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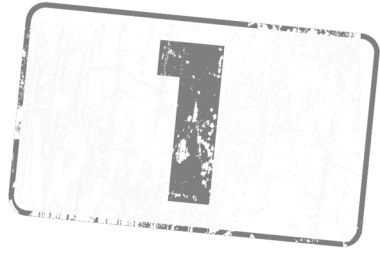
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**Turkish-Syrian Border**  
**40 Kicks South of Sanliurfa, Turkey**  
**Local Time 0547 Hours**

Covered in three days' worth of perspiration, filth, and fine yellow dust, First Sergeant Samuel Adams "Goose" Gander knelt beside the river that cut through the harsh land of southern Turkey. The stream was muddy brown, low for the season. Fish nearly as long as his arm swam slowly through the water.

Goose leaned forward and filled his canteen, wishing for cooler weather. He popped two water purification tabs into the canteen and shook it.

Then one of the fish he'd been watching jerked violently. Blood sprayed from a huge wound that ran through the creature's side. Water jumped from the river only a few inches from the dying fish, seeming to hang frozen in the air for a split second. A rainbow flashed through the spray and Goose knew a bullet had caused the splash.

"Sniper!" Goose yelled to his squad as he dove for cover. A second bullet slammed the metal canteen from his hand, leaving his fingers numb from the impact. Goose landed behind a shelf of broken rock.

The Rangers working the water supply detail flattened out against the harsh terrain immediately. Some of them ducked in behind the Hummers and cargo trucks and the big water-pumping unit.

Then the sound of three rifle reports rolled over their position.

"Anybody see anything?" Goose yelled.

"Nothing, Sarge."

"Thomas?" Goose asked over the headset. Cliff Thomas was the team scout.

"I don't see anything, Sarge."

"That's a heavy-caliber rifle," another Ranger said. "The sniper could be set up as much as a mile away."

Goose scanned the broken mountains in the distance to the south. "Anybody hit?"

A chorus of *nos* followed.

Goose breathed a sigh of relief. Syrian snipers had been something of a problem, but so far he hadn't lost any of his men. More shots ripped into the river. Two dead fish floated up in response.

Goose didn't think the shooter was actually aiming for the fish. The creatures were unexpected casualties. But the effect was a sobering one. It was a message of sorts, warning shots fired across the bow of the United States Rangers assigned to the area.

Switching frequencies on the headset, Goose said, "Base."

"Go, Phoenix Leader. You have Base."

"I've got a sniper hosing my water detail," Goose said. "I can't find him. Can you assist?"

"Affirmative, Leader. Base is looking." Base was the central Ranger command post. The intelligence teams there had access to spy satellites that could peer down into the country and read the time off a man's watch.

Goose remained pressed into the hard earth, feeling the heat soaking into his body. He listened as Base maneuvered their own sniper team into position.

"Got a line on your troublemakers out there, Leader."

"Affirmative, Base. Patch me through to the sniper team." Goose breathed out, blowing dust from the baked grit covering the bare areas where vegetation had given up the struggle to survive.

"Phoenix Leader, this is Sniper Team Romero."

"Good to have you there, Romero. Can you confirm Base's report of one hostile sniper team?"

"Not only confirm it, Leader, but we're in position to cancel their pass to the party."

"Negative on the cancellation, Romero," Goose replied. "The Syrians are baiting us. None of my team has been hit. But I wouldn't mind seeing them sit out the next few dances." Sliding his M-4A1 to the side, he took out his 10X50 binoculars and had the Ranger sniper team direct him to the hostile shooter's location.

After a brief search, Goose found the enemy team—a shooter and

a spotter—stretched out on a rocky outcrop in the jagged mountains to the southeast. No one else was around. The digital readout on his binoculars estimated the distance at a little less than a mile.

“Romero,” Goose said, “I have our sniper team in sight. Send them on their way.”

“Affirmative, Leader. We’ll send them packing.”

An instant later, rock jumped from the outcropping around the two Syrian soldiers. They jumped for cover, obviously not expecting to be found so quickly.

The other Rangers cheered the sniper team on as they reported, “Leader, your water detail is clean and green.”

“Understood, Romero. Thanks for the assist.” Goose put his binoculars away and stood. He took up the assault rifle and felt fatigue eat into his bones.

