetery now filled with the residents of Willow Creek and the Patriots who had died liberating Oneida. His heartache over the death he’d been witness to always brought him back to thoughts of General McClellan during the Civil War. General McClellan had been pivotal in training a magnificent Union army early in the war, but he’d been terrified of committing that force to battle. It seemed incomprehensible to him to tarnish something so beautiful. His hesitation to pursue the enemy and never-ending excuses compelled Abe Lincoln to lament: *If the general does not want to use the army, I would like to borrow it for a time*.

Once Ulysses S. Grant was promoted to lead the Union armies, he’d quickly proved he wasn’t afraid to shed some blood, both friend and foe.

These were the two extremes John often found himself bouncing between. The idealistic side of him screamed out to preserve life at all costs, while the practical side knew there could never be real peace without bloodshed. The nature of the human animal was to blame for that, not him. At least that was what he told himself.

“There was something I wanted to ask you, John. I know now might not be the best time.”

“What is it?”

“I was thinking about that pot farm you mentioned during the meeting.”

John’s eyes narrowed. He wasn’t sure where Diane was going with this, but he didn’t like it, not one bit.

“That crop has probably already flowered and I wanna take a group down to salvage as much of it as we can. It may be the only chance we get to save the oils for ropes and lighting and whatever other uses we can put it to.”

There wasn't much John could say. It was his suggestion after all to have her team look into salvaging crops from the local farms. The idea that she'd be going with them hadn't occurred to him.

"Your knowledge and experience is far too valuable to take the risk," he tried.

"Oh, cut it, John. I had a feeling you'd pull that line. You'll have to forgive me if it's a hard one to swallow coming from a mayor who leads assaults against neighboring towns."

"They weren't hostile, Diane."

"Yeah, but you didn't know that at the time. Sometimes your protective side is too much."

He relented, realizing she was right. "The next thing we know Gregory and Brandon will be asking to hop that train to the front tomorrow."

Diane's eyes fell to the ground and at once John knew he'd stumbled onto something. "No, you're kidding," he said in disbelief. "When were you going to tell me?"

"Go talk to them, John. Brandon and Gregory are out back."

Chapter 9

The boys were by the rear door just as Diane had said, but instead of filling sandbags they were feeding their pet goose George with grains and wild grass. A fenced-off area they'd hastily thrown together using chicken wire and wooden stakes served as a pen for the beast.

Both Gregory and Brandon turned as John approached.

"It's good to see George is still going strong," John said, not entirely sure how to broach the subject he'd come to talk to them about.

Gregory nodded and smiled with enthusiasm. "He's been eating like a pig."

In spite of his son's jovial expression, John wondered what damage had already been done to his son's psyche. No one, especially not a child, should ever be exposed to the kinds of things they'd seen. Emma was exhibiting outward symptoms of trauma, but Gregory wasn't and that made John all the more concerned.

"We need to find him a goosette," Brandon said with a devilish smile. "You know, a girlfriend, so we can breed an army of Georges."

John couldn't help but laugh. "Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but there's no such thing as a goosette. Technically speaking, George is a gander. His future love interest would be a goose."

The boys smiled and turned to continue feeding the bird.

"Listen, Gregory," John said. "I was surprised to hear your mom say you were here. I thought you would have reported to Moss already to help erect the gabions."

Nearly identical looks of guilt crept up both boys' faces. It was clear enough that even though John had been addressing Gregory, he was speaking to both of them.

"We're gonna go as soon as we're done with George," Brandon said.

John nodded, his hands on his hips as he examined the bird. Gregory was right, George was getting bigger.

"Have you spoken to Emma lately?" Brandon asked. "I wonder how she's feeling. I know she hasn't been eating all that much lately."

"She'll come around," John told him. "Although it wouldn't hurt if you had a word with her. You may have more luck getting through than I did."

Brandon removed the ball cap he was wearing and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. "I'll see what I can do. Maybe I'll make some lunch after and bring it to her."

"That would be nice," John replied and turned to leave. He hadn't made it further than a few steps before he stopped. "I'm guessing you two have heard there's a train coming through town tomorrow."

Both of them nodded slowly.

"And you know where it's headed, right?"

"To the front," Gregory told him. "To fight the Slovaks and the Chinamen."

John wasn't thrilled with derogatory stereotypes, but it was hard to defend the very men who were on their land committing atrocities.

“That’s no place for young men such as yourselves. I heard the two of you were thinking of hopping that train and I can tell you that it’s a terrible idea. If you were both full-grown men I’d have no real say in the matter, but since you’re both under my care, you’ll stay in Oneida. There’s more than enough work here to keep you busy.”

Brandon opened his mouth as though he were about to offer some resistance. But John cut him off. “There’s no glory that way. Only death and suffering. In the coming days and weeks I’m sure you’ll find plenty of opportunity to prove yourselves.”

“Yeah, by digging foxholes and filling sandbags,” Gregory exclaimed. “They need us up there, Dad. It’s every American’s duty to stand up and fight.”

“No, son. It’s every American’s duty to fight smart. Charging off into chaos when neither of you have the proper training is just plain dumb.”

“I have training, Mr. Mack,” Brandon said. “Everything I’ve done since the lights went out has gotta count for something.”

“This isn’t a debate,” John countered, his voice raising in an uncharacteristic show of emotion. “I’ve been put in charge of prepping this town for the worst and I’m your guardian. Both of those are the only reasons you need to do as I say.”

Gregory’s eyes fell to a pile of loose pebbles which he nudged with his sneaker. Brandon stood squinting at John in the glare of the sun.

“Do I have your word you won’t disobey me, boys?”

“Yes,” they both mumbled in unison.

John didn’t like coming down as the heavy. He also understood it was the dream of just about every young man to rush off to fight during war. With the outbreak of World War II, boys as young as fifteen and sixteen would provide false documents in order to trick recruiters into letting them sign up. But of course, John’s objections weren’t simply that the boys were under his care, nor that he needed their help. Right now, the front lines were a terrible place for anyone to be and he was sure that soon enough they’d become a living hell.

Chapter 10

Later that night John lay in bed next to Diane, a cool evening breeze ruffling the drapes. She had the habit of pulling the covers right over her head, which often made John feel as though he were sleeping next to a pile of blankets. He watched the slow rise and fall of her breathing, unable to fall asleep himself.

This was when thoughts and scenes from past wars tended to worm their way into his mind. Difficult decisions he'd made long ago would re-emerge to torture his conscience. Had the men who died under his command been killed by mistakes he'd made, or by a system that was inherently violent and chaotic? John tried hard to steer his mind away from such guilt loops. The past couldn't be changed, no matter how much one might wish for it. As a commander—heck, even as a parent—he was constantly forced to make difficult decisions based on little or no data.

As much as John tried not to think about the poor souls strung along the Mississippi, he couldn't help but wonder what they must be going through. They were outnumbered and at a technological disadvantage. He was surprised they'd managed to hold out as long as they had. Drawing in deep breaths meant to relax his mind, John slowly drifted off to sleep. Awaiting him were dreams of Iraq and the tragedy that continued to haunt him.

It was March, 2003, and they were nearing the outskirts of Nasiriyah and the banks of the Euphrates River. Two main bridges crossed from the south: one over the Saddam Canal, which John and Bravo Company were fast approaching, and the other over the Euphrates. Made up of mostly Shiite Muslims, Nasiriyah was the gateway to Baghdad. Two hundred and twenty-five more miles and they'd be in the capital, a destination which represented more than an end to Saddam's regime. For John it meant a ticket back home to his wife and young children.

"Charlie Company, come in, over."

The radio operator and joint terminal air controller (JTAC) in John's Bradley was Senior Airman Christopher Lewis, a kid who couldn't be a day over nineteen. Skinny as a bean pole, he had a long face covered in painful-looking acne and an Adam's apple that gave the distinct impression he'd swallowed a potato.

"Charlie Company, come in, over," Lewis said again with no luck. "Sir, I can't reach them."

"Keep trying," John ordered the young airman. Lewis was a liaison from the Air Force whose job it was to help call in air strikes and ensure the safety of troops on the ground.

With the recent advent of what the Pentagon was calling 'Transformation' and network-centric warfare, each of the Bradleys had been hastily outfitted with Blue Force Tracking, a GPS system which helped identify friend versus foe. A digital map of the area was populated with blue and red icons representing US and coalition forces in blue and enemy combatants in red. Overhead, Predator drones flown

remotely by pilots in air-conditioned trailers in the New Mexican desert searched for Iraqi army units, relaying the information via satellites to the military internet. It was all complicated stuff and for many of the young soldiers, it helped to have more than a passing familiarity with video games.

The intention was to coordinate all arms of the military and maximize their effectiveness while minimizing friendly fire incidents.

Dependence on a computer and satellites had made John uncomfortable from the get-go, but as a lowly lieutenant in the army, it was hardly his job to question policy. He couldn't help feel, however, that the satellites which tied the entire system together were a major vulnerability. Without GPS, guided munitions wouldn't work and his troops would be almost completely blind. There was a name for that kind of thing. It was called the fog of war. As John's company spotted the bridge over the Saddam Canal, he was beginning to realize that haze of war was thicker than he thought.

Bravo Company's objective was to race across the Euphrates and hold the bridge for the rest of the regiment coming up behind them. The problem was most of the men under him were seeing combat for the first time. If that weren't bad enough, their radio had stopped working and Charlie Company—moving along their right flank—wasn't showing up on John's Blue Force Tracking display.

"What should we do, sir?" his driver, Specialist Sutton, asked, a swell of panic in his voice.

"We're gonna complete our objective and trust that Charlie's doing the same," came John's reply.

They were halfway across the bridge when the first RPG went sailing over them.

"Contact, eleven o'clock," John called out as small arms opened up from buildings across the canal. Rounds dinged off the hull, making Lewis wince.

Another RPG struck the lead Bradley. Black smoke billowed out from a hole in the vehicle's side. Slowly, almost drunkenly, it veered right and over the bridge into the water below. Another hail of RPGs flew past them.

"We've got guys with rockets and small arms shooting from the upper story of those buildings," John called out. The gunner maneuvered his 25mm chain gun and opened fire. Huge puffs of dust kicked out as the rounds battered the side of the building and finally found their targets.

The row of Bradleys fought their way across, all firing in different directions at the buildings on the other side of the canal. Soon another Bradley was hit, but the explosive charge didn't penetrate the armor and it kept on moving. It was starting to feel as though every time they fired on an enemy position, the bad guys would simply run to another. The battle was quickly turning into a game of Whac-A-Mole.

"Call in a Warthog to level that front row of buildings," John ordered his JTAC.

Lewis hesitated.

"Do it quickly before we're cut to shreds."

Fumbling with his radio, Lewis called in the strike. "Easy Rhino seven three three, this is Bravo six nine requesting immediate air strike. Target location is grid golf one one. Target is troops in buildings two, five and eight. Danger close. Over."

The good news was that the Warthogs were already in the area and should be over the target in a matter of seconds. In the meantime, John ordered the vehicles struggling to cross the bridge behind him to pour as much fire as they could through those windows. The idea was to keep the Iraqis pinned down until the air strike could take them out.

A moment later came the distinct rumbling of an A-10 Thunderbolt streaming overhead. A slow and ugly plane, it had been designed to hunt and kill Soviet tanks during the Cold War. Rapidly headed for the trash heap, the Warthog had been narrowly saved by Operation Desert Storm, the Gulf War, where its missiles and bombs made it the perfect platform for supporting advancing infantry.

But the aircraft's real strength lay in its 30mm Avenger Gatling cannon around which the entire frame of the plane had been built. A two-second burst of armor-piercing rounds would be more than enough to shred any enemy before them.

John's Bradley was still firing when he heard the all-too-familiar giant zipper sound as the A-10's gun strafed the buildings on the other side of the canal. A cloud of brown smoke was kicked into the air from the impact as the first structure and everyone in it was destroyed. Four runs later and all fire from the opposing side of the bridge had stopped. The men were cheering as the last of the enemy was neutralized.

"Glad they're on our side," Lewis said.

John agreed wholeheartedly.

Once they secured the bridge, they would set up a defensive perimeter and get to that Bradley that had gone into the canal. Even though the chances were slim that anyone had survived, John was still hopeful. He glanced down at his hands and saw that they were shaking.

In spite of the adrenaline coursing through his veins, John couldn't help but wonder how Charlie Company was doing west of his position along the Euphrates. Popping the hatch, he immediately heard serious gunfire in the distance. It sounded like they were in a firefight of their own. If John's own crossing was anything to go by, he might even say it sounded like the men of Charlie Company were in serious trouble.

Chapter 11

John's eyes snapped open, a face hovering over him.

"Honey, you okay?"

He recognized Diane's voice a second before her features came into focus in the early morning light. Cool air tickled his nose, but the rest of his body was sopping wet.

Diane felt his forehead. "You don't have a fever. Was it another bad dream?"

It would take him another few minutes to phase back into the real world, making the prospect of answering his wife challenging.

"Iraq?"

He nodded. "Nasiriyah."

That was all he needed to say. She became solemn.

"That wasn't your fault, you know."

One of the many reasons he loved Diane was her never-ending battle to ease his guilty conscience. From bus drivers to airline pilots and military commanders, it was a weight that anyone responsible for the lives of others felt. It was usually in situations where that conscience was lacking or even dulled by some distant objective that human beings became numbers and commodities.

Emma joined them for breakfast, quietly nibbling at the oatmeal before her. At least she was eating. No doubt when she was done she would escape to her room and the sketchpad and fantasy world waiting for her there.

Across from her sat Gregory, who seemed pensive. The chatterbox, that was what Diane had nicknamed him years ago, since he was always talking about his plans for the day, each goal exaggerated into a life-or-death struggle. He could make digging a foxhole sound like a Hollywood movie. If things had turned out differently, he might have made a fine actor or newscaster.

John understood his son's desire to head off to the front and do his part. Back when he was Gregory's age, John would have felt the same, but rushing off to get yourself killed wasn't brave, it was foolish. And besides, if Gregory really wanted to fight Russian or Chinese troops, the chances were good they would be arriving at Oneida's doorstep in the not-too-distant future. John knew this not only because the U.S. forces were at a serious tactical disadvantage without the integrated technology they'd been trained to fight with, but because they seemed to be refusing to accept that fact themselves. Flexibility and adaptability were essential qualities for any leader—a bit of wisdom that wasn't his own. It went back about two and a half millennia to Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

Once Gregory was busy with the hard work ahead, John was sure he would forget his disappointment.

Not long after breakfast, the town was abuzz with activity. With a population just over two thousand strong, it had many helping hands, but that also meant more mouths to feed. Mounted patrols on six horses watched the outer perimeter for any

signs of trouble. It didn't seem to matter that foreign armies were on U.S. soil. Reports about gangs of thieves and raiders trickled in every day. Those groups weren't large, maybe ten to fifteen hungry and desperate men who'd decided to survive off the hard work of honest people. A reality that in the present situation was unavoidable. To date, they tended to rummage through outlying cabins, robbing and killing anyone who was too dumb or stubborn to accept John's invitation to come to Oneida.

In the first two days following the Chairman's death, John had sent envoys to as many of the surrounding hills and mountain retreats as his men could find. The message was a simple one. The country was at war and they needed everyone they could get. Unlike the Chairman, John hadn't used intimidation or threats. If news of an invasion by foreign powers wasn't enough to kickstart your sense of patriotism, then nothing would. In the end, many of the families who preferred to go it alone had quickly changed their minds after suffering attacks from raiders on a near-nightly basis. Every day a handful of families continued to stagger in, battered, often hungry and many having lost loved ones to disease or assaults.

Diane rushed past him with a group of women in tow.

"You seem in a hurry," he commented.

"We're grabbing a pickup and heading to the pot farm to salvage what we can," she said. "Might also scout around some of the produce and dairy farms to see what we can find."

"Pigs would make a nice addition if you can find any," John told her. "They'll eat just about anything. Even urban families in the 1800s owned a pig, which they let graze in the yard and fed with leftovers."

"That's fascinating, Mr. Mayor," a twenty-six-year-old brunette named Samantha Todd exclaimed. She looked at John, her eyes twinkling in the morning sun.

"Call me John, please."

"Okay, John," Diane said, giving him dagger eyes as she took Samantha's arm and led her and the other women away. "We've got work to do."

"Ask Moss to provide you an armed escort," John called after them.

Diane tapped her hip and that was when John spotted the holster and the Colt 1911 inside of it. The first thought in his head was one he could never say to his wife out loud: that .45 might be too much for her.

Not far away, another group under the direction of Shelley Gibson was setting up a water collection system around town. They would start with fifty-five-gallon barrels connected to the rain gutters of the surrounding houses. Of course, this was only an emergency backup since Oneida was surrounded by reservoirs. All that needed to be done was purification and storage and Shelley knew what she was doing.

In a grid-down situation, food and clean drinking water were the biggest challenges. This was precisely why grocery stores were the first to be emptied out in a crisis. Lucky for John, hardware stores weren't as high on the list. If the disaster had been a hurricane or a tornado, then things would have been different. The Ace Home Center stood with most of its shelves bare. That meant a trip to the closest Home Depot was a must and soon.

Did John expect the store to be in pristine condition three months after an EMP? Of course not, but with most folks running around trying to keep themselves fed, there was a chance some useful items might still be there. Parts they could use on the windmills they planned to build. PVC pipes for Dan Niles' waste management projects. Additional fifty-five-gallon drums, nails, hammers and perhaps a few table

saws if those windmills ever managed to get the power back on. The list was endless and it was going to be a big job. But the real problem was the distance. The closest Home Depot was in Oak Ridge fifty miles away. They would need a number of vehicles as well as the security personnel to keep them safe.

John was in the middle of making a series of mental notes when a whistle shrieked in the distance. The sound made him think of that whistle Tim Appleby had blown moments before he'd been killed. But this was one was bigger and louder. When it sounded again, John knew exactly what it was and for a reason he couldn't quite explain, his heart leaped with joy. The army's supply train had arrived.

Chapter 12

A cloud of steam vapor billowed in the air as the train slowed to a halt at Oneida's modest station. Its arrival was met with cheers from the crowd that had assembled to watch it roll in. The locomotive looked like something out of the Wild West, although steam-powered trains hadn't been completely replaced by diesel locomotives until the end of the 1950s. That meant this was likely pulled from a museum or private collection, and surely there were many more like it around the country being put back into active service. They might not be fast, but they were EMP-proof.

Soldiers in woodland camo fatigues hung from the open doorways and windows waving at the jubilant crowd just as they had during both world wars.

Moss came up beside John, a radiant smile on his face. He ran a hand through his mohawk and cupped the back of his head. "A beautiful sight, isn't it?"

John agreed and looked back to find fifty men and women lined up in formation.

"Are these cadets we're sending to the front?" John asked.

"It's the most we can afford right now," Moss told him. "When the call went out, I was swamped with volunteers. Seems everyone wants to do something to help, but I went through the list of names and picked fifty. With only one backhoe, digging trenches and fortified positions takes manpower."

"I know," John replied, watching a group of girls handing loaves of homemade bread to the soldiers. "We're working on getting you more backhoes to fill those gabions."

"Fill? I gotta find the material to build them first."

"Start with whatever chain-link fences you can find." John told him about the trip to Home Depot they would need to make.

Moss chuckled. "Sounds like a regular Saturday errand run."

"It does, doesn't it," John agreed.

A man in woodland fatigues with a patch on his left breast which read U.S. Army headed their way. The insignia on his uniform indicated that he was a colonel.

"Colonel Paul Edgar," the man said, holding out his hand to John. With dark, short-cropped hair and olive skin, he certainly looked the part.

John greeted him and introduced him to Moss. "This is my head of security."

"I can't tell you what a sight for sore eyes you boys are," Moss told him, swept up in the moment.

"We feel the same way," Colonel Edgar replied. He turned to John. "I don't mean to be unceremonious, but we're gonna need to get moving. Where are the troops you're giving us?"

The men and women in formation behind them saluted, some better than others.

"Yes, I saw these," Edgar said, "but where are the rest?"

John was taken aback. "This is all we can spare."

"I was told by Colonel Higgs to expect several hundred volunteers."

“Several hundred?” John said, shocked. “I wasn’t given a specific number, only told to send whoever I could spare.”

“Well, I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but this is our last stop and I have two empty cars at the back that I need to fill before we leave.”

“But Colonel,” John protested. “We need these people to maintain the train tracks and help make biodiesel and everything else the army needs to help with the war effort.”

“John, if we don’t get more soldiers to the front to help plug the gaping holes that open up every time the Chinese launch an attack, then there won’t be a war effort.”

Reluctantly, John turned to Moss. “All right, round up the rest of the volunteers. How many did you say there were in total?”

Moss paused, counting in his head. “Nearly three hundred.”

“Can you fit them all in?” John asked.

The colonel smiled. “Even if I have to strap them to the roof.”

Moss left as one of Edgar’s sergeants led the group of fifty toward the back of the train. If this encounter was anything to go by, the front was surely a chaotic and disorganized place.

Losing that much manpower would require John to shift the workforce around in order to compensate. If John’s concerns about sending his people to the front were vague before, they weren’t anymore.

•••

Less than an hour later, the rest of the volunteers were stowing their things in the last two train cars when Colonel Edgar returned. Accompanying him were eight soldiers carrying four heavy containers.

“What’s this?” John asked.

“Call it a gift,” Edgar replied, patting the largest of the boxes. “This here’s a Ma Deuce. Along with five thousand rounds.”

Moss furrowed his brow. “A ma what?”

“Army slang,” John told him, “for a .50 caliber machine gun. Don’t you need those up at the front, Colonel?”

“We do, but it might come in handy for you folks. The enemy’s supply lines were stretched far too thin to fuel up their jets and choppers, which is part of why we’ve been able to hold on for as long as we have, but the word coming down the chain is that’s about to change. A big shipment came in yesterday evening. That’s part of the reason we’re on such a tight schedule. But it also means you’re likely to start seeing some increased enemy air activity in your area.”

“Increased? We haven’t seen a single plane since the EMP.”

“Getting the fuel, that’s been our biggest problem. We’ve still got the aircraft, all of them hardened against the effects of an EMP, like most of the equipment in the military arsenal. Problem is, once the tankers and refineries we rely on to move that fuel were knocked out, we were grounded. You should have seen what we had to go through to get the armor in place.”

The military’s dependence on civilian infrastructure was a major vulnerability. It was one thing to protect military hardware, but another thing entirely if that hardware no longer had the nuts and bolts that kept it running. For this reason the Allies had devoted considerable energy during World War II to bombing Nazi ball-bearing

factories. Without them, any mechanized army was bound to grind to a halt. Lack of supplies was also the reason that Germany's final daring push during the Battle of the Bulge had stalled.

"What about the smaller ones?" John asked about the green, nondescript containers at Edgar's feet.

"Those you're really gonna like," the colonel said, grinning. "It's a Stinger anti-air missile launcher. Unfortunately, all I can afford right now are three missiles. Colonel Higgs told me you were in the 278th over in Iraq, so I'm assuming you know your way around these puppies."

John smiled, as much because of the smug look on Edgar's face as his use of the word puppies.

"Now, if there isn't anything more," Edgar said, turning to leave.

"There's just one other thing," John replied. "We're planning on making a run to Home Depot for some building material. The closest one is in Oak Ridge. I was wondering if you knew whether the town had been liberated."

"If you mean liberated from Russian agents, I can tell you they never got a hold of the place. They tried, far as I heard. But there's government industry there—the Department of Energy, among others—so you can imagine their deception didn't go over very well."

"So it's safe?" John asked.

"Nowhere is safe, but I don't think that's what you're asking. If this were two months ago, I'd say stay put, but my guess is most of the people who woulda given you any trouble are already dead." The colonel's eyes dropped to the weapons he'd left. "I guess Christmas came early for Oneida this year, didn't it?"

"Thank you, Colonel," John said, praying he would never need to use the gifts he'd just been given. For a moment, the smell of gun grease from the Ma Deuce whipped him right back to Nasiriyah and what had been one of the worst days of his life. John shook the feeling away and wished Colonel Edgar a safe journey, not entirely sure the troops heading for the front would make it there in one piece.

Chapter 13

Not long after, John and Reese were at the head of a five-car convoy.

A trip to a hardware store that in the old days would have simply meant a long drive was today a major operation. They were ten altogether, two in each pickup, the truck beds empty to give room for the supplies they were heading there to get. The prospect of turning the power back on even in a limited capacity was still hard for John to believe. It would be the first step in increasing their ability to help resupply the front.

Part of the plan brewing in John's mind over the last couple of days involved turning the old movie theatre on Alberta Street into a factory producing bullets, mortars and improvised explosives. This along with the extra food they grew would be shipped by train to the front. If it proved successful, John would send his own envoys out to liberated towns to show them how to do the same.

Although it would have been handy to have Moss come along, John had left him back in Oneida to continue overseeing the city's defenses. The ring of gabions that would provide cover and protection would take time. So too would the hundreds of sandbags they needed. In some cases, giant empty bags of dog food could provide a nice alternative. The bag itself was made from a sturdy material and once the end was tied off, they could be laid out as the bottom layer of a fortified wall or position. In other examples of improvised defenses, mini-gabions could be put together using garbage cans. For that purpose, members of Dan Niles' crew were tasked with collecting as many garbage cans from the surrounding area as they could find so that Moss' men could fill them with dirt. It didn't look pretty, but these solutions did offer some level of cover from incoming shrapnel.

Once the convoy turned south onto Highway 75, there was a noticeable increase in ruined cars. A number of ghostly camps built in haste by refugees fleeing the city also lined the interstate. In some were clear signs that a battle had taken place, reminiscent of the first pioneers who headed west in long wagon trains, under constant threat from hostile Indians. Many of the improvised structures even formed a defensive circle, just like the wagons of old. In many ways, the country had taken a step back into a bygone century.

Beside him, Reese was driving the pickup, one hand on the wheel, the other holding a cigarette next to a crack in the window.

"You know those things are gonna kill you," John said. "Maybe when we're in Oak Ridge we should look for something less deadly."

Reese let out a snort of laughter. "I think they're starting to grow on me."

To the left of John's knee was his AR-15 and beside that Reese's Remington 700. For his secondary, Reese was using a Colt 1911 with a "black army" finish. He patted the pistol grip when he noticed John admiring it. "Wanted a chrome finish, but glinting has a nasty habit of giving a sniper's position away. Pretty, isn't she?"

“One of the nicest, no doubt,” John agreed, thinking of the one he’d seen Diane carrying earlier. “I only wish they held more than seven or eight rounds.”

“Nah. Doesn’t matter when every one of yours will put a grown man on his rear end. You stack that kinda stopping power up against any 9mm, I dare you.”

“Then I take it you don’t think the military should have replaced it with the Beretta.”

Reese shook his head vigorously. “No, siree, I don’t. As far as I’m concerned that decision was based on the principle that throwing more lead downrange will always win a firefight. I’m willing to admit that in certain cases that’s true. But not when you compare the power differential between these two weapons.”

John nodded. “I think it might have also had something to do with standardizing the ammo soldiers were using.”

“Perhaps,” Reese admitted, “but there’s a reason so many special forces are still using it a hundred years on. This baby came with me to the Sahara when I joined the French Foreign Legion. Us snipers had to use the FR F2, but our secondary was up to us and I took my trusty .45. Best decision I made. She got me out of more than one close-quarters scrape.”

John was still eyeing the walnut grip and the black army finish. Outside, the convoy raced past rusted hulks and the bleached bones of the occasional skeleton, picked clean by crows and other scavengers. “I’m afraid it’s going to take more than stopping power to defeat the Chinese and their allies,” John said, almost to himself.

