The Red Cliffs of Zerhoun

Some men will travel a thousand miles to kidnap our children for sex slavery.

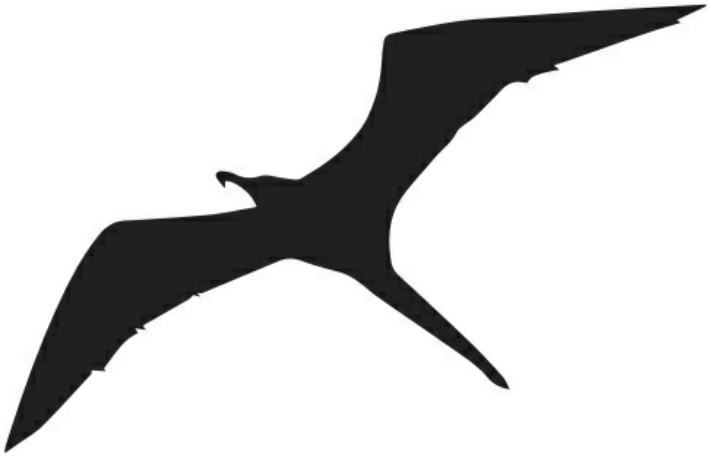
Some men will go much farther and risk everything to bring them all home.

A novel about slavery, and the high price of freedom

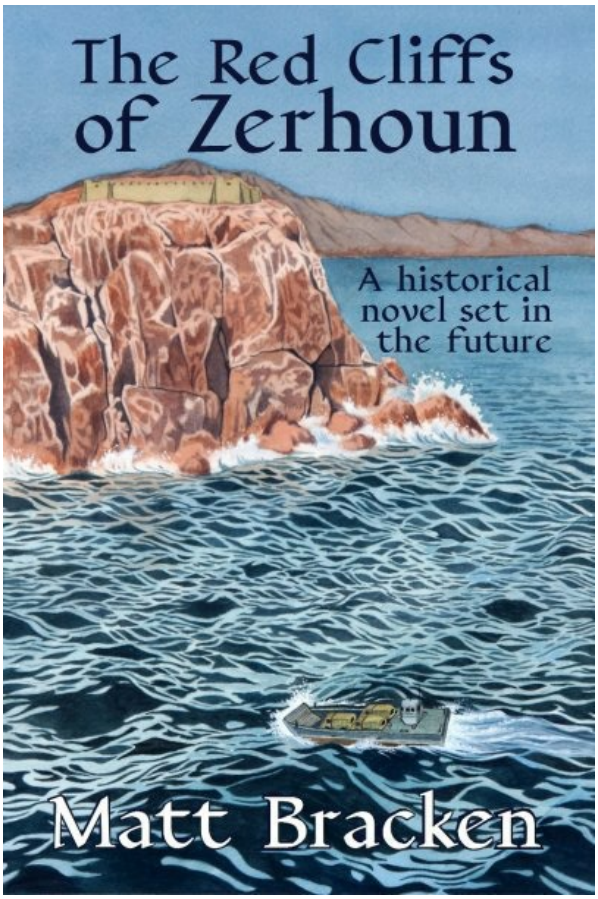


by Matthew Bracken

The Red Cliffs of Zerhoun



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The Red Cliffs of Zerhoun
A historical novel set in the future
Matt Bracken

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This novel is a work of fiction. All the events and characters described herein are products of the author's imagination.
Any similarities to actual persons are entirely coincidental.

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This novel is dedicated to my wife and children,
who somehow continue to lovingly endure me.

I would like to again thank my editor Rita Samols.
Thanks also to my consultant editor Tony Quinn,
and to Mark Kohler for creating the cover art.

In loving memory of my sister Mary Neale,
and my Kiwi brother-in-law Cliff Strange.



Oh Prophet! We have made lawful to thee thy wives
to whom thou hast paid their dowries; and those
slaves whom thy right hand possess out of the
prisoners whom Allah has assigned to thee.
Quran 33:50

So enormous, so dreadful, so irredeemable did the
(slave) trade's wickedness appear that my own
mind was completely made up for abolition.
William Wilberforce

All married women are forbidden unto thee save
those captives whom thy right hand possess.
This is a decree of Allah for thee.
Quran 4:24

You may choose to look the other way, but you
can never say again that you did not know.
William Wilberforce

Slavery is part of Islam. Slavery is part of jihad,
and jihad will remain as long as there is Islam.
Sheikh Saleh Al-Fawzan
Saudi religious leader

Those who cannot remember the past
are condemned to repeat it.
George Santayana

The Red Cliffs of Zerhoun

We were sitting in the corner of a gloomy Irish pub, its only customers. Victor was across the table from me. There were half-finished pints between us, along with a few notepads, books, binoculars, and other personal clutter from spending most of the day there. Peat burning in an iron stove helped to drive off the autumn chill, but even inside the pub we wore sweaters. We could have moved closer to the heat, but then we would have lost our corner window position.

The aroma of the peat, or turf as they called it, made the place seem cozy and welcoming when you stepped inside. After two weeks of adapting to the local ways we might have been taken for locals, if we kept our mouths shut. Our front corner table had windows on two sides, and we could watch both the road leading out of Crowhaven and my sailboat at anchor a hundred yards away.

This rocky outcrop of southwest Ireland was as close to continental Europe's ongoing civil wars as I cared to drop anchor while engaging in a commercial venture. A month earlier we had left an abandoned NATO air base on the west coast of Greenland with ninety-six drums of diesel fuel loaded two-deep in our cargo hold. A tight fit, and my sixty-foot schooner had her waterline submerged by a foot from stem to stern on the voyage. With a virtually infinite amount of fuel aboard, we ran the engine nonstop for a week, motoring all the way to Ireland.

The rain had let up and I had a decent view of sections of the road as it wound its way up into the hills from the tiny seaport. We had staked out the strategic table by paying in silver coin for our pub fare. Not that there was much demand for this or any table in the establishment. In fact, the two of us constituted much of the pub's daytime business. Some cars, minivans, and small trucks were parked outside, but few of them had moved in the two weeks since we had opened shop. The brewery van, greengrocer, and various fishmongers made periodic visits, but hours went by without the arrival of another patron. Vehicles moving on the visible sections of road were rare enough to make our task of surveillance easy. Slow-moving pedestrians, bicyclists, and horse-drawn carts were more frequently seen than cars or trucks.

Aside from potential customers, we were keeping an eye out for the

Garda, the Irish national police force, or anybody else who might attempt to remove our cargo without paying for it. In an hour, when it grew too dark to observe the distant hillside, we would return to my schooner and have our evening meal, spend the night at anchor, and then return to the pub the next morning.

Hung, my elderly Vietnamese cook and boat guard, would already be at work in the galley. He'd been with me since I'd picked him up in Trinidad a decade back. He spelled it Hung when he had to spell it, which was rarely, but it was pronounced Hoong. His family name was Tran, so his full name was Tran Hung. Besides being a great sea cook, Hung is the reason I can leave my boat at anchor with no worries.

The late October daylight was fading fast. Victor had just returned from a long walk on the rural lanes of the surrounding countryside. When ashore, and when the weather was fair, Victor was big on hiking, or trekking, as he sometimes called it. He was always looking for a steep hill with a sweeping view from the summit. Sometimes with me as his companion, and sometimes without.

Victor liked to appreciate geological formations at close range, explaining how many millions of years ago this or that outcropping had been thrust up from the sea floor to become part of a mountain, which had then been worn down by glaciers and erosion to become what we were presently standing upon. Southwest Ireland was also replete with castle ruins on hilltops, and we had already visited several of them. In another era, I would have taken loads of photographs. I had thought that our recent Irish treks would have put Victor in a good mood.

He put down the tattered paperback novel he'd been struggling to read in the lowering light and said, "Another day, the same stale rumors, but still no customers. How long are we going to remain here? The longer we wait, the greater the chance that we'll be arrested, or robbed. If there were any more local customers, they'd have found us by now."

"It's more than a rumor."

"More than a rumor? Only according to your lady friend."

"My lady friend has a name."

"Sinead Devlin." He rolled his eyes and sighed. "And I'll admit she's quite attractive, so I understand perfectly well why your thick American brain is not functioning correctly. Visual stimulation and chemical pheromones. Mammalian biology, nothing more. So be it. But how long will we wait here?

It’s getting colder every day. And darker.”

“Maybe another week, maybe two.”

“And then we’re going to South America, correct? That’s still the plan?”

“That’s still the plan.”

“No more stops in Europe? Not even Spain or Portugal?”

Victor had been kicking around the Atlantic with me almost as long as Hung had, and now he wanted to revisit his homeland of Argentina. I didn’t understand why. He had no living family there, at least none who would recognize his blood connection to them. Victor was the bastard son of an escaped Nazi officer and his late-in-life mistress, a Buenos Aires “dancer,” to put it politely. The old Nazi had done very well in the import-export business after landing in Argentina in 1946, but his German-Argentinean family did not consider the much-later-arriving Victor a member in good standing of the new clan. He had received a first-rate education in Argentina and Germany, but the tenuous family connection was severed with his father’s death.

I said, “We’re going to South America. That’s where we’ll repaint and refit. But we’re not going there in a straight line. We’re low on propane, and I don’t want to cross the ocean eating cold food. And if Sinead comes aboard, we’re going to spend the winter in the Caribbean. That’s just how it is. She’s never seen a coral reef or a palm tree in her life. But first we’ll stop in Madeira. Maybe we can get propane there.”

The Portuguese island of Madeira lay halfway between the Azores and the Canaries. I hoped that visiting the nearly idyllic semi-tropical island would make Sinead fall in love with the cruising life. Enough to inoculate her against the tedium, bad weather, and seasickness she would also undoubtedly experience.

It would be a challenge to adapt her pale Irish skin to the burning tropical sun, so best to take it in easy steps. It was a challenge I looked forward to, along with teaching her how to sail and skin-dive and introducing her to all the other joys of a tropical pleasure cruise. But my new Irish girlfriend was not yet committed to coming along on the voyage. And we still had a third of our original cargo of diesel fuel to sell.

Victor closed his book and studied me over his gold-rimmed glasses. “You are letting a woman dictate your schedule again. Don’t you remember what happened the last time?”

“Yes, and the time before that.”

He sighed. “And a ginger with green eyes. You’re absolutely mad.”

“She’s not a ginger,” I said. “She has brown hair, and her eyes are hazel.” To be perfectly honest, in certain light, and depending on what she was wearing, Sinead’s hair did pick up a reddish glint. In any case, it was lovely hair, sometimes held back with a ribbon or tied in a ponytail. That was my favorite, because it showed off her sweet face from more angles.

Okay, I’ll admit it, I was well and truly whipped. Why else would I have endured shaving off my Arctic beard with a straight razor, a steel relic from another century? Victor kept his gray beard trimmed short with a comb and scissors no matter where he was, down in Argentina, above the Arctic Circle, or here in Ireland. At his age, he had no expectation of finding female companionship, or for that matter, of impressing anyone at all with his appearance.

He looked at me very sternly. “Dan Kilmer, you are completely out of your mind. As we both know perfectly well.”

“Victor, if I bring Sinead on board, then I’m going to show her the Caribbean. That’s just how it is.” No matter what was happening in the rest of the world, winter in the Caribbean was a paradise for visiting sailors, just as it had been ever since Columbus had first set eyes on it. Five centuries later, some of the islands still had their economic and political acts together, providing a safe venue for commerce. Voyagers who could pay their way in hard coin, or who were bringing a desirable cargo to sell, were always welcome to drop anchor—and I was willing to test Victor’s patience by spending the winter season in the eastern Caribbean with Sinead.

It was my schooner, after all, and he was not the most agreeable company to begin with. We were never equal partners. I was the sole owner and master of Rebel Yell. He was the German-trained doctor who lived on my boat, a man who read dull, often indecipherable books, blurted callous remarks to strangers, and occasionally stitched me up when my hide required patching.

He folded his hands and looked at me coldly. “When we sell the rest of the diesel, then we will divide the profits?”

His blunt question did not surprise me. For the past few years we’d operated on a 25 percent basis, with one share of our income for Hung, one share for Victor, one share for the captain, and one share for the boat. You could say that meant two shares for me, but if you knew how much my old steel sailboat demanded for her upkeep, you would understand that I was being very generous in offering each member of my permanent crew a one-

quarter share in our mutual endeavors. Our provisioning costs came out of the boat's share. Hung was given the required coinage, and he gimped ashore anyplace we dropped anchor to explore the local markets and bring back what he could find for Rebel's galley.

Our formal divisions of the loot did not come at regular intervals, because our profitable endeavors were infrequent and unpredictable. Victor also had sporadic income from his services as a physician. Neither of us had any off-boat investments or foreign bank accounts. The global economic crash had wiped out all of that years before.

"Victor, do you want a fresh accounting right now? Here? Or can it wait until we're back on board?"

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "Just so you know: when we reach Argentina, I think I will be leaving the boat."

So that was it. I'd sensed some irritation at my intention to bring a new girlfriend along for an ocean voyage, but this was the first time in at least a year that I'd heard him mention jumping ship. "Do you mean you're just going walkabout for a while, or are you planning to leave for good?"

"At this point, I'm not sure. How long would we spend in the Caribbean?"

"At least through January." Doctor Victor Aleman was always prickly, and the prospect of the skipper bringing a new female on board had made him more so. But Sinead Devlin was certifiably gorgeous, and she'd already left her scent in my cabin. And I wanted more of it—a lot more of it—but not in cold, rainy Ireland, with the northern winter fast coming on. Island-hopping around the Caribbean with Sinead could be a life-changing experience for both of us. She could even be The One. In that case, maybe it would be good-bye to cranky old Doctor Aleman, and hello to sweet young Miss Devlin. I would just have to be more careful to avoid being shot, stabbed, or run over without a resident sawbones on board to put me back together.

After a minute of studying the dark ceiling beams of the pub he replied, "Yes, of course, the northern winter is a good time to be in the Caribbean. Martinique and Guadeloupe would be very nice to visit again, as would Saint Maarten and the other Dutch islands. Excellent bookstores. And we might see some yachts we know."

Right on all counts. Unspoken between us was the fact that a fresh cut of the cards was offered to a sailor in every new port of call. Hundreds of

voyaging yachts would be cruising around the Caribbean over the winter, with some of them bound for every point of the compass between Canada and Cape Horn. The services of a European-trained orthopedic surgeon were always in demand, even a moody son of a bitch like Victor. He could do his doctoring from boat to boat in the major anchorages without ever putting a foot ashore or having to deal with local officials or bureaucrats. And then he would meet well-connected people and hear about interesting employment situations. If he found a better position, it wouldn't take him an hour to pack his seabags, and even less time to say good-bye.

For that matter, if things didn't work out between Sinead and me, once we were in the Caribbean she might wind up aboard another yacht sailing back across the Atlantic to Ireland, or to anywhere else. Even Hung might eventually decide that he'd had enough of life afloat. Anybody who tossed their bags aboard my schooner was a volunteer, free to go at the time and port of their choosing.

Nobody was a prisoner aboard Rebel Yell except the captain. Without my care, she would rust away and sink, but I would never let that happen, not while I drew breath as a free man. Rebel was more than just my mobile home; she was the one place on the planet where my footsteps landed on my own sovereign territory. Sixty feet on deck and eighteen feet wide across the beam, she constituted my movable micro-state: Dan Kilmer Land. I repaid Rebel's faithful service to my needs with my own fierce loyalty to hers.

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I tried to understand Victor's urge to leave the boat to revisit the land of his birth. The bastard son of a Nazi had no living family who would accept him as their kin, so family reunions were out of the question. Any remotely possible inheritance had been wiped out during the worldwide economic crash. All the wealth he possessed was on my boat, either hidden among his possessions or awaiting a new division of the profits from our last salvage expedition; the reality was that Hung and I were the only family Victor had.

When he returned to Buenos Aires, he would look for a few old friends. Place *una ramita de flores* on his murdered wife's grave. Visit former schools and neighborhoods, the haunts remembered from his youth and early adulthood. Maybe he would return to my boat, maybe he wouldn't. For all I knew, he might fall in love with a rich widow or be kidnapped by gangsters,

the way his wife had been. Or he might join another medical do-gooder group, to suffer harder penance than could be found aboard an old schooner.

It didn't matter. If he decided to go, he would go. He was pushing sixty; maybe he felt that he had little time left to reconnect with his origins and find some cosmic meaning to his life. Perhaps declining health and vigor or the fear of creeping dementia lying ahead were giving him a new sense of urgency. For whatever reason, his walks up into the Irish hills were getting longer and longer. Something was eating him, but his private thoughts and inner motivations were always an enigma to me.

After the Caribbean, Rebel Yell would spend a few months knocking around the boatyards of the River Plate for a much-needed refit. According to rumors being cast across the radio waves, the yards in Uruguay were still functioning. But if Victor didn't return to Rebel after going walkabout, I would move on without him. I wasn't getting any younger, either. Unless I found the right woman, eventually I would be sailing solo again when the septuagenarian Hung jumped ship, fell overboard, or simply failed to wake up one morning.

Reconnecting with old friends and family was a frequent thought in the mind of a rootless vagabond sailor. Going home could be painful, though. What if nobody was still around who even faintly remembered your past life there? In that case, your entire existence upon the planet Earth held no more lasting meaning than a random pebble tossed into a pond: the few ripples were soon gone, leaving no mark. In a zero-sum world, your life might as well not have been lived.

So maybe there was more driving me to invite Sinead Devlin aboard than just her pretty face and soft curves. I wasn't even forty, just a decade older than her. She was still in her fertile years, and I had time to make a family, time that had already run out for Victor. Still in her twenties, Sinead would also be acutely aware of her ticking biological clock. Judging by her behavior in my private cabin over the past week, her alarms were all clanging away. We'd been careful, so unplanned offspring were not yet a part of the equation. Thus far.

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The prior months spent in the Arctic in the company of two older men had left me with an abundance of desire for youthful feminine charms. I was

lucky in my choice of Irish smuggling ports, meeting Sinead Devlin on my second night in Crowhaven. Never married, no kids. Riding out the hard times with her family, like everybody else. She was not put off by my old Marine Corps souvenir, the scar that ran from under my right eye toward my ear. I had been attempting to reel her in for two weeks, and she had stayed overnight on Rebel Yell for the past two nights. If things worked out, there was a good chance that Sinead would be on my schooner when we left Ireland bound for the tropics.

That morning, I had brought Sinead back to shore in my old Avon RIB, the rigid-hulled inflatable boat that was Rebel's dinghy. Pleasant and relaxed during breakfast aboard my schooner, she seemed to stiffen and withdraw as we approached the quay. We tied the dinghy to the floating small-boat dock beneath the stone wall and climbed the angled bridge onto solid ground. She went ahead of me up the narrow ramp, giving me a welcome opportunity to admire her curves from behind and below.

At nine in the morning there was nobody in sight on the small landing. But after spending a night of unbridled passion in my cabin, Sinead now seemed mindful of showing any slight public display of affection. I settled for a quick hug and a brief kiss before she pulled away and unlocked her bicycle, which she'd left chained to a section of iron fence. It was hard to understand Sinead's sudden shyness after her unrestrained behavior in the privacy of my cabin. I guessed that this was an Irish Catholic cultural affliction, and I hoped to cure her of it in the warm and sunny Caribbean.

If I'd had a car, I would have given her a lift home, but I didn't, so I couldn't. It would take hard physical effort to peddle steeply uphill to her home in the village of Golleen, but returning to sea-level Crowhaven would be an easier decision for her. She would be able to fly downhill, coasting most of the way straight back into my arms. "See you again tonight?" I asked her.

"You might see me, you might not. I have to look after my sister and my mum." She pulled the chain from the fence and dropped it into the basket in front of her handlebars, along with her small overnight bag.

I reached for her shoulder, turning her to face me. "Sinead, are you going to come sailing with me or not? Last night—"

"Last night I was out of me head!" Strands of auburn hair spilled across her cheek as she tilted her head and gave me an exasperated look. "Oh, Danny, you know I'd love to go off sailin' with ya on your lovely boat, you

know I surely would. If all I had to do was pack my bags, they'd already be packed. Don't you know that by now?"

"What about tonight, then?"

"Oh, you know I'd love to, but I have obligations. *Real* obligations. I'm not free as a bird to fly away. My life is ever so much more complicated than yours."

"Sinead, I want you come with me. Maybe just for a year, and then I'd bring you straight back here to your family. But maybe for forever."

"And I want to go, don't you understand that? But it's not that simple!" She shook her head and pulled away, both hands firmly set on her handlebars, looking up the road. The sea-breeze chill had left her cheeks rosy.

"Okay, I understand." So, was this the kiss-off? Her last good-bye? I hoped that I was misreading the moment, but I couldn't push the issue without sounding desperate. "Hey, well, listen—if you hear anything new about buyers, you can reach me at the pub. We still have thirty drums."

"Aye, and I told you there's a fella nosin' about. But nothing specific, you understand. You'll be the first to know if I hear anything." A quick peck on my cheek and she mounted her bicycle, gave me a final smile, turned, and pedaled away.

Some people might observe my lifestyle, tally my few and brief semi-meaningful relationships, and assume that I was a confirmed bachelor by choice. But the truth was very different. I'd been trying to find the right woman for years. The problem was finding someone who could live aboard my old steel schooner for longer than just a voyage or a season before jumping ship for drier and steadier pastures. After a decade afloat I was still looking for that one special lady who would surrender her home, her family, and her friends for the watery seafaring life. A woman who would not try to drag me ashore to live out my days imprisoned between white picket fences and square walls on the unmoving land.

2

Crowhaven was too small to appear on most maps. Years before, road tourism had been the economic mainstay, but that had died with the end of readily available and affordable fuel. Centuries before automobile tourism had come and gone, Crowhaven had been known as a dodgy port specializing in even dodgier cargoes, which was why Rebel Yell was anchored there. Diesel fuel was insanely pricey in any part of Europe. After the normal distribution systems had broken down, any kind of machinery that could be made to run presented a tremendous economic advantage to its operator. Boats, cars, and trucks still worked, but only if you could nourish them with the liquid hydrocarbons that they craved.

I wondered how old Driscoll's Pub was. It certainly preceded the 1916 Easter Uprising and the following Irish Republican war of independence from Great Britain, when the midnight cargoes had included German Mausers. The gray stone walls of the pub had already been ancient even then, protected from the ocean's fury by the granite finger of land that separated the narrow harbor of Crowhaven from the Atlantic.

Some of the exposed beams above my head appeared to be hundreds of years old, the cut marks of hand tools still visible in the dark wood. According to Driscoll family lore, they had been salvaged from a wrecked sailing ship, possibly from the Spanish Armada, from which the timbers had been recut to build a new second floor and roof above the original gray stone walls. In 1588, the ill-fated Armada had been driven by storms all the way around Scotland and Ireland, where a dozen or more Spanish ships foundered on the rocks. Armada or not, hundreds of ships had wrecked on the nearby headlands and offshore rocks over the centuries, and salvaging their timbers, rigging, and cargoes was no myth.

The pub had another notable benefit in addition to its views of both the narrow harbor and the solitary road leading down to it: it had a working landline telephone. According to Driscoll, the last cell phone service had been gone for over a year. The electric grid in County Cork was hanging by a thread, but the old hard-wired telephone system still worked. Fishermen and other local mariners called the pub to inquire about the current weather conditions out on the open bay beyond the protected harbor, as well as to leave messages.

Most of our drums of diesel had been sold with the help of the pub's telephone, and Owen Driscoll had been well compensated for the service in the meals and beverages we'd consumed. In addition, he'd promised to warn us of any customs agents or Garda policemen approaching by road. He claimed that an informal system of watchers in the villages along the road from the city of Cork would call the pub if they saw them coming toward Crowhaven.

With dusk falling fast, a new customer for our diesel fuel was unlikely. Road travel was risky by day, and even more so by night. Not all Irishmen were saints by a long shot; highway robbery was a scourge in Southwest Ireland, as it was in most places. It was easy to ambush solitary vehicles on remote stretches of road, and even easier after dark. Hunger often trumped morality, especially when there were small mouths to feed. As a result, people normally planned their travel to be in a safe place before nightfall.

So if Sinead was going to come coasting down to the pub on her bicycle, she would appear in the next half hour or not at all. No doubt she had a profoundly important decision to make. Would she toss her baggage aboard my sailboat for a Caribbean cruise? Or would she resign herself to enduring another dark, cold, rainy winter, shut in with her old mum and helping to care for her invalid sister?

Miss Devlin was no innocent waif being shanghaied. She was twenty-nine and worldly wise, having worked in offices from Cork to Dublin. She was strong and athletic, and I had little doubt she would make a fine sailor provided she didn't turn out to be chronically seasick. She assured me that she had been on boats all her life and had never suffered from it. The long, slow voyage south would give her fair skin time to adjust to the tropical sun.

But once we reached the Caribbean, what then? Would she be the one to sign on for the lifetime cruise, perhaps to raise a family afloat? It might be years, if ever, before Rebel Yell returned to Ireland. Her mother and sister might well die in her absence. But hadn't millions of Irish faced the same hard choice during centuries past and taken the bold leap to new lives in new worlds? Her mother might even be encouraging her to leave. She must have noticed Sinead's overnight stays away from their home, and village tongues would wag. No doubt her mum knew that she was spending nights aboard a Yank's boat in Crowhaven.

Even if she came with me, Sinead might jump ship once we neared America. Or on the other hand, what if she fell hard for me and I didn't fall

for her? Perhaps I would be forced to scrape her from Rebel Yell like a barnacle. I'd known her for only two weeks, so maybe she was concealing some bizarre quirk or dark emotional problems. Inviting a recently met lady on a long cruise always presented this dilemma. You couldn't just call a taxi and send them home if things didn't work out.

The idea of Sinead Devlin sharing my cabin for the next few months or even years was the primary factor keeping Rebel Yell in Ireland. With only thirty drums left aboard, we were no longer a foot low on our waterline. We could move on and sell the diesel almost anywhere. The longer a strange foreign vessel hangs around a port, even one as bureaucratically unmolested as Crowhaven, the more chance it has of gaining the attention of hostile parties more interested in stealing a cargo than in purchasing it.

That was the smuggler's paradox: to sell your wares, you had to float the word on the local rumor mill and hope that it reached enough ears—but not too many. After more than two weeks in Crowhaven, I had no interest in retailing the rest of our cargo a drum or two at a time. On the other hand, the appeal of Miss Sinead Devlin spending even one more night warming my bed was undeniable. My eyes strained on the dark road, looking for a girl on a bicycle gliding downhill.

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A distant flash of silver became a car, visible for a moment as the road lifted and then dipped. My binoculars were up before the next rise offered a few more seconds of observation. A silver-gray sedan, with multiple heads inside. Then the car disappeared into another fold of land. If Driscoll's Pub was their destination, they would be here in a minute.

I had not yet had any government interaction during my unofficial and so far, unrecorded visit to Eire. I had completely skipped the legal formalities of clearing into the country, putting me outside the law, such as the law existed that October in Ireland. But would Garda or customs officers arrive in one unmarked sedan? Possibly. Why would they waste their gasoline driving more than one vehicle to investigate rumors of untaxed fuel being sold? Unless they were worried about resistance. But if that were the case, they would have brought more than one car.

Victor, facing away from the road and my view of it, watched me raise my binoculars and asked, "Visitors?"

“A gray sedan. More than one person in it.”

“To buy our fuel, I hope.”

“I don’t know. Maybe the local gentry are dropping by for a pint.” The kilometer-long ridge of granite that Crowhaven was built upon had a single road running down its length on the harbor side. Driscoll’s Pub was the only establishment that was open for business, and just barely. It’s not as if the place carried much overhead. Owen and Brigid Driscoll lived over the pub in their second-floor residence.

I took my glass of stout, rose from our corner table, and moved to the far end of the bar, facing the front entrance from the other side of the room. The bar was made of solid timber and would provide cover if I needed it. A narrow waiter’s port cut through the short leg of the bar to my left. Behind the bar a single door led into the kitchen and pantry. The pantry connected to a back exit. During the two weeks that we’d been regulars, my mind had mapped every inch of the place.

Victor remained seated in the far corner of the pub from my position. We were both facing the main entrance, in the center of the side of the pub toward the harbor. He habitually carried a snub-nosed Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver in the right pocket of his black leather coat, which was hanging over the back of his chair. He reached behind him, retrieved it, and laid it on the table in front of him. He arranged a rumpled linen napkin over the gun, between his pint and his paperback, then made a slight nod in my direction. No matter what was happening at my end of the pub, he could casually reach for his beer, his book, or his revolver without drawing attention.

Being positioned wide apart on either side of the pub’s entrance gave us a critical advantage over sitting together at one table. Bad guys with guns coming through one door can’t effectively cover two armed men when the two are spread thirty feet apart. This type of deployment is the best you can do to create ambush conditions in a pub or other small, close space when trouble is coming your way.

There had been at least four heads in the approaching car. Customers, government officials, or maybe some kind of local mafia. But whether they were policemen or diesel customers, Owen Driscoll should have known about them and informed me in advance.

I pulled my sweater up a bit on the right side to give me easier access to my Glock 19 in its holster, tucked inside the waistband of my jeans; the bar I

was standing behind was tall enough to conceal the gun. The sedan parked out of sight around the side of the pub. I heard car doors open and close, then nothing for another minute.

When the front door finally eased open, only one person slipped through. Sinead, but no smile of greeting graced her pretty face. She was wearing a black raincoat, belted at the waist. She remained by the pub's front door and said, "Hello, Danny," gloved hands limp at her sides.

I didn't move toward her. "It's good to see you again so soon, Sinead."

"And you."

"So, you caught a lift down the hill?"

"Aye, I caught a lift."

I said nothing. This was her play, so it was still her move.

"Remember the fella I mentioned, the new fella who was interested in your fuel?"

"I remember. So, it's good news, then?" But why was she hanging back, if it was as simple as that? Obviously, it wasn't. "Is there a problem? Why don't they come in?"

"They're a wee bit the careful types, that's all."

My left hand was on the bar next to my pint, my right hand hovering near my pistol, my eyes darting between the pub's front entrance and the still-swinging door to the kitchen, where Driscoll had disappeared to. If the men came into the pub in force, either to arrest me or for another purpose, they might come from multiple directions at the same time. They might already have a man behind me, where there were windows I couldn't see without turning around.

"Do I have a reason to be worried, Sinead?"

"No, Danny. No reason at all." But she looked right past me when she said it.

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Four men from the sedan walked into view past the pub's front windows. Why hadn't they parked directly in front? There was plenty of space there, enough for several cars. They were just being careful, if I believed Sinead. But on a drizzly evening in a country where cold rain was always waiting to fall, it was usual for people to park as close to an entrance as possible, not out back or around the side.

Instead of entering the pub, the men stopped and looked across the water toward Rebel Yell, lying at anchor a hundred meters away. Gray sky above, gray water below, and between them a homely black sailing vessel with two equal-height masts. The men's backs were to me as words passed between them. One of the men carried a briefcase-size leather satchel, the rest had their hands in coat pockets. They studied my schooner with interest, but they certainly weren't admiring her blocky lines, from the steel-pipe bowsprit welded on her stem to the square pilothouse and bluff transom of her stern.

To the average observer, probably the most interesting item aboard my schooner was mounted on her transom. A waterproof canvas covered our heavy machine gun, but there was no hiding its size and purpose. Deck guns were a common sight on ocean-traveling vessels during those times. No port expecting trade from the outside world could afford to be squeamish about visitors carrying armaments adequate for their self-defense on the open ocean. In some countries with still-functioning governments, local laws or simple prudence dictated that deck guns be stowed below while in port. This was not the case in southwest Ireland, where there was not even the pretense of a naval or coast guard presence within fifty miles, the distance to the closest major port city of Cork.

I asked Sinead, "Who are these men?"

"I only know one of them, a fella named Pat Maguire, and I've only known him a few days. He's not from around here, he's from the North. You'll get on with him; he's practically a Yank." She looked at me while she was talking, and almost seemed to smile. Nervous chatter. "He lived for a while in the States. Boston. Do you know the place?"

"Not really. I've been there a few times."

"Well, all I know is you need to meet these men. It's very important that you do."

"Does this have anything to do with selling my fuel?"

"Aye, it has everything to do with your precious fuel. And maybe a lot more than that. You just have to talk to them and find out, that's all."

It was clear from her demeanor that I was already a part of her past. It occurred to me that perhaps I'd been set up from the start. Neatly honey-trapped by a pretty Irish colleen, like any horny, naive British squaddie who had found himself in the wrong Belfast pub during The Troubles. If that was the case, then this was the scene in the drama where I was going to be introduced to some hard men with very unpleasant plans for my immediate

future. And where was Owen Driscoll, with four new customers in the offing? Nowhere to be seen.

One thing for sure, unlike the unlucky-in-love British soldiers mislaid in Belfast so long ago, there would be no local memorial erected in Crowhaven for a single misplaced Yank, one who had never even bothered to enter the Irish Republic formally on the official record. When you slip into a country off the books, you can disappear the same way.

After a long silence to make her squirm a little, I said, “Well, if you’re satisfied, send them in.” I might have been in Sinead Devlin’s past, but I couldn’t bring myself to believe that she would betray me. She was my lover, after all, and if you can’t trust your lover, what kind of a damned fool are you, anyway?

She opened the door and gestured outside, said something I didn’t catch. I stayed behind the solid timber around the corner at the end of the bar. Two of the men came inside.

3

The older of the two was a few inches shorter than the other and wore a gray trench coat, collar up. He carried the satchel. The other, in a dark coat, had a head of unruly dark hair sprinkled with gray. One of them was Pat Maguire, the man Sinead said was from the North, meaning the northern counties of Ulster. But at least they looked like potential diesel customers and not Garda or customs agents or the local mafia. I put both of the men in their late fifties, plus or minus. No, the shorter gray-haired man was at least sixty, but he still looked spry and fit. Certainly neither was young, but they both looked like men who would not run away from a fight at any age. I smelled ex-military on them.

"Captain Kilmer?" asked the older one, approaching me with his right hand extended. Short gray hair, carefully combed, and piercing blue eyes. Clean-shaved except for a narrow gray mustache.

"That's me." I sidestepped around the corner of the bar and shook his hand and held it. His eyes remained locked on mine after the briefest glance down at the partly exposed pistol on my hip.

"I understand that you have diesel fuel for sale." He had an English accent, not Irish. They could still be cops. It could be a sting.

"If the price is right. But I won't take paper money or banknotes." I didn't want them, not even the new British pounds. Paper was paper to me. National banknotes might have value in one or a few countries, but they would prove worthless and impossible to convert anywhere else. Especially on the other side of an ocean, in a different hemisphere, on another continent. And particularly in Argentina, with the history of renewed war between the two nations over the god-forsaken Falkland Islands.

"If we strike a deal, we'll pay you in Krugerrands."

Music to my ears. "I'll need to test them first. Do you have them here?"

"We'll produce them at the appropriate time."

I'd heard that one before. "I'm not going to move a single barrel until I've tested the gold. Half paid in advance, the other half on delivery at the quay." I pronounced it their way, *key*.

The taller curly-haired man moved up close to the older man, and whispers and nods were exchanged. My terms must have been amenable, because the older man continued. "All right. How much do you have for

sale?”

“Thirty barrels. Each barrel contains fifty-five American gallons. It all comes out to more than six thousand liters. How much do you want?”

“We’ll take all of it,” he said without hesitation.

One and done, more music to my ears. “If you take all thirty barrels, my price is thirty ounces of gold. Can I see it?” I looked at his leather grip bag, guessing its weight.

The older man said, “It’s not here.”

“When can you bring it?”

“Soon enough.”

“As soon as I’ve checked the gold, I’ll bring my boat to the quay. I assume you have a truck? A lorry?”

“We have a lorry, yes.”

The curly-haired one said, “We may need to account for the tide. What’s your draft?” He had an Irish accent, and light brown or maybe hazel eyes.

“Seven feet.”

“What is she, sixty, seventy feet long?”

“Sixty feet on deck. Plus the bowsprit.”

The Irishman said, “You wouldn’t know it today, but this harbor used to be full of yachts from everywhere.”

“It’s a good anchorage in this weather,” I said.

“Your boat looks rugged,” he continued.

Did he mean rugged ugly, or rugged strong? I chose to take it as a compliment and not an insult. “That’s right. Rugged is what she is.” Nobody would ever call Rebel Yell beautiful, not with her fading black hull paint and streaks of rust on her white-painted deck, pilothouse, and handrails. But even when freshly painted, which was more than five years back, she wasn’t pretty. Functional, yes, but never pretty, not with her blocky pilothouse planted far aft in the stern behind the mainmast. Square, with big square Plexiglas windows, the pilothouse had all the grace of a turnpike tollbooth cut off at knee level and welded to the deck. Her Dutch designer had obviously not cared at all about aesthetics in design. Two equal-height masts technically made her a schooner.

The Englishman said, “A vessel like yours can go anywhere. What’s her best speed under power?”

I didn’t like the question, so I sidestepped it. What was it to him? “It depends on too many factors to give a simple answer. Does she have a clean

bottom? Is the wind from behind or on the nose? Flat water or rough? Empty hold or laden with heavy cargo?"

"I understand," he replied. "But safe to say, you could make eight or nine miles per hour under power?"

"Nothing is safe to say, not out on the ocean. Conditions can change from hour to hour."

"But that speed is achievable, on that boat and with that engine?"

"What does my boat's speed have to do with your buying my diesel fuel?"

"Captain Kilmer, hypothetically speaking…" He cleared his throat, then continued. "How far and how fast could your vessel motor with all of the diesel that is aboard her, both in your own tanks and in the thirty drums? Even if the winds were against her?"

"I don't know. I'd have to make a few calculations."

"But a long way, yes? Your hull bottom is clean, and your engine is in good order?"

"I'm sorry, but what does any of this have to do with buying my diesel?"

"Everything, Captain Kilmer. But to be frank, I have another business opportunity to offer you in *addition* to buying your diesel fuel." He cleared his throat. "Actually, I would like to propose a short-term charter. One or two weeks, say."

My vision of a fast thirty Krugerrands, an empty cargo hold, and Rebel Yell riding high and sailing fast over the blue horizon popped like a shiny soap bubble. "I'm sorry, but I'm not interested in charter work. I'm just interested in selling thirty barrels of diesel. That's what I'm here for. That's *all* I'm here for."

"I understand that, I most certainly do, and quite right. But even so, can you give us a few minutes of your time to discuss what this charter might entail?"

"Why should I?"

"Why? I'll be frank: because your vessel is available, and because we have need of the use of it. And, as fortune would have it, I am made to understand that we are both traveling in the same direction. You are only waiting to sell the rest of your cargo before sailing to the Caribbean, isn't that correct?"

So they weren't cops. His proposed charter was not a surprising turn of events; being a sailor of fortune meant that deals often twisted and turned in

unexpected directions. But his obvious knowledge of my plans and destination bothered me. That was not publicly shared information. I glanced past them to Sinead. She was sitting in my chair, facing away from me and toward Victor.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but you have received incorrect information." I nearly added, "from Miss Devlin." I glanced out the front windows: the two other men were still spread apart, but now they were facing the pub instead of the harbor. Their hands were still concealed in their coat pockets. A discreet tactical deployment, should our discussions take an ugly turn. "I'm sorry, but my boat is not available for charter, and what you need is of no concern to me."

"Yes, I quite agree," said the older man with the English accent. "And I fully understand that our needs are not your concern. But at the end of the day, I'm still left with *our* needs, our own very urgent needs. Captain Kilmer, this is most uncomfortable for me. Hear what we have to say…please."

"Why should I?"

The Irishman said, "Just hear him out. Just hear what the colonel has to say."

"Colonel?" The rank fit the gray-haired older gentleman like a glove.

"Well, he *was* a colonel. In the *S-A-S*," said the Irishman, tossing me a wink.

His companion said, "Captain Kilmer, I do apologize for making a complete hash of our introduction. We know your name and you do not know ours. My associate is Mr. Patrick Maguire, and I am William Rainborow, at one time an officer in the British Army. It's true, as he said, that I left active service with the rank of colonel. And as coincidence would have it, around the time when you were a sniper in Iraq with the United States Marines, I was a major serving with the Twenty-second Special Air Service Regiment. I worked between Basra and Baghdad in the early two thousands."

"I was in Baghdad and Anbar province back then." He'd obviously checked my history, somehow. I hadn't told Sinead anything about that time in my life, except that my facial scar was an old war wound.

The old colonel said, "Then perhaps we crossed paths, or even spent time on the same allied bases. 'Operation Iraqi Freedom,' what? Now, many adventures later, we meet in a pub in Ireland." He was an intriguing man, with a quick smile, a readily arched eyebrow, an agreeably conspiratorial air. In short, a salesman.

“Iraq was a *long* time ago, Colonel.”

“Yes, it was quite a long time ago, for both of us. But now I implore you, soldier to soldier, to spare us a few minutes of your time. Captain Kilmer, please—hear us out.”

Detecting my reluctance from across the pub, Sinead had walked over and was now standing beside the Irishman. She looked me full in the face and said, “Danny, just give these men a wee bit of your time. You’ve nothing to lose by giving them a listen.”

Owen Driscoll reappeared behind the bar, and he slowly nodded his own solemn agreement with Sinead’s assertion. But why were these Irish men and an Irish lady suddenly insisting that I needed to listen to what a British colonel—an ex-SAS colonel at that—had to say? What was I risking by agreeing to hear them out? So far, nobody had presented an official law enforcement badge or government credential, or pointed a gun at me. Everything was strictly voluntary, at least up to that point. Take it or leave it. Walk away at any time.

Right…

The alleged former SAS colonel kept his gaze locked on mine and slowly withdrew a small item from his left breast coat pocket. He held a one-ounce gold coin between us, and then he placed it on the corner of the bar. “I brought that in case you had doubts about our actually possessing any gold. You may have this coin if you listen to what we have to say. Accept or decline, this Krugerrand is yours to keep in return for twenty minutes of your time. Twenty minutes for one ounce of gold. I’m thinking that you don’t receive such an offer every day.”

Well, that was certainly true. I picked it up and hefted its weight, looking for signs that it was a counterfeit. The South African springbok on one side, Paul Kruger’s bearded profile on the other. Before I agreed to the full deal for all thirty barrels, I would give his coins the acid test and check them on size gauges and a scale. The Chinese were very good at producing gold-coated, tungsten-cored fakes. I dropped the heavy coin into the pocket of my jeans. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“Can we sit down?” asked the colonel. “I’d like to use a computer, so that I can show you a few things.”

After a moment to think I replied, “Okay, why not?” The man exuded competence, and I was curious despite my forebodings to hear what he had to say. I couldn’t help making a visual comparison between this bantam-rooster

retired colonel and Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, of World War Two fame, and this inflamed my curiosity even more.

Maguire led us past the end of the bar to a table in the corner farthest from where Victor was still sitting and watching us. I gave him a nod indicating that I was not acting under duress, and received a nod of acknowledgement in return. I took the seat with my back to the far wall. From my position, I could see the front door of the pub, the door to the kitchen, and all the way across the room to Victor.

The colonel unzipped his satchel, removed a laptop computer, opened the screen, and switched it on. Three fresh pints of stout appeared on the table. Sinead said something to Owen Driscoll that I didn't catch, then continued past the bar and lowered herself into the chair opposite Victor. My seat. No doubt she was going to give him a variation of the same sales pitch I was about to receive. If she hadn't been a part of this team when I'd met her here two weeks ago, she was certainly a part of it now.

While the computer booted up, the colonel said, "I have a prepared briefing that I've presented several times since I agreed to lead this operation. I've had little sleep of late and I'm rather fatigued, so it will be best if I just plunge into it straightaway." He placed the laptop at the end of the table where we could all watch it, but mostly it was facing me.

Colonel Rainborow had called it a briefing, but in the end, the point of his briefing was a military sales pitch. At the top end of the pyramid it's a matter of selling generals and politicians on the idea that a desired mission will succeed at an acceptable cost in blood and treasure. At the far wider bottom, it's a matter of convincing privates, sergeants, and lieutenants to climb aboard trucks, armored vehicles, boats, helicopters, or airplanes and travel to places where whizzing shards of hot metal might end their young lives.

As I expected, the colonel had a PowerPoint presentation queued up, with slides and video clips running in succession while he spoke. Amazing. Even after the shit had hit the fan, with the Old World Order in ruins, there was still PowerPoint.

Rainborow came across like a former welterweight fighter who had retained his energy and fitness into his late middle age. Good DNA, a strict PT regimen, or a healthy diet—and probably all three. I had only been a Marine scout-sniper, not a so-called tier-one operator, but I'd been around enough hard-charging infantry and special ops senior officers to recognize

the type. Intense demeanor, tightly wired, always switched on. Slept with one eye open. The world ran in slow motion in comparison to their default settings. They had to throttle way back so that the common herd could keep up.

The Irishman introduced to me as Pat Maguire took a chair next to the colonel, opposite me, where he could also see the screen. The colonel used a computer mouse and clicked through the first panes rapidly. He cleared his throat and said, “These are my bona fides. I need to invoke them from time to time to convince extremely wealthy gentlemen with absolutely no military expertise to hand me loads and loads of cash. Always for a worthy cause, it goes without saying.”

Fancy diplomas from Sandhurst and Cambridge appeared for just a blink as he clicked the mouse. A knowledge of French and Arabic was indicated on other certificates from military and civilian language institutes printed in several languages. Images flashed by of the younger William Rainborow, both in uniform and wearing unlikely civilian and Arab garb. In later pictures, he was seen in the company of generals and politicians who were unknown to me.

He dwelt just a moment on a newspaper clipping about an SAS rescue in Basra, Iraq. Another rescue in Yemen. A magazine article about a “British tourist” who just happened to find himself in exactly the right place at precisely the right time to help end a mall massacre by Somali jihadists in Nairobi. The tourist had “borrowed” a pistol from a Kenyan policeman and used it to very good effect before trading it for a terrorist’s AK-47. It was all quite impressive, as it was meant to be.

“But enough history,” the colonel said, appearing slightly embarrassed. “Now to the present situation. Two months ago, Moroccan pirates attacked a private girls’ school not far from here. An elite boarding academy called the Saint Agnes Convent Secondary School.”

Maguire opened a beige file and unfolded a section of a paper Michelin road map across the table. It showed southwest Ireland from the city of Cork in the east to the very end of the Dingle Peninsula in the west. The location of the school, tucked inside a fjord-like cut, was indicated with a red arrow.

We’d heard some recounting of the raid since we’d been in Crowhaven. It had been discussed among locals who’d dropped by Driscoll’s Pub, but we were attempting to maintain a low profile by keeping our mouths shut, concealing our foreign origins as much as possible. If they were not

interested in buying diesel, we were not interested in chatting. Some conversation was unavoidable—there were the same curious busybodies in Crowhaven as almost anywhere—but we tried not to become too well remembered.

The colonel clicked through images of maps and aerial photographs showing the layout of the campus, and photos of academic buildings, sporting fields, and the adjoining Wexford Bay. A few pictures and short video clips of young girls playing soccer and field hockey, laughing and smiling in a dining hall and on class outings. It was more than enough to thoroughly humanize and personalize the girls, a key element of what was a very professional sales pitch.

Maguire took up the story, using the unfolded map and a pencil for a pointer, jotting little circles and arrows for my closer attention. “Armed terrorists came ashore here aboard two large inflatable rigid-raiders. The rigid-raiders were launched from a long-range ocean fishing vessel, a converted purse-seine ship. After launching the boats, the ship anchored here in Wexford Bay. As you can see on the chart, the school was less than half a mile away. The attackers knew exactly where and when to attack, down to the hour. The pirates came ashore and kidnapped the girls straight from their classrooms at gunpoint. They herded them to the beach and carried them out to their ship a dozen at a time.

“They were on the ground less than forty minutes, and they took away sixty-seven girls between the ages of eleven and seventeen. They killed a dozen nuns and lay teachers who tried to protect the girls, and they killed more than twenty children who tried to run away or couldn’t be persuaded out of hiding places. Just shot them out of hand. All of the staff were unarmed, of course. For them, it was a bloodbath. Most of the students hid themselves successfully or ran away and escaped, but in the end, they kidnapped sixty-seven girls.”

Colonel Rainborow took back the thread of the briefing. “And they didn’t take only Irish girls. Nearly a third are English, plus a smattering of French and Belgians. The school was quite exclusive, meaning bloody expensive. Its very isolation was viewed as the reason for its safety from the chaos and danger back in the UK and on the continent. The girls were sent to the convent school for their safety, but instead they were kidnapped and carried away.” After clearing his throat, Rainborow clicked the mouse again and began a new video. “Two weeks after the raid, some of the parents of the

girls began to receive messages like these. A thumb drive would arrive in the post, or they were dropped on doorsteps."

The screen was filled with a weeping girl's frightened face, and a video began. "Daddy, Daddy! You have to pay them, you have to pay them, Daddy! They are horrible, wicked men—" A man's hand slapped her face hard and the girl screamed in terror. Rainborow froze the video. "I have dozens of videos like this one, if you care to watch. And many of the ransom demands include old videos of executions and amputations, beheadings, burnings, crucifixions—the lot. The kidnappers send snuff videos to the parents to prove they mean business. And of that, we have no doubt at all."

"What was the Irish military response?" I asked. "Don't you have some frigates or destroyers?"

Maguire said, "We do, back in Cork, but that's fifty miles away, and they were too slow to get moving. It was hours before a frigate could get under way, and by then the raiders were long gone. A coast guard helicopter went out and shot a bit of film, but they had to turn back when they were half out of fuel. A complete cock-up all around."

Colonel Rainborow clicked the mouse and a video played, the pirate vessel filmed from an altitude of perhaps 1,000 feet. The ship was painted all white on the decks, rails, and superstructures, above a blue hull. Just under 200 feet in length, I guessed. The working cranes of a purse-seine fishing boat were gone, and the angled transom was clear of the piles of nets and the seine boats. Instead of fishing gear, two big rigid inflatable boats, RIBs, were pulled up on the stern ramp. The black inflatables were each at least twenty-footers, with center consoles and big outboards.

Minus its fishing gear, in appearance the pirate ship might be taken for a research vessel or other government ship. It could appear from over the horizon anywhere and not attract much attention. The innocuous ship could draw close enough to almost any undefended coastline to launch its inflatables, each of them carrying heavily armed teams of slave-catchers.

I could only imagine the conditions for the girls aboard that ship while in the hands of Moroccan pirates. According to Islamic Sharia law, any infidel or *kafir* girls they captured were the lawful property of the pirates, either to personally rape or to sell. Only the promise that they were worth a much higher price as virgins might have kept the girls physically unharmed during the voyage. The raiders' financial sponsors might even behead the pirates for delivering spoiled goods if they took liberties prematurely. The privilege of

deflowering the terrified young girls would be reserved for the men who paid the most gold to purchase them.

The colonel said, “The group that is holding the girls declared a three-month ransom period. But after that, they’ll go on the auction block and be sold to the highest bidders.”

Maguire added, “And the time is up in just two weeks.”

“So, you’re delivering the ransom. Is that the plan?”

The men glanced at each other, and Colonel Rainborow spoke for them both. “No. Paying the ransom is not the plan. *This* is the plan.”

4

“Instead of paying a ransom,” said the colonel, “the grandfather of one of the girls has taken the decision to finance a rescue operation for *all* of them. This is Portia, his granddaughter.” Photographs of a smiling blonde teenager appeared in rapid succession. “She is seventeen, so she’s one of the older girls. I was contacted by this gentleman early on, and, like you, I initially believed that it would be to manage the delivery of her individual ransom. The kidnappers demanded one hundred kilos of gold for her release after they learned who her grandfather was. We’ll call him Mr. Smith. The gold was to be parachuted into Morocco. That’s how it’s typically done.”

“Could Mr. Smith actually come up with a hundred kilos? That’s a *lot* of gold.”

The colonel said, “The first ransom demand is a throwaway; it’s never paid. This is Morocco we’re talking about, after all. Some haggling is expected, and Mr. Smith’s agents have been engaged in sham negotiations as a stalling tactic.”

Maguire interjected, “But what’s non-negotiable is the three-month waiting period. When that’s over, the girls go on the auction block. We intend to prevent the auction and bring the girls home instead. We’re not going to let them turn this into a new business model—at least, not in Ireland. We’re going to bring our girls back.”

“I take it that you two are going on the mission?”

The Irishman slapped the table. “Of *course* we’re going! What did you think? That we’d come here tonight and put on this show for you, and not go? What a question.”

Colonel Rainborow cleared his throat and clicked open a new computer file. “Now, here is the outline of the mission we are prepared to undertake. Twelve of us will travel by sea from here to a position off the central coast of Morocco.” While he spoke, the colonel’s steely eyes locked onto mine for long seconds at a time. I wondered if it was an odd personal quirk of his, or the result of some kind of training.

He continued. “There is a landing craft waiting for us in the Canary Islands. It’s a seventy-five-foot LCM-8, commonly called a Mike Boat. It was built for your American Navy quite a few decades ago, and it’s been transporting cargo around the Canary Islands in recent years. This landing

craft will be loaded with three military lorries when we make the rendezvous. The original plan was for a ship provided by Mr. Smith to carry our team to the rendezvous point."



"So, your plan was to meet the landing craft at sea?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"Have you ever done it? First, you would need an unusually calm day at sea to cross-deck men and equipment between two vessels. And just trying to make a mid-ocean rendezvous using celestial navigation is a waste of time. Mid-ocean link-ups went out with GPS. If I were you, I'd scrub the idea of a transfer at sea." I felt the gold coin in my pocket through the fabric of my jeans. I wasn't giving it back. They'd paid me to listen, and even though their scheme was harebrained, the Krugerrand was mine to keep.

The colonel winced almost imperceptibly, but carried on. "Leave the rendezvous to me. Without going into details, we have the technical means of achieving it." Another map appeared on the screen, showing the Atlantic coast of Morocco from the Straits of Gibraltar down to Western Sahara and out to the Canary Islands, some sixty miles offshore. "The lorries have been painted the same green as the ones used by the Moroccan army. We'll beach the landing craft, drive ashore in our lorries, conduct the operation, and return with the girls."

I stared at him. Until that point, his sanity had not been in question, even if the idea of an at-sea rendezvous struck me as incredibly optimistic. "You're serious?"

“I’m dead serious.” His eyes remained locked on mine.

“Do you know what the Atlantic can be like off the coast of Africa in November?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do. I’ve studied the wind and sea data from the pilot charts.”

“Then you know the data are all based on statistical probabilities. Your landing craft has a flat bottom and a square bow ramp. If the weather turns bad, a seventy-five-foot landing craft won’t be up to the job. A boat like that is okay for traveling between islands, but only in calm weather.” Located in the Atlantic just to the west of southern Morocco, the Canaries were made up of a half-dozen primary islands. Administratively, they were an integral part of Spain, in the same way the Hawaiian Islands had been a part of the United States.

“Believe me, Captain Kilmer, we have analyzed the data in great detail. This landing craft can do the job. LCM-8s have successfully conducted many open-ocean transits longer and more difficult than this one.”

He seemed convinced, so what was it to me? Still, I felt compelled to add my two cents. “Colonel, nothing that complicated ever works, not on the ocean. I’d say it’s fifty-fifty that your beach landing turns into a complete fiasco. That is assuming that we could make it to your rendezvous with the landing craft, and from there to the beach in Morocco. And I wouldn’t assume any of that.”

Rainborow locked his gaze on me again. “I’ve chanced riskier operations and succeeded.”

“In November, with big ocean waves pounding the beach? Colonel, with all due respect, pulling off a beach landing with wheeled vehicles isn’t as simple as jumping out of the back of a C-130 with a parachute strapped on your back.”

“I’m well aware of what is required for a successful beach landing, Captain Kilmer. And yes, we do have all the requisite knowledge and experience among our team. Believe it or not, the SAS has quite a bit of experience at driving lorries over sand.”

This was a reference to the origins of the SAS in the Sahara during World War Two, and in later operations from Oman to Iraq and elsewhere. “Okay. Let’s say that the landing craft makes it to Morocco. Do you have anybody who’s ever been to the beach where you’re going to drop your ramp? Are you sure your trucks will be able to drive on that exact sand

without getting stuck? Every kind of beach is different. High tide, low tide, shallow gradient, steep gradient, plunging surf, you name it."

"We have a pair of local surfing guides on our team. They escaped from Morocco on a small sailboat. They know every beach and cliff up and down the coast, and every passable road, track, and goat path in between them. And we are landing in a place that can support our vehicles when they drive off the landing craft, while avoiding the heavy surf."

Surfers for beach guides; that made some sense. For decades Morocco had been a popular surfing destination for Europeans. The chance to surf in big overhead waves was just a charter flight away to Morocco, where good food and decent lodging were cheap.

"Okay, great, whatever. Good luck, then. So, how much diesel do you need? I have thirty drums for sale, and I'll sell it for one ounce of gold per drum. Which is half of what you'd pay in Cork or Dublin, if you could even find any."

"We don't need the thirty drums of diesel. What we need is a replacement for the ship that Mr. Smith had arranged."

"What happened to it?"

He clicked the mouse and the screen showed a motor yacht photographed from the air while tied to a commercial wharf. "This ship was supposed to transport our team south. However, a week ago it was seized by His Majesty's Government in Cardiff, and that is why we are here talking to you. Mr. Smith is currently under house arrest in England. His accounts have been frozen, and his ship is under close guard."

Rainborow clicked onto another photo of the yacht; it was on the low-profile research vessel end of the spectrum, about a hundred feet long. Sometimes they were called explorers or expedition yachts by wealthy owners who desired to maintain an ambiguous low profile instead of flashing ostentatious wealth. "This was to be our transportation to the rendezvous with the landing craft. As far as can be determined, our team's presence here has not been compromised, so the rest of the plan is intact. But now we need a replacement vessel capable of transporting our team to the Canaries. Our time is short, we have no better options, and so here we are."

I stared right back at him. "Well, I'm sorry, Colonel, but I'm not interested in any kind of a charter job, and I certainly won't be involved in transporting mercenaries."

"Captain Kilmer, more than sixty innocent school girls are at this very

moment waiting for their ransom period to end. That will come with the next full moon, on the first Friday of November, which is just sixteen days from today. After that, they will be auctioned off as slaves. Sex slaves."

Maguire added persuasive details. "The girls will be sold to sheikhs who purchase thoroughbred horses and camels for kilos of gold. They'll pay a lot more for young virgins from Ireland and England. And among the girls are two eleven-year-old identical twins. Blondes. They're simply *mad* about blue-eyed blondes. The ransom demand for the twins is two hundred kilos of gold. Their parents don't have it, of course. They don't have a thin fraction of it, so the girls will be sold—as a pair—to become sex slaves. The total ransom being demanded for all the girls is over four thousand kilos of gold. It might as well be four million; it's impossible. So instead, we're going to stop the auction and bring them home.

"The landing craft is waiting in the Canaries. We only need transport to the rendezvous, and you're already sailing that way. All we're asking is that you carry a dozen men fourteen hundred miles due south from here. That's the distance from Boston to Miami. Fourteen hundred miles is *nothing* for your boat. Just give us a lift to the Canaries, then drop us off and continue on your merry way. Why the hell not, damn it?"

I paused and looked at them in turn. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have no desire to take part in a fool's crusade. I won't be involved in a suicide mission—not even as the bus driver who drops you off."

The colonel flushed and reddened, suppressing a burst of anger. "It is *not* a suicide mission. Every aspect, every angle of this operation has been accounted for. Listen to me: you have no need to know this part, but I'll tell you a bit more because it may help to change your mind. One of the girls was ransomed out by her family, and she was a trove of information." He clicked to pictures of a port, a town, a mountain, and a medieval fortress all captioned with variations of the name Zerhoun. He left the screen on a large-scale coastal chart. Its most prominent feature was a west-facing point of land. On the chart it was called *Cap Zerhoun*. French still echoed in Moroccan place names.

"From her description of their lodgings, we deduced that they are being held in what was originally a sixteenth-century Portuguese fortress. The Portuguese built them to a standard design, so we have a good idea of how it's put together, inside as well as out. We sent a light plane from the Canaries and performed our own aerial reconnaissance, which confirmed

where they are being held. As you can see in the photos and the diagrams, the main part of the fortress is on the east side of this ridge just above Port Zerhoun. It was built into that mountain so that its cannons could dominate the port. Today it's the stronghold of the pirate captains who control the area around Port Zerhoun, and they are the ones holding the girls until the auction."

Rainborow moved his cursor across the aerial photo on his screen a bit, making a little circle. "Over here, away from the main fort, you can see another set of ramparts on the other side of the ridgeline. The western rampart controls the sea approaches to Port Zerhoun, and it's connected to the main castle by a tunnel cut through solid rock. The tunnel was dug to bring the stone blocks to build the western rampart. The Portuguese were first-class architects and engineers, and they kept detailed records. They built massive storerooms under the gun decks, and that's where the girls are being held. The only way in or out of the western rampart is through the tunnel from the main castle, so it makes a perfect prison. The pirates believe that it's escape proof, because the only other way out is straight down these stone walls and cliffs."

Rainborow pointed to a square at the northwest corner of the western rampart. "The girls are allowed outside onto this bastion during the day, for fresh air and sunlight. Presumably, their captors want them to appear healthy for their auction. They are kept overnight in three of the old store rooms under the gun deck. It's tight quarters with over twenty girls in each room, and the ventilation is poor."

"How do you know the girls are in Zerhoun, if all the Portuguese forts in Morocco are built the same way?"

"Because Zerhoun is controlled by the pirate cartel, that fact was already known to us. The girl who was ransomed out reported that they were marking their terrace with an SOS made from their shoes. Very clever girls." Rainborow clicked to another picture on his computer, grainy black and white. It had been enlarged many times, but the SOS was clearly visible. The photo was marked with the latitude and longitude, and a time stamp from a few weeks earlier.

Maguire added, "Our two surf guides know the area around Cape Zerhoun. We've been practicing on our own local sea cliffs and castle ruins."

More maps and charts flashed on the screen. Rainborow said, "This is the route from the beach to the fortress. The local population hides inside

anytime a military unit is about. Nobody will even look at military trucks passing by at night. The critical stage of the rescue will take place on these cliffs and fortress walls. As Mr. Maguire said, we've been training on local cliffs and castles for several weeks. We have the equipment, the know-how, and the men. We have everything we need, and all of it is ready to go. We'll spend one night in Morocco, in and out." Rainborow spoke excitedly, his reserve slipping away. "We have every single element necessary for success—we just don't have a vessel that can transport us to the Canaries in ten days' time."

Maguire said, "Listen, Captain Kilmer, this is the long and the short of it: without your boat, we're stuck here in Ireland. That means the rescue operation is at full stop, and the girls will be sold into slavery. And that means *sex slavery*."

I said to them, "*If* you find your landing beach, and *if* you get your trucks off the beach and onto a road, you'll be in the middle of Morocco, with no friendly supporting assets. Then, after you drive to the fort—assuming you make it across the roads unimpeded—you'll be scaling cliffs and walls to attempt a mass hostage rescue. And after all of that, after finding the girls and getting them into your trucks, you'll have to drive *back* across those same Moroccan roads to your landing craft, which you're assuming will be waiting for you on the beach, ready for your extraction. And you're going to do all that in one night?"

"That's our plan," said Colonel Rainborow with a glint of devil-may-care in his blue eyes. "We'll abandon the lorries and escape on the landing craft."

I looked at both of them very hard. "Do you have any idea how insane that sounds?"

Rainborow barely flinched, just cleared his throat to hide a tremble in his voice and said, "There was once a fellow who said, '*Who dares, wins.*'"

I replied, "That *fellow* was David Stirling, the founder of the Special Air Service. They became famous for chasing the Nazis around the Sahara in American jeeps. But at least your side had the imagination to do it. Ours didn't."

Colonel Rainborow nodded. "You know your history."

"I've had time to do a lot of reading. Along with the SAS there was the Long Range Desert Group, and another special outfit called Popski's Private Army. But only the SAS was retained after the war."

"PPA and the LRDG—if I do say so, Captain Kilmer, I'm impressed

with your knowledge."

"Thank you, Colonel. I've read *Popski's Private Army* so many times the pages are falling out. Vladimir Peniakoff was a natural genius at irregular warfare, like David Stirling."

"Yes. It's a shame Popski died so soon after the war."

"But at least he had time to write his book, or I'd have never heard of him, or the PPA. Listen, Colonel, back to the subject at hand: the beach landing is a complete crapshoot. I'd call it less than a fifty-fifty chance right there. Have you ever seen a landing craft stuck sideways on a sandbar, out in breaking surf? It's not pretty."

"We have our local surf guides to put us on the right beach. It's not even sand; it's a stony beach."

"Guides or no guides, if anything goes wrong, from the beach to the fort and back again, you'll be slaughtered. Your team, and the girls. Or, more likely, you'll be captured and tortured and *then* you'll be slaughtered."

Rainborow glared at me. "We won't be captured. Capture is not an option."

"Colonel, you might be ready to go out in a blaze of glory, but what about the girls?"

He regarded me evenly, his blue eyes locked on mine. "One way or another, that slave auction is not going to take place. Once again, you have no need to know—but you do have a need to be convinced. So, let me show you another aspect of our plan. We have one more final and decisive asset in our plus column: sheer bloody firepower."

5

Rainborow clicked to another file of images. A small naval vessel was shown in overhead and profile views. He rattled off its particulars. “This patrol boat will be lurking just offshore during the entire operation. It was built for the Norwegian navy more than a half century ago, but it recently underwent a complete overhaul in a Swedish shipyard. It is one hundred twenty feet long and only twenty feet wide, so it cuts through the waves like a knife. There were twenty-odd of them built and they were named the Storm class, and that is the name given to our ship: the Storm.”



He continued. “Launched in 1970, the P-980 was decommissioned by the Norwegians in 2001. Then it was sold to Latvia, and then it was decommissioned again in 2014 and laid up out of the water. What matters is that with its engines overhauled it makes its original best speed of thirty knots. And in terms of firepower, it’s more effective today than it ever was in the past. Originally it had a seventy-six-millimeter gun on the bow and a forty on the stern, but they were old models, and obsolete by today’s standards.”

In a picture of the boat were four boxes on the aft deck, laid over and angled slightly upward and outward. “What are those, missiles?”

“Correct. When the Norwegians built them they carried Penguin anti-ship missiles, but they’re long gone. Originally these patrol boats had a twenty-man crew, but now with the missiles and the old guns removed the

Storm only needs ten. Today it has a modern 57mm Bofors automatic cannon on the bow that fires four rounds a second. The gun is aimed by radar and the shells are proximity-fused, so they'll even shoot down jets. Sea and land targets are even easier for it to hit. There's no comparison to the old guns. The Bofors fifty-seven is so good that your navy and coast guard licensed the design and put it on their warships."

"Then it must have cost a fortune."

"The shipyard needed the work, and the gun was left from a cancelled project. The Swedes were happy to take their payment in gold and make the upgrades to the Storm."

"I'll bet they were." With the breakdown of international banking, incredible bargains could often be found by anyone paying in precious metals or other valuable commodities, such as the drums of diesel on Rebel Yell.

"The Storm can destroy any target within nine miles, on the land, the sea, or in the air, and it will be just over our shoulder from the time we pass Spain and right through the operation."

"And she just happened to be available?"

"A case of fortunate timing. Officially—whatever that means today—the Storm is in transit from Sweden to West Africa to take a contract security job protecting Nigerian oil platforms. But where it actually is in a month, I couldn't possibly care any less."

"Where is she now?"

"In Spain, pretending to repair a bent propeller. And as far as I'm able to detect, His Majesty's Government has not connected the Storm to our Moroccan expedition. In fact, since it was built, the Storm has never touched a port in the United Kingdom."

"Who's the skipper, and does he speak English?"

Rainborow brightened. "Fortunately for us, the Storm has a real crackerjack of a captain. A Dutchman, a fellow named Simon Dansekker. Speaks English as well as you or I. Have you heard of him?"

"Simon Dansekker? Sure, I've heard of him. I've even met him. But he's a sellout, a Muslim convert. He'll work for anybody, he'll take anybody's gold. He's scum in my book."

"He guards people and property," Rainborow replied. "He provides security in dangerous and unstable regions."

"Colonel, how can you possibly trust a European traitor? A renegade, a Muslim convert of convenience?"

“You’re wrong. Simon Dansekker is *not* a renegade. And he’s not a Muslim, he didn’t convert.”

“Even if he didn’t convert, he’s worked for some of the worst people in the world.”

“Dansekker was wearing a cross around his neck when I met him in Rotterdam. He’s made his peace with the Dutch government, and he travels freely around Europe.”

“If that’s true, Colonel, it’s only because he pays them in gold, which he has plenty of. Dirty gold. And who or what is the ‘Dutch government’ today? The one in Amsterdam, or the one in The Hague? The Dutch government—that’s a laugh.”

“Be that as it may—”

“Listen, Colonel, I saw him in Norway a few years ago. Up in Narvik, above the Arctic Circle. He was the skipper of a research vessel then. I’m not sure what kind of *research* he was doing, but when I saw him, he had at least a half-dozen young Norwegian girls with him. With him and his crew of cutthroats, and half of them from North Africa.”

“What does that mean? Are you saying that Captain Dansekker kidnapped them?”

“Don’t pretend to be naive, Colonel. You know how easy it is for some men to lie. They’ll lie to emirs and sultans, they’ll lie to imposters posing as Dutch or Swedish politicians, and they’ll even lie to men like you. But the easiest people to lie to are the ones who are trapped in terrible places, the ones who are desperate to get out. I’m not talking about ports like Crowhaven, I’m talking about real hellholes. Desperate people think they’re being rescued by some kindhearted soul, but it’s all just a trap. Oh, yes, it’s a slick process from start to finish. But in the end, is it really any different from what happened at the Saint Agnes School? The ladder to hell ends at the same place: the slave auction. And that’s just *one* of the ways that men like Dansekker earn their gold.”

As far as I knew, Dansekker had never flown the black flag of sea-jihad, but he might as well have. By the looks of them in Narvik half of his crew were Muslim, and he’d spent far too much time south of Gibraltar to be considered anything other than a traitor and renegade.

The British colonel was not deterred by my skepticism. “Dansekker is not wanted on any charge by any European government. He left Sweden on the Storm with the government’s blessing.”

“And how do you know that? Because he told you?”

“He left Sweden with new guns and a full load of ordnance, and that constitutes official sanction in my book. And I was able to freely inspect the Storm at pier side in Rotterdam, in broad daylight.”

“If he travels freely, it’s only because he pays every official he comes across in gold coin. Come on, who the hell is in charge of Sweden or the Netherlands? Dansekker fought for the Emir of Tunis in the Tunisian civil war, so he has blood on his hands. And I saw him with those Norwegian girls on his ‘research vessel.’ Sure, they appeared happy enough, up in Narvik. Escaping from there, who wouldn’t be happy?”

“Captain Kilmer, I’ll grant you that Dansekker has an unsavory past, and I can’t explain the Norwegian girls. If you saw them, you saw them, but it may have been totally innocent. And I’ll grant you, he may have done some contract work that we wouldn’t necessarily approve of. But he wants this operation to come off just as much as we do. If we succeed with this operation, he’ll be fully accepted back in European waters. Not just tolerated, but welcomed back as a patriot and a hero. A *Christian* hero. I’ve met him, and I’m a good judge of character. I believe he’s sincere. He wants to help us save the girls. He’s proving himself trustworthy and honorable again, step by step.”

“Colonel, I can’t believe that a man with your background in the Middle East and North Africa would *ever* trust a man like Simon Dansekker.”

“Yet trust him I do.” Rainborow leveled an earnest gaze at me, but I didn’t buy it for a moment. It was a salesman’s practiced sincerity. He had to believe in Dansekker because he needed the Storm’s 57mm Bofors auto-cannon to support their operation ashore. And because he needed my boat for transportation to the area of operations, he had to convince me too.

“So, why don’t you just fly to the Canaries and meet the landing craft there?” I said.

“Believe me, we would if we could, but at this point we can’t possibly arrange a big enough aeroplane. A plane that’s still airworthy, with viable aviation fuel, after all these years? Impossible. At this point, just actively *looking* for such an aircraft would flag us for attention in Dublin and London.”

“There’s not enough room aboard my boat for a dozen men, never mind all their equipment.”

“Captain Kilmer, there was room in your hold for ninety-six drums of

fuel, and now you have thirty left. By my calculation, that means there is enough space for my team."

Sinead knew the original number of barrels, because I'd told her. "Colonel, did your calculations account for your provisions, your gear, your weapons, everything you're taking?"

"Of course they did. I'm a professional."

"Are you bringing your own weapons? Or will they be on the landing craft? They weren't on Mr. Smith's boat in Cardiff, were they?"

"No, fortunately they were not. We're bringing our own small arms and ammunition."

"Let me guess: Mr. Maguire provided the guns?" Otherwise, I thought, why would an Irish civilian be allied with a British SAS officer? Which meant that this Pat Maguire was probably an old IRA man, one way or another. Who else in Ireland could arm a commando team but the former (or possibly current) Irish Republican Army, considered by many to be no better than common terrorists? The British Isles were notoriously short of privately owned firearms, and military weapons were virtually impossible for civilians to acquire. A hodgepodge of engraved hunting rifles and antique fowling pieces would not be sufficient for their mission to Morocco.

Maguire grinned and said, "Captain Kilmer, we Irish may have our national shortcomings, but losing track of our guns in between wars isn't one of them. But that's neither here nor there. What's right here and right now is one very simple fact: you have a boat that can carry us where we need to go —and we need to go *now*. So please don't tell me that a United States Marine is going to pull the plug on a mission to rescue sixty-six innocent girls from sex slavery. I lived in the States, and I knew some Marines. There are no ex-Marines, isn't that what you all say? So, no, you won't scupper this operation. I can see it in your eyes that you've already agreed to take us. You just haven't come around to admitting it yet."

"You said the Storm is in Spain. Then why can't it come back to Ireland to pick you all up? Colonel, you said she can make thirty knots."

Rainborow answered. "We already considered that, but it won't work. At thirty knots the Storm would be nearly out of fuel when she arrived here, and you don't have half enough to get her from Ireland to Morocco. But at a slower speed to conserve fuel, she'd arrive here too late, and you *still* wouldn't have enough fuel to get her to Morocco in time. It's your schooner, or it's nothing. So what'll it be, Captain Kilmer? Are you going to scuttle our

rescue mission?" He smiled, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "No, you won't. I know you won't."

He was right, of course. I just never enjoyed being hustled into an unwanted charter. I lifted my pint of stout and took a long drink, looking at the two men. "Okay. I won't pull the plug. But it's for the sake of the girls, not for you two, and certainly not to salvage Dansekker's reputation. So, where's your rendezvous point?"

Rainborow said, "Latitude thirty, a hundred miles off the coast of Morocco. Fourteen hundred miles due south."

"Highway Ten: due south down ten degrees west. Ten almost touches Spain and Portugal, and lands you halfway down the coast of Morocco. Swing out to fourteen west, and you'll hit the Canaries. I've made the trip before."

"So it's agreed, then?" said Maguire. "You'll take us?"

"Yes, I'll do it, but not for charity. If your Mr. Smith had enough gold to ransom his own granddaughter, my price will be pocket change, and certainly nothing compared to hiring the Storm. But transporting armed mercenaries is serious business. It can get you hanged in some places and beheaded in others. So, my price is four ounces of gold for every day that you and your team are on my boat. Barring major storms or unforeseen disasters, we can do it in ten days. If we make better than a hundred and forty miles a day, we'll get there sooner. If it takes longer than ten days, I won't charge any more. If it takes less time, it's still forty ounces. Those are my terms. Do we have a deal?"

Rainborow said, "Yes, we have a deal."

"Colonel, now is the time when you put half of the coins on the bar. Don't worry, Mr. Smith can afford it. Just mark it down as another expense. He's good for it, right?"

Rainborow cleared his throat and hesitated. "Captain Kilmer, we have agreed to pay you forty ounces. But there's a bit of a problem with *when* we can pay you. Mr. Smith is under close surveillance, and with him under house arrest, I can't exactly pop over to England and collect it from him in person. But he's an honorable man, and you will be paid in full. You have my word on it, sir."

I stared back at him, not blinking. "So, you want to charter my boat with gold that you don't have?"

Maguire said, "Captain Kilmer, taking no pay in advance was good

enough for the twelve of us, and we're still pressing forward. And since we're going ashore in Morocco and you're just dropping us off, this operation represents a much greater risk to us than it does to you."

"Okay, I can respect that. But one of my non-negotiable conditions is that I always take half of the charter price in advance. For me this is business, not charity."

Rainborow glared at me. "Business, not charity? Then just how are you any different from Simon Dansekker?"

"I've never taken my pay from slavers, that's one way."

"So, once the girls are kidnapped, it's none of your business what happens to them afterwards? Let me be frank: since our ship was seized in Wales, we've been operating on a wing and a prayer. But one thing we have *never* done is quit because we haven't been paid. We will go to Morocco, and we will conduct this mission, one way or another. We're going to bring the girls home or we're going to die trying, gold or no gold. I know that for you this is just a complicated charter, made riskier for carrying armed men, and you are all about the coin, and I understand that this is just business for you. But please, Captain Kilmer, carry my team south. Help us to save those girls. On my word of honor as an Englishman and a retired British Army officer, you will be paid. Only just not now, not in Ireland."

He extended his hand, his eyes locked on mine. I sighed, shook his hand, and the deal was made. "All right. I'm in. But you'll have to bring your own food; I can't feed a dozen men."

"Done," said the colonel. "They'll be sick of cabbage and carrots and potatoes, but they won't be hungry."

"How soon will your team be ready to come aboard?"

"They're ready now. If our ship had not been taken, we'd already be three days south. I think our operational security is holding, but I have no way of knowing that for certain. We're in easy helicopter range from the UK if they want to shut us down. So the sooner we get aboard your boat and gone, the better. Is dawn too early?"

"Dawn is fine. We'll be along the quay."

We stood and I shook the Irishman's hand. Then I stepped away from them, looking toward Victor and Sinead, who were still sitting at the far corner table. Victor must have noticed us rising and said something to her, because she turned around and rose from her chair. From *my* chair. Then she left the pub after just a glance in my direction.

Rainborow packed his laptop and papers into his satchel. Maguire had a few quiet words with Owen Driscoll at the bar. Then the SAS colonel and the IRA man left the pub together and disappeared around the end of the building.

Victor gathered up our binoculars, books, and other loose items. “What a fascinating change of plans,” he said. “Now we are to be a troopship instead of a love boat. Sinead is certainly a very attractive woman; it must be a big disappointment to you.” He was only half concealing a smile.

But I would get my revenge. “Yes, we’re going to be a troopship. And that means their officers will berth with you in the crew quarters.” Referring to his accommodations forward as the crew quarters was a subtle dig, reminding him of his ultimate status on board my boat. Three extra men dressing and undressing in that cramped forward space with him would make him wish that we were departing Ireland with only a single female added to our number. An Irish colleen who would have been living at the other end of the boat with the skipper, leaving his living space undisturbed.

Our RIB was tied to the floating dinghy dock. Victor walked down the ramp to get it ready while I lingered at the top. Sinead met me there at the edge of the quay. A cool mist was falling in the darkness. A single light over the pub’s entrance cast a soft glow. She kept her hands in her coat pockets.

She said, “Before I go, I wanted to tell you that when I met you, I had no idea about any of this rescue business. I only met Pat Maguire a few days ago, and I only clapped eyes on the British colonel today.”

“I believe you, and thanks for telling me that.”

“It’s the truth, Danny. I knew nothing of their mad plan when I met you.”

“I think we’d have had a wonderful time in the Caribbean. And maybe a lot more time after that. Maybe forever.”

“Oh, Danny, it breaks my heart, it truly does. But rescuing the girls, that has to come first. It just has to.”

“I suppose. I only wish we could have had more time. We had something special, you and me.” A last hard stare into her eyes, trying to drink in the memory of her sweet face.

“Aye, that we did, Danny. It was a special time. It wasn’t cheap or common. It was real, and it might have lasted. I’m sorry it had to end this way, but I’m glad you agreed to take them. Maybe they’re daft, those men, but they won’t stop at anything. If you hadn’t agreed to carry them, they would have taken your lovely sailboat anyway.”

“I had the idea they might have tried.”

“They would have tried, and they would have succeeded. But that would have been no good way to begin a rescue. Very bad karma, like stealing a Bible. So thank you from my very heart for agreeing to take them.” She looked past me as their car pulled in a circle, crunching on gravel and flashing its parking lights. “Now I’ve really got to go. They’re giving me a lift back up home.”

“I might stop by here again on my next Atlantic Circle.”

“And when might that be?” A final wistful smile.

“A few years, who knows?”

“Well, Mr. Dan Kilmer, if I’m still here in a few years, then look me up.” She gave me a quick kiss on my cheek, then pushed away and dashed off toward the waiting car, where a rear door opened and then shut behind her. A brief hand wave through the back window, and she was gone from my life.

Another foreign port, another romance measured in weeks instead of years. Another rapid courtship and part of a honeymoon without the rest of the marriage. Sinead Devlin certainly would have made beautiful children. What a shame, and in the end it was all my shame. But this time, at least, I could plead extenuating circumstances. Our two weeks together had been overtaken by events beyond our control. No, it hadn’t been cheap, and it hadn’t been common.

6

I awoke an hour before dawn. When I climbed the ladder up to the pilothouse, Hung was already there, sitting in my captain's chair as he often did, wearing his usual faded black pajamas, puffing one of his execrable hand-rolled cigarettes. He didn't have proper rolling paper, so he was using pages torn from a tiny New Testament printed in Swedish. His source of tobacco was a constant mystery to me. A thermos of hot tea was waiting on the navigation table. After I poured myself a cup, I said, "Victor told me he's leaving the boat when we get to South America."

Hung took a long drag and exhaled a stream of acrid blue smoke. "You only learn this now, *chu tao*? I know this for long time." Chu-tao meant boat captain or skipper in Vietnamese. There were other names for ship and army captains.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You not ask me. Not my business. That for him tell you."

"Did he actually say that he was leaving, or are you just guessing?"

"He not tell me the words, but he tell me. He tell you too, but you not hear."

"So, what do you think about Victor leaving the boat?"

"His life. I die soon, no matter."

"You're going to live forever. You will outlive us all."

He snorted, took another puff, and asked, "You believe in hell, *chu-tao*?

"I don't know what I believe."

"I believe in hell very much. I think we all going in hell. Me, you, Victor. But maybe not forever. Some man, long time hell. Some man, short time hell. Victor not easy man, but he save your life many time. No matter, I die soon. Then, hell. Maybe for long time. Maybe for short time. I do many bad thing, long time ago. Many bad thing."

I stepped up into the cockpit, turned the ignition key to the Caterpillar diesel, and jabbed the start button. Victor made his appearance a minute after I fired up the engine, climbing onto the foredeck through the forward hatch. I steered from the cockpit while Victor handled the bowlines and old Hung took care of the stern.

Old truck tires served as fenders between our painted steel hull and the stone quay. We had performed the same maneuver bringing my forty-ton

schooner alongside the quay wall several times before to offload sixty-six drums of diesel, so it went smoothly. Boats shifting about at night were unremarkable in a small port where many of the local vessels were constrained by their drafts and forced to move with the tides or be left stranded aground.

Once we were tied up, Victor disappeared back down below without coming aft or exchanging a word with me. I knew he must have spent some of the night repacking his earthly possessions to make room for our new guests, and considering what he would take with him when he stepped off the boat in Argentina. Boats were finite universes. You either took it with you or you left it behind when you went ashore for the last time.

While waiting for Rainborow and his men, Hung dragged our hose ashore and topped off our fresh-water tanks from a public spigot near the quay. In most ports, you had to pay for potable water, and it was usually metered. Not so in Ireland, where all the pure fresh water you could ever want was as free as the rain.

Six hundred gallons in the water tanks divided by fifteen men on board meant four gallons per man per day over a ten-day voyage, leaving Rebel with empty tanks. So, make it two gallons per man per day, which meant there would be enough fresh water for drinking, preparing meals, and some basic washing up and brushing of teeth, but not enough for showers. Rainborow's men could bathe on the swim platform with buckets of salt water if they cared to. After the team disembarked, we would still have a few hundred gallons left for the rest of our voyage across the Atlantic.

At the first glimmer of morning twilight, the gray sedan crept toward us. It paused a hundred meters away and flashed its headlights. I responded by turning on Rebel's downward-facing mast spreader lights, illuminating her decks and open cargo hold. The car proceeded toward us and stopped by our bow. Colonel Rainborow and a new man climbed out as I watched from inside the dark pilothouse. I stepped ashore to greet them. Both of the men were dressed as ordinary seamen in jeans and dark coats.

"Good morning, Colonel." We shook hands again, both of us now cheerfully smiling with the prospect of what was certain to be a great adventure ahead of us.

"And good morning to you, Captain Kilmer. I'd like you to meet Sergeant Major Richard Tolbert. For this operation, he's my 2IC, my second in command."

Tolbert put out a beefy hand, and I took it in turn. Strong grip, as expected. He said, “Pleased to meet you, Captain. None of the men call me sergeant major; they all know who I am. So please call me Bert, same as them.”

“Alright, Bert, and you can call me Dan. But as for your men, I’d prefer that they stick with captain, or skipper.” I didn’t want any of them to forget who was ultimately in charge on my schooner: me, not their colonel or his senior noncom. But I understood enough about the unique culture of the SAS to know that they didn’t stand on ranks or other military formalities. Going by Christian names was an old SAS tradition, particularly remarkable within the otherwise class-conscious British culture.

Tolbert appeared to be as old as Rainborow, so around sixty. Nearly eye to eye with my six feet two, meaty and solid, thick but not fat, with a broad English accent. Staying in NCO mode, he said, “I’ll keep the men from underfoot, and they’ll be no trouble while they’re on board. I can assign men to the galley to help prepare the food, or for any other duties. We’ll pull our weight, and more. Keep ’em busy, that’s my way. We’re bringing plenty of victuals, but we don’t expect you to do the cooking for us. I’ve told the men they’ll be assigned berthing in the cargo hold, and they’re fully prepared for that. They’ll sleep on deck if I tell ’em to.”

“No need for that, Bert. Your men will sleep in the hold, but there are bunks for your three senior men in the crew quarters forward. That would be you two gentlemen and Mr. Maguire, is that correct?”

“Yes, that is correct,” said the colonel.

“Doctor Aleman has made room forward. There are two bunks on each side, top and bottom.” For my British audience, I pronounced Aleman with two syllables, rhyming with bail men. In South America he was called Alemán, with the accent on the third syllable. In Spanish, Alemán means German, a name of convenience bestowed upon the bastard son of an old Nazi exile.

We stepped from the quay over to Rebel’s deck between her two masts. The cargo hold was already open, the two hatch leaves hinged back, flat on deck to port and starboard. The front of the hold was empty, the rear was loaded with thirty fuel drums standing upright, held in place with taut chains. The deck opening was just over two meters square, or almost seven feet on each side.

The cargo area below was roughly five by five meters, or sixteen feet

square. Going back to my time as a Marine Corps sniper, I moved between feet, yards and meters without giving it much if any thought, like most Brits I'd met. The same automatic conversion process took place in my head between land miles, kilometers, and nautical miles; and pints, quarts, liters, and gallons—both American and Imperial.

"With the cargo hatch shut, your men will have four feet of sitting headroom on top of the drums. There's some plywood and old tarps down there to smooth out the top for comfortable sleeping. How you arrange it is up to you; it depends on how much gear you're bringing. Please just don't mess with the chains: there'll be hell to pay if those barrels get loose in rough weather."

Sergeant Major Tolbert said to the colonel, "It would be my preference to berth in the cargo hold with the men, boss. I don't want to lay an undue imposition on Doctor Aleman, nor on yourself."

Rainborow cleared his throat. "Nonsense, Bert. We'll not inflict our presence upon the men in their rough quarters. They need their own space away from us just as much as we need it away from them. The three of us will share the crew quarters with Doctor Aleman. We're all on the same mission, and we'll just have to get along."

Tolbert hesitated. "Aye, boss. But I—"

"But nothing. We'll all three berth forward, and that's the last I'll hear of it. Now, let's get cracking, shall we?"

I noted the informality between the former SAS colonel and the NCO. "Boss" and "Bert" were night-and-day different from my old dealings with Marine Corps officers. But this was the SAS way, going back to its origins in the Second World War. I'd only read about this unique culture, and now it was right here on my boat.

Victor's usual habitat forward of the cargo hold had about as much space as a pair of sleeping compartments on a train, with narrow top and wider bottom bunks on either side, and built-in lockers and drawers. Just forward of this sleeping compartment was a small head, with a sink and a cramped shower. Now, instead of only Victor and his possessions, this space was to be shared by four men and their baggage for the next week or two. But an actual bunk in the crew quarters meant luxury living compared to the makeshift dens the other nine men would create in the cargo hold among their gear and atop the remaining drums of fuel.

In my experience, during a voyage most people learn to adapt to one

another. In tight quarters, politeness is rewarded and orneriness harshly punished. This understanding was common to military men who had lived in barracks and tents, shared the same foxholes and bunkers, or sat on one another's laps in full battle-rattle while crammed into lurching trucks, APCs, and helicopters.

My previous record head count aboard Rebel Yell had been more than forty Syrian Christian refugees that we hauled from Beirut to Cyprus. Most of them spent the short trip on deck, grateful to be getting out of Lebanon alive. The worst of my guests were millionaire fugitives who always expected to be treated like royalty. They assumed that they would evict me and settle into the captain's cabin, the most comfortable space on the boat, with its own toilet and bath. They always assumed wrong. The captain's cabin was my private domain, and it was never offered up as part of a charter arrangement.

With nothing more to see in the cargo hold, the three of us were staring up the road past Crowhaven into the gloom when a pair of headlights became visible far up the hill toward the village of Golleen.

Tolbert said, "That'll be our lorry."

"Your men will always use the forward companionway hatch to get below or to come on deck. We call that box over the foredeck hatch the scuttle." We walked past the foremast and I showed it to them. The scuttle looked something like a meter-high mailbox, with Plexiglas windows on the front and both sides.

The full-width cargo hold between the masts separated my schooner's bow and stern living areas. When the hold was empty, it was possible to walk from one end of Rebel Yell to the other below deck, but not when it was full. Because of this, both ends of the boat needed easy access from on deck to down below, hence the steel box a few steps ahead of the foremast. The hatch scuttle was painted off-white to match the decks and the pilothouse.

This forward companionway hatch scuttle opened in two parts, with a steel top that slid forward, and narrow doors on the back that split in the middle and were hinged all the way around to latch against the sides. In fair weather it could be kept open for easy access and maximum ventilation. During storms, it was sealed tight so that boarding waves could not gush below.

"When they're on deck, your men will stay forward of the pilothouse and out of the cockpit, unless they're personally invited back there by me and nobody else. As the team leaders, you don't need an invitation to come aft, or

to go up and down the ladder through the galley to the pilothouse. The same goes for Maguire—but just you three. Your men can get into the galley from the back of the cargo hold, and they can sit around the dinette table unless it's needed for something else. Tran Hung won't tolerate any galley pilfering. I don't want to find a stray finger in my stew, so tell your men not to test him."

Both men had eyes agog, uncertain as to whether I was joking or not.

"Isn't your dinette table in the galley?" asked Sergeant Major Tolbert.

"Right, it is. I mean, they should stay out of the *cooking* side of the galley, unless they're just getting water. That's to port of the ladder; the dinette table is to starboard. But if he chases them out of any part of his galley, then they'll stay out for the duration, and that means they'll have to spend the voyage in the cargo hold or up on deck. So, tell your men to mind their manners and clean up their mess, and *no pilfering*. Hung will put some food out for snacks, but there will be no doubt about what they are. The rest of the chow is off-limits. I'm serious. Tell your men not to test him."

I'd done enough passenger charters to know better than to allow unrestricted access to the pilothouse, cockpit, and the cooking side of the galley. Once allowed that access, passengers often turned into squatters, and took offense at being evicted. Steerage class was steerage class, and right from the start, my passengers needed to know what their tickets did and mostly did *not* pay for.

The sergeant major said, "Our men will be no problem, skipper, I'll see to that."

"In heavy weather, I'd advise them to stay below deck—it beats being washed overboard and drowned. We'll go over all the rules after the men are aboard and their gear is stowed."

"What about smoking?" Tolbert asked.

"They can smoke on deck, but not down below. I'll tolerate them smoking in the forward scuttle hatch standing on the ladder. And I allow smoking in the pilothouse, but that's off-limits for your men." In turn I had my own question for them. "What about booze? Are you allowing it?"

Both men began to speak. Tolbert caught himself and let the colonel proceed. "We're bringing a few bottles, Captain, but no drunks. We'll take care of it; it'll be no problem."

"That's fine with me." By tradition, American warships were dry and British warships were wet. This wasn't a military vessel, but it was on a paramilitary mission. "I just filled our water tanks. There will be enough for

drinking and for preparing meals, but not enough for showers. I'm allotting two gallons per man per day, but most of that will be for cooking. Your men can wash their faces and hands and brush their teeth, but that's all. And they can fill their own drinking water bottles in the galley."

The colonel said, "You will be happy to learn that we did, in fact, have the opportunity to bathe with soap and hot water before we came aboard." (Later, I found out that the team had been lodging in a small seaside tourist hotel which had been closed for years but was reopened for their use while they trained on the cliffs and castles nearby. Different parts of the local community had been contributing to their cause in different ways, large and small.)

The team's box truck pulled past us, looped around the end of the quay, and parked along the edge facing back toward the mainland with its rear even with the cargo hatch. Sergeant Major Tolbert stepped back ashore to supervise the loading. The truck's rear doors swung open and more of Rainborow's men jumped down. I recognized Pat Maguire among them by his shock of unruly hair.

The men formed a queue from the back of the truck across to the schooner's deck and down below. They began passing duffel bags, kit bags, cases, and boxes down into the hold. All of the men appeared to be clean shaved, outside of a few well-trimmed mustaches. I had a good look at them as they moved about the decks under the spreader lights. Rainborow had assembled a formidable-looking team of men in their twenties to forties, with the three leaders a generation older than that. Cardboard boxes and gunnysacks containing extra food were handed below. Among them I noticed potatoes, cabbages, carrots, onions, and other Irish staples. In just a few minutes the preliminary on-load was complete, all of the men were aboard and the empty truck and sedan were driven away.

In order to minimize our vulnerable loading time at the quay, they'd passed their gear and equipment below in no particular order, so we were by no means ready for the challenges of the open ocean. Ordinarily, we would close the twin cargo hatches at quayside and swing our sixteen-foot inflatable RIB aboard using the foremast boom. With the panels of the cargo hatch still laid to each side of the gaping square hole, we needed to tow our RIB for the short run to the temporary anchorage where we would make our final preparations for sea.

Compared to loading almost a hundred drums of diesel into the cargo

hold, this was child’s play. Back in Greenland, it had taken the three of us a week to haul the ninety-six heavy barrels of diesel down to the pier on dollies and swing them into the hold one at a time. But considering that each drum could be turned into an ounce of gold, it had been time well spent.

7

Victor and Hung pulled in our dock lines from the bow and stern. I shoved the gearshift and throttle levers on the steering pedestal ahead, and we maneuvered out of Crowhaven's entrance channel. Twenty minutes later we re-anchored in the open bay. Enough ocean swell bent around the headland to give us a bit of rolling. It was always a smart idea to make final preparations for the open sea in a place with some wave motion, particularly when carrying untested landlubbers as passengers. I had learned that when the transition from terra firma to big ocean swells occurred too rapidly, many stomachs would be emptied in an unpleasant way. A transitional period anchored in an open roadstead would take care of all but the worst cases of motion sickness.

A few of Rainborow's men passed around various seasickness remedies, but I didn't offer them any of mine. I was hoarding my last seasickness pills for future girlfriends, not for a dozen strangers embarking on a paramilitary adventure. Some folks did just fine on the open ocean right from the first heave and roll, and others would be puking their guts out in anything but a flat calm in spite of any medications taken. But seasick or not, Rainborow's men were aboard for the duration of the voyage. They would tough it out and suffer if they had to, but their comfort wasn't my problem. They could whine and moan to Sergeant Major Tolbert—who I suspected would not have any more sympathy for their misery than I did.

After the chain rattled down and the anchor was set, Rainborow's team got to work repacking their gear and provisions for the voyage. Hung helped them stow the boxes and bags of food around the galley and at the back of the cargo hold. Once this was completed to my satisfaction, I asked to speak to the assembled team, to go over the rules for their time aboard.

After we closed and dogged the twin cargo hatch leaves, Tolbert assembled the team on the mid-decks. I stood in front of the pilothouse with Rainborow. My briefing to them was simple and direct. No going aft of the pilothouse on deck, or aft of the galley area down below, not without an invitation from me personally. Fresh water was for drinking, eating, and brushing your teeth, so don't waste it. If you puke on my schooner, you or your best mates will clean it up. And don't fall overboard or you'll be as good as dead, especially at night or in rough weather. I didn't need to practice

gentle diplomacy or put on sugar coatings for an embarked squad of veteran soldiers, so my speech to them didn't take long. Then the RIB was swung aboard, lashed to its re-assembled cradle over the secured cargo hatch, and we were ready for the open sea.

I wanted to get Rebel away from the coast under cover of darkness. During daylight, both official watchers and casual observers ashore might catch a clear view of us departing, and they could potentially relay messages to greedy villains with fast vessels. In sight of coastlines is where both government revenue agents and pirates spend most of their time searching for slow and vulnerable prey.

And while there was great danger in approaching the rocky Irish coast at night (GPS and electronic charts being a fading memory), it was perfectly safe to leave during the hours of darkness. Unlike threading your way into the tiny ports hidden between the offshore rocks and craggy peninsulas encountered when approaching Eire from the sea, the open ocean is an easy target to hit. A steady course set from a known position—our temporary anchorage—would take us past the famous Fastnet Rock with miles to spare.

The new moon was due in two days, so we had a week of dark nights ahead of us. Once packed and ready for sea, we only had to wait for nightfall. Some of the troops stood around, smoking and chatting on deck. Some were wearing military uniform remnants, mismatched fatigue pants and jackets with old desert camouflage patterns. Others were dressed in civvies, mostly jeans and sweaters or jackets.

I was in the pilothouse going over some charts, when I decided to recheck the lashings holding the RIB to its cradle. When I came around the side of the pilothouse, two of the youngest of Rainborow's team were standing by the mainmast. One of them was a European of medium height, with sandy hair. The taller of the two appeared to be a North African, with his dark hair pulled back tight. He had green eyes and a light complexion with just a sprinkling of freckles.

The European spoke first; he had an English accent. "So, you're the skipper, right? This is your boat?"

"I don't work for anybody else, if that's what you mean. Yeah, she's all mine."

"We heard your rule about not coming aft without an invitation, but we wanted to have a word."

"What about?"

The taller of them said, “We’re sailors, too. Do you raise your sails by hand?”

“They’re manual winches, if that’s what you mean. The jibs are already on roller-furlers, so we just roll them out.”

He asked, “Who does it? Works your sails, I mean? You?” He had high cheekbones, nice features. A handsome guy, I suppose, if you like the exotic type. He was maybe an inch shorter than my six feet two.

“We use the mast winches to haul them up while the boat’s motoring on autopilot.”

The Englishman asked, “Well, do you mind if we do it on the voyage? We’d rather be on deck and useful than be stuck down below when there’s sailing work to be done.”

“You’re sailors, are you? Well, then, you’ll know a sheet from a halyard. Tell me what they are.” This was my standard bullshit-detector question for aspiring deck crew.

The taller one said, “They’re control lines on a sailboat. You pull down the halyard and the sail goes up.”

The Englishman answered the other half of the question. “Sheets control the sails after they’re up. You sheet them in tight to sail to windward, you let them out when you’re running with the wind.” He laughed. “So, did we pass the test?”

“You passed. Come on back and I’ll show you how the sheets lead to the cockpit winches. I take it you’re the surfers who escaped from Morocco?”

“Right, that’s us. I’m Tommy, Tommy Pellow. And this is my best mate, Kamal.”

The Moroccan shook my hand the American way while holding eye contact and said, “Kamal Abidar, but you can call me Kam.”

I led them around the pilothouse and aft. I wasn’t afraid of causing divisions between them and the rest of their team. They were surfers and sailors, not ordinary soldiers and landsmen like the others. If I chose to allow them back there, that was my prerogative.

Tommy said, “Kam’s father ran a surfing camp in Tag. That’s how we met.”

“Tag?”

“Taghazout. It’s a surfing town up the coast from Agadir. Their surf camp had its own hotel. Brits, Frogs, Swedes, Krauts, the lot. His dad runs it. Well, he ran it: the hotel, surfing lessons, board rentals, even transport to the

airport—everything. Plus treks up into the mountains."

"But that's over now," said Kam. "Ever since the world went to shit and the crazy people took over down there."

"We were arrested in July," said his English friend, "and we escaped in August."

"What kind of boat was it?" I asked.

"A six-meter open sloop. GRP, or fiberglass, I think you Yanks call it. A mainsail and a little jib. It was a rental job for tourists. And for giving sailing lessons."

"You guys sailed a twenty-foot open boat from *Morocco* to *Ireland*?"

Kam said, "It had a compartment in the bow for life jackets and things like that. Not big enough for a person. Otherwise, yeah, it was an open boat. Just a centerboard, a swing keel, no ballast. Tourists had to be able to pull it over the beach. That's how we were able to steal it: we dragged it to the ocean."

"How long did it take you?"

Tommy said, "Nine days from Agadir to Portugal. We made almost sixty miles a day. Then we spent two weeks in Portugal. Recuperating, you might say. When we left, we were much better prepared than when we escaped from Morocco. We had a compass, charts, food, and plenty of water. The locals were very kind to us."

Kam said, "When we left Portugal, we were aiming for England or France, but we barely made Ireland. If we had missed Ireland, we'd have been off to Iceland."

"And we'd have been dead," added his English friend.

Even in summertime, crossing a big stretch of ocean on a twenty-foot open boat took huge amounts of courage, skill, and endurance. I was impressed. "Okay, you can be my deck apes. Do you want to stand watch too? It'll give you another excuse to get out of the cargo hold."

Kam said, "Yeah, we'll do anything you want."

"Okay, you're hired. I'll let your bosses know that you've been promoted to crew and that you'll be standing watch. That means you can come back to the cockpit, because that's where we trim the sails."

"With the sheets," Tommy added.

"Right, with the sheets." After their escape on a twenty foot boat, Rebel Yell must have seemed enormous to them. But on a higher level sailing was the same. Exactly the same principles pushed and pulled all sailing vessels

through the water, from dinghies to schooners.

