

ANCESTRAL VOICES

S. M. Stirling

"Shall I provide a map display of the tactical situation?" The Mark III Bolo sounded slightly hopeful.

"Who needs maps?" Lieutenant Martins said. "Take a goddamn piece of paper, crumple it up, and you've *got* a map of this goddamn country, and the towns are worse."

"My optical storage capacity extends to 1:1 mapping of this entire hemisphere," the tank said.

It didn't add that the street-maps of this particular Central American city were hopelessly obsolete. Unchecked fires and squatters almost as destructive had altered it beyond recognition over the past decade.

The Mark III Bolo still used the sultry-sweet female voice poor Vinatelli had programmed in; Martins told herself that the hint of injured pride was her imagination. The plump newbie's bones were pushing up the daisies—or bougainvillea—back in the Company's old firebase in the now-defunct Republic of San Gabriel a few hundred miles to the south, but the Mark III was still with them. Being sent a giant state-of-the-art tank had seemed right on schedule with the general madness and decay, a couple of months ago. They'd been virtually cut off from even routine resupply, and then the Pentagon had delivered a mobile automated firebase instead of ammunition or replacements. Now . . .

If the Company had any chance of getting back to what was left of the USA, the Bolo would be the key. It was also much more comfortable than sitting outside in a UATV, a Utility All-Terrain Vehicle. A nice soft crash-couch, surrounded by display screen that could register data in any format she chose; there was even a port-a-potty and a cooler, although the supply of Jolt had given out. You could fight a major battle in this thing without even cracking a sweat—and with 150 tons of density-enhanced durachrome armor, about as much risk as playing a video game.

Bethany Martins hated it. She hadn't joined a Light Infantry unit to sit in a cramped moving fort. Still, you used what you had. She shifted in the crash-couch restraints at the next message.

"Target two hundred sixty degrees left, range one thousand forty-three, target is bunker. Engaging."

A screen slaved to the infinite repeaters showed an aiming-pip, sliding across the burning buildings. Bars of light snapped out as the coils gripped the depleted-uranium slugs and accelerated them to—literally—astronomical speeds. Where they struck, kinetic energy flashed into heat. What followed was not technically an explosion, but the building shuddered and slid into the street like a slow-motion avalanche.

The Company's troopers advanced across the shifting rubble. Screens focused on them, or showed the jiggling pickups of the helmet cameras. Part of that was the ground shaking under the Bolo as it advanced, maneuvering with finicky delicacy.

"Give me a scan of the area right of our axis of advance," she said to the machine. "Sonic and thermal." The computer overlaid the visual with a schematic, identifying sources of heat or hard metal, sorting shapes and enhancing. Martins nodded to herself and switched to the unit push.

"Right four-ten, Captain," Martins said. "Heat source."

She could see the M-35 in the commander's hands turn. Then the picture tumbled and the weapon went skidding across the stones, catching on a burning window frame. Bullets flailed the ground around the

Americans, and a hypervelocity rocket streaked out at the Bolo. Intercepted, it blew up in a magenta globe of flame halfway across the street. The first screen showed a tumbling view of dirt as someone dragged the Company commander backwards.

"Captain's hit, Captain's hit—medic, medic!" a voice was shouting.

"Suppressing fire!" Martins shouted, cursing herself. *It's not alive.* But it gave such a good imitation you could forget it had no judgment.

"Acknowledged," the tranquil sex-goddess tones replied.

BRAP. That was audible even through the armor; the main ring-gun mounted along the axis of the vehicle cutting loose. The impact was half a mile away; evidently the machinery had detected something important there. The infinite repeaters opened up all at once, threading with needle accuracy around the pinned-down troopers of the Company. Enemy fire shredded and vanished.

"McNaught's out cold, broken leg, doesn't look too bad otherwise," a voice said. Sergeant Jenkins, the senior NCO.

Martins nodded. "We're pulling out, Tops. Northwest, transmission follows." She traced the Bolo's idea of the optimum path, then transmitted it to Jenkins's helmet display with a blip of data.

Silence For a moment. Then: "Ma'am—" That was a bad sign, Tops getting formal. "—we're awful short of supplies, fuel too, and there's nothing much there."

That was why the Captain had taken the chance of coming into an urban area; better pickings. The problem was that pickings attracted predators.

"Do it, Tops. We've got enough firepower to level this place but we don't have enough troopers to *hold* it long enough to get what we need."

"Wilco."

The Mark III turned and headed northwest. A building was in the way, but the great vehicle only heaved slightly as it crushed its way through in a shower of beams and powdered adobe. The sensation of power would have been more intoxicating if Beth-any Martins hadn't been quite so hungry.

Two days later, she popped the hatch and stuck her head out. There was no point in talking to an AI, after all; it wasn't conscious, just a bundle of reflexes. Although a very *good* bundle of reflexes.

For once the air outside wasn't too hot; they'd climbed a ridge above the jungle and they were a couple of thousand feet up. The line of volcanoes ahead of them shimmered blue and green in the morning light, densely forested, patches of mist on their sides. This forest smelled different from the dry scrub and limestone back in San Gabriel, intensely green with an undertang like spoiled bread or yeast. It reminded her of childhood, the time her father had tried making beer in the basement. The barrel had shattered in the night, leaving the floor two inches deep in half-fermented suds, and the smell had never come out of the concrete. The jungle smelled a little like that.

There was the odd patch of smoke, too, where the locals burned off the cover to plant their crops. Her tongue touched her lips. Supplies were short, now that they'd gotten out of the inhabited country.

"Anything new on the net from back homer"

That was Captain McNaught. He was sitting in one of the UATVs, a light six-wheeled truck built so low to the ground it looked squashed, with six balloon wheels of spun-alloy mesh. His splinted foot rested on the dashboard, beside the muzzle of his M-35.

"Nothing I can make sense of, Captain," she said. "California just left the Union. San Francisco just seceded from California. And that's not the worst of the weird shit coming down."

They'd called the United States *Reality* back in San Gabriel, while they'd been fighting the Glorious Way guerrillas. Since the recall order, that was beginning to look like a very sick joke. Things had been going to hell *before* some crazed Russian shot down the President, the Veep and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs over Alaska.

"Well, if you can bear to leave the air-conditioned comfort—" McNaught said.

"Yeah," Martins muttered, tucking the printout into a shoulder pocket of her armor and picking up her helmet and M-35.

