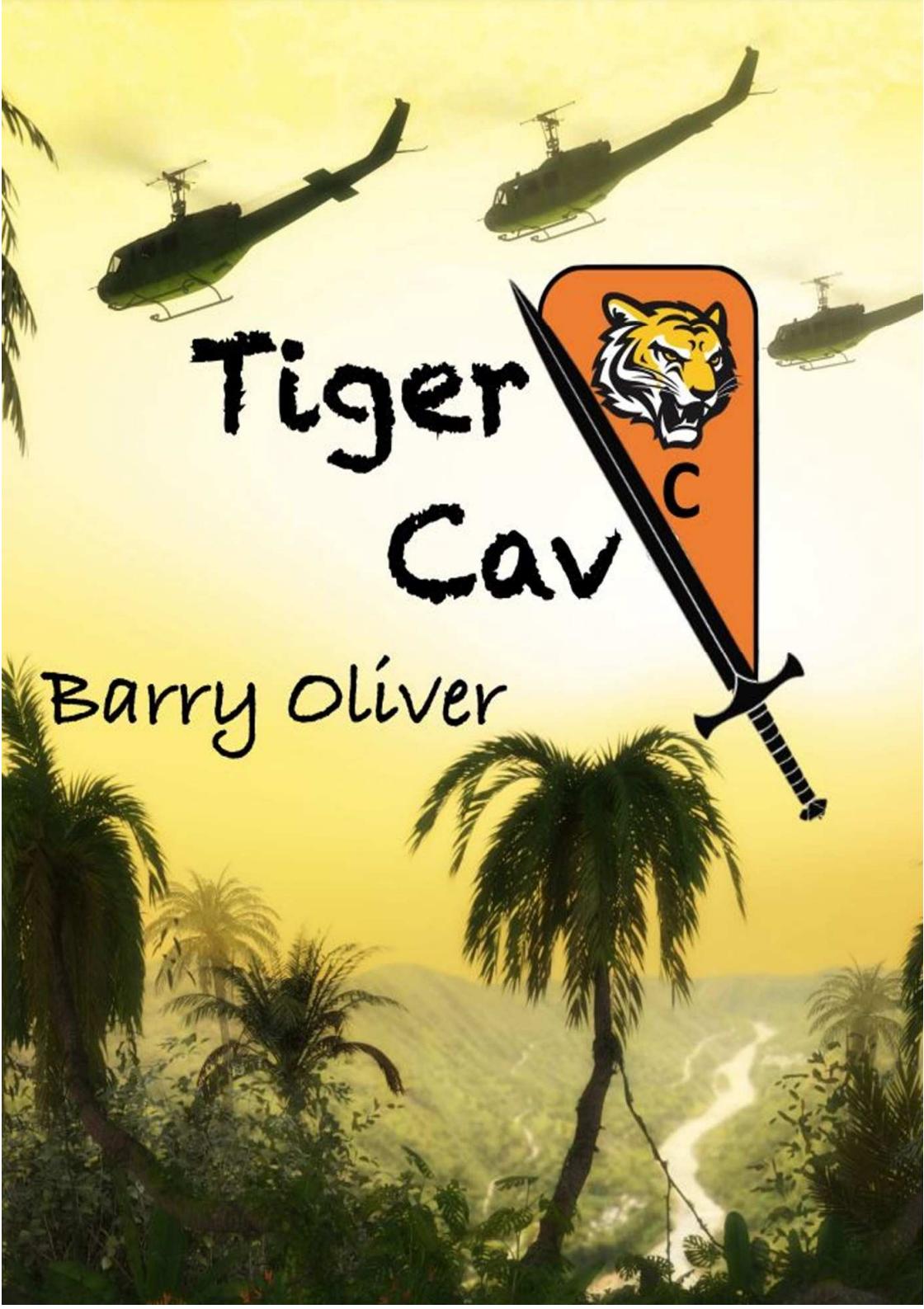


Tiger Cav

Barry Oliver



TIGER CAV

by
Barry Oliver

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Chapter 1:

The Democratic Republic of Pardali

Sunrise in the Democratic Republic of Pardali (DRP) was like this—a glowing yellow haze on the eastern horizon followed minutes later by a misty orb burning through that haze, well above the horizon. You could never see the exact moment of sunrise through the humid jungle air. But you could certainly *feel* it this close to the Equator.

At a flight altitude of 200 feet, Lieutenant Todd Stalk leaned forward to open the small access window on the canopy of his attack helicopter. The down blast from its twin rotor blades, powered by a Wolf-Littney turboshaft engine instantly flooded the cabin with that humid air.

“Can you feel the change?” Lieutenant Stalk spoke into his flight microphone. He turned to see his co-pilot shaking his head.

“No, El-Tee. It always feels the same to me, day or night.” The co-pilot never looked away from the combat map in his lap as he plotted their course with a grease pen.

Stalk altered their course a few degrees due east to face the indistinct yellow haze.

“There it is,” he pointed. “I can feel it. The Sun just came up.” The lieutenant and pilot of the helicopter grinned when a few minutes later the hazy disk of the Sun appeared as predicted well above the jungle canopy. “I can always tell.”

Lieutenant Todd “Smokin” Stalk, Free States United (FSU) was a 27-year-old tiger in command of a platoon of attack helicopters in the

Army's 1st Tiger Cavalry, "Tiger Cav." He flew the Fuchs AH-2B attack helicopter, ironically known as a "Sword." At age 27, he was considered an old man by Tiger Cav standards. Life expectancy in Tiger Cav was numbered in days.

"It's the last one I'll ever see. You know that don't you?" Stalk turned to his co-pilot again.

The co-pilot, Junior Warrant Officer (JWO) Bill "Bullet" Gaines, a 24-year-old tiger, continued to plot their course. "That's right, El-Tee. It's a good day to die," he answered with almost bored casualness.

Lieutenant Stalk smiled confidently and clicked the missile launch trigger on his control stick (he had yet to arm it, so nothing happened).

"You're absolutely right. It's a damn good day to die."

The JWO (pronounced Jay-Woh) finally cracked a grin. He was well familiar with the Lieutenant's mental preparations for combat. He shared a similar attitude himself. They had learned, like countless soldiers before them, that the fear of combat was made worse by the hope of living through it. If you could convince yourself that you were meant to die—that you were in some way already dead—then it didn't really matter what happened. When you witnessed a friend being blown apart by a grenade, you could simply say, *Well, of course, that happened. He was already dead.* When you flew your Sword directly into anti-aircraft fire, you could simply tell yourself, *Now it's my turn.*

Lieutenant Stalk flicked the access window closed with the claw of his index finger. "What's our course, Bill?"

As a junior warrant officer, Bill Gaines would have been the pilot of his own Sword with a sergeant as his co-pilot and navigator, as was usually the case for warrant officers. The death rate in Tiger Cav was too high to use commissioned officers exclusively as pilots, hence the invention of the Warrant Officer rank (a non-commissioned status that outranked other NCOs but was subordinate to regular officers).

The Army could crank out warrant officers by the hundreds to be used as pilot fodder. However, since Gaines was in the command Sword,

he now flew second seat to the lieutenant. Though he liked flying with *Smokin* Stalk, the loss of control during combat was slightly unnerving.

Gaines marked a straight line on his combat map. "Heading One-Eight-Six. That way," he pointed toward an indistinct ridge of jungle trees. "And you might want to head down to the treetops. We're a big fat target up here."

"On my way down, now." Lieutenant Stalk dipped the nose of the Sword well below the horizon, causing their stomachs to fly into their chest as the AH-2B plummeted to the treetop level. He hit the comm-switch on his headset. S42C was his Sword's designation. "This is Sierra Four Two Charlie. Follow my lead, boys."

At that moment, eight Swords flying behind in 'V' formation, four on each side of their commander, dropped to the forest canopy.