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As dusk fell, Tran Hung removed the canvas cover from our 12.7mm heavy machine gun. Their three leaders walked aft around the pilothouse to observe at close range.

Sergeant Major Tolbert said, “That’s a Dushka, right? Is it Russian or Chinese?”

“Russian.” It fit the same niche as the American fifty caliber. It even had similar twin vertical grips and triggers. The stacked cooling fins around the barrel and some other oddities made it difficult to keep corrosion free in the marine environment, but it’s what I had, and it worked.

In Russian, Dushka was a girl’s pet name, like sweetie or darling. The name came from three Russian letters, pronounced D, Sh, and K. The American M-2 fifty caliber was nicknamed the Ma Deuce. Both machine guns fired half-inch diameter projectiles and delivered similar terminal effects. When these heavy machine guns arrived on the battlefield, much of what had previously constituted protective cover for infantry suddenly became concealment at best. Cement block walls were smashed to dust, trees were turned into mulch, and ordinary steel plate became Swiss cheese.

The Ma Deuce was the stouter of the two weapons. The M-2’s receiver was carved from a block of solid steel, while the Dushka seemed tinny and claptrap by comparison. Between the two I would pick the M-2, but I didn’t have a choice. The choice was made for me at the open-air flea market located on Beirut Harbor’s seawall jetty. Part of the jetty was paved and wide enough for two trucks to pass. Everything from marine engines to used military weaponry was available for the right price. The Dushka and 200 rounds of ammunition cost me three ounces of gold. The ammo came in belts of fifty, each fifty rounds fitting in a steel box that attached to the left side of the gun.

My Dushka came with only one barrel, the one in it. Running through an entire fifty-round belt in a single burst could ruin the barrel. Even if you took it easy on the fifty rounds, firing only short bursts, that full box was about the limit before she needed a rest. Of the 200 original rounds, I had 80 left. If I linked them all together and held the triggers back, they would be expended in about ten seconds and the barrel would be cooked.

Soldiers held both a deep affection for and an abiding fear of these half-inch-bore guns, depending upon which end they were looking at. Too big and heavy to be man-carried in battle, they were easily mounted on any civilian pickup truck. When these “technical vehicles” arrived among men equipped only with small arms, they became the new queens of the battlefield, unless the machine gun crew was killed by a sniper or a mortar shell. Or until an even bigger gun arrived aboard an armored vehicle. And so it went, climbing up through the calibers until the main battle tanks appeared with their 120mm cannons. Tanks which could be destroyed by something even more lethal, like an attack helicopter.

It was the law of trump. When a new big gun arrives at the fight, the former champ becomes the instant chump. And the really lethal ordnance could target you from far beyond any range where you even perceived their presence. When you’ve seen the terminal results of standoff weapons, like the burnt-out Soviet tanks in Iraq, you gain a more realistic view of modern ground combat. It was like lightning striking you from a clear blue sky. That’s why I had preferred to be a scout-sniper, and hated riding in trucks, APCs, and helos. I always considered them to be fat, juicy targets, visible for miles. Future fireballs just waiting to explode.

These days, thankfully, I didn’t see many tanks or helicopters. For most countries, their complex systems were too difficult and expensive to maintain after the breakdown of the modern spare-parts distribution system. My Caterpillar diesel was maintainable, but only just barely, and I had a long shopping list of replacement parts to seek out in Brazil or Argentina. As a boat captain, I’d found that the remaining large, complex, dangerous weapons systems could generally be avoided by steering a wide course around the few remaining centers of power. That was why I had put into remote Crowhaven to sell my diesel, and not Dublin or Cork.

When I’d picked up my Dushka in Beirut, it came with a steel tripod mount. The tripod had previously been torched off of some other boat or armored vehicle, and I simply rewelded the three legs to the stern of Rebel Yell. Hung did all the maintenance, whispering to himself while he cleaned, lubed, and cycled her action. Removing the canvas and checking the Dushka was one of his collateral duties, but it was one that seemed to give him great satisfaction. Tonight he had an audience of former soldiers to impress with his casual expertise and obvious familiarity.

First he checked inside the ammo box attached to the left side of the gun.

Satisfied that the fifty cartridges and links were clean and dry, he closed the lid and clipped it shut. He cycled the gun's bolt with the long charging handle, ensuring that it was running free, then lifted the receiver cover to check the feed mechanisms and apply a few drops of oil to critical points. After a brief inspection he snapped it down and pronounced, "Gun ready, *chu-tao*." His task finished, he slipped past us inside the pilothouse and back down the ladder to his domain in the galley.

"What does *chu-tao* mean?" asked Colonel Rainborow.

"It's Vietnamese for boat captain."

The sergeant major said, "Your cook seems rather familiar with that Russian twelve-point-seven. By any chance did he fight in your Vietnam war?"

"Why don't you ask him?" I said with a wink. "But he's not much of a talker, especially about *that* subject."

Maguire had his own question. "Do you always leave the gun uncovered at sea?"

"We take the canvas off when we're leaving port, but we leave the ammo in the box to keep it dry. If you're going to get jumped, it'll usually happen close to land. Almost anything with an engine can outrun us, so if they're close enough to see us, they're usually close enough to catch us. But can a speedboat stand up to my Dushka? No way. So I'm not too worried about small boats carrying small arms, as long as we don't get jumped by surprise. We put the canvas back on it once we're away from land."

Why did I tell them so much? Normally I would not be so forthcoming with virtual strangers. I was probably on some level trying to impress the ex-SAS colonel, as well as Sergeant Major Tolbert and Pat Maguire, the presumed IRA weapons man. My Marine Corps days were far in the past, but when old warriors gathered, their chests thumped out and their tales grew tall. The mastery of many types of infantry weapons was their stock in trade, and for soldiers of any age or country my lovely Russian Dushka was a beautiful sight, and a chance for the proud skipper to exhibit his heavy artillery.

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Six large men could fit at the galley dinette table, three facing forward and three facing aft. Along with providing space for consuming our meals, this table was also where paper charts were unfolded and voyages were planned.

With its upholstered bench seats, it was one of the most comfortable places on the boat, outside of my own aft cabin.

The galley proper, on the port side across from the dinette table, all belonged to Hung in his capacity as the ship's cook. When he wasn't in the galley, he could often be found up in the pilothouse enjoying a smoke, and if he wasn't there, he was usually relaxing in his tiny cabin behind the dinette table on the starboard side, across the passageway from the engine room. This narrow ten-foot-long passageway terminated at the door to my cabin. I slept soundly, knowing that the elderly Vietnamese was nearly always located somewhere between my cabin door and any potential attacker or sneak thief.

Between the inboard side of the dinette table and the cooking galley was a small open space about a meter wide. In front of this spot was the sliding-door opening to the cargo hold, and behind it was the ladder up to the pilothouse. You could lean back against the ladder with your backside resting on the third step. When you stood in this spot you were in the steadiest part of the boat, where the effects of roll, pitch, and yaw were minimized. I had even installed a pair of teak grab handles above the place. Standing at ease in that spot even during the wildest storm, I could communicate with Hung to my left when he was cooking, converse with anyone sitting at the dinette table to my right, or call up the ladder to gain the attention of anybody on watch in the pilothouse.

Hung made no complaint about cooking for fifteen men instead of three, and he rebuffed Sergeant Major Tolbert's offer of help with cooking their supper. "Only room in galley for one cook—me" was his statement on the matter, and the case was closed. A bit later, while Hung was working over the gimbaled gas burners, I heard him laughing and muttering to himself. Mixed among his own language I heard, "English cooking—beef taste like dog. English cooking—maybe sometime in hell." He couldn't tell the Brits from the Irish among Rainborow's team; they were all English to him.

Hung was, however, willing to hand over the job of peeling and chopping bulk quantities of potatoes, carrots, onions, and other raw vegetables. When choosing volunteers for this duty some Brits ribbed the Micks about them being natural-born spud-peeling experts, leading to jokes, then insults, and finally some potatoes being thrown back and forth. The insults grew heated and turned both political and religious. I heard the growing altercation from the pilothouse.

Sergeant Major Tolbert rushed past me and dropped down the ladder into the galley like a thunderclap, separated the quarrelling factions, and grabbed two men, the ones who were at the front shoving one another. I watched it from above.

"You, and you—sit! Everybody else, get forward into the hold where you belong! Now, if you two sodding tossers can't learn to live in peace, I'll handcuff you both together so that you'll have to wipe each other's arses when you shite!" The two, chastened, sat at opposite corners of the dinette table and quietly set to work peeling and chopping vegetables in silence.

Once the meal preparation and cooking was finished, we ate in three shifts while at anchor in the open bay. The first seating was made up of the five "officers" aboard Rebel Yell: myself, Victor, and the three team leaders. The places were already set: heavy plastic plates and stainless steel utensils. Victor and I arrived and sat down first, facing forward across the teak table. Pat Maguire was the third to arrive and slid across the bench seat facing aft, across the table from Victor.

Sergeant Major Tolbert appeared next, coming down the ladder from the pilothouse, followed by Colonel Rainborow. Tolbert deferred to his senior, and the colonel sat next to Pat Maguire, across the table from me. Bert sat down last, next to his colonel and separated from the Irishman. It was an awkward moment, and once again I detected antipathy between the ex–SAS sergeant major and the ex–IRA man—especially after the recent near brawl over the delicate subject of who was best suited to peel spuds. We didn't discuss the mission or the recent altercation, only safely neutral topics like the excellence of the Irish codfish fillets and the well-seasoned stir-fried vegetables that Hung had prepared. And I noticed for the first time that the two antagonists seated across from me on either side of Colonel Rainborow had nearly the same shade of hazel eyes and brown hair tinged with gray.

A perquisite of our seniority was leaving the table when we were finished, the between-settings and final cleanup left to the other ranks. As we stood to leave, Maguire informed me that he was not new to sailing, that he had done some ocean racing and had a few trans-Atlantics under his belt. If I needed another qualified watch-stander or any help with the sails, he was volunteering his services, and I told him he was hired.

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After dinner, we made our final preparations for sea. After confirming that the boat and all hands were ready, I fired up the diesel, raised the anchor with the power windlass, put the engine in gear, and we were under way. We motored straight out into deep water until we were beyond the unseen headland and turned into the wind. Then Tom Pellow and Kamal Abidar cranked the winches on the two masts to raise our mainsail and foresail.

It was a black night, with nothing to see ahead of our bow but darkness. The wind and the swell were both from the northwest, and our course was almost due south. If we sailed exactly down ten degrees west longitude for the next 1,400 nautical miles, we would pass within fifty miles of Spain and Portugal and eventually run ashore in Morocco. I had set the Canary Islands for my destination, which meant steering a bit west of south. Once on course, we unrolled the two triangular jibs on the bow and sheeted them in. The steady press of the wind on our four working sails pushed Rebel over to about a ten-degree angle of heel, while also eliminating most of our rolling.

I left the Caterpillar in forward gear running at low RPMs, so we were motor-sailing at nine knots, or about ten miles an hour. At this speed, with a fair wind pushing us along our course, we would need less than ten days to finish the charter. Of course, receiving Rainborow's gold for the charter was another matter. But even running the engine day and night, at the end of the week and a half I would still have at least twenty-five drums of diesel left to sell, making for a profitable voyage no matter what happened with Rainborow, his mission, or Mr. Smith's gold.

At sea there were normally just the three of us, and we each took turns pulling watch, usually three hours on and six off. The two surfers and Pat Maguire claimed to be competent sailors, so I worked them into a new watch schedule rotation. Hung had a full-time job feeding fifteen men, so he was relieved of the duty. Victor had been required to give up most of his living space in the bow, so I took him off watch standing as well, as partial compensation for his inconvenience.

I kept myself in the new rotation, but no matter who was officially on watch, I always spent some time on deck during the night. For years, I'd existed on a few irregular naps spread through every twenty-four hours. Life aboard a voyaging sailboat was not conducive to normal sleep patterns, especially for the skipper. That first night I managed to get in a few hours between trips up to the cockpit for the change of the watch at midnight and then at 0300. It was essential to train each new watch-stander on a variety of

standard operating procedures.

The engine room was just forward of my cabin. The Cat diesel lived in this enclosed space directly beneath the pilothouse. My private bathroom was to port of the engine room. To starboard was the passageway connecting the galley to my aft cabin. With the diesel running at low RPM, the noise in the back of Rebel Yell was about like the sound near the engine in a city bus. After many years of living behind the motor, it was just white noise to me.

8

I awoke in the darkness and checked my watch, squeezing the button to illuminate its digital face. It was 0530. The Casio was still making a light, but it was beginning to grow dim. I stretched and imagined Sinead Devlin hovering above me. It was only a few days earlier that she had shared my bed. Now the last trace of her perfume and her woman scent in my cabin had been replaced by the smell of burning diesel. There were boot steps above me, and the sound of something being dragged on deck. I heard voices in the galley. Instead of a pretty Irish colleen in my bed, there were a dozen strange men scattered about the rest of my boat.

By dead reckoning, we should have been about 150 miles west of Land's End, the tip of Cornwall in Southwest England. When I came on deck, Pat Maguire and the two surfers were already in the cockpit, mugs of tea in their hands. Maguire was set to replace Kam on watch at 0600. Tommy Pellow didn't have to be on deck, so presumably he just wanted to watch the sun crack the horizon.

"I'm glad you're all here," I told my new crew. "Dawn is a dangerous time. I want somebody up in the crow's nest every morning a half hour before daybreak."

Tommy stood and said, "I'll go up."

"Take the binoculars that are inside the pilothouse on the port side. The pair with the yellow strap, not my Steiners. You'll see the bino rack. Always use the strap, and stick them inside your shirt while you're climbing." Rebel's mainmast has hand and footholds every two feet on alternating sides to form a ladder. Tommy found the second-string binoculars, clambered up, and sat where the radar had once been.

A stainless steel tube formed into a circle was screwed to the mast above the teak seat to provide the watcher some security. The little bench could be adjusted to tilt twenty degrees to either side and lock in place. This way, the lookout could sit on a level surface when the boat was heeled over. The adjustable crow's nest seat was my own invention, installed after the radar had finally died and been junked.

We gained a significant optical advantage by putting a sharp pair of eyes and binoculars sixty feet up. Seen from the deck, the horizon was only four miles away, but from sixty feet above the water that distance increased to ten.

Without a lookout up the mast, our sails would be visible to other vessels before we would catch sight of them. I always operated under the assumption that any strange vessel we encountered would be faster than us, and hostile. If we saw another vessel first, we would have a chance to turn and run the other way, fleeing from their line of sight over the curvature of the earth before they noticed us. Otherwise, we could blunder into closer proximity before discovering their intentions.

We had no radar, but we did have a radar detector to warn us if we were being painted by another vessel's radar. It had been weeks since it had made its warning sound. Outside of naval or coast guard vessels, almost nobody risked turning on radar. You might as well broadcast your location to the entire world. The last time I'd been painted by radar and heard the chirping tone from the detector was when we were leaving Bergen, on the west coast of Norway, and we'd been circled by a twin-engine patrol aircraft.

This close to Europe, encountering a cutter, frigate, or patrol aircraft could not be ruled out, and their radars could be on frequencies undetectable by my commercial detector. But 150 miles out to sea from Land's End, the ocean is a mighty big place. Imagine a five-foot-wide paper chart of the entire North Atlantic, taped to a wall, covering the distance from New York to London. Throw a dart at it. That pinhole represents the limit of your eyesight to the horizon. How many pinholes would it take to completely blanket the chart with dots? Millions of them. And how likely would it be that a few successive darts would make touching holes? So it wasn't surprising that on our first dawn at sea, the horizon was clear around all 360 degrees.

Soon, more of the groggy-eyed team were coming on deck, stretching, pissing over the side to leeward, lighting smokes. Some of them leaned back against the inflated rubber side tube of the RIB, using it like a couch. I could hear a few more voices down in the galley.

Colonel Rainborow came through the pilothouse into the cockpit carrying his leather satchel. He was wearing a tan British commando sweater and fatigue pants in the old British 'desert disruptive' camouflage pattern. He exchanged a few morning pleasantries while scanning the horizon, and after a minute or two Hung brought us mugs of tea on a tray and departed. This was an unexpected level of service from the old man. I wondered whether Rainborow had asked him, or if Hung had taken it upon himself. I affected nonchalance, as if being served morning tea in the cockpit was routine.

Pat Maguire and the Moroccan surfer wandered away forward, having

observed that the captain and the colonel were about to have a discussion. I sat on the bench behind the wheel and across from Rainborow, both of us sipping our tea and studying the ocean and one another.

The wind held west at fifteen knots, and we were broad-reaching along at a good clip without too much heeling. Waves were less than six feet, nothing my forty-ton schooner cared about. The swells were regular, the decks were mostly free of spray. I was seated on the high side of the cockpit, my back to the breeze, my legs braced against the opposite bench just ahead of Rainborow's satchel.

"I thought that Yanks preferred morning coffee, Captain Kilmer."

"We do. Have you got any? I forget what it smells like."

"Good tea may be God's greatest gift to mankind, but good coffee is not far behind." He looked around the horizon again, then at the various electronic instrument displays mounted on the back of the pilothouse, and said, "Ten knots—we're making good time."

"We are for now, but if the wind veers south, we'll be lucky to make seven, even running the engine. Throw some current against us, and we'll make even less."

"But we'll arrive in ten days?"

"I'd say that's reasonable, but nothing is ever sure a week out on the ocean."

The colonel studied the magnetic compass atop the binnacle just in front of the wheel and asked, "Is that thing accurate on an iron boat?" The compass card floating level in its liquid-filled glass hemisphere indicated that we were sailing at about 220 degrees magnetic. The autopilot's digital display said 195 degrees true, a glaring disparity.

"Accurate? Hell, no, but the autopilot has its own electronic compass up the mast."

"And that's how you steer, using the electronic compass to guide the autopilot?"

"That's right, for as long as it works."

"What if the autopilot packs it in?"

"I have a table of offsets for the magnetic compass, and we'll hand-steer."

"So, when will you do your navigational work?"

"Noon, if we can see the sun. If not, we'll shoot the stars at twilight."

"What if it's still overcast?"

“Then we’ll wait for dawn and try again.”

“Seems like a lot of bother to find out where you are.”

I said, “If you know an easier way, tell me.”

“And in between, you rely on dead reckoning?”

“Celestial navigation and dead reckoning are all there is anymore.”

“And that lack of precision was your main objection to attempting an at-sea rendezvous, was it not?”

“That’s right.”

The colonel smiled and said, “Then you’ll be happy to know that I have a GPS unit.”

“You have a *working GPS*?”

“Two, actually. Current British Army issue. Quite a trick to obtain them.”

“I thought the GPS satellites were dead.”

“Apparently not all of them.” He reached into his satchel and produced a green plastic device the size of a thick paperback book, switched it on and handed it to me.

“*Very* nice,” I said in massive understatement. His unit had a waterproof keypad and a small LCD display. After a minute, our latitude and longitude were shown on the screen. The GPS indicated we were making eleven knots over the ground when Rebel’s speedo read ten, so we had a knot of current behind us. “It seems like a miracle to watch the numbers change and know that’s *exactly* where we are.”

“At times you have to wait for satellites to pass over. It can get a bit spotty.”

“When it loses coverage, how long is it down?”

“Maybe for an hour, never much more than that.”

“That’s still fantastic. I haven’t seen a working GPS in five years.”

“The landing craft has the other one. I called in every chit I had left to make *that* bit of magic happen.”

“Colonel, I haven’t been paid for the charter, but this GPS can be a down payment. You won’t need two of them after the renezvous.”

“It wouldn’t do you much good. It’s military, and they change the crypto every month. If it’s not updated with a new code, it’ll be useless in a few weeks. But you’ll be paid; I gave you my word.”

Despite what he said, I figured I’d never see the forty ounces of gold… but the altruistic side of my nature was still glad to be giving his team a ride.

Then he said, “The next order of business is our radio plan. We need to communicate with the landing craft, and with the Storm. We have prescheduled contact windows.”

“I assumed that you brought your own radio.”

“We did, but it will be simpler if we use yours.”

Our high-frequency antenna consisted of twenty feet of stainless steel wire stretched between the mastheads. Its purpose was made obvious by the insulators at each end. It would be a waste of effort for his radioman to try to duplicate my proven system. Nothing sent out HF radio waves like a dipole antenna high above a steel hull grounded to the entire ocean.

“You can use it, but not today. Not while we’re still near the UK, in range of their patrol aircraft.”

“What patrol aircraft? And we have a burst-transmission device. It’ll take only a fraction of a second.”

“That’s all they need. When’s the first window?”

“Quarter after ten this morning.”

“Let’s wait until tomorrow to break radio silence. Okay?”

He considered for a moment. “You’re the captain.” He rose, stepped down into the pilothouse, and descended the ladder. He took his satchel but left the GPS with me. My trusty old sextant could stay in its box for the time being.

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The first twenty-four hours at sea are a process of settling into routines and providing on-the-job training for the deck crew and watch-standers. For breakfast and lunch, Tran Hung set out staples for the men to prepare and consume as they liked. Supper was undertaken as before, in three sittings at the dinette table. The same five “officers” always went first, and were excused from galley duty. We retained our original seating order for the rest of the voyage, with Colonel Rainborow serving as a buffer between Pat and Bert, across from Victor and myself.

The first full night at sea I was able to catch a few hours of sleep, but I still went up to the cockpit at each change of watch, to take reports and continue training the new hands. Often the best conversations happened in the cockpit, in the middle of the night, during a change of the watch. Something about the infinity of the cosmos caused people to open up and

share their deepest thoughts. That's how I found myself in the cockpit with the two surfers. I found their story fascinating, and there were some questions I'd been meaning to ask them.

"I just want know one thing: why are you going back to Morocco? It sounds like you barely got out of there alive, so why go back?"

Tommy said, "Why go back? To rescue the girls and bring them home, of course."

The Moroccan said, "Of course to save the girls, but I also have a father and a sister back there."

"Family, I understand. But neither of you know any of the girls who were taken."

"What difference does that make?" Tommy asked.

"But the fanatics will behead you if they catch you."

"So, what else is new?" said Kam.

I had to ask. "How much are they paying you? Don't tell me you're going back for no pay?"

Tommy smiled uncertainly. "They're paying us with gold coins, or so they say. But that's just fairy tales, I'm thinking."

"I take it you haven't seen any of it yet?"

The young Englishman said, "The ounce of gold that you squeezed out of Rainy is more than any of us have seen."

I was surprised he knew about the single Krugerrand I'd been paid, and I wondered if Rainborow or Maguire had told him. I asked them, "Do you think we'll ever see the colonel's pot of gold? Any of us?"

Tommy shrugged. "If we're alive in a month, maybe we'll find out. If not…then the gold won't matter, will it?"

"So why go back? Just for some girls you never met?"

Kam said, "Look at yourself, mate. Here we are on *your* boat, heading toward Morocco."

"Yes, we're on my boat—but I'm not going ashore. I'm just dropping you off."

"True enough," said Tommy. "You're not going ashore. But the colonel and his team can't save the girls without us, and that's the plain fact of the matter. Without us to get the lorries over the beach, they wouldn't stand a tinker's chance. With us, they do. Simple as that. Just like they can't get to Morocco without your boat. And so, here we are. It's all fate or karma or God's will or whatever you want to call it. Think about it: we arrived in

Ireland almost exactly when we were needed to go straight back to Morocco to fetch the girls home. How else could you look at it?"

"A coincidence?"

"Some coincidence!" said the young Englishman. "Listen, mate, surely you know the normal weather patterns down there, right? On the trip from Morocco to Portugal, the wind blew from the south for a week, nonstop. Ask anybody—that never happens. Never. But it did, for us."

"Are your religious or something?"

"Religious? Not really. I was raised Christian, more or less, I suppose. Baptized, at least. But we didn't go to church. Wasn't really much of it around where I grew up. Mostly all just mosques springing up like mushrooms, or moving into old churches. But some of the good part of being a Christian must have stuck on me without me knowing it. I can't say, I'm not much of an expert when it comes to religion. But I know that God brought us to Ireland for a reason. Before the voyage, I never would have thought that God had a plan for me, never would have thought that God gave me a second thought. But the trip north changed me. Changed us both."

"How about you, Kam? Are you religious?" After Iraq and Afghanistan, I found it nearly impossible to trust anybody raised under Islam. Even a drinking and whoring so-called ex-Muslim could revert to fanatical belief in Mohammed and the Koran with no warning. They could convincingly smile to your face and then shoot you in the back at the next opportunity. For lapsed Muslims, the murder of infidels was often demanded by their fanatical co-religionists as proof of their sincere return to hard-core Islamic belief.

"Me? Religious? Captain, if I have any religion, it's surfing, and maybe now it's sailing too. I don't give a damn about any religion written down in books. My father is Berber, not Arab, and he doesn't give a damn about religion either, and neither did my mother, and she's French. But they taught me about good and evil, and I know that what's happening to those girls is pure evil and it's happening in *my country*, so we're going back because they need us for the mission. Tommy said it right: Rainy's mission can't succeed without us. Our voyage to Ireland didn't happen by coincidence. It was meant to be. But I'm not religious, no. I don't know what I am, but I'm not religious. Not unless surfing is a religion."

Tommy said, "Before we escaped, I didn't even know how to sail. We were surfing mates; we met at his father's surf camp. I've gone back to Morocco almost every summer since I was sixteen, and I spent the last three

years there. I thought I knew the place, I thought I understood Morocco and Moroccans. I thought it would be a nice low-key way to ride out the crash. I thought I'd be safe there, like always. I speak enough French to get by, and a little Arabic too. It gave me a false sense of security. I mean, they can spot me for a Nesrani at a hundred yards, with this face and hair."

"Nesrani?"

"Yeah, from Jesus Christ, the Nazarene. A Christian. They think every European is a Christian. But I still love the place. There's a lot more great blokes than arseholes. A lot more. It's just that sometimes the crazy arseholes wind up in charge."

I said, "They do tend to win the debate when they cut people's heads off. So how much of Morocco do the crazy assholes control?"

The young Moroccan said, "When we left, they controlled Agadir and most of the south. Rainy says the king is still in charge in the north, but we don't really know."

Tommy continued their story. "They took us to the football stadium in Agadir. It became an instant prison when the fanatics took over. It was just a mob scene while they sorted everybody out. People were beheaded on the football pitch in plain sight, and that's all we needed to know. We guessed what we had coming at the end of the interrogation line and we decided to make a run for it. Kam could have made it off even easier by himself. I was *kafir*, a white Nesrani. I had no chance alone. No chance at all, nil. Kam could have given me the slip and helped his own chances, but he didn't. My mate stuck with me all the way to Ireland. And I didn't even know how to sail when we left."

The Englishman was getting a little choked up, and the Moroccan continued their tale. "We stripped electrical cable from a light tower and made it into a rope. There was no power on, of course, so it was pitch dark. We abseiled down the outside wall at night. Not straight down; the wall was on an angle. But it was so high and so steep that nobody was guarding the streets on the outside. It was a football stadium, not a real prison, and the guards didn't know what they were doing, at least not then. They were new at it. So we decided to escape before they got the place under proper control. And I couldn't have done it without Tommy. It was a two-man job, climbing the light tower and stealing the cable in secret and then abseiling down. Rappelling, I think you Yanks call it."

Tommy said, "It was an easy abseil, even with improvised kit. Cliffs and

ropes are easy for us. Almost anywhere you surf in Morocco, there are cliffs around."

"That's how I grew up," said Kam. "That's part of how you become a surfing guide. A lot of times you have to climb down cliffs to get to the best breaks. Climb down with one hand, because you're hanging onto your board with the other. After we got out of the stadium, we made it over to the tourist beach. We moved at night like ninjas and found a hotel that was abandoned after the last tourists fled. We broke in and found some hidden food. The hotel had a concession for water sports, everything was for rent. That's where we found the boat and came up with our escape plan. We found wetsuits, a lot of things that we needed. We dragged the boat across the beach in the dark, and we set up the mast. Then we pushed it out through the waves, paddled past the surf, and raised sail. We were facing eight hundred kilometers in an open six-meter boat to reach Spain. We had a tourist map of Morocco that we found in the hotel, and that was all. We didn't even have a compass until we got to Portugal. Just Polaris at night and the sun during the day."

Tommy raised his face to the stars and shook his head, reliving the memory. "I can't tell you how many times we looked up at waves as big as houses ready to fall on us. We had to tie ourselves to the boat. It was terrible, but the boat was unsinkable."

Kam said, "Capsize and bail. Capsize and bail. We would have died for sure without the wetsuits. I don't know how many times the ocean swallowed us and spat us out. But it didn't kill us, and we made it to Portugal. And then we made it to Ireland."

"We were aiming for England," said Tommy, "But we found Ireland instead."

"If I believed in God," said the Moroccan, "I would call it a miracle. But I don't believe in God, so I don't know what to call it. But it can't be just luck."

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On the second morning at sea I was in my stateroom when there was a rap on my cabin door. I was sitting in my swivel chair, at my desk, writing in my journal. My swivel chair doesn't roll around on wheels, like those in offices on the unmoving land. Instead, it's bolted to a steel beam beneath my teak

cabin sole. My single-sideband radio and some other electronic instruments are located above the desk. If the man banging on my door was Hung, I would have known it by his coded knock. If it was Victor, he would have said so instead of knocking at all.

A Scottish-accented voice said, “Hello, captain. I’m here for the radio.”

I got up and went to the door. It had louvered slats in the middle for ventilation. They also allowed me to look down at whoever was standing outside, without my being seen. Green T-shirt, uniform trousers of the old British desert pattern, holding a black daypack in one hand. I pushed it open to let him in.

“I’m Stanley, the signaler.” He was medium height and slender, maybe late thirties. Thin blond hair, what was left of it. Wire-rimmed glasses.

“Where’s the colonel?” I asked him.

“He gins up the sit-reps, and I send them.”

“Well, okay, then, come on in.” I indicated my swiveling navigation seat. “Sit down and do what you need to do.”

He sat, pulled an aluminum case from his pack, and opened it up on the desk, revealing a laptop within. While it booted up, he glanced at my electronics. “Icom. Great radio.”

My single-sideband transceiver was probably very basic compared to what an SAS radioman would use for military or espionage purposes, even if my antenna setup was first-rate. Many of my irreplaceable electronics had already died, and I dreaded the day that my Icom M802 finally gave up the ghost. “I don’t know how great it is, but at least it still works.”

He added, “And that’s what makes it great. I’m more used to throwing a wire between buildings or even trees, and making do with any kind of radio that’s available. Trust me, this one is a lot better than most.” He studied the input jack on my single-sideband, found the correct wire within a side pouch on his daypack, and connected his computer.

“How long will this take?”

“Oh, just a few minutes—as long as the other stations are tuned in and standing by.”

I stood behind him, looking over his shoulder. Stanley checked his digital wristwatch, and at 1020 he began typing, then he studied the computer screen. “Lovely signal, just look at those bars. Now, here she comes, station two. And now, station three. Bing-bang, and…she’s done.” A few more clicks and keystrokes, then he disconnected his laptop, shut its metal case,

and slid it back into the daypack resting between his feet. Finished, he stood up. “Thank you, skipper—would have been a bloody nuisance to string my own antenna with all those ropes and sails flappin’ about.”

“No problem, Stanley. So, I guess I’ll see you again in twelve hours, right?”

“A bit more than that. Our next transmission window opens at 2245. I hope that won’t be inconvenient. I could splice into your antenna where it comes out on deck and not bother you anymore…”

Like hell you will, I thought. “No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll be right here for every transmission.” His business was complete, but I wasn’t done with him yet. “What frequencies do you think are best for November? Any stations or operators that you can recommend?”

“I’ve got some of my own lists; do you want a crack at them? Non-mission-related, I mean.”

“Sure, let me take a look. I’ve got a few of my own that you can copy.” Some of these were taped on scraps of paper above and around the radio, and in the back and front pages of various notebooks and logs. We spent the next few minutes copying call signs, times, and frequencies, and sharing our opinions about which stations provided the best weather guidance, hourly time-ticks for synching up our navigational chronometers, rumors about the bloody civil wars raging on the continent, the ongoing war in the Western Pacific, and other world news and rumors.

We agreed that continental Europe was hopeless, the Disunited States were still too dangerous to visit, China was a complete disaster, Japan and Korea would eventually rule the ruins of Asia, and, somehow, parts of South America were still up and running, more or less. If there was anyplace better, the locals were keeping mum, and who could blame them?

9

We had fair winds and nice weather the first few days out, giving us good daily mileage runs and an easy ride. None of Rainborow's embarked team were seasick past the first day or two. Good weather also meant that the men living in the cargo hold could escape its confines and enjoy the fresh air and infinite horizons available on deck.

The galley dinette table was the one place down below where the men could relax in comfortable surroundings, so it was rarely left unoccupied. At any time of day or night men worked on jigsaw puzzles, played chess, read paperbacks, scribbled in journals, and fiddled with gadgets. But during the day, outside of mealtimes, priority was given to mission planning. I passed the dinette dozens of times a day on my way between my cabin and the galley or the pilothouse above. I never intentionally hovered around the team during their briefings and other mission preparations, and they didn't go silent or cover up their maps and papers when I was near. The team just ignored Hung, with his limited English and apparent social self-isolation.

It was the same plan they'd pitched to me in Ireland. Rainborow believed that military trucks traveling in convoy under cover of darkness would make such an impressive showing of counterfeit Royal Moroccan Army military might that their unexpected appearance would cause any local gangs or militias to stand aside as they roared past. A covered truck might be transporting a squad or more of infantry, armed to the teeth and ready for battle the instant they spilled out of the back like angry hornets from a disturbed nest. Unless a suspicious adversary was ready to attack all three trucks with heavy weapons, simultaneously, he was not likely to pick a fight with what could be a combat-ready infantry platoon. If a late-night checkpoint guard had any remaining doubts, belt-fed machine guns mounted on each truck's cab would help him decide to let the convoy pass unchallenged.

But instead of carrying Royal Moroccan Army soldiers, Rainborow's trucks would be empty on their way in and full of rescued schoolgirls on their way out. It was a bold plan, depending upon pure bluff for its success. I thought the SAS motto about daring and winning was a flimsy foundation to build a mission on, but it was Rainborow and his team who were going ashore in Morocco, not me. Even so, I couldn't help but admire their courage

and wish them the best of luck.

Victor met with their two patrol medics at the dinette table to go over their medical gear and compare opinions about combat casualty procedures. He was glad to share his knowledge and experience, and was also interested to hear their ideas on treating combat trauma. An afternoon of seeing the table covered with tourniquets, bandages, hemostats, and the other tools of the combat medical trade reminded me of what I'd be losing when Victor left the boat. Without his past interventions, I would have been dead years before.

The crow's nest high up the mainmast was occupied continuously from before dawn until after dusk. Sergeant Major Tolbert asked if it was all right if the team used the mast steps for practice, to maintain their climbing strength and keep their hands toughened. Of course I agreed, and it became a familiar sight to see them ascending, chatting with the lookout, and then shinnying down again.

Long ago, I'd mounted a pull-up bar between two lower wire mainmast shrouds where they are only about a meter apart. The bar, cut from a stout piece of aluminum tube, was lashed to the wires high enough above the deck that I have to hop up to grab it. I don't use it as often as I used to, but it was in frequent use by the team. I hadn't been formally briefed on the mission, but I knew that the final stage of the rescue meant climbing, and climbing required a particular type of strength that was highly perishable.

The amount of time the team dedicated to physical training indicated to me that they were professionals. They did calisthenics on deck in groups and singly. They did endless sit-ups and push-ups. The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war, as the saying goes. The team did a lot sweating, staying in shape for the cliffs of Cape Zerhoun. They were obviously very serious about the undertaking ahead of them.

Most of the Hajis I'd tangled with back in the day didn't train at all. Instead, they took the path of trusting Allah to get them through every scrape. This blind trust even extended to Allah guiding the bullets they fired, eliminating the need for them to carefully aim their weapons. Some of the Marines called them skinnies; I think that expression was handed down from grunts who had served in Somalia. While not as thin as Somalis, the Iraqis I'd seen without a shirt or a man-dress on had not been impressive physical specimens.

Our Moroccan surfer, Kamal Abidar, was not cut from that skinny Arab mold. He had a substantial amount of chest and arm muscles on him. You

won’t find a genuine longtime surfer without some serious arm and shoulder meat. Mixing it up with big waves on a frequent basis takes strength, stamina, and guts. Sometimes you can be held underwater for long periods after a wipeout, your body being thrashed like a rag doll in the mouth of a terrier. Kam had said that he was half French and half Berber. As far as I knew, he was the very first Berber of any sort I’d ever met.

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Like every voyage made with a fresh cast of characters aboard, I had the opportunity to hear some interesting personal stories. Most of the news about current events in Europe that I’d been able to glean had been third-hand rumors I’d overheard on my single-sideband. The national radio news services were an absolute joke. On the presumably private stations, everybody seemed to have a national, ethnic, or religious ax to grind, and it was impossible to verify any of their versions of events. I assumed that most of the supposedly independent voices were fronting for some interest group or government entity. For example, depending on whom you chose to believe, the situation in Germany ranged from worse than during the Nazi regime to a long overdue return to national pride and identity, with the assistance of their new Russian allies. A confusing picture was a hallmark of the times.

A ten-day passage would give me a chance to compare notes with men who had actually been living through the strife, at least in the British Isles. During one of the first mornings of the voyage, I was in the cockpit with Colonel Rainborow, chatting over tea. I assumed that as an ex–SAS officer and the leader of a private military outfit, he would be as tuned in to current events as it was possible to be.

“So what’s really happening in Europe? Ireland was as close as I’ve gotten in a few years, and I don’t know how to judge what I hear on the radio. It’s almost all propaganda, as far as I can tell.”

“The radio? Propaganda? Yes, it mostly is. I assume that you know about the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower?”

“Sure, of course: seven-ten was the French nine-eleven. That was two years ago, at the beginning of their civil war. They were both blown up at the same time, on July tenth.”

“Not quite the same time,” said the colonel. “The Louvre was first. A

lorry delivered four tons of Semtex. A small team of jihadis hijacked an art shipment and made the switch out in the countryside. Drove the lorry right into an underground car park and straight up to the receiving dock. The blast killed two thousand tourists and cratered the place. And needless to say it destroyed a thousand years of priceless Western artwork."

"So the Louvre bombing was a diversion."

"Right. It pulled away all the French security forces, and then the Eiffel Tower was attacked by a much bigger team of terrorists. About thirty of them held a hundred tourists on the observation deck and threatened to kill them and destroy the tower. After what had just happened at the Louvre, the French had no doubt of their sincerity. The terrorists tore down the big French tricolor on top and raised a gigantic black flag of jihad. They declared the Eiffel Tower to be the minaret of the new grand mosque of Muslim Europe. Paris was called the capital of the European Caliphate.

"They brought their own television and radio equipment with them. Loudspeakers, generators, the lot. Then they made the usual demands: free all the Muslims held in European jails and remove all European forces from Muslim lands. And then on Bastille Day, when none of that had happened, they began pitching hostages off the tower one by one, starting with an elderly Jew. Goes without saying they raped all the women and children. The Caliphate declared it a major victory for Islam. The terrorists held out for a week, leading the call to prayer from on top of the tower, black flag and all. And after each call to prayer, another hostage was thrown down. Finally, after nine days, French commandos tried a helicopter assault behind a smoke screen. It was a bloody fiasco—the terrorists were ready for them—but they didn't have enough Semtex to completely destroy the tower. They only had enough to demolish the top third of it. French sappers had disabled the charges they'd planted lower on the legs.

"Attacking the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower were taken by the French as a declaration of war on France itself. After those twin disasters, nobody spoke of radical Islam anymore, just Islam. Islam in every form was declared to be the enemy of France. The French passed new anti-Islam laws almost overnight. Loyalty oaths were demanded of all Muslims in France. The Sharia no-go zones had to be opened up for inspection and completely disarmed. All Muslim men from age fifteen to fifty had to be registered, photographed, fingerprinted, and eye-scanned. This was all refused out of hand, of course. Instead, the no-go zones were barricaded, and then the

French had car bombs going off in front of their schools and police stations. And snipers, of course. And rocket attacks, and ran-dom mortars. That lasted until August, when the French Army went full-out medieval. The no-go zones were attacked and then destroyed, one after the other."

"I thought the French military was full of Muslims."

"It was—before the loyalty oaths. The loyalty oaths were rejected in the Sharia zones, but they worked well enough in the military. Almost all the Muslims in the French Army were thrown out. The ones who didn't desert and run into the Sharia zones were put behind razor wire as a risk to French society. It amazed everybody how fast the French could build concentration camps when they set their minds to it. This led to even more car bombs and rocket attacks, until the French used heavy artillery on the no-go zones. Leveled them. Large parts of Paris and the other French cities look like Stalingrad now, but at least they're one hundred percent French again. Well, in the north, anyway."

I said, "There must have been a lot of civilian casualties. When push comes to shove, Muslims always use their women and children as human shields."

"They did—and yes, they always do—but this time it didn't work. Not when the French were in a fight for their survival. The problem with that human-shield strategy is that sooner or later somebody calls your bluff, and that's exactly what the French military did. And being concentrated in all-Muslim enclaves, well, that vastly simplified matters when it came time to take care of business and end the mess once and for all. Of course, thousands of innocent French civilians died as well, but that couldn't be helped. Collateral damage. War is hell, and civil war is even worse."

A lot of what the colonel said was similar to the rumors I'd heard on the single-sideband. "I didn't think they had it in them anymore, the French."

"It finally came down to a matter of national survival. Do or die. Nobody could deny reality after the Louvre and Eiffel Tower attacks. In the end, the French military showed very little mercy. Bastille Day with the black flag of jihad flying above the Eiffel Tower was the turning point. And there was a growing realization that if the no-go zones were going to burn anyway, it would be simpler just to kill them all in the ruins with artillery than to try to coax them out and put them into camps or deport them. A realization by the French military, I mean. It wasn't the declared French national policy, not that I ever heard. But that's exactly what happened."

“So, are there still any Muslims in France?”

“There are almost none north of Lyon, but there are millions left in the Marseille Pocket. The French Civil War isn’t over, not by a long shot. It’s still a big mess in the south. The hardliners want to starve them out, and force them across the Mediterranean to Africa. The socialists want to trade a Muslim enclave in the south for a peace treaty. There were some talks about population exchanges and repatriation, but they came to naught. The French socialists don’t have much influence anymore. They’re seen as collaborators for supporting the Muslim invasion in the first place. French Quislings. Traitors. Cowards and sellouts, like that poofter Emmanuel Macron. They were blamed for the Louvre and Eiffel Tower attacks. Nationalists are running the show in France today.”

“What about England and the UK? How’s it going there?”

“Let’s just say that we’re taking extreme measures to ensure the loyalty of the remaining ex-Muslims. After the Paris attacks, we weren’t going to wait around to see what happened to Buckingham Palace and Big Ben.”

“*Ex*-Muslims?”

“Those are the only kind we have left in Britain. They had to renounce Islam and pledge loyalty to the king. And all of the mosques and ‘Islamic cultural centers’ were leveled, plowed under, and sown with pigs’ offal—full stop.”

“Pigs’ offal?”

“So help me. And all done by local volunteers.”

“What happened to the diehard Muslims who wouldn’t renounce Islam?”

“They were allowed to leave on ships, most of them. But I’m shedding no tears for the Muslims that left the UK in one piece. They got off easy, and lucky, after what was done to the Christians back in *their* homelands.”

“Weren’t a lot of your Muslims born in the UK?”

“Doesn’t matter where they were born, they’re all one and the same. That’s how they looked at the world anyway, Islam versus the rest. The worldwide *Ummah*, and all that rot. In the end, the Muslims didn’t want to assimilate, they didn’t want to become Britons at all. They came to conquer, or rather, to be parasites until they killed their host and took over that way. The war of the womb, outbreeding us five to one. They just wanted to live on entitlement benefits in their Sharia zones and force Islam down everybody’s throat, step by step. Well, that non-assimilation turned out to be a double-edged sword. They didn’t want to become British? Fine. They identified as

Muslims first? Great. That made it easier to bin them all when it came down to them or us. They were never our countrymen. They were just invaders and, in the end, we spat them out."

"Even the ones who were born in the UK?"

"They all had to leave, all of them, unless they renounced Islam, renounced Sharia, and swore loyalty to the king. Even the so-called white Muslims, the converts. And just like in France, we started with cleaning up the military."

"So, the only ones that are left in England are—"

"The only ones left are the ex-Muslims."

"But how can you trust them? You know they're taught to lie to infidels."

"Of course I know that. Holy lying to spread the Islamic faith—*taqiyya*. But they had to swear the oath while standing on the Saudi flag, facing the Union Jack and a picture of the king. You know what's written on the Saudi flag, right?"

"The main Islamic prayer, the *Shahada*: 'There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his messenger.' The green Saudi flag is basically the same as the black flag of jihad, except for the color, and the calligraphy. And the sword."

"Right. They have to wipe their feet on the Saudi flag, spit on it, and pledge loyalty to king and country. And it's all recorded on video. Tends to separate the sheep from the goats, knowing they can never live among Muslims ever again."

"Even so, Colonel, I wouldn't trust them. The Koran tells them to lie to infidels."

"The sincere ex-Muslims are the best at sniffing out the fakes. They know that if there's any more Muslim terrorism in the UK, they'll all be deported next time—every last one of them. And they don't want to go back, oh no, they don't want to go back. Being dropped off on a Libyan beach is not very pleasant, I'd imagine, and that happened to thousands of them. And after they've taken the King's Oath standing on the Saudi flag, it's a death sentence if they're ever sent back to a Muslim country. It's all on video. They know full well they have the most to lose from any more terrorism in Britain. They're the best ferrets we have, the sincere ex-Muslims. Anyway, there's not many left. Most of them went home on the ships. Better than ninety percent. The ex-Muslims who are left are a good lot, by and large."

“It’s hard to believe they’d just agree to leave like that.”

“They didn’t have much choice about it. Remember, this all happened soon after Paris and the start of the French Civil War. We were all watching it on the television, hour by hour. The Muslims in the UK knew that if we went in hard, like the French Army did, then the only alternative to deportation was dying in the rubble of their no-go zones. The French example was staring them in the face. Anyway, most of them are still alive—which is a lot more than you can say for the Christians in the Middle East.”

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I had the chance to finally see their rifles when they were broken out during an afternoon with mild weather and dry decks. Their rifle practice was conducted in groups of four. One of the Brits used the top of the forward scuttle hatch for a rifle rest, kneeling behind it. I was back in the pilothouse but came out for a closer look. The rifles appeared to be M-16A2s, or maybe A3s, with the signature M-16 carrying handle on top, and a round fore stock. These were the rifles I'd carried in Marine Corps boot camp, and they were still in use well into the 2000s, when the carrying handle was replaced with a flat-top receiver milled with a rail to carry optical sights.

Sergeant Major Tolbert was standing with his rifle shouldered, his feet spread apart in a wide stance, dry-firing with no magazine in the weapon. I approached him and said, "Can I offer a suggestion?"

He lowered his muzzle and turned to me. "D'ya really think I need one?"

I put my hands out to take his weapon. "Do you mind?"

He shrugged, said, "Why not?" and passed it over to me.

A glance at the receiver stampings near the safety showed it was indeed a Colt M-16A2. The A2s had a very nice peep sight at the rear of the carrying handle, adjustable both for windage and elevation, with clicks out to 800 meters. The selector switch on the left side had three positions: SAFE, SEMI, and BURST, which fired three shots with each trigger pull. I pulled the charging handle back, checked the empty chamber, and let the bolt go forward. The other men turned to watch me. "This is what works best for me." I lowered myself into a sitting position, knees up, feet wide apart. "Even on a day like today, if you're standing, you're going to move too much. If it was any rougher, you couldn't stand at all. The best way to shoot from a boat is sitting." I took a position similar to the military marksmanship position, but with my arms raised.

"If you catch a calm spell between waves you can drop your elbows to your knees, but most of the time you can't. Up close, standing up is fine, especially since you need to move around and change positions. But either way, sitting or standing, at longer ranges you correct off your splashes and walk your rounds onto your target. Just find a cadence where you're firing again right after each splash."

I shouldered the rifle and got a cheek weld. I tested the trigger; it broke

with a crisp snap. I laid the rifle across my lap and studied it. The Colt firearms rampant horse logo was stamped on the left side of the magazine well, and below it was imprinted:

PROPERTY OF U.S. GOVT.
M-16A2 CAL. 5.56MM

Something was unusual about the rifle: the receiver had been milled down in a small oval about 2 millimeters deep, where BURST had been stamped. It was also milled down where it was stamped M-16A2. The only reason to grind these areas down was to restamp them where they had once said M-16A1 and AUTO instead of A2 and BURST. I'd seen a few of these oddball converted M-16s in Iraq; they'd been issued to some reserve units. These transitional weapons that had been arsenal refurbished and upgraded to A2 standards were sometimes called "M-16A1-and-a-halfs."

Tolbert sat near me and I handed him back his rifle. I said, "It looks like the U.S. government is missing some property."

"If you say so." He shouldered the rifle and tried my modified sitting position, traversing its barrel side to side.

I said, "Funny thing, M-16A2s winding up in Ireland, and then on my boat."

"It's not funny to me. Ironic, maybe, but not funny."

"I can imagine." If the SAS ever went back into Ireland on operations, weapons like these would undoubtedly be used against them. It had to feel strange for an SAS man to be holding an IRA rifle. "What do you think of the M-16? I mean, as a combat rifle?"

"An Armalite is plenty good enough. Keep 'em clean and lubricated and they'll work as well as any. These have like-new barrels and they're accurate as hell, but their length works against them for vehicle ops and FIB."

"FIB?"

"Fighting in buildings. You call it close quarters battle. And personally, I don't like the three-shot burst; I'd rather have fully automatic. I used different models of Armalites off and on for thirty-odd years. Seen them from both ends many times. They're just a tool, and it's a bad workman that blames his tools. They'll do their part, if you do yours."

"That's how I look at them, too." My few pearls of wisdom about the best way to shoot from moving boats imparted, I laid aft. My pilothouse provided a picture-window view of the forward decks. After they each fired a

few rounds, including a few three-shot bursts, they took their rifles back below. A while later, some others came up and repeated the process. This time I saw that along with practicing from the standing, kneeling and prone positions, they tried my sitting off-hand as well. The old dogs were not too proud to learn a new trick.

Lastly, Tolbert came up on deck with the surfers. He gave them a bit of coaching with an M-16, and they each took a few shots, but they spent most of their time working on pistol craft, using a pair of Glocks. I wondered whether these pistols had been taken from an IRA weapons dump, or whether some of the ex-SAS troops had kept them hidden away despite their being banned in Britain. They were reliable pistols no matter how they had originally been acquired, and reliability was half of the battle. More than half.

Squirreling away spuriously obtained contraband firearms is a common impulse among former soldiers, who understand far better than most the difference between being a disarmed victim and an armed survivor. Undocumented firearms were readily available for black-market purchase in the third-world shit-holes these soldiers had frequented. Troops returning from overseas had many opportunities to conceal illegal souvenirs among their official equipment.

This was particularly true with the top-tier elite units, who often looked after packing and shipping their own gear from rucksacks to cargo containers. I wondered what percentage of ex-SAS men back in the UK could lay their hands on a pistol if they needed to. Probably most of them. At least I hoped so. It was impossible for me to imagine leaving the Marines and never being able to own a firearm for the rest of my life, as the British government had forced their former soldiers to do.

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The following day I was in the cockpit just after dawn when I found myself chatting with Pat Maguire, who was coming off the three-to-six watch. He was wearing an off-white cable-knit Irish sweater, jeans, and old sneakers. Pat was an untroubled-looking man, with his shock of graying hair always in a new configuration depending on how he’d slept or what kind of hat he’d worn last. Maybe he ran a comb through it every other day, or just his fingers. The Irishman rolled a cigarette with tobacco kept in a sweets tin, lit it with a paper match while ducking low against the breeze, and finally took a

drag.

"Terrible stuff," He said. "I'm looking forward to Africa just to get some decent *baccy*. You wouldn't believe what they sell this shite for in Cork—if you can find it." He took another pull on his short cigarette, exhaled, and said, "I've never sailed on a schooner before. She's quite stout, but she's not as slow as I'd have thought. Even for motor-sailing, she really goes. What's her best twenty-four-hour run under sail alone?"

"Our best day without the engine was a hundred seventy miles. Anything over a hundred forty is a good day, but sometimes you're glad to break a hundred. Of course, sitting on all this fuel, there's no reason not to use the motor."

"Most of my sailing was on racing boats," he said. "But that was years and years ago."

"Racing? I thought that was for rich snobs."

"Yeah, I noticed a bit of that too."

"So how did you get into it, then?"

"Well, I was living near Cork. Not rich, that's for sure, but there was a big yacht racing scene there."

"Wait a minute—Sinead said you were from the north."

"She did, did she?"

"Yeah, she did." I still felt a little betrayed by her and saw no reason not to make this former IRA man squirm a little.

He grinned and said, "Well, I suppose I was commutin' back and forth across the border a bit in those days. Livin' here and there, on friends' sofas and such. In caravans and in sheds, north and south. Always movin' about."

"I'll bet." Pulling IRA operations in the north, and hiding out in the Republic. No wonder Tolbert seemed to grate in his presence. I could only imagine how the SAS men felt, reduced to needing the guns of their bitterly hated former enemies.

"Anyway, I wound up crewin' on people's yachts. Friends of friends. Even some English toffs, which was quite ironic, considering. We did the Fastnet Race and like that. But I never owned a boat, myself."

"It can be better that way," I said. "Sometimes a boat ends up owning you."

"I've heard that said, but I wouldn't know. Way above my humble station in life, you might say."

"I never sailed at all before I owned Rebel Yell."

This revelation seemed to surprise him. “What, then? Did you win her in a poker game?”

“Poker? No, even better than that. I inherited her.”

His hazel eyes widened. “So, you had a rich daddy? That must have been nice, growin’ up rich in America.”

“The only thing I ever got from my father was the back of his hand.” I gave Maguire a short recounting of my father’s disappointment at my enlisting in the Marines instead of going to college after high school as expected. This was post–9/11, when the country was caught up in a wave of patriotism. I glossed over my time in the Corps and skipped ahead to my more humorous single semester at the University of Oregon, and my sudden need to be far away from that state after an altercation with a gay liberal professor who hated me for being ex-military. My forced relocation came at the same time my sixty-something Uncle Jeff was running out of energy and motivation in his ongoing effort to rehabilitate an old steel schooner clear across the country in Florida.

The sandblasted and primer-painted sixty-foot hull had been propped up on its keel for so long that nobody even knew its original name. My arrival breathed new life into the boat’s rehab program. Not long before Rebel Yell’s relaunching, my uncle fell off a high scaffold plank, cracked his skull, and broke his neck. Uncle Jeff left the boat to me, free and clear, much to the chagrin of his ex-wife and adult children. But owning a sixty-foot schooner and paying for its upkeep were two very different propositions, as I soon came to understand.

“So, your uncle’s bad luck became your good fortune.” Pat leaned back and grinned at me again, then took another drag on his little hand-rolled cigarette.

I was no stranger to fatal chance. I’d seen Marines get on or off a helicopter by random chance; one crashed, one didn’t. I’d seen guys shot where I’d been standing just before. I kept these thoughts to myself. Life-or-death coin tosses had happened so often in my life that I didn’t question them. Thinking too deeply about twists of fate could only make you crazy. My uncle fell and he died, and I got his boat. So what? Was there some cosmic plan behind it all? Who knows? Enjoy life while you can. It can be over in a blink.

I just said, “I guess that’s one way of looking at it: my good fortune. So, Mr. Maguire, now that you know my story, what about yours? My guess is

that the M-16s came from the IRA. And since you know how to sail, I'm guessing the guns and the sailing are connected. IRA guns and sailboats, and a Mick who used to live in Boston—something tells me there must be a good yarn in there somewhere."

He smiled coyly. "If it was anything like that, now why would I tell you?"

"Why not? It's been a few decades since the end of The Troubles. Wars have come, and wars have gone. Who better to tell than me, another professional smuggler?"

He took another hit of smoke, studying me. "Now, if I *had* been an IRA man—not sayin' I was—I'd have been sworn to secrecy for life, now wouldn't I?"

"I have no idea. But who would I tell? Sergeant Major Tolbert? Doesn't he know already? And who cares anymore? Dozens of books have already been written about the dirty war between the IRA and the SAS. Right now, it's just an old war story to pass the time. One smuggler to another."

Pat took another drag on his stubby cigarette. I could see that he wanted to talk. "All right, then. Why not? It was back in the 1990s. I'd come across to Florida on an American sloop, a Hunter 33. It'd been damaged on the crossing to Ireland, and it was sold for cheap in Cork. It was a busted boat, a bad-luck boat, and it sold for pennies. Some of my mates and me, we bought her cheap and fixed her up. She was a fine sailin' boat once we put her right. The next summer we took off for the Canaries, and then the Caribbean. Five of us were packed into that little plastic sloop, eating rubbish from tins and catching the occasional fish. We had the best time of our lives, let me tell you. Still in our twenties, and free as the wind.

"A few months later, we were in Miami. Miami in the 1990s—can you imagine? Do you know what that was like for a crew of poor Irish lads? Let me tell you: it was like Shangri-La, only much, much better. We all got work, we all made friends, we all had girlfriends. Tried my first cocaine there, didn't care for it much. Americans, Cubans, Haitians, and a few Irish lads on expired tourist visas. Some of the lads went home, some didn't.

"It was a wonderful time, magical. I worked in the South Florida boatyards while I learned how to get along in the States. I even wangled a driver's license. Everybody loved our accents, especially your American girls. When we worked, we were paid in cash under the table, or sometimes with a check. I knew the yachting scene backwards and forwards, from Key

West to Palm Beach.

"Florida was loads of fun, but I had contacts for better-paying work up in Massachusetts, so Boston it was. No papers needed, not in Miami, not in Boston, not ever. Then up there in New England I did a bit of crewin' on big ocean racing boats. The maxis, they called them. Far out of my league, really. I mean, I was just a poor Irish lad, but I had a reputation as a sailor. It was me for the spinnaker pole or going up the mast to pull down a lost halyard. And I was always popular, with lots of American girlfriends—but none close. I had a shady past I couldn't really go into, so my relationships had to be kept light and superficial. If I'd had a proper background, I could have married an American girl from a fine family, but my reputation as a wild Irish rover only carried me so far. And then let's just say that certain non-racing opportunities happened to arise at about the time I was ready to come home.

"You see, around the middle of the nineties, your old M-16s were being phased out and replaced by newer models. Some of the old rifles were sent off to be updated with the heavier barrels and so forth. There was a bit of shuffling about between the arsenals and the home units, and there might have been some clerical errors about just who owned which guns and where they were going. If they had been struck off the books or sent off to be warehoused for World War Three. I heard that some of the refurbished guns went to Colombia to fight the war on drugs. With millions of M-16s being replaced, well, I suppose fifty here or fifty there could fall through the cracks—especially with a little help in the clerical department. I only know that I was contacted by some Irish friends who put me in touch with an Irish-American businessman. He owned a forty-foot sloop and he was getting ready to sail over to the Emerald Isle. I was going along as the second hand for the Atlantic crossing. Just the two of us. It was a very low-profile operation."

"A forty-footer is not how I picture an arms smuggler."

"Then what you picture is wrong, Danny Boy. You see, back in the eighties when The Troubles were raging hot, the IRA tried moving guns with fishing trawlers. It didn't work. Too many people were involved, and there were informers. Uncle Sam tracked them right across the ocean with satellites. Live and learn, and so a forty-foot sailboat with a two-man crew was *perfect*. The boat was docked on a side creek. A van rolled up—just a driver—and we loaded the cargo. The guns were already stuffed into duffel bags, a half dozen in each. More bags full of ammunition and magazines. It

was an extra-dark night. Overcast, and no moon. We slipped out of the Charles on the tide. Forgot to tip our hats to your Coast Guard. The American skipper thought it was a grand adventure. I thought he was an old man then, but he was younger than I am sittin' here today. If he's not dead, he's in his eighties now. And cheers to him!

"A month later, we sailed into a little place like Crowhaven. We could have come in from a day sail up the coast, but we'd just crossed the Atlantic in one jump. Nobody the wiser. But by the time the guns arrived, there had been some big changes at home. The peace accords and all that. New guns coming in from America was a problem nobody wanted to deal with. My orders had been to bring in the guns and cache them for later. I was told to make them disappear, and I did. I knew a farmer, and he dug a hole with a little backhoe. We put them in big plastic farm barrels, the rifles and the ammunition, and we buried the lot. Then I helped the farmer build a wee barn right over them all. So they were kept under a dry roof and a plank floor for thirty years."

"Nobody came to collect them in all that time?"

"Who would come? I was just told to bring the rifles from America and cache them in the Republic, and I followed my orders. Remember, The Troubles were almost over when I came home after Boston. The Troubles, the Provisional IRA, it was all windin' down to nothing. My contacts fell away. We went on with our lives. I found a girl, and we were married a while. But all those years, I kept a keen eye on that shed. The farmer died, the land was sold to another Irishman, and then to a retired English gent for a holiday retreat and a hobby farm."

"Until the girls were kidnapped."

"Right, until the girls were kidnapped. That's when I met Colonel Rainborow, in Cork. That's another fascinating story in itself, how we met, but it doesn't really matter, because it was all Providence. The girls were taken, Rainy needed guns, and some people thought I might know something about the subject. And I did."

"Nobody else knew where they were all those years?"

"As far as I know, only the dead farmer, me, and the Good Lord above. It was only a small load of guns, not much in the scheme of things. The English gent who owns the farm today, he was gobsmacked when we rang his bell. Five minutes alone with Rainy and he was on our side for life. IRA guns and an SAS colonel, all for a rescue mission in Morocco—who could resist a tale

like that? You should have seen his face when we pried up the floor of his shed and he saw the tops of those blue barrels under a foot of earth."

"So the SAS didn't have the guns, but the Provisional IRA did."

"*Former* SAS and *former* PIRA. And like I told you before, we Irish can't afford to lose track of our guns between wars. We don't have enough for that."

"But you were the only one who knew where they were buried. If you had died—"

"Then they'd have stayed buried and caused no harm to anyone, ever."

"So if it wasn't for your guns, would you even be on this operation?"

"If it wasn't for my guns, there'd *be* no operation."

"My boat, IRA guns, and the SAS. What a story."

"It's no story—it's fookin' real, Danny Boy. As real as it gets." He took a final drag of his cigarette roach, nearly scorching his fingertips, and flicked it overboard downwind.

"Too bad nobody used your guns to protect the girls."

That one gave him pause. After he exhaled a blue stream, he said, "Yeah, too bad, all right. Then there'd be no need of this mission at all. What good are guns buried under a barn? When you need them, you need them in a hurry. Like you Yanks say, we were all a day late and a dollar short."

11

By noon on Wednesday, Rebel was 200 miles west of Lisbon. After six days of steady motor-sailing we had passed most of the Iberian Peninsula. Because the swells were minimal, the boat's motion was comfortable. Some of the men were bare-chested and wearing only shorts, attempting to darken their pale northern European skin and absorbing some vitamin D. They had all spent time in the tropics and understood the importance of gradual sun conditioning. Some of them did PT on the foredeck, alone or in groups. Others brought their kitbags topside, their contents removed for sorting. Musty blankets and unlaundered clothes were clipped to the lifelines to freshen and dry in the sunshine and breeze.

Tommy Pellow was up the mainmast in the crow's nest. Anybody could take a turn there, but usually it was one of the two surfers. They could spend hours up there, so it was easy to forget about their presence aloft. Easy to forget—until everybody on the schooner heard Tommy call out, "Contact! Ship dead astern!" I glanced back, saw nothing, and then looked up. The surfer was standing on the seat facing aft, hugging the mast with one arm and pointing behind us with the other.

I grabbed my binoculars from the pilothouse and scanned the sea astern. I soon saw the reason for his yelling: a black dot was just poking over the horizon directly behind us. We had not seen so much as a speck during the past week, so as tiny as it was, it fairly leapt out at us. Since it was clearly visible behind us now, and it had not been there before, simple logic dictated that the vessel was overtaking us.

In a few moments, Colonel Rainborow was in the cockpit with his own binos. Like some of the others, he was wearing a tan T-shirt and his desert camo trousers. After a minute of observation, he asked, "Should we make a turn? To be sure he's following us and not just overtaking us on a similar course?"

"No way; we'll hold our course. If he's a pirate, as soon as we turn he'll know we've seen him. I'll increase our speed a bit, but we'll maintain the same heading. If he sees no activity, he might think we're sailing on autopilot and nobody is on deck looking astern. It might make him more careless about his approach."

Sergeant Major Tolbert, in running shorts and another tan T-shirt, joined

us in the cockpit and conferred with the colonel in low tones, passing the binos back and forth. I nudged the throttle forward, and our motor-sailing speed edged up to nine knots. The winds had lessened over the voyage, and we were getting less push from the sails.

"Is that all she's got?" asked Pat Maguire, who had come back into the cockpit by then.

I said, "There's a little more, but it's not worth risking the engine for. We can't outrun her, so one or two more knots of speed won't make any difference." Before any of them could try to hijack the tactical planning, I announced, "Prepare your men for action. Get their rifles and war gear ready, but everything has to be done below decks and behind cover." For now, we were just a dot on the contact's forward horizon, but that would soon change. "Once they're armed and ready, some of them can use the RIB for concealment. Another three or four can hide behind the pilothouse. One can stand on the ladder in the forward hatch, but just below deck. Two can lie down back here on the cockpit benches. The rest of them can hide in the pilothouse. I'll leave the details of who goes where to you, but the point is to keep them hidden."

Hung appeared. He already knew the pirate drill, so he passed us without speaking and removed the machine gun's canvas cover. He patted the box on the left side of the gun, gave me a questioning look, and I nodded. He lifted the cover, opened the ammo box, dropped the first cartridges into the feed mechanism, slapped the cover shut, and then worked the action with a long pull on the charging handle. "Dushka ready, *chu-tao*. *Sat hai-tac*."

"*Sat hai-tac*," I agreed. "Kill the pirates." *Hai-tac* literally meant sea robbers.

"Today we kill *beaucoup hai-tac*, *chu-tau*." He was grinning. A battle with pirates was a joyful occasion for the old warrior. He feared dying in feeble infirmity, not in battle.

"I'll put on the rack, you get the towels." I had whittled and glued up a special wooden slat that clamped crosswise in front of the Dushka's front sight. It was stored in a corner of the pilothouse with some other long, skinny items, such as the American flag rolled around its staff. Once in place, the rack extended a meter beyond each side of the barrel's muzzle. Hung grabbed a few of his galley towels, draped them over the arms, and clothes-pinned them in place. Only the three-inch-high front sight peeked above the flapping cloth.

Hung clipped other towels to the aft lifelines and railings around the gun's tripod. The intent was camouflage, of course. Towels drying on lifelines and stern pulpits are an ever-present feature on oceangoing vessel in sunny weather. The team's musty clothes and bedding already clipped to the lifelines on both sides of the foredeck added to our laundry-day effect.

Pat said, "Well, this is shapin' up to be a grand battle." In the presence of the Brits, he often dialed his Irish accent up to a thick brogue—I think just to needle them.

Sergeant Major Tolbert squinted at him and asked in his round English accent, "And what in Gawd's name is a 'grand battle'?"

The Irishman laughed and replied, "Well, a grand battle is when you have time to prepare your guns and put in your ear defenders. That's a grand battle."

"And just what army were you in, then, to experience all these grand battles?"

"You know what fookin' army, Bert—you were there, too. The Provisional Irish Republican Army."

Tolbert's face flushed nearly scarlet. "That was no army. Your Provie IRA were just terrorists, planting bombs in pubs."

"Plantin' bombs in pubs, did ya say? The *first* pub that was bombed was McGurk's Bar in Belfast, in 1971. And as you well know, that was a Catholic pub, and the bomb was planted by your Ulster Volunteer Force, which was no more than an SAS sock puppet. So don't tell me about bombs in pubs, when your side led the way."

The sergeant major said, "Bollocks! And what about—"

"*Not that tired old subject again*," hissed the colonel, lowering his binoculars and turning around to face the two. "Leave it, the both of you."

But Pat Maguire wasn't finished. "Does the Miami Show Band massacre ring a bell? That was your lot as well."

"Bollocks! We had nothing to do with that. That's all just IRA lies and propaganda."

"Your Proddy Ulster Volunteers were an SAS black ops cutout, and we both know it."

Tolbert snorted. "And the Provie IRA were all Taig Saint Patricks, is that it? What about—"

"Sergeant Major!" snapped Colonel Rainborow. "Call the men to lay below and prepare for action."

By then we had an audience standing on both sides of the pilothouse, watching the scene in the cockpit and staring at the ship steadily growing behind us on the horizon.

Tolbert about-faced and bellowed, “You heard the man! Get below and break out the weapons. Come on, then, *move* it, you paralyzed veterans!”

****

I dropped below through my own deck hatch onto the double bed in the captain’s cabin and slid around to the foot, where I kept my body armor and chest plates, and strapped them on. Stuck my Glock 19 into its attached cross-draw holster on the left side. I took my foam earplugs from their little container and stuck them in my ears. If I forgot to do so later, or didn’t have time and found myself lighting off the Dushka without them, I would be deaf for hours and hear ringing for days (and I would permanently lose even more of my already diminished hearing).

Tommy was still aloft, now sitting backward on the lookout’s seat with a leg on either side of the mast. He called down, “She’s still gaining. Hard to judge her size yet.”

“Okay,” I called up. “Come on down before they’re close enough to see you.” Without radar, the size of the approaching ship and its distance were hard to estimate. Around me and all over the foredeck a dozen very serious men were kitting up, shoving magazines into their weapons, and moving into their positions. In a few minutes, all of them were prone or crouching behind some type of cover or at least concealment, so that they would remain invisible from dead astern.

Maguire and another of the Irish contingent came back to the cockpit, each of them carrying an M-60 belt-fed 7.62mm medium machine gun. He was the same man who had been involved in the galley altercation over peeling potatoes. This was the first time that I had seen the machine guns on the boat.

The M-60 had served from Vietnam to Iraq, but had been replaced as the American general-purpose machine gun by the M-240 during my time in the Marines. These M-60s looked to be in pristine condition. The bluing was not all worn off the metal as I remembered on the ones I’d seen. Either these two guns had lived very gentle lives, tucked away in armories, or they had been refurbished along the way.

“I haven’t seen an M-60 in decades,” I said. “Where did you find them?”

“Massachusetts National Guard,” said Pat. “Same as the rifles. Somehow they got mislaid on their way to the furnace.” Both men were crouching below the level of the flapping towels, not needing to be told to stay low. “Now, here’s what I’m thinking, skipper. Me and Sean will lay flat and stay down out of sight. After the show begins, we’ll make ourselves useful as best we can.” Speaking to me, he shed most of his brogue; he could almost have been an American.

“Just don’t get too excited and shoot me—or my boat.”

“Oh, we’ll try not to, skipper.”

“Sometimes those old M-60s want to keep running, even after you let off the trigger.”

Sean said, “Not these, they won’t. But just in case, we’ll be sure and twist over the belt if that happens.”

Twisting the cartridge belt was the correct solution for a runaway M-60, so I gave him a thumbs-up. Each American-made machine gun had a plastic 100-round box clipped to the left side. More ammo boxes lay within the men’s reach. If the oncoming vessel wasn’t too heavily armed, we would give them a hot time at the very least.

Pat lay down on the port-side cockpit bench; the other Irishman went prone on the opposite side. Sean was a serious-looking fellow with reddish-brown hair. He was thick but not fat, medium height, unremarkable in appearance. Late thirties or early forties, more than a decade younger than Pat, so he was too young to have participated in The Troubles. Both were wearing green boonie hats, green T-shirts, blue jeans, and sneakers. No body armor, no chest rigs. Yellow plugs were sticking out of their ears.

I asked Sean, “Where are you from?”

“Where do you *want* me to be from?” he replied with almost no Irish accent. “Does it really make any difference?”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Sean’s not the braggin’ type,” said Pat, “but he was in your American Special Forces: a Green Beret. *And* he was in the Irish Ranger Wing. It’s an all-star team we have on board, Danny Boy—even if they don’t talk about it much.”

Rainborow crouched low inside the open pilothouse door. Tolbert was just in front of the pilothouse, on the other side of the open front windows. From these two positions, Tolbert and Rainborow could communicate with

their hidden men. All of them carried M-16's, except for the two machine gunners with me in the cockpit, and another man with a third M-60 who was up forward. Everybody that I saw had bits of foam in their ears in preparation for the grand battle.

I said to their leaders and to anybody else who could hear me, "If we're going to have a fight, I'll start it with my heavy machine gun. Nobody else fires unless I do or I tell them to. Make every shot count. And for God's sake, watch your firing lanes. This boat might be turning fast, so be careful where you point your guns."

Tolbert repeated and amplified my instructions to the hidden riflemen, and added more of his own. The seas were not big, and although Rebel was heeling a bit to port as we motor-sailed southward, she was riding steadily without much pitch or roll.

The ship grew in size, no longer splitting the edge of the horizon but surrounded by ocean. A few more minutes and I could begin to make out some details on her with my Steiners. She had a blue hull and superstructure. No tuna tower, outriggers, cranes, or booms were visible against the sky. They seemed to be overtaking us by a good five knots, so they were making about fifteen through the water. Maybe that was their maximum, or maybe they had more speed held in reserve, but it wouldn't matter to the final result. They would overtake us in an hour at the most.

Rainborow's team settled in for the siege. Firing positions for the commandos were modified and improved upon. More clothes and towels were clipped on the lifelines to improve the deck camouflage and concealment, any movement made in a low crouch. In a half hour I could make out distinct details of the ship and estimate her size and her type even without seeing her side profile, which would have been more instructive. I could see by her finish that she was a fishing vessel or workboat, apparently stripped of working gear. A high, sweeping bow, with a superstructure and bridge deck above.

My binoculars were on their strap around my neck, and I took another careful look at the ship. A few details came into focus. Something on the foredeck looked like either a whaler's harpoon cannon or a deck gun. And instead of following straight up our wake, when they were about a mile back they began to diverge from our course to pass us down our starboard side.

Rainborow asked me, "What do you think he's up to? Are they going to pass us by?"

“Maybe, but I think they want to get a better look at us before they commit to action.” I crouched behind the machine gun, clutching its two vertical hardwood grips. One trigger for each set of fingers, so that if you lost an arm to enemy fire, you could at least finish your ammunition belt before you fell down dead.

As they opened the angle between us, I kept the muzzle trained on them, always presenting them with the same innocent picture of laundry drying on the back of a boat. I took another careful look with the binoculars, mindful of the sun and possible reflections. The vessel was close enough to see that she was constructed of wood, obvious from the uneven and choppy lines in her plank-built hull.

I could now see that the contraption on her bow was no harpoon gun. There was a man behind it and another man beside him. A third man was also on the bow but standing away from the deck gun. There were more men up one level, partly visible in front of their own bridge or steering station, and other men on the side of the superstructure. Over the years, I’d studied enough of them through rifle scopes, spotting scopes, and binoculars to know them on sight even at a distance. They were dressed mostly in black and brown. The ends of the rags wrapped around their heads streamed in the wind. So far, no flag was visible. It didn’t need to be to know who they were.

“Colonel,” I said, “I think one of them has an RPG.” They continued on a parallel track only a half mile back. If they held this course and speed, they would pass by our starboard side a few hundred meters off.

From the pilothouse, Rainborow, with his own binoculars still pressed to his eyes, said, “It looks like an Oerlikon gun on the bow. If I’m right, that’s a twenty-millimeter auto-cannon. See the big drum on the right side? If I remember correctly, it holds fifty or sixty rounds. If it’s in good nick, I’d say we have a rather serious problem.”

Pat Maguire raised his head above the cockpit benches to peek beneath the towels for another look and said, “A twenty-millimeter cannon? They can open up on us anytime, then, so why don’t they?”

Still clutching the Dushka’s twin grips, its barrel trained on the ship, I said, “They want to capture us, not sink us. They want what we’re carrying, and they want this boat as a prize. They want to get in close, scare us half to death, and make us surrender without a fight. That’s their SOP. But if they open up with that deck gun, I’m going to open up with mine. I only have fifty rounds in this belt, so you’ll have to do most of the job. Aim for the gun crew

and the RPG. Those men on the bow have to be shot first."

I heard Rainborow repeat my instructions to Tolbert, who repeated them to the rest of the team: aim at the men on the bow. Kill the Oerlikon gunners and the RPG man.

If the pirate vessel simply used their big gun on us from long range, we would have almost no chance of survival. The deck gun remained silent, but its barrel turned to track us. They were still gaining ground, but more slowly now. Five hundred yards back and five hundred to starboard.

They appeared to be slowing even more. Four hundred yards back. Easy for our riflemen if they were on dry land, firing from steady rests. But this was not dry land, and there was no such thing as a steady rest on a pitching, rolling sailboat, even in gentle seas. Now with just my bare eyes above the Dushka I could see the two men standing behind their deck gun, their loose black clothing rippling in the wind.

Behind me, I could hear Rainborow's team muttering as they crept around the side of the pilothouse and the RIB to remain invisible to the oncoming pirates. I shifted my aim, following the ship until my barrel was pointing over Rebel's starboard quarter. The towels around the front of the Dushka and clipped to the aft deck's lifelines kept me hidden from the pirates' view.

There were at least eight bearded men on their boat now visible to my bare eyes. More of its profile was visible as it advanced down our side on a parallel course. It was smaller than I had thought, perhaps thirty meters or a hundred feet in length. No need for binoculars now, I slipped the strap off my neck and laid them down. Up in the very bow of the pirate ship was a steel-pipe bow pulpit like a harpooner might have used. The RPG gunner had taken up a braced position inside the pulpit. His loaded rocket launcher was held sideways to us, the ugly warhead clearly visible, meant to be seen, meant to intimidate. Behind him on the foredeck, the Oerlikon gun kept its barrel trained on us.

A 20mm auto-cannon's rate of fire would be machine-gun fast, so I would have to be even faster and more accurate with my 12.7mm Dushka. If their first shells missed us, or at least did not destroy us, I would have to chop up that gunner before his follow-up salvos finished the job and sank us. At sea, most gunners correct their fire by observing the curtain of spray where the rounds strike the ocean. It was normal to take some ranging shots and then make adjustments. Or he might try firing into the water across our bow,

to encourage us to stop and surrender. No matter: if he opened up, so would I.

"What are they waiting for?" asked Sean, taking cautious peeks between the winches on the cockpit combings.

"I think they're confused because they can't see anybody on deck. If they think we're running on autopilot and nobody is keeping watch, they'll get a lot closer. Remember, they want to capture us, not sink us." The enemy vessel was now well inside the effective range of my Dushka, as long as a bad roll or pitch didn't throw off her barrel as I fired. The heavy machine gun was evenly balanced above its deck-welded tripod mount. If I was standing to fire, the Dushka's grips would be level with my chest. But I wasn't standing; I was crouching low, with one knee on deck.

Then a black flag slid up a pole behind their bridge and unfurled in the wind. A simple banner with a broad white scimitar against a black field. This was confirmation. The shit was going to hit the fan, no ifs, ands, or maybes.

Our VHF radio, always set on channel 16 at sea, crackled to life for the first time during the voyage. I heard a bit of Arabic muttering, then "Hey, come on, somebody waking up. We want to talk with you." A heavily accented voice. Probably the first language was Arabic, but I guessed a French blend. Marseille or Morocco or anywhere in between. The message was repeated in French. Marseille had been a Muslim stronghold for so long that the voice on the radio could have been a jihadist who had been born in France. And maybe his father and his grandfather as well.

From the pilothouse Rainborow said, "Well, Captain, are we going to chat them up?"

"No. Let them wonder." I wasn't about to answer the radio. If they heard no response, they would think that maybe our radio was broken or turned off. Then we heard a rapid exposition in Arabic, probably an ultimatum for us to see the way of Allah and his prophet. I could make out a few *Allahu akbars*.

My Dushka's front sight, sharply pointed on the top and shrouded on both sides with protective metal wings, was bladed on their deck gun as I steadied the leveled barrel with both grips. I crouched lower, my left knee on deck. Our two vessels were close enough that I could pick out individual human targets. Some were bare-headed, but every face was bearded to a greater or lesser extent.

I was looking straight up the muzzle of their deck gun as its barrel swept up and down the length of Rebel Yell. The pirate vessel slowly crept ahead, closing the distance between us. Even without seeing any crew on board their

target, they were being extra wary. Hidden riflemen were not exactly an unheard-of ploy in the game of cat and mouse at sea between pirate and prey. Another try on the radio, another angry voice mixing Arabic, French, and English. The main gist of what I understood involved forcibly committing painful and humiliating unnatural acts upon us as foreplay to cutting off our *kafir* heads. They were trying to goad a reaction, but there was still no response from our radio, and nobody visible on our deck.

Then she was nearly flanking us, less than 300 meters to starboard and only 200 behind. I anticipated a warning burst from their deck gun exploding in the water ahead of us at any moment. Instead, their RPG gunner turned, assumed a new position braced against their bow pulpit, and took aim at us. His rocket's warhead became a black dot resting on his shoulder. It was a view I'd seen before, through a rifle scope.

I expected them to gradually edge close alongside us with their most menacing weapons brought to bear. I hoped that the leaders on their bridge were gathered around their radio, discussing the sea-jihad pirate theory that cowardly infidel sailors were so terrified of Allah's mighty warriors that they would all hide below deck until their ship was boarded and captured, hoping to survive as kafir slaves by offering no resistance and begging for their miserable lives.

Come a little closer, boys, we're almost there. As soon as I obtained a steady sight picture on their foredeck gun between rolls, it would be go-time. I knew that most of Rainborow's men were drawing beads on their RPG gunner, and would let fly the moment after I did. I was just about done waiting. My index and middle fingers were already caressing both triggers, the wavering tip of my black front sight hovering around the gun crew on their foredeck.

12

The rocket exploded from its launcher and went smoking past us just ahead of our bow. I readjusted my aim at their deck gun and fired a burst at its crew, the Dushka blasting away in my hands. My concentration was focused on the enemy, using the green tracers that streaked out after every fourth shot to adjust my aim between short bursts. B-B-B-BANG! It was that crazy rock-and-roll gun battle time once again, as my blood received a furious adrenalin dump and my body shook with the heavy machine gun's fury. I was in the zone, I *was* the Dushka, the slayer of pirates and destroyer of pirate ships! B-B-B-BANG! Again and again, my green tracers were reaching out to mark a path of death and destruction.

Their flaring bow hid the men on deck from the chest down but could not protect them from my 12.7mm projectiles. One of them disappeared below the side bulwark planks but the other remained crouched behind the Oerlikon gun. I waited to see the flash and feel the explosions around me as their auto-cannon finally opened up, but it remained silent. Then the Oerlikon gunner dropped from sight as more of my shots pursued him through his wooden side planking. He didn't get up again; at least he didn't appear in my view. Lovely Dushka, she chewed up their wooden ship as splinters and dust erupted at the end of my green tracers. The bow gun remained unmanned, so I raked their bridge at waist and knee level with a few aimed bursts. My rounds were chasing any unseen crew inside as well as targeting the critical systems and control nodes that were clustered inside any ship's bridge.

By then both Irishmen were standing to my left on the aft deck, firing their M-60s from the hip, walking bursts from the water up the pirate ship's hull, their red tracers mixed among my green. Steady prone positions with rests and bipods are memories of land. Water strikes and tracers are all the aiming you need at sea during daylight.

I was trying to conserve my rounds; there were maybe twenty left for the gun in the ammo box. I yelled, "Tran Hung! Ammo!" and in a moment he was at my left side with the last belt of thirty big cartridges slung over his shoulder. He found the end of the cartridges in the ammo box and connected his belt while I kept firing. The non-disintegrating links dangled in a black chain out the right side of the receiver.

Behind me, kneeling, sitting, and standing troops were firing their M-

16s. The concealed RPG gunner on the foredeck popped above the raised bow side, took quick aim, and fired his second rocket warhead. If he needed two seconds to take a good aim through his launcher's optical sight, he got only one before he was struck by the combined fire of many rifles, and his rocket flew high above us. Then he was out of my sight, either lying down low against the deck to stay hidden, or dead or disabled. In any case their foredeck seemed under the control of our riflemen, so I fired a few more aimed bursts of just two and three rounds into their bridge. Another scan for visible human threats, and seeing none, I raked their waterline aft, splinters flying and spray exploding. I could only imagine what terrible damage the tumbling finger-sized fifty-gram projectiles were doing inside their wooden fishing-boat hull.

It wasn't a completely one-sided battle. A few of the pirates fired back at us, mostly emptying their magazines on full-auto, but they were shot down one at a time by our riflemen taking aimed shots. Even given their typically lousy marksmanship, I heard the Brits yelling out behind me that they had taken a casualty, and I heard the cry go out for their medic. I left that for later, keeping my Dushka's front sight trained on their boat. Nobody else came onto the foredeck to try to put the Oerlikon gun into action.

The pirate vessel continued on its course while slowing down. Maybe I'd killed everybody on the bridge. Or maybe I'd gotten lucky and clipped some critical cable linking their bridge to the engine. Only a hundred meters were between us as she continued to decelerate. Our riflemen peppered their open windows, ports, and doors, preventing potential diehards from firing back. If any of them were alive and still able to fight, they were no longer showing themselves on deck.

Rainborow was in the cockpit with me then, and he asked, "Why didn't they fire their deck gun?"

"I don't know. Either it's jammed or they're just out of ammo."

I could picture the 20mm automatic cannon mounted on Rebel's bow ahead of the foremast. Probably 200 pounds for the gun, and more than that in the massive and very solidly built mount. It had shoulder braces like half-moons behind the twin grips, so that the gunner could lean into it for more control, and a big drum magazine mounted above its right side. Even if I didn't install it on our deck, I could sell it for a pretty penny.

"Take in all sail!" I called out. "Jibs first, then drop the main and foresail." In the cockpit, Pat slacked the jib sheets one at a time and rolled the

jibs around the forestays with their furling lines, which ran from the cockpit through small pulley blocks along the starboard toe rail to the bow. Hung took my position behind the Dushka, keeping it trained on their bridge.

With one of the surfers standing by each mast to release the halyards, the two big sails dropped into their cradles of lazy-jack lines, and their booms were secured amidships. We continued motoring under autopilot, but with more side-to-side rolling in the absence of the wind's steadying effect upon our sails. There wasn't much risk left to us, not with M-16s trained on every port, backed up by the machine guns if they were needed. Even if a pirate jumped out with another RPG, he wouldn't survive long enough to aim it.

Instead of a weapon, a white flag, or really just a rag, was waved out of a side window aft of the bridge. We closed to within fifty yards. With the sails taken in, I could match our speeds simply by tapping the throttle lever back, and I could adjust our course by pushing the plus and minus buttons on the autopilot.

"Colonel," I said, "Do you think your men up for boarding them?"

"Board them? Is it worth the risk? Where's the benefit?"

"Anything we find on that ship is ours. They're pirates, so they might have some gold or other valuables. You can keep it all except for that Oerlikon gun. And there's at least one RPG launcher and probably some extra rockets. They might come in handy in Morocco."

"The Oerlikon is too big to take off."

"We can leave the mount and just take the gun. The gun by itself is maybe a hundred kilos, that's nothing for your men. If your boarding party can get that deck gun loose, anything else on the ship is yours."

"What if they've rigged their ship to explode?"

"They're pirates, not suicide bombers. They expected to win today; they won't have any charges set."

The colonel paused, considering, and then said, "All right, we'll do it. Sergeant major, let's send over a six-man boarding party. Anything that moves, slot it."

The pirate ship was slowing to a crawl as it settled lower in the water. My Dushka had done some fatal damage to her waterline, and each time she rolled, more of the ocean sloshed inside her. I disengaged the autopilot so that I could steer by hand as we drew near.

I asked Rainborow to bring his best Arabic speaker back to the cockpit, and Kam joined us. I dashed into the pilothouse and grabbed my megaphone,

plugging its cord into a twelve-volt outlet on the way out. I switched on the bullhorn and handed it to the Moroccan surfer. “Tell them their ship is sinking, but if they surrender, we’ll show them mercy. Tell them to come out on the aft deck with their hands straight up and then to lie down.”

I could only presume that Kam translated exactly what I’d told him. I’d never picked up the language except for a few words and phrases. I looked to the colonel, who nodded agreement with the translation. The effect was not long in coming. Two bearded men descended the ladder at the back of the superstructure. One of them fell to the deck partway down. He could hold only one arm above his head; his other was injured and swinging limply at his side. They both dropped to their knees and then went spread-eagle prone on the aft deck.

I told Rainborow, “We’ll come in close enough for your boarding team to jump over. That ship is sinking, so your men will have to be quick. As soon as we touch, send them over.”

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Sergeant Major Tolbert shouted commands to the men. Six of them prepared to scramble aboard, their weapons slung. The rest kept their rifles and M-60s trained on the pirate vessel. The vessel was still making a few knots of forward speed as I steered closer until our courses converged and our hulls touched near their sterns.

Then a new cry came from within the pirate vessel. Somebody inside was frantically banging metal against metal. A muffled voice called out, “*Salvami! Ayúdame!* Help me! *Estoy atrapado! Sono intrappolato!* I am trapped!”

The boarding team leapt across when our two hulls touched, then we split apart again. A pair of them went to the foredeck and retrieved the RPG launcher and a backpack containing two extra warheads, which brought to their side deck. With that done, they inspected the Oerlikon gun.

A second pair took custody of the two pirates lying on the aft deck, tying their hands behind their backs and patting them down for hidden weapons or explosives. I steered over to them again, bumped hulls, and the prisoners were roughly thrown across, tripping over our lifelines and landing upside-down by the RIB. The voice within the hull continued to call for help, and the rest of the boarding party disappeared inside the superstructure. Single shots

from within the ship indicated that any pirates who were wounded or even playing possum were being dispatched.

One of the boarding team had a radio; his voice came out of a walkie-talkie held by Colonel Rainborow. “There is a man chained in the engine room. European, not a pirate. Says he’s Italian, I repeat, he says he’s Italian. We’re working on getting him out. Everyone else is dead. We made sure.”

Rainborow spoke into his radio. “The ship is sinking fast; can you get the Italian out in time?”

“We’re working on it, boss.”

A different voice came from his walkie-talkie. “We can’t get the gun off without tools. And the ammo drum is empty: they were running a bluff.”

Rainborow said, “Never mind. Get back aboard.” Then he said to me, “Pity about the Oerlikon gun. Fortunes of war.”

The troops from the boarding party plus the freed captive joined up amidships and wasted no time getting to the side. I brought Rebel in close again, and this time when we bumped hulls, their side deck was lower than ours. I steered a parallel course as carefully as I could without slamming us together.

The freed captive was a dark-haired bearded man, his skin so grimy that it was hard to guess his age or ethnicity. He was wearing filthy torn trousers and no shirt or shoes. He held a length of rusty chain that was attached to his right ankle. The chain was so long that he could drape it over his shoulders so that he would not trip over it. He needed no assistance as he climbed over the sinking ship’s side rail, and when our hulls touched he sprang up and across, grabbing our lifelines and swinging aboard.

When we were very close or even touching, the boarding party passed over the RPG, the extra warheads, what looked like a Russian RPK light machine gun, two extra ammunition drums for it, and three or four AK-47s. Their loot delivered, the boarding party jumped across on the next touch, and I opened the distance between us with a turn to port.

The pirate ship was settling more deeply in the water, and I slowed the engine until we were making only two knots. I pulled out my earplugs and pocketed them, but my ears were still ringing. We’d been stalked by a pirate ship, and now they were all dead except for the two who had been taken as our prisoners. Their boat was going down, and we had even freed a captive. A pretty good day’s work, even if there had not been enough time to search their vessel for hidden valuables, or to remove the 20mm Oerlikon gun.

Colonel Rainborow had gone forward to check his men. In a minute when he came back into the cockpit, his face was grim. “I suppose you know we had a casualty. KIA. Our senior medic caught one in the neck. Of all the bad luck—our senior patrol medic!”

I had temporarily forgotten about their casualty, and I looked forward around the port side of the pilothouse. They had laid him beside the RIB. Thick trails of darkening blood ran across the deck. Victor was sitting with his back against the inflatable, legs out, staring at the horizon. His hands, arms, and chest were covered in blood from a determined but hopeless effort to save the man’s life. There were bloody bandages, gauze pads, clotting sponges, and other medical debris scattered about the deck.

“I’m sorry,” I told the colonel. “And I’m especially sorry it was your medic.” There was no such thing as a minor skirmish or a small firefight for the soldier who caught a round in the neck. It was bad luck indeed for them to lose their team’s senior medic, but you can’t fix dead. Dead is dead. You adjust your plan and drive on. I was glad that I barely knew the man. Victor had spent a lot more time with him, with both of their medics, going over their equipment and procedures with them.

We motored in a slow circle around the now stationary pirate vessel. It was going down by the stern. In a few minutes their aft deck was awash, and when the sea reached her open hatches she flooded and sank very fast. For a few seconds just the superstructure was visible, then the black flag, and then she was gone. Floating trash marked the spot. Dirty bubbles came up, and some oil.

It was time to raise sail and get back on our course.

13

After stripping off my body armor, I was staring at the oily rainbow sheen where the pirate vessel had disappeared when sudden angry shouting broke out in front of the pilothouse. I shoved the throttle ahead, set our course due south again, reengaged the autopilot, and hurried forward along with Rainborow to see what was happening.

It sounded as if a fight was breaking out on the starboard deck between the masts. From the side of the RIB to the lifelines was maybe two meters. This was where the two bound prisoners had been deposited, but now there was a mass of writhing bodies there. Most of the men were trying to pull the freed captive away from one of the captured pirates. This was made more difficult because the man had wrapped the end of his chain around the prisoner's neck, and was simultaneously attempting to strangle him and to smash his face against the deck, all while screaming in Italian. The other end of the chain was still attached to the freed man's ankle, compounding the difficulty of extricating him from the tangle.

The former captive was pulled to his feet after his chain was finally unwound from the neck of the bound pirate. This was my first opportunity to get a good look at the presumed Italian, and I could see that he had festering sores in multiple places. His gaunt face and prominent rib bones indicated that he had been on a starvation diet while held captive. His face and neck wore a month of scraggly beard, and his skin was encrusted with filth. The pirates were stretched out face down on the deck, hands still tied behind their backs with cord. One of them was bleeding from new wounds to his head and neck. The freed captive was seething with rage, pointing to the two prisoners while some of the team held him by his upper arms and shoulders lest he dive upon them again.

Physically prevented from attacking his enemies, the man looked among us for our leader and then he addressed Colonel Rainborow. "English? You are English?"

The colonel nodded.

"Me, I am *Italiano*. My English is no very good, but maybe enough okay." He pointed to one of the bound men, his finger shaking. "This pig is captain of *pirati*. This one is the pure devil from *l'inferno,* from the hell." The pirate lay very still, his forehead against the deck, either mumbling to himself

or praying. He was wearing jeans, dirty white sneakers, and a black windbreaker. The other man who was wounded in the arm wore a bloody brown smock that came down to his thighs, and brown pants beneath them.

I asked him, “What’s your name?”

Instead of answering, the freed prisoner looked frantically at our faces as if he’d had a sudden mental break. Waving his hands wildly, he cried, “Stop, stop—what about the *girl*?!”

“What girl?” asked Rainborow.

“The Sweden girl! She is a prisoner also with me. She is alive only a little time before. I hear her very alive! Now the ship is down—but where is the Sweden girl?”

Stanley, the Scottish radioman, who was one of the boarding party, looked toward the colonel with downcast eyes. “I saw the wee lass he’s speaking of. She didn’t drown, at least. She was already dead when we arrived. She was under a chart table with a chain to her foot. Our machine guns really tore up their wheelhouse. I pulled a blanket over her. It was all I could do. I’m sorry. But maybe it was for the best.”

Irish-American Sean, one of the M-60 machine gunners who had not gone across with the boarding party, asked him, “What do you mean, ‘maybe for the best’?”

“I mean she was already in a very bad way before she was killed. She was burnt all over with cigarettes, it looked like. I could tell by the color of her bruises and her old wounds that she had been badly mistreated for a long time before today.”

This brought to mind some very nasty Baghdad memories. Girls who are gang-raped by Muslim jihad savages and survive their external injuries often die of complications and infections due to the severity of their internal wounds. Or they can perish from sheer misery and mental anguish, often never speaking or eating again.

Tolbert repeated my original question to the man. “What’s your name, and how did you come to be on that ship?”

“My name is Gino Mauricio Bracciano. I am working as number one engineer on one other ship, when *pirati* are taking us maybe one month ago, maybe some time more. The *pirati*, they put me on ship that is going down today. They put the chain on my leg, and I make the engines running. My job is running engines, running pumps, running generator, running everything. If the engine stop, if the generator stop...” He made the throat-slitting gesture. “I

believe them, because I see them do it on other peoples. Maybe one month I live by the engines, I sleep by the engines, everything I do by the engines, with the chain on my foot. This chain!" He shook its end.

Hung was there, along with everyone else, watching the spectacle. I said to him, "Get the bolt cutters," and he slipped around the back and into the pilothouse. In half a minute he was back. The bolt cutters were kept in special brackets in the pilothouse, because sometimes when you needed them, you needed them in a big hurry.

The rusty chain was made of links about an inch long. Instead of a shackle, the final links were wrapped around his ankle and secured with a padlock. His skin was badly abraded where the rusty iron had rubbed against it. Hung clipped the padlock, freeing the Italian from the chain. His grimy fingers hovered above the band of tormented flesh as if he was afraid to touch the raw, open wound. Besides the injury to his ankle he had several other wounds that would require treatment.

Hung left and returned with a plastic bottle of water, which the freed captive drank in one extended gulp. Some of Rainborow's team were sitting in and on the RIB, the rest of them around the freed captive and our two prisoners.

The Italian said, "Maybe two weeks before, *pirati* attack one other *barca a vela*, a sailing boat. Where are we now?"

"We're about two hundred miles west of Lisbon," I said.

"*Portogallo*, okay. What day it is?"

"It's October the twenty-eighth. October two-eight."

"Okay." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then opened them again. The Italian was coming to grips with the end of his living nightmare. "So, I am already a long time on the chain when they catch a sailing boat. They tie together, pirate boat and sailing boat. Ocean is very flat. No waves. I only see sailing boat mast up through a hatch in the deck, but I know. Enough I know it is a sailing boat. And I know three people are on the boat. Two are woman, one is man. Even with the sound of the engines, I hear them screaming. Then after maybe one day, only one girl I am hearing. One girl, crying."

Nobody spoke. The Italian held everyone's rapt attention.

"When they bring me food and take my shit bucket, they tell me what they do. It was big happy day for pirates. Sweden family on sailing boat, they say. Father they kill on one day, first day. I see him head, they carry head

down, show me what they do on him. A big Sweden man, blond hair, blond beard, like *Vichingo*, big Viking man. Holding up the head from long Viking hair. The *pirati*, they are very happy. They say if engine stop, they cut my head same as Sweden man." The Italian made the throat-slitting gesture again.

Someone asked, "What happened to the other woman?"

"The other woman I think is mother of the girl. I don't know what happens. But I am not hearing the other woman after some time, maybe one day. Then only the young girl is alive. I know, because I hear young girl screaming. I hear her crying and screaming, and pirates are laughing." The Italian pressed his hands to his head, looking at all of us with wild darting eyes. "When *pirati* bring food and take bucket, they tell me what they are doing on 'dirty *kafir* girl'." He pointed to one of the men lying bound at our feet. "That man, that man is captain of *pirati*! Him!"

The team looked at me and they looked at Rainborow and the other leaders. We all looked at each other, and nodded. It was understood what would happen next. They had attacked us unprovoked, flying the black flag of jihad, the black flag of no quarter. Well, no quarter worked both ways.

I said, "Sit them up and park them against the RIB." My Avon's V-shaped bow tube was deflated. It had caught a stray round during the fight, but the side tubes were still pumped hard. The two pirates were shoved against the inflatable, their hands bound behind them. An extremely pissed-off group of infidels was assembled around them. The pirate captain glared at us, his dark eyes bright with defiance despite some new cuts and contusions on his face and around his neck, sustained during his encounter with the angry Italian and his rusty chain.

Kam was already there, so I had him translate again. "Ask him the name of the sailboat they captured, and the names of the people." It might matter to any family left back in Sweden or Norway. Word could eventually be sent back by a radio. Their family would gain some closure instead of wondering forever about their relatives who had sailed off to safety and were never heard from again.

Kam spoke to him in Arabic, and the pirate shook his head. Their captain was a hard case, seemingly unwilling to provide even the minor mercy of giving us their names and home port. Or perhaps he didn't know, perhaps he had never bothered to find out their names. Presumably, they had placed

pirates aboard the captured sailboat, taking it back to North Africa as legitimate infidel booty captured while out searching for easy prey on their sea jihad.

Any captain worthy of the title would remember the name of the boat he had taken. He would have kept their personal documents for ransom purposes if for no other reason. The pirates had killed the girl's parents, but they might still have tried for a ransom for the girl once they were back home, so they had every reason to know their names and addresses. I asked Kam to try again.

There was another rapid exchange of Arabic between the pirate and the translator. "He says he will tell us the names after we make a deal with him." More Arabic from the pirate captain, more translation. "He says sinking his ship was a big mistake. He says that more than a kilo of gold and other treasure was on his ship." More translation. "He says he has fifteen kilos of gold in Port Zerhoun, and he will get it for us if we take him there. We should be wise and merciful, and take him to fetch his gold, which he will give us in return for his life. Fifteen kilos of gold for his life and his freedom."

I was amazed by his audacity. "That's what he said?"

"That's what he said. Fifteen kilos of gold, for his life."

"Tell him that we agree, but as a sign of his good faith, he must tell us the name of the girl, and of her mother and her father, and of their boat, and what city it was from."

Kamal translated again, waited for the pirate captain's response, and translated that in turn. "The captain says that he also agrees, and he will tell the names. But as a sign of *your* good faith, you must untie his hands first."

"Tell him that if he doesn't speak the names right now, I will force him to eat the flesh of a filth-eating *kafir* pig, and Allah will curse him to burn in hell for eternity. No virgins, just burning in hell forever." Muslim fanatics who believed in the perpetual seventy-two-virgin jihad orgy reward strongly enough to blow themselves up with a big smile on their faces feared an exquisitely torturous Islamic hell with equal belief.