Glancing at the dead fish floating on the river, he was reminded of an old army axiom, the military version of Murphy’s Law: “It isn’t the bullet with his name on it that a professional soldier has to fear; it’s all those that are addressed ‘To Whom It May Concern.’”

The 75th Ranger Regiment was stuck between a rock and a hard place. And it seemed more than their share of trouble was looking for them.



**Turkish-Syrian Border**  
**40 Klicks South of Sanliurfa, Turkey**  
**Local Time 0601 Hours**

Death stalked the invisible line that separated Syria and Turkey.

Goose peered through his binoculars and adjusted the magnification as he scanned the border. He knew the balance that kept three armies from each other’s throats was so tenuous that any change might tip it the wrong way. Even a shift in the slow, dry wind might trigger renewed hostilities. The hatred between the Turks and the Syrian-sponsored Kurdish terrorists had existed for too many generations to count. And Goose knew that the Turks’ American allies would be in the thick of the fighting, no matter who started it.

The early morning light hurt Goose’s eyes, and the rocks and sand around him absorbed the sun’s rays and steadily rose to baking temperature. By midafternoon, he knew from hard experience, the arid land would be almost unbearable.

For the last seventy-two hours, he and C Company had been on constant alert in full battle dress, camped in the harsh, barren plateaus overlooking the border. He'd been awake for so long that sleep was a distant memory. The exhausted man inside him had no place here. The professional warrior had to stay sharp.

Despite the circumstances, he'd taken the time to stay clean-shaven, although he hadn't foisted the same expectation on his men. Leadership was often as much about image as about substance. A shade less than six feet tall, with wheat-colored blond hair that almost matched the desert around him and a body disciplined by nearly two decades of military training, Goose looked like a soldier. He kept his hair cropped high and tight, but sand still found a way to burrow into his scalp, where it itched furiously. Just one more irritant he had to ignore. The dry heat pulled at the half-moon shrapnel scar that ran from his right eyebrow to his cheekbone. The scar was less than six months old and still felt tight.

During the last few months, his border patrol assignment had turned nasty. The body count was getting serious for all sides. Of late, a few American casualties had been added into the mix, kicking up international scrutiny and drawing the attention of news media from all over the globe. There were other hot spots in the world, of course, and news service people were hunkered down like vultures around the various front lines, waiting to see where the bloodiest violence would erupt first.

Goose prayed some other place would win that lottery. He was sitting atop a powder keg that could leave dead soldiers piled high on both sides of the border—some of whom he might be responsible for.

Many months ago, the United Nations had sought the help of the United States to police a flare-up in terrorist activity along Turkey's borders. President Fitzhugh responded by sending in the troops. He explained to the American people that it was more than local terrorism that threatened the peace in that part of the world. Before long the Syrian army was facing off with the Turks at the border. Because of Turkey's role as a key Western ally in the turbulent Middle East, Fitzhugh had made sure help had been quick in coming. The 75th Army Ranger Regiment moved into the area on a peacekeeping mission. Rifle companies of the Third Battalion from Fort Benning, Georgia, an outfit with an illustrious combat history, had taken on their portion of the mission.

Goose hoped the American forces could keep the border nailed down until peace talks between Turkey and Syria and the Kurdistan

Workers Party could bear fruit. It was his job to see that the diplomats had the time they needed to keep people from dying.

But being so far from home for so long was hard. He missed his wife, Megan, and his boys, Joey and Chris. The last couple of years hadn't been kind to Goose—or to any American Special Forces troops. Terrorist activity around the globe had kept them in the field. Goose's five-year-old son, Chris, seemed to be growing up much too fast in the pictures Goose had received from home over the last few months. And his seventeen-year-old stepson, Joey, was on the brink of manhood. It nearly killed Goose not to be there for his boys and his wife.

According to the intel from HQ, the peace talks between Turkey and Syria were going to get serious any day. *Any day* had been more than a month in coming, and moving C Company from support capacity inside Turkey to the border wasn't a promising sign.

Dug in on the plateaus that made up the southeastern section of Turkey, Goose stared due south. The terrain wasn't as mountainous or craggy as in many places along the border. This had once been the gateway to Mesopotamia, home of some of the world's oldest civilizations—Babylon, Sumer, Persia, Assyria, Chaldea. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers flowed from the mountains further north and spilled into the lowlands in the southeast, emptying into Iraq and Iran to form what had once been known as the Fertile Crescent.

