

A female US Army captain on a Mideast mission.

Honor Bound

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# **HONOR BOUND**

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**John Ratti**



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**One day, some of this fiction *will be fact.***

# 1

*Sergeant Dalton Harper raised his voice, "Three of ours heading this way." He seized a longer look with binoculars, "One has on a rancher's hat."*

Captain Kasey Lawrence frowned and called her squad to attention, "We're getting a visit from a headquarters puke who struts over spit and shine! Don't give him a reason to linger."

The unit scrambled to appear up to regulations. Captain Lawrence never busted them about little things, so long as the work got done. She saw it as the only way to operate in this hoary desert near the Iraq border. They were miles off the road running across Saudi Arabia northwest from Jordan to the Persian Gulf southeast, a US Army chemical and biological substance detection team working on the edge of the Empty Quarter seeking evidence of materials used by Saddam Hussein's forces during the Gulf War.

Major Jack "Cowboy" Bowers vaulted out of a mutt followed by an attendant combo. In rapid stride he surveyed the troops, finding something to criticize about everyone. He ended with Kasey, her image reflecting in his mirrored shades.

"Captain Lawrence, unbutton your coat."

Vertically embroidered along the edge of the lining, knurly stitching on top of the finished weave, are the words - *America, One Nation, One Destiny*.

Bowers knew it. He smiled, "Your uniform is not up to code."

Kasey peered at his hat, "With due respect sir, neither is yours."

Her crew stifled smirks while Bowers failed in a search for an appropriate retort. "You're coming with us," he finally fired off. "General Zalman wants to see you."

She dropped command on Lieutenant Tyrone Moore and climbed into the jeep.

They moved south, toward the outpost near Badanah. The Gulf War ended years ago, but America continued enforcing no-fly zones in north and south Iraq. An effort mostly carried out by US personnel in Saudi Arabia, America's best friend in the Arab Mideast. Their relationship was mature and polished in the



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ways it had to be. The US provided the force to warn off outsiders with eyes on Saudi oil reserves, over one quarter of the world's total. That much both countries admitted to themselves, each other and the world. Neither dared acknowledge US presence as serving to deter internal threats to the Saudi royal family. They never went there, showing the two nations understood each other's no-fly zones.

En route, Bowers engaged in a rant disguised as small talk, criticizing in minutiae the expertise of her unit and finally degenerating into a tirade about women in the military.

"Politicians are bending over backward to curry favor with female voters and liberals. Brass is being forced to lower standards."

Kasey stared ahead, never replying, until Bowers turned to her and growled, "The fact is, you know I'm right. Don't you, captain?"

He had left himself wide open. Kasey patiently detailed, "Sir, if so, why am I, working in the field, a captain, while you, working in an office, are a major? We both graduated from West Point at the same time." She took no joy in dishing it to Bowers. Always too easy to one up him. At least he became quiet. That was satisfaction enough.

Kasey met with General Zalman soon as she arrived at the makeshift base. She noticed his white hair had grown long. Seems he's been near retirement forever. A good man but one who should have found something else to do with his life long ago, as the peccadilloes leaving his face crimson raw revealed.

"I have an order from DOD that came in on a diplomatic back channel," Zalman said when they were alone. "I am to send the highest ranking intelligence officer in the region to the Iraq border. From there Iraqi military will take you to meet an official who allegedly has information of major security interest to the region."

Kasey digested the words. Outside a window, her eye caught sight of a small plane landing and its sole occupant, a man, exit and walk toward them.

"Seems an issue for the diplomats," Kasey observed.

Zalman shrugged, "The order comes from high up on the chain. Iraq wants the meeting right away. It could be a new ploy to get sanctions lifted. DOD wants to handle this informally."

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"I'm to go alone?"

"No. A comparably ranking Saudi will accompany you."

Kasey raised a brow. A very unusual pairing.

Zalman elaborated, "The matter is said to be of significant interest to them."

The pilot of the plane, Air Force Captain Nasir ibn Saud, entered the room. He ignored Kasey, quickly presented himself to the general and then went on without taking a breath, "General, it is inappropriate for a woman to attend this meeting with me. As a member of the royal family, it is unacceptable."

Zalman, too played out for such conflict, stepped on his protest, "I will follow my orders. If you won't go, that's your choice."

