

DEMOCRATIC



HATE-CRIME

a thriller
by Warren Fisher

“Death solves all problems: no man, no problem.”
- Joseph Stalin

Chapter 1

Sometimes killing is all you got...

The man's bloodless face hung in the gloom, distorted by spasming light. His crooked features gave the impression that he had once been broken and put back together again. Faint scar tissue was visible beneath his pale skin. The little finger on his left hand was missing; the one on the right was heavily scarred, as if it had been chewed off and hastily reattached.

The tunnel lights snapped by the subway train.

The rattling carriage settled and the interior lights began to glow steadily. The four black youths watched the lone white man. The subway carriage was almost empty, the few passengers all black, save the one man. Further down the car sat a large woman, anywhere between forty and seventy, solid and stoical, loaded down with grocery bags. Just across from her slept a wizened old man, his wiry hair and beard snowy white. His head lolled, snoring, undisturbed by the shuddering of the train. Of most concern to the youths was a burly, black transit cop standing at the far end of the carriage, thumbs hooked in his belt, close to his gun. He occasionally eyed the youths. Almost hidden behind his bulk was a slender young black woman, professionally dressed, probably returning from a good job in the city. She too eyed the youths, her fear palpable, the cop the only barrier between her and her worst nightmare.

The train slowed and slid into a station, the walls smeared with graffiti. The cop roused himself, straightening up and headed toward the doors as they slid open. The young woman gave the youths one quick glance, then hurried after him. They smiled and watched the cop go. The train lurched out of the station.

The group's leader, Luther, slid from his seat and ambled down the central aisle. Dressed in an outsize black T-shirt, baggy jeans hanging halfway down his ass, unlaced hi-top Nikes on his feet. His little posse, all dressed similarly followed him. Luther had a hard, mean face. Head shaved clean, ebony skin drawn tight across his lean face, a sneer permanently disfiguring his expression. A single scar bisected his left eyebrow. He was seventeen. It wasn't likely he'd live much longer.

They approached the white man.

Luther slumped in the seats across from him. One his team headed up to the two remaining passengers. He halted, fixing a lifeless stare on the heavy woman. Contempt twisted her broad face, but she grudgingly nodded. The youth turned and kicked the sleeping man once in the sole of the foot. He awoke with a start, trying to work his cottonmouth.

“What the fuck?” he muttered dryly.

He looked from the youth to the old woman to the youth and back again. She shook her head. The old man slumped back into his seat, muttering darkly to himself. The youth moved back to his crew.

Luther watched the white man. He wanted a response, but he got nothing. The man didn't even look up when they sat opposite him. Luther hated him all the more. He glared at the man, dressed in an expensive looking dark suit; shirt collar undone, silk tie loose, highly buffed loafers on his feet. Faggot, Luther thought. The man sat easily, legs crossed, relaxed in his seat; newspaper folded in his lap as he did the crossword with his swanky-looking pen.

The train slowed as it reached the next station. The last passengers, the elderly couple hurried off, never looking back. The doors hissed shut and they moved out.

Luther smiled and sat forward. He was only inches now from the white motherfucker. He couldn't ignore him now. But he did. He patiently carried on with his crossword. Luther was livid. He felt his rage building, hot blood rushed to his head, misting his vision. A thick vein throbbed in his temple.

“Hey, white boy!” he muttered thickly.

The man didn't respond.

Luther screamed, “Yo, motherfucker, you deaf or just fucking stupid!” His crew sniggered.

The man sighed. He clicked shut his pen and slipped it into his inside pocket. He carefully laid the newspaper aside and looked up. A small weary smile crossed his twisted

lips. He leant back in his seat and steepled his fingers, regarding the group with infinite patience, as if they were some specimen.

“You is one fucked up dude!” Luther snorted. “Don’t you know you in Harlem now, nigger-town, you ain’t got no business here!”

The man continued to just sit and smile his tired smile.

“You come here in your fancy faggot clothes, your fancy fuckin’ watch,” he jabbed a finger towards the heavy watch hanging from the man’s wrist. “You think you can flaunt your shit! Think your better than us! Well you gotta pay the toll, man, this is my town and you gotta give me my due!”

The man’s smile thinned and he sat forward, uncrossing his legs. His face was close to Luther’s now. One utterly calm, the other twisted by rage.

“You don’t want to do this,” the man said softly, his cold, grey eyes fixing on Luther’s. The youth’s gaze flickered.

“What?” Luther almost laughed in his confusion; he glanced around at his crew. He could see his authority bleeding away. His head snapped back around to the white man.

“Okay, motherfucker, enough of your shit, give me your wallet and your watch, maybe we won’t cut you too bad!” His nasty smile twitched.

“Walk away, now,” the man whispered.

With a roar, Luther and lunged across the aisle. The man came up out of his seat fast, moving in one silken movement. He slammed the heel of his hand into the bridge of Luther’s nose as he came at him. Bone and cartilage crunched loudly, blood sprayed as his nose exploded. Luther howled, reeling away, his left hand reaching up to his ruined face, his right groping blindly under his shirt. The man stepped back and stabbed out his foot, driving it into Luther’s kneecap, bending the joint back on itself, shattering it. The youth shrieked and tumbled sideways, hitting the floor hard.

The carriage erupted, the black youths coming out of their seats fast. The man saw someone coming in fast from his right. He stepped into the tall, rangy youth as he closed,

driving his elbow hard into his exposed throat, crushing his windpipe. He buckled, staggered backwards and fell. A third attacker closed from the man's left, this one a huge, hulking figure, lumbering forward relentlessly. The man caught a glint of light flash from the youth's hand. He sidestepped the attacker, stepping around him, grabbing his knife hand as he passed, ripping his arm backwards, using the momentum of the big youth to rip the shoulder out of its socket. He screamed and released the shank. The man reeled him back in, pulling him close, reaching around him with the knife and cutting his throat in one fluid motion. Arterial blood sprayed across the carriage windows and he let the dying youth fold to the floor.

He stepped over the body, dropping the bloody shank. He paused, as if distracted by some inner abstraction for a moment, then reached inside his jacket and pulled out a slim, black automatic pistol. He eased back the slide and checked the chamber for a round. He retrieved a stubby silencer from his jacket pocket and began to carefully screw it onto the muzzle of the weapon. He hummed absent-mindedly as he did so, only glancing up once at the remaining youth, a slender boy, probably no more than sixteen, his features fine and feminine. The blood had drained completely from his face, and transfixed in terror he remained pinned back against the far doors, perched on tiptoes. The second attacker groaned and stirred at the man's feet. He casually kicked him once in the side of his head and he quietened down.

He screwed the silencer tight and let the weapon fall down by his side. Again he seemed somehow distracted, as if not quite present in the moment. He cocked his head, then sighed and stepped over the second attacker, levelling the pistol on the back of his head. He fired two quick shots, mere pops, and the prostrate figure's head deflated, blood and brain-matter exploding across the floor. The man stepped clear. Blood ran through the grooves of the floor-panels.

Luther dragged himself backward across the open area before the doors, until his back came up hard against a clear plastic partition. His ruined leg lay twisted and lifeless before

him. His nose was smeared across his bloody, broken face. Gore stained the front of his shirt, dripping thickly from his chin. He grunted, groping beneath his shirt.

The man approached, rearing up over Luther, the faint, perplexed smile still on his face.

“Fucker!” Luther hissed, his hand coming out from beneath his shirt, a battered, snub-nosed revolver gripped in his hand. The man fired once, the round tearing through Luther’s right elbow, shattering it, the revolver flying clear, clattering away across the floor. Luther sobbed, clutching his ruined arm.

“You fucking faggot!” he spluttered.

The man fired again, blowing apart Luther’s good knee, bone and blood spraying. The stench of cordite and blood filled the carriage.

Luther writhed and shrieked. The man stood and watched him, head slightly cocked. Gasping, choking on the pain, Luther looked up, his misty eyes fixing on the man.

“Why?” he croaked.

The man fired twice, both rounds entering Luther’s left eye, blowing off the side of his head, gore spraying the partition behind him. He stayed upright for a moment, then toppled slowly sideways.

The man lowered his weapon and turned to the last youth. The boy quivered, trembling so hard he had trouble remaining standing.

“Looks like you’re out of friends!” the man said softly.

The youth swallowed and nodded.

The man began to carefully unscrew the silencer, his eyes glazed and sightless. He slipped the noise-suppressor into his jacket pocket and let the pistol fall by his side.

The light flickered as the train slowed, approaching a station.

“I suggest you find a different line of work. That’s the problem with random street-crime. Random. Never know who you might run up against.” The man smiled wearily and nodded.

The train slowed and slid to a stop. The man turned his back and stepped over Luther's body. The doors opened and he stepped out and walked away. His footsteps echoed across the cold station as the train slipped out. Behind him he left a trail of bloody footprints.

* * *

Steiner let himself into his apartment. He dropped his keys on the hallway table and headed into the kitchen, emerging with glass of ice-cold mineral water. He took a deep drink and laid the glass on a small table beside an armchair in the wide, open-plan living room. He shrugged off his jacket and threw it across the back of the sofa. He unclipped the pancake holster from his belt and removed the pistol. He tossed the holster onto the sofa and collapsed into the armchair. He laid the pistol, a stubby, polymer HK USP Compact, on the table beside him.

Slumped in his seat, he stared out of the tall windows that lined one side of the apartment. A cold grey light hovered on the horizon, as another new day threatened to dawn. Steiner felt an enormous weight bear down upon him. The darkness and pain twisted inside.

He wasn't worried about the killings on the subway. There would be no comebacks. His patrons protected him. There was no record of his existence. He did not exist. He was clean.

Guilt did not trouble him. How many people had he killed? He had lost count. More than fifty that he was sure of, close enough to see the light die in their eyes. But there were many more, deaths he was at least culpable for, hundreds maybe. What did it matter, this is who he was.

If they knew, some people would call him a monster. But he was beyond them and their petty, lying morality. Right and wrong, good and evil, to him such terms were only a matter of semantics. He realised long ago that what people said and thought were meaningless. A man was defined by his actions.

Steiner was a killer.

He had killed the only man he ever truly admired; he had killed the only woman he ever loved.

He sat alone in the dark, staring out into another cold dawn.

The pain twisted inside him, his back tightened, his brain clenched down hard on itself. Darkness bled into the corners of his soul.

They gave him drugs to keep him working, huge doses of anti-depressants, stimulants, sedatives and analgesics. They knew he was coming apart, but they needed him. The drugs kept him going. He was functioning, but still he felt he was constantly wading through some viscous, burning mist.

Nothing really helped anymore.

He reached out and laid his hand on his pistol, feeling its cool reassurance. He stared out across the city. The cold dawn clawed over the horizon, another day dragging itself to life. His eyes stung and a single tear fell, rolling down his cold cheek. He gripped the pistol and brought it up, thumbing off the safety and cocking the hammer. He felt the cool of the muzzle kiss his throbbing temple. He squeezed his eyes shut, and tightened his finger on the trigger.

Suddenly the pain and noise in his head cleared. An icy calm descended. The clarity was almost overwhelming. He smiled and squeezed the trigger tighter.

Somewhere far off a phone rang.

Chapter 2

Out of the swirling dust whipped across the desert plain, a convoy of vehicles slowly appeared. The rumble of their engines eventually caught up, carried on the howling wind. The guards watched them draw nearer, the canvas around their emplacement snapping, sand whipping against their covered faces.

There were six vehicles in the convoy, all identical white 4x4s. As they neared, six letters stencilled in black on the side of each one became visible: UNSCOM.

The sentry commander lowered his binoculars, only his eyes visible through the slit left by the kaffiyeh wrapped around his face and head.

“Tell them they are here!” he hissed. One of his men nodded and scampered away.

‘The Palace of the Heavenly Sun’, translated roughly from the Arabic, wasn’t most people’s idea of a palace. The complex of buildings was more than half a mile across. Behind the outer perimeter electric fence, razor wire and anti-personnel mines a cluster of make-shift, battered huts surrounded a large central building. Guard towers and surveillance cameras covered the interior and exterior of the site and military trucks and armed men were scattered across compound. The central building was less than palatial; five storeys high, a single, monolithic whitewashed block, utilitarian at best. Badly weather beaten, and already crumbling, only a few years after it was hastily constructed, it resembled more some prefabricated industrial building. Perhaps the site’s more prosaic alternative title was more fitting: Palace No.73. It was just one the almost one hundred ‘Presidential Palaces’ constructed in the last five years, all officially off-limits to the UNSCOM weapons inspectors in Iraq.

At least until today.

The convoy halted at the main gate, and waited engines idling. The guards at the sentry-post eyed the visors warily from behind their sandbagged emplacement, covering the vehicles with their AK47s. One soldier swung his PKS machine-gun idly on its tripod,

playing its muzzle over the lead vehicle. The sentry commander sauntered towards the first 4x4, his right hand hitched casually on his belt-holster.

The front passenger of the lead vehicle lowered his window. The sentry officer leant against the door and hung his head by the open window.

“Want do you want, this is a restricted site, you have no business here!” he drawled lazily.

“Today we do!” a voice spat back from inside the vehicle in flawless Arabic.

The guard turned his head, his dark eyes fixing on the passenger. The man was a westerner; his grey hair cropped close against his skull, his face lean and leathery, tough and determined. He removed his military-issue sunglasses, fixing the guard with his flinty eyes.

“Open the gate, now!” he growled.

The guard untucked his kaffiyeh, pulling it away from his face. He smiled, revealing blackened teeth. He stroked his long nose ruefully.

“You cannot come in here, you make yourself much trouble,” he hissed happily.

“Maybe so,” the man replied, “Now open the fucking gate!”

The guard stepped back and waved his arm. As the gate slid open, he gestured for the convoy to enter. The lead vehicle moved forward.

“We’ve been expecting you, Colonel Moore!” the Iraqi officer called in flawless English and laughed.

The vehicles swept in the compound and pulled into a rough semi-circle before the main building, like settlers pitching their wagons in expectation of attack by Red Indians.

Colonel Wesley Moore, US Army (retired) swung out of the lead vehicle, straightening to his full six foot two inches, still lean and fit at 54 years of age. He stood, arms akimbo, surveying the site. Even in khaki pants and polo shirt he still bore that unmistakable military air. Despite the less than glaring sun, obscured by the swirling dust, he replaced his dark glasses, almost as a statement of intent.

Men and women spilled from the vehicles, cases and equipment in hand and converged on the central building.

“I want this goddamn site searched from top to bottom,” Moore barked above the crack of the wind, “Rip the shit out of it!” His colourful military phrasing had occasionally caused trouble with some of his colleagues from scientific and diplomatic backgrounds. They got used to it.

Wesley Moore had spent almost his entire adult life in the US military, but it was a life like so many others that didn't play out as expected. Born the son of a Marine, a veteran of WW2 who rose through the ranks to achieve the rank of Major, recipient of two Purple Hearts, a Silver Star and Navy Cross, young Wesley had dreamed of being a soldier, leading his men into combat. His father, while not overtly opposed to this, nevertheless steered his son towards more intellectual pursuits, encouraging him in his school studies. At 18, Wesley was accepted into Cornell, where, at his father's urging he studied biochemistry. He hated every moment of it, but being a dutiful son he stuck at it. His only solace was in the college's ROTC program, which he threw himself into. He graduated, with honours, after four years, having done his duty by his father. Now it was time to live his own life. To his father's chagrin he enlisted in the army. The war in South East Asia was hotting up and he dreamt of joining Special Forces, the Green Berets. In those fetid jungles, he hoped he would at last get to taste the thrill of true combat, men caught in extremis, living each second as if it were there last. He completed his year-long OCS course and advanced infantry training, receiving his cherished Ranger tab along with his commission as a second lieutenant. At last, primed for war, he volunteered for Airborne and awaited posting. But events were already conspiring against him. Once the bureaucracy of the army got a sniff of his Ivy League degree in hard science, the boys at the top were hot for him. They had him marked out as some kind of egghead, and there weren't no way they were going to allow an asset like him to run around the jungles of Vietnam playing commando with a bunch of Greenies. His application for infantry, let alone airborne was refused, and he was sent to Fort Meade, Maryland, the

military's top weapons research site. Trapped. There followed years of postgraduate studies, courses and intense research. His dreams slipped away. Married now with two young sons, he was caught. Problem was, he was too damned good at his job. Promotions came thick and fast as Wesley Moore toiled at the heart of the military-industrial complex, developing new and exciting refinements in the field of chemical and biological weapons. Of course this research was purely defensive, one had to develop deterrents they were told, you had to know your enemy. It helped them sleep at night. The years slipped by, he watched the Green Berets and D-Boys from a distance, a warrior breed apart from him, some lab-coated REMF. While they fought and died, he toiled in his lab, pondering over his test tubes. At 52, after serving his 30 years, Colonel Wesley Moore retired, having never heard a shot fired in anger. He was a success to everyone but himself.

After the Gulf War, in which he served (well back from the front, in an advisory role to the Joint Chiefs in his capacity as an expert on 'weapons of mass destruction'), with Iraq and its military officially in ruins, the UN Security Council voted to create UNSCOM under Resolution 687, its purpose to supervise the destruction of any remaining chemical and biological weapons, and to assure no further development in the Iraqi dictator, the Rais's weapons of mass destruction. Wesley Moore, still trapped by circumstance, was called out of his retirement, and as with the rest of his life, he found himself drawn listlessly into the job.

He soon realised the whole damn thing was rigged. The Rais, a past master of manipulation and obfuscation, hopelessly outmatched the naïve diplomats of the UN. He only declared a fraction of his weapons and missile technology, accounts the western powers knew to be lies, but could not prove. While UNSCOM went about checking and destroying the surrendered weaponry, The Rais played his second ace. Under the agreement with the UN, all sites, military and industrial were open to inspection, the only exemptions were officially designated Presidential Palaces, a move seen by western diplomats as one purely of goodwill. The Iraqi leader used this one point carefully. He embarked on the construction of dozens of complexes dotted throughout the country; all designated as 'Presidential Palaces'. It

was an open secret that within these sites were hidden the unaccounted for weapons. It was if The Rais was laughing at the west, as they were left utterly impotent before him. The UNSCOM teams continued going through the motions, but everyone now realised how utterly pointless the whole thing was.

Everyone, that is except for one man, Wesley Moore. The man who had done as was expected his whole life, keeping his head down, never bucking the system, suddenly made his stand. Something about the whole situation pissed the hell out of him. He started to push - his colleagues, the Iraqis, the very rules of the UN resolution he had to work within. Washington, exhausted and embarrassed by the whole debacle of the UNSCOM inspections, just wanted the whole thing to go away. But Moore, in his almost daily memos, in his vitriolic TV and press interviews, in his off-the-record briefings to journalists, just wouldn't let it go, his very existence becoming a reminder of their failure. So they started applying the screws. He learnt from his wife that he was under investigation by the FBI, suspected of being a spy for the Israelis because of his persistence and '*aggression*'. He laughed it off. In Washington and at the UN in New York, State Department officials pushed for Moore's removal and the Iraqis were more than happy to go along.

Moore, sickened, but no longer surprised by his superiors' actions, knew his time was running out. An informant got word to him that large quantities of weapons grade biological and chemical material were being stockpiled nearby, at Presidential Palace No.73. Within hours, he and his team were rolling. He knew this would finish him, maybe even bring down the whole UNSCOM process, but finally he would show the world the truth.

So here he stood, listening as his team tore through this stark, functional building. He was disturbed by the sentry's apparent expectation of the visit, but this was Iraq. In the past UNSCOM inspectors had been accused of being spies. True, in a way they were, they were investigating, snooping on a foreign power, raiding some of their most sensitive sites. But they always called in advance to make an appointment. They were spies, just very bad ones. Not this time though, no warning was given, he was rolling in hours, acting on his own

authority, over-ruling even some of his own people. But still it seems the Iraqis were expecting him. Maybe that wasn't such a big surprise, this being Iraq they knew what you were going to do five minutes before you did. He just hoped he was in time.

Standing on the scuffed front steps of the building, he watched the armed Iraqi guards milling closer, watching him, drawing in nearer as if curious. He pretended to ignore them, shut off behind his dark glasses. He watched the officer from the gate amble across the compound; an AK slung over his shoulder, a smouldering cigarette pinched between the fingers of his right hand. The thin smile still plucked at his lips.

Moore stood calmly and waited. He trusted his team; he just wanted to be in at the kill. The Iraqis tightened around the base of the steps, knotted around the UNSCOM vehicles.

Marcus Sewell, Moore's deputy, emerged from the building, a handful of techs in his wake. None of them looked happy. Sewell, a British career diplomat and consummate ass-kisser, looked enraged. He had been the one most against this raid; right from the get go.

Moore, his stomach knotting moved to meet them.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, what?" Sewell spat through gritted teeth, "There isn't anything."

"What do you mean?" Moore seemed confused.

"Absolutely nothing, the place is clean, absolutely empty!" the Englishman growled.

"Too empty, looks like they cleaned the place out, sorry Wes!" one of the American techs muttered softly, head hung low.

"They were ahead of us..." Moore began, his mind racing.

"You fucking idiot!" Sewell almost shouted, his voice shrill. Moore started, he had never heard the Englishman utter a single curse before, indeed he had been positively school-marmish about Moore and some of the others language. "You've destroyed everything, the whole mission, all our careers, all for nothing!"

Moore opened his mouth, trying to speak, gripped by overwhelming shame.

“Colonel!” a voice called out. Mickey Shaw, a Delta operative assigned to the group, chiefly as protection for Moore after things hotted up, headed briskly from the building. Shaw, mid-twenties, still boyish, freckles scattered across his nose and cheeks, was a Sergeant with Delta, although rank was irrelevant in the elite special forces unit, but for some reason he seemed incapable of addressing Moore as anything other than Colonel or sir. The retired officer insisted he call him Wes, or at least Mr Moore, but Shaw seemed incapable of breaking the habit. Guess he was just a well brought-up kid. Only his flat, killer eyes gave him away. The boy seemed to almost see Moore as a father figure, something the older man thought ironic as Shaw was everything he ever wanted to be. Be he had a soft spot for the kid, taking him under his wing.

“What is it, Mickey?” Moore turned, cutting of the irate Englishman.

“Out-back, ground’s pretty cut up, heavy vehicles in and out, I’d say in the last hour.” The D-boy reported in his normal clipped tone.

“We could try and track them,”

“Another game of cat and mouse with tooled up SRPs and SSOs, nearly got our asses wasted with the atomic. We ain’t hardly equipped, sir!” Shaw winked. Moore almost smiled. Only the Delta operative was armed, and all he had was a small automatic concealed in an ankle holster beneath the cuff of his trousers.

“We gotta do something!” Moore could feel it all slipping away.

“Reckon we can,” Shaw rocked in the balls of his feet, a big grin on his boyish face. He seemed mighty proud of himself. “If you just follow me, Colonel.”

A bemused Moore followed the eager D-boy into the building.

The small group entered and hurried down cool corridors. White-coated Iraqi’s hovered in the doorways, muttering softly. Moore was led out of the rear of the *palace*, the heat hitting him again. The blazing disc of the sun hung low above the shimmering horizon. Shaw was right; the rear compound was heavily churned up, the tracks leading to a distant gate.

“Well?” Moore asked, looking around.

Shaw grinned and nodded towards the side of the elevated loading bay. Bathed in shadow, Moore just made out one of his team squatting beside a broken crate. He approached and hunkered down. The crate was stencilled in Arabic, marked as medical supplies; Moore peered through the broken lid. Inside lay glass or plastic spheres, each smaller than a man’s fist and heavily padded and cradled in their own individual bay. Inside each sphere was a viscous green liquid.

“What we got?” Moore poked at the contents of the crate with a ballpen.

“The jackpot,” Moore glanced across at the grinning techie. “VX.”

Moore couldn’t help an involuntary flinch. VX gas was a relatively new development in the field of chemical weapons. A highly sophisticated nerve agent, it attacks the central nerve system, causing the misfiring of electric impulses, leading to spasms and fits, culminating in such a violent seizure that often victims would die of a broken back. That was if they were lucky, otherwise they would suffer the accompanying acidic liquefying, burning and melting of the skin and internal organs, faces eaten off, lungs dissolved. In the unlikely event you survived these tortures, eventually your entire nervous system suffered total shutdown, death a belated merciful release. Developed by many nations, led by the US and UK, both of whom had supplied The Iraqi dictator with it and other chemical and biological agents and toxins back in the ‘80s during the Iran-Iraq war. Back then he was our pet dictator. The techie was spot-on, this was the jackpot. Any other weapon-grade agent could have been passed off as a remnant of old stocks missed after the Gulf War. The Rais always denied possessing any VX gas. They had the fucker by the balls.

“Must have dropped it when they were clearing out!” Shaw said.

“Lucky us, lucky them!” Moore looked round, “Any of these VX ampoules had broken we’d have a Presidential Palace full of dead Iraqis!”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer bunch!” the D-boy snorted.

Moore sprung up, suddenly all business, “Alright, get this shit together and loaded up, we’re out of here!”

Amidst much handshaking and high-fives, the broken crate and its contents was hefted onto a trolley and wheeled back through the building. The watching Iraqis’ voices could be heard rising in panic.

Mickey Shaw took charge of the team loading the VX into the lead 4x4, while Moore hustled the remaining members of his team out of the building and back to their vehicles. The Iraqi troops were still nestled in tightly around the parked convoy. Moore spotted the officer from the gate watching through narrowed eyes, still smiling as he drew on his cigarette. It was time for them to leave.

“Colonel Moore?” the Iraqi officer dropped his cigarette, grinding it into the dirt with his toe.

The UNSCOM team members strung out along the chipped steps froze. Moore turned slowly, his eyes hidden behind his dark glasses.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow you to leave.” The Iraqi said in flawless English, his soft voice.

“Really?” Moore smiled affably.

“You have illegally entered a restricted area, in violation of UN resolutions, and both Iraqi and International law.” The Iraqi’s slender smile widened to reveal a single gold tooth tucked back among his blackened molars. His dark eyes glistened.

The armed Iraqi troops scattered across the dusty compound moved in tighter, their weapons unslung. The atmosphere had changed markedly.

The UNSCOM personnel eyed their leader, shifting uneasily.

The desert wind howled, snapping and clawing at the palace walls, unfastened canvas snapping in the wind. Bitter dust swirled; the growing moan of the sandstorm filled the hot air.

“What are you, Special Security Organisation, or Special Republican Guard?” Moore spoke carefully, eyeing the slouching officer. He shrugged amiably. “Maybe you’re Amn al-Amm, Secret Police?” Moore took one step closer to the Iraqi. “Was this just one big trap dreamt up by you boys at the Directorate of General Security. Embarrass the UN, get rid of me?”

The Iraqi cocked his head, still smiling. “If so, Colonel Moore, you certainly fell right into it!”

“Maybe?” Moore shrugged, “But I’m willing to bet what we found wasn’t in the plan.”

“Ah yes, the package you have acquired, I’m afraid we will have to confiscate that!”

“Is that so?” Moore was trying to keep his cool.

“You have illegally entered this site, anything you remove is therefore stolen. We cannot allow that.” While still smiling, the Iraqi’s eyes hardened.

“You really fucked up didn’t you. VX of all things, The Rais’ll have you’re balls!” Moore was beginning to lose it. “You’re really fucked now, once we hand this over...”

“Are you really that naïve, Colonel Moore?” the officer’s smile had evaporated. “You are going nowhere until we say so, and you have nothing, no proof of anything. You belong to us.”

“Then you will have to stop us!” Moore turned and headed to his vehicle. In the silence, his team stood and watched.

“Colonel Moore!” the Iraqi officer called. He paused and turned. The officer slowly raised the muzzle of his AK assault rifle; the wooden butt tucked into his shoulder. The rattle of bolts and chambering of rounds was audible above the groan of the wind. The Iraqi troops surrounding the team aimed their weapons. Men set on the walls and in the guard towers swung round their mounted machine-guns. “You will please stay where you are and order you’re men to hand over the package!” the officer spoke softly, sighting carefully down his rifle.

Moore's rage suddenly seemed to clear and distil itself into cool, hard resolution. He stood perfectly still and turned slowly, facing the armed man, both men only a few feet apart.

"I'm taking my people out of this place and I will be taking the evidence obtained with us. Any attempt to stop us will be considered an assault upon the UN and as a declaration of war upon the whole international community." Moore was eerily calm. Finally after a life of compromise and quiet mediocrity, this was the moment he had dreamt of. He stared down the barrel of the gun zeroed on him and felt no fear. He was truly happy.

"Do what you will. I will do my duty," he called clearly and turned. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are leaving!"

"You are a fool!" the Iraqi officer spat contemptuously.

Moore paused and smiled, "Fuck you!" He strode towards the parked vehicles, head held high.

The Iraqi seemed incredulous. He tracked the American with his rifle.

"Colonel Moore!" he called. Moore neared the base of the steps.

The Iraqi's finger tightened on the trigger of his AK and he muttered an oath. His rifle cracked dryly, flame darting from its muzzle as he squeezed off a short burst, his body absorbing the sharp recoil.

Moore's torso exploded as the 7.62mm steel-jacketed rounds slammed into his back. He went down hard, slamming against the steps, blood spraying the white stone.

"Colonel!" Mickey Shaw bolted from the open door of the lead vehicle, reaching down for the small automatic pistol concealed in his ankle holster. He straightened; bringing his weapon up as Moore went down. He moved forward, arm extended, firing as he went. A guard stepped into him, bringing round his AK, Shaw put two rounds into his face and he went down. He jumped over him, heading towards Moore's bloody form on the steps. He levelled his pistol on the Iraqi officer. He was going through him. He fired, but too late. A burst of automatic fire from a guard tower hit Shaw, ripping open his upper-chest and neck, almost taking off his head. Blood exploded in a mist as he was lifted and hurled backwards,

crashing down in the shadow of the lead 4x4. His left leg remained visible, twisted unnaturally, twitching in the dirt.

The Iraqi officer moved over to Moore, sprawled on the steps, a pool of viscous blood spreading around him. He looked down at the American. A beatific expression was fixed on his blood-splattered face; his lifeless eyes fixed on the sky above, a serene smile touching his lips. The Iraqi muttered an oath and spat on the body at his feet. He turned and lowered his weapon. He looked from his waiting men to the cowed UNSCOM personnel on the steps. He moved clear of the westerners and paused as if in thought, then slowly turned.

He sighed once, raised his head and brought his rifle up.

“No witnesses!” he cried in Arabic and the soldiers opened up.

The chatter of gunfire and the strangled screams of the victims were snatched by the sandstorm, whisked heavenwards, twisting and writhing, carried westward on the fierce desert wind.

Chapter 3

“I want the motherfucker dead. I want to grind his fucking face into the dirt and piss in his dead eyes!” the President of the United States of America screamed at the top of his voice. Spittle flecked his lips and a vein pulsed in his temple as he jabbed his finger at the assembled group before him.

General Paul Harker, US Army (retired), had been President for a little under two years, finally elected in his own right the previous November by a landslide. Almost universally lionised by the media and idolised by an American public clamouring for a tough leader. In the space of two years he had gone from Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defence and Vice President upon the assassination of the then President. Upon the murder of the presidential successor, he had ascended to the throne, assuming the leadership of the United States and the free world. Only a handful of people knew that Harker had engineered the killings of both previous Presidents, seizing power for himself, effectively in a coup d’etat. By using a revolt by rogue US soldiers, and the ensuing national emergency, he had eliminated all opposition, not only taking control of the nation, but also becoming a national hero in the process. With the plot complete, Harker eliminated the soldiers unwittingly used, then purged the ranks of his co-conspirators of anyone deemed by him as “unreliable and unsafe”. What this amounted to was the assassination of any plotters beyond Harker’s immediate control. Any others were kept in check with the threat of blackmail. Harker maintained dossiers more comprehensive than any that fag J. Edgar Hoover had. He had the dirt on everyone. The only people Harker trusted were a handful of military men, past and present, men whom he had served with for years or personally selected and trained. Killers who had trained and killed with Harker, predators like himself.

“Do you see this?” President Harker held up a copy of this morning’s *Washington Post*, holding it at arm’s length, pinched between fingertips, as if the odious object offended him. The banner headline read: ***Iraqi Dictator mocks President.*** The sub-headline read, ***Calls Harker liar and coward.***

“This fucker, this camel-jockey fuck, he has the goddamn temerity to say here,” he waved the newspaper. “*The Americans and their pawns in Britain and the Zionist Entity send spies and assassins into our land. They pose as the UN while they plot to destroy our nation and make our people suffer. If President Harker is man enough, let him come out from hiding behind the UN’s skirts and face me like a man.*” He tossed the paper aside. “I want this fucking cocksucker dead, do you assholes read me!” he screamed.

Assembled around the President’s desk in a sunlit Oval Office, sat various senior government members: Secretaries of Defence and State, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, National Security Advisor, the presidential Chief of Staff, and assorted staff members. In addition there were a clutch of Harker’s nebulous aides, hovering in the shadows. For the last half-hour they had all listened to the President rant and rave, stalking around his desk, waving his arms and hammering on the desktop for emphasis. His face flushed with rage, the veins bulging out of his neck, threatening to burst his shirt-collar. Viewed from a distance this could be seen as comical, but for these men, accustomed to close proximity to Harker’s rage, it was terrifying.

They had known since last night about the incident in Iraq. The UN and media had been informed by the Iraqi authorities that the UNSCOM team led by Wesley Moore, had attempted to storm a presidential place, trying to shoot their way in. The guards had been forced to return fire. Three Iraqis were killed, ten wounded. The entire UNSCOM team was killed.

The Iraqi leadership announced the immediate expulsion of all UNSCOM personnel. They had been herded onto transport planes and flown out within hours. The Iraqi regime would no longer co-operate with the UN, they claimed the shoot-out only confirmed what they had always believed, that America and their allies were using UNSCOM to destroy The Rais’s leadership, filling its ranks with spies and subversives.

Washington knew this was bullshit.

“Well the Iraqi story may have some validity, Moore was a loose cannon...” the Secretary of State intoned in his sonorous voice. His noble, patrician head, crowned by unkempt, thinning grey locks was perched atop a body of prodigious bulk. He was a man much respected in certain circles, a frequent guest on TV shows, famed as much for his wit and wisdom as his humanity. Harker kept him around as a front, but he would have gladly killed the fucker in instant.

“You shut the fuck up!” the President barked, his ice-cold, blue eyes fixing on cowed, slightly affronted looking head of the State Department. “You been selling me that line of bullshit about Moore being a troublemaker for months. Maybe I went with the program for a while, but seems to me, if I check out the facts, that Colonel Moore was only trying to do his job, the job we gave him. Just he was betrayed by fucks like you,” Harker jabbed his finger at the Secretary of State, “And my two late, lamented predecessors, God rest their fucking souls!”

Harker slumped back into his chair and glowered at State Department head.

“But, Mr. President...” he croaked.

“Shut the fuck up, who gave you permission to talk?” Harker spat. “You’re not fit to say Colonel Moore’s name, let alone judge him, you fat fuck. He did his duty and paid the ultimate price. He died a soldier’s death, a hero’s death. You wouldn’t know shit about that. Seems to me, you and your buddies over at State been spending way too much time of late sucking up to the Arabs. Maybe you like kissing ass, but I ain’t prepared to bent over and take it up the ass from The Rais and his pals. Reckon Colonel Moore felt the same.”

“With respect...” the Secretary tried to interrupt.

“You are really beginning to tick me off.” Harker said quietly.

“I’m only...”

“Right that’s it!” the President jerked open a draw and pulled out a stubby .45 automatic and thumped it down on the desktop before him. There was silence in the Oval Office.

“I intend to award Colonel Moore the Medal of Honor posthumously,” Harker continued.

“I believe he was officially retired from....” the Secretary of State interrupted.

“You really ain’t too smart, are you boy?” the President whispered softly, laying his hand on the pistol. “Now get the fuck out of my sight!” he barked.

The Secretary of State looked around, bewildered.

“Now!” Harker screamed. The terrified man leapt to his feet and scrambled awkwardly through the massed observers. “Make sure you wait until the meeting’s over until you leave the building, I don’t want any awkward questions from the press.” The Secretary hung his head in shame and shuffled towards the doors. “Move it, chubby!” Harker called and the humiliated man waddled hastily out, the doors closing behind him.

The President sat back, seemingly satisfied.

“In answer to our esteemed colleague’s point, Colonel Moore was retired from the army, but he was still a reserve. Any problems with the medal, I’ll posthumously reinstate him. Understood?”

The observers nodded enthusiastically.

“Good.” Harker sat back, smiling.

At 54 Paul Harker was still a handsome man. His close-cropped grey hair framed a lean face, his tanned skin taut, blue eyes clear. He prided himself on maintaining the same figure he had as a 22 year old West Point graduate, when he humped his ass through Ranger School and over the Airborne course. No matter how busy his itinerary, he worked out daily, insisting on running his regular five miles. His glacial blond wife, twelve years his junior was also an asset, a fact that he didn’t allow to hinder his roaming eye.

He gazed across his desk, smiling, fingers resting in a prism before him.

“Well, gentlemen, what are we going to do about this situation?” he smiled pleasantly, eyeing them as a shark eyes its next meal.

The Secretary of Defence and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs glanced at each other. The former cleared his throat.

“Well, Mr. President, we have prepared an appropriate response. Air strikes on key sites are in preparation, we will be able to hit them...”

“Jesus, fuck.” Harker muttered darkly. “We’ve been doing this shit for years, has it ever got us anywhere. He makes his play, we hit him from the air, he accedes, and then within weeks he’s fucking us again. Air strikes alone never solved anything. Didn’t Vietnam teach you assholes anything? We flattened that piece of real estate, got us a long way didn’t it?”

The assembled officials remained silent.

“I bet you want to just use cruise missiles from warships in the Gulf, as well. Don’t want to risk any pilots, do we? Christ, what happened to backbone in this country? That Iraqi cunt knows we will only go so far, he’s fucking laughing at us. I don’t know about you boys, when I get fucked in the ass, I don’t bend over and ask for more!” the President growled sitting forward.

“When someone snatches your daughter, rapes her and dumps her on your lawn, you don’t go round and throw rocks through his windows. And you don’t ask some neighbour to ask him nicely not to do it again.” He fixed his eyes on them and spoke clearly. “You go round to where the fuck lives, cut his throat and burn his fucking house down. Do you read me?”

It was silent for a moment. Then the President’s Chief of Staff broke in, his voice a dry croak.

“The American people won’t stand for our boys being shipped home in body bags. They don’t have the stomach...”

“The stomach?” Harker barked, rounding on the man. “They don’t have the stomach for anything!” The President was warming to his favourite subject. He saw the American people as soft and flabby, where once they were hard and tough. Once they were prepared to make a stand, now they were too lazy, or just cowardly. The rewards of their nation had made

them complacent. Harker was going to take them, like he would take a class of raw recruits, and shape them into merciless warriors. “American boys become soldiers, they know the price. They are willing and waiting. In the main, even their parents accept this possible sacrifice of their children. It’s the politicians who don’t have the nerve. They’re scared. Certain individuals in our country, individuals who would never stand and fight and die for our beloved nation are the ones who scream and whine when our soldiers die. They have that right, a right they don’t choose to fight to defend, we do that for them. But they gnash their teeth and bemoan the pointlessness of war. What the fuck do they know about war?” his face coloured and voice rose. “It isn’t them or their families who are fighting and dying, they are above that. The same boys they proclaim to be protecting, they mock and spit on. To them honour and duty are jokes, soldiers jarhead psychos. Well fuck them!”

“Maybe so, Mr. President, but Congress wouldn’t stand for outright military action,” the Secretary of Defence interjected. “A ground war would alienate our allies, especially those in the Gulf. The press would crucify us!”

“Fuck the press.” Harker barked. “As for our fucking *allies*, it was all right when we were defending their tin-pot dictatorships and their precious oil. Now they use that oil to try and screw us. Fuck them, we go it alone, we done it before!”

“It isn’t going to happen, Mr. President.” General Hummel, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said calmly. He was an old friend of Harker’s. The muscular Marine General shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

“Shit, I know, Frank, I know,” Harker groaned, his shoulders sagging. “Just I hate feeling so goddamn impotent. Don’t know about you boys, but I’m used to getting it up!” Harker groaned.

Jesus, the Secretary of Defence thought to himself, he’ll be getting his dick out in a second, slapping it on the desk like old LBJ.

“What else can we do?” the President asked his people. “Can’t we just whack the fucker?”

“Leaving aside the practical difficulties, it is against international law to target for assassination the leaders of a sovereign state. If it got out, we’d be international pariahs. We’d be fucked, your presidency finished!” the Director of the CIA said coolly. “Anyway it would be a suicide mission, and any prisoners or bodies IDed as Americans would drop us deep in the shit!”

“We gotta do something, this fucking monkey is making us look like damn fools, the people expect me to do something. Whatever you say they think about our soldiers in combat, they want the Iraqi fucker gone!”

“I believe I have a suggestion, Mr. President,” a voice rasped from the shadows. A tall, lean figure stepped into the sunlight. His salt and pepper hair was shorn close to his skull, black eyes blazed from his skeletal, impassive face. The tailored, navy suit didn’t hide his military bearing, nor the setting his menace. Colonel Charles ‘Chuck’ Logan, US Army (ret), was an infamous figure. A highly decorated former Special Forces officer and lifelong friend of Harker, he had operated in and out of the shadows all his life. But in 1989 he was thrown into the glare of the media spotlight. During the US invasion of Panama, Logan and a team under his command had been implicated in the execution of prisoners. Witnesses testified, some photos of the killings surfaced. Logan resigned his commission and disappeared into the nether-world of intelligence black-ops, running wet jobs for the CIA, as he had most of his military career. He resurfaced when Harker became President, the controversial figure becoming some kind of nebulous advisor, his duties unspecified. In actuality he was Harker’s right hand man and most trusted assistant. With the President’s ear, he was the second most powerful man in America.

The politicians in Harker’s camp despised Logan. The feelings were more than mutual.

“A team of highly trained operatives, men with without any assignable identity, men willing to exchange their lives for that of their target, could achieve the terminal resolution required.” Logan spoke in a cold, metallic voice.

The observers about the table glanced at each other uneasily.

A smile slowly spread across Harker's face as he looked up at his friend.

"Jesus, I reckon you might have something there, Chuck!" he laughed. "Is it possible to find such individuals?"

"Finding the capable operatives is simple enough, and such individuals by necessity have had any traceable identity eliminated. Black Ops personnel are by their nature invisible. We would of course make doubly sure, purging any remaining records of their existence. Such non-persons would be untraceable to any one nation. However, many things motivate such men; by money, by the thrill of the kill, and some inevitably have a more than equivocal attitude to their own survival. It is possible we could find the appropriate personnel. It may take some time, and I would imagine time would be of some importance to you, Mr. President?" Logan spoke coldly and logically.

"We could temporise matters, the usual airstrikes and diplomatic noises could save face. But I would want this matter pursued and executed with extreme prejudice." Harker turned to his CIA chief. "Could this be done?"

"In theory, Mr. President." he shifted uncomfortably, glancing around for help. "But I would caution against any such action, it would be fraught with peril..."

"Yeah, yeah," Harker muttered, waving his hand. "But it could be done?"

"We would have to look into it, examine the possibilities, prepare a proposal. However, having explored this option in the past, we have come up against the same problem. Eliminate the Rais, what takes his place? The only viable options are the Sh'ia Muslims in the southern marshlands and the Kurds in the north. The Shi'ites are partnered up with the Iranians, they get in Iran gets control of the whole region and its oil, plus they turn Iraq from a religiously moderate country into Fundamentalist Islamic state. Put this Iranian power bloc with the Afghans and we got a shit-load of trouble. With the Russian missile technology Iran has acquired and The Rais's weapons of mass destruction they'd pose a massive threat to Israel. That with the oil reserves means the Iranians could hold a loaded gun to our head. The

Kurds are out, they'd use any independent state they got to launch attacks into Turkey, who have their own major Kurd problem. We need the Turks on side. Also, the Kurds have been getting cosy with the Iranians lately. We have tried to work with exiled Iraqi democratic opposition parties, the INA and the INC, but they spend most of their time fighting amongst themselves. And anyway, fact of the matter is these democratic organisations have no clear support base in the country."

"No shit," Harker snarled, "State always pushes for these pie-in-the-sky democratic opposition groups, never amounts to shit. Your Arabs have no interest in liberal democracy, they just don't fucking get it. Never be a true democracy in an Arab nation in my lifetime, probably not even in my children's lifetime. They only respect the strongman leader, dictatorship is their natural state, to them democracy is seen as weakness. Democratic opposition? Fuck em!" he leaned further forward. "Just pick a fucking side and get on with it. I want that slimeball fucker dead, you get it?"

"Whatever side we choose, the disparate groups would turn on one another, their foreign backers would be drawn in. The whole damn country'd be torn apart. Make the Lebanon look like nothing. It'd be a bloodbath, we just can't predict where it would lead." The CIA chief sighed, "I'm sorry, Mr. President, like it or not, The Rais is our best option. He brings a level of stability to the region, maintaining the status quo. He went, anything could happen, and it's bound to be bad. I'm afraid it's the old '*better the devil you know*' argument."

"I've heard this fucking argument a million times. Well, gentlemen I got news for you, I don't give a shit!"

"I'm afraid the argument is valid, sir." The CIA Director said.

"Fuck you!" the President spat. "Maybe it is, maybe it ain't, big fucking deal. You assholes are advisors. You advise and I listen. Well, I listened and as the one with his ass on the line I make the call. I want the assassination options examined, in particular Mr. Logan's suggestion. And I want answers quick."

There was silence for a moment. The CIA chief cleared his throat.

“It will take some time, sir. An operation like this...”

“Whatever, just do it!” Harker snapped.

“Yes, Mr. President.” He choked down his anger and shame.

“Well I believe we have a plan, gentleman.” Harker smiled pleasantly. “I shall expect the appropriate operational proposals for immediate airstrikes on my desk by the end of the day. I want the fuckers hit hard.” He swung his chair round and gazed out of the windows, signalling the meeting was at an end. “That’ll do for now.”

The officials climbed to their feet and shuffled from the office, the uncomfortable silence shut off when the doors swung shut.

“They ain’t gonna do shit, are they?” the President asked, gazing out, his face in sunlight.

“Mr. President?” Logan replied from the shadows.

“They’ll lay out their fucking lame-assed airstrikes. But they ain’t got any damned intention of pursuing the ultimate option, have they?” he spoke coldly, eyes narrowed.

“I believe not, sir.” Logan hovered at the President’s shoulder.

“Gutless fucking wonders,” he snarled “No wonder this country is in such a goddamn mess. Fucking politicians. Wish I could grease the whole bunch of them, Chuck, they aren’t worth a damn.”

“No, sir.”

“Well then, I guess it’s up to us then. You up to it, Chuck?” Harker looked up, a grin on his face.

“Reckon so, sir.”

“Good. Bring me Steiner.”

Chapter 4

The past hung behind him, littered with ruin; the future stretched ahead, perilous and uncertain. He felt it all closing in on him. Only one thing kept him together. He repeated it over and over, the mantra his only lifeline. *Now is the only thing that's real.*

Steiner awoke at 6.00am, ripped from the relative quietude of sleep. He stared at the ceiling as the grey fingers of dawn clawed silently across him. He sat up and swung his feet around and climbed out of bed. He washed down his daily cocktail of drugs: anti-depressants, sedatives and prescription painkillers. Dressed only in sweat shorts he began working out on the small gym set up in his apartment. He pounded away for more than half-an-hour, until bathed in sweat.

He stripped and towelled himself dry, dressing in fresh sweats and sneakers. Heading into the bedroom, he opened the closet and reached inside. He hit a concealed switch and a panel in the rear wall swung open. Inside was his personal arsenal: assault rifles, SMGs and shotguns mounted on long racks, a selection of pistols lying on shelves, the floor taken up by boxes of ammo and grenades. He retrieved a small backpack and swung the panel closed.

He poured himself a glass of orange juice in the kitchen and munched on some toast. Laid out on the table were two automatic pistols mounted in their holsters. He took the compact HK USP fitted into a shoulder holster and slid the rig on. The tiny subcompact Glock 26 he fastened beneath the cuff of his jogging bottoms in an ankle holster. He finished his juice and swung on the backpack. He left the apartment, setting the security on the way out.

He descended the twenty floors in the elevator, moved swiftly through the foyer, nodding briefly to the doorman on his way out. Leaving the luxury Manhattan apartment block, he headed onto the rain-dampened city streets and began to run. In the grey, early morning murk, the sidewalks were still fairly clear and Steiner picked up speed, jogging quickly, covering the twelve city blocks in only a few minutes.

He reached the building, the sign outside reading, *Maxwell Security Services*, and headed down the steps to the basement entrance. Inside, he nodded to the brawny guy behind the desk and headed out back. An irate customer watched him pass, as he sat waiting.

“How the hell does he get in if the range is out of operation?” the angry middle-aged banker-type asked.

“Mechanic.” The big man replied, turning back to his copy of *Guns & Ammo*.

Steiner emerged inside the gloom of the subterranean pistol range. The members-only club was quiet at this time usually, but Steiner slipped the proprietor \$200 bucks a time, just to make sure.

He set his pack down by one of the lanes. He pulled a pair of plugs from his pocket and stuck them in his ears. Especially designed to dampen the percussive discharge of a firearm, the plugs still allowed sounds lower on the spectrum to remain audible. He pulled a small ghetto-blaster from the pack and switched it on, *The Velvet Underground* blasted out, Lou Reed’s mordant tones bouncing back off the baffled walls.

Unloading the pack, he laid out his weapons on the table beside him. A Walther P99 automatic pistol, its smooth polymer frame matching the CZ100 semi-auto beside it, were laid out top. Beneath them he set a compact SIG P228 and a short HK P7. Bottom-most was a small J-frame snub-nosed .38 S&W revolver.

Steiner stripped off his jogging top, tossing it aside. The vest he wore was tight over his lean, muscular torso, his knotty arms marked by scarring. He unfastened the holster of the shoulder rig worn over the vest, raised his leg, jamming his foot against the shooting station and retrieving the subcompact Glock from his ankle-holster and laid it beside the revolver.

He lifted the Walther P99, his fingers wrapping around its smooth plastic shape. He drew back the slide, chambering a round and moved into the booth, holding the weapon low. He focused on the paper target mounted at the far end of the shooting alley. He raised the light polymer pistol, holding it steady, his long arm fully extended. He sighted down, steadying his breathing. This was how he yearned to live, caught in the moment, no past, no

future, any wavering of his attention on the moment shattering everything. He smiled, squeezing the trigger gently, drawing it back its full 14mm, the pull around 4kg.

There was a dull blast as the 9mm 115gr PMP JHP ripped from the muzzle of the P99, the weapon rising slightly with the recoil, Steiner controlled it, bringing it back level. The round hit square in the upper-left quadrant of the chest of the silhouette target, the blast bouncing off the soundproofed walls. Steiner steadied his aim, again drawing back the trigger to its full 14mm, but with the striker now cocked and in single-action, the pull was only 2kg. He put two quick rounds into the target's chest, brought the weapon up and put two more, one on top of the other into the head. He lowered the pistol, checked the target, and repositioned himself. He brought the Walther up fast, firing three rounds into central mass, then three into the head, and the last three into upper-left chest. He unlocked the slide, laying the pistol back down, the smell of burning plastic rising from the hot Walther.

He lifted the CZ100, chambered the first round and took up a two handed combat pose, bringing the pistol up and firing quickly. He rattled off the ten .40 calibre rounds, pounding the target, ripping the paper silhouette to shreds. He had had the CZ recommended by a friend, but he wasn't totally happy with it. When the trigger reached the end of its stroke, it pivots through a 40-degree arc, at which point your finger tends to slide off the base of the trigger. This was a particular problem when a long string of shots are fired.

He laid the CZ aside and stabbed the button, bringing the target back to the firing station. He removed the shredded paper silhouette and replaced it with a fresh one. He sent it back down the alley and retrieved the compact SIG, jerking back the slide, bringing it up, firing as the target retreated. He emptied the 13 round clip and reloaded as the target locked home. Aiming one-handed, side on he began to fire steadily, swinging his arm from side to side, placing a round first in the target in his lane, then one in the neighbouring alley, then swinging back. He continued, swinging back and forth, his arm like a metronome, beating out a steady tattoo, in time with *Venus in Furs* blasting from the stereo.

He put fresh paper targets in each alley, then resumed his station. He lifted the P7, chambered a round and passed it to his left hand. He unholstered the compact HK USP from his shoulder holster. It was already cocked and locked. He thumbed off the safety. He positioned himself square on, both pistols hanging by his sides. He rolled his head, clearing his mind. He brought both guns up fast, firing simultaneously, shooting into targets in the neighbouring alleys. The 9mm rounds shredded the targets, the blasts ringing almost musically. He emptied both weapons, popped the clips and unlocked the slides. He lay down the P7 and reloaded the USP, reholstering it.

The stench of burnt gunpowder, the sounds of firing and impact, seemed to excite Steiner. His eyes shone in the gloom. He stabbed his hand into the bag and pulled out the squat black shape of a Mini-Uzi sub-machine gun. He slapped home a magazine and yanked back the cocking handle. He stepped into the booth and raised the Israeli SMG one-handed, side-on and opened up, squeezing off burst after burst, fighting the recoil as he shredded the target, paper fluttering like confetti. He emptied the Uzi and tossed it into his bag.

He stood there, hands empty, suddenly feeling spent. He felt everything closing in again, the fears, the dark pain. He gasped, feeling his pain rise. He grabbed up the stubby S&W revolver, squeezing it tight. He swung open the cylinder. He emptied out all but one of the .38 bullets, spun the cylinder and slammed it shut. He cocked it, steadying himself with his left hand against the side of his booth. He sucked in air, his head spinning. He raised the revolver, aimed it down-range and pulled the trigger. It snapped dryly, the hammer falling on an empty chamber. He recocked and brought the pistol up to his head, jamming the muzzle into his temple and jerking back the trigger. He shuddered as it snapped coldly on another empty chamber. He whipped the weapon away from him and fired again at the target. Again it snapped emptily. He put it back to his head.

The vibrating of his pager snapped him out of it. His breathing slowed and he heard its beeping. He lowered the revolver, staring down at it as it lay there in his hand. He pulled

the pager from the waist of his sweat pants with his free hand and looked down at the display. He laughed, weakly, then almost hysterically.

He quickly packed up his weapons, pulled on his top and swung on his backpack. He barely nodded at Mitch the proprietor as he stormed out, ignoring the waiting customer as he muttered, "Asshole!"

Steiner burst onto the street, breaking into a sprint. A heavy drizzle was falling. He weaved through the crowds on the sidewalk, then jumped into the street. Horns sounded as he raced through the warm rain.

* * *

The airliner descended through the cloud, emerging into bright sunshine. Engines shrieking, it descended into Dulles International Airport. Across the Potomac, the white marble edifices of Washington DC shimmered in the heat.

A driver and limo were waiting for Steiner. He slumped in the back, hidden behind tinted windows, and checked his HK P7 automatic. Carrying a concealed weapon on an internal flight was no big deal for him. He was officially a FBI agent and his badge got him certain perks.

The car slowed. Steiner smiled, craning his neck. He looked up at the impressive façade of the White House as they swung by, entering by the South Gate. He had been here once before, though under less conventional circumstances, arriving as part of an invading army. When a renegade military force under Colonel John Ullrich had hit the very seat of the executive government, Steiner had been beside him, though under a different identity. Harker had manoeuvred Steiner inside Ullrich's organisation, making sure they did as was expected and assassinated the sitting President. Harker had been their captive that day, captured as part of the cabinet while Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Now he was President, Steiner having set

up Ullrich as the patsy for the killing of the successor as President, allowing Harker to assume power. With the coup complete, Steiner completed his task, killing Ullrich.

The limo pulled up outside a rear entrance, but Steiner was out before the vehicle had fully stopped. He strode towards the doorway and was met by a pair of Secret Service agents. One was already reaching beneath his jacket for his weapon, the other, older man just smiled grimly. He told the other to stand down.

“Steiner?” the older man growled.

“Yes.” Steiner replied.

“Follow me,” the agent led the way inside, his partner taking up his station behind Steiner. Maybe he figures I’ll swipe a White House ashtray as a souvenir, he thought

Inside, they reached a Secret Service security station. Another agent sat at a desk, arms folded. Behind clear plastic screens (bullet-resistant), heavily armed men in dark overalls sat, killing time, weapons close to hand. A couple watched Steiner with dark, predatory eyes, like dogs sensing an interloper in their pack.

“Do you have any weapons on your person, sir?” the sitting agent asked.

Steiner turned, still smiling, “What?”

“He said,” the older agent, standing close in, growled darkly, removing his standard issue dark glasses. “Have you got any weapons on your person?”

“What you reckon?” Steiner shrugged.

The senior agent raised a quizzical eyebrow and nodded to the man behind the desk. He stood and Steiner was aware of the man behind him reaching for his own weapon.

“Jesus, calm down will you!” Steiner raised his hands in mock defence. “It’s true, you Secret Service boys got no sense of humour!”

“Yeah, you’re a regular laugh riot!” the senior man muttered. “Weapons?” he snapped.

Steiner reached inside his jacket. He noticed that all the SWAT agents behind the screen were watching him now, weapons ready, hair practically standing up on the back of

their necks. Steiner couldn't help laughing to himself. He slid out his pistol, holding it gently between two fingers and laying it on the table.

The seated agent drew the weapon towards him, eyes fixed on Steiner. He lifted the P7, popped the clip, then eased back the slide and ejected the round in the chamber.

"You got some balls on you, boy, bringing a piece into the White House. Who'd you think you are, Elvis?" the agent shook his head.

"Wouldn't be the first time!" Steiner laughed.

The seated man looked at the agent in charge, puzzled. The older man, obviously clued up, muttered darkly, "Smart ass!" He shoved Steiner across the room. "Search him!" he barked.

The agent stood, holding an electric wand. "You got any metallic objects on your person?"

"What you reckon?" Steiner chuckled.

"Cut the shit!" the senior agent ordered.

"Empty your pockets all metallic objects, remove your watch, any jewellery. Place them on the table." The other agent said.

Steiner removed his watch and emptied his pockets of change and his keys. He paused then tossed down a lead-filled sap and switchblade. He shrugged and smiled coyly as the agent snapped open the six-inch stiletto blade.

"Wise-ass," the senior agent muttered. "Do it!"

They ran the wand over him. It hummed dully, but began shrieking as it passed over his head. The agents looked at each other in puzzlement.

Steiner smiled and rapped his knuckles against his skull. "Metal plate. You'll find some more steel in my leg. Little accident."

"Shit!" the agents couldn't help but laugh along with him.

They ran him through x-ray and gave him an old fashioned frisk, but stopped short of the full-cavity body search, before passing him.

The two original agents led him down long, winding carpeted hallways, their footsteps silenced as they moved eerily through the still gloom. They went up a floor in a service elevator, then down more corridors, past secretaries and agents. They halted outside a simple, bare door.

“In here,” the older agent said and opened the door.

Inside was a bare, starkly lit room, empty except for a table and a chair at each end.

“Is this the Lincoln Bedroom?” Steiner asked.

“Smart-ass!”

“So it’s the Oval Office then?”

The agents shut the door and left him alone. He slumped into the chair and looked around. Obviously a ‘clean room’, interior setting, soundproof baffling and swept for bugs, this was Steiner’s life. He rested his elbows on the table and rubbed his tired eyes and buried his face in his hands.

There was a click as the door at the far end opened. Steiner sat back. President Harker breezed in, Chuck Logan at his elbow. The heavy door thumped shut behind them, locking electronically.

“Steiner, good to see you!” the President leant across the table, proffering his hand. Steiner paused, looking at the presidential hand, as if momentarily confused. He reluctantly lifted his own hand and shook with Harker. The President seemed pleased and sat in the other chair, crossing his legs. “You keeping well?” he asked banally.

“Fine,” he glanced up at Logan. “How you doing, Chuck, you killed any good prisoners lately?” he grinned. Logan remained deadpan, looking straight ahead. “Guess we’re all fine then, that’s lovely ain’t it!”

“I see you’re social skills haven’t improved.” Harker shook his head indulgently.

Steiner rocked back and forth, his chair on two legs, fingers interlaced across his stomach. He watched the President through narrowed eyes, a slender smile twisting his lips.

“So,” Steiner finally broke the stand-off, “To what do I owe the honour?”

Harker raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“The White House, man!” Steiner waved his hand around. “Though to be honest I find the present surroundings a little disappointing. What’s this décor? I’ve heard of the Blue Room and Green Room, what’s this, the institutional beige room?”

“What’d you expect, the Oval Office, tea on the White House lawn maybe?”

“That’d be nice.” He shrugged. “I mean usually the best I get is a message in a dead-letter drop, garbled phone calls in the middle of the night. If I’m real lucky, I get a visit from old laughing boy here!” he nodded to Logan.

“You’re not really surprised are you, I can’t afford to be seen with you, least of all here.”

“Why me, I ain’t nobody, just a lowly FBI agent? By the way I’ve been meaning to have a word with you about that, I kinda fancy the sound of Secret Service Agent. Get to hang around cool places like this, meet juicy little interns!” Steiner was clearly enjoying himself.

“Yeah, right!” Harker cut him off. “Play the clown. We know what you are, Dark Angel. You maybe tops at executive action, but that still doesn’t make you anything more than what you are, a killer.”

“Look whose talking, you ain’t so clean,” Steiner replied in mock offence. “You were greasing guys for the Company during Phoenix, back in Nam. And lately you didn’t mind availing yourself of my services. I seem to recall I was the one did the wet jobs that got you this cool new job of yours and this lovely house that goes with it!” He leant forward. “Ain’t just my hands dirty, I was just the weapon, you pulled the trigger!”

“My point exactly!” Harker smiled contentedly, spreading his hands. “You might be no one now, but you get seen with me, they start digging, I don’t want any blowback when the shit flies. You get exposed, I want containment.”

“Yeah, whatever!” Steiner settled the chair back down on all four legs. “So what’s the deal? Must be a big fucking job to invite me here?”

“The biggest, maybe,” Harker said.

“Yeah. Thought I’d already done that, two US Presidents under my belt!” he crossed his legs calmly.

“Similar deal, higher odds.”

“Higher odds?”

“Take down the leader of a foreign state. Inside his own country, a country that we are all but in a state of war with. Taking him in his own territory. Deep penetration and liquidation.” Harker spoke coldly and decisively.

Steiner lit a cigarette, “Isn’t that illegal?”

“You and a team would be airdropped into this country. You would then proceed to infiltrate the capital, locate the target and terminate him.”

“Then get out?” Steiner interjected.

“Of course.” Harker shrugged.

“Sounds like a one-way trip to me. No big fucking deal to me, but try selling that to this *team* of yours?” Steiner drew deeply on his cigarette, watching the president through narrowed eyes.

“Chuck thinks he has located the appropriate personnel.” Harker glanced at his loyal lieutenant.

“Good old Chuck!” Steiner exhaled a big cloud of smoke.

“We have everything in hand.”

“Sure, so what is the country I have to penetrate?”

“Iraq.”

Steiner stopped, his cigarette halfway to his mouth. He looked between the two men, glancing back and forth, a smile spreading across his lips, drawing them back across his teeth. He took a long pull on his cigarette and ground it out.

“You want me to kill the Iraqi dictator, the Rais?”

Harker smiled and nodded.

“Inside Iraq, inside Baghdad?” he laughed shaking his head. “You guys are fucking nuts!”

“How so?” the President asked amiably.

“That isn’t just a suicide mission. No one would get close. Penetrate a hostile state, a country under martial law? Locate a target who remains hidden, who allegedly uses doubles? Then break through his bodyguards and eliminate him?” Steiner snorted. “That’s fucking madness. The odds are astronomical. And if by some miracle you pulled it off, no way on earth the team could get clear.”

“Maybe, but we think you could do it.”

“The hit? Maybe, but I doubt it’s possible. But there ain’t no one on Earth could escape and evade after the hit. Can you imagine the shitstorm that would come down? Not just bodyguards and security personnel, the Secret Police, the Republican Guard and the whole fucking Iraqi army!”

“So you’re not interested?” Harker asked.

“I didn’t say that.” Steiner smiled thinly.

“I knew we could rely on you.” Harker folded his hands in front of him.

“One-way trip, grease some goombah Arab? Why not?” Steiner shrugged. “So what’s the plan?”

“You’ve heard it.”

“Right. So, basically me and a bunch of other suicidal sociopaths drop into Iraq and kill one of the most elusive, highly protected men in the world. Great fucking plan. You must have really taxed both your brain cells working out the finer details of that!” he snorted. “Has Chuck’s fingerprints all over it.”

“The plan is in development. We have four weeks...”

“Well, four weeks, that’s all the time in the fucking world!” Steiner interrupted.

Harker continued. “I am about to make a live television address to the nation. In it I will announce the immediate commencement of air-strikes on strategic targets inside Iraq.

The first targets will be hit as I make this announcement. I will string out the strikes for four weeks. Intel says The Rais won't fold within that time-span, if at all. On the night of the last strike you go in. You'll be dropped probably around 30 clicks short of Baghdad, a six-man team, including you. You'll hump ass in, locate and liquidate. Exfiltration will be by chopper, when you are clear of the city."

"Just like that. I still hear no plan." Steiner sighed. "Chances of stumbling across The Rais practically zero. Surviving till we find him not much better. And there won't be any exfiltration."

"Maybe not," Harker smiled. "But we do have an operative inside The Rais's inner-circle. They can provide intel on his location and movements."

"You got this source, why not drop one of your smart-bombs on top of him."

"One, when I say *our* source, I am being a tad disingenuous. The operative in Mossad, I have got access through friends inside Israel. Secondly, but most importantly, The Rais trusts no one, His movements are sudden and never preplanned. An airstrike takes advance warning and preparation. By the time we or the Israelis got word and had our planes or missiles on site, he'd be long gone."

"Some preparation is preferable in a ground op too, you know?" Steiner muttered.

"With a team on site, you move instantly on word from the source."

"Better be quick. We'd stick out like shit on a snow-cone hunkered down in the middle of fucking Baghdad."

"You speak Arabic!"

"Barely, I can get by. I won't pass for a local."

"All the prospective team members have some Arabic skills, from the rudimentary to fluent. All will pass a cursory physical exam as Arabs too."

"Swarthy and circumcised?"

Harker grimaced. "If The Rais doesn't move into the open within a few days, you go in to find him."

“This gets better and better. We stroll into the beast’s lair, tag him and amble out. You and Chuck are regular, fucking geniuses.” Steiner lit another cigarette. “Why not let the Israelis pull this deal, they’re better at covert ops, specially wet jobs in that part of the world?”

Harker and Logan glanced at each other. “That’s one of our problems. The Israelis aren’t sure they want The Rais dead. They figure with him contained, he’s better than most alternatives: a resurgent Iran spreading its influence over a leaderless Iraq; an unstable Islamic fundamentalist state; anarchy and civil war worse than Lebanon; and worst of all, the Arab nations drawing together in alliance and focusing their hostilities on *the Zionist Entity*, instead of each other. They’ve opted for stability.”

“A view not uncommon within our own intelligence community, I believe?” Steiner drew on his cigarette.

“I make the calls here!” Harker stabbed the table with his finger.

“So I’m guessing the Israelis aren’t on board for this. Is anyone else?”

Harker paused, “The Israeli government is out, but I have contacts inside their military and intelligence community. Supporters have provided access to their logistical support, as well as the operative inside Baghdad. In addition we have one Israeli member on the team. A sniper, Sayaret Maktal, fluent in Arabic, operated extensively in covert ops in the region. Knows Iraq well, ran some missions in the past. He’s our regional expert and one of the sharpshooters.

“We also have a British operative with us, SAS. He’s demolitions.”

“The Brits are in?”

“Not as such,” Harker shrugged, “I could have that dimwit British PM on-side, but he’s so fucking unstable he’d blab in five seconds. Again I’m using friendly personnel in intel and the military.”

“So we’re alone on this then?”

“In more than one way. This operation is being run outside the Agency’s and military’s purview. It’s my operation, we use them, but I run the show. They don’t want to play, I keep the ball.”

“The rest of the team?”

“American, Army Special Forces.”

“Why the mixed nationalities?” Steiner stubbed out his cigarette.

“Damage control. This operation cannot be traced back to this government, or indeed any other one friendly nation. All personnel are 100% unattributable. As well as ambivalent feelings towards the longevity in their lives, most have little or no family ties; the only friends are in the life with them. They’re all phantoms of the covert op world, no traceable identity or nationality. The mixed nationalities is just insurance.” Harker examined his fingernails while talking, his eyes not meeting Steiner’s.

“Understandable.”

“Additional precautions will have to be taken. From their profiles, our people on the team would hold out longer than most under intense interrogation. No one can hold out against torture indefinitely.”

“There are Buddhist Monks in Tibet who may differ,” Steiner interjected.

Harker continued. “Of course all personnel will be supplied with L-pills. However, it will be your job to ensure no one is taken alive. No prisoners, no wounded left behind. No identifiable remains left if possible. There are no records, even dental, to trace our people, but I don’t want the risk. A white phosphorous grenade, tossed under a tarp with the body is best. The Brits did it with US mercenaries found on the Falklands.”

“Understood.”

“Good.” Harker tossed a pile manila folders on the table. “Your team.”

Steiner fingered the dossiers. “I have no input in the team?”

