

HOUSE OF ENTROPY

THE MONGO MACHINE

PART 1

BUCK ROGERS. JOHN CARTER. CRASH CORRIGAN.

THREE WARRIORS. OUT OF TIME.

BY JAMES L. RICHARDSON

CHAPTER 01

Live-fire exercises.

Bloody Bill and Wally ran damned things every other day, and John Carter was beginning to think that it was their way of getting back at the three of them for getting the assignment that might have gone to the two senior trainers. Nothing in the brief required a three-man team, and Bill and Wally certainly had all the requisite skills.

Another shot cracked off the facing of the boulder he was hunkered down behind. This sort of exercise usually involved a trench and a bunch of muddy soldiers pissing themselves in the mud as they desperately tried to keep from getting shot in the ass crawling through it. There was almost no real danger in a standard live fire trial so long as nobody lost their head. Bill and Wally didn't do anything standard.

Crash had already taken a shard of stone shrapnel in the cheek, the blood streaming down his face like crimson tears. Against all sense, he was grinning as he ducked back under cover, ten feet from Carter's boulder. Rogers was nowhere in sight, but Carter knew where he should be.

The pinning fire came from two directions; Bill and Wally having taken to the trees somewhere out there in the dense forest. There wasn't a trench to crawl through and they weren't aiming at anyone's ass. John Carter didn't imagine that either of them would intentionally do the other any serious injury, but a low-calibre bullet grazing your thigh or ribcage was no joke. He would rather not test their marksmanship today.

His team was armed with special pellet guns that used compressed gas to silently fire 22-calibre glass balls filled with ink. Camp X had developed the special guns to give trainees something better than blanks to return fire with during this kind of exercise. Since the whole point was to take down snipers

firing from cover, they couldn't very well be issued real guns and ammunition, not even low calibre weapons. It's too easy to injure or kill a man in cover with a careless shot.

The gas guns, as they were known, could fire other ammunition as well and had utility in covert operations, so it was good practice. Sadly, the ink pellets were ballistically little better than old fashioned lead shot, so the trainees had neither the range nor accuracy of conventional weapons.

That was just fine with John Carter. Close in fighting was more in keeping with his style. All three men in the squad had been chosen for just such proficiency, and three months of intensive training at Camp X, a secret facility in a nondescript rural area of Ontario, Canada had honed those skills to a razor's edge. Bill and Wally were about to learn the meaning of the old saw, 'Be careful what you wish for.' Rogers should be bringing their little surprise into play right about...

Now.

With a nod, Crash Corrigan ran from cover, drawing fire. A centre fielder on his college baseball squad, Corrigan was as nimble as he was fast. He jinked and leapt, not giving Bill or Wally a straight line to draw a bead on. Shots came from cover and missed him by a margin that would have the two trainers buying the drinks at the PX tonight. Laughter followed him into cover.

The stunt had given Carter the locations of both shooters and he fired two shots into each bolt hole in rapid succession. The gas guns might not be powerful or accurate, but they had the virtue of being semi-automatic and for his purpose that was more important than scoring a hit. He just needed to keep their head down. He could hear Rogers' little surprise, coming fast.

The mad bastard had strapped rockets to his glider and was careening through the forest at a speed Carter could hardly believe. And...dear lord. The man was doing a Tarzan yell as he weaved his way through the trunks. Buck Rogers was the only man John Carter had ever met who might actually be crazier than Crash Corrigan.

The wingtips of Rogers' glider clipped leaves from branches at every turn, but

he somehow, impossibly managed to navigate a path that took him in the perfect arc to drop two canvas sacks, one on each position Carter had marked with his shots.

Each bag had held fifty of the little ink filled glass nodules, pilfered last night from the camp armoury. Both improvised bombs found their mark, raising cries of alarm and anger from the men hidden in the brush. Rogers pulled up sharply, yanked a release and dropped lightly to the ground, rolling to bleed off the last of his momentum. The wings and the rockets he had strapped to them fell to the wet ground, a couple of pops signaled the end of the fuel in the tubes. The whole contraption caught and burned merrily, lighting up the forest and wafting an oddly pleasant aroma of woodsmoke and burning fuel to their nostrils.

Jogging through the trees, Carter reached Buck Rogers' landing spot and offered the younger man a hand up. "You gonna put that out?" he asked, nodding to the little blaze.