Kasey moved toward Nasir and extended a hand, her first course in dealing with fixed attitudes, simply ignore them and move forward, an automatic response to diffuse negative emotions. Nasir avoided her gesture.

Zalman delivered words like a weary dirge, "Captain Saud, I won't argue etiquette with you. Saudi Arabia will have to get our briefing after the meeting."

Kasey watched an Army convoy pull up outside. Two ACAVs, a Lorry and an M113. Aged hardware, back from the Desert Storm era. Kasey walked down a hallway after being dismissed, while Nasir stayed behind threatening political repercussions. She came across Bowers loitering by the exit.

"You better watch your ass up there."

"Maybe you should come. You've been watching my ass since we entered the academy."

Kasey had a seat in a waiting vehicle. Nasir at last emerged. An angry gait launched him next to her, where he perched like a cramped animal. The caravan moved away. Zalman stared at them through a window and poured a shot of whiskey.

Kasey and Nasir didn't swap a word all the way to the border.

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Deserts can be recent or ancient environments, as much Earth's future as past. They begin in climates where water evaporation exceeds rainfall over long periods. For a desert to evolve there must be significant open land, scant

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inherent vegetation and few natural bodies of water around. An atmosphere generally free of clouds is also necessary. Clouds deflect heat. High winds must predominate. Falling air warms, absorbing moisture, while rising air cools, holding less moisture, causing clouds and precipitation. Often deserts form due to continental drift and rising mountain regions. Deserts have mystery. Still unknown factors can advance their genesis. The desert in the Arabian Peninsula formed sixty-five million years ago by emerging mountain range to the west. The desert in nearby North Africa is much more recent. In Egypt, the Sphinx and monuments to the pharaohs were built before the land became arid. That area became desert only a few thousand years ago, short order Earth time. Deserts are fragile and rugged. Vivid but blurred. Smooth yet craggy. Sustained and ruined. Teeming with the energy and suspense of life in a vexed setting.

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Kasey and Nasir crossed the last guard station in Saudi Arabia before entering Iraq. A scant place watched over by two US soldiers. In the sand, borders between nations blur. Even among antagonistic states. The desert itself serves as effective sentry. Official crossing sites are rare and usually located near highways or population centers. Otherwise, border stations sit in remote territories only as far from main roads as those sneaking around dare attempt to travel. The sentries on this isolated frontier knew they were coming. They stood and watched the procession roll through. Since the Gulf War, Americans staffed these secluded margins. US soldiers are never at established border crossings. Political considerations. Citizens of Arab allies become anxious when they witness visible US military presence.

The convoy pushed north, through the time of day when motion and sun angle made the sand sparkle. Kasey looked as if she belonged here. Her pale blue eyes and milky light hair fused with the faded color values. Nasir's presence appeared distinct, even at odds, with the land of his origin. His form seemed both chiseled and uncut. Raven hair. Dark eyes. Fashioned from a clan that for

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eons compelled its presence on austere surroundings, defying it with their bold visage.

A waiting procession lined up like a freight train came into view on the horizon. Kasey could make out uniforms.

"Some welcoming committee - Republican Guards."

Nasir kept silent as these once warring factions came together. After a taut pause, the Iraqi in charge saluted and walked in their direction. Kasey and Nasir left their escort and converged on the officer. The man had rehearsed the few words of English he needed to know.

"Your guns, please."

Nasir wavered before handing over his revolver. Kasey remained still. Nasir glared and motioned her to comply.

"It's not part of my orders," she matter-of-factly stated.

Her reaction seemed absurd because they were facing weaponry far greater than two handguns. Kasey's refusal was a matter of principle. Iraq, a defeated enemy, never gets to impose conditions on the victor, America. Ever.

A standoff ensued. The Iraqi officer consulted with his soldiers while Nasir scowled at Kasey, "Give them your gun, I tell you!"

"You don't *tell* me to do anything!"

"I know how these people think," Nasir condescendingly said. "There will be no meeting. It will be your fault."

At the same time, the Iraqis engaged in heated debate with hostile eyes aimed at Kasey. Eventually, the Iraqi in charge signaled them to a carrier. Kasey and Nasir got into the back of a croaky Soviet transport and sat across from some Republican Guards. Kasey gawked at the interior, the rusted steel props and drooping canvas. This must be at least forty years old, she thought as the motorcade budged far inside Iraq.

