

A Cambridge educated SEAL fighting al-Qaeda in Syria sustains brain trauma. That makes him a brilliant savant with temper control issues. While waiting for a medical board, he works with the Joint InterAgency Task Force and the Army Special Forces Underwater Operations School. Then al-Qaeda attacks the school.

Baby It's HOT Outside: Rise of the Weatherman

By Paul Murdock

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BABY IT'S **HOT** OUTSIDE

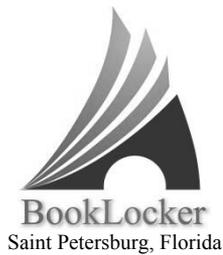
RISE OF THE WEATHERMAN



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Baby It's HOT Outside:
Rise of the Weatherman

Paul Murdock



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First Edition

The Acquired Savant Syndrome

“Acquired savant syndrome, in contrast, are instances in which dormant savant skills emerge, sometimes at a prodigious level, after a brain injury or disease in previously non-disabled (neurotypical) persons where few such skills were evident before such CNS injury or disease. This circumstance, of course, raises the question of whether such dormant capacity exists in everyone, only to surface, perhaps as a backup system, when there is such CNS injury or illness.” Darold A. Treffert, MD, *Islands of Genius*, (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia: 2010), p. 194.

Cuban Missile Crisis Documents

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB393/>

Acronyms/Terms

AGU - Airborne Guidance Unit

CINC — Commander in chief: usually a unified Combat Commander

Clobbered - A full flight deck or landing area

CMS — Communications Material System: crypto for secure comms

CSO — Combat system officer on an AC-130

DAMA - Demand Assigned Multiple Access - improves satcom security

EW — Electronic warfare

IFAK — Individual First Aid Kit

ISR — Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

JIOC — Joint Intelligence Operations Center

JOCC — Joint Operations Command Center

JTAC — Joint Terminal Attack Controller: controls military aircraft

JTF — Joint Task Force

LEDET - Law Enforcement Detachment

MANPAD — Man-portable air defense system

Baby It's HOT Outside

NAVWARSSYSCOM — Naval Information Warfare Systems Command
NCA — National Command Authority. The ultimate source of military orders
ODA — Operational Detachment - Alpha, also called an A-Team
OSD — Office of the Secretary of Defense
POO — Point of origin
Racket -- ESM intercept
ROE — Rules of engagement
Racket — intercepted electromagnetic signal
Run the Rabbit — Slang for a tactic used for room entry
SCIF — Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility
TACON — Tactical control
TERN — Tactically Exploited Reconnaissance Node drone
USCENTCOM — United States Central Command
USSOCOM — the United States Special Operations Command
POLAD — Political advisor
QRF — Quick Reaction Force
VERTREP — Vertical replenishment

ONE

Muhammad Abd ar-Rahman, at the top of the last of several flights of stairs, was breathing hard; he stood there, regaining his breath while running a hand through a henna-dyed red beard. After a moment, he pushed aside a partially open door and entered a room. It was unfurnished and contained only a kerosene heating stove. Muhammad stopped just beyond the door, turned his gray-haired head to point an ear towards the stairs. When he heard the sound of footsteps coming from them, he limped across the room to a pair of shutters, unlatched them and pushed. As they opened, a sheen of fine dust fell off them, and a bright drape of sunlight embraced the tiled floor.

He drew a collapsed telescope from a pocket in his dirty thobe. He pulled it open; the hand on Muhammad's tattooed right arm was missing a finger. He directed the scope's end out the window. The first thing he saw was a blue and white UN flag. He shifted his aim to the entrance to a large compound: a sign mounted over it read United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Welcome to Sanliurfa Refugee Camp, Sanliurfa, Turkey.

It was necessary to cross a wide security zone to reach the camp entrance. A high berm formed the exterior of the zone; a wire fence, topped with razor wire, was its interior edge. Closer, 500 meters from him, a guard armed with an MP5K submachine gun stood next to a pair of steel pillars that supported an open gate. Those marked the beginning of a narrow, twisted travel lane defined by concrete barriers. It

crossed the zone to where guards stood in front of a gatehouse that had one window; Muhammad knew it was bulletproof.

Behind Muhammad, a boy appeared at the door. He was wearing tracksuit trousers, a soccer jersey, and Adidas. He had a scraggly beard, some would call it a 'hope beard,' and was carrying a battered suitcase. Muhammad said, "Hurry, Ibrahim, they'll be here soon."

Ibrahim sat on the floor, opened the suitcase, and extracted a joystick and a stubby antenna. He plugged a lead from each into a console that was inside it, swiveled up an LCD screen, and turned it on. The display produced a greenish light that changed to provide the view from the top of a roof: centered on the screen was the refugee camp.

Soon Muhammad detected a HUMVEE with Turkish army markings traveling down a street. Close behind it, was an armored truck labeled *Ziraat Bankasi*. Muhammad said, "The bank truck's here."

Ibrahim said, "*Alhamdulillah.*"

Muhammad watched the HUMVEE and truck arrive at the pillars; the guard waved the HUMVEE down the lane. The armored truck moved forward. After the driver showed IDs to the guard, he and the truck were allowed to proceed. At the other end of the lane, another guard directed the HUMVEE to drive up a ramp and onto a metal frame. It drove the length of it, down the ramp on the other end, and halted before the gatehouse. The entry gate slid aside, and the HUMVEE drove into the compound and stopped.

A soldier waved the armored truck onto the rack; as it moved forward, a retractable claw-like metal barrier popped up, and the vehicle halted before it. A man inspected the truck's undercarriage from below; another walked a dog along its length. Once the truck was inside the compound,

Muhammad watched it follow the HUMVEE until they went behind a large building. He lowered the telescope and pecked numbers into a cell phone. Someone immediately answered his call. Muhammad terminated it after saying only, “*Nushkar Allah.*” He watched the compound for nearly ten minutes before using the phone again; someone answered his call on the first ring. He ended it after saying one word: “*Ruuh.*”

Moments later, coming from the street below the window, he heard the clattering sound of a starting diesel, followed by the grind of shifting gears. Through the window, Muhammad watched a propane tank truck, it sat high on its suspension and had unusually big wheels, rumble down an alley towards the travel lane. Muhammad produced a smile; it disappeared when a blue Range Rover drove out of a side street and then in front of the moving truck. Muhammad yelled, “*Khara!*” He threw the telescope, and it bounced off the wall and onto the floor. He retrieved it, returned to the window. Through the shattered lens, he saw the Rover halt at the pillars, then the propane truck stop behind it. The Rover’s driver produced a handful of IDs; the guard examined them, then waved it towards the entrance. It climbed on the rack, and four men stood near the SUV as it was inspected and sniffed by the dog. Then the four men reboarded the Rover, and it went down the ramp towards the gate.

Muhammad made another call on his phone and said in Arabic, “Launch it.” Ibrahim put a hand on the joystick. Muhammad watched the propane truck stop before the claw on the rack; beyond it, the Rover parked in front of the building the bank truck had gone behind. The inspection process began; the dog and its handler walked around the truck. A guard gestured for the driver to dismount. The truck’s door opened, and the driver leaned out of the cab; Muhammad could hear the guard and driver shouting. Then

the dog sat down: it had detected explosives. When it did, the driver dodged into the cab. Muhammad saw a puff of smoke and heard the truck's engine as the vehicle backed two meters. Then the engine roared, and the truck lunged forward. There was a screeching sound as it bounced over the claw and charged down the ramp. The guards pulled submachine guns up and shot into the cab, but the truck slammed into the closing gate. It buckled, then the truck exploded.

The fireball was as bright as the sun; the pressure wave stroked Muhammad's beard. He began yelling, "*Allahu Akbar.*" Ibrahim gleefully repeated the phrase. Muhammad watched the fire for a moment, then limped to the door. Behind him, Ibrahim was moving the joystick and concentrating on the LCD screen. Muhammad said to him in Arabic, "May Allah guide your hand," then he hurried down the stairs and into an alley where two white Crown Victorias waited: armed men were in each. Behind them, others were securing a Kord heavy machine gun on the top of a Ford F-350's cab. Muhammad climbed into the first car and said, "*Yalla!*" The vehicles sprinted down the alley.

Red Sea

In the dim light of dawn, a dry combat submersible (DCS) was purring past coral spires. Some were over seven meters high. The visibility around it was over two hundred meters. The DCS was trolling an antenna to pick up radio messages.

Inside it, LCDR Reef Klima was sitting behind a yoke that controlled the DCS's fairwater and stern planes. Through the hull, the sharp snapping sound made by shrimp, to stun prey, was ubiquitous. Like everyone in the DCS, Reef was breathing its one-atmosphere air. In a rack, LAR V rebreathers were dripping.

Senior Chief Emma Bartram was beside him using a console displaying message traffic and a digital map. She wore a one-piece swimsuit, had the body of a sprinter, straight blond hair, blue eyes that sung stories: her scars told others.

Reef adjusted the DCS's depth, then squirmed to remove a wetsuit. Bartram reached over and helped him pull it off, revealing ridged muscles and the forest of scars on his body. "Thanks, Senior. Master Chief said you knew one of them?"

"Chief Dominick. We went through BUD/S together. We'd fantasize about where we'd travel when we finished. Egypt was on our bucket list. At least she saw the pyramids before she died. She was getting out of the NAV next month; she was pregnant."

"*Christos.*" After a beat, Reef said, "When that boat went over us, I thought they'd detected us."

"It was worse than you know. Brady stopped swimming then. I bumped into him and leaked a gob of bubbles."

"How do you feel about becoming a mustang?"

"I might not accept the appointment. I don't like the idea of being a butter bar ensign after all my years in the Navy."

"Then why'd you apply?"

"My last command insisted. I'll do what God tells me."

A thought entered Reef's mind. *Did I ask her about becoming an LDO out of more than concern about her career?* He pushed it aside and said, "I'm looking forward to going on leave."

"So am I. I'll be hunting elk soon." She turned a switch on her console, and music played in the DCS. "We have an email from the Naples shore patrol about Hallon's incident. He put three men in the hospital. The bar owner gave them a bill for a thousand bucks. If he doesn't have a good reason for what happened, you should bust him."

“I’m no shrink, but it’s because his girlfriend ODED three months ago. Till then, he’d never been in trouble. You saw he fights like a Spartan, the dude’s a good piece of gear. I’ll do something, but keep in mind that, except for you and Brady, we’ve been together for two years and haven’t lost anyone while getting every mission done.”

At the harbor entrance, in a slot cut through the coral on top of a steep underwater hill, Reef steered the DCS over two large ships. One had missed the opening and wedged its bow into the extensively bleached coral; its hull angled down, the stern rested on the bottom forty meters below. On top of it was the other ship; they were piled together like discarded toys. Prowling sharks and schools of fish cruised over them. Reef spied a clam with a garishly colored meter-wide maw. Then a voice behind him said, “Boss, something bad happened in Turkey. All the intel agencies are commenting about it on IntelChat.”

Reef turned around and saw Special Warfare Operator First Class (SO1), Mustafa Haddad sitting behind a computer screen that flipped-out from the DCS’s hull.

Reef said, “Give me the zest, Mushy.”

“Jihadis killed many people in a refugee camp in Turkey.”

SO2 Monty Montgomery, a heavily muscled black man, pulled off a headset. “I checked HICOM and the other command nets; there’s traffic about it on all of them.”

Reef said, “Try to find out more, Rock.” Montgomery’s nickname did not come from the fact that he looked as hard as a rock; he’d earned it by almost failing drown-proofing in BUD/S.

There were other SEALs in the DCS. Master Chief Syvertsen was tall and an explosives expert. SO1 Brady was stocky, of medium height, had gone through BUD/S after being a fleet hard hat diver. SO1 Fernando Marquez was a

heavily tattooed American Indian and a medic. They usually referred to him as Tonto, but sometimes Fern. SO1 Ragnar Erickson was blond, barrel-chested, an expert on parachuting. The remaining team member was SO1 Drew Hallon: a gunsmith who could fix or jury-rig anything.

In front of Montgomery, a console began beeping. He looked at it and announced, “Boss, that’s an immediate precedence message from the head shed. Hatchett wants you to call him ASAP.”

“Patch me through to his desk phone.” Reef said to Bartram, “Take over.”

She pulled the control yoke in front of her, pushed a button on it; that caused a whirring sound to come from below them.

Reef sardonically said, “What are you doing?”

“The DCS isn’t trimmed right.”

“It was okay.”

“Not by my standards. You need to be more careful in what you do on liberty too.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“For example, you shouldn’t have done dead bug in the best restaurant in Naples. It was embarrassing having you guys fall backward in your chairs, wiggling your legs in the air.”

“You sound like an up tight black shoe.”

“I’m all for fun, but it wasn’t right to do that there.”

Montgomery said, “It’s ringing, skipper.”

Reef put on a headset and heard a phone ringing in the Naval Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU) headquarters at Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia Beach, then, “Captain Hatchett.”

“Captain, we sunk and wrecked the Somali boats. What’s up?”

“We extended you guys again. It shouldn't be for long, but you're not returning to CONUS next week.”

Reef felt sorry for himself and the team. He could imagine his mother's face when he told her. “That's the fourth time, sir.”

“Here's why. A Commander Chang, on the Joint Staff, called me and said SECDEF gave a verbal warning order to SOCOM to prepare to conduct a direct action operation, a rescue, in response to an attack on the UN refugee camp in Sanliurfa, Turkey. The terrorists killed many people, took hostages, one's a US Marine, and stole money being transferred to the camp's bank.”

“Which group?”

“The intel weenies think al-Qaeda. They killed two hostages yesterday, said they'll execute more in forty-eight hours unless the ransom's paid and other demands are met. That means it's going to be a super fucking short-fused op. If JSOC tasks DEVGRU to do it, you guys have the trident. You'll do the rescue.”

“Do we know where they are?”

“The bet is Syria. I'll send you the ransom video where they killed the hostages. Look, the media don't know the full story. One of them is the Duke of Edinburgh—”

“You mean—”

“Yeah, the heir to the British throne. He completed a humanitarian visit to the big camp in Gaziantep, then, without notice, visited the one in Sanliurfa. The fact that the Duke and the Marine were captured's top secret; only the US, the UK, and the Turks know. We're using the code word Zeus for the Duke and Semper for the Marine.”

“Was it an inside job?”

“The Turks are still interrogating people, but they're adamant the bad guys were lucky Zeus was there.”

“What happened to the camp’s security force?”

“We’re waiting to find out the details, but know most of it went to stop a brawl before the bad guys blew their way into the camp. Look, maybe our Marine and Zeus are dead, but we’re assuming they’re not. When the bad guys figure out who they have, we expect them to kill the Marine and Zeus and broadcast it on the internet or to try to blackmail us and the UK.”

“How has the UK responded to this?”

“CIA and State think they’ll pay more ransom if we don’t rescue him. They’ve cut their force structure so much they have no military options they can execute quickly.”

“What about video of the attack from surveillance cameras or security drones?”

“The security force office was destroyed in the attack. That’s where the camp’s drone ground control station was. The surveillance camera feeds went there too.”

“NSA should have the cloud back-ends.”

“NSA hasn’t given anyone anything. Here’s what’s happening next. MH-60s from the *Dewey* will be overhead the *Hawaii* in three hours. They’ll take you guys to the Jeddah airport. We have an AS2 on the way there. It’ll fly you to the Muwaffaq Salti Air Force Base in Jordan.”

“Why not Turkey?”

“They won’t let us stage there, say they’ll handle the bad guys if they’re in Turkey. One last thing. Just because JSOC’s staging everything in Jordan doesn’t mean you have the mission. Any questions?”

“No, sir.”

“Good luck, out.”

TWO

In the cabin of the dart-shaped AS-2, most of the team was sleeping. Haddad and Syvertsen were using laptops at a table that had bucket seats on each side of it. Reef, about to shut his eyes to sleep, noticed Syvertsen showing a pained expression. “What’s got you looking so beat up, Master Chief?”

Syvertsen seemed to be ripping words apart, as if they were a physical presence, when he said, “An email. Betty says my son’s still getting picked on by kids at school. They’ve never seen me; we’ve been deployed so long. One even said Betty and I are divorced, that I won’t be living with them anymore.”

“You can take leave as soon as we know this op’s over for us.”

“I will. I’d walk to school with Conan, the brats would see me. I’d attend a PTA meeting with Betty too.” Syvertsen seemed to catch his breath, before saying, “I noticed you’ve been spending a lot of time eyeballing Senior Chief.”

“I have to make sure she learns the ropes.”

“She has your attention in a way I’ve never seen with you. It’s what I call the I’m going to reproduce look.”

Then an AS2 crew member handed Reef a paper message. He studied it a moment before saying, “It’s the JSOC Warning Order. Get everyone up, and we’ll talk about it.”

A minute later, Bartram sat down across from him, soon all the SEALs were gathered.

Bartram said, “What’s the mission statement?”

Reef said, “Within forty hours JSOC assets will conduct an assault in the vicinity of Sanliurfa, Turkey, in order to rescue Zeus and Semper held hostage by a terrorist cell. Once they are extracted, if the tactical situation permits, the rescue of other hostages is encouraged. Operators will then kill or capture terrorists, destroy their assets, and exploit the venue for intelligence.”

Syvertsen said, “What are the assumptions?”

“Besides the location, the terrorists number no more than twelve. There’s no explanation for the number.”

Hallon said, “Till we know where they are, we can’t plan.”

Reef responded. “To do it, we need the location or locations of the hostages, the layout of the place or places they’re at, the number of bad guys guarding them, and other *mujahideen* nearby that could affect a rescue.”

Bartram said, “Are they optimistic about finding them?”

Haddad said, “Not within forty hours. The agencies are analyzing the ransom vid for clues.”

“Why don’t we have it?”

“We should; I’ll ask for it again.”

When the AS2 landed in Jordan, there were two aircraft refueling on the hot tarmac. One was a dull black CV-22; the second was a gray AC-130J ‘Ghostrider’ gunship. Clustered nearby them were their crews and some Jordanian Air Force personnel. The familiar CV-22 was special operations configured: fitted with extra fuel tanks, a probe for air to air refueling, a turret-mounted 7.62 mm Gatling-gun. Reef had worked with many AC-130s before, but this one was different. Aft, on its port side, it had a canvass cover over what would commonly be a turret for a 105 mm cannon, but it projected out from the fuselage further than those. A female

Air Force officer, wearing tight coveralls, was keeping anyone from inspecting it.

As they taxied past the aircraft, Hallon said, "There's a babe officer I'd like to play Dick in Jane with."

The team was unloading gear from the AS-2 when a car arrived. A man left it, and Reef walked towards him, saying, "I was hoping you were still here, Bill. How long's it been?"

"Two years. The Navy had just promoted you."

"How are Brook and Myla?"

"Super good, but Myla's a handful, keeps Brook busy." Bill pointed, "Is that Haddad?"

"The one and only."

"I'm here to brief you on a few things."

Reef yelled, "Mushy, we need you here." They spent five minutes in Bill's car, as he was departing a gray van drove up. An Arab wearing a Jordanian Special Forces uniform got out of it and heartily said, "*Ahlan wa sahlam, Ahlan wa sahlam.*"

Reef said, "*Marhaba, Faruq! Keef Halak?*" The two embraced; Haddad and Faruq did too. Then the three conversed in Arabic until a Mercedes bus passed them on its way to the other aircraft. Faruq said to everyone, "SEAL people put your gear in the van. I will take you to barracks after Commander Reef and I talk to your Air Force people."

Reef and Faruq walked to the other aircraft. While they were there, the team loaded its gear into the van. When finished, Bartram said to Haddad, "Faruq seems nice. How do you know him?"

