



Generous Enemies

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Doug sized up Krue yet shook his head. “Major, I’m trying to explain but it’s very hard to get it right... I read up on what happens down there just in case I parachute in, land up shit creek without a paddle and you know what. It’s not because I’ve gone mental or been sitting in the stratosphere playing God... Up there you’ve got to wonder, and Peters – I haven’t met him but he’ll back me up – you have to wonder who owns what up there. A line is a line and beyond that, in Occupied Australia, it’s a million shades of grey. There can never be some U-N peace deal. It’s the new Middle-East up there. I commend you for going in there, I really do. Sooner or later we’ll all have to go and stake a claim up there or write it off as something for the Aboriginals to sort out.”

“All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible. This I did.”

T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

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Desert Surgery

Krue's sleek eyebrow arched up to the clear blue sky, followed by her widening eye, expecting a deathly angel to appear. Her eye pressed against the sniper scope and her shoulder gave a shrug, right up to her ear, pushing in an earphone.

“Angel Five in queue for Voodoo Child...”

Krue tried not to look up; it seemed unreal that in low-orbit, an armour plated satellite was transferring data to an airborne drone, somewhere above her, wheeling into positioning, aiming to where she stared to: the target zone. Relying on hi-tech tools was risky, too many things in the daisy chain were way out of her control, but this was an ace up her sleeve, she had never used it before, and had only ever heard of its use as gossip.

She had seen warlords sweating around the Top End hauling camouflage-draped howitzers, mobile missile-launchers and beetle drones bristling with antennae and gatling guns. The buy or hire, haul and raise hell weaponry were ideal for perimeter defence, geopolitical bullying, small scale acquisition and general mayhem, yet their preference to phallic weaponry on the wide open field brought about their downfall: large weapons were picked up on radar and bombed too easily, jammed by electronics and most of all, jammed by dust. Now for Krue, lying sideways behind a branch in a crevice where the dry earth had opened up, and living there for days on end covered by a bleached net, nibbling dried rations and measuring her diminishing water, she could see hope in the out-of-sight, out-of-mind ordinance, fed on a string of co-ordinates.

“Angel Five in queue for Voodoo Child...”

“Yeah, we'll see,” she whispered to the automated call, no-one listening. HQ weren't too open about what the airborne drone carried. That confidential knowledge, she knew, was not worth putting in her pretty head, but the stark warning to keep a safe distance when the Angel Strikes, was.

She drew back from the scope, scanned end to end of the horizon, then edged back to the scope and studied the target zone again. So far, so good.

The target arrived at midday from the north in a well-tuned, diesel, desert camouflaged 4x4. They knew, like Krue, roughly where to stop and after a bit of chasing the exact co-ordinates with their GPS system, they had hit the lode to within a ten metre radius. There were three, looking the part of civilians. One wriggled himself through the sun roof and swung an outdated .50 calibre to the north and remained there, relaxed, sitting back, jabbering. Expecting visitors? Krue, to the south, snorted dust out her nose. Visitors would kick up dust and there were none to be seen. The other two, mercenary prospectors, unloaded metal cases, erected a tripod

for a drill, a satellite data link, cleaned out their rifles, trading talk with the gunner. Then one of them swung a sophisticated, low-grade-uranium sniffing Geiger counter over the ground, sweeping, searching, marking a point, sweeping, marking, fixing a diagram, defining the zone. After a solid hour of basic prospecting they were enthusiastic and relayed their success to their warlord, somewhere up north or maybe just over the horizon. This was a career changing event, they may have struck a lode. This was what commandeering foreign soil was all about. But it wasn't a natural lode, Krue smiled, easing herself back into the plan. At the same time she spread the coordinates across the Top End airwaves and in a few paying ears, the radioactive fragments were being buried just over there, creating over the weeks a myth that evolved into a honey pot, now cheerfully verified.

Krue nudged the satellite phone from above her breast to mouth, pressed a button and waited. The beeps were long, encrypted dots of data drawn from her, up to the satellite, and down to her HQ, over eight hundred kilometres away in Broken Hill.

HQ answered, "Voodoo Child... Progress?"

"They've hit their jackpot.

"Have they made the call?"

Krue winced. HQ wanted the prospectors to advertise their little uranium prize, call in a crew for excavation, so when they came in and hopefully the local warlord too, HQ could wipe everyone out with some *enriched* uranium.

"They've radioed their patron."

"Good." HQ broke up then came back. "How safe are you?"

"Safe enough..." She had three litres left, four days max. One hundred bullets. What is safe out in the desert? "Why?"

"Parameters have shifted."

"Parameters..."

"Intelligence warning: a Chinese satellite hunter is shifting into low orbit, Angel Five and other birds have to re-align. We're expecting a major disruption."

"Shit. Look, the target zone is as good as it gets."

"It could be premature..."

"Just do it."

"Yes Captain."

She slid the satellite phone back. Nothing else worked this far out in the desert. Back to her scope she saw that the two prospectors stood away from their 4x4, their lean brown arms tense, holding heavy binoculars to their eyes, as they made concentrated sweeps over the lifeless desert. One of the surveyors dropped his

binoculars and held a gadget before him, swinging it east to south, west to south, hoping to detect her satphone's signal again. She turned it off. 'Fuckers', she muttered. The other zeroed in on her hideout. He saw the crook of the grey branch and assumed something was behind it. He pointed and gave an order. The guy with the .50 calibre deftly swung around.

Krue wriggled for cover, her eyes resting on some speck of sand. They were under three hundred metres away. Even if she survived the probing bursts of lead they would drive up, and then she could shoot out their tires on the way, but it was still three to one, the distance between them and her *now* as good as it could ever be. How long would it take to pull the tarpaulin off her dirt bike, buried a few metres back, kick start it a hundred times and zigzag south leaving a cloaking cloud of dust? No, she damned them, these guys were smart. She imagined a satellite and a drone, zapping data, adjusting aim, one floating by at twenty thousand kilometres an hour, the other as fast as a crow.

She carefully raised her eye to the scope. They were packing up their boxes and tripods into the 4x4. The gunner at the top was aiming straight at her, a blip of flame came from his barrel. His body rippled. She ducked. The volley cracked the air a few metres to the left and overhead. She looked from the defunct satphone to her rifle. Another volley of shots came over, in a wide spread, followed by another, honing in on her position.

Krue braved the odds and spied through her scope. The gunner with the .50 calibre was adjusting his sights and snarling at the other two. The other two had sheltered behind the vehicle and she could just see, under it, their boots, scuffing up dust.

Krue gritted her teeth, uncorked the barrel of her K-40 Rifle, stretched her arms then propped herself just over the branch. The sun hit her grubby face. With the gunner glaring down his .50 calibre at her in her sights she squeezed the trigger, a healthy fuck-off burst - that missed. She cowered, a cold dread seeping from her core.

The gunner's return volley was still high, but it'd be back, turning her cover into matchsticks.

She rolled to the other end of the branch and turned the satphone on. While it warmed itself up she took aim again. The gunner fired first and sent a spray of lead just over her head. So that's it, Krue smirked, we're all aiming a bit too high because the heat off the desert is magnifying what we see. She deliberately aimed below the vehicle, popping the radiator, and firing another healthy burst, drew the gun slightly up. She did it again, and again, until the gunner caught on and thumped a few holes in her grey branch. The shriek of dry wood splintering, the thump-thump of bullets into the ground metres away, was eating into her mind. She rolled back, burrowed into the crevice, loaded a fresh magazine and psyched herself that if she heard them driving up, closing in, she'd let them have it. But there were no sounds, just the

desert, and her coarse breath. HQ had not sent anything to the satphone. She pressed in the ear piece.

“Angel Five in queue for Voodoo Child...” Automated as ever.

They would pick up her signal. There was no escaping on the bike. She readied a grenade. She heard nothing, no yells, no thump-thump, no whining engine. The desert was silent again.

She wriggled along the branch and peeked through one of the bullet holes blown through, the scope to her eye. The gunner was coughing and trying to wriggle out of the sun roof, his smoking .50 calibre limp. She could make out one prospector, then the other, staggering in oblong circles, their hands clasped over their mouths and eyes, their feet tripping over until they fell. One of them raised himself to his knees and in act of defiance stayed there, hands over eyes, gazing at the sky, until like a tombstone hit with a crowbar, he toppled forward and bit the desert. The gunner slumped backwards, his pigeon chest, stringy forearms and flowing beard facing up to the sun, easily mistaken as placidly snoozing, catching some rays, the usual peace time stuff.

