

# Flanking Maneuver

## Mickey Zucker Reichert

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AN icy breeze glided through the woods, rattling the branches of the tightly packed *aldona* trees and sending the dying weeds into a strange, bowing dance. Dressed in homespun worn into rags, Umbert shivered and tried to focus on the words of his commander. The sweet spices of his fourteenth birthday bread were still haunting his tongue when the army demanded his apprenticeship a full year before the one prearranged with the blacksmith. The same naturally muscular thighs and upper arms that had attracted Horton Blacksmith had drawn the attention of the troop's commander as well, and the drafting age had drifted downward through the years.

Umbert ran a hand through his thick black hair, glancing around at the other Arsie soldiers. None had uniforms, and many wore clothing as tattered as his own. Though dozens strong, the unit bore little resemblance to the proud ranks he thought he remembered from his childhood, marching off to war in rigid lines with spear points gleaming and songs of victory wafting to the heavens. He wondered whether the innocence and relative smallness of youth had only made things seem so much huger, so much more glamorous than reality.

The commander stopped speaking, and the men broke off into groups. Umbert remained in place, feeling empty and chilled, realizing he had missed most of the instructions. The youngest by at least three years, he felt out of place, confused, and uncertain. The soldiers knew one another like brothers, had risked their lives together and rescued each other with desperately grim matter-of-factness. He was the newcomer, untried and untrained, dragged into a part of something too enormous for him to understand and desperately wishing for a different life for himself. He did not want to kill, did not seek the excitement of worrying for his own life or others, saw no future here.

The clusters of soldiers prepared themselves and their weapons, built fires, and shared their scant but welcome evening meal. The tribe had become urgently small, yet Umbert knew very few of these warriors. His world consisted of men and women too old, too wounded, or too feeble to fight, children, and the captured Hurrdu females who helped bear the tribe's babies, including his own mother.

An older man with ivory skin and a shock of white hair gestured at Umbert, and he gratefully accepted the invitation. The boy trotted over to where the man sat cross-legged in front of a cheery, orange campfire. "Hello," he said, motioning for Umbert to sit. "My name is Oslan."

Umbert sat. "I'm Umbert. This is my first day."

Oslan smiled kindly. "I know. We all know the new recruits."

Umbert nodded, gaze straying to the fire. They all might know, but none of the others had made the effort to acknowledge his presence in any way.

As if reading Umbert's mind, Oslan responded to the thought. "Everyone's afraid to get too close to the new guy, especially one as young as you. The inexperienced don't tend to last long. They'll get a lot friendlier once you've proved yourself."

Umbert did not understand. He rolled his gaze to Oslan's blue eyes. "Proved myself what?"

"Competent. Reliable." Oslan poked a stick into the fire and rolled something from the ashes. "A survivor."

Umbert shivered. "What if I'm none of those?"

Oslan replied without emotion. "Then you won't last long, and there's no reason to get to know you." Attention still locked on the campfire, he explained further. "It's dangerous to associate with new recruits. They make more mistakes, and in war, mistakes are fatal. You freeze up, it might mean the death of your shieldmate."

Umbert bit his lip and studied his own hands. As shocking as the revelation was, he appreciated the older man's candor. "I'm going to die, aren't I?" The words came surprisingly easily, but true contemplation of their meaning remained a distant abstraction, impossible to reach.

Oslan grasped the object he had poked from the flames, gingerly tearing it with light touches that saved his fingers from burning. "We all are, son. Some sooner than later. That's just the way it is, the way it's always been."

"Why?"

"Why, indeed." Oslan's lips formed a knowing smile that reflected all of his years. "Because we're at war. And, in war, no matter how good you are, you'll run into an enemy who's faster or stronger or more determined than you. Or into plain old bad luck. The fighting goes on; but, for you, it's over. Everyone's time comes eventually. The quick, the alert, the lucky last longest." He passed over a greasy hunk of charred grouse.

Umbert accepted the food gratefully. Like most boys his age, he could happily spend all day doing nothing but eating and sleeping. "I meant 'why' as in, why are we fighting? What's the war about?"

"We're fighting to save ourselves, our women, our flocks, and our land from the Hurrdu."

