



The Open Sky

Vladimir

NIKOLAI'S EYES ARE KEENER THAN MINE. HE WAS THE FIRST TO SEE THE HORSEMAN, WHEN ALL I SAW WAS A CLOUD OF DUST. BUT EVENTUALLY I COULD MAKE OUT DETAILS.

THE MAN WAS RACING ALONG THE OLD RIVER HIGHWAY, SPURRING HIS MOUNT, HIS LOOSE CLOTHES BLOWING IN THE WIND. HE TURNED DOWN OUR PRIVATE ROAD, AND WE BEGAN TO FOLLOW HIM.

IN THE FRONT YARD OF OUR CABIN, HE WHEELED HIS HORSE AROUND, AND MOTIONED FOR US TO LAND. WE HAD A VISITOR, IT SEEMED, OUR FIRST IN MONTHS--A MAN IN A HURRY.

DO WE KNOW HIM, VLADIMIR? IS HE A FRIEND?

HE'S A STRANGER--AND AS TO WHETHER HE'S A FRIEND, WE'LL FIND THAT OUT SOON ENOUGH.



LOOK AT HIS ARM. IT'S ALL STIFF AND GREEN, LIKE I DON'T KNOW WHAT.

LIKE JADE, NIKOLAI, CARVED JADE.



IS HE A NICE PERSON?

I HOPE SO. BE QUIET NOW--LET ME DO THE TALKING.



GREETINGS, GOODSIRS--MAY I SAY HOW IMPRESSED I AM WITH YOUR MAGNIFICENT BALLOON?

YOU'RE VERY KIND.



I'M CURIOUS--WHAT MAKES YOUR WONDERFUL INVENTION FLY?

HOT AIR, THAT'S ALL. THE HOTTER THE AIR, THE HIGHER IT RISES. REDUCE THE FIRE, AND DOWN IT COMES!



IT'S SIMPLY ASTONISHING. HOW DO YOU STEER?

WE GO BY THE WIND CURRENTS ABOVE THE EARTH. THEY CHANGE DIRECTION AT DIFFERENT ALTITUDES. WE RARELY HAVE TROUBLE FINDING ONE THAT'S SUITABLE.



I'D LIKE TO BUY YOUR BALLOON. I'LL PAY YOU WHATEVER YOU THINK IT'S WORTH--JUST NAME YOUR PRICE. I CAN AFFORD TO INDULGE MYSELF.

THE CASTLE OF THE YAGYU NINJAS SQUATS IN ITS MOAT LIKE A MALIGNANT TOAD IN A STAGNANT PUDDLE. THE WRETCHED PEASANTS WHO INHABIT THE REGION CALL IT...

LAIR OF THE ASSASSINS

IT HAD TAKEN ME THE BETTER PART OF A WEEK TO WALK THE 150 MILES BETWEEN THE GATE OF RASHOMON AND YAGYU CASTLE... IT WAS A WELCOME BIT OF EXERCISE AFTER HAVING BEEN LOCKED IN AN ATTIC FOR THREE YEARS...

HALT, STRANGER!
HALT AND IDENTIFY YOURSELF!

IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF JULY. THE SEASON OF BLOATED FLIES...

NAME AND RANK?

I HAVE NO NAME. I HAVE NO RANK

...AND IT WAS HOT, HOT AND DAMP, LIKE A SWORDSMITH'S FORGE IN THE MIDDLE OF A SWAMP...

DISOWNED, EH? WELL THEN— FAMILY NAME? FATHER'S RANK?

NO FAMILY. NO FATHER.

... MY CREDENTIALS WERE GETTING RIPE...

NO NAME OR FAMILY? LOOK HERE, YOU'LL GAIN NO ENTRY TO YAGYU CASTLE WITHOUT PROPER CREDENTIALS OR...

... I HAVE CREDENTIALS...

... I BRING THE HEAD OF PRIEST DO-SHIN!

DO-SHIN, THE ZEN ARCHER... SWORN ENEMY OF THE YAGYU CLAN!

...IT SEEMED MY CREDENTIALS WERE IMPECCABLE...



...BUT THEN GETTING INTO YAGYU CASTLE WASN'T HALF AS DIFFICULT AS GETTING OUT WAS GOING TO BE.

YOU SEE...THE YAGYUS ARE A FAMILY BUSINESS...



