

The Texas Bake Sale
by Charles Coleman Finlay

Last month, Charlie Finlay took us back to the days of the American Revolution. This month he takes us into the future with a decidedly different take on matters of State....

In the Texas panhandle, the heat made everything shimmer. Still, the blur on the horizon was definitely a convoy of trucks. They rolled over the old broken highway, kicking up spumes of dust that the wind bowled north, as if even the dirt were eager to escape such a desolate stretch of land.

Marine Captain Mungus lowered his binoculars. "Sanders," he said to the driver of his open-top humvee. "Remind me why we're out here in this god-fucked waste."

Sanders, whose left eye socket was covered by a dirty patch of gauze where he'd been slashed by shrapnel, closed the book he was reading, and lifted his head. "Because no one else is crazy enough to come here."

"Right," Mungus said. He looked around at the rest of his Recon unit, vehicles and men spread out in the shade of the abandoned rest stop on the side of the old highway. "So what's that convoy doing out here?"

"Reason says they came this way because they didn't expect to see anything or anyone either."

"Mm-hmm." Mungus looked toward his flagtank, and to the tattered banners that snapped at the end of its antenna. "Is that still the stars-and-stripes we're flying?"

"Blood red, bone white, and true blue, sir. Bit ragged and faded, but still proud and free."

"You think they've seen it?"

"Well, as we've seen them, they've had a fair chance to see us," Sanders said, which wasn't quite true, as their unit was sitting still, and aside from the sparks thrown up by the welders trying to patch the shielding on one of the three tanks, they didn't stand out in any way from the dusty brown landscape around them. A fair streak made him add, "Although if they had seen it, they would likely be reversing their direction."

“Maybe they’re desperate men,” Mungus offered.

“Could be,” Sanders replied skeptically. “Maybe they’ve seen those Arklahoma women, since they’re coming from that way.”

“I was married to one once—desperate about sums it up.”

That bad marriage, along with no job and no prospects, was what sent him out to the desert to join Recon. Best decision he’d ever made. He stood in his seat, knuckled the grit from his eyes, and peered through the binoculars again. He counted fourteen, maybe sixteen, trailer trucks in the convoy, with a couple mounted guns on pickups, roving as flankers for an escort, and a fuel tanker riding in the middle of the line.

It didn’t make sense. There was nothing out here but ghost towns and tumbleweed, not all the way to the Mexican gobernador’s base in Albuquerque. Which was why Mungus brought his outfit out here to hide after their last raid north to the rebel states for food and fuel.

He lowered the binoculars. The sun’s glare made him squint, but he could see his own troops well enough. The more alert had also noticed the clouds of dust and were stirring the rest from their usual afternoon torpor. They amounted to barely a hundred and fifty men, not even company size, although they still carried battalion colors. And he only had three tanks, and one of those useless with the shielding peeled off, plus a half dozen of the two-man dee-pee-vees and a motley fleet of LAVs and humvees. Some of those were sitting dead until they could refuel.

They were supposed to protect the open roads, but the fuel truck in the center was too much to resist.

He picked up the radio. “Wake up, Recon. We’re deploying for Operation Bake Sale.”

There were shouts along the shell of the rest stop, and men tugging on equipment as they ran toward their vehicles. Sanders sank down in his seat and mumbled, “I don’t like it.”

Mungus ignored him.

“We’re going to blockade both sides of the highway, just west of the bridge,” he said into the radio. “Lopez, you’ve got the road. Leave one lane open, with room to squeeze by the tanks.”

“Yes, sir,” came the rough voice of the platoon sergeant. Both tanks rattled toward the road, followed by a group of humvees.

“Giuliani, take your bottle rockets up on that hill, and that hill there.” He stood on the back of his seat and pointed. Giuliani was a small man who looked like a bookkeeper, with a pocket protector to keep leaky pens from ruining his one good shirt; he leaned out of the window of his LAV at the far end of the lot and nodded confirmation.

“And Guns,” Mungus said.

“Yeah?” Giuliani replied over the radio.

“I want snipers spread out along the length of that convoy once they stop.”

“Like I don’t know my job?” the voice came back.

“That’s ‘don’t know my job, SIR.’”