Umbert savored the warmth of the cooked food in his hands and the heat of the fire on the front half of his body. "Why do *they* fight?"

Oslan gave Umbert a patient look. "To get those things."

The explanation made little sense to Umbert. He took a bite of the grouse, considering for several moments as he chewed. "We take those things from the Hurrdu, too."

Oslan took a bite of his own share of the meager feast. "We have little choice but to kill the black devils when they attack us. We need their flocks to eat, their women to help us reproduce. And it seems only right to reclaim the lands they steal from us."

Oslan's point seemed at once logical and ludicrous to Umbert. "But if we just stopped fighting, wouldn't we each have our own flocks to eat, our own women to reproduce, and our youth back to grow crops on our share of the land?"

Oslan rose, stretched, and placed a fatherly hand on Umbert's shoulder. "Wouldn't it be lovely if life really were that simple?"

Umbert just nodded. So many things in life seemed easy and obvious to him, and grown-ups found him eternally amusing. *Will I ever get old enough to understand?* If he believed what Oslan had told him about war, it seemed unlikely.

The next day, another contingent joined them, bone-weary, disheveled, supporting their injured. They also brought a line of twenty women, roped together to prevent escape. Their leader reported to the commander; and, though Umbert could not hear the words, the deepening frown on the commander's face suggested bad news. Umbert focused on the women, who ranged in age from nearing thirty to one barely his own age. He studied her most closely. She bore the same velvety black hair as the others, but her eyes held a glint of emerald. While the others kept their heads low, she glanced about fitfully, like a deer seeking a safe place to give birth to a helpless fawn. Umbert's tea-colored skin was the darkest in his company, yet all of the prisoners, save her, were darker still. The youngest matched him and was, perhaps, even a quarter shade lighter.

The commander raised his voice above the camp hubbub and greetings, which silenced instantly. "Men, our companions won a very hard-fought battle."

Cheering followed the announcement, cut short by the commander's sudden glare. Sunlight blazed through his close-cut sandy hair, and his gray-brown gaze carved a trail of quiet through the ranks. "But

they could not prevent a flanking. Men, we must turn and fight the enemy behind us or risk losing our entire village."

Umbert gave his attention back to the girl, who hurriedly looked away. It did not matter to him where he fought and, probably, died.

"Umbert!" the commander's voice drew Umbert to instant attention, and he whirled to face the man who now stood nearly on top of him. "I want you to stay and guard the prisoners." He handed Umbert an iron-tipped spear.

Shocked, Umbert accepted his first weapon, stammering, "Y-y-yes, sir." He could not keep himself from blurting, "Wouldn't someone with more experience do a better job?"

The commander's head lowered, snakelike. He was clearly unused to being challenged.

Umbert swallowed hard, anticipating a lecture on obedience.

But the commander's features turned as fatherly as Oslan's. "Umbert, I need every experienced spearman to handle the threat behind us. You're safest here. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Umbert believed he did. The commander had given him the most secure assignment to keep him alive longer, a gesture of mercy not mistrust. "Thank you, sir." Only then, he thought to wonder if the choice had more to do with the other men's safety, relieving them of their youngest, least competent member.

"Good luck." The commander stormed off, shouting orders to the other men. Within moments, he had them all massed and marching, including the injured, leaving Umbert and the women alone.

Umbert stared after the retreating soldiers, scarcely daring to believe they could mobilize so quickly. Dragged into an unwelcome apprenticeship, he found himself alone in enemy territory with absolutely no clue as to how to handle the situation. His mind felt numb, blank. A chill spiraled through him, followed by episodic shaking that made his teeth chatter and his hands tremble in wild, uncontrollable arcs. He fought for control. *Just wait and hide until they come for me.* The whole thing seemed madness, one day celebrating his birthday and savoring the beginning of his last year of childish freedom, the next swept into a nonsensical war. Alone. Untrained. Apparently, surrounded. Weak-kneed, he slid down the shaft of the spear to huddle in a heap on the ground.

