

Once again, Colonel "Fragger" Sparks teaches the future that a U.S. Army Ranger from 600 years in the past leads the way...in cunning...courage...and the combat rage it takes to protect his son and everyone under his command.

The Third Misadventure of Fragger Sparks, A Ranger Paves the Way

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The Third Misadventure of Fragger Sparks

A Ranger Paves the Way

Steven D. Fisher

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Chapter 1

It was a long and screaming tumble of a descent to the surface of Aifor.

Fragger was glad he'd kept his own screaming inside his head while the dropship bore an erratic hole through the atmosphere.

The captured Aiforian pilot, Ranglin, had tricked them after they'd made the escape from the jungle planet, Jivaro.

Fragger had ordered the pilot to find a new planet, a home for him, his Rangers, and his infant son, Patrick.

Ranglin found a home all right—his own—and set the Jivaron Rangers down in the midst of Fragger's enemies.

The latest in a long list of them.

How the pilot had fooled them, Fragger didn't know and would never know.

Ranglin lay back inside the ship sprawled on the deck, a knife protruding from his throat like an obscenely distended Adam's apple.

Fragger had tried to kill him first.

Iso Watanabe had been next.

To everyone's surprise, Amalia got to the pilot before the two seasoned warriors did. The Shuar nursemaid had slipped the knife from the sheath on Fragger's leg and pounced on Ranglin as he tried to rip the baby from the Ranger's arms, knowing possession of the child was his only ticket to safety after his betrayal.

The maternal instinct had been as deadly as a Jivaron slipsnake.

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Now Amalia and Waktrun Wik, the vidman, stood with Fragger outside the damaged dropship as Iso organized the survivors and Buurk, the Martian medic, tended to the injured.

“We were lucky,” the Ranger said. “Damned lucky.”

“How is that so?” the nursemaid asked as she soothed the swaddled baby by rocking it back and forth in her arms. “We’re on the planet of your enemies. You killed Lord Lesto in honorable battle, but you raped and murdered the mother of this child. Lord Lesto’s daughter deserved her death, there’s no doubt of that, but I doubt the Aiforians will see it that way.”

The memory of his driving the knife into Andriana’s heart to prevent her from killing his son stung the Ranger. And the boy’s eyes peeking from the blanket made sure he felt the sting every day. Patrick had his black hair, but the eyes were pure Andriana,

In most respects, he amended. Hers were an ice-blue, cold as Arctic snow. Patrick’s eyes are bright blue, so intense it sometimes seems like he’s looking straight through me, the world, and anything else in the path of his gaze. Other times, I feel as if Andriana is inside those eyes and reminding me constantly that I killed her.

He drove the guilt out of his head by saying, “Look at those mountains. If we’d crashed over there, we’d all be dead. Instead, we’re on the plains. We survived—most of us, anyway.”

Happy to be out of the ship and feel the breeze on his skin, Fragger sniffed at the air. It had the tang of clover to it and punctuated the weak heat hovering over the oddly green-purple color of the dry long-grass prairie. A strong wind blew from the mountains to the west bringing a coolness born of snows atop peaks taller than

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the Rockies he'd trained in as a Ranger learning how to fight in cold and altitude. The distant range had the sharply crenellated wall of an immense natural castle that stretched from horizon to horizon.

The prairie was Dakota-like, a flat surface roiled by gullies and bluffs looking like aircraft carriers stranded by a receding ocean. It smelled of late autumn dust and scents strangely akliter in his nose.

A musky odor rode the breeze from a massive herd of...Fragger wasn't quite sure what they were. At first glance, he thought they were American bison. But, when they turned their heads toward the noise and smoke erupting from the cracked-open dropship, he saw far larger bodies. The horns, he estimated, reached close to three meters across from tip to tip.

The bastards look like they're straight out of Earth's Pleistocene age or whatever age they first lived in.

The herd of giant quadrupeds surrounded the ship and stretched to the horizon. A shadow crossed one of the shaggy heads, and Fragger looked up to see an ebony bird glide across the herd. To his one good eye, the wing span was twice the length of the bison horns. He thought the bird looked similar to Earth's extinct giant condor, but the beak that tore into a desperately fleeing rabbit was that of an eagle.