"Let's see what Hell we can stir up," Lieutenant Stalk announced to the squadron.

The fixed-wing aircraft in the Army could also provide close air support to infantry troops on the ground. Their much greater ordinance-carrying capacity could deliver quite a devastating punch to the enemy hidden among the trees. However, airplanes required long runways that had to be kept many miles behind the front line. Their pilots required mission plans and vectors to suspected targets, all delivered in a briefing before heading out to their planes. That they could be on target in under an hour was an impressive feat in itself.

But an hour to an infantry platoon surrounded by an enemy was an eternity. Tiger Cav's mission was to fill that gap. Their mission briefs went something like this. "The infantry's in a brawl over yonder. Why don't you boys fly over there and see what Hell you can stir up."

And that was what Lieutenant Stalk and his squadron of Swords were on their way to do—stir up some Hell. They would be on target in fifteen minutes.

"Sows at ten o'clock, thirty degrees down," the co-pilot called over the intercom headset.

He pointed down through the observation window at his feet. In a combat helicopter, visibility was critical, so windows were situated everywhere. But visibility came at a cost. A window meant no armor, and that was lethal. Thus, their eyes on the world were also their greatest weakness.

“I see ‘em,” Stalk replied. He banked his Sword in a slow arc to get a look at the four helicopters on the ground out his side window. A Sow was the earlier, slower model Fuchs UH-1A (Utility Helicopter). It had a much wider fuselage capable of airlifting a troop of eight soldiers in addition to its own crew.

Its wider dimension gave the UH-1A the appearance of a fat, pregnant mama pig—a “Sow”—planting her fat ass on the battlefield. That enlisted troops were sometimes referred to as “grunts” made the metaphor all the more meaningful. But the term “Sow” wasn’t entirely insulting. To a wounded soldier trying to get off the battlefield alive, there was no more welcome sight in the world than his mama Sow.

“Bats at one o’clock, forty high,” Gaines called out next.

Stalk acknowledged the Bats above them with a short salute. The “Bat” was a light, two-seater helicopter used for reconnaissance and observation (ROH), produced by the Beetle corporation. The Beetle ROH-1E had no armor, and its only weaponry was the guns its crew carried with them. The joke went: a Bat’s skin was made of cardboard and its frame was made of aluminum foil. The end result was that they were crazy agile. In order to avoid being hit, however, a Bat had to be flown at higher altitudes and in a near-constant state of evasive maneuvering. Hence their uncanny resemblance to bats chasing insects in the sky.

The Charlie Squadron commander, Captain Mike Owens, flew in one of those overhead Bats. He communicated attack vectors to the Swords below. Captain Owens’ “vectors” however sounded more like football plays. “Todd, you and Four-Seven take center-right.” He called out Sword designators by number only. “Five-Two and Three-One go long down the right side, then cut center.”

“I’m on it, Mike.”

Stalk saluted his commander again then veered his Sword right. In combat, it was first names only among the officers. Formality was thrown aside. They were all going to die anyway.

“Open up the channels, Bullet. Let’s see what we got.” By “channels,” Stalk meant the ground frequencies used by the infantry to call in air support.

JWO Gaines ran his finger across a line of switches, opening every ground channel. Their ears were immediately assaulted by a series of overlapping calls.

“Lima troop needs fire at 5-6-2-9 point 7-8-3-0!”

“Indigo troop needs fire at 5-6-8-0 point 7-9-2-0!”

“Oscar troop needs fire at 5-7-0-5 point 7-8-8-0. Goddamn now!”

With all channels open, all the calls came on top of each other. Todd Stalk had developed the skill of separating each in his mind, using the specific tenor of each desperate voice to distinguish them. He clicked the Sword call frequency.

“Four-Two and Four-Seven, we will take Oscar troop.”

Gaines reached up and switched off all frequencies except for Oscar’s.

Stalk looked out his window and spotted the embattled Oscar troop below. He keyed their frequency. “Oscar troop, this is Sierra-Four-Two-Charlie. I have visual. Tell me what you need.”

The voice on the other end responded with the same panicked desperation as before. “I need fire at 5-7-0-5 point....”

Stalk cut him off. “Don’t give me fucking numbers. Just tell me where to shoot.”

Stalk could make out the figure of a panther pressed against an armored vehicle gesturing across an open field. The panther’s voice came over the frequency. “It’s that line of trees, across the field, right in front of the ditch. But watch your fire. I’ve got men pinned down in that ditch. They’re getting slaughtered!”

"I see it," Stalk acknowledged. "We're on it." He drove the Sword to within thirty feet of the ground and raced toward the tree line at 130 miles per hour. S47C fell in behind Stalk's lead Sword. Stalk called to the two panthers manning machine guns mounted on the landing skids on each side of the Sword. Gunner 1 sat behind Stalk. Gunner 2 sat behind Gaines. "Watch your fire. There are friendlies on the ground everywhere. Only shoot into the trees."

"Understood, sir," Gunner 1 responded.

"Who are we?" Lieutenant Stalk recited the familiar battle cry of Tiger Cav.

"WE ARE TIGER CAV, SIR!" the two gunners shouted.

"What are we?"

"DEATH FROM THE SKY, SIR!"

JWO Gaines repeated the phrase a moment after the gunners, with his own modification. "Fucking death from the sky, El-Tee."

Todd Stalk liked the ambiguity of the Tiger Cav battle cry. It could mean they were delivering death to the enemy. Or it could just as well mean that they themselves were going to die. Either way, the battle cry was true.

Stalk didn't need to see the incoming tracer bullets to know they were being hit. He could hear the ping of bullets hitting the frame of the Sword. Stalk flipped the arming switch to the rocket launchers hanging off each side of the Sword. A circular bullet hole suddenly appeared in the canopy, one foot above Stalk's head. He released the safety for the twin cannons mounted under the nose of the craft. Another bullet hole appeared in the canopy to his right. The reinforced plexiglass canopy of the AH-2B was designed not to shatter when hit but offered little resistance to the bullets themselves. Each one of those holes represented death that had missed Stalk by inches.

"My turn, motherfuckers," Stalk whispered as he depressed the cannon trigger. He was rewarded by a sudden kick under the nose of the Sword followed by a twin line of orange fire cutting into the trees. As Stalk swept his nose along the tree line, the trees and all vegetation in their

path were cut down like a scythe cutting through wheat, like a weed trimmer cutting through grass. Stalk swept in one direction, while S47C swept in a counter direction. Their crossing line of fire destroyed everything in their path, plant or animal. Stalk fired two rockets into the destruction for good measure. He was met moments later by billowing columns of flame and smoke.

Next, the Sword's two rear gunners opened up with their twin 8 mm, Gore swivel-mounted machine guns. Attached to the Sword by a cable called a monkey harness, each gunner was able to stand on the chopper's landing struts and lean all the way over to fire straight down into the jungle. Their tails were buffeted wildly by the rotor blast as they released a hail of death onto whoever may have survived the initial assault.

The ping of bullets on his airframe had now ceased. Stalk made a quick call to his gunners. "Gunner check."

"Gunner 1 alive," responded one. "Gunner 2 alive," responded the other, as each continued to unload 8 mm rounds onto the luckless souls below. The running joke was that, if the lives of Tiger Cav pilots were numbered in days, the lives of gunners were numbered in minutes. Hanging over the jungle by a monkey harness, that joke too often came true.

Lieutenant Stalk turned his Sword away from the tree line, then flew a slow pass over the ditch he had barely missed. A panther infantryman stood up and faced the Sword that had saved his life. He raised his paw high above his head and extended a middle finger.

JWO Gaines pressed his paw against the canopy and raised his own middle finger. Like almost everything in the Army, the middle finger had acquired multiple meanings. With the paw held anywhere below the head, a middle finger meant the usual—Fuck you. However, with the paw held high over the head, the same gesture meant, "Are you okay? / I'm okay." When held at the level of the head, the gesture was equivocal. It could mean either or both, as in: "I'm okay. And fuck you for almost shooting my ass off."