The climb down was a long one. The Mark III weighed 150 tons, and looked it—the Bolo was essentially a four-sided pyramid with the top lopped off, bent and smoothed where the armor was sloped for maximum deflection, jagged with sensor-arrays and weapons. Two sets of double tracks underlay it, each nearly six feet broad and supported on eight interleaved road wheels, underlying nearly half the surface of the vehicles. She dropped to the ground with a grunt—her body-armor weighed about a tenth of her mass—and walked over to the commander's vehicle.

The ten UATVs of the light infantry company were parked around the perimeter of the scrubby clearing. They'd all turned off their ceramic diesels, and the loudest noises were the buzzing of insects and the raucous cries of birds. Everyone was looking at her as if she knew a solution to their problems; all seventy-five of the troopers, and the half-dozen or so hangers-on, mostly girls. Everyone looked hungry. They *were* hungry.

"There *was* a road through here," she said to McNaught. "Problem is, I don't think anyone's used it since before either of us was born. Since things started going bad—and they went bad there first."

"Big Brother can use the route?" Sergeant Jenkins flipped up the faceshield-visor of his helmet. The path behind them was crushed flat and hard; the Bolo pulped hundred-foot trees as if they were stalks of cane.

"Oh, sure—but if there isn't enough traffic to keep it open, where are we going to get food or fuel?"

The Mark III was powered by ionic batteries; it could travel thousands of miles on one charge, and carried acres of monomolecular solar film in one of its dispensers. The UATVs were combustion powered; their ceramic diesels would burn anything from raw petroleum to bathtub gin, but they needed *something*. So did their passengers.

The three leaders looked at each other. McNaught had freckles and thinning reddish hair, and a runner's lanky body; Jenkins was the color of eggplant and built like a slab of basalt; Martins was wiry and olive-skinned, with short-cropped black hair and green eyes. All of them had been together through the Glorio war and its aftermath; they could communicate without much need for words. *We can't go back*. They'd left a hornet's nest behind them, one way and another, and gringos had never been too popular down here. *We can't stop*. This jungle wouldn't feed a coatimundi, much less ninety human beings.

"*Why* do the locals keep fighting us?" McNaught asked.

Because they're starving themselves, Martins thought irritably, then forced herself to relax. The Captain was hurting and pumped full of painkillers. The locals were hurting too; first the world-wide collapse, a slow-motion catastrophe that had gone berserk in the last year. Chaos with that, and the famine that usually followed anarchy, harder than any drought. At that, things seemed to be going down the tube even faster back home. When worst came to worst people around here could go back to being subsistence farmers, and try conclusions with the hordes of cityfolk-turned-bandits. That wasn't much of an option in the USA.

They were going home because there didn't seem to be much alternative. And they couldn't go forward without something to run on.

"Hey, Top," Martins said meditatively. "Doesn't Carmody's squeeze come from around here?"

The big black man frowned, then grinned. "Now that you mention it, El-Tee, she does. Most recent intelligence we're likely to get."

"Lord of the Mountain, First Speaker of the Sun People, there is no doubt."

The cool whitewashed room was empty save for the old man and the messenger. The man who had once been Manuel Obregon leaned back in his chair and examined the youngster who sank to one knee before him, still panting with his run, trim in cotton culottes and sandals. Seven-Deer was one of his best; a steady young man, and reliable.

"Go on," Obregon said, stroking his chin reflectively.

Pleasant sounds drifted through the tall arched windows; masons' chisels, the clack of a loom, a woman singing. There were smells of tortillas cooking, flowers, turned earth, and underneath it a faint sulphur reek. He used them to cut free of worry and thought, making his mind a clear pool for the scout's words. He would absorb it, and then analyze.

"Sixty, perhaps seventy of the *yanqui* soldiers, and with them some *Ladino* women from the south. A dozen little trucks with six wheels each, some pulling carts."

"They are *yanqui*, beyond doubt? Not government soldiers of San Gabriel, not terrorists of the Glorious Way?"

"No, Lord of the Mountain, First Speaker of the Sun People." Seven-Deer touched the jade plug in his lower lip for emphasis. "The farmers I spoke with saw them closely and heard them speak English. Also . . ."

He hesitated, his eyes sliding aside for the first time. "Go on," Obregon said, schooling impatience out of his voice.

"They said the *yanquis* had with them a mountain that walked."

Obregon's age-spotted hands tightened on the arms of his chair. The scout swallowed: "I only repeat—"

"Yes, yes."

The old man stood and walked to the window. Across the plaza and the town, over the patchwork fields of the basin, a thin trickle of smoke rose in the air from the notched summit of the Smoker.

"I saw myself great tracks and crushed jungle," the scout went on, gathering confidence. "Like this." He unfolded a paper.

So. A *tank*, Obregon thought, surprised. It had been a very long time since heavy war vehicles came into these remote uplands. Then he caught the neatly drawn scale. Each of the tread-tracks was wider than a man was tall, and there were four of them impossibly close together.

"A mountain that walks," he said to himself—in Spanish, not Nahuatl. "But does it *burn*?"

Seven-Deer's eyes flicked sideways to the sky-pillar of dark smoke that reached upward from the mountain, and he shuddered with awe and fear and worship.

"Your orders, Lord of the Mountain, First Speaker of the Sun People?"

"Report to One-Coyote that the Jaguar Knights are to be mobilized, and the border guards strengthened. We cannot allow outsiders to prey upon our people."

"Lord of the Mountain, First Speaker of the Sun People," Seven-Deer said, greatly daring, "they are only Ladinos beyond the mountain—and perhaps the *yanqui* will turn aside before the pass."

Obregon nodded. "Yet they pay us tribute," he said. "And their blood is ours." His own face showed more Europoid genes than the scout's did, or than most of the people in the valley. "In time, they will return to the ways of the Ancestors; as we did, after many years of following the false gods of the Ladinos. This valley is our base, not our prison—we must be ready to expand beyond it. Now go."

And, Obregon thought, looking up at the darkening sky, *Venus is nearing the holy place*. The favor of the gods was not bought cheaply. The *yanqui* troops could be valuable, in their way.

Outside, the masons shouted cheerfully to each other as they worked on the last level of the stepped pyramid—small, but brilliant with whitewash, gaudy along its base with murals in the ancient style he had reconstructed from books and disks. It would be ready soon. '

And in the end you must go, he thought regretfully, looking at that library. In a way, he would miss the ancient videos more than the anthropological texts. The latter held the voice of the ancient gods, but they would live—live more truly—when they existed only as words spoken among the people. The videos were his only vice; he was not a man who needed much in the way of women or wealth or luxury. In a way, it was sad to think that they must die with him . . . for he too could never really be a part of the world he was bringing to birth.

