ALLIANCE UNLEASHED by Raymond Paul Johnson

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CHAPTER 1

The Philippines, 2007

Eric Ridge's face smashed white sand like the backside of a shovel. Splayed headlong on a hot, sun-drenched beach, he listened—but heard nothing. Then, ocean to his right. Forcing his head up, he spit out sand and cranked his neck left. Raising gritty eyelids, murkiness gave way to focus, and then time froze. He stared several feet ahead…at the hole in Angelo's temple. Blood pooled at the young man's mouth. His eyes were open, but no spark. No movement. No breath. They had been jogging one moment. Then a noise, and the teenager fell like a tree. Ridge next. Thank God Angelo's sister hadn't joined them, flashed across his mind. But…what in God's name happened? What would his clients—Angelo's mom and dad—think? In combat, Ridge had witnessed death. Too many times. But never…never so unexpected. Never from nowhere. How? This was a vacation to the Philippines—for winning their California case. Why this? Why now? Why here?

Just then, liquid seeped into his left eye. Burning. He pulled his arm across the sand and wiped it. Blood smeared his hand, followed by distant yelling. Racing

footsteps. Louder noises. He looked up. In the distance, three or four men, in rebel dress, were rushing at him. His mind spun to his wife Jayne. His daughter Jenny. Saving…Angelo. Could he still be alive? Planting both hands in sand, he pushed to his knees and leaned toward the boy. Can't leave him, thought Ridge. And then—the world turned dark, darker yet and slowly spiraled. His head swirled and dropped, like a curtain. Eric Ridge blacked out.

When his eyes opened, his face, scrubbing sand, felt afire. They were dragging him face down. His eyes shot up, and he twisted his neck back. Blood trailed in the furrow dug by his chin. How? Was it a single shot? One minute with his client's son, the next—helpless, bleeding, caught like an animal. After decades fighting for others, Ridge now had to fight for himself.

Suddenly, his chin got pulled from sand to jungle, and leaves slammed his face. Then, everything stopped. A huge Filipino with a bolo machete in his belt raised Ridge's arms. Two other men lifted his feet. Now above ground, they moved forward. His body and face continued being beat by branches, ferns and other plant life as they tracked through jungle. Finally, they stopped, flipped him over and dropped him.

Ridge stole a look, right and left, and spotted some Filipino men and two bamboo box cages with long carrying poles along the sides. At that moment, another man behind him grunted and bagged Ridge's head with a sack. Dust filled

his eyes, and the light went out as he sucked in burlap material. With breathing near impossible, Ridge got pulled on his back toward the cages.

Then the men hoisted him into a sitting position, shoved his head between his knees, and tied his hands back with rope. They crammed him into the box. Bamboo bars scrapped his sides, but he felt they'd never get his six-foot-three-inch and 210-pound frame fully in the cage. Then they pushed on his head and yanked the cage around him. He heard the door slam and latch.

The cage crushed in all directions, but Ridge knew the mental pain could be far worse—like being dropped in a dark hole with dirt shoveled in from above. He had to fight panic. Luckily, before combat in Southeast Asia, he had gone through prisoner-of-war training. It all came back. Never let 'em take both your mind and body. Breath slow. Use measured breaths. And literally, think outside the box…through thought, take yourself to the nicest place you know and stay there—until you can do more.

Ridge lost contact with the ground. They lifted the cage with the side poles and headed through the jungle. Every jostle, every jolt hurt, but Ridge concentrated on being home—in Southern California—relaxing with Jayne, his dog Pistol and his guard cat, Mister, curled on his lap. About an hour passed, maybe two. Then the cage crashed down, the door opened, and they jerked him out.

Just stretching on the ground became heaven, so Ridge stayed basically still. About fifteen minutes later, someone eased the bag off his head. It wasn't the huge Filipino; it wasn't a Filipino at all. Smiling at him, a small dark-skinned Negrito warrior loosened the ropes on his hands and turned Ridge's head, inspecting the left side. Decades earlier, before Nam, Ridge had taken jungle survival school in the Philippines. Negrito warriors, among the most talented fighters he'd ever met, instructed about survival, evasion and jungle life. Some were only four feet tall, but all were Wild Wild West tough. Impressive. Standing in a clearing, they could disappear into the jungle—never to be found—in less time than you could turn around.

This Negrito warrior was obviously a lowly hand hired by the Filipino rebels. He had black and gray hair, a t-shirt that was white—a long time ago—cutoff jeans and flip flops with rubber tire soles. He also had empathy for Ridge.

Shaking his finger, the Negrito signaled Ridge to be quiet, stay still. He began pouring what smelled like alcohol—citrusy-piney-gin?—from a small, round bottle over the left side of Ridge's head. Then, he took off his own t-shirt, tore it into strips, tied them together and tightly wrapped Ridge's head—as to stop bleeding or cover a wound or both. The warrior raised a finger to his lips, placed the bag gently over Ridge's head again and ushered Ridge—who curled up—back into the bamboo cage head first. This time though, Ridge heard no door latch

behind him. Just men yakking in the background. Sounded like Tagalog…Spanish laced with indecipherable words. Three different voices—at least. Eating? He could smell it. But no one offered food. No water. And as he peeked at jungle greenery through the bottom of the bag, night slowly fell.

Ridge bided his time. The yakking finally stopped, leaving only jungle chirping, rustling leaves and stray animal sounds. He carefully, silently pushed the door with his feet. Ridge crawled from the cage, worked the loose ropes from his hands, and slipped the bag off his head. He found himself in dense jungle at the edge of a small clearing and ducked behind huge V-shaped plants that reached toward the sky, a half moon, countless stars and a weird smokey glow.

In the clearing, two bodies were skewed around a smoldering fire with red, spitting embers but no flame. They seemed asleep with empty round bottles lying on the ground near each. Closer to Ridge were two smaller sleeping bodies—probably Negrito warriors. Suddenly one raised his head and looked directly at Ridge. He waved his hand signaling Ridge to take off to the right into surrounding jungle.

Ridge looked at himself. At least he had dressed for success—an old black t-shirt with a violet "NYU" on the front, black Nike running shorts, gray Nike running shoes and his trusty IWC diver's watch. He still had the watch, so robbery wasn't motive for all this. And more importantly, he still had on sun cream he had

rubbed in that morning mixed with insect repellant—couldn't hurt given where he was going.

Using techniques from jungle school, like staying low, trying not to step on thick jungle debris or snap vegetation, and avoiding any worn paths, Ridge slowly, methodically made his way through deep jungle. A couple of hours later, he stopped where the ground was thick with leaves and plant life, and like his Negrito instructors, began to disappear. He laid out, as they had done, in a depression near giant greenery, yanking more and more leaves and fallen vegetation over his body. Only his mouth to breath and his eyes to watch remained uncovered. Yet eventually, despite the danger, eerie jungle noises and efforts to stay awake, Ridge fell asleep—not knowing what lay ahead.