Haddad said, "Two years ago, the boss and I came here to shut down an al-Qaeda cell that had embedded itself in the dockworkers in Aqaba. They were smuggling arms in and antiquities out. King Abdullah assigned Faruq and his team to work with us. They helped us ID the members, then Faruq

and his guys helped us kill the cell. He's a friend too. When we finished the Aqaba op, he showed us some of Jordan."

"What did you do?"

"He took us to Petra first."

"That was on Chief Dominick's and my bucket list."

"I'll go back if I can. Then we drove up the escarpment to his father's date farm on the Dead Sea and had dinner with all of his relatives. His wife and mother made *maqluba*."

"What's that?"

"*Maqluba* means upside down. It's made by putting sliced eggplant on the bottom of a pressure cooker, then a layer of chicken, then one of rice, raisins, and pine nuts go in with spices, another layer of everything. As it cooks, the chicken juices soak the eggplant and rice. When it's done, you flip the pot over and dump the food on a platter. After dinner, Faruq's father said we were going to visit the *Nawari*: Arab gypsies. Faruq's mother and wife didn't want us to, said they were unclean, *wasikh*, that the women were prostitutes. Faruq's father insisted. As you know, Arabs are very hospitable with guests."

"That's not my idea of hospitable."

"Anyway, we went with Faruq and his father over dunes towards the sound of music. In a cluster of trees on the shore, there was a circle of tents. Around a fire, four men were sitting on cushions. One was playing a rebab, one an oud. Three women were with them; I didn't see children but heard some. When we sat with them, a man opened bottles of Johnny Walker and passed them around. Later, a pretty woman came out of a tent wearing a short dress. My mother would have called her *wasikh* too. She danced, clicking castanets and twirling, her belly had muscles I've never seen. She pulled the boss up to dance, kept bumping her butt into

him. Faruq told us we could screw her.” Haddad chuckled, “It was a hard situation.”

“I bet.”

“Not that; to beg out of it without offending him, his father, or the woman. The boss said he was engaged to be married. I showed a picture of my cousin, said she was my wife.”

Haddad was interrupted when Reef said, “Listen up, Major Faruq has some things to tell us.”

Faruq said, “Please get into the van. We go to the barracks after I drop SEAL lady off were women pilots sleep.”

Bartram spoke up, “We all go to the same place, sir.”

With a raised eyebrow, Faruq looked at Reef. Reef smiled back. As the van started down the runway, Faruq said, “The British Air Force build the barracks before hundred years. We would give you a better place, but a Captain named Hatchett telled King Abdullah you need a private spot. A bus will take you to eat.”

Syvertsen said, “We won’t need it; we’re eating MREs.”

Hallon said, “Hatchett chopped up our chance for hot food.”

As the van neared the end of a runway, Faruq hesitantly said, “Pardon, SEAL lady, please, how you become a sailor soldier?”

Bartram smiled. “I get asked that a lot.”

Reef said, “She’s the team sniper. We average 3,000 rounds a week on the range. Her bullet groups are always the best.”

Faruq said, “No woman shoots good as best man.”

“Sex isn’t a factor. For example, the Russian sniper Liudmyla Pavlychenko killed over 300 Germans in World War Two.”

Faruq laughed. “Don’t tell my wife. How you learn shoot good?”

“My father taught me when I was five. I killed my first deer that year. We hunt all the time, mostly deer and elk, sometimes moose and bear. I hunt with a knife too. To finish answering your first question, when I was fourteen, I read about how ISIS forced women they capture to have sex, and thought I could help women that were in situations like that by being like Liudmyla.”

“I hate ISIS and al-Qaeda. They kill thousands of Muslims, would kill my family if they could. They’re *khara*: shit.”

Brady said, “Muslims persecute everyone, even Muslims.”

“I know history. Muslims, Christians, and Jews live under Muslim rule in peace after we defeat Christian armies. With Muslim rule, Jew and Christian only pay a small tax. They were happy to do it; Muslims treat them better than the Christian king. When Muslims rule Spain, Jews have what they name their Golden Age. When Christians take Spain back, they kill and torture Jews and Muslims in Inquisition. Christians burn Jews and make the racist idea. Which religion do most evil?”

“What about the Muslims who kill innocent people with IEDs?”

Haddad said, “The Provisional IRA blew up about 20,000 IEDs, an average of one every day for thirty years. Those killed many civilians. No one banned them from the United States.”

Faruq stopped the van in front of the first of two biscuit colored barracks; the bus stopped at the second. Faruq said, “You have good private here. Guards keep people away.”

The team boiled out of the van and hauled seabags, weapons, and dry boxes into a long room. From the ceiling, uncovered light bulbs hung on copper chains. Rolled up mattresses were on metal-framed beds: one had a pile of sheets and blankets on it. Wall shelves held dry goods and cooking utensils; a table had a stack of pita bread on it. There was a metal sink. At the far end of the room were enclosed toilets, showers, and a closet. Faruq opened a refrigerator that was making a frantic thumping sound. They saw bottled water, egg cartons, and plastic containers. “Please eat food. Hummus and yogurt are in the boxes. Now I must see if Air Force people okay.”

Reef followed Faruq out of the barracks. The team dropped gear on the beds; Brady plopped on one. Hallon looked unhappy when he finished inspecting the shelves. “Shit, there’s no cereal.”

Montgomery cackled, “You need those corn flakes too. You’ve been beating your shlong so loud at night Senior Chief can’t sleep. Right, Senior?”

Bartram ignored him. Brady giggled out, “It’d be a schlort, not a shlong.”

Hallon said, “Fuck off — why’d you say corn flakes, Rock?”

“They were invented to help people stop masturbating.”

“Bull shit.”

“No, it’s true; check out a Doctor Kellogg on Wikipedia.”

After Faruq left, Reef used a satellite phone to call Hatchett. As he waited for him to answer, he could see Bedouin herding goats towards black tents on the horizon. When Hatchett picked up, Reef said, “Skipper, we’re in Jordan. I got the CIA brief when we landed. The only thing new was that NSA has the camp’s drone video.”

“Do you have the ransom vid?”

“You guys haven’t sent it to us.”

“Hold on.” Reef heard Hatchett yell, “I want the ransom and drone videos to Klima’s team now. If they don’t have them in ten minutes, you’ll be eating your balls.” Hatchett came back on the line. “You should know there’s a food fight going on. SECDEF intends to use overwhelming force in the rescue.”

“What’s she planning?”

“They might employ a company of Rangers, even a Delta Force squadron. The Air Force is all in on her approach; that’s why that AC-130J’s there. It has their new tactical laser.”

“We shouldn’t be saddled with an unproven weapon.”

“You’re preaching to the choir; that fight’s over, we lost.”

“I vote my team alone unless we find out there are too many terrorists or venues for us to handle.”

“That’s our and Delta’s position. Got to go, General Johnson’s calling. Out here.”

Reef stood there, worried. The deadline for the hostages was approaching. If JSOC tasked his team to do the rescue, he wanted time to plan and rehearse it: impossible without knowing their location. In the barracks, he said, “Mushy, Hatchett sent us the ransom and the camp’s drone videos. We’ll have lunch, then your intel brief. I’ll invite the pilots and the AC-130’s combat system officer. You need to talk to her. It has the new laser.”

“Did you say she?”

“She’s the woman who was keeping people away from the gunship. I met her when Faruq and I talked to the aircrews. She didn’t mention the laser, but she’s probably more of an engineer than a gunner since the laser’s new technology. Make sure she knows how to work with us. With

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the precision it should have for tactical fires, maybe we can employ it more aggressively.”

THREE

For the intel brief, Haddad rolled out a five-meter-long ultra-high-definition display screen and with Hallon's help hung it from an overhead beam. The audience sat or stood. He began with the ransom video and a close up of two male soldiers; Haddad stopped the video with a remote after the camera finished panning them. They had swollen faces, were naked, bent over a table, and their limbs were duct-taped to opposite ends of it. The gunship's CSO sobbed and exclaimed, "Oh my God."

Haddad said, "Maybe you should leave, Major. What comes next is the worse thing I've ever seen or heard."

"I can take it. You surprised me with this."

Haddad pointed at one of the soldiers on the screen. "This guy's a Jordanian Circassian."

Brady said, "What's a Circassian?"

"An ethnic group from the Caucasus Mountains brought here by the Ottoman Turks. My Lebanese grandfather told me they're like the Gurkhas. Skilled and tough soldiers."

The CSO said, "Your grandfather's from Lebanon?"

"Yes, he and *teta*, grandma, moved to San Francisco in 1958."

Hallon said, "That's why Mushy has a degree in computer science from a California faggotiversity."

Bartram snapped, "Knock off that kind of talk, Hallon." Then she said, "The other guy's the German?"

Haddad said, "That's him, Senior."

Brady said, "They have holes in their hands."

Hallon looked at his own hands; they had round scars on them. He hissed, "Fucking animals," and slammed a fist into the wall. An Air Force crewmember near him scooted a chair away.

Reef barked. "Get a hold of yourself, Hallon."

"Sorry, you know why it gets to me."

The CSO said, "Why are the soldiers from different countries?"

Haddad said, "The UN needs guards for its camps; there are ten in Turkey alone. Member countries provide them." Haddad resumed the video. The camera pulled back and panned; he stopped the video again to say, "Notice the high barb-wire topped wall, the hills, distant cell phone tower." He resumed the video, and it swiveled to show the front of a two-story building. He stopped it to say, "This is the best look at what we, when I say we I mean CIA and DIA, believe is a house. From this partial view you can see it has broken windows. That's why we believe it was abandoned. Those are concrete pots for plants in front of it. When the camera panned, you saw part of a structure rising so high the top's not visible; we think it's a minaret." Haddad restarted the video; the camera zoomed in on six men and an Arab female. They looked scared, and their limbs were tied. The girl's hair was covered, because her abaya was open they could see she wore an ankle-length dress. Behind the group, an Arab held a pistol and wore a balaclava, thobe, agal, and ghutra.

Haddad stopped the video and pointed. "He's the US Marine. This guy's from the French 27th Mountain Infantry Brigade."

Reef went to the screen and touched it twice. "He's a Brit; this is a Rifles regimental badge. This is the Duke of Edinburgh. The other two suits must be his bodyguards."

Haddad continued the video. The camera swung to another masked man who declared, “We fighters for Allah now kill a Crusader and a Jordanian soldier. The Jordanian dies because he’s a *murtad* who fights al-Qaeda and for the *taghut* Abdullah.”

Haddad said, “A *Murtad* is an apostate. A *taghut*’s a tyrant.”

The camera swiveled to the men tied to the table. Muhammad, masked, limped into view, holding a curved knife.

Hallon said, “I have a *shibriyah* like the one he’s holding.”

Reef said, “Can you tell what the tattoo on his hand says?”

Haddad stopped the video and peered at the image. “*ash-Shabaab*. It means young men or guys.”

An Air Force officer said, “I’m Major Jim Blackwood, fly the Osprey. Are you talking about the African terrorist group?”

“That’d be my guess, sir. They’re an al-Qaeda off-shoot.”

The CSO said, “Are those track marks on his arm.”

“Some Muslims, even Jihadis, use drugs, ma’am. Notice the boat trailer by the garage behind him.” Haddad resumed the video, and the camera moved to a different position. Then Muhammad bent down and grabbed the German by the testicles and briskly cut them off. The victim screamed, then sagged, crying. In the barracks, people wept, cursed, muttered prayers; a sergeant vomited. Muhammad pulled the soldier’s head back and began beheading him. His screams turned to a ghastly choking as his larynx was ripped apart: blood spasmodically sprayed. In the video, terrorists repeatedly yelled, “*Allahu Akbar*.” The Jordanian soldier was mewling, struggling to get free, his face fear itself. Then his castration

began; he squealed a despairing bleat and lost control of his bladder and bowels.

Bartram said, "I hope I can kill the bastard with the knife."

The video went black: when it started again, the camera showed two dead men; their heads were on their backs. The speaker reappeared, held out a paper; the camera focused on it.

Haddad said, "CIA posted on INTELChat that those are the names of terrorists in prison in Turkey, Saudi, Syria, France, the United States, or held by the International Criminal Court."

The speaker continued the manifesto. "After two days we will kill another hostage. We will kill one every day. To stop this, the men, names on list, must be released by two days." The first paper was replaced by a second: it had a series of numbers on it. "Governments shown on this paper must also pay in Ethereum tokens the amounts shown to the accounts listed. Follow the instructions on the paper."

Blackwood said, "They use tokens?"

Haddad stopped the video. "They're nearly impossible to trace because of the way the currency's open transaction ledger, the blockchain, works, sir. Over ten percent of cryptocurrency transactions are to pay ransoms."

Bartram said, "Have any of those prisoners been released?"

"So far, no. State's attempting to stop any moves in that direction without saying what we'll do."

A tall thin man said, "I'm Lieutenant Colonel Shay, fly the gunship. What are the chances of getting ID's of the terrorists from the partial facials we've seen?"

"I only know we're trying. Any conclusions so far?"

Bartram said, “The man that killed the hostages is in his late forties. The guy reading was older too.”

Blackwood said, “I was an assistant defense attache in Pakistan. The man reading sounds like one.”

Haddad said, “I think so too. CIA and NSA linguists will be able to tell.”

Brady said, “Why, except for the girl, did the tangos only take soldiers and the Brits hostage? Wouldn’t UN personnel get them more attention?”

Haddad said, “They killed the UN staff and probably want to embarrass the countries the soldiers are from.”

Shay said, “I wonder if they’ve figured out they have Zeus?”

Syvetsen said, “He and his guys would’ve tried to destroy anything disclosing that. What have the agencies done to find the hostages, Mushy?”

“We started by reducing the size of the area we’ll search. That’s partly because the Turks are looking near Sanliurfa and won’t let us look there. Then we made assumptions; one is that they must be within a four-hour drive of the camp since they released the ransom video less than five hours after the attack on the camp. We knocked an hour off the time because it took some to torture and murder the soldiers and upload the video.”

Shay said, “They could’ve flown it somewhere with a drone or uploaded it using a satellite. They might even be close to the camp because, like your assumptions, people don’t expect it.”

Haddad said, “True, and the tangos might have moved too, but we have to make assumptions in the absence of facts, time, and assets. We produced an initial area of probability by assuming the average speed the terrorists traveled from the camp was ninety-six kilometers per hour.”

Hallon said, "I doubt the roads are good enough for that."

"Some of the roads around Sanliurfa are; in Syria, they're worse, but ninety-six is doable and purposely optimistic."

"If they have brass asses."

Reef said, "It's the best-case for them, the worst for us: a good practice in military planning. It's also doctrine."

Haddad favored Hallon with a smug smile before saying, "Then we produced scenarios. Most assume the bad guys drove for no more than three hours. In DC, they overlaid cell phone tower locations, and the distance arcs the scenarios produced onto maps. They also considered the geographic and vegetation characteristics of the region around Sanliurfa. This reduced the search area more."

Blackwood said, "What about the sun, the shadows?"

"They used the probable time the vid was made, the shadowing, what I've mentioned, and concluded the terrorists made the video south of the camp, within 300 clicks of Sanliurfa. Based on that analysis, we've deployed drones, listening systems and other intel assets around northern Lake Assad. It's a big area, the lake's eighty miles long."

Reef said, "It sounds like a good start. Now let's see the camp drone video."

It began with the drone flying outside the camp. The viewers saw shops around the compound; signs advertising services such as dry cleaning, products like olive oil, soap, drugs. Inside the camp, the living quarters were a mix of Conex boxes and trailers, but mostly several thousand tents; those had 'UNHCR' blazed in blue on their tops. As the drone grew close to the main entrance gatehouse, they saw people in traditional and western garb walking the paths in the camp and children playing. Laundry hung from lines stretching between tents, trailers, Conex boxes, and fences.

The camp had permanent buildings for support services: rec rooms, cafeterias, internet access.

Haddad provided commentary. “The camp’s over six kilometers long and two wide. It has three entrances. APC’s and drones patrol the security zone and outside the compound.”

Brady said, “It looks like a forward operating base.”

Haddad said, “That’s because, ever since the end of the Caliphate, ISIS fighters that were never caught have preyed on them. Later, those were joined by ISIS guys who escaped from the Kurds when the Kurds abandoned the camps where they’d imprisoned them. al-Qaeda’s active too. The Turks keep killing them, but, like roaches, they’re hard to stomp out.”

Syvertsen said, “How many people are in this one?”

“Around 25,000; almost seventy percent of them are women and children. Some have been there for thirty years; many live outside the camp too. They’re mostly Syrian Sunnis, but there are Shi’ites, Yazidis, Christians, Circassians, Chechens, and Afghanis. Kurds came after Trump let the Turks attack them.”

Major Blackwood said, “Where’s the bank?”

Haddad paused the video to point on the screen. “Here, in the main UNHCR building, sir.” He resumed the video. “The propane truck waiting to get into the camp’s the one that blows up. You won’t see it again, but you’ll see a pickup, and two Crown Vics enter the camp carrying tangos.” He fast-forwarded the video until the drone abruptly turned and flew towards a mosque. They watched as men that were fighting each other spilled out of it. Several fought with fully extended arms. The drone camera zoomed in on the melee, and the drone orbited over it. Twenty security force personnel ran up in riot gear. One of them raised a megaphone; this had no

visible effect. The security force formed into a wedge, and with rifles in the on-guard position and thrusting, it advanced into the brawl.

Montgomery said, "They're motivated; they won't stop."

Haddad froze the video and used the remote to zoom in on the rioters. "Based on the black turbans some of the men are wearing, you can see they're all on one side, and this dude wearing the *zulfiqar* sword shirt, the fight was between Sunnis and Shiites. It'd be easy to get one going."

Hallon said, "What kind of sword?"

"Zulfiqar was a two-bladed sword the Prophet, peace be upon him, gave to his cousin Ali." He pointed to a man's shirt. "This Arabic writing says *la fata illa Ali; la sayf illa Zulfiqar*. It means, 'there's no hero like Ali; no sword like Zulfiqar.'"

Reef said, "Remember, Ali founded the Shiite branch of Islam."

Hallon quipped. "Notice how Arabs slap like girls."

Haddad gave Hallon a hard look. "It's cultural; they don't constantly watch Rambo and Rocky movies like you."

"At least I don't waste time trying to get a date on one of those Islamic dating services. How can you pick out a babe bride when she's wearing a full-body condom?"

Haddad said, "Watch what happens next."

The video resumed, and a teen who had been observing the fight ran near the riot control formation, held a hand out, and opened it. The resulting explosion killed and wounded many people: all of the security force was down. Then the camera pulled out and pivoted to the main gate. The gatehouse was a smoking crater.

Syvertsen said, "It took a powerful explosive to do that."

Haddad said, "The Turkish Army's EOD guys estimated a ton of old munitions plus the propane."

The drone flew closer to the crater, and its camera began tracking vehicles coming towards the camp. They entered the security lane and zigzagged down it.

Hallon said, "There's a machine-gun mounted on the pickup."

The truck's masked gunner fired at the drone. It retreated, keeping the camera on the vehicles as they entered the camp. The gunner on the truck switched his fire from the drone; they watched as slugs ripped people apart.

Marquez said, "The fucker's killing anyone he sees."

Then a Crown Vic and the pickup swerved to a stop, the second car kept going, made a turn, and moved out of view. Haddad said, "The guys that stopped will attack the camp's admin office. The others go behind it to get into the bank."

They watched as four terrorists bailed out of the Crown Vic and ran, using security barriers for cover, towards a building while exchanging fire with people at its entrance or that were behind a wall there. The pickup's gunner engaged them: bullets chewed into the structure, punching through the wall.

Reef said, "Stop the vid." He pointed at men behind the wall. "I know some of you can't tell from where you're at, but these are the guys who wore suits in the ransom vid." He touched the screen, "This guy firing the pistol's Zeus."

Major Blackwood said, "He's got balls."

"Let's hope he still has them. Keep going, Mushy."

Then they saw a man wearing a balaclava run towards a security barrier and duck behind it. Brady said, "The limping guy might be the one who did the beheading."