She'd already hit their 4x4 a few times but as a test she tried something dramatic: the windscreen was intact until she made a neat hole right in the centre. They didn't react.

She stood up and mutely studied the target zone and the sky above it. Somewhere up there was a drone, camouflaged against the sky, armed with guided canisters of illegal gases, and above it, a satellite. Space, she ran her lean fingers through her hair, was now a mean ass place. She rolled her kit into the camouflage net, rolled that into the tarpaulin and kick-started the dirt bike on the first go. She gave the engine a noisy rev and cautiously closed in, her K-40 resting on the handlebar. At one hundred metres she made a slow half circle around, not venturing closer, studying the prospectors baking in the sun.

A scavenging bird landed and hopped along the roof and inspected the gunner's earlobe.

“Hey!” Krue shouted, relieved it lived.

The bird glared at her, shuffled along and knew to outwait her. She stopped and remembered the orders from the Instructor at Operations, ‘Do not go within one hundred metres of the target zone’ and inspected the prospectors, poisoned to death, silent and peaceful.

Yet to truly finish the job she had to show, in case there were still War Crimes Trials and someone paid the lawyers, that warfare was kind and conventional. With perfect accuracy she tapped a bullet in each of the prospector's skulls then made a casually

spray over the 4x4. Last was the gunner, it was a shame to break his sunny snooze but the bullet didn't do much, he just seemed to nudge a bit and bleed.

Her next concern were gate-crashers. She spied from end to end of the horizon and saw nothing. She took a satisfying gulp of water and accelerated well away from the target zone. Far enough away to feel innocent she plucked out the satphone. She waited for the drawn out beeps, but nothing happened. She shook the satphone. There shouldn't be too much dust in it. She drew it closer to her eyes. It was on, it had power and was transmitting, but, she tipped her head up, something up there was dead.

Hong Kong

Ghan admired the hum and bustle cutting through the humid air of Hong Kong. The island was permanently charged and today it was blazing; in the neon-lit interconnecting malls and bars he'd expected global tourists but now it were the excited troops, splurging what disposable cash and emotions they had, making the most of, and some stretching it to the limit, their shore leave. On the streets was the familiar tangy air of the dense, Asian, industrially polluted and garish electrical kind, and now a sweet euphoria was lifting the acumen of the locals; shopkeepers, barmen, prostitutes and pimps, and anyone else with their finger on the commercial pulse, was raking it in. This week was a slice of boomtown in a world of flat, morbid and grim recession. It was also peace town in a sea of pain. Arising from the constant news of carnage and conflict, was the dizzying acknowledgement that history in most of Asia and the Pacific had gruesomely ground to a halt, reset itself and was evolving unmolested, and now, from today, it seemed there was real hope in the air: Looking down from Victoria Peak into the harbour, over to Kowloon, then staring out to the sea, Ghan studied the majesty of the Third Fleet.

His daughter tugged at his hand, "Daddy! Are you really going out to sea?"

His eyes shifted left, right, then he slyly checked behind; a few tourists and many troopers like himself, forming rivulets through the crowd, jostling onto and pushing against the railings of the viewing platforms. There was a small chance, but he swallowed hard, picked his daughter up and hugging her, faced her to the fleet, pointing out to the larger vessels. They were anchored in a defensive diamond formation, sparkling and bristling with the latest technology, and although Honk Kong was neutral, the world knew that to touch it and the rest of the West was liable.

"I am. I'm not sure which one I will go on but you choose one, and you remember it, can you do that?"

She nodded, picked out the nearest (a Jiangwei II, freshly painted, a row of sailors in white standing on the bow, a new radar up the top swivelling madly) and shut her eyes and concentrated.

Ghan smiled, he looked up to the sky then down at the tram coming up again. Packed inside were young men. He recognised a few.

"Daddy, why are they waving at you?"

"They are in my Brigade, they serve under me."

"Do I serve you, too?"

"No, I serve your mother, and you – but," and he whispered into her ear, "I serve you for ever and ever."

Digesting that concept, time and servitude, in such a young fertile mind, was hard work. She fell silent and stared hard out at the ship, then the others, and at a helicopter touching down on one of them.

Ghan's wife returned. Her expression of joy at the holiday had washed away in the night and now she was foreboding, un-ashamedly, yet prosaically smiling. She knew too who some of those troops looked up to.

She said, "I was chatting to some of your officers, they were buying postcards. They are very excited."

"Many of them have never been out of their own province."

"Colonel Chiang was there too. By himself."

"Deafening solitude is his kind of music."

Her brittle smile morphed into something real. "He talks to me."

"He trusts us."

"He *knows* us."

Ghan slowly nodded up and down, meditating almost, until his daughter playfully made a swipe at his bobbing goatee, so he swung her into his wife's arms and clasped the railing before him and glared at the towers of Hong Kong, then straight over the fleet, and to the horizon of the sea. All around him were the *zzzt* of digital cameras zooming and translating light and form into binary, the cooing of people and the quiet respite of others, contemplating, like Ghan, what lay over the curvature of the earth, where patchy reports of horrors were beamed from. He exhaled, blushed, turned and saw that his wife and daughter were frozen too, fixated, alone in their thoughts, unable to extract from myth and hope what they wished for most.

His daughter, with all the naivety and impatience of youth broke the spell, "How far away is Australia?"

He took her back, positioned her firmly on his forearm and with his free hand limply cuffed her mouth and drew her closer. "Where did you hear that?"

She shook her head under his hand.

He held her jaw up. "It's a story, a little story." He checked left, right, left again. "Ice cream?" He removed his hand.

She didn't nod. She didn't squeal with delight. She just sat on his arm, kicked her legs out, a fierce stare trying to penetrate and travel beyond the horizon (not knowing yet the earth was round) and to what lay there.

"Will you come back?"

"For you," he swallowed hard, "I would swim back."

Ghan was alone in the elevator for the long ride to the top, the longest ride he'd ever enjoyed. When the polished steel doors opened at the top floor bar he was blinded by the morning sunshine, then stepping out, nauseous at the smell of stale cigarette smoke and spilt alcohol that had seeped into the carpet. It was a tidy bar, fit for the playboys and elite, but empty as a tomb. He saw Chiang had been there awhile, comfortable in a couch set to a table, smoking, staring smittenly out to sea. Crossing the freshly mopped dance floor, Ghan inspected the windows, floor to ceiling plates of glass, and through them the other wonder; fields of tower blocks stretching from behind the fancy sky-scrappers, filing the island, rows and grids gone vertical. Who exactly lived there he dismissed with a shrug and sat down across from Chiang.

Chiang's eyes shifted from the sea to the table, and he blushed. "You thought you would come early, to be alone, and enjoy the view?"

"Yes."

Chiang slid his lighter into his cigarette packet and made to grab his folded up newspaper.

"Stay," Ghan commanded, "We all need a view to clear the mind." He settled into the soft leather cushion. The bar had seen many hard nights, he could almost hear the local Hong Kong syndicates cutting their deals, and before that the diplomats and expats of the West drowning their homesickness. He rotated his head back to the sea and counted the fleet, not so much brute force, just protective power: two frigates and five destroyers to escort ten cargo vessels. And there were submarines too, not the diesel kind to boost the numbers for small scale regional bullying, but the nuclear type, sleek, quiet and primed with civilisation-levelling payloads. And there was one, taking on fresh supplies from a rubber dingy, sitting heavy as lead on the ocean when everything else the same size or smaller, bobbed like toys. Civilian pleasure craft drifted up to the perimeter set by the Water Police, appraising the huge grey hulls and exotic armaments. A horn would blare and the civilian craft would turn before the buoys, leaving a small wake away from the attraction.

Chiang looked appraisingly at the newspaper then up to Ghan, "Have you kept up with the news?"

"Just television; kids stuff mostly."

Chiang lit a cigarette and shifted the newspaper to Ghan, "It's official now, Indonesia has requested support from us to police their territories. Clandestine activities will continue, as ever, but it is a step forward."

Ghan opened the newspaper, it was a local high-brow mouthpiece, keen to smother up the pains of nursing Taiwan back to the bosom by proving Hong Kong's transition wasn't that bad, obviously censored as much as the rest, but endorsed by the local

entrepreneurs. Ghan browsed for a few minutes, noted a few articles and closed it, placing it squarely in the middle of the table.

