

## 970

Firearms were kept to a minimum after hours, so bows were the order of the day - except for the snipers on the mesa top. My movements must have alerted her. I sat down and continued dressing.  
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"Charlotte, the Seven Pillars know we are here - they know the camp is here," I told her.

"How imminent is the threat?" Charlotte knelt beside me. I didn't know.

"They must be close, to be making a reconnaissance of the caves," Miyako said with tactical certainty.

"It was drawn to you, Charlotte - you were out of place, so this thing looked further. Otherwise these caves are irrelevant," she added. Miyako had the mindset of a seasoned professional spy.

"The cavern and spring have a night guardian," Charlotte countered. "I saw her when I was following you two here."

I had on my light bulletproof vest (no shirt), shorts (no underwear) and shoes (no sox).

"Let's go check on her to see if she's seen anything," I suggested/ordered.

What I had assumed was some sort of bedroll brought by Miyako turned out to be a Ninja Survival pack. This allowed me to weapon up while she dressed up. The amount of time we were taking still ate at my nerves. Charlotte stopped me from heading out first, only to be stopped by Miyako. The ninja slipped out like a cool desert breeze.

(Friend, Enemies and those In Between)

Thirty seconds later, a plastic BB bounced off my right shoulder. This time, I was leading Charlotte out. No one spoke. We couldn't see Miyako anyway, now dressed in her black pajamas and her face being reduced to just one slit for her eyes. We found the Amazon dead at her post. She was in a cunningly crafted blind not easily spotted from any direction.

A quick sweep for 'gifts' left behind revealed nothing, but the corpse yielded plenty. She was shot multiple times with two separate flash and sound suppressed submachine guns. The woman had been alive when we came down and if there had been a firefight, Charlotte would have heard the shots, if not seen them; thus the suppression. The bullet holes suggested a small caliber weapon.

Miyako stepped up, held up three fingers. Every piece of the Amazon's gear was still on her. The attackers had shot up her phone box. Wireless communications were deemed too risky so all the outposts had buried land lines. At this point, a few seconds of extra effort stood between the Seven Pillars and success; that and the Goddess Paranoia.

Had the assailants yanked up the box and cut the phone line, it would have been rendered useless. Instead, they shot up the device and moved on so that when Charlotte pulled out the cache of concealed goodies, including the spare phone box, we were back in business. As Charlotte got to work switching out the busted for the back-up, I studied our situation.  
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Advanced teams taking out the perimeter guards, and most likely the snipers, didn't make much sense. The camp had 300 highly motivated Amazons. Cutting them off temporarily from their armory and vehicles didn't make any sense, since all Amazons were armed anyway. That left timing. But timing meant nothing if I didn't have the goal of their attack.

It came as a double-whammy. The Chinese place a high premium on family and the Seven Pillars had mastered a sadistic art form of turning young foreign women into their concubine/assassins. The Condoteiri would have slaughtered the entire camp. The Seven Pillars would want to kidnap the children, both as current bargaining chips and as future tools.

500 girls... 400 could be kidnappable. The oldest would go down fighting with their sisters. How did you get 400 kids out of here? Helicopters? That would be a fuck load of helicopters taking out their team and the children. Besides, helicopters alone couldn't dig them out of their cave and cliff-face strongpoints.

Desert - no waterways. That left the road. You couldn't use ATVs - not enough carrying capacity. The smart move would be to have tractor-trailers parked alongside the hard top state road. They would use smaller, more rugged trucks to ferry their captives out to the semis. That suggested some sort of 'cover/support' vehicles.

2 1/2 ton trucks with weaponized Hummers providing fire support a la 'Blackhawk Down' and that meant the bridge and the BBQ pit. That objective would solve both of the Seven Pillars problems - moving the main assault group into close contact with the Amazons so the Amazons couldn't organize a defense, and removing their hostages in a prompt manner so they all could be gone before anyone else could react.  
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The Seven Pillars had to have secured the bridge and were mostly likely replacing the missing piers. It was the choke point of their battle plan. Worse for them, it wasn't part of a barricade where they could attrition the Amazon numbers with vehicle mounted heavy weapons. The ditch ran north-south, bow shaped with the arch to the west and was over a kilometer from the camp.