"It rained last night, remember?" said Crash Corrigan, trotting up to join them. "Buck's not gonna burn the place down."

Carter looked at the blaze and could see it was already dying, having consumed the wood and canvas that made up most of the glider's body. A few spars of aluminum were blackening, but the fire wasn't spreading on the damp ground. They might be nuts, but his team was the kind of crazy that thought three steps ahead, qualities that made them perfect for the mission.

"You three are on REPORT!" called Bill, standing and wiping a giant splatter of red ink from his face. The canvas sack had dropped in front of him, blasting open and drenching him from forehead to chest. He was furious. And red.

The three trainees looked at each other, swallowing their laughter.

From the other side of the glade, Wally's voice chimed in. "And you owe me a new hat!"

The man stood, a vision in crimson. Where Bill had taken a near miss and a splatter of ink to the face, Wally had been directly in the line of fire, the sack dropping directly on his head and spilling its entire contents over him. He looked like a man who had upturned a bucket of blood on his head.

Half a mile away, the rest of Camp X was puzzled by the sound of wild, abandoned laughter from the forest.

CHAPTER 02

“I think he’ll put you on report for this,” suggested Rogers.

“I think he’ll shoot you for this,” offered Carter.

For his part, Crash Corrigan just laughed and drove the nail home. The full-page pencil drawing of Little Orphan Annie was actually very well done, right down to an extra touch of red on Annie’s signature red locks. One of Corrigan’s talents was drawing and he had knocked out the sketch while they were stowing their gear from the exercise. Nailing it to Wally’s billet in honour of his newly red hair was not actually likely to get Corrigan shot, but Carter wouldn’t be surprised if he wound up peeling every potato in the camp tonight.

The caption read, “Little Orphan Wally.”

As they walked casually away, bright laughter erupted behind them as a couple of female trainees jogged past the barracks and caught sight of the cartoon. Carter still hadn’t gotten used to seeing women training for war, but he had to admit, every woman in the camp was a formidable soldier in her own right. Camp X only recruited the best, if not always the conventional.

“Worth it,” shouted Corrigan, raising his arms in triumph.

The three men strolled through the camp, waving greetings to fellow trainees, and trainers alike. Camp X was designed on a new model, one that eschewed military protocol, with every facet of every day designed to work the military out of soldiers. Those who graduated from the program were destined for covert assignments behind enemy lines. Military reflexes like salutes and parade march lockstep were useless to such operatives. Experienced soldiers could recognize their peers from their bearing, so everyone in Camp X walked in loose groups, hands in pockets or waving cheerily, unlearning their military rigidity.

Corrigan and Rogers took to it like ducks to particularly inviting water. For Carter, it was more like being thrown into the Atlantic in January. Of course, Bill

and Wally had actually thrown him into the Atlantic in January and he'd survived that. Slouching on a stroll was actually a lot harder for him than survival training.

"He'll know it was you," chuckled Buck Rogers as he turned a in circle to watch a lovely blonde walk by. She watched him back, amused. Everyone around them was wearing civilian clothes. Even the trainers dressed like tradesmen rather than soldiers, another attempt to break the military routine. "You did that cartoon of Hitler getting his..."

"We know what Hitler was getting, Rogers," interrupted Carter with a glare. These two were generally harmless, but little good would come of letting them run rampant. He cracked the whip every so often, just enough to get their attention. The camp might encourage them to shed military discipline for their operations, but Carter was still the senior officer in this trio. "We're late for the briefing."

"Another 'hurry up and wait,'" grouched Corrigan.

"Yeah," added Rogers. "If your machine works, we can't let them turn it on."

"It works," said John Carter. "Too damned well."

"So you've said," replied Corrigan with an elbow to Rogers' ribs. "Dejah Thoris. The doll with the big..."

"Army," finished Carter, coldly.

"Tell me again," asked Rogers, "how all that figures? It still sounds like dihedral oil to me."

"It's not 'dihedral oil' at all. It's as real as you and me. The Germans have a device, that they call 'Die Glocke.' I've seen it with my own eyes," growled John Carter. "Somehow, don't ask me how, it opens a door to..."

"Another planet," scoffed Corrigan.

