

# CUSTER'S FIRST STAND

*A War Mage Story*



L.A. JACOB



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L. A. Jacob

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## CUSTER'S FIRST STAND

The ginger needed a haircut.

In fact, they all did. Task Force Bronco, the team from the 25th Division who called themselves “Deuce” — symbolized by a two of spades patch on their left arm — consisted of a Humvee, a ginger, a son of a state senator, a baby-faced kid, a juggernaut, and a war mage.

Master Sergeant and First Magus Brent Rogers stood a little shorter than the juggernaut, but was a lot smaller. Brent’s brown hair was cut severely short for the trip to Afghanistan, his first deployment. He had forgone his magus’ robes for the typical Army body armor of tan and black camouflage. The team looked him over that first day.

“Wizard,” said the ginger, whose name was Custer, “they said you don’t carry a gun.”

“No, sir, I don’t.”

Custer brushed back the hair in his eyes. “We’re going out on patrol tomorrow. We can’t protect you.”

“I don’t need any protection.”

Custer raised an eyebrow. “How do you do it then?”

He raised a twisted tree staff, a little taller than he was. “I’m my own weapon.”

“I’ve never worked with one of you people. You’re the first and only one for the whole division.” Unsaid, *And I’m the one stuck with you.*

Custer didn’t seem happy to see him, but the other men were. They’d heard stories about the war mages, and wondered if they were true. Brent had heard the stories himself as well. He knew he couldn’t disappoint.

At two hours before dawn, in the cold desert air of Forward Operating Base Aslamabad, south east of Kabul, the men piled into the Humvee. They weren’t the only ones. Patrol would be with a whole series of coalition forces, even including the French who were taking lessons from the Afghans about being on their own time.

They went down the main highway, heading toward Kunar. Brent sat in the back seat between two soldiers, his eyes closed and his body relaxed. “He’s sleeping,” said the baby-faced kid from Wisconsin, who they called Cody. The men chuckled.

Suddenly, Brent opened his eyes and yelled, “Stop!”

The driver, Mark Masterson, slammed on the brakes and skidded to a stop. “What the fuck?” He was the biggest man on the team, the one you didn’t want to get on his bad side.

“There’s a bomb.”

Immediately, everyone’s hackles went up and they all became very awake and aware.

“Deuce-One, why’d you stop?” crackled the radio.

“Where’s the bomb?” asked Custer.

“Let me get out,” said Brent, leaning forward with his staff in hand.

The doors slid open and Jason Blake stepped out, his gun at the ready across his body. Behind the Humvee was a convoy of two other gun trucks.

Brent used his staff to tap the ground. As he tapped, he sent out feelers with spells, and then stopped when he saw the tripwire a few feet in front of the Humvee.

“Sarge!” he called. Custer came over - Brent held out the stick to stop him from stepping near the wire. He pointed with the end of his stick. Custer looked down with his night vision glasses to see the thin silver line reflected.

“Well, god damn.”

“Do you have an explosives expert?”

“No,” said Custer.

“I’ll do it, then.” Brent kept his staff on the wire and closed his eyes. He followed it to the bomb, though he couldn’t see it in his mind’s eye. He encased it in a bubble as best he could, then tugged on the wire. The explosion was to their left, which blew out a side embankment. Rocks and dirt came tumbling down, stopping short at the bubble shield that Brent had shored up. He gave a mental push, sending the rocks and dirt along the ditch at the side of the road, filling it in, instead of having it cascade into the road itself.

“I’ll be damned,” said Custer quietly. Custer looked at Brent. “How did you know?”

“I had a feeling. That’s all it is, Sarge. A feeling.”

“Your ‘feelings’ always right?”

Brent almost said yes. But then there would come a time when his senses wouldn’t find something, and someone would get a leg blown off. Or worse. “No guarantees with magic,” he said, quoting from one of his teachers. “It depends on the user’s will.”

Custer gave him a snort, so Brent wasn't sure how to take that. He assumed it was agreement, because Custer got in the Humvee without saying anything else.