During this round of translation, the pirate captain began speaking rapidly in Arabic.

"He says he can't remember. He says that their Christian names are impossible to pronounce. He says it was all written on their passports, but their passports are on his ship, which is now at the bottom of the ocean."

"Well," I said, "that's too bad for him, then. Hung, what kind of pork do

we have?”

“Pork? We have only devil ham, *chu-tao*.”

“Get it. And get the tie-wire.”

Hung returned with a roll of steel wire, wire cutters, and a small can showing a dancing red devil, complete with horns, a barbed tail, and a trident spear. The paper label read *jamon endiablado*. Deviled ham. It was in Spanish, but the red devil was unmistakable in any language. The open can smelled of the greasy, salty, minced pork mush that it contained. Hung had stuck a metal spoon into it. I waved the can in front of the noses of the seated pirates, they recoiled from its sight and its odor. I said, “Kam, translate every word I say. Ready?”

He nodded yes.

“Good. Tell them this is the infidels’ special devil pork.” I waited for him to catch up. The pirates were wide eyed. “This is special devil meat made from the assholes and private parts of filthy pigs that live in shit.” I paused again. “These pigs are cursed by the Pope in Rome to send Muslims who surrender to infidels down to the hottest corner of Allah’s hell.” I held the open can in front of their faces and pointed to the writing on the label by the red devil. “That’s what it says right here: the devil’s pig meat, specially cursed by the Pope in Rome to send cowardly Muslims to hell.” By then, both men were trembling.

“Signor Bracciano, would you like to serve the pirates their last meal?” I handed him the can of pork mush, and he accepted it with the first smile I had seen on his face.

Rainborow’s team had lost their senior medic to the jihad pirates, so they were nearly as enraged at the two survivors as the Italian was, and now even more so after hearing his story about the Swedish family.

I said to the team, “You’ll need to hold them down; they *really* don’t like this part. Clamp their noses and shove it in when they need a breath. Don’t worry, they’ll swallow it. Get plenty of it on their faces, let them smell it. When they’ve had it all, gag them and give them a few wraps of wire so they can’t spit it out. After that, do what you like. When they’re ready for a swim, cut their hands loose so they can tread water for a long time. Long enough for the sharks to find them.”

I didn’t need to hang around for the rest of the show. I already had enough Technicolor craziness stuck in my head, and I was suddenly feeling very tired. Rainborow had a dead medic, I had a punctured RIB and sticky

blood on my decks. These two subhumans deserved no more of my attention. I went back to the cockpit and stretched out on a bench seat. I had to sweep away empty brass with my hand. We would save it all for trading purposes. I stared up above the masts and the clouds as Rebel Yell drove on to the south.

Occasional screams from the foredeck punctuated the afternoon. Finally I heard many voices rise again, so I sat up and leaned out to starboard to look past the pilothouse. The two captives were pulled to their feet, then shoved to the edge of the deck. Their tied hands had been cut free, but their arms were pinioned by the surrounding men. Loops of steel wire cinched between their teeth and wrapped around the backs of their necks forced their expressions into grimaces. The rusty chain had been wrapped around an ankle of each pirate and secured with the same baling wire. They would be able to keep one another company while awaiting the sharks, and with any luck enjoy the spectacle of each other being devoured.

Not one man spoke of showing them mercy or of making them prisoners. They were corsair pirates. They had flown the black flag of sea jihad when they attacked us. They murdered and they enslaved and they tortured and they raped, and they did it all in the name of Allah and Mohammed. The added touch of sending them down to Muslim hell with greasy pig meat in their mouths and stomachs made their deaths just a bit more satisfactory, somehow. Instead of seventy-two virgins awaiting them in Mohammed's teenage rape-fest heaven, they were now anticipating being flayed and roasted in alternating turns for all eternity in their prophet's Islamic version of hell.

After a chorus of "One, two, three, go!" they were shoved over the side by all of the hands that held them. The lifelines caught them above the knees, causing them to flip over head-down as they hit the water. They came bobbing up astern, thrashing their arms, and in a minute they were lost behind the low swells and gone from our sight. I hoped that they were strong swimmers and their misery would be prolonged.

I steered Rebel into the wind and we raised the mainsail and foresail again, one of the surfers standing at each mast to crank the halyard winches. Then the roller jibs were unfurled, and we were motor-sailing again down our original course.

Victor approached me in the pilothouse and said, "The Italian needs to be washed and treated. I'd like him to use your bathtub, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. Does he have any injuries on top of what we

can see?”

“He has several infected wounds, and they may or may not respond to the antibiotics we have on board. There’s no way to know until we try, but they look very bad to me.”

“Including what the team have brought with them?”

“Yes, including that. Sepsis might kill him, but he has a very strong desire to live. He’s malnourished and dehydrated, but that will be easy enough to fix. He seems to have been in very good health before he was captured. If he responds well to the antibiotics, he’ll make a full recovery. If not, it’s going to be a long, painful death. His ankle is badly infected where the chain was chafing against it. He could lose his leg.”

****

In the late afternoon, an airplane approached from the east at a few thousand feet of altitude. Rainborow happened to be in the pilothouse with me when the radar detector began chirping out a staccato of shrill tones. I was in the cockpit with my binoculars up before it passed over us. Coming only a few hours after our battle with the pirates, the plane’s sudden appearance was electrifying. The airplane had the general form and profile of a high-wing military cargo transport like a C-130, but with only one engine on each wing instead of two. Red and yellow stripes on the wings and tail meant that it belonged to Spain.

About a mile after passing above us, the plane banked into a left turn, circled back, and flew over us from down our bow. There were a half dozen of the team on deck during the flyover, but they were smart enough to just sit still, look down, and wait for the reconnaissance plane to depart instead of conducting a Chinese-fire-drill evacuation beneath their cameras.

“May I?” asked the colonel, and I handed him my binos. The plane circled around again and its next pass was made from our starboard side, then it disappeared over the eastern horizon. He said, “That was a Spanish CASA 235. Spain built hundreds of them, for their own air force and for export. They’re used for everything, including long-range sea patrol.”

“How is it you know so much about them?”

“It’s my business to know such things, Captain Kilmer. Actually, I’ve flown aboard CASAs on three continents. Even the Irish Air Corps owns a few of them. Unfortunately, when the convent school was raided, none of

them were ready to fly. If only they'd been able to follow the pirates, they could have alerted the Spanish to pick up the surveillance with another plane and send a warship out to intercept them. It was a bad show all around. Just pathetic how the Irish dropped the ball."

I said to him, "Well, so much for that big ocean, small boat theory. How do you think they found us?"

"I'd say by the pirate ship's radio."

"But that was on VHF, and VHF is only line of sight."

Rainborow gave me an amused look. "That's true, Dan, but it's a rather long line of sight from a few miles up."

"Of course." I felt like an idiot to forget such a basic fact. This sprang from living my life as a sailor down at sea level, and considering VHF radio to be a short-range tool.

He said, "That aeroplane has probably been doing an expanding box pattern search around the last point of their VHF transmissions. They can stay aloft for a dozen hours and cover thousands of miles." He handed me my binoculars and went forward around the pilothouse to speak to his men, presumably about the incident and its ramifications.

****

The service for their senior medic was held at sunset in the cockpit and on the small aft deck behind it, on both sides of the cleaned and covered Dushka. Colonel Rainborow and Sergeant Major Tolbert read Bible verses and a British soldier's prayer. The deceased, wrapped in old sailcloth and weighted with a piece of scrap iron, had been covered with a Union Jack and laid on Rebel's teak swim platform. Not being a member of their team, I observed from the open pilothouse door.

The Italian, scrubbed and bandaged, had joined them to show his gratitude. Now he was wearing a set of British desert cammies, his filthy trousers tossed overboard. Cleaned up and with his beard shaved off, he didn't look half bad, nothing like the raving wild man we had rescued from the pirates. About like a thirty-year-old Frank Sinatra, but with brown eyes.

The Union Jack was retained as the shrouded body was sent into the depths. The flag was then folded with solemnity by the British while the Irish looked on in respectful silence.

I donated a hoarded bottle of Bushmill's Black Bush for a wake. I had

given it to Pat Maguire before the service so that he could offer it on behalf of the Irish contingent. I hadn't forgotten the rancor between him and the sergeant major before the pirate battle, and I thought it might help to calm the waters between the English and Irish.

Pat broke the seal and handed it over to Rainborow for the first swig. After that, it was passed from hand to hand. Tolbert poured the last of the Irish whisky into the water as a farewell toast, and the bottle was tossed into our wake to join their lost teammate at the bottom.

Victor and Hung watched from the pilothouse with me. Their second and now only medic was also a combat veteran, and to hear the team speak about him he was no slouch at his job, but he did not have the legendary lifesaving reputation of the dead man. At dinner, Colonel Rainborow asked Victor if he would mind helping their now solitary "doc" to reapportion the medical kit among his men. Naturally, Victor agreed.

14

The next day made it a week since we'd left Ireland. In the morning, the dinette table was once again covered with stacks and piles of bandages, tourniquets, and the many other tools of the combat medic's trade. Their junior medic, now promoted and on his own, had to decide what he would carry, leave in the trucks, or redistribute to other team members. In typical military fashion, this occasion was seized as an opportunity for more medical training, with Victor in the role of instructor. Unusually for him, he contributed his ideas without his usual didacticism and air of intellectual superiority.

Around mid-morning, while the medical gear was being stowed away and I was gluing patches onto the deflated bow of the RIB, a vessel was sighted on the southeastern horizon. Still coming off our fight with the pirates just the previous day, we were fully armed and in our battle positions in only a few minutes. However, it soon became evident that the contact was a warship, and we had to immediately adjust our appearance back to that of a humble sailboat innocently plying international waters. Everyone except me disappeared below or into the pilothouse, where they would be invisible behind tinted Plexiglas windows.

In the pilothouse I pulled the cover from my American flag, unrolled it, and stuck its hardwood staff into its matching socket on my stern rail, just to the starboard side of the covered Dushka's barrel. The sea breeze immediately seized Old Glory and snapped it back to life. National flags were far too difficult to replace to leave them up all the time, where they would soon be whipped into faded tatters. My American flag was displayed only when it was needed, and with a warship coming for a look it was definitely needed.

I studied the ship with my Steiners. Sizes and distances are difficult to judge at sea before details come into focus. My first impression was that the ship was a patrol boat, perhaps even the Storm, but as more of the superstructure and finally the hull became visible, it quickly became clear that it was a frigate or a destroyer. Her radar mast was huge, pushing at least sixty meters above the water, ruling out the Storm.

As it drew closer, it slowed and made a J-turn behind us to come onto a parallel course. This encircling maneuver left us no doubt that we were the

subject of the warship's curiosity. I guessed her length to be about 150 meters or nearly 500 feet, the size of an American frigate or possibly even a destroyer. But the flag raised up the mast was not the Stars and Stripes; it was the red-yellow-red banner of Spain. When the ship was about a mile away, our VHF radio squawked to life.

"Sailing vessel on my starboard bow, this is the Spanish warship. Over." The gray monster seemed to cover half of the horizon, looming over us like a starship bristling with space-age weaponry. Our radar detector had not made a single warning chirp since the twin-engine airplane had flown away the day before. Either the warship was not using radar, or it was transmitting on a frequency our detector couldn't detect.

There were speakers for the VHF radio in both the cockpit and pilothouse, but the transceiver and its microphone were inside. This was not a call that I could ignore, so I went in and grabbed the mic to voice my reply.

"Spanish warship, this is the sailing vessel Rebel Yell." Then I went through the standard radio protocol of spelling out the letters phonetically: Romeo, Echo, Bravo, and so on.

"Sailing vessel, what is your nationality? Over." The ship could plainly see our flag, but a boat could show any flag as a ruse. The Stars and Stripes had already served one purpose: no doubt the visible American flag was the reason they had put an English speaker on the radio.

"Spanish warship, we are a United States sailing vessel."

"Sailing vessel, what was your last port of call? Over."

This was always tricky. I had never formally cleared into Ireland. But in country after country the old formalities were losing their grip as power decentralized and national capitals withered in significance. As the old saying went, if you don't patrol it, you don't own it. If the Dublin government sent no representatives out to southwest Ireland, was it their duty to turn away every foreign visitor on Dublin's absent behalf? I decided to be honest. "Spanish warship, my last port of call was Crowhaven, Ireland." Another round of phonetic letters. And good luck ringing up Ireland to find out if this was true.

"Sailing vessel, what is your next port of call? Over."

This was easier, because it dealt with the unknown future. "My destination is the Cape Verde Islands, over." In other words, not Spanish territory, so none of your business. We were sailing in international waters and therefore Spain had no reason to interfere with our innocent passage

more than 200 miles out on the ocean. Sailboats could go as far as the wind might carry them before pausing to provision. Catch enough fish and rainwater, and you could stay at sea almost forever.

"Sailing vessel, please maintain your course and speed. We are sending an inspection team. Over." The justification for boarding vessels in international waters was the scourge of piracy. An innocent-appearing sailboat might have been captured by cutthroats. Sometimes the captives were forced to send radio messages with knives across their throats.

With my finger off the mic's transmit button I looked around to the three team leaders plus Victor huddled around me in the pilothouse. "I don't suppose we can hide your men and all their weapons. It's not even worth a try, is it?" All of us could see the warship looming ever nearer, but we were effectively concealed behind our tinted windows. They would appear opaque even to infrared cameras.

All four of them shook their heads no. Not worth trying. And nobody suggested dumping the guns over the other side.

I keyed the mic. "Spanish warship, we are maintaining our course and speed. Over."

"Sailing vessel, stand by for our inspection team. Over."

"Warship, Rebel Yell, standing by." From this point on, all we could do was comply with their instructions, attempt to be clever, and hope for the best. At least they had the good sense and seamanship to order us to maintain our course and speed instead of heaving-to or stopping, which would have entailed dropping sail and then rolling beam to beam in the swells.

The Spanish ship passed us along our port side, edging nearer, maybe a half mile off, while slowing down even more. When she was abreast of us, she lowered a RIB into the water from an alcove located amidships. I took the opportunity to study the ship with my binoculars. F-105 was written on her side. The F stood for frigate, or *fragata* in Spanish.

Another RIB appeared from behind the ship, launched from the other side. In a few minutes they were both heading our way, spray flying while driving over and through the small waves. The boats turned to come up our wake, one on each side. They were gray-and-black military inflatables, about six meters long, with center consoles and arches for lights and antennas. Both approaching RIBs had two sailors sitting in front of the center consoles on built-in seats. Two more were standing behind each console, making a total of eight men, their eyes hidden by wraparound goggles.

They wore black berets and gray foul-weather coveralls, striped with reflective material. One boat came up to our starboard stern until its coxswain pressed its rubber nose against our quarter and kept it there with his engine's thrust. I stepped from the pilothouse into the cockpit to greet them, my empty hands clearly visible.

Two sailors and an officer came aboard by stepping over onto our swim platform. The sailors had compact bull-pup carbines slung on their backs muzzle down, the officer a pistol in a covered holster. They were bulked up inside their offshore suits, which incorporated both flotation and pouches for ammo magazines and other gear. The sailors on the other RIB kept watch over the boarding party from a short distance behind.

Rebel's teak swim platform sits a foot above the static waterline and five feet below the aft deck. There are four steps welded to the transom to form a ladder, painted white for visibility against Rebel's black hull. First up onto our aft deck was a young enlisted man with short dark hair under his black beret. Then the other sailor climbed aboard, and both took up positions in each stern quarter, braced against the rails. Once aboard, they rolled their slung carbines around to a low-ready position. Third up was an officer in his mid-twenties. When the three men were aboard, the other RIB came in close and repeated the process, depositing two more armed sailors on our swim platform. In only a few minutes, five Spanish sailors were standing on the aft deck.

Still in the cockpit, I was the only person visible to them. Victor and the team leaders had disappeared down into the galley before the arrival of the RIBs. Until that point, they had no way of knowing if I was a solo sailor or accompanied by a crew. They had not even asked me any questions about my crew on the radio, which was surprising.

I stepped around the wheel and up onto the aft deck, extending my hand to the officer. "Welcome aboard," I said. "My name is Dan Kilmer. I'm the owner and master of this vessel." I would not reveal that I spoke Spanish unless I needed to.

The officer pulled his goggles down around his neck and we briefly shook hands. "Thank you, *Capitán Keelmare*. I am *Teniente* Espinosa, of the *fragata Cristóbal Colón*. *Teniente* is meaning lieutenant. I have some *documentos* for you to read and some others to write upon and put your signing to. Do you have a place where we can make writing?"

"Yes, of course. Inside the pilothouse."

The floor of pilothouse was at the bottom of two steps, so once inside, we had full standing headroom again. Two of the armed sailors came inside with us, and the other two remained on the aft deck in easy sight of both RIBs, now trailing close behind. The frigate was looming over us from just a kilometer away, matching our course and speed. Once inside the pilothouse, we were invisible to watchers on the warship, but we were still in sight of the sailors on the aft deck. Their tactical deployment was sound and suited the situation.

On the port side of the pilothouse was a chest of drawers with a writing surface on top. I cleared it off and stood aside for the Spanish lieutenant. He unzipped the top of his uniform jumpsuit and pulled out a plastic valise. He removed some papers from it and in a casual voice said, "*Capitán Keelmare*, I think that you are not the only person on board of this sailing boat. Are you not the only person on board? Yes or no?"

Usually this question was already asked and answered on the radio before a vessel was boarded at sea. Typically, everybody would be ordered to gather on deck, where they could be kept under the warship's observation while inspection teams searched below.

"No, I am not the only person on board."

"Then, before we proceed, I will need to have all of the passports of every persons on board, and the official document papers of your ship."

I had anticipated this request, and before the boarding team had even been launched from the frigate I had collected all of the team's passports in a gallon-size slide-lock baggie. Most of the passports were expired, which was expected during that time of governmental breakdown. In place of passports, some of the men had only expired driver licenses. A few of the team were traveling without any official documents at all, including the two surfers and the Italian. We had decided not to include handwritten affidavits as substitutes. If it came to a detailed search and full head count, we would deal with the substitute documents at that point. I handed the bag to the lieutenant and he removed the mostly British and Irish passports and other forms of identification and laid them on the desk side by side, his eyes growing wider as he counted them. "There are eleven of you?"

"Yes." Strictly speaking, this was not a lie. There were indeed eleven of us, plus four more than that.

"*Y todos son hombres*." All men. "These men are all down in the inside?"

“Yes, they are all down below.”

“*Capitán Keelmare*, I must need to call to my ship. I have to obtain more instructions. Please, you can sit outside when I am talking on the radio.” He placed the passports and ship papers back in the plastic bag. We stepped up into the cockpit and I took a seat while the four enlisted sailors kept an eye on me; not aggressive, not rude, but not conversational either.

The lieutenant stood in the corner of the stern pulpit looking toward his frigate. This placed him beside the waving American flag and near the canvas-covered heavy machine gun. He withdrew a handheld radio from a pocket of his coveralls and spent several minutes speaking, taking one passport or license at a time from the plastic bag. When he finished, he kept his eyes on his ship and waited, braced against the stern rail. He didn’t speak to or even take notice of the four enlisted men with him; his focus was entirely on his frigate. The Spanish sailors were standing uneasily, swaying with the pitch and roll, bull-pup rifles held at port arms, while watching me and glancing over to their ship and to their officer.

After nearly ten minutes of waiting the lieutenant began speaking into his walkie-talkie again, but I could catch none of the exchange. When he finished, he slid the radio back into his ocean suit and paused, no doubt planning how to express his words in English, while staring at his ship pacing us across a kilometer of whitecaps.

He finally turned to me and said, “*Capitán Keelmare*, I am wanting to say to you, this situation is very not the typical. There is a man *Británico* on aboard of this boat and his name is William Rainborow. Is this correct information?” It was very hard for him to determine which Rs to roll, so Rainborow came out *R-r-rain-burro*.

“Yes, there is a William Rainborow on this boat.” *You’ve got his British passport, Lieutenant. It’s definitely him.*

“Okay, very good. *Coronel Rain-burro* have to coming to my ship.”

“Coming with you?”

“Yes, and you are also have to coming with me, *Capitán Keelmare*.” He paused between his sentences, clearly translating his thoughts in advance. “This situation is very not the typical, but these are my *instrucciones*. You and *Coronel Rain-burro* have to visiting my ship. I have to bring you to visiting *mi capitán*.”

“Well, Lieutenant, I can’t visit your captain dressed like this. I need to change my clothes to show the proper respect.” I mimed changing out of my

paint-stained boatyard pants and shirt, and after a moment he understood my request.

"Okay, five minutes only. Then we are going. You and the *Coronel Rain-burro*."

Rainborow's former military rank wasn't on his passport, and I was certain that I hadn't mentioned it, but *Teniente* Espinosa sure knew it. I slid down the ladder into the galley. The lieutenant didn't follow. This was indeed very not typical. The colonel and the other leaders were seated at the dinette, straining to hear the conversation in the pilothouse above. The rest of the men were inside the cargo hold or up forward in the crew quarters, spread out to not appear to be an obvious squad of soldiers at any single glance if the boat were searched.

"Colonel, we have five minutes to change and make ourselves presentable."

"What?"

"We're going over to meet the captain of the F-105."

"You don't say! The captain? Five minutes?"

"Yes, five minutes. They asked for you by name, and they called you *Coronel*. It's not a suggestion. We're going."

Rainborow nodded his understanding, slid open the door to the cargo hold, snaked over the drums, and disappeared forward to his abode in the crew quarters.

"Victor, let's maintain our course and speed. We should be back in… well, I don't know when we'll be back. Fairly soon, I hope." I dashed back to my cabin and threw on my least-wrinkled khaki trousers, brown boat shoes, and a long-sleeve khaki button-down shirt I kept on a hanger.

It was a non-uniform uniform. Khakis never appeared out of place on a ship. As long as you didn't pin any insignias on your collars, you weren't actually impersonating an officer. You just looked like an officer, and this often meant that you were treated like one. But appearing before a ship's captain in paint-stained boatyard rags would be taken as an insult to the dignity of any warship being visited, unless one was being rescued from a life raft or other dire situation.

In the pilothouse I grabbed my blue foul-weather coat for the ride across to the frigate, which was sure to be wet from spray. I threw a handheld VHF radio into its cargo pocket. A navy blue ball cap pulled down tight would keep my hair from being soaked on the transit, and add to my naval

appearance.

Colonel Rainborow came aft on deck, having come up from his quarters via the forward scuttle hatch to avoid crawling back through the cargo hold. He was wearing khaki pants over desert boots, and a military raincoat in the old British woodland pattern. He was not carrying his leather satchel. I imagined that Tolbert was keeping it in temporary custody.

The Spanish lieutenant said, "*Capitán Keelmare*, I must ask you, you do not have weapons or firearms on your clothing or under your body?"

"No, I'm not armed."

"*Coronel*?"

"No, I'm not carrying a weapon."

"Then, now we go." He turned to the two RIBs, still trailing on either side of our wake. A wave of his hand brought one up to our stern quarter again. Espinosa said, "First is going *Capitán Keelmare*, and then is going *Coronel Rain-burro*."

I climbed down the steps to the swim platform, just above the moving ocean as we slid through the smallish waves. The RIB pressed its bow against our stern quarter, and with both hands on the tube I hopped into the open deck space in the front of the inflatable. Colonel Rainborow, the lieutenant, and the armed sailors followed us over and gestured for us to sit on the built-in cargo box at the very bow. The lieutenant joined the coxswain behind the console, and the other two sailors sat in the seats attached to its front, facing us.

In a moment, the inflatable dropped back away from Rebel Yell while the sailors from the other RIB were taken aboard their own craft, and then we cut over toward their ship. The coxswain pushed the throttle ahead and we smacked a wave and took a slap of spray over the bow. The lieutenant motioned for him to slow down. This was the courteous thing to do for guests who had been invited to visit the captain of their frigate. Spray didn't matter to them; they were dressed in waterproof ocean suits.

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Even at a moderate speed it still took only a few minutes to reach the waist of the Spanish frigate. The coxswain went alongside, gray rubber pressing gray steel, matching speeds. Near the waterline, the frigate's hull was painted with black arrows indicating the RIB's position for lifting. A wire came down with a hook below a padded ball. The sailors raised the RIB's wire lifting cables and snapped them onto the hook.

The lieutenant said, "Sit down, please, don't make any accident." Satisfied, he signaled our readiness, and with a lurch and then a steady upward force we were hoisted away into the air, sliding up the side of the ship. With the RIB's engine shut down, I could both feel and hear the warship humming with the power of countless machines all running at once. When we cleared the side deck the crane swung us in, and we were lowered into the RIB's cradle.

We climbed from the inflatable onto the side deck and Lieutenant Espinosa said, "Please, remove the coats. I am sorry, but we must to examine every *visitante* for the weapons and the contraband." He gave an order and one of his sailors stood in front of me. When my coat was off, he handed it to another sailor, who went through its pockets, examining my handheld radio, a flashlight, and a small flare pack.

The sailor in front of me said, "*Los manos así*." He put his arms straight out to the side as a demonstration, and I followed suit. He then proceeded to give me a thorough pat-down, running both hands from my neck to my ankles and wrists, missing nothing. When he finished with me, he duplicated the process with Colonel Rainborow, who had also removed his coat for inspection. Underneath, the colonel was wearing a short-sleeve khaki uniform shirt with tabs for soft shoulder boards but minus any rank insignia. Our coats were then folded and placed inside the RIB. I considered this a positive sign that they were planning to return us to my schooner.

Espinosa said, "Walk behind me, please." He turned and we followed, and were in turn trailed by two of the boarding-party sailors with their slung carbines. We walked forward between a pair of enormous quad rocket launchers mounted sideways—athwart ship, in naval terms. I guessed that Harpoon anti-ship missiles were inside their eight canisters, four of them ready to fire to either side of the ship.

We walked between the rocket launchers across thirty feet of open deck, then passed through a door-like hatch and into the main superstructure. We climbed up metal stairs so steep they were almost ladders, back and forth and up several deck levels, then through another door-hatch and into a narrow passageway. I could see the bridge windows through another open hatch. The lieutenant guided us around a corner and down another narrow passageway to a finely finished door made from dark wood.

Lieutenant Espinosa knocked twice and said, "*Capitán, los marinaros extranjeros están aquí*."

"*El coronel Británico y el Americano*?"

"*Sí, mi Capitán*."

The voice switched to nearly unaccented English. "Send the colonel in first. Take the American to the wardroom. I will call for him in a while."

Espinosa opened the door, and I glimpsed a small room like a compact office or study. A closed door on the other side would presumably lead to the captain's private at-sea cabin, with its own head and shower. This was a level of luxury and spaciousness unafforded to anyone else on a warship. Rank indeed has its privileges, along with its responsibilities.

As the lieutenant closed the door, I saw Colonel Rainborow shaking hands with the captain of the ship. While I was escorted to the wardroom, I could think of only one reason why the colonel had been selected to come over to the frigate for a visit. His name was too well known to escape notice. A quick radio message back to base would bring up the colonel's British Army record. A twenty-meter sailboat carrying at least eleven men, including a former SAS colonel, was obviously not on an innocent pleasure cruise.

The officer's wardroom was down one level from the bridge and the CO's cabin in the middle of the ship's superstructure. It had three banquet tables covered in white linen, already set for the next meal. Counting plates, I guessed that at least two dozen officers could dine at the three tables at one time. On the few American warships I'd spent a little time on as a Marine, "officer's country" was terra incognita to me.

This must have been part of my father's life while he was a naval officer. This is what I could have experienced if I had gone to college and obtained a naval commission instead of enlisting in the Marines and fighting in the desert. Spotless white linen and gleaming silverware on the tables. Oil paintings and framed pictures of ships and Spanish admirals going back to Columbus on the wood-paneled bulkheads. The level of luxury that

immediately struck the eye was a pleasant contrast to the gray-painted industrial finish of the rest of the warship. I drank it all in, turning in a slow circle. At one end of the wardroom a giant flat-screen television was mounted on the wall; along the sides were padded chairs and end tables. A place of genteel comfort for the officers at sea. A refuge from machinery, weapons, and the enlisted crewmen.

Lieutenant Espinosa broke into my pleasant reverie. "*Capitán Keelmare*, do you wish for coffee or tea?"

"Coffee, please." He spoke to a steward through a service window, then gestured for me to sit and shortly there was platter in front of me with a china mug of coffee, cream and sugar in matching porcelain, and a plate with an assortment of pastries. I stared at it like a mirage while inhaling a combination of aromas. This was all brought to me by an enlisted man in a spotless white uniform while the lieutenant remained standing near the door to the kitchen, still in his offshore suit.

I wondered if American officers were treated so well as I stirred cream and sugar into my coffee. It was the first real coffee I'd tasted in many months. Hot, delicious, and reason enough to return to South America. In my mind I compared the weight, compactness, and value of various cargoes. Coffee would be a lot lighter than ninety-six barrels of diesel fuel and might be worth even more, depending on where it was sold.

How much would coffee cost in Brazil? How many kilos would fit in a similar-size barrel? And Brazil also grew tobacco, another high-value commodity in the British Isles. I could spend the Southern summer refitting in South America, invest in Brazilian coffee and tobacco, and then circle back around the North Atlantic and look up Sinead Devlin.

In mid-daydream, as I was finishing my second cup of coffee and third pastry, Lieutenant Espinosa said, "*El capitán* will see you now." I was led by the same detail to the same door. Espinosa knocked, we heard *entra*, and we went inside.

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The ship's commanding officer was seated on a small sofa like a love seat, upholstered in tan leather. Dark hair, recently cut to military standards. Freshly shaven, fit, and trim. Close to my age, or maybe forty. He wore a short-sleeve white shirt, open at the neck. Black shoulder boards with three

gold stripes on his shoulders. Black trousers and shoes. Silver watch, gold wedding band. He said, “Thank you, Lieutenant. Please wait outside until we are finished. I will have no other visitors.”

Rainborow was seated in one of two wooden straight-backed chairs, facing the captain. In good weather these chairs could be placed where you liked on the floor. During storms, they would be tied to a bulkhead to keep them from crashing about. You could never leave a chair loose in the middle of any deck on a sailboat, no matter the weather, so I guessed that the ride on a five-hundred-foot warship was usually quite steady, like today. Between the sofa and the chairs was a coffee table, with a thermos pitcher, cups, cream, and a sugar bowl. The ship’s captain rose slightly, shook my hand across the table, and gestured that I should sit next to Rainborow.

“So, Captain Kilmer, welcome aboard the *fragata Cristóbal Colón*. My name is Alvaro Manresa, frigate captain of the Spanish Royal Navy. Captain Kilmer, I have just had a very interesting conversation with Colonel Rainborow. Let me tell you, it is not every day that one meets a colonel of the famous British SAS.”

Rainborow slumped in his chair, embarrassed.

I looked back at the Spanish officer, ignored his aside about the SAS, and said, “Thank you for the hospitality of your wardroom, Captain.” I was flattered that he’d addressed me, the unlicensed master of an old schooner, as captain.

“It is my pleasure. Please, sit down and let us have a frank discussion.”

“You speak English very well, Captain Manresa.” Compliments about foreign language skills often resulted in useful information being conveyed, and I was not disappointed.

“Thank you very much. I passed one of my happiest years in California when I was a young naval officer. San Diego is a wonderful city. Perhaps someday you will visit our home port of El Ferrol, in Galicia. It is near La Coruña, in the northwest of Spain. Do you know the region?”

“Only by reputation. I’ve never visited.” El Ferrol and the city of La Coruña occupied a strategic corner of the Iberian Peninsula, and it had been an important shipbuilding and naval center since time immemorial. That’s all I knew about it.

“Well, you would enjoy visiting someday. The region is also an important center for sailing yachts. But the colonel and I were not only chatting about sailboats. Sometimes, Captain Kilmer, did you know that even

foreign warships visit? It is true. In the former times, American, British, and French warships visited with some frequency. This was during the time of the NATO alliance. Not so often in these days, I am afraid, but sometimes a warship still arrives in El Ferrol or La Coruña. Did you know that, Captain Kilmer?"

"Honestly, I've never had any reason to think about it."

"Well, I was just telling the colonel about it. Last week in La Coruña there was a quite interesting small warship, one rather old, but with a particularly fascinating history. It was a Norwegian patrol boat, thirty-six meters in length. They were named the Storm class, and many of them were built. By a lucky coincidence, when I was a junior officer like Lieutenant Espinosa, I was sent on a NATO exercise in the North Sea. For several days, I was on a Norwegian Storm-class patrol boat. I have quite fond memories of those days. Quite fond, and you may imagine my surprise when I learned that a Storm-class patrol boat had somehow arrived in La Coruña, near to our naval base. Well, you know that I had to visit her, and meet her lucky captain. And so I did. Perhaps you know this captain, his name is Simon Dansekker. He is Dutch, but he is not in the Dutch navy, or in any navy, for that matter. He said that he is taking his ship to Nigeria to protect offshore oil platforms. Captain Kilmer, do you know of this man? Colonel Rainborow informs me that does not know Captain Dansekker, but being a sailor and not a soldier, perhaps you have heard of him."

"I have heard of him. But just rumors, stories that people tell on the radio."

"Ah, yes, stories that people tell on the radio. And do you know we also pay very close attention to the radio? And we heard a very interesting story yesterday around the middle of the day. The idiot pirates have not yet learned that we can hear everything on the radio even very far out into the ocean, even on VHF frequencies."

I glanced at Rainborow, his eyes were fixed ahead.

Captain Manresa continued. "The entire story seemed rather interesting, based on the radio intercepts. Interesting enough for a reconnaissance airplane to be sent out, finding only your sailboat. Then after I received Lieutenant Espinosa's report and I learned that a famous colonel of the British SAS was on board, with a large number of men for so small a boat, I decided to meet you both. Captain Kilmer, don't you find the entire episode to be fascinating?" Manresa leaned back against his leather couch and folded

his arms, looking between us like a cat regarding a pair of caged canaries. With the door to the cage wide open and his paw hovering just outside.

I didn't know what Colonel Rainborow had already told him, or what the government in Madrid or the Spanish navy had reported to him. I wanted to add as little new information as possible. Almost anything that I said could be used to incriminate us in some way. Carrying a team of mercenaries and weapons had to be a crime in some jurisdiction or another.

"Yes, we had quite a fascinating day yesterday. Among other things I could call it."

"Please, tell me all about it." Captain Manresa settled into his small couch, hands on his lap, staring at me, his eyebrows cocked in anticipation. Nearly every part of his office that was not covered in flat video screens or framed charts was covered by photographs of warships. And photographs of a woman I took to be his wife, and children across a range of ages.

"We were overtaken by Muslim pirates in a thirty-meter wooden fishing boat, and with great luck, we managed to sink them instead of their sinking us, or worse, capturing us."

"How can you know they were Muslim pirates, if they were on a fishing boat?"

"Well, they spoke Arabic on the radio, and they said they would cut off our heads if we didn't surrender. That must be in your transcript. They had no fishing gear, they flew the black flag, and they had a twenty-millimeter Oerlikon gun on their bow. And they fired a rocket-propelled grenade at us. That's how we knew they were Muslim pirates."

Captain Manresa grinned and said, "Someday, Hollywood will make this story into a movie."

"I don't think Hollywood is making movies anymore."

"No, they are not. Perhaps in Texas. But California…no."

"I've heard on the radio that Texas still has electricity. Do you know if that's true?"

"I think that it is."

"What about the eastern states?"

"Still terrible, like in California. Journalists don't dare to visit the United States, except for a few places like Texas. It's much too dangerous."

"I've heard on the radio that half of the people are dead in some of the cities. But I've also heard more than that, and less. What does the Armada of Spain believe?"

“In some cities half are dead, that might be true. Nobody knows when the situation will stabilize. The gangs and militias have not yet run out of ammunition, even if they did run out of food. Thank God it did not happen like that in Spain, but it came very close. We never lost our electrical system the way that it happened in America. It was cut back to only a small fraction, but we never completely lost electrical power.”

“Are you having a civil war with your Muslims, like they are in France?”

“Not anymore, we’re not. The only Muslims remaining in Spain have been tamed.”

“Tamed?”

“They had to sign an oath of loyalty and renounce Sharia law. No *da’awa* is permitted, that is, there is no preaching of Islam outside the mosque. There are only a few mosques left now, and they are closely monitored. The smallest connection to radicalism, and they are deported or imprisoned. The entire mosque, all of them, for the actions of even one man. It is very tense, but we are dealing with it.” Captain Manresa chuckled. “We have imposed our own Spanish Sharia on them—that is what they call it. For example, women may not wear the veil, or be forced to remain in their homes.”

“I heard that there’s a nuclear problem in America, in the state of Tennessee.”

“That story is true. The small American Chernobyl, and nobody is even trying to stop it. Millions have been forced to evacuate, but where can they go? There is still no electrical power in most of your country. If one can believe the reports, there is only starvation, disease, anarchy and death.”

“But not in Texas?”

“Texas did not suffer a complete breakdown. I will collect some newspapers and periodicals and see that you get them. I wouldn’t believe every word in them, but perhaps they are more reliable than what you have heard on the radio.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“And now I must return to the situation of today. Please do not worry about speaking freely, Captain Kilmer. Colonel Rainborow has already described the rescue operation to me. Everything is out in the open between us.”

I looked sideways at the colonel in his chair beside me. He glanced back and barely nodded yes, it was true, they had spoken, but his glance conveyed

a minimum of enthusiasm. Captain Manresa was employing a basic interrogator's trick. Your buddy already told us almost everything, so please tell us just a little more. No, thanks. I would talk about yesterday until Manresa grew tired of it, but I would keep my counsel about next week's plans if I could.

"Don't worry," said the captain. "He had no choice but to tell me everything. My next order would have been to search every centimeter of your sailboat and arrest every person on board if even one firearm was found. I would place my own sailors on your boat to sail it to El Ferrol. In that case, it is unlikely that you would ever see it again. The disposition of your case would be taken from my hands and put in the hands of judges and politicians. Many of them are socialists, from Madrid. Let me tell you, they hate our navy, so as for foreign mercenaries? They would, as you say, throw away the key."

He picked up a remote control and turned on a wall screen, then clicked the screen through a series of views: from the bridge, forward, port, aft, starboard, port again, and then a blurry infrared close-up of Rebel Yell motor-sailing along on autopilot. Magnified to fill the screen, the black-and-white image was clear enough to make out the pilothouse, the RIB stowed on deck between the masts, even the covered machine gun on the stern. The diesel exhaust through the transom was a black cloud of heat following our wake. Targeting brackets surrounded my schooner and information data points gave constant readouts of range and direction. It was locked on.

"That is what your sailboat looks like to my close-in weapon system. If I wished to terminate your voyage and stop your operation in Morocco, it would not be difficult." Manresa turned his full attention to Rainborow. "Truly, Colonel, did you think that a Storm-class patrol boat could sneak into La Coruña, and not be noticed by every naval professional in the province? Truly? A bent propeller shaft, but no divers were called. A patrol boat would go into dry dock for that repair, but no such request was made. After a week, her propeller shaft was suddenly straight again, okay. A miracle, I imagine. Now she is gone. Refueled, and gone. Paid with gold coins, and she is gone. Another mystery of the sea, yes?"

The colonel's cheeks were flushed and he was studying his hands on his lap with downcast eyes.

"Colonel Rainborow, perhaps the British navy is in a state of dysfunction, but let me assure you that the Armada of Spain is not. But I

prefer to take the long view of history. Our two navies have sailed on these waters for many centuries, many centuries, as friends and, long ago, as enemies. Better days will come again for Great Britain, I am sure of it."

Rainborow nodded. "Thank you for your magnanimity."

"But let me tell you something, Colonel—you do not have many friends in Whitehall. Not according to the report I have just read. They particularly disapprove of unsanctioned private military adventures. Your name is on a watch list. A *stop* list."

"How did you…"

The Spanish captain put up a hand and said, "Never mind Whitehall. More to the point, the Armada of Spain and the British military have their own, shall we say, parallel structures. Officially, and unofficially. And among your peers, both in Britain and in Spain, you have, can I say, a *sterling* reputation. Between the opinions of British politicians and the opinions of those in the British military, well, I know which group I prefer. Or *any* politicians, for that matter. Myself, I am a military man." Manresa sat quietly, looking between the two of us, as if savoring the moment.

He held total power over us. He could have us thrown in the brig or destroy my schooner with a word of command, but I knew he would do neither. I ended the silence. "Captain, if you know why the colonel is going to Morocco, then I don't think you will sabotage his mission. You will not sabotage a sacred mission to rescue almost seventy Christian girls from Muslim sex slavery. Innocent girls like your own daughters." I pointed to one of his framed family pictures.

The captain said, "Of *course* I am sympathetic to your mission. It took Spain seven centuries to expel the Moors the first time; we know them very well. So, on a personal level, I have great sympathy for your position. But I am also a frigate captain of the Armada, and this corner of the Atlantic belongs to Spain. A vessel carrying armed mercenaries, gentlemen, it would be very bad, very severe, for you to appear before a panel of judges in Madrid. And during ordinary times, that is exactly what would happen." He paused again, a long pause, while he looked back and forth between us. "But these are not ordinary times, gentlemen. I will not sabotage your mission."

Captain Manresa stood and gestured for us to join him. It was only a step to a bulkhead with a mounted chart of the Atlantic covering from Spain and Portugal across to the Azores and south to the Canary Islands and Western Sahara, still claimed by Morocco.

He placed his finger on a spot on the map about two hundred miles off Portugal. “This is where the pirates made their radio threats yesterday. It is also where you sank them, and thank God for that. Our reconnaissance airplane found you a few hours after your battle, at this position.” He slid his finger down the chart. “This is where someone made a series of burst transmissions in the high-frequency range last night. Then more transmissions this morning, and that was enough to launch our helicopter. And now we are here, having this chat.”

I glanced at Rainborow; he was staring at the chart.

Captain Manresa continued moving his finger toward the south. “Tonight we will reach latitude thirty-six, and then we will turn to the east and transit through the Strait of Gibraltar. From that time on, there will be no Spanish naval presence south of Gibraltar until the Canary Islands. There are more ships of the Armada located in the Canaries, but if your destination is the central coast of Morocco, then you will have no contact with them. My concern is the creation of a political disturbance that upsets the status quo. Spain does not want to be dragged into a Moroccan civil war. Are you familiar with Mahmoud El-Ayashi?”

“Yes, I know about him,” Rainborow said. “The leader of the Moroccan fanatics.”

“Then you know that he is consolidating his control in the south, and that means he will eventually threaten Spain’s oil fields near the Canaries. Spain would like to see his faction destroyed and the country stabilized and reunited under the king. Your mission would not run against our interests, but neither do we wish to be dragged into a war by mistake.”

Rainborow said, “There will be no mistake on our part. We will be on Moroccan soil for less than twenty-four hours.”

Manresa gave a weary smile. “Yes, that sounds like an excellent plan, Colonel, and I wish you every good fortune. But please understand our strategic imperatives. The Strait of Gibraltar must remain open. We have good relations with the king and his royal military forces in the north. But if the Ayashi faction conquers all of Morocco, then we could be facing anti-ship missiles fired from mobile launchers that are sitting ten miles from Spain, controlling and blocking the strait, and that we cannot permit.”

I asked him, “What about the American Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean? Or the British navy?”

“Most of the Sixth Fleet was moved to the Asian theater, and most of it

was destroyed there, I regret to say. The British were already out of Gibraltar by then. The British navy has no permanent presence in the Mediterranean, and rarely makes a visit. Today, Spain must carry the burden for all of Europe in keeping the Strait of Gibraltar open. Spain, cooperating with the king of Morocco. Now, as for your rescue operation, we won't interfere, but that is the best that we can offer."

"That is quite sufficient, Captain," Rainborow replied.

"Is there anything that you need, anything that I can help you with before you depart from my ship?"

The colonel said, "We rescued an Italian prisoner from the pirates. He says he was an engineer on a Spanish ship. They had him chained in their engine room as a slave. I'd like to put him on your ship. He needs medical attention."

"Is he injured?"

"He has some badly infected wounds."

"I am sorry, but I cannot accept him. For political reasons, your visit today must remain unofficial. It will be impossible to pretend that your visit never happened if I take the Italian on board. Drop him in the Canaries or anywhere that you like. Is there anything else? No? Then I think we are finished." He glanced at his wristwatch and said, "Lieutenant Espinosa will now return you to your vessel." When he stood, so did we, and when he put out his hand, we both shook it.

I said to him, "My compliments on the professionalism of Lieutenant Espinosa."

"His English is not very good, but he enjoys encountering new situations. I value his judgment, and that is why I sent him to meet you today. He has discretion. And discretion is why I am not giving you a tour of Spain's finest warship, or a luncheon in the wardroom with my officers. Pardon me for bringing you here by the servant's entrance, as you say, but your visit is a delicate matter."

Rainborow said, "I do appreciate your discretion, Captain Manresa, and thank you."

I added, "Thank you for not confiscating my schooner."

"What schooner? There is nothing in the official record about any schooner. Only some routine training operations for our ship boarding teams. We conduct such training operations nearly every day in fair weather. Personally, I wish you all the best of luck with your mission. May God go

with you and give you every success.” He opened the door.

In the passageway, Lieutenant Espinosa and the same two armed sailors were waiting for us. There had been no change of the guard, and therefore no reports to exchange, minimizing the exposure of our unlogged visit to their ship and its crew.

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We were taken down the interior ladder and aft to the RIB in its cradle. Espinosa led the way, the armed sailors following close behind. A petty officer in a black uniform came out of the ship onto the side deck and asked, “You are the American captain? These are antibiotics for your patient.” He handed me a clear plastic bag with white and amber medicine bottles inside. I thanked him and he disappeared back inside the ship. Captain Manresa must have made a call to their sick bay. It hadn’t taken five minutes for his order to be carried out.

We climbed into the big inflatable and the Spanish sailors made it ready to be lowered away. The hydraulic crane above us took tension on the bridle while other sailors tended the bowline. We were lifted smoothly, swung outboard over the side, and lowered away. The outboard engine came to life as we dropped into the ocean. The cables were released and we were on our way back to Rebel Yell.

We sat again in the bow on the triangular cargo box, facing aft. As before, Espinosa and the coxswain stood behind the console and the other two sailors sat in front of it on the molded seats, all of them wearing their ocean goggles again. Between our feet on the small forward deck were four pieces of some type of cargo, square and covered with black plastic. Boxes waterproofed with trash bags was the logical deduction.

Under his breath Rainborow said, “Well, that didn’t go too badly, considering.” He spoke quietly enough that only I could hear him over the engine and waves. Unless one of the Spanish sailors facing us from behind dark goggles could lip-read English, we were unlikely to be understood.

I didn’t bother whispering. “What? Didn’t go too badly? They picked us up like we were stray kittens. They’re tracking your radio transmissions. I’d say it went *very* badly.”

“Not at all. We’re not under arrest, and as you said, your bloody schooner hasn’t been confiscated. Quite the contrary, we’ve been sent

forward with the Spanish navy's blessing."

"It seems like you get more respect from the Spanish than you do from your own country."

"Welcome to *my* world, laddie. But don't ever mistake the Spanish Armada for the Madrid government. They are often at cross-purposes."

"I thought we were going to visit El Ferrol in chains. We were just lucky today, that's all. And your operational security sucks if they picked up your burst transmissions."

"Aye, but they couldn't crack them."

"That we know of. But even if they couldn't decode them, they were enough for them to find us, weren't they? And the Storm, he knew all about the Storm."

Rainborow waved a hand. "That's irrelevant, don't you see? They allowed the port visit. They didn't interfere, which is more than I can say for my own miserable politicians. And Manresa didn't know anything about our landing craft, or the trucks waiting in Lanzarote. Overall, our op-sec is holding."

"Or maybe Captain Manresa didn't want to tell you everything he knows."

"He didn't know about the landing craft."

"If he didn't know about the trucks and the landing craft, then he must think I'm going to put your team ashore. Is that what he thinks?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You wouldn't know? Did you tell him that, or not? Since you didn't mention the landing craft, what else can he assume? That you're going to swim to Morocco? Well, just for your own information, Colonel, it's *never going to happen*. Your team is getting off of my boat onto your landing craft, or it's getting off of my boat in the Canaries. Either way, your men are getting off. I'm not coming any closer to Morocco than a hundred miles. And when I drop you off, we're done, except for one more thing: paying me for the charter, *as agreed*."

"We're going to rendezvous with the landing craft. Our plan depends on the lorries. There's no Plan B."

He didn't mention anything about my payment, and I didn't bring it up again. What would be the point?

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As the Spanish RIB nudged Rebel's starboard stern quarter, Colonel Rainborow climbed over onto the swim platform. Before I stepped over, Lieutenant Espinosa came forward of the center console, shook my hand, and said, "Please, *capitán*, we have some little gifts for you. These are compliments from my ship, on the orders of *mi capitán*. He has said to me that you are on an important mission of God, so I am hoping God is giving a blessing on you and giving to you a great success."

I shook his hand, standing in the front of the moving RIB, and thanked him, too chagrined to mention that I was just the bus driver and not actually going on the mission with Rainborow and his team. I climbed over onto the swim platform while the coxswain kept the pressure of his RIB's rubber nose against the corner of Rebel's moving hull. His sailors passed me the four boxes, and I swung each of them onto the aft deck as I received them.

After the last box was aboard, Espinosa gave me a crisp salute and I returned it. I was standing on the swim platform, at eye level with the lieutenant. The red-yellow-red flag of Spain was on the shoulders of their uniforms, it was flapping on the back of their RIB and waving from the mast of their frigate, pacing us a half mile away, and I felt strangely proud standing on Rebel's swim platform while the red, white, and blue of the Stars and Stripes snapped in the wind above me.

In the middle of a Spanish sea, I was standing on a small piece of American territory—or was I? I hadn't set foot on American soil in over a decade. I hadn't even seen a U.S.-flagged ship in two years. My U.S. passport was five years expired and couldn't be replaced. Was I still an American if the United States were no longer united? And if I wasn't an American anymore, just what the hell was I? A man without a country, that's what. A refugee from a broken nation, sailing through the new world disorder.

The RIB swerved away, catching air between the waves, spray flying, making a high-speed run for home. Once the inflatable was hoisted up, the F-105 accelerated forward, the roar of her turbines audible from a kilometer away, her hot exhaust blurring the air in waves behind her. In ten minutes the frigate was a tiny scale model, seen from astern. In fifteen minutes, she was hull-down on the horizon, and a few minutes after that we were alone on the ocean again.

I handed the antibiotics to Victor, who would determine if they were any better than what he was already using to treat the Italian. The mystery of the four black-wrapped boxes was solved on the dinette table while everyone

crowded in. Hung served as our quartermaster, beginning with the largest box. It was packed with Valencia oranges, at least three or four for every man on board. These were a big hit after a week at sea on a potato, onion, carrot, and beet diet. For that matter, the men had probably not seen an orange or any fresh citrus in Ireland for at least few years, not since the European wars had ignited into full fury and international trade had collapsed. Fifteen of the fresh oranges were passed around and were immediately cut up or peeled, the tart citrus aroma temporarily overcoming the stink of unwashed bodies and diesel.

Another box was layered with blocks of cheese, tubs of butter, and thick sausages. The third was filled with loaves of fresh bread, each in a clear plastic bag. Beneath the loaves were some magazines and folded newspapers. The last carton contained a half-dozen bottles of brandy from the Canary Islands. I uncorked one of the bottles, took a long swig, and handed it to Rainborow, who did likewise. Then it was passed among the fifteen of us until it was gone. After a week in close quarters without even a sniffle among us, nobody was worried about sharing a germ or two. By that point in the voyage we were all brothers, at least in the bacteria-sharing department.

16

Friday morning, the last morning of October, a week and a day into the voyage. The paper chart on the pilothouse navigation table had a series of penciled Xs marking each noon's position from Ireland to the latitude of Gibraltar, which signified the end of Europe and the beginning of African waters. That was where I took the canvas cover off my Dushka for the duration. All thirty of the remaining linked 12.7mm cartridges were in the closed ammo box. When they were gone, the Dushka was only going to be capable of bluffing, like the 20mm Oerlikon gun that had gone down with the pirate ship.

Colonel Rainborow came up the ladder from the galley. He was wearing his usual tan T-shirt and desert camo trousers. Freshly shaved, gray mustache trimmed. He said, "We need to have a chat, skipper," as he passed by me on his way up to the cockpit. If we'd had a conversation in the pilothouse, it might have been overheard by someone sitting on deck forward of the open front windows, or down in the galley at the dinette, so I knew he intended to bring up an important subject.

We sat across from each other in the cockpit, the wheel between us making its little ghost turns on autopilot. I took the high side and braced my legs on the opposite bench, and he leaned back against his lower cockpit side. As usual, he had brought his well-worn leather satchel. He unbuckled it and withdrew a folded paper chart. No smile, no suggestion of morning tea, straight to business. "So, Captain Kilmer, we're drawing rather close to the end of our time together."

The wind had lightened so the sails were still up but not providing much push. Most of our eight knots were coming from the engine. "That's right, Colonel. Four hundred miles to the Canaries, so call it three days, tops. Even sooner if your landing craft meets us first. If this weather holds, we could do a cross-deck at sea."

He said, "As far as that goes, I have some good news: we won't need to make an at-sea rendezvous after all."

"I can't clear customs in the Canaries with you and your men on board. Not loaded with weapons."

"You don't need to worry about Spanish customs, Dan. It's been taken care of."

“Taken care of? How?”

“Back on the frigate, I spoke to Captain Manresa before you came in. And resulting from that conversation, we have a new destination.” He unfolded his chart so that it showed Lanzarote, the northernmost Canary Island. It was a hundred miles off the coast of Morocco, near the bottom of that country. The island was forty miles in length and slender, running from the southwest to the northeast.

“As you can see, there are a few small islands just above Lanzarote. This one is called Alegranza. It’s a few miles wide, and it’s uninhabited. The Spanish navy maintains moorings here on the south side, out of the prevailing winds. That’s where we’ll meet the landing craft.” He used his pencil tip to point to their exact location below the small island, but he didn’t write anything on the paper, not even an X or an arrow. I recognized his fear of marking an operational map as an old warrior’s tic, lest it fall into hostile hands. My own well-marked chart in the pilothouse, on the other hand, was a part of my voyage record-keeping, along with the logbook.

Then it occurred to me. “Wait a minute—yesterday you said that Captain Manresa doesn’t know about the landing craft. Why would it occur to him to offer you a mooring if he thinks I’m taking your team to Morocco on this boat?”

“Actually, I said he *didn’t* know about the landing craft—and he didn’t—not until I told him.”

“You *what*?”

“Captain Kilmer—Dan—you have to understand: I had only a short time to make him *believe* in our rescue mission. To make him an ally in our cause. I succeeded. It was for the good of the mission, and that is my *only* concern. The good of the mission. Nothing else. Not you. Not me.”

I was angry but tried to conceal it. If Rainborow hadn’t lied to me outright, he had certainly lied by omission. “How can he give you permission for something like that? He’s the captain of a frigate, he’s not the king of the Canary Islands. How many people did *he* have to tell to get you that permission? Have you completely thrown op-sec out the window and told everybody everything? Everybody except me, that is. What else haven’t you told me?”

Rainborow ignored my last question. “I don’t know how he obtained permission, but he assured me that we won’t be bothered on these moorings. Alegranza is in a military exclusion zone. The moorings were put in for tugs

and barges to use during bad weather, so a landing craft will appear completely innocuous. We'll have no visitors and no harassment. The landing craft will be waiting for us there in forty-eight hours. Its skipper is an American, by the way. Ex–U.S. Navy." He raised an eyebrow and gave a half smile. I recognized the salesman's subtle pitch. Rainborow never missed a trick.

I didn't care where the guy hailed from. But something else about Rainborow's demeanor bothered me. The offer of the secure mooring was good news, but instead he seemed conflicted and doubtful. He clearly had more to say, but he appeared reluctant to spit it out. To open him up, I said, "If the Spanish have green-lighted your mission, then why don't you seem happy about it?" I stared straight at him, and for once he didn't return my gaze.

He cleared his throat, often one of his stress indicators. "Because, Captain, unfortunately I have other news today. The Storm has missed three radio reports. Two yesterday, and one this morning."

"That's three out of, what, more than a dozen? Maybe it's a technical issue. Or maybe the Spanish are jamming us now. They could, you know. Easily."

"Why would they jam us? And we've made our routine radio contact with the landing craft. No, it has to be the Storm. There's some kind of problem at their end."

I thought: The problem is that you trusted Captain Simon Dansekker, a known renegade, and, predictably, he's betrayed you. "Have you told your men about it? Has your radioman said anything?"

"No."

"Are you *going* to tell them?"

He stared past me, at the horizon. "I must, I know. But not yet. They've only missed three transmissions. We'll try again tonight."

"Without the Storm, will you abort the mission?" On-call fire support from the patrol boat's modern 57mm rapid-fire auto-cannon had been a key factor in my decision to transport his rescue team in the first place. The Storm's firepower was the one element that had elevated his scheme a single notch above a fool's crusade.

Rainborow's face was grim, but there was still some cold fire in his blue eyes when he turned back to face me. "No, we won't abort the mission. We've come much too far only to quit now. We'll carry on as before, no

matter what. There's only a week until the full moon. We're going to stop the auction, and we're going to bring the girls home. With God's help."

"But Colonel, what if God *doesn't* help?"

"We are going to stop the auction, Dan. With God's help, or without it."

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The next morning, Saturday, was sunny and warm. Colonel Rainborow came through the pilothouse into the cockpit and sat across from me. "Captain Kilmer, how is our supply of fresh water?"

"We'll have enough to see you off."

"I'd like all of my men to shave before we part ways. Shave and wash up. Will that be possible? And it's not just for vanity or comfort. The Royal Moroccan Army is very strict about their grooming. It's part of their military culture; it separates them from the fanatics. We'll need to shave if we're going to pass as Moroccan soldiers, even at night."

"Your men can use the sink in the forward head. Just tell them to take it easy on the water. Don't let it just run."

"Thank you. What about showering?"

"Not enough fresh water for that. On the swim platform with buckets, as usual." I did some rough computations in my head and relented. "Well, perhaps one gallon of fresh per man for a rinse-off."

"All right, I'll pass that along to Bert."

"Any communication from the Storm?"

"Nothing."

I was tempted to ask him if he'd told his men, but I decided it wasn't my place. Pay or no pay, gold or no gold, I was looking forward to their departure. Fifteen men on my sixty-footer was about a dozen too many under even the best conditions.

On the other hand, I was sorry that Rainborow would be taking his GPS receiver with him. During the passage I'd fallen back into my old lazy habit of electronic navigational addiction, and our sextants had remained in their boxes. The British military GPS coverage went dark a couple times a day when there was no satellite coverage, but it was still a hundred times more accurate and convenient than celestial navigation.

During the afternoon a stream of freshly shaved men headed past the pilothouse to the transom. Standing on the swim platform, they were visible

only from the shoulders up as they doused themselves with buckets of warm seawater, finishing with one bucket of fresh dribbled over their heads. After a week of sailing into sunnier tropical latitudes, their northern pallor was being replaced by tan skin, and their new voyage beards hadn't grown thick enough to leave their faces conspicuously pale.

The Italian shed his bandages and washed with the others. The thick scabs around his ankle appeared to be healing, and his foot was no longer swollen or streaked with angry red. Under Victor's care, and with the Spanish antibiotics, he was receiving the best treatment conceivable within hundreds of miles. He seemed in good spirits, but then, who wouldn't be after being saved from a living hell? And he appeared to be well liked by Rainborow's men. It was impossible to forget that he'd joined us on the same day that their senior medic had been killed.

They were men intent on a sacred rescue mission, and they had already rescued one victim of Muslim slavery. Nothing could be done about the unfortunate Swedish girl. No one blamed anyone but the pirates for her terrible suffering and death. And despite the loss of the team's senior medic, the successful outcome of the pirate battle seemed a harbinger of ultimate victory. Rainborow's men treated the rescued Italian like a good-luck charm, or an anti-Jonah.

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That afternoon Rainborow came up the ladder into the pilothouse, gave a look around, and said, "Well, skipper, I have a bit of interesting news."

"What's going on?"

"The Italian wants to go with us. He claims he was an *Alpini*. Have you heard of them? Italian mountain troops."

"Sure, I've heard of them. I think a few of them were in Afghanistan, if that means anything. Except for you Brits and some Canadians and Aussies, the NATO troops never left the wire. But I suppose they had good training in Italy."

"You can't blame the ordinary soldiers for what happened in Afghanistan," said Rainborow. "That was all political."

"Do you believe him, about being an *Alpini*?"

"I suppose. Why would he make it up? He can field-strip our small arms, and he talks a good game. And he claims he can fix any motor and drive any

lorry that was ever made, and if that's true, that's a plus, but he's still too damned weak. I've decided to let the sergeant major sort it out with a test. Should be amusing. Here they come now."

The colonel settled into the starboard-side swivel chair, looking forward through the open front pilothouse windows. I stood, leaning over the nav table. A stream of men exited the forward scuttle hatch and gathered in front of the pilothouse and on both sides of the RIB. The Italian and Sergeant Major Tolbert stood on opposite sides of the mainmast, the rest of the team around them.

Tommy Pellow rapped on the mast and called up, "Come on down, mate." His friend Kam was aloft on the lookout seat.

In a few moments the young Moroccan was on deck with the rest. "What's going on?"

"You'll see," said Tommy.

Tolbert led the proceedings. "Right, then, let's get about it. Our job in Morocco means climbing, and a man who can't climb will be no bloody use to us."

The Italian swept his gaze around the circle of men and said, "So, okay, you don't believe me, I say I am *Alpini*? You are thinking that I no can climb?"

From the din of their banter, I couldn't make out if most of the team wanted him to join them or not. Much of their British and Irish humor was scathingly sarcastic, and it was still hard for me to tell when they were just joshing, or ready to come to blows.

But it was the sergeant major's show, and he responded. "That's what we're going to find out: if you can climb. One test, one exam, pass or fail. If you can touch the masthead, you pass. But you can't take all day about it, you have to be fast. How long should we give him, boys?"

Before anyone could respond, the Italian said, "How fast can *you* climb, Sergeant Major? You climb before me, and I will climb more fast than you."

The Italian's English was improving rapidly, I noticed. The jostling team roared their approval of the idea of the sergeant major climbing the mast, but he ignored the Italian's challenge. Instead, he spat out, "One minute to touch the masthead. One minute, and you can join us on our African picnic." He looked at his watch. "Tell me when you're ready."

The Italian gave the British sergeant major a hard look, then stared up the mast. He was wearing a khaki T-shirt and British desert camo pants, so he

was indistinguishable from the team except for his thin arms and gaunt face. His dark hair had been cut short to military length since he'd been cleaned up and disinfected. An extra pair of boots had been found that fit him.

The thirty steps screwed to the aluminum mast were made of inch-wide aluminum straps bent to form triangular stirrups, flat on the bottom and angled toward the mast above. One minute to reach the masthead would be a fair test. He swung his arms in circles, flexed his shoulders and arms, cracked his knuckles, and did a few deep-knee-bends. "Okay, I'm ready."

"Well, get cracking, you sodding Italian bastard," replied Tolbert, his analog watch held before his face.

"What means 'get cracking'?"

"It means you already wasted five seconds—now climb!"

The Italian had to clamber atop the mast-mounted halyard winches and the boom before he could reach the first step. The mast steps were mounted two feet apart on alternating sides, making it a four-foot reach between handholds and steps on the same side. It was a good stretch between them, getting each hand and foot up to the next aluminum strap.

The colonel and I lost sight of him due to our location inside the pilothouse, so we stepped out into the cockpit and came around in front to watch his ascent with the rest of the team. Even Victor and Hung were there to observe the test. The full mainsail was boomed out to starboard, so the Italian had to climb the front of the mast, facing aft. We were sailing downwind and the boat was rolling, so the mast was swinging in wider arcs the higher up he went. When the Italian touched the spreaders halfway up, Tolbert called, "Twenty seconds!"

The Italian lost a little time getting around the spreaders, appeared winded, and then paused in between each subsequent step. His resting pauses were growing longer. Tolbert called out thirty seconds, and then forty, but the Italian still had a quarter of the mast to go. Fifty seconds. The Italian kept at it, but it was clear that the result would be close. Sixty seconds from deck to masthead was a brisk pace even for a fit, healthy man: a second per vertical foot climbed.

He was on the next-to-last step when the sergeant-major called out, "That's it—time's up."

The Italian kept climbing. I couldn't tell if he had heard Tolbert or not. Maybe five seconds later he touched the masthead and shouted down, "How much-a time?

“It doesn’t matter how much,” said the British noncom. “You took over a minute.”

“How much-a time?”

“Doesn’t matter how much time, you sodding Italian. You failed the test.”

“Doesn’t matter? I think it matter! Now you climb in the same time as me, then we know who is ready to climb!”

“Sorry, that’s not how it works, mate. You don’t make the bleeding rules—I do.”

“You make-a the bleeding rules? Then you and your bleeding rules *andare all'inferno*—go to hell!”

Tolbert called up to him, “Come down, you bloody fool, and maybe we’ll discuss the matter.”

“No, we no ‘discuss the matter,’ and I no coming down. You climb now, and we discuss the matter up here.”

The team gathered around their second-in-command and roared, pushing him toward the mast. They wanted to see old Bert climb the mast, and honestly, so did I. Even Rainborow was grinning. In the end, the final decision would be left to the colonel.

But the Italian spoke next. “You all-a climb, and then you follow me—if you can.”

It seemed clear that the team wanted to take him on their mission, and Tolbert was also leaning that way, but the perception of a deck-level consensus didn’t seem to reach sixty-some feet up into the air. Instead of descending the aluminum steps, the Italian put both hands on the horizontal king-stay wire, which connected the two mastheads and was also our HF radio antenna. He twisted sideways, made a few attempted swings with one leg, finally hooked an ankle over the wire, then brought his other foot up and crossed the first.

Both feet were extended in front of him, and like an inchworm, he did his own version of a commando crawl out onto the bare wire between the masts. The team cheered and yelled encouragement from down below, and I did too. We were heeled about ten degrees to starboard, but rolling some, so the wire between the mast heads was out over the water most of the time. Water that was rushing back along Rebel’s hull at a steady motor-sailing eight knots. If the Italian lost his grip and fell, depending on the angle of the roll at that instant he might strike the deck and be killed outright or he might

splash into the ocean—man overboard.

He was halfway across, and with his weight in the middle, the king stay was swinging side to side as the deck rolled sixty feet below him. He kept inching ahead until he reached the foremast, wrapped his legs around it, and then clutched it with his arms. The foremast didn't have steps; going aloft required a bosun's chair attached to a halyard. The Italian hugged the mast and slid down it, his right knee on the extended foresail, finally standing on top of the boom where it met the mast. Then he jumped to the deck, rebounded like a gymnast with both arms up and out, and took a bow. His ankle was bleeding where the scabs from his chain had been ripped open. He was lifted onto many shoulders among hip-hip-hoorays, the loudest cheers coming from the colonel and the sergeant major.

I wondered at the storm of emotions that must have been churning inside the Italian, who in a few days had gone from the frying pan of his ordeal with the pirates into the fire of joining Rainborow's team for their "African picnic." But this time he wasn't a chained prisoner, he was a free man and a volunteer. His desire to join them for what was sure to be an extremely dangerous mission still puzzled me. I put it down to some kind of emotional whiplash related to the Stockholm syndrome. And in a very real sense he had been reborn: his liberation had literally handed him a fresh new life.

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The wind had been clocking around all day, and by afternoon it was from the southeast. It brought with it a reddish haze and deposited a film of dust on our decks. Kamal Abidar was in the cockpit and said, "It is the *Harmattan*, the desert wind. In the Canaries, it's called the *Calima*. Look at the horizon, see how blurry it is? The red dust makes a false horizon and hides the true land until you're very close."

I wiped my finger on the cockpit seat; it left a distinct trace. "That won't be a problem as long as the GPS is working. But it's making the boat filthy. We'll have to hose it off with seawater or it'll get tracked down below. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. It'll be something different to do."

"There's one outlet up by the anchor, and another on the stern. Hung can show you where we keep the hoses, and he'll turn on the seawater pump from down below."

I knew that there would be plenty of volunteers for this duty, with the sun blazing down and the temperature about thirty degrees centigrade, almost ninety Fahrenheit. Their rough berthing in the cargo hold on top of the remaining drums of diesel and their military equipment was becoming more uncomfortable (and smelly) as we sailed deeper into tropical latitudes. In port or at anchor, the cargo hatch could be opened for greater light and ventilation below, but at sea it had to be shut tight beneath the RIB, even when the hold was packed with passengers. As a result of the wretched conditions below, the men spent most of their time on deck, some of them even sleeping there, and the red dust was not making matters any easier for them.

Later in the afternoon I came up into the pilothouse after a nap in my cabin and saw the team mustered on the foredeck. I noticed they were all seated and facing forward. Rainborow was the only man standing, in the very bow by the stowed anchors, facing his troops. He spoke for a few minutes and then the sergeant major stood and spoke in turn. It appeared that a briefing for the troops was under way. Pat Maguire took a turn speaking, then sat again. Only Rainborow remained standing up the entire time. Hands were raised as if to ask questions, or possibly to conduct a vote. Some voices were raised in apparent opposition or defiance, but I couldn't make out the words. Tolbert stood again, and then most of the men disappeared down the forward scuttle hatch, so he must have dismissed them.

Colonel Rainborow made his way aft to the pilothouse. He gave me a doleful look and said, "Well, I told them about the Storm."

"How did they take it?"

"Better than I would have. Of course, I couldn't decide for them about continuing the mission, and I wouldn't even try to order them. But they voted to carry on. They're not happy, but nobody is for quitting. They all agreed that we've come too far to quit."

"Do you think Simon Dansekker has flipped sides?"

"Dansekker? No. I think if he'd flipped, he'd be making his normal comms to lure us into range. It has to be something else."

"I never trusted him. I consider him a renegade."

"I know you do."

"How much does he know about the mission?"

"He's not been briefed on precise dates or the exact landing beach. He only had a window of time and a place to be on station. He was going to learn the particulars only when we were under way in the landing craft. We have

alternate beach landing sites for different wind and sea directions."

"But he knows in general about the mission, he knows about the girls?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then he could still be in a position to stop the rescue, couldn't he?"

"I suppose he could, but why would he?"

"Why *wouldn't* he? Maybe he's playing both sides. Maybe he shopped you out and accepted a better offer."

"Captain Kilmer, the Storm could be anywhere. It could have been sunk, for all we know. It could have had an electrical fire or a lightning strike that destroyed their radios. If he was trying to betray us, he'd have every reason to keep the regular radio schedule. We don't know what happened. But I know this much: we are going forward with the mission. With the Storm, or without it."

Dinner was tense the night of our last supper together on the open ocean. Informing the team about the Storm's missed comms had set them all on edge. It would be the same exact mission for the men going ashore, but without the comforting presence of on-call fire support. As usual, Victor and I sat across the galley dinette table from the three team leaders. Hung had rationed the meat down to a single can of chicken divided into enough potatoes, onions, and cabbage to feed fifteen men. Victor and I ate what they ate, and it was becoming an increasingly thin and tedious gruel.

Tomorrow we would reach our destination, and Rainborow's team would go their separate way. And not a day too soon. It was difficult to be cheerful, or even polite. Cramped quarters and bland, repetitive food made for short tempers. At least I had my private retreat in the captain's cabin; it was much worse for the rest of them. Nine men had been living over fuel drums, and the three leaders had been crammed into the forward crew quarters with Victor, and all of them were sharing the toilet in the forward head. But after one more night and day they'd be gone, and it would be just the three of us again to carry on to South America. I think they were just as eager to get off the boat as I was to see them go.

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In the Canaries, even the outlying uninhabited islands make for dramatic landfalls, especially when they emerge from the horizon after more than a week at sea. The chart showed that Alegranza was only three miles from end to end. Six miles beyond Alegranza, Graciosa was twice that size. Just beyond Graciosa lay Lanzarote, which was much larger. But the small volcanic rock named Alegranza was the first land to emerge from the sea before us since Ireland.

In some respects the Canaries are comparable to the Hawaiian Islands, similar in size and latitude but with a drier climate. In happier times jumbo jets had disgorged thousands of European tourists every day on the main islands. In the absence of tourism and international trade, I wondered if the arid Canaries could support their population. It couldn't have hurt that Spain discovered oil between the Canaries and Africa, and their strategic location off the left shoulder of Africa meant that the Spanish Armada would always maintain a naval presence and the necessary modern infrastructure to support its warships.

The Canaries had an oil refinery, and if it was operational they would have liquid propane to sell. We didn't need diesel fuel, but we were getting near the end of our cooking gas after feeding fifteen men for a week and a half on top of our Arctic salvage mission. Two bottles were empty, and we were well into our third and last one. As soon as we were rid of Colonel Rainborow's dirty dozen, we would sail down to the port of Arrecife on the eastern side of Lanzarote and see about filling them up. We would also provision with fresh meat and vegetables, if they were available, and refill our fresh-water tanks. Then the three of us would be able to enjoy hot meals and hot water for the rest of our cruise to South America.

I'd made plenty of longer voyages, but Rainborow's men were land hungry after ten days at sea, and there was nervous excitement among them on deck as Alegranza grew before us, widening to occupy more of our horizon. The wind calmed and the seas flattened as we rounded the island, its thousand-foot height blocking the northeast trades. I gave the word to Tommy and Kam, and they brought in our sails, rolling up the jibs and dropping the mainsail and foresail.

A final turn to the west put us on course to the mooring. With binoculars,

I could see a landing craft against the cliffs. After a few minutes the rectangular profile of the LCM-8 was visible to the naked eye. Every line of the craft was either vertical or horizontal, except for the bow ramp, which slanted upward at a forty-five-degree angle. The red and yellow flag of Spain hung limp from a staff on her square transom.

I would have used the VHF to coordinate our rendezvous, but after our experience with the Spanish navy's radio intercept capability I was more cautious. Our arrival was expected, so I just eased over to them under power. Once we were secured alongside her, we were going to reduce Rebel's load by a dozen men and their baggage. It seemed unlikely that I would ever get my hands on the promised forty ounces of gold, but I was still pleased by the prospect of the imminent departure of Rainborow and his team.

A name became visible on the twenty-foot-wide transom. *ATLAS* was painted in white block letters outlined in black, over the haze gray of the rest of the hull. Underneath was its home port, *Las Palmas de Gran Canaria*. The landing craft had old truck tires strung along its port side as fenders. The boat was tied with a thick hawser extending from its bow to a rusty ship's mooring. The iron ball was about two meters in diameter, and half submerged by its own weight.

A few more unoccupied moorings floated to the north and the south, all of them in a line a few hundred meters from the rocky beach. As we drew near, Rebel Yell fell into shadow beneath the island's high cliffs. I brought my schooner alongside the Atlas, killing our forward momentum with a shot of reverse, the wheel hard over. The two surfers were ready with our dock lines, which they tossed over to deckhands on the landing craft. Only when the lines were cleated securely did I shut down our engine. It gave a little clatter and a cough and went silent for the first time since Ireland.

Our side deck was seven feet above the waterline, theirs was a foot higher. The front three-fourths of the landing craft consisted of the open cargo deck plus the raised and secured bow ramp. Three canvas-covered military trucks were on the cargo deck, two lined up on the port side and one to starboard all the way aft.

The aft quarter of the boxy landing craft was decked over, making a raised area about twenty feet by twenty feet. The pilothouse was a steel cube about seven feet on a side, planted in the middle of the aft deck, with tinted windows at shoulder height all around. It sheltered the boat driver from the elements while also providing him with an elevated conning position where

he could see over his bow ramp (and the trucks, on this mission). The space below the aft deck was the engine room. Wire lifelines on welded stanchions ran around the perimeter of the aft deck to help keep the crew on board in rough weather.

My first priority was to launch the patched and now fully inflated RIB, so that we could open the cargo hatch and unload the team's baggage and equipment. The two surfers put it in the water using the foremast boom while the rest of Colonel Rainborow's men hurried about, preparing for the cross-deck operation. I was watching the action from the cockpit when one of the men from the Atlas came over to the side and said, "Permission to come aboard, skipper?"

"Of course, come aboard."

He climbed over both sets of our lifelines, hopped down onto our aft deck, and said, "Hank Landry. You're an American, right? That's what the colonel said. I'm from Louisiana, and we sure don't see many Americans out here." He was an imposing man, a few inches taller than my six feet two, but considerably thicker in all his dimensions.

"Yeah, I'm an American. Dan Kilmer." Rebel Yell was not showing a national flag. Old Glory had been stowed away since the departure of the Spanish frigate.

"She your boat?" he asked.

"Yeah, she's all mine, free and clear."

"Same with me. I own the Atlas and I run her for a living." Landry could have passed for a Spaniard, a Moroccan, or a Louisiana Cajun. The skin that was showing was burnt to the color and texture of old leather. Around fifty judging by his squint wrinkles, but hard to really know more precisely than that with his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. A ball cap, green T-shirt, stained khaki work pants. Plenty of gut but a lot of muscle too. He put out a meaty hand and I gripped it. He had a faded U.S. Navy chief's "fouled anchor" tattoo on his forearm, and the calluses and thick fingers of a lifelong mechanic and manual laborer.

His grip was powerful, but so was mine. "Good to meet you, Captain Landry," I said, noticing that he was missing half of the little finger of his left hand.

"Naw, Dan, only ships have captains. A seventy-five-foot landing craft is still just a boat, and I weren't no officer, that's for damn sure, so you can just call me Hank. I put twenty-two years in the U.S. Navy and I got out as a

chief, but that was a long time ago. Say, I heard from the Brit colonel that you was in the Marines."

"I was, but not for a career."

"Well, I hauled a buncha you jarheads around Virginia and the Carolinas back in the day. You do your basic training at Parris Island? You ever stationed on the East Coast?"

"No, I did boot camp in San Diego and Camp Pendleton, but after that I was deployed most of the time."

"You in Iraq?"

"Oh, yeah, I was there."

"Me too," he said. "In the early two thousands. My unit was down south, on the rivers. They called it 'Operation Iraqi Freedom,' can you believe that? What a joke. What a waste."

"Colonel Rainborow was there, too."

"I know, he told me already. Small world, huh? All three of us over there at the same time. Anyway, I retired from the Navy and moved here before things went completely to shit back in the States. I married a Spanish gal when I was stationed at Rota. You know where that is?"

"Sure. Near Cadiz, on the Atlantic side of Gibraltar."

"Right on. That's where I found my boat. I bought her at auction when she still had a number instead of a name. My wife and me, we'd gone on vacations in the Canaries and I saw the business opportunity for a Mike-boat. A second career for both of us—me and the Atlas. She has two great engines, Detroit Diesels. I rebuilt 'em myself, and I drove her nonstop from Rota to Las Palmas. Now my wife runs the office and I run the boat."

"Sounds like a good way to make a living."

"It has its moments. It was *really* good when I was still drawing my Navy pension, before America went tits-up." He laughed and added, "But now I have to work for a living." He patted the canvas covering my heavy machine gun. Only its welded tripod legs were showing. "I heard you had a run-in with pirates. I'll bet this came in handy. What is it?"

"It's a Dushka, a Russian twelve-point-seven millimeter."

"Sure, I seen plenty of 'em in Iraq. They were on some of the boats we operated with. About like a fifty caliber."

"Yeah, that's right. Listen, Hank, there's something I've been wondering. Have you gotten paid for any of this?"

"Paid? What's your interest? What's it to you?"

“Well, I haven’t been paid what I was promised, and I was wondering if you had.”

“Naw, not yet. But I’m gonna be. At least that’s what he just told me,” he said, cocking his head toward Rainborow over on the Atlas.

“When?”

“Like maybe five minutes ago.”

“No, I mean when is he going to pay you?”

“Maybe today, that’s what he just said.”

“Really? He didn’t tell *me* that.”

“Must have slipped his mind.”

“You ever get stiffed on a job?”

He laughed again. “Not too often, but it happens.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You must be glad I’m taking ’em off your hands.” He surveyed Rebel Yell’s decks with a practiced eye. “Must have been crowded with that many on board.”

I said, “We managed all right. But it looks like you’ll have an even tighter fit.”

“It’s only for an overnighter. One day there, and one day back. They’re soldiers—they’ll live.”

“Is there any berthing aboard the Atlas?”

“Naw, it’s just engines and machinery down there. We got some fold-down bunks, but about the only time we use them is when we’re dockside and the crew needs to sleep off a drunk. Can’t use them under way; it’s too cramped, too hot, and *way* too loud. Naw, they’ll be on the cargo deck all the way to the beach. On the deck, or in their trucks—I don’t care which.”

“How big is your cargo deck?”

“Thirteen meters by five. Forty-two by seventeen feet—not counting the ramp.”

“It looks like a tight fit between the trucks.”

“You should see us when we’re hauling cargo containers. Don’t worry: Atlas can do the job.”

“But can she do it on the open ocean, all the way to Morocco and back?”

“I brought her here from Spain on her own bottom. And this won’t be my first run from the Canaries to Africa.”

“What if the weather turns ugly and big seas are running against you?” I was trying to imagine that flat bow ramp slamming into steep ten-footers.

Square waves, sailors called them. Square wave, meet square bow ramp. No, thanks!

"Don't worry about the Atlas. She's as solid as a tank, and her engines are like new. The cargo deck is above the waterline, so any ocean that comes aboard goes straight back out the scuppers. She has a double hull, with four feet of air chambers between the cargo deck and her bottom, and the entire engine room under the aft deck is another watertight compartment. Atlas is a lot more seaworthy than most people think. She's practically unsinkable."

She'd better be, I thought. Maybe I was just prejudiced against square-bowed vessels when it came to tackling an ocean passage. On the other hand, Atlas's wide beam, flat bottom, and low center of gravity would make for a steady ride—if it could motor forward through head seas. She was certainly far more massive than my schooner, and I wasn't afraid of the ocean, either. Hurricanes and gale storms, yes, but the ocean in general? No. And presumably he understood these waters like a native.

So I just said, "Well, good luck on the mission, Hank." *And good luck to both of us in getting paid for it.*

The big Cajun stepped back up and over onto his landing craft to oversee his side of the cargo transfer. Rainborow's men had formed another human chain to shift their bags and boxes up from our cargo hold and over to the raised deck around the Atlas's pilothouse.

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Colonel Rainborow came back over from the Atlas and met me in the pilothouse. He was dressed in khaki trousers and his short-sleeve khaki uniform shirt. "Well, Dan, we made it, on time and on target. Do you still think we're engaged upon a fool's crusade?"

"Atlas appears to be tough enough. If this weather holds, you'll do all right."

"It'll hold."

"How long until you cast off? As soon as you've finished the off-load?"

"No, I have a bit of business to attend to before we go. We'll stay here until nightfall."

"The moon is already up. It's not going to be dark until after midnight."

"It'll be dark enough."

"Then as soon as your men have finished, I'll be ready to cast off. Well,

almost ready, except for one more thing—and I think you know what that is. My payment." You had to keep reminding clients of the business nature of their charter lest they drift into an overly chummy appraisal of what was at its core a contractual commercial relationship. You often grew to be friends with a client over a voyage, and sometimes these new pals happily assumed that the original business terms had been superseded by the budding friendship. Nope. You can be my friend, but you still have to pay for the ride.

Honestly, though, I didn't expect payment from Colonel Rainborow, or else he would have paid me already. I just wanted to let him know that his debt was going to remain on the books. Of course, if the colonel and his team were all dead or in a Moroccan jail the next week, my chance of ever being paid would go from slim to none. Still, it was worth a fresh reminder. "Forty ounces of gold, that's what we agreed on. I've kept my end of the deal."

"Yes, indeed you have. And if you're not in too much of a hurry to depart, a few more hours might change our financial situation considerably for the better. I'm going to go and meet some people this afternoon. Some rather significant people, you might say."

"A meeting? Out here?" All that was visible were our two vessels, the open horizon, and the towering cliffs of Alegranza, where only a seabird could find a toehold. A few iron mooring balls were the only evidence that humans had ever visited this godforsaken place.

"Yes, out here. Shortly, I will be picked up by a launch. And while I am away, and while my men prepare to depart, would it be too much to impose on your hospitality for one more favor? There's no galley on the Atlas, no interior quarters at all, and it's going to be rather Spartan conditions on the transit to Morocco, so I was wondering if—"

"Another meal? Sure, why the hell not?" His mention of the possibility of our finally being paid had put me in a very agreeable mood. "It'll be our last supper together."

"Dan, no matter what happens next, I must say that it was quite a memorable experience just getting here. The pirates, the Spanish frigate…the lot."

"Captain Manresa was right: they should make a movie about it someday." And if they did, Colonel Rainborow could play himself. It was hard not to admire a retired SAS colonel cut from the Field Marshal Montgomery mold. "We'll do the meal in three sittings, as usual."

"We'll need to make it four sittings this time. We'll need to include

Captain Landry and his crew. They have no proper galley aboard."

"Yes, of course. And just how long will you be away at your meeting?"

Rainborow glanced at his watch. "No more than a few hours, I should think. Let's make the first sitting for seventeen hundred hours. I'm quite sure I'll be back before then."

"I'll tell Hung." I leaned down the pilothouse ladder to get his attention, but he was already standing on the bottom rung, looking up at me.

"I know already, *chu-tao*. Only one more time I cook for everybody."

I looked behind me at Rainborow; he affected a casual shrug. People just bent to his will. Natural leadership ability, charisma, call it what you want—he had loads of it.

"I might have mentioned something to him. Good man, your Tran Hung." The colonel went back across to the landing craft. Hung was already at work in the galley. Not involved in cross-decking the cargo, Victor had disappeared; presumably he was up forward rearranging his own personal possessions among the now empty crew storage lockers. Under the sergeant major's direction, the human chain quickly finished unloading our cargo hold, even giving it a sweeping-out.

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After conferring with Colonel Rainborow, Sergeant Major Tolbert sent three men back over to assist Hung: one Brit; Gino Bracciano, the skinny Italian; and a deckhand from the Atlas, a Canary Islander who spoke enough English for galley work. He carried over a big plastic cooler and proudly opened its lid for inspection. White fish fillets the size of a man's arm were layered in crushed ice, at least a dozen kilos in all. The Atlas crewman said in a mix of English and Spanish that they had been bottom fishing for the past two days while awaiting our arrival. He pointed out the down-riggers with motorized reels welded on each side of their aft deck. Not a bad way for the crew to occupy their time while waiting on moorings or anchored out. The Atlas even had an icemaker, so they could keep the fish they caught until they got home, and sell any surplus to supplement their income. And why not? They lived and worked on one of the world's great fishing grounds.

"*Pescado fantástico,*" I said in admiration. "Great looking fish." Hung greeted the fish meat with undisguised joy. After ten days of increasingly dull fare and little luck at fishing, we were in for an epic bon voyage feast.

I left Hung to direct the conscripted galley hands, and busied myself in the cockpit. Rainborow came over again. “Do you mind my waiting here?” he asked. “Your swim platform will be more convenient for my pickup.”

It was a good eight-foot drop from the landing craft’s aft deck down to the water. “No, of course not. Come aboard.”

Our small talk was minimal, mostly about our guesses at the weather patterns that would affect the region over the next few days. His attention was focused to the west, where barren Alegranza fell into the sea at the next headland. Within a few minutes a small vessel appeared, curving seaward and then arcing back in toward us.

It was a white RIB about seven meters long, more of a sport boat than a working craft. Center console, with a welded alloy T-top spreading a white canvas sunshade above the helm position. The big inflatable mounted a single outboard, a 300-horsepower Yamaha. The coxswain at the wheel was wearing a spiffy white short-sleeve uniform shirt, black knee-length shorts, and docksiders. A pair of men wearing gray trousers and shirts stood by each side of the console, holding onto the T-top’s welded aluminum supports. Ball caps, sunglasses, tactical vests. Carbines across their backs on carry straps. I guessed that these three men represented two of the classes of employees back on the RIB’s mother ship: the sailors, and the shooters. The setup oozed serious money.

Rainborow climbed down onto the swim platform as the coxswain brought his RIB alongside it. The colonel stepped across and went around the console and sat on the built-in seat at its front, his satchel on his lap. Estimating proportions and likely dinghy-garage dimensions, I guessed that the RIB was the primary launch for a vessel in the forty-meter range. The white rubber wasn’t immaculate; it was scuffed and spotted, but neither was it patched and stained like a real workhorse. I suspected its mother ship might be a true megayacht, or perhaps a former so-called research vessel, and I imagined that it was lurking around the rocky coast just to the west.

I guessed at the basic tradecraft and logistics involved. A few minutes by fast boat around the headland was another crescent bay, and another one beyond that. Rainborow took his precious satchel, yet he went alone, without a single bodyguard from his own team to accompany him. He didn’t even take a pistol, unless it was in his bag. This meant that he had absolute trust in the people he was meeting. And very likely the person or persons he was meeting didn’t want to be seen by a motley band of British and Irish

mercenaries, plus an odd assortment of other foreign scalawags embarked on a pair of ugly steel working craft.

So, who was the Mr. Moneybags that Rainborow was meeting? Perhaps it was Mr. Smith himself, absconded from his house arrest in England and flown to the Canaries by private jet. Or perhaps it was one of his close relatives, business associates, or the local agents of his overseas holdings. Or perhaps there was no Mr. Smith at all, and from the very start I'd been fed a complete load of bullshit by the colonel for his own secret reasons. When it came to radio op-sec, Colonel Rainborow had many shortcomings, and he had lost track of the Storm, but when it came to serving as an opaque cutout for his wealthy patrons, he was absolutely pitch-perfect.

It was hard not to resent millionaires and billionaires who were riding out the hard times on megayachts while enjoying every modern luxury, from air conditioning to refrigeration. But since I hadn't heard about anyone else financing the rescue operation, or about any European national governments stepping forward, I personally could not feel antipathy toward a private party who was fronting the cash, billionaire or not.

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I was in the pilothouse two hours later when the white RIB reappeared from around the headland. The coxswain pressed the boat's white nose against Rebel's swim platform with just enough throttle to allow Colonel Rainborow to step aboard. When the RIB backed up and turned away, neither the coxswain nor the armed guards gave so much as a thumbs-up or a wave. They were all business behind their dark glasses, faces shadowed by ball caps, and were soon gone.

The colonel held his satchel in his right hand and grabbed the nearest of the machine gun's welded tripod legs with his left. But he needed both hands to climb up the steps welded to Rebel's black transom, so he was at an impasse.

I said, "Don't worry, Colonel. I won't run off with it."

He winked at me and swung his satchel onto the aft deck by my feet. I nudged it with a toe—it was heavy all right.

When he had climbed up I said, "Welcome back. I trust you had a profitable meeting?"

"Yes, I did, and thank you very much." He picked up his bag and we stepped down into the cockpit, where we would be alone. His men were all aboard the Atlas, except for the galley detail. Rainborow held the leather satchel with both hands and sat, planting it on his lap. I sat across from him, both of us aft of the wheel. "Back in Ireland I told you that you would be paid. Thank you for accepting my word as a gentleman. Now we may conclude our business—if this is a convenient time."

"Oh, it's very convenient."

He unclasped his satchel and rummaged inside, withdrawing a plastic tube a few inches in length, capped on both ends. It was just bigger than the diameter of a one-ounce gold piece. I recognized it as a tenner, made to hold that many coins.

He handed it over to me. The white tube was just barely concealable inside my fist. I twisted off the cap to see what kind of coins were inside. Paul Kruger's profile greeted me. Rainborow withdrew three more containers, handing them across to me one at time. "And that's all forty."

"Thank you, Colonel. It's mostly been a pleasure."

"Then we've concluded our business relationship."

“Yes, and thank you again. Just make sure you come back so they can make the movie someday.”

I dropped the heavy cylinders into four different pockets of my cargo shorts. No need to advertise their presence to any casual observer on either boat. We both stood and shook hands again. He nodded somberly, turned, and climbed back up onto the Atlas, disappearing from view down onto the cargo deck between the trucks.

I was stepping down into Rebel’s pilothouse when I ran into Victor, who was coming the other way up the ladder from the galley. He had something important to say to me, I could tell by his expression. And I had something to tell him as well, namely, that we’d just been paid. I was reaching into a front pocket to show him his share of the gold coins, but before I could pull them out he blurted, “Dan, I’m going with them.”

“What’s that?” It didn’t register.

“I’m going to Morocco with Colonel Rainborow.”

“You’re what?! You’re leaving Rebel Yell? Here? *Now*?”

“That’s what I just said, didn’t I? But I’m only going with them for their mission, so obviously, I’m not taking all of my belongings. I intend to return and to continue on to Argentina aboard your schooner—that is, if you don’t mind waiting here for a few days. Rainborow said that you can stay here for a week, or even longer than that. Nobody will molest you here.”

“But why?”

“Because they need somebody who knows a suture from a staple, that’s why. Their junior medic isn’t up to the job. I wish he were, but he’s not. Well intentioned, heart of gold—but not up to the job. Not if there are serious injuries.”

“Did Colonel Rainborow ask you to go?”

“No, it was my idea. I volunteered.”

Like hell, I thought. The colonel was constantly rearranging my life right around me, just beyond my eyesight and earshot. His team’s last supper aboard Rebel Yell, for example. But I shouldn’t have been surprised. It had been my own idea to berth Rainborow, Tolbert, and Maguire up front with Victor. Ten days at sea is a very long time. No doubt they’d all shared their life stories and sworn oaths of eternal friendship. Blood brothers by now, for all I knew. “Are you up to it? Going on their mission?”

“Do you mean physically? Of course I am. But I’ll just be riding in one of their lorries, not climbing at the castle. I’ll be waiting down below, in case

I’m needed.”

His decision was shocking to me. “So, when do you think you’ll be back?”

“A few days at most. I’m only taking a medical bag and my rucksack. I’m leaving everything else I own, so I would appreciate it if you didn’t sail off without me. At least not for a week or so.”

“Yes, of course we’ll wait.” Victor was actually doing it—he was signing up for the colonel’s mad crusade! I suddenly recalled that I had something to tell him as well. “Rainborow just paid me. That’s where he went today, to collect our gold.”

“I know.”

“You do?” I pulled out one of the plastic tubes. “Here’s your share—ten ounces.” I handed it over. He had certainly earned them, sharing his cramped forward crew quarters with three other men during the voyage south.

Victor uncapped the tube, spilled out a few Krugerrands, eyed them, turned them over, then replaced them and recapped it. He said, “Thank you. Oh, and can you lend me a pistol, a nine-millimeter? I’d like to bring something with a bit more power than my thirty-eight revolver. Just in case.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all I can think of at the moment.”

My mind was spinning. I had thought that he might be leaving the boat in a few months, after crossing two oceans into another hemisphere, but this sudden twist came out of the blue. Victor was going on the mission! And so was the Italian, which was somewhat more comprehensible to me. Gino Bracciano had literally exchanged lives with their dead senior medic in the course of his rescue from the pirates. On some deep metaphysical level, I understood the karmic balance of the Italian’s decision. And I certainly understood the payback element. I’d seen him with his chain around the pirate’s neck, smashing the man’s face against the deck.

So the Italian, I understood. But Victor? He’d never stepped foot on the continent of Africa in his life, and I had heard him state many times that he had no desire to ever do so.

“I’ll get the pistol,” I told him. I dropped down the ladder to the galley. Dinner preparations were under way, Hung and Gino on the cooking side to port, the other two pairs of hands chopping and slicing the usual vegetable fare at the dinette table to starboard. I went aft to my cabin. For a combat surgeon defending himself and his patients in the back of a truck, a Glock

9mm was indeed a better choice than his five-shot revolver. But I knew that he would take both. He never went anywhere without his Smith and Wesson.

I lifted a seat cushion and then a small concealed panel. My Glock 19 was loaded with ten jacketed hollow points plus one in the chamber, my best remaining factory ammunition. The pistol was always kept inside a black plastic holster. You have to do this with Glocks. Once they're loaded with a chambered round, they'll fire if anybody or anything presses the trigger, on purpose or by accident. Kept inside a holster, where the trigger can't be touched, they are as inert as a hammer.

Two more magazines in their own plastic belt carrier were also loaded with ten rounds each, well under their maximum capacity. I didn't want to risk weakening their springs during long-term storage, but I also hated the idea of unloaded mags around a pistol that I might need in a hurry, so I compromised by leaving them mostly loaded. A box of shells also kept in the hidden compartment could top off all three magazines. I thought, should I jam the mags now, myself, or give Victor the extra box of cartridges and let him do it later, on the ride over to Morocco? With so much on his mind, though, and carrying so much gear, he might overlook the critical task.

I slid the pistol from its holster. It was the latest in a line of Glocks that had done me good service over the years, and it occurred to me that I might not see it again if I lent it to Victor. And if I didn't see the pistol again, well, I probably wasn't going to see Victor again either. So it would be a package deal: if I lost the Glock, I lost Victor.

After a minute or two of staring at the black pistol and recalling past gunfights and the wounds inflicted upon my precious irreplaceable body, I had the thought that if Victor didn't come back, then it would be partly my fault, because I hadn't been there to watch his back just when he needed somebody to watch it the most. Victor was going with Rainborow to patch up their wounded warriors, not to fight their war. But who would be there to protect Victor? It occurred to me that the bitter old SOB was trumping me in the altruism department, and I didn't like the feeling much. Was I really only about the gold, as Rainborow had told me in that Irish pub? What about Rainborow and his team? What about the kidnapped girls? What about Victor?

And what about the wholly undeserved salute of respect that I had received from the young Spanish lieutenant when he brought us back from his frigate? An unearned salute I had no absolutely no business returning.

None.

Like turning a page to a new chapter, my entire thinking switched over into a new mode. The hell with it—I'll just go along for the ride with the sour old half-Kraut bastard and keep a watchful eye on him. After all the times he'd kept the red stuff from leaking out of my perforated hide, I owed him at least that much. If he could ride in the back of a Mercedes truck on Colonel Rainborow's Moroccan picnic, so could I. Then he could cross "Visit Africa" off his bucket list, even if the Dark Continent had never been on it in the first place.

Hung could watch the boat for a week on the mooring, as he had many times before. After feeding fifteen men for ten days, he would enjoy the solitude of boat guard duty, fishing, smoking whatever horrible tobacco he still had left, sleeping half the day, and cooking for one. Or not cooking at all.

It took me ten minutes to pack my war bags for up to a week ashore. It all went into my ruck, a parachute kit bag that would stay in a truck, and a soft case containing my current working rifle, a Sako 7mm Remington Magnum with a 4x12 Leupold glass. I would take my other Glock 9mm, my full-size Glock 17, and just hang out with Victor and we would guard the trucks while the rescue team did its thing. In the rear with the gear, holding the horses. Piece of cake. Two days, one night, in and out.

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I was getting ahead of myself, though. I couldn't just invite myself along. I caught up with Rainborow on the raised aft deck of the LCM-8 behind the pilothouse. He was speaking to Hank Landry about the weather and the currents and how they would affect their speed and therefore their ETA to the beach.

When they finished and Landry ducked into his pilothouse, I said, "Colonel, I just found out that you're poaching my surgeon, and I'm not sure I approve."

"Poaching?" he asked over a raised eyebrow. "Such an ugly word. Doctor Aleman volunteered of his own free will. And anyway, I'm only borrowing him, so I'm not poaching him. We'll be back in a few days."

"Right, you'll be back. With all the girls."

"Yes, that's exactly right, Captain Kilmer. We'll be back, with all the girls."

“What’s that SAS motto, Colonel? I just want to hear it from your lips one more time before you go.”

He grinned and said, “*Who dares, wins*.”

“That’s it. Well, I used to be a sucker for a dare, and maybe I’m getting it back after hanging around with your lot.” *Your lot? I was starting to speak like them.*

“What?”

“Do you have room for one more fool on your crusade? If Victor is going, then so am I. If you’ll have me, of course. I need to protect my surgeon, and make sure I get him back in one piece.”

He stared at me with those blue lasers. For once I had surprised him. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I think we all have, Colonel. But I promise I won’t be just another mouth to feed. I’ll bring a good rifle that can hit things a long way off. That’s come in handy in the past.”

“What about your boat?”

“Hung can watch it. Boat guard is his favorite duty. We’ll be back in a few days, right? He won’t miss us; it’ll be like a vacation for him. So, am I invited or not?”

“Yes, of course you are. And thank you.”

We shook hands on it, hard, our eyes still locked. “Where should I stow my gear?”

“With your surgeon, of course, in the back of lorry number three. That’s the only one on the right side. Starboard.”

“I’m already packed.”

“Dress in civilian clothes, long trousers. We’ll switch to uniforms tomorrow. No need to bring your own, we have more than enough. I assume that you have a sturdy pair of boots?”

“I do.”

“Good. Wear them. And bring ear defenders; I’m told that the Atlas is rather loud.”

“I’ll need to rig my own mooring line. When will we be casting off?”

“Not before 2100 hours. After one more radio check for the Storm.”

“What’s the distance from here to the landing beach?”

“Two hundred fifty nautical miles. Twenty-eight hours at nine knots puts us on the beach late tomorrow night.”

“And then we fetch the girls and bring them all home.”

“Quite right. We shall do just exactly that.”

This time I didn’t mock the mission or calculate the odds of success, or even mention the missing patrol boat. Not now, not when I was going ashore with them. Back on Rebel, I went forward on deck and down the scuttle to inform Victor of my decision, but he wasn’t there. I went through the cargo hold to go aft, climbing over the fuel drums and into the galley and then back to my cabin to grab my war gear. Rucksack on my back, kit bag, and rifle case: I could still carry it all in one trip, like any Marine worth his salt.

On the landing craft were two trucks on the port side and one to starboard. Number three, the one to starboard, was Victor’s truck, my truck. Nobody was in the back. Just empty troop benches on both sides under the green canvas. The top of its raised tailgate was level with the landing craft’s aft deck, so I climbed over and down inside and set my bags next to Victor’s. Other kit bags and gear for their mission were lashed or clipped to the sides of the truck, under the troop benches.

I dropped down the centerline ladder to the cargo deck, between the two trucks in the rear, and went forward. I passed Stanley the radioman who was heading the other way. We both had to turn sideways to get past one another.

“Is Doctor Aleman aboard? Have you seen him?” I asked.

“Aye, he’s up at the front.” He stared at me a moment and then went on his way.

Where a fourth truck might have fit on the starboard side forward, there were two black inflatables. They were four-meter Zodiacs, thirteen-footers. No consoles, just outboard motors with tillers. The outboards were painted black to match the rubber boats; from their size, they looked to be about twenty-five-horsepower jobs. It was a tight fit for the two inflatables. They were staggered, with the front boat to port, hard up against the forward truck’s front right tire. The aft boat was pressed against the right side of the landing craft well. Tolbert, Pat Maguire, and the two surfers were loading gear into them. The one in the back had an off-road motorcycle lashed down against the bottom on its side, its handlebars loosened and turned to lie flat.

