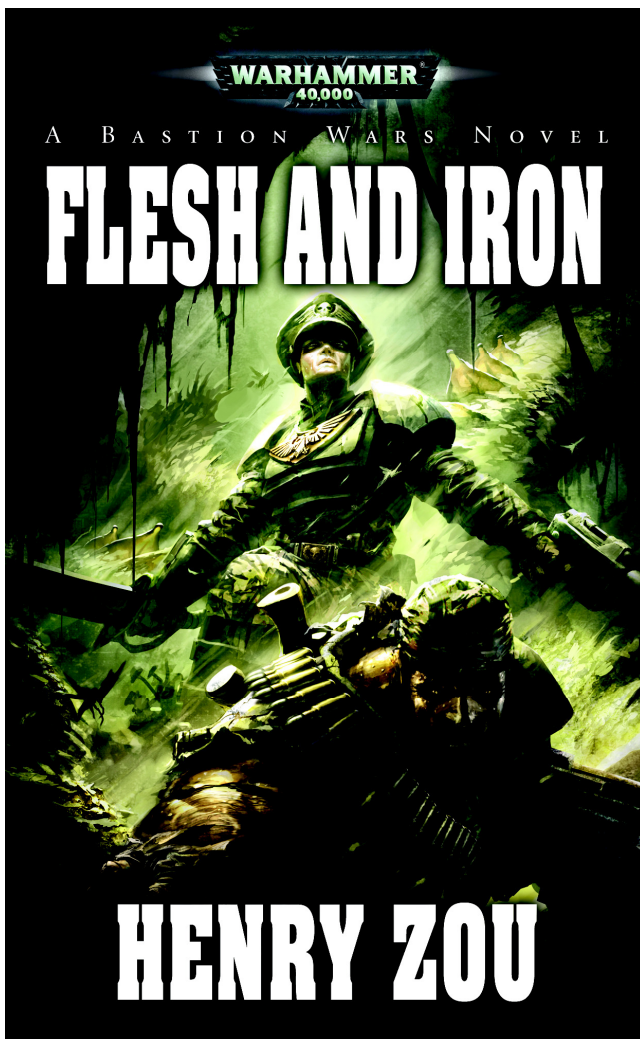




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FLESH AND IRON

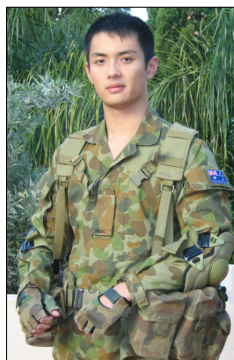
A Bastion Wars novel

By Henry Zou

From the planet of Solo-Baston, there come reports of an uprising. Indigenous forces are rebelling against Imperial rule, and a mysterious figure known as ‘Dos Pares’ is at the centre of the conflict. Into this chaos, the 31st Riverine Imperial Guard regiment are despatched to neutralise a massive siege gun, and find themselves surrounded by hostile local forces. But what the regiment first dismiss as simple tribal warfare soon turns out to be something much more sinister and dangerous.

About the Author

H.T.R Zou lives in Sydney, Australia. He joined the Army to hone his skills in case of a zombie outbreak and has been there ever since. Despite this, he would much rather be working in a bookstore, or basking in the quiet comforts of some other book-related occupation. One day he hopes to retire and live in a remote lighthouse with his lady and her many cats, completely zombie-free.



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The following is an excerpt from *Flesh and Iron* by Henry Zou.

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OUT ACROSS THE oceans of Solo-Bastón, far beyond where the muddy inlets gave way to thrumming tides, the water became a foamy jade. From those frothing waves rose the towering might of an Imperial Argo-Nautical, a warship of distant Persepia. From its forward-jutting ram prow to its stern, the Nautical was a vast floating gun battery. The solid, blue-grey sheets of its hull towered over the water like a fortress, sloping up on an incline towards the deck. The Argo-Nautical dominated the ocean, eclipsing the horizon as it drew astern with an offshore platform. Its sheer bulk made the support girders of the platform appear frail and dwarfed even the Vulture gunships roosting on the landing pad.