Cody stared at Brent when he came back into the Humvee. Cody had not stepped foot outside, but had seen the destruction of the bomb. Jason climbed in first, then Brent, who shut the door after them. Jason's body weight had been almost doubled by the amount of gear he carried. Stuck in the middle, he rubbed intimately against both Cody and Brent. Brent had nowhere to go except out, so accepted the proximity of the senator's son's arm against his torso.

"Was that a spell?" asked Cody.

"Yes," said Brent, closing his eyes again.

"There aren't going to be any more IED's on this road," said Jason. "At least for a good couple of clicks."

"Good to know." But Brent sent out feelers anyway.

The Humvee turned off to the side, down a goat path almost, heading toward a village. The rest of the convoy headed around them, planning on linking up with the Afghan National Police and picking up the group of men on the way back before dark. They parked the Humvee close by, able to be seen by the villagers in the daytime. There was no other place to park the vehicle.

Mark, the huge driver, piled out, as they stripped the vehicle of any weaponry, in case anyone got close enough to ransack the Humvee. The only thing other than parts the Taliban scavengers would get could be gas and the battery, if they could get the engine open.

They heard howling of the dog before they got close enough to the village. "What the hell is that?" asked Jason.

“Sounds like a dog in pain,” said Cody. “Like a dog in a trap.”

“There’s something wrong here,” said Mark, walking forward to the entrance of the village.

It was getting a little before sunrise, the sky beginning to turn navy blue instead of black, but the stars still shone in the blue velvet sky. Custer waited near the entrance. “Nobody’s here,” he said. “They’re usually moving by now.”

The dog did not stop. “Maybe it’s just the dog,” said Mark.

“We should let the dog out of the trap,” said Cody.

“For all we know, it probably is the trap.”

Custer made a motion, and all the men raised their guns, clicking off the safety. Brent raised his staff.

The dog stopped for a moment. “Jason,” said Custer, and motioned with the gun. Jason stepped to the side of Custer and yelled out something in Pashto, the native language of the Afghans in this region. They waited. The dog started to bark.

“Go in there, Wizard,” said Custer.

“You sure nobody’s here?”

“No.”

Brent peered around the corner. “Why do I get to go?”

“You’re new. We’ll be right behind you.”

Damn, Brent thought, and hugged the wall for a second before stepping out into the street, staff across his body like a shield. No one shot at him. He decided to follow the sounds of the barking dog, so he took a left and followed that path between two buildings. Stretched out behind him came the rest of the platoon, one body-length between each other to minimize casualties if one stepped on a mine. Brent swept the ground in front of him with his ability and spells, each step uttering one spell to protect him from a mine.

The dog was barking wildly for a few minutes. Then suddenly, there was a crack of a gun, a muffled yelp, and the dog fell silent.

Brent turned sharply to his left to see three buildings. The dog was in one of those three buildings, and so was the bad guy. Rage and fury at whoever it was who had shot the dog came up to the fore, clouding his mind but not stopping the spell, adding weight to it. He yelled the spell, and slammed his staff into the ground.

Doors blew into the three buildings. The platoon recovered and scouted the building to Brent's left, while Brent went to the building to his right.

In there, a man in dirty white Afghan costume was struggling to get an AK-47 that he had dropped, a dead dog before him. Again, he yelled the push spell, this time with his mind behind it. The man flew back, into the wall and through the mud-daubed back wall, through a makeshift outhouse and into a ditch beyond, finally slamming into the wall of the village.

Brent went over to the dog. As he bent to it, he looked up to see another man sitting in the corner, his hands tied behind his back and his mouth gagged with a dirty rag. He was of lighter coloring than an Afghan, so Brent could tell he was an American. Brent left the dog and started to go over to the man.

The man widened his eyes and kept shaking his head. Brent stopped, exhaled to clear his mind, and searched for bombs. There was one in the room.

Custer entered the door and saw the man first. He started over to him but Brent held out his hand. "He's booby-trapped. He's sitting on a live grenade."

