

## PRELUDE

### **Farah District, Afghanistan Daybreak, Tuesday, October 4, 2425**

His boots heavy and caked with mud, Fornax Nehrengel marched zombie-like through the bleak and raw dawn. He wore the face of exhaustion, wincing as each step brought forth a fresh dose of pain from the untreated blister oozing puss from between his toes. His dark skin and hair were grimy, his legs and arms sore. From deep within his belly an unheated breakfast of gruel protested its confinement. Indifference deadened his spirit, and his eyelids drooped with fatigue.

Like the other foot soldiers in his unit, Fornax Nehrengel was outfitted in a tattered, drab-colored uniform, wearing poorly fitting boots, and carting a handmade, breech-loading rifle of irregular calibre. Suffering privation, the Afghan army could not afford to equip its men with recoil blasters like the enemy had, or even with force guns. Their chances for success were slim, and Fornax knew it. Surely the black scowl etched into his face said it all. Fear. Exhaustion. Pain.

Through chapped and broken lips Fornax Nehrengel silently cursed his plight. He was not a brave man. Indeed, he found it curiously ironic that he should be fighting to defend a flag he paid scant allegiance to or risking his life in support of cherished ideals he barely endorsed. Fornax Nehrengel resented being here and desertion was on his mind.

This was not his war; this was his father's war. Nevertheless, Fornax found himself stranded in its midst, laboring to discharge a hastily made promise to serve in uniform so he might gain entrance to his beleaguered country's finest university. And yet, it was a promise which he now held in contempt.

Fornax resented the war's inconvenient disruption of his studies. He resented how his grandiose schemes to achieve great things at a young age had all of a sudden been thrown askew. But more than anything else, he resented being under the thumb of Pasha Norandu, the feeble-minded young officer heading up his platoon. How this inept buffoon ever earned his command was anybody's guess. But by impatiently pressing his men forward without first waiting for an updated recon report, Norandu was needlessly endangering every last one of them. What should have been a simple and straightforward scouting operation had suddenly become a new and more dangerous game in the less-than-capable hands of Pasha Norandu.

To a recruit as green as Fornax, the whole thing was a bit unnerving, and he was beside himself with fear. Turning to speak to the dark-skinned soldier marching directly behind him in line, Fornax vented his bitterness.

“He’s gonna get us all killed,” came the hoarse whisper. “And the bastard doesn’t even give a damn!”

“Me-thinks you worry too much,” Vishnu chided, trying to maintain a visage of calm. Though Vishnu would probably have been the last one to admit it, he too had been wrestling with the same troubling thoughts. He and Fornax were like two peas in a pod: they thought alike and wanted much the same things from life. And well they should. The two of them were not only distant cousins, they were close friends as well. They had both grown up in the same, desperately poor village; they had both seen war ravage their tiny, landlocked country.

“I do worry too much,” Fornax admitted. “Especially about staying alive.”

“Unless you want Pasha to hear you, you had better quit bellyaching,” Vishnu cautioned, brushing back a lock of rain-soaked hair from his eyes.

“Look,” Fornax grumbled, “all I want is to come out of this thing alive. Alive and with all my body parts still in working order. Is that so much to ask? I’m no hero, you know — not like my father anyway. Now there was the genuine article — the original army hero — but not me.”

“I promised your mother I’d keep you safe. But you’d better quit griping or else . . .”

“Quiet back there!” Pasha shouted, bringing the line of soldiers to a halt and interrupting their harmless banter. “If you two pains in the butt don’t shut up, and I mean right now, I’ll have you both drop right here in the mud and give me twenty. Is that understood?”

“Oh, yes sir . . . perfectly,” Fornax parroted, suppressing an irreverent snicker. “Whatever you say, sir.”

“Enough already!” Pasha boomed, determined to have the last word. “Not another syllable.”

Rubbing the black stubble of an untended beard, Fornax shrugged his shoulders in resignation and hiked dejectedly on. Through dark, brooding eyes he surveyed the landscape, his field of vision obscured by the unrelenting rain.

The eleven-man unit he was attached to was tramping through a wasteland of barren hills in a single-file line, taking the utmost care not to uproot the scruffy mountain vegetation as they went. Outgunned and outnumbered, the tiny band of freedom-fighters couldn’t risk leaving behind a trail of upturned moss or broken twigs an enemy patrol might follow back to their main camp.

The wet ground over which they trod was dotted with outcroppings of immense boulders. Every so often they would come upon a stunted bush clinging tenaciously to what little topsoil it could find. Like an unlanced boil, the terrain was swollen with one butte after another. And, had the turf been sandy instead of rocky, it might well have passed for a desert rather than a

meadow. But, decimated by centuries of unrelenting war, the formerly fertile prairie now supported only a few scrawny sheep per acre.

