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Liu and Qian roused up their respective commands. Liu strained his eyes, looking forward at the horizon. Qian was equally intensely focused on what was behind them.

Some of their precious water was allocated for a quick bowl of morning gruel for everyone. Liu did not seem to be in any particular hurry, but he told his men to make sure their weapons were loaded and on the ready. Qian took his cue from Liu and gave the same orders to his men.

“God, it was cold last night,” Ian griped.

“You hogged most of the blanket,” Ming-shan threw at Hans.

Separately, Ross quietly turned to Elizabeth, “You, okay?”

“Yes,” she replied shyly. “This was not exactly what I imagined my first time sleeping with a man would be like.”

Ross blushed a bit and then became serious. As quietly as possible, he began to instruct Elizabeth. “Look, when we get to the transfer, you be ready to run with me if we have to, got that?”

“I guess, but we’ll have our legs tied together like yesterday.”

“Right, so it might be a little like a three-legged race. Ever do one of those?”

“Never without falling down in some heap,” Elisabeth offered.

“Well, no matter, just be ready to do whatever I say when I say it without hesitation.”

“You got a plan?”

“Maybe,” Ross mumbled. “Maybe.”

Liu and his men approached Ross and the others and again restrained and tethered them, as they had done many times before. But this time the restraints connecting Ross’s and Elizabeth’s legs were longer and had a bit more slack affording them greater mobility. Liu and Qian were on their horses, side by side, when Liu gave the signal to begin marching forward. The whole motley group began to slowly advance to some appointment with fate.

The lieutenant looked at his watch. 10:00 he thought.

“We better get going, corporal,” the lieutenant announced. “I don’t know exactly how much further it is, but we had better begin to inch our way towards the meeting place. Don’t want to be late.”

“Yes sir. Let’s hope it all goes smoothly.”

“You can say that again,” Private Jones chirped.

They packed up, started the truck and began to advance at just a few miles an hour—fast enough to close the gap, but not too fast.

By 12:30, the lieutenant could see some dust arising at some distance in front of them. Inching closer slowly, he noted the stand of trees to his right and a little hillock and decline to his left that seemed to lead to a stream and another stand of trees. They had reached the location described to him before they left Jinan. He did not want to penetrate into the open space between the trees too far, as it looked like a great place for an ambush.

Liu’s advance rider came back to the group and motioned anxiously forward, saying he had seen a truck approaching. Liu motioned for his outriders to quickly check the flanks and Qian nodded to some of his men to do the same. Slowly the two groups inched towards each other in between the trees on the one side and the stream and trees on the other.

Two of Liu’s men took the lead, walking in front of the trio of Ian, Hans, and Ming-shan.

“Hello, we are here!” Hans shouted to the men in the truck. One of Liu’s men bashed Hans on the side of his head with his rifle, felling him to the ground. The procession stopped, and the truck pulled just a little closer and then turned around so as to point the back of the truck towards the bandits and hostages.

Behind the hostage trio a dozen yards or so were Elizabeth and Ross with Liu and Qian. They were obviously being held back as Liu assessed the situation and what to do next. Spread out a bit further behind were the rest of the bandits. Those with horses were dismounted and all of them had their rifles at the ready.

“Tell them to get out of the truck,” Liu instructed Ross.

Ross complied. “Get out of the truck fellows, so Commander Liu can see you.”

The lieutenant turned to Private Jones, the driver, and said, “Leave the truck running.”

Facing Corporal Andrews, he instructed, "You get out on your side and be ready to jump back in and take off if we have to. Come on private, we'll get out on this side."

As Lieutenant Williams and Jones did so, Williams, with his hand on the handle of his .45 in its holster, motioned to Jones to spread out a bit. "Unslung your rifle and be ready to fire at my command," he barked at Corporal Andrews.

"Now tell them to lift the flap of the truck to show what's inside," Liu ordered Ross.

"Ok, now show them what's inside the truck," Ross shouted to Lieutenant Williams.

Lieutenant Williams cautiously walked to the back of the truck and lifted the flap. "Here it is," Williams shouted back. "All here as requested."