Giuliani saluted Mungus from his window as the LAV rolled down the exit ramp, followed by more of the eight-wheeled vehicles. They bounced over the old curb and crossed the hills toward their position.

“Talley?” he said, calling the last of his sergeants, also the oldest and most experienced.

The radio crackled. “Yes, sir?”

“Sprinkle surface mines across the riverbed, make them think twice about trying to go off-road that way. Then go do that thing you do so well.”

“On it.”

The dee-pee-vees, little two-man go-carts with guns mounted on back, zipped off behind the old rest stop and out of sight while a second group, mostly humvees, headed off-road toward the dry riverbed. Only one more order to give.

“Keebler?” Mungus said.

“Sir!” came the enthusiastic reply.

“Set up your table and cookies in the open lane, down there in front of

Lopez's tank. We'll need at least twenty plates."

Keebler's real name was Freeman, but the unit's cookie man was always called Keebler. There was a long pause before the radio crackled. "Don't think I got that many cookies, sir. Got some zucchini bread and a couple slices of sweet potato pie. Oh, and some of Talley's chocolate brownies."

"The zucchini bread and sweet potato pie'll do."

"What about Talley's brownies, sir?"

"No brownies. I'll meet you down at the roadblock."

"Yes, sir!"

Mungus dropped into his seat and put the radio down. "'What about Talley's brownies?' Jesus, we don't want to kill them. Not unless we have to."

Sanders rolled his tongue through his stubbled cheek. "Those things are dry enough to choke an armadillo."

"Well, if it comes to a fight, we can always use them for missiles." He checked his guns to make sure they were loaded. "What do you mean you don't like it? What don't you like?"

Sanders waved a hand at the convoy. "This, the fuel truck, all of it. It's too good to be true."

"Maybe we're lucky for once."

"When was the last time we got lucky in anything?" He meant the last raid north into the Colorado free state, where rebel hostiles had an ambush waiting for them. Although their bad luck had been running a bit longer than that.

Mungus didn't have an answer for him, not a real one. He pounded the dashboard and pointed toward the spot where Keebler would set up his table. "Just means we're due."

"I'm handsome and a genius, but I'm still not rich," Sanders said. The gears ground as he shifted and the humvee jerked forward. "Saying 'we're due' doesn't mean shit."

“Is that what it says there in one of your books?”

“Nah, that’s just medieval history, knights and stuff,” Sanders said.

“Good,” Mungus said. “Then we’re due.”

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The driver of the first truck in the convoy was about as rough and scarred-up as most of the men in Mungus’s company, which he found reassuring. If it was another well-fed, clean-shaven Mormon boy from the free states up north, they’d be looking at a fight for sure. The truck’s passenger was something else entirely—smirking, pale-skinned, eyes hidden by a sweet pair of sunglasses. Mungus didn’t quite know what to make of him.

He hopped up on the sideboard and leaned in the open window. Dangerous to do, if these were bad guys, but things hadn’t gone so well on their last raid and his men needed to see him lead by example. “*Compran nuestros cookies, o preparanse para el muerto,*” he said. “*Cinco mil pesos.*”

The smirker said, “Are you shaking us down?”

“Bake sale,” Mungus explained, happier to be using English. “It’s as American as apple pie and as old as the Marines. Helps pay for road maintenance and safety patrols.”

The barrel on the lead tank, just beyond the cookie table, cranked up and over, aimed straight through the truck’s window. Nice effect, Mungus thought. It’d be a hell of a lot nicer if they had any shells for it.

The smirker ignored the tank. “You know I never understood that. How can you guys still call yourselves Marines when there isn’t a drop of water between here and Albuquerque?”

Mungus grinned at him, wide enough to show off his gold tooth. “We’re the Marines—wherever we are, that makes it the sea,” he said. “What brings you fellows this way?”

“Business,” the smirker answered.

“What kind of business?”

“Car factory,” he said. “We packed it up in Spring Hill, Tennessee, a couple weeks ago, and we’re driving it to California, where we’ll put it on a ship to send to China.”

“Don’t they have their own crappy cars in China already?”

“Not enough, apparently,” the smirker said. “Not every place has it as bad as we do here, and this is the fastest, cheapest way to go. Mike here,” he patted the driver on the shoulder, making him flinch, “worked at the old factory.”

“Uh-huh. And what’s your job?” Mungus asked.