*Hardly worth fighting over*, Fornax reflected, stomping his feet to stay warm. *But then what was?*

A moment later, he had his answer. It stared them in the face when they crested the next rise.

“Oh, my Lord!” Pasha groaned, his panic-stricken voice serving to focus their attention on the open expanse before them. There, just sitting in the neighboring valley waiting for them, was a heavily fortified Chinese detachment. Raised over the camp were Overlord Ling Tsui’s colors, and adorning the cadre of armored vehicles was his coat-of-arms.

“Damn you, Pasha!” Fornax spat, his face going white. “This is your fault, you stupid mongrel! You were more concerned with keeping us on schedule than with keeping us safe!”

Even as he spoke, Nehrengel’s sinewy arms tightened with rage. The bloody fool had led their small company into harm’s way; unintentionally perhaps, but into harm’s way just the same. And now they were in big trouble. The mechanized Chinese column they had accidentally stumbled upon was obviously engaged in a search and destroy mission — and the emir’s main camp was almost certainly Ling’s intended target. Only, before Overlord Ling ever had a chance to move his big guns into place, Pasha had obliged him by giving his artillery a target to practice on ahead of the main attack — *their tiny platoon!*

“Oh, my Lord!” Pasha groaned again, shrinking from his responsibility. “There’s so many of them . . .”

“I don’t think they’ve spotted us,” Vishnu said, bravely mustering a full dose of courage. “Maybe we ought to strike while we still have the element of surprise.”

Fornax couldn’t disagree more. “We’ve got to get out of here!” he shouted, diving for cover behind a huge boulder. “And I mean right away!”

“Shut up!” Pasha screamed, clearly out of his head. “Shut up or else . . .”

“Or else what?” Fornax hollered back, the foul wind tearing the words from his mouth. “You’ll make us drop and give you twenty? Don’t you get it? We don’t stand a chance out here in the open like this. For God’s sake, Pasha, they outnumber us fifty to one!”

Still crouching low for protection, Fornax stole a glance in the direction of the enemy camp spread out in the canyon below. Along with hundreds of battle-hardened soldiers, a dozen or more fearsome-looking artillery pieces were assembled right there beside the road.

It made for a chilling sight, one Fornax would never forget. Without exaggeration, the grim truth was that once their platoon was spotted, it would be only a matter of minutes before the yellow-skinned heathens ordered in their deadly airchops to bushwhack them from above. Scattered across the open hillside the way they were, there was almost nothing they could do to

defend themselves against an aerial assault like that. Plus, instead of taking charge of the situation and giving orders, all their squadron leader could manage to do was point and grunt.

Seeing Pasha fidget with indecision, Fornax coughed out a desperate, freakish sort of plea. "We've got to get out of here!" he implored, repeating his earlier entreaty.

But when Pasha didn't respond, when he just stood there frozen in his tracks staring blankly off into space, Fornax stepped in without hesitation, issuing but one forceful command.

"Hit the dirt!" he yelled. "Everybody down!"

But it was too late. The murderous ordeal had already begun.

The words scarcely out of his mouth, the men in Fornax's platoon barely had time to scramble for cover before the Chinese perimeter-gunners began pounding their position with a vicious round of shelling. The results were brutal and devastating.

No sooner had Fornax himself dropped to the muddy ground to avoid the sudden barrage of small-arms fire, than the hair on his neck stiffened. A bullet whizzed perilously close to his head. Sprawled as he was, face down on the rocky earth, it was difficult for him to judge how many of his comrades had fallen prey to the merciless spray of gunfire, but the air around him was filled with pained cries of agony.

Instinctively scurrying along the ground on his belly to shield himself behind one of those massive boulders the Afghan steppe was so famous for, Fornax closed his eyes and curled himself up into a ball to protect his vitals. As he lay there mortified, hugging the wet dirt for dear life, an anguished moan reached out to him from the scraggy bushes to his left. He didn't have to see the man's face to know who it was. Commander Pasha had been standing at the head of the line when the attack began. Apparently, he hadn't been as adept as Fornax at dodging bullets.

Deep down, Fornax was glad. And he had no qualms about admitting it. If not for Pasha, if not for his brazen attitude, this senseless slaughter would never have taken place. The man was responsible, damnit — *he deserved to die!*

Unfortunately, no matter how satisfying Pasha's death was to Fornax personally, it didn't improve his own, rather precarious situation one little bit. Indeed, he was busy devising a way out of this quagmire when the inflection of a familiar voice reached his ears from across the hillside.