“No time.”

“What if I have a problem with anyone?”

“Deal with it.” Harker jerked his head. “They have been approached and all are on their way to Fort Bragg. You will be waiting for them. Four weeks. Three at Bragg, then one in Israel to acclimatise. Then you will go in.”

“They know what they’re in for?”

“Only the high-risk nature. You will give them more information on their arrival. They have one last chance to back out. Put it to them. You will not reveal the target until two weeks in. After that, they have no way out.” Harker paused, smiling. “Well, one!”

A sound emanated from Logan’s chest. It may have been a chuckle.

“I don’t have much latitude.” Steiner sat back.

“You’ll manage.” Harker stood. “In addition to your usual benefits, you and your team will receive substantial financial rewards on completion of the mission.”

“Like we’ll live to enjoy that!”

“Well, it isn’t the money, is it. It’s the work.” Harker turned on his heel, then paused. He pulled an envelope from his pocket and tossed onto the table. “Your tickets to North Carolina. They’re expecting you at Bragg. Also some money for expenses. You leave tonight.”

Steiner peered inside the envelope.

“Well, my nation awaits!” Harker called and Logan opened the door for him.

“*The* nation.” Steiner called without looking up.

“What?” Harker turned.

“I believe it’s *the* nation.” Steiner looked up.

“Whatever!” President Harker grinned and swept out.

Steiner sat alone, staring down at the paper-strewn desk. Maybe he was going to kill the wrong national leader.

Chapter 5

They had booked Steiner on the train of all things. He didn't mind. He felt trapped and claustrophobic in planes, even in first class, and he was often wracked by nausea and migraines if he travelled in a car for more than half-an-hour. But trains were different. He found the gentle rocking of their motion soothing, the sound the wheels upon the tracks and the soft beat of the engine lulling. He found train travel lent itself to quiet and restful reverie, the gentle repetition of sound and motion almost hypnotic. Often he would gently drift off to sleep. Steiner loved trains, he thought of them as a metaphor for life: riding along rails, an undeviating path laid out before you, the past behind, the future ahead unalterable, the only reality the fleeting now caught in the window as a blur. Calm and stillness at the centre, carried along on an engine of motion.

Steiner had a sleeping compartment on the over-night train to North Carolina. After dinner, he retired to his cabin to peruse his team's dossiers. He slumped in his seat and closed his eyes for a minute, listening to the gentle thrum of the train, feeling himself at rest yet in motion, carried unrelentingly to his destiny. He floated free for an all too brief a moment. Finally he sighed and pulled the manila folders from his brief case and opened the first one.

The Englishman, Steve Wilson, was SAS. Deserted by his mother as an infant and thrust upon the state, he had been raised in a succession of homes and fleetingly by unfortunate foster parents. A disruptive and violent child, he battled against carers and his peers, earning only despair and loathing in equal measure. In and out of trouble with the law, he only escaped a custodial sentence at 16 by heeding a judge's suggestion of joining the army. However, perhaps unsurprisingly this proved a less than ideal environment for the young delinquent. Discipline was an anathema to him; he fought against all forms of authority, earning a succession of stays in the glasshouse, the military prison. Reviled by officers and fellow troops, Wilson was on the brink of being cashiered when he happened to meet a NCO from the SAS. The older man seemed to recognise something of himself in the truculent youth. He took him under his wing, and even more surprisingly Wilson accepted

him, allowing himself to become close to someone for the first time in his life. The NCO became a father figure for him. Wilson seemed to settle down, and six months later, aged 18, he passed the gruelling SAS selection course. With 22 Squadron, Wilson at last had a home. He flourished within the independently-minded regiment. Freed from stifling authority, offered impossible challenges, trained and guided, he became a perfect special forces soldier. Specialising in demolitions, but also serving time with the elite counter-terrorist unit, he served throughout the world in the last twenty years: Northern Ireland, the Falklands, South America, the Middle and Far East. Details, even in this highly classified dossier were sketchy, but clearly Wilson's bag was black ops, wet jobs his speciality. Whether training terrorists in Cambodia or the Balkans to lay mines, or just setting up death-squads and eliminating South American drug-lords and IRA personnel, Wilson had carved a swathe across the globe, killing with alacrity.

Steiner peered closely at the headshot of the SAS man. Short-cropped, dark hair, a sharply receding hairline. Metal-framed glasses perched on his slim nose, crooked, sharp teeth bared in a rodentine, mirthless grin. Apparently, according to the appraisal appended to the dossier, Wilson was an excellent soldier, but a marked loner. People still disliked him. Steiner already felt the same.

The Israeli, Yonathan 'Yoni' Bach, was in his early thirties. His picture revealed a handsome, solemn-faced young man, his long, slender features accentuating his solemnity. His cropped dark hair set off his high-cheekbones, his olive skin drawn tight over fine facial bones. Bach was the son of a professional army officer, a paratrooper and member of the elite Sayaret Mahktal commando brigade, killed on the Golan in 73. His mother was killed only a couple of years ago, blown apart by a Hamas suicide-bomber while shopping in downtown Tel Aviv. Bach's only sibling, a younger sister, had been infected by pro-Palestinian, leftist friends while at university. She denounced her father and Yoni as fascist imperialists. Her brother shook his head indulgently, thinking she'd grow out of it. When their mother died, the sister had said she wept more for the young Arab bomber than her mother; she had reaped the

whirlwind for Israeli crimes committed upon the Palestinians. The bomber was a hero. Yoni stood, slapped his sister's face, turned and walked away. He no longer had a sister. He was alone except for his lover, Ayana Yacoby, a young female officer with military intelligence. They had been together for three years, but Bach had always resisted her overtures of marriage. When she announced she had been approached by Mossad with an eye to recruitment, she tried one last time to draw him on marriage, but he drew back. She joined the *Institute*, they tried to keep in touch but she soon disappeared into the labyrinthine shadows of the world of espionage. Yoni was alone.

Bach had followed in his father's footsteps, joining the paratroopers, soon progressing into the Mahktal. Assault and hostage rescue took up some of his unit's time, but quickly marked out as an expert marksman, Bach had joined units running deep penetration operations behind enemy lines throughout the Middle East. As a sniper, the long kill was his speciality. His unit hunted terrorists and their supporters throughout the region, showing them no mercy, no quarter. To him they were vermin who had forfeited all rights or expectations towards humanity. He killed with a glad heart. During Desert Storm, he was one of a handful of Israeli troops operating behind Iraqi lines, working with US Special Forces on sabotage and assassination.

Bach was the team's regional expert. He spoke fluent Arabic and knew the terrain. He was their way in.

Carl Zaborski, was a member of the elite US Army Special Forces unit, Delta Force. Nicknamed 'Homer' after Homer Simpson, not because he bore a resemblance to the fat, bald, food-loving, idiot-savant cartoon character, but because of his fixation with the TV show. He would watch and re-watch every episode, constantly regaling friends with verbatim recitation of speeches, always ready with an appropriate aphorism or witticism from the cartoon show. He did share a simple, primal zest for life with his cartoon namesake, always ready with a joke or prank, the unit clown. Big, two metres tall, more than 250 pounds of solid muscle, it was lucky he was such an amiable figure, at least to his friends. Head shaved

clean, blue eyes blazing from his broad, angular face; Zaborski presented an image to strike terror into the heart of anyone who crossed him. Volunteering at eighteen, he joined the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg, and eventually progressed to join the Army Special Forces, the Green Berets. From there it was a short hop to the top wrung, Delta. A Master Sergeant, 34 years old, Zaborski was an assault specialist. Highly decorated and universally respected, he had served throughout the world, including the Gulf, on Scud-busting teams during Desert Storm. Zaborski was the sort of man you wanted at your side when the shit hit the fan. Why he wanted this one-way trip was less clear. Devil-may-care, and a thrill-seeker in every area, he was always looking for the next rush, the bigger high. His only friends and family were in the life with him. Good enough.

Luke Armstrong was a lean, tough Texan. His sharp, implacable face gazed back at Steiner from his picture. 29, he had enlisted at eighteen and joined the Rangers. An elite sniper, or *sharpshooter*, to use the more friendly PC term (what friendly had to do with killing was beyond Steiner, but maybe that was the point), Armstrong had one of the lowest and steadiest pulse rates on record. He was an unflappable shooter. In addition he had a freakishly low-level of lactic acid build up in his muscles. He could fight and move all day and never drop. He was like some genetically engineered, specially bred sniper-soldier. Profiled, like many of his peers, as having a morally ambivalent to the accepted norms of society, Armstrong had been a loose cannon in his youth. At nineteen, he met Rebecca Duke, the sister of one of his friends in the Rangers. Apparently it was love at first sight. They married six months later. Rebecca brought a new-found stability and focus into Armstrong's life. He joined Special Forces, then Delta. His home-life provided a counter-balance to his work as sniper on the CT team and black ops, obviously as a hitter. For six years, the couple tried for children, and after two miscarriages and an eptopic pregnancy, Rebecca finally managed to bring a baby to term. There were complications during the birth. She was rushed into surgery, but it was too late, the baby, a daughter was stillborn. Rebecca died less than hour later. Armstrong was destroyed, but after only a week he returned to duty, much against his

commander's wishes. As implacable as ever, he threw himself into his work. Friends noticed a new recklessness and nihilism in his attitude. As professional as ever, he began to take risks with his own safety. He volunteered for every dangerous assignment, preferring to work alone. Now the young Sergeant had found his way to Steiner.

Steiner reached for the fifth dossier, but found none. He was sure Harker said it would be a six-man team including Steiner himself. The number seemed right, an even number breaking down into smaller groups more easily. Something was up. It was six, Steiner never made mistakes like that, and he certainly didn't lose files. Harker was pulling something. The sixth man was going to a mystery they'd spring when ready.

Let them play their fucking games, he thought. Steiner shrugged and smiled, snuggling deeper into his seat, allowing his eyelids to fall. Within minutes he was fast asleep.

* * *

The glistening Amtrak train pulled into the dusty station just outside Fayetteville NC. Steiner descended the steps onto the platform. Slightly dishevelled, but refreshed, he looked slowly around him, then headed through the terminal. Waiting inside was a soldier dressed in BDU fatigues, baggy trousers tucked into the ankles of his jump-boots. The youthful sergeant spotted Steiner and head towards him.

"Mr. Steiner?" he asked.

Steiner nodded, switching his bag to his left hand and holding out his right. The soldier looked down at it uncertainly, then seemed to shrug and shook Steiner's hand once, firmly.

"Your vehicle is waiting outside, sir." He indicated Steiner should follow him. "Shall I take your bag?"

“That’s all right,” Steiner smiled and followed the sergeant outside. He noted the *Airborne* and *Special Forces* flashes on his shoulders, and the green beret tucked beneath his epaulette.

Outside was parked a plain, unmarked sedan, obviously military-issue.

The sergeant took Steiner’s bag and placed it in the trunk, then opened the rear door. Steiner settled into the rear passenger seat and the driver climbed behind the wheel and the headed out. Hidden behind the tinted windows, Steiner allowed the whirring AC to cool him after the heavy Carolina heat.

Joining the All-American freeway they cut through the early morning traffic, heading quickly towards Fort Bragg.

The sprawling military base came in to view, smeared across the horizon, buildings stretching as far as the eye could see. Sterner had only visited Bragg twice in his military career, and was never stationed there, having been seriously injured in a chopper crash while with 101st Airborne at Fort Campbell, his military life cut short just before receiving his transfer to Army Special Forces. He was familiar though with the base, a legend in military circles. Fort Bragg represented the pure warrior spirit within the US Army. Here there was no place for the modern PC, corporate military, an army of clerks, functionaries and politicians, at Bragg all was elite, even the necessary clerical staff were a highly-trained killers. The base was home to the 82nd Airborne, the last fully activated parachute regiment in the army.

Alongside the paratroopers in their scarlet berets were their brethren in the Army Special Forces, the Green Berets. Based around the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School, the SF spent their days honing their lethal skills, moving with the swagger of the masters of their domain. But within their closed area there resided an even more superior predator: Delta. Delta did not officially exist, the name never passing the lips of senior officers in the GI, Joe-Straight army and the politicians. This little artifice was merely a pretence to save the bosses in Washington any blushes or moral disquietude. If an inconvenient and troublesome third-world dictator or drub-baron suddenly died, possibly in violent circumstances, just after I

denounced them, then so be it. It must just be a coincidence, they maintain. To the rest of the army and the politicians the soldiers within Delta were none only as *Operatives*, or *D-boys*. They were the *Dreaded D*.

Benning had the Rangers, Campbell the 101st, but Fort Bragg was *the* place, the home of the meanest, toughest motherfuckers to walk this planet. The Marines can go fuck themselves. SEALs? Faggots. Here was the one true home of the killer-elite.

The sedan pulled up to the gate. The driver wound down his window. The corporal leading the detail on duty approached, his M4 carbine slung by his elbow. The soldiers, all 82nd Airborne, took up station around the vehicle, weapons ready. An M60 locked onto them from the bunker by the gate.

“Pass?” the corporal snapped, adding tersely, “Sergeant.”

The driver handed over his paperwork. Obviously the documentation covered Steiner’s presence, as the Corporal glanced at the passenger.

“Wait here,” the Corporal sniffed and headed back to the guard-hut. He nodded to the PFC as he passed, the man taking up the lead with the gate detail. The soldiers moved in a little tighter. Inside the hut, the Corporal could be seen on the phone.

“Problems?” Steiner asked.

“Nah!” the driver replied casually.

The Corporal came back out and headed over to the sedan. He exchanged glances with the PFC.

“Out of the car!” he snapped tersely, hand on his weapon. “Both of you!”

“You’re shitting me!” the Sergeant behind the wheel groaned.

A rattle of bolts as the troops chambered rounds and slipped their weapons off safety.

“Guess not?” the driver climbed out, Steiner followed, keeping his hands in plain sight, trying not to make any sudden moves.

There ensued an agonising few minutes as both men were kept waiting, pinned under unwavering gun barrels, as two troops tore their way through the car, searching it inside and out.

“Hope we don’t get the same treatment. Don’t fancy an internal.” Steiner muttered. His driver snorted a laugh, but the guards shifted angrily, bristling, their cold eyes boring into Steiner. He just shrugged and grinned.

With a squeal of brakes, a Humvee swung to a halt inside the gate. A tall, thickly muscular figure climbed languidly from behind the wheel. He moved with a swagger towards the gate. Dressed in cammo BDU, his eyes were hidden behind mirrored shades. He swung a long leg over the barrier and approached the corporal.

“Sergeant-of-the-guard,” he called in a hearty voice as he approached. He halted before the man, arms akimbo. He dwarfed the guard, himself no shrimp. At least six-three, he bulk was solid muscle, his tailored tunic moulded across his highly-developed torso. Steiner noted the *Special Forces* and *Airborne* flashes. In addition to these he bore another patch, a vertical commando dagger on a field of green. Special Operations Command. Delta, Steiner thought.

“What’s the hold up?” the Delta operative, a Captain, asked amiably.

“Well, sir, security been heightened, thought I’d better double-check...” the somewhat cowed Corporal began.

“Yeah, yeah,” the officer interrupted, waving his hand casually. He pulled off his fatigue cap and ran his broad hand over his wavy, brown hair, the sides close-shaved.

“Well, I’m here now. You can let these men through, I’ll vouch for them.”

“But with the civilian, sir, I’d prefer to wait for confirmation. Clearance should...”

The Captain cut him off with a chop of his hand. He reached up and removed his reflective sunglasses. Although his broad, bland face was unremarkable, the piercing, blue eyes now fixed on the Corporal were startling.

“Are you fucking with me, Corporal?” he said softly, a grin twisting his lips.

“No, sir,” the soldier replied in a quavering voice, his head drawing back into his shoulders. “Just...”

“You are fucking with me. You think you earned the right?” The Corporal shook his head slowly. “You think I’m a bitch, Corporal?” he still smiled, but leaned in closer.

“No, sir.”

“You wanna fuck me, least have the courtesy to ask nicely. You punk me out, I might have to break you up!” His voice dropped still lower. “You read me, son?”

“Yes, sir.” The Corporal croaked.

“You wait for your confirmation; we’ll just be on our way.” The Captain straightened up, replacing his glasses and cap. “We’ll be on our way then!” he called out in a loud voice. He turned on his heel, dismissing the Corporal. He indicated for the gate to be raised and the detail leapt to it.

The Delta Captain strode over to Steiner and his driver.

“You can take the vehicle back to the motor-pool now, Sergeant, I’ll take care of our guest from here on in.” The officer towered over Steiner. It wasn’t just height; he only had a couple of inches on him, or even his bulk, though he did dwarf Steiner’s slender frame. It was more an attitude, a sense of assurance beyond mere swagger.

The Sergeant headed into the base, lighting up his tyres. He gave the Corporal on the gate the finger as he swept past.

“Steiner?” the officer asked. Steiner nodded. “Neil Murphy, friends call me *Murph!*” he stuck out his meaty hand and pumped Steiner’s vigorously. “Shall we?” He indicated the Humvee.

Steiner followed Murphy through the gate and swung into the front passenger seat of the low-slung 4x4. Murphy vaulted into the driver’s seat, starting up the Humvee, the vehicle leaping away with a screech.

They swung through the maze of buildings, swerving round corners, tyres screaming and smoking. Mounting sidewalks, pedestrians scattered. Murphy laughed.

“So, Steiner, we met before, you know?” the Captain shouted over the roar of the engine.

Steiner looked at him blankly.

“In the Gulf, back in ’91.” He swung the wheel hard over. “Don’t expect you’d remember me. I was just some puke 2nd El-tee with the 82nd. You were hot shit. Just pulled that attack on that Republican Guard battalion, chopper assault, we provided flanking cover. Hit ‘em hard, wrapped them up. Folded faster then Superman on laundry day.” He swung around another corner. “Then you were on that patrol, both your Black Hawks went down, you held off a whole company of Iraqis,” He looked over grinning. “Got a Silver Star for that, right?”

Steiner nodded.

“Heard about your accident. Shame, could have used you in Special Forces. Then you kinda disappeared!” Murphy locked up his brakes with a screech, taking a bend almost on two wheels.

“So what you been up to?”

“This and that.” Steiner spoke, his voice barely audible above the roar of the Humvee.

“Yeah, read you.” Murphy nodded sagely. “Spook, right?”

Steiner didn’t respond.

“Yeah, plausible deniability, right?” The Captain grinned. “We worked with you guys in Special Forces and Delta. I know the deal!”

Steiner remembered Murphy; it was his business to remember everything, his curse. The name didn’t mean much, but he remembered the broad, smug, Irish face, the shit-eating grin. He was the kind of gung-ho, hot-shit, macho motherfucker made him nervous. He didn’t like them, they hated him, it was a mutual understanding. They needed each other; they didn’t need to like each other.

Passing a sign for the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School.

“Abandon hope all ye who enter here!” Murphy shouted and laughed. “You’re now entering the Kingdom of the Damned!” He looked to Steiner for a response, he got none. “Home sweet home!”

The Humvee pulled onto a long, straight drive, the pitch of the engine dropped. Murphy hit the brakes and the vehicle lurched to a stop. He was out, seemingly before the Humvee had stopped. He stalked around the parked 4x4. Steiner climbed out and followed him.

“This’ll be home for the next couple of weeks,” He held out the slab of his hand to one a row of white, stucco bungalows. “Officers’ Married Quarters, managed to swing you one. I got one like it a few blocks over, guess we’ll kinda be neighbours!”

To Steiner it looked like any suburban street. All somehow alien.

“Let me show you around!” Murphy led him up the path, lawn on their left, heading to the front door. “Got your own POV in the garage there,” he pointed, “I’ll arrange a Humvee for transport round the base, if you like?”

Steiner nodded and followed him through the front door.

They entered the den, filled by a new suite, all arranged around an impressive TV and video set-up.

“Cable-ready, 102 channels. DVD, all the comforts of home,” Murphy played the benevolent host. He showed Steiner the fully-fitted kitchen, the bathroom, complete with Jacuzzi bath. “Of course the place in fully air-conditioned,” They entered the master bedroom. “Got full set of fatigues and kit laid out for you,” he slid back the door of the closet lining one wall. “We’ll get you fitted up with weaponry tomorrow. Anything else you want, just holler!”

Steiner a little dazed, just nodded.

“Got a gym a few buildings over, I’ll show you around later.”

“When will my people arrive?” Steiner asked flatly.

“Tomorrow. Of course Armstrong and Zaborski are already on site. Figured you’d want to wait to meet them with the rest?”

Steiner nodded. "How much do you know about my mission, Captain?"

"Call me Murph!" he slapped Steiner on the shoulder. "Fully briefed, except in all the telling details. Covert op, deep-penetration of a hostile Middle Eastern country. Assault on an unnamed target. Guess it's all I need to know."

"I was told it was a six-man job, including myself. I only got dossiers on four. You know anything about the sixth man?"

"Colonel Logan said the man would arrive the day after the rest, late addition or something?" Murphy shrugged.

"You know Logan?" Steiner frowned.

"Sure we go way back, he picked me for this job."

"Right."

"Reckon the Colonel will explain everything when he arrives day after tomorrow, with the last man."

"Great."

"Well I'll be off," Murphy headed towards the door. "Reckon you wanna freshen up, maybe take a walk around. I've left a list of numbers by the phone if you got any questions. Street plan of the base with it."

Steiner followed him to the front door.

"Meet me in the Officers' Club tonight, I'll buy you a drink and introduce you to the wife."

"Great, sure," Steiner hustled him out of the door.

"Seven o'clock, then. See you later, neighbour!" Murphy cried as the door shut on him.

Steiner leant with his back against the door until he heard the Humvee move off. Loosening his tie, he headed into the den. He pulled the blinds and through his jacket across the back of the sofa. He flopped into an armchair, placing his pistol on the table beside him.

Sitting alone in the gloom, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

Chapter 6

Steiner sat alone in the gloom until dusk descended. He rose from the armchair and moved around the unfamiliar house. The refrigerator was fully stocked, and he poured himself an orange juice. He unpacked his small bag and stripped down to his skivvies. Putting away his clothing, he checked the fatigues hanging in the closet. Everything was the right size, right down to shorts and socks. From the bottom of his bag, he retrieved his personal weaponry: a Walther P99 polymer-framed battle pistol, a stubby HK P7 and a Mini-Uzi submachine-gun. He hid the Walther and the Uzi beneath towels at the back of the closet, then took the P7 and the HK USP automatic he had been carrying and hid them at various easy-to-reach points around the house. He placed the Glock 26 subcompact in the drawer beside his bed, next to his knife and sap.

In the bathroom, he stood before the huge counter-top mirror and carefully shaved. Drawing the blade across his skin, he was aware of the scars criss-crossing his naked torso and arms, disfiguring his lean musculature. He rinsed his face clean and turned the shower on full and climbed beneath its pounding, scalding flow. He leant against the tiles, allowing the water to pour over his knotted shoulders. Slowly his head cleared.

He emerged from the bathroom, refreshed and reborn. He washed down a double dose, 150mg of the anti-depressant Venlafaxine. He dressed slowly, pulling on khaki linen trousers and a black polo shirt. Settling gently on the soft bed, he pulled on expensive Loafers. He paused before the full-length mirror and ran his hand over his close-cropped hair, flecks of grey appearing at his temples. His face was a weird combination, young-old, still youthful, but somehow weary and tired, his lifeless, hopeless eyes gazing out from the still soft face, only slightly marred by scarring. He sighed. Retrieving the tiny Glock 26 automatic from the draw by the bed, he tucked it into an ankle holster hidden beneath the cuff of his trousers.

Closing the front door behind him, he headed down the quiet road. It was a warm evening, the sound of crickets audible above the sound of distant activity. The liquid air was

heavy with the scent of pollen and warm resin, in the distance someone was preparing a barbecue. Somehow everything, right down to his own feeling of peace reminded him of long forgotten childhood holidays. Hopefully this though would end better.

Heading further out, he saw more people; some of the men in mufti like himself, also civilian women and children, all busy with their day-to-day bustle. The men in military dress blended in into the harmonious whole, a white-bread suburban idyll. There were few black faces, as was common as African-Americans were in a distinct minority in all the military elite units (the SF swimming qualification was said to have been dreamt up by a General, remarking, *“That should keep the niggers out!”*).

Wandering down these peaceful, happy streets he felt strangely unreal, like he was inside some ‘50s Eisenhower-Norman Rockwell world of happy, loving, law-abiding, WASP respectability. Just happens all the Daddies, and some of the Moms, were trained killers. Life’s funny that way.

He reached the Officer’s Club a little after seven, and headed inside, unchallenged.

Inside, he moved through the smoky lounge, searching for Murphy among the throng of muscular men around the bar and sitting in groups knotted about the room. They ranged from the young and vigorous to grizzled veterans, but all were unmistakably professional killers. He recognised the ice behind the eyes, the stillness of body, the intense focus of spirit. He was among fellow predators.

He noticed a single woman draped against the bar, surrounded by animated young men, all vying for her attention. She was strikingly beautiful, tall and elegant. High cheekbones rose imperiously from her broad face, her liquid hazel eyes widely placed, her lips full and sensuous. She smiled and bantered with the men, but she somehow seemed bored and imperious as much as flirtatious. But they didn’t seem to care. Each jostled to be nearest her. She wore a slip of a black dress, cut low and slit up her long thigh. The silken fabric clung to the curves of her statuesque figure. A sheer blouse covered her bare arms. She tossed her head haughtily, the light catching her short, red, glossy hair. As she looked over the heads

of the men around her, her eyes met Steiner's for a moment. Neither flinched. They clung for a moment, then she moved on.

"Hey, Saul, over here!" Murphy's raucous cry broke Steiner's reverie. He glanced over. The big Delta officer rose from his table and beckoned for his guest to join him. Casting one last look towards the woman, Steiner headed over.

"How you doing, man?" Murphy reached over and slapped Steiner on the upper-arm. The civilian fought a shudder. This forced familiarity, not to mention jocularity, unsettled him. The physical contact unnerved him. "You made yourself at home?"

Steiner nodded.

"Had a good look around?" Murphy grinned, weaving his meaty fingers together in front of him as he leaned back. "Better get used to it, the Special Forces area, and especially Delta, will be home for the next three weeks."

"I want my people kept separate from yours as much, as possible, outside working hours." Steiner said bluntly.

"Colonel Logan said the same, but it isn't going to be easy. Armstrong and Zaborski are both Delta, this is their home, they are among friends."

"I understand that. But for security, as well as unit cohesion, I want my team kept close together and separate from outsiders. I want all access and movements controlled and monitored."

"I'll take care of my men, you take care of yours. But as for security, you don't have to worry about us D-boys, we ain't strangers to this cloak and dagger shit!" Murphy still grinned amiably.

"Whatever. I just want the ground rules laid out, so there won't be any misunderstandings!"

"Sure," Murphy held up his broad hands defensively. "I know the deal."

"Good, so what's the timetable?" Steiner was all business. Murphy either didn't notice, or chose to ignore the other man's coolness.

“Well, as you know, four of your people arrive tomorrow. We can give them a while to settle in, get them kitted out. When the Colonel arrives the day after with the last man, we can begin exercises,” Murphy began.

Steiner held up his hand, “Fuck that shit. I want those men put to work the second they arrive, I’ll see to the arrangements. We’ll have kit ready when they arrive, then I’ll start on them.”

“Whatever, man, your show. Anyway, we have a packed schedule of live-fire exercises, battlefield manoeuvres, CQB, weapons drills, physical training. The whole enchilada. Then week 3 we move to Nevada, Desert Training, Units of the 82nd will be the hunters. It’s escape and evade. Live-fire. Then we ship-out.”

“We?” Steiner’s eyes flickered warily.

“Well it is an assumption, but I have been led to believe by the Colonel that you may require a liaison on the ground on our side when you go in?” Murphy shrugged.

“Maybe.” Steiner replied darkly, sinking deeper in his chair. “Give me some more details on the training.”

While Murphy bumbled endlessly, Steiner let his eyes wander. Inevitably they found the woman at the bar. The crowd of men around her had become quite raucous, visibly jostling for her attention. Egging them on, she would occasionally touch one or other of them, laughing flirtatiously, or even lean close to one, speaking softly, her lips almost touching their skin. The men seemed to be degenerating to some animal level, their grins more like bared teeth as they pressed around her, each jostling to mark their claim. The threat of violence was almost palpable in the air, their fervour about to reach a critical mass. Their eyes shone as they drew tighter around her, teeth bared. Her eyes were flat and cold. The situation didn’t seem to even amuse her anymore. As the men scrapped and sparred verbally, she gazed past them into the middle distance, bored, absorbed in her own melancholy.

“My wife should be joining us in a minute. Then we can go in for dinner.” Murphy’s voice broke his concentration. He turned, confused for a moment.

“Your wife?”

“Yeah. You married?” Murphy finished his beer.

“No.”

“Right,” Murphy replied disinterestedly. “You want a drink?”

“Sure. A soda.”

“A what?” Murphy seemed incredulous.

“A soda. A coke, I think.”

“Okay?” Murphy shook his head and headed to the bar.

Steiner glanced around. He had never felt too comfortable in social gatherings, least of all surrounded by men, the air of competition and forced machismo distasteful. Maybe his choice of a career in the Army had been a little odd. But while the Special Forces bar was full of men, these officers seemed more at ease with themselves, they felt no need to compete here. That is except for in the case of the woman, the loose vector in the equation. Her presence, her alluring femininity, threw off their carefully balanced world. In this disorder and flux, these men, trained killers became gauche, over-eager schoolboys. It was this disruption that fed her, but she quickly tired.

Murphy ordered the drinks, then moved along the bar. The young officers around the woman scattered, only a couple cast a backward glance, some muttering darkly. The woman glared at Murphy and spat angrily.

“So you fucking pay attention to me now!” he flushed and she wavered unsteadily, grabbing the bar for support.

Murphy gestured for her to be quiet and hissed angrily at her, pulling her close as he spoke, thick fingers digging into the soft flesh of her bare arms. She struggled as he spoke, his voice muffled, but his face twisted angrily. Her wriggling lessened, and she leant into him. Although about six foot herself, she sank into his chest so she looked up into his eyes, fluttering her eyelashes coquettishly, a crooked smile spreading across her sensuous lips. Murphy continued to lecture her sotto voce. She reached up and drew his broad, Irish-pug

face down and kissed him firmly on the lips. Mouths open, they clinched, the woman grinding her hips against him. Steiner realised he wasn't the only man in the bar watching the couple. Finally they broke. Murphy glanced around, embarrassment mixing with something else on his face. It was pride, Steiner realised, the smug satisfaction of a cruel child that has something that everyone else wants, even if he doesn't know what to do with it. He spoke to her sternly once more in a hushed voice. She pouted and finally nodded. Murphy retrieved the drinks from the bar and headed back towards Steiner, the woman trailing behind him.

He laid the coke and beer on the table. Steiner took his soda and gulped down some of the icy liquid, watching the approach of the woman, as she slinked across the room in her hugging dress, head held high, aware of every pair of eyes in the place on her.

Steiner laid his glass on the table and looked up at Murphy, stood above him, grinning with vicious glee. "Saul, I'd like you to meet someone," he stood aside, allowing the women to draw in. She was even more beautiful and overwhelming close up. Steiner fought to keep his poker-face. "This is my wife, Hannah." He held out his spade of a hand in pride, "Hannah, this is Saul Steiner."

She stabbed out a long, elegant hand. Steiner rose taking it, feeling the soft flesh of her palm held in his rough, scarred hand. She glanced at the heavy scar-tissue circling his right pinkie-finger. She looked up and smiled. As their hands separated, her arms turned slightly. Steiner caught a brief glimpse of the faint scars criss-crossing her wrist. He looked up, their eyes met. She sank into her chair, crossing her long legs, her slit skirt rising up.

Steiner sat and took another quick drink.

The woman was young, no more than 21, but she bore a certain weariness beyond her years.

"Saul's here for a couple of weeks, I'm showing him around." Murphy tried to prompt conversation.

“How interesting!” Hannah spoke with exaggerated sarcasm and sipped her white wine. She stared at Steiner, her eyes boring into him with an intense mixture of contempt and boredom. He squirmed uneasily in his seat. “You in the Army too?” she sneered.

“No.” Steiner lit a cigarette and drew on it deeply, tilting back his head to exhale a long plume of smoke.

“Suddenly you don’t seem quite so boring, after all.” Hannah smirked.

Murphy looked at her sharply.

Steiner smiled to himself, flicking the ash of the end of his cigarette. “You don’t like the Army?”

“No fucking shit!” She snorted, tossing her head. “Bunch of faggot-assed losers playing toy soldiers. They should grow the fuck up!”

“Not a view makes you too popular round here, I suppose?” Steiner played with the ashtray on the table, sliding it idly about with the scarred little finger of his right hand.

“Oh yeah, the brass fucking loves me!” Her laugh was hoarse and brittle. “And those service wives, those bitches want to rip out my eyes. Just cause I don’t dig their bake-outs and coffee mornings. Just cause I don’t play little wifey.”

“Not too many friends then?” Steiner drew on his cigarette again, watching her from the corner of his eye.

“Well the soldier-boys seem to like me. Wonder why?” She laid her long hand on her bare thigh and smiled flirtatiously at Steiner, then downed her wine, licking lips, her long tongue flicking across her blood-red lips. Steiner gently shook his head.

A nervous Murphy jumped in. “Yeah, Hannah’s the resident eccentric. But we all love her!”

“Yeah, whatever?” she drawled in a slightly drunken voice.

Murphy laughed her off, launching himself on a long rambling monologue, some anodyne bullshit, probably taught it at the Point. He jabbered on with his one sided conversation, much of it featuring himself, the first-person singular the main feature. His

voice had a strange masturbatory quality, as if he was not only his own favourite subject, but also his preferred audience.

Steiner slunk low into his seat, stubbed out his cigarette and glanced at his watch. When he looked up and found Hannah still staring at him. He met her gaze and held it, staring back square into her eyes, a slight smile touching his lips. Her blazing gaze was like a challenge, but he wouldn't buckle. It was like a game. A wilfulness crossed her beautiful face, frustrated that her usual ploy wasn't bearing fruit. Her frustration amused Steiner. His grin widened. Her boredom seemed to have lessened, her contempt turning to rage. The stare-off continued. Steiner remained cool and impassive, loosely folding his arms and relaxing in his chair. Her fists were clenched, her crossed legs twitched, her foot kicking like a metronome. A light entered her eye, her rage and frustration suddenly metamorphosed into a glee. Realisation. It was a game. She smiled and lowered her eyes for an instant, then glancing back up from under heavy lids. Steiner inclined his head towards the rambling Murphy and pulled a quick face, crossing his eyes. She fought back a laugh. Her foot made contact with his leg under the table. His heart pounded in his chest.

"Are we going to have dinner or what?" Hannah interrupted her husband, her smouldering gaze never leaving Steiner.

"Sure, babe!" Murphy stood. "Shall we?"

Steiner and Hannah followed him into the dim cool of the dining room. He swaggered ahead, approaching the headwaiter, exchanging a few pleasantries, quickly backed up by a too-loud fake laugh. Steiner and Hannah glanced at each other quickly and grimaced.

Then settled at their table and menus were presented. Murphy ordered white wine while they chose their meals. Steiner felt Hannah's eyes on him as he scanned the menu. The waiter hovered. Steiner felt a foot brush the inside of his calf.

With their order placed, they sat back while their wine was poured. Hannah emptied her glass quickly, snatching up the bottle and refilling it before the waiter could get close.

Steiner watched her candidly, smiling. She looked at him askance.

“So not army. Then we’re left with only a few options,” she smiled mischievously, sipping at her wine. “You don’t look like a writer or journalist doing research, and anyway my husband, the consummate ass-kisser wouldn’t suck up to one of them. So that leaves politician or spook?”

“You’ve guessed my dark secret. I’m a United States Senator!”

“Yeah, right?” she snorted, “Spook all the way!”

Steiner waggled her eyebrows.

“I feel I should apologise for my wife, she’s a bit high-spirited!” Murphy laughed uneasily.

“I feel I should apologise for my husband, he’s an asshole!” she laughed too loudly and drank down the rest of her wine. She waved the waiter over for a refill. Steiner noticed the waiters exchanging loaded glances. He got the feeling tonight’s display was something of a common occurrence.

The foot touched him under the table again.

“So, Hannah, If you hate the army so much, why marry a soldier?” Steiner asked casually.

“Good question!” she sat forward. “One, I didn’t realise I hated the army at that time. Two, maybe I was blinded by love?” Murphy smirked with self-satisfaction. “That or I was too young and stupid to know better, amounts to the same thing!” she laughed loudly again. Murphy glowered. It was going to be fun at their house tonight.

The food was served and they ate mostly in silence, the tension between husband and wife palpable. Murphy glared at Hannah with barely concealed rage; she looked back with mocking derision. Then she would look to Steiner, a playful grin playing across her lips. Her foot continued to stroke his leg beneath the table. He wasn’t sure how to respond. Was she just playing him, like the soldiers at the bar, was this just a game to piss off her husband. Frankly, Steiner didn’t care; he got his jollies where he could. He sat back, basking beneath her beauty, feeling her sensuous touch. He feigned playful indifference.

Hannah polished off the rest of the wine and they finished their meal.

“So Saul, are you married?” she asked, he shook his head. “Well let me ask you something. Do you think I’m beautiful?”

Steiner glanced at Murphy, who seemed to be trying to pretend he wasn’t present any more.

“Yes, very beautiful,” he replied.

“And if you were married to someone like me, would you want to spend all your time playing with your friends. Never come home. Go out chasing whores!”

Murphy rolled his eyes heavenward.

“I don’t believe I would?” Steiner smiled.

“I don’t blame you. Maybe I should have married you!” She leant across the table and touched his face.

“If I was married to you, Hannah, I would never leave home, I would spend every second with you.” Steiner said with obviously faux sincerity. Hannah laughed. Murphy shot him a fiery glance.

The Delta Captain cleared his throat; “Well I reckon we should call it an evening. Saul and I have an early start,” he made to stand.

“You go home, I’m sure Saul and I can somehow amuse ourselves,” she slid over to Steiner’s side of the booth, allowing Murphy out.

“Right that’s enough!” he grabbed her by the upper arm and dragged her from her seat. She laughed, stumbling; her face lit up by a grin. Guess she finally got what she wanted. “Good night, Saul, I’ll see you tomorrow at 08.00, okay?”

Steiner nodded as he watched Murphy drag his wife from the club. She was all over him. He smiled sadly and sat back in his booth and lit a cigarette.

He sat alone in the dark, smoking and drinking for about twenty minutes, waiting for the coast to clear. Knocking back the last of his soda, he finally stood and headed for the door. Stepping out into the chill, starlit night, he stifled a shudder and moved down the path to the

sidewalk. Nearing the street, he heard a muffled sound from the side of the club. He paused and turned. There it was again, a half-stifled cry. Steiner reached down and withdrew the subcompact Glock from his ankle holster. He checked the breach, then headed up around the building, keeping close to the wall, weapon held low by his side.

Sliding around the corner, he made out the shape of an open-topped Humvee parked in the shadow of the building, tucked in the side alley among the trashcans. Movement was coming from the rear. He moved closer, peering through the gloom.

Hannah was stripped naked except for her high-heels; eyes squeezed shut and down on all fours, facing the rear of the vehicle. Murphy was above her, trousers around his ankles, taking her doggy style. Both grunted and moaned as they rutted, the Humvee swayed and shuddered. Steiner froze. The look of abject pleasure and pain on Hannah's face, coupled with the pure hatred and glee on her husband's, froze his blood. Murphy muttered obscenities as he thrust viciously. "Bitch, whore!" he hissed. Occasionally he would reach over and grab a handful of her hair and jerk her head up. "Speak, bitch!" he snarled, tearing at her hair, twisting her neck. Her feline smile would spread.

"Fuck me. Fuck me, Daddy!" she purred in a little girl voice. A tear slid down her cheek.

As their thrusting grew more frantic, their cries rose. Steiner backed off, slipping around the building. He reholstered his gun and moved back into the light in front of the club. Pausing for a moment, he shuddered and passed a hand across his face.

Reaching the sidewalk, he stuck an unlit cigarette between his lips, and head down walked into the night, the blackness weighing down heavy upon his hunched shoulders. Behind him, the cries of abandon echoed through the darkness, taunting him.

Chapter 7

Steiner awoke at seven. He showered and dressed before eating a frugal breakfast. By eight, he was waiting outside his billet, dressed in olive BDU fatigues, Ranger forage cap and combat boots. The sun glittered overhead; the stink of soft asphalt was rising. Steiner hid his eyes behind dark glasses.

Murphy swung up to the curb in a Humvee. Steiner jumped in beside him and they took off with a screech of tyres. Murphy was dressed in identical fatigues, a SOCOM .45 automatic on his hip. The vehicle sped through the sprawling base.

Murphy broke the silence, "So, sorry about last night, man!" He glanced over at his passenger. Steiner looked back blankly. "Women, man. Can't live with 'em, can't herd them over the border into Canada!" he laughed raucously.

"She like that all the time?" Steiner broke in.

"Like what? Pissed off at the whole world? Bustin' my balls? Drunk as a fucking skunk? Or maybe just flirting with anything with a fucking dick?" he snorted blithely, feigning amused indifference. Steiner detected a rising note of rage beneath his camouflaged tones.

"You don't get jealous?" Steiner, a veteran of dysfunctional relationships, just liked to toss a grenade in now and then for fun. Throw a rock in a pool, watch the ripples spread.

"Me, nah!" Murphy laughed. "She's only doing it to get my attention. I don't give her the satisfaction of rising to it," he lied.

"But seeing her with other men, that doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it. I ain't got nothing to be bothered about. She only wants me, and who can blame her!" he slapped his chest and laughed too loud.

Steiner could happily kill this fuck.

"But all the grief, the acting up, doesn't it drive you nuts?"

“Of course, stupid bitch never shuts her fucking mouth!” his answer slipped out reflexively, the malice naked in his voice. Realising, he quickly covered, looking across with his big shit-eating grin.

“So why do you stay with her?” Steiner watched this piece of shit sitting next to him, figuring out how many ways there were to kill him where he sat, using only his bare hands. He was up to 23.

Murphy leaned over and winked conspiratorially. “The sex, man. What else?” he laughed. “She’s a fucking demon in the sack!”

“That it?”

“Look, Saul. I met her when I was teaching up at the Point last year. She was a student at NYU. We brought over some girls from there, for a dance with our cadets. Only she ended up with me. We start seeing each other, sex is great. Then I get my posting here, at Bragg. She starts screaming and balling, how she’ll kill herself if I leave. Goes fucking nutso! What was I supposed to do? I asked her to come with me. Only she takes this as a proposal, and says yes, she will be my wife. So I think, what the hell! I just go with the program. Get married, she drops out of her studies, we come down here. All hearts and fucking flowers for the first month, then she starts. I don’t pay enough attention to her, I chase other women, I don’t love her. She gets nuttier by the day. Starts saying she wants me to quit the army. I get the base Doc to put her on Prozac. She’s tolerable when she takes her meds, which ain’t often. Rest of the time she’s after me, bustin’ my balls. Fucking bitch is insane, out of her fucking mind man!” Murphy shook his head. “That bitch is destroying my fucking career. Brass see this nutty wife of mine, pass me over for the plum jobs. I ain’t going nowhere with her in tow. She’s dead fucking weight!”

“Why don’t you just leave her then?” Steiner hid his contempt for this loathsome fuck.

“Says she’ll kill herself if I leave her. That kind of shit’ll finish me in the corporation. No staff post for the wife-killer!” Murphy’s face coloured, hate clogging his throat. “Nope,

fact of the matter is I'm 29, she's 21 and beautiful, people think I've got it made, but that bitch is killing me. I've only got two ways out. She either gets her head together, realises she can do better and dumps me. That or she loses it completely, goes completely fucking insane, ends up in a loony-bin, or she just totals herself. Either way I come out of it looking good. I'm just trying to stay the course and enjoying the fringe benefits!" he laughed coldly.

"Which way's it look she's going?" Steiner chilled.

"Down and down. Worse by the day. Soon she'll be crazier than a shithouse rat!" he laughed.

Steiner nodded.

"Then I can play the poor, grieving husband, and get the fuck on with my life. It's hello easy-street and eventually that top slot in the corporation!"

"Great." Steiner muttered. He'd enjoy killing this fucker.

"Right, let's get you tooled up!" Murphy swung the Humvee into the armoury.

* * *

Steiner squatted in the guard tower, binoculars pressed to his eyes. 30 feet up, he scanned the surrounding area, focusing on the point 600 metres away. Set on the corner of the parade ground, as he had instructed, were some old, scarred bleachers, facing out across the open grassland separating it from the tower. Steiner removed his cap and settled on the bare floor, checking his watch. 10.00am. It was time.

A truck pulled up on the parade ground, Steiner watched through his field glasses. Four men all dressed in identical olive fatigues, jumped from the rear. A Special Forces Sergeant indicated for them to sit and wait on the bleachers. With a little bemused grumbling and head scratching, they took their seats. The truck took off, leaving the men to broil under the sun overhead.

Steiner watched them shuffle uneasily beneath the unrelenting sun. Waiting is a killer; it eats you up, strips away the facades you erect. Ordinary soldiers learned to cope with the 'hurry-up-and-wait' of the regular army. But these men were predators, singled out, their own masters. Steiner wanted to watch them, unobserved, staked out under the sun. He wanted to burn off any pretence, he wanted to humiliate, confuse and generally unsettle these men. Only then would he have their true measure.

Patience was a skill, an art that must be mastered. Impatience and its partner, haste, killed. One must live only in the instant, focused, never thinking of what might come, what has passed. Clarity, stillness, ultimate indifference were the greatest weapons a man possessed. The Englishman had obviously yet to master this art.

Wilson, the weasel-faced SAS man began to jabber in the heat. Steiner watched his mouth open and close, his sharp, little teeth glittering in the sun. He was all motion, arms waving, body squirming, while his mouth seemed stuck in gear. Bad.

Steiner moved his binoculars across the bleachers. The two Americans, Armstrong and Zaborski sat close together; both pressed against the far end of the benches, as if trying to escape the Englishman. Zaborski was huge, a colossus, but the grin fixed on his broad face helped to alleviate his menace. He sat, shoulders hunched, feet apart, and head down. He would shake his head from time to time, glancing at Armstrong beside him. The lean, taciturn Texan seemed very different from his friend. Still, relaxed and focused, he leaned back on the bleachers, his long, sculpted face impassive. His lips would only twitch in an attempt to smile; darkness seemed to engulf him. His cool eyes occasionally glittered with controlled mania. He glanced at Wilson, the Englishman, as if he'd happily kill him and give it no more thought than swatting a fly.

The Israeli sat apart from them all, perched atop the bleachers. From his vantage-point he watched the rest as a falcon would watch its prey. His utter calmness, his intensity dwarfed even Armstrong's. Like his fellow sniper, his focus and stillness were his greatest

strength. He sat loosely, fingers laced in front of him, coolly observing his teammates. Steiner instantly warmed to him.

Lowering his binoculars, Steiner unslung the Galil automatic sniping rifle from his back and unfolded its wooden butt. He popped the 20 round clip, tapped it against the wooden railings and reseated it with a slap. He pulled back the charging handle and chambered a round. He shuffled to the edge of the platform and hung his legs over the edge. Raising the Israeli rifle, he rested it on the tower's railings and drew the butt into his shoulder, resting his cheek against the cool furniture. He thumbed off the safety and peered through the Nimrod 6x telescopic sight. He wrapped himself comfortably around the squat rifle, the long muzzle brake/compensator fixed to the end of the heavy barrel traversing gently.

Steiner regulated his breathing, allowing the stillness at the centre of his being to overtake him until swallowed whole. Locked in, he zeroed first on Bach, his calm, mournful face filling the scope. He moved to Armstrong, recognising the quiet abandon behind the Texan's outer cool. Then he sighted quickly on the grinning, wild face of Zaborski. Finally he reached Wilson, the Englishman. His sharp face was transfixed by the cross-hairs of the sight, his mouth still a blur as he chattered on. Steiner wavered. He felt the man's restlessness unsettling him, polluting him like a disease, corrupting the group.

Steiner calmed himself. Wilson's glasses glittered as they caught the sun. He laughed hysterically. Steiner fixed the reticle of his scope on the bridge of the Englishman's nose. He drew back the trigger, squeezing it gently, absorbing the slack until he met the heavier resistance of the sear, pulling back only to the point of release.

It would be so easy.

He inhaled, then exhaled and smiled.

*

*

*

"You Yanks don't know shit!" Wilson whined in his nasal voice.

“Oh yeah, how’s that?” Zaborski asked amiably, glancing across at Armstrong with a grin and a conspiratorial wink.

“I was in the Gulf, running Ops behind the lines. I was on one of the Bravo missions, Scud busting, you know, Bravo Two Zero?” his small eyes shone eagerly.

“Oh yeah, I remember, that was that squad fucked up and got caught!” Zaborski interjected amiably.

Wilson’s face darkened. “I know Andy McNab, fucking excellent guy. Wasn’t his fault they got nabbed...”

“Not according to his version. Now, Chris Ryan, he may not be much of a writer, but he seems more my kind of man. His version of events seem slightly more plausible,” Zaborski was enjoying himself.

“You fucking Americans, you ain’t got a *Scooby-Doo!*” the two Americans took a long sideways look at Wilson, like he lost his mind. “Rhyming slang! *Scooby-Doo, Clue!* Get it?”

“Oh yeah, obviously?” Zaborski wound his finger by his head and whistled off-key.

“I knew Ryan too. Arrogant fucker, thinks he’s better than the rest of us. Geordie bastard!” Wilson squeezed his fists open and shut, his eyes staring far off.

“Freak!” Zaborski coughed, his hand in front of his mouth. Even Armstrong laughed.

Wilson glared at them.

“Maybe Ryan was better than the rest of you, he was the only one to evade capture and get out?” Zaborski suggested innocently.

Wilson was apoplectic. “Fucking ran, chicken-shit bastard...”

“Escape and evade. Seems to me he was the only one knew his job!” Armstrong chimed in.

“Fucking yanks, what would you know!”

“Enough. It may surprise you to know that us lowly Americans were running missions behind enemy lines during the Gulf War. Delta and Army Special Forces busted Scuds and all the rest of that shit!” Zaborski said, seemingly without malice.

“Oh yeah? How come we don’t hear about that then?”

“Well,” Armstrong said slowly, in his thick Texan twang, as if explaining patiently to an idiot child. “That’s kind of the idea behind covert operations. Generally you’re Special Forces types try not to blab the whole thing, writing dumb-assed fucking books for retards.”

“Fuck you!” Wilson spat, saliva flecking his lips. “The SAS was doing its stuff before you Yank bastards had heard of Special Forces!”

“Being first don’t make you necessarily the best.” Zaborski grinned.

“Fuck you!” Wilson shrieked.

“Even you being first is dubious. We had the Rangers, the Russians...”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” the wiry Englishman leapt to his feet, fists drawn up.

Zaborski glanced once at Armstrong, shook his head and slowly stood. The big American towered over the irate Wilson, having more than eight inches on him in height and probably outweighing him by a hundred pounds. Still, Wilson squared up to him, twitching and kicking at the dirt.

“When you’re ready, little man?” Zaborski planted his hands on his hips.

Bach, perched atop the bleachers, cleared his throat. They looked up. The Israeli smiled indulgently down.

“It may interest you to know that someone is coming!” he slowly pointed out across the open ground. They all turned, squinting through the dense sunlight.

Moving quickly over the ground ahead, a figure appeared out of the shimmering haze. Head down, fatigue cap pulled low, he strode through the knee-high elephant grass, the sun catching his dark-glasses. As he drew nearer, they could make out the shape of a rifle slung across his back.

“Who the fuck’s this?” Wilson muttered, turning.

“Well, I ain’t no genius, but I figure this would be our esteemed leader,” said Zaborski.

Bach and Armstrong climbed down from the bleachers and followed the other two to the edge of the grassy expanse.

The figure was closing fast.

“Looks like we’re about to find out.” Bach muttered.

The man looked up, his face screwed up against the blazing sun. The air around him shimmered as if alight. He waded through fields of fire.

All four men stepped back as he drew nearer, finally stepping onto the paved ground. He removed his crumpled cap and wiped a hand across his damp brow, his whole face gleaming under a film of perspiration. The cropped, dark hair was shot through with grey at the temples, his lean, twisted face turned away, as he gazed into the distance. He pulled the canteen off his webbing and took a short drink. He turned and examined the four men. His blank, inscrutable face twitched.

“Have a seat,” he said softly. The soldiers complied.

He placed his hands on his hips and stared at them for a moment.

“My name is Steiner,” he said after a moment. He began to pace slowly back and forth in front of them, removing his sunglasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. He halted, glanced at them sideways, his lips twisting. “What I have seen so far has left me distinctly unimpressed.” he hissed and began pacing again. The men looked at each other.

“Frankly,” he stopped again, pulling his shades back on, “You appear to me to be perhaps the most pitiful bunch of fuckers it has been my misfortune to meet!”

Wilson opened his mouth as if to protest.

“You, shut the fuck up!” Steiner stabbed his finger at the Englishman. “You’re the worst of the fucking bunch. Can’t you keep your mouth shut for five seconds?”

Wilson glared at him.

“Jabbering on like an old woman. I couldn’t give a shit for anything you had to say. And I suspect the rest of these men feel much the same!”

Zaborski grinned and nodded.

“As for you,” he turned to the big American. “You should know better. Sure this asshole is an idiot,” he jerked his head towards Wilson. “That don’t mean you have to encourage him, just so you can act the clown!” Zaborski’s grin faded and his broad face darkened. “You’re like a bunch of schoolgirls!” Steiner pulled back on his cap. “Only Mr. Bach and Sergeant Armstrong showed any composure or maturity. For them I hold out some hope. But you two should get together and set up home. You bicker like an old pair of faggots!”

Steiner began to pace again, moving briskly up and down.

“I was expecting a degree of professionalism, but I see our training is going to have to cover the very basics!” Steiner unclipped the radio handset from his belt and keyed it once. Within seconds a Humvee sped onto the parade ground, reversing up behind the bleachers.

Steiner strode over and dropped the tailgate of the vehicle. Inside was a pile of large backpacks.

“75-pound packs. Thought I’d start light. Ten mile, cross-country should be a nice warm up!” Steiner almost smiled.

“Fuck that shit!” Wilson cut through the groans of the rest. “What am I, some raw squady. I signed up for special duties, not this rookie shit!”

“You’ll do as told.” Steiner said bluntly.

“Fuck you, I can hump packs make you faint like a pansy. I…” Wilson blustered.

Steiner covered the ground separating them quickly. His first blow drove hard into the Englishman’s solar plexus, doubling him up, then he brought his knee up into his Wilson’s face, flipping him over backwards. As he hit the ground hard, Steiner stepped over him, drawing his Walther P99 automatic. Wilson rolled over, holding his hand to his bloody nose. Steiner levelled his weapon on the man’s face.

“There is one simple rule. I will tell you to do something just twice. Refusal number one, you get that,” Steiner nodded towards Wilson’s bloody face. “Two, you get this.” He indicated the Walther. “When the mission goes operational, we go straight to step two. Understand?”

Wilson just glared up at him, blood seeping between his fingers.

“Understand?” Steiner kicked him hard in the ribs. Wilson cried out, doubling up. When he looked up again, he nodded slowly. “Say it.” Steiner growled.

“I understand.” Wilson hissed through clenched teeth.

“Good!” Steiner turned on his heel and headed back to the Humvee. “Fact of the matter is, I’ve been lumbered with you lot. I had no say in team selection. I’ve only got three weeks to get you working as a unit. Seems like I can’t chop and change, so only way I can get rid of any non-hackers is to fail their ass, permanently. You fuck up, and worse still try to fuck me over, you’ll get a bullet in the head and an unmarked grave.” The men watching him showed no outward reaction. “Don’t act too surprised. You already don’t exist, and by the fact of your very presence, I doubt very much anyone’ll miss you. You’re here because you’re expendable and invisible. You fuck with me, then I’ll vanish your ass for good. Then maybe I get the team I want.” He paused by the Humvee. “Anyone not up to this, you better walk away now, it’s your last chance. After this point, the only way out is horizontal with your brains seeping out your heads. Understand?”

He halted, scanning their faces, “Speak now, or forever hold thy peace!” He hoped Wilson would take the offer and walk, but the Englishman just slumped on the bleachers, staring at him with unconcealed hatred.

“Okay,” Steiner shrugged, tossing the first pack off the Humvee. “Let’s get fucking moving then!”

*

*

*

Eight miles, the straps of Steiner's pack were cutting into his shoulders. Head down, he pounded on, his legs heavy, fatigues glued to his skin, sweat pouring down his face. He knew he was out of shape, he'd been out of the field for too long, easy hits in the straight world had made him soft. But he could not let it show.

All through the run, he had been aware of the rest of the team on his heels. All were match-fit; hardened veterans fresh from combat units. Armstrong and Bach were especially smooth and fast, threatening to pass him. Each time Steiner had to pick up the pace. Even the massive Zaborski seemed fresh, like he could happily pound away all day long. Steiner even had to admit to himself that Wilson, the Englishman, was more than up to the task, as he tore along, back bent beneath his pack, racing like a fired-up terrier. All the time, Steiner felt his eyes boring into his back.

Steiner couldn't show any weakness. He had to be better than them: stronger, faster, smarter. It had been like that his whole life, especially in the military. Steiner, with his slender frame, had always had to rely on his will. Other men were stronger, heavier, maybe even smarter. But Steiner would not allow himself to be beaten. No one was tougher. He may lack power, bulk, sometimes speed. But he would push himself further, harder till he triumphed over everyone and everything. He would defeat anyone, master any skill. To win he would defeat every weakness within himself.

The finish was in sight. Steiner picked up his pace. Armstrong and Bach went after him. Zaborski and Wilson tried to keep up, but dropped off. Steiner fought all inclination to stop and fall. The pack was dragging him down, his legs were heavy, leaden, every step a battle. He shook it off, focusing his mind. Armstrong slowly dropped back. Only the Israeli stayed with him. Both men tore across the open ground, the parade ground only metres away. Side by side, both men reached the finish, Steiner marginally ahead. He staggered, struggling to keep his footing. He circled around, dropping his head and sucking in air.

Armstrong finished and both he and Bach shrugged off their packs and collapsed on the ground. Zaborski led Wilson in. Steiner straightened and unfastened his pack, letting it hit

the ground hard. He pulled off his cap and stuck it in his pocket. Struggling to maintain his composure, he watched the others on the ground, gasping for air.

“Not a bad start,” Steiner headed towards the Humvee, head swimming. He reached inside, took a canteen and gulped down some water. He tossed more bottles to the other. Wilson gulped some down, then emptied his canteen over his head, shaking the water off like a dog.

Steiner allowed them about two minutes. He was happy, his physical exhaustion had cleared his mind.

“Okay,” Steiner broke in. “Stow your packs.”

Grumbling, they climbed to their feet, dragging their packs behind them. Zaborski hefted his up, one handed, as if to hurl it into the vehicle. Steiner held up his hand, planting it in the centre of the big man’s chest.

“Not too quick, the fun and games aren’t over yet!” Steiner reached into the Humvee and slid out five M4 carbines, compact M16 rifles with a foreshortened stock and retractable butt. He tossed one to each man, then passed out clips. “Now you can stow your shit,” he smiled, “Then you can hump your asses over to the range, double time, we got some target practice to do.”

“Fuck!” Wilson cursed.

Bach and Armstrong checked their weapons, then headed out without a word. Zaborski shrugged, and went after them, rifle held across his chest. Wilson waited; his dark eyes fixed on Steiner. The American slammed a magazine into the automatic rifle and yanked back the cocking handle, chambering a round. He brought the muzzle of the weapon round, keeping it low, aiming it in Wilson’s general direction. Wilson shifted uneasily. Steiner smiled and waggled his eyebrows. Wilson fingered his rifle. Steiner began to bring up his M4.

“Fuck,” Wilson turned and moved off. Steiner waited for a moment. It would’ve been so easy to put a bullet in the Englishman’s back. But there was plenty of time. He took a last

drink and pulled on his dark glasses. Hefting the rifle across his chest, he headed out fast, closing on the others.

Chapter 8

They were all shit-hot shots, no big surprise there. Bach and Armstrong were world-class, better than Steiner. Like all great shooters, it isn't the eye, it's patience and the inner-stillness and calm that goes with it. The team spent a couple of hours popping away with the M4s on the rifle range. Lunch was served in the field, MREs (*Meals Ready to Eat*, as tasty as they sound). Afterwards followed more shooting, then a five mile run with rifles held port arms, taken at speed. This was followed up by a run through of the SF assault course. By sundown the men returned to their billets. If they were anything like Steiner, they immediately fell into their beds, still encrusted in filth and sweat, and were asleep in seconds.

The following morning, Steiner awoke at eight, his alarm clock shrieking insistently. Climbing out of bed, he felt drained, but exhilarated. The aches and pains only made him feel alive. After shaving and showering, he had a quick breakfast and washed down his 75mg of Venlafaxine, before leaving the house, dressed in fresh fatigues.

He met the team at the Delta pistol range. Steiner gave a brief talk, before the range-master handed out the range of handguns: Sigs, Glocks, HKs, Walthers, Colts and Israeli Jerichos. Steiner included the standard issue Beretta 92F, the sidearm of the regular army, despite his misgivings about the weapon. There was also a representation of rarer, more specialised handguns, and those of their would-be enemy.

For more than an hour, the men tried out the weapons. It was likely they already knew their preferred choice of sidearm, but he wanted to see them in action, and he wanted to make sure they were proficient with a variety of weapons. All four men were of course first class shooters, but that would be of little importance. In the field, a handgun is of little use. It is redundant in all but the closest combat; its primary function is self-defence.

With the shooting completed, Steiner had 100-pound packs distributed. He announced another run, 10 miles. This was met with a roar of disapproval, but they were on the move in two minutes.

Double-timing it, they were back on the parade ground in a little over an hour. Good, could be better. The men were lolling about, clothes plastered to their sweaty bodies, gulping down fresh water, laughing and coughing from the exhaustion.

A dark sedan pulled onto the paved area, the town-car almost a limousine. The absurdity of this sight of civilian plushness amidst the military rigour, struck Steiner. He climbed to his feet, his heavy legs wobbling beneath him. The car slid to halt outside the nearby Delta HQ building. A tall, distinguished man climbed from the rear, grey hair cropped short, pearl-grey suit tailored as immaculately as a uniform, cold smile creasing his leathery face.

Logan, Steiner groaned. He picked up his pace, heading towards the visitor. As he neared, a second man climbed from the back of the sedan. Emerging from the side nearest Steiner, the man was slim and of medium height. His jet-black hair was brushed back from his high brow, sleek and slightly touched with grey. Next to the pitch hair, his alabaster skin was all the more striking. The man was probably about 40, but the milky skin was still clear and firm, drawn taut over his high, sharply defined cheekbones. The prominent bones of his face were almost visible beneath his translucent skin. His eyes were slightly oval in shape, almost oriental. The cold, black eyes that burned out at Steiner as he neared, were calm and steady and surprisingly touched by humour.

The driver stepped out of the sedan. Although dressed in a civilian suit, he was clearly military. Logan, his eye fixed on the approaching Steiner issued a clipped command and directed the driver to take the other passenger inside. The driver led the man towards the building.

Logan rounded the car to meet Steiner. He smiled icily and held out his hand. Steiner drew in close and jabbed his finger at the older man.

“I’ve got a bone to pick with you, you fuck!” he spat.

“Is that so?” Logan dropped his hand, but the smile stayed fixed.

“You held out on me!” Steiner was in his face, grimy finger jabbing at the immaculate breast of his suit-jacket.

“So?”

“You want me to run this fucking mission for you, you never hold out on me. You want me to do my job, I need all information, any resource I demand. Either that or your half-assed fucking op is dead before it starts. Still-born like the fuck-up it is!” Steiner was desperate to strike Logan; he just wanted an excuse.

“Chill the fuck out, Steiner. I tell you what I want, when I want. You’re just a hired gun here.”

“Maybe so, but this bird won’t fly with this shit. You let me run this how I want or I walk.”

“Get down off your fucking high-horse. You’re just our pet psycho. We got you on a short leash. You belong to us. You don’t give the orders. We say jump, you ask how high.”

The smile never left Logan’s lifeless face.

Steiner boiled with icy rage.

“Now get yourself cleaned up for our guest. You look like shit and stink like a hog!”

Logan turned on his heel, dismissing Steiner, and disappeared inside the building.

* * *

Steiner ordered the Delta range-master to take the team out to the rifle range, then quickly showered and changed into fresh fatigues and boots. He headed from the shower-block to the main building, and found Logan waiting in a corridor, hand in his pocket as he lazily drew on a cigarette.

Steiner marched up to him. He really wanted to wipe the smirk off the fuck’s face. He invaded his space, hissing into his face.

“So what’s the deal, you scumbag fuck?”

“I got rank on you, Steiner!” the smirk was gone. For a second rage flashed across his impassive face.

“You got nothing.”

“I work with the President. The President owns you,” the humourless grin returned.

“He may own you, not me. I do the odd job for him. I got shit on him. You’re nothing but a fucking lap-dog, dry-humping your master’s leg.”

“Watch your mouth!”

“I could grease you in a second, no-one would give a fuck.” Steiner smiled.

“You could try,” Logan flicked away his cigarette and straightened up.

“Some other time.” Steiner turned away, dismissing him. He looked through the door window of the office beside them, aware of Logan glowering next to him. “So I take it this is the sixth member of my team?”

“Yes,” Logan hissed.

“So you held out on me for this,” he turned, grinning and shaking his head. “All the fucking mystery, just for a Russian. Big fucking deal!”

“Not just any Russian.” Logan seemed affronted.

“Of course,” Steiner snorted.

The Russian sat alone in the room. His fingers interlaced, he rested his hands on the bare table, his head hung, eyes half closed, focused on the nothingness before him. Steiner knew that from such stillness and focus, true violence came, not the shambolic, undisciplined chaos that came from twitchy loudmouths like Steve Wilson. Alone in the stark room, the Russian had a nobility, like a Samurai without a master, a Ronin, but still with his honour.

“Is a Russian a good idea. The Arabs and the Soviets were sucking each other’s dicks for years. I know the Rais was our boy for a while, but the way I hear it, the Russians been all over them and the Iranians lately, any fucking Arab. For the right price, of course.” Steiner didn’t take his eyes off the Russian.

“Exactly. This boy’s been out in the Gulf, including Iraq, as a military advisor, training their troops, while Russian techs fix them up with new missile technology. He was inside Iraq until only a few months ago, working with their military and their government people. He’s got the inside line. Who better to lead you in.”

“Why exactly should I trust this fuck. He joins up with us, sells out his old bosses, all for the right price. Why wouldn’t sell us out?”

“You don’t get it, do you, Steiner. He didn’t sell anything. Your Russian is half-Jewish, on his mother’s side. Loyal soldier of the Soviet Union. Spetsnaz, GRU. Commando and Assassin. Seems he believes in all that socialist crap. He’s got *principles*.” Logan spat the last word with derision. “Stays with the program when the Ruskies get capitalism. But it seems they went too far when they started selling missile technology and God knows what else to the Arabs. They give them what they want, but now there ain’t no Cold War, the Kremlin isn’t exacting any control over their use. So our Russian friend jumps sides.”

“He comes over to us?”

“Fuck no. We’re still the enemy to him. That wouldn’t square with his sense of fucking *honour*. No, he starts working with the Israelis. Volunteers to go out to the Gulf. Starts leaking to the Israelis. Missile and weapons details. Unit positions, defence capabilities. Israelis collate this data, even hit some of the sites. When our boy has given all he’s got, he jumps sides. Vanishes into the Arabian Desert. Mossad picks him up and whisks him back to Jerusalem. Way he tells it, defected out of disgust. Says he’s finished with Russia. Guess he found his *spiritual* home. Maybe he got fucking *religion* or something. So the Israelis been debriefing our born-again kike for the last couple of months, had him tucked up in a safe-house. We pulled a few strings, the Jews in Jerusalem leant him to us.”

“You know, Logan you missed your vocation. Did you ever consider a career in the diplomatic service.” Steiner shook his head.

“Laugh on, funny man. Oh yeah, that right, ain’t you a yid or something. You and chuckles should hit it off. Seems to think he’s something special too!”

Steiner ignored him, staring at the Russian with newfound respect.

“What’s his name?”

“Yuri Medvedev.”

Steiner nodded and began to open the door.

“One more thing,” Logan interrupted him.

Steiner half-turned, his hand still resting on the handle.

“He knows.”

“He knows what?” Steiner frowned.

“He knows everything, well pretty much everything.”

“What are you saying?”

Logan shrugged, “He knows the target, some of the mission plan.”

“You’re fucking joking?” Steiner was incredulous. “Why the fuck did you do that. I thought was the only one briefed. The team would be told after initial training.”

“Only way he’d come on board. Didn’t want anything to do with us Americans. I had to sweeten the deal.”

“You fucking cretin!” Steiner swung open the door and stepped into the room.

Medvedev looked up slowly, a thin smile on his lips.

“Steiner?” he asked in a soft voice.

Steiner nodded, standing before him, arms crossed.

“My ears are burning!” he nodded to the open doorway. Logan entered.