“Right now they beat us in the technology department,” Reese said. “And maybe in the manpower department.”

“Technology they stole from us,” John added bitterly.

“Maybe so,” Reese said, drawing heavily on his cigarette before shoving it through the crack in the window. “But I guess it’s a moot point.”

“Colonel Edgar mentioned that the Chinese, Russian and North Korean supply lines were stretched to the breaking point.”

“Not hard to imagine when you think about the ocean they’ve gotta cross and then the two-thousand-mile journey over land to the Mississippi. It’s a wonder they made it this far. You’re the history buff, John, but I seem to remember the Allies in World War II using England as a launching pad into northern France.”

John nodded. “So anyone playing havoc with those over-stretched supply lines could be a pain, is what you’re saying.”

“More than a pain. A royal pain, I’d say.” Reese lit a fresh cigarette. “Wouldn’t surprise me one bit to learn there were already dozens of groups stuck behind enemy lines who’d taken to the hills. With a little training and the proper leadership they could become an effective fighting force.”

“Which is why the enemy’s corralled captured Americans into labor camps.”

“Maybe by creating their own factories closer to the front they aim to ease the strain on their supply lines.”

Rubbing a growing headache from his right temple, John agreed. “That’s what the Germans did.”

“Yeah, the world condemns them, but then goes ahead and does the same thing as soon as the tables are turned. It’s a two-faced world we live in, that’s for sure.”

“Supply lines are definitely one of their weaknesses,” John said, thinking aloud again. “But they must have another. If we can find it, we might be able to push them back where they came from.”

Chapter 14

They slowed when they reached the outskirts of Oak Ridge. Just north of Knoxville, the city, which once boasted a population of nearly thirty thousand, was lucky to have a fraction of that number today. That wasn't a problem for John, since collecting what they needed and being on their way was as close to a best-case scenario as he could hope for.

Along the road, the trees were starting to betray the first hint of fiery reds and oranges, a sight which used to remind him of long walks with Diane and the kids along wilderness trails followed by hot chocolate. Fall was no longer about beautiful scenery, it was a stark reminder that winter and the threat of starvation were always close at hand. Cruising down the turnpike, four pickup trucks trailing behind them, John wondered what the country would look like in spring, once hunger and cold had thinned the population out even more. The United States was quickly becoming a gigantic ghost town, perhaps one that future generations would marvel at the way tourists skulked around the ruins of ancient Rome, amazed by the ingenuity and aghast that a civilization so powerful could crumble into dust.

"We're nearly there," Reese said in a low voice.

When the EMP struck, it had been early in the morning on a weekday. Lucky for them, that meant the parking lot at the Home Depot was empty. Not that it meant there was no one inside, but at least it would make parking the pickups near the entrance that much easier.

They circled around once, and when they were sure the area was clear, they backed each of the pickups by the front door. This way, whatever they were able to scavenge could be loaded up easily. Parking nose out also meant they could peel away in a hurry if they needed to.

"I hope you brought some cash," Reese joked, killing the engine. "Cause I don't think they take Visa or MasterCard."

Both men took their weapons and got out, locking the vehicles behind them. They assembled beside the entrance. If anyone with bad intentions was inside, they wouldn't be caught out in the open, waiting to get shot.

John went over the list of what Oneida needed. Each two-man team would be responsible for specific items. PVC piping, fifty-five-gallon drums, components for the windmill and as many nails, screws and power tools as they could find.

"There might not be much left," John told them. "Most folks around here would have rushed for the grocery stores while those less fortunate would have joined the golden horde surging out of town. Each of you has a flashlight and a whistle. You encounter any kind of threat, you give one long blast and the rest of us will come running." John surveyed the assortment of shotguns, AKs and pistols the men were carrying. "Let's make this quick and easy. The goal's to get everyone home in one piece."

For a moment, he felt like he was addressing his platoon. Unlike many of the baby-faced soldiers he'd served with, the men looking back at him were in their forties and fifties. Colonel Edgar had grabbed most of the men and women in Oneida between the ages of eighteen and thirty.

With their flashlights on, many duct-taped to the ends of their rifles or shotguns, the men headed for the entrance. The first in line, a father of two little girls and former insurance salesman named Barry Lund, walked right into the double doors out front. He stumbled back, clutching his forehead. A thin trail of blood ran down his face.

The others burst out laughing. Barry must have expected the doors to open automatically as they used to back when the world had power. Apparently some old habits were harder to kill than others.

"Looks like we got our first casualty," Reese sneered as he patted Barry's back. "Nothing but a flesh wound, I'm sure. It's a good thing that shotgun of yours didn't go off accidentally. Then someone really might have gotten hurt."

Barry shook the cobwebs out of his head and followed in behind them. The store was dark and cavernous. Far from echoing, their voices seemed to get swallowed up in the giant space they now found themselves in.

"I'm guessing most of you know your way around," John said.

Barry shook his head. "I was never much of a handyman. I used to get lost in this place back when the lights were working."

John smirked. This was yet another consequence of Colonel Edgar's request for all able-bodied men and women. But John would need to make the best of it.

From here, the teams each split up to accomplish their varying objectives. John and Reese stuck together. While John's AR was at the low ready, Reese had his Remington slung over his shoulder and his pistol snugly in the holster on his belt.

"Seems like there isn't a lot that worries you," John observed.

"I shouldn't be here," Reese said.

"Here on this mission?"

"No, here on earth, is what I meant."

"Why's that?" John inquired, glancing from side to side as they made their way down an aisle that stretched farther than the eye could see.

"The French Foreign Legion are the ultimate expendables. When France wants to put boots on the ground, but doesn't want to risk its own people, it calls in the Legion. The ranks are mostly made up of former colonials and foreigners, many looking for adventure. My last tour was in Mali, Africa during Operation Serval. Our job was to oust Islamic militants who were trying to take over the country and set up their own Muslim paradise. There are things I saw there I can't unsee, John, no matter how much I try."

"That's the burden with what we do," John replied.

"That may be part of it, but it's one thing to risk your life to do good, and it's another thing entirely when your own people nearly get you killed."

John's stomach tightened painfully. He felt a flush rise up his neck in the darkness.

"FFL CENTCOM ordered us to take out a local terrorist leader named Omar Ould Hamaha. Flamboyant-looking dude with a bright red goatee. Bottom line is, they fed us the wrong intel and sent us in the wrong direction. That wouldn't have been so bad, but in this case, the wrong direction meant we crossed into Algeria where we came under attack by an outpost of the People's National Army. Lost eight of our own before we fought our way out."

John was weighing Reese's words, trying to keep his emotions in check, when he saw the candy bar wrapper on the ground. He stopped, spearing it with his light. Reese knelt and inspected it.

"I see more up ahead," Reese whispered, pointing.

Cautiously, they followed the wrappers into the bathroom department. At one point John caught his reflection in a mirror and nearly blew it away. That was when he caught the unmistakable smell of human waste.

John turned to Reese. "I don't think we're alone."

Chapter 15

Reese unholstered his .45 and pulled it out, holding his flashlight over the barrel with his other hand. On point was John, his AR at the ready in case anyone was foolish enough to jump out at them. The smell grew stronger as they got closer to the bathroom department. Neither man said a word. There was a dead body up ahead, maybe two, from the odor of decay.

Soon the air became thick with flies, both men trying their best to breathe. Then movement up ahead. It sounded as though it were coming from one of the display showers. The closer they drew, the clearer the scene became. On the left of the aisle was a row of single-piece prefabricated shower stalls, maybe six of them in all, display units for customers looking to do some home renovations, but inside each was more than soap on a rope. There were people inside, their hands tied together and lashed to the top edge.

Reese squinted at the sight. "What the hell is going on here?"

John wasn't sure, but he went to the closest stall to see if any of them were alive. The man's eyes were closed and his face emaciated. Even his lips were pulled back into a grimace. It looked as though he'd starved to death.

A noise from out of the darkness startled them. Reese swung his pistol in that direction, his flashlight clearing the darkness and finding nothing.

"I vote we find ourselves another hardware store, kemosabe," Reese suggested. "I'm guessing whoever did this isn't very fond of company."

Reese was brave, but John knew he was more accustomed to being the predator than the prey.

John got to the man in the next shower stall and carefully turned him around. This guy was fatter and wearing a heavily stained blue suit with a yellow neck tie. He'd either arrived well fed, or hadn't been here as long as the first guy.

John slid his fingers inside the man's shirt collar, looking for a pulse. That was when the stranger's eyes snapped open and he started to scream.

Instinctively, John covered the man's mouth, muffling his cries. "We're not going to hurt you," he told him. "Now just relax. That's it." Slowly the man's breathing began to ease. "What happened here?"

"I thought you were with them," the stranger said in the raspy voice of a man who hadn't said a word in many days.

John reached for his ten-inch Ka-Bar Becker BK9 and cut the man free. The man sank to his knees, rubbing his discolored hands.

"The people who tied you to this shower?"

"Yeah. The ones who live here. They own this place. I came looking for a few things and they boxed me in. I've been tied to that shower for over a week now."

"They live here?" John asked, wondering how they ate. Taking over a grocery store made sense, but a Home Depot? "How many of them are there? And how well armed

are they?"

Jerry shook his head. "Not sure how many. At least a dozen, maybe more. And they got an assortment of guns and blunt weapons."

"Blunt? You mean clubs?"

"I mean all sorts of medieval stuff. And when they find out I'm gone, who knows what they'll do. They wanted to find out where I lived. Wanted to know if I had a wife and daughter. I don't, but they didn't believe me and said I'd tell the truth eventually or they'd eat me." The man looked at them, then at the weapons they were carrying. "Are you cops?"

"No," John answered. "Just regular people like you, trying to survive."

The man rose to his feet. "Jerry Fowler," he told them. "And I owe you my life."

The shrill whistle blast that cut through the air a moment later was followed by the echoing boom of gunshots and deer rifles and John was suddenly certain that whoever had tied Jerry to that shower was coming to do the same to them.

Chapter 16

“They’re all dead,” Jerry shouted at John, who was checking the other captives for signs of life.

The rattling of AK fire reverberated from every direction. Efficiency had dictated that his men spread out to search for the items they’d come to retrieve. Now they were divided and maybe even cut off.

John and Reese hurried toward the gunfire closest to them, Jerry close behind.

The end of the aisle was just up ahead and John swung his AR up, squaring his shoulders into a universal fighting position. Behind him, Reese with his .45 was covering the flank, a single hand on John’s shoulder, a clear sign he’d been trained in close-quarters battle.

A shriek of pain in the distance told John someone had been hit. Were they one of his?

They were rounding the corner when a round ricocheted off the metal shelving near John’s head, sending a burst of sparks into the air. Thirty feet ahead were two figures. Sliding his finger over the trigger, John squeezed off four rounds, two for each of them. The first one dropped and stopped moving. The second must have been hit in the shoulder because he spun a full one hundred and eighty degrees, staggered back and tried to dart out of the way.

A shot from Reese’s pistol went wide and thudded into a bag of cement. Powdered dust puffed out. John followed up with a final round to the torso. The attacker fell dead.

“How’d you know he wasn’t one of ours?” Reese asked.

“It’s simple. Our light won’t attract fire from our own men. The real question is why you missed that shot. I thought you were a sniper.”

“Funny,” Reese replied, scanning the darkness. “And I thought you were a general contractor.”

Through a break in the gunfire, one of his men shouted in the distance. They were falling back to the front entrance, blowing their whistles as they ran. Like all hardware stores in the chain, the place was laid out in a grid with long aisles stretching from front to back. This made each two-man team with a light particularly vulnerable. On the one hand they needed the lights to see, but that also meant the enemy could target them.

Double-timing it back down the aisle toward the front entrance, John and Reese came up behind a group of their men, taking cover and firing into the darkness. A handful of others had cleared the open space and were kneeling behind a set of washing machines.

“They’ve got the entrance covered,” Barry said, his voice rising to a panic.

“Relax and take a breath,” John ordered him, as he muffled the light. “Who are we missing?”

Barry looked around. "We were trying to carry their bodies out." Barry wasn't answering the question.

"I count eight of us alive, John," Reese said from behind him.

"They ours?" John asked, pointing at the two lifeless bodies by the washing machines.

Barry nodded. "Craig Johnston and Graham Sanders."

"There's a back door," Jerry said. "If we head that way and hook left along the break through the middle of the store, we might be able to make it."

John shook his head. "We're not running away with our tails between our legs. Two of our men are dead. Two of theirs are dead too. So right now it's a fair fight. Running away is more likely to get us shot in the back."

He pointed at Barry and two other men hunkered down across the aisle behind the washing machines. "You three stay here and keep them busy. The rest of us are going to move up this aisle and around to catch them in a crossfire."

Barry looked on with doe eyes. John shook him by the shoulder. "Can you do that?"

Nodding, Barry whispered that he could, but the look on his face said all he wanted was for this to be over. Combat might not be the only test of a man, but when the bullets started flying, it was certainly the quickest way to find out what you were made of.

John turned to Jerry and winked. "Stay here and keep the enemy's heads down."

Beside them was a display with clear shower curtains. John removed his BK9 knife and cut off a square piece. In his pouch was an elastic which he used to secure it over the end of his flashlight.

"What's that for?" Barry asked, mystified.

"Homemade flashlight diffuser. I'll leave the light off, but if we need it to see, we won't be sticking out like a sore thumb. As soon as we leave, I want you guys to open fire. Keep it sustained and make sure you don't run out of ammo, so pace yourselves."

Barry nodded.

After that, John, Reese and the three men going with them backtracked away from Barry and the group who were taking cover behind the washing machines. As ordered, those who remained opened fire, drawing the attention of the men guarding the exit.

Since John knew where all his men were, he let his finger slide down over the trigger. They were inching forward in near darkness, each person behind him gripping the shoulder of the man in front for reference. It was the blind leading the blind in an otherwise textbook flanking maneuver. His old CO would have had a fit, a thought which might have made John laugh if he wasn't so focused on the darkness ahead. Crazy as it was, extreme circumstances required adaptability. In their own way, the thieves and murderers who now called this hardware store their home had done exactly that. It was too bad they'd made the choice to become vultures, preying upon the weak and the unsuspecting.

John's disdain for that kind of predatory behavior was part of why he'd opted to stay and fight instead of cutting and running. What would happen to the next Jerry Fowler who stumbled in here looking for supplies? If the country survived the current crisis, it would need to be rebuilt from the bottom up and in John's mind, this store and the bandits inside of it were about as close to ground zero as you could come.

John and the others reached the main intersection which cut the store in two and made their first right. They weren't more than a few feet along, sporadic gunfire to their right as Barry and the others kept up the distraction. Suddenly, a shadow loomed out of the darkness. The rough outline of a man's face appeared a split second before John pulled the trigger on his AR. The round tore through the first man at point-blank range and continued into the next one standing behind him. Both collapsed dead.

Then came the deafening noise from Reese's .45 as he fired over John's left shoulder. The flash illuminated the space before them, revealing a group of nearly ten men, armed mostly with pistols, a hunting rifle and an odd assortment of brutal-looking homemade weapons. Their faces were painted coal black, accentuating the whites of their eyes. The thought of how barbaric they looked occurred to him at about the same time as the thugs before him raised their weapons.

Chapter 17

Gunfire exploded as the rest of John's men opened up. Staccato images of death punctuated the darkness as rounds impacted the attackers. The enemy only had enough time to get off a single shot, but John could see that they'd made the most of it. A Mossberg 500 pump-action had struck the man next to Reese in the chest, killing him instantly. Seemed that each side had set out to flank the other and it was a good thing John's side had been able to squeeze the trigger first. Tenths of a second, that was what most gun fights came down to.

John pulled the flashlight from his utility pouch and surveyed the scene. All the attackers were either dead or gravely wounded. Reese and the others quickly disarmed them, ignoring their pleas for aid.

Confident the immediate area was secure, John was about to switch off the light when he caught sight of Reese's shoulder.

"You're hit."

Reese glanced down. "Caught a couple pellets in the arm is all. Looks like our bud here wasn't as lucky," he said, pointing to the man from their group who lay dead. He was the third member of the expedition they'd lost so far.

It was horrible to admit, but John knew next to nothing of the dead man except for his age—early forties—and that he was from Oneida. He'd volunteered to come help them and said he could handle a weapon.

Gathering themselves, they pushed on. The gunfire from Barry's group had begun to slacken. They needed to hurry. Surely by now the thugs blocking the exit had caught on to the vicious one-sided firefight that had just taken place. With any luck, the bandits would think their side had won, which would only help to cement the element of surprise.

Their vision now recovered from the muzzle flashes, John and the others came to the aisle that intersected the enemy position. Judging by the distant bursts of light as they returned fire onto Barry's men, there weren't more than half a dozen of them.

John and the others broke into two groups of two. Each would hug the edge of the shelf as they approached. The idea was that if the enemy decided to spray the aisle, the chances of being hit were greatly reduced. Plus, approaching from two different places would further divide the enemy's fire.

In a burst of inspiration, John reached into his pouch, removed the diffuser from his flashlight, turned the light on and flung it toward the enemy position. The beam spun in circles, temporarily confusing the men near the door and also exposing where they'd taken cover. John was the first to fire. It didn't make sense to use the Acog sight because of the darkness and so he made do with the iron sights and his best guess. The others with him followed his lead and it was immediately clear that the enemy had been caught completely unaware. They'd thought that by ambushing

John's men in the dark, they would make off with their weapons, vehicles and perhaps even intel on where they'd come from. Instead, they got exactly what they deserved.

•••

"This one's still alive," Reese called out, pointing at the figure on the ground with the barrel of his .45.

Barry and the others were collecting the enemy's weapons when John stood over him. "How many others are in here?" he asked the wounded man.

He was olive-skinned, maybe Mexican or South American. He shook his head and said something in Spanish.

Jerry stood by John's side. "He speaks English."

"How do you know?"

"Cause he's the one who tied me up. His name is Ramone."

"Please, I beg you," Ramone pleaded, suddenly finding his tongue. "We thought you were going to steal from us."

John sneered. "Is that why you tied Jerry and the others up? 'Cause you thought they were looters? What have you been doing for food?"

Ramone didn't answer and it was just as well because part of John thought he knew.

"What do we do with him?" Barry asked. "They killed three of our people."

"Not like we can call the police," Reese said. "You let a worm like this go and he'll go right back doing the only thing he knows. Even if the police were still around, I'd have a hard time finding the motivation to call 'em."

More suggestions rang in from those gathered and they ranged from mutilation to outright murder.

John turned to Jerry. "You were the one they tortured for a week. What do you say?"

Thirty minutes later it was done. The pickups were loaded with the bodies of the dead along with all the items they'd come to collect. It seemed sacrilegious to load the dead next to the things on their grocery list, but burying them here would deny their loved ones in Oneida the chance to grieve properly. The enemy were loaded onto a utility cart normally used for lumber and thrown into the Dumpster out back, a decision that was made less out of hostility for what they'd done and more out of practicality. There simply wasn't enough time to dig graves for all of them.

With the truck beds full, there was one final act that needed to be addressed. The seven remaining men John had brought from Oneida as well as Jerry stood before the shower stalls, plugging their noses against the stench. Each of them looked on with a sense of admiration at a job well done. The focus of their attention was Ramone, bleeding from a wound he'd taken to the thigh, his hands tied above his head in much the same manner Jerry's had been.

"What if some Good Samaritan comes along and frees this worthless piece of garbage?" Reese wondered, searching his pockets for a smoke.

"That's why we have this," John replied, producing a sign which he hung above Ramone. Little more than a single word, it brought back echoes of what justice must have been like in the Old West.

The sign read: *Cannibal*.

Chapter 18

Not long after, the five-vehicle convoy loaded with equipment was headed back to Oneida. The three casualties had meant that some of the men riding shotgun on the way down were now drivers. Among them was John. Seated next to him was Jerry. After spending a week held captive and stewing in his own filth, it wasn't a surprise that his body odor could make your eyes water. Before they left, John had found the cleaning aisle and tossed Jerry a roll of car wipes. Smelling like a new Buick sure beat smelling like goat.

"I appreciate what you did back there," Jerry said, rubbing the deep red grooves still left in his wrists.

"I couldn't leave you hanging there to die," John replied, feeling like he neither needed a thank you nor particularly wanted one.

"That too," Jerry told him. "But what I meant was how you handled the Ramone situation. I think most men would have just killed him outright."

"Maybe. Don't think for a second the thought hadn't crossed my mind. But if you give into bloodlust, it has a nasty habit of leading you down a slippery slope."

Jerry didn't look up. "That may be true. All I know is that he didn't deserve a quick death."

"The idea of hauling him back to Oneida to be tried and perhaps hanged had occurred to me," John admitted. "After all, he did kill three of our people. But on the other hand, we were on his territory."

"His territory?" Jerry exclaimed. "He didn't own that hardware store anymore than you or I."

"So who owned it then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who owned the store?"

"How am I supposed to know? The corporation, I guess."

John shook his head. "A corporation is a legal concept that's only as strong as the courts and laws designed to uphold it. It's part of the reason internet crime became so rampant in those last few years. You can draft up all the laws you want, but if they can't be enforced, then all you're doing is making people *feel* safe."

Jerry smiled. "Sorta like the way we had to remove our shoes at the airport?"

"Precisely. There's a term for it, you know. Security theater. Measures designed to provide a sense of safety in order to keep the public calm."

"So how does this relate to Home Depot?"

John grinned as the convoy slowed to avoid a wreck on U.S. Route 27. "People still cling to the way the world used to be because it gives them a sense of security. Right now, that store doesn't belong to a corporation. It belongs to whoever can keep others out. You ever heard the term possession is nine-tenths of the law?"

"Sure."

“Well, that’s the only real rule which applies nowadays, at least in the less civilized parts of the country.”

Jerry seemed to ponder this. “And in Oneida?”

“Oneida is probably one of the last holdouts against anarchy and lawlessness.”

“I was expecting you to say something about freedom,” Jerry said, rather surprised.

“The truth is, we’re not quite there yet. But if we can win this war then we can begin working in that direction. Look, for the most part, the people in Oneida have security. At least far more than the folks who’ve chosen to remain on the outskirts of town and be vulnerable to bandits. And yet, in spite of that security, I still can’t allow people to do as they please. Everyone has to pitch in...” John paused and swallowed hard, unable to help thinking of Emma. “Anyway, you get what I’m saying.”

“You’re starting to sound like a president,” Jerry joked.

“I was elected mayor of Oneida,” John told him, shaking his head. “But under protest, I might add.”

“There’s a first. Most of the politicians I know are foaming at the mouth for power.”

John grew quiet. His main interest was in keeping his family and the community around him safe. If the best way to do that was by assuming the helm, then so be it. Dictatorship had become a nasty word over the last hundred years, but the term as it was originally conceived by the early Romans during the republic had a humility to it that had been lost over the centuries. When the republic was at war or under serious threat, the two consuls who ruled would step aside and allow a dictator to take the helm. The idea was that in times of crisis, a leader with unhampered powers was the best choice to get the job done. But once that threat had been dealt with, the dictator was expected to step down, allowing the consuls and senate to take back the reins of power. This was how John imagined his role, not as a stepping stone to something larger, but as his duty to those around him. A duty that, once completed, he could relinquish in order to return to a simpler life.

“I mentioned to you before about the war we were in,” John said. “And I couldn’t help but notice you didn’t flinch.”

Jerry rolled down the window to let some warm early fall air stream in. “Oak Ridge is a government town, John, don’t forget.”

“So you know then?”

“It would have been hard not to. I mean, I worked at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, which is in charge of dismantling outdated nuclear weapons. It was built during World War Two as part of the Manhattan Project to help build the first atomic bomb.” Jerry made a clicking sound with his teeth. “We didn’t get the nickname Atomic City for nothing. After the power went out, we spent a few days on lockdown. Then a handful of military units rolled in. They might still be there, guarding the stockpile. It’s too dangerous to move, especially given the lack of vehicles. I heard nearly every able-bodied soldier we had left was heading west to meet the Chinese and Russians. But that’s all I know.”

“Don’t forget the North Koreans,” John said. “Every few days we get a status report from the front.”

“I’m afraid to ask where that is.”

“At the moment, it seems to be along the Mississippi river, but as you know, that could change at any moment.” John was still thinking about Jerry’s work at the National Laboratory. “What specifically were you in charge of down there?”

Jerry waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, nothing cloak-and-dagger, if that's what you mean. I wasn't dismantling nuclear warheads. I'm a meteorologist, part of a small team that monitored the weather with satellites and high-altitude balloons."

"I would never have made that connection between nuclear disarmament and the need for weather analysis," John admitted.

Jerry laughed. "No harm done. The connection seems tenuous until you watch what radiation does when it gets into the atmosphere. It can travel, like a poisonous cloud, with the potential to kill millions. That was why they needed us. If there was ever an accident, we had to know right away which towns and cities were in its path. Think of what happened at Fukushima in Japan."

John grew quiet, deep in thought.

Jerry cleared his throat. "I hope I haven't bored you."

"No, not at all," John said, gripping the wheel. "Quite the opposite. You've given me an idea."

Chapter 19

The trip back to Oneida was uneventful. Jerry continued to tell John about his life. He was a fifty-two-year-old bachelor who had just discovered internet dating before the world as we knew it came crashing down. He spent twenty minutes telling John a horror story about taking a woman out who happened to be mentally unstable and how she'd stalked him for weeks, driving past his home honking at all hours of the night.

After two more similar stories, John came to the conclusion that Jerry might be smart, but he certainly wasn't wise. At least not in the ways of love.

In the end, a trip to scavenge parts to build himself a hot water system for his house was what had landed Jerry in trouble. The hot water system, however, made listening to Jerry's cringeworthy stories worth it. He'd coiled a hundred feet of five-by-eight-inch rubber tubing on his roof and used a hand pump to draw water down a pipe and out a shower nozzle. The water in the black rubber tubes would be heated by the sun's rays. A system like this would no doubt work wonders in many of the states further south, but being able to have a warm bath without boiling water was still something to consider.

Not long after this, the convoy came to the first layer of Oneida's defenses, the Cecil bridge over the New River. On the north side were foxholes manned by men armed with AK-47s looted from the Chairman's captured resupply trucks. If they ever got their hands on more heavy weapons, John would love to set up a concealed .50 cal overlooking the bridge. Artillery and mortar teams could also be set up within range to rain down destruction on anyone dumb enough to attack. Once Moss' people returned from collecting the explosives from the local coal mines, they could begin setting up charges on both sides of the bridge as well as under it in order to blow the thing up in a worst-case scenario. Each of the major highways into town would also have a forward observer concealed a few hundred meters ahead of the defensive line in order to warn the men in the foxholes of any approaching enemies.

Blocking the road before them were two sentries standing behind a heavy chain that stretched from one end of the bridge to the other. John slowed his pickup and waved out the window as they got closer.

"Mission accomplished?" a craggy-faced man named Gordon asked. He had bags under his eyes and droopy facial features which made him look in dire need of some sleep.

"We got what we went for, but not everyone made it, I'm afraid."

Gordon undid the chain. "How many casualties?"

"Three," John told him, not in the mood to go into details at the moment. He rolled through the checkpoint and picked up speed as he cleared the foxholes.

A similar exchange played out each time John and the others crossed additional checkpoints. It seemed that in the hours since they'd set out this morning, Moss' men

had been busy digging in.

Finally, they reached the town proper and were greeted by a sight which made John smile. The .50 cal Colonel Edgar had given them was now mounted onto the bed of a Toyota pickup, a sight which made John wonder if he were living in Mogadishu, not a rural town in the United States.

Manning the Ma Deuce was none other than Moss.

John stopped the car, the other vehicles in the convoy moving past him toward the mayor's office.