THEY PROVIDE A SERVICE...ESPIONAGE AND ASSASSINATION. OTHER SPECIALTIES INCLUDE ARSON, POISONINGS AND MUTILATIONS.



SAMURAI FROM THE MOUNTAIN PREFECTURES CLAIM THAT THE YAGYU NINJAS LEARNED THEIR OCCULT FENCING STYLE FROM DEMONS... THIS IS DUBIOUS...

...HOWEVER, MY FATHER ONCE TOLD ME OF A YAGYU NINJA WHO SPENT A WEEK SUBMERGED UNDER AN OUT-HOUSE, BREATHING THROUGH A STRAW...



...WAITING FOR HIS VICTIM TO COME AND SIT DOWN!

YES, THE YAGYUS ARE A CUNNING AND DANGEROUS CLAN, AND THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND THE CLAN IS...



...OLD MAN YAGYU.. FATHER OF NINJAS.. MASTER OF THE OCCULT SWORD AND LORD OF THE LAIR OF ASSASSINS!



LORD YAGYU...

DON'T BOTHER TO LIE TO ME, BOY.. YOU'RE OUT OF YOUR CLASS HERE AS FAR AS LYING IS CONCERNED...

BESIDES... I KNOW YOUR REAL NAME.. HAH! YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW THAT! I EVEN KNEW YOUR FATHER!

THE RUMBLE OF HIS FIGHTER'S ENGINES STIRRED ANCIENT MEMORIES IN TAGLON'S MIND. PRIMITIVE MEMORIES OF A TIME NOT LONG AGO WHEN HIS ANCESTORS HUNTED GANGREWS AND HOOVED WILDEBRANS ACROSS THE VELDT OF REGULUS III WITH NO MORE THAN A SLING-A-RAM TO BRING THEM TO THE PUST.

TAGLON'S CLAWS RAKED THE POLISHED METAL CONTROLS OF HIS TERRAN-MADE CRAFT -- TALONS BARELY FORMED INTO HANDS -- AS HIS VOICE GROWLED INTO HIS COMM-MIKE.

REGULIAN TECHNOLOGY WAS COPIED FROM THE TERRANS' AND TO THE MORE ADVANCED HUMANS, TAGLON'S RACE WERE MERE BEASTS IN MEN'S CLOTHING! YET THE REGULIANS POSSESSED A SIMPLE MOBILITY THE TERRANS HAD LOST SOMEWHERE IN SPACE.

IT WAS THE PRIDE OF THE HUNTER FREE TO STALK ON HIS OWN LAND.

MAMMA'S PRIDE TO HERD LEADER. THE TRACKER CONFIRMS T.E.F. CRUISER ON ATTACK COURSE TO ENGAGE MAMA!

A Lion In Our Midst



THERE'S THE TERRAN CRAFT! RANGE 3-2 MEGS. IN QUAD C. I'LL LURE AS MANY OF HER CUBS AS I CAN. THE REST OF YOU GO IN FOR A KILL.



WITH SKILL EQUAL TO THE TERRANS' FINEST PILOTS, TAGLON GUIDED HIS FIGHTER INTO THE THICK OF THE T.E.F. (TERRAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES) ESCORT CRAFTS.

ZWOP
ZING



OPERATION LURE A SUCCESS! I'VE GOT A THIRD OF THEIR DEFENSIVE CRAFT AFTER ME. GO IN AND HIT THE BIG ONE BEFORE THEY CATCH ON TO ME.



TAGLON! IT WAS A TRAP! THE BATTLE CRUISER WAS A TERRAN DECOY... NO LIFE FORMS ABOARD. A SECOND CRUISER IS AFTER MAMMA AND WE'RE TOO FAR AWAY TO HELP. THE TERRAN FIGHTERS ARE DESTROYING OUR FORCES... THERE'RE TOO MANY OF THEM! TOO--



KA-FALOOM!

A FLASH OF BLINDING RADIANCE IN FAR DISTANT SPACE HERALDED THE DESTRUCTION OF TAGLON'S MOTHER SHIP.



BY ASORV'S HORN! THERE WERE THIRTY-FIVE HUNDRED OF US ABOARD. THIRTY-FIVE HUNDRED AND...

...MAGLA! SHE WAS AFRAID FOR MY SAFETY! OH MY LOST LOVE... OH WHAT A STUPID WASTE!