



Hope & Glory



NUMBER THE
BRAVE



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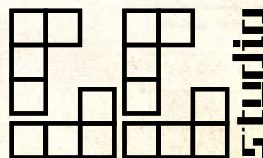
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Welcome to a new world...

On the 21st of October 1852, the citizens of London and Paris were awed at the sight of the western sky turning suddenly a strange shade of purple and red.

The first seismic shocks were felt all over the world in the following hours, and by the dawn of the 23rd of October, the giant waves hit the coasts of Europe. In the evening of the same day, while the tremors continued, catastrophic waves also hit the coasts of Asia. Whole cities, blasted by the earthquakes, were submerged by the sea. Millions of lives were lost.

Then the Black Rain began, washing the ruins and leaving behind a thick layer of ashes. Dark, impenetrable clouds hid the sun, and the Thirty Years Winter began.

In the Northern Hemisphere crops failed, snow-bound cities went up in flames as the populations rioted and the governments tried to find a solution, the means to survive.

One hundred years have passed now since the Catastrophe, and humanity has survived.

In the former colonial domains of Africa and South America. In the blasted plains of China. Among the remains of the Japanese archipelago. In Russian palaces sealed against the howling winds of the steppe. In the land that once was India. With sacrifice and ingenuity, with courage and hope, new nations have crawled back from the brink to claim the new world.

Science is a beacon to the future.

From the frozen wastes of Europe, where the mammoth roam, to the proud Zulu Nation of Africa, from the technological wonders of the Anglo-Indian Raj to the mist-shrouded shores of Lost America, these are the stories of a new, strange world.

Number the Brave
by Davide Mana

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The Italians said the desert would turn green, and that luscious woodlands and green fertile fields would stretch once more from the Tropic to the coast of the Mediterranean, like it had been in the ancient times, when dinosaurs ruled the Earth. The Italians believed it. Captain Bhekizizwe doubted it.

From the vantage point of the northern tower of the In Guezzam fort, the Sahara stretched ceaselessly beneath a thick layer of gray clouds, only sand and wind in every direction, as far as the eye could see. Adjusting his scope was no use. No matter the range or the scale, the landscape was an endless succession of dunes, crawling after each other.

The fort was a square box of sandstone, with four squat towers and a wall enclosing the barracks, the officer's quarters. There was a well in the middle of the courtyard. The Italians had taken possession of the premises about fifty years earlier, during the final phases of the diaspora, but only in the last decade the former military structure had been turned into the nucleus of a civilian settlement. Some fifteen families worked the land around the fort, trying to squeeze a livelihood out of the thin layer of soil over the sandy bedrock. Two large sheds had been built on the eastern side of the courtyard, and a system of pumps and filters attached to the well, feeding a line that provided the

fields outside the walls with the much-needed moisture during the dry season. The two southern towers now supported big rainwater tanks, to supplement the underground reservoir.

The Italians said the rains, in some places, caused spontaneous outbursts of lush vegetation. Aggressive patches of fat grass and many-colored flowers that lasted for a brief moment before the harshness of the desert erased all life again. Bhekizizwe shuddered in the chill wind. He turned as footsteps sounded on the staircase behind him.

"This is going to be long," the woman said as she walked on the top platform, and made a face as her eyes swept the emptiness surrounding them.

Her name was Gabisile, and once again the man reflected on the irony of such a dour creature being called "Has made people envious, but they won't get it". Made them uneasy was more like it.

She leant on the balustrade, cocking a hip. There was a heavy panga on her belt, and her feathered headgear waved in the wind. "It's the cursed sand of this place," she said.

'I told you so,' in other words.

"An ornithopter--"

She nodded her head. "Yes, yes, the swiftest way to reach Tamanrasset. But you know me, nkosi. I don't trust the Italians."

She glanced at him, as if daring him to say her mistrust was not founded.

Bhekizizwe closed his eyes and took a long breath. "How long before we can take to the air again?"

She shrugged. "The men have to dismantle the wing mechanisms, and clean out the sand. Then assemble the thing back. Rizzo says that he can provide us with a better lubricant, one that will not cause the mechanisms to seize in midair because of the dust. Viscosity, or something." She was obviously none too convinced about Engineer Rizzo's prognosis.

"Meaning?" he said.

She turned again to the desert. Lightning flashed in the distance.

"Three days, maybe more."

He stifled a curse, and she had a brief, ironic smile.

"An airship would have been faster," she said. "Almost."

He smiled. "Almost is not eaten," he quoted.

She straightened and turned, leaning against the wall. "Which reminds me, we are to be guests of Mrs. Ciambotti, for dinner."

"Ciambotti is a good man," he said. "And his wife is a good woman."
She sniggered. "Sure."

He gazed at the northern horizon. The storm was coming closer.

"We better go and get ready for the evening," he said.

"Are we to dress up for these bums?"

Captain Bhekizizwe sighed. "These are good people."

She did not answer. She just turned her back to him, and leaned again on the parapet, immersing herself in the panorama of dunes under the incoming storm.

2.

An old Zulu proverb says, 'Plenty sits still, hunger is a wanderer.' When the black clouds had blotted out the sun and the ice descended on Europe, cities went up in flames, and crops failed. Thousands succumbed to cold and starvation. Many more died in the food riots, in the misguided attempts of this or that leader at seizing their neighbors' resources, at setting themselves up as masters of the new world.

The Italians just left. The Catastrophe had caught them in the midst of a struggle for independence, and while the Savoy King and President Mazzini faced each other off across the snowbound, wind-blasted plains of the Po river, a large part of the population just moved south, in a long march down the peninsula, until they reached the tip and the heel of the boot. Once there, they boarded a ramshackle flotilla and sailed to other shores.

They settled in Egypt, and along the shores of the Red Sea. They marched up the Nile and then spread east, along the line that separated the great Sahara Desert from the forests of Black Africa. Here they met the mighty Zulu Nation, as it marched on across the continent, bringing its peace and order to the peoples of Africa through the wreckage of the colonial powers.

3.

Captain Bhekizizwe never felt at ease in his dress uniform of blue, with the leopard-pattern sleeves and the cobalt and silver silk sash of authority.

It felt stiff. It was a concession to Old Worlder etiquette, and if it was pleasantly warm in the cold of the Saharan night, it still made him feel out of place. Which was ironic, as its purpose was the exact opposite. The old commander's quarters of the fort had been refurbished and adapted by the Italian colonists. Carpets to cover the bare stone floor, nicely whitewashed walls, all the decor and coziness associated with Old Europe.

The Italians were nostalgic. They had turned their back on their dying country, but still cherished a past that had probably never existed.

Through the open sliding door, Bhekizizwe could see the table had been set for six. Apart from himself and his bodyguard - that Mrs. Ciambotti insisted in calling his 'companion' - and the hosts, the guest list included Mister Rizzo, the engineer in charge of the colony's hydraulics, and Lieutenant Valente, who commanded the token garrison of six Bersaglieri.

Music played on the gramophone. Mrs. Ciambotti had commented on the fort's lack of a majordomo system, or of many other modern luxuries, her embarrassment evident.

Bhekizizwe drifted towards the portrait hanging on the wall. The lantern-jawed profile of the Peaceful Prince, the man who had forged the alliance between the Italians and the Zulus. According to the official sources, prince Antonio Griffio Focas Flavio Angelo Ducas Comneno Porfirogenito Gagliardi De Curtis di Bisanzio had found himself first in line when the Italians had settled in Africa, and he had grudgingly accepted the role of chief of a nation without a country.

The Zulu raised his glass in a silent toast to the old Italian.

"Mind if I join you?"

Doctor Alessandro Ciambotti was a big man, not your stereotypical Italian. He was tall, barrel-chested, with gray streaks in his beard and a witty light in his eyes.

"My father met him," Bhekizizwe said.

Ciambotti turned to the portrait. "Really?"

"My father fought at Alarsas."

In Alarsas, forty years earlier, the Zulu Nation had blocked the expansion of the Italian colonists, prompting an intervention of the Italian troops.

Ciambotti's salt and pepper eyebrows crawled up his forehead.

"Really? My father was there too. He was a Lieutenant in the Truppe Cammellate."

"My father was a Sargent Major in the Shaka Guard."

Ciambotti smiled. "I doubt they had the opportunity to meet."

"And yet, I guess they both survived because of this man."

The Italian nodded. "Yes. Had the situation escalated..."

"We wouldn't be here."

They were silent for a moment, each nursing his drink and thinking of might-have-beens.

"Captain," Mrs. Ciambotti said, gliding close, "is your companion indisposed?"

Bhekizizwe suppressed a grimace. No, she was just terminally ungracious.

"I think..." he started, but right then Gabisile made her entrance. For a long minute, all eyes were for her.