Bartram said, "They're not fighting as a team."

Using the barriers for cover, the terrorists neared the entrance. One fell: a blood circle grew around him. Then the camera switched to the back of the building, disclosing the

bank truck and the HUMVEE behind it. The truck's back door was open, and three armed soldiers were next to it. The second Crown Vic, its doors were open, had blocked the end of a dog-legged and dead-ended alley going to the back of the building. Five men were at the corner of the building and were not visible to the soldiers. Then a man dashed from the UNHCR building and into the truck via its open back door. It shut. The soldiers boarded the HUMVEE. The terrorists, while firing weapons, ran from the corner towards the armored vehicle and HUMVEE. Haddad touched the screen. "This one has an RPG." The HUMVEE moved until an RPG hit it: the explosion tore it apart, and it began to burn. The armored truck rolled around the dog-leg and crashed into the car blocking the alley. A terrorist ran to it, taped a bag to it, dropped to the ground by the side of the vehicle, there was a flash, and its door went flying. The jihadi climbed into the back of the truck. Seconds later, he jumped out of it and pulled a chest from it to the ground. Then another man did the same thing. They carried the chests to the Crown Vic.

Shay said, "I thought they robbed the bank too?"

Haddad said, "They kill and mutilate people in the bank and blow the vault next, sir."

Hallon said, "Sounds like the Takfiri dudes."

The CSO said, "What are they?"

Haddad paused the video. "This will take a minute, but it's worth a digression. He's referring to a doctrine called *al-Takfir wa al-Hijra*. It came from a group called *Jama'at al-Muslimeen* that had radical and peculiar beliefs. Those metastasized, and now most Islamic terrorists and organizations, such as al-Qaeda, have behavior traceable to them."

"What religious beliefs would allow the mutilation of people?"

“That it’s permissible to do anything, even kill Muslims, including women and children, to achieve the goal of a world run by the Takfiri version of Islamic law and practice. They use their belief to justify violating Islamic prohibitions, honor standards, orthodox Shariah law. They drink alcohol, do drugs, date women to blend into a host society, so they can more easily attack it. They recruit Muslim criminals who can get things like fake IDs, counterfeit passports, weapons, bomb-making materials. Crime’s even encouraged because those doing it pay one-fifth of the value of what they steal as a tax to support jihad.”

Reef said, “They believe there’s sinless sin. It allows Muslims on the fringe of the society they left and miss, or think they miss, and the one they live in and find alien, to purge their lives of sin and transform themselves from being criminals into a person worthy of heaven. Some become suicide bombers.”

Shay said, “How do they justify killing other Muslims?”

Haddad said, “*Takfir* refers to judgment and apostasy. Takfiris consider nearly everyone an apostate, those have no rights under Islamic law, it means their property can be confiscated, and the penalty for apostasy is death. The Takfiris believe they can excommunicate any Muslim they think is not following true Islam, and that converts those people into apostates.”

Brady said, “Don’t Muslims resist this?”

“Mainstream Muslims know only Allah, Islamic legal scholars, and judges who apply Islamic law have the authority to declare a person an apostate. These leaders have said it’s wrong; the Takfiris consider them apostates. Their distortion of religion isn’t unique. In India, the Tripura National Liberation Front forcibly converts people to Christianity, even uses rape to get it done. They were caught selling porn

DVDs of women they'd captured to raise money. Israel stopped the Gush Emunim from flying an airplane full of explosives into the Dome of the Rock to rid the Temple Mount of the Muslims praying there."

Shay said, "I've heard of Muhammad's *Hijra*. What does *hijra* mean with these Takfiris?"

"The Prophet, peace be upon him, left Mecca on the *Hijra*, *hijra* means emigration, and traveled to Medina to start the first Islamic community. The Takfiri *hijra* refers to a person who travels among unbelievers to conduct jihad."

The CSO said, "Why the mutilations?"

"They say to terrorize people into following Takfiri beliefs; I think they're perverted." Haddad resumed the video and pointed at a moving dot on the screen. "This is the drone that wrecks the camp's security office and drone control station." They watched it until the screen went black.

FOUR

Commander Roberta Chang left her townhouse in Alexandria and took the Metro train to work. She often went in early to avoid the rush hour chaos, but today it was to prepare for a long day. She walked through the Pentagon's retail mall, went up an escalator, and stood in a short line, mostly of food service workers, to go through a body scanner. After that, she slid a smart card through a reader and walked up a ramp, past an empty cafeteria. At the A-ring, the innermost above-ground ring of the Pentagon, Chang went along its perimeter. The ring encircled a park-like area commonly referred to as 'ground zero,' and came to an intersecting corridor, turned right, and went down it until she stopped at a metal and glass bulletproof booth where a sign read National Military Command Center. Chang greeted the Marine in the booth, used her smart card, passed a retina scan, and walked on while glancing at the people standing watch in the NMCC. After walking a short corridor, she stopped in front of a door in the Directorate of Operations, J-3, to inject numbers into a panel; the door lock mechanism buzzed, and she entered an office that was a SCIF. After saying hello to the admin sergeant, she picked up a folder marked Top Secret UMBRA and went into a warren of cubicles.

In Chang's cubicle, there were two computer workstations. Between those was a bookshelf containing Hans Wher's *Arabic-English Dictionary*, the *Oxford Chinese Dictionary*, *The Joint Officers Guide*, and *The Lucky Bag*: the Naval Academy yearbook. Chang's sole concession to her

personal life was a picture of her husband. At her workstation, she logged into the computer and looked at the titles of her message traffic and email.

Finding nothing urgent, Chang picked up the Joint Staff Action Processing Form, a JS 136. She had worked on it for a week. 'Actions' are projects or proposals requiring a staff decision. On her form, were the signatures of planners: people who had the authority to make a decision about an action for their directorate, military service, or part of the government. Under the form was an Information Paper she had classified secret and written. It was titled "Peshmerga Request for Weapons." The paper provided a list of the weapons and the quantities involved, discussed the political-military pros and cons of giving the Kurds the arms, and delivery issues. It ended with her recommendation the action be approved.

Chang's main task that day, as the responsible 'action officer' (AO), was to get the action 'coordinated.' That meant approved or disapproved by every stakeholder affected by the decision. On the JS 136, all but one of the labeled boxes, the labels were J-3, CIA, STATE, DSCA, OSD, USCENTCOM, SOCOM, J-5, and LEGAL, had been signed by a planner. To complete the action, she needed a J-5 signature.

J-5's formal title was Strategy, Plans, and Policy; it handles political-military issues. Her action had to be finished by five pm. If it wasn't, the Assignment and Control Branch would begin to pester her. More importantly, so would her division chief. She hated the bureaucracy but knew it usually produced a better military decision. Then, aware the J-5 planner would not be in until seven, she put the JS 136 down and picked up the folder marked Top Secret UMBRA. Inside it, Chang looked at the intel about Turkey first because of the attack on the Sanliurfa refugee camp. She had spent the

weekend writing info papers about the attack and US response options. Then she read through the intel on Syria. After going through most of it, Chang came to a report that grabbed her.

Asayish, the Kurdish government's primary intelligence agency, reported one of its sources observed a "group of armed men buying large amounts of food in the suq in the village of al-Thawrah." Chang knew the village and its surrounding area were infamous for their support of the defunct Caliphate. It was close to Raqqah, the Caliphate's former capital, and the Kurds monitored the area because they feared a resurgent Caliphate. The locals often attacked the occasional Syrian Army patrol daring to operate there; the Syrians seemed to have decided it was not worth the effort to establish full control. She knew groups of armed men were common in Syria, but *Asayish* reports were infrequent and usually about events the Kurds wanted help with or to provide intel they thought was particularly useful or significant. Chang also knew their report might be ignored and decided to go to the Directorate of Intelligence, J-2, to talk to the senior officer working Syrian issues.

She soon stood beside the desk of Colonel Mikac. He immediately said, "I don't have time to talk, Commander. I'm finishing my input for the Chairman's Daily Intel Brief."

"Did you see the latest intel from the Pesh?"

"Skimmed it."

"You need to look at it closely."

Mikac simulated a new voice. "Just give me the facts, ma'am." Chang looked at him like he had spoken in glossolalia. Mikac said, "I was imitating Joe Friday from *Dragnet*."

“Never heard of it. The incident I’m referring to happened in al-Thawrah. A Pesh source saw armed men buying large quantities of food there.”

“So what? Syrians eat like everyone else.”

“It could be the jihadis that hit Sanliurfa. The Pesh don’t report much. They must think this sighting’s important.”

“Did the report give numbers?”

“No, it used the word group.”

“If I recall, group means two or more people.”

“This group’s armed and buying gobs of food.”

Mikac snorted. “There’s no police in Thawrah, the people worry about getting robbed or killed. Most carry weapons when they buy food or things like kerosene for heating. In today’s intel alone, I can show you four reports of armed men within 200 clicks of there. The Kurds lost people in the attack. They’re angry, reporting on everything that moves.”

Chang emphatically said, “Because of the Sanliurfa attack, we should investigate it.”

“To get you off my back, I’ll have DIA press the Pesh for more details. Satisfied?”

“There’s a lethal deadline approaching; we should retask drones, and other assets to surveil the Thawrah area.”

“Maybe I can.” Mikac used his computer for a few seconds. “We have an Avenger coming on station at zero nine-fifteen our time to snoop around al-Bab; then it’ll fly down to Maskanah, a town on Lake Assad fifty clicks northwest of Thawrah. We’re controlling it in the JIC. Maybe I can move it. It’ll depend on the other agencies, the tasking they have for it. I’ll meet you in the JIC at zero nine hundred, and we’ll see. Now please, let me finish my input for the Chairman.”

The moment Chang walked into her cubicle, her phone rang. She picked up and heard, answered it with, “J-3, Commander Chang.”

“This is Captain Chris Durnford, Royal Navy. I was hoping you’d answer. You may recall we met in Tampa at CENTCOM?”

“I do, sir. We worked on the exercise schedule. You informed us *HMS Queen Elizabeth* wouldn’t be available again due to the prop shaft alignment problem.”

“That’s right and still true. Could we talk secure voice?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll key my phone.” Chang pushed a button on it; there was a period of silence as the crypto kicked in. When she heard Durnford breathing, she said, “Can you hear me, sir?”

“Lima Charlie. Do you know who Zeus is — not the Greek God?”

“It’s not Brad Pitt who looked godly in the movie *Troy*, but it’s someone royal.”

“Your answer makes this considerably easier. My country must take action on an option related to this ghastly mess with Zeus. The Chief of the Defense Staff will ask the Chairman favors related to it today. My DATT instructed me to ascertain how the chairman will likely respond to the requests.”

“What are they?”

“The first is, would he approve a Ministry of Defense request for your country to rescue Zeus?”

“We intend to rescue our Marine if we can locate him. We’ll rescue Zeus along with the others if we can.”

“We thought that would be the case. Indeed, it’s why we’re entertaining the rescue option. We much prefer it to paying a ransom and will not permit the future King, the symbol of our country, to be humiliated or beheaded. The

other request is to allow us to include one of our best operators in the rescue.”

“That depends on our operators. JSOC won’t permit interference with them. The Chairman will be strongly inclined to support JSOC. I don’t think the CINCs or SECDEF would oppose it.”

“The Chief will call the chairman at fourteen hundred to ask. Could you please help us have the requests approved?”

“A combined op would be good for our countries and for what’s left of NATO. I’ll talk to OSD, urge them to support it too.”

“Smashing. MOD would be most grateful. I dare say the Prime Minister and King will be too. Good day, Commander.”

Chang considered the request, then went to see the J-3. His Executive Assistant, Colonel Cline, US Army, was in an outer office. One of his duties was to control access to his boss.

“I need to see him, John. It’s important.”

Cline did not look up from his computer.

“What’s the topic? How long will it take?”

“It’s Top Secret. I need five minutes.”

“I’m cleared for up to God’s secrets. Lay it on me.”

“I need to see him, John.” She emphasized him.

“You’re testy this morning. I’ll chalk it up to you being selected for O-6; the required lobotomy always does that.”

“You should know; I’ll take that as a congratulation.”

“Go on in, but make it fast.”

Chang went into the office. Lt. General Peak was standing in front of a map of Syria. He said, “What is it, Commander?”

“A Royal Navy captain from their DATT’s office called me. They want to put an operator on the Sanliurfa rescue force and will officially request that of CJCS this afternoon.

The captain asked me to grease the skids. The request has political implications; the royal family dimension's significant."

"I'm sure CJCS won't oppose it. Did they say why?"

"I think it's the cowboy colonial Yank thing."

"They can be so arrogant. You mean they think we use deadly force too freely, that we're idiots, and want to be sure we don't get their precious Duke killed."

"He was less sanguine than you."

"Who would they send?"

"He said one of their best operators."

After a moment, Peak said, "The two CINCs, JSOC, and the operators will need to agree. Have you said anything to J-5?"

"No, but I'll see the division chief for Middle East pol-mil next about the Pesh weapons. I'll tell him."

"After you see Colonel Berger, let JSOC know why we support the Brit request and get the phone numbers to the probable leaders of a rescue; we may have to explain why it's good to them. I'll work on the CINCs and their POLADs. Do you want to give the Chairman the heads up, have the face time?"

"I've had enough of that since the attack on the camp."

Later, as Berger signed the JS 136 about the Pesh weapons, he said, "I know the Turks will scream about this, but the Kurds need them. I'd like your help persuading the J-3 to roll on the terms of reference for the on-site inspections of Iranian nuclear facilities. State and DOE have signed off on them."

"I'll help get the signature. The T O R are now acceptable since the I A E A inspections extend to 2036 and the inspectors have access to Parchin. I have another issue too. The British DATT's office called me. They want to put an

operator with whoever does the Zeus rescue. Will you support that? Peak does.”

“It’s a good pol-mil move. The J-5 will love it.”

Happy to have the Pesh weapons coordination done, Chang turned in the JS 136 on her way to the NMCC’s National Military Joint Intelligence Center. In the NMJIC there were compartments, Mikac was in one of them, that had subdued lighting and ground control stations (GCS) for remotely piloted aircraft. A pilot at a console was using a joystick to fly an Avenger via a satellite link. The console had two mission displays going: one provided a wrap-around view of what was in front of and around the drone. On a second, a multi-dimensional map showed the Avenger’s current position. Next to the pilot, the sensor/payload operator was using a console to monitor the output of the Avenger’s Lynx synthetic aperture radar and the MS-177 electro-optical/infrared sensor. Between the pilot and the sensor operator, a screen displayed chatroom text conversations. That allowed them, and other users of the aircraft, to manage its employment and sensors. Behind them, a large screen showed the ultra-high-definition streaming video the Avenger was transmitting.

Mikac said, “The agencies allowed the move. They can collect what they need as long as the Avenger’s in northern Syria. Where do you want to park it?”

“The ransom video showed a trailer, so how about over Lake Assad, maybe twenty-five clicks to the northwest?”

“I’ll tell the pilot. It’ll be a done deal in five minutes.”

In her office, Chang wondered if she’d have time to swim her customary fifty laps in the POAC’s pool as she called the JSOC chief of staff. As she expected, he did not support adding a British operator or want her talking to the commanders of the potential rescue forces. It took Peak’s

intervention to get JSOC to provide the names and phone numbers of those leaders. JSOC did so on the condition it would handle all personnel decisions.

Chang called the Delta Force number first. Her office mate, a Ranger, leaned back in his chair to watch. Chang listened as the phone rang. When the ringing stopped, she said, "Major Griffin?"

An icy voice replied, "That's my name this week."

"This is Commander Chang. I'm with J-3 on the Joint Staff."

"What can I do for you?"

"Let's go secure voice."

"Going."

After their phone crypto synched, Chang explained the situation. When she had Griffin said, "He'll slow us down no matter who they send. I'm fiercely against this."

"Do you --"

"That's all I have to say. Griffin, out."

Chang looked at her office mate. "The fucker hung up on me."

He laughed and said, "I told you."

Chang called the Ranger commander next: Major Liston. After Chang had explained the request, Liston said, "I would've accommodated their operator. One more wouldn't have mattered since we're doing the op with a large force. But SECDEF dropped us out of contention. She wants it done by tier-one operators."

"I wasn't aware she'd made those decisions. Thanks for your cooperation."

Chang called the DEVGRU team leader next. After explaining why she called, she heard Reef say, "I don't want a hanger."

"What do you mean by hanger?"

“Someone you add to my team.”

“Would you accept one if it's for the good of the mission?”

“My objection's based on the fact my team's like a synchronized engine. Adding anyone impairs its ability to apply precise lethal force.”

“What if they send an outstanding operator?”

“We train for thousands of hours to do rescues, use real bullets and volunteers in a building built to help us practice. Even an excellent operator can't safely participate in a hostage rescue on the spur of the moment. Out here.”

With the help of the intel clues Haddad has briefed, the drone and intel analysts located the possible venue of the hostages. Mikac called Chang, she went to the NMJIC and looked at the video the drone was sending. It showed the front of a big house perched on a hill above a shoreline of a lake that the GCS map display labeled Lake Assad. On a screen next to it a segment of the ransom video was frozen.

Mikac said, “You can see it's a good match.”

Chang said, “Do we know anything about the house?”

As they moved behind the sensor operator, Mikac said, “Walid Foz, a close friend of Assad, owns it.”

“What about bad guys?”

“There's what we assume is a lookout on top of the house.”

“We can't base a rescue on that. Have we seen inside it?”

Mikac said, “Nothing useful yet. Most of the windows are covered, but IR says there's heat coming from a chimney.”

“Can we get something inside?”

“The Avenger deployed SWARM MAVs. So far, they've only sent us the sound of a motor running.”

The sensor operator said, “CIA posted they haven’t been able to get a MAV inside. It’s cold in Syria. Nothing’s been open.”

Chang said, “Or the tangos know the capabilities of our drones and expect us to find them.”

Mikac said, “JSOC’s Intelligence Support Activity wants inside pictures and what the MAV IR LiDAR can provide for the VR model they’ll make for the rescue force.”

“Have you thought about seeing if anyone knows more about this house from the refugee population? There are thousands of Syrians in Europe and the camps.”

Abington, Scotland

Magnus McKellar, dressed in a tweed waistcoat, had not been in his cottage for weeks, so sitting in front of a crackling fire with his dog Wag at his feet was a caress. He was enjoying a Boccherini sonata while reading Burns’s *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. The moment became sensuous when he took a sip of Glenlivet from an antique crystal Hawkes Whiskey glass. He savored the peaty taste and rationed the expensive scotch: it had been bottled in 1974. The tumbler had one ice cube in it. Some purists consider ice with scotch a sacrilege; he always let the cubes melt to get the flavors, plus the melting requirement slowed down the imbibing and extended the whiskey. McKellar usually drank an excellent but cheaper whiskey; on some occasions, the bottle finished him before he finished it, but being home after two months away, was special. Then he heard a knock on the door. He put the book down, went to the door while tweaking a tightly trimmed goatee. On the other side of it was his neighbor, Stewart MacKay. He was holding a fly fishing rod, and said, “You must come out; they’re biting like demons.”

“How can that be, Stewart? It's nearly November.”

“You haven't been home enough. They feed late most years now. Summer doesn't yield to fall, fall to winter as it once did. You'll regret it if you don't. You could be eating one tonight.”

“All right, neebur, thanks. I'll fetch me rod, be there soon.”

“Don't forget spirits. It'll be cold when the sun retires.”

“I don't need an excuse to drink a jacket. It sounds like you have a thick one on already.”

“Ah do, and it's glorious.”

“Go on; I'll be following.”

McKellar went to the conservatory, the sun through the glass warm on his face, to release a bamboo fly fishing rod from a small vise. He had tied and glued a new guide to it months before. He whipped it a few times, loving the way it was balanced. McKellar smiled; the thought of catching trout in the Clyde River behind his house was good.

