

Sergeant Chip

by Bradley Denton

To the Supreme Commander of the soldier who bears this message --

Sir or Madam:

Today before it was light I had to roll in the stream to wash blood from my fur. I decided then to send You these words.

So I think of the word shapes, and the girl writes them for me. I know how the words are shaped because I could see them whenever Captain Dial spoke. And I always knew what he was saying.

The girl writes on a roll of paper she found in the stone hut when we began using it as our quarters three months ago. She already had pencils. She has written her own words on the paper many times since then, but she has torn those words from the roll and placed them in her duffel. Her own words have different shapes than the ones she writes for me now. She doesn't even know what my word shapes mean, because the shapes are all that I show her. So the responsibility for their meanings is mine alone.

Just as the responsibility for my actions is mine alone.

Last night I killed eighteen of Your soldiers.

I didn't want to do that. They reminded me of some of the soldiers I knew before, the ones who followed Captain Dial with me. But I had to kill them because they came to attack us. And if I let them do that, I would be disobeying orders.

I heard them approach while the girl, the two boys, and the old man slept. So I went out and climbed the ridge behind the hut so I could see a long way. I have good night vision, and I had no trouble spotting the soldiers as they split into two squads and spread out. Their intent was to attack our hut from different angles to make its defense more difficult. I knew this because it was one of the things Captain Dial taught me.

So I did another thing Captain Dial taught me. As the two squads scuttled to their positions to await the order to attack, I crept down toward them through

the grass and brambles. I crept with my belly to the earth so they couldn't see me coming. Not even with their infrared goggles.

Captain Dial once said I was black as night and silent as air. He was proud when he said it. I remembered that when I crept to Your soldiers.

They didn't hear me as I went from one to another. They were spread out too far. Their leader wasn't as smart as Captain Dial. I bit each one's throat so it tore open and the soldier couldn't shout. There were some sounds, but they weren't loud.

The first soldier had a lieutenant's bar on his helmet. I had seen it from a long way away. It was the only officer's insignia I saw in either squad. So I went to him first. That way he couldn't give the order to attack before I was finished.

But the others would have attacked sooner or later, even without an order from their lieutenant. So I had to kill them all.

The last soldier was the only female among the eighteen. As I approached her, I smelled the same kind of soap that Captain Dial's wife Melanie used. That made me pause as I remembered how things were a long time ago when I slept at the foot of their bed. But then the soldier knew I was there and turned her weapon toward me. So I bit her throat before she could fire.

I dragged the soldiers to the ravine near the southern end of the ridge. You'll find them there side by side if You arrive before the wild animals do. I did my best to treat them with honor.

Then I went to the stream. The stream is near the hut, so I tried to be quiet. I didn't want to wake my people before sunrise.

After washing, I went into the grass and shook off as much water as I could. But there was no one to rub me with a towel. There was no one to touch my head and tell me I was good.

I remembered then that no one had ever told Captain Dial he was good, either.

This is what it means to be the leader.

I wanted to howl. But I didn't. My people were still asleep.

I take care of them. I don't let anyone hurt them. These were Captain Dial's orders, and I will not disobey.

Captain Dial was my commanding officer. I was his first sergeant. If You examine the D Company roster, You will see that my pay grade is K-9.

My name is Chip.

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Whenever Captain Dial gave me an order, I obeyed as fast as I could. And then he always touched my head and told me I was good. Sometimes when I was extra fast, he gave me a treat. I liked the treats, but I liked the touch even more.

There was never a time when Captain Dial wasn't my leader. But he wasn't always a captain, and I wasn't always his first sergeant. In the beginning he was a lieutenant, and I was his corporal.

We were promoted because of the day we demonstrated our training to the people in the bleachers.

That morning, in our quarters, Lieutenant Dial said that what we would participate in that afternoon was political bullshit. Money for the war was about to be cut, so public-relations events like this were an attempt to bolster civilian support. But Lieutenant Dial said that only two things had ever motivated the public to support the military: heroism and vengeance.

He also said that we had to do well regardless. He said I would have to do a good job and make him proud. So I stood at attention, and I thought about running fast to find mines and attack enemies. I thought about making Lieutenant Dial proud.

Then he touched my head. He knew my thoughts. He always knew my thoughts. He told me I was good and gave me permission to be at ease.

So I wiggled and pushed my head against his knees, and my tail wagged hard as he buckled my duty harness. Even though he had said it was bullshit, I could smell that he was excited about the job ahead. That made me excited too. And as we left our quarters, Lieutenant Dial's wife Melanie came with us. That made me even more excited, because she was almost never with us except in our quarters.

Melanie spoke to me every morning, and although I couldn't understand her thoughts too well, I knew she was telling me to take care of Lieutenant Dial throughout our day of training. And every night when Lieutenant Dial and I returned, Melanie touched my head and said I was good. Then, after we all ate supper, she and Lieutenant Dial would climb into their bed, I would lie down on my cushion at its foot, and we would sleep. Sometimes in the night their scents grew stronger and blended together, and they made happy sounds. But I stayed quiet because I wanted them to stay happy. Other times I smelled or

heard strangers outside our quarters, and I would go on alert even though Lieutenant Dial was still asleep and had not given me an order. But the strangers always went away, and then I slept again too.

Those were the only times Melanie was with us, and that one order every morning was the only order she ever gave me. All of my other orders, all of my treats, and all of my food came from Lieutenant Dial.

But Lieutenant Dial loved Melanie. I could see the word "love" whenever he thought of her. And that made me glad because it made him glad. So we were all happy on the day she came with us. She smelled like a hundred different flowers all mixed together, and she was wearing new clothes that seemed to float around her.

She also wore a gift that Lieutenant Dial had given her the night before. It was a shiny rock on a silver chain that she wore around her neck. Lieutenant Dial told me that Melanie liked the color of the rock. It just looked like a rock on a chain to me. But when Lieutenant Dial put it around Melanie's neck, it made me think of the chain and tags that Lieutenant Dial wore around his own neck whenever he was on duty. And it also made me think of the collar he put on me when I wasn't wearing my duty harness. So then I understood why Melanie was so happy to receive the rock and chain. Now we all had things to wear around our necks.

We didn't go to our usual training area at the fort that day. Instead we went to a park by the ocean. There were flags and people everywhere. It was busy and noisy, and I wanted to run around and smell everything. But Lieutenant Dial ordered me to stay beside him, and that was fun too. I still got to smell everything. We walked from one tree to another, with me on one side of Lieutenant Dial and Melanie on the other. And at every tree, people gathered around while Lieutenant Dial told them who he was and who I was. Then he would give me a few orders -- easy things like attention, on guard, and secure-the-perimeter -- and we would move on. A lot of people asked if they could touch me, but Lieutenant Dial said they couldn't. He explained that I was on duty. I wasn't a pet. I was a corporal.

He was proud when he said it, and that made me proud too.

As we walked from place to place, sometimes Lieutenant Dial held Melanie's hand in his. And once, Melanie reached across and touched my head. This violated the rule Lieutenant Dial had been telling everyone. But even though I was on duty, it seemed all right. I was glad she did it.

After a while we walked away from the trees to a broad stretch of lawn beside the ocean. I saw a long pier floating on the water. And across the lawn from the pier were bleachers with people in them. There were more people in

the bleachers than I had ever seen in one place before, and some of them were high-ranking officers in dress uniforms. So I knew that even if what was going to happen here was bullshit, it was important bullshit.

Out on the lawn were little flags, mud puddles, wooden walls, sandbag fortifications, and some mock-enemies. I knew they were mock-enemies because they wore dark, padded suits. All of these things were familiar to me from training. But there were more things on the lawn than I had ever seen in one training session, and that excited me.

Melanie went to the bleachers while Lieutenant Dial took me onto the lawn, where we were joined by other soldiers. Some of the other soldiers were also K-9s. I knew most of them. Lieutenant Dial and I had trained with them many times.

Out on the pier, men and women dressed in white stood at attention. And when Lieutenant Dial and I reached a spot in the middle of the lawn, he told me to stand at attention as well. So I did, and all of the other soldiers did too.

A colonel stood in front of the bleachers and addressed the crowd. He said a lot of words through a loudspeaker, but I couldn't understand them. Since they didn't come from Lieutenant Dial, they were meaningless.

When the colonel stopped talking, the people in the bleachers clapped their hands. Then a soldier ran onto the lawn and handed Lieutenant Dial a microphone. Lieutenant Dial signalled that I should remain at attention, so I didn't move as he took a step forward and addressed the people.

He told them a lot of things about K-9 soldiers. One thing he said was that while war dogs required a lot of training, we didn't have to be trained to understand loyalty or rank. A dog who was raised and trained by one soldier would always see that soldier as his or her pack leader. So if Lieutenant Dial was put in charge of a platoon, that platoon would become my pack. And I would see my duty to that pack as absolute and unquestionable.

It surprised me that Lieutenant Dial had to explain that to people. It was as obvious to me as knowing that food is for eating. But then I remembered that people didn't always think the same way that Lieutenant Dial and I thought. Melanie, for example. Melanie was always kind to me, but sometimes I could smell that she also feared me a little. And I always wondered how that could be. Lieutenant Dial loved Melanie, so I would never hurt her. And as long as I was near her, I would never let anything else hurt her, either. So I hoped that what Lieutenant Dial was saying to the people in the bleachers would help Melanie understand that she never had to be afraid.

Then Lieutenant Dial said something that made him sad as he said it. I don't

think the people knew how sad it made him, but I knew. The other K-9s knew, too.

He said that during a war in the past, some high-ranking officers had decided that K-9s weren't really soldiers. Instead, they were classified as equipment. That meant that when their units left the field, K-9s were abandoned or destroyed. They were treated like utility vehicles or tents. They weren't allowed to return to their home quarters with their handlers.

Lieutenant Dial always spoke the truth, but this truth was difficult for me to comprehend. I knew I wasn't equipment. I knew the difference between a vehicle and a dog. And the K-9s in that past war must have known the difference too. So I was glad the regulations had changed. But I wondered then, and wonder now, whether there might still be some high-ranking officers who don't think of me as a soldier.

I urge You not to make that mistake.

Lieutenant Dial's sadness went away as he continued talking. He described some of the duties K-9 soldiers perform, and as he described those duties, different handlers ordered their K-9s to perform them. And as the dogs obeyed, their images appeared on a big screen that had been set up beside the pier.

One dog, a pointy-eared shepherd, attacked and subdued first one mock-enemy, then three, and then five. He was good at it. Even though the mock-enemies were padded so he couldn't really hurt them, I could smell that they were afraid of him.

