

CHILDREN OF APIS

BOOK 3: War Erupts



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1

KNOX *(Northeast Territory)*

THE BACK OF my head snaps back and hits something hard. It takes a few seconds for the fog to lift before I realize where I am. I reach up and wipe a line of drool from the corner of my mouth. Looking around, I see other men seated in the cargo hold of the helicopter. Some are sleeping, while others just stare straight ahead anxiously awaiting the start of the mission. The steady hum of the rotor overhead sends vibrations through the hull which I can feel in my back and feet. The sun is visible over the tops of the trees to the east. With no cloud cover to speak of, it looks like another hot August day to go along with a string of them we've had this month. Hopefully, we can complete our missions before the midday heat hits us. I look to my left to see Sparrow's eyes wide open. The excitement of his first operation is written all over his face.

“Why don’t you try and get some sleep before we land?”

He turns toward me with a confused look.

“Are you kidding? There’s no way I can sleep right now. This is awesome.”

I smile and shake my head. To be young again. When we land, he’ll just hop out of this aircraft raring to go. It will be painful for me just to straighten up, let alone exit the helo. My lower back will be screaming for the rest of the day after sitting in one spot for this trip to Boston.

I can’t complain. Life in the Northeast Territory beats what I left behind in the north. At least I have a solid roof over my head and clean clothes on my back. I’m starting to get used to the Apis Pills, although it would be nice to have some solid food. I guess you can’t have everything. The people in charge appear to be warming up to me, and I seem to be gaining the trust of General Taggert. During the most recent meeting, the general and a few of the brass were somewhat friendlier. I’m no longer alone on one side of the table, which makes it less of an interrogation and more of a meeting. General Taggert has been appreciative of some of the intel I’ve provided. He is particularly interested in the tracking device, which Sparrow placed on the rebel helicopter when they attacked our northern facility. There has been no feedback on whether the aircraft has been located.

Without warning, I’m racked with another coughing fit. I cover my face with my right arm and ride out the attack. Eventually, the coughing subsides, and I sit up to catch my breath. I close my eyes and stare up at the inside of the aircraft.

“Sir, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Sparrow. My throat is just a little dry.”

If only that were the case. The coughing fits have been getting more and more frequent. Lately, I’ve been seeing traces of blood. I glance down at the sleeve of my light jacket and see the telltale dark spot. It’s tough to tell if it’s blood or spittle in the dim light, but I know better. From my horrific experiences, back in the north, I know it’s the invisible radiation which killed hundreds of northerners and is slowly eating away at me from the inside out. I also hear rumblings when I walk past people. They treat me as if I’m contagious. I’ve thought of going to the doctors, but I’m afraid of what they might say.

The pitch of the rotor changes and the helicopter banks to the right. Turning toward the window, I can see a portion of the city below. The size of some of the buildings is incredible. Most of the windows are shattered or missing entirely. One of the tallest buildings has a name in large white letters on the top. Most of the letters are missing, but the name appears to start with PRU and, then there is a T and an L near the end. Looking further down, I can see cars and trucks abandoned all over the roads below. It’s going to be difficult for our military vehicles to navigate around. A few trucks were sent ahead of the helicopters to lend support. Visits to previous cities resulted in heavy resistance. The only way we ensured cooperation was with a show of force. Rifles and small weapons are no match for heavily armed helicopters and armored vehicles. Voices in the cockpit distract my thoughts.

“Sir, the drone’s thermal sensors show multiple contacts just ahead. There is a small park nearby which can accommodate our aircraft.”

“Let’s set our bird down and see what kind of welcoming committee Beantown has to offer.”

A few nervous chuckles follow the pilot’s reference. I have no idea what Beantown means. It must be a local reference to the city. The rotor changes pitch and the helicopter begins to descend. It’s impressive that an aircraft this massive can maneuver so well. The co-pilot appears in the doorway to the cockpit.

“Okay men, this is it. Gather up your weapons. We will be landing shortly. There are numerous contacts below. We have to assume they are hostile. Remember this is a retrieval mission. Let’s try to spare a few lives this time. Do I make myself clear?”

The co-pilot turns to stare directly at me while he finishes his last statement. A few snickers circulate around the cargo hold. I sheepishly smile and shrug my shoulders. The co-pilot attempts to look annoyed, but I can see the humor in his eyes. He retreats from the doorway to prepare for landing.

A few moments later, the buildings thin out and the helicopter passes over a small clearing. The pilot finds a spot with no trees and expertly sets the aircraft down. The cargo door immediately slides open, and men begin to hurry toward the exit. I make the mistake of getting up too quickly and my back protests loudly. I stumble to the doorway as fast as possible and jump out. As soon as my feet hit the ground, a bolt of pain radiates from just above my ass.