Victor was all the way forward, just behind the bow ramp, leaning against the side of the well deck. The top of the angled bow ramp was too high to see over when standing on the cargo deck, but the side of the landing craft was at neck height. He was staring at Alegranza

I stood next to him and said, “Hey, Victor.”

He mumbled hello without turning to greet me, and we both stood and

stared at the foreboding cliffs of Alegranza. Its colors and patterns had been changing with the sun's angle over the course of the afternoon. After ten days at sea, merely the sight of land was mesmerizing. I said, "I put the pistol in your truck. But you forgot something else."

He ignored me. "I don't see an easy way up those cliffs, do you? Maybe the crack above those orange boulders could get you onto that gray ledge, but then what? You'd need ropes from there, but it would be an amazing view from the top. So, you have something else for me to take?"

"That's right. Me."

"What?" He half turned around.

"I decided to go with you." I thought Victor would show some surprise, but he didn't. He just nodded and went back to staring at the island. We knew every wrinkle and pore of each other's faces, but Alegranza was something fresh for our land-starved eyes. Its presence before us was a staggering sight, otherworldly in its vast, barren beauty.

He said, "There's really nothing for me in South America. Nothing that actually means anything. So, I thought, what am I saving myself for? Senility and old age, until I can no longer get around on boats? Then what? A shack on a beach? Alone? Is there even one person living today in Argentina who knows if I'm dead or alive, much less one who cares? I doubt it very much. I can spend my gold anywhere, or nowhere, but what difference does it make? My wife is dead, she won't know that I put flowers on her grave. She lives only in my mind now. A visit to her grave means little, really." He slowly shook his head. "But if I can help Colonel Rainborow's mission to succeed, if I can help to bring the girls back to Ireland, well, that would actually *mean* something, wouldn't it? They're just beginning their lives."

"Yes, that would mean something."

"And that's why I'm going. And I'm glad that you're going, too. For the same reason. For the girls. When both of us are dead and gone, there'll be nobody to mourn us, or even to remember our names, or what we did, or what we failed to do. But the girls, if we get them out, the girls will carry on. They'll return to their families, they'll marry, they'll have children of their own. They'll be living in freedom and not in slavery—and that's why I'm going."

When he ended, he didn't turn around, he just kept staring at the land a few hundred meters off, and so I left him with his thoughts. Before I passed the two black inflatables again, I told the sergeant major, "You're stuck with

me, Bert. My war bags are already in lorry number three."

He put his hand out for me to shake and said, "Welcome aboard, skipper. Are you bringin' a rifle, then?"

"Of course I am."

"What is it?"

"A Sako seven-millimeter Remington Magnum."

He grinned and said, "*Very* nice. You can't have too many good snipers, I always say."

There were more handshakes and "welcome aboards" from the others on Rainborow's team. None of them seemed particularly surprised that Victor and I were joining them on their mission. I told the sergeant major that I could use some help to take a line from Rebel Yell to the mooring ball, and I requested the assistance of the two surfers. The request was granted, and they went across with me.

I stood at my RIB's console to handle the wheel and throttle. Enough wind and chop had come up to soak the two with spray while they leaned far over the bow and grabbed the iron ring of the mooring ball and shackled my thickest hawser to it. Nylon rope that was two inches in diameter would hold my schooner through almost any conceivable weather while she was tucked out of the northeast trades behind Alegranza. With the mooring line attached and the shackle's big steel pin wired down, Tommy and Kam helped me lift the RIB onto Rebel's deck with the foremast boom and stow it in its chocks between the masts.

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We sat down to dinner in our usual order: Pat, Rainborow, and Tolbert across from Victor and me, with Captain Hank Landry added to our side. For the first and only time since Ireland we held hands around the table while the colonel thanked the good Lord for the fine meal, the successful voyage, and, if possible, for His divine assistance on the upcoming mission. Even the religiously agnostic Victor gave a respectful amen and allowed his hands to be grasped.

The fish was prime; it tasted like grouper or sea bass. The Canary Islanders had brought over some of their own local spices and other garnishes, making the meal even better. The local paprika was reputed to be the best in the world, Hank Landry claimed. (I had already noticed that Hung

had found a supply of fresh tobacco, so he would be happy on solitary boat-guard duty.)

With more dinner seatings waiting behind us, we couldn't tarry over each morsel. We finished quickly, with little conversation, and went about our business. I retired aft to my cabin and stretched out on the double berth. There was no rush to go across to the Atlas, where I would only have the back of a troop truck for my accommodations.

After a half hour, there was a knock on my door. I knew it was the Scottish radioman, so I told him to enter.

He said, "Do you mind, skipper?"

"Be my guest, Stanley." He didn't have to mention that he wanted to connect his laptop to my radio, making one last try at contacting the missing Storm.

He plugged in and set to work. I stood behind his back facing the side of my double berth, reviewing some of my boat documents and gathering them in a manila envelope to leave under my pillow, where Hung would find them if we didn't come back. Most of my guns and gold were hidden somewhere in my cabin. Hung knew some of the hiding places, but he would find them all, given enough time. I thought of a few more things to take with me on the mission: a hand compass, an extra laser range-finder, a second small flashlight, another pair of socks.

After ten minutes of tapping on his keyboard, the Scottish signaler unplugged his machine, packed up and left. He was dressed in civilian clothes for the departure; they all were. For most of the voyage they'd worn a mix of civvies and uniform parts, but tonight military wear had been banned. I wore jeans and a brown jersey over a tan T-shirt. It was a long way to the beach, and if the landing craft was intercepted by a patrol boat or a cutter, it would not do for us to be seen in uniform. Of course, if we were bagged by a warship and boarded, as soon as the weapons were discovered, the game would be up. After the radioman left, I closed my cabin door behind me and went through the galley one last time.

Hung was there, cleaning up. I told him, "I'm going with Victor. We'll be back in a week or less. After we're gone, use the anchor windlass and take in the mooring line so there's only thirty feet to the mooring ball. Thirty feet, okay?"

"I know thirty feet. Thirty feet mean same nine meter. Nine very lucky number. You know how many big fish they catch, *chu-tao*?"

“No, how many?”

“They catch nine big fish. Nine very lucky number. You and Victor be back before nine day, I know.”

“Tran Hung, I left all the boat papers in my cabin.”

“No boat paper, *chu-tau*. You be back before nine day, and Victor be back too.”

“Yes, I’ll be back, with Victor and the girls.”

“This a very good thing you do, *chu-tau*. Girls not trash, to throw away and forget. Girls mother of world.”

“This is a very crazy thing that we’re doing. Number ten *dinky-dau* crazy.”

“We all going die someday. Maybe now you have easy quick time in hell.”

“Maybe. I hope to see you again, my old friend.” I shook Hung’s hand, staring into his narrow, dark eyes.

He said, “I know I see you again, *chu tau*. You and Victor. This a very lucky mission. *So rất may mắn*. Very lucky.”

We went topside. I climbed over both sets of lifelines, up onto the aft deck of the Atlas. The big diesels rumbled to life beneath my feet, unleashing a roar through the exhaust stacks atop the back of the pilothouse. I put in my ear plugs, but the gale storm of sound penetrated straight through my skull.

The Atlas crewmen fore and aft cast us off, throwing Rebel’s lines over to Hung. We just nodded to each other as our hulls drifted apart. There was a bang and clatter of gears engaging, the engine blast grew even more ferocious, and the Atlas was under way. As soon as she cleared the mooring ball out ahead of my schooner, she cut a sweeping turn to starboard and made for the open Atlantic, leaving Alegranza behind.

A less stealthy insertion craft was impossible to imagine. In 24 hours we would be closing in on the beach in Morocco, and they would hear us coming from miles at sea. What the hell had I just done in deciding to join Colonel Rainborow’s mad crusade?

19

Colonel Rainborow, Hank Landry, and his first mate were inside the pilothouse. It had a waist-high handrail welded around its exterior, and I grabbed it to steady myself outside the window, looking in. It felt strange to be completely shorn of authority during an ocean voyage. I was lower in the pecking order than Landry's most recently hired deck hand, and I left after watching them for a few minutes.

The canvas-covered back of lorry number three was already half full of gear for the mission. We pushed these bags and boxes around and created little nests and tried to rest. It was a miserable, never-ending night, but somehow I managed to catch a few hours of sleep. The twin diesel roar was unrelenting, even with ear plugs. As the skies grew lighter, tea was brewed up in one of the other trucks and brought around to number three in a thermos.

Breakfast was the same vegetables and rice we'd been eating for a week, with bits of yesterday's fish added. We were soldiers on a mission, and no one among us would whine about the miserable conditions. Each man did his suffering in private, while outwardly cracking jokes and forcing happy faces. Even Victor smiled a little. We stretched out our aching muscles and bones and eased into the new day.

I climbed from our truck onto the aft deck for a look at the horizon. Blessedly, we were alone on the ocean. The pilothouse had watertight doors on the port and starboard sides that were swung forward and latched open for cross ventilation. Hank Landry was wearing plastic earmuffs over a ball cap, and dark aviator-style sunglasses. He was sitting in the captain's chair behind the wheel, his fingers laced behind his neck, while Atlas ran on autopilot.

I had to shout to be heard over the diesels. "Wanted to have a look."

"Not much to see," he yelled back.

Inside the Spartan wheelhouse was a mix of twentieth-century analog gauges and some newer digital devices. The brass work was polished, the gray paint clean. The radios, the depth sounder, and the radar were all turned off.

Conversation was impossible over the diesel roar, so I yelled, "What's our ETA?"

Landry hollered back, "If the wind holds from the east, maybe around

midnight.”

I stood by his shoulder and watched for a while, getting a feel for the boat from the skipper’s perspective. After a few minutes of sharing his space I left, my departure seemingly unnoticed. Landry’s attention was fixed ahead.

Next, I went down the short aluminum ladder between the trucks. The surfers were checking and adjusting the gear in the two Zodiacs. Rainborow had calculated the dimensions of the loaded landing craft down to the inch. Standing in the middle of the cargo deck, I gained even more respect for the colonel’s professionalism. He’d said the landing craft would be waiting for us in the Canaries, and it was. He’d said three military trucks would be aboard, and they were. From when I’d met him in Ireland until that moment, everything that he had said would happen had happened—except for the Storm missing its radio contacts.

In the light of day, the trucks were checked over, each motor started and run until it was warm. Holes for the machine guns had already been cut in the roofs of the cabs, but the team had to attach pintle mounts for them, drilling holes and bolting on their mounting brackets. An M-60 machine gun was handed from truck to truck to check the cab-roof pintle mounts.

The mounts looked sloppily built, not true ring mounts at all. Their unpainted steel would begin to rust almost immediately, but so what? They were made back in Ireland for a one-night mission. At Pat’s suggestion, the RPK light machine gun we’d captured from the pirates went into lorry three as the convoy’s tail gun, to discourage road pursuit if that became necessary. It could be tied at its balance point over the tailgate, a crude but effective mounting system.

One of the M-60s was already packed into an inflatable, to provide beach security until the Atlas came ashore and disgorged the three trucks. Only when the hinterland was known to be safe and the trucks were ready to drive out would this machine gun be relocated atop the cab of lorry number three.

In the afternoon, the team changed into their old-style British desert pattern uniforms. They could pass as Moroccan troops at a hundred meters, maybe. Even closer at night, and that was the plan: in and out in one night. Sergeant Major Tolbert handed me a set of camo trousers with a brown nylon belt, a long-sleeve uniform blouse, and a floppy hat. The hat was too small, but the shirt and pants fit well enough. I kept my own hiking boots.

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There was a long swell from the northeast trades, but these low rollers were so far apart that the landing craft gently climbed and descended them without any slamming. The wind chop driven by the desert wind out of Africa slapped off the starboard side of the landing craft. Spray occasionally shot up and the wind swept it across. The driest and most comfortable places on the boat (outside of the pilothouse) were inside the cabs of the Unimog trucks. Three men could comfortably sit inside, and they were rarely empty. I grabbed an hour sitting in the passenger seat of lorry number three when it was unoccupied, giving me a clear view of the forward horizon over the bow ramp.

The steady diesel roar precluded easy conversation. Throats would only grow hoarse, so verbal orders and instructions were kept to a minimum. The time for briefing the mission had passed; now we were *on* the mission. My part in the plan was simple and required little in the way of detailed instructions. Just stay in or near the trucks, protect Victor, and make myself useful with my Sako, if and when that became necessary.

Long, loud hours passed with nothing more to do than wait. In the afternoon the surfers changed into black wetsuits. They climbed all the way up onto the front of the angled bow ramp, their heads and shoulders fully exposed to the wind and spray, their arms spread wide like they were flying over the ocean.

Dusk fell again, marking nearly twenty-four hours since we'd left Alegranza. There was nothing to see, so I climbed onto the aft deck and stood just outside the pilothouse for a while in the wind, clutching the handrail. Same faint glow of instruments; Rainborow, Hank, and his mate still in the same order inside. The waxing five-eighths-full moon was high above. Polaris told me our course was still northeast.

I climbed over the tailgate into lorry three, using my LED penlight to avoid stepping on Victor or Pat. The other Irishmen in his lorry crew were up in the cab. I settled down among the gear bags and tried to let my mind slip into neutral, but the unrelenting diesel roar was maddening. I tried not to look at my digital watch every other minute. The rear of the truck was open above the tailgate, so the silhouette of the pilothouse was visible as it rolled against the background of stars.

At eleven p.m., Colonel Rainborow exited the pilothouse, crouched behind our truck, and yelled, "Two hours! Two hours!" while holding up a pair of fingers. Then he disappeared to pass the word to the men in the other

trucks.

I was sitting across from Pat, my upper body swaying to keep upright against the constant rolling motion. The penlight clipped to his collar was smaller than a lipstick; it cast a soft glow inside the truck. I'd turned off my own mini-light as soon as I'd gotten settled, to save its battery. I leaned over and I asked him in a near shout, "Two hours to what? The beach?"

"No," he yelled back. "Two hours to launching the inflatables. And that means me. I'm in the beach party."

There was no point in shouting back, so I just nodded my understanding and gave him a thumbs-up. Most of the team were snug in the cabs of the trucks, seat-belted in to keep them from rolling around. Victor was next to me, but he'd arranged his bags into a comfortable slope behind him and was lying on his back, eyes shut, mouth open, earplugs in and apparently asleep. He was wearing old British desert cammies like the rest of us, but he also wore his compact inflatable life vest. He was always more cautious than me that way, using safety lines on deck in rough weather and usually wearing the life vest in the dinghy, especially after dark. A little later, I saw Colonel Rainborow cross the aft deck again and re-enter the pilothouse. The faces of the three men inside were just perceptible through the square front windows in the pale light cast up by the gauges.

Another hour crawled past as I checked and rechecked my watch. At midnight the colonel returned, and this time he held up a single digit. He roared to be heard over the engines, "One hour, one hour!" Pat held up a single finger in response, indicating that he had received the message, and the colonel disappeared again. What mattered to me was that soon I would be planting my boots on terra firma and finally escaping the skull-splitting roar of the diesels.

Pat yelled, "One hour means me. I'll see you in Morocco." He was wearing British desert cammies, not a wetsuit, so I presumed that he was going to drive a Zodiac while the two surfers swam to shore to scout the landing site. He slipped a military-style inflatable life vest over his head and pulled the strap around his back. The Irishman collected a few small items and climbed over the tailgate and out of the truck.

With Pat's light gone, I turned mine back on and tied it to my shirt's left pocket buttonhole with a little piece of string, so that it could either dangle outside or be tucked safely away. All Victor and I could do was wait in the back of the truck until it drove off the landing craft and onto the continent of

Africa. He was stirred awake by Rainborow's announcement and Pat's departure, and he shot me a stern look. He mimed clutching at his life vest and pulling the inflator. Deflated and folded, it was only a couple inches wide lying flat against each side of his chest, and running up behind his neck to form an inverted U. He pointed to my kit bag, then to me, and mimed putting it on, unless I'd been too stupid to pack it.

I began to say, "We're *driving* off this boat," but he had a point. I unzipped my kit bag, found my life vest, put it over my head, worked the strap around my back, and buckled it. Just get me off this screaming torture barge, I thought, checking and rechecking my digital watch as the final hour dragged by. I tried to escape into memories or by thinking about what Hung was doing on Rebel Yell, or Sinead back in Ireland, but it was impossible. Being at sea on the Atlas had been like standing on a runway behind a jet engine. Every living soul in Morocco would hear us coming from miles away. It was madness to believe that we could simply drive our trucks ashore unnoticed.

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At almost one in the morning the engine roar lessened a few decibels, so we were slowing down. This meant that we were nearing the drop-off point for the inflatables. The stars behind the pilothouse slewed to the left, so we were turning to the east. The landing craft's motion changed with the new course and lessened speed. Victor and I observed one another in the dim glow of my dangling penlight. Our job was to sit tight and wait. We both startled when we heard electric motors whining, and what sounded like chains banging link by link over metal.

"That's the bow ramp," I yelled to Victor, and he nodded his understanding. In order for the Zodiacs to be launched, the ramp would have to be lowered down to the level of the sea. I tried to picture the beach scouts dragging the inflatables forward onto the now horizontal ramp. The rubber boats would be plenty heavy, loaded down as they were with guns and gear and even a dirt bike.

It was frustrating to be stuck in the back of the lorry, with all the action happening in the bow, but I would only add to the confusion if I went forward to help. If they needed me, they knew where I was, and Victor too. The drivers, machine gunners, and navigators waiting in the cabs would be

able to see the show, and they would know if the beach party needed help launching the Zodiacs. The diesels became even quieter, and I guessed that the Atlas was slowing down to maintain bare steerageway with her rudders.

There was more metallic grinding, banging, and squealing as the bow ramp's angle was adjusted. I couldn't stand not to at least watch, so I climbed out of the truck, dashed across the rolling deck to the pilothouse, and grabbed the pipe railing with both hands. I couldn't stand in front of the forward windows without blocking the view of those inside, so I followed the handrail around to the port side. With our forward speed almost gone, the Atlas was wallowing like a pig in the swells. Working lights on both sides of the bow had been switched on, casting a harsh glare down on the deck and the now-horizontal ramp. Both Zodiacs had been dragged forward onto its lip, the beach parties holding the grab ropes on their sides.

I looked inside the pilothouse. Hank Landry was standing in the middle behind the wheel, steering manually, making big corrections to port and starboard. At dead slow speed, the two rudders had almost no bite, and I could see that it took a lot of effort to keep the flat-bottomed vessel on course. Rainborow was on the other side of Hank, his first mate was on my side. I scanned the instruments that I could read through the pilothouse window, and I was surprised to see that the radar had been switched on. I could see it making orange-black sweeps, but from my angle it was just garbled gibberish and I could make no sense of it.

Then a big swell lifted our stern, and the Atlas surged forward and lowered her bow. Inside the pilothouse I could see the glowing numbers of the depth sounder, the digital display flashing elevens and twelves. But was it set to feet, meters, or fathoms? Twelve feet seemed impossibly shallow, so did we have forty or seventy feet of water beneath us? Meters or fathoms? If we weren't close to land—and I couldn't see any land in the moonlight—then we were either dangerously close to an unseen reef, or we were passing over a seamount. We would find out which when we struck bottom, or when the fathometer showed the depths beneath us dropping off again as we reached deeper water on the other side.

If we were approaching a reef, I should have been able to see the white spray of breaking waves ahead of us in the moonlight. Then another huge swell passed under us, and again the Atlas surged forward. I looked between the trucks to the brightly lit bow ramp. The two surfers were identifiable in their black wetsuits. The others were in cammies like the rest of us, but

soaked with spray. They were all pulling the forward-most rubber boat, trying to launch it, when the next swell gave the Atlas another nudge of acceleration and a downward tilt as her stern lifted, and then I watched as the inrushing sea flooded over the bow ramp and it dug in and disappeared underwater.

The Atlas recovered as the wave surged beyond us, but the bow ramp was still buried deep under water, and a swimming-pool volume of ocean had to be expelled from her self-bailing cargo deck. This was theoretically always higher than the waterline, due to the flotation compartments welded inside her when she'd been built a half a century earlier.

Before the sloshing water could drain out the scuppers, though, the next swell overtook us from behind and drove us forward again, and with a pair of bangs like cannon shots, the retrieving cables and chains on both sides of the bow ramp snapped and gave way. The deck was flooded all the way back between the trucks, and the ramp nowhere to be seen!

The buoyancy of the air-filled double bottom beneath the cargo deck brought the landing craft back up and the sea ran out her scuppers, but the bow ramp was still gone from sight. Its slack chains and cables flailed from side to side across the landing craft's bow, which was now wide open to the sea. The rubber boats and their crews were gone.

The air chambers between the deck and the bottom of the hull should have kept the bow a couple of feet above the ocean's static waterline even with the broken bow ramp hanging free or detached. And I'm sure it would have had the Atlas been tied alongside a pier in flat water, but we weren't in flat water. Far from it!

I looked inside the pilothouse again, my forehead pressed against the Plexiglas. Hank pulled both throttles back with one hand and worked the transmission gear-shift levers with the other. He shouted something to his mate and to Rainborow, then he stooped through the port side hatch and came outside. Each movement required them to acquire new handholds and balance points as they knocked against one another with the wild rolling and pitching of the landing craft. Surprised to see me there, Hank grabbed my shoulder, bug-eyed. "The bottom just came up from two hundred meters to ten!"

"How far is it to land?" I looked forward; the inflatables and their crews were nowhere to be seen. The ramp was gone and the bow was still open to the sea, but most of the water had been ejected out the scuppers or through the open bow as the Atlas rolled and pitched.

Hank ignored my question, or hadn't heard it. "We have to drive her in

reverse until we can get the bow ramp back up. We have to do it in reverse, it's the only way, and we have to use grappling hooks and come-alongs and chain-hoists to pull the ramp back up—it's the only way!" While shouting this to me, he was giving arm signals to his mate, who was standing at the wheel, watching his skipper through the window. Hank leaned back through the open side hatch and yelled, "A little more to port!"

When I had his attention again, I asked him, "What if we can't fix it? Can we make it to the beach in reverse?"

"I don't know!" he bellowed. "The GPS went out a half hour ago, and we've been running parallel to the coast. We were waiting for new satellites to come over."

Murphy's Law of technology. "Then why did you put the ramp down?"

"Ask the colonel!" The skipper of the Atlas leaned back inside the hatch to holler new instructions to his mate, while I watched through the side window. "That's it! Hold that, hold that!" The mate looked terrified. Rainborow held a grab bar with one hand to steady himself while he punched buttons on his GPS with his other hand and moved it around, trying to find a signal. Hank brought his head back outside and turned to look forward again, grabbing the handrail just behind me.

"You mean we're *lost*? Is that why the radar is on?"

"Naw, we're not lost—we found Cape Zerhoun on radar. At least we *think* it's Cape Zerhoun! Rainborow thought we were close enough to launch the boats. The beach party could make sure where we were, and lead us in. Come on and help me, we have to get the bow ramp back up! I don't know if we can do it out here, but we have to try. It's hard enough to do it alongside a pier."

"It's happened before?"

"Sure, it's happened before. But never like tonight!"

Then another swell even more massive than the last sent the Atlas forward despite its twin propellers churning at low RPM in reverse. While the stern lifted again, Hank grabbed the shoulder of my uniform again and said, "Come on, we can't wait—let's go!" He let go of me and half-slid across the aft deck, heading for the ladder down to the cargo deck, as the mountainous wave lifted our stern higher and higher. I heard both diesels screaming at full RPM once again, this time in reverse, but they were useless against the force of the rising wave and the gravity of the downhill slide.

Through the window I saw the mate spin the wheel hard over to

starboard in an attempt to turn the landing craft around, but this put the lifting force of the wave under our port quarter, so that as the stern came up the Atlas heeled over. I looked forward and saw her wide-open bow digging into the ocean, her deck lights still blazing, the ocean rolling onto the cargo deck, and I could feel the stern lifting so high that I had to hang onto the railing with both hands. The seventy-five-foot landing craft corkscrewed to starboard as her stern continued to rise and then she rolled until she was laid over nearly on her beam and I was pressed against the side of the now nearly horizontal pilothouse. While she was lying on her starboard side, the gripe chains attaching the trucks to the deck failed with loud bangs and the trucks slammed down against each other and the right side of the Atlas and met the rising water.

Now the side of the pilothouse was a wet, slanting deck beneath my feet, with water, foam and spray rushing in every direction and the exhaust from the roaring diesel engines still blasting out of the dry stacks at the back. I was unsure whether the landing craft would right herself or completely keel over to belly up—it never for a moment occurred to me that she could sink, hypothetical under-deck buoyancy chambers and all! I stood on the pilothouse window, waiting to see which way she would roll, back upright or belly over, when she slid forward and down, her engines still revving at full RPM in reverse.

Her rampless bow was an open mouth buried deep in the sea, and then in a slow, almost gentle motion, the Atlas knifed forward while still on her side, her stern rising as she went down. I was lost in vertigo as the air rushed out of the Atlas’s pilothouse doors, the Plexiglas windows and steel bulkheads sinking beneath my boots and disappearing into the deep. And just like that, the Atlas was gone.

20

I was tumbling in seawater, and the increasing pressure on my ears meant I was being dragged down. I felt something against my neck: it was one of the lifelines. I grabbed the wire with both hands and pushed away, not knowing up from down, wondering what might try to kill me next. And if the Atlas was rolling all the way over, I might be trapped beneath and forced to the bottom.

An idea flashed through my mind. I grabbed the knob on the right side of my life vest and yanked it hard. The vest burst full of CO_2 and I felt the fat, rubbery yoke smashing the sides of my face, hauling me upward. My head broke the surface and I tried to catch a breath but swallowed foam instead. After gagging most of it out, I forced myself not to inhale until I saw the starry sky above. Another steep swell lifted me high, giving me a clear view of the horizon under the moon, but this wave didn't break, instead it simply rushed away, dropping me into a valley-size trough.

Once I'd choked up some more seawater, I was able to calm myself down enough to take stock of my situation. I could see right away exactly what that situation was: utterly hopeless without outside rescue—which was not coming. The water wasn't uncomfortably cold, but it was far enough below my core body temperature that hypothermia would kill me in a matter of hours. On the plus side, my life vest took care of buoyancy, so I didn't need to expend energy simply to stay afloat. The British desert cammies would trap some water like a loose wetsuit, slowing down my heat loss. Maybe I would see another sunrise, maybe not, depending on how long I could hold out against the effects of hypothermia. I wondered about ditching my boots, but decided that the heat they saved more than offset their weight.

Apart from my labored breathing, silence reigned as the big swells alternately lifted and dropped me and raced away toward distant shores. One of any sailor's worst nightmares had become my reality: I was treading water, alone in the ocean. The swells that had sunk the landing craft had come without wind or sound. In the deep ocean, three-meter swells with dozens of meters between them are negligible, but when the sea floor below them abruptly angles up toward the surface, the waves can be squeezed together and thrown skyward. I thought of my old paper charts. "Seamount reported" was commonly indicated in small type. Their locations were often reported as

approximate, but the Atlas had scored an unlucky bull's-eye.

With each new swell I was lifted high, able to see up and down the line of the wave, the moonlight flashing off its back. I checked my wristwatch to see what time it was, but it was gone, torn away as I escaped from the sinking ship. And what difference did it make what time it was? For some stupid reason, I just wanted to know the time of the disaster. For the record, I suppose. But for whose record? My oldest and my newest memories and every memory in between would disappear forever when my core temperature dropped a few degrees. Still, I wondered what time it was. I knew that it was already after midnight, making it Tuesday, the fourth of November. For the record, I thought, this would be my last November. And my last Tuesday. My last night alive, period. So I knew at least that much, for the record, just before the record inside my mind disappeared without a trace.

A watery grave, that's what I'm in, I thought. I might as well be buried alive. And after I lost consciousness, what then? Darkness, or some new light?

The seawater was at least ten degrees colder than my body temperature. In a matter of hours my temperature would match that of the sea, but long before that, I would be unconscious. If I'd gone overboard back in the Arctic, the process would have taken minutes instead of hours. Here at thirty degrees north latitude the water wasn't painful, but it was still cold enough to kill me. I was at about the same latitude as Jacksonville, but Florida was a long, long swim to the west.

Above me was Ursa Major, the Big Dipper, its handle pointed down, the top of its ladle pointed left toward Polaris, the North Star. And there was zigzagging Cassiopeia, to the left of Polaris. I turned counterclockwise to say farewell in turn to Aires and Perseus, then Taurus, Orion, Gemini, and Leo, and back around to the Big Dipper.

What I saw of the moon, flattened on its top, was really just reflected sunlight. The sun had already dropped from my view for the last time. The moon and the stars and the planets had all been spinning for millions of years before I'd come along, and they would still be spinning for millions of years after I'd gone. Maybe billions of years, an incomprehensible span of time. And in the middle of it all, there had been a blink of awareness on an insignificant blue planet known to himself as Dan Kilmer.

Something flashed by me in the water, leaving a green phosphor trail. Anything that big and fast has sharp teeth at its front end, so perhaps my wait

would be shorter than I'd expected…then I heard a puff of stale breath being exhaled and saw a curved fin looping over and disappearing. This was followed by more exhalations and more shiny backs and arcing dorsal fins. Porpoises were a more welcome sight than sharks, but they couldn't un-sink the Atlas.

After sailing my schooner over thousands of sea miles, I'd had a boat sink out from under me during my second night on board. I'd joined a fool's crusade, and the fools hadn't even made it to the beach. And now I was treading water in the Atlantic, God knows how far from the coast of Africa. We had been close enough to drop the ramp to launch the Zodiacs, so the cape might have been only a few miles away. But to a man treading water out of sight of land, at night, it might as well have been a hundred.

Then I remembered that my life vest had its own light attached to the left shoulder. It blinked on when I squeezed the button. I tried to be optimistic. Coastal currents might carry me toward land. Or I might be picked up by a fishing boat after daybreak, if I lasted that long. Or even by pirates: you'll take what you can get when you're treading water out of sight of land in the ocean. Slavery in Morocco? Bring it on—just get me to dry land. I can plan an escape only if I'm still alive. Staying alive was the only thing left to do, so I should swim toward the east, where Hank had seen land on the radar, just to give myself the best chance at survival.

I found Polaris again, turned right, and began to side-stroke toward the continent of Africa. After a while the swells lowered and stretched out again, so I must have drifted beyond the seamount, back into deeper water. Kick, stoke, and glide. Side-stroke on my right side, eyes mostly closed against the salt, blinking them open on the lift of the swells to orient on Polaris. Slow and steady wins the race. Polaris is north and Africa is east. Kick, stroke and glide. Kick, stroke and glide. Time passed without meaning until I paused for a moment and took a deep breath. I smelled something new, something oily.

Fuel that had escaped from the Atlas? An oil slick somewhere near? Then the smell was gone. I tried the breaststroke for a while, with my face out of the water, making only a little forward progress. On the tops of the swells I strained my eyes and ears to the east. I was hoping for the sight and sound of breaking surf, but there was nothing ahead except more ocean. Down in the trough, then back up to the top for another look; still no land. That didn't mean I couldn't reach land, if I was lucky. With my eyes barely above the water, even on the wave tops the radius of my visible horizon was

less than a mile.

Then the burnt oil smell returned, and with it a faint new sound. I lowered my ears underwater and heard the crackly whine of what might have been a distant propeller. The sound was not much different from that made by shoals of shrimp, so I thought perhaps my mind was playing tricks. While turning and being lifted at the same time, I thought I saw a distant flickering light near the horizon. I noted its location below Cassiopeia, so I could find it again

Then I remembered a pair of pop flares the size of small cigars in a pouch along the bottom of the vest. Like the LED light, I hadn't even thought of them. I ripped open the velcro flap, grabbed them both in my left hand, unscrewed all four of their plastic end-caps, and hooked my finger through one of the little chain loops that would launch the rocket. When I could make out the light again, I yanked the chain. A little red meteor streaked skyward a few hundred feet and burned out halfway back down. But for a few seconds it had lit one corner of the sky with an unmistakable flash of red.

I had one more flare, one more chance. On the next wave top I scanned the horizon and saw the distant light blink a few times, and then I was down in the trough again. I aimed the flare skyward, pulled its chain and launched it, following the red comet up with my eyes and saying a little prayer. It blinked out and left an after-shine printed on my eyeballs.

On one of the next wave tops I saw the blinking strobe, now accompanied by a steady white light. After a few more minutes of rising on the crests and dropping in the troughs, I could hear an outboard motor's steady drone. I ducked my head underwater and the crackling whine of a propeller was much louder. Only then did I realize that foam plugs were still in my ears, way in there, forced in by the pressure of my near drowning. I dug them out and let them float away.

My vest had a plastic whistle tied to its right shoulder. I grabbed it and blew it as hard I could. I could make my visual checks only during the moments on the wave crests, but after a few more dips and rises I saw that the strobe was now under the steady white light, not beside it, and both were brighter than before. They had turned. Somebody had seen my flares.

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A black Zodiac nosed up to me, and I heard Kamal Abidar's voice from

behind a flashlight asking someone else, “Who is it? Can you tell?”

Another voice said, “It’s the other Yank.”

The engine’s transmission lever clacked into neutral, and there were more voices and moving lights and many hands, and the black rubber side tube of the inflatable in front of my face. I grabbed the rope that was tied to rings along the side.

I heard Pat Maguire say, “Take it easy, Danny Boy, take it easy. Let us pull you in.” Their light was switched off, the strobe still blinking somewhere. Hands grabbed at my shoulders and armpits and elbows and belt, and I was manhandled over the side and dragged on top of a mound of cargo.

I rolled onto my back and looked up at their shadowy outlines against the stars, rubbing my salty eyes. There was Kamal Abidar, Pat Maguire, Hank Landry—and Victor. I wasn’t surprised to see some of the men who had been preparing the inflatables for launching from the bow ramp. And Hank had been outside when his ship keeled over. But Victor had been in the back of lorry number three when I’d seen him last. I grabbed him by the shoulder, pulled him close, and stared at his face, haloed by stars. Like me, he was soaking wet and shivering, and his life vest was still inflated like mine.

“How did you get out of the truck?” I asked him. I couldn’t see him well; my eyes were still burning from salt.

“I don’t know. The last thing I remember, Colonel Rainborow was saying get ready and holding up one finger, but I don’t know why. My next memory is being in the water. I just don’t know what else happened. I may have taken a blow to the head. They told me that our ship sank, but what ship?”

I said, “The Atlas broached in big waves after her ramp broke. She’s gone.”

He looked at me and said, “I remember nothing, not until I was in the water and staring at the moon. I thought I must have fallen overboard from Rebel Yell. My vest was inflated, I was in the water, but I didn’t remember anything else. And then they found me. But I don’t even know who Hank is. I think I just met him, but that makes no sense. And I’m not so sure about the others. They told me their names, and they seem to know me, but I don’t remember them.”

Victor helped me to a sitting position, and then I turned to the other American. “Rainborow and your first mate were still in the pilothouse when she went down.”

Hank only nodded. There were reasons beyond hypothermia for his numbness and overall flat affect. His boat and his crew were gone—sunk. He wore no lifejacket, and perhaps his bulk had kept him afloat better than a skinnier man, but he had to have been treading water for quite a while just to stay alive, unless he had been picked up early.

I turned to Kam and asked, “How much fuel do we have? Can we make it to land?”

He was sitting on the port-side tube all the way back; it was his hand steering the outboard’s tiller. “We started with twenty liters. We were supposed to launch from ten kilometers offshore, but the GPS was down and they were using the radar. I don’t know where we are or how far it is to land from here, but I think we have enough.”

Rainborow and the mate were in the pilothouse when the Atlas went down, and most of the others had been in the cabs of the trucks. They might have escaped, but probably not. One minute the Atlas was afloat, even if in peril with the broken bow ramp, and the next minute she was gone. I was outside on the aft deck, and I’d barely made it clear.

“It’s just us,” said Hank Landry. “Just us. Nobody else.” He seemed to be in shock, but at least he was making sense and that was a good sign. Victor didn’t even remember the sinking.

“We have to head east,” I said. “The Canaries are too far.” This was so obvious that I felt stupid as soon as I’d said it.

Kam said, “We’ll head for the land, of course. But first, we can spend some more time looking for other survivors. We found you, Dan, and we found Victor and Hank, and we might find some others. We have enough fuel to spend some more time looking.”

The Moroccan surfer had a plan, and it was a damn sight better than anything I had to offer at that moment. He was wearing a wetsuit, meaning he’d suffered less from hypothermia, meaning that his brain was functioning at a higher level than mine. I just sat on the port tube between Kam and Victor, and tried to find space for my feet among all the kit bags and weapon cases. My boots were full of water and I thought about taking them off, but I doubted that my fingers could untie their laces, and I wanted them on in case I found myself treading water again or climbing over rocks or coral to get to shore. Once I was settled, I found the inflation tube on my vest and pushed in the mouth-inflator at the end while I squeezed the vest to deflate it a little. The way it was, inflated fully, it was choking me.

Then I did the same for Victor, but he didn't react at all. Hank was lying on his side between the cargo and the side tube, his face toward me, his eyes open, his expression blank.

Across from me, Pat Maguire had put on a pair of night-vision goggles, NVGs, mounted on a plastic helmet. He was looking eastward when he said to Kam, "There's something out there, I see a light. Turn a little more to starboard. That's it, hold that course." Then he held his arm out to the front, pointing the way for Kam on the tiller. In a few minutes their target was near enough for me to see another flashlight.

It was the other Zodiac, with two men sitting on top, the engine tipped up. Kam pointed his flashlight toward them, aiming it low so it wouldn't blind them, and I saw who was there: Sergeant Major Tolbert and Gino the Italian. Tolbert was wearing a life vest over his wet desert uniform. Gino was wearing the same uniform, but without a life vest.

Tolbert blinked at our flashlight and asked, "Who's there? Who made it?"

"It's me, Bert," said Pat Maguire. "Your old Provie pal is still among the living."

"Kam. I'm here too."

"Dan Kilmer."

"Hank Landry."

Then: "Victor."

Tolbert said, "Well, over here, it's just me and the world's luckiest Italian. It took us forever to get her right side up, but the engine's drowned. At least, we can't start it."

Hank cleared his throat and said, "Did you try—"

But he was cut off by the Italian. "I try everything! She's not gonna run tonight."

Maguire said, "We'll tow you. Give us your bowline. But she'll tow better if everybody gets on this one."

We held the two boats together while Tolbert and Gino climbed across. There were now seven of us sitting on the side tubes and on top of our cargo.

Once we were sorted out, with everybody hanging onto one another, Pat said, "Now that we're towing another boat, I think we should head to land. We did all that we could."

"What about the others?" asked Kam.

"What about them?" said Hank.

“Most of them were in the lorries or the pilothouse when she sank. But Tommy was wearing a wetsuit,” said Tolbert. “He could tread water for days.”

Kam said, “He’s wearing a wetsuit, but I never saw him after the bow ramp broke. I was right there, and I never saw him or heard him after the Atlas went down.”

Tolbert asked, “How much fuel is left?”

Pat shook the plastic gas tank to feel its weight. “Less than half in this one. Now that we’re towing another boat, we’ll burn it even faster. We must accept that everyone else went down with the Atlas. We need to head for land, keeping a sharp lookout, but that’s all we can do. God will have to look after them now.”

Gino said, “I am helping move these boats off from the ramp when she went over. I swim east by the North Star. I swim like this.” He mimed doing the breaststroke. “I am praying to God. I say, *‘Please don’t be too angry on Gino. He make a lot of sins, but he’s no very bad a man.*’ Most time I can’t see nothing, so I just swimming. I am praying to God, and then I am putting out my two hands like this, and I touch the boat. I no see it before I touch it. I open my eyes and see the boat she up-on-top-down, and I don’t see nobody. I come around the boat and I find the sergeant major.”

Tolbert said, “I was trying to turn the boat over. It was impossible by myself. But after we got her upright, even the world’s luckiest Italian couldn’t start the motor. So we were damned fortunate that you tossers happened to come along.”

“When we are on the land,” said Gino, “I start this motor easy in maybe five minutes. No more than that.”

“If we make it to the land,” said Hank.

“Oh, we’ll make it, all right,” said Pat. “We have half of this tank and all of the other.”

Hank replied, “The other tank might have gotten ruined by saltwater while the boat was capsized and the vent was underwater. It don’t take much.”

The sergeant major said, “All right, time for a command decision: head for land. We already have a few hypothermia cases on the way. Just head east, and everyone keep a sharp lookout. That’s all we can do now.”

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Kam found Polaris, pushed the tiller over, and we were off, seven of us on one boat, towing the other. Morocco was a big target, impossible to miss—provided we didn't run out of fuel and the second tank of gasoline wasn't contaminated.

The moon was only a finger-width above the horizon behind us, red and flattened on its top, casting its light eastward across the tops of the swells. Pat Maguire was sitting on the tube opposite me wearing the NVGs. After what seemed like twenty or thirty minutes he said, "I see land!"

In a few more minutes we could all see it. The Sahara dust had obscured the coast until we were very close, and then red cliffs became visible as if a fog had burned off.

Kam throttled way down, and in the quiet we could hear breakers crashing ahead of us. He said to Pat, "Let me have the night vision. It's the only way I can steer us in."

There was no denying the local surfer's qualification to remain on the tiller, so Pat flipped the NVGs up and unsnapped the chin strap. Kam fitted the helmet to his head and pulled the goggles down to his eyes. He looked around, getting adjusted to the new view, and slowly scanned the coast. He said. "We're not where I thought we might be."

Pat asked him, "Don't you recognize it at all? Can you see Cape Zerhoun?"

"No, I just see cliffs. There are cliffs like these up and down the coast for a hundred kilometers."

"Are we north or south of the cape?"

"I don't know. I don't see any landmarks. But I can get us in, and then we'll learn where we are. Hang on, everybody—this might be a bit difficult."

Without night–vision goggles, I was aware only of cliffs out in front and the sound of breaking surf. Then the last of the moon was gone, and only the stars were left. Running through breaking surf was always tricky, and I was glad that we had an actual Moroccan surfer to steer the boat for us. He slowed the engine even more, making gentle turns, choosing his wave.

The swells changed again, this set was lower, and then Kam declared in full voice, "Here we go! Hold on tight—we're going in!" He twisted the throttle to full power, but that didn't do much, not with seven men plus a full combat load of gear in a boat towing a second loaded Zodiac. It was just a question of Kam choosing a wave, which amounted to choosing when to throw the dice. I felt a swell picking us up from behind, but we were towing

another boat, so we couldn't surf that wave in.

Then it reared up to become an overhead comber, but we were still held back by our towed boat, so there was no outrunning it. We found ourselves under a pounding waterfall and then were cast out, skewing sideways in the foam, backwards, around again, in water up to our necks, foam over our heads, holding onto one another and the boat, the boat almost flipping but remaining upright. And then we were scraping on the bottom and stopping. We were on an actual sandy beach; we had not been dashed against a rocky shoreline.

I slid off the Zodiac onto the sand while grabbing the side rope to pull against the force of the spent wave, which was rushing back down the slope, trying to drag the boat back into the surf. We all pulled together and dragged it higher up the beach, out of the reach of the next wave. The tow rope to the other Zodiac had parted during the surf passage, and I heard Kam yelling, "There it is, there it is—let's catch it before it's gone!" He was still wearing the night-vision goggles, so he could see what we could not.

I pushed off from the black rubber tube and followed him, slogging down the beach and back to the water's edge, which was shooting up and rushing back with each spent wave. "Where is it?" I couldn't see the other boat, only Kam's silhouette.

He said, "Follow me—we need to move, or we'll lose it."

I staggered through the wet sand behind him, along with Pat Maguire. When we were close enough, I could see the black boat against the white foam. It was in waist-deep water being carried back out, but we caught it by its side ropes and dragged it up beyond the reach of the next waves. Then I fell to my knees and collapsed across the side tube, my chest heaving, spent.

Our two rubber boats were secure on more or less dry land, but at some distance from each other. The entire beach was only about fifteen meters wide from water to cliff. If the tide was coming up, we would run out of sand and be forced to climb up the rocks. Kam must have been reading my mind, or he just understood what was written on my face, because he said, "The tide is going out. The boats are safe for now." In his wetsuit and goggles, he looked like a true frogman.

All of us were gathered around the second boat by then, after everybody had caught up. Victor's was the first voice I heard. He said, "Hypothermia is going to kill some of us if we make any mistakes. I don't think we can start a fire, and we can't get dry. So we need to keep moving until we make a plan.

Nobody stops, nobody wanders away until we find something we can use for blankets. If we are going to live, we must share our body heat; that is our only chance."

Kam, still wearing the goggles, said, "I'll find a place for us to sleep," and turned and walked up the beach toward the cliff. The rest of us set to untying and unloading gear bags and boxes onto the dry sand, coming up with tarps and ponchos and nylon poncho liners and shiny Mylar space blankets. Kam led us to the cliff and said, "It's not a cave, but it's almost as good. This place will keep the wind from us, and it's above the high-tide line. Give me the biggest plastic sheet for the bottom, and we can all lie down together."

Victor said, "That's right, we have to share body heat. We'll put the other blankets on top."

And that's what we did. We had no physical or mental reserves left; at least, I didn't. I understood that hypothermia would numb us into apathy and immobility if we were left to our own random and individual choices. I knew the signs of hypothermia from long experience, and sure enough, as soon as I stopped moving, I began to shiver like a paint shaker, but in spasms, with periods of calm relaxation between the sudden jolts. I knew that when the shivering stopped for good, I would begin to die as my core temperature dropped even more than it already had.

But an external source of heat, either from a fire or a hot beverage, was beyond our means to create. Instead, we crawled into the little alcove in the cliff, lay on top of the tarp that Kam spread out, and pulled the other plastic sheets over the top of us. That was all we could do. By the luck of how we collapsed in a heap, like a football huddle hit by a cloud of sleeping gas, I found myself somewhere in the middle of a pile of sandy, salty, exhausted, dehydrated, hypothermic men. In a matter of seconds we were all spooning together in our wet uniforms in a mutual search for body heat.

The boats were pulled as high up on the beach as we could drag them, but they were not actually tied to anything or secured in any way. We were too dulled by cold and fatigue to even remember the boats. Nobody was posted to stand watch to guard the rest of us while we slept. Nobody even mentioned posting a watch, unless it was after I fell asleep in the first few moments after tumbling over into that scrum.

God would have to stand watch over us tonight; there was no one else who could. *I'm incredibly lucky to be alive* was my last thought as a warm

feeling that I was at complete peace flowed through me. I had not drowned alone at sea. I was surrounded by my friends, safe on dry land. Then I was gone.

At some point during the night I felt cold rain lashing the plastic against my face, but it was not enough to drag me back up to full consciousness.

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I awoke with sand gritting in my teeth, my arm for a pillow. It was daylight, but we were in shadow at the base of the cliff. I untangled myself from sandy ponchos and tarps and wormed my way out of our alcove without waking the men still asleep beside me. I stretched, still shivering but not as violently as the night before. My damp British desert uniform was crusted with sand both inside and out. I was thirsty, hungry, and cold. But as miserable as I was, I felt like a lottery winner when I remembered treading water in the ocean, believing I was the only survivor of the sinking of the Atlas.

Both Zodiacs had been pulled closer to our sleeping place. The tide was out, exposing another ten meters of beach. I saw Kam, still in his wetsuit, on his knees in the sand with his back toward me, rummaging through gear bags. I trudged down the beach to him and grunted some kind of hello.

He turned around to greet me. “Good morning, and welcome to Morocco. How do you like it so far?”

“Not much. Did you get any sleep?”

“Oh, enough.”

I stretched and yawned and looked out at the ocean, working the kinks out of my sore neck. A clear horizon to the west, cliffs behind us to the east. The surf was much smaller than the night before, breaking over fifty meters out. I wanted to go for a swim just to rinse the sand off, but I was still too cold to get wet again. Damp and sandy would have to do. I spoke quietly, to not awaken the others. “Well, we didn’t drown, and we’re still alive, so I guess we’re lucky, considering. But we’re still basically screwed, don’t you think?”

He grinned. “You more than me, mate! I’m back in my own country, I speak the language, and I have family here. But yeah, we’re still basically screwed.”

“The Spanish have a saying for this, ‘between the sword and the wall.’” And that’s where we were, trapped between the blue Atlantic and the red cliffs of Zerhoun. “So, what’s next? And how do we get out of here?”

Kam said, “I want to take the boat out and look around. There could be other survivors around the points, just out of sight. Tommy was wearing a wetsuit, so it’s possible he made it to land. I should at least go and check.”

“I’ll go with you.” Our little stretch of beach was only about a hundred

meters from north to south, bound by cliffs extending into the sea at both ends. There might have been more cliffs, rocks, or beaches in either direction. No way to tell unless we went out and looked. Hell, there could have been an abandoned Club Med resort just out of sight in either direction. There could have been anything.

Kam seemed encouraged by my offer to go with him. “All right. After we look around with the boat, I’m going to climb up on top and see if I can tell where we are. We can’t plan our next move until I know that.”

No argument there. Every plan starts with “Where am I?” The cliff was sandstone, laid in horizontal slabs that had been thrust up at a sharp angle by ancient terrestrial forces and then cross-cut with gullies and ravines. Deep erosion channels would make climbing fairly easy, except that the sandstone looked weak and crumbly. The topmost ledge that we could see from the beach was maybe fifty feet up, but what was above that? It might be a series of cliffs in steps and we could see only the first of many false summits. No way to know until somebody went up. Keep going far enough and you would reach the Atlas Mountains, four thousand meters high and covered in snow year round.

I sat on the side tube of the Zodiac and began unlacing my boots to at least rinse the sand out of my socks and let my feet, boots, and socks begin to dry. Once this was done, I laid my rinsed boots and socks carefully inside the boat on the plywood deck. Kam handed me a plastic bottle filled with water, and I drank half. It was water from Ireland, because the bottle had been filled from Rebel’s tanks.

“Depending on what I see up there,” Kam said, pointing behind me at the cliffs, “here’s my general plan. First, we’ll get the *moto* up on top. The motorbike. We have a twenty-meter rope that we can use to pull it up. There might be more cliffs on top of that one, but there are seven of us and I’m sure we can get the bike to a road, one way or another.” The boat had been mostly unloaded, with bags and gear scattered about, but the dirt bike was still lying on the bottom, its handlebars folded sideways.

“You think we can start it?”

“Why not? We have two engineers. They’ll start it. Once we get the bike up there, I’ll find a road, and maybe I can get some help.”

“In a wetsuit?” Stupid question. My sluggish mind was still not quite all there. I could have used a pot of coffee or tea, which obviously was not available. Hot coffee, hot tea, hot soup, a hot bath…my mind was still drifty.

“No, not in a wetsuit. I have clothes in a dry bag. Once I find out where we are, I’ll know what to do next. We might use the boats to move up or down the coast. It all depends on where we are.”

“Then what?” I was at a loss. I was just a foreign castaway, and an infidel at that. This was his native land, so it was his show.

“It all depends on where we are and who I can find to help us.”

“But you know the coast all around here, right?”

“I do…well, a lot of it, anyway. Not every kilometer, of course. This beach, these cliffs, they look like a hundred other places. I didn’t see the GPS or the radar, but Rainy said we were close to Cape Zerhoun. I’ll know where we are once I get this bike on a road.”

“How did you learn to speak English so well?” It took both of us to wrestle the dirt bike out of the rubber boat without damaging either of them.

“I grew up hearing English, because I was raised around European tourists. When a German talks to a Spaniard, they talk—they speak—English. The same is true with Swedes and Dutch and Italians and everybody else: they all spoke English when they were on holiday in Morocco. And I can speak French because French was my mother’s tongue and it’s Morocco’s second language. And I speak Arabic, of course, and two Berber dialects.”

“I can speak Spanish okay,” I said, “but that’s it. English and Spanish.”

“Oh, I can speak Spanish too, I forgot that one. All the other Romance languages are easier than French. Portuguese, Italian, I grew up speaking and understanding them all. When I was a small child, I thought the Romance languages were just different dialects. It came as a surprise that not everybody could speak a few different languages. In our family, in our surfing and trekking business, everybody did. I was amazed when I met an Italian who could only speak Italian. That was when I was maybe nine or ten years old. And when I was a teenager I spent a year in California, and that helped me to improve my English even more. You know, colloquialisms and the American accent.” Kam straightened out the bike’s handlebars, aligning them to the frame, and then tightened them down with a wrench that had been taped to them for just that task.

“You lived in California?” We pushed the dirt bike up through the soft sand and left it leaning against the base of the cliff.

“I went there for some surfing competitions when I was sixteen, and I stayed with an American family. I even went to an American high school. They were a family we met when they visited Morocco on a surfing holiday.

And I've traveled to France and England and some other places. And Ireland, of course."

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We spun the now empty and much lighter Zodiac around to face seaward, and dragged it back down to the water.

Kam said, "I'm wearing rubber and you need to stay dry, so I'll get wet again." He grabbed the bow rope, pulled the boat into waist-deep water, and held it steady, the incoming wash rising and falling from his chest to his knees. I jumped over the transom to get aboard, and he pulled us farther out, deep enough for me to drop the motor and yank the starting cord. Nothing. I played with the choke, gave the rope a few more pulls, and the outboard coughed to life and steadied out.

In a flat spot of foamy water between the waves, Kam slid over the side tube across from me and into the boat like an otter. I smacked the shifter into forward, timing my approach to the waves so that we powered up a glassy overhead face just before it broke, popped out on the deep ocean side, and slammed back down. With just two of us in the unloaded boat, the 25-horsepower engine pushed us onto a plane and we easily sped over the next swells before they broke.

Once we were past them, Kam said, "Do you surf?"

"Not for a while. I don't even have a surfboard anymore. But you never forget how to get out through the waves. The timing."

"Yeah, it's all timing. Head south. That's with the current, so it's more likely any survivors will be down that way."

I turned the boat and told him, "Hey, nice job finding that beach last night. If we had run into cliffs like those…" I nodded toward some particularly formidable ones. From our position in the deep water past the breakers, we could see that the coast was broken into segments of beach interspersed with stretches where the surf pounded directly against boulders and cliffs, sending spray skyward and seaward.

"I can't claim it was skill. Mostly it was just luck."

"No, it was more than luck. Like sailing from Morocco to Ireland in an open boat. That wasn't luck, either."

"What was it, then?"

"I would call it seamanship. Maybe you're a natural waterman. Surfing

can do that, and some people are just born with it. Or maybe it was the man upstairs."

"God, you mean?"

"Yes." Kam had saved us all by putting us on one of the rare stretches of sandy beach visible in either direction. If our Moroccan surfer had not survived the sinking of the Atlas to guide us in, then nobody would have survived. The rest of Rainborow's team had already run out of luck when the Atlas went down.

In the foamy backwash not far from the cliffs we spotted an orange life ring, and Kam pulled it aboard. It had ATLAS and LAS PALMAS stenciled on it in black letters. I asked him, "How far out do you think the Atlas was when she went down?"

"I don't know. Five or ten kilometers."

We spotted something black and low in the water, but shining in the sun when it lifted on a swell. In a minute we were there. It was a body floating face down, arms and legs splayed out and hanging below the surface. The body was in a black wetsuit, wearing a life jacket that was not inflated. Pale white hands were visible in the water. We knew who it was even without seeing his face. We heaved him by his lifejacket straps up into the Zodiac. Tommy Pellow was cold but still flexible; rigor had not set in.

Kam turned him onto his back. Tommy's blue eyes were open and undamaged: perfect, but flat and lifeless. The side of his head above his right ear was stove in but there was no blood. The ocean had seen to that. Just some loose flaps of skin and cracked skull bone. Something on the bow of the Atlas must have struck him when she broached. Maybe the bow ramp itself. Or the chains and cables that were flailing around after the ramp broke loose. But no matter what had struck him, Tommy was dead even before he had a chance to inflate his vest. The buoyancy of his wetsuit had kept him from sinking, but had left him face down and invisible to Kam as he'd searched in the darkness.

We didn't see anybody or anything else of note on the small beaches around the next two points, so we headed back. I followed behind a breaking wave, then ran the Zodiac up onto the beach. Kam jumped off with the bowline and I tilted the engine up before we grounded on the sand. We did it so well that I was able to step onto nearly dry land, keeping my damp trousers from getting any wetter.

Once we pulled the boat past the reach of the waves, I helped Kam drag

his friend's body ashore, his feet trailing in the sand. We laid Tommy along the base of the cliff and folded his hands over his chest. Kam took a plastic sheet from where the others were still sleeping in the alcove and placed it over his friend's body, tucking it in along the sides so it wouldn't blow away. When he'd finished, he paused for only a few moments, touching Tommy lightly on the chest, and then he stood again. No tears, no visible expression that I could read. His friend was dead, and nothing could change that fact. No tears. No sobs, no words, no sound at all, just his jaw working a little.

Without speaking, we returned to the Zodiac, went back out, and checked the coastline to the north. In some places there were small sandy beaches, but mostly it was rocks and cliffs. We didn't find anybody, alive or dead, and we didn't recover any more flotsam from the Atlas.

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When we returned to our beach, some of the team were on their feet and the others were stirring. Sergeant Major Tolbert grabbed our bowline and helped us drag the Zodiac ashore. He said to Kam, "I see you found Tommy. I'm sorry, mate. Looks like it was quick, at least."

The Moroccan nodded. "Yeah, quick. No pain, no fear."

I guessed that Tolbert had been testing him, to judge how Kam would come through such a traumatic experience. An emotional breakdown would be understandable, but it could have been ruinous to our already shaky morale. Nine out of the twelve original members of Rainborow's team, including the colonel himself, were either dead or missing and presumed drowned, and the Atlas, our ride back to the Canaries, was lying on the bottom. Nearly all of our weapons and other supplies were gone.

Tolbert said, "Now that you two are back, we'll have a meeting."

"Where?" I asked.

"Right here, I reckon." Right here was by the two beached inflatables.

Soon everybody was stretching, brushing off sand, or drinking water from the plastic bottles that had been packed for the beach recon team. The boats were a few meters apart, their bows toward the cliffs. I sat between Victor and the Italian on one boat. Across from me were Pat, Kam, and Hank, with the sergeant major standing in between.

He said, "Right, then, first things first. First we need an inventory of our

available drinking water, our weapons and ammunition, and our rations. Nobody takes another sip or eats a crumb until then. After we know exactly what we have on hand, we'll decide on breakfast, if any, and then we'll go from there."

Pat Maguire said, "An inventory is a fine idea, *Bert*, but first I think we need to discuss the chain of command. I don't remember electing you to be our leader, and I'm pretty sure I'd remember if we did."

The sergeant major huffed at this. "Yesterday I was the 2IC"—British military shorthand for second in command—"so now I'm the boss. That's how it works, *Pat*."

"You think so, do you? Maybe that's how it works in the British Army, but we're not in the British Army, now are we? Just looking about and counting noses, I see only one Brit on this beach, and that Brit is you, Bert, so I think we need to back up a step or two and talk about how we're going to run this show."

"This is a paramilitary operation. Back in Ireland, we all agreed that—"

"Bert, listen to yourself. There're only three of the original team left, and there are seven of us now, so we're not even a majority. What about the others? Don't they deserve a say?"

Sergeant Major Tolbert looked around at us: two American ex-pats, one in a British desert uniform. An Italian, an Irishman, and a German-Argentinean, also in British desert uniforms, and a Moroccan in a wetsuit.

After a moment of reflection, he said, "All right, then, let's talk." He sat next to Hank, on the bow of the other boat, folded his arms, and made a show of listening.

Pat didn't stand to speak. "No more sergeant major, Bert. That all went down with the Atlas. There are seven of us now, so we can vote on what we'll decide to do." He looked at all of us and asked, "Everybody want to take an inventory, like Bert suggested?" We all nodded or muttered yes. "Well, I'm glad *that's* settled. So let's take an inventory."

All of the gear bags and boxes that had been scattered around the boats were laid in a line along the base of the cliff, and then in turn opened to reveal all of the items that the beach recon party would have taken ashore with them, every item made visible to all. Five M-16s were leaned against the cliff, thirty-round magazines loaded.

"What's in the black case?" I asked.

Pat said, "That's my M-60. No point in taking it out."

Five rifles and a belt-fed machine gun, meant for the six men in the original beach party. Plus the gear to support those six men for a few hours at most, until the landing craft came in and disembarked the trucks. Everything and everyone else that Colonel Rainborow had assembled for the rescue mission had gone down with the Atlas.

I grabbed a rifle, dropped the mag into my hand, and pulled back the charging handle. It was gritty with sand, and the bolt failed to return fully when I eased it forward. “We’ll need to clean them all,” I said. “What else do we have for weapons?” There were still a few unopened zipper cases on the ground, but they were too small for long guns.

Tolbert said, “We have two Glock nine-millimeters and six magazines. Thirty-five magazines for the rifles. Five hundred rounds of linked thirty-caliber ammunition for the machine gun. One set of night goggles. A pair of handy-talkies, one of which is ruined, so the other is useless. A twenty-meter rope and a few other pieces of cord. About two liters of water remaining. Some waterlogged biscuits, some sweets, no other rations.”

The inventory finished, we all gathered once more between the boats, sitting and facing one another again.

Sergeant Major Tolbert started the discussion. “If you don’t mind, Mister Maguire, I think that first, we should lay out all the known facts, so that everyone is on the same page as far as understanding our situation. If you have no objection, I’ll begin. There are seven of us, and we’ve enough drinking water for bare survival for a few days at most. Once our drinking water is gone we’ll be helpless to climb out of here, so if we’re climbing, it should be sooner and not later. We have enough fuel to travel just a little way up the coast in one of the boats, but we don’t know where we are at present and we don’t know how far the petrol will carry us. Is that more or less how you understand things to be, Mister Maguire?”

“I’m Pat, or I’m Maguire if you prefer, but you can please drop the mister.”

“Fair enough, Pat,” said the sergeant major, his rank, for official purposes at least, now part of the past.

Tolbert—now Bert—said, “All right, then, next order of business, if I may be so bold: What in the *bloody hell* are we going to do next? Does anybody have any brilliant ideas about how we’re going to get home?”

Kam smiled and said, “I *am* home, mate.” That drew an appreciative chuckle from the rest of us. The ability to find humor in grim situations is

always prized among soldiers trapped in a tight spot.

Victor said, “It’s two hundred fifty miles back to the Canaries, so obviously getting there on these boats is out of the question, even if we tried to rig them with sails. However, we might be able to take one north along the coast to get to the king’s territory, and back to Spain from there. Even if we have to find more petrol along the way.”

Kam said, “That’s a possibility, but first, before we do anything else, I need to know where we are. We can climb up these cliffs, that’s no problem. I’ve been doing it all my life, and Pat and Bert, they’ve been training on cliffs in Ireland. Gino, how do they look to you? What route would you take?”

“Eh…I think I start in the corner where that big piece of wood like a dead tree is against that rock looks like a Chinese hat.” After he had climbed the mainmast and gone hand-over-hand to the foremast, nobody would doubt his climbing skills, or his heart.

I concurred with his route analysis; at least, I didn’t see a more promising one, but I held my counsel. I could climb, but I was far from being an expert, and long out of practice. I knew that Victor could climb just about anything I could climb, perhaps with less speed or stamina due only to his age. Big Hank, I had no idea about. He looked strong, but he was carrying too much weight; he might tire quickly, or even have a heart attack if he was put in a difficult situation. Climbing puts a lot of stress on muscles that are rarely used in everyday life.

Kam said, “I’ve been climbing cliffs like these since I was a kid—with a surfboard. I’ll go up first. Maybe I can see where we are from up there. But if I can’t, the rest of you climb up; once we’re all on top, we can use the rope to pull up the motorbike. Then we’ll keep climbing until it’s flat enough for the bike. Once I’m on a road, I’ll find out where we are and come back with more water. Then we can make the next plan.”

Hank said, “So, you’re going to take off on the bike and we’re supposed to just wait for you to return? We’re supposed to trust that—”

Pat cut him off. “Shut up, Hank. Yes, we *do* trust him. We know him. You don’t.”

I thought that was a good call by the Irishman. Alienating our only local guide, literally our lifeline, was plain stupid.

Not finished, Hank looked around at us and said, “He’ll be gone like the wind. I know ’em all too well. He’s one of *them*, he’s not one of *us*. I’ve had ’em for crew—you can’t trust ’em, not ever. Now that he’s home, why would

he help us? And you're even going to give him a motorcycle as a parting gift? Are you all crazy?"

Kam was taken aback, his eyes wide, nostrils flaring, teeth grinding, fists knotted, but he remained seated. I studied him for the signs that he was preparing to launch himself onto Hank. It wouldn't have surprised me, and I wouldn't have lifted a finger to stop him.

Hank was being way out of line. A real asshole. But even somewhere in his fifties, Hank Landry was still a lot of man, and he didn't look anything like a pushover. The scars on his face and hands testified that he had not lived a gentle life. And he certainly hadn't lost half of his left pinkie finger tapping on a computer keyboard in an air-conditioned office.

Pat wasn't finished. "You're all wrong, Hank. Kam *is* one of us. We know him like a brother, and we don't know you at all. We barely met you before your boat sank with our mates on it, and that doesn't exactly endear you to us, so let me give you some free advice: Put a cork in it, if you know what's good for you." Then he turned to the Moroccan surfer. "So, Kam, what do you reckon? We exfiltrate to the north using the boats after you find out where we are? Like when you coast-hopped your way to Portugal?"

The Moroccan looked at each of us before replying, controlling his anger. "No, we don't exfil by boat. At least, not yet. For one thing, we only have a little water. Water has to come first, no matter what else we decide."

I was glad to see that he hadn't become misdirected into blind rage by Hank's appalling outburst. Fully trust him or not, Kamal Abidar was our local guide, the only one of us who spoke Arabic and the only one who even looked halfway Moroccan. (Except maybe for Gino Bracciano, the world's luckiest Italian.) Our situation was far too dangerous to permit schoolyard pissing contests to distract us from our survival mission. We were all sore, tired, cold, and hungry, but most of all we were thirsty. Disunity and infighting while trapped on the beach—between the sword and the wall—could doom us to death by dehydration just as surely as the previous night's hypothermia might have killed us. Or drowning before that. We had no margin for screwing up.

Bert said, "Yes, water. We need to find water first of all. It's pointless to do anything else until we have more water. And there's none but what we have in those bottles, and that's little enough, so we have to get about climbing. And we might as well climb while we're in the shade, before the sun is behind us. As bad as we feel, it's not going to get any better by waiting

for a miracle down here."

Kam said, "I don't think we'll find a food market or a water fountain at the top, so I'm still going to need to take the motorbike. And that means you'll just to have to trust me." He glared at Hank when he said that, and Hank glared right back but said nothing further. "We need to get up that cliff. Then I need to go for a ride on the moto and find out where we are. Can we at least agree on that much? Or does somebody else think they can do a better job of it?" He was staring right at Hank when he said that.

Bert replied, "Yes, of course we all agree on that. Getting up the cliff, that's job number one. You find out where we are and come back with more water, that's number two. If you can find enough petrol, maybe we can take the boats up the coast to the king's territory. We must assume it's all enemy forces up there, so we'll have to be stealthy and tactical about our business. All right? Now, let's get cracking."

It was foolish not to let Bert play sergeant major to a certain extent when it was obviously his strength. He had been handpicked by Colonel Rainborow to be his second in command for a reason. He had everybody's respect, and he could get things done. I glanced at Pat Maguire; he said nothing and may have even nodded his agreement. The sergeant major, now just plain Bert, stood up from his seat on the Zodiac's side tube. The meeting was over.

22

Pat asked, “What should we do with Tommy?” He gestured toward the plastic-shrouded body at the base of the cliff. “We can’t leave him there.”

Bert said, “Well, we sure can’t take him with us. Let’s give him a decent Christian burial where we spent the night.”

We scrounged some driftwood for shovels and went to work removing the pebbly sand. It was hard going, with only pieces of wood and our hands. By the time we were a meter down, we’d struck water and further digging was pointless.

“The first winter storm will take him out to sea,” said Pat.

Kam smiled. “And what’s wrong with that? Tommy was a surfer. He loved the ocean.”

We carried the body to the alcove in the cliff, laid him in his shallow grave, and pushed the sand back over him. Gino arranged our driftwood shovels on top in a cross.

Bert recited part of a British soldier’s prayer. “Heavenly father, receive those fallen in battle, and all the innocents who have died: surround their loved ones with compassion, and give them a patient faith. Lord, graciously hear us. Amen.”

Gino said something that sounded respectful and holy in Italian. Pat asked the good Lord to look after Tommy and all the other men who had been lost at sea on the Atlas. Bert named them all, beginning with Colonel William Rainborow, and spoke a few words about each man. They’d come to Morocco on a holy mission, and even if the mission had gone disastrously wrong, simply making the attempt should count for something when they stood before God’s final judgment.

Amen, we all agreed.

It seemed impossible that Colonel Rainborow was gone forever. The same thought must have been going through the others’ minds as well. This was Rainborow’s mission; he was its driver and its brain. And now we were just seven castaways, and the girls would never even know that we had come all this way to rescue them. Kam took a rock and scratched a cross into the red sandstone wall above Tom Pellow’s head. As far as I’d known, the young Moroccan wasn’t religious at all. Probably he’d just made the cross for the sake of his friend, who I knew had at least been baptized as a Christian, even

if he was not outwardly religious. Kam handed the rock to me, and I scratched the cross deeper. We each took a turn, widening and deepening the ancient Christian symbol.

Kam went down to the water, wading out to where he could dive under the beach break, and swam out past the surf zone. He just floated out there for a while, then he caught a wave and bodysurfed it most of the way back in. He stripped off his wetsuit next to one of the Zodiacs and dressed in the clothes he'd kept in a dry bag: blue jeans, sneakers, and a tan T-shirt, like we all wore. There was also a brown bomber-style windbreaker that he pulled out to check and then returned to the bag. Thrift-store items from Ireland, nondescript civilian camouflage.

He took the coiled twenty-meter rope, it was about eight-millimeter stuff, and ascended the cliff in stages. He used the tilted slabs of sandstone when they were useful, and pushed himself up narrow cracks when that was the only way. After about thirty feet he was lost from our view. Ten minutes later his face reappeared over a higher ledge almost fifty feet up, and then his rope came down in lazy spirals, leaving only a little extra on the sand at our feet. He called to us, "There's nobody up here, nobody, and nothing to see. Come on up."

Bert said, "I'll go next, if that's all right with everybody."

"I'll stay on the beach until everybody is up," said Pat. "I'll make sure that everything goes up before I do."

Gino said, "No, I stay until last. We use the rope to pull up the moto, no? Then you need somebody who can climb with no rope, so when the bike is trapped, to make it not trapped. I can do that."

Pat said, "That makes sense to me."

"Any objections?" asked Bert, trying to shed his sergeant major's commanding voice. We all indicated no, then proceeded to drag the empty boats all the way up the beach to the cliff, removed their engines, and laid them on their plywood decks. Their bowlines were tied to buried driftwood dead-man anchors. There was no question that the tide occasionally reached the cliff, and if we ever wanted to see the Zodiacs again, we needed to secure them. More driftwood, seaweed, trash, and sand were piled over the black Zodiacs to conceal them both from seaward and from the cliffs above.

I stayed at the bottom with Gino and Pat while the rest climbed one at a time with help from the rope being belayed from above. When it was his turn, Victor ascended slowly, but smoothly. Hank became stuck in a difficult spot

where the narrow ledge he was using nearly disappeared. But after a minute's hesitation, he made it across the tricky area and up to the next stage, which was easier.

Down on the beach, our gear bags and weapon cases had been repacked for lifting. The five M-16s went up in a single bundle wrapped in a plastic tarp for padding. Even the red plastic gasoline tanks from the inflatables and their fuel lines went up. They would extend the range of the motorbike and prevent anybody who somehow happened upon the boats from being able to simply drive them off under their own power. If we decided to coast-hop north, we would need to find the boats where we'd left them.

I went up after Hank. The steady upward pull made it easy, despite the cliff being composed of brittle sandstone and shale. The top ledge was loose and crumbly, but when I was within reach Hank grabbed my collar and helped me up and over the last bit.

Pat Maguire came up next. After him, all the weapons and gear bags were pulled up and the rope was tossed down again and tied to the motorbike. While we hauled the bike up, top-belaying the rope around a small tree, Gino climbed near it, freeing it when it became stuck against overhangs. Finally, all seven of us and all of our gear and the bike were off the beach, but we were only on a narrow shelf, with more cliffs above us.

Kam found an erosion gully where we could push and pull the bike up to the next step of the escarpment. This led to a finger ridge where the ground leveled out enough for us to roll the bike along with just a man on each side and another pushing from behind. There was another five-meter nearly vertical face that required us to use the rope again, and then we were on a flat acre at the end of a small peninsula above the ocean.

Somebody had once begun to build a seaside villa there, judging from the foundation and partial walls. It was easy to see why the spot was chosen: it had spectacular views up and down the wild Atlantic coast. The columns that would have supported the upper floors of the mansion had already been poured when construction was abandoned. The iron rebar protruding from the tops of the columns and the foundation had been rusting for years if not decades. The pillars and partial walls, as well as the low thickets of thorny bushes surrounding the site, provided us with cover and concealment. Palmettos, wind-bent trees like junipers, and plenty of cactus gave the place the feel of coastal Mexico.

After another whispered huddle with Bert and Pat, Kam took off uphill

on another foot recon. Under Bert's direction, we formed a small perimeter on the cement foundation. Pat didn't interrupt or question Bert this time; he seemed to have accepted his judgment on tactical matters. We couldn't stop and hold a vote at every twist in the trail. I sat near Victor, facing the ocean. When we moved around, we all took care to stay low and remain in the shadows near cover.

All except Hank, who needed some reminders from Bert about moving tactically, but even after receiving this schooling, he stooped and bent over only with reluctance. With just a few thin trees and sparse desert vegetation, anybody far up the distant slopes could potentially glass us with a scope or binoculars. Otherwise, I felt that the location was as safe as could be hoped for. I'd already seen signs of goats in the area, and where there are goats, goatherds are usually not too far away. Bert and Pat arranged our gear bags and weapons in the center of our perimeter, sorting them into new piles. The brown dirt bike stood in the middle, a centerpiece.

I was still just a straphanger, a last-minute volunteer, and it was obvious to me that our new democracy was built on the foundation of the three surviving members of Rainborow's original team. Bert, Pat, and Kam would be the primary decision makers, because they'd planned the mission and knew the most about the local terrain and conditions, but three was not a majority of seven. Gino had been made a member of the team after the death of their medic, and he had the zeal of a convert, so I presumed that he would be an automatic fourth vote supporting any decisions taken by the three core team members.

So why bitch, as long as what they decided aligned with the reality I was observing and made tactical sense? Like me, Victor would not oppose their decisions if they were based on logic. He was a cynic, but a practical cynic; he would not whine and gripe merely for the sake of whining and griping. We could get through this ordeal only as a team, and unnecessary squabbling must be minimized. We were playing for life-or-death stakes, so I was looking for signs of anybody cracking, a point when a breakdown could endanger us all. And there would be no great shame in it, not after all we'd been through in the past twenty-four hours.

To have any chance at escaping from Morocco, we would need more than luck on our side; we would also need to make no mistakes at all. We had almost no more water, just a few liters among us, and dehydration could lead even a stalwart to suffer rapid physical decline and psychological collapse.

Five out of the seven of us I put in the solidly reliable category. Gino was still a question mark in some respects, subject to emotional outbursts and acting on impulse. Hank was our most obvious weak link. But, provided the rest of us presented a united front in our decisions, I thought he could be controlled. Other than bringing a surly attitude and showing his bias against Moroccans or possibly Muslims, he seemed strong enough to keep up with us if we held to a moderate pace. He was maybe a decade younger than Pat and Bert, but he was carrying much more body weight.

Hank seemed to show little ability or inclination to quickly drop behind cover, much less to go prone on the ground in an instant. This was often a soldier's key to survival when the enemy was spotted, or worse, when enemy rounds began to snap past and impact close around. One tactically oblivious goofball who couldn't keep himself hidden in every type of terrain could give us away and get us all killed. I'm sure the others were thinking along the same lines while Kam was out on his solo foot recon.

And while we waited, it was also easy to imagine Kamal Abidar reaching a well-traveled road, putting out his thumb, and saying "Sayonara, suckers" in a half dozen languages.

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The five rifles had been wrapped in a bundle to haul them up the cliffs. Now that we were settled, Bert set to untying them. He selected two M-16s and placed them next to where he had been sitting near Hank. He carried another rifle and web belt over to where Gino was sitting near Pat, and after taking a knee he had a little chat with them. Pat already had his M-60 machine gun out of its case; it was propped across a stack of cement blocks near his side. Then the sergeant major brought the last two rifles and two web belts over to where Victor and I were sitting behind a partial wall. He sat facing us, a rifle in each hand, butts on the ground. Each had a sling made from a green strap for carrying it hands free. The web belts had a GI magazine pouch on each side.

"Dan, I know you're familiar with Armalites, but how about you, Doctor?"

"Yes, of course I am familiar."

Bert glanced at me and I nodded affirmatively. Victor was good to go on ARs, one of the easiest rifles to shoot that were ever made. The retired British

noncom was wrong to refer to them as Armalites, but it was such a common error that the generic name had stuck in the UK, and I wasn't about to correct him.

"We lost our sniper in the sinking," he told us. "A dead-eye shot he was. He made a one-mile double kill in Afghanistan. One shot, two Taliban, at a mile. We lost him, and we lost his lovely Accuracy International rifle, a .338 Lapua Magnum. Dan, that means you've been promoted to designated marksman and squad sniper. This rifle was the best of the lot, and its sights are dead-on accurate."

I grabbed it by its round fore stock, and he released his grip. "This is the rifle I shot in boot camp. I shot expert every time I qualified."

"You won't get a chance to test-fire them, of course, but you can trust the zero. We spent a few good days in Ireland learning just how well these rifles can shoot. A skilled rifleman can make two-inch groups at a hundred meters. Sometimes even better. That's from prone or from a rest, of course. Point is, they're damned accurate. They're all zeroed at three hundred meters, that's the way the sight works."

"I know. The elevation knob takes it from three hundred on out."

"Right. Now, Dan, besides being our designated marksman, you're also going to be our rear security, our tail-end Charlie."

"No problem, boss." This meant I'd be responsible for protecting our back trail when we were moving in a patrol file. And if we had to quickly reverse our direction of travel, I'd be the point man until we could get the entire patrol turned back around again.

"Mister Abidar is going to be out in front whether he's on the motorbike or he's on foot. I'm patrol leader and I'll be second in the line of march when he is with us. When he's not, I'll be on point. Big Hank will be behind me with a rifle. Don't worry about Hank; I'll keep him sorted out. He said he qualified on the M-16 when he was in your Navy. Next in line comes Mister Maguire with his machine gun, then Gino with another M-16. Then Victor, and then you, bringing up the rear. All right?"

"All right, boss." I was beginning to enjoy calling him that. It would have been unimaginable in the Marine Corps to call a sergeant major boss—it would have been considered insubordination. Boss was an SAS idiosyncrasy I'd grown accustomed to hearing during the voyage. I understood its subtle meaning. It showed that you understood the chain of command but took it lightly, in both directions. I was never a member of Rainborow's team, I was

only the skipper of Rebel Yell, and so during the voyage I had no right or reason to call anybody boss. But now I was in Bert's squad, so boss it was.

"Sometimes Mister Abidar will be far out in front, sometimes he'll be off on his own business while we're laying up. Maybe for a few minutes, maybe for a few hours. You're good with that? You trust him?"

"I trust him. And what other choice do we have, even if I didn't?"

"Exactly right. The six of us will be further divided into pairs: me and Hank up front, Pat and Gino in the middle, then you two laggards bringing up the rear. Mister Abidar will be our only singleton, roaming out front, and I will be his contact." Bert looked back and forth between us, but mostly he was making sure that Victor understood the patrol order and had fixed it firmly in his mind. "Stick with your buddy no matter what, and keep in visual contact with the man in front and the man behind. Now, if it's daylight and we're in open country, we'll spread out. If it's nighttime or we're in thick bush, we'll close up the gaps. But if the whole world goes to shit, stick with your buddy until we can link up at a rally point. Simple stuff, nothing fancy. Standard military hand signals, we'll go over them later. You each have seven thirty-round magazines: one in the rifle, the rest in the pouches. Keep a round chambered, weapons on safe. That's it. Any questions?"

"How are we going to clean the rifles with no cleaning gear?" I asked him.

"We have a little kit with a pull-through, what you Yanks call a bore snake. I missed it on the inventory, it's that small. We'll take turns. Go easy on the oil, it's all we've got."

"I have another question. There's white paint on the bottom of our front sights. Does it glow or something?"

"Aye, that's right, it glows. But you have to shine a torch on it first, sort of juice it up. You have a torch, don't you?"

"I do." I pulled my penlight out of my left shirt pocket, attached by its string to the buttonhole. There were still a few good hours on its rechargeable triple-A battery. The light on my life vest had been left on and died overnight. The vest was buried under a Zodiac with other gear that was no longer needed. "How good is this paint? I never used it on a rifle sight."

"Not as bright as tritium, but it's a lot better than nothing. Especially when your eyes are night adapted. Of course, you still must be able to see your target. But if you can see your target, at least you can find your front sight. It's old-school, but old-school is all we have. Just like these old rifles."

We hadn’t had an AR-pattern rifle on Rebel Yell in more than a few years, but it was like riding a bike: you don’t forget. Anyway, the thumb-switch safety and other controls on the M-16 were about as simple and intuitive as any rifle ever designed. Eugene Stoner, the gun’s designer, had understood ergonomics before the word was even coined. The M-16A2’s iron sights were also dead simple. Rifle to shoulder, safety off, eye to peep sight, front post sight on your target, squeeze the trigger, bang, repeat.

There were two different rear peep sights that flipped over like a tiny hinged L inside the back of the carrying handle. One was a wide-aperture “ghost ring” for shooting from point-blank out to two hundred meters, and the other was a smaller aperture for use out to a very optimistic eight hundred, using the elevation knob to correct for distance. But past about four hundred meters it was mostly a question of a shooter’s eyesight, because you can’t hit what you can’t see. I’d been using magnified optical scopes for decades, but I still had close to 20/20 vision. And I could still estimate distances and ranges; I had never lost that sniper’s ingrained habit. I did it without thinking, every day. That buoy is five hundred meters away. The end of that jetty is a thousand.

Now that my beautiful Sako rifle and its irreplaceable Leupold scope were resting on the seabed, I was back to using the same adjustable iron sights I’d learned to use in boot camp. My score for qualification was 246 out of a possible 250. Not to brag, but that was the best score in my boot camp company, and it set me on the path to scout-sniper school. Those qualification scores had been shot with an M-16A2, and now this old friend was back in my hands, courtesy of the Massachusetts National Guard and the Irish Republican Army. And it was increasingly striking me as rather long odds that this was all happening purely by coincidence.

Bert looked at both of us and said, “I don’t need to tell you not to go loud unless it’s a matter of life or death and there’s no other way, so keep ’em on safe. If we get into a scrap and it goes loud, there’s no Storm for fire support, and there’s no choppers coming to lift us out. There’s just six of us pale-faced Christians in this God-forsaken heathen land—and Mister Abidar. We’re all alone in a very big country, with no friendly forces. The guns are our last resort. Stealth and guile: that’s how we get out of here alive.”

Victor was silent, nodding but paying close attention.

“I understand,” I said. “Quiet and sneaky. What about the two Glocks?”

“Mister Abidar has one of them, and I have the other. Mine is threaded

for a suppressor. If any quiet shooting needs to be done, I'll be the one to do it. Did you manage to hang onto a knife?"

"No, I lost it with all the rest of my gear."

"What was it?"

"About like a Ka-Bar." It was a pretty good knockoff of the old Marine Corps fighting knife, and now it was on the bottom of the ocean, along with my Sako.

"I'll lend you one, then. You're going to be at the back of the patrol, so you might have to deal with a situation quietly. He stared straight at me, hard. "You can use a knife? When it counts?"

I stared right back at his droopy hazel eyes. "Yeah, boss, I can use a knife." Even though the scar across my cheek had been the result of a frag splinter, for some reason it tended to make people believe that I knew something about knife fighting. And, in fact, I did know something about the subject—mainly to avoid it.

"Okay. This one is nothing like your Ka-Bar." He pulled a black dagger from a narrow sheath on his belt. Double-edged blade with a needle-point tip, each side a mirror image of the other. "You know what this is?" He flipped it in his hand and offered its hilt to me.

I took the knife and hefted it, feeling its balance. "Sure. It's a Fairbairn-Sykes commando knife. Invented by two British policemen in Shanghai, back when Britain was running the place. Mainly used for killing sentries." It was heavier than it looked, and in spite of the length of its blade, it was grip-heavy, giving the needle tip at the end the light and airy feel of a magician's wand. Among fighting knives it was a rapier, meant for thrusting and stabbing, not slashing and cutting.

"Very good. You do know your military history. Try not to lose this one—it has sentimental value." The leather sheath had a metal cap on the end to protect the blade's delicate tip. He untied it from his belt and handed it to me, his eyes locked on mine. "Don't lose my F-S, laddie, or I'll be cross."

The commando dagger was a traditional graduation gift within the Special Air Service. In fact, SAS operators called themselves blades. "Don't worry, I won't."

Victor said, "I'm not much for knives, but I still have my revolver. It was in my cargo pocket all along. It goes where I go, Bert. I'm too old for fistfights."

"Quite right, quite right. But remember, we can't go loud. Stealth and

guile, that's the ticket. There's a few other bits and bobs of kit up in my corner, so come and see what you need. And fetch the cleaning kit and take care of your rifles."

I said, "We'll be right up, boss. And thanks for the F-S—I promise I'll take good care of it."

"Mister Abidar will be away a good bit of today, so we'll be able to rest in turns. I'll take the first watch, then Hank. We'll go down the patrol order, half hour at a time. We'll pass down my timepiece with each watch-stander. If a man has my watch, then he's on watch, so no excuses for tardiness. Of course, I don't need to tell you that; I just make it a habit to inform everybody of the patrol SOPs. You rouse your watch relief, tell him the time, and hand him the watch. You don't let go until he says, 'I have the watch.' When you take the watch, it's all on you. I'll take it back before we move out, and I'll always stand the first watch when we're laying up. All right?" I looked at his wristwatch. He was wearing an all-black diving watch, an old Seiko self-winder with a thick black strap.

"No, not *my* watch. *This* watch." It was another old diver's watch, shiny stainless steel, but with no band. Instead, it had a length of parachute cord tied through both side pins. "This is the watch-stander's watch. Loop it through your belt and keep it in your pocket. Both watches are always synched up, so we can conduct separated time-on-target missions."

"That's smart," I said. I didn't mention that my own waterproof digital watch had been torn off during the sinking. I'd already been gigged for losing my Ka-Bar.

He winked and said, "It's an old sergeant's trick, keeping two watches. It means no excuses. Any more questions?"

We had none, and he left us.

23

Thirty minutes on watch out of three hours was not a bad deal. We'd all be able to catch some much-needed sleep. The system of physically handing down the watch was a new one on me, and it struck me as both practical and professional.

Fewer and fewer people owned wristwatches. Even before the collapse they were disappearing, replaced by the ubiquitous smart phone. But after the collapse, a dead smart phone was a plastic paperweight. And then the digital watches began to fail as their batteries died. In the emerging low-tech world, even something as basic as a pair of functioning watches could be a force-multiplier, such as when conducting a synchronized time-on-target operation, as the sergeant major had mentioned.

With Rainborow dead, Bert was the unquestioned leader, in my mind at least. Pat had done well with his machine gun during the pirate battle, but when it came to patrolling in enemy territory, I would go with a retired SAS sergeant major any day. Even one two decades older than me. And I would gladly follow Kamal Abidar as our local guide. If those two couldn't weave and thread us through every danger toward freedom, well, then, it just couldn't be done. Victor and I sure couldn't get out of Morocco on our own.

I appreciated that the sergeant major was taking on Hank as his special project, so I knew that he shared my concern about his possible performance deficiencies. But Hank Landry had moved his considerable bulk up the cliffs pretty well for a middle-aged guy who had to be pushing a hundred forty kilos. Getting up the cliffs was mostly a matter of slow and deliberate movement, but I had to think that Hank might fall behind when we got into a sustained fast pace moving over rough terrain, uphill and down.

Cross-country movement is always brutal, like running an obstacle course where the winners shoot the losers before they reach the finish line. Pure Darwin, and heart-attack territory for a big, heavy guy like Hank. To remain unseen, we would have to stay off the roads, and that was going to mean bushwhacking up and down some damned rough country.

Bert had given each of us seven loaded thirty-round ammunition magazines. That meant we each had 210 rounds for our M-16s, and that's all we would ever have. When they were done, so were the rifles. Three mags in each GI ammo pouch, one on each side of the web belt, and one in the rifle.

Seven times thirty. Then click instead of bang.

The ends of the cartridges were painted green, hence their name, green tips. They were also known as the M855 FMJ, for full metal jacket. That's what was painted on the crates and ammo cans and bandoliers that the ammo came in. I'd opened enough of them to have the military nomenclature imprinted in my brain forever.

The twenty-inch barrels of our M-16A2s would drag every bit of velocity out of the bullets, significantly more than when they came out of the fourteen-inch barrels of the M-4 carbines. The 62-grain green tips could hit and kill enemies out past six hundred meters, I knew that for a fact. But in Iraq and Afghanistan, I'd been using a four-power ACOG sight on top of an almost identical M-16A4, which came minus the carrying handle and iron sights of the A2.

Bolt-action rifles like the M-40A1 that I had been issued in the Corps (and the Sako that had gone down with the Atlas) had a lot of fine qualities, including greater inherent accuracy and a much longer effective range, but they lacked speed between shots. An M-16A4 with a four-power ACOG had been outstanding for taking out runners in chaotic streets and alleyways at a few hundred meters. With an M-16 and a 4X sight, six hundred meters had been an easy shot when the bad guys decided to pause and study the situation from a slightly exposed position. But my military sniping had all been done with magnified scopes, with crisp reticle crosshairs or a glowing chevron tip. And now I was back to my boot camp irons.

Evidently, whoever had looted the Massachusetts National Guard on behalf of the Irish Republican Army had thought to include the ammunition, magazines, magazine pouches, and web belts, but had not thought of canteens, canteen covers, or the other standard GI accoutrements. Only the specific items involved with putting metal downrange or carrying the ammo had gone into the Irish farmer's blue plastic barrels. I poked around in the sergeant major's random gear pile and came up with a brown sling bag, like a one-shoulder daypack, to go with my web belt. Victor grabbed a green messenger-type bag that I guessed had once held a British satchel charge.

We did manage to scrounge up some plastic sheeting, pieces of rope and cord, and other random items scavenged from the beach recon party's two inflatables. Sergeant Major Tolbert's commando dagger went on the left side of my web belt, so I could either straight-draw it with my left hand or cross-draw it with my right, if my right wasn't busy holding the grip of my M-16.

The slots of the leather sheath didn't fit over the wide web belt, so I tied it on with the parachute cord that came with it, the same way Bert had done.

With the weapons and gear distributed, I cleaned and lubricated our rifles while Gino and Hank turned their attention to the dirt bike. Its battery had been submerged and shorted out, but the Spanish-built bike also had a kick-starter. Gino sampled the fuel at the bottom of the tank with a straw that he made from a plant shoot, and decided that saltwater had not invaded it through the vent. In less than five minutes it was running as smoothly as a 450cc dirt bike can ever run.

It had an extra-large muffler, so it was quieter than most similar off-road bikes, but it was still loud. The motorbike had been spray-painted flat primer brown, chrome bits and all, so the cliff dirt didn't show. Hank and Gino let it run for about ten minutes before they were certain that the gas in the tank and the fuel lines hadn't been contaminated. Finally they shut it down, so we could sit and plan in silence again. I felt like every pair of eyes in this part of Morocco must be staring down at us after the racket we'd just made.

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Kam returned a half hour later. He said, "I heard the moto. Is it ready to go?"

"It's ready," said Hank, patting the dirt bike's brown seat.

"I found a paved road a few hundred meters up. There's an old construction trail that runs from here up to the road. It's not the main coast road, the N-1. I'm still not sure where we are. I watched the road for ten minutes, but I didn't see any traffic." He had a comb that was packed with his street clothes in a dry bag, and while he spoke he worked his wavy hair straight back into a short ponytail and tied it off with a rubber band. "Do I look all right?" he asked us.

Pat said, "You look like a bloody movie star, mate."

"That's not what I meant. There's not too much dirt on my face? We don't have enough water for me to waste any washing up."

Bert said, "No, you look fine, you silly bugger. Nobody would ever guess you were a castaway from a shipwreck."

I suppose Kam was a good-looking guy; I'm not really one to judge how a fellow appears to the ladies. But objectively speaking, he had a nice profile, with high cheekbones and a strong chin. His entire face was visible now that his dark hair was pulled back. It was a lean face, almost chiseled. Wide-set

green eyes, white teeth when he smiled. I tried to picture his Berber and French parents. They both must have been attractive in their own right. And Kam was almost six feet tall, with the broad shoulders of a serious surfer. In no way did he resemble most of the scrawny desert Arabs I'd dealt with in the sandbox.

Kam slid a leather belt through the loops of his blue jeans, then attached the holstered Glock on the right side. The pistol's grip was reversed toward the left, for a left-handed cross-draw. The holster appeared handstitched from dark cowhide. He was a right-hander, but I understood the backwards holster. You can ride a motorcycle with only your right hand on the throttle and your left away from the clutch. So if you're going to draw and shoot from a moving bike, it has to be done left-handed. Once he was happy with the pistol's placement and had practiced drawing and reholstering a few times, he put on the brown bomber-style windbreaker he'd pulled out of his bag earlier and zipped it halfway up. The jacket covered the pistol and holster, and the elastic at its bottom would keep it from blowing upward on the motorbike.

Yet again, I appreciated Colonel Rainborow's attention to detail. The windbreaker, the Glock, and the custom-made left-handed holster had come from Ireland; the Spanish motorcycle was from the Canaries; and here they were in Morocco, ready to go. If the Atlas had not sunk, Rainborow's daring plan with his dozen men and three trucks just might have worked.

Kam said, "I may need to travel some distance to find out where we are. If I can, I'll bring back some water on my first trip. All right?" He didn't say it, but we could all understand the subtext: You all trust that I'm coming back, right? He looked squarely at Hank, who was staring at the ocean.

Bert said, "We don't need to rehash that discussion, Mister Abidar, it's already been decided. You do what you need to do, and we'll be waiting right here. Now, let's finish the water so that you can carry all the empty bottles."

They were passed from man to man, the water drunk a few sips at a time until it was gone, and then the bottles were loaded into a daypack that had also been in Kam's dry bag. We had all seen how much potable water had been packed into the Zodiacs for the beach recon, and now every drop of it had gone into our bellies. This meant that we were fully committed to Kam's success. If he never returned, either because he'd deserted us or had been captured, or had simply been ambushed and killed for his motorbike, what else could we do? Walk up to the road and hitchhike north? Attempt some ruse to try to hijack a passing vehicle, not knowing if there was a police,

military, or paramilitary checkpoint around the next curve? And us being unable to speak the local languages? Foreign infidels all wearing old British military uniforms, except for Hank Landry? Maybe Hank could try out his Cajun French—if he had any—against the second language of Morocco.

Or we could try to coast-hop northward in one of our Zodiacs. Until we ran out of fuel and found ourselves trapped against another cliff, with no drinking water. So scratch that option as well. The only conceivable backup plans that came to my mind were all doomed to failure.

Kam slipped on a pair of wraparound sunglasses, mounted the bike, restarted the warm engine with his first kick, and racked the throttle a few times. He faced uphill with the same flat expression as when we'd buried Tom. He'd transformed quite convincingly from Kam the wetsuited frogman to a local biker. Brown windbreaker over his tan T-shirt, concealing his Glock. Dusty blue jeans, dark sneakers, gray backpack.

He faced us and said, "I'll be back as soon as I can," and received halfhearted smiles and weary thumbs-ups in return. He let out the clutch and shot away from us. In a minute he found the road, and the sound of the dirt bike faded away.

Sitting in the shade against a half-wall as the silence returned, Hank asked no one in particular, "You think we'll ever see him again?"

Without hesitation, Pat replied, "Bloody right we will."

Hank snorted derisively. "And we hauled his bike up here and I even got it started for him. We must be out of our fucking minds."

Skinny little Gino, half the weight and inches shorter than Hank, leaped up and loomed over him. "*You* no start the moto, you fat fuck, *I* start it. And you shut up about my friend, unless you want to go again down on the beach, like this." He held a rock in his hand, shaking it in front of Hank's face, and then he pitched it far out over the edge. All of our jaws dropped as Gino stormed out of sight uphill toward the road.

But his rifle was slung over his back, and he had his web belt, so even if he was having an emotional eruption, he hadn't simply abandoned his weapon and ammunition. I marked this as a plus as well as a minus. The Italian still had good soldiering instincts even if he had a hair-trigger temperament.

Pat gave Gino a minute, then followed after him up the trail. He was carrying his M-60 on a wide strap, so that it hung at the ready in front of him, ammo box attached. Sergeant Major Tolbert didn't need to say a word to Pat

about sticking with his buddy and having his weapon with him at all times. Pat was an original member of Rainborow's team, so it stood to reason that he knew their SOPs.

That left the rest of us staring at one another across a dozen meters of empty foundation. Nobody felt like talking, lest angry words lead to another outburst. Without another drop of drinking water among us, resting quietly in the shade became of paramount importance. In a few minutes Pat returned with Gino, who cut a wide berth around Hank and sat facing westward on the ocean side of the foundation, ostensibly on perimeter watch, but watching only sea gulls and the empty horizon.

Pat sat near Gino, but facing the rest of us. After a couple of minutes he broke the uneasy silence. "Somebody important must have had a nice plan for this place."

"You see unfinished villas all over the third world," said Bert. "As soon as you start doing well, the local mafia takes you out. I've seen it from Oman to Belize."

"Unless you're already in the mafia," said Pat. "The mafia or the government, and usually they're one and the same."

"Human nature. Gangsters rule the world almost everywhere. An actual civil society, under the rule of law? What we used to call civilization? That's rarely seen anymore."

"Ireland is about as good as it gets today."

"Bollocks, there's more of a functioning economy back in Blighty." Blighty meant England, or maybe the UK. It was a term I'd become familiar with since leaving Ireland with this crowd.

"Well, if you don't mind living in a fascist police state," Pat replied. "What do you think about South America?"

Bert ignored the insult to his homeland. "What part of South America?"

"Chile, maybe?"

It was quite surreal, sitting there on the foundation of a Moroccan villa that had never been built, following a conversation about the collapse of modern civilization between an ex-SAS and an ex-IRA, both of them armed with thirty-year-old American weapons and wearing obsolete British Army desert uniforms.

24

It was the early afternoon when we heard the motorbike again. The sound grew until Kam coasted down the trail into our staging area and stopped in the middle of the foundation.

He was smiling when he dismounted. He swung off his pack, now much heavier, and dropped it in front of Bert, then continued to pace around the bike like a nervous cat. The sergeant major unzipped the pack and removed our water bottles, now filled. This would be the end of Irish water and the beginning of Moroccan, with whatever bugs and parasites it contained. Bert said he had some water purification tablets in his survival tin, and we should treat the water and wait a bit before drinking it or we would all have the shits for sure. After waiting ten minutes for the bugs in the water to be killed, we passed around an old sports drink bottle until it was empty.

Kam also brought some crusty flat bread and a yellow pasta mush he called couscous in a plastic tub. Brown paper twisted into a container held some figs, and another contained shelled almonds. We moved in close and sat in a circle around the chow. Local food meant local bugs and diseases just as surely as did bad water, but we would just have to take our chances; we had to eat. I was glad to see that Kam had brought a half-dozen metal spoons, so we didn't have to dig into the couscous using our hands. The spoons were mismatched and worn, so they had come from a home kitchen and not from a store or restaurant.

The cold pasta and flat bread were damn tasty, as were the figs and almonds. Things were looking up. We had food and water, none of us were injured, all of us were mobile, and we had good weapons with which to defend ourselves. For the first time since the Atlas sank, I felt as if we might survive our Moroccan expedition. Or at least the next day or two, and that was a good start.

Kam said, "We were very lucky, where we came ashore. As soon as I got up the road to the coastal highway, I knew exactly where I was. I've already been to the home of an old family friend, and we'll be getting a ride out of here."

Bert broke into a smile. "A ride? When?"

"Tonight."

"The moon will be up," Pat said. "It's almost full."

“It doesn’t matter; it’ll be behind the mountains until later. Anyway, that’s when we can get the transportation.”

“What kind of transportation?” asked Bert.

“I’m not sure what kind. Probably a minivan or a camionette, what you call a pickup truck, something like that. Something big enough for all of us—for all of you. I’ll stay on the moto. Oh, and I need to fill it with petrol before I go out again. I have more places to visit. A few more people to see. People who might help us, if they’re still around.”

I glanced at Hank. He looked skeptical, but said nothing. He was a retired Navy chief, so he had spent his military career obeying orders that he didn’t like. If he could fit into our squad without expressing his private doubts, he would be better off for it. I could imagine what he was thinking: Kam, the untrustworthy Moroccan, might be leading a gang of head-choppers straight to us. Maybe the food and water were just bait, meant to allay our doubts and lead us deeper into a trap. Getting us to drop our guard.

Even though I trusted Kam after a week and a half with him at sea, this was still a situation where you just had to accept fate and play the cards dealt to you. We had no alternative. It would be impossible for a handful of foreigners with no Arabic between them to get out of here on their own. There was no high-tech magic button for privileged Europeans and Americans to press to transport us to safety. No sat-phones, no emergency beacons. No helicopters launched from a distant warship zooming over the horizon to take us home, wherever home was. We had nothing except what had been packed into the two rubber boats and what Kam had brought back for us in his daypack.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” he said. “I have some cigarettes. Anyone interested?” He knelt on the ground near Bert, unzipped a side pocket on his pack, and took out a smashed pack half-full of the local coffin nails. He tossed them onto Pat’s lap. There was Arabic and French writing on the crushed cardboard.

