

# TU'AN

A soldier in a dark uniform with a backpack and a rifle stands in a desolate, war-torn city. He is looking down and to his left. In the background, there is a tank on the left, a fighter jet in the sky, and a large plume of black smoke rising from a destroyed building on the right. The ground is covered in rubble and dust.

D. KRAUSS

Tu'an

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To the Rufe's, from one of your orphans.  
Thanks for the safe place.

... plague killed them all except one man – Tu'an ... and God fashioned him in many forms, and that man survived alone from the time of Partholon ...

Lebor Gabala Erenn  
*(The Book of Invasions)*

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# TU'AN

BOOK TWO

D. KRAUSS



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

*The madman lived just south of the lines.* Soldiers manning those lines would have killed him long before now, but lingering superstitions regarding the mad stayed their hands. Not that he wasn't abused. The soldiers often kicked in his door and rifled his goods and slapped him around until he was bloodied and crumpled. After they'd gone, he'd get up, rehang the door, and move the remaining cans of stuff the soldiers didn't want – beets, pumpkin, dog food – from a no-longer-secret stash to one that was, leaving a couple out to placate the next group of soldiers. It was a good arrangement.

He wasn't really a madman; he was just playing a role. But, played too long, reality blurs, and he went about mad chores – dusting, sweeping, arranging – even when rounds from the enemy across the creek whistled through his attic and manufactured more rubble from the whole pieces of his house. He even raked his yard, every day, in rain, snow, in summer, when there was nothing at all to rake. This convinced the soldiers he was mad. It convinced him he wasn't. No one could see the clean and ordered interior of his house because no one visited anymore, except the soldiers, and they made short work of it. But the yard was on display, and by ensuring every square inch of it looked good, he let the enemy across the creek, and the officers and the sergeants and the looters on this side, know that civilization continued.

Besides, raking made him feel good. If he stood in the yard just so, and leaned on the rake just so, while a cool breeze evaporated the sweat from his brow, then narrowed his eyes to block out the wreckage and the empty yards and the shattered houses ... at that moment, his old life came back. Even if passing soldiers jeered or sergeants yelled at him to get inside or officers frowned mightily, even when he could not avoid seeing the columns of distant smoke, the moment existed.

It made him happy.

*Chirp.*

Collier immediately keyed the radio twice, acknowledging the incoming signal. Jonesy was about to start some crap. He took in a deep breath and held it, getting his jitters under control. Again. Got them every time, no matter how routine the ops.

He snapped on the night-vision goggles for a quick look-see. Ghost-green pine trees and tangled underbrush loomed, a hint of the New Lisbon Road just beyond. He frowned. That road ... he didn't like it. Right at the moment Jonesy comes whooping across with Reds in hot pursuit, some other group of Reds would be tooling around the corner and there Collier'd be, flanked and taking fire from two directions. Again.

He'd made his objections to this spot quite clear but Major Arce gave him the icy stare and said, "Sergeant Rashkil, just do it." Salute, holler, "Yes, Ma'am!" go off and get yourself killed.

Major Arce. Rosa Arce. Rosa ...

There, on the breeze, her perfume, a natural mix of cold air and clean skin and desire, close, so close. Holding each other, gasping the last of the passion, returning to earth.

My God, Rosa. Rosa ... Knock it off. Hard-ons make running away difficult.

Collier grinned but still drifted, savoring their rendezvous three nights before in that little cemetery hidden behind the wreckage of some old Methodist church in what was once Pemberton, New Jersey. Midnight, the dark and their passion a blanket, exchanging breath for breath until they were the same air, the same life, the same person ...

Dude. Seriously. Stop it.

He snapped off the goggles, raised them and shut his eyes for a moment to readjust, turned his head slowly (just in case some Red IRing noticed the motion), and stared hard towards the rear, where he'd posted the two privates. Both of their helmets were clearly silhouetted against the trees, heads bobbing, obviously chatting.

Idiots.

How many times had he warned them? Keep your helmets, your backs, your butts down! And don't freakin' move! Even crappy Vietnam-era night vision will spot you, and, with a little diligence on the spotter's part, lead to the spotting of one Sergeant Collier Rashkil skulking near the road while grinding his teeth in rage.



Just can't get good help these days.