Another dog, a lean pinscher, ran fast fast fast, dodging and leaping over obstacles that popped up before him, and he delivered a medical kit to another soldier at the end of the lawn. Then he dragged that soldier to a designated safety point while avoiding some booby traps. The booby traps went off bang bang bang after the pinscher and his soldier were past them.

A big-chested Malinois destroyed a machine-gun nest.

Another shepherd crept on her belly to flank an enemy platoon.

A hound pointed out hidden land mines and howled as he found each one.

Lieutenant Dial announced each K-9's name and rank, each handler's name and rank, and the task to be performed. The K-9s were all good, and the people in the bleachers clapped. So I was glad because everyone was happy. But I was getting more and more excited because I wanted it to be my turn. In fact, as the second shepherd completed her flanking maneuver and took down a mock-enemy from behind, I almost broke attention. I wanted to help. I wanted to be a good soldier, too.

I whimpered, and Lieutenant Dial gave me a corrective glance. So I tried extra hard to remain still and silent. I didn't want to disappoint Lieutenant Dial. Disappointing Lieutenant Dial would be the worst thing in the world.

When all of the other dogs had performed their tasks, Lieutenant Dial told the people that the modern K-9 soldier went beyond those of the past. He told them that K-9s and their handlers were now matched according to their skills, temperaments, and rapport -- because there were some dogs and humans who had a gift for understanding each other, and some who didn't. And he told them that such matchings had been so successful that dogs often knew what their handlers wanted them to do even before any verbal or visual orders had been issued. In addition, a subcutaneous device implanted in each dog made it possible for handlers to send pulsed signals that their K-9s had been trained to recognize as orders. And the implants, in turn, sent biometric signals to the handlers to indicate their K-9s' levels of anxiety and confidence as orders were carried out. So even when a dog and handler weren't in close proximity, they could still communicate and complete their mission.

I didn't remember receiving my implant, but I knew it was under the skin between my shoulders. I almost never thought about it because Lieutenant Dial almost never used his transmitter anymore. He had used it often in our early days of training. But as our training had progressed, our thoughts had become clearer and clearer to each other, and one day we had both known the electronic signals weren't needed anymore. So Lieutenant Dial had unstrapped the transmitter from his wrist and put it in a pouch on his belt. After that day, he would sometimes send a signal just to be sure my implant was working, but I always started carrying out his orders before I felt the pulses anyway. That was because I paid attention to him, and I could see his thoughts even when he was far away.

When Lieutenant Dial finished telling the people about the communication implants, he told them about me. He told them I had been rescued from a municipal shelter as a puppy, and that a military veterinarian had determined that the dominant breeds in my genetic background were black Labrador and standard poodle. That made me a Labradoodle. Some of the people in the crowd laughed when they heard that name, but Lieutenant Dial didn't laugh when he said it.

He said I had the intelligence of a poodle and the temperament of a Labrador. He said I was three years old and in peak physical condition. He said I weighed eighty pounds, which was big enough to be strong, but small enough to be fast and to squeeze into places too tight for people. He said my black, wavy coat was good camouflage at night. He said I was at the top of my training class. He said I was a corporal and my name was Chip.

Then Lieutenant Dial looked across the lawn at a sandbagged machine-gun nest and gave me the hand signal to attack. I knew he was going to give me the signal as soon as he looked across at the sandbags, but I also knew I should wait for it. The people in the bleachers wouldn't like it if I didn't.

But I jumped away fast when he gave it. I ran for the sandbags, and the machine gun opened fire. It was firing blank cartridges, but I knew from training that I had to act as if the ammunition could hurt me. So I zigzagged and made quick stops behind cardboard rocks, stacks of tires, and other things that were on the lawn between Lieutenant Dial and the machine-gun nest. The machine-gun barrel swiveled to follow me, but I was too fast and tricky for it, because when I ran behind a cardboard rock, I would come out in a different direction. The machine-gun barrel couldn't keep up, and soon I was right under it so it couldn't point at me. Then I jumped up over the sandbags and pushed the gunner onto his back. Two mock-enemies on either side of him pointed rifles at me, so I bit one in the crotch and twisted so that he fell against the other one. Then all three mock-enemies were on their backs, and I bit the pads at their throats. A bell sounded over the loudspeaker as I broke the skin of each pad and the mock-blood came out. After the third bell, the people in the bleachers clapped.

Then I felt a quick series of pulses between my shoulders, but I was already jumping away from the machine-gun nest because I knew what Lieutenant Dial wanted me to do next. I ran as fast as I could to the farthest end of the lawn, dodging mock-enemies as they popped up and tried to shoot me, until I reached the wooden wall with the knotted rope at the top. The wall was high, but I liked that. I'm good at jumping.

I ran hard and jumped high, and I grabbed the bottom knot on the rope with my teeth. Then I pushed against the wall with all my feet so I could grab the next knot, and the next, and the next. Just before the next-to-last knot, a piece of the wall broke away as my feet pushed it, and I almost missed the knot. I caught it with just my front teeth. But that made me angry at the wall and the knot, because they were trying to make me disappoint Lieutenant Dial. So I bit as hard as I could with my front teeth, and I kicked and scratched the wall until another piece broke away and gave me a good place for my hind feet. Then I pulled with my teeth and pushed with my legs, and I went all the way over the wall without having to grab the last knot.

On the other side of the wall, two soldiers lay on the ground. They had mock-wounds on their legs and chests, but they weren't pretending to be unconscious. So I went to the nearest one and let him grab the handle on my duty harness. Then I dragged him through a mock-minefield to a medical station. The mines weren't marked with flags the way they often were in training, but I didn't

need the flags. I know the smells of many different explosives, so I could smell the mines even though they were just smoke-bangs. It was easy to drag the soldier around them. Some of them went off when we were past, but it didn't matter. None of the smoke touched us, and I got the soldier to the medical station in the same shape I found him in.

I ran back for the other soldier, but when I reached him he was pretending to be unconscious. I whined and licked his face, but I knew it wouldn't make him stop pretending. So then I grabbed one of his flak-jacket straps and began to drag him toward the medical station. But when we were halfway through the minefield, an open utility vehicle carrying four mock-enemies came driving across it, straight for us. The mines didn't go off as the vehicle drove over them, and the mock-enemy manning the mounted gun began firing at me and my soldier.

They were trying to prevent me from obeying Lieutenant Dial's orders. I wouldn't let them do that.

I dropped my soldier and started running so the mock-enemies would chase me. When they did, and when we were far enough from the wounded soldier that I knew he would be safe, I made a quick stop, turned around, and jumped. I cleared the vehicle's windshield and had just enough time to bite the pad on the gunner's throat. The bell rang. Then I hit the ground behind the vehicle and tumbled, but got up and turned back around in time to see the gunner slump over and the driver turn the steering wheel hard. The other two mock-enemies were raising their pistols.

As the vehicle made its turn, exposing the driver, I ran and jumped again. But when I bit the pad on the driver's throat, the skin didn't break right away. So I hung on and bit harder. The driver gave a yell that I don't think was a word. Then the pad broke, the mock-blood came out, and I heard the bell. So I jumped away, spinning as my paws hit the ground so I could be ready to attack the remaining two mock-enemies.

But I didn't have to. The vehicle rolled over so its wheels went up, and three of the four enemies fell out. Then it was still. The driver was still strapped in his seat, but his neck was bent against the ground, and he didn't move. The three mock-enemies on the ground didn't move either. So I ran to the two I hadn't bitten yet, broke the skins on their throat pads, then returned to my soldier in the minefield.

The soldier was sitting up with his eyes and mouth open. But I grabbed his flak-jacket strap anyway and resumed dragging him to the medical station. Then he tried to pull away from me. But I was still under orders. So I growled, and then my soldier was still again. I delivered him to the medical station, ran back

to Lieutenant Dial, and stood at attention.

The people in the bleachers began to smell unhappy. They made growling noises, and none of them clapped their hands. So for a moment I was afraid I had done something wrong. But then I knew it wasn't so, because Lieutenant Dial touched my head and said I was good.

That was all that mattered.

From Lieutenant Dial's next thoughts, I knew that the driver in the utility vehicle had made a mistake. He'd been supposed to drive farther away from me after the gunner was bitten. But he had turned back toward me too soon, and I had been faster than he had thought I would be. Then, when his throat pad hadn't broken right away, he had panicked and turned the steering wheel too sharply. So the vehicle had rolled over. But by then I had broken the throat pad and jumped away.

All four of the mock-enemies in the utility vehicle had to be taken away for real medical care, and I could hear that some of the people in the bleachers felt bad about that. But Lieutenant Dial didn't. Instead, he became angry. He wasn't angry with me, but I didn't want him to be angry with anything. Being angry made him unhappy. And that made me unhappy too. Anger was like smoke with a bad smell in his head.

The K-9 demonstration was over then, and Melanie came down from the bleachers to meet us. I was glad to see her. But Lieutenant Dial was still angry. He told Melanie that the driver of the utility vehicle had done the exercise incorrectly, and that what had happened wasn't my fault. I had done what I was supposed to do, but the mock-enemies had screwed it up.

Melanie told him she already knew that, and that everyone else knew it too. She said he shouldn't worry about what people would think of him, or of me, or of any of the K-9s, because we had all been wonderful.

I didn't always know what Melanie was saying, but that time I understood every word. And as she spoke, Lieutenant Dial's anger drifted away. Just like smoke. And then he was happy and proud again. And so was I.

I rubbed my nose against Melanie's knee, and she touched my head. I wished I could tell her she was good.

Then Lieutenant Dial, Melanie, and I walked to the edge of the water with some of the people from the bleachers, and we stood on a boardwalk while the people on the pier performed demonstrations with water animals. We had a good view even though we were about thirty meters from them. Lieutenant Dial said the animals that stayed in the water all the time were called dolphins, and

the ones that hopped from the pier to the water and back again were called sea lions. One of the sea lions barked, but I couldn't understand it.

The water animals delivered equipment to people underwater, and they also searched for mines and mock-enemies. Pictures of them doing those things appeared on the big screen. Sometimes a sea lion carried a clamp in its mouth, and when it found a mock-enemy, it swam up behind him and put the clamp on his leg. Then the mock-enemy was pulled up to the pier by a rope attached to the clamp, while the sea lion jumped from the water and got a treat from its handler. It looked like fun, and I wished I could go underwater and sneak up on the mock-enemies down there too.

Then the sea lions had a contest. They were supposed to find some small dummy mines and push buttons on the mines with their noses, then attach handles and bring the mines up to the pier. It was a race to see which sea lion could bring up the most mines in two minutes. So the sea lions were swimming fast and splashing a lot, dropping the mines on the pier and grabbing new handles before plunging into the ocean again.