Kasey absorbed every detail of the hours long ride. It concluded with the procession moving up elevated terrain. At a defended entrance carved out of stone, they advanced inside the gradient and stopped at an immense staging area. Republican Guards swarmed around, leading Kasey and Nasir on foot to a level below, passing colossal facilities constructed of marble and garnished with dense metal and down again to a darkened corridor surrounded by solid rock.

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Menacing doors blocked every passageway. Kasey and Nasir followed along to a dark chamber and sat in two chairs positioned in front of a long table. Behind the table was a door. It opened and a man approached. In flat-toned English he mechanically asked for Kasey's gun. She refused. The man disappeared behind the door.

Nasir all but jumped from the chair, "This is no time to defy them!"

"It's not defiance," Kasey wished she had time to explain.

Seconds later, the man returned trailed by Republican Guards. They crammed the room, brandishing automatic weapons and chaotically forming a fast circle around Kasey and Nasir, as if to intimidate by using chaotic gestures. They set their attention on Kasey's hands. Then Saddam Hussein walked into the room.

Kasey made a quick determination. She got up, which provoked the soldiers. They tightly converged on her, guns aimed. Kasey ignored them, placed her right hand over her heart, and spoke -

*"Is-saal-laam a-lay-kum."* (May peace be upon you)

Saddam slightly nodded and replied without obvious demeanor.

*"Wa-alaykuum is-salam."* (And to you be peace)

Nasir seethed at what he viewed as an inappropriate display by Kasey. Saddam positioned himself in a chair. As Kasey sat back down, she sensed a new fury consuming Nasir as he stared at Saddam's feet.

The man who spoke deflated English stood by to interpret. Saddam declared, "I have something you need to see. It is of interest to us all."

He waved a hand and a round concrete container with a metal cover was wheeled into the room. Soldiers removed the top. Saddam pointed at it. Kasey and Nasir slowly walked over and gazed inside. Kasey masked any reaction while gently touching the pulpy mass inside and rolling the residue between her fingers. She wiped remnants on her sleeve. Nasir looked to her for an explanation, "Seems to be cellulose acetate," she said. "Used for creating plastic

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explosives. Few sources outside America have the furnace reduction technology needed to produce this quantity."

"That may no longer be true," was Nasir's obvious perspective.

The remark peeved Kasey, "We would know about it."

"Maybe now you do."

Kasey coldly stared at him, "Maybe."

Saddam's words broke their tension, "It was smuggled from Iran. Found in possession of Jordanian produce traders. They were tracked across Iraq and stopped at the border. The substance weighs 45.35 kilograms."

Saddam paused until he locked eyes with Kasey. Again, he said, "45.35 kilograms."

Nasir had another subject on his mind, "Jordan? That couldn't be the ultimate destination."

After another prompt from Saddam, a man was hauled into the chamber. Kasey and Nasir cringed at his pulpy wounds as he cowered on the floor.

Saddam didn't immediately answer Nasir's statement, "He is the only smuggler alive ... because he speaks English."

Republican Guards prodded the man with a pistol whipping. His spirit implored the outsiders, "Please ... mercy ... I have told everything. It was not for use against Iraq. We were taking it to Jordan, to a Saudi in Amman."

Nasir felt no pity for the man's obvious impending destiny, "Who was the Saudi?"

"I don't know ... a mullah there was to put us in touch." He faced Kasey, "Please, some water."

His request brought a battering. The man covered up and writhed on the floor. Kasey pushed through the soldiers, kneeled by him and addressed Saddam, "You asked us here in a presumed diplomatic setting. Witnessing violence is not a part of it. I want water for this man."

The interpreter gawked at Kasey, apprehensive of repeating such blunt words. Carefully, he translated. Saddam didn't move for a long time while Kasey wiped the man's forehead.

At last, Saddam summoned water with a hand sign. The man tried to grip the container. His finger joints were too shattered. Kasey helped him while looking

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up at Saddam, "The credibility of your words could be better established if this man were to return with us."

Saddam wouldn't go for it, "He has no more to tell you."

Kasey pressed on, "If I could point out-"

Saddam didn't wait for translation, "He will not be leaving here."