The Zulu woman was wearing a russet paper skirt, cut into thin strips to simulate a dried grass skirt, with a leather and leopard-skin high belt, and a simple top. Her dark skin glistened in the lamplight, her ritual scars in full display, and she had dusted her eyelids with gold.

Necklaces cascaded across her chest, and a golden band covered her forehead and her temples.

She walked over to them, and bowed her head stiffly to the master of the house and his lady. Then she turned to Bhekizizwe.

He nodded at her. "Sawubona."

She nodded in turn. "Yebo, Sawubona."

Lieutenant Valente came closer, carrying two glasses of liquor. "You're just in time for dinner," she said, offering one to Gabi.

Gabisile accepted the drink, and the other woman eyed her utility armband. "Nice gear," she said. Valente was a small brunette with an impish smile and a crescent-shaped scar underneath her left eye, and she appeared to be the only one in the room not intimidated by Gabisile's tribal elegance.

"Warrior women," Ciambotti said, while Gabisile and Valente started discussing the pros and cons of wearable technology in the battlefield. "It's a new world, my friend," Bhekizizwe said. "Much has changed underneath the veneer of tradition. Both for your people and mine."

Ciambotti nodded wisely.

A chime sounded, and Mrs. Ciambotti clapped discreetly her hands.

"Ladies, gentlemen... dinner is ready."

"And yet we jump when they beckon," her husband said to Bhekizizwe, with a genial smile.

4.

The dinner over, the party split according to the European tradition. The ladies retired to Mrs. Ciambotti's parlor, with sherry and cigarettes, while the men moved to the billiards room, with brandy and cigars, "well suited to such a stormy night" in their host's words.

Dr. Ciambotti's billiard table was an original, dark wood and bright green felt, and the fact that it had come all the way from Lost Florence to the Sahara Desert was a token of the Italian spirit.

"And have you tried the new circular ones?" the Italian asked, smirking, while chalking his cue. "No, sir. Give me a billiard with corners any day of the week, and not these novelties!"

Between games, the discussion turned to the state of the art of Italian engineering in general, and the hydraulics work being carried out in the gardens outside the fort walls.

Bhekizizwe took his chance to inquire about the repairs of his ornithopter. This caused Rizzo to launch into a long lecture about the present and future of flight.

"Mind you," Rizzo said, stroking his mustache. It was a sort of habit of his. "I still say that heavier-than-air is going to be the coming thing. But they just can't hope to get an edge over the Russian flying fortresses and the Raj airships, if they don't find a way to make the wing mechanisms simpler, and sturdier."

"But we'll get you back in the air in no time, captain," the mechanic said. "My boys are working shifts to make sure your bird will be sky-worthy in less than thirty-six hours." He grinned. "Or I'll send them back home on foot."

Bhekizizwe wondered whether by "home" he meant Sharm el Sheik, the unofficial capital of the land-less Italians, or back in Italy. Lost Rome.

Rizzo was about to pocket the last ball of the game, his cleft chin resting on the cue as he calculated his shot, when voices sounded from the main hall. There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Ciambotti came in without waiting for an answer. She was clearly in a grave state of agitation.

"Alessandro!" she breathed. "Please!"

The men dropped their game and hastened into the next room.

One of the Bersaglieri was speaking with Lieutenant Valente. The officer nodded, was silent for two heartbeats, and then gave the man directions of some sort, in clipped Italian.

"There seems to be an incoming land vehicle, north and west, approaching fast," she said, turning to the gathered guests. "I am putting my men on alert, but I am sure there is nothing to worry about."

She did not look so sure as she excused herself and went to join her squad. Bhekizizwe checked his watch. It was well past eleven. Who or what would brave the desert under a storm, in the darkness.

"Shall we go and see?" he said.

Gabisile straightened her back, and nodded.

With Rizzo and Ciambotti in tow, they went out.

5.

Outside, wind-carried raindrops splattered on them as they walked up the steps of the watchtower. Four Bersaglieri were taking position by the gates. One of them carried a big multi-barreled assault cannon. Lieutenant Valente was not taking any chances.

The fort was one of an advanced line of defensive structures built by the French before the Catastrophe, when they thought they would become masters of North Africa. The men from the fabled Légion Étrangère had been stationed here for long, mind-numbing tours of duty.

Lieutenant Valente greeted them with a nod and handed Dr. Ciambotti her radium binoculars. "There," she said, pointing in the darkness.

Bhekizizwe slipped his scope in front of his right eye, and turned the heath vision on. The dunes turned into a pale blue sea, frozen under a pitch-black sky. A single red spot burned bright as it weaved through the undulations of the landscape. It was coming closer, fast.

"It's a small car of some sort," Ciambotti said.

Bhek zoomed the target closer. By his side, Gabisile shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She had retrieved her speargun, and hooked it up with the data array on her utility armband, and in her tribal finery she was the portrait of imaginary Isadshi-Koseshi savagery.

"It's a monowheel," Bhekizizwe said.

Rizzo took a step forward. "A Goventosa?"

Ciambotti handed him the binoculars, and the engineer watched the unknown vehicle. "Looks like a Gove all right."

"And it comes from Tamanrasset," Valente added.

"Bad news?" Rizzo said, venting the question on everybody's mind.

The wind was carrying the distant drone of a high-compression steam engine.

"I guess we'll know soon," Valente said.

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The Goventosa monowheel bike rode up through the fields and swerved to a stop in front of the gates. The single six-foot wheel leaned to the side, allowing the rider to dismount from the saddle-like seat cradled inside the wheel itself. The steam motor droned softly, in chorus with the asthmatic wheeze of the compression chamber. One of the Bersaglieri pointed a light down, painting a bright circle around the traveler.

The rider, swathed head to toe into full Tuareg garb, staggered a few paces towards the gates. He lifted an arm to shield his eyes from the flare, and patted his clothes with the other hand.

"Ahoy, there!" he croaked.

He pulled down his goggles, and the scarf looped over his mouth and chin, and from a fold in his rags he produced a silver metal square, a red silk tassel hanging from a hole in the corner.

"I'm Raj! I seek sanctuary!"

The voice was coming clearer now.

"It's a woman," Ciambotti said.

Valente gave a clipped order, and one of the doors of the gate opened with a creak.

The woman in Tuareg clothes pocketed her silver pass, and pushed her wheel through the gap.

They ran down the steps, and by the time they reached the courtyard, the gate was closed. In the lamplight of the guard post, the woman was sprawling on a bench, her wheel propped against the sandstone wall. She was drinking long gulps of water from a baked clay flagon. Water dripped down her chin and soaked her dusty rags.

Ciambotti took the lead, and bowed stiffly.

Bhekizizwe was both amused and impressed by the Europeans' willingness to stick to formalities, no matter what.

"I am doctor Alessandro Ciambotti," the man said.

The woman put the flagon down. "You the boss?" she asked, standing up.

"I am the administrator of this settlement, yes."

Again she was rummaging in her clothes. She had a pretty, strained face. There was a band of grime around her eyes that made her look like a civet. A small ring shone at her nostril, and a strand of auburn hair escaped from her turban.

"Lucinda Gadakari," she finally said, offering Ciambotti her silver plaque. Her hands were dirty, chapped, the left wrapped in a dirty rag.

"I am a citizen of the Raj."

The Italian perfunctorily studied the marks and fine print on the document, then handed it back to the woman.

"Where you in Tamanrasset?"

She nodded. "Tamanghaset, yes." She pronounced it the Berber way.

"I've been riding out the storm since yesterday at sunset." She looked at them in turn. "The city has fallen. The French are coming."

And then she swayed, gave a heavy sigh, and crumpled to the ground.

6.

Vacating the premises would have been the best choice, but it was simply not viable. Taking to the desert tracks with a group including women and children would mean death for most of them, either in the rough, or at the hands of the incoming French forces. So now the gate of the fort was open, and the Bersaglieri were letting in the Italian colonists, a disheveled mass of men and women, kids and old people, pulled out of bed and ordered to move to the fort. They stood in line under the rain, carrying bundles: old photos, some implement or some piece of equipment, a clock. Rizzo and his men had cleared one of the sheds, and now it was being set up as emergency quarters. Thunder roared, shaking the glass panes of the windows.

Bhekizizwe turned his back on the scene. "We have failed."

Gabisile sat on one of the too-soft chairs of the billiard room, arms crossed, and studied her nkosi as he paced the room. His frustration was evident. "It was not your fault," she whispered.

But it was obvious that he felt responsible. He had been sent to negotiate with the raiders, and only the ornithopter's malfunction had stopped them from reaching Tamanrasset.

"It would have made no difference," she said. "We would have died with all the rest. Or worse."

Valente stood by the pool table, a map laid out on the green baize. She was talking in low tones with Rizzo, her fingers brushing the surface of the paper.