"Barsoom," intoned Carter. He couldn't blame the other two for their skepticism. If he hadn't lived it, he wouldn't believe his story either. Certainly no one had believed him in the days after the mission that had resulted in his incredible journey.

"So, you get roped into a secret mission in the last hours of the war," recounted Corrigan. "You'd have been what, nineteen?"

“Seventeen,” corrected Carter. “I lied about my age to get into the fight. Sons of Virginia love a good scrap.”

“And you roll into a little German town and wind up...”

“Not quite ‘roll into,’ but yes, we found ‘Die Glocke’ in a German village. I don’t know if they built it or found it. It was deep in a mine. We thought we’d found a secret cache of gold that the Kaiser was hoarding for his escape if the war went against him.” Carter shook his head at the memory. “A huge, humming, spinning machine that made my teeth itch was not at all what we expected.”

“So you roll into this mine...”

“Chased in, actually. The mission went pear-shaped, we were spotted and a running fight drove us into that God forsaken mine. We were absolutely stuffed. No chance we escape.”

The trio was close to the main building now. Their pace had slowed as Carter recounted his strange tale. Though they’d heard it before, Rogers and Corrigan knew that their mission, if it ever got approval to launch, could depend on any one detail of Carter’s recollections, so they were an attentive audience.

“The chamber with the...machine...” Carter paused, uncomfortable in his reverie. “There was one entrance, no way out. We made our last stand. There were five of us. Two at the door, three reloading, rotating as we ran dry.”

The other two nodded, easily picturing the grim, practical setup. Warriors, bound by the knowledge that death was an ever present companion to their profession.

“I was the extra man in my last rotation. Frozen stiff, exhausted, low on ammo, scared for my life. I leaned back on the machine. It was warm and I was cold. Next thing I know...”

“Barsoom,” said Buck Rogers.

“Barsoom,” confirmed Carter.

“And you’ve been trying to get back there ever since,” said Crash Corrigan with a sly smile.

John Carter simply opened the door and held it for the other two before following them inside.

CHAPTER 03

The conference room was Spartan, just a wooden table, half a dozen uncomfortable wooden chairs and bare, white cinder block walls. An easel stood in the farthest corner from the doorway, but otherwise, the room was empty. Rogers, Carter and Corrigan strolled in and slid into seats at the end of the room near the door, the head of the table usually reserved for superior officers and briefing specialists who usually used the easel.

A moment later, a tall man sporting an impressive moustache and in the full uniform of a colonel in the Canadian Army was followed by a willowy woman also in full uniform, in her case a colonel in the WASPs, the women's element of the United States Army Air Corps. She hardly looked to be more than her mid-twenties, making the rank insignia doubly unusual. By habit, all three men rose to their feet, but none saluted, deferring to the camp protocol of avoiding such military customs.

"Be seated, gentlemen," ordered Colonel May. May was in charge of the entire Camp X operation. A veteran of the Great War, like John Carter, he had an extensive background in both conventional and unconventional warfare. What Churchill called 'ungentlemanly combat tactics.'

"Lieutenant Ray Corrigan, Captain Anthony Rogers, and Major John Carter, let me introduce Colonel Wilma Deering, Signals & Strategic Intelligence."

Corrigan shot out a friendly hand instantly, offering "Crash, Ma'am," with a smile. Deering shook it firmly.

"Lieutenant," she said, formally. Turning to the other two, she added, "Captain, Major." with a nod to each in turn.

"Buck, Ma'am," corrected Rogers, leaning back in his chair and tipping it onto its two back legs, his fingers laced behind his head. "We're working hard to drop the soldier stuff around here."

“He’s right, Colonel,” added Carter. “We go by first names around here. Wouldn’t do for Fritz to hear one of us call the other by our rank behind the lines.”

“Wilma, then, gentlemen. I’ll do my best to break the habit before...”

Colonel May interrupted her, clearing his voice loudly and deliberately. All three men shot him a look of mixed concern and surprise.

“Sir?” they all asked at once.

May waved them to silence and popped the end off the tube he had been carrying under one arm. With practiced movements, he clipped the contents to the easel, top and bottom. Without preamble and before flipping the first page of the pad on the easel, May told the three men, “Your mission is a go, gentlemen. This is your final briefing.”

