

Narakan Rifles, About Face!

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Narakan Rifles, About Face!

By JAN SMITH

Those crazy, sloppy, frog-like Narakans ... all thumbs and six-inch skulls ... relics of the Suzi swamps. Until four-fisted Lt. Terrence O'Mara moved among them—lethal, dangerous, with a steady purpose flaming in his volcanic eyes.

T

errence O'Mara lay flat on his back trying to keep his big body as still as possible. Despite the fact that he was stripped to his regulation shorts, a large pool of sweat had formed on the cot underneath him. The only movement he permitted himself was an occasional pursing of his lips as he dragged on a cigarette and sent a swirl of smoke upward through the heavy humid air. Then he would just lie there watching as the smoke crept up to mingle with the large drops of water that were forming on the concrete of the command post.

"Damn! Damn Naraka, anyway! Outpost of civilization! Who'd want the blasted place except the Rumi?"

At the words, Terrence moved his head just a fraction of an inch and his eyes only a little farther to look across the room to where Bill Fielding was twisting and turning on his cot. All he could see of the other man was the wet outline of his body under a once white sheet and a hand that every so often reached into a bucket of water on the floor and then replaced a soaking T-shirt over a red head.

"You'll feel it less if you lie still," Terrence said, distressed at the necessity for talking.

"Feel it less! My God, listen to the man! What difference does it make if you lie still or move around or even run around in the suns like a bloody Greenback? Dust Bin will get you one way or another ... and if it doesn't, the Rumi will."

The visible hand lifted the T-shirt and began to pop salt tablets into an open

mouth like they were so many peppermints.

"I wonder where Norton is. Out reviewing the troops?"

"Reviewing, my eye. He's up at Government House sitting in that cool living room drinking one of Mrs. Wilson's icy drinks and admiring Mrs. Wilson's shapely legs. From a discreet distance, of course. Being temporary Commanding Officer of even Dust Bin has its privileges!"

There was a rattle of drums and the blare of one or two off-key instruments from outside.

"Then why," asked Terrence, "are those poor beggars marching up and down in this blasted heat?"

"The Greenbacks? They love it! It would take more than a little heat to get under those inch-thick skins of theirs. They like to play soldier when it's a hundred and thirty under water."

There were a few more straggling notes and then the semblance of a march began.

"Listen to that, will you?" Fielding moaned, "They can't even keep time with a drum! They can't march, they can't shoot, they can't break down a Banning; they're all thumbs and six-inch thick skulls. 'Train local forces to take over'! Bah! Did those desk jockeys back in New Chicago ever see a Greenback? Did they ever try to teach a Narakan to fix a bayonet to the proper end of a rifle or to fire a blaster in the right direction?"



T

errence was lighting another cigarette with as little exertion as possible. "Yes, but they keep trying. Ten hours a day. You don't have to drive those boys. They want to learn. Listen to O'Shaughnessy barking out orders."

"Sergeant Major O'Shaughnessy of the First Narakan Rifles!" Fielding murmured sarcastically. "A year ago he was squatting in a mud cocoon at the bottom of Suzi swamp with the rest of the frogs. Now he's got a good Irish name and he's strutting around like a Martian Field Marshal."

"I thought the names might give them a sense of self respect. Besides we couldn't pronounce theirs and I was tired of hearing Norris yell 'Hey, greenboy!' at them."

"Well, they picked the right guy when they made you Training Officer. You and those damn frogs get along like you came from the same county!"

"They aren't any great shakes for brains but you can't take anything away from me boys for willingness."

"Willingness! Hooray! They're willing, so what? So is a Suzi Swamp lizard. What'll it get them? A week after they pull the Terran forces out, the Rumi will gobble up the lot of them. Maybe they'll gobble them and us before we pull out. Who could fight in this place? Who'd want to fight? I say, to hell with Naraka! It's so near to hell already with those two blasted suns blazing sixteen hours a day. Let the Rumi have the stinking planet! Let them have the whole Centaurian System!"

"Speaking of pulling out, I wouldn't be surprised if Dust Bin wasn't the next place we let go of...."

Fielding raised himself on one elbow, "No kidding? Where did you hear that?" His sunburned and blistered face was alight with excitement.

"Well, you know how it's been. When we first came here twenty years back, we drove the Rumi out of all this country and more or less took their cat feet off the Narakan's backs but now that so much of the Earth garrison has been pulled all the way back into the Solar System, the Rumi are acting up again. So much so that the dope I got is that we may be pulling everything back into the Little Texas peninsula to wait for reinforcements and it will take four years for those to come out from Mars."

"Great! Great! But.... Ah, it's too good to be true. Can't you just picture Fielding and O'Mara parading down Dobi street in New Chicago with their first lieutenant bars on their collars? Say, you don't suppose that's why the *Sun Maid* is sticking around out here, do you? Imagine, free transportation! A two hour trip to New Chi!"

"I'd sure hate to march those two hundred miles at this time of year!"

"March? Through those swamps? Every time we run a patrol through them...."

Fielding was interrupted by a knock on the door and a skinny young Terran with sergeant's chevrons on his shorts stuck his head through from the other room and said, "Major Chapelle's on the voice radio, sir. He's calling from battalion headquarters and wants Captain Norton."

"Tell him Norton's up playing footsies with the Resident's wife," Fielding said, "You'd think those people down at the river would have enough to do without bothering us in the heat of the day, wouldn't you?"

The sergeant looked shocked and started to withdraw his head. Terrence frowned Fielding into silence and called to the sergeant, "Just a minute, Rogers. I'll talk to the Major."

Major Chapelle was a thickset, balding man in his late forties. Even the blazing suns of Naraka hadn't succeeded in burning the sickly yellow color off his face. In the vision screen he looked like a man on his last legs. Whatever was wrong with him didn't help his temper, Terrence thought as he lowered himself gently into a seat before the screen.

"O'Mara! Where in hell is Norton?" he demanded.

"Well, sir, you see...." began Terrence.

"Never mind! I've a pretty good idea where he is. A fine time to be chasing skirts! Well, get this straight, O'Mara. Orders have come through and we're pulling the battalion out. We're ordered back to Little Texas. We're going to give up these positions along the river tonight and pull back into Dust Bin. The *Sun Maid* will stand by to evacuate us. You people are to come too. Everybody has to get out, both the military and civilians. All hell's broken loose down river. The Rumi are across the Muddy in half a dozen places. They've cut the 5th to pieces. New Chicago thinks that those cats have been bringing troops in from space all along despite the agreement by both sides not to do so. And now they have us way outnumbered." The Major's voice held a thin edge of hysteria.