In this case, everyone was all right, and "thank you."

Stalk turned his Sword around toward the grounded Sows. He received another call from Captain Owens circling above. "Nice work, Todd. I need you to turn toward heading Nine-Zero. About a quarter-mile, there's a cluster of farm huts I need you to check out."

Stalk keyed his command comm-line. "Sure thing, Mike. What are we looking for?"

There was a pause as the command Bat made a series of dodging maneuvers, followed by Captain Owens' calm voice again. "I'm not sure, Todd. I think it might be..."

In that instant, Lieutenant Todd Stalk had his answer. A fast-moving, slender dart intercepted Captain Owens' Bat, followed by an explosion. The canopy and tail of the Bat flew apart while its rotor blades continued to fly away from the wreckage, like the body of a beheaded chicken staggering away from its head.

"Surface-to-air missiles," Stalk said under his breath as he watched the pieces of the Bat tumble to the jungle below. Captain Mike Owens was gone that quickly.

Some future Todd Stalk, a businessman, perhaps twenty-five years from now, married with one kid in college and one still in high school, might kneel at the gravestone of one Captain Mike R. Owens during some future Military Memorial Holiday and weep for the man who had been like a father to him during the DRP War. Captain Mike, as everyone in the squadron including the enlisted men called him, had been a Sword pilot like Todd. He had taught Stalk the ins and outs of the tricky AH-2B before moving to squadron command after the death of his own predecessor.

Todd had played poker with Captain Mike the night before. Captain Mike was unbeatable at poker. As such, he could decide when to win and when to lose. He understood that it was necessary to let his men beat "the Captain" from time to time, while at other times putting them in their places. Todd had beaten the captain twice, just as Mike had intended. Now, that master poker player, that teacher of the UH-2B, that leader of men, that father figure to Lieutenant Todd Stalk was nothing more than chunks of flesh falling to the jungle below.

But that weeping old man at his captain's gravestone was from some unimaginable future. The Lieutenant Todd Stalk of the here and now merely thought: *Of course, he's gone. He was dead from the start.*

"We're taking out those missiles." Stalk spoke to his co-pilot as he angled his Sword toward the cluster of huts where the missile battery was hidden.

Even to someone already "dead," this seemed like a crazy idea. "Sir, we should let the fixed-wings do that," Gaines replied. "Those missiles will shoot us out of the sky like pigeons."

Stalk watched as the rotor blade of Captain Mike's Bat finally reached the jungle canopy. "They're already shooting us out of the sky. We'll all be dead before the airplanes get here. We're taking those missiles out now." Stalk keyed his open comm-line. "Sierra-Four-Seven. Make a feinting attack on those huts from the west. We'll crawl in from the east, then pop up and take them out."

"Confirmed, El-Tee." The reply came over electronic crackle.

The Tiger Cav term, "Crawling," meant flying so low to the ground that troops could literally jump from the Sword to the ground safely. At high speed, crawling gave zero margin for error. A slight shift in the breeze could send the helicopter plowing into the dirt in a split second.

The JWO braced himself with his arms. "Death from the sky," he mumbled into his comm, intending the second meaning of that phrase, the one where the pilots die.

"Death from the sky," Stalk replied as he brought the Sword down low as if landing, then angled the nose forward into the grass. It felt like he could reach his paw out the canopy window and push off the ground. Flying this low and this fast, Stalk couldn't take his eyes off the ground. He had to rely on his co-pilot to see for him. "Tell me when we're there, Bill."

Stalk was too busy watching blades of grass fly by at 130 mph to see another dart intercept S47C high above. Gaines, however, saw it clearly. "Now it's our turn," he spoke with the comm off so as not to distract Stalk. "On my mark!" he shouted next. The line of huts was

quickly approaching. Lines of tracer bullets began to intercept them. They had been spotted. "NOW!" Gaines shouted.

Stalk pulled up on his stick violently. It felt like they had gained a thousand pounds as Gaines and Stalk were pressed hard into their seats. When he had reached sufficient altitude, Stalk angled the nose over sending them flying violently upward against their seat straps. The gunners weren't so lucky. They each were thrown hard against the ceiling of the Sword.

Stalk had armed the rocket launchers and was prepared to release both tubes when he saw two darts racing up to meet them. "Fuck!" he shouted. "Hang onto something!"

Helicopters aren't designed to do loops (perhaps with the exception of the ROH Bat, but certainly not the AH-2B Sword). Helicopters possess a single, downward-directed source of thrust and no aerodynamics. Once past 90 degrees, they tend to spiral out of control with their thrust aimed directly at the ground. Lieutenant Stalk threw his Sword into such a death spiral by turning over hard left, then pushing his nose forward, hard down. He lost sight of the surface-to-air missiles as the ground and sky tumbled randomly together.

Gunner 1 was thrown first up to the ceiling, then down to the floor of the Sword, then up again as if a child was shaking a bug to death inside a glass jar. Gunner 2 was thrown out the right side of the open gunner door. His trajectory was temporarily halted by the monkey harness that secured both gunners in place. Then the cable to his harness snapped, allowing Gunner 2 to continue his course away from the Sword at 200 feet above the ground.

Stalk forced his control stick wildly in all directions trying to regain control. He finally leveled out a few feet above the ground, but that ground was rushing up to him at deadly speed. In a final desperate move, Stalk hit the afterburner on the throttle. The Wolf-Littney turboshaft engine screamed like an airplane launching off a carrier.

Helicopters don't have afterburners, either. In a forward-thrusting jet engine, the process of "after-burning" means dumping fuel directly

into the exhaust chamber creating a controlled explosion along with tremendous, though fuel-costly thrust.

A helicopter's thrust comes entirely from its blades, not from its engine exhaust—that is, until the designers at Wolf-Littney decided to run that exhaust through an extra, outer turbo-crank. Dumping fuel into that chamber resulted in a similar explosion that translated into tremendous torque on the spinning rotor shaft. This gave the AH-2B something called “rapid start” capability, earning the “B” designator of the AH-2. A typical helicopter required between two and five minutes to lift off from a cold start. Using its afterburner, the AH-2B could lift off the ground in under thirty seconds.

But hitting the afterburner during flight risked exceeding the maximum operating torque on the blades. At that moment, S42C did both. Its powerful burst slowed their deadly descent while at the same time cracking the blade shaft. Their tremendous thrust suddenly dropped to zero as both blades flew off into the jungle foliage, killing anything in their path. S42C hit the ground hard, collapsing its landing struts and breaking its tail. Lieutenant Stalk felt like someone had hammered his ass with a sledgehammer. But at least he was alive to complain about it.

Both Lieutenant Stalk and JWO Gaines opened their canopy doors and jumped clear of the Sword in case it caught fire. The surviving gunner released his harness and did the same. Gaines, with the pants of his flight suit obviously soiled and wet, ripped off his flight helmet, leaned over and vomited. Gunner 1 literally hugged the ground and wept.

The smoking Sword never caught fire, but the three survivors were greeted moments later by an earth-shaking explosion. The cluster of huts housing the surface-to-air battery exploded into a ball of flame as another Sword in Stalk's squadron successfully emptied his rocket launchers into it. That Sword then made a slow pass above the broken S42C.

Stalk recognized the pilot of S31C. He raised his paw high in the air and extended his middle finger. The pilot acknowledged with the same gesture, then continued to his next target. A Sow would come by shortly to retrieve the lieutenant and his crew.

Stalk turned toward Gaines who was leaning on four paws over a puddle of his own vomit. "Well Bill, I guess we'll have to see another damned sunrise tomorrow. I had hoped today would be the last."

"Damn it, Todd!" Gaines spat bile from his mouth. "That isn't funny anymore!"