Pat held the open pack out to see if there were any other takers. Big Hank and skinny Gino both leaned in, noticed one another’s reactions, and recoiled, looking away from each other. Pat slid out a cigarette and a pack of paper matches that were also inside, then flipped the pack onto Hank’s lap. The big Cajun took out a cigarette and passed the pack over to Gino without making eye contact. The cigarettes were unfiltered. Strong, fresh tobacco wafted in the air around us. Pat lit up first and tossed the matches to Hank.

Gino said, “I stop smoking maybe five years, but I think I smoke again today. Hey, why not? Enjoy the short life, no?”

In a few moments all three of them were puffing away. I never understood tobacco’s pull, but there was no denying the grip that it had on many people, as well as the immediate pleasure it gave them. Plenty of Marines dipped “smokeless tobacco” when they couldn’t smoke, and that habit was even more disgusting, with its ever-present spit cups and vile chin dribbles. Smoking cigarettes was a clean habit by comparison. But no matter how it was consumed, it was an undeniable fact that for many, nicotine seemed to cut human stress like a miracle drug.

The sea breeze would disperse the smoke, so I was happy to see the three of them light up. I even caught Hank and Gino exchanging glances with something like mutual respect instead of seething resentment. When we were somewhat refreshed and relaxed (especially the smokers), Kam said, “I have more good news. We’re only seven or eight kilometers north of our original landing beach. And when we were planning the mission back in Ireland, I had no way to know what was happening around here for the last six months. Now I know, and it’s mostly good news, too. Or at least it’s not bad.”

Big Hank asked him, “Do you have a road map?”

“No. They weren’t in the Zodiacs.”

“They were in the lorries,” said Bert. “The operational maps sank with the Atlas.”

Hank was silent after the mention of his lost landing craft and crew.

Kam piled up some blown sand on the cement in front of him, then smoothed it out with his hands while we huddled around him. Then he drew a curving line in the sand with his finger.

“This way is north. This point is Cape Zerhoun. A few kilometers inland from the cape is *Jebel Zerhoun*, Mount Zerhoun. It’s only a hill compared to the Atlas Mountains, but it’s still more than three hundred meters high. Only two hours from here by road, we have mountains higher than three *thousand* meters, and the highest in Morocco is more than four thousand. The geography is very similar to California, if you have been there.” He made a series of dots with pokes of his finger. “Up here is Casablanca. Down here is the city of Agadir. We are between, just above Cape Zerhoun. This is one of the nicest areas in all of Morocco. It rains because of the coastal mountains, and there are rivers that are fed from the snow in the high Atlas. Every kind of food grows in the valleys, like in California.”

Gino said, “Cape Zerhoun, she looks like a woman’s, you know, *tettas*.” He held his hands to his chest, miming a woman’s breasts. “What you say, tits.” He still had half a cigarette bouncing around on his lips. As angry as he’d been when he’d threatened to throw Hank Landry off the cliff, he was now just as cheerful.

“Not tits,” Victor corrected. “Only one tit.”

“Yes, but a *nice* one,” said Gino, forming its shape in the air with his hand.

Kam ignored them and said, “The cape gives Port Zerhoun protection from the north winds, and from the winter swells. Even before the modern ship jetties were built, a port was always there, going back to ancient times. Even the Phoenicians and the Romans traded there. The Portuguese built Fort Zerhoun in the fifteen hundreds to command the ships that came for trade. The fortress sits on the ridge between Mount Zerhoun and the cape. The western rampart of the fortress is where they’re holding the girls. It’s here, almost on the end of Cape Zerhoun. And this is where we are.” He jabbed his finger into the sand just above the westward-facing point. It did look like a young woman’s firm breast jutting out to sea.

Kam continued. “When Tommy and I escaped from Agadir, all of the territory almost up to Port Zerhoun was controlled by Mahmoud El-Ayashi and his fanatics. Until today, not only didn’t I know where we’d landed, but I also had no idea who would be in control. Now I know the answers to both questions. We are just above Cape Zerhoun, but still in the area controlled by the *taifat al-rais*. That means the council of captains; maybe cartel is a better word in English. They run Zerhoun as a free port, which means any vessels are welcome, including pirates. They even have some electricity, because they trade for coal from South Africa. And there is a reservoir in the foothills which makes some hydro. The fanatics who are loyal to El-Ayashi are trying to win control of the city. They don’t have it yet, but they’re close. Ayashi is not eager for battle, but he intends to assert his control. The cartel is still running the port and the territory inland and north for about twenty kilometers. North of that is the Royal Moroccan Army. In between and to the east is tribal land, Berber land.”

Pat asked him, “Why does the king tolerate the cartel? If he has an army, he could just pound them with artillery and take over the port.”

“The royal army is spread too thin. Morocco is as big as California, never forget that, with mountains almost as high, and just as many people.

But unlike California, most of the people live in the north. The king has to choose his battles, and his enemies. He has to keep most of his forces in the north to ensure the control of his base of support, which is most of the population. The Royal Moroccan Army is happy to let the cartel stand as a buffer between his forces and Ayashi's fanatics in the south. And everyone benefits from the free trade zone, even the king. Nobody will benefit if the port is destroyed. The trading that happens at Zerhoun is what has value, not the docks and piers, and consequently the port is hostage to all three factions. It survives as a free port only as long as all three factions desire it to survive. For now, Zerhoun being a neutral port suits all three parties."

Then Bert asked Kam, "How do the pirates feel about shipwrecked infidels?"

"I don't know how the pirates feel, but I was told that if we had landed twenty kilometers to the south, we wouldn't have lasted a day with our heads attached to our bodies. But around here, around Cape Zerhoun, it's not so bad. The cartel of captains isn't a real government, and it doesn't have a real military. It's more like a junta of warlords and mercenaries. If you have gold or any kind of cash, almost anything is possible."

Victor asked him, "So, can your friend's lorry take us north to the king's territory?"

"If we could pay, I think so, yes. We would need to pay bribes at a series of dangerous checkpoints. Very large bribes. You pay the local chief, the local boss, but you never know what will happen until you're past. The farther north you go, the more they prefer the king. That is my understanding, at least, based on only one conversation. But we have no money. At least, I don't."

We all looked down, variously scratching our salty and unwashed selves, stroking our stubbly three-day whiskers, or poking at the ground. Another dead end.

After a minute of silence Victor looked across at Kam and said, "I have my share of the gold that Colonel Rainborow paid us for the voyage."

"You do?" I asked. "You've had it on you all along?"

"All along? If you mean since the day before yesterday, when you handed it to me? Then yes, all along. One thing I've learned in my life is that a piece of gold placed into the right hand at the right moment can unlock almost any door. Of *course* I brought the gold—and I'm rather surprised that you did not." He turned his wrist over, revealing a stubby white tube

concealed in his hand, and addressed our Moroccan guide. “Would ten ounces of gold be enough to pay our way out of Morocco?”

Kam’s smile made dimples in his cheeks. “Ten ounces of gold? That’s a small fortune around here. Oh, I’m *sure* that would be enough. *More* than enough.” He looked at each of us in turn. “But I have a different plan in mind. I was going to say something about this idea, but I thought you would think I was mad, crazy, that it was impossible. But with your gold—your gold makes *many* things possible.”

We all glanced at each other.

“So, what’s your idea?” asked Bert.

Kam looked at each of us again. “The mission. I think we can still do the mission.”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

“Do the mission?” Pat was incredulous.

“How?” asked Gino. “The Atlas, she is down, the lorries are down, we have no equipments and not enough men.”

Kam said, “The lorries are gone, but we can find other transportation. The same with the equipment. Back in Ireland, we planned that we would have no help from anybody once we landed. Now I know where we are, and I’ve already visited a friend. In some ways, it’s better for us now than the way we planned it before. Nobody knows we’re here except a close friend and, soon, my father. I need only one ounce of gold to begin—petrol is unbelievably expensive, and it’s required for our transportation tonight. The petrol merchants, they require money, which in Morocco is *dirhams*, but gold is even better. With ten ounces of gold, we can purchase anything we need. Today is Tuesday, the auction will be held on Saturday, after the night of the full moon. We have time. We can still do the mission.”

His enthusiasm surprised me. Kam wasn’t Irish, or English, or even a Christian. When I’d met him, he’d told me that surfing was his religion—whatever that meant. This wasn’t his fight, or his mission. He was home, he had already visited a friend, and he could have easily deserted us. Maybe even turned us in to the local mafia for a reward. Or even claimed slave ownership over us under Sharia law as our captor. Yet here he was, suggesting that we could still try to rescue the kidnapped schoolgirls, despite our own extremely perilous predicament!

Victor removed one Krugerrand from his plastic tube and handed it to me. I hefted it briefly and passed it to Gino, who examined it more closely,

saying, “Never have I one of these in my hand.” He looked both doubtful and hopeful at the same time, then passed the gold coin to Pat, who handed it to Bert.

“We can use the backup exfiltration plan,” Bert suggested. “If we can hire sufficient transportation, enough for all the girls, we can get out to the north. I know it’s a long shot, but it’s possible. That was already our backup plan, but using our own lorries.” He gave the coin to Hank, who didn’t even look at it before giving it to Kam.

Kam held it up in the sunlight, looked across at Victor, and said, “Thank you,” before pocketing it in his jeans.

Pat said, “We only have the rope we used to climb off the beach, but it’s more than twenty meters up the wall of the fortress—and that’s the only way to get the girls out.”

“Don’t worry about rope,” said Kam. “I can find all the rope we’ll need.”

“This is crazy,” said Hank. “If we can get out now, we should just get out.”

We all turned to stare at him. He glanced at us all, saw our growing resolve, shut up, and looked away.

Then Victor said, calmly, evenly, “The important thing is that we try to rescue the girls. Even if we don’t succeed, they will learn that a rescue mission was sent. That they weren’t just kidnapped, then forgotten by their countrymen and sold into slavery. That memory—that a rescue mission was sent—might be all they have to hold onto, so we have to try. We can’t just run away. We can’t just try to save our own lives. There’s no one else. It’s up to us.”

I was surprised at this outpouring of bigheartedness from Victor. I had thought that I understood him after a decade of living with him, but obviously I didn’t.

Pat said, “I think this deserves a vote. And once we vote, that’s it. No come-backs. No second-guesses. After we decide, one way or the other, it’s done. I’m with Kam and Victor. I vote we push ahead with the mission, come what may.”

“You know I’m in,” said Bert, reaching across to shake Pat’s hand, their hazel eyes locked.

“Of course I vote for yes,” said Gino. “If there is even a little chance to save the girls, we must to try.”

By then, my vote didn’t matter, but I still said, “Why not? I have nothing

else on my calendar this week. I vote yes."

That left only Hank Landry. I gathered that the formal vote was really meant only to impress upon him the finality of our decision. The tally stood at six for and one undecided.

He looked around the circle, saw our firmly set faces, and said, "Sure, I'll go with you. What other choice do I have?"

"You can swim back to the Canaries," Gino suggested. "But it is a *long* swim."

We laughed, but it was lighthearted, not malicious.

Bert said, "Good, it's done, then. We're not leaving without the girls."

"You know I can't climb any twenty-meter walls," said Hank. "Ropes or no ropes."

Pat said, "Don't worry, you won't have to. We won't ask anybody to do anything that's impossible for them. We'll do the climbing."

25

Kam spoke quietly with Bert and Pat, all of them leaning over the dirt bike while they refilled its tank from one of the gas cans from the Zodiacs. This was a messy process, using a funnel improvised from plastic sheeting. As soon as the bike's tank was full, Kam was off again.

The villa foundation provided enough nooks and crannies for us to find shelter from the afternoon sun. With the wind off the ocean, the red Saharan dust was gone, and the western horizon was sharp. I was used to seeing the horizon from three or four meters above ocean level aboard Rebel Yell. Now we were about fifty meters above the beach, and the horizon was much farther. I saw a small ship a great distance away, too far even to identify its type. It could have been coastal traffic, or it could have been heading for Port Zerhoun.

The surf made a steady crashing roar against the beaches and cliffs below. Sea birds floated on the updrafts. There was only sand and cement and low scrubby vegetation around us, but the coastline and ocean views were stunning. With a magnificent five-star-resort view of the Atlantic, rustling palm trees above, fresh sea breezes, and wheeling seagulls, the bare foundation could have become a lovely villa, and still might, under the right circumstances.

Victor and I had snagged a worn-out poncho and a plastic tarp from the common pile. With our pieces of cord we made a lean-to hooch against our section of wall that gave us more shade and a windbreak. Pat and Gino constructed a similar bungalow across from us. Bert and Hank were somewhere upslope behind us, out of our sight. Using my shoulder bag for a pillow, with my rifle leaned against the wall within easy reach, I finally allowed myself to go all the way down onto my back. Victor did the same a meter away.

The poncho hooch flapped above us in the breeze, and the sky clouded over while we napped. The west wind shifted and dark clouds marched in from the north, stirring up dust and sand before we were pelted with rain. The rain wouldn't last—I could read the clouds—so I didn't bother to rig the tarp to collect the water that could be channeled down it. By the time the dust was washed off, the storm would be over.

The rain soon quit and it cleared up again to partly overcast, but the

ground was damp. This meant that our footsteps would be quieter, but also that we would leave a conspicuous trail. It couldn't be helped. We struck our little encampment when the sun was still a finger above the horizon, and repacked our scanty bags. Then Victor and I sat with our backs against our section of wall, facing inland, waiting for the word to move out.

On my web belt were two ammunition pouches and a Fairbairn-Sykes commando knife. My rifle was across my lap, the sling behind my neck. My shoulder bag was heavier and thicker, with the rolled-up poncho and a liter bottle of water added to the other items it contained. Twilight faded and it grew dark, both because of the overcast and because the moon had yet to appear above the mountains to the east.

While the world was reducing to shadows, I watched Bert slink over to Pat and Gino and crouch down in front of them for a few minutes. When he was done with those two, he came across to Victor and me and crouched down again. We pushed away from the wall and raised up onto our haunches, our rifle butts on the ground, our hands on the stocks.

He spoke quietly, just above a whisper. "Mister Abidar's lorry has arrived. It's up the trail and then down the road a bit, about two kilometers, he said. He left his bike with the lorry, and he'll lead us there on foot. I'll be up front with Kam. The night-vision goggles packed it in last night, so we'll be using only our eyeballs. Victor, stay close to Gino. Never more than ten meters away, closer if we're in close country. Don't lose Dan behind you, either. You must be able to see him at all times. Rounds chambered, rifles on safe?"

"They are," I said.

"All right, then. When Gino moves out, follow him. Dan, you'll be our eyes and ears in the back."

"You'll have no surprises from behind, boss."

"Anybody fires a shot, for any reason, the mission fails."

"I understand," I replied, and Victor nodded.

"Good. When Gino moves, follow him."

Bert rose and slunk away uphill and then out of our sight. My pupils were fully dilated, capturing every glimmer of light. The moon back over the Atlas Mountains shone on the clouds above, which cast enough of a downward glow for us to be able to perceive the ground at our feet, and thus avoid falling into ravines. I had my LED mini-flashlight, but I didn't want to use it unless it was absolutely necessary. Folks moving at night should

always use natural light unless they are in pitch-black darkness. Only then, under heavy tree canopy on an overcast moonless night, or in the unlit cargo hold of a ship, you do what you have to do—very carefully.

But in every condition it always pays to observe light and sound discipline. And foreign infidels must tread *very* lightly in the lands of the head-choppers. The odds were extremely slim that anybody was in our path with a working night observation device, but it still pays to be careful. Needless to say, there would be no more smoking while the patrol was moving. A glowing cigarette could be seen from an enormous distance at night. A flaring match could be seen even farther, and the smell of cigarette smoke carries a long way.

On a patrol, the man who makes too many unnecessary noises is considered a liability. Snapping sticks and kicking rocks are unforgivable errors. Everyone must strive to move like panthers. The bottom line was that we must not be discovered by anyone. Goatherd, gatherer of firewood, child chasing a ball, an old man taking a piss: it didn't matter. If we were spotted, we were done for. We might make a lot of noise and cause a lot of hurt with our 210 cartridges per rifle, and Pat's 500 machine-gun rounds, but what would happen after they were gone? And the more of them we killed before we ran out of ammunition, then the greater their rage would be if and when we were finally captured. Unless each one of us saved the last round for himself.

The night-vision goggles that had allowed Kam to steer between the cliffs to a rare sandy beach had not survived their ordeal in the surf zone. One by one the old technological marvels were falling away, like my Sako rifle with its Leupold scope. Would I ever see their like again? Even the famous Colonel Rainborow of the vaunted SAS couldn't lay his hands on electronic red-dot rifle sights for our M-16s. A decade before, they had been standard issue for ordinary soldiers. Now we were back to using iron sights and flashlights. And the future of flashlights was not looking too bright as, one by one, irreplaceable batteries died, even the so-called rechargeables like the triple-A in my penlight.

Working by feel, I used the opportunity to place my light against the glow-paint on my front sight, shielding it from view with my hand. When I switched off my light, I could see my front sight glowing green like a firefly the size of a vertical grain of rice. I charged up Victor's front sight while I had my light out, and then put it away.

Bert had disappeared up the trail leading away from the foundation and the cliffs. I could make out Pat, standing against a pillar with his M-60, but I saw nobody uphill ahead of him. Gino stepped out of some shadows and fell into position, then moved off behind Pat, who had disappeared when I looked back his way. Then it was Victor's turn to move out, then mine. Uphill past the foundation, past the last low walls and pillars, past scrub palmettos and thorn bushes our patrol moved up an old dirt track. A bulldozer had once leveled the trail, but nature was returning with a vengeance, creating new washouts. Only a few of the cross-cut erosion channels were more than a nuisance, a meter down, across, and back up, with the expected slipping and stumbling on loose rubble.

As we walked, we often crunched on stones, making unavoidable noise while trying to be perfectly quiet. The patrol's forward speed was slow enough to allow me to make frequent careful sweeps behind. I knew we were getting close to the road when we passed the burned-out hulk of a car. In the third world, wrecks were frequently left at the scene of their final disaster, and in time, many of them wound up burnt, I suppose for somebody's night of entertainment. Or maybe it had been a fiery crash in the first place. Either way, in a few centuries it would be just a rusty stain on the ground, unless somebody scavenged the metal first.

The final approach to the paved road angled up an embankment. The patrol crossed over the old tarmac one at a time until finally I crouched low and shuffled across, crab-walking backwards, my rifle aimed astern. Then down the opposite embankment through brush that tore at me with sharp spines and thorns. I lost my footing and staggered down a ravine, nearly out of control, ungracefully skidding to a stop against a curtain of dense thickets. The path grew twisty and maze-like, following both sides of a streambed. The moon was not yet visible, just its reflection off the clouds, so I could not keep track of our direction, which left me utterly disoriented. It took most of my attention not to trip or lose sight of Victor.

Bert was moving the patrol forward cautiously, which I appreciated at the back end. Because I was the caboose, I would have to trust those in front to navigate us undetected around any obstacles or dangerous areas. No matter how far or wide or fast Kam was ranging ahead, Bert was keeping it slow and deliberate, with a lot of pauses where we would close up our ranks a bit and sink down low against the nearest concealment. My job was simple. Just slink along behind Victor and keep my eyes peeled to the rear and both sides.

Sometimes I could see all the way ahead to Big Hank in front of Pat, but sometimes I couldn't even see Gino.

My rifle's rear peep sight was flipped over to the wide aperture for night work. When I shouldered the weapon, I could still make out the glowing paint on the front sight. Not as bright as right after I'd put my penlight to it, but still visible. You can't hit what you can't see, obviously. But if you can't make out your front sight against a dark background, then you can't even hit what you *can* see. That pale green firefly out on the end of my barrel would keep me in the game if life came down to a shooting match.

The rain had stopped but the ground was still wet, which quieted our footsteps except when we crossed loose stones. I didn't even try to obscure our back trail against trackers; it would have been pointless. Pine branches whisked across my body while I walked crabwise and backwards. At times I needed to physically move limbs out of my way. Eventually the ground widened and grew flatter, the vegetation sparser.

Seven was a good number for a patrol. This was enough men to put some serious firepower onto an enemy, given our weapons. But with more than seven or eight, the line can stretch out so far that the tail can easily become detached from the head. Or the tail can continue blundering forward while the point man is on high alert, with the enemy nearby. Pat with the M-60 was right in the middle, and he would always be aware of what was happening at each end.

I lost track of time. After a while I didn't know how long we'd been patrolling, or how far we'd gone. I had no timepiece, no compass, and the moon was still not yet visible. Our path had taken dozens of twists and turns in labyrinthine terrain, more uphill than down. While backing up a trail and turning around to spot Victor, it came as a surprise when I made out the boxy shape of a vehicle, the others already gathered behind it.

It was parked close against a stand of low palms, a ravine falling off to the other side. I could only make out the open doors on the back of some kind of truck. Since I was rear security, I was the last one to scramble in. Kam pushed the two doors closed from the outside, and we were left in total darkness to sort ourselves out. We were in some kind of box truck, our M-16s clumsily banging against one another. Somebody clicked on a penlight shielded by their hand. I pulled my own light out of my shirt pocket, switched it on, and let it dangle.

With just a little quiet cursing, we all found places to sit against the sides

and front of the closed compartment. It stank of livestock. Victor sat across from me by the rear doors. I noted that all rifle butts were on the deck, the barrels pointed up, nobody unthinkingly sweeping or jabbing his mates with a muzzle. Once we were more or less situated, we turned out our lights and Bert said, “Get comfortable, laddies—we’re going to be in here for a while.”

Kam’s motorbike started up, and I heard it fade away as it moved out ahead. The truck’s motor rumbled to life, a gasoline engine by its sound, with a good starter battery. We lurched forward and uphill, the motion indicating that we were on a rough and twisting dirt track. The truck’s muffler was rotten and the noise level inside was barely tolerable, but it was nothing compared to the twin-diesel roar of the Atlas.

I tried to lean back in the corner, but it was nearly impossible with all the random jolting. I leaned my rifle against my body, stock between my legs, barrel against my shoulder. Conversation was just possible but not easy, so mostly we were quiet, lost in our private thoughts. Was it only forty-eight hours since I’d stepped from Rebel Yell onto the Atlas? And here I was, jammed hips and elbows against rifles and boots inside another troop carrier, in another war.

I looked at my rifle’s front sight, not a foot from my face. I could still make out the glow, but it was dim, so I took my penlight and juiced it up, holding my fist around the light and the sight to contain the shine. After half a minute, it was charged up again to green firefly brightness. I did the same for Victor’s rifle, and the others followed my example with their own penlights, fingers glowing orange around the lights.

In a few minutes, there were five green dots hovering inside the blackness of the truck at eye level. As long as we could see our glowing front sights, we could hit anything we could see—and God help anybody who stood against us. If I can see it, I can hit it, I thought again and again, like a mantra. This sudden surge of confidence, as if five tiny dots of green glow-paint made us dangerous night fighters! (Pat’s machine gun had no glow paint: it would be aimed by its tracer rounds.)

And then I had another thought: maybe the sinking of the Atlas had used up all of Team Rainborow’s bad luck in one go. You had to believe in something, and that was something to believe in. Thoughts rattling around inside my head, in the dark, in the back of an unknown truck jolting and lurching through an unknown land. For all I knew, when the truck finally parked and the rear doors were opened, we might be in a prison courtyard.

At times the road smoothed out, and judging by the tire sounds and engine vibrations, we got up some speed on pavement and I would almost begin to relax, but then we would stop jerkily and turn onto another rough and twisting trail where we would all be thrown side to side and front to back, making it impossible to even relax, much less sleep.

Eventually we all leaned inward, grabbing onto each other's shoulders and rifle barrels to steady ourselves as a unit and prevent individuals from being thrown around too much. The truck swayed and jerked uphill and downhill, but mostly up, twisting and dipping, engine occasionally straining on very steep upgrades. It was impossible to map our route in my mind, but I knew that we were climbing higher into some foothills or mountains, and most often at very low speed.

Bert looked at the glowing hands of his diver's watch from time to time (he'd also juiced it up with his penlight) and he took to muttering the time aloud for our benefit. Nine o'clock. Ten o'clock. If we had landed less than ten klicks above Cape Zerhoun, our long journey in the truck meant we had to be heading inland past the fortress. With nothing else to do, we charged up our front sights a few more times. During one more section of twisting downhill, the truck came to a complete stop, the emergency brake scraped on, and the engine switched off, coming to silence after a long rattle. We all pulled ourselves from various states of semi-sleep, the back doors were yanked open, and Kam was standing there. I hadn't heard his motorbike before or after the engine shut down, so he must have preceded us to that place.

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Victor and I slid out first and set the back of a hasty perimeter. After the pitch-dark inside of the truck, the moonlight made the night landscape seem nearly as bright as day. The others tumbled out, and after a brief huddle we fell into our patrol order, continuing on as before. A short climb up and over a muddy bank, and then we went snaking downhill through tall wet grass. As the path grew steeper, the terrain on both sides closed in until there were rocky walls on both sides. Water from the recent rain ran down the path, which twisted and turned in crazy switchbacks like a maze. The moonlight shone straight down upon us, allowing us to find our footing over, across, and down hundreds of boulder steps. Kam knew the route and was unafraid of

ambush, because we made steady progress for most of an hour with no stops.

The sound of rushing water became audible and then grew strong. We were very near a creek or river. The rock wall on the right side fell away, the patrol went around another turn to the left, and we came to a flat area of sand and pebbles. A cliff at least ten meters high rose above us in a natural cleft shaped like a horseshoe. This area must have been scoured out when the river was running much higher than now, an unimaginable torrent. At the back of the flat area against the cliff was a circular tent about five meters across. By the time I saw it, Gino was going inside, and then Victor. Bert stood by its opening, waved me in, and then he came in last.

Kam stood near the center pole, holding a lit candle. The roof of the tent was high enough for all of us to stand. Rugs made a floor. He said, “We’re staying here tonight. If you want to fill your bottles, the river is very sweet, very pure, so there is no need for tablets. You can even smoke a cigarette if you like. We’re perfectly safe here.”

Victor collapsed onto the ground and said, “I could have gone farther, but not much. The ride in the truck was worse, though. The older I get, the more pain I have.”

“You’re just working off your penance in advance. Doing your purgatory time on earth. You’ll get to heaven sooner that way.” I was just needling him. Victor was an agnostic with an antipathy to organized religions.

“That’s Papist nonsense.”

“It probably is, but Hung believes it too, and you know *he’s* no Papist. Or maybe you’ll come back in the next life as an eagle, or a cow. Or a dung beetle.”

“That’s all nonsense too.” He was unlacing his boots.

“So, what’s the real story?”

“The girls are the real story.”

“Victor, you always said you could outwalk me. Tonight you gave me a good run for my money. And you always looked back to be sure I was following. You did well at patrolling tonight. For a geriatric, I mean.”

“It’s not exactly brain surgery if they can teach Marines to do it. Really, it’s only a matter of being in sufficient physical condition for the terrain. But I could have easily broken a leg. Would you have carried me then? Or stayed behind with me? Or just left me?”

“I’d have carried you. But it didn’t happen. You made it all the way. Even Hank made it. Look at him, wheezing like a walrus. Him, I couldn’t

have carried. But even he made it, so I never had any doubt about you."

Next to the center pole was a small iron stove, with paper, charcoal, and pieces of wood stacked beside it. Kam loaded the fuel and lit the fire. A metal chimney carried the smoke up to the open crown of the tent. There was more couscous and flat bread, along with some cold chicken, black olives, and yellow saffron rice. Pat, Gino, and Hank, the three smokers, sat and shared a single cigarette after dropping their packs and placing their weapons on the ground.

Bert announced that we would stand guard on one-hour shifts outside the tent. Standing, not sitting, and he would take the first hour. He said that if he found the watchman asleep, he would never wake up. It didn't sound like a joke.

Kam passed out folded blankets. He explained that they were stored in a cave along with the tent and the stove. Since the dry tent had already been standing when we'd come upon it, I wondered who had set it up. We all stripped off our packs and bags and web gear, placing our rifles between us, muzzles pointed outward. Men and weapons, alternating around the stove and center pole like the spokes of a wheel. We mashed our gear bags into pillows and arranged our blankets. I unlaced and pulled off my boots. Nobody chatted, and if they snored, I didn't notice. The sound of the river rushing a dozen meters away made a continuous roar. I slept like a dead man.

Hours later, Victor stirred me awake and whispered, "It's four o'clock, and it's time for your watch." As Rebel Yell's skipper I was used to being awakened at all hours, but it took a moment to orient myself to the tent and the sound of the river. Off with my blanket, on with my boots and web belt.

When I was ready, I whispered, "Give me the watch."

He handed it to me but didn't let go of it yet. "You're to give it to Kam, not Bert, at five o'clock. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. Kam takes the watch at five."

"Do you have the watch?"

"Yes, I have the watch."

Only then did he relinquish its paracord leash. I took it and my rifle, and stepped outside. The moon was low in the west, its rays ending against the cliff behind the tent. With so much moonlight, there was no danger of falling down the rocky bank into the river. Segments of the river shone with reflected moonlight as it fell away in loops. I was tempted to just stare at it, but I wanted to stay alert, so instead I roamed the lengthening shadows,

searching for hostile watchers and practicing old stalking skills. When the glowing minute hand completed its revolution and pointed at twelve again, I slipped back inside the tent and roused Kam to take the watch.

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My best sleep came after I pulled guard duty, just before and through the dawn. When I finally opened my eyes, the entry flaps were tied to the sides of the tent to permit daylight and fresh air inside. I could hear Pat and Kam talking quietly just outside. Hank was also gone, and so was the sergeant major. Victor and Gino slept on. I was still dressed, except for my boots, so it took only a moment to make myself ready. I pushed off my blanket and ducked outside in my stocking feet.

In daylight I could see that the circular tent was made of ocher-colored canvas, which blended into the sandstone cliff. From the air or from a distant vantage point it would appear to be just another red-rock boulder. Hank, Pat, and Kam were sitting on a rug a couple meters away from the tent. Their weapons lay beside them, within reach. They were sipping something hot from mismatched cups. The little iron stove that had been inside the tent when we'd arrived was by the edge of the rug, with a teakettle on top. The river wasn't visible from our location by the tent, but its presence was inescapable because of its steady rushing sound.

Pat Maguire was the first to speak, greeting me with "Good morning, Sunshine."

I yawned and stretched, twisting my neck to get the kinks out. "Better than yesterday, anyhow. Where's Bert?"

"He's out tramping around, maybe taking a crap."

"Without his buddy?"

Hank said, "Fuck that shit. I ain't wipin' nobody's ass."

"So, where the hell are we, and what happens next?" The men shifted around and made room for me on the rug, and I sat down with them.

Kam poured a cup of tea from the pot on the stove and handed it to me. It was sweet mint tea, nothing at all like the English tea from the voyage. He said, "We call this the Third Valley. It's one of the places we brought trekking groups for *le camping*. This afternoon we'll hike down this river, and then up another one. Most of the way will be in daylight. The moon will make it possible to continue after the sun is gone."

Still groggy, I asked, "How far are we going? Why don't we just leave earlier?"

"We're waiting for some others who are going to join us here. We'll

spend tonight at another camping place. Tomorrow, we'll obtain our transportation for carrying the girls to the north. But while we're waiting here, you can have a bath, if you like, and rinse your uniform. There's a good place for having a bath just a little way below here."

I nodded and sipped the mint tea. I had sand, salt, dust, and dirt matted into my hair and scalp as well as into every inch of my crusty skin and my stiff clothes. I stood and walked a dozen meters away to the edge of the river, drawn by the sound of water pouring down the canyon. After satisfying my curiosity about how the gorge looked in daylight, I sat again by the stove, and Kam refilled my cup, lifting the kettle with a flourish so that the hot tea streamed down from a height.

In a few minutes the others were awake. Kam retold the late risers about the spot being a layover for trekkers, about our expected visitors, and about the opportunity for bathing. I surrendered my spot on the rug to Victor. Back in the tent, I put my boots and web belt on, grabbed my rifle, and then went exploring in the direction Kam had indicated. If the sergeant major could go off wandering on his own, so could an old scout-sniper. Swirling water had carved pockets into the red rocks where the stream twisted around in a tight turn. I removed one article of clothing at a time and rinsed them in the rushing water, rubbing in sand and gravel from the bottom to free the salt and grime. Then I sat down in the frigid chest-deep water and rinsed my body. There was no soap or shampoo, but just rubbing my hair and face while I was underwater provided relief.

I wrung out my wet uniform, socks, T-shirt, and boxers as best I could, then piled everything onto my shirt in a bundle and wrapped it all up. Bare skin was just what the doctor ordered while there was a chance to dry out and let a dozen little wounds and abrasions begin to heal. Soon the tent area would be in direct sunlight and perfect for spreading my wet uniform out to dry.

Since I was the first one down to the pools, I was the first to be finished. Kam met me on the path halfway back while I was still out of sight of the tent. I was naked, holding my bundle of wet clothes and wearing only my boots, which were only loosely tied. The many sharp stones would have made walking barefoot extremely painful.

As soon as he saw me, he looked away. "Dan, you have to be careful in Morocco. At least wear your shorts. We're going to have company this morning, my father and my sister. They could arrive at any time. And dude,

let me tell you—it would cause a nuclear explosion if they saw you like this."

I continued up the trail, my rifle slung over my shoulder, holding my wet clothes and web gear in front of me. "When are they getting here?"

He continued to avert his eyes, walking around and ahead of me. "I don't know when. We'll know they're here when they walk down the same path we used last night. So please, at least wear your pants, okay?"

"Is your sister a…believer? A Muslim? I thought your family wasn't religious."

"Oh, no. She's not religious at all. But even when a person isn't religious, it's still a problem. In an important way, Islam *is* the culture of Morocco. It's difficult to explain to an outsider, but believe me, it would be a big problem if they saw you without your clothes on. Even among people who wish to help one another, this would be very serious. And she's coming with us on the mission, so we don't want to freak her out, or our father."

"She's coming with us? What's her name? How old is she?"

"Her name is Tala, and she's a few years older than me. And she has no husband, if you're wondering. No husband, no children. But she's a very good climber. She wants to come with us, and Bert and Pat have agreed to it. She led groups of trekkers through these canyons many times, back when the tourists were still coming."

Once again the Old Guard of Bert, Pat, and Kam were making decisions without taking a vote or polling the new guys. But that didn't bother me. I didn't expect to vote on everything, and what advice could I offer them anyway? "She led treks, a woman?"

"Yes, she led them, but always with a male cousin for appearances. Europeans, what did they care who led them? It didn't matter to them. She even learned to drive, and better than most men. That's quite rare in Morocco, believe me."

"She sounds like an independent person."

"Yes, very much independent. During the years when I was teaching Europeans to surf, my sister was leading treks in these coastal mountains and taking European climbers into the High Atlas. Some Americans, too. Even climbers from Australia and New Zealand. But her specialty is free-climbing. The highest wall we're going to climb is about twenty meters, almost vertical."

"You haven't seen it yet, Fort Zerhoun?"

"Yes, but only from a distance. If the stones are rough and uneven, it can

be an easy climb. If the stones are very smooth, not easy at all. And when we reach the girls, the presence of a woman will help to make them calm. But that is all for later. My father and my sister are coming today, so you can't go walking around naked. You simply can't."

"Fine, no problem. I'll go up the trail a little way, and if I see anybody coming, I'll warn you in plenty of time."

"Good thinking," he said. "Rear security."

"That's right. I'll warn you when they're coming—and I'll have my clothes on."

I left him and walked around the side of the cliff to the canyon trail, and climbed up to where the sun had already found the red rocks. I spread my wet clothes out to dry on warm boulders. The top of a smooth rock became my seat, and I was even able to take off my boots and let my feet dry in the sunlight. The buddy system was the last thing on my mind, since the sergeant major had already ditched it. And I wanted to be alone after so much forced closeness.

The furthest visible part of the trail was no more than five hundred meters away as the crow flies, but it would require inbound visitors at least ten minutes to negotiate that distance on foot, with plenty of switchbacks where they would be out of my sight. So I sat on my rock in the sunshine, keeping my eyes glued to the visible sections of the trail. This gave me a chance to play with my M-16 and pick out hypothetical targets like tree stumps or prominent boulders at increasingly longer ranges. I'd been so accustomed to using magnified optics for so long that it took a serious mental adjustment to fully accept that they didn't exist on this mission. The best I could do was flip the rear aperture over to its smaller daytime peep sight.

Now what counted were strong eyes, good iron sights, and better-than-average marksmanship. But even without optics, my old scout-sniper skills would remain valid, giving me an edge in many situations. Stalking. Camouflage. Building a mental "range card" of known distances up my firing lanes. If enemy fighters were to come swarming down the canyon, I had already identified the killing zones.

This canyon was a perfect little Thermopylae, a deadman's gulch where one good rifleman could hold off a platoon. At least until they brought in the mortars. Or fired smoke grenades to cover their approach. Or it became dark. Or the defending rifleman ran out of ammunition. But in daylight, it was a natural 500-meter shooting gallery. If I could see it, I could hit it. The glow-

paint on the back of the front sight appeared white in daylight, but the top few millimeters of the sight were left the original unpainted black. I would have to aim low at night to compensate for the unlit, unseen tip.

Did I wish that I had a magnified optical rifle scope with a ranging reticle? Of course. I pictured my beautiful Sako 7mm Remington Magnum with its Leupold scope, secure in its nylon soft case, clipped to my other gear bags in the back of lorry number three, now resting on the bottom of the ocean. The Atlas and the Unimog trucks on the uncharted seamount would make prime fish habitats.

I could only hope that the local Moroccan warlords were having just as hard a time hanging onto good scoped rifles as I was. But even cheap binoculars would give an enemy hiding somewhere above me in the rocks a big advantage. Success in fighting and in warfare often comes down to who perceives the enemy danger first, at the greatest range. And throws the first sucker punch, and thereby wins, survives, and writes the one and only history of the engagement. Dead men tell no tales.

But if I had to have an iron-sighted rifle, I was glad it was an M-16A2. I dropped the mag and ejected the chambered cartridge into my hand. Pulled the empty rifle into my shoulder and scanned up the canyon through the rear peep, centering the tip of the front post sight on a boulder near the top. Hold steady…exhale…squeeze—snap. The trigger broke crisply at about six pounds of pull. Not bad for a rack-grade soldier's rifle.

So just let some idiot with an AK-47 stand on that ledge up there 500 meters away, taking a nice long look down the ravine. Just let him. If I chose to, I could center-punch the sky-lined son of a bitch with my cold-bore shot. Shooting from a rest, of course, and not from offhand. I would save shooting offhand for when they were much closer.

I moved my drying clothes to follow the shifting pools of sunlight, while also scanning the complicated rocky terrain above. I was thoroughly enjoying my sunlit solitude. It was not much more than a very long day earlier that I'd been treading water in the open Atlantic, under a setting moon. After that experience, every day standing in the sun on terra firma was a pure gift from…somebody. Or something.

But unquestionably a gift, and not to be squandered.

27

The sun was high when I noticed shadowy movement far up the ravine. People approaching, coming down the trail. Careful study from behind cover while they were visible revealed a bearded man in the lead and a somewhat smaller, clean-shaved person behind him. I slipped back down toward the tent, grabbing my clothes along the way. The rest of the team were finished with washing, some wearing only their skivvies; it was an open-air locker room from the tent to the river. I pulled on my trousers while announcing, “Two people are coming. They’re a few minutes out. A man with a beard, and possibly a woman.”

There was a flurry of activity as they all got busy dressing and packing. In less than a minute everyone was in uniform or otherwise clothed, and busy with their boots, web gear, and packs. A female was on the way, and in a Muslim country that was always fraught with peril. If anybody takes offense at some real or imagined transgression, blood can be spilled in an instant.

When I was fully dressed and kitted out with my rifle and combat load, I went back around the cliff to the trail. Kam was already there, waiting. We could both see a hundred meters up the last canyon twist while remaining unobserved behind some junipers growing against a rock wall. Definitely a man in front and a woman behind. The man had a short beard and was wearing dark pants and a brown jacket. He had a pack on his back and a rifle slung over his shoulder, barrel up. The female was dressed in black, with only her face and hands exposed.

Kamal moved up the trail to greet them, and I followed a few paces behind. I swung my M-16 onto my shoulder to mirror the man who was approaching us. An armed society is a polite society, as author and philosopher Robert Heinlein had noted in the twentieth century. Kam met his father first, and after exchanging hugs and air kisses with him, he introduced me, saying, “Captain Kilmer, this is my father and my sister. They both speak English. They have brought some more food for us to eat.”

Kam’s father shook hands with me in the Western way, making direct eye contact. He didn’t really have a beard; it was more like he hadn’t put a razor to his face in a few weeks. His graying hair was cut short. Simple and utilitarian. He was an inch or two shorter than me, and his eyes were brown, not green, like his son’s eyes. Straight, strong nose. His rifle was an old

military bolt-action that I didn't recognize. Not an Enfield, Springfield, or Mauser, but from that era. The wood of the fore stock ran near to the muzzle, so World War Two or older. But no rust that I could see. Even where the bluing was worn off, the rifle had been kept oiled.

Kam's sister had a pleasant, attractive face, made all the more intriguing by the simple fact that it was completely uncovered in a Muslim country. No *hijab* or veil, not even a scarf. Light brown eyes, and brown hair pulled back and tied in a single long braid. I remembered Kam saying on the voyage that he had been raised in a nominally Muslim household, although he himself was not religious. But what about his sister and father? I remembered hearing about his French or possibly half-French mother.

His sister was wearing dark slacks and a black tunic that covered her arms to her wrists and extended from her neck to the bottom of her hips. And she had a gray rucksack on her back, with a chest strap fastened across her rib cage.

But most interesting to me by far was the fact that she wore no head covering of any kind. This was very significant in an Islamic country. All that feminine charm was right out in the open to be seen, potentially leading decent, Allah-fearing Muslim men into deadly sins of carnal temptation. And any ensuing sins, up to and including rape, would be entirely the responsibility of the guilty female temptress.

I remembered how crazy it had been in Iraq and Afghanistan, and how unappealing Muslim places had been to me after my experiences there. Any nation where most of the men lorded it over most of the women most of the time, like masters and slaves, was no place for me. It always bothered me to see streets full of men and only men. Where were all the women and girls? I knew where. They were being kept at home—and not by their choice. Usually they were the mates of husbands they had not chosen. Often, they had been child brides forced into arranged marriages with much older total strangers. So I was always uncomfortable in conservative Islamic countries. I did not enjoy palling around with male slave masters who kept their female slaves under lock and key. I felt only pity for their unseen and unknown wives and daughters, ordained to servitude, submission, and official second-class status. Half of the population born as slaves to the other half. No, thanks. But maybe Morocco was different?

Kam's father had been walking down the canyon in front, and he was taller, and he was a middle-aged man, so logically, I had exchanged my

cursory hellos with him alone, while taking only a polite and furtive glance at his daughter. But then, unexpectedly, when my eyes went toward hers again, she met my glance and she held it. And then, even more unexpectedly, she stepped up beside her father, and she spoke.

"Hello, Captain Kilmer. My name is Tala Abidar, and I am walking with you today." She did not put out her hand to shake mine, as her father had done, so I did not extend my hand toward hers. Instead, as if to forestall any chance of physical contact, she had hooked her thumbs inside the straps of her pack as she'd stepped forward.

"Nice to meet you, Tala. And my name is *Dan* Kilmer, not captain." With no handshake to consider, I was left to stare at her face and into her eyes.

Kam spoke some words to them in Arabic or Berber—I couldn't tell which—and led them around to meet the rest of our band of shipwrecked infidels. Kam's father unslung his rifle and passed it to his son, who casually swung it onto his own shoulder, showing some familiarity with handling it. The bolt-action rifle had no optical scope mounted on it, just adjustable iron sights, like mine.

Tala took off her rucksack and set it on the ground, and her father did the same with his. She emptied the contents of both packs onto the rug by the stove, then stood again and spoke to us, with a little pause to translate her thoughts before each sentence. "We brought food, enough to carry us to where we are walking. I am walking with you, down the river. Soon my father is returning up the mountain. He also speaks English, and now he desires to speak to you."

Kam's father stood with his back to the tent, facing us, the river behind and below us. I had the impression that he had planned his words while hiking down the trail. After clearing his throat he looked at each of us in turn and said, "I am very sorry that men from my country did this terrible thing, taking your female children on a ship from *Irlande*. My family will help you to carry them to return to your home. Now I will go again up the path, but I will see you again tomorrow, in another place. Good luck, my new friends. If God is willing, I will see you again tomorrow." Then he put his empty pack back on, slung his rifle over his shoulder, shared more air kisses with his son and daughter, turned, and disappeared around the cliff and back up the trail.

I didn't anticipate his sudden departure. Most Middle Eastern men turn every family meeting into a reason for a leisurely meal lasting several hours. I

had to remind myself that this was not the Middle East, but northwest Africa. Kam's father was a Berber, not an Arab, and I had no idea how their customs might differ from Arab ones.

Or perhaps Kam's father just didn't want his muscles to stiffen up. The man looked to be about fifty, plus or minus a few years. Better to keep moving once you've warmed up. It would be an uphill hike over uneven rocks and boulders most of the way back to his vehicle, assuming there was a vehicle. I had no idea where he'd come from, and if he'd walked or driven to the top of the canyon. I was trying to picture all the moving parts of the evolving operation. Just how many locals knew about us? How large was the growing circle of knowledge?

Or perhaps the situation in front of the tent was uncomfortable for Kam's father because his unmarried adult daughter was in the presence of a ragtag band of European mercenaries, and the forced small-talking among strangers across such a vast cultural divide would only be uncomfortable for him. Whatever the case, Kam's father abruptly departed, and we seven men found ourselves joined by a single woman in her twenties, and a slim and attractive woman at that. The presence of her younger brother, along as a male escort, would serve to preserve her family honor. If that was even an issue in their family.

The Abidars had brought more couscous, rice, chicken, bread, dried fruits, nuts, and homemade cookies in a variety of plastic containers and paper bags. It wasn't meant to be fancy; it was more like Moroccan field rations prepared in a local kitchen. But everything I'd tried so far had been damned good, even when eaten cold. No way was anybody starving in this part of Morocco, not if this quantity of high-quality energy food could be produced on short order and packed into a remote canyon. Morocco was obviously a country that could still feed itself, even after the global economic crash. If you judged a place by the cuisine it could offer to strangers on short notice, you would have to give Morocco high marks.

An assortment of plastic bowls and plates had been stored with the tent and the other camping supplies. I filled a bowl and sat off to the side on a boulder to eat, while watching Tala Abidar out of the corner of my eye. I could sense the other men also making their own sly glances of appraisal. After almost two weeks in the presence of only smelly and unshaven men, average age north of forty, we were all starved for the sight of a pretty girl. It was like a forgotten copper wire that had unexpectedly been charged with

high-voltage electricity.

Tala Abidar, woman of mystery. Unmarried, in her late twenties, with her hair and her face completely exposed to view. Thank God she didn't have to live under a burqa, I thought. Not even a "moderate" hijab, which was like a strict old-line Catholic nun's habit, hiding all of a woman's hair and some of her face. Not that I was constantly staring at her. Just discreetly, out of the corner of my eye. The last woman I'd seen before Tala Abidar was Sinead Devlin, when I was saying good-bye to her outside Driscoll's pub.

Like the others, I ate with my own metal spoon, given to me back at the villa foundation. I was coming up in the world: I had the beginnings of my very own mess kit—a bowl, a cup, and a spoon. Kam had said that anything useful we found was ours to keep, in the service of the mission. They were just the odds and ends left at the camping site by trekkers over the years, kept in the same dry cave with the tent, blankets, rugs, and stove.

Including useful trash, like old screw-cap beverage bottles and almost any old plastic, glass, or metal containers. Treasured debris from the long-lamented but thoroughly blown-up former world economy. More reasons to look at random manufactured items and say, nearly every day, "They don't make *those* anymore." But they *had* made them, made them by the billions, back when a million factories were humming and thousands of ships were carrying their cargoes to every corner of the globe.

So far today, Tala Abidar had experienced only a relatively brief and easy hike down the canyon to the tent, so she was ready to continue from the moment she arrived. She stood on the other side of the tent from me with her brother, Bert, and Pat. The leaders of our lost patrol. I saw her shake hands with the two men. Perhaps she'd only been reluctant to shake my hand in the presence of her father, and now he was gone.

While the three men continued speaking, she turned away from them, unbuttoned her tunic, took it off, folded it, and placed it into her rucksack. Underneath, she was wearing a sapphire blue knitted jersey that revealed half of her forearms. She didn't seem concerned in the least about its camouflage value—or lack thereof. Bert glanced at her shirt but said nothing. We were in her territory, on her turf, and she would be more attuned to the local dangers than we were. In any case, I would always take my cue from Sergeant Major Tolbert, formerly of the British SAS. If he was cool with her vivid blue shirt, then so was I.

Now that her coat was gone, I noticed that she was carrying a long,

curved knife in a gray metal sheath on the left side of her belt. The grip was some type of black antler, naturally knobby and ribbed. Ibex, perhaps. There was no cross guard. The knife bespoke a useful family heirloom, now resting purposefully on Tala Abidar's left hip.

I rinsed my new dinner service in the rushing stream and prepared my few possessions for travel. We milled about under the all-seeing eyes of Bert, who was nonchalantly giving each of us the once-over from head to heels. Subtly herding the sheep, looking for problems. Identifying the weak links among us, so he would know how hard he could push.

The old noncom asked us, "Anybody have issues with their feet or their kit? If you have issues with your feet, let's sort them out. They'll only be worse tomorrow, so let's take care of them here and now. Anybody? Yes? No? Fair warning, lads—if you don't sing out now, don't expect my pity later. All right?" We nodded our assent. "Good. If you don't have full bottles, top them off from the river, and never mind my pills—I'm out. And each man take one of the food containers until they're all packed. We'll push off as soon as we're ready."

I stood by Victor, at the back near the tent. He looked old and grouchy, but he was ready to move out again, not bitching or complaining. I had grabbed a plastic container filled with couscous, chicken, olives, and peppers; he had taken a cloth bag full of dried fruit and cookies that were like trail mix, whole grain, and honey pressed into bars. Our water bottles were already refilled from the stream.

For me, this was T-shirt weather, so I took off my now dry camo shirt, folded it, and jammed it into my sling bag. The terrain I'd seen down past the bathing pools hadn't looked rough enough to require long sleeves. Nothing spiny or tooth-edged was encroaching on the trail, but that could change, so I wanted my shirt readily available. We fell into a line, the same patrol order as before, with Kam and Bert leading and Tala between them.

Bert addressed us all with just enough volume to be heard over the water. "Same SOPs as before, gents. Miss Abidar will join Kam and myself up front and help to guide us along the way. Which, I understand, she has done many times. No particular threat is anticipated. This is friendly tribal land, relatively low risk, but nothing can be ruled out. Lock and load, gentlemen, if you have not already. Rounds chambered, weapons on safe—but don't go loud before I do, or I'll skin you alive."

My right hand was wrapped around my rifle's pistol grip, my thumb

fiddling idly over the selector switch. I was able to study Tala while looking generally toward Bert, noticing a few new details about her. She wore no jewelry that I could see. I wasn't sure if this was a fashion statement, or because she had prepared for hiking and climbing in rocky terrain. Rings were especially dangerous, because a climber's body weight could rip off a finger if a ring became snagged during a fall.

When Bert finished, Tala stepped out of the line and spoke to us next. This I hadn't anticipated. She said, "In many places, the path will be wet. Please maintain your best balance." She paused between each statement, translating her thoughts. "If you are walking slowly, often you can prevent your vertigo. If you fall, there can be danger of injury and the breaking of bones. Because of this, please walk slowly and carefully on the narrow places. Look how the person to your front makes a jump. Learn what he does, and do the same, or maybe do better. Always be following the person who is to the front of you, and always be looking where are your feet."

I looked at her feet; she was wearing black sneakers with a thick rubber rim around the bottom edge. I had the impression that she was trying to establish her leadership credentials by making fearless eye contact with all of us infidel men, while also demonstrating to us that she could communicate in English. I guessed that she was used to dealing with foreign men, from guiding groups of mixed-sex European trekkers. And maybe there was some sibling rivalry with her younger brother.

Her vocabulary and grammar were unique, but her meaning came through loud and clear. She was obviously smart and assertive, and her word choices and sentence structures indicated that she'd been college educated, but it was also clear that she had learned her English in textbooks and language labs and had never lived in an English-speaking country for any significant period. An audience of German and Swedish trekkers who spoke English as a second or third language would not be able to do much to help her improve her spoken English. Her accent was hard to place, but it was clear that French was her primary European language. With her still youthful and nearly girlish voice, she was very pleasant to listen to, but then, I'd been in the company of only men for so long that maybe any woman's voice would have sounded like a songbird to my femininity-starved ears.

Tala was on the tall side, in feet probably five-eight or five-nine, or about 1.75 meters, with her legs contributing a generous portion to her height. And since she had shed her tunic and was now wearing a snug jersey, her not-

large-but-not-small breasts were nicely accentuated, particularly with her pack's chest strap across her ribs just beneath them.

Because she was speaking to us, I could look directly at her face without being rude. Not a speck of makeup that I could detect. Again, was that a personal fashion statement, or was it based on her religious beliefs, or was it simply because she was out hiking in the boondocks? She appeared to be in her late twenties. A wide mouth, an elfin chin, and prominent cheekbones. Almond-shaped eyes with irises the color of liquid caramel. Long fingers, and her close-trimmed fingernails were unpolished.

Like her brother, Tala didn't look like an Arab. Maybe Spanish or Italian. Or Israeli or Egyptian. For that matter, she could have been from any of a dozen countries around the Mediterranean and even more around the Caribbean, and she would have been considered attractive in all of them. Maybe even pretty, if she would ever crack a smile. So, what did a French-Berber mixture look like? Tala and Kamal Abidar.

That crazy old ratio-driven male-female behavior was kicking in again. Throw one hot or even slightly sexy woman among a squad of average adult males and the men instantly switch into peacock and rooster mode, standing taller, sucking in their guts, and throwing out their chests. Men just can't help it. It's hardwired, by God or by evolution. Yes, it's hilarious. It's pathetic. It's ridiculous. It's totally absurd. And it's what has kept humanity from going extinct for a hundred millennia—that otherwise inexplicable yet completely unstoppable male attraction for the supposedly weaker (but undeniably prettier) sex.

Et vive la difference.

So yes, Tala was attractive, but with a hard edge about her. Not a natural smiler, but perhaps she was merely on guard while being surrounded by so many strange males. Strange *infidel* males. She had the start of some worry lines around her eyes, so late twenties was probably close. Serious chip on her shoulder, always feeling as if she had to prove something to somebody, or to everybody. Somewhere in her wake lay a heavy burden of emotional baggage. What could that mean in this country? An ugly divorce? Whatever it was, Trouble with a capital T was flashing red above her, with a warning siren.

But at least, and to her credit, Tala Abidar was daring to show the world her face, her hair, and her female figure in a Muslim country, and in my book that made her a brave spirit. That took nerve, and I always admired nerve in

anybody, anywhere, anytime.

And there was another possibility: maybe Tala used her brunette hair and vaguely European face as camouflage, pretending to be a non-believer in a Muslim country. Christians, Jews, and other non-Muslims were not expected to go veiled or with their hair covered in most Islamic countries, but this was a risky ploy. I wasn't sure about Morocco, but in some Islamic countries if a woman attempting this gambit was cornered by devout followers of the prophet, she could easily be trapped into either a "blasphemy" or an inadvertent admission of "apostasy," and then she risked being lynched on the spot. Or she could be arrested, tried, and sentenced to death, if the crowd was of a more civil bent. That is to say, if the police—if there were any—arrived before the first fanatics showed up armed with a basket of stones, a jar of acid, or a can of gasoline and a match.

This was part of the reason I avoided Islamic countries on my voyages. Anywhere the call of the muezzin was heard, that insane lynch-mob hysteria was always lurking just below any outwardly placid surface. Most Muslim societies had never gotten past the "burn the witches" stage of human development, where simple feminine beauty (arms, legs, face, and figure) exposed in public was considered akin to witchcraft. So when it came to any free-spirited outlier Muslim women that I met in Muslim countries, my policy was strictly "Look, but don't touch."

It was safer to juggle rattlesnakes.

Or lit sticks of dynamite. Or jars of nitroglycerin.

When we were all standing ready on the flat ground between the tent and the river, Sergeant Major Tolbert faced us and said, "All right, let's be about it, then. Mind your intervals, and look after your sectors. And sling your rifles when you need to—don't bash them about on the rocks like sodding wankers. Everybody ready?" Nods all around. "Then let's go."

28

The first part of our march took us down past the bathing pools, and for a time we walked on a shelf close enough to feel the mist and spray of the fast-moving river. Later on, the trail ascended in switchbacks above the river course. Sometimes we walked in the sun, and then we would turn the corner at the end of a cliff and be in cool shadow. The most frequent risk was slipping on mossy stones down near the water, but the greatest danger was falling from a height. Depending on where and how you fell, the accident could be either trivial or fatal, and an injury to any one of us might imperil the success of the mission. I comforted myself with the knowledge that this trail had been deemed safe enough for European adventure tourists.

Occasionally, when the trail curled back on itself, I would pass the front of the column going the other way. When I could see them both, Kam and Tala seemed to be conferring. I supposed that while they were leading the patrol, they were also catching up on the past six months, spent apart in Ireland and Morocco. At other times, I noticed that Tala was walking near Bert and speaking with him. I couldn't imagine what they had in common to chat about. Perhaps she just felt the need to converse with any new men that she fell in with, perhaps to prove her equality with them, at least in her own mind. In other words, overcompensating. This had been fairly common among hard-charging female Marines, and especially officers.

Sometimes when the trail doubled back, the head and tail of our column were so close that we could almost reach out and touch across a narrow chasm. On these occasions, Tala's eyes met mine and seemed to linger a moment longer than necessary, but of course this might have been a case of wishful thinking on my part. But later in the afternoon, when the trail widened and the going was easy, she paused and gestured for each of the men to pass her by. When I reached her, she fell in behind me and took up the pace again. During a scan to the rear while I was walking backwards and facing her, I stage-whispered, "Can you please go in front of me? My job is rear security, and you're in the way of my rifle."

Her eyes lifted to mine and she said, "Okay, no problem, *Captain* Kilmer." Then she slipped past but took up her new position nearer to me than to Victor.

We were in safe terrain then, safe enough for speaking quietly, and I

said, “I thought you were the trail guide. What are you doing back here?”

Tala could skip sideways and backwards across the broken ground seemingly without effort, in much the same way that an ice hockey player could skate backwards without giving it conscious thought. “Anybody can guide this path. Even a blind donkey with three legs only can guide this path. At the front, I was tired from having too many eyes looking on my back. What you can say, looking on my ass.”

And she did have a very nice posterior aspect, a fact that not even her compact rucksack and black cargo pants could conceal. So maybe it really was a sense of modesty that had caused her to relinquish her position at the front, and not the opportunity to chat me up, as the Brits would say. No doubt she had gotten a report about me from her brother, and possibly also from Bert.

After a few minutes spent walking in front of me, she snatched up a slender piece of wood that was about a meter and a half long. Time had weathered this deadfall branch into a gray staff. She tested it as a walking stick, which was often useful as a third point of contact on steep terrain. I’d have grabbed one for myself if my hands weren’t already occupied by toting an M-16.

After a few more minutes, when the path was level, she turned around in a low crouch, her feet wide apart, holding her walking stick in front of her like a leveled carbine, making exaggerated sweeps. In a mock-deep voice she said, “My job is the security of the rear, and you are in the way of my rifle.” Then she spun back around, laughing, and began to march like a soldier with the walking stick on her shoulder.

The girl who had not cracked a smile when she spoke to our entire group had turned into a flirt with a sudden interest in Captain Kilmer. And what a smile!

A while after she stopped giggling she turned again, walking backwards while facing me, and said, “You have a very small knife. Did you ever cut a man with it?”

Her question caught me completely by surprise. “Cut a man? No, not with this one.”

“I want to look on your knife. It is an English knife, yes?”

“My knife is English, but I’m American, not English.”

“Yes, I know that.” She drew her knife from the sheath on her left hip with her right hand, and waved it in front of me with a flourish. The curved

blade was narrow at the tip and grew wider near the hilt. Only the outside edge was sharpened. The steel was gray with darker lines of damascene.

Though astonished by her sudden display of cutlery, I drew Bert's dagger. I used my left hand; my right still gripped the M-16, its weight carried on the sling behind my neck.

She stood in my path and said, "Give it to me. I want to look on it. *Please*."

I flipped the knife around in my hand and presented its hilt to her. She took it and held the two knives together. The curved blade of her knife was at least three inches longer than the seven inches of Bert's commando dagger.

"I think mine is better."

"I think that you're a very strange woman," I blurted out.

"What is *strange* meaning?" She turned her light brown eyes up to mine. "*Étrange*?"

"*Oui, étrange*. Strange. Unusual. Different."

"Yes, I'm a *very* unusual woman. Very different."

She turned Bert's F-S dagger around and handed it back to me, and we both sheathed our blades. We were standing in the trail, Victor now far ahead, nearly out of sight.

"Captain Kilmer, you have a ship of sails?"

"A sailboat, we call it. Yes, I have a sailboat. And we need to get moving again."

"Don't have worries; I can find them. How large is the sailboat? You have carried the men from *Irlande*, yes?"

"Twenty meters, and yes, I carried them from Ireland."

"Another ship, it went down in the sea. It sunk?"

"It sank. Sink—sank—sunk."

"It was named Atlas, like as our mountains? The fat man was the captain?"

"Yes. It was named the Atlas, and Big Hank was the captain."

"I am having a small problem with the verbs, but I am understanding your meaning. The other ship *sank*, and some other mans are dead."

"Yes, the other ship sank, and some other *men* are dead."

"*Men*, yes, I am knowing this from many years. One *man*, two *men*, many *men*. And even when the other ship have sank, and the other men are dead under the sea, even so, you continue to discover your girls from

Irlande."

"That's right. We're going to find the girls and take them home to Ireland."

This answer seemed to grip her in contemplation, and we walked in silence for a while. But then she turned around again and said, "Captain Kilmer, you and the men of this group are not like the other men I am knowing."

"Where we come from, men are taught to protect women and children. Old people too. Anybody who is small or weak. That is our culture, where we come from. To defend people who can't defend themselves."

She thought about this, and then she said, "In *Maroc*, many men also say they want to defend women. But no, they make the life of many women into a prison. In Maroc, men may keep a woman closed into a house if they decide to *defend* her in this manner. For all of her life, closed in a house! In Maroc, even today, the father owns the daughter. And if he decides, he can sell his daughter like a sheep or a goat to a strange man, to an old man. And the daughter does not decide, only the father."

"But I think that you were not closed in a house for all of your life."

"Me? Closed in a house?" She grinned, showing large white teeth that could have benefited from just a bit of orthodontic work: one upper incisor crossed a canine at a slight angle. "Closed into a house? Oh, no, never. *Impossible*." She pronounced this the French way, am-po-SEE-bluh.

"Why not?"

"I think because my father is how you say Berber, but we say *Amazigh*. This means we are the free people—even the women." When she said this, she patted the black antler hilt of her knife, winked at me, and spun back around.

We were on a west-facing trail heading downhill for a bit. The lowering sun found just the right angle beaming up the canyon to turn the cliffs on the far side a fiery orange. A line of palm trees grew near the watercourse at the bottom, their fronds throwing waving shadows against the rock walls across the canyon.

I kept about ten meters behind Victor, sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the terrain, but Tala stayed only a few steps in front of me. Being at the back of the patrol, we felt reassured by the presence of the gunmen in front who would run into any trouble well before us. The chance of an unseen enemy doubling back around behind us in this canyon terrain

was nil. The sound of falling water would also obscure our quiet conversation.

"You are *Ameriki*, American, and also the fat man. I can hear very well that you have another dialect from English. From where in America you are living? From California? My brother have been living one year in California."

"I'm from no single place. I was a child in a military family. I lived in a lot of different places growing up."

"So you are *bedawi*, a bedouin. What you say in English, a nomad."

"That's right, I'm a nomad of the ocean."

"Free to sail to any place that you like."

"Yes, but only when I'm on my boat. Which, at the present time, I am not."

"And you have no woman? In America? In your boat?"

"I have no woman, and no wife. And I have not lived in America for many years."

Our conversation was full of breaks, with answers coming after delays for climbing over or around boulders, or for sidling along narrow ledges where we had to turn and face the cliff. These breaks suited her, because she had to form her ideas into English words. At one point she asked me if I spoke French, because that was easier for her than English, but I had to beg off. Then we tried some Spanish, but we soon went back to English as being our best common language.

"Your sailboat *está en Las Islas Canarias*, yes?"

"Yes, it's in the Canaries."

"When we carry the girls to the north, how will you travel to *Las Canarias* and return to your boat?"

"I don't know how. I have no plan for that far in the future. First we have to get the girls out of the fortress. Then we have to take them to the north, to the king's territory. Then I can think about how to return to my boat." *If I'm still alive*.

It was still daylight when we crossed the river, wading across a knee-deep ford, and began climbing a new stream. It had taken us a few hours to make the descent down the river to this junction. Bert had stopped the patrol about once an hour for a break, places with good cover and shade to sit in. After the junction of the rivers we remained long enough to drain our boots, wring out our socks, and eat a meal from our shared food containers. The

threat level must have been perceived as being very low, because Bert tolerated the three smokers sharing a cigarette. It was cooler down in those shadowy recesses after the sun had dropped below the surrounding terrain, so I put my uniform top back on, and Tala did the same with her black thigh-length tunic.

After about an hour of climbing along the right side of the new canyon, for a memorable few minutes we walked through brilliant late-afternoon sun, where a distant sliver of the blue Atlantic was visible through a cleft in the coastal foothills. It was plain to see why trekkers had come from around the world and paid plenty of euros to enjoy this serene beauty. That canyon valley in the foothills was a natural paradise.

Later we came across the ruins of a French-era waterworks—the rusted remnants of sluice gates and cylindrical tunnels bored into canyon walls. For a while we walked up a dry concrete aqueduct. Once we had to cross the canyon walking on the top of an iron pipe over a meter in diameter. The path rose higher above the river, where canyon walls were very close. In several places we were shuffling sideways along ledges no more than a foot wide, where a fall of more than a hundred feet would have certainly been fatal.

The terrain changed again and we finally quit following the stream below, instead marching up the bottom of a *wadi*, a dry streambed. Dusk fell, but light from the as-yet-unseen moon beyond the distant mountains prevented complete darkness. Upslope ahead of us appeared a dark mass, a monolith rising above the skyline. As we drew closer I could see that it was an old ruin, an abandoned mud-brick fortress with eroded crenellations along the top. We approached it from below. The front of the patrol had stopped, and we piled up outside an opening in the dark wall.

Kam said, “We’re spending the night here.” He switched on a penlight and aimed it downward. “Follow me. If you have a torch, be ready with it.”

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The nondescript opening in the bottom wall led into a passageway. A short way inside, Kam stopped at a heavy wooden door braced with iron straps that was set into a stout timber frame. Feeling between the timbers, he extracted an ancient key, used it in the equally old lock, and then pushed the creaking door inward. We followed him inside. I felt the coolness and absolute quiet of a cave, totally dark except for the random flicker of our lights. Tala went to a

shelf, struck a match, and lit a kerosene lantern. We were in a room about three meters wide and ten deep.

Kam and Tala unrolled rugs to cover the dirt floor, something they had obviously done before. We chose our sleeping areas in patrol order, with Kam and his sister nearest the exit and Victor and me the furthest inside. Tala showed us where blankets and bedroll mattresses like futons were stored in a cedar wardrobe and chest. There were even pillows, which seemed like an extravagant luxury, but it all made sense if this had been a place for European backpackers to spend the night.

Victor woke me when it was my turn to pull guard duty. He guided me past the others, who were sleeping, led me outside, and showed me where to stand to keep a watchful eye on the approaches to the bottom of the fort and the almost invisible entrance to our hidden room. The moon high above was nearly full, so concealment meant staying in the shadows. When my hour was finished, I turned the watch over to Kam and went back to sleep.

Sometime later, Victor jostled me awake again. The lantern was glowing and the others were already stirring. We formed up in our patrol order inside the room, and when we left, we walked around the side of the fort ruins and then continued uphill in close order. The moon had set and we had only starlight to guide us, but the path was easy. This time, Tala was up front.

After half an hour of walking, most of it uphill, the patrol ahead of me disappeared into a copse of small trees. Once inside, we formed a perimeter and sat, guns pointed outward, to await our next means of transportation. I couldn’t see a road from my position, but figured that we must be hiding just below one. Around the time when it was light enough to see some distant land features through the trees, I began to hear the low sound of a distant engine.

The cab of a truck became visible as it drew even with our hiding place, but it went chugging slowly on past us, heading farther uphill, trailing a cloud of blue smoke. I guessed that Bert or Kam had put a signal marker by the road, and if this was our ride, the driver was being cautious and making a security run beyond us.

A few minutes later, assisted by gravity on its return, the truck came jerking to a halt next to our trees with a metallic squeal of brakes. It was a small farm truck, well over a half-century old, some French oddity with antique front wheel fenders. The homemade sides of the flatbed and the tailgate were made of rough-hewn planks stacked on edge and bound by iron

pillars. After the truck stopped, we moved up the embankment and climbed into the back. Once we were all inside and the tailgate was up and latched, the driver let off the brakes and we rolled forward. Victor and I, the last to board, sat on opposite sides, the tops of the gray planks just above our heads. From what I could see through the gaps, we were traveling through country that looked like Southern California or coastal Mexico.

The road was old tarmac, cratered with potholes and split by washouts that had been haphazardly filled with dirt and gravel. The few people we passed were either trudging along on foot leading heavily laden donkeys, or they were driving wagons pulled by mules. Back in Ireland, they'd been riding bicycles, and horses had been harnessed to the wagons, but evidently gasoline was equally difficult to come by in both places. It made me think of my schooner back at Alegranza and the small fortune in diesel fuel remaining in her hold.

At the bottom of each switchback's hairpin turn, when the truck slowed down with protesting brakes, I could see the distance-blurred abyss of a deep chasm below us. In some places there were rusty iron guard rails, in some places only white-washed stones, and in some places nothing at all marked the rim. Like soldiers on troop carriers everywhere, we grabbed onto each other for stability and nervously laughed through each slide and swerve. If we went flying over the edge, at least we would all go over together.

After an hour of mostly coasting downhill, but sometimes straining hard to climb upgrades at little more than a walking speed, the ancient truck rolled to a stop on a level section of road. To our left was a three-meter-high wall constructed of rough cement blocks. Our driver got out and shuffled over to a double gate made of heavy timber reinforced with iron. He was an elderly white-bearded man wearing a white knit cap, a gray robe with a big hood folded on his back, and slide-on shoes. He unlocked a chain in the middle, and with great effort rolled one of the two sides back behind the wall, opening a gap just wide enough for his truck.

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When the old man returned and drove us through, the two Abidars stood up at the front just behind the cab, and the rest of us got up as well so that we could see what they were seeing. We had entered a compound a few acres in size that ended against a steep hillside, almost a cliff. In the back and to the left were more than a dozen faded yellow construction machines of a size and class that were transported any significant distance on flatbed trailers, which were also present. There were hydraulic road cranes, backhoes, bulldozers, and dump trucks, some complete and some partly cannibalized.

Directly ahead was a quarter acre covered by rusty corrugated roofing, with some smaller vehicles and workbenches and tables underneath. An open-air mechanical shop, typical of the temperate third world, where air-conditioning had never been an option, neither before nor after the collapse. Off to the right was a three-story white building with an arched entryway on the side facing the wall, which was more than thirty meters away across the open compound.

Our old farm truck pulled up near the open-sided shed, and I lowered the tailgate. We all dropped down to the ground with our bags and rifles. I was unsure if we needed to move to cover and set a perimeter, or if we were in a secure area, so in a whisper I asked Kam, “Where are we? Is it safe here?”

“What? Oh, it’s completely safe, they’re our friends. This is one of the places where we brought our company vehicles. They welded our cargo racks and did custom jobs like that. My father’s already here—that’s his Toyota.” He pointed to a white pickup truck parked in front of the building, which I assumed was the residence of the people who owned the construction equipment. There was a dusty old Mercedes sedan parked there as well.

Hank said, “He *drove* here? Then why did we have to walk?”

Tala answered him. “*Très dangereux*. This is very too dangerous for you. The road from *la plage*, from the beach where you landed to this place passes through Port Zerhoun, and there are many control points. For six Europeans with weapons, it would be very too dangerous.” She made the throat-slitting gesture with her index finger, and she wasn’t smiling or laughing when she made it.

The three-story building wasn’t much to look at from the outside, just a

big cube with a whitewashed exterior and a few small windows, with some fruit trees growing around it. But if it was laid out like upscale homes in other Islamic countries I'd visited, through that arched portal would be an intricately tiled atrium with a luxuriant garden and a gurgling fountain in the center. The bedrooms on the top floors would face the open courtyard, sharing common balconies and stairs.

The splendor of the home would be saved for the family living inside, and what the place looked like to the outside world would be of no concern to them. If anything, the homeowners would try to conceal evidence of their affluence from potential thieves, tax collectors, and other shakedown artists. And passersby on the public road would see only the compound's plain cement-block perimeter wall.

On top of the building I could see laundry fluttering on lines to dry, and solar panels tilted to the south. The flat roof, no doubt half-walled, would also be the domain of the women, the normal compensation for their inability to freely leave the house. There were also whip antennas supported by guy wires on top. Perhaps they were still sending and receiving radio transmissions, or perhaps they were just relics of better days, when the bosses of this construction business had been in contact with the drivers of their fleet.

Our white-bearded driver, who looked eighty but might have been sixty, whispered something to Kam and then shambled over to the house and disappeared inside. After a few minutes, a man came out; it was Mr. Abidar. He got in the white pickup and drove it the short distance to where we were standing around near the outdoor shop.

The truck was a famously indestructible Toyota Hilux, its body style indicating that it had been manufactured well back in the last century. A version of the same pickup had been sold in America as the Tacoma. There was plenty of rust breaking through the chalky paint, every panel was scraped and dented, the windshield was cracked, but the tires had tread and the engine sounded robust. There was a good reason why Toyotas had long been preferred in the third world, and the proof was right in front of us.

Kam's father stepped out of his truck and greeted his two children with hugs and air kisses, while the rest of us stood around the cargo bed, studying its contents and waiting for them to finish their greetings.

Kam pointed to a coil of rope in the truck bed and asked his father, "How long is it?"

Like his daughter, the senior Mr. Abidar had to pause to form his sentences in English. “I do not know. Maybe thirty meters? You will have to be checking how long.”

Bert said, “We’ll need a longer rope than that. The wall we’re climbing is twenty meters high, maybe higher, so our primary rope needs to be at least twice that long. And what about harnesses and climbing gear?”

Mr. Abidar looked perplexed, perhaps not understanding these words in English, especially when spoken with an actual English accent by an actual Englishman, but Tala said, “I can find all the rope that we need.”

For a minute, the Abidars conferred in their own tongue. Again, I couldn’t tell if it was Arabic, a Berber dialect, or a mix, but I thought I recognized a little French, probably covering the technical climbing terms.

When they finished, Tala said, “I’m going with my father to look for another rope, and for some other equipments. We will return in maybe one hour, or maybe two.” They got into the Toyota, Mr. Abidar driving, and drove back out through the wall onto the public road. One side of the gate had been left open since our arrival.

Then it was just us six foreign infidels, plus Kam. Bert said, “We lost our lifting tackle when the Atlas went down, so we’re going to have to suss out another way to get the girls down the wall.”

Kam replied, “We can use anything we find here—thanks to Victor’s gold.”

Victor made a little nod back toward him. *No problem*.

I asked Kam, “Where are the people who live here?” The three-story dwelling easily went twenty-five meters on a side, with enough room inside for a large family, or several families, but nobody had come out of it except Kam’s father.

“They’re all in the house,” he replied. “It’s safer for them to pretend they never saw us here. Our interaction will be kept to a minimum.”

Bert said, “While we’re waiting, let’s clear off some table space and find some paper and something to write with.”

Gino and Hank, at home among workbenches piled with engines, electric motors, pumps, and parts of machines, shifted a few items around to make an open space a few meters wide, but they did so carefully, so as not to disturb their arrangement. What might have appeared to be a random scattering of bits and pieces might actually have been left in a careful sequence for eventual reassembly.

In the new world disorder, when machines broke down, and absent new replacement parts from distant factories (that were probably closed anyway), broken machines generally remained broken. This meant that the services of mechanics, machinists, and welders were always in demand. The parts they couldn't repair, they could often fabricate from scratch or build from other parts.

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Victor found a clipboard holding some old invoices printed in Arabic that were blank on their back sides, and gave it to Bert, who'd already found a pencil and sharpened it with a knife. He leaned over the workbench and began to draw, making a series of short lines at ninety-degree angles. We all gathered around him to watch.

"Now, the place where we're climbing, we believe it's about twenty meters from the base to the top of the parapet—that's the wall around the top of the fort. The very top of the parapet is about two meters across, and it slopes down to the outside if it's like the other Spanish and Portuguese forts from that era. There are nine cannon ports spaced about five meters apart along the main gun deck facing west. The openings for the cannons are wider on the outside, so their barrels had some room to swing."

He sketched a diagram while he spoke, and we remained huddled around him, watching. "We had an aluminum tripod for mounting our lifting gear, but it was on the Atlas. A clever piece of work it was; it folded flat for carrying. Anyway, now we need to come up with a way to attach our primary rope so we can lower the girls down through a cannon port. Assuming we can find a long enough rope, we'll need a good pulley right here." He marked an X in front of an open port.

Hank leaned over the paper. "This is how I would do it. Do you mind?" He took the pencil from Bert; it almost disappeared in his meaty hand. "Two beams and some rope, that's all you need. If you set one beam along the top edge across the opening, that can support your pulley." He drew a line across the top of the open port, extending a little past on each side.

Pat said, "Won't it slide off if the top of the wall slopes downward?"

"Naw, not if we put a second beam back here across the opening on the inside of the wall, then lash them together. The beam across the inside won't let the beam on the outside move past the edge. Look, I've been shifting

cargo with jury-rigging for forty years. Trust me, this is a piece of cake. Two good pieces of timber and a little rope for marrying them together, that's all you'll need."

"And a good pulley," Bert added. "And a primary rope that's long enough."

We went on our first compound scavenger hunts, both under the rusted roof and among the mostly derelict construction equipment. Hank found a stack of timber beams used to support engines off the ground after they were lifted out of their machines. He selected the main support beam and pointed out another for me to carry back to the group. Both were about two and a half meters, eight feet, in length. Hank's was about ten by fifteen centimeters thick, mine about ten by ten. In inches, a four-by-six and a four-by-four. Mine weighed about ten kilos, so his had to weigh at least fifteen.

"Are they going to be strong enough?" asked Kam when we returned to our meeting place under the roof.

"*Plenty* strong enough," Hank replied. "It's only got to hold little girls, not elephants." To demonstrate, he set one end of the heavier beam on a cement block, stood balanced in the middle, and bounced up and down. He was surprisingly agile for a big man of his age. No doubt that came from being a boat captain. Hank was a couple inches taller than me, but much thicker, and would easily tip the scales somewhere around a hundred forty kilos, or three hundred pounds. Even with Bert probably slowing the pace to what Big Hank could handle, it was still amazing that he had made it this far, considering the rough terrain we had crossed.

Gino returned from his scavenger hunt with a collection of brass pulleys, galvanized steel shackles, cargo hooks, and random knives with weapon potential, and dropped them on our table, saying, "Maybe we can use something from this." The compound full of half-completed mechanical projects was a mechanic's cornucopia. The Abidars had brought us to exactly the right place.

Bert said, "Now we just need a primary rope. And while we're waiting, let's conduct an updated mission briefing. Most of this will be familiar to Kam and Pat, but since we're shorthanded and using jury-rigged gear, we'll have to adapt the original plan, so everyone needs to pay close attention."

This time, he found a stool and sat at the table. The six of us stood around him again while he sketched. "Now, the place we're talking about, Fort Zerhoun, is built on the side of a steep ridge that's on the back of Cape

Zerhoun.” He drew the familiar breast-shaped peninsula, with the port and its surrounding manmade jetties tucked just under it to the south.

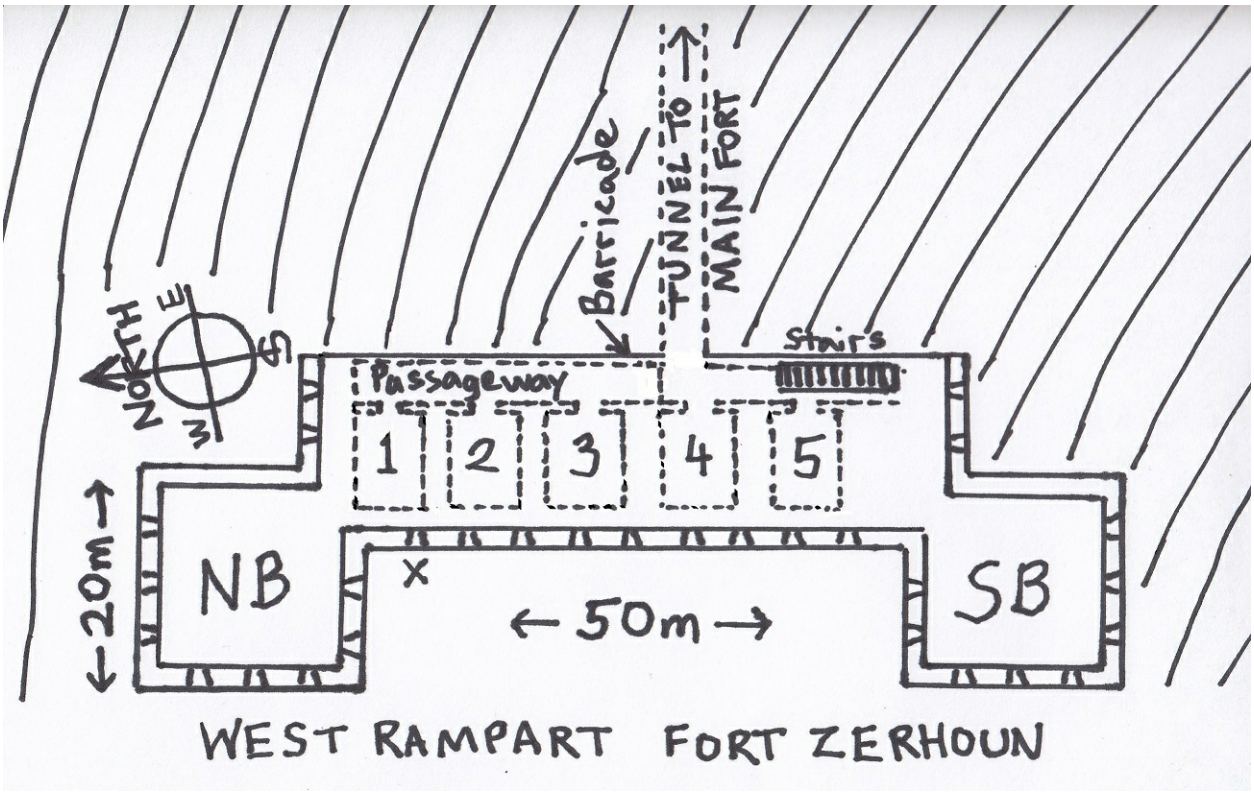
“The Portuguese built this fort five hundred years ago. It’s made of solid stone blocks—nothing like the mud-brick fort we slept in last night.” The sergeant major was a surprisingly adept artist, and he quickly fleshed out the details of his drawing, even shading the mountain with the side of his pencil to give it a three-dimensional appearance.

“Most of the fortress is on the other side of this ridge. The part we’re concerned with, the part where the girls are being kept, is on the seaward side, and it’s mostly cliffs below it right down to the ocean. So, how did the Portuguese build it, practically on the side of a cliff, five hundred years ago?” He paused to spin around on his stool and look at us, holding his drawing in front of his chest.

In my mind, I could both see and hear Colonel Rainborow giving this identical lecture. Now it was up to his second in command to carry on and get the job done. Next man up. The show must go on. Or as Charles de Gaulle had famously said, the graveyards are full of indispensable men.

The sergeant major continued. “The Portuguese were great engineers. By cutting a tunnel straight through the ridge from the main part of the fortress, they were able to build a gun position right on the side of the mountain. The guns of the main fortress covered the port, but couldn’t range around to protect the seaward approaches—that’s why they troubled to build the western rampart. Anybody trying to attack Port Zerhoun would have to reckon with the cannons on both sides of the ridge. From two hundred meters up, they could far outrange anything a ship could bring to bear. It was a very strategic location back in the fifteen hundreds, and worth the effort it took to build. And it’s still there, while all the local mud-brick forts are melting away.”

We looked over his shoulders as he added details to his fortress diagram. “This is the main gun deck. It’s about fifty meters long by twenty meters wide, running parallel to the side of the ridge. At each end of the gun deck, set out on the corner, is a bastion.” He drew two smaller squares.



Big Hank—our Louisiana Cajun—asked him, “Ramparts? Bastions? Can’t you say it in English? I didn’t go to college.”

Bert said, “The western *rampart* means the main gun deck on the western side of the ridge. Rampart, like in your national anthem. Rocket’s red glare, and all that. The western rampart is this large rectangle where they had space for nine cannons facing out to sea. The *bastions* are these squares extending out from the corners of the gun deck. They’re about twenty meters by twenty meters across, and they also have their own cannon ports. The two bastions are joined here and here to the main gun deck, on the same level.”

Pat said, “The bastions stick out to allow a cross fire, so there was nowhere for attackers to hide, up or down the coast, or below the walls where musketeers could pick them off.”

“So that it’s easy to remember,” Bert continued, “we’ll just call these two squares the north and the south bastion.” He drew NB and SB in the middle of each square. “In between, it’s the main gun deck, so you don’t need to remember rampart. But whether it’s the main gun deck or the bastions, from the top of the parapet we estimate it’s about twenty meters down to the base, and then it’s more cliffs all the way to the ocean—and that’s more than two hundred meters.”

Hank whistled softly and said, “Jesus, Bert, could you maybe have found an easier way into the fort?”

“That’s the whole point. Nobody is guarding these walls, because escape is impossible. Or so they think.”

Pat said, “We know the girls spend their days on the north bastion behind a fence. Sunshine and fresh air, to keep them healthy for the auction. The parapet rises two meters above the gun deck and bastions, and it’s topped with barbed wire. The openings for the cannon ports are closed off with barbed wire, too. But even if the girls could climb over the wire, there would be no way to escape. There’s just a vertical drop, and then more cliffs all the way down. We think the barbed wire is there to prevent suicide, not escape. By now, the girls must know they’re going to be sold as sex slaves after the full moon, which is tomorrow night.”

Sergeant Major Tolbert went back to his brief. “At night, the girls are locked up in these storerooms under the main gun deck.” With dotted lines, he drew five small rectangles running along the north-south rectangle. “When they built these forts, they constructed the outer walls from stone blocks, and then they filled it all in with rubble and sand as they went up, and then they built the gun decks out of more stone blocks on top of that. But before they filled it in and built the gun decks, they built storerooms underneath. They’re arched, to hold all the weight. That’s where they kept the gunpowder and supplies for a siege. The storerooms are big enough for more than twenty girls each.”

“How in the hell do you know all this?” Hank asked him. “You got a spy in there?”

“No, no spy. One of the girls was ransomed out early on. A very bright lass. She helped us locate Fort Zerhoun on a map, and from that we were able to send an airplane over from the Canaries and take aerial photographs.”

“Early on? What, like a few weeks ago?”

“Almost two months, actually.”

“*Two months*? So, how do you even know if the girls are still there?”

Bert paused and stared at him. “Actually, we don’t.”

“You don’t even know if they’re still there? You mean they might be gone?”

Pat said, “What’s the matter, Hank? Getting cold feet?”

He waited a moment, gauging our reactions, then replied, “Naw. We’ve come too far for that. Keep going.”

Bert cleared his throat and picked up his narrative. “She also described the layout down under the gun deck. These Spanish and Portuguese forts were all built to the same basic design all over the world, and her description matched up with what we know from the history books and other forts from the same era. So, of the five storerooms under the main gun deck, our girls are being kept in these three at the north end.” He drew numbers on each small rectangle. “Starting at the north, the girls are in one, two, and three. There’s a passageway that ties them all together, here. After storeroom number three, there’s a barricade across the passageway, and the girls are locked behind it at night.

“The next two rooms, four and five, are barracks or guard offices, we’re not sure which. One of them has a telephone, because the girl who was ransomed heard it ringing. We think it’s a landline, probably over to the castle, the main part of the fort, on the other side of the ridge. The tunnel comes in about here.”

Bert drew a new line at a right angle away from the passageway connecting the storerooms. “And that’s also where we come to the stairs up to the gun deck. The girls are taken up to the north bastion during the day and they’re locked behind a fence. The guards stay out of the bastion when the girls are there. The girls are all virgins, that’s their main selling point, so we’re pretty sure the guards aren’t messing them about. We’re climbing up the wall right here, in the corner where the north bastion joins the gun deck. Then it’s down the stairs to get the girls. But before that, we have to take care of any guards in storerooms four and five.”

Hank said, “And you don’t know how many guards?”

“That’s right, we don’t. The girls are locked in at night, and they don’t know what’s happening on the other side of the barricade across the passageway. We’ll just have to deal with any guards when we get there.”

Pat added, “But at all costs, we can’t go loud. Any unsuppressed gunfire will bring the cartel’s entire security force running over from the castle, through the tunnel.”

“Can’t we block it?” I asked him.

“Not with what we have. It would take a ton of demo to cave it in. The tunnel is more than two meters high and almost four meters wide, cut through solid rock. Remember, the tunnel was used to build the western rampart. Every stone block was cut somewhere else and brought through that tunnel from the castle. It was big enough for oxcarts to pass each other, bringing

stones like a living conveyor belt. The tunnel is also a breezeway that provides extra ventilation to the storerooms."

I wondered if Pat Maguire had handled demolitions when he was a member of the IRA, but of course I kept that idea to myself. And I wondered if the ex-SAS Sergeant Major Tolbert was having the same thoughts.

Gino said, "*Il Portoghese*, they learned to be engineers from the *Veneziani*, and that means the *Italiani*."

Bert tapped at the drawing with his pencil and said, "Right. Now, we're climbing up this corner where the north bastion meets the gun deck. The walls aren't quite vertical, maybe like this, maybe ten degrees." He indicated the angle with his raised forearm. "Vertical walls don't last, good engineers know that, and the Portuguese were damned good—whoever taught them." He glanced at Gino. "Where these two walls meet should be fairly easy to climb."

"Well," said Hank, "you'll just have to count me out of that part."

"Once we reach the fort, you won't have to do any more climbing. In the new plan, you and Victor will be our ground belay team, tending the primary rope running up to the pulley. You two will stay at the bottom of the wall and mind the girls as they come down. You'll keep them calm and organized until we're ready to move out."

"I thought you said it was all cliffs from the wall down to the ocean," Hank said.

"Not quite," Pat replied. "They built the wall on a shoulder of the mountain. You'll just take care of the rope and mind the girls until everyone is down."

"How many girls?"

"Sixty-six," Bert answered. "The oldest girls are seventeen, and they'll look after the youngest ones, who are eleven. We're going to pair them off, the oldest with the youngest."

"My sister will be the lead climber," Kam added. Then he looked at me. "Dan, did you ever do any rock climbing?"

He didn't ask Gino that question, so I supposed they already had confidence in the Italian's climbing skill. I replied, "Not much, but some." Actually, I'd had significant experience, but it was a long time before, and like many other things, climbing skills are perishable. I just didn't want to sabotage their new plan by overselling my abilities.

Bert smiled encouragingly and said, "Don't worry about it, Dan. Once

we have a top anchor set, the bottom belay team will slingshot everybody else right on up. It'll only be tricky for the lead climber, and Kam says that Tala can climb like a spider."

"That's right," Kam agreed. "She can climb anything."

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After the mission briefing, and after collecting more odds and ends of gear (including bolt cutters for the barbed wire and padlocks we expected to encounter), we were able to relax, sitting and chatting on an assortment of old chairs and stools in the shade under the metal roof. Hank used a handsaw to cut the timbers down to two meters each, to minimize the difficulty of transporting them our backs. Nobody came over from the house, no vehicles entered or departed the compound. We snacked from the provisions we'd carried from the Third Valley campsite and sipped the remaining river water from our plastic bottles.

It was still morning when Tala and her father returned in his truck. He parked near us, and we went to see what new surprises were in the back. More coils of rope, gear bags, and at the front, a giant wicker basket. While we were studying the new materials, Tala gestured Victor aside, and the three Abidars spoke with him out of my earshot—but I saw him pass something to Mr. Abidar. More of his gold coins, presumably. Maybe all of them. Then Mr. Abidar walked over to the white house and disappeared through the arched entrance.

Bert leaned over the side of the truck and fingered the line comprising the biggest coil. "Ten-millimeter. How long is it?"

"Forty or fifty meters, I think," Tala replied, dragging it onto the lowered tailgate.

I said, "I'll measure it." I untied the loops and hitches binding the coil and stacked it so it would run freely. From fingertip to fingertip, my fully extended arm span makes a handy six-foot ruler. I'd measured dozens if not hundreds of ropes and lines on my schooner this way, so it took only a minute, each section being flung back into the truck to keep it out of the dirt. When I'd finished I said, "Twenty-eight times six. Twenty-five times six is a hundred fifty, plus eighteen makes a hundred sixty-eight feet, so I'd call it fifty meters."

"That'll work," agreed the sergeant major. "Twenty up, twenty down, and ten to play with—in case the wall is higher than we estimated."

As I stacked the rope in a new coil on the tailgate, I checked it carefully for cuts and badly abraded sections. It was a typical climbing rope, kern-mantle construction, with an outer cover protecting the inner, load-bearing

core. The original primary color was faded to a dull corn-silk yellow, its black and red tracer flecks now gray and pink.

I asked Tala, who was standing next to me behind the tailgate, “How old is it? It looks pretty old.”

She spoke slowly and deliberately. “At least ten years, maybe more.” She paused as usual between her sentences, and the gaps gave me an excuse to stare at her face while waiting for her next words. “And some of the time, it was left outside for a safety rope. We don’t have a better, not a fifty-meters-long rope. But this is *corde Allemande*, German rope, the best from the world. The outside is maybe *ogly*, but the inside is very strong. All the ropes I bring are very good enough, or I would not bring them.”

Very good enough for Morocco, I thought. Any German climber in better years would have rejected it outright for overhead use by humans based simply on the appearance of the outer layer. (And immediately purchased a new rope, probably over the Internet, and paid for it with digital euros.) But like Tala Abidar, I wasn’t too concerned. There was some external wear, but no seriously ragged or torn areas. It had never been abused, except for being left outside in the elements. And even if it retained only half of its original tensile strength (and I was sure it retained more than that), it would still be strong enough for lowering schoolgirls down the outer wall of Fort Zerhoun’s western rampart.

I did my best job of coiling the rope and binding it for transportation. Tala watched me carefully at this task, and I took the opportunity to glance back at her. Her eyes, shining in the sunlight, were the color of dark honey. I could see that she wanted to do this rope-coiling job, not trusting anyone but herself to do it perfectly, but my work must have passed her inspection, because she said nothing about it.

When I finished, Bert said, “All right, now we have our primary rope. So put it on the table with the equipment that we’re carrying.”

I took it over to our cleared workbench. Tala brought over a black zipper bag from the truck, unzipped the main compartment, and lifted out a jangly collection of black webbing and shiny silver metal bits. Her climbing harness, with an assortment of rock wedges and carabiners hanging from nylon straps and stainless steel wires. She also lifted out a pair of red-and-blue climbing shoes, like high-top sneakers with black rubber gripping surfaces on the sides and up the heels.

Then she went back to the Toyota and dragged the enormous basket out

and dropped it onto the ground. We all followed her and watched out of sheer curiosity. When she turned it upright, I could see that it was really two baskets woven into one, the baskets joined by a woven arch obviously meant to be hung over the back of a pack animal. Made from a natural organic fiber like hemp or sisal, it was a masterpiece of the weaver's art. I guessed that at least four twenty-liter Jerry cans would easily fit inside each basket—they were that big.

Tala stepped over and into one of the baskets and lowered herself inside until her knees were up by her chest, with only her shoulders and head sticking out. She looked up at us and said, "One girl on each side, so we carry two girls each time down. I think maybe thirty seconds for two girls to be sitting down, twenty seconds for going down by the rope, and ten seconds for pulling up by the rope *vide*, empty. Every minute, two girls are going down. Why not?"

The sergeant major looked at her and at the basket, obviously impressed, and said, "Why not, indeed, lass? Sure, it'll work. In fact, it's a better way than what we'd planned before. A double basket, and two girls at a time—why, it's brilliant."

Tala popped back up and stepped out, beaming. I could see that she really did have a gorgeous smile, with dimples beneath the apples of her cheeks. The slight overlap of the two upper teeth made her smile even more endearing.

Kam said to her, "You have your climbing seat, but what about the rest of us?"

"Almost as good as a proper harness is three meters of rope," she replied, her smile fading quickly. Back to business.

Gino said, "I know how to do it, and already I find a perfect rope for this job. Wait, I come right back."

He returned in half a minute with a loose coil of thick, braided nylon rope draped over his shoulders and back and dragging on the ground. Once it had been white; now it was gray.

"It's *much* too big," said Pat. "It's more than an inch thick."

"No, no, it's-a *perfect*. We only use the outside, we throw away the inside." He dumped the big rope in a pile at his feet, grabbed an end, and pushed the core inside. "See? Just this outside part makes nice and flat, makes a very nice climbing seat. We cut three meters for everybody climbing. And maybe four meters for Hank." He went back to the worktable

and returned with a small roll of black tape and a knife, and wrapped the tape around the thick braided rope every three meters, after measuring the length with his open arms as I had done. Then he used the knife to saw through the middle of the tape and the rope against the tailgate, pushed back the mantle, and pulled the core out of each newly cut section.

Hank said, “Do I need one of these climbing seats, Bert? I thought you said I wouldn’t be climbing up the wall.”

The sergeant major replied, “You won’t be going up the wall, but you’ll need one for working the belay at the bottom. And it might be a bit tricky just tramping to the bottom of the fort, so we’ll all need a seat.”

“How bad is it going to be, I mean getting to the fort?” Hank asked.

Kam answered. “I’ve never been on this exact ground. Near it, and below it, but never on it. I don’t think we’ll need climbing gear on the way there, but we should all take a climbing seat, just in case it’s worse than I think. If there is any climbing to be done, it won’t be any harder than getting up from the beach, and you managed that without a climbing harness.”

Gino said, “Watch me, and just make like I make. Make a knot like this, making a circle.” He tied the ends of his length of rope cover with a water knot, then placed the resulting loop behind his back, holding it with both hands. “Now, you pull each side around onto your middle, and pull one more side up between your legs. Like three corners coming together, okay? And maybe it’s too big? Tie the knot a little more closer and try again. Maybe a little tight is the best way. That’s where you put the carabiner, where the three corners are coming together in your front. Now you can climb anything.”

The skinny Italian smiled just a little, trying hard to appear nonchalant, but he was clearly happy to contribute to our mission, and even happier to have an opportunity to showcase his old mountain warfare training to a group that included some serious climbers. I glanced at Bert and Tala, and from their expressions I could see they both had their own divergent ideas about the best way to make a hasty climbing harness, but Gino’s method was more than adequate, with the added attributes that it was very easy to create and even easier to remember *how* to create. In the Marines I’d been taught a much more complicated method, but I could see that his one-big-loop climbing harness would work just as well, and the loops could be pre-made and carried with us ready to use.

Soon we all had our own loops, knotted to the correct length for each of us. Flattened, the rope cover was three or four centimeters wide, so it

wouldn’t cut into our thighs the way a smaller-diameter line would. The ends were melted with the flame from a candle, to prevent their fraying. Gino showed us that when we doubled our loops, the resulting smaller loop would fit neatly over one shoulder and across the opposite hip. From there it would take only a few seconds to put on, joining the three corners in the front with a carabiner. Brilliantly simple and effective.

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At the back of the compound behind the construction equipment was a section of cliff where we could test our improvised climbing gear and the two-sided donkey basket. Kam and Tala each chose a different route to where some boulders made a suitable ledge about twenty meters up. Tala had ditched her black tunic again, revealing her form-fitting blue jersey, her narrow waist, and the curves of her hips. Her father was still over in the white house, and I wondered if this was another coincidence.

Once the top anchor was set and the pulley tied in place, the empty basket was hauled up, the fifty-meter primary rope tied around its connecting middle. Tala stopped it so the basket tops were just above the level of the rock ledge, held in that position by Hank on belay down below. Bert had said that no pair of schoolgirls could possibly weigh more than our two smallest adults, so Tala and Gino were our guinea pigs.

Tala climbed into a side pouch, facing the cliff and hanging onto the ledge, lowering herself as the entire double basket tipped somewhat while Gino grabbed it and held it steady. It was easier for Gino to get into the other pouch with Tala’s weight stabilizing it, and once they were both sitting inside, the two baskets were level. Their combined weight was still less than that of Big Hank, so there was no chance of lifting him off the ground.

The cliff at the back of the compound wasn’t vertical and it was far more uneven than any fortress wall, but even so, the loaded baskets slid down easily enough, and when they became stuck, the passengers simply pushed off the cliff and continued on their way. Victor determined their exact landing spot by grabbing the baskets while Hank controlled the belay all the way to the ground. It was then just a matter of the two passengers standing up and stepping out.

The sergeant major explained to us that when all the girls had been brought up from their storeroom dungeons and assembled on the gun deck,

they would be lined up in height order and then paired off two by two, an older girl to look after each younger one. The tallest with the smallest was how he put it. This would also average out their combined weights in the baskets and give the youngest girls a nearly adult minder to look after them and help them get into the first basket, the hardest step of all for anyone afraid of heights.

The double-basket lowering method having been proven viable, we all took turns at climbing the wall and rappelling down, with Hank on belay. He used the belay brake that Tala had given him from her collection of climbing widgets to control the movement of the rope. She'd instructed him on its use, and Hank, accustomed to shifting much heavier cargo, was a quick study at using the little gizmo clipped to the snap-link on the front of his climbing harness.