"Is there any action along our front, Major?" Terrence asked quickly, hoping to stop the flow of talk before Chapelle's hysteria communicated itself to the enlisted men who were sitting or lying about the command post.

"Not yet; just patrols across the river so far. We've got to get out, O'Mara, and get out fast. They'll be all over us if we don't. The Colonel says for Norton to have everything ready to go. He wants the depot destroyed. Everything's got to

go, everything we can't take along. The *Sun Maid* won't have time for more than one trip. He wants the HQ company and the civilians on board by tomorrow morning at the latest."

"What about the Rifles, sir?"

"What? The what?"

"The native troops, sir. The Narakan Rifles." Terrence grated.

"The Rifles? Good God, man! We haven't time for nonsense. The Rifles are only Greenbacks, aren't they? You get Norton started burning those stores."

Terrence put down the microphone very carefully to keep from slamming it down and stalked back into his quarters. Angrily he began to take his radiation clothing from its hooks on the wall.

"What the devil is eating you?" demanded Bill Fielding.

"We're pulling out, lock, stock and barrel," Terrence told him.

"Pulling out? Whoweee! I knew Mrs. Fielding didn't raise her boy to be a fried egg. Goodbye, Dust Bin! Hello, New Chi!" Bill was up on his hands and knees pounding on his cot. "But what's the matter with you? You like this place?"

"They're leaving the Rifles," Terrence said, zipping up his protective coveralls as he left the room.

II

S

tepping outside on Naraka with the full power of Alpha and Beta Centauri beating down was like stepping into a river of fire. Even with the cooling unit in his suit, Terrence was aware of the searing heat that filled the parade ground. Looking off across the makeshift native huts, he could see the bright sides of a huge space ship-like object. The big dirigible *Sun Maid* was lying in an open field. It's a funny world, he thought to himself, where you have to use dirigibles for planetary travel. But a dirigible was the only practical aircraft when you had to use steam turbine engines because of the lack of gasoline and the economic impracticability of transporting it in the limited cargo holds of the occasional spacers that came out from Sol.

The Narakan Rifles were marching toward him now, the band doing absolutely nothing for *The Wearing of the Green*. Three hundred big, green bodied, beady eyed, frog-like creatures were marching in the boiling heat with their non-coms croaking out orders in English which might have come out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

As they marched by him, he snapped a salute. Watching them closely he tried to find two men who were in step with each other or one man who had his rifle at the right angle. Unable to find either, he stood there conscious of failure; failure which went beyond mere military precision however. Sloppiness at review could have been overlooked if he had been able to find that the Narakans had any ability as fighting men but after a year of training they seemed almost as hopeless as they had at first. It wasn't that they were completely unintelligent. In fact, other than the Galactic traveling Rumi, they were the only extra-solar race of intelligent beings encountered by man so far. It was just, he thought, that the hundreds of years during which the Rumi had dominated their planet had reduced the Narakans to a state of almost complete ineptitude.

He stood there as they passed in review three times because he knew that his presence pleased and encouraged them. Then he turned, and with dragging feet made his way down Dust Bin's single street toward Government House.

In a few minutes he was standing in the cool, air conditioned living room of the

Wilson. Wilson was seated at his desk rummaging through some papers while Norris and Mrs. Wilson were lounging in contour chairs admiring each other over tall, frosty drinks.

They took the news just as he expected them to. Wilson ran his hand through his sparse, gray hair and murmured something about it being a shame to have to leave the natives on their own after having more or less dragged them out of their comfortable swamps. A glance from his wife silenced him.

"What the hell," Norris said, "they're only blasted thick witted Greenbacks."

Mrs. Wilson yawned, "It'll be something of a bother packing but it'll certainly be a pleasure to get back to New Chicago. Some women's husbands get good posts in half-way civilized parts of the Universe. I don't know why I should always have to be stuck in every backwater, hick town there is."

Wilson smiled apologetically, "Now, dear..." he began but was interrupted by the sudden ringing of the telephone on the table near Norris' chair.

"Get that, will you, O'Mara?" the captain said, making no attempt to reach for it, "It's probably the Command Post."

Terrence put the phone to his ear angrily and growled into it. An excited Bill Fielding was on the line. "Terry? Is that you? Fielding here. Hell's breaking loose. There's a bunch of blasted Rumi trying to force their way into town. They attacked the sentries down this way and may be heading for your end of town too."

Terrence dropped the phone and headed for the door. "*Rumi!*" he shouted and there were shouts and cries from outside in answer. Then he heard the clack, clack, clack of Rumi spring guns. Windows of the room crashed in and Wilson collapsed across his desk. Norton grabbed Mrs. Wilson and pulled her down onto the floor. Terrence dropped to his hands and knees and continued toward the door as he drew his forty-five.

S

omewhere, someone had cut loose with a Banning and its high whine drowned out the clack of the spring guns. With a quick look around, Terrence started at a

run for the next building which was the native schoolhouse. He didn't make it. There was a clack, clack from off to his left and he threw himself forward, skidding and sliding in the dust and gravel of the street. A warehouse across the square was on fire and three Rumi had darted from behind it. In one brief glance he saw those long barreled spring guns of theirs and the tall, graceful bodies and the feline faces under the plastic protective clothing.

He snapped four shots at them and saw one fall. Then he began to slither along the ground raising enough dust to mask his movements. There were half a dozen of them in the square when he reached the rear door of the schoolhouse. Several gleaming plastic bolts smashed into the wooden outer door a second after he had raised up to open it and then had dropped back down.

Norton fired from the residency and momentarily scattered the Rumi and Terrence was inside the school room and racing for the side window from which he could get a clear line of fire at the raiders. He had a brief glimpse of Joan Allen, the school teacher, standing in a corner of the room with the tiny green figures of native children huddled around her. Then he was at a window and had beaten out the heavy protective glass and was firing into a mass of the catmen, firing and cursing as his gun emptied. He cursed in a stream of Martian, English and Greenback profanity as he forced another clip into the gun.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, if you'll be so kind as to restrain your language in front of these children," a voice said from over his shoulder.

Terrence reached back and felt something soft and forced it over against the wall out of the line of the window. Then he risked a quick look which was almost his last. A spring gun bolt burned a groove in the windowsill next to his head and smashed into the blackboard across the room.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, would you mind telling me what this is all about?" came the same calm determined woman's voice from beside him. He fired again at a darting figure across the square and saw it stumble before he had to drop to his haunches as the window above him was smashed and scattered by bolts and glass rained down about his head.

He put another clip into his gun and cursed because he had only two left. He turned his head briefly and had a quick glimpse of a white face framed in straight dark hair and a small, neat figure in a yellow dress.

"Rumi attack. One of their patrols must have gotten around the battalion."