The flanks were purposefully strewn with huge boulders that limited traffic to horse and motorcycles - no four-wheelers. They had to have control of the bridge, so that's where I went.

"Charlotte, I'm going to the bridge," I whispered before slipping out of the blind. I didn't order Miyako to follow me and I was sure Charlotte wanted strangle me for departing from her protective custody.

There are four kinds of fights, be they between armies, or individuals. Set-piece (sparring), assaults, ambushes and meeting engagements. I was about to be in the latter one. Meeting engagements happen when opposing forces are set on goals that unknowingly intersect one another. One of the most famous battles in US history - Gettysburg - was a meeting engagement.

I was using the bone-dry culvert because we feared the Seven Pillars had replaced our snipers. Miyako was... somewhere else. The enemy commandos used the same conduit to avoid having the remaining Amazon pickets spot them and raising the alarm. I had little doubt that the three men speedily moving south were heading for the grotto and its three inhabitants (Charlotte, Miyako and me).

Not knowing that I could both see ghosts and guessed who its demonic masters were, they assumed we were still in the caverns. Me not knowing how this whole ghost-scout thing worked, I assumed that I had a chance of surprising them at the bridge if I moved fast enough. In a final prick of irony, they misinterpreted the role their snipers played in our engagement.

They believed that their snipers would alert them if anyone moved on the bridge, ignoring the fact that the snipers didn't have a complete view of the gulch. I was only using the big ditch because I was afraid they had taken out the Amazon snipers and now had the high ground, which turned out to be true. Thank you, Goddess Paranoia.

My first tomahawk was in my left hand and my Glock-22 was in my right. My fear of snipers and the bend in the gully saved my life. We literally ran into each other, me and the first 7P soldier. His long barreled Type-05 was pointing past my left, his torso slammed into my pistol, ramming his front armored plate against it as it discharged.

The proximity muffled the sound of the gunshot. The bullet failed to punch through his impressive body armor, but the resulting force knocked him down and out. Unfortunately, our shared momentum knocked my gun out of my grasp. My right hand went for tomahawk two. The flattened man's team mates swung their submachine guns my way.

Halfway through his shift, a black dart flew out of the western darkness, past the first one, then snapped back. The action caused the hardy thread to wrap around the barrel of his weapon. I couldn't see her, but I knew it was Miyako with her flying wedge with the thread attached. The middle guy was startled and not moving as his training dictated.

That allowed me to use him as a shield against the third guy. Right as 7P #2 decided to release his weapon, I kicked him hard into the confused man behind him. Neither man went down, but I still got what I wanted.

Guy number three's main weapon was trapped to his right as I rushed his left. Vainly he tried to get an arm up to defend himself. My right tomahawk shattered his forearm at the elbow joint. Only the body armor on the inside of the blow stopped the appendage from falling off. My rational mind was catching up with my instincts.

These men had on head-to-toe ballistic body suits with knee guards and solid ballistic inserts for the front and back of the torso. They had on some sort of dull, dark-grey respirator mask which was why the armless guy wasn't screaming his head off. They also had matte black circular ear protections and a type of high tech visor on the ears and eyes respectively.  
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The sole survivor was falling back, drawing his silenced pistol while trying to put some distance between us and find Miyako at the same time. Dummy, tomahawks are designed for throwing. A bit of Amazons indignation was behind that toss. His visor was cut in two as my anger drove the blade 6 cm/2+ inches into his skull.

I heard a sharp crack of a rock being shattered. Miyako's graceful flip landed her at my side. I ran to the last victim, put my foot on his chest and put my right hand on the tomahawk's shaft. The guy reached up and grabbed the thigh of the foot on his chest with both hands. Shit, the fucker wasn't dead!

My left axe came down, struck his right temple and his skull came apart like a nitrogen frozen cantaloupe. I was sure I'd be downing a case, or ten, of something potentially alcoholic to bury that visual for the rest of my life.

"They have definitely taken out our snipers," Miyako murmured.

"You didn't have to do that. He was already dead. It was a nerve spasm." Nerve spasm? He GRABBED ME... okay, in the instant replay it was more of his arms flying up than an actual grab. The cracking rock was a near-miss of my tender, sensitive ninja athlete. The fuckers must pay.