

WIND

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The wind whistled thru the prairie grass, a quiet night wind, almost inaudible but never quite gone. It slid around a mass of stone and earth covered by bushes, a sudden outcropping that seemed odd in the flat nebraska prairie.

Many years before, men had built roads in this land. Vast wide roads crossing from horizon to horizon. So that those roads could run smoother, they had built bridges for one road over another, making deals with local farmers- digging lakes for those farmers and in return, using the stone and earth they dug up to build a way to pass over the road. An overpass.

Now the overpass was a pair of small, abrupt hills, the highest point in the area. Bushes and brambles grew on them, protected from the big grazers by the broken concrete boulders that littered the hills. This night, men moved among the boulders.

Team Leader Tom Wooten scratched the skin under his eyepatch, adjusted his binoculars. The scar, and the cavity where his eye had been were still sensitive. He supposed a telescope would make more sense for him now. The binoculars were really not designed for the one-eyed. Of course, then his team would call him the pirate king and ask him where his parrot and peg leg were.

Wooten smiled at the thought, the smile creasing his weathered face, kept adjusting his binoculars.

Billy Dade slid into the bushes beside Wooten. Like Wooten, he wore green Morrow Project coveralls and a flak vest. Over that, both men wore web gear festooned with weapons and gear. Over that they wore loose netting festooned with strips of sacking dyed to match the colors of the prairie. He scanned the scene below them with his own binoculars. "My, my, my, they have been busy little beavers."

From their small promotory, they could see the dark lines of antitank ditches crossing the prairie, sod bunkers and earthworks and row after row of light brown tents. A handful of electric lights still burned, not the vast array that had lit the area a few hours ago. Just a few, around a tangle of wrecked buildings at the center of the camp.

"We were stupid enough to give them the time to work." Wooten grimaced. "There must a thousand Connie troops down there, probably at least that many slaves. We could have busted this up a week ago. But we were hunkered down, waiting for those Free State commandoes they flew in."

Dade gave a nod that was lost in the dark. "Who'da thunk they'd fly in mechanics and engineers? Whaddaya think they got in there, Tom? Maps don't list any military sites near here, just a truck stop."

They heard the voice of Hampton over their PRCs. "Yo, check it. Local legend says a warlord, some really vile dude, ruled from that truckstop. Then he experimented with forbidden, unholy forces and was punished with death by the almighty. Real scary monsters." Hampton spoke like a teenager. He was a wizened old slip of a guy with a long nose, a few wisps of hair on his head and a mouth that boasted all of six teeth.

He'd shown up at the base area two months ago, one more penniless wanderer coming in, except for three possessions. A weathered HP-35, a Morrow Project ID and a

dozen battered notebooks containing collected information on the societies of the plains states. He was the last survivor of a Science team that had awakened 40 years ago or so. They'd been wiped out by some group of barbarians called Krell who apparently had a serious mad on against the Project. Since then, he had wandered the west, observing. Until he found another MP team.

“You've heard of this place?” Dade spoke. “But you never checked it out?”

“Dude, if I checked out every cursed ruin and forbidden area, I'd have died long ago. There's generally a reason for the bad karma. Chemical spills, biowar bombs, maybe some good old fashioned radiation- no telling.”

It had taken a long time for Wooten to get used to the little radios. When a whole team wore them, it was almost exactly like a group of friends sitting around a table having a bull session. Everybody heard everything everyone else was saying. But if you got a group of people who could minimize the chatter and concentrate on the matter at hand...

“So what would be there that they'd violate taboo to go there?” Wooten kept scanning, watching the camp. Two broad roads went into the camp, each one turning sharply as it cut between gaps in the antitank ditches. In one ditch, lit by torches, he saw men digging, watched over by a dozen men with rifles standing on the edge of the ditch.

A sudden wave of hatred gripped him. He clenched on the binoculars tightly, gritted his teeth to keep from saying anything.