He selected his favorite; viewing it would calm him, and it was a minor indulgence, after all.

"The Wicker Man," he read from the spine, as he slid the chip into its slot and pulled the goggles over his eyes.

Me and my big mouth, Martins thought. The problem was that she *was* the best one for the job; her Spanish was better than Jenkins', since she'd grown up in Santa Fe.

The view through her faceshield was flat and silvery, as the sandwich crystal picked up the starlight and amplified it. The fighting patrol eeled through the undergrowth from tree to tree, their heads turning with lizard quickness as the sensors in their helmets filtered light and sound. These were *big* trees, bigger than she'd thought survived anywhere in the isthmus. Not too much undergrowth, except where one of the forest giants had fallen and vines and saplings rioted. Not much light either, stray gleams through the

upper canopy, but the faceshield could work with very little. The Americans moved quickly; every one of them had survived at least three years in the bad bush, where you learned the right habits or died fast.

Martins made a hand signal, and the patrol froze. They went to ground and crawled as they neared a clearing. Thick bush along the edges, then scattered irregular orchards of mango and citrus and plantains. She felt saliva spurt over her teeth at the sight, and somewhere a cow mooed—steak on the hoof. And where there were people and food, there would be some sort of slash; distilling was a universal art. The UATVs could run on that.

"Careful," she whispered on the unit push. "We don't want to off any of the indigs if we can avoid it."

Not that lifting their stuff was going to make them feel very friendly, but there was no need to put them on a fast burn.

Planted fields, maize and cassava and upland rice. Then a village, mud-and-wattle huts with thatch roofs. It smelled cleaner than most, less of the chicken-shit-and-pigs aroma you came to expect. Nothing stirring; through the walls she could see the faint IR traces of the sleeping inhabitants. A man stumbled through one door, fumbling with the drawstring of his dingy white-cotton pants. A trooper ghosted up behind him and swung his arm in a short, chopping arc. There was a dull sound—a chamois bag full of lead shot does not make much noise when slapped against a skull—and the indig slumped into waiting arms.

"*Proceeding*," she whispered on the unit push. Captain McNaught would be watching through the helmet pickups.

She wasn't quite sure which was worse; being out here at the sharp end, or being stuck back there helpless with a broken leg. Call-signs came in as the squad-leaders took up position.

"Right." She raised her M-35 and fired a burst into the air, a short sharp *braaap* of sound.

Voices rose; a few at first, enquiring. Then a chorus of screams. Martins sighed and signaled; a flare popped into being high overhead, bathing the village in actinic blue-white light. That was for the benefit of the locals, to let them see the armed soldiers surrounding them.

"Out, out, everybody *out!*"

That and slamming on doors with rifle-butts was enough to get them moving. Martin's mouth twisted with distaste. *Robbing peasants wasn't what I joined up for either.* There had been altogether too much of that, back in San Gabriel, after the supply lines back to the US broke down.

Although when it came down to a choice between stealing and starving, there wasn't much of a dispute.

The noise died down to a resentful babbling as the two hundred or so of the little hamlet's people crowded into the dirt square before the ramshackle church. Very ramshackle; the roof had fallen in, and goats were wandering through the nave. That was a slightly jarring note; mostly the people in this part of the world took churches seriously. And it wasn't one of the areas where everyone had been converted by the Baptists back in the '90s, either.

Jenkins trotted up, flipping up the faceshield of his helmet. There was a slight frown on his basalt face.

"Not a single goddam gun, El-Tee."

She raised a brow, then remembered to raise her visor in turn. A village without a few AKs was even more unusual than one that let its church fall down.

"Not just rifles—no shotguns, no pistols, *nothing*."

Something coiled beneath her breastbone. They might have hidey-holes for the hardware that would defeat the sonic and microray sensors in the Americans' helmets, even the scanner set Sparky was packing, but they wouldn't have buried every personal gat and hunting shotgun. In fact, since they hadn't known the soldiers were coming, they shouldn't have hidden anything. You keep a gun for emergencies, and a gun buried ten feet deep is a little hard to get to in a hurry.

She looked at the peasants. Better fed than most she'd seen over the past half-decade, and almost plump compared to what had been coming down recently, with the final collapse of the world economy.

"If the indigs can't defend themselves, bandits should have been all over them like ugly on an ape," she said meditatively.

"Right," Jenkins said. Which meant that the locals—or somebody—*had* been defending this area.

The locals were murmuring louder, some of them trying to sneak off. She was getting hard stares, and a few spat on the ground. That was wrong too. Far too self-confident . . .

Well, I can fix that, she thought, keying her helmet.

"Front and center," she whispered.

It took a while for the sound to register over the frightened, resentful voices. When it did it was more of a sensation, a trembling felt through the feet and shins. A few screams of *earthquake!* died away; the ground was shaking, but not in quite that way. Harsh blue-white light shone from the jungle, drawing their eyes. Trees shivered at their tops, then whipped about violently and fell with a squealing, rending crackle. What shouldered the forest giants aside like stems of grass was huge even in relation to the trees. The steel-squeal of its four treads grated like fingernails on a blackboard, crushing a path of pulp stamped harder than rock behind it. The snouts of weapons and antennas bristled . . .

Now the villagers were silent. Martins walked up to the huge machine and swung aboard as it slowed, climbing the rungs set into the null until she stood at its apex. When it halted, she removed her helmet.

When she spoke, her voice boomed out like the call of a god:

"BRING ME THE *JEFE* OF THIS VILLAGE!" Best to strike while the iron was hot. Eyes stared at her, wide with terror. A whisper ran across the sea of faces; *the mountain that walks*.

"I don't like it."

Martins also didn't like the way McNaught was punishing the tequila they'd liberated; the bottle wavered as he set it down on the rough plank table beneath them. Liquor splashed onto the boards, sharp-smelling in the tropical night. Big gaudy moths fluttered around the sticklight she'd planted in the ceiling, taking no harm from its cold glow. A few bugs crawled over the remnants of their meal; she loosened the tabs of her armor, feeling it push at her shrunken and now too-full stomach.

He'd always been a good officer, but the news from the States was hitting him hard. Hitting them all, but McNaught had family, a wife and three children, in New Jersey. The broadcasts of the bread riots—more like battles—had been bad, and one blurred shot of flames from horizon to horizon before the 'casts cut off altogether.