A husky, whimpering little sound made him look down. A native child or pollywog as the Terrans called them was clinging desperately to the teacher's skirt. His tiny webbed feet clutched at the cloth as he buried his face against her leg. From behind her peered still another child, its baby frog face working spasmodically in the beginnings of a sob. Six or seven others were lying flat on the floor their bodies trembling in terror.

Terrence took another look outside and what he saw sent him into another stream of cursing. The Narakan Rifles were hurrying to the scene of action. Down the middle of the street they came in a column of fours with their drums and bugles blaring out a poor imitation of *The Wearing of the Green*. Their standard bearer was running at the head of the column beside Sergeant Major O'Shaughnessy.

"Oh, my God! He wouldn't...!"

"Lieutenant, please!"

"Teacher, will you shut up!" he roared as he leaped across the room toward the front door. At the harsh tone of his voice, the whimpering sounds in the room suddenly burst forth in full volume as the ten pollywogs raised their hoarse voices into full throated croaks.

Terrence braced his body against the wall and held his gun ready as he pulled open the door. In parade formation his men were moving up the street and in a moment they would be away from the buildings' protection and directly in the Rumi line of fire.

"O'Shaughnessy, you idiot!" he roared above the croaking from behind him and the rattle of firing outside.

O'Shaughnessy came to a skidding halt almost directly in front of the schoolhouse but his men kept on going, their faces set and determined. O'Shaughnessy came to attention and snapped a salute.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lieutenant."

"Halt! Damn it, HALT!" Terrence yelled at the column of greenbacks. Their formation crumbled as they ran into each other, stepped on each other's feet and pushed and shoved. But they halted.

"O'Shaughnessy! Break ranks ... take cover ... line of skirmishers!" Terrence shouted and hit the dirt behind a sandbox in the schoolyard as the Rumi resumed

firing. There was a mad scramble among the Narakans as they scattered behind walls and into buildings, moving with an incredibly rapid jumping motion which they used when in a hurry.

Terrence was so glad to see only one sprawled figure in the dust of the street that he just lay there for a few seconds spitting dust before he realized that he had forgotten to close the face visor of his radiation clothing.

T

here was a slight clucking sound from beside him and when he turned he found O'Shaughnessy lying almost beside him, squinting along his carbine. The Nakan's face split into two replicas of the map of Ireland and he saluted flat handed, his webbed fingers at just the proper angle.

"O'Shaughnessy, you don't have to salute when you're lying down!" O'Mara tried to keep his voice as calm as possible.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lieutenant. Pretty quick we fight now?"

His lieutenant ignored him and searched for signs of life in the houses across the square. There wasn't a Rumi in sight except for one on the roof of a shed next to the burning warehouse. He tried a couple of shots with his automatic and missed. He grabbed O'Shaughnessy's carbine and dropped the creature as it tried to scramble off the shed.

"Pretty soon we fight with bayonet?" O'Shaughnessy asked as Terrence handed back the carbine.

"O'Shaughnessy, why do you do things like this to me, me who took you out of your damn mud hole and made a soldier out of you?"

O'Shaughnessy's mouth formed a huge round moon, "Not understand, Lieutenant..." he began but he was ignored again as Terrence stared across the street in pained disbelief to where the heavy weapons squad of the Nakan Rifles was gathered in a huddled group behind a native house, struggling to set up their Banning Automatic Blaster and two machine guns. One of the men was down on his hands and knees balancing the heavy barrel of the blaster on his back while two others were attempting to push the ponderous breech onto it by

main strength. The two machine guns were half on and half off their tripods. The leg of one of them had been bent in the wrong direction and the other was so covered with grease that the parts wouldn't fit together.

"Oh, Lord!" moaned Terrence and was bracing himself for a dash across the street when a figure in Terran battle armor came around the building on the run, dodging and crawling as spring bolts raised the dust in front of him. It was the short, stout Gunnery Sergeant, Polasky. Terrence breathed a sigh of relief.

He turned to O'Shaughnessy, "Now, Sergeant, this is our problem. Those buildings over there are filled with Rumi. They have automatic weapons ... spring guns ... firing a clip of twenty plastic bolts. They're deadly at close to medium range. They can penetrate our battle armor." He looked at the thick, knobby skin of the Narakan, "Yours too. Now, they are probably just a patrol about the size of one of our companies. They don't seem to have any heavy weapons and ours will be in action in a few minutes. Then, O'Shaughnessy...." The Narakan was squinting along the barrel of his rifle.

"Are you paying attention, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir! Attention, yes, sir." O'Shaughnessy started to lift his bulky three hundred pounds up off the ground. Terrence heaved with all his might against those thick khaki clad legs to knock him down again.

"Man, what are you doing?" he yelled.

"Attention, sir. Sir said...."

"No, no, O'Shaughnessy. I meant, listen to me. O'Shaughnessy, how could you? Haven't I been like a brother to you? Didn't I share my whiskey and candy ration with you?"

"Yes, sir. That's why...."

"Then for the sake of your two headed frog-faced gods, shut up and listen to me."

"Yes, sir."

"Look. In a minute our Banning will be in action," his voice was drowned out by the scream of tortured air as the Banning cut loose. "Now there is a sweet sound. What do we do next, O'Shaughnessy?"

One of the row of buildings across the square glowed red briefly as the beam from the Blaster caught it; glowed red and then burst into a ball of fire. O'Shaughnessy's mouth was open wide, his chinless face resting on the edge of the sandbox and his little black bead eyes were as large as they could get.

"What do we do now, O'Shaughnessy ... come on...."

The Narakan made a thrusting gesture with his carbine, "Bayonet ... we go in with bayonet now," he said.

O'Mara slapped him on the seat of his khaki pants. "No, no. You got to get this stuff straight."

The whine of the Banning interrupted him again and it was joined by the chatter of machine guns and rifle fire and answered by the rapid clacking of spring guns. Bolts dug into the wall of the schoolhouse and showered them with plaster. Others shattered the front window. Terrence wiped plaster off his visor and tried again. "You've got to get this straight, O'Shaughnessy, because ... well, because you may be getting an independent command pretty soon and there won't be anyone around to tell you what to do."

The Narakan was listening to him but wide-mouthed and uncomprehending. "We're going to burn them out of those huts; burn them out or burn the houses down over their heads. About the time Polasky gets to the third one, those guys are going to break and then they'll either rush us or...."

Norton was yelling something from the Residency. There was a noise of clanking armor behind him and he could hear Fielding's voice cracking out orders as he came up with twenty hastily armed and armored clerks, cooks and radiomen from the HQ unit.

"O'Mara! O'Mara, they're breaking! They're running! Let's go!" Norton was on the porch of the Residency pouring Tommy gun slugs at the rear of the burning row of houses.