“I’m a lawyer, kind of a businessman. I put this deal together.”

“A lawyer, huh? And since these are lawless times, you had to find other work.” Mungus squinted at the sun, looked down the length of idling trucks, licked dust off his lips. “There’s not much out here in the way of refreshment, Mister Lawyer. Your drivers could each use a plate of cookies.”

“Why exactly would we want cookies?”

“Oatmeal, it’ll keep you regular,” Mungus said. “Also, we’ve got zucchini bread, nice and moist, and sweet potato pie that’s better than your mom ever made. But mainly it helps out a good cause—yoo, ess, that’s us. It’s five thousand pesos a plate, one plate for every man in the convoy. We don’t take dollars.”

The lawyer nodded, as if he knew all this was coming. “Look, the same thing happened when we crossed the Mississippi and had to pay a toll. I understand, times are tough, you’re all just doing what you need to do to get by. But maybe, and I mean no disrespect when I say this, but maybe you’re in a little over your head.”

“Am I?” Mungus said.

“So why don’t you take me to the guy in charge of this outfit.” He had to shout to be heard above the roar of the wind, which gusted just then, casting a spray of dust through the open window. “Your general, whatever you call him, the guy with the rank insignia. He and I’ll have a little talk, and you can keep your cookies.”

“You want to talk to the leader of this outfit?”

“I promise, you’ll be rewarded if I do.”

Mungus jumped back off the sideboard, his boots kicking up a cloud of dust whisked instantly away. He stepped back from the truck, toward the road block. “Fine with me,” he shouted. “This way.”

The lawyer pushed his door open and jumped down. He was wearing pink silk slacks and a cream-colored jacket over a white polo shirt. His shoes were some kind of braided leather sandal. He had a duffel bag in one hand, his other raised in a gesture of peace, as he followed Mungus. Snipers held rifles trained on his exposed head, and a corporal fell in behind him when he passed the barricade.

Keebler nervously rearranged his plates, pushing the pie to the front, as he watched them pass.

Mungus walked back to Sanders, on the downwind side of his command vehicle. “This gentleman claims to be a lawyer, traveling west on business. Wants to speak to our leader.”

Sanders looked from Mungus to the lawyer and back again, his expression flat. “All right.”

The lawyer came forward, hand extended. “I didn’t catch your name, but still, I’m pleased to meet you. Is there someplace we can speak privately?”

Sanders slipped his hands into his pockets and stared at the outstretched offer of a shake. He tilted his head toward Mungus. “He’s the one to ask.”

“Excuse me?” the lawyer said.

“Captain Dave A. Mungus, commanding, Recon Company, remnant, U.S. Marines,” Mungus said. He grabbed the duffel bag from the lawyer and handed it to Sanders, who pulled it open and started going through it. “Let’s get a few things straight now. First, you will talk to every man in my company as if they were me, because we are all equal. Anything you do or say to any one of them, I’ll consider it done to me. Is that clear?”

“Look,” the lawyer said. “It’s obvious there’s been some kind of mistake—”

“Second, you will speak when spoken to, and until you are spoken to, you will keep your mouth shut. This is a military operation and you have no authority here. Is *that* clear?”

“Very,” the lawyer said. His face flushed a color that matched his pants and looked ready to burst.

“Third, whatever your business is, I don’t care, it’s not my business. You buy some cookies, we let you go on your way. It’s that simple. But if you lie to me, or treat me like I’m stupid, then you become a hostile, and if you are hostile, I will take you apart and keep anything I want. Do I make myself clear, Mister Lawyer?”

“You do.”

There was nothing subservient in his tone of voice, but Mungus was betting he had nothing to back up his overinflated sense of bravado.

“Good,” Mungus said. “Now so far, even though you’ve treated us rudely, we’ll play fair with you, give you a chance to buy something you need—food—for something we need, which is cash, and we’ll let you pass through.”

“My bag contains a variety of small valuables,” the lawyer said. “I think we can barter, profitably, in place of money.”

“It’s Indian beads,” interjected Sanders, who was part Choctaw, and originally from Arkklahoma, so he meant it more as a historical reference than a slur. “It’s mostly junk, cheap electronics, games for kids. He’s trying to buy Manhattan Island from us.”