More shadows passed, and Fragger shaded his eyes to scan a blue sky a subtle shade darker than Old Terra's atmosphere. High above the ship, raptors gathered, reconnoitering for prey.

"Wik," Fragger pointed a finger skyward and joked to the dwarf. "You'd better watch out. Those big birds of prey catch sight of your scrawny ass, you'll end up as lunch meat for their chicks."

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A fly had landed on the vidman's gin-blossomed potato of a nose. Wik swatted it away with a stubby finger.

"I'll just be first in line, colonel," he retorted in the booming bass voice that always surprised Fragger because it seemed twice as large as the man himself. "The nursemaid's right. The Aiforians won't forget your mortal insult. You'll be joining me in their hell. We all will."

Wik shivered as the wind gusted and blew across his walnut-colored skin. The breeze snapped the vidman's thin shirt and cargo-style pants like a yellow and black flag.

"Well, landing in different kinds of hell seems to be my specialty, doesn't it?" Fragger responded mildly.

A complaining grunt escaped the vidman's lips.

"I always get you in to these fixes, but I always get you out as well, Wik," the Ranger reminded him.

"You could have found us some place warm."

"Want to go back to Jivaro? That planet had a lot of heat."

"No, thanks."

"Stop your bitching, then," Fragger said. "You're still alive and in one tiny piece. You don't hear Amalia complaining, do you?"

Bucaram's daughter smiled, but she was trembling as well. The Aiforian fatigues she wore were a shapeless dark uniform designed for the interior of the dropship, little protection against the climate of Aifor. Her people, the Shuar, were adapted to the jungles of Jivaro and had no experience of the cold temperatures the Rangers were bound to face.

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Although short, Amalia was taller than most of her people. She was slim rather than chunky and wore her black hair back in a most un-Shuar like pony tail. Her nose was unlike her father's. Where his nostrils had flared widely across his face, hers formed a delicate end to the sharp ridge that led up to thin eyebrows arching across the characteristically broad brow of the Shuar. In contrast to Bucaram's dark, impenetrable eyes, Amalia's eyes sparked with hints of mischief and a resolution Fragger found matched his own.

No wonder Bucaram was eager to let her come with me, Fragger thought with amusement. *A shaman, an uwishin, would not want a rebellious daughter to usurp his authority over his people.*

"It's always the preacher's kid who causes the most trouble."

"What did you say?" Amalia asked.

"Nothing," Fragger said, not realizing he'd spoken out loud.

"This is no time for daydreaming," Wik said.

"You're right, you little fart. Let's get Iso here."

The Ranger spoke into his commlink. Iso Watanabe responded and joined the group a minute later.

"Iso," Fragger said, "'General' Wik seems to think we should be taking immediate action to seek safety from the Aiforians."

"Not only is Wik short in stature," his squat second-in-command responded in a tone of affectionate contempt from a nose smashed into a button by the hilt of a sword in a long-past battle, "but he's short in command experience as well. Not to mention brains."

"Screw you, you *Ainu* ape!"

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“For a vidman, his vocabulary is remarkably limited as well,” Iso added.

Wik reddened. “If I were your size, I’d—“

“Die a quick death,” Iso interrupted, “but for once, I’ll admit you’re right, little man. Our landing couldn’t have gone unnoticed. We need to leave the ship. The question is, where do we go?”

“The mountains,” Fragger said. “That’s the obvious choice.”

Iso turned his underslung jaw toward the range. “Difficult terrain for our enemies. For us, as well.”

“Can we survive up there?” Wik asked. “More to the point, can your son survive in those conditions?”

“A Ranger can survive anywhere,” Fragger answered. “So can a Ranger’s son.”

Wik rolled his chocolate-brown eyes. “False bravado won’t keep us warm.”

“We had a saying in my day. ‘If you can do it, it ain’t bragging.’”

“Words aren’t getting us anywhere,” the dwarf said.

Fragger searched the vidman’s face. “I’m surprised at your fear, Wik. You proved your bravery back on Jivaro. To save me, you took on a slipsnake and survived. Not many men could say that.”

“Slipsnakes don’t torture people. They just kill you outright.”

The vidman shivered again, and this time Fragger saw that it had nothing to do with the cold.