Then the phone Special Boat Service personnel were required to have with them at all times, buzzed. He saw it was from the officer in charge of operations, and answered it: “Good Afternoon, Colonel O. What do you need while I'm finally, did I say finally, enjoying my dear and well-earned holiday?”

“I know you're enjoying your Arcadian splendors, but there's been a terrorist attack. We need your help with it.”

FIVE

At 0216 the next morning, Reef's sleep was interrupted when he heard the team's comm gear hooting it had received a flash message. He opened his eyes, saw Montgomery at a table by a window where the SATCOM transceiver's antennae had access to satellites. A minute later, he handed Reef an iPad. "It's a new warning order from JSOC; it has a short response time, sir."

Reef said, "Finally."

"Look at the info addressees."

Reef did, and saw the message was marked Top Secret, the distribution marking after the classification was 'US/UK only.' "Thanks, Rock, they probably sent it to the Ministry of Defense since it concerns the royal family. Make sure Master Chief, Senior Chief, and Mushy see it now."

Reef read the message. It instructed specified commands, such as his team, to develop Courses of Action (COA) to rescue the Marine and the Duke and to submit them to JSOC within eight hours. He opened an app on a laptop and typed into a template.

Soon Syvertsen came over. "Morning, Boss. Things are picking up. When do we start?"

"Let them sleep for an hour longer, then make sure they read the order. At zero four-thirty, I want Mushy to brief us and the aircrews on the intel. We'll write our response to the order as we figure out COAs and the CONOPs."

"I'll tell the pilots; did you notice the restraint?"

"Yeah, whoever gets the mission may regret they did."

Later, Reef and Bartram were working at a table when Haddad showed them a grid reference graphic and said, "I downloaded the intel pictures and put that together, every building in the compound's labeled on it. It should speed up comms. The grid numbers of potential gunship targets are on the side of it."

Bartram said, "Have you checked them?"

"Tonto and I did. If you guys approve what's there, I'll make one for all the players."

Reef said, "Add the Thawrah-Raqqah road junction as a target."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Montgomery, with the comm gear, held out a headset. "Hatchett's on the horn, skipper."

Reef put on the headphones and said, "Yes, sir."

Hatchett said, "JSOC transmitted a flash precedence warning order. I can give you the date-time group--"

"We're working on our response now."

"Try to get your input in before DELTA's."

"I'll have it to JSOC in five hours."

"Get to it then, out, here."

Later, while the team and aircrews assembled in the barracks, Reef flipped through a stack of annotated pictures Haddad had given him. He passed them to Syvertsen and said, "Those are good gouge, but where's the one of the hostages?"

Haddad said, "I'm using it in my brief. I kept it out of the stack to make it more interesting."

"Always the showman."

Hallon said, "It's like sliding a babe's panties off; the anticipation's almost as much fun as the penetration. But Mushy wouldn't know that."

Bartram sat next to Reef and handed him a mug of coffee. He tasted it and said, “Thanks, Senior. It’s very good.”

Marquez sat down across the table and tried to produce an accent. “It’s Jamakinma Day Blue Mountain coffee, mon.”

Reef called the meeting to order by whistling a simulated ‘All Hands on Deck’ bosun pipe call. Then said, “From the warning order, you know we’re time-limited, so let’s get going. Special Operator First Class Haddad will begin with the intel brief.”

Haddad said, “This is where we think the hostages are.” He used a remote, and the big hanging screen displayed a map. “The X is where the compound’s located in Syria.” Another picture appeared. “That’s the peninsula it’s on, though it’s almost an island. The compound’s only accessible by land on the road you see. It goes to the village of al-Thawrah that’s nine clicks from the X. Thawrah, sometimes it’s called Tabqah, is filled with angry Sunnis. The Syrians pretend they control it, but don’t.” Haddad used the remote again. “Here’s a closer view. As you see, the compound’s U-shaped, the long legs are a 700 meters long, the short ones 400. It was abandoned when the civil war started. From the hill it’s on, the main house has a good view of Lake Assad. It has a basement. Below the pool deck is part of the air conditioning system and equipment for the pool.”

Marquez said, “How do we know that?”

“From the architect who designed the house. Because most of its windows are covered, not just those in the main house, we’ve had to rely on his drawings a lot.”

Brady said, “They had their own mosque?”

“Rich Muslims often have one for family and staff.”

Shay said, “The owner didn’t spare money building the stable.”

“His wife breeds Arabians. He races them in Dubai.”

Erickson said, "We'll have to check the stable. Major Blackwood, could an Osprey land in the courtyard?"

Reef said, "Remember JSOC's restraint; we can't use crewed aircraft within four clicks of the compound during infil."

The CSO said, "Do we know why we have it?"

"JSOC's worried they'd get shot down. They assume we'll control the LZ area for exfil."

Hallon said, "It sucks. Fast-roping's perfect for this op."

Reef said, "We have constraints too."

Brady said, "What's the difference?"

"A restraint prohibits us from doing something; a constraint requires us to do something. The constraint's we must be able to finish any proposed COA within a half-hour once we enter the house or are spotted. That's because JSOC assumes the bad guys will get help from the locals if they know we're there."

Syvetsen said, "In Neptune Spear, we had forty minutes to search bin Laden's compound. We needed every bit of it."

Haddad showed another picture, and Bartram said, "Is that an RPG by the awning on the roof?"

Haddad said, "Your eyes are great, Senior. There's a lookout under it. They've had one there since we started surveillance."

"You'll have to take him out, Mushy."

The gunship's CSO said, "If he's visible, I can fry him."

"The top platform of the minaret would make a good snipe hide. I could see almost everything in the compound from there."

Haddad said, "To snipe from a mosque, you need an exception to the CINC's standing ROE."

Hallon said, "You'd be silhouetted up there and could get trapped inside it."

Bartram said, "It's worth the risk for the field of fire I'd have."

Reef said, "We'll ask for the ROE exception in our response to the warning order."

"Mushy, to prepare, I need the height of its top platform."

Brady said, "What's between the minaret and the house?"

Haddad said, "A bridge like the Bridge of Sighs in Venice."

Hallon said, "Is that some sort of wop make-out place?"

"It's an enclosed pedestrian bridge."

Erickson said, "I see security bars on the windows."

Haddad said, "All of the windows have them, and there are no outside stairs to the second floor, so we climb or parachute onto the roof or upper deck to enter the house from above."

Hallon said, "I'll figure out how many ladders we'd need if we want to go over the walls or to the upper deck or roof."

Haddad put up a new picture. "Now the water side of the compound. Notice the channel going from the dock to deeper water."

Brady said, "It's shallow."

"Syria's been in a long drought, but the deep parts of the lake get to thirteen meters. The chain link fence warping-out from the shore to enclose the dock has razor wire on top of it."

Erickson said, "The shoreline looks steep enough to hide us from anyone in the house if we come from the water."

Reef said, "In front of the sunk boat, what's the tarp over?"

"CIA thinks it's a fuel storage tank."

Marquez said, "Why's it covered?"

"I guess to keep off bird shit."

Hallon laughed. "Tangos don't worry about bird shit. At night, are there any lights on in the house?"

"Not since we started surveillance, but the MAVs detected a motor running yesterday. If they use lights, they must cover the leaks like we do when we darken ship."

Marquez said, "What's the big wood structure in the lake?"

Haddad said, "A 110-meters long fish farm." He put up another photo. "This is the main house and nearby buildings."

Brady said, "Besides the a/c equipment on the roof of the main house, what's that big tank for?"

Reef said, "Water storage. People living where water can be hard to get usually store it. In my home town of Key West, most of the old houses have cisterns. We'll have to check the tank and the enclosure below it."

Haddad said, "The two buildings on the left side of the courtyard are housing for workers. We'll need to check those, the garage, and the gatehouse."

"Do we know what's in them?"

"We have drawings of the interiors of all of them. A MAV took pictures of the stable, I'll show you those in a second, but we couldn't get a MAV inside the apartment for a groom and trainer, or in any of the compound's buildings because the doors have always been shut." Haddad clicked through pictures as he spoke. "This is the stable. It has this corral, these stalls, this tack room. Here's the architect's drawing of the apartment."

Haddad used the remote a few times while saying, "Now the interior of the main house. This is a drawing the architect made of the front half of the house." They saw two long living rooms joined by a front entrance foyer; it enclosed a staircase and part of a hallway going to the back of the house.

After a beat, Haddad said, “This is his drawing of the men’s living room.”

At one end of it was a huge fireplace. One side of the room had an alcove and a long curved bar. A string of windows behind the bar overlooked the courtyard and garage.

Brady said, “Why is one side of it labeled glass?”

“The entire wall’s an aquarium.”

Shay said, “I know Muslims are strict about women but are you saying they have separate living rooms for men and women?”

Haddad said, “Most strict Muslims do it because of a custom called *purdah*. But Muslims aren’t the only people who follow the custom. The Nestorian Christians probably started the custom. Jews used to do the same thing, some Hindus still do. It’s partly a cultural choice; it’s not based only on religion.”

Bartram said, “In an article in a Saudi English language newspaper, a woman wrote the first and only time she saw her mom’s face was when she washed it before burial.”

Shay said, “Those Muslim honor killings are barbaric.”

Haddad said, “Yes, and I’ve heard this countless times. It happens in traditional cultures. You’ll find examples if you search the internet. There are verses supporting it in the Bible. For example, in Leviticus a verse says, ‘And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father: she shall be burnt with fire.’ In other words, if she’s promiscuous she’s killed. The Romans allowed honor killings too.” Another slide appeared, “A MAV took this picture of the hostages through an opening between drapes. They’re in the head in the men’s living room. The black shape’s the back of the girl’s abaya.”

Hallon said, “The fuckers have the men wearing underwear, and it’s as cold there as it is here.”

Marquez said, "I count six guys; no Zeus."

Haddad said, "He might be in there; we can't see everything. The assumption's still that there are twelve *mujahideen*."

Bartram said, "It's strange a MAV could take pictures of the hostages, but not anywhere else inside."

Haddad said, "Here's a drawing of the women's living room and what's around it." It looked like the men's, but one end went into a kitchen and dining room. The other went to the same foyer as the men's. He displayed another slide. "That's a drawing of the back half of the house." It revealed that the hallway coming from the front of it ended at a door opening onto the pool deck. On the women's living room side of the main hallway, a narrower one paralleled the deck and went to a media room, a library, and the dining room. The other side led to a sitting area, a master bedroom, and a staircase.

Haddad said, "The staircase goes to the basement."

Syvertsen said, "Did we get a drawing of that?"

"No, the architect heard they would install a shooting range there, but he didn't have anything to do with it."

Haddad displayed another drawing. "This is the layout of the upstairs." There was a recreation room, a hall then the bridge going to the minaret, a staircase to the roof, the entryway, and five bedrooms; a long deck fronted those. "I'm done with my brief. We should get the ISA VR models by noon."

Reef said, "Take a five-minute break, guys, then we'll brainstorm COAs."

SIX

On the big roll-out screen, a slide showed the compound and the area around it. Reef said, “The other thing to remember is we don’t evaluate our work now, no matter how crazy you consider a COA. That’s to encourage a brainstorming process more likely to come up with something the bad guys won’t anticipate.”

Shay said, “How many COAs do we need?”

“Doctrine says at least three. A COA has to be able to accomplish the mission, do it with the forces and time available, be acceptable, and distinguishable from the others.”

Brady said, “What do you mean by acceptable?”

“It’s easier to give you examples of what’s unacceptable. An unacceptable COA would be one that violates the law of war or that’s too costly in lives, or that take too long to finish. Mushy, write our COAs on the whiteboard as we work. I’ll type them in the message template, and any ROE issues we identify. Senior, you do the CONOPs for the COAs. Master Chief, you have their logistical requirements and the segments.”

The CSO said, “What are segments?”

“What our specific tasks and actions are in the rescue.”

Bartram said, “How detailed do you want the CONOPs?”

“A sentence or three explaining how we’ll do it, then we’ll paste our parts together --”

Hallon laughed. “That sounds sexy for you too.”

Bartram said, “Quit being an ass.”

Marquez said, “If he did, there wouldn’t be anything left.”

Reef said, "After we do a sanity check on our message, I'll send it to JSOC and SOCOM. Now someone give me a COA."

Hallon said, "We all know we want a manly man frogman COA —sorry Senior, frog-person COA. Mine's like the Buchanan rescue in Somalia. We do a high altitude-high opening drop into Lake Assad, swim to the X, cut the fence, enter the house via the doors, or use ladders to get in from the second floor."

Shay said, "Is the HAHO from a C-130 or a CV-22?"

"Whatever's good for you guys."

Erikson said, "Surface swimming or using LAR's?"

Brady said, "A swim's easier and faster."

Hallon said, "With ladders and our other gear, I doubt it."

Syvertsen said, "Concentrating on the house is wrong. We have a big compound to search. Once we're inside it, we'll need segments checking out every place the hostages could be."

Bartram said, "It's where we know some of the hostages are; I bet the rest are there too. Otherwise, they'd need more men than JSOC's assumption gave us."

Reef said, "Remember, don't evaluate a COA now, and we flesh out the CONOPs later. Another COA."

Montgomery said, "The best way to clear a house is from the top down, so we parachute onto the roof to do it."

Blackwood said, "Fly means what — CV-22 or C-130?"

"It can be like with COA one."

Syvertsen said, "The COA doesn't search the compound — sorry, scratch that, I'm evaluating."

Brady said, "Mine's we do a HALO onto the opposite side of the peninsula from the X, yomp to it, use ladders to get into the compound, enter the house via the upper deck."

Reef said, "Another one." No one volunteered. "Okay, let's improve what we have. COA one: parachute into the lake."

Bartram said, "Why a HAHO? We don't need the altitude to fly our chutes a long distance. If we do a LALO, we can skip breathing O2 during the transit to the X, and don't have to carry it for the free-fall phase of our drops."

Syvertsen said, "A low opening won't be as detectable."

Hallon said, "It should be a LALO; the opening should be as low as three cupids."

The CSO said, "What's a cupid?"

Haddad smiled. "It's parachutist slang for 100 feet."

Brady said, "After splashing, we should use LARs and Jetboots to get to the X. It'd be faster, and we stay submerged."

Syvertsen said, "Doing a LALO with Jetboots and other gear means our exit rate will be high. Weight will be critical. We'd have to figure everything to the ounce, so we don't auger or blowout. Four cupids are as low as we should go." He looked at the CSO and said, "Blowout means a chute panel failure. That's usually caused by being too heavy and falling too fast when the chute opens. Auger means landing at an unsurvivable speed."

Erickson said, "They can send us chutes able to take the load of a fast heavy opening. I know what to ask for."

Bartram went to the screen and pointed. "This COA's slow, but if we do it, we should splash in this cove. We'd be less exposed while we're on the surface."

Blackwood said, "Which aircraft do you want to do it from?"

Bartram said, "Your Osprey. We can set up the drop with you guys and complete some practice dirt dives."

Reef said, "Anything else on this one?"

Haddad said, "I'm concerned about the TALOS. Every change in depth screws up the dry box's buoyancy; it'll be hard to control on a shallow underwater swim."

Blackwood said, "Would you explain what TALOS is?"

Hallon said, "TALOS stands for Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit. It's a powered exoskeleton able to support heavy weapons."

Marquez said, "We should leave it here."

Bartram said, "We don't know how many tangos there are; its firepower could save our butts. A Diver Propulsion Vehicle would easily control the box and move all of us, and the gear we've talked about, to the X faster. It could be rigged to a pallet with a DragonFly, and an C-130 could drop it where we want."

"The whole mission's at risk if the DragonFly's chute fails or its guidance unit or remote control unit malfunctions."

Bartram said, "You know the odds of that are way low, but we'd still have our weapons and could do the swim and the mission."

Reef said, "The fewer aircraft in the vicinity of the X means less chance of alerting the tangos. We should have the DPV in the Osprey with us. It drops the DPV, we fly it with the remote control to where we want it, we do a LALO, splash next to it."

Hallon said, "Sounds good."

"I'll write the COA that way. Master Chief, put in the logistics we need a DragonFly, an RCU, a DPV able to pull all of us and our gear. Now COA two, parachute onto the roof."

Montgomery said, "I'm worried about being seen in this one. If anyone does, we're dead. To pull it off, we have to kill or neutralize any muj or hostile outside the house."

Brady said, "Taking out anyone besides the lookout means a body or bodies lying in view while we drop."

Montgomery said, "Senior could go first. When her wing opens, she shoots the lookout. That'd make the time shorter."

Bartram said, "The gunship's a much better play."

The CSO said, "It'd be easy to kill them with the laser if they show themselves, but it'll light up the sky. A Kamikaze drone's kinetic energy alone would kill them silently."

Syvertsen said, "Landing on the roof might alert them."

Haddad said, "And part of the a/c and a jungle of pipes and air ducts are there. The first guys on it may be okay, but the follow-on have to deal with that crap and the guys in front of them. The upper deck could take some of us."

Montgomery said, "Two of us could land by the stable."

Marquez said, "I don't think we should split up."

Hallon said, "What I like about this COA is I could wear the TALOS, or we could drop it right on the house."

Syvertsen said, "If you don't land it there, it could end up under the control of the tangos."

Brady said, "Even if we pull off the roof landing, the bad guys may get alerted and barricade the stairs. Then we have to assault down the infamous lethal tunnel."

"They'd have time to kill Zeus and hostages too."

Erickson said, "We should try to get fast-roping okayed."

Reef smiled. "Hatchett told me SECDEF would never allow it. Any more thoughts on this one?"

Syvertsen said, "Go with it, but the guys assigned to check the stable should drop in the courtyard."

"Now COA three: the yomp to the X."

Brady said, "It's almost as slow as COA one."

Hallon spoke with enthusiasm. "We could bring dirt bikes or dune buggies to get to the X faster."

Bartram said, "I know you want to be buried on your iron, Hallon, but they're noisy."

"Not if they're electric."

"They're also unnecessary for the distance we have to travel."

"Two electric buggies could carry all of us and the TALOS. Or maybe one buggy and some bikes."

"I'll write the CONOP to indicate we prefer electric rides. Dropping over land means our chutes are more likely to be seen, and the ride or yomp means we're more liable to be noticed. If we are, the locals will probably attack us or warn the tangos."

Syvertsen said, "If they anticipate a rescue attempt, they'll expect it to come from the land."

Erikson said, "We're dropping after midnight. People won't be looking at the sky."

Hallon said, "I like it cause we can bring the TALOS."

Brady said, "It could end up landing in a palm tree."

"Like with COA one, we can fly it in by remote control."

Bartram said, "This COA ranks as number two for me."

Reef said, "And in the Navy, we always chose the lesser of two weevils."

With a smile, Bartram said, "Admiral Nelson would've liked what we have. We haven't talked much about ROE. I mentioned using the mosque. Besides ROE allowing that, we need to be able to kill anyone we think has hostile intent even if they're unarmed. We can't risk them alerting the bad guys."

Reef said, "Under the law of war, we can do it if it's a military necessity. I'll ask for guidance on how to proceed if they use the hostages as human shields."

Montgomery said, "We may have to go through locked doors. Are we using breaching charges or M870s with lock busters?"

Hallon said, "If I'm wearing the TALOS, I can do it."

Bartram said, "I say charges, they're more reliable than lock busters, and we don't have to count on Hallon being there."

Brady said, "Those blow our chance for surprise."

"If Hallon's there, we use him. Once we go hot, we need the charge option. We may want to blow through walls too."

Marquez said, "How about personal weapons?"

Hallon said, "The HK MP7s we have; they have the best suppressors with BAT rounds."

Brady said, "I'd like to bring my Nigsaw AR."

The CSO said, "What's that?"

"The Next Generation Squad Weapon's an automatic rifle."

Hallon said, "It has too much penetration for this rescue."