"Plenty of supplies," he said carelessly. Sweat trickled down his face and stained the t-shirt under his arms, although the upland night wasn't all that hot. "More than we can carry."

"It's the indigs," Martins said, searching for words. "They're . . . not as scared as they should be. Or maybe not as scared of *us*. The Mark III sure terrifies the shit out of them."

McNaught shrugged. "It usually does; whatever works."

Martins nodded. "Sir." Somebody had to be boss, and her misgivings were formless. "We'd better scout the basin ahead; according to the maps there's a fair-sized town there, San Pablo de Cacaxtla. We won't get much fuel here, but there should be some there even if the town's in ruins."

McNaught shrugged again. "Do it."

Six hundred men squatted together in the circular ball-court, ringed by the empty seats, a stone loop at each end where the hard rubber ball would be driven during the sacred game. Now it served as a rallying-ground. They were young men mostly, leanly fit, their hair bound up on their heads in topknots; they wore tight uniforms of cloth spotted like the skin of jaguars. Those and the hair and the jade plugs many wore in lips or ears gave them an archaic cast, but the German-made assault rifles and rocket launchers they carried were quite modern. So was the electronic equipment hung on racks by one end of the enclosure.

One-Jaguar finished his briefing; he was a stocky-muscular man, dark and hook-nosed, still moving with the stiffness of the professional soldier he had been. He bowed with wholehearted deference as Obregon stood, and gestured to his aides to remove the maps and display-screens from the stone table.

Obregon was in ceremonial dress this time, feathered cloak, kilt, plumed headdress, pendants of jade and gold. He raised his hands, and absolute silence fell.

"Warriors of the Sun," he said. The armed men swayed forward, eyes glittering and intent. "When the mother of our people, the holy Coatlicue, was pregnant with Left-Handed Hummingbird, his four hundred brothers conspired to kill him—but Standing Tree warned him. As Seven-Deer has warned me of the approaching enemy."

In the front rank of the Jaguar Knights, Seven-Deer looked down at the ground, conscious of the admiring eyes on him.

Obregon continued: "And Left-Handed Hummingbird—Huitzilopochtli—was born in an instant; his face painted, carrying his weapons of turquoise; he had leathers on the sole of his left foot, and his arms and thighs were striped with blue. He slew the four hundred Southern Warriors, and our people worshipped him, and he made them great."

A long rolling growl of assent. "That was in the day of the Fifth Sun. Huitzilopochtli showed us how to greet enemies—and made us great. Yet when the new invaders came from the sea, the First Speaker of the Sun People, Montezuma was weak. He didn't take up his weapons and kill them, or send them as Messengers. So the Fifth Sun was destroyed. Now the Sixth Sun has been born here; we have returned to the ways of our ancestors. While all around us is starvation and desolation, we grow strong.

"Will we follow the word of Left-Handed Hummingbird? Will we kill the invaders?"

This time the growl grew into a roar, a savage baying that echoed back from the empty seats of the auditorium.

"Before we go into battle, we must appeal for the help of the gods of our people. Seven-Deer, bring out your beloved son."

The young scout bowed and walked to the entranceway. His role was symbolic, like the cord that ran from his hand to the prisoner's neck; two priests held the bound captive's arms, their faces invisible behind their carved and plumed masks. The prisoner was a thin brown man with an acne-scarred face, naked and shivering. His eyes darted quickly around the amphitheater, squeezed shut and then opened again, as if he was willing the scene before him to go away. He was neither old nor young, wiry in a peasant fashion, a farmer from the lowlands driven into banditry by the collapse.

"Come, my beloved son," Seven-Deer said, his face solemn, "Hear the messages you must take to the land beyond the sun. Be happy! You will dwell as a hummingbird of paradise; you will not go down to Mictlan, or be destroyed in the Ninth Hell." He bent to whisper in the man's ear.

Evidently the lowlander spoke a few words of Nahuatl, or he recognized the stone block for what it was, because he began to scream as the Feathered Snake priests cut his bonds and stretched him out over it on his back. That too was part of the rite.

Obregon—*Lord of the Mountain, First Speaker of the Sun People*, he reminded himself—stepped up and drew the broad-bladed obsidian knife from his belt. There had been enough practice that he no longer feared the embarrassing hacking and haggling of the first few times. His original academic specialty had been geophysics, not anatomy, but the sudden stab down into the taut chest was precise as a surgeon's. There was a crisp popping sound as the knife sliced home, its edges of volcanic glass sharper than any steel. Ignoring the bulging eyes of the sacrifice, he plunged his hand into the chest cavity, past the fluttering pressure of the lungs, and gripped the heart. It beat one last time in his hands like a slippery wet balloon, then stilled as he slashed it free of the arteries.

Blood fountained, smelling of iron and copper and salt, droplets warm and thick on his lips. He raised the heart to the Sun, and felt the pure clean ecstasy of the moment sweep over him. The Jaguar Knights gave a quick deep shout as he wheeled to face them, red-spattered and gripping heart in one hand, knife in the other.

"We have fed the Sun!" he proclaimed. "And so shall you, Our Lord's knights, be fed." The priests were already taking the body away, to be drained and butchered. "Our Lord Smoking Mirror shall fill you with His strength, and you will destroy the enemy—take many prisoners for the altar. Victory!" The Knights cried him hail.

"Looks good," Martins murmured under her breath.

The jungle thinned out around them as the UATVs struggled up the switchback road. Grassy glades and forests of pinion pine and oak replaced the denser lowland growth; the temperature dropped, down to something that was comfortable even in body armor. After years in the steambath lowland heat, it was almost indecently comfortable. The air carried scents of resin and cool damp soil and grass; for a moment she was back in the Sangre Del Christo, longing like a lump of scar-tissue beneath her breastbone. Then she caught a rotten-egg tang underneath it.

"Air analysis." she keyed, on the Mark III's frequency.

The tank was back downslope with McNaught and the other half of the Company, but it should be able to tell her something through the remote sensors she carried.

"Variations from standard: excess concentrations of sulphur, sulphur dioxide, dilute sulfuric acid compounds, ozone," the Bolo said. "Seismic data indicate instabilities." A pause. "My geophysical data list no active vulcanism in this area."

Which means it's as out of date as the street maps, Martins thought.