A sound at Umbert's back mobilized him. He sprang to his feet, whirling, and the spear collapsed to the forest's leafy floor. He found himself suddenly confronted by the frightened faces of twenty women. Helplessly bound to one another in a chain that stretched from one sturdy oak to another, they watched his every move in silence. Most reminded him of the women who had raised him and the other children: dark, silky-haired, doe-eyed women with broad hips and pendulous breasts. Though merely one of the group, his mother had quietly and proudly claimed him, though she could not pick out his father for certain. His gaze went naturally to the youngest and remained there, spellbound.

The woman looked bravely back at him. "Are you going to rape me?"

Her question shattered the silence, and Umbert back-stepped in surprise. "Wh-what?" he stammered, though he had heard her words clearly enough.

Another spat at him. "You heard her, white dog! What do you plan to do with us?"

Umbert continued to stare. He could imagine the Hurrdu children crying for their mothers and sisters, the men separated from their wives, mothers, and daughters. "I'm going," he said softly, "to release you."

The loathing and terror disappeared from their faces. The youngest woman smiled at Umbert. Despite her age, she clearly spoke for all of them. "Release us? Why?"

"Because." Umbert summoned courage from a depth he never knew he had. "Because I don't understand this war or why we're fighting it. Because you call me a white dog, though I'm as dark as you. Because... I'm too young... too inexperienced, perhaps too stupid to understand any reason to keep you from your loved ones when I miss my own so terribly." Umbert raised his knife.

Most of the women flinched, rearing backward, though the one he addressed did not. She watched in fascination as the blade hacked at the restraining ropes again and again. Each attack parted a few

strands and sent the knife bouncing back toward Umberto. He settled for a slower sawing motion, and the rope parted, dividing the women into two lines.

Several still stared at Umberto with dark suspicion. Others set to trying to fully free themselves from the bindings, while Umberto chopped them into smaller groups until, finally, they all stood as individuals, some bound and some free. Most took off running toward their tribal grounds, even with frayed ropes still wrapped around their wrists or ankles. Others stayed where they were, unwinding the tattered hemp. The youngest remained still, allowing Umberto to cautiously cut around the loops until the two of them stood, alone and unfettered, in the clearing.

"Thank you," the woman said.

Guilt assailed Umberto, and he lowered his head. So many men had spent their lives for these captives he had cut loose on a whim. He could not help considering Oslan's words. His tribe needed those women to replace the ones the Hurdu had taken, to assure future generations, to merely keep them alive. Yet, when these frightened women had stood before him, all he could see was the agony of their own people, the families who would so desperately miss them. "My name is Umberto."

"Mine's Kaliah," she replied. "You're not safe here."

Her words seemed like gross understatement. Umberto forced a smile. "Run with the others," he said. "I am already dead." Surrounded by the enemy, he doubted he had much chance for survival, even if his own allies did not kill him for his treachery. "My life ended the moment they conscripted me."

"Come with me." Kaliah offered her hand.

Umberto stared, her request utter nonsense. Sunlight gleamed from her jet-black hair, drawing out highlights of sienna and red mahogany. "Come..."

"... with me," Kaliah finished again, holding out a hand. "Come."

Umberto found his hand edging toward hers, beyond his control. "Am I a prisoner?" Males caught in the war were usually executed, though both sides took occasional slaves. The danger of the men banding together in the fields or escaping with significant information seemed too great to risk. The women appeared to understand and accept their roles in the process, whether as warriors or prisoners. He had always believed that a sign of their passivity, though now he wondered whether the women just had a better, calmer approach to a horrible situation.

Kaliah laughed, the sound high and musical. "You're not a prisoner. You're... my friend. My guest."

Umberto accepted her hand, though he wondered what it truly meant. He doubted the men of her tribe would prove as welcoming. They might take his youth into account and try to retrain him to fight for their cause, which seemed like an astounding irony. More likely, they would execute him. Nevertheless, he went. At least, he might have a few hours in exquisite company before he died, whether in war, for treason, or as a hated tribal enemy. Neither of those ends would likely be quick or painless.

Hand in hand, the two walked through the *aldona* in silence. Though crisscrossed with boot tracks and stinking from decades of blood and death, the forest still seemed beautiful. Sunbeams stabbed or glared through the canopy, making the hand-shaped leaves appear to glow. Sparse undergrowth fought the ravages of eternal shadow and stomping columns of warriors. Deadfalls lay scattered through the forest, the dusty remains of roads crushed beneath them, notches cut in wild patterns that had once marked trails or served as targets for testing or nervous sword arms.