“Your English is good.” Steiner said. It was an understatement. Medvedev spoke without a trace of a foreign accent; indeed his speech was touched by a credible mid-west cadence, maybe Indiana or Ohio in origin.

The Russian shrugged. “Should be, in Spetsnaz we spent many years learning how to infiltrate the western nations. I’m also fluent in German, French and Arabic. I can also get by in Spanish and Polish. I’m learning Hebrew right now.”

“Language whiz. Me, I can speak passable French, and a bit of Spanish and Arabic. And that gives me a headache.”

“My English is rusty. I have a trace accent. We don’t get much practice these days. They closed down our schools at home and we lost the ones in East Germany.” He seemed genuinely saddened by this.

“Things changing all over.” Steiner agreed. Logan cleared his throat.

“I think Colonel Logan wants us to move onto more substantive matters.” Medvedev smiled, perfectly still in his chair.

“Colonel Logan is an asshole,” Steiner spat, glancing only briefly at the older man. Logan hid any anger behind his poker-face. “You didn’t want to play?” Steiner continued, turning back to the Russian. “What changed your mind?”

“The mission?” Medvedev was utterly inscrutable.

“Yeah?”

“The target.”

“You got something specific against our Iraqi bud?”

“Yes and no. Reckon I still need to make up for training and arming the Arabs.”

“You fed the Israelis information.”

“Not enough. Anyway, the man is a danger to my new country. He is unstable, and now with his new missile technology he can strike when the whim takes him. In the Gulf War, he deployed chemical and biological warhead to his scud sites targeting Israel. No-one knows what stopped him using them. Luck maybe?”

“Chosen people. That and Israel’s nuclear capability?” Steiner smiled.

“Yeah, well there’s that!” Medvedev swallowed a chuckle.

“You willing to put your life on the line for this?”

“You Americans, and the British, gave him his chemical and biological agents. The Russians have given the missile technology. I intend to make good those gifts.”

“Like the Israelis stopped the French giving the Iraqis a nuclear capability?”

“Maybe?” the Russian gave his thin smile again. “They did it twice.” He was referring to two attacks to thwart French attempts to sell nuclear reactors to the Iraqis. On April 6th 1979, Mossad agents raided the storerooms of a French nuclear plant at Le Seynes-sur-Mer, near Toulon, where a nuclear core was being built for delivery to Iraq. They blew the core up. The French persisted, despite this and the subsequent killing in Paris of Egyptian born scientist and member of Iraq’s Atomic Energy Commission, Dr. Yahya al-Meshad, by person or persons unknown. Building of a reactor site commenced in Iraq. On June 7th 1981, with building complete and only days before the reactor was due to come on line, a force of eight Israeli Air Force F-16s, covered by six F-15 interceptors, swooped down on the Osirak nuclear reactor at Al-Tuweitha, north of Baghdad, and bombed it to rubble. They had infiltrated Arab airspace, over-flying Saudia Arabia and Jordan for more than an hour undetected. They obliterated their target and reached home unscathed. The world condemned Israel, but the Iraqi nuclear programme was set back by years. The French also got the message and stopped trying to supply Iraq with weapons-grade uranium, as Israel had long demanded.

“Your reckon we can do the same thing, on the ground. Get in, beard the lion, get out?” “Maybe. But remember any idiot can stick his head in a lion’s mouth. The trick is to do it and get it out again.”

“You don’t think much of our plan?”

“What plan. Frankly, whoever came up with it must be a moron!” Medvedev smiled bashfully. “No offence?”

“None taken. It was chuckles here came up with our so-called plan. Colonel Logan is your moron.”

“I’ve had enough of this shit!” Logan grunted. “I’ll leave you to fag kikes to it. The President expects regular status reports.”

“He can expect them. I ain’t gonna write them. Let your boy Murphy do it, if he can read and write!”

Logan left, muttering darkly under his breath.

Steiner turned back to Medvedev.

“You think we can make this work?”

The Russian shrugged. “The central plan is sound. It needs work though, if it’s to succeed. We might even get out alive afterwards.”

“You want to live?”

“Why not?”

“Make a change from the rest of the team.”

“I have plans. The Rais isn’t the only tyrant needs dealing with.”

“Who you got in mind?”

“The list is long. My old and new country have many enemies.” The Russian smiled grimly.

“Can’t kill everyone.”

“Yes, but some people have to die.”

* * *

The Humvee emerged out of the inky darkness, the deep, throaty bass of its engine drowning out the chirping of the crickets. Murphy pulled the vehicle over to the side of the road and shut it off. The hot engine ticked in the stillness. A warm wind rustled through the scrub of the plains.

A sedan pulled in ahead of Murphy and parked. He climbed from the Humvee and approached it, his fingers brushing his holstered firearm. The driver of the sedan got out and reached for the handle of the rear-passenger door, but it flew open before he could reach it. The tall, stern figure of Colonel Chuck Logan climbed from the car and stood, his silvery, cropped hair glowing in the moonlight.

Murphy approached and saluted sharply, drawing himself to attention and standing ramrod stiff. Logan returned the salute half-heartedly.

“So, what goes on, Captain?” Logan growled, his flat eyes shining out of the gloom.

“Training is continuing, sir. Routine shit so far, Steiner seemed to be marking time ‘til the Russian got here. Basic range work, PT, pack-marches. Seems a waste of time to me, sir.”

“Maybe?”

“I mean, these men are all highly trained operatives, all drawn from active elite units. Why’s he fucking around with this chicken-shit stuff?”

“Not much he can teach them, is there. Apart from sizing them up, it’s all about unit cohesion. Gotta get used to each other and their little ways. In the field, they got to be able to function smoothly as a team.”

“Maybe, but none of this has anything to do with killing The Rais, does it?” Murphy whined.

“Captain, sometimes you can be the densest motherfucker!” Logan sighed.

Murphy blushed deeply.

“Sometimes I wonder why I pulled strings to get you into Delta. The unit commander didn’t want you, but he owed me. Maybe he was right after all?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Murphy apologised abjectly.

“Not your fault, Murph, original thought was never your forte. But no one obeys orders better than you.” Logan slapped the Captain on the shoulder, his face a mixture of shame and gratitude. Logan drew him off to the side. “What’s your reading on Steiner?”

“Don’t know,” Murphy shrugged. “Kind of an asshole, actually!”

Logan nodded.

Murphy, seeing he was on the right line, continued. “Thinks he’s something special, arrogant bastard. His eyes all over my wife, thinks I don’t notice!”

“Really?” Logan seemed intrigued by this last titbit.

“Yeah, I’m used to her fucking flirting. Her way of getting attention. But he was enjoying it way too much. Didn’t even try to hide it. Nearly fucking kicked his ass!”

Murphy’s eyes took on a faraway look, caught up in his rage.

“Sounds to me like you’re jealous?” Logan smiled.

“Me?” Murphy struggled to smile, throwing back his shoulders with fake bravado. “I never get jealous. I don’t care about anybody or anything!”

“Maybe?” Logan whispered softly and smirked. “But this thing with Hannah could be of use?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Murphy shrugged. “It’s just Steiner, guy pisses me off. Thinks he’s better than me!”

“That’s because he is.” Logan snapped coldly. Removing his hand from Murphy’s shoulder, he turned and headed back to the car. Murphy hurried after him, snapping at his heels.

“I could do this operation, Colonel. Give me a chance. With a team of D-boys, dropped behind Iraqi lines, I could take The Rais out, no fucking problem!”

“No, Captain, we’ve had this before. We need a force that is not purely American, one that is totally deniable.” Logan paused and turned. “And frankly, Murph, you’re not up to the job. You have other talents. And I’m afraid the Delta operatives fucking hate you!”

Murphy looked up at him with puppy-dog eyes.

“Jesus,” Logan sighed, deciding to throw the poor fuck a bone. “You’re too valuable to waste on some dumb, fucking suicide mission. I’ve groomed you for a top slot in the corporation. You’re my man on the inside.” He slapped the forlorn Murphy on his brawny upper arm. “When this shit is over, you’ll be transferred, onward and upwards. SF is for cowboys and psychos. People like me and Steiner. I need you at the top where the real power is.”

Murphy brightened, “Yes sir, you can rely on me, sir!”

“Good.” Logan opened his car door. The driver slid behind the wheel. “One more thing,” he turned back to Murphy. “Tell Steiner we’re moving the timing up. Ten days at Bragg, three at Fort Bliss in Texas, then straight out to Israel. We go operational in 18 days. The President is starting to wobble, and frankly I’m starting to have a few misgivings. Keep your eye on them, you’ll be going out to the Gulf with the team. You’ll handle communications from our side. If this goes to shit, I’ll need you to handle damage limitation.”

“You can rely on me, Colonel!” he barked happily.

“I know. You may have to clean house. Make a few people disappear, you know?”

“Of course, sir!”

“One way or the other, Steiner isn’t coming out of this alive.”

“Glad to hear it, sir. Nothing would give me greater pleasure!”

“Don’t get too excited. The Iraqis will probably save you a job.”

“I can always hope.”

“Right,” Logan shook his head and slipped into the car. The fucking losers he had to deal with.

The sedan took off, fishtailing its rear in the dirt as it roared away. Murphy stood alone in the dark, swallowed up in the twisting cloud of filth.

Chapter 9

The pain twisted and knotted in his head. His eyes burned. Sitting, shoulders hunched, elbows planted on the desk, he pressed his palms against his tightly closed eyes. It didn't help. He lowered his hands and opened his eyes. The room swam. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around the polymer grip of the 9mm automatic and lifted it to his head.

He sat alone in the dark, fighting for air as he floated in the pool of light spilling from the desk lamp. He felt the cool kiss off the muzzle against his feverish temple. His ragged breathing slowed and steadied. Slowly the pain ebbed away. The gnawing tension bled from his body. The pistol wavered and slid from his temple. A thin smile plucked at his lips. He laid the weapon back on the desk within easy reach.

Steiner slid the unopened dossier on the table towards him and flipped it open.

The file on Medvedev was slim even by the standards of the world he inhabited. The file on him held by the Russians had been ruthlessly excised of any information deemed too sensitive. The Israelis had obtained the substantive part of this dossier, and this in turn had been pruned by them before handing it to the Americans. Undoubtedly Harker and Logan had also trimmed the file before passing it on to Steiner. So here it was, the heavily censored, bowdlerised version of a life in the shadows. The bare bones of a deniable existence.

Yuri Medvedev, was born forty-two years ago in the Russian town of Rostov, just over a hundred miles north-east of Moscow. A grey, drab industrial town, unremarkable except for the fact that this unassuming place has become known as the world capital of serial killers. An interesting, but unexplainable fact, but Rostov had the highest proportion of these predators than anywhere else on Earth. Anyway, this charming berg was the hometown of Yuri's mother, Anna Medvedev, nee Mayakowski. The only daughter of a poor Jewish family, Anna had returned home for the birth of her first child, while her husband, Viktor, a paratroop officer, remained on active-duty. The Mayakowski family was blighted, like all Jews in Soviet Russia (not much different from Imperial Russia, just sans Cossacks). The shtetl was maybe a thing of the past, maybe the pogrom, but Jews remained a hated and

mistrusted minority. Things had improved after the death of Stalin four years before, whose hatred of Jews was pathological, overshadowed only by Hitler's. The Jews suffered worse than many under the Iron Leader's tyranny, hundreds of thousands slaughtered in the purges or swept up into the Gulags. Along with the rest of the Russian people, things had improved for the Jews in the relative thaw under Khrushchev. But still they were banned from membership of the communist party, banished from many jobs and all positions of power, forced into squalid ghettos.

The Mayakowski's had it better than most, the father being a pharmacist, but still their life was hard. Then their nineteen-year-old daughter, Anna, brought home a handsome paratroop officer, Viktor Medvedev. Her family, although concerned, didn't stand in the way of the burgeoning relationship, but was surprised when the young soldier proposed to Anna. As an officer, Viktor was obviously a party member, and as a loyal supporter of Khrushchev, his star was in its ascendance. By marrying a Jew, he was tainting himself; any place in the highest flight of the military would be barred to him. The family demurred, but in the face of Viktor and Anna's obviously love and determination, they relented and the pair were married. Less than a year later, Yuri was born. Through the following years, Anna followed Viktor from posting to posting. Another son was born two years later.

Viktor, it seems was not just a paratrooper, but was a member of Spetsnaz, the elite and shadowy special forces unit. The nature of his job necessitated long separations from his wife and children, but it seems to have been a happy family.

Yuri excelled at school, in his studies and at sport. He grew up strong and handsome. And smart. Viktor's career may have been curtailed by his marriage, but he never wanted to be Chief of Staff, or Minister of Defence. He was an infantry officer. He lived for the excitement and danger of combat. The paratroopers and Spetsnaz more than provided this. With the fall of Khrushchev, Viktor had another mark against him, but petty politics, or an unwise marriage could not sideline such a gifted soldier. Likewise held true for Yuri. His talents and father's reputation drew the attention of the party apparatchiks. They turned a

blind-eye to the whole Jewish matter, and the boy was enlisted in the young pioneers, the first step towards full party membership.

Yuri graduated at eighteen, top of his class. Unsurprisingly he enlisted in the army and began his training as an officer. Three years later he was a lieutenant in the paratroopers, and soon after joined Spetsnaz.

On 26th December 1979, two giant Antonov transport aircraft emerged out of the gloom of an Afghani dawn and landed at Kabul airport. On board were Spetsnaz commandos dressed in Afghan army uniforms. In the belly of the planes were trucks and jeeps painted with Afghan markings. Spetsnaz troops who had arrived two days earlier on commercial airline flights, disguised as civilians, returned to the airport. Acting in concert, the two groups swiftly seized control of the control tower and runway, planting beacons to guide in the following invasion force. As the vast fleet landed, the Spetsnaz troops headed into the city centre, towards the presidential palace. En route they wiped out a heavily manned checkpoint. Reaching the palace, the commandos took out the eight tanks defending it with RPGs and rammed their way through the gates. Joined by KGB special forces, the force stormed the palace. They liquidated everyone they found inside. President Hafizullah Amin was finally trapped in his private bar on the top floor. His bodyguards dead, he was captured. He was killed by a single gunshot to the head. It was widely believed Yuri Medvedev fired the fatal shot.

The Soviets had seized the reins of power in Afghanistan, as they had in Czechoslovakia eleven years before. Viktor Medvedev was at the vanguard of the Spetnaz force that struck Prague, now his son repeated the triumph in Kabul. But the joy of victory was short-lived. As an omen, the commander of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant-General Vassily Papatin was killed in a minor road accident. Viktor Medvedev, head of Spetnaz forces in Afghanistan, was given command. The Soviets had the capital and they had installed their own government, but the vast wilderness that made up most of the country wasn't as quick to fall.

For more than seven years, the Soviets were bled dry by the Afghan resistance army, the Mujahedeen, a collection of disparate Islamic groups that ranged the fundamentalist to off the chart fucking wackos. They were armed and trained by the CIA and the British. Mikhail Gorbachev, the new reformist leader in the Kremlin knew the war was doomed and he began to negotiate a staged pull out. He wanted peace with honour. The CIA had their dogs in the Mujahedeen hound them out, before turning on each other.

The Russians had paid a heavy price. More than 13,000 were dead, at least 30,000 wounded, all out of an invasion force of around 115,000. Among the dead were Lieutenant-General Viktor Medvedev, his chopper shot down by an Afghan using a US-made Stinger missile. Weeks later Yuri's only brother, Mikhail, now a young paratrooper officer, was ambushed along with his patrol. Wounded, he was captured with two other survivors. A week later, their three bodies were found skinned and nailed to a tree outside a nearby Soviet base.

Yuri had continued to serve in Afghanistan throughout the war. After the death of his brother and father, viciousness entered the formerly detached professional. He blamed the Americans as much as the Afghans for his father's death, but it was the Afghans who had tortured and butchered his little brother. His Spetsnaz team, along with KGB units launched a savage wave of assassination and terror upon the Afghans, beside which the American's Phoenix Program in Vietnam pales in comparison. Suspected sympathisers and activists within the Afghan resistance were killed, others were snatched, tortured and executed. Villages were burnt. The violence was savage, but it was focused, the rage tempered by design. The Mujahedeen reeled beneath the onslaught, but Yuri's people were pulled off when the western press got hold of the story.

The Yuri Medvedev who returned from Afghanistan was much changed. As always he continued to work with Spetsnaz and GRU military intelligence, but on occasion he was loaned out to the KGB for assassinations, in Western Europe, the Far East and Latin America. This caused some bad feelings inside Directorate V of the KGB, the unit dedicated to *wet work*. His commanders were always mindful to keep Yuri away from any operations in the

Middle East, mindful of his hatred of the Muslims, as well as his Jewish background and possible pro-Israeli feelings.

As his father was a Khrushchev supporter, so Yuri was pro-Gorbachev, his communism more Marxist-socialist, than Stalinist. He supported the reforms of *perestroika* and welcomed the openness of *glasnost*, but like Gorbachev he could not have foreseen that these very reforms to the Soviet system were to destroy it. Their socialist utopia was consumed by a monstrous capitalism, spewing up in its place a grotesque land run by gangsters and corrupt politicians. This defilement was presided over by the bloated drunk and shameless opportunist, Boris Yeltsin. Yuri had opposed the coup against Gorbachev, and his Prime Minister, Yeltsin, in '91, but he quietly backed the '93 uprising against Tsar Boris, by now president of the corpse that was once Russia. It failed. Disillusioned, Yuri began to plot, and when the Russian government began selling missile technology and other advanced weaponry to Iran and other outlaw Arab states, he acted. He volunteered to be posted out to the Middle East, training Arab troops. Shocked, his superiors put aside any suspicions, and out of desperation agreed.

Yuri flew out of Moscow. He never looked back. He was gone.

*

*

*

“You know killing The Rais won't make the damnedest difference. Not to Israel?” Steiner and Yuri walked across the parade ground, both in military fatigues.

“Maybe?” the Russian shrugged.

“Might make things even worse. With the strongman leader dead, the whole fucking place could come apart at the seams. Inside and out, everyone will be trying to grab control. Make Lebanon look like a tea party.”

“Exactly,” Yuri smiled. Steiner glanced across. “With the Arabs busy fighting one another, they'll leave the Israelis alone, at least for a while.”

“Maybe?” Steiner grunted.

“Maybe.” Yuri just shrugged and flicked away his cigarette.

The two men headed briskly towards the waiting group.

“Anything I should know?” Yuri asked as they neared.

“No. Mostly they’re good men. All reliable professionals.” He paused in thought for a moment. “Well maybe one might be suspect.”

“Which one?”

“I’ll allow you to decide.”

The four waiting team members sat waiting on the scarred bleachers. Steiner halted in front of them.

“This is Yuri. He is the sixth member of our little group.”

The Russian just nodded and smiled coolly. The four seated men looked him over. Zaborski and Armstrong guessed his origins, but seemed unflustered, instantly accepting the newcomer. Bach eyed him for a little longer, scrutinising him a little too intently maybe, as if recognising something telling. The Englishman, Wilson just scowled, his face twisting as if from a bad taste.

“This is it?” he snorted. “Tell me he ain’t a fucking Russian!”

Steiner ignored him.

“Looks like some kind of fucking freak to me. What is he, Russian, or another fucking yid?”

Steiner stepped in close, swinging his left fist in a short arc backhanded. Connecting with Wilson’s face, his knuckles drove into his cheek with an audible crunch. He was flipped from his seat, hitting the ground and rolling, coming up with a hand held to his bloody mouth. His dark eyes fixed on Steiner.

“Consider that your first warning.” Steiner nodded. Wilson’s eyes shifted briefly to the other man’s holstered sidearm, then back to his face. “Just try it, please!” Steiner grinned crookedly. Wilson looked away, and then climbed back onto his seat, chastened.

Yuri glanced at Steiner and nodded.

“Don’t worry about Ratboy here, he’s got some serious behavioural problems.

Reckon his Mommy and Daddy just didn’t love him enough.” Zaborski grinned, “That or his Mom drank too much gin while she was carrying him, or maybe dropped him once too often on his head when he was a kid.”

“Fuck you!” Wilson whispered, looking down at his feet.

“That or he’s just an asshole?” Armstrong drawled.

“Yeah, well, there’s that!” Zaborski shrugged and both men dissolved into giggles.

“As you can see, Mr. Wilson had been voted most likely to fragged in the first week!”

Steiner said to Yuri.

The Russian nodded, then glanced at Zaborski and Armstrong. “*Ratboy?*”

“Oh just a little sobriquet we’ve dubbed our English friend with.” Steiner smiled, as the two seated Americans continued laughing.

“I see,” Yuri nodded, struggling not to smile.

“Anyway, let me make the formal introductions.” Steiner nodded at each man in turn.

“This is Luke, Homer and Yoni,” he paused and turned to the Englishman. “And this is Mr. Wilson.”

Wilson looked up, as if hurt, “Why they have their first names and not me, why aren’t I Steve?”

Steiner shrugged, “This is Wilson,” The Englishman glared at him. “Or *Ratboy*, if you prefer!”

“I think I do,” Yuri nodded. “Luke, Homer, Yoni,” he paused grinning, “*Ratboy.*” The group dissolved into laughter. Wilson squirmed, hatred and shame leaking from every pore.

Before the laughter subsided, Wilson was on his feet. “You fuckers!” he screamed. The rest laughed even louder. “I’ve had it with the bonehead shit round here!”

Steiner waved the others to quieten down. They struggled to do so.

“Please enlighten us, Mr. Wilson?”

“For a start, back with the squadron there’s none of this *sir* shit, everyone’s equal, you fucking square heads ain’t got a clue!”

“I think you’ll find the same applies with the Delta boys, Mr. Wilson. But I wouldn’t worry too much about it. Round the base you’re a civilian, so are automatically granted the title of *sir*, and a certain deference. I wouldn’t take it personally though, just a matter of common courtesy, but you being British you wouldn’t know anything about that. And anyway, soon as they realise what an asshole you are, reckon you’ll be lucky to get the time of day.”

“You fuckers...” Wilson blustered, his face reddening.

“Sit down, and shut the fuck up,” Steiner snapped, “I’ve heard enough of this shit.”

“Fuck you, you assholes don’t know shit...”

Zaborski kicked out with his right foot, his boot driving into Wilson’s thigh, hitting his femoral artery, cutting off the flow of blood. The Englishman crumpled, folding in on himself, unconscious before he hit the ground.

“Thank you, Homer,” Steiner nodded.

“Thought the dipshit would never shut up.” Everyone laughed.

“Anyway, now we have the full team assembled, you’ll be glad to hear we’ll be cutting out the rookie shit. We can get down to specifics. Yuri and me and have been knocking about a few ideas, and we reckon we might have come up with a halfway workable plan.”

“Whoopee fucking do!” said Zaborski.

“Okay, this is how it’ll work...”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Ratboy to wake up?” Bach asked.

Steiner glanced down at the inert crumpled heap at the foot of the bleachers.

“Fuck him!”

Chapter 10

Killing isn't as hard as you think.

First time out, there's just that moral hurdle to overcome. Just fucking social conditioning anyway. Crossing the line's the hardest bit, but from there on it ain't nothing.

I suppose there's the risk of guilt, but if you're going into this line of work, your sense of right and wrong and all that shit is probably pretty fluid. Trick is not to think about it. Truth is, I felt worse about most the bugs I stepped on than most of the people I whacked.

Killing's an art, like any other, you're born for it. I guess I'm a natural born killer. It's all I'm any good at. Seems a shame to let your God-given talents go to waste. Sure, any asshole can kill someone, but where's the fucking artistry. It's all hack and slash and fucking mess. Then there's the panic and the fucking crying. Then the pitiful fucking excuses: my mommy and daddy were mean to me, I'm a victim of society. All that shit. Pathetic. Gives us professionals a bad name. Of course the press and the politicians gobble this shit up: it's TV/movies/music, it's lack of gun control, it's the sixties, it's the Devil. All shit. Some fucking amateur lost his head. End of story. Stop pissing and moaning, stop looking for answers.

No, an amateur killing is like an amateur trying to sing, or paint, or write. Maybe it's okay, for an amateur, but really it's pretty damn awful most of the time. Like the old dancing dog. Sure it can do it, but is it any damn good.

Amateurs and their goddamn excuses. I'm not some born-again, fire and brimstone, hang 'em high Republican asshole, but if anybody deserves the death penalty it's these little weasels. Lethal injection practically invented for these bastards. That's about the saddest, most pitiful way for a man to go. Quietly pissing and shitting yourself to sleep on your back in bed. Like some old geezer. Just right for these losers. Me, I'm going out kicking and screaming. I'm gonna take as many of the bastards with me as I can, I'm taking down the whole fucking planet.

No excuses, no explanations, no regrets.

Nope, killing is pretty damn easy if you got the head and stomach for it. Once you've crossed the line, that imaginary line, it's as simple as everything else in life, maybe easier. Everyone says the first is the hardest. Maybe? They can all be hard if you think about them. No, kill and move on, that's the trick. Sure the first one is hard, sort of; it's a pretty big step killing a man. But it's just all that conditioning, that shitty, fucking baggage your parents, teachers and the rest of those losers burdened you with. Number One, forget all that. Guilt, remorse, shame, all that stuff is just shit dreamt up by assholes scared of what's inside them, trying to pin down the darkness with rules. Fucks you up. Do what you want to do, what you're meant to do. Don't listen to those fucked up losers, they suck the fun out of everything.

Once you have the divine power of life or death, you tend to develop delusions of grandeur. That power can be intoxicating. Killing becomes too easy. Some asshole cuts you off in traffic, kill him. Someone shoves you on the subway, kill him. Someone hassles you, kill him. Someone looks at you funny, kill him.

Self-discipline. It has its place in our line of work. You can't kill every fucker who pisses you off, tempting as it might be. Console yourself with the thought that you could kill this fucker without a second thought. Smile and move on. Sure you can kill some of these losers, perks of the job, but don't go crazy.

Sad fact is though, you finally realise, you don't really have any power. You're just a weapon. Someone else picks the target, takes aim and pulls the trigger. Your boss, he makes the call; you just do the distasteful deed itself. You're just another fucking brain-dead drone punching the buttons the management tells you.

But there are the perks. When your boss finally pisses you off and outlives his usefulness, just kill the fucker.

I'm not saying there aren't any drawbacks in the life of a killer. After a while, no matter how you try, it all starts to creep in on you. Something dies inside, the darkness creeps up on you. All that shit you put behind you finally catches up. Things will start to gnaw at

you; ghosts will begin to haunt you. This is when to get out. Stay and you're finished. Guilt and shame will first take your dignity then slowly kill you.

. Me, I won't wait that long. Moment I begin to feel my shit slip, I won't hesitate to put a single bullet in my head. Long time ago, I reached the realisation that nobody could kill me but me. And one day I'll do it. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe right now, who knows? Kind of appropriate though. The killer kills himself. Perfect symmetry

No, killing isn't a bad life. It's what I was born to do.

*

*

*

The silhouetted head exploded. The blast followed a split second later.

Steiner watched the swirling debris clear through his binoculars. Lying prone, his Galil sniping rifle set on its bipod in front of him, he waited for a clear view. He was 600 metres short of the target, the other two shooters 300 metres further back. As the echo of the shot died, the view cleared. The head of the target was shot clean through, ripped open.

“Target down. Clean headshot, Alpha.” Steiner pinched his throat mike, reporting to Bach, set back on his right.

“Bravo, stand by,” Steiner signalled Armstrong.

In the days since the introduction of Yuri, training had begun in earnest, roles allocated. Armstrong and Bach, as primary snipers, along with Steiner as secondary shooter, had selected their weapons. The two primaries, covering shots up to 1000 metres had settled on the Heckler and Koch MSG90 automatic sniping rifle, the sturdier, lighter version of the precision PSG1. Taking a 5 or 20 round clip, and mounted with a 10x-telescope sight, the MSG90 was capable of hitting a target 1200 metres away. It was perfect for their requirements. Steiner would take targets up to 700 metres and decided on the Galil.

Homer and Yuri were primaries on close assault. Yuri would be armed with an assault rifle, Homer with a light machine-gun, a M249 SAW, backed up by either an SMG or

compact Colt Commando. Wilson was on demolitions, room breaching and HE; also he was secondary on assault, armed with an M4 carbine mounted with a M203 grenade launcher. Steiner was also a secondary, armed with a Commando. If necessary, both Bach and Armstrong would provide back-up, each carrying compact assault weapons.

Basic fitness training continued with a five mile run each morning, thankfully now in gym clothes, as well as PT and assault course work. But primarily they were focusing now on fundamental tactical matters, the snipers working on the range, the assault teams working CQB at the Delta kill-house. Together they worked on various ambush and evasion techniques. Underlying all this was the need to build team cohesion.

Steiner waited, the electric remote control in his hand. He lifted his field-glasses with his free hand. He stabbed the button.

The silhouette target leapt up on a spring-loaded mount, the outline of a figure, head and shoulders projected above the small rise off to the right, 5-600 metres ahead of Steiner.

“Bravo, target north-east, 11 o’clock.” Steiner reported.

The shot sounded immediately, back from Steiner, to his left. The head of the target dissolved an instant before the rifle report reached him. The metallic clang of the hit on the target mount bounced back to Steiner as the rifle blast reached him.

Another clean headshot.

At 1000 metres it takes a remarkable shooter to get a clean body-shot, but for a headshot it needs something else. It takes more than high technology and precision weaponry; it requires the preternatural abilities of a natural born sniper. It needs not just better than perfect eyesight, low pulse rate and stamina, it requires that inner stillness, the ability not only to wait, but the calm and focus to lock into a zone most other mortals barely glimpse. Steiner was touched by this gift, but both Bach and Armstrong were full-blown geniuses.

“Confirmed headshot.” Steiner reported tersely. “Both teams, Alpha and Bravo, stand by for mobile target.”

Steiner settled behind his rifle, drawing the butt in snugly to his shoulder, his cheek settling against the cool of the stock. Gazing through the 6x Nimrod sight, he steadied his breathing, long and steady. His pulse slowed, he stilled. He rode the soft undulations of his heartbeat. He was free and clear, utterly calm and serene. He was in the zone. He pressed the time delay button and settled in and waited.

“Fire at will when target acquired,” Steiner whispered over his radio.

The target was launched from the right of Steiner’s position, more than 500 metres out, moving east to west at around 30 mph. Mounted on an invisible rail, the target showing the upper torso of a man, slid fast across the range. Steiner tracked it, his weapon locked on.

The first shot came from back on his right, closely followed by one on left. The head of the figure split, sparks flying off the metal mount. More shots sounded from right and left, staccato barks, both shooters firing semi-auto, emptying their 20 round clips, each shot striking home. The head and shoulders of the target dissolved beneath the fusillade of hits.

Steiner waited until the target had reached the halfway point of the range, directly opposite his position, then he fired. He didn’t make a conscious choice; he just began to fire.

Round after round of his heavy 7.62mm bullets struck the upper body and head of the figure, ripping what remained to shreds. He fired quickly, building a steady, regular tempo, pounding out a mournful drumbeat. One after the other his shots struck home, the blasts of the rifles and the clangs of their repeated strikes echoed across the range.

Steiner traversed, tracking the target, firing again and again, even after Armstrong and Betser had run dry. As the target reached the end of its ride, the last remnants of the silhouette target slipped from the metal mount, wisps of paper caught on the swirling wind the shooters had to compensate for. The reinforced steel plate, naked and exposed seemed split and twisted, scarred and shameful.

Steiner continued shooting, imagining where the head and body had been, driving round after round into the metal. Lead against steel.

As the smashed target mount lurched to the end of its ride and disappeared, Steiner squeezed off his last round, but he didn't even notice. He was lost. He pulled the trigger, the snap of the bolt on the empty chamber falling on deaf ears.

* * *

Steiner padded around the supermarket aisles, dressed in T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. It was dark out, quiet. It must have been around midnight. He couldn't sleep, figured might as well do his grocery shopping. It was dead in the store; just some whacked-out, pimply teenage clerk slumped behind the checkout.

He slid aimlessly up and down the aisles, checking out the shelves with little or no interest, picking up packages, reading them, and then replacing them. He was in no hurry, he had all night.

The automatic doors of the store hissed open and shut. Steiner didn't bother looking up, just carried on drifting.

"Mr. Steiner, you always do your grocery shopping in the middle of the night?" a voice asked softly behind him, breath on his ear. He turned slowly.

Hannah was dressed in a tight T-shirt, jeans and boots, all black. Her red hair was pulled back sharply, accentuating her alabaster skin. Her dark eyes shone out, her sensuous lips curled into a playful smile. A fresh bruise above her left cheekbone was barely hidden behind make-up, lipstick clotted a split in her full lower lip.

Steiner stood spellbound for a second. She was so close. He smelt her perfume.

She waited, arms akimbo, head slightly cocked.

"Looks like I'm not the only one?" he finally croaked.

She smiled wider, "My, the things we have in common!"

He swallowed.

"Trouble sleeping?" she was so close.

He shrugged. “Neil not with you?”

“If he was here, I’d be back home in bed. I mean, would you want to spent the night next to that dumb asshole, snoring away, lying there like a beached whale?”

“What me personally?” he smiled.

“I guess not?” she glanced down at the package hanging in his hand. “Bran? You got problems with your regularity?”

Steiner stared at the cereal packet in his hand and blushed. He quickly stuffed it back on the shelf. “Uh, I was just browsing!” he stuttered.

“Yeah, right?” she smirked, reaching past him for a box of Cheerios. He almost swooned as she brushed past him. Her scent washed over him. She smiled, savouring the effect she was having on him. Steiner was shaken from his reverie when he noticed the latticework of scars criss-crossing the inside of her outstretched arm. Two particularly deep old wounds were carved across the back of her wrist, fresher wounds marked the soft, white flesh of her upper arm.

She drew back, but frowned noticing the look on his face. She followed his eyes to her arm. She snatched it back, straightening up and taking a step back. Now it was her turn to blush.

Steiner shook off his shock and concern, pretending nothing had happened. He managed an awkward smile.

“Never expected to see you playing the little woman?” he joked feebly.

She knew he was covering, and she smiled gratefully, but kept her arms tucked in and hidden behind her back.

“Guess it must be the Stepford Wives syndrome!” she laughed.

“I guess?”

She reached up, her hand touching her hair. Her halter-top raised, baring her midriff. A small gold ring pierced her navel, a tiny tattoo visible on the left of her flat belly, tucked in the hollow above her hip. She followed his eyes and smiled archly.

“Maybe you can give me some shopping tips?” he asked.

“Yeah right! I know about as much about grocery shopping as you appear to!” she nodded towards his basket, a few pathetic items rolling in the bottom.

“Maybe you’re right?” they both laughed.

“So what are we both doing in a grocery store in the middle of the night then?”

Steiner raised his eyebrows.

“You raise a very pertinent point,” she nodded, restraining her smile.

“Troubled consciences, I reckon.”

“You got a conscience?” she asked in mock surprise.

“Well, I got a highly evolved sense of guilt, I just hide it beneath a façade of ambivalence and sarcasm.”

“Must be a bit of a problem in your professional assassin?” she laughed.

“I cope,” he noticed her raised eyebrows. “But you got me wrong. Me, a killer?”

“Sure, sure.” She nodded sagely, grinning all the time.

“So what’s troubling your peace of mind, then?” he asked.

“Apart from being married to an asshole?”

“Yeah, I guess that would be a problem,”

“Life’s a big shit sandwich, we all gotta take a bite!”

“I reckon. You know, Buddhists say if something makes us unhappy we should change it. If it can’t be changed or eliminated, then we should just accept it and get on with life and stop making ourselves miserable.”

“Nice idea. You a swami, or something?”

“What makes you unhappy, list the things that bother you most.”

“Neil, the army and this shit-hole,” she snapped off.

“Well then eliminate them from your life. Leave Neil, then you’re also free of the US army and Fort Bragg.”

“Nice theory, but there’s a small problem,” she sighed.

“Yeah?”

“The only thing that makes me happy is Neil.”

“Then you’ve got a small problem then,” he grimaced.

“Catch 22?”

“You’re fucked!”

“Guess so?” she shrugged.

“Then according to our Buddhist friends, you should just accept your situation and you will find happiness and contentment?”

“Easier said than done, they don’t have to live with the asshole!”

“You got a point there, reckon those Buddhist’s didn’t reckon with a problem like your husband?” he smirked. “A regular fucking conundrum.”

“Well he is world class asshole!” she grinned.

“You said it.” They both laughed.

“Why don’t you apply this Buddhist theory to your life, rid yourself of this unhappiness?” she smiled slyly.

“Problem is I kind quite put my finger on what it is that’s bothering me. Seems to be a general malaise,” he smiled grimly.

“That is a tricky one?”

“Maybe unhappiness is just my natural state?”

“A depressing thought?”

“Maybe if I accepted my unhappiness, I would find true happiness?” he pondered.

“Truly fucking Zen!” she laughed.

“I guess?”

“Maybe we’re both doomed to unhappiness?”

He shrugged.

“Maybe we should be unhappy together?” she reached out and touched him. A shiver ran through him and he involuntarily leant into her, his head swimming. Her hand ran over his

shoulder and down his back, briefly touching the small of his back beneath his T-shirt, before pulling away.

“You and me should go for a drink up at the Delta bar sometime?” she purred.

“Wouldn’t Neil be there?”

“You’re joking,” she laughed. “They think he’s an even bigger asshole than I do!”

“No, shit?” he frowned. “How’d he get into the unit then?”

“Friends in high places!”

“Really?”

“Pulled strings, forced them to take him on, at least for a limited tour. Never use him for ops though. Sits around here, training and posing for the girls, acting the big uber-warrior. The D-boys hate his fucking guts. Won’t have him around them!”

“Surprised they haven’t fragged him by now?” Steiner said.

“You and me both. Reckon they’re just counting the days ‘til he’s out of here,” she sounded almost wistful. “Personally, I reckon the only reason he’s still breathing is his all powerful, mysterious friends upstairs. It’s common knowledge. Jerk-off owes his entire career to their string pulling.”

“I have to say I was a little disappointed by Neil. I always pictured Special Forces, especially Delta as these almighty warriors. Pure fucking samurais or something!”

“Killers?” she grinned.

“I guess. Natural born killers. The last warriors in today’s faggot-assed army.”

“I know, kind of dig them myself. You’re kinda like them yourself!”

He blushed.

“Whereas Murph is just a dickhead politician on the make. Total fucking dickless wonder.”

“He does come off that way,” he shook his head. “Who are these friends of his?” he asked casually.

“Only one I met is Chuck Logan, *Colonel* Logan. You know, war crimes, *60 minutes*, CNN guy. Mr Badass killer himself.”

“I know Logan. Don’t see what him and your husband have in common?” Steiner angled.

“Know what you mean. Logan’s an asshole, but at least he walks the walk. Neil’s just some loser got lucky!”

“They been seeing each other a lot?”

“Now and then. Actually been around a lot lately. Hey, Saul, I think the Delta bar should still be open,” she looked at her wristwatch. “Why don’t we get a drink right now?”

“Sure,” They both headed out the store, Steiner dumping his half-empty basket.

They stood in the neon-lit darkness, feeling the cool night air on their skin.

“We gonna walk?” he asked.

“Well I haven’t got my car. You?”

“Nope, ‘fraid not, just started walking and kept going.”

“Well it’s walking then. Don’t worry, it isn’t far.”

“I think I’ll survive.”

Laughing, they stepped off into the inky darkness. She reached for his hand, seizing it in her cool palm.

As they crossed the parking lot, they heard the slam of a car door, and looked across to see a single figure striding purposefully towards them, dressed in jeans, shirt untucked and unbuttoned, unlaced sneakers on his feet. His dishevelled, sleep-tousled hair blew in the wind.

“Oh, shit!” Hannah sighed, dropping Steiner’s hand as if scalded.

Murphy stormed up to them, face like thunder, muscles clenched in rage, skin flushed.

Steiner stepped around Hannah, blocking his path. Although three inches shorter and at least fifty pounds lighter, he squared off on Murphy.

The Delta officer stopped dead in his tracks, looking from Steiner to his wife and back again. His twitching rage quickly evaporated when he saw the smaller man's eyes. They burned darkly as if he was all too eager for any violence that came. He'd seen it before in the Delta boys, and it scared him. Murphy stepped back, forcing his tight face into an unconvincing smile.

"Hey, babe," he looked past Steiner to his wife. "I woke up and you were gone, been looking everywhere for you. I was worried!" the fake concern in his voice didn't mask his rage.

"Couldn't sleep, went for a walk. Saul's been taking care of me," she purred.

"Oh, yeah. That right, sport?" he glanced at Steiner. He nodded once. "You couldn't sleep either?"

"That's right." Steiner muttered.

"Things on your mind?"

"Got a lot to think about." Steiner said in clipped tones.

"Well we better let you get back to your thinking," he turned to Hannah. "Let's go home, honey, to bed" he added with a leer, glancing at Steiner.

Hannah stepped round Steiner, smiling wanly at him. Murphy made a great show of slipping his arm around his wife, his eyes never leaving Steiner's face.

Murphy paused as the couple were about to turn to leave. "Hey, Saul. Me and you should take those boys up to the Delta bar sometime!"

Steiner and Hannah exchanged glances.

"I appreciate the offer, but I don't want to encourage my people to be drinking at a bar on base. Mixing with outsiders, even D-boys, could be prejudicial to security." Steiner stated bluntly.

"Why not a night out in town, a civilian bar. Surely they deserve one night, you'll be gone soon, who knows if you'll be back?" Murphy smirked.

Steiner eyed him darkly.

“All right, one night,” he nodded. “Night after tomorrow?”

“Okay,” Murphy nodded. “We’ll be off then.”

Guiding Hannah by the shoulder, Murphy turned and headed back to his car. She glanced back once, her smile lost in the darkness.

Standing alone in the dark, Steiner shivered in the cold. He was suddenly acutely aware of the weight of the pistol strapped to his ankle. Feeling spent and empty, shoulders hunched, all he could think of was the gun as the shadows gathered and bore down upon him.

Chapter 11

Some people say that every time you kill someone, you kill a little part of yourself.

I don't know about that. But once you become a killer, every time you do a job you cheapen your own life.

I don't mean in some bullshit moralistic way, but in a basic relativist way.

If you can kill and walk away and carry on like normal, like the life you took don't mean a damn, then how can you maintain that your own life is so fucking precious. If their life is so disposable, you have to accept your own existence is just as irrelevant. To maintain anything else would just be hypocrisy, and I hate fucking hypocrisy.

All life is meaningless. Yours, mine, every-fucking-body.

Goes with the job.

*

*

*

The shaped charges blew the door outwards, splintered wood filling the air.

“Alpha, go!” Steiner signalled over the radio.

Homer and Yuri flanked the gaping doorway. Both wore Nomex coveralls and gloves, combat boots, Kevlar body-armour and Fritz helmets, faces covered by Nomex ski-masks and goggles, head-to-toe in black, both carried MP5 10mm sub-machine guns. On Steiner's signal, they swung into the doorway, weapons raised to their shoulder, and moved inside, disappearing into the smoke.

Steiner vaulted over the railing and brought up his MP5 and followed them in, moving carefully forward: small, shuffling, sideways steps, scanning with his unsafed weapon. Wilson, having ditched his M52 firing trigger, brought up the rear, covering with his SMG.

Homer and Yuri covered either side of the entrance passage. Steiner moved up to the cross of the T where the entrance met a corridor.

“Charlie, go!” he rasped, his soft voice picked up by his throat mike.

At the rear of the building, Bach covered the door. Armstrong brought up his Beretta automatic shotgun and fired into the upper hinge. The solid slug splintered the wood and the door sagged. Armstrong lowered the muzzle and fired again into the lower hinge, obliterating it.

He stepped back, letting the shotgun swing back by his side on its short strap, unslinging his MP5 and bringing it up to his shoulder. Bach moved forward, kicking the sagging door, sending it crashing inside to the ground. He moved quickly inside, MP5 up, Armstrong followed him in.

Steiner heard the shotgun blasts from his position. He stripped a flashbang from his vest and tossed it around the left-hand corner. As it detonated, Steiner swung out to the right, scanned, then swung back to his left. The corridor was clear. Three rooms lay on each side, some with doors, others open.

“Alpha 2 with me. 3 and 4 pair off,” he whispered.

Yuri moved up to his shoulder. Homer moved to the right, Wilson with him. Even behind his mask, Steiner could hear the big American muttering to himself, “Shit, fucking Ratboy!”

Steiner signalled for the second team to move out down the right side. He took the left, Yuri covering him.

Steiner approached the first room. Sucking in a breath, he swung into the open doorway. He swung his weapon right and left. It was clear. He signalled for Yuri to move onto the next room. The Russian nodded.

He positioned himself opposite the closed door. Steiner slid up beside it, laying his hand gently on the handle. He looked to Yuri, who nodded once, hands flexing and tightening on his weapon.

Steiner turned the handle and shoved the door open. Yuri stepped forward, eyes searching the gloom and plunged inside. Steiner followed him in. Yuri turned and shook his head. Clear.

Emerging into the corridor, they saw the second team exit a room further down. Homer shook his head. Steiner nodded.

Steiner and Yuri approached the last room. The door was shut. This time Steiner took up position opposite the doorway, while Yuri reached for the handle. He reached across the door, laying his gloved left hand on the handle, his right staying on the grip of his MP5, butt tight into his shoulder.

Steiner nodded and Yuri threw the door open. The darkness leapt out at Steiner. He moved into the open doorway, his weapon levelled ahead of him. He sucked in a breath and went to enter. There was a blur in front of him and an armed man in fatigues stepped into his path. Both men fired together.

The flat blasts of weapon discharges filled the confines of the corridor and room, only the *bionic* earplugs saving their hearing.

Steiner just had the edge. He fired and simultaneously twisted sideways. The other man's shots went wide, but Steiner had him tagged. The front the man's vest lit up red and an electronic screech filled the room.

"Shit!" the Delta operative looked down at the red light burning on his chest.

Steiner grinned behind his mask. "You're dead, pal. Better lie down and take a rest!"

The D-boy flopped down to the floor and lay back playing dead.

Steiner and Yuri moved back into the corridor. Homer and Wilson were squatting and waiting at the far end. Steiner signalled they had put down one man. The he pointed upwards and the two men headed up the open staircase at the far end.

Steiner and Yuri approached the stairs at their end and waited. Upstairs they heard the rattle of gunfire.

Steiner's team and the Delta defenders inside the Killhouse were all using the new MILES (Military Integrated Laser Engagement Systems), each man wearing electronic sensors mounted on their torsos and heads, to correspond to lethal strike points. Beneath the muzzle of all their weapons were mounted small lasers that fired a beam when the trigger was pulled. If the beam hit a sensor mounted in a lethal area, the sensors would trigger a light and siren that would indicate the man was dead. Outside the Killhouse, Delta commanders monitored the process of the exercise. All participants were firing blank rounds, just to add the necessary verisimilitude.

Another blast of gunfire sounded upstairs. Steiner nodded and he and Yuri moved fast up the stairs.

Homer and Wilson were pinned down at the top of the stairs at the far end. A Delta operative was kneeling in the passageway, firing off short bursts. Steiner jammed his weapon through the banisters as he neared the top of the bare staircase. The long tearing burst ripped into the man. His vest lit up and squawked.

Turning, the D-boy saw Steiner and Yuri.

"Shee-it!" he cried in a thick southern drawl.

"Down, fuck-wad!" Steiner hissed, rounding the head of the stairs. The man slowly dropped to the floor, grumbling loudly.

A second Delta defender leapt from a side room, vaulting over his prone buddy, MP5 firing wildly. Steiner and Yuri hit the deck, both opening up. The exposed D-boy hit the opposite wall, fought to recover his balance and was caught in the open. The lasers locked on him lit him up like a fucking Christmas tree, lights and sirens going. The chatter of gunfire filled the narrow passage. Homer and Wilson opened up from the far end; the man now transfixed, caught in the crossfire. The siren seemed to sound all the louder. Finally the gunfire died. The Delta man stood limply, weapon hanging by his side.

"Fuck!" he groaned. His buddy by his feet laughed.

Steiner moved in, "Down!"

The D-boy looked at him dumbly. Steiner kicked him in the knee, folding his legs, dropping him to the deck.

“You dead, boy!” the first D-boy said to his buddy.

“Fuck you!” his pal snorted. Both tried not to laugh.

Steiner dropped to one knee, Yuri covered him.

“Charlie, report?”

Bach replied, his voice slightly broken by static, “We’ve cleared the ground floor, but we’re pinned down on the second. Can’t reach the roof!”

“Received. Hold tight, we’re on our way.” Steiner looked across at Homer at the other end of the passage and pinched his throat mike, “Alpha 3, you and 4 clear this floor, 2 and me are going up to the roof.”

“Understood,” Homer replied.

Steiner and Yuri headed up the next flight of stairs to the roof. Homer and Wilson proceeded down the corridor.

“Okay, try not to fuck up, Ratboy!” Homer hissed.

Wilson gave him the finger.

Homer signalled for them to split, he would take the first room, Wilson the second. Moving silently, they peeled apart and slid into each room. Homer swept his room, it was clean. He emerged. Wilson was already entering the last room, kicking open the door. Asshole was always trying to prove something, rushing the jobs. Homer hung back, smiling ruefully to himself. Let the fucker learn.

Wilson moved fast into the room, sweeping the muzzle of his weapon around the spartan interior, even remembering to check beneath the table and behind the door.

But he didn’t look up.

Wilson lowered his weapon and began to saunter out of the room. The D-boy dropped down behind him, hitting the floor with a soft thud. Wilson froze, then tried to turn. All too

late, he realised the tricky fucker had lodged himself up above the doorway, hugging the ceiling.

Wilson twisted around, wrestling to bring up his weapon. The D-boy just grinned behind his mask and fired his MP5 point-blank into Wilson's face. The muzzle flash engulfed the Englishman's masked features. He screamed. Only the goggles and Nomex balaclava saved his face from being burnt up, but the pain was intense. He staggered back, ramming into the doorway, gloved hands held up to his face.

"You dead, boy!" the D-boy laughed.

Wilson dropped his hands. His reddened eyes burned behind his goggles. He lunged forward, catching the Delta operative by surprise. Wilson brought up the butt of his weapon, whipping it beneath the man's chin, snapping his head back. He drove his elbow into his exposed throat, crushing his windpipe. Gagging, the D-boy reeled backwards. Wilson kicked his feet from beneath him and he went down to his knees. He drove the butt of his MP5 down twice on the back of the man's neck. He hit the floor hard.

"Who's dead now, asshole!" Wilson sniggered, kicking him once in the head.

"Hey, shit-for-brains!"

Wilson turned too late. Homer stepped into him, slamming the butt of his weapon into the Englishman's jaw. He sagged and bounced off the wall. Homer caught him by the collar as he went down, Wilson's groggy eyes rolling in his head. Homer drove the heel of his hand into the Englishman's nose, the bone collapsing with a crunch. Stepping inside the room, he lifted Wilson and rammed his head into the wall and let him flop to the floor.

Homer snorted, brought round his weapon and headed out.

Steiner and Yuri emerged onto the roof. They weaved through the crates scattered about, heading towards the open walkway linking their building with the other containing Bach and Armstrong.

They reached the walkway and moved fast across, covering each other with their bristling weapons.

On the far building, a single man tracked them. Tucked in beside a tarpaulin-covered crate, he crouched in the shadow of the tarp. He drew a careful bead with his squat Colt Commando assault rifle. He smiled, fixing Steiner in his sights.

“Say goodnight, Gracie!” he increased the poundage on his trigger, squeezing it back, tracking them, waiting for the rifle to fire of its own accord.

Yuri saw the muzzle flash light up the shadows beneath the tarp. Before the sound of gunfire reached them, he lunged forward, knocking Steiner to the floor. He followed him down; both hit the bare wooden boards of the walkway.

The sniper fired again, trying to lock onto the two men, hidden as they hugged the deck. Yuri lay atop Steiner; firing is MP5, trying to pin the shooter down.

“Get the fuck off me, man!” Steiner grunted.

Yuri slithered off him, continuing to squeeze off short bursts. Steiner lay prone, aimed through the walkway railings, firing on the shooter’s position. They were only buying time.

“We’re fucked!” Steiner spat as he reloaded.

The rooftop door on the shooter’s building burst open. Armstrong and Bach came out firing. The Delta sniper was caught in the crossfire. He tried to make a break for it, but was hit from both sides. Homer appeared on the other roof, loosening more fire on the exposed man.

With his vest lit up, the sniper accepted his fate, and wearily sank to the floor.

Steiner and Yuri reached the roof on the second building, Homer close behind. The other two men squatted low, waiting for them.

“You managed to break though then?” Steiner asked.

Armstrong and Bach nodded.

“Is it clear?”

“All neutralised.” Bach said softly.

Steiner turned to Homer, “Where’s Wilson?”

“He fucked up.”

*

*

*

The bar was a weeping canker sore, throbbing neon red. The noise and light burned into the night. Steiner always hated this kind of place: cheap bars and dingy nightclubs. The noise, the crowds, it was like some nightmarish Dantesque fucking hellhole. These shitholes always mistook noise for character. It was in this kind of situation that Steiner found his only consolation in thoughts of violence and murder. Homicide and suicide his only salvation. He clung to his tenuous inner calm as the world spun noisily out of control around him.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Wilson seemed to be enjoying himself.

He eyed the sinuous young women as they glided across the dance-floor, as they wriggled through the throng. He licked his lips like a Pavlovian dog.

The bar may have been off-base, but it might as well be back at Bragg. Almost every man in the place was military (an elite soldier is unmistakable even out of uniform), the exceptions a few surly locals peering enviously over their beers as the soldiers caroused with their eager womenfolk. The local girls, and maybe a few visitors hunting a soldier husband, clung to the soldiers. These dumb young soldiers thought all their Christmases and birthdays had come at once. Their ecstatic faces shone in the dark.

Wilson wanted some of that.

Homer, Armstrong and Bach stood clustered together at the bar, toasting each other with beers. Their happy faces shone in the light spilling over them. Wilson stood alone off to one side, his hungry eyes eating up the seething life around him, his burning gaze following the young women. Steiner was stuck with Murphy; the two of them seated at a low table.

The bulky Delta officer waddled over to the table and dumped down two brimming draughts of beer, the contents splashing over the top of the already sticky table. Murphy slumped into his chair, snatching up his glass and gulping down his beer. Steiner watched in disgust as a few drops fell from his chin and stained the front of his figure hugging T-shirt.

The dark top was emblazoned with the Delta insignia, printed beneath: *Mess with the best, Die like the rest.*

Murphy really was a walking, talking joke. When he first met him, Steiner was disillusioned. He had always viewed the Delta operatives as classic warriors. Stoical, tough, ruthless and resolute. He idealised them as Zen warriors, latter-day Samurai. This swaggering braggart, Murphy blew all that out of the water. Here was a man worse than almost anything he'd seen amongst the workaday stiffs of the everyday army. But now, Steiner found his faith in Delta restored. Not that Murphy was any better than he at first thought. He wasn't, he was worse. It was that the D-boys had put up with Murphy, a man forced upon them by those with their own agenda. That the Delta men had not fragged Murphy's worthless ass long ago was a testament to their patience and discipline. Such restraint was almost superhuman.

Steiner wanted to kill the fuck real bad.

Murphy sat back in his chair, banging the half-empty glass back down on the table, straightening his tight shirt as it clung to his narcissistic, gym-honed torso. A big grin spread across his meaty face.

Steiner watched Yuri drift behind Murphy and take up station at the bar beside Homer, Bach and Armstrong. He took a sip of his drink, standing semi-detached from the group, coolly observing everything around him.

Murphy belched and slapped his belly and sat back and began talking. Steiner wished he could tune him out. Only the thought of the pistol strapped to his ankle offered solace.

“So what do you think?” Murphy bellowed over the music. “Ain't this bar sweet?”

Steiner wished he could tell the truth. But then again he wished he could kill this annoying fucker, right here, right now.

“It's about as loud as your shirt.”

“Yeah, ain't it cool!” he roared in his fake laugh. “Women wherever you look, free for the picking!”

Women, Steiner thought? All he could see was an array of scrawny, underage white-trash girls, and gold-digging sluts.

“If you like that kind of thing?”

Murphy grabbed a girl swaggering by. He pulled her onto his lap. She laughed coquettishly, he cackled while running his hand up her shapeless leg. The girl was around 17 at most, immature and barely formed, and even in the poor light Steiner could make out her bad skin. She giggled, her hand flying to her mouth to hide her retainer.

Murphy ran his hands all over the girl, cooing.

“Hey, Saul, go on grab one. Like picking apples from a tree. Ripe and juicy!” he snorted.

“No thanks, I’m saving myself.”

Murphy scowled. He lifted the girl to her feet. She pouted. He slapped her on the ass to send her on her way.

“You know, Steiner, I sometimes think you might be a faggot?” he laughed.

“Is that a proposition, Murphy?” Steiner didn’t rise to it, sitting back in his seat.

“Remember don’t ask, don’t tell?”

Murphy’s face darkened. “Maybe you’d prefer my wife?”

“Maybe?” Steiner was tired of this shit.

“You’re an annoying little fucker, ain’t ya?” Murphy rocked in his chair like caged gorilla.

“It’s been said.” Steiner shrugged.

“If it weren’t for the job, I’d take you outside and fuck you up!”

“You sure you mean fuck *up*, I seen you in action outside bars?”

Murphy reached across the table, his meaty forearms resting in the pools of beer, his hands inches from Steiner. The other man didn’t flinch. He just smiled.

“When this job’s done, I’m gonna fix you and your smart mouth!” he growled.

“Why wait?” Steiner leant forward. “I’m ready, but I hear there’s a waiting list to cap you, headed by your buds in Delta?” Murphy blanched. “I mean, what is the deal? I hear they won’t go operational with you. You just sit around the base pumping weights in the gym and chasing little girls?”

Murphy lunged, his fat hand reaching for Steiner. He was too slow. Steiner barely stirred from his repose. He caught Murphy’s wrist with a casual move of his arm. He bent the joint back on itself, using his attacker’s momentum against him. Murphy cried out, half-rising from his seat. Steiner kept the lock on, calmly looking at the pain and shame twisting Murphy’s face.

“I’m waiting?” Steiner laughed softly. Murphy looked like he was about to piss himself.

Steiner twisted back the wrist, hearing the pop of cartilage.

“Enough?”

“Gentlemen?” Yuri stepped in close to the table. “I don’t mean to interrupt?”

Steiner looked up. Yuri met his eye and shook his head. Steiner took one last satisfying taste of the anguish on Murphy’s face, and then sighed and released his grip. Steiner took a leisurely sip of his beer.

Yuri pulled out a chair and sat. Murphy sat curled, rubbing his wrist.

“Maybe you should go visit the bathroom?” Yuri said softly.

Murphy’s head snapped up. The Russian’s icy look cut him off.

“Sure,” he finally muttered after a pause. He stood, avoiding meeting Steiner’s eye. He elbowed through the crowd and disappeared.

“Maybe that wasn’t the smartest?” Yuri sighed.

Steiner shrugged, smiling sheepishly. He sipped at his beer.

“We got to work together,” Yuri continued.

“But the guy’s an asshole,”

“No doubt. But deal with it. We haven’t got time for this.”

“You’re right, I guess.” Steiner sighed, shoulders sagged.

“Right.”

“Would like to frag the asshole though.” Steiner smirked.

“I reckon there’s a consensus on that.” Yuri grinned back.

“Wilson maybe an asshole, but at least he knows his job. Murphy’s a total fucking loser. No matter which way you cut it. Can’t do shit, don’t know shit.”

Yuri nodded.

“Come to think of it though, him and Wilson are kind of alike?” Steiner pondered.

Both men turned to look at the Englishman at the bar. He stood slouched; unwavering eyes fixed on the mass of women. Sweat beaded his forehead; his tongue flickered between his jagged teeth to moisten his lips.

“Wilson’s a predator. He’s sick, I’d watch him,” Yuri spoke, his eyes not leaving the coiled Englishman.

“Guess you’d know, being from Rostov and all?” Steiner glanced at the Russian.

“He’d turn on anyone in an instant. As for women, he’s got a definite problem.”

“Believe you me, so has Murphy.”

“Probably, but he’s just a spineless bully. His swagger is just over-compensation. He’s a self-loathing creep is all. He’s predictable. Wilson though is in a different league.”

“You reckon?” Steiner scrutinised the Englishman.

“He’s a venomous snake. He’ll do anything he pleases, fuck anyone else. His is a special sickness.”

“You sure, I thought he was just a little creep, like Murphy?”

“He’s dangerous. To you, me and everyone else.”

“He could have an accident.” Steiner said blankly.

“Soon, maybe?”

“Could be.”

“He’s a disaster waiting to happen. Get rid of him.”

Steiner nodded.

“Assholes like Murphy we can deal with. He’s history when we go operational anyway. But Wilson has to go.”

“He’s already gone.”

Both men turned.

“Look out, here comes laughing boy!” Steiner muttered.

Murphy approached.

“It’s going to be a long evening.”

At the bar, Bach, Armstrong and Homer watched Wilson.

“That is one fucked up dude!” Homer growled, a crooked grin on his face.

“You got that right, bro.” Armstrong sighed.

“Check it out!” Homer nodded towards the Englishman.

Wilson straightened up, making a beeline for a young, attractive woman gliding past the bar.

“Hey, babe, how about a drink?” he called, laying his hand on her bare arm.

She turned, looking him up and down, disgust contorting her beautiful face.

“Take your fucking hand off me, ass-wipe!” she muttered icily, pulling away.

Wilson stood awkwardly as she turned her back and strode away.

“Dyke!” he spat and turned back to his drink.

The three at the bar dissolved into laughter.

“Fuck you!” he screamed, his twisted face burning blood-red as he faced them.

“Chill, man.” Homer held up his hands palm outwards. “Maybe you should lower your sights a little. I saw some livestock in a field a ways back. Maybe if it’s dark enough, you might get lucky there!”

“Fuck you!” Wilson screamed even louder, his shrill voice almost breaking. He shook all over, his eyes burning wildly, swimming in and out of focus. He clenched and unclenched his hands.

Armstrong shook his head; “Looks like you hit a nerve, Homer man. Ratboy seems a little fond of our furry friends?”

“In the blood, I guess?” Both Americans laughed.

“You fucking yank fuckers. I’ll fucking show you, think you’re so shit-hot. You don’t know shit!”

“That so?” Homer wagged his eyebrows.

Wilson staggered, yawning as if struck by waves of rage. Twitching and hopping unsteadily from foot to foot, invective and profanity spilled incoherently from his lips, foaming like an epileptic.

“Fuck... arseholes... cunts... I’ll fucking fuck... bastard fucking wankers... fuck with me... don’t know fucking shit... cunt... fuck... shit...” Eventually the fragmented words broke down into indecipherable grunts and moans. Wilson staggered and swayed wildly, face scarlet and slick with sweat. His eyes were clouded and bulging. He twitched and shook, threatening to crumple and fit.

Steiner and the other two men at the table turned in alarm. Wilson’s ravings even rose above the din of music and voices. People began to turn and stare. Nervous giggles and whispered alarm replaced the chatter.

Steiner stood.

“Wilson. Steve, now just calm down, take it easy,” he said softly, trying to soothe the Englishman. “Everything is gonna be alright,”

“Fuck you, fuck all of you!” Wilson shrieked, eyeballs bulging, spittle flecking his lips. He bared his sharp, little teeth.

Steiner held up his hands, palms out, “Everything’ll be cool, we can talk about this.”

Wilson smashed his beer bottle against the bar and lunged at Steiner. He parried the blow, easily batting the bottle from Wilson’s hand.

Wilson staggered back, eyes wild, head snapping from side to side. His lips moved wordlessly.

“We can head back to the base, sort this out?” Steiner continued amicably.

“Fuckers!” Wilson screamed, spewing out the word. “Fuck all of you!” He staggered away, waving his arms, heading for the door. He turned, “And fuck you, you Jew-boy, kike bastard!” Pointing at Bach. Sniggering he turned and dashed from the bar.

“What did I do?” Bach asked innocently.

“I suggest someone find him.” Yuri stood.

“Any volunteers?” Homer smirked, raising his beer.

“Hope he don’t have an accident, or piss in the wrong person’s ear?” Armstrong slouched next to him, shrugging lazily.

Steiner moved forward.

“Find him.”

* * *

He stood hidden in the shadows, eyes burning out of the darkness.

The girl moved across the parking lot. Long-legged and skinny, she tottered on heels; hand pinned to her upper thigh, holding down her tiny skirt against the gusting wind.

He watched.

Girlish and still not quite formed, the faintest suggestion her curves beneath her flimsy clothes excited him. He touched himself. Alone out in the open, awkward and ungainly like a foal seeking the protection of her mother. Defenceless.

He moaned.

She skittered from pool to pool of light, closing on the burning neon of the bar.

He began to move, tracking her. His steps quickened, closing, feet falling softly on the damp gravel. Closing, closing. He could almost smell her. Her silhouette visible through her diaphanous clothes as she stood backlit by the fiery light. He began to run.

Too late, she heard something. Beginning to turn. Too late.

He hit her hard, sweeping her off her feet. Wrapping his arms around her, he drew her to his chest, one hand searching for her mouth, the other already reaching beneath her short skirt.

He swept her into the darkness, her cry choked off.

Garbage cans around him. Standing over her, sucking in air, sobbing with joy. She looked up with wide eyes. He fumbled at the front of his trousers, descending upon her. She opened her mouth to scream. He hit her once, then again and again. It felt good.

Outside in the light, he heard them searching.

Chapter 12

“I want that fucker gone.” Steiner stated bluntly. “He’s totally fucking insane. He’s dangerous.” Logan and Murphy just stared back at him blankly. “Tell him Neil, you saw him. He’s totally fucking gone, isn’t he?” Steiner almost pleaded. Murphy shrugged, a sadistic little fuck of smile on his lips.

“Jesus, the guy is fucking nuts!” Steiner groaned.

“You and the rest of your boys ain’t exactly what you’d call the picture of sanity.”

Logan smiled.

“I didn’t say I was poster-boy for mental health week. But this dude is a freak. He’s split from the whole program. He ain’t even on nodding terms with sanity.”

“Well it is a suicide mission?” snorted Logan.

“Well I was planning on surviving at least until the start of the mission. This crazy fuck-wad is gonna get us all killed. That’s if he doesn’t try to off us himself!”

There was silence in the darkened room. The three men sat watching each other. The social dynamic was clear. It was Steiner and Logan bucking for the alpha-male position, Murphy was out of the game, he was just the Colonel’s ass-kisser. The two men faced off, sizing one-another up, each trying to get the upper hand.

“Well, Murph, you saw this scene at the bar. Did Wilson lose it that bad?” Logan turned to Murphy. The Delta man looked at the Colonel obliquely, as if afraid to meet his eye square on.

“Sure he went a little nutso. Maybe he’d had a bit too much to drink?”

“Bullshit, the asshole is out of his tiny fucking mind. I’m familiar with dysfunction...”

“I’d say!” Logan interrupted with a smirk. Steiner ignored him, carrying on.

“But this fuck is in a different league. He goes way beyond nuts. He’s fucking sick. He’s sitting in his own shit jerking off to the fucking Bible crazy. He’s one step off drooling

in the nuthouse, straitjacket, padded cell fucking insane. He's rapist, kid fucking, serial killer crazy. He's off the board. God alone knows what this creep is capable off?"

"Sounds perfect for your team?" Logan smirked. Murphy dutifully sniggered.

Steiner sighed. He was tired of this shit.

"Either you resolve this situation, or I will." Steiner said coldly.

"Meaning what?" Logan's face darkened, his chill voice cutting through the bullshit.

"You get rid of this asshole, Wilson. Or I will get rid of him."

Logan raised his eyebrows.

"He's gone, or I will dispose of the fucker once and for all." Steiner spoke calmly.

"You might have forgotten that it is the President and myself make team selection calls, not you."

"Make the call, or I will."

"You do as your ordered."

"I've taken this asshole's shit for the last couple of weeks. I've let it ride best I can. No more."

"Watch what you say."

"I have to enforce discipline. He pushes me once more, he goes down for good."

"You do that and there will be repercussions." Logan was speaking softly. It was just him and Steiner now.

"Fuck you. I didn't want in on this bullshit operation from the start. I always run my own show. I make the calls. You let other motherfuckers mess with the plan, shit happens. I've had it. You don't like my way, I just walk."

"Like fuck you will!"

"How you gonna stop me? Kill me?" Steiner snorted, "Well I'm fucking scared!"

"Tough guy!"

"I ain't got nothing to lose. Why do you think I'd do this job otherwise."

“Maybe you think you got a hold on us. Maybe you got shit can be leaked if we cap you?” Logan hissed.

“Maybe? Spin the wheel and find out?” Steiner grinned crookedly.

Logan’s face hung in the shadows, teeth bared.

“Wilson could always have an accident in training?” The grin didn’t leave Steiner’s lips.

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t try it.”

“Maybe you could just off me, get some D-boys to run this op. I’m sure they could handle it!”

Logan didn’t respond.

“But then again, an American unit, maybe traceable? Risky? You want us disposable assholes. But is the mixed nationality thing so important. Do we need this English asshole so bad? He’s more fucking harm than good. He brings nothing to the table, only grief.”

Steiner sat back with finality.

“I’ll have to talk to the President.” Logan conceded.

“You do that.”

“Nothing happens till you get word.”