Bhekizizwe stared at her. Had she been too harsh?

There was no helping that. She was Isadshi-Koseshi.

"We are not here to make war," he said, as if reading her mind.

"The French seem to think differently."

Before Bhekizizwe could reply, the door opened and Ciambotti came in.

"Miss Gadakari is sleeping," he said. "I have cleaned and stitched the cut in her hand, and Angela is watching over her. But I doubt there will be any problem. She was just exhausted."

Gabisile and Bhekizizwe joined the others at the table.

"I guess we'll get more details when our guest wakes up," Valente said.

"But as things stand, this is the situation."

She pointed at the map. "It is roughly 250 miles between Tamanrasset, here, and In Guezzam." She tapped her finger on the point representing the fort.

"So we can expect them by dawn," Gabisile said.

The Lieutenant glanced at her and nodded. "Hopefully later, but we'll go with that right now."

"Maybe they will not attack us straight away," Ciambotti said.

"If I was their commander," Valente tapped the map again, "I'd clear Amsel and Talan Teidit first."

"Any communication line with Amsel or Talan?" Bhekizizwe asked.

"Nothing," Rizzo grunted. "Telegraph lines have not been laid out yet."

"It would be a logical move," Valente said, "and one that would hopefully give us some extra time."

She looked up at Ciambotti. "But I wouldn't count on that. It's not a regular army we are dealing with. These are wasteland raiders."

7.

Well before the Catastrophe, the French government had set its eyes on North Africa, as a natural extension of its Imperial interests on the other shore of the Mediterranean, and to the vast, mostly desert country the French themselves called 'Algeria'.

There had been confrontations, political disputes and matters of piracy, and the British and Americans had been involved too. But for France things had escalated out of control when the Bey of Algiers stuck a French diplomat with his fly whisk. This had been cause enough for a blockade first, and later for the full deployment of troops on Algerian territory.

But then the Catastrophe struck.

Louis Philippe of France came into conflict with his man in Algiers, the old Duc de Rovigo. Louis was eager to initiate a plan to move as much of the population as possible to North Africa, just like the British were doing in India. According to this evacuation plan, the Crown itself would move to Algiers, which was to become the new capital. De Rovigo, on the other hand proposed to turn Algeria into 'the Empire's Granary', the main source of produce for France, by taking advantage of the climate shift. This would of course also allow De Rovigo to maintain his role as sole ruler of Algeria, and it would also grant a nice cash flow directly into his pockets.

Something similar had happened, of course, in India, where the East India Company had strongly opposed the move of Victoria's court to Bombay. The main difference had been the British Government in Exile's willingness to join forces with the Indian population, so that when the Company rose up in arms during the Mutiny, British and Indians fought side by side.

In Algeria, neither the Crown nor De Rovigo had any interest in involving the population in the dispute. When the people rose in arms, it was against both. As the ice buried Europe, French North Africa drifted into anarchy, revolt and tribal war. Slowly but mercilessly, the lights went out both in France and in French North Africa.

What was left of the French population in Africa coalesced into a ragtag mass of adventurers, raiders and highwaymen, that some way or other found their roots in the French 'Grandeur' and were by all means just another people of the desert, despised by both the Tuareg that ruled the interior, and the Berbers and the Algerians of Turkish and Arab descent that held the coastline and the highlands. Through the years they attracted the dregs of North African society. The outcasts and the untouchables, the thieves and the cheats. With the new century, they took again the lost city of Algiers, and there sat their putative leader, who claimed to be a descendant of the Duc de Rovigo. They were land pirates and reavers, a people living in the shadow of a grand past, trying to use violence and brutality to take back at least a small piece of it.

8.

Lieutenant Valente unrolled a second map. This one showed the details of the In Guezzam settlement. The fort, the fields, the water lines and the farms.

Gabisile cursed under her breath.

"Yes," Valente nodded. "We are not in the best of positions."

"To say the least. We're completely in the open."

"They had cannons on the bastion, when this was a Légion base."

"How many men can we rely on?" Bhekizizwe asked.

Valente grimaced. "Seven," she said. "This is a civilian outpost."

Gabisile grinned. "Make it nine."

"And of course," Ciambotti said, "the men of the settlement will take part in..."

"You are looking at it from the wrong end," Rizzo said.

Lieutenant Valente nodded. "We should worry about how many of them are out there."

"Our guest will be able to enlighten us, as soon as she wakes up."

Gabisile stared at Ciambotti. "Then wake her up!"

But the engineer was shaking his head. "No, I didn't mean that. We should not worry about the men we have, but about the hardware. If we have one hundred men but only seven rifles, we are, the ladies will pardon me, screwed."

Bhekizizwe straightened his shoulders. "Lieutenant," could you please provide us with an inventory?"

She stared. He was stepping on her turf. This was Italian territory, not Zulu Nation, not African Confederation.

But Valente was no fool. She took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

The Zulu turned to Rizzo. "While we wait for the inventory, may I have a word with you?"

The Italian arched his eyebrows. "Of course."

Gabisile stepped up. "What about me, nkosi?"

Bhekizizwe was silent for a moment. Her lips creased into a cruel smile.

"You want me out there?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

He nodded, and handed her his scope. "You take this and the girl's mono. Run north for one hour. When you make contact, you run back as fast as you can. We need information."

She nodded in turn.

"And no personal initiatives."

"Of course not," she grinned.

"Truly. We need a fair warning, no heroics, and you're the only person I can trust out there."

"Because I am Isadshi-Koseshi."

"Because you are Isadshi-Koseshi."

She gave him a short bow, turned on her heels and was gone.

"Now, mister Rizzo..."

The Italian touched his mustache. "What's Isashi...?"

"Isadshi-Koseshi," Bhekizizwe said. Outside, thunder boomed. Voices shouted and the hinges of the gate creaked as the hum and whine of the monowheel rose in volume. "It's Nupe language. You would translate it as..." he shrugged. "Amazons?"

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"Tamanrasset was no raid, Captain," Lucinda Gadakari said. Doctor Ciambotti had given her a mild tonic, and now she was leaning on two pillows in the Ciambottis's bedroom. "It was a well-designed attack. There were an estimated three thousand men, two horse companies, a pod of walkers and two airships."

She glanced at Bhekizizwe's dour expression. "The ships are no longer a problem, and your people took down two of the walkers."

He nodded.

"You suggest that De Rovigo is trying to take the southern rim."

She massaged her eyes. He handed her a glass of water.

"Seems the only explanation," she said, nodding a thank you. "You don't get this many Frogs all in one place without Algiers' authority."

She eyed him above the rim of the glass. "Do you?"

9.

"Fifty-two rifles, with five thousand cartridges, and seven long-bore carbines, with a total of about six hundred shots. Twenty-odd handguns, mostly revolvers, a variety of calibers, all viable but short on ammo. Plus my two autocannons, with fifteen thousand cartridges each."

"It could be worse."

Valente crossed her arms. "It could be a lot better."

"Bayonets?"

The woman looked at him. "You can't arm civilians with bayonets," she said.

"I can if I have enough blades, Lieutenant."

"I can set you up with something from the shop," Rizzo said, walking in again. "Cutting a two-inch pipe to make conical blades is not hard," he added. Then he turned to Bhekizizwe. "And I got the boys working on your idea, captain. We have about one hundred and fifty pounds of TNT and all the copper wire you want."

"Fine. Doctor Ciambotti..."

The Italian was sitting on a stuffed chair. "Yes?"

"I need you to keep the women and children out of harm's way. And to manage the field hospital. Do you mind checking your medical supplies and provide me with a detail?"

The man nodded and stood. "Of course. I'll ask Angela to prepare bandages, too."

Valente watched him go. "He's not a bad sort," she said when the door closed. "He's a good doctor and a good administrator."

"And I need him to be a doctor," Bhekizizwe said. "And to leave military matters to us."

He went to the map. "Where would you place the gunnery landmarks?" Lieutenant Valente eyed him. Slowly she ran her fingers on the map.

"Here," she said. "Here and here. But alas, we have no artillery."

"But they don't know. Mister Rizzo, how many devices can your team put together in, say, two hours?"

A wide grin flashed under the engineer's mustache. "Twenty?"

"Fine." The Zulu took a pencil and scratched a set of crosses along the line that Valente had pointed out. "I want you to place ten of your devices here. With a one hundred and fifty yards spacing."

"Yessir."

"And," Bhekizizwe scrawled a set of circles. "A second line here, ten devices again, same spacing. Can you do it before dawn?"

"We'll have to, right?"

Bhekizizwe nodded. "And I'll need your men to set up the landmark signs."

The soldier shook her head. "I think I see where you and Mister Rizzo are going with this, sir. And I think it's sort of a long shot, sir."