“Colonel, I don’t want to fall back in their hands.”

“They treated you well before when you were on this planet, didn’t they?”

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“They had a purpose for me, then. They don’t now. Except to make an example of me, and anyone else with you.”

“They respect force, then?” Fragger asked.

“It’s the *only* thing they respect.”

The Ranger knelt, put his hands on the vidman’s shoulders and turned him so they were face to face. “Wik, you don’t have to come with us, you know. They still may have a use for you. After all, you have the inside story on me and Jivaron Rangers. They’ll want as much information as possible, and you can supply it.”

The dwarf knocked Fragger’s hands away. “Just what do you think I am? I don’t betray friends. Besides, it’s likely I’ll live a bit longer with the Rangers. Not much longer, but longer, and that’s all that counts.”

“Then, what are you grumbling about?”

“Everyone needs a good grumble now and then.”

“Most people don’t do it twenty-fours a day,” Iso said. “Why don’t you just shut up, so we can make our plans?”

“Like I said before, screw you, you *Ainu* ape!” Wik shot back, but no more words came out of his mouth.

“What do you think, colonel?” Iso asked.

Fragger glanced up at the black smoke billowing into the sky from the ruptured dropship. “I think we move now. With our feet trampling down this long prairie grass, they won’t need any fancy electronic means to find us. They can simply follow our trail. The faster we get to the mountains, the better. Iso, you know what to do.”

Watanabe nodded and left. A moment later he was replaced by Buurk.

“What’s the situation with the injured?” Fragger asked the absurdly tall Martian.

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“Ten are ambulatory. Nine will need to be carried,” the medic answered. “Fortunately, the dropship is equipped with gravsleds.”

Buurk’s enormous chest inhaled deeply as a gust whipped across the prairie. “Good, cold, clean air,” he said. “It’s not Martian air, but it beats the stink of Jivaro.”

Fragger smiled as Amalia aimed an offended scowl up at the bronze-skinned seven-foot medic whose face looked like Abraham Lincoln’s on a very bad day.

“Sorry, nursemaid,” Buurk said as he noticed the reaction. “I was genetically designed for Mars. To my lungs, the atmosphere of your home planet was like trying to breathe swamp water.”

“Mars must be a very soulless place, then,” Amalia said in a dismissive tone.

“No proto-crocs, no slipsnakes, no genmod apes, no Dr. Shaper. It was heaven compared to--”

“You can argue the respective merits of your planets on the way to the mountains,” Fragger interrupted. “Right now, Buurk, get back inside the ship and prepare your patients to move.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Amalia, Wik, help him.”

As the three walked back toward the main hatch, the Ranger surveyed his ragtag command’s activities around the dropship. Most of the troopers wore their power-armor and were lugging supplies onto the gravsleds that had been of little use in the thick jungles of Jivaro. Others ran checks on weaponry—PPC and Gauss rifles, laser pistols, disassembled 90 mm mortars suitable for mountain warfare, and the heavier crew-served cannons. The remainder formed a protective perimeter, scanning the sky and prairie for signs of Aiforian forces.

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Fragger nodded his appreciation of Iso's organizational skills. None of the soldiers were goofing off. He turned to assess the distance to the mountains again.

"Fifty klicks," he estimated as his gaze rose again to the large raptors circling above and spreading their feathers to ride the thermals. "A long, hard way to go with wounded. We could use some wings right now."

The silhouette of one of the birds caught his eye. It had a subtle bulk at odds with the other raptors. The flight was different too. The bird didn't swoop and soar. It maintained a steady altitude and a purposeful track.

As if suddenly aware of his gaze, the bird banked and dropped

straight at the Ranger.

Fragger swore as he broke into a run toward the cover of the dropship.

The way to the mountains just got harder.

Chapter 2

“Drone!” the Ranger shouted. “Straight above us.”

As he dove through the hatch, Fragger saw the perimeter guards wheel about and fire their weapons into the sky. He knew they hadn't found their target when a blast threw him deeper into the ship and high and hard up against a bulkhead. He dropped onto the deck, striking the back of his head against the floor. Sudden nausea corroded his throat as multi-colored lights stabbed his vision with pinpricks of pain. He rolled onto his hands and knees and staggered upright, fighting the confusion with a stupid combat mantra.

