

THE FIRES OF
NEEW
SUN

A BLENDING TIME NOVEL

MICHAEL KINCH

Copyright Information

The Fires of New SUN: A Blending Time Novel © 2012 by Michael Kinch.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any matter whatsoever, including Internet usage, without written permission from Flux, except in the form of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

As the purchaser of this ebook, you are granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on screen. The text may not be otherwise reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, or recorded on any other storage device in any form or by any means.

Any unauthorized usage of the text without express written permission of the publisher is a violation of the author's copyright and is illegal and punishable by law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. Cover models used for illustrative purposes only and may not endorse or represent the book's subject.

First e-book edition ©2011

E-book ISBN: 9780738732633

Book format by Bob Gaul

Cover design by Kevin R. Brown

Cover art: Sword © iStockphoto.com/sunexpo

Editing by Ed Day

Flux is an imprint of Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.

Flux does not participate in, endorse, or have any authority or responsibility concerning private business arrangements between our authors and the public.

Any Internet references contained in this work are current at publication time, but the publisher cannot guarantee that a specific reference will continue or be maintained. Please refer to the publisher's website for links to current author websites.

Flux
Llewellyn Worldwide Ltd.
2143 Wooddale Drive
Woodbury, MN 55125
www.fluxnow.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

THE CROSSING

The Zomba Savannah

The plateau from Wananelu, on the east, to the Kings Range (the so-called “Blue Mountains”), to the west, is a vast savannah of approximately 150,000 square kilometers. At an altitude of 1,000 meters, the daytime temperatures soar while the nights bring killing frosts. Lack of water has kept the plateau uninhabitable, and those attempting to cross it can only do so on treacherous unpaved tracks. A plan to lay tarmac for an east-west highway crossing the savannah was terminated by savage battles of the Pan-Af Wars.

—A. E. and R. S. Smit. *“The Topography of Southeast Africa.”* (Cape Town, 2061)

Jaym mopped sweat from his forehead and glanced at Lingana limping beside him. Her face was drawn, tight with pain. His guts cramped to see her like this. Here they were beneath a blazing sun, trekking across this endless plain. They had no shelter and there was no time to tend to the wounded. But even now the able-bodied were dragging, but they had to keep moving. They had fled from the burned ruins of Lingana’s village because they knew the ’gades would return in force. Their only chance of survival had been to head for the Blue Mountains in hopes of finding a New SUN outpost.

The wounded had been triaged and tended to as best as possible, but many villagers refused to leave until relatives were given a proper burial. When they finally left, those who couldn’t walk were carried on makeshift stretchers. Jaym knew some of the wounded would die on the road, but they couldn’t leave them in the smoldering ruins of Nswibe with vultures already circling.

In the chaos of leaving, Lingana had tried to console crying children, wailing mourners, and did her best to tend to the wounded. But she forgot about the thorn traps they had set to slow the ’gades. The vicious thorns had punched through her sandal, stabbing deep into her heel. The pain of the poisonous acacia

barbs was agonizing.

Jaym forced a shaky smile. “How you doing?” he asked Lingana. Her face was twisted from pain. *Damn*, he thought. After a week on this savannah trail, her wound had festered and spidery red veins snaked up her leg. If that continued ... *No. They’d fix her up at the outpost. They had to.* He grit his teeth and shifted the weight of her arm around his aching neck.

He glanced back to see his Blender buddy, D’Shay, with Nakhoza. She’d taken a ’gade bullet to the shoulder, and now leaned on D’Shay as they trod the dirt road leading to the blue-gray mountains on the horizon. As they trudged under the African sun they carted their few belongings, shouldered the wounded, and paused daily to bury and mourn villagers who had not survived ’gade bullets.

Jaym discovered that burial out here was not easy. No one had a shovel, and the red savannah dirt was dry and hard as adobe. Thank God Giambo brought his quarry pick to break through the hardpan. Jaym and others tried to help with machetes, knives, and even pointed sticks to hack out shallow graves. Then, those who were able helped gather heavy rocks to pile up cairns. Prowling hyenas would not get their loved ones.

When they started from Nswibe, Jaym guessed the Blue Mountains would be a two- or three-day walk. The sharp, clear African air made them appear only twenty or thirty kilometers across the plains. But after seven days of hauling wagons and the wounded, the mountains still seemed distant. Unlike Lingana’s home in the lush Nswibe valley, this vast savannah had no water, just cracked earth, dust, and withered grassland. *God*, thought Jaym. This must be like what Reya and her family had to do during their exodus from the smothering dustbowl and dunes that had been MexiCal. But this landscape was littered with the detritus of some forgotten skirmish of the Pan-Af Wars. Burnt-out shells of trucks, armored rovers, and half-tracks lay like blackened carcasses. As they walked past the carnage, villagers steered clear of the wreckage. “Ghosts,” said Lingana, her voice weak. “My people sense the spirits of the soldiers trapped inside forever.”