"Shit," Custer said.

Cody and Jason spared a glance at the dog before continuing on through the hole in the wall to the outside. Mark stepped into the room. "Nobody in the other buildings, Sarge."

“Untie him,” said Custer, looking to Mark. He went over and pulled down the gag.

The man shook his head for a moment and spat. “Thanks.”

“What’s your name?” asked Custer.

“Lance Corporal Joshua Rollings.”

“Marines?”

“Yes, sir.”

Custer nodded. “How long you been here?”

“I don’t know. A month?”

“Okay. We’re gonna get you out. Wizard?”

“I can sense the bomb, and put a shield around it like I did with the IED on the road. But he has to get off of it.”

“We can do that.” Custer waited until the Marine rubbed his wrists to get the blood flowing back to his hands. “Give me your hand, and I’ll pull you off.”

The Marine nodded and held out his right hand. Custer took it firmly. Mark moved out of the way, to the hole in the wall. He was too big to walk through it but not too big do dive shoulders-first through it.

“On three,” said Custer. “One.”

Rollings took a breath and Brent readied the staff. Normally it took him about three seconds to utter the shield spell, but he had less than that if he was going to stop the grenade from going off. With his secondary ability of telekinesis, he had developed a way to think the spell and lose it in the speed of thought.

“Two,” said Custer. Rollings exhaled, tensed, planted his feet on the ground.

“Three.”

Custer yanked him up, somehow pulling him past him and into the wall beyond, then sheltering him with his body. Brent didn’t see that happen, but saw the grenade. He thought out the spell within the three second for the grenade to go off. The shield covered the grenade like a blanket.

There was a flash on the ground, then a muffled “whoomp”, a cloud of dust close to the floor. Brent kept the shield up with the dust settled on its own, into a crater about three feet deep.

While Brent kept the spell up, he heard a yip from behind him. The dog suddenly got up and ran to the Marine against the wall. Brent noticed now that the dog was a damn big dog, bigger than a typical German Shepherd, and closer to a wolf. The Marine cried, “Viper!” and turned from the wall to hug the dog.

Custer, Mark, and Brent all stared at the dog. Then they looked up at each other. Mark finally said, “That dog was dead.”

“They didn’t use the right bullets,” said Rollings, nuzzling his face in the dog’s neck.

Cory and Jason came in with the man who had tried to crawl for the AK-47. Jason said, “Whatever you did, Wizard, you gave him a concussion.” Jason stared at the scene against the wall, where the Marine was now standing up and the dog standing protectively next to him. “Wasn’t that dog dead?”

“He’s not just a dog,” said the Marine, absently petting him. The rest of the men waited for the explanation. None came, but Brent knew .

The size of the animal, the healing powers, the fact that it waited until the grenade went off to get up, and the attachment of the animal to the soldier pointed to one thing. The Magic Academy said it was not uncommon for the K9 units to utilize them.

A werewolf.

“Can you walk?” asked Jason, giving him the once over. He was the first-aid medic of the team.

“After almost getting my face smashed in from getting thrown into the wall,” he said with a smile to Custer, “I’m fine.”

“You need water.”

“I’ve got an MRE,” said Cody, unloading his kit. Mark was faster, handing the Marine one of this bottles of water.

“We’d better get out of this village,” said Custer. “Who knows who’ll come back.”

“What’re we going to do with this guy?” asked Mark, pointing his gun at the Afghan who hadn’t said a word yet.

“Take him with us. We’ve got zipties.”

Loading up the Humvee with seven men and a dog — it could conceivably hold eight, according to its specs — they traveled back to the closest camp, Fire Base Vegas.

They dropped off the men, stopped and gave report, and were told to wait for the ANA and another couple of platoons to go back to the village and clear it. As they waited for the men to gather, a huge, hulking man about the size of Mark came up to them. He had just a t-shirt and uniform bottoms on, no stripes, no markings. Custer inclined his head to him. “Hello.”