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While we were taking turns practicing on the cliff, a bus pulled into the compound and parked near the shop area. Both sides of the rolling gate had been pushed all the way open to accommodate its size. Its rounded body style and small windows indicated that it had been manufactured well back in the last century, but its diesel motor sounded strong. The bus was painted in faded shades of green, and *Tours Tazmamart* was just visible on the side in chalky white. It had been modified to give it higher ground clearance than a typical bus of its size, and it had oversize tires. There was a nearly full-length cargo rack on top, large enough to carry luggage, surfboards, kayaks, rafts, and camping equipment for all the tourists sitting below.

Tala was up on the ledge, and when Bert called to her, she untied the top anchor and pulley. Then, without a safety rope for belay, she free-climbed back down the face in skips and hops, taking little more time than gravity would have required to reach the ground. I gathered up the rope as she came down, and we followed the others over to inspect our next means of transportation.

Mr. Abidar came out of the white house, walked over, and spoke to the driver, who had stepped down to greet him with the usual handshakes and air kisses. Tala still had on her rock climbing harness and her blue jersey, and made no effort to find her black tunic or otherwise conceal her figure. I looked for signs of conflict between father and daughter, but the two of them went about their business, ignoring each other while in the presence of the driver.

I coiled the fifty-meter rope on the pickup's tailgate while Kam, his father, and the driver stood by the front of the bus conferring, and Tala wandered off somewhere out of my sight. I looked around and didn't see her, but I noticed that the open gate to the public road had been rolled shut. Victor joined me behind the Toyota and, nodding toward the bus, said, "Well, that's what my gold paid for—hiring an antique bus. I think it's older than I am."

"Maybe so, but it looks like it can do the job. And I'll be happy to replace your gold when we're back on the boat."

"Getting the girls out will be payment enough, but I do appreciate the offer."

When I finished binding up the coiled rope, we joined the others by the

front of the bus. Mr. Abidar smiled at us and said, “My cousin does not speak English, not one word, and he knows nothing of the fort, or of the girls. I will be with him inside the bus for the operation from start to end. You must have no worries about him, or the bus.”

The unshaven driver also smiled at us, revealing several missing teeth. He was in his thirties, dressed in jeans, sneakers and a black Adidas warm-up jacket. There was no family resemblance, but “cousin” can cover a lot of territory in an Islamic country. My impression was that he was just part of the business arrangement, and that Victor’s gold had rented the driver along with the bus. The bargain had probably been made by Mr. Abidar over in the house, with the call for the bus and its driver sent from one of the radio antennas on the roof. Or maybe Mr. Abidar had made the deal while he was out with Tala collecting the rope and donkey basket.

We each stepped up through the open door for a look inside. The coach was arranged like a school bus, with a dozen rows of padded bench seats and a narrow luggage shelf above them on each side. With three small passengers on each seat, six per row, it could easily accommodate all sixty-six rescued girls plus our team.

When we had satisfied our curiosity about the interior and were milling around outside, Sergeant Major Tolbert said, “That’s not where we’re riding, laddies.” We followed him in a gaggle around to the rear, where there was a ladder bolted to the back of the bus, leading up to the cargo rack on top. The bottom and sides of the roof rack were made of metal grating, its sides more than a foot high.

Bert pointed up the ladder. “We’re riding to our drop-off point on top. With no passengers inside, even if we’re stopped at a checkpoint, there’ll be no reason for them to inspect the cargo rack. Mister Abidar will remain inside with the driver, in case he has to chat with any locals at roadblocks or checkpoints on the way to our insertion point, or on the way north after we fetch the girls.” The sergeant major looked at each of us, to make sure that we were tracking with his new plan, and then he continued. “This is the order for going up. Kam, myself, and Pat will be in the front. Next come Hank to the left and Gino to the right. Then Victor, Tala, and Dan across the back, facing to the rear. You’ll keep your weapons beside you; the mission cargo goes in the middle. Grab your rifles and your kit, we’re going to practice getting up and down. And that means bringing the scaffolding timbers, the basket, the climbing gear, the ropes—the lot. We’ll sort out who’s carrying what when

we meet back here. Any questions? No? All right, then, ten minutes, fully kitted out and with all of our equipment."

After returning and distributing the gear, we practiced climbing up the ladder and lying prone in our positions, and then climbing back down in the reverse order, setting a hasty perimeter, and then transitioning into our patrol order and moving out. I was responsible for transporting the donkey basket, which weighed at least fifteen kilos empty. Worse than its weight was its bulk, even when it was stomped flat and tied up in a web of cordage. But I was assured that we would be hiking no more than a few kilometers, and not through any thick bush. And when we were finished, we would ditch the unneeded gear at the bottom of the fort and fling it down the cliffs, to have an easier time on our way out with the girls.

After we climbed up and down the ladder and spread out on the roof rack several more times, adjusting how we carried our weapons, packs, and cargo, and then mustered again at the back of the bus, Bert pronounced us as ready as we would ever be. Actually, he said that more practice would only leave us like the knackered, useless old sweats we were, so we should look after our kit, hydrate, and grab some kip, which I knew from the voyage meant sleep. In a little while some scoff, which I had learned meant chow, would be brought out to us for a proper meal before going into action. And if we turned in our empty water bottles, they would be refilled. We dropped them into a box in the back of the pickup, and the bus driver, accompanied by Mr. Abidar, drove it the short distance to the house and they disappeared inside.

The sergeant major approached me while I was retying the trussed-up double basket, trying to compress it into a more compact cargo and creating better shoulder straps from flattened bits of Gino's rope mantle.

"You'll never make a proper donkey," he said. "You're the wrong body type."

"It's a good thing we're riding on top, boss. I wouldn't fit through the door with this on my back."

"I must admit, it was a brilliant idea. She's a clever one, and not hard to look at. But I didn't come over to chat about our favorite half-Berber lass. I've something more serious on my mind. Something I didn't want to discuss in front of the entire mob."

"What's that?"

"First of all, I'm grateful that you've come with us. You could be on your boat, sailing off to the Caribbean. You didn't have to be here. But here

you are."

"Yeah, that's right. Here I am." It wasn't like him to beat around the bush.

"I see that you haven't managed to lose my F-S yet."

"Not yet." I patted the sheathed Fairbairn-Sykes commando knife on my left hip.

"That's what I want to talk about."

"You want it back?"

"No. Not yet, anyway." He looked me square in the eye. "Dan, when you were a Marine, did you see any real action? You were a sniper, right? No bullshit?"

"Three combat tours."

"And you had some trigger time?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"But snipers, you know, that's all long-range stuff. What about up close?"

"I've done some of that, too."

"With a pistol, or a knife?"

"Both. And not only in the military."

"Good. Because here's my problem. We have two pistols, but only one suppressor. The girls are in the three storerooms at the north end of the passageway." He unfolded his sketch of the western rampart and laid it on the tailgate. "There's some kind of barrier here," he said, pointing below the third storeroom, "and we don't know who or what is in these other two rooms at night. We *think* there's a telephone in one of them, but that's all. We don't know if there are ten guards in those rooms at night, or one. And we don't know which room the guards are in, or if they're in both rooms. So, you can see the problem. Two rooms, and one suppressor. Now, my own preference would be to handle the room with the most guards, use the suppressor and kill them all fast while they're sleeping." He tapped his index finger on his temple, indicating where he would shoot them.

"Now, if we're lucky, their doors will be open for ventilation and we'll be able to see inside. The girl who got out said they have some electric light at night. But if there's no light, we'll have to use our own torches, since our night goggles packed it in. Either way, if we can suss out which room has the most guards, I'd prefer to take the pistol with the suppressor. But that means that any guards in the other room have to be killed with a knife at exactly the

same time. It's nasty work, and it takes a cold heart. So I'm asking you, can you kill a man in his sleep with a knife? Quietly? And be sure about it? *Really* sure about it?" Bert was staring straight into my eyes when he asked me this.

"Kill the men who are guarding little girls until they can be sold as sex slaves? Are you joking, boss? Like stepping on a cockroach, as far as I'm concerned."

His eyes narrowed, and he smiled. "Good. And I believe you. Because we have to kill every living soul on that rampart and under it that isn't a wee lassie. Kill them fast, and kill them sure, with no mucking about. No prisoners, no hostages, no comebacks, no nothing. Just kill them all without making a peep. Have you ever killed a man with a knife while he was asleep?"

"No, but there's a first time for everything." I drew his dagger and held it up between our faces.

"Good. But there're some tricks of the trade. We can't have anybody screaming bloody murder or getting to an alarm switch. When we go into those guardrooms, they all have to be killed quickly. I'll take the room with the most guards, but you still might have to deal with more than one. It'll be the wee hours, and with any luck they'll be asleep, but silent killing, well, it's not for the squeamish. If he's lying on his side or on his belly, tickle his kidney first." He touched my back, just below my ribs. "Ram it in to the hilt and pull it straight out. Do it right, do it fast, and they won't make a sound—they'll freeze up from the shock.

"Then stick it right here, between the neck and the clavicle, aiming straight down to the heart. You'll cut the aorta, and it's goodnight, Mohammed. Now, if they're on their back, go for their throat, but don't slash away at their neck like a tosser. Stick it right through, under the jaw and behind the windpipe and out the other side. It's messy, but it's sure, and there'll be no screaming. That's why we use a dagger for this work: it goes in and out easy, like an ice pick. Just don't stab away at the chest like an idiot; it'll get stuck in the ribs and they'll scream bloody murder. Got it?"

"Got it." I was thinking, where has this SAS man been, and what has he done during his life and career to know these things? And then I thought: Am I that different?

"Now, I'll use the pistol in my room, and then I'll be over to help you quick as I can. We just have to do it fast, and do it quiet. The hard men I had

for this job went down on the Atlas, so it's just you and me, laddie. Gino, he's too high strung. I love him, but this isn't the job for an Italian. I need a cold-hearted killer for this one. And you're the man for the job, right?"

"I'm the man for the job, boss."

"I knew you were, I just had to be sure. Pat and Gino will cover the tunnel, and if things go shambolic, they'll hold off the counterattack team."

"Shambolic? Counterattack team?"

"If things become a complete bloody shambles and their quick-reaction force is coming through the tunnel from the main fort. But being realistic, if we're compromised, if we go loud, we'll all die—and the girls will be sold. So it's up to you and me to do it right."

"I'm your man, Sergeant Major. Fast and quiet. I won't let you down." I sheathed the dagger on my hip by feel, still looking into his eyes.

"I'm going up the wall second, after Tala. I'll cut the wire away from the cannon port and give us a place to work. Any roving guards on the gun deck or the bastions, I'll take care of them with the suppressor. Then we'll pull up the timbers and set the pulley. Then everybody goes up, except Big Hank and Victor down on belay. Once we're all on top, we'll tiptoe down the stairs, me in front and then you, Pat, and Gino, and we'll take care of business in the guardrooms. And it's going to be damned ugly business, I can promise you that much."

"Not as ugly as what they have planned for the girls."

"Exactly right. As you said, stepping on cockroaches."

"I've never lost any sleep over the ones I've sent to hell."

He nodded slowly. "Neither have I. And let me tell you, laddie, I've stepped on a lot of them—and the world is a much better place for it."

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Kam and his father walked over and joined Bert and me by the side of the open shed, near the work tables where our gear was staged. They'd left his Toyota parked in front of the house. Mr. Abidar said, "I am going to take my dinner in the *riad* with my son, and also with the doctor. Where is he?"

I said, "He's taking a nap—he's sleeping."

"I'm awake." Victor appeared from the back of the shed and joined us.

Mr. Abidar said, "The first wife of my friend has a sickness inside her body. He thinks maybe cancer, and he wishes that you may examine her.

Other members of his family have other small problems, and he wishes that you may examine them also."

"I have no medical supplies, not even one aspirin. I have nothing to help them with."

"Your wisdom and experience are enough. Trips to clinics are risky; every trip to the cities is dangerous, especially for women. So why make two trips when one may be avoided? Simply a medical examination will be very much valuable to my friend."

It occurred to me that they couldn't be too conservative, not if they would allow a male doctor to examine their women. A stranger, and an infidel at that. Maybe they were also Berbers like Mr. Abidar, and maybe that was the difference. Or maybe it was just a different culture in Morocco, or even just in this part of Morocco.

Kam spoke to his father in their language, a few unintelligible words were exchanged, and then Mr. Abidar addressed us in English again. "My son will carry the food to you here, and then he will return to the riad to take his meal with us. There are two young daughters of my friend's first wife. My friend has the idea that my son can be a husband for one of them. It is impossible to say no to my old friend concerning this matter. I only wish to explain why my son will be taking his meal in the house and not with you, my new friends. So that you may understand."

Father and son exchanged a few more words in their language, and Kam said, "Okay, Victor, let's go. And good luck with his first wife: she's a real battle-ax." He lowered his voice to a whisper: "Don't rule out poisoning. Arsenic and other poisons are very popular in the war between the wives. It is often put down to cancer—especially in the case of a wife the husband would not mind burying."

The three walked to the house and disappeared through the archway. A few minutes later I noticed several women carrying dishes and containers to the pickup parked just outside. The women were dressed in flowing brown and red robes, and wore brightly colored scarves on their heads, scarves revealing some hair, and their faces were uncovered. They looked our way, presumably to observe the strange Nesrani mercenaries temporarily ensconced within their family compound, but they didn't linger and were soon inside the house again.

Kam came out and slowly drove the pickup the short distance back to us. There were teapots and metal pans and covered ceramic pots in the back,

some wrapped in cloth to keep them warm. Our plastic water bottles had been refilled and were all standing in a box. In other boxes were heavy ceramic plates and bowls, cloth napkins, and stainless steel utensils. Our Moroccan picnic had arrived.

He said, “My sister can explain what the dishes are. And now I must return, to be paraded before their family as a potential husband. But of that there is no possibility. Not only because I cannot pay the dowry, but even more important, I have no intention to marry a child as young as some of the girls we came to rescue. But I’ll be expected to tell amusing stories of distant lands and my adventures while among the infidels. Living in California and Ireland makes me something of a Moroccan Marco Polo.

“And while the ladies of the house are serving us, I am meant to notice the daughters, and they are meant to notice me. In this part of Morocco there is no dating in the European or American meaning. Most marriages are still arranged by the families, this is very deep in our culture. I have no choice about this meal; for me to refuse would be a terrible insult to their family honor. My appearance and the doctor’s visit are as much a part of the arrangement for the bus as the gold is.”

This was all perfectly understandable and elicited no argument from us, although I noticed that Tala appeared agitated, folding her arms and cutting her eyes at her brother until he left us to walk back over to the house. Clearly there was some sort of sibling rivalry playing out. Younger brother is invited to the big house for the fancy meal, while older sister is not.

Tala gave each dish in the back of the pickup a desultory glance and a name as it was uncovered for our inspection. I can’t remember the Arabic or Berber names she gave for most of them, but I knew couscous by then, and I remember the beef stew she called *tajine* that came in a big ceramic pot, and the warm homemade bread. And lamb and chicken cooked with yellow rice and olives and peppers and things I didn’t recognize. There were also salads, fruits, nuts, pastries, and cookies.

Since there were plates and forks and serving spoons included, we helped ourselves to what caught our eyes and appealed to our noses. I filled a plate and took a few sample bites, standing up. I looked around the compound and thought, how could Moroccans, out in the middle of nowhere, eat so well after the global economic order had collapsed? Was the family that lived in the white house a rare exception? But it didn’t look as though their construction equipment had been busy in recent months or even years.

Perhaps they were coasting on their accumulated wealth from bygone times.

The bounty laid before us in the back of the old pickup must have originated from a dozen farms and gardens. It was impossible that Victor's gold had purchased this feast and brought it from market to table on such short notice. So, this was their normal household fare, even allowing that they broke out their very best for a formal meal with guests in attendance. Guests that included a friend of the patriarch, a European medical doctor, and a possible future son-in-law.

Between the shed and the construction machines was an empty cable spool turned on its side to make an outdoor lunch table. Since Kam and Victor had left us to dine inside the house, there were just the five of us infidels plus Tala left to eat outside. The men dragged over a few rough stools and chairs, and after I put down my plate I was looking around for one as well when I noticed that Tala was not joining us. Instead, she was standing at the far end of the shed, staring at the house.

I walked over and stood a little off to her side. Her arms were crossed and she startled when she noticed me so near.

"What's the matter?" I asked her. "Don't you want to eat with us?"

She turned and glared at me. "I don't want to eat with *anybody*. I have no hunger, and I have a very bad mood."

"Why are you in a bad mood?"

"Why? Why? It would take some hours to explain why, and it would be a *very* bad story. You would *not* to enjoy hearing why I have a bad mood."

"We're not leaving until tonight, so if you want to tell me, we do have a few hours."

She stared at me for a few seconds and said, "If you *truly* want to hear, then come walking with me. I cannot say my story in this place. This place gives me too much anger. And you are right, we have a few hours. My father and brother will be in the riad for a long time. Three hours or four or maybe even longer. If you want to come with me, come, I will take you to a place where *maybe* I can be happy. Up there." She pointed above the cliff at the back of the compound. "I know a place where we can see a great distance. Then, if you want to hear my story, I will tell it for you."

"Yes, I do want to hear your story. Do I need to bring my climbing seat or a rope?"

"No, this will be easy. Just walking, not climbing. Maybe a little climbing, but very easy. This place is not very distant from here."

“It’s safe to go to this place? Nobody is around, there are no other people? You’re sure this place is close by, it’s near to us?” I still wasn’t certain how much of my English she really understood, so I took extra care to express my questions to her in different ways, and to use rather simple English. I’d learned that a lot of people will pretend to understand a foreign language when they really don’t, wanting to appear agreeable. And I had learned that an ability to speak a foreign language fairly well does not always correspond with an equal ability to comprehend it when it’s spoken by another.

“This place we can go is very safe and very close, and there are no people. I am sure in this.”

“I have to tell Sergeant Bert that we’re leaving. He’s the boss, you know.”

“Yes, Sergeant Bert, the soldier of England. You go and tell him. I will carry something for us to eat. You can carry maybe some liters of water.”

I walked over to where the other four men were sitting around the cable spool and eating. Some of the pots and serving platters had found their way over from the Toyota. I said, “Hey, boss, Tala wants to show me a local scenic overlook. It’s not far away. She says they’ll be in the house for three or four hours, so we’ll have plenty of time. Do you mind if we take off? She says it’s nearby, and there’s nobody around. Completely safe.”

Gino grinned and winked at me. Hank briefly looked up from his plate, then continued eating. Pat was smoking a cigarette and appeared surprised for a moment, then smiled. If Sergeant Major Tolbert was going to pull rank and give me the order not to go, it would be now. Then I could say *get stuffed, you tosser,* and there might be dissention in the ranks just hours before the mission. But he didn’t order me not to go. I was a volunteer, and way over twenty-one.

Instead he said, “All right. Just be careful. Don’t get smashed up—we need both of you in good nick tonight. And don’t take your rifle off campus—too conspicuous. Take this instead.” He pointed to his Glock. It was on the table in its handstitched leather holster, the suppressor sticking through the open bottom. “And take this so you don’t lose track of time.” He pulled out his bandless duty watch and handed it to me. “It’s coming on half-past one, thirteen-thirty hours. Be back in three hours. All right?”

“Three hours is fine, boss. See you before sixteen-thirty. And thanks.” I worked my nylon pants belt through the holster. My T-shirt covered enough

of the gun to obscure it from a distance.

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I grabbed my sling bag and threw in a pair of water bottles from the truck. The water looked clear when I briefly held them up to the sun before packing them. Tala was waiting at the bottom of the cliff, wearing her gray daypack over her blue jersey, no climbing harness or rope, her Berber knife still resting on her left hip. On her feet were just her black sneakers, not her fancy rock-climbing shoes. Of course, I was still wearing my leather boots with their cleated rubber soles.

I looked up at the cliff. “Are we going up there again?”

“No, there is a more easy path.”

“Sergeant Bert said we have to be back in three hours.” I held up three fingers and repeated it to make sure she understood. I showed her Bert’s bandless watch, which I’d tied to a belt loop by its lanyard, then I dropped it back into my pants pocket. “Three hours, no more.” I felt that I had to be very specific, because many people in Islamic and other third-world nations tend to have an elastic concept of time. “Tomorrow” can mean next week, or never.

She stared at me again and said, “Okay. Three hours are enough.” Then she turned and took off at a fast pace, almost a trot, and I was left trailing behind her. She went another fifty meters past the practice cliff, beyond all the construction equipment, to the back corner of the compound. There was an erosion gully carved from red dirt, and for a few minutes we were just putting one foot in front of the other, or rather, one foot above the other. Most of the time I could touch at least one side of the gully, keeping my balance and trying to catch up to Tala without breaking an ankle. My pursuit continued in a snake-wise fashion up the ravine until I was sure that we were several times higher than the cliff where we had practiced rappelling.

In another few minutes, the ravine widened and grew steeper; my heart was hammering and I was short of breath. The last few meters were nearly vertical, forming an escarpment when seen from below, but I watched her hands and feet, then duplicated her holds as I followed her to the top. My head and shoulders went over, then my belly, and finally my legs. I crawled up onto another hillside consisting of dun-colored rocks and dirt with almost no vegetation. Tala was already standing a dozen meters up the slope, waiting for me.

As soon as I was on my feet, she turned and began to power walk straight uphill, with me trailing her once again. Her long, brown braid swung from side to side in time with her stride. When it seemed that we were near the top of the slope and might crest it and head down the other side, she veered off on a barren ascending ridgeline that ran to the left. The walkable part of the ridgeline was less than a foot wide, with steep slopes on both sides. A fall to right or left would result in an unstoppable tumbling slide down more than a hundred meters of stony scree, shredding skin and breaking bones. And probably killing you in the end by leaving you critically injured in a place where both helicopters and hospitals were a fantasy.

Our ridgeline ended against the side of a sandstone formation similar to some of the promontory rocks I'd seen in Arizona and New Mexico. I looked up at the next thirty meters or so of sandstone, and the climbable part seemed too near to vertical for my personal comfort.

"We're going to free-climb that?" I wondered if Tala had intentionally sandbagged me, leading me to a cliff that I couldn't manage safely off-rope. Perhaps she'd anticipated that once I was here, my male pride would not allow me to retreat without giving the rock a try. But there was no malice in her expression, only something closer to innocent joy.

"Yes, yes, we are going to free-climb it. Don't worry, you are more tall than me, so anything I can touch, you can touch more easy. I have guided maybe one hundred people to this place, three or four each time, and nobody fell. Anybody who can trek to this place can climb the next pitch. Just follow me and observe where I place my hands and feet."

It wasn't as difficult as it had looked at first glance. What had seemed like a vertical face was in fact a good thirty degrees off vertical, which put most of my weight against the rock. Some natural cracks made easy holds, and where the cliff was bereft of holds, somebody had taken the time and effort to drill and cement grab handles into the solid rock, handles which also worked as footholds. The iron handles were made from round bars heated and formed into a shallow U, items they could easily fabricate down in the compound.

When I crawled onto the top of the boulder, Tala was standing there, her arms spread wide above her head as if she were greeting the world. Her face was alight, her smile the widest I'd yet seen. Most of the top of the rock formation was too slanted to be safe for walking, but straight ahead was a flat area with enough room for a group of trekkers to congregate, presumably for

group photos and mutual congratulations. I passed her and cautiously approached the far edge and looked over. It was at least a hundred meters straight down to the rocky slope we had ascended, and even farther down to the compound, which was hidden by folds in the terrain. Up on top of the formation, we were surrounded by sloping plains, then green foothills, with higher mountains looming in the distance. “It’s beautiful,” I said. “It reminds me of California.”

“Oh, yes, California—that’s what *everybody* from America says. But do they have Berber villages in California? She pointed three of four kilometers east to a mud-brick village that clung in terraced steps to the side of a brown hill.

Below the village were terraced fields, some still green in early November, descending in steps down the hillside. It was too far to see individual people, but judging by the well-tended appearance of the fields, the village was inhabited. Maybe some of the food we’d eaten had come from there, within the range of laden donkeys and a few operational trucks. I wished I’d had my binoculars for a closer view, but I was also glad I’d left them on Rebel Yell. If I’d brought them on the mission, they’d have gone down with the Atlas.

“It’s beautiful,” I said again. “It looks like the modern world never touched them.”

“Maybe only a little. I climbed to this place the first time when I had maybe ten years, and the iron holds were not yet created.”

I imagined Tala leading groups of European climbers here, being the diligent tour guide and pointing out the sights, snapping group photos on their cameras, hustling for the tips that would come at the end of the day. But she would also be testing their endurance, balance, and overall fitness levels. The spectacular views from the conveniently located rock might hook potential future climbers on the sport, leading more paying customers to sign up for increasingly challenging (and expensive) treks and climbing lessons, including overnight outings to places like the Third Valley tent encampment. Most of her income would have been in the form of cash: Moroccan *dirhams*, euros, or dollars put straight into her hand by happy clients, for as long as foreign tourism had lasted.

She slipped off her rucksack and sat down about a meter back from the precipice, and I did likewise, sitting on her right side but not too closely. The wind was in our faces, with some scattered overcast passing above us and

sometimes obscuring the sun. She pointed to her right and said, “Up between those hills you can see white snow on the High Atlas. And the other way, there is the blue Atlantic. And in the front of us, I can see the places where we walked yesterday, in the valleys between the hills.”

“I think I can follow our route. It really does look like California, you know. Except for the Berber village.”

“My brother lived there for one year, with an American family. Surfing, and attending school.”

“Yes, he told me.”

“That was a very good year for my brother, but it was a very bad year for me.”

“What happened?”

Tala stared toward the distant mountains, then said, “That year, I was attending the university in Rabat. The Mohammed the Fifth University.”

When she looked past me, the sun lit her face and shrank her pupils. Her irises were no darker than amber, honey-gold near her pupils, with flecks of cinnamon radiating out to their borders. It took an effort of will to look away, but I was afraid I would frighten her if I stared too long.

Instead of describing her time at the university, she said, “You know, for me, climbing is freedom. Just freedom, pure freedom. I can climb away from the men that I hate and climb to places where nobody else can go. Almost nobody. There are many places like this rock where I can be alone, or only with friends who I decide. Places where nobody can follow me, or spy on me, or shout at me, or hurt me. Only in these places can I be one hundred percent free and happy.”

She chose a water bottle from the two I’d placed between us, so I took the other. Then she pulled a brown paper package from her daypack and opened it on her lap, and also some pastries wrapped in cloth, which she unfolded. I could also see oranges and pomegranates in the bottom of her pack.

She offered me a small pastry and said, “These are *mes favoris*, they are my most favored. Favorite?”

“Favorite is correct.” I bit into it, and it was indeed excellent. I tasted almonds and honey and flavors that were both sweet and spicy. She offered me other pastries and cookies that tasted of pistachios, coconut, and new flavors I couldn’t even guess at. Some were quite intricate in their layered construction, indicating that they were difficult and time consuming to

prepare.

"Was everything prepared in the house? Or do they buy these cookies in a market, you know, in a store or a *souk*?" I tried one of the few Arabic words that I remembered; it meant marketplace, generally outdoors.

She laughed and smiled. "Oh, no, everything is prepared in the kitchen of the house. And why not? The women have nothing else to do every hour of every day, unless maybe they are washing the clothing or cleaning the house. Or sewing with the needle. Or painting tattoos of henna on their skin. Oh, they have many hours of time to prepare the food."

"Well, they're very good at it. All of the food I've eaten here has been very tasty."

"Tasty meaning like tasting good?"

"Yes, that's what tasty means." After finishing another delicious pastry I said, "You were starting to tell me about your bad year at the university."

"Oh, yes, my very bad year at the university." She sighed and shook her head slightly. "So, to tell you this story, I must tell you first that my *nom officiel* is not Tala. Tala is a Berber name; it means a spring of water, or maybe a fountain. But Tala was not on the list of names for a girl baby Muslima when I was born. For the government, my name is Nadia. My mother chose Nadia from the official list because it might also be a French name, or maybe even a Christian name. For the government, such as when applying to the university, my official name is Nadia Kadijah Abidar. But I was also given the name Tala by my father and my mother."

"Where is your mother? Is she alive?"

"I don't know. She was in France when the civil war began and the electricity stopped. She was visiting to her mother. That was also when the *aviones* stopped. The airplanes. And the Internet, and the international telephone. I don't know where my mother is now. I don't know if she is living or died. I think she is in France, if she is living. Where were you when the electricity stopped?"

"I was on my boat, but I make my own electricity, so it never stopped. I heard that the civil war in France is mostly finished, except in the south around Marseille."

"My mother's family came from near to Bordeaux, not Marseille, so maybe she is living. I visited there a long time before. Now there is the civil war, and there is no more news from France. Maybe she is living, I don't know. She left my father. They were divorcing."

She leaned forward and looked down between her knees. “I *told* you, I have a very bad story, and you will not like it. I *told* you. And now, because of who I am and how I live my life, I may not go with my father and my brother into the riad of their rich and important friend.”

Her story took a long time to tell, because she had to pause to form her thoughts in English. I didn’t mind.

“I am not welcome in that house. I am despised there, so they pretend that I do not exist. My name will not be said by anyone in that house, not even by my father or my brother. To the family of the white house, I am a bad woman, and *much* too old to be married in a manner of respect. To them, I am *ruiné*, ruined. Good enough only to be a prostitute, and then to be despised even more. I bring only the shame where I visit. *Shuma*. If not for my father, I don’t think I am living today. Oh, my story is a terrible one, I have told you that.”

She was frowning, her face screwed with worry lines, her arms wrapped around her knees, which were drawn up to her chest. Tala was a mercurial one: hot and cold. Danger signs flashed around her again. Pretty enough to look at, but definitely don’t touch. Effective emotional blast radius unknown.

“Do they despise you because you won’t wear the hijab?”

“Not only for that. We are Berber, *Amazigh* people, and nobody tells us what to do. If they tell us, we do the other. My father never made me to cover my hair, and I didn’t, not even when I became a woman, yet still I was not married. Remember, my father married a French woman. And this was okay when we lived by the sea. There were so many tourists, so many Europeans, I think people were more free. At my school in that place, in that time, girls could wear the hijab or no. I could live the way I wanted to live. That was what I believed, that anyone can choose how to live their life.”

She turned to look at me, and I could follow her eyes as she studied my scar. “Did that come from the war, when you were a soldier? Or did it come from a knife?”

Her change of subject caught me off guard. “When I was in Iraq, something exploded close to me. I was wearing a helmet and eye protection, or I would be blind.” The right side of my face had a white line running from below my eye back toward my ear. The Army doctors had done a bang-up job in the field hospital sewing my face back together, and that was the only scar that still showed.

Quietly, she said, “I have marks also. And for that I am ruined, I am

destroyed."

"What happened? Were you in a car accident?"

"Oh, no, what happened to me was not an accident."

"So, what happened? Can you tell me?"

She sighed, choosing where to begin. "You know that my brother is more young than me. He has twenty-four years, and I have twenty-eight. The year when he was living in California, I was taking my second year at the Mohammed the Fifth University. It was a very high honor to be accepted to the university, and I was most of the time happy there. Being a student at the university was a very great opportunity for my future, for finding employment. For a woman to find a good job in Maroc is not easy. That year, my second year in Rabat, I shared a flat near the university with two other students. Woman students, of course. But I have to go back even more to explain my story.

"Where I was living before the university, near the surfing beaches, there were many European tourists. In that place, not many women did wear the hijab. Muslim women, I am meaning. The Nesrani women did not have to wear anything on their heads, and so I thought for me also. I refused since many years to wear anything to cover my hair. Maybe unless I choose to wear a hat for the sun, or because of the cold. But that is my choice, and in every other situation I refuse. Why must I cover my hair when the man does not? What is *shuma*, what is to be shameful about my hair? And who made the man to be the master of the woman? But it was very different in Rabat than the place where I was a child. In Rabat, in that time, for a Muslim woman not to wear the hijab was becoming more rare. I think more than half of Muslimas wore the hijab, and the *jellaba*, to cover their body."

"What's a jellaba?"

"It is a robe. *En Français* is called *manteau*, a coat. Like a caftan, but with a hood to cover the head, then it is a jellaba. When she is outside from her house, many believe that a good Muslima must cover her hair and also the shape of her body, but for me, I don't want to. Some female students wore the hijab on the street, but not at the university. Also we had some woman students of Europe, and of course they never cover their hair, and when the air is warm, they wear a *chemisier* like I am wearing now, and *pantalons* like I am wearing now.

"So I decided not to cover my hair when I am in Rabat, and every day, out by the public street, men and boys call me a prostitute, call me a slut and

a whore. *Putain*. *Salgot. Kahba*. They call me every terrible name and say every terrible thing behind my back and even to my face. Right in the public place, in any place I am walking, they make the kissing sound and say they want to sleep with me, and things much more bad. Things they want to be doing on me. Just when I am walking by the street near the university. They walk up close, standing in my front, and they say, 'Hey, you want me to be your boyfriend, you want me to be your lover boy?' And when I give them no attention and walk around them or give them my back, sometimes they catch my arm and they shout, 'Oh, you slut! You dirty whore! Cover your shame, you dirty sinning woman!'

"That I am hearing almost every day, walking to the university. Cover my shame. Something about me is to be of shame? What? Why? But I felt no shame, and even so the boys were like animals on me. Oh, but I was the brave one! I was Berber and I was French more than I was Arab, and I was not religious. I would show the other womans that they did not need to have fear. They did not need to wear the hijab because they were afraid. So I stopped my ears and gave no attention to the harassment, the *taharrush*.

"This was because I was very strong inside of me, and I would not change only because of fear. Yes, I was afraid, but I won't let them win over me. I will never wear the hijab, no matter what they believe about me, no matter what they say about me. They can all go to the demons, go to hell, yes, that is what I say. And every day is the same harassment sexual, the boys saying what they will do on me. Many times five or six boys are making a circle about me, touching on me with their hands. Why don't I go with them, because already I have lost my honor? Every day was *très difficile*, but I was strong. Some days, nobody gives any attention on me, walking to my flat or to the university. I am believing that I can survive the harassment and give courage to the other woman students."

For Tala, this was a flood of words. I could only conclude that these thoughts had been uppermost in her mind for a long time, for her to be able to articulate herself so forcefully without most of her usual pauses.

"After some time stopped the taharrush. Not on one day, but after some few weeks. At the first, we did not understand why stopped the harassment. The woman students, I am meaning. Soon we learned why. It was because a new message was running about the land, a message from a new *marabout*, a holy man from the south of the country. This man is Mahmoud El-Ayashi. So the taharrush stopped, but after maybe a few weeks arrived *la police de la*

vertu."

"The virtue police."

"Yes, the virtue police. They are wearing the white jellaba with the black belt. There was no alarm, no warning. No one made an announcement official. They simply arrived, always in a group of maybe about ten."

She stopped and stared at the ocean, then resumed. "One day I was walking to my flat after my classes are finished. My flat was by a street also with some shops and small hotels for the tourists. The virtue police were near to my flat. They stood across so I could not pass. They knew my official name, Nadia Kadijah Abidar, and they called to me. Their leader pointed to me, and he said he knew I was of a Muslim family, so I was a Muslima, and so I must live to the Sharia, I must live to the Islamic law. They carried *fouettes en cuir*, whips made from the skins of animals."

"Leather whips."

"Yes, leather whips. I am wearing pantalons like today, and a chemisier that covered my arms. A blouse with buttons in the front, but no caftan or jellaba. My hair was as today. A small rucksack on my back. But instead of calling me a slut and a whore, they quoted from the Koran and the Hadiths, the things that said of Mohammed. I recognized some of the boys who harassed me before, but now they were of the virtue police, with new beards. I turned the opposite way in the path, to run away back to the university, but there were more of them behind me also. I tried to run into the street, into the traffic of the cars, but they seized me, there were too many. They were like demons, like wild beasts—and they were *so happy* to be punishing the sinning woman!

"They pulled off my rucksack and they teared off my chemisier. Then they pushed me down on my face by the street, and they striked me on my back. They striked me very hard with many whips. Maybe not for a long time, maybe not for one minute, but enough time for many strikes, and then they ran away in every direction. Maybe they have seen the king's police coming, the *Gendarmerie Royale*. I don't know why, but the virtue police quickly ran away."

"They would have run away from real policemen? Why? Would they be arrested?"

"The virtue police are not of the government. They are police only to Mahmoud El-Ayashi. To their minds, there is no other law but the law of Allah. To their minds, the law of man is only another form of sin, and it must

be the path of holy jihad in the way of Mohammed to destroy the laws of man and to live to the Sharia only."

"So, what happened? Were these virtue police arrested by the king's police?"

She appeared struck by the naiveté of my question "No, of course not. The virtue police are not of the government, but the government does not stop them. Not in that time, when Mahmoud El-Ayashi was preaching in Rabat."

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She sighed, looking down. “I walked to my flat, holding my chemisier in front, and with much blood on my back. Blood I had everywhere. No one is helping me, no one. Instead, they turned away so the virtue police would not come back on them. People had much fear of the virtue police in that time. But a car stopped on the street close by me, and a woman, a European woman, she standed out and asked me, in English and *en Français*, if they can do anything to help me.

“She said they would give me a ride to any place I can go. She and her man; maybe they were a little older than you. I didn’t want to go to my flat, even if I was very close by. I was too afraid because the virtue police know who I am, and they can come later and do worse things to me. Maybe the virtue police are inside my flat, waiting for me. I was very afraid to go inside. These people have a car for their holiday, and they carried me from Rabat to the home of my father. More than five hundred kilometers they carried me, a Dutch man and a Dutch woman. She also cleaned me of my blood and put *médicaments* on my back, and she put the bandage on my back and gave to me a chemisier to wear from her own clothings.”

I could see that Tala was tearing up at the memory, so I tried to think of a way to change the subject in a tactful way without being too obvious about it.

“Was that the end of the university for you?”

“Almost the end. After one week, my father carried me back to Rabat in his Toyota, the same one you have seen. When he was sure no one was in my flat, we walked inside and carried away some things. I wrote a letter to the other girls who lived there to say good-bye of them. Then we went away from my flat, just driving in the city—and I see the virtue police again. Always they are in groups of maybe eight or ten men, wearing the white jellabas and carrying the whips.

“We followed them from some distance, and when they went apart to their different paths, we followed them by three and then by two and then by one. When we saw one man making ready his moto, his motorbike, my father stopped maybe fifty meters behind and told me to drive slowly past. Oh, yes, I can drive any car, and I can drive a moto as well. So I drived—I *drove* past him very slowly. My father has a cloth over his arm, like he is carrying a towel to the bath, but he is carrying his knife in that place. When the man is

pulling up his jellaba, for having one leg on every sides of the moto, my father puts his knife here, one time, very quickly." Tala pointed to a spot on her side, around back and just below the ribs. The same kidney strike that Sergeant Major Tolbert had suggested for guards sleeping on their sides.

"I am in the Toyota, I am driving slowly, and I see this in the glass, in the mirror. The man stands maybe some seconds, and my father is walking past. He puts in the knife, he takes out the knife, and he is still walking. The man and the moto fall down, that has nothing to do with us. I stopped after some short distance and my father entered the Toyota, and still I am driving. So my father gave me a good revenge on one of them.

"Another of *la police de la vertu* we see only by chance. We are maybe two kilometers away from the first man, and more distant away from the university. One more of the virtue police is walking alone in an open place, almost *la campagne*, like the country on one side, only fields, and only a big wall on the other side, and the road going up. I stopped in front of the man; this was the idea of my father. My father called out if the man wants to ride instead of walking, he can climb in the back. He climbed in, over the door of the back. Something of the *meubles*, the furnishings from my flat, was in the cargo, so the man cannot see that the driver is a woman, that the driver is me. We have many boxes and other things in the Toyota, and only some small place for a man sitting in the back.

"After maybe one more kilometer driving, my father says for me to stop again. He stands out and says to the man in the back which way is the best way to go from here, and pointing to where the road divides like a letter Y. Then my father struck his head with a piece of iron, and the man was *inconscient* in about one second. Unconscious, like he is sleeping or maybe dead. My father put cords on his arms and his legs, and covered him with a rug from my flat. The man was by the little door that goes down in the back. Nobody can see him."

I said, "That little door is called the tailgate."

"Yes, the tailgate. The tail from the animal, but meaning in the back. Gate like the door. The door in the back: tailgate. That is named a compound word in English."

"That's right."

"So he is behind the tailgate, and my father he drived again. I mean, he drove. I am very sorry, I cannot remember so many conjugations in English. So we drove far out into the country where there are many small hills, and we

find a quiet place. Found."

"Don't worry about the verbs; I understand you just fine."

"Thank you. So we found a lonely place where nobody will walk for many years, not even the poorest shepherd. Just sand and small stones. My father put down the tailgate. The man is not dead, he is living. His eyes are closed like as he is sleeping, or pretending sleeping, but he has the breathing in and out. I wanted to connect him to something so he cannot run away, so we can leave him in the desert, but there was nothing, only sand and small stones.

"There was a chain in the truck to connect him, but nothing to connect the chain to. My father has the chain to tie petrol tins and extra *pneus*, tires, so a thief cannot steal them quickly. My father digs a hole down in the earth with a spade, and he puts his iron bar down inside the hole, with the chain in the middle. Then he fills the hole with stones and earth, and pours water on, and steps on the earth, so the man cannot pull the chain. *Il est impossible*. The other end of the chain, after maybe three meters, was around the foot of the man, with a lock to connect it. A lock to lock on the chain: a lock is a noun and also a verb, *oui*?

"Yes, lock is both a noun and a verb."

"So the chain was locked around his foot with a lock, and also connected to the iron bar down under the earth. My father makes these with the chain when the man is lying upon the tailgate, sleeping or maybe pretending to be sleeping."

"Or maybe he was still unconscious from the blow to his head with the iron bar."

"Yes, *inconscient*. So, when it is impossible for the man to run away because of the chain to his foot, my father removes the cords from his hands and his legs. Still the man is unconscious—but maybe only pretending. Then my father entered the Toyota and he drove it forward, and the man is falling from the tailgate down on the earth because of the chain on his foot, and he became conscious very quickly. I think he was pretending to sleep. When he sees me, when he *saw* me, he was very afraid. We are in the desert, in a little valley no different from a thousand more. No house to see, no city, no people, nothing. Not even one small tree. Just one man, one woman, and one Toyota. And he sits on the ground, and he is very afraid. He is shaking, afraid to look on me with his eyes.

"'Stand up! Stand up!' I shout to him, but he only remains sitting, very

afraid. So I tell him, I *told* to him to remove his jellaba and his *chemise*, because I am going to strike on him with his whip. Yes, his leather whip was in the Toyota. Whip is also a verb?"

"Yes."

"I said I am going to whip him on his back, and then we will give him water and we will go away. Then in some time he can dig the chain and he can go. After some time, he takes off his jellaba and his shirt, and he stands on his knees with his back to me. But I don't want to whip him. I don't want to touch the leather whip of the virtue police. Instead, I have my father's knife in my hand, and just a little time before, it has killed another virtue police, and still there is blood on this knife. This very old Berber knife."

She drew the blade and held it in front of her in her right hand, reliving the memory.

"I said to him, 'You are so big a coward, you must have ten of you for whipping only one woman. So now is your time to be brave—stand up and fight me! Take away my knife and kill me, nobody is stopping you!' He was a large man, maybe ninety kilos, and more young than you, but he did not stand on his feet, only on his knees, and he begs, he cries with tears. He puts his hands up, and I walked close enough to cut him, like this." She jabbed at the air in front of her. "I cut on his hands, and I cut on his arms, because he would not stand up and fight against me. I know you must think I am very cruel, but you must understand that only after one week, I still am having very bad cuts also on my back, so I still am having very much anger. *Very* much anger." She sheathed her knife.

"Did you kill him?"

"Did I kill him? There was much blood, much, but I don't think that I killed him with the knife. Maybe yes, maybe no, but he was still living when we left him in that place. My father allowed me to decide his destiny, and I did not want to give him an easy death, a quickly death."

"Could he have survived? Could he still be alive and searching for you?"

Tala huffed dismissively. "Only if he discovered the iron bar almost one meter down in the earth. I cut his hands many times, his hands and his fingers. When we left, he was sitting with his hands under his arms this way." Tala tucked her fingers into her opposite armpits. "I think he was trying to stop the blood, but if he tries to dig the earth, he will bleed again."

"So, do you think maybe he bled to death?"

"Maybe. Or maybe the wild dogs found him before his death. *Le chien*

sauvages. When we were in that place, *les vautours* were already making a circle above in the sky. When the vultures observe something maybe to eat, the wild dogs and *les chacals* also know what this means. The jackals. And the desert wind will carry the smell of blood very far. I believe he is living a long time, and I believe the wild dogs and the jackals found him, and also the vultures, and he had a very bad death. I never returned to the university after that day."

"Did the king's police in Rabat ever connect what happened to you, your whipping, to the man your father killed?" I assumed that the man left in the desert was never found, or at least not before being reduced to bones.

"How can they? Many other women were whipped by the virtue police in that week, I am sure in that."

"I thought the king was a tolerant leader. I didn't know that he permitted vigilante groups like the virtue police."

"Oh, the virtue police are gone from the north today. *Very* gone. The Gendarmerie Royale arrested many of them and put many of them into prisons, and many are in the desert, in a special prison where no one is coming back. Mahmoud El-Ayashi was gone away from Rabat when the king arrested the virtue police. The others of the virtue police are in the south today, with El-Ayashi. In the north, with the king, there are no more virtue police, and by the king's law a woman cannot be made to wear the hijab. Not even a Muslima. By the king's law, not even a husband can force a wife to wear the hijab—but of course, they still do."

"But we are not in the north, are we? We are in the middle. What are the rules here?"

"There are no rules but the rules you make for yourself, and every place can be very different. I can tell you an example. In the white riad, the friend of my father is like the sultan. In that house he is the one hundred percent king. He can rule like a saint, or he can rule like a cruel tyrant, and no one can stop him. So in one house there can be a cruel tyrant, and in another house a man can be a kindly man like my father. And sometimes in one city also a cruel tyrant can rule over the people. Agadir and almost to Marrakech, and most of the south of the country, that is under Mahmoud El-Ayashi, and he is a very cruel tyrant. So you see, in Maroc, in only one house or in one city can there be a cruel tyrant. But for me, it is better to live in the north."

"If El-Ayashi comes to power in Port Zerhoun, will he bring the virtue police with him?"

“Yes, of course! El-Ayashi is the leader of the virtue police. He created the virtue police. And Zerhoun? Ayashi *hates* the pirate captains, maybe more than he hates the king. In Zerhoun, the pirates sell wine and whisky and beer. They buy and sell anything there. Alcohol, *hashish*, girls, boys, gold, diamonds; anything you want, they will sell to you this thing. Truly, some of the pirate captains are very bad Muslims. They are Muslims only so they can continue to be as pirates, and to trade in a pirate port. Some of the captains are Nesranis who converted to Islam, but they don’t go to the mosque, and they continue to drink wine. Many say that they eat the burnt meat of pigs, and in secret. El-Ayashi hates the pirate captains very much. But if he attacks Zerhoun, then the king will move against him, and Ayashi is not yet strong enough to fight the Royal Moroccan Army.”

“After what happened at the university, what did you do? Were you afraid of being arrested by the real police, by the king’s police?”

“Afraid of the Gendarmerie Royale? Five hundred kilometers of distance from Rabat? No, never. A man on a moto falls down and he dies, this is nothing important. Nobody loves the virtue police except some fanatics. Who will speak? Nobody. Another man is eaten by wild dogs and vultures in the desert. Now he is only some bones, and bones in the desert mean nothing. Except to me, and to my father: we remember. Oh, we had the very good revenge on the virtue police. We are *Amazigh*, and who are these Arabs in Rabat to whip my back? After Rabat, I lived in the mountains. When there were still coming Nesrani tourists on holiday, I was the leader of many treks and I gave many lessons. Climbing gave me peace. After the university, I lived with my father year on year.”

“Until your brother returned from Ireland.”

“Yes. And when my brother returned, my brother who I believed was dead, and he told me why he returned to Maroc, when I learned the stolen girls were in a fort, and this was meaning to climb walls to discover the girls and carry them out, yes, of course I asked to have my part. I am a much better climber than my brother, and even he will say this is true.”

“You never met these girls, you don’t know them at all. You didn’t even know the girls were in Morocco until your brother came from Ireland. But you still care about them?”

“Yes, and the more I care about them because they were born free. Many women can as well be slaves in this country. It is the way they are made to believe from when they are a baby. To be married to a strange man is their

destiny. Young man, old man, fat or ugly man, rich or poor man: their father will decide their husband. This is their destiny. In Maroc I am unusual because I am a free woman. But in this country *la femme*, the woman, in Arabic *mara*, means a woman married of a husband. The meaning of *fille* is like the young girl, but in Arabic the young girl also means the daughter who is a virgin—*bint*.

"So what is a woman like me who is not married of a husband? Only a very bad thing. And a woman with no husband who will not wear the hijab, she is even worse. But to me the hijab means that a woman is a slave. A slave to her father, a slave to her brother, or a slave to her husband, but always a slave. And today I am not permitted to visit in the riad, a place I visited many times in years ago, because now I am a woman with no husband, and I refuse to wear the hijab. I would be *une mauvaice influence*, a bad influence on his women. On his wives, and on his daughters, because that house is a prison for his women. Did you see how small are the windows? So they cannot escape. The riad has one door with one lock, and never can the woman have the key. And even if they run away, they cannot drive a car, and where can they go only walking? Nowhere. I have only pity of them."

"Why are you so different?"

"Maybe because my father is *Amazigh*, and my father did not teach me to be the slave of anyone. Remember, my father married a French woman, and that is, the way you say, unusual. Yes, my father is also very unusual, like me. In Maroc, if your father permits you to be free, you can live rather free, and in my father, I had the good luck. But in the white riad, the friend of my father is like the sultan who is a cruel tyrant. His wives and his daughters cannot leave the house unless he opens the lock of the door and carries them in his car, as to maybe visit a clinic. But only if the sultan of the house decides. If he does not, the women can become sick and die, and nobody will bother about it. It is the business of the sultan of the house only if they live or if they die."

Tala shook her head and paused again, staring off toward the ocean. "I knew his first daughter from the time when were children. Aisha. I was invited to the riad many times, also to visit with my father and my brother. We were friends, before I attended the university."

She rubbed her two index fingers together, as if to indicate their closeness. "Two or three times we climbed to this place with my mother and father. But my friend was married when she had only sixteen years, and now

she lives far away, and I have not seen her in many years. But even when she was a young girl, she knew something like this life was her destiny, her *maktub*. She cannot decide to marry or not to marry, and this she understands for all of her life. But I cannot live this way—I would prefer to die. And it is the same for the girls of *Irlande*. They were born for living free, like me. Every day will be *une torture cruelle* for them to be slaves, just as every day would be a cruel torture for me. And that is why I am going with the mission—and not only because I am a better climber than my brother."

After she was talked out, we finished the cookies, pastries, and fruit that she had brought, washing it all down with water from the house while savoring the spectacular views. We left around four in the afternoon and were back with minutes to spare.

After our return, Tala sat on a ratty wicker chair at the cable spool table with the rest of us reprobates. None of the gang tossed any impolite winks or made off-color remarks, for which courtesy I was grateful. Nothing of a physical nature had occurred between us over the hours of our absence. In fact, we had never so much as touched at all, but in an Islamic country, a woman merely going off in private with an unrelated man equates to proven adultery. Yet Tala could sit with us infidel men, leaning back in her rickety chair, her black sneakers on the edge of the spool table like any of us guys.

Leading all those European trekkers—men and women both—had ruined Tala Nadia Abidar for any possibility of ever living confined as a house-slave in an arranged marriage. She no longer glared in silent rage at the white riad where she was unwelcome. Instead, she sat with her back to it, laughing and joking with the boys in the band. I could only guess why her mood had improved so much. Tala had just put one over on the rich and locally powerful sultan. She had gone for an unauthorized private outing with an infidel mercenary, in his backyard, right under his nose—and he didn't know the first thing about it. She had climbed high up to a place where his entire compound was just an insignificant flyspeck on God's magnificent creation.

She was sitting across the spool from me, and when we caught each other's eyes it seemed that we were communicating on a new level. Something profound had changed on our hike and climb to the chimney rock. For one thing, she had bared her deepest secrets to a trusted stranger, and they do say that confession is good for the soul. And once again, events seemed to be aligning in ways that could not be explained as purely random happenstance. But I was just an extra trigger puller on Colonel Rainborow's

mad crusade. A mad crusade where most of the fools were already dead.

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Gino placed a small canvas bundle on the spool table and unrolled it, revealing four of the knives that he'd scrounged up, now sharpened and improved. They averaged about a foot long, including their grips. They were not as curved as Tala's Berber knife; they were thicker, more like working tools, and like hers they were also sharpened on only one side. He'd improved the underlying wooden grips, tightly wrapping cord around them, and he'd made sheaths for the four blades out of the same rope mantle that had produced our improvised climbing seats. I already had the commando dagger that Bert had lent me, but I gladly accepted his gift.

Gino had understood our need to fight in total silence and so, without waiting for instructions, he had done something about it. The sergeant major was impressed enough to say it would be a good idea if he went into the first storeroom with me, in case I needed any help in there. Bert didn't say help with what task, and I put this omission down to Tala being with us at the table and his not wanting to discuss the gory details in front of her. I decided to mount the sheath on the right side of my web belt, opposite the dagger. My M-16 was now my absolute last resort; firing it would be an admission of complete tactical failure.

About a half hour later Kam returned. He dragged over a wooden crate and sat down. "I left as soon as I could without being rude. I'm to return the dishes, but there's no hurry."

Gino asked him, "What about the daughters?"

"Well, I'll never be invited into *that* house again. Victor is giving physical exams now, and he'll be busy for at least another hour. But I learned a lot while I was there, and some of it might concern the mission. First, let me tell you about the Storm: the Storm is in Port Zerhoun."

Sergeant Major Tolbert spat. "Bloody hell! So Dansekker turned renegade after all. Well, I suppose that explains their radio silence. Sodding bastard!"

"I warned you not to trust him," I said. "Back in Ireland, I warned you."

Pat said, "But how does the Storm being there affect the mission? I don't see that it does, unless he warned them to lay on extra guards at the fort."

"Dansekker never knew our target," said Bert. "He only would have found out after the Storm linked up with the Atlas. And our new exfil route

takes us north by road, so I can't see that the Storm being there is a mission-stopper. So, Kam, did you find out what he's doing in Port Zerhoun?"

"I only know what my father and his friend discussed. I didn't ask any questions, because I didn't want to give away any information by what I asked. My father and his friend have no idea that the Storm was part of our operation, and there was no reason for me to tell them."

"But does your father's friend know about the rescue mission?" Pat asked.

"I don't know. We never told him why we needed the bus. But the slave auction was a part of our conversation, so he must have made his own conclusions. How could he not? They only know that the Storm is in Port Zerhoun, and its captain is a Dutchman. The friend of my father believes that he may be trying to join the *taifat al-rais*, the council of captains. That's how the pirates call themselves, captains. They don't call what they do piracy, they call it sea-jihad. I learned many things about the council today, listening to my father and his friend. There are fourteen captains on the council, and the leader is a Dutch convert to Islam. He is called Murad Rais, or Captain Murad, but before, he was named Jan Jansen or John Johnson. This wasn't clear in their language; they were speaking *Darija*, the Moroccan Arabic, also mixed with a Berber dialect. My father's friend believes that this new Dutch captain will appeal to Murad Rais for a place on the council, offering the service of his patrol boat as his bride-price. Oh, and I learned that it was Murad Rais himself who personally led the attack on the Saint Agnes School, using his own ship."

I said, "A *Dutchman* kidnapped them? A *Dutchman* is the leader of the pirates?"

"He's one of the fourteen, but yes, Murad Rais is their leader, at least for now. He was elected by the other captains, and they could choose another if they wanted to. But Captain Murad has lived for many years in *al-Maghreb*, North Africa and Morocco, and it's said that he speaks Moroccan Arabic as well as any man ever could who was not born here."

Pat said, "Maybe Dansekker is here for the auction. He's rich enough, isn't he?"

"Coals to Newcastle," Bert replied. "Easier for a man like Dansekker to find white girls in Norway or Sweden. In Morocco he'd be selling girls, not buying them. So maybe he's here to provide extra security for the port?"

"If he is trying to join the council, that's possible," Kam said. "But there

is also a political and a religious aspect. Some of the captains don't want another Nesrani convert to Islam on the council. They feel they already have too much power, especially with a Dutch convert as their leader."

"But how does any of that affect us, or our mission?" Pat asked again.

"It doesn't, really," said Kam. "But it's interesting that it came up. My father wasn't interrogating his friend, but the slave auction and the arrival of the patrol boat were already topics of their conversation. You see, my father's friend is a radio enthusiast. It's his hobby to listen to the radio with a frequency scanner when he's not using them for his business. He is his own intelligence agency, you might say. There is no more wireless phone service in this part of Morocco, but many people still use radios to communicate, and much may be overheard by a careful listener. He has also learned that very wealthy men have traveled from far away to bid on the Irish virgins. The three months of seclusion will be finished after the full moon, and the girls will be sold on Saturday after the noon prayer. Some of these men have arrived on yachts, and some have even flown here on private jets."

"Jets? Who is having private jets today?" asked Gino with an incredulous look.

"I don't know. Sheiks from Arabia or the Gulf States, perhaps. But now there's a new problem with the auction, and this may affect our operation. Mahmoud El-Ayashi is demanding a tribute, a percentage of the virgins. He's demanding that the council afford him the respect of a proper sultan. It was traditional that the sultan would take one-fifth of any slaves who were captured. That was the Prophet Mohammed's share of the slaves that his armies captured, and that tradition has continued."

Pat said, "But if he doesn't control Port Zerhoun, how can he make demands?"

"Without Mahmoud El-Ayashi, the pirates might never have come to control Zerhoun. They were allied against the king at the beginning of the civil war, and Ayashi supported the council. Now he's angry that the captains no longer have regard for his demands, and there is a contest of wills between them. The captains are becoming very rich, while Ayashi must find a way to feed millions of people in the south. And now as a sign of respect, he is demanding the one-fifth tribute. Of course, the one-fifth would constitute much of the value from the auction, because Ayashi would choose only the most beautiful virgins. According to the radio, the bidding just for the identical twins will begin at fifty kilos of gold, so you can see that there are

very large fortunes involved."

A kilo of gold was 32 troy ounces. The last I had heard a price quoted in the old American dollars, one troy ounce had been worth around two thousand dollars, so a kilo would have been worth about sixty thousand. Fifty kilos times sixty thousand was *three million* of the old dollars, and that was just the opening bid for the identical twins, and there were sixty-six girls. By comparison, Victor's ten ounces were inconsequential pocket change.

Bert said, "But if the council tells him to sod off, is El-Ayashi in any position to take the girls anyway?"

"No, it's not yet in his power to capture Port Zerhoun by force, not without destroying it. Both sides have many heavy weapons, including the Panhards they took from the Royal Moroccan Army. Panhards are almost like a small tank with four wheels, and they carry a ninety-millimeter gun. Ayashi has more of them, but the captains have enough for a strong defense. For both sides the calculation is the same: the cost of attacking the port is the same as destroying it. To take the girls without paying for them, first Ayashi would have to capture Port Zerhoun and then attack the main fortress, which lies a few kilometers to the north."

Pat said, "Well, it doesn't sound like *that's* going to happen by Saturday."

"Yet all the same," Kam said, "Ayashi has been steadily increasing his forces directly south of the port in the *ville nouvelle*, Sidi Zerhoun. These are suburbs, but not nice ones like in California. Sidi Zerhoun is more like a poor ghetto or shantytown and now it's controlled by El-Ayashi. The Ayashi faction says they brought their military vehicles into Sidi Zerhoun to provide security for the port, but the captains say they have no need for more security. It's something like the mafia offering protection, yet it's even more complicated than that.

"For example, the electrical power station for the area is located in the port, and it's powered by South African coal. Moroccan phosphates for making fertilizer are shipped the other way in trade. Ayashi needs the materials that come in through the port, especially refined petrol and diesel. Every kind of contraband comes from everywhere and goes everywhere. Vehicle tires are especially prized. The warehouses are always full, and business is good, so there are many who say that Ayashi doesn't really want to capture Port Zerhoun, not when he already benefits from it. But now when he demands the respect of a sultan, that he should receive the one-fifth

tribute, the council has said no, he must pay in gold the same as any other."

"Will the captains give in?" asked Pat. "Maybe they'll compromise. Maybe they'll settle on less than one-fifth."

"I don't think so. The rules for the auction are very clear."

Gino asked, "How does the friend of your father know all of these things?" It was a fair question, with the house being isolated in the remote walled compound, almost nobody entering or leaving, and little evidence of traffic on the road beyond the wall.

"Anyone can listen to the radio." We must have looked surprised at this, because Kam said, "The council has a radio broadcast, and so does El-Ayashi, and so does the king. Between the three propagandas, one may find some truth. All of this I learned from the friend of my father, who was proud to be showing off his knowledge. Anyone wishing to bid on the Nesrani virgins must come to the fortress with only one bodyguard, armed only with pistols, and with only beasts to carry their gold if it is of such weight that two men cannot carry it. The council guarantees the security of all who attend. Payment for the virgins must be made in gold, and must be made at the time of the sale. Ayashi considers these terms to be an insult to his position as the future sultan of all Morocco. Of course, nobody believed that Ayashi would attend the auction under those conditions, and they were also an obvious opportunity for the captains to trap him.

"But Ayashi has thought of his own countermove. He says that he has assembled a great number of his followers, and on his radio he has announced that tomorrow they will make a pilgrimage to the *zawiya*, the shrine of their sect's *marabout*, something like their saint. And where is this shrine? It is near the top of Mount Zerhoun, and only a few kilometers inland from the cape and the fortress. But the path of the pilgrims from Sidi Zerhoun would take them through the port and very near to the road which goes up to the fortress. The soldiers of the council might take a chance and ambush El-Ayashi and one bodyguard, but firing on a large group of holy pilgrims, that's very dangerous. Especially now. Do you know what today is?"

Bert said, "It's Thursday, November the sixth." His self-winding diver's watch had a little window showing the day of the month and the week. Because of his watch he was not only our timekeeper, he was also our calendar.

"Yes, yes, but do you know what day November sixth is in Morocco? Of course you don't—even I had forgotten what day is today. The sixth of

November is a national holiday, it's the Green March Day. It celebrates the day in 1975 when the previous king rallied hundreds of thousands of people, and they marched south into Spanish Sahara and dared the Spanish army to fire on them. Well, the Spanish did not open fire—instead, they departed, and Spanish Sahara became part of Morocco. This people's march almost doubled the territory of Morocco, even if the United Nations did not approve. This national holiday is why the friend of my father had so much food already prepared.

"And El-Ayashi has used this same tactic before, invading a city with a people's march disguised as a pilgrimage. Among the religious, and that is most Moroccans, El-Ayashi holds great power and influence. You see, some of the captains on the council are converts to Islam, like Murad Rais, and El-Ayashi reminds everyone of this constantly. More than anyone else, it's El-Ayashi who has the religious authority to declare these Nesrani converts to be good Muslims or to condemn them as false Muslims, so the council must take his threats very seriously. It's been a long time since Ayashi took Agadir and the Marrakech road. Everyone is wondering if he will finally move against Marrakech, or if he will attack Port Zerhoun first, to secure his Atlantic flank. He doesn't have the forces to accomplish both at the same time. Some believe that he is only making a bluff toward Port Zerhoun with his demands for tribute and his talk of the pilgrimage to Mount Zerhoun. This is the opinion of the friend of my father, who spends the day listening to many radios."

I understood Kam's repeated vague references to "the friend of my father," with no names being given: it was for operational security. It was for this same reason that Kam had brought over our food and would return the dishes. Our exposure to their family was being deliberately minimized, and this actually encouraged me. It was a sign of overall professionalism by Kam's father and his wealthy and well-connected friend. And it was another confirmation that in the absence of the Internet and satellite television, old-fashioned two-way radio was once again at the pinnacle of communication technology, and thus it became a powerful force-multiplier for anyone who could still master its intricate mysteries.

Pat noted, "If these Panhards have ninety-millimeter cannons, that's a bigger gun than even the Storm has."

Sergeant Major Tolbert replied, "At a certain point it's not the caliber that matters, it's more about the control. The precision. Up close those

Panhards are very dangerous, of course. But the Storm can hit pinpoint targets from kilometers away, and an old Panhard can only hit what it can see at close range. And the Storm's fifty-seven is an automatic cannon capable of rapid fire. A Panhard's gun is loaded by hand, so its rate of fire is much slower."

"But if that Panhard is at the other end of the street," Pat said, "a ninety-millimeter cannon can ruin your day."

"That's true enough," Bert agreed. "If they get that close."

"Why do they have so many of these Panhards?" Hank asked him.

"The Moroccans have been fighting the Polisario over Western Sahara for decades. It used to be Spanish Sahara, but like Kam said, the Spanish left in 'seventy-five and the Moroccan army moved in."

"What the hell is the Polisario?"

"Marxist rebels, but most of them are hiding in Algeria. They wanted Western Sahara for their own country when the Spanish left. It's empty desert, but it's mineral rich. Because of the Polisario, the Royal Moroccan Army took mobile desert warfare very seriously, and they built up a powerful armored force. They have some actual tanks and armored personnel carriers that run on treads, but mostly they use wheeled APCs and fighting vehicles. Main battle tanks are too expensive to maintain, and they're too difficult to move around. Tanks need to be transported any distance on trailers, so instead, the Moroccan army concentrated on wheeled fighting vehicles that can move fast on the roads and still travel off-road in the desert. Some of their fighting vehicles are even bigger than the Panhards, some have six wheels and an even bigger gun, a one-oh-five. Old French stuff, mostly. It's not new, but obviously a lot of it still works well enough."

"How the hell do you know all this?" asked Hank. "I live in the Canaries, and I never heard any of it."

"We did an area study when we planned the operation. When the Moroccan civil war broke out, the army's fighting vehicles were spread all over the country. A lot of them were in the south to contain the Polisario, and Ayashi's faction scooped up most of those. His biggest problem is finding the fuel to run them, and that's where the pirates have the edge. Most of the refined fuel coming into central Morocco comes through Port Zerhoun, because it has the infrastructure to handle it. But even with a shortage of fuel, everybody can bring serious firepower to the table in Port Zerhoun if they want to. The king, the pirates, and Ayashi. The question is, do they want to

fight over the port, and maybe destroy it, or just maintain the status quo?"

Pat said quietly, "And in the meantime, we are going to slip in the back door and carry off the girls."

"You're bloody right we are," agreed the sergeant major, and this declaration was met with a small chorus of *hell yeahs* and *bloody rights*, but without a lot of cheery enthusiasm. This was no longer some hypothetical rescue mission being speculated upon in an Irish pub over pints of stout. The old bus that would carry us to within striking distance of the fortress was right there in front of us. One way or another, the fool's crusade was going to come to conclusion tonight.

I had my own question, for Kam. "Just how much *does* this friend of your father know about our operation? Enough to sabotage it?"

"We never said anything about rescuing the girls, but how can he come to any other conclusion? A bus that large is not needed to carry only the eight of us. He's a businessman, so he can add two plus two."

Pat asked him, "Aren't you afraid he'll shop us out to the council the minute we drive through that gate?"

"Or he may sell the information to Ayashi," added Tala.

"I have no way to know what he'll do. I don't know the man as well as my father knows him. If the rescue mission is connected to this place, his entire family will suffer. This is Berber land, but the council could easily send a force of Panhards out here and kill everyone. I don't think he'll inform on us, but I can't see into his heart."

I looked across at Tala. She was glaring at her brother with her arms crossed, but she said nothing further. Perhaps she was envious of his glib fluency in our language and didn't want to appear ignorant or unschooled by comparison. Kam's year in California had allowed him to perfect his English, but his good year had been her absolute worst, and his unexpected return to Morocco must have been a constant reminder of all that had happened to both of them, good and bad.

The conversation fell away. We refilled our plastic food containers with what we wanted from the leftovers, and Kam returned the empty pots and dishes in the pickup. Dusk was falling when Kam, Victor, Mr. Abidar, and the bus driver finally left the house and walked back over to rejoin us. We'd been doing final gear preps on the worktables under the shed roof and were now relaxing.

Victor said, "They gave us a pair of portable radios."

Mr. Abidar set the brick-size walkie-talkies upright on a table. “These radios can have a six kilometers distance, if the air between them is clear. The batteries will live all night. One I will carry in the bus, and one my son will carry.” By then everyone had gathered around the table to hear the latest news. A working pair of walkie-talkies was an unexpected prize.

Sergeant Major Tolbert picked up one of the radios and extended its whip antenna. Its shell was made of black plastic and silver metal. He twisted a knob on top to turn it on, and it emitted a hiss of squelch.

“What time are we kicking off?” I asked him.

In turn, the sergeant major asked Mr. Abidar, “What do you estimate is the driving time to the place where we’ll leave the bus?”

Mr. Abidar asked the driver the same question in Arabic or Berber, then, after hearing his response, replied, “In daylight, at a normal speed, maybe one hour. In the time of darkness, very slowly, maybe two.”

The sergeant major then asked Kam, “How long will it take us on foot from the bus to the fortress?”

“If the bus can go as far as I think, no more than one hour. More time if it’s difficult walking or we need to climb with ropes before we reach the fortress, less time if I find some good trails we can use. Even very slowly, with some difficult places and some stops, I think no more than two hours.”

“I don’t want us to be anywhere near the fortress before midnight, so we’ll leave at twenty-two hundred hours. Ten o’clock.” Sergeant Major Tolbert checked his wristwatch. “It’s coming on six. Let’s get our equipment on top of the bus and tied down while it’s still light. Be ready to move out by half past nine. I’ll be around to see each of you before then and go over your kit. Any questions? After everything is on top, get some kip if you can—it’s going to be a long night.”

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Victor managed at least an hour of downtime, but I don't know if he actually slept. I was too restless to even lie down and try to catch some shut-eye. Instead, I explored around behind our end of the compound with my rifle and web gear, back between the cranes and backhoes and our practice cliff. Out of sight of the others, I did a few drills as a warm-up. Mostly I was getting my body used to moving fast to cover and taking a rapid firing stance, more often than not a prone position. As rear security, I was responsible for protecting the entire patrol. I did not take this duty lightly, and so I was dashing from stacks of old truck tires to piles of rocks to the backs of excavating machines, always looking for a hidden place behind solid cover to lay my rifle.

While I was by myself, I ran through the new information I'd obtained during the final briefing around the spool table. In general it was not good news, notwithstanding the optimistic spin Pat and Bert had put on it. If the Storm was in Port Zerhoun, the odds were good that the guard force around the girls had been put on high alert. The well-publicized slave auction was happening in less than two days. The Dutch traitor Murad Rais and El-Ayashi were already butting heads over the spoils.

If Kam's father's friend could make some simple deductive guesses about the intended use of the bus, no doubt Simon Dansekker could make some guesses of his own. Hell, Dansekker had even met Colonel Rainborow; the colonel had said so himself. They'd met in Rotterdam to discuss the Storm's employment. That ex–SAS colonel had been a blabbermouth when he was pitching the operation to me back in Ireland, and he had certainly spilled his guts to Captain Manresa on the Spanish frigate, so I took it as a given that Dansekker knew all about the schoolgirls, no matter what Bert said.

The odds seemed to be stacked heavily against our success, or even our survival, but in that late moment there was nothing else to do but to push on forward. *I think I'll just hang around in Morocco and take my chances* might work for the Abidars, but it was not an option for us white European and American *kafirs*. The only way out for us was to the north, on that old green bus, with the sixty-six schoolgirls. And I noticed that where it had said *Tours Tazmamart* on the sides of the bus, there were now wide bands of brown

primer paint.

I finished my dry-fire rifle drills when I began to break a sweat, and walked back over to the big shed. Well before ten, we had all gathered at the back of the bus with our weapons, web belts, and personal gear slung or otherwise strapped on. Pat, Hank, and Gino shared a final pre-mission cigarette. The moon was already looming above us. It was still one night from being completely full, but any slight difference was imperceptible. Passing clouds would soften the edges of the moon shadows on the ground, but it would never be any darker tonight than a silvery dusk.

Tala was wearing her black tunic again, her Berber knife belted around her waist on the left side. Black sneakers, black pants, a black coat, and a gray daypack, but nothing on her head or covering her brown hair, which was still tied back in a single braid. She stood between Victor and me because we would be the last to climb the ladder onto the bus.

When the sergeant major looked at his watch and announced it was time to go, our three smokers each took one last puff, and Pat flicked their shared butt away. Bert looked at each of us and said, “Now, I’m not what you would call a particularly religious man, but if you don’t mind, I would like to step off on the right foot with the man upstairs.” He lowered his head and in a solemn voice said, “Lord, we all know what we must do tonight. If we should forget you, please don’t you forget us. And most of all, please don’t forget the wee lassies we have come to bring home. Amen.”

“Amen” was muttered in response.

The sergeant major was the first up the ladder, his rifle slung across his back. The rest of us climbed up in patrol order and went prone in our designated positions, Tala lying between Victor and me in the back. The bus’s diesel engine rumbled to life, and the rear lights came on, glowing red. The bus moved forward toward the wall and stopped. Someone pushed open the gate, probably Kam’s father, who was riding down below with the driver, but I couldn’t see this from my position up top in the back. We rolled through the opening onto the road, turned left, and kept going. I supposed that somebody from the house would close the gate after we were gone. And then, for their own safety, they would try to erase the knowledge of our visit from their memories.

Even atop the bus I was rear security, so my view was through the vertical grate on the back of the luggage rack as the road unspooled behind our wheels. The moon was still rising in the east, and I used it to keep a rough

idea of our direction as the road twisted and turned, the bus always moving at a moderate speed.

After mostly coasting downhill for a good half hour we slowed to a crawl and left the old pavement for a dirt track, and the bus extinguished its lights. Hills rose above us on both sides; we were moving down a *wadi*, a dry riverbed, lurching and jolting over rocks and ruts, the bus leaning to the left and then to the right as the driver kept to the passable sections. At the bottom of a long descent, the bus left the wadi, turned left, and began the even slower process of climbing uphill. After a while, with the moon having risen higher and with jolting up hill and down, often at crazy tilted angles, I completely lost track of our direction and the time.

While bouncing along, often at a walking speed, I wondered if this was the same path that would have been taken by the three Unimog trucks if the Atlas had not gone down. And I wondered how Bert was finding his way without Rainborow's bootleg British military GPS. He had to be depending on Kam's father and the driver, having told them that the western rampart of Fort Zerhoun was our ultimate destination by foot when the bus could travel no farther.

After an hour, maybe two, the bus came to a complete stop on the side of a hill next to a palm grove, with the engine left running. Mr. Abidar walked behind us with a flashlight, signaling to the driver. The bus then reversed hard uphill into the trees, with palm fronds scraping against both sides and dragging above us. Finally the engine was shut down, leaving us in complete silence except for the rustling of the palms. This was as good a hiding place for a bus in mostly open country as we were likely to find, and I had memories of similar groves in Iraq that were often used for camouflage.

Palm trees and palmetto scrub would provide some overhead cover and break up the outline of the bus, at least at night. The bus was even aiming downhill to make a rapid exit. *Combat parking*, we used to call it. We waited under the palm fronds for at least ten minutes to ensure that we had not aroused the interest of a local wandering shepherd, or anybody else who might be out in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, on a national holiday. Or worse, a security patrol from the council of captains or the king. It was unlikely that any of El-Ayashi's forces would be located north of Cape Zerhoun and the steep ridge that supported both sides of the fort.

Eventually the word was passed back that it was time to dismount. I

climbed down first, Victor and Tala passed me our team equipment, and piece by piece I placed it all in an open space behind the bus. After the gear was unloaded, the others came down the ladder and formed a close perimeter, guns pointed outward. Victor helped me get the basket strapped to my back, and Bert assisted Hank with the heavier of the two timbers, and Gino with the lighter. The sergeant major wore the heavy bolt cutters and the bound and coiled primary rope on his own back. Moonlight flickering through the palms provided enough light to tie knots and adjust straps without resorting to flashlights.

This time, Tala was placed between Victor and me in the back of the patrol order. She wasn't familiar with the terrain, she hadn't surfed in the area as her brother had, so there was no advantage to having her up front. The sergeant major's idea was that we should have a speaker of the local dialects at each end, in case we had to move in reverse order. It would be far better to quietly talk our way out of a problem if we possibly could than to shoot our way out, and for this reason neither of the Abidars were burdened with suspicious cargoes.

Kam and his father made another quick radio check with clicks of squelch on their walkie-talkies, then they exchanged air kisses, hugs, and a few words in their native language. Tala said her own good-bye to her father, then she returned to her position between Victor and me. Sergeant Major Tolbert gave the "let's go" hand signal, and Kam stepped out of the palm grove, each of us following in turn with about ten meters of distance between us.

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The bright moon made finding our way easy, and the footing was clear. On fairly straight and even sections I could see each one of us spread out in the moonlight. Big Hank and Gino were especially distinct with the timbers strapped across their backs at an angle. The hillside grew steeper, and our path climbed it at an angle. We passed the first summit and headed down the other side. I could smell salt on the breeze, could feel the nearness of the ocean.

Over the second rise, I could see down the next and even deeper ravine, and out to a sliver of the ocean beyond, both the land and the sea flooded with moonlight. Our route continued upward, winding back and forth on the

edge of narrow paths. The steeper sections meant a constant struggle for balance, with the chance of tripping and sliding far down the slope. It seemed to me that Kam was following mostly natural seams that had been beaten somewhat flat by grazing animals over the centuries. On a moonless night, our path would have been impossible to negotiate without night-vision goggles, not only for the point man but for each member of the patrol as well.

I guessed that we'd walked six or seven kilometers of ascending switchbacks to advance no more than four kilometers overall. Memories of Camp Pendleton ruck marches way back during boot camp flashed through my mind. One by one, the members of the patrol disappeared over another false summit, and when I topped that ridge, there it was, looming above us half a klick away: the western rampart of Fort Zerhoun. The walls shone in the moonlight, the square cannon ports along the crenellated parapet clearly visible.

But seeing was not arriving. We continued our circuitous route ascending the side of the mountain, and for a time the fortress walls were lost from view again. Sometimes we had to scramble over boulders and scree, but mostly Kam kept us on passable footing. I had the reassuring thought that if Big Hank had made it across whatever was coming next, so could I. And therefore, so could sixty-six girls, who would be descending the same path on their way to the waiting bus.

When we began our final climb, both the side of the fort and the ocean were in continuous view. As we drew closer to the rampart, the mountain became even more vertical. In places, the paths narrowed to only curb width, and I had to turn sideways toward the rock face so the compressed basket, which extended past my shoulders on both sides, wouldn't catch the rock and send me over the edge. And when the footing was especially treacherous, Tala was just in front of me to steady the wicker monstrosity and guide it around another outcropping, while offering whispers of encouragement.

We finally approached the north bastion. Kam's path took us toward its side, where centuries of rubble had collected against it. The Portuguese engineers had taken advantage of a sloping shoulder protruding from the side of the cliff to support the base of the fortification. We filed around the bastion's base on a narrow ledge, turned left for twenty meters and then left again. Twenty meters away was the main wall of the western rampart, the location of our climb.

I had a chance to study the stone wall as we advanced along its base; it

was bathed in moonlight, and the gaps and irregularities between the blocks made contrasting shadows. The horizontal blocks averaged about a meter in width, some shorter, some longer, but all were a uniform height of about a half meter, keeping each new layer of stones level, vastly simplifying construction. Each new row was set back a few centimeters from the one below, so that the finished wall leaned inward at ten or fifteen degrees.

Gaps between the stones where ancient mortar had fallen away meant that there would be plenty of fingerholds and toeholds for climbing. Fort Zerhoun was just military-grade construction, rapidly built on a hostile shore by an expeditionary force. The fortress had probably never been directly attacked by an enemy, but it had stood against the Atlantic storms and Saharan winds for half a millennium.

Just as Bert had drawn it in his sketch, there were about fifty meters of space between the bastions at each end of the western rampart. The area between the bastions sloped downward, but gently enough for us to stand on it before the cliffs fell steeply away. The condition of the small trees and brushy shrubs (both living and dead) that had sprung from the barren, rocky ground and even from between the stones of the walls suggested that no one had visited here in many years.

So at least one major break had gone our way: there were no roving guards at the base of the rampart walls. Evidently the girls' captors and custodians didn't believe that anyone would ever approach their great prize from this impossible direction. The council of pirate captains running Port Zerhoun had obviously never met anyone with the imagination and audacity of Colonel William Rainborow, formerly of His Majesty's Special Air Service. By comparison, kidnapping the undefended schoolgirls from the Saint Agnes Convent Secondary School had been stealing candy from a baby, requiring only an evil mind and a converted fishing vessel with sufficient range.

Our patrol closed up as we arrived at our destination: the inside corner where the main wall met the north bastion at a ninety-degree angle. After clearing away some dried brush to make a working area, we huddled together and the sergeant major quietly said, "There's enough space between the bastions for all of the girls. Victor, that'll be your job, because Hank will be on the rope. Put the first pair of girls in the corner by the south bastion. Remind them to remember their pair numbers, because that's how we're going to keep them organized for the march back to the bus."

“All right, put them along the wall by their numbers,” Victor acknowledged.

“By their pair numbers, thirty-three pairs. Now, here’s the timeline. We’ll need about an hour to get the climbers up on top, take care of any guards we find, and then bring the girls up onto the gun deck. Then it’ll take an hour to an hour and a half for us to send them all down the wall in the basket. All together, that’s two and half hours, so let’s call it three.”

He looked at his wristwatch, then handed Victor his duty watch. “It’s coming on one o’clock, so we should be walking out of here with the girls by four. Then in the bus and away to the north before daybreak. You can be our timekeeper, if you have a mind to. For the official record.” Bert gave him the strapless watch, then he turned to Hank, put a hand on the big Cajun’s shoulder, looked up into his eyes, and said, “Just do it like we did today in practice, and I know we’ll all be fine.”

Victor and Hank nodded that they understood their roles.

“All right, let’s get cracking. You all know what to do.”

The sergeant major was right; we all did know what to do, and so we set about doing it. I slipped the donkey basket’s rope straps from my shoulders, and with Victor’s help we cut off its compression bindings, unfolded it, and opened it up. Tala and the sergeant major stacked and prepared the fifty-meter primary rope near the corner. They would be the first two up, so the rest of us gave them room to work. We couldn’t wander very far, of course. Other than the slope between the two bastion towers, the ground was too steep for easy standing, and became dangerous just a few meters farther out.

Tala removed her pack, her knife belt, and her tunic, put on her climbing harness and shoes, and then put her knife back on. She did some stretching, then leaned inward against the two walls, staring up the nearly vertical corner. The rest of us except for Victor clipped on our climbing seats and watched her. Tala turned and conferred quietly with Bert. It was clear from her face that she was eager to climb.

The sergeant major asked her if she was ready, and she replied that she was. He whispered, “Go ahead, then, lass, climb when ready.” Tala started up the corner, her arms and legs splayed out like a crab, making easy progress while moving one hand or foot at a time. The end of the fifty-meter rope was clipped to the back of her harness, so as she climbed, it followed her up, unwinding from the stacked coil. She would set a temporary anchor with one of her rock wedges or cam-locks when she was over the top. She didn’t stop

along the way to set any of these safety tools between stones or to put in any other falling protection. She just free-climbed straight up the corner and, now just a dark shadow, disappeared over the top. According to the plan, she would lie flat atop the parapet and silently observe the gun deck and the bastions, looking for guard activity, cameras, and alarms.

After about ten minutes, the primary rope began moving up the corner again from its stacked coil. This meant that Tala had set the temporary anchor on top, and in a few seconds the working end of the line came bouncing down the wall with a carabiner snap link tied to it. Judging by how little of the rope's fifty meters were still on the ground after it had gone up and returned, I guessed that the wall was well over twenty meters high. A forty-meter rope would have come up short.

By the time the rope came back down, Bert was ready to climb, his rifle and the bolt cutters secured across his back. He stood in the moonlit corner with Hank and Victor and made sure the rope was fed correctly through Hank's belay brake, clipped to the front of his climbing seat. As the belay man, Hank needed to be able to pay rope out freely or to stop a fall in an instant. In this situation, every kilo of Hank's weight worked to our advantage.

The sergeant major climbed much more slowly than Tala had, but the man was sixty if he was a day. Because Hank was on belay, if Bert slipped he would drop only a meter at the most, but he never slipped. He disappeared over the top of the wall, and we saw nothing more of our two lead climbers for at least fifteen minutes. Then the end of the rope came dropping back down to us in little jumps; either Bert or Tala was feeding it down to us by hand.

Next, the two timber beams for supporting the pulley went up bound together, Victor hauling down on the belay line hand over hand as Hank controlled the slack. At least fifteen or twenty minutes later the rope came skittering down again, and then it was Kam's turn to climb. After he disappeared over the parapet, Gino went scrambling up almost as fast as Tala had. Pat went up next, with the M-60 strapped to his back. Then the rope came down again and it was my turn. I stood facing the corner as I'd seen the others do.

Hank said, "Good luck, skipper," and gave a downward pull on his belay line, giving me a little upward tug on my climbing harness to let me know that he and his belay brake were in full control of my rope.

“I’ll see you in a little while,” I said.

Victor added, “We’ll be waiting right here.”

“I know you will. Okay, I’m all set.”

Hank said, “Climb when ready.”

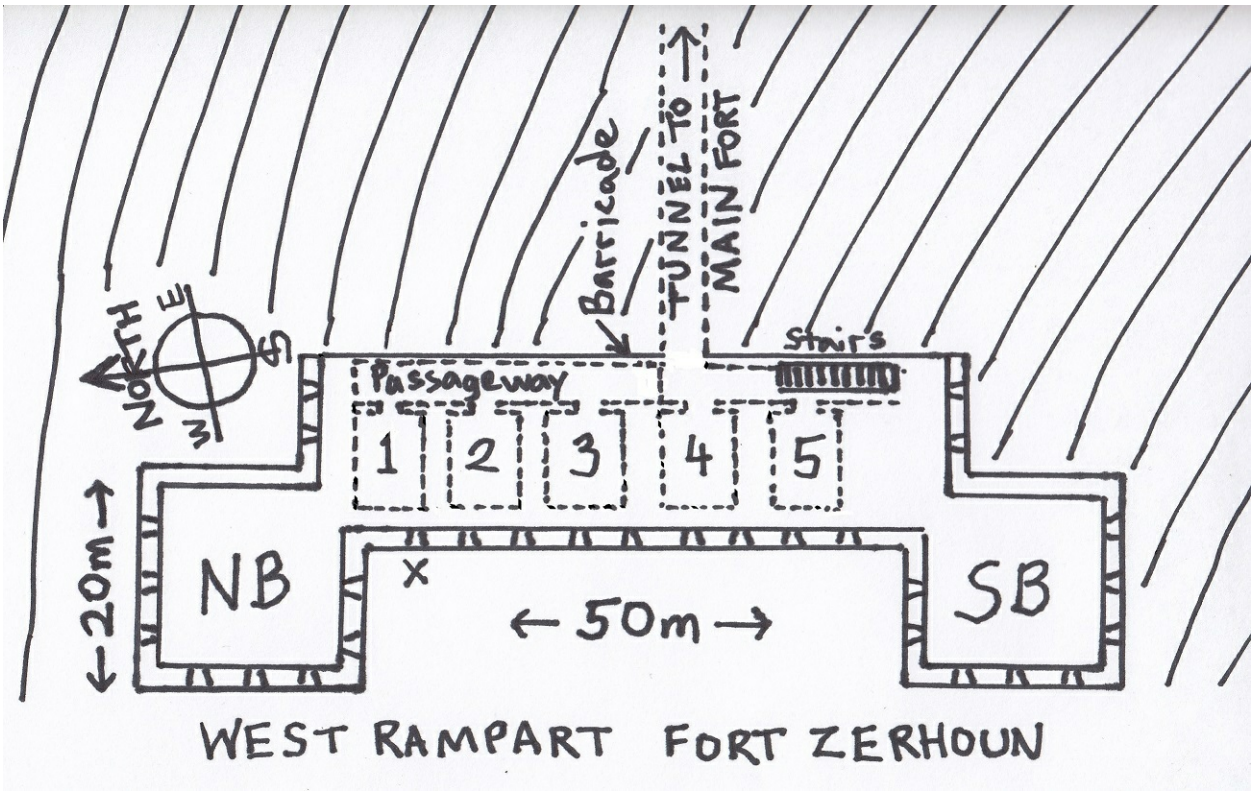
I began to push my way up while leaning into the corner, my hands and feet spread apart. The shadowy gaps between the rough stone blocks were plain to see in the moonlight, and after using them as handholds, I could then find them easily enough with my feet. But it was an inside corner, one of the simpler climbing situations, with steady pressure against the rough, uneven opposing walls giving plenty of support.

After a few minutes of this I neared the top and saw Tala leaning out of the first cannon port on the main rampart wall, just a bit to my right. One of Hank’s timber beams and the pulley had been installed across the square opening above her. This meant that I had to leave the safe corner for the last few meters and traverse the wall over to her, but by then I was used to finding the gaps between the blocks for holds, and I had no problem making it across. But this was with a belay team on the ground to catch me if I slipped. It would have been quite another matter to move horizontally across even a few meters of the wall without any falling protection, where any slip might have been fatal.

Seen from the outside, the opening through the parapet was about a meter and a half wide and almost as high. Tala was kneeling in the bottom, and when I reached for its lower corner with my hand, she leaned out and grabbed my arm by the sleeve, helping me to belly my way up onto the ledge of the cannon port, which seemed cavernous and as steady as a bank vault after what I’d just climbed. The stone blocks at the bottom of the opening sloped downward to the outside, but not enough to make me worry about sliding off. *Safe as houses,* as the Brits said. The beam supporting the pulley was right above my head, the rope trailing down to Hank and Victor far below. Once I had scooted back from the edge a little, I unclipped the snap link from my climbing seat, held it for a moment, and let it go. The carabiner and its knot were stopped at the pulley. The next time Tala sent the working end of the rope down to Hank and Victor, it would be to haul up the empty basket.

I followed Tala through the cannon port on my hands and knees. It was not quite two meters through the wall to the gun deck, the port narrowing to a meter wide in the back. Hank’s second timber beam was across the top of the

back of the opening. The inner and outer beams were joined by short ropes, each beam keeping the other locked in place, thereby keeping the pulley centered above the rescue mission's all-important launching pad. Big Hank Landry's idea had worked perfectly, and I gained even more appreciation for Sergeant Major Tolbert's leadership in making use of the Cajun's considerable talents, and even his gross tonnage, despite his often obnoxious social interactions.



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Tala swung her legs down to the gun deck, and I did the same right after her. Bert whispered, “Welcome to Fort Zerhoun.” He was now wearing a tan beret with an insignia on the front, something I had not seen before.

When I stood up, the bottom of the cannon port was at about my hip level. I looked around to get oriented. Because I’d seen Bert’s pencil sketch, I knew I was standing on the gun deck of the western rampart. The parapet wall was almost two meters high, so it was impossible to see over. Except where Bert had clipped it away, a roll of concertina wire stretched along the inside top of the parapet, sharp butterflies gleaming in the moonlight. The big loops of wire that Bert had removed from the cannon port with his bolt cutters now lay on the stone deck off to the side.

We were just a few meters from the opening to the north bastion, which was closed off from the gun deck with a chain-link fence, topped with more concertina wire, and a pedestrian gate in the middle. Three rolls of concertina wire, two on the bottom and one on the top, were strung along the top of the

parapet surrounding the north bastion, forming a barbed-wire barrier nearly two meters high. This was where the girls spent their days, and the extra wire was probably meant as a precaution against suicide by defenestration. On the bastion's stone deck a sunscreen had been set up for shade, and there was a privacy curtain, presumably for bathroom duties. Some floor mats in a stack. Plastic buckets and pails of various sizes, some old chairs and plastic tables.

After I'd gotten my bearings, and swung my rifle on its sling around to the front, Bert signaled us to follow him south along the wall. The only openings through the parapet were the empty cannon ports spaced about five meters apart. Concertina wire continued along the parapet top, looping down to block off each cannon port. The moonlit ocean two hundred meters below seemed an easy pistol shot away.

The gun deck was wide open and empty, except for a low wall near the south bastion. Remembering Bert's sketch, I knew this wall marked the top of the stairs leading down to where the girls spent their nights. Kam was crouching behind it, leaning over and looking down, holding Bert's suppressed pistol. Any guard unexpectedly coming up the stairs for a smoke or to stargaze would have his back to Kam's silencer. This meant that Kam had both Glocks, but this made sense. The sergeant major had trained Kam and Tommy Pellow primarily on the Glocks, and so Glocks were what Kam knew best. He gave a little wave as we approached.

Bert whispered to Tala, "Go to your brother, lass, and we'll be back in a few minutes." She didn't challenge his edict; she joined Kam behind the wall.

The gun deck joined the south bastion just past the stairs. As at the north bastion, the narrow opening to the bastion had been closed off with a few meters of chain-link fence topped with more concertina wire. And as at the other end, there was a gate in the middle of the fence, but this one was partly open. A broken padlock lay on the ground, its shackle snapped in two. I followed Bert through the gate. Pat and Gino were already there, waiting for us. The south bastion was the mirror image of the north one, but without the sunshades, buckets, chairs, mats, or table. Instead, in the middle of the bastion, gleaming in the moonlight, was a big mortar leaning against bipod legs and aimed toward the south.

Bert went over to it and we huddled close around him. He looked at each of us and whispered, "Right, then, we're finally all here, just the downstairs boys." He didn't seem nervous, considering where we were and what we were about to do.

“You’ve had your beret all along?” I asked him quietly.

“I was saving it for a special occasion.” He patted a cargo pocket on his desert camouflage trousers. “I’ve never lost it yet.”

“Is that the SAS flash?”

“We call it the cap badge, but yes.” The badge showed a winged Excalibur, King Arthur’s sword, with some writing on scrolls underneath.

“‘Who dares, wins,’ right?”

“Yes, that’s what they say. But now will you just look at this beauty.” He wrapped his hands around the slanting mortar tube so that his opposite fingers and thumbs were just touching. “It’s a one-twenty—a real beast. This lovely mortar is why the girls spend their days in the north bastion and not here, closer to the stairs. Its range is better than four miles, and you do *not* want to be around when they come down. The shells weigh thirty pounds each.” He took his hands off the tube and spread his fingers, mouthing “Boom.”

The big mortar was indeed a beast. One hundred twenty millimeters is almost five inches. I’d both seen and heard 120s being fired; unlike smaller mortars they made a very loud report. But 120s were usually headquarters stuff, transported by vehicle and then set up semi-permanently. In other words, they stayed in the rear with the gear, or at least they didn’t go out in front with the scout-snipers and the other recon elements. But I remembered being around plenty of 81mm mortars when they were firing, and even they were impressive enough.

I’d even had the honor of dropping a few 81s down the tube myself. Cross-training, we called it. From boot camp on, it was drilled deeply into our heads that every Marine is an infantryman, and that means knowing all the basic infantry weapons, including mortars. That was our warrior mindset, our ethos: to fight to the end, until you drew your last breath, *and then fight a little more,* and that meant knowing how to use a mortar, or your bare hands, or anything in between.

No better friend, and no worse enemy. War to the knife, and knife to the hilt. Death before dishonor. Leathernecks! Devil dogs! From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli. We were all-in on that gung ho Marine Corps stuff. Ooh-rah, Sarge, let me be the first to jump on that hand grenade! Because up in heaven, where the streets are guarded by United States Marines, Chesty Puller was smiling—and that was all that mattered to Uncle Sam’s Misguided Children. And we even believed most of it, back when

there had been a United States Marine Corps and I had been a Marine.

Back when there had been a United States.

Even leaned over on its two supporting legs, the tube was nearly as tall as I was. Its muzzle had a cover over it, to keep out rain and random debris, but that would take only a moment to flick off and just a few seconds more to drop a round down its open mouth. Each fourteen-kilo shell had to be lifted well above shoulder height to place it in the tube. You don't lift and drop; you stick the shell partway in, hanging it there, and then you drop it on command—and duck. BOOM!

On the ground beneath the front legs was a metal ammo box lying on its side, just big enough to contain two shells. Stand it up and pull it open and there would be the first two ready rounds, meaning ready to fire at a moment's notice. Just pull one out, drop it down the tube—fins first, of course—and pure hell would be unleashed downrange after a cloud-scraping elliptical flight. And these two rounds were not the only ones available to feed the beast. Something was stacked a meter high under a tarp at the base of the parapet wall on the south side. At least a fifty more rounds, judging by the height and width of the cache.

The reason it was stacked there was because south was where the tube was aimed, and so that was where the pirates expected any counter-battery fire to be coming from. The ordnance was perfectly safe from direct fire behind two meters of stone wall. Taking out the mortar and mortar team would require a perfectly aimed high-angle indirect-fire shot, like a golfer pitching the ball up onto an unseen green with a sand wedge, and landing it straight in the cup. Such a counter-battery shot was nearly impossible, at least not without tracking radar and computerized fire control systems to follow an outbound mortar shell's track back to its point of origin. Did anybody have that kind of high-tech stuff anymore?

And while the bastion's mortar team would be able to gaze downward with powerful binoculars to observe and correct their impacts, the counter-battery fire would be launched virtually blind. Enemy spotters located far away and down below would be almost useless for making the minute corrections required to land a shell directly inside the south bastion walls. (Unless they had camera drones immediately ready to put up above Fort Zerhoun, which could not be entirely ruled out.)

But even if a lucky shell landed inside the bastion, another mortar and mortar team could be quickly set up and firing, with replacements sent from

the main fortress through the bombproof connecting tunnel. And that was why they had a big mortar here on the south bastion and not a longer-range howitzer: a mortar is much more portable, especially when broken down into its component parts for transportation. In Afghanistan and Iraq, helicopters could have slung a battery of 105 howitzers onto a dominating high-ground position like this soon after capturing it. But that was in the Marine Corps a long time ago, and these were Moroccan pirates; as far as I could guess, the pirates didn't have helicopters capable of airlifting howitzers, so mortars it was.

Seeing our military curiosity satisfied, Bert whispered, "The mortar isn't even what I wanted to show you. Follow me." He led us to a south-facing cannon port, the middle of the three on that side of the bastion. The coastline down to Port Zerhoun was visible through the opening, from the big seawall jetty and across the ship piers to the warehouses and round fuel tanks on steps carved into the adjoining hillside. A small city spread out beyond the port, with thousands of tiny connected roofs shining in the moonlight and just a little electric light visible on what must have been the main streets. Inland from the port facilities and the city to the south, the view to the east was blocked by the side of the mountain.

When we were looking through the opening, Bert whispered, "There's the Storm. See her? Bow to the land, on the second ship pier."

And there she was, lying far below us like a tiny matchbox model, a little patrol boat dwarfed by much larger cargo ships, warehouses, and rail cranes on the piers beyond her.

Gino hissed, "Simon Dansekker—that Dutch goat-fucker." He'd been picking up our profane jargon since we'd rescued him.

Pat snarled, "Traitor! Give me three tries with that mortar, and I'll blow his little ship into little pieces."

"Pity we can't afford the commotion," Bert said.

"What do you think it's aimed at?" I asked him.

"Whatever the pirate captains reckon is their biggest threat. Whatever they fear the most. In a pinch, if they just drop a round down the tube, they'll be hurting *somebody* they hate. It isn't aimed at random, I'll tell you that much."

"You know this type of mortar?"

"Oh, I know it well. It's a Soltam K-6, made in Israel and exported all around the world. The Moroccan military bought weapons from everywhere.

That Israeli mortar was so good that the U.S. Army bought the design and made their own. Better than a seventy-meter kill radius in the open."

"But where do you *think* it's aimed?" I asked again, the latent scout-sniper in me trying to guess its distant target. "It's not aimed at the Storm, I can see that much."

"No, not at the Storm. Farther, and a bit to the left. I'd say at an important Ayashi strongpoint. A headquarters or a barracks, or the car park for their Panhards. Or wherever they think Ayashi might be sleeping tonight. What do you make the range to be from here to the Storm?"

"Not quite two miles. Maybe three klicks. And two hundred meters down."

Pat said, "And this mortar's range is four miles."

"Four miles at least," Bert agreed. "Ahh, but pipe dreams, laddies! Now we've another job to do, so listen up. Here it is, the final mission briefing. Kam will stay on top, keeping radio watch. Tala will get the basket ready for the girls. The steps are solid stone, so they won't creak, and the treads are very wide, so you won't stumble. Just put your feet down softly, like a cat burglar. There should be a bit of light in the passageway, but be ready with your torches. Remember, we think the girls are in the three rooms at the north end past a barricade. I'll decide which guard room I'm taking after I've had a look at them both. Pat watches the tunnel for anyone coming from the main fortress. Does everyone understand their job?"

We all nodded and whispered that we did.

"All right, then, lads, it's time to do what we came to do. I'm in front, then Dan, Gino, and Pat. Two-meter interval. Stop when I stop, and look and listen. We'll go into both guard rooms at the same time, and you'll move when I move. And if it's not a wee lassie, it dies, you understand me? If it's not a wee lassie, it dies. All right?"

With mutters and nods, we all agreed that we were ready. I slid Bert's dagger out of its slim leather sheath and squeezed its slender metal grip. With my right hand occupied, my M-16 felt clumsy and useless in front. It could only get in the way, so I slid it under my right arm so that it rode barrel-down across my back. If I needed it, it would take only a second or two to swing it back around to the front. But I knew that if I went loud—if any of us went loud—the mission was done, we were done, and the girls were done. I saw that Gino had copied me in positioning his rifle onto his back and gripping his knife in his right hand. I pulled my mini-light from my left shirt pocket

and let it dangle on its short lanyard. I would use it only if I needed to, but until then, I wanted my hands free.

"I'm ready," I whispered, holding the dagger ready.

Gino said, "Me too, I'm ready too."

"Let's go fetch the girls," said Pat. His M-60 machine gun was still slung in front of him, a box of linked ammo attached and ready. He had four more boxes of ammo on his web belt, two on each side, making 500 rounds in all. Pat Maguire's machine gun was our final argument, our last resort. If his M-60 went loud, we were all done for—but we would go down fighting before ever surrendering to the girls' captors. That was not up for discussion, and never would be.

Sergeant Major Tolbert had a slightly crazed look in his eyes, and if the force of his personality had been strong before climbing up onto the moonlit fortress, now with his tan SAS beret he was absolutely dominating. He was the one man in charge, the one man you did not want to cross. The one man you obeyed without hesitation. "All right, then, lads, it's nut-cracking time—but first I'll need my own pistol. Follow me, and stop when I stop. Two meters." He held up two fingers, and hand-signaled "Follow me—move out."