Ain't that the truth? When everything went TU about five or six years ago, the population of idiots grew geometrically to the point they were now ninety percent of all survivors, which meant they were ninety-five percent of all new recruits, so ... how many idiots were in the ranks right now? Let's see, if the Blues had lost about seventy-five percent of those recruits during last month's nightmare slogging fight across Pennsylvania, then seventy percent of the idiots (but, wait, is there a true proportion between ninety-five percent and seventy-five percent?) were now gone, but half had been replaced, which would be forty percent idiot enrichment so ...

Man, was he getting punchy.

Collier bit down hard on his inner cheek, trying to raise some pain adrenaline. So freakin' tired. What he'd give for eight hours, even six hours, of straight, uninterrupted sleep. Or six hours of straight, uninterrupted Rosa ...

... Rosa, my life. I see you standing in a glade sheltering a creek, that winds slow and soft across the front of our log cabin, deep in eternal woods enveloped by mountains, the creek waters singing to us, the music in the waters ...

Wake up!

Collier shook himself. Damn! Had he just drifted off? Collier peered towards the road, all senses screaming but things were quiet, thank God. The stream, though, was still singing. Collier furrowed his brow. What the hell?

Oh, yeah, that's right, there's water in the small dam a few yards off, and it tinkles rather nicely. Just a country dam, nothing spectacular, maybe five, six feet deep in the spillway, enough to cover him if he needed to jump in and hide. Probably die of hypothermia and leeches before the Reds found him there, but he'd rather do that than be shot or, worse, captured. Doubtful the Reds were any more sparing of prisoners than he was. Chew him up for all they can get and then shoot him in the back of the head, just like Collier had done dozens (hundreds?) of times.

He gave the water an appreciative glance, then peered back towards the road, tempted to snap on the night vision again and check things, and then check what further mischief the two privates were up to but, no, keep your night eyes, bud. He wondered if the privates saw his head nod from sleep. That would be embarrassing. Probably both asleep themselves. Or, one asleep while the other watched. No way. That'd be too smart.

About as smart as sitting here freezing his ass off next to a country dam, while waiting to be shot.

He chuckled. Yeah, if he had a smidgen of smart, he'd be hiding out somewhere in deep woods enveloped by mountains, instead of here. But a lot of smart people – Rosa, Jonesy, Captain Palmer (although his country-boy shuckiness made Collier wonder how smart he truly was) – were here, because the smartest of them all, Colonel Caldwell, had chosen the flat, open farmlands of south Jersey, with the only natural barrier an easily fordable Rancocas Creek, as the place to make a stand. So much for smart. Even a dumb boot like Collier knew

they were better off in Pennsylvania, hiding out in the low mountains behind the Delaware and the Schuylkill rivers until help came.

Like that was going to happen.

Collier smiled grimly and listened to the water and worked out its rhythm. He wondered if he could pick it out on a guitar, maybe throw in some counter-rhythms and call it the Water Song. Or, better, the Dam(n) Water Song. His hand itched for a guitar and he stroked the rifle in compensation. When this was done, when someone won and they all drifted away, he'd have to see about a guitar. If he ever got back to the Valley, he'd try his hand at making them, good ones, all sweet pine and resin. The world cannot have enough guitars. Rosa and he and their five or six kids would all share a little stone house up on some ridge near Staunton or down towards Lexington, away from wars and politics, and turn out guitars. They'd load them up on carts or burros and bring them down to the market towns and barter for food and ammunition and clothes. In the evening, he'd play songs he'd written, like the Dam(n) Water Song, and old ones he remembered: Metallica's *Never Land* or Incubus's *Wish You Were Here*. And those Dad had liked, Springsteen and Floyd ...

Shots ripped out somewhere across the road, followed immediately by shouts and someone tearing off a long burst of M-16. Collier's jitters came roaring back but he gulped them down and smiled. Here we go. Looking back, he raised his hand and motioned and watched the privates break laterally. At least they were doing that right. Sometime in the next, say, four or five seconds, Jonesy would barrel through the flanking privates and form the back, then Collier would collapse on the pursuing Reds and they'd have 'em. All a matter of lovely timing.

Collier took out the small flashlight and stared across the road. Movement, frantic and fast: two shadows swooped to the corners of a ruined house opposite, stopped, then fired short bursts at the woods behind them. Two ... where's the rest of 'em?

Damn.