“Sir,” said the man, saluting. “Wanted to thank you for bringing Rollings back in.”

Custer returned the salute. “I’m glad we did. We’re going back to see if there’s any more.”

“There isn’t any more. I already gave my report.”

“Who are you?”

“Viper,” he said.



# War Mage

Book One of the *War Mage* Series

Jake Logan & L.A. Jacob



# ONE

## ★ *NANGAHAR PROVINCE* ★

The Afghan National Police seemed to like wasting American ammo. First Magus Brent Rogers assumed that was why the ANP were shooting up a vineyard half a kilometer away.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” yelled Sergeant Custer, storming up the observation hill. The rest of the team scampered up behind him. “Wizard!”

Brent got to the top of the hill just after Custer, and handed him a black stone with gold Pashtun symbols on it. Whoever held the stone could speak and understand the language on the stone. Custer yelled, “What the fuck are you doing?” loud enough for any trigger-happy Afghan to notice, Brent thought.

But the Afghans were having too much fun mowing down vines from a distance.

The Afghans and Custer's men all stood at the top of a small fortified hill. Directly in front of them were sandbags piled about three feet high, with the men standing over the makeshift wall, firing across a dirt path into the vineyard. Most of the vines were already cut down, exposing a small dirty-red hut just beyond with glassless holes for windows.

Some Afghans paused to reload. Custer grabbed one man by the shoulder, yanking him away from the wall and his semi-automatic weapon. Seeing this, the one next to him paused and stepped away from his SAW. So did the one next to him, soon ending the fire down the short line of ten Afghans. A potshot rang out, and someone out in the vineyard yelled. Custer glared at the men, who started to look sheepish, no matter what language he might have spoken.

“What the fuck is going on?”

One of the Afghans spoke, but Brent didn't understand him. The man gestured to the vineyard. Brent thought he caught the word “Taliban.”

“Where is he?” Custer demanded, as he peered out at the vineyard. No one shot back at them, though they were big enough targets, standing over the makeshift wall. Brent began the “Raise the Enemy” spell. A boy, flailing, rose from behind the hut. They heard him screaming.

Custer yelled, “Don't shoot —” but someone on the line took a clear shot at him. The boy stopped moving and fell with a thud to the ground.

“Who did that — find out who did that!” A hard-eyed Afghani said something, but Custer wasn't buying it. “We could have talked to him.”

The Afghani snorted and said something else. Custer went red.

“Sarge’s gonna pop,” said Mark, backing away.

“Shut up,” hissed Jason, watching the sergeant, ready to step in if necessary. They couldn’t see the man’s eyes behind the sunglasses, but Brent saw the fury by his body language alone.

Sergeant Robert James Custer did pop. “You might think it’s easier just to kill whoever you think is Taliban, but we’re not in this fight to make things easy. That was somebody’s son, and even if he was Taliban, you just killed someone’s goddamn kid. What if it was your fucking kid?”

Some of the other Afghans looked down. But the one who spoke, obvious to Brent he was a resistance fighter during the Soviet invasion, didn’t look sorry at all. In fact, he walked around the fortifications of the hill, his gun at the ready, all by himself.

“Dumb fuck,” spat Custer, and turned to the Afghans left. “Find out who owns this, now that you’ve mowed down his vines.”

Custer handed the stone back to Brent, who dropped it into a pouch hanging off his belt. Brent looked at the Afghans, some with scars on their faces, pockmarks, and lines from bullets or knives. Most looked young, unblemished, new to fighting against any enemy. Brent studied the ones with scars, looking for the man who tied him up and tortured him just a few short weeks ago.

He sometimes couldn’t tell the difference between one Afghan and another. All scarred men reminded him of that time in the freezer. He rubbed his shoulder, which he allowed to ache, even though he knew a spell to take the pain away.

Brent, surprised that he got back with his old team, thought that since he blabbed all about the magic training, they would consider him a collaborator. He assumed he would be stripped of everything and dishonorably discharged at the least,

or become a permanent resident of Leavenworth prison at the worst. The Magic Corps did not press charges. He had to talk to the Army shrink, and she was the one who said he was fit for duty. It was like nothing ever happened.