Rangers have hard heads, and I've got the hardest head of all so no damage done.

Fragger stumbled out of the ship and dropped face-first into the blast crater, eating a mouthful of dirt and explosive residue. He spat it out and climbed over the edge of the crater and straight into the intestines of a dead Ranger who'd been unlucky enough to be out of his armor. The stink of shredded bowels rose from the ground as he wiped the bloody guts on the grass and rose shakily to his feet.

Through the smoke, Fragger saw the carnage the drone had inflicted. He counted seven more bodies and several Rangers screaming in pain.

“Medics!” he shouted into his commlink. “We have casualties. Get to them now!”

As the medics spilled out of the ship, Fragger raced back through the hatch.

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“Amalia? Wik. Where are you? Are you okay?” he yelled into the smoke-filled corridor.

There was no answer.

A giant staggered out of the smoke.

“Buurk! Are you hurt?”

“What? The Martian shook his head as if trying to rid himself of cobwebs in the brain. A large bruise already swelled out above one ear.

“Are you hurt? Fragger asked again.

“No...I don't think so.”

“Where's Amalia and Patrick? And Wik? They were with you.”

“Who?”

“He's stunned, colonel,” a bass voice said from the area of Buurk's knees.

“No shit! Wik, are you all right?”

A soot-covered face grinned up at him. “Never better. Sometimes, it's good to be a dwarf. The big Martian shielded me from the blast.”

“Good, lead Buurk outside and have him checked by the medics. Have you seen Amalia and Patrick?”

Wik frowned. “They were just ahead of us.”

Fragger broke past the two men, searching the corridor and demanding answers from the Rangers he met. None of them had seen the nursemaid or the baby.

“What the hell?” Fragger said as he came to the end of the corridor. There were no bodies on the deck. “I saw them go in. They have to be in the ship.”

He doubled back and searched again to make sure he hadn't missed them. He stood in confusion

“Colonel?” a shaky voice sounded over his commlink.

“Amalia? Are you and Patrick okay?”

“We're fine.”

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“Where the devil are you?”

“In sick bay.”

“Sick bay? That’s the center of the ship. How did you get back so quickly?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Fragger sped through the ship. He entered sickbay and saw Amalia sitting in a chair. She gazed down in puzzlement at the baby suckling noisily and happily at her breast.

Fragger dropped with relief into a chair opposite her. “Thank God!”

He took a moment to compose himself before saying, “I don’t understand.”

Amalia raised her deep-brown eyes to him. “Colonel, all I can tell you is that one moment we were in the corridor, then...we were here. Somehow, Patrick did it.”

Fragger stared at his son for a long time before saying, “Amalia, assuming we survive, that kid is going to be hell to raise.”

The nursemaid smiled. “Much like his father, I expect.”

“Believe me, I won’t hold a candle to him,” the Ranger said. “But, thank you for coming with us and caring for my son. I owe you much.”

“I owe you as well, Fragger. Life is boring for a woman on Jivaro. Already I’ve had more adventure with you than in a lifetime on my home planet.”

“You would have made a good Ranger on ancient Earth, Amalia.”

“Why should I want to be a good Ranger on Terra Past when I’m a good one right now?” she asked.

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Fragger laughed as he rose. "Indeed, you are a Ranger and as tough as any trooper under my command. Ranglin found that out the hard way. Now, I need to get back to the men. Please remain here until we're ready to move out. There may be more drones."

Amalia nodded her agreement and switched the baby to her other breast. They both seemed very content as Fragger left.

He assessed the condition of the men within the ship and then found Iso outside, cursing Rangers too slow at pulling supplies off a damaged gravsled and loading them on to another. Fragger lifted his eyes to scan for drones. He breathed a silent sigh of relief when he saw none.

"I assigned men to direct random fire skyward," Iso said, noticing his glance "It's cleared out those raptors so the drones can't hide among them. However, if the Aiforians send a bunch of them at us, we'll have a hard time defending against an attack once we're out on open prairie."

"I have an idea to handle them," Fragger said. "Give me a situation report."

"We'll be ready in an hour," Iso answered. "The wounded are loaded on the gravsleds. All that's left is the remaining food and survival supplies."