"You couldn't resist the urge, could you?" John asked, laughing.

"She's gorgeous, ain't she?" Moss replied. "We fired off a few test rounds before and let me tell you, this baby kicks like a mule."

Nodding, John asked Moss how the checkpoints were coming along.

"We're nearly done. Got a crew on Alberta Street finishing the last emplacement. We don't have a whole lot to protect it yet, but a few more of these would be nice," he said, patting the long black barrel. "That was the main reason I wanted our first .50 cal to be fully mobile. Any group of armed thugs won't stand a chance. Only thing we're missing is a protective steel plate on the front."

John nodded. Moss was right, but of course the problem now wasn't holding bandits at bay. The enemy at their doorsteps was much meaner and far more sophisticated. Enough to make their only heavy machine gun look like a pea shooter. John only prayed the IEDs could help change that.

"Do you have an update on the explosives?"

Moss shook his head and dismounted from the pickup. "I sent out two teams this afternoon and neither of them have returned. I'll let you know as soon as they do."

"Please do. You know where to find me."

A few moments later, John was in the middle of turning into the parking lot at the mayor's office when he saw Diane running frantically from one pickup to another. Members of the convoy who were busy offloading the dead, wrapped in white shower curtains they'd taken from the hardware store, stopped and pointed in John's direction. She was always the worrywart. Those improvised body bags must have freaked her out. He pulled into the first parking spot he could find and got out, Jerry in tow.

"Don't worry, honey, I'm fine," John said. "We ran into a little resistance is all." He pointed to Jerry. "This is—"

"Please tell me the boys are with you."

"You mean Gregory and Brandon?"

"Of course, John. I've been looking for them all day. I just assumed they'd decided to go along with you to Oak Ridge at the last minute."

John shook his head, feeling the horrible sensation that something was wrong. "They must be here somewhere."

"They're not," Diane shouted. "I've searched everywhere. You don't think they hopped that train to the front, do you?"

"I told them they couldn't go, so they must be here somewhere," John said, not entirely sure he believed it himself. But that stabbing feeling in his gut was quickly rising to his heart and with it the certainty that the boys had not only defied him but that they were headed for grave danger.

Reese was only a few feet away and John ran to him at once.

"You know, if I'd been the same age," Reese said, "I'd have probably done the same thing myself."

John felt the same way, but it was hardly any consolation. "These boys haven't snuck out the window at night to go drink beer or shoot guns in the woods. There's a war going on. This isn't a game."

Reese dropped his cigarette and stubbed it out. "I'm with you. So you want me to go fetch 'em?"

"I do," John said, nodding. "And take someone with you."

Moss arrived just then, his smile fading when he saw something serious was going on. John explained.

"Damn kids. Used to be cops and robbers when I was a kid," Moss lamented. "Now boys just wanna play *Call of Duty* with real guns. Reese, I'd go with you, but—"

"I don't need any help to rustle up a couple kids. Besides, I'll go faster if I'm alone. Maybe it'll give me a chance to knock some sense into 'em on the way back."

"Take Betsy," John told him, fishing in his pocket for the keys.

"We don't have the fuel, John," Moss informed him. "That's what I was coming to tell you. The trip to Oak Ridge just used up the last of what we had. Might take a couple days before we can scrounge some more up."

John wanted to swear, but held his cool. Having to swallow his anger only intensified the emotion. "Can you ride?" John asked, suddenly remembering the horses.

"Aren't the free horses being used for farming right now?" Moss asked.

"Well, they can be recommissioned. Can you ride?"

Reese nodded. "You kidding? I rode competitively in the State Fair."

"Good," John said, feeling a small measure of relief. "Then pick the best horse we have."

"He'll need to take two, boss," Moss said. "The boys are gonna need to ride something on the way home, unless you want them to walk."

"Walking would do them some good. Just take whatever you need and hurry back as soon as you can."

"Roger that," Reese replied. He retrieved his Remington sniper rifle from the front seat of the pickup he'd driven from Oak Ridge and stalked off toward the barn.

John went into the mayor's office to find Henry. He would send a message to Colonel Higgs to be on the lookout for Gregory and Brandon and ask him to hold the boys until Reese arrived to escort them home. From his previous conversations with the colonel, John knew the front was a chaotic and dangerous place. As a sniper and tracker, Reese was the best man for the job. No doubt about it. John only hoped that would be enough.

Chapter 20

The train steaming toward the front had just run through Newbern, Tennessee, only a few miles from their final destination of Dyersburg and the Mississippi river, when the two boys began hearing the concussion from distant artillery fire. Brandon caught the look of sudden fear on Gregory's face, as though the plan they'd devised to help defend their country, one which had sounded positively awesome on paper, had in reality been a colossal mistake.

Had America not been in such a desperate situation, they would never have been allowed on this train in the first place. But wasn't every able-bodied citizen expected to take up arms in whatever way they could? During one of his long chats with John, Brandon had learned about how the Germans had conscripted boys as young as Gregory to help defend Berlin against the Russians. It might not be something you saw on the nightly news—back when there was such a thing as TV and channels like CNN and Fox—but when able-bodied soldiers were in short supply, kids were often used in their place. That had been part of Brandon's speech to Gregory as soon as they found their seats, the train still sitting at the station in Oneida. But now, feeling the earth tremble every time one of those shells landed, Brandon wondered if in the end he hadn't been trying to convince himself.

The train was packed to the gills with soldiers, some in uniform, but most wearing regular clothing. Several were even standing in the middle aisle and had been the whole time.

Questioning looks from a few of those around them had been frequent at the outset of the trip. When a nervous-looking guy with short, wavy hair and dark-rimmed glasses had asked if they knew where this train was headed, Brandon explained they were going to the front to be messengers. That seemed to satisfy the man, who left them alone from then on.

A soldier with three chevrons on his arm pushed his way into their rail car and cupped his hands over his mouth. "Five minutes to Dyersburg. I repeat, we disembark in five minutes. Gather your things. Don't leave anything behind or you will lose it forever. Once everyone's off, this train is heading back to bring more troops and supplies. After you exit the train, you will be given a uniform, a weapon and organized into units." He repeated the message two more times before shoving through to the next car.

With every passing second, this was becoming more real and more frightening.

Gregory's eyes were darting around. "Maybe if we stay on the train it'll head back to Oneida?" he suggested, not entirely able to hide the panic in his voice. His eyes were watery, as though he were on the verge of tears.

"Maybe, but what will they think of us back home? Cowards is what they'll call us. You remember how we defended the cabin? We can't lose face just because we're scared."

“You’ve shot a man before,” Gregory said, referring to the time when Cain’s men had attacked them.

“More than one,” Brandon corrected him. “And I was even one of the first into Oneida when we liberated it.”

Gregory’s face fell. “Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. You’ve done all that ’cause you’re older. I’ve only shot at static targets. In the cabin, I was mostly reloading the magazines for my dad’s AR-15.”

“But this was your idea.” Brandon was getting annoyed.

“It seemed like the right thing to do, but I’m not so sure anymore.”

A deafening explosion rocked the train, throwing both boys forward. The people standing were flung to the ground by the force of the train coming to a sudden halt. Cries rang out from the wounded.

There was a cut beside Brandon’s left eye where his face had impacted the chair seat in front of him. “Are you okay?” he asked Gregory, who looked more terrified than hurt.

“I think so. What happened?”

“No idea. We may have hit something.”

Two of the cars being pulled by the locomotive were flatbeds housing anti-aircraft batteries and those began firing at once. Peering through the spiderweb crack in the window, Brandon caught sight of a missile streaking out from the train toward a pair of helicopters hovering nearby. It struck the first chopper a second later, creating a ball of flame and sending the burning wreckage spiralling out of the air where it landed in an empty field.

“We’re under attack,” Brandon shouted. “We need to get off this train.”

Each of them reached for their backpacks as large-caliber rounds tore through the train car, killing men all around them. The boys dove to the ground only to find themselves lying on a body that was once human, but was now hardly recognizable. Struggling through the carnage, they made their way the short distance to the rear exit and stumbled out onto the edge of the tracks.

Thick black smoke billowed up from where the front locomotive used to be. Dozens of other passengers were pouring off the train now, running for cover from the remaining chopper circling overhead. One of the anti-aircraft batteries had already been knocked out. It looked like a double-barrelled 40mm turret that had been pulled off of an old, outdated tank, except now it was largely twisted metal with bodies strewn about it.

In the distance, Brandon spotted the town of Dyersburg. Like the others who’d come scrambling off the train along with them, many were headed in that direction. Hundreds of them ran for their lives while heavy rounds from the remaining enemy chopper cut down as many as they could. The two boys had gone looking for adventure and instead they’d found hell on earth.

Chapter 21

Tossing restlessly in bed, John was having difficulty relaxing his mind. Time and time again his thoughts returned to Gregory and Brandon. Wherever they were and whatever they were doing, John prayed they were safe and looking out for one another. Gradually, he let go and let sleep overtake him. That was when he found himself back in Nasiriyah.

It had been close to ten minutes since either John or his JTAC Lewis had heard from Charlie Company. Calls had come over the radio from other men in Bravo, asking if they could push along the two miles between them and reinforce their embattled brothers in arms. But Bravo Company was having problems of its own. Rain last night had softened the ground, turning the terrain north of the bridge that John's men were holding into a quagmire. Over half of the Bradleys were now stuck in the mud and many of the twenty-seven-ton vehicles had only dug themselves in deeper by rocking back and forth. The good luck they'd been having after the A-10 helped to silence the Iraqi fire on their position was starting to evaporate.

Several soldiers had exited the Bradleys and were doing what they could to help dislodge them. They were in an increasingly vulnerable position. If another attack were to begin, his men would be sitting ducks.

Just then the radio crackled and John was certain it was another plea from his men to help Charlie Company.

"Bravo six nine, this... Charlie... over."

The signal was bad, but John recognized Donovan's voice. Donovan was the radio man for Charlie Company.

"Bravo... Charlie Company. Do... read? Over."

"We read you loud and clear," Lewis replied. "You sure did take your sweet time dialing in."

More static, then. "Under... heavy... fire. Need air..."

"You're breaking up, Whiskey Lima," Lewis shouted. "Please say again."

"Air support. Call in... right away."

"Roger that. What is your position? Over."

They waited agonizing seconds without a response.

Robert Forest, the Bradley's driver, turned to Lewis. "Don't be an idiot, man, they're trying to hold their bridge just like we are. The ragheads are dug into the buildings picking them off. I can hear it from here."

"Whiskey Lima," Lewis repeated. "What is your position?"

This time the response was terrified screaming and a burst of gunfire. John and the others recoiled.

"What do I do, sir?" Lewis asked.

John felt his intestines being squeezed to jelly. That last transmission sounded like they were getting slaughtered. "I can't sit by while they're being killed."

“Why don’t we send some men from Bravo to help them?” Forest asked.

“Because our orders were to stay put and hold the bridge,” John told him.

“Besides, most of our Bradleys are stuck in the mud.” He looked at Lewis. “Call in the air strike.”

“But what coordinates do I give them?”

“If they’re doing their job, they’ll be holding that bridge over the Euphrates just as we are. Do like Forest said. Tell the Warthog pilots to pepper the buildings north of the bridge and tell them to watch Blue Force Tracking for friendlies.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” John barked, “now do it.”

Lewis called in the strike as John climbed out of the turret of his Bradley to watch the planes fly in.

He heard the sound of their engines before he saw them. There were two of them and they made successive runs on the target, strafing with their 30mm cannons and firing missiles. The soldiers trying desperately to help free the stuck vehicles stopped briefly and cheered. Even John felt a smile come over his face at the thought of destroying the enemy that was threatening his men in Charlie Company.

Lewis was back on the radio.

“Whiskey Lima, do you copy? Over.” After trying twice more, he turned to John. “It’s still dead.”

Lifting the binoculars to his eyes, John strained in vain to see. But it was the sounds he was hearing that were making him feel suddenly unsure. The distinct rattle of AKs and RPKs had resumed, as though the men attacking Charlie Company hadn’t been hit that hard from the strafing and bombing run after all.

Then another message over the radio, this one intended for the A-10 pilots. “Check your fire. I... rep... check your fire. Friendlies in... area.”

John and Lewis exchanged a uneasy glance.

“Charlie Company, come in, over.” Lewis’ voice was barely a whisper.

“Friendly fire! Friendly fire!” came Donovan’s voice. “Requesting immediate medivac. Thirteen wounded. Ten KIA.”

The airstrike they’d just called in had killed their own men and John’s heart felt like it was about to shatter.

Chapter 22

Brandon pulled out the compass from his pocket and studied the needle as it swung back and forth and finally settled on a southwesterly direction. They'd been sprinting and walking from one scrap of cover to another for close to an hour since they awoke this morning. They'd been forced to take shelter in an abandoned car they found along State Route 211 once they realized they wouldn't make Dyersburg before sundown. After discovering the car's power seats wouldn't recline, Brandon had told Gregory to sleep in the back while he made do sitting upright in the front. The explosions from the front, only a few miles away now, were loud enough to drown out the sound of the crickets. They had spent the night shivering, cold and afraid. It had been one of the worst nights of their lives.

When morning broke, the two had set out at once. It had taken a while before Brandon was able to free himself of the knot that had formed in his back.

Whenever they caught the distinct sound of a helicopter approaching, their hearts began to race. Although he would never admit it, Gregory was normally the first to react. His eyes would scan the skies and he would run a few steps toward the nearest tree line or building. Only once he saw that Brandon wasn't following would he stop and look guilty. The truth was, Brandon wasn't playing the tough guy, he simply couldn't see where the chopper was and, more importantly, who it belonged to. Part of him would have loved to see an Apache streak by as it raced to give the enemy some payback.

Payback or not, the carnage he'd witnessed at the train was still fresh in his mind. As the morning wore on, more and more survivors from the attack joined the trek toward Dyersburg, many walking in small scattered groups and all of them looking like something from one of those old-fashioned zombie movies.

A sign up ahead welcomed them to Dyersburg, but what kind of a welcome would they find when they arrived? Would they all be branded as cowards for having run for their lives? What was considered brave when the people around you were being hit with 23mm rounds from a Chinese attack helicopter, their bodies literally exploding before you? It was the Z-10 helicopter. Brandon remembered the sleek design and tail wheel from a video game he used to play.

During the attack, he'd wanted so badly to stop and help whoever he could. But that chopper, circling overhead, spitting out death all around them had made that impossible. The event had offered them their first truth about war. Sometimes you didn't have a choice other than to save your own skin.

A few random buildings dotted Highway 51 which presumably ran through Dyersburg. Of course, none of them knew where they were headed. The plan had been for the train to pull into the station where a sergeant would assign them to units. But in less than five minutes that plan had been shot to ribbons.

"I'm so thirsty," Gregory said, dragging his feet.

The sweatshirt and jeans he was wearing were caked in dirt and singed in places. So too was the t-shirt Brandon was wearing. In the mayhem, they'd even been forced to abandon their backpacks along with the filtered water and snacks they'd brought for the trip.

To their left were what appeared to be storage sheds, the kind you paid money for every month in order to keep all the stuff you could no longer cram into your garage. Past that a ways was a white pillared building with a sign out front that read "Dyersburg Funeral Home" and etched underneath "Respect, Compassion, Dignity".

Brandon pointed in that direction. "Maybe we can find something to drink in there."

Gregory didn't look so certain. "I'm not sure. It looks closed."

"Of course it's closed. Everything is closed now. I went to a funeral in Knoxville when Grampa Appleby passed and I seem to remember a vending machine or two. Worst case, we can drain what's left in the water heater."

Gregory was focused on the road ahead, as though wishing for a better option. In the distance, only the outline of small buildings was visible. But more importantly, the stretch that lay immediately in front of them was a long and empty one. The sun was climbing higher in the sky every minute, cooking their exposed flesh and increasing their already overwhelming thirst.

When it was clear that Gregory wasn't interested in checking the funeral home for something to drink, Brandon began heading there himself.

"Hey, where you going?"

"I already told you. You keep going if you want." But Brandon knew exactly what Gregory would do. A moment later, the boy appeared by his side, huffing and out of breath. There was no way he was gonna set off on his own.

"We may get in trouble for trespassing. Maybe we could ask someone coming up behind us for a drink?"

Brandon stopped and glanced over his shoulder at the people coming this way and spotted a group of three. Two men and a woman who was stouter than both of them. Walking slow and looking dispirited, none of them were carrying any bags, backpacks or otherwise.

"I think we're all in the same boat, Gregory. In fact, you just gave me an idea."

"I did?" Gregory's face lit up.

"Yeah, maybe if we can find some buckets inside, we can fill 'em from the water heater and leave them by the side of the road for the other people coming up behind us."

"But won't the water be bad after sitting there all this time?"

"Probably," Brandon answered, "that's why we're going to throw in a few droplets of bleach. What funeral home doesn't have bleach?"

Gregory let out a nervous laugh. Brandon could tell the kid was worried about zombies or some other form of monster he'd seen in Hollywood movies. But computer-generated bogeymen didn't frighten Brandon because the horrors of real life were so much scarier.

Chapter 23

Shouting pulled John from the dream. All at once, thoughts of Nasiriyah and his old JTAC Lewis were swept away like a fine mist before sunrise. The analogy was apt because early morning light bled into his bedroom from outside, informing him that it was dawn.

Another sound entered his awareness: a quick repetitive thudding of rotor blades. A helicopter was approaching Oneida and the single question coursing through John's tired mind as he threw his clothes on and grabbed his AR was whether it was friend or foe.

Diane sat up in bed with a start. "What is it?" she asked, rubbing her eyes and craning her head to listen.

A manhole out near the back door of the mayor's office led to the storm drain, a location they'd decided to use as the town's air-raid shelter should the need arise. "Get Emma and take her underground."

Diane blinked and then threw the covers off.

Charging through the front door, John saw heads peering out from windows and doorways. Everyone had the same question on the tips of their tongues.

Although he hadn't acquired a visual, John knew what an Apache gunship sounded like and this wasn't it. Whatever was flying around the airspace above Oneida had a blade rotation that sounded much faster than the Apache.

Down the street, John caught sight of Moss, who waved him over before disappearing into an alleyway. Darting across the open space and then hugging the walls of the nearest building, John made his way over. When he arrived, John discovered a pickup parked in the alley, the one Moss had mounted with that .50 cal machine gun. Standing on the truck bed clutching the dual grips was Moss, smiling down at John like a giddy schoolkid.

"I got spotters climbing the cell tower on the edge of town," he said, "to get a better look at this thing. One of them's a pilot and aircraft nut who used to fly the bushwhack trails up in Alaska. If the bird's ours, he'll know it." One of Moss' men sat in the driver's seat, waiting for orders to move out.

"You've been watching too many movies," John said, concerned firing on the chopper might only get Moss killed. "Where's the Stinger?"

"In the stairwell, by the library roof door. I've set a sandbag firing position up there."

The sound of rotors grew louder as the chopper thundered by overhead. John maneuvered for a better view.

"She one of ours?" Moss asked.

"Afraid not," John replied, watching it speed by. "Looks to me like a Chinese Z-10."

"Just one? Can't be all that bad," Moss said, racking the bolt on the Ma Deuce.

"Well, it certainly ain't good, that's for sure." Breaking cover, John darted down Municipal Drive, heading for the library. Unassuming as it was, the building's three-

story height made it the ideal choice for housing the Stinger anti-aircraft missile system.

As he burst through the front entrance, a group of frightened adults and children were kneeling behind the checkout desk. They'd apparently been using the building as a dormitory.

"Get yourselves into the air-raid shelter," John ordered, not caring a whit whether he sounded like some grouchy old dog.

He wasn't sure what the Chinese rules of engagement were, but it stood to reason the gunner would need permission from headquarters before opening fire. The fear wasn't so much that Moss would rush out with his hillbilly technical, but more so that the chopper might spot the sandbag emplacements strewn throughout the town and report back to base. If word got out that there were hostile elements in Oneida preparing against an assault, this Z-10 would only be the first of many paying them a visit. John needed to knock this sucker out of the sky with a single shot before they had a chance to radio back.

Just as Moss had said, the metal case containing the Stinger was in the stairwell. A missile had already been loaded in the launch tube. The last time he'd fired one of these was on a training exercise, more years ago than he cared to admit, so he grabbed the manual and shoved it into his pocket.

Slinging his AR over his shoulder, John grabbed the launcher with both hands and charged out onto the roof.

For now the sound of the chopper had faded into the distance. Had they flown away after calling in what they'd seen?

Just in case, John put the launcher down and flipped through the manual, his breathing harsh and punctuated by his beating heart. This was not the way he liked to wake up in the morning.

"Place the weapon on right shoulder, grasping the pistol grip to provide support," he said out loud. "Okay. 'Unfold the antenna, and remove the front cap,'" he said, skipping ahead. "Done. 'Now raise and lock the sight assembly into position.'"

The sound of rotor blades again.

"Weapon activation occurs when the safety and actuator device is operated.' Okay, tell me something I don't know."

Growing louder by the second.

It's nearly on you, John, hurry! he told himself. *If they spot you wielding an anti-aircraft missile, you'll be dead before you know what hit you.*

He released the safety and actuator device. The launcher began making a sound, like a gyro spinning up. Yes, it was all starting to come back now. With his hand clutching the pistol grip, he turned to his left and spotted the chopper, a thousand feet in the air, bearing down on him. The distant sound of cannon fire came right as he pulled the trigger.

A whoosh and a blast of white smoke came as the missile was flung from the tube, igniting a split second later. A vapor trail streaked across the sky until it intersected with the approaching chopper. The gunship tried to turn away at the last minute only to take the impact right below the rotor. A burst of yellow flame shot out, then a delay as the sound of the explosion travelled to where John was kneeling on the library rooftop.

The Z-10 spun in wild circles as it plummeted out of the sky. From the street came whooping and cheering. John went to the edge of the roof to see Moss pull up

alongside the building, a group of citizens trailing behind him.

“Get over to that crash site right away,” John barked. “And bring me back any survivors.”

Chapter 24

Finding and then emptying the hot water heater in that funeral home along Highway 104 hadn't been difficult for Brandon. Finding bleach in one of the maintenance closets and pouring a few drops in the way John had taught him was also easy. But braving the cloying odor of formaldehyde and decaying bodies, that had been something else altogether. The worst room by far, and one they'd done little more than glance in through a porthole-style window, had been packed with bodies, many of them laid out, little more than clothed skeletons with bits of flesh clinging to bony faces and hands.

It was starting to look as though this place had gone from the town funeral home to the town morgue. Burying the dead was a much better idea, but Brandon sensed that many of the decisions made by the ones who ran this place as well as those living in the area were the product of wishful thinking. The power was bound to come back on any day now, that was probably the story they told themselves.

The open floor safe in the office only reinforced that theory. It told Brandon that whoever was running the funeral parlor had still believed paper money had some value. And more than that, it revealed a critical point in time when the dead began piling up and the harsh reality started sinking in that the lights would never be coming back on. And so a funeral home had gradually become a crypt.

No matter how thirsty they were, the two boys had held off until they were outside and a safe distance from the suffocating odors before they drank. After they had their fill, they left the bucket on the side of the road, a tin cup floating on the surface. A sign written with a sharpie along the side read: *Clean water*.

Brandon and Gregory hadn't made it more than a dozen yards before they turned and caught sight of a ragged group of three men and one woman stopping to have a drink.

"I'd heard my dad talk about using bleach in water, but I never saw how he did it," Gregory said with something that resembled admiration.

"Your dad and I spent a lot of time together when you and the rest of your family were being held by the Chairman."

"Tell me something I don't know," Gregory snapped, and Brandon realized it wasn't admiration at all. But what child wouldn't be sore about their father spending time with someone else's kid?

"I never asked for things to turn out the way they did," Brandon said, offering a kind of truce.

"Well, maybe if you'd stayed on Willow Creek, things would have been different."

"Maybe," Brandon shot back. "Or maybe we would be dead, along with the rest the neighbors who didn't make it."

"You survived because you ran away to our cabin."

"I thought we already settled this months ago."

“Just seems like you’re in the habit of taking things that don’t belong to you.”

Now Brandon was starting to get angry. “We helped defend the cabin too, don’t forget. And do I need to remind you that my dad was killed raising the alarm when the Chairman’s men attacked us?”

Gregory shook his head. “It just isn’t fair. I’m just saying that it shoulda been me he taught all that stuff too, not you.”

“He musta shown you some stuff over the years,” Brandon replied, but quickly saw he was barking up the wrong tree. John had taught his son some survival skills, but Gregory felt Brandon was his dad’s favorite, a protégé of sorts. If that were the case, then nothing Brandon said would convince him otherwise.

They walked on in silence until they spotted an old sports car from the sixties racing up the highway in their direction. It screeched to a halt when it reached a handful of people walking a few hundred meters ahead. A moment later, it continued in the boys’ direction. When it braked next to them, they saw two men in desert camo military uniforms. The one in the passenger seat was broad-shouldered and mean-looking.

“Our train was attacked...” Brandon began.

“Save it,” the mean one cut him off. “We know what happened. Why do you think I’m here?”

“I don’t know,” Brandon replied.

The brawny passenger turned to the driver. “We got a comedian on our hands, Olson. A regular Jim Carrey. How old are you boys?”

“I’m fifteen,” Brandon said. “And Gregory here is twelve.”

“Twelve and a half,” Gregory amended.

“And a half?” the passenger noted, amused. Three chevrons on his shoulder told them he was a sergeant. His name tag read Burns. “Well, I need you and Mr. Twelve and a Half here to head to Dyersburg State Community College.” Burns threw a thumb over his shoulder. “Keep following the 51 and then make a right on Lake Road. It’s a mustering station for new recruits.”

Brandon nodded, swallowing hard, but doing his best not to betray the fear inching into his heart. Maybe on account of his age, Gregory wasn’t nearly as good at hiding it and his voice squeaked as he thanked them.

“Don’t thank us yet, little man,” Burns shouted as the sports car pulled away.

•••

An hour later, after following the sergeant’s directions, they arrived. The green space hugging the campus along Lake Road was dotted with artillery and anti-aircraft positions. Men and women in army fatigues of all sorts were manning the weapons, scanning the horizon and digital readouts for signs of approaching enemies.

It had been a while since Brandon had seen a computer display screen that was anything but black and lifeless. Cutting across the lawn, they headed for the main building, protected by layers of sandbags and gabions.

A single thought kept racing through Brandon’s mind. When John found out what they’d done, he was going to kill them. If the Chinese or Russians didn’t get the job done first, that was.

But surely John would understand why they’d been motivated to serve, whether or not they were the proper age to do so. Hadn’t John told Brandon about the thousands

of soldiers who'd signed up for all branches of the military after 9/11? They'd wanted to do whatever they could to serve their country. Many of those same volunteers had filled the ranks of the unit John served with, so if anyone should understand, it would be him.

Inside, the building was dimly lit with emergency lighting, presumably powered by diesel generators outside. Figures darted past them at dizzying speed. Everyone knew their job and what they should be doing.

"New recruits?" a soft female voice asked.

Brandon's eyes widened when he saw her. A shock of red hair under a marine's cap, alabaster skin. She was beautiful, if out of place. Not that he had much right saying so. At least she was of age.

"We came to serve however we can," he answered. "But our train was attacked..."

"Yes, we heard. I'd say I'm sorry, but you're gonna see more of that sooner than later." She glanced from her clipboard to Gregory. "This one's too young for combat. Desperate as we are, even we have limits."

Brandon spotted her name tag and rank. "PFC O'Brien, where are you gonna send him?"

She fixed Brandon with a stony glare. "Trains from the east have been pouring in all day long. If I had a nickel for every prepubescent boy who stowed away to play soldier I'd be a rich woman."