Stalked turned away and fumbled for his pack of Scepter cigarettes stowed in his flight uniform. "It was never supposed to be funny," he mumbled while trying to pull out a cigarette. His own paws were shaking uncontrollably. He struggled with the lighter switch, then struggled touching its flame to the end of his cigarette. When the two finally met, Stalk did what had earned him his nickname, "Smokin."

In a single giant breath, Todd Stalk burned the cigarette to a nub, inhaling its entire content into his lungs. The burning fumes and blast of nicotine had an instant calming effect on him. His hands stopped shaking. His racing mind cleared.

In one explosive exhale, all the smoke in his lungs escaped carrying with it all the fear and weeping and messed up fuck-pile of emotion in his brain. "Death from the sky," he spoke through the lingering vapors of smoke in his mouth. "Someone always dies. It always comes true."

Lt. Stalk then walked toward the jungle to retrieve the body of Gunner number 2 before the Sows arrived.

Chapter 2: JinnSai

Lieutenant Todd Stalk slid open the curtain and stepped out onto the third-floor balcony of his room at the Grand JinnSai Hotel. JinnSai was the Southern capital of the DRP, and Stalk was currently billeted in its premier resort hotel. He inhaled the exotic morning aroma of a city now waking up, as he witnessed yet another hazy sunrise.

The smells of cooking fires, car exhaust, and myriad flowering bushes were blended with the smells of rotting vegetation from the nearby jungle. It was a unique, alluring aroma that Stalk would always associate with this city. It was an aroma that would bring many a soldier back to this country long after the war was over, seeking absolution, or old friends, or in rare cases, revenge—but for whatever their reason, it was the beauty and smell of the jungle that they missed.

There was something else about the jungle that was alluring to Stalk as it was for many a tiger from the Free States United. The FSU was situated in the high northern latitudes of the Atican Continent. Todd Stalk had grown up with memories of pine forest mountains and snowy winters. Tigers, with their thick fur coats, had adapted easily to the cold, northern climate of Atica. But in ancient times, before written history, tigers had evolved from the jungle. The jungle held a primordial calling that Stalk and so many others could feel deep in their soul.

The jungles of the DRP felt like an ancient home that none of them could remember, but all of them could feel. Todd Stalk couldn't explain it but, somehow, he felt like he had always been from this place—the jungle—if not the city itself—JinnSai.

JinnSai had exchanged hands no less than five times during the course of the war and was currently (obviously) in the hands of the FSU.

In order to avoid the destruction of their beautiful city, the Pardali would always surrender it rather than fight inside the city. The city experienced its times of greatest destruction when the FSU held possession since they would *certainly* fight inside the city. The DRP Army, therefore, would never invade the city but rather lay siege. The longest siege had lasted nearly eighteen months, one time. Although its citizens had starved, the result was that its oldest buildings, including this one—the Grand JinnSai—still stood.

Lieutenant Stalk had been at the Grand JinnSai for almost a month recovering from his crash with a broken ass bone. The bone's medical name was the Ischial Tuberosity, that hard knot of bone that supports one's weight while sitting. Stalk had cracked his ischial tuberosity during his controlled crash landing of the S42C.

"So, I broke my ass-bone," he had said irreverently to the doctor who had given the diagnosis.

The Army doctor, a frustrated tiger in his mid-forties who had been recalled from private practice to the DRP because he had made the mistake of remaining in the reserves, had rolled his eyes at that term.

"Yes, you could call it that."

I was pulled back for this shit?

"I could call it that, because that's what it is. I have a broken ass-bone."

By either term, Stalk's broken ass had taken him off flight status and earned him a month's stay in this fine hotel. The Army had found it was cheaper to house junior officers and other support staff in local hotels rather than build more housing on its military bases. Its Pardali owners charged the Army three times their regular nightly rate. Even still, by FSU dollars it was a good deal for the Army.

Future economists analyzing the DRP War would comment that (aside from the death count) the war had been economically favorable to the Pardali. It was also economically lucrative to the military contractors supplying the FSU Army. Yes, other than all the killing, the war helped

both counties' economies. But this was a detail invisible in the present moment and certainly lost on Lieutenant Stalk.

There was a familiar knock at the door. Stalk shouted from the balcony. "Come in. It's not locked."

The door to Stalk's hotel room opened quietly. JoonTao, or simply "Joon" as Stalk shortened the name, stepped in. Joon was a sixteen-year-old ocelot boy who (speaking of economy) for 75 cents per day served as Lieutenant Stalk's personal valet. Joon entered the room carrying the lieutenant's freshly pressed uniforms, along with the daily newspaper. He placed the paper on the hotel dining table and proceeded to prepare the lieutenant's breakfast.

The Pardali were a nation of ocelots. Their diminutive size and unusual spotted fur pattern made them look like some exotic tribe of children inhabiting the jungles of the DRP. By tiger standards, Joon would be no larger than an eight-year-old child. Stalk had been taken aback when the kid had told him he was, in fact, a teenager nearing adult stature.

Why the military giant of the Free States United, mostly inhabited by tigers and panthers, would flounder in a protracted war against the largely agrarian, child-sized ocelots of the DRP would be yet another subject of extensive future analysis.

Regardless of his age and size, Joon was well worth the 75 cents per day out of Stalk's military paycheck. In addition to the usual duties of ironing the lieutenant's uniforms, delivering the daily paper, picking up the hotel room, and smoothing his bedsheets, Joon had the skill of locating nearly any product on the black market that Stalk could request. Most importantly, he had managed to locate Stalk's favorite cigarette, the Scepter. Scepter cigarettes were popular in the Free States but were not a standard military issue. Joon had acquired them at Stalk's request.

Joon had also scrounged up a bottle of Stiller's Choice whiskey, also popular in the Free States but nowhere to be found in the DRP. Stalk had used the whiskey to "self-medicate" for the first few days after Captain Mike's death. His had been a death that Stalk could not so easily rationalize away.

Stalk turned from the balcony and walked over to the kitchen table where Joon had set the newspaper. He picked up the paper and took a seat.

"The newspaper says you are winning the war," Joon said while preparing the lieutenant's eggs at the two-burner kitchen stove.

"The newspaper always says we're winning," Stalk replied. He reached for a Scepter and searched for his lighter. "Don't believe what they print. We've been winning this War for ten years now, yet here we are." He had no luck finding the lighter. "Hey Joon, have you seen my lighter?"

The teen boy set the frying pan aside and raced over to the dining table. He produced the lighter in his paw and lit its flame. "I'll do that for you, sir," he said while politely averting his eyes downward.

Stalk touched the tip of his cigarette to the flame. He smiled at the attentive boy as he took his first morning puff. "You know, it's okay to look at me. I won't bite you." In Pardali culture it was considered rude to make eye contact with superiors, whereas for Aticans such a gesture was considered a sign of weakness.

"*I am* looking at you, sir," Joon said with eyes dutifully averted.

Stalk grinned at that. "Of course, you are." After ten years of war, and no end in sight, the Pardali were anything but weak.

"But I hope the papers are right," Joon added. "I hope you win the war."

Stalk took a longer draw on his cigarette, though nothing like the lung-buster after his crash landing. He looked at the teen ocelot with skepticism. "Really?" He exhaled. "Why is that?"

Joon had a quick answer. "I like you, Colonel. You are my employer."

Stalk rolled his eyes at the canned response. He had also long given up trying to correct the kid regarding his military rank. Apparently, the word "Lieutenant" was a tongue twister in the Pardali language and

Joon could never get it right. So, he had promoted Stalk to colonel, which was easier for him to pronounce.

“But if I wasn’t your employer?” Stalk left the question unfinished.

Joon returned to the kitchen to catch the eggs before they burned. “Same thing, Colonel. Aticans are good for my country. I have lots of opportunities now.”