Custer scowled at the sun. "Let's see about the western village. We can check if the medic came by."

Jason nodded. He was Brent's backup "doc" so was often concerned about medicine. None of the Afghans wanted Brent's "sorcery." It was against their religion.

The western village was too small to have a name. It consisted of maybe three families, probably all connected by blood. Custer went to one of the houses, where a man sat in an alcove smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. He was small and gnarly, like the stubborn trees in the front yard. He did not look up at the approach of the men, but there was some scurrying behind the house, black shapes moving among the orchards.

"A fine day," said Custer, holding out his hands, palms up, in the universal "we come in peace" gesture. The translation stone was tucked between his thumb and forefinger. "I am Staff Sergeant Custer of the US Army."

The man's eyes moved up and down, taking him in. He puffed a bit before saying, "Timin."

Assuming that was his name, Custer said. "I am honored to meet you. Would you mind if we took a look around?"

The man snapped something at Custer. Brent and the team knew this wasn't going to go well. Some women came out from the back of the house, dressed in head-to-toe black burqas, but some did not have their eyes veiled.

Meanwhile, the old man was ranting. Brent did not look at the women, but Cory stared. Mark hit him, and Cory dropped his eyes momentarily. A woman stopped, but was dragged away by her companions. Cory watched her go.

"She's the ugliest bitch in the world, Cory," said Mark.

“Her eyes —”

“She ain’t worth it, kid.”

Brent had his staff in the ground, trying to sense other movement. He felt the receding women, but there were more people around. A heavy foot, close by. Watching them. He turned, as if trying to see into the trees.

“Can we meet them?” Custer said to something the man said. Brent just knew that these had to be Taliban, secret fighters, probably the ones they were looking for.

The man folded his arms across his chest and muttered. Custer forced a smile.

Brent raised his head. Someone came over the rise behind them to the south, a few men. Even though Brent wore sunglasses like they all did, the sun was brutal enough so that he had to shield his eyes from it to see. He could pick out a few men heading their way. As one man blocked the sun for a moment, Brent realized that they were more Army men.

The interlopers were a group of eight, laden down with packs like themselves and all in tan, as opposed to the mixture of tan and green on the members of Brent’s team. They wore the patch of Army Special Forces — the brown arrowhead with a sword and three lightning bolts. Brent knew who they were without their signature hats: A team of Green Berets.

Along with them came an interpreter dressed in a hodge-podge of Afghan clothing and some military belts. He carried a military-issue pistol and holster, which Brent caught his team staring at. Brent’s team didn’t have sidearms like that. A scarf covered the interpreter’s nose and mouth, while black sunglasses hid his eyes. All the Berets wore better sunglasses than Brent’s men did.

“Sergeant,” greeted one of the Green Berets. According to his stripes, he was a staff sergeant like Custer; though when he

said the title, it sounded like he was in charge. Custer didn't back down.

"Sergeant," he replied.

The Beret looked at Timin. "These men bothering you?"

Through the interpreter, he said, "Yes. They come here staring at my women, and now they want my sons."

The sergeant turned to look at Custer's men. Brent did not look down from the withering glare of the Green Beret.

"Why don't you go back to base," said the sergeant to Custer. "We'll take care of things here."

"Sure," said Custer. "Are you giving us a direct order?"

Let the contest begin, thought Brent, watching the two men.

"I believe I am, Sergeant," said the Beret, leaning close. "We've been working on getting this fucker to tell us where his stash is. Don't fuck it up for us."

"Right," Custer said, and turned to his own team. "Come on."

The men turned to head back to their vehicle, a Bradley troop transport truck.

"Prick," said Mark.

"Probably pissing on their territory," said Brent. "You know how they get, especially if you do something better."