"They're sending us down there to eliminate the rogues," Chiang grinned.

"And not to face the Americans?"

"Our prayers are answered..."

"For the moment." Ghan could see the elevator had gone, and was returning, rocketing up forty floors and in a minute his Captains would spill out, perhaps soothed by the bottle and the brothel, and now anxious to venture out. Ghan had heard from his Two Stars peers news that might never make it into print.

"Do you know about the satellite-killers?"

"I heard something," Chiang's eyes narrowed to the tip of his cigarette then out to the sky above the sea.

"A new kind of war to command space. Some craft have been knocked out of orbit, others wrecked, or obliterated into a thousand pieces."

Chiang emitted a distorted chortle and inhaled.

"Cloud of fragments, just like shrapnel, spray out but unlike on earth, nothing falls to the ground, instead this debris stays until it drifts down, and is damaging those that survived."

Chiang nodded, tapping one foot, his eyes now locked on to the fleet, "So the West's edge has been blunted?"

"Intentionally yes, so too ours."

Chiang squinted at the fleet's radar domes and wiry antennas, and the expanse of sea to cross.

"When we get to where ever they send us, and we land ashore, deployed and securing what we know not," Ghan stroked his finger tip across his chin in a small arc, "We may be out of contact, or reliant on old means; radios, relay stations. Fifty years of technological advance, been turned back in two hours."

Chiang was immobile, stubbing out his half cigarette. "It must have been some show, up there," he kinked his head to the heavens then made a slow droop to his feet, "But it doesn't change much down here."

"Perhaps."

"How many know?" Chiang asked.

"None."

The elevator arrived, the doors opened, the Captains' amazement at the view stunned them and then seeing Two Stars Ghan, they gave a whoop.

Ghan stood up, one hand out to the arrivals and the other out to the fleet in Hong Kong's harbour, tilting to the sea they would vanish across, "Comrades, come!"

Outside Broken Hill

At first glance of the parched camouflage sheet draped over the still curvaceous body one would have assumed death, dehydration or hypothermia. From a distance it would appear as an insignificant dot on the dry desolate landscape that stretched for miles. To the statisticians, they would add the casualty into a database that recorded the loss of most of a generation.

To the boy on the camel, staring down at the sun kissed brunette hair protruding from the jumble of concealed limbs, hopefully his second sense, the one of dread, would retain its place of defeat. He stroked the coarse hairs on the neck of his camel and straightened his back surveying the lay of the land. His wary eyes saw to the ends of the shimmering horizon and coupled with the carbine slung diagonally across his back, could shoot anything out there in a matter of seconds. He waited, slumped forward in the saddle for a good minute, turned to check his flanks, then slowly back the way he had come and waited another minute. To the north, scavenging birds hopped about a mangled carcass of a long dead kangaroo. With their large black wingspans, hawks drifted on thermals rising up from the baked land, circling directly and patiently above his objective.

“Hey miss,” he called, the tremor in his voice waking him from the trek into isolation. “I know you aren’t dead.”

A crisp breeze tickled her exposed skin. She pictured the rising sun and imagined the progress she would make in the day; walking painfully hunched into herself, staggering into the coolness of morning, struggling with the first pangs of thirst at midday and collapsing, waking, wandering east for shelter, failing, curling up in chilled agony in a rocky crevice beside some inedible low-lying shrub.

“Hey Miss,” the boy called louder, and then unslung his rifle, made another long look around the flat land, the ranges stepping up to the north, the rising sun lighting the crowns of low shrubs a vibrant, pastel, oily green. “Don’t be playing dead on me. I know you’re alive.”

He quietly peeled the crinkled khaki sheet off Captain Katherine Krue. She was cuddled into herself, the broad shoulders crankily hunched up to her ears and collar. Her army uniform had been trashed; cotton frayed, loose faded buttons dangled by threads, yawning crevices opened in the leather of her battered combat boots. As the crisp morning sun blinded her she groaned and buried her head into the crook of her arm. The dessert swallows me. We are one. Passing through my lips is cool water, droplets soaking into my dry swollen tongue. Oh God it’s good.

“*Nah nah nah nah* you don’t!” the boy withdrew the wet tea-towel from her flaking lips and greedily protruding swollen tongue, “You been dying real slow too... Takes longer to get better. You had all the time in the world to die so now you got all the time to get living. You watch. I’ve seen worse get better quicker but then they go back to nothing... Sick again... For what?”

Though utterly exhausted, she portrayed a strained glint of thanks for the friendliness the boy exuded. He was captivated by the scene and inspired to tell his Uncle Willy and together they would paint it on the rear of a door and leave it there as testament, on its hinges, to bridge the mystics of dreamtime and the realities of wartime. The boy patrols a waypoint, is heading back, and finds a warrior woman. They are two-days ride west from Silverton, south of Broken Hill. Her food is gone. She doesn’t really know how to live off the land. They say her friends skirmish way north around the old uranium mines. Some don’t make it back, but she came out of the desert alone. For those that died their spirits remain part of the desert. Many more would have come into Broken Hill but helicopters, though they look around a lot, can’t find aviation gas, they can’t rescue these warriors who think they know the land but they don’t. This is as far as the boy will travel for further west is where starved strangers with guns wail at the moon’s china white beams cast on the desert’s endless sandy ripples. You would have to be crazy to walk out here, he smirked, and not know a thing about how to survive. With a towel dampened by bore water he cleansed the muck from her eyes.

“Thank you,” she croaked, though it sounded indecipherable.

He then blew the grit out of the barrel of her rifle, practised aiming it on a watchful hawk above, then slung it diagonally over his back. Next he crafted a small fire by her side to brew a large pot of tea and brown sugar. He then erected a small camouflage tent and watched over her shaded body or out to the sun-baked land. Throughout the scorching day he fed her chocolate mashed into a paste, a pulped apple, and a grub he found poking its head out a hole. By sunset her eyes opened alertly and she found herself helped up and propped on the rear of the seated camel. After the sun’s fiery retreat to the west an onslaught of perfectly sparkling stars were sprinkled across the sky. The boy stroked the camel’s head to the east and feared his passenger was paralysed by a tick or a big brown snake’s venom for when her head tipped back up to the heavens her face was blank and morose, jaw sagging, the eyes wild at the stars dazzling above.

He nudged her with his elbow.

“Uh,”

“How long?” he asked of her retreat.

“Eight days,” she croaked.

“I reckon you could have made ten. Eight’s O-K eh? That’s all right. You’re alive – that’s even better.”

She closed her eyes and fell to sleep. She awoke again at dawn. In the distance the land was desolate, ranging from black to shades of pink, and flat, yet when she watched the passing ground it was craggy and harsh. The boy artfully navigated along a thin path between bare hills and rocky passes, whispering to his passenger that she was going home. She murmured that she already was.

South China Sea

Ghan's gesture to his own captains came back full circle. Prominent on his mind for the first days at sea was the farewell at the quay, dignitaries of Hong Kong, the wealthier of the troops' families, and the mandatory batch of political types were pressed against the barriers waving the brigade's dragon flag, cheering, singing, yet those with an investment of love were set apart; intermittently their farewell façade would drop, and in its place, an inhospitable glare took over them; the profit from this entire venture could be their ruin. Ghan had wondered, from the eyes of his own wife, if she felt that way too. His daughter, too young and shielded to understand, was probably the happiest little girl in Hong Kong that day, but her mother was something else. Was it superstition, or some higher order at play, coming from not only the mothers, but the wives, the sisters, and the male relatives of the departing troopers. It was as if they knew not to expect them back in a hurry or in one piece, at least. The newspaper editors and television presenters chatted that it was only a regional inspection, home by New Year, but who believed that, except maybe, his daughter. The more he thought about it the more it weighed him down; was fate decided in the black hole they were shipping to? So he paced his cabin, stared for the spare minutes he could out the porthole to the sea. Sometimes a lone seagull, flying beside the ship, would stare back at him, both of them flushed along to what was drawing them, yet one only needed to flap it's wings to exit the slipstream. Thankfully there were duties. Some of his troops were seasick, in his mind, a symptom of something other than the poor food and pitching. There was discipline. Planning. Information.