"Heh, Fornax!" his buddy yelled from the safety of a nearby escarpment. "The bastards have got us pinned down here! What the hell should we do?"

"How the devil should I know?" Fornax snarled, unable to camouflage the raw fear in his voice. Dipping his head in contrition, he watched as a drop of rain trickled off his brown-skinned face and rolled onto his tattered parka. It joined a hundred other such raindrops in a pool at his feet.

Vishnu stared at him through expectant eyes, waiting for an order. But none was forthcoming.

“What should we do?” he repeated. Vishnu was disappointed that Fornax hadn’t moved a muscle to exercise his prerogative as second in command.

When Fornax looked up to see his friend’s dour expression, he shuddered. “You of all people should appreciate that I’m no leader. Hell, I’m not even a very good follower! All I want to do is come out of this thing alive and . . . ”

“I know, I know,” Vishnu interrupted, exasperation coloring his voice. “All you want to do is come out of this thing alive and with all your body parts intact. Well that’s just not good enough, damnit! With Pasha dead, you’re in charge now. You had better think of something! And darn quick!”

Making every effort not to panic, Fornax locked his teeth with indecision. He felt totally unqualified to make these sorts of decisions; yet, with Vishnu and the others depending on him, he dared not shirk his responsibility either. *But what did they expect him to do?*

Staring down the length of his drab uniform in quiet terror, Fornax contemplated his poorly crafted pistol and ill-fitting boots. His feet were already swollen with blisters; how far would he be able to get before being cut down?

Again came the question. Only this time, it was everything Vishnu could do to be heard over the staccato whine of incoming tracers. “What the hell are you waiting for, Fornax? We can’t just sit here all day doing nothing!”

Vishnu was a short, unremarkable fellow with a temperament to match; yet, there was a certain finality, a certain determination to his words. As a perplexed Fornax looked on, the other man drew his archaic weapon from its battered holster, peered cautiously around the boulder he was hiding behind, and then, without even taking aim, let loose a couple of rounds.

Watching this whole process unfold would have been comical if it hadn’t been so dangerous. But no sooner had Vishnu unloaded his six-shooter in the direction of the opposite valley, than the ground at his feet was peppered with return fire. Charting a hasty retreat, he quickly ducked his head back behind the giant outcropping to avoid being hit. His wet, black hair twisted crazily in the wind.

“Are you out of your mind?!” Fornax boomed at the top of his voice. “Put that silly six-gun of yours away before it misfires and blows off one of your damn fingers! For God’s sake, all you’re doing is drawing their attention!”

Lowering his eyes, Vishnu mouthed an apology. But his words were lost in the din as the almond-eyed demons made the switch from light guns to heavy shells.

With the contentious roar of artillery thundering in the background, Fornax realized he had to make a decision. And it had to be the right one! If they stood and fought, they would almost certainly die. Their only chance was to run for it, and he said as much.

Vishnu’s response was immediate and blunt. With an astonished look plastered across his weather-beaten face, he grunted out a bitter objection.

“Begging your pardon, cousin, but what in Allah’s name can running accomplish? If we retreat now like cowards, we’ll be stripped of our honor. Shame will follow us wherever we go; it will haunt our every waking moment.”

“So what?” Fornax retorted, crouching on one knee, his sights set on a distant grouping of rocks. “Better shame than an unmarked grave! Better long life than kudos!”

“I don’t understand you, Fornax — it’s considered honorable to die for one’s country.” It was an exacting, matter-of-fact statement; one given without hint of fear.

“I fail to see the honor in dying,” Fornax returned, flexing his muscles in grim anticipation. “Not for my country — not for any reason.”

Clearly agitated, Fornax trembled uncontrollably. It was everything he could do not to suddenly lose his nerve. His dark eyes spoke only of fear. They were out of time — and out of choices. No matter how cowardly it might seem, escape was their only hope. Nothing could change that now, even if quitting the battlefield meant violating their vaunted Afghan Code of Honor.

Poised to make a wild dash to safety, Fornax flushed the adrenalin from his system with a single, sharp deep breath. “Honor is not the issue here, my good friend — body parts are. I want to keep them all in proper working order.”

“And the emir? What will he say?” Vishnu quizzed, his bandanna grimy with sweat.

“The emir? He can go to blazes!” Fornax vented at the height of disrespect. “Now, are you with me or not?”

There was resignation in the other man’s reply. “You’re the boss, Fornax. Lead the way.”