"Okay, let's go," Terrence said, lurching to his feet. The Narakan sergeant blew his whistle and the riflemen swarmed out from their shelters and started at a run across the square with Norton, Terrence and O'Shaughnessy at their head. The rest of the Terrans in full battle armor lumbered along after them.

One or two bolts whistled overhead and Corporal O'Brien dropped his rifle and fell forward clutching his leg. The smoke from the burning buildings obscured

their vision but Terrence had a momentary sight of Rumi radiation clothing and emptied his clip at it.

Someone from behind threw a grenade which fell short of its target and rolled in front of them. Norton took two quick strides and kicked it into one of the flaming buildings.

III

T

here were about twenty Rumi, less than they had thought, fleeing across the open fields behind the burning huts. They were firing as they ran and giving out those queer yelping cries of theirs. Three or four of them fell and then Norton was shouting, calling back his men to organize fire fighting parties.

"Captain! Captain, let's go after those guys. We can cut them off before they get to the grasslands," Terrence yelled.

"Get your men after these fires, O'Mara. We can't let them spread."

There was nothing to do but obey but he delayed long enough to empty his automatic in the general direction of the fleeing Rumi. Then he turned and yelled, "Harrigan! Sergeant Harrigan! Where in the devil is that...." There was a crashing sound behind him and Harrigan stumbled through the smoke and came down on his foot, all three hundred pounds of him.

Later, as the last smoking embers of the fire were being smothered by industrious squads of Narakans with buckets and shovels, Terrence limped back across the square with Bill Fielding.

"We should have gone after those lousy scum," Bill said, "They may cut back around the town again and give the battalion some trouble on the river road."

"Don't you think I know it! As fast as the Greenbacks can move when they want to, we could have caught the lot of them before they got into the grasslands. But Norton was worried about the fires! Of course, we're going to burn all these buildings tomorrow or the next day but Norton was afraid the Residency would catch fire."

"Probably didn't want his sweetie's fancy clothes to burn."

"They got Wilson, you know."

"Good Lord! Dead?"

"Right between the eyes. They almost got all four of us."

Fielding took his heavy battle helmet off and pushed back the glass visor of his radiation helmet to wipe the perspiration and dirt off his face. "Well, maybe Norton didn't want us to catch those damn cats. Maybe he figured he owed them that much."

O'Mara shielded his eyes as he said, "Beta's setting. It'll be night in a couple of hours and we can walk around without this blasted radiation armor for a while."

"Yeah, and we can start looking for a full scale night attack as soon as good old Alpha hides his hoary head."

"If you see O'Shaughnessy, tell him I want to see him, will you? I'm going to stop at the schoolhouse for a few minutes."

Surprise spread across Bill's freckled face, "Not the school teacher? Not you! Buddy, you've been in Dust Bin too long. You've been on Naraka too long. You'll be attending services at the Chapel next."

Terrence muttered a few old Anglo-Saxon words under his breath and limped off in the direction of the school building.

T

he Reverend Ames Goodman was the smallest Nakan that Terrence had ever seen. The Johnathan missionary from Little Texas was somewhat under two hundred and fifty pounds which was slight for a Greenback. He also spoke the best English except for some of the big shots in New Chicago. Ordinarily he was a composite of superstitious reverence and natural dignity which Terrence had always found admirable. Today, however, he couldn't have appeared more ludicrous if he had tried. He was dressed for a visit to the Residency in a white duck suit which was too small and out of which he bulged in a number of surprising places.

He and Joan Allen were talking half in English and half in Nakan as the lieutenant entered. The minister had a painfully surprised look on his round green face.

"I hope we didn't bust up your school too much, Miss Allen."

"If you are quite finished with your shooting and cursing, Lieutenant O'Mara, perhaps you have time to explain to Rev. Goodman and me what this talk about evacuation means."

As she spoke, she brushed stray strands of black hair up under her radiation helmet. For the first time in the six months that she had been in charge of the orphan school in Dust Bin, Terrence decided that maybe she was pretty after all. He wasn't sure whether it was the high color which excitement lent to her usually pale face or if Bill Fielding was right in saying he had been on Naraka too long, but Joan Allen was beginning to look good to him. At the moment the feeling wasn't at all mutual.

"Is it true that the Defense Force is pulling out and leaving the rest of us to the Rumi?"

Terrence took off his helmet and let the rapidly cooling air strike his head. "Not exactly, teacher," he said, "The Fifth is pulling out but so are all the Terrans in Dust Bin. Everyone's being ordered back to Little Texas. That's why the *Sun Maid* is standing by."

"All the Terrans, Lieutenant? What about the people here who depend on us? What about my children?"

O'Mara somehow couldn't quite look either of them in the face. He muttered something about having to get back to his command post and started out the door. Joan called after him as she noticed his limp, "Lieutenant, I'm sorry, I didn't know you have been wounded."

"Oh, it's nothing ... nothing," he said, hurrying away, his neck reddening from something more than the attention of Beta Centauri. How in the name of Naraka's sixty devils could you tell a woman that one of your own non-coms had stepped on your foot and nearly broken your instep?

The battalion straggled into Dust Bin during the night. It hadn't exactly fought its way back from the river but had had enough casualties to make the men nervous and jumpy without tempering them at all. One of the casualties had been Lt. Colonel Upton. Now Major Chapelle was in command. The men of the battalion were nervous but Chapelle was riding on the thin edge of panic. He ordered everyone on board the *Sun Maid* at once and then countermanded the order and formed a defense perimeter around the town. He threw out patrols which were unable to contact any Rumi on the Dust Bin side of the river.

The next morning Terrence was summoned to Government House for an officers' conference. As he hurried along its single street, Dust Bin was in a state of confused and helpless excitement. The three or four hundred Narakans who made up its population were all in the street or square. Many of them were carrying their belongings on their shoulders and looked as if they were only waiting for an order of some kind to send them scurrying off toward the Suzi swamps.

As O'Mara reached the veranda of the Residency, Rev. Goodman was speaking with Joan Allen by his side. His words were aimed at Chapelle, Norton and a large gray-eyed man whom Terrence recognized as the Captain of the *Sun Maid*.

"When you came, you earthmen in your great ships, the Narkan was a hunted creature on his own planet and had been back as far as he could remember. You drove off the Rumi and took parts of the planet for your own use but you did not hunt the Narkan. You brought him out of his swamps and taught him much; to wear clothes, to till the ground and many other things. You even gave him your religion. But now the Rumi have returned and you say you are not strong enough to hold all the planet."