The three exchanged glances, then all three of them turned back to May, expectantly. They had been training for this mission for months but had seen no indication that they would get into the field in all that time. Carter had laid out what he knew of the machine that was their objective, this strange device that he claimed had transported him to another planet, but all three had begun to believe that the brass had decided it was all nonsense and they were soon to be reassigned. Carter, their leader, asked, “What’s changed?”

“We have intelligence that the device is being moved,” said Colonel Deering, drawing looks from the three.

“Moved where?” asked Rogers.

“There’s a dam in Norway. A power plant,” said May. “The only reason the Nazis would take the trouble to move such a large device into close proximity to it would be if they intend to turn the thing on.”

“From my research, I am certain that the device requires a great deal of power,” explained Deering. “When you had your...experience, Major, excuse me, John, we believe that they were using the entire output of the coal mine you found it in to power it.”

“I don’t know about that, Ma’am,” answered Carter with a shrug. “I was a cold, scared kid in a firefight I thought for sure we were gonna lose. The thing

was pumping out heat, I leaned against it for warmth.”

“Then you were...elsewhere,” she finished for him. “I’ve read your report a hundred times, John.” She fixed him with a sympathetic smile and added, “I’m so sorry.”

Carter shrugged and said nothing. That she had read his report was no surprise if she was somehow involved in the intelligence gathering for the mission. It was only surprising that her tone didn’t carry the same skepticism as everyone else who had been read in when it had come to light.

When Carter filed his report, no one believed a word. Another planet, a war there; delusions of a shell-shocked grunt, they said. But when May found him in ’43 and asked for a team to go after the device, those ghosts came roaring back.

“As you know, Carter,” began Colonel May, “in the last few months, the chatter from our sources has convinced the eggheads that your little trip wasn’t just the result of one too many blows to the head.” May’s tone still carried a full measure of that skepticism Carter had grown used to. “If Fritz plans on plugging the machine back in, at best he uses a bunch of electricity for nothing.”

“And at worst,” interjected Deering, “the Nazis make contact with another planet and possibly get hold of technology and weapons advanced enough to win the war at a stroke.” She flipped the first page of the pad to reveal a detailed drawing of the machine. All three men had seen this drawing before. It had been cobbled together from Carter’s half remembered descriptions and technical schematics smuggled out in pieces by half a dozen lab assistants and scientists who had fled the Nazi regime as it took power in the late 1930s. Someone, somewhere had put together the fragmented technical information with Carter’s report and this little cadre had been the result.

“So we’re a go,” said Rogers with a grim smile.

“With one small change,” said May. There was a hesitancy none of them had heard from the camp commandant before. “Colonel Deering will be going with you.”

“Not a chance in Hell!” exclaimed John Carter.

“Colonel Deering is *going*.” The finality in May’s voice made the order clear and

the glare he shot first at Carter and then turned on the other two reinforced his authority. He took a deep breath and continued. "The colonel is a qualified pilot, our best field qualified expert on the device and has logged more hours behind enemy lines than the three of you combined."

"Colonel, if I may?" Deering asked quietly. May's wave gave her the floor. "I hold the women's sharpshooting record at Fort Dix, speak German and Norwegian fluently and have personal contacts with the Norwegian underground which we will need to get anywhere near the dam. I ran the Boston course, unofficially, in four hours last year."

"In short, gentlemen," emphasized May, "she's as good as any of you and smarter than all three of you on your best day."

"I won't have a woman under my command, Colonel." Carter's tone was flat and as final as the colonel's. Deering stiffened, but no hint of reaction crossed her features beyond that. It was obvious that she had been expecting the reaction.

"That's fine, Carter," said May with a smirk. "You're going to be under *hers*."

CHAPTER 04

The bomber's red cabin light turned everything to blood and shadow. Carter tugged at his harness and eyed the big black and green diamond stitched dead centre on the stranger's chest. The man had arrived at the airfield wearing an old-fashioned leather skullcap-style flight helmet and goggles, though he arrived by *jeep*. He wore the least military outfit Carter had ever seen: a red, skin-tight shirt with the strange diamond, green jodhpurs and shiny, black, knee-high boots, all topped off with a black cape lined with bright yellow fabric that hung to his mid-thigh. Despite the garish costume, he was waved through the airfield checkpoints and shown aboard their Lancaster as if he belonged.