Upon the platform, the high officers of the Bastón campaign were assembled with their accompanying ceremonial guard. They had been summoned by Cardinal Lior Avanti, head of the diocese on Solo-Bastón, acting governor-general and, without a doubt, the most powerful Imperial authority on the planet. Rarely was such a meeting requested of them; the staff officers shifted uncomfortably as they stood to attention.

Also present was Major General Gaspar Montalvo of the Caliguan Motor Rifles. He sweated in the sun underneath a furred mantle and a full suit of burnished copper. Accompanying him were two of the tallest, most imposing men in his regiment. The soldiers were men of the 105th Motor Rifles, a mechanised formation from the oil-rich world of Caligua in the Bastion Stars. They wore loose-fitting jumpsuits of dusty brown with pads of ballistic mesh sewn into the thighs, chest and shoulders of their utility uniforms.

Standing opposite was Fleet Admiral Victor de Ruger of the Persepia Nautical Fleet. He stood smartly in his sky-blue dress coat, with silks arranged in layers across his left shoulder and a feather-crested helm curled under one arm. A coterie of attendants and

officers flanked him, bearing his personal shield, standard and refreshment towels on platters. Persepien Nautical Infantry were arrayed in ordered ranks behind him in their chalk-blue frock coats and polished chrome rebreathers. Lasguns fixed with boarding pikes were held vertically in salute, a bristling forest of steel that glinted with oceanic reflection.

Almost unnoticed, Brigadier Kaplain stood off to the side. He hated ceremony, like all men of the Riverine Amphibious. Regardless, Kaplain had shaved and even pressed his uniform that very morning. A tall, thin man of late middle years, the brigadier looked more like an administrative clerk than the commanding officer of the wild Ouisivians. He wore fatigues of muted swamp camouflage, standard issue amongst all Guardsmen of the 31st Riverine. Even as the docking ramp of the Nautical was lowered towards the rig platform, Kaplain continued to smoke his tabac. There was no way that he was going to salute a man who had never earned his right to be saluted.

Overhead the Nautical sounded its boarding horns, braying with tremulous urgency. Air sirens whooped as the boarding ramp locked into position. Below, the assembled soldiery snapped their heels and stood to attention in unison. Kaplain sighed wearily and stubbed out his tabac with the heel of his boot.

Slowly, with measured strides, Cardinal Lior Avanti descended the ramp. Avanti was overwhelmingly tall and upright for a man of so many centuries. Although the skin of his face was like veined parchment, his features were heavily boned and well proportioned. A web of metal tubes sutured to his nostrils trailed into his voluminous robes, connecting him to a life-support system deep within his attire.

His every movement was deliberate and sure, exuding a great conviction that he could do no wrong. His holy vestments of embroidered tapestry, rich with midnight blue and purple, cascaded in perfectly measured lines, strangely unmoving despite the whipping ocean wind. Over this he was draped in a cope of needled gold and a lace train of tremendous length. Behind him, walking two abreast, sisters of the Adepta Sororitas in white power armour carried his lace train for a length of eight bearers.

The cardinal finally reached the ramp's landing and levelled his gaze on the Imperial officers. He drew an imperious breath.

'Gentlemen. Every morning I pray for victory. Do you?' Avanti asked.

Major General Montalvo risked a sidelong glance at Admiral de Ruger, syllables stuttering behind their teeth but not forming any words. Kaplain, however, kept to the old regimental adage – ‘Keep your chin down, your eyes high and your mouth shut.’ He did exactly that, keeping himself towards the rear of the assembly. For Kaplain, this entire meeting was a farce. He would have much preferred to be back on base camp where he was needed. In the past few days they had experienced a spike in insurgent activity and there were even rumours that they had lost favour with the local loyalists in the surrounding provinces. In his opinion, he had much better things to do than curry favour with the Ecclesiarchy, but orders were orders.

The cardinal approached Major General Montalvo and placed a hand on the officer’s shoulder. The squat, pugnacious general shuffled uncomfortably from foot to foot for a brief second. Kaplain almost pitied the man. He was already sweating profusely underneath his fur mantle and copper plate and doubtless the cardinal’s attention did little to abate his condition.