"What's pretusesent?" Gregory asked.

"It means brave," Brandon lied.

"Oh."

"We might be able to squeeze you in," she said, "but your little brother's gonna have to head back on the next transport east."

"Please," Brandon pleaded. "We've come this far. There's nothing left for us to go home to." That last part was a lie, of course, but helping at the front sure beat Gregory being killed on the way home by a Chinese gunship.

O'Brien didn't look convinced.

"There must be something he can do."

Her eyes fell to a stack of thirty-pound ammo cans by the entrance. "If your brother can lug those cans around, then there might just be a job for him at the front."

Chapter 25

The Chinese pilot sat handcuffed in the Oneida sheriff's department interrogation room, looking defiant, face smeared with dried blood from the crash.

John, Moss, Vice Mayor Ray Gruber and a handful of others stood in a darkened room, behind a two-way mirror.

"What about the gunner?" John asked, studying the prisoner's grey jumpsuit, which was torn but nondescript. As startling as it was to have an enemy combatant as his prisoner, that wasn't what surprised John the most about his new guest. The biggest shock had been that the pilot was a woman.

She'd been unconscious when Moss and his men had gone to retrieve her and she'd come awake less than an hour ago.

"We found the gunner still strapped to his chair, dead. Looks like a broken neck from the impact, but we can't be sure."

"Doesn't really matter," John told him. "Where'd you put the body?"

"Left it at the coroner's office, boss," Moss replied. "There ain't no real way to keep it on ice, so we may end up burying him within the next day or two. I think the real problem we have is the crowd that's gathered outside. A bunch of 'em are calling for a trial and a hanging."

"Not that you can blame them one bit," Ray added. "I'd be tempted to do the same myself."

"But you're the vice mayor," John reminded him sternly. "And you're expected to lead these folks with your head, especially when they're being pulled by emotion."

"I was just saying that I can see why the crowd wants blood."

After a moment of tense silence, John's attention returned to the pilot. She had pale, soft skin and a round face. Her hair, which was long and dark, was tied back in a pony tail, a curious contrast to how dishevelled the rest of her looked.

"Has she said anything yet?" John asked.

"No, boss. None of us have been in to see her yet. Besides, I wouldn't know what to ask. I'll be more than happy to get in there if you want."

John smiled. "I'll keep you posted. I know you have a thing for Asian girls. First, bring me something to eat."

"You didn't have breakfast?"

"Not for me. It's for her. Sometimes getting the information you need is easier with a smile and a warm meal than it is with a fist."

Moss left with one of his men. When the door shut, Ray turned to John.

"What's the plan, John? Don't you think we're endangering the town by holding this prisoner?"

John shook his head. "What do you think will happen if we let her go? Besides, Moss has some of his people clearing away the wreckage. We may be able to salvage

some of the weapons onboard. The 30mm chain gun as well as the knockoff Hellfire missiles.”

Ray cocked an eyebrow. “Knockoff?”

“Don’t be so shocked. Most of the aircraft design has been lifted from other platforms. Namely the Italian Augusta attack helicopter. I suppose it’s one of the ways they’ve been able to keep up. America and other Western countries do most of the innovating and China steals the plans.”

“I was about to say that imitation is the best form of flattery,” Ray began. “But I suppose this is a case where it’s bitten us in the rear.” He paused. “Have you figured out what you’re going to ask her?”

“I’m working on that.”

“U.S. intelligence would surely like to get their hands on her.”

“They will, Ray, but not until we’re done.”

Moss returned with a plate of rice, canned ham and a plastic cup with filtered water. “I figured you two would have a big laugh over how bad this looks. See, I know they like rice, but I couldn’t figure out what meat to throw on. We don’t exactly have crates of orange beef or General Tao hanging around.”

John burst his bubble. “Those are Chinese-American creations.”

“Well, here ya go. Anyway, as far as I’m concerned, she’s lucky to be getting anything at all.”

John made his way to the door before he stopped short. “You’re a real charmer, Moss. Don’t go far. If the nice-guy routine doesn’t get her talking, I may need someone to play the bad guy.”

The guard posted outside the interrogation room nodded to John and opened the door as he approached.

The prisoner glanced up, watching John as he entered and sat down across from her. Apart from the fact that her lips were drawn into a thin line, it was difficult to detect any real emotion coming from her.

“Are you hungry?” John asked, sliding the food over to her. Her gaze fell to the plate and then rose back to him.

Silence.

“If I were you, I’d eat, since this may be your only meal of the day.”

John brought his hand up to his mouth, trying his best to demonstrate what he figured was the universal sign for eating.

Her expression didn’t change.

“Do you speak English?” John asked. Mandarin was the most common dialect in China, but finding someone in Oneida, Tennessee who could speak it was more than a long shot.

More silence. The food didn’t seem to interest her either.

“Well at least you can tell me what unit you’re with. The Geneva Convention allows for that.”

“Name, date of birth, rank and service number,” she replied in broken, but surprisingly good English. “I am required to give you nothing else.”

She was right, but more importantly, John had just learned that she spoke English.

“Then let’s start with your name.”

“Huan Wei,” she replied after a small delay.

“Huan,” John said. “Your name means happiness.”

Her eyes fluttered, betraying the first hint of emotion. "I know what my name means."

"And your rank?" he asked in as calm and soothing a voice as he could muster.

"Lieutenant."

"So am I."

"You're in the military?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore, but I was." He looked down at the food and was beginning to think she either wasn't hungry or that it wasn't quite to her taste. "I wish we had something else to offer you besides rice and whatever that meat is."

The pilot stared at him blankly.

"Your English is quite good. Where did you study?"

"Cambridge," Huan replied.

"In England. How nice." The truth was he was disappointed in her answer. He had hoped she'd studied somewhere in America. Berkeley or NYU. That would have given them more common ground, helped to break down barriers and weaken her resistance.

Either way, John felt the time had come to take his questioning up a notch. "Listen, Huan. I want you to tell me why you were flying over Oneida. What was the purpose of your mission?"

"I've already told you what information I'm required to give."

"Yes, and I heard you. You should know, however, that there is a large group of angry people in this town waiting outside who would love nothing more than to hang you from the closest tree for what you've done."

A crack in her armor was starting to appear. "I've done my duty. Nothing else."

"Maybe you have, but that's not the way we see it. You've come to our home, killed and imprisoned innocent people." John felt his own blood pressure begin to rise and tried to calm himself down.

"I've told you already that wasn't me."

"Yes, but do you think the people outside are going to listen to you? I'm giving you options. Behind door number one is the easy way where you tell me everything I need to know. You'll be given food, medical attention and a safe place to stay. Behind door number two is pain and discomfort. Trust me, I'm not thrilled about hurting a woman, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes to protect the people close to me." John let out a deep breath. He wanted his words to have a moment to settle in. "So, what'll it be?"

"I've already told you what information I'm required to give," she repeated, like a mantra.

John sat up straight, laced his fingers together and cracked his knuckles with a series of loud pops. He'd hoped it wouldn't come to this, but Huan's defiance meant it was time to bring Moss in to encourage her in other ways.

Chapter 26

The observation room was cleared except for John and Ray. Through the two-way mirror, they watched as Moss and two others waterboarded Huan, a mild form of torture which involved holding a person on their back, placing a cloth over their face and dousing them with water. Although it wouldn't leave any lasting physical effect, the sensation of drowning would be overwhelming.

"It's a real disgusting thing to do to a woman," Ray said, arms crossed over his chest.

Inside, John echoed those same feelings. Perhaps he even felt more strongly than that. "I wonder if you'd be saying the same thing if she were a man?"

Ray looked at him. "I suppose I wouldn't."

"Woman or not, she's a soldier, Ray. A soldier who may have important information our boys at the front can use. If she knows something that could turn the tide, would you still object?"

Ray didn't reply, probably because he hated admitting that sometimes horrible decisions needed to be made. In war, there wasn't room for wishful thinking. There was only winning or losing.

Some people in town saw Ray's idealism as a sign of weakness, but truth be told, that was what John liked about the man and one of the reasons he'd made him vice mayor. He wasn't looking for someone who would parrot his own views. Even a government the size of the one in Oneida needed some form of checks and balances.

"Maybe you should be in there doing it yourself," Ray jabbed.

John frowned. "You think I'm being a coward, is that it? That I'm getting Moss to do my dirty work? What you're forgetting, Ray, is that I've built a rapport with Huan. It might not seem like much, but once she's been broken, it'll make a world of difference. I'm the anaesthetic that will make all her pain go away. In a moment, I'll rush in there and reprimand Moss for going too far, ordering him to stop, even threatening to arrest him. She'll hate Moss for what he's done and a tiny part of her will thank me for stepping in. I'll make her feel safe. Not completely, but maybe just enough to open up."

John didn't wait around to see if Ray had started to see the issue clearly yet. He left and burst into the interrogation room, performing the role of good cop just as he had described. Feigning anger and humiliation, Moss and the two men helping him stormed out, leaving John to remove the wet cloth over Huan's face. He lifted her—discovering in the process that even soaking wet, she was surprisingly light—and sat her back on the chair, cuffing her hands to metal rings on the table. She fought to catch her breath, coughing and gagging.

"I never meant for that to happen," he lied. "I'd asked my colleague to question you vigorously, not torture you. We're going to find you some clothes to change into."

Huan sat shivering before him, wheezing in and out. She resembled less a porcelain doll now than she did a wet cat.

"I'm going to do my best to keep him away from you, but the longer you hold out, the less I can do to keep you safe."

There was a long, drawn-out silence before Huan cleared her throat, drew in a ragged gasp of air and spoke. "What do you want to know?"

John nodded, trying not to show the slightest glimmer that he'd won. He was playing the reluctant interrogator who was only collecting information in order to keep her safe. It was a nasty game, no doubt about it. But if there was another way to get the job done, John had never found it.

"Let's begin with why you were flying over Oneida."

"Our mission was not Oneida. We were sent to scout and disrupt supply lines. There are not supposed to be enemies in Oneida."

"What do you mean?"

"Intelligence briefing told us that we controlled the town."

Suddenly it made sense. The enemy didn't know the Chairman was dead. As far as they were concerned, Oneida and many of the smaller towns just like it situated in strategic locations were under their control.

"Was attacking supply lines your only mission?"

Huan shook her head just as a nurse from the clinic came in with a change of clothes and a fresh towel and placed both on the edge of the table. Huan reached for them before John stopped her hand.

"A few more questions and then I'll leave you to get dried off and changed."

Huan's eyes flicked between the table top and the towel. "Secondary mission was to scout and report enemy activity at the Y-12 National Security Complex."

John's ears perked up. "In Oak Ridge? Why?"

"We were not told."

John's best guess was that it had something to do with the nuclear work being done there, at least up until recently. Were the Chinese wondering if the Americans had enough parts to put together a crude atomic bomb? Chinese and Russian forces were stretched along the Mississippi river. Even if dropping a bomb or activating a missile silo was possible, the damage radius wouldn't deal a devastating blow to the enemy.

"Why have you attacked us?" John asked.

"We were attacked first," she answered. "We have the right to defend ourselves."

"You say we attacked you first?" John spat. "That's a lie."

Huan grew quiet and he realized that as far as foreign media was concerned, the People's Republic of China was a closed system. The government could create any story they wanted and probably even supply the doctored digital video to convince the population that retaliation was necessary. Hadn't Americans accused a former president of doing the same thing?

"How was it you attacked us?" he asked her.

"A Jin-class nuclear submarine off the coast of Washington State launched a CSS-N-5 Sabbot armed with a super-EMP warhead. The missile detonated high in the atmosphere over Kansas, destroying the communication, power and transportation network on the continent."

John nodded, feeling numb. It was one thing to speculate about what had happened and another thing entirely to have the plan laid out before you.

“And how long after did your army reach American soil?”

“One month.”

“Why so long?”

Huan reached for the cup of water and this time John let her drink. When she was done she put it down and spoke. “We had to wait for the nuclear fallout to clear.”

“The what?”

“The Russians used nuclear warheads to take out each of your missile silos so they couldn’t respond.”

John swallowed hard. “How many nukes did they use?” he asked.

Huan shook her head. “I don’t know. Dozens. Mostly in the Midwest.”

“Lord have mercy,” he said, feeling the room spinning out of control. It made sense, but one always assumed getting nuked wouldn’t go unnoticed. Perhaps the military brass he’d spoken to hadn’t bothered to mention it, since news that the country’s missile silos had been hit with nukes might demoralize the population.

“There’s something else I need to ask you,” John told her. “I’ve heard rumors about prison camps behind enemy lines.”

“I don’t know anything about those,” she answered quickly. Huan’s eyes found his and the look of shame John saw confirmed not only that the camps were real, but that the atrocities being committed there were far worse than he’d imagined.

Chapter 27

The convoy of heavy diesel M35 transport trucks containing Brandon and Gregory along with a dozen other soldiers rumbled west along the 104 on its way to the front. The M35 was an old vehicle Brandon was told had last seen action sometime before the Vietnam War, but had been thrown back into service since many of the newer transports no longer worked. The military had seen fit to begin protecting weapons platforms such as tanks, APCs, jets and helicopters against EMP strikes, but had failed to do the same for the vehicles that brought the fuel and parts that kept them all running. It was a colossal oversight and one it seemed that armies around the world were guilty of.

Back in Dyersburg before they left, O'Brien had led the boys to the quartermaster who had issued both of them a uniform. There hadn't been anything that quite fit Gregory and so he'd been forced to roll up the cuff of the smallest fatigues available.

The quartermaster's next question to Brandon had been his familiarity with using an M4 rifle. He explained that he'd fired an AR-15 many times, a handful of which had been in combat.

"Well, this one goes full auto, son, so you better be careful," the quartermaster had admonished.

"Yes, sir," was Brandon's sheepish reply.

As they headed for the M35, Gregory looked like he'd just had the guts ripped out of him.

"What's wrong?"

"Don't I get a weapon too?" he asked.

Brandon put an arm around his shoulder. "They've given you a much more important job. Those soldiers need that ammo delivered pronto or it's game over."

The little speech wasn't doing much to convince Gregory and Brandon couldn't blame him. If the tables were turned, he'd have been devastated too.

Not ten minutes later, they were rolling down the 104, the culmination of what they'd travelled all this way to do. The butterflies in Brandon's stomach had just started to subside when the first artillery shell whistled overhead and exploded a mile behind them. A thick orange and yellow fireball billowed into the air, followed a second later by the sound of the explosion.

A soldier sitting next to Brandon was chewing gum, his eyes vacant, his uniform covered in dry mud. The soldier pulled on a dying cigarette before flicking it over the side. "Here we go again," he said.

"What do you mean?" Brandon inquired.

The name tag on the soldier's uniform read Dixon. "Those ChiComs always start with an artillery barrage before an attack. Probably a tactic they got from the Russians. It's a bad tell, if you ask me."

"A bad tell?"

Dixon glanced over at Brandon. "How old are you, kid?"

"Fifteen. Well, nearly."

"Recruiting toddlers, is that what the army's come to?" That was when he leaned forward and saw Gregory sitting one seat over, the pants of his uniform rolled up.

"Lord have mercy."

"You never answered my question. What's a tell?"

Dixon laid his head back as another shell swept over and detonated somewhere out of sight.

"Well, you're too young to play poker, kid, but a tell's a dead giveaway. Sorta like a fighter who always leads with a left hook before he goes in for an upper cut. Those Chinese have been trying to fight their way across the Mississippi for the last few days now and every time we keep beating 'em back."

"Maybe with all these reinforcements we can hold them off forever," Brandon said and immediately realized he probably sounded like a real noob.

"We're gonna be there any minute, kid. Just lie back and enjoy the peace and quiet while you can."

...

The artillery barrage only intensified once they reached the front lines. But now shells weren't sailing overhead, they were landing all around them, throwing up mounds of dirt and deadly shrapnel.

Each truck had a staff sergeant who stood and ordered the soldiers off the vehicles on the double. Each group was assigned to a specific fortified trench and that was where they headed now, many of them running at full tilt, dragging rucksacks with the few pieces of equipment they were given.

The staff sergeants led the way, corralling their soldiers and shouting at them to move it or lose it. No one needed any added incentive to scurry for cover—the artillery barrage was more than enough.

The layout here looked far more like something out of World War One than it did a modern battlefield. Maybe even a low-tech version of the Maginot Line Brandon had learned about in history class.

They were halfway there, the land around them churned up from repeated barrages, devoid of trees and greenery, when the artillery stopped and the helicopters swept in. A dozen Z-10s strafed the area with fire from their 23mm chain guns. Brandon grabbed Gregory by the waist and dove behind a gabion as the massive rounds peppered the area, killing dozens.

From a series of fortified positions along the front, the slightly outdated M163 Vulcan Air Defense Systems lit up. Essentially Gatling guns mounted on an M113 chassis, they made a whirling sound a split second before they erupted with devastating effect. At once, four of the enemy choppers were shredded in the sky, falling to the ground in clumps of twisted metal. One by one they fell from the sky before the few that remained retreated across the river to safety.

Brandon rose and couldn't believe the number of dead. They'd been caught out in the open and paid a heavy price. A boy no older than twenty lay a dozen yards away, clutching at something pink spilling out of his belly. Most of the others were far less fortunate, many with wounds so ghastly they were hardly recognizable as human beings. Medics swarmed out from the trenches and ran to those in need. Brandon

went to the soldier with the gut wound, grabbed him by the uniform and proceeded to pull him to safety.

“Are you gonna help or what?” he asked a stunned-looking Gregory. “Grab him by the wrist and pull.”

Almost on autopilot, Gregory did as he was told.

Finally they reached the entrance of the trench where a medic emerged and took over. If there was such a thing as a baptism by fire, this was it.

Even after entering the relative safety of the covered trenches, Brandon’s hands continued to shake. This new area was dim and smelled of damp earth and sweat. Planks of wood laid along the ground were designed to keep feet dry. Around him, soldiers were rushing in every direction, several staring out the gun ports that looked out over the river.

A whistle came from out of the darkness. “Hey, kids. This way.” It was Dixon, standing by one of the gun ports. Brandon and Gregory went to him. “You stick here with me and keep an eye out for those Chinks. They should try to cross at any minute.” He turned to Gregory. “Where’s your rifle?”

“I don’t have one,” Gregory whimpered.

“He’s been assigned to ammo duty,” Brandon explained.

“Well, there’s a depot in trench delta, about thirty yards that way. You just be sure to keep the supply flowing nicely for anyone who needs it.”

Gregory saluted and then went off.

“No, that way,” Dixon called after him.

Gregory stopped, looked back and then changed direction.

“Damn kid’s gonna get us all killed.”

“He just wants to do his part,” Brandon said defensively. “I’m sure there are plenty of others who should be up here and chose to stay home instead.”

“Hmm, you might have a point there.”

“Contact, twelve o’clock,” a voice called out.

Dixon glanced through the gun port and swore. “What’d I tell ya, kid? Here they come.”

Brandon fell in beside him and looked out for himself. With all the trees along the river blown away long ago, the line of sight was extensive. And what Brandon saw now took his breath away. Hundreds of Chinese ZBD-08 infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) and Type 99 main battle tanks (MBT) pushed into the far side of the river.

“They’re killing themselves,” Brandon said out loud.

“No, kid,” Dixon shot back. “Those guys can swim.”

A moment later, American M777 howitzers miles from the front opened fire, creating high towers of water with every miss and an orange blast and a cheer from the soldiers in the trenches with every hit.

“Looks like a lot of them are making it across,” Brandon said, fear rising in his voice.

“I can see that,” Dixon replied.

Just then they heard the roar of planes flying over them. These weren’t jets, they were something else. Brandon ran to the trench opening and peered into the sky. Transport planes crossed overhead, some going down in flames after being shot down by US anti-aircraft batteries. But the planes weren’t the biggest threat, it was what they were carrying. Slowly the skyline behind their position filled with paratroops. Brandon ran back in and told Dixon what he’d seen.

“Have they landed airborne units like this before?” Brandon asked. “Is this part of their tell?”

Dixon spat on the ground, looking worried now for the first time. “No, this would be something new. They’re trying to cut us off and unless we can stop ’em, this whole front line may be about to crumble.”

Chapter 28

"I won't be able to keep Moss from hurting you again if you're holding out on me," John told Huan.

She was trying to be strong, he could see that by the way she struggled to maintain eye contact with him, but the lack of focus in her expression told him her mind was somewhere far away. While her body might be trapped, her mind could go where it pleased.

John rubbed his hands together. "Are you married, Huan?"

"I am."

"I'm sure you miss your husband a great deal, don't you?"

Her expression didn't waver.

"What about kids? You have any?" John paused to let her answer, and when she didn't, he went on. "I've got two myself. Son and a daughter. Twelve and fourteen. She's been traumatized something fierce by a laundry list of things I won't get into, but staying put in her room drawing pictures and writing stories is pretty much all she's been up to these last few days. My wife says it's just a phase." The finger of his left hand tapped a quickening rhythm on the table. "And for some reason my son got it into his mind he wanted to be a soldier and sneaked off to the front with a friend. Twelve years old and ready to throw his life away, can you believe it? I may not see him again because of what he's done. Not unless we can track him down and get him back. It's a thought I have a hard time accepting, Huan. Hard to face, you know what I'm saying?"

She didn't respond.

"Any parent, no matter what their kids have done, shouldn't have to face the chances of never seeing them again. I'm sure you feel the same way. You wanna see your husband and children again, don't you?"

Her gaze fell to his tapping finger before she found his eyes again.

"Don't you?" John shouted.

"Yes," Huan whispered.

"Of course you do. We understand each other better than you think. We may be on opposite sides of the fence, you and I, but I think there would be many things that we agree on. Believe it or not, I want you to see your family again, Huan. So far you've been pretty forthcoming, all of which is helping to get you home, one step at a time. But when I asked you about the camps you clammed up. I don't wanna see you backslide, Huan. I'm the only one rooting for you here, so you don't wanna lose me as your ally, but I need the whole truth or so help you God."

Huan swallowed and her throat made an audible clicking noise. "If I tell you what you ask, you'll let me go?"

"Maybe not just yet, but I'll do what I can to convince the others. Your cooperation or lack thereof is what they'll look at first."

“All right. What do you want to know?”

John stopped tapping and leaned in. “That’s more like it. The camps, Huan. Where are they and what are they being used for?”

“There are many.”

“Then let’s start with the closest one.”

“West of Jonesboro.” The way she spoke the name it sounded like Joanboro.

“Jonesboro, Arkansas.” That was exactly where David Newbury had located it, which meant she was probably telling the truth.

Huan nodded.

“And what purpose does the camp serve?”

“POWs, but that is only a small part. Most of the inmates are political prisoners, forced laborers and citizens who require re-education.”

“By forced labor you mean slave labor.”

Huan nodded reluctantly. She had a conscience, probably the only reason this interrogation was going anywhere. John was thankful, since the alternative would have been increasingly brutal forms of torture and resulting intelligence that would have been questionable at best.

“What are they making?”

“Things to help the war effort.”

Hearing it reminded John of Germany’s camps during the Second World War.

“And what about the re-education you mentioned?”

“Following conquest, the United States will be divided into two major zones of control. One controlled by China, the other by Russia.”

“And what about North Korea? What will they get?”

“Canada.”

“Wow. I guess that’s one way to do it.” This whole conversation was starting to feel surreal, like children arguing over starting positions in a giant game of Risk. “So your government wants to wring capitalism out of the Americans under its control?”

“We are also capitalist, don’t forget. It is notions of democracy that must be erased.”

John was nodding, trying not to look as agitated on the outside as he was feeling on the inside. “I don’t think that’ll be as easy as your people think.”

“Maybe not, but General Wei Liang is quite confident.”

John’s expression changed. She’d let slip the name of a major player and he wanted to get as much info on this person as he could. “Who’s General Liang?”

“The supreme commander of all Chinese and North Korean forces. Once the United States is defeated, General Liang will become the military governor of the People’s Republic of China occupation zone.”

“But how have you determined the zones of control?”

“That will be determined after the defeat.”

John scratched at the stubble on his chin. If what Huan was telling him was true, then the enemy was doing to the United States what the Allies had done to Germany during WWII. In those final weeks of the war, a race of sorts had begun to gobble up as much territory as possible, a contest which the Russians had won.

It also meant that tensions were likely to exist in the current alliance between China and Russia. Just as in the past, each nation was now attempting to outmaneuver the other in order to claim the biggest piece of the pie once hostilities ceased. At the very least, this new piece of information meant General Liang was a

man of some ambition. And John knew very well the way ambition had a habit of blinding men until it was too late.

"It seems to me," John said, "as though North Korean forces have been resigned to a secondary role."

"They have," she admitted. "Their primary objective is to guard the supply routes and operate in the rear."

"I see." Cracks certainly existed in what was beginning to look like a fragile alliance. And given the right pressure, even a small crack could lead to a catastrophic failure.

But Huan had one more secret to divulge, one even John hadn't been ready for.

"There is one other thing about the internment camps I have not told you. A rumor, although I have heard it from a reliable source."

John leaned in. "Go on."

"While the men are being worked to death to help support the war effort, the women are being forced into a breeding program."

"A what?" John asked, not entirely sure if he'd heard her properly.

"A powerful company called BDI Shenzhen has sent personnel to occupied territory in order to help promote Chinese principles. The EMP and subsequent war will have taken a great toll on your population. The People's Republic is trying to help repopulate these lands. To make them more... Asian."

"You're trying to breed us out of existence?"

"I'm not doing anything," Huan protested. "The same has been going on in Tibet for many years. It is a slow process of diluting the existing genetic makeup."

As insane as it sounded, the more Huan spoke, the more John realized there were historical precedents for what she was telling him. The English in Scotland during the Middle Ages had practiced 'le droit du seigneur', translated roughly as 'the lord's right', which enabled him to sleep with a peasant girl on the first night of her marriage. The idea was to dilute Scottish blood and breed them into a state of subservience.

John could only imagine the countless numbers of camps that already dotted the states now under enemy control and the unspeakable horrors being perpetrated there.

John had given explicit instructions that he not be interrupted, so when the sudden knock came at the door, he knew something was wrong.

Ray poked his head in, a dour expression on his weathered face. "We have a situation."

Chapter 29

Ray brought John over to the Pioneer Community hospital on Alberta Street where dozens of people were milling around the entrance.

Oneida's main doctor, a short, balding man with horn-rimmed glasses and a sweaty complexion named Dr. Trent Coffey, met them outside on the front stairs. His twenty-five-year-old son Daniel, also a doctor, worked with his father, but was likely inside seeing to patients.

"What's going on?" John demanded. "Ray told me there was a problem."

"We believe a cholera epidemic's broken out," Dr. Coffey said.

"What do you mean, you think?"

"Since this morning, we've had over thirty people admitted, complaining of leg cramps, profuse diarrhea and vomiting."

John put a hand up to his forehead to block out the sun. "How is it transmitted? Is this contagious?"

"The method of transmission is through contact with infected feces. A fly that's been contaminated only has to land on your food for it to spread. But it means that the water supply might be contaminated. Have your people been boiling the water after filtering it?"

"That's the protocol," John said. "Although I can't say for sure. Maybe some of them are cutting corners." John turned to Ray. "Do you know anything about this?"

Ray shook his head. "Not at all. I thought the same as you, John."

"Somehow the bacteria's getting into the water supply," Dr. Coffey said. "That must be the entry point, which means that either the sanitation department isn't processing the waste properly or..."

"That's Dan Niles' job," Ray blurted out. "Let me have a word with his people. See where the runoff is being directed."

John considered this. "Where's the town's main source of drinking water at the moment?" he asked.