Haddad said, "Since I'll be outside with Hallon, I'll bring the HK grenade launcher."

Marquez said, "We could take a dog to help us search."

Hallon said, "Yeah, one with the titanium teeth."

Brady said, "A dog can't dive; we'd have to drop COA one, but we could bring motion detector radars."

Reef said, "Good idea, each segment should have one. Master Chief, requisition four of them."

Marquez said, "Some of the hostages may need medical care, so could we. We should have more than I have."

Reef said, "Tell Master Chief what you want. I'll even ask for a Critical Care Air Transport Team."

Erickson said, "Master Chief, I'll give you what I think's best for the chutes to use for each COA too."

Reef said, "Any more comments?"

Erickson said, "What about a Quick Reaction Force?"

"Senior, in the CONOPs, say we expect one. Now let's check how our COAs do in relation to the governing factors."

The CSO said, "Tell me what those are."

Reef said, "They're parts of the military situation the commander, JSOC for us, considers critical to the accomplishment of the mission. Commanders usually have priorities, ways they like things to go. Governing factors are how they tell forces what they are. Go ahead, read them, Mushy."

Haddad read. "'Which COA allows the rescue to be completed in the shortest time? Which COA is least affected by the weather? Which would have the fewest friendly losses? Which best capitalizes on the following principles of war: simplicity, security, and surprise?' JSOC weighted surprise twice as high as the others."

Reef said, "Now let's hear opinions. How does COA one, the LALO into Lake Assad, stand up to those?"

Bartram said, "Since we pick the time to go hot, our presence can remain unknown until the very last, so it's superior on surprise. It's not the quickest or simplest, but the trade-off in terms of our safety's worth it. I think it has the best chance of rescuing the Marine and the others without losses."

Shay said, "It's the least affected by weather, and at this time of the year, that may be problematic. Some of you might not know how a dust storm handicapped Gulf War Two. It grounded us for days. Now's when the flaky weather happens."

Reef said, "Any more comments?" They answered him with silence. "COA two, LALO onto the X?"

Hallon said, "If the weather goes bad, landing on the house might be impossible. We could do the rescue faster than with COA one unless the bad guys see us, then it'd be impossible."

Bartram said, “Surprise is iffy. If we lose that, we assault down the stairs, which means funerals. This COA reminds me of Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg.”

Reef said, “Any more?”

After a moment of silence, Reef said, “COA three — the yomp.”

Syvertsen said, “It’s riskier than COA one.”

Marquez said, “If no one sees us, we pick the time of the assault, but surprise and security are lower than with COA one. We’d probably have fewer casualties than dropping onto the X, but not if the bad guys see us or locals alert them. If we’re seen, the losses could be all of us and the hostages dead.”

The CSO said, “You guys are too worried about the locals. If we have the ROE we discussed, I can toast them.”

Reef said, “Anything else?”

Bartram said, “I think we’ve nailed it as much as we can in the time we have.”

Reef passed two blank pieces of paper to team members. “Those are your ballots; you vote twice. Write the COA number you like the best in the upper left corner of the ballot. In the upper right, write a number two for the number of points it’s worth: two’s the max. On your second ballot, write the COA number of your second choice in the upper left corner and a number one in the upper right. Mushy, count the votes.” Once everyone had ballots, Reef said, “Okay, vote, then pass your ballots to him.”

It didn’t take Haddad long to count the results. When he had, he said, “It’s unanimous: COA one.”

Hallon said, “It’s a manly man COA, the best one for us.”

Reef said, “I’ll finish writing up our COAs and explain the pluses and minuses of each, and why we like COA one. I need the CONOPs ASAP, Senior.”

Bartram said, "I'll do the building and aperture analysis as soon as I get that to you."

Syvertsen said, "There's no reason to change our buddy teams for the segments is there?"

Reef said, "I don't think so, but for the segments, remember JSOC wants me to lead the one likely to find Zeus."

Hallon said, "Why the fuck do they want that?"

"Hatchett told me SECDEF stipulated an officer will do it."

"Rock, in the comm plan, include the MOD on the command net."

Hallon said, "Are the Brits going to micro-manage us too?"

"Only our NCA has command override authority. Once we get the JSOC decision on who's doing the assault and the COA, we'll perfect our contribution to whatever tasking we have. What do you guys think the muj COAs would be?"

Bartram said, "The usual options are defend, reinforce, attack, withdraw, and delay. They could pull off defend if they get alerted, reinforce is likely, an attack would be risky with the numbers we're told to assume they have, plus they want the hostages for ransom. They may delay to allow reinforcements to get there. Withdraw would be a bad move due to the geography there."

Reef said, "I think they'll ask for reinforcements."

SEVEN

At Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Lt. General Johnson, USA, put down a message and stood up from a desk and ambled to a waist-high roundtable. He pushed a button on a side console, and the table projected a holographic image of northern Syria's geography. Using a joystick, he moved a cursor and pushed a button until a compound was the main feature. Johnson studied the projection, then abruptly marched from the office. When he did, his EA said, "Sir, where are you going?"

"To see the J-3. I've waited long enough."

Johnson went down a hallway, past a janitor stripping wax, into a smaller office. There he said, "Sully, damn it, I've been looking at DEVGRU's input so long I have it memorized. Do we have DELTA's and yours yet?"

Colonel John Sullivan, his face had bubbly white and red burn scars, it was missing part of a lower lip, looked up from a computer screen. With a lisp, said, "We received DELTA's thirty minutes ago, sir. I have an AO working on an info paper to compare the COAs and CONOPs that DEVGRU, DELTA, and my guys generated. I want to run the COA analysis software too."

"We don't have time to tit fuck around. Bring the Chief of Staff, DELTA's input, what the AO and your guys came up with to my office."

Later, Johnson looked across his desk and said, "They're all good on what they'd do in the compound, but DELTA's number two and three COAs are almost the same, give them

an hour to rework them. DEVGRU's bother me because they have team myopia.”

Johnson's Chief of Staff, Colonel Bill Huff, a man who looked more like a lawyer than an alumnus of DELTA Force, said, “Would you explain what you mean by that, sir?”

“They've built theirs around the team they have, but Thawrah's ripe with Caliphate and al-Qaeda sympathizers, and the X is near Raqqah. As you well know, it's even worse. Those facts, and SECDEF's intent to deliver a don't-fuck-with-us message, must influence the size of our force.”

Sullivan, next to Huff, lisped, “We'll have a QRF available.”

“Maybe they'd be able to help the assault team in time, but if I go with what DEVGRU produced, it could end up like Delta in Somalia. We persuaded SECDEF to accept a small team doing the rescue itself. If the *muj* bring in more men, I want our guys to be able to defend themselves better, and annihilate the enemy if they do, so I'm dispensing with the QRF.”

“That's the opposite of what you just said about force size.”

“No, I intend to practice good operational art and put more troops on the ground at Thawrah-Raqqah road junction.”

Huff said, “To block the *muj* from reinforcing those at the X.”

“Roger that. I want a Ranger platoon there when the rescue team's at the X. Because the platoon will have the advantage of interior lines, they can quickly move to the X if the assault force needs help. If the rescue generates a powerful response, they can withdraw to the X and help hold off any probable attacking force. Move the platoon to Jordan ASAP.”

“Yes, sir. Do you have a preference for which one?”

“I want it led by a mean, ass-kicking fucker.”

Huff said, “Hastings?”

“Damn right, he’s the man, his guys have the job.”

“We’ll have a lot of troops on the ground from this. What if an aircraft designated for their exfil has engine failure?”

“Good point. Send another C-130 and CV-22 to Jordan.”

Johnson looked at Sullivan. “Sully, J-3’s COAs were good, no issues; tell your guys I said so. Now I want you two to think about how you’d beat DEVGRU’s and DELTA’s COAs if you were the enemy commander. That’s because, when we get to the wargaming phase, which I hope’s within four hours, you guys and the J-2 will be the red side. I want you and to disrupt the rescue, be aggressive, ruthless, assume the terrorists will do anything. Pick hotshot J-3 and J-2 AOs to be the blue force.”

Huff said, “We’ll be total bastards.”

“That’s why I picked you; you guys don’t need to act.”

“I’ll get DELTA hot on the COA rework.” Huff turned to leave.

“Hold on. I’m getting ahead of our normal process, but there’s no time for normal. DEVGRU’s COA one requires logistical support. It’s the COA I’ll go with if I don’t use DELTA.”

“The DPV, special parachutes, a DragonFly rig, and RGU.”

“I don’t want to be foreclosed by them not having those. Get J-4 and Little Creek to move that to Jordan with the Rangers.”

“What about the Critical Care Air Transport Team?”

“What do you think of that request?”

“It’d be smart. The political costs will be vast if we rescue people, and then one or more die from survivable injuries.”

“You decided for me; make it happen.”

A few hours later, Lt. General Johnson finished studying a sheet of paper; his Chief of Staff and J-3 were expectantly watching. He pleased them when he said, “The decision matrix and scoring’s good. The wargaming was excellent. DEVGRU’s COA one’s the best option; it’s my decision. Now we sell it. I want the info paper I’m taking with me to include this as an attachment. SECDEF loves matrixes. How long will it take, Sully?”

Sullivan looked at his watch. “It should be done in an hour.”

“Let CJCS know when I take off. He wants us to take the decision to SECDEF as soon as I get there.”

In the barracks in Jordan, Bartram, Brady, Montgomery were wearing helmets that displayed the virtual world of the compound that JSOC’s ISA had created. The helmets also allowed them to communicate. Brady and Montgomery had spot emitters on their limbs and heads to provide Bartram and the model, it was running on a powerful laptop, data about their movements. Bartram was observing the two men do the segment they had, using the tactics they would employ. The men had just entered the stable when Bartram transmitted, “I’m freezing it.” The simulation participants pushed their helmets up. She said, “Brady, when you went through the door, you dropped the muzzle of your weapon across Monty’s head. We don’t need lethal accidental discharges. Tonto, before you went through it, you flagged your presence; the end of your MP7’s barrel was sticking out almost a foot.” She turned to Reef and said, “We’ll take a break, you guys can do your while we do.”

Reef and Syvertsen were doing their segment when Captain Hatchett called. Reef answered, and Hatchett said,

“Klima, you have a go on COA one. They’re sending the Execute Order now. The supplemental ROE you requested were all approved.”

“Outstanding, when?”

“Tomorrow, not later than 0300 local. JSOC changed the CONOP.”

Reef’s smile vanished. “What did they do?”

“A Ranger platoon will drop onto the Raqqah and al-Thawrah road junction. You call them to trigger their infil.”

“It’s smart to control that. Whose leading them?”

“A Captain Hastings, from the 75th Ranger Regiment; he’s supposed to be as hard as a woodpecker’s lips. They’re on the way, with them are the DPV and the other support you asked for. Make us proud, son, out.”

Reef put his phone in a pocket and whistled the ‘All Hands on Deck’ bosun call. Facing the team, he said, “It’s on, we’re doing COA one early tomorrow.”

Hallon said, “I was sure JSOC would go with the DELTA.”

“He did add Rangers to the op. I’ll give you the details in a minute, but first, I want to reaffirm the mission goal. The mission’s to rescue the Marine and Zeus; it’s not to kill terrorists. Keep the distinction clear. Questions?”

Bartram said, “How about the ROE?”

“The changes we asked for were approved.”

Then a man in civilian clothes walked into the barracks. He said, “I’d like to be briefed on how we’ll do the rescue.”

Reef looked shocked, then grinned. As the two men embraced, he said, “Magnus, what the hell are you doing here?” Reef turned to the team. “This is Major Magnus McKellar, also known as Black Mack. He’s with the Special Boat Service.” Reef, brow wrinkled, said to McKellar, “What’s going on?”

“I thought you’d know by now. The Chief of the Defense Staff called CJCS, arranged for me to come along.”

Bartram said, “Are you implying we’re incompetent?”

Magnus said, “I didn’t expect you to be all creased up over it. I know your team’s exceptionally competent, but the PM decided we needed an operator from our country on the op to avoid a face full of embarrassment. MOD picked me.”

“Them forcing you on us is not so sweet.”

Reef said, “If we have to have an operator from the UK, I’d want it to be Magnus. I worked with him when I was with Team Ten.” Reef said to McKellar, “But we need confirmation.”

“Get it, mate. There’ll be no trouble about it.”

Reef left the barracks to make a call. Bartram said, “Where did you meet our boss?”

McKellar said, “At Cambridge. SBS sent me there to learn Arabic. We met on a golf course when we shared a tee time. While we played, I told him about diving the German U-boats around Scotland. He told me about diving near Key West, the Spanish galleons, and how the ancient Greeks fought wars.”

Syvertsen said, “He’s still stuck on the Greeks.”

“I’m well aware of his fetish. He once informed me the word Scotland’s derived from a Greek word meaning the dark land.”

Brady said, “He wasn’t in the Navy when you met?”

“Not until a terrorist killed his brother. When I met him, he only wanted to study the bloody sun, what he called the solar dynamo, how it does its magic, and warms the world.”

Brady said, “What happened to his brother?”

“He and your young commander were touring London. A terrorist drove a car onto the sidewalk and ran over him. Reef

saw it happen, and it changed him. I started him thinking about special operations. He soon joined your Navy.”

Bartram began cleaning a rifle. McKellar said, “This is the first time I’ve seen one of those lightweight Barrett’s.”

Bartram said, “It’s my favorite weapon.”

“The bullets are self-propelled by micro jets?”

“Yes, the barrel points them towards the target, doesn’t have to withstand the explosion propelling them. I’ve killed men two miles away. It shoots armor-piercing and fusible HE rounds too. The thermal scope gives me the distance to a target, I tell the rifle’s CPU to have the bullet explode a specific interval beyond it. It can take pictures of anything I shoot too.”

Reef was on hold awhile, before he heard, “Captain Hatchett.”

“Sir, a Major Magnus McKellar, Special Boat Service, is here. He says he’s attached to us for the rescue?”

“Yes, damn it, I just found out. JSOC fought it, but CJCS agreed to it. SECDEF backed CJCS. I’ll send you his clearance, so you have it for the next admin inspection. Anything else?”

“Any more gouge from the MAVs?”

“Not, I’ll let you know if that changes. Good luck, out.”

Reef returned to the barracks, and McKellar said, “Did you get the word, mate?”

“Everything’s set. Have they told you what we plan to do?”

“Loose lips sink ships.”

“I’ll do it, then you, Master Chief, and I will do a VR run of the segment we have. It’s the one most likely to find Zeus. Did you bring a rebreather?”

“Yes, and weapons.”

Later, Reef, McKellar, Bartram, and Syvertsen stood outside the barracks watching a C-130J land. Reef said, "It has a Critical Care Air Transport Team on it."

McKellar said, "I hope we don't need it."

Reef said to Syvertsen, "I'm going over to talk to the Rangers. While I'm gone, make sure the guys get some rack time. At midnight, I want them in front of the barracks, all jocked up in full battle rattle."

Muhammad and five men were in the basement of the main house. The Duke was in a chair; his arms were wired to the armrests; his face was battered and bleeding. Next to him, a dead man, missing strips of skin, was bound to a chair; his joints looked like pieces of wood that had fed termites. On a table were a long knife and a drill; blood dripped from them.

At a table in the back of the room, Muhammad was using a laptop. Car batteries supplied it and a terminal that had 'Hughes' blazed on it with power.

Muhammad attached a wire to the antenna of an Iridium satphone and punched numbers into it. When his call was answered, he said in Arabic, "Emir, you know I must transfer half the money today or he'll sell it to someone else. What should I tell him?"

The Emir said, "Are you sure it will work?"

"I told you I wouldn't know until I test it. But, from the description, I think so. It should be perfect for Saint Petersburg."

"You have my permission. I want this Duke in my majlis as soon as possible." Then the Emir hung up.

Muhammad put the phone down and said to Ahmad, a brother, "The idiot finally made the decision. We'll soon be traveling."

EIGHT

The moon was setting, and a dry cold desert wind was blowing and vampirishly sucking the heat from everything. Five aircraft were parked alone near the end of an unlit runway far from the airfield's control tower. Groups of mostly men stood near them.

The team, with faces blackened, stood by the CV-22 they would travel in. Next to it, a platoon of Rangers was waiting to load onto an MC-130E. Another CV-22 was beyond them; it would fly the mission and be available if needed. In the cockpit of the AC-130J gunship, the pilots were visible in the dim reddish light secreted by instruments. Beside it, was the C-130J that had the Critical Care Air Transport Team onboard. It remained dark though heads peered from windows.

For the swim in cold Lake Assad, Reef's team and McKellar wore wetsuits: those also provided ballistic protection. Over them were LAR V rebreathers, below those, hanging from their waists, were parachutes. Besides their ammo, taped down grenades on their harnesses, they wore helmet-mounted night vision devices (NVD), hanging face masks, and IR strobes. Some wore gloves; they all had fins taped to their shins, tactical ear inserts, and mics permitting hands-free communication. They also had weapons, those mounted ATPIAL lasers.

Reef huddled with the team and said, "I'm not giving a pep talk, but I know some of you are worried about the numbers we could face. Just remember we have the

advantage of surprise, better combat skills, NVDs, and a platoon of Rangers backing us. Once we're detected, shoot, move, and communicate. And no Gucci moves, finish your segments unless one of us calls for help, or finds Zeus and the Marine together."

Bartram said, "Aim small, miss small, guys."

Montgomery said, "Why can't the Air Force ever be ready when we get to the damn runway?"

Hallon said, "Chill, dude."

"That's my problem. I'm freezing my nuts off in this wetsuit."

McKellar, cold too, jerked up the zipper to his. Syvertsen said to him, "We all wish they were warmer."

McKellar said, "We don't have these. It's hard to believe something made of filaments from frog slime can stop a bullet."

"The slime's from a hagfish. There's Kevlar in the suits too."

They heard a whine as the Osprey's cargo bay door opened. The CV-22's crew chief, wearing a helmet, emerged from the bay and said, "You people can board now." She said to Hallon, he was cradling a six-barreled gun, "Where do you think that's going?"

Hallon said, "In the big dry box on the DPV."

"Why didn't you get it to me sooner? I have the aircraft balanced; everything stowed the way I want."

"I did PMS on it. The gun I'm holding won't affect it."

With a smirk, she said, "I'm sure you know more than a woman about holding a tiny gun that won't affect anything. Follow me, I'll show you where to put it until we're flying." She walked up the ramp into the cargo bay. Hallon followed her, the team and McKellar trailed them.

The DPV was secured to an aluminum pallet by ratchet straps and sitting on runners in the aft end of the cargo bay. The front of it had a control console with a plexiglass shield; its long frame ended with fin stabilizers. Resting on top of it, but attached to the frame by more straps, was a box: the DragonFly.

The crew chief pointed, "There. I'll help you put it in the box later."

"I'd like your help putting a gun you made fun of into something else I see."

"Put a tampon in your mouth."

Hallon said, "If it's yours, I'll do it."

Syvertsen yelled, "You're on my shit list again, Hallon. That's no way to talk to a fellow warrior."

Hallon said to the crew chief, "Did you charge the Fly's guidance unit?"

Pressing lips together, she said, "Are you saying I'm stupid?"

"Did you?"

"Yes," then she went into the cockpit.

Reef pulled down a seat near its entrance; Bartram sat next to him and plugged a set of aviation headphones into the Osprey's communications suite. McKellar and Syvertsen sat nearby. The rest of the team used the seats built into the sides of the bay.

Bartram said, "Boss, they want you in the cockpit."

Reef and McKellar went into it. The crew chief left it and inspected the way the SEALs had seated themselves. Hallon said to her, "Miss Special Missions Aviator, my sister told me this joke. A woman's in a bar, see, walks by a man on her way to the head, sniffs because she notices he reeks of cologne. She stops; you know what she says?"

The crew chief said, "Was it buzz off, dip shit?"