Feet pounding and shouts from the woods, followed by someone opening up on the backyard and the two survivors shooting back. Collier crawled to the edge of the tree line where he could get a better view. The two shadows hauled ass down the ruined driveway of the caved-in house, whipping across the road. They were breaking too far left and Collier looked frantically down both sides, expecting the unwanted Red patrol to suddenly appear.

Nothing, so he flashed once and saw both shadows alter their course in mid-stride. Please let one of those shadows be—

Jonesy, thank God, burst through the tree screen and dropped beside him, panting hard; the tall, skinny shadow blurring past them both and towards the back, obviously Private Swift (more thanking of God). Jonesy gasped, "Lost two. Six coming!" slapped Collier hard on the shoulder and bolted after Swift.

Collier had to grin. Jonesy and he were gettin' pretty good at this. Must be all the practice. They went out almost every night during the run through Pennsylvania, grabbed any Red they could and handed 'em over to Major Arce

for her tender ministrations. The resulting intel let them avoid Red ambushes and slip into New Jersey, depleted and hurt and desperate, but still formidable and largely intact. The 1st Combined Arms Division. The Ghosts.

Oo-rah.

Self-consciously, Collier slapped the tattoo on his right bicep – a ghost with fierce black eyes, bayonet in its “O” shaped ghostly mouth, an M-16 hugged to its chest. Jonesy had come up with the design and one night, somewhere near Bristol, they’d cut it into each other’s arms. It caught on among the good soldiers and became a sign of who you could trust. Rosa had one; didn’t even whimper when he cut it into her. Caldwell did not.

Hmm.

Running feet and shouts snapped Collier’s head back towards the road. Yes, there, three or four, no, six shadows, all gathered at the front of the house. Idiots, bunching up like that. Collier could take all of them with one burst. Maybe the Reds’ discipline was collapsing, too.

Not bloody likely. A victorious force had lots of élan and high morale and, especially, discipline.

Most likely, they’d paused to get bearings. C’mon over, you Red bastards, or this carefully contrived and quite sophisticated ambush would quickly go to shit. Maybe he should encourage them—

A round blasted from somewhere behind Collier, momentarily startling him, but then he grinned again. Good ole Jonesy ...

Four of the Reds came screaming across the yard while the other two loosed long bursts at Collier’s position. He scrunched into the pine needles as tracers sprayed the trees and couldn’t help admiring the effort. Good fire discipline, good tactics. These Reds were no slouches.

Well, of course not; they were Americans, too.

The four flashed past him into the box, but Collier stayed down. He had other worries. Gunfire erupted as the back of the box engaged the Reds. General firefight hell now, tracers flying and branches crashing and people screaming. Collier watched the two across the road hesitate. No doubt, the extra gunfire had rattled them. Instead of chasing what they thought were two desperate fugitives, they’d stumbled into a trap. Precisely, guys, and now it’s decision time: do you invoke patrol discipline, lay down cover fire and provide an avenue of escape for your buddies while calling for help (or, if you don’t have a radio, one of you running back to get help)? Or, do you say, “Fuck it,” and go charging in to help your buddies, er, comrades? C’mon. Choose. We don’t have all night.

“Fuck it” won.

Collier watched the two shadows come together in an obviously quick conference and then bolt right for him. Good, closer, closer, keep up your momentum. The Reds cleared the tree line and ran past Collier’s right, heading for the tracers.

Collier rolled and stood, whipping the 16 up to his left while pulling out the Taser with his right hand. Now was the time when night eyes paid off: the two

Reds were clearly silhouetted against the tracers, hesitant, trying to figure out who was who.

Big mistake, fellahs.

Collier fired, stitching the Red on the left up the spine, blowing his innards across the woods. Not bad for one-handed shooting, left-handed at that. The other guy whirled, going to his knees. Collier was impressed. Good reaction, Red, probably thinking Collier would overshoot, but no chance of that, Mao. Collier canted the Taser down and fired the clips into him. The Red did the chicken dance as Collier squeezed more juice into him. Shut down, amigo, shut down. The Red danced a bit more, stiffened, and toppled over. Collier hoped he hadn't fried him too much. These jury-rigged Tasers were a bit unreliable.