Back when he was a young man, in a Bible class his daddy'd taught at church back home in Waycross, Georgia, Goose had studied this region. It was the place many Bible scholars believed had once housed the Garden of Eden. But now the green paradise was gone. Here the world seemed reduced to a sea of shifting yellow sand and gravel that sported islands of treacherous rocks and stubborn scrub bushes. And Goose, too, had changed. His easy acceptance of the church's teaching was long gone. He had seen too much violence to buy into the simple beliefs of his youth.

His faith, like the landscape around him, had been blasted.

"So, what do you think, Sergeant?" The voice of his commanding officer came via Goose's ear/throat headset. Satellite communications kept the teams in constant contact, and with HQ five clicks behind the front lines, that was good. As First Sergeant, Goose's headset was chipped for the main channel as well as four subset frequencies he could use for special team assignments. He was second-in-command and ranking NCO of a company consisting of four rifle platoons ranged across the border, shoring up the exhausted Turkish soldiers on the front lines.

Despite the fact that the Syrian military hadn't shown signs of having audio-pickup equipment or signal-capturing communications antenna, Goose spoke quietly and evenly over the scrambled channel. "I think they're waiting on something, sir. Or someone."

"Nothing appears out of the ordinary," Captain Cal Remington replied.

"No, sir," Goose said, surveying the way the Syrian soldiers took refuge from the sun under vehicles and tarps. "The grunts are all business as usual. But I do see a little more spit and polish than normal today."

"Spit and polish'?"

Goose grinned. "Yes, sir, Captain. An enlisted man, sir, he never forgets the dog and pony show he has to put on for an officer. Always cleaning. Always drilling. Always looking busy. The more important the officers, the more spit and polish."

"And you'd know that, would you, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. And if I recall, sir, there was a time before OCS when you knew that, too." Their friendship reached through nearly sixteen years of hardships and dangerous assignments, including Remington's choice to sign up for the army's Officer Candidate School. That long bridge of friendship more than spanned the gulf between officer and non-com.

Remington was silent.

Knowing the captain was back at headquarters, availing himself of the computer systems tied into the geosynchronous spy satellites twenty-three thousand miles into space, Goose waited. He shifted the binoculars slowly. Maybe Remington hadn't noticed the subtle change in the attitudes of the Syrian soldiers on the other side of the border.

The Syrian soldiers wore camouflage fatigues that looked a lot like the ones worn by the American and Turkish troops. The pattern was bigger, cleaner, and not as shaded. A civilian eye, Goose knew, probably wouldn't be able to differentiate between the three sets of battle dress uniforms in this part of the world, but Goose had no problem. His life—as well as the lives of his squadmates—could depend on that skill. It wasn't just a matter of finding and shooting the enemy. Like the old saying went, "Friendly fire isn't."

Syrian troop placement was heavy. Winning through intimidation, Remington called the effort, with his signature smirk of disapproval. Remington always said real warriors won wars by handing down a decisive victory that left no room for argument—not by saber

rattling and trafficking in threats. Goose knew that for Remington, anything other than confrontation and aggressive action was NJ—no joy.

Goose didn't feel that way. If intimidation kept everybody from shooting, he was all for it. Putting on a good show could save lives. Remington may have had his reasons to prefer action. An officer's career advanced through victories, while an enlisted man simply wanted to do a good job and remain alive. Goose hoped the Syrians were willing to stick to intimidation for the foreseeable future.

The Syrian military boasted an assortment of Jeeps, Land Rovers, T-62 and T-72 main battle tanks, BMP-2 and BMP-3 armored infantry fighting vehicles, and BTR-60 armored personnel carriers. Farther back among the hills, Goose had seen self-propelled artillery and air defense units, as well as multiple rocket launchers. Satellite reconnaissance had confirmed all those weapons, as well as giving reliable estimates of troop numbers.

During the last week, the numbers had doubled. So the changes weren't all just spit and polish. Goose was getting a bad feeling about the future.