“She said, ‘What is it that you have on?’ He said, ‘A hard-on bigger than Moby Dick’s dick but I didn’t know you could smell it.’” Hallon laughed over a goofy grin and said, “Funny, huh?”

With hands on her hips, the crew chief said, “You reek.”

“What’s an Australian kiss?” She looked at him like he was a roach. Hallon said, “The same thing as a French kiss, only down under.” She stomped away. Hallon frowned.

Bartram said, “Hallon, try being her friend instead of someone trying to take her clothes off.”

Marquez said, “You shouldn’t have said some of that, Hallon. Didn’t your mother teach you how to treat women?”

Syvertsen snorted. “He didn’t have one; he’s from parthenogenesis.”

Hallon said, “Parthno-the-fuck-what?”

“It sort of means reproduction without screwing. Hell, my son may think he came from it. I’m never home.”

When the crew chief walked by again, Hallon wiggled his tongue at her. With a ghost of a smile, she flipped him the finger, and Hallon became a grin. “See, Senior, she’s hot for me.”

Bartram said, “When the gun’s in the TALOS dry box, make sure she updates the DragonFly’s AGU to account for its weight.”

“You gonna tell me to get a box of chem light batteries next?”

“I’m doing my job, making sure you do yours.”

Hallon said, “Mushy, your wetsuit looks older than you.”

Haddad said, “I like the way it fits. It’s comfortable.”

Reef and McKellar had just returned to the bay as an Army captain ran up the ramp. He said, “What’s the holdup?”

Reef said, “The laser’s cooling system has a high temp alarm.”

Captain Hastings said, "Can't they fix it in the air?"

"Not the pump their technician says is causing the alarm. I've given them thirty minutes; if it's not working by then, we're leaving. They'll scream, but they can provide fire support with their Griffin and Hellfire missiles. The weather's my main concern; the 28th Operational Weather Squadron called our pilot and told him the front's moving faster."

Bartram said, "Excuse me. He wants to talk to you again."

Reef said to Hastings, "Let's hear what he has to say."

When they wedged themselves into the cockpit, Blackwood looked up from a DASH-1 preflight checklist. "I talked to the 28th guys again. Their weather model says the front will get to the X even sooner." On a multi-function display screen, Blackwood pulled up the satellite imagery of the regional weather. "Our routing's still good, we'll beat it to the X, but it could be a problem for the Rangers depending on when they do their drops."

Hastings said, "I've done blasts in sandstorms. They usually turn into cluster fucks."

Reef said, "I'm moving our departure to now."

"Hooah, we're pumped like the war dogs we are. Good luck."

After Reef and Hastings left the flight deck, Blackwood pushed his NVDs down and flipped a switch on the control panel. An APU began wailing in the mid-wing gearbox of the CV-22, then one of its engines spun-up until its exhaust port produced a momentary jet of fire and a billow of white smoke.

In the bay, the crew chief closed the bay door partway. Reef put on a headset and transmitted on the encrypted command net, "All stations, this is Falcon. Signals follow. This is an immediate execute frag order. Aircraft will now

sortie in the sequence assigned, I say again, aircraft will now sortie in the sequence assigned, standby, execute, over.”

Blackwood radioed, “This is Bull Dog, roger, out.” He followed that by driving the Osprey to the middle of the runway. There he turned it, then it lumbered down the runway, after a hundred meters it was airborne. As it gained altitude and speed, the nacelles rotated forward, and it converted to horizontal flight. The second CV-22 took off, then the gunship and the C-130 with the Rangers. The aircraft flew with their navigation lights off.

Aboard Reef’s CV-22, some of the SEALs tried to sleep on the bays non-skid; they had over an hour before they would parachute. But Syvertsen honed a Winkler dagger; Haddad prayed; Bartram sat with the headphones on, reading a small Bible.

Reef found himself wondering how his father was doing; a week ago, he’d jumped from a boat, slipped, and broke a leg. Then he thought about his mother and sister. Eventually, as was always the case before a mission, he remembered his twin. In his mind, he said, *I’m hunting terrorists again, Ryan. I hate the killing, but they deserve to die.* His eyes came to rest on Bartram. For a moment, he wondered how it would be to kiss her but hacked the thought from his mind.

Hallon stuffed a wad of Copenhagen into his mouth and went to the chain gun. He released it from fastenings and placed it at the side of the DPV. He had opened the TALOS’s dry box when McKellar went to him and said, “I’ve read about this suit and 30-millimeter chain gun. Could you tell me more?”

Hallon seemed to swell and said, “It fires 200 rounds a minute and is part of a system that I can change for specific mission types. The exoskeleton supports an almost impenetrable body armor. Its electro-mechanical muscles

make me as strong as Iron Man. I can lift a ton, even run in it.”

“It has to be heavy.”

“The chain gun alone weighs 140 pounds.”

“How heavy is the suit, gun, magazine, and ammo together?”

“Near 360, but with the suit on, it doesn’t matter.” He pointed inside the box. “That’s the electrical supply; it provides enough power for six hours of medium intensity use.”

“It’s impressive kit, thank you.”

Hallon waved to the crew chief. She came over, they put the gun into the TALOS dry box and then began to talk.

Reef, monitoring the command net, heard his call sign called and replied, “This is Falcon, over.”

“Son, this is General Johnson. A MAV sent video of Zeus, his bodyguards, and the girl being moved from the men’s living room. Then something blocked the window the MAV was using. Also, the video from an MQ-9 showed two outboards arriving at the dock. There’s a motor running nearby it, over.”

“At least we know he’s alive, over.”

“They have more men; the weather’s going bad, the gunship has an equipment problem. You’re in command, abort if you think it’s necessary. I’ll support you either way, over.”

“I’ll evaluate the situation there, and do what seems tactically best, sir.”

“That’s what I’d do. Have a good ‘un, out.”

Reef yelled what Johnson had said to the others. McKellar went to him and said, “They could be beheading them now.”

Reef said, “Because of this, we’ll reverse our segment and try to find the Duke before going to the men’s living room.”

Bartram held a hand up, then said, “The gunship reports the laser’s working again. It was a clogged filter.”

Reef said, “I’m not counting on it staying that way.”

The engine noise suddenly increased, and the crew chief’s voice boomed out of a loudspeaker, “ETA’s fifteen mikes.”

Reef jacked rounds into his MP7 submachine-gun and Sig Sauer XM17 pistol. Both had silencers. He did press checks on each to confirm the bullets were well seated and made sure his PMAGs were fastened securely for the drop. Some team members were jamming PowerBars or energy gels into their mouths, knowing it could be a long time before they ate again. They all checked weapons and reconfirmed the battery charges for devices.

An electronic voice in the cockpit said, “Radar searching,” into the headphones of the pilots. The copilot flipped to the Electronic Support Measure (ESM) submenu on a multi-function display, studied it, and said, “Nothing to worry about, Jimmy. It’s the air search radar at the Aleppo airport.”

Blackwood said, “Did Becky make the Venice trip?”

“She’s doing it now and is pissed off. I can’t blame her. We started planning the trip over a year ago.”

“I’ve been doing pop up missions like this for fourteen years, missed graduations, proms, soccer games. It’s a wonder that Sue and the kids put up with me.” Blackwood checked the map display, then switched the screen to another view. He studied it, then said. “Tell the crew chief the MQ-9’s dropsonde reports the wind over the lake’s sixteen knots, from due west.”

The copilot talked over the crew circuit, then flipped a switch; in the cargo bay, the jump light on the aft bulkhead began flashing red. The crew chief dimmed the bay lights, yelled, “Six minutes,” and went to the DragonFly. She

entered the numbers she'd received from the copilot into to the AGU. After reporting that done, she pushed a button on the bulkhead, and the bay door dropped fully open.

Blackwood called Reef on the crew circuit. "Unless you say no, we're dropping the DPV in three minutes. We updated the AGU."

"I'll have Hallon ready to fly it in case the AGU fails."

Reef got up, walked aft, and said, "Hallon, they're dropping the DPV in three mikes. She updated the AGU." Hallon, carrying the remote control for the DragonFly, followed Reef to the cargo bay door. They looked out of it. They were moving down the middle of L-shaped Lake Assad and could see most of the eighty kilometers long lake. Dim lights were visible along its shore.

Blackwood put the CV-22 into a slow bank, then leveled it out at 10,000 feet. The crew chief shoed Reef forward past the DPV, and seconds later, it was jerked out of the cargo bay by two ram air chutes rigged for a HALO drogue-drop. Hallon watched it descend until it turned, then yelled, "The DragonFly's working."

The crew chief inserted pylons in the deck and ran a cable, supported by them, down the middle of the bay. The team used it to steady themselves as they moved to their usual positions in a line called a chalk; Reef was at the head of it.

The crew chief yelled, "Commander!" Reef looked at her, saw her hold a hand up like she was talking on a phone. Reef picked up an interphone on the side of the bay. "Klima."

Blackwood said over it, "Are you ready to do your drops?"

"Affirmative."

"Good luck and kick butt!" Then the Osprey banked and rapidly lost altitude. Blackwood radioed the trailing aircraft,

“Flashman, Alamo, Zombie Hunter, Spear Chucker, this is Bull Dog, I’m descending to begin the insertion run, out.”

In the bay, Syvertsen went down the line of SEALs and verified the valves on their LAR V oxygen bottles were tight: a small leak will soon render a Draeger useless.

The crew chief trumpeted, “You jump in one minute.”

With amped-up eyes, the operators moved to the end of the cargo bay. The crew chief pushed a button: Dead Pool’s “Let the Bodies Hit the Floor” boomed out of a loudspeaker. Then the jump light turned green, and the crew chief yelled, “Go, go, go!”

Reef, toes over the edge of the ramp, took a deep breath and launched himself, did a quick roll, and stabilized; he saw the DPV floating on the lake’s surface several hundred meters below. The engine noise faded, the wind whistled past his ears as he dropped at 120 miles an hour; the air was cold. He hand released a small pilot chute. For an instant, he feared he’d waited too long, then the chute jerked the square ram-air chute out, and it snapped open. He heard sharp cracks as the chutes of the others opened above him. He twisted to see them and was happy to see Bartram among them. Twenty meters above the lake, he flared the chute, splashed, dumped the chute. Reef swam to the DPV, released its parachutes, pulled its drain plugs. It sank. By then, the team and McKellar were treading water near him. They submerged and dropped to a flat sandy bottom where fish excitedly swam around them as they pulled the DPV’s outriggers out. Bartram, sitting behind its plexiglass shield, turned to see if everyone was holding onto one; since they were, she activated the DPV’s water-jet. As they hissed through the water, they looked like remoras attached to a shark.

Bartram stopped the water jet, and the DPV settled to the lake bottom by the submerged chain link fence. The team

waited there while Reef ascended to the surface. There he encountered a stiff wind and the smell of fish. In front of him were parallel strands of razor wire stretched along the top of the fence. He could see the two outboards; the sunken boat, the canvas-covered fuel tank behind it. The dock and boats looked deserted. He heard a motor running, figured it was the one Johnson mentioned.

Reef returned to the others and saw Hallon and Brady had finished cutting a hole in the fence. Except for Bartram, they all swam through it and surfaced near the shore. Weapons ready, faces barely above the water, their heads on swivels, they surged to the rocky shoreline and found cover against a steep bank. Syvertsen moved to the top of it to provide security. A moment later, Bartram drove the DPV into the shore, so that only its plexiglass shield was visible, and the team dragged the boxes containing the gear ashore.

Reef had his radio set up to receive team and command net communications simultaneously; he could select which net to transmit on. He switched to the command net, and transmitted; “All stations, this is Falcon, we’re at point X-ray, break Zombie Hunter, Alamo, over.”

Hastings acknowledged, then Shay, in the AC-130J, replied, “This is Alamo, roger, break, we’ll deploy a Tiger Moth and are ready to provide support. Be advised the weather front’s twenty clicks from you, out.” The gunship’s CSO pushed a button on a console. From a tube launcher in the fuselage, a twin-rotor Tiger Moth drone dropped and flew towards the compound. It would hover above it and stream video and augment the gunship’s MX-20D Electro-Optical/Infrared (EO/IR) cameras and sensors. Those, like one half of the mythic Janus, squinted at the compound through a side port as the gunship orbited in a yaw of 45 degrees so that its laser and sensors were immediately

useable. The crew joked the IR sensor could detect the heat from a rat fart from six kilometers.

In a brisk wind, the team dropped the rebreathers from their tactical vests, put on and adjusted gear, and completed jump jingle tests to make sure they were not noisy. Then they extracted retractable ladders, hooley crowbars, rucksacks from the DPV. Bartram removed the Barret from a dry box. With Brady's help, Hallon donned the TALOS, and Brady locked the chain gun into its mount. While this occurred, Haddad slung the HK XM25 grenade launcher and removed a ROVER 5 from a case. He turned it on, and it established a link with the Tiger Moth. The Rover displayed on a screen designed to only be visible through NVDs, the top of the house, the lookout, and part of the compound. Haddad touched the screen. "There's a guy on the hood of the car." It was parked in front of the gate, beside the gatehouse.

Reef said, "Kill the lookout, the guy on the car later."

On the fire support coordination net, Haddad transmitted, "Long Rifle, this is Falcon Four, type two in effect, advise when ready to copy a nine-line, over."

The CSO replied, "Four, negat nine line, the combat system's partly down. The weapon control interface isn't responding to commands. We've taken the consoles down to troubleshoot, over."

"Roger, out." Haddad whispered to the others, "The gunship can't control its weapons or use its consoles."

Reef turned to Bartram. "It's up to you, Senior." He said to Marquez and Erickson, "Head for the stable. Hallon, Mushy, go to where your segment starts. If you guys see tango movement, radio us." They all climbed up the bank, then Hallon and Haddad went left, on their way to the front of the house. Reef and the others got to Syvertsen, who was

standing by a body. He said, “I noticed a heat source under the bush and found him.”

McKellar said, “He’s Magoon Brooks, one of the Duke’s bodyguards. We worked together in Task Force Knight when he was with the SAS. He has a lovely wife and daughter.”

Bartram, Marquez, and Erickson followed a brick path along the back of the house. As they neared the entrance to the mosque, they could see the crescent moon icon of Islam on top of the minaret. On the right side of it, there was a gap between it and one of the two compound walls that ended in the lake. Marquez and Erickson went through it. Before Bartram entered the mosque, she saw, to the left of it and under the bridge connecting the house’s second floor and the minaret, one of the closed garage doors.

Reef and the others went up the stairs to the pool deck that spanned the house’s length. Trash littered it and the empty pool. For cover from above, they moved under the overhanging second-floor deck. A door provided access to the house. They could see several barred windows had broken glass that had cloth, tape, cardboard, or wadded rags over or in the breaks.

Brady and Montgomery extended portable ladders and climbed up onto the second-floor deck. There they saw few metal chairs missing cushions. Across it were the sliding glass doors to some of the bedrooms. The glass was broken or shattered. They glided over to a door, looked through it, and saw an empty room; its interior door was intact and closed.

Inside the dark mosque, the few windows were vertical slits, Bartram slung her rifle and drew a pistol. Through the NVDs, across the prayer hall, she saw a wood minbar and a door. Near it was a mihrab niche indicating the direction to Mecca. She opened the door, entered the minaret, and ascended its steps. They were attached to the outside of the

tower and had no interior support. A man stepped out from the stair landing where the bridge from the house connected with the minaret. With a rising voice, he said, "Khalid?" and shined a flashlight on her. The light, intensified by the NVDs, blinded Bartram. He dropped the light and lunged; they fell intertwined. Her helmeted head hit the stairs; her pistol fell free as they slid down steps. The flashlight bounced, creating a gyre of light. When they stopped, the man raised his head from her and tried to stand. Bartram rolled to her side, pulled a knee up, kicked out, and hit his chest. He fell backward onto his elbows. She slid down to him, he lurched upright, reaching for her. She caught his hand, twisted it, baring his arm, she slammed his face down onto a stair. Mounting his back, with one hand on his head, she rode him as he skidded down a few stairs. She used her other hand to draw a knife. The man twisted, urgently reaching for it. She plunged it into his back: he howled. Unbalanced, she fell over him and sprawled onto the ground floor. She regained her feet; he lay gasping. Whimpering, he crawled for the prayer hall. Bartram pulled her knife from him, held his head back, and cut his throat. She turned off the flashlight, retrieved the pistol, and sat on a stair catching her breath and saying a prayer.

On the pool deck, Syvertsen whispered, "Is that a cat?"

McKellar whispered, "It's a baby or someone crying."

They followed the sound down the deck and heard music too; a dim tendril of light was leaking from a window, and so was sound. From it, they heard yelling, then the music stopped.

Syvertsen whispered, "What's going on?"

Reef said, "Someone wanted the music off, said it was forbidden." Reef took a pencil-thin tube from a pouch, pushed one end of it through the break in the glass, and into the slit the light was leaking from: the tube's camera

transmitted video and audio. On one lens of his NVDs, he saw a desk with a portable radio on it; a scowling young male was turning its volume down. Reef shifted the camera's aim. He saw two men on a mattress on the floor; one was holding the arms of a crying naked girl, a bearded older man was on top of her. Reef could see a tattoo on his hand, and whispered, "They're raping the Arab girl. The guy who murdered the soldiers is on her. I can't see all of the room, but I don't see the Duke or the Marine."

McKellar and the others flicked a switch on their NVDs and saw what the camera was transmitting.

The older man finished, stood, and left the room.

The young man by the radio said, "*Abghiha halla.*"

The other man said, "*La, anna al-awal!*" He pulled up his thobe and mounted the girl. The other stomped to the door and slammed it shut. Chest heaving, he turned on the radio: it played rap music. He increased the volume. Then, with a triumphant smile, he went to the mattress to hold the girl's arms.

Syvertsen whispered, "What were they saying?"

McKellar, a disgusted look on his face, whispered. "The smegs were arguing over whose turn it was."

Reef said, "She may know where they are. We'll find out if she does as soon as Senior kills the lookout, and the others report they're in position."

Haddad and Hallon had ascended to the level ground at the front of the house. From a corner there, across a thirty-meter space to their left, they saw the unlit small-single story building they knew was the housing for the female staff; behind it was a similar structure for men. Haddad got on his knees, Hallon stood: 'stacked' they looked around the corner into the courtyard. Spaced across its center, parallel to the house were rows of planters, and the table used when the

soldiers were castrated. Beyond those, they saw a Crown Victoria sedan: the man who had been sitting on it was gone. To the right of it, clanging was coming from the closed garage. Hallon radioed. "Falcon, this is Five, we're at our IP and set. The guy that was on the car's gone, probably in the garage. I can hear men talking in there, and banging on metal, over."

Reef acknowledged the report, then heard from the other segment leaders. Except for Bartram, they were ready to search.

The top of the minaret had a concrete dome: stone columns supported it. Below it, trumpet-like speakers were pointed to disperse the call to prayer. A circular platform open to the air was below those. From it, Bartram saw the rooftop lookout sitting on a stool. He wore a ghutra, thobe, and was smoking a cigarette and gazing at the sky. Bartram could see most of the courtyard and compound, the gatehouse, the garage, and the road to the compound. Through swaying trees behind her, Lake Assad, the fish farm, and some of the dock were visible. She pulled the rifle's bipod legs into position. After a short prayer, Bartram put a projectile through the lookout's head. She then transmitted, "Falcon, this is Two, I'm in my position, killed one *muj* getting here, and smoke checked the lookout, over."

"Roger that, if the men in the garage react when we execute entry, kill them when you can, out." Reef then transmitted, "All stations, I have control — Immediate Execute, house entry, I say again, house entry, three, two, one, execute, execute, execute!" Reef switched to the command net. "Alamo, Zombie Hunter, this is Falcon, execute your infil, over."