“That’s not true—”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Mungus said, raising his hand. “Rule number two, you weren’t asked to speak.”

The lawyer squeezed his mouth shut. Sanders tossed the bag to the ground. “It’s nothing we need. Or want.”

Mungus nodded sadly as if this were to be expected. “Okay, Mister Lawyer, I’m going to give you exactly one lesson in how this is going to work. I tell you what to do, you say yes, and we have no problems. Clear?”

“As Waterford crystal.”

Sanders snorted. Mungus grinned again at the guy’s attitude. “I’ll have to take your word on that,” he said. “Here goes the lesson. You look hungry to me. Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” the lawyer said through clenched teeth. “I feel a bit peckish.”

Mungus opened his hands, as if to say this was also to be expected. “Since you like the idea of barter so much, you’re going to offer to trade me that pair of sunglasses for a slice of Corporal Keebler’s famous pie. I will graciously accept, and say thank you.”

The lawyer stared straight at Mungus for a long moment, his expression hidden behind his glasses. Finally, he said, “I think I’d prefer the cookies.”

“Then cookies you shall have. *Keebler!*”

The exchange was made, and the lawyer stood there blinking like a possum caught in daylight while Mungus slipped on the sunglasses and smiled at the sudden transformation of the landscape to a cooler blue.

Sanders took a message on the radio. “Wind’s picking up, sir. Gusts to forty, fifty miles an hour.”

As if to make his point, a tumbleweed bounced out of nowhere and climbed up Mungus’s back, and over his head. He looked down the road and saw some of the convoy trucks, back in line, rocking in the wind.

The lawyer saw the same thing. “The factory’s useless if we don’t get it all there in one piece. You tell me what to do and we’ll do it. Let’s just hurry this up, so we can get on the road and reach someplace safe from this wind.”

Mungus nodded. That was fair enough. “We’re going to do an inspection of your trucks, make sure they’re carrying what you say they’re carrying. You get on your phone, call whoever you need to back there in the convoy, and tell them to come up with the money for passage.”

That stopped the lawyer cold yet again. “Can’t I go back there, talk to my people personally?”

“Nope, you’re my guest right here until this whole process is done.

But I give you my word as a Marine, we'll be quick about it, and as long as you're on the up-and-up with us, we won't damage anything or hurt anyone."

The lawyer stared straight into Mungus's shaded eyes. "What if we pay you half again as much in dollars, will that speed us through, at least our first few trucks?"

"Keep your dollars. You can use them when your oatmeal cookies come out the other end. Pesos only."

The lawyer braced himself against the wind, looked away from the dirt thrown constantly into his eyes. "Fine, fine, pesos. Can we just get to work?"

It was almost too easy, but then they were overdue for some luck, no matter what Sanders thought. Mungus leaned into the humvee and picked up the radio. "Lopez, redeploy your men forward for inspection of the trucks. We're looking for factory equipment and we need a headcount."

After he received the confirmation, he turned back to the lawyer.

"See, we're practically done," he said. "By the way, there's a diesel tax I forgot to mention. We'll need to take a quarter of whatever you have in that tanker."

* * * *

The rising wind made both communications and inspection difficult, a problem hampered by the fact that no one knew what they were looking at once they cracked open the trucks. An hour later, the lawyer was arguing with Mungus, saying they should let the first trucks pass through the roadblock as soon as they were cleared so they could head down the road to someplace more sheltered from the wind. They were interrupted by Lopez, who had his hair tied back in a faded red bandana because his hat kept blowing off.

"We've inspected four trucks," Lopez reported as he pulled Mungus aside. He shouted at a level that made his throat raw. "Looks like a bunch of heavy equipment, could be factory parts, I can't tell. When have I ever seen a factory?"

"You sound like you're bothered by something?" Mungus said.

"You mean besides the sight of you in those pansyass sunglasses?"

Well, yeah, I'm bothered. The first truck looked about what I'd expect, and so did the second. But the third truck just looks like junk's thrown in it, and the fourth one, the stuff inside is arranged weird. We can't get all the way to the back. The driver keeps trying to tell us it's just big pieces of equipment, but...." He shrugged skeptically.

"Go look at the fifth truck and tell me what you find."

"Yes, sir," he said, and left.

Sanders had listened in on the exchange. "I still don't like it," he said.

