

## Conqueror's Realm

"No one can terrorize a whole nation, unless we are all his accomplices."

– Edward R. Murrow

# 1 Eller

The Vertolifter *Sea Stallion* swooped over the rugged pre-dawn terrain like a gigantic black locust. It hugged the ground for safety, sometimes barely clearing the assorted boulders and scrub below, sometimes startling its occupants with the sound of branches scraping its belly. Since the terrain was mountainous, the flight meant constant lifts and drops coupled with the aircraft's customary hobby horse rock. It rode like a light-weight boat on a stormy sea.

"This ain't nothin'!" the crew chief shouted over the din of the aircraft's four turboshaft fanjets. He focused his attention on one in particular of his twelve charges, a young man in his twenties who looked the most likely to convulse into retching. "You should ride her when the rag heads start shootin'! When that happens, the PIC gives us not only jump and drop and rock and snap, but damn near barrel rolls, too!"

Mike Eller sat braced in a corner on the other side of the cabin, a spot chosen for its view through the cargo door view port. The crew chief knew better than to speak to him as he did the newer men. At twenty-four years old and a hundred and thirty-eight insertions, eighty-three under fire, Mike was too senior to be bothered with such nonsense. He was easily the most experienced journalist in the press pool, if war was a measure of experience. That print guy over there, if memory served, was thirty-seven and had covered the Balkans for Reuters for over fifteen years. But the man was still a hot zone novice. He still jumped at explosions, and kept close to his military bodyguards. Apparently, most of his reporting had been done from hotel rooms in Rome. Then there was Billy Charter, the front man for BBC. He went in when things were still hot, took the pictures his

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reporter partners would talk about later, then jumped back to safety in time for his weekly deadlines. Billy was the longest running press man in the theater of war, aside from Mike, and this was only his thirty-second insertion. Reporters didn't last long in the Balkans; it was a nasty, brutal place to earn one's living. It was just the sort of place Mike loved.

The other press men, excluding Charter, did not seem as enamored with the Balkans as Mike. They pitched in their places and collided on the cabin floor, cursing, grabbing for ever-failing hand holds, and sometimes, as with the reporter near the crew chief, they sat silently in miserable airsickness. Mike and Charter were secure, if not comfortable, in their separate niches of the aircraft, their legs braced in front of them and their shoulders wedged between stanchions. They were relaxed, calm in their trust that the other vertolifters, though unseen, flew nearby. The dark terrain through the Plexiglas view port revealed nothing, but an aid ship bigger than this one paralleled them, filled with food, blankets and other priceless freebies for the woeful civilians below. More important were the two gunships riding protection on either flank. They would keep the heat off, but even if they failed, there was no sense in worrying. The press could do nothing about it.

The view outside changed from gray, forested hillside to red tile roofs accented by an occasional street light. It was too dark and they moved too fast for details, but Mike doubted the houses were much more than rubble, the roofs no more than heaps of artillery-shattered clay shards. He stretched his legs in anticipation. Not long, now.

"One minute to touchdown!" the crew chief yelled, as if in agreement. "Please keep your seat till I give you the word! Your escort officer will meet you on the ground!"

The aircraft banked, and Mike caught a glimpse of a vehicle of some sort burning in the street. As the vertolifter righted itself, he felt the pull of deceleration, then waited for, and found, the distinct pitch of the aircraft gliding in to land. Next came the bounce of wheels on pavement, and the grating sound of the starboard cargo door, the one opposite Mike, rolling open.

"Stand up! Out the door!" the crew chief shouted. The crowd of journalists shuffled across to the exit. Mike and Charter lagged at the back of the group. They knew the vertolifter stayed with its passengers. The fanjets would soon shut down, and with them the

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whirlwind of debris just outside the cargo doors. Even so, a swirling cloak of dust enveloped the ship when Mike made the two-foot drop from deck to ground. The dust in conjunction with the pre-dawn darkness made it difficult to see.

A soldier in green-gray battle dress grabbed Mike by the arm. The vertolifter's settling wash had dusted the man a pale ochre. "Straight out, perpendicular to the aircraft, sir. The dust clears in about twenty feet."