M

Major Chapelle was impatient, "That's right, Reverend, there's too many of them. The garrison just isn't big enough to hold everything and it's too far back to Earth for us to expect any reinforcements for a year or even longer."

Norton took over. "You're an educated ... ah ... man, Goodman. You see what the problem is. We can't hold everything so we've got to cut our losses. All of the most important resources and towns are in the Little Texas area and so we're pulling back into there."

"I see. Yes, I understand. The people of Dust Bin are part of the losses that must be cut."

"Now, now. Don't put it that way, Reverend. The natives can always take refuge in the swamps, you know."

"Yes. I suppose it must be so. Back to Little Texas for the Terrans and back to

the swamps for the Narakans. Back to living naked in the mud, back to fishing for our food and back to thinking only of the next meal."

"It really isn't that bad," Chapelle said. "As soon as the situation adjusts itself, the Terran forces will be coming back. Then you can come out of your hiding places and resume your regular life again."

"Yes. And in the meantime our only problem will be to stay out of the way of the Rumi."

"I don't believe that they will go out of their way to harm you. It's the Terrans they want to drive out."

Suddenly the Reverend Goodman was shaking his fist in the Major's face, forgetting in his excitement both his manners and his correct English. "Not hurt! Not hurt, Mr. General? No, they not hurt, they just eat! They favorite food is Naraka steak."

"Now, now, calm yourself," Norton put a hand on Goodman's shoulder. "There's plenty of room in the *Sun Maid* for you and the rest of your people will be safe enough in the swamps."

"What about my children?" demanded Joan Allen.

"Children, Miss Allen? I don't know... Oh, yes, you mean the poly ... the children. Why, I assume they will go with their parents."

Joan placed a small fist firmly on each of her slim hips. "Major, all the children in the mission school are orphans. They have no parents. None of them have ever lived in the swamps."

"Ah yes. But I hardly see what we can do about it, Miss Allen."

"Well, Major, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to do about it. Unless those kids are loaded on the *Sun Maid* in place of some of this junk," she waved a hand at the piles of luggage which belonged to Mrs. Wilson, "I'm going to stay with my charges and leave you with the problem of explaining to the Mission Board and to the Bishop of New Chicago just why you left me behind."

At the mention of the extremely influential Johnathan Bishop the Major looked more worried than ever. After a short conference with Norton, he turned to Joan.

"Very well, Miss Allen. The children will go in the airship. I'm sure that Mrs.

Wilson will be only too glad to leave some of her clothes to make room for them."

"Thank you, Major." Joan said, making no attempt to gloat over her victory.

"Now, Captain, I understand that most of the military stores have been destroyed and that the men are ready for embarkation," Chapelle went on hurriedly, addressing himself to the captain of the *Sun Maid*. "We will have about three hundred and twenty, no ... about three hundred and thirty passengers for you."

The captain shook his head doubtfully, "It's a big load. I hope we can make it without any trouble."

"Well, then," Chapelle went on, "We'll go aboard during the day after we complete the destruction of the stores and facilities. The native troops under Lieutenant O'Shaughnessy will cover our embarkation and then convoy the civilians as far as the Suzi swamps. Afterwards they will march overland to Fort Craven on the Little Texas border."

Terrence had never had any urge to be a hero. He had always pictured himself retiring at a ripe old age as a Colonel or Brigadier and raising canal oranges on Mars, but suddenly the memory of the Narakan Rifles rushing down the street with bugles blaring and flag waving right into the Rumi line of fire rose before him. The thought of O'Shaughnessy, even with his new lieutenant's commission, leading the blundering troops along the two hundred miles to Fort Craven was too much for him.

"I beg your pardon, Major," he heard himself saying, "But as the Narakan Training Officer, I think that I should remain in command of the unit in its overland march."

The Major was dumfounded. Norton looked as if he were sure the Narakan climate had proven too much of a strain for the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant O'Mara, are you sure...." began Chapelle.

"Are you nuts, O'Mara? Do you know what you're asking for?" demanded Norton.

"Yes, sir. I feel that since Colonel Upton appointed me Training Officer for the Narakan Rifles, it is my duty to stay with them until I am relieved."

Chapelle's look of astonishment had changed to one of relief. It would be far easier to explain the hurried abandonment of the Narakan Rifles to the native representatives at New Chicago if a Terran officer were to remain with them.

"Well," he said, "I could, of course, relieve you of your responsibility but if you feel that...."

"I do, sir." Terrence said quickly lest he be tempted to back out.

IV

L

ater in the day as he sat in the shade of the command post's overhanging roof with his back against a stack of sand-bags, he cursed himself for sixteen kinds of an idiot as he watched the evacuation begin. Beta was dropping low over the pink Maldo hills as the long line of earthmen filed up the gangway into the big airship.

"Hello," said a voice behind him. He turned to find Joan Allen standing there clothed in radiation armor and holding a small canvas bag in one hand. "I thought ... I mean ... I came to say good-bye."

"Hello, yourself. I thought you were on board with the rest of them." He got up hastily.

"No. I got the kids on board but I wanted one more look at the schoolhouse before we shoved off."

Somehow he was holding onto her arm, "I guess it meant a lot to you, that schoolhouse," he said.

"Yes, it did. I ... I was afraid that I wouldn't get to see you when you get to New Chicago."

"There's no danger of that, Joanie. If and when I get there, I'll be looking for you ... that is ... if you want to see me."

"If you think you can stand an old maid school teacher, I'll be looking for you." She was very close to him now. "Why did you do it, Terrence? Why are you making the march with the Narakans? Fielding says your chances aren't very good."

"I'll thank Fielding to keep his big mouth shut! I don't really know why, probably kind of an Earthman's Burden, noblesse oblige ... you know ... something like the sort of thing Kipling used to write about."

"Hell," she said, surprising him with her vehemence, "you don't believe that guy

any more than I do. It was old when Kipling wrote it and it's even older now. I think that somewhere under that tough Irish skin of yours, there's a sentimental fool hiding."

She was still closer now with her hands pressed lightly against his chest and suddenly his arms went around her, he lifted her protective visor and forced his lips down hard on hers. All of her primness had disappeared as she leaned against him, returning his kiss with a burning eagerness which a more experienced woman might have controlled.

There were tears running down his cheeks and he knew they weren't his. He released her slightly and looked down into her tear streaked face, wondering how it was possible for them to have been at the same post for six months without really knowing each other.

"I guess I'm kind of crazy about you, teacher," he said.

He had lifted her off her feet and she clung there with her arms around his neck. "Terrence, I can't leave you ... I...."

As Terrence bent over to kiss her again there was a loud cough and Bill Fielding was standing there dressed in full battle armor. He grinned and said, "Much as I hate to break this up, I don't think Chapelle is going to hold the *Sun Maid* much longer."