"Maybe the lawyer's telling the truth," Mungus countered. "It looks like junk 'cause it is junk, just like their Indian beads. Their haul isn't worth much, there's no reason for anyone to steal it, so they came this way 'cause it's the cheapest, fastest route. Just like he said."

"Maybe," Sanders said, meaning no.

Mungus glanced over at the lawyer, who sat in a sheltered spot on the ground with his duffel bag on one side and his plate of untouched cookies in their recycled plastic wrap on the other. Sanders usually knew what he was about. It wouldn't hurt to trust him. "Okay," he said. "You keep an eye on him. And make it the good one."

"All right," Sanders said, relieved. "Now, the next thing is, we got a problem."

"What problem?"

"Wind's screwing up communications and everything else. We can't reach Talley at all, and Giuliani says he's got to pull back from the hilltops into shelter or the wind's going to tip his vehicles over."

"Tell Giuliani to redeploy the TOW guns where they can still do some good. He can bring the rest of his men in, have them report to Lopez, speed up the inspections."

"What about Talley?"

"He's a big boy, knows what he's doing." As he said it, he glanced toward the horizon, but the wind was so strong now, it was impossible to see the dust kicked up by any vehicles.

“You say he knows what he’s doing,” Sanders said, “even though you’ve tasted his chocolate brownies.”

“Listen,” Mungus snapped, in no mood for jokes. “Let’s be quick about this, do it right, then get back to base and hunker down till the storm blows out.”

Sanders nodded and left. Mungus went over to the lawyer, who yanked his hand out of the duffel bag and nodded toward the flag that whipped back and forth atop the lead tank. “Why do you still fly that thing?” he asked. “There’s no United States any more, nothing that resembles what that flag used to mean.”

Mungus knew that was true, that the climate change, the home wars, the mass starvation followed by big migrations and the collapse of the old political structures, had wiped out not only the United States as a nation but had erased many of its monuments and most of its history. He knew it, but he didn’t have to accept it.

“That flag stands for freedom and democracy, a tradition we carry on,” he said. He’d heard the same speech when he joined Recon, and he believed it more than ever. This was the only community he had, and it had to mean something. “The men in Recon are volunteers, free to come and go as long as they meet our standards and follow our rules. And our men elect their own officers so they never have to frag one. As long as there’s one Marine alive somewhere, that flag means something.”

“Tell that to Jim Elkins and his family,” the lawyer said. “All six of them dead out in the sun after some of your men siphoned all the gas from their truck. Or what about the eleven men you killed during that raid in Boulder and for what? A bunch of canned food and bottled water. Or what your men did to Deacon Scott’s wife—”

“That’s none of my men, not on my watch,” Mungus growled, even though he knew full well that people got killed sometimes. But there were limits, things they wouldn’t do.

The lawyer looked past Mungus, down the road toward the tank and the row of trucks. “That flag hasn’t meant anything but fear for most folks for a long time. You guys are nothing but pirates.”

Mungus squeezed his jaw shut until the muscles in his neck hurt. Finally, he pointed toward the cookies. “You get something, we get something—that’s not piracy. We have a code of honor, whether you

believe we do or not.”

“Cookies, right.” The lawyer slipped his hand under the plate. He smirked again, but it was kind of pathetic, Mungus thought, the best effort of a small-time smirker. “What’s your motto, *Semper pie?*”

Whatever Mungus was going to say next to the lawyer, one of three or four things he was sure to regret later, it was interrupted by Private Chilusky, a new recruit out of Tulsa, from Lopez’s platoon, a skin-and-bones teenager who was smarter than he looked. Chilusky ran back, panting, from the convoy and stood between Mungus and the lawyer. “Sir?”

“What is it?” Mungus shouted.

The wind carried away Chilusky’s words and Mungus had to shout at him to repeat them.

“It’s the tanker, sir.”

“What about it?”

“The fuel’s contaminated. As soon as we loaded our own fuel truck, I put some in my humvee because it was running on fumes. I went to drive off and it was dead.”

Mungus looked down the road. His men were spread out along the whole length of the convoy now, a few near each truck. Over on the hillsides, his TOW missiles were caught between one position and the next, useless for the moment. And one of his platoons was missing out in that mess of a wind. Suddenly, he had a very bad feeling about things. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir—I took a sample and tasted it.” He scrubbed his sleeve across his mouth. “It’s not diesel, not much, maybe ethanol, but sweet as hell.”