Four days to sea he was summoned by two military police, escorted to the deck and whisked to a frigate by helicopter, body-searched, and entered the cabin of General Zhing. Before Ghan could observe the layout, Zhing's pale flat palms and splayed fingers flipped back through the air like a fish's belly out of water, arcing towards a long leather couch staged before a wall that was covered in a white screen, the screen illuminated with a projected real time map of S.E Asia and the locations of all units, land, naval and airborne. Ghan giddily sat down, grinning down his boyish excitement, yet adult enough to acknowledge the counterweight deep in his gut. The un-announced invitation to spend time with one of the top brass didn't happen on training missions, or on Sunday cruises throughout the region. Alone with Zhing (a once in a life-time opportunity), he studied the live map, and in that silence the weight unsettled and began to rise.

After basic and abrupt formalities Zhing spoke to the map, "Many things have changed. We have these means, but there is still the fog of war." Somewhere in a mainframe the new data of unit locations was updated, and the map changed, new

points to focus on and new directions to ponder. Sea lanes were covered by small craft and submarines, divisions were amassed all over Taiwan, and a reconnaissance bomber was pushing into the lonely expanse of the Pacific. Zhing keenly watched its progress, awaiting a discovery, his mouth mumbling, “So let’s start with what troubles you.”

Ghan, stoical and statuesque, said, “Do we have a reliable satellite fleet for the tasks ahead of us?”

“One in four, for how long... If ‘they’ had done their messy work a week from now, maybe that would be beneficial, but so soon.” Zhing’s wrinkled face dropped, half contemplative, half despondent. “How are your troops?”

“Well enough, building up courage. Fear of the unknown induces sickness, so I make sure they are not idle, as best I can.”

Zhing’s wiry eyebrows raised and he smiled.

“They are ready, if that’s what you must know,”

Zhing slapped a hand on Ghan’s shoulder, “You have told me more than any technocrat in a similar position could tell me in ten years and a billion emails.” He shuffled about his expansive cabin, answered a silent yet flashing phone, barked a few orders, went to a refrigerator and fetched two beers and two glasses. As he sat down, poured them and said, “When I was a boy the only entertainment I had was the town square. So much change and everything keeps changing. In one corner, after dark, the men with the splinted spirits and addictions would gather. They made me laugh, but when they made me cry I found better things to do. No revolution, no red book, no dollar note could change them but they are there for a reason: Great Lessons in Life. One night the guitar man, one leg in bandages, who knows why, hobbling on crutches for pity, I don’t know, was playing his songs. His guitar was old and patched up, and he was terrible, singing like a woman twice widowed and crowing for a third. But they put up with it, they had nothing else, and one of them had a dog. It began howling, howling like a beast betrayed.”

Again, on the map, unit positions were updated. Zhing ran his finger up to his fleet and loosely drew a route south. Picketed along the route were submarines, and stations Ghan guessed as spy vessels.

“The man with the guitar, he said, ‘Shut that dog up’. And the others went along, ‘Yeah, shut that dog up or we share it, our stomachs are empty’ and then the owner said, ‘It’s my dog and it does what it wants!’ so the guitar man, put down his guitar and took up his crutches and hobbled over to the dog owner, ‘Shut that dog up – I’m playing!’ and the owner he backed up, trying to defend himself from crutches, screaming, ‘It’s my dog and I like the sound it makes!’ So the guitar man hit the dog owner with his crutches.”

Zhing took a hearty swig, smacked his lips, seemed to forget where he was, checked the map, massaged his forehead and continued.

“So the dog, his head hung low and his tail still, seeing his master under attack, you know what he did?”

Grinning like a boy, Ghan said, “No.”

“He scampered away into the shadows. Gone. His master was pinned down on the ground. But the dog came back, jaws wide open, closing right on the guitar man’s good leg; and down he went, screaming, waving his crutches but the dog and his master, by then, skipped down the alley, singing.”

Ghan asked, “Did that make you laugh or cry?”

“Ha!” Zhing elbowed him playfully in the ribs, “It kept me awake, I begged my father for a dog, but that wasn’t the point.”

“Yes.”

In the middle of the map of the Pacific was a speck of live data; the reconnaissance bomber began to wheel north, peeling off from its previous course to a glowing, now fading, radar signature: Surface vessels in wing formation and a title appearing as it was typed by an analyst in a backroom: *US 7th Fleet: Battle Group*.

“Ahhh expected... They are watching from the sidelines... They have lost too many and that old weary giant is tired. That’s what they say. Or it could be oil and resources: they can’t get it and now they claim not to want it. Isolationism takes a strange pride... The question is,” Zhing enthused, “In this new world, who are we? Playing our guitar or howling at the noise.”

“There is no answer, only contemplation.”

“True if you are unsure of who you are.” Zhing stood up, went to the map, and keeping his shadow off the east coast of Australia, planted his finger on a region and drew a circle, “It was the man that could walk away that made me laugh, yet in life we can’t always play our parts.”

Ghan clenched his teeth, scrutinizing the region so far away, so remote, so volatile. No training could prepare him for this.

“I will not be sailing so far south as I’d like to,” Zhing cocked his head up to the 7th Fleet, a pocket of ocean sprinkled with metal fins, “They might chase us down, and there is so much to attend to.” His hand brushed against Australia. “Yet, you will not be so alone down there.”

“How so?”

“Most men are obedient, like their dogs. They can’t wander far. But you and three other Brigade Commander will be beyond that, there is no master you can

conveniently call in to right the wrongs. You, my friend, will be master of all before you.”

Now Ghan burnt, bright and hot with pride and the humiliation of susceptibility to it, and gulping down the last of his beer didn't dampen the flames.

Aged as ever, Zhing continued, “It's not so bad, you know. Many men lie awake dreaming of what you will be undertaking. They are restless, right until the end, but have done nothing. They wake, feed the chickens, die happy, never knowing their true worth.” Zhing fetched more beer. “I have thought of you, especially you, for a reason you will only come to understand much later: First comes the Mission for the Motherland, then the Mission to Yourself. They are intertwined. They give, they take. Men die, many more may not return.” Then Zhing made a double-take; stooping to place the beers on the table and as if to lay on a final bereaving commitment to his brave junior, then standing straight as a rod, digging his bony finger right into Ghan's sternum, commanding, “You and I live the curse ‘May you live in interesting times’. The path of your brigade is down a one-way street; actions will make history. In a sense your life is over Ghan, you are history, now live it.”

Zhing sighed, slapped a hand on Ghan's shoulder and sat him down. He opened their beers, made a silent toast and watched as Ghan sipped.

“It's not so bad, it may not be that bad. All this might blow over. Your brigade could be extracted out and back home in months,” Zhing yawned, “You never know in this world, ever.”

“... Yes.”

“You must understand,” Zhing spoke squarely to his man, “Where you're going, to make history, to clean up history and enforce civilisation on barbaric senility, I and many others, want you back.”

Tipsy, on deck, waiting for the helicopter to take him back to his ship, Ghan made sweeps of the inky dark for the fleet and then up to the stars. South. Full steam. History. He knew where they were going, most of the ‘why’, obviously the ‘how’. Yet he'd been there, maybe not the same cities or regions, and they knew he'd been there and seen the bright lights, so to say, and wouldn't he be tempted to live on there, to defect? He filled his lungs with the sea air. Why not send someone who had never tasted the delights of the West? Unless of course, where he was going wasn't the West, it was something else.

He mused, stoic and sober, pondering the West; It was a state of collective minds, he decided, and when the minds broke down it was just a wasteland. And of history? There is little history now. Hadn't a Chinese fleet, six hundred years ago, explored Australia? Or was that myth, adorable as nationalistic banter, yet the available

evidence inconclusive. He was not the first to venture so far, yet his lips parted and widened, and his teeth were bare to the salty spray, this is *my* history.

Sydney Town

She artfully snaked through the crowd lining the parade route along George Street. Unfurling streamers floated down from skyscrapers. Jubilant cheers rang up the walls of the congested bustling city. Civilians, the young, too old, returned, or too important but left to carry on the struggle behind the lines, poured out of their offices to see the passing of the latest gladiators: A battalion of babies marching before the grand architectural statements of corporate fanfare, Martin Place, heading for an army fleet of diesel armoured trains down at Central Station. Drones were in the air and the undercover police were sweating it, the crack of an obliterating suicide bomber hadn't broken the city nerves for a month, and the parade progressed with a festival radiance.