The dummy water mines looked like black soccer balls, and they had lights that came on if the button had been pushed. Once one of the sea lions brought up a mine that didn't have its light on, and his handler threw the mine back into the water. Then the sea lion had to go get it again, and he had to be sure to push the button before putting it on the pier. If I had been that sea lion, I would have felt bad for not doing it right the first time. But I couldn't tell whether he felt bad or not, because he kept on swimming for more mines. So then I was glad because he was still being a good soldier.

He didn't win the contest, though. He came in second. At the end of two minutes, he had eleven mines, and the winner had twelve. All the people who had watched the race clapped and cheered, and the four sea lions who had raced got up on their hindquarters and barked. The people cheered even more then, and Lieutenant Dial and Melanie did too. But Lieutenant Dial didn't clap because he had one hand on the handle of my duty harness.

Both Lieutenant Dial and Melanie were happy. So I should have been happy too.

But I wasn't. Something was wrong.

I didn't know what it was at first, so I lifted my head high and sniffed the air. There were many smells. There was sweat, soda, and popcorn. There were buckets of little fish. The sea lions smelled salty. Melanie still smelled like flowers. The other K-9s smelled thirsty. The practice mines smelled like wet Frisbees.

Except there was another smell with the Frisbee smell. It wasn't big. But it was there. It was a bad smell. It was a bad smell like the real mines that had been in the practice minefield during the hardest part of training. It was a bad smell like the real mine that had killed another K-9 who wasn't careful enough.

And as soon as I had identified that bad smell, I knew where it was coming from. The final mine that the winning sea lion had brought up wasn't like the others. It looked like them, but it didn't smell like them. It was different. It was bad.

It wanted to explode and kill someone.

But none of the sea lions were doing anything about it. They were still on their hindquarters, swaying back and forth, while the people clapped. One of the dolphins was splashing and chattering out in the water, so I think she might have known. But none of the handlers paid any attention to her. They were smiling at the clapping people.

I was under no specific orders. But Lieutenant Dial had given me one General Order many training sessions ago: If I ever knew something was wrong, I had to act.

So I bolted for the pier, and Lieutenant Dial released my harness handle. I knew his thoughts, and he knew mine. He knew I was being good.

I ran fast between people's legs. Some of them yelled. And then I was on the pier. It moved up and down a little, but I kept on running fast even though it tried to make me fall. Two of the people in white stepped into my path, but I zigzagged around them. The pier was wet there, and my feet slipped. But I scrabbled hard like I did at the wall and kept going.

One of the sea lions came down from his haunches as I approached, and he opened his mouth as if to bite me. It was a big mouth with big teeth. The whole sea lion was as big as five of me, and he lunged at me when I came close. So I jumped over his head and kicked the back of his neck with my hind feet. That pushed me the last three meters to the end of the pier.

My front feet hit the pier right beside the bad mine, so I grabbed its handle with my teeth, whipped it forward, and let go so it flew into the water. Two of the dolphins swam away fast as the mine splashed and sank.

Then I couldn't smell the bad mine anymore, so I was glad. But when I turned around and saw the white-clothed people and their sea lions, none of them seemed glad. The people were shouting and the sea lions were barking. The sea lions' barks still didn't make sense.

I saw Lieutenant Dial running down the pier toward me, so I started running

toward him too. And just as I began to zigzag around the sea lions, I heard a rumble and a splash, and the pier rose up under me. I fell, and the pier hit my jaw and made me bite my tongue. Then the pier bounced up and down, and I couldn't stand up because my feet kept slipping. One of the people in white had fallen down beside me, and he kept slipping too. That made me worry about Lieutenant Dial, so I looked up to see if he was all right. But a sea lion was in the way.

Then I yelped. Later, a news reporter would say that I yelped because my tongue was hurt. But that wasn't the reason. It was because I couldn't see or hear Lieutenant Dial, and I couldn't find his thoughts. There were too many people thinking and yelling all at once. I couldn't even smell him because I was too close to the sea lions.

That was a bad moment. But the pier moved a little less each time it bounced, and finally I could stand up. And then I could see Lieutenant Dial. He was in the middle of the pier helping another person stand up, so I ran to him and stood at attention. When he had finished helping the other person, he looked down at me and saluted. And he told me I was good. He told me I was more good than I had ever been before.

And the bad moment was gone.

Later, investigators said that that a real enemy had replaced one of the sea lions' dummy mines with a live one, intending to hurt or kill as many people and animals as possible. But because I threw it back into the water, only one dolphin was hurt. And no one was killed.

A few weeks later, Lieutenant Dial was promoted to Captain, and I was promoted to Sergeant. Captain Dial received silver bars for his uniform, and then he leaned over and showed me a new metal tag before clipping it to the ring in my collar. It was shaped like the insignia for Sergeant First Class. I knew I couldn't wear it on combat duty, because it would get in the way and make noise. But it was still a fine thing, because that was how it looked in Captain Dial's thoughts.

Other soldiers were promoted during that ceremony as well, but I was the only K-9. Also, Captain Dial and I were commended for finding the live mine. We were called heroes.

Melanie was there for the ceremony, and both she and Captain Dial were proud and happy. So I was proud and happy too.

But I still wasn't as happy as I had been on the pier. That was where I had been more good than I had ever been before. Captain Dial had said so.

That was how I knew it was true.

#

Soon after our promotions, Captain Dial and I left the fort with many other soldiers, and we all went to the war. Melanie came to the fort to say goodbye to us. She and Captain Dial hugged each other for a long time while I stood at ease. Most of the other soldiers were hugging people too. There were wives and children, and even a few dogs who weren't soldiers.

Then Melanie knelt down and put her head against mine. It surprised me. She had never done anything like that before. I think she was trying to help me understand her thoughts the way I understood Captain Dial's. It helped a little. But even if she hadn't done it, I would have known she was telling me the same thing she had told me every morning before training. She was telling me to take care of Captain Dial.

So I kissed her face. I wanted her to be glad that Captain Dial and I were going to the war together. Her face tasted like ocean water.

Then Melanie took her head away from mine and put her arms around Captain Dial again. After a while, Captain Dial pulled away from her and gave me the signal to proceed. We left Melanie and went to the D Company bus.

When all the soldiers of D Company had boarded the bus, it took us to the air transport. Captain Dial was quiet during the bus ride. He just looked out the window. And for the first time, his thoughts weren't clear to me. It was as if they were far away in a fog, and a fuzzy sound ran through them. I glimpsed Melanie, but that was all. Captain Dial kept his hand on my neck, though, and every now and then his fingers rubbed behind my ears. So I didn't worry. Captain Dial always had some thoughts that I couldn't understand anyway. The only ones I really needed to know were the ones that were orders.

The air transport took a long time, and it was loud. I didn't like it. By the time it stopped at an island to refuel, all my muscles were sore. But I felt better after marking some trees near the airstrip, and better still after some food. We got back on the transport then, and Captain Dial gave me a pill to help me sleep through the rest of the flight. It helped a lot. But I was still glad when we were on the ground again. When we finally left the transport we were in a place that was dry and sunny, and all of the smells were sharp.

The soldiers of D Company spent one night in a tin-roofed barracks at the combat zone airfield, and Captain Dial and I slept there with them. There was no kennel or cushion for me, so I slept on a blanket beside Captain Dial's cot. I

was the only K-9 in the company, and some of the other soldiers were nervous around me. But Captain Dial made sure that I met each one and learned that soldier's smell. Captain Dial wanted to keep them all safe. So I wanted to keep them safe too.

I could see some soldiers' thoughts, although none of them were as clear to me as Captain Dial's. But that was all right, because the soldiers' voices and smells told me all I needed to know about them. Most of them were friendly, although several stayed nervous even after they met me. And a few smelled frightened or angry.

One of the angry ones was an officer, Lieutenant Morris, who was in charge of First Platoon. I couldn't see his thoughts at all, but I still knew he didn't like me. I knew he didn't like Captain Dial, either. When he stood before us, his sweat smelled bitter, and his voice was low. And even when he saluted, his muscles were tense as if he were about to run or fight.

Captain Dial was aware of all this, because he knew my thoughts. But unlike me, he was able to think of a reason for Lieutenant Morris's attitude. He thought Lieutenant Morris believed he should have been promoted to Captain and given command of D Company.

This troubled Captain Dial, because he had never wanted to lead a company of regular soldiers anyway. But I was the only one who knew it. What he really wanted to do was serve in a K-9 unit. But when we were promoted, he was ordered to command D Company because its original captain had died in training. So he requested that I be allowed to join the company with him, and we were both happy when his request was granted. We joined D Company on the same day we went to the war. And I knew that all of the soldiers in D Company were lucky to have Captain Dial as their leader.

The morning after our arrival in the combat zone, D Company was assigned to guard four checkpoints on highways that led to the airfield. So Captain Dial put a platoon at each checkpoint, splitting the soldiers among three separate road barriers per checkpoint. He told the lieutenants and sergeants to stop and inspect each vehicle at each barrier, and to detain the occupants of any vehicle found to contain contraband. He also told them to have their soldiers fire warning shots over any vehicles that passed the first barrier without stopping for inspection. They were to aim at the tires and engines of any vehicles that also passed the second barrier without stopping. And any vehicles that passed the third barrier without stopping were to be destroyed. But any vehicles that stopped at all three barriers and were found to contain no contraband were to be allowed to proceed unless the soldiers had reason to believe that a more thorough inspection was needed. In that case, the suspicious vehicle was to be reported to Captain Dial so he could bring me to it and I could smell whether

anything was wrong.

I thought these orders were easy and clear.

Captain Dial and I spent our first five days in the combat zone riding from checkpoint to checkpoint in a utility vehicle, inspecting cars and trucks and seeing to the needs of D Company. I liked doing the inspections. In those first days, I found three pistols, four rifles, a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, and a brick of hashish. Captain Dial arrested the people with the guns and sent them to Headquarters. But he laughed at the man with the hashish and let him drive away. Hashish wasn't contraband here, he told me, so long as no one gave any to our soldiers. This was a new rule to me, but I'm good at learning new rules.

The first five days were fun. All of our platoons did their jobs, and so did Captain Dial and I.

Then, on the morning of the sixth day, Lieutenant Morris ordered First Platoon to open fire on a van that had gone past the first barrier without stopping. It didn't reach the second barrier. By the time Lieutenant Morris ordered his soldiers to cease fire, all seven people inside the van had been killed.

