

The Beasts of The Earth

Adan Tejada

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This is for my brother, Eric and his long-time friend Bill. You know why.

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Chapter One

I'm not sure why I'm writing all of this down. It's probably a throw back to my Defense Intelligence Agency days. Document everything. That was the federal government's basic strategy for covering its ass. I think it's also a case of "use it or lose it," which has its roots in my past experience as a fighter pilot. You had to have that all-important flight time. So I figure writing is a good way to use my mind so that I don't lose that in addition to everything else that's disappeared. Of course, out here we use our heads so that we don't lose them, but it's not quite the same.

I can remember a professor saying that you write for an audience. So who is my audience? Who are you? Maybe you are the person who picked up this journal off of my corpse. Or maybe the corpse of the guy who got me. Or maybe the corpse of the guy who got him. Maybe you just happen to be the first literate person who found an old beat up book on a pile of bones. Whoever you are, I'm going to assume that you're younger than me, so you may not know of things the way they used to be, but you do know how things are. I hope if this is taken off of my body, the slug who killed me is under me, and has been dead just a little longer. It doesn't help much to fall first.

In any case, if you are reading this, it probably means that I am dead. That could be good or bad. Either way, I'm gone. Since you can't ask me questions, I will try to explain things as clearly as I can. You have to understand that writing isn't my first priority. In fact, it's fairly far down the list. But, it is important to me, so I will try to keep up.

For (hopefully) many pages, you will see ink that was produced by an industry, in a factory. All of that is gone now (or has it returned?). Eventually the ink will look different. I've been experimenting with ways to make the ink and have it flow well. I have some favorite

types and colors and I will continue to work with it. Since this is written by hand, I won't be going back and editing things out, so perhaps even within my life time things will move closer back to how it was before The Turn. I doubt it. Things are pretty broken.

Depending upon how the world moves on, and depending on how long since "The Turn" it has been that you are reading this, you may or may not know much of what was. Industry. Factories. Technology. Nations. I have no way of knowing where this will all go. But I am determined to keep my thoughts going in this journal.

I wonder what I will do when I run out of paper?

* * *

As the party walked through the sparsely wooded plain, the point man, Bull, was dividing his attention between the environment, and his scout, Spider. The scout was substantially ahead of the group, his senses at their most acute. The rest were alert, and attempting to remain aware of everything around them. This type of travel is exhausting, and difficult to maintain for extended periods. For most groups, that is. This particular assortment of individuals accepted this method of movement as the norm, and had conditioned themselves to be able to travel this way for as long as Bull decided it was necessary.

It was not a strict single file advance. Spider, the scout, was ahead of the group, and skittered across the terrain in a seemingly random pattern. Next was Bull, at the point. He did not usually trust anyone else for very long at this position. Behind Bull and to his left was Mack. To Bull's right, but behind Mack, was Joe the youngest. Three more members came behind the initial four at irregular and changing intervals; Doc, Ace, and Hunter. Dragon brought the rear, remaining some distance behind the group, as the drag man. It was his special duty to prevent a rearward ambush, and internal

subversion. Bull would have trusted Dragon at the point with no reservations, but he preferred his brother's unique talents at the rear.

* * *

Starting from the beginning usually helps to make things a little clearer, so let's go back a bit. Out here, names are different than how they used to be. The old names were something given to you by someone who didn't have any idea of what or who you were going to be. Some people still use them, but most don't. My old name was Terrazas. Carlos Terrazas. Now they call me Dragon. My old name was a combination of an age old Spanish surname, and first name my father liked from Spanish, his native tongue. It didn't mean much, but that was how the old names worked.

Before The Turn, which happened the year I turned 30 – 1989 by the old calendar – I was a Defense Intelligence Agent. I'll be thirty six years old this summer, but it feels like four lifetimes.

I was the "Golden Boy" of my high school, then Cal Tech and then the USAF. I got tired of the pressure of that image. A college graduate in electrical engineering at the age of nineteen, I was flying jets for the Air Force on my twentieth birthday. By the time I was twenty three, I was an Air Force Captain with a masters degree. I had to convince the command staff to allow me to fly. They rarely let engineers fly. Eventually I was a part of the test crew for new Air Force fighter jets. I was having the time of my life. Then another pilot ended my flying career and nearly my life.