Krue, six-foot-plus in boots, saw over the bobbing heads of the swarm of civilians. In the rich morning sun the parade went on with a fresh heroic impetus. She shied from the lure of community hype, settling for seasoned anonymity, but was jolted from the quiet of her mind as the jolly crescendos, "*Good luck! Farewell! Safe Return!*" pounded the young passing soldiers, hit a chilling apex, capped by plain roars from patriotic well wishers. A departing soldier with bold green eyes fell out of step as what had to be his lover, a petite brunette radiating a lustre of youth and complete devotion, excitedly ran up, squeezed him, sucking a lasting wisp of love with the locking of their arms and smashing of lips.

The crowd stood on their toes in merry awe, misty eyed, then the boots kicked forward. The girl wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. Krue's lips kinked, it was enticing and exhilarating, the rush of love, to miss, to love again, but all that bullshit was on hold. The breath of sweetness brought another onslaught of mob cheer. The soldiers proudly heaved a fancy glossy banner over their heads: *Alice Springs Relief Battalion*. Brave and strong, ignorant of their fate, they were off. It was little relief to Krue's eyes. She'd been there. To think back to that time would only give her a nauseous headache. Was it the gas they used or the stench of death it caused?

She slipped through the crowd, heading further up George Street, towards Circular Quay, thankful to escape the dispersing crowd and found her mark. She stood before Australia Square; a grey cylindrical forty-eight floored building, blasted with sunlight, a monument to peace time economies. At ground-level the electronic doors were repeatedly tripped by four old women sparingly sipping tea out of styrofoam cups having just enjoyed watching the battalion march by. Krue stood in front of the glass foyer, studying in her reflection the tight immaculate uniform issued only two-days before. Behind her had marched the fodder, to her sides chatted the old timers. In the middle stood her mirror image on the heavy glass, her enveloping stare admiring a new apparition; the newly appointed Major, gracefully tall, savagely yet clinically

scary, a contemporary noble in the savage art of war, proud in action but silent in mind.

She rotated her profile and followed the curves of her jaw leading down to a finely round chin, then up the commanding line of her Romanesque nose, to her finely cut eyes and sleek, streamlined eyebrows. The roll of the genetic dice had served her well; three Anglo and one Asian grandparent had blessed her with a silky appearance: long coils of brunette hair with golden tips, deep blue eyes with dashes of silver in the iris (making them altogether paler at dawn by the sea or in acts of defiance), a curvaceous tall frame tight with lean muscles, and a well-rounded mode of simplistic, though very unattainable to the average punter, graceful style. The month in hospital had restored her well from the skeletal, scatterbrained, infertile wreck that walked in there.

The elderly women chattered slowly and profoundly about the parade. Krue knew to listen to the old dears; catch a dash of their wisdom and mix it with life for another generation or two.

“Much the same, really.”

“I saw the boys of the *HMAS Sydney* do the march... In forty-one? Didn't know what they were in for.”

“None of 'em did. Nor ever do.”

“Singapore. All over again.”

“Didn't happen then but it sure as hell happened now. God only knows why we've been kept around.”

“First time wasn't it, was it? Off go the boys.”

“They're not coming back.”

“They don't know that. Didn't know about my father until it was all over.”

“You think the names will be in the papers again?” asked the shortest of the elderly, “Uncle Archi, that's how we found out about Archi. Always one to leave with only a nod, so be it.”

“Otherwise no one would know,” one exclaimed and then bounced with calamity, “Off they go together. Fight'n wars. Dreadful business.”

“At least they're not fighting each other. See them all do some good.”

“All of the buggers'll do some good – Black, Yellow, Towel Heads, Wogs, Snobs and Yobs too.”

“Well, what ever happens the blacks might be the only people left on this dry old land – they know what to do'n'all. Who knows, they may have seen it all before.”

Krue clicked her heels and made for the electric doors. As the old women raised their tea to her she gave a quick return salute and beaming smile then smartly made her way inside. The doors rolled closed behind sealing her in a vacuum of silence.

In a lavish boardroom high in the sky worked Colonel Smacker and Brigadier Tolken. Pre-War they were high-rollers sitting on blue-chip boards, prestigious committees and slumbering hedge funds. They were the fanciest of corporate dressers, their image of opulence bench-marked to respect and responsibility regardless of their true prowess, logic and ego-driven aptitude to stretch the longest lunch. Come the thunder and mobilisation of war they were slotted into the ranks of those who look out the windows at the bombers creeping across the sky, the frigates, submarines and ferries cutting through the harbour weaving a criss-cross of widening white-wash, and stare with stony scrutiny at the crowds in the streets below, and to each square foot of wing surface, cubic centimetre of hull, litre of rocket propellant and mouth to feed, attribute a cost, check it against the mountain of debt, plug it into a master plan and play, tinker and hope there was still enough to go around and deliver a favourable outcome. But when there was a glitch in the system, when something wasn't adding value, or it was sucking too much, it was Tolken and Smacker who implemented more than economic orders, their niche realm was salvaging, grafting or liquidating.

Smacker stood by the expansive window, using the flood of fresh light to review the manila folder. Colonel John J. Smacker was forty-something with flaking skin, looked about sixty-something and carried and a terminal illness that screwed with his haemoglobin. He stiffened and looked up to view Sydney, thankful for the depth of distance to aid him like a tonic for his thinking. He admired the concentric blue ripples on the harbour, the smog stained yellow tiles of the Opera House, the great curved spine of the earthen grey Sydney Harbour Bridge and the sweep of the harbour.

Brigadier Tolken sat down at the boardroom table and playfully typed away at his laptop. Usually he spoke to the machine in his patient manner and it handled the rest but for succinct correspondence he solely relied on his brain and fingers for conveying the privacy of his thoughts. He was the older, wiser and softer touch in the Tolken-Smacker team. Tolken could not always explain his military duties to his wife. It overlapped from counting beans to bodies. He had nearly finished the calculation of how much to charge the United Nations for the latest fiasco, but as if they will pay, really. Blame would have to be appropriated first. Someday he'll receive a medal for this and other conniving activities and literally no one will have security clearance to know why or what he accomplished. There will be no parade in front of the plastic-flag waving masses. They'll want to forget his doings. And if we do lose, he grimaced

and tapped away, if I can't get out to New York or some obscure South American villa I'll jump out that bloody window even if I have to shoot my way out. I'm fried, he shrugged, but at night I sleep with a calming satisfaction; I make a difference.

Smacker sat down, thinking of the next briefing. His withered, thin fingers formed into knotted fists as a distinct memory hit him like a brick – the wild cobalt eyes of that maniac sent to a beach of slaughter and horror – an event Smacker and Tolken were now facing the consequences of even though they were a thousand kilometres behind the stagnant frontline. With a flicker in his eye Smacker pictured a nuclear strike over Sydney; which buildings would fall, would the water in the harbour rise in a column of steam? Wouldn't that alleviate the state of six million hungry, useless, wailing individuals penned up in their self-prescribed ghettos? If given warning, could he escape? Did he want to?

Tolken's eyes locked onto a recent sentence, his fingers poised, his lips mouthing the rephrasing.

Smacker shakily asked, "Do you think we could have ever really *understood* him?"

Tolken frowned down his inferior's peculiar frailty. "It's too late for hindsight: I rate it up there with laziness. Idle minds are the playground of the devil and that precious hindsight. I don't have time for it. Now you make me think of him, it's on the record I recommended him for the job; young, devilish, perfect. You travelled up the coast with him. If he had turned then, would you have known?"

"He changed, up there." Smacker cleared his throat, rambling from an over-exaggerated memory, "He'd never left there, I believe. In the very early days I was cutting my teeth with Army Intelligence in Far-North Queensland, he was up there, just another Reserve Officer, feeding back the reality of what was really going on, and the first units to really hit back. Knowing what they saw and faced... All that mayhem of starving refugees and foreign soldiers forging something *alien* to us at the time, I wonder if that was the seed..." he nonchalantly explained only to fire himself up, "We lose it then we send him back! No wonder he's off the rails. A wildcard!" He shuddered and pretended vague interest in some visual anomaly on the North Shore skyline and robotically drew himself to the window.

"Wildcard..." Tolken absently commented.

"Always the wildcards," Smacker muttered to the grandeur of the city, his eyes roving from towers of commerce to the inner-city ridges crested with red-tiled roofs, distracting himself – hunting in the thin shadows between the walls for a weighty resolution.

"Heroic and decorated one at that." Tolken whistled lowly and tapped away, deliberating on what goes wrong and more importantly, he shed his frown with a delighted smirk, is harnessing the maximum effectiveness from the players who

survive having outlived failure. A cornered animal fights to the death. Tolken straightened his face and gave Smacker a stern look over; Everything can be fixed, even from the comfort of behind the lines.