According to Colonel May, the man had trained at Camp X. Carter didn't recognize him, but that could mean he had been there before Carter arrived. May explained that the man, code-named *Spy Smasher*, was a specialist in counterintelligence. Apparently the outlandish style was meant to conceal his identity. It certainly drew the eye, thought Carter.

"You ever worry that thing makes a better target than a fashion statement?"

Spy Smasher grinned under his goggles. "That's the idea. Steel mesh and silk weave. Stop a .38 cold." He tapped the diamond with a gloved knuckle. "Helmet'd barely stop a tennis ball. Chest'll take what counts. I want them shooting *here*, not here." He rapped the helmet with his fist for emphasis.

Carter snorted. "So you're bulletproof everywhere but the brain."

"The idea is not to get shot at all," Spy Smasher said. They had been flying for a couple of hours, the Lancaster was hollowed out and stuffed with a huge fuel tank in its bomb bay for range. He eyed the red light of the jump bulb before finishing, "But if the fur flies, I keep my head down like everybody else."

"So why the cape?" shouted Crash Corrigan over the roar of the engines.

"The human eye is drawn to movement," explained the strangely dressed

operative. "This flapping flag has taken a whole mag of bullets meant for me."

"Don't give the army any ideas," scoffed Buck Rogers chucking a thumb over his shoulder at Wilma Deering who was leaning over the shoulder of the radio operator. "They've already got us bringing along the ladies' auxiliary. If they make a get up like that the new olive drab, I'm sticking to civvies."

Carter, Buck Rogers, Crash Corrigan and Wilma Deering sat in the cramped quarters of the Lancaster on makeshift seating. Hop Harrigan, the mission's jump master, watched the clock, checking against his clipboard and wrist-watch every few minutes. The jump light flashed green and Harrigan gave Spy Smasher a nod.

The cape was strapped under the parachute pack. He stood and clipped his line to a ring near the improvised jump door. Air hissed all around the jerry-rigged foam seal and had since takeoff. When Harrigan pulled the latch, everything in the cabin took a gust of wind but the crew had been prepared and everything was secured. Nothing but Spy Smasher went out the hatch and into the night. Harrigan watched the white silk blossom and then slammed the door closed. He called an all clear to the pilot and the plane banked left as the engine note changed. They climbed.

"Hop, tell our wing walkers we're two hours out. Once we level off, start the prep," came a calm confident voice over the loudspeaker.

"Hey, that's Midnight," said Wilma Deering with delight.

"You know our cabbie?" asked Corrigan.

"Yeah, that's Jim Albright, call-sign 'Captain Midnight.'"

"I've heard of him," said Buck Rogers. "Got the name for some rescue he pulled off back in '42."

Hop Harrigan grinned and added, "He dropped a crate in a farmer's field in occupied France and got me and half a dozen of my crew out of a dust up. Tossed a Jerry like a medicine ball. Arms like a couple of howitzers."

"And a *great* dancer," added Wilma with a dreamy smile.

"You guys know he can hear you through that," said Carter, pointing at Harrigan's headset and the microphone it held.

“Oh, I’m well aware,” said Deering.

“Nice to have you aboard again, Colonel,” came a chuckle over the loudspeaker.

“Too bad there’s no Glenn Miller on the box, Jim,” she answered. “Not a lot of rugs to cut where we’re heading.”

“Yeah, they made me take the phonograph out to save weight,” joked Midnight.

The engine noise deepened as Captain Midnight applied more power and drove the Lancaster past its operational ceiling, into purely theoretical territory. Oxygen canisters were passed around and the skeleton crew grew quiet as their mission objective neared. Everyone knew that what came next was anything but business as usual.

An hour later, the cabin light again changed from red to green. This time, Hop Harrigan did not give anyone a nod, but climbed the ladder to the hatch that had been installed over the opening that normally led to the mid-upper turret. The Plexiglas turret housing, the gunner’s seat and twin guns had also been removed, leaving just a hole beneath the hatch, easily accessible. Despite the bomber flying at close to 30,000 feet, Harrigan shoved the hatch open. Double checking his oxygen mask, he climbed up and out of the cabin and onto the fuselage.