‘It hurts my heart,’ the cardinal proclaimed. He turned to address the entire assembly before continuing. ‘It hurts my heart to think that men of the Imperium are not fighting hard enough or faithfully enough to have ended this war already.’

Montalvo looked to Admiral de Ruger for support. De Ruger simply stared straight ahead to attention, evidently glad that he was not the object of the cardinal’s ire. When no help was forthcoming, Montalvo gritted his teeth. ‘We are operating at maximum capacity considering the situation. Strategically, the enemy hold the mainland and its super-heavy siege-batteries,’ he conceded.

‘Yes, I’ve already heard enough about the curtain guns that it hurts my head at their mentioning. I’ve known about these siege-batteries since you landed. I can’t figure out why, with so many troops at your disposal, you cannot wrest control of these defence silos from the enemy?’ At this, Avanti directed his gaze on Admiral de Ruger, expecting an answer.

Kaplain was now more amused than before. Admiral de Ruger, a thin man with avian features, long of face and long of neck, began to fumble for an explanation. For a moment, the wide-eyed look on the admiral’s face threatened to dislodge the monocle he wore over his left eye. It amazed Kaplain that two of the most dominant military officers in the subsector were being terrorised by an old man with barely functioning joints.

‘We’ve performed numerous bombing runs but the canopy is dense and the super batteries are well fortified due to terrain. But we will send more, increase bombing runs twofold, supplies allowing.’

Avanti leaned in close, a smile curling the corners of his mouth, but there was no mirth in his slitted grey eyes. ‘Then why can we not dissuade these indigenous savages from undoing the good work of the God-Emperor here? What is it about these savages that His armies cannot overcome?’

Now it was Admiral de Ruger who looked to Montalvo for support. Neither officer spoke a word.

‘Because they’re holding the super-heavy battery on the mainland and blasting the snot out of our transport craft every time we attempt to deploy anything,’ Kaplain called from the rear.

The brigadier could not help himself. He would bring an end to this farce. He had little regard for the Ecclesiarchy. As far as he was concerned, the military and theology were distinctly separate entities and he did not answer to the cardinal. Pushing his way through the ceremonial troops, jostling aside platter bearers and junior attendants, Kaplain emerged at the front of the assembly.

‘What my comrades here are trying to say, in the simplest terms, is that the insurgents have captured the island’s big gun. This big gun blows up big boats. But we need big boats to deploy troops onto the mainland, and we need big boats to run supply lanes in order to sustain any mass mobilisation. But as long as this big gun remains in enemy hands, we have to skulk beyond their range.’

Although Kaplain’s fellow officers were glowering at him with unrestrained anger, the brigadier continued. ‘So, for the past four months, we’ve been sending piecemeal patrols into the wilderness and getting thoroughly licked. I would send in an expedition, but my esteemed comrades here,’ Kaplain gestured at his fellow high officers, ‘outrank me, and refuse to do anything but send high-altitude bombing to disable the guns. They don’t seem to understand that the heavy canopy cover and terrain protect the battery and renders it almost impervious to bombardment, and I can’t send my boys out there without support. And that, my surly friend, is why these savages are tying your hosieries into a knot.’

There came a collective gasp from the audience. Several members of the Adepta Sororitas took a step towards the brigadier, their plated boots thudding with intention. For a moment, Kaplain wondered whether his Ouisivian manners had pushed the cardinal too far. But the cardinal began to chortle. His laughter wheezed

through bundles of tubing that connected his nostrils to pressure filters hidden beneath his voluminous robes, sounding like a discordant metal organ.

‘Well said, brigadier. I appreciate your candour,’ commented Avanti with his eyes twinkling. He turned back to Montalvo and de Ruger. ‘You could learn much from this man. You propose a different method, brigadier?’

The generals began to trip verbally and wring out excuses. They listed a lack of sufficient logistics, supplies and even blamed the monsoonal weather. But the cardinal had ceased to pay them attention.

‘It’s hot and I don’t like this weather. I need to retire to my chambers,’ the cardinal decided. ‘Brigadier, if I give you authority to commit to an inland operation, can you break this stalemate?’