"It will buy us time."

"Yes, maybe one hour. Two, possibly."

"My people says that a half loaf is better than no bread. It only has to work once," he said.

"It surely won't work twice," she replied sourly.

10.

One hour before dawn the rain stopped, which made the engineers' work easier. Bhekizizwe ordered all men not engaged in preparation to get as much rest as they could, and then climbed to the top of the northeast tower, to survey the landscape. The sun crawled up the eastern horizon, painting the sky with blue, violet and scarlet hues.

"You should take a break, sir."

Bhekizizwe turned to Valente, handing her the binoculars. "You are right, of course."

"I had a cot set up in the southwest tower," the woman said. "You won't be disturbed."

He gave her an interrogative look. She pointed at the tallest tower of the fort. "It's set on the desert's bedrock, and has a cistern on the top," she explained. "Thick walls, good iron door. It would make for a last redoubt."

She pointed to the courtyard. "I'm also having a barricade built in front of the well," she said. "For when the reavers breach the gates."

"If they breach them," he corrected her.

She looked at him. "How many men were there in Tamanrasset?"

He turned away, looking at the Bersaglieri hammering the gunnery landmarks in the wet ground. "Fifty men from the Zulu Nation," he said.

"And two hundred Italian soldiers. And they had artillery, and armored land runners. Do you really think we can do what they didn't?"

"We are here, Lieutenant, because our fathers and our grandfathers did what was deemed impossible. We descend from the survivors."

"Those men in Tamanrasset came from the same stock, sir."

"You are a fatalist."

She straightened her back, looking him in the eye. "I am a soldier."

He held her gaze. "You can't be that anymore," he said. "You will have to be a warrior."

She was silent. She walked to the parapet and leaned on it. "I will try, sir."

"So will we all," he said, starting slowly down the steps.

He didn't go far.

"Sir! She's coming!"

The bell on the other tower started ringing the alarm. The gunnery landmark men looked around and started running back to the gates.

"She's got company!" Valente said.

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The monowheel skidded and slid on the wet sand of the desert. Gabisile could not hear the horses' hooves, but she knew they were behind her, about one hundred yards, and gaining on her.

The single-wheeled ride was not designed for high speed on loose terrain. It was the sort of vehicle a postman could drive on country lanes. She had learned the worst way that braking too hard would result in the wheel to just keep rolling. This would simply cause the seat and motor unit inside the wheel to cartwheel wildly along. A complicated way to kill oneself.

She jumped over the crest of a dune and there was In Guezzam fort, a pale yellow set of boxes against the rapidly paling sky. She accelerated down the side, and pointed at the pretense of a dirt road leading to the castle gate.

A gun banged behind her, followed by more shots. Her pursuers had reached the top.

She zigzagged, taking full advantage of the monowheel's agility. Shooting a rifle from horseback while riding across the dunes was no easy feat.

There were two men, small like insects, running to the gates of the fort. They wore the blue jackets of Bersaglieri. More shots. Now the hooves were beating their tempo in her ears.

Then a bullet punctured her high pressure boiler. The steam escaped with a screaming wail, and the heat scorched her leg. She swerved, tried to keep control of the machine, but the loss of power and the uneven ground caused her to roll on one side, the transmission seizing. She rolled away as the Goventosa sputtered and died.

She stood, and started running. A bullet slammed in the ground by her foot. One of the pursuers had shown enough brains to stop and take aim.

She gritted her teeth and sprinted. No more than three hundred yards from the gate, the first rider caught up with her.

He leaned down from the saddle and tried to grab her. She was pretty sure this was a maneuver he had executed hundreds of times, as his band rode through villages and camps: catch, heave, pull across the saddle. He reached out – and she grabbed the pommel and pulled herself up, straddling the horse face to face with the Frenchman. He was taken aback. She grinned. His face was a mess of scabs, dirty hair and grime. She head-butted him. Twice. He fell backwards and rolled off the horse.

She turned on the saddle, grasped a handful of mane and forced the beast to turn. She saw fear in the eyes of the second rider, and her panga was in her hand. A bullet zinged by her head. She ducked instinctively. The second rider was upon her, swinging a Turkish curved saber. She intercepted his arm with her weapon, the ball-shaped head of the panga fracturing his elbow. She finished the crippled man as another bullet flew past.

She stood on the stirrups, staring at the rifleman as he took aim, and shouted her defiance at him.

There was a loud bang. The man with the rifle slumped on his saddle, and then rolled to the ground. His horse reared on its hind legs, and was gone.

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Lucinda Gadakari handed the carbine back to Rizzo.
The Italian was looking at her in awe.

"Nice gun. We've got something similar, in India," she said, matter-of-factly. "Call them jezail. Afghan. Long range, very precise. Pretty lethal."

Rizzo turned to look at the tiny blot of the dead rifleman.

"That's what? Five hundred yards?"

The woman shrugged. "Somebody better do a runner and collect his gun and ammo. I understand we are short on weapons."

She turned to acknowledge Bhekizizwe's presence. "Captain," she said, "if you don't mind I'll retire momentarily to my quarters to freshen up."

The two men watched her go, and exchanged a glance.

"Frigging Brits," Rizzo whispered.

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"There's about one thousand of them, maybe fifteen hundred, mostly on foot," Gabisile said. "They are marching in close formation from the north, and have out-runners on horseback. They will be here," she checked her watch, "in about two hours."

Valente sat back heavily in one of the chairs in the billiard room, that had now been dubbed 'War Room' by Rizzo. "One thousand," she said, and she cast a glance at Bhekizizwe.

"There's some good news," Gabisile said. "They are traveling light, and they do not carry heavy weaponry. The guns of Tamanrasset were left in Tamanrasset. They are just an unwashed rabble, without a plan or a strategy." She turned to her nkosi. "And there could be no peace with such creatures."

"No walkers?" Gadakari asked from where she stood by the window. She had spotted a pod. Considering two were reported as disabled, that meant the French still had three walkers to deploy. "Those are hard to miss."

"None whatsoever."

"That's small consolation," the Lieutenant said.

Bhekizizwe stood in front of the Italian officer. "We must defend the civilians."

"Of course," she said, absentmindedly.

Then she jumped up. "Yes, of course," she said again. "I'll go and check the perimeter, then join my men on the north wall. Gentlemen, ladies..."

"And I'll go see that everything is set at the hospital," Ciambotti excused himself, and followed her through the door.

Gabisile turned to Rizzo. "And you? Haven't you anything urgent that requires you to be gone?"

The engineer looked at her like she had slapped him in the face.

He caressed his mustache.

"Isadshi-Koseshi, right?" he said. "I saw you out there, with the man on the horse. You are a great warrior."

She stared at him, proudly. "I am Isadshi-Koseshi."

"Then try and be a human being, too, before we all die."

He turned to Bhelizizwe. "And if now you'll excuse me, I'll go and keep working on your bayonets."

The Gadakari woman struck a match and lit a cigarette. "Pretty straightforward," she said.

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The reason for Gabisile's growing anger became clear about one hour after noon, when the French came over the crest of the dunes and marched towards the fort.

The first lines sported assegais and Zulu shields, black-feathered hats and blue jackets. In the tight field of the sighting scope, they carried captured weapons and cartridge belts, medals and crests. Many were wearing a mismatched assortment of Italian and Zulu uniforms, civilian clothes and Tuareg garb. One of the leading men was waving a ragged Italian flag, and wore a Union Flag as a sash, on his head the headgear of a Zulu umkhuzi.

They saw the fort in the distance and a roar erupted from a thousand throats, a raw sound of animal passion. They shot their guns and rifles in the air. They waved their swords and sabers, glinting homicidally in the noonday sun. Those that carried shields rapped their weapons on them, in a drum-like thunder.

"They are not organized at all," Gabisile said, handing back the binoculars to Lieutenant Valente.

"But there's a hell of a lot of them," the other woman replied.

"There's at least six warbands," Bhekizizwe said, adjusting the focus on his scope. "If you look close enough, you'll notice the colored scarves tied on their arms, and the fact that they do not mix. The first line are the 'Coureurs du Désert', the first on the walls of Algiers, back in '97. What amounts to De Rovigo's elite forces."

He glanced at his bodyguard. "Underestimating them would be bad." The staring match between defenders and besiegers lasted for about one hour, during which the French shouted and made noise incessantly. Bhekizizwe and Valente walked up and down the bastion, speaking softly to the men. The colonists were grim-faced and flint-eyed, but it was obvious the tension was mounting.

Then the French fell silent, the sudden absence of sound making the defenders dizzy. Silence stretched for a long minute.

The absence of sound made the defenders feel suddenly dizzy.

"Here they come," Valente said.