“We kill them all soon, right boss?” A clumping, heavy step as a big man slid onto the grass next to Wooten. Clay. He had no last name. Slaves didn't get last names, unless they took those of their owners. They'd rescued him from being hung by slave catchers and he'd thanked them by becoming their most fanatical follower among the thousand or so escaped slaves, wanderers and rebels who'd gathered near the base area. He still had the rope burn around his neck, and an “E” branded into the skin of one cheek. He'd proved himself often enough that they'd given him the weapons and resistoweave of one of their fallen. He growled in hatred and fury. “Kill ever' damn confed bastard in yonder camp.”

Wooten felt an answering fury and hatred well up, choked it back. Forced it down. The soldiers in the camp were part timers, Confed shopkeepers or ranch hands or farmers, fulfilling their military service obligation to their society. They weren't scum like the Slavers who'd jumped airscout Valkyrie when it made a forced landing. Who'd skinned Dan Jefferson alive and raped Sandy Wilkins to death.

Wooten forced back the anger, buried it, harnessed it. It would keep him warm in the winter to come.

“There'll be plenty of killing, Clay. But you have your section of the perimeter to watch. Go back and guard that section. Keep your eyes open.”

“Yeah boss. Sorry.” He clumped off. The big man was fearless, loyal and could hike any three team members into the ground. But he didn't do “quiet”.

“Well, these guys were ready for the bad karma.” Dade tapped Wooten on the shoulder, handed the team leader an object. “Take a look at these.”

Wooten looked at the object. It was twin plastic tubes, with a metal device- a tube- on one side. There was writing on the side, too small to be read in the dark, but one word was printed large on the side.

“Atropine?”

“Yep. The only known cure for exposure to nerve gas, in an autoinjector. Bang it against your thigh and it shoots a massive dose of atropine into your system. Messes you up, but you can still fight and move. Those are new, too. Property of the army of the Kentucky Free State, says so right on the side. Every sentry on this hill, all seven of them, had an injector.”

“We’ve been holding back on using the bolt rockets. How the hell did the Connies find out about them?”

“The soldiers from the free state told them.” A piece of the night detached itself from the darkness, sat down near them. It was a dark-skinned, arabic girl, tall for a woman. She had a strong arabic nose but would have still been a stone fox if it wasn’t for the acid burn on the right side of her face. She was dressed entirely in black, a silenced pistol her only visible weapon, her night vision goggles hanging around her neck.

“Salida. The prisoner talked?” She’d taken one of the sentries alive.

“I thought to frighten him with talk of torture. His masters had already prepared the way. They have been told we mutilate and torture all prisoners before killing them. He spoke much. They know that we have a MARS-1 and they know exactly what its’ abilities are. The free state men also provided the atropine.”

“Well, that’s just ducky.” Wooten looked at the atropine injector, thought real hard. So far, they’d enjoyed a big technological edge over the New Confederacy. If that edge started to shrink, things could get dicey fast.”

“Dammit, I hate an enemy who learns fast.” Wooten heard Dade speak thru the jumble of thoughts in his head. “Salida, you coached Clay on the phone check?”

“He is ready.” Salida had spent two hours in the grass outside the sentry post, listening. A sentry’s ultimate job is to scream loudly before they die, to alert their people. In this case, there’d been enough people in the recon party to take them out silently. Next time, there would undoubtedly be more guards. That was the annoying thing about the New Confederacy.

It had all started a week after wakeup, an errant radio signal accidentally keying the wakeup call for MARS Team Beta. The Doomriders. They’d listened with increasing nervousness for Prime Base, for zone command, for any other MP team before they’d been forced to accept the fact that they were alone, that they’d overslept by a century and a half. So they sent out their first patrols, investigating the source of some radio signals nearby, improvised a contact team in a couple of XR-311’s so as to not spook the locals. That hadn’t done much good. The local Sherriff and his deputies had opened fire the minute he saw them.

Apparently, the local power structure, the “New Confederacy” was already fighting a low-level insurgency against Morrow Teams to the north and south. Their technology seemed about 1900 level, but they knew how to get the most out of it. The contact team made a fighting retreat, but the Sherriff must have phoned in an alert. Four days later, a battalion of New Confederacy troops, 500 men with machine guns and light antitank guns, had come after them.