Kaplain nodded. ‘Yes. But my men will need low altitude overhead support. I won’t send my soldiers out there into enemy territory without any lifelines. I expect Vulture gunships and Persepeian aviators to ghost them.’

‘Pure folly,’ the admiral interjected. ‘The enemy have access to anti-air weaponry. I will not expose my fliers on low altitude runs.’

‘Stop saying words,’ the cardinal ordered. ‘You will give the 31st Riverine all the support they need to conduct this operation. I want those guns silenced with all possible haste.’

The officers knew that all discussion was over. The admiral saluted crisply, and Montalvo slapped the breast of his armour with the flat of his palm in respect.

The cardinal turned his back on them. ‘Excellent! Dismissed.’

The assembly dispersed swiftly as the generals stalked away towards their waiting Valkyries. Already the engines were whirling to life and ready to airlift them back to their mainland provinces.

Kaplain watched his fellow officers leave, growling angrily and snapping at their attendants. Chortling, the brigadier reached into his breast pocket and slid out a tabac stick.

‘Are you an intelligent man, brigadier?’

Kaplain looked up, the tabac hanging unlit between his fingers. Cardinal Avanti stood before him, smiling with only his mouth. Despite Kaplain’s considerable height, the cardinal was far taller and thinner, towering over the brigadier with his spectral shadow.

‘That can be subjective,’ Kaplain said, staring up at the cardinal. He was not intimidated by Avanti, if that was what the cardinal was

trying to achieve. The old man moved in closer, far closer than would be considered a polite distance.

‘I’d like to think you are. So I’ll tell you this, brigadier.’ The cardinal leaned in towards Kaplain, smelling strongly of ointment and rose powder. ‘If you ever patronise me like that again, I will have you executed for contempt of the Emperor’s servants. That’s just how it works, my boy. Dismissed.’

Kaplain said nothing as Cardinal Avanti and his lace bearers slid up the docking ramp. Cardinal or not, the next time Avanti threatened him like that, Kaplain swore he would shoot the man himself. That was the way the 31st Riverine worked on Ouisivia.

AT THE CENTRE OF the Bastón mainland, at equal distance from the western seaboard and eastern peninsula, the Earthwrecker was a conduit of maritime dominance. A rail-mounted artillery piece based on the Earthshaker design, the super-heavy Earthwrecker was an immense artefact of war. It lay dormant in a subterranean rail network built specifically for its containment, a military installation situated in the Kalinga Curtain and stationed with six thousand PDF servicemen. Unstoppable, undefeatable, its machine pulse could be felt across the archipelagos. Girdled by hills and powered by iron-hulled engines, it was manoeuvred ponderously by way of rail-track to any number of firing vents carved into the hillside.

The Kalinga Curtain covered an area of thirty-five square kilometres and contained an entire underground rail system and hundreds of anti-air raid structures. The subterranean complex was said to have been mostly hand-dug by eighty thousand local residents during the first stages of Imperial rule.

Inevitably, it was the first target of the Carnibalès and fell into insurgent hands in the early stages of the war. With its eight-tonne rocket-propelled warheads, the Carnibalès had managed to thwart every Imperial attempt to land troops or supplies onto the mainland. Insurgent forward observers, usually no more than rebel peasants with hand-held vox-units, kept a vigilant watch for Imperial movement. When such movement was spied, the inevitable warheads would roar. The Imperial Guard lost thousands to the Earthwrecker in those early stages of conflict.

The Persepien Nautical Fleet wasted thousands of tonnes of munitions in relentless bombing sorties in an effort to neutralise the threat but to no result. The gun’s very presence emboldened the insurgency. It allowed a dissident force of ill-equipped

agriculturalists to stalemate many times their number of disciplined, well-trained Imperial Guard.