We were testing new fighter jets at Red Flag in Arizona using the U.S.'s mocked up Russian MiG jets. Back then, countries often had planes built to the specifications of the other countries' fighters. That was how we remained prepared. I was in the lead U.S. jet, and was bearing down on a replica MiG. Major Frank Tunney was behind

me. He was a great pilot, but he liked to jump assignments. Frank Tunney is an old style name that I will never forget. The MiG banked right suddenly and started to climb. I stayed right in his tail jets, and was just about to fire the computer simulated machine-guns. Frank's reactions were just as good as mine, and he reacted the same way I did. However, he was flying as if it were just him and the MiG.

The nose of his fighter sheared off part of my left aileron – that's the little flap along the back edge of a jet wing that helps the plane steer. That severely hindered my maneuvering capabilities. I had to boost my power to keep from spinning into oblivion. The contact bumped Frank's jet into the MiG and damaged it's jets.

The MiG pilot bailed out. He was unhurt, and he floated to mother Terra. Major Tunney, his radar and most other navigational equipment damaged, flew his fighter back by the seat of his pants. My jet was heavily damaged. "Trashed" is the word the ground crew used.

Part of our orders during the testing was to consider ourselves more expendable than the aircraft we were flying. I slowly spiraled my half-billion dollar aircraft towards the Earth. The tower commander kept telling me to bail out. I guess he hadn't read the orders.

The navigational equipment, the landing gear, the radio transmitter, and most of my steering was non-operational. As I got closer to the ground, I figured that my best bet for saving the majority of the aircraft, or what was left of it, was to angle it towards a small lake. I altered my spiral slightly, and crash landed at about 85 miles per hour into the shallow water. The Air Force was able to salvage most of what was left of the jet, and most of what was left of me.

I had internal injuries and a broken nose and right arm and three broken ribs. Those injuries healed quickly and satisfactorily. The damage to my right leg was the biggest problem.

I was in a hospital for three months. Three separate operations were performed on my right leg. The medical technology was very good. There was almost no fear that I might lose my leg, only that I might

lose the use of it. I worked hard daily in physical therapy to make sure that would not happen.

I ended up with a metal plate in my right leg, a Distinguished Flying Cross, a promotion to Major, and the worst injury of all – a ground assignment.

Major Tunney was found at fault in the accident, and was forced to retire. Three weeks after I was able to walk again, I visited Frank Tunney and he ended up in the hospital. The Air Force advised me to retire, which did exactly one week past my fourth year in the service. I still carry my wings.

Why is my name Dragon? I was a black belt in a number of martial arts. I started studying Tai Chi Chuan in elementary school, and kept branching out as I got older. The study of a physical skill helped me as a balance to the intense school work I was doing. I was probably as close to mastering Bushido – the ancient Samurai code – as any occidental had for a long time. Born to the proper family in Japan, I may have been a worthy Samurai warrior. But, I am a Mexican half breed, so I am merely “Dragon.” I sometimes wonder late at night, while I am trying to come back to “center”, if my sensei – my mentor/instructor – would approve of me now. I guess it doesn’t really matter. We do what we must to survive.

I am sure there are other “Dragons” in the world. It is a very popular creature, after all. But I’m the only Dragon here, so it works just fine.

* * *

Dragon was the “drag man”, meaning that he was responsible for protecting the Patrol from where they had been. It often meant that he was alone, hanging back several yards. He enjoyed that role. He carried his rifle at the ready with a side-arm and his ever-present Katana as his back-up weapons.

While he enjoyed the company of others, he preferred working alone. As a former pilot, he never trained much on the ground as part of a group, as many of other Patrol members had. He was more confident relying on his own skill and perceptions.

Bull watched from cover as Spider moved far up to his right. He gave the “cover” signal. The signal was silent, the reaction immediate. The entire group quickly and silently moved to concealment. The scout had noted that there were people ahead and Bull wanted to get more information before he lead his group forward. The Patrol was down and nearly invisible to a casual eye. The forest provided excellent concealment, and the Patrol knew it well. But there were very few “casual” eyes left anymore. Everyone in the “Outers” was careful. Most were experienced field people, most of them hunters. Or hunted.

* * *

But enough about me. For the person reading this journal, an introduction to our patrol is in order.