By then, the first escaped slaves had shown up and they’d killed their first slavers. Wooten had tried to go easy on the Confederates. A couple of Chapparals into their command post, as soon as their radios were located, followed by setting off CS and CN-DM grenades upwind of their horses.

Next the Confederates tried attacking with horse cavalry, coming at the team from several directions at once, supported by what passed for their air force- biplanes that Eddie Rickenbacker would have felt at home flying. That had cost the Doomriders one mortar track, airscout Valkyrie and six irreplaceable personnel. It had cost the Connies most of their air force- Stinger missiles worked just dandy on biplanes- and half a battalion of cavalry. The horses captured alive had been put to work by the refugees at the base area. The dead horses had fed the refugees for a week.

Finally, the Connies threw in a reinforced battalion augmented by special units trained to fight Project teams. They'd occupied good defensive ground ten miles from the base area, dug in with lots of their antitank guns and those light revolver cannon they had, planted a lot of mines and sent out ambush parties. Wooten had been impressed with the ground and the position, so much so that he kept everyone away from it. Instead, Doomrider One and its escorts wiped out every supply column the Confederacy tried to send to the force. The growing population at the base area had feasted on captured food. After a month in the midsummer heat, starving and low on water, the Confeds had broken camp and tried to head home.

After what had happened to Valkyrie, there was no talk of going easy on them. Doomrider One blasted thru the long column of troops with all guns blazing while the mortar tracks dropped white phosphorous to both sides of the road. The TOW tracks engaged the artillery from long range as it attempted to deploy. The Confederates hadn't gone down easy. Most of their gun crews had stuck to their weapons until they were killed, banging away at the tires and wheel assemblies on the fast-moving MARS-1, trying for a mobility kill.

The battle ended with the MARS-1 down three wheels and one wheel assembly, while two miles of road were littered with dead confederate soldiers and broken confederate equipment. The Confederates got their licks in after the battle when the TOW tracks and refugees came down to glean the dead of useable clothing, weapons or ammo. Confederates who'd been playing dead let them come in, then struck. The butchers bill for the final act: one dead TOW track, 3 more dead Project personnel, 16 dead refugees.

Since then, it had been infiltration, ambush and counterambush, small unit actions and patrols. Secure comms, body armor and night vision devices usually gave the Doomriders and their allies the better of it, but the Confederates still got their licks in. Each time Wooten saw one of his people wounded or killed, he was painfully reminded that there were no replacements in the pipeline. There wasn't even a pipeline.

What the hell had happened to the rest of the Project? Even the Project personnel who were fighting the Confederates to the north and south were hard to find, suspicious of people claiming to be the project. Apparently the Confederates had tried that one already. The Connies had also been quick to see how bad it would go for them if the various MP teams linked up. The areas between them were thickly patrolled, by Confederate Cavalry and allies they'd brought in from the Indian nations.

Clay spoke over the radio, his voice calmer now. "Why do we not go in with Doomrider One? There is a good, broad road going right to the heart of the Confederate camp, between the ditches."

"That road bends sharply each time it crosses an antitank ditch. My guess is, under each bend they've buried enough explosives to launch Doomrider One into orbit.

They've got those revolver cannon of theirs at each end of the camp and I'll lay odds they've pre-registered every bit of covered ground within miles."

"There are plenty of ranches near here." Tranh spoke over the radio. He was watching their rear, hunkered behind an M-21 sniper rifle dam near as big as he was. "Easy to get food here. No supply convoys to ambush."

"Tom, something's happening." Dade adjusted his binoculars. "Over by those two big A-frames they set up."

Wooten looked, heard one of the steam engines the Connies used chugging away. Saw a familiar shape rise above the wreckage, swaying slightly on thick chains slung from the a-frames. "Great. A tank turret. M-48 or M-60 series, looks like. The main gun's out of battery, but I doubt they'd be messing with it if they didn't think they could fix that."

"Look on the bright side" said Dade. "At least it's the tank turret and not the whole tank."