A knock at the door sent both men into a few seconds of reprieve.

Smacker slowly bee-lined to the door then briskly opened it, “Come in, please.”

Krue entered and computed two classy Military heavy-weights at a black marble boardroom table. Her stride was like a precision instrument, every movement effortless, sitting opposite them, holding an auspicious presence, placing her beret in front, enveloping their stares.

Smacker sat next to Tolken. Their eyes were as wide as dinner plates and slowly shrinking to size. Their fingers compulsively tugged for the request sheet, assuming they had received the wrong package, but in no way wishing to make a complaint.

Krue’s curt tone purveyed a mild defiance, “Sorry if I’m late, gentleman.”

“Brigadier Tolken, and, Colonel Smacker,” Tolken said, and then with a casual and charismatic charm, “You gave us more time to think.”

“Major Kathy Krue.” She leant over the table to shake their hands. “Lieutenant Manning posted my profile. You received it?”

They nodded. They knew her record but not her. The profile they dug up from Canberra was an extensive anthology; eight de-classified (excluding five too sensitive) geo-political critical missions ranging from target acquisition, to saboteur and assassin, documented extensively by pre and post-mission intelligence reports. She was in the prime of her twenties and they knew, as with previous participants, those that burn to shine are like the candle that burns twice as bright – for half as long.

“Busy outside?” Tolken asked, faintly interested. “I could hear some street fiasco.”

“Sending off parade,” Krue altruistically smiled for the people, “Relief for Alice Springs.”

“They’ll be off to Darwin then,” he quipped.

Krue flatly replied, “I don’t think so.”

“No?” Tolken raised his bushy eyebrow. “Amuse me, please,”

“They won’t make it to Darwin this year. They’ll be bogged down on the outskirts in an intensive guerrilla war waged by armed refugees operating under the local Warlord – some scar-faced tyrant searching for a fabled plutonium El Dorado in Kakadu. Gentleman, let’s get to business?”

“Yes, certainly.” Smacker’s hands smoothed over the folder positioned squarely on the bare marble table. “Due to the urgency, the importance of the region involved, I’ll be blunt. We have a low-profile yet high-hardware target.”

Her eyes narrowed to the folder then sprang up to them; welcome to my world.

“We just need to restate some facts. You’ve been operating beyond the frontline for the last eleven-months, between Darwin, Broken Hill, the dead centre?”

Usually they gave her the orders from dusty bases, maps over a fold-up table, with days to discuss strategy. Once it was in-flight to the drop zone, cruising low across the Simpson Desert. But above Sydney the level of classification multiplied proportionally and significantly the risk and severity. She liked the brassy feel up here, the imposing comfort of wealth, the physical elevation above the masses, the knowledge that a diplomatic levelling of the eyes can draw as much weight as a discharged bullet.

“Dead centre, it’s out there,” Krue innately joked.

Dull response. Old Tolken and Smacker were strictly facts men.

Smacker continued, “Targets?”

“Communications, headquarters and personality sabotage in arid environments are my speciality.”

Smacker continued, “Using marksman, air-strikes, guided missiles, drones and chemical weapons?”

At the word chemical, Tolken uneasily clasped his wrinkled hands.

Krue interjected, “If you’re intent to delete a target – it’s all *science* – mathematics.”

“I see you studied physics? You’d like to continue that, after all this?”

“All ‘this’ has changed everything.”

“True.” Smacker noted a line in the text. “Wounded once.”

She winced, shifted herself forward as if seated uncomfortably, “Early days. Once bitten – Twice shy.”

Tolken sardonically chuckled. “Isn’t that the truth.”

“And in your experiences, from either side of the line, do you know of an Indonesian bounty on your head?” Smacker informed her, observing her eyes and hands, then formally pressing on, “It’s the first for a white female too. And I’m talking not just Islam, it’s a wider appealing bounty, a very fanatical bounty. If anyone will actually pay it out is another matter. The *notoriety* is what concerns us the most.”

She looked straight out the window and crossed her arms, her silent sigh filling the room. Her targets were key players of the invaders, some she had even known on a short personal basis, many she’d paid information for. A bounty was just plain karma.

“I guess I’ve had it coming. No, I didn’t know.”

“Well, it makes you a liability. The weak and desperate and spies will close in and sooner or later all the technology and expertise in your team’s arsenal will count for

nothing.” Smacker paused then fired up like a coal furnace, “You see Major, out *there*,”

Krue’s eyes zeroed in on his idiosyncratic facial twitches; a pinched cheek, a half bitten lip, a curled up nostril. As if he’d ever been beyond here. If he had, he’d cut that crap and seep back to reality – everybody has an un-posted bounty. But then he showed her something that she could never forget. From his folder he slid out a facsimile of her sketched portrait set in a crude *Wanted* poster. She could not read the variety of Asian characters labelling her crimes, names, height or traits. She only saw herself as depicted by some artisan paid to enhance her into a majestic and seductive creature that was not to be trusted yet its curvy flesh and polished skull worth its weight in gold. She wondered if she had met the artisan, was it some friend of some warlord she lied to and destroyed, was it from a photo they had taken in a moment of courteous behaviour to the brave young diplomat from the vanquished nation?

“You are a complication to regular strategic procedures.” Smacker stated nauseatingly categorically into her facsimile. “Notoriety supersedes you and will undoubtedly come back at you.”

“Right,” she snatched the facsimile and grinned at herself.

Tolken added, “Katherine, we take these matters very seriously...”

Her voice was anxious, direction blurred yet brightening, “Does that make me inoperable? I’m grounded? An exit?”

“No,” Smacker guided her, “But a change of scenery is as good as a holiday, they say – and for the better. Every Indonesian soldier, refugee and civilian from Darwin to Alice Springs to Broome and across to Mt Isa would know of your escapades so we’ve organised to move you elsewhere.”

She felt giddy. “I understand...”

“And, we’re acting on new information and responding: Occupied Australia needs a new yard for you to roam. We know you’ve just recovered from a decisive and tough mission and now it’s time to get back on the horse.”

Krue reflected on the circumstance. With a bounty for her scalp, capture by hostile units no longer meant military imprisonment, rape, or a mid-afternoon execution. Indonesian superiors would claim a hearty price for her alive, she would be en-slaved to the lunacy of their disintegrating war machine, a prized possession and caged star of a Jakarta Propaganda Circus.

She rattled her finger tips on the table. “How much is the bounty?”

“Fifty thousand, Euros.”

She scoffed. “Punitive.”

Smacker brazenly flared up, “Fifty thousand is the highest we’ve heard of!”

“Maybe it is – but it doesn’t reflect the damage one has caused. It should be a measure of the damage you can still inflict in the future.”

“I *see*,” Tolken leant back, and in an anxiously agreeable tone, “We all crave to be known for our true worth. But when has the world ever given that to anyone?”

Krue shrugged. Be happy with the notoriety.

Smacker didn’t understand perceived worth, nor want to. “Ignore the fifty-K. It could be ten or a hundred, it doesn’t change the facts – you’re formidable and that will not be wasted.”

Tolken embraced her with a pleasing smile, “You see Major, given your history you’re exactly what’s required: You *make* the Mission,”

And with a precision salesman grin Smacker continued, “Exactly. Now, about your contact with Indonesian military commanders operating as warlords,” Smacker eyed the response in her eyes, reminding her, “They have constituted most of your targets. We know you’ve been in contact with a variety of adversaries up the Top End. We know that your craft extends from saboteur and assassin to un-official diplomat.” He grinned his thin lips into a tight smirk, “Playing them off one another, so to say.”

Krue felt an icy fear run through her legs. Now she’s *so* right for it. She insipidly spied her superiors as more than glorified messengers for a much higher brass reporting to righteous wig-heads at the Hague hammering the need for humanity and order. They were so keen for her they just had to add on the personal dimension, her dirty laundry was a lure and hook: Did they want her out of the Top End due to her habit of meddling in affairs too far beyond what they could ever have perceived? Is this her reward for ingenuity and excellence?

“Major,” Tolken wet his lips, “To enable us to understand *your* experience, define what you know of warlords, and speak freely.”