Liu and Qian could see boxes and bags and some other stuff in the truck. Liu sent one of his men to approach the truck for a closer look. Lieutenant Williams stepped aside but watched the man intensely. Private Jones kept his hand on the door handle and Corporal Andrews leveled his gun and pointed it in the general direction of the bandits.

Liu's man excitedly grabbed a small bag of what looked like millet and rushed back to Liu.

"Now have them unload the truck," Liu commanded Ross.

Lieutenant Williams and Corporal Andrews began to grab the boxes and put them on the ground behind the truck. Everyone nervously watched. Williams and Andrews as they carried several boxes closer to the bandits and opened one up to reveal the BARs. One of Qian's men rushed forward and immediately took one out of the box. He fumbled around a little, trying to figure out how to load it with the ammunition that was in a separate box.

"Don't worry, everyone. He won't be able to fire it," Lieutenant Williams shouted. He motioned to a box at his feet. There was a second box there as well and Williams opened it up to reveal the cash payment. Next to that was a gunny sack at Lieutenant Williams's feet. "Tell them that the firing pins and instructions on how to insert them are right here. That is to prevent anyone from getting trigger happy until we get our people back and are on our way."

Qian's men all hoisted their rifles up in the air as if to indicate that they already felt armed enough to settle matters with just three American soldiers.

“Now let the hostages come towards us and get in the back of the truck.” Williams instructed and waited for Ross’s translation.

Hans had gotten back up, though he was still a bit dazed. Ian and Ming-shan looked back at Liu as if to determine if they should move. Ross noticed Qian was beginning to twitch a bit and feared the worst.

“Get ready to run,” he whispered to Elizabeth.

Liu nodded and Ian, Hans and Ming-shan took a few steps towards the truck.

Suddenly, the sound of a sizeable amount of gunfire erupted from some distance behind them. Everybody turned around to see dust ascending upwards from what sounded like a gun battle.

Ian, Hans, and Ming-shan immediately bolted towards the truck and a couple of Qian’s men began shooting. Hans was hit in his back and fell forward only to be caught by Ming-shan who pulled him towards the truck and Williams, who had pulled his .45 and started shooting too.

Somehow Ian and Ming-shan and Williams got Hans into the truck. Ian and Ming-shan jumped into the back of the truck as more of the bandits began to shoot. Private Jones immediately jumped in and began to drive off as both Lieutenant Williams and Corporal Andrews, who had been shot as well, struggled to get in the truck.

Hearing the gunshots, Captain Kenji immediately ordered Sergeant Yamuna to break from their concealment and join the fray around the truck. He motioned to five of his men to stay back with him in the thicket at the stream.

The sound of gunfire immediately triggered a flash of panic in Ross. His Siberian experience instantly welled up inside him. But he knew that this time his survival and the survival of Elizabeth depended on their quick actions and the conquest of his fears. Ross pushed Elizabeth off to the right towards the stream and shouted, “We’ve got to run!” Liu and Qian hesitated a bit but then took off after Ross and Elizabeth. Qian’s men began to engage Liu’s men, and pandemonium broke out. Several of Qian’s men followed their leader as they chased Ross and Elizabeth.

“Come on as fast as you can,” Ross urged Elizabeth as they struggled towards the stream. Surprised to find as much water in it as there was, Ross and Elizabeth hesitated at the bank. With Qian and his men nearly upon them, Ross pushed Elizabeth into the water and hoped that the water was not too deep and even with their hands tied behind them, they’d be able to get across somehow.

Qian reached the edge of the stream and almost laughed at the futility of Ross and Elizabeth struggling in the water.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Came the reports of the Japanese sharpshooters in the thicket on the other side of the stream. Captain Kenji smiled as he caught the anguished look of surprise and pain on Qian's face as a bullet ripped into his chest. Qian's other men attempted to return fire, but Captain Kenji's men dispatched them in very short order.

Discretion being the better part of valor, Liu beat a hasty retreat and desperately looked for some place to escape or hide to save his own skin. Despite his loyalty to his men, the situation had exploded into such chaos, that all he could do was to figure it was every man for himself.

Captain Kenji and one of his men jumped into the stream themselves to pull Ross and Elizabeth out. Wet, sputtering, and shaken, they were nonetheless exceptionally relieved. They had been saved!