She leaned a hand against the rollbar of the UATV, the long barrel of the autocannon on its pintle mount swaying about her, tasting the dust and sunlight, eyes squinting against it. The landscape looked empty but not uninhabited; the grass had been grazed, and there was animal dung by the side of the road—goat and cattle, from the look of it. It was a different world from the ghost-grey limestone scrub of San Gabriel, or the thick moist jungles they'd been passing through since. Telltales in her faceplate gave a running scan of the rocky hillsides. No indications of metal concentrations, no suspicious E-spectrum radiation. She cracked one of the seals of her body armor to let in the drier, cooler air.

"Our athlete's foot and crotch rot will die if we're not careful, El-Tee," Jenkins said. "Doesn't look like much else in the way of danger so far."

Martins nodded. "Objective A deserted," she broadcast.

That was a small town near the top of the pass; a couple of thousand people once, maybe more in shack-tenements at the edges that had long since slumped into weed-grown heaps. There was the wreckage of an old colonial Baroque church and town hall near the center, and both might have been impressive once. The snags of a couple of modest steel or concrete structures stood nearby. The buildings looked positively crushed, as if toppled by earthquake, but they had also been quite comprehensively looted. Stacks of girders and re-bar hammered free from the concrete stood in orderly piles; there wasn't much rust on cut ends and joints, which meant the work had been going on until the last few weeks. Rubble had been shoveled back out of the main street.

"Halt," she said. *This is serious.* Bandits would steal food and jewelry, but this was *salvage*. That implied organization, and organization was dangerous.

"Take a look. Make it good, troopers."

She collated the reports. Everything gone, down to the window-frames. Truck and wagon tracks . . .

"You," she said. It was her private name for the Bob; she couldn't bring herself to give it the sort of nickname Vinatelli had. "How many, how long?"

"I estimate that several thousand workers have been engaged in the salvage operation for over a year, Lieutenant Martins."

Martins' lips shaped a soundless whistle.

"You catch that, Captain?"

He grunted. "We need more data."

"Damn, that's impressive," Jenkins said.

The cut through the lava flow wasn't what he meant, though it showed considerable engineering ability. The view of the valley a thousand feet below was. The road switch backed down forest slopes; much of the forest was new, planted. The valley floor beyond was cultivated, with an intensity she hadn't seen in a

long, long time. A rolling patchwork quilt of greens and yellows and brown volcanic soil rippled with contour-plowing. She cycled the magnification of her visor and saw the crops spring out in close view; corn, wheat, sugar-cane, roots, orchards, pasture. There were people at work there, some with hand-tools or oxen, but there were tractors as well. Irrigation furrows threaded the fields, and so did power—

"Damn," Martins echoed. "They've got a grid working down there."

"Geothermal plant, I think," Jenkins said. "Over there by the town."

There were several villages scattered through the valley, but the town was much larger. It lay in a semicircle around the base of the conical mountain, tiny as a map from this height. The usual *hispano* grid centered on a plaza, but very unusual otherwise. The buildings were freshly painted, and there was *new* construction off to one side, a whole new plaza ringed by public structures and some sort of monument, a stone heap fifteen meters on a side and covered in scaffolding.

"Well, we ought to be able to get fuel here, right enough," McNaught's voice said in her ear, watching through the helmet pickups. "All we want. Maybe even spare parts."

"If they'll give us what we need," Martins said slowly. They looked as if they could afford it, much more so than anyone else the Company had run across. But it was her experience that the more people had, the more ready they were to defend it. "I wish we could pay for it."

"Maybe we can," McNaught said thoughtfully. "I've been thinking . . . the computer capacity in the Beast is pretty impressive. We could rest and refit, and pay our way with its services. Hell, maybe they need some earth-moving done. And if they won't deal—"

Martins nodded. "Yessir."

We have the firepower, she thought. Using it hadn't bothered her much before; the Company was all the friends and family she had. These people looked as if they'd hit bottom and started to build their way back up, though. The thought of what the Mark III could do to that town wasn't very pleasant. She'd seen too many ruins in San Gabriel, too much wreckage on the way north.

"Well, we'd better go on down," she said. "But carefully. One gets you nine they're watching us with passive sensors; Eyeball Mark One, if nothing else."

"No bet," Jenkins said, his voice returning to its usual flat pessimism.

"Right, let's do it." She switched to the unit push. "Slow and careful, and don't start the dance unless it looks like the locals want to try us on. We fight if we have to, but we're not here to fight."

"Surely you see that precautions are reasonable," the old man said to her. "In these troubled times."

He looked to be in his seventies, but healthy; white haired and lean, dressed in immaculate white cotton and neat sandals. The "precautions" consisted of several hundred mean-looking *indios* spread out along the fields behind him, digging in with considerable efficiency and sporting quite modern weapons, along with their odd spotted cammo uniforms. The helmet scanners had detected at least one multiple hypervelocity launcher, and the Mark III thought there was an automortar or light field-piece somewhere behind.

This close the town looked even better than it had from the pass. The additions upslope, near the black

slaggy-looking lava flows, looked even odder. The building beneath the scaffolding was roughly the shape of her Bolo; a memory tugged at her mind, then filtered away. There was a delegation of townsfolk with the leader, complete with little girls carrying bouquets of flowers. It made her suddenly conscious of the ragged uniforms patched with bits of this and that that her Company wore. The only parts of them that weren't covered in dust were the faceshields of their helmets, and those were kept clear by static charges.

The spruce locals also made her conscious of the twenty-odd troopers behind her in the UATVs; if the shit hit the fan the rest of the outfit and the Mark III would come in and kick butt, but it could get very hairy between times.

"Hard times, right enough, *señor*" she answered politely, Some of the crowd were murmuring, but not in Spanish. She caught something guttural and choppy, full of *tz* sounds.

"You've done very well here," Martins ,went on, removing her helmet. A face generally looked less threatening than a blank stretch of curved synthetic.

The old man smiled. "We seek to keep ourselves isolated from the troubles of the world," he said. "To follow our own customs."

Looking around at the rich fields and well-fed people, Martins could sympathize. The well-kept weapons argued that these folks were realistic about it, too.

"You've also got a lot of modern equipment," she said. "Not just weapons either, I'd guess."

The *jefe* of the valley spread his hands. "I went from here to the university, many years ago," he said. "There I had some success, and returned much of what I earned to better the lives of my people here. When the troubles came, I foresaw that they would be long and fierce; I and my friends made preparations. Luckily, the eruption sealed the main pass into the valley of Cacaxtla when the government was no longer able to reopen it, so we were spared the worst of the collapse. But come, what can we do for you?"