“Nothing’s guaranteed in this life.”

* * *

Some people say it’s killing that’s hard. I’ll tell you what’s fucking hard: Not killing some motherfucker just begging for it.

Now that’s hard.

Wilson seemed to be watching his step over the next two days. Cowed, he kept his head down. Surly and ill tempered, he only glared at his team-mates, trailing along on exercise.

Steiner was disappointed. He was just waiting for an excuse. He was already picking out unmarked graves.

Word began to filter through about the mission being moved up. The situation was going cold in Iraq, the President wanted them inserted and the job done while the shit was still flying.

Steiner was sleeping less and less.

He started taking long; rambling walks during the night. In the darkness, he saw all. The sounds of fighting and screams emanating from idyllic bungalows, furtive lovers hurrying through the shadows, drunks rolling home. The dark laid bare the world in all its ugliness.

It was warm and inky-black. Steiner moved silently through the fluid darkness. Moving without direction or plan. He found himself outside the Murphy's home.

A crash broke the stillness of the night. Steiner froze. Another crash followed on the heels of the first. He dropped low, unholstering the automatic hidden beneath the tails of his untucked shirt. He cocked his head. A series of shattering noises shook the air. He tracked them to the Murphy house. Keeping low, he ran across the lawn.

Hugging the cool walls he slid around the house, slipping into the backyard. Ducking beneath the light burning from a window, he tucked in beside the rear door. He waited and listened.

Another series of crashes followed. He ducked his head around the doorway quickly. The door was open, but the screen closed. Inside, the kitchen was scattered with broken debris. Movement came from further inside the house. Steiner swung across the doorway, switching hands with his pistol. He reached out, laying his hand on the screen-door handle. Bracing himself, he shoved it open and stepped into the house.

He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the glare of the kitchen. Debris crunched beneath his feet. He looked about, automatic held two-handed. He edged towards the open doorway.

Something slammed into the wall in front of him. He dropped to one knee, weapon up.

One plate, then another crashed into the wall beside the open doorway, exploding into broken shards, ripping paint and plaster from the wall. Hannah stepped into the doorway, eyes wild, breathing deeply.

Steiner slowly rose, his eyes meeting hers. She was dressed only in a T-shirt and panties. Her eyes seemed distant and uncomprehending as she blinked at the figure before her. She opened and closed her palms. Blood trickled from cuts criss-crossing her arms and hands.

“Where is that motherfucker?” she screamed.

Steiner hid the automatic close to his side.

“Who?”

“My fucking husband. You been out chasing pussy with that asshole?” she growled, eyes twitchy.

“Hate to break this to you, but me and your husband aren’t the world’s best buddies!”

She paced, swinging her arms, jerky and nervous.

“Hannah?” she paused, turning and looking quizzically. “Your feet!” Steiner nodded at her bare feet, gashed as she walked on the broken debris. She stared downwards.

“Oh shit!” her face dissolved. She stumbled backwards, sinking against the wall and sliding to the floor. Burying her face in her hands, she began to sob.

Steiner holstered his weapon and moved closer.

Head down, ankles splayed and bare knees together, her body shuddered as she wept. He crouched before her and spoke softly.

“What happened?”

Her bloody hands never left her face, “He left me!”

“Where’d he go?”

“I don’t know, out with one of his whores probably. He knew I was upset. I asked him not to go...” Her voice trailed off.

“Did something happen?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

She wept some more.

Helpless, he reached out and gingerly touched her knee. She threw herself into his arms, burying her face in his shoulder, sobbing loudly. He just held her.

Eventually she began to quieten. He laid her back against the wall and smoothed her hair. He lifted her arms, inspecting her injuries.

“You do this yourself?” the lacerations criss-crossed her inner-arms and ripped up her palms.

She nodded. He was aware of the old scar tissue beneath the wounds.

“Were they accidental?”

She shrugged.

“Okay,” he stood and found a first aid box and began to clean and dress her wounds.

When he was finished he gave her drink of water. She gulped it down and looked up gratefully, grinning, her eyes swollen.

“Better?”

She nodded. He swept up some of the mess and straightened the chaos that sprawled through the downstairs of the house, furniture over-turned and broken crockery and ornaments.

When he restored a kind of order, the two of them sat at the kitchen table, heads close.

“So what set this off?” Steiner asked softly.

She shrugged, “You know?”

“Did he hit you?”

She looked at him sharply.

“No!” she shook her head.

Steiner nodded, less than emphatically.

“So, what happened?”

“You know, same old stuff,” she sighed sadly. He noticed blood seeping through her dressings.

“Your life ain’t too happy is it?”

“Whose is?” she smiled grimly.

“Maybe you should do something about it?”

“Like what?” she almost sneered, “You got all the answers!”

“I ain’t got shit. But it seems your husband just makes things worse.”

“Probably, but he’s all I got!”

“You could do better.”

She looked at him. “Like you.”

“I ain’t no great catch. I doubt I could make you happy, but I could do better than that asshole husband of yours.” His eyes met hers briefly.

“You’re probably right. Maybe at a different time, in a different place, we might have worked out. You’ve got a good heart,” She shrugged. “But he’s my husband, I have to make it work. I have to make something work in my life.”

“Sometimes you just have to admit that something is broken, that it wasn’t meant to be. You have to walk away. It would be the smart thing to do.”

“I never was too smart,” she smiled. “My marriage is all I got. I walked now, I’d only be admitting these last years have been for nothing.”

“Admitting you made a mistake doesn’t make you wrong. You realise you been hitting yourself in the head with a hammer for years, but decide to carry on so you don’t look stupid for doing it in the first place. Now that’d be dumb.”

She looked at him, frowning.

“Life doesn’t have to be hammering nails into the floor with your forehead,” he said sadly.

“You sure?”

“I reckon life isn’t meant to be like this, a constant struggle. Just pain and misery. Life is short and hard, is it too much just to expect a little happiness?”

“Life is a struggle.”

“What about destiny?”

“Nice idea.”

That sat in silence for a while.

“You hear about the rape the other night. At that bar, the night you and Murph and the others went out?” she broke the spell.

“Yeah.”

“The girl was beaten half to death. She was only 16. That’s life.” Pain crossed her face.

“It’s got to be better than that.” He touched her hand. She didn’t draw away.

“There was another one last night.”

“A rape?” he asked.

She nodded. “First one got off light. This one was raped and sodomised. She’s in intensive care. Fractured skull. She isn’t expected to make it. He beat her face in.”

“You get much of that round here?”

“Some,”

“Military base, I guess?” he shrugged.

“We get our share of rapes and fights. But this is different. This is bad. Sick, twisted, bad. This guy is building to something.”

“You reckon it’s the same man?”

“You don’t? This freak is on the rampage. It’s going to get worse.” Her lips twitched.

“I hope your wrong.”

She shook her head.

He squeezed her hand.

He looked into her eyes.

“You figure it was Murph, your husband?” he asked softly.

She reared back, “No!” she said sharply. “He’s a weak, stupid bully, but he isn’t a monster!” she seemed aghast.

“I’m sorry,” he dipped his eyes and took her other hand.

“I wish my life would change, somehow on its own. I don’t know what to do anymore.” She paused and sighed. “I’m so tired.”

Steiner wanted to speak, but didn’t know what to say.

“Sometimes I just walk out into traffic, maybe someone will hit me. Other times I’ve visited the coast. Stood on the rocks, waiting for the big waves to wash me away. If things won’t change, maybe it’ll just end. I need a little peace.”

“Maybe I could help?” he croaked.

“How?”

“I could kill your husband.”

There was silence for a moment. She cocked her head as if thinking.

“No, I don’t think that would help. He’s all I got. For better for worse.

Steiner shrugged.

“Thanks though,” she smiled. She reached up and touched his face. He leant into it. He closed his eyes and brought his hand up to her cheek. He felt the softness of her skin against his fingers.

A noise crashed outside.

Steiner’s eyes snapped open. He jerked away from the table.

“What?” Hannah’s eyes flashed wildly.

Steiner reached for his concealed pistol and began to stand.

Murphy crashed through the rear door, Beretta automatic held two-handed. Steiner brought up his pistol and levelled it. Standing side-on, he held the weapon one-handed, his extended right arm unwavering, sight fixed on the bridge of Murphy’s broad nose. Both men froze, weapons locked on each other.

“Well this is touching scene!” Murphy puffed, his face red.

Steiner noticed a hickey on his thick neck.

“You still sniffing around my wife?” Murphy spat.

Steiner didn’t speak. He noticed the muzzle of the Murphy’s pistol waver.

“I oughta do you right now!” Murphy whined.

Steiner smiled.

“Fucker!” Murphy stepped in closer.

“Murph!” Hannah snapped, rising from her seat. Her husband paused, jerking his head round.

Steiner stepped into the other man, knocking his weapon aside and driving the butt of his pistol into Murphy’s nose. Bone and cartilage crunched, and blood splattered. Murphy screamed and folded, hitting the floor hard. Steiner kicked his weapon clear.

Hannah moved quickly across the room, dropping to her knees beside her hunched up husband. He jerked away at first, then relented as she reached out to him. She fussed and tended to him. She cooed softly. Steiner could hear her husband sobbing beneath the hand covering his face. Blood poured between his fingers.

Hannah looked up. “Maybe you’d better go?” her eyes met Steiner’s, her voice soft but firm.

He paused, then nodded, holstering his pistol.

He headed out the rear door, looking back only once. Hannah was hugging Murphy, covering his bloody face with kisses.

Steiner looked away into the darkness and walked away.

*

*

*

The man moved fast. Crouched low, he skirted the high perimeter fence. He found the spot, dropped to one knee and freed a pair of wire-cutters from inside his jacket.

The torch snapped on, the man caught in the beam. He froze, dropping the wire-cutters and groping for his holstered pistol.

“Well, well, well, what have we got here?” Homer stepped forward, a HK automatic pistol gripped in his right hand, the Maglite torch held in his left. Armstrong hovered in the shadows at his elbow, covering Wilson with a Colt Commando compact assault rifle.

Wilson crouched; teeth bared like a cornered animal.

“You going somewhere, Ratboy?” Homer grinned.

The Englishman emitted a low growl.

“You been spotted skulking around the last couple of nights,” Homer extended his arm, levelling his weapon on Wilson. “What you up to?”

“Fuck you!” Wilson snatched for his weapon. Homer kicked him hard once in the jaw, flipping the Englishman over backwards. Homer crouched and retrieved the SIG automatic lying on the grass and tossed it to Armstrong.

“I reckon it’s time we had a little chat, don’t you?” Homer stood. Wilson rolled onto his knees. He glared up, blood covering his face. The muzzle of Homer’s pistol hovered just inches from his forehead.

Wilson started to laugh, a low wheeze starting deep in his chest, rising up his throat until it became a crazed cackle. Saliva flecked his lips, his eyes rolled.

“Jesus, what a fucking loon!” Homer turned to Armstrong. The tall, rangy Texan smiled thinly, the gash of his mouth twitching.

Homer turned back, shaking his head, “Shut your fucking mouth!” Wilson’s laughter grew wilder. Homer snapped his pistol backhanded across the Englishman’s face, whipping his head round. An arc of blood followed the jerk of his head. When he turned back, his cheek was laid open. He grinned, his smirk opening up his flesh.

“We’re onto you, you fucking freak,” Homer continued, nudging Wilson’s head with the muzzle of his weapon. “That girl that was attacked at the bar the other night?”

Wilson glanced at the American.

“You were missing for a while there?” Homer bent nearer. “Then last night you were seen around the perimeter fence, and surprise, surprise, another rape off-base.”

Wilson cocked his head.

“We seen the way you look at women. We know it was you out there.”

Wilson’s eyes shone.

“You like the ladies, don’t you, Steve?” Homer asked softly.

The Englishman giggled, “More than you, you bunch of faggots!”

“Don’t seem they like you that much though, do they?”

Wilson’s eyes darkened, “Fuck you!”

“Guess you get frustrated enough, maybe you’ll do anything to get your rocks off,”

“I know how to treat the ladies.” Wilson sniggered.

“You’re a fucking freak,” Homer snarled. “You ain’t gonna hurt no-one else, you sick fuck!”

“Oh yeah?” Wilson’s head bobbed as he giggled.

“We’re gonna keep you on a short leash. You ain’t getting off this base again.”

“Plenty of fine bitches on base, I reckon. What about Captain Murphy’s wife, she looks like a hot cunt. She’s just fucking begging for it. Maybe I’ll show her a good time!”

Backhanded, Homer pistol-whipped the Englishman, tossing him sideways. He hit the ground still sniggering. He scabbled across the loose-dirt. Homer holstered his weapon and stepped over the grovelling Englishman, jerking him to his feet. He held him at arm’s length as he writhed. Homer began to hit Wilson, pounding him methodically. Blood sprayed from the gaping wounds opening up in his face.

“Man, lay off the face!” Armstrong called softly.

Homer nodded and drove his fist into Wilson’s midriff, driving any air out of him. Again and again he slammed his huge fist into the Englishman. Wilson hung limp, tenderised. Homer heard one or two ribs crunch.

Letting Wilson fall, Homer drove a couple of heavy kicks into his body and a final last kick to the head for good measure.

Wilson's giggling had died away to a low gurgle. He twitched, one hand clawing loosely at the earth.

Homer turned away.

"Your turn, man," he nodded to Armstrong.

"Don't see why we can't just cap the degenerate fucker?"

"Steiner can't grease the freak without orders,"

"Orders, always fucking orders!" Armstrong tossed Homer his Colt Commando and rolled up his sleeves.

Wilson was struggling to stand, rising slowly onto all fours. Armstrong took a slow leisurely approach, then swung his foot back and drove the toe of his boot up into the Englishman's torso. Wilson was lifted clear of the ground and thrown back against the chainlink fence. The rattle of the metal rung through the cool night.

Wilson hung against the chain fence, grinning out of the bloody mask of his face.

Armstrong stepped in close and began to pummel the Englishman, starting on his body. Wilson, dangling from the fence like a boxer on the ropes stayed upright as he took a terrible beating. His head hanging, chin in his chest, he gazed up through the gore. Armstrong moved to the face, ripping into the torn and broken mess of his broken features.

Bach, standing guard out in the dark moved in closer, his M4 carbine hanging low in his long arms. He thought he might pass on his turn. He had no taste for beatings, even on a freak like Wilson. He just wanted the creep put down like the sick dog he was. But nevertheless he watched, fingering the cool plastic of his rifle.

Armstrong stepped back, blood splattered across the front of his shirt.

Wilson hung from the fence, face and body bloody and raw. He dangled like a broken doll.

"Reckon that might teach the fuck." Homer called.

“Doubt it?” Armstrong swung his foot in, slicing it into the outside of Wilson’s knee. There was a crunch of bone and cartilage and the Englishman went down hard, hitting the ground without a sound.

Armstrong moved over him. He placed his foot on Wilson’s windpipe and squeezed.

“Remember, asshole, we’re watching you!” Armstrong didn’t wait for any response. He stepped back then drove the heel of his boot down hard into Wilson’s face. He twisted his foot, then stepped off. He spat into what remained of Wilson’s bloody face and turned away.

Homer handed the rifle back to Armstrong and they met up with Bach out in the shadows.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

A single pair of eyes watched from the darkness.

Yuri stood crouched in the watchtower. He had watched the beating and he understood it. It was he who had let the others know about Wilson’s nocturnal activities, albeit anonymously. The Englishman was a problem that had to be dealt with. Time was short. If Steiner didn’t make the call soon, it would be up to him.

Who’d ever know?

Chapter 13

“Time’s up.” Logan sat, fingers interwoven before him, a slender smile on his bloodless lips.

“You’re shitting me?” Steiner spat back.

“The President has given the word. You go.”

“Fuck that, we aren’t ready.”

“You got to move while the situation’s hot. We want you going in when the bombing raids are still in operation. The Iraqis are playing footsie with the UN through the French and Russians. They’re coming over all co-operative, say they wanna play nice. We look the bad guys. We’re getting pressure to shut down the bombing. You gotta hit him now.” Logan continued unflustered.

“We should have another week plus at least!”

“You ship out to Fort Bliss in Texas for two days desert training then it’s out to the staging post in the Middle East and 48 hours acclimatisation before you go operational.”

“We need more time,” Steiner pleaded.

“You saying your boys aren’t up to the job?” Logan smirked.

“Of course they fucking are. They were capable the day they arrived. But we need more time to develop teamwork. Then there’s Wilson?”

“There’s no more time. As for Wilson, you’ll have to make do.”

“He isn’t up to it. The men don’t trust him. He’s dangerous. He’ll blow the operation and get us all killed.”

“Tough. Deal with it.” Logan stood and left the room, Murphy trotting after him.

Steiner groaned, burying his head in hands.

*

*

*

Steiner arrived on the parade ground, dressed in full BDU, his Colt Commando rifle slung.

Yuri, Bach and the two American Delta operatives were waiting slumped on the bleachers.

“Not good news,” Steiner stood before them. “We’ve got the word to move. We ship out to Fort Bliss tomorrow. Two days then we ship out and go operational after 48 hours.”

Homer and Armstrong showed no noticeable reaction. Bach’s already grim face took a further downturn. Yuri’s dark eyes didn’t even flicker.

Bach cleared his throat, “You think maybe now’s the time to give us the full briefing on the operation?”

“Yeah, like the target?” Homer chipped in.

“Oh shit, I forgot.” Steiner groaned. “Guess we better wait for Wilson.”

“Why?” said Armstrong dryly.

“Good point, but I ain’t going through this twice.”

“Fuck,” Armstrong muttered.

“Has anybody seen the asshole?” asked Steiner.

Homer and Armstrong smiled thinly, exchanging glances. Bach shifted uncomfortably.

“Shit, find him. Now!” Steiner barked.

The Israeli and the two American’s jumped up and headed off.

“Splitting up may reduce time, this ain’t a goddamn day-trip.” Steiner called after them. They split and moved off laughing.

Yuri approached Steiner and spoke softly.

“We may have a problem.”

* * *

“Hey, Homer, get your ass over here!”

Homer turned. He recognised his friend Luke ‘Lucky’ Moran, the barman from the Delta bar. The ex-Delta man was standing outside his bar, waving Homer over.

“What is it, man?”

“That English fuckwad from your team,” Lucky growled, “Been in my bar drinking all fucking day. He’s out of head, man, drunk as goddamn skunk!”

“No shit?”

“I ain’t got that much problem with that, though the creep is an asshole,” the barman continued.

“No doubt!”

“Nope, it’s a whole other thing. The fuck is in fatigues and kit and the dumb bastard is carrying a fucking weapon. He’s got a pistol strapped to his hip!”

“You want me to deal with it?”

“He’s your boy. Only thing stopped me from knocking the fuck on his ass or whacking the loser, is common courtesy. You deal with him or I will.”

“I read you, buddy!”

“Let’s go!” Lucky led the way, moving purposefully towards the bar, Homer on his heels. Lucky moved pretty fast for a big guy, specially as he was missing a leg. He lost it in Somalia in ’93. He was covering an op in Mogadishu, sniping from a circling chopper when his left leg was taken clean off by a burst from a heavy machine gun. Not only did he recover; he made it back to full combat duty, getting around pretty darn well on his artificial leg. He had finally retired a few months back, taking over the running of the Delta bar.

Homer followed Lucky inside the gloomy bar. The barman nodded to the figure slumped at the bar and moved off. Homer approached.

“Hey, Wilson!” he stood over the Englishman. Wilson raised his head from the crook of his arm and stared blearily at the American.

“Fuck,” he groaned. His face was a bloated, bloody mess. His lips were split, broken teeth visible. His nose was smeared halfway across his face; one eye was swollen shut. He grinned drunkenly, the bloody, blackened mask twisting horribly.

“What you up to?” Homer asked amiably.

“Whatta fuck’s it to you?” Wilson slurred. He took a slurp from his beer and belched.

“Steiner wants a meet. We got a briefing before the night exercise.”

“Fuck that. Fuck you.”

“Whatever, but maybe you should tell Steiner that personally. I’m sure he’d appreciate your input.” Homer grinned.

“You fucking people. Faggots!” Wilson turned, swaying unsteadily on his stool.

“Yeah, yeah, big fella, whatever. I guess we can’t all be the hit with the ladies you are?” Homer laughed.

“Do better than you, you bald-headed freak!”

Homer slapped both hands against his shaven skull. “Oh my hair! I’m so ugly!” he sobbed in his best Homer Simpson voice. He laughed. “Seems to be it ain’t polite to draw attentions to others shortcomings.”

“Fucking comedian!” Wilson groped for his beer and emptied it. “Hey, barman get me a whisky, a double.”

“You’ve had enough, buddy. Maybe you should head on home.” Lucky replied amiably from down the far end of the bar.

“Fuck you all, ya fucking losers!” Wilson screamed, almost falling off his stool.

Lucky just smiled and continued wiping the glass in his hand.

“None of you are worth shit. Think you’re so fucking hot...” Wilson ranted.

“Come on, Wilson, we ain’t got time for this shit.” Homer reached out and gently took the Englishman’s upper arm.

“Get your fucking hands off me!” Wilson screamed and reared back, breaking free, his face blood-red. His wounds opened.

“Cool, man!” Homer held up his hands. “Just reckon maybe we should get out of here?”

“Fuck off, you fucking freak!” he howled. “Maybe I’ll go visit Mrs Murphy, show that fucking bitch some action!”

Homer kept his eye on Wilson’s holstered sidearm.

“Come on, man let’s go!”

“Who’s gonna make me? You?” the Englishman giggled wildly, eyes rolling.

He was losing it again. Homer decided he didn’t have time to fuck around anymore.

He reached out and snatched Wilson’s pistol from its holster. Reversing the automatic he slipped it into his belt.

Wilson slid off his stool. Without a sound, he slipped inside Homer grasp. He plucked something from his pocket, and drove his hand into the American’s midriff.

“Shit!” Homer grunted, rolling clear as Wilson slipped away. The American looked down and saw the handle of a knife sticking from the side of his gut. Blood welled from the wound, streaming down his front. “Oh, Christ!” he muttered in disgust.

Lucky saw what had happened. He snatched a squat pump-action shotgun from beneath the bar. Holding it by the pistol grip, he brought it up, jacking a shell into the breach.

“Hold it there, fuckwad!” he called.

Wilson cackled, eyes wild and lunged for the doorway.

Lucky fired, jacked the slide and fired again, but Wilson was out the door and clear before the buckshot ripped the wall and doorway apart.

Lucky vaulted over the bar and grabbed Homer, easing him to the floor.

“You okay, man?” he asked.

“What the fuck does it look like, Einstein?” Homer grunted.

Lucky’s fingers went to the knife.

“Don’t touch it you asshole, it’s the only thing stopping me from bleeding out.”

Homer growled.

“I’ll get the paramedics.” Lucky stood.

Homer reached out and grabbed his arm.

“Get Steiner first.”

*

*

*

Steiner jumped out of the Humvee before it had rolled to a halt. Yuri and the two other team members followed close on his heel. An army ambulance was parked outside the bar, alongside two Military Police vehicles. Flashing lights lit up the fast descending darkness.

Steiner barrelled past the MP on the door. Paramedics were loading Homer onto a gurney. Steiner crouched next to him, bending close. He looked sickly and pale. Bandages criss-crossed his torso. He stared up at Steiner from hollow eyes. He smiled wanly.

“How you doing, Homer?” Steiner asked softly.

“Had better days,” he croaked.

“What happened?”

“I fucked up.”

“Wilson?” Steiner whispered.

Homer nodded, “He was pretty fucking drunk. Raving. Out of his head.”

Steiner nodded.

“Caught me by surprise. Stuck me and bugged out. Sorry, Mr Steiner.”

“It’s okay,” Steiner laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, buddy!” one of the paramedics broke in, “We gotta get this guy to the hospital.”

“Sure,” Steiner stood. “Homer, did he say anything about where he might be going?”

The Delta trooper shook his head weakly.

“Can’t remember. The asshole was just ranting, wasn’t making much sense. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Steiner nodded to the paramedics. They began to wheel the gurney out.

“Oh shit!” Homer gasped, twisting round painfully. His bloodless face was twisted in horror.

“What is it?” Stunned, Steiner rushed over.

“I remember something,”

“What?”

“Wilson, last night, he started going on and on about Mrs Murphy. Said he didn’t have to leave the base to, you know, get some action,”

Steiner blanched.

“Mentioned her name again today,” Homer continued, but Steiner was already moving.

Steiner burst out of the bar, moving fast, leaving Yuri and the others in his wake. An MP was blocking his way to his Humvee.

“Excuse me, sir!”

Steiner hit the man hard in the chest, sweeping his feet from beneath him, sending him crashing to the ground. Steiner swung into the Humvee, turned the ignition. The engine caught and he lit up the tyres, taking off with a screech, his headlights flashing across the black sky.

* * *

He crouched in the darkness, watching and waiting.

She came to the door and opened it. Leaving the screen closed she leant against the doorframe and sipped her glass of wine. The light behind her burned through her loosely knotted silk dressing gown.

He licked his lips, crouching close to the building opposite, hidden in the shadows.

She sighed and pushed open the screen. It caught, she stepped out onto the doorstep. She leant back against the doorframe. She leant her head to one side, her neck curving languorously. The wind plucked at her flimsy gown. She looked up at the stars for a moment, then took another sip of wine. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the doorframe. Her body arched.

His eyes traced the curves of her body, naked beneath the gown. A little smile on her face. The bitch wanted it bad. She was waiting for him.

She sighed and let the wind play on her face.

He began to move, slowly at first, but faster as he neared. His steps were silent on the soft grass. His breaths came in short gasps. His heart pounded, but not from the exertion. As he got closer he swore he could smell her.

She thought she heard a sound, sensed movement or something. She opened her eyes. Too late.

He hit her hard, knocking her off her feet and carrying her over the doorstep. He clamped a hand over her mouth choking off her scream.

There was a crash of glass, then the screen slammed shut. Then there was silence.

* * *

Steiner stopped short of the Murphy house. Turning off the ignition and killing the lights, he rolled quietly to a halt. He slipped from the vehicle and freed his Walther P99 automatic from his hip holster.

The night was dark and still. Crouching low and moving fast, he closed on the house, sliding around it. Light spilled from the rear door. He circled. It was clear inside. He slid open the screen and slipped through the open doorway.

It was silent in the house. A broken wineglass lay inside the doorway. He moved further into the house.

Edging sideways, pistol held two-handed and extended slightly before him, he checked each darkened room in turn. Nothing.

He heard a muffled sound coming from the room at the end of the darkened passageway, like a muffled cry choked off. He approached the doorway. The door stood slightly askance, light spilling through the crack.

Steiner slid the fingers of his left hand into the crack and eased the door slowly open.

Dim light spilled over the bed. Shadows clung to the corners. Hannah was naked and tied to the bed. Spread-eagled, lashed arm and leg to the foot and head of the bed. She sobbed quietly. A rag was stuffed in her mouth. Even from where he stood, Steiner could see blood on her face and the sheets.

Wilson was on top of her. He was naked from the waist down; trousers rucked around his ankles, socks and boots still on his feet. His exposed flesh was slick with rank, psychotic sweat. His dark hair was plastered against his skull. He clutched the headboard, back arched. He thrust again and again. Each stab was accompanied by a dull grunt. She wept.

Steiner froze. He thought he was going to be sick.

Wilson continued his cold thrusting, but slowly turned his head. His face was beet-red and glistened in the light. A big, sick grin was smeared across his face. His bulging eyes found Steiner in the shadows. His lips drew back further, revealing his short, jagged teeth and thick gums. He began to laugh, the awful cackle filling the deadened room.

Steiner fired twice, both shots sounding as one. Blood and brain-matter splattered across the headboard and Hannah's face. Wilson's headless body hovered for a moment above her, as if mocking Steiner, then flopped sideways, rolling off the bed and hitting the floor with a soft thud.

* * *

Steiner had cut Hannah clear and wrapped her in a blanket when Yuri and the others arrived. They waited awkwardly in the doorway. Steiner held Hannah in his arms as she sobbed quietly. He nodded over her shoulder at the headless body slumped by the bed.

Yuri motioned Bach and Armstrong forward. The two men grabbed Wilson by the heels and dragged him from the room leaving a smeared bloody trail.

Steiner finally quietened Hannah down and laid her down on the bed. She curled into a foetal ball.

The three men were waiting in the living room.

“What do we do now?” Yuri asked.

“We get rid of the body.” Steiner said quietly.

“What about the MPs, CID?” asked Armstrong.

“Fuck that!” muttered Steiner.

“It was a clean shoot, wasn’t it?” Armstrong asked, eyebrows raised quizzically.

“So what, we haven’t got time to get caught up in investigations, enquiry panels and that shit. We can’t afford to draw attention to ourselves,” Steiner paced. “It’d go away soon enough, we’re all invisible anyway and we got friends high up to tidy up the mess.”

“So why hide what happened?” Armstrong persisted.

“We’re going to deal with this in-house. It’s our problem. We’re going to make it go away.” Steiner continued pacing. “Clear?”

The three men nodded.

“Wilson stabbed Homer, that’s on record. Now he’s going to disappear. The cops will think he’s running, it’s what they expect.”

“So what now?” Bach asked from the shadows.

“We get rid of this piece of shit,” he kicked Wilson’s corpse.

“Where?” Yuri asked.

“We’re on a massive military base, it covers several hundred fucking acres, most of it wooded. I’m sure you can manage to lose our friend here somewhere.”

Yuri nodded.

“Deal with it!” Steiner turned his back, ending any discussion.

“Luke,” Yuri addressed Armstrong. “Get the vehicle, bring it round the side of the house.” The American nodded and headed out. Yuri turned to Bach. “Yoni, help me shift this table.”

The two men moved the dining table. Then they rolled Wilson’s body in the rug beneath it. Together they manhandled the bundle into the kitchen.

Armstrong entered, breathless. “Murphy’s here!”

“Shit!” Steiner headed for the front door as Murphy burst in.

“What the fuck...” the Delta officer moved for his sidearm. Yuri stepped into him and knocked the weapon from his hand. Armstrong pulled his pistol and covered him.

Red-faced, Murphy tried to gather himself.

“What’s going on here?” he muttered.

“You heard about Wilson and Zaborski?” Steiner snapped.

“Of course, but what’s that got to do with you assholes being in my house?”

“I warned you about Wilson,” Steiner snarled.

“Yeah, yeah,”

“You fuckwit, you and your asshole bosses got us in this mess,” Steiner fixed him with an icy glare.

Murphy was totally fucking confused now, but even he realised something was up. “What?” he looked over Steiner’s shoulder to the bedroom.

“Wilson thought he’d take a little R&R with your wife.” Steiner said coldly. “Of course she wasn’t of the same mind. But he wouldn’t let a little thing like that deter him.

Murphy opened and closed his mouth, big, stupid eyes glazed and confused.

“Hannah?” he asked dumbly.

“She’s all right. But now we’ve got another problem.” Murphy had tuned out, looking towards the bedroom. He looked frightened and repulsed. He turned Steiner’s stomach.

“Murphy!” he snapped and the dumb ox met his eye.

“What?”

“We have a problem. We’ll get rid of the evidence, but you’ll have to square it with your bosses.” Steiner had considered getting Murphy to lie and they’d pretend Wilson had done a flit, but he knew the Delta officer was too damn stupid and cowardly to pull it off. Someone was going to have to sort things with Logan and the President.

“Bosses? Square what?” he mouthed dopily.

“Wilson.” Steiner met his eye, so even this moron got the message.

“He’s dead?”

“I’d say. You’ll find the contents of his head and what’s left of his skull splashed all over your bedroom. Shouldn’t be too much for you clean up.” Steiner’s eyes shone in the dark.

“Of Jesus!” Murphy looked like he was going to throw up.

“You understand? We’ll lose the body, you clean up here and square this with Logan?”

Murphy nodded hazily.

Steiner nodded to Yuri and Armstrong. The American put up his weapon and the two men bundled the rolled rug out of the house. Minutes later a Humvee started up and moved off.

Steiner lit a cigarette and watched Murphy. He stood frozen; Steiner reckoned the odds on getting rid of a second body tonight.

“Go and look after your wife.”

Murphy sleepwalked into the room. Steiner finished his cigarette and checked the window.

He headed silently back to the bedroom.

Murphy was perched awkwardly on the edge of the bed, flat eyes distant. Hannah clung to him, kissing his face through her sobs, hands clawing at him desperately.

Steiner turned his back and walked away.

Chapter 14

The black delta skipped low over the desert plain. Swooping tight over the undulating dunes and rocky outcrops. Almost invisible, an indistinct shadow against the night sky, it was gone before its howling roar caught up.

The Lockheed F-117A precision attack aircraft, or 'Stealth Fighter' as she was popularly known, had until recently not existed, at least according to the United States Airforce and US government. That didn't stop the press alternately eulogising and ridiculing her. Now her existence was acknowledged, but many aspects of her, including her armament were highly classified. But at this moment, this F-117 was carrying two GBU-27 2000 lb. laser-guided smart bombs. In addition she carried two AAMs (air-to-air missiles) and a 20mm cannon.

The F-117A was in fact not a fighter in the classic sense. She was a ground attack aircraft, a fighter-bomber, a Stealth fighter-bomber. And this beauty, the *Black Beelzebub*, was loaded for bear.

Captain Jake 'Hardcore' Mason had christened his aircraft, the name not going down too well among some of the more God-fearing of his colleagues and superiors. Well, fuck 'em, he thought. Unfortunately it was this attitude that Jake Mason was never going to be anything more than a Captain in the USAF.

His plane rose and shimmied in rising columns of hot air, riding them like the twisting waves of a riptide. The Black Beelzebub was moving at a little over 500mph, hugging the desert floor at no more than 100 feet. Mason sat back in his cockpit and surveyed his instruments. Moving at this speed and this altitude, only the onboard computer could handle the aircraft, reacting instantly to every tiny variable. To fly so low and fast would take an exceptional pilot, and Mason was indeed an exceptional flyer, but even he couldn't handle this. Over alien terrain, at night, so fast and low, to turn off the computer would be instant suicide.

So he sat back and watched as the plane pitched and yawed, monitoring the instruments, trying to stay awake. They had been in the air for a little over two hours, having to fly in from Cyprus, as Turkey and the Arab cocksuckers in the Gulf were too spineless to let them operate from their bases. Mason checked his defence systems. Although effectively invisible to radar through the F-117's unique technology, and flying beneath the radar umbrella, Mason and his flight had had sniffs from two Iraqi air-defence systems. Only a sniff, no lock on, but it was enough.

Mason was flight leader, his ability ensured that. He was carrying the bombs for the main strike. Out on his wings, invisible in the darkness were two more F-117s, both fully loaded with ASMs (Air-to-surface missiles) and AAMs, to cover him and follow up the main strike. Out covering his tail was a fourth Stealth, fully loaded with AAMs to cover his ground-strike buddies.

They remained, alone and to all intents and purposes invisible, but that would only last so long. When they began their attack run, they would be all too visible, every Iraqi south of Baghdad was going to take a pop at them as they ripped over their heads.

Reaching the prearranged co-ordinates, Mason and his comrades disengaged their autopilots and took manual control of their aircraft and began a slow, steady climb. They were 30km out from their target.

Mason suddenly felt alive, his hands wrapped around the joystick of his joyously bucking craft. He smiled, the adrenaline kicking in.

Their target was an Iraqi military installation, nominally another of The Rais's Presidential Palaces, rumoured to be one of his biggest chemical and biological weapon centres. There had been some concern initially about such raids, the inevitable risk of leakage of the lethal weapons when struck. Any escape of weapon-grade material would lead to contamination of the surrounding civilian population and excessive collateral damage. Then in the end they just thought, fuck it. They were way beyond PR and a few dead Arabs.

Mason wished they were hitting the 'Palace' where the Iraqis had killed that ex-army weapons inspector. He'd have liked a bit of that payback, but they had already totalled that site right back at the beginning of the raids. This one would have to do, and the scuttlebutt was The Rais himself could be in situ. Man, that would be sweet payback.

At twenty kilometres out, the flight lit up their engines. Reaching 250 feet, they commenced their final bomb-run.

Mason's two wingmen were targeted by missile batteries. The two F-117s locked onto the hostile AA sites and launched their ASMs. The missiles streaked away and the two planes nosed back. Mason had point on the attack, he was going in.

10km away the Iraqi missile batteries dissolved in a sea of flame as the American missiles hit. The perimeter was breached. The dead lay among the burning ruins of the first damaged buildings.

Inside 10km, Mason started getting incoming AA fire. Heavy, but archaic artillery blasted away at him, starbursts of flack exploding around him. Jake 'Hardcore' Mason whooped with joy.

He reckoned just about 500 Iraqis were right now ripping into him with their AKs. In fact he thought he could hear a gentle pattering against the underbelly of his plane. He laughed some more. They couldn't touch him with that shit.

He was locked on. Nose down, the target was large in his sights. Weapons bay open.

Below, the surviving Iraqi guards fired everything they had into the black silhouette as it tore over them. More American missiles exploded amongst them. Figures fled the inferno.

Mason released his two bombs, yanking up the nose of his plane, sending the two GBU-27s skipping over the perimeter and smashing into the weapons complex. It was almost silent for an instant as the blast of the jets' afterburners faded, then the bombs detonated.

The huge blast sucked in all the available oxygen, the fires briefly dying. Then the concussion wave hit, killing everyone and everything within a half-mile radius instantly. Then

came the fireball, swallowing everything whole, engulfing the broken landscape in a relentless sea of fire.

Broken and burning, the Iraqi facility had ceased to be. In its place was a bloody, burning bedlam. Everything within two miles was dead or dying. But they were the lucky ones. For beyond the fire and ruin there came a far worse fate. Carried on the wind came plague, pestilence and slow, agonising death.

Mason looked back, a big grin plastered on his face. The blazing sea beneath him lit up his eyes. Shit, someone was gonna be mad as hell about this one.

* * *

“What a fuck up,” the US President buried his face in his hands and groaned. “What a complete, goddamn fuck up!”

“Well, really, Mr President, if you look at it rationally, we weren’t to know about the hospital,” the Air Force chief explained.

The President peered, bleary-eyed, between his fingers.

The Air Force General continued, “It’s not as if we could see a red cross painted on the roof in the middle of the night,” he snorted feebly.

“I don’t give a shit about the fucking hospital!” President Harker snapped, half rising from behind his desk.

“Don’t forget the orphanage?” the CIA chief chipped in, a thin smile twisting at his lips. Harker snapped an icy glare at him.

“I realise intel should have picked this out...” the Air Force man continued.

“Shut the fuck up!” Harker groaned and flopped back into his seat.

“The Iraqis place their military sites close to these soft civilian targets...” the Secretary of State intoned.

“No shit?” Harker grinned maniacally. “With your international knowledge, you should be Secretary of Defence?”

The donnish politician squirmed, flushing uncomfortably.

“Mr President, nobody could have realistically foreseen this mess.” General Hummel, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said softly. His old friend looked at him and nodded at him slowly.

“I know, Frank. I’m not surprised, and really I don’t give a shit about a bunch a scabby fucking Iraqis; sick, kids or otherwise, they all come out the same in the end. But it is the press; those limp-wristed, pencil-necked fucking creeps are going to be all over this. They hate it when someone gets killed in a war.”

The military men all laughed. The handful of professional politicians present squirmed. The CIA chief and his colleagues remained inscrutable, watching everyone.

“I take their liberal bellyaching. It’s the political fallout; it’ll kill us. Our so-called allies have been pissing and moaning throughout these air strikes. The British ain’t a problem, those dumb-assholes would suck my dick morning, noon and night and ask for more. It’s the rest, the Italians, the Greeks, even the Krauts. They’re all rallying behind our old friends the French. That coupled from the shit already coming in from our camel-jockey allies in the Gulf will finish us.”

There was a deathly pause.

“The air-strikes are over, finished. At best we’ve got days until we’ll have to shut down. The UN will makes us look like assholes if we don’t pull the fucking plug.”

“We had intel The Rais himself was on site last night. We had to move fast,” the Air Force General plead.

“But you missed. Any chance of hitting him now has probably gone.” Harker and the CIA director exchanged glances. “He’s gone, buried deep.”

“What do you want, Mr President?” General Hummel asked.

“A suspension in air-strikes, two, three days tops. We’ll make all the right diplomatic noises, how sorry we are about the dune-coons. Then I want a big one. A major fucking air strike, multiple targets. Missiles, fighters, bombers. Precision fucking saturation, the lot. I want the whole goddamn country blitzed. Then we call it quits.”

“Mr President, I must object!” the Secretary of State interrupted.

Harker swung around, his cold glare fixing on the politician.

“Shut your mouth, you fat fuck,” his hand came up, a .45 automatic in his fist. “When I want your opinion, I’ll give it to you!”

Harker laid the pistol on the desk, sitting back in his chair and slowly turning away.

“Now all of you, get out.”

When they had left the room, Logan stepped out of the shadows.

“What now, Mr President?”

“We don’t have much time.” Harker smiled to himself, the sun lighting up his face. “Move everything up. Abort any training, I want the team shipped out to the Gulf within 24 hours. I want them on the ground behind Iraqi lines in four nights, max. They’ll go in under the last air strike. It’s our only chance.”

“Steiner won’t...” Logan began.

“Fuck Steiner,” Harker looked at Logan for the first time. “Steiner’s paid to do a job, and he’ll do it.”

* * *

Logan was heading towards his car in the parking lot, when the CIA director stepped into his path.

“What do you want, Ives?” snarled Logan, eyeing the two bodyguards shadowing the CIA boss.

“I think you know, Chuck?” the Ivy League, WASP motherfucker smiled.

“Humour me?”

“We know about you and the President’s little plan. It isn’t going to happen.”

“Let’s say I know what you’re talking about for a second. Why isn’t this plan, if it exists, going to happen.”

“We can’t allow it.”

“*We*? Who the fuck are *we*?” Logan smiled crookedly.

“The people who make the hard decisions. The ones who really run this country, hell most of the damn world, at least the civilised part.” Ives, the CIA boss was totally serious, his unblinking eyes those of a zealot.

“Excuse me, but correct me if I’m wrong, but the President is the elected leader of the country and the commander-in-chief? He is the one who calls the shots.”

“He needs the approval of Congress.”

“Bullshit,” Logan laughed. “Executive Order, any dumb-ass fucking President can get around those goons. You think that would stop someone like Harker?”

“Of course not. But you forget, we know a lot about President Harker, perhaps more than he realises. Not just shit from his past in the military and intel. We got the scoop on his rise to power.”

“Bullshit.” Logan’s eyes darkened.

Ives grinned and leaned in closer, “Two dead presidents fall before him? Convenient renegade army officers attacking the government allowing martial law? Ready scapegoats, tidily eliminated before any trial?”

“You’re playing a dangerous fucking game!” Logan muttered darkly.

“We’re old hands.”

“Harker would kill you in a heartbeat if he thought you represented a threat.”

“Not if we both had stuff on each other.” Ives shrugged. “Stand off.”

“Then you’re threats are meaningless.”

“Maybe?” Ives smiled. “But we got plenty of shit on you as well. We still own you after tidying up that mess of yours down in Panama in ’89.”

Logan blanched.

“We got pictures. Photos, video, even a list of possible witnesses. We literally know where the bodies are buried. We got that and plenty of other shit on you. You’re ours, motherfucker.” Ives practically purred with satisfaction.

“You can’t pull this shit on me. General Harker...” Logan snarled.

“Harker will do what? He’d throw you to the wolves without a second thought, anything to save himself. We can’t have him; we’ll take you. It’ll serve as a threat to our little President.”

Logan opened and closed his fists impotently.

“This operation cannot be allowed to succeed. You will persuade Harker to abort.”

Ives snapped orders, assuming instant authority.

“It won’t happen, he’s hot for this...”

“No one is going to whack The Rais, he’s our boy. We set him up, then he kinda went off track for awhile, but he’s back on board. He’s a loudmouth, but we need him. Without him, that place would go to shit and suck the whole goddamn region, maybe the whole world in with it.”

“He’s a fucking psycho!”

“Yeah, but he’s our psycho.” Ives couldn’t be happier.

“Harker won’t back off.”

“Then you’ll have to sabotage the mission, shut it down. I don’t care how, just fucking kill it.” Ives snapped his head around and signalled for one of his men to bring his car round.

“I don’t know if I can persuade Harker. What if I can’t stop them before they go operational, what then?” Logan pled.

“Sell them to the Iraqis, of course.” Ives snapped impatiently, looking around for his drive.

“But what about the men?”

“It’s contained isn’t it? Everything’s clean and untraceable?”

“Of course.”

“The fuck ‘em.” Ives rattled some change in his pocket as he watched his car move up. “They’ll be dead before the dune-coons ever take them anyway.”

“But Harker wants The Rais dead?” Logan almost whined.

“About time he learned, what he wants and what he gets are two entirely different things,” the CIA director slid into the back of his car.

“But he’s the President!”

“Presidents come and go,” Ives snorted. “But we’re here forever, and we own you.”

Chapter 15

The burnished copper cauldron of the sun sank slowly towards the horizon. As it fell, the last tendrils of its stark rays clawed across the anvil of the desert floor. The heavy afternoon heat sagged heavier as the light faded.

Fort Bliss, Texas is the desert warfare-training centre for the elite regiments of the US Army and is the site of the second phase of Ranger School. All soldiers dream of passing the Ranger training course, irrespective of whether they plan to join the regiment or not, and any officer hoping for a career of any distinction in the army has to pass. To reach the highest branches of the elite infantry branches, especially Special Forces and Delta, all men, enlisted and officers alike, must pass the Ranger and Airborne courses.

The Ranger base is set apart within the Fort. McGregor Range, or Camp Schlocklee as it had been recently renamed in the memory of the command sergeant major killed in a parachute accident, houses the 7th Ranger Training Battalion. It is this unit's sole purpose to harass and torment all students at the camp. Nominally instructors, these men will harangue and pursue the students, teaching as they push each man to his limit. In each exercise carried out upon the harsh desert terrain, members of 7th Battalion act as the enemy, the hunters, in a relentless battle of ambush and counter-ambush. It is war only minus the death. Usually.

Sitting among the cluster of pup tents, they team stripped and cleaned their weapons. As Steiner reassembled his rifle, he watched the other men.

It had been rough for a while after Wilson's death. Steiner had debated covering up the whole thing, claiming that the Englishman had just vanished, gone AWOL. But in the end, all things considered, he went completely the opposite way. He let the shit spill everywhere. He sent Murphy to Logan and Harker. That Wilson had flipped, gone Section 8, raped a bunch of women, stabbed Zaborski, and then attacked Hannah. Faced with the risk of total exposure and such a scandal, the killing of the Englishman seemed a fortunate escape. Steiner had got rid of the body, and Murphy was taking care of his wife.

That isn't to say Logan and Harker were happy. They were pissed. They were a man down and Steiner got what he always wanted. With time short, they suggested getting a last-minute replacement, maybe someone from Delta. Steiner vetoed them. He wanted someone he knew, someone prepped. A professional, someone he trusted. The pair had pissed and moaned, but eventually relented.

Zaborski had been patched up and had joined them in Texas. The wound looked worse than it was. Apart from the blood loss, he had got away without any organ damage and only a nick to his abdominal muscles. Stitched and patched up he was sent back into the field.

Steiner rewrapped his Colt Commando in an oil-dampened cloth, to protect it from the dust.

“Get your shit together, we're moving out in a little over an hour!”

The others grumbled and roused themselves.

An hour after sundown, the team was to be choppered out into the heart of the desert. Under cover of darkness, and pursued by hunter-attack teams in choppers on the ground, they had to traverse eight miles of open ground and seize a site defended by a squad of Rangers. In and of itself, this was not uncommon. But tonight the exercise was to be totally live-fire. Better to fuck up now, than on the ground in Iraq, Steiner figured. All the men, the team and Ranger hunters were packing live rounds. Steiner men were told to avoid killing any of the Rangers, an order not over-stressed to the RI hunters.

Steiner watched as the sun slipped beneath the horizon. All they were waiting for was their new sixth team-member.

As they kitted up, a distant throbbing filled the heavy air. The Black Hawk came in low and flared up, kicking out a cloud of dust. A figure climbed onto the chopper skid. They tossed down their bag, then jumped the three feet to the ground from the hovering helicopter. The figure half-crouched and signalled to the pilot. The chopper lifted its nose and peeled off, climbing out of the swirling dirt and accelerating away into the inky darkness.

The passenger reshouldered their bag and began humping it over to the team.

“Who the fuck is this?” Homer growled.

“If I’m not wrong, this would be our sixth man,” Steiner replied.

“Cutting it fine.”

The approaching figure, dressed in desert fatigues, marched head down, Ranger forage cap pulled down low, and sunglasses still donned despite the darkness.

The men paused in their preparations and waited.

“Jesus!” Homer gasped.

The figure halted before them, unslung their Colt Commando rifle and removed their dark glasses.

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce Rachel Vansen, our sixth team member.”

The young woman, around her mid-to-late twenties smiled, removed her cap and ran her hand over her short-cropped dark hair. Her face was arresting, even beautiful, her alabaster white skin accentuated by her black hair and eyes, the flawless skin taut over her sculpted cheekbones.

“You’re shitting me, right?” Homer grinned, looking from Steiner to the other team members. “I mean, this babe, she’s a stripper, or hooker, right?” he laughed. “You brought her in to give us all a fine send off?”

Steiner just looked at him.

“Not that I’m complaining, man she’s sweet. Man’s gotta get his rocks off before he dies. Anything else would be un-American, right?”

Chuckling, he sidled up to the woman, Vansen. She smiled flirtatiously.

“What’d you say, hot stuff?” the big D-boy almost giggled.

“Whatever you want, babe?” she purred.

“Oh man!” Homer blushed, kicking at the dirt. “Baby, I gotta go first, but I’m going to ruin you for other men.” He looked round, grinning at his friends. “Sorry fellas!”

Vansen kicked Homer's legs from beneath him, slamming her left arm across his chest as he went down. He never knew what hit him. He hit the ground hard, disappearing in a cloud of dust. Vansen stepped back, unflustered, smile still on her face.

"Jesus, what hit me?" Homer struggled to sit up, coughing up dirt.

"Vansen and me have worked together before," Steiner said, "She's done shit'd turn your hair white, if you had any hair Homer."

"This little angel?" Homer asked, incredulous, unconsciously touching his shaven head.

"She even scares me, I shit you not."

"Oh man, I think I'm in love!"

"Homer," Armstrong muttered dryly, "You're an ass!"

* * *

As they finished kitting up, Vansen approached Steiner. She smiled, almost coyly.

"Steiner, how you been?"

"Okay, you know?" he shrugged. "You?"

"Can't complain," she tilted her head. Her face like Steiner's and the rest had been covered with dark camouflaged paint. The oily swirls reached up into her short-cropped black hair. She fiddled with her forage cap. She looked up at him demurely.

Steiner shifted uncomfortably.

"You get your weapons sorted?" he asked.

"Yeah," Vansen had switched her compact Colt Commando assault rifle for the slightly larger M4 carbine, the intermediate weapon between the ultra-short Commando and the full sized M16. The switch had been to allow a M203 grenade launcher to be mounted beneath the rifle's barrel. Vansen was picking up the slack in demolitions after the loss of Wilson. It was a role she slipped easily into, like Steiner she was multi-skilled: explosives,

assault, sniping, unarmed combat, as well as other arcane arts. Both were assassins, highly classified, part of the Dark Angel program. Officially deniable, Dark Angels were trained for deep cover and wet work, all black ops the CIA by necessity had to accomplish, but by Act of Congress were forbidden. Invisible, they took care of the nations dirty, but necessary little jobs.

“You clear on everything?” Steiner checked his Colt Commando and slung it over his shoulder. Already strapped across his back was an Israeli Galil sniper rifle, and he wore his Walther P99 battle pistol on his hip. In his webbing and lightweight pack he was also carrying a Mini-Uzi submachine gun and a small HK P7 automatic pistol, threaded with a silencer. He was also carrying grenades and as much ammo and ordnance as possible. He had wanted to replicate as closely as possible the equipment he would have to carry into Iraq. The others were doing likewise. Vansen herself was also carrying a suppressed Mini-Uzi, a FN FiveSeven automatic pistol and a silenced P7. Despite their loads, both slouched comfortably.

She nodded and stared at him, her dark eyes boring into him. He shifted uncomfortably. The silence grew between them.

“Uh, we better get moving,” Steiner muttered, gathering himself and moving past Vansen. She caught his arm in a tight grip, jerking him back.

“Have you even missed me, Steiner?” she hissed.

“Yes, of course,” he tried not to meet her intense black eyes.

“Did you think about me?”

“Now and then, sure,”

“Liar.” She hissed. “You still think about *her* don’t you?”

Steiner turned, his eyes meeting hers. He didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

“You’re a fool. She didn’t love you. She despised you, for Christ’s sake!” she spat.

“Just because a man loves something, doesn’t mean it has to love him back.” His eyes didn’t leave her, but he blinked.

“You killed her boyfriend, she tried to kill you...”

“And I killed her,” Steiner finished for her, his lip curling bitterly.

“Yeah, and her fucking boyfriend almost wasted me. I did everything for you, she did nothing. She never loved you. I always loved you.”

Steiner’s eyes softened, “I know.”

“But it doesn’t change anything?” she gasped bitterly from the darkness.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“But still we always end up back together, one way or another, don’t we?” her teeth shone out of the blackness.

There was silence. Vansen released his arm and reached up and gently ran the back up her hand across his cheek. He didn’t step away.

In the distance came the throb of an approaching helicopter.

“We’ve got to go.” Steiner whispered.

She lowered her hand.

“I need your mind on the job, Vansen,” He said. “ I need you with me on this mission.”

She didn’t reply.

“Are we okay?” he asked.

“Sure,” she sighed in the darkness.

* * *

The team hunkered down in the darkness, flares illuminating the LZ, smoke drifting across the ground. Steiner listened to the approaching thud of the chopper’s rotors. He looked around himself. All of his people were in full camouflaged gear, faces blacked out by dark paint. Vansen was next to him. She smiled. Yuri was just off to his right, armed with a SIG SG550 assault rifle, butt folded and the 30 round magazine in the housing was snapped to its twin, inverted for quick reload. Next came Armstrong and Bach, both with their MSG90 sniping

rifles slung, the Israeli carrying a compact Galil carbine and the American with a Colt Commando. At the rear was Zaborski, covering their asses with his M249 SAW light machine gun.

The chopper was coming in without lights for a combat exfiltration. It would be a short hop to the jump off point and the exercise began.

Steiner moved a short way away from the group, crouching low. It was as he was settling again that he began to notice something was wrong. He cocked his head, as if sniffing the wind, body tensed. He couldn't pin down the problem. But something was wrong. Then he realised the chopper sounded wrong. They were expecting a Black Hawk, but...

The huge Super Stallion helicopter swooped down out of the darkness, snapping on its landing lights and momentarily dazzling Steiner and his team. Recovering, the group instinctively raised their weapons and began to deploy.

But Steiner was ahead of them. He cut them off and signalled them to stand down. Alone he approached the settling chopper. He had already recognised the two figures braced in the doorway of the bird.

Logan and Murphy jumped down, ducking beneath the downwash of the rotors and headed towards Steiner. He marched to meet them, weapon braced.

“What the fuck is this?” Steiner snapped.

“Stand down,” Murphy croaked.

“We've got an exercise...”

Logan cut him off, “Exercise is scrubbed.”

“What?”

“You're shipping out tonight, the President wants you and your people on the ground in Iraq and operational within 48 hours.”

Steiner's shoulders sagged. He looked back at his team and passed a weary hand across his face.

“Fuck.”

Chapter 16

The Super Stallion carried them to the nearest Air Force base where they boarded an Army C-140 transport plane, heading east. Within hours they were at Andrews airbase outside Washington DC. The team and Murphy were hustled aboard a huge C-5B Galaxy. The vast transport plane was capable of carrying two M1A2 Main Battle Tanks or six AH-64 Apache helicopters, or if necessary 345 troops. The six-man team and Murphy were the only passengers on this flight. Apart from cases of infantry weaponry, the hold was also empty.

The Galaxy took off as dawn broke. As the plane banked and climbed above the slate grey waves of the Atlantic the team settled in their seats. Zaborski and Armstrong drew Bach and Vansen into a game of cards. Yuri slept. Steiner climbed from his seat and moved up through the plane. Murphy sat alone, tucked behind the cockpit going over some papers.

He looked up and squinted, “Steiner?”

Steiner made no move to sit. “Even you must realise this last minute change is just the final fucking straw. This operation is stillborn.”

Murphy sat back, scratching his belly. “Well that isn’t for you to worry about, is it?”

“Who else is going to worry. It’s us with our asses hanging out there. You and the fucks in Washington will be nice and safe.”

“Change the record, will you,” Murphy smirked. “Let us do the thinking, you just do the killing.”

“I don’t see any evidence of anyone thinking here.”

“Whatever.” Murphy returned to his paperwork.

Obviously dismissed, Steiner made to leave.

“Steiner?” Murphy called. Steiner turned.

“Yes?”

“This is for you,” without looking up from his papers, Murphy handed him a small envelope. It was lavender coloured, Steiner’s first name written on the front in an unformed schoolgirl hand. He looked back at Murphy, but he seemed engrossed in his paperwork.

Steiner opened the envelope and read:

Dear Saul,

I wanted to write to thank you. Things got pretty fucked up back there, but you were there for me. Everything is still a little cloudy, but Murph says maybe that isn't so bad. I guess he's right. Maybe what happened was for the best. It made me realise my life is a mess and I got to do something about it. If my life is fucked, it was me who fucked it and so it's got to me that unfucks it.

Murph has arranged for me to go away to a clinic up north. They're meant to be the best. Murph's tried to get me to go before, but I guess I was too much in denial to accept it before. Anyway I'm going, who knows for how long? Murph says he'll come and visit me as much as possible, when work allows. He's getting a transfer to the Pentagon in a month or so, so he'll be a little closer, but it'll still be a trek.

Maybe now I can begin to turn my life round. I've stop fighting; I realise now that Murph was only trying to help. I've put myself in his hands and left all the decisions up to him. He has power of attorney and will decide when I'm ready to be discharged from the clinic.

I know you and him don't get on, but I hope you and Murph can become friends. You're the two people I guess I really love in the world, each in different ways.

I have hope again, I feel this will be a new start for me, and for me and Murph. Please be happy for me.

I hope you can visit me soon, when you get back from wherever. Murph can put us in touch.

Take care.

All my love,

Hannah

Steiner looked; Murphy was smiling at him.

“Logan put me onto the place. The clinic.” Murphy looked pretty fucking pleased with himself. “It’s where friends of ours dispose of their more insoluble problems.”

Steiner didn’t reply.

“All my problems solved. Caring husband finds his wife the specialist help she so obviously needs. Over time people forget, or maybe they understand that she isn’t coming back. The husband’s only human. Eventually he moves on.” Murphy was still wearing his shit-eating grin, but his dumb eyes were cold.

The note hung from Steiner’s hand. Murphy sat back, enjoying himself.

“Logan’s people will have her doped up to the gills. She’ll be so strung-out she won’t even remember her own name. As the doting husband I’ll make the visits I promised, but over time they’ll become more infrequent, pressure of work and all. Not that she’ll care, eventually the drugs will have rendered her a vegetable, maybe there’ll be an accidental overdose, maybe just her poor heart will give out?”

Steiner closed the distance between him and Murphy in a split second. Jerking the startled officer up with his left hand, he jammed his right forearm into his thick neck, pinning him to the bulkhead. Perched on tiptoes, Murphy’s meaty face went from deep scarlet to blue. Spittle covered his lips as he fought for air. Steiner eyed him coldly.

“Steiner... don’t... need... me...” Murphy gasped.

Steiner tilted his head, relaxing the pressure on Murphy’s neck slightly.

“You need me,” Murphy writhed, still struggling for breath. “Logan will have your head if you hurt me...”

Steiner drove his forearm back into his throat.

“Logan’s a realist. He needs me to do his dirty work. You’re expendable. He’s a dozen more like you lined up, ready to go.” Steiner almost smiled. “I could do you, no one would give a shit. I’d kill you without a second’s thought. I wouldn’t care, who the fuck would?”

Murphy's eyelids fluttered, hypoxia setting in. As unconsciousness engulfed him, he whispered just one strangulated word. "Hannah,"

Steiner released the pressure and stepped back. Murphy crashed back into his seat. Gasping and heaving, he flopped forward and vomited on himself.

"Where is she?" Steiner asked quietly. Murphy needed a kick before he relinquished the address.

Murphy sobbed as he curled into a foetal ball. Steiner could smell the urine and had noticed the wet stain on the front of the other man's trousers.

"You'll have your time," Steiner said softly, looking down at the quivering figure. "But for a coward like you, your fear is worse than death. So you'll have to wait. Tomorrow, next week, next year, you'll never know when I'll come. But I will kill you. And it won't be quick. You will suffer."

Murphy sobbed uncontrollably.

"You're nothing. Killing you would be a kindness." Steiner could help a thin smile.

"Please," Murphy wept, reaching out across the deck, his swollen face bloated red, streaked with mucous and tears.

Steiner rested his foot on the outstretched hand. He heard the crunch of the bones.

"Soon," he cooed, "Soon."

* * *

They were waiting for them when they landed on Cyprus. The Super Stallion and the Black Hawk were both unmarked, each painted a standard dull black/green and bristling with electronic equipment and weaponry.

They were loaded aboard. The crews of the choppers boarded. All eight men spoke English with an authentic American accent, all were dressed in non-descript, clean uniforms,

all identification and insignia absent. All eight were special forces, all recruited by contacts in Mossad and the Israeli army.

Within an hour, the refuelled Galaxy was airborne again.

* * *

They landed in Saudi Arabia as dawn broke fell. Inside a heavily defended US military base just outside Riyadh, sealed off from the Islamic world outside, they disembarked. As the equipment was unloaded, the team and aircrews grabbed a few hours of sleep.

As the heavy heat of the afternoon settled, Steiner emerged from the hanger. Inside, away from prying eyes, the choppers were being prepped by their crews. The team were checking their gear and weapons.

Outside, the rattle of bolts and seating of magazines carried on the dry, dead air. Steiner settled on a crate and leant back against the hot wall. Clad only in gym shorts and combat boots, his eyes covered by dark glasses, he let the sun's heat wash over his pale, scarred flesh. He lit a cigarette and let his heavy eyelids fall.

Yuri, dressed in desert fatigues, an Israeli Jericho automatic pistol on his hip, sat on the crate beside Steiner and stared off into the sunset, watching the fiery orb slip towards the horizon.

"Not long now," he said.

Steiner drew deeply on his cigarette and let his head fall back.

"You know," Yuri spoke softly, "Even with the alterations we made, this mission is fucked." He looked over at Steiner's face. He was shocked to see the other man's features relaxed for the first time. "Even if we manage to eliminate the target, there is no way we will get out alive."

A big grin creased Steiner's face. He put out his cigarette.

"What you grinning about?" Yuri asked.

“Suddenly all my troubles seem so far away.”

Chapter 17

The night lit up with a thousand suns. Light exploded up and down the inky horizon, a distant rumble grew. Rolling thunder. Death and horror rained from above.

It was the biggest single aerial bombardment since the days of Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Fire and terror fell from the sky across Iraq. The airstrikes were at their fiercest in the south, inside the No-Fly Zone that fell between Baghdad and the southernmost borders. Power stations, bridges, centres of communications, military installations of all sorts were hit. It was estimated later that thousands died. In a country already lying in ruins, the true final bodycount will never be known.

Cruise missiles, high-level bombers, ground attack jets and even helicopter gunships pounded the remaining infrastructure of Iraq. From offshore, the US Sixth Fleet pounded far inland, even using their archaic heavy guns.

Beneath this horror, they came.

The two choppers hugged the undulating contours of the desert. Without lights, the pilots flew using night vision goggles, but the night sky awash with flame was almost enough to illuminate their path.

30 miles before Baghdad, the two choppers split.

25 miles from Baghdad, the Super Stallion settled down. A battered Land Rover rolled down its open tailgate. Aboard, Bach, Armstrong and Homer. The helicopter was airborne as the vehicle rolled clear. They were left alone in the darkness.

12 miles south of Baghdad, the Black Hawk hovered low; three figures jumped three feet from the ground. The chopper peeled away, slipping away into the gloom.

Explosions rolled like thunder across the desert. Vansen, Steiner and Yuri spread out, setting up a defensive perimeter. They waited in the dark, flame flickering in the distance and waited.

When ready, Steiner stirred and rose. He signalled and they moved out.

They followed the Hilla rail line into the city.

The US planes (and a few British support craft) had flown way above the southern no-fly zone. Baghdad burned. The rumble of explosions rocked the city. Anti-aircraft fire thudded, SAMs streaked the sky. Oil refineries blazed, thick black smoke choked the air.

As dawn rose, they dug in. From their camouflaged foxholes, they looked down on the ruins.

* * *

The meeting broke up. After five minutes, Logan emerged from the office. He headed down the labyrinthine corridors, heading out of the building. Head down, he leafed through some papers. He rounded a corner and looked up at the last minute. Ives, the CIA Director stood waiting for him, grinning like a whore with your dick between her teeth and your wallet in her back pocket.

“Well?” Ives asked.

“Well, what?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Logan!” Ives hissed.

Logan sighed, “Couldn’t kill it. The President’s got a hard-on for The Rais, he wants the bastard dead.” He shuffled uneasily under Ives’ glare. “They went in last night, under cover of the last air strikes.”

“No shit, Sherlock. We’ve been watching your goons from the git go. Our satellites tracked them going in and the choppers coming out.”

“I did my best,” Logan shrugged.

“Fuckwit,” Logan closed on the bigger man, jabbing him in the chest with his finger.

“I was this deal closed down, killed, you got me?”

Logan couldn’t meet his eyes.

“What can I do?”

“You cut all links, cut those boys off. Let’s see how they fend.” Ives smiled a shit-eating grin.

“Won’t do any good, they’re on their own here on in. Compartmentalisation. They’ve got a contact on the ground, third party, Israeli, she set up the arms caches in the city.”

“Well, we’ll have to help our camel jockey friends along. We’ve got contacts inside the Iraqi regime. We’ll feed them the word on the team, let them hunt them down.”

“We can’t do that...”

“Shut the fuck up, you just do as I say. And don’t think of running to Harker. We’ve got enough to take you down, him too.”

“You little faggot, do your worst!” Logan found his balls at last.

“Killing you would play right into your bullshit warrior ethos, wouldn’t it?” Ives was unflustered. “No, we’ll take something you value. We’ll tempt the press in with the real story on what you pulled in Panama, and some more of your greatest hits. Once we’ve got them with the truth, we’ll feed a little extra, something juicier we cooked up. Drug running, of course, links with whacko militias, but my favourite is kiddie porn, a whole stash appearing in your home. You the centre of a whole freak network.”

“You wouldn’t fucking dare?” Logan blanched.

“You know I would. We own you. And you run to the President, he gets involved, he gets the same treatment. You both go down together. Both your names for shit.”

Logan looked like he wanted to snap Ives’ neck. He could, but knew he couldn’t. So did Ives. The little Ivy League fuck grinned.

“Now you run along. Time for the pros to clean up this shit.”

* * *

Sunrise. The watery rays barely filtered through the pall of smoke. Life stirred among the ruins. Steiner watched through field glasses, tucked inside his foxhole.

He watched the ragged wraiths from about a mile outside the outskirts of the city. They picked at the rubble numbly, like the dead picking through their own entrails.

Five miles off to the west lay the smouldering ruins of the International Airport, between them and it lay the infamous Radwaniyah Prison. During the night a wall had been breached by errant bomb. Gunshots echoed through the dead stillness. Special Republican Guards from the nearby 2nd Company, 1st Battalion base were mopping up any escapees. Extra SRG forces surrounded the neighbouring Radwaniyah Presidential Palace.

The stench of burnt rubber and roasted flesh hung on the lifeless wind.

Steiner waited. The other part of the team should be entering the city about now. They would move at dusk.

The two teams' cover was rudimentary. It was decided Homer would never pass as an Iraq, or an Arab of any kind. Even with his blond hair shaved away, or dyed, he was too obvious. So he was a Russian military advisor. His Russian was better than his Arabic anyway. Yoni with his looks and local knowledge and fluent Arabic was clear. Travelling by Land Rover, he would be the guide to the Russian guest, an agent of the Amn al-Amm, the feared Iraqi secret police. Otherwise known as the Directorate of General Security (DGS), they were The Rais's attack-dogs. His presence would allow no brook for questions, even military. Armstrong could just pass as a local, so he was their military driver.

So Yoni's team got a ride into the city. Steiner wasn't so lucky. Although arms were waiting for them inside Baghdad, and the Land Rover was carrying a small cache, the other three-man team would have to carry in their own weaponry, if only for their own protection. This and their obvious kit would have to be humped in, while remaining hidden. All three wore loose Arab smocks over military fatigues. The BDUs they wore were clean: no insignia, bought in Europe and South Africa from general wholesalers, labels removed. The whole unit were equipped with the same 'clean' combat gear. They had debated even wearing Iraqi military-issue boots to hide their tracks, but they were found to be unwearable. So all selected their own footwear. Standard US combat-boots were discouraged, but Homer stuck with

them, while Armstrong wore soft leather Australian SAS boots. Yoni stuck with Israeli jump-boots, Yuri had expensive Swedish walking boots and Vansen had luxury store-bought boots from Germany. Steiner wore his favourite Spanish mountain boots.