The French broke in a loud, savage cheer, and started advancing, picking up speed as they came closer, first walking and then jogging lightly, and finally breaking into a wild run. Bhekizizwe pulled his saber and lifted it high. The French were running unchecked when they came to the line of artillery landmarks.

The saber fell.

In the courtyard, Rizzo saw the sign and turned a switch.

Through the long rainy hours of the night, the Italian engineer and his team had worked on the 'devices' Rizzo and Bhekizizwe had sketched earlier in the evening. The things consisted basically of a length of water pipe, sealed at both ends, and containing five pounds of explosives and a few handfuls of nails and nuts, glass shards, gravel and scrap metal. Each makeshift bomb had an electric detonator. The men had worked at length laying down the lines and burying the charges under a thin layer of sand.

When the first switch was turned, a volley of explosions ripped through the French front lines, sand erupting in thick clouds, shrapnel cutting and rending human flesh. Men screamed and fell, and for many long minutes the line of fire was obstructed by a thick cloud of debris.

When the air finally cleared, dozens of Frenchmen were on the ground. The luckiest, Bhekizizwe reflected, were dead already. The others would probably die from massive trauma and blood loss in the next few agonizing minutes, or be crippled for life.

The rest of the French force had retreated well out of range of the fort walls, and was observing the crenellated bastion, trying to spot the exact position of the artillery pieces. They were making sure they were staying well back from the gunnery landmarks.

Bhekizizwe waited for them to settle down, and cut the air with his blade again.

Rizzo turned the second switch.

A second sequence of explosion upturned the sand under the very feet of the besiegers. Again the air was filled with dust and the screams of the wounded and the dying. Again, as the dust settled, the landscape was covered in human bodies.

"This will make them think twice before they try and rush our walls again," Bhekizizwe said.

12.

Indeed, the French stayed well out of range for much of the afternoon. Only a few of the Coureurs came forth, in ones and twos, shouting Gallic contumelies at the defenders, calling them out in single combat. "How charmingly primitive," Lucinda Gadakari said.

It was now past four in the afternoon, and again thunderheads were piling up above the fort. A single Coureur was standing in front of the gates, shaking a Zulu shield and shouting abuse. The shield was punctured by a dozen bullet holes. The man had the red Coureurs scarf tied to his arm, and wore a bloodstained kaki tunic with gold buttons over his dirty shirt.

"He thinks he's out of range, the poor dear."

Gadakari leaned on the parapet, a long carbine resting on her bandaged hand, and took aim through a scope she had fixed on the gun. Bhekizizwe saw her breathing slow down as she acquired her target.

"Don't," he said.

The woman from the Raj did not move. "Why? Afraid they might take offense?"

"There's a saying, about sleeping dogs," he said.

"I know that saying."

The report of the shot reverberated in the air.

The Coureur fell back, and was still.

"Sleeping dogs make easier targets," the woman said.

"I gave you an order."

"So court martial me. Look at the jacket on that maeter! Just look at it!" She squatted down in the shade of the wall, and lit a cigarette, morosely ignoring the Zulu.

Bhekizizwe did not need to look. The dead Coureur wore a Raj havildar tunic.

"Is it true, what they say about revenge?" he asked quietly.

She just puffed on her cigarette, and pretended not to have heard.

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The rain came after sunset, pouring like a waterfall over sieged and besiegers alike.

"And this used to be one of the most arid places in the world," Valente said.

They were sitting under the porch of the officer's quarters.

"It is still, you know?" Rizzo said, holding his plate in one hand and shaking his empty glass with the other. "Up north of here, where the rain clouds do not reach. If possible, it's much drier than it was back before the Catastrophe."

Mrs. Ciambotti poured him some water.

"Deserts," the engineer said after wetting his lips, "are an artifact of geography and atmosphere. Nature's machinery, if you will."

He placed the glass on the floor by his side. "A desert is simply a place where wet air doesn't arrive. Too far inland, for instance. Or barrier mountains block the clouds. Or pressure gradients." He put a forkful of pasta in his mouth and munched slowly. "Mountain ranges made of air, if you will."

"And here?" Gabisile asked.

"Here we are on the margins. The hot air from the African continent rushes towards the depression of the iced north, and on the margins of the Sahara it slowly turns clockwise, and cools. And we get this heck of a weather, if the ladies will pardon me for saying so."

"So the Prince's plan to turn the desert into a garden, is limited to the rim of the Sahara," Bhekizizwe said.

"Right now, yes. But as you can imagine, the gardening of the rim itself will cause the circulation to change in turn, like a dog biting its tail..."

“So your Prince does really want to move mountains,” the Zulu said.

“Mountains made of air, but yes, that’s the plan.”

A gunshot rang in the distance.

Then another.

“Ladies, gentlemen,” Bhekizizwe said, “dinner’s over.”

13.

The French shot at the defenders the whole night long, but apart from a man who twisted an ankle while rushing to get some cover, there were no injuries.

"They are shooting blind," one Bersagliere said. "They just want to keep us on our toes."

Later that night, the besiegers set fire to the outer farms and settlements, the fires casting a sinister halo in the darkness. The Italians gathered on the ramparts, staring at their life's work going up in flames. "We will rebuild," Ciambotti said. The men and women nodded. Some of them were crying.

Dawn crept on the landscape and the boys from the engineering shack did a round on the bastions to hand-out their makeshift bayonets.

"It's basically a sharpened half-steel pipe," one said. "With a screw to fit it to the barrel of the gun."

Valente was unconvinced.

"Have you ever used a bayonet?" she asked Bhekizizwe. "On a living man, I mean."

"I used that, and the assegai, too."

"Do you remember the first time? The sound the thing does as it goes through a living body and bleeds the life out of it?"

"I am a warrior, Lieutenant."

"Indeed you are." She nodded to the men lining the wall. "Those are farmers, tinkers, bricklayers. Those are not warriors."

"You fear they will crack."

"I'm surprised they haven't cracked already. Shooting from a distance is nothing like doing the work at close quarters."

"They are fighting for their lives and their families. They won't crack." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "But your worries do you honor, as a soldier and as a human being."

She looked at her feet, and then up at his face. "I am a soldier," she said. "My duty... mine and my men's... we are here to die for those people to live, you know this."

He just nodded.

The bell started ringing. "They are coming!"

The French were advancing en-masse, slowly. The surviving Coureurs were again at the front of the horde, and again they were showing their war trophies.

"They are coming to see our bluff," Rizzo said, his eyes to the binoculars.

"Do you see any ladders?"

Bhekizizwe was scanning the crowd with his scope lens.

"None," the Italian said.

The French had reached the second blast zone. When no cannonade came, they emboldened, and their steps became quicker.

Bhekizizwe adjusted the pistol in his sash, and looked left and right. He had put on his blue and leopard jacket. He wanted the enemy to know where to find him.

Gabisile was at the eastern end of the rampart, with a rifle. She turned, and gave him her cruel grin.

"I don't want you to waste no ammo," the Bersaglieri corporal said, pacing up and down the rampart. "Do not hurry, take your aim, and shoot at the body. A wounded bastard will count as much as a dead one..."

The French passed the gunnery landmarks and when no shells were fired at them, they roared like one wild animal, and started running.

"No stepladders and no rams," Rizzo said, dropping his binoculars and lifting his rifle.

The signal was given, and the men started shooting.

14.

They advanced running, and firing blindly against the men on the ramparts.

"Take cover!" somebody shouted. The Italians looked around, one of them fell back, his face a bloody mask.

"Keep firing!" the corporal shouted, "I am the only one giving orders here!"

The French were flush against the bastion. Some started tossing grappling hooks. Soon they were climbing the wall.

The wall was eighteen feet tall and two feet thick, which meant that firing at someone climbing it required the shooter to stretch out at an absurd angle. One or two defenders tried it. One was grappled in the back and pulled down, screaming. The other was shot in the head.

"Cut the lines!"

The improvised bayonets that had been distributed had no edge. Only a few of the men had a hatchet or a knife with a blade strong enough to bite into the two-inches hemp ropes.

Soon the Frenchmen were swarming the rampart. All order was lost. Some Italians used their bayonets, gutting the attackers and trying to push them back. Others reversed their weapons and used the rifle stock as a club.

Gabisile dropped her gun and pulled out her panga. Moving like a machine, she started hitting the French in the head as they vaulted over the wall. Soon she was swinging her thick blade left and right, her back to one of the crenellations, the assailants rushing at her from both sides, walking over the wounded. She had just disabled her left-hand attacker when the one on the right slammed into her, his foul breath making her gag. He laughed and raised his sword.

His head exploded.

Wiping the blood from her eyes, the warrior woman turned in time to see Lucinda Gadakari reverse her long-barreled carbine, and hit a Frenchman in the side, pushing him over the rampart's parapet.