So she spoke eloquently but blandly factually, “After Indonesia’s major trade routes to the north were jeopardised by warring South East Asian nations they looked to the south... The Indonesia Navy had to defend its vital trade routes to the Australian continent and hence became easy pickings for our submarines. The fate the of Indonesian Army on this continent was sealed. Their supplies from their bases off-shore stopped. Partially stranded, self-sufficiency by the invading population was a means of survival. Once they could eat properly they upgraded from barbaric antics to fierce self-determination and if they continue to evolve and prosper, organised states and cultures seeking legitimacy will flourish, as some have. The elimination of particular warlords is a directive based on our military strategy and not to be confused with a criminal activity. Do not misconstrue my diplomatic quests with an underlying rogue element *up there*. I know where my allegiance lies, gentlemen. Yes, warlords

and merchants have charmed me as I them – but look who sits before you – in one piece.”

Tolken sucked in his cheeks and with a casual wave authorised Smacker to continue.

“Buy beyond dictatorial force, how do these warlords operate?”

“Operations depend on the resources in the region they hold. Most of my targets were just entrepreneurs mining diamonds, gold, uranium, bauxite, trading slaves on the side. Once they found a raw commodity they’d try to refine it, ship it out in bulk, trade it for weapons, food and the usual bits and pieces of infrastructure. Humanity is ingenious or cancerous, depends how you view it.”

“Were they all military personnel?”

“No... You don’t have to be; some are ingenious civilians out to make a buck... But mostly military, turned mercenaries, yet tied to the high command somewhere. What else are they to do out there stranded by their own army? The produce naturally goes back into Asia on smaller vessels disguised as nomadic sea-faring refugees.”

“We understand there is a fierce rivalry?”

“Again, depending on the resources in the region. Dead ground is dead ground. Fertile valleys are prized possessions but the teething problems of these new arrivals has subdued. It’s more political than feudal. That’s how I came to penetrate their lines. The politics of preference. They’re so desperate for acceptance in the foreign world – the world outside their warring territories and the undefined borders. They’re content with protecting their spoils from outsiders of all types – but most commonly it’s themselves they have to fear.”

“Of your elimination of such warlords, were any civilians?”

“My orders were sabotage of foreign targets on Australian soil,” Krue snapped.

Smacker sensed the distress, “Yes...”

Tolken intervened, shamelessly playing the coach-cliché, “Together we’re a Team, Major Krue. And as a Team we’ll be open. There’s absolutely no leeway for confusing of agendas and right now we’re just trying to adjust you to the difficult nature of what the nation has been confronted with. The elimination of military and civilian targets are merely benchmarks enabling us to qualify you as an appropriate player in the following scenario.”

She smugly smiled. Deaths as benchmarks. What they wanted, snug in their armchairs a hundred metres up in the sky was another willing participant to the tactical merry-go-round at the top of the geo-political pyramid. Consecutively, by playing such parts one steps past and above the normal selection routine. Who knows where this leads, but when it’s finished, she’ll have leverage over them. This must be her final flight in and out of the firing line.

“Go on,” Krue accepted the game.

Tolken slid a folder from Smacker, carefully fingering out a grainy black and white photo and gave it to Krue. “It’s interesting, to say the least... Do you know of a General Sumatra?”

General Sumatra, a grainy study in black and white, half-criminal, half-entrepreneur, brewing his own brand of trouble in what was an abandoned Western beachside backyard. For all the curses fired straight into his narrow black eyes, bounced back his principle – he was right. Any man that smiles for a kneeling photographer, wearing a weathered Indonesian General uniform, Pearl Colt .45 peeking out of a leather holster, and with two play-bunny Asian mistresses at his side, should have reason to believe he was the Shit. He had the Winning Poker gleam in his cheeks and wild holy cannon eyes that lined you up for a nasty death. Behind him were his troops, some rustic regular army Indonesians with uniforms, others the skint sun-tanned refugees with an assortment of guns celebrating today as a pseudo-revolutionary-militia-day with one principle – enforcing the King’s golden words. Sumatra’s prowess and mean sneer looked as though he loved it all – and it wasn’t a pose. The power, the clear sub-tropical sky overhead, girls under his arms, all the possessions in a tribal sense of the self-made man. He could afford to act the part, because he was the part. He was bona fide Warlord and loving it. Intelligent minds love power vacuums.

“Central Queensland Coast Kingpin,” Krue recognised the face. “Queensland was not my field of operations. And, he’s dead, so they say on the intelligence grapevine – the usual confessions from tortured prisoners. I’ve heard it’s a massacre zone for newly arrived refugees. Some fabled *white devil* took over. A tropical paradise for South Pacific pirates...” She peered into the photo. “I have to say though, there’s so much disinformation germinating from all corners of Occupied Australia that I can only believe what *I* see... *Out* there, I mean.”

“Very wise, especially concerning Queensland,” Tolken said with a drawn out breath, anchoring the severity of his command: “We want you in there immediately.”

Krue suppressed a shallow sigh. The man in the photo now came to her as a humorous caricature of a lost soul but a worthy soul to remember. He once held a history in his hand and that was more than a million other men had to offer this world in the thousands of days at the peaks of their lives.

Tolken continued, “Central Queensland Coast, into a region around a small town called Providence. You’re right: He’s dead. And now it’s his replacement that worries us.”

Behind Sumatra, bobbing over his shoulders, were his cheery faced fans and loyal subjects; refugees with guns and high hopes peering into a lens that to them promised

some form of immortality. The photo relayed the message that Sumatra had it all under control and all the other scene stealers would never amount to anything of historical substance.

Tolken decisively tapped the folder, “To be more direct, it’s the capabilities of his replacement; the personality is bloody irrelevant.”

She tossed the photo aside, her brow crossed, ruminating. “Warlords are not easily replaced. They’re predator minded entrepreneurs that serve to replace anarchy with order. Easy to say, painful to do. This replacement is following in Sumatra’s footsteps. They write their own rules with the same pen.”

Smacker twitched into a defensive mode, “True... Yet this is different. *He* knows our tactics... We can’t dislodge him so easily. This replacement is also wanted by the United Nations on charges of International Piracy.”

Krue tsked, “*That* he will wear on his sleeve. The U-N has no place in the new world. Is he part of the *Black Tide*?”

“There are connections,” Tolken affirmed, almost apologetically, “But the replacement knows our weaknesses. He *is* our weakness. He’s so evasive not even the Americans can pin him down with satellite coverage. Rival warlords haven’t been able to lay a finger on him, we thought they were just trying to rip us off but no – He’s a very tactful tyrant. He’s made it into east-coast folklore and it’s tipping the regional see-saw. We tried to reel him in, gave him incentives, but it doesn’t work. Major Krue, after lengthy consideration, you’re our best shot.”

Krue felt suffocated in her chair. Like the marching boys this was another suicide gig. All line up. All run forth. All lay down.

Smacker calmly continued where Tolken left off, “His power-play is the stealthiest we’ve seen. His armed forces are impossible to calculate... He could be concealing a hundred or five-thousand militia and we wouldn’t know. It’s like he’s invisible so our superiors shy from handing sizeable resources over to us to chase a ghost.”

Krue speedily interjected, “This replacement, is he a tactical threat to our frontline?”

“Well, yes. Behind our front lines too!” Tolken boorishly thumped at the table with the divine authority of a pocket preacher. “The global community – those that do know of his atrocities – want him done away with immediately. Australia has to wash her hands of him. It’s a disgrace Major Krue, a terrible mistake by our strategists, I might add.”

Krue imagined she were in the same boat, alone, up there, in an invaded Queensland, on par with the devil, in the sub-tropical heat, like all the rest.... “Whoever he may be, why eliminate him? He’s obviously taken the reigns of Sumatra’s little enclave up in the middle of Queensland. It’s surrounded by other warlords and starved Indonesian Army Divisions... To knock him out would create a

power vacuum. And where our frontline is, Brisbane! As if he's going to attack... Surely if he is as sinister as you say he is, the odds are he'd be expanding inland for the minerals and cattle. His survival hinges on his ability to trade. He's a warlord making it work out of anarchy. The Indonesian Army is too weak to attack him – Why should we?"

"Because he's a multi-layered danger," Smacker testified with a refined frown, "He's set up a new frontier, free trade, black markets, shipments departing from his port all through Asia and back again full of weapons. That's how he buys defence – always keeping ahead. Before, he was benign problem. Yes he maintained order, a barrier so to say, between us and the multiplying messes of the north, but the near future," he smartly professed with a stately tone, "Is the greatest peril. The rush of people from the north hasn't stopped, it's only evolved."

Krue probed, "Does he attack us?"

"No." Tolken said, "But will if provoked."