Steiner's team, posing as local merchants, travelling by foot to Baghdad had debated bringing along a mule to hump their shit, but the noise and hassle was too much. Therefore, their weaponry and supplies were either hidden in the heavy bundles they carried, or strapped to their bodies beneath the loose smocks, easy to reach if things turned bad.

But they were lightly armed. If they ran afoul of an Iraqi unit, they didn't stand much of a chance.

From their separate foxholes they watched the lethargic stirrings of the shattered city. The heat of the afternoon settled across the rocky desert hill. A dry wind kicked up loose dust, whipping down into the ruins.

As the light failed, they began to gather their equipment, preparing to emerge from their holes. In the distance came a low, approaching rumble. Within minutes, the mechanised convoy was on top of them. Army trucks, APCs and Land Rovers pulled into a defensive ring, troops scattering; raised voices carried on the wind. Barked orders and the rattle of bolts.

"Shit," Steiner reached for his Colt Commando, unsafing it. He bore into the edge of his foxhole, bracing his weapon. Unseen, Yuri and Vansen were doing likewise. All three trained automatic weapons on the swarming patrol.

They were SRG (Special Republican Guards) the elite of the Iraqi army. These weren't raggedy-assed conscripts, terrified teenagers, like those who the allies fought in the Gulf War. These fuckers were hardcore; The Rais's trusted elite. Professional and well armed, these boys were after something. Something definite.

They troops fanned out and began to search the area.

The Iraqis were all around them.

Steiner smiled. Sweat dripped from his chin onto the plastic stock of his rifle. He had to stifle a laugh. Fear was gone; his old friend death was near.

* * *

Those lazy Arab fucks had drifted back into their camp within an hour. As darkness fell, fires were lit; tea brewed and rations heated. The smells and their laughter and raised voices drifted up the hill to their positions. Huddled in the cold they could just listen.

If this was the elite, this mission wasn't going to be so hard after all, Steiner thought. Problem was, these dumb motherfuckers were sitting right in their way. They may not be searching, but they had posted sentries. Half-heartedly they circled the perimeter in the darkness.

They'd have to go around. They couldn't afford to wait and lose a night, and risk they fucks picking up their search.

Steiner left Vansen to hold the keystone position in the foxholes, covering the Iraqis with a LAW anti-tank missile and her M4, a M204 grenade launcher slung beneath the barrel. Yuri and he would circle around either side of the Iraqi position to find the clearest path.

* * *

The darkness was complete. Steiner slithered beneath its shroud, the loose rocks cutting through the palms of his leather gloves. He had removed the shapeless smock, exposing his desert BDU. His face was smeared with camouflaged paint, across his back was slung his Galil sniping rifle, its solid butt folded, an image-intensifier night sight mounted. As he crawled across the rocky ground, he cradled his silenced Uzi across his elbows.

The stones and dry scrub tore at his fatigues and scored his face. Blood and sweat streaked his face. He moved silently. He could hear and smell the Iraqis close by. He kept moving. He could kill anyone who crossed his path. But one dead soldier and everything would be blown. He had to find a way by, but without spilling fucking blood.

Somewhere on the other side of the base, Yuri was moving like him. It seemed to Steiner he had been travelling for hours. Surely he had covered miles? But he knew it was merely yards, and it was minutes and seconds stretching into eternity.

Keep moving, ever forward. He was nearing the edge of the patrol's Iraqi perimeter, he was nearly through.

He froze. Out of the dark shambled an Iraqi trooper, AK47 in the crook of his arm, cigarette hanging from his lips. Steiner's hands played along the surface of the Uzi, bringing it round. The Iraqi kept coming. The man fumbled with his AK. Steiner brought up the Uzi. The Iraqi stopped. He switched hands with his rifle. He drew on his cigarette. He dropped it and ground it out. He turned.

Fumbling in the dark, then there came a hiss. Steiner nearly laughed as the Iraqi took a long piss, sighing with satisfaction. He even smiled when some of the piss splashed onto him.

Finished, the soldier shook himself off and belched. He lit another cigarette, slung his rifle and shambled back into the gloom. Steiner heard him call to his friends as he headed back into camp. Something about more drink.

Steiner continued crawling; the stones like broken glass beneath him. Eventually, he could rise, moving at a crouch. He was clear. They had their path.

* * *

Steiner dodged up the hill, crouched low. He rolled and dropped into his foxhole. Panting, he wiped the sweat and paint from his face with a rag and gulped water from his canteen. A shuffle of movement, he snatched his Walther automatic from his holster and jabbed it muzzle-first into the bridge of Yuri's nose as he peered over the edge of the foxhole.

"Fuck, man." Steiner reholstered his weapon.

“We got a problem.” Yuri whispered.

“Yeah?” Steiner had another drink.

“Vansen. She’s gone. Disappeared.”

* * *

Vansen walked tall. Back straight, she swung her narrow hips beneath her loose-fitting ankle-length smock. Her head was covered by a kaffiyeh, a Bedouin shawl, the loose end covering her face and tucked back under the wrappings. She squinted against sun as it crept above the horizon.

Life stirred with the dawn. Dogs barked, the cry of voices carried on the dry wind. Dust swirled.

Vansen had left her rifle behind. Beneath her Arab dress she only carried her FN Five-seveN automatic pistol. This unusual state of the art weapon, Belgian by design, is made almost completely of plastic polymers and is extremely light. Most unusually, the pistol is chambered for 5.7 x 2.8mm rounds, a load original utilised by the high-capacity P-90 personal defence weapon, an almost space age sub-machine gun. The rounds although long, are smaller than the standard 9mm pistol round. The recoil impulse of the pistol when fired is somewhat less than a 9mm. Also the discharge is quieter, closer to the almost noiseless pop of a .22. Also the magazine housed in the broad grip of the pistol has a maximum capacity of 20 rounds. A formidable weapon, but like all pistols primarily of use only as a defensive weapon, and only close in. She also carried a silenced HK P7, but she didn’t expect to need any firearm. If things turned out for the worse, she’d probably only need her knife. She preferred it that way anyway.

The nearest dwellings were off to her flanks, left and right, maybe 50 to a 100 feet back. Her dark eyes kept scanning. They flicked back and forth, gazing from the gap in her kaffiyeh.

She had never liked waiting around. Least of all for others. Besides, she was sick of humping all this shit. Those other three mooks got a free ride; she'd be fucked if she was going to break her back like some nigger or spic porter. Least of all when she was surrounded by Arab motherfuckers.

The sun was fully up when she spotted what she wanted.

The donkey was grazing from a pile of hay outside its stable. She thought stable, but really it was a scabby little outhouse, sagging off the adjoining stucco hut. A mangy, broken-down animal, but it'd do. She altered course.

She approached the animal. It barely stirred. Its big, dumb eyes switched to her for a second before returning to its food. It swished its mud-clotted tail. Thick, black flies swarmed over the animal's eyes. It paid no mind to the veil of insects.

Vansen had no time for animals usually. No time for children either. People period, in fact. But she was willing to play nice. She petted the filthy creature for a moment, making the mewling noises she'd heard sappy fuckers making to their pets. She was practised at mimicking others' human traits. Thinking she'd done her duty (the donkey didn't seem to give a shit one way or the other, maybe they'd get on after all) she headed into the outhouse.

Inside, the heat was intense. It stank of shit. At least it was just horseshit, she could handle that. The straw scattered thinly about was black and rotting. The stench of it fermenting was worse than the animal shit. Asshole who owned this animal didn't deserve it anyway, she figured. She hunted around for a bridle and maybe some kind of harness to throw over the animal's back, to help carry their stuff.

She found the bridle straight off, hanging from a rusty nail. She peered through the gloom, rays of light slipping through gaps in the wooden walls cutting across the murk. Dust and hay pollen swirled in the thin beams of light. She saw what she wanted tossed in a corner, forgotten. She reached for it.

She never heard him approach. She bent to grab the harness. A foot was placed squarely on her ass and she was sent sprawling onto the filthy floor.

He was on top of her before she could react. She rolled over and he fell upon her, driving his knee into her chest. Pain shrieked through her strapped down breasts. She cried out.

The man hissed and pressed the blade of his knife against the narrow strip of exposed flesh at the base of her throat.

“Shut up!” he whispered in Arabic, digging the blade in further. Vansen felt blood slip from the wound, trickling into the hollow at the base of her throat.

“Gonna steal my animal were you, you little bastard!” he hissed, grinning, clearly enjoying himself. Vansen would have guessed his age at somewhere in his late forties, early fifties. But it was hard to tell with these dune coons. But this asshole looked bad, even for a sand nigger. His wizened skin, blackened by the sun, seemed to be diseased, scabs and sores covering every exposed area, clustered most thickly around his lips. These were drawn back as he grinned, exposing diseased gums and only a couple of blackened stumps the passed for teeth. The top of his head was covered only with a few clumps of greasy, grey hair.

Vansen twisted her head from side to side as he spoke, mostly to avoid the stench emanating from his toothless mouth.

“Well, I’ll show you. I’ll teach you a lesson you won’t forget!” he chuckled. Saliva covered his lips. It bubbled. He reached down and tore the end of the kaffiyeh away from Vansen’s face. He gasped.

“Aren’t you the pretty one,” he whispered, running his hand across her smooth, pale cheek. His thumb touched her lips. She watched him. “Well, my boy. Time to become a man!”

He yanked Vansen up. She didn’t resist. He dragged her across the stable and threw her against the horizontal beam that served as the side of the stall. He bent her over the splintered beam. With his free hand he groped at his smock, yanking it up above his waist, manoeuvring behind Vansen. She couldn’t bring herself to take a look.

He was gasping and wheezing, drool trapped in the patchy beard sprouting from his chin. He jerked up the back of Vansen's kaftan. In his inflamed haste, he didn't seem to pay attention to the oddity of her trousers beneath it. He merely tore at the belt and yanked them down, taking her underwear with it. He shuffled to get into position.

At the last moment he looked down and realised his mistake. He gasped and almost cried out as he reared back.

"A woman!" he gasped.

Vansen straightened and turned. She calmly pulled back up her trousers and allowed her smock to fall.

"That's right, father!" she whispered in mocking Arabic.

He opened and closed his mouth mutely. His arms hung by his side. He'd lost his knife somewhere along the way.

"Am I so repulsive?" Vansen whispered, her full lips curving into a smile as she edged closer. "Can you not love me?"

The man just stared aghast.

Vansen's hand slipped from beneath her smock as she reached to embrace the Arab. As her left arm encircled his shoulders, she could feel him quiver.

She held him for a moment, then stepped away. He stood swaying. Vansen glanced down at his midriff. His eyes followed hers and widened as his gaze reached his own belly. The front of his filthy garment was stained the deepest scarlet. He reached to touch the edge the tear in the cloth. He let out a little whimper and squeezed his hands against the wound.

The man's entrails gushed from the six inch gash bisecting his belly and fell in a mound at his feet. He just gazed down dumbly at the steaming grey heap of matter.

"Oh dear!" Vansen stepped in and casually shoved him in the chest with her left hand. He hit the floor soundlessly, landing on the rotten straw. His eyes fixed on the cobwebs in the ceiling.

Vansen appeared above him. Her right hand held a cruelly serrated combat knife. Weapon and hand were stained with gore.

“Now let’s deal with what got you in this predicament,” she smiled.

Vansen flicked the hem of the Arab’s smock over his face and grabbed hold of his genitals and began to hack with the knife.

* * *

Dusk smeared across the horizon. Smoke hung over the city. The barking of dogs on the wind. Darkness approached, the heavy heat of the afternoon wrapped tight. Another day lost.

The Special Republican Patrol had cleared out mid-afternoon, after another cursory search. Steiner and Yuri remained squatted in their foxhole, awaiting the night.

Steiner sensed movement off to his right flank. He turned his head. When he moved he was aware of the heat trapped in the confines of his dugout. He squinted into the dying sun hung on the western horizon. A figure, leading a donkey or ass approached, head down. Steiner reached for his rifle, drawing it close.

It wasn’t until the figure closed that he realised. He scurried from his hole. He felt the cooling evening breeze through his damp fatigues, touching his cramped, sweaty body. He didn’t make any effort to keep low. He strode briskly across the incline of the rocky hill.

The end of Vansen’s kaffiyeh trailed in the wind, the grin smeared across her face.

“Pretty slick, huh?” she laughed as Steiner approached.

He struck her square in the face with his free hand. His closed right fist slammed into her grinning mouth, knocking her down. He stood over her, rifle gripped in his left hand by his side.

Vansen coughed, rolling on the hot, rocky ground. She sat up, hand to her mouth. When she removed it, blood spilled from her full lower lip, colouring her teeth. Her dark eyes burnt up into Steiner. His face was impassive.

Vansen laughed, Steiner's attention wavered for a second. Vansen snatched the FN Five-seveN pistol from beneath her smock and levelled the sleek black automatic on Steiner. He didn't flinch, his face remained inscrutable. He simply met Vansen gaze.

"Don't ever fucking touch me. I warned you before. Do it again, we'll settle it once and for all," she snarled. He didn't respond. She smiled, keeping the weapon levelled. "Like old times, ain't it?" she laughed.

Yuri wriggled from his foxhole. He came running. The donkey stood watching them, eyes blankly indifferent.

In the distance a muezzin started up his cry to the faithful, his call echoing from some distant minaret across the ruined city. Vansen was distracted for only a fraction of a second; her eyes not even leaving Steiner, just losing focus for an instant. Steiner kicked up his right foot, bringing it around in a shallow arc. The inside of his boot connected with Vansen's pistol hand, snapping the weapon from her grip. He brought his Commando automatic rifle back across his chest, fixing the butt in his right shoulder, aiming the muzzle down at Vansen's face, sighting down the short barrel.

Yuri arrived on the scene and halted, rifle by his side. He looked from Steiner to Vansen and back again. He and the donkey stood as mute witness to the tableau. Vansen simply stared back up at Steiner defiantly, as if daring him the shoot. He in turn never wavered.

Eventually Steiner spoke, "Where'd you go?"

"Here and there, you know?" she shrugged.

"Where's the donkey from?"

"Is it a donkey, or is it an ass?" she pondered. "What is the difference, anyway?"

Steiner replied softly and evenly, "Where?"

"A donation. From an admirer, I'd guess you'd say!" she laughed.

Steiner glanced at the bloodstains on her cuffs. "You can't help yourself, can you?"

"You know?" she shrugged. "But I tidied up afterwards and everything."

“You disobey my orders again; you’re dead. Desert your post; you’re dead. Do anything to cross me; I’ll kill you. You read me?”

Something like hurt crossed her face for an instant, clouding her eyes. Then she grinned defiantly. “I got you. You’re the boss.”

Steiner hesitated for a second, then lowered his weapon and turned. Vansen called from behind.

“Can I keep the donkey?”

Chapter 18

She strode down the street with long, elegant strides, rubble crackling beneath her feet. She was aware of the men looking her. She was a beautiful woman; she was used to it. She used her beauty. It was just another weapon in her armoury.

The heat was intense, the air heavy. Dust swirled in the wind; the stench of ruptured sewers filled the air. The city was just ruins. The rulers had descended into their subterranean lairs. Here they were safe, coddled by luxury while their people suffered and died.

She knew this. She worked and occasionally bunked in one of Baghdad's major underground installations. She worked with the elite. To all intents and purposes she was one of the elite. Protected, comfortable and safe.

Walking down the hill to her apartment, she was aware not just of her beauty, but also of her cleanliness and good health. She was a heavenly apparition among this destruction.

She tossed her long, lustrous black hair. A faint sheen of sweat covered her alabaster skin; the heat barely brought a flush to her face. Her complexion was flawless. Her dark, dark eyes never wavered. Her prominent, slightly arched nose could be considered by some to be haughty, but this along with her prominent cheekbones and proud chin only added to her sophisticated beauty and grace.

She had come to Baghdad two years ago. Her papers identified her as a Palestinian. Born in a West Bank refugee camp, she had moved to Jordan as a teenager, then to southern Iraq. She came to the capital, aged twenty-one according to her papers. She had obtained a secretarial job in a minor government department. Her skill and most importantly her beauty had assured rapid promotion. She was soon working as the Defence Ministry, as a secretary attached to the Army High Command. It was here that she came to the attention of a very important man. This man was head of the SSO, the internal security organisation, in charge of not just the President and his family's protection, but also responsible for the concealment and movement of The Rais's weapons of mass destruction. The Iraqi officer pursued her. He was

already married, of course, but he had to have her. She demurred as long as was decently expected. Finally she relented and became his mistress.

Continuing to work within the government, her new lover assured further promotion. Of course he suggested she give up her work. He said he could keep her in luxury, she need not work. She refused. He would have been disappointed if she hadn't. Her independence as much as her beauty is what made her attractive to him. So unlike the wife his father had chosen for him. Although Iraqi women were freer than most women in the Arab world, such independence and in one so beautiful was rare.

The affair was common knowledge. Soon she was feared by her own colleagues and superiors. For her lover was indeed a powerful man. He was The Rais's eyes and ears. He held the keys to the court and it was accepted by most that he was the heir apparent. His name was Qusay. He was the second most powerful man in Iraq. He was the Rais's son.

She had access to the heart of the Iraqi regime. This made her very precious, but made her position even more dangerous. In such a prominent position, surely it was only a matter of time until she was exposed as an Israeli spy.

* * *

Mossad had recruited her straight out of the army. Although the Israeli army had introduced women into artillery and other combat units, they had not yet allowed women into front-line infantry units. As part of a test program, one group of fifty women soldiers was allowed to try out the rigorous advanced infantry-training course. Only two passed, she was one. This was one reason why Mossad were interested in her. The other was her brains and her beauty. When her two-year national service was up, she had been invited to join the top Israeli universities and even colleges in the US. She was multi-skilled, but her speciality was languages. Beyond Hebrew, Arabic and English (the third, albeit unofficial language of Israel), she was fluent in French, Spanish and Italian. Also she spoke several Arab dialects

like a local, including Farsi, the predominate language of Iraq. She was already starting on Russian, German and Japanese in her spare time while in the army. Mossad approached her. When her national service was up she left the army and joined them.

Her family and friends were told she was working at the foreign ministry, but of course many suspected the truth. But among Israelis such a secret could expect to be kept.

18 months rigorous training followed before she was even allowed to paddle in the shallows of the intelligence world. She was taught more language skills, along with communication and cryptography. She was taught demolitions. She was taught to kill, with guns, with knives and if necessary her bare hands.

Her first operations had been short, shallow ops. Usually running surveillance inside the occupied territories and borderlands with their Arab neighbours. She and her Mossad colleagues were to observe targets. Then they would call in air strikes or military snatch squads. More than once she had watched from the shadows as Mahktal assassins had come when called to silently eliminate the targets.

She felt no guilt, no remorse. She did not hate all Arabs. She was sure most just wanted to get on with their lives, but were to often co-opted and coerced into accepting the violence of their militant brothers. She did hate the killers, whether they were Hizbollah, Hamas, PLO, whatever they called themselves. The groups were interchangeable; the only difference was their backers. Hizbollah and Hamas were primarily backed by Syria and Iran. The PLO had lost its chief paymaster, the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact when the Iron Curtain fell and the Cold War ended. Now they dabbled in politics while they let the young Turks of the Islamic terrorists loose to kill. They were all united by their hatred of Israel, *the Zionist Entity*. Whatever they might say, they would only rest when Israel was no more and the Jews were driven into the sea.

She had seen enough terror and killing. The Arab terrorists would butcher any Israeli, any Jew, indiscriminately. They would slaughter men, women, and children. She could accept the death of soldiers on duty, that was their job. But when families were blown apart while

shopping and infants shot in their fathers' arms. When the Arabs weren't satisfied with just killing, they would hack, butcher and mutilate. Killing was one thing, this unspeakable savagery was worse than animals. They were mad dogs. Such uncompromising evil spoke of pure hatred.

So she hated the Arab killers, and sometimes she did hate all Arabs, for sheltering and allowing the butchery. Like Israel itself, she had seen the hatred and the horror awaiting them should the tiny state flinch. They had to be hard. They had to meet violence with violence. The Arabs may butcher indiscriminately, but Israel would strike with precision, coolly, surely, and without mercy.

When her time came, she was called. She was to be sent deep into Iraq. They had prepared her cover. She required only slight cosmetic surgery to assure any doubt about her origin. She was prepped and briefed and within six months she was inside Iraq, heading for Baghdad.

Ayana Yacoby, Israeli, had become Hanna Murawi, Palestinian émigré.

*

*

*

She had one regret. She had lost her one love, sacrificed him for this job. She had met Yoni when she was with military intelligence and he was with Sayaret Mahktal, Special Forces. They had been together for three years. He was everything to her and she was willing to give up her job with Mossad for him, if only he would give her a sign, anything. But Yoni was a closed off man. His whole family were fucked up. His father, a famous soldier had been killed when he was young, and his mother was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber. His messed up bitch of a sister had ended up some kind of peacenik and rejected him and the country Yoni loved and his family had fought and died for. Yoni was afraid. He was willing to fight and die for Israel. He was unafraid of death, but life terrified him. He would not allow himself to love fully; he couldn't open himself up to the danger. Eventually she accepted this. Her

Mossad assignments drew them apart and when this operation was offered she had ended the relationship. It had hurt her even more than it hurt Yoni. But it had to be done. She left him and vanished.

* * *

She headed down the hill. Her apartment was in sight. Thankfully it had again escaped the bombing. Smoke blackened its once pristine white stucco façade and like most of Baghdad (outside The Rais's palaces and military bases) she had no electricity or running water.

Suddenly she was very tired. Her steps were heavy as she climbed the gravelly steps to her first floor apartment. The stench of death and ruin was heavy on the air. She knew she was close to burnout, they would pull her out soon. It was only a matter of time before she was blown, she was getting sloppy and she knew it.

She placed her key in the lock and opened her front door and stepped inside. In the sudden gloom she automatically reached for the light switch and flicked it uselessly three times. Sighing, she dropped her bag and turned.

The harsh rattle of cocking weaponry greeted her. She froze.

Three masked men squatted in the darkness, automatic weapons levelled on her.

She knew her time had come.

One of the gunmen smiled through his mask.

* * *

Ives was waiting when Logan pulled into the vacant lot. He appeared to be alone, but Logan knew there would be a CIA sanctioned team watching from the darkness. A sniper had him zeroed right now.

The gravel crunched beneath his dress shoes. If he had to move fast, he was dead. Should have thought ahead. He was aware of the rushing of the river.

Ives stood hands in pockets staring out over the Potomac. The air carried a faint scent of salt and the stench of rotting garbage.

“What is it, Ives?”

“You been in contact with your team?” the CIA director didn’t turn.

“You know I fucking haven’t. One, we agreed I was to cut them free. Secondly, and most importantly, I had no means of contact once they were on the ground. The very essence of the mission is deniability. We’re not exactly gonna be running messages back and forth.”

“Good.” Ives gazed out of the rushing black waters.

“So?” Logan hissed.

“Just checking in.” Ives seemed to roll on the balls of his feet. “The President?”

“He doesn’t know shit.”

“As it should be.”

They stood in silence, side by side. Only the cold river spoke.

“Fuck this,” Logan turned to leave.

“We’ve been in contact with our friends in Baghdad.”

“Yeah?” Logan paused, half turning.

“Won’t be long now. They’ll be gone real soon, then our friends will be real grateful we helped out. Works out both ways, really.” Ives smiled to himself, his little rat brain whirring.

“I’m glad for you. But what if any of the team are taken alive.”

“Won’t happen. I know Steiner he’s a pro. He won’t let any of his people slip into their hands. He’ll take care of it, whatever it takes.”

“Maybe, but who takes care of Steiner?”

“He’d never talk if taken. Masochistic little fuck just laps up pain. The question’s academic anyway, Steiner’ll never be taken alive. He’s been looking to get himself killed for years. Little bastard can’t wait to get offed. He’s got problems.”

“Ain’t we all?”

“True, but his will assure a neat ending to our tale. A firefight and a bloodbath. Lots of questions, but no loose ends leading back to us. Just a bunch of grateful Arabs in our pockets. Couldn’t be better.”

“I hope you’re right. Whatever Steiner’s problems, he’s the sort of problem can come back and bite you on the ass.”

“Don’t worry about Steiner,” Ives turned. He bared his little teeth. “This time the cards are stacked against him. Him and his friends are already dead.”

Chapter 19

“Ayana?”

The heat inside the apartment was intense. She felt a bead of sweat trickle down her spine, gathering in the small of her back. The three men remained in the shadows, weapons trained. The one who had spoken began to rise.

She calculated her chances. She was too far from her stash of weapons. She only had the piece of shit obsolete Russian pistol in her purse, complements of the Iraqi Interior Ministry. Running was hopeless.

The man approached. He let his weapon dip.

Ayana stepped into him, driving her elbow into his throat in one quick, fluid movement. He gagged and started to go down. She moved quickly sideways, looking for cover, hand in her purse on the old Makarov automatic. It was a futile gesture. She expected to feel the bullets in her back long before she heard the automatic fire, by which time she would be dead.

Her bedroom was within reach. Here she had serious firepower. Pistol in hand, she only turned her head a degree as she reached the doorway.

A flash of movement in the corner of her eye. She never felt the blow. Something hit her hard in the neck, cutting off the flow of blood in her femoral artery. She was unconscious before she hit the floor.

When she came to, she was disorientated for an instant. How long had she been out? One dark figure stood over her, automatic weapon cursorily aimed in her direction. He was tall and lean. He watched her through his mask for several moments, his eyes meeting hers, both sets unflinching. His gaze never left her.

“She awake,” he spoke English, his accent clearly American, southern, Texan? Ayana was confused. Was she hallucinating, maybe dreaming? Was she conscious, maybe the blow had been worse than she realised?

Another figure hove into view. He was rubbing his throat. It was the one she put down. Payback time? She was afraid to move or even talk. It was all over.

The man stopped rubbing at his no doubt painful throat. He waved the other man away. Frozen in fear and resignation, she just watched as he reached up and pulled off his hood.

Her brain seemed unable to compute the information, as if locked back in a feedback loop for an instant. She recognised that long, mournful, strangely beautiful face. She could never forget it. The man cocked his head and smiled a crooked smile. He waited patiently.

Her lips began to move unbidden and to form the word.

“Yoni?”

* * *

They moved again when night fell. Steiner and his team had spent the night holed up in the cellar of a bombed out house. They were within a couple of miles of the rendezvous point, but with dawn fast rising they couldn't risk exposure. It had been a fretful day, dug in, weapons ready, every noise the prelude to their discovery and annihilation. But despite the tension and the drag of each tortuous hour, Steiner had been happy. Faced with his own death and ultimate extinction he always found a kind of peace and focus. Every minute of peril was a fountain of contentment; every second under fire was ecstasy.

They had dumped the donkey. They had left it at their refuge when darkness fell and they moved out. Vansen wasn't happy about it. She pouted the whole way.

The three moved swiftly but calmly through the shattered city centre. They had no need of maps; the rendezvous was imprinted on all their memories. Maps almost as much as obvious weaponry would give them away in an instant. All three kept a hand tucked beneath their smocks, weapons to hand if things got hot.

There was little or no sign of life on the streets, a curfew was in effect, and only the desperate were willing to take the risk. Wraiths seemed to stir from the rubble, scrabbling

through the ruins, scuttling into cover at the sight of a searchlight from an army patrol. They paid no heed to the three travellers.

Steiner watched the scavengers, he knew the hungry and hopeless were capable of anything. Desperation made the most insignificant creature a threat. The team also avoided the military and police patrols, but that threat was obvious and quantifiable. They poor wretches were a danger to all. The Rais himself was courting danger with such an army filling his streets. But he assumed he was safe, this horde could never unify and find a leader. But a blind mob is just as greater threat. This was a weapon Steiner could use. He would deal with The Rais, and then this army of ghosts could rouse and consume the machinery of power.

Steiner spotted the target. He signalled for the others to halt. All three crouched in the shadows of an alley. Vansen and Yuri covered; she with her Five-seveN automatic in one hand, a silenced P7 in the other, the Russian with an MP5 with integrated noise suppresser. Steiner surveilled the building with night vision glasses.

In the silence all that could be heard was the low moan of the wind. Nobody spoke. Just waited.

Finally Steiner lowered his glasses. He nodded and signalled for them to move. He led the way, crouched low, silenced Uzi across his chest. Vansen and Yuri followed flanking him. Steiner headed straight up the steps, turned onto the landing and halted in front of the door. He signalled for the other two to take up position to cover him. When they were ready he rose and tucked himself against the doorframe and knocked: twice quickly, then once slow, then twice quickly again.

He raised his Uzi up to his shoulder and aimed down and waited. There was a pause then two quick knocks followed by one slow from inside. The handle turned and the door began to open. Steiner drove his foot into the door, forcing it open fast, and swung into the doorway, sighting down the Uzi. His muzzle met the bridge of Homer's nose. The big Delta operative grinned. Armstrong covered him from behind with an MP5.

Steiner didn't lower his weapon. Homer continued to grin dumbly. "You ain't gonna shoot me, are you, copper?" he shrugged.

Steiner craned his head and finally lowered his weapon. He breezed past Homer. Vansen and Yuri followed him inside.

"Make yourself at home, mia casa... and all that!" Homer shuffled after them. "What took your so long anyway?"

"Traffic," Steiner muttered, Uzi tucked in by his side, as he paced across the apartment. He reached the kitchen. Inside Bach and an attractive young woman sat heads close together, talking softly. Steiner simply pointed with his free hand and turned to Homer.

"Love's young dream, ain't it sweet?" he grinned. Steiner raised his eyebrows. The Delta operative nodded eagerly, pursing his lips as if to receive a kiss, both hands clutching his heart and swooning. Armstrong hid his smile.

"That's just fucking great!" Steiner marched into the kitchen.

* * *

"I'm Steiner," he spoke directly to Ayana.

"I've been expecting you."

"What do I call you?" his tone was cool, clipped.

She glanced briefly at Bach. "My cover name is Hannah..."

"That'll do," he interrupted. "I understand you've got access and can give us a window." Ayana nodded. "How soon?" Steiner's eyes never left her, as if studying her.

"He's out of town until tomorrow night. I can get his location then and hopefully learn when he'll be in the open."

"Better be soon, we're too conspicuous. We got days, tops."

"I have a bolt-hole nearby you will operate from. You're too obvious here. There you'll be able to come and go pretty much as you like."

Steiner nodded. “Still...”

“He’s due to address the Ba’ath Party National Council in the next couple of days. I should be able to give you heads up.”

“How far ahead?”

“If we’re lucky you’ll be on stand by for a day or two. You’ll have an hour, maybe two to move and get in position. It’s the best you’ll get. Only a handful know his movements in advance. It’s how he survives.”

“Doubles?”

“They exist, one or two, but I’ll okay the target 100%.”

“Good.”

She nodded, as if to conclude matters.

“There’s one more thing?” Steiner added.

“Yes?” she frowned quizzically.

“I don’t mean to offend, but it regards your bona fides?”

She didn’t seem angered, but voice had an edge, “My masters seem satisfied, as do yours.”

“I’m sure, but if only his inner circle can know his movements, how can you obtain this data?”

“I have access.” Ayana spoke coolly.

“So I was given to understand. How?”

She noticeably chilled, “You have no need to know. It is enough that I do.”

Steiner shrugged. She turned back to Bach.

“Forgive me, it’s just I can’t fail to notice that you are a beautiful woman.” Her head snapped back around as Steiner spoke.

“Meaning?”

“Well,” his voice was guileless, but a smile played around his lips. Bach had stiffened in his seat. “A woman of your beauty has certain advantages.” Her eyes narrowed. Bach

turned. Steiner briefly met his gaze, looking at him for the first time. Just as quickly her looked back to Ayana. “You have an undeniable power, a weapon to utilise. Surely you use this to gain access.”

“What are you trying to say?”

Steiner smiled sheepishly and shrugged. “I admire your dedication,” his glanced to Bach and back again. “Who are you fucking for your country?”

Bach was out of his chair before Steiner had finished. “You asshole...” the Israeli hissed as he reached for him. Steiner barely stirred; his gaze never left Ayana. He drove the edge of his left hand into Bach’s throat, choking off his words and swung up the silenced P7 automatic pistol concealed by his right. He drove the muzzle into Bach’s forehead, forcing him back down.

“Sit,” he hissed softly, keeping his eyes locked on Ayana. Her dark eyes never wavered, holding his gaze with a fierce intensity. Steiner smiled.

Bach slumped in his chair. There was silence for a moment, only the gentle coughing of the choking man breaking the icy hush.

“It is time,” whispered Steiner. Ayana raised her eyebrows. “You will show us our new home.”

Chapter 20

Steiner crouched in the shadows. The guards patrolled below. With NVGs he watched; the night lit up an eerie green.

The *palace* was surrounded by a ring of steel: razor wire, minefields, machine gun emplacements and guard towers providing enfilading fire. An on-site barracks provided full battalion-strength SRG protection around the clock. Even in the dead of night patrols swept the perimeter and interior of the site. Men on foot and in vehicles crawled over each other like ants.

All this noise and action wasn't going to keep the Rais and family awake though. The *palace* itself was a beard, a dead edifice, there just for the world to see. Beneath the surface of the presidential palace and accompanying military base stretched miles of subterranean tunnels. The real palace was a bombproof, airtight, impregnable bunker. Hitler would have shit himself with jealousy.

Steiner's unit had been in place for a little over 24 hours. The base of operations was the basement of a bombed-out high school. Beneath the stench of sewerage and ruin it was perfect. Ayana had stocked the site an arsenal: machine guns, sniping rifles, automatic weaponry of all varieties, plus shotguns. Also they had beaucoup ordnance: plastic, incendiaries, even state-of-the-art liquid explosives. The equipment had been funnelled into the city in expectation of their arrival.

Ayana had returned to work. Bach watched her go with puppy-dog eyes.

Steiner had the base operational and they had started running shifts covering the presidential palace around the clock. The next evening they received a message from Ayana inside the bunker. Using a burst transmitter the size of a thumbnail, the signal lasted less than a tenth of a second. It said simply: *IN*.

With all the traffic, when he arrived was impossible to tell. But The Rais was home. Now they just had to wait for the signal to move, then they would have only minutes to get in position to make the hit. It could be their only chance.

*

*

*

Homer and Armstrong were playing cards over an ammo crate when Steiner entered the basement. Yuri had relieved him at dawn and he had made the short journey back to cover as the first tentacles of sunlight crept through the shattered city streets.

He stripped off his Arab garb and fatigue jacket and flopped on his bedroll. He gulped down some water and rehydrated an MRE and began to eat without enthusiasm. From the shadows he watched the others while he ate.

The two D-boys were engrossed in their game. Armstrong dressed in BDU pants and a T-shirt scrutinised his cards. Homer, bare-chested and clad only in his skivvies was skittish, stifled giggles as he hummed tunelessly to himself. He absent-mindedly scratched the Homer Simpson tattoo on his left shoulder.

“Hey, you in or what, man?” Armstrong muttered wearily.

“Sure, bud.” Homer began to hum the opening bars of *The Flintstones* theme tune. “*Simpson, Homer Simpson, he’s the greatest guy in history,*” he sung flatly as he played with his cards. “*From the town of Springfield, he’s about to hit a chestnut tree,*” he looked up, big grin plastered across his face. “*Do ‘h!*” he cackled hysterically, slapping his bare thigh, wriggling in his seat. Armstrong rubbed a hand wearily across his face. Homer took a swig of rehydrated orange juice and belched loudly, slapping his belly, wincing as he just missed the dressing on his abdomen. “Whoops!” he tittered, almost nudging the other Delta operative conspiratorially.

“Man, the cards?” Armstrong pleaded.

“Tell you what, bud, these Arab motherfuckers, they ain’t that bad.” Homer opined as he once more rearranged his hand.

“That so?” Armstrong laid down his cards. After all these years, he was used to his friend’s wayward digressions and strange ways. He accepted defeat, slid a cigarette from his pack and sparked it up, inhaling deeply, sitting back to enjoy the ride.

“Sure, they dress bad, are loud, a might excitable, shit-poor soldiers, can’t cook, not least anything edible. They got a crazy goddamn religion, even by relative standards, they seem to hate every goddamn motherfucker, not least your Jews and us American boys, which is just plain crazy. Everybody knows us Americans are the loveliest, most charming, most beautiful motherfuckers on God’s green earth. Nope, I can forgive all that, not least ‘cos some of their women are pretty fine. But there is one thing that is truly unforgivable. You know what that is?”

“No, Homer?” Armstrong sighed behind a cloud of smoke.

“These motherfuckers stink. I mean they really stink,” he shook his head as if with despair. “It makes your damn eyes water, man. Ain’t they heard of deodorant?”

“They’re poor, I guess.” Armstrong shrugged.

“A valid argument, you might think, my friend, but no. It’s been my pleasure to be introduced to Arabs of all colour and stripe. Generals to beggars, and you know what unites every single motherfucking one of them?” Homer’s voice rose as he warmed to his subject.

“Stink?” Armstrong replied softly, as if unsure.

“Correct, my friend, 100%. They fucking stank, each and every one of them!” he slapped both hands down hard on his thighs, nodding firmly.

“Cultural, maybe?” Armstrong stubbed out his cigarette and gazed longingly at his cards where they lay face down on the crate.

“You may be right, but there is a line in your quaint local customs, a line that I believe must not be crossed.”

“I can tell you feel strongly about this, man.”

“Undoubtedly, I shit you not. I consider myself a tolerant man. Am I not, my man?”

“Oh, tolerant, definitely!” Armstrong agreed half-heartedly.

“But even I have my limits. I can take stupid, boring, I can even do ugly. Weird’s fine, even rude on occasion. But when some motherfucker assaults my olfactory organs, that shit-for-brains fuckwit lowlife is getting personal.”

“I see your point,”

“It’s the disrespect as much as the lack of self-respect. It’s fucking loathsome, man.”

“You are not wrong.” Armstrong tentatively lifted his cards, sensing the ending in sight.

“I mean, these Arabs are floating in money, liquid gold, Texas T, but not a penny of their profligate and conspicuous spending seems to go on personal hygiene. Where are their priorities?”

Armstrong looked around for a little help.

“And The Rais, and the rest of his camel-jockey Hitler nut-bags, they can build huge fucking armies, manned obviously by idiots, but huge nonetheless. They got state-of-the-art weaponry. They got missiles, damn near inter-continental, they got chemical, biological, even nuclear capabilities. And the fuckwits can’t get a deodorant!” Homer was on a roll now, face reddening, voice loud.

“Yeah, it’s a real poser, that for sure,” Armstrong was resigned to his role as designated stooge.

“I say their stink is the real weapon of mass destruction. Chemical and biological all rolled into one, the original fucking doomsday device. I say for humanitarian reasons if nothing else, this is a job for your Red Cross and UN. Forget baby medicine, give the fuckers deodorant. For the love of god, deodorise these poor savages. Give the bastards a bath if nothing else!”

“A point well made,” Armstrong said with finality. “Now your cards...”

“Now I come to think about it, there’s the whole moustache thing too.” Homer sat up, “I mean, what came first, The Rais or the moustaches?”

Armstrong groaned, burying his hands in his face.

“The fucking BO stink and the moustaches,” he paused “And that’s just the women...” Homer cracked up.

Vansen appeared behind him. She allowed her fingertips to trail across his bare shoulders as she passed. “Shouldn’t get too bent out of shape over a bunch of over-ripe dune coons. Don’t want to angry up the blood, big fella.”

Homer’s grin spread from ear to ear, his face flushed and gleaming with rapture. “Hey baby, you can cool me down, any time, every time!” He reached out for her.

“In your dreams, lover-boy!” she laughed and slapped the back of his shaven head. She slipped one of the Armstrong’s cigarettes and headed over to Steiner. Homer watched her go, head tilted, a beatific look on his face.

“Poetry in motion,” he sighed. Armstrong groaned and tossed away his cards. Homer positively swooned. “Now that is the woman I’m going to marry!”

Vansen slumped down next to Steiner, lit the cigarette, took one pull and handed it over. While he smoked they sat side by side. Homer was still clowning around; he had a full metal jacket rifle round up each nostril and bared his teeth like a monkey while he grunted and gurned. Armstrong stared back deadpan, arms crossed.

“Real sharp team, slick!” Vansen took the cigarette, took a drag and handed it back. He just shrugged.

“Check out lover-boy,” she jerked her head towards Bach. He sat at the base of the stairs, Beretta automatic shotgun resting across his knees. He stared up the staircase like some dumb old dog waiting on their owner.

“Shit. Love,” Vansen spat. “Kill me if I ever end up like that sorry sack of shit, will you slick?”

* * *

Bach's head was fucked. It was going two hundred different directions at once. He was paralysed and transfixed. His suddenly simple life, directed and fatalistically driven, had been blown apart. How was she here? Why? What should he do? What about the mission, the risks? Everything was up for grabs.

When they had been left alone after Ayana had returned to her apartment that first night, they had sat in the kitchen and talked.

"Did you know I was here?" Ayana asked.

He shook his head. "You didn't know I was coming?"

"No."

They sat in silence.

"We have a situation," she spoke.

He nodded.

"I suggest we get on with our jobs. We are both professionals," she said.

He met her steady gaze.

"But Ayana..."

She cut him short; "This is neither the time nor place for this. We made our choices, now we live with it. Don't make a fool of yourself or embarrass me, please."

He sat, mouth open.

"Yoni," she spoke softly, "We can't look back, we can't undo what happened. This is us. Here, now. Don't fuck it up."

"I love you." He reached for her hand. She withdrew. Her black eyes never left him for an instant. A look of pain and anger flashed across her face only for a second before she composed herself.

"You could have said that four years ago. You knew that's all I was waiting for?" she said coldly.

He didn't reply. He looked away.

“I wanted to marry you, make a life together. But just those three words would have been enough. But you said nothing and I left.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Don’t apologise,” she said softly. “It is who you are. I was a fool to want anything else. You are a loner. You are self-contained. I loved you for that and so much else. But then I tried to change you. Make you something you’re not and never could be. I was the one in the wrong.”

He shook his head violently, “No, I always loved you, I was a coward and a fool, I should have told you, shown you. I fucked up. I realise that now. I love you. Without you I am nothing.”

“You say that now!”

“You are all I have left in the world. Beyond the army, our country, you are all I love.” His eyes were welling up.

“So now you are desperate,” she never flinched. “Now you want me back, now everything is slipping away.”

“No. You are all I love, all I will ever love. You are and always have been the one thing I wanted. All I needed. Without you I have no reason for being.” His hand took hers.

“Please!”

She shook her head, averting her eyes for an instant. “We made our choices, we can’t go back.”

“We were wrong. We can change, it’s not too late.”

She remained silent; staring away into the shadows as her held a hand. Finally she spoke, turning back to meet his gaze. Her eyes were cracked blood-red.

“So what do we do, just walk away?” she said coldly.

“I don’t know, but this is our last chance.”

She freed her hand. “You took this mission. You knew what would happen.”

“I had nothing left, but now...” he pleaded.

“Now what? Now I’m your excuse, your salvation?” pain scored her voice. “I am a person too, I have feelings. I loved you. I love you. But things change. We are no longer who we were. We can’t go back.”

“You’re everything to me.” He leant towards her. “Together we are something. Ayana, please!” Their eyes locked, heads inches apart, breaths mingling.

So they sat, together in silence and he waited.

Bach was lost. Trapped in some kind of limbo, a purgatory of uncertainty and indecision. He was here standing guard. She was somewhere deep within The Rais’s bunker. She might never return, he would likely be killed within days, possibly hours. As soon as she sent word they would move out. They would probably not come back.

He might see her again, he might not. She may give him an answer; maybe it would be the one he hoped. But it was too late. His path was chosen, his course locked in. He, like everyone else could not escape their destinies.

* * *

White noise. The hiss of static rent the air. Steiner bolted upright and reached for his burst transmitter/receiver. The other turned and froze expectant. He held the tiny device up to his face. The screen read simply: *OUT SW*.

He looked up and grinned.

“It’s time.”

Chapter 21

It's the thirst you can never shake. It starts hours before. You don't even have to think about what's coming, it starts up all on its own. But pretty soon your throat is scraped dry. Raw and tight, you feel like your going to choke. It doesn't matter how much you drink, it won't go away.

When it begins and the shit starts flying, when you're just living from nanosecond to nanosecond, you begin to forget. But it's always there, deep down below, waiting.

* * *

They moved fast through the tight, winding back streets. They wore Iraqi fatigues now, with SRG patches. They carried a couple of AKs for show, the rest of the weaponry covered. The disguises were paper-thin, but they only hoped to be in the open for minutes. Most Iraqi civilians wouldn't look too closely at armed soldiers, especially Republican Guard. When the shit began to fly it wouldn't matter much anyway.

They neared the kill zone and split into three teams. No one spoke or looked back. There was no need, time was short and they all knew what was going to happen. It was too late for anything but what was expected now.

* * *

The heat lay heavy across the city, enveloping everything in a sticky viscous blanket. Ribbons of cloud streaked the sky. The sun burned behind the veil of a smoky haze.

Steiner crouched on the flat roof of the two-storey building, tucked in the shadow of the doorway. The sweat covering him chilled and he felt the cheap fatigues twist damply against his skin, Vansen lay on her back beside him, smoking a cigarette. With her pack beneath her head she watched her smoke curl listlessly skywards. Beside her lay a M249

SAW machine gun, set low on its bipod near the roof's edge. On her other side lay a M3 Carl Gustav recoilless anti-tank gun and uncased ammo. Small arms and ammo, plus grenades and plastic explosives strung her torso, a M4 carbine with slung M203 grenade launcher resting across her knees.

Steiner wiped the sweat from his eyes and peered through his binoculars. He sighted east up the dusty freeway and waited. The roadway had been shutdown in preparation for the convoy. Not that there was much traffic beyond the army and inner echelons of the government. Oil, along with medicine and a decent home was a precious commodity in sanction-hit Iraq.

Steiner lowered his field glasses and checked his weapons. His Galil sniper was mounted on its bipod beside the cumbersome Barrett .50 cal heavy sniping rifle, also bipod mounted. His compact Colt Commando was slung across his back. He like Vansen wore a variety of weaponry, ammo and ordnance strung across his Kevlar vest.

Satisfied he resumed his vigil. Still nothing, he swung his glasses to check the others.

He scanned the roof of the four-storey block set at a tangent on the opposite side of the road. He could see nothing, as he expected. He knew Bach and Yuri were already in place with their own arsenal. They had signalled when they were set.

Steiner switched his view to the concrete bridge crossing the highway. He watched the two Iraqi army guards as they stood together at the centre of the span. One lit a cigarette for the other and they smoked together, shoulders hunched. One adjusted the strap of his AK47, the other continued to talk. Steiner watched his wordless lips. He swung his binoculars. Where were the third team, they should have been in position already? Steiner bit down on his tension and swung back to the sentries and waited.

The seconds ticked away. Steiner felt a bead of sweat snake down his spine. He went to check his watch, but a sudden blur of movement caught his eye. He couldn't trace it; he swung from end to end of the bridge, refixing on the guards. One dropped his cigarette and

ground it out with the toe of his boot. The other took one last drag on his, eyes closed as he inhaled.

Steiner never heard anything; there was no muzzle-flash, nothing. One second the Iraqis stood together, the next there was a double explosion as both men's head exploded and they crumpled. A red mist hung in the air.

Steiner spotted movement on the bridge, shadows skirting the parapet, then nothing. Seconds later static filled his radio earpiece, then a whispered voice.

"In position," Armstrong reported.

"Received. Weapons?"

There was a brief pause.

"Ready," Homer cut in.

"Stand by." Steiner swung his field glasses back around. In the distance he thought he could just make out a plume of dust.

"Two, report?" Steiner pinched his neck mike.

"Wait," Yuri called in. There was a pause; Steiner swung his glasses back to the four-storey building. He could make out the silhouette of a head. "We have incoming vehicles," Yuri broke the silence.

"All units stand by for target ID," Steiner kicked Vansen. She rolled over, pulled the Carl Gustav close and loaded it with a HEAT round. She rose to one knee, head low. Steiner crab-walked to the parapet, raising the Barrett .50 cal rifle to the edge of the roof.

"Target confirmed." Yuri called in, his voice cool and emotionless.

"All units stand by. Go on my signal." Steiner settled behind the Barrett, sighting through the powerful 12x scope. Lying prone, he felt completely at peace. The lead vehicle, a dusty Land Rover came into view. He thumbed of the safety and felt an icy calm wash over him.

The convoy was moving at quite a speed given the pockmarked surface they thundered over. 40mph, Steiner would guess. Pretty fast, especially for the two APCs he

could make out now, third and second to last in the trail of vehicles. The black Mercedes limo was fourth in line, behind two Land Rovers, an APC and a deuce-and-a-half trunk laden with troops. Behind it were two more troop trucks, a second APC and a final Land Rover covering the rear.

The first vehicle reached Steiner and passed. He tracked the approaching limo. Pennants flew on the front wings. The windows were blacked out. Steiner swept his scope over the windshield and took up the slack in the trigger. He only had a second. He locked on and fired.

The Barrett barked and spat out its heavy .50 calibre round, Steiner absorbing the heavy recoil. The armour-piercing round hit the Mercedes nose-on, sliced through its radiator and cut deep into the engine block. The car shuddered and died.

Before the round hit home, Vansen had risen fully up onto one knee and fired her Carl Gustav. A white spigot of flame leapt from the weapons exhaust and she rocked on her heels. The 84mm HEAT round cut through the heavy air at 310 metres a second, leaping across the eighty-odd metres to the first APC. It slammed into the side of the vehicle, easily slicing through its thinly armoured flanks, and detonated inside the crew compartment. The APC was vaporised in a ball of white flame as its own ammo cooked off. The consequent inferno engulfed the Land Rover in front of it, incinerating its occupants. Simultaneously a LAW round was fired by Yuri from his position, hitting the first Land Rover, blowing it apart, the tattered chassis flipping onto its side and sent skidding across the burning asphalt into the roadside barrier.

Withering machine gun fire from Yuri and Homer ripped down into the surviving vehicles. Bach and Armstrong started picking off targets. The American sniper took out the drivers of the third truck; the Israeli took the second. The two machine gunners raked the truck next in line, slaughtering its cargo of SRG troops before they could deploy.

Steiner slid the Barrett onto the top of the roof doorway and vaulted up, quickly scooping up the rifle and taking aim. The concrete around him pinged and exploded as troops

from the remaining truck vomited across the roadway, opening up. He ignored them and fired, once, twice, then again and again. First he hit the limo windshield. He double-tapped the driver's position, then the passenger's. Then he opened up on the side windows and the armoured roof and doors. The incoming fire on his position grew more intense. Shrapnel filled the air, bullet fragments and broken masonry peppering him. He emptied one clip, reloaded and fired off the eleven rounds in the second magazine. He tossed the rifle aside and rolled off the top of the doorway.

The final APC was trying to manoeuvre around the vehicles blocking the road. The gunner in the turret was swinging back and forth, spraying indiscriminately with the mounted 20mm cannon. The explosive rounds slammed into the surrounding buildings. Vansen put a round into it, blowing it apart.

Steiner was behind the Galil, firing fast picking off the SRG troops as they tried to provide cover. The two other snipers did likewise. The final Land Rover made the mistake of trying to swing round the rest of the convoy. Homer and Yuri ripped it to shreds, and then they too turned their weapons on the remaining men out in the open.

Vansen was also behind her SAW now, joining the barrage of automatic fire.

It was a bloodbath; the Iraqis didn't stand a chance. One by one, they were cut down, dismembered by triangulated machine gun fire, decapitated and eviscerated by the snipers.

The gunfire quickly dwindled. Steiner abandoned the Galil and rose, unslinging his Commando. Without a word he leapt off the roof. He crossed the rubbish-strewn alleyway separating the building and roof. He hit the asphalt and rolled once, coming up weapon ready. He moved through the burning wreckage, aiming his rifle from his shoulder, swinging left and right.

Covering fire still rained down from the three positions, sporadic answering fire still coming from the blazing convoy.

Body parts and tattered corpses were scattered everywhere amid the burning vehicles. Anyone stirred; Steiner put short burst into them. He kept moving.

He rounded the bullet-riddled trucks. There were more bodies. As he rounded the second deuce-and-a-half two Iraqis burst from cover and ran. Steiner drew a bead and dropped both with two short bursts. He lowered the muzzle of the rifle and bore down on the limo.

Homer tossed a rope over the side of the bridge and rappelled down one-handed, SAW jutting from his right hip. Chomping loudly on gum, he disentangled himself and squinted up at Armstrong's position. "I'm off out, ma, don't wait up!" He headed through the burning wreckage.

The snap of sniper fire continued, picking off survivors. Vansen vaulted onto the road with a whoop, and moved fast, M4 held port-arms.

Steiner circled the bullet-scarred hulk of the limo. It lay low on its ruptured tires. The black chassis was scorched and gnarled, the smoked windows frosted by multiple impacts. An eerie silence seemed to have settled over the kill-zone.

Steiner took up position by the right rear passenger door. Aiming from the shoulder, one-handed, he reached out with his gloved left hand and tried the door handle. He was surprised when it yielded with a soft pop. The door swung open and a shattered, blood-smeared corpse flopped out. Steiner shifted back a single step, then moved over the body. Cradling his Commando two handed, he squinted into the darkened interior.

Smoke curled in the beams of light punching through the countless bullet holes. Blood was smeared across the upholstery, walls, floors and ceiling. The driver and front passenger lay slumped, headless. Brain and hair stuccoed the headrests.

Another man lay curled face-down in the far corner of the rear passenger seat. Steiner reached out with his left hand and grasped the figure by the collar and jerked him back. Gore oozed from the rear of his gaping cranium as he hit the floor with a wet slap.

Revealed, sitting curled up, knees practically tucked beneath his chin sat an apparently unmarked man. Eyes peeled wide open; he appeared frozen with terror. He gazed back with a mixture of fear and confusion, uncomprehending. Steiner met his gaze, took in

the plain military fatigues, the heavy body, the luxuriant moustache. For a few seconds, both men simply stared at one another in silence. The stillness was broken only when Steiner became aware of a low noise, growing slowly. He couldn't place it, then he realised it was a sob. It rose with fearful abandon from the other man's chest. Heavy tears began to fall from his glazed eyes.

Steiner moved back into the doorway. He stopped, rifle aimed two-handed from his shoulder. He tilted his head, paused, then whispered. "Shit!"

Steiner put a short burst into the man's chest, ripping it open and driving him back into the seat.

Homer and Vansen arrived as Steiner emerged from the vehicle.

"How's it going, chief? We got the big cheese?" the big Delta operative grinned.

Steiner brushed past him.

Vansen grabbed his arm and jerked him round.

"What is it?" she hissed.

Steiner shook his head. "It isn't him. It's a double. We've been set up."

Three helicopters swept low over the buildings, the thunder of their Klimov turboshafts washing down over the highway. The thud of their rotors chopping into the air beating a fearful tattoo. The two Russian-built Hinds swooped down low on the roadway, banking. The two gunships turned their menacing snouts on the wreckage of the convoy. Their engines shrieked. They began their attack-run.

"Fuck," Steiner screamed above the suffocating wave of noise. "Move!"

The two helicopters opened up with their fearsome arsenals.

Cannon and machine gun fire ripped through the remains of the convoy as the two choppers closed at over 100mph. Fuel tanks detonated along with any stray munitions. A fireball rolled through the broken chassis scattered the length of the road. Explosions leapt skyward, ammo cooked off in the firestorm. Shredded metal filled the air like blossom on a breeze.

The three Americans scattered. Steiner dived to the side of the road, hitting the hot asphalt hard and rolling into the shadow of the crash barrier. As the two Hinds swept overhead, he opened up with his carbine, the 5.56mm rounds pinging impotently off the two choppers' armoured hides.

Homer sprinted hard for the flyover and the rope back to Armstrong's position. As the vehicles behind him vaporised, the barrage of automatic fire ripped into the liquefying tarmac of the road-top. Armstrong, Bach and Yuri provided covering fire, but rifles and a light machine gun were no match. Homer cursed, spun on his heel and embraced his destiny. He opened up from the shoulder, ripping into the lead chopper. Flame leapt a foot from the end of the muzzle of his SAW, spent 5.56mm shell casings gushed from the overheating breach of his weapon. He screamed silently as he ate through the 200 round box magazine. Bullets ripped through the air around him, the thunder of the choppers sucking in all the available oxygen. The road around Homer exploded and he vanished in fountain of rock and lead.

Vansen leapt clear of the road, machine gun fire snapping at her heel. She sailed over the garbage-strewn alley and caught the rope hanging from the roof. She slithered up it and vanished over the parapet.

The two choppers ripped over the bridge. Armstrong, seeing his friend down, tossed aside his HK sniping rifle and grabbed the AK beside him. He reeled around; the familiar rip of the rifle's burst drowned within the downdraft and cacophony of the choppers as they passed overhead. He emptied the 30 round banana clip into the bellies of the craft in seconds, popped it and reloaded.

The two Hinds banked and split. One reared around and bore back down on Armstrong's position. The second peeled off and turned on the Bach and Yuri's four-storey building. Its gun platform ripped into the block, ripping great mouthfuls of masonry from its flank.

Armstrong watched the first bird bearing down on him.

“Oh fuck!” he snatched up a second AK and planted both rifles on his hips. It was nothing but a gesture, but fuck it. He opened up; the harsh rip off the twin rifle burst was beautiful noise. He bared his teeth and grinned, unloading both clips into the onrushing beast. The unstoppable Hind lit up with its 12.7 and 23mm guns. Armstrong felt the air rip and come alive. Both his rifles clacked dry and he watched flickering of the chopper’s muzzles as it reached for him.

The Hind exploded, vanishing in on itself in a glaring fireball, tattered wreckage falling from the air. Armstrong snapped his head round. Vansen stood on the roof of her building; a Stinger surface-to-air missile launcher propped on her shoulder. Even from this distance he could see her grin and give him the thumbs up.

The second Hind came in at a steep bank, all its guns lit up, the barrage of gunfire biting huge chunks out of the four-storey building. Yuri knelt inside the parapet, firing his HK21 machine gun. He ripped through the belt of ammo, brass casings ground like shingle beneath his boots. The barrel of the weapon glowed red hot. He watched as sparks burst off the chopper’s nose as he hit it repeatedly, but still it kept coming. Bach stood just back from him a way, rapidly firing off rounds from his MSG90 sniping rifle, trying to take out the pilot. At the last moment the Plexiglas canopy fractured but it was too late. The roof around the Israeli sniper erupted, Bach vanishing amid flame and ruin. Yuri tumbled onto his back as the parapet exploded and the Hind swooped over. An instant later a streak of white vapour tore over on its trail. Yuri flipped over just in time to see the Stinger blow that helicopter out of the air. For an instant a sea of blazing fuel washed back onto the building, but then it was gone, leaving only a pall of black smoke.

Yuri’s machine gun was buckled and shattered beyond repair, showing how close he’d come to death himself. He struggled onto all fours, dust and broken debris falling from his clothes. He unslung his SIG assault rifle and found his feet. He saw the soles of Bach’s boots staring back at him on the other side of a huge ragged crater.

He tottered unsteadily to Bach, rounding the jagged hole. He made as if to call out, but choked it off in time. The Israeli lay flat on his back, arms flung wide, eyes staring blindly up into the hazy sky. His face was blank and unmarked except for a faint mist of blood spreading up from the jaw. Yuri lowered his eyes. Bach's torso was laid open, his internal organs excised, chest cavity cauterised. Kneeling by his side, Yuri almost reached for the dead man's pulse, purely out of habit. He pulled back his hand and instead eased Bach's eyes shut.

For a moment the Russian remained kneeling by his dead comrade. Then he began to neatly arrange Bach, drawing in his outstretched arms and knocking his legs together. Gathering him in his arms he gently turned the dead Israeli over onto his front. The white of his spine shone through where his viscera had been blown out of his back. Yuri rose, returned to the roof's edge, gathered his gear and secured a bungee rope and tossed it over the side. He returned to Bach's body, snapped a grenade from his webbing, removed its pin and let the spoon fly clear, then slipped it beneath the Israeli. He moved quickly away, took the rope and launched himself off the roof.

As the white phosphorous grenade erupted, Yuri rappelled to the ground. He knew the incendiary grenade would incinerate the body in seconds, leaving nothing but ashes and melted bone, so eliminating any means of identification. The white fire was already dying when he hit the ground and moved off.

Steiner weaved through the molten remains of the convoy. Vansen zipped down onto the road and met him. They headed for the bridge.

A furrow was gouged from the asphalt. At its head knelt Armstrong. As they neared, they saw that he had Homer's head cradled in his lap.

"Jesus!" Vansen whispered.

Homer's right leg had been sheared off just below the knee. There was very little blood. His clothes were blackened rags, but a grin was plastered across his pallid face. Soot spotted his wan skin; his eyes glittered from shock and opiates.

“Homer,” Steiner’s voice was surprisingly soft, “How you doing?”

“Been better,” Homer rasped. “Reckon my ballet dancing days are over though!”

“Christ, Armstrong, how much dope you given him?” Vansen shook her head.

The other D-boy glared up at her hollow-eyed.

“You found the leg?” she continued blithely, “Maybe they could stick it back on?”

“Yeah, I reckon they could reattach 15lbs of ground chuck. Bound to be some top-notch surgeons in this neighbourhood.” Homer croaked, his white-cruled lips twisted in a painful grin. “Maybe they could give me a face-lift while we’re at it. You could get a titty-lift too.”

“What these ain’t enough for you?” she cupped her small breasts.

“Baby, you know you always light my fire.”

Armstrong jabbed another morphine syrette into his left thigh. “We gotta move him,” he said.

“It could kill him,” Steiner said coolly.

“Man, I’m right here!” Homer groaned.

“We stay here, we’re all dead. I can stabilise him.” Armstrong pled. “But maybe you want to leave him? Or maybe you’d like to tidy up all the loose ends?” His eyes met Steiner’s.

There was silence for a moment. Steiner looked down at his weapon, then at the gravely wounded Delta operative.

Yuri arrived, breathless. “We got to move, there’s more Iraqis heading this way,” he saw Homer’s wound. “Shit!”

“Where’s Bach?” Steiner turned. Yuri shook his head. “How?”

“Gunship blew his guts out his back.”

“Jesus!” Vansen whistled.

Steiner ignored her. “You took care of it?”

Yuri nodded, “White Phosphorous. It’s done.”

In the distance came the rumble of vehicles and the throb of approaching choppers.

“We’re moving. Now.”

Chapter 22

They pounded through the winding alleys. They were going to split, head to various boltholes, but it was too late. The Iraqis were all over them. Choppers thundered overhead, military vehicles filled the streets, troops were fanning out. They had no choice. The basement hideout was the closest. As the net tightened, they disappeared below ground.

Anyone could have spotted them, but all their options had run out. All they could do was sit and pray. If things went bad, it was simple: fight and die.

* * *

Homer lay sprawled on some crates. His wounds had been tidied up best they could do. Blood soaked the dressings covering the ragged stump where his leg was truncated below the knee. Shirt off, he leaned back, loose-limbed like a junkie. Morphine pumped through his veins, probably enough to kill most men. Steiner hoped that might solve at least one problem. A cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth, shit-eating grin on his face, pupils blown, eyes glassy. A Beretta automatic shotgun lay across his knees.

Armstrong's gaze flickered between his friend and the staircase. He sat at the bottom, covering the doorway with a SAW machine gun. The other three, Yuri, Vansen and Steiner squatted in the centre of the basement, smoking in silence. The unit leader sat hunched, face buried in his hands.

Outside the earth rumbled as the SRG units swept through the streets. There was the occasional blast of gunfire and nearby explosions. Subtlety wasn't the Iraqis strong point. Obviously, anything looked hinky got fragged.

"Well that didn't go as well as I hoped?" Vansen broke the silence. Yuri gave her a withering glance. Steiner never looked up.

"What now?" the Russian asked softly.

Steiner didn't answer for a moment. Slowly he rubbed his face and removed his hands. His face was deathly pale, his eyes bloodshot.

"We finish the job."

"How exactly would that be?" Vansen sniped. "If we survive tonight and don't get snuffed like rats in a proverbial, obviously the entire Iraqi military and police will be waiting for us. You don't think The Rais is going to sit around and wait for us. He's going to find the deepest hole he can, crawl inside and pull it closed after him. He ain't coming up until we're dead or long gone."

"Probably. But then we follow him down his hole and make sure he never comes out." Steiner sounded dead tired.

"Shit-hot plan, slick. Obviously we can find this hole, get in, find him, kill him and get out?"

"Who said anything about getting out?" Steiner almost smiled.

"There's suicide, and then there's just plain dumb!"

"We can still get him. It's gonna be hard. It's gonna be ugly and none of us will probably make it out. But one way or another I'm gonna kill this motherfucker."

"Shit," Vansen shook her head and ground out her cigarette.

"Getting him isn't what bothering me," Steiner said softly.

"What is then, slick?"

"Someone sold us out."

*

*

*

"What the fuck do you mean?"

Darkness gathered. The Iraqis ripped the shit out of the city above their head.

"Who sold us out, how?" Armstrong spat.

"That's two questions," Steiner shrugged.

“Why do you think there’s a leak?” Vansen spoke from the gathering shadows.

“They were waiting for us. A relatively lightly guarded convoy, out in the open. A double as the passenger. The gunships waiting. Then the SRG attack dogs swoop. It all stinks.”

“The double could be routine, if you believe the stories. The rest could be bad luck?”

Vansen continued.

“Maybe, but I doubt it.” Steiner hung his head, his features swallowed in darkness.

“You could be right,” Yuri spoke up, “But who would sell us out and why?”

“The woman, Yoni’s friend?” Armstrong interjected.

“I doubt it. If she’d betrayed us, why did they wait for us to strike? They could have taken us here.”

“Who then?”

“Our masters.”

“What?”

“Washington.” Steiner bared his teeth in a facsimile of a smile, his eyes sunken in hollows.

“You’re shitting me?” Armstrong stirred, gripping his weapon tightly.

“We were always deniable, on our own. Looks like there might have been a change of mind.” Steiner snorted. “A policy change.”

“The President?” Vansen hissed.

“Maybe, he blows hot and cold. But more likely somebody else who wasn’t on board from the start. The Company.”

“CIA?”

Steiner nodded.

“Fuckers!” Vansen bristled with rage.

“They were never on board. They play their own games. No one pisses in their pool.”

“They told the Iraqis.” Yuri stated baldly.

Steiner nodded. "They tidy up the mess and the agency scores beaucoup points with their new pals."

"But the agency were never on board." Armstrong had lost his customary icy demeanour. "We still got our out with our own people, right?"

Steiner smiled chillingly. "Oh, I doubt it. The agency didn't have any real hard info, just vague knowledge." He paused for effect. "We only get out on completion, but I ran an emergency radio check earlier when we got back."

"And?" Yuri asked coolly.

"Nothing. They've shut down all our reception frequencies. There's nothing out there."

"Maybe they're playing safe, waiting for us to finish up?" Armstrong didn't even believe his own words.

Steiner shook his head and lit a cigarette.

"We're on our own. They've washed their hands of us."

There was a chilly silence. Gunfire rattled overhead. It was black and airless in the basement. Only one light burned weakly. The air was thick with the stench of blood and funk.

"What now?" Armstrong broke the hush, his voice a dry croak. "We abort right? Find some way out?"

Yuri and Vansen didn't speak. They met Steiner's gaze and waited.

"We finish the job." He spoke, eyes glazed and distant. "We do what we came for."

"Why?" Armstrong whispered.

"Because they don't want us to. Not in Washington, not here." Steiner grinned and gave a hollow laugh. "We're going to kill him because they don't want us to and because we can."

* * *

They sat quietly in the darkness. The only sound inside the basement was the rasp of Homer's narcotic breathing, interspersed with snoring and muttered incoherent oaths. Outside the thunder of action thinned amidst the blackness. As the cold, grey light of dawn smeared away the darkness, the sounds grew more distant.

Steiner, Yuri and Vansen sat hunched in a circle on the cold concrete floor. Homer lapsed in and out of consciousness. Armstrong stirred only as a recurring hacking cough assailed him.

It was cold in the cruel, despairing grey light of dawn. Its chill fingers pierced even the inky depths of the basement.

Outside it was now almost silent. No one stirred in the basement. The door at the top of the stairs rasped open and shrieked back on its hinges. Armstrong swung around his SAW, hunching behind sandbags. Steiner was up and slithered quickly beside the staircase, silenced automatic held up beside his ear, his left hand hanging at his side gripping an Uzi. Vansen, an automatic pistol in each hand, hung back in his shadow. Yuri rolled across the floor, AK47 in his arms. Even Homer stirred. He disengaged his shotgun's safety.

The stairs creaked as someone took two heavy steps on the bare wood.

"I'm not fat." A voice called softly.

"It's glandular." Steiner replied. He nodded to the others, but they didn't lower their weapons.

Footsteps banged down the stairs. Ayana appeared, her face gaunt and tired. Steiner stood down and the others followed suit.

Ayana looked around. She paused, her eyes fixing on the bloodied Homer. He smiled sheepishly. She continued to search the basement, her eyes probing its darkest corners. She hid her panic well. Her movements took on the telltale jerky haste of anxiety, her breathing was shallow, but Steiner was impressed. Only when she looked directly at him could he see the frantic terror behind her eyes. They clung to him in final desperation. She knew the

answer, but still she hoped, sometimes everyone needs hope. Steiner lost his years ago. He remained blank faced.