Bhekizwe pulled his gun and stood, one hand on his hip, his weapon-arm stretched. He stepped forward. He fired and killed a man as he jumped from the wall. He took a second step and fired again, disabling a second assailant. Three, four.

When his eight .45 barrels were empty, he switched to the single shotgun barrel of the weapon, peppering the face of a man with a fistful of buckshot. Then he dropped the gun and pulled his saber. He saw Valente dance between her enemies, sword in the left and revolver in the right. She was bleeding. They traded glances, and came to stand back to back.

And still they came.

Rizzo was stabbed in a leg, but had time to use a spare bayonet and run it through the neck of his adversary.

"Lay down!"

The last defenders standing dropped on the blood-slick floor as the two autocannons started firing. Two Bersaglieri were stationed on the southern rampart, each wielding one of the multi-barreled guns.

They kept their aim level with the top of the wall, and fired across the width of the courtyard, pouring hot metal on the Frenchmen standing on the rampart, and those that were climbing through. For two solid minutes, there was only men screaming, the whine of the barrels turning on their axles, the thunder of the explosions and the dust of the disintegrating wall.

Then the fire stopped, and there was only the groaning of the wounded, and the sour smell of powder. Beyond the wall, the French were retiring. It was not yet eight in the morning.

15.

Six dead, nineteen wounded, two rifles lost.

"They had it worse," Valente said. She had been hastily bandaged and had climbed back on the eastern tower. Two men were going along the rampart, picking up fallen Frenchmen and throwing them out, without checking whether they were dead or just wounded.

She drank from a waterskin, and offered it to Bhekizizwe. He shook his head.

"You were flying to Tamanrasset," she said. "Were you to take command of the Nation's units there?"

Again he shook his head. "No. Tamanrasset was an accident, as it was our stopping here. A way point, really. We were en route for Algiers."

The woman stoppered the waterskin and waited.

"I am inkosana yasebukhosini," he said.

"Quite a mouthful. Must be important."

"I'm of the Mpande family." She still looked baffled. "I am a prince among my people."

Lieutenant Valente's eyes widened. "That's why you have an amazon as a bodyguard, and not a plain soldier."

He grinned. "I should have twelve Isadshi-Koseshi defending my life with theirs."

"But you can't fit twelve of those in a ornithopter," she grinned back.

"And Gabisile is more than enough."

"I noticed that..."

"What?"

"Nothing. Barrack gossip."

He crossed his arms. He felt a pain in his back, just below the shoulder blade, and shifted position. "Well?"

She shrugged. "My men say she's the man in your team. I'm sorry."

He laughed out loud. It felt good. "She certainly is a woman and a half. But let's not tell her."

"Why were you going to De Rovigo's court?"

He closed his eyes. "I was to join the diplomatic staff there. The African Confederation wishes to start peace talks."

A shot rang out in the distance. The alarm bell started tolling.

Valente shook her head, and perfunctorily checked the chambers in her revolver. "Well, that's pretty ironic, don't you think?"

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The French attacked the fort three more times that day. And three more times they were pushed back. On the last assault, the sun low on the horizon, the Bersaglieri improvised a sortie. Two men with autocannons and five, including Lieutenant Valente, covering for them as they poured death on the men rushing at the open gates. It was a carnage.

One of the Italian soldiers was killed, and another wounded.

The charge of the Frenchmen breaking, the survivors ran back into the fort. They dropped their weapons in the dirt and sat down in the long shadow of the wall.

They were exhausted, and they had used all the ammo for the autocannons.

Night fell, and apart from the random shots from the besiegers, both sides took time to lick their wounds.

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"What's this sound?" one Bersagliere asked.

There was a low humming, carried by the wind. As the horde came closer, mangled words and an off-key melody reached the defenders.

The sun was already high in the sky, and the storm clouds had moved east. There was a faint breeze, and it did not feel like a day for fighting.

Lucinda Gadakari chuckled. "La Marseillaise," she said. "All as one against the oppressor. That's the Frogs for you."

The French were standing on the crest of the far away dunes, intoning the anthem of their long lost country.

Bhekizizwe turned to the men on the wall.

They were bandaged, bruised and bedraggled, but they were holding their ground.

"Don't you have a song?" he asked, aloud.

"Of course they have, they are Italians," Lucinda quipped.

"Don't you have a song?" the Zulu asked again, louder. "Can't you hear them, out there? They are singing to let you know that they are undefeated. That they are fearless. That they are not going to stop. That you have shot them, bombed them, ran them through with your bayonets, and still they can sing! That you have piled the bodies of their fallen at the foot of your mighty walls, and still they can sing!" He took a deep breath. "Are you less than them? Are your spirits so spent and broken, are you so scared that you will accept this in silence?"

He unsheathed his saber and lifted it chest-high. "Sing, you bastards!" he shouted, pointing the blade at the far away French, like he was leading a charge.

One Bersagliere, a barrel-chested corporal that had handled one of the auto-cannons, placed his rifle on the floor and turned around, staring at his compatriots. He passed his hands on the front of his sweat-stained tunic. He glanced at Valente, and the woman nodded her consent.

Then, in a booming voice that echoed in the courtyard, the soldier sang. "Il cantico di guerra alzate, o forti!"

The Italians stared back. He repeated his verse.

Lucinda Gadakari leaned on her long carbine and chuckled. "Well, I never..."

"What's it?" Gabisile asked.

"It's the soprano's part," the Brit replied, grinning.

His voice surpassing the distant chanting of the French, again the corporal chanted his line.

And tentatively at first, the other Bersaglieri and then the civilians started singing, slowly at first, and then picking up speed and suddenly the desert itself reverberated with their words.

"Guerra! Guerra!"

"War. It's a war chant," Gabisile said.

The woman from the Raj lit a cigarette. "If you will. It's the war chant from Bellini's 'Norma'. Italian Opera, you know. A rather unusual arrangement, but it seems to work."

The voices rose above the desert, booming in the hollow of the courtyard, growing in volume and increasing in speed until the men were singing at a breathless pace, the lines chasing each other. And then the women joined in, too, from where they stood with their men, handling a rifle, or from the hospital down below. For two long minutes the Italians sang their hearts out, and when their words faded, the silence was absolute.

"This one, too, we have won," Bhekizizwe said, rising his saber in a salute.

"The fun part being," Gadakari said, softly, "the song's actually the Gauls' chant as they prepare to do short order of the Romans." She glanced at him. "I'm sure you'll appreciate the irony."

For three more minutes nothing happened. Then, the French lines moved.

"Here they come!"

And behind the men, came the mechanical walkers.

16.

There were three of the machines. They staggered in the sand on their massive legs. Little more than moving platforms, steel boxes sitting over a spherical motor compartment from which the legs projected. They advanced blowing smoke, and swinging this way and that. Each walker was equipped with two arms, one with a machine gun in place of the hand. As for the other, two of the things sported a long-bladed claw. The third had a shorter arm, ending in a metal ball. Each vehicle carried a complement of three men, a pilot, an engineer and a gunner. Pilot and gunner sat behind shields in the box-like turret, watching the field through loopholes. The engineer sat behind them, on a lower seat. Down in the courtyard Rizzo, half-walking, half-jumping on a makeshift crutch, shouted. "What's happening?"

"Walkers, three!"

The engineer cursed, and limped back to the workshop shack. "Hold them for ten minutes!" he shouted as he went.

The horde advanced, the walkers standing like giants among the men. As they came closer, Bhekizizwe noticed the rust patches on the armor, the steam escaping through the joints, the oil leaking. Old machines, probably as old as the taking of Algiers.

"We can stop them." He wondered who was he trying to convince.

Bullets rained on the defenders, and then the French runners and the machines slammed into the pale rock of the fort walls.

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Ignoring the hailstorm of bullets, Gabisile let out a shout and jumped from the rampart. The French, again climbing the wall with ropes, watched her silhouette fly through the sky and land into the open turret of the closer walker. The gunner tried desperately to maneuver the Gatling arm but his shots went astray and the woman landed on top of his shoulder, her weight cracking his collarbone. The engineer stood, turned and shot at the amazon. Two shots went wide, one caught her in the side. She cursed and smashed her panga in his head. By then, the pilot was trying to disengage from his safety belts and jump ship. She hit him. The big machine coughed and stopped, and then it fell forward, leaning heavily against the wall. The French foot soldiers started using it as a climbing ladder, rushing to meet the mace of the wild woman.

Bhekizwe parried a clumsy slash from a wild-eyed Coureur and pushed him back, off the rampart. The fighting had spilled over the wall, and it was by now a free-for-all. His gun in his left hand, he tried to reach the eastern tower. He turned just in time to see Gabisile fall under the blades of three Frenchmen. He shouted her name, and opened fire on her aggressors.