Brent felt eyes on his back and turned around. Three of the Berets watched him. One gave a pansy wave. Brent felt a fire in his chest. He almost stomped the staff down, to send an earth wave their way.

"Wizard," said Custer. "Come on."

Brent must've looked angry for Custer to round on him like that. He forced himself to look away as they went to the Bradley.

"What now?" asked Mark, settling into the driver's seat.

“We go east. There’s something the old man was babbling about.”

“What, Sarge?”

Custer reached over to give the translation stone to Brent. “Something your rock translated as a ‘flying salamander’.”

Mark laughed his big, booming laugh. “What’s that guy smoking?”

“Don’t know, but it won’t hurt to go find out.”



Brent didn’t have time to think as Mark drove at near breakneck speed, confident in Brent’s ability to sense Improvised Explosive Devices, or IED’s. Brent wondered if the guy did it on purpose to see if he could out-distance Brent’s ability. After his debriefing, Brent practiced on improving his distance and speed at finding IED’s. He could now sense about 100 meters in all directions, twice that if it he concentrated.

There were no IED’s in the way of their trip. They turned onto a dirt road that, according to the map, was the entrance to a village named Baktar. About five minutes in, they saw in the distance what looked like black, ruined buildings. The ground surrounding them was black and smooth instead of brown and sandy. Black nubs took the place of neat rows of crops.

As they got closer, they saw the rock and mud houses were blackened and charred. Mark slowly drove into the village center, or what would have been, except the well was burned black.

“The fuck..?” Mark whispered.

“Stop,” said Custer. He got out before the Bradley came to a full stop. Jason and Brent climbed out from the rear. Cory didn’t come out initially, looking through the slits of the Bradley at the apocalyptic destruction.

It stank of fire and Sulphur, probably the way hell would smell. Brent turned around in a circle for a minute, trying to use his magic to sense things of the past. He had to touch something to do it, though. He walked in the fine dirt to a blackened mud wall, and touched it with his bare fingers.

It was smooth, he noticed, and closed his eyes, thinking the spell. Behind his eyes he saw fire, like a flame thrower, come right at him. He let go, and fell backwards, stumbling. Jason stood behind him to catch him. "What happened?"

"Fire," said Brent. "Directed fire."

"Sarge!" yelled Mark. The three men ran to Mark. He was looking at the ground. At first, Brent saw nothing but sand. But, then, he saw some glittering rocks in the dirt.

Custer dug his hand in the dirt and lifted his hand, letting the fine sand flow between his fingers. He brushed some sand away and some rocks remained in his hand. Except they weren't rocks.

"Glass bits," said Custer, in awe.

"Seventeen-hundred degrees Fahrenheit," said Jason. He shrugged when the men stared at him. "Trivial Pursuit."

"Even flame throwers don't get that hot," said Mark

"No wonder everything's ash," said Custer. "And no wonder the old man was so scared."

"Flying salamander," mused Jason.

It came to Brent in a rush, and when it did, so did the memory. The memory of the question his torturers began his time in hell with.

Brent dashed from the group and ran to the rickety side of a building. He threw up his lunch, breakfast, and probably yesterday's dinner. He was dry-heaving when Custer came over to him. Custer patted him on the back and took out a water bottle from Brent's pack, handing it to him.

Brent couldn't trust himself to drink it. He poured some into his mouth, sloshed it around, spit it out.

He looked up at Custer and uttered one hoarse word: "Dragons."



Back at Forward Operating Base Lonestar, Cory asked, "Are you sure they're dragons?"

They sat inside the Gansett container where it was warmer. The rest of the fireteam were hanging out, but half-listened to Brent.

"I'm not sure. But flame throwers can't set fire to those buildings like that."

Custer came into the room. They all stopped what they were doing when the sergeant walked in.

"What did the brass say?" Brent asked.

"The Green Berets got to them first," said Custer, grabbing a bottled water. "Brass wants to see us"

"Us? Now?"

"At the asscrack of dawn," said Custer.

That didn't sound good. Brent went to his cot. He pulled out his kit to make sure he had a relatively clean uniform.