Finally she spoke, “Yoni?”

Steiner simply shook his head once.

A faint gasp escaped her lips and she snatched hold of the banister beside the stairs. The others looked away, eyes downcast in shame or compassion. Only Steiner’s gaze never wavered. He studied her with cool detachment. He was again impressed. She fought to control her breathing. Her legs quavered briefly, the skin on her face tightened, but she gathered herself quickly. She bit down on her pain, buried it deep. Her black eyes met Steiner’s. They were bloodshot but sharp. Pain and rage tempered but a ruthless self-discipline. She nodded and he gave her a fractured smile of recognition.

He offered her a cigarette, took one himself and lit them both.

“What now?” she said after a moment’s silence.

“We finish this.”

“After what happened? How?” she seemed more curious than surprised.

“That’s up to you.”

“What?”

“We beard the lion in his den.” Steiner smiled with grim joy. “You get us in.”

Ayana shook her head, “Even if I could get you inside, it would be suicide. You’d have to penetrate several circles of protection. I can only get you so close. You’d be dead before you could finish it.”

“Maybe.”

“You’d never get out after.”

Steiner shrugged.

Ayana sighed and shook her head wearily; “Will it make any difference in the end? One man alone will not change things.”

“I know.”

“Then why?”

Steiner shrugged again, “It’s what I do. It’s all I do.”

The two remained standing locked in silence. Then Ayana shook her head in weary resignation and smiled.

“He will be moving in hours, as soon as the city’s locked down. He’s spooked bad. He’ll get out of the city, disappear into the desert until he thinks it safe.”

“Then we have to move fast.”

She nodded.

“How long?”

“24 hours, tops.”

“Then we go tonight.” Steiner was utterly calm. “You can get us in.”

“I can get you inside the bunker. I can get you close, but that’s all.”

“That’s enough.”

Armstrong spoke from the gloom, “What about Homer?”

Steiner looked at the semi-conscious Delta operative. “He won’t last much longer,” he said calmly. “We leave him, or we finish him.”

“Jesus, I’m right here, man!” Homer groaned.

Armstrong’s fists ground the grips of his weapon, his clear blue eyes burning into Steiner. His finger caressed the trigger of the SAW.

“Maybe I could get a doctor?” Ayana said.

“Too risky, we couldn’t trust him.” Steiner was adamant.

“We snatch him, he tidies up your friend. Then we hold him here or kill him.” Ayana answered calmly.

“He could only buy Homer time. Without a medivac he won’t last long.”

“Hey, man,” Homer called out. He grinned, shotgun across his chest. “I’ll outlast you motherfuckers. I get to stay here. You’re walking into a bona fide death trap.”

There was silence.

“I’m just wounded. You’re all already dead.”

Chapter 23

Steiner hunched in the darkness on the hillock overlooking the palace compound. The dead-eyed windows of the lifeless palace stared back at him. He lowered his NVGs and checked the time: 10.45pm. Still fifteen minutes to go.

During the day they had laid low as military activity within the city dwindled. Slowly the Republican Guard units had fallen back to their bases and the palace. Reinforced checkpoints stood at every major intersection. As night returned, teams of DGS secret police swooped on selected sites, backed by SRG units. They were obviously rounding up the usual subjects.

Ayana had located a nearby doctor, and not just some local general practitioner, a surgeon attached to the palace infirmary. They had been waiting when he returned home. Steiner and Vansen had swooped, knocking him down and pulling a sack over his head. They had bundled him into the waiting Land Rover that Ayana had found. The Israeli agent was behind the wheel. She jammed the vehicle into gear and took off.

The doctor was terrified, so easily malleable. The team had plenty of drugs and medical supplies stored at the basement site. At gunpoint, the doctor cleaned and patched up Homer pretty well. His hands only shook slightly. Even he seemed happy with the results of his work.

Steiner had debated killing the man, but in the end reckoned he might still be needed. He had him gagged and cuffed to a radiator just out of reach of Homer. They left the big Delta man propped up and happily stoned out of his gourd. Shotgun by his side, he held his silenced SOCOM .45 automatic in his lap, its muzzle trained on the wide-eyed doctor.

“Don’t worry, us two boys will keep other company,” he slurred, big sloppy grin on his face, pupils fully dilated.

“Play nicely!” Vansen called.

Armstrong looked back just once. He gave a wan smile and slid shut the door.

Steiner checked the compound again. A lot of activity. Plenty of coming and going. That would help. He checked his watch and settled down. He felt strangely at peace with his future mapped out one way or another. He smiled as the seconds trickled away.

* * *

He slithered down the hill. Steiner knew it was a stupid risk, but what the hell. He cupped the flame inside the palm of his hand and lit the cigarette. He inhaled deeply. What did he care about exposure, he would be dead before the night was out anyway. But still he made sure he was downwind of the base and its sentries, he was still at heart a professional.

Headlights swept the hill. Steiner stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and scooped up his weapon.

The Land Rover came to a halt as he approached.

“Are we interrupting a party?” Vansen popped the front passenger door.

“In the back.” Steiner gripped the door. Vansen pouted and moved to the rear of the vehicle. There was grumbling from inside as she clambered in.

“Everything ready?” Steiner addressed Yuri and Ayana in the front. The Russian was wearing an Iraqi SRG uniform and driving, Ayana sat beside him in her regular clothes. Both nodded. “No problems?” Steiner asked to which they both shook their heads. “Lighten up,” Steiner grinned, “This is gonna be fun.” He shut the door and climbed in the back alongside Vansen and Armstrong. Ayana looked at Yuri, eyebrows raised. The Russian just tapped his temple and shifted the vehicle into gear.

They bounced along the rough road, emerging out of the inky darkness into the glare of the massed lights of the palace. The guards on the gate barely mustered the effort to approach their vehicle as they slowed.

“Papers!” the guard grunted. Yuri handed them over and the soldier cast a glance over them, matched them to their faces and nodded for them to pass.

“That wasn’t too tough?” Yuri smiled as they entered the compound.

“That was just stage one. I can get you so far, then you’re on your own.”

* * *

They rolled through the second checkpoint after barely a cursory glance.

“Fucking dumb-ass Arabs,” Armstrong hissed, hunched in the rear of the Land Rover.

The vehicle negotiated the traffic and zigzagging troops. The central compound was getting nearer.

“I’m afraid our free pass might be up,” Ayana whispered as much to herself as anyone else. She shifted uneasily as the vehicle slowed at the perimeter of the central presidential compound.

These guards were different. All palace security personnel were Special Republican Guard, but these men moved with the precision and cool of hardened professionals. They fanned out, surrounding the vehicle. The OC approached the cab. His eyes like the men he commanded were focused, cold like dead stones.

“Papers!” he snapped tersely. He stuck his free hand through the cab window, his right hand remaining on the grip of his AKSU automatic rifle. He quickly scanned Ayana’s papers.

“Yours are okay,” he jerked his head at Ayana, “But where is your authorisation?” He fixed his eyes on Yuri. “Papers, now!”

“Okay, okay,” Yuri muttered grumpily in thick Arabic, rifling his pockets.

“Search the vehicle!” the officer barked. One guard approached the rear of the vehicle, rifle aimed from the hip.

“Calm down, here are my papers,” Yuri handed over a crumpled wad of documents. The SRG officer handled them with obvious distaste.

The guard at the rear of the Land Rover edged closer, peering into the gloom of the covered flatbed. He stooped and craned his neck, squinting.

The officer thumbed back and forth through the papers, a frown spreading across his brow. He spoke without looking up. "These documents are not correct!"

Ayana fired twice, the silenced .22 merely popping. Both rounds tore through the documentation, igniting them. The first bullet hit the officer below the left eye, killing him instantly. The second struck him in the mouth, blowing blood and teeth back onto the burning papers as he fell.

A volley of silenced automatic fire leapt out of the gloom, cutting down the guard at the rear of the vehicle. Simultaneously, two silenced Uzis were jammed beneath the tail canopy, the stuttering gunfire ripping through the loosely gathered sentries.

Armstrong vaulted from the rear of the Land Rover, aiming from the shoulder with his silenced MP5 SMG. His first burst blew apart the head of the lone machine gunner in the bunker covering the gate. He pivoted and cut down the man making for the gatehouse to raise the alarm. He headed to gate, pausing only to put a burst into a groaning figure on the ground.

Yuri jumped from the cab of the vehicle. He grabbed the nearest body and dragged it into cover beneath the sandbags around the gatehouse. He returned and grabbed the next corpse. Armstrong raised the gate and joined the Russian removing the bodies.

Ayana took the wheel of the Land Rover and manoeuvred through the gate, stopping in the shadows. Yuri and Armstrong finished clearing the bodies, then lowered the gate and busied themselves about the guard-post for several minutes. In the vehicle, Ayana shifted uneasily, her eyes sweeping the gloom. Steiner climbed from the rear of the vehicle. He slung his silenced Uzi and circled the Land Rover with his Colt Commando at port arms. Vansen leaned from the tail, chomping loudly on gum, grinning like she was having the best time in the world.

Yuri and Armstrong finally joined them. Steiner climbed inside the cab and Armstrong slung one leg inside the tailgate. As the vehicle pulled away, Yuri swung onto the running board.

They neared the dim glow of the bunker. They moved along its cold concrete flank. Armstrong dropped from the rear and rolled clear. The vehicle slowed.

The Land Rover rolled to a halt by a bunker entrance, a lone sentry on duty. Steiner leant from the cab with a smile on his face and shot the man through the left eye. The sentry's partner patrolling the perimeter saw him crumple. He began to run, unslinging his rifle. He opened his mouth to raise the alarm. Armstrong fired a short burst from his silenced MP5; the guard's head exploded and he went down.

The team were out of the vehicle when Armstrong joined back up. Each was strapping on the equipment unloaded from the rear. The Delta operative tossed the silenced SMG to Yuri and the team finished kitting up.

Ayana popped the bunker door and nodded. She led them inside. Armstrong watched them go, then closed the door behind them and went to work.

* * *

The first patrol arrived at the inner perimeter checkpoint fifteen minutes after the last man went down. Radio communication had been lost, but that wasn't uncommon with the dilapidated soviet-era equipment and a routine sweep had been sent out.

The patrol neared the checkpoint. The man on point spotted a single figure seated in the booth. He waved but received no reply. With a grunt he approached the gate. He called out. Still nothing. He shouldered his weapon and rounded the lowered barrier and swung into the booth.

"Hey!" his brain had but an instant to take in the bloodied figure slumped inside the gatehouse, his vacant, sightless eyes. Then the explosion engulfed him.

He never felt the snap of the tripwire. He was so close to the blast that ballbearings arcing out of the claymore sliced him clean in half. The steel shrapnel continued out in a widening arc, cutting through the patrol. Only two escaped, the rest lay dead and dying.

Groans and screams filled the night as the blast died away. One of the survivors bolted. He hit a second tripwire and was torn apart by a second claymore anti-personnel mine. The remaining SRG man remained frozen.

From his position beneath the Land Rover 250 metres away, Armstrong took careful aim. The head of the Iraqi was huge in his 10x scope. He squeezed the trigger. He absorbed the recoil as the PSG 1 kicked, the shot muffled by the attached noise suppresser. The single round entered the base of the man's skull, severing his brain stem. He crumpled.

Armstrong settled back and waited.

* * *

Yuri led the team through the winding passageways, Ayana at his elbow giving directions. He swept their path with his silenced MP5. Ayana carried a silenced automatic pistol. Steiner followed with his silenced Uzi; Vansen covered their rear with a similar weapon.

"How much further?" Yuri hissed.

"A way yet," Ayana touched his arm.

They kept moving. They heard a distant rumble.

"Sounds like Armstrong's got company," Vansen muttered. Steiner barely grunted. He was relying on the D-boy to run interference for as long as possible.

"Hold it!" Ayana hissed. Yuri signalled for the team to halt. They hunkered down.

"Radio room," she jerked her thumb towards the nearest doorway. Now they were still they could here the low hiss of static. She nodded towards the door at the far end of the passage, "Barracks."

The door of the radio room was ajar. Yuri rose and craned his neck. Inside he could make out two men manning the equipment, headphones clamped over their ears. He jerked his head and the others streamed past. Vansen dropped to one knee by the barracks door. She yanked a claymore from her pack, fixed it to one side of the doorframe and drew the tripwire across the entrance and fixed it to the other side. She flicked the switch and nodded to Yuri and followed the others around the corner.

Yuri checked the fire-selector on his MP5 and eased the door of the radio room open with the toe of his boot. He took one step inside and fired from the shoulder. He put two rounds into the back of the nearest man, pivoted and put two more into the second man who hadn't even turned. Yuri moved past the dead men, took the package from bag and attached it to the radio transmitter and activated the charge.

Yuri exited the room, closing the door softly after him.

* * *

When they returned they came in force. Armstrong heard the rumble of diesel engines before the two APCs came into view. The troops followed on foot in their wake; helmeted heads hunkered down into their shoulders.

Armstrong drew careful aim on the commander of the lead APC, his head bobbing nervously in the turret hatch. The silenced 7.65mm full metal jacket round exploded silently from the PSG 1. It hit the Iraqi just below his helmet, transfixing his head temple to temple, hot blood washing over the turret as he slumped inside the APC. Armstrong pivoted, but the second commander had seen his comrades demise and had firmly bolted his hatch. Armstrong couldn't give a shit though. He began to pick off the searchlights illuminating the checkpoint one by one.

The vehicles were almost on top of the gatehouse by the time the Delta sniper had taken out all the lights. The two vehicles opened up with cannons and machine guns, hosing

down the checkpoint. Tracer rounds arced through the darkness, ammunition inside the gate bunker cooked off. Armstrong watched the two vehicles pull up on top of the gate. The accompanying troops, emboldened by the darkness emerged from behind the vehicles.

Armstrong hit the trigger twice. The checkpoint, gatehouse and two APCs dissolved in a ball of white flame. The scene burned with the intensity of daylight, as the boiling flames leapt skyward. The shockwave rocked the vehicle above the Delta operative as he felt the heat roll over him.

As the noise of the blast dissipated, Armstrong became aware of the wail of a siren. The base alert had finally kicked in. Now things would get lively. He grabbed an electronic transmitter and activated it. Two simultaneous blasts sounded distantly. The siren stuttered and died, along with the remaining searchlights in the area.

In the eerie darkness and still, Armstrong drew the HK33E automatic rifle near. He settled the weapon on its bipod and drew the stock into his shoulder and settled his cheek against the cool plastic furniture in a perfect spotweld. Through the undersea-green glow of the NVG scope he could make out figures stirring among the carnage. The crack of his first shot startled even him. The figure folded. He moved on mopping up any survivors. When all was still around the shattered checkpoint he began seeking targets of opportunity. The guards manning the towers were first, then the reinforcements gathering in redoubts. Anyone venturing in close, entering his field of fire was immediately targeted. Life expectancy in the established kill zone was short.

*

*

*

When the siren started it was all around them. The shrieking leapt off the concrete walls and reverberated about the subterranean crypt. The team kept moving. Behind came the blast of the claymore mine tripped outside the barracks.

The first Iraqi they spotted was a bewildered guard clumsily unslinging his AK. Yuri put a three-round burst into his face before he even saw them. They leapt over his corpse as it still twitched. A door opened on their right, two heads peeked sheepishly out. Steiner cut them down with his silenced Uzi, the two clipboard carrying clerks flopping into the hall.

“How far?” Steiner shouted, as the siren suddenly died, his raised voice echoing through the tunnels. Ayana twisted her head to answer as they rounded the corner.

“Fuck!” Steiner realised their luck had just run out. Strung out across their path was a heavily armed squad of Iraqi, tucked behind a makeshift barricade. Yuri spotted them in time and knocked Ayana to the ground and opened up with his silenced MP5. His subsonic 9mm rounds pinged harmlessly off the barrier. Then the Iraqis returned fire.

Red-hot rounds ripped through the air around them, ricocheting off the walls, shattered concrete and flattened rounds spinning about the exposed team. The sound of gunfire amplified within the space was overwhelming, almost painful in its intensity.

“Back, back!” Steiner and Vansen let their Uzis fall back by their sides and switched to their automatic rifles. With heavy suppressing fire, the team began to fall back.

Yuri tossed his SMG to Ayana and opened up with his SIG assault rifle, squeezing off short bursts as he scabbled backwards, the Israeli moving with him, firing the MP5.

Amazingly no one seemed to have received a direct hit. In amongst the buzz of rounds, only ricochets and shattered masonry had inflicted any wounds. All five were bloodied and torn as they fell back.

The Iraqis never let up. They kept pouring in fire from their AKs, and then someone opened up with a RPD light machine gun. The invaders were on the losing end of one-way contest. Ayana called out as she went down, her left shoulder blown open by a 7.62mm round. She bit down on the pain as Yuri grabbed her by the collar and dragged her after him.

Vansen raised her M4 carbine and fired from the shoulder. The M203 grenade launcher slung beneath the rifle kicked and the spinning 40mm round speared through the

space between the two forces, vapour marking its trail. There was silence for an instant as all eyes watched its arc.

It hit with a disappointing thud. Then the detonation ripped through the barricade. The incendiary grenade spilled out its blazing yield, incinerating all those around the point of impact. Others scattered as their own ammo cooked off.

The team backed off, firing into the Iraqis as they broke in disarray. Steiner and Vansen covered the other two as they fell back. Kneeling, both squeezed off carefully aimed bursts, ignoring the return fire still thick around them. They methodically cut apart the surviving defenders. With Yuri and Ayana safely in cover behind the corner, Steiner signalled Vansen, and she too fell back. Steiner was the last. He crab-walked backwards, still firing at anything that moved.

* * *

Armstrong was being pinned further back as the attackers closed in. They had the drop on him and were pounding his position. Beneath the truck he picked off targets, dropping infantry and triggering booby-traps. But by now he had blown all the charges. He had held back the armour as long as possible, but time had run out.

The Iraqis seemed to sense the change. Emboldened, the APCs and even tanks rolled in tighter. Armstrong kept their heads down, chopping down anyone exposed. They had his position roughly zeroed; it was only a matter of time before they had him.

Machine gun and cannon fire riddled the truck above him, pocked the earth in the open and tore into the bunker walls. The nearest tank manoeuvred, rotating its turret with menacing intent.

Armstrong pulled the Carl Gustav close and sighted down its barrel. He zeroed on the target and fired. The exhaust blast illuminated his position, white flame leaping backwards under the truck. The missile tore low across the ground at 310 metres a second and slammed

into the tank just below the turret. The vehicle shuddered and jumped up onto one track before crashing back down. It stood as if stunned for a moment, wreathed in smoke, then the HE/anti-armour round detonated inside its armoured hull. The initial blast shook the tank, flame bursting from every exit, the armoured shell seeming to buckle. Then the tank ammo cooked off and the secondary explosion blew the vehicle apart, showering the area with red-hot shrapnel. Screams echoed out in the wake of the blast.

Armstrong rolled clear of the sheltering truck and moved fast at a crouch. Behind him an APC ripped apart the vehicle with cannon fire, then a second tank blew it to pieces. A cry echoed out, then more as the SRG troops spotted the American on the move. Gunfire echoed as poorly aimed rounds kicking up dirt in his wake. As more weapons joined in, their aim seemed to improve, 7.62mm full metal jacket rounds nibbling at his heels.

Armstrong fired on the move. He traversed the interior fence, running parallel to the bunker. He cut down the figures shadowing him, picking them off as they appeared from the gloom. But more and more appeared to take their place. An army appeared out of the gloom. Red-hot rounds zinged about Armstrong as he zigzagged.

The APC swung around the burning hulk of the truck, the tank following. The lead vehicle opened up with machine gun and cannon, sweeping their fields of fire wildly.

Armstrong dropped to one knee, shouldered his HK automatic rifle and opened up on automatic, firing well-aimed short bursts. He chopped down the infantry hovering behind the wire, driving them back. Ignoring the APCs fire, he aimed at the oncoming vehicle as it cleared the truck. He put a single round through the head of the APC commander who recklessly exposed himself at the last minute. Then Armstrong lowered his weapon.

Inside the APC and tank, the Iraqis looked on in disbelief, unable to comprehend the man's suicidal gesture. For a second they relented in their attack.

Armstrong grinned, his teeth shining out of his blackened face. He raised the box in his hand, like a plaintive offering. With his free hand he knocked off the safety and hit the trigger twice. The last of his charges, piled heavily around his former position beneath the

truck detonated as one. The thunderclap ripped across the earth, even Armstrong tumbling sideways to the ground. Flame leapt high into the night sky, bathing the base in a hellish-glare as the blast ripped through the air. The tank leapt sideways, its nearest track shattered and unravelling as it flailed in its death throes, the crew probably killed by the concussion. The APC was peeled open from behind, shelled like a nut, the surviving personnel inside incinerated and blown apart.

Armstrong struggled upright, still grinning. He wiped the blood away from his nose. More fell from his ears, the concussion causing internal bleeding.

Some survivors beyond the wire crept in close, like curious children, transfixed by the carnage. They never even saw Armstrong. He cut them down with one long arcing burst, maybe twelve-thirteen men in all.

Then he was gone. He peeled open the bombproof bunker door and slipped inside, the bolts sounding with a cold snap behind him.

* * *

Gunfire was all around them, buzzing as rounds snapped by. The air was thick with cordite and dust. Gunfire came from every doorway. They kept moving.

Steiner's left cheek was laid open to the bone by a near miss. Blood streamed down his neck and stained his black shirt. Yuri had lost the tip of the ring finger on his left hand when a round slammed into his rifle. He fought on without sparing the wound a second glance. Ayana's shoulder was strapped up, her face bloodless and gaunt. She kept firing the Uzi one-handed all the same. Only Vansen had escaped any serious injury, just a few scratches and bruises. Otherwise she seemed to be having a whale of a time.

The team edged slowly through the maze of tunnels, fighting for every inch. Apart from a couple of makeshift barricades, resistance was mainly piecemeal and disorganised. Confusion reigned and the attackers slipped in with it.

Steiner in the few seconds he had given way to thought he had realised they were too far in to pull out now. They were committed. There was no going back. If they didn't find the target they would die wandering aimlessly amongst the withering crossfire.

"How much further?" he shouted.

"Not far, I think," she replied through gritted teeth. She could hear bone grinding against bone inside her shattered shoulder.

"Great!" Vansen sniped as she reloaded her weapon.

Yuri glanced back, just for an instant.

A single Iraqi lunged from the nearest doorway. He swung in front of the Russian, bringing around his AKSU and squeezing the trigger.

"Yuri!" Ayana called out.

The Russian snapped round in time for his eyes to meet those of the SRG man. Then the Iraqi fired. There was a dry snap as the weapon misfired. The man froze. Yuri brought up his SIG rifle and pulled back the trigger. The pin hit an empty chamber. Yuri didn't have to look down to know. Out of ammo.

The two men, the Iraqi and the Russian remained still, eyes locked for a split second that stretched an eternity. Then Yuri smiled. The SRG man dropped his rifle and groped for his sidearm. He scrabbled frantically at the holster flap. Yuri calmly took a step back and swung his rifle around and up. The solid plastic butt slammed into the jaw of the Iraqi, knocking back into the wall.

"Yuri," Steiner called once and the Russian stepped aside. Steiner put a long burst into the Iraqi's midsection, opening him up like an over-filled sack. The wall kept him upright and Vansen then Ayana joined in, their fire ripped the man apart, until his ragged remains slithered down the pocked, gory wall.

Yuri dropped to one knee, popped the clip from his rifle, flipped it and inserted the second magazine clipped to its side. He rose, yanking back the charging handle. Another Iraqi

tore round the corner, his mouth gaping in a silent scream, a Makarov automatic in his outstretched right hand. He got off two, maybe three rounds before Yuri cut him down.

The Russian led, taking the corner. The others closed up. He raised his fist and the team halted, settling low on their haunches. Steiner scooted up to his point man.

“Well?”

Yuri pointed ahead down the long, brightly-lit corridor. At its end the lights were gone, but you could still make out two huge steel, bombproof doors.

“Ayana!” the Israeli moved up to join Steiner. He nodded towards the doors.

“That’s it,” her haggard face brightened as she grinned. “That’s the entrance.”

Steiner just nodded and signalled for the team to move. He and Yuri rose, then the world erupted. A huge crescendo of automatic gunfire lit up the darkened doorways. The muzzle flashes lit up the defenders tucked in behind concrete emplacements and sandbags. These men laid down a brutally effective field of fire, turning the passageway into a shooting alley.

“Back, back!” Steiner and Yuri fell back, providing covering fire as they backed off. They barely made it back to cover with the others. Yuri’s thigh was laid open, blood filling his boots, Steiner’s neck was pocked by lead fragments. The two men collapsed in a heap, reloading their overheated weapons.

“We’re in trouble,” Steiner gasped as he sat up, rubbing away the sting of his neck wounds.

“No shit, slick?” Vansen grinned. “Those boys are burrowed in deeper than an Alabama tick!”

*

*

*

There was a single dull thud against the steel door. Armstrong crouched in the gloom of the passageway. A series of further blows followed on the exterior of the entrance door. The bullet impacts echoed down the lifeless corridors. Then there was peace.

Armstrong shifted uncomfortably, eyes squinting in the poor light afforded by the emergency overhead lighting. When the screech of metal against metal eventually came, he slipped back around the corner for cover.

The door blew as it opened, the blast ripping down the passage, shattered masonry swirling, the buckled steel door carried in its wake like a leaf in the wind. The initial blast killed most of the entry team; the ballbearings arcing out from the source took out the rest of the survivors.

Armstrong swung into the open. The Beretta M3 automatic shotgun tucked into his shoulder covered the ragged hole of the doorway. There was movement in the mist of dust and debris. He fired twice, his targets going down in an explosion of buckshot and blood. Weapon still shouldered; Armstrong edged across the passage. More movement. He fired twice more, the boom of the double blast sounding as one. This time there was answering fire. Armstrong fell back, putting two more rounds into the doorway.

Swinging back into cover, Armstrong popped the clip in the M3 and reloaded. He rolled a smoke grenade around the corner, paused, then followed it.

They were coming through the doorway, the swirling dust clouding their eyes. They stumbled over each other. Armstrong emerged from the smoke and opened up, cutting them apart.

*

*

*

Gunfire thundered down the passage. The team hunkered in the shelter of the corner. Each looked bleakly at the other. Yuri intermittently jammed his rifle round the corner to loose off a volley.

“Will you quit that shit!” Vansen snarled at the Russian. He looked back at he, blinking in puzzlement. “It’s not likely you’re gonna hit anything. You’re just getting on my nerves.”

“Might get lucky,” he shrugged. “Keeps their heads down in the meantime.”

“Yeah, those boys must be shitting themselves right now.”

Steiner sat apart, ignoring this bullshit. He was aware off movement in their rear, closing fast. He reloaded all his weapons, chambering rounds and snapping off safeties. He ripped two grenades from his webbing and rolled to his feet.

“We stay here, we die.” Steiner checked his rifle one last time. His fingers idly caressed the smooth metal of the grenades.

The other stared at him open-mouthed. “We go out there we die!” Vansen shook her head scornfully.

“Maybe, but I prefer not to sit around waiting for the bullet.”

“So what’s the big plan, slick?”

Steiner just grinned and cocked his head.

Vansen groaned, “Oh shit!”

* * *

Armstrong dropped more smoke and fell back. They were pouring in more firepower now. He dumped the shotgun, moving to the M249 SAW and laying down a withering fire. But it only held them back for so long.

Backing off, he kept pouring it on, flame leaping a foot from the end of the muzzle of his weapon. He emptied a 200 round magazine in less than a minute. He tossed two frags, ducking round the corner for cover. The double thump of the grenades sounded flatly in the confines of the tunnels. Armstrong reloaded, jammed the SAW round the corner and loosed a wild volley. Choking and screaming echoed beneath the gunfire.

Armstrong dropped to a knee, set a Claymore and fell further back. At the next turn in the passage, he laid his last anti-personnel mine, fixing the tripwire and snapping the activation switch. He rose to his feet, adjusting his weapon; eyes fixed on the swirling gloom ahead of him. He began to slowly back off. The sudden silence was eerie.

Armstrong never saw the Iraqi officer, never heard him, just suddenly felt the kiss of cold metal behind his right ear. He froze. His instincts screamed at him to move, but he knew it was too late. Suddenly he felt very tired.

The Delta soldier allowed his weapon to waver. He grinned and drawled “Shit!”

He never heard the shot, never felt any pain. His world dissolved in a wash of red.

* * *

Two smoke grenades bounced around the corner. The barrage of gunfire from the Iraqis barely wavered. The smoke rolled and billowed, choking off any visibility.

Steiner rolled around the corner; Colt Commando tucked into his shoulder. He began squeezing off bursts through the smoke, edging slowly forward. The Iraqis fired blindly back, the rounds plucking at Steiner’s clothes, gashing his flesh. Two slammed into his Kevlar vest, he reeled but stayed on his feet. Bullets filled the air like angry hornets; shattered masonry stung his skin.

Steiner popped his magazine and reloaded, then slowly began to emerge from the smoke. The Iraqis drew down on him. Vansen emerged from Steiner’s shadow, crouched low. Before she was even spotted, she fired the M203 grenade launcher slung beneath her rifle. The 40mm round spun low in a flat trajectory, fine vapour marking its trail. Vansen followed up with a series of bursts from her M4, rolling aside to the wall to reload the M203.

The HE round hit low, detonating with boom that echoed off the walls. Flame and shattered masonry erupted in the confined passageway. Screams echoed beneath the explosion, many of the Iraqis ripped apart by the blast. As the swirling dust cleared, it was

clear the concrete and sandbag emplacement had suffered serious damage. The bloodied survivors darted about the ruins, firing ill-aimed volleys.

Steiner was picking off targets when Vansen fired a second round from her M203. Her flechette round exploded amidst the defenders, razor sharp metal blasted out in a tight radius, eviscerating and dismembering anyone out in the open.

Yuri came through on Steiner and Vansen's tail, firing his SIG from his shoulder. All three were then amid the Iraqis, killing anything that moved. As the staccato fire died out, only the snap of isolated shots could be heard as Steiner picked off the survivors.

* * *

The C2 breaching charge ripped the door open. Shredded steel fluttered on the air like burning ash. Vansen and Steiner swept in, weapons up. They moved quickly, Yuri and Ayana following in their wake.

They were suddenly in a different world. Gone were the austere, cold concrete tunnels and spartan offices. All around was fine wood panelling, coloured drapes and thick carpet. A warm light suffused the rooms they moved through, illuminating the expensive furniture.

Room by room, the team swept through. All were largely uninhabited, only a single clerk and lightly armed soldier crossed their path. Both tried to flee but were quickly dispatched.

Ayana again took point and began leading Yuri and the rest forward. It was warm and close inside these palatial quarters; Steiner wiped sweat from his eyes and signalled Vansen to take the rear.

Suddenly the lights died. Darkness flickered for a second, then emergency lighting kicked in, its pale red glow altering their surrounding. A dull electronic hum sounded distantly. Steiner cocked his head.

“They’re coming.”

Chapter 24

They came out of the darkness. The flickering gloom of the emergency lighting bathed the maze of rooms in a blood-red glow. The tattoo of approaching footsteps was soon followed by the flicker of laser sights and barrel-mounted flashlights.

They moved sleekly, moving in teams, each covering the other. They had been well trained, but their professionalism was only a cracked veneer. Beneath they were as undisciplined as any other Arab hothead.

Before the black fatigue wearing guards had even sighted their targets, they opened up. Instead of ageing Soviet weaponry, they carried German HK and Swiss SIG automatic rifles and SMGs. Flame was clearly visible leaping from the muzzles of their weapons as they weaved through the rooms. Their bursts were ill aimed and undisciplined. As their excited emotions spiked, they were emptying clips in only two, three bursts. Amongst the flickering lights and muzzle bursts, you could hear the rattle of fumbled reloads.

Steiner had drawn his team into a tight perimeter and they waited. They were heavily outnumbered. He wanted to draw them in and negate their numerical advantage.

Better heads seemed to prevail as the Arabs drew in close. They slowed; the gunfire became more staccato. Steiner reached out, touching Yuri's sleeve.

The Russian opened up with his MP5 SD. He fired well-aimed, short bursts. The noise and flash suppresser hid his position. The Iraqi guards started to crumble. Yuri took those on the fringes first, picking them off one at a time so as not to alert the main body of the force. Steiner watched the numbers dwindle. He noticed one man near the point. He seemed to draw up, cocking his head. He didn't see anything, but Steiner knew they'd been made. The man raised his hand to signal his men.

Steiner rocked up onto one knee, Commando already at his shoulder. He let off a long burst, spent 5.56mm cases spiralling from the breach of the weapon. The flame leapt almost a foot from the muzzle. His first rounds cut down the team leader, and then he widened his arc

of fire, scything through the exposed troops. The rip-tear of his weapon's blast shockingly loud.

On the flanks, Vansen opened up with her M4, the rifle laying down a withering base of fire. On the left, Ayana fired an Uzi. The Iraqis scattered in disarray. Leaderless and exposed, their meagre discipline broke down. Their returning fire was erratic and they fell apart as they tried to withdraw. More than half the force was dead before they knew what was happening, the survivors, those that lived long enough to shake off their shock, broke and ran. Many fired their weapons over their shoulders as they fled, some hitting and killing their own comrades. The team targeted the barrel-mounted lights and laser sights of the broken Iraqis, chopping down the handful of survivors. The muzzle flashes of the fleeing men was like a beacon, if they returned fire, they were chopped down in short order.

The last man standing fell before he escaped the room. Steiner put a short burst into his back as he reached the doorway, and almost safety. The team squatted in silence for a minute. Groans and choked off death rattles came out of the gloom. Steiner signalled for Vansen and Ayana to give cover. He slung his rifle, unholstered his Walther automatic and led Yuri out. Both men dispatched the survivors. It didn't take long.

Yuri joined Steiner beside the body of the Iraqis leader.

"SSO," Steiner kicked the corpse, indicating the insignia on the dead man's uniform. The Special Security Organisation were tasked with protecting the Iraqi leader and his weapon sites. The elite unit was commanded by the Rais's favoured son, Qusay. Vansen and Ayana joined them.

"Better than that," the Israeli said to Steiner. "They are Special Location Group. They are responsible for the Rais's safety in places he and his family use."

"Good," Steiner unslung his rifle and yanked back the charging handle. "That means he's close."

* * *

The Iraqis had foolishly thrown the bulk of their men into this last desperate stand. The remaining defence was fragmented and weak. The occasional pockets of resistance were easily neutralised. Usually a single grenade or burst of automatic burst was all that was needed.

The offices gave way to even more sumptuously furnished living quarters. The rooms were smaller and mostly abandoned. A hush had descended. Providing cover from the passage, Steiner and Vansen took it in turn to storm and sweep the rooms. So far all they had found was a SRG general cowering behind a sofa. Steiner had cut short Vansen's fun, putting a bullet in his head.

Vansen was pouting. Steiner directed her to take the last room at the head of the passage. She braced herself inside the double doorway. Steiner covered her. Ayana and Yuri covered their rear.

Vansen tentatively tried the handle. Nothing, it was locked. She stepped back, fixed a C2 charge on the lock mechanism. She signalled the others. They lowered their heads. Vansen hit the trigger. The warmth of the blasts washed over them, shattered wood dusting their clothing.

Vansen swung into the room, bringing her M4 carbine up as she moved. Steiner moved to follow her in. From inside he heard her screaming, "Freeze. Freeze, you fucking asshole!"

As Steiner entered the palatial room with its vaulted ceiling and mirrored walls, he was aware of a woman cowering in one corner. She seemed to be trying to shield the large group of children clustered around her. All were wearing traditional dress fashioned from the finest cloth. But it wasn't them Vansen was shouting at.

A single hunched figure was powering his wheelchair, somewhat ineffectively across the glistening marble floor. Between Vansen's shouts all that could be heard were the squeak of the chair's tyres on the stone floor and the puffing of the man trying to flee.

Uncharacteristically, Vansen fired a warning burst very close to the man's head. He froze, then wheeled his chair.

The man was thickset, was probably born that way. But since becoming confined to the chair, he had softened and bloated. His belly ballooned, filling his lap like an evil tumour, overhanging his atrophied dead legs. His black, curly hair was greying, but the grey hadn't yet reached his thick moustache. His black eyes burned feverishly from his swollen, pasty face.

"Shit, is that..." Vansen allowed her weapon the waver. The man snatched at the holster strapped to his chair, fumbling with the flap as he tried to grab the weapon. "Fuck!" Vansen brought her rifle back up, her finger tightening on the trigger.

Steiner stepped into her, knocking the barrel of her weapon sideways, the M4 discharging harmlessly. Vansen's head snapped round and she glared at Steiner, "What the fuck did you do that for?"

Steiner ignored her. He let his rifle fall back by his side, reaching down and unholstering his pistol. He strode calmly towards the wheelchair-bound man. The Iraqi freed the pistol from his holster and brought the weapon up. Steiner noticed the Colt .45 was nickel-plated and fitted with pearl handles like a pimp's. Steiner slowly brought up his own weapon and closed to within feet of the man. The Iraqi fired once, twice, the twin booms of the .45 reverberating within the cavernous chamber. Both shots went wide. Steiner noticed spittle flecking the corner of the man's lips. Sweat covered his face, his wild eyes now just scared.

Steiner fired once when he was within three feet of the man. His 9mm round punched through the Iraqi's shoulder, blood spraying the man's cheek. The .45 fell uselessly from his dead hand. He cried out, clutching his good hand to the gaping wound to staunch the flow of blood. Steiner reached him and placed the muzzle against the man's forehead. When the Iraqi felt the kiss of cold steel he fell silent, freezing in his seat. His eyes slowly travelled up along the barrel of the weapon, until his gaze reached Steiner's face. The American didn't say a word. His face remained expressionless.

"Is this..." Vansen joined him. She looked down at the man in the chair.

“No,” Steiner spoke, his eyes never leaving the man, the pistol held to his head unwavering.

“It is Uday,” Ayana spoke as she and Yuri approached from behind. “The Rais’s eldest son.”

“Cool,” Vansen laughed gleefully. She reached out and pinched the man’s cheek. He seemed oblivious, his eyes never leaving Steiner’s. “What’s with the chair,”

“Got ambushed out in his car one night in ‘96. Gunmen shot him up at an intersection. Going to see one of his mistresses.”

“Who done it?” Vansen’s gaze was transfixed by the man. She prodded and examined him like a strange novelty.

“That’s the thing. No one knows. The Rais blamed the west. Rounded up and shot some of the usual suspects. Who knows, old Uday’s pissed off plenty of people in his time. Cuckolded husbands. Relatives of those he’s killed. Even his father.”

“His brother.” Steiner said coldly.

“Yes, his half-brother, Qusay. Uday was the first born, the natural heir. But he’s a hothead, he’s too dangerous even for his dad.” Ayana continued. “Also the Rais fell out with his mother, divorced and remarried. The son from that marriage, Qusay, is the golden boy. As ruthless and vicious as his father, but smart, charming and very cool. Uday got a little jealous, started plotting against his younger half-brother. But Qusay was always smarter and faster. He struck pre-emptively.”

“How’d Dad feel about this?” Vansen asked.

“Turned a blind eye. But had the two brothers reconcile in public. The Rais and Uday had also been alienated for years after the son nearly triggered a civil war by killing a senior ally of his father’s in a row. Father and son were reconciled now after this tragic incident. Made him leader of his own military unit, the Fidayeen, 10,000 volunteers. So it was all happy families again.”

“He paralysed?” Vansen drew closer to Uday.

“Paraplegic, mid-chest. Got limited use of his arms.”

“No more mistresses for Mr lover-man then?” Vansen shoved Steiner aside and flipped the wheelchair over. Uday hit the marble floor with a slap. For a second he thrashed wildly. All the activity came from the chest upward, his lower body oddly inert. He was helpless like an up-turned beetle. Vansen laughed and shoved him with her boot. The Iraqi scratched at the floor, trying to escape, turning his head away. Steiner noticed tears covering his cheeks.

“Let’s finish this shit and move on!” Yuri elbowed between Vansen and Steiner, a look of disgust on his face.

“Fuck off!” Vansen screeched as he sent her staggering.

The snap of the pistol shot sounded oddly ineffectual. Yuri stumbled. His neck burst open, the small calibre round exiting and leaving an ugly wound. He coughed once, blood bursting from his mouth. He seemed to be trying to speak as he fell, hitting the floor silently.

Steiner and Vansen wheeled around, both opening up with their automatic rifles. The woman surrounded by her children got off one more shot, but it went wild. Both the American’s ripped her apart with their concentrated fire. Their 5.56mm *slap* rounds, plastic coated titanium bullets could penetrate armour. They sliced through the woman. She barely seemed to notice most of the impacts, the through and through was that clean. Only when they struck bone or vital organs did she buckle. Vansen and Steiner emptied both their weapons, 60 *slap* rounds. Both reloaded, but it was over. The woman lay like a heap of tattered rags. Her children lay scattered around her like leaves round a fallen tree. All were still.

Steiner slowly turned. The corpulent figure of Uday was slithering across the floor, a bloody path in his wake as he neared the doors. Steiner allowed his rifle to fall back on its sling. He covered the room in five strides. He unholstered his pistol, positioned himself above the Iraqi and put two rounds into the back of his head.

When Steiner rejoined Vansen and Ayana, they were standing over Yuri. They had rolled him onto his back. His eyes gazed sightless on the beyond. Steiner thought he could make out a slight smile on his bloodless lips.

“He’s dead.” Steiner said quietly. The others didn’t look at him. “It’s time for us to go.”

* * *

Rokan ‘Abd al-Ghafur emerged from the swirling smoke, cordite burning his eyes. As the Rais’s chief bodyguard and head of the presidential security detachment, he was directly supervising the last line of defence.

His large, terrifying form moved among the lines of troops, all Special Location Group, the elite unit within the SSO charged with the leader’s life. All were hardened killers, highly trained and ruthlessly honed, but all were terrified of Rokan. He was a legend. He had risen from street enforcer within the President’s al-Majid clan. The tribal group was little more than a highly evolved criminal gang, involved in generations of blood feuds with other clans. Like the Rais, Rokan had risen quickly, elevated by his ruthlessness and savagery. Torture and violent death were his signature. Eventually he became one of the leader’s personal guards, and with time he not only assumed the mantle of chief bodyguard, but also became one of the President’s closest confidants. Indeed, there were only four men in Iraq the leader truly trusted: beside Rokan they were Qusay, the Rais’s own son and chosen successor; Ali Hassan al-Majid, a top General and the President’s chief trouble-shooter; and finally Abid Hamid Mahmoud, presidential secretary and gatekeeper to the leader himself. No one got close to the President without going through Abid, even the Rais’s own sons. He was the eminence grise, the second most powerful man in Iraq.

Gunfire sounded nearby. The snap of multiple reports echoed through the confined chambers. Even the grim-faced defenders exchanged nervous glances. Rokan muttered a dark oath, driving them back into line.

“They are getting close, we must go,” Rokan glared back over his shoulder at the sound of the voice. His flat, black eyes burned with unsurpassed rage. The strained voice added as if as an afterthought, “We have to get the President to safety.”

“The President is safest here.” Rokan growled.

The speaker floated from the shadows. Shoulders slouched, hands buried in his pockets, the man affected an air of bored indifference. A smile played on his bloodless lips, his dark eyes glittered. Middle-aged, but ageless in his malevolence, Abid Hamid Mahmoud gazed at Rokan with undisguised derision.

Rokan shifted uneasily. No man would speak to him in such away and live. Merely such an insolent look would unleash a torrent of murderousness. But he could not touch Abid, and they both knew it. But how he dreamt of just an hour alone with the loathsome reptile. First he would take his eyes, then his fingers and toes, and after his manhood...

Abid interrupted his chain of thought, “You said the President was safe here an hour ago, that the attackers would be stopped before they got close. But you were wrong.” He paused to allow the rattle of approaching gunfire to illustrate his point.

“They will not break through our lines.” Rokan could barely talk. Hatred and rage choked him; his own impotence clogged his throat.

“Forgive me if your words do not inspire great confidence,” Abid was mocking him now. There was a line, and if crossed Rokan would act whatever the consequences. “We must relocate to the emergency evacuation point. We cannot allow the President to become trapped.”

“We are safest holding our position here. We hold the strongest ground.” Rokan ignored the other man’s snort of derision. “We do not know what will be waiting for us outside that escape hatch.”

“Nonsense. That exit is known only to a handful. They could not be waiting.”

“They know enough to have got this far, who knows what else they know.” Rokan was enjoying holding the upper hand, if only for a moment. He was proud of his physical strength and menace, but he knew Abid was smarter than he was and that was often the greater power.

They had reached a standoff. Both stood eyeing the other with venomous hatred.

“You both make valid points,” another man approached out of the darkness. Younger than the other two, he managed to combine the ruthless intelligence and physical menace of both. Slim and handsome, he moved with precision and spoke with clarity.

“This is our strongest position, but we cannot allow the President to be trapped here. But what is waiting for us out there,” he waved his hand vaguely.

“Qusay...” Abid interrupted. The President’s son shot him a glance that silenced him.

“Abid Hamid Mahmoud will accompany me. I will take some men and secure the escape route and make sure it is safe. I will then return for my father. In the meantime, Rokan ‘Abd al-Majid will remain with the President and supervise his protection.”

The presidential bodyguard couldn’t contain his satisfaction. A grin spread across his scarred face. A furious Abid looked prepared to argue his point, but saw the pointlessness of his position.

“But surely I should remain also with the President. It is my place?” Abid tried to hide the fear in his voice.

Qusay cocked his head and smiled, “But surely you wanted to ensure the safety of my father’s evacuation. It was your suggestion, after all?”

Abid surrendered and followed the younger man. Qusay signalled for his personal security detachment to join him. The heavily armed men surrounded their charge and they moved off.

As the group moved away through the darkness, Qusay spared only the briefest of glances for the lone figure hunched alone in the gloom. The President of Iraq didn't look up to acknowledge his son. Qusay did not say goodbye to his father.

* * *

Out of the swirling gloom, they saw them moving. They weaved in and out of cover. They appeared to be dressed in dark fatigues; respirators covered their faces. The CS gas they had laid down was already dissipating. It had been ineffective, as has the fragmentation and incendiary grenades pitched at the defenders. The Iraqis were already stripping off their own respirators.

Rokan watched them come. They were trying to draw fire. But he had maintained fire control. His two machine-gunners were laying down cover with short bursts. A handful of his most trusted men had been authorised to engage with targeted single shots. The rest of Rokan's men had been ordered to hold fire. He was holding back their massive firepower until the attackers were in close.

Rokan had instilled steel in the discipline of his shaken men. The first man to break rank and fire without authorisation had received a bullet in the back of the head from the commander. Rokan continued to move amongst them, automatic pistol in hand. The men feared him more than the attackers.

The dark figures continued to move. Rokan estimated two men on the move, but he could be wrong. The air was thick with swirling cordite and smoke from the grenades put out by the attackers. They had a single base of fire covering them. A lone machine gun was operating from a makeshift emplacement at the head of the passage. Tucked in the lee of the corridor, the attackers had built a barricade from the bodies of the scattered dead Iraqis. Rokan ordered his machine gunners to rip into the position. Heavy 7.62mm rounds ripped the bodies to shreds, but after a brief respite the attackers light machine gun would open back up.

But Rokan was unconcerned; he had them effectively pinned down.

* * *

Qusay, surrounded by his cadre of bodyguards, moved swiftly through the darkened passageways. The rattle of gunfire faded in the distance. The man on point was barely visible in the gloom. Abid floundered in the wake of the armed men, gasping for air.

The point man halted and signalled the group. They waited, then the man signalled the all clear. Qusay broke away from his guards. He unholstered his sidearm as he led the men in.

They reached the end of the passage. A lone soldier stood guard in front of the elevator doors. Beside the sliding metal gate was an open doorway, inside metal ladder heading upwards.

Qusay signalled two men to enter the lift. They slid shut the gate, hit the button and began the ascent. Another man was sent alone up the ladder.

Then Qusay waited. From the corner of his eye he watched Abid shifting uncomfortably, his face clammy and flushed.

“Abid Hamid Mahmoud, you look unwell. Do you need any help?” Qusay smiled. “A drink, maybe?” He signalled one of his men. The man removed his canteen from his belt and offered it to Abid. The older man waved it away angrily and glared at Qusay.

“Not long now, Abid Hamid Mahmoud, then we will be safe.” Qusay continued to smile. “Not long now.”

* * *

They had put out more smoke and the passage had been shaken by several invisible blasts, but Rokan was unconcerned. He watched carefully for movement in the smoke, but there was

none. He had this bottle firmly plugged, and by now the attackers no doubt knew this. Even his men were beginning to look happier. Rokan allowed himself a smile.

The defenders let out some lazy probing fire, but otherwise settled back.

In the lull, Rokan and his men at first missed the device. Hidden by the swirling smoke, it was shoved out of cover around the bend at the far end of the passage, sliding several feet towards the defenders' position. One Iraqi spotted it and called out pointing, when the explosion came.

The shaped Thermite charge detonated with a suffocating blast. Waves of liquid fire tumbled down the passage, sucking up all the available oxygen. The heaving flames washed over the front Iraqi positions, the soldiers cowering beneath the intense heat. Then the sea of fire began to slowly recede.

Vansen fired the LAW from behind the fire, the rocket lancing through the flames, slamming into the Iraqis, the blast vaporising the forward defences.

Steiner emerged from the flames as they ate back on themselves. His figure shimmered in the intense heat. His Nomex and Kevlar overalls saved him from the worst of the fire, but they were eating through the layers fast. He ignored the pain, keeping his rifle locked into his shoulder, eye locked on the target.

The stunned and battered Iraqis stared transfixed at this apparition; body sheathed in flame as he relentlessly advanced. Rokan stood, screaming for them to fire. He brought up his own weapon, firing as he moved forwards.

Steiner kept moving steadily forward, flame and smoke trailing from his clothing. He ignored the incoming rounds. He acquired his target and smiled behind his Nomex mask. He squeezed his trigger and fired once.

The single 5.56mm green-tip round punched through the centre of Rokan's face, his nose vaporising and face imploding. The tungsten carbide tipped bullet neatly exited from the back of the man's skull, killing another soldier in his shadow, before embedding itself in the concrete wall.

The horrified SLG men watched their leader buckle and flop to the ground. They glanced from his body to the advancing figure. Unrelenting, the attacker now opened up on full automatic, hosing down the Iraqi positions with his automatic rifle.

The defenders fled. Men burst from cover, many dumping their weapons as they dashed pell-mell, horror clouding their features.

Steiner kept firing as they ran. He cut down swathe after swathe. As he reloaded his Colt Commando, Vansen emerged from the black smoke that marked the remains of the Thermite blast. She pumped a 40mm grenade from the M203 launcher slung beneath her M4 rifle. The HE round exploded amongst the fleeing Iraqis, butchering the exposed men. She then opened up on auto with her rifle, mopping up the survivors.

All semblance of order had broken down. The Iraqis' blind retreat was suicide; they were cut down in seconds. Others just cowered among the debris.

Steiner and Vansen moved through the ruins, killing everything in their path.

* * *

The radio in Qusay's hand crackled, "I'm at the top. It's all clear."

"Understood, one," he replied. "Two?"

"I'm nearly at the top, sir," the ladder man reported.

"Good." Qusay lowered the radio and signalled the officer in charge of his protective detail. The Captain began breaking the team down into squads. The first headed to the lift doors, the second waited at the foot of the ladder. The remaining men stood gathered around Qusay.

"Two, sir." The radio squawked.

"Report?"

"All clear, sir. I'm with one."

“Good, send down the lift.” Qusay smiled as he nodded to the Captain. The ladder team began its ascent.

“We must fetch your father now!” Qusay turned at the sound of Abid’s somewhat shrill, nasal tones. The older man shifted uneasily as he felt all eyes turned to him.

“Of course, Abid Hamid Mahmoud,” Qusay smiled pleasantly and extended his hand. “You shall have the honour of leading the way. My father will be suitably grateful, I’m sure.”

A wave of relief washed over Abid and he couldn’t help smiling warmly in return to Sadddam’s son. He turned briskly on his heel and headed back into the gloom.

“Abid?” the older man turned at the sound of Qusay’s voice. What he saw, he brain refused to compute. Why was Qusay holding a pistol? And why was he pointing it at him? Finally his brain caught up.

“No,” he whispered dryly.

Qusay shot him in the face, the bullet entering his left eye and blowing out the back of his head. The pleasant smile never left the younger man’s face.

* * *

Steiner stepped over the last of the bodies. He reloaded his rifle. Behind him came the report of a shot as Vansen dispatched the last survivor. Steiner pulled off his Nomex hood and tucked it beneath his belt. Smoke still drifted hazily from his burnt overalls. Beneath the mask his pale flesh was sooty and his eyebrows singed, but otherwise he was unhurt.

Vansen appeared and tossed him her canteen. He took a drink and poured the remnants over his head and face. He slung his rifle, removed a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his overall pocket. He lit his and Vansen’s cigarette and they both stood in silence.

Ayana joined them, pistol in hand.

“Is that them all?”

Steiner didn't reply. He stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and unholstered his pistol. He raised the automatic and fired a single round into the shadows. There was a cry and the sound of a body hitting the floor.

Steiner sauntered over, the other two in his wake.

"Shit!" Vansen laughed. "Is that who are think it is?"

"No other." Steiner took a long drag on his cigarette.

"You sure?" Vansen dug a toe into the figure. The thickset man drew away. His teeth were bared in pain beneath the luxuriant moustache, his hands pressed against his shattered knee, blood pulsing between the fingers.

Steiner glanced at Ayana.

"It's him," she nodded solemnly. "The President of Iraq."

"The Rais himself. Sweet." Vansen slung her rifle and slid her combat knife from its sheath. The glitter of its blade reflected malicious glee in her eyes. "Party time!"

The curled Iraqi leader shuddered and instinctively drew further away. He began to wriggle, but was going nowhere, just paddling in his own blood.

"What now?" Ayana asked.

Steiner lifted his pistol and fired twice. The 9mm rounds obliterated the Rais's head, blood and brain matter exploding outwards across the floor in a vivid halo. Steiner reholstered his weapon and finished his cigarette.

"We get out of here."

Chapter 25

Steiner led them through the dark passages. He followed Ayana's directions. She followed close behind, ready to call out further instructions. Vansen covered their rear.

They had left the body of the Iraqi President where it lay, bleeding out on the cold concrete. With him dead, he held no more interest for Steiner. Vansen still wanted to tarry, to get her jollies. Steiner had levelled his weapon on her and told her in no uncertain terms that they left now.

"The next left," Ayana called out. Steiner looked back over his shoulder. "The lift and escape shaft will be right ahead." Ayana was looking gaunt and tired. Blood stained her dress, her automatic pistol dangled by her side. Her sunken eyes were glazed and distant. Steiner just nodded and rounded the corner.

Ahead, illuminated by a single feeble bulb lay the lift and the ladder that represented the only possible exit for the team. Steiner halted, signalled the other two to hold up and slowly approached the lift.

The blast lifted him off his feet and dumped back of the concrete floor, six feet back. Both the lift and the adjoining shaft dissolved in the explosion, flame and debris blasting through the enclosed passage.

Steiner must have blacked out, because the next thing he knew, Vansen was helping him up, dusting debris off him. He shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears.

"We're fucked," was all Vansen said.

He looked where the lift had been, but now both it and the adjoining ladder and shaft were gone, buried beneath a broken heap of reinforced concrete and steel.

"What now, Einstein?" Vansen snorted, reaching for her cigarettes.

Steiner saw the two men too late. The Iraqi troops swung into the mouth of the passage at their rear, weapons already up, framing Ayana where she stood, her back to them. She must have seen the look in Steiner's eyes, but it came too late to save her.

Ayana spun, bringing up her pistol, but both men opened up with their automatic rifles before she had turned 45 degrees. The impact of the steel-jacketed rounds flipped her round the opposite way she had been turning, ripping open her torso, front and back, her blood arcing out and hitting the walls.

As she crumpled, Steiner and Vansen returned fire, cutting down both Iraqis before they could redirect their aim.

After the sudden explosion of gunfire, the silence in the small passage was oppressive. Steiner didn't have to check Ayana to know she was dead, but he knelt to close her sightless eyes, and to neatly arrange her splayed limbs.

Vansen stepped over him and approached the two dead Iraqis. She lifted her rifle and fired a burst into the first man's head, his skull coming apart. She then turned and executed a similar coup de grace to the second soldier.

Steiner stood and reloaded his weapon. Vansen joined him. They both looked down at Ayana's body.

"This isn't going to plan, is it?" Vansen passed him a cigarette.

"Depends whose plan you mean."

* * *

Steiner rigged the last charge and stepped back from the lattice of tripwires. He could hear the thud of approaching footsteps.

"Time to go," he turned to Vansen. Having removed the last screw in the air vent, she removed the grill and set it aside. She glanced briefly up the black shaft.

"We don't know where the fuck this goes, if anywhere," she handled her rifle awkwardly.

“You got any better ideas?” Steiner stepped by her and vaulted up into shaft. Vansen handed up her M4 without a word and took his proffered hand and swung up behind him. She snagged the cable attached to the ventilator grill, lifted it up and jammed it back into place.

Steiner jammed the mini Maglite between his teeth and unholstered his sidearm.

“Let’s boogie.”

* * *

The first Iraqi trooper hove into view. He craned his neck around the corner and signalled his men to move up. The heavily armed squad gathered at the mouth of the corridor. The officer trained his flashlight over the debris where the lift had stood. The beam passed over the dead SLG men, their bodies heaped against the wall. Then he saw the dead woman, lying out in the open, hands arranged neatly across her chest, cradling a package to her bosom.

He signalled his men forward, keeping his flashlight up, lighting their way. The men fanned out, moving with expert precision, inching forward, weapons up. The officer continued to sweep his light, then he froze as the beam was reflected back off a slender wire. His mouth opened, his light moving, picking up more wires criss-crossing the passage, a giant spider’s web.

“Stop!” he screamed, “Back, back...” his men looked back, unaware that they were already caught. One man took a single step and hit the first tripwire.

The blast of the first claymore ripped the man clean in half, the ever widening arc of steel shot cutting down three more men, two of them dead before they hit the floor.

The men didn’t panic, they were professionals. They began to pull back. But that was a mistake, they should have remained still. The second claymore lit up the passage, quickly followed by two more, the surviving men caught in the crossfire. They never stood a chance; they were ripped to shreds.

The officer stood frozen in horror as he watched his men slaughtered in the blink of an eye. He opened his mouth, but never uttered a sound. The remaining ordnance, anti-personnel mines and carefully placed shaped C4 charges, all detonated on the pre-programmed signal that followed the final blast. Critical mass was a daisy-chain of cascading blasts, the last thing the Iraqi officer saw as the passage collapsed around him was the detonation of the charge cradled in the dead woman's arms. White light engulfed her, lifting her up and consuming her in its ethereal light.

* * *

Steiner hugged the filthy floor of the shaft. He reached back and pulled Vansen down as the fireball rose up behind them. It expired just short of their position and fell back on itself. It took several seconds for the reverberating blasts to fade and the shaking of the shaft to cease.

Steiner looked back. Vansen could just make out the glint of his smile behind the narrow beam of his flashlight.

“No way back now.”

* * *

They climbed for what seemed hours. Steiner didn't check his watch, what was the point. As they ascended they dismantled one fan unit and three grills blocking their path. On the single occasion the shaft divided, Steiner made the call. They continued slithering through the oily filth that caked the metal around them.

Sweat streaked Steiner's face. He blinked it out of his eyes. His grimy, bloody, sodden uniform clung to his body. The thin walls of the shaft pinged and groaned as it yielded beneath their weight.

Steiner choked down any anxiety. Given the choice, he'd suffer his claustrophobia over his agoraphobia. Confined spaces more often than not eased his fears; it was only the suffocating dread of being trapped and buried alive that such confines evoked that bothered him. As a child he had often hidden from his parents in cupboards, boxes, linen baskets, anything to escape the fighting, the frantic chaos and fear of the world.

"We're not climbing anymore." Vansen called out. Steiner didn't respond. She reached out and grabbed his ankle. He rounded on her, his light cutting into her eyes, the automatic pistol in his hands levelled on her face. "What the fuck?" she cried out, but let it drop when she saw the look in his eyes. She couldn't isolate one single feeling: terror, rage and indescribable horror, plus god knows what else clouded his flat grey irises.

"We're not climbing, we've levelled off." Vansen spoke as gently as she could. Steiner's eyes slowly cleared.

"I know," he lied.

They continued moving through the oily shaft until light became visible in the distance. Slowly they approached the source, a heavy grate covering the end of the shaft, flickering beams poking through its bars.

Steiner shoved up against the vent and peered through the spaces in the grate.

They were high up, looking down over the compound. Fires still raged, the flicker of their flames lighting up the night. Men rushed through the choking black smoke. Officers arranged units to fight the fires. Sirens sounded through the haze of the artificial heat of the burning night. Only here and there could Steiner make out armed men making anything that approached an organised sweep. He peered up at the guard towers, but could make nothing out through the flicker of the flames and the sweeping searchlights.

Steiner reversed his position and drove both his feet into the vent, then took the screwdriver Vansen offered. He jammed the tip of the blade in the space he had opened. He worked his way around the rim, until the unit was loose enough for him to slice off the screws with the bolt-cutter from his belt.

“I’ll go first.” Steiner checked his silenced automatic, then flashed a grin and dropped out of sight.

* * *

Steiner hit a concrete ledge around five feet below the vent. He crouched low and looked around. He was still about six feet clear of the ground and a razor wire topped fence stood between him and the open compound. No one had spotted him; they were all too preoccupied with the world burning down around them.

Steiner reholstered his automatic and reached for his rifle, slipping it around his body. He reached up to the open vent. “It’s clear!”

He didn’t hear the cry of alarm, there was too much white noise emanating from the chaos below. The searchlight was suddenly on him. He didn’t have time to react before the snap of the rifle report.

The bullet ripped through the meat of his left thigh, impacting on the concrete wall of the bunker. He was aware of the cool spray of his own blood following in the wake of the round as he fell backwards. He dropped without a sound.

Vansen slithered out of the vent, only her head and shoulders visible. She had her rifle shouldered and was already behind the sights. She fired twice quickly, the first round taking out the searchlight, the second killing the Iraqi behind it, his head vaporising before the light faded. Her third shot found the sharpshooter in the tower. He didn’t have time to compute what was happening. His rifle was up, but he was beginning to turn, aware of the warm blood from his dead partner that painted his cheek. Vansen’s green tip round cored his head, entering through his left eye, blowing his brains out the back of his skull.

Vansen swung from the vent, hit the ledge and then dropped to the ground. She crouched beside Steiner. He was moaning, his hand clamped over the bloody wound in his thigh.

“We don’t have time,” he squeezed his words through his gritted teeth. “We’ve been made.”

“We’re clear.” Vansen pulled at his hand. He fought her. Looking past her he watched the personnel clogging the compound. Some had paused, looking about themselves, as if they knew something had happened, but didn’t know what. There was too much noise, too much mayhem. A killing in this charnel house went unnoticed. No one knew or less cared anymore.

“Move your fucking hand,” Steiner looked back at Vansen. He allowed her to move his hand from the entry wound. She inspected the damage, front and rear. “Fucking pussy, ain’t nothing,” she grinned down at him. “It’s clean, through and through.” She tied off a tourniquet and quickly dressed the wounds.

“Let’s move,” she pulled out wirecutters and began snipping through the fence.

Steiner sat up, his rifle cradled across his chest. He watched the figures dancing in front of the flaming ruins like crazed wraiths.

* * *

Secondary explosions cascaded inside the perimeter. Ammo and fuel was cooking off all around, the whole base seemed to be on fire. The frantic efforts of the personnel to fight the inferno took on an increasingly chaotic nature. Order had broken down, people rushed everywhere, it was total meltdown. The blaze had reached critical mass, it was obvious it was now completely out of control, and finally the inhabitants had realised this. Some continued to fight a hopeless fight against the firestorm, but most were trying to flee.

Vansen led Steiner through this diabolical nightmare landscape. She supported his weight as he slung an arm around her shoulders. He held his Colt Commando one-handed. His head hung low, his eyes sunken into deep hollows. Vansen, M4 gripped in her free hand made no attempt to conceal their presence. She just barrelled through the heaving crowds,

elbowing past increasingly frantic troops and civilians. Steiner was so close he could look right into their eyes. The light had gone out in all of them. Panic and sheer disbelief had taken over. These fucks had been targeted and bombed by the west and by Iran for almost a generation. For longer than that they had been leaving beneath the omnipresent terror of a fickle dictatorship. But now an unseen enemy was amongst them. Here they were safe inside probably the most secure site in Iraq and someone had come amongst them, killing them and obliterating their world. Now all the certainties were gone. It was as if their whole world was going up in flames around them.

There were dead bodies everywhere, scattered among them the wounded and dying. No one tended them or even paid them any mind. The crowds trampled over them, their cries drowned beneath the ripple of explosions.

Among the panic some minds had just snapped. Here and there figures sat hunched in the dirt, eyes glazed and flat, gently rocking, lips moving wordlessly.

Among this bedlam, Vansen and Steiner moved beneath a cloak of invisibility and seeming indifference.

But eventually the spell had to be broken.

“Stop!” a voice practically screamed. The strangulated single word was barely audible above the concussive blasts all around. The dazed crowds around the two Americans seemed to rise briefly from their mental torpor. They gazed about, blinking, then began to part, peeling away from Vansen and Steiner.

An SRG Captain stood in full battle-dress, AKSU compact assault rifle cradled across his chest. Arrayed around him were four heavily armed Republican Guard troopers. All had their AKs levelled on the two Americans. They all looked very earnest and deadly serious.

“Fuck!” Vansen muttered.

All the ambient noise seemed suddenly to fall away.

The two groups stood facing each other down, no one sure what to do next. Steiner checked their eyes. The troops although well-trained were confused and didn't want any part

of this shit anymore. The officer was a different matter. Steiner watched a thin smile slide across the Captain's bloodless lips.

"Fuck this shit," Steiner shoved himself clear of Vansen, his rifle already up. He squeezed off a long burst of automatic fire as he fell sideways, the first rounds hitting the officer in the throat, opening his neck up in a glittering arterial burst of colour, practically decapitating him. The arc of fire crossed the two men on the officer's right, scything them down in his wake.

Vansen dropped low, bringing her M4 rifle up to her shoulder. She dropped the two remaining men with a double burst before they could even react.

Steiner was trying to struggle back up. He waved his weapon in the faces of the seething zombie hordes around them. Vansen grabbed him and jerked him up. They burst through the crowd, moving fast but to who knows where.

The whole hornet's nest was awake and pissed as hell now. Sporadic bursts of gunfire ripped from the watchtowers dotting the compound. The two Americans tried to find cover within the crowds, but the guards couldn't give a shit about friendly fire incidents. Ill-aimed fusillades ripped through the bemused bystanders and then someone opened up with a machine gun, slicing through the faceless crowds like a gardener through weeds.

Running wasn't going to get them far. Steiner stopped Vansen, both ducking behind a power relay unit. Vansen started to lay down suppressing fire from cover, ducking out delivering well-aimed sporadic bursts. Steiner hunched against the chainlink fence and removed the rifle from his pack, unfolding the butt. He slammed home the 20 round clip and yanked back the charging handle. He quickly checked the Nimrod 6x sight, then slapped Vansen on the shoulder. She leant out and delivered another burst of automatic fire.

Steiner leant against her curved back and aimed over her head with his Galil sniping rifle. He found the man behind the big Soviet PK machine gun, tucked up save in a tower 200 metres off, elevated 8 metres off the ground. His fat head filled his scope, transfixed by the crosshairs.

Steiner exhaled and gently squeezed the trigger. The 7.62mm round left the muzzle at about 860 metres a second, slowing little on its short, deadly journey. The full metal jacketed round struck the bridge of the Iraqis nose, his face imploding as it punctured his skull, mashing his brains, then venting the remains through the gaping wound in the back of his head. Steiner then pivoted and fired again and dropped the second man in the tower.

“Moving!” Vansen lunged from cover, crossing the narrow space separating her from some crates. She hit hard and brought up her M4 and lit up the nearest watchtower set off at 45 degrees. She emptied her clip into the two men inside, shredding them, before putting a 40mm grenade into the platform, blowing it apart.

Steiner had rolled clear of the relay station into the open. He lay prone, found a third tower, firing fast with his Galil, killing both occupants instantly. He noticed movement to his right as two armed men elbowed through the crowd. Steiner acquired them and cut them down.

Vansen retrieved Steiner and helped him to his feet. “We gotta get out of her fast, this shit’s just gonna get worse.” Steiner grunted. He let the Galil fall by his side on a short sling and gripped his Colt Commando.

“Just point the way, shit for brains,” Vansen hissed through clenched teeth. Sweat streaked the grime covering her face. She fired a quick burst, dropping three Republican Guards. “Maybe you know a short cut!”

They saw the main gate at the same time.

“Oh baby!” Vansen laughed.

Then the vehicles opened up. Two APCs, a tank and maybe a couple of machine gun mounted Land Rovers all arraigned before the gate. Dug in around them looked about a Company’s worth of heavily armed men.