Jaym tried to keep his eyes on the dusty path, but couldn’t help but glance at a charred chopper—a giant twin-bladed Russian model. It looked like an RPG had sheared off the rear of the craft. The remains of the pilot sat in the cockpit, his

charcoal-stick arms raised as if reaching for the sky.

“Hey, Jaymster,” said D’Shay. “All this remind you of anything?”

Jaym nodded. “Yeah, the Old Seattle Sector.” He tried to concentrate on Lingana hobbling at his side, but the burnt ruins they were passing stirred up memories of his life in the Corridor.

The hood in his own sector hadn’t been hit as hard as the old business sector during the Riots and Troubles. His “home” had been a one-bedroom unit cobbled from a long-abandoned office complex. Mom had tried to pretty up the plywood walls that divided the units. She actually concocted some “paint” by mixing beet juice with dish soap and covered a couple of walls. If their daysleepers objected to the color of the beet room, they didn’t say anything. They must have figured purple-red walls were better than naked plywood. Jaym rarely saw the day-sleepers who shared their flat, except for a few times when he scrambled out late to tech school, or had to do shit-work for the landlord: trapping rats; dusting poison for cockroaches; unclogging toilets. His hood was no paradise, but nothing like some of the places in the South Corridor—such as SeaTac, where D’Shay grew up.

In Jaym’s grandparents’ time, the Corridor had been called the Seattle-Tacoma Corridor—really just two sprawls grown into one. Then came the Changes. The Melting, the sea rise, and the subsequent changes in Pacific currents. Then the weather shifts followed. The Pacific storms and life-giving rains that always drenched the Corridor in the winters now moved north to British Columbia.

Mom said when she was a girl they’d still get a couple of good rains in December or January—enough to fill some of the reservoirs. But then the water rationing began and the governor asked for help from the feds, but the federal government was facing food riots on the East Coast. Some of the states in the Midwest and the Deep South formed Confederations, cultivating their own militias and hoarding dwindling food stocks. The Corridor was cut off from interstate suppliers, so food rationing and hunger set in.

Jaym heard there used to be fat people throughout the Corridor, but that sounded like an urban myth. How could there be fat people when Mom’s collarbones stuck out and her arms and legs were like broom handles? Jaym

wasn't as skinny because Mom always gave him half her dinner. "No, Jaym," she'd say, "I'm stuffed. Really." In his teens he realized she was starving herself for him. He dreaded becoming a s'teener—but at least he'd be assigned by the Alliance and sent beyond the Corridor and Mom wouldn't keep starving herself. Maybe by now she was actually putting meat on her bones.

Jaym first met D'Shay at the Blending Training Center located in Old Seattle, the Corridor sector that looked like a war zone. The center was a concrete building behind the razorwire that kept people out of the ruins. Getting off the Alliance bus at the center was the first time Jaym got a look at the once-thriving area. High-rise office buildings had been turned into concrete and steel shells blackened by the fires and pocked by shelling during the anti-corporate riots. The Space Needle across the seawater inlet leaned like a broken statue. The gigantic disk at the top had been blown in half by anti-corp terrorists, and the tower itself was bent when intense fires melted the steel supports. And the area was littered with National Guard choppers shot down during the height of the riots. They were blackened ruins with their rotors shattered and pilots cremated within—like the fallen choppers Jaym was passing now.

He looked away from the battle ruins they skirted and shifted his arm to ease more weight off of Lingana's injured foot. Up front, Lingana's brother, Giambo, took the lead, his limp seeming to get worse by the day. Jaym had become so used to Giambo's leg that he didn't even notice it—until now. Jaym recalled the day Giambo told him how 'gades had clubbed and shattered his leg bone and dragged away his bride-to-be. He wondered if that memory was plaguing Giambo as the pain of his limp grew worse.

Giambo suddenly stopped and held up his arm. He pointed to the north where a plume of dust arose—maybe four or five clicks away. Jaym had seen dozens of dust devils dancing across the savannah like mini-tornadoes, but this plume was different. Had to be a caravan of vehicles.

"Jay-em," said Lingana. "You think they be 'gades?"

"I don't know. From all that dust there must be a half-dozen rigs. But ... maybe they're not 'gades." *But who else would they be?* Not GlobeTran military forces. They should be out here protecting the Blending Program, but they'd withdrawn to the safety of the capital. Except for scattered groups of New SUN

guerilla fighters, the 'gades had free rein of the countryside.

"Dust coming closer," said Giambo.