The next morning at 0510, ten minutes after the normal patrols left, they waited inside the Combat Task Force (CTF) Headquarters. They saluted the major as they each stepped into his office. The major in charge of the CTF glanced up at them. All the men stood at attention.

"You're all in a fuckload of trouble."

"Sir?" asked Custer. Still no eye contact.

"You know about our secret weapon. You —" He looked pointedly at Brent — "had to fuckin' blab about the dragons."

Brent swallowed. "It was a guess, sir."

“A guess, my ass.” The major looked at Custer. “I don’t want you to say one fucking word about these dragons. You never saw what they did, you got it?”

“Yes, sir,” said Custer with no emotion on his face.

The major look at the other men in turn. Cory was the only one who looked away. “Not one word,” repeated the major. “Dismissed.”

The team left the office and Mark let out a breath. “That wasn’t so bad.”

Custer said, “Let’s go back to that village. See if we can find any hidden stashes.”

Mark grinned.



The men found their way back to the village. They dismounted there, among the blackened outbuildings. Brent had no idea where to start, and looking at the destruction around him brought back fear. What if the dragons came back?

Mark and Jason went to look closer at the buildings. Custer watched Brent. “You gonna be okay, sergeant?” he asked Brent.

“I don’t know.”

Brent stayed by the vehicle. He looked out to the south. He saw something flying in the air in the distance, but because it looked flat, he couldn’t tell if it was a bird or a plane.

“Wizard,” called Jason. Brent broke from his reverie and followed the voice to the well. The men were gathered there, but they were looking south, behind Brent. Brent turned around.

Where he had been looking before now had a plume of black smoke rising from the horizon. Brent looked back at the men, finally at Custer.

“We should go investigate,” Custer said.

Mark bolted to the Bradley. As soon as they piled in, Mark floored the pedal.

“Jesus, man,” snapped Jason, as he got squished between Cory and Brent when the vehicle took the turn onto the hard-packed dirt highway.

“I wanna see that dragon!” yelled Mark.

“It’s probably long gone by now,” said Custer, holding onto the dash.

They followed the directions the GPS gave them, but they didn’t need them, not with all the black smoke. Mark slowed when they came upon the village. The mud huts burned, flames licking the sky, as if set on fire by a flame thrower and sprayed with accelerant.

“Watch out for fucking mines,” said Custer, as Mark skidded to a stop. Custer turned to Brent. “Wizard? You’re our sapper.”

“Right,” Brent said, and got out of the Bradley, staff first. As a “sapper,” he knew he had to find any IED’s in the vicinity. He could see piles of ash and pools of melted sand. He walked around to the front of the vehicle.

The spell was in his mind, and flowed out through the staff. To his left, about a half a kilometer away, a mine exploded. Dust and dirt mixed with the ash and covered the pink and tan pools of sand. He walked to the village’s main street and waved his hands over his head, signaling all clear. The Bradley followed his path and pulled up to him.

To make the fires stop, Brent knew he needed to deny the flames oxygen. He raised his staff. He summoned the wind and it built up in front of him, pulling the flames with it. By the time the men got to him, he had a flaming tornado about the size of a small Jeep, churning sand and ash in the funnel. The flames on the buildings fed the tornado, which were eaten up

by the wind. He mentally pushed the tight tornado away from them, toward the edge of the village.

Another mine exploded under it, the sand flowing into the vortex. Brent dispersed the spell and the tornado faded, flames disappearing among the dust, sand, and ash, floating into a pile on the ground. Brent leaned against the Bradley, panting. Wind and fire were not his forte.

Mark got out of the vehicle, and the rest cautiously followed. "See if anything survived this," said Custer, hefting his gun. He said to Jason and Cory, "You two take the west, Mark and I'll take east. "Wizard, you're center."

Brent slammed the bottom of his staff into the ground to get energy. Its top glowed white for a moment, then faded quickly as Brent pulled the energy into him. The first spell he learned when he was in the Academy: a mage light. Brent watched the men separate. His Army training kicked in and he hugged near the walls, though they were still hot to the touch. He slowly made his way down the street, staff in the lead.