"I believe it's Ponderosa Lake," Ray replied.

"Then change it to Laxton Lake right away."

"Laxton's a lot further away. Moving that much water without vehicles isn't easy. Shelley Gibson's people are going to have a fit."

"Then let them have a fit," John barked, still on edge from his interrogation with Huan. "We still have horses, don't we?"

Ray nodded reluctantly.

"Then put them to good use. I know Diane won't mind diverting the ones she has from farming for an emergency. Besides, the last thing we need is an epidemic breaking out in our midst when foreign armies are only a few hundred miles away." He turned to Dr. Coffey. "So you've got the infected quarantined?"

“Those who’ve come forward with symptoms, yes. We’ve also set up special beds to deal with the effects. Cholera’s a messy disease, as you can imagine. But I’m afraid it’ll put a big dent in your work force if the problem isn’t addressed immediately.”

John nodded, noting the urgency in Dr. Coffey’s voice. Oneida was currently a town of over two thousand people living in conditions comparable to the American Civil War. It was hardly a shock that cramped living and working conditions, mixed with fatigue from eking out a subsistence style of living, would eventually take their toll on people’s health.

“What are you using to treat it?” John asked.

Dr. Coffey’s eyebrows rose. “Right now, an antibiotic called tetracycline. It seems to be doing the job. I expect to run out of it within the next forty-eight hours, after which I’ll move to three hundred milligrams of doxycycline. These people are losing fluids fast. If we don’t get some clean water moved up to the hospital, folks are gonna start dying.”

John was about to leave to issue orders when he remembered something Dr. Coffey had said at the beginning of their conversation. “You mentioned before that human waste might be leaking into the drinking water,” John said.

“I did.”

“But it sounded as though there could also be another reason for the outbreak.”

Dr. Coffey shifted, adjusted his lab coat, which was covered in patches of discolored fabric. “There might be, John, but the likelihood is so remote that I decided to bite my tongue.”

“Don’t hold anything back. The information could help save lives.”

Reluctantly, Dr. Coffey agreed. “Well, if sewage isn’t mixing with the water supply it does leave one other possibility.”

“Which is?” John asked impatiently.

“Sabotage.”

Chapter 30

Back at the front, Brandon and Dixon busied themselves loading 5.56 rounds into magazines. The Chinese had launched three successive waves of armor at the American position and each time they'd been beaten back thanks in large part to the defending artillery and Abrams tanks. The few who'd managed to run that gauntlet and survive were taken out by Javelin missiles or the last line of defense, the AT-4 shoulder-fired anti-tank missile. Though not nearly strong enough to defeat the frontal armor of a main battle tank, they were more than enough to knock the treads off or destroy a Chinese ZBD-08.

The ground on either side of the river was littered with burned-out vehicles and dead bodies. As for the Chinese paratroopers who had landed behind enemy lines, when the frontal assault failed, they had found themselves cut off and were quickly destroyed by Humvees mounted with .50 cal.

The skies were relatively quiet now. The anti-air defense, a combination of M1097 and M6 Linebackers along with the older, but still lethal M163, had done their part keeping bombs from dropping on their heads.

The all-clear hadn't been given just yet, since it still wasn't known whether there would be a fourth wave, nor how the other sectors had managed to hold up in the face of the stubborn Chinese assaults. All they could do now was reload and prepare for the worst.

Dixon wasn't saying much as he snapped bullets into his polymer mag. The death toll was rising with every fresh attack and even Brandon knew this part of the line would need reinforcements before nightfall or the enemy would break through. But that wasn't all that was bothering Dixon. He'd told Brandon he was worried about the lack of American armor. The last of the Abrams near the front had been destroyed during that last attack. Even the Bradley Fighting Vehicles, largely designed to provide infantry support, had been thrown in to fill the gaps and were quickly knocked out. That meant the only thing keeping the enemy armor at bay were the Javelins and AT-4s.

"One more push and we've had it," Dixon murmured to himself. He glanced up at Brandon and threw him an extra mag. "I didn't know someone your age could shoot like that." He was referring to the way Brandon had taken out a squad of Chinese troops as they disembarked from their troop carriers on the near side of the river.

Brandon couldn't help but smile. "I've had a fair amount of practice, I guess."

Gregory came in then, lugging another ammo can, breathing heavily.

"Bring those to Keller's M249," Dixon told him.

Gregory did so and, when he returned, collapsed with exhaustion.

"You've done a great job," Brandon commended him.

"He's running out in the open to fetch our ammo," Dixon added. "That ain't no small thing."

If Gregory liked the kind words, he wasn't showing it.

A shout rang through the trench, only partly muted by the gaping hole in the roof where an enemy artillery shell had made a direct hit. "They're building up."

Brandon sprang to his feet and peered out across the river where a fresh formation of armor was amassing.

"Don't these guys ever run out of tin cans?" Dixon said, swearing under his breath.

If they managed to hold off this attack it would be by the slimmest of margins.

"Here they come," Keller shouted, pulling the bolt back on his M249.

The sound of chaos and explosions rang out from the rear. Dixon scanned the approaching armor, appearing mystified by what he was hearing.

"They haven't fired yet," he said. "Where's that coming from?"

Over by the trench entrance, Gregory stood frozen. Brandon sprinted over to see what had stopped him in his tracks.

When he arrived, the sight he found was utterly terrifying. Dozens of Chinese Type 99s were roaring in from the rear. They had broken through somewhere further south and were now encircling America's last line of defense.

When Dixon saw what was coming, he reached into his pocket and calmly pulled out a cigarette. "I'd offer you one, kid, but I don't think we'll live long enough for you to enjoy it."

...

The sight of so many American soldiers throwing up their hands in surrender made Brandon's eyes fill with tears. Wet, hungry and exhausted after days of fighting, for many the choice was a simple one. Death might have seemed the more honorable solution, but living to fight another day was infinitely more practical.

Chinese soldiers ran toward them, aiming their QBZ-03 assault rifles and shouting instructions no one could understand. One of their officers appeared and motioned for the men to lace their fingers behind their heads and form a line. Similar scenes were playing out all along the trench.

Already, Chinese army engineers were laying the pontoons for the improvised bridge they were building across the Mississippi.

"Efficient little buggers, aren't they?" Dixon observed.

The Chinese officer heard Dixon speak and stormed over. His insignia, a single chevron with a pair of crossed rifles above it, designated him as a sergeant. Thin, with the fresh face of someone Brandon guessed was in his early twenties, the soldier shouted and then buried the butt of his rifle into Dixon's gut.

The American let out a loud moan and sank to his knees. The sergeant kicked him in the face and was preparing for another blow when Brandon stepped between them.

Other soldiers rushed forward, weapons drawn. The sergeant sent the back of his hand across Brandon's face before shoving him to the ground as well. Salty blood oozed from Brandon's lip. The sting was ferocious and Brandon's heart was pounding in his chest, but the sergeant must have felt as though he'd made his point, because he turned away and stormed off.

From the corner of his eye, Brandon could see Gregory standing at attention with the other prisoners. He was struggling to hold back the tears and Brandon couldn't help but wonder now that the country was wide open whether their parents in Oneida would be next.

...

The column of American POWs stretched for as far as the eye could see. Every hundred feet or so was a Chinese soldier in fatigues, yelling at anyone who stopped to rest or go to the bathroom.

Before they'd left, each prisoner had been searched and stripped of weapons and valuables. Trudging along next to Brandon was Dixon. They'd stolen his cigarettes and a touch of his pride as well. A swollen left eye marked the place where that sergeant's boot had met his face. There hadn't been much bleeding, although he'd complained of a headache. Just ahead of them Brandon could make out the thin figure of Gregory. Once the opportunity allowed, he would move up to check on his younger friend.

As they crossed the newly finished pontoon bridge, Brandon gave one final glance backwards, wondering what had become of all the troops in the rear. Had they escaped or were they not far behind?

Hours passed as they marched through the night, south down Interstate 55 toward a destination none of them knew. Without any food or water, soldiers began to stumble. In some cases, they collapsed on the side of the road. They were given five seconds to get back up by the Chinese, who stood over them poking at them with their rifles. After the first Marine, a wiry soldier with thick blond hair, was shot for failing to comply, the Americans began scooping up their exhausted brothers in arms and carrying them along.

With the first hints of dawn, Brandon began working his way up through the column until he reached Gregory, who looked dispirited and low on energy.

"When's the last time you ate?" Brandon whispered, suddenly worried.

Gregory didn't respond.

Brandon nudged him and asked again.

"Hey, watcha doing?" Gregory snapped, noticing Brandon for the first time.

Lack of food, water and extreme exhaustion meant Gregory's system was starting to shut down. To their right was the side of the highway and Brandon slowly maneuvered in that direction, removing the t-shirt he wore under his uniform. The cool, early morning air bit at his bare chest. Soldiers around him looked on quizzically wondering what he was about to do. Up ahead was a patch of wild dandelions. Once they drew even with it, Brandon sprang off the road, dragging his shirt through the dew which had formed overnight and snatching up as many young dandelions as he could. An angry voice behind him shouted in a language Brandon didn't understand. But he didn't need to speak Chinese to know what the guard was ordering him to do. Glancing back, Brandon saw the enemy soldier advancing toward him, rifle drawn. Quickly, Brandon rejoined the line of POWs and shuffled back over to Gregory.

"Here, eat these," he told him.

Gregory looked down at the dandelions in Brandon's hand with confusion.

"Your body's starting to give up on you, so eat them, will ya?"

"All right, fine." Gregory took the weeds and ate them.

"Now wash them down with this." Brandon held his wet t-shirt over Gregory's mouth and wrung it out, providing several precious drops of water. Brandon took the last little bit for himself.

Within thirty minutes, the changes in Gregory were noticeable. His eyes were more alert and no longer looked dark and sunken.

“Feeling better?”

Gregory nodded. “Where did you learn that?”

“It’s a little trick your dad taught me,” Brandon replied. “Dandelions are best when they’re young. The older ones taste bitter. Usually it’s a good idea to boil them to remove the bad taste, but we didn’t exactly have that option. You can also drink the broth after as tea.”

“Sometimes I wish I knew that stuff myself,” Gregory lamented.

“Well, maybe I can teach you some as we go.”

A smile grew on Gregory’s face. “Really?”

“Sure thing.”

Brandon reached into his pocket and pulled out two mullein leaves and handed them to Gregory. It was the same species of plant John had taught him made great toilet paper in the wild.

Gregory brought them to his lips to eat them. Brandon pulled his hand away, laughing.

“Those aren’t for breakfast,” Brandon told him. “It’s nature’s toilet paper. I had a few extra I found on our way to Dyersburg and I have a feeling where we’re going these may come in handy.”

After they headed east on State Route 18 for close to ten minutes, the edges of a camp slowly came into view. A sprawling open field was surrounded by a twenty-foot-high barbed wire fence encircling rows and rows of wooden barracks. Even from a distance, Brandon could see thousands of other prisoners behind the enclosure, busy building more of the structures. They hadn’t arrived at a place for POWs. This was a concentration camp, one which many of them would not survive.

Chapter 31

John was on Bank Street heading toward Oneida High School when the skeleton of the greenhouse came into view. They were building it on the football field and the impressive structure stretched from one goalpost to the other.

He spotted Diane over by a stack of lumber they'd reclaimed from some of the vacant houses on the edge of town and the lumber store on Alberta Street. She looked busy as ever, directing the dozens of workers buzzing around her. Close by were hundreds of yards of plastic tubing they would use for the hydroponics inside.

"You amaze me more and more every day," John exclaimed, not entirely able to wipe the smile off his face.

Diane stopped what she was doing and put a hand on her hip. "She's coming along nicely, I must admit." Her face settled into a frown. "Any word on Gregory?"

John shook his head. "I've got Reese on it. I also sent a message up to the front for them to be on the lookout. If I don't hear back, I'll probably just head down myself on the train scheduled to pass through tomorrow. I'm sure they're fine, honey."

Diane didn't answer, but he knew empty reassurances would do little to ease her worry.

"When do you expect to have this place up and running?" John asked, trying to divert her attention.

"Soon, except we're still waiting on Ray Gruber and the windmills he promised to build us."

"Don't forget those windmills are for the whole town, Diane, not just for your greenhouse."

"I know that, John," she shot back, clearly annoyed. "The food we're getting ready to grow here is for everyone."

This conversation was heading in the wrong direction. His eyes fell to the necklace hanging outside of her shirt. It was the wedding anniversary gift he'd fished out of the cabin fire. "I see you haven't thrown that old thing away yet."

"This?" she said, touching it with the tips of her fingers. "You keep misbehaving and I may just do that."

He pulled her close and kissed her lips. They were cold in the early morning air. "Have faith, honey, because right now, we don't have much else."

"I'm trying, John," she replied, holding on tight.

"Tell me how everything went at the pot farm."

"Better than expected. Half of the plants were still viable and we found quite a bit of this tubing."

"I left a small cache of weapons out there by the old hut when I discovered the place," he told her. "Just a few shotguns and rifles, nothing fancy. But I wanted you to know in case your team runs into trouble out there."

“While you were at it, you should have buried those dead bodies. We could smell them coming up the pathway. Two of my girls lost their breakfast.”

The visual might have made John smirk if he hadn't been thinking that the loss of a meal these days wasn't a laughing matter. “I guess I had to make a decision.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Diane said, a thread of annoyance creeping into her voice. “Moss came to see me yesterday.”

“Really? What for?” he asked.

“He wanted our fertilizer. The stuff we salvaged from the Ace Home Center on Industrial Lane.”

“I thought that place had pretty much been emptied?”

“It had, except for some of the outdoor stuff.”

“But why would Moss need fertilizer? Doesn't he know you need it to grow the crops?”

Diane sighed. “He told me he needed it to build IEDs.”

“All right,” John replied. “Let me handle it.”

John was getting ready to walk away when Diane said: “How'd it go with Dan Niles?”

“Fine, I guess. I didn't want him to think the cholera outbreak was his fault. Even if there is a leak, people need to remember to boil the water they drink.” John was sounding annoyed himself and tried to rein it in. “It doesn't take long before people start relaxing on the safety measures and thinking we're back to business as usual. It's making me think that if we ever do get these lights back on, our next headache might be monitoring usage.”

He hadn't told Diane that Dr. Coffey had brought up the possibility of a saboteur in their midst. First he would allow Dan to run his own investigation and if that didn't turn up a likely cause for the contamination, then he would talk to Moss about taking measures, although what those would be, John didn't know.

Of course, there was still a giant elephant in the room—the intel John had gathered from his conversation with their Chinese POW, Huan. Diane had clearly noticed the way he'd been biting his lower lip, a habit he'd had since high school whenever he had too much on his mind.

“When do you plan on telling everyone?” she asked, not wanting to spell out in detail that she was referring to the concentration camps.

“I wasn't sure if I should.”

“Really, John?”

“What good's it gonna do besides get everyone wound up over something they can't do anything about?”

“I agree, but keeping secrets for other people's sake is a slippery slope, don't you think? When they finally do find out, the impact will feel like a nuclear bomb blast.”

John grew quiet. That last thing she said reminded him of something he needed to do. He turned then to walk away.

“You're not upset, are you?” she said as he left.

He stopped. “Of course not, honey. It just occurred to me I need to talk with a man about a bomb.”

Chapter 32

John found Jerry Fowler over behind the Mayor's office, tossing wild grass to a cranky-sounding gander.

"I see you've met George."

"That his name?" Jerry replied. "I have to admit, I wasn't George's biggest fan when he and I first met. Nearly took my finger off as I tried to pet him."

John let out a burst of laughter. "You wouldn't be the first. I can't tell you how many times I've been tempted to turn him into a nice stew and been begged to stop."

"I'd say your first mistake was to give him a name," Jerry said, reaching into his pocket for more grass. George poked his beak through the wire mesh, clearly eager for more.

"Trust me," John told him in no uncertain terms, "that wasn't my doing."

"Ah, yes. Kids," Jerry said knowingly. "The friends of farm animals across the country."

The comment brought a rush of raw emotion to the surface that John hadn't anticipated and he struggled to keep his composure. For a moment he imagined Reese with the boys on the trail back to Oneida, giving them a good talking to. "I trust you're settling in all right?"

Jerry nodded. "There's no one back in Oak Ridge waiting for me, if that's what you mean."

"My main concern was whether you needed anything."

"At some point, I'd like to take a trip back to my house for a few sentimental items."

"That can be arranged," John replied. "Perhaps even sooner than you think."

Jerry tossed a clump of grass to George and glanced over at John, unsure. "Something about that sounded rather cloak-and-dagger."

"Maybe I should come clean then," John admitted. "I've been thinking some about our conversation on the way back from Oak Ridge. You mentioned the Y-12 facility there dismantled outdated atomic weapons."

The look on Jerry's face made it clear he wasn't crazy about where this conversation was headed. "I did say that, but I also told you I had very little to do with that side of things. I was in charge of charting and monitoring weather patterns."

"That part I got. But do you think any of the material there could be used to make a bomb? One that works is what I mean."

Jerry rubbed his thick fingers through his beard as though he were scratching for fleas. "Gosh, I don't know. I suppose so. They're sent there to be dismantled, after all. Although I couldn't say whether any of the old weapons were still there."

"Yeah," John said. "I've been thinking about that, and it seemed to me that if the military was having trouble finding vehicles to move troops and equipment to the front, would they really use those resources to haul away outdated bombs?"

“Hard to say,” Jerry admitted. “You do raise a good point, but if those were the only nuclear weapons they had left, they might.”

John nodded. “Well, I suppose it’s worth having a conversation with some of my contacts at the front.”

“So you wanna put together some kind of missile and lob it onto Beijing, is that it?”

The sound of it made John smile. “No, I was thinking of finding a way to lure as many enemy troops as possible into a major U.S. city and dropping it on them there.”

Jerry shook his head. “Oh, goodness. That’s insane.”

“I know,” John admitted. “I’m not pretending to have worked out all the details and ramifications, but taking out a million enemy troops might just turn the tide.”

“It might, but it might also kill lots of innocent Americans.”

“No doubt,” John replied, thinking of the millions probably already in concentration camps waiting to die if they continued to stand by and do nothing. “Maybe part of me expected that most of the folks in cities had either fled to the country or died. It’s crazy, I know, but do you think it’s possible?”

“To have any real effect, I think you’d need a handful of bombs. Besides, I’m sure the army’s already sent off our nukes the minute they learned who was behind this.”

John shook his head. “It doesn’t seem that way. Shortly after the EMP, we were also hit with nuclear attacks which wiped out our silos.”

“There goes mutually assured destruction.”

“Exactly. Listen, you know that place better than anyone in Oneida. If we go back in, will you help us?”

Jerry didn’t answer for a moment. Then: “Have you ever heard of Don Quixote, John?”

“The knight in the Spanish novel by Miguel de Cervantes?”

“Yeah, the guy who used to charge windmills thinking they were giants.”

“You think this is a fool’s errand?” John said, feeling defeated.

“It is right now. Finding the warheads is one thing, but it isn’t like lighting a stick of dynamite. You need to find someone who knows how to program it and then some kind of vehicle to deliver it.”

“What about a plane?” John asked. “If we do find someone with expertise, maybe we could load it onto a Cessna and fly it over a concentration of enemy forces. There’s the Scott Municipal airport southwest of Oneida.”

“But you’re talking about a kamikaze run, John.”

“Certainly sounds that way, doesn’t it?”

“And who are you proposing will fly this Cessna?”

“I will,” John replied.

Chapter 33

John was about to head to the comms room to see if Henry had received any news from the front when Devon and three other men approached him on horseback. They were about to begin a patrol around the perimeter of town.

The military fatigue-style baseball cap covering Devon's head did nothing to suppress his wild brown curls underneath. "Sir," he said, pulling his chestnut mare to a stop. "Moss asked me to keep an eye out for you. Says he needs to have a word."

Sometimes John felt like he was being pulled in a million different directions at once. "Sure thing, Devon. Where is he?"

"Last I saw, he was over by the high school, having some heated words with your wife."

"All right, thanks for the heads up."

John waved them on and headed toward what he could only imagine was about to become a full-blown shouting match.

When he arrived, a crowd had gathered in a circle around two figures. Even from a distance John could hear two distinct voices and he knew right away who they belonged to.

As he reached the throng it became clear that Moss' men had come in to take the fertilizer and Diane's workers had stepped in to stop them.

Pushing through the crowd, John was intent on putting a stop to this immediately. Not only was it unprofessional to have his wife openly arguing with his head of security, but it was also unproductive. This greenhouse needed to get built and start functioning as soon as possible.

"Listen," John shouted through cupped hands. "I want all of you back to work right away."

Slowly, reluctantly, the crowd broke apart and split in two groups. One headed back to the greenhouse while Moss' people returned to filling sandbags and putting out barbed wire.

Between Diane and Moss was a stack of fertilizer bags, many torn, the precious fertilizer spilled on the grass.

John led both of them to the high-school gymnasium, which was being outfitted with beds and cots taken from homes no longer being occupied. If war, disease or some other unforeseen crisis gripped the community, Oneida needed a place to care for them.

Diane and Moss stood before him, refusing to look at one another.

"Frankly, I'm ashamed and embarrassed," John said to both of them.

Moss shook his head. "I'm sorry, boss, but I was just following orders."

"Whose orders?"

"Yours."

Surprise registered on John's face. "I never told you to grab the fertilizer."

“No, but you did tell me to plant IEDs along the major choke points leading into town.”

“Which is why I sent you to the Birch coal mine to grab some dynamite.”

“Well, there wasn’t much there,” Moss replied.

Diane stood by without saying a word, perhaps intent on letting Moss dig his own hole.

“So I mentioned in passing to Diane that I was going to use some of the fertilizer I found at the Ace Hardware store and when I showed up, it was gone.”

“By the time we got there,” Diane said, “I thought you’d taken what you needed.”

Moss’ hands flew in the air. “Heck, I didn’t get a chance. You swooped in so fast.”

“Easy now,” John warned them both.

For a moment, neither said anything.

“I thought we could work this out on our own,” Diane said.

Moss motioned to Diane. “When I saw her people had taken every last bag, well, I sorta felt like they’d gone behind my back and stolen it.”

“First off,” John said, “something can’t be stolen if it doesn’t belong to you in the first place. Whatever’s in Oneida is a town resource. If one of our citizens is hoarding food or weapons, that hurts all of us. This isn’t every man for himself anymore.”

Moss looked away.

“And that goes for you as well, Diane.”

“If there was enough to share,” his wife said, “I would have been happy to. I also think we need to set our priorities straight, John. What’s more important right now, making sure we have food to last us through the winter or planting bombs?”

Diane had a good point about the importance of food production. What she wasn’t taking into consideration was that food was useless if there wasn’t anyone alive to eat it. “The ammonium nitrate required to make explosives,” he told her, “requires a purity of at least ninety-four percent. There are plenty of organic substitutes you can use for fertilizer in the meantime—dung, compost, low-grade plant food.”

Diane crossed her arms. She thought John was taking Moss’ side.

The truth was, this wasn’t an issue of mixed priorities or taking sides as much as it was about two leaders of the community behaving badly. “Given the threats we’re facing,” John said. “I think Moss’ entitled to as much of it as he needs. You can use whatever’s left over. More importantly, I don’t want lines drawn in the sand with one department fighting against another. We all have a common enemy and we need to remain united.”

With some reluctance, Moss and Diane agreed and sealed the compromise with a handshake.

“I need to get back to work,” his wife said, a touch of tension still in her voice.

Moss was about to leave as well when John asked him to stay. “Devon mentioned you wanted to see me,” John said. “Was it about the fertilizer?”

Moss shook his head. “No, sir. I wanted to let you know that the defensive perimeter around Oneida is basically in place. I’ve positioned men with Winchester scoped rifles on the buildings with the best fields of fire. The sandbags and gabions are set up. Foxholes have been dug with lines of sight over the major bridges leading toward town. As you instructed, the outer ring starts about two miles out with a second defensive ring a mile inside of it. The bridges have also been rigged to blow. As of now I have IEDs planted on the opposite sides, but it’d also be nice to have a few between each strong point.”

John nodded. "Good work. I'm sure when Diane hands over the fertilizer you asked for, you'll have what you need. Also see to it that a team with a radio is positioned on Owens Ridge since it overlooks the town and the three major approaches." John swallowed, wondering if he was missing anything. "How we doing on manpower?"

"I could also use more," Moss admitted. "Won't lie about that. Especially given that if the enemy breaks through each of our strong points, we'll be left fighting them house to house."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," John said, knowing perfectly well they lacked any real anti-armor capability. If Chinese and Russian tanks made it through the outer defenses, they would be powerless to stop them.

Chapter 34

As morning wore on into afternoon, John's thoughts returned time and time again to his interrogation with Huan and the news she had revealed about the concentration camps. His first inclination had been to keep the information a secret, since it might destabilize the delicate balance in the community he'd striven so hard to achieve. Blowouts like the one he'd seen between Diane and Moss were a rare blip in an otherwise harmonious community. John's mother had always said that 'idle hands were the devil's workshop' and with all the major projects going on around Oneida, it wasn't a surprise that at the end of the day, people didn't have the energy for bickering.

So in a rare move, John had asked the heads of each department to gather the citizens of Oneida before the mayor's office. The speech John had prepared wouldn't be long, but the impact would surely reverberate throughout the coming days and weeks.

His wish was that far from pushing them apart, news of the atrocities being committed against fellow Americans would draw them closer together. Perhaps even infuse them with renewed purpose.

Before long, more than two thousands souls stood before him. The mayor's office was a single story, and so John had climbed up onto the roof to address them.

"I don't want anyone to get the wrong impression with the perch I'm speaking to you from," he began.

The crowd chuckled in response.

"Everyone here is an important member of the community. This isn't like the old days where a few were able to enjoy wealth and privilege while everyone else worked their fingers to the bone. So if I speak to you now from the top of the mayor's office, it's only because we haven't found a way to recharge the bullhorn yet."

Behind John stood each of the department heads and by his side was Vice Mayor Ray Gruber, wearing his nice-guy smile the way some people wore a beloved shirt.

"God willing," John continued, "the windmills Ray and the small team of handymen and engineers are working on will be up and running within the next twenty-four hours."

A huge eruption of applause.

"Don't kid yourselves, this will mark a terrific achievement. We've been in touch with communities all over the non-occupied zone and many of them are struggling to even imagine what we've been able to achieve. When we bring the power back on in Oneida, it's likely to be the first on the continent. Hopefully, the first of many," he added.

More applause and hollering, which stretched Ray's perma-smile even wider. Given how little good news there was of late, it was difficult not to rejoice.

“There is something that as Americans and citizens of this town, each of you deserves to know,” John began solemnly. “I’m going to warn you beforehand that much of what I’m about to say is disturbing, but I felt it was important that the truth gets out, no matter how frightening or ugly it is.”

Predictably, the mood began to shift. Some wore blank expressions, steeling themselves against what was to come. Others were far less capable of handling the anticipation of bad news and bit dirty nails and the inside of lips.

“There’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just come right out with it. In the last few days, we’ve learned a number of shocking truths from the Chinese helicopter pilot who crashed outside of town. Foremost among them is the presence of concentration camps in enemy-held territory filled with American citizens. I don’t need to go into detail to say that atrocities are being committed there on a scale unseen since the Second World War. If ever there was a reason why we must win this war, this is it. Let the millions of Americans currently imprisoned be your rallying cry. Victory is the only option, lest we share their fate.”

The audience stood silent for a moment. From the stillness, a single pair of hands began clapping. Soon others joined and before long everyone assembled was stomping and cheering and continued doing so for several minutes.