A gun fired only feet from Mungus’s head and Chilusky threw himself to the ground. Mungus, recognizing it was only small caliber and had already missed him, spun around. Sanders had the lawyer in a chokehold, with his arm twisted back, his gun aimed up in the air. The plate that he had used to conceal the gun was spilled in the dirt.

Mungus shook his head. “Bad lawyer, no cookie.”

But what did the lawyer hope to accomplish? Killing him wouldn't get his factory to California. Mungus snatched up the duffel bag, rummaged through it. A communicator, mercenary grade, disguised as a game unit, sat on top. He looked down the convoy and the realization hit him. It was a Trojan horse.

Leaping across the seat, he grabbed the radio and yelled into it. "Lopez, fall back, it's a trap! Giuliani, I want Predators aimed at those trucks *now!*"

On the road, through the swirling cloud of dust, he could see that everything was already chaos. Hidden panels popped off the sides of every truck, vomiting soldiers in full body armor—some commercial outfit, probably hired with rebel money. Ramps dropped off the trucks at the end of the line, spitting out the first of hundreds of soldiers, some with anti-tank guns, others on dee-pee-vees mounted with light machine guns.

Mungus pulled the shotgun from its holster on his back and put it at the back of the lawyer's head, and for the first time, the smirk slipped completely off the lawyer's face. Mungus waited just long enough for Sanders to duck out of the way before he squeezed the trigger.

Sniper fire was falling from the hillsides like the patter of rain as Lopez pulled his men back. The last two trucks in line, only half empty of men, exploded, one whump after another, as grenades hit them.

Slinging the shotgun back over his shoulder, Mungus cried, "Ooh-rah!"

He grinned as the shout came back to him from men running to the fight. Sanders stood beside him, frowning at the lawyer's corpse. "You think he really was a lawyer?"

"He was a liar," Mungus said. "And I hate liars. That bothers me more than him trying to kill me."

Sanders ducked as bullets whistled overhead. They mixed in with the sound of the wind whistling over their equipment. The truck at the front of the convoy exploded, cab then trailer, whump whump, and Mungus spread his legs to ride the ground as it rocked beneath him. Debris pelted down around them, and out of the dust, a group of hostiles, mounted on small, fast dirtbikes, supported by the two pickups, roared straight toward them.

"If it weren't for bad luck," Mungus muttered, and then there was no

time left to say he'd have no luck at all: he pumped the shotgun and shot at the lead rider, missing, before he had to dive for cover behind their humvee. Fortunately, Sanders was there to lay down suppressing fire and the attack veered off as soon as they saw the lawyer's body—in that outfit, he was unmistakable, even with the mess that had been his head.

“We're in for it now,” Sanders grumbled.

Mungus grabbed the rifle from him and popped up to take a shot at the nearest hostile. “Just let me shoot one son of a bitch in his semper piehole first.”

Sanders dragged him toward a culvert beside the road and after that they engaged in a strategic retreat toward Giuliani's forces on the hillside. When they finally found Giuliani, Mungus yelled at him to deploy the LAVs.

“Can't risk it,” Giuliani said. “They've got the guns to take them out and we may need them to withdraw. I had the snipers take down a few trucks with high explosive rounds on the grenade launchers, but we're out of those rounds.”

“Shit,” Mungus said. He grabbed Giuliani's radio. “Talley, report in *now!* Where the fuck are you?”

The answer was slow to come, and when it crackled back, there was gunfire in the background. “We're a little busy.”

“We need the fucking cavalry!”

“No, you need us to keep their armored units from pinning you up against their trucks. Out!”

“Shit.” Mungus said again. “Hey, Guns, can I ask you something?”

Giuliani was grabbing men by the collar and throwing them down the hill to cut off a group of hostiles that was trying to flank their position. “What?”

“Do you think we're pirates?”