"Take cover!" shouted Nakhoza. Then she yelled in Chewan to the villagers.

Jaym took Lingana by the arm. "Whatever happens, follow Nakhoza's orders. We can't panic." Lingana nodded, wide-eyed. Jaym squeezed her arm. In a stand against a 'gade attack, he trusted Nakhoza more than anyone in their group. Without Nakhoza's SUN training, the 'gades would have massacred everyone in the battle at Nswibe. Yes, the village had been lost, but thanks to her defensive strategems they managed to defeat the 'gades.

"Carts and wagons together!" shouted Nakhoza. "Mothers keep children silent. Warriors, spread out in the bush with weapons." She ran to one of the wagons. "Camouflage sheets out, quickly."

Jaym and D'Shay ran to help spread the sheets across the carts. Nakhoza hadn't had much to work with, but before they left, she had the Nswibe women dye two-dozen sheets and blankets in patchy patterns of earthen tones. Thrown over the carts, the sharp edges and corners softened in the savannah background. From a distance, Nakhoza had said, the effect could resemble a grove of scrub in the grassland. And with all the metal carnage scattered across the plain, they should be less noticeable.

"Good," she said. "Warriors take positions. Women, children, and the wounded stay low behind carts. Yes. Okay, make prayer and we wait. If we must fight, do not fire until I shout the command." Jaym and the others with weapons scattered to take cover behind clumps of brush.

As Jaym lay in the grass, he felt his heart pounding against the warm earth. He checked his rifle. It was an old Chinese semiautomatic with a cracked plastic stock. He could have chosen one of the high-tech models taken off 'gades, but this was simple. Just jam in a clip and pull the trigger. No confusing LEDs or buttons to fiddle with.

Beneath the dust plume Jaym could now see vehicles. Two armored half-tracks in the lead followed by half-a-dozen rovers and trucks. They were approaching at a tangent, now no more than a klick away. The leading vehicles had .50-caliber machine guns mounted in turrets. The best the Nswibe fighters might do is to hold them off for a few minutes while the women and children

scattered. A few might make it. God, would Lingana have any chance with her injured foot? Only if she could find cover behind brush. But brush was scarce out here, mostly knee-high grass with a few islands of scrub. But maybe she could crawl under one of the metal hulks.

Jaym's gut tightened. This was it. The 'gade convoy rumbled closer. It was beginning to cross the faint trail they were following.

But the column didn't slow. It rumbled by in a haze of dust, only a few hundred meters away. The rover at the rear of the column was an old pickup truck with a machine gun mounted in back with a single gunner.

Jaym saw a sudden movement from the corner of his eye. *Oh, shit!* It was one of the Nswibe men. He'd leaped from cover, and was now running and shouting in Chewan.

"No!" shouted Nakhoza, but the man was now screaming, chasing the pickup and spraying bullets at the convoy. The 'gade in the pickup jumped to his machine gun and fired. The Nswibe warrior was thrown backward in a spray of red.

**NEW SUN
BASE CAMP**

**To: Global Alliance Hdqrs in Geneva
From: African Subcommittee
Investigating the Blending Program.
Re: The “New SUN” Movement in Africa**

At this time we know little about the activities of the so-called New SUN movement, which seems to have originated in Chewena, Southeast Africa. This subcommittee has received conflicting information from our African posts as to the status of the Blending Program. As you know, the SUN was created by a Quaker organization in the former Netherlands. SUN was dedicated to helping the people of Africa survive the effects of the Great Solar Flare and warlords ravaging rural populations. But when the operations of SUN were taken over by GlobeTran, Ltd., we have heard little regarding the status of the Blending Program. This so-called New SUN movement may be an attempt to revive SUN’s original mission. We know next to nothing about the locations or leadership of New SUN.

At this point we urge Alliance Headquarters to pressure the commanders of GlobeTran, Ltd. to release data relating to the current progress of the Blending Program.

—Classified Internal Memo, 23 Jan 2070

Reya leaned against a warm canyon wall and looked out across the morning haze hanging over the savannah. She was a few hundred meters down the canyon, just trying to find some solitude from the bustle of the New SUN camp. Since she was still recuperating from her gunshot wound, she felt useless. She hated that feeling. She was used to work and being valued for her strength and courage—not seen as an in-the-way invalid.

Reya had now been at the New SUN mountain sanctuary for two weeks. She was alive only because a SUN scout, Bettina, found her wounded in the highland

forest in Mozambique. Reya's arm had been torn open by a 'gade bullet when she and the other women held captive made their break from the 'gade camp. Most survived the daring escape, but as Reya tried to save her wounded friend, Mai-Lin, she took the bullet in her upper arm. She'd almost bled to death as she pushed her way through the forest underbrush to make it to the edge of a tiny village in the middle of the night. Thank God a village woman had heard her weak cries for help. They carried her into a hut where Bettina and the medicine woman worked to keep Reya alive.