All that noise made it hard to hear the two-way radio on Moss’ belt as it sprang to life. Eventually, the message got through and he came up to John who was still standing before the gleeful crowd.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Moss told him.

But by then John could already see the first hints of what Moss had come to tell him. A battered-looking column of M1A2 Abrams tanks was rolling down Industrial Lane. Following close behind were a ragtag band of bloodied and dispirited soldiers. It was a sight that John had prayed he would never see.

The front had collapsed.

And the enemy was on its way.

Chapter 35

John descended from the roof to meet the approaching soldiers, his heart full of dread at what he was about to hear. Diane was by his side, clutching his arm as though they were about to hear news of Gregory's fate. Mingling in the shocked crowd were Kay and Natalie Appleby and John had to remind himself that he wasn't the only one who had a missing son.

The M1A2 pulled to an abrupt stop. The top hatch on the lead tank opened and out came a soldier in his mid-twenties, wearing a helmet. He removed it, shaking out a scruff of blond hair and introducing himself as Captain Bishop. Somewhere in the middle of the column of tanks, Humvees and Bradley Fighting Vehicles were a number of fuel trucks.

John gave them his name and told them he was the acting mayor of Oneida.

"I'm wondering if my men could rest in town before we move out tomorrow morning," Bishop said, looking more like a football quarterback than a tank commander.

"Of course," John replied without a moment's hesitation. "We haven't seen any military here since Colonel Edgar came through. What news is there from the front?"

"Front? There is no front anymore. The Chinese must have broken through somewhere around Memphis. Circled around and cut off everyone fighting in the trenches on the front lines."

The implication was that Captain Bishop and his men had been in a reserve unit in the rear. Nevertheless, the news couldn't be any worse. John had a momentary urge to ask Captain Bishop about his son, but realized how futile that was. "Wasn't there any way to break through to them?" John asked in despair, referring to the soldiers in the trenches.

"If it were possible, don't you think we would have done it?"

"Of course," John replied. "It's just our son is up there..."

"There were a lot of sons up there, Mr. Mayor. I served two tours in Iraq and that was by far the worst fighting I've ever seen. Barely made it out ourselves."

"So what now?" John asked, no longer caring if the townspeople listened in. They would learn the grim truth sooner or later.

"First light we continue east till we reach our rendezvous point near Johnson City. Only problem is our fuel trucks are nearly bone dry and the chances of bringing the armor with us are slim to none. I'm guessing you folks don't have any spare JP-8 jet fuel lying around?"

John shook his head, feeling too queasy to smile at the captain's joke. "Any clue how close behind the enemy is?"

"Hard to say, but we're gonna deploy defensively while we're here. We noticed your foxholes over by Cecil Bridge on our way in. Tell me you have that thing rigged to blow at the first sight of enemy armor."

"We sure do," John told him. "But we don't have anything that can put a hole in a Chinese Type 99."

"You won't need to worry about that," Captain Bishop said, grinning. "Not while we're here at least."

"Who's your commanding officer?" John asked.

Bishop winked. "You're looking at him."

John left the captain to sort out his men and headed back to the mayor's office, Diane, Kay and Natalie in tow. The near-hysterical expressions on the Appleby women's faces were only making the situation worse.

"Stop beating yourself up," Diane said once they were inside. "Reese was the most qualified man for the job, so if you're feeling like you shoulda gone in guns blazing yourself, you can just stop it."

He let out a heavy sigh. "You know me too well." John turned to the Appleby girls. "Right now, I know about as much as you. I'll keep you notified if I hear anything else."

Kay pulled Natalie in tight. They slowly made their way to the exit.

Poking his head into the comms room, John found Henry sitting with Rodriguez. "You up?" John said, surprised. "At least that's one piece of good news in an otherwise horrible day."

Rodriguez turned to say hello and winced. His abdomen was clearly still hurting him.

John filled them in on the situation. "Don't bother sending messages to the front anymore. If anything, I want you to broadcast what we know to each of the surrounding communities. All towns within a twenty-mile radius should take what supplies and weapons they can and head here. There's strength in numbers and it looks like the Chinese are heading this way."

Both men nodded.

John was out and down the hall when he heard the radio crackle to life. A second later, Henry came charging after him. "Sir, you better come quick. I've got Reese on the line."

Chapter 36

“Got myself all but a handful of miles from Dyersburg when I caught sight of those Chinese tanks barrelling along Interstate 40,” Reese said, and paused briefly before exhaling the smoke from one of his awful Russian cigarettes.

“Where are you now?” John asked.

“Don’t wanna say exactly, just in case someone’s listening in. I will tell you an older couple was nice enough to take me in and the gentleman’s got a ham radio running on batteries in a back room. Says he’s listened in to Henry’s broadcasts and sends him bits and pieces of information here and there.”

John was tapping his finger on the table. “So I’m guessing you weren’t able to find the boys?”

“I tried, John. Maybe if I’d had a truck I coulda made it in time. But judging by what I’m seeing now, my guess is I’d be stuck in this mess maybe worse than they are.”

“You did your best,” John commended him. “I’m sorry I had to send you at all.”

“They’re some of ours, John. I’d do it again if need be.”

“Can you give us any more information on what you’re seeing over there?”

“I watched that road for a good hour or more and spotted at least ten mechanized infantry battalions roll by one after another. I’m sure most of the roads heading east are clogged with enemy troops. But I will say, I haven’t seen any Russians.”

“We have it on good authority that they’re further north,” John told him.

“Well, listen, John, I don’t wanna be the bearer of bad news, especially if I don’t have all the facts to back it up, but this couple I told you about who took me in, they been in touch with some of the military folks over in Dyersburg and the rumor is the Chinese are building special camps behind enemy lines. Closest one’s not far from Jonesboro. If the boys were captured alive, then my guess is that’s where they took ‘em.”

Diane gripped John’s shoulders, no doubt fighting to keep herself together.

“What’s your best guess on how long we have before the Chinese arrive?” John asked.

“I’d say you’ll see them by this time tomorrow, give or take a few hours. All depends on whether the fuel can keep pace with their advance.”

“What about you?”

“Me? I’m gonna keep off the main highways. If all goes well I should be back in a day or so. It’ll be radio silence for me till I do though.”

“Roger that. See you then and Godspeed.”

“If those Chinese grunts beat me to Oneida, do me a favor and grab me a pack of Zhongnanhai from the first corpse you see, would ya?”

Henry took the headset. “That Reese is one sick puppy, I tell you.”

John smiled, but there was no joy in it. The thought of Brandon and Gregory being sent to that camp was hard to fathom. He had a sudden and overwhelming urge to

Speak with Huan again. Perhaps there was some bit of information about the camps she hadn't given him before. Something that could help them put together a rescue plan.

Chapter 37

“There’s nothing else I can tell you,” Huan said flatly, her handcuffed arms pulled against her chest as she sat opposite him in the interrogation room.

Part of him had hoped to hear she’d been lying about the terrible things going on in the camps. That she’d been using it to frighten and demoralize the citizens of Oneida. Whether she sensed his motives for asking or not, John couldn’t tell one way or another, but she could feel the despair in his voice.

“You promised that if I cooperated you would hand me back to my people.”

“I said I would help you see your children again.”

“I’ve taken you as a man of your word, John,” Huan said. “I want you to see that I am being open and honest with you.”

“So far you’ve given me no reason to doubt you.”

“There is one more piece of information I’ve been holding back. By giving it to you now, I hope you will see that I’ve fulfilled my end of the bargain.”

“Go ahead,” John told her. “Every useful bit of intelligence you provide us only makes it easier to help set you free.”

She nodded, her features tightening as she spoke. “Our Russian allies were not the only ones who had agents in towns and cities across America.”

John shook his head. “What are you saying? Are you saying your government planted a man like the Chairman in Oneida?”

“Not like the Chairman. Someone far more subtle.”

For the first time, John wasn’t sure what to think about Huan’s claim. Then something else occurred to John which made her story seem even less believable. “Oneida isn’t nearly as multicultural as Knoxville or Memphis. I don’t think we have many here of Asian descent.”

She began to look pensive. “Who said I was talking about an Asian? Unless you’ve already ferreted them out, my government has a mole in Oneida, I’m afraid. We haven’t heard from the agent in days. I don’t have any more information for you other than that and the call sign by which they are known: Phoenix.”

•••

John was reeling over the implications of what Huan had told him as he left the interview room. No sooner had he closed the door behind him when three men in military fatigues headed his way. A single star on the lead man’s zipper line signified he was a brigadier general.

“You Mayor John Mack?” the general asked gruffly. His hair was light brown and styled in a classic taper cut, his mouth curled into a grimace.

“That’s right,” John replied. The man’s nametag read Brooks. “What can I do for you, General Brooks? I take it you just arrived.”

"I understand you folks have a Chinese POW on the premises."

"We do. Her name is Huan, least that's what she says. She was flying over Oneida in a Z-10 when she was shot down. The gunner didn't make it."

"Don't be modest, John. The word from your man Moss is that you shot down that gunship with a Stinger."

John nodded, not sure where this was heading. "I've already questioned her," he told them. "And I'll be more than happy to relay what we've learned so far."

"You'll forgive me if I sound out of line," General Brooks said. "But these two gentlemen behind me will be taking over the interrogation from here on in."

"I don't know. I've built a relationship of sorts with the prisoner. She's provided us with information in exchange for certain assurances. I wouldn't want to go back on my word."

The two men behind the general were smirking and John didn't like that one bit. "I see what's going on here," John said. "You think we're a bunch of country bumpkins. I'm not one to pull out my resume, but you should know I was a commissioned officer with the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq. Detainment and interrogation were part and parcel of what we did on a daily basis."

Brooks' expression changed at once. "Then you understand how important it is that we have a go at questioning her."

"I won't say no," John said. "But I'm letting you know I've given her my word and I wouldn't want her to clam up if she sees your men and assumes she's starting again from square one."

"What kind of assurances have you offered her?" General Brooks asked with noticeable skepticism.

"She wants to see her family again when this is all over."

"That's hardly something you or anyone else can promise. Even if you release her, the Chinese might send her to a labor camp on the assumption that she divulged state secrets."

"There are other ways to return her once we're done."

"Maybe, but for now, these two gentlemen are going to have a word with her."

"Fine by me, but if she doesn't seem forthcoming, I don't think resorting to torture will do any good. She's already been waterboarded."

Surprise and a touch of admiration from the general. "I was told you were on top of things here, John, and I'm glad to see the praise wasn't an exaggeration. Where can we go to talk? Preferably somewhere that has maps of the surrounding area."

"How about the boardroom in the mayor's office?" John replied.

"Perfect," General Brooks said, grinning for the first time since they'd met.

"Because our first order of business will be to reactivate you into the armed forces. I'm also bumping your rank up from lieutenant to lieutenant colonel. You're an authority figure here, John, and I wouldn't want any brash young officer of mine to think otherwise."

Chapter 38

A short time later, the two men were poring over maps spread out on the conference room table inside the town hall. John was now decked out in woodland army fatigues with a silver oak leaf denoting his new rank of lieutenant colonel and feeling decidedly uncomfortable.

Standing next to General Brooks were Captain Bishop and Colonel Higgs, the latter having recently made it into Oneida.

"I just want to make it clear that when this mess is over," John said, "I'll have my old rank reinstated and be removed from active duty."

Brooks was surprised and somewhat confused by John's request. "Most men wait years for this kind of opportunity."

"They might, but I'm not most men," John told him. "I'll serve my country whenever she calls on me, but I'm not in it for the glory. I'm here for the people of Oneida and hopefully, one day, something resembling the life I used to have."

"So be it," General Brooks replied.

"Good. Now there are a handful of members of my own team I'd like to have present in this meeting," John told the General. "But intelligence we've received from Huan, our Chinese POW, suggests the enemy might have a mole in town."

"The enemy will be on our doorstep in a matter of hours," General Brooks said. "There isn't time to run any kind of investigation."

"Yes, that's what I was worried about."

"Rest assured that during the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours all outgoing radio communication will be strictly monitored. So there is little concern about any of our plans being compromised. Bring in whoever you need."

Moss, Vice Mayor Ray Gruber, Henry and Rodriguez had all been waiting patiently in the hallway. John opened the door and invited them in.

"There's a lot to prepare," General Brooks began after everyone was acquainted, "and very little time to do it. The enemy's rapid advance means reaching the designated rallying point will not be possible without exposing our rear to assault from the enemy." Brooks studied a handwritten list prepared by Colonel Higgs. "The hodgepodge of units which continue to trickle into Oneida represent all that's left of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment as well as the 101st Airborne division." Brooks turned to Colonel Higgs. "Any estimate on the fighting force we have available?"

Higgs cleared his throat. The colonel didn't look at all the way John had pictured him during their many conversations over the radio. Silver-haired, with deep weathered features, he was a career soldier through and through. "General, we've been able to account for roughly three thousand out of seventeen thousand men from the 101st and fifteen hundred out of thirty-eight hundred from the 278th. Altogether we're looking at four and a half to five thousand men."

The 278th had been John's old regiment and hearing about their extensive losses was especially difficult. "Oneida can add at least another thousand to that," John told them.

General Brooks nodded, looking concerned. "That's not a lot, given the Chinese are likely to hit us with at least ten brigades. What about equipment, Higgs? Tell me we have something to fight back with."

Higgs didn't look very confident. "Half a dozen M1A2 battle tanks, maybe twice that number of Bradleys. We've got a number of Humvees mounted with an assortment of M2 .50 cal machine guns, M240s, and MK19 40mm automatic grenade launchers. The good news is each of them came in towing M198 155mm Howitzers. On top of that we've got a number of surface-to-air Stinger missile launchers."

"What about hand-held anti-armor?" John asked, recalling his concern over holding the various choke points.

"A bunch of AT-4s but no more than a few Javelins," Col Higgs replied. "I'll admit, more Javelins would have been better, but beggars can't be choosers."

General Brooks turned to John. "I see that you and your people have already begun setting up a defensive perimeter around Oneida."

"That's right," John replied. "We were aiming for a defense in depth. Make the enemy pay for every inch. The town itself will represent our final stand."

"I like it," Brooks said, smiling for the second time today. "Given our meagre resources"—the general pointed to the four major roads into the city: Route 27 which covered the northern and southern approach, the 297 which covered the western approach and Route 456 in from the east—"reinforcing these key entry points with heavy machine guns and AT-4's should slow them down. Blowing the western and southern bridges once the enemy has crossed is also an option."

"The bridges have already been rigged with dynamite taken from the local coal mines," John informed the general. "We've also planted IEDs a few hundred yards before and after the bridges to destroy the forward and rear elements of the enemy column, trapping them in a kill zone."

Now it was Moss' turn to beam at his handiwork. If he'd been born in Afghanistan, John's head of security would have made a fine mujahedeen.

"If I may make a suggestion, General?" John requested.

Brooks set his hands on the table. "Go ahead."

"If we move half of the artillery onto Owens Ridge, it'll allow us to rain down shells on anything that comes within miles. Ideally we should establish target points at preset locations, designating them with names like TP1, TP2 and so on. That way forward observers can call in target points instead of long grid coordinates. It'll save us time and if the enemy is listening in, they won't know where the fire is directed." John glanced down at the map. "I also suggest we hold the tanks and Bradleys back in town and use them as a quick reaction force."

General Brooks agreed. "What about you, Higgs?" he asked. "What are your thoughts?"

"I think John's right. We can't expose the armor to attack from the air. Our best bet is to keep them well hidden within the city. If the enemy manages to move within range we can wear them down by shooting and scooting to predesignated fire points."

"If they come at us," General Brooks said with assurance, "it'll be from the west along Route 297."

John shook his head, uncertain how disagreeing openly with the general would go over. "I'm not sure about that."

"Really?" Brooks replied.

"Well, the chances are the enemy will be stretched over a wide front. Oneida surely won't be their prime objective, although they'll want to secure the town because of the railroad running through it. Their main objective will be capturing Knoxville. I believe they're more likely to move their armor along Interstate 40, sending a modest force north along Route 27."

General Brooks went back to the map laid out before him. "I think it's a mistake to over-think this, John. We're going to defend each entry point, but the Chinese come at things head on. Look how they assaulted us over and over along the Mississippi. They'll be coming from the west and that's where we'll set up the stiffest resistance."

Even though John disagreed, there wasn't any sense starting an argument. The truth was, none of them knew what the Chinese would do. One man's guess was as good as the next.

Colonel Higgs then moved in, unfurling a map of Oneida he'd found in the town records. "The bulk of what we still have left to do will involve prepping the town for attack. Let me assure you, gentlemen, that urban warfare's a messy business and I intend to make any assault on Oneida as painful as possible. There are generally two main approaches to city defense and both carry their own risks and rewards. One option is to allow the enemy to enter the city, drawing them into a trap. While an ambush-style tactic might bog the Chinese forces down, it'll allow their dismounted infantry to gain a foothold within the outlying buildings, which could pose a problem. The other option is to defend along the perimeter of the town, reinforcing key structures and bringing the armor forward to engage targets as they come into view. By the time they breach the outer layers of defense, it won't be a surprise that we're here and ready for a fight."

"How many of the men under you have previous combat experience?" General Brooks asked John.

"Not many, I'm afraid to say."

Higgs made a clicking noise in his throat. "Then you'll have your work cut out for you. When the Chinese do break through, we're gonna need to channel them down Alberta Street. This'll give us the best overlapping fields of fire." Higgs stopped to take a drink of water. "Channelling the enemy along this corridor will mean filling the other approaches with debris and rubble to make them impassable."

"We can move some wrecked cars in place for that," Moss told them.

Higgs turned to John. "You'll need to instruct your men firing from inside buildings to cut loopholes in the wall. They should avoid placing the muzzle too close to the opening or it could give them away. Standing or kneeling a few feet back is more than enough. Likewise, concealed heavy weapons emplacements should use a wet blanket or cloth to prevent dust from kicking up when the weapon is fired. And let your people know it's always better to fire around a wall if they can, rather than over it."

"Will do," John confirmed, trying to keep track of everything the colonel was telling him. "Any suggestions on reinforcing the individual structures?"

"First of all, if it comes to urban combat, they shouldn't be using doorways. Holes blown through the walls of adjacent buildings will allow our boys to reposition without exposing themselves to enemy fire. Likewise, stairways leading to second stories should be filled with furniture and covered with razor wire. Getting up and down will be

accomplished by using ladders placed by holes cut in the floor. If the enemy enters the building, those ladders can be pulled up at a moment's notice. The glass in the windows of outlying buildings should also be removed to prevent shards spraying in soldiers' faces if they come under fire. But make sure to knock the glass in where possible to prevent giving the position away."

They spent the next hour refining the strategies and tactics they would use to defend the town against attack. Much of it John already knew from the time he'd spent serving in the army, but as Higgs pointed out, many of the townsfolk under him would need to be briefed and prepped. During World War II, the Germans, desperate to defend Berlin against the Russians, had called up young boys and old men with little or no military training. In several instances the consequences had been disastrous. Instead of helping to bolster the city's defenses, many of them had simply gotten in the way, blocking friendly fire, preventing the more experienced soldiers from doing their duty. With Moss' help, John would make sure the people of Oneida would do everything in their power to keep the town from slipping into enemy hands.

Chapter 39

Not long after, John watched as the tanks and Bradleys were systematically hidden from view. Some took shelter in hollowed-out buildings set up as concealed firing positions. Others were moved to areas thick with trees and covered with camo netting. Six of the M198 155mm Howitzers were being towed up Owens Ridge when John caught the first sounds of an approaching plane.

Captain Bishop was nearby overseeing the entrenchment of an Abrams tank when his ears perked up.

"It's a prop plane," John said. "Everyone to your positions, quick."

Soldiers and civilians scrambled for cover. Others ran to the roofs of buildings to man Stinger missile launchers.

Was this the beginning of an attack or nothing more than a scouting mission? A second later, John spotted the plane. From here it looked like a Chinese Y-8 military transport plane, essentially a copy of a Russian An-12. The closest American counterpart was probably a C-130.

The chances that this was a bombing run or scouting mission began to lessen by the second.

John moved out of the street and toward an overhang where Capt. Bishop and some of his men were peering out at the aircraft above them.

"Any thoughts?" John asked.

In response, Bishop poked his finger into the air. "Take a look."

A bundle fell from the rear hatch and John couldn't help thinking it looked like a giant bird had just let one go. Soon the bundle broke apart into hundreds, maybe thousands of pieces, each fluttering through the air. The size grew larger and larger before John realized what was happening.

"They're dropping leaflets," he shouted.

The air defense crew stood down right away, since they'd been briefed that unless they were under imminent threat, it was important not to let the enemy know their capabilities until the last minute.

With thousands of leaflets seesawing through the air, John couldn't help feel like he was watching some sort of bizarre ticker-tape parade. Before long, they were coming down all around them, landing on the pavement and the roofs of buildings. John bent down and picked one up.

Predictably, the English on the leaflet was laughable, but the core of the message was clear enough. The Chinese claimed to be on a humanitarian mission, promising safety, food and medical attention to those who didn't resist.

"How comforting," Captain Bishop exclaimed sarcastically, shaking out a propaganda note that had landed on his head. "I think I'll turn myself over to the first Chinese grunt I see."

His men burst into laughter as Bishop spat in his hand and used it to pat down a patch of errant blond hair.

Studying the paper in his hands, John knew he'd just found something for Emma to do.

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Not surprisingly, when John arrived at the mayor's office, which doubled as the Mack family home and now the tactical headquarters, he found a flurry of activity. Down the hall was Emma's room and when he knocked and let himself in, she wasn't there. About to leave, he glanced out her window and spotted a familiar-looking figure sitting under the maple tree. He made his way outside and found his daughter studying one of the Chinese propaganda leaflets. She seemed positively transfixed by it.

"I didn't expect to find you here," he said as he drew closer.

She looked up, startled. "I looked out my window and thought it was snowing."

"It was, I suppose. Little bits of paper scrawled with terrible English."

"Do you think anyone will do what it says?" she asked.

"You mean surrender? I hope not. If they do they'll go right to one of those camps."

She broke eye contact. "You mean the one Gregory and Brandon are at?"

"Maybe, but more likely somewhere else. Either way it won't be pleasant. Listen, Emma, I know I've given you a hard time about sitting in your room all day. I won't bore you by going over it again. I think you already know where I'm coming from, but these leaflets got me thinking about a way you could help us out. Put your artistic side to good use."

"You want me to make propaganda stuff?"

"I want you to create something we can drop into the concentration camps," John told her. "Something that will give the people inside the reassurance that they haven't been forgotten, that we know what's being done to them. That we're coming to set them free."

"You wanna give them hope," she said, her eyes watering with tears.

"Exactly."

He knelt down and pulled his daughter into a firm hug at about the same time that Moss appeared.

"Sorry to bother you, John, but you better come quick. Reinforcements just arrived."

John stood. "Reinforcements?" he asked, confused. "From where?"

"Huntsville... Winfield... Jamestown," Moss told him, shaking his head in disbelief. "You name it. Not only that but they've brought food, supplies and weapons too."

"All right," John replied, his eyes dropping to the Chinese propaganda leaflet. "See that they're set up in the community center for now."

"You don't understand, John. This ain't a few families. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of them."

Chapter 40

Two thousand, three hundred and twenty-five to be exact. What had seemed at first to be a blessing was quickly becoming a curse. Not only was the Chinese army fast approaching, snatching up more and more American territory as they pushed east, but Oneida was still suffering from a cholera epidemic. According to Dr. Coffey, the Pioneer Community hospital was bursting with patients. They had had to resort to having people sleep on wooden tables cut with holes to allow for the nastier parts of the sickness to wash away. All told, well over a hundred people had been infected and a quarter of those had already died. The report John had received from Dan Niles, the waste management guy, was even more disturbing. After extensive testing, the cause of the outbreak did not appear to be runoff of human waste. Although sabotage couldn't be proven just yet, it was looking more and more likely every day.

Now on top of everything, a horde of people had showed up requiring a place to sleep. The logistics alone of logging everyone in by hand to Oneida's town registry were a massive headache.

"We're gonna need to transform the high school into a temporary dormitory to accommodate all these folks," John said, rubbing his temples.

"No can do, boss," Moss replied. "I'm afraid the army's already using the school as a makeshift barracks."

"Then what about the Wal-Mart?" John threw out on a whim.

Moss thought about it. "It's pretty much been stripped bare. There may not be enough washrooms, but I suppose for now it could work."

"Good. Then pass the message along to Ray Gruber. Have him lead them over there and see that they're set up. They'll need to get creative to find bedding until we can take care of them properly."

"Roger that," Moss replied and went to leave.

"Moss, one other thing."

He planted his feet and turned. "Shoot."

"Go through the new arrivals and pull out anyone who's fired a weapon before. Although we expect the enemy armor to stick to the roads, the infantry can attack us from anywhere, so those perimeter rings need to be beefed up."

"Understood."

As Moss left to carry out his orders, John glanced up at the Highland veterinary hospital building next to them. Square, red-bricked and with a terrific line of sight down Alberta Street, it offered a strong defensive position. A handful of Captain Bishop's men were busy knocking out the windows and reinforcing the firing holes with sandbags, installing a .50 cal machine gun recessed from the opening for concealment.

Similar work continued frantically for the next few hours. By dusk, the refugees were settled and the troops set to defend Oneida were dug in. John returned to the

mayor's office and made his way around to the back door that led directly into their living quarters. John was about to pull the handle to go inside when George squawked at him. He glanced back, letting the handle go. George waddled up to the edge of his enclosure, peering back at him with his beady little eyes.

A strange kind of calm settled over John. Surrendering to fate was the best way he could describe it. They'd done everything they could to prepare for an attack. With any luck, the enemy would simply ignore the town altogether in its mad dash for the capital. Sometimes protecting the ones you loved meant pulling up stakes and running for your lives and sometimes it meant standing your ground. John's conscience was clear. He reached out and stroked George's tiny head, praying the price wouldn't be too high.

The door opened and closed behind him.

"I think he's lonely, you know." It was Diane and he couldn't help but notice the slight tremble in her voice.

John smirked. "You think he needs a girlfriend, is that it?"

"Maybe."

"Don't you think that'll make him soft?"

Diane stifled a laugh. "I think you've already managed to sap whatever guard dog George had in him. Maybe it's best to just accept the fact that you've turned him into a wuss."

John cupped George's head with both hands. "Don't let her speak to you that way, George."

Walking up to him, Diane slid her arms around his chest. He turned and held her.

"Have you seen Emma lately?" she asked.

"Why?"

"I found her in the center of town with her sketchpad, working on a flyer of some kind."

"It's nice to hear she's out of her room," John said. "I think she just needed to find something she excelled at."

"You didn't have anything to do with that, did you? It's got John Mack written all over it."

John shook his head. "I wish I could take credit, but it was all her."

"Don't you think it's dangerous, John, giving hope to the poor souls imprisoned in those concentration camps? I mean, we don't have any way yet of helping them break free."

He contemplated Diane's comment for a moment. Frankly, it wasn't an angle he had considered before—the disappointment they would experience if the good guys never showed up.

"You speak to anyone who's ever done time in any kind of prison," John said. "They'll be the first ones to tell you that hope is a dangerous thing to lose."

Chapter 41

John lay down to sleep, his armored and tactical vests draped over a chair by his bedside. Next to that were his AR-15 and the tactical holster with his S&W M&P .40 Pro. Walking around town with his pistol by his side, John couldn't help feeling more like a lawman from the Old West than the mayor of a twenty-first-century town.

He glanced next to him, awed by how soundly Diane was always able to sleep, even on the cusp of danger. The same had been true on Willow Creek Drive just as it was true this evening. It was normally on nights like this that the bad memories came back to play. John closed his eyes and let himself drift off into the past.