Though disappointed by Vishnu’s tepid show of support, Fornax steeled himself for action. With a wave of his hand, he signaled the others to follow suit. And then, as if on cue, the two men sprang to their feet and began scrambling towards the next ridge as fast as their cramped legs would carry them.

Hobbled by their shoddy boots, hindered by the rough terrain, the going was torturously slow. So slow, in fact, that they hadn’t covered more than a dozen meters when an artillery round struck the very boulder Fornax had taken refuge behind earlier. Under the force of the impact the giant stone disintegrated, spewing razor-sharp fragments of dirt and rock in every direction. To Fornax’s unspeakable horror, one particularly lethal shard of rock struck his friend in the back, mortally wounding him.

At first, when Vishnu grunted out a barely audible outcry, Fornax didn’t even realize that his cousin had been hit. Indeed, if not for the sudden explosion of blood, he might not have known how serious the injury actually was. Certainly, the truncated gasp which issued from Vishnu’s mouth seemed insufficient given the true extent of his wounds.

Aghast, Fornax stopped dead in his tracks. For a long instant, he thought to administer first aid to his friend. But it would have been a futile gesture. There was no possible way for him to save the man.

In the first place, Fornax was no medic. Yet even if he had been one, such a remarkable amount of blood had already hemorrhaged from the fist-sized cavity blown out of Vishnu's back, it was doubtful whether he would have been able to keep the man alive. Aside from comforting Vishnu in his final moments, there was nothing Fornax could do now to prevent his cousin's death.

Gently slipping his hand beneath Vishnu's shoulder, Fornax drew him close, letting the man's head come to rest in his lap. Had the morning sun not been held captive by the gray mist, it might have witnessed a bitter tear roll across Fornax's dirty face and fall to the earth.

"You were right," Vishnu sighed, the life nearly drained from his body, "there is no honor in dying for your country. None at all."

And then, after coughing once or twice, he expired, his head still cradled in Fornax's arms.

Squatting on the wet ground, the sounds of mortar-fire raging all around him, his clothes and hands splattered with the fresh blood of his only friend, Fornax was sickened by this horrible turn of events. Never before had he seen death at such close quarters. Never before had he seen death at any range!

His eyes still fixed on Vishnu's ashen face, Fornax struggled unsteadily to his feet. Clenching his fist in rage, he wanted to shout obscenities at the heavens. He wanted to shout obscenities at the heavens and ask who the hell up there was to blame for this travesty.

But he didn't say a word. What was the use anyway? There was nothing to be gained by it. Vishnu was dead and no amount of cursing at Allah could change that. Vishnu had paid the ultimate price and the only question still remaining to be answered was: Had it been worth it?

Dying for the preservation of vague ideals had never made much sense to Fornax, and from where he stood now, defenseless on that craggy hillside, his future looked awfully dim.

If death was the price to be paid for victory, then he would just as soon lose. If death was all he had to look forward to out here on the battlefield, then he would much rather make a stand elsewhere, at another time and in another place.

Whether he succeeded or whether he failed was no longer of consequence; whether his nation survived or whether it was overrun no longer mattered. With Vishnu dead, all that he had once held dear was now gone, and existence had lost its very meaning! All Fornax knew for certain now was that his heart was no longer in this. *His short career as a soldier had come to an abrupt end!*

If Fornax was to have a future, if any of his lofty ambitions were to have even a prayer of being fulfilled, he had no choice now but to try and make a run for it. As much as Vishnu might have disagreed with his decision, Fornax knew that the only possible way for him to escape from the crosshairs of this nightmare would be to desert!

Caught-up in this moment of introspection, Fornax failed to notice the menacing blotch swelling ever larger against the horizon. Not until its ominous whine reached his ears, shocking him back to the present, did he focus on the airchop closing in swiftly on his position.

Approaching at high speed, the killing machine hugged the ridge, its short, stubby wings glistening in the rain, its overhead rotors slicing effortlessly through the cold air.

Even at this distance, Fornax could plainly see the bomb bay doors hanging open from its steel belly. Like perhaps no other, this was an unambiguous sign of its eagerness to do battle.

Then too, Fornax could make out the silhouette of a giant eagle affixed to the underside of its stubby wing. Appropriate to his methods, this bird of prey was the heraldic symbol of Overlord Ling Tsui, their avowed enemy.

Armed with a phalanx of deadly nitro-projectiles, each capable of incinerating an entire battalion in the blink of an eye, these highly-maneuverable, flying war-wagons were well-suited to strike at soldiers in a mountainous district such as this one. And when they were done with their killing and their maiming, they would leave nothing behind in their wake but twisted metal and charred bones.

“Oh, my God!” Fornax exclaimed, a lump forming in his throat. “The bastards are gonna fry us right where we stand!”