EVERY FEW DAYS, the shores of mainland Bastón would light up with the rolling thunder of detonations. For several hundred metres along the eastern coastline, amphibious transport vessels would disgorge waves of Guardsmen who waded through the sand, lancing the air with las-fire. The Guardsmen of the 31st Riverine Amphibious practised their live fire drills here. In between the monotony and terror of river patrols, the men of the 31st worked on their land assault tactics in the hope that soon, maybe in the coming weeks, the Serrado siege-batteries would be silenced. When that day came, the Imperial armies would deploy en masse and come to grips with the enemy. Until then, they trained.

Against the backdrop of ocean and jungle, these Guardsmen were quite a sight. Bronzed and tall, they wore fatigues of swampland camouflage: a splinter pattern of pale, milky green and dusty tan that had been produced for the jade swamps and sandy riverbanks from whence they came. Sweating in the subtropical heat, many of the troopers cut the sleeves and legs off their standard-issue fatigues. It was entirely against regulation, but Riverine officers understood the men under their command and, by their nature, draconian discipline would likely have an adverse affect.

They committed many other offences that were against regulation too. Bandoleers of ammunitions were slung across their chests exposed to dust. Autoguns were shortened, the webbing around their hips was loosened, magazines were taped and blades hidden. Above all, the threat of infection in sweltering climates prevented shaving and every man was thickly bearded. Each a minor infraction within itself, their accumulated discrepancies earned them quite a reputation amongst the other Imperial regiments they served with.

On this day it was the men of the 88th Battalion of the 31st Riverine Regiment that came ashore for their assault drills. They were five hundred and fifty men in all, transported by a flotilla that lined up for the race to shore. The forty swift boats got a head start, for they had to arrive first. Their lean-bladed profiles painted in the cream green and tan of the Riverine colours bounced atop the tidal waves as their gunners swept the beach with their mounted bolters. Next came the inflatable assault landers, black rubber and U-shaped. Each carried a twelve-man squad of Riverine troops. Behind them

came a support squadron of fifteen gunboats, flat hulled and fifteen metres in length. These were robust vessels resembling squat river barges, each housing a single autocannon or heavy flamer. Oversized flags of the 31st Riverine, displaying the sword and dragonfly, flew proudly from most boats; a glorious touch.

The waters of Solo-Bastón were clear, far too clear when compared to the silty bog that the Riverine were accustomed to on Ouisivia. The vessels beached themselves too far out from the shore and the men in the rubber landers splashed into the water, dragging their inflatables behind them. The sand was loose too – not like the sucking mud of home, which was firm and slippery. Here and there a Guardsman tripped and fell into the waist-high water, resurfacing with laboured gasps.

‘Secure positions at the sandbanks. I don’t want any piecemeal formation like last time,’ barked Colonel Fyodor Baeder of the 88th Battalion.

The colonel ran at the front of his men, taking care to lead the pack. At thirty-three years standard, he exerted himself more than any of the younger men. He took care to lead by exemplary performance, as respect between the soldiers of the 31st and their officers was difficult to earn and easy to lose. These were resilient men, and Baeder knew that they did not respect him. He was a new officer amongst their ranks, transferred to the 88th Battalion after their last commanding officer ‘disappeared’ during a cleanse operation.

It did not help that theirs was a lawless world. On Ouisivia, the steaming semi-habitable swamplands created rugged men who eked out a living netting for shrimp or hunting for gator or swamp rat. It was either that, or join the Guard. Colonel Baeder himself had been born and educated within the sheltered administrative parishes and, like many of his fellow officers, had attended military academy in the urban heartland of Norlens. He was not welcome amongst these swampmen and he knew it.

‘Hold this line steady,’ Baeder yelled as he crashed belly-first into the sand dune. He dragged the last ounces of strength from his lactic-burnt limbs and made sure to edge himself ahead of his men. They leopard-crawled through the sand, heaving and grunting. Something popped in the colonel’s lower rib, but he could not stop or his men would make their disdain well known to him. ‘You move like old people dance! On! On!’ Baeder urged, with a confidence his body did not feel. Over their heads, the gunboats and swift boats

shredded the rainforest ahead with heavy support fire. The noise and exertion was physically deadening.

Finally, they reached a long sandbar before the tree line. The Riverine lay prone behind their lasrifles and snapped sheeting volleys into the vegetation, chopping down trees and brush. Under the combined firepower of the battalion, even the thick-limbed gum-saps leaned and fell over.