Mike struck out in the indicated direction, cradling his satcam as best he could from the swirling, abrasive cloud of grit. The dust cleared as promised, unveiling a surrounding town square. It was large and ancient looking, with rough cobblestones radiating in all directions toward the charred and blasted buildings at its perimeter. Most of the buildings burned. Their flames cast an eerie, uncertain light on a scene of indiscriminate mayhem. Mike tried to keep his eyes forward, not wanting to investigate the soft heaps scattered about the pavement. The others stood just where the soldier had said, clustered around a clean, crisp officer in light field gear and parka, weaponless. Public relations man. Other soldiers moved about, all heavily armed. Some crouched or stood as security for the landing zone. Others worked at the grizzly task of checking those soft heaps in the street. A hundred feet away, likely placed for the benefit of the press, stood a gaggle of apparent prisoners. They were ragged creatures, but, if Mike's experience held true, undaunted by their American captors. It was a show, and the cameras ate it up.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" the public relations man said. He exuded the brash assurance of a victor. "I'm Captain Jeff Matheson, your escort officer for this visit. I hope your flight was bearable. We've nicknamed the *Sea Stallion* Bucky, the Wonder Horse."

"Nothing wonderful about a two-hour ride on the floor of that thing," someone said. Everyone broke into agreeable but mechanical laughter.

"Well, maybe we can make it up to you." Matheson grinned like a recruiting poster. "For the last nine hours, elements of the United States Peacekeeping Forces in Southern Europe have been engaged in an extensive security sweep of Bihac and surrounding areas."

Mike pressed the audio button on his satcam. He expected little more than the usual propaganda, but it never hurt to be prudent.

"About six hours ago, American peacekeepers discovered a

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lightly armed insurgent group here in Bihac, numbering about one hundred fifty. As you know, United Nations Resolutions 582 and 584 both prohibit the formation, maintenance, or use of agencies belligerent to the dominant governments of this region.”

“Translate ‘belligerent agency’ as Muslim,” Mike whispered to Charter, who stood beside him. The Britisher delivered a kick to Mike’s ankle.

Matheson continued. “Pursuant to their mission to enforce all United Nations resolutions, American forces pacified the agency in question. The operation lasted approximately one and one half hours, and concluded four hours ago.”

“You mean, you *attacked* them?” someone asked. It was the new guy, the one with the queasy stomach.

Matheson’s eyes sought him with dispassionate machine accuracy. He stared at the reporter in silence for a moment, reading the ID tag the man wore on his coat.

Well, *he* just bought a ticket back to The World, Mike thought.

“Yes,” Matheson said. “We engaged and destroyed the enemy.” He turned to the rest of the group. “The belligerent agency’s casualties were heavy. Friendly dispositions are well within acceptable limits.”

So, some American troops got killed or wounded, but they’ll never tell us who or how many, Mike surmised. He cleared his throat to ask a question. “Could you tell us which American forces were engaged against the belligerent agency?”

“Certainly. The agency was discovered by elements of the 502nd Mountain Rangers. Aiding in the pacification were the 3/86 Armor, 4/65 Infantry, 3/48 Mobile Artillery, and elements of the 532nd Combat Air Wing off the *Evan Bayh*.”

The reporters stood aghast. The poor Muslim schmucks got nuked, Mike thought.

No one said anything.

“At any rate,” Matheson continued, “what you see around you is the mop-up operation. You are free to interview any of the soldiers, but not the prisoners over there. They haven’t been interrogated as yet. I caution you not to leave the area. The perimeter guards have instructions not to allow you out of the square or into the buildings. For your safety, I’m sure you understand. So, if you have no further questions of me...

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“Okay. You’re free to do your jobs, gentlemen. The vertolifter leaves in fifteen minutes.”

The group scattered into the square, the electronic people fanning out for the best camera angles and shots, the print men moving straight to the soldiers, hoping for the definitive quote. They all sought the feature story angle, knowing that any news gleaned from these events would be eight to ten hours old by the time the end users got it.

Mike Eller moved toward the prisoners, but stopped a good fifty feet away. He did not feel up to handling the guards, and couldn’t care less what they might say for the record. Nor did he want to attract Matheson’s attention. That man, and others like him, had too much power over who filled the small war zone press pool.

He felt a nudge at his elbow. Charter stood there, his camera hanging like a brick from one hand. He, too, wanted to avoid any hassle.

“That Matheson,” the Britisher said. “He’s so representative of his species. I recall a few years ago, I got assigned to Lotus plc in Norfolk, that’s in the UK, to cover their aerocar event. PR man prattled on and on about the superiority of the Lotus project over that of Ford and Benz. He didn’t even stop when the car burst into flames and crashed twelve meters to the tarmac. On my honor, he lauded the power of the wheel rim lifter fans even while the pilot-driver stumbled about in flames, his mates trying to catch him in the halon. It was hilarious.” He leaned forward to peek into Mike’s eyes. “You look more solemn than usual, young friend.”