Terrence set Joan gently on her feet and she turned and fled toward the waiting ship. He watched until she was on board and then turned to stare at Bill. Still grinning broadly, Bill clapped him on the shoulder as he said, "I could never have faced those bartenders on Dobi Street if I had gone back without you. We better get going, hadn't we? Sergeant Polasky's down with the men. He couldn't bear to leave his Bannings."

"Well, I'll be damned!" was all O'Mara could find to say as he watched the big airship lift itself in the fading light, circle and pass through the smoke of Dust Bin for the last time.



T

hrowing their gear over their shoulders, the two officers crossed the parade

ground to where the two hundred khaki clad figures of the Narakan Rifles stood waiting with Sergeant Polasky clucking slightly as he fussed over his Bannings.

O'Shaughnessy was wearing his new lieutenant bars and a pith helmet and was carrying a large piece of wood in imitation of Norton's swagger stick. Terrence took one look at him and at the two orderlies who stood behind him holding his field kit. He strode toward him scowling, placed his fists on his hips and stood glaring up at the Greenback as he roared, "So! It's delusions of grandeur you've got, is it? Where are Hannigan and O'Toole and their patrols? Why aren't they back?"

O'Shaughnessy stiffened to attention trying to pull in his great stomach. "They are back, Mr. Lieutenant Sir... I forgot. They had nothing to report ... no contact."

Terrence looked him up and down, "If you foul up just once more ... I'm going to ... I'll split your gizzard, stuff it with To-To leaves and send you to the Rumi for their breakfast with my compliments!"

O'Shaughnessy shivered at the dire threat as O'Mara turned to Rev. Goodman who stood with his people clustered about him. "All right, Reverend, you can move out with your flock. I'll throw patrols out in front of you and bring up the rear with the rest of the Rifles. We'll see you as far as the edge of the swamps."

In a long straggly line, the refugees started out with the native police keeping order and Goodman marching at their head. The two drums and the three bugles of the Narakan Rifles struck up a badly mangled version of *Back to Donegal*, and the column followed on the heels of the civilians. Once or twice Terrence glanced back at the smoke and flame that had been Dust Bin before he turned his face forward across the miles of grasslands to where the Suzi swamps lay.

Darkness had fallen but progress wasn't difficult until one of those sudden, lashing storms for which Naraka was famous hurled itself upon them, flattening the tall grass, raising swirls of dust and finally turning the dust into thick, clinging mud.

As suddenly as it had come, the storm was gone. But by that time they were in the swamp itself. Night in the Suzi swamps. Swamps composed of a sticky, gray mud and heavy tangled undergrowth. The night was as black as the day had been bright. The column which had left the civilians at the edge of the swamp was pushing slowly forward. The Narakans glided along on their bare, webbed feet

and the Terrans pushed along on snowshoe-like glides attached to their boots.

Bill Fielding, bareheaded with his helmet thrown back over his shoulder, floundered along beside Terrence. "Did you ever see a place like this? Did you ever see mud like this? Even the Irish bogs couldn't be this bad."

Terrence checked his map, shielding his flashlight carefully. "We'll be out of the worst of this by tomorrow morning," he said.

"If we live until tomorrow morning," Fielding replied, "those Rumi have eyes like the blasted jungle cats they're descended from."

"I don't think we have much to worry about until we get out of the swamps. I doubt if their patrols would penetrate very deeply into this mess."

"How about the radio? Has Polasky been able to get through to Fort Craven?" asked Fielding.

O'Mara shook his head, "no. You know what Beta's radiations do to radio reception this time of year. Even at night it takes a powerful transmitter to reach farther than twenty or thirty miles."

Later in the night, with a good ten miles of swamp country between him and the enemy, Terrence called a halt on a slightly raised spot of almost dry ground. The unwearied Greenbacks and the exhausted Terrans dropped down in huddled groups. The patrols that had penetrated to the edge of the swamp came in to report that they had contacted no Rumi ahead. Terrence munched a can of cold beans and fell over in an exhausted sleep to the sound of O'Shaughnessy placing sentries about the camp.



T

he next day's march was a nightmare to the lieutenant. If anything, the heat and humidity were worse in the swamps than they had been in Dust Bin and the going got tougher every mile. The mud was softer and the undergrowth had to be cut away by bayonet-wielding Narakans before the main body could move through. Terrence had thrown off his battle armor and lost his radiation helmet somewhere in the morass as had other of the Earthmen. Hannigan had prepared a thick mess of mud and grass which the Terrans applied to exposed parts of their bodies.

Late in the afternoon of the second day the Narakan Rifles came to a tepid little stream that marked the end of the swamps, and for the first time Terrence ordered a rest of longer than two hours. Bill Fielding was lying flat on his back in the grass beside the stream with his feet dangling in the water, shoes and all, when O'Mara dragged himself wearily back from inspecting the pickets and flopped down beside him.

"If I never to my dying day see another speck of mud," Fielding muttered as he ate a bar of tropical chocolate that was as mud covered as he was, "I'll still have seen more than all the Fieldings for two hundred years back have seen on Earth and Mars."

"And now," said Terrence as he eased over on his back with a heavy sigh, "that we have run out of mud, we can start looking for Rumi."

"At least it'll be a change! Here Kitty! Here kitty! Nice Rumi! Come and get a bayonet in...."

Clack, clack, clack. The sound of spring guns broke the stillness of the afternoon and was followed by the sound of rifles and a cry of pain.

"Oh, Lord!" moaned O'Mara, "now it starts!" He was on his feet, gripping his carbine and running bent over. Fielding was at his heels, dragging a machine gun off the ground.

"O'Shaughnessy! Hannigan! Take the first platoon. Move up to support the pickets. O'Toole! On the double! Take your squad and try to get around the firing. Bill, you and Polasky stand by here with the rest of the men and the Bannings."

Terrence had plunged into the stream and splashed across and was clambering up

the opposite bank when one of his pickets came crawling and stumbling back clutching a wounded arm. "Mr. Lieutenant! Mr. Lieutenant! Rumi! Rumi! Many Rumi up ahead! Sullivan and O'Leary dead! Rumi get!"

"Medic! Medic!" O'Shaughnessy was yelling in his ear with the full-throated croak of an adult Narakan, drowning out what the wounded picket was trying to say.

"How many? How many Rumi, man?" Terrence demanded.

"Twenty ... thirty ... maybe thousand!" the Narakan gasped as the Medic led him off.

"'Twenty, thirty, maybe thousand.' That gives us a damn fine idea of what we're up against!"