The Turks and the U.N. forces had their own array of weapons. The border area was crawling with Humvees, M-1 Abrams main battle tanks, and Bradley M-2 and M-3 APCs. Artillery and air defense units were bolstered by MLRs and Apache helicopter gunships. If that wasn't enough to handle the army arrayed against them, heavy-duty help was close by. The 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit—Special Operations Capable, or MEU(SOC), was on standby, poised for action on their three-ship amphibious ready group, anchored by the USS *Wasp*. The ARG sat on a 180-day float out in the Mediterranean Sea, ready to lend air and Marine support to the land-based forces at a moment's notice.

The Syrians knew that, and not just because of secret intelligence operations. The *Wasp's* presence had been broadcast all over CNN and FOX News networks since the Rangers had moved in-country. The bad guys knew what they were up against—though not, Goose hoped, the specifics of all the goodies they had in their bag of tricks.

"Maybe they are waiting on something," Remington said.

Cal Remington wasn't one to drop hints and not pay off on them. "You got something, Cap?" Goose said.

"I don't know yet, Sergeant. But I may have a way to get something. I've got a maybe-mission for you, purely hide-and-seek with a chance at some action. If you'd rather bake in the sun and watch the



Syrian army corps sleep, I can use one of the staff sergeants for this little exercise."

Smiling despite the tension, Goose scanned the Syrian line again. Lots of snoring soldiers. Even with the changes in the front line, many Syrian troops were stretched out in the shadows under vehicles or under small tents. In this climate, a nap in the shade made a whole lot of sense. Goose felt it was a pity he and his men couldn't join them.

"I'm interested in a maybe-mission, Cap. Especially if it gets me off this plateau and out of the sun. It'll give me a chance to stretch my legs and clear my head."

"Not worried about leaving the troops there, Sergeant? As I recall, you're usually the last one to leave the field when we're in a hot zone."

"You've got sat-relays overlooking the play out here, sir," Goose said. "You've got a clearer view of what's shaping up than I do. I figure you must need me. I know you don't like me being away from the front line any more than I do."

"That I don't, Sergeant." Remington's banter was light. "I may have eyes and ears in space, but I'll take your gut over technology any day. Anyway, you'll be back in place soon enough. I'm looking at a short hop that will give you the chance to show your stuff. Maybe if you get away from that standoff for a little while you'll get a different read on it when you get back."

"Yes, sir." Goose peered along the mountainous area and at the tarmac road that crossed the border. The Syrians and the Turks had checkpoints for vehicles as well as pedestrians. So far there had been nothing to see today. "Who do I need, and when do I go?"

"Take a squad. Yourself and ten. Two vehicles. And you're leaving now."



Captain Cal Remington stood behind the four-man unit that handled the communications relays for his present operation. Nervous energy filled him, pushing him to act. Instead, he waited and watched the eight computer screens spread in front of his team. Waiting was not his forte and never had been.

The computers in the cinder-block building that had been revamped into a command HQ five clicks behind the border made the chill air-conditioning necessary. Gasoline-powered generators supplied the juice to run both the computers and the air-conditioning.

Thick bundles of cables snaked across the chipped stone floor. An assortment of bullet holes scarred the walls, offering mute testimony to how many times firefights had taken place in this building. The building had once been part of a small village, a place where farmers and artisans had met to swap goods and talk, but it was mostly rubble now. Only three of the small cinder-block buildings remained intact.

The satellite feeds came in beautifully, panning down over the Turkish-Syrian border. The signals actually came from two different satellites, but Cray computers relayed those signals into the systems so they could be handled independently at each of the four workstations manned by Remington's tech support unit.

OCS hadn't revealed all the secret machinations of its cybernetic systems, and Remington was amazed at the computer surveillance program's abilities. Still, he knew how to use the intel the programs provided. Even though the information they gave him would have been a commander's dream just a few years ago, he needed more. Three shifts of four operators kept twenty-four-hour surveillance on the border over different overlapping fields.

After three days of close scrutiny, Remington was of the opinion that there wasn't much they hadn't seen, photographed, cataloged, and archived along C Company's section of border country. The tech teams had accumulated gigabytes of information and pumped it out to army databases in Diyarbakir, where the general command in-country was situated, to the ARG headed by the USS *Wasp* out in the Med, and to the Pentagon. None of the information gathered so far offered any indication of what was behind the increased terrorist attacks within Turkey. Something was up. Watching just wasn't enough; Remington wanted—needed—to know what the enemy was thinking.

"Captain Remington, sir."