Ten days later, Bettina had to report back to the New SUN base in the Blue Mountains. She had to leave, and said the villagers would help Reya recuperate for a few more weeks. Reya insisted on going with Bettina. Bettina finally relented, and somehow prodded and half-dragged Reya across the barren savannah under blazing sun to this refuge.

Bettina was at home here because she knew most of these New SUN people, at least her former SUN colleagues who'd been replaced by GlobeTran Ltd. Rumors were that much of the policing in Wananelu, once performed by SUN personnel, had been given over to former 'gade mercenaries who showed little compassion for the struggling locals.

Annja van Eijk, the matriarch of this group, headed the New SUN post. Although Reya heard occasional grumbling about her leadership, Annja was gutsy and one of the original founders of SUN. She told Reya she was determined to head this disparate group of recruits toward the same goal—to defeat the 'gades and corrupt GlobeTran authorities keeping this country mired in poverty and fear. The 'gades were actively trying to crush the Blending Program in the countryside, yet GlobeTran did nothing. As long as the 'gades left GlobeTran alone, GlobeTran simply looked the other way.

Annja's second-in-command was a good-looking boy named Tarkin, but Reya discovered he was a real dick. Bettina told Reya to just ignore his irritating glances and comments about "intrusive newcomers." Tarkin tried to relegate her to a shelter at the edge of camp, but Annja said Reya needed to become a part of camp, and must be integrated into camp life, even if she was unable to work or train until her wound was better. Until then, she was to observe and learn.

Observe, thought Reya. Watch and learn. See how they planned scouting

missions, how they trained with new weapons, how they set up better communications. *Just don't get in the way* was the unsaid message. But being on the sidelines brought back the old feelings of being a MexiCal refugee back in the NorthAm 'gee camp. It brought back the memories of razor-wire fences and the fear of getting knifed by one of the camp gangs. Many MexiCal 'gee kids had lost their families during their flight north to escape the dust storms and creeping dunes engulfing ranches, farms, and entire cities to the south. Too often 'gee-camp gangs took the place of family.

Like the thousands of other 'gees, Reya had come north with her family on foot, hoping for the Promised Land of the Seattle Corridor. There they would find rain, get a piece of land, and raise a garden that didn't wither in the drought and hot wind that tore the soil into storms of brown dust. Her father had fought the wind and the dust while most neighbors packed to go north.

Her *papá* fought by digging a well by hand. Reya, her mother and sister did their best to keep the dust out of the house. They tried to seal the window casing with tape and stuffed rags under doors. But within hours Reya would be mopping and wiping dust from floors and tables. They all wore dust masks or damp kerchiefs around their mouths and noses, but still blew out muddy snot.

Her mother pleaded with *Papá* to give up the dry well. He and Uncle Ramos had dug so deep that they had to strap three long ladders together to bring out the dirt. But he couldn't keep his mask on as he dug. And at night Reya cringed at the sound of him hacking up muddy phlegm. Dust pneumonia, some called it. He actually began to run a fever, but he wouldn't stop until Uncle Ramos screamed for help that day in June. They lowered ropes to bring him up. *Papá's* mouth was covered with frothy, muddy blood.

After a week of gasping and coughing, he was gone. The doctor said five of his ribs had broken and his heart burst from the coughing. After they buried him, the family packed and started north along the rubble of old I-5, a roadway that once carried petrol cars. There were still cars—those rusted hulks on the shoulders, and sometimes burned-out cars in the middle of melted asphalt. That all happened before Reya was born—the rationing, the riots, neighbors killing neighbors for food, or even stealing petrol to escape.

But that terrible time was prehistory to her. In the 'gee camp, Reya had been

relieved when she finally turned seventeen and became a s'teener, the time for Alliance placement. And to get placed as a Blender was such a stroke of luck for a MexiCal girl. Most in the 'gee camp were sent south to dig on the Canal—a make-work project to bring water to the south. What a joke. Everyone knew there'd never be enough water to wet the canal. It was said hundreds, maybe thousands, working on the canal died of the heat, the cave-ins, and dust pneumonia.

But here she was, finally safe in the Blue Mountain sanctuary. So after all the crap she'd gone through, she could put up with Tarkin's bullshit.