Kaliah eased Umberto around encampments he might have blindly blundered into without her steady guidance. No one paid them any heed, which surprised Umberto. Even with Kaliah's reassuring company, he felt nervous as a hunted squirrel. The camps clearly belonged to the Hurdu, yet they did not leap up at the sight of him, eager for destruction. Instead, they gave the two youngsters the meaningful smiles of grown-ups watching children play at love. In those moments, Umberto clung to Kaliah's hand like the lifeline it appeared to be.

At length, forest gave way to a village remarkably similar to that of the Arsie, his own people. Tents dotted the outskirts, where olive-skinned women swept doorways, sewed, or pounded foodstuffs. Children raced along the dirt pathways, the younger ones engaged in the rough-and-tumble of

play-fighting, the older ones assisting their mothers.

Kaliah drew Umbert past these to the village shops and cottages, then straight to a walled mansion in the center. There, a pair of female guards met them. Without word or question, the women opened the gates and gestured them through the opening.

Stunned by the whole process, Umbert continued to walk with Kaliah, scarcely believing a prisoner would be accorded such treatment. The king of the Arsie lived in a castle in the middle of their tribal lands, and he had similar fortifications, breached by peasants only in times of desperate need, for example, if the Hurrdu penetrated deep into their lands. He could not understand why these guards would grant access to an enemy without the slightest challenge, without interrogation.

At any moment, Umbert expected a spear through his back or a horde of armed men to descend upon him. As if awakening from a dream, he wondered what had possessed him to come. Surely, the Hurrdu would hack him to pieces once they realized what he was; he wondered why it had taken them this long. The Arsie always knew one of their own at a glance, and he doubted the Hurrdu would have any more trouble. Dark devils, white dogs, they called one another; yet, Umbert had never understood the difference.

At the door to the mansion, another pair of guards, men this time, let them through without a word. One did give Kaliah a smile and a bow of greeting before opening the door. Avoiding looking at them, for fear they might examine him, Umbert continued to shamble along at Kaliah's side. Once past the guards and into an airy hallway, he finally whispered his concern. "Kaliah, what's going on?"

"I want you to meet my father."

"All right." It seemed a proper request, especially given the feelings stirring inside him. He enjoyed holding her warm hand in his, staring into her beautiful eyes. "But isn't this... incredibly dangerous?"

Kaliah slowed her pace only long enough to steer Umbert from room to room. Though sparse, the furnishings spoke of ancient elegance and wealth. The worn chairs nestled into intricately carved frames, their fraying fabric silk and velvet. Desks and cabinets, though split and notched, perfectly matched. "No battle was ever won without courage." She paused to knock on a massive, wooden door. "You displayed more today than any man I've met."

"I only did what was right." Umbert confessed, "And right now, I'm very much afraid."

"I would worry," Kaliah said, "if you weren't."

The door wrenched open. A skinny, middle-aged woman in patched and faded finery opened the door and gasped. "Kaliah!" She caught the girl into an embrace, her hazel eyes shining with delight, her rich brown hair like a shimmering cascade between her narrow shoulders. "Kaliah, they told us—"

Umbert lost the rest beneath a rush of desperate worry. His own attention went to the gray-bearded man who occupied a gem-encrusted chair at the farther end of the room. Two boys attended him, and a guard snapped to attention between the sitting Hurrdu and the door. Clearly a man of station, Kaliah's father spoke in a booming voice. "Kaliah! It's so wonderful to see you. They told us the Arsie had captured you."

Kaliah wriggled free of the woman's grip. "They had. But this brave man rescued me." She took Umbert's hand again.

Umbert glanced behind himself before realizing she meant him. Suddenly, he found all eyes precisely where he did not want them: on him. He flushed. "I... it... was nothing."

The father's face went stern. "My daughter's freedom is not nothing."

Terror ground through Umbert. "I didn't mean... I mean I wouldn't..."

Kaliah squeezed Umbert's hand.

The father laughed. "Your bravery pleases me. And your modesty. What's your name, young man?"