John Carter followed him up and out. Crash Corrigan was next, then Wilma Deering. Buck Rogers brought up the rear. The five made their way hand over hand up the fuselage until they reached the wings. One by one, Harrigan helped them to drop from the fuselage onto the wings, two to a side. The wind tore at every stitch of loose clothing, but they were well prepared for that, everything tucked and belted down. Only pant legs and a few wisps of Wilma’s long hair moved more than a few inches in the gale.

Beneath each wing hung two black experimental glider pods. The pilots clipped in, their harnesses tethered to the new rings. They’d practiced this stunt a dozen times over Camp X, but not at this altitude, this speed, or in this darkness.

Harrigan crouched, braced against the wind, watching the four pilots ease themselves back and over the trailing edges of the wings. If one of them fouled

the flaps or the ailerons with their lines, he was ready to crawl out and clear the mechanism. His orders were to cut a pilot free if the risky manoeuvre endangered the airframe, a detail he hadn't shared with his charges. He was relieved to see that all four sets of lines lay clear of any of the wing's control surfaces as the four figures dropped from sight.

Each pilot now hung, whipped by the wind that flowed past the wing. Handles had been hastily installed and with great effort, each pilot was able to pull themselves toward the glider pods that waited for them. Their harnesses were designed to hook easily into the rigging that was built into the experimental pods. Within a few minutes, all four pilots gave the radio signal to indicate they were latched in and ready to drop. Harrigan was reeling in the harnesses they had left on the right-hand wing. He had been pulling up the first one on the left-hand wing seconds after Rogers had disconnected from it.

Captain Midnight didn't wait for Harrigan's re-entry into the fuselage to give the signal. As soon as he indicated the last harness was reeled in, he punched the release button. The four pods dropped cleanly off the wings and a second later, the Lancaster was turning for Scotland, their part in the mission complete. All that remained was returning their stripped down, unarmed bomber safely to base. Through six hundred miles of enemy territory.

Behind and below, four pairs of fragile black wings snapped open, catching the bitterly cold air at the edge of Norwegian airspace.

CHAPTER 05

Each team member had a radio in their helmet. The range was limited, so they kept to a close formation. The night was moonless, the biting wind bitterly cold. The only real light came from the radium painted dials on their wrist-mounted compasses. Once they had formed up, Buck Rogers took the lead in a tight wedge, with Corrigan and Deering immediately trailing to either side and Carter off his starboard wing behind Corrigan in what pilots called a “finger-four” formation.

The wind was so fierce that speaking over the radios was impossible, so a series of *clicks* had been developed for each stage of the flight. Each stage began with two clicks from Rogers, their most expert pilot. Each of the others would respond with two of their own if all was well. Once all four gliders were in place behind him, Rogers gave two clicks and got two from each of the others in return. As practiced, the formation spread out both laterally and in altitude. Two more clicks, six back, and all four pilots flipped a switch on the panel strapped to the crossbar of their glider. Corrigan’s and Carter’s gliders surged ahead, the chemical rockets firing smoothly.

Below her, Deering saw Buck’s rocket light and then sputter and die as she was about to push the switch to light her own. She held her thumb over the switch and watched for the backup rocket on Rogers’ glider to fire.

Nothing happened.

Mission protocol stated that any member unable to make the rendezvous was to be considered lost. The mission was too important to jeopardize for any one man, or woman. Without a thought, she lowered the nose of her glider and aimed for the middle of Buck’s airframe.

Coming on board the operation late as she had, Deering had little time to learn to fly the fragile and temperamental glider. Each glider had a locking

mechanism at the top of the wing structure to secure it to the Lancaster for transport, so they had rigged a version of that below one of the gliders to allow Buck to latch onto her wings in a sort of makeshift biplane arrangement. The tandem had been their way of jump starting her flight training. Because the coupling added weight, they gave Buck's training glider to her rather than removing the mechanism. The additional weight meant that all four airframes carried similar mass. Despite her lighter build, this allowed them to use the same rockets for all four of their gliders. The latching mechanism was still in place beneath her.

Wilma Deering's rank of colonel was no honorary title. She had been flying for years before signing up for the WASPs at the outset of the war and had ferried airframes of every description all over the United States and even to the Canadian border for FDR's lend-lease program. Her skills had caught the attention of the OSS and after a whirlwind training regimen, she had spent most of 1942 in occupied France, gathering intelligence and organizing resistance cells. She hadn't had much call to fly in that time, but flying was as natural to her as breathing.