It's easy to decide who to write about first. My brother, Bull, has become our undisputed leader. His ability to lead in the field was well recognized during his days as an NCO for the US Army Rangers. He was in Central America during the expanding skirmishes against the Colombian ground troops just before everything started to go sideways. Bull's superior sense of what to do next meant his unit lost few lives. But Doc gets some credit for that as well.

As the medic of Bull's unit in C-A, Doc allowed an unrecorded number of limbs to remain with their original owners, and proved to be an invaluable combat partner. His large frame belies his quickness. That was how he managed to break every sack record for defensive linemen in college football history. But you may not know anything of the old game of football. It was considered quite violent

during its day. It could be described as a highly organized version of the game “odd man out.” Many people still use the old football equipment. The shoulder pads and helmets are very popular.

Doc talks about the old days often. When we find a defensible hooch, and we can let our guard down a bit, Doc can easily be talked into reminiscing about dropping Heisman Trophy winners in their tracks. The Heisman Trophy was something given to outstanding college football players. Oh. In football, dropping someone in their tracks didn’t mean “eight-ringing” him with a forty five.

Doc never graduated from college, and he decided to enter the army before becoming a professional football player. He never left the service.

Yes, they actually paid grown men to play games.

* * *

Spider signaled them forward to an indicated spot. They moved silently to the meeting point as Spider made his way back. Without hesitation, they covered all possible angles of attack as they moved. There was no need to signal for it or talk about it. It was simply the best way to stay alive. As they settled into the indicated position, Hunter looked at Bull. He gave a brief nod and Hunter tapped Joe on the shoulder. Joe knew he had to Hunter’s pack as she slipped out of the straps. Once free of the bulky weight, Hunter slung her rifle and moved to a tree about 20 yards away. She went up the tree almost as quickly as she had crossed to it. No one watched her move as they had all assumed their roles, scanning in all directions.

Spider slid down next to Bull to report. Spider described a group of thirteen in a gully at two o’clock to their position, with a detail of three sentries. They had not appeared to notice the approaching patrol. The group was well armed, but as always it was not possible to know how much ammunition they had. Spider’s most important

piece of information was that one member wore the colors of the Apocalypse Riders.

As Spider had determined that the Patrol was not yet visible to the gully dwellers, Bull signaled for the Patrol to convene. The eight person group had a good position behind a cover of rocks and brush. Bull outlined the course of action. Since one of the group in the gully, and therefore the entire group, was connected with the Apocalypse Riders, the decision to kill them was not even brought up: it was necessary.

* * *

One of the best examples of how the names of our time are determined is Mack. His name comes from the still famous Mack Truck. Mack has about the same level of intelligence as one of those big rigs. There is another similarity between Mack and his namesake; the effect is the same regardless of which one hits you.

Mack was the most highly decorated Marine in the Middle East because he followed an order no matter what obstacles arose. Often, he would find himself in a no-win situation, but because his orders were to win, he did. Mack was not big in the leadership department, but never wanted to be. Mack was given a large number of commendations, to go along with his many battle scars. Luckily for the U.S.A., Mack healed very quickly. Doc said his ability to heal was scary.

We found Mack protecting an encampment of dead people. One of the inhabitants of the camp, wiped out by some unknown plague, had been a US Navy Admiral, and had instructed Mack to defend the camp no matter what. Mack was not aware that the entire camp was dead when we arrived, and stood his ground against Bull. Spider had scouted out the camp the night before, and figured out what was going on. Mack was slightly jarred by the loss of the Admiral, but

because we had a U.S. Navy officer, a U.S. Air Force officer, and two Ranger N.C.O.'s in our group, we persuaded Mack to leave the dead village.

Ace is the Navy officer in the group, and was an ex-flyboy as well. Before The Turn, Ace and I would have been rivals by nature. There is no Navy or Air Force now, but I still distrust him.

I wasn't particularly happy with Ace from the beginning, but Bull wrote it off as inter-service rivalry. Ace was part of the regular detachment of pilots that provided air support for Bull's squad in C-A. He spent some time as an unexpected part of Bull's squad after being shot down. Bull regarded him as a first class fighter, and to Bull that was a most important quality. Maybe the most important. I look at things a little differently than Bull, and that is one reason I bring up the rear in the field...

As a by-product of my extensive martial arts training, I can sense when something isn't "right." Before I started bringing up the rear, I was the second person in our formation. Then, we almost got wiped out by someone who succumbed to the extreme stress of the field.