During the days, Reya exercised and stretched the muscles in her healing arm. She also wandered around camp, watching, observing the New SUN fighters and workers. About half were blenders, and half Chewans. A few Chewans had been part of the old SUN organization and still wore SUN-issued khaki tee shirts, shorts, and light hiking boots. Others were natives who'd survived raids on their villages. Most of the villager women did much of the cooking, and had families to care for. But one tall Chewan girl, about Reya's age, stood apart. She was an archer named Maykego. Regal and strong, she always gave Reya a little nod and said, *Moni*, if she passed near. As far as Reya could tell, Maykego was the only female of the half-dozen archers in camp. Most New SUN fighters, Chewans and blenders, carried rifles slung over their shoulders and packed 9mm pistols on their hips.

With her wounded arm still in a sling, there was no way Reya could handle a rifle. Her upper arm muscles were so chewed up she might never be able to raise a rifle. But she could learn to use a pistol and be of some use if the 'gades ever raided this place.

She'd never seen anyone actually shoot with a bow and arrow. Somehow it seemed like such an outdated weapon, something natives only used before they got their hands on guns. But Maykego carried her bow and quiver with such pride.

One day, Reya followed Maykego to watch her practice at the range downslope. From a distance, her motions were almost Zenlike. Drawing an arrow from the quiver to the bowstring in a quick, fluid motion. The ease of her stance. The assured draw of the bowstring. The steady release and follow-

through as the arrow hissed into the straw target. She wanted to talk to Maykego—to find out about this aloof young woman and why she became an archer. Maybe they could be friends. Maykego seemed like a loner, and Reya had no friends in camp except Bettina, who was always busy scurrying for Annja.

Friends, she thought. On the ship over she made two guy friends, Jaym and D'Shay. Where could they be now? They had to be living with their African families. Funny, she thought, how Jaym had been so nervous about meeting his bride-to-be, but D'Shay was eager to meet his “chocolate honey,” as he referred to his blending match. Be so nice to see them again. They'd declared themselves *The Three Musketeers* aboard the transport ship. Each of the three was so different, yet during the Atlantic crossing, Jaym and D'Shay were the closest thing she had to a family.

She missed her own family with such a deep ache. She prayed each night to the Holy Mother to keep her mother and little sister, Leeta, alive and from harm back in the Corridor 'gee camp. Her mother, she knew, would try to stay alive long enough to see Leeta become a s'teener. If the Holy Mother answered Reya's prayers, Leeta would one day be selected as a Blender. If she did come to Africa, Reya was going to find her—no matter what, no matter how.

Reya had had such hopes that the African boy she was assigned to would have a family that would welcome her, and they would care for each other. They'd have kids and a future. They might live in a village and she'd probably learn the language, but it would be worth it all.

But it was time to quit feeling sorry for herself. She needed to become part of this family of New SUN people—if ever she could find a purpose.

MOUSE VS. LION

The Rover X-37

The predecessor of the Rover X-37 was the *Nyla* RG-31, a multipurpose mine-protected armored personnel carrier (APC) manufactured in South Africa. The original prototype was based on the *Mamba* APC of TFM Industries. The X-37 is built from an all-steel welded armor hull and features high suspension, typical of South African mine-protected vehicles, providing excellent small-arms and mine-blast protection. The vehicle is designed to resist a blast equivalent to two TM-3 antipersonnel mines detonating simultaneously. Its 452-N Mercedes engine has been modified to run on syn-petrol power, and the fuel tanks allow a 1,000 km range. Slanted bulletproof glass and a turret-mounted .50 caliber machine gun make the Rover X-37 a swift, formidable military vehicle for all-terrain fighting. Although production ceased following the Pan-Af Wars, dozens survive in the hands of warlords in several African nations.

—Michuriu, James. “Military Vehicles of the Pan-Af Wars.” *Alliance War Department Information Memo #413* (May 2067)

“For the sake of God!” shouted Nakhoza, “everyone stay flat to the ground!”

The pickup truck gunner raked the savannah brush where D’Shay, Jaym, and the others lay. D’Shay heard a woman scream. Bullets hacked into grass and brush like a sickle.

D’Shay pressed his face to the dirt. Damn, this was *not* what he’d signed up for. Not this suicidal-warrior shit. Back in the Corridor, in that seedy hacker’s apartment, he’d paid big money to get his assignment switched to the Blending Program. Hell, then he didn’t even know what a Blender was. He just knew it wasn’t the death sentence of Canal duty where no one ever returned. The other choice had been “military,” where he was sure to get his ass shot up in some

country he never heard of. Well, here he was, fighting for his life in a country he'd never heard of. Hell, he just wanted to be with Nakhoza. Wasn't that the Blender idea? Just find a sweet African honey and settle down in a quiet village.

"Riflemen!" yelled Nakhoza, "Take out the machine-gunner!"

D'Shay aimed and squeezed. Nothing. *Shit*, still on safety. He flipped the safety and lifted off his belly enough to take aim. He squeezed off bursts as gunfire chattered from all sides. Still the machine-gunner continued to rake their positions. The 'gade shooter was protected by a steel plate with a view-slit. Sparks flared off the plate as the machine gun chattered. D'Shay heard the hiss of bullets just overhead and saw dirt spattering too close.