Back in Iraq, John was going over a mission checklist for a series of armored spearheads into Baghdad. They were calling them thunder runs and several of his men weren't thrilled with the prospect. The concern was they were going to be targets in a shooting gallery. The strategy was to test Baghdad's defenses before committing the entire force. If they were successful, it would demonstrate to the Iraqi people that Saddam was no longer in control. State-run media was reporting that U.S. forces were being repelled on all fronts and the top brass was anxious to prove otherwise.

A young soldier appeared next to him. "Lieutenant Mack?" he asked, wringing his hands.

"That's me," John replied, hardly taking his eyes off the checklist he was working his way down.

"The name's Senior Airman Holland. I'm gonna be your new JTAC."

Then John did look up. A veritable child stared back at him. Red hair, freckles. Only thing he was missing was an English private-school uniform.

"How old are you?" John asked him.

"Nineteen, sir."

"Where's my other JTAC, Lewis?"

"I believe he's in medical, sir."

"Medical? How was he hurt?"

"I'm not sure I should say."

Grimacing, John handed Holland the clipboard and stomped off. To his knowledge, Lewis hadn't been on another mission since Nasiriyah, which left John wondering whether some of his fellow soldiers had taken matters into their own hands and punished the JTAC for the friendly fire incident.

John entered the Combat Support Hospital, a sprawling series of tan-colored tents—some still being erected—and went to a nurse sitting behind a desk. The place was cool compared to the grinding heat outside and smelled vaguely of bleach.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I understand you have a Christopher Lewis admitted."

She typed something into the computer and the expression on her face changed at once. "Hmm."

“What is it?”

“My apologies, sir, but I’m not at liberty to say.”

John sighed, drumming his fingers. “Fine. Can I at least see him briefly then?”

“You’ll need to check with one of the doctors at intensive care. Down the corridor,” she said, pointing. “Then take your third left.”

John followed her directions and entered the intensive care unit. Laid out before him were a number of beds separated by wraparound curtains. Paper name tags hung from the fabric. When he came to one reading Lewis, Christopher, John glanced around, waiting for a doctor to stop him and, finding none, pushed his way inside.

Lewis lay before him, hooked up to machines that pinged and beeped. He had two black eyes and a deep red mark around his neck.

The young JTAC’s eyes peeled open. There was no breathing tube in his mouth which meant he should be able to speak, at least theoretically.

“I just heard you were here,” John said, trying to piece together what had happened from the little bits he’d already seen. “How you feeling?”

Lewis’ eyes dropped to his feet. “Not much of anything, lately. But maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

John looked at his legs, which were positioned at a strange, lifeless angle. It didn’t look comfortable. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“I couldn’t take it anymore, sir.”

A flashbulb went off in John’s head. The friction mark around his neck, the paralysis. Lewis had tried to hang himself and only managed to paralyse himself.

For a moment, John didn’t know what to say. “The friendly fire incident. Is that what led to this?”

Lewis didn’t answer, but he didn’t need to.

“You shouldn’t have taken that all on yourself,” John told him in vain. “The fog of war, Lewis, that’s the nature of the beast. We made the best call we could under the worst kind of circumstances.”

“Pulling the trigger’s the easy part,” Lewis said, struggling for breath. “Learning to live with it, that’s another thing entirely.”

John’s head fell into his hands. “I wish you’d come and talked to me first before you did something rash. If anyone was to blame it was me.”

“I just couldn’t take it anymore,” Lewis repeated. “I kept seeing their faces and how their loved ones would look when they got the news.”

There was nothing pretty about fratricide and it was even more horrible when the chain of causation led directly back to faulty technology. The failing radios along with Charlie Company’s disappearance from Blue Force Tracking had played a major part in the tragedy. Not to mention the fact that they’d repositioned further north than they were meant to be, disobeying orders. Of course, those were merely words and would do little to ease the waves of guilt and sorrow Lewis was no doubt feeling. This was also a perfect example of how the human mind could make a bad situation so much worse. In some cases, there was still a tough-guy culture in the armed forces which stigmatized soldiers who went for grief counselling.

John studied the marks on Lewis’ neck. Normally when a soldier decided to take his own life, finding the means to do the job wasn’t difficult. A pistol was usually the weapon of choice. For Lewis to choose hanging made John wonder if it wasn’t an attempt to cry out for help that he was too afraid to ask for directly. Emerging from the

fog of war, Lewis had likely entered another kind of fog which made critical thinking nearly impossible. John only wished he could have done more.

He laid a hand on Lewis' arm. "If there's anything I can do, please let me know."

The pain in Lewis' eyes was nearly overwhelming. "There is something, John," he said. "But they'd arrest you for murder and I wouldn't want to destroy someone else's life."

The implication was clear enough. Lewis wanted someone to finish off what he had started and the realization hit John like a boot heel to the gut.

That was when a noise began tugging for his attention. Was it a patient going into cardiac arrest a few beds over? No, the sound was staticky. A formless voice blaring intermittently.

John's eyes snapped open to the dim awareness that he was back in Oneida, lying next to Diane. Down the hall, the sound came again. It was emanating from the radio room. Someone with a heavy accent was trying to contact them in Chinese and then Russian. He didn't know enough of either language to understand what they were after, but one thing was clear. The enemy had arrived.

Chapter 42

Henry was asleep at the console when John rushed in.

The message came through again.

“Wake up,” John shouted to his comms officer.

Henry twitched in his chair and then sat bolt upright, rubbing his eyes. He and Rodriguez had been doing shifts of twelve hours each and exhaustion had clearly gotten the better of him. “Oh, I’m sorry, sir. It won’t happen—”

“The radio transmission. What are they saying?”

Diane came in, pulling a robe around her. Soon Emma appeared, followed by Captain Bishop, who had fallen asleep in the conference room across the hall. They all stood in silence, assessing the situation.

The message blared over the radio again.

Henry listened. “I don’t speak a lick of Chinese and my Russian’s almost nonexistent. But I believe they’re asking for the Chairman.”

Jacob Golosenko was his real name, one of many Russian fifth columnists sent to suppress local populations and hold key strategic locations. The advancing Chinese likely wanted to make contact to ensure the town was still in their control. Unfortunately for them, the Chairman’s body was currently rotting in a pit on the outskirts of town.

“What should we say?” Henry asked.

“How much Russian can you speak?” John asked him.

“Not nearly enough to be convincing, I’m afraid.”

“Heck, it’s worth a shot,” Captain Bishop shot from the doorway, still rubbing his puffy eyes.

“Tell them the Chairman is coming,” John ordered.

Henry nodded and drew in a deep breath. “I’ll do my best.” He activated the mic and spoke, trying to mask his voice since it wouldn’t be another minute before he had to play the role of the Chairman as well. John crossed his fingers, praying the Chinese would buy it.

After several moments of tense silence, the radio crackled to life and a short reply came back.

“What’d they say?” John asked.

“I think they said to tell him to hurry up.”

Henry’s hands were shaking when he gripped the mic again and held it to his lips. “Well, here goes nothing. Это председатель. Продолжай.”

Long static, then: “Что такое слово безопасность?”

Henry looked up at John. “They want the security word.”

John’s heart was beating in his chest, his mind racing a million miles a second.

“Ah, nuts, that could be anything.”

They sat there for a minute before Henry spoke into the mic.

The enemy's reply came shortly after that and the fear that bloomed on Henry's face made one thing perfectly clear. The enemy wasn't buying it.

"What'd you tell them?" John asked.

"This whole time I kept picturing that scene from the 1965 war movie with Henry Fonda."

"You mean *The Battle of the Bulge*?" John said.

"Yeah, it kept ringing in my head the whole time, so when they kept asking for the password, I said the first thing that popped in my mind. I told them 'nuts'."

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The entire town swung into high alert after that. Reinforcements were rushed to each of the major choke points. Others were ordered to beef up the various perimeter rings around Oneida. A handful of spotters were positioned a few hundred yards past the main defensive line along major roadways to warn of enemy movement. The army had brought a number of tactical radios to supplement the few John and the others were already using. Spotters on the cell tower would also play a crucial role, acting as the commander's eyes. Rodriguez arrived just as Captain Bishop sprinted out to join his unit over on Alberta Street.

"General Brooks is on his way to coordinate the defense from here," John told Diane. "I need you to lead as many of the non-combatants as you can down into the storm drain. Take some food and warm clothes with you." He turned to Emma. "Go with your mom and help her."

Emma's eyes started to water with fear.

He cupped the side of her face. "Don't worry, honey," John said, feeling the lie begin to press against his lips. "We'll be fine."

John went outside and watched as they faded away in the distance, praying silently they would be safe. Making empty promises before a battle was like holding the hand of someone suffering from a grave illness. You didn't wanna lie, but hope and faith were all they had.

Then, from out of the early morning mist, an impossibly tall figure moved quickly in his direction. A moment later John saw that it was Reese arriving on horseback.

"You certainly cut it down to the wire," John said when the sniper reached him.

Reese dismounted and withdrew his Remington 700 from the saddle bag, slinging it over his shoulder. "I'm real sorry I wasn't able to get them back, John."

"No need to apologise. At the end of the day, those kids are my responsibility, not yours."

"Well, now that that's out of the way, let me tell you, things ain't pretty in the occupied zone. If you thought the Chairman was a bully, try picturing millions just like him tearing people from their homes."

"What's happening in those camps has to be stopped."

Reese raised a knowing eyebrow and nodded. "In time, if we can survive that long."

"We just got off the radio with Chinese troops who were looking for the Chairman," John said. "They're on their way to take back the town. And they should hit the outer defenses any minute now."

"So that's why everyone's running around like headless chickens?"

“That’s right.” John motioned to the cell tower in the distance. “Think you can head up to the top platform and work your magic?”

“Not sure if I’d call it magic,” Reese said. “But I’ll be happy to do my part. What direction you expecting them from?”

“General Brooks thinks they’ll be hitting us from the west.”

“But you don’t?”

“I’m not a fan of putting all my eggs in one basket. All I can say is be ready for anything.”

Chapter 43

The call came in from a forward observer along Highway 27 South at 6:05 AM. Concealed along the crest of a small hill and outfitted with a radio, he was meant to give advance warning of any threats heading toward Oneida from the south.

“Overmountain, this is Dragonfly, over.”

Rodriguez was in charge of communications from the walkie-talkies. “Read you loud and clear, Dragonfly, go ahead.”

“Tell the boys manning the Cecil bridge they’re about to have company.”

“Roger that,” Rodriguez replied. “Can you give us any details on strength and composition?”

“Must have been at least five mechanized platoons. Maybe a dozen Type 99 and 96 tanks and twice that many ZBD-08s.”

John and General Brooks were in the room, listening intently.

Rodriguez got back on the radio. “Dragonfly, this is Overmountain. Let us know the minute you see anything else.”

“Will do,” came the reply.

“We’ve got the artillery ranged for that whole area,” John said, his heart beginning to hammer in his chest. He felt the desire to be in those foxholes right alongside the men there, and would have been if he wasn’t needed at headquarters to help coordinate the defense.

Rodriguez radioed in to the other spotters to the west, north and east. Each of them reported back that the coast was clear. Already it was starting to look as though the Chinese forces had been south traveling along I-40 heading toward Knoxville when a few platoons were diverted north to ensure that part of Tennessee was still in enemy hands. When moving entire divisions, it made far more sense to utilize interstates rather than the much smaller highways that crisscrossed the country. The forces moving up against them now might only be the tip of a much larger spear.

The radio crackled again. This time the voice on the other end belonged to a young, but experienced lieutenant named York in charge of the Cecil bridge. “Enemy spotted,” he said. “I don’t think they’ve seen us yet.”

General Brooks moved in and snatched the mic out of Henry’s grasp. “Listen here, Lieutenant, if you can hit that first tank on the bridge and stop it dead, then the artillery on Owens Ridge can knock them out one by one.”

“Understood.”

A series of tense minutes went by. John felt his hands bunch into tight fists. No one said a thing. Then word came back.

“Sir, we got a problem,” York told them, sounding nervous and a little rattled. “Our AT-4 guy got taken out by one of the fighting vehicles in the rear before they could get a shot off. The enemy’s about to cross the bridge. Do I have permission to blow the bridge?”

Brooks swore. Their best chance was to block the column of tanks and kill them one by one.

"We're taking heavy fire now, sir."

"Blow it," Brooks shouted. "Blow it now." He turned to Rodriguez. "I want artillery three hundred meters on either side of the bridge, right away."

"Calling it in," Rodriguez replied.

"Wait a minute," John protested. "That's awfully close to our men, isn't it?" Horrifying images of Nasiriyah were bubbling back to the surface.

Rodriguez paused, unsure what to do.

"You heard my order, Comms Officer," General Brooks barked. "Now do it."

"Roger that."

A second later came the echoing boom from a detonation as the Cecil Bridge blew up. Then the staggered sound of the howitzers from Owens Ridge as they fired their 155mm shells.

"The bridge is gone, sir," York said. "Three tanks and one fighting vehicle destroyed. But we've still got two tanks on our side of the river causing havoc—"

Then the sound of deafening explosions as the artillery shells rained down.

Silence for a moment and John's heart leapt into his throat.

Then York's voice again. "Enemy tanks on this side of the river destroyed, but that might have been too close a shave. Please adjust your fire. We may have friendly casualties."

John prayed that wasn't the case. Tension gripped his entire body.

"The enemy column on the western side of the river is backing away," York reported. "We're now blowing the southern IEDs." An explosion sounded. "Three more down. The remaining five Chinese ZBD-08s appear to be tucking tail and running."

"Great job, Lieutenant," General Brooks said. "Looks like we got 'em on the run."

Rodriguez's radio crackled a moment later with a report from the spotter along Highway 27. "Overmountain, this is Dragonfly. I'm seeing what looks like a full armored brigade heading your way and these boys sure are in a hurry."

They quickly passed the information along to York, who told them he was sending the wounded back to Oneida via medically designated pickup trucks.

"Shouldn't we reinforce the area?" John asked. "I mean, an entire armored brigade is heading toward them."

"With the bridge blown?" General Brooks replied, still euphoric from repelling the attack. "The minute they get within distance, we'll give 'em another taste of our 155s."

Yeah, John thought. *That's what I'm afraid of.*

Chapter 44

John asked Henry for his mic. "Those tanks should be coming within view. What's your status, Lieutenant York?"

"I can hear 'em loud and clear, rumbling around the curve, but I don't see 'em. Almost sounds like they turned off Highway 27."

General Brooks and John exchanged a troubled look.

"Keep us posted," John said and gave the mic back to Henry. He jogged over to the conference room to study one of the local maps laid out across the table. His finger traced a line along Highway 27 until it reached the bridge and that was when he saw what the Chinese were doing. He raced into the radio room and got back on the radio. "York, this is John. There's a road that runs parallel to the highway named Sycamore Lane. It leads right up to the river's edge."

"It's possible," York replied. "But we can't see around the bend where you say they turned off."

"It's only a theory, but you need to reposition your anti-tank troops right away. I think they're going to use the side road to ford the river and come up on top of you."

"What are you doing?" General Brooks demanded, sounding incensed that John was issuing orders without his consent.

York paused for a second before ordering two companies to move out.

"The bridge is blown," John replied. "So the Chinese are doing exactly what we would under the circumstances. Looking for another way across."

"Hold your positions," York shouted over the radio. "Watch our right flank."

"York, what's going on?" John called out. "Lieutenant York?"

Through the frantic sound of intense gunfire, York said, "They're coming up through the river just like you said and there's too many of 'em to stop. I managed to move a few companies over there, but the reactive armor on those Type 99s is giving our AT-4s a run for their money."

A slab of high explosive commonly attached to the body of military vehicles, reactive armor was designed to detonate on impact in order to neutralize the incoming projectile.

"We need to call in another artillery strike," General Brooks exclaimed. "Pepper the whole darn area."

"Are you crazy?" John shouted back. "The enemy's right on top of them. You're gonna hit our own men."

"But we'll also take out those tanks. Listen, we do nothing and the next thing we know they'll be in Oneida," General Brooks shot back, breathing heavily.

"York," John called into the mic. "Tell your men to retreat into the woods and work their way back to town." Time ticked by without a response. "Lieutenant York, are you there?"

Then another voice came on. One John didn't recognize. "York is dead, sir, and most of the men are running for their lives."

•••

The next strong point was about a mile further north on a straight stretch of Highway 27 overlooked by a small hill. The line of sight was superb. It was a shame they didn't have more armor of their own they could spare. A handful of M1A2s on that rise would have made a great difference. As it was, the soldiers were dug in once again in foxholes and armed with light and heavy machine guns along with AT-4s.

"The armor on the front of those tanks is too strong," John was telling General Brooks, although it certainly wasn't anything the career soldier didn't already know.

"What are you suggesting then? That we let them roll by and aim for the tracks or engine compartments in the rear?"

"The minute we do, those IFVs are likely to engage and wipe out any resistance."

"The problem is the terrain is too open," General Brooks said and John had to agree. "Our only hope is that the IEDs and artillery will whittle them down."

Soon the second strong point reported spotting a long column of enemy armor heading their way.

"That's the last line of defense before they hit Oneida," Brooks said morosely. "This time we gotta throw everything we have against them, no matter the consequences." He got on the radio and told them to coordinate fire with the men on the front lines. Now, all John and the others could do was sit back helplessly and listen.

"Send three M1A2s over to the western edge of town," Brooks ordered. "Whatever breaks through needs to be engaged and killed before it gets a foothold in the city."

A few tense moments passed before the call came for artillery support from on top of Owens Ridge. The play-by-play from the front lines painted a grim and desperate picture. The first volley destroyed three Type 99s and two ZBD-08s. Right after that, soldiers from the remaining IFVs disembarked and moved to engage the defending foxholes from the flanks. Now the Americans were in a crossfire between the armor on the highway and the troops coming at them from both sides. All the while, artillery shells were pouring into the area, drawing ever closer to friendly forces.

There was a look of determination on General Brooks' face. It didn't seem to matter how many of their own men they needed to sacrifice in order to halt the Chinese attack. These men were pawns to him and perhaps that was one of the big differences between the top brass and the grunts who got their hands dirty.

The sound of men shouting orders while the wounded shrieked in the background was hard for John to listen to. The final report came through that the American forces at the second strong point were pinned down and no longer able to put up an effective defense. Additional detonations were heard as the IEDs along Highway 27 went off, signalling that the Chinese forces were advancing again.

Before long, they came within visual range of Oneida and all at once the town opened up on them. Both Javelins along with three M1A2 tanks and a handful of Bradleys firing Hellfire missiles pounded the Chinese armor. The first two tanks exploded in a violent plume. The artillery from Owens Ridge joined in, wreaking more havoc on the enemy's lines. Running through both layers of the town's defenses had greatly reduced their numbers and now this final punishment proved too great. With the lead vehicles destroyed, those that followed faced the dangerous choice of

remaining exposed to American fire as they struggled to maneuver around burned and flaming hulks, or living to fight another day.

Much to the chagrin of those in town, itching for payback, they chose the latter. But John wasn't worried about the disappointment his men must be feeling since it wouldn't be long before the enemy would regroup and attack again. Next time, stopping them wouldn't be so easy.

Chapter 45

The two-mile strip between Jonesboro and Lake City, Arkansas was made up almost entirely of farmland and squat, single-story buildings. An observation which wasn't completely lost on Brandon given the hunger churning away at his insides.

The sprawling camp which overlooked Highland Drive was ringed by a twenty-foot-high barbed-wire fence and dotted with guard towers. The camp was still under construction, most of it being built with American slave labor on what was once a farmer's field.

In several places, weeds, grasses and wild flowers still grew in clumps around the fence line and near light poles and this was precisely where Brandon was snooping around, looking for something to eat.

"There isn't anything here but grass," Gregory told him, keeping an eye out for guards. It was only a matter of time before the two boys were processed into a labor group and until then they had been instructed to follow the rules. Failure to do so would lead to punishment. Problem was, no one had told them what the rules were.

"It's not the grass I'm looking for," Brandon clarified. "It's patches of violets. As long as the leaves are heart-shaped they're fine to eat." He plucked one up and ate the petals and greens. "They may not taste great, but they'll keep you alive."

Gregory squished up his face, the cuts on his cheeks still visible from the train attack. "Just as long as we don't need to eat any more worms. I almost gagged the last time."

The painful grumble in Brandon's stomach came again and not even the foul odor from the camp's thousands of prisoners could divert his hunt for food.

"Eating violets and worms isn't my idea of fine dining either," Brandon snapped. "Don't you think I'd rather be having a nice cheeseburger and chocolate shake?"

Gregory snapped his eyes shut and licked his lips. "With French fries and ketchup and a chocolate sundae."

"Okay, you gotta stop or I'm gonna go crazy."

A frown formed on Gregory's face as he slowly phased back to reality.

From around one of the long wooden barracks Dixon appeared and waved them over. It looked like he was carrying something under his shirt.

Stuffing a handful of violets into his pocket, Brandon headed over with Gregory.

When they arrived, they saw Dixon had a black eye and a fresh cut on his forehead.

"What happened to you?" Brandon asked.

"A guard caught me leafing through the garbage pit over by the cooking shed."

Brandon winced. "You're lucky you weren't killed."

"It'll take more than one of those North Korean goons to finish me off, let me tell you."

That had been the first of many surprises after entering the camp. The guards weren't Chinese as they'd expected, but North Korean. Seemed after years of throwing their own people into camps, they'd developed something of an expertise in the matter. What didn't surprise anyone, however, was how cruel and heartless they could be. Every day dozens of American prisoners died from disease, starvation or execution. A disturbing rumor was floating around the camp that Commandant Jang Yong-ho, the short, brutish man who ran the prison, let his German Shepherd feast on dead human bodies. Brandon didn't want to believe a word of it. Anything that ghoulish must be a story made up to frighten the newcomers.

But even in a hellhole like this where the oppressed should unite in misery, some prisoners chose to exploit the little power they could muster. Most of the time it would take the form of bullying others for scraps of food or clothing, maybe even the boots off a dead relative's feet. In other cases it was worse.

Dixon reached under his shirt and handed each of them a bruised apple. Gregory's had a worm in it.

"Hide it for later," Dixon told them, then turned to Gregory. "And you better eat it all, little man. 'Cause you never know when you gonna get more."

Gregory blinked hard and slid the apple into his pants.

Reaching into his pocket, Brandon removed about half of the violets and greens he'd collected and handed it to Dixon.

"What am I supposed to do with this? Make a hat?"

Brandon laughed. "You can if you want, but you're probably better off eating it."

"Some of my contacts have been asking for that mullin stuff."

"You mean mullein," Brandon corrected him.

"That's what I said. Makes great TP."

"I know, but there's none growing inside the fence line."

Dixon pretended to cough and shoved some of the flowers into his mouth, his face contorting from the bad taste. "Well, that might not be a problem for long," he said after swallowing.

"You're breaking outta here?" Gregory asked.

"Keep your voice down, son," Dixon reprimanded him, scanning around to be sure there were no guards within earshot. "The plan's in the initial stages, but I'm working on something."

"They'll shoot you," Gregory said, seemingly in disbelief that Dixon was even contemplating a breakout.

"Not if you don't give me away," Dixon shot back. "Listen, don't you find it a touch weird that all the men and women in camp are kept apart? And ain't it even stranger that many of the women appear to be in the early stages of pregnancy?"

Brandon didn't understand the implication, but if Dixon thought it strange, then it likely was.

"When the time comes will you take me with you?" Brandon asked.

Dixon slid some of the greens into his mouth, eyeing Brandon up and down. "I think this stuff is growing on me. You follow me and it could earn us both a death sentence, kid."

Brandon scanned the rows of wooden barracks which housed the prison's population. Even during the day, the smell of death was hard to miss. Anything would be better than staying here. "I don't care. I'm in."

"But what about me?" Gregory asked.

Dixon turned his glare in the kid's direction. "What about you?"

"Don't worry," Brandon said. "We won't leave you behind. Besides, your dad would kill me if I made it home without you."

Chapter 46

Back in Oneida, John, Moss, General Brooks and several of his subordinates were in the conference room assessing the attack they'd only narrowly managed to repel.

"The chances are that was little more than a probing attack," John told them flatly. "They know now we're entrenched and have howitzers covering every approach. If I was them I'd send in some air power to soften us up and then move in where we least expect it."

Captain Bishop was there as well and he cleared his throat before he spoke. "Given how close they came to reaching the town, they may not need a hat full of fancy moves the next time. Most of our men armed with AT-4s along the perimeter were largely ineffective against the reactive armor on those Type 99s."

The room grew quiet.

"Then maybe we oughta take a page from the Chechens," John offered.

"How's that?" General Brooks asked.

John's hands clenched the back of the chair before him. "The first months of the war in Chechnya saw the Russians lose ninety-eight percent of their heavy tanks and armor to rounds impacting areas not protected by reactive armor. The main areas of vulnerability were the rear of the turret and the engine in the back. Since the Chinese Type 99 main battle tank was largely inspired by the Russian T series, the same weaknesses will likely also be present. The Chechens knew of these weaknesses and developed hunter-killer teams armed with RPGs along with snipers and machine-gunners to protect the anti-tank gunner and suppress enemy infantry. The trick was to engage the armor from basements and upper floors where their main gun couldn't traverse. It'll also mean baiting the enemy armor by attacking them with our Abrams and Bradleys from the edge of town and then drawing them into predesignated kill zones." John squeezed tighter, listening to the leather whine beneath his fingers. "First we'll need every available AT-4 gunner reorganized into anti-tank teams spread throughout town."

General Brooks and the others grew quiet as they contemplated John's plan. "But what about the defensive perimeters?"

"I don't see how we can hold them," John replied, not bothering to mince his words. "They're far too exposed. You heard those men being slaughtered. Our best bet is to pull them back."

Brooks still wasn't convinced. "But that would mean risking enemy infantry getting a foothold in Oneida."

John bobbed his head before the two men locked eyes. "That's exactly what we've been trying to avoid, I know, but you saw how easily one Chinese armored brigade was able to penetrate our lines. What'll happen when ten times that number show up? Our only chance of fending off the next one is to lure them in and turn our town into a meat grinder. Otherwise, we won't stand a chance."

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Once the meeting was done, John oversaw the relocation of anti-air assets to protect the artillery on Owens Ridge. Although most of the infantry would be pulled back within Oneida's immediate boundary, mines and explosives were planted along each of the major roadways into town. An enemy paranoid about IEDs strung along the side of the highway was an enemy who wasn't looking for targets in the distance.

Captain Bishop and others would be in charge of organizing the troops into dozens, if not hundreds, of tank-killing teams. They would operate independently and with little direction other than to protect the soldiers firing the AT-4s. One of the big drawbacks of the American shoulder-fired anti-tank weapon was the blowback. Like the Javelin, when the rocket was fired, anyone standing directly behind the one pulling the trigger would be in for a world of hurt. It was possible to do, but a safer solution was to set up in an alleys between buildings or amongst the debris in the streets. The key to John's strategy was to let the armor pass, thus exposing the less protected areas.

The dip in immediate hostilities had also meant that a number of the non-combatants had moved to the high-school gymnasium in order to help load magazines and strengthen defensive points.

John was making local inspections when he heard a familiar voice.

"So what can I do to help?"

John glanced up from the list he was holding and saw Jerry, the man they'd found at the Home Depot in Oak Ridge.

"That depends on whether you have any military training," John replied.

Jerry shook his head. He was pudgy and looked like he hadn't picked up a dumbbell, let alone a rifle, in years. "I'm a man of science," he replied, smiling. "We must be good for something."

"Someone with your skill set will be an asset to Oneida," John offered, "once we make it out of this mess."