Hastings instantly acknowledged. The pilot of the MC-130 carrying the Rangers transmitted, "This is Alamo, roger

out.” He put the plane in a tight turn towards where the roads from al-Thawrah and Raqqah converged. In the rear of the MC-130, the Rangers shuffled aft, their RA-1 chutes rigged for a double bag static line drop. The jumpmaster yelled, “Remember troops; if your main chute doesn’t open, you have the rest of your life to pull the reserve.” Then, all business, he said, “Check static lines and equipment.” The troops did so, and those of the person in front of them. He yelled, “Stand by!” A green light turned on in the aircraft. He roared, “Go! Go!” Spaced by half-second intervals, the Rangers launched themselves into the air.

When Bartram saw the Ranger chutes open in the distance, she reported the news over the troop net. On the second floor of the house, Brady and Montgomery entered a bedroom and used a hooley crowbar to pry open the interior door. They went into a hallway.

McKellar tried the door going into the house from the pool deck, smiled, and eased it open. They entered an anteroom and went a short distance down a long hallway that ended in the front foyer containing a wide staircase. They could only see the back of it. Dim light emanated from a room to the left of the stairs; they knew it was the men’s living room. From there, they heard chanting. Reef recognized it was a Surah from the Quran.

NINE

As Reef, Syvertsen, and McKellar moved towards the foyer, the Quranic chanting grew louder, and Reef smelled a musky incense made from agarwood: oud. This evoked memories of the many times he and Ryan had camped on the Marquesas Keys when they were boys. They had looked for the treasure the first, mostly unsuccessful, salvors of the Spanish galleon *Atocha* were rumored to have buried there. The men stopped at the intersection of the main hallway with a smaller one. Syvertsen dropped to look around the corner to the right; Reef did the same to look to the left. Finding both directions clear, they made the turn into the hallway to the right. After ten meters, they stopped by a pile of shoes in front of a door. On the other side of it, they could hear the girl crying and music. They pushed their NVDs up to let their eyes adjust to the light seeping under the door. Then Reef whispered, “Get ready to run the rabbit.” That’s slang for a room entrance procedure used to slow an opponent’s decision making OODA loop; Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act.

McKellar whispered, “Run it, mate.”

Reef bolted into the room, went straight ahead along a wall. The rapists gaped. Syvertsen peeled right, McKellar followed him, shutting the door. The young man holding the girl’s arms released them, reached for a rifle. Reef’s pistol huffed twice, and the terrorist’s forehead collapsed. Syvertsen’s MP7 spit, and the face of the rapist, uncoupling from the girl, blew apart. A third man screamed, “*Khatar!*” and launched himself at the girl. Clutching her body with his

legs, he pressed a knife on her throat. Reef snapped off a shot. The endless hours spent using real bullets in a 'kill house' paid off; a bullet went through one of the man's eyes, and his skull sprayed blood. The other result was a bloody, screaming girl.

In Arabic, Reef said, "Quiet, you're safe, understand?"

Shivering, with arms wrapped, the girl said, "Yes . . . yes."

Syvertsen picked up a torn dress from the floor and gave it to her. She seemed to collect herself, began slipping it on.

McKellar said in Arabic, "Where are the others from the camp?"

She cried, saying, "In a loo, but last night, me and three men taken from it. I brought here, men use my body."

McKellar handed her a tartan handkerchief and said, "Don't leave this room. We'll send someone for you soon."

Before they left, Reef transmitted a SITREP. Through the open door of the next room, they saw an empty frame for a video projector screen hanging from the ceiling, dangling from a wall was a screen. The walls of the next room had built-in shelves. Within a blackened ring on the floor were the cremated remains of books and furniture. They entered the dining room; it contained only a wrecked table. Reef thought it strange, noticed a monofilament line stretching from a vent to the table, and pointed at it; tiny hooks dangled from the line. McKellar looked into the vent, then whispered, "It's a tripwire alarm." As Reef radioed the news to the others, Syvertsen checked the restroom and found it empty. In the women's living room, the furniture was also gone, and the chanting was louder. The kitchen was empty, as were the slots for a stove and refrigerator.

On the second floor, Brady and Montgomery were inspecting the bedrooms. It was a slow process; they had found an IED.

Outside, Haddad and Hallon confirmed the jihadi who had been on the car was still gone. Then they ran to the female staff housing. There, from behind a tree, they looked through a window into a room holding a smashed TV and a dead cat. Beyond it was a hallway with two closed doors that ended with another. They went inside, advanced to the hallway, and heard voices coming from behind the first door. They ran-the-rabbit. The room they entered held three males. One appeared to be unconscious and was tied up and on the floor. A young teenager and another man were lying beside him; they reached for AK-47s. Haddad and Hallon fired; Haddad killed the man, Hallon, the teen. As Haddad examined the man who was bound, Hallon bent over and vomited.

Haddad said, "Are you okay, bro?"

Hallon said, "Yeah, but he was a kid."

"War sucks. This guy's alive, but he's been shot."

They cut his bindings. When Haddad began tending the man's wound he opened his eyes and said, "*Ana min muharabi albshmarka.*"

Hallon said, "What'd he say?"

"That he fights for the Peshmerga."

The man spoke again, and Haddad said to Hallon, "He said he and another Kurd had orders to look for *mujahideen* near Thawrah. Four days ago, they saw some, followed them here, and were captured. He says the guys we killed have been talking about how they'll trap Green Berets or Rangers here. He said there are many *mujahideen* in the other house like this one."

“Radio the others about that.” While Haddad did, Hallon went to the back door and looked over at the male servant housing. When he returned, he said, “We have to check it out. Tell this guy we’re leaving and will come back for him when we can.”

Haddad conversed with the Kurd, then said to Hallon. “He told me to give him the Kalashnikov, and he’ll be okay. Give me a couple of minutes to finish bandaging his wound.”

Marquez and Erickson had checked the stable and were in the apartment. In its kitchen, Erickson went into a pantry. The shelves were empty, rice and cockroaches littered the floor. Then a gun discharged, and a bullet hit him; the wetsuit absorbed the force, but Erickson fell to the floor. A man left a closet. Marquez jammed the blade of a K-bar into the back of his skull; he convulsed and fell dead. Marquez said, “That was too close.”

Erickson groaned out, “I feel like a sledgehammer hit me.”

“You need to be more careful, *hombre*. Our segments done; I’ll find out what the boss wants us to do now.”

In the main house, Brady and Montgomery were going to the roof. To reach it, they had to use the staircase that started in the front foyer. To get there, they went down the hallway that became the bridge over to the minaret. Then, back to back, they climbed the staircase: Brady looking forward and up, Montgomery down. They took their time: stairs with a blind corner are dangerous. If they knew the terrorists had been alerted, they would have cleared it with a grenade.

At the top, Brady eased a door open, and a cold wind greeted them. When they moved out from the door, Montgomery had his weapon pointing at the top of the enclosure, Brady to the front. There was a meter high wall around the flat roof. At one end of it was the top of the bridge

going to the minaret. The other end was empty except for the water tank, which was supported by a structure that had a door. The middle of the roof held the air handler for the air conditioning system. They heard talking coming from the front of the house and went by the dead lookout to see the source; the voices came from the closed garage. The SEALs went to check the water tank and the room below it.

From the foyer entrance of the women's living room, Syvertsen said, "I'm in first this time, boss."

Reef said, "Okay, Master Chief."

Because of the staircase in the foyer, they were able to go across it without being seen from the men's living room to the walls on both sides of the entrance to it. Syvertsen went to the right side. From the left one, Reef extended the wire camera and maneuvered its end around the corner into the living room to where they knew there was a restroom. Through their NVDs, over a mound of clothing and through the restroom door, they saw three blindfolded men. They wore only underwear, were on the floor by a toilet, Tuff-ties bound their hands and legs. Reef directed the camera to the right; they saw a shattered plexiglass wall that formed a side of an empty aquarium. Reef moved the camera more to the right, and revealed the far end of the room where a fire burned in a fireplace. A buffet was being cannibalized to fuel the fire. The windows on each side of the fireplace were covered. Below a chandelier, Reef recognized weapons on a couch: RPGs, RPKs, AKs. A man wearing a cloak, a *bisht*, was sitting on the floor near those and facing the camera. He had a pistol on his lap and was injecting himself. Near him were magazines, books, and a chanting prayer clock. Reef whispered to McKellar, "You know what the druggie means?"

"We have to kill them twice."

Reef moved the camera towards them and to the right and they saw a bar and windows; one was the window the MAV used to take the pictures of the hostages. A drape now covered it.

Brady eased open the door to the room below the water tank, and a stench engulfed him. He said, "Something's dead in there." Inside a room containing PVC pipes, they found a corpse. It had been shot, and the fingers on both hands were bone stubs.

Montgomery said, "We better find them before Freddy Krueger does. I'm embarrassed to say it, but I need to take a dump."

"I'll be at the stairs. I'll tell Klima we're done."

In the main house, Reef withdrew the camera and said to McKellar, "If they're not in the head, the druggie will know where they are. I'll radio the others we could be going hot." Reef transmitted the info, put his NVDs up because of the light of the fire, and looked over at Syvertsen and nodded.

Syvertsen, followed by Reef and Syvertsen, jetted into the room. The guard saw them, reached for the pistol; Syvertsen's HK coughed as he killed the guard. Reef and McKellar moved towards the hostages. A man stood up behind the bar; McKellar's HK spit and the man's face vanished. Three others rose to replace him. McKellar yelled, "Back out, back out!"

The terrorists wildly discharged AK-47s. Bullets ricocheted and whirred, and tracers hissed. A chandelier crashed to the floor. The operators returned fire and retreated behind the foyer walls. From there, Reef looked around the corner. A fourth *mujahid* had positioned a Kord heavy machine-gun on the bar. He started hammering bullets into the wall Reef and McKellar were behind. Splintered concrete flew, and pieces cut them. Reef looked across the entrance to

Syvertsen and saw bullets punch through the wall there. Reef's mind screamed; *we might not rescue anyone. We could die here.* Then he transmitted, "We've been ambushed in the men's living room. Need help!"

By a wall, Montgomery jerked up his pants and stood. The gunfight in the living room was making light flashes in the courtyard, escaping through windows now missing coverings.

In the gatehouse, a man yelled in Arabic, "Someone not wearing a ghutra is on top of the big house. They must have killed Salah." A third man picked up a switch and flipped it.

From her overwatch, Bartram saw the HVAC air handler explode and flame envelope Montgomery. Brady, at the stairs, fell. Bartram screamed into her radio, "Oh my God, they killed Monty! Brady's down, but he's moving."

In the basement, an obese Arab was putting a bar into brackets on the back of a set of double doors, and Ahmad was shoving deadbolts into its frame. A man, wearing thick glasses, had moved a wall mirror aside, beyond it were pumps and a side of the pool. The Duke, bound in the chair, twisted in pain. Muhammad, holding a phone, announced, "Jamil's bringing them." He looked at the fat Arab. "Samir, put all of the furniture but my table in front of the doors."

The Arab wearing glasses bleated, "Will they be here soon?"

"Inshallah, Musa."

Haddad and Hallon were slinking towards the male servant's residence when the shooting started. Then terrorists boiled out of it. Hallon pointed the 30 mm at them; it sounded like a ripping sheet as its one-way luminescence tracer rounds, only visible through NVDs, connected with a few. Haddad and Hallon ran for the courtyard. There, other mujahideen engaged them from the gatehouse and a now

open garage stall. Haddad ran for cover; Hallon stood and fired back, tearing more tangos apart. He switched to the gatehouse. The chain gun's bullets pulverized its facade: that produced laughter inside it. The SEALs lodged themselves by the living room chimney. It gave them minimal protection, but through a broken window, they had a view of the bar in the living room. From there, Hallon yelled. "Boss, I see what you're dealing with, I'll give them a taste of hell."

Reef yelled back, "Make it bitter."

The TALOS's slugs chewed into the bar, and parts of it fell off. As it dissolved, bullets began to ricochet from it.

McKellar yelled, "They've reinforced it with steel."

"It takes three inches of steel to stop those AP rounds."

Haddad, covering Hallon's back, watched a *mujahid* run from the garage. He raised his MP7, but before he could fire, Bartram made the runner's head disappear. Then the gatehouse door opened, and two men ran towards him. Haddad bellowed in Arabic, "Here's your Ramadan gifts." He fired, killing them.

Muhammad made another call and sounded petulant when he said, "Emir, they've come, but we had no warning."

"Don't whine like a beggar after *zakat*. Can you still kill them as planned?"

"Yes, I moved the men into position after the *Maghrib* prayer. I transferred half the tokens too. We still need the instructions on how to take delivery of it, but we have it for Saint Petersburg."

"I want those instructions. Some in the Council say we've been tricked by the Crusaders. Those will help convince them we weren't. Now kill Crusaders for us."

Call finished, Muhammad issued orders over a handheld radio. He was also informed there was a sniper in the compound.

On a dark street in the village of Thawrah, twenty armed men, three carried FN-6 surface-to-air missiles, hustled towards cars. Two of them were over forty; one of those was Ghafur, a Pakistani wearing a karakul hat. The other older man, an Arab, stopped beside a sedan to yell, "Remember to keep weapons out of sight until we get there, and stay away from the house."

Ghafur said, "Don't do this, Jamil. Driving there all together's stupid! We must fight with *hilm* like the Prophet. Split us up, or I won't go!"

With a look of disgust, Jamil said, "Jihad requires bravery. Stay here and play like the coward you are!" He looked at the other men and said, "*Yallah*." Three of them got into a Ford; Jamil dropped behind its steering wheel. The others boarded Toyotas. Ghafur looked sad as he watched them leave.

In the basement of the house on the lake, Muhammad said to Ahmad, "Untie him." Then, pointing a pistol at the Duke, he said, "We're moving. If you give us trouble, we'll kill you. Now get up. Understand?"

The Duke's eyes stabbed fire as he produced a muffled, "Yes," and he rose. Muhammad pushed him through the opening the wall mirror had hidden and said, "Take our pig to the dock and wait."

Samir said, "How long should I set it for?"

"Twenty-five minutes. Then you and Musa take the boats."

Musa stammered out, "Is twenty-five safe?"

"It's long enough. I'll leave after I make them stay longer. I'll radio the other men in the house that it's time to leave."

In the men's living room, the *mujahideen* behind the bar fired weapons and taunted. One yelled, "Green Beret,

Shaytan burn you. Green Beret mans suck dick, fight like girl.”

McKellar said, “Why are they screaming about Green Berets?”

Reef said, “Probably because they’ve killed so many of them.”

They heard another voice say, “Green Beret shit of sick dog.”

Reef radioed, “Mushy, I’m sure our Marine and Zeus aren’t behind the bar. Hit these tangos with a HE round.”

Haddad popped up, aimed the grenade launcher through the window, calibrated the grenade, and shot. It exploded a meter behind and above the bar: all firing stopped. The smell of cordite wafted through the room. Then a man clambered up from behind the bar, rolled through the window behind it, and staggered across the courtyard until his head splattered apart.

Reef, Syvertsen, and McKellar went into the living room, as they approached the bar, Syvertsen lobed a grenade behind it. After the explosion, Reef and Syvertsen went behind it. Three men lay in a pile, the top one’s shirt was blown open, his intestines had spilled out. Syvertsen reached down to confirm the other men were dead. The man at the bottom released a grenade and its fly-off lever. Reef jumped backward. The terrorist grabbed Syvertsen’s leg, Syvertsen tried to shake free, then dropped onto the grenade. It exploded, blood and tissue hit Reef. Reef screamed and emptied his MP7 into the piled jihadis: machine-like, he reloaded and raised the weapon.

McKellar held Reef’s arm. “No, mate.”

Reef dropped to his knees, crying. “I should’ve noticed he wasn’t dead.” He leaned forward and hugged Syvertsen’s body.

“He didn’t notice himself. I’m sorry you lost a close friend.”

While the firefight continued, in the light provided by a flashlight, Samir shuffled down a narrow passageway defined by the pool’s hull and the foundation supporting the pool deck. Musa, the Duke, then Ahmad followed him. He stopped at a bullet-shaped object. It had yellow rings painted around its brown body; stenciled on it was an ammunition logistics code and MK. 84 Mod 1. Taped to the 2,000-pound bomb were an LCD timer, an explosive charge, and six 9-volt batteries. Samir gave the light to Musa and flipped up the timer’s cover. The Duke saw him set it to twenty-five minutes, and the numbers begin to decrement. Holding the flashlight, Samir led them to a slot in the deck’s foundation. They went through it and along an air duct to the condenser for the HVAC system. There, Samir pushed out a vented pane. They could hear the crack of gunfire as he cautiously went through the opening. On the path to the mosque, he looked around before waving the others out. Then he and Musa left for the dock. Ahmad and the Duke stayed at the opening.

In the main house, from where the hostages were tied, a man yelled, “Youze guys Americans or Brits, yew talk like both?”

In the light of the fire, Reef made sure the man by it was dead and turned off the prayer clock. When he did, he noticed one of the books there was Fodor’s travel guide about Cuba. Then he and McKellar walked over spent bullets to the restroom. From its door, they could smell urine and excrement. Reef pointed his MP7 over the hostages. “Are any of the terrorists here?”

A man wearing the undergarment common to Mormons, said with a familiar voice, "I'm Gunnery Sergeant Hendricks, we's okay."

As Reef began to cut the bindings from the shivering captives, he said, "I'm a SEAL, he's Special Boat Service."

McKellar said, "Where are the other hostages?"

Hendricks said, "We were all here until last night. Then they took three Brits; one's a big shot, and an Arab girl away."

A man putting on a Royal Army uniform interjected, "They know they have the Duke of Edinburgh."

McKellar said, "Where did they take him?"

Hendricks, looking surprised by the news, said, "This is the only place we saw him. They kept all of us here, made us use the head here, even the girl."

The Royal Army soldier said, "I speak Arabic and heard one of them say the basement."

A man putting on a French Army uniform said, "They're devils. They planned to fuck her."

Reef said, "We killed two of them. She's in a room by the back entrance. Gunny, bring her here. You'll find weapons by the fireplace. Someone put out the fire too."

Hendricks, now in uniform, said, "Yes, sir. "

Screams of *Allahu Akbar* and the *shahada*, the testament that there's only one God and Muhammad is his messenger, began coming from different locations. The sound echoed in the compound.

From the hallway, McKellar said, "They positioned mirrors out here so they can see movement here from in there. These tangos weren't just expecting company — they wanted it. We're lucky the druggie was more interested in drugs than his job."

Reef said to the hostages, "We'll exfil when we account for the Duke. Be ready to defend yourselves." He then transmitted to the team, "We have the Marine, a hostage overheard a muj say they were taking Zeus to the basement. We're going there, over."

Bartram radioed. "Someone get Brady and Ragnar, over."

Marquez and Erickson had just climbed the stairs to the pool deck when Marquez replied, "This is Eight, we'll get them, out."

Reef switched to the command net and gave a SITREP. As he did, McKellar pulled a tightly rolled body bag from a pouch and gave it to the Royal Army soldier. "Get the frog to help you put the SEAL behind the bar in this."

Outside the house, by the chimney, Hallon said to Haddad, "The way they're yelling reminds me of Fallujah, how they'd get worked up for an attack."

"Roger that. And we're hanging out like a dog's balls here."

"Let's get into the house."

When they were, Haddad positioned himself in a window on the left side of the chimney, Hallon took one behind the bar. Then they heard the sound of a motor cranking. Hallon said, "That's a diesel." From his window, he saw another garage door go up. A fierce fusillade erupted from the gatehouse and garage as soon as it had. It forced him to duck behind the wall.

In the minaret, Bartram edged forward to see what was happening. She transmitted, "A BTR-82 with a 30 mm gun just came out of the garage!"

The BTR, an eight-wheeled hulk, stopped in front of the gatehouse and shot rounds into the men's living room: the firing sounded like a boxer pummeling a punching bag.