With a wave of panic rising up to engulf him, Fornax mechanically began to wipe Vishnu’s hardening blood from his hands. Black and white pictures of death formed in his head as he visualized the pain these incendiary weapons would visit upon the few remaining members of his unsuspecting platoon. Once the scorching nitro ignited, his men would suffer a most grisly and painful finish.

Yet, even in the face of a death more horrifying than anything he could possibly imagine, a determined look took hold between his eyes. There was no way he was going to meet his maker without first putting up some sort of a fight!

Ignoring his improbable chances for success, Fornax calmly reached down and drew Vishnu’s antiquated handgun from its holster. It felt heavy in his palm.

Dauntless, Fornax took deliberate aim. Nothing but a hundred meters of cold, wet air separated him from the glassed-in cockpit of the incoming airchop. Nothing, not even the threat of imminent harm, could deter him now. All he heard was the whine of the airchop; all he saw were the charcoal-black eyes of the sneering pilot.

Steadying his grip on the gun, Fornax waited. Even as the pilot guided his deadly, jet-propelled craft directly at him, still he waited. And then, when the craft was almost right on top of him, he squeezed off a single round. This act he did with the cold dispassion of a man who was going to die anyway.

What happened next, happened in slow motion. He heard the crinkle of glass as the bullet hit home. He saw the airchop pilot’s wounded look of



anguish as he slumped over the control stick. He heard the roar of the engines as it screamed by, just overhead.

All at once, as if Fornax had deliberately planned it that way, the enemy airchop veered obligingly off to the right, away from his beleaguered platoon and straight down into the valley where the Chinese garrison was bivouacked.

But the best was yet to come, for no sooner had the airship dipped below the horizon, than the ground at his feet was rocked by a horrendous explosion! An instant later, a fierce firestorm leapt skyward, the pillar of flame choked with smoke and debris. The white-hot flash of combustion was so bright, Fornax had to shield his eyes to avoid being blinded by it.

It took him a moment to figure out what had happened, but then it hit him — the nitro-projectiles onboard the airchop must have exploded on impact, unleashing an inferno which consumed everything — and everyone — in its wake!

As the dank wind carried the stench of seared flesh across the mesa to his nostrils, Fornax committed the entire gut-wrenching scene to memory. Even though the putrid odor was nauseating, even though the smell made a chill run up and down his spine, he found the whole gruesome affair curiously satisfying.

Lingering there on the hillside, his sweat-drenched face baked by the heat of the blast, Fornax felt no remorse at viewing the spectacle of burning enemy soldiers. They deserved to die if only to give honor to Vishnu's death!

Then suddenly, from out of nowhere, came a voice. It was the voice of one of the other soldiers from Fornax's decimated platoon.

"Well done!" the burly Afghan said, slapping Fornax on the back in a hearty, congratulatory fashion. "Hitting that pilot must've been the luckiest pistol-shot in the history of the world! You're a hero! Just like your father! Honor shall follow you all the days of your life!"

But Fornax wasn't having any of it. He simply shook his head in annoyance and started to walk away, heading off in the opposite direction. From the moment Vishnu had died in his arms, his mind had been made up, and nothing this overexuberant comrade of his could say or do was going to change it.

"Your bravery spared all our lives!" the husky man shouted after him as Fornax set off across the steppe at high speed. "Mark my words — the emir'll give a banquet in your honor."

Slowing his pace just a little, Fornax chuckled with derision. It was all he could do not to laugh. "A banquet, eh?" he said, speaking over his shoulder even as he continued to meander further afield. "And I suppose if I hang around here long enough to collect it, my rash act will win me a commendation. Perhaps even a promotion. I can just hear the emir now: 'For your bravery and quick thinking, I present you with the coveted Afghan Medal of Honor. We're all so very proud of you.' Hah!"

"Are you out of your head?" the big Afghan bellowed as Fornax walked away. "Where in blazes do you think you're going?"

But this time, Fornax didn't answer. Exhausted by his ordeal, he staggered from the field of battle and just kept right on moving.

If it occurred to him that by his actions he would be disgracing his father instead of making him proud, his face didn't show it. If it occurred to him that by taking flight he would be sullyng his family name rather than elevating it, his expression didn't reveal it. On that day and at that moment in time only one thing could be said with certainty — the man who once called himself Fornax Nehrengel deserted, never to be heard from by that name again.

Now, as this man without a country moved with dispatch across the muddy land, he cocked his head skyward. A thin sliver of last night's moon still hung in the western sky. Though he didn't know how, he was certain his future lay up there among the stars!