

October 9th, 4:55 am

Mali, West Africa

Gunfire woke Jason Gorman from a bone-deep sleep. It took him an extra half breath to remember where he was. He'd been dreaming of swimming in the lake at his father's vacation house in upstate New York. But the mosquito netting that cocooned his cot and the pre-dawn chill of the desert jolted him back to the present.

Along with the screams.

His heart hammering, he kicked away the thin sheet and tore through the netting. Inside the Red Cross tent-cabin, it was pitch dark, but through the tarp walls, a flickering red glow marked a fire somewhere on the east side of the refugee camp. More flames licked into existence, dancing across all four walls of the tent.

Oh, God...

Though panicked, Jason knew what was happening. He'd been briefed about this before heading to Africa. Over the past year, other refugees camps had been attacked by the Tuareg rebel forces, raided for food. With the price of rice and maize trebled across the Republic of Mali, the capital had been besieged by riots. Food was the new gold in the northern districts of the country. Three million people faced starvation.

It was why he had come here.

His father sponsored the experimental farm project that took up sixty acres on the north side of the camp, funded by the Viatus Corporation and overseen by crop biologists and geneticists from Cornell University. They had test fields of genetically modified corn growing out of the parched soils of the region. The first fields had been harvested just last week, grown with only a third of the water normally necessary for irrigation. Word must have spread to the wrong ears.

Jason burst out of his tent in his bare feet. He still wore the khaki shorts and loose shirt that he'd had on when he'd fallen into bed last night. In the pre-dawn darkness, firelight was the only source of illumination.

The generators must've been taken down.

Automatic gunfire and screams echoed through the darkness. Shadowy figures dashed and pushed all around, refugees running in a panic. But the flow was turbulent, heading this way and that. With rifle blasts and the staccato of machine gun fire arising from all sides, no one knew in which direction to flee.

Jason did.

Krista was still at the research facility. Three months ago, he had met her back in the States during his stateside briefing. She had begun sharing Jason's mosquito-netted cocoon only last month. But last night, she had stayed behind. She had planned to spend the entire night finishing some DNA assays on the newly harvested corn.

He had to reach her.

Pushing against the tide, Jason headed toward the north side of the camp. As he feared, the gunfire and flames were the most intense there. The rebels intended to raid the harvest. As long as no one tried to stop them, no one had to die. Let them have the

corn. Once they had it, they would vanish into the night as quickly as they'd come. The corn was going to be destroyed anyway. It wasn't even meant for human consumption until further studies were done.

Turning a corner, Jason fell over the first body, a teenage boy, sprawled in the alley between the ramshackle hovels that passed for homes here. The teenager had been shot and trampled over. Jason crabbed away from his body and gained his feet. He fled away.

After another frantic hundred yards, Jason reached the northern edge of the camp. Bodies were sprawled everywhere, piled on one another, men, women, children. It was a slaughterhouse. Some bodies had been torn in half by machine gun fire. Across the killing field, the research camp's Quonset huts stood like dark ships mired in the West African savannah. No lights shone there—only flames.

Krista...

Jason remained frozen in place. He wanted to continue onward, cursing his cowardice. But he couldn't move. Tears of frustration rose to his eyes.

Then a *thump-thump* rose behind him. He twisted around as a pair of helicopters flew low toward the besieged camp, hugging the terrain. It had to be the government forces from the nearby republic base. The Viatus Corporation had cast bushels of U. S. dollars to insure extra protection for the site.

A shuddering breath escaped Jason. The helicopters would surely chase off the rebels. More confident, he headed across the field. Still he kept low as he ran. He aimed for the back of the closest Quonset hut, less than a hundred yards away. Deeper shadows

would hide him there, and Krista's lab was in the next hut over. He prayed she'd kept herself hidden inside there.

As he reached the Quonset's rear wall, bright light flared behind him. A brilliant searchlight speared out of the lead helicopter and swept across the refugee camp below. Jason let out a rattling sigh.

That should scare off the rebels—

Then from both sides of the helicopter, the chatter of machine gun fire blasted out and ripped into the camp. Jason's blood iced. This was no surgical strike against invading rebel forces. This was a wholesale slaughter of the camp.

The second helicopter swung to the other side, circling outward along the periphery of the camp. From its rear hatch, barrels rolled out and exploded on impact, casting up goutts of flames into the sky. Screams erupted even louder. Jason spotted one man fleeing off into the desert, naked, but his skin still on fire. The firebombing spread toward Jason's position.

He turned and ran past the Quonset hut.

The fields and granaries spread ahead of him, but safety would be found there. Dark figures moved on the far side of the cornrows. Jason would have to risk a final dash across the open to reach Krista's research lab in the next Quonset hut. The windows were dark, and the only door faced the open fields.

He paused to steady himself. One fast dash and he could be inside the hut. But before he could move, new jets of flames burst forth on the far side of the field. A line of men bearing flamethrowers set off down the rows of corn, burning the fields that had yet to be harvested.

What the hell's happening?

Off to the right, the single granary tower exploded in a fiery whirlwind that spiraled high into the air. Shocked, but using the distraction, Jason dashed to the Quonset hut's open door and dove through it.

In the glow of the fires, the room looked unmolested, almost tidy. The back half of the hut was full of all manner of scientific equipment used in genetic and biological research: microscopes, centrifuges, incubators, thermocyclers, gel electrophoresis units. While to the right were cubicles with wireless laptops, satellite uplink equipment, even battery back-up units.

A single laptop, still powered by the batteries, glowed with a screensaver. It rested in Krista's cubicle, but there was no sign of his girlfriend.

Jason hurried to the cubicle and brushed his thumb over the touchpad. The screensaver vanished, replaced with a view of an open email account. Again it was Krista's.

Jason stared around the hut.

Krista must have fled, but where?

Jason crossed to the computer, the camp's only means of communication, and quickly accessed his email account. He toggled the address for his father's office on Capitol Hill. Holding his breath, he typed rapidly as he described the attack in a few terse sentences. In case he didn't make it, he wanted some record. Just before he hit the SEND button, he had a moment of insight. Krista's files were still up on the screen. He dragged them, attached them to his note, and hit send. She would not want them lost.

The email failed to immediately transmit. The attached file was huge and would take an extra minute to upload. He couldn't wait. Jason hoped the battery pack would last long enough for the email to go through.

Fearful of waiting any longer, Jason swung to the door. He had no way of knowing where Krista had gone. He hoped she had fled into the surrounding desert. That was what he was going to do. Out there were mazes of gullies and dry washes. He could hide for days if necessary.

As he hurried toward the exit, a dark figure appeared and blocked the doorway. Jason fell back with a gasp. The figure stepped into the hut and whispered in surprise.

“Jase?”

Relief flushed through him.

“Krista...”

He hurried to her, his arms wide to take her in. They could still both escape.

“Oh, Jason, thank god!”

His relief matched hers—until she lifted a pistol and fired three times into his chest. The shots felt like punches, knocking him backward to the floor. Fiery pain followed, turning the night even darker. Distantly he heard gunfire, explosions, and more screams.

Krista leaned over him. “Your tent was empty. We thought you'd escaped.”

He coughed, unable to answer as blood filled his mouth.

Seemingly satisfied with his silence, she turned on a heel and headed back out into the nightmare of fire and death. She stopped, momentarily silhouetted against the flaming fields, then vanished into the night.

Jason struggled to comprehend.

Why...?

As darkness folded over him, he would have no answer to his question, but he alone heard one last thing. The laptop in the neighboring cubicle chimed. His message had been sent.