The two Americans broke for cover a split second too late. Steiner felt the hot burn of the rounds as they cleaved the air around him. Vansen cried out as she was hit twice. She folded. Both of them hit the dirt together hard. Steiner emptied his Commando as he grabbed

Vansen by the webbing and dragged her towards cover. He ignored the pain from the wound pumping blood from his thigh. Incoming rounds kicked up dirt around them, then Vansen came to and began to scream.

* * *

Steiner huddled in the shadow of a concrete office unit. High velocity rounds ripped through the building, blowing through walls as easily as through glass. The building shuddered as concrete and glass were blown through the air, hole after hole appearing in it.

The Iraqis poured heavy machine gun, cannon and small arms fire all into the single target. Steiner hunkered as low as he could. He tasted dirt as brick and glass cut his neck. It was only a matter of time until the tank opened up and then it would all be over.

The cleaving of glass and stone, the blast of weapons fire washed over him as he flipped onto his back and wriggled to the edge of the wall. Vansen lay hunched back, howling as she plucked blindly at her vest.

Steiner peered around the corner, then jerked his rifle up and loosed a long, continuous burst. It was like spitting into a hurricane. Before he emptied the thirty round clip, the Commando was ripped from his hands, shattered by a fusillade of automatic fire. Broken plastic and metal ripped open his hands, as the ruined weapon was blown apart.

Steiner ducked back into cover, gunfire biting huge chunks out of the corner of the wall. He wriggled back to Vansen, grabbed her M4 and checked its clip. He rose to his knees, jammed the muzzle of the rifle through the broken window and opened up, squeezing off burst after burst. He clearly made out men going down and the sparks of ricochets off the armour. He emptied the clip and fired the 40mm HE round from the M203 grenade launcher slung beneath the rifle's barrel. It crossed the 250 metres to the gate in just over three seconds, impacting on one of the Land Rovers, ripping it apart. Ammo cooked off and burning fuel spilled over the exposed troops.

Steiner dropped low, reloaded rifle and grenade launcher, was up again, firing hard and fast, cutting into the still confused troops. More men went down, then he put a second 40mm grenade into the other Land Rover, peeling it open and triggering a string of secondary explosions.

The APCs continued to pour fire on the Americans' position. As he dropped, Steiner saw the tank manoeuvring, turret rotating.

He grabbed Vansen by the collar, "We gotta move," she looked back at him, bleary eyes. "Now!" He dragged her up and pulled her along with him. Surprise and balls-out insanity was their only chance.

They burst out into the open. Steiner ran as fast as he could, but still felt as though he was wading through treacle. Either they were unseen, or the Iraqis were just flat-out stunned, but they didn't attract any immediate incoming fire.

The 125mm tank gun barked and the T-72 bucked, jumping in its tracks. The HE round hit the shredded office unit that had served as the Americans' cover. It sliced through the first exterior wall, the masonry crumbling like cheese. The flimsy interior walls were even easier to breach, but something obviously finally stopped the round as it impacted on the inside of the rear wall. The building vaporised in an instant, shattered masonry and fire spiralling through the air.

Steiner fought to keep his feet as the concussion wave hit him. Then one of the APCs spotted him and opened up. Cannon and machine fire chewed up the dirt around his feet and cleaved the air around him, the heat scorching his skin.

He kept moving, firing the M4 across his chest. Sweat stung his eyes. Shelter was only feet away. Stumbling in his wake, Vansen brought up her left hand and opened up with the Uzi gripped in her fist, brass spirally back over her wrist.

They reached the shelter of another office unit. Steiner tossed Vansen into cover, dropped low and emptied the M4 into the gate position. Then he dropped up the rifle, ripped a simple plastic tube, just over a foot long, from his pack, extended it and brought it up, resting

it on his shoulder. He fired the LAW as soon as he acquired the target, the warhead tearing from the muzzle of the launcher with a savage rip. The white exhaust plume engulfed Steiner's kneeling figure.

The HEAT round struck the tank's forward armour, just below the turret. The T-72 was always a piece of shit compared to modern western tanks, its gun only a slightly mitigating consideration. Light and slow, its greatest Achilles heel was its armour. Even later models only had 300mm and 400mm protection, and even a feeble LAW can penetrate up to 700mm. But this Iraqi tank was, unfortunately for its occupants, a decrepit early model with front armour of only 250mm.

The armour piercing, high explosive round detonated as soon as it penetrated the tank. The initial blast shook the vehicle; blowing off its hatches and belching flame from every opening. But then the ammunition cooked off, detonating with an almighty ripple noise, blowing the turret clear off the chassis of the vehicle. The series of secondary blasts opened the tank like a tin can. Fire spilled onto the nearest APC. It tried to escape, but the final catastrophic blast that destroyed the tank blew the helpless vehicle onto its side. It hung, wavering precariously for several seconds, then rolled onto its roof. Men fought to escape from the belly escape hatches, but were quickly engulfed in the flood of fire that washed over them.

The second APC raced away from its position, desperate to escape its companion's fate. It raced towards Steiner, cannon and machine fire blazing.

Steiner tossed the LAW launcher and looked round for the M4. Vansen moved behind him, snatching up the weapon, reloading as she moved. She brought up the rifle and began firing, squeezing off well-aimed short bursts.

Steiner unslung his Galil, and joined fire. His second round took out the vehicle commander, decapitating him as he unwisely stuck his head out of the turret, reaching for mounted machine gun. As Vansen lay on covering fire, Steiner resighted. Dirt exploded around them as hot lead gobbled up the air around them. Vansen fired her M203, the grenade

hitting the APC nose on, exploding harmlessly against the armour, barely slowing the vehicle down.

Steiner sighted on the narrow slit in the front of the approaching vehicle. It wasn't going to be an easy shot. The APC bucked and shuddered as it moved quickly over the rough ground. Steiner waited. The APC grew nearer; the target grew in his sights.

“Whatever you're going to do,” Vansen reloaded, “Do it now!”

Steiner smiled. He clearly saw the brown eyes peering through the slit. At the last second he saw the look of realisation enter the driver's eyes. Steiner fired twice quickly.

The driver was obviously killed instantly, both rounds passing through the narrow viewing slit. The APC continued straight for a second or two, then began to slew, drifting off line, nose digging into the dirt and lurching sideways onto two wheels.

“Fuck! Move!” Vansen grabbed Steiner and pulled him clear as the APC ploughed into the office unit, the outer wall collapsing on top of it as it was brought to a shuddering halt.

Vansen dumped Steiner and jumped atop the vehicle. She slapped a C4 charge against the driver's hatch and ducked clear. The blast blew the hatch clear and Vansen stuck her M4 inside the vehicle, emptying the entire thirty round clip. She reloaded, then stuck her head inside. A second later she re-emerged, a big grin on her face.

“You gonna help get these dead fuckers out of here?” she called to Steiner. “Looks like we got a ride out of this shithole.”

Chapter 26

They dumped the APC twelve blocks from the presidential compound. On foot, they moved fast through the tight winding alleys. The streets were getting hot. Armed personnel flooded the city. No one was going to sleep tonight and a lot of people were going to suffer and die. Someone was going to pay, it didn't matter who.

Explosions rattled the air and distant fires lit the sky. The stench of destruction and ruin were heavy on the air.

They made it back to the cellar. Exhausted they stumbled through the ruins, found the basement door and shoved it open. As they descended into the darkness on broken steps, they froze. They heard the cold snick of a round being pumped into the breach of shotgun. Steiner didn't make any sudden moves. He peered into the blackness below. All the lights had been extinguished. It smelt like death down there.

"You took your time!" Steiner looked towards the source of the voice. The red point of a cigarette burned in the darkness.

"I told you not to wait up." Steiner didn't move. Homer slowly turned up the lamp beside him and grinned up at them.

"You look like shit!" he snorted, eyes squinting against the sting of the cigarette smoke.

Vansen followed Steiner down the stairs.

"The others?" Homer asked softly.

Steiner shook his head.

"Armstrong?" his voice was brittle.

Steiner paused. "He was covering our rear. We didn't see what happened to him."

"He could have made it?"

Steiner shook his head. "They were all over us. They had our rear. He held them off for a while, but..." his voice trailed off.

Homer nodded. “Shit, it’s what he wanted. Poor bastard had had enough of this shit anyhow.”

Steiner felt he should say or do something more. Maybe a reassuring hand, but he couldn’t even meet the other man’s gaze. Instead he lit a cigarette and paused for a moment.

“What the fuck?” Vansen’s voice broke their reverie. Steiner turned. Vansen stood over the hunched, bloody figure of the doctor; his extended arm still shackled to the busted radiator.

“What happened?” Steiner nudged the body with the toe of his boot.

“You like?” Homer laughed and coughed. “Ran out of drugs, didn’t like the way the fuck looked at me.” Steiner looked at Homer. The man blushed. “Well that, that and the little bastard tried to get the jump on me. Though I was out good on the old morpho. Popped him twice, went down quiet as anything.”

“What about your wounds?”

“This old bastard didn’t know shit about battlefield medicine. All he knew was writing scripts for pills, that and maybe diddling little kids and scraping in back alleys,” he snorted. “Got me cleaned up and drugged nice, but from there on in I took it. I knew better what I was doing.”

Steiner looked down at Homer’s wound, the stump of his leg exposed, its end blackened.

“Cauterised the baby myself. Pried open some 7.62 rounds. Did the job beautifully!” he laughed, wagging his stump.

“Jesus, think I’m gonna throw up!”

* * *

Homer shot himself up with more morphine. His eyes swam, a stupid grin smeared across his slack face. He passed out, doped up good.

Steiner found an M4 and began breaking it down. Customised by Delta armourers the refined M4, often known as the CAR 15, was possibly the most sophisticated infantry rifle in the world. Lighter and smaller than the standard M4, the optimised CAR 15 was especially refitted with a customised lightweight fixed stock and hand-tooled barrel. A 4x daytime/nighttime scope was mounted atop the frame and an automatic shotgun mounted below the barrel. He stripped, cleaned and oiled the weapon, then reassembled it. He tenderly wiped the rifle down before loading a round into the M203 grenade launcher slung beneath the barrel. He seated a curved 30 round clip loaded with 5.56mm green-tip rounds. He chambered a single round, safed the weapon and laid it aside. He lit a cigarette and leant back exhaling.

“We gotta get out of here,” Vansen watched him from the shadows. “These fuckers will rip the city apart trying to find us. It’s only a matter of time.”

Steiner didn’t answer, just watched the smoke curling listlessly upwards into the darkness.

“We done what we came for. We gotta dee dee,” she leant forward, indicating the dead doctor. “This fucking Arab’s gonna stark stinking the place up pretty soon anyways.”

“Bury him then.” Steiner continued to smoke.

Vansen slithered next to him, leaning close, her breath warm on his cheek. “We dump our friend here, he’s dead anyway,” her eyes moved to the unconscious Homer as she spoke softly. “We’d move faster that way anyway. We get out of the city and call in the evac.”

“There’ll be no evac.” Steiner replied emotionlessly.

“What?”

“We’re on our own, remember. Those fuckers in Washington cut us loose. Now we’ve fucked them up good by whacking the main man. Last thing they’ll do is give us warm welcome and fly us out of here.” He smiled. “No one’s coming for us. We’re on our own. Only way our friends in Washington are sending anyone in here would be to finish us off.”

Vansen was silent.

Steiner finished his cigarette and closed his eyes, his breathing slowing into sleep.

Vansen grabbed his arm, “We finish Homer, get out of the city and strike for the border together, we can still make it!”

Steiner turned his head; hooded eyes fixed on Vansen’s shadowed face. “Just what you’re going to do. But you’re taking Homer with you.”

“Fuck you, that asshole’s dead-weight. And what’s this shit about just *me*?”

Steiner brought up his silenced automatic and touched the muzzle to her cheek.

“You’ll get Homer out. If you arrive without him, I’ll find you and make it personal.” They’re eyes met, Vansen knew he meant it. “Strike south-west for Jordan. Try to get to Israel, we still have friends there.”

“Homer will never make it. He’ll get us both killed. Alone it’ll be almost impossible, together it’ll be suicide.”

Steiner smiled. “You don’t like those odds?”

“We could dump him at a friendly embassy?”

“Wouldn’t work. No one is going to take him and if they did he’d be dead in hours. The Agency would get him.”

“Little lady’s right!” they both turned and looked at Homer. He sat up, an unlit cigarette between his lips. He scratched absent-mindedly. “I’d make it now if I reached a hospital. Get fixed up with a prosthesis in a few months and I’d be good as new. But it ain’t gonna happen. We’re deep in Indian country. Blood loss and infection will get me fast, if I don’t get you two killed first.” He laughed and lit his cigarette.

“See!” Vansen cried.

Steiner shoved her away.

“I can still do some good though. Run some interference. Get me set up, I’ll take a few of our A-rab buddies with me.”

Steiner looked at Homer, both men’s eyes meeting. Steiner nodded once. Homer lay back and closed his eyes.

“Just me and you then!” Vansen clambered to her feet.

“Just you.” Steiner lit another cigarette.

“What shit is this?”

“You’re going to get out, try and get me a ride out of here.”

“You too good to walk or something?”

“I’m staying.” Steiner smiled cryptically.

“Why?”

“I’m going to find out what’s going on and fuck it up.”

* * *

They emerged from below ground as dawn stained the horizon. Steiner carried Homer strapped to his back. He bent beneath the load of the heavier man. Vansen covered their rear. The air vibrated with the rattle and thunder of a city being torn apart.

They headed south, several blocks until they reached the tallest remaining structure in the blasted neighbourhood. The old concrete water tower stood alone in the centre of a scarred wasteland. Pocked and stained, it looked down over the sprawling misery of southern Baghdad. Somehow it had escaped western bombers and civil unrest, an ugly, lonely sentinel.

The three figures hunkered down at the tower’s base in the early morning gloom. Wordlessly, they waited. Vansen swept the area with image-intensifying night vision binoculars.

“Good to go,” she whispered tersely without lowering the glasses.

“Is that all I get?” Homer laughed softly, “Not much of a farewell!” His white teeth gleamed in the gloom.

Vansen lowered her glasses and shot him a look.

“Just I always pictured my last stand being something more romantic.”

“What do you want, a kiss?” she snorted.

“That’d be nice.”

“Fuck you!” she almost smiled despite herself.

“Time to move.” Steiner rose with a grunt, still carrying the heavier man on his back. He gripped the rusty iron ladder that ascended the tower. Vansen bent and checked the strap attached to the weapons pack that would follow the two men up.

Steiner started to climb. Homer looked back and winked.

“Hold it!” Vansen called and Steiner paused. She reached up and gently kissed Homer on the lips. “Okay,” she said as she stepped back. Steiner recommenced his climb.

“Being seeing you, little lady.” Homer called back with a grin.

“In your fucking dreams!” she smiled.

It was a long, hard climb. Homer did his best to help, but Steiner carried the bulk of the burden. As well as Homer on his back and both men’s personal weapons, suspended a couple of metres below them, hung from Steiner’s harness was the heavily loaded weapons pack.

Steiner was strong and stubborn, but before he was halfway up the tower, his muscles were screaming at him. Sweat soaked his clothes. He became light-headed.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

“Okay, man?” Homer helped steady their hold by gripping the ladder with both hands.

Steiner nodded, sucked in a couple of breaths and shook it off. He resumed the climb, biting down on the hurt.

They reached the top as dawn broke across the sky, a dirty spill of grimy pain across the cityscape. Smoke hung in a pall over the low buildings. Fire could still be seen burning in the presidential compound. Troops and tanks were visible to the naked eye manoeuvring through the tight streets.

Homer unfastened himself and rolled clear. Steiner quickly pulled up the weapons behind them. He tossed the pack onto the parapet and fell back against the cool concrete. Homer immediately began collecting and prepping his weaponry.

Steiner stared up at the cold, dead sky, feeling the dull calm within his body as his sweat cooled. It was in these quiet moments after trial or before the cataclysm that he finally found peace, albeit fleetingly.

He slowly sat up, took a drink from his canteen. He checked the horizon through his field glasses. He looked back at the big D-boy, arranging his weapons around him and setting up his shooting nest.

“You okay?” Steiner asked.

Homer looked back over his shoulder, schoolboy grin on his face. “Couldn’t be better, man!”

Steiner knew he should say something. He shifted uncomfortably. “You got everything you need?”

“I reckon.”

An awkward silence rose between them.

“I wish things could have been different.” Steiner said baldly.

Homer smiled sadly, “I guess,” he looked out of the ruined city. “Fun while it lasted, though.”

Steiner handed him a cigarette, took one himself and lit them both. They sat smoking in silence, staring out into the grey dawn. Cold day washed over the burning of the city. Soldiers moved from house to house; gunfire and screams choked off. Death carried on the languorous breeze.

“Time to go,” Steiner put out his cigarette. Homer nodded once his eyes fixed on the horizon. Steiner rose and paused for a second. Then he was gone. Homer remained among his weapons, cigarette pinched between his fingers, smile on his lips, eyes staring blindly into oblivion.

Chapter 27

They hunkered down and watched the sun set. The night sky burned blood-red. With their backs to the desert, they watched the city blaze, the fires framed by the International Airport and the infamous Radwaniyah Prison. They had reached the outskirts of the city before sunfall, avoiding the patrols sweeping every neighbourhood.

“You should come with me, there’s nothing left here.” Vansen’s voice was almost tender. Steiner just shrugged. “Who cares what really went down here. We done our part, now let’s just get the hell out of dodge.”

“Someone fucked us,” he muttered.

“Big fucking change. All our lives we been fucked over. Goes with the job. We do the dirty jobs no one else wants and no one wants to think about.” Vansen lit both their cigarettes. “We’re the shit-shifters. Everyone knows what’s gotta be done, but no one wants the think about it.”

Steiner shrugged, “I know, my hands are dirtier than most. I’m not getting self-righteous about this. Maybe I just want a little payback.”

“Hell, we all want that. Aren’t we all sick of being used and thrown away.” She looked at him. “Let me come with you. We’ll do this together.”

Steiner briefly met her gaze. He smiled grimly. “I gotta do this alone. If I get wasted, you’re gonna finish this back home.”

“Fucking-A!”

“This score’s gonna get settled. I get out of it alive, you’re gonna be waiting with my ride out of here.” He reached out and touched her cheek. “If not, you waste the fuckers who handed down this bullshit job.”

“I get you home, we do the fuckers together?”

He smiled and nodded.

“Beautiful!” She leant forward and kissed him, gently at first, then urgently.

*

*

*

“You’re clear on the route, what you gotta do?” Steiner was invisible in the darkness.

“Once again, yes.” Vansen finished adjusting her gear and checking her weapons.

Steiner lit a cigarette, took a long pull and handed it to her.

“How you gonna figure who to go after in all this?” Vansen peered into the darkness.

“I’ll have plenty of time and nothing to do but think. Reckon I’ll just figure on it for a while.”

“That’s it?”

“Just work out who has most to gain, work the angles, see who comes out on top.

Then I start.”

“Blood and hair on the walls.”

“Some might call it justice.”

“Same thing.” She finished the cigarette. “Could take a while?”

“I got nothing but time.”

“And a bad attitude.”

“Always got that. Never underestimate a pissed off professional.” Steiner laughed.

“Reckon they’ll learn soon enough.”

There was silence between them. The cold wind whipped across the blasted desert, cutting into them.

“Time to move.” Steiner spoke from the shadows.

Vansen reached into the dark to find him, but touched only emptiness.

“Goodbye, Steiner,” she whispered.

“See you soon,” his hand grazed hers, then he was gone.

Vansen waited, but there was nothing more. She turned and walked away.

*

*

*

Homer killed the first man as the sun rose the following day.

He watched the armoured brigade swarm through the dense city streets, pouring south, smashing and burning as they went.

Homer had just popped another morphine syrette and was floating clean. His mind was still and smooth. He smiled as he settled behind the PSG 1 automatic sniping rifle. He searched through the 10x scope and found a target.

The officer, a captain was waving his arms and shouting, his face puffy and red. He directed his men, bellowing silently, his voice lost in the 700 metres separating him from the Delta sniper.

Homer rested his cool, clammy cheek against the plastic stock of the precision rifle. A man with an unnaturally low resting heartbeat, as had all the best snipers, Homer didn't have to will himself to calm, the morphine had already knocked his blood pressure and pulse rate through the floor. He smiled as he tracked the officer, crosshairs locked on the man's bobbing head.

Homer was bathed in warmth. The pain in his leg, the phantom agonies forgotten. His mind was liquid clear and soft. He felt calm and a kind of clarity he had rarely felt before. Death and drugs were a heady cocktail. Staring his own death in his face, he felt utterly free. There was nothing left to trouble him. Everything was right here, right now.

He squeezed the trigger. He absorbed the recoil and he heard the smooth mechanical cycle of the weapon as another round was chambered. The 7.62mm hollowpoint round exited the muzzle of the weapon with no more than a cough; the noise/flash suppresser displacing the escaping gasses.

Homer rode the recoil; his eye remaining fixed on his target. The silencer slowed the round to subsonic speed, much less than the PSG 1's usual 820 metres per second, and the wait seemed interminable. Then, without warning, the Iraqi officer's head exploded. Homer

laughed at the vividness of the crimson flower, blood and brain erupting and covering the surrounding troops. All watched, confused as the headless corpse flopped to the ground.

Homer fired again. A soldier looking dumbly at the mess covering him buckled and folded, neck torn open. Homer kept firing. He had five down, all dead before anyone reacted. Suddenly the whole brigade seemed to light up. Small arms, machine guns and even APC mounted cannons and tank guns opened up. A thunderous rage rose up to the skies, dust and smoke engulfing the vengeful force.

Homer laughed, rolled onto his back and lit a cigarette. The Iraqi fire ripped the surrounding city neighbourhood to pieces. The fire was beyond indiscriminate; it was pure panic, pure chaos. The shattered buildings burned, the gunfire rumbled on as the troops devoured the city. The armoured brigade fired everywhere but where Homer was. He just lay back atop his tower and waited.

* * *

Steiner heard the barrage of gunfire as he hunkered down in his rocky foxhole just outside the city. Steiner checked his watch and peered out from beneath his camouflaged netting. The rocky expanse of the desert lay before him, shimmering in the hellish heat.

It was going to be a long day.

* * *

Homer felt real good. The dull ache of his truncated leg barely registered through the warm miasma of morphine. He smiled, but was quickly tiring of this shit. With the silenced PSG 1 he had picked off all the obvious officers and senior non-coms. He'd whacked every armoured vehicle commander dumb enough to show his head. He'd taken out RTOs to hit communications, sappers to fuck logistics and even done some medics to instil the fear. The

Geneva Convention was for faggots. Rules of engagement? Bullshit. This was war – ugly, brutal and pitiless. Fuck you if that upsets you, war ain't meant to be nice.

None of the surviving Iraqis blundering through the surrounding neighbourhoods thought to look up. They just ripped up their own assholes, burning and killing everything around them.

The stupidity of this offended Homer's professionalism.

But hey, why look a gift horse in the mouth.

He popped the commanders of the newly arrived reinforcements, all hot for a bit of easy killing. Homer wasn't too sorry to disappoint the new arrivees. Seemed these boys weren't used to someone shooting back at them, it was fucking up their day.

While he watched the city burn the armoured convoy lumbered towards the clearing at the base of the tower. He popped a couple of men, just grunts, no fun.

Leaning back, he shot up more morphine. Things were getting real fuzzy now. He felt good, but he knew before long he was going to slip into unconsciousness. He wanted some fun first, some rock and roll. He wanted to go out with style. Going peacefully in your sleep might be nice, but Homer wanted to take the whole fucking world with him.

He smoked a cigarette, staring up at the clear sky with filmy eyes. He smiled; a tear fell from the corner of his eye. He heard the throb of approaching choppers.

Homer rolled over and shoved the PSG 1 over the parapet. He pulled the heavy .50 calibre Barrett M82A2 tight in and settled behind its high power 12x scope. Pivoting on the fitted bipod he searched for targets. With the heavy .50 cal slug he could do just about anything, puncture engine blocks, armour, or just blow some poor fucker apart.

The old Soviet chopper swooped low over his head. It flared over the armoured point of the convoy. The beady black eye of its canopy looked out, hunting for prey. It was too good to miss.

Homer fired, the boom of the shot lost in the wash of the helicopter's rotors. The heavy armour-piercing round punched through the canopy, decapitating the pilot, the

chopper's engine rising in a shriek. Homer resighted and fired again, killing the forward weapons operator. He then put a single round through the Klimov main powerplant and watched the aircraft just drop.

The Iraqis troops just looked up in horror, powerless as the helicopter fell upon them, detonating in a searing fireball

* * *

Gunfire rattled and explosions shook the air. Steiner waited. He wondered how long Homer would last. If the Iraqis didn't get him, his wounds would probably finish him before the day was out. But Homer was choosing his own way out. He was going on his own terms, at the time of his own choosing. And what a way to go.

Steiner envied him. Squatting in his hole, aware of the smell of his own body, his physical discomfort and uncertainty, it was clear who had the best deal.

Death didn't scare Steiner. He longed for his certainties. It was life that terrified him.

* * *

Homer knew it wouldn't be long now. He had enjoyed this time, but he had become very tired. The shattered convoy lay in flames beneath the fallen helicopter. The Delta sniper picked off survivors stumbling dazed from the carnage. When reinforcements arrived in speeding Land Rovers and trucks, he put .50 calibre rounds through their engine blocks, instantly immobilising them. He then went to work, cutting the occupants to pieces.

He was amazed no one picked up on the massive blast of the Barrett, assuming distance and the noise of the fire and secondary explosions blotted it out. He just kept thumping away. He was working his way rapidly through .50 ammo, reloading again and again, pausing now and then to shoot up with more morphine. He noticed at one point that his

wound had reopened, thick arterial blood pooling, bathing him as he lay. He didn't feel the dampness and he certainly felt no pain.

He saw the man, a corporal, stop and look up. He was huge in Homer's scope as he passed over him. By the time he swung back, the Iraqi was looking directly up at him, staring right into the crosshairs that transfixed him. Slowly he raised his hand and pointed. His look of puzzlement passed to one of realisation. He started to shout.

It only lasted seconds, but Homer patiently watched these events unfold. He simply smiled, silently congratulating the young Iraqi soldier. Then he gently squeezed the trigger and blew the man's head off.

Homer started firing at will, cutting apart the swarming Iraqis. He exhausted clip after clip, the barrel of the Barrett burning red hot. It was a futile measure; the genie was out of the bottle. Accusatory fingers rose up to challenge the tower. The troops, mostly on foot were reinvigorated. They charged across the clearing surrounding the tower, firing wildly as they closed. Men fell amongst them as they came, but they kept coming.

Homer shoved aside the Barrett. He shot his last morphine syrette. He laughed, "The pharmaceutical man came by and shot us full of Christmas cheer!" He lit a cigarette, ignoring the incoming rounds ricocheting off the concrete parapet. He leant back.

The sun had reached its zenith and begun its slow descent across the hazy afternoon sky. The heavy air was thick and dead. But Homer was oblivious to his surroundings; he was lit by his own inner fire.

Cigarette clenched between his teeth, he peered over the parapet. The Iraqis were swarming within 50 metres of the tower base. Out of the ruins of the shattered convoy, armoured vehicles emerged.

Homer shoved the muzzle of the M60E3 over the parapet, sighted down the barrel and opened up. The roar of the machine gun was overwhelming as it ate through its disintegrating link belt, spewing out 7.62mm rounds at 600 rounds a minute. Flame leapt two feet from the muzzle. Homer pivoted on the weapon's bipod, mowing down wave after wave

of oncoming Iraqi infantry. He laughed through the cigarette clamped in his mouth. It was like literally shooting fish in a barrel. The overeager attackers were in too tight to the tower base, unable to get an effective elevation to draw a bead on the overhead shooter. Only their comrades still further out were putting in any effective suppressing fire.

Homer exhausted the 200 round box magazine, grabbed another and reloaded, immediately resuming his withering fire. The piles of dead and dying Iraqis were piling up. Survivors vainly took shelter beneath the dead, but Homer sought them out, ripping through the dead flesh, carving open the stragglers. The attack waned, the troops going to ground, directing fire on the tower.

Unseen below, a handful of Iraqis had reached the tower base. They began to clamber up the ladder, one after the other, ascending eagerly, the taste of blood already in their mouths.

Homer was reloading. He heard the first motion detector and pulled the M57 electrical firing device close. He flicked off the safety and waited for the second motion detector to be triggered.

The cluster of Iraqis hurried up the rusting ladder. In their haste they didn't notice the small parcels packed around the fittings driven into the wall. They even missed the first Claymore, but the lead man saw the second and froze. His mind struggled to make sense of what he was seeing. He was unaware that he was already dead.

The one and a half pounds of plastic explosive encased in each Claymore anti-personnel mine detonated instantly and each unleashed seven hundred ball bearings, a blizzard of steel expanding outwards at four thousand feet per second. The Iraqis literally dissolved, vaporised before they knew what was happening, their bodies exploding, atomised blood and flesh coating the concrete of the tower. A nanosecond later, the C4 strung the length of the ladder blew, obliterating the shattered remains of the buckled ladder, the reverberation of the blast shaking the whole tower.

Homer tossed aside the M57, shaking off the concussion before the wave had even dissipated. He grabbed the M60 and resumed his fire.

Word spread throughout the city. From every neighbourhood and each base and outpost, soldiers converged on the battle. In their wake slack-jawed locals drifted in to rubberneck. In a turgid shithole like this city, watching some other poor motherfucker getting his ass shot off qualified as sport.

Men on foot, riding on vehicles of all description arrived, joining in the wild onslaught of gunfire gnawing away at the tower. Tank and APCs began to surround the area. The air filled with the throb of approaching choppers.

Homer dragged himself up against the parapet, mowing down any of the attackers foolish enough to venture out into the open. He sliced apart the waves lapping at the foot of the tower.

Incoming rounds sliced through the air around the American, the heat of them searing his flesh. Impacted rounds send shards of hot metal and broken masonry flying, the air thick with shrapnel. The buzzing rounds and whirling debris cut into Homer's flesh. The cloth of his uniform alternately smouldered, ignited by the red-hot rounds, and was bathed by his spilt blood.

Homer was unaware of the innumerable injuries, the drugs and euphoria eclipsing the pain.

The cannons and heavy guns of the tanks and APCs joined the fray, drawing a bead on the tower top. Heavy explosive rounds cleaved the air about the parapet, rounds beginning to bite great chunks out of the concrete. Emboldened by the covering fire from the armour, more soldiers appeared, ripping into the elevated position.

The barrel of the M60 literally glowed red-hot. The weapon seized up. Laughing wildly, Homer flipped it over the edge of the tower, scooped up his M4 carbine with attached M203 grenade launcher. He loosed a couple of well-aimed bursts and squeezed off a grenade from the M203. It impacted amid the front rank of attackers, killing the assembled troops

instantly. Homer slammed home another projectile, squeezed off another burst of automatic fire and fired the 40mm grenade. At more than 75 metres per second, the HE round slammed into the midst of the Iraqi infantry, less than 150 metres from the base of the tower.

Panicked, assault troops charged at the tower. Homer put two flechette grenades into the heart of the mob, the explosive shrapnel slicing the men apart. Homer continued pouring in automatic fire, the 5.56mm green tip armour-piercing rounds finding their prey irrespective of cover.

But one man cannot hold back the tide.

Cannon fire ripped up the tower platform. Homer struggled to reload the M4 and M203, his hands slick with his own blood. Incoming rifle fire struck him again and again, cutting through his body armour, cleaving apart any exposed flesh. Homer seemed unconcerned. He shuddered beneath the repeated blows, struggling with his own weapon.

The tanks found their range and fired for effect, ripping apart the tower. Two choppers swooped down, cannons and machine guns pouring in death. Concrete vaporised beneath the onslaught.

Homer seated a magazine in the M4 and opened up with a wild burst. A cannon round impacted on the rifle, obliterating it. Homer buckled as broken plastic and burning lead ripped open his torso. Doubled up, wisps of smoke escaped his broken body as the hot metal burned his flesh. He choked back a cry and struggled to straighten up. Around him his world dissolved amidst a biblical firestorm. He watched his own viscera tumble into his lap. He laughed with a crazed abandon. Flame and destruction surrounded him, lapping at his heels. The howl of the helicopters and chatter of gunfire filled the air like the baying of hounds.

Homer unholstered his SOCOM .45 automatic and began firing with his right hand. In his left he held his trusty old Colt M1911 .45 service pistol. He struggled to raise his left arm. He bared his blood-smeared teeth. He opened up two-handed, both weapons barking. There was no target; his world had shrunk to the two-foot spot he occupied amid the blinding storm. He was reduced to an empty act of defiance. Things were as they ever were.

Round after round slammed into the American. He kept firing. A burst of cannon fire sliced off his left arm. He was blinded by his own blood. His SOCOM automatic locked open. He shook the empty weapon impotently. He lifted his face and felt the wash of air as a chopper passed close overhead.

“This is gonna hurt come springtime!” he laughed, digging the muzzle of his pistol into the floor to help himself upright. He leant over the parapet, the concrete crumbling beneath his weight. The Iraqis swarmed like ants, scratching wildly at the tower’s base. Homer coughed up blood and turned his head. He watched the lined up tanks patiently sighting on his position. There was no pain, just a terrible weariness. He never felt the volley of 7.62mm fire the ripped open his throat. All he knew was that he was suddenly flat on his back staring at the sky. Blood flooded his air passages, his vision burned crimson. But he felt no pain, just the peace of certainty.

His eyes searched the heavens. Sunlight and fire streaked the sky. He lay quietly and watched the luminous streamers of light criss-crossing the burning air. Amid the silence, his vision faded to black.

The tanks fired on command, the combined impacts of their heavy guns obliterating the tower top, concrete washed away in fire. The column shuddered then buckled, and the tower fell, crashing down on the mob at its base.

* * *

The icy blanket of night smothered the heat of the desert. Steiner walked alone. The city burned behind him, the flames of its agony lighting the sky in his wake. Head down, weapon in the crook of his arm, he slipped away into the wilderness, his tracks washed away by the wind long before the coming of dawn.

Chapter 28

President Paul Harker sat behind his desk, basking in the sunlight spilling through the tall bay windows at his rear. He reclined in his soft chair, head back; eyes closed in quite satisfaction. His hands lay palm down on the desktop; its surface scattered with piles of the day's newspapers. Buried beneath the disarray lay his daily reports: State, Pentagon and NSC intelligence collated from NSA and CIA sources. They remained barely read and forgotten beneath the avalanche of newsprint.

Logan moved across the Presidential seal before the desk and took up his position at Harker's shoulder.

There was a soft knock at the door and Bernard Ives, the Director of the CIA, was shown in, a single aide at his side. Ives didn't look happy. He halted before the desk and waited. The door was shut behind him. Harker slowly opened his eyes, the smile never leaving his lips.

"Director Ives, how are you today?" he asked amiably.

"Fine, Mr President." Plainly Ives was anything but.

"Please have a seat."

Ives sat awkwardly, his aide perching on a chair behind his boss.

The visitors waited uneasily, the silence growing to fill the cavernous circular room.

Harker slowly sat forward. He folded his hands on the desk and smiled, meeting Ives' fragile gaze. "You seen the papers today, Bernie?" he asked.

"Of course, Mr President."

"Good news I'm sure you'll agree?" Harker played with the scattered papers, rearranging them. He didn't need to look down to read their screaming headlines: "*Iraqi Dictator dead*", "*Cut down by assassin's bullet*", "*The Rais Dead?*" and endless variants on the theme. Sub-headlines screamed of civil war inside Iraq, mayhem and slaughter on the street.

"Time will tell, Mr President." Ives' gaze didn't wavered.

“Really? It all looks good to me. We’re finally rid of that thorn in our side.”

“Indeed,” Ives raised an eyebrow. “Most propitious, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

Harker smile only widened. “Propitious. God or fate moves in their own mysterious ways.”

“Rather messily in this case though.”

“Have you seen the late editions?” Harker held up two newspapers. Both spoke of a newly released statement from the Iraqi government announcing the sad death of their president and beloved leader. They reported that he passed away quietly in his sleep after a short illness, his family gathered around him. The late president’s son, Qusay was confirmed as the state’s new leader.

“I saw a copy of the press release from the Iraqis just before I left Langley.” Ives remained stone-faced.

“Don’t seem messy at all. We’re rid of that motherfucker, a permanent running sore for this nation and the free world. Nobody’s pointing fingers our way. A nice smooth succession. A fresh start.”

“That’s if the press and the rest of the world, especially the Arabs buy this latest version of events.”

“Why not, everyone wanted to see the back of that cunt, he was an embarrassment to all, including his A-rab buddies.” Harker sat back. “Seems to me way things turned out suits everyone.”

“We can hope, Mr President, but there is the question of internal instability and already hostile neighbours are making their moves. Iran has mobilised several divisions and moved them up to the border.”

Harker just waved his hand. “Seems the new boy, Qusay, is sorting out his internal problems right from the git go. He does that, the Iranians and anybody else ain’t got nowhere to go.”

“I trust your assessment of events is correct, Mr President. But this remains a highly volatile situation.” Ives allowed an edge to creep into his voice.

Harker slowly rose in his seat, head still, eyes fixing on the CIA director.

“Maybe you should attempt to grow some balls, Ives. The world is a dangerous fucking place. Gotta destroy to build. You fuckers and your status quo is killing us.”

“Can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs?” Ives said coolly, eyes never wavering.

“Don’t get fucking cheeky with me, boy. I done shit’d turn your hair white.”

“Indeed, Mr President.” Ives restrained a smile.

“People like be me get shit done. Fuckers like you just scrabble in our wake, trying to make something out of nothing and invariably fucking it up worse than before.”

Ives smiled thinly, “We do our best, Mr President.”

Harker’s lip curled and he turned away. He plucked a cigarette from the box on the desk, jamming it in the corner of his mouth. “What you got Qusay?”

“We’re compiling a full briefing for you, sir, should be ready within hours. I have a preliminary background report with me.” Ives slid the thin dossier onto the desk. “Would you like me to go through it with you?”

Harker fixed him with an icy stare. “I can read,” he lit his cigarette. “Now get out and go do whatever it is you do.” The President swung around his chair. Ives and his aide left quietly.

“Faggots!” Harker hissed under his breath.

* * *

Neither man spoke as they were escorted through the long White House corridors and out to their car. Only when the vehicle was pulling out of the gate did the aide speak.

“What now?”

“Not here.” Ives hissed, cutting the younger man off.

With the traffic it took an hour to reach Langley, Virginia, the CIA headquarters. Ives led his aide direct to the building’s cavernous basement. Buried deep within wall within wall of concrete, lead and electronic baffling lay one of the Agency’s ‘*clean rooms*’. Only here would someone be safe from electronic eavesdropping.

“This situation must be resolved. Now.” Ives could barely control his rage as he slammed shut the heavy door. “We seem to have Qusay on a leash. He’s our boy now. Should be a damned site easier to deal with than his daddy. He’s nice and grateful for us gifting him the info on the hit.”

“He seems to have a lid on things at home,” The aide interjected. “He’s liquidated all his brother and father’s allies who could have been problematic. Most saw the way the wind was blowing and jumped ship. He’s just mopping up and using the opportunity to chop down any nascent stirrings among the Shi’a Marsh Arabs and Kurds in the north. Everything seems to be going smoothly.”

“One problem, though.”

“Sir?”

“Steiner!” Ives practically screamed, his face swelling with blood, veins popping. “I’d say that’s a pretty big fucking problem.”

“But he’s done what he was sent in for. Either the Iraqis will finish him or he gets out and then we take him.” The aide seemed almost non-plussed.

“Wake up, you idiot!” Ives got in his face. “Steiner is many things, but he isn’t stupid. He knows we fucked him. He won’t stop now. He’ll work things out, then he’ll settle the score.”

“Even if he gets out, he can’t get close to us, sir.”

“I’m not worried about that. Not yet anyways. No, he’ll work out what happened and who benefited. He’ll know we fed info and to whom, then he’ll go after them. He won’t stop. That prick won’t let this pass.”

“You think he’ll go after our boy?”

“Think? I fucking know. He got the father. He’ll want the son and nothing will stop him.”

“But the others are dead and satellite reports point to a single individual, probably Vansen, heading south for the border on foot. He couldn’t do it alone.”

“He’ll try. He’ll kill our boy and fuck everything else in the process. He doesn’t know how to forgive or forget. He likes to kill and he’s got nothing to lose. A pretty fucking dangerous combination.”

There was silence for a moment, only broken by the hum of electronic jamming equipment.

“We have to stop him. We can’t rely on the fucking Arabs.”

“What do you want me to do, sir?”

“Get me Max Schreck.”

*

*

*

The cadaverous figure loped through the caves. Scattered fires lit the twisting caverns and their endless chambers. The man’s shadow moved across the rough walls, shrinking and growing as he moved. The man’s movements were unusual, but highly effective. Stooped, he seemed to drag his feet, but moved silently and very quickly. From time to time he would pause as if to sniff the air, then move.

There were bodies everywhere. Bloodied and torn, they covered the cave floors, carpeting it from blood-splattered wall to blood-splattered wall. The gore smeared the walls like primordial paintings speaking of an insufferable torment and the coming of a great evil. The man walked upon the bodies. When one groaned and stirred, he would halt and dispatch them with a short burst from his weapon. Their blood covered him, but it showed little on his

black clothing, only the streaks of gore upon his waxen face that burned in the darkness. He paused and licked the blood sprayed across his lips.

He paused in the flicker of a fire illuminating a central cavern. The weapon he carried was as unusual as the man who carried it. The FN P90 more resembled a ray gun than a conventional rifle or sub machine gun. Short, stubby, the 'bullpup' design resembled a plank fashioned from black plastic and steel. The barrel was merely a small stub jutting from the front of the weapon; the enclosed, moulded pistol grip was mounted near the front of the frame and the butt was a solid moulded block integrated into the entire design. The unique feature of the P90 is the magazine lying above the weapon with the cartridges at 90 degrees. This allows for a magazine capacity of 50 rounds. The penetrative power of the 5.7mm bullet is formidable. Empty cases are ejected downward through the hollow pistol grip.

He moved around the fire, turning bodies with his toe until he found what he wanted. He slung the P90 and unholstered the SMGs brother automatic pistol, FN Five-seveN, an equally unusual looking weapon. Moulded almost exclusively from plastic and advanced polymers, the elegantly strange pistol fired the same 5.7mm round as the P90, allowing for a magazine capacity of 20 rounds. The man chambered a round and moved closer to the fire.

The man looked barely human. The skin tightly wrapping his skull-like face was bloodless and paper-thin, every bone, vein, tendon and muscle visible as it moved beneath the translucent papyrus of his flesh. His flat, black eyes were utterly emotionless and almost hidden within shadowy sockets. His black hair was shorn close against his skull. A single bone-white scar sliced along the side of skull, carving a track through his inky hair, slicing off the top of his left ear, crossing his razor-sharp cheekbone and curving down over his hollow cheek and ending at his jawline. There was no emotion, nothing shown on this hellish blank canvas, but as he looked down something akin to a smile crossed his lips. They curled back mirthlessly revealing small, sharp teeth, colourless like ageing tombstones.

The wounded man at his feet looking back up at him was dressed like all the bodies in a mix of local Afghani dress and ill-matched military fatigues. His head-dress had tumbled off

to reveal stringy grey hair that matched his long, ragged beard. Firelight reflected off the scalp visible through the thinning locks plastered against his skull with sweat and blood. The black, beady eyes set above the long, almost parodically Semitic nose stared back. There was attempted defiance in the faltering gaze. But the man standing above him saw only fear. It was a look and a smell he was more than familiar with.

With indifference the armed man examined the bloodied Arab at his feet. His face was infamous, plastered across to worlds media, universally reviled as a monster, the figure behind possibly the world's greatest terrorist atrocity, a blow so devastating to the American heartland that the hunt for him had lasted almost a year. Seemingly forgotten, at least by an indifferent western media, the masters in Washington had moved from large-scale military action, to increasingly small clandestine operations. Finally they had called in a specialist. He had tracked his target to the northern-eastern Afghan border with an ambiguously placed Pakistan. Many in the Arab world lionised this man lying here as a great warrior and hero. These questions held no interest for the hunter; he merely had a target. He located his prey and then exterminated it without mercy.

The armed man cocked his head and ran his eyes over his prey. Both legs appeared shattered by explosions, his torso lay open, a ragged bloody wound that bubbled with each laboured breath.

“Who are you?” the Arab asked in halting English. The man above did not reply, just stared back with his dead, black eyes. “Are you an American? A Jew?”

“I am Max Schreck.” He replied in accentless English.

“What does that mean?” the Arab gasped, blood staining his teeth. The man calling himself Max Schreck did not reply.

“You can kill me. I am only one man. I shall be a martyr, my death will inspire millions of the faithful to rise up against the Zionists and their American masters.”

Schreck shrugged.

“My death will mean something!” he cried.

“Death doesn’t mean a thing.” Schreck fired twice, both rounds punching a single hole in the Arab’s forehead. A thread of blood ran from the small hole. Schreck lowered his weapon and fired three quick rounds into the Arab’s ravaged torso, all puncturing the already still heart.

Max Schreck reholstered his pistol and knelt by the fire. From a sheath on his belt he removed a large, serrated hunting knife. He placed the blade against the dead man’s neck and began to saw.

* * *

Max Schreck was a legend in his field. Among those who knew or needed to know, he was the alpha male of killers. Not that you’d think it too look at him. His appearance might make you think he was an undertaker, or someone who would have need of an undertaker in short order. But these impressions were not surprising. Schreck had the stench of death about him. Normal, respectable people sensing this would assign innocent explanations for this, like undertaking or terminal illness. But to the anointed or to anyone who cared to look a little closer, there could be no doubt about Schreck’s calling. He was a predator, a creature born to kill, without thought or remorse. To him killing was as natural and easy as breathing is to other people.

His cadaverous body moved like a reanimated skeleton, his medium height further diminished by a slight stoop. This along with his strange way of moving called to mind an insect. Some people might call him the bug or the mantis or some such thing, but never within his earshot. He was known as *The Golem*, after the creature of Jewish folklore, a human image brought to life, often to avenge a wrong, the Hebrew meaning literally ‘shapeless thing’. Otherwise it was just Max Schreck, the time name he had given himself. The original Max Schreck was the mysterious German actor of the 1920’s. Best known for the role of the vampire, the screen’s first Dracula, in Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, speculation long surrounded the

original Schreck. His bald, twisted, grotesque Count Orlock was so vivid it led to stories that the actor himself was in fact a vampire. Little was known of him before the filming began and even less after. During the making of the film he remained separate and always in character. Stories circulated about bloodletting and murder. The name Schreck in German means scream. It seemed natural for The Golem to assume the assumed name of another man, a man who may have been a monster.

No one knew where The Golem, the killer called Max Schreck came from. There was a lot a speculation from the people in his world and those in need of his services. Some said he was an Israeli, a former Sayaret Mahktal Special Forces or Mossad assassin. Others speculated he had sprung from behind the Iron Curtain, going freelance after the fall of the Soviet Union. Maybe he was ex KGB, GRU or Spetsnaz, or he could have come from within the lethal and impenetrable East German secret services. The truth was no one knew and it was from this puzzle that wilder speculation arose. There were whispers of the supernatural, even the divine or diabolical. The mystery merely added to the lustre of his formidable reputation.

Schreck, the mysterious Golem was a force a nature. More lethal and inescapable than the wrath of God. Once unleashed, the outcome was without doubt.

* * *

Schreck emerged from the cave, weapon slung, a large cooler in one hand. He had planted the electronic beacon inside the cave complex so Afghani forces allied to the US led alliance could find the site and discover the scene of carnage waiting for them.

Dawn was breaking; the probing fingers of light slithering above the horizon, reaching out to touch the rocky slope. Schreck bent and retrieved his bullpup Walther WA 2000 sniper rifle from its hiding place. He popped the six round magazine, checked the chamber, then reseated the clip and chambered 7.62mm hand-loaded round. He paused,

allowing the cool morning wind to wash over his face. He derived no pleasure from the sensation, just experienced it. Pleasure and pain for The Golem were so deeply immersed and obscured that they ceased to have any meaning. He felt no more than the rocks around him.

Schreck moved laterally across the steep incline of the rockface, WA 2000 in one hand, cooler in the other. He found a sheltered nook in the broken rock and settled in. Knees up, rifle across them, he stared blankly out across the grey horizon. In his hand, the homing beacon flashed.

An hour later the chopper came. The throb of its rotors sounded above the moan of the wind before it came into sight. Then out of the overcast sky the MH-60 Pave Hawk, the special operations variant of the Black Hawk, appeared. Its sleek black form skated along the broken desert floor. Moving in excess of 150mph, the heavily armed gunship threw out a broad jamming signal to block radar and all but selected radio frequencies. The MH-60 slowed as it approached the mountains. It climbed, the heavy torque putting out a rising shriek from the two GE 700 turboshafts.

When the helicopter was level with Schreck's position, he slowly rose to his feet. The Chopper manoeuvred closer as he approached. Schreck stepped up through the open side door and the aircraft immediately banked and peeled away from the mountain.

The crew chief slid shut the door behind Schreck and returned to his position behind the cockpit. Inside the rear compartment were four heavily armed, unkempt men, a Delta team who had been Schreck backup, not that he needed them. The men, although hardened operatives and trained killers, kept their distance from the lone assassin, regarding him with an equal mixture of awe and disquiet.

There was one other man waiting aboard. Dressed in unmarked military fatigues, a Colt Commando resting across his knees, he was too clean to be a soldier and he lacked the leathery menace of the D-boys. His eyes though were of a similar cold cast, eyes that had seen too much, the eyes of a man who done things most normal people could not or would not imagine. He was Schreck's CIA liaison, the man to whom it fell to handle the lethal asset.

“It’s done?” the CIA man asked.

Schreck just nodded.

“How did it go?” one of the Delta grunted. “How did the fucker die?”

“Like they always do. He just died.” Schreck’s voice was a low, dry rasp, devoid of all inflection. The D-boys nodded sagely with shared wisdom.

“You get the thing?” the CIA operative asked.

Schreck just pushed the cooler across the helicopter deck. The other man bent and popped open the lid and peered inside. “Jesus fucking Christ!” he quickly resealed the box. He swallowed and met the cool gaze of the Delta operatives.

A silence fell amongst the men, all but Schreck just staring down at the cooler.

“Mr Schreck, we have another job for you,” the CIA man broke the hush. The Golem turned his flat, dead gaze upon him. “We have a rogue asset on the ground in Iraq. A Dark Angel”

Schreck did not respond, his stare unflickering and apparently insensate.

“We want you to terminate our assassin.”

Chapter 29

Steiner headed southwest, meeting up with the Euphrates River. He followed the west bank out into the rocky wilderness of the desert.

Around 15 kilometres out he saw the bombed out Salman Pak Technical Research Centre. It had been hit in one of the early US bombing sorties. American intel had it made as a major research site for Saddam's biological and chemical weapons development program. When it was obliterated by two 2000lb laser-guided smart bombs, the Iraqi authorities screamed atrocity and duly invited gullible western journalists to tour the carefully arranged site. It was explained to them the facility was solely involved in the development of much needed drugs for the children of Iraq, children denied essential medication from the outside world due the UN sanctions. This was bullshit of course, on both counts. It was well known Salman Pak was one the top sites for the development of horrific weapons of mass destruction, chiefly the cultivation of biological agents: pathogenic bacteria (anthrax, plague, and *Clostridium perfringens*, which causes gaseous gangrene) and toxins (botulinium, aflatoxin, ricin and mycotoxins). There was developmental work done on chemical agents like sarin and CX. As for the withholding of drugs for Iraq's children by sanctions, this was just an age-old barefaced lie. Medicinal Drugs were exempted from the sanctions; Saddam's regime was just withholding them as a propaganda tool (and possibly as a punitive means of control and oppression). Steiner kinda hoped that the gullible journalists who reprinted the Iraqi lies after their visit to Salman Pak may have picked up something nasty on their little jaunt. Nothing like a spot of plague to reorientate your thinking.

As Steiner moved deeper into the wilderness, signs of human settlement dwindled. What the Iraqis probably called towns were barely villages: a few broken-down old mud dwellings and hastily erected cheap prefabricated units. It was a hideous hybrid of the worst of the old and the new. Filthy children played in the streets, amidst the filth and squalor. The adults sat about in torpid despair, only occasionally rousing themselves from their lethargy, often to beat the children to prepare them for their own hopeless future.

Steiner skirted these settlements. Sometimes he would set up an OP and sit and watch them for a few hours. Whether this was merely schadenfreude or a sense of shared misery, he couldn't have given you an answer. He just watched.

Eventually even these towns gave way to just the odd tumbledown collection of huts scattered across the desert plain. Steiner kept moving south-west following the river. He moved mostly at night, digging in and resting during the day. He saw little military activity, only occasional choppers and distant patrols.

As he travelled he came across more and more burned out wrecks scattered across the rocky plains and lining the dirt roads. Some may have been civilian, but most were unmistakably military. Iraqi Army trucks, APCs and more and more shattered, crumbling tanks. Some of these were newer wrecks from recent raids and incursions, but the decay indicated that most dated from the rout that ensued after the Iraqi collapse at the end of the Gulf War of '91.

Crossing into a small valley, the scene of carnage he encountered even shocked Steiner. Scattered across the plain for almost as far as the eye could see lay dozens, maybe hundreds of shattered armoured vehicles. He descended and walked amongst the burned, buckled wrecks. Almost every tank and APC was Iraqi, all ageing Soviet-era relics. Although the markings had long burned away, it was clear these were not elite Republican Guard units, but just regular military, populated by ill-trained, unmotivated conscripts and led by failed officers marking time.

The eerie calm of death hung over the battlefield. Steiner was reminded of walking through a vast graveyard. Amidst the skeletons of the dead vehicles there was still the odd bleached bone visible, scattered in the dirt or hanging from inside a blackened metal tomb, still clinging to some semblance of human form.

Steiner came across less than a dozen destroyed US vehicles and only three destroyed M1 Abrams tanks. The American vehicles had obviously been stripped of all vital components by American forces that had retrieved the dead of their side for proper burial.

Any other damaged Abrams had probably been towed away for repair or salvage. Either way it was clear that this had been a one-sided battle. The outnumbered and out-classed Iraqis had been caught up in one of the largest tank engagements since World War Two and had duly been cut to pieces, slaughtered even as they tried to flee.

Saddam had probably chosen to leave the wreckage and the dead as some kind of reminder. One would shrink from the term memorial. He couldn't give a rat's ass about these dead Iraqi boys. He just wanted the fear and horror of what happened here to permeate through his people, to keep them cowed.

Steiner passed through the battlefield. He halted on a hilltop and hunkered down to watch the activity in the dusty village below.

He spent a day and a night huddled in his little foxhole carved out of the rocky ground, poncho pulled over his head. Through binoculars and night-vision glasses he watched the torpid existence that passed for life in the crumbling settlement.

At first it seemed like all the rest. The resigned, hopeless adults plodding painfully through their tasks, or simply sitting slumped and lifeless. But this place was without the small mercy of the children. No children frolicked and played in the streets, there was no laughter. Steiner finally spied a single child, then as time progressed, one or two more. But all of the children below eleven appeared to have been touched by the war in a most terrible way. Stunted, deformed limbs, congenitally misshapen heads and faces were the most obvious signs. All were small and sickly, their skin grey and covered with sores, their thin wisps of hair barely covering their malformed scalps. Depleted Uranium, Steiner realised. The American forces in the Gulf had used ordnance loaded with depleted uranium, especially the armoured divisions. A shell tipped with the uranium had incredibly powerful penetrative force, able to puncture almost any enemy armour. The depleted uranium while safe in its inert state, however when a shell impacted and exploded, a microscopic cloud of radioactivity was released. So with each Iraqi vehicle hit, uranium was dispersed. In addition to this, The M1 Abrams, the main US battle tank also had depleted uranium in its armour plate, making it the

most heavily armoured tank in the world. But also, if struck by an enemy projectile, this life-saving armour in turn belched out a cloud of lethal radioactivity. The children living among the battlefields started falling sick soon after. Miscarriages became common, as did an unusually high concentration of birth defects. Infant mortality rocketed. Adults sickened too as the carcinogens spread, but it was the children who paid the highest price. Years after the end of the war, people were still suffering and dying.

Steiner knew all this. So did the West, so did Saddam and the Iraqi regime. But nothing was done. The sick became yet another political football, each side blaming the other. It was a hot topic for a while, then the media got bored and moved on.

Watching the sick and dying, Steiner wasn't sure how he felt. He accepted the inevitability of collateral damage in war. But it was the way these people had been first used, then abandoned and forgotten that angered him.

On nightfall on the second night, Steiner left the village. He headed off into the barren wilderness, disappearing into the rocky, razor-backed hills.

* * *

Steiner dug in on the north-west slope of the jagged hills, facing back towards Baghdad. Almost 100 miles off, the city was invisible, but still a pall of smoke could be made out in the distant sky, hovering above the capital. It was a week since he had walked out of the city, but still it burned.

He covered his foxhole with camouflaged netting and heat-resistant sheets. He wasn't so worried about the Iraqis tracking him using his body heat emissions, but whoever had fucked him back in the US probably had access to satellite imaging and plane overflight photography. If they found him using body-imaging technology, he had no doubt they would feed this to their new buddies in Baghdad. Unless they came after him themselves.

Steiner needed time to think. He was going to be here for a while. He could keep moving, but why waste energy pointlessly. He would be as safe here as anywhere else. He needed to rest and allow his mind to percolate the facts, sift through his impressions and instincts and find a course of action. Deep down he knew what had happened and what he had to do. But he needed the time to clear his head and find direction.

He settled into the cleft in the hillside he had made his home. With it camouflaged, he set out his provisions, MREs and water, first aid kit, radio scanner. He arranged his weapons around him: the M4 laying by his side, the loaded magazine taped to a second inverted clip for fast reload, Galil sniper rifle, positioned in front of him on its bipod. He also had two LAWs and an array of grenades. He holstered both his sidearms. Ammo was arranged carefully for speed of access. On the first night he strung his perimeter with Claymore mines, trip flares and motion detectors. Day and night he covered the approaches to his position through a spotting scope, binoculars and NVGs.

By the second day he was settled, his position secure. The smoke in the distance thinned and faded. He heard choppers patrolling in the distance and spotted the dust trail of a ground convoy some way off. But this was the only sign of life.

He was alone with just his thoughts. He shut down his conscious mind: that would do him no good. He cleared his head and hunched motionless in his foxhole and allowed the thoughts to come unbidden.

* * *

Day after day, Steiner sat motionless in the hollow carved out of the mountainside. He would only stir every couple of hours to take a sip of water, maybe pop a salt tablet. Three times a day he would eat lightly, consuming MREs without appetite. When he needed to relieve himself, he would piss in a bottle or shit in a plastic bag. At night he would crawl out of his foxhole and bury his waste in the rocky ground away from his position.

Otherwise he remained still, relaxed and loose in his covered OP. When he heard or spotted nearby activity, he would move to his spotting scope and watch. Airborne and ground patrols worked across the barren expanse, but none ventured his way.

Long ago, and at great cost, Steiner had learnt that conscious thought was a futile exercise. Worrying and obsession, restlessly picking at and forcing your thoughts only clouded your mind. Mental turmoil and unrest exhausted you and only obfuscated what would otherwise come to you. Goethe said that 'Man errs as he strives', and Steiner instead took a Zen approach to any question.

Sitting utterly still, his mind quiet, listening to his breathing, he would drift within himself. A novice could focus on one thing, one part of their body, a mantra, but Steiner had quickly passed through this. One could become transfixed and all jammed up. Instead he followed the route of Zen masters. He focused instead on total nothingness. He quietened his mind and body, his breathing soft, pulse rate and heart slowing, body completely relaxed. He had to get beyond ego. To achieve this he imagined he did not exist, that nothing around him was real, purely an illusion, phantoms conjured in the mind. The feeling of transcendence came only in fleeting glimpses at first, tantalising and invigorating. But finally one moved beyond ego, beyond yourself and everything that surrounded you in this chaotic world. Then there was just peace and complete lucidity.

So as the days passed he remained hidden, removed from himself and his surroundings, squatting in the dirt like some ancient ascetic. His beard grew; his clothes grew ragged and dirty. He ate and drank less, his weight dropped. He stared sightlessly out over the desert plain, dust covering his face, the sun bleaching the colour from his face like a portrait left exposed.

Thoughts would come unbidden into his mind, drift listlessly but left untouched. Slowly they would fade and pass. One by one ideas and impressions would surface from his subconscious, float across the screen before his inner eye, then move on. He would let them come and go, just passively observe and absorb.

Occasionally thoughts would surface and try and lure him into interaction. They would seduce and cajole, tempting him to reach out and touch. He resisted and they would pass, these devils and their seductive promises that would only lead to confusion and ruin.

Eventually, Steiner did not know when, his mind became utterly clear, serene and as clear and placid as a cool mountain lake. It was about this time, all sense of his own existence or any meaning or purpose forgotten, that he plunged still deeper into unfathomable depths. He saw everything, knew everything and didn't care. He was free, life could touch him no more, death was a waiting friend. What he did held no great meaning or purpose. Like everyone else, he was just a phantom passing through a hellish, contorted world.

Beyond ego and self. Beyond any sense of duty and obligation. Beyond good and evil. He was going to do this, not for himself or anyone else. He was going to do it because he could.

The most dangerous thing in this world is a purposeful man with nothing to lose.

*

*

*

40 days and 40 nights after he walked into the wilderness, Steiner returned to the city.

Chapter 30

Schreck sat alone in a corner of the hangar. In desert fatigues and heavily armed, he was at rest, all systems shut down. Eyes lightly closed, back straight, one hand on a loaded pistol.

“That the freak?” Murphy strutted across the hangar, escorted by an armed guard and Schreck’s CIA handler.

“That is Max Schreck, and I advise you to watch your mouth.” The CIA operative replied sharply.

“What’s your problem?”

“I’ve been handling him for the last three years. Be respectful, but distant. Don’t give him any extraneous or pointless information. Just give him the facts and nothing else. Most importantly don’t piss him off.”

“What’s he gonna do, kill me?” Murphy snorted.

“In a heartbeat.”

Schreck had been transferred by chopper via Pakistan to a carrier in the Arabian Sea, then flown north into Saudi Arabia. After refuelling in Riyadh he had been airlifted to this US airbase on the northern Saudi border with Iraq. No one had seen him sleep, he had just sat alone, sometimes with his eyes closed, sometimes not. He hadn’t uttered a word during the entire flight. On arrival, his CIA man gave him the full briefing and arranged for him to be issued with any clothing or equipment he needed.

Murphy had been ordered to meet with the killer by Logan.

“Fucking prima donnas, I’ve had enough of them lately.” The burly Delta officer muttered under his breath. The CIA man cast a derisory glance at him and put some space between himself and Murphy.

When they reached Schreck, Murphy waved the enlisted man away. As he turned he saw the Schreck’s eyes were open and fixed upon him. Unblinking, he considered him like some potentially interesting specimen under a microscope. Then he turned away, dismissing Murphy and fixing his gaze on his CIA liaison.

“We’ll be airborne in 15 minutes.” Schreck nodded. “This is Captain Murphy, he worked with Steiner and his team.” Schreck turned his dead eyes back onto the Delta officer.

“Tell me about Steiner.” His voice was an otherworldly rasp, seeming to emanate from deep within him.

“Well, I’ve seen his file and I met him briefly in the Gulf...” Murphy began self-importantly, but Schreck cut him off.

“I’m not interested in his file, I’ve seen it. I know about his past, and I have no interest in yours.”

Murphy bristled, his face flushing. “Well, straight off he’s an asshole.”

“Really.”

“Thinks he’s better than everyone else, thinks he knows best. Has to do everything his own way.”

“Well, how do you expect him to behave? Like you?” Murphy could have sworn there was almost a note of derision in this strange creature’s uninflected voice.

“He fucks with everyone, he isn’t right in the head.” Murphy fought his rising anger.

“How so?”

“I don’t know, little things. He’s got no respect.”

Schreck cocked his head and looked at what they had brought before him. “Did he come between you and your wife? This is what I hear.”

Murphy flushed beet red, his hands tightened into fists, “I don’t know where you get your fucking info, but that faggot...”

“Did he threaten to kill you?” Schreck’s lips twisted mirthlessly.

Murphy moved his lips wordlessly like a beached fish.

“If he comes back, he will kill you. I do not blame him.” Schreck indicated to his CIA man that he was finished.

As he was led away, Murphy turned a flushed face back towards the killer. “You freak, you and Steiner fucking deserve each other,” he was quickly hustled out of the hangar. Schreck ignored the shouts, he had already forgotten about Captain Neil Murphy.

* * *

The Pave Hawk special ops chopper flew at ground level. It skimmed the rough terrain, the low altitude and electronic jamming rendering the MH-60 invisible to all forms of radar. The craft was completely blacked out and the pilot and his crew, all of the 160th SOAR (The Night Stalkers) navigated by using night vision goggles and computerised terrain scanning.

Schreck sat alone in the darkened rear of the helicopter. Weaponry and ammunition were strapped all over his body. His small pack contained the most advanced GPS and satellite communication equipment. Not only could he send and receive scrambled radio transmissions to his controllers, he could also uplink real-time telemetry from US satellites overflying Iraq. They would hunt for the target and when acquired Schreck would make the kill.

The Pave Hawk slowed and descended, flaring its engines. Without a signal, Schreck dropped from the open doorway. The MH-60 peeled away and slipped back into the night. Silence descended.

Schreck stood, sand falling from his body. He checked the GPS; he was 15km south of Baghdad. He unslung his WA2000 sniper rifle and sniffed the air. The vast emptiness of the night enveloped him. He cocked his head as if listening to the deafening hush and then moved off into the darkness.

Chapter 31

Ali Hassan al-Majid's armoured limo pulled up outside his palatial family home. The two Land Rovers escorting him halted front and rear. The General climbed from the back of the limo and his bodyguard detail covered him as he entered the building.

Ali was the one surviving member of The Rais's trusted inner circle. With the deaths of Rokan and Abid Hamid Mahmoud, only Qusay and he remained. But not only had Ali survived, he had held onto all his powers and had them further enhanced under the new leader. This was a testimony to the wily old operator's skill. One does not survive in the hotbed of plotting and betrayal of Baghdad without a ruthless survival instinct. Ali had sensed the change in the wind and taken the necessary steps. He had long cultivated his relationship with Qusay as the heir apparent, but when he felt events shifting he had quickly hitched his wagon to the presumptive would-be leader. Qusay must have realised this because he had come to the old General. This was an enormous risk. As a senior General and The Rais's chief troubleshooter, Ali could easily have gone to his President and betrayed Qusay to his father. But he had realised it was time. He had joined with the young man and together they had plotted the removal of the President and the subsequent consolidation of power. When Qusay had seized power, Ali as one of The Rais's inner circle had been able to identify anybody remaining loyal to the old guard. Those he hadn't won over were immediately arrested and executed.

Now after more than a month of internal strife and murder, stability had been restored in the country. The nascent rebellions of the Kurds in the north and the Shi'as in the south had been snuffed out, and their allies in Iran massed on the border had been persuaded that intervention would be folly. The cities and the army had been purged. The Rais, their late, lamented former leader would have been proud, they had acted with the ruthlessness of the old President's idol, Stalin.

Ali was now the second most powerful man in Iraq, and he and he alone had the ear of the new President. He was an old man, but the General saw a glittering future ahead of him.

The warmth of the day remained in the house. It was a welcome relief after the chill of the night outside. He dismissed his bodyguards and headed for his private quarters.

Secluded from the world, he removed his uniform and donned silk pyjamas and dressing gown. Wearing slippers, he drank and ate a little of the meal his servants had prepared for him. He had little appetite, but ate anyway. He dismissed his servants for the night. He quietly sat alone, smoking a slim cigar. He gazed out of the open windows and over the balcony. He was very aware of the deathly hush the hung over the house. It was his family home, but he no longer had family here with him. His three daughters were married and had their own children. Of his two sons, one was a Colonel with the SRG stationed in the south, dealing with the Shi'a problem. His other son, Hussein was dead. He had been Ali's youngest child and his favourite. Handsome and vital, he had been named in honour of the illustrious leader of their al-Majid clan and President of the nation. Indeed the Rais had been like an uncle to the boy as he grew up. Hussein had joined the SRG and distinguished himself as a great warrior and leader. But nearly ten years ago his son had been arrested. A coup had been exposed amongst the young turks within the army. Many of Hussein's friends and peers had been among the plotters and it wasn't long before implication fell on Ali's son. The General had gone to his President to plead for his son's life, but to no avail. The Rais declared Hussein a traitor and demanded, as a test of loyalty, that Ali be the one to execute his son. The boy was brought before his father and the leader. A pistol was handed to Ali. He paused for a moment and looked from his son's eyes to those of the President, then back again. He shot his kneeling son twice in the head, his life-blood pouring over his shoes. Numbed, the President embraced him like a brother. But Ali's wife never forgave him, turning away from her husband. She died within two months of her son's death. Ali knew he had killed her as surely as he killed his own son. He had broken her heart and destroyed his family. To this day he

was haunted by one overriding doubt: Was his son guilty, or was his arrest and execution merely a test of loyalty engineered by The Rais? He knew his leader was more than capable of such an act.