As if that was a signal, a massive engine rumbled into life somewhere inside the wreckage. It grumbled briefly, then stopped. For a few seconds, there was silence. Then it roared into life again, this time thundered, revving as the driver gave it more fuel. It settled into a steady roar, echoing among the ruins, across the plain. Lights moved thru the ruins until they were underneath the hanging turret. There was a bang of metal on metal, two masses of metal striking with a hollow boom, then the revving of the engine again.

"Ah, those big Lycoming diesels can really roar." Wooten said, to no one in particular. "Now we know what the evil warlord used."

The engine noise dropped to a low rumble. As they watched, the turret was slowly lowered. Inside the ruins, a second engine roared into life. Wooten ground his teeth. He actually saw this one illuminated in the work lights, it's sides streaked with rust, the bright metal of new welds spotting the turret and body. The tank drove into a small square enclosure of high dirt walls faced with stone. Quickly, Wooten looked for similar enclosures, saw four others. "They're putting each tank in it's own revetment, so we can't take them out with the rockets or the chapparals."

The second engine died. A third engine started up, revved up. Then there was a boom and the engine died. "Blew a pack." Dade commented. "They aren't all ready to roll yet, by a long shot."

"But they will be. We'd better be ready when they do." Wooten put away his binoculars. He'd seen enough. "Those 105's can do a hell of a lot more than scratch the paint on Doomrider One. Whoever these Free State bastards are, they are entirely too frikkin' clever."

"We'll just have to be smarter." Dade was still watching. "We've got the fusion charge. We could nuke 'em from orbit. It's the only way to be sure."

Wooten looked at Dade, wondering. The man was a rock, cool as ice in a firefight and indispensable as Field First. But sometimes he said things that made Wooten wonder if Dade had seen too many men die, or not enough. "Don't even joke about that, Billy. Get 'em moving."

Dade nodded, grabbed his claymore clacker, unplugged it from the detonater wire. He subvocalized into his PRC, his voice a whisper to anyone without a radio. "Pack it in, people. We've seen what we came here to see. It's two hours to the extraction point."

The Confederates field telephone buzzed. They were phoned hourly by someone in the camp. The Morrow Project personnel grew silent. Clay picked up the phone, eyes closed as he tried to remember what Salida had told him, his voice lightening to the local nebraska twang. "Advance one, reporting."

Silence as he listened for a moment. "Just a dang minute, lemme check. Whiskey Six Actual, I authenticate, uhhhh-" His pause seemed completely natural, his eyes focussed on Salida as she looked at a sheet of paper they'd taken off the Confederate Lieutenant who'd apparently been in charge here. She whispered the words to Clay. "Authenticate. Delta Five-Niner Bravo. Uh, over."

One skill all slaves learn early, Wooten thought. How to lie convincingly to their masters.

"Roger that. Talk at you in an hour."

They all waited for three tense minutes, listening for the sounds of an alert in the camp. Hampton, scanning the radio frequencies, was the first to speak. "No extra radio chatter."

"No extra movement in camp," said Dade. "I think they bought it."

Wooten started breathing again. "We've had enough fun for tonight, people. Let's go. Reel in the claymores. Salida, you lead off."

Hampton spoke. "Aircouts Hugin and Munin standing by for cover, 15 minutes out."

"The prisoner?" asked Salida. The woman held the man's head by his hair, a knife at his throat. Her face was impassive. The man closed his eyes, gritted his teeth on his gag.

"So long as he keeps quiet, we take him to the extraction point and release him there." Wooten answered. "Alive."

Salida shrugged, helped the man to his feet, handed him off to Dade who was pulling in one of the claymores they'd laid out when they took the position. Dade unscrewed the detonating cap from the mine, screwed in the dust plug, stowed the cap.

Extraction point, thought Wooten. When he'd been a 90 day wonder in the Rangers, extraction meant a chopper back to base camp, then steaks and beer. Here, it meant a river crossing and a 10 hour ride in a V-150 on bad roads. Then steaks and beer. Granted, it was mutant buffalo steak and homebrewed beer, but both were pretty adequate. He put on his night vision goggles, saw the people of his squad filing away across the nebraska prairie.

Morrow Project MARS, he thought. The difficult we do every day. The impossible takes a little longer.