Piloting the glider was trickier than any powered airframe and matching speeds with Buck's rig was trickier still. That he had no idea what she was planning made her idea all the more difficult, but none of that crossed her conscious mind. Her teammate was in trouble and she had the means to solve his little misfire problem.

With a deft touch, she dropped her craft behind him. She caught a glimpse of him in through the Plexiglas faring that kept the wind out of his eyes as she swooped into line with him. He was angrily stabbing at the control for the rocket. If he managed to light one of the two rockets now, the blast would set her silk, aluminum and balsa-wood glider alight. She could only aim, drop and hope.

With a metallic thunk, she dropped her glider on top of his, feeling the latch engage with a satisfying clack. She sent *two clicks*.

If clicks on a radio could sound puzzled, the two-click reply from the glider below her did just that. With a grin, she stabbed both rocket switches and

whooped as the power of her rockets kicked in. She imagined she could hear Buck shouting in fear and confusion. Her grin grew wider.

CHAPTER 06

The gliders had no undercarriage and were not designed to land. For the pilot to land, the craft would swoop to within a few feet of the ground, drop to a stall speed and then the pilot would simply unlatch and drop. By bending their knees and rolling in the manner of a parachutist, they would theoretically bleed off the remaining speed, safely. The dangerous landing maneuver made the piloting of the temperamental and fragile airframes seem simple by comparison.

Corrigan and Carter were already on the ground, brushing snow and debris from their clothing as Buck and Wilma's ungainly, improvised biplane dropped into the targeted clearing. A hundred feet from the ground, Wilma kicked a release lever, and Buck's glider dropped free. He flew a circle to bleed off speed, dropped to within ten feet of the ground and hit his release. He dropped and in a practiced roll, impacted the ground and let his roll dissipate his remaining momentum. He came to his feet with a shake and a grin.

Deering circled above him and followed his course in. She dropped even closer to the ground than he had, timed her release to match the moment that her wings lost all forward momentum in the stall, and instead of unlatching and dropping into a roll, she let the wings drop for a beat before she released her harness. She stepped onto the ground with no more impact than someone stepping off the high step of a bus or truck and walked calmly away as her glider collapsed under its own weight behind her.

Carter and Corrigan joined her as Buck strolled over. "That was risky as hell, Wilma," chided Carter, "and against mission protocol."

"Pretty impressive, though," added Corrigan.

"Never thought of pulling that in reverse," said Rogers, impressed. "You flew the maneuver like a pro."

"I liked being on top," she said, with a sly smile.

“And what would you have done if one of your rockets hadn’t fired, Deering?” demanded Carter, annoyed.

“We’d have wound up miles short of target and the mission likely would have failed,” she conceded. “But without our full team, we would have had a slim chance at best, anyhow.”

“And now we have just a little better than a slim chance,” finished Buck with a chuckle. “Let it go, Carter. Done is done. We’d be in worse shape if Wilma here wasn’t as crazy as the rest of us.”

Carter looked from Rogers to Deering and with a final, annoyed nod, turned to the next task. They dragged the remains of their gliders from the clearing into the trees and broke them into smaller, easier-to-conceal pieces. From the remains, each team member extracted a survival pack, a pistol and holster, and a Lee-Enfield rifle, specially fitted with a long-range scope. These weren’t standard-issue weapons.

The rifles had been heavily modified by the experts at Camp X and each was capable of hitting a target accurately at nearly fifty percent further than the standard range of the Lee-Enfield, and each team member had practiced extensively to do just that. The pistols were the gas guns that they had used in non-lethal combat training. Each of them carried four magazines, two with lethal metal bullets designed to fire from the odd guns and two that carried the glass spheres they had trained with, only these were not loaded with red ink.

“We have a five-mile hike from here,” stated Carter, looking at his map. “And since we all managed to hit the landing zone, the built-in muster time won’t be necessary. There’s enough darkness left to make the rendezvous and if we beat feet, we might make it early enough to do a recon sweep before our contact arrives.”

Behind Deering, Buck piped up as he pulled back his hand theatrically, “So let’s move our...”

“You’ll lose the hand, Rogers,” warned Wilma without turning to face him.

With exaggerated slowness and a comical frown of disappointment, Buck dropped his hand. Deering shot him a glare and he took a step back, waving his

hands between them in surrender.