An enemy shell hit close enough to make them all duck as dirt and rocks rained on them. Giuliani tugged his helmet down on his head and glared at Mungus as if he were crazy. Mungus nodded to Sanders and they circled the hillside firing over the ridge at the enemy below. From here, he

could see the enemy's plan: if they'd passed even a few trucks through the roadblock, they would've been able to get Mungus's men in a crossfire. With a little luck, they might have taken a lot of them down in the first volley and then mopped up in the confusion afterward. If they also had light armored units coming cross-country to outflank them and pin them from behind, it could have been very bad. Thank God for Talley.

He moved to a hilltop and pulled out his binoculars for a better view. Lopez's men had fallen back just soon enough to nail some enemy troops against their trucks when they busted out. He was taking heavy fire, but they weren't being pushed back from their position on the far side of the highway. Meanwhile, the enemy that took cover on this side of their trucks were exposed to Giuliani's snipers. A few isolated groups had already thrown down their weapons and surrendered.

Mungus ran, low to the ground, and climbed into one of the LAVs where he ordered the driver to a spot so they could fire on a group of enemy mobile units and drive them toward the riverbed. When the first motorcycle sprinting down the riverbed hit a mine and exploded, Mungus yelled out to anyone who would listen, "Push! Push them into the river!"

But his men already had the right idea, and as the enemy funneled into the twisting riverbed, looking for cover and a quick road out of the firefight so they could regroup, they ran smack into two more mines before they realized it was a trap and bunched up with nowhere to go.

Mungus took Sanders and started circling the field, ordering his men to press hard, before the enemy could reorganize or develop a new strategy. But his men had things under control—in places, they were already stripping the enemy of their weapons and plastic-cuffing them. Shooting anyone who balked at a command made the rest of them compliant.

"You know," Sanders said, as they headed back toward their own vehicle, "the original pirates were an offshoot of the Knights Templar, after they were disbanded. The jolly roger flag, the pirate code, all that stuff came from the Templars and the shipping industry that they created for the crusades. So the pirates started out as part of a trained military, and then they adapted to circumstances as the existing socio-political structure collapsed."

"I don't really care what that liar called us," Mungus said.

"No, of course not." Sanders scratched at his bandaged eye,

pressing the loose adhesive tape back onto his sweaty cheek.

They found Lopez bloody and bare-headed, his red bandana tying off a wound to his left forearm. His platoon had taken the worst casualties, with three men killed, including Chilusky, which was a damn shame, and fourteen wounded. Two of those were iffy to make it, medical care being what it was. But he was in a jubilant mood. "You can't believe the ordnance, Captain! We captured thousands of fifty caliber rounds. *Thousands.*"

With Sanders hanging over his shoulder, Mungus couldn't ask Lopez about the piracy thing. No matter how much Mungus hated to lose anyone, equipment and ordnance were much harder to replace than men, so he congratulated Lopez and asked for a full report, then he went and visited the wounded in the first aid unit they set up in the old rest stop, where the tile floors made it feel a little like a hospital.

Talley was the last to report in, hours later, near dark. An old man, past sixty, he never hurried when he didn't have to. "Sorry for the radio silence, sir, but as soon as my scouts stumbled across their off-road units, I knew it was a trap."

"You couldn't send anyone back to tell us?" Mungus asked, more than a little pissed off.

"I knew you'd figure it out." He twisted open a bottle of water and poured some over his head, sending rivulets of mud across his dusty cheeks. Talley was old school Marines, served before the collapse; he claimed to have been present at the very first Operation Bake Sale, when a military abandoned financially by their country tried to find some nominally honorable way to keep their unit together. On his uniform, he wore the insignia of the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, a badge more than a hundred years old, dating back to the days of the United States. In the very center of the diamond-shaped badge, surrounded by some words in Latin, there was a skull and crossbones. It was the same design they had on the unit flag, which they flew beside the stars-and-stripes.

Talley saw Mungus staring at his insignia, looked down to see if something was wrong, and said, "What is it?"

Talley was one of the best men Mungus knew. There was no way Mungus was going to ask him about pirates. Instead, he turned his head and spat before he spoke, as if to get the taste of the word pirate out of his mouth.

“We’re going to recruit some of the men who attacked us,” Mungus said. “Replenish our ranks so we can keep the unit going. We sent them marching down the highway. I thought a few miles over the desert might improve their decision-making ability. I’m going to send Keebler after them.”

“That’s a great idea,” Talley said. “I’ll go along. Just let me get some of my chocolate brownies.”