"Well done. How's Buurk?...What's that? Is someone singing?"

"Buurk is fine, colonel He's with Wik, and the little man is the one doing the singing."

"Why the hell is he singing at a time like this?"

"The *chicha's* made him happy as usual."

Fragger swore. "That man could be stranded in the middle of the desert and find an oasis of beer rather than

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water. Iso, what the hell's the matter with you, letting him drink at a time like this?"

"It's serving a purpose, colonel."

"Purpose? What possible purpose could it serve?"

"Go see for yourself."

Fragger cleared a corner of the dropship, ready to drop kick the dwarf all the way into orbit. He stopped when he saw Wik atop a gravsled, dancing among the casualties, a flask of beer in each hand. Grievously wounded men laughed at his antics. Even the serious Buurk, holding a cold pack to his head, had a smile on his face.

"He's helping them forget the pain for a little while," Iso said as he joined the Ranger. "And keeping their minds off our trek to the mountains."

"I'll be a sonuvabitch," Fragger said. "How can anyone so short be so much trouble and be helpful at the same time?"

"He has a knack for it, doesn't he?" Iso agreed. "The aggravating thing is the little man can really sing."

Fragger had been too pissed to pay attention to Wik's voice. Now, he listened closely. The vidman sang a bawdy song about a whore towing a hapless soldier around by his cock in a zero-G environment. Incongruously, the dirty tune rolled out of the dwarf's mouth in a clean, rich baritone.

Fragger stood in silent amazement until Iso asked, "You want me to shut up him, colonel?"

"No. Hell, no! Just make sure he doesn't get any more beer."

Chapter 3

Wearing his power armor, Fragger led the Rangers slowly away from the dropship and into the midst of the Aiforian bison herd.

When he heard grumbling about the pace over the commlink, he keyed his connection open and ordered, "Cut your pussy complaining, Rangers. We'll be moving fast soon enough."

His men surrounded the gravsleds, keeping the pawing bulls and their dangerous horns at a safe distance from the wounded. The stench of manure and musk rose from the herd as the animals milled uncertainly about the column of intruders. When a red-eyed and testosterone-laden bull lowered its head and charged a few steps forward, Fragger snapped off a shot between the hooves. The startled animal stopped and backed off but not before snorting saliva onto the Ranger's armor.

As if activated by the drool, his suit's defensive system came alive with the warning, "Enemy drones approaching. Attack range within two minutes."

"Acknowledged," Fragger responded and opened the command frequency to his men. "Initiate smoke. I repeat, initiate smoke."

He watched as covering smoke belched from the rear of the gravsleds and, at the same time, Iso directed selected Rangers away from main force and into the herd. Soon, the blasts of energy weapons, including his own sizzled in the air, and panic seized the animals.

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They stampeded in every direction as wounded bison dropped to the ground in agony.

Fragger was sorry to kill the animals, but pleased with the result of his plan. Under impact from the hooves, dust rose from the dry prairie ground and mixed with the smoke to billow into an opaque cloud obscuring the sky and, he hoped, the sensors of the drones.

“Iso, tell the Rangers to keep up the fire,” he ordered, “but have some teams carve up the dead bison and throw the meat on the sleds. It may come in handy in the mountains. Maintain passive systems until further orders.”

The gravsleds leapt forward, and Fragger and the Rangers ran with them. Blasts from blinded drones punctuated screams from wounded animals. Deprived of accurate targeted information, the operators detonated their killer machines on the prairie seeking to get lucky. It only added more confusion and more dust.

Sweating despite the automatic cooling of the suit, Fragger worked hard to keep his soldiers together. He was proud to see them stumble into prairie dog holes—or what passed for prairie dogs on Aifor—and still keep combat order.

The pride ended when he heard a yelp and saw a small figure tumble off a gravsled in front of him and trip a cursing Ranger. He already knew who it was before he picked the man up off the ground and held him at eye level.

A frightened vidman stared into Fragger’s helmet.

“Wik, I’m going to put you on my back, so hang on. If you fall off, I’m not going back to rescue your drunken ass. I’ll let the bison pound you into flank steak and

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leave you for the carrion eaters. And, for God's sake, drop the damned flask of beer!"