That's a switch. "We're travelling north, home," she said. "We need fuel—anything will do, whatever your vehicles are running on—"

"Cane spirit," the local said helpfully.

"—that'll do fine. Some food. We have spare medical supplies, and our troops include a lot of specialists; in electronic repairs, for example."

Actually the self-repair fabricators of the Mark III were their main resource in that field, but no need to reveal everything.

"You are welcome," *the jefe* said. "The more so as it is wise to—how do you say in English—speed the parting guest." He looked behind the brace of UATVs. "I notice that not all your troops are here, señora, or the large tank."

Large tank, Martins thought. *Nobody really believes in that mother until they see it.*

She inclined her head politely. "Surely you see that precautions are reasonable," she said. "In these troubled times."

The *jefe's* laugh was full and unforced. "I am glad that we understand each other, *teniente* Martins. If you will follow me . . ."

Fearless, he stepped into her UATV; the children threw their bouquets into it, or hung necklaces of flowers around her neck and those of the other troopers. Martins sneezed and looked around. The *jefe* noted her interest.

"As you say, a geothermal unit," he said, pointing out a low blocky building. "The waste water is still hot enough for domestic use, and also for fishponds and other uses. Very simple. We have a few machine-shops, as you see, and small workshops to make what household goods we need."

There were actual open shops along the streets, selling clothing and leather goods, tools and food—something she hadn't seen for years. And people selling *flowers*. That shook her a bit, that anyone could still devote time and energy to a luxury like that.

"We issue our own money, as a convenience for exchange; but everyone contributes to things of public worth," he went on. "As our guests, your needs will be met from the public treasury; and first, since you have travelled far, baths and refreshment. Then you must join us for dinner; tomorrow, we will see to the fuel and travelling supplies you need."

Martins and Jenkins looked at each other and the spacious, airy house the Americans had been assigned.

"Is it just my sour disposition, Tops," she said meditatively, "or does what looks too good to be true—"

"—probably too good to be true, El-Tee," the sergeant said.

"See to it."

"All right. Listen up, shitheels! Nobody gets out of reach of his weapon. Nobody gets out of sight of his squad—washing, crapping, I don't care what. Nobody takes more than one drink; and you keep it in your pants, I don't care what the local señoritas say, understand me? Michaels, Wong, you're first guard on the vehicles. Smith, McAllister, Sanchez, overwatch from the roof. Move it!"

"Omigod," Jenkins muttered. "*Beer*. Real, actual, honest-to-God-not-pulque-piss *beer*."

The jefe—he'd answered to Manuel Obregon, but the locals called him by something unpronounceable—smiled and nodded and took a swallow from his own earthenware pitcher. There were more smiles and nods from all around, from the tables set out across the plaza. Much of the town's population seemed to be taking this chance for a *fiesta*. They were certainly dressed for one, although the clothes were like nothing she'd seen in the back-country, and very fancy. The rood was good enough that she'd had to let out the catches of her armor—nobody had objected to the troopers wearing their kit, or seemed to notice their M-35's and grenade launchers—roast pork, salads, hot vegetable stews, spicy concoctions of meats and tomatoes and chilies.

Obregon sat at their table, and quietly took a sampling of everything they were offered, tasting before they did. Martins appreciated the gesture, although not enough to take more than a mug or two of the beer; Jenkins' eagle eye and the corporals' made sure nobody else did either. It was intoxicating enough just to feel *clean*, and have a decent meal under her belt.

"I notice you don't seem to have a church," she said.

Obregon smiled expansively. "The Church always sat lightly on the people here," he said. "When the *campesions* prayed to the Virgin, they called her Tonantzin, the Moon. Always I hated what the foreigners—the Spaniards—had done here. Since my people made me their leader, I have spoken to them of the old ways, the ancient ways of our ancestors; what we always knew, and what I learned of

the truth in the university in my youth, things which the *Ladinos* and their priests tried to suppress."

Can't argue with success, Martins thought. The helmet beside her on the table cheeped. She took another mouthful of the coffee, thick with fresh cream, and slid it on.

"Lieutenant Martins," the Mark III's voice said. "What *now*?" she snapped. *Damn, I'm tired*. It had been a long day, and the soak in hot water seemed to be turning her muscles to butter even hours later. "Please extend the sensor wand to the liquids consumed."

Nothing showed on Martins' face; except perhaps a too-careful blankness, as she unclipped the hand-sized probe and dipped it into the beer.

"Alkaloids," the computer-voice said calmly. "Sufficient to cause unconsciousness." "But the *jefe*—"

"Partial immunity through sustained ingestion," it said. "Have you any instructions, Lieutenant Martins?"

Bethany Martins tried to shout and pull the knife sheathed across the small of her back in the same instant. Somewhere a single shot cracked; she was vaguely conscious of Jenkins toppling over backwards, buried under a heap of locals. Her tongue was thick in her head, and hands gripped her. Obregon stood watching, steadying himself with one hand against the table, his eyes steady.

"Basser sumbitch," Martins slurred. "*Help*—" The helmet came off her head, with a wrench that flopped her neck backward. Blackness.

A confused babble came through the pickups. Captain McNaught stiffened in the strait confines of the Mark III's fighting compartment. His leg knocked against a projecting surface in a blaze of pain.

"Get through, get me through!"

"None of the scouting party are responding, Captain," the tank said in its incongruous sex-kitten voice.

The pickups from the UATVs showed bustling activity, and a few bodies in American uniform being carried by unconscious or dead—until thick tarpaulins were thrown over the war-cars. The helmets showed similar blackness; IR and sonic gave the inside of a steel box and nothing more. Until one was taken out.

"Greetings, Captain," Manuel Obregon's voice said.

His face loomed large in the screen, then receded as the helmet was set on a surface and the local chieftain sank back in a chair. The voice was slurred, but with tongue-numbness, not alcohol, and his black eyes were level and expressionless as a snake's.

"Release my troops and I won't kill anyone but you," McNaught said, his voice like millstones. "Harm them, and we'll blow that shitheap town of yours down around your lying head."

Obregon spread hands. "A regrettable ruse of war," he said. "Come now, *mi capitán*. I have more than a third of your personnel and equipment, and your second-in-command. It is only logical, if distressing from your point of view, that you listen to my terms. I cannot in all conscience allow a large armed body—which has already plundered and killed—to operate in the vicinity of my people."

"I repeat; release them immediately. You have no conception of our resources."