Captain Dial and I weren't there when it happened. We were two checkpoints away. By the time we arrived, the incident had been over for fifteen minutes. Lieutenant Morris and a few other soldiers had dragged three of the bodies from the shot-up van and laid them by the side of the road. They were heading back toward the van when Captain Dial stopped our utility vehicle in front of them and ordered them to stay away from the van and the bodies.

Then he ordered me to search the van, and I obeyed. It was a bad place. It smelled of spent machine-gun rounds, explosive residue, and human blood.

The driver was still in her seat. She had been a woman about the size of Melanie. The three other bodies still in the van had been small children. There were two boys and a girl. I had seen children of their sizes on the day by the ocean. But the ones in the van had been shot through and through. Their blood was all over the floor and seats, and I had to step in it to conduct my search.

There was no contraband. There were no guns, and the only bullets were spent rounds. And I couldn't smell any explosives except the residue of a grenade that had been fired into the van by someone in First Platoon.

After I had searched the van, Captain Dial ordered me to search the three bodies on the ground. So I did. They were all girls. Two were even smaller than the children in the van. The third was larger, about the size of the girl who writes these words. But she wasn't fully grown. All of them had been shot many

times. One of the younger girls had most of her face gone. The older girl had a narrow cut on her neck. None of them possessed any contraband.

Captain Dial was angrier than he had ever been before. The smoke in his head was thick and turbulent. And there were sounds. I could hear Melanie crying. I could hear a hundred Melanies crying.

Then Captain Dial began shouting at Lieutenant Morris. I had never heard him shout like that before, and it made me cringe even though he wasn't shouting at me. All the soldiers of First Platoon cringed, too, especially when Captain Dial said he would bring Lieutenant Morris up on charges for disobeying orders.

But Lieutenant Morris's bitter smell was acrid and strong now, and he stood with his head thrust forward and his arms straight down at his sides. He didn't salute. It was as if he was challenging Captain Dial. It was as if he thought he had done a good thing, and that Captain Dial's orders had been wrong.

That made me angry, because Captain Dial always gave good orders. So I took a step toward Lieutenant Morris and growled.

Lieutenant Morris reached for his sidearm, but Captain Dial slapped his hand away from it. Then Lieutenant Morris made a fist and started to swing it at Captain Dial's face. I was on him before his fist was halfway there, and I put him on his back on the highway.

I stood with my front paws on Lieutenant Morris's chest and my teeth touching his throat, and Captain Dial ordered him to remain still. This time, Lieutenant Morris obeyed. I could feel the pulse in his neck and the shallow motion of his chest as he breathed, but those were the only movements he made until Captain Dial ordered me to stand down. Then I took my paws from Lieutenant Morris's chest and backed away.

But now I smelled something wrong in a pocket of Lieutenant Morris's fatigues. It smelled like the girl with the cut on her neck. It smelled like her blood.

I pointed at Lieutenant Morris's pocket and barked. So Captain Dial knelt down, opened the pocket, and brought out a slender chain with a shiny rock on it. It wasn't just like the one he had given Melanie, but it didn't look much different. Except that this one had blood on its chain.

The clasp on the chain was closed, but the chain had been broken in another place. The rock slid down against the clasp when Captain Dial pulled the chain from Lieutenant Morris's pocket, and it dangled there as he held it up. It caught the sun so that it seemed to have a light inside it.

Captain Dial remained on one knee, looking at the necklace, for a long time. Lieutenant Morris started to speak, but I growled and he shut up. I was doing him a favor, because one of Captain Dial's thoughts was clear. He was thinking of using his sidearm to shoot Lieutenant Morris in the head. He was thinking that if Lieutenant Morris said even one word, that was what he would do.

What happened instead was that Captain Dial stood up and told a First Platoon sergeant to call for military police. Then he returned to our utility vehicle, leaving Lieutenant Morris on his back on the highway. I went with Captain Dial, and we waited in our vehicle until the military police came. When they did, Captain Dial gave the rock and chain to one of them.

I didn't understand everything that happened after that. But Lieutenant Morris was back with D Company just two days after he ordered First Platoon to attack the van. And Captain Dial was unhappy because he didn't think there would ever be a court-martial. For one thing, none of the soldiers of First Platoon were sure about what had happened. Some of them even thought that the van had been loaded with explosives, and they continued to think so even after Captain Dial told them I hadn't smelled any. Also, Lieutenant Morris said that he had found the girl's necklace on the ground. And there were no soldiers who would say that he hadn't. Except me. I hadn't smelled any dirt or asphalt on it. All I had smelled was skin and blood from the girl's neck plus sweat from Lieutenant Morris's hand. But the only officer who could hear my testimony was Captain Dial. And unless there was a court-martial, he had already done all he could do.

Besides, the military police said they lost the necklace.

Captain Dial was sad from then on. I don't think anyone else in the company knew that. But I did.

I wanted to make Captain Dial happy again, so I tried even harder to be good. And he told me I was. He told me I was the best sergeant he had ever seen.

But he was still sad. So I was sad too.

#

Two weeks later, D Company was assigned to a combat mission. A few hours before dawn on a Friday morning, thirty enemy guerrillas had attacked our supply depot using mortars and small arms -- and although they had been repelled, four of our soldiers had been killed. So the guerrillas had to be followed and destroyed, and D Company was chosen to do it. Captain Dial thought it was strange that an entire company was being sent after only thirty

enemies, but he followed the order without hesitation.

D Company was in pursuit of the guerrillas within an hour of the attack. The guerrillas had a big head start, but they were on foot, and D Company had armored personnel carriers, utility vehicles, and me. So we were able to move fast over both roads and fields, and every few minutes Captain Dial had me run ahead and correct the direction of our pursuit. The guerrillas were staying in one group, so their trail was easy to smell.

We had almost caught up to them as they reached the hills fifteen kilometers west of our airfield. We were so close that Captain Dial could see them through his night-vision field glasses. They were making their way up a narrow, ascending valley, and they were still in one group.

This troubled Captain Dial. It seemed to him that once the guerrillas had reached the hills, they should have scattered to make our pursuit more difficult. But they were staying together. So Captain Dial used his radio to consult with Headquarters, and Headquarters said a refugee camp of about three hundred souls lay a short distance up the valley, a few hundred meters beyond a natural curve. The guerrillas probably intended to stay together long enough to reach that camp -- and then they would disperse and blend in with the civilians. This would force Captain Dial to either let them escape, or arrest the entire camp.

So we had to stop the guerrillas before they reached the refugee camp. Captain Dial increased our speed, then dropped off two squads from Fourth Platoon with ten mortars as soon as we were in range. His plan was for those squads to fire the mortars just beyond the guerrillas, forcing them to turn away from the refugee camp . . . and perhaps also to run back into our pursuit.

As the rest of D Company started up the valley, the mortar squads put a dozen rounds where Captain Dial had ordered. But instead of reversing direction, the guerrillas began to ascend a hill on the south side of the valley. They remained in one group, though, and we gained on them. When we were close enough that we might be hit by stray mortar rounds, Captain Dial radioed the squads and told them to hold fire. But they were to stay put to intercept any enemies that might be flushed back toward them.

We rushed toward the base of the hill the guerrillas were climbing. They were moving much more slowly now, and in the light of dawn it was clear that we would overtake them before they reached the crest of the hill. I became excited as I thought of knocking them down and holding them, one by one, until my fellow soldiers could take them prisoner. And as the utility vehicle that carried me, Captain Dial, and Staff Sergeant Owens began to climb the hill, I readied myself to leap out and attack.

Our vehicle was in the lead, so most of the company was still on the valley

floor as we started up the hill. It was at that moment that rocket-propelled grenades and mortar shells began raining down around us from the opposite hillside to the north. And then the guerrillas we were chasing took up positions and began to fire down on us with small arms.

Captain Dial radioed orders to our platoon leaders to take cover and return fire. Then he had Staff Sergeant Owens turn our utility vehicle broadside to the enemy fire, and the three of us exited on the downhill side. We crawled downhill as fast as we could until we reached one of D Company's APCs, and we took cover behind it with soldiers from First and Second Platoons. The soldiers were jumping up and leaning out to fire quick bursts from their rifles, and Captain Dial shouted for them to keep it up as he got on the radio again to call Headquarters for air support. Our helicopters and drones were always out on missions, but two or three could be diverted if soldiers were in trouble. And we were in trouble.

But now Captain Dial couldn't raise Headquarters on the radio. He tried every possible frequency, and there was nothing but silence.

Lieutenant Morris crawled to us and told Captain Dial that we were all going to be killed, and that it was Captain Dial's fault. I wanted to bite Lieutenant Morris's throat then. But Captain Dial ignored him, so I tried to ignore him too. He wasn't a good soldier. He didn't belong in D Company.

There was a loud explosion up the hill, and a soldier told Captain Dial that our abandoned utility vehicle had been hit by a rocket from the other side of the valley. They were zeroing in on us. So Captain Dial said we couldn't stay behind the armored personnel carrier, because it would be targeted next. He ordered First and Second Platoons to retreat to the valley floor, and then he got on the radio and told the mortar squads from Fourth Platoon to fire on the northern hillside. Finally he called to Third Platoon and the remaining two squads of Fourth Platoon, who were all still at the base of the hill, and told them to abandon their APCs and move up the valley on foot, doubletime. All platoons were to return fire as best they could. No one was to retreat back toward the plain.

As Captain Dial and I moved downhill with First and Second Platoons, Lieutenant Morris shouted that Captain Dial's orders were insane. The soldiers in APCs should stay in them, he said. Without armor, he said, they would be picked off in the valley like cattle in a chute.

But Captain Dial knew that the armor was what the enemy would try to destroy first, unless it was moving fast. And it couldn't move fast in the terrain we were in. So getting the soldiers away from it was the only thing to do. And sure enough, before we reached the bottom of the hill, the APC we had been

using for cover was hit by a rocket and destroyed.

Our mortars began hitting the northern hill as Captain Dial and I reached the base of the southern hill, and Captain Dial stood his ground there while urging the soldiers of First and Second Platoons to run past our abandoned APCs and continue up the valley. And even now, Lieutenant Morris kept telling him he was wrong, and that D Company ought to be heading back to the plain in full retreat.

But I knew Captain Dial's thoughts, and I knew he was right. Headquarters had been tricked into having D Company follow the guerrillas into an ambush -- but Captain Dial wouldn't let the guerrillas trick him any further. He knew that once the ambush began, the enemy would expect D Company to retreat toward the plain. So there would be another trap waiting at the mouth of the valley. The enemy would close us in, then fire down upon us until we were annihilated.

