

FIVE The Warrior

Kestrel Team, Anglo-American Special Ops Alborz Province, Northern Iran March, 2022

The air vibrated to the beating THUD-THUD-WHOOMP-THUD-THUD-WHOOMP-THUD-THUD-WHOOMP of an apache Longbow attack helicopter growing louder as it rose up from the darkness like a bird of prey, its guns locked and loaded, missiles primed. Its engines echoed up the near vertical cliffs – THUD-THUD-WHOOMP-THUD-THUD-WHOOMP-THUD-THUD-WHOOMP...

The Revolutionary Guard fired a flare and it streamed up into the dark, moonless heavens. With a distant crack it exploded into a bright phosphorous light that glowed ethereally into the valley, descending slowly to earth on a parachute.

There it was, coming in fast and mean. THUD-THUD-WHOOMP-THUD-THUD-WHOOMP-THUD-THUD-WHOOMP...

On the other side of the valley the night sky started to flash, followed by distant BOOMS of thermobaric missiles detonating along the enemy's southern defenses – the opening salvos of an American offensive against Iranian strongholds in the mountains, digging in for the long haul.

Revolutionary Guard opened fire on the Apache with a fifty-caliber machine-gun, blasting out two dozen hot glowing rounds that traced through the sulfurous glow into the valley.

'*Bollocks!* Incoming fire, one o'clock,' Elizabeth said. 'Kestrel Leader to chicks,' she barked into the comms. 'We're taking fire, hold your positions.'

'Copy, Kestrel Leader,' came an American voice.

'We're going in, Ed. Say thank you mummy and kiss your bum goodbye,' she said to her co-pilot, Lt. Eddy Waring, who sat behind her. She reached to the console. 'Switching sight to target weapons control...' The monacle over her right eye switched to tactical and became the apache's targeting system, the chain gun following her line of sight as she pulled up sharply and banked left as the fifty caliber rounds whizzed and zinged past them. She pulled right, sourcing the muzzle flashes on a ridge midway up the mountain. She came in fast and opened fire.

The chain gun roared to life with a quick BRATATAT! Spitting white-hot bullets through the darkness as the flare dimmed and burned out, plunging the valley back into darkness. They strafed the ridge where the fifty caliber was firing, blasting chunks out of the cliff.

She flew in closer, coming up over the enemy's position, using thermal and infrared imaging. She fired on the exposed hotspots, the chain gun spitting death and carnage – BRATATAT-BRATATAT-BRATATAT.

The fifty fell silent and a dozen bodies lay on the ground, glowing in the thermal imaging, including the blood spilling from their bodies.

The enemies were dug into the mountains in an extensive network of bunkers spreading for several kilometers inside the mountains and hills.

The sky flashed and boomed with more explosions ten miles south from the US infantry attack taking place on the far side of the valley, assaulting the enemy's main strongholds with half a dozen Apaches, softening them up ahead of the ground offensive planned for dawn. It was supposed to act as a diversion for Kestrel Team to fly its birds in over the enemy lines. It was an Anglo-American Special Forces team, consisting of Elizabeth's apache and two Westland Lynxes as well as fourteen team members. Five American Green Berets, a US Marine, a Navy SEAL and seven British SAS, including their commander, Colonel Elizabeth Brooks.

Elizabeth flew in close, too close for Eddy's liking. They could see the glowing shapes of Revolutionary Guard fighters running about in the thermal imaging, firing AK-47's at them, running in and out of the caves and tunnels for cover as the chain guns responded.

The apache's engines roared as it drew back like a rearing warhorse, sweeping left, firing another volley from the 30-millimeter chain-gun, BRATATATAT-BRATATAT-BRATATAT – strafing the upper ridge, the explosive bullets blasted rock into dust and men into scattered flecks of bloody flesh, bone and dismembered limbs.

Another fifty-caliber opened fire again below them. Bullets whizzed past, glowing orange around the Apache, some striking the fuselage with hard thuds, zings and pings.

The fifty needed taking care of before it did any serious damage. Using her IHADSS,¹ she brought her big black mechanical bird of prey up above the target and dipped the nose majestically, the chain gun swiveling on its turret; locked the target and opened fire, pulverizing the ridge and everything on it. The fifty was out of action.

Elizabeth pulled back on the stick and nosed up, climbing parallel to the enemy on the upper ridge, facing them full on. Revolutionary Guards were firing at them with pistols and AK-47's, several shots careening off the fuselage. One smacked into the side window beside Eddy's head and cracked the glass. He jerked sideways with shock and looked at the fractures in the glass, rooting out jaggedly from where the bullet struck. He took a deep breath. *Bollocks to this for a fucking game of cowboys!* He spotted a dozen insurgents hurrying to the ridge from the right with a Russian Verba MANPAD surface-to-air missile shoulder-launcher. 'Heavy hostiles, two o'clock!'

¹ *Integrated Helmet and Display Sighting System.*

Elizabeth looked right and spotted them, the chain gun swiveled with her head and she pressed the fire button on her joystick and gave them a six second burst BRATATATAT! BRATATATAT! BRATATATAT! The chain-gun shredded them like meat through a mincer, cutting them to pieces and the barbarity of war revealed thermal ugliness.

She activated the missile targeting system and honed in on the caves, plotting on her tactical screen. 'Have this on King Charley,' she said and fired.

SWOOSH! The AGM-114N thermobaric missile was away, shooting off in front of them in a trail of smoke and fire. They hovered and watched as the missile disappeared into the gaping mouth of a cave.