The second walker punched at the wall with its claw, and once it had a firm grip, the gunner maneuvered the Gatling up and over the parapet, spraying the courtyard with bullets while the vehicle provided an easier way for the men to climb up to the rampart. The pilot of the machine stood up, wielding a rifle, and shot as well, trying to find a better angle. A dozen defenders fell. A hail of Gatling bullets hit the shed where the hospital had been set up. Then the pilot turned around and screamed. Three men had been working with axes and crowbars at the struts supporting the rainwater tanker on the northwestern tower. He shot at them, but it was too late. The structure creaked, leaned over, and crashed on the anchored walker, crushing the crew, washing away the assailants with hundreds of cubic feet of water. The cold water poured into the machine's boiler chamber, and the engine exploded.

Lieutenant Valente stood in a corner of the courtyard, her three remaining Bersaglieri in front of her, keeping a band of assailants at

bay. Over the shoulders of her crouching men, she could see Mrs. Ciambotti kneeling by the body of her husband. The doctor had been hit repeatedly by the machine gun fire. Valente fired her pistol at an incoming man and then she watched as Mrs. Ciambotti picked up her husband's revolver and marched into the surging mass of screaming men, coldly shooting six of them before she was overwhelmed.

The great steel ball at the end of the walker's arm smashed the gates and the attackers poured in. The machine followed, bending its knees to go through the low arch of the gate.

With a roar and a metallic screech, the monowheel shot from the workshop shed, running straight at the war machine. Its engine was spewing steam from a hastily repaired hole, and the motor had been revved up for maximum speed. A box of explosives was tied to the empty driver's seat, an improvised contact trigger sticking out at the front like a knight's lance. The Goventosa collided with the walker and the whole thing went off, in a great explosion that caused part of the archway to collapse, blocking the entrance with a pile of rubble and burning metal. The courtyard became a battlefield.

It was at this point that Miss Lucinda Gadakari noticed the first man coming over the north wall, and being a good shot and in possession of a loaded carbine with a fine scope, she shot him across the courtyard. Then she pulled the cartridge from her pocket, tore the paper with her teeth, poured the ball and powder in the barrel. She rapped the stock of the gun once on the floor, took aim and shot the second. And again, and shot the third. At that point, the four remaining Italian troops ran up to the northern rampart, and started working with their bayonets. Then it was over.

The sudden sense of void, and quiet, left the men reeling for a few heartbeats. The French were retiring, in silence, leaving behind their dead and their broken machines. Soon they were over the crests of the dunes, and were gone.

The survivors looked around dazed, if without the press and the fury of the fight they were somehow lost, disoriented. The air was heavy with the smell of battle: blood, smoke, dust and black powder. There were no cheers, no expressions of joy, of triumph. They were all like in a dream, themselves surprised at still being alive, and wondering what to do next.

Lieutenant Valente sat down heavily on the steps of the tower. Lucinda Gadakari handed her a cigarette, and they both turned to Bhekizizwe, a question in their eyes.

"Let them go," he said, wearily. "They won't come back."

The woman from the Raj nodded, while the Italian ripped a strip off her own shirt and used it to stop the bleeding from a cut in her scalp.

"You sure?" she asked.

Bhekizizwe looked at the bodies strewn across the courtyard and along the ramparts, and nodded. He was sure.

17.

They built fires, downwind of the fort, to burn the French bodies, and set out to dig graves for their own. There was no priest among the colonists, so it fell on Bhekizizwe to say a few words.

It was the black smoke from the bonfires, that the column from Arlit saw first. They rolled in, with two land ironclads and a complement of smaller vehicles, and their commander, an Afrikaner from the Cape, contemplated the destruction and cursed under his breath. The fort was a broken box of rock, the gate collapsed, rubble piled both along the walls and in the courtyard. The Italian flag still flew on one of the towers, at half-mast. People came out to meet the soldiers of the African Coalition, walking slowly, as in a dream. A tall man with the remains of a blue-and-leopard jacket and a limping woman in an Italian uniform led the way, followed by a rag-tag band of haggard survivors, men and women battered and bruised.

Colonel VanDerVelde saluted stiffly, while his aide shouted for doctors and assistance.

"Inkosana yasebukhosini Bhekizizwe kaMpande?" he asked.

The Zulu nodded, and saluted back. "Sir."

The colonel waved a hand, making it clear that there was no reason for formalities between a prince and a colonel. Then he cleared his voice noisily, looking around and realizing he had no idea of what to say. He

saw the freshly dug graves, the bloodstains on the uniforms and on the remains of the walls. What do you say to a man who went through this?

"We should have moved faster," he said, almost apologetically.

The medics arrived. "We have many wounded, inside," Bhekizizwe said. The Italian Lieutenant took charge of the surgeons, and led them inside.

"What you did here is just..." the Colonel began.

"We survived, colonel. Something our ancestors understood very well. A basic human trait, I would say."

The Afrikaner coughed, nodding. "Of course, of course."

Again he looked around, at the burnt and bomb-pitted fields, at the blackened husks of the farms in the distance.

"The Italians bit more than they could chew," he said, his hands behind his back.

"The French, you mean."

The colonel shook his head. "This whole colonial push was wrong from the start. The Prince in Sharm dreams big, but this is a harsh country, not a place for gardeners."

"The gardeners will change it," the Zulu replied. "They are going to rebuild the houses, rebuild the fort. They are a stubborn people, colonel."

The other officer did not seem convinced. He was eager to move on, this place made him uneasy. This strangely melancholic warrior-prince made him uneasy. "What's the name of this settlement, anyway?" he asked.

"Gabisile," the other replied.

The Afrikaner rolled that word on his tongue.

"Zulu, isn't it? Made them envious, but they won't get it." He pursed his lips. "Seems appropriate," he said

At last...

Number the Brave is a story set in the universe of “Hope & Glory”, a game setting developed for the Savage Worlds rules.

The “Hope & Glory” universe exists for the game and for the gamers, and what follows is a roundup of gaming information for those readers that would like to start playing straight away. We hope the readers not (yet?) interested in gaming will find the additional informations on the story background interesting.

Thanks for reading, and have fun!

The Savage Appendix: Gaming stats

Vehicles

Goventosa Monowheel

The Goventosa monowheel - and derived designs - is a one-wheel motorbike characterized by the peculiar transmission system.

In the Goventosa, the driver sits inside the ring-like wheel (that has a diameter of five to six feet), on a “saddle” that rests on the engine unit itself. A set of gears, pressing tangentially to the interior circumference of the wheel, transmit the power from the engine to the wheel.

The driver steers his course through a wheel, whose main purpose is to vary the barycenter of the system, thus “unbalancing” the wheel, and causing it to lean on the side in which the curve is to be taken.

More advanced monowheels rely on gyroscopes to maintain their balance and maneuver. High speed models also rely on tail steers, to achieve sharper, fastest changes in direction without losing balance.

Gerbiling: if the driver accelerates or brakes too hard, it is possible that the force applied overcomes the force of gravity keeping the rider at the bottom of the wheel, sending the rider spinning around the inside of the wheel. This is known as gerbiling because it has some similarity to the situation of a gerbil running too quickly inside of a hamster wheel.

Monowheel “tank”: a design that attaches a 20-mms gun or a gatling system to the side of the driver’s saddle. This type of vehicle is often provided with a frontal shield to protect the driver, that can cause serious problems of visibility.

Ornithopter

Ornithopters are a class of heavier-than-air aircraft that fly by flapping their wings.

Ornithopters are by their nature small (1 or 2 passengers), light-weight (usually 50 kilograms for a one-seater), and slow (top speed 50/70 miles per hour), but they are usually built with natural, local materials (balsa wood, cotton canvas), which makes them an affordable technology in nations with a low technological and industrial development - such as the African Confederation.

The low speed range and high maneuverability make the ornithopter the idea recon vehicle.

The standard ornithopter design includes a cockpit (open or closed depending on the model), a high-power engine unit (usually at the back of the cockpit), and a lightweight frame. The wings are normally built by stretching canvas over a flexible frame actuated by a system of pistons.

The exact wing-flapping mechanism varies depending on models and makers, but it is considered the critical element in the construction of the ornithopter.

Modern ornithopters rely on a "mixed" flight technique, beating their wings to achieve speed and/or height, and then gliding on the air currents.

Note: the launch of an ornithopter usually requires a catapult or tow-launcher (like a glider); this is especially true for two-seaters.

Walker

Any kind of mechanical device that uses legs instead of wheels or tracks to move.

Civilian walkers - used as cargo loading machines, the standard civilian walker is a one-person vehicle, with a basic "body" containing the engine and the cockpit, and equipped with one pair of legs and one pair of arms. Depending on the model, the arms can be equipped with functional hands, with hooks or pincers.