The vidman looked stupidly at the flask and let it fall. Fragger flung Wik over his shoulder and ran on until the drone explosions petered out and then ended altogether.

Fragger instructed his Rangers to maintain the pace. After an hour, the dust began to clear and the mountains came into view.

"Fifteen minute break," he instructed his men as he plucked the vidman off his back. Caked with dirt and dung, Wik staggered and fell onto his back.

The Ranger opened his faceplate and glared down at the dwarf. "Wik, you're a fucking menace to yourself and everyone around you!"

"I wasn't doing any--!"

"Shut up!" Fragger shouted. "I'm going to make sure you never do anything like that again."

"What do you mean?"

"I said, shut up and sit there until Iso gets here."

In response to Fragger's commlink command, Iso emerged out of the dust.

"Colonel?"

"Iso, we have a problem."

The sergeant opened his helmet and glanced down at the vidman. "Wik? What's he done now?"

"Nearly got his drunken self killed and endangered the rest of us. Recommendations?"

Iso sighed. "It's a waste of energy to shoot him. And there's no brig to toss his sorry butt in."

"I didn't ask what we couldn't do," Fragger said in a sharp tone. "I asked for what we *can* do."

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“Make him walk point,” Iso said after a moment’s thought. “If that doesn’t do it, then nothing will. Maybe the Aiforians will shoot him and save us the trouble.”

“That sound good to you?” Fragger asked the vidman.

Wik scrambled to his feet. “You can’t do that! You know I can’t keep up the pace the way you Rangers do.”

Fragger stuck his face close to the vidman’s until their noses touched. “I said, does that sound good to you?”

Wik backed off. “Yes, yes, colonel.”

“Get moving then. Head straight to the mountains.”

“Don’t I get a chance to rest like everyone else?”

“I’ll give you a choice, Wik. If you start moving in ten seconds, I’ll give you a weapon. Any longer than that, and you can go without a weapon.”

“I’m going! I’m going!”

“Iso, give him a pistol.”

The sergeant handed the weapon down to the vidman.

When Wik hesitated, Fragger said, “I’m willing to put an armored boot into your ass and give you a flying start.”

The vidman turned and ran, his short legs churning up small puffs of dust. The Rangers who’d been listening to the exchange sped him along with jeers and laughter.

“Iso,” Fragger said. “Assign a Ranger to tail him and keep him out of mischief. If he falls down a prairie dog hole, we’ll never find him.”

“Yes, colonel.”

Iso issued the order and then said, “I make it about 30 more clicks to the base of the mountains. We’ll be badly exposed if the Aiforians send more drones. Or

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troops. Or anything else they decide to toss into an assault.”

“The fact that they’re sending drones tells me that they’re trying to buy time and slow us down,” Fragger said. “My guess is that they’re not that well organized.”

“I hope so,” Iso said with a worried gaze fixed on the mountain tops.

“You fought in Alpine conditions before?” Fragger asked.

“I assume ‘Alpine’ means mountains?”

Fragger nodded.

“Then no, colonel. At least, not in mountains like these. How high are the damned things, anyway?”

“The tallest look like they’re in the 8 to 9000 meter range. Don’t worry. We won’t be going so high. Nobody fights at that altitude.”

“It’s not the altitude I’m worried about,” Iso said. “It’s our lack of experience. I don’t know if a single one of our Rangers has fought in mountains.”

“I have,” Fragger lied. *I’ve trained in those conditions in the Rockies and studied the tactics, but never fought a single real battle at altitude. But no one needs to know that right now.* “Once we get dug in, it’ll take three soldiers to one of ours to get us out. *If they can find us in the first place.*”

“That’s comforting,” Iso said. “But the Aiforians may have experienced mountain fighters. If so, they’ll know the terrain better than we do. And we certainly can’t match them in manpower. They may be willing to starve us out.”

Fragger arched an eyebrow at the Ricer’s tone. “Giving up already, you pussy?”

“I don’t know what a ‘pussy’ is, colonel.”

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“It means you’re as weak as a woman.”

A puzzled look came across Iso’s face. “But, many of our best Rangers are women. That doesn’t make any sense.”

Exasperated, Fragger said, “It’s an insult, you thick-headed grunt.”