“If you two are done,” huffed Carter.

Corrigan emerged from the woods, carrying four rockets. The two unfired extras from his and Carter’s gliders and the two duds from Buck’s rig.

“What are you doing with those?” asked Deering. He was stuffing them into his pack, but there was only room for two. He reached over and pushed the other two into Buck’s backpack. The tubes stuck out of the pack’s flaps, but they were in no danger of dropping out.

“They go boom,” grinned Corrigan. “We are carrying pistols, rifles and some ‘special’ ordnance for them, but we had no weight allowance for explosives.”

“The mission doesn’t call for any,” noted Carter with a frown.

Corrigan patted Buck’s pack once he was certain the rockets were secure. “Waste not, want not,” he said with a broad grin.

The other three shared a look and with a shrug, they set off at a determined jog. Carter took the lead, checking his radium-lit compass every few minutes. The other three fell in, giving each other just enough room to maneuver should they suddenly need to reach for a weapon in haste.

The team had enough time to recon the clearing and as the sky brightened to dawn, they risked a small fire to keep warm. Four gas guns aimed at the figure that strode casually into the clearing later that morning. She ignored them, stopping a few feet from the fire. “Wilma,” the woman offered.

“Margit,” replied Wilma with a smile. She lowered her pistol and returned it to the holster at her hip. Turning to the team, she added, “Our personal code. If there’s trouble, Margit greets me by my last name, and I greet her by hers.”

“Smart,” noted John Carter.

“And what’s your last name, sweetheart?” asked Corrigan with an interested look and a lopsided grin.

Margit shot him a disapproving look and shot back, “I am not your sweetheart. I am Margit Olafsdotter.”

“No offence intended, Ma’am,” offered Crash with an apologetic smile.

“None taken. It’s better you don’t get the habit of calling me ‘sweetheart’ now.

If my husband hears that from you, your team will be short a man,” she said with a smile.

Corrigan waved his hands in further apology and turned back to study the fire.

Margit nodded in the direction she had come from. “The dam is twenty miles back that way. My strike team will meet us there in two nights.” She gestured at the area around them. “I have five men in the woods, all freshly rested. You may sleep now. We will watch your back.”

She turned and strode away from the fire, spinning back after a few strides, walking backwards as she added, “There will be snow tonight, you can be sure. I will return at dusk.” A few more steps took her back into the trees and she vanished as if she were part of the forest.

Buck watched, shaking his head. “Know her well?” he asked.

“I recruited her and Lars to the resistance last year,” Deering answered. “She comes from a very remote group that doesn’t mix much with the rest of the population. Her cell is made up of her people, exclusively.” She looked around the forest, slowly. “If they don’t want you to see them, you won’t.”

“What she said about snow,” said Carter, “doesn’t track with the weather report we had at the briefing.”

“If one of Margit’s clan says ‘There will be snow,’ then you can bet next month’s pay there will be,” she said. “It’s uncanny, but in the four months of winter I spent here, they were never wrong.”

“Good thing I packed my L.J.s,” quipped Corrigan.

“It’s Norway, Crash,” laughed Buck. “Long johns are practically lingerie.”

“Alright, stow the chatter,” ordered Carter with a sigh. “Everybody get some kip. It’s been a long night and we have work once the sun goes down.”

Wilma unrolled her thin bedroll, lying as close to the little fire as she dared. Four of them head to toe around the perimeter of the tiny blaze were uncomfortably close. “And Rogers?” she asked, pointing at the distance between them over the fire. He looked up questioningly.

“I’m a light sleeper,” she said with mock seriousness. “You’ll lose more than the hand.”

Rogers' grin grew wider and he made a show of tucking his hands into his bedroll and rolling his back to the fire.

On the second night, the team lay in the brush on a ridge overlooking an unnamed dam on a river that not one of them could properly pronounce. Between the landing zone and the ridge, they'd fought, bled, and nearly frozen.

Two days of gunfire, forced marches, and men who didn't make it had taken a physical and emotional toll. The team and their guides reduced to four exhausted soldiers and one surviving resistance fighter watching the dam below.

The story of that crossing could fill a book, but none of them would ever tell it.

Right now, they had a job to do and by the looks of the frantic activity along the length of the dam, not much time in which to do it.

TO BE CONTINUED IN PART 2.

Available In January!