So Captain Dial would confound their expectations. D Company would continue up the valley, on foot, until we could reach an elevated position. With our mortar squads out on the plain providing harassing fire, we could be well up the valley before the guerrillas could leave their hillsides. And then we would transform the enemy's ambush into an attack of our own.

But we would have to take up our battle position before reaching the refugee camp. So we would doubletime around the curve to get out of sight of the enemy, then run up the hill on the backside of the curve. The guerrillas would have no clear shot from their current positions -- and if they followed us, we would be able to pour fire down on them as they rounded the curve. So even without air support, we could prevail.

Captain Dial's plan was good, and as D Company rushed up the valley, it began to work. Two more of our abandoned vehicles were hit and began to burn, but despite the constant fire from the enemy, we had not yet lost a single soldier. Our mortar squads were hitting the hillsides as ordered, and the guerrillas' weapons fire became erratic. Captain Dial paused every few meters to shout orders and encouragement to his running soldiers, and once he sent me back to nip at the heels of a few stragglers. But the stragglers weren't stragglers for long, and I was able to rejoin Captain Dial in less than a minute. Then, bringing up the rear, he and I rounded the curve and began running up the slope to take our positions with the rest of our soldiers. They were already following Captain Dial's orders, taking cover behind rocks and in gullies. And they were readying their weapons.

Some of the guerrillas had chased after us, and a few of them came around the curve before Captain Dial and I were far enough up the slope to take our positions. But we hit the dirt so our soldiers could fire on them, and only two of

these enemies survived long enough to come within twenty meters of me and Captain Dial. So I turned, charged, and bit their throats. Then I returned to Captain Dial, and we joined several of our soldiers behind a jumble of rocks and dirt.

More guerrillas came around the curve, and D Company shot them. Then some came up the slope in a truck, and one of our soldiers destroyed it with a rocket-propelled grenade. We were winning the battle despite being ambushed.

Then strange things happened.

They didn't seem strange at first. At first, I heard the buzz of airborne drones. Captain Dial couldn't hear them yet, but he knew that I could, and he was glad. It seemed that Headquarters had heard his request after all.

But almost as soon as I heard the drones, I also heard distant explosions, and our mortar squads stopped firing. So Captain Dial radioed them for a status report. But there was no reply. Then he tried again to contact Headquarters, but there was still no reply there either.

The buzz became loud, and two drones appeared around the curve of the valley, flying low. They were narrow-winged and sleek, and almost invisible against the sky. They didn't have any insignia on their wings.

Then they fired rockets at us. They fired rockets at D Company. And at least twenty soldiers died as the rockets exploded. Dirt and rocks pelted me and Captain Dial where we crouched. My ears hurt.

The drones rose up over the opposite hill, then turned back toward us. Captain Dial shouted into his radio, trying one frequency after another, doing his best to raise Headquarters, to raise the remote drone pilots, to raise anyone who should have been listening. He shouted to his lieutenants to try their own radios too. And they did. But no one received a reply.

The drones came swooping toward us, and it became clear that their first attack hadn't been a mistake. Captain Dial's thoughts were tangled as he realized this. The enemy had no such weapons. So he couldn't understand why the drones were attacking us. Their cameras should have seen who we were, and their pilots should have known that D Company wasn't the enemy.

But even in his confusion, Captain Dial was a good leader. He ordered Sergeant Owens to fire a flare to identify us, but he didn't wait to see whether the cameras had seen it and understood its meaning. Instead, he shouted for D Company's surviving lieutenants and sergeants to get their soldiers up and moving again. If the drones were returning to attack our position again, he was going to put us somewhere else.

The soldiers of D Company were already running down the slope when the drones launched their second wave of rockets, so most of them made it to the valley floor. But eight more were killed. Captain Dial and I were bringing up the rear again, and the rocket that killed the eight exploded in front of us just as another exploded behind us. Captain Dial dove to the ground, putting his arms around me and pushing me down. Then he covered me with his body as more rockets exploded on the slope above us.

I didn't like it. Captain Dial wasn't supposed to shield me from harm. I was supposed to do that for him. So I tried to reverse our positions, but Captain Dial ordered me to stay put. Of course I had to obey. But I didn't understand. Captain Dial was more important to D Company than I was.

The rockets stopped exploding, and the drones passed over us again. They were so close that the dirt under my jaw hummed. Then Captain Dial was on his feet again, shouting orders as the drones flew behind the hilltop. The surviving soldiers of D Company were to run like hell up the valley and to take whatever cover they could find -- rocks, trees, ditches, anything -- if the drones made another pass. But the soldiers were to avoid entering the refugee camp, wherever it was, at all costs. If they came upon it while still on the run, they were to find a way around it.

#

Captain Dial was smart. But even Captain Dial could only make his choices based on what he knew. And he didn't know that the refugees weren't gathered in a single camp, as Headquarters had said. He didn't know that they were scattered in small clusters throughout the rest of the valley.

And he didn't know that the drones would return so soon, or that they would swoop up and down the valley firing their Gatling guns at anything that moved. The valley was full of sunlight now, so the pilots should have been able to see our soldiers' uniforms. There was nothing to block the view of the cameras. But the drones kept firing on us.

I wished I could jump high enough to tear them out of the sky.

As D Company's lieutenants and sergeants began shouting and radioing Captain Dial, telling him that they were losing more soldiers and that every scrap of cover was occupied by noncombatants, Captain Dial made a decision he didn't want to make. He tried one more time to contact Headquarters -- and when that failed, he ordered D Company to return fire. Then he took a rifle from a fallen corporal and fired the first shots at the lead drone as it swooped toward us again.

I couldn't fire a weapon, so I did the only thing I could do to help. I ran in a

zigzag pattern toward the drones in an attempt to draw their fire and give the rest of D Company a better chance to make their shots count. And I could hear Captain Dial shouting that I was good.

That made me glad.

The lead drone turned toward me, and in that instant the soldiers of D Company were able to hit it broadside with small-arms fire and at least one RPG. The drone began spewing smoke, and then it turned and almost collided with the second drone. The second drone pulled up and vanished behind a hill just as the first one began to spiral downward.

I returned to Captain Dial, who ordered me and the soldiers who were closest to follow him. We ran up a hillside and dove into a gully that cut across it. There were six of us: Captain Dial, Lieutenant Morris, Sergeant Owens, two specialists, and me. And in the gully we found five civilians: An old man, a woman, an adolescent girl, and two young boys. They scrambled away from us as we tumbled into the gully, and they seemed about to climb out until Captain Dial spoke to them in their language. I think he told them they would be safer if they stayed put.

He had no sooner gotten the words out than the ground shook with the biggest explosion yet. I smelled burning fuel, and I knew the drone had crashed. Captain Dial shouted for everyone to hit the dirt, but I was the only one in the gully who heard him. There was a roaring noise and more explosions. The drone's remaining weapons were detonating.

One of the boys tried to climb out of the gully. The woman jumped up to stop him, and something from the exploding drone hit her in the face. She fell back into the gully. So Captain Dial tried to get to the panicked boy to pull him down. But Lieutenant Morris clutched Captain Dial's leg and stopped him.

Captain Dial made a gesture, and I followed the order. I leaped over him and Lieutenant Morris, and I grabbed the boy's ankle and pulled him down. My teeth broke his skin, but it couldn't be helped. When the boy fell to the dirt beside the woman, I pressed my chest against his to hold him there.

The girl started to move as if to protect the boy from me, but then she looked at my eyes. And for that moment, she knew my thoughts. So she crawled to the woman instead and wiped blood from her face.

The woman wasn't breathing, and I knew she was dead. The girl knew it too, but she tried to make the woman breathe again anyway.

There were a few more explosions from the fallen drone, and then the only noise from it was a muted roar as it burned. So I listened for the other drone,

and I heard it flying farther and farther away.

Captain Dial told me I could let the boy up, so I did. He tried to run away again, but this time the girl stopped him. He was crying, and so was the girl. So was the other boy. The girl looked at me again, and I knew then that the dead woman was their mother and the old man was their grandfather. The old man was sitting against the wall of the gully with his knees pulled up to his face and his eyes closed tight.

I looked at Captain Dial then and saw that he was hurt. His left sleeve was turning dark at the shoulder, just below the edge of his flak jacket. But I could hardly smell his blood among all the other bloody smells. I went to him and whined, and he touched my head and told me he was all right. I wanted to go find a medic for him, but he ordered me to stay.

Then he used his radio to ask the rest of D Company for a status report, but he couldn't hear the replies because Lieutenant Morris began shouting. I couldn't understand all of the words, but I understood that Lieutenant Morris blamed Captain Dial for what had happened. He accused Captain Dial of treason for shooting down one of our own aircraft. And he said that the civilians weren't refugees at all, but guerrillas like those we had been pursuing. He said that was why the drones had attacked. And he said it was Captain Dial's fault that D Company had been in the line of fire when that happened.

Nothing Lieutenant Morris was shouting made any sense. But nothing that had happened to us had made any sense either. I knew that much from Captain Dial's thoughts. He didn't understand why things had happened the way they had happened. He slumped with his back against the wall of the gully, and he wondered whether Melanie would still love him after this.

Lieutenant Morris turned to Sergeant Owens and the two specialists, and he announced that Captain Dial was incapacitated. So he was now ranking officer, he said, and he ordered them to turn their weapons toward the old man, the girl, and the boys. If any of them moved, he said, the soldiers were to shoot them all.

Sergeant Owens and the specialists did as they were told. Then Lieutenant Morris reached for the radio in Captain Dial's right hand, but I jumped in his way and snarled at him. So Lieutenant Morris unholstered his sidearm and pointed it at me.

But before he could fire, Captain Dial spoke. He ordered Lieutenant Morris to lower his weapon, and after some hesitation, Lieutenant Morris obeyed. Then Captain Dial ordered Sergeant Owens and the specialists to lower their weapons as well, and they obeyed too.

Captain Dial was strong again. His shoulder was bleeding, but his thoughts

were clear. He stood up, pushing himself off the gully wall with his right forearm, and peered over the rim at the burning drone. He spoke into his radio and told his soldiers to stay put if they were in a safe place, and to keep trying to find one if they weren't. He would assess the situation and issue new orders within the next few minutes.

But we didn't have a few minutes. I could hear the second drone returning.

I barked to let Captain Dial know it was coming. So then he shouted into his radio and ordered all of his soldiers to remain still and refrain from returning fire unless directly fired upon. Then he ordered those of us in the gully to hit the dirt. The girl and the two boys didn't understand at first, but the old man put his hands on their shoulders and made them lie down close to their dead mother.