"On the contrary," Obregon said, his voice hard and flat. "You have forty men, light weapons, and one

tank—which must be short of fuel. Abandon the vehicles and the tank, taking only your hand weapons, and you will be allowed to leave, with your advance party. For every hour you refuse, one of the prisoners will die. And, *Capitan*—do nothing rash. This valley is protected by forces which are stronger than anything you can imagine."

Flat sincerity rang in the old man's voice.

Something seemed to have crawled into Martins' mouth and died. She tried to sit up and stopped, wincing at the pain, then doggedly continued. She was lying in a row of bodies, some of them groaning and stirring. They were all wearing white cotton tunics; a quick check showed nothing else underneath. The room was bare and rectangular, with narrow window-slits along one wall and a barred grillwork of iron at the other end, the holes barely large enough to pass a human hand and arm. Fighting weakness and a pain that made her sweat, she staggered erect and groped along one wall to the end. Beyond the grill-work was a plain ready room, with a bench and nothing else except a barred window and steel-sheet door.

And a guard in the jaguar-spot local uniform, with an assault rifle across his knees. He gave her a single glance and turned his eyes back to the wall, motionless.

Oh, this is not good. Not good at all, Bethany, Martins thought to herself.

More groans came from her troopers where they lay like fish on a slab—an unpleasant thought she tried to shed. Jenkins was sitting with his head in his hands.

"Goddam native beer," he said, in a painful attempt at humor.

"Check 'em, Tops," she said.

A minute later: "Wong's missing."

Martins chewed a dry tongue to moisten her mouth, striding back to the grillwork and trying to rattle it.

"I demand to speak to your leader," she said in a calm voice, pitched to command "Where is Private Wong?"

The guard turned, moving very quickly. She was just quick enough herself to get her hand mostly out of the way of the fiber-matrix butt of the man's weapon, and take a step back sucking at her skinned knuckles.

Jenkins unbundled his shoulders as she turned. "What's the word, El-Tee?"

"For now, we wait until the Captain and the Beast get here," she said quietly. "We—"

A rising swell of noise from outside interrupted her, muffled by the high slit windows. Then it cut off, replaced by chanting. One commanding voice rose above the rest. Then a scream; words at first, in English, followed by a high thin wailing that trailed off into a blubbing *don't . . . don't . . .* and another frenzied shriek.

Jenkins bent and cupped his hands. Martins set a foot in the stirrup and steadied herself against the wall as he straightened, then raised his hands overhead until her compact hundred-and-twenty pounds was standing on his palms. That put the bars on the slit windows just within reach. Grunting and sweating with the effort and the residual pain of the drug, she pulled herself up.

Brightness made her blink. They were on one side of Cacaxtla's new square, the one with the odd-looking building. Her mind clicked, making a new association; the one with the unfinished stepped pyramid. Because it was unfinished, she could see quite clearly what went on on the flat platform atop it, over the heads of the crowd that filled the plaza below and the gaudily-costumed priests on the steps. When she realized what was happening, she wished with all her heart that she could not. A dry retch sent her tumbling toward the floor; Jenkins' huge hands caught her with surprising gentleness.

"What's going on, Lieutenant?" he said—the formal title a sign of *real* worry.

"Wong," she said. "They've got him on the top of that pyramid thing. They're—" She swallowed, despite years of experience in what human beings could do to each other. "They're skinning him."

"Enemy in blocking positions two thousand meters to our front," the tank said. "Shall I open fire?"

Captain McNaught felt cold sweat leaking out from his armpits. The narrow switchback up to the pass had been bad enough, but the passage through the recent lavaflow was worse, barely any clearance at all on either side of the Mark III. Every once and a while it scraped the cutting, and sent showers of pumice rock bouncing downslope toward the UATVs.

"Not yet, we'll wait until we can do 'em all at once," he said, and switched to the unit push. "Take up covering positions."

Damn, damn. It was his fault. He'd let things slide, gotten apathetic—and the wound was no excuse. There *were* no excuses. The Company was his.

Obregon's voice came though. "This is your last warning," he said.

"Fuck you."

If they thought an avalanche would stop the Mark III, they could think again. Or an antitank rocket. They might damage one of the treads, but that was a worst-case scenario; there was no precipice they might hope to sweep the tank off, not here.

"Follow when I've cleared the way," he went on to the waiting troopers. Some of the guilt left him. He might be behind a foot of durachrome alloy, but he was leading from *the front*, by God.

The tank trembled. "Seismic activity," it said helpfully. "Instructions?"

"Keep going! Bull through. We're going to rescue Martins and the others *at all costs*. Do you understand, you heap of tin?"

"Acknowledged." Rock ground by, pitted and dull, full of the craters left by gas-bubbles as it hardened. "Anomalous heat source to our left."

There was no view, but the rumbling underfoot grew louder. "What the hell are they doing?"

"Insufficient data," the tank said. "Estimated time to firing position—"

Obregon's voice: "You are in the hands of Xotl-Ollin," he said regretfully. "Feel his anger while I dance for Xipe Totec. Better if this had been a Flower War, but the god's will be done."

The indig chief had clearly gone nuts. The problem was that the world seemed to have done so too. The restraints clamped tighter around McNaught as the Mark III shook. Rocks and boulders and ash

cataracted down around it, muffled through the armor but thunder-loud in the pickups until the guardian AI turned it down. Something went off with a rumbling *boom*, loud enough for the noise alone to make the tank vibrate slightly.

"What was that, what was that?" McNaught shouted.

"No weapon within known parameters," the Mark III said. "Searching."

At first McNaught thought that the wall of liquid was water, or perhaps thick mud. It wasn't until he saw patches of dried scrub bursting into flame as it touched them that he recognized it. That was when he screamed.

It was not entirely the lava that made him bellow and hammer with his hands at the screens. The one slaved to Martins' helmet was showing a visual; it was showing Obregon. He was dancing, and he was covered in skin—Trooper Wong's skin, skillfully flayed off in one piece and then sewn on to the old man like an old-fashioned set of long-Johns. Hands and feet flopped empty as he shuffled and twirled, his eyes staring through holes in the sagging mask.

The molten stone swept over the Mark III in a cresting wave.

The guard proved unbribable, to anything from promises of gold to offers of more personal services; and he never came within arm's reach of the grillwork.

The attendant who brought them water did. Martins' eyes met her NCO's; from the man's frightened scurry, they both did an identical, instant evaluation of his worth as a hostage. He was old, older than Obregon and withered with it, nearly toothless.

Somewhere between nada and fucking zip, Martins decided.