The shooting became sporadic, a sign that it was over. Now was the time to use night vision and Collier flipped his down and clicked it on. Okay, no one standing, good; that meant his patrol was still in cover and, either the Reds were all in cover, too, which was bad, or were all dead, which was good. Collier looked at the three or four smoking lumps in the underbrush. Seemed dead enough. He watched for movement, ready to cut loose with the 16 or fry the captured Red a little more, if need be. Nope. Nothing.

"Clear front," Collier called and got four answering "Yo's" in quick succession. He squatted next to the quivering Red and detached the clips, then checked the pulse. Thready, but what do you expect after a few thousand volts? Just don't die on me, you little Stalinist fuckhead.

Jonesy crawled up next to him, "He okay?"

"He'll live. You?"

"We're good. Swift got grazed but he's all right. Your two privates are all right, too."

"That's a surprise," Collier paused. "What happened?"

Jonesy shook his head, "Damndest thing, Coll. We worked back to that Browns Mills access road and saw the bastards up near some trashy house, so we stepped out and they just opened up on us."

Collier pulled a knife, a lighter, some cigarettes, and some gaggy crackers out of the Red's pockets and pitched all of it into the woods. Not worth keeping. He stuffed all the papers he found into his own pockets. Probably just letters and pictures of no intel value, but they made good reading. Proof of life beyond war. "They just opened up?"

"Yep. Got DeFelice and Scrothers in the first burst."

"Hmm." Collier frowned. "That's odd."

"Telling me."

Everybody on both sides wore basically the same half-assed fatigues, Pre- and Post-Event stock issued years ago and, subsequently, stripped from the dead, both ally and enemy, as needed. Couldn't tell who was who anymore, except for a red or blue bandana tied around an arm, and how many times had he taken his blue one off as subterfuge? So it was a bad idea to start shooting without first confirming identity. Might be friends.

“Maybe they’re getting antsy over there. Maybe we’re winning,” Collier said, and then wrinkled his nose as an odor washed over him. “Or maybe they smelled you guys.”

“Fuck you, Sarge. There was a leaking septic behind that house.”

“No shit. Or should I say, lots of shit?”

Jonesy snorted in reply and Collier chuckled as he rolled the Red over, plasticuffed him and pulled the Red’s pants down to his knees. If Lenin woke up, little chance he’d get far. Jonesy retrieved the rest of the patrol and then all of them searched the dead Reds, pulling out equipment, discarding the useless and pocketing what they wanted. “Any cigars?” Collier asked.

“Nothing, man,” Jonesy said.

“Wouldn’t tell me if you found any, would you?”

“Get you own, white boy.”

“Thieving bastard.”

“Your momma.” Both of them snickered and slapped each other’s shoulders somewhat helplessly. The privates stared at them like they were crazy while Swift toned, “Jesus,” and watched the road for movement. Couldn’t help it; both of them got giddy towards the end of these things. Of course, this Slappy White routine would get them killed one day. Who exactly was Slappy White? Dad had always used that phrase, and now Collier owned it. Things stuck with you.

“Let’s go,” Collier said and pointed at the unconscious Red.

The two privates muttered but one hoisted the Red across the other’s shoulders, fireman style, while Jonesy and Swift flanked and checked across the road. Collier took point, heading north towards Eliot’s position. The others fell in, Jonesy taking drag. Silent, they picked their way along the berm, staying deep in the tree line but within eyesight of the road. Probably had about twenty minutes before the Reds came looking for their lost buddies. Should be in Eliot’s perimeter by then; that is, if that freakin’ idiot had actually put out a perimeter.

It’s what, about 0400? Collier took a covert glance at his watch. Yep. Okay, at this pace, about thirty minutes to reach Eliot’s perimeter, another thirty or so to get with Deavers’ patrol down the Creek, then deliver the prisoner, yadda yadda ... so, in the hammock by 0600-ish. Sleep for two hours (at best), smack some recruits around, write the report, go see the Major, get the take, make a date, and by this time tomorrow night, Rosa in the cemetery.

Sweet.

Collier walked, lost in her smell and her touch and her eyes, those eyes, so black, so luminous, dark crystals sparkling with heat and want and life. Internal sun.

Walk and walk and lost and lost and—

Wake up. You’re there.