While his men dragged their big bodies up the bank of the stream, O'Mara stood scowling at the eight foot high grass. Usually about a foot high, the hardy and ubiquitous purple grass of Naraka grew far more lushly around the edges of the swamps. He felt that it would be a risky business at best to plunge into it after an unknown number of enemy. At the same time he had an illogical determination not to leave the bodies of his men in the hands of the Rumi. He looked at the broad, big-mouthed exaggerations of Irish faces around him, heaved a sigh that came from deep in his chest and ordered, "All right, men. Spread out. Keep low and keep your eyes open. And try not to shoot each other."

"We fix bayonets now, Lieutenant, sir?" Hannigan asked.

"You keep your eyes open, Sergeant," Terrence snapped, "I'll tell you when to fix bayonets."

The noisy rustling of his men's heavy bodies as they pushed through the grass made him nervous and irritable. Then suddenly, just as they were edging their way around a gully, a dozen Rumi were swarming down on them. Terrence cut down two with his carbine but his men were firing and missing as the incredibly fast catmen hurtled at them. He had a brief glimpse of O'Shaughnessy spraying submachine gun slugs wildly about and then there was a hail of spring bolts and two of his men were down. The whole platoon was thrashing through the grass in their direction and the Rumi were gone as quickly as they had come.

"Come on!" Terrence shouted, breaking into a run with twenty or thirty Riflemen after him. A bolt grazed his cheek and another cut down a man to his right. He

emptied his carbine in the general direction of the Clack, Clack, Clack. Hannigan was roaring a primitive bull-throated chant and firing at everything that moved. O'Shaughnessy managed to jam his gun and was beating frantically at it with one webbed fist. They burst into a clearing filled with Rumi and both sides blazed away at point blank range. It was hard for even a Narakan to miss at that close range and the Rumi broke and ran just as Sergeant O'Toole and his squad came out of the grass on the other side of the clearing.

The Rumi, trapped, turned and dashed at Terrence and his men. The lieutenant drove his fist into one cat faced creature and smashed his empty gun across the head of another. Hannigan grappled with one of the lithe gray-bodied things and slowly crushed it beneath his 350 odd pounds. O'Shaughnessy beat another insensible with his jammed Tommy gun. Several Narakans were down but most of them had taken Rumi with them.

Terrence was knocked off his feet by a gray ball of fury that leaped at him wielding a stiletto-thin knife. He caught at the Rumi's arm with both hands but the creature was not only fast but strong. It twisted out of his grasp and slashed at him and only a quick sideward roll saved him. Desperately he brought his fist down on his assailant's head.

The Rumi's grip relaxed slightly and Terrence drove his fist full into its face and locked his legs about its waist. The catman couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and fifty pounds but all of it was wiry strength. It clawed at him now, ripping his protective clothing and gashing his legs, meanwhile trying to get its knife into play. He was vaguely conscious that his men had disposed of the rest of the Rumi and were dancing around him frantically trying to get a chance to aid him. He was struck by the incongruity of a civilized being descended from simian ancestors and a civilized being descended from feline ancestors fighting fang and claw while a bunch of misplaced amphibians danced about them.

Making his weight count he suddenly twisted and hurled the Rumi under him but something hit him a terrific blow on the back of the head and blackness closed in.

V

O

'Mara awoke with a head that felt like all the hangovers of a misspent life.

"Have a nice rest?" Bill Fielding asked.

Terrence reached a weak hand to the back of his head and felt bandages. "Did I catch a spring bolt?" he asked.

Bill grinned, "Well, no. Not exactly. It was more on the order of Private O'Hara's rifle butt. He was trying to hit the Rumi you were necking with."

"I might have known," Terrence groaned.

"We lost six men but recovered all the bodies except for one. We've got four wounded ... litter cases. Thought you were going to make it five for a while."

"Well, they won't slow us down too much. We still have about a hundred and fifty miles to go. We'll camp here for the night and move out at dawn."

Marching in the early morning and resting in the heat of the day before another afternoon march, the Narakan Rifles covered another fifty miles of the distance to Fort Craven without incident but not without signs of Rumi. Twice they came on recently occupied camps and once they caught sight of a Rumi patrol moving parallel to their own line of march.

The next morning, which was blistering and cloudless, they were only seventy miles from the Fort.

"Maybe we ought to give the radio another try." Terrence decided. "We're close enough to have a chance of getting through now."

Polasky set up the field radio.

"Hello, Balliwick. Hello, Balliwick. This is Apple Three Three. Can you read me? Come in, please."

O'Mara and Fielding sat and listened while he repeated the call a dozen or more

times. His only answer was the heavy static that Beta produced in most electronic instruments. The same static that made radar and space scanners all but useless, that limited aircraft to the big dirigibles and weapons to old fashioned rifles and machine guns.

"I guess we'll know what's going on when we get there!" Terrence said. He wiped his forehead with his arm, noticing that the heavily caked mud was beginning to crack off. He would be in for a bad case of sun poisoning probably.

A rare breeze had sprung up and drifting down it from the west came the sound of gunfire. As one man, everyone in the camp stiffened.

"Did you hear that?" demanded Fielding.

"I think I hear a Banning," Polasky said, "sounds like it's coming from in back of us ... off to the west."

"From what our scouts have been able to pick up, that's the general direction that the Rumi have been moving," Terrence said.

"But there's nothing over that way. What in hell could they be attacking?" Fielding was on his feet, looking off in the direction from which the sounds were coming.

Terrence was aware of an increasingly uneasy feeling. He got to his feet and picked up his gear. "The sounds could be deceiving. We might as well get moving. It isn't going to get much cooler before nightfall."



A

n hour later they were hotly engaged with a large force of Rumi. Rumi armed for the first time with heavier weapons, mortar-like guns that hurled pods of smothering dust that caused almost instant strangulation. Rumi who attacked suddenly, giving them time only to drop to the ground and set up the Bannings and machine guns before three hundred howling fiends came charging through the grass at a dead run, firing as they came.

O'Mara was behind a machine gun and Fielding and Polasky each had a Banning in action. They met the Rumi charge with a withering hail of lead and fire. The

Narakans lying as flat as their huge chests would allow them were firing as fast as the automatic rifles would fire. The Bannings swept the line of charging figures. As the beams paused for a moment, the charge would take effect and a ball of fire would mushroom skyward, leaving a dozen seared cat bodies on the ground. Terrence swept his machine gun along in a swath behind the Bannings, picking off what they left. Some dozen catmen made it to within ten yards of their front but sprawled still or lay kicking briefly until a Greenback put another bullet into him.

The Rumi were gone, withdrawing to the west and Terrence was yelling and cursing at his men to keep them from breaking ranks and following them. Three Riflemen and O'Toole were dead and Sergeant Polasky was coughing out his life beside his Banning with a spring gun bolt in his stomach.