“Oh. Well, no, I’m not giving up colonel. It’s my job to point out the obvious to you or have you forgotten that already?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten, Iso. But, sometimes, I wish you wouldn’t point it out so damned well.”

Iso grinned at him. “What are sergeants for if not to irritate officers and point out the error of their ways?”

Fragger returned the grin as he checked his suit’s time readout. “We’ll figure it all out on our way to the mountains. Tell the men to get their sorry Ranger asses into motion. Their 15-minute break is over.”

Iso turned and barked orders at the resting soldiers. The Rangers reacted quickly, forming a defensive perimeter around the gravsleds as the machines rose like mechanical mules and floated to the west. Fragger scanned his suit’s display and was relieved to see no signs of enemy activity.

That doesn’t mean it’s not there, he reminded himself and set off after his command.

Within minutes, they’d caught up with the dwarf’s guard.

“Where’s Wik?” Fragger asked the corporal.

“A hundred meters directly ahead, sir.”

Fragger’s eyes followed the pointing finger and saw nothing.

“The little prick is hard to see in this prairie grass, but he’s there,” the corporal assured him.

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The Ranger quickened his pace until he found the vidman lying face down on the ridge of what passed for a hill on prairie.

“Point men don’t sit and rest, Wik. They go until they locate the enemy.”

Wik turned his face up. Frightened yet defiant eyes looked up at Fragger. “That’s what I’ve done. There’s enemy ahead, so keep your damned voice down.”

Fragger dropped to the ground. “Where?”

“Down there in that gully where that single tree is showing its top.”

The Ranger flipped his face plate down and increased magnification. He saw a cottonwood-like tree with its silver underleaves shimmering in the constant wind. He scanned from left to right and saw nothing.

“Wik, goddamnit, you’re letting your nerves get the best of you!”

“The hell I am. I saw a damned Aiforian! He ran right below me. I couldn’t miss him. He had yellow hair and a mortar tube over his shoulder.”

“All right, all right. Calm down. Was he in armor?”

“No.”

“Did he see you?”

“No, I don’t think so, colonel.”

“Did you see anybody else?”

“No, but I heard voices and...animals.”

“What kind of animals?”

“How the devil should I know?”

Fragger opened a link. “Iso, Wik says we have bad guys in front of us.”

The sergeant responded with a snort. “The little shit’s letting his fear get the best—”

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Fragger interrupted. "He says he saw a soldier carrying a mortar tube."

"I'm behind you and approximately 20 meters to your left," Iso said. "Location relative to my position?"

"Lock onto the single tree sticking up out of a gully."

"I see it," Iso said.

"Flank their position and spread the men out to reduce casualties from any incoming. Get the mortar crews into action. Keep an eye out for a supporting force."

"Yes, sir."

Fragger listened as Iso issued orders. Rangers split away from the gravsleds as the unmistakable metallic click and hollow "Crump!" of a round leaving a mortar tube broke over the prairie.

"Get under me!" Fragger shouted at Wik. The vidman scrambled on hands and knees and tucked himself close into the Ranger's armor.

The blast lifted Fragger off the ground as shrapnel hit his suit and whined off into the grass.

"You all right?" he asked Wik.

A whimpered "Yes" answered his question.

"Didn't see you, my ass, Wik! They landed that round right on top of our position. Nobody's that good with a mortar."

He picked up Wik and moved down the slope toward the enemy. A second blast sent the two men tumbling down to the ground.

"They're going to kill us!" Wik screamed. "Go the other way! Go the other way!"

"This is the safest way," Fragger said as he got up and ran forward. "We'll be inside the effective range of those mortars. Besides, Rangers always move forward."

A Ranger Paves the Way

“I’m not a goddamned Ranger! I’m a civilian!”

“As if the enemy cares!”

When he reached level ground, Fragger shifted the dwarf under his left arm and freed up his sword. He’d just powered it up when the enemy came boiling up out of the gully.

Fragger froze in amazement at the sight.

“I’ll be damned!” he swore. “Horses!”

Once again, Colonel "Fragger" Sparks teaches the future that a U.S. Army Ranger from 600 years in the past leads the way...in cunning...courage...and the combat rage it takes to protect his son and everyone under his command.

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