*Collier blinked fully awake* and held up a closed fist to halt the others. He peered through the trees. Eliot was positioned in the buildings across the road, some kind of old government center paired with a mental hospital – Button Wood Hall, according to the maps. Crazy people and bureaucrats sharing the same complex; for once, someone had planned well. A water tower had collapsed across the intersection and there was a lot of wreckage and crap all over the place, making it an ideal spot to infiltrate the Reds. Not anymore. After tonight’s festivities, even the dullest Red will know this is a staging area.

Collier stared hard – looking for the oddity, something out of line, something that just didn’t seem right – and listened hard, filtering out the sounds of night birds and rubble settling and rats stirring ... God, was there ever a world without so many rats? Yes, there was: back Before, back when you were a kid playing Nintendo in an intact house with an intact Dad and Mom and even a dog and you went to school and had lots of friends and ran from house to house and played Pogs in third grade and guitar in seventh and fought with Dad and the education system and got sent to boarding school and was there when the Event happened so you survived ...

A familiar tremor creased his heart: his old pal, Grief, here to remind him of people he once knew, the life he once had, the world so recently with us, all now a ruin, a wreck, broken walls sunk in swamp and bog; avert the eyes as you pass and make a warding sign. Grief for this present life, bound in death and murder, always fighting, always running, and wondering why.

Why?

All right, all right, snap out of it.

Collier dropped the goggles and flipped the switch and examined the wreckage once more. Still nothing. Okay. He pulled out the radio and keyed it twice. Hello, Eliot, we’re here, itching to go home. Can you pull your head outta yer ass and get us there?

What the hell’s Eliot doing on this mission anyway?

The Major had told Coll to button it when he and Jonesy yelled, “What? Eliot! No way, Major!” “Orders,” she said.

The Colonel’s fair-haired boy needed some medals, Collier guessed. Funny, that. Most fair-haired boys usually got safe, fat assignments guarding prisoners or ruined supplies at out-of-the-way depots. Yet, here Eliot was.

Yet here he *wasn’t* because there was no response. Collier clicked twice again, wrath rising. More moments passed and still nothing. Collier looked back at

Jonesy, whose green-lit face showed alarm. Two more clicks. Zip.

Jonesy crawled up. “What the fuck, man?” he whispered.

“That fucking Eliot, that worthless rat bastard shitbag.”

“Creative, man, but what do you want to do?”

“I want to shoot the sonofabitch.”

“I’ll load while you do it. But, we gotta get out of here.” Jonesy glanced down the road. By now, it was crawling with some real pissed-off Reds.

Collier considered. “All right. You and Swift take the right, over by the big yellow house. Me and the privates will slide around this side and cut through the looney bin yard, meet you at those storage sheds behind. We’ll try the password there, see what’s up. Then I’m going to shoot Eliot.”

“Cool, but hey, man, his radio might be out.”

“My ass.”

“That it is. See ya.” And Jonesy grinned and crawled towards Swift. A few words and they were gone.

Collier smiled. Good ole Jonesy.

He gestured at the two privates, who dragged the Red over with them. “There’s a problem,” Collier said, “We’re not getting a response, so we gotta quarter over to the inner post and see what’s up. I’ll lead, you two stagger, and for Chrissake, don’t shoot unless I do. Follow?”

One of the privates ... Zoll? Who knew? There was no more point in learning a private’s name than an LT’s ... waved an arm at the Red. “With him?”

“Yes, with him! What’d you think we did all this for?”

“He’s gettin’ awful heavy, Sarge,” the other one, Akin, or something like that, whined.

“Suck it up.” Collier’s tone was murderous. He’d shoot these two right now and drag the Red himself, if necessary. He looked at the Red, who hadn’t stirred. Well, crap, the privates may have a point: deadweight was tough to move.

“All right, both of you carry him together, then. I’ll cover,” He cut off the ensuing protest with a curt, “Let’s go!” and rolled to the right, sliding through a little tunnel running under the wreckage. He checked the road and then sprinted across it to a set of big pecan trees offering lovely cover. He turned and watched the two privates emerge, both hoisting the Red, and running in tandem towards him. Pretty smart. Maybe these guys weren’t total idiots, after all.