"Those damn cats!" he was muttering when O'Mara reached him, "those damn cats. We showed 'em, didn't we, Lieutenant? That Banning's a good gun if you...."

They buried the Greenbacks in eight foot graves and the Earthman in a seven foot one. "Those dirty, lousy, stinking...." Bill Fielding was beating his fist into the palm of his hand. "We got one of them alive this time, Terrence. Hannigan knows a little of their lingo. His old man escaped from one of their breeding pens on the other side of the Muddy. He's working him over."

In the twenty odd years that Terrans and Rumi had occupied different halves of the same planet, the number of men who had learned the Rumi language wouldn't have filled a small room. So Terrence was surprised at Bill's information and hurried toward the place where the interrogation was taking place. Before he got there, he heard a piercing cat cry which ended in a gurgle and when he reached the group of Greenbacks, Hannigan was wiping his bayonet on the grass. He stood looking down at a Rumi officer whose throat was neatly slit from furry ear to furry ear. Then fists clenched on his hips, he confronted his men.

"I don't suppose it ever occurred to you bunch of dimwits that we might have gotten some information out of this guy. He might have talked, you know."

"He talk," grinned Hannigan, "he talk plenty. He feared we might hurt him. We tell him no hurt if he talk.... Ha!"

"He say big flyship down, Mr. Lieutenant," said O'Shaughnessy.

"What? What do you mean?" demanded O'Mara.

"Flyship ... *Sun Maid* crash in storm.... Rumi find."

"Good God! The *Sun Maid*!" Terrence gasped, "That storm the first night!"

"They surround and attack Terrans. These ones on way to join attack when meet us," O'Shaughnessy went on.

"He tell where ship down," Hannigan said, "it near bend in Big Muddy ... place I know. Ten, twenty mile back."

The Greenbacks were watching the Terrans, fingering their bayonets eagerly and hugging their rifles. Terrence had the impression that they were beginning to like their jobs. He turned to Bill Fielding, "Well, Bill, it looks like we came about twenty miles too far."

Bill grinned, "Yep, I guess so. Come on, soldiers, fall in. We got work to do back here a piece."

A two hour's forced march with the sun beating down and the sound of firing growing closer. Only a column of Greenbacks could have done it and only a crazy Irishman would have asked them to. They came up over a rise and looked down a gentle slope toward the brown twisting snake that was the Big Muddy. On its banks lay the broken shape of the airship and swarming across a burned circle around it were Rumi, thousands of them. The firing had slackened in the last few minutes and now they could see why. The Rumi were assaulting and were at close grips with the ring of defending Terrans.

"Now?" questioned O'Shaughnessy, "we fix bayonets now?"

"Yes," replied Terrence, "now we fix bayonets."

At his word three hundred big clumsy hands reached for three hundred bayonets and fixed them to three hundred rifles.

"O'Shea, take O'Toole's squad and stand by up here with the Bannings. O'Shaughnessy, take the left flank. Bill, you take the right. Let's go!"

There wasn't a sound out of the Rifles as they started down the hill, none of their usual croakings and bellowings, just silence and the heavy thud of their feet. The Rumi had seen them. Many of those in the rear of the attack were swinging about to face them. Spring gun bolts began to whiz in their direction. One or two

Narakans fell. They were closer to the struggle now, closer to the tightly packed Rumi and the hand to hand struggle about the *Sun Maid*.

Terrence was firing, throwing lead into the gray-bodied mass ahead of him but his men were just thundering along with their little black eyes fixed on their old oppressors, bayonets leveled in front of them in approved training school method. They resembled nothing so much as a regiment of tanks hurtling at an enemy. The momentum of their charge carried them half way through the Rumi ranks, the terrific force of the plunging amphibians bowling over the lighter catmen.

Bayonets, clubbed rifle and heavy webbed fist fought against claw, teeth and knife. There was almost no firing, almost no sound save for the cries of the Rumi and an occasional cheer from the Terrans.

Terrence emptied his Tommy gun, hurled it in the face of a Rumi and reached for his knife and automatic. A Rumi knocked him off his feet with the butt end of a spring gun but before he could do more, Hannigan stepped over his lieutenant and plunged his bayonet into the catman. The Irishman scrambled to his feet amidst the gray furry bodies, thrust his .45 into a snarling face and pulled the trigger. The face disappeared but another took its place and he fired again. A Rumi with a knife grabbed at him from behind and he raised his pistol again but the cat was already down with a bayonet between his shoulders.

The Greenbacks were yelling now, lifting those great voices of theirs in full throated bullfrog croaks. The Rumi, trapped and desperate, were scattering and trying to flee down river. O'Mara stumbled over a barricade of rocks and boxes and almost got a Terran slug in him before he realized that they had cut their way through to the broken ship. He was up in a minute and urging his men on after the scattering enemy. Twenty or thirty of them tried to make a stand around a tall Rumi officer but O'Shaughnessy at the head of a wedge of Narakans swept into them at a full run.

Their bayonets flashed for a few seconds and then flashed no more, the steel was covered with blood. A few hundred Rumi made it to the river under a hail of fire from O'Shea and his squad on the hill. Hardly pausing to consider their cat-like aversion to water, most of them plunged in and struck out for the other shore. The rest were cut down on the bank by onrushing Greenbacks. Terrence grabbed hold of one of his buglers and then had to practically beat the man over the head to get him to sound Recall.

Bill Fielding picked his way among the bodies and came toward Terrence holding his left arm. O'Shaughnessy was leaping up and down and waving his fist across the river.

"Things different now! All different now! One Greenback better than four, five, eight Rumi!"

"At least that many," Terrence said under his breath before he roared at O'Shaughnessy, "Fall the men in on the double now! We're going to march back to the *Sun Maid* in proper military style."

There was a blowing of sergeant's whistles, the shouting of corporals, and the Narakan Rifles slowly formed ranks. Some were missing and others were limping and holding wounds but they stepped out smartly as the column headed back up the river. Every rifle was at the correct slope, every man was in step as they marched through the makeshift barricade and past where Chapelle was standing. The drum and bugle corps struck up *The Wearing of the Green* just as O'Mara shouted, "*Eyes Right!*" and every eye swung right in perfect unison. A tattered and weary Chapelle brought a surprised hand up to salute and the Narakan Rifles came to a snappy halt.

A small, black haired figure threw itself at Terrence and his arms were again holding Joan Allen. "I knew you'd come," she said, "only a big, crazy Irishman like you could do it."

He kissed her and then pressed his mud-caked face against hers as he said into her ear. "Only three hundred big, crazy Irishmen, baby. There's not a drop of anything else in me boys."

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