"*Aqua*" he said.

Martins crouched to take the canteens through the narrow slot near the floor.

"*Gracias*" she whispered back.

That seemed to make the man hesitate; he glanced over his shoulder, but the guard was staring out the window at the pyramid. The screaming had stopped long ago, but the chanting and drumming went on.

"It is a sin against God," the servant whispered fearfully. "They worship demons, demons! It is lies, but the people were afraid—are afraid, even those who don't believe in Obregon's lies."

"Afraid of what?" Martins whispered back, making the slow drag of the canteens on the rock floor cover the sound. "His gunmen?"

"The Jaguar Knights? No, no—they fear his calling the burning rock from the mountains, as he has done. As he did to cut us off from the outside world."

Oh, great, one sympathizer and he's another loony, Martins thought.

The man went on: "It is lies, I say. I saw the machines he brought, many years ago—machines he buries all about the valley. He says they are to foretell earthquakes, but he lies; he *makes* the earth shake and the lava come! It is machines, not his false gods!"

The guard shouted in the local language, and the servant cringed and scurried out.

"What'd he say?" Jenkins asked.

'We're in the hands of the Great and Powerful Oz, Tops," Martins said with a bitter twist of the mouth. "But I don't think this one's a good guy—and this sure isn't Kansas, anyway."

"No shit."

This is where we're supposed to make a rush, Martins thought. *If this were movieland. One of us would get a gun . . .*

She'd seen an old, old vid about that once—some snotnose got a vid hero into the real world, and the stupid bastard got himself killed, or nearly.

In reality, a dozen unarmed soldiers with automatic weapons pointed at them were simply potential hamburger. The door in the grillwork was too narrow for more than one person to squeeze through at a time, and there were grenade launchers stuck through the high slit windows on either side of the prison chamber.

Jenkins muttered under his breath: "We could crap in our hands and throw it at them."

"Can it, Tops, Wait for the Captain. I got us into this, no reason more should get shorted than have to."

Although it was taking an oddly long time for the Mark III to make it. The ground had trembled after Wong . . . died . . . and then nothing, for hours.

She walked out from the huddle of prisoners. Hands pulled her through the slit door and clanged it behind her, pulled off the tunic and left her nothing but a loincloth. Others bound her hands behind her back and led her out.

The sun was blinding; no less so was the fresh paint on the pyramid, the feathers and jade and gold and bright cloth on the priests. She ignored them, walking with her eyes fixed on the horizon and the smoking volcano above the town. Her heart seemed to beat independently of herself.

Crazy bastard, she thought, as she trod the first step. The stone was warm and gritty under her feet; twenty steps up it started to be sticky. She could smell the blood already, beginning to rot under the bright sun, and hear the flies buzz. Sheets and puddles of it lay around the improvised altar; she supposed they'd build something more imposing when the pyramid was finished, but the block of limestone would do for now.

At the top, Obregon waited. They'd washed the blood off him—most of it—when he shed Wong's skin.

Like a snake, she thought, light-headed.

"Lord of the Mountain," she said in a clear, carrying voice. He frowned, but the chanting faded a little—as it would not have for screams. "The Mountain that Walks will come for me!"

Obregon gave a curt sign, and the drums roared loud enough to drown any other words. Another, and the priests cut her bonds and threw her spread-eagled back across the altar, one on each limb pulling until her skin creaked. Her skin . . . at least they didn't have the flaying knives out.

"You are brave," the old man said as he stepped up to her, drawing the broad obsidian knife. "But your

tank is buried under a hundred feet of lava, and the valley sealed once more." The plumes nodded over his head, and his long silver hair was streaked and clotted with crusty brown. "Tell the Sun—"

"That you're a fucking lunatic," Martins rasped, bending her head up painfully to look at him; the sun was in the west, and she could just see Venus rising bright over the jagged rim of the valley. "Why? Why the lies?"

Obregon replied in English, slowly raising the knife. "My people needed more than tools and medicines. More even than a butterfly-effect machine that could control venting. They needed to *believe* in their guardian." A whisper: "So did I."

The knife touched the skin under left breast and then rose to its apogee.

Braaap.

The ultravelocity impact that smashed Obregon's hand cauterized the wound. It twirled him in place like a top, until his head sprayed away from the next round.

One of the priests released her left foot and snatched for his own knife. Martins pivoted on the fulcrum of her hips and kicked the other at her feet in the face. Bone crumpled under the ball of her foot. Something smashed the man with the knife out into the shadows of gathering night. One hand slacked on her wrist; she wrenched it free with a brief economical twist and flipped erect, slamming the heel of her free hand up under the last priest's nose. He dropped to the blood-slick stone deck, his nasal bone driven back into his brain.

Martins stood and walked to the head of the steep stairway down the pyramid, the only living thing on its summit. Below her the crowd screamed and milled, and behind them . . .

Mountain that Walks. It looked it, now, with the thick crust of lava that covered it from top deck to the treadguards. Cooling and solidifying, smoking, whirled and dripping like hot wax. A few antennae poked through, and the muzzles of the infinite repeaters.

Two treads were gone, and the machine kept overcorrecting for their loss.

"Light," she whispered.

Actinic glare burst out from the Bolo, making it a hulking black shape that ground forward and shook the earth. The same searchlight bathed her in radiance; she couldn't see much detail of the square below, but she saw enough to know that townsmen and Jaguar Knights alike had fallen on their faces.

Bethany Martins raised both hands, fists clenched, her body spattered with blood and bone and brains. She remembered treachery, and Wong screaming. One word, and everyone in ten miles' space would die.

She remembered famine and bandits, and bodies in ditches gnawed by rats or their own kinfolk.

"They do need a guardian they can believe in," she muttered to herself. "A sane one." Whether she was still entirely sane was another matter, but she had more to think of.

A statue stood at the base of the stairs, squat and hideous. Her right fist stabbed at it, and stone fragments flew across the square, trailing sparks. It was important to know when to stop. The rest of the Company wouldn't take much talking around—and it was best to get things straight with the locals right from the beginning. Hit 'em hard and let 'em up easy, as her father had always said.

"Amplify."

"YOU HAVE FOLLOWED FALSE GODS," her voice bellowed out, relayed at an intensity enough to stun. "BUT THERE WILL BE MERCY."

The people of Cacaxtla shuddered and pressed their heads to the ground, and knew that a god—a goddess—stronger than the Lord of the Mountain had come.

He had brought fire from the stone. She had made stone walk.