Then Captain Dial lowered himself to a sitting position with his back against the gully wall. He couldn't lie down flat with his wounded shoulder. I lay down next to him and put my chin on his knee, and we waited while the drone flew back and forth. Its Gatling gun chattered three or four times, and I hoped it was shooting enemy guerrillas and not D Company soldiers or civilians.

One of the little boys began to cry, but the girl and the old man whispered to him, and then he was quiet again. I was glad they could calm him like that. They were being good leaders. Like Captain Dial.

But a good leader needs good soldiers.

On the drone's fourth pass, Lieutenant Morris stood and fired his weapon into the air. I was on him fast, my front paws hitting his back and pushing him down, but it was too late. Even as I pinned Lieutenant Morris to the bottom of the gully, I could hear the drone turning and the barrels of its Gatling guns beginning to spin.

Lieutenant Morris shouted into the dirt that we had to show ourselves to the drone so it would know who we were and so it could help us kill the rest of the enemy. He worked a hand free from under his chest and pointed at the family with the dead mother.

I wanted to bite Lieutenant Morris and bite him hard. And I smelled something in one of his pockets that made me feel that way even more. It smelled like the dead girl at the highway checkpoint.

But I didn't bite him, because I knew Captain Dial wouldn't like it. Captain Dial was busy with his radio, telling the rest of D Company that they were not to give away their positions by firing on the drone if it attacked those of us in the gully -- not unless there was a clear shot for an RPG. Otherwise, we were on our own. But D Company would survive.

I heard the drone dip low. It was flying on a path directly in line with our gully. It would be able to pour bullets and rockets on us with ease.

Captain Dial was on his feet. It was as if he had been yanked up on a rope from the sky. His left sleeve was so wet that it dripped.

He shouted two orders. First, Sergeant Owens and the two specialists were to get out of the gully at the south rim and run through the smoke of the downed aircraft until they could find other cover in the valley. Second, I was to take the civilians over the north rim and head up into the hills until I could find another gully, a cave, or some other sheltered position. I was to keep them safe.

Sergeant Owens and the specialists clambered over the south rim, rolled, and ran into the smoke. I jumped off Lieutenant Morris and started toward the civilians. But after a few steps, I stopped. The drone's Gatling guns had begun to fire.

I looked back and saw Captain Dial pull Lieutenant Morris to his feet. Captain Dial could only use his right arm, so he had dropped his radio. Lieutenant Morris seemed dazed, and Captain Dial had to hold him up and drag him.

Captain Dial shouted for me to obey my order. I was not to wait for him and Lieutenant Morris. They would catch up, he said.

But I knew Captain Dial's thoughts. I knew he didn't think that he and Lieutenant Morris would make it.

So for the first time ever, I decided to disobey a direct order. I would obey my General Order instead. That was what I had done on the day beside the ocean, and Captain Dial had told me I was good. He had told me I was more good than I had ever been before. So I would do that again.

I ran back to Captain Dial, and he yelled at me. He said I had to obey his order immediately.

But instead I grabbed one of Lieutenant Morris's flak-jacket straps, and I pulled him away from Captain Dial and began dragging him up the gully wall. He was heavy, but I'm strong.

Captain Dial knew then that he should take charge of the civilians. Dragging soldiers to safety was one of my jobs, and keeping civilians safe was one of his. But first, he jumped to me and hooked Lieutenant Morris's arm through my harness loop. Then he pulled the strap to tighten the loop. Now I could let go of the flak-jacket strap and drag Lieutenant Morris a lot faster.

Captain Dial touched my head and told me to go.

I went up the gully wall and over the top with Lieutenant Morris while Captain Dial ran to the civilians and told them that they must go with him. One of the boys cried because he wanted to stay with his mother, but the old man and the girl listened to Captain Dial and wouldn't let the boy stay. They all climbed up from the gully.

Captain Dial's foot slipped on the way up and he almost fell, but the girl grabbed his arm to steady him. It was his wounded arm, but she couldn't reach the other one. I saw a flash like a grenade exploding in Captain Dial's thoughts. But Captain Dial didn't cry out even though it hurt a lot. He was a good soldier. The girl was, too. She didn't hesitate to help Captain Dial. She didn't flinch from his blood.

When we were all out of the gully, we ran north through the smoke. Captain Dial and the civilians were a few meters west of me and Lieutenant Morris, and they were moving up the slope a little faster. Every few steps, Captain Dial would look back and call encouragement to me. And I would pull harder and could feel Lieutenant Morris's boots bouncing on the ground behind us.

I didn't look back, but I heard the buzz of the drone as it flew low over the gully we had just left. I could smell its exhaust. Its Gatling guns chattered, and the slugs made dull thumps in the dirt.

And then, as we ran higher and came up out of the smoke, I heard the drone swoop out over the valley, turn, and head right for us. It was attacking us from behind, and there was no place for us to take cover when its guns started firing again. I looked ahead and saw a shadow on the ground that looked like another gully, but it was too far away. Lieutenant Morris and I wouldn't reach it before the drone strafed us.

I looked over at Captain Dial. Although he was wounded, he was now carrying one of the boys. The girl was carrying the other one. The old man was breathing hard and stumbling. So they were losing speed, and Lieutenant Morris and I had almost caught up to them. They wouldn't reach the next gully either. The drone would be able to hit all of us with the same burst of gunfire, or with just one rocket.

Captain Dial looked over at me as I looked at him, and we each knew the other's thoughts. There was only one thing to do. And when his thoughts said Now, I followed his order.

He and the civilians cut left, where there was still a little smoke, and I cut right, where the air was clear. We ran away from each other as fast as we could. I could hear Captain Dial's breath getting farther and farther away behind me. I could hear it even over the noise from Lieutenant Morris's boots.

I would have dropped Lieutenant Morris if I could, because he would have been safer lying still. But I couldn't. The loop on my harness was pulled tight around his arm, and there was no time for me to turn my head to yank it loose.

The drone came after me and Lieutenant Morris. I was sorry for what that meant for Lieutenant Morris, but glad because it gave Captain Dial a better chance to get himself and the civilians to cover. And I was glad because it gave me a chance to be good.

I ran hard, and I zigzagged as much as I could while dragging Lieutenant Morris. The engine buzz became a roar, and the Gatling gun chattered loud and long. And it almost missed us. But the last slugs in the burst came ripping through the dirt right behind us, and Lieutenant Morris jerked as they reached him. I was slapped down at my hindquarters, and I fell. Lieutenant Morris and I rolled a little way down the hill, and the drone flew over us so low that I could see the rivets in its belly. It rose up over the ridge, hung there for a moment, and then started toward us again.

But this time it bloomed fire from its tail, and it twisted sideways and dove into the hillside above us. There was a loud noise and more fire when it hit, and smoke like there had been from the first one.

I tried to get up, but Lieutenant Morris was lying on my hind legs. And my back hurt, close to my tail. But I couldn't see or hear Captain Dial, and I had to find him. So I twisted my head around far enough to tug on my harness loop until Lieutenant Morris's arm slipped out. I couldn't hear Lieutenant Morris's breath or heartbeat, and I could smell that he had blood coming out of his legs, back, chest, and neck. He was dead, and there was no place I could drag him where he would be all right again.

When his arm came free, I was able to scramble with my front legs and pull myself out from under him. And then I was able to stand up all the way even though my back hurt. I looked for Captain Dial and the civilians, but I couldn't see them. There was a lot more smoke now, and it made my eyes itch. It also made it hard to smell anything else. But I heard the girl say something, faint and soft, so I left Lieutenant Morris and followed her voice.

I found her with the other civilians and Captain Dial. Captain Dial was lying on the ground, and the girl was kneeling beside him with her hand on his head. The old man was standing nearby holding the little boys' hands. The boys were scared. They were looking at the body of a D Company soldier lying nearby. It was torn in two.

Captain Dial smiled when I came up to him and licked his face. I had to step over an RPG launcher to reach him, and when I touched him I knew what he had done. He had found the RPG launcher with the dead soldier, and he had used it

to bring down the second drone. But it had recoiled against his wounded shoulder, and now the wound was bleeding even more.

He saw my thoughts and knew what had happened to Lieutenant Morris. But he said I had done everything right. He said he was proud of me. He said I was good.

And just as he said that, I heard a buzzing noise far off in the south. It was heading toward us fast. More drones were coming.

Captain Dial couldn't hear them. But he knew I did. And he said that they might not be coming to attack us, because their pilots might have realized that the first two had been firing on allies and civilians. But we couldn't count on it. So I was to take the four civilians away and find shelter for them. I was to do so immediately.

I didn't understand at first, because the picture I saw in Captain Dial's thoughts was a picture only of me and the civilians. He wasn't in it. He wasn't walking with us, and I wasn't dragging him with my harness.

And then he made me understand. He was too dizzy to walk, and I couldn't drag him without making his wound worse.

I wanted to follow his orders, but first I wanted to go back down the hill and find a D Company medic to take care of him. But Captain Dial said there was no time for that. Not if I was going to take the civilians to safety before the new drones arrived. And I knew he was right, because the girl could hear the drones now too. She still had her hand on Captain Dial's head, but she was looking at the sky.

I whined. I didn't want to go off with the civilians and leave Captain Dial all alone, even for a little while.

Captain Dial reached up with his right hand to touch my head. He told me it was all right to leave him for now, because I could come back as soon as I had taken the civilians to a safe place. It could be a cave or a deep ravine. It just had to be somewhere they couldn't be hurt. Once I had made sure of that, I could return. And if a medic hadn't come to help Captain Dial yet, I could go find one for him then.

But for now, I had to go. I had to keep the civilians safe.

Captain Dial took his hand from my head and spoke to the girl, and he took his pulse transmitter from the pouch on his belt and gave it to her. I knew he was telling her to go with me, and that the transmitter would help us communicate. She shook her head at first, but I could understand her thoughts well enough to know that it wasn't because she was afraid of me. It was because

she didn't want to leave Captain Dial alone any more than I did.

I knew then that I liked her. But we were under orders now, and we had to follow them. So I took the girl's hand in my mouth, and I gave a tug to pull her away from Captain Dial. She didn't want to go, but she didn't fight me. She knew what we had to do. She strapped the transmitter to her wrist and stood up. She was good, too.

We left Captain Dial and went to the old man and the boys. I released the girl's hand as she told them they were all going with me. She put the old man's hand on the handle of my harness, and then he held the hand of one of the boys. The girl held the hand of the other one. We all started up the hill again, pushing through the smoke. My hind legs hurt, but I was still strong. I helped the old man go fast. The girl kept pace beside me as I sniffed and listened to find the best path for us.