"Umbert," Umbert said, very aware of his gaze. He worried the older man might find it too evasive or intense, and he found it hard to manage anything in between.

"Umbert," the king repeated. "Thank you for saving my daughter." He added carefully, "How goes the battle?"

"Wretchedly, sir." Umbert answered without thought, studying his hands to avoid the man's probing gaze.

The squeak of chair legs brought Umbert's regard back to the older man, who had risen and taken a step toward them. "Wretchedly, but I had heard—" He took another step toward Umbert, the boys hanging back, the guard hurriedly moving ahead of him. "I was told we had managed a flanking maneuver, that my daughter would be rescued in no time. And here she is to prove it so."

Umbert did not know what to say. Clearly, this man possessed great status in the Hurrdu tribe and believed Umbert one of them. The wrong words would seal his doom, so he chose them as carefully as possible. "Sir, the war goes wretchedly for me, because I do not wish to fight. I was to be trained as a blacksmith's apprentice, not a warrior's."

Kaliah gave Umbert's hand another squeeze. The woman, by appearance Kaliah's mother, retreated.

"You do not wish to fight?" The gray-haired man seemed taken aback.

"No."

"Not even for the good of the Hurrdu? To keep our women, like my daughter, safe?"

Though Umbert knew it a dangerous answer, he gave the honest one. "No." He added cautiously. "But perhaps I would change my mind if I understood the reason for this war."

The father's nostrils flared, but he gathered patience for his daughter's savior. "We fight for the honor of our people, to protect our lands, our homes, our property, and our womenfolk.",

The answer sounded astonishingly familiar. Umbert might as well be back in the camp, listening to Oslan. "But we could spare all that, and our men, too, if we simply stopped the battle."

The older man returned to his chair, eyes rolling. "Yes, that would be simple. Sometimes I forget how the young think." He shook his head, glancing at his guard. "How does one define patriotism to a child? How can I explain the significance of racial pride?"

The guard merely shrugged, the questions clearly rhetorical.

"Tell him," Kaliah said softly, and suddenly Umbert understood. She had recognized in him the same youthful innocence and wonder that spurred her, the same driving need to end a conflict that had spanned more decades than they would ever see. Generations had come and gone through a war that simply was and would remain until one side or the other disappeared or came to understand. The abject hatred driven into all of them at birth had become consummate, an understanding as old and certain as life itself. "My tribe good; your tribe bad." Yet, the very details that defined those differences had disappeared, lost in the need for a tribal future: offspring, new warriors to replace the old, the ancient hatreds fed anew.

Kaliah had placed his life at ultimate risk; yet, at the same time, granted Umbert exactly what he wanted: one chance to save both worlds.

Umbert cleared his throat. "Sir," he started, hoping the proper words would come. "There are no more white dogs or dark devils. The capture and breeding of one another's women has seen to that." He glanced at Kaliah, who tightened her grip in his and gave him an encouraging look. "Kaliah and I could pass for siblings, which seems absurd when you realize that she is Hurrdu." Umbert met the king's deeply set brown eyes. "And I am Arsie."

The guard stiffened, hand gliding to his sword. He looked askance at the older man, who sat in a stunned silence.

Kaliah grabbed her mother's arm. "Please," she said softly.

The woman spoke. "Mylian, I am half Arsie, by blood." She added carefully, "And so are you."

"No." Mylian pounded his fist on the chair. "No!"

The woman gave no ground. "Look at our daughter, and tell me otherwise."

Mylian did as the woman bade, studying Kaliah as if for the first time. His gaze traveled over the auburn hair, the hazel eyes, the skin with just a hint of her parents' swarthinness. A smile eased onto his face, then split wide open into great, peeling guffaws. He whirled back to face the youngsters in the

doorway. "Do you think you can convince the leader of the Arsie as you have me?"

Umbert did not know, but Kaliah never hesitated. "I'm certain of it."

A great respect welled up in Umbert now that Kaliah had proved willing to risk her own life the same way she had his. Her certainty proved contagious, and he knew that one day the great tribe of the Hursie-Ardu would bring prosperity to a territory once ravaged by war. And Kaliah would marry Horton Blacksmith's apprentice.