Turning, Remington studied the man in civilian clothes who stood between two Ranger escorts. The man was tall, over six feet, but Remington stood two inches taller. The Ranger captain was also broader through the shoulders than the new guy, and at thirty-eight, probably a handful of years younger.

"Sir," the corporal said, throwing a sharp salute while standing at attention, "this is Central Intelligence Agency Section Chief Alexander Cody."

The CIA agent didn't look happy about the announcement. He seemed to be fit, and his mouth looked habitually stern. He had

short-cropped dark hair going gray at the temples. His light-colored slacks, white dress shirt, and tie showed a layer of dust, as did the tan jacket slung over one arm. Beneath a painful looking wind- and sun-burn, his skin was pale. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes.

"Come in, Agent Cody," Remington said. "Corporal, Private, you're dismissed."

The corporal saluted again, spun smartly, and departed with the private in tow.

"Not exactly the kind of introduction I usually get in my line of work." Cody crossed the room and held out his hand. "Or one that I would want."

Remington shook the offered hand. Cody had a firm grip and a callused palm. "In the regular army, we stand on formality, Agent Cody. Except for sometimes on the front lines, where a salute is considered to be a sniper magnet by our more experienced troops."

"I can understand their caution. I start to feel exposed when I get the full treatment. You can call me Alex," Cody offered.

"Fine. You can address me as Captain, or Captain Remington."

If Cody took any insult, he didn't show it. "Very well, Captain. You've been briefed on our situation?"

"Only that you've had an agent go missing, and that we're supposed to help you get him back. If possible."

Cody reached into his shirt pocket and produced a miniature CD in a plastic case. "I've got an image of the agent here."

Remington took the disc and handed it to Lewis, one of the young techs. "Get this up for me."

"Yes, sir." Lewis took the disc, pushed it home into a CD-ROM reader, and tapped the keyboard.

Instantly, the monitor on the left scrolled. Thumbnails of images spread out in a simple information tree. All of the images were of a young, dark-complexioned man who looked Middle Eastern. He might have been Turkish, Kurdish, or Syrian; in fact, he could have been from any of a dozen countries in the area. He looked all of twenty years old.

"He's one of ours?" Remington asked.

"Yeah." Cody gazed at the young man's photo. "An American, Captain. Not a recruit or paid informer."

"What kind of assignment has he been on?"

Cody hesitated. "You don't have clearance."

Remington mastered the wave of anger that flooded through him. "I just detailed a squad of men to handle the intercept your agency

asked for, Cody. If my men are going to be in danger, then you'd better clear me."

Cody pursed his lips and removed his sunglasses. "Icarus is a covert operative we've managed to get into one of the PKK cell groups."

The PKK, Remington knew from his own briefings regarding the border patrol assignment, was the Kurdistan Worker's Party. Organized in 1974 by Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK planned to establish an independent Kurdish state from land within Turkey, Iraq, or Iran. Over the years, the organization had turned to terrorism aimed at destabilizing the Turkish government. Often the PKK terrorists killed as many Kurds as they did Turks.

"Infiltrating a single terrorist cell doesn't seem like a good investment of manpower," Remington stated. "The cells are kept small and independent, with relatively no interaction among other cells or the parent organization. The intelligence you'd get would be infinitesimal at best."

"Icarus penetrated the cell assigned to assassinate Chaim Rosenzweig," Cody said. "Thanks to Icarus, the members of that team were . . . *dissuaded* from that action."

"How dissuaded?"

"Five of the eight men assigned to the assassination are dead," Cody said. "The other three escaped our sweeps. They have apparently taken Icarus with them."

Remington nodded. He hadn't heard about an assassination team being intercepted, but he wasn't surprised that Rosenzweig was a target. The Israeli botanist whose synthetic fertilizer had turned his country into a veritable Eden almost overnight was reviled by most of the Arab nations, although Israel's neighbors had made their peace with Israel. In the end they'd had no choice, but peace at the end of a gun barrel was still peace.

Rosenzweig had been given the Nobel prize in chemistry for his efforts, and he'd been handed a death sentence by terrorist organizations scattered around the Middle East, who now faced a concerted Israeli effort to put them out of business.

That shift in prosperity in the Middle East, especially since it also affected the global balance of trade and power, had triggered a Russian surprise attack that had caught Israel and the world off guard fourteen months ago. When he'd heard of the attack, Remington had figured Israel's existence would be measured in minutes.