Mike tossed his satcam from palm to palm. “Feel like an office drone, Billy. No point to being here. Everything’s been arranged; I just do as I’m told.” He nodded toward the guards surrounding the Muslim prisoners. “Those gomers are thoroughly briefed on what to tell the press, and how to say it. We’ll only get propaganda from them. What’s worse, most of us play along. The only one with enough guts to ask a question is the one too dumb to know the consequences.”

“Yes. Well, I expect he *will* know the consequences within moments of his return to home station.”

“Sure. He’ll be on his way back to wherever, and the rest of us more experienced and circumspect pros will carry on our noble task. In other words, we’ll waste our time for fear of losing this

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assignment by doing our goddamned jobs.”

“I imagine one is in a far better position to do one’s job if one is where the job needs doing, don’t you think?”

“Got to *do* it, though. Did anybody ask the real questions? Why are we beating up on the Muslims? This is their country, not ours. Or at least it *was* theirs. The Serbs took it away from them, made them second-class citizens, the ones they couldn’t run off. The Muslims only want back what’s theirs. How come the Muslims and the Croats aren’t allowed to arm themselves? The *Serb government* is armed. We haven’t taken away *their* army, just restricted it to home stations. And, do *they* care? We’re freakin’ doing their fighting *for* them.”

Charter clicked his tongue. “A uniquely American perspective. You wouldn’t be so game on letting this nonsense continue if these people lived next door. It’s quite a different situation for Italy, Greece, Austria, even Great Britain. We don’t like people trading bullets and artillery barrages practically within earshot. Rather bad for the neighborhood.”

“That doesn’t change anything. I’m a reporter. I need to know what’s going on. I don’t like being used as a cog in an official information machine.”

Charter patted Mike’s shoulder. “The exuberance of youth. When you get my age, you’ll be more accommodating of the way things work. After all, I’m not here to discover The Truth. I just need pretty — or, in this case, ugly — pictures for my deadline. I’ll let the writers worry over truth.” He gestured toward the perimeter. “Along such lines, I’m going over to that nice, burning restaurant to interview those soldiers and get some good burning building video. What about you?”

Mike looked hard at the gaggle of prisoners fifty feet away. “I think I’ll offer those guards some smokes.”

“Good for you! But, I had the impression you weren’t a smoker.”

“Your impression is correct.”

The two parted company. Charter whistled as he strolled across the cobblestones to his targets. He kicked a few convenient pieces of debris like a kid on a lazy summer day. But summer was a long way off, and the debris was not aluminum cans, but the grotesque remnants of a shattered culture. Mike walked as nonchalantly as he could toward one of the prisoner guards.

“Cold night,” he said by way of greeting.

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The guard nodded, watching him.

"I suppose you fellas are used to it, though. You've been out in this weather for at least two months." He fished the bribery Marlboros out of a pocket in his jacket and held them out to the guard.

"Cain't," the man said. "Cain't smoke in the field. Light discipline."

"Really. I thought it wouldn't make any difference, what with the fires, and the camera lights, and all." Mike swept his gaze to encompass the burning, smoking perimeter of the square. While doing so, he sneaked a look at the kneeling prisoners. He was surprised at how young they looked, even through the masking effect of filthy faces and bad lighting.

"It's the rules," the soldier said.

Mike shrugged. "Too bad. Here, consider these a present." He stuffed the cigarette pack into a cargo pocket on the soldier's field jacket. "You can share them with your buddy over there." He nodded toward the other guard.

"Suit yourself," the man said, his suspicion only slightly diminished. "I don't reckon I'll see ya again to pay it back."

"Consider it a show of appreciation for a job well done. Support our boys in green, and all that." Mike allowed a lull in the conversation, a hint of changing gears. "So, I see by your unit patch you're in the 4/65. Was it a tough fight?"

"Not really. These guys got no weapons worth talkin' about. And they ain't organized too good. The job took a while, but that's 'cause they wouldn't hold still for a straight-up fight. We had to chase 'em down."

"Kind of a motley bunch, wouldn't you say?" Mike looked full on the prisoners for the first time. He squinted in the guttering light, trying to catch a few sets of eyes, perhaps a demonstrative stance. The eyes he caught held no fear, only the same personal insult that he recalled from past prisoner displays. These people viewed the world with hatred, frustration, and a sense of injustice. They were not the rabble-rousing anarchists described by public relations men like Matheson.

"Motley ain't the word," the guard said. "They ain't got nothin' left. They sendin' in their kids these days." He shrugged. "I wouldn't be surprised if we was all back in The World come summer. These people won't last that long."