‘Cease fire! Cease fire!’ Colonel Baeder yelled hoarsely into the battalion vox-unit. The firing withered and died away. Exhausted, his men rolled over onto their backs, staring at the sky. Others tugged their canteens from their hip webbing, taking long, throat-bobbing gulps. Baeder had no doubt that it was not purely water his men were drinking.

‘Well done, ramrods. Seven minutes and eighteen seconds. Best time this week.’ Despite his weariness, Baeder did not wish to show fatigue or thirst in front of his new battalion. Instead he hauled himself up and began to move down the line on shaking legs, making ammunition and weapon checks.

After the battalion was settled, Colonel Baeder stood before his line of soldiers. They lounged on the sand before him, canteen bottles uncapped, looking up at him while shielding their eyes from the early morning sun. Baeder liked to think he was what an Imperial officer should look like but he knew that was likely not to be the case. He was not tall compared to most of his men, and certainly not as thickly shouldered. Rather, he was slight of build, with a young boyish face and, unlike the other men of the 31st, Baeder could not summon more than patchy stubble on his chin and neck. He knew it would be a long while, if ever, before the battalion would be used to him. But despite his appearance, Baeder had a fine martial record, and his neck bore the scar of a swamp ork’s teeth. The bite formed a ridged scar two fingers from his jugular as testament to his experience. Baeder knew how to run a battalion and he would make these men understand.

‘Today was an acceptable time. It has been our best all week. Incidentally, this week has been far the worst since I joined this battalion. I don’t know if it is boredom, or the lack of a tangible fight, but we are getting lax. We cannot allow the 88th to become the worst battalion in the 31st Riverine.’

The men began to murmur. They knew what was coming and some even cursed openly and loudly.

Baeder nodded. 'Reorg. We're running the drill again until we can hit under six flat. Be up and ready to move in five minutes.'

By mid-afternoon, the battalion had run the drill another five times over. Their clothes were crusted with a fine evaporation of sweat and seawater. At the end of the sixth landing drill, most of the men lay face down in the sand with their eyes closed. Some, less fortunate, were dry retching into the sand. Colonel Baeder moved briskly down the line, hiding his weariness well. He worked relentlessly, first moving to each and every man, praising him for his efforts and offering him water. Next, he gathered his captains and sergeants together for an analysis of their performance. Not once did he sit or slake his thirst. Finally, after his duties were fulfilled, Colonel Baeder left his battalion strewn across the sand at rest, and slipped into the tree line on his own.

Staggering into the humid darkness of vegetation, out of sight, the colonel braced his arms against the trunk of a gum-sap and bent over double. He vomited. He emptied his stomach until he tasted the acidic burn of bile and his lungs locked up with exertion. Completely and utterly drained, Baeder collapsed as the straining ligaments of his hamstrings went out underneath him.

'I knew I would find you here.'

Colonel Baeder craned his head and saw a tall, thin figure standing before him in crisp fatigues. The man stood with his hands on his hips, shaking his head.

'Brigadier Kaplain, sir.' Baeder struggled to push his back against the tree and rise to salute.

The brigadier waved him down. 'At ease, at ease. You've done enough for today.' Crouching down next to the sprawled out colonel, Kaplain proffered him a canteen of water.

'How are you settling in with the 88th?'

With a heave of effort, Baeder wedged his back against the tree into a slumped sitting position. 'They are a hard bunch. It takes more than some dog-pissed inspirational speech to get them moving. Constant action is what they need.'

Kaplain laughed. 'Speeches? This isn't some war hero story. Leave the talking to the Commissariat.'

'True as that may be, I'd like to instil some sense of trust between the men and me before we may have to mobilise as a battalion. So far I've had the platoon on rotational patrols, fragmented puissant business.'

Kaplain smiled. 'Let me guess – the closest you've got to combat so far has been reading patrol reports from your platoon commanders?'

'I need a cure for the itch, sir,' Baeder shrugged.

The brigadier clapped the colonel on the back knowingly. 'If your legs can still move, take a walk with me, the Persepan Nautical Fleet are bombing the hills again. It's a glorious if wasteful sight.'