Instead, the Russian air force had suffered a massive systems failure. Their attacking force had self-destructed, its crumpled remains

raining down from the sky in flaming chunks. Military experts and analysts agreed that the Russian air force had grown lax and that the fleetwide systems failures were caused by poorly maintained, obsolete equipment. Remington wanted to be sure that such a disaster never occurred to his forces on his watch.

"If this assassination attempt is off the books," Remington asked, "why is your covert agent still with the PKK cell?"

Cody stared at the young man's face on the computer screen. "We haven't been successful in exfiltrating Icarus."

"Maybe he didn't want to be exfiltrated."

"We don't feel that's the case."

*Don't feel*, Remington knew, wasn't a definite answer. "How long has Icarus been under?"

"A year and a half. He penetrated the PKK almost seven months ago. We were about to pull the plug on the op at that point but he managed to get inside the cell." Cody paused. "Captain, there is no question about this man's loyalty. That's why I'm here talking to you today. He's a good man in a bad situation. He gave us the assassination team when they were ready to strike, and he endangered himself by doing so."

"He could be dead already."

Concern creased Cody's face for just a moment then flickered out of existence. "I refuse to believe that."

"You've asked for help," Remington pointed out. "I'm risking the lives of my men. Sell me on what you believe."

The CIA agent nodded at the computer terminals. "I can log your computers in to the link we've set up for your team."

Remington excused Lewis from the chair and Cody sat. The CIA chief's fingers clacked against the keyboard in rapid syncopation. The monitor screen scrolled and scrolled again.

"What am I looking at?" Remington asked.

"I'm downloading a satellite feed. We have a lock on the vehicle Icarus is being transported in."

The screen image changed, revealing a ten-year-old Subaru Legacy. Battered and pale blue, the vehicle stood out in sharp relief against the yellow sand. A billowing amber dust cloud trailed behind the Subaru.

Remington watched the station wagon jerk and bounce across the rough terrain. The road was ancient, a whisper-thin memory that probably was constructed for carts and foot traffic, or military Jeeps.

"You're sure he's in there?" the Ranger captain asked.

Cody tapped more keys. The feed changed to a thermal image view. The station wagon registered as purple, and the road and the desert became a sheet of pale yellow. The human body temperature of 98.6 degrees was lower than the ground temperature, making the four figures actually register cooler than the land around them. The four people inside the car became outlined in dark yellow and orange.

"We've had a lock on this car since it left Ankara this morning," Cody said. Ankara was Turkey's capital city. "We've tracked Icarus since the group left Jerusalem."

"The assassins got close," Remington observed.

"Yes. Icarus has been closely watched."

"They suspected him?"

"The group watched each other. Since we decided to take them down in Jerusalem, we created an opening for Icarus to feed us information. However, we couldn't get a message back to him."

"What message?"

"We wanted him out," Cody said. "Icarus has reached an untenable position. If those other men don't suspect him now, they will soon. Or whoever they're going to meet in Syria will."

"When your teams swept the other members of the cell, seems Icarus should have jumped ship."

"Unless he thought he was about to get more information we needed. We would have gone after Icarus ourselves, Captain Remington, but given the state of alert in Turkey and Syria, the decision was made that it would be more feasible and prudent to have your men handle the exfiltration."

Remington silently agreed. While the United States Army's peace-keeping effort was welcomed in-country, CIA agents weren't. Especially since they didn't operate with Turkey's permission in many cases.

Cody tapped the keys, changing the view back to normal.

The perspective also pulled back, revealing movement high in the hills overlooking the road. Cody tapped the keys again, narrowing the focus to the eleven Rangers huddled in two groups on either side of the narrow road. Another keystroke put the group's geographic location in longitude and latitude under them.

"These are your men?" the CIA section chief asked.

Though he recognized the Ranger camo fatigues, Remington checked the location of Goose's group. The figures matched. Goose had brought his unit into position after a fifteen-minute hop from

the front lines. They now sat seven clicks north-northeast of the border face-off.

"Yes," he replied, moving back to Cody's screen.

"They're good?"

"They're Rangers," Remington answered. "They're *my* Rangers. They're the best."

"Well," Cody replied noncommittally, "in three or four minutes, we're going to find out."

The pale blue station wagon continued bouncing across the broken terrain, closing on the Rangers' positions.