"Sharpshooters!" commanded Nakhoza. "Fire at the vision slit in the armor plate."

D'Shay was no sharpshooter, but he held his breath, took aim and fired. Rounds were sparking so close to the slit. Suddenly the barrel of the machine gun lurched up, firing a final burst into the sky. A 'gade jumped from the pickup cab and ran back to man the machine gun. D'Shay fired with the others. The 'gade spun and went down. The driver of the pickup spun the pickup around and sped to the other end of the column.

Those around D'Shay whooped and whistled.

The other 'gade rigs began to swing around. "Those are armored rover APCs," shouted Nakhoza. "Aim at the driver windshield! Do not fire in bursts or they will spot you. Take aim carefully. One shot at a time!"

A half-track APC rumbled toward them. D'Shay couldn't see the driver, only the reflection of sunlight on a dusty windshield.

"All you Blenders!" shouted Nakhoza. "These vehicles have right-hand drive."

D'Shay shifted his rifle to the driver's windshield and fired. Bullets pocked the glass, but the steel monster kept coming. *Bulletproof windows*. Should have known. Damn, the thing was gonna just run over them; crush them under its wide tires and grinding rear tracks. It was only fifty meters away, bucking over the rocks and gullies of open savannah. Behind it, other rigs were turning, heading this way.

The oncoming rover stopped maybe twenty meters away. The turret gun up

top spit fire as it raked the brush. *Damn*. The only way to stop it was for some of them to rush the rover and take out the gunner.

Someone behind D'Shay screamed.

That scream jolted through him like a bolt of electricity. *God*, he thought. That could have been Nakhoza. Will be if that gunner keeps firing. Okay, he thought. There's no way out.

"Jaym! Giambo!" he shouted. "Run with me! To the rover doors! Nakhoza. Cover us! Keep the turret gunner busy!"

"You heard!" shouted Nakhoza. "Open fire at the turret."

Okay, thought D'Shay. *Hero time*. "Jaym, Giambo. Now!"

D'Shay ran low, dodging and weaving as bullets kicked up dirt around him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jaym sprinting to the right. D'Shay glanced back in time to see Giambo go down. *Shit, not Giambo!*

It only took D'Shay seconds to reach the driver's door. The driver's eyes were wide as he struggled to put the Rover in reverse. D'Shay grabbed the door handle.

Locked! The glass would be bulletproof. But how bulletproof? He slammed the muzzle of his rifle against the window. Squinted, then fired. The driver jerked like a gut-shot rabbit. Yes! Not bulletproof at point-blank range.

The passenger leaped from the other door. D'Shay heard the shots of a .45, and then saw ... Nakhoza. She jumped inside and reached over to unlock the driver's door.

D'Shay pulled the driver out and climbed onto the bloody seat. He gawked at Nakhoza. "What the hell are we—?"

"Not now! Can you drive this?"

"But ... where's Jaym? Is Giambo—"

Then he saw Jaym, scrambling up the hood of the Rover, up to the turret with his 9mm pistol. He couldn't hear Jaym's shots over the machine gun up top, but there was sudden silence. No one shooting now. The shadow of a body tumbled from the turret.

"D'Shay!" snapped Nakhoza. "*Can you drive this thing?*"

"Yeah, yeah ... " I think." D'Shay looked at the gearshift. Good, almost exactly like the controls in one of the black-market vid-games back in the

Corridor. The same right-hand joystick for steering; the left for acceleration. The rover's engine was still rumbling.

"Hurry," said Nakhoza. "Turn 'round and kill next rover. Ram it." She popped a new clip in her 9mm. "Giambo is okay. He cannot run so good with his crooked leg. He just trip and fell. I am taking his place."

D'Shay worked the sticks and swiveled the Rover a hundred-and-eighty degrees on its tracks. He now faced another rover firing at him. The bullets pocked the windshield, but it held.

"Fast as you can now," said Nakhoza.

D'Shay pushed the accelerator to full throttle. *Shit, shit!* he thought. This is gonna be suicide.

Overhead, Jaym had opened up with the turret machine gun.

Only ten meters to the next APC. He wanted to grab Nakhoza's hand before they hit, but he had to keep his hands on the knobs. He held his breath and braced for the collision.

But, yes! At the last second the oncoming rig swerved left and tilted. It ran into a deep wash and flipped. Its tracks spun helplessly in the air. Jaym fired at its underbelly. Sparks shot off the undercarriage, then the rover exploded in flames.

"Petrol tank," said Nakhoza. She grinned.