He felt it before he saw it: powerful magic. He looked up, stepping out to the center of the street.

Something was coming in the air toward the village. Something big and red. As it grew closer, he could see the wings.

"Holy shit," he muttered, and almost pissed his pants.

It came closer, easily bigger than an Apache helicopter. The huge red dragon flew right over the village, so close he thought he could see the dragon's scales. It landed gracefully, just beside the Bradley.

Brent, ignoring the possibility of any mines, ran up the center road to see Mark standing just past the Bradley, his mouth open. Custer approached the dragon and was talking to someone.

"... third infantry," he heard Custer say.

“Staff Sergeant Meghan Belliveau,” said a woman somewhere near the dragon.

Brent got closer. The dragon’s head could easily eat half their vehicle in one bite. Red and long, it stood easily over two stories. It looked like a huge lizard, with wide tufts for ears and teeth as big as a man’s leg. The dragon’s legs were relatively short and thick. Across its body, the folded red wings took up most of its length.

A female Marine sat on what looked like a jockey’s saddle, in normal light kit. She also had no helmet, which was against all the rules of the armed forces. She had a parachute on her back. She sat like a jockey, her knees up near her chest, the stirrups of the saddle set high. She looked comfortable there, and the dragon looked like he didn’t even notice. Compared to the dragon, she was tiny, as big as one of its ears.

“Sergeant,” said Custer, “What brings you here?”

“Checking to make sure there were no survivors. Tyrath saw people moving here and came to investigate.” She looked down at Brent. “You have a wizard.”

“Master Sergeant Brent Rogers,” said Custer, introducing him.

“Sir,” said the sergeant, saluting.

Brent returned it instinctively. The dragon rumbled. Brent looked at the dragon, who looked at Brent as if contemplating swiping him with one of those evil claws.

“Tyrath doesn’t like wizards, sir. My apologies.”

Brent said, “As long as it doesn’t eat me.”

The Marine patted the dragon’s neck. The dragon snorted, smoke rising from its nostrils.

Said Custer, “Mind looking around with us?”

She didn’t complain. “We can help, sir.” She leaned forward and said something to the dragon. The dragon raised its wings and jumped, kicking up a cloud of dirt not unlike a helo taking

off. It gained some altitude; still close enough to be a dragon, but far enough away to see the entire village in one gaze.

Mark grinned. “Did you see that? Did you fuckin’ see that?”

Jason slapped Mark upside the back of his head. “Shut up, man.”

“What I wouldn’t give to ride on the back of that thing.”

Jason shook his head. Cory kept looking up. Jason grabbed Cory and they went back to the eastern side of the village.

Brent got through the first of two buildings on the street, when he heard a loud whoosh and a roar following that. He saw the building next to him on fire, the dragon hovering above it, wings fanning the flames. Brent backed away from the burning building.

“Nothing left in there, sir!” called the Marine. The dragon seemed to grin, showing long, pointy teeth; he turned and flew north. Brent watched as the building melted before his eyes. He forced himself to not hyperventilate. I won’t lose it. Not here.

The dragon landed at the northern collection of destroyed huts. It took a little while for everyone to assemble near it.

The dragon was a major distraction to the men, at least Cory and Mark. Mark grinned like a lunatic, inching his way closer to the beast. Cory hugged his gun and stared. The dragon turned to Mark and huffed at him, blowing black smoke in his direction. Mark coughed and backed off.

Custer gazed up past the dragon to its rider. “You can go now.”

The Marine saluted. The dragon took three steps north, then launched into the air. He intentionally kicked up a pile of sand in their direction.

“Shit,” said Mark in wonder.

Brent turned from the men, the dragon, and looked at the burned-out hulks of buildings. The team stood by and watched the last building flame out, then headed back to base at dusk.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Find out more about the world of L. A. Jacob at  
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