They flopped next to him, panting, and Collier tore to his right, bee-lining fast and hard for the corner of the first big building. He slid down the wall, rifle ready, and peeked around the corner. Jonesy and Swift, crouched behind an outbuilding next to it; Jonesy gave him the “All clear” sign. Okay. Collier waved the two privates up and raced for the next building, Jonesy and Swift covering. He dropped by the corner, got a thumbs-up from Jonesy, and then frantically waved in the two privates, who were just taking their sweet-ass time getting over here, weren’t they? Both of them fell hard and heavy next to him, wheezing like a couple of worn-out greyhounds. The Red rolled over and groaned. Collier quieted him with a kick to the chin.

“Jesus, you two sound like a couple of goddamn trains. Shut it!” he whispered savagely.

“Sarge, he’s so fucking heavy!” Zoll.

“I don’t care, you’re loud enough for artillery to zero in. Get control. Now.”

“Shoulda just left the fucker.” Zoll, again.

Collier whirled and leveled the rifle on him, “Say one more word.”

Zoll paled, obvious even in the green light, and clapped his mouth shut, pulling in air through his nose. Akin stared, jaw dropped, but smart enough to say nothing because Sergeant Rashkil had a fearsome temper.

Sergeant Rashkil had killed privates before; hell, he’d killed corporals and other sergeants and even officers who said and did something to piss him off. He’d been busted and promoted a thousand times but never executed because he was just too damn good.

Sergeant Rashkil had survived eight, no, nine promotion moves, and was still in charge of 1<sup>st</sup> Squad. Wounded sixteen times, three of them serious, a fanatic, an iron man, a crazy old-timey vet who’d fought the Richmond Campaign and went ten miles into the Zone during the Test and didn’t get sick and fought with the rear guard during the Big Run and was here, right now, confused and grieving and heartsick, but loved Major Arce and what he remembered about America and wanted, like most of the Blue Army, to restore it and would not, by God and all his angels, allow the Reds to impose some half-assed Marxist regime, instead.

So, say one word more, you whining baby-ass shithead.

Zoll didn’t. Collier glared at him for a moment more, then broke position and turned back to the corner of the building. He’d have to kill Zoll later, of course, because the guy had a grudge and would, eventually, work up the nerve to drop a grenade in Collier’s locker or knife him through the hammock while asleep. Pure spite was worse than a promotion move; with that, at least, you had a good idea of when it was coming. Collier couldn’t be lucky all the time, so, had to off Zoll soonest. But not right now; he still needed the stupid bastard.

Eliot’s perimeter was behind some giant storage shed for trucks or snowplows or whatnot; that is, if the freakin’ fool had actually posted one. If not, they’d have to run about a thousand yards farther north to find Eliot’s center, and then find Eliot himself so Collier could shoot him. He waved at Jonesy and clicked the radio twice again, and then again, and surprise, surprise, nothing. Jonesy cupped his hands around his mouth, and Collier nodded. Time for voice contact.

“Panther!” he spoke in a loud whisper. No need to shout. A human voice carried well in this silence, even if the word itself was lost. Should wake someone.

Jonesy waited a moment. “Panther!” a little louder and more insistent this time.

Dammit, where the hell was Eliot?

“Raider,” a whisper drifted from the direction of the shed and Collier felt genuine relief. God, it was like hearing you got an ‘A’ on a tough final exam, back in the days when final exams and grades meant something. He glanced at



Jonesy, who stood with a half-raised fist. So, he heard it, too. Collier nodded and pumped his own fist twice, then turned towards the privates. “All right, we’re breaking cover. I’m going first, Jones and Swift will take drag. You two carry the prisoner up behind me, but don’t move until I signal you. And don’t waste time. We’ll be having company in about ten minutes and I don’t want to be anywhere near here then.”

The two privates exchanged looks and nodded. Collier waved at Jonesy and watched as he and Swift moved to the corner, Swift taking high, and leveled their weapons towards the shed. Collier counted down then called, “Out!” to let Eliot know they were coming. He better damn well have a broken radio, Collier thought, as he slipped low and sprinted for the shed wall.

Collier dropped into cover about ten feet short of the corner, leaving an open space where the privates could leap-frog. He turned back and pointed. The privates dragged the Red to the gap, Jones and Swift covering. Okay, do a snap-look around the corner, locate the pass-through team, get acknowledgment, move Jonesy and Swift, and then run past the shed for one big happy reunion. Then shoot Eliot.

The privates were at his back and he spotted Jonesy’s upraised fist and raised his own and nudged his goggled eye past the corner ...

And froze.