"Goddamn," said D'Shay. "We're alive. But there're three more trucks and ..."

The lead truck's wheels threw dust as it spun around and headed up the road. The others followed suit.

"We actually did it," whispered D'Shay.

Nakhoza nodded. "Even a mouse is gonna fight for life when he is trapped by a lion. We just beat the lion."

Jaym climbed down from the gun turret and stared at the burning rover in utter disbelief. D'Shay and Nakhoza climbed out to stand with him. One by one, the others in the savannah grass began to stand. Nakhoza shouted, "All is clear!"

Lingana hobbled over to Jaym. She was shaking when he hugged her. Nearby,

D'Shay wrapped his arm around Nakhoza's waist and said with a serious expression, "As our Defense Goddess, please don't let the 'gades come so close next time. Just a few clicks farther away, okay?"

Nakhoza grinned and poked him in the shoulder. "Yes sir, Mister Du-Shay. Ten kilometers good 'nough for you?"

"We'd appreciate that, ma'am."

They walked on under the burning sun. Jaym tried to carry Lingana piggyback, but after a couple of hours, his legs burned and his ankles shot electric pain with each step. When he was at a point of collapse, he was forced to let Lingana walk beside him, grimacing as she hop-stepped. But he couldn't stand to see the gentle profile of her face so wracked by pain. After only minutes he said, "Okay, Lingana, it's time for me—"

"No, Jay-em. No more. Look how the others show their courage. Many are sick and wounded, but still they walk. I am my father's daughter. He would want me to walk with my people. To give them courage as he would do." Her lips pinched tight as she held her trembling chin high and pushed on beside him.

"Nakhoza?" Jaym rasped. "Any idea how much farther to those mountains?" Her left sleeve was torn from her shoulder wound. The bandage had been linen white, but was now the color of the road's red dust; her blood still oozing.

Nakhoza shook her head, then coughed and licked her cracked lips. "I cannot say, Jay-em. But I think we must now rest the wounded and the elders."

"Giambo!" yelled Jaym. "We gotta take a break. Let's stop for our water ration at those trees." He pointed to a grove of struggling trees throwing patches of thin shade. But any shade was welcome out here.

Giambo nodded. Although he was the strongest in the caravan, his shoulders seemed to slump as he shuffled forward.

Jaym helped Lingana limp toward the grove.

"Lingana," asked Nakhoza. "Do we have enough water for another ration today?"

"I do not think so. Maybe a half-ration."

Nakhoza clapped for attention. "Come, everyone. Take rest under the trees and we shall have a little water." The villagers trudged forward to collapse in the

sparse shade of the scrub oaks.

“Let’s get you in the shade,” said Jaym.

“Yes, but first I must talk to that woman by the cart.” Lingana limped over to the Chewan woman leaning against the water-barrel cart and nodded to her. “Enough for a half-ration, yes?”

The woman shrugged. “Yes, but I think we have ’nough for one more day only.”

“We must take the chance,” said Lingana. “Else more will die before sundown.”

The woman shouted in Chewan, then English. “Half water ration for all.” As people filed by, she dipped water from the 30-liter plastic jug; one-third liter per person. Some were too weak to line up, so family and neighbors took drinking cups to the cracked lips of the wounded and bony elders.

Jaym looked beyond the grove of trees and wondered if he’d ever get used to the African heat. The afternoon air shimmered over the savannah making the tall grass seem as if it was being blown by hot wind, yet there was not the slightest breeze. The leaves of the oaks that sheltered them hung motionless. Cicadas chirred in the heat and locusts buzzed in the stubble of the plain as Nswibe parents shooed flies from the weary faces of their children.

Jaym thought about the lack of real leadership in this struggling band of survivors. The battle with the ’gades had killed most of Nswibe’s leaders: Mr. Zingali, five of his best warriors, and a half-dozen village men and women. Mr. Zingali had been Nswibe’s chief, so the burden now fell on his son’s shoulders—Giambo. Back in Nswibe, Giambo had been sullen and reclusive, spending most of his waking time mining in his jade quarry. His father had made all the village decisions.

Giambo moved alongside Jaym and Lingana. “Lingana,” he said. “I must talk alone with you.”

She shook her head. “What you say to me, you say to Jay-em also.”

“What’s going on?” asked Jaym.

She gave him a gentle poke in the ribs.

Giambo said, “No! I want talk to you as family. Jay-em is not blood.”

Not blood, thought Jaym. *Jesus. He’d fought alongside Giambo, and*

Lingana's my blending match. Did he still see me as a worthless mzungu?

Jaym got up to leave but Lingana grabbed his sleeve. "No! Jay-em will come too," she said firmly in English. "Jay-em's blood gonna be in my children. He will be 'blood' through your nieces and nephews. Yes?"