Republican Guards forced Kasey aside and took the man. She turned away, unable to face her failure to save the man's life.

Nasir stared at Saddam, "Why are you telling us this?"

"Iraq has already fought a long war with one fundamentalist state along our border," the interpreter held up a hand to indicate Saddam hadn't finished. "Our security would be at great risk if we end up flanked by another."

Nasir resented the insinuation, "There will never be a revolution in my country."

"Consider what this could have done," was the nightmare Saddam asked Nasir to ponder.

An anxious Kasey needed to know, "What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm giving it to you. Maybe you can learn why it passed through Iraq," Saddam knew they'd find it an unexpected reply.

Kasey's struggled to contain her shock as she tried to figure Saddam's rationale. Is there another dynamic here?

It seemed less complex to Nasir. He murmured to Kasey, "Can we safely transport it?"

"In this state - yes. It is inert without a binding agent."

Saddam briefly gazed at Kasey, "I want you to report what I've said to the president."

"I'm sure he will know," Kasey didn't want to promise anything.

"Once he knows, I will share anything else we learn. One week from today, I would like to hear the president make a public statement about desert weather. Then I will be certain he heard from you," at last Saddam revealed the outline of an agenda.

But what was it? "I'll pass that along to my superiors," Kasey remained noncommittal.

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"You should know," Saddam paused, a clue he knew how to get what he wanted, "this was the third shipment smuggled through Iraq. The first two successfully made connections inside Jordan."

With that, Saddam stood and exited the room.

Kasey and Nasir burned with alarm at his parting claim but remained silent as they watched the cellulose acetate packed and loaded onto a cart. Then soldiers escorted them out. Marching through the corridor, nearby gunfire vibrated off the walls around them.

Approaching their waiting convoy, a small truck sped by carrying the inanimate flesh of the smuggler Kasey tried to save. No doubt on the way to some inglorious burial. Kasey and Nasir kept mum while returning in the company of Saddam's troops.

The US caravan waited on the spot they left them, securing the surprise freight at the rear of the procession. By the time they had moved beyond the two perimeter guards into Saudi Arabia, Nasir's seething rage finally escaped.

"Your behavior almost doomed us."

Kasey knew it was coming, "That's the main thing on your mind right now?"

Nasir wasn't listening, "Not giving up your gun ... I feared for my life ... then seeing you greet Saddam like a cherished friend-

Kasey interrupted as Nasir began shaking his head, "I was obtaining information. I am an intelligence officer. I learn what I need to know any way I can."

He kept venting, "Americans never get it right in this part of the world."

She matched his anger word for word, "I have been in the Mideast for ten years. This is my beat. I helped defend your country when you needed us."

"Don't confuse America's self-interest with altruism."

"The same applies to Saudi Arabia."

"I have lived in America ... attended Georgetown ... spent time Benning. I know your ways."

"Your *obligation* is to know what might be happening in your country."

Kasey's language was intentional. Obligation is a word frequently used in Islam. Obligation to country is a foremost tenet. Surprisingly, her dig melted his



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anger. Nasir's tone became subdued, "My country is more than a religious obligation. It's my life."

The response made Kasey feel she went too far. She softened with a try at faint conciliation, "Then we are similar in one way."

Nasir kept the exchange from getting too sentimental, "Please indulge me by not announcing it."

Now they were back on ground familiar, even comfortable, in a provoking way.

"Fine!" Kasey stewed for a moment, then decided to let him have it: "Let me *announce* this to you ... The material we have has only recently been developed. The mass is small, but very dense. Probably twenty or thirty percent cellulose acetate content. C-20 or C-30 if you want to know the terminology. Mere ounces will blow the best tank to dust. Pan Am 103 was blown up over Scotland by a C-2 compound. That's least ten times less destructive than what we we're dragging now. This isn't for usual Jihad or Hezbollah activities. This is for some different purpose and we better find out what that is."

Nasir honed in on the weakness in Kasey's assessment, "That is if Saddam is telling it straight."

"Even if he isn't, the material wasn't manufactured in this part of the world. We need to find out where it came from, that's the key."

They arrived back in Badanah. Personnel surrounded the cargo while Kasey and Nasir walked away from each other to separate debriefings.

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