“I’m getting too old for this shit.”

Sparrow turns and grins just before he tears off after one of the other men. They head over to a large rock sticking out of the ground. At one time it must have been a landscaped area in the middle of the park, but now it's just a big boulder surrounded by scrub. Just before I reach cover, a few shots come from across the street. The ground to my left explodes showering me with dirt and debris. I momentarily forget the pain and find some extra speed. It's funny how a little motivation can overcome physical limitations. As I dive for cover, a volley of automatic gunfire erupts.

I scramble toward the face of the rock and find a spot that I can look over. The sound of gunfire echoes off the surrounding buildings. An adversary emerges over the rear of a parked car. I swing my weapon over, but before I can fire, automatic gunfire explodes off to my left. The target's head snaps back, and the body disappears from view. A few individuals make a break for a doorway, and I strafe the area from right to left. A few others join in, and the bodies take multiple hits along with the plate glass windows behind. The targets perform a brief dance before falling to the ground. One of the opponents is spun around like a rag doll before landing inside the store display. His body is almost severed in half by the glass shards sticking up from the bottom of the opening.

Our second helicopter appears over the tops of the building facing our location. The pilot has positioned his aircraft behind the main body of our opposition. A few of our trucks can be heard heading in from the west. My eyes scan the abandoned buildings, searching for additional targets. A rocket launches from our helicopter and strikes a truck, which was being used for

cover by the enemy. The vehicle explodes and rises off the ground. Bodies are thrown in all directions. Smoke and debris fill the air, making it difficult to see any enemy targets. The automatic gunfire continues on our side, but the opposition's attack has significantly decreased. As the smoke clears, what looks like a large, white sheet can be seen waving from a third story window directly across the street. Opponents begin to stand with their hands and weapons raised. A few more can be seen exiting the various buildings.

We begin to cautiously walk toward our adversary while keeping our weapons trained. As we get closer, I can see the condition of our newest recruits. They are similar in appearance to past people we've captured. Their clothes are nothing but rags. They are gaunt and filthy. Once they receive clothing and a solid roof over their heads, they will eagerly fight for the Northeast Territory.

Hopefully, the rest of today's raids will go as smoothly as this one. At least I won't be blamed for having a happy trigger finger this time.

2

SUAREZ/GENERAL TAGGERT *(Northeast Territory)*

I LOOK BACK over my shoulder at Wilson, who is concentrating on the drone laptop. He has been providing Richards and I with updates on the northeast mission in Boston using one of our drones high overhead. Our helicopter is safely a few hundred miles away, parked in an abandoned airplane hangar, at a small airport near New Haven, Connecticut.

“So, how do you like flying this Canadian model?”

I glance over at Richards and then scan the control console in front of us.

“It’s not as quick as our American aircraft, but it has a few nice bells and whistles. It also maneuvers pretty well. If I had my choice, though, I’d buy American.”

Richards chuckles and then turns his head to the left.

“Wilson, what are our northeastern friends doing now?”

“It looks like the little skirmish is over. They overwhelmed the small resistance with a couple of helos and some trucks. They are presently herding the survivors into the vehicles.”

Richards voice pipes in from my right.

“That’s just great. The northeast has a few more mutants to add to their forces.”

“They’re not mutants, Richards. They’re probably just a bunch of scared individuals who somehow made it through the long winter on the surface. I have to give them credit. You’ve got to be one tough bastard to brave those extreme conditions. I’m concerned with the army that General Taggart is compiling up there.”

Richards shrugs and turns his attention to Wilson who resumes his update.

“It looks like they’re heading out to a different part of the city to look for more survivors.”

“Why don’t you shift over to the other drone and see if our rebel mole is early? She’s not due for another thirty minutes, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Wilson moves his mouse, and the left window on the screen is highlighted. I swivel my chair and lean over in my seat to get a better look. The video feed shows a clearing somewhere in the southwest corner of the town of Bellows Falls. The clearing is empty as expected.

“So, how did we find out about this mole, to begin with.”

I glance over at Richards who is also watching the video feed.

“Fortunately, Elliot, who was a former rebel in the northeast, set up an emergency communication method in the event any rebels were left behind. Since we no longer have moles in the northeast’s communications group, we have to resort to less sophisticated methods. For the foreseeable future, our mole will appear in this clearing at predetermined times to relay critical information about the northeast. Until we are able to get something more efficient set up, this is what we are stuck with.”

The three of us turn toward the laptop and await the star of our show.

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As I head down to the main lab, I try to figure out why Gant was so animated on the radio. The update I received earlier indicated that the mission in Boston was proceeding as planned. Whatever it is, I will find out soon enough. As I walk through the double doors, I see Gant standing in the center of the lab behind two drone operators. Gant turns at the sound of the doors and motions me over.