Haddad radioed, “Maybe they’re trying to get Zeus away in it.”

Reef heard the transmissions and radioed, “Disable it if you can do it without killing anyone inside.”

Then the turret trained towards the top of the minaret, and the gun fired again. The slugs cut through the dome above Bartram, and big chunks of rubble fell around her.

Haddad radioed, “Get the hell out of there, Senior!”

Bartram retreated down the stairs until she was protected from the falling debris by those above her.

TEN

At a gunship console, the CSO reported, “All stations, this is Long Rifle. We have control of the Tiger Moth again, but still have weapon control problems, break, Falcon Four, over.”

Haddad answered, “This is Falcon Four, roger, out.”

The CSO switched from the Tiger Moth video to that coming from the MX-20D; it was aimed at a different location. She studied it, had a conversation on an intel net, then transmitted, “Zombie Hunter, this is Long Rifle, four vehicles left Thawrah and are traveling towards your location. They may be hostile; I deconflicted their presence with the Kurds, over.”

Hastings radioed, “This is Zombie Hunter, roger, out.”

Samir and Musa hurried out onto the dock and boarded the small boats. In seconds, Musa had left the pier in his and was going down the channel. Samir’s failed to start until he remembered to choke the motor. He jerked the starter cord, the motor backfired and ran raggedly. He twisted the hand throttle and nearly fell out of the boat when it jumped forward. Ghutrah flapping in the wind, he followed Musa, who had passed the fish farm by then.

In the basement, Reef and McKellar found two sets of double doors. McKellar opened a pair, and they saw infinite darkness: there were not enough photons inside for NVDs to work. Using the lasers on their weapons to provide some, they saw toppled wooden racks and jumbled bottle fragments on the floor. They entered a wine cellar. Reef picked up a

label, saw it was a Chateau Margaux 1999, and said, “They had some great wine here.”

McKellar whispered, “It’s a manky place now.”

Those in the house heard a discordant horn blare; that was followed by a rabid sounding multi-voiced, “*Allahu Akbar!*” coming from several directions. Haddad, from his chimney-side window, saw men advancing from the staff housing. The British and French soldiers were manning the other chimney-side window. They fired at the tangos carefully, knowing it would be wise to ration ammo. That’s when Hendricks arrived with the Arab girl.

Hallon, from a window behind the bar, saw men at the corner of the mosque. He said, “Gunny, our sniper’s in the minaret. Go to the mosque to keep tangos from getting to her. Use the stairs in the hall. There’s a bridge over to the minaret on the second floor. Frenchie, I want you at the back door, down the hall.” Then three men ran from the mosque towards the garage. He could see more tangos beyond the mosque, coming towards it. Hallon engaged those closest, the BTR responded by training its gun around and chugging slugs at him. Marquez helped Brady stagger into the room then, and Erickson carried in Montgomery’s body.

Hallon yelled to them, “Guard the front door.”

Haddad engaged mujahideen near the female staff housing. A man there fired an RPG-22 rocket at him. When the projectile exploded over Haddad’s window, Haddad bellowed, “I’m hit.”

Hallon ran to him and cut Haddad’s wetsuit open with a knife. That was easy: easy meant it provided little protection. He saw Seeing a penny-sized hole and smaller ones on Haddad’s chest he said, “This wetsuit can’t give you ballistic protection, dumb shit; it’s a rag. You know water degrades them.”

Haddad said, "It fits great. I can still fight."

"Where's your IFAK?" Haddad extracted a packet from a harness pocket. Hallon opened it and Haddad clamped the dressing on the large hole. Hallon taped it in place, then took an Xstat syringe from his harness and injected pill-sized cellulose sponges into the other holes. They had an immediate hemostatic effect.

In the wine cellar, Reef and McKellar saw light suddenly come from under the other set of doors. Muhammad shouted from behind those, "We'll kill him if you try to get in here. Leave."

McKellar bellowed at the door. "Surrender!"

"So the CIA can torture us?"

Reef said to McKellar, "It's nuts the way this is happening."

McKellar said, "Aye, they could be recording his murder."

"I mean the light was no accident. They're stalling us, and we're behind the timeline for the rescue as it is."

From a leg pouch, Reef took a device. It looked like a stud locator and stamped on its label plate was MDR-2. He loved what it could do, but not that it weighed ten pounds. He pointed its aperture at the door, studied a small LCD screen, and whispered, "There's one source of movement ten meters behind the door."

McKellar said, "The Duke might be further inside."

Reef hissed, "Do we break in or not?"

McKellar whispered, "We do." He removed his rucksack, took a flexible linear charge from it, began taping it to the door.

"I'll radio the team we're going explosive."

Muhammad was reaching to disconnect the laptop from the terminal when an email arrived. The subject was:

‘Vacation details now available.’ This caused him to open a webpage showing pictures of common vacation destinations. One picture was of a cross-shaped cathedral with five domes. Muhammad minimized the page, opened another program, executed strokes on the keyboard, pushed the ‘Extract’ tab on the app webpage, and returned to the picture. Numbers and text had appeared on it. He wrote the numbers and some of the text on a notepad, saved the webpage to a zip drive, and ripped the page from the pad. He pocketed it and the drive with the radio.

When Reef finished his report, Hallon queried, “If he’s there, we can destroy any muj target now, right?”

“Negative, the tango could be lying, out.”

McKellar hissed, “Ready to go boom, mate.” Reef nodded. McKellar set a timer, they returned to the wine cellar, and Reef prepared to throw a MK 13 flash grenade.

Muhammad had just disconnected the laptop when the charge went off. The high-pressure blowback shattered the laptop’s screen and made the computer fall to the floor. Then the MK 13 detonated. That produced a 180 decibel sound making his ears ring; the 13,000,000 candela flash blinded him. The remains of the grenade ignited some of the paper targets on the floor. Muhammad felt around on it, found the laptop, felt the cracks on its screen, and abandoned it. He staggered into the pool equipment room, slid the wall mirror back in place, and careened through the room. Drawing a pistol, moving faster as his sight returned, he stumbled along the pool’s hull.

Reef pointed the MDR-2 at the door, he and McKellar were coughing from the smoke spewing from a jagged hole in it, and said, “I’m not getting good readings through the smoke, but I don’t think anyones in there now.” They jerked on the broken wood, made the hole larger, then Reef ducked

below the bar lock and pushed furniture away. Inside, he verified the room was empty, then they stomped out fires and determined the mirror covered an exit. While McKellar felt around it for IED triggers, Reef examined the computer. For a millisecond he saw a building on its cracked screen, then it was replaced with numbers, letters, and symbols. He scrolled through pages of it.

McKellar slid the mirror aside while saying, “Got something?”

“Could be a code. What do you make of it?”

McKellar looked at it. “Maybe the result of a virus.”

Then the screen turned brown, and the computer began to burn. Reef bent over, picked up the notepad hoping to find writing on it, but saw only indentations. He put the pad in a pouch, thinking the content might be derived later. Then, with NVDs down, they went into the opening towards the hull of the pool.

In the AC-130J, the laser tech finished shutting an access panel. With Nomex flight gloves on, he used the plane’s interphone. “CSO, I fixed the kyber crystals. The Death Star’s super laser cannon and the Griffins will follow your digital commands now.”

From a console, the CSO said, “Bolinsky, just keep the system up and quit using the Star Wars jargon.” The CSO then radioed, “Four, Zombie Hunter, this is Long Rifle. My main gadgets are sweet, over.” Haddad and Hastings acknowledged.

Bolinsky sat at the other console and watched the video coming from the Tiger Moth. “I use it to keep my sanity. The laser’s purpose is to burn people like kids burn ants with a magnifying glass.” Seeing a boat leaving the compound, he selected a range scale encompassing a larger area and said,

“Did you notice two imperial fighters left the compound’s space dock?”

“Tech Sergeant Bolinsky, you’re asking for the Wrath of Khan.”

“You better look and Khan was in Star Trek.”

The CSO switched from the MX-20D output to the Tiger Moth’s and transmitted, “Four, this is Long Rifle, two squirters departed the X in boats. Do you want them engaged, over.”

Haddad said, “This is Four, wait, out.” On the troop net, he transmitted the news and asked for guidance. Reef told Bartram to make the decision. Bartram, sucking water from a CamelBak and searching for targets, swiveled to look at the lake and saw the boats porpoising through waves. She transmitted, “Four, tell Long Rifle to confirm there’s one person in each.” After a beat, she heard, “Long Rifle said there’s one tango per boat, over.”

“Tell Long Rifle to go hot on the boats.”

The CSO fired the laser. Bartram saw Musa turn red like a wood punk, then the boat exploded. Seconds later, Musa’s was gone.

Ahmad saw movement at the top of the minaret and pushed and the Duke into the vent as Muhammad came to it. In Arabic, Ahmad said, “The sniper’s still alive. We can’t go to the dock.”

“I’ll radio our tank to kill him.”

In the gunship, while looking at the MX-20D’s video, the CSO transmitted, “Zombie Hunter, this is Long Rifle, the vehicles from Thawrah are one click from you, over.”

Hastings replied, “Request you sparkle them, we need to verify they’re armed before we engage per the ROE, over.”

“Wilco, we’ll be coming in from the West, out.” Shortly the AC-130J’s IR illumination laser, invisible to the unaided

eye, projected a green beam that the Rangers could see through their NVDs. The Rangers watched the cars enter the traffic circle from the blowing sand. When the cars were closer, they could see men in two of the cars were holding weapons. Hastings yelled, "Fire, pour it on them!" In seconds, the vehicles were burning hulks.

Bartram noticed the BTR's turret training towards the mosque and scrambled down the stairs. It fired the first bullets into the middle of the minaret and then zigzagged closely spaced rounds up its length. Bartram radioed, "I can't use the minaret until the BTR's knocked out."

Haddad said, "I'd do it, but the Duke might be in it."

When Muhammad and Ahmad heard the BTR banging away, they kept the Duke between them and the minaret and backed down the dock. While moving, they saw the top of the DPV wobbling in waves. At the end of the pier, they came to what looked like a tarp-covered tank. In Arabic, Muhammad said to Ahmad, "Get the cover off so I can get it ready. While I'm doing that, disconnect the cables, close the junction box, and untie it."

Ahmad said, "If the sniper's alive, he'll kill me."

"Not with the Duke next to us."

Ahmad sputtered, "Close to you."

"Finish what I ordered!"

With a pout, Ahmad jumped onto the supposed fuel tank. He bundled up the canvas revealing a small submarine. Painted on its side was *Super Yacht Sub 3*. The bow section was a plexiglass dome; on the forward lower portion of its hull was a manipulator arm. On top, aft of the dome was a hatch that had a deck area around it. Six thrusters provided the sub with propulsion in all dimensions. Ahmad disconnected the charging cable and began closing the turnbuckles on the junction box while Muhammad helped the

Duke climb down a ladder to the sub. Once on it, he yelled, "Open the hatch. Get inside."

The Duke said, "Bugger off!"

Muhammad hit him in the face with the pistol. "Do it!"

The Duke used his bound hands to pull the hatch up, sat down on the hull, and put his feet on a ladder.

Reef and McKellar left the passageway and stood on the brick path, unsure where the Duke might be. Then, over the gunfire and wind, they heard yelling coming from the lake. They hurried towards it. Near the shoreline, they crawled to where the bank dropped to the water and saw Muhammad, the Duke, and Ahmad.

Reef said, "I'll step out, yell I want to negotiate, walk closer, and kill the guy by the Duke. You have the other one."

McKellar sternly said, "Commander, I'll do it. My orders are to rescue him. If I can't, I won't leave without his body."

"I'm doing it. This rescue's my responsibility."

Reef radioed on the troop net. "The Duke's with two men on a small sub at the dock. I'm going to say I want to parley. I'll try to get closer and kill the guy next to the Duke. McKellar has the other one. Senior, help us if it's possible."

Bartram replied, "Hallon, knock out the BTR."

Hallon fired into it. The rounds penetrated its thin armor, and it exploded. Hallon radioed, "The fucking BTR's destroyed."

Haddad said to Hallon, "Have you noticed the tangos haven't tried to get into the house even though they outnumber us?"

"Yeah. I think some have retreated too."

Reef transmitted, "Senior, we'll try to free him now. We're not leaving without him. You and I have the guy with the Duke. Magnus has the other one. If we fail, make sure the

Duke doesn't leave. That's what the UK wants, according to Magnus."

With a grimace, Bartram replied, "Wilco, out."

Muhammad and Ahmad saw Reef walking down the dock. As Ahmad scrambled to cut the mooring lines, Muhammad pointed his pistol at the Duke's head and yelled, "Don't try to stop us!"

The Duke swung his bound hands into Muhammad's legs, and Muhammad collapsed onto the deck, dropping the pistol and radio. The gun fell into the heaped tarp; the radio splashed into the lake. Ahmad jerked his AK-47 up; before he could use it, McKellar shot him. Ahmad fell into the water, as he submerged, his lifeless eyes seemed to plead for help from Muhammad.

Muhammad roared, "You killed my brother!"

The Duke, on Bartram's line of sight to Muhammad, stood. Muhammad saw Reef sprinting down the dock. He crawled to the tarp, rummaged inside it. As Reef jumped for the sub, he wondered why, thinking the pistol fell into the lake. Reef landed and kicked Muhammad in the face; he dropped to the deck.

Reef pulled the Duke up and said, "Move ashore!"

The Duke put his bound hands on the ladder, fumbled at getting onto it. McKellar grabbed him and lugged him away. He radioed, "I have the Duke. I'm moving him to safety."

Muhammad regained his feet. With his arms up, Reef looked forward to the fight. Then Muhammad dove into the tarp, twisted around and raised the pistol. Bartram had watched the fight through her rifle's scope but could not shoot due to Reef's movements and the Duke. When Muhammad raised the pistol, she pulled the trigger even though Reef's left arm was in the way. The bullet hit it and

went through it into Muhammad's chest; the impact caused Reef to spin and fall into the lake.

Muhammad crawled headfirst into the sub, closed the hatch, sat in a bucket seat, and flipped switches. He picked up the sub's MANTA controller, pulled the right joystick. The bow thrusters pushed the sub away from the boat in front of it. The starboard one sucked in a rope attached to the tarp and gobbled the rope and part of the tarp up and stopped. Muhammad drove the sub forward and away from the pier. It moved slowly with one of the two forward thrusters useless and dragging the tarp.

Reef saw it going down the channel and realized he might catch it via the fish farm. Even with a wounded arm, he could swim. He quickly swam to the 110-meter long walkway that was one side of the farm. He rolled onto it, ran down it, jumped near its end, and splashed by the *Super Yacht Sub*. He grabbed the tarp; Reef's weight unfurled some of it, but he was able to embark on the sub by cycling his legs on its side and pulling on the canvass. Muhammad heard the noise, saw Reef through the dome: they locked eyes. Muhammad screamed, picked up the control for the manipulator arm. When Reef bent over the hatch, Muhammad swung it around and slammed it into Reef's head. Nearly unconscious, Reef fell into the lake. Then Muhammad pushed the joystick forward, and the *Super Yacht Sub* submerged.

In the lake, waves of pain rolled over Reef. Then he noticed everything looked different: the colors were more vibrant, all shapes were sharp and geometric. As he drifted into darkness, he thought; *I hope death's the greatest adventure of all.*

By then, having given a pistol to the Duke, McKellar was on the DPV with Marquez. McKellar drove it; Marquez scanned the water ahead and suddenly yelled, "Stop!" He

submerged and soon surfaced with Reef. As they returned to the dock, Marquez discovered Reef was not breathing and began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on him. When Reef coughed out water, Marquez whooped. Then he said, "Welcome back, boss." McKellar laughed.

Bartram transmitted on the command net, "Bull Dog, we're ready for exfil. The LZ's the road in front of the gatehouse. Enemy forces are active near the LZ, over."

In the CV-22, Blackwood answered, "Bull Dog, roger, out."

McKellar consulted a watch and radioed, "Do it fast! The Duke said the house is rigged to blow. It happens in five minutes."

Hallon said to the others in the living room, "That's why they didn't assault into the house."

The CV-22 swooped onto the road, the big tilt rotors produce eighty miles per hour downdrafts, and the loading ramp dropped. McKellar walked the Duke up it, followed by Haddad, Brady, and some of the hostages. Marquez carried Reef onboard, and then the French soldier brought the remains of a bodyguard. Erickson had Montgomery's body, Hallon had Syvertsen's. Hendricks, the Marine, was behind him with the other bodyguard. When Bartram accounted for everyone, she went to the cockpit and said to Blackwood, "Get us out of here, sir."

The airframe shuddered as the Osprey ascended. Seconds later, through the bay door, they saw a fireball consume the house and heard a deep rumbling. Marquez searched Reef's pouches for medical supplies, found a pad of paper without writing on it, and dropped it. Then he passed a hand in front of Reef's eyes. They didn't move. He used a penlight to test for a pupillary reaction to it. Marquez repeated the test, then said, "Did any of you see what happened to the boss?"

Bartram said, "I saw it all."

As she recounted the events, Marquez put a cervical collar on Reef, hooked him to an IV, extracted bullet fragments from his arm. When she finished, he said, "I think what you did was right. His arm will be okay, but his head trauma's serious. I did some field tests on him, and he failed them." Looking at the deck, he said, "I don't know if he'll make it."

Bartram looked like someone had stabbed her. "Are you sure?"

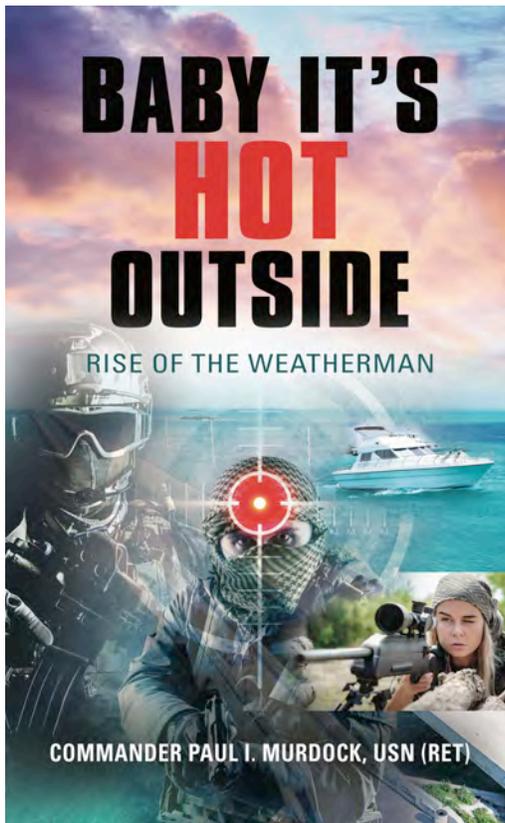
"No, but he probably has a traumatic brain injury. I think the CCAT will CASEVAC him to the Bethesda trauma center." With a grim look on his face, Marquez went to the flight deck and told Blackwood what he'd said to Bartram. He finished with a statement; "Radio the CCAT they'll have four patients. One has TBI and cabin altitude restrictions."

Bartram picked up a headset in the cargo bay and transmitted on the command net, "Citadel, this is Falcon Three, over." After a short wait, she heard the voice of General Johnson replay. Then she said, "SITREP follows. We rescued Gunny Hendricks, the Duke, and the hostages. Master Chief Syvertsen and SO2 Montgomery are KIA and with us. So are the bodies of the Duke's bodyguards, Blades Magoon Brooks and John House. We have three wounded operators, Commander Klima, SO1 Haddad, and SO2 Brady. They and the Duke require immediate CASEVAC, over."

"Sorry about the KIAs, but I'm proud of you blue guys, out."

Later, they stood around flag-covered body bags as Bartram led them in prayer. Then she went to look at Reef. Marquez said to her, "Hallon's a mess, he had to kill a kid."

She replied, "Sometimes I hate the world."



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