Giambo glared at Jaym. "Then you gonna keep what I say quiet to three of us? Like family would? Else I lose face and fail as Nswibe people chief."

"Of course," said Jaym. "I swear."

Giambo nodded, then the three moved to the back of the scrub grove and sat in the dry grass.

Giambo looked aside, his face a mask of worry. He spoke softly, avoiding Jaym's eyes. "Sister, I cannot take place of our father. God did not make me like him."

She put her hand on his muscled forearm. "Giambo, you fought like a mighty warrior against the 'gades. Father's spirit is proud of you. You will make a fine chief."

He hesitated, fists clenched. "A warrior, yes, but not a true chief. I cannot ... see ahead like father. Not like you—or Jay-em. Even Nakhoza and DuShay have clever spirits. I only see and act at the moment time."

"Giambo," said Jaym. "I respect you as our leader. Believe me, we all do."

Giambo read Jaym's expression, then gave a little nod. "*Zikomo*, Jay-em."

"You're welcome."

Lingana smiled. "Maybe you do not need to be chief alone, Brother. Jay-em, Nakhoza, DuShay, and I can share your burden."

Giambo cocked his head. "But there can only be one chief."

"But even a chief needs a council. We will be yours. Yes?"

"I will lose face with villagers," said Giambo.

"No. We will honor *you* as chief. We work and plan together, but you make final word."

"Yeah," said Jaym. "I'll stand by you, and I know D'Shay and Nakhoza will, too." He grinned. "After all, you're gonna be my brother-in-law."

Giambo took a moment before he nodded. "You will not tell village people of this talk?"

Lingana shook her head. "No. This is sacred talk between brother and sister—

and Jay-em. Come. Jay-em and I will gather your council.”

Minutes later, Lingana, D’Shay, Nakhoza, and Jaym squatted at the edge of the grove. Giambo’s sun-red eyes stared at grass stubble he poked with a stick. He spoke slowly, without the usual fire and hostility Jaym sensed back in Nswibe.

Giambo said, “I must honor tradition of our village, and my father. I will be Nswibe chief. But I ... need you wise words to help plan and do best for my village peoples.” He looked at them one by one as he spoke. “You, Lingana. If I be killed you be village head. Already you show courage. ’Sides, you gonna make strong Zingali babies with Jay-em.”

Lingana blushed.

“Yes, yes. You not bride yet, but I be pleased that Jay-em be with you. He show much, much courage ’gainst ’gade killers in our battles. I think he be like a Nswibe man now.”

Jaym’s eyes widened. *Good God*, he thought. *One minute I’m an unworthy mzungu, the next I’m family.*

Giambo nodded toward D’Shay. “And DuShay, I now see you more than just a brown blender boy. I think you be almost clever as Lingana.”

“Brave too, right?” said D’Shay. Nakhoza grinned and poked him in the shoulder.

“And you, Nakhoza. You be a warrior girl—no, a warrior woman. And you be trained in ways of SUN and know much for us.” He paused, and looked at each in turn. “I speak as chief, but we be leaders together, yes?”

D’Shay lifted an eyebrow. “You mean you want us to take turns leading?”

“No. We gonna work together. You gonna be my ... ” His mouth twisted as he struggled for the word.

Lingana leaned forward. “I think my brother wants us all to be advisors—his council.”

“Yes,” said Giambo. “My council.”

Lingana held her chin high. “Giambo, I am proud to be your sister. This is what a wise man would do. To use the strength of each other.”

Giambo held out his palm. Jaym placed his palm against Giambo’s rough skin. Light against dark. Lingana covered his hand with hers, giving him a slight squeeze and smile. His heart jumped like a rabbit. Finally Nakhoza and D’Shay

followed. "We be one forever, yes?" said Giambo.

"Forever," they said in unison.

Giambo nodded and stood. "Nakhoza. How far, you think to Blue Mountain camp?"

She puffed her cheeks. "Cannot be much farther, twenty kilometers at most."

"So, 'nother full day," said Giambo. He glanced ahead at the heat-scorched savannah. "No water, no shade. Many of our people may die."

"What if we stay here until night?" asked Jaym. "Most people are worn out and really need more rest. Here we've got a little shade. I know the big cats come out after dark, but if we travel at night we wouldn't need as much water, and the wounded and elders will travel easier."

"I think it is worth the risk," said Nakhoza. "We might even make it by daybreak."

Lingana nodded. "I agree. The moon is bright and we can use torches to scare cats and hyenas."

"Good," said Giambo. "We must take chance. We let people rest, then leave after sun go down. If we walk close together I think we be safe 'nough from big cats." He grinned and slapped his knee. "Yes. I like this council way."

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>