The aforementioned economic dynamics were as yet invisible to Stalk. He only saw that Aticans had given Pardalis more opportunities to die. He took another long, silent puff of his Scepter.

“Jinn or Coffee, sir?” Joon called from the kitchen.

Stalk spoke around his cigarette. “Come on, Joon. You know me better than that.”

“Yes sir. Jinn.”

Jinn was a Pardali national obsession, more so even than coffee was for Aticans. The drink was a kind of tea made from the bark of an indigenous jungle tree, spiced with the flower petals from that same tree. Its flavor was exactly that - a bitter, barkiness with disgustingly sweet flowers thrown in. JinnSai, the Southern capital city, was even named after the drink. The city’s name meant something like “Perfect Jinn,” or “Eternal Jinn.”

Pardalis drank jinn with almost every meal, but few Aticans had acquired the taste, preferring their more familiar coffee. Stalk had disciplined himself to acquire the taste during his month of ass recovery. Now he was hooked. He suspected there might be a drug more powerful than caffeine contained in the tree bark. Or perhaps the exotic flavor had gotten under Stalk’s skin just like the exotic aroma of the jungle city. Either way, Stalk now clearly preferred jinn over coffee.

Sociologists would, in future years, discover an interesting statistic. Those soldiers who returned to this country after the War were overwhelmingly jinn drinkers. Far fewer coffee drinkers would ever return to the DRP. You could almost predict who would return based on their choice of beverage.

Joon presented the “Colonel” with his plate of eggs and toast along with a cup of steaming jinn. He also handed Stalk a letter envelope. “This came in the mail for you, sir.”

Stalk glanced at the envelope with the official Army heading. “Looks like my new orders came in.” He reached down and rubbed his butt cheek. “I guess they figure my ass is well enough to get shot off again.” Stalk used his butter knife as a letter opener and withdrew his orders that now had a grease stain along one edge.

Stalk raised an eyebrow at the single page. It was a letter signed by Colonel Abraham Remy himself, the commander of Tiger Cav in the DRP. Stalk was to report to the colonel directly this afternoon.

“Good news, I hope,” Joon said as he went to hang up Stalk’s uniforms.

Stalk frowned. “No. I’m afraid not.” Military orders normally specified a given date, time, and location to report to a new assignment. Lieutenant Stalk was certainly not being assigned to the Command unit here in JinnSai. Command unit assignments were for majors and above. They had no use for lieutenants other than to make their coffee and deliver their mail. Stalk’s orders could only mean that he would receive his real orders directly from the colonel, that those orders could not be delivered by mail. Those kinds of orders were never good news.

Stalk was suddenly not hungry. He pushed his plate away and returned to his hotel balcony with his cigarette. He stared absently into the jungle surrounding the city as he contemplated what his future might hold.

Joon looked at the uneaten food and seemed hurt. “Did you not like it, Colonel? Did I do something wrong?”

Stalk didn’t want to hurt the kid’s feelings. “No. You made it just the way I like.” He took a long draw on his cigarette. “Seems I’m to meet the real colonel today. Better get me one of those fresh uniforms. My Dress Greens. The one with the row of pretty ribbons.” Stalk had not worn his formal Dress Greens since the first day he had reported to the DRP three years ago.

"I hope to God they still fit."



The Eagle Thunderbolt GTT was currently the hottest muscle car in the Free States United. Its 4.7 liter, V8 engine installed in a relatively light frame gave it a ton of overpower, creating a lot of tire squealing which was so pleasing to the ear of many a teenager who wanted to own a Thunderbolt more than life itself. Also pleasing to the ear was the deep, unmistakable rumble of its particular V8 engine. The Thunderbolt's classic front grill, wind-swept side, and convertible top made it equally pleasing to the eye. For young soldiers newly arrived in the DRP, the Eagle Thunderbolt GTT was the third most common masturbation fantasy, coming in behind their girlfriends back home, and prostitutes in the DRP (not necessarily in that order).

It was the throaty roar of the V8 Thunderbolt that greeted Lieutenant Todd Stalk as he passed through the entry gate and stepped into the massive courtyard of the FSU Command base in JinnSai. The courtyard was larger than a football field, large enough to justify roads being built to connect its buildings; roads along which four rowdy soldiers were driving a Thunderbolt GTT in a reckless fashion, squealing its tires and blaring its radio.

"What the hell?" Stalk gaped in awe. "How did they get one of those here?"

The driver of the Thunderbolt, a tiger, turned in a collision course toward Stalk, accelerating wildly, then slammed on the brakes causing it to fishtail as it approached the lieutenant head-on. Stalk had to step aside to avoid being hit. He was too enthralled by the car to be offended that the tiger had almost run him over.

In the driver seat of the Thunderbolt was a major. To his right was a panther sergeant, and in the back seat, sitting precariously on the top of the rear trunk without restraints were two tiger captains. It was possible that the four of them were a little drunk.

"Where the hell did you get that thing?" Stalk asked incredulously.

"It's the Colonel's car," the major yelled over the radio. They all four pointed to the second-floor window of Colonel Abraham Remy's command office. "He lets us drive it around the courtyard. If you're a good boy, he might let you take it for a spin."

At that moment a voice - presumably Colonel Remy's - emanated from the open window of the command office. "Be careful with the goddamn tires! You bust one of those tires, I'll bust your ass!" The colonel apparently had less concern for the two captains who were in danger of being thrown, than the precious tires of his GTT.

In response, four paws went high into the air and four middle fingers saluted the colonel. In complete disregard for the health of its tires, the major hit the gas, making them scream and squeal. The two captains in the back held on for dear life. The Thunderbolt sped away from Stalk blaring the song, *My Thunderbolt GTT*, by the Surfing Boys, from its radio.

The Surfing Boys were an equally popular boy band in the FSU. Their songs were about surfing (naturally), racing cars, dating girls, getting into fights, and generally living a free, fun-filled life. Their tight harmonizing voices combined with a great guitar player and an "okay" drummer were a perfect fit for the Thunderbolt.

Purists in the Free States would accuse the band of "selling out" to corporate FSU by naming a song directly after an Eagle brand car. Rumors were that the Eagle Corporation had paid the Surfing Boys a handsome fee for that song - rumors that were likely true. Stalk didn't get the impression that these three tigers and their panther NCO were the "purist" type.

Ironically, the number two most popular song in the DRP—after *My Thunderbolt GTT*—was another song by the Surfing Boys titled, *High School Days*. Stalk wasn't a fan of that song with its sickeningly sweet reminiscence of high school life and its call to be loyal to one's school. Thousands of young soldiers fresh out of high school being thrown into the meat grinder of the DRP War, however, would think otherwise.

Inside the command building, Stalk knocked on the heavy oak door to Colonel Remy's office. Above the door was a placard labeled: Remy, Col FSU, Commander Tiger Cavalry, DRP.

"Enter," came the terse reply.

Stalk opened the door to see Junior Warrant Officer Gaines already present, standing at attention behind a chair. Gaines, also in his dress greens, turned toward Stalk and saluted.

"Lieutenant," he said crisply.

Stalk returned the salute with casual familiarity. "JWO." He then turned toward the colonel and presented a more crisp, rigid salute. "Colonel Remy, sir."

Remy, who was not in uniform, did not return the salute but rather motioned for Stalk to take a seat. "Sit," he said tersely. Apparently terseness was the colonel's only tone). It seemed JWO Gaines was to remain standing, and so Stalk took the assigned chair.

Remy, who was dressed in morning bathrobes as if he had recently awoken, reached for a cup of hot jinn and took a careful sip. The colonel was an aged tiger with grey whiskers who appeared to be in a sour mood as if Stalk had awoken him a 5 AM. It was 2 in the afternoon.

The sound of squealing tires floated through the open window. "Careful with the goddamn tires!" the colonel barked.