One afternoon we thought the guy, whose name was Dirt, had left the group. We couldn't find him, and his equipment was gone. Bull is not one to cry over spilled milk, so we shoved off without waiting for him. We had been moving for less than a half hour, when Dirt came up out of a shallow hole in the ground, and attempted to garrote the rear guard, Mack.

Dirt was an adept hand to hand fighter, and Mack was dazed. Dirt gained the early advantage. Finally Mack flipped Dirt over his shoulder to get away from the wire. I went to Mack's aid, sword in hand. Dirt was good, but he had no defense against the Katana. I severed Dirt's spinal cord, ending the fight. Ending Dirt.

After that experience, coupled with the fact that I had told Bull two days before that Dirt was cracking, I was assigned to the rear. Now,

it's Ace gives me doubts.

* * *

The plan of attack set, all there was to do was wait. The patrol would not attack until it was dark. With a group that large in the gully, Bull was sure they would maintain a fire. Additionally, much to Hunter's delight, there would be a three quarter moon.

Spider believed that the man wearing the colors of the Riders was the leader of the group. He was Hunter's target. Hunter removed the .375 H&H magnum rifle from its scabbard in the rear of her pack, and left to take a good position to make her shot. The shot would be the beginning of the attack. If things worked out right, the skirmish would be over before the echo of Hunter's round left the air.

* * *

Hunter is an interesting person. Normally, she has a lot of excess energy, and tends to talk too much. However, when Bull sends her on a sniper assignment, she's ice. When she is on assignment, her movements are deliberate, her mouth shut. The transformation is a dichotomy that helps to make Hunter an intriguing person.

I remember that when Joe first joined the group, he was fascinated by Hunter's Australian accent. I guess having grown up in these times, one doesn't run into folks from abroad. But because of Hunter's gregarious nature, Joe came to trust and like her.

As her name suggests, Hunter was a big game hunter in the other time. She studied her intended prey, and came to anticipate what the animal might do in the field. She says man is the most difficult to hunt because of his extreme unpredictability. But Hunter also says, that when a man is hit, he dies just the same.

* * *

The moon was just beginning to rise. Hunter was in place and on target. The three sentries from the gully campers would never know that their fates were sealed hours ago. Spider was in a tree watching one of the sentries. Spider's crossbow was poised. Dragon's sentry would die from behind; a knife blade piercing his kidney. The last sentry was left alone. He was on the far side of the patrol's attack. Joe's long-slide .45 would make sure he would not interfere.

When the high-powered rifle's report gave the signal, the gully group's leader was no longer in possession of a heart, and most of both lungs. The first two sentries died swiftly, and the patrol flowed into the gully.

Three of the remaining nine condemned were asleep before the shot. Mack snapped the neck of one, stepping on him as he ran. Ace was running next to Mack, partially using him as a shield. Ace dropped on another of the barely awake men, slitting his throat. Mack drove into the fray, leaving the third of the previously sleeping men for Ace.

Bull was unbelievably close to the group when the Hunter's shot gave the signal. He was already standing straight and moving in, relying on Spider to cover his advance. But, Bull moved early knowing he would not alert the sentry. All of his nerves were energized, all of his muscles prepared. He walked with his Kukri knife in one hand, and a huge solid tree branch in the other. Two Riders came at him. Bull left with a shattered skull, the other with none at all.

One of the gully dwellers dove for his rifle. All he grabbed was Doc's ankle. He yanked on the trunk-like leg to no avail. Doc grabbed a nerve center and jerked the man to his feet. The man screamed in pain, as Doc smashed his ribs with a free hand. Doc released the nerve center and drove the man's nose cartilage into his brain.

The remaining three campers had weapons in their hands. Joe's .45 killed the third sentry with his first shot, and one of the three armed

men with four more shots. Bull, from across the camp, was highly annoyed with Joe's excessive use of ammunition. Bull's reprisal would hurt Joe far more than the 9mm round that crashed through his left bicep.

One shot. It was all Hunter was going to allow the gully camper. Hunter had changed weapons after her initial right shot. The .375 H&H rounds were much too scarce to waste. The .44 magnum round from his scoped revolver tore through the man's head, sending the body writhing to the ground.

The final member of the group decided to leave. He got as far as the hilt of Dragon's Katana.

* * *