The operator sits in the cockpit and controls the legs with a set of pedals, and the arm movements through a set of levers.

Military walkers - usually larger and more rugged in design, military walkers often replace one of the arms with a distance weapon (gatling guns and revolver cannons are normally used) or a battering tool (wrecking balls and rams are the standard).

The military-purpose walker is usually larger than its civilian counterpart, and requires two or three man as a crew (pilot, gunner, engineer).

Both open- and closed-cockpit configurations are known.

Known issues are imbalance and high maintenance costs

Due to the cost, the long training time of the pilots, and the general low speed on the battlefield, walkers are considered better as defensive tools than as attack weapons.

Once described as a “wonder weapon”, walkers have in the last thirty years fallen out of favor as a machine of war.

VEHICLE	ACC/TS	TOUGH	CREW	COST	NOTES
Monowheel	15/30	7(2)	1	2000	Gerbiling
Monowheel, Tank	12/24	8(2)	1	4000	Gerbiling, Shield
Weapon: 20 mm Gatling Gun					
Ornithopter	5/25	6(1)	1+1	3000	Climb -1
Walker, Civilian	-/-	10(2)	1	4000	Heavy Armor, Walker 8, Arm Strength d12+2
Walker, Military	-/-	14(2)	1	Milit	Heavy Armor, Walker 7, Arm Strength d12+2

Weapon: 20 mm Gatling Gun

WEAPON	RANGE	DMG	ROF	COST	SHOTS	NOTES
Gatling Gun (20mm)	24/48/96	3d8	3	Military	100	AP 2, Bipod, Heavy Weapon, Snapfire

Vehicles Special Notes

Gerbiling: When the driver fails a Driving roll making a Tight Turn or a Hard Brake, he must immediately do an Agility (-2) roll. In case of failure, in addition to the normal Out of Control effects, he also goes “gerbiling” (spinning inside the wheel) for a round suffering 2d6 damage.

Shield: The vehicle is fitted with a vehicular shield (has the same stats of a Medium Shield, plus Heavy Armor). It hinders the visibility of the driver causing him -1 to Notice and Driving rolls.

Walker X: This vehicle actually walks on legs. It has a basic Pace of X and the driver, with Driving roll, can make it run (running dice 2d4), but it is quite dangerous, because, in case of failure, the vehicle goes out of control. Due the legs, it ignores the majority of Difficult grounds. Walkers are usually fitted with arms, which are maneuvered with Driving and can be used in combat dealing Str+d6 damages. They are Heavy Weapons. In battle they are also often used to stomp enemies, winning an opposed roll between the pilot's Driver and the pedestrians' Agility (-2). If the pilot wins, the victims suffer 2d8+4 damage

Military

Isadshi-Koseshi

A fierce unit of warrior women, the Isadshi-Koseshi were originally part of the Nupe people, an ethnic minority in the so called Middle Belt of British Nigeria.

With the Catastrophe, the Nupe established an independent state in West Africa, and came in contact with the expanding Zulu Empire in 1889.

In the brief military confrontation that followed, the Zulu generals were so impressed by the female warriors of the Nupe, that Emperor Dinuzulu offered them a place in the roster of his army.

Today, the Isadshi-Koseshi are an elite corps, mostly serving as honor guard and with special duties. A separate unit, known as “Emperor's Lionesses” is formally the Emperor's bodyguard, but has in fact special investigative duties over the whole African Federation.

Starting in 1913, enrollment in the Isadshi-Koseshi was opened to all African Confederation ethnicities; warriors are selected at age 12, and undergo a fierce training for the following three years. The ideal Isadshi-Koseshi is expected to be loyal, independent and merciless. They favor traditional weapons, but do not disregard modern or exotic weapons when the need arises.

Outside of Africa, the Isadshi-Koseshi are the stuff of legend, and are often called (improperly) "Zulu Amazons".

Bersaglieri (lit. "Marksmen")

Light infantry corps originally created by General Alessandro La Marmora in 1836 to serve the Kingdom of Sardinia.

They follow the basic "La Marmora's Ten Rules", the unit's "bondobust":

1. Obedience
2. Respect
3. Absolute knowledge of the personal weapon
4. Strenuous training
5. Any kind of gymnastic, to the extreme
6. Camaraderie
7. Family values
8. Respect for the laws and the chief of State
9. Honor the Motherland
10. Self-confidence to the point of conceit

Traditionally quirky, independent and favoring individual initiative over strict discipline, the Bersaglieri were conceived as a high-mobility, flexible unit. They are expected to be able to operate in small, loose units, capable of serving as both skirmishers and shock troops in the battlefield.

In the aftermath of the Catastrophe, the 8th Regiment of the Bersaglieri, stationed in Caserta (by Naples), and the only unit not involved in the fights along the Ticino border, joined the Italian refugees as they moved across the Mediterranean to North Africa.

"L'Ottavo" (The Eight) became the core of the new Italian army, and currently acts as personal bodyguard to prince Antonio Griffo Focas Flavio Angelo Ducas Comneno Porfirogenito Gagliardi De Curtis di Bisanzio, leader of the Italian Nation.

Small units of Bersaglieri are usually found in all Italian settlements in North Africa and along the Red Sea coast.

New Edges

Bersagliere (Professional Edge)

Requirements: Novice, Agility d6+, Pace 6"+, Shooting d6+, Survival d4+, Vigor d6+

Bersaglieri are known for their mobility and capacity to act both as skirmishers and shock troops: in gaming terms they receive +2 to rolls to resist to Fatigue and don't consider the weight of their personal weapons for encumbrance purposes.

This Edge is also useful in tactical combat: if, during their last action, they moved at least 4" from their starting position, they receive an additional point of Cover, and +1 to Spirit rolls.

Many Bersaglieri have a Code of Honor (La Marmora's Ten Rules), but this isn't mandatory.

Isadshi-Koseshi (Background Edge)

Requirements: Novice, Fighting d8+, Shooting d6+, Throwing d6+, must be female

Also known as Zulu Amazons, these warrior women are among the deadliest fighters of Africa.

They endure a rigorous training in weapons, from childhood making them deadly and feared fighters.

An Isadshi-Koseshi, when she takes this Edge, chooses one skill between Fighting, Shooting or Throwing. The selected one is the focus of her training, and she gains the Wild Dice in it. If she already has the Wild Dice, it is increased by one dice step (usually d8).

She gains another focus Skill when she reaches the Veteran Rank and a third one at Legendary.

Zulu Amazons are feared and respected, and they also gain +1 to Charisma and to Test of Wills, which becomes +2 at Veteran Rank.

Afterword - Not Last Year's Steampunk

The core concepts of this story were developed in 2014, as a short demo scenario for the Savage Worlds RPG. Called "The Snowglobe Caper", it was based on what, at the time, was just an elevator pitch and a notebook filled with notes, and a working title.

What I wanted was a different sort of steampunk/steampulp world, an exciting and diverse gaming world for the players to explore. Something that could be described as "not last year's steampunk".

In the end, that demo game was never played - and the story slowly morphed into "Glass Houses", the first story, and the first published bit of the "Hope & Glory" universe.

I hope you had as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

And talking about writing - this is not a one-man-show (even if it maybe started like one), and there's a few people I need to thank.

I am tremendously indebted to the graphical artists currently at work on the project, Angelo Montanini and Alberto Bontempi, whose vision gave body and color to what were only words on a screen. Without Angelo and Alberto's contribution, this project would be going nowhere.

I also need to express my gratitude to my long-suffering editor, miss Clara Giuliani, that helped turning my first draft into something readable and (hopefully) worth reading.

And a big thank you to Umberto Pignatelli, that took my raw notes and turned them into playable concepts in the Appendix.

Finally, a tip of the hat to the GGStudio team: Matteo Ceresa and Luca Basile, and of course our fearless leader, Gionata dal Farra.

Davide Mana

Asti, Italy

January 2017

About the Author

Davide Mans was born in Turin, Italy, 1967. He studied science in Turin, London, Bonn, Urbino. He got a BSc and a PhD in Geology. He served in the Air Force.

Davide has been a call center operator, language teacher, scarecrow, university researcher, freelance researcher, post-doc course teacher, translator, author, content crafter, art show coordinator, editor, lecturer, game designer, fantasy writer, teacher of Taoist Philosophy, book reviewer, web designer, bicycle repairman.

He lives in Castelnuovo Belbo, a 900-souls community in the hills of the Monferrato area of Northern Italy.

Davide has been writing – both for the fiction and gaming markets – since the mid '90s, and his works have been featured in a number of fiction anthologies and gaming books.

In his spare time he listens to music, plays at tabletop roleplaying games, cooks and watches old movies. He's currently waiting for the dealer to deal him the next hand of cards.

He blogs – about history, adventure, literature – at the **Karavansara Blog**