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Mike sought the eyes of a random prisoner. This one was smaller than the others, more frail, if such words had meaning when applied to starving armies. Where was the resignation in those eyes, the sense of hopelessness? Surely these people knew they were beaten, that their fighting only wasted time and lives. Why continue? Why, in the light of their futile pursuit, did their eyes hold such defiance? Of course, the same had been wondered of the Israelis in 1949 and 2015, of England during World War II, and of George Washington. And all of them were winners.

An artillery impact flashed in the hills above town. Mike started at the revelation from its sudden light. The prisoner he watched was a girl!

“Nothin’ to worry about, it’s ours,” the guard said, misreading Mike’s reaction.

“Yeah, sure.” Mike’s discovery rattled him. He knew the insurgents were weak, that the Americans had whittled them down to little more than ragged mobs hiding in the hills of their burned-out land. He knew they drew on their young boys for manpower, always the last gasp of a defeated people. But the appearance of this filthy, gnarled excuse for a teenaged girl drove home more than any statistic the desperation of the Muslim position. Theirs was a patriarchal society. To willingly lower their women into the crucible of combat was an unthinkable action for Muslim men. Yet, there she knelt, alongside her male comrades, bloody, ragged and shivering in the cold.

“Thanks for the talk,” Mike said. “They’ll be cranking up my vertol any minute, and I want to be on board before the dust starts flying.”

“I comp that.” The guard smiled for the first time. “Them birds is their own private tornado.”

“Yeah, well, this Dorothy intends to be way up inside the twister before the first updraft flies.” Mike slapped the soldier’s arm, then started back to the vertolifter. All affability slipped from his face the moment his back was turned.

“Have a good trip!” the soldier yelled after him. “And thanks for the lights!”



Mike spoke to no one as he braced himself into the vertolifter. He remained silent as his fellow reporters filtered back to the



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aircraft. He said nothing when Charter, one of the last to return, settled next to him on the deck. He did not return Charter's friendly greeting, did not feel the fanjets burst to power and begin to turn. He sat immovable as sculpture as the aircraft pitched upward in departure.

For forty minutes the vertolifter leapt, dropped and wrenched over rugged terrain. It was not until they leveled off over the Adriatic Sea that Mike punched Charter in the arm and brought his mouth to the Brit's ear.

"I'm going over!" Mike yelled. The covering engine noise made his shout an effective whisper.

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm going *over*! I need to know what's going on!"

"I don't understand! What do you mean, 'going over'? How do you plan to go over?"

"First time I get a chance! Next insertion, as soon as the guards turn their backs! I'll just take off! What are they gonna do, shoot me?"

Charter looked alarmed. And why shouldn't he? Reporters often talked of "going over", of escaping the control of American press relations people. It was a standard joke, nothing more. They all realized the dangers involved; everyone knew the all too predictable fates of those cutting loose from the system. Some of them were dead. The American security people were a nuisance, but they were excellent bodyguards, as well.

"This is not a good idea!" Charter yelled.

"I *have* to do it! I have to find the Muslims and get their side of the story! Nobody knows what's going on over here, not even us!"

"You'll get yourself killed! This is crazy!"

"You gonna tell?"

Charter stared at him, slack jawed. He should tell; any real friend would. The Balkans were dangerous for anyone, and the natives hated Americans more than they hated each other. If Charter reported his conversation with Mike, it would mean a trip home, one-way and irrevocable. But better a man should lose his job than lose his life. That was the reason of it; Mike hoped Charter wouldn't be reasonable.

The Englishman squinted at Mike. "Why are you telling me this?"

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“I need your help!”

“*What?* First you make me complicit, now you want me implicated?”

“I need you to get a message back to the States, that’s all! My satcam uplink is non-op! It was part of the press pool deal! I need to establish commo links with *See It Now* in New York, Indianapolis, and Los Angeles! Without commo links, I can’t broadcast once I go over!” Mike stopped to swallow. The shouting hurt his throat.

“Perhaps we should discuss this back on the ship!”

“No! Too much chance of being overheard! Answer the question, Billy! You gonna tell?”

“Just give me the info, bright boy! You want to get shot by Bosnians, that’s your business! Just don’t mention my name from now until then!”

“I’m thinking three digitized microwave frequencies, just to be safe! Call Steve Tallman at CBS in Indianapolis! Tell him to listen on freq 1 first, noon, GMT! Tell him not to use the others until we get jammed! He and I will arrange the uplink codes!”

“A bit overblown, don’t you think?”

“Satcams aren’t simple, just bad ass! Now, Billy! Don’t say a thing to anybody until you know I’m gone!”

“I’m not an idiot, Michael! Give me the frequencies!”

He did.