We passed in single file around the big mortar, went through the chain-link gate, turned right, and formed in a line along the vertical mountainside, hidden in the narrow moon shadow. Kam and his sister were watching for us across the stairwell, and when Kam saw us coming he made a wide loop around the stairs and handed the suppressed Glock back to Bert. I could see that it now had a compact tactical pistol light mounted ahead of the trigger guard.

Because I was second in line, I overheard Bert whisper, "Mind your sister, lad. We'll be back just as quick as we can."

"Good luck," Kam whispered back, then went with Tala up the gun deck toward the open cannon port where she would prepare the double basket.

I was glad that Bert was going to spare them the bloody mayhem that was about to be unleashed below. Our Moroccan friends would not be killing any of their countrymen tonight, not if we could help it. We who were going down the stairs, men with more than checkered pasts, we were already in the caste of the damned, and a few more terrible memories wouldn't appreciably tip the balance. We would see Kam and Tala again when we brought up the girls. The same with Victor and Hank, down at the bottom of the wall. We would either see them again in the next hour or two, or we wouldn't ever see

them again. It was as simple as that, and the next few minutes would probably tell the tale.

Nevertheless, a feeling of calm satisfaction came flowing through me, because I realized that no matter what happened next, good or bad, one thing was certain: the kidnapped girls would know for the rest of their lives, no matter how long or short that might be, that a rescue mission had been sent out to bring them home. That they had not been forgotten, quietly consigned to being auctioned off as child sex slaves, because to some good men their lives and freedom were worth more than the gold to be profited by selling their innocence to the highest bidder.

The four of us stood ready in the moon shadow against the mountain. The stairs were almost two meters across, built to be wide enough for Portuguese soldiers to pass one another on urgent military business five centuries before. At the front, Bert hand-signaled over his shoulder, "*Follow me.*"

"*Andiamo,*" Gino whispered. "Let's go."

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Bert moved down the steps, carrying his pistol tucked back near his chest at high ready. His M-16, like mine, was slung across his back. We stayed in the moon shadow as we went down the open stairwell, and when Bert paused, we all did. There were at least twenty long steps in one straight line down and to the north, taking us deep underground in one go. My attention was focused inside the fortress, where the moonlight was replaced by dim electric light up ahead; my night-adapted eyes made the transition easily. When Bert reached the bottom, I could make out the main passageway straight ahead, running north below the gun deck.

He clenched his left fist above his shoulder, indicating that we should stop in place. Then he moved forward alone to scout around. I was near the bottom of the stairs, and I could see that the passageway ahead was dimly lit, but I couldn't yet see the source of the light. When Bert returned a minute later, he hand-signaled us down the stairs into a close huddle and signaled for us to look ahead. The arched passageway was about four meters wide and three meters high in the center, tapering down to stone walls on each side. A conduit ran along its apex, with wires branching off it. Most of the important landmarks from his sketch were in sight.

From the bottom of the stairs we could see vertical bars blocking the passageway to the north. On our side of the barricade were two doors on the left, storerooms four and five. They were heavy wooden doors of ancient construction, with iron hinges and metal cladding. Storeroom number five was across from the side of the stairs. The passageway was narrower there to accommodate the stairs' intruding bulk, and was open to the sky, providing ample ventilation below and no doubt plenty of natural light during the day.

There were no doors on the right side, only a single wide opening just before the barricade, also blocked off with vertical bars. This had to be the mouth of the connecting tunnel to the main fortress. I noticed that cool, fresh air was flowing through the passageway, the tunnel acting as a natural breezeway.

Dim electric light came from a single exposed bulb mounted above the intersection of the passageway and the tunnel. This bulb provided all of the light up and down the passage. The two low doors on the left were partly open, I assumed for ventilation. They were rounded across the top to match

the arched openings into the rooms. Bert pointed to the door of number five and then to us, communicating with gestures, nods, and glances that we were assigned to deal with that room.

Gino and I had to backtrack a few steps around the side of the stairs to get into position. Beyond the stairs to the south the passageway was a black void. Both of the doors had hinges on their right side, so they were ajar facing south. Bert hand-signaled that Gino and I should get ready to enter. He made the throat-slitting gesture with his left hand, then pointed inside and nodded, and we nodded back.

I watched Bert as he crouched by his open door. Following suit, I peeked around my own door and could see that it wasn't completely dark inside; there was a slight glow within. And the storeroom wasn't immediately inside the oaken door, but through a meter-long portal that was also arched to match the top of the door. I looked back at Bert, ten meters up the passageway. Both of his hands were on his pistol, held near his chest, the suppressor pointing slightly downward, his light off. He nodded to me and I nodded back, and when he disappeared within, I slipped around my own door and ducked through the portal, which was inches lower than my head.

The room was about seven meters wide and a dozen deep, with an arched ceiling more than three meters above the stone floor. Immediately to my right was a table, and I could see that an old desk telephone with call-waiting buttons along the bottom was the source of the light. There was a bed against each side of the room, low affairs parallel to the side walls. The one on the left was empty except for disheveled sheets and blankets. The one on the right was occupied by a very large man apparently asleep, lying on his left side facing the stone wall, his feet toward me. Blankets were pulled up under his bare arm. He was not merely large, he was obese. Maybe not as tall as Big Hank, but much rounder. And I was lucky: he was facing away, so I didn't need to attack him in a dead rush the moment I entered the room.

I wondered for a moment if I would even be able to locate and target his kidney for my first strike. Besides his obesity, his various anatomical regions were obscured under his blanket, and I worried that I would hit pelvic bones or ribs, or my knife would be deflected by thick rolls of flab, so I decided to attack his neck instead. All this musing happened in speeded-up time, when seconds are broken into fragments and stretched like putty. And there was not a microsecond to waste, not when Bert was already busy in the other room.

I could see the sleeping man's back expanding and contracting, could

hear his rasping breath as I crept to the edge of his low bed and sank down into a crouch. This was no wee lassie, to be sure. The mattress was half a meter off the floor. A narrow bed for such a wide man. The spot under his right ear was my new target, so I changed my grip to blade-down. Straight through his neck under his jawbone, between his spine and his windpipe and out the other side. That was my intention. I raised my dagger for the downward plunge while silently inhaling.

Then someone yelled out in the passageway, something banged, and just as my blade was dropping, the supposedly sleeping man rolled toward me with surprising speed, his eyes going wide as his massive right arm swept up and across. The tip of my dagger only stuck into the meat of his shoulder as he rolled, not his neck. I recoiled to avoid his back-fist strike, but his forearm separated my hand from the partly embedded dagger, and it went flying from my grip and clattered across the room as he began to sit up, our eyes locked together.

Microsecond snapshots. Freeze-frame of a round face with huge dark eyes. An ugly scar across his forehead. He was overdue for his monthly combined shave and haircut. Graying chest hair right up to his flabby neck, and something on a chain.

The dagger was across the room, so I went for Gino’s knife on the right side of my web belt, grabbed it and drew it while parrying the fat man’s arm on its return swing. He was trying to push himself up from the bed, and while his right arm was blocked with my left I stabbed him straight under his double chin. The knife sank in until it met resistance and jammed against something tough and stayed there. His neck was instantly fountaining dark liquid that smelled of copper and felt slippery hot between my fingers.

He fell flat onto his back while trying to push away from Gino’s knife. Both of his meaty hands grabbed at the half-sunk blade to push it away. I had the opposite goal, trying to shove it in deeper, but I had only one knee on the bed and my left leg was sliding away because of its angle. I had no leverage, no real power to push down on the blade, but at least for the moment it wasn’t coming free. He let go with one hand and tried to punch me, to no effect, but meanwhile he continued spouting blood in lessening spurts as his efforts weakened and he settled into the mattress. I found more purchase with my knee and leaned forward, putting as much weight as I could on the grip and torqueing it side to side. He finally settled into death, his arms flopping limply, awaiting their mortal relaxation, his bleeding now just a trickle. I kept

both hands and my bodyweight on the grip of the knife until his arterial pulse was gone forever.

I'm not sure how much time passed before I heard Bert's voice. "All this trouble and strife over one sleeping fat man?" The light on his pistol was switched on and its brilliant cone darted about, illuminating what looked like a scene from a horror show.

"He wasn't sleeping," I said as I rolled off the bed and landed on my back, my rifle, ammo pouches, and gear bags all tangled up and trying to choke me and jab me at the same time. I tried to stand up, but my rifle barrel became fouled with the bottom of the bed frame and caught for a moment. I freed it but half fell in the effort, so I sat back down on the edge of the bed, my recently deceased companion of short acquaintance behind me, Gino's knife still buried in his throat.

I'd inadvertently sat on his right hand, so I dragged his arm out and threw it wide of the bed, where it bounced in the air before coming to rest palm up but still off the ground. It looked like he had waved hello, and Bert guffawed. I had the impression he thought I'd thrown the arm out to achieve just this effect, but it had been a total fluke.

"What happened out in the passageway?" I asked, trying to appear calm.

"There was an extra bugger we hadn't planned for. I'm guessing that's his empty bed there. Turns out there's a loo for the guards back behind the stairs. My mistake—I should have checked every inch first. Bugger came out and had a dustup with Pat that got a bit noisy. Gino came out to help and they were all shouting to beat the band. You didn't hear it?"

"Just a shout, but I had my own problems with this guy." Auditory exclusion and tunnel vision were expected in a situation like the one I'd just experienced, so missing the passageway excitement was no surprise. It had happened enough times that I'd come to expect it. But as I grew older, I knew my strength, reflexes, and possibly my judgment were inexorably diminishing and sooner or later I would be a second too slow, or I would miss the fatal danger, and I would be the guy with a knife sticking out of his neck. I rubbed my throat and asked Bert, "So, how was it in your room?" Trying to sound casual. Not wanting him to see me all wobbly getting up from the side of the bed.

"There were four of them. They were all snoring away and grinding their teeth, poor sodding bastards. Plus the one that jumped Pat in the passageway; I had to quiet him down too. Your man makes six, but damn, you're a mess!

You look like Dracula on a three-day bender. There's a pitcher on the table, clean yourself up. If the girls see you looking like this, they won't come out."

He was chuckling: another day at the office for the old SAS man. I took a few deep breaths, letting the adrenaline dissipate. I looked around for anything useful, noteworthy, of intel value. Reverting to training, I suppose. Against the wall opposite the telephone table was a rifle rack with a shelf at the bottom. There were a half-dozen AK-47s, barrels up, magazines loaded, a wire cable running through their trigger guards, with a padlock on the end. This was the armory for the guards in the other room, but kept under the control of their sergeant, probably my fat man.

Gino came into the room backwards, dragging the dead guard from the passageway by his ankles. The dead man had one bare foot and one in a shoe, a leather slide-on. A dirty T-shirt and pajama pants. Top of his cranium gone. The missing roommate. When the corpse was far enough inside, Gino dropped the legs.

Bert pointed to me. "Help clean him up," he said to Gino, then he ducked and went back outside.

Gino brought the metal pitcher from the table and poured some of the water onto the corner of a sheet from the other bed, and I used it to wipe off my face. He gave me another look and pointed to where I'd missed, and I cleaned those places too. He squatted down facing the dead man and gazed at the cord-wrapped handle of the knife he'd modified and improved and given to me only hours earlier. "What happened to your English knife?"

"We both heard the noise outside just as I was going to stab him. Maybe he was already awake when I came in. Anyway, he rolled over and knocked it out of my hand."

"I see it." Gino picked it up. "I never like it. The hand part is too small." He gave it to me, and I sheathed it on my left side. Then he took the fat man's bloody pillow, put it over his face, and held it down with one hand while he pulled out the knife with the other. It didn't come out easily, and it made a sucking sound when it did.

He wiped the blade off on the pillow, then tried to clean the grip on a corner of blanket. His tight cord wrapping around the hardwood panels had been saturated in blood, but it hadn't budged and had provided plenty of grip even when I'd had all my weight on it. When it was as clean as he could make it, he handed it to me and I sheathed it on my right side. Then I looked at my hands and saw more blood in the dim light, so I washed them with

water from the pitcher.

Gino pointed over his shoulder at the other more average-size body on the ground and said, “I am having a big fight too, me and Pat. We are making much noise. You not hearing it?”

“I didn’t hear it. I didn’t even know you were gone.”

“We were three of us on the ground, me trying to stick the man and not to stick Pat, Pat he is trying to grab the man on the neck, the machine gun she is hitting everything, making a big noise, and you no hear it?”

“No.”

“Okay, you no hear it. So Bert, he is coming out in a little time and he stop the fight.” Gino pointed his index finger at his temple. “Pop-pop.”

“Is Pat okay?”

“He’s okay, and the machine gun is okay, too. And I think you looking okay now.”

I glanced at the old telephone on the table, its hold buttons still glowing. Tattered photo magazines and old newspapers in Arabic. Uniform shirts and pants on hangers on a little pipe rack, probably khaki and olive drab in better light. Old posters taped to the whitewashed walls, but strictly standard tourist views, no bikinis or girly stuff. Drinking glasses and cups, empty plastic bottles, an overflowing trash can. A pair of eyeglasses. A dirty ashtray, an open cardboard pack of cigarettes.

I returned my interest to the rifle rack with the AK-47s and a pile of curved ammunition magazines on the shelf at the bottom. I picked one up at random; it was a loaded thirty-rounder, called a banana clip in some places, a goat’s horn in others.

On the stone floor next to the rifle rack was an ammo crate like a little footlocker. Sturdy wood with metal corners and fittings, painted a dark color. Closer inspection revealed that it was a military ordnance box with Cyrillic writing on top. A padlock kept me from opening the lid. One of its carrying handles was connected to the side of the rifle rack with another cable like the one through the trigger guards of the AKs. Just enough to keep anyone from casually walking off with it.

Bert ducked back inside the storeroom and said, “I was wondering if you two gentlemen would care to join us in the passageway. You are aware that we have more to do?”

“Did you happen to notice what’s on the floor next to the AKs?”

He turned toward the rack and bumped the switch on the tactical light

beneath his Glock. “No, but thank you for pointing it out.” He holstered his Glock, then pulled the bolt cutters from his web belt; they now rode there with one handle inside and one out. First he cut the cable that ran through the AK-47s, and then he clipped the lock on the box and lifted the lid.

“Russian fragmentation grenades,” he said.

Inside, the box was arranged like an egg crate, with wooden dividers making four rows of five. Based on the box’s height, there was another tray of grenades below this one, so forty in all. I could certainly see where hand grenades would be handy items for protecting a fortress against folks creeping around down below. If the guards had known we were coming, it would have been ugly and hateful for us at the base of the walls.

I pulled out a grenade, gingerly. There was a square gray firing assembly on top that included the pin with its ring and the spoon, and a green metal sphere beneath it to contain the explosive charge. It weighed half a kilo, about a pound. And it wouldn’t take an Einstein to figure out how to pull the pin while holding the spring-charged spoon handle until you really meant to throw it. Unless you were confident enough to burn a second or two of time while holding the spoonless grenade to prevent throw-backs, a high-stakes game of hot potato.

I handed the grenade to Bert, who turned it over and gave it a close examination. He said, “Eight-meter kill radius, but the concussion effects would be *much* worse in here. And they detonate on impact as well as by the time fuse.”

“On impact?” That was a new one on me.

“Impact or a five-second fuse, whichever happens first. Nobody throws them back, I can tell you that much. Sensitive buggers too: they’ll even go off hitting the water. Ivan sold them to anybody who could pay. I’ve seen them in more countries than I can remember. Are you ready now, Captain Kilmer? *Signore* Bracciano? May we go now, please?”

“We may go,” I said. Gino grabbed the cigarettes from the table, and we ducked back through the portal.

38

When we re-entered the passageway Pat said, “So, there’s a telephone in that room?” Not having been in a storeroom himself, he made his guess based on the overhead network of wires running into the rooms from the conduit running down the passageway over our heads. That and the fact that the ransomed girl had heard a telephone ringing.

“Aye, there’s a telephone,” Bert admitted.

“I thought as much. And while I want to thank you again for shooting that other fella and not me, do you think that maybe we should have kept a prisoner alive? So that maybe he could answer the telephone? Did you think of that? I had the situation well in hand—he was nearly in a choke hold.”

Bert replied, “*Somebody* was nearly in a choke hold, that much is certainly true.”

“Well, he might have been able to answer the phone if you hadn’t shot him.”

“Patrick Maguire, you’re giving me advice on keeping prisoners, are you?”

“Only one, but he’s dead now, so there’s not much advice to give.”

“Keep a prisoner? Since we have nothing better to do than guard him and keep him quiet and cozy until the phone rings, and hope he doesn’t give us away with a duress code? No, I’m afraid not. No prisoner, no problem, I always say.”

“But they won’t use a duress code,” said Pat. “Not if you give them the proper incentives first.”

“Very interesting subject,” said Bert, “but can we discuss proper incentives later? Nobody from the other side will telephone tonight. Why should anyone from over there telephone here?” He looked at his diver’s watch. “At past two in the morning? ‘Hello, Mohammed, are you awake, old chap?’ But there’s another wrinkle we need to address.”

“A wrinkle?” I asked him.

“CCTV. A video camera. I’ll show you.”

We followed Bert up the passageway. Just past storeroom four the passage was blocked by real jailhouse bars, with a gate in the middle. An identical barricade blocked the mouth of the tunnel where it met the passageway at a ninety-degree angle. And these bars were not newly

installed; they'd been there for decades at least and probably much longer, judging by the old-fashioned style of the white-painted ironwork.

The rationale for the placement of the two barricades was obvious. The entire dungeon complex could be sealed off from the main fortress, and the prisoners in the three northern rooms could be kept confined by the guards, who controlled access through both gates. Six guards with six AK-47s and grenades kept under lock and key in the guard office with the telephone. It was serious security. Enough manpower and firepower to defend the rampart and the dungeon until the quick reaction force from the main fortress arrived. Not enough to inspire a mutiny or hostage situation that could hold off a determined counterattack for long. The security had been well thought out, and I was convinced that the conversion of the rampart storerooms into a dungeon complex long predated the kidnapping of the girls. Perhaps by centuries.

Dim electric lights were spaced ten meters apart along the top of the connecting tunnel to the main fortress; the closest light was atop the arch between the two barricades. This was the only light for the entire passageway, providing just enough illumination for the guards to see the gates and their locks. The tunnel conduit fed into the dungeon passageway conduit, from where separate wires ran into each room. Day or night, artificial light had to be brought in.

Horizontal bars across the middle of each barricade precluded would-be escapees from prying the verticals apart. And securing the gate was a heavy-duty stainless steel padlock with its shackle hidden inside a steel cover welded over the hasp. There would be no way to put Bert's bolt cutter blades on anything they could cut. It would take an acetylene torch to burn through the bars, but the team's metal cutting rig and small portable bottles had gone down on the Atlas. There had been a cutting torch back at the compound, but its large shop-size oxygen and acetylene bottles were empty, and much too big and heavy for us to carry in any event.

Bert just stared at the bars, thick as broomsticks, and said, "We'll need to find that key, won't we?"

Pat said, "If they keep the keys on the main side of the fortress overnight, then I suppose we're done here."

"Maybe I know where it is," I said. "The fat man in my room had something around his neck." I saw his face again in all its phases, from waking terror to calm, bloody death. There was a chain around his thick neck,

partially concealed by folds of skin.

"I am seeing it too," Gino said, and he went back to look.

Pat said, "Even if we can open the lock, what are we going to do about the camera?"

A white plastic ball the size of an apple was mounted at the top of the arch between the barricades. The ball had a lens pointed at the gate keeping the girls in.

Pat said, "Maybe nobody is looking at that camera. Maybe it's not even switched on. Maybe it's broken."

"And maybe it is working, and maybe guards are watching it right now," Bert replied. "Fort Zerhoun is the headquarters of the pirate cartel. If they have enough electricity for lights, they have enough for a camera. If we open that gate, they'll be able to see us—if anybody's watching that camera."

"What about motion detectors?" I asked him.

"Probably not. Remember the guard who was visiting the loo when we came down. They'd be setting motion detectors off all night with false alarms."

Gino returned. "I cut off the chain from his neck; here were two keys. The small key for the Kalashnikovs and I think the big one, she is for the lock here." He handed both keys to Bert, then he looked up at the camera. "You think she is working, this camera?"

"Probably," said Bert. "They do have electricity."

"I am having an idea," said Gino. "Why not we point it on the other gate? They no look so different, same color white."

Bert smiled. "*Signore* Bracciano, you're bloody brilliant."

If the camera was swiveled ninety degrees to the right, any guards would just be looking down at another set of white bars and a gate across another gray stone passageway, only this one was across the end of the tunnel back to their own part of the fort. Maybe the camera wasn't working, or maybe the guards in the main fort were all sleeping. But maybe it was the only camera in the entire Fort Zerhoun complex, running to the only screen, with a terrified guard watching it like a hawk on pain of cruel death if he missed anything of importance.

Gino said, "Rise me up. I'm sure it's gonna turn."

Pat whispered, "But if a guard sees the screen moving…"

Bert replied, "If a guard is looking at that screen every minute and every second, then we can't reach the girls, now can we? You want to go over to

the main castle and find their security room and see if we can kill all the guards in there too? I didn't think so. Let's turn the camera. We have to take the chance."

"Who dares, wins," I noted.

"Too right, mate."

"It's at least three meters up," said Pat.

Gino said, "Just rise me up, and I can do it." He made a ball-and-socket with his hands and mimed swinging the camera. "This is how they work. I know."

Bert turned to me and said, "Grab them." He pointed the handles of the bolt cutters toward me while he held the cutting end in both hands. We stooped down facing one another, Gino climbed onto the hinged part of the cutters and rested his hands on our heads for balance. Bert said one-two-three and we stood and raised the cutters to shoulder height, and Gino was elevated toward the ceiling, grabbing onto the metal conduit to steady himself with one hand while he twisted the little white ball to the right with his other. Then we lowered him back down and he hopped to the ground. We would just have to hope that nobody had noticed the sudden ninety-degree shift in camera perspective, even assuming it was correctly aimed and not cockeyed and obviously crooked.

Wasting no time, Bert used the complex double-sided key from my fat man's neck and opened the padlock. I'd seen locks like that on armory and ordnance bunker doors in the military. It was a puzzle just to remove the heavy silver lock body from behind the steel cover; both it and the unlocked shackle had to be turned just so to get it out. Once the lock was clear, Bert lifted a lever and pulled the iron-bar gate toward us, and the northern end of the passageway was open.

There were three more storeroom doors on the left, all of them opened completely, their thick wooden doors set flat back against the passageway wall. With twenty-some girls in each room, open doors were a requirement for ventilation. A curtain was set up halfway across the passageway just beyond last door. Based on what I'd seen on the north bastion, behind the curtain would be a few twenty-liter plastic buckets for the girls' nighttime needs. The only light was from the single dim bulb back past the barricade. There was a good flow of air up the passageway, so there must have been another opening somewhere at the north end of the gun deck.

Pat stayed back to watch the side tunnel and I followed the sergeant

major to the first door on the left. This was storeroom number three on Bert's sketch, which so far had proven accurate. He signaled for Gino to wait outside and for me to follow him, then he ducked into the room with me just behind him. Inside was a blinding absence of light. None of the weak light from back at the tunnel intersection penetrated through the meter-long portal into the room.

Bert switched on his pistol's tactical light and shone it downward; it splashed up enough to light the whitewashed room. It looked to be the same dimensions as room number five, only much more crowded. A single raised sleeping platform hugged each side of the room, with a passageway down the middle. The girls were sleeping with their feet toward the middle. Oxford shoes with laces and leather slide-ons were spaced along the floor on both sides of the narrow aisle.

A dozen or more girls were sleeping on each side under shared covers, so that it was impossible to know where one blanket ended and the next began. All the girls appeared to be in deep sleep; they were unmoving and totally silent. Bert aimed his light at the girl sleeping on the left side nearest the portal. She opened her eyes, blinking and shielding them with her hand, so Bert aimed the light down again.

The girl slowly sat up, pulling the covers to her chin. Bert aimed the light up at the ceiling, making himself visible.

He said, "We've come to take you home, lass. Aye, we've come to take you home."

She blinked again at the sudden light. "You're English—are you from the SAS, then?" In the brighter light reflecting down from the whitewashed ceiling, I could see that she had light brown hair and blue eyes. She appeared to be at least sixteen or seventeen, so she was one of the older girls.

"That's right, love, we're from the SAS, and we've come to take you home. What's your name, love?"

"Portia Harrison. And who are you?"

"Sergeant Major Richard Tolbert, at your service."

"Then I'm not dreaming?" She had an English accent.

"No, Portia, you're not dreaming. You're all going home. Now tell me, dear, can we switch that light on?" Bert aimed his light at a small bulb over the center of the arched room.

Portia said, "Not from here we can't. They won't put on the lights until their first prayer. It's lights-out between their last and first prayer."

By then all of girls were stirring, eyes opening, blinking from behind their covers. It was obvious that few of them had actually been asleep at all.

Portia said, “We heard trouble down the hall, and the gate opening when it shouldn’t have, so we were already awake.”

“Well, I’m glad of it, because it saves time, and time is one thing we don’t have gobs of tonight. Now, listen to me carefully, all of you. You must all be ready for a bit of a hike. You’ll need your best tramping shoes, the best you’ve got for walking on rough ground. What do you have to wear? Your school uniforms?”

Portia continued to speak for them all. She had been nearest the door in the first of the three dungeon rooms. This was no coincidence. She’d put herself there as their guardian, to be the first one facing the guards each morning.

“Aye, we have our uniforms, and they gave us robes and slippers and some other things as well.”

“Can you show me one of the robes, dear?”

“I’m not properly dressed, Sergeant Major. You’ll make me feel better if you turn around and give me a little space. I have to stand up; my things are under the bed.”

“Of course.” The old sergeant major about-faced away from her, his light still aimed at the ceiling and lighting the room. I followed his example and turned to face the portal. I could feel cool air being drawn into the room, so there had to be an opening within.

Portia spoke while she changed behind us. “They gave us soap and water for bathing and washing yesterday and today. Plenty of water, and it was even warm. And they gave us new undershirts and their kind of knickers. And we were able to launder our things in tubs they brought us. And they gave us these robes a few days ago.”

In about a minute she said, “Okay, you can turn again.” She was standing at the foot of the common bed wearing the white blouse with the Saint Agnes crest and black-and-green plaid skirt that she’d been captured in, white socks, and dark oxford shoes. Shirt open at the neck, no tie. She held a folded robe in a tawny beige fabric with ribs, like thick corduroy. “Should we wear them?” she asked as she showed it to Bert.

“No, not yet, love, just your uniforms and your best shoes for now, but bring the robes along. Can you walk in them all right? They’re not too long?”

“We can walk in them fine.”

“Then put the robes on after you’re down the wall—your blouses will shine like beacons. You all need to dash upstairs and wait for us there. Except for you, Portia. I need you to tell the other girls what’s happening and get them ready too.”

Curious about the air moving into the room, I studied the far wall, where I found a vertical slot about fifteen centimeters wide and half a meter high. Too narrow for an escape through the thick fortress wall, but enough to provide cross-ventilation. The engineering behind the complex was impressive.

“Did you see our SOS?” she asked Bert.

“That’s why we’re here, love. You were all brilliant, just brilliant. And if you can believe it, I’ve even met your grandfather, John Harrison. Your grandfather is why we’re here, Portia. Your grandfather, and some other blokes who didn’t make it all the way…”

She began to weep. “The SAS saw our SOS. Oh, how we’ve been praying for a miracle…”

“No tears yet, love. You’ll have time for that later, but we still have to get you all up top and then down the wall. All right, ladies, once you’re dressed, dash up to where you spend the day, up to where you made the SOS with your shoes. All right? We’ll step out into the hall now so that everybody can get dressed and ready for a hike. Quick as you can, ladies, your best tramping shoes, and bring your robes. Dan, leave your little torch here so they can see.” I untied my penlight from my buttonhole, turned it on, and handed it to the next girl on Portia’s side. Then I ducked back out into the passageway following Portia, who did not have to duck, but only just.

She asked Bert, “Do you have a helicopter, then?”

“No, lass, we don’t have a helicopter. You’ll have a little walk to a lovely motor coach. The coach will carry you away from here to a safe place, and then back home.”

“A motor coach? The SAS doesn’t have a helicopter?”

“Not this time, love. The choppers will come tomorrow, when you’re all in a safe place. Come, we need to get the other girls ready. I’m sure you can explain it to them better than I can, and quicker too.”

Then the sergeant major addressed me nose to nose, communicating his evolving plan. “Pat will keep an eye on the tunnel and keep the girls away from the camera side as they pass through the gate. Tell them on top that

we’ll all be up in a few minutes.” Then he went with Portia toward storeroom number two and the next twenty-some captives.

39

After collecting Gino and passing the sergeant major's latest instructions along to Pat, we led the first group up the stairs and back to the north end of the gun deck. Kam was sitting on top of the rampart wall with his walkie-talkie, its antenna fully extended. Tala waited by our cannon port. In what seemed like just a few minutes the girls from all three rooms were massed in a milling herd, and in the general confusion and excitement, nothing had been organized and nobody had been sent down the wall yet.

"That's the lot," said Bert, bringing up the rear alongside Portia. A tall girl, she came well above his shoulder. He had no reason to whisper now. "All right, ladies," he said in his best sergeant major's voice, "I need you to queue up, shortest here by me in front, the tallest in the back. Right along the wall, smallest to tallest, queue up, ladies—let's get cracking, we don't have all night. Smallest to tallest, quick as you can."

It took under a minute for the girls to accomplish this task in the moonlight. The ascending line materialized as if they had practiced it for a teamwork competition. After months together, and being schoolmates before that, the girls must have known one another like peas in a pod.

There was no missing the blonde identical twins a little way back from the front. The prize package of the entire slave auction, so it was said.

Bert told Gino and me, "Now go to the other end and lead them back around like a hairpin, and we'll have our pairs."

When this was accomplished, Portia was standing next to a girl who looked to be no older than ten.

Bert leaned down and said, "What's your name, lass?"

"My name is Grace, Sergeant Major. Are you truly from the British SAS?" She had an Irish accent.

"I truly am, Grace." He touched his beret. "That's what this badge means: Special Air Service. Now you and Portia are going to be chums tonight, real pals." He raised his voice and spoke to all of them. "In fact, tonight you're all matching up in pairs. Sixty-six girls, so thirty-three pairs."

"No," said little Grace. "We have six Spanish girls with us now. They came after we did, so now it's seventy-two."

"All right," Bert responded. "It's thirty-six pairs, then. Now—and this is super important, so pay attention, ladies—tonight you'll be in pairs every

single minute. This is only because some of the ground you'll be walking over might be a bit dodgy, and the big girls will need to look after the little ones until you all arrive at the motor coach. And remember who is in the other pairs near you, in case somebody forgets her number, because we don't want to lose anybody. Tonight Portia and Grace are pair number one, and everyone has to remember her pair number."

All their faces nodded in understanding. Their pair numbers were spoken in a murmur going down the line. Because I was rear security, by default I stationed myself at the back of the line, which was soon reorganized into two parallel files.

Each girl in front of me held her folded robe against her chest or her hip. Most of them were dressed in their white school blouses and dark skirts, but some of them were in athletic clothes, as if they had been grabbed from soccer practice, and some were in regular clothes; maybe they were the Spanish girls, who had been kidnapped separately.

To introduce myself and put them at ease at the back of the line, I said, "Nice to meet all of you thirties tonight." They turned toward me. "My name is Dan Kilmer. Yes, I'm a Yank, and I'll be back at this end of the queue to look after things."

"How far is it to the bus?" asked a girl a few pairs up. At this end of the line they were all about the same height and not so far apart in age. The middle of the bell curve. I guessed they averaged about fourteen, their hair ranging from black to blonde, with more than a few that might have been gingers.

"A few miles, a few kilometers, but it's an easy walk." No point in discouraging them. There was no alternative to hiking out. Difficult or easy, it had to be done. The girls went back to whispering among themselves.

The last two girls both had brunette hair, and both had it tied in a French braid. From behind, they could have been twins. After a minute, and feeling rather foolish, I said, "So, what are your names, thirty-six A and thirty-six B?"

They looked at one another, then at me, and one said "I'm Jane" just as the other said "I'm Clare."

"*She's* Clare," said one, pointing to the other. "*I'm* Jane."

"Jane's English, but she's not stuck-up. She's nice." Clare had a lilting Irish accent. "I didn't know they had Yanks in the Special Air Service, Mr. Kilmer. And I'm *sure* that fella down by the gate was Irish—I heard him.

And that other fella, I don't know *what* he is. It all seems a bit off to me. I'm not sure what to make of it."

"Sometimes they bring Yanks and Micks along for special missions. And this time they even have an Italian, and a doctor from Argentina. And some Moroccans too."

She looked doubtful, but I couldn't tell if she was serious or teasing. "Are there any more Englishmen with you on this mission, or just the sergeant major?"

"There were, but they couldn't make it. There were some more Irishmen, too."

Jane asked, "Where are the helicopters, if you're from the Special Air Service?"

"Not tonight, sorry."

"Just a coach," said Clare. "We know, we already heard."

"What are they doing up front?" Jane asked. "I mean, how are we getting down from here?" It didn't need any explaining that pair number thirty-six was going last.

"We have a long rope running up to a pulley and back down again. Two big strong men are at the bottom handling the rope, and there's a basket big enough for two girls at a time. You sit in the basket and you go down, that's it. It's easy. Works by gravity. You can't miss."

"I was hoping for a helicopter," said Jane, looking up at the full moon. "I haven't been walking much lately, and I'm afraid I'll have blisters if it's a long walk." She had a cultured and sophisticated English accent.

I thought, *if blisters are our worst problem, I'll take it*. I didn't have a wristwatch, so I could only guess how quickly the basket was going up and down. There was still no sound from downstairs, and Pat's M-60 would make a hell of a racket if it was lit off in that stone passageway. I wondered if he had remembered to bring his earplugs. But what really mattered was that the sound of his machine gun might be the only warning we would ever get that the enemy QRF was on its way through the tunnel from the main fort.

But the gun deck remained quiet, the moon still high above and now leaning west, the girls all talking quietly. Irish, English, and French accents, and some Spanish as well: Pinch me, I'm dreaming. I can't believe it, we're going home. They didn't forget us. All that praying, it worked. They sent the SAS, even if it's some odd foreign ducks and old men, but wearing British Army uniforms and carrying American rifles, the kind with the little handle

on top.

For some reason I felt compelled to make conversation. “So, what did you do for three months?”

Clare answered after a moment. “Oh, we prayed most all of the time. We prayed and we sang. And we told stories, and we had classes. We learned French and Spanish, and cooking. Make-believe cooking, I mean, but proper classes. Things like that. But mostly we prayed. It’s pitch-dark down there after lights-out, but we could wander between our three rooms as we liked, or stay out in the hall where there’s a little light.”

Jane said, “The acoustics are *amazing* down there. There are places where you can hear quiet whispers from far away.”

Another girl up the line said, “Every song that any of us remembered, we all learned it by heart. We even know French and Spanish songs now, and what every word means.”

“Our singing sounded incredible,” said Jane. “Especially when we were in the back of the hall. It drove the guards mad, but we didn’t stop. When they screamed at us and threatened us, we just prayed harder and sang louder. We prayed every prayer we knew, and we made up new ones and prayed them too, and then made them into our own songs. We even sang after lights-out, and that *really* drove them mad. After a few days they quit screaming at us when we carried on singing after their last prayer, and they left us alone on our side of the gate. Up on the sundeck too, they left us alone after they locked us in for the day. It was strictly for us girls, I’ll give them that. And downstairs, they didn’t come past the bars.”

“Did they ever hurt you?” I asked them.

Clare said, “No, they never touched us. Not really. Maybe just a bump now and again. The odd grab on the stairs to hurry us on. But we knew why they weren’t abusing us. They even told us: so that we wouldn’t be *ruiné*—that means ruined in French. We know what that means, Mr. Kilmer. We’re both fourteen. We’re not babies, and we weren’t born yesterday. We knew what they were about, those wicked, evil men.”

“We prayed for angels to carry us up to heaven,” said Jane. “And we prayed for the SAS or for somebody just like the SAS to come and take us home. That’s why we made the SOS with our shoes, in case anybody was searching for us.”

“They were,” I replied. “People were out searching for you from the very beginning. Ask Portia Harrison about her grandfather someday. And a man

named Colonel Rainborow."

"Our prayers were answered," said Clare, serenely sure of cause and effect.

They seemed perfectly content, certain of their deliverance, but I had more doubt. We were still a long way from the bus, and the bus was even farther from safe territory.

Jane said, "We knew we were getting short of time when they brought water for us to bathe yesterday and today. Here on top, on our daytime sundeck. They put blankets across the fence like curtains. And they brought us mountains of towels, and whole bars of soap. We knew time was short if they were letting us clean up and wash our things. And they brought us better food the last week. We thought the full moon was it for us, because that's what we heard from the guards; some of us could speak with them in French. But we weren't sure which night was the full moon. We thought maybe it was tonight and we were done for. Then the noise in the hall, and we thought that your old SAS man was one of the guards and they'd come to take us away. We were just petrified, so petrified you can't even imagine."

"Better late than never," said Clare. "But it was rather a close call. Don't think we're whinging, mind you. A bit of a tramp will be nice, and then a ride in a coach. It sounds lovely, to tell the truth. Even if we get the worst blisters ever, it will be worth it. I won't mind a bit. I won't complain, not ever."

"And the moon is so beautiful," said Jane. "We've never been up here at night to see it."

The line grew shorter until we could watch the process while standing behind the open cannon port. Two girls at a time crept through on their hands and knees to where Tala waited by the outside edge. She had her own short safety line attached to the overhead beam, so she was in no danger of falling. One girl, then the other, would sit on the edge and put her feet down into the basket, steadied by Tala. When they were both seated, she passed them their folded robes and signaled Hank to belay them down.

Time passed, and the queue shortened. Almost all of the twenties had gone down the wall. Rainborow's basic plan, as modified by Bert, was going to work. It was just a matter of a little more time on the gun deck and then a walk to the bus. After that, it would be up to Mr. Abidar and the bus driver to sneak us across the lines into the king's territory by paying bribes at checkpoints where *baksheesh* was an expected method of conducting business. Exactly how those transactions would be accomplished was above

my pay grade, as almost everything on this operation had been.

Pat came up to the gun deck to check on our progress, and he reported continued silence down below. The dead had gotten no deader. If that closed-circuit camera was working, nobody in the main fortress had noticed that it was pointing at a different barred gate. He said it was a pity we couldn't carry off the Kalashnikovs, and maybe he would ask Bert about it. Not to mention the grenades. We'd come in with the timber beams and the donkey basket, so maybe we could manage a little cargo on the way out as well.

Pat and Gino even shared a cigarette, bantering with some of the girls, who told them that *baccy* was bad for their health, it could even stunt their growth and shorten their lives, and they all had a good laugh about that. Finally the cigarette was smoked down to burnt fingertips and flicked away, embers blown down the gun deck. Pat said good-bye to the girls and went back down below to stand watch on the tunnel.

It was going to work, I finally decided. Colonel Rainborow's mad plan was going to succeed. We were going to get away with it. The girls' serene assurance infected us all, how could it not? Moonlight, moonbeams, moonshine. The girls had prayed hard for their deliverance, and their deliverance had arrived. It was just a matter of a little more time until they would be home. Some of them shivered against the chill, but all of them waited stoically, certain that their much-prayed-for liberators had at last arrived.

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I knew something was wrong when Kam stood up on the parapet with the radio pressed tightly against his ear, facing back the way we had come in. He held up a hand for silence, then turned toward us again and crouched down, so we could all hear him. "Military vehicles are driving toward the palm grove, and they will find the bus."

"The king's, the pirates', or Ayashi's?" Bert asked him.

"Probably not the royal army—too far south. And not El-Ayashi—it's the wrong side of the mountain. A Panhard, and two trucks with soldiers." Kam turned away again, hearing an update, answering with just a few words, then relaying the news to us. "It's the pirates. They'll find the bus for sure. It's not possible they won't find it." He listened, then made another report. "Soldiers are on foot, approaching the grove in a combat formation. There are

searchlights on the trucks. They will burn the bus."

"What?!" Bert exclaimed, "*Who* will burn the bus?"

"My father said they're going to burn the bus, I can't stop it. Anyway, he's not talking anymore, his radio is turned off."

I wondered if Tours Tazmamart would be legible under the new primer paint after the bus was incinerated along with the grove. Maybe the pirates would be able to suss out who had provided the bus for the failed rescue mission, maybe they wouldn't. Why take chances? Burn the bus. The girls couldn't use it anyway, not with armed men all around.

Everybody had frozen at the terrible news, and Bert broke the spell. "And why have you all stopped? Mental paralysis? Go on, send the next pair down, and don't stop for anything." We were into the thirties by then, with just a few more pairs to go. Bert stepped away from the wall, waving to me and Gino, saying, "Let's take a walk." We followed him across the gun deck into the widening moon shadow beneath the mountain.

Bert said, "All right, so the coach is out of the equation. That means there's no benefit going north, not if soldiers are there. So, what's left?"

Gino looked at him and said, "I don't *know* what's left. What? What?"

"Only one thing: the Storm. You have to take the girls south, down to Port Zerhoun, and capture the Storm."

I said, "I don't think Simon Dansekker will just leave his ship sitting there for us to steal."

"Dansekker?" Bert retorted. "Simon Dansekker is probably in a whorehouse tonight, catching up. So, do you have a better idea than capturing the Storm? No? Gino?" Gino also shook his head. "Then the Storm it is."

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Pat Maguire came jogging across the gun deck and joined us, out of breath, his M-60 slung across his front. “The telephone rang down in the guard room,” he panted. “Ten rings, and I ignored it. But then it rang again, and I came up.”

Bert grimaced. “Damn! That means their counterattack team will be on the way. At least most of the girls are down the wall.”

“How much more time till they’re all down?” Pat asked.

“Ten minutes, no more,” said Bert.

“I think I can buy them fifteen minutes at least.”

“There’s more bad news,” Bert told him. “Soldiers have found the bus, so we can’t get out the way we came in.” He thumbed over his shoulder toward Kam up on the wall. “His father told him. We have to capture the Storm instead, and get out that way.”

“Capture the Storm?” Pat was incredulous.

“Unless you have a better idea, in which case I’m all ears. If the pirates are searching toward the north while the girls are going south around the cape, it can work.”

“It’s only three klicks as the crow flies,” I offered. *And a good bit longer on foot*, I kept to myself.

Gino said, “If the Storm she came here on diesel power, she can go out the same way.”

“Storm has a pair of MTU diesels,” said Bert. “Four thousand horsepower each.”

Gino nodded appreciatively. “MTUs? German MTUs I can operate with my two eyes closed.”

Kam slid off the parapet into the open cannon port, climbed through, and joined us.

Pat shared the bad news from down below with him. “The phone was ringing in the office, so we’re going to have company soon. But I laid some traps with hand grenades we found, and I sabotaged the padlock on the tunnel gate. Both locks took the same key, so I pushed ours halfway in, broke it off, then I pushed it in with the stub. Here, Dan, have a souvenir from your dead man.”

He tossed me the top half of the broken key. I caught it, saying, “Thanks,

mate.” After two weeks with Rainborow’s team I was beginning to use their British jargon. We all were.

Pat continued. “With the lock sabotaged, they’ll need a torch to cut through that gate, and that will take some time to arrange. A torch, or high explosives. But I’ve got five hundred rounds of linked seven-six-two to keep them at their end of the tunnel, and a box of grenades for booby traps on the way out. Plus the Kalashnikovs. Oh, I reckon I can buy fifteen minutes, easy. Maybe twenty. Enough time for everybody to get far away from here, at least.”

“And leave you by yourself?” exclaimed Bert. “What if the pirates get a lucky ricochet and you’re slotted? Or they fire an RPG down the tunnel and blast you even more dim than usual? Then what? They walk right through, that’s what. And did you actually think I’d leave a bog-Irish Paddy from the Provisional IRA to be the last man of Colonel Rainborow’s team out of Fort Zerhoun? A Provo the last man out, on an SAS mission? That will *never* happen! Patrick James Maguire, if you’re for sticking around, then so am I.”

“You’re more than welcome to keep me company, Bert. At least for twenty minutes, and you have the wristwatch, so what do you say we set a few more booby traps before the bastards are ringing the doorbell?”

“Speaking of booby traps, did you know the impact fuses on those Russian grenades can be used for an anti-disturbance trigger? A zero-second delay? That’s what they have on those grenades you’ve been messing with.”

“Zero-second impact fuses you said? How long have *they* been around?”

“Why, almost since the last century.”

“Well, I was done with my active service by then.”

“Your *active service*, you called it?”

“Aye, Bert, we did. And that lovely M-16 you’re carrying was a fairly big part of it.”

“Yes, it is a lovely weapon, true enough.” The sergeant major had a sudden idea. “Well, if it’s going to be noisy down there, I won’t be needing this anymore.” He slid the Glock out of its holster and handed it to me, then unfastened the holster from his belt and gave it to Kam, saying, “Put this on. And I won’t be needing these, either.” He handed the bolt cutters to Gino.

While I was holding the suppressed pistol, I used its light to charge up the glow-paint on my rifle’s front sight, shielding it behind my other hand. The light was much brighter than the little one-battery penlight I’d donated to the first room full of girls and promptly forgotten. The back of my rifle’s

front sight soon glowed bright neon green. Gino stuck his rifle's muzzle over toward me, and I repeated the process on his front sight, and then Bert's. Pat's machine gun lacked the glow-paint: his M-60 would be aimed by its red tracer bullets.

Bert continued his ad hoc briefing. "Kam, you'll be roaming out ahead of the line; just find the best way to the Storm that the girls can follow. The silencer will let you take care of any problem quietly. Do it just like I taught you—and don't hesitate. That's the key, don't hesitate. The girls come first, always. And take the bolt cutters, too; you'll need them for gates and fences." He passed Kam a pistol magazine and said, "This one is half full. The one in the gun is topped off. A cartridge is chambered, of course."

Kam had been in street clothes since changing out of his wetsuit on the beach. He had no M-16 and hence no need for a web belt and its magazine pouches. He pocketed the spare mag, then clipped the custom holster over his leather belt on the left side; when it was in place, I gave him the Glock and he stuck it in. Now he had both Glocks, one with and one without a suppressor. His tan windbreaker concealed the handguns, and the protruding suppressor could have been the bottom of a hammer or another innocuous tool. Once Kam had the two holsters and pistols sorted out, one on each side of his belt, Gino handed him the bolt cutters.

Bert told him, "You're the point man and pathfinder all the way to the Storm. After you will be Hank, and he'll be the front rope man."

"Front rope man?" Kam looked confused.

"You'll take the fifty-meter rope. If I know Victor, when you get down the wall there'll be seventy-two girls between the north and south bastions in pair order. Drag the rope all the way to the far end of them and tie it to Hank. Hank is tied on the front of the rope, and Victor is on the back, if he can manage it. If he can't, then Tala, but this plan only works with somebody strong enough at each end. One girl from each pair on each side, and the rope runs down the middle. All right?"

Bert looked at each of us in turn to make sure we were tracking with his new concept. We were. "Dan looks after rear security. If Victor can handle being tied to the back of the rope, then Tala stays in the middle to help the girls over difficult terrain. Gino stays in the back with Dan, and they both deal with any followers. You just make it to the Storm, and you get out to sea. That's the plan. That's all the plan I've got. Once you're down the wall, the rest will be up to you heroes to figure out."

“But what about you and Pat?” I asked him. “After twenty minutes, how are you getting down?”

“I’ve got the twenty-meter rope from the beach; it’s long enough for us to abseil down. But you’ll need the fifty-meter rope for the girls—the fifty-meter rope is the key to everything. The rope, and Kam finding a way to the Storm. And Dan keeping the bad people far away from the girls. Dan and Gino, both of you.”

Kam said, “I’ve never been so far up this mountain, but I’ve surfed all the way around the cape. I know most of the roads and villages lower on the mountain. If we can get halfway down, we can make it to the port.”

“I know you can, son. We’ll give you a head start, set lots of booby traps coming out, and we’ll catch up to you when we can.” He leveled a steely gaze at me and I returned it. “We’ll buy you plenty of time, Dan—so make the most of it.”

Pat stared at me too. “That’s right, Dan, make the most of it. Get the girls to the Storm, and we’ll buy you all the time you need.”

“Twenty minutes, right?” I asked him.

“And we’ll have some fun in the meantime. I’m going to show Bert a few tricks we used to play with hand grenades.”

“You? Tricks with hand grenades? Not bloody likely. The SAS wrote the book on booby traps before we were born, Mr. Maguire. And you didn’t even know about impact fuses.” The sergeant major shook his head dolefully, then looked at us. “We’ll give you twenty minutes, but after that, it’s up to you.”

I said, “Even you old cripples should be able to walk faster than seventy-two girls holding a rope. But make sure to blink a flashlight coming in. I like Morse alpha—that’s dot-dash. It’s hard to forget. And if you think we can see you, pat the top of your head like this.” I made the gesture with my open hand. “That’ll be our linkup sign, our recognition code. If you forget to signal when you’re coming in, I can’t be held responsible for your safety. If I can see it, I can hit it—but I might not know who I’m hitting.”

Pat said, “A twenty-minute head start, blink Morse alpha, and touch our heads coming in.”

Gino handed him the cigarette pack from below. “I find some fags in the guard post, but I think I stop smoking now.”

“Thanks, mate, I truly appreciate it.” The Irishman smiled warmly at the Italian and pocketed the half-full box.

“Get the girls to the Storm,” said Bert. “And we’ll see you when we see

you.”

I started to put my hand out to shake his, still somewhat in awe of his SAS beret, when some reptile part of my brain took over and my hand floated up toward my brow in a salute. Bert snapped-to and gave me the proper British Army palm-away salute, and then Gino saluted as well, the three of us assuming various interpretations of military attention, facing one another for a few moments in that rigid posture. Former SAS, former Marine, former Alpini. Hell, we were even in uniform, even if it was obsolete British desert camo. Old and worn, like ourselves, from the pre-digital era. Desert Disruptive, that was us. The sergeant major dropped his arm, and then we did too.

Kam, a surfer who had never served a day in any military, just stood back and observed. Pat had begun to snicker during our shared salute, but he stopped himself short. “I wasn’t in that kind of army,” he muttered after our arms came down.

“No, you were not,” Bert agreed.

We each shook hands with the two stay-behinds, mentioned twenty minutes a few more times, and then Bert and Pat turned away, walked the length of the moonlit gun deck and disappeared down the stairs. When they were lost to view, I looked back toward the open cannon port. Jane and Clare were gone, and this time the basket didn’t come back up. Now there was just the carabiner snap link at the end of the rope, stopped at the overhead pulley on the timber beam.

It was time for us to go. Gino hooked in and rappelled down. Kam followed, then it was my turn. I crawled through the port, enjoyed brushing past Tala while making brief but strong eye contact, then I clipped the carabiner into my climbing seat, sitting on the edge with my legs dangling. I turned and bounded down the wall as Hank let the rope glide through his belay brake. When my feet touched the ground I unclipped and watched the carabiner go skittering back up after Hank gave his end a good tug.

Between the bastions, sitting with their backs to the rampart wall, were seventy-two young schoolgirls, Bert’s wee lassies, only now they were barely recognizable as such. Once down the wall, the girls had put on their tawny corduroy jellabas. Some hoods were up, covering their faces, and some were pushed back. With the girls all sitting in a long row with their knees drawn up close, they resembled a line of gunnysacks, about half of them with a small face visible at the top.

Tala bounded down last of all and unclipped the carabiner from her harness.

I said, “Untie the snap link; we need the rope down here.”

She looked at me. “The other two mans are yet on the top. You are very sure we are bringing down the rope?”

“I’m very sure. Bert has a twenty-meter rope they’ll use to rappel down later. They’re staying on top for a while to delay the guards. We need the fifty-meter rope for the girls to hold onto. Kam knows the plan. Kam is our point man, and he’ll be out in front like before.”

Tala nodded, then untied the knot joining the end of our primary rope to the carabiner, and she pulled down on Hank’s side, sending the bare end of the line up through the pulley. In a few seconds the entire rope came tumbling down around us.

Hank and Victor had been on the bottom all along and didn’t know about the bus or the new plan, and I wasn’t sure how much Tala had gleaned, being so busy sending down the girls. Since I didn’t know who knew what, I took it upon myself to promulgate Bert’s new plan to everybody, just as the sergeant major had done up top. He wasn’t here now, so the responsibility fell to me. *Next man up*.

“We’re not going north, back to the bus. Pirate soldiers have found the bus, so we’re going south, to Port Zerhoun. The Storm is there; we’re going to capture it and put to sea. We’ve seen the Storm from up on top, and we know exactly where it is. It’s about three kilometers south from here.”

“What is the Storm?” Tala asked while stepping out of her climbing harness.

“It’s a thirty-six-meter patrol gunboat. It was part of our original plan, but it missed its radio reports for the last few days. We don’t know what happened to it, but now it’s in Port Zerhoun, and we’re going to capture it and escape on it.”

While she listened, Tala exchanged her climbing harness for her black tunic, which had been folded in her daypack. The rest of us unclipped and stowed away our climbing seat loops in case they were needed later.

Victor asked, “Why didn’t Pat and Bert come down?”

“The phone was ringing in the guard office. I’m guessing that the pirate captains have heard about the bus, so they’ll be sending soldiers through the tunnel to check what’s happening on the west rampart. Especially after that telephone call wasn’t picked up. Bert and Pat will stay behind and delay them

while we're heading for the Storm. They'll give us a twenty-minute head start, and they'll set booby traps as they leave. That's why they didn't come down with us."

"Okay, so what's the new plan?" asked Hank. "How do we get to the Storm?"

"Kam will lead us there. The girls will hold onto the rope. The rope will run down the middle between each pair. It'll be tied to you in front and Victor in the back. Kam won't be on the line; he'll be out in front finding the best path, using the bolt cutters and the quiet pistol to solve any problems. Tala will help the girls over the difficult places. Gino and I will watch our back trail. If Kam needs our help, we'll come up front. That's the plan."

Hank didn't appear shocked at the revelations. This time he didn't hesitate or complain, just took the end of the rope and tied it to the back of his web belt. "We already heard about the bus; the last girls down told us. So now we're heading south instead of north. Why the hell not? Me, I like the idea of driving out of here on a boat. Seems fair to me. Nothing I'd like better."

The big Cajun had taken it a lot easier than I'd expected him to. I wasn't nearly as optimistic. If the bus ride north had been a dicey proposition, capturing the Storm in Port Zerhoun seemed a thousand times more difficult, bordering on impossible. But at least Bert had given us the invaluable gift of a plausible snap plan that allowed us to instantly reorient our mental direction and prepare to move away from the fortress without losing time to confusion and despair. And Bert had given us the buddy pair system, and the entire rope line concept. Now these seventy-two young souls all with their backs literally to the wall were depending on us, only us and nobody else, to get them the rest of the way out of captivity and back home to their families.

"Tala, you'll be halfway along the rope, or anyplace else you're needed. You'll be in the middle, so you can see Hank and Victor at both ends, in case they can't see each other. Over a hill, or around a corner, you can see everything, okay? You will be the messenger in the middle. You can tell Hank to stop if Victor says to stop. The girls will hold onto the rope all the time. They must never let go, they must stay in their pairs, nobody gets lost, nobody gets left behind. *Nobody*. All right? Does everybody understand the new plan?"

They all nodded their assent, so I continued. Most of the seventy-two faces along the wall were also turned our way, listening as intently as they

could. The new plan would soon be repeated down the line. “Kam and Hank, when you’re ready, move out trailing the rope. Hank, when Victor is ready and the girls are all holding onto the line, Victor and Tala will wave to you, and you wave back, and then off we go. That’s how we’ll do it: slow and steady wins the race. Kam, you just have to find a path that the girls can navigate. Just keep in sight of Hank so he can follow you. All right?”

“All right. A path the girls can navigate. And I’ll find a stone that I can use for chalk, so I can mark an arrow to show the way to go. In case you can’t see me at a divide, just look for the arrow.”

“Okay,” said Hank. “I’ll follow you when I can see you, and I’ll look for the arrow when I can’t. Slow and steady. I’m ready when you are.”

Kam looked at each of us. “Okay, then we’re all ready?”

I gave him a thumbs-up, and so did the others.

He set out walking in front of the sitting girls. The big Cajun followed, trailing the rope behind. Then Tala positioned herself in the middle of the girls, on the downslope side between the bastions. By then, Victor had taken the other end of the rope and tied it to the front of his web belt. Because his rifle would only get in the way if it was in front, and because he would not be the first to open fire in any case, he swung his M-16 onto his back so that both of his hands were free.

After Kam and Hank reached pair number one, Portia and Grace, we watched as the line of gunnysacks rose in a wave and formed itself into a double file. Almost all the girls had their monkish hoods at least partway up, so their heads were invisible from behind.

“Jane and Clare,” I said to the last girls in line, “I would like you to meet my friend Victor. Victor, meet Jane and Clare and the rest of the thirties. Listen up, ladies: Victor has the back of the rope tied to him, so don’t go too fast; he’s not a young man.”

Jane and Clare both turned around and said “We won’t” at the same time. Victor shot me a glare, and I winked back at him. The line of girls began to edge forward, Hank the shepherd leading the flock, Kam the sheepdog roaming ahead and sniffing out the way. The double line picked up speed from a crawl to a slow walk, and Victor was nearly pulled off his feet as the rope surged forward under the combined pull of many small hands. At the corner of the south bastion the line turned ninety degrees to the right and flowed along the base, and then around the outside corner to the left, disappearing toward the south like a beige caterpillar with 148 feet, counting

Victor and Hank. A quick calculation told me there was about one and third meters between each pair of girls, just enough space for them to not tread on one another.

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Gino started to move out from our corner when Victor was just a short distance down the long wall between the bastions. I clicked my tongue loudly two times to get his attention, and when he turned around I waved him back. At almost any volume this palate-clicking could be mistaken for a natural wildlife sound, so it was commonly used between soldiers as an audible close-range attention-getting signal. I needed to have a more specialized conference with the Italian. The girls would not get very far away at their speed.

"*What*?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"We can't help the girls if we're too close to them. If we follow them too closely, anybody that's close enough to shoot us is close enough to shoot the girls. In a place like this, with a lot of corners, you just have to keep in sight of the girls, keep them in your vision, and I'll keep in sight of you. When you can see the girls from a long distance away, from maybe one hundred meters, keep that distance. One hundred meters. And I'll stay one hundred meters back from you. But sometimes closer, and sometimes farther."

"Okay, boss. *Cento metri per me, e cento metri per te*. But depends on *il terreno*, on how far I can see the girls and how far you can see me."

"Exactly, depending on the terrain. But where the country is open, we want to stay far back from the girls. We should only be close enough so we don't lose them. If there's going to be shooting, I don't want it to happen close to the girls."

"Okay. So we go now? *Andiamo*?"

"Not yet. I have more to tell you."

"What? Okay, so tell me."

"If I'm shooting at somebody and you want to help, that's great, but don't shoot me by accident when I'm in the middle."

"Okay, I don't shoot you."

"I'm really glad to hear that. But just because you can see some *idiota* with a gun doesn't mean you have to shoot him. But if you have to, let them come into easy range when you're hiding behind good cover. And don't just shoot if I shoot—that might give away the direction of the girls." If we initiated a firefight, the girls might get mowed down by a single burst of automatic gunfire tearing through their line. We had to be surgical in the

application of our rifle fire and keep it as far away from the girls as possible.

"You think we gonna shoot tonight?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Me too, I think so too."

"Let me see your front sight." I grabbed his barrel. "Okay, it's not bright like before, but you can still see it. Remember, the glowing paint doesn't go to the top; the top is still black for daytime. This means you should aim a little low if you're using the top of the paint for your aiming point. But if you have a bright background, use the top like it's daytime. What I'm saying is, use your front sight. Don't waste ammunition just making noise. You understand? *Capisci*?"

"Yeah, *capisco molto bene*. Don't be only making noise, only be shooting people."

"That's right, but only if you have to."

He had his own question for me. "What's the hand sign saying I want you coming here now?"

I made a gesture like waving my hand back toward my shoulder. "But up in the air like this, if we're far apart. Okay? And this means 'this is me.'" I patted the top of my head the way I'd shown Bert and Pat. We went over other hand and arm signals for get down, freeze, catch up, danger, listen, I see an enemy, and a few more. Silent hand signals would work over a good distance in the full moonlight.

Then we both heard gunfire from up the wall that sounded like a city jackhammer, but faster. I pictured Pat holding his trigger back for a long and discouraging initial burst down the tunnel—probably with a lit cigarette in his mouth.

Gino stared up the wall. "And now are coming *il pirati*?"

"That's right, now are coming *il pirati*—but Pat and Bert will keep them busy for a while. I'm more worried about the ones that found the bus, if they're coming this way."

"When did beginning the *venti minuti*?"

"I don't know, I don't have a watch."

"Okay, now we *andiamo*?"

I nodded, and he scurried off in a crouch along the base of the rampart wall.

Even though the girls were out of our sight, I wasn't concerned about losing them. Hanging onto the rope, they would be lucky to make a few

klicks an hour across easy ground, and I didn't see much of that around. But route selection wasn't my job. I just had to keep Gino in occasional sight to know where the herd was going.

While I was easing along the outside of the south bastion, heading south, I stopped for a look back toward the north. A few ridges behind, I could see the orange glow of fire lighting the sky. Assuming that it was the mercenaries from the pirate cartel that had found the bus, they would probably continue straight toward the western rampart of Fort Zerhoun.

Near the corner of the bastion a gnarled tree grew against the wall. I grabbed onto it to swing myself around, the cliff being very close there. If it was a little tricky for me, it must have been even harder for the double-file of girls, but I could see where many feet had trampled the underbrush on the narrow ledge while moving past the tree. I could only guess that the rope itself acted as a kind of movable railing, with the girls who had better and worse footing distributing the danger along its fifty-meter length.

Another burst of machine-gun fire from inside the fort reminded me to hurry. Then I heard a few three-round bursts from Bert's M-16. Both of their guns would keep the enemy at the far end of the tunnel, but soon enough they would advance behind improvised ballistic shields after firing a few RPGs. Rocket-propelled grenades could blow apart the locked gate, stun Bert and Pat senseless with their concussion, and even kill them outright with stone and steel fragments. The pirates might also launch smoke or tear gas grenades down the tunnel to force them out of the passageway and up to the gun deck. But how long would it take the pirates to figure all that out and then to accomplish it? Longer than twenty minutes, enough time for Bert and Pat to rappel down the wall and get clear. Especially if they were clever with their booby traps—and those two were nothing if not clever.

I left the bastion and headed downhill toward the south. The terrain was so steep that I had to slide a bit, stopping myself against protruding boulders to make rearward security sweeps. Seeing no threat from behind, I would make another semi-planned skidding dash to the next boulder down and across the slope while avoiding bayonet-spiked desert plants and many types of cactus. I wondered how the girls on the rope line had navigated this terrain without tumbling pell-mell in an avalanche. I hadn't seen any sign of an avalanche, or even of their tracks, so Kam must have found an easier path than the route I'd taken. Then I saw Gino waiting farther down across the slope and I hand-signaled to him. He signaled back, then slid over a ledge

and disappeared.

When I rolled over the berm where I'd last seen him, I landed on a relatively flat strip of ground. At some time in the past a bulldozer had cut into the slope, creating a jeep trail that had been abandoned to disrepair. I next spotted Gino at least two hundred meters farther down along this path. His Italian penchant for hand and arm communication was dialed up to full power. The girls were even farther ahead and hidden in some fold in the land and therefore invisible to me, but I knew from his frantic miming just before he disappeared that I should take immediate cover. A few seconds later I saw movement down the jeep trail past Gino, so I dived off to the low side, rolled a few times, and slid to a stop half a meter from a cactus thicket big enough to conceal me.

After crawling around a bit and finding better cover in a small erosion gully, I heard and then saw a Panhard grinding uphill on four big tires. It wasn't huge, it was just an armored car, but on top was a turret like a tank's, with a long barrel sticking straight out front. A 90mm tank gun, if Bert was correct. The machine's paint was about the same tone as the earth and rocks around it, so I guessed it would appear some shade of tan in daylight. The vehicle was skylined to me, so I could see the heads and torsos of two crewmen sticking out of the turret.

Each man had a hatch hinged back behind him at an angle. They were leaning well out of the turret to both sides to obtain a good view of the narrow trail. The man on my side was behind a pintle-mounted machine gun with a box of ammo at its side. He wore a helmet that probably included a radio headset. I was close enough to see a pair of whip antennas on the back of the turret.

As the vehicle passed my position, I saw the driver's helmeted head just above the front wheels. The front of the turret was only inches behind his helmet, and the cannon barrel was right above it. I remembered how the armor guys hated looking through prism slits when there was a risk of rollover on difficult terrain, and they normally would not button up and fight from inside unless they were taking fire. Once they dropped their steel hatches they would lose much of their vision and situational awareness, not to mention be unable to see the terrain immediately around their wheels. Like almost everything in warfare, there were always tradeoffs.

The Panhard drove past me and continued uphill, heading toward the cliffs below the western rampart. Maybe there was a switchback farther up

the trail that would get them closer to the base of the walls; if not, they would wind up a good fifty meters below them, because that's how far I'd already skidded and slid down the mountain.



The Panhard was not alone. Fifty meters behind it followed a military truck like the Unimogs that had gone down with the Atlas, but without the canvas over the back. It was loaded with troops, and due to the jolting ride across tilted terrain, the men were all standing and holding on to the front and sides of the cargo area to keep their balance. When the truck passed my hiding place, they were so close that I could see their bearded faces in the moonlight. They were carrying AK-47s or similar weapons. Some appeared to be wearing parts of military uniforms. A few had on combat vests, most did not. I couldn't tell if the vests included body armor, or if they were just a handy place to hang their spare Kalashnikov magazines.

Five minutes earlier and the Panhard crew would have met the girls face-to-face. But from their vehicles, navigating uphill on a slant, they had evidently not detected any sign of the girls' passing. I supposed that so many feet didn't leave distinct footprints; maybe they just made what looked like a well-worn natural path of indeterminate origin or age. At least on that jeep trail, in that light, when seen from their angle.

Both vehicles continued to lumber uphill and away, the truck whining in low gear while tilting seaward, the Panhard just loafing along so as not to outdistance its companion. I hoped they would drive far past me and keep going to a location beneath the western fortress walls. Perhaps these pirate

mercenaries would link up with the platoon that had found our bus, give up the chase, and call it a night. Maybe break out a bottle of bootleg Berber hooch, if such a thing existed, pass around the hash pipe, lie back, and stare at the moon.

Not bloody likely, as the Brits liked to say.

That hope was dashed when the truck rolled to a stop about 150 meters past me. The Panhard also stopped farther ahead when the truck did. The back of the truck was toward me. I laid my rifle across a little berm at the edge the erosion gully that hid me and worked myself into a good shooting position, squirming into the ground, finding support for my elbows, knees, and feet. Just like the old days, but without an optical scope: rifle butt pulled into shoulder, left hand gripping forend, cheekbone to stock, right eye to peep sight, right hand tight on the pistol grip, right index finger caressing the trigger.

My glowing front sight split the tailgate, and I watched it flop over and down. Standing in the cargo bed were a dozen or fifteen pirate troops, all gathered in one place at one time, who were about to scatter, maybe to search farther away up toward the western rampart walls, or maybe to begin tracking downhill in my direction. In either case, the old Marine sniper in me just couldn't resist that bunched-up target. The girls on the rope line could not hope to outrun these soldiers in a downhill footrace, and if the girls were forced to scatter, they would be recaptured one at a time. Even if these soldiers marched all the way to the rampart walls before turning around, they would still find our spoor trail and catch us before we could reach the Storm.

All of these mental calculations took place while the tailgate was being lowered, before the first soldiers jumped to the ground. It was that old familiar speeded-up time, when the film slows way, way down and you can see everything in the finest granular detail—and sometimes hear nothing but the rushing of your own blood.

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I flipped my safety back to three-round burst, and I fired into their mass while they were still packed together like fish in a barrel. With each burst I deflected the front sight a hair, but I got back on target for each new trigger pull, aiming into the thickest bunch of them. I burned through the mag firing ten bursts into the truck bed and at a few runners as they jumped down, until

they disappeared from my line of sight and I had no more targets. Then I reloaded and fired another magazine into the back of the truck, low, just for good measure.

When my second mag went dry I dropped it and shoved in a fresh one. I left the two empties where they fell. With so much 5.56mm brass glittering in the moonlight, they'd know what kind of rifle had done the damage whether they found the magazines or not, and I had no chance of ever reloading them.

I rolled away and trotted in a crouch to a better position a little farther down. The terrain was cut with ravines except for the bulldozed jeep trail, so it was easy to stay hidden in the folds and out of sight from their direction. This time I chose a firing position that was even better than my last, and from there I saw the Panhard making a multi-point turn up the trail.

After finally getting itself turned around, the armored vehicle was now trying to squeeze past the stopped truck, tilting sideways with its right wheels off the trail on the downslope. One of the crew was still foolishly visible half out of the turret, swinging his pintle-mounted turret gun back down the trail, looking for whoever had just ambushed the truck. Directly below the cannon I could see the driver's dark helmet above the sloped front of the armored car; he would be straining to observe the terrain immediately to his front and right.

The Panhard was coming straight toward me, driving slowly and carefully because it was canted sharply sideways on the sloping trail. Once it was past the truck and safely had all four wheels on the jeep trail again, it would become a dangerous hunter, but for the moment its crew was preoccupied with their precarious position.

I had to decide who to target first, the machine gunner or the driver, and I chose the driver. I took careful aim and fired two bursts centerline and low on the front slope of the Panhard. When the driver's head disappeared, I aimed at the gunner on top and began to fire at him just as he cut loose with a sweeping burst that tore up the dirt on both sides just in front of me and continued far up the hillside, letting me know that he really hadn't seen my muzzle flash—or perhaps I'd even gotten lucky and winged him.

Maybe I'd hit the driver dead in his face, or maybe I'd dinged him with a ricochet. Maybe he'd just ducked inside when he knew he was under fire and fell against his steering wheel in an unlucky way. But no matter what had happened to the driver, the Panhard turned downslope, picked up speed, caromed over a boulder, bounced, tripped sideways on its right tires, and

rolled over and disappeared below my line of sight no more than eighty meters from my position, one man still on top hanging out of the turret.

Well, I won't be seeing *that* Panhard again, I thought, as the echoes of steel crashing against stone reverberated.

Taking out the armored vehicle had been a matter of finding myself in the right shooting position while the driver's head was exposed. If not for the narrow, sloping jeep trail, he would have had his hatch closed and my bullets would have been as harmless to him as spitballs. The open-hatch bow shot on the Panhard had been pure luck, like getting the stern view of the troop truck while its tailgate was going down. Luck, or karma—or something else entirely. Something beyond easy explanation. Again.

But after a moment of exhilaration came the letdown: my shots hadn't really changed all that much about our situation, except maybe to buy a little more time out of captivity for the girls. I swapped the half-empty mag for a full one from my web belt. The Panhard was just a scout vehicle, and I had no doubt they had sent a radio report about the truck being ambushed before they'd rolled off the cliff. After all, what good was their 90mm cannon or their machine guns against schoolgirls? The girls would have no value if they were dead or maimed. The cartel wanted to recapture the girls, not annihilate them, so from our perspective their radio was by far their most dangerous weapon.

And as far as the troop truck, being realistic, maybe I'd shot half of them with those twenty three-round bursts. This meant there could still be a half-dozen enemy soldiers back there completely untouched. But they would be busy dealing with their wounded and looking after their own self-defense for a while, especially without the Panhard to protect them. Even so, this recon element had done its job and made first contact. Now the main enemy force would be coming, and they would be much warier, knowing that their comrades had just taken serious casualties.

I heard the faint rattle of a machine gun far up the mountain; the fast cyclic rate made me guess it was Pat still on his M-60 down in the passageway. When had their twenty-minute stay-behind mission begun? Of course, without a watch, time had become impossible to estimate, especially considering the constant excitement and repeated adrenaline dumps.

Any squad taking the casualties I'd just inflicted upon them would be holed up and licking its wounds, evaluating the situation from within a defensive perimeter. They would not be aggressively attacking down the

slope. So I took the opportunity to skedaddle, following the low folds in the terrain between boulders and briars and cactus until I saw Gino on the other side of a downhill grassy field, waving me on. I half ran and half slid toward him, getting as much distance as I could from the jeep trail. I spent a good part of the time sliding on my ass, and I wondered how the girls had gotten over the same terrain, even if not down this exact route. But obviously they had, because Gino was down ahead, waving me on.

In a little while, after catching up to within fifty meters of Gino, I stopped where I could observe another section of the jeep trail. A minute after finding a new rifle position behind cover, I was treated to the sight of another Panhard rolling uphill, but very slowly. The commander's turret hatch was down and shut, the driver's lower hatch indiscernible from my position; it might have been open or closed; I just couldn't see it or the driver's head this time.

The Panhard moved out of my line of sight behind a rise, but following it were dismounted troops in a loose double file. Due to the narrowness of my field of view in that direction, only a half dozen of them were visible to me at a time, but as I watched, a platoon of about thirty passed by, trudging uphill, their guns sweeping out to both sides. They were not all carrying AKs; I saw a couple of RPGs and RPK light machine guns as well. They must have heard reports from the first recon patrol and had decided to forego their trucks for their boots in order to stay closer to the protection of ground cover. At their cautious pace they would reach the scene of the truck ambush in about ten minutes. Of course I let them pass without harm. Shooting at the few men who were visible up my firing lane at any given time would only reveal my position.

After they had all passed out of my line of sight, it was time for me to leave again. I turned back downhill, moving as stealthily as I could in case the enemy platoon had put out flankers on parallel tracks despite the steep and broken terrain. But I saw no sign of anyone else as I moved down the ravine, which narrowed to a pinch point, then widened out again. Here, the path the girls had taken down the middle was obvious. Many small stones had been dislodged, and their darker bottom sides glistened in the moonlight. Subtle details become obvious once you know what to look for.

Then a little below and on both sides I noticed the tops of dwellings, flat and square in the moonlight, one-story structures on both sides of our ravine path. An ambush alley if I'd ever seen one. It was the kind of place that had

been a death trap for allied infantry on patrol in Afghanistan, but Kam had chosen this route, and it was my job to follow. I couldn't steer from behind. Then it became evident that the dwellings had been abandoned decades ago. There were no intact doors or windows; they were just mud-brick buildings in various states of decay, with many collapsed walls and roofs. But just because nobody lived there didn't mean that nobody was hiding back in all those dark shadows aiming an RPG at us.

At the bottom of the abandoned village, Gino popped out from behind a mud-brick wall and waved me forward, then disappeared again. The land fell away steeply beyond my most recent line of sight, but instead of a bare cliff I found myself at the top of ancient stairs hewn from the natural stone and without any handrail. In some places, the uneven steps were not even a meter wide. It was a wonder that thirty-six pairs of girls could have negotiated it side-by-side, but they must have, because Gino had signaled me to this place, and I knew that he could see the rope line most of the time.

After the steps, the trail led across the side of another slope, then into a square cement culvert about two meters by two meters, the mouth of a channel for handling storm runoff. This was the first place I saw Kam's arrow chalked on the wall, directing us to follow the open culvert downhill. Gino waited at each major turn to wave me on as more culverts and storm channels merged and widened. A few more turns directed by Gino, then a chalk arrow pointed me back up a tributary culvert narrow enough to touch both sides. After a good fifty uphill meters, this narrow channel ended at an iron gate that had been opened and swung to the side. A cut padlock lay on the ground. After I closed and latched the gate behind me, I picked up the lock and tossed it into some weeds. A shut but unlocked gate is not nearly as suspicious as one with a cut padlock lying below it.

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A few steps beyond the gate I saw another arrow chalked on the ground, directing me to the right. The arrow had been trodden over by many feet, but it was still legible. This chalk arrow system had not been my idea, nor Bert's. It was entirely Kam's contribution, and it was brilliantly practical, using readily available natural materials. Bert and Pat didn't know about Kam's arrows, but they would figure them out soon enough while following our trail. But how would they make it through all the enemy troops probably swarming around the base of the western rampart by now? They would just have to, that was all. And wasn't the SAS particularly noted for operating behind enemy lines? If anybody could wheedle their way through that mess, it was Bert and Pat. And if they couldn't follow us south to the port, they still might head north, toward the king's territory.

On the other side of the gate I found myself in an urban alleyway about two meters wide, with high whitewashed walls on both sides. Every ten or so meters was a stout, medieval-looking door inset into the stone and cement. Just like the doors back inside the fortress, thick timber was reinforced with iron rivets and bars. There were no windows on the street level, only some small square openings closed with shutters for the night. The walkway in between was also cement, sloping downward, with steps every few meters to accommodate the downhill terrain. In some places there were a half-dozen steps, in some places only two or three, and the doors tended to be located in the almost level sections between the steps.

On the far side of the high walls I imagined courtyards and upscale homes butting shoulder to shoulder in descending order, like San Francisco townhouses. As with the riad back in the compound, I could only imagine their interior courtyards, gardens, fountains, and balconies. There were no streetlights or lamps in the alley, but plenty of moonlight was reflected off the whitewashed walls. After many steps and almost as many turns, the narrow passage opened into a wider alleyway, maybe three meters across from wall to wall, but also with steps to match the slope. Side alleys fed into the main route through the hillside neighborhood like capillaries, and at these junctions I would usually spot an arrow on the ground or on a wall.

When this main alley descended in a straight line for almost a hundred meters, I was able to see the tan caterpillar flowing downhill and then

disappearing around another turn. In the last half kilometer the girls had passed between dozens of doors, all locked for the night. Evidently no drunks, lovers, or night-shift gendarmes had crossed Kam's path and decided to interfere, because Gino kept waving me down and ahead. And the muffled but unmistakable sound of machine-gun fire coming from the direction of Fort Zerhoun certainly would not tempt anyone outside their walls for a late-night stroll. Gun fire still going on long after twenty minutes had passed.

The main route, now the width of a small road, widened as more side alleys joined it. Some of these alleys were just long sets of steps ascending their own narrow passageways. Finally, at the bottom of the whitewashed neighborhood was a nearly level plaza about twenty meters across, with a blue-tiled fountain in the middle. Along with doors like the ones we'd been passing, in the walls around the plaza were also metal roll-down shutters and iron bars protecting the storefront windows of small shops and walk-up kiosks.

On the lower side of the plaza was a tarmac road and another steep drop beyond it, and beyond the drop the moonlit ocean was visible far below. The plaza was where commercial vehicles could unload supplies for the affluent neighborhood above. This was where cargo would be transferred from trucks to muscle power, either human or donkey, and it was where buses and cars would drop off or pick up passengers.

Gino waited by an outside corner of walls at the bottom of the plaza and waved me forward, pointing downhill to his left, then he scooted away. Soon I was where he had been, and I took a quick peek around the last building before crossing the road. This time, Gino was less than fifty meters away on the cliff side, and he windmilled his arm furiously, urging me to run. There was no cover available, just a two-story wall with more closed doors and storefronts on the uphill side, and a low guardrail and cliff on the downhill. So I ran toward him, and when I was halfway there he disappeared again.

He'd been waiting for me at an opening for pedestrians through the guardrail, and below that was a set of steps that descended at least ten meters. The steps seemed almost as steep as a ladder, with one side built against a concrete embankment, and an iron railing on the open side. By the time I got there, Gino was already out of sight, but I wasn't worried about losing him. I wanted to do some back-trail surveillance of the uphill neighborhood, and this was an ideal spot. I went down the steps until only my head was at the road level and I could peer out from below the guardrail and observe the

plaza to see if anyone was following us.

When I was ready to leave and find Gino again, I heard a vehicle, and a Humvee came rolling around a curve and up the street into view. I lowered my head to eye level with the road. So even the Moroccan pirates had Humvees, and why not? We'd probably given them away for promises of friendship between our two nations, neither of which now existed in unified forms. But the pirate mercenaries in Port Zerhoun had somehow kept at least one of them running, so good for them.

The Humvee had a Browning fifty-caliber machine gun in a mount on the roof. The exposed gunner was wearing neither helmet nor goggles, just a black shirt, not even body armor or a microphone headset that I could see. Close behind the Humvee came a pair of uncovered Unimog trucks loaded with troops standing in the back, altogether about a full platoon.

Of course I wasn't the least bit tempted to fire on them. They rolled past the plaza without slowing, so I knew they had not picked up our trail. I stayed frozen as they passed and continued around the bend uphill and out of my sight, trailing diesel exhaust. They were heading farther north and back around the mountain toward the western rampart, but on a lower level than where I'd encountered the Panhard and the troop truck that I'd shot up. This new platoon would probably drive as far as they could and then dismount, spreading out and combing through the badlands for any sign of the girls.

After all the vehicles and pirate troops I'd seen, I assumed that other trucks were dropping off more squads in a planned and coordinated fashion throughout the entire Cape Zerhoun region. The European schoolgirls were worth a fortune, but capturing them unharmed would require an efficient cordon-and-search operation under central radio control, not trigger-happy morons beating the brush and doing recon-by-fire.

It was pure happenstance that my inflicting heavy casualties upon them back closer to the rampart walls might have served to misdirect them temporarily. But by now somebody with good maps would be methodically directing the troop placement. And while they couldn't afford to use sheer firepower out of fear of destroying what they coveted, neither could seventy-two girls simply pass like water through the many geographical chokepoints that I assumed were being occupied by other squads of soldiers. Unless they didn't know about the missing girls at all, and were only responding to the discovery of the bus and my subsequent one-man ambush.

I waited another minute to be sure that no more vehicles were following

the convoy, listening as carefully as I could, and so I clearly heard a muffled boom from back toward the fortress. It had been much longer than twenty minutes since we'd left the bottom of the fort, and even longer since we'd rappelled down the wall. I wondered if Bert and Pat had already been forced to use their hand grenades up on the gun deck.

But ten or fifteen seconds after the report, I heard another deeper and more powerful *ker-umph*, coming from the south. The seaward end of Cape Zerhoun still blocked my view of the port, but I could tell that the second explosion had occurred in that direction. The two dissimilar and geographically distant detonations made me wonder if somebody had dropped a round down that big 120mm mortar tube back on the south bastion. Then I heard the boom again, and I waited, and when I heard the *ker-umph* following it, I knew: either Bert or Pat was firing that mortar, creating a diversion for us. There was simply no reason, out of the blue, for the pirates to be firing a mortar in the middle of the night. It had to be Bert and Pat.

I skipped down the steps using the handrail and found myself at the top of another pedestrian alleyway. The stairs I'd just come down were the access for downhill residents to the mini-shopping plaza and local transportation hub above. Only physically fit locals with a sense of balance could use the steep steps, but at least they were an option. The local kids probably earned tips running errands for the less mobile.

In contrast to the presumably upscale area I'd just come through, this lower-level neighborhood was a warren of rough, unpainted, one-story cinderblock dwellings. The slope of the terrain allowed me to see the corrugated roofs of the dwellings farther down. As in the neighborhood above the road, steps supplemented the sloping path to accommodate the persistent elevation drop.

And as in the nicer neighborhood above, in the cinderblock slum every door was locked tight. At times I lost sight of Gino for several twists and turns, and once I guessed wrong where the alley divided. When the alley twisted the wrong way and went uphill again, I backtracked and finally spotted the nearly trodden-out arrow I'd missed, and so I found Gino again after a few minutes of worrying that I was lost in a labyrinth.

Where this lower barrio ended there was another, humbler market plaza fronting onto another road that was hardly more than one lane wide. Gino waved me across, and I followed him to stairs that led down into a graveyard. There were no crosses or statues of saints, of course, just row after row of

tightly packed headstones, many with ornately patterned tile work gleaming in the moonlight.

The graveyard dropped in terraced steps, level ground being in short supply around here. Gravediggers, funeral attendees, and visitors would have to be agile to make it down to the lower levels, and the wheelchair bound would have to wait on the narrow road above or stay home.

But at least the headstones had a sweeping view of the Atlantic, and a sea breeze was blowing through. I could think of many worse places to be planted for eternity. That thought brought another: Was it really only three days and nights since the Atlas had gone down somewhere out there?

While descending from the fort, we'd also been traveling counter-clockwise around the tip of Cape Zerhoun. From the graveyard I could see the port for the first time since Bert had pointed out the Storm from the south bastion. When I heard the sound of a mortar being fired, I stopped and watched toward Sidi Zerhoun, the sprawling slums south of the port, and saw a flash of light beyond the harbor. I counted between the flash and the *ker-umph*: ten seconds, so the impact area was about three klicks away, the speed of sound being about three hundred meters a second.

The distant explosions were coming about a minute apart now, so Bert was taking it easy, not trying to set any records with his fifty or so shells. I wondered if Pat was helping Bert with the mortar or if the Irishman was still down in the passageway holding off the pirate QRF. I couldn't hear his M-60 anymore, but I supposed I was just too far down and around the mountain by then. There was no question, though, that somebody was dropping mortar shells down the tube at a steady rate and raining hell on something the Ayashi faction cared about. (Unless the pirate cartel had randomly pointed the tube at Sidi Zerhoun, which could not entirely be ruled out.)

But after hearing Tala's story about her public street whipping at the hands of El-Ayashi's Sharia-law vigilantes (insanely called the virtue police), I didn't really give much of a damn where in Ayashi-land the big mortar rounds were coming down. And neither did I think that such one-sided punishment could go unanswered for long. As if in response to this hunch, while I was climbing down overgrown and crumbling steps to a weed-choked lower cemetery level, I heard the first shells exploding up the mountain behind me. Some of them made that creepy whistling sound just before impact. These were a lot closer than the 120mm mortar's distant *ker-umph*; these made a cracking boom that said the impacts were maybe only a klick

away.

Ayashi's artillerymen would be hoping for that lucky hole-in-one shot at the unseen mortar firing at them from the western rampart's south bastion, but in the meantime they were dropping high-explosive shells all over Fort Zerhoun. Ayashi's go-to howitzers were probably pre-registered on the main front gates of the fort, or someplace else expected to cause maximum confusion and strife among the pirate cartel. That's what trained artillerymen did when they were in range of their enemy—but I had no idea if Mahmoud El-Ayashi's cannon-cockers were trained or not.

From the graveyard, the ocean was visible all the way south to the kilometer-long ocean seawall jetty and the port in a continuous sweep. Much closer at hand, for a minute I could see the end of the fifty-meter-long caterpillar flowing down from the bottom corner of the lowest terrace of the cemetery and out of view. But most of the time, my attention was focused back the way we had just come, because my job was rear security.

The closely spaced headstones looked bulletproof, most appearing to be made of cement almost a foot or thirty centimeters thick and a meter wide and high. The dead must have been buried in layers, or very close together; otherwise, there were just too many headstones for the given amount of land available. (Of course, dispensing with coffins and caskets, in the Muslim fashion, meant the deceased could be packed in very tightly.)

Looking around, I thought that it would be a truly rotten assignment to pursue a former Marine sniper into such a warren of interconnected firing positions. The moonlit scene made me remember the Battle of Najaf, when United States Marines had fought the Shia militia in Sadr City, named for the warlord who commanded local allegiance at the time. Marines and some Army units had fought there during the early chapters of the so-called Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Much of the battle had taken place in the vast Shia cemetery south of Baghdad, said to be one of the biggest and oldest boneyards on the planet. Most people probably don't remember what they were doing in August of 2004, but I sure did. And now I was in another Muslim boneyard, this time on the western edge of the Islamic world, and this time I had an iron-sighted M-16 instead of a scoped bolt-action M-40 sniper rifle.

The cemetery was a natural shooting gallery, but I could detect nobody stalking us from behind, so after a few minutes of South Baghdad Class of 2004 nostalgia I slid out of the bottom corner of the graveyard, and for a few

hundred meters the path took me scrambling and sideslipping across a rocky hillside in full moonlight. This time it was possible to see the path made by all those feet. I was about seventy meters above the ocean, and I could both hear and see the surf pounding below.

The path led into a washout ravine and then steeply uphill for a while, then I was scrambling and slipping up the other side of the ravine toward a modern poured-concrete wall, an arrow chalked on it pointing uphill. After a short distance the path led into a round storm drain with an arrow marked on either side of the mouth pointing inward, making my route inescapably clear. I had to lean far over to get through, since the tunnel was only about a meter and a half in diameter, but it wasn't very long, maybe a dozen meters, before moonlight was visible ahead. The girls had to have adjusted themselves from two abreast to a staggered single file to make it through.

When I came out of the tunnel, I was standing on the side of a vast triple slab of cement that ran downhill. An arrow was chalked on the ground: go down to the right. The sides of the channel were angled up and out, and the flat bottom was at least ten meters wide. It was a major storm runoff canal, by far the biggest I'd seen yet, almost like a dam's spillway. This storm channel made a few bends while dropping at an overall thirty-degree angle. It was steep but readily walkable, with good traction on the dry concrete.

Just like arid Southern California, Cape Zerhoun was in dry and mountainous country, but when it rained hard in the coastal foothills all of that sudden water had to be directed safely to the ocean, lest it back up and cause mayhem and destruction to the local area. Probably by sending waterfalls cascading right down those hillside alleyways above, while also cutting washout ravines through the roads.

It gave me the creeps to walk in the middle of that spillway with no cover whatsoever, right out in the moonlight for all the world to see. And Gino was equally exposed a little farther down. At the bottom, where the concrete channel ended almost at the sea, thousands of quarried stone blocks had been piled up to attenuate the final force of the storm waters, as well as to protect the concrete lip from the unrelenting battering of ocean waves.

This was the first time I was in a position to observe the entire fifty-meter caterpillar in detail, and also to see the taller Hank and Victor tied at each end of the line, Tala just off to the side, and Kam out in front. I saw the beige line flow into a gap between the end of the concrete and the boulders, then up onto the stone blocks themselves. At times the line paused for a

minute before beginning to flow forward again. I put that down to Hank waiting while Kam scouted ahead, or to Hank having a difficult time climbing up or down an obstacle. But anywhere Hank could eventually climb, so could the girls.

Victor was still connected to the back of the rope and being dragged along, but at least he had Jane and Clare to commiserate with. I couldn't tell if it was easy for him or an ordeal. I looked forward to asking him about his experience anchoring the back of the line across the many types of terrain.

When I reached the bottom of the spillway, I had to crawl on my belly up onto the first boulder, and then hop and jump from one to the next. The stone blocks were the size of old refrigerators and small cars, with random meter-wide gaps and leg-breaking cracks between them, yet that fifty-meter caterpillar had just passed through here.

But a caterpillar moves slowly, and I had no urgent need to catch up, so I had plenty of chances to find beautiful firing positions among the blocks, places where I could observe the uphill storm channel and flanking environs for any signs of pursuit. If I had to, I could take aimed rifle shots across a rock-steady rest from behind impenetrable cover. Sniper heaven, lacking only a magnified rifle scope and a heavier caliber. The glow-paint on my front sight had faded to pale white, but its black tip was sharply defined against the moonlit cement of the spillway.

The ocean smell was strong, the pounding surf close. Artillery shells were impacting up the mountain behind us, and mortar shells continued to flash and *ker-umph* south beyond the port. Some of the flashes in the direction of Sidi Zerhoun came so rapidly one after the other that it could not only have been Bert launching shells from a single 120mm mortar tube. Green and red tracers from heavy machine guns arcing in both directions delineated the battle.

If all those soldiers and armored vehicles had been out looking for the missing girls an hour ago, they were probably getting different orders now. I tried to put myself into the mind of Murad Rais, formerly Jan Jansen, Dutch renegade, a convert to Islam, and the current leader of the pirate cartel.

Maybe he would think the burnt bus was evidence of a diversionary attack by El-Ayashi to draw his best mobile forces away from Fort Zerhoun. He might not even know that a rogue 120mm mortar was being fired from his own fort's western rampart toward Sidi Zerhoun, or that it had instigated the entire battle. He might only be aware that El-Ayashi was shelling his fort, and

that his cartel forces were now responding in kind as best they could.

And maybe Murad Rais didn't even know that the captive infidel girls had absconded from his dungeon, not if Pat was still holding their quick reaction force at bay. Murad would connect any kind of ninja-style attack on the western rampart to Mahmoud El-Ayashi, not to external foreign interference.

To the pirate cartel captains, the green bus, burnt or intact, would be evidence that an Ayashi-faction commando team in platoon force had infiltrated around the back of Fort Zerhoun from the north. The casualties I'd inflicted near the western rampart would confirm that an enemy military unit was loose in their rear and wreaking deadly havoc, possibly as a diversion for a frontal attack now being prepped by artillery.

Both the pirate cartel and the Ayashi faction would each believe that the other side had attacked first as part of some unprovoked sneak attack. Both sides would draw into defensive positions while they tried to sort out the unanticipated artillery duel. And meanwhile, each side would try to gain the upper hand by unleashing superior firepower upon their rivals using the howitzers, armored vehicle cannons, heavy mortars, and heavy machine guns at their disposal.

While I watched the light and sound show, I remembered some scarcely known Second World War history. On at least two separate and completely unrelated occasions, trapped but as-yet undetected elements of the SAS and Popski's Private Army had deliberately opened fire on infinitely more powerful German armored units located close by on either side of them, causing them to engage in fratricidal battles, which gave the British jeep patrols the opportunity to slip away during the havoc and mass confusion. Sergeant Major Tolbert was certain to have known this history if I did.

And I had the thought that Kam's father's friend back in the white riad inside the walled compound would have headphones pressed to his ears while he monitored radio scanners and hopped frequencies. Even aside from the question of the possibly missing Nesrani slave girls, tonight was going to be one for the local history books.

The cartel of pirate captains and the Ayashi faction had just gone to war —and I had a front-row seat.

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The thousands of stone blocks in Kam's sea-level route around Cape Zerhoun had been put in place as part of some twentieth-century macro-engineering project, probably when the ocean jetty that defined and protected the modern seaport had been built. Because of the full moon, I could easily hop across the boulders; on a dark night I would have needed a flashlight. I had given away my own little penlight in the fortress, and my lifejacket's tiny shoulder light had died on the beach when I forgot to turn it off before collapsing into sleep.

I guessed that Kam had been through here in years past while finding a way out to the waves with his board. Who else but a local surfer would have any reason to become familiar with such inhospitable and alien topography? Certainly none of the pirate cartel mercenaries. I'd seen no sign of them since the convoy on the road between the hillside neighborhoods. There were no distinct landmarks among the endless blocks of stone, only timber pilings and other flotsam deposited by winter storms. The seawall trapped anything drifting past at high tide, like an oceanic filter. Fragments of fishing nets and their floats stretched across the rocks, and plastic bottles were piled in every nook, glowing silver in the moonlight.

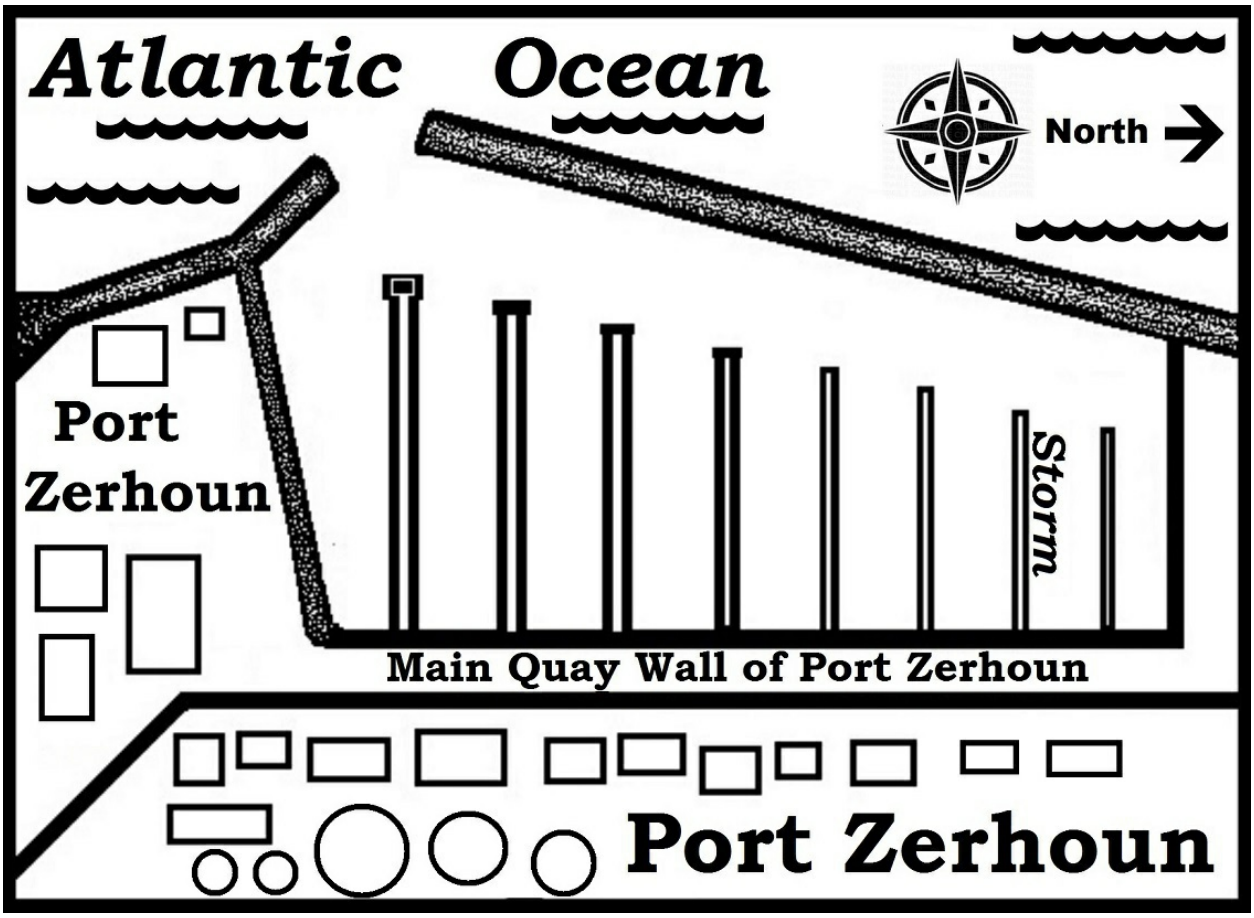
The boulder field was lower on my right side where it broke the ocean waves, and higher on my left, so our route to the port was now obvious and I didn't need turn-by-turn guidance. When I saw Gino again, he was standing high atop a boulder and waving me on; I signaled back and he dropped from view. When I reached his last position, the rocks sloped down and terminated onto flat concrete. The cement was old and broken, and small trees grew out of some of the cracks, but it was essentially intact and easily walkable, especially after boulder hopping for a half kilometer.

A dozen acres at the northern end of the port had been given over to the long-term storage of items that would not be needed anytime soon but still held some intrinsic value. Old ship anchors, mountains of chain whose links were bigger than loaves of bread, spools of wire cable that dwarfed the round table back at the walled compound. Nothing was small or light enough to steal, and the area was inaccessible to trespassers except by crossing the seawall jetty boulders, so it wasn't even protected by fencing—which Kam must have known from his surfing explorations.

Sometimes when I spotted Gino he would wave me onward and then scurry off, and sometimes he would signal for me to wait behind cover until it was time to proceed. Past a row of derelict cargo containers he signaled me on. When I got to the last container, I saw a chalk arrow where the path turned ninety degrees and passed through a chain-link fence that had been cut vertically and spread a meter wide, the sides tied back with cord. Once I was through the fence, I used the same cord to conceal the opening by knitting the two sides back together.

Gino waved me forward from beneath a rusty harbor tug that was resting on its keel and supported on each side by a timber frame. When I was past the tug, I was able to see all the way down the main north-south quay wall, a distance of at least a kilometer. Seven or eight ship piers projected from it toward the seawall jetty at a ninety-degree angle. A few cargo ships greater than a hundred meters in length were tied to the piers farther to the south, nearer the opening through the seawall jetties. This was in line with what I remembered observing from the south bastion. I couldn’t see the more distant piers from ground level, but I could see enough of the ships above them to guess that the port, while operational, was functioning at a small percentage of its capacity.

Farther down Port Zerhoun on the landward side were giant mobile cranes that moved along the north-south quay on iron rails, and behind them were warehouses. Above the cranes and warehouses, built on hillside terraces, were round fuel storage tanks. Along with the power plant and the South African coal that were said to provide electricity to the nearby region, these fuel tanks represented much of the true wealth of Port Zerhoun. This meant that they were a target that neither side engaged in the artillery battle would want to see erupt in flames.



Far down the wide cement apron running along the main quay I could see a variety of vehicles, trucks, and mobile cranes—and at least two Panhards. It was impossible to determine whether the unmoving armored cars were manned or not. If they were part of the port's security detail, they would probably stay down at the south end, where I guessed the main road entrance to the port was located. If the cartel was expecting an attack by the Ayashi faction, they would expect it to come from the south, and not from the north, where we had negotiated a half a kilometer of massive stone blocks around the tip of Cape Zerhoun.

Still, it was unnerving to see the armored cars less than a klick away and realize that they could roll up to the Storm in a minute if they had reason to. I wondered if the private warship getting under way without clearance from the port authorities would constitute such a reason. To escape from the port, the Storm would have to motor south past the ends of the main ship piers to clear the sea jetty and reach the open ocean. The piers were maybe two hundred

meters long and at least ten wide so that trucks could drive out onto them to load and unload cargo, and this meant that the Panhards could drive out on them just as easily.

Unlike the Panhard on the slanted jeep trail up the mountain near the western rampart, those assigned to port security could easily drive all the way out the piers with their hatches closed, so there was no chance of stopping them with rifle fire twice in one night. And there was little or no chance of the Storm slipping unnoticed out of port, even with mortars and artillery blasting away from the north and south.

The Storm was tied most of the way out the north side of the second pier, its bow toward the land. Near the base of the first pier Gino stepped out from behind a shack next to a thousand-gallon fuel tank meant for refueling the smaller working vessels docked at the north end of the port. He directed me onto the first pier, and I followed him.

On the north side of the pier, wooden fishing boats about twenty meters long were tied up two and three deep, rafted together. On the south side, the side across the water from the Storm, were a pair of tugs and a red pilot boat. *Pilote Zerhoun* was painted on the side of its hull alongside Arabic writing. The vessels were unlit and appeared unmanned as I walked past them, but there was really no way to know if someone was looking out from behind a dark window or porthole.