Stalk jumped at the vocal outburst. "Sir," he interjected timidly. "I apologize for being out of uniform. If I had known, I would have worn my own bathrobes."

The old tiger lifted his eyes from his drink and gave Stalk a cold, piercing glare.

Stalk averted his eyes. "Uh, sorry sir. I was only trying to..." The lieutenant knew when it was time to shut up. "I'll be quiet now."

The colonel took another cautious sip of his steaming jinn, then reached for a folded paper and spread it across his desk. It was a strategic map of the DRP: North, South, West, and surrounding countries.

Col Remy stood from his chair and rested both paws on the map. "You are familiar with this map, I take it."

Lt. Stalk's expression said both yes and no. He was intimately familiar with the geography of the DRP. The North and South, where the war was being conducted, was confined to a hundred-mile coastal plain hugging the country's East Coast. Splitting the country north to south, was the giant KongSai River with twenty-mile demilitarized zones on either side. West of that was the DRP's much larger western zone, a four-hundred-mile swath of mountainous jungle inhabited by mostly farm villages. Finally, to the northwest of the DRP was the Talon Republic, a country "not officially" involved in the war as of today.

What made Stalk's eyes open wide, however, were markings on the map that seemed to detail future operations, making this map highly classified. The lieutenant wasn't sure he should be looking at it.

Colonel Remy could see the lieutenant's hesitation. "If I opened it in front of you, then yes you can see it." He moved his paw south of JinnSai toward the battlefield. "It's no secret that we are massing forces to the south for a big push to end the war. Everyone can see it. Folks at home think this war will go on forever, but I'm here to tell you it won't. The end is in sight." Remy then moved his paw north to JinnSai and traced a line with his claw west to the DMZ. "This, however, is your mission." He tapped the map repeatedly with his claw for emphasis.

"Two days ago, three Swords from Second Cavalry, Bravo Squadron disappeared into West DRP. They are known to have entered the DMZ here." Remy traced his claw westward. "They crossed the KongSai here, then flew to this International Union base outside the DMZ to refuel." The colonel looked upward with a haggard expression. "After that, we lost them."

Stalk was puzzled. "How could Swords refuel at an IU base? Wouldn't they simply arrest them and hold the helicopters?" The International Union was a charter of fifteen nations around the world (of which the FSU was but one). The IU had been tasked to prevent the spread of the DRP War into a larger regional conflict. Specifically, they patrolled the DMZ and West DRP to prevent military action by either

country and certainly to monitor for the potential entry of the Talon Republic into the war. Should the Free States United invade the West, it would bring the war to the doorsteps of the Talon Republic, thus ensuring their entry.

Colonel Remy smirked, the closest thing to a smile he would give them. "This part is more classified than the rest. The IU doesn't patrol every one of their bases at all times. They visit them more on a rotating basis, leaving behind a skeleton crew of neutral Pardali to run a base when they are gone." Remy tapped three IU bases extending into West DRP. "The IU won't be at these bases this month. You should be able to refuel there while you search for my missing Swords."

Stalk was somewhat taken aback. Colonel Remy had slipped in his mission assignment just as simple as that. "Wait, what, sir? You want me to take Swords past the DMZ into neutral West DRP to find your missing squadron? Armed Swords? Wouldn't unarmed ROH Bats be less provocative? Shouldn't you send Bats?"

Once more, the grey whiskered tiger glared at the lieutenant silently. Stalk realized he had been given orders by the colonel. They weren't open for debate. "Okay, sir, I'll shut up now."

Remy looked down at the map and continued. "It will only be one Sword, your Sword, no others, so as not to be provocative. You'll find the details in the written orders." He reached for his jinn and took a scalding gulp. "These aren't the first Swords to go missing into the West. Either we have a bunch of pilots and crew abandoning their posts and going AWOL, or those Swords are making their way into Talon hands. I want you to go figure out which it is. Believe me, I would be happier if they had merely crashed."

Colonel Remy then brought his fist down hard on the map. "Do NOT engage Talon forces if you run into them. Run the FUCK away." Remy pounded the map again. "We can't afford to bring the war into the West. If you do that, not only will I remove your ass, the Army will remove your head. Understood?"

Stalk gulped and saluted. Remy had just stated the reason why the DRP war was unwinnable. That four-hundred-mile swath of jungle

mountains in the West of the country was untouchable. Even if the FSU took both North and South, Pardali troops could always melt into the West only to return at their convenience in the future. The fragile balance of international alliances meant that a complete victory in the DPR, to include the West, would draw in other countries, like Talon. Thus, for the FSU, a win would be a loss. The DRP War, by international treaty, could therefore not be won.

Colonel Remy broke the silence. “Of course, your orders won’t mention anything about a recon mission. Officially, you will be engaged in medical evacuation. International law allows anyone to transport an injured soldier to the nearest hospital by the most direct route, even through a DMZ.” Remy cocked an eyebrow. “You may have to produce an injured soldier if questioned.” He looked again at the three IU bases on the map. “Also, they will not likely accept FSU dollars as payment for fuel since that would link them to us. We will provide you with some local currency.”

“Local currency,” was another dual-meaning word in the Army. Because the DRP economy was in a shambles, their money was worthless when it came to buying things like jet fuel. The true “local currency” was drugs. Everyone understood this. Drugs were officially illegal but could buy you all the jet fuel you could burn.

“That part is also classified,” Remy added regarding the drugs. The Army could not officially be involved in drug trafficking, though for practical purposes it very much was.

At that moment a young ocelot woman entered the room carrying a tray and a pot of jinn. She refilled Remy’s cup then placed a breakfast biscuit on his desk. Just as Joon had served Lieutenant Stalk at the Grand JinnSai, this woman was Remy’s Pardali valet and servant. Remy paid a bit more than 75 cents daily for her service.

Colonel Remy’s facial expression softened uncharacteristically. “Thank you, Milley,” he said to the woman. “I appreciate it.”

Stalk raised an eyebrow at that. *Milley?* It didn’t sound like a Pardali name. It implied an Atican familiarity with the woman. It would be as if Stalk decided to call JoonTao, Johnny.

Ten years after the war ended, Colonel Remy (a jinn drinker, no less) would return to the DRP to marry this woman. He would father two children with her before he died in this, one-time, enemy land. By then he would consider it his home. But that future was unimaginably distant.

“Any questions?” Colonel Remy asked of both Stalk and Gaines.

Stalk had a shit-ton of questions for the colonel. For starters, if this mission was so important, why send only one Sword crew? “No sir.” He saluted and turned to leave.

Remy stopped the lieutenant for a moment longer. He handed Stalk a thick envelope. “Your Medevac orders,” he rumbled. “They’re missing some of the details we talked about, but you know what to do.”

Both Stalk and Gaines again saluted sharply, then turned on their heels to leave, trying not to run. They had a great deal to discuss between themselves but at that moment it was more important to get the hell out of Remy’s office lest he add more to their mission. They could still hear the roar of the Thunderbolt GTT in the courtyard below. They each wondered if this was the sort of mission that, if successful, would earn them a ride in the Colonel’s muscle car.

They each seriously doubted it.

Chapter 3: Gunner 1, Gunner 2

“Well, I’ll be damned. They repaired the S42C.” Stalk shook his head in disbelief.

Lieutenant Stalk and JWO Gaines stepped out of the flight hangar at JinnSai Airbase and approached their old Sword that was sitting on the runway *almost* as good as new. They spotted the designation S42C on its tail right away. The obvious repairs to the AH-2B included a new tail and new propeller blades. Its canopy with all the bullet holes from their previous mission had been replaced and a fresh coat of paint covered most of its scars. The two pilots walked a wide circle around their bird, reverently inspecting its exterior while pointing out the dents and bullet holes that had not been repaired. Scars and all, she was their baby.

“I don’t know how many times we almost died in this thing,” Stalk said as he completed his round.