“General, thank you for coming down so soon.”

“Gant, I have to admit, you had me intrigued by the sound of your voice.”

“As you know, Sean has been working on a search algorithm which incorporates the unique frequency for Knox’s tracker. We have installed this program on our drones and have been searching for the rebel helicopter for the past week. One of our drones has detected the tracking signal just west of New Haven, Connecticut at a small airfield. We have subsequently steered the

drone away from the target to avoid detection. The coordinates of the target have been saved to the drone, and a low altitude attack pattern has been uploaded to the aircraft to minimize the chance of it being shot down during its approach.”

“The helicopter is probably operating a drone of their own and spying on our activities. Well, it’s time the rebels paid for their curiosity. How long before you can engage?”

“We could be in firing range in about fifteen minutes.”

“Let’s teach our rebel friends a lesson. Blow the bastards up. Great work, gentlemen.”

“Thank you, General.”

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“Hey, Suarez. It looks like our rebel has arrived.”

Richards and I quickly jump out of our seats and look over Wilson’s shoulders. A woman hurries to the center of the clearing, where she stops and appears to nervously glance around. Wilson begins to zoom in on our contact. Even from this altitude and angle, I can tell she’s an attractive woman who appears to be in her late thirties or early forties. Her long, dark hair covers part of her face as she peers up into the sky. Eventually, she looks down at her watch to verify the time and reaches inside her light jacket. When her hand reappears, it is holding a large, folded piece of paper. She begins to unfold the paper but proceeds to drop it on the ground. After bending down to retrieve

it, she unfolds the paper the rest of the way and then holds it out so that it's facing toward the sky. Wilson zooms in further to get a better view of what is written on the sign. As the video clears, you can see the distress on the woman's face. I wish I could fly up to the clearing and rescue her, but the critical nature of her position prevents it.

"Okay, that's the best I can do without spending more time to bring the drone in at a lower altitude and possibly putting her in jeopardy of being found. The message reads, 'Have made contact with target. Intel to follow. (248)'."

We all stare at the screen, just watching the woman look up at the sky while she continues to hold the message.

"What the hell is 248?"

"I have no idea, Suarez."

"Well, we better get Brent on the radio and relay the message. Is the second drone back in position to communicate with home base?"

"Yes. It arrived there about fifteen minutes ago."

Richards reaches down and grabs the handset for the portable shortwave radio and brings it up to his mouth.

"Brent, can you read me?"

After a few seconds, Brent's voice can be heard coming in over the unit.

"Loud and clear, Richards. Have you read any good books lately?"

Richards and I smile at each other. Brent can't help himself. He loves to speak in code. Richards brings the handset back up to his mouth.

“I just finished a short story, but I don’t understand the ending. The last lines in the story read, ‘Have made contact with target. Intel to follow. (248)’. We can’t figure out what the numbers stand for. Any ideas on your end?”

Mumbling comes in over the radio as Brent confers with someone. While they are talking, I can see the woman start to refold her message. As soon as the paper is tucked away in her jacket, she flees from the clearing. Wilson begins to reroute the drone back to our position. Richards and I wait patiently for Brent to come back with an answer. Finally, the brief conference finishes and Brent turns his attention back to the radio.

“Sorry about that guys. We were discussing the reason behind the three numbers. Kenji is the one who came up with the likely explanation. His theory, and it makes sense, is that the numbers represent the Julien date for a day next month. Today’s date is August 27th which would correspond to a Julien date for just this year of 239. The number 248 would indicate September 5th, which lands on a Wednesday. Perhaps there is an event, such as a meeting, earlier that week which would provide helpful information. We can confirm the meaning of the numbers before you guys get back.”

Before we can reply an alarm sounds on the radar screen. Our eyes snap to the display where two incoming missiles are shown.

“Oh my god. Are those real incoming missiles?”

I have no time to acknowledge Richards’s question, as I immediately reach down to the radar monitor to authenticate the incoming threat. Normally, we could perform some evasive maneuvers in the air or release some counter-

measures. On the ground, we are sitting ducks. Brent's panicked voice can be heard in the background.

"Guys, what the hell is going on? What's the alarm for?"

I don't have time to answer Brent as I turn to my friends and scream.

"Everybody out. Now!"

The three of us start scrambling out of the cockpit as the alarm blares. I've just reached the concrete and started to move away from the aircraft when the first rocket strikes the thin roof of the hanger. The explosion knocks me off my feet and sends me flying face first into the concrete. A blinding flash of pain explodes in my head. I turn my head to gaze up at the blue sky just in time to see the second missile streaking through the hole. The rocket slams into the back of the helicopter. A searing wave of heat engulfs my body.