"Well, our forces can't possibly retake that land. It's been tried and failed. Queensland is their country, still open to any raving refugee the disintegrating world has to offer. It'll take at least ten years of hard slogging and crusading genocide to return the population back to anything like pre-war. Hard times are ahead either way. Why kill him? Who wants it other than bleeding hearts in the U.N.? What's the cause?" Her face was burning from a reckless embarrassment but she tightened her fists. "These are factors I have to take into account on every mission. I'm not taking your case apart out of sheer indulgence – I need a point to focus on. Statistically I'm cannon fodder with tits, so I need reason to believe before I go in anywhere."

Smacker eyed Tolken who said it slowly, bitterly, the cliché of the coach saving the best for last, passing the folder to her, exhaling, "Because, *he* was one *us*."

She opened it expecting the usual desert grid maps and satellite photos of hidden headquarters in gullies and rock-faces. But no, a crisp photo of a Caucasian man in an Australian Army combat uniform at work in a mobile armoured personnel carrier headquarters. Radios nestled in the back sprouted cables like vines, strained Australian Reservists in the background lugged ammunition crates through a smoky semi-forest. Although it was obvious he was busy, surrounded by two wounded aides and outdated communication equipment, he still had time to look at the photographer with a warm smile, beaming a sharp confidence from piercing, precise, cobalt, blue eyes. He was playing it up, laughing at himself for being in this dangerous predicament, knowing this could be your last second, it could be his. Krue shuddered. He was fine boned, using sly visual wit to portray an aura of magnetic power in the midst of the fog of war. Peering closer, his face was soft, sincere. Back, he was chiselled like a work of stone, austere and commanding. A caption read, *Captain Peters*.

“Taken years before,” Smacker explained, “At that time he was one of the frontline tactical geniuses defending the Queensland coastline. Indonesian Forces eroded us all the way to Brisbane, and if it wasn’t for his type, they may have done it in half the time. Once a fine man.”

She was entranced by the photo and asked in a muddled croak, “Who is he? I’ve never heard of him.”

“He’s your warlord.” Tolken announced, a grumpy sigh of relief fuming from his chest as he sat back in his chair and studied Krue’s inoculation to the madness trembling in her hands.

A simple photo, a minute before, a no-one, an anyone, with guts, and now she was suckered into the majestic illusion of a warlord. A white man? She placed the photo squarely in the middle of the table next to her beret and ran through the extremes of possibilities. Smacker and Tolken patiently brooded at her countenance and hesitantly prodded her to speak by directing their piercing stares at her skull, trying to read the fine print running across her mind.

“Major, feel free to ask any question you like.”

She tapped her index finger into the space before them, “He is one of us, doesn’t attack us, unless provoked. His region is defended by his means. How he chanced to replace Sumatra and re-engineer his forces is another story. But why go out of our way to eliminate him? Look at us, sitting here high’n’mighty. I need reason.”

Tolken whispered his thoughts, “A simple reason...”

Smacker spoke in a dark classified tone. “Nuclear capabilities. You think because he’s raided a few ships in the Pacific he fears international reprisal? Not worth it right now. That’s piracy, chicken feed, and punishable as one lives by the sword, dies by the sword. And so what if he’s guilty of genocide, the over-populated world has been bubbling over to all the major coastlines and no-one can claim to have saved every single refugee. Besides, over-population is this generation’s as much as the next generation’s problem. It will get a lot worse before it gets better. What we’ve got right now is a rogue nuclear player.”

Krue sat impassively. “We fear him and he fears *us*.”

Tolken spoke rigidly, “He won’t fire on us. He won’t fire on the Indonesians, they’re weak and couldn’t amass enough confidence to take a swipe. It’s all anarchy up there, no established government or society. Year zero in some places, like history was swallowed up, spat out and what we have now... Non-compatible, they say. It’s living on the edge. We know the regional muscle of his arsenal are short range missiles. He has a wide range of warheads; napalm, high-explosives, maybe gas.” Tolken sullenly spoke down his shirt, seemingly pushing his breath across the table to Krue. “Then there are the killings. Yes, mass genocide to curtail the influx of refugees. That is a

secondary issue.” He sat up, recomposed himself, his eyes never leaving Krue. “Somehow he traded in a Beijing Ninety-Six: an inter-continental ballistic nuclear missile riding on a mobile launcher platform, hauled by a heavy haulage truck. The missile was made in Taiwan, programmed to home in on Beijing and shipped throughout Asia by the Black Tide to classified dealers as a message to China not to destroy Taiwan or face the consequences from any number of hidden locations. Up until a few months ago China hadn’t broken the peace and this Beijing Ninety-Six was one of the last to be tracked down and destroyed. Now the urgency of a benign situation has become precariously dangerous.”

Initially she struggled to make coherent sense and then her eyes widened. “You think he’ll attack China with it?”

“Major, it’s not will he....” Tolken explained, “It’s that he can. And we fear that if his cohorts can alter the guidance system he can lob that nuclear warhead anywhere from Los Angeles to Tokyo to Jakarta to Beijing. It’s war all around the Pacific Rim and every chief including India, Korea, China, Indonesia, Taiwan and Japan, have ruled out the use of nuclear weapons. After India and Pakistan’s tit-for-tat nuclear match, easily culminating into half a billion casualties in the next decade, the global village, although not publicly, is united on not using weapons of mass destruction.”

“So who is to say he’ll use it?” Krue argued. “Unless in defence.”

Smacker prophesied. “His region is stable: command is based in the coastal town of Providence, trade flows in and out from the deep-water port of Kingston to the north. If an invading force were to throw itself at his region, who can accurately predict his reaction? He’s been bent, Major Krue. Day one of this war he was first into the action. He’s been captured, rescued, and back in the line. Defeated countless times and victorious for his stubbornness. Hardened to the bone... Yet, never for an instance think we owe him the right to exist beyond the means that forged him.”

Krue’s eyes squinted and she tried to shake away the confusion. “So are *we* pushing him over the edge?”

“God no, but China is.” Tolken’s pace slowed and his tone deepened. “It’s the only superpower at full capacity. They’re already restoring order in Malaysia and creeping south. They’ve got a hell of a lot of cleaning up to do, and there is a pact, all unofficial, that the U-S is staying out of it. When it comes to taming religious insurgency, rounding up pirates from the sea lanes and wiping out rogue nations, the Chinese have raised their hand and why not? They’ve got the units, trained, armed and deployable. They’ve been given the mandate and they’ve been watching the action and they have a hit list, so given some warlords’ positions the Chinese will move into Queensland and make a point. It’s lightly defended and packed with resources.” He furtively threw up his hands, “After that, who knows what’s on their card table? Half their game is confusion! The other half is gaining leverage!”

“And an ounce of prevention is worth the pound of cure,” Krue confided.

Smacker continued, “Think, if Colonel Peters was attacked and he lobbed his pride and joy at them, they could retaliate a hundred times as hard. We’re talking global stability. Now it has to make sense.”

“Certainly. And if I’m caught, what would his reaction be?”

“Would he kill his own kind?” Smacker asked her.

“Is he one of our kind?” Tolken proposed to Smacker and Krue.

“Well, as he doesn’t strike his homeland – I suppose it’s not worth it, the guilt,” she comforted herself.

“Right.” Smacker agreed.

“So what are my objectives given the China scenario?”

“The elimination of his present and future nuclear capabilities by whatever means possible,” Tolken said, cementing Krue’s next bout of war.

“And,” Smacker expanded on a friendlier note, “The elimination of Colonel Peters’s present and future capabilities as a renegade.”

Krue blinked. “I’m free to adapt to the nature of my mission?”

“Freedom granted solely to you,” Tolken widely smiled. “We wouldn’t have such a flexible tactician such as yourself unless we thought you were qualified.”

“Yes,” she replied sagely. Krue knew her target – a renegade of a different calibre in a new region. Regardless of how unstable or sane he was, *they* wanted him six-feet under and more importantly *they* were prepared to create a power vacuum because it’s simply safer than *his* threat.

“Very well then,” Tolken said, fatigued but exulted, “You’re up for it, Major Krue?”

“Of course... It appears straightforward, the identity, the situation... But I have one question,” Krue looked out to the clear blue sky, the expanse of the glowing harbour and the city spread out to the horizon, then to her new superiors and their reflection in the dark marble of the polished boardroom table, “How did Colonel Peters ever become a warlord?”

End of Sample Chapters