"If we make it out," Jerry amended.

"I've always been a hardcore pragmatist," John told him. "But it's only really been in the last few weeks that I've come to understand how powerful hope is."

The side of Jerry's mouth dipped as he nodded. "You might be right. When you break it down into itty-bitty parts, hope is the cornerstone of every major religion."

John laughed. "Leave it to a scientist to take the cold and calculated view."

"You may be a recovering pragmatist, John, but I'm still a full-on realist and I'm not so sure we have any chance of winning this."

"Are you talking about the war or defending the town?"

"Take your pick." Jerry stopped and watched John as he went back to the list in his hands. "Are you still considering that crazy plan of yours?" Jerry asked.

For a moment, John wasn't sure which crazy plan Jerry was referring to. "You mean getting our hands on an outdated nuke from Oak Ridge?"

Jerry nodded. "That's the one. You know, I'm starting to think it might not be such a bad idea after all."

"I didn't think you approved of suicide missions, Jerry."

"I don't," he replied. "But after what happened today, the realist in me is starting to reconsider."

Chapter 47

“Anything from our forward observers?” John asked both Henry and Rodriguez as he tightened the straps on his body armor and then swung his tactical vest on.

Even though they had pulled all their troops back to Oneida, they still had a thin skirt of observers watching the approaches.

Rodriguez looked up from the radio equipment. “Reports of Chinese armor gathering south along Highway 27 again.”

“Is that it?”

Henry nodded. “No movement in the other sectors yet.”

They’d nearly gotten through earlier. John wondered whether the Chinese plan called for a repeat of their previous attack.

Both radios came alive at once with busts of static and frantic voices.

“Choppers coming in from the west,” one of the spotters said.

Then Reese’s voice from atop the cell tower. “Overmountain, please be advised, I count six Z-10 attack helicopters inbound. Looks like they’re heading for the ridge.”

“They’re trying to take out the artillery,” John roared. He grabbed his AR and a handful of extra magazines and tore out the front door.

As soon as he was outside, the sound of the approaching helicopters grew from a low hum to a growl. Soon enough they came into view, a series of black dots about a thousand feet in the air. And with that sight came the realization that Reese had been wrong. There weren’t six of them. There were ten.

No sooner had they gone from dime-sized to silver dollar-sized objects on the horizon than a flurry of Stinger missiles streaked into the air from rooftops all over town. Contrails streamed up toward their targets at supersonic speeds. One by one, plumes of fire and smoke exploded in mid-air, each followed a second later by the boom from a violent shockwave. Five flaming Chinese gunships spiraled to the ground and exploded.

At about that time, the .50 cal Ma Deuces opened up from a series of strong points around Oneida, as well as the half-dozen technicals they’d hastily built to mount the heavy machine guns.

There was a distinct rhythm to the Ma Deuce when she fired. She didn’t spit rounds out in quick succession like an M4 or an M249. But what she lacked in rate of fire, she more than made up for with brute force.

Tracers filled the early evening sky, reaching out like neon fingers flicking aside targets one by one. Two of the five surviving gunships managed to evade the hail of bullets and swing around to retreat. But by then, the Stinger teams had reloaded. Three missiles rose up from white plumes, chasing the fleeing choppers.

“Come on, you son of a gun,” John shouted.

The reply came in the form of two explosions followed by the distant sound of cheering from every corner of the town.

Over the echoes of jubilant celebration came another sound, this one far more ominous. Chinese fighter jets were fast approaching. The town's Stinger missiles didn't have the range to threaten them, which meant the Chinese could drop bombs on them all day and night and there was nothing the Americans could do but hunker down and wait for the slaughter to end.

A thunderous blast erupted along the crest of Owens Ridge followed by a giant fireball. The fighters were going for the artillery positioned on the mountain that the choppers had failed to take out. And that tingling feeling on the back of John's neck told him things were about to get a whole lot worse.

Chapter 48

The bombing lasted another hour. By then the reports coming in had gone from bad to outright depressing. All of the 155mm howitzers atop the ridge had either been destroyed or otherwise put out of action. That meant they only had a handful of artillery left, most of it concentrated and camouflaged near the high school.

But that wasn't all. Before long, forward observers began radioing in to report that Chinese armor was gathering along every major road leading into town. The enemy's plan aimed to cut off any American attempts to escape or call in reinforcements. It seemed that the Chinese had learned a thing or two from the mistakes of their initial attack and were determined to overwhelm Oneida's defenses by sheer force of numbers.

John hated to admit it, but it was starting to look as though Jerry's suggestion of doom and gloom was coming true.

The lull in the bombing also provided a narrow window for non-combatants to get down into the storm drains again. John found Diane and Emma making ready to lead some of the others underground. John stopped briefly and gave Diane a kiss.

"Don't you dare try to be a hero," she told him sternly. "I need you back in one piece."

"What do you take me for?" he teased, trying to hide the butterflies fluttering in his belly.

John hugged Emma and told them he loved them both.

Leaving General Brooks and the others at the headquarters behind, John hurried to meet up with Moss and Captain Bishop, who were dug in over at the veterinary hospital.

The four major state routes and highways leading into town converged on Oneida's main thoroughfare, Alberta Street. The abandoned cars and debris put in place had all been designed to channel the enemy into this killing zone of fortified buildings. Lying in wait in and around every structure sat tank-killing teams as well as fighters armed with heavy and light machine guns, grenades and in some cases mortars.

This narrow strip was where the bulk of the fighting would take place, where the battle would be won or lost, and it was exactly where John wanted to be. Let General Brooks sit things out at the headquarters, shuffling reinforcements here and there.

The veterinarian's ground-floor entrances were blocked with furniture and barbed wire. As per John's instructions, even the stairs had been rendered impassable. The same was also true for every house and business along the main strip, whether occupied or not. Denying the enemy infantry as many safe havens as possible was just as important.

A ladder led up to a second-story window and John climbed it, feeling the weight of his armored vest and weapons fighting him with every step.

He entered into what was once a post-operation recovery room back when the vet hospital had still been functioning. Before any medicine of value to humans had either been stolen or, in some cases, salvaged by Dr. Coffey.

Gathered before John now were a mishmash of soldiers and armed townspeople, several in torn and bloodied uniforms. Ironically, many of the soldiers were quiet and thoughtful, while members of the town's militia paced back and forth excitedly, expressing their eagerness to kill themselves a 'Chink' and other such racial slurs. It was all a way of psyching themselves up for battle. John understood that as well as anyone. In fact, he'd seen quite a bit of it in the early stages of the Iraq invasion when most of the military were little more than young men who'd never seen combat. But it was the sort of display you rarely saw from veterans. Not from a professional who'd seen the awful effects of war firsthand.

Some of these men and women were still green, but after today that would all change and in ways they could hardly imagine. At least it would for the ones who made it out alive.

Moss and Captain Bishop came over as John was pulling the ladder up and into the room.

"Any word from headquarters?" John asked.

"Not yet, Colonel," Captain Bishop replied, and it took John a second to figure out Bishop had been talking to him.

"Just call me John," he told him.

"I'd sooner call you Colonel, sir, if it's all the same to you."

Moss grinned, flashing a newly dyed mohawk. The strip of hair that ran across Moss' scalp was now a mix of red, green and black.

"I hope that's not for camouflage," John quipped.

The three of them laughed.

"I've always had a fascination with the Maori warriors of New Zealand and wanted something that would scare the pants off the enemy."

"Or give them hunger pangs," Captain Bishop joked. "Since you kinda look like a giant rooster."

The visual was gut-splitting and John slapped Moss' back, unable to contain his belly laugh.

All joking stopped when the mechanized growl of Chinese armor came into earshot. The howitzers located near the high school opened fire. Not long after, the blasts from the howitzers mixed with the sound of 60mm M224 mortars being lobbed toward the enemy.

The mortar's maximum range was a little over two miles, which meant the tanks and fighting vehicles were drawing closer.

"Any visual yet?" John asked Moss, who was over by the corner window, peering out through a pair of binoculars.

"Nothing yet. All I see is a bunch of dirt and smoke being kicked up. Oh, wait a minute, here they come. Looks like a column of Type 99s, 96s and a ton of ZBD-08s."

A similar description came from Captain Bishop, who was watching through the window on the north side of the building.

"It's gonna get busy real soon," John told them. Another ladder led from the room they were in to the roof of the building. He climbed it and crawled over to the three AT-4 teams positioned there.

“Remember,” he told them. “Aim for the top and rear of the vehicles. And whenever you can, fire all at once. You three with the heavy machine guns, it’s your jobs to keep the heads of those infantrymen down.”

They nodded just as the howitzers and artillery let up. John crawled to the rooftop edge in time to see the enemy column snaking its way through the cluttered streets.

“Just a little bit further,” John whispered.

Running along the sides of both buildings were rows of Chinese infantry, scanning the tops of buildings for any targets. The Americans hadn’t given themselves away just yet. The enemy knew the city was occupied. The battle earlier, the thorny reception the Z-10s had received as well as the artillery barrage were all confirmation of that. But that didn’t mean the Americans intended to stand out in the open and wait to be shot. Combat was as much a chess match and a waiting game as it was a race over who could shoot first.

The southern vantage point from atop the veterinary hospital gave John a glimpse of another Chinese column approaching from the west. Each consisted of at least two dozen vehicles. A sobering thought when you considered there were two more columns just like it entering from the east and the north. Then John spotted an armored vehicle in the enemy column he didn’t recognize at first. Short, squat and armed with four cannons, it seemed out of place. Could it be an anti-aircraft gun?

Soon his focus was yanked back to the southern spearhead as it wound further and further into town. The lead Type 99 main battle tank was crushing a wrecked Chevrolet when a high-explosive round from a concealed M1A2 impacted the side armor, causing a blinding explosion. That was when all hell broke loose. Rounds fired from the nearby buildings poured down into the infantry below. Dozens of AT-4 rockets streamed from alleys and rooftops, bursting in a violent hail. Many of the anti-tank rounds hit reactive armor and failed to cripple or destroy the vehicle. But there was one unexpected consequence. When the reactive armor exploded to neutralize the incoming rocket, it also peppered the supporting Chinese infantry marching along their flanks. In many cases the result was pure carnage.

Less than a minute later, the town was engaged from one end to another. John steadied his scope over an enemy soldier taking aim at a second-story window. Squeezing the trigger, he let off two clean shots and watched as the infantryman crumpled.

Glancing to his left, John saw that the AT-4 team next to him was cowering. “Get those rockets into action,” he yelled, but they stayed glued to the roof, rounds cutting through brick and ricocheting around them.

When it was clear that these townspeople had lost their nerve, John grabbed the AT-4 and aimed it down onto the street. That was when he saw the M1A2 and two Bradleys over on Second Avenue burning. They’d been caught out in the open and destroyed.

Then the distinct sound of anti-aircraft fire joined in the fight. John focused on the Chinese column entering Oneida from the south and finally recognized what was making that sound. A four 25mm-barrelled Type 95 anti-aircraft tank was chewing up the Walgreens like some ravenous beast. Anti-aircraft fire from each direction soon told John the Chinese had anticipated an American ambush in town and were ready. In horror he watched as one AT-4 team after another rushed out from alleyways or exposed themselves from rooftops only to be immediately decimated by 25mm cannon fire.

Running over to the hole in the roof, John slid down the ladder. Several fighters inside were wounded, some even dead. Captain Bishop was busy engaging targets with his M4 when John asked for his walkie-talkie. He tossed it over and John radioed headquarters.

“Henry or Rodriguez, come in.”

For a terrifying moment there was no response.

“Henry or Rodriguez, please come in.”

“What is it, John?” Rodriguez said at last.

“You need to get a message out to all AT-4 teams. They need to focus all their fire on those anti-aircraft tanks first. They’re killing us out here.”

“Roger that.”

The message went out a second later, but whether it was going to do any good, he didn’t yet know.

Keeping the walkie by his side, John climbed back up the ladder and onto the roof, knowing what he needed to do. The AT-4 team he’d left a moment ago was still pinned down. Grabbing their rocket launcher, he moved to the edge and peered through a haze of gunfire. There he spotted one of the AA tanks directly below them, its guns swivelling up toward the animal hospital.

“Oh, no,” he shouted, but it was too late.

The Type 95 opened up, sending cannon fire bursting into the building’s first and second stories. Shards of brick and powder flew out from the impacts. Moss, Bishop and the other soldiers beneath him were being turned to Swiss cheese.

Rounds from Chinese infantry below thudded all around John as he leaned over and aimed at the rear of the AA tank. When he was sure he had it, he depressed the trigger, releasing a violent backblast as the rocket raced toward its target, only to bounce off a slope in the armor and explode in a shop window. John cursed his bad luck right as fire from infantry below made him take cover.

This was the last rocket on the roof, which meant John would need to find another way to destroy those AA tanks.

What about the mortar teams?

Yes, he could call in a barrage of 60mm mortars, but friendlies were all around. A single miss could be disastrous.

John peered over the edge just in time to see the Type 95 on the street below tearing up a nearby building with 20mm cannon fire. From inside came the screams of the wounded and the dying.

He got on the walkie, his palms slick with sweat. “Kiowa 55, this is Overmountain, prepare for mission, over.”

After a moment of silence the radio came to life. “Overmountain, this is Kiowa 55. Go ahead, over.”

“Kiowa 55, adjust fire, shift TP15. Danger close, AA tanks, two, in the open. ICM in effect, over.”

“Bravo, one round, HE. Out.”

A moment later the first mortar round whistled through the air and exploded in the intersection of Alberta and 2nd, wounding a handful of Chinese infantry.

“Right fifty,” John hollered into the walkie. “Drop thirty, over.”

The fire team repeated the order.

The Type 95 began moving just as the second mortar landed right where it had been a moment before. Asphalt and chunks of rock were kicked into the air, pelting

the nearby buildings. Any closer and the round would have landed on the vet hospital, killing John and everyone else in the building.

The Type 95 ground to a halt, perhaps unsure what had just happened.

“Kiowa 55, you nearly got him that time,” John told them. *In fact, you nearly got all of us.* “Right twenty, add fifteen. Fire for effect, four rounds, HE, Danger close, over.” He closed his eyes for a moment, unable to stop himself from thinking about Nasiriyah and the men lost there because of him.

The AA tank began to lurch forward as the last mortar shell slammed into the turret, causing a deafening explosion.

“Bullseye!” John shouted, scanning down the street for the next Type 95. “Great shooting, Kiowa 55. You ready for the next one?”

One by one the other 25mm cannons were silenced by mortar fire, allowing the remaining AT-4 teams to get back to work on the main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles. Once the lead and rear vehicles in each column were destroyed, the remaining trapped tanks became easy prey.

With every passing minute, the fierceness of the fighting began slacken until at last it stopped altogether. The enemy infantry had been denied a foothold in Oneida and most of their armor was either burning, disabled or abandoned.

John and the other survivors from the roof made their way down to find a second floor covered with bodies. Only three had lived through that AA assault against the second floor. One of them was Moss. In several cases, the dead weren't recognizable, let alone treatable. Lying in a corner still clutching his M4 was a dead Captain Bishop.

John took Moss' arm as the latter was reaching down to move a corpse. “You're lucky to be alive,” John told him.

Moss' eyes found Bishop's body. “Are we lucky, John?”

Those words echoed in John's ears as night began to fall and he braced himself for a list of American casualties which was sure to be staggering.

Chapter 49

The enemy could return in force at any moment, a fear that was on the minds of nearly everyone as they combed through the streets separating the living from the dead. Needless to say, priority was given to wounded friends and allies. Enemy dead were carried off, sometimes in wheelbarrows on account of the difficulty of moving about on the cluttered roads, and dropped into a mass grave on the edge of town.

In all, the defenders of Oneida had suffered just over four hundred dead and three times that number of wounded. Even John had to admit that grim as those numbers were, they'd fared far better here than during the attack on Willow Creek.

The Chinese hadn't fared nearly as well. Initial estimates claimed as many as five thousand dead and less than five hundred wounded. The wounded tended to outnumber the dead three or four to one, but in this case, the scarcity of medical supplies and the townspeople's insistence on caring for their own first were likely to blame.

As for the vehicles and equipment, the majority of the Chinese tanks that weren't still ablaze were quickly stripped of useable weapons and ammunition, their hulks left in the streets in order to hamper any future armored attack.

It would take weeks or maybe even months before Oneida began to look anything like her former self and even then many of her battle scars would still show.

A modest-sized park sat off North Cross Street and talk had already begun of transforming that green space into a mini-Arlington cemetery for the four hundred souls who had sacrificed their lives.

When Diane, Emma and the hundreds of other non-combatants emerged from the storm drain beneath the town, they found themselves staring at a world they hardly recognized. The violent roar of combat had been impossible to block out, even underground, but the sight of so much death was still hard for many of them to fathom.

Ragged, his face cut and bleeding from flying bits of shrapnel and shards of brick, John staggered toward his family. It didn't matter what Moss said, he couldn't help feeling blessed to be alive. If he hadn't climbed to the roof to lend a hand to the AT-4 teams up there, he might very well have shared Captain Bishop's fate.

Emma and Diane clung to him, his daughter sobbing as she looked about her. If the horrors of Willow Creek and her capture by the Chairman had made her come undone, he didn't want to think what seeing the streets of Oneida in their present state would do.

"Will they be back?" Diane asked, covering her nose from the terrible stench.

John nodded. "Without a doubt. They won't quit until we can drive them all the way back to California and into the ocean."

Emma was still clutching John around the waist, paper crumpled in her hand.

“She’s been working on that propaganda pamphlet,” Diane told him proudly. “The one for the prison camps behind enemy lines.”

John gently pried it from Emma’s fingers and studied what she’d done.

Stay Strong, it read. *Victory is Close at Hand*. An image of a small town in the foreground with a giant fist swinging down to scatter tiny Chinese tanks. But it was what he saw floating above the city that truly caught his attention.

“What’s this, honey?” he asked her.

Emma pulled her head from his chest, her eyes filled with tears. “It’s the EMP that got us here in the first place,” she whispered.

But it was the placement of that EMP over Oneida that jogged something loose.

“Was Jerry in the storm drains with you?” John asked them.

Diane shook her head. “No, I think he was at the medical clinic with Dr. Coffey helping the cholera patients. Why?”

“If you see him, tell him to come to the mayor’s office right away. Tell him it has something to do with that suicide mission.”

Diane agreed, although John could tell she didn’t like the sound of this one bit.

Chapter 50

Less than an hour later, John, General Brooks and the remaining members of his staff were in the radio room in a conference with General Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“They’re calling your little town the new Bastogne,” General Dempsey said over the radio, an announcement which caused a rare show of smiles and laughter. “The Chinese are likely to lay siege to Oneida, but expect them to give you a wide berth. It’ll be more of a containment operation while they do their best to grab as much of the country as they can. You people did a fine job and we’re proud of you over here. Your bravery has given all of us faith that we might still win this dirty business.”

“Where is the here you mentioned, sir?” John asked, not caring what the protocol was for addressing General Dempsey out of turn.

“Whom am I speaking to?” Dempsey asked.

“The mayor of Oneida,” John replied.

“Colonel Mack.”

“John will do just fine,” John said, wondering if his face looked as hot as it felt.

“Nonsense. It’s no secret—remaining U.S. forces are dug in along the Appalachian mountains with a sizeable contingent tasked with defending the Cumberland Gap. The 3rd Infantry Division has been deployed on the east side of the Emory river bridge to block the Chinese advance into Knoxville. There has been news of a rather surprising development of late. Apparently the drug cartels and the Mexican government have formed a temporary ceasefire and have been pushing into California.”

“They’re trying to nibble away while we’re weak,” General Brooks said with disgust.

“That may be so, but we shouldn’t complain,” Dempsey told him. “Not when it’s taking some of the pressure off of us. Hopefully, the North Koreans, Chinese and maybe even the Russians will need to divert precious resources south to deal with the problem.”

John found it hard to decide what was more surprising, that the drug cartels south of the border could ever find common ground with their own government or that a top American general would celebrate their invasion of U.S. soil.

Just then Jerry Fowler pushed his way into the already cramped comms room.

“General Dempsey, sir,” John called out. “There’s something I wanted to run by you.”

There was a pause on the other end. Next to him, General Brooks threw John a strange look.

“Go ahead, Colonel Mack.”

“I’ve got a man here who used to work in the weather department over at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge.”

“Yes,” Dempsey said. “I’m familiar with the facility.”

“So then you’ll be able to confirm whether the site still contains any of the outdated nuclear warheads sent there for disarmament.”

“That’s the very reason we sent the 3rd Infantry Division to block the Emory river,” General Dempsey said. “We plan on clearing what remains to a safe location as soon as possible.”

“General, what if I asked if I could have one of your warheads?”

“I don’t understand, Colonel. We don’t have a viable rocket to put them on. You’re not dreaming of trying to hit Beijing or Moscow, are you?”

The room burst into laughter. Everyone except for John and Jerry.

“No, sir,” John replied. “I know that would be a waste of time. I’ve also come to realize that dropping it on the heads of any foreign armies pushing east would also be foolish.”

“So then what do you need it for?”

John drew in a breath so deep he wondered if his lungs would explode. “We want to send it into the upper atmosphere on a high-altitude weather balloon and detonate it over the continental United States.”

The pause this time seemed to last forever. General Brooks and others were mumbling their disbelief.

“If we can protect the few radios and little equipment we have,” John continued, “then we might just be able to even the playing field. Maybe even swing it to our favor.”

“It’s a stupid plan,” General Brooks barked. “Don’t you know their combat vehicles have already been hardened against an EMP? I wish you’d cleared it with me before you went and wasted General Dempsey’s time with this nonsense.”

“General Brooks is right,” John conceded. “Just like in our own military, the enemy’s tanks, fighting vehicles and aircraft have all been hardened against an EMP blast. But their weak point may not be the tanks so much as the thousands of vehicles they rely on to move the supplies to the front necessary to wage war. Speak with any maintenance crew and they’ll be the first to tell you. Without a steady stream of replacement parts and fuel, any armored force is dead in the water.”

The room grew quiet as a flush crawled up General Brooks’ neck and into his cheeks. Without a doubt, John’s plan was an audacious one that might not have a hope of succeeding, but from the Revolution through the dark days of World War Two, wasn’t America’s history built on brave men rolling the dice against impossible odds?

When General Dempsey’s voice came again, it was filled with resolve. “It’s a bold idea, Colonel Mack, but if you can pull it off, it may just work. You have twenty-four hours to put together a team. You’re heading to Oak Ridge.”

“Understood, General,” John said. “Oh, and one more thing.”

“What is it, John?”

“You might want to start building some Faraday cages.”

Appendix

A reader and Army veteran contacted me after reading *Last Stand: Surviving America's Collapse* to express his enjoyment of the book. He also took that time to inform me—much to our mutual amazement—that his own life has mirrored the character John Mack's in several eerie ways. Since both Johns served with the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq, I decided to ask him how, given the task, he would organize Oneida's defense against an invading army. Although by no means definitive, I thought others might find it interesting to see it for themselves. It certainly helped me as I made my way through the third book in the series.

Defense of Oneida.

OPORDER

1. SITUATION:

a. Enemy Forces: A large force of Russian and Chinese Armor are advancing through the State of Tennessee in order to secure transportation routes and to destroy America's ability to fight. They recently destroyed the main bodies of the 101st Airborne and the 278th ACR; however, they also suffered heavy losses and are down to Brigade strength. They still have Armor and Infantry, but their air capability and artillery has been decimated. They will likely approach Oneida from the West or the South.

b. Friendly Forces: Surviving remnants of the 101st and the 278th will be consolidated as 3rd Squadron, 278th ACR with two Troops, L Troop and K Troop, for the duration of this mission. L Troop will consist of the remaining wheeled vehicles and the crews. K Troop will consist of the remaining 3 M198 Artillery guns, crews and their support equipment. Nearest friendly forces are the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, NC.

c. Attachments and Detachments: None

2. MISSION: 3rd Squadron will secure the town of Oneida, TN NLT 11SEP2014 in order to secure the eastern route to the Cumberland Gap to deny enemy forces from breaking through to the Shenandoah Valley and assaulting Washington DC.

3. EXECUTION:

a. 3rd Squadron will establish a defensive perimeter around the town of Oneida to secure Highway 27, State Route 63, and State Route 297. The Squadron will establish 3 Fire Points for artillery, LP/OP's, and will make ambush points along Route 27 and 297. All bridges will be mined.

b. Commander's Intent: To destroy enemy forces as they try to cross bridges and enter through the valleys in order to force them further south towards the main US Forces.

c. Tasks to Subordinate Units:

1. L Troop:

a. Establish ambush location at the bridge on Highway 27, mine the bridge, place an LP/OP (Forward Observer) on the spur on the NW side of the bridge (Ridge Road). Place explosive charges on the E and West Ridges approximately 600m east of the

bridge. Place additional charges on the ridge just NW of the bridge. Create an Abatis approximately 600m E of the bridge. As the vehicles approach the Abatis, detonate the explosives on the E and W ridges in order to collapse them onto the lead vehicles. Blow the charges on the west side of the bridge to trap the enemy on the bridge. Direct artillery fire and crew served fire onto the enemy until the threat has been eliminated. Blow the bridge as a last resort.

b. Establish MK19 and M2 fighting position at the junction of Carson Rd and Highway 27 to cover the southern approach to Oneida.

c. Place additional ambush location at the bridge on Highway 297 (Leatherwood Rd). Establish LP/OP on the spur located to the NE of the 297 switchback. Place explosive charges on the ridge above the switchback on the west side of the bridge. Mine the bridge. Place additional explosives along the ridge to the N and S of 297 on the E side of the bridge. Create an Abatis on the road just NE of the major switchback on the East side of the bridge. Allow enemy forces to cross the bridge and enter into the valley on the East side. As the vehicles approach the Abatis, detonate the explosives on the N and S ridges in order to collapse them onto the lead vehicles. Blow the charges on the west side of the bridge to trap the enemy on the bridge. Direct artillery fire and crew-served fire onto the enemy until the threat has been eliminated. Blow the bridge as a last resort.

d. Establish MK19 and M2 fighting position at the junction of Station Camp Rd and Highway 297 to cover the western approach to Oneida.

e. Establish MK19 and LP/OP on the peak north of Ditney Trail and Wright Lane to cover the eastern approach to Oneida

f. Prepare individual fighting positions along the outskirts of Oneida, focus on the western and southern approaches but do not completely ignore the north or east.

2. K Troop:

a. Provide Forward Observers to L Troop for the LP/OP operations

b. Establish a M198 Fire Point on the mountain top east of Howard Baker Lake (Eli Lane)

c. Establish a M198 Fire Point on the mountain top south of Paint Rock Rd at the end of Walnut Lane

d. Establish a M198 Fire Point on the Ridge above the airport (Pistol Lane)

4. SERVICE AND SUPPORT: None

5. COMMAND AND SIGNAL:

a) Signal.

1) Frequencies and Call Signs. 147.255MHz SC,
Commander - Peacemaker 6

XO - Peacemaker 5

L Troop Commander - Longbow 6

K Troop Commander - Kiowa 6

2) Pyrotechnics and Signals.

Red Flare - Enemy Breakthrough

Green Flare - Mission Complete

3) Challenge and Password.

Challenge: Overmountain

Password: Men

4) Command.

1) Command Leader Location. Oneida Mayor's Office

2) Chain of Command. 3rd Squadron Commander, XO, L Troop Commander, K Troop Commander

Thank you for reading
Last Stand: Warlords!

I hope you enjoyed the story. I'm always grateful for a review. For thoughts, comments or feedback feel free to send me an email: williamhweberauthor@gmail.com

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