I could still see Captain Dial's thoughts for a long way up the hill. At first he was thinking of me and what I was doing, and he was proud. That made me glad.

Then he thought the two words he had thought about on the day we performed our demonstration by the ocean. He thought the words "heroism" and "vengeance."

And then he worried about the other soldiers in D Company. So that made me worry, too. But I couldn't go back to check on them yet. I had orders to follow.

Finally, as the civilians and I came out of the smoke onto a sloping field of rocks, I saw one last strong thought from Captain Dial. It was of Melanie. It was of Melanie with him in their bed, sleeping. And I was on my cushion at their feet.

It was a happy thought, and it made me happy too.

Then Captain Dial's thoughts became fuzzy as the civilians and I went higher, and soon they were gone. I paused near the crest of the hill and looked back down the slope, but I couldn't see the place where Captain Dial lay because of the rocks and smoke. And I thought for a moment that maybe the civilians were safe now, and that I could leave them and go back to where I could know Captain Dial's thoughts again.

But the sound of the approaching drones was loud now, and as I watched, one of them came flying up out of the smoke below us. So I led the civilians behind a big rock. We all crouched down, and I heard the drone turn away and fly back down the hillside again.

Then I heard Gatling guns firing, and I remembered my orders. So I got up from my crouch, and the girl and I took the old man and the boys over the top of the hill and down the other side.

I didn't like not being able to see Captain Dial's thoughts. But now I could see the girl's thoughts almost as well as I had seen his, and she had some good ideas about where we might find a safe place to hide. So we started off in the direction she thought was best.

We had to alter our path many times because of things I smelled or heard. And once we had to make a long detour because the girl remembered there were land mines ahead. I couldn't smell them yet, but she warned me by sending pulses to my implant. And then I saw her thoughts, and I knew they were true. So we found another way.

I became tired and thirsty, and my hind legs hurt. The girl and her family became tired and thirsty too. But we could hear gunfire and explosions behind us, so the girl and I wouldn't let the others stop. Not until we found someplace safe.

Not until we had done what Captain Dial had ordered us to do.

#

We went up and down through the hills all that day. At dusk we found a guerrilla camp that had been bombed many weeks before. But there were still some matches, a knife, and three plastic jugs of water. So we were able to get a drink. The water tasted like plastic, but we drank a lot of it. There was only one jug left when we were finished. The girl tied it to my harness, and we set out again. The girl carried the matches and the knife.

After nightfall, the girl couldn't see where we were or where we were going. Clouds covered the sky, so she couldn't find any stars to help her. That meant our path was up to me. So I followed my nose and my ears, and I took us farther and farther away from cities, camps, and roads. I took us away from anything that smelled or sounded like people with weapons. We had to go a long way.

At last, when the eastern sky had begun to brighten, we found a shelf of rock in the side of a hill. Under the shelf was a cave that was narrow but deep. It was well hidden by brush. I went in first and found some bone fragments and a ring of stones for a fire, but I could smell that they were old. No one had used the cave in a long time.

So I brought the people inside, and they slept on the bare rock. I didn't sleep right away because I had to lick the cuts on my hind legs. Then I dozed. But I

kept my ears and nose alert. The only sounds were of the wind blowing through the rocks and brush. The only smells were of rabbits, birds, and other small animals nearby. There were no guerrillas, soldiers, or other people anywhere near us.

When I had rested for a few hours, I went out into the morning sunlight and killed three rabbits. I had to chase them, and that made my legs hurt again. But I still caught them with no trouble. I tore one apart and ate most of him, and then I took the other two back to the cave. The girl was awake, and she knew what to do. She woke up the boys and had them gather brush and sticks while she used the knife from the guerrilla camp to skin the rabbits. The old man made a spit from the sticks, and they cooked the rabbits over a fire the girl started inside the old ring of stones. It filled the cave with smoke, but the people didn't care. They were hungry.

While they ate, I scouted the area around the cave in widening circles. I sniffed, smelled, and listened. I marked a broad perimeter to warn off animal intruders. Then I did it all over again. And then I was sure my people were safe.

I had followed and completed Captain Dial's order. So I went to the girl and pushed my nose into her hand to be sure she knew my thoughts. I made sure she knew that she and her family should stay close to the cave. They could kill more rabbits to eat, and they still had the jug of water from the guerrilla camp. When that ran out, they could catch rain and dew.

The girl understood.

So I started back to the battlefield where I had left Captain Dial. I was able to go faster now because I didn't have people with me, and because my legs felt better. I could also choose a path that took me closer to dangerous smells. And I found a pond where I could get a drink. But that was the only time I stopped. I wanted to get back to Captain Dial as soon as I could.

There was still some light in the sky when I came over the hilltop and looked down the rocky slope at the battlefield. The two fallen drones had stopped burning, and there was no more smoke. A number of people were walking around down near the gully where Captain Dial and I had found the civilians, and the wind brought me their smells along with the smells of many dead D Company soldiers and refugees. The walking people didn't smell like soldiers or refugees. But they didn't smell like the enemy, either. They didn't make much noise, but occasionally one of them would fire a single shot. It sounded as if they were firing into the ground.

I didn't care who they were, or why they were shooting at the ground. Because now I smelled something else, too.

When I reached Captain Dial, I lay down beside him with my chin on his chest. There was nothing else I could do. I didn't nudge him with my nose or lick his face. I didn't try to wake him up. I'm not stupid. That was one of the things Captain Dial liked best about me. He liked that I was smart.

I closed my eyes. I didn't have an order for what to do next, so I would do nothing. I was tired, and there were no D Company soldiers left for me to help. I would stay there with my chin on Captain Dial.

I closed my eyes and fell asleep. And I dreamed. I dreamed about the day I found the live mine on the pier and about how proud Captain Dial was. I dreamed about running fast in training so I could complete my orders and get back to Captain Dial before the buzzer sounded. I dreamed about lying curled up on my cushion on the floor while Captain Dial and Melanie made soft noises above me.

Then I woke up and opened my eyes. Three of the people below were coming up the slope. They were solid shadows in the dusk. And their smell was sharper now. They smelled like men who used shampoo and soap and who wore clean clothes. They smelled like the men in the crowd the day I found the mine. They smelled like civilians from home.

And as they came toward me and Captain Dial, I heard something behind me. Something higher up the slope, moving down through the rocks. It wasn't loud, so I knew the men coming up the slope couldn't hear it. I couldn't identify it by scent because the wind was blowing the wrong way, but I could hear that it was small and alone. So I didn't think it would hurt anyone. Besides, none of the men coming up the slope was my commanding officer. I wasn't required to alert them.

The three men approached within a few meters of me and Captain Dial, and now I saw that they were dressed in dark clothes that weren't uniforms. But they carried pistols in holsters. One of them pointed a camera at me and Captain Dial. I couldn't see the men's thoughts, but they spoke in the same language as D Company, so I understood some of what they said. One of them said something was great, and the others agreed.

I didn't know what they thought was great, but I knew there was nothing there that was.

One of them stepped closer and leaned down as if about to touch Captain Dial. So I raised my head and snarled at him, and he moved back. Then I put my head down again, but I stayed ready. I didn't know who they were, but they weren't part of D Company. They weren't even soldiers. I wouldn't let them touch Captain Dial.

The one with the camera kept aiming it at me and Captain Dial. But the other two put their hands on their pistols and conferred. And I understood enough to know they were talking about shooting me. So I did what Captain Dial had taught me to do. I planned how to attack them so they couldn't get off a shot. If either of their pistols began to rise from its holster, I would execute the plan. And I would decide what to do about the one with the camera based on how he reacted.

But another thing that Captain Dial had taught me was that a battlefield situation can change quickly.

The thing coming down the slope sent some pebbles skittering through the brush. And the three men heard it. They backed away from me and Captain Dial, and the one with the camera let it drop to dangle on a cord around his neck. They all three began taking their pistols from their holsters. But now they were looking past me toward whatever had made the pebbles skitter.

I kept my eyes on the three men. But I sniffed the air, and even though the wind was still going the wrong way, I caught a faint scent that told me who was on the slope behind me. It was the girl I had taken to safety on Captain Dial's order. She was still and quiet now, probably crouched behind a rock. But even so, she wasn't safe anymore.

All three men were raising their pistols. They were farther away from me than when I had made my plan of attack. But they weren't looking at me now. The light of day was almost gone. And I am black as night. I am silent as air.

The third one got off a shot as I hit his chest, but the bullet went into the sky. The other two were already on the ground, their throats torn out, their weapons in the dirt. The third one tried to fight me off once he was down, but that didn't last long.

When he was still, I looked back up the slope, beyond Captain Dial, and saw the girl standing beside a clump of brush. She was almost invisible because the sun was gone now. But I saw her shape against the brush. And the wind had shifted so I could smell her better. She smelled scared.

I was angry that she had returned to the battlefield. I had done my duty and made her safe, and she had spoiled it. I didn't understand why she had done that.

Then she came down the hill past Captain Dial, past me, and past the three men on the ground. She didn't walk fast, but she walked steady and strong even though she was scared. She said something soft to me as she went by, and I saw a flash of her thoughts. Then I understood. She was going down to the gully, to her mother. She wanted to wrap the body and take it somewhere to bury it. She had returned by herself to do this, leaving her brothers in the care of the old

man.

I looked past her and knew I couldn't let her do as she planned. There were more people down there. They were like the three men I had just killed. The girl wouldn't be safe among them. Already, I could see and hear several of them starting toward her. She couldn't see them yet. But she would encounter them before she could reach the gully.

So I ran down to the girl and got in front of her. But she just walked around me. Then I took her hand in my mouth, but she just pulled it away and kept going. She wouldn't stay in contact with me long enough to see my thoughts. She was determined to reach her mother.

I couldn't knock her down or bite her to make her come with me. But I couldn't let her keep going. I had to make her pay attention to me long enough so she would understand what we had to do. So I turned and ran fast across the hillside, away from both the girl and Captain Dial. I ran to the body of Lieutenant Morris, and I tore open one of his pockets. Some ammo clips fell out, but that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted what I had smelled when I'd pushed Lieutenant Morris down in the gully.

And I found it curled up in the corner of the pocket. It was the necklace from the dead girl at the checkpoint. There was still enough blood on it that I had been able to smell it. The necklace had been taken from Lieutenant Morris for the investigation, but he had stolen it back. Now I took it from him again.

I ran back to the girl with it, got in front of her, and pushed my nose against her hand so she would feel the necklace hanging from my mouth.