'Oh, lovely pot, Boss!' Eddy complimented.

Then a deep resounding KABOOM sounded from deep inside the earth and it shook loose rubble and boulders along the side of the mountain like an earthquake. Tremendous waves of energy rippled out in concentric arcs like when a stone plunged into a millpond – jets of fire, smoke, dust, earth and body parts flew out from the cave mouths, incinerating everything combustible, human or otherwise in an instant. Then there was a secondary, even bigger explosion that blew out a huge hole from the side of the mountain, sending thousands of tons of rock and rubble crashing down the mountainside in an avalanche.

Elizabeth looked at Eddy. She thought for a moment of the death she had wrought. There were probably kids in there, and once more she reminded herself of the ugliness of war.

'Kestrel Leader to Chicks. Hold your positions at Zulu-Foxtrot. Repeat. Hold your position at Zulu-Foxtrot.'

'Copy. Holding position at Zulu-Foxtrot.'

Elizabeth kept the apache hovering parallel to the ridge, weapons locked and loaded, a second thermobaric missile ready to go. Nothing moved but the dust and debris falling back to earth in a thick gray cloud.

'Kestrel Leader to Hawkeye. You can have that one on us.'

Someone laughed and a Texan accent thundered in her ears. 'Uhm, copy that Kestrel Leader. Much obliged, ma'am.'

'You can buy me one at the Cat's Whiskers, Hawkeye.'

The American laughed again. 'It'll be a pleasure. Y'all stay safe out there.'

'You too Hawkeye. Kestrel Leader to Chicks. The road's open, on my vector.'

Harry's voice responded, 'Copy that, we're coming in from your seven.'

She had them on her radar screen, three kilometers behind them.

'We've got you five-five,' Eddy said.

Four RAF F-35 Lightning II fighter jets screamed through the sky overhead, scrambled to intercept six Mig-29 fighters flying in from Syria. She had heard the radio traffic through her comms several minutes ago.

There was a bright flash over the horizon and more explosions from the Hawkeye team's positions, blowing the hell out of the enemy.

Elizabeth maneuvered up and banked to port into a gorge cleaved into the mountains for a ten kilometer stretch of twisting canyons, keeping the height thirty meters below the ridge, chicaning through its contours left and right in the dark. *A piece of piss*, she thought.

The two Lynxes, Kestrel One and Kestrel Two, which was flying empty (except for Charles and Martin on the guns), roared in behind them, their engines echoing through the gorge, their lights blacked out.

In the apache, thermal and infrared guidance systems displayed the terrain on their IHADSS.

They emerged from the ravine into the semi fertile hills over some olive groves, where the thermal cameras picked out the spectrally glowing outlines of sheep and goats scattering beneath the trees, startled by the helicopters' engines.

'Okay, we need to go west two degrees. Climb to three thousand feet,' Elizabeth said. 'ETA three minutes. Stay sharp on those guns, lads. Kestrel Leader to Shadow Company, sitrep, over?'

'We're at the rendezvous standing by.'

'We're almost there, Shadow. I could murder a ciggy,' she said to Eddy, feeling the adrenalin beginning to surge again as they neared the rendezvous. Here was where things could get very dangerous.

And suddenly, they did. The proximity alarm started buzzing loudly in the cockpit.

'*INCOMING!*' Eddy shouted urgently.

Elizabeth yanked on the stick and the apache pulled up sharply at speed with a beating roar of propellers, while the Lynxes veered sharply to port, both diving towards the ground.

The missile locked on the Apache and was coming up fast.

Elizabeth responded quickly, making evasive maneuvers. 'The fucker's on us like a greyhound up a hare's arsehole!' she said. 'Standby to deploy countermeasures...'

Eddy's finger was hovering over the launch button.

Elizabeth watched on her viewer with an unnaturally steely calm. 'Not yet, Ed. Not yet, sunshine...'. She watched the blip fast approaching.

The seconds seemed like minutes, Eddy's finger as stiff as a rod of ice over the button, his face pocked with beads of icy sweat, anxiously waiting for her order. He watching the missile closing in as she maneuvered the Apache, weaving through the air at extreme angles, like a mosquito looking for a vein.

'DEPLOY! DEPLOY! DEPLOY!' she yelled.

Thank fuck for that! Eddy pressed the button.

A volley of infrared decoy flares shot out from either side of the Apache in wings of crimson fire as they burst into bright hot infrared light – Elizabeth pulled up sharply, climbing almost vertically.

Eddy's butt-hole clenched like a vice as he was thrown back in his seat and glared goggle eyed through the windshield at the stars glimmering across the pitch-black heavens in front of him. '*Jesus Christ!*' he gasped.

The missile honed on the flares and exploded into a hillside in an inflating ball of flames that briefly turned night into day.

Elizabeth dived and banked round. Thermals picked up a heat source and plotted the trajectory of the missile to its launch position. 'Target acquired.' She fired a Hydra 70 missile immediately.

Eddy watched the image on the screen from the missile's onboard camera. He saw men running in all directions, growing fuzzily on the monitor. Too late, the missile detonated with a bright flash and K'BOOOOMMM of high explosives along with a huge fireball.

'Target destroyed,' Eddy confirmed.

'Kestrel Leader to Chicks. How are you boys doing down there?'

'Enjoying the fireworks.'

'And so's half Revolutionary Guard for fifty miles in every direction, so let's get this done; I need a gin,' she said.