There were several low buildings half-mooning around the shed’s back, overlapping it. Must have been a marshaling yard, where the trucks all gathered to load or something, back when road maintenance was an actual job. It was like an amphitheater, no cover from the back of the shed to the first buildings and the woods behind them. But that’s not what stopped him.

The beams did.

Lines, bright red ones, crisscrossed Collier’s green-lit world in a semicircle around the yard, in the perfect configuration of an ambush box.

IR illuminators. Which only Reds used.

Collier savagely flipped his fist to an open palm and pumped it twice in Jonesy’s direction. He felt the privates startled response behind him, but Collier’s motion conveyed enough urgency that they remained still. He looked back and found Jonesy and gave him a “Trouble” motion, and then scrutinized the wavering beams.

What the hell?

Maybe Eliot was just being Eliot. Where he got IR illuminators, Collier couldn’t figure, but it would be just like that dumbass to use them, and also like that dumbass to set up in ambush configuration instead of pass-on: one guy at point to wave them in, two guys behind to cover and then the next three to escort them into the perimeter. Allows everyone to simply fade away if something goes wrong. Gotta be it; Eliot was just being his usual moronic self. Or ...

... this is exactly what it looked like: a Red ambush.

Collier swore under his breath. How’s that possible? A whole crapload of things would have to have gone wrong in a ridiculously short period to (a) move

Eliot off the position far enough that (b) Reds could steal in and set up an ambush ... on a team the Reds had no earthly idea was actually coming this way. Even a fuck-up like Eliot couldn't manage that.

Could he?

Let's find out.

"Raider!" Collier called out the secondary, no longer worried if his voice carried back to the road. If the Reds were that close, they were screwed, anyway.

Silence.

Shitdamndallhellfire. "Raider!" Collier insisted.

Nothing.

"Jonesy! Abort!" he called out and lowered his rifle.

All hell broke loose.

Tracers and gunfire exploded from the yard and woods and slammed into the corner of the shed. Collier flattened and then fired off a long burst while screaming at the privates to drop. Jonesy and Swift low-crawled at sixty miles per hour back to the corner of the opposite building as tracers sought them. Collier loaded a grenade and shot a 40 towards the yard, followed quickly by four more, and then sent three bursts to either side. Jonesy and Swift flopped around the corner of the building and stood, Jonesy giving him a thumbs-up.

Collier shook his head. Amazing how much flying lead you could run through without getting a scratch. Even more amazing was how a single shot from a hundred yards away could get you right between the eyes.

Jonesy engaged around the corner as Swift launched grenades. The two privates were firing hard and fast. Okay, that should slow the Reds down. So, Eliot, you craven little bastard, just before the Reds slit your throat, you blubbered out the countersign, huh? Good thing the Reds weren't smart enough to ask for the fall-back counter or you'd have given that, too, you sonofabitch.

Collier heard the radio squawking the alert tone and he looked over to see Jonesy holding it up. Collier fired off another burst and then put the radio to his ear. "Go, man, go!" Jonesy yelled, "We'll cover you. Get the Red back to Battalion, man!" and Jonesy clicked off. Collier gave a thumbs-up as Jonesy fired a savage series of bursts towards the yard. No John Wayne bullshit here; the Red had to be delivered. Only Collier could do that now, and only Jonesy could cover them. That's just the way it was.

The return fire intensified and Collier saw it shifting towards their left. Trying to flank them. The privates were shooting hard in that direction, the forgotten Red in a lump behind them. Collier fired his last 40 and then dropped to the Red and hoisted him into a fireman's carry. The two privates turned towards him, bewilderment on both their faces.

"We're going to get out of here," Collier said. "Follow me. Jonesy and Swift will cover us. You'll owe them your lives." He paused, reading their uncertainty and fear. No time, just no time. "Let's go," and he ran straight back towards the intersection, the Red and his weapon and equipment slapping in rhythm. He didn't look to see if the privates followed.

## About the Author

D. Krauss resides in the Shenandoah Valley. He's been a cotton picker, a sodbuster, a librarian, a surgical orderly, the guy who paints the little white line down the middle of the road, a weatherman, a door-kickin' shove-gun-in-face lawman, an intel analyst, a school-bus driver, and a layabout. He has been married over 45 years to the same woman, and has a wildman bass guitarist for a son.

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