“Brings back the good memories, doesn’t it?” Gaines answered sarcastically, grinning ear to ear.

“I can’t wait to almost die again,” Stalk replied, equally happy to be flying his old, familiar Sword. Every helicopter, no matter how similar, handled slightly differently in the air. Stalk was intimately familiar with all of S42C’s quirks. She fit like a glove, as the saying went, and Stalk had confidence he could make her fly exactly to his will. He could place her at any point in the sky or on the ground with precision.

After his initial elation wore off, Stalk spotted a *big* problem. “Where are the guns?”

Gaines had missed it, too. “Holy shit,” he exclaimed as he raised two paws to his head. Its rocket launchers, its twin cannons under the

nose, and the landing strut mounts for its two 8 mm Gore swivel machine guns had all been removed.

Stalk tore open the envelope with their mission orders and flipped through the pages. "It doesn't say anything about not having weapons in our orders. Where the hell did this come from?"

"Must be the unwritten stuff the colonel was talking about." Gaines put a foot on the landing strut and leaned inside its open gunner door. "Look what they gave us instead."

Stalk stepped up behind his co-pilot. There in its gunner bay, he spotted several cans of jet fuel that had been secured to the floor. "They want us to carry extra fuel instead of weapons to give us greater range." Stalk shook his head. "We'll be a flying bomb. One stray bullet and we'll be barbecued."

"You would think the idiots in command would know better," Gaines rolled his eyes doubtfully. Compared to fixed-wing aircraft, Swords were relatively slow and flew at much lower altitudes (sometimes measured in inches). When their gunner doors were open, anything in the gunner bay (including and especially those extra fuel cans) were easy targets.

"I guess that's how they get promoted to command—by being idiots." Stalk slapped the side of the attack helicopter. "We're not carrying this shit."

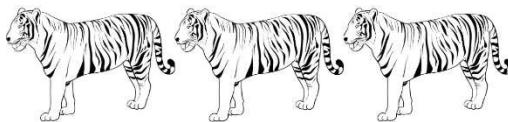
"Look what else they gave us." Gaines hopped into the gunner bay and pointed to a large trunk sitting behind the co-pilot seat. He opened the lid to reveal hundreds of clear plastic bags containing a white powder—local currency. "I'm afraid we'll have to carry that shit," Gaines said, trying to estimate the street value of the drugs.

Lieutenant Stalk looked at their orders again. He then turned toward the flight hanger they had just come from. "I saw plenty of ordinance lying around that hangar," he said to Gaines. "There's nothing in our official orders that says we *can't* have it. How long would it take you to put some teeth into this baby?"

Gaines scratched his chin as he looked between the hanger and the S42C. "Only a few hours if you only want the cannons and Gore machine guns. Take a lot longer for the rocket launchers. Better part of a day."

Stalk contemplated his choices. "I don't think we'll see heavy combat, so we can do without the launchers. But if someone spits at us, I want to be able to spit back." He gave Gaines' shoulder a pat. "Get to work on the guns. I'll find us some gunners to shoot 'em." Stalk turned away to locate the base personnel building, then paused. "Oh, and get rid of those extra fuel cans. Fucking idiots."

Although their orders said nothing about carrying a full crew into combat, Lieutenant Stalk figured the base commander would understand that a Sword needed gunners if she was to fly a mission. Surely the commander could spare them a couple of gunners.



The JinnSai Airbase Commander had permitted Lieutenant Stalk to pick his crew out of four men, all of them with long disciplinary records. Naturally, the base commander himself had not spoken directly to Stalk. Rather, it had taken hours of the lieutenant arguing with three successive personnel clerks, shoving Colonel Remy's orders into three different faces to finally get results.

"It don't say nothing about a gun crew in these orders," all three clerks had pointed out.

"It's a goddamn Sword!" Stalk had shouted. "Who do you think shoots the guns?!"

The call had eventually been made, and four personnel files had reluctantly been handed over. "It's all we can spare. You only get two," the final clerk had stated after getting permission from the base commander.

Todd Stalk now thumbed through four thick folders while the four soldiers attached to said folders stood at attention on the flight tarmac. Those soldiers included two panther privates, a panther specialist, and a

tiger sergeant—a fairly representative cross-section of the racial divide found throughout the Army.

In the FSU, panthers represented less than a quarter of the civilian population. But in the Army, they made up nearly 70 percent of enlisted soldiers. Lieutenant Stalk had heard of but had never actually seen a panther officer. Needless to say, panthers were the underclass in the FSU with fewer educational opportunities, less money, and more likely to be drafted into the enlisted ranks.

Stalk was now directly witnessing that split. There wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

JWO Gaines had nearly completed his work on S42C in the time Stalk was arguing with the personnel office, so he had decided to join his lieutenant as he picked their flight crew. Gaines' life also depended on Stalk picking the least terrible of the four bad options.

Stalk's selection strategy was to interview his top choice first, followed by his bottom choice (who he could quickly eliminate). The remaining choice would be a coin toss. Lieutenant Stalk took a step in front of the panther specialist. The soldier braced to attention and saluted the officer.

"Specialist Andrew 'Dickless' Simms," Stalk announced as he thumbed through the panther's file. He returned the specialist's salute, then turned his paw down toward the soldier's pants. With a single claw, he pulled forward on the panther's belt and took a look inside. "It would seem your nickname isn't true?" He released the soldier's belt.

"No sir," the panther replied crisply. "I do, in fact, have a dick."

Stalk turned his eyes to the specialist's file. "So, tell me then, why do they call you Dickless?"

Speaking without being addressed, the tiger sergeant answered. "It's because he won't fuck the local prostitutes, sir."

Stalk turned a harsh look toward the tiger who had not been addressed; the soldier who was next to be questioned—Stalk's last choice. The tiger stiffened to attention with eyes aimed silently forward. Stalk didn't need to say, *shut the fuck up*. His eyes said it all.

Stalk returned his attention to Specialist Simms. "You married?"

"No sir."

"You religious?"

"No sir. I do not believe in God."

Stalk scratched his forehead. "Then why don't you fuck?"

Simms gulped before answering. "Sir, I signed up for this war to shoot Derps. I ain't here to fuck around."

The term "Derp" was a simple derivative of DRP and was the common pejorative term used for enemy Pardalis. Stalk thumbed a page in the file. "Says here you earned your Specialist rank as a sharp shooter. I guess you shoot Derps quite well." Stalk contemplated this a moment. "So why are you still flying gunner missions on Swords?" He turned another page and found his answer. "Oh, here it is. You might not fuck but you sure do drink. From this report, you drink quite a lot."

Simms gulped again. "It... it sometimes helps, sir."

Stalk remembered his own days after Captain Mike's death. It *did* sometimes help. He slapped the file closed. "Congratulations, Dickless. You're my Gunner number One. Fetch your gear and be ready to fly in one hour."

Gaines shook his head silently and held up two fingers.

"Two hours," Stalk corrected. Then in passing, "And if you happen to have any Stiller's Choice, bring that with you as well."

Specialist Simms saluted sharply, performed a military about-face, and marched briskly away.

Stalk next turned his attention to the interrupting tiger sergeant. His dislike was immediate, even before the soldier had spoken out of turn.

"Sergeant Thomas 'Butthead' Buford," he announced in a derisive tone. The tiger stiffened once more to attention. "Apparently you have no problem with fucking," he said thumbing past the first page.

"No sir. I generally approve of the activity."

Stalk turned another page. "And you also like to be insubordinate. Apparently, that's how you got your nickname, for 'butting heads' with officers."

The tiger grinned broadly without answering.

Stalk's disdain for the tiger deepened. "Well, that won't work in my command." He turned a final page in the tiger's file. "But it looks like you can be brave when you have to. Says here you once threw your body on a grenade to save your men."

The sergeant's grin began to melt away.