She stopped walking. Her palm was against my nose. Her fingers brushed the silver chain. The transmitter on her wrist hummed. And then, as someone shouted below us, I thought hard and showed her what had happened to the girl who had worn the necklace. So she saw that girl lying on the side of the road with her sisters. She saw me find the necklace in Lieutenant Morris's pocket. She saw how angry Captain Dial had been at what Lieutenant Morris had done.

The shouting below us grew louder. I could hear six voices now, and weapons being readied. More of the armed-men-who-weren't-soldiers were coming toward us.

But I didn't turn away from the girl. I kept my nose in her palm because I had to be sure she understood. I had to be sure she understood that Captain Dial was my commanding officer, and that I hated to leave him there on the hillside again. But I would. And she would have to leave her mother there, too. We both had to follow Captain Dial's last order. And if the men coming up the hillside reached us, we would fail. I wouldn't be good. And she would be like the other girl. The

one who had worn the necklace.

The girl was smart. I saw in her thoughts that her mother wouldn't want her to die like that other girl. But when she understood what I was telling her, she began to cry. She hadn't cried before this. But she cried now, taking the necklace from my mouth and clutching it in her fist. She wanted to fight the men coming up the hill. She thought they were responsible for her mother's death. She thought they had made the drones attack.

I didn't know why she thought that. But I understood why she would want to fight whoever had made the drones fire on D Company. I wanted to fight those people too. But even if those people were the men who were coming up the hill, we couldn't fight them now. I had already killed three of them, but I had caught those three by surprise. There were more than three coming now, and they had their weapons ready to fire.

So we had to go back up over the hill. And while the girl stood there with the necklace clenched in her fist, I took her other hand in my mouth. And then I started up the hill, pulling her with me.

At first, she came with me without knowing what she was doing. She was still crying and thinking of what she wanted to do to the people who had sent the drones. So the men coming up the hill gained on us, and a shot was fired. I heard the bang and then heard the slug hiss through the air. It hit the dirt several meters ahead of us.

Then the girl's thoughts came back to where we were and what we needed to do. So she began to run, and I was able to release her hand. We ran together back up the hill, through the rocks and brush, up toward the night sky.

We paused for a few seconds when we reached Captain Dial again. He lay still in the twilight. He made no sound. He had no thoughts. He didn't even smell like Captain Dial anymore. So it was all right for the girl to take his sidearm and empty his pockets. And this time, it was easier to leave. This time, I knew I wouldn't need to return.

In training, Captain Dial had told me that when a soldier was gone, he was gone forever. But he had also told Melanie that they would be together forever. So forever was always a hard word for me to understand. But whenever I didn't understand something, it was because it was something only someone as smart as Captain Dial could understand. And in those cases, I would just have to believe whatever Captain Dial said. Because Captain Dial always spoke the truth.

So that was what I did as I left his body there on the hillside for the last time. I remembered what Captain Dial had said, and I was glad that even though he

was gone, he and Melanie would still be together.

I wished I could be with them, too. But I didn't know how to get to wherever they were.

The girl and I went up over the top of the hill, and soon I couldn't smell or hear the men behind us anymore. Then the twilight was gone, and the girl held my harness so I could lead her through the darkness. She knew my thoughts most of the time now, so I promised her I would do a good job. And she promised me the same thing.

We had our orders. So we would follow them.

Forever.

#

I took the girl back to the cave where the old man and the boys were waiting, and we stayed there several weeks until I smelled men with weapons approaching. Then we left, and I led the way deeper into the hills, taking us as far from danger as I could. The weather grew colder, but my fur grew thicker, and we found winter clothing in an abandoned village. The old man also found sewing tools, and he made blankets from the skins of the rabbits I caught. The girl stretched some skins between two long pieces of wood, and that was where we kept our growing collection of supplies. The people and I took turns dragging it as we traveled.

We traveled this way for many days, until we came upon the stone hut near the stream.

It's been a good place. We found more things that my people could use here. But the people who had stayed in the hut before us had been gone for a long time when we arrived. I couldn't even smell them on the things they had left. So I believed my company would be safe here for the winter.

Food was easy to obtain. All I had to do was go up and down the stream until I found rabbits. Once I killed a small deer, and the girl said its skin should be my bed. So now I sleep on it even though I like the bare ground just as well. I have thick fur. But it makes my people happy to see me lie down on the deer's skin, and that makes me glad.

In recent weeks the bushes and trees have grown leaves, and the grass that was dry and thin is now thick and juicy. The girl and the old man have been making plans to plant seeds they found in the abandoned village. We've all been looking forward to warmer days.

Then, last night, eighteen of Your soldiers came to kill us. You must have told them we were the enemy. So they didn't know I was trained by Captain Dial. They didn't know that even when I sleep, my ears and nose are awake.

I took the girl to their bodies this morning, and it made her sad. But she understood that I had to follow orders. She understands a lot. She and I often help each other figure out things that are puzzling.

I didn't understand how Your soldiers could have found us, or why You would want them to, because we've traveled far from anything that should matter to You. Besides, we're not Your enemies. And even if we were, we wouldn't be important enough for You to bother with. Or so I thought.

Then the girl remembered the implant under the skin between my shoulders, and the transmitter that Captain Dial had given her. We had used these things to help us understand each other in our first weeks together, but then -- just as Captain Dial and I had found -- they had become unnecessary. So the girl had placed the transmitter in her duffel, and we hadn't thought of it or of my implant since. But now the girl said that machines in the sky could probably hear signals from them at any time, and that the machines could then tell You where I was. So that was how Your soldiers found us.

The girl also says she knows why You want to attack us.

She found a radio receiver in the abandoned village, and now she listens to its voices for a few minutes each evening. I can't understand the voices, but the girl has told me some of the things they've said. They've said that all Your soldiers were about to be sent home because the money for the war was almost gone. But then D Company was ambushed and destroyed by enemy guerrillas, and the bad publicity from what Lieutenant Morris had done at the checkpoint was obliterated by the heroism of his company's sacrifice. So Your public support surged, and more money was provided so Your soldiers could avenge the ambush by destroying the enemy.

This is what the radio voices say. They don't say anything about the drones. But if the drones hadn't come, D Company would not only have beaten the guerrillas, but would have suffered almost no casualties. Captain Dial would have seen to it.

But the drones did come. They came from our own airfield. They came from You.

Then the men-who-weren't-soldiers came too, and the girl thinks she knows why they fired shots at the ground. She thinks they killed any soldier or refugee who was still alive. And we believe those men were sent by You as well.

The girl says that our knowledge of this is why You want to attack us. We're the only survivors of that battle. So as long as we still live, You fear that we may reveal the truth of what happened to D Company and the refugees. And the girl says that then all of Your public support and money will go away again.

I have tried to think of what Captain Dial might do if these things had been revealed to him. But he was much smarter than me. And I can't see his thoughts anymore.

But I still know the final order he gave me: To keep my people safe.

So I've thought of things I can do to obey.

The first thing I thought of was to have the girl write this message. Again, she doesn't know what she writes. Only that I require her to write it. And what I'm asking her to write now is a promise that You have nothing to fear from me if You leave us alone. If You allow me to keep my people safe, we will never tell the radio voices what Your drones and men-who-weren't-soldiers did to D Company.

The second thing made the girl cry again. Before beginning this message, I told her to use her knife to cut between my shoulders and find the communication implant. She cried because she didn't want to hurt me, and then she cried more because the device was smaller than we had imagined, and it was hard to find. She had to make the cut longer and deeper. But she finally found the tiny glass bean and gave it to the boys, who took turns hitting it and the transmitter with a hammer until both were dust. Then the old man cleaned my wound and sewed it shut. I growled once because the needle hurt, and he stepped back. But then I licked his hand, and he finished the job. Afterward, I was proud of all of them for following orders so well.

The third thing makes us unhappy. But it's necessary. We must leave the stone hut. We must leave this good place with its water and rabbits. Your soldiers found us here, so You know where we are.

But since I no longer have the communication implant, You won't know where we'll go next.

Finally, there is a fourth thing I'll do.

If the above measures fail, and if You send more soldiers or men-who-aren't-soldiers to find us, I will kill them all. I'll always know they're coming, so they'll never be able to attack us before I attack them first.

You may even send some of my fellow K-9s, because they could find us more quickly than people could. But Captain Dial said that the K-9s in my training class were the best war dogs there had ever been, and I was ranked

first in that class. So there are no K-9s that I can't find and defeat before they can find and defeat me.

And if You attack us with drones instead of people or dogs, we're now equipped to fight them. Some of the soldiers I killed last night were carrying RPGs, and others carried guns with armor-piercing rounds. We have taken these weapons.

But if You bomb us from high in the sky so we can't fight, there may be nothing I can do to stop You. Then You will have made me fail to carry out my orders.

In that event, I'll do whatever I must to survive. And then I will find You. I don't know Your name or Your rank, but I will find You anyway. I will hunt and kill every officer in every company and every battalion until I reach You. I will read their thoughts as they die and will use that knowledge to hunt You. I will climb walls and dig tunnels. I will swim and run. I will stow away in trucks, ships, and aircraft that will bring me closer to You. I will find something You have touched so I know Your scent. And then I will find You in Your bed or at Your table or wherever You may be.

And I will bite Your throat so it tears out.

So I hope You heed this message. It will be left with one of Your dead soldiers, so I know it will reach their unit's commanding officer. And then it will reach that officer's commanding officer, and then that officer's commanding officer, and so on until it reaches the officer who gave the orders that resulted in the current situation. Until it reaches You.

My company has its equipment and is ready to move out. The two boys are my specialists. The old man is my medic and quartermaster.

As for the girl --

She now wears the metal tag I received when I was promoted to sergeant. She found it in Captain Dial's pocket as we left the battlefield, and today she put it on the chain of her necklace beside the shiny rock. Sergeant is the toughest enlisted job. But she can do it.

I myself am no longer a sergeant. I didn't realize that until this morning. But after I showed the girl what I had done in the night, she touched my head. And I heard her thoughts. I heard what she called me.

She called me Captain.

Then she took the silver bars that she found with the sergeant's tag, and she pinned them to my duty harness.

I am the ranking survivor of D Company, and my final order from Captain Dial was a commission. I know this because what he told me to do was what a good officer does.

A good officer takes care of his soldiers.

But if You attack us again, You will not be a good officer. You will not be taking care of Your soldiers. And if You make me fail in my duty to take care of mine, You will not be an officer of any kind for much longer.

Captain Dial told me what I am, and he always spoke the truth. So now I tell You:

I am black as night. I am silent as air.

My sergeant touches my head, and I tell her she's good.

This message is complete.

Respectfully,

Officer