Ali finished his cigar and wearily rose and went to his study. He entered the darkened room, only the desk lamp offering the slightest light. He skirted the shadows and reached for his chair.

He felt the cool steel of the blade touch his throat and froze. A voice whispered in his ear: "Make a sound and you will die." Ali felt his knees trembling and his heart swell painfully. "Understand?" Ali nodded slightly and barely whispered a yes. "Sit, slowly." Feeling suddenly very old, the General sunk into his seat.

The man took the knife from his throat and rounded the desk and sat on the chair facing Ali. In his hand he held a silenced automatic pistol. He was dressed entirely in black, even his face covered with a knitted ski mask. He reached up with his free hand and pulled off the balaclava. Ali wasn't sure if he was pleased or even more frightened when he saw it was a westerner. The man's pale skin burned in the darkness. He smiled crookedly.

Ali had thought for a moment that Qusay had sent someone to kill him. But that could not be, this man was not an Iraqi, as he should have realised from his heavily accented Arabic.

"Do you know who I am?" the westerner asked.

Ali shook his head.

"Of course you do. Think." He waited.

When Ali finally spoke, his voice was a croak. "You are the man the American's sent. The leader of the group that killed the President."

The man nodded. "My name is Steiner. I can tell you that because I am going to kill you." His voice was soft and not unpleasant. It took a few seconds for the message of his words to reach Ali. He opened his mouth to speak. "Do not try and plead for your life," the man called Steiner interrupted. "Begging is so demeaning, not just for you but also for me."

"I can help you," Ali whispered in a broken voice. "I can get you out of the country."

“I’m not going anywhere, I have unfinished business.”

Ali opened his mouth to speak again, but Steiner cut him off.

“You will die quickly and painlessly or you will die a slow, immensely painful death. These are your only choices.” Steiner paused and lit himself a cigarette, the pistol levelled on the Iraqi never wavering. “All you have to do is answer my questions. They are very simple questions.” He took a long drag on his cigarette. “Do you understand? Yes or no.”

“Yes.” Ali croaked.

“Good.” Steiner placed his cigarette in the ashtray but didn’t put it out. Smoked curled languorously upwards into the darkness.

“Did the American’s tell you we were coming.”

Ali paused for a moment, but saw no choice. “Yes.”

“Good. Who contacted you?”

“I don’t know.”

Steiner fired once, the discharge of the weapon like a soft slap. Ali’s left elbow exploded. He clamped his good hand over the wound as it pumped out blood. He cry was choked off when he saw Steiner raise his finger to his lips.

“I have killed all your servants and all your bodyguards in the house. I don’t think anyone will hear you, but I cannot be sure. I don’t want to have to gag you,” his voice remained soft and reasonable.

Ali sobbed quietly.

“Once more. Who gave you the information.”

“It came through CIA channels, other than that I cannot tell you.” Ali flinched when Steiner frowned. He continued hastily. “Qusay has been in contact with certain individuals within the CIA for months.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. They wanted to get rid of The Rais, but wanted a smooth transition of power. Qusay is ambitious and he is clever. He can be very reasonable. He could work with the Americans. They knew this and so they began working together.”

“And I nearly fucked it all up for them, didn’t I?” Steiner smiled wearily.

“You’re coming was just fortuitous. We saw it as a way to remove The Rais and install Qusay without any risk to ourselves.”

“Worked out nicely for you didn’t it?” Steiner took a single drag from his cigarette and put it out.

“Only Qusay and myself know all the details. A handful of others maybe know bits and pieces, but they can all be trusted.” Ali was sweating heavily.

“That’s nice.”

“There is no need for this. You can go home. We can get you money.” Ali’s voice rose in pitch as he leant forward. “We can talk to your people in America, we can make things right.”

Steiner didn’t answer. He stood and slowly rounded the desk. He pulled Ali’s chair back and leant it back. He pressed the muzzle of his pistol against the Arab’s forehead.

“You will tell how to get to Qusay,” he whispered.

“Why?”

“Because I am going to kill him.”

* * *

Steiner slipped out of the room half an hour later. Behind him, the bloody figure lay sprawling in the chair behind the desk. He had been shot once through the left eye and once in the heart. He had earned his quick death.

Chapter 32

“The rabbit is running.” Schreck listened closely to the radio transmission, headphone clamped to his ear. “Looks like our boy took out Ali Hassan al-Majid. Killed him and around twenty of his personal staff. Vanished without a trace. We’ve told our friend in Baghdad to get out of the city. He just sits there waiting for Steiner, we’re going to have trouble interceding. We draw him out into the open away from the city, you or the Iraqis can finish this.”

“When is he leaving?”

“Dawn. You’ve got six hours.”

*

*

*

The convoy moved at high speed through the city. It left the presidential palace as dawn broke and made quick progress through the empty streets. The armoured limousine was escorted by wheeled APCs, Land Rovers front and rear and three truckloads of Special Republican Guard troops. Travelling in two armoured troop carriers were elite troops from the Special Location Group, Salih (Mobile Group). The two SLG vehicles sandwiched the limo.

It headed south-east out of the city, its progress unhindered, all checkpoints held open and the roads cleared. Approaching the final checkpoint at the city’s edge, the lead vehicles barely slowed. The barrier was up and a single guard stood at his post. Inside the gatepost they could see more personnel seated. A machine gun emplacement and a single APC covered the OP.

The lead Land Rover drew parallel with the guard and in that instant he vaporised in a shattering explosion. The blast blew out the vehicles windshield, flying shrapnel and bodyparts killing the driver and front passenger. Simultaneous to the triggering of the explosive strapped to the guards body, the road beneath the lead Land Rover and following APC erupted, flipping the vehicles as flame engulfed them.

The convoy screeched to a halt, troops quickly spilling from the three trucks, two fore and one aft of the limo. The Claymore anti-personnel mines and incendiary charges blew in a daisy-chain surrounding the halted column. The men out in the open were cut to shreds, the survivors roasted alive by the white phosphorous and Thermite charges.

The APC parked in the shadow of the gatepost opened up with its 20mm cannon. It took out the first armoured troop carrier with a short volley, the rounds ripping open the vehicle. The second SLG vehicle tried to manoeuvre out of the jammed column, rounding the limo. Troops spilled from its rear as it broke ranks. The gatepost APC ripped it apart as it moved, carving the troops to pieces, disarticulated bodyparts flying through the air.

The final escorting APC at the column rear raced round the halted vehicles, cannon and machine guns firing. As it climbed the curb, anti-tank mines detonated, flipping the vehicle and blowing it apart. The tail Land Rover opened up with its mounted machine gun, but lay hidden behind the burning vehicles.

The gatepost APC loosed a savage burst of cannon fire on the limo, the explosive 20mm rounds puncturing the armour and shattering the glass. The vehicles bucked and shuddered as it came apart. The APC ceased fire and seconds later lurched forward, its engine roaring, belching smoke from its exhaust. The heavy vehicle quickly gathered speed and slammed into the side of the shredded limo, flipping it over onto its roof and slamming it into the far curb.

The driver's hatch of the APC popped open and Steiner jumped clear, hitting the burning asphalt, rifle in hand. He quickly rounded the vehicle and approached the overturned limo. The broken doors lay open, ragged bodies spilling from it front and rear. Steiner fired into each body, then flipped them with the toe of his boot.

Dropping to one knee, he craned his head to look inside the overturned vehicle. "Shit!" he straightened up.

“He isn’t in there.” The voice was soft and uninflected. That the voice spoke in English caused Steiner to start. “He’s in a helicopter. He should be airborne now. He’s heading to the palace. 25 miles, shouldn’t take too long.”

Steiner didn’t turn. He remained completely still. He was aware of the weight of the rifle in his hands. “The convoy was to draw me out?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to turn around.”

“Slowly.”

Steiner turned, keeping his rifle held low, the muzzle pointing at the ground. The man was aiming down on him, the P90 sub machine gun tucked into his shoulder. He was dressed in black fatigues, the dark cloth highlighting his bloodless, translucent skin. His flat, black eyes never wavered. The muscles moved beneath colourless skin. The face was a death mask.

“The Golem.” Steiner almost smiled. “Washington sent you?”

Schreck nodded.

“They must be desperate to stop me.”

Schreck didn’t answer. Steiner looked into his fathomless eyes. Schreck’s finger tightened on the trigger. The Iraqi lunged into the open, AK gripped awkwardly. Schreck spun and put a short burst into the man and he crumpled. When the assassin turned back, Steiner had his rifle up. There was silence as both men squared off.

The rear Land Rover screeched round the column, the .50 calibre machine gun mounted on the rear belching indiscriminate fire. As it reached the two men, both turned and emptied their weapons into it, killing the driver and passenger instantly, ripping them apart. The gunner in the rear was flipped out of the vehicle and the shredded Land Rover meandered lifelessly until it rolled to a halt, bumping softly against the blasted checkpoint.

Steiner and Schreck looked at each other, a look of recognition passing between the two men.

“Maybe this isn’t the time or place for this?” Steiner grinned crookedly. Schreck just shrugged. Both men lowered their weapons and reloaded. A helicopter gunship thundered overhead. The roar of approaching vehicles and the clatter of footsteps sounded in its wake.

SRG troops swarmed through the wrecked column. They appeared wreathed in smoke. Steiner burst out, firing as he moved. The stunned Iraqis scattered as the first men went down. Before they could muster any resistance, Steiner had reached the buildings. He ducked down by the wall and continued firing into the scattered attackers.

The helicopter gunship swooped down low, opening up with its cannon and machine guns. There was a shriek and a white vapour trail arced up from the column and slammed into the belly of the aircraft, ripping it open. It stuttered for a moment then just fell from the sky. It detonated as it crashed upon the leading Iraqis.

Schreck appeared from the column, tossing aside the spent LAW. He brought up his P90 and began firing as he moved forward. He walked into the flames, moving among the scattered Iraqis, firing as he moved. Steiner watched as he disappeared. Out of the smoke and flames he could here the short bursts of the man’s weapon and the snap of returning fire. Choked off screams echoed over the secondary explosions. Panicked Iraqis fled into the open, Steiner picked them off. Then came a thunderous explosion and the gunfire faded into the distance.

Steiner headed off among the buildings. He moved quickly from doorway to doorway, then moved quickly through the city blocks. He caught the occasional flash of a panicked civilian face, but saw no other sign of life.

Reaching a street corner, he saw a parked Land Rover and a small squad of men gathered. He paused, checked his weapon, then walked out. He was within feet of the group before he was spotted. One man cried out. Steiner put a single round through his throat before the words were out. The other men spun around, fumbling with their weapons. Steiner killed the officer next; two rounds centre mass, then the two NCOs, one through the heart, the other in the face. The two remaining soldiers stood transfixed. Steiner was within arm’s reach of

both. He shot the first in the chest, killing him instantly, then turned his weapon on the last man. The muzzle rested against his forehead. The man's lips moved slowly, "Please!" Steiner shot him through the head.

He reloaded then climbed into the Land Rover. He slammed the vehicle into gear and headed out of the city.

Chapter 33

Steiner got about fifteen miles away from Baghdad before the Land Rover ran out of gas. He dumped the vehicle and headed off on foot. He moved through the rocky foothills of the sawtooth mountains shadowing the main highway. Helicopters patrolled overhead.

He moved fast, keeping the highway within sight. There was little or no traffic on the cracked and sun-bleached roadway. Occasional checkpoints were easily avoided.

By nightfall he had reached the palace. He climbed into the hills overlooking the complex. It seemed different to the other '*palaces*' The Rais had built to circumvent UN inspection. The old sandstone fortress at the heart of site appeared to be 18th or 19th century and was of classic Iraqi design. It was positively Kiplingesque in its grandeur as he looked out over the desert plain. With battlements and towers it was a palace in the truest sense. Outside the old, walled battlements of the palace lay less aesthetically pleasing barracks and razor wire fences. Machine gun emplacements, guard towers and checkpoints crisscrossed the interior and ringed the site. Beyond the wire and the towers were undoubtedly minefields.

Steiner lay prone and studied the complex through binoculars. The entire site was bathed in artificial light and heaved with activity. He quickly spotted the helicopter on its pad. This was probably Qusay's. He continued to watch and the night drew on and the deadening chill descended.

As dawn approached, he began to sense that he himself was being watched.

*

*

*

He felt the weight of the scope sighted on the back of his neck. The reticle bored into his brain stem. He guessed the shooter was up to a kilometre away. He was slowly moving closer for a clean shot. Steiner couldn't see or hear anything; he just felt the ominous presence approaching. Max Schreck, the Golem.

When the night had reached its darkest in the dead hours before dawn, Steiner slowly moved off. Keeping close to the ground, he started crawling until he had some high ground between him and the approaching Schreck. Far enough distant from the palace compound and with his rear covered, he rose to a crouch and picked up his pace. He took care to stay low and to obscure his tracks. He zigzagged and stopped periodically to scan his rear with NVGs. He saw nothing, but knew Schreck was there.

Sweat soaked Steiner's fatigues despite the chill. His heart pounded and muscles ached. This wasn't the thrill of combat with the frisson of near death; this was an ominous weight bearing down on him. For the quarry there was no thrill of the hunt. More than the threat of sudden death, it was the omnipresence of the invisible figure dogging him. Like some paternalistic, interventionist god teasing, the shadow bore down.

Steiner tried to remain calm. His pace kept rising recklessly as he tried to outstrip his shadow. *Why didn't he just shoot?* He slowed and scanned, wishing the fight would just come. Like his childhood, it wasn't the eventual explosions of violence, it was the constant, inescapable pressure. Building, crushing him. He had no control, he was being driven and herded. Like a passenger in a car driven by a stranger to an unknown destination. He needed control, but instead the unknown brought its old fears.

Dawn stained the horizon. Steiner reached a small ridge and rounded it. He ascended the back of the rocky outcrop, crawling to the crest. He unslung his Galil and hunched behind the scope. The cold sun rose at his back, spilling over his head, washing over the barren desert basin. A stale wind kicked up the loose dirt covering the broken ground. Shadows spilled from scattered rocks and pooled in hollows pitting the arid lunar landscape. Nothing moved. Steiner wiped the sweat from his eyes and raised his binoculars. Nothing. But he knew Schreck was out there, he could still almost feel his gaze upon him. He had reversed the table somewhat, but still he could not escape the sense of dread that crept over him.

Steiner lay prone watching the day pass. He drank from his canteen and tried to ignore the tremor in his hand. He let the heat of the sun warm his cramped body. His mind

stilled some as he lay waiting. He followed his slow, deep breathing as a querulous calm descended on him. But deep in his gut a questioning fear still gnawed.

Steiner had always progressed and prospered by his own reckless impetuosity. He feared neither pain nor death. He feared uncertainty. He would rather rush headlong into hell than to wait under some unknown threat. This had always been a grave character flaw, especially for someone in his line of work. When in control, he could wait indefinitely. But driven and hounded, he would crack.

Did Schreck somehow know this?

Steiner drove his fingers into the ground, the broken stones slicing into his flesh.

* * *

Schreck lay prone, his outline blurred by the ghillie suit he wore. The overalls were covered with woven ribbons of cloth and smeared with grime. Even close up he was almost invisible against the desert floor. Inside the small hollow, a pile of broken rocks on its forward lip, he propped his Walther sniper rifle in the crook of his arm. He peered through his 20x spotting scope.

He had slowly crawled the last few hundred metres as the sun inched across the sky. As the heat of the morning brewed he had advanced over the broken ground, the razor sharp rocks grinding beneath him. As the sun reached its zenith he had reached the position and settled in.

Steiner's head occasionally bobbed above the back of the distant outcrop. 800 metres according to the range finder. Schreck lay in wait. Time for him had no meaning. He felt nothing. He was as unassailable as the rocks scattered around him. He was free from the raging passions, fears and wants of most men. He lay like a lizard in the sun. His mind calculated variables dispassionately, evaluated sensations and choices like a machine. He could out-wait anyone or anything.

He remained cool beneath the scorching sun. His heart beat slowly and his blood ran cold through his veins. He watched and waited.

*

*

*

A heat raged inside Steiner, boiling and curdling. The fear knotted in his stomach and spread out through his extremities. His limbs felt numb and insensate. He drew the combat knife from his belt, the grip awkward and strange in his hand. He rolled his sleeve and drew the icy blade across the smooth skin of his inner arm. The flesh softly peeled open and the blood oozed from the wound. He felt his tension ebb for a moment, the pressure building inside dissipating.

For a while he lay still again. But slowly the gnawing tension returned. A steel band of scalding pressure wound tightly round his head. A miasma of pain fell over him. He fought the debilitating waves of nausea, but the very effort to deny the pain only increased it.

So many times he had just wanted to jump up and expose himself. Let the bullet come and end this. Something always stopped him. Reason or cowardice, he didn't know. He just hung on.

The heat of the afternoon lay heavy in the air as the sun slid lower in the sky. Gradually it slipped behind him, the searing rays burning across the desert plain.

Steiner squirmed. His eyes searched the barren ground. Twitching nerves plucked at his muscles. He caressed the furniture of the Galil propped before him. He saw nothing. He wiped a hand across his eyes and buried his face in the dirt.

The hours crept by. Minute by agonising minute. Steiner gave up. His body felt heavy as it sank into the dirt. He rested his chin on his arm and stared blankly out. He had reached his end and burned out. It always happened like this. The burden grew too much and he was forced to buckle and let the fear wash over him. Now he felt spent and empty. But he felt a peace, albeit an unnatural one. The crushing burden of life had led to his embrace of death.

His flat eyes gazed out. Something caught his attention. He backtracked. What was it? Then he saw it again, the slight inconsistency of colour and texture in the patch of ground. He looked through his binoculars, but could not make it out, something tucked behind some rocks in a hollow. 700, 800 metres. He reached for his range finder as he pulled his rifle closer.

The snap of the shot reached him seconds after the impact. The ground in front of his face exploded, the broken stones peppering his flesh. As the flat crack of the discharged weapon echoed, he recoiled, rolling away from the impact. A second bullet rent the air by his left cheek; he felt its heat as it cleaved the air. This time Steiner brought up his own weapon and opened up. He fired round after round, spent shells spiralling from the breach, rolling through the loose shale. His first shots were wild, but he acquired the target quickly, concentrating his fire on the position.

Through his scope he watched the stones piled in front of the hollow explode. He fired repeatedly, pounding the obstacle until it crumbled. He emptied the 20 round clip and reloaded. He fired five more times then halted. The dust slowly cleared. He searched through his scope. Something was different, the irregularity gone.

He saw the muzzle flash, twenty metres to the side of the original position. The round snapped through the air at 900 metres a second, reaching Steiner before his brain could react or even comprehend. It sliced through his left cheek and ripped into his shoulder. It cleaved open the flesh, nicking his clavicle, and exited the rear, leaving a gaping wound. Steiner could hear the 7.62mm round continuing on its path as he fell. His rifle tumbled from his hands and he rolled down the rear of the slope.

He lay still at the base of the rocks, dust covering him. He groaned and struggled to rise. Blood pooled beneath him and saliva fell from his mouth as he rose on quivering arms. He vomited once and collapsed face down in the dirt.

*

*

*

Schreck saw the explosion of blood, but he already knew he had made the shot. He watched the dirt and blood cloud the air as Steiner vanished. He waited and saw nothing more.

When Steiner had opened up on his position, he had slipped into the dried up creek that ran from the hole he occupied. He slithered the twenty or so metres and emerged in his secondary position. He acquired his target and fired before Steiner even spotted him.

He doubted the American was dead, but probably hurt badly. Either way, he would wait, then finish the job.

* * *

Steiner came to. He flipped over onto his back and stared at the sky. Pain radiated out from his shoulder, but he welcomed it. It clarified and focused his mind. This was something definite. Everything was clear and simple now.

He ripped the first aid kit from his webbing with his good right hand. He give himself a shot of morphine and bound up his shoulder the best he could. Blood quickly oozed through the dressing. He felt his cheek; the flesh laid back over open raw tissue and bone. He peeled the flap back and put in a few clumsy stitches to hold it.

Night was already streaking across the sky as the sun faded and died, sizzling as it slipped beyond the horizon. Steiner took a drink from his canteen and gave himself another morphine shot. Schreck would come when it was dark.

Steiner sat upright. His left arm was useless and hung it in a makeshift sling fashioned from his camouflage scarf. The Galil lay at the top of the rocks. He scrambled to his pack and remaining weapons. He checked the M4 and hung in on its short strap from his right shoulder. He dumped any unnecessary equipment. He shed his flak jacket. He strung his webbing with grenades and ammunition. He holstered both his pistols and slung the short shotgun he carried. He took just one canteen and left everything else.

Travelling light, it was still going to be a struggle. He stood and as darkness fell he moved off.

* * *

Schreck reached Steiner's position near midnight. He found the abandoned equipment and knelt to touch the blood covering the ground. He raised his head and looked out into the darkness.

* * *

Steiner broke into a run as the chill night enveloped him. His breathing and the pounding of his heart filled his ears. Blood soaked through his clothes and poured from his face as his wounds reopened. He ran without aim or reason, just to feel the sensation. The cold air stung his lungs. He almost laughed as his boot thundered against the ground.

Blindly he staggered and reeled on. Blood began to fill his boots and he felt light-headed. He swayed and stumbled. He tripped once and went down on one knee. He paused for a moment, breaths sobbing from his heaving chest. He vomited, then slowly stood and moved on at a walk. Soon his steps became erratic as he dragged his feet, toes catching the ground. He began to zigzag in the darkness. His vision swam.

The shot came from nowhere. It ripped open his calf and he crumpled. He rose onto all fours, travelled a few yards then tumbled into the dry gully and was swallowed by the darkness.

* * *

Schreck moved slowly along the gully edge. The dry creek was deep. Peering over, the darkness hanging in its shallow swam like poisonous water. He had slung his sniping rifle and instead cradled his P90 sub machine gun. He crouched, listening. He cocked his head but heard nothing. He moved on.

Moving parallel with the creek he quickly found where Steiner had gone down. Blood covered the ground. He edged closer to the banks of the gully and jumped down. Crouching in the darkness he touched the floor and felt the dampness. He raised his hand; it shone black with blood. He ran his palms across the creek-bed and found the drag marks and began to track them. He moved slowly, keeping low, fingers reading the soil like braille.

After a few minutes he came to a bend in the creek. Leaning into the bank, he ran his left hand along the wall, weapon held in his right.

The crack of the M4 splintered the night. Schreck leapt back as the burst of fire blew apart the creek wall. The flash of the weapon lit up the gloom. He juted his P90 around the bent and loosed a blast, then swung into the open, firing as he moved. The flame leaping from the muzzle of the weapon lit his path. He placed his feet carefully step after step, squeezing off burst after burst.

Return fire spat out of the shadows. Steiner was moving. Schreck tracked him. He heard the M4 snap dry. He broke into a run. He heard the boom as the M203 launched the grenade. He reeled back; dropping low as the flechette round passed overhead and slammed into the bank behind him. The blast rippled over his body and shards of metal sliced closely by, slicing through his clothes and flesh. He rose up quickly, firing the SMG as he rose, flame leaping from the muzzle. In return a shotgun boomed repeatedly from the darkness. Both men continued firing until their weapons ran dry.

Schreck rose, letting the P90 fall from his hands. He unholstered his pistol as he moved. He worked the slide and chambered a round. He could make out Steiner in the gloom. He was drawing his won sidearm. Schreck fired once, then reached the other man. He rested the muzzle of his pistol against Steiner's upturned forehead.

Steiner smiled. Blood covered his face. His clothes clung to his body, sodden with gore. He let the pistol in his hand fall back. The weapon hit the soil with a soft thud. Both men looked at each other. Schreck's bloodless face shone in the darkness.

Steiner slowly placed a cigarette between his lips and lit it. Schreck kept his weapon to the other man's head.

Steiner looked up sadly. The cigarette hung from the corner of his mouth.

"When you're ready then," he folded his hands in his lap and waited.

Max Schreck straightened his arm and nodded.

The crack of the shot echoed through the creek. Schreck lurched and blood gushed from his throat. The pistol wavered in his hand. A second shot blew out his chest. He looked down at the wound uncomprehendingly, then looked back at Steiner.

"Shit happens!" Steiner shrugged.

Schreck walked away and sank down against the wall. He rested his head in his chest, then lay still.

Vansen came out of the darkness, M4 in the crook of her arm. She barely spared a glance for the lifeless assassin. She stepped over him and crouched down in front of Steiner.

"Will you look at the fucking state of you?" she touched his face. "I can't leave you alone a second."

Chapter 34

Qusay bade goodnight to his wife and children and retreated to his study. He poured himself a scotch on the rocks and sank behind his desk. Of course alcohol like so much else Qusay enjoyed was forbidden by the Koran. But in all things he was a pragmatist. He was not an idealist, let alone a fanatic. He regarded pleasure as the cornerstone of life. And Qusay's greatest pleasure was power. He enjoyed drink, gambling and women, but all paled into insignificance before his greatest love.

So he would drink in moderation and he liked to gamble, and although he loved his wife as a man should, he enjoyed the company of many beautiful women. But he allowed nothing to stand in the way of greatest desire, his greatest vice.

He had gratefully flourished for years as his father's protégé and chosen successor. He had loved his father in his own way. But he had known it was time for him to take the reins of power. He could no longer wait for his father's passing and he knew he would never simply stand aside for his son, it was not in his nature.

Qusay had long plotted. He had been careful and patient. He had manoeuvred subtly, careful never to expose himself and never to reveal his intentions. He sounded out potential allies and enemies, positioning himself and those necessary to him. He had waited for the time to come.

The American plot had merely been opportune. In fact it had been perfect. When the CIA warning reached him, he had realised here was the chance he had waited so long for. He had kept the information from his father and continued the contact with the Agency he had also been nurturing over the years. Over time he had made it clear to the American's at Langley that he was a man they could deal with. Now was the pay-off for both sides.

Qusay had attained his cherished goal, even more easily than he could have allowed himself to imagine. His power was consolidated. He would rule his nation as firmly as his revered father, but he would engineer its acceptance back into the international community. In

time the wealth of Iraq would flourish again and the country with him at its head was resume its natural place as the leader of the Arab world.

He sat back in his seat. He emptied his tumbler and felt the warmth of the liquor radiate from his gut. He lit a cigar.

Of course there was still this American out there. But one man can only do so much. Soon he would be dead and everything would be assured. Nothing could stop the inevitability of his own destiny. The smoke from his cigar curled heavenwards. He smiled and slowly stood. He checked his watch. It was midnight, he would visit his mistress, she would be asleep, warm and ready for him as she always was.

* * *

The hum of the generators rolled over the desert stillness, the fizz of the blazing searchlights cooking the cool air. Troops still moved about the compound, but as the night wore on their movements grew lazy and stuporous. Guards leant on their elbows in the elevated guard towers, cigarette smoke wafting on the dead wind. Muttered oaths and whispered conversation bubbled along with the electronic hum of the base.

The two troops in the first guard tower gazed mournfully out into the dark. One smoked, leaning on the ledge, the other picked his nose with a vigorous passion. The double pop of the silenced rifle was lost in the ambient noise. The smoker flopped dead, his spine severed by the first shot. The nose picker died less than two seconds later, the sub-sonic round cutting through his raised hand, punching into his face, then tumbling through his brain, obliterating it. He crumpled, index finger still jammed up his nostril.

The guards in the second tower died seconds later, both taken down with single shots to the brain stem. They just dropped like rag dolls.

A shadow moved along the electrified perimeter fence. The sentries patrolling the interior continued obliviously.

The occupants of two more guard towers died without notice. The blood pooled black on the decks and ran unseen down the wooden struts elevating the platform.

The figure crouched in the shadow of the fence. Electrodes were clipped in place, cutting the feed of power to the area of wire. Quickly the intruder snipped the wire and rolled inside. The procedure was repeated on the secondary fence, then they led the second person inside.

Throughout the next hour, life apparently continued much as ever. But within the shadows, darkened figures moved. The last of the guard towers were neutralised.

Sentries patrolling in ones and twos were taken from behind with knife and silenced pistol. They died quickly and without a sound, their bodies dragged back into the shadows.

Anyone observant enough would have noticed the unnatural silence that descended over the compound through those sixty minutes. Within that time all guard towers had been taken out and all sentries eliminated. Only those safely inside remained alive when the clock reached 2.00am.

The first blast obliterated the main gatepost, the occupants and buildings ripped apart in the explosive fireball. Simultaneously a daisy chain of blasts rippled across the compound: main barracks, armoury, motor-pool, helipad, generators and secondary guardhouses. Last to be taken out was the communications centre, just as they began sending out the alarm; the building was vaporised in an explosion of fire and shrapnel. The severed antenna tower wavered for a moment then tumbled into the whirling flames.

Within seconds, everyone within the main compound was dead. The alarm within the palace echoed feebly as the sounds of the explosions faded. Fire washed over the outer base. The main guardhouse on the place front gate burst open and the detail spilled out. A barrage of automatic fire ripped them apart as they exited the door, then a recoilless rifle put an 84mm HE round into the building, blowing it apart.

In the flickering flames of the shattered guardhouse, a figure moved into the palace gateway, rifle up. They fired several short burst into the palace, then launched an M203 grenade. Screams echoed from within as they entered.

* * *

Qusay emerged from his mistress's bedroom as the first explosions sounded. He strode down the passageway, dressing as he moved. He strapped on his holstered pistol and an aide handed him a SIG automatic rifle.

“What's happening?” he demanded of the officer in charge of his protection detail.

“It appears to be a large-scale assault on the palace. The perimeter was penetrated and the garrison wiped out. They are inside the palace.” The Captain fought to keep the panic from his voice.

“How many?”

“We don't know,”

Qusay elbowed past the man and chambered a round.

“Sir, you should join your family in the shelter,” the Captain called uselessly after the President.

* * *

Gunfire and explosions echoed through the palace. Qusay led his men towards the gunfire. Everywhere he looked were bodies. Blood smeared the walls like an abattoir. They reached the central courtyard. Smoke filled the air. Men fired down from the battlements. It was unclear if there was any return fire or where it might be coming from. Then Qusay saw someone in the smoke, moving fast across the courtyard. He raised his rifle and fired. His

action galvanised his bodyguards, who joined fire. The swirling smoke swallowed up the figure again.

A burst of fire ripped out of the smoke and some of Qusay's bodyguard went down.

"Back, back!" the detail forced Qusay back. He roared his disapproval, fighting them as they went. Gunfire followed them, the rear-most men falling in their wake.

The guards on the battlements swarmed, their undisciplined fire raking the courtyard. Many just held their rifles above their heads and let rip.

Precision fire opened up on the elevated positions. Single rounds started taking the guards down one at a time. They couldn't fix the shooters location. Men continued to die. Cohesion broke down. The survivors fled, running for cover.

SSO bodyguards tried to steel the Republican Guards resolve, but panic had set in. The SRG men opened up on the presidential guards, firing wildly as they fled. The enraged bodyguards returned fire, cutting down the deserters. Open gunfights broke out, Iraqi against Iraqi. Pockets battled each other through the winding passages. Smoke and fire filled the air, blood and hair splattered the walls.

* * *

Gunfire still echoed throughout the building. Qusay stood ankle-deep in blood. The palace was on fire. The commander of the SLG detachment stationed inside the palace reported.

"We have resumed control." His face was grave. His wounded left arm was in a makeshift sling.

Qusay nodded. The Special Republican Guard collapse had been halted. To do this, the SSO had killed every SRG man within the palace building. A small civil war had raged for around thirty minutes. Outnumbered and their will broken, the Republican Guard soldiers had offered little resistance. Qusay had supervised the execution of the survivors.

"The attack?" Qusay reloaded his rifle.

“We have one pinned down in the courtyard.”

Qusay smiled. “There is only one.”

“Sir?”

“It is the American. The assassin who killed my father. He has returned.”

“Impossible, sir. It is an army!”

Qusay turned his back on the Colonel and addressed the assembled officers and men.

“We will launch a mass assault on the courtyard. He will be unable to cope with the numbers.

The time has come to finish this.”

* * *

The sudden explosion of gunfire erupted from all sides. Black-suited combat troops swarmed the courtyard, moving en masse from every direction. A blood curdling battle-cry echoed above the rattle of weapons. Covering fire came from the arched doorways and the battlements overhead.

The courtyard immediately vaporised in a ripple of continuous explosions. Claymores ripped the attackers apart, bodies crashing on top each other, eviscerated and disarticulated. High explosives opened up the ground itself; earth and shrapnel blasted in thick waves as the dead and dying soldiers were swallowed up. Incendiary charges blew creating a sea of liquid fire that filled the cauldron of the courtyard.

Broken and bloodied, the survivors ran, but more explosions awaited them. Tripwires and timers triggered more Claymores and C4. Thermite and White Phosphorous fed the fire. Human torches dashed upon the burning ground, shrieking and dancing Saint Vitus Dance as they joined the dead.

Qusay looked on in horror, powerless.

Charges lining the walls of the courtyard blew with deafening crescendo. Shattered masonry blew out arc-wise and the battlements above fell in. The palace shook as more explosions rippled throughout the building.

Qusay crouched as the world crumbled around him and watched the fire devour his men. A soldier lay curled beside him sobbing a prayer.

* * *

The fires died as dawn broke. The palace lay broken and smouldering around them. Qusay, face blackened and other men's blood covering him, led his surviving bodyguards into the lifeless crucible of the courtyard. His men fanned out and searched.

Qusay walked among the dead, their burned and shredded remains fertilising the black earth. The stench of mass death thickened in the air.

"Sir, we've found him!" a voice called out.

Qusay turned and frowned, "Found who?"

"The American. He's alive."

Qusay hurried through the charnel garden and elbowed past the gathered soldiers.

A single man knelt, his dark fatigues blackened and scorched. His hands lay bound in his lap. Gore drenched him from head to toe. Blood washed from his down-turned face, falling like tears onto his shirt. Bandages swathed his neck and chest. He remained head down, as if at prayer.

Qusay waved the other men back and approached the kneeling figure. He bent and placed a finger under the man's chin, raising his head. He stared into the skull-like face. Black, lifeless eyes met his. Blood smeared the white skin, but no expression animated the features.

"Steiner," Qusay smiled, moving his face closer. The man looked back, eyes blank. He moved his lips silently. Qusay stood. "Who bound him?"

“Sir?”

Qusay’s head exploded. He jolted as his headless body adjusted when his cranium exploded. Blood and brain sprayed the surrounding soldiers. As one, they dropped for cover. The flat blast of the shot arrived seconds later. The body of the President of Iraq remained standing alone for several seconds then slowly crumpled.

* * *

Steiner lowered the Barrett M82 rifle. The heavy .50 calibre round had travelled true. At 950 metres, the bullet had taken just a second to reach the target. He had watched the decapitation in graphic detail through the 12x scope from his position on the highest point overlooking the palace. He resighted and Max Schreck’s head filled the scope. His finger tightened on the trigger for a second, then he eased back. Let the Iraqis have him. They deserved each other.

“I’m moving,” Steiner radio crackled. He lifted his binoculars and found Vansen. She was moving fast, weaving through the ruins of the outer compound. As she cleared the place compound, Steiner could see the big shit-eating grin on her face.

* * *

Max Schreck stood. The Iraqis cowered on the ground around their fallen leader, like savages who had witnessed their chieftain struck down by the hand of god. That woman, Vansen, had dragged him in here with her last night. Steiner and her had patched him up and planned this. She had him bound and tethered like a dog while she killed and planted her explosives. Then when it was all over she had left him here to be found.

Schreck was in grave pain and he could no longer speak after the wound to his throat. But worse than all this was this alien feeling stirring within him. It was rage.

He passed through the prostrate Arabs and headed through an arched doorway out of the courtyard. He walked calmly down the cool, dimly lit passage. The first Iraqi that confronted him he took down with a single kick. He bent over him and broke the man's neck. He took the Iraqi's knife and cut himself free, then stripped him of his weapons. He rose as three men rounded the corner. Schreck emptied his rifle into them, cutting them all down with a single burst. He looked at the bloodied bodies and felt a measure of relief. He walked away, looking for more people to kill.

Chapter 35

Vansen had found the white Isuzu SUV before initially tracking down Steiner. He didn't ask where she got it from; at least she'd washed most of the blood of the interior. He was waiting at the vehicle when she returned from the palace. He leant out of the open passenger door, cigarette pinched between his fingers.

"You all packed and ready to roll, slick?" she was happier than he'd seen her since she'd last killed a whole bunch of people. Could call it a natural high. She took his cigarette and took a long drag and stuck it back between his lips. She kissed him girlishly on his good cheek.

"Let's get the fuck out of here." Steiner slammed his door.

Vansen swung behind the wheel and started up the vehicle, gunning the engine for a minute or so.

"When you're ready?" Steiner flicked his cigarette out of the open window.

Vansen slammed the SUV into gear and released her foot from the brake, flattening the accelerator against the dusty floor. She lit up the tires, kicking up dirt and probably spotting the tyres. The rear end of the vehicle fishtailed as they took off. Vansen fought the wheel, laughing and looking over at Steiner, her eyes shining.

The SUV tore across the rocky desert plain, a trail of broken, barren filth rising in its wake. The sun simmered as it rose above the horizon.

*

*

*

Vansen had reached friends in Israel. They had choppered her back into Iraq and arranged extraction. The site was pre-arranged; she just needed to send the signal. 25 miles out she sent the burst transmission. The IDF chopper should have been waiting just inside friendly territory. The Israelis maintained a covert operations outpost inside Jordan, near the Iraqi border. It was unknown to the outside world, particularly the other Arab nations, but it

secretly authorised by the Hashemite rulers in Amman. They had long secretly co-operated with the Israelis on defence matters. Always the least passionate enemies of Zionism, they had worked with the Jerusalem government since 1970 and '*Black September*', when Palestinian terrorists operating out of Jordan tried to engineer the overthrowal of King Hussein's Hashemite government and the installation of Yasser Arafat as de facto president. The King sent in his army against the PLO and with the covert military assistance of Israel the terrorists were driven out and forced to relocate to Lebanon (which in turn sent that once glittering country spiralling into civil war and self-destruction).

It should take the Israeli Pave Hawk little more than an hour to reach the rendezvous point some 180 miles inside Iraq. It would pick them up and with the aid of drop tanks fly them safely back to Israel.

Vansen was keeping her speed to a constant 50mph. She was giving the suspension a brutal workout as they pounded across the unmade desert floor. Scattered rocks and potholes shook the vehicle violently as it bounced and reeled. Occasionally Vansen would up her speed and Steiner thought the fucking vehicle was going to shake itself to pieces. He would punch her in the arm and with a scowl she would ease off the accelerator. By the time they reached evac point, the suspension would be shot to shit, but it wasn't like he had long-term investment in this particular vehicle. But he was determined to make it to the rendezvous. He wasn't going to be able to walk anywhere anytime soon.

Vansen had the AC cranked up to the max and the interior of the vehicle was like an ice box, but a heavy film of sweat covered Steiner. He shivered as he wiped the bloody sweat from his eyes. Blood leached through the bandages on his shoulder and leg and the wound on his face kept reopening. He shot up more morphine. He felt little pain, but his body shook worse than the vehicle racing over the broken ground. He could relieve the pain, but he knew he was slowly dying.

Steiner curled up in his seat, his teeth chattering. His head swam and he felt almost unbearably floaty. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

*

*

*

Ahmed was 25 years old and had failed thus far to grow a beard. He desperately cultivated any facial hair growth, but even after two or three months the best he had managed was an embarrassing downy growth dusting his cheeks and jawline. This was worse than nothing and had to shave it off. His father and brothers all sported magnificent beards and moustaches, even Ahmed's youngest brother, Hussein, who was only 16. This was just one of the worries that dogged the young soldier's life.

The three other soldiers standing guard on the sentry post all sported annoyingly lush facial hair, just another reason why he could never fit in with them. They teased him about his smooth girlish skin and womanish good looks. He smiled wanly and took it in good spirits, but inside he burned with shame.

Ahmed was in the army only because there were no other jobs. He had stayed after national service, but he remained stranded in the regular army alongside conscripts, convicts, drunks and other washouts. He dreamt of joining the Republican Guard, but he knew he had neither the aptitude nor the courage. He was full of ideals about soldier-hood, but couldn't fit in. He lacked the gruff machismo and insolent recklessness. He was soft. His fitness was poor, he was a bad shot, he wasn't a leader of men and he lacked the brute simplicity to enjoy the simple camaraderie of the ranks. He stood apart, the butt of jokes and an object of pity.

The sun burned overhead. Ahmed wiped the slick sweat from his hairless face. The other soldiers stood close together, muttering while they smoked and spat. They knew something was wrong. They had heard the distant explosions in the night, but had failed to reach anyone on the radio. Then in the last hour voices had exploded across the airwaves, but it was difficult to discern any precise information from the garbled traffic. No one seemed to inform or involve the regular army units like Ahmed's scattered across the desert. So the men just shrugged and continued to while away the torpid day.

Ahmed was the first to spot the vehicle. He called out to his comrades, but as usual they ignored him. He grabbed the binoculars from their vehicle and trained it upon the shimmering horizon.

He focused as the vehicle sped across the rocky plain. Ahmed wiped the sweat of his eyes. He identified it as a white 4x4, expensive looking. By now the vehicle was clearly visible to the naked eye and even the other soldiers had roused from their stupor, but merely to locate their weapons and drift aimlessly about the checkpoint. Ahmed tried to make out the occupants of the vehicle. He thought he could see two figures, but he wasn't sure with the sun flaring off the windshield. The plates were Iraqi. He looked for any identifying insignia.

"I don't like this," Ahmed called out. The others laughed. He lowered his binoculars.

The first shot killed the man nearest Ahmed. The man crumpled and Ahmed felt his blood covering his face. Then gunfire ripped the air and he threw himself to the ground. Bullets snapped by above his head. He choked back a sob as he heard the shrieks of the men around him dying.

* * *

Vansen slapped Steiner twice before he awoke. He sat up, rubbing his arm.

"What the fuck?" he muttered cotton-mouthed.

"Checkpoint." Vansen had her knees jammed up under the wheel as she loaded and cocked the Uzi in her lap.

"We can't go round?"

She just shrugged and sneaked him a grin.

"Fuck." Steiner sat up. From the rear of the vehicle he retrieved the Colt Commando that Vansen had brought in with the weaponry from Israel. He ejected the magazine, checked the load and slammed it back home. He yanked back the charging handle and chambered a round. He squinted through the windshield. They were coming up on the checkpoint fast.

There was no distinct movement among the assembled figures. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and aimed through the glass. He sighted on one of the soldiers. He fought the shuddering of the vehicle as they picked up speed.

“Party time!” Vansen shouted over the roar of the engine.

Steiner fired a single round, the bullet punching through the windshield. He fired again and saw the soldier crumple. He resighted, fired three single rounds, cutting down another man. He flicked to auto and started squeezing off short bursts. Vansen jammed her Uzi through the open side window and opened up.

Two more men went down in explosions of blood as the vehicle reached the checkpoint. Steiner reloaded as they passed through. Vansen slammed on the brakes and tossed the Uzi into Steiner’s lap. She unholstered her sidearm and popped open the door.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Steiner reached for her arm.

“There’s one left.” She stared at him blankly with her glittering eyes.

“Leave him, it’s only five miles to the dust-off point.”

“Just mind the car,” She jumped out of the idling vehicle and strode back towards the checkpoint.

The remaining soldier was struggling to his feet, shaking his head groggily. Dust fell from his uniform and another man’s blood covered his smooth cheek. He saw Vansen approaching and cried out. He tossed away his weapon and raised his arms. He started to beg, his words fractured by the sobs racking his body.

Vansen stopped and raised her pistol. The young man fell to his knees, pleading incoherently. She stared into his wide eyes and watched the tears roll down his hairless cheeks. He reached out to her. She shot him twice in the face and he folded. She took a couple of steps closer and put two more bullets into his body.

She reholstered her weapon as she reached the SUV. She swung behind the wheel and shifted the vehicle into gear.

“Happy now?” Steiner lit a cigarette.

“Why not,” Vansen smiled and took the cigarette from him.

They had just started to pick up speed when they heard the helicopter. Steiner craned his neck and the Kamov Werewolf attack chopper swept low overhead.

“Well that’s fucking great.” Steiner started to yank open the sunroof. “Now we need speed.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, step on it for Christ’s sake!” he climbed up through the open sunroof as the SUV accelerated past sixty.

The Werewolf banked and turned nose-on and began its attack run. Steiner steadied himself as the vehicle shuddered beneath him. He lifted the rifle to his shoulder and opened up on automatic. As the chopper closed, he watched his rounds pinging uselessly off the armoured hide of the aircraft.

“Oh, Jesus!” The Werewolf opened up with its 30mm cannon and 23mm gun pods. Tracers arced through air towards the SUV as the guns blasted. “Turn, turn!” Steiner screamed down to Vansen. She jerked round the wheel as the incoming rounds ripped apart the unmade road ahead of them. The SUV veered sideways and the cannon and machine gun fire ripped along the side of the vehicle. The driver’s door was sheared off and bullets chewed up the vehicle’s flank as it tore by. The chopper howled overhead and Steiner dropped back inside the cab.

“Have we got Stingers?”

“Couple, in the back. Somewhere.” Vansen fought the wheel. She screwed up her eyes as dirt blasted through the broken windshield. Steiner noticed blood on her cheek.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” she shrugged.

Steiner started to rifle through the rear of the vehicle. “Try and find us some cover. We’re sitting ducks out here!”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Vansen pointed the vehicle at the small rocky outcrop several hundred yards off. The vehicle rattled and howled as she increased speed again.

The Werewolf made another pass. Gunfire blew out the windows and further shredded the metalwork. Steiner felt the vehicle lurch then shudder violently.

“We’ve lost a tyre.”

“I know.”

Vansen drove the vehicle into the small outcrop, slamming the breaks on at the last minute. The nose of the SUV hit the rockface and the vehicle shuddered to a halt and a cloud of swirling dust engulfed them.

Vansen dropped from her open doorway. She cocked the M4 she carried and loaded the breach of her M203 grenade launcher. Steiner followed her out, crawling across the seats and then retrieving the Stinger launcher.

The Werewolf banked in the distance and began another attack run.

“Get away from the vehicle.” Steiner loaded the launcher.

“You’re shitting me?”

“Do it.”

Vansen started clambering up the rocks. Steiner attached the Stinger’s IFF unit to his belt and positioned himself in the shadow of the crashed vehicle. At four hundred metres had the target acquired. He ignored the incoming fire from the chopper’s cannon and gun pods. The launcher growled as it locked on. He steadied himself and fired. The missile streaked away, the exhaust blast enveloping Steiner in its mist. He quickly detached the gripstock from the empty launcher and discarded it. He looked up. The SAM arced in on the chopper. As the helicopter tried to peel off, it launched an AT-12 air-to-surface missile. The Werewolf banked steeply, its engines shrieking. The Stinger slammed into its belly and the aircraft vaporised in a fireball.

Steiner watched the ASM curving down on his position, vapour burning in its trail.

“Shit,” he grabbed his equipment and ran. The missile slammed into the SUV and obliterated

it in a massive detonation. The blast caught Steiner, blowing him off his feet as the flame washed overhead.

As the blast died, he sat up and looked back at the burning remains of their vehicle. Vansen slithered down the rocks.

“Nice going, slick!” she laughed.

“How far to the evac?”

“Two miles, tops.”

He slung his weapon and tossed the Stinger to Vansen.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” he lit a cigarette. “Course, you’ll be carrying me most of that.”

“Shit!”

* * *

The two Hinds found them less than a mile from the rendezvous. The two helicopters hovered low, each disgorging their eight-troop complement. The soldiers, all elite SSO deployed as the choppers ascended.

Steiner blew one of the Hinds out of the air with the last Stinger missile. As the burning wreckage fell, he retrieved the Israeli Negev machine gun. He drew the unfolded butt into his shoulder and pivoted on the bipod. He opened up; squeezing off short bursts to keep the ground troops pinned back. Lying next to him in the shallow hollow, Vansen squeezed off single rounds from her M4, targeting the remaining Hind.

The heavy chopper turned, hunting for its prey. Vansen calmly kept firing. The Hind found them. It increased speed and opened up with its 12.7mm machine guns. Vansen ignored them.

“A little closer, a little closer,” she smiled behind her weapon. She steadily popped off rounds. “Gotcha!”

The green tip rounds punched through the chopper's canopy, killing the pilot instantly. Seconds later the weapons operator died as the craft began its nose-dive.

The Hind slammed into the earth with a devastating explosion, fire tumbling over the undulating ground.

"Moving!" Vansen grabbed Steiner under the arm and yanked him up.

"The machine gun!" he reached for the abandoned weapon.

"Leave it,"

Seconds later their abandoned position was blown apart by a single RPG. A squad of SSO troops charged in from the flank. Vansen and Steiner cut them down, then continued to fall back.

* * *

Vansen half-carried Steiner, one arm wrapped around his body. They found slender cover among the desert landscape as they retreated. As they fell back, they picked off the Iraqis as they pursued.

Only a couple of hundred metres short of the RZ, the two American's took shelter in a shallow gully. From here they could target their pursuers as they emerged into the open.

One by one, the Iraqis came, darting from cover to cover, traversing the open ground. Side by side, Steiner and Vansen tracked them, popping of single rounds, brass shell casings ejected and clattering to their feet. Occasionally a small group would make a break for it, but were quickly cut down by withering automatic fire.

Slowly the Iraqi numbers dwindled. The gunfire became staccato: haphazard fire from the attackers, short bursts and single rounds taking them out in return.

"How long?" Steiner reloaded.

"Nine minutes." Vansen peered through her rifle scope and squeezed off a round.

"How many you reckon are left?"

“Just one now,” Vansen couldn’t help but grin.

Steiner dropped to the floor of the gully, rifle across his knees. He lit a cigarette with shaking hands. He felt the rocks and spent shell casings cutting into his buttocks. His legs quivered.

“Chopper.” Vansen called out. Steiner checked his watch. “Not ours,” she said. Steiner rose, clawing his way up the dirt wall. A French-made Panther light helicopter hovered low several hundred metres behind the Iraqis’ lines. A single figure dropped from its open doorway.

Steiner put out his cigarette. “Who the fuck is this?”

* * *

The Aerospatiale Panther helicopter was part of the presidential flight. Far more modern than the majority of the Soviet-made choppers that made up the Iraqi fleet, the Panther was one two reserved for Qusay’s exclusive use. The first had been destroyed on the ground during Vansen’s attack.

The Panther flared its engines and landed softly in the shattered outer complex of the presidential palace. The six SSO troops jumped to the ground. The two doorway machine gunners covered them. The chopper crew had failed to reach anyone as they approached the base. Fragmented radio traffic reporting the attack had raised the alarm, but communication had been lost.

The soldiers moved out from the LZ. The compound was eerily quiet. Blackened bodies were visible amongst the burned out ruins. The sun blazed overhead and a low moaning wind drifted through the ruins. The pilot continued trying to raise anyone inside the palace.

The first burst of gunfire cut down three of the soldiers. The others scattered and hit the dirt. As they went down, a single shot took one of them in the head and he was dead

before he hit the ground. The machine gunners in the chopper swung behind their weapons, sweeping the deserted compound.

Two more shots rang out and the remaining troops were killed where they lay. The gunners inside the Panther opened up, ripping the surrounding ruins apart. Their frantic blasting chewed up the dirt and shattered the remaining structures. They continued to fire, swinging their weapons wildly, firing into anything.

The first gunner was hit in the neck and he fell to the deck of the chopper, hand clamped to his throat as his blood gushed out. His comrade looked round as he felt the thrashing of the other man and his blood covering him. His finger eased off the trigger of his weapon. A single round transixed his head and fell out of the open doorway.

“Let’s get out of here!” the pilot started to crank up the engines and the rotors began their lazy sweep as they slowly accelerated. “Come on!” the pilot frantically worked the controls.

Two rounds punched through the canopy, hitting the co-pilot in the face. He slumped forward in his harness. The pilot wiped the blood from his eyes and wrapped his hands round the joystick.

A single man stepped in front of the helicopter. He aimed the automatic rifle through the canopy. He lifted his left hand from the weapon and held it palm out. The pilot swallowed and eased back on the torque. The engines kept turning, the rotors pounding overhead.

The man moved around the chopper, keeping his rifle levelled on the pilot. He grabbed the dying gunner in the rear compartment by the collar and dragged him out. He climbed inside, folding the butt on his rifle. He leant into the cockpit and pointed the muzzle of his weapon at the pilot’s neck. He jerked his thumb up.

The Panther rose from the ground, the downwash of its rotors kicking up dirt and the man bleeding slowly to death watched as it climbed away.

Schreck directed the pilot with hand-signals and it didn’t take them long to find the Americans’ trail. The shattered debris of the Werewolf was scattered across the desert floor

not far from the smouldering remains of the vehicle Steiner and Vansen had been using. Schreck directed the pilot on.

They saw the twin columns of smoke rising from the crash-sites of the Hinds from far off. Schreck could make out figures on the ground. He could tell they were all dead. He directed the pilot to land.

The Panther hovered low. Schreck watched the pilot's sweaty face. When they were a few feet clear of the ground, Schreck rose and moved to the side doorway. He unfolded the butt of his HK33 automatic sniper rifle. He pounded on the door as he hung in the opening. The pilot looked back. Schreck pointed at him and jerked his thumb up. Incredulous, the pilot nodded dumbly, then the man was gone.

Schreck hit the ground. As the pitch of the helicopter's engine rose, he activated the satchel charge and tossed it up into the Panther as it peeled away. He dropped low and quickly moved off.

* * *

Steiner and Vansen watched the chopper climb and move away, then it exploded, detonating in a blossom of flame. The shattered remains dropped from the air.

“What the fuck?” Vansen muttered.

“I don't know, but I don't like it.” He slung his rifle and checked his watch. “We gotta move.” Vansen looked at him. “Now.”

Vansen supported him as they moved down the gully. They moved into the open, keeping low. A rifle shot snapped behind them. Vansen looked back. “Shit.” Another round snapped by, closer this time. Vansen dropped to one knee, letting Steiner fall. He landed softly and rolled over, freeing his rifle. Vansen remained kneeling and aimed her rifle. A figure emerged behind them, maybe 200 metres. He fired wildly as he ran. Steiner and Vansen fired together and the man went down in a puff of dust.

Vansen helped Steiner back up and they continued on. Steiner was in incredible pain. He grunted as they moved over the uneven ground. Bloody sweat filled his eyes. His clothes were plastered to his body. His boots felt like they were full of water. The only relief from the pounding agony was the waves of delirium that washed over him. He looked up at Vansen's face. She clenched her teeth, a fine sheen of sweat covering her alabaster skin, barely a flush touching her cheeks. The veins were raised beneath her skin as she strained her muscles. She didn't make a sound. Her eyes shone and her face seemed alight. Steiner realised for the first time in a long time, maybe for the first time, how beautiful she was. He reached up to her cheek with his free hand. She swatted it away.

Vansen lay him down gently and held a canteen to his lips. He drank greedily, the water spilling down his chin. She poured some over his face and cleaned away the blood and filth, tenderly dabbing at the skin.

"We there?" he whispered. She nodded. "How long?"

"Christ!" she laughed. "You gotta deal with your patience issues, man!"

She knelt beside him and lit a cigarette. She took a couple of drags and then placed it between his lips. Far off he could hear the throb of an approaching chopper. Vansen raised her binoculars. "It's them." She lowered the glasses and took a quick drink. She arranged Steiner's clothing and smoothed his hair.

"Christ, will you stop fussing!" Steiner smiled through his pain. Vansen took his cigarette and stood. She stuck the cigarette in the corner of her mouth and popped a flare.

"When I get you home, I'm gonna give you the best time, you know that, slick?" she laughed.

"Yeah, sure!"

He heard Vansen grunt just before the snap of the rifle report arrived. The cigarette fell from her lips and she called out softly as her knees buckled, "Steiner!" She crumpled beside him and he rolled over, clamping his hand to her gaping neck wound. Blood pumped between his fingers.

“Just hold on. We’re nearly there,” he had to raise his voice above the noise of the approaching helicopter. She looked up at him, eyes wide and uncomprehending, her normally pale skin completely bloodless and translucent. She blinked rapidly and swallowed. She tried to speak but no sound came out. “Just hold on.” Steiner held her tighter as the chopper closed.

* * *

Schreck had intended to kill Steiner as well as the woman, but now he paused. He resighted and had Steiner’s head transfixed in his crosshairs. He watched as he held the dying woman. Schreck caressed the trigger of his weapon and watched as they embraced. He lowered his rifle, then slithered back down the hill. The wind whipped up the loose dirt and when it cleared, Schreck was gone.

* * *

Steiner wrapped her tightly in his arms. He felt her warm blood washing over him, mixing with his own. He kept his hand clamped against her neck, but she was pumping out fast. Their faces were inches apart. Her lips kept moving wordlessly; her eyes fixed on his.

The chopper came in low, rotors pounding, dirt swirling on the ground in its wake.

Vansen seemed to smile. She reached up and touched Steiner’s face, then placed her hand over his as it pressed down on her wound. She stared into his eyes and seemed to gently shake her head. Slowly she lifted his hand from her throat. The blood gushed out. She sighed and her eyelids flickered. Steiner kissed her and buried his face in her shoulder. The chopper flared above them and they vanished in a whirling mist of blood-red dust.

Chapter 36

President Harker sat comfortably behind his desk as CIA Director Ives was ushered into the Oval Office. Ives looked uneasy as he sat on the opposite side of the desk. The two men sat alone together in silence for a moment.

Harker leaned forward and laced his fingers. "Well, Bernie, how goes it?" He smiled pleasantly.

"Mr President?" Ives looked perplexed.

"The wife, the kids, you know?"

"Fine, Mr President." Ives swallowed dryly.

"Good, good." Harker leaned back in his chair, gazing ruminatively at the ceiling.

"After all, all you can really rely on in this world is your friends and family." His eyes shifted back to Ives. "Don't you agree, Bernie?"

"Of course, Mr President."

"We have had our differences in the past, like grown ups do. But we have respect for each other, we are professionals." Harker lit a cigarette. "In many ways we are very different men, but we are also very similar. I think out of respect and co-operation real friendship can grow." Ives nodded uneasily. "I think of us as friends, Bernie."

"I'm flattered, Mr President," sweat beaded the CIA man's forehead. Harker waved him off.

"Now this Iraqi situation," Harker took a long drag on his cigarette and held it before exhaling. "What's the latest?"

"Well I'm afraid to say it appears the whole country is in meltdown. The Shi'a Marsh Arabs have moved northwards and are now encircling Baghdad. The Kurds have seized the north of the country. The Iranians are supporting both groups, and the Iranian army has deepened its incursions on the eastern border. There are reliable reports of massive loss of life and considerable internal damage. It seems the Shiite majority is getting major payback on the Sunnis; there is some evidence of mass killings. The Rais's Sunni Ba'ath party has collapsed.

Factional in-fighting allowed the opposition forces to overwhelm them. Only pockets are holding out now against the Iranian-backed uprising, mainly in the major towns and cities.”

“Bet you want to tell me I told you so?” Harker grinned and Ives smiled sheepishly and wiped the palms of his hands on his pant legs. “How long until the Iranians and their proxies have seized total control?”

“That’s difficult to say, Mr President. It is unlikely the Sunni groups will be completely eliminated. The Iranian-backed opposition will be the effective leaders of Iraq in days, but civil unrest will very likely continue indefinitely. There is also the risk of the conflict spilling over into the neighbouring countries. Turkey is already banging on our door about their own Kurdish minority. Emboldened and rearmed by Iran they are causing even more problems than usual.”

“UN?”

“Made some noise about the Iranian incursions, that’s about it. Tehran is keeping their military involvement as low profile as possible. That will change of course. The Shi’a Arabs and the Kurds will never be able to work together. The country could effectively split in two, north and south. The Iranians will then step in and seize total control and in effect annex the country. The UN won’t do much, with Arab block veto and the Iranians claiming merely to be protecting a sovereign nation, probably claiming they were invited in, they will at worst suffer some sanctions. But by then they will control a huge portion of global oil production and will be able to call the shots.” Ives remained perched uneasily on the edge of the seat.

Harker sat back, quietly nodding to himself. He put out his cigarette.

“We are in very dangerous position, Mr President.” Ives interrupted.

“No one is pinning anything on us, are they?” Harker remained at ease.

“No, sir.”

Harker shrugged and smiled. “No problems then.”

“But, Mr President, the destabilising effect and the oil...”

“Don’t worry about it, Bernie.” Harker held up his hand interrupting the Director. “I’m sure we can find a way to deal with the situation. Dangerous times call for extreme measures. I’m sure you understand?”

“Mr President?” Ives seemed stupefied.

Harker looked at his watch. “I’d love to get into this, Bernie, but I’ve got another appointment. British ambassador, seems their PM is pissing his pants about the mid-east, as if it’s anything to do with him.” Harker stood and rounded the desk. Ives stood awkwardly and took the President’s extended hand. Harker squeezed his palm and grinned. He met Ives’ eyes, his gaze steely and cold. “We’ll talk again, I’m sure.”

A dazed Ives was escorted out of the office and the door shut after him. Harker stood looking after him. His lip curled, “Motherfucker.”

* * *

Ives was waiting in his limo in the shadows of a Bethesda parking garage. The cold clung between the damp concrete levels although the day outside was warm. The sun slowly descended as the heat of the afternoon thickened. Inside the garage it was a chill permanent twilight.

The rear door of the limo popped open and Logan slipped into the rear beside the CIA Director, shutting the door after him. The leather upholstery squeaked beneath him as he settled.

“I saw your boss today, where were you?” Ives barely looked at Logan.

“Had me out running goddamn errands,” Logan shrugged as he growled. “I dunno, but he seems to be keeping me at a distance. He’s careful, but I think something’s up.”

“Paranoia.” Ives grunted.

“Total paranoia is total awareness, especially in our line of work.” Logan placed a cigarette between his lips.

“I’d rather you didn’t in here,” Ives said sternly, disgust pinching his features. Logan muttered an oath and stuck the cigarette back in the packet. “We just got to keep our heads. He needs us now more than ever. He’s fucked up badly and he knows it. Whether he finds out we screwed with his plans or not, he’ll have to stick with us. Who else will sort out his shit but you and me?” Ives seemed almost happy, like he believed it.

Logan shook his head; “You don’t know Harker. If he finds out we screwed him, he’ll come back at us.”

“You’re being melodramatic. This is politics, it’s not personal.”

“Everything is personal with Harker.”

“Bullshit,” Ives snorted. “He’s got no one but us. We hold all the cards.”

“I need a smoke,” Logan pooped open the door and swung a leg out. He looked up and saw a figure tucked in the shadows watching them. “Jesus!”

“What?” Ives sounded irritated.

The limo was blown more than a metre clear of the ground as the explosives beneath it detonated. Its windows and doors were blown out and the chassis buckled in on itself as it crashed down on the burning asphalt. Logan was blown apart in the initial blast; he was the lucky one. Gravely injured, Ives and his driver remained trapped inside the wreck as it burned. Flame engulfed the twisted metal and as the blast faded; their screams could be heard cutting through the cavernous coldness of the garage.

* * *

Murphy slammed his car door and entered his darkened bungalow. It had been a good night. He’d scored himself another nice bit of gash, some jailbait from the bar. He’d given her no doubt the fuck of her young life in that fleabag motel. He took all the bitches there. He could have fucked them back at his home, now he’d got rid of his wife, but he didn’t wanted any of it coming back to fuck up his promotion prospects. Keep it nice and anonymous, that way he

could fuck a different little girl every night and nothing could touch him. A few more days and Logan was getting him out of here. He was sick to death of these gung-ho fucking snake-eating savages in SF and Delta. He wanted back in the world with civilised folks. Logan had promised a primo assignment at the Pentagon and a Major's gold oak leaf to go with it.

Sweet.

He tossed his keys onto the hall table and headed into the living room. He clicked on a lamp and poured himself a drink.

"Hello, Neil." Murphy froze for a second at the sound of the voice behind him. He dropped the glass and groped for the pistol hidden beneath his shirt. A single silenced round thudded into the wall above his shoulder and he froze. "Slowly remove the weapon from its holster, using only your thumb and forefinger. Keeping it in view, place it on the counter and step away." The voice was cool and calm. Sweating heavily, Murphy removed the automatic from its holster on his belt and did as ordered. He stepped back. "Turn around, slowly." The voice ordered. Murphy hesitated, but then turned.

A lamp clicked on illuminating the figure sitting slumped in the armchair. Dressed entirely in black, his pale face glowed in the gloom, a jagged scar livid on his left cheek. Legs crossed, he rested the hand holding the silenced automatic on his knee. He smiled.

"Steiner!" Murphy felt his legs begin to tremble. He swallowed dryly and fought the urge to throw up.

"Sit down," Steiner said softly.

"Please, Steiner," there was a tremor in Murphy's usual brazen voice. "Saul, we can work this out..."

Steiner shot Murphy in the right knee. His patella exploded, broken bone tearing through his skin. He howled as he fell sideways, hitting the armchair beside him. He rolled over its arm and ended up twisted in its seat. Tears covered his cheeks and he openly sobbed. At first his words were incoherent, pouring from his lips with the saliva that stained his shirt.

"Please," he sobbed.

“Shut up, Murphy.” Steiner lifted the remote control resting on the arm of his chair and switched on the stereo. The sound of Nick Cave singing bled out, soft at first, louder as Steiner raised the volume. “I hope you don’t mind my choice of music, and fuck you if you do.” He laughed and lit a cigarette.

“You don’t have to do this!” Murphy pled through his sobs.

“I know, but I want to.” Steiner’s voice was almost pleasant. When he smiled the thick scar on his cheek twisted like an ugly grin. “Your life doesn’t mean a damn one way or the other. You are irrelevant, but I’m going to kill you because I want to.”

“Logan’s looking after me. He’ll sort this out; he won’t let you get away with this!” Murphy almost shrieked.

“I doubt Logan will be doing much of anything. Last time I saw him he was in several pieces.” Murphy looked at him uncomprehending. “An unfortunate explosion beneath the car of the CIA Director killed Logan, his buddy Director Ives and some unlucky driver. Arab terrorists are being blamed according to the news.”

Murphy broke down, curling in his seat, his body wracked by sobs as he buried his face. Steiner put out his cigarette. “Jesus, Murphy. At least try and die like a man, you piece of shit!”

“Please don’t do this!” Murphy squirmed in his seat. He turned his swollen face towards Steiner and extended an imploring hand. “Please!” Steiner shot him in the other kneecap and he shrieked. Steiner punched up the volume on the stereo as Murphy vomited into his lap.

“Logan got to die quick. He was lucky. Ives burned. It’s what he deserved. Hard whether to say he was worse off or not than you. You will die slow, but for me burning is the worst.”

Murphy howled and threw himself out of his seat, lunging at Steiner. His legs buckled beneath him and crashed to the floor. Steiner heard his nose and teeth break as he hit face-

first. Steiner lit another cigarette and smoked it listening to the music, Murphy's sobs muffled in the carpet.

Finally Steiner stood, the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He flipped Murphy with the toe of shoe. Blood and phlegm covered Murphy's bloated face. The red saliva bubbled on his torn lips. Steiner shot him through the left elbow. Murphy tried to scream, but choked on his own blood. Steiner increased the music's volume again. He took a drag on the cigarette and then shot Murphy through the other elbow. His cry was inaudible through the blood filling his throat.

Steiner knelt and turned Murphy's head with the muzzle of his pistol. "Cough," he whispered into his ear. Murphy retched and let loose a hacking cough, vomiting out the aspirated blood and fluid. His body shook with the retching and cough. Steiner remained kneeling, watching him as he smoked. He flicked the ash in Murphy's face. He lay there powerless. Steiner put the cigarette out in Murphy's palm and stood. Murphy just groaned and stared up at him like a dumb animal.

"Hannah," he muttered through his torn lips, the blood bubbling. Steiner cocked his head. "What about Hannah, she needs me!" He coughed and his torso shook, but his limbs lay lifeless like a broken insect. "She loves me!"

Steiner shot him in the groin and he shuddered. He positioned himself above Murphy and looked into his face. "I will take care of Hannah. She will forget you." Murphy tried to shake his head and failed. Steiner shot him once in the heart and watched him die. As the last breath rasped from his chest, he put a bullet through each eye.

The music died and Steiner sat. He wiped the blood off his shoes with a handkerchief and lit a cigarette. The night was still and calm

He sat and waited.

Chapter 37

I kill people. Judge me if you like, but I have seen death. Death is beautiful in its simplicity and assurance, unlike what we call life. Life is ugly, cruel and pointless. People spend the whole of their existence denying the inevitability of their own death, hiding behind the shit they erect around themselves to insulate them from the truth. I am just reality knocking at your door.

You talk about making something of your life, making a difference. Any difference you might make would be negligible. Those who strive to impose themselves upon the world and those around them in the process almost always unleash a wave of incalculable evil. Ego is a malignant tumour burrowing into our minds. It is lie we are fed and then nourish daily with illusions and poisonous hope. To most of you out there your ego is everything. Beyond you and your pissy little dreams there is nothing else. You got your life-plans, your dreams, but so has every other prick out there. Six billion plus losers all with their own little plans, how'd you reckon to reconcile all those little egos? You figure yours is the dream that'll come true?

Happy endings are a lie. The only ending is death. But maybe that is the happiest ending of all.