"Only problem is, your fellow soldiers were over thirty yards away at the time, well out of danger from the grenade." Stalk slapped the file closed. He stood directly in front of Sergeant Buford, glaring at him. "Were you trying to kill yourself? Did you want to die?"

Any hint of humor was gone from the sergeant's face. His tone was somber and subdued. "Sir, I was in a really bad place at the time. I was hoping the grenade would go off."

Stalk moved to within inches of the sergeant's face. "And what about now? Do you want to die now?"

Sergeant Buford tried to swallow with a dry throat. "Yes, sir. I do want to die." He paused, then added, "Unless there's a chance to fuck, then I would rather be doing that."

JWO Gaines could be seen shaking his head vigorously and giving the universal "wave off" sign for airplanes—*do not land here!*

Stalk turned away from the sergeant to regard the S42C that was parked on the other side of the tarmac. He remembered his own mental preparations going into combat, how he always convinced himself that he was going to die this time. But were those *only* mental preparations? Was there a part of him that really wanted to die if only to escape this interminable war? Stalk reached for a Scepter, lit its tip, and took a long draw of smoke. He exhaled—*Death from the Sky*.

"We leave in two hours, Butthead. Get your things."

Gaines gave his lieutenant a look of shocked alarm.

Stalk turned to face the sergeant and grabbed his shirt firmly, pulling the tiger's face to within a breath of his own. "But understand this, Butthead. If you end up killing me while trying to kill yourself, I'll fucking kill you twice. And the second time won't be any fun." He released the sergeant and stepped away.

Sergeant Buford knew better than to say a word. He didn't bother with a military exit, either. He turned and ran away from the fuming officer, nicknamed *Smokin*.

Gaines walked over to Stalk after the sergeant had exited. "That was a bad choice. What were you thinking?"

Stalk took another puff of his cigarette. "What are we, JWO?" He recited the final phrase of the Tiger Cav motto.

"We're fucking dead, that's what we are," Gaines replied then turned to complete his preparations on the S42C.

Stalk finished his cigarette in a lung-buster. "Either way, someone always dies."



Late that afternoon, a single, fully armed Sword (minus its rocket launchers) lifted off the tarmac at the JinnSai airbase heading in a westerly direction. It was a common enough sight at the airbase that would draw little attention. Two diagonal red slashes had been painted on either side of its number S42C, thus designating it a "Medevac" flight, also a common enough sight. The fact that unarmed Sows were more commonly used for medical evacuation missions would hardly be noticed since any aircraft could technically be designed "Medevac." The control tower had given clearance for them to proceed on its westerly heading, at a designated altitude until they cleared controlled airspace.

Lieutenant Stalk was happy to be off the ground as soon as possible in the highly unlikely event that Colonel Remy might pay them a final visit before their mission. He certainly *would* notice the fully armed Sword violating his orders.

What would likely be noticed by any observer who gave a shit, was that one of the Sword's gunners was standing on the landing strut as the AH-2B flew low over the airbase. With his monkey harness securely attached, Sergeant Buford leaned far over the landing strut extending both his middle fingers at a level well below his chest—the usual meaning of that gesture.

"What's he doing out there," Stalk spoke into his headset comm to his co-pilot.

Gaines looked over his right shoulder toward the open gunner door. His face broke out into a grin. "He's sending his love to JinnSai airbase. Looks like he's really going to miss this place."

Moments later, the sergeant loosened his pants and urinated over the airbase below. Gaines turned around to face forward. "I did *not* need to see that."

"Going to be a helluva mission," Stalk smiled sarcastically as he saw his co-pilot's expression. He angled his control stick to turn the Sword along the exit vector given to them by the control tower. "Let's get this thing started."

As soon as they had cleared controlled airspace and were flying over the unpopulated jungle, Stalk hit the arming switches for his nose-mounted cannons, flipped up the red trigger guard on the control stick, and fired a quick burst. He was rewarded by the familiar kick under his feet and a twin line of yellow fire blasting forward from the cannons.

"Good work, JWO. Looks like we can spit."

In similar fashion, the two gunners test-fired short bursts from their swivel-mounted 8 mm Gores. "She spits, sir," Gaines replied over his comm.

"But we're still only one Sword," Stalk replied. "Let's hope we don't get into a spitting contest with anyone."

Stalk flew at a cruising altitude of 1,000 feet over the jungle, affording them an expansive view of the DRP countryside. Since they were currently over FSU occupied territory there was little chance anyone

would take a shot at them. Once they crossed the boundary into the DMZ, however, Stalk would drop their altitude to skim above the trees.

Stalk and Gaines were leaning over their combat map, tracing out the course to their first stop in the DMZ, when music began to broadcast over the Sword's intercom system. Stalk's ear perked up as he recognized the band. "Is that who I think it is?"

"Granite," Gaines confirmed with a nod.

Both officers turned around toward the gunner bay. "You brought Granite?" Stalk asked admirably.

Sergeant Buford held up a portable cassette player that he had plugged into the Sword's communication system. "I brought my entire collection, sir. You're out of luck if you like the Surfing Boys."

Stalk saluted with his middle finger. "Fuck the Surfing Boys. Granite rocks!"

The fact that granite is a class of rock was the point of the band's name. The band "rocked" in both name and spirit. Granite was a heavy guitar and drum band from the FSU that played a more serious and irreverent mix of songs; songs that were bitter and disillusioned; songs about broken lives; songs about doing drugs; songs about fucking. They were Sergeant Buford's kind of songs.

The young kids arriving from the Free States came with the sounds of the Surfing Boys buzzing around their heads. By the time they left the DRP, they would be transformed into Granite (both battle-hardened, and fans of the band by the same name). Yes, Granite was the perfect name to describe their music and to describe the effect of the war on those young kids who came to fight it.

"We're almost at the best part of the song," Gaines said, making a drumming motion with his paws. "The drum solo."

"Hail Demon!" Stalk shouted into the comm line.

Hal Demon was the lead drummer of Granite and arguably the greatest drummer of their generation. At his concerts, fans altered the name from Hal to Hail, in the familiar guttural cry "Hail Demon, our Fiend

of Drums!" Demon's epic drum solos were the centerpiece of many of Granite's songs. They even had a song titled, *Drums of War*, which was entirely Hal Demon on the drums for eight solid minutes before the song ended with a single flourish from the rest of the band.

The current song playing over S42C's intercom finally reached Demon's solo. At that moment, Lieutenant Stalk released his flight stick allowing the AH-2B to fly itself while he and his co-pilot went wild banging on "air drums" as they mimicked the thudding, crashing beat of the "Fiend of Drums." At 1,000 feet they could afford a little loss of control as the Sword swayed drunkenly off course while its pilot was lost in an adolescent drum fantasy.

"At least we'll die with some good music!" Gaines yelled as he, too, drummed wildly away.

Stalk leaned over his shoulder again. "Hey, Butthead. For what it's worth, I don't hate you as much."

Sergeant Buford grinned and saluted the lieutenant with his middle finger at eye level.

Stalk looked forward again, laughing. "I fucking love you too, Sergeant." He finally took control of the flight stick as the drum solo reached its conclusion, having lost about 300 feet of altitude. "This is really going to be a helluva mission. I hope we don't die right away."

Stalk made one more flourish on his "air drums." "DEATH FROM THE SKY!" he screamed.

"DEATH FROM THE SKY!" Gaines followed.

"DEATH FROM THE SKY!" the gunners responded in unison.

At now 700 feet, the AH-2B Sword cruised above the DRP jungle to the hard rock tunes of Granite, as it raced ever closer to the DMZ. If a machine could be happy, if metal and glass could experience joy or elation, then the S42C was at that moment experiencing all three. To its four vulnerable and completely mortal crew members, it certainly felt like the attack helicopter appreciated their musical selection. They trusted the S42C would not let them down. In a way, she was their own protective, motherly Sow.