The two staff officers meandered back out onto the beach as squadrons of winged craft climbed to high altitude overhead. As they scaled the slippery tusks of igneous rock that littered the coastal slopes, bombs were already spilling out over the high hills of the mainland.

Kaplain gestured at the undulating horizon, carpeted in green. Explosions were swelling up in the distance, tiny bubbles of orange that burst into rolling black smoke and flame. The hills were trembling as the chain of explosions popped and expanded. 'Those damned siege-batteries. Who would have thought that a handful of insurgents could stalemate twenty divisions of Imperial fighting men.'

'I understand that the Persepan Aviation boys have been flying sorties to the mainland night and day. We've barely had any sleep from the constant noise,' Baeder replied. Although they were too far off to be seen, Baeder could imagine the Marauder bombers of Persepia, painted chalk blue, devastating the landscape on wide banking runs.

'The Earthwrecker sunk another one this week, you know. High Command have kept the sinking classified, but word will be out sooner or later,' said Kaplain.

'Sir?'

'A Persepan Argo-Nautical. The warship Thrice Avenged attempted to land fourteen thousand Motor Rifles onto the mainland just two days ago. It managed to sail within visual distance of the island before the super-heavies began firing ordnance on it. One shell went clear through the hull and the whole mess went down within minutes. We lost about ten thousand Caliguans and almost the entire crew. What a disaster.'

Baeder was not sure how to accept the news. In a way he was angered by the High Command's relentless stupidity. It was not the first time the Nautical Fleet had lost one of its precious warships to the siege-batteries. If the two warships sunk in the early days of the

war did not teach them to stop deploying the vessels, then the subsequent three sunk in the following months should have. Yet they persisted, sending one after another of the great warships towards the mainland loaded with supplies, fuel and men, hoping that this one would make it through unnoticed by the siege-batteries and their distant spotters.

Rudimentary logic would have concluded that, where one tactic has failed, trying it repeatedly would not increase the success rate. But that was exactly what High Command had continued to do. The war had begun with a full complement of twelve great Nautical warships, a dozen floating fortresses that should have stopped the war within days. Now, four months later, they were left with seven and were no closer to finishing the war than when they had started.

‘That’s a mess, sir. Are the pilots homing in on the exact coordinates of these super-heavy pieces? My men are getting testy. We’re burning out from the waiting, sir.’

Faraway, the explosions began to calm. Fire, like an emergent sun, glared on the horizon, burning thousands of acres. Kaplain watched the pyrotechnics for some time before replying. ‘A deeply fortified gun piece. We know it’s dug-in on a range of hills known as the Kalinga Curtain with a cannon large enough to compensate for the cardinal’s glaring insecurities. We have approximate locations from old PDF schematics, but the gun is embedded in an underground system and the Persepians are too scared to fly any lower. We probably haven’t even scratched its paint job.’

Judging by the crease of Kaplain’s brow, Baeder knew there was something the brigadier wanted to say. Finally, Baeder could wait no longer. ‘What will High Command do now then, sir?’

‘High Command wants me to send troops into the heart of Bastón. I’m going to send you.’

‘Sir?’

Kaplain nodded. ‘The siege-batteries are preventing us from launching any sustained assault on the mainland; you know this. The Motor Rifles need fuel and transport for their vehicles and it’s obvious the Persepians are trapped out at high anchor. The Riverine are the only regiment who have a foothold on the mainland. We can’t take this island ourselves, but we can send in a smaller probing force to find and disable this gun. I’m sending the 88th to fix this mess.’

‘Sir. We’re not ready. The 88th Battalion is not cohesive yet. I’ve been with my men for four months! We have not even operated

at a company level. Any of the other battalions are more tightly knit, even the 76th, frag it, even the 123rd would do a better job.'

'Don't make this harder than it has to be, Baeder.' Kaplain suddenly looked very weary. 'It doesn't get any easier for me to send men to their deaths. This will be a dangerous operation. You will lose men, colonel. But we need this done, and I can't entrust a lesser battalion with the job.'

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