In the open spaces between the tugs and the pilot boat, I had a clear view of the Storm across the water at the next pier. The thirty-six-meter ex-Norwegian patrol boat was painted gray like most warships, or so she appeared in the moonlight. She had a low freeboard, with a flush deck rising just a bit toward her angled clipper bow, complemented by a minimalist superstructure that occupied the middle third of the small ship. Her foredeck was broken only by the 57mm Bofors automatic cannon mounted just ahead of the bridge, its barrel pointing straight ahead. The superstructure was bluff in front below the bridge windows and angled down to the deck in the rear. Behind the superstructure on the stern deck was a RIB, a rigid inflatable boat similar to my Avon but much larger.

Past the pilot boat and directly across the water from the Storm was an ocean fishing boat about thirty meters long. The wooden vessel’s working deck was below pier level, but its two-level superstructure was higher. Like the Storm it was tied bow to land, and like the pilot and tugs was unlit and appeared unoccupied, but there was really no way to know.

When I was between the pilot boat and the fisher my attention was to the left and the Storm, so I didn't notice the girls until I was nearly upon them. They were sitting in two rows down the middle of the cement pier, but with their jellaba hoods up they looked like a consignment of half-full gunnysacks waiting to be loaded aboard. The adult rescuers were huddled near the fishing boat's aft superstructure, where they could observe the Storm without being seen from across the water. I hurried past the girls, who stayed motionless, only their eyes following me, reflecting the moonlight.

Gino was in the huddle, but he had just arrived. I glanced at Victor, who was leaning against Hank. He looked up and gave me a weak smile, and I gave him a thumbs-up.

Kam directed our attention down to the water between the fishing boat and the pier, about three meters below our feet. Tied to the boat's stern was a battered raft about three meters by two. Typical of shipyard floats the world over, it would support the weight of one or two scrawny men and was made to ride low so that hired painters could reach their customers' waterlines with brushes and rollers. The float was also tied to a metal ladder bolted to a square concrete pier piling, so that the workers could climb down and pull it over.

Kam whispered to Gino and me, "We already have a plan; tell me what you think. If I tie the raft tight to the ladder, then the girls can slide into the water without making a splash."

"Why don't we just use the ladder and skip the raft?"

"It's rusted and covered with barnacles at the bottom. It won't do for the girls. They might fall. The raft will be better."

"Can all the girls swim?" I asked him.

"I don't know, but I think the plan will work even if they can't. Tell me if you see a problem. We'll use the fifty-meter rope again. I'll swim it across and tie it to the back of the Storm, but up high. You take up all the slack on this side and make it as tight as you can. I'd say it's less than fifty meters between the piers, and the Storm is about six meters wide, so we'll have enough rope. Once I have it tied to the Storm, you tie it on this side, just above the barnacles. Then the men come across, and when we're all on board we'll take the ship. The girls don't come over until we have the Storm in our control. Tala stays on the pier with the girls, and she'll send them over in pairs when we signal that we're ready."

It was clear that the others had already been briefed, that Kam was just

waiting for Gino and me to arrive. This was his local seaport, this was his plan, and I couldn't think of any mistakes or omissions that would stop the show, but I did say, "We'll be in plain sight from the Storm when we're crossing the fairway between the piers."

"We've been in plain sight all night, and here we are. If anybody is on board, they'll be watching the battle and not the water between the piers."

He had a point. "You're taking both Glocks?" Pistols would be a lot handier for the next phase than our rifles, and the first man aboard the Storm would need the quiet pistol to deal with any crew he encountered until the rest of us arrived.

"I already have both holsters, and I know I can swim with them. I'll give you one on the other side, but we need to go. We don't know when the battle will stop, or what they'll do on the Storm when it does. I think you should be the one to tie off the rope on this side and come across after me. And we should do it now."

"It's a good plan," I replied. Artillery impacts continued to be seen, felt, and heard from both north and south, as strings of red and green machine-gun tracers also continued to arc up and past one another just inland from the port.

"What about Pat and Bert?" asked Victor. He was visibly shivering. Even in the moonlight he looked terrible. His condition made me glad the mission was almost finished.

"I think they started the whole battle," I said. "There was a mortar on the south bastion."

"But how long should we wait?" Victor sounded short of breath, even though he must have been standing there for at least a few minutes.

"How much time has passed since we left the fort?"

Victor had Bert's other watch. "An hour and a half."

I said, "So much for following us after twenty minutes. They stayed behind to fire the mortar, to make a diversion so we could get clear. They were never coming behind us, I can see that now. And the diversion will also work for them, for them to get away to the north."

"Now, only the girls matter," Victor said. "Now, Bert and Pat are in God's hands."

It was unlike him to mention God. "We all are," I added.

Gino said, "If Pat and Bert are up there now, they see the Storm, and they see us." He pointed to the north; the square corner of the south bastion was just visible above the cape.

“Then let’s give them a show,” said Kam. “If they see the Storm leaving, they’ll know we made it. They’d like that. And they can escape to the north on foot.”

“Then that’s it?” I asked them all. “We’re going?”

They all reluctantly nodded yes.

“I guess that it’s it, then. Are you ready, Kam?”

“I’m ready.” He tied the end of the fifty-meter rope to his belt, then climbed down the ladder and pulled the raft over. He stood on it, untied the raft’s line from the ladder, and pushed off so that it glided the few meters back to the fishing boat’s stern, where he uncleated it. Then the surfer pushed off again back toward the ladder and secured the float to it with both lines so it would be stable enough for everyone else to climb down on. When the raft was ready he sat on the edge, slid into the water, and breast-stroked across the fairway with only part of his head exposed. His sister fed him slack from the stacked coil at her feet.

There was something on the back of the Storm; it must have been a ladder or steps, because Kam was able to climb out of the water seemingly without much effort. He was busy on the back of the transom for a minute, then he crawled over onto the aft deck, crouching behind the big inflatable, and signaled that he was finished and I should secure the line on our side. Four or five meters of rope remained at the end when Tala gave it to me.

I climbed down the ladder, stood balanced on the shaky float, and wrapped the rope around the square concrete piling. I tied it about a meter above the water so that the girls would be able to grab it when they were sitting on the raft. Making a line tight around a piling was something I had many of years of experience at, which Kam had known. When I was finished tensioning it, the rope was touching the water in the middle of the fairway. When it was secured, Gino climbed down and joined me on the raft. He whispered, “You go first, then me.”

“All right. If everybody is ready, then I’m ready.”

“Everybody is ready.”

“Okay, I’ll see you on the Storm.”

I sat down and lowered my boots into the water; it was cool but not frigid. My M-16 was in front, across my lap, the sling behind my neck. I slid off the raft while holding the rope, kept my head out of the water, kicking my feet at nothing, my rifle dangling below me, my rifle and sling-bag straps trying to strangle me. In the middle of the fairway the combined weight of

my rifle and remaining ammunition conspired to sink me.

As tight as I'd made the rope, the extra weight submerged me, but I had a good grip on the line so I pulled myself hand over hand toward the Storm, kicking to the surface to get a breath when I needed to. The rope gradually turned upward until I could breathe freely again, and I soon found myself looking at the gray wall of the patrol boat's stern from near the waterline. STORM was painted in black letters across the twenty-foot-wide transom. No home port was given.

The rope was tied to a deck cleat on the far side so that it lay across a ladder hanging from the transom into the water. This ladder was a serious purpose-built affair made for use in port or at anchor, with teak or mahogany steps supported by knotted ropes passing through holes in their sides. I pulled myself along the fifty-meter rope until I could grab the ladder, and when I found the bottom step, I pushed and pulled myself up out of the water, soaking wet and feeling as if I had at least an extra twenty kilos of dead weight wrapped around my neck and my waist.

Kam met me at the top and helped pull me over the deck edge, where I flopped onto my back, exhausted and out of breath. "Welcome aboard," he whispered.

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On the Storm's aft deck where canisters for four Penguin anti-ship missiles had once been mounted were now two big gray RIBs, their bows forward and engines aft. There was less than a meter between the inflatables for a walkway. At their transoms the RIBs stood about a meter and a half above the deck, and their raised outboards were higher. This meant there was enough space behind them for us to hide while we studied the rest of the ship. Each of them was strapped down to massive deck-mounted chocks contoured to fit their aluminum hulls. They were military jobs about seven meters in length, with rugged and utilitarian low-profile center consoles. Their unmarked outboard motors were painted dull gray, but by their size I guessed they were Honda 300s or something close.

On each side of the Storm, located between the RIBs and the back of the superstructure, was a heavy machine gun on a post. Both guns were covered with gray canvas, but I guessed they were fifty-calibers. Unlike my similar 12.7mm Dushka, these gun mounts had armor plates in front to give their standing gunners protection.

In a coastal or riverine fight the Storm could be a serious player, able to launch a platoon of commandos to attack an unwary adversary, and then control the battle with its modern 57mm automatic cannon and pair of heavy machine guns. The RIBs could be used to ferry jihad pirates ashore to capture infidel slaves the way that Murad Rais had done with his modern Janissary raid in Ireland, or they could be used to send boarding parties against prey they captured at sea. The main gun's proximity-fused shells could even shoot down many potential air threats. They didn't need to strike a target to explode, but would detonate at the closest point of approach.

The Storm could dominate most of the scraps she found herself in, unless an actual frigate or destroyer showed up—and how many of *them* were guarding random stretches of coastline anymore? The Spanish *fragata* had dealt with my schooner easily enough, but that was off the Iberian Peninsula, back in its home waters. And disgracefully, the Irish navy had not been able to muster even a single warship to undertake pursuit after the massacre and mass kidnapping at the Saint Agnes School. Just a single helicopter to video the escape of the raiders, and Ireland had run out of ready assets.

While I was crouched behind the port-side inflatable, I removed my

sodden sling bag. My knives were still in place on both hips. I hung my rifle in front again, mentally and physically readying myself for the next evolution. The water hadn't been frigid, but it had been cold enough to set me to shivering in the sea breeze now that I was soaking wet.

Kam arm-signaled across the fairway, then he faced me, also hunched down low, and spoke in a whisper. "The hatch to the engine room is open and there's a light on. I think we should check the engine room first, then the bridge. What do you think? Engine room or bridge?"

"Engine room. Don't leave a potential enemy behind us." I peeked forward between the RIBs and saw a standing scuttle hatch like the one on Rebel Yell's foredeck. This one was substantially bigger, almost two meters high and a meter wide. It was open at the back, built to protect the engine room deck hatch from rain and spray. Light glowed upward from below. I could feel and hear a hum within the steel hull, and I could hear water discharging overboard into the harbor, so a generator was running.

In a minute Gino climbed over the transom and joined us in our crouched huddle behind the port-side RIB. We whispered the evolving plan to him while he sorted out his gear and got himself ready. We decided that Gino and I would check the engine room, me with the suppressed pistol and him with a knife, with his rifle in reserve. Once we ascertained that nobody was down below, or took care of anyone who was, he would remain behind to become familiar with the propulsion systems and get the diesels ready. Sometimes while in port, crews would close their fuel lines and seawater intake hoses, or isolate their starting batteries. It wasn't enough to capture the boat; we had to get the engines running in order to escape.

Hank climbed up next. He was blowing like a walrus when his face appeared above the transom deck edge, and there he remained, appearing too winded to go any farther. I crawled over and grabbed the shoulder of his uniform top, Kam and Gino each grabbed an arm, and together we dragged him aboard. Once he was on deck, he rolled onto his back behind the starboard RIB, clutching at his neck, the straps and slings still choking him. When his breathing was nearly back to normal and we'd pulled him up to a sitting position, we let him in on the plan.

Compared to the others, Victor was taking too long to come across, and I looked for him in the fairway. He was a few meters from the back of the Storm, where the rope was above the water. He was gripping it with both hands, and his face was above water, but he was making little progress.

As hard as it had been for Hank, I thought it might be even harder for Victor, so I unslung my rifle and laid it on the deck, and unbuckled my web belt to get rid of the weight of the magazines. Thus unencumbered, I slid over the transom and down the ladder to meet him. He was wheezing and huffing, barely hanging on as he slid one hand, then the other, a few inches at a time.

When I could reach him, I grabbed his sleeve and said, “Let go. I’ve got you.”

He turned toward me, misery written on his face. When he dropped from the rope back into the water, I held onto his sleeve and dragged him over to the ladder, and he was just able to grab it. He was holding onto the thick rope sides, but was too low in the water to get a foot on the lowest rung. I climbed down into the water beside him to hold him against the ladder and keep him from slipping off.

Kam said, “Get this around him,” and I looked up. He lowered the end of a dock line down to me. I worked the M-16 off Victor’s back and passed it up to Gino, who was reaching down, then worked the thick rope under Victor’s arms and pulled it around him as Kam fed me slack. With my left hand I tied a pair of half hitches against his back and gave a thumbs-up to Gino and Kam, who were both leaning over the transom. Half hitches were the only knots I could tie one-handed while hanging onto the ladder and pressing Victor against it.

I was nose to nose with him in harbor water up to our shoulders, and I said, “They’ll pull, I’ll push, and you’ll climb. All right?”

Victor barely nodded, too out of breath to speak. I knew he was in a bad way.

“All right, start pulling,” I said to the two on deck. I grabbed the back of Victor’s pants with my left hand and tried to haul him up while hanging onto the ladder with my right. Kam and Gino pulled him up enough so that he could find the bottom plank with his knees, then get a foot onto it, then slowly straighten out his body, and finally, with all of us helping him, he was able to lift himself clear of the water. With our assistance he was able to climb one rung at a time, resting on each plank step, until the others could grab his arms and haul him over the transom.

I climbed up after him. He was lying parallel to the transom on the cold steel, staring up, panting. Gino grabbed a life jacket from inside the closest inflatable and put it under his head for a pillow. I knelt over him and rubbed his hands, looking into his face.

He made a choking sound and I turned him onto his side, and he coughed up a little water. When he was breathing more smoothly he said, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, we all made it. Now the girls will come over and we’ll get out. But first we have to take the ship.”

“I can’t help you, Dan…I can’t…I’m sorry.”

“Just catch your breath. Hey, you were fantastic tonight on the rope line.”

“Jane and Clare…wonderful girls.”

“Yes, they’re all wonderful.”

He tilted his head and looked into my eyes. “This meant something.”

“You’re damned right, this meant something. But we have to take the ship before the girls can come over. You just need to rest, and I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

I let go of his hands. Kam handed me the holster for the suppressed Glock, and I fed my pants belt through it, and then he gave me the pistol.

Gino said, “Now the engine room—*andiamo*.”

“*Andiamo*,” I agreed. Victor was breathing more easily, open eyes staring at the full moon. I was concerned about him, but I had to refocus on the mission. We had a ship to capture.

I crept forward between the RIBs, Gino behind me. The scuttle over the hatch was in line with the bows of the two inflatables on either side. I was on my hands and knees, with just the pistol, and I took a first look down the open deck hatch. Inside was a vertical ladder made of welded steel pipe with flat steps. It was installed fore and aft, not side to side, so I would be facing starboard going down. I could see the tops of two engines and a metal walkway between them, but I didn’t see or hear anybody.

If somebody was down there, they would spot my legs before I saw them. But there was no other way to get into the engine room, so I stuck the suppressed Glock into its holster and climbed down as quickly as I could without making a sound. When I was standing on the aluminum deck between the engines I drew the pistol and took a quick look around, saw nobody, then stepped forward of the ladder as Gino came down.

The port and starboard diesel engines were the size of minivans and painted gray, with less than a meter between them. The space was well lit by a white light in the ceiling aft of the ladder. A stainless steel chain with coin-size links was attached to the bottom of the ladder and ran forward on the aluminum deck and around to the port side. There wasn’t much room behind

the engines, just machinery and gauges bolted to the inside of the Storm's transom bulkhead. I nodded to Gino and glanced aft. He had his knife in his hand, and he looked behind each engine and shook his head to indicate that nobody was there. Our backs covered, I crept forward between the engines to where I could see that there was some space.

The decking was aluminum plate with raised diamonds to make it nonskid even if it was wet or oily. The hull sides, bulkheads, and ceiling were painted creamy yellow. I'd seen private megayacht engine rooms that looked a lot worse, but I knew from Colonel Rainborow's original briefing in Ireland that the Storm had recently undergone a shipyard refit in Sweden. A few meters ahead of the engines was a closed steel door with tightly fit corners and a large window in the top half. This door was meant to contain the sound of the roaring diesels to within the engine room, while allowing crew forward of it to keep an eye on the running engines.

Between the big diesels and the soundproof door was an open working space with conduits, piping, pumps, and filters crowding the bulkheads. I followed the silver chain all the way around the port engine to the side of the hull, where I saw a pile of tarps on a filthy piece of foam padding that maybe had once been yellow. As I watched the pile, it shifted a bit. I reached out with my left hand and pulled back a paint-stained tarp, and a man's head appeared. He was scrunched into the forward port corner of the engine room beneath a shelf for some auxiliary machinery, cringing into a defensive position with his knees drawn up to his chest. He was shaking with fear, his eyes shut tight as if he was expecting a blow.

Gino pushed me out of the way and knelt by the man's side. He spoke to him softly in Italian, and then English, as he pulled away the rest of the tarp. The man shrank back like a beaten dog cowering in its kennel, his arms clutched around his knees. The chain was wrapped around his right ankle and secured with a padlock. The skin was rubbed raw there, an open wound all the way around. His face, chest, arms, and legs were filthy with oil and grease and he was wearing only torn shorts that were little more than rags, as filthy as the rest of him.

Gino touched his shoulder and said, "Hey, we are friends, friends. We are coming to take you home. We are friends, you no be afraid." Turning to me, he said, "He is a slave like me before. This is what they do, *il pirati musulmani*. They put on the chain, and the engine she is running or you die." Then he said to the man, softly, "My friend, where are you from? You speak

the English? *Italiano*? *Français*? *Español*?”

The man’s shaking calmed a bit. He looked back and forth between us with bloodshot blue eyes. His face was covered with old and new cuts and bruises. Finally he spoke. “I am from Norway, but I am speaking English okay. You can understand?”

“*Sì*, yes, I can understand. My name is Gino, what is your name, my friend?”

“My friend?” The man started to weep, then rubbed his eyes with the backs of his grimy hands. “My name is Henrik.”

I said, “Henrik, we’re going to take this ship out to sea. We want to go to the Canary Islands. Can we do it? Is everything working on the ship? Do we have enough fuel?”

Henrik squinted, his fear melting away as he studied our faces and listened to our voices. He appeared to be in his forties, with blond hair, and he was unshaven, filthy, bruised, and burned. Kept alive only for as long as he was needed to keep the Storm’s propellers turning and the lights on. An expendable subhuman machine.

“Where are we?” he asked. “How far is the distance is to the Canaries?”

I answered. “We’re in Morocco, in Port Zerhoun, and the Canaries are about four hundred kilometers from here.”

Some life came back into his eyes. “Then yes, by God, we can go there!”

“Gino, do what you can to help him, and be ready to start the engines when we give the word. The starting controls will be on the bridge, but you and Henrik make sure everything is ready down here. Okay?”

“Okay, we make the engines ready for operation.” Then he asked Henrik, “Is there something for cutting your chain?”

“No, nothing close to here. They take away anything that can cut the chain.”

I stood up and said, “We’ll deal with your chain after we capture the ship.” To Gino I said, “Tell him about the mission, tell him everything. But it’s going to take some time to capture the ship and bring the girls across the water. Just be ready for anything, okay?”

I holstered the Glock and climbed up the ladder. Kam and Hank crouched aft of the scuttle, between the bows of the inflatables. I whispered, “Everything is ready. We found a man down there, a chained-up engineer like Gino was. How is Victor?”

Kam said, “We put him in the RIB. He’s right there.”

I leaned over and looked down into the bow of the port-side inflatable. Victor was lying in the bottom with his head toward the bow and his feet against the center console. He still had a life jacket for a pillow, and now he had a folded canvas tarp over him for a blanket. His eyes were open, staring toward the moon lowering to the west.

"How are you doing?" I asked and reached out to touch his shoulder.

Only his eyes moved. He sighed and said, "Been better."

"This mission really means something. It's important."

"The girls…"

"Yes, the girls." I turned away and back to Kam. "The man in the engine room has a chain on his leg. If we pass the bolt cutters down to Gino, he can cut it off."

"I can't, sorry."

"Why not?"

"I lost them swimming over. They fell out. Sorry."

Spilt milk. At least Kam hadn't lost the pistols. "Okay, we'll cut the chain later. Now we'll do the bridge."

Over the years I had visited enough coast guard cutters, patrol boats, and even megayachts around this length and tonnage to understand the basic layout principles. Inside the hundred-twenty-foot hull would be a single continuous deck from bow to engine room. Above the deck was a one-level superstructure occupying the middle third of the ship, with a bridge at the front of it. Anybody on the Storm was wide awake and watching the battle, so they would be looking forward, and inland. And probably wondering whether they should sit tight or get their ship under way.

There was enough space to pass between the hatch scuttle and the V-shaped bows of the two RIBs. They were the biggest inflatables that could fit on the aft deck of the patrol boat and still permit the crew to move around them on all sides. In front of the engine room hatch, where the obsolete manually loaded 40mm aft gun mount had been removed, there was now a hydraulic crane on a rotating pedestal. Like everything on the patrol boat it was painted gray, or appeared gray in the moonlight. Its telescoping arm was horizontal and retracted so that its lifting hook was attached to a ring welded on top of the scuttle. With the crane extended it would be a simple matter to launch the seven-meter RIBs, each one capable of transporting a dozen pirates over the horizon to an unsuspecting target.

And once the RIBs were gone, the Storm could support the raiders out to

a distance of nine miles with its 57mm Bofors automatic cannon. The fifty-caliber heavy machine guns behind the superstructure on each side were meant to compensate for the missing 40mm aft gun, and would provide respectable firepower at low cost, without the need to expend the Storm's essentially irreplaceable proximity-fused 57mm shells.

Irreplaceable until the Storm returned to Sweden, and who could say when that might be? But Simon Dansekker had probably purchased enough shells to last for years when he'd had the chance. No question about it, Dansekker had put a lot of thinking and dropped a lot of gold into refurbishing the Storm for a new mission in a new era.

His private warship was a perfect slave catcher.

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Studying the back of the superstructure while peering around the standing hatch scuttle, I was struck by how narrow the ship was. Seen broadside from the adjacent pier, Storm had looked low slung and minimalist, but not extraordinarily so. But as I peeked forward now, she seemed like a knife on edge, almost as if I was standing on the deck of a World War II submarine behind the conning tower. Her beam was about six meters, twenty feet, and her superstructure took up most of that, leaving only a narrow side-deck walkway on each side.

The superstructure was open in the back, the first transverse bulkhead a few meters forward. This was so that the main entry hatch into the ship would be protected from ocean waves striking the front or sides. All I could see was a dim light thrown out from within; the rest I would have to discover.

I had the suppressed Glock, Kam had the unsuppressed one, and Hank had his M-16. "Two-meter interval," I whispered, holding up two fingers. I felt the way I'd felt at the top of the stairs before going down inside the fort, except this time I was first in line. I wondered for a moment how Bert and Pat were getting on. *Make the most of it*, they'd both said.

It was only a few meters from the scuttle and around the crane mount to the back of the superstructure. The centerline entrance hatch was a proper naval watertight door, latched open to the side for ventilation. I ducked down, lifted my boot over the sill, and I was inside, holding my quiet Glock in front of me; anybody I encountered was a dead man. The interior was faintly illuminated with red light for sure footing, but not so much that it would

affect a sailor's night vision. A few meters ahead and to the right was a ladder descending to the main lower deck inside the hull. This wasn't a narrow vertical ladder like the one down into the engine room; these were aluminum stairs with beefy railings around the opening like those on any warship.

Deck gear, safety equipment, and foul-weather coats were stowed close at hand on both sides, but my attention was farther forward. The superstructure had a split level at the very front, with the bridge deck a meter higher than the rest. The centerline entry was up three steps. The bridge was softly lit inside, and I could see a man's foot, leg, and part of his back. I took a knee to observe the activity for a moment while Kam and Hank followed.

I signaled them forward, and they crouched behind me within touching distance. I pointed to Hank, then at the open stairwell, and I conveyed to him silently that he should stay there and watch for anybody coming up. Then I signaled Kam to follow me again, and we crept toward the raised bridge. The deck space inside the bridge wasn't large, only about two meters from front to back. I crouched low and to the left to peek inside. Unseen electronics were glowing onto the ceiling and reflecting off the bridge windows.

Two men were standing with their backs to me, both staring through the front windows at the unfolding battle. Both were dressed in light-colored draw-string pants and slip-on shoes, one wearing a tank top, one a regular T-shirt. Both had dark, scraggly hair, and from what I could see from behind they were unshaven but did not have the full beards of long-time *mujahedin*. They were in sleepwear, not combat gear, but there could have been a pistol sitting on the dashboard of the bridge in front of them. From my low angle I couldn't see what was up there. A Kalashnikov could be just out of my view but within their reach.

Speeded-up time again. They were less than three meters from me, and looking away. Easy enough to make head shots at that distance with the suppressed Glock, my black finger of death. But head shots might carry through and shatter pilothouse windows, and they would also leave a hell of a mess on some critical real estate. The bridge dash was where things like engine throttles, controls, switches, gauges, radios, and other tools and instruments lived, and we would be using them soon to make our escape.

What would Bert do?

Well, I knew he wouldn't hesitate, not when he had the opportunity handed to him on a silver platter. I chose the guy on the left to go first because he was taller and a step closer to me. With a two-handed grip I shot

him twice in the spine, aiming for his heart from behind, then immediately shifted to the man on the right. Two quick double-taps, with just a beat missing between them. The one on the right began to drop before the first had hit the deck. I was up there in a bound and put a point-blank security shot into each of their heads before they'd even stopped moving.

Nothing personal, fellas. We just need your ship, and we don't have time for any extra drama—we already have all we need. What had Bert said? No prisoner, no problem. That summed up how I felt. Now we owned the bridge, which was about five meters wide, with good headroom and windows all around from shoulder level up.

They were both dead, and Kam and Hank were covering my six. These two were just dead meat, bleeding out while blocking convenient access to the ship's steering wheel and throttles. Most of their blood disappeared through the open grid pattern of the rubber non-skid deck matting.

But blood or no blood, if we were going to drive this boat I had to get them out of the way. I thought I would at least push the two bodies all the way to starboard to get some room behind the centerline wheel. They had fallen on top of one another, and I couldn't budge them by pushing with one foot. I would need to squat down and untangle them first, and I would need both hands to do that, so I holstered the Glock. I crouched down and was looking past their bodies, assessing the place where I was going to shove them under a console, but there was already a pile of something in that space—and then I saw a face, a living face, looking out at me! There was a third man hiding under the console, his back to the starboard bulkhead. I clumsily drew the suppressed Glock from its holster and aimed it at him across the bodies.

He was leaning forward and looking at me from beneath the table, with both of his open hands in front of him, saying, "Don't shoot! Be cool, man, be cool. Don't shoot."

45

This third man's sudden appearance was completely unexpected, and he was even speaking English—how did he know to speak English? The bridge furniture was metal and bolted in place, which made for some interesting voids, like where this new guy was sitting in his own little nest. Then it occurred to me that I had a tactical light in front of the Glock's trigger guard, so I lit him up and said, "Who are you?"

He held an arm in front of his eyes and said, "Who am I? Who are *you*? Why are you here?" He spoke in accented but fluent English.

"I asked you first, and I have the gun, so who are you?"

"I am Captain Dansekker, of course. And just who the hell are *you*?"

"You're Captain Dansekker? What are you doing down there?"

"I am a prisoner, what do you think? We had a mutiny, *I* had a mutiny, with a change of command. And can you please switch off that beam?"

I did. It took a moment for my partial night vision to return. Between the full moon outside and the lit instruments inside, there was still enough ambient light.

"They killed four of my crew, but they kept me alive to run the boat and teach them the rest. So, are you one of Rainborow's men? Did you get the girls out?"

"That's right," I said, surprised by his knowledge. "I'm one of Rainborow's men, and we got the girls."

"Did the operation work to plan, even without my ship? What happened to the trucks? Why are you here? And where is Colonel Rainborow?"

"The colonel is dead, and no, the operation did *not* work to plan. The landing craft sank and so did the trucks, and we had to make a new plan. Come out of there, and help me deal with these two."

"I would, and happily, but my chain is beneath them."

"Your chain?"

"Yes, of course my chain! Do you think I am living here like a dog by my choice?"

After Henrik, I should have guessed. He pushed his blanket away and showed me. The stainless steel chain was the same type that was on the engineer, much nicer than the rusty chain Gino had been wearing when we liberated him.

“I sleep here, I eat here, I shit here, until I teach my former crew all that I know about running every system on this ship and how to navigate on the ocean. Until that day I am still alive, so you may be sure that I am a very slow teacher. Where are the girls?”

“On the pier across from us, behind a fishing boat. Who else do I have to kill before we can get out of Port Zerhoun? We already checked the engine room. Who else is on board?”

“You checked the engine room? Was there a man there?”

“Yes, a man named Henrik.” I worked Dansekker’s ankle chain from under the bodies, and when I got it free he was able to crawl out from under the table and stand up. He was blond, two inches taller than me and like me a week unshaven, dressed in grimy khaki trousers and a filthy gray T-shirt. Evidently bathing, hygiene, and laundry were not on the itinerary for short-term infidel slaves destined in any event to be put over the side. He stuck out his hand above the two corpses.

It was a lot to absorb. Shake hands with Simon Dansekker? I transferred the Glock to my left and we shook. He had a strong grip and made direct eye contact, sizing me up as I did the same to him. He was older than me, but not by much. A strong chin, light-colored eyes, their precise color unknowable in that weird light. A week of semi-starvation had not yet put a dent in his broad shoulders and overall musculature.

“So, my Henrik is alive? I did not hear him for two days. I thought he finished teaching them about his engine room and they threw him in the sea.”

“He’s pretty banged up, but he’ll be okay. Our team engineer is with him.”

“You have an engineer?”

“We have two. With Henrik, now three. Can we start the engines from the bridge?”

“How are the girls coming over? A boat? Or swimming?”

“Swimming, with a rope tied between the piers.”

“And then up the ladder on our stern?”

“Yes.”

“Then we cannot start the engines until they are aboard. Not if the girls will be in the water behind. It is too much gas, hot exhaust gas. Better to wait.”

“How long will they take to start?”

“Ten seconds, no more than that. Cut the dock lines and we go.”

“We still have to get rid of these two.” Casually chatting with Simon Dansekker on the bridge of the Storm over dead bodies wasn’t remotely a scenario I had imagined. I turned around and Kam was just behind the bridge at the foot of the three steps. I told him to get Hank, and when he appeared I told him to hide the bodies and get rid of them when he could. Meaning overboard. Dansekker and I untangled the two and dragged them by their feet to where Hank could grab them and thump them down the three-step ladder.

That task dealt with, I asked Dansekker, “Who else is on the ship?”

“Nobody else.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I am on the bridge since the mutiny with this chain around my foot. Anybody coming on and off this ship, I know it. The other three traitors are spending the night in one of Port Zerhoun’s many whorehouses. Only those two idiots were on duty tonight. There is no one else aboard except Henrik.”

I turned to Kam behind the bridge.

He was already dialed in. “So, now it’s time for the girls to come over?”

“That’s right,” I said. “Now it’s time for the girls.” Kam departed and I asked Dansekker, “Can we cut your chain, or maybe find the key?”

“If there was any tool in my reach to cut this chain, I would have cut it. The new captain has the only key; I do not know where it is. Probably with him in the whorehouse, or hidden in my cabin that he has claimed for his own.”

“Then your chain will have to wait.”

“Tell me, is it a coincidence that this war is happening just when you arrive like the American Rambo?”

“No, it’s not a coincidence. There was a mortar on top of the fort near where the girls were kept. Two of our team stayed back to buy us more time. Did you know about the fort?”

“Yes, of course, the western battlement of Fort Zerhoun. Colonel Rainborow told me everything—but I never told my crew. Nobody knew about the operation except me.”

“So, this mutiny is why you missed your radio comms?”

“Correct. My long-trusted Mohammedan friends made a mutiny against me. Four of them, plus one former Christian who prayed *Shahada* and turned renegade behind my back. After the mutiny, they kept me alive to bring the

ship here, and to teach them navigation. And they kept Henrik alive, but I did not hear him for two days. The other Christians they fed to the sharks after beheading them, and by then, beheading was a mercy. Without a miracle that I did not deserve, I expected the same fate for myself in a few days, or weeks at most."

I looked out a side window toward the fishing boat and saw a pair of heads in the water, one on each side of the rope, and another pair of girls on the raft. "They're coming now."

Dansekker unclipped a microphone with a spiral cord from the port side of the bridge. "Engine room, bridge. Henrik, Henrik, are you there?"

In a few seconds I heard Gino's voice. "Bridge, Henrik is not feeling good, but don't worry, we have everything ready for making full speed of engines."

Then I heard Henrik's wavering voice. "The engine room is ready, Captain."

"I am happy to hear your voice! I think in a few minutes we will start both engines."

Dansekker hung up the intercom mike and switched on his VHF radio. It was mounted on the overhead near the intercom on the port side of the bridge. He pointed to the radio and said, "It is set on the port captain's channel."

"We have seventy-two girls; where can we put them?"

"In the troop quarters. Some of them will have to stand up, but if you pack them in, there will be sufficient space. Go down the main ladder, then all the way forward on the starboard side."

I turned around and got Hank's attention; he was standing at his post by the top of the stairwell. I repeated the captain's message and added, "Make sure nobody is hiding down there, and if they are, shoot them." He had an M-16, and nobody outside the ship would hear shots fired down below. Especially not during an artillery battle.

"I'm on it." The big Cajun disappeared down the ladder. I knew he would check every locker and nook and cranny for hidden pirates as only a former chief petty officer and boat captain could. Just as I knew that those two bodies were already overboard and probably submerged under the pier tied to something heavy.

When I looked out the port windows, I could see pairs of heads spaced all the way across the fairway, and a dozen moonlit ripples spreading out and

intersecting. I knew Kam would be at the stern to help them aboard and guide them into the superstructure, where Hank would meet them and lead them down the stairs and to the troop quarters in the bow. I didn't need to personally inspect what was happening below deck or at the back of the Storm. Good men were on those jobs, and more importantly, I didn't want to leave Dansekker alone near the VHF radio. I still didn't fully trust him.

I was taking him at his word that he'd suffered a mutiny and been forced to become a professor of maritime knowledge where final student satisfaction would mean his death. But one way for Dansekker to leapfrog beyond his mutinous crew in currying local favor would be to betray the mass escape of the girls to the port authorities, so I stayed with him, and I had the Glock to ensure his loyalty. But while I mistrusted him, I also knew that he was the best man for the job of getting the Storm out of Port Zerhoun. Looking aft through the rear pilothouse windows, back down the middle between the two inflatables, I could see Kam helping the first girls up onto the deck. When they stood side by side I could see that they were tall Portia and little Grace, pair number one.

"Here they come now," Dansekker said, with wonderment on his face.

"You know, I met you once before."

"You did? Where?"

"In Narvik, in northern Norway."

"I *thought* that I remembered you from someplace. What is your name?"

"Dan Kilmer."

"You had a steel sailing boat about twenty meters, yes?"

"And I still do. What I remember is that you had a lot of girls on your ship."

"Yes, and so what?"

"Where did you take them after Narvik?"

"To Stavanger, in the south of Norway. So what are you thinking? And not only girls, where did you get this idea? It was starvation for them, starvation or freezing to death. They had no fuel deliveries for two years. No airplanes, no ships came, they were forgotten. One Norwegian man paid me to bring out one family from the North Cape, but we saved many more than that. We brought out hundreds of people, fifty at a time in a space for twenty. Narvik was only a place to buy and sell fuel, and then a place of refugees. And let me tell you, Narvik was a happy place compared to Hammerfest and many small villages on the North Cape."

Well, maybe I had gotten him wrong about the girls in Narvik. I remembered seeing him a few times in the bars and on the docks surrounded by slim blonde beauties, but perhaps they had valid reasons to be outwardly cheerful in his company. Maybe it was genuine gratitude or even hero worship of the man. But Simon Dansekker had a lot more history than Norway in his past. “What about the Tunisian civil war? I heard that you fought for the Emir of Tunis—the one they call The Butcher.”

“Yes, I fought for him. Why do you think I went to the North Cape after that? Maybe you believe that your hands are clean, Captain Kilmer, but I see a lot of blood on them. Two men are dead at my feet, shot in the back, and all in just a blink. And it seemed to come rather easily to you, if I may say.”

Dansekker turned his back to me and stood behind the ship’s wheel throwing switches, pushing buttons, and studying analog gauges and digital displays as they lit up. “Now I am on another rescue operation, an operation that has gone in many strange directions—but tonight is the strangest of all. Yes, I knew about the Irish girls of Fort Zerhoun, and the slave auction. Colonel Rainborow told me everything in Rotterdam, or I would never have agreed to participate. But I did not tell my crew, not one word, except that we were going to do a short operation around central Morocco before we continued on to Lagos. I had a contract to work for Royal Dutch Shell protecting their offshore oil platforms.”

“But if your crew didn’t know about the mission, why did the Storm end up here?”

“Because Port Zerhoun is the pirate port, what do you think? Where else would they go? Coming so near to Morocco presented a great temptation for them. My old friend the new captain turned the other Mohammedans against me and stole my ship, but he will be surprised when he returns from his whores to find empty water here! And now I shall energize my magnificent Bofors gun.”

The fire control station for the 57mm automatic cannon had its own position on the starboard side of the bridge, directly above the corner where he’d been living like a dog under the console. In a few seconds a vertical screen lit up, showing a night-vision picture over our bow toward the land. With the full moon behind us, it was as sharp and bright as daylight, but in shades of green and white.

“Now infrared.”

The same view switched to a color image, with red showing hot and

white showing cold.

While Dansekker made the bridge ready for an emergency sortie, I turned around to check on the embarkation of the girls. Kam led a file of them into the superstructure and handed them over to Hank to guide them down the ladder. Portia and Grace and the other front pairs already knew him well from the rope line, so they followed him below without hesitation. The girls were all soaking wet and shivering in their white blouses and dark skirts and random soccer uniforms and street clothes. The line grew longer as more girls climbed up the transom and found their way inside. In the water of the fairway to port another half-dozen heads arranged in pairs pulled themselves along the fifty-meter rope toward us.

Then the VHF radio began to squawk, first one male voice and then another in an agitated conversation in Arabic. I could understand nothing of it, but Dansekker froze and began to listen intently. After a few unintelligible replies back and forth between the two voices he said, “A harbor pilot is talking to the port captain’s office. I can understand half of what they say, but half is enough. A witness on the pilot boat has seen many people swimming between the piers, and he has reported it.”

Instead of a computer mouse, the cannon’s fire control station had a trackball embedded in the middle of the console. Dansekker spun it left and the camera view on the screen swung to port across the fairway and centered on the *bateau pilote*. When he spun the ball, the gun mount and barrel just below the bridge windows also swung across the foredeck and pointed at the same target like a condemning finger. There was an aiming box with a cross-hair reticle in the center of the display screen that provided the azimuth, elevation, range, ammunition available, and other targeting data.

The sturdy-looking vessel down across the fairway was of a modern design, made to go out in any weather, with a pilothouse on the second level of its superstructure. The big windows were opaque from our direction, but the water between the pilot boat and the Storm was wide open to observation and bathed in moonlight.

“Look at this,” said Dansekker, indicating the FLIR image on his screen. The pilot boat windows were opaque on infrared. “Now watch what happens when I switch modes.” The color picture changed back to shades of green, and as the camera zoomed in tight to fill the screen with just the pilothouse, I could make out a man inside looking at us across the water, his eyes shining back like a coyote staring at a spotlight. Lit from within by the pilot boat’s

subdued instrument displays, the picture was grainy, but I could see that the man was holding his hand near his mouth, a hand that was holding a microphone. While we were watching him inform on us, we could hear his voice coming out of the VHF radio mounted on the ceiling of the bridge.

I told Dansekker, “Before I came out on the pier, I noticed they had a couple of Panhards parked farther down the quay. We can’t see them behind those ships, but believe me, they’re there.”

“Panhards?”

“French armored cars with ninety-millimeter cannons.”

“Ah, yes, Panhards. AMLs. Four wheels. In South Africa we called them Elands. That ninety is a very big gun—if they get to use it.”

“Their first shell will be loaded in the breech, and if they can see us, they can hit us.”

“They can try,” Dansekker said with a wink.

The Storm’s side deck was nearly level with the top of the concrete pier, so the bridge, and our eye level, was a couple meters higher than that. The top of the Bofors gun mount was just below and in front of the bridge windows. Our view was perfectly unobstructed to the front and sides.

Dansekker rolled his trackball so that the camera panned down the main quay until its view was blocked by the bow of a ship a few piers over. The gun mount and its barrel followed the aiming reticle on the display screen. With my naked eye I could make out the shadowy bow of the distant ship through the Storm’s pilothouse windows. Zoomed in, on the screen I could read the depth numbers painted above the Plimsoll line. No Panhards were visible from our angle; they were a few hundred meters farther to the south down the main quay. On the screen in night-vision mode, the details of the fuel tanks squatting on the hillside terraces above the port were distinguishable down to access ladders and security fences. When it was amplified thousands of times, moonlight made the picture as bright and sharp as high noon.

I said, “Can you see how many girls are still on the other pier?”

He fiddled with the keyboard and spun the trackball so the camera aimed at the stern of the fishing boat, but this time without causing the gun mount to rotate. Two girls sat on the edge of the raft and we watched them slip into the water. Another girl was climbing down the ladder. Up on the pier I recognized Tala because she was the tallest by nearly a head. Her tunic was gone; she appeared to be dressed all in formfitting black like Catwoman, her

daypack on her back. There were only a few girls left with her, and as we watched, they dropped their jellabas onto the pier, their white school blouses reflecting the moonlight so brightly that they appeared to be lit from within like lantern mantles.

"They are almost finished," Dansekker said. "Maybe only a few more minutes?"

"I think so. The tall woman in the dark clothes is going to come over last, and then we can start the engines."

"Were you in the American military?" he asked me.

"Yes. Why?"

"Army? Navy? What?"

"Marine Corps."

"Do you know how to load and fire a Browning fifty-caliber machine gun?"

"I have a Russian twelve-point-seven Dushka on my boat, but I know the Ma Deuce. Yes, I can load and fire it. The charging handle is on the right side instead of out the back, and the Browning has disintegrating links, but otherwise they're very similar."

"Then you are hired. Get them uncovered and make them ready. There is a belt of one hundred cartridges in the box on each gun. I hope we don't need more than that."

"You think we'll need them?"

"Oh, yes, I think we'll need them. There is a bunker on the end of the pier across from the jetty mouth. I don't think they will be happy to see us leaving port without permission. The pilot boat already reported the swimmers, and the pirate captains will hear this news and add two plus two. And there is another reason to get the Brownings ready: my Bofors gun cannot cover one hundred twenty degrees behind us. Oh, and you also have to cut the dock lines. There is an ax on each side of the house, behind the life ring."

"An ax?"

"This will be the second time in my life that an ax will be used to cast off in a hurry. The other time was a port fire in Malta that sank twenty boats. Cut the spring lines now, don't wait. Make certain to throw the aft spring on the pier, or it will go in our propellers. Give the second ax to one of your men to cut the stern line, and take the other for the bow. Have him cut the stern line as soon as the engines are running, then count five seconds and cut the

bowline. Then get behind a Browning and hang on."

Here I was, taking orders from Captain Simon Dansekker in Port Zerhoun! But the Storm was his ship, and he would know best how to fight with it. He was chained in place on the bridge, and we were the only show in town. "Which Browning? Port or starboard?"

"I'll leave that up to you. Oh, and take some of these." He grabbed a plastic box from a small drawer under the dash; it was full of foam earplugs. "The Bofors gun will destroy your hearing without these. And tell the girls to cover their ears when they hear the guns. Tell them it will be the loudest thing they have ever heard in their lives, like steel thunder, but it only means that we are fighting back and they are going home, and they should not be afraid."

"All right. I'll get the fifties ready, and I'll cut the spring lines." I shoved the foam plugs in my ears, lest I forget later and suffer the consequences.

"The big man, he does not look like a commando to me, he looks more like a sailor. Was he from the landing craft?" Dansekker put in his own plugs.

"He was the captain. His name is Hank Landry."

"Is he a good captain? Why did his ship sink?"

"The bow ramp was down to launch our rubber boats for the beach reconnaissance party. We crossed a seamount and a heavy swell came up. The ramp was in the water and it broke when the hull lifted, so the bow was wide open in giant waves. Down she went."

"But he can drive a twin-screw ship?"

"Yes, he can do that. Hank's a good captain; losing his boat was just terrible luck."

"Then send him up here, because I can use him. We will need to drive this ship and fire the guns at the same time, so I will need his extra hands and eyes. Can he do that?"

"Oh, hell yes, he can do that. Big Hank can do just about anything."

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I turned and jumped down from the bridge. A line of girls was heading down the stairs. Once outside the superstructure I ripped the canvas off the starboard pedestal-mounted fifty-caliber; the fabric was attached only with Velcro underneath. I levered open the ammo box, flipped up the action cover on the top of the receiver, dragged over the heavy belt, and dropped the first cartridge into the mechanism, slammed down the cover, and worked the charging handle. I swung the fifty by its twin vertical grips to check the limits of its traverse.

The barrel was prevented from sweeping the superstructure by a stop, but I could swing it all the way aft across the stern, so careful fire discipline would be required to keep me from blasting the RIBs to ribbons—especially with Victor in one of them. Now I understood why the rigid inflatables had no T-tops, Biminis, or radar arches: they would be in the line of fire.

It felt nice to be standing behind a thick steel armor shield, and I thought of my own fully exposed Dushka. I needed less time to get the port machine gun ready, then I grabbed the ax that was in a bracket behind the life ring at the back of the superstructure, just where Dansekker had said it would be, crossed the deck again, cutting through the line of girls like a madman, and grabbed the second ax.

I dashed to the stern along the narrow deck space outside the RIB so that I would not interfere with the progress of the girls moving forward down the middle, especially while I was carrying two uncovered axes. Hank had just gotten to the transom as well, having led the first girls all the way down below and forward, Portia Harrison presumably taking charge at that point. He joined Kam, half-kneeling by the top of the ladder, grabbing small hands and helping the girls aboard. I got Kam’s attention; his eyes widened when he saw me holding a pair of axes.

“This is the new plan,” I announced. “Kam: as soon as Tala is aboard, you wave to the bridge and the engines will start. Once they’re running, cut the stern line as fast as you can with this.” I laid one of the axes on the deck near him. “I’ll cut the bowline a few seconds later, and then we’re getting out of here. Hank: the captain needs your help on the bridge. You need to report there for duty.”

“The captain? Report for duty?”

“Captain Dansekker. He had a mutiny, he’ll tell you all about it, but first he needs your help to drive the Storm out of here. All right? You both understand the new plan?”

They nodded.

“Tell the girls that if we fire our guns, it’s going to sound like steel thunder and they should hold their ears, but it means we’re fighting back and they’re going home.”

“I’ll tell them,” said a soaking-wet girl in a soccer uniform who had just climbed aboard. Within a minute or two, all of them would be warned about the sound of the deck guns.

Next I had to cut the long, crisscrossed spring lines that were cleated off on the starboard side deck by the superstructure. The bow spring line couldn’t reach the propellers, so I chopped it with the ax blade and let it fall into the water. The other spring line could foul our props, so I took a moment to unwrap it from its cleat and heave it onto the pier.

These tasks complete, I went forward and stood over the bowline with my ax, waiting to hear the two big MTU diesels rumble to life. The Bofors gun behind me was a malevolent presence, its long barrel leveled forward, a cylindrical coaxial radar sitting on top of the barrel where it ran into the elevation ring.



Bofors 57mm automatic cannon

The double wire lifelines that began at the stern and protected the narrow side decks angled down and terminated at the toe rail just ahead of the bridge. Clearly the open foredeck was not meant for humans while the ship was running in a seaway any more than the bow of a U-boat running on the surface through waves would be. There was no foredeck hatch scuttle, only two small deck hatches, down flat and sealed tight.

The moon was lower, but it still had plenty of strength. Sporadic firing was coming from both directions inland of the port, but not in its previous intensity. Both sides were probably running out of available ordnance. I looked across the fairway behind the fishing boat and watched the last two girls drop their jellabas and climb down the ladder onto the float. Pair number thirty-six, English Jane and Irish Clare.

As soon as they went into the water, Tala stood on the raft and untied my knots. She held the end of the rope when she slid into the fairway, and was pulled across with the last girls. I couldn't see him back on the port stern from my place on the starboard bow, but I knew that Kam was hauling in the line hand over hand to speed them across to the Storm. In a few moments his sister would climb the rope ladder, and I would hear the big diesels roar to life.

I was looking down at the bowline, my feet apart, ready to drop the blade, when I heard a hydraulic whine behind me, then was nearly blasted off the deck by the concussion of the Bofors gun! B-B-BOOM! Three or four shots had gone down range in less than a second, leaving my ears ringing even with foam plugs inside.

After a moment, when I'd regained my senses, it occurred to me that Dansekker must have had a good reason to fire his automatic cannon, and when I looked down the pier I saw a Panhard bursting into flames on the main quay, and another one reversing away at high speed. I was struck with the shock waves from another multiple firing of the Bofors, my ears ringing at an even louder and higher pitch, and I saw the escaping Panhard explode in fireworks while still rolling backward. The blast waves stung my exposed skin like hard slaps. They were so shocking that I must have missed a few seconds while the twin diesels were cranking up, all 8,000 horsepower coming on line unheard and unnoticed—at any rate, they were now running! Dansekker had said to wait five seconds before cutting the bowline. But when had the engines started?

The bowline was stretched so taut that it was humming like a guitar

string, and when I dropped the ax blade to cut it, both sides shot away from my feet with bullwhip cracks. The Storm was surging back from the pier in reverse, her stern angling away, her steel bow scraping concrete in a grinding tear.

I ran past the superstructure and put the ax down while deciding which fifty-caliber to grab. The Storm was reversing to port; the end of the first pier was coming up fast. Back on the main quay, the two Panhards were Roman candles. While I was looking down the fairway between the piers, the Bofors barked a single time and the bridge of the pilot boat exploded. The gun barked again, but this time I didn't see the target.

I had a fifty-caliber ready to fire on each side of the ship, but where was the more immediate threat? As I dashed across the deck, I literally ran into Tala who was heading inside the superstructure. Her eyes were alive with excitement that said we would talk later when things were less hectic.

I grabbed the grips of the port fifty and swung the barrel forward, looking for targets. The Storm missed the end of the first pier by bare meters while still charging in reverse, then the engines quieted a notch, and when they came back to full roar our rearward motion stopped and she began to surge forward, her bow slowly coming up out of the water.

Somebody grabbed my shoulder from behind, and I turned around. It was Kam.

He yelled, "Take care of my sister!"

"What?" I yelled back. Yelling was the only way to be heard over the engines, especially with partially deafened ears. Yelling and lip reading.

"Take care of Tala! I'm going back to look for my father. I'll find out what happened to Pat and Bert, and I'll help them if I can." He put out his right hand, I took mine away from the Browning, and we shook. He pumped my hand a few times and let go, backed up a step and gave me a surfer's mock salute, then turned and ran aft between the RIBs and leapt high, both arms windmilling.

Our foamy wake was only fifty meters from the main seawall jetty on our starboard side. Swimming to the jetty would be the easy part. Then he would have a half kilometer of boulder hopping before he would reach the tip of Cape Zerhoun, and then even more boulders all the way to the concrete spillway, if that was where he was going. I hoped that he hadn't lost his Glock during the leap the way he'd lost Bert's bolt cutters, but I knew that with or without a pistol he would come out all right. If Bert and Pat were still

alive, if they'd made it down the wall of the fortress, Kamal Abidar would find them if anybody could. I hadn't seen his walkie-talkie since we'd left Fort Zerhoun, but I guessed that he'd cached it somewhere along the way in order to contact his father.

We passed the end of each ship pier down our port side at better than twenty knots and still accelerating, throwing monster wakes into the harbor. Nobody fired at us and so I kept my fingers off the triggers, but then our Bofors started banging away again, this time making single shots, and I noticed that a conflagration was breaking out on the terraces above the port. The fuel tanks were exploding and burning: Simon Dansekker was using his Bofors gun to make a shiny object for everyone else to fixate on during our most critical half minute. The sound of the bow gun was far more tolerable from behind the superstructure than it had been standing on the foredeck two meters to the side of that ferocious muzzle blast!

The Storm drove southward, the rock jetty flashing past our starboard side. On the port side the end of each successive ship pier was wider than the last, with specialized bulk material loading machinery and tower cranes for cargo containers on some of them. I was standing behind the Ma Deuce on the port side with my hands on both grips, its barrel aimed well forward, when the Bofors gun began sustained firing, making better than four industrial-scale thunderclaps per second and not stopping, and I saw successive explosions along the end of the last pier. Before we reached it, the Storm carved a turn to starboard and after about ten seconds of nonstop firing the automatic cannon on the bow went silent, its targets lost astern in the sector that it could not cover.

By then I was in easy fifty-caliber range of the end of the last pier, and I could see that the sandbagged and bunkered fortress guarding the mouth of Port Zerhoun was already a smoking ruin, with the turrets of several armored vehicles belching flames and a blockhouse turned to Swiss cheese and rubble. To fortify the mouth of the port, the cartel had embedded Panhards behind dirt-filled barrels and sandbag walls on the end of the pier, leaving only their turrets exposed. The Bofors gun had destroyed each of them before the Panhards could be manned up and get their 90mm cannons on the unexpected fast-moving target.

I saw movement atop a lookout tower and sent a stream of red tracers into it. As the Storm swung out to sea, I held the triggers back and raked the end of the pier from side to side. I was just trying to keep the barrel level to

make hits along the top of the sandbag wall to discourage any last-minute heroics. That was as good as aiming got under those conditions, and I ran through most of the belt taking long bursts, empty brass and disintegrated links clattering all over the deck.

The Storm leaned into its hard turn to starboard. I didn't want to risk hitting the RIBs by sweeping the gun barrel across them, so I let go and ran to the starboard gun, swung it behind and on target, and held the triggers back as we passed through the mouth of the jetties and entered the open Atlantic. I poured tracers into the end of the pier until it was out of effective range. With the Storm running at its full thirty knots, the bow had lifted up on plane and the stern had sunk down, so the RIBs had dropped below my new line of fire. This meant that both fifty-calibers could be brought to bear against a pursuing enemy that was directly astern, more evidence of Dansekker's thorough planning.

Outside the jetties there was enough swell to give the Storm a bit of rise and fall. It was an old familiar feeling that filled me with immeasurable relief. Morocco was diminishing behind me, and the open sea was ahead, growing larger. The live ocean was beneath my feet—I had once again escaped the land and its troubles. Our wake was a glowing green highway as the Storm's hull and propellers churned a trillion tiny marine organisms into momentary bioluminescence.

I watched until I was sure nobody was pursuing us, then I let go of the Browning and made my way inside. I stood at the foot of the short ladder up to the bridge to savor the moment. Hank was standing in the center, his beefy hands on the brass wheel. Dansekker was standing to Hank's right near the firing controls for the Bofors gun, the chain still around his ankle. Tala stood to Hank's left, holding a grab rail with one hand and the VHF mike with the other, her hips wedged into the forward corner. She was speaking animatedly into the mike, her eyes afire. I had no idea what she was telling the port captain and anybody else listening on that channel, but whatever it was, it made her very happy to say it. I was about to climb up and join the celebration of our successful escape when I had a sudden thought—Victor!

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I ran to the bow of the port RIB. The folded tarp still covered Victor up to his chest. His eyes were fixed and unblinking, staring skyward to the east, no

longer toward the moon. As I reached across and touched his shoulder, I felt a chill and just *knew* he was gone. I laid my fingers across his carotid artery and confirmed the absence of a pulse. I thought about CPR combined with warming, somehow, but gave the idea up as wishful thinking. He had passed some time before, he had died while I had gone off into another world and forgot about him.

I leaned across the bow tube and stared at my old friend. He had fallen into the sleep from which there is no waking while gazing at the night sky. An underlying heart condition, overexertion, exhaustion, and stress, finished off with a dash of hypothermia, adding up to a heart that beat no more.

Yes, Victor, my old friend, it had really meant something.

While I leaned across the bow tube and watched him, the engine roar lessened and our speed dropped from about thirty knots to perhaps half that, and the ship lowered its bow to a more even trim. At cruising speed the noise level was unobjectionable, more like that of a megayacht than a rampaging pocket warship.

I closed Victor's eyelids with two fingertips and pulled up the tarp to cover his face so that no one else would suffer my shock. I would let the others know about his passing, but first I wanted to be alone and just think for a while. I'd seen more than enough of the Storm's aft deck, and I didn't want to join the others on the bridge and ruin their celebratory mood. And I wanted to look ahead, not back, so I went around the superstructure and out onto the bow.

The swells were negligible, there were no whitecaps, so the ship had an easy motion and no spray wet the deck. I sat well forward on her narrow bow, the engines nearly inaudible far behind and below. The Storm's long, empty foredeck held its own stark beauty. From bridge to bow, fifteen meters of steel had been welded into a triangular knife made to split the ocean, and I was sitting out near the tip. There was nothing on deck ahead of the Bofors gun that might hamper its barrel from lowering to engage small close-range targets, not even lifelines.

The horizon was clear and the Atlantic breeze was pure as we chased the setting moon. With nothing in view but sky and ocean, I did an inventory of names and faces. Victor had just passed away. Kam had leapt into the wake and returned to his native country. Hank and Tala were with Dansekker on the bridge. Gino was down in the engine room with Henrik. Bert and Pat were in God's hands and their outlook was grim, but there was a chance that

they were escaping and evading north to the king's territory.

Then it hit me: not one of Colonel Rainborow's original team was on the Storm coming out of Morocco. Not one! For that matter, most of them had not even made it *to* Morocco. But seventy-two Irish, English, Spanish, and other girls were on the Storm and heading back to a life of freedom instead of into the hellish future of sex slavery. I knew that Rainborow himself would say, *You can't argue with success, laddie,* and grin his impish grin with his blue lasers firing. I knew that he would be well satisfied with the mission's outcome despite its high cost. Rainborow was a soldier's soldier, and the mission would always come first. What surprised men like him was surviving it to such a ripe old age in the first place.

My uniform had dried to merely damp. Although I wasn't eager for company, I was shivering, so I went back into the superstructure. Inside, the sound level was quite tolerable, and I warmed up as soon as I was out of the breeze. Hank was still behind the wheel, but his hands were in his pockets. The ship was running on an electromagnetic compass autopilot, twentieth-century technology that still worked.

As before, Dansekker stood to the right, Tala to the left, but there was room for a few more. The bridge was more than twice as wide and deep as the cramped doghouse on the Atlas, and at this cruising speed it was also much quieter than the landing craft had been. By comparison, the Storm must have seemed like a luxury yacht to Big Hank. I mounted the bridge and went to the left, between him and Tala.

They greeted my appearance with smiles and Hank said, "So, we all made it out, except for Pat and Bert."

"And Victor. My friend Victor has passed away."

"Victor has died?" Tala asked with a stricken look.

"Yes, he is gone from us."

"How can he die?" asked Tala. "He is a strong man, he was tied on the rope."

"I don't know how. Overexertion, hypothermia, or maybe his heart. Something."

Dansekker asked, "Was this Victor a very close friend of yours?"

"Oh yeah, for many voyages around the North and South Atlantic. His name was Victor Alemán, and he was from Argentina. He was a medical doctor and a surgeon, and he saved my life more than a few times. He was educated in Germany, and he spoke four languages fluently. Rainborow

chartered my schooner back in Ireland just to get his team to the Canaries. I only volunteered for Morocco because Victor decided to go. That was after their medic was killed by pirates off Portugal, but that's another story. Do you remember the original plan? Rainborow's plan with Hank's landing craft and three military trucks? In and out the same night?"

Dansekker smiled. "He told me that same fairy tale back in Rotterdam."

"But you know what? None of Rainborow's team is on your ship. Not one! But even so, it's still his mission. Without Rainborow, there would have been no mission at all."

"He was one hell of a pitchman," Hank agreed. "I know three different boat captains he bamboozled into volunteering for his fairy tale. And two of them still have their boats."

"As far as we know."

"Aw, hell, Dan, what are you worried about? You left your boat on a ship mooring behind Alegranza with your old Chinaman to mind her. She'll be there, all right."

Dansekker produced a chart from a wide, shallow drawer and folded it to show the coast of Morocco and the northern Canary Islands, then he drew our course with a pencil and parallel rules, did a little mathematical figuring on scrap paper, and then adjusted the autopilot knob south a few degrees from southwest.

I didn't bother to correct Hank about Hung's ethnicity; what would be the point? Instead, I turned to Tala. The full moon was still hanging above the horizon, sending its shimmering silver beams down the swells toward our starboard bow. Her right and my left hand were on a brass grab rail on the back edge of the dash. Grab rails had been placed at strategic locations throughout the ship, which had clearly been designed to run at high speed through big waves with sailors hanging on for dear life.

I asked her, "Did you know your brother jumped off?"

She looked at me. "He said to me he is going back to our father, and to look for Pat and Bert."

So she already knew. "How are the girls doing?"

"I looked on them a few minutes before. Now the air is warm down the below. Nobody is damaged or injured. They have learned to find water in the little kitchen. Now they are sitting on the little beds and on the floor. Oh, and when I am down the below, they are singing like so many angels."

"Tala, tomorrow we'll come to a small island, where I hope my sailboat

is waiting."

"This Alegranza, of saying Hank."

"Yes, Alegranza. And when we arrive there, I'm going to leave the Storm. You can come with me, or you can stay here with Captain Dansekker."

She looked into my eyes and said, "And I am making the choosing?"

"Yes."

"Then I am choosing to go with you."

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The boat was running on autopilot, and an exhausted Hank Landry had sat down on a folding jump seat at the back of the bridge, then fallen asleep with his head resting in his hands and his elbows on his knees. A sailor could sleep anywhere, that's what they said. Dansekker mentioned a little sea berth just behind the bridge to starboard, and Tala lay down there, since Hank didn't respond to the offer of a bunk. The space was far too small to have been his captain's cabin, which had to be down below.

For a while, just Dansekker and I were standing watch on either side of the wheel, driven by an unseen autopilot ghost, the Storm running darkened ship and making no electronic emissions. That meant no radar, no radios, and no running lights. Just one hundred twenty feet of steel running a line as straight as a Kansas freight train across the ocean. According to the glowing analog dials, the Storm was driving to the south-southwest at eighteen knots and an easy eleven hundred RPM. The full moon went orange and then red as it disappeared, and when it was gone we drove on by starlight, but only for a short time until the dawn broke behind us.

We had a clean view all around us, which we both checked carefully: not a speck broke the crisp new Saturday horizon. And just like that, Morocco was gone into our memories.

I asked him, "After Alegranza, you're going to Arrecife on Lanzarote?"

"Yes, I will. I'll meet the Spanish navy there and turn the girls over. I cannot feed them, but I know the Spanish can."

"Yeah, I'm sure they can." I remembered the Spanish frigate. The girls would be in good hands. "Have you been there before, to Arrecife?"

"Never, but I have the charts. Listen, Dan, I cannot anchor at Alegranza and I do not want to take a mooring. The Storm is like a motorcycle: she is steady when she is moving, but she rolls like a pig at anchor in a swell. I will launch one of my boats to get you back to your schooner."

"Tala is going with me. And Victor, of course."

"Of course."

Hank was now awake and listening. He looked up from the jump seat and said, "I'm staying on the ship, so I can drive the RIB and bring it back." The big Cajun had a firm grasp of maritime logistics, which he'd been demonstrating to Captain Dansekker, who was severely short-handed, down

to just himself and his enfeebled engineer, Henrik. Dansekker would need Hank's help just to get his ship tied to a pier in Arrecife. The writing was on the wall: he couldn't fulfill his Nigerian security contract without a new crew, and the Cajun was presently without a boat or a livelihood. Hank would need to earn substantial gold to get back into the captain game on his own vessel, and being first mate of the Storm could accomplish that and more.

Only Simon Dansekker could have been operating the sophisticated Bofors gun while the Storm ran at full speed out of Port Zerhoun, so Hank Landry must have impressed his future employer with his wheel and throttle work. I had the feeling that Señora Landry, back at Atlas HQ in Las Palmas, was going to be a sailor's widow after the two captains raised a fresh crew and headed south to Nigeria. And I doubted that any "Mohammedans" would be included among them.

It was full daylight when Gino came up onto the bridge and I introduced him to the captain. I pointed out Dansekker's leg chain and their similar circumstances of forced labor under Muslim management. He said, "I cut the chain from Henrik. I use this that I find in a place where he tell me to look." He held up a pair of bolt cutters. "Henrik is sleeping now; he is in the little cabin in front of the engine room."

Dansekker asked him, "Will he be all right?"

"I think he is worse than me when I am on the pirate ship, but nothing is killing him now. You want to break the chain?"

"Of course. Thank you." In a moment the lock was cut.

"Gino," I said, "Victor has passed away."

"I know. I see him in the boat. I am very sad for this."

"And so am I. Gino, now you have a choice to make. The Storm is going to stop at Alegranza, where Tala and I will leave. You can come with us and stay on Rebel Yell, or you can stay on the Storm and go to Arrecife on Lanzarote. Maybe you can work your way home from there, or maybe you'll end up in a Spanish refugee camp or something like that. But it's for you to decide."

Captain Dansekker made his own pitch. "I can use your help, Gino. You are welcome to stay on board with Hank and Henrik. I still have a contract for a job in Nigeria, I just need to gather a new crew. If you stay on board, you will be a full mate and my second engineer, and I will pay you in gold."

"Nigeria?" Gino chuckled. "Thank you for asking me, but I want to go with Dan and Tala."

I managed to get a nap in the sea berth behind the bridge, after Tala awoke and found me sleeping on my feet, leaning against the dash. We all took turns in the sea berth behind the bridge and the cabins down below, and even Hank got in a few hours of horizontal shut-eye.

The girls were given the run of the ship, but we ordered them for their own safety not to explore forward of the bridge, where there were no lifelines —at least not while we were running through the ocean at eighteen knots. I chatted with Portia on the bridge. She was a blue-eyed stunner even in her school uniform, and nearly as tall as Tala.

She asked about the SAS sergeant major and the Irish fella from Fort Zerhoun, and I told her what Bert and Pat had done. I asked her, when she finally got home, to tell her grandfather what had happened to Colonel Rainborow and all the others who made the ultimate sacrifice, from the senior medic killed by the pirates to Victor in the port and everyone else in between, and for him to please not forget them, nor their families, as they welcomed the girls home.

I saw pair number thirty-six again as well. Jane and Clare were distraught at the news of Victor's death; they hadn't realized what an ordeal it had been for him anchoring the rope line just behind them.

Clare said, "This whole story has to be written down. People should read about it. It can't just be forgotten. It can't be blotted out just because they don't make books anymore, it can't. Someday they'll make books again, books and movies, and this story should be one of them. Nobody should ever forget Victor, nor the two who stayed back at the castle so we could get away."

"Why don't you write it?"

"We are," Jane replied for her pal. "We already decided. We're going to write it all down, both of us, so we don't forget a thing. We heard what you said to Portia, and we're going to make *sure* that nobody forgets. If you give us a list of their names, the ones that died, and all of your names, everybody on the mission, we'll make sure that Portia's grandfather won't forget. That nobody will forget. And Clare can draw like you can't believe. She's going to make the illustrations."

"I've already drawn them in my mind," Clare said. "Starting with that castle and dungeon."

"Fort Zerhoun," I said. "It's called Fort Zerhoun."

Jane said, "You know that a miracle happened last night."

“Yes, it was a miracle that we got away,” I agreed.

“No, I mean a *real miracle*. The rope. Something miraculous happened with the rope. On the steepest ground, or climbing over the rocks, it was always as steady as a handrail. It was not like rope at all; it was like an iron railing.”

And poor Victor had anchored the back end.

Dansekker provided them with a notebook and pencil to begin their own mission, and I gave them those names of Rainborow’s team that I could remember. Most of them I had not gotten close to before their demise on the Atlas, and some of them I knew by only one name, and one, to my regret, who I could only describe. Hank gave them the names of his two crew that had been lost with the Atlas. Gino told them about the Swedish family from the captured sailboat, and some of his own story. Enough for Jane and Clare to begin.

Sometime in the morning we were visited by dozens of spinner dolphins that easily kept pace with the Storm and specialized in turning airborne cartwheels and making twisting flips and dives around our bow. Our warnings to stay off the foredeck were forgotten as the girls ran along both sides of the superstructure, oblivious to the danger of absent forward lifelines after what they had lived through. I watched them from the bridge with Tala, Gino, Hank and Dansekker. The sight of the girls jumping and waving and the dolphins leaping and spinning made every sacrifice worth it. It had truly meant something to bring these girls out of Port Zerhoun.

His mobility no longer restricted by a chain, Dansekker shot a noon sight with his sextant from the open flying bridge atop the inside bridge, and I accompanied him up there. In full daylight his eyes shone the same blue-green as the sunlit sea. After calculating our position at his navigation table, he made a small course correction to the autopilot.

We reached Isla Alegranza mid-afternoon on Saturday. No wonder the mutineers had kept their former captain alive: Simon Dansekker could make pinpoint landfalls. In the era after the demise of readily available GPS, the open ocean was once again the exclusive domain of an elite caste of celestial navigators.

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We rounded the gray cliffs of Alegranza and passed Rebel Yell close enough

for me to wave to Tran Hung, who stood on the bow dressed in his usual faded black pajamas. The Atlantic was as calm as it can be in that latitude in November, and even more so out of the trades in the lee of an island. Dansekker had slowed his ship to just a few knots, still set on autopilot southwest toward the open sea. He came out onto the aft deck and prepared to operate the hydraulic crane while Hank readied the port RIB's lifting cables and got the towing bridle sorted out.

I placed my rifle, pistol, sling bag, and other kit into the RIB, and so did Gino. Both of us had stripped off our uniform tops, socks, and boots, leaving us in our tan T-shirts and desert camo trousers. The shirts and boots went into the boat with the rest of our meager possessions. Victor's unfired M-16 was already lying next to his shrouded body. Tala had coiled and tied the fifty-meter rope and she tossed that in as well. The Berber knife stayed on her left hip, where it had been since I met her.

The towing bridle had hefty silver clips like oversized carabiners spliced to its ends for easy connecting and disconnecting. Dansekker lifted the RIB with the crane, swung it out, and lowered it into the ocean while Hank tended the towing line on a forward cleat so that the big rubber boat came to rest against the port stern of the ship.

There seemed to be an acre of open deck space with the RIB in the water, but it was soon filled by the girls. Dansekker came over to the side rail to see us off. He shook our hands, thanking us for the miracle of our appearance, but then we all agreed that our gratitude had to be directed much higher. The girls crowded back on the aft deck to say good-bye to us and pay their last respects to Victor, now wrapped in the tarp in the bow of the RIB. I heard many of them speak of "the miracle of the rope," often with tears in their eyes, as they looked down upon him.

Hank was remaining on the Storm, and most of the girls hardly knew Gino and me, the roamers behind their rope line, but Tala was now one of their sisterhood, and each of the girls squeezed in to give her a last happy, tearful hug. I shook hands with Jane, Clare, and Portia, reminding her again to please make a full report to her grandfather.

Hank rigged the rope-and-plank ladder from the transom over the side above the RIB. At the Storm's slow forward speed the two hulls were glued together, gray rubber pressed comfortably against gray steel. We climbed down to the RIB's big inflated side tube and then hopped onto its aluminum deck. Victor was alone in the concave bow; Tala, Gino, and I stood on the

flatter deck alongside the center console. We unclipped the slack lifting cables and Dansekker raised the crane arm.

Standing behind the console, Hank lowered the big outboard and got it running while we were still on side-tow. Up on the Storm, Dansekker pulled a long cord, releasing a pelican-hook from our bowline and setting us loose. The RIB cleanly detached and we were under our own power. Hank stood behind the wheel, his knees bent as he kept his considerable mass vertical and balanced. It was hard to believe that he had never run this boat before.

I held a grab rail on the side of the console and said, “Do me a favor, Hank. Take us around them, slowly.”

The ocean was like a pond in the lee south of Alegranza. The RIB circled the little warship at idle speed while the girls lined the sides and waved, all of them singing.

You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains,
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas.
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders,
You raise me up, to more than I can be.

It was another of those moments when every sacrifice and loss was pushed out of my mind. At the same time, I wept inside that Victor was not alive to see the girls above us, so happy in their freedom. I would have to doubly remember the moment on his behalf.

After going around twice, Hank steered for Rebel Yell, waiting on its mooring a few hundred meters away. On the way over, and still moving at idle speed, he said, “I think he’s a good captain.”

“Yeah, I think so, too. Oh, I meant to ask you: Who had the wheel last night coming out of the port?”

“Dansekker reversed away from the pier, and then he let me have it. Both engines were set at max RPM. He firewalled them sumbitches from the git-go.”

“How did you manage not to hit the jetties making a full-speed turn like that?”

“I could see everything because of the full moon. And he turned on the radar for a few sweeps while we rolled out, so I had the picture. Dansekker knew we could cut that turn at full speed, and he was right. He told me when to spin the wheel over, and I did.”

“I had a real nice view from back on the fifties.”

“Yeah, I heard them after he quit with the big gun.”

“That was one wild ride out of there.”

“It was a wild one, all right. The whole mission, really. I lost my boat and my crew, but I reckon all in all it was worth it to get them girls sprung loose. I mean, just look at ’em. Who wouldn’t think it was all worth it? Nobody with a heart or a soul. And you and me, at least we’re still alive, so we come out pretty good compared to the others.”

“Good luck on the Storm, or wherever you sail.” I put my hand out to him, looking into his brown eyes.

He shook it, looking back into mine. “You too, skipper. I’m sure we’ll cross wakes again somewhere down the line. Front me a bottle if I’m short, and I’ll do the same for you.”

“You got it, Hank.”

He shook hands with Gino and Tala, then brought the side of the RIB smartly against Rebel’s swim platform. Up on deck, Hung waited to grab the bowline, but his help was not needed, because Hank kept the boat pressed against the platform with small wheel and throttle moves. I jumped aboard to steady the RIB in place, then Gino and I dragged Victor’s body over the side tube and onto the platform. Tala passed over the weapons and gear, then climbed aboard and we were done with the Storm, Captain Simon Dansekker, and Captain Hank Landry.

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The RIB slid away, Hank giving us an arm motion that was half a wave and half a salute. Dansekker had turned his little ship around to pass my schooner close by, and he and Hank soon had the RIB stowed in its chocks up on the aft deck. The girls were all waving to us as the Storm accelerated to cruising speed and powered off to the south and Lanzarote, visible on the horizon. The Spanish would take good care of them and get them home; I had no worries on that end. Big Hank and his M-16 would keep Simon Dansekker true to his word until they reached Arrecife, if his word was still at all suspect.

The three of us were ready to lift Victor's shrouded body from the platform up onto the aft deck, but Tran Hung, looming above us, made his vehement opposition known with ugly scowls and waving-off gestures. He already knew Gino, the Italian we had saved from the pirates. And the captain arriving with a new woman in tow was nothing out of the ordinary. But the prospect of bringing a corpse aboard Rebel Yell freaked out the elderly Vietcong.

"So, Victor dead," he stated flatly. "How he die? Bullet?"

"No, just exhaustion and hypothermia, I think. Too tired and too cold."

"You meaning too old. But I know he come back."

As I stood on the platform, my shoulders were at the level of his feet. The sea was so calm that I didn't need to hang onto the toe rail. "Victor died looking up at the sky, and I'm going to bury him up there." I pointed at the cliffs of Alegranza. I had once studied them with Victor from the bow of the Atlas.

"Good," Hung replied. "You bury him on land. Very bad luck bring him on boat, maybe keep ghost of him. Tomorrow you bury on mountain, ghost of him very happy up there."

There was no arguing Hung out of some of his beliefs, so I let him win this one. A few quick turns of line ensured that Victor's body could not slide off the platform if the weather worsened and Rebel Yell began to dance on the mooring.

We passed the rifles and other loose gear up to Hung, and I said, "We're starving to death. How soon can you feed us?"

"How soon you at table? You coming back on very lucky day: I catch too many big fish." I knew he was making amends for his abruptness about

Victor’s body.

I led Tala through the pilothouse and down the ladder. We sat at the back of our dinette facing Gino. I told her that Hung was our cook and boat guard, but I didn’t introduce them, because he didn’t bother with introductions when the captain brought a new lady on board. Until a new woman had spent a month or two aboard, they were utterly interchangeable in his eyes. And it had been a few years since that had happened.

This was Tala’s first time in Rebel’s galley, and her eyes drank in every homey detail. Hung brought over chunks of already cooked local white fish, his own special dipping sauce and house fried rice, along with a metal pitcher of tea from the fridge. The fish tasted like lobster, the rice was the best I had ever eaten, and the chilled tea had never been fresher or sweeter, but I knew that this was a classic case of hunger being the best seasoning. We wolfed down and guzzled these first offerings while Hung fired up the stove and then kept busy putting new dishes in front of us. With satiation came drowsiness, and sleep would have to come soon, but the three of us were much too filthy for resting on clean linens.

I said to Gino when he was getting up from the table, “You already know the boat; use the shower in the forward head. Look around in the lockers, you’ll find soap and towels and some clean clothes to wear. Anything you find up there, it’s yours if you want it.” Meaning Victor’s old clothing and whatnot, which went unstated.

He said, “Okay, boss.” He had learned to use the word on the voyage, and I didn’t correct him. Boss was fine, if that’s what he wanted to call me. He went forward over the remaining fuel drums after sliding open the door to the cargo area.

Hung had already disappeared; he knew the deal when I had a new lady on board. When both of them were gone, I was finally ready to offer Tala a tour of my end of Rebel Yell. I rose from the dinette table and said, “You can come with me if you’d like to wash up. Believe me, you are perfectly safe anywhere on my boat. Let me show you my end while Gino is taking a shower up front. Then you can decide if you’d like to sit down for a bath or stand up for a shower.”

Unmistakably curious, she followed me aft through the starboard-side passageway behind the dinette. Of course, the Berber knife was resting on her left hip.

“On this side is the engine room, and Hung lives on this side.” His

curtain was partway back, so Tala could see his compact cabin, with its bunk, seat, shelves, and lockers taking up three meters along the passageway on the way to my own quarters. Many visitors had compared his space to a passenger train's compact sleeper cabin, with clever conversions made by folding and unfolding the hinged furnishings.

I opened the louvered wooden door across the end of the passageway, and Tala followed me inside. My aft cabin occupied the five-meter width of Rebel Yell's stern, and was nearly as large from front to back. My schooner looked like a workboat on the outside, but my aft quarters were handsomely appointed in teak, leather, and brass. From just inside the door she could see my double bed, lockers, and bookshelves across to port; the desk, office, and navigation seat to starboard; and the two brass portholes that opened through the transom. All the way around to port and forward was the door to my private en-suite head, which I opened for her inspection.

"This is my bathroom, which English sailors call a head, but you might know it as the *toilette*."

She nodded, her eyes wide. The brightly painted bathroom was surprisingly large, occupying the area from the port side of the engine room all the way to the hull and forward to the galley's aft bulkhead. Besides the toilet and tub, there was also a white porcelain sink with a mirror above it, along with towel racks and cabinets and drawers. Tala's eyes darted all about, taking in the details. We were both grimy and itching in our damp, salty, dirty clothes, and the bath presented a welcome prospect to both of us.

My private bathtub was a steel box welded to the side of Rebel's hull; in fact, the outboard side of the tub *was* the hull, with an opening brass porthole at eye level when sitting down. Over a meter wide and long, the tub's curved bottom was above the waterline so that it would drain into the ocean like any galley or head sink. A permanent ladder made climbing in and out of the sitting-only tub a breeze. Faired smooth and porcelainized with glossy white enamel paint, it rivaled the tubs in many megayachts. I knew from past experience that two people sharing a physical attraction could more than comfortably fit inside, if they were clever with their leg placement.

I watched her study the tub, sink, and vanity. "You can take a bath here if you would like, or you can take a shower up in the front of the boat after Gino is finished. But I'm going to take the first bath, and make sure everything is working correctly." Then I led her back to the galley and told her that she could wait either there or up on deck.

Shaving off a week of stubble with a fifty-year-old German straight razor and a pathetic excuse for soap lather was a miserable exercise, and I nicked myself a few times. From experience, I knew that most of the bleeding would stop by the time I was finished with my bath.

When I was sitting inside, the rounded top edges rose to my shoulders, so that even if the boat was rolling, water never sloshed out. I didn't fill the tub; instead, to save water I used the showerhead and handle on its flexible hose. When I was finished and had climbed out and dried off, I brushed my teeth for about five times longer than usual to catch up, and then carefully brushed my hair. I even slapped on a bit of rarely used cologne, then dressed in khaki shorts and my favorite blue polo shirt, one that matched my eyes.

When I was finally presentable, I set about making my bathroom ready for a female guest. Inside a rarely opened drawer I located a few fragrant bars of soap and small bottles and tubes of shampoo, hair conditioner, body wash, and perfumes. I made sure that a washcloth, razor, back brush, and natural sponge were in easy reach of the tub, and toothbrushes, hair brushes, and combs were on the vanity by the sink.

Tala would need new clothes after she'd bathed, so I retrieved a duffel bag from a locker in the passageway and spread the contents across my bed. After giving myself another once-over in my bathroom mirror, checking that my shaving cuts had stopped bleeding, and brushing my hair yet again, I went topside and found her sitting in the cockpit.

She looked me up and down, even sniffed me as she rose, then followed me cautiously down through the galley and once again back into my personal lair, as if she expected at any moment to have to either fight me off or succumb to my lust, but she need not have worried. Instead, I showed her the folded clothing laid out on my bed.

Over the years Rebel Yell had accumulated random sundresses, jerseys, T-shirts, blouses, halter tops, skirts, shorts, slacks, swimsuits, sandals, hats, and underwear for both top and bottom. It was an accidental collection of women's wear, but more than enough to cover the basic requirements. On a rotating basis, that duffel bag had provided a welcome change of garments for the occasional stray waif or wench who had found herself stranded aboard Rebel Yell without luggage for any numbers of reasons, some of them even legitimate.

Tala had been wearing the same black tactical pants and sapphire-blue jersey, now torn in several places and smeared with grime, since the Third

Valley, three days before. Wearing her unwashed escape clothes again after she bathed was not an option she would wish to entertain.

She appraised the wardrobe arrayed on my bed, and then stared at me with a cocked eyebrow. “Why do you have so many clothings for ladies? Do you have a woman, a wife in some other place? Maybe did you have a wife before?”

“No, no wife before. I have never been married. These are just some things that women left on my boat over the years. I also have some clothes for children, and extra clothes for men. Something that one visitor leaves behind can solve a problem for the next. You can choose anything that you might like to wear, anything you see. These are just old clothes, but they’re clean and some of them should fit you.”

“I’m sorry, thank you. It is all very good, and I am sure there is something I can wear.” She moved around me to look at more of the collection spread across my bed.

“I’ll leave you to it, then. Of course you can lock the bathroom door, and the cabin door as well. There’s a lock on the inside of both, a bolt that you push across. You’re safe on my boat; you don’t have to be afraid. Not of me, not of anybody. Nobody will hurt you here.” I backed out of my cabin, closing the door to the passageway as I left.

Tala was lithe and spry, long and lean, curvy but not buxom. I had admired her fully clothed legs, derriere, hips, waist, and chest during the past three days, and in a few minutes her bare body was going to be planted in my bathtub, wet down and soaped up. But would I ever see the naked Tala Abidar in the flesh? So far I had an excellent idea about her figure, and no doubt about her fitness, but I’d seen no exposed skin between her neck and her wrists or ankles. Many women raised in a Muslim culture were stuck with lifelong hang-ups about revealing their uncovered bodies to men.

I was standing in the cockpit enjoying the start of sunset when I heard Tala’s voice floating up through the partially-open deck hatch above the sink in my head. “Captain, can you please come down the below? I must to show you something.” She could see me from her angle, but I could not see her.

It would be a massive understatement to say that I was eager to see what she had chosen to wear. Would Tala steer in the Mother Hubbard direction, and cover herself again from neck to toes? The same 28-year-old French-Berber woman who had refused to cover her face and hair even in Muslim Morocco? I knocked on my cabin door and she said to come in, that it was

open, but when I entered she was nowhere to be seen. The louvered door to the head was still shut, but I could hear her moving around inside.

The bathroom door finally clicked open and she took a few tentative steps into my cabin to stand near the foot of my bed. She was wearing a pink terrycloth bathrobe, a belt of the same material cinched snuggly around her waist. Her face was scrubbed clean, and maybe for the first time I appreciated how naturally attractive she was, with her wide-set eyes and high cheekbones. Pretty, even, but striking was also a word that came to mind, especially her eyes that were the color of dark honey. Instead of being in a braid, her damp hair was brushed out and fell down her back. She said, "Thank you very much for the hot water, and for the soap and shampoo."

"You're welcome to use the bath anytime you like, if we have enough fresh water."

"Captain—"

"Not captain. You can call me Dan, or Danny."

She looked around the wood-paneled cabin, inspecting my quarters, by far the most luxuriously appointed fraction of my old trading schooner. She said, "Where I am from, *Danny*, many people would believe that you possess me now. That I am your woman, because I am possessed by your right hand."

I was taken aback by this unexpected observation. "And where I am from, we don't believe in possessing people. Nobody owns anybody on this boat. You can sleep anyplace you like. And you can leave anytime you like as well. Nobody is a prisoner on this boat."

She stared at me in a calculating manner and said, "Your bed is very large." She swept her hand toward the collection of women's clothing spread across it. "I am thinking there have been many ladies in your bed, and also in your *baignoire*, your bathing tub."

"Not as many as you might believe."

She had a serious look. "It has no importance. When I am down the below in your boat, then I am wishing to be with you here—but only if you wish for me as well. But before you say to me your answer, there is something I am showing you."

Tala moved to stand in the middle of the cabin, facing my navigation table and desk on the starboard side, her back to the side of my bed and to me. She loosened her belt and let the robe slip off her bare shoulders, catching it around her waist. She held the robe with one hand and swept her hair around to the front with the other, exposing her entire back to me. Her

immaculately clean skin was crosshatched with fine white lines. Some of the lash marks continued onto her upper right arm. I guessed that this was why she'd worn long sleeves. I knew a thing or two about old scar tissue. She had more than I did, but none like the one across my right cheekbone, which I could never hide.

I spread my hands and gently touched her shoulders with all ten fingers, my thumbs resting along each side of her spine at the base of her neck. I leaned against the side of my bed as I slowly traced my fingertips down into the hollow at the small of her back and out the swell of her hips, where they touched her gathered robe. "I can't feel them at all. Your skin is perfectly smooth. Can you still feel them?"

"No, I cannot. My back feels the same as any other place of my flesh."

"They're hardly noticeable," I lied. "If you get some sun on them, they'll disappear completely." This was a white lie, or maybe it wasn't even a lie at all. Some scars do disappear with time and sunlight.

I thought Tala was going to lift her robe to cover her back again, but instead she turned around, and when she did she had a look on her face that I had not seen before. Despite the feline magnetism of her golden eyes, I couldn't help glancing lower. Her breasts, while not quite as bountiful as the twin charms of Miss Sinead Devlin, were even lovelier. In fact, Tala had the most exquisitely formed breasts I'd seen since Cori Vargas, whose mother had been Miss Venezuela. While I gazed upon them in awe and wonderment, her chest raised goose flesh.

She said, "I am *very* happy because you touch me, Danny. *Very* happy. Before, I don't know what you might say when you look on my back. Perhaps you will think that I am *ruiné*, that I am too *ogly* for your bed."

When she reached for my shoulders, she let go of her robe and it fell to the cabin sole. I was already leaning against the side of my bed, and when she pushed me onto my back I gave no resistance. Tala followed me down and straddled me on her knees. Tilting her head, she first offered me her parted lips, her amber eyes burning into mine.

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We had our first breakfast together as the new crew. Tala and I slid into the dinette first, sitting across from one another, because Hung and Gino were both involved in the galley operation on the other side of the ladder. My new assistant cook and engineer had evidently found Victor's long-unused straight razors and scraped off his whiskers, so there were two newly clean-shaven bachelors aboard. And now that it was clean and brushed, I could see that Gino's dark hair had a natural wave to it.

While they shared the cooking, Tala and I held hands across the table, our eyes locked together. We had made love, slept entangled, and made love again, and then taken our first warm bath together just after dawn. I scarcely noticed what they prepared for us to eat. When we finished breakfast and the table was cleared, Hung placed a cigar box in front of me and said, "Victor have these when I make him ready for bury."

I opened the lid. Inside was his little Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver, cleaned and oiled, and Sergeant Major Tolbert's dive watch, with its paracord lanyard instead of a strap. I could add them to Bert's commando dagger and Pat's broken dungeon key as keepsakes of the mission. Not to mention three M-16s, a Glock 19 with a suppressor, and the fifty-meter rope.

Gino asked, "How high is the place we're going to climb for taking him for bury?"

"Not very. Less than a hundred meters, I'd guess. Just to the top of the cliffs we can see from here."

"Where is this place?" asked Tala.

"Come and I'll show you." I closed the box and we got up and moved to the cockpit, where I pointed out the beach we could land on and a possible route we might take to the top. Coming through the pilothouse, I'd grabbed my Steiner binoculars so we could study the terrain and geology in detail. Millions of years ago a slab of the ocean floor had been thrust up at an angle here. Volcanoes and earthquakes had taken their turns, along with patient erosion. The cliff went on for a mile in both directions and it was mostly vertical or nearly so, but many broken layers presented a lot for climbers to work with.

Tala studied the cliffs with the Steiners and said, "I do not think there is a problem."

“I don’t think so too,” said Gino when he had his turn with the binos. He had been emaciated a week before, but he was now taking on noticeable weight and muscle tone. Everything that had happened to him since his chain had been removed only seemed to make him stronger. And nobody could ever deny the quality of the food we’d eaten in Morocco.

“Can the three of us do it?” I asked, meaning, Can we haul Victor up there? It went without saying that Hung was remaining behind for this operation. He hadn’t even come on deck with us, having no interest in the cliffs of Alegranza.

“Of course we can,” Tala responded. “We can climb on a fort, we can escape from Zerhoun, I think we can do anything. If you want to elevate him *pour l'enterrer*, we are doing it.”

They never even hinted at the obvious alternatives. Why bother dragging Victor’s unknowing and unfeeling carcass up a cliff when we can bury him at sea in five minutes, without breaking a sweat? Good God, skipper, haven’t we already done enough climbing? Or how about maybe we bury him on the land, but down near the beach? I studied their faces for signs of crew discontent and found none.

Decision made, I put on my captain act. “Get the fifty-meter rope and your climbing gear. Bring some water. Enough for all day, a few liters each. Hung will show you where we keep our empty water bottles. When we’re ready, we’ll launch the RIB.”

We regrouped ahead of the pilothouse by our inflatable. Tala’s hair was again tied back into a single braid. She was wearing a black short-sleeve T-shirt and black stretch pants, both grab-bag selections. I was heartened to see that she had no compunction about showing off her figure, but there was also a practical element. Snug-fitting clothes are safer for rock climbing, with nothing loose to catch or snag. Gino and I both wore the same desert uniform trousers. They hadn’t been laundered, but they were perfectly suitable for the job at hand. Same boots, but clean, dry socks and fresh T-shirts. And both of us clean shaven, after a week of beard.

I brought a small folding shovel, which went into my daypack with my water bottles and binoculars. Tala already had a pack, and Gino had found one of Victor’s. I keep a bag of old leather sailing gloves for crew who arrive on board with soft, uncalloused hands. Fingerless, they are also useful when rock climbing, and Gino selected a pair that suited him, and so did I. Tala usually didn’t wear gloves at all; climbing lead, she wanted nothing between

her bare hands and the rock, and she said she already had her own pair for rappelling back down.

She was bringing her genuine climbing harness; Gino and I were using our improvised seats that we'd brought back with us from Fort Zerhoun. Today her Berber knife was nowhere to be seen, unless it was in her gray rucksack. Then I showed them my secret weapon for hoisting Victor up the cliffs: a ratcheting pulley block that could be set to rotate in only one direction and had teeth around the wheel to grip the rope.

My five-meter Avon rigid inflatable was a weak imitation of the Storm's pair of seven-meter raiding craft, but it was the biggest tender that I could fit on deck between the masts. Patches and all, the old rubber boat still held air, and it didn't require a crane to launch. The ocean in the lee of the island had some long, low swell but it was otherwise fairly calm, so it was a good opportunity for the skipper to show his new crew how we launched the RIB using our foremast boom to swing it out. Once it was splashed, we trailed it astern by its bowline, then pulled it up to the swim platform and tied it off to bring Victor's body aboard.

Hung had supplemented the tarp from the Storm with some old white sailcloth, and had then bound the package with worn-out line using a series of tight running hitches. The ends were somehow folded into box-like corners. He must have snuck down onto the swim platform while I was in deep sleep for him to have retrieved the watch and revolver and prepared Victor's body without my hearing a thing.

The old VC was nothing if not stealthy. Nobody else could cross the aft deck without waking me up. If Hung didn't want you to know he was around, you wouldn't, and he'd had the moon to work by. There was nothing he wouldn't do for Victor, alive or dead. He just didn't want Victor's ghost haunting Rebel Yell, so he had done his work outside the metal skin of our little ship, on the wooden swim platform. There was no discussing such matters with him; instead, I had learned to live with Hung's reality, which included ghosts.

The Avon's plywood center console folded forward when the boat was stowed on deck to give clearance to my foremast boom. Once I boarded from the swim platform I rocked it back, locked it in place, and checked the wheel and engine control cables. My ancient Evinrude 80 had an electric starter and she cranked up after a few coughs and snorts. My two companions joined me aboard the inflatable, and Hung made an appearance on the aft deck to cast us

off.

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It was only half a kilometer from the mooring to the black-sand beach. The shore had a steep gradient, but fortunately on that morning, there was no surf on the south shore of Alegranza, it being in the lee of the trades. When I beached the Avon, Gino jumped over the side with the bowline. He carried it toward a massive piece of driftwood timber, an old piling that was mostly buried in the sand. Someone had sledge-hammered iron spikes into the high end of the wood at opposing angles; they were rusty but still thick enough to be sound. I took it as a positive sign that local fishermen considered this beach safe enough for tying off their boats that they had bothered to create the heavy-duty cleat.

Gino made the bowline fast around the spikes, tying it so securely that deliberate human intervention would be required to remove it. My RIB with its engine was much too heavy for the three of us to drag up that sharp incline, so we would have to return before beach conditions changed and surf might be plunging onto it. In the present settled weather conditions, I estimated that we would have more than enough time to get Victor's body up the cliff and get back down. It was nearly high tide, so the boat might be stranded when we returned, but we would just have to deal with that potential complication when the time came.

The coarse black volcanic sand was cool while the beach was in the shade of the cliffs, but I knew it would be a different matter when we returned in the afternoon. Black sand becomes so scorching hot in the direct sun that it burns bare feet like hot coals. On Iwo Jima, the Marines had landed on just such a beach under Japanese artillery fire. The thought of those World War II Marines always came into my mind when I visited a barren volcanic island like Alegranza, and I gave thanks that at least nobody was shooting at us.

We slung on our packs, and I looped the coiled rope over my head so that it rested on my right shoulder and left hip. We carried Victor between us, with Gino and me at his shoulders and Tala supporting his feet. The taut running hitches encircling him meant we could grab hold anywhere. Somewhere in his unspoken past, my old Vietcong traveling companion must have learned how to dress combat fatalities in this manner for clandestine

removal to the rear, wherever that was in VC-land back in the day.

We carried him as far as we could, then we rested in a hollow between massive boulders and discussed our climbing strategy. We worked it out that Tala would lead each stage, taking the end of the rope with her, and then we would haul Victor up, using my ratchet block to reverse the process that had lowered the girls down the wall in the donkey basket.

Tala switched to her climbing shoes and checked the rack of equipment that dangled from her belt. We used the time while we were strapping into our harnesses to go over our climbing terminology or "calls." There was no need to climb in silence on Alegranza, as there had been at the fortress. This time we could talk or even yell up and down the rope.

When there was nothing left to prepare or to discuss, Tala went up the cliff like a lizard. She set an anchor at the top of each new stage, sometimes up a dozen meters, sometimes less. She rigged the ratchet block below the anchor so that when Gino and I hauled down on one side of the rope and Victor was lifted headfirst up the other, we didn't have to expend any energy to hold our gains, the ratchet doing that work for us.

When Victor was all the way up a stage, we would climb, with Tala on top belay. When we joined up, or were at least in close proximity, we would sip a little water while resting on ledges and study the next pitch. Then Tala would climb lead again, trailing the rope and setting new top anchors, and we would repeat the process, hoisting Victor meter by meter up the gray stone, Gino removing Tala's protective hardware as we went, to hand it back to her at the top of each stage.

After more than ten such efforts I was worn out, beat up, and questioning my own sanity. Finally Tala called down, "I'm on the top! Here is the top!" She anchored the ratchet block somewhere up out of our sight and we set to hauling Victor up the last pitch, by then with much practice smoothly alternating our four hands on the rope as we pulled it down. The last two meters were the most difficult, muscling Victor up onto the top of the cliff. Suffice to say this final job was neither pleasant nor easy, but eventually all four of us were on top, scratched and scraped and streaked with dirty sweat.

The top of the cliff was by no means the highest point on Alegranza. A kilometer northwest, the side of the island's caldera rose hundreds of meters higher, and every descending acre appeared to be covered in brown volcanic rubble. But as stark and foreboding as the top of the island appeared, the azure view toward the south was equally magnificent.

“There is Lanzarote?” asked Tala. The closest point of land was about ten kilometers south.

“It’s two islands, a small one called Graciosa, and then Lanzarote. There’s a channel between them, but we can’t see it from here.” We dragged Victor well back from the edge, unslung our packs, and sipped from our plastic bottles. It was Irish water from Rebel’s tanks.

Gino asked, “How big this island is Lanzarote?”

“About sixty kilometers long.” I pulled out my Steiners and gave it a quick scan.

“How big a city is Arrecife?”

“About fifty thousand people.”

“Are we going there?”

I handed him the binoculars. “I’d like to. We’re low on propane and fresh water, but I’m not sure what the Spanish will do with us. You both should have some legal protection if you’re on my crew list, even if you don’t have any documents—but the truth is they can do anything they want after we clear in.”

Gino passed the binos to Tala and said, “Okay, we can talk about Lanzarote more later. We no can bury Victor here, this a no-good place. Maybe we go a little more far away over there.” He pointed to the west along the cliff edge, where a point jutted out. We studied it with the binoculars. Anyplace was better than this cinder field. Here it was flat enough to stand on, but the ground fell away toward the precipice at about a ten-degree angle, and gradually steepened toward the rim of the volcano.

Command decision. “Okay, let’s go check it out. We’ll bring everything except the top anchor; we’ll leave it for rappelling down.” The top anchor was a made of three piton spikes Tala had hammered into the pumice a few meters from the edge, connected by webbing. She unbuckled and stepped out of her harness and its jangly rack of climbing tools, then packed it all into her rucksack. She also changed from her colorful high-top climbing shoes back to her black sneakers to save their special soles from the sharp pumice. Following her example, Gino and I unclipped our own rope-mantle climbing seats, stowing them away in our packs. I coiled the fifty-meter rope again and threw it back over my shoulder. We took our positions around Victor’s body, stooped in unison, and picked him up by his rope bindings.

With the edge of the world to our left and the stability of the cliff doubtful, I steered a path about ten meters upslope from certain doom while

crunching over the volcanic debris. The half of the world to our right and uphill was a landscape that might have been on Mars, while the half to our left consisted of the blue ocean sparkling far below, with the islands appearing as an ocher-colored whale basking on the horizon.

Twenty minutes of tramping just above the edge brought us to the outcropping. I guessed it was a fractured tooth of limestone raised from an old sea bottom millions of years ago and broken off. It covered a few acres at the top of the cliff and felt solid and secure underfoot, unlike the treacherous cinder fields sloping down to the uncertain precipice. Uneven erosion had gouged pockets into the surface, and some of them held little pools of rainwater. Tufts of sea grass, dandelions, red and purple wildflowers grew around these depressions.

We slowed and then stopped a few meters from the end of the point, and lowered Victor without words. Looking over and down, I could see Rebel Yell on her mooring, the water all around her sparkling in sunlight. After scaling the cliffs, I felt no vertigo standing so near the edge on solid stone, but even leaning far over I could not see what lay directly below us.

Gino kicked the ground. “This is rock, we no can bury him here.”

“Then we’ll build a cairn over him,” I said.

“What do you meaning, a cairn?”

“A tower of stones. You’ll see.”

After downing the rope and my pack, I made my initial selection and returned with a gray stone block about as big as a smashed mailbox. It was a real brute, with sharp edges gouging my chest and arms. I placed the stone on one side of Victor and went back for another. My companions watched me for just a moment and then joined me in my labor. We built a low wall down both sides of his sailcloth shroud and around the ends, then placed flat stones across them to form his protective crypt. Some of these bridge-stones were so large that it took two of us to carry them. After the white shroud had disappeared, the stones could be set anywhere that they made a good fit, and the tower went up rapidly.

Our conversations took place in segments when we met at the rising monument with new stones. At one meeting Tala asked, “So, we are going to Lanzarote, to Arrecife? Maybe we can see the girls again before they go home to *Irlande*.”

“Sure, we’ll go there next. We’ll just have to take our chances with the Spanish.”

“What if *Espagne* will not permit us to remain? Then where will we go? Danny, I will never return to Maroc, never. My life there *est terminée* to one hundred percent.”

“We were going to South America, but that was Victor’s idea. I’d like to go to the Caribbean, but we need to find cooking gas before we cross the Atlantic. And we need to fill our water tanks if we’re going to be taking many more baths.”

I nudged her hip and she nudged mine right me back, slyly cutting her eyes at me.

“Some new food would be good too,” Gino added. “And what if I find a woman? There is enough space up in the front for me and for a woman living both. Because I gotta tell you: it’s making me crazy, looking on you two.”

Tala’s black T-shirt was even tighter than her blue jersey, and after last night I could picture in detail what lay beneath the thin cotton, both front and rear. The two lash marks on the back of her right arm that were visible below the short sleeve were hardly noticeable without the context of what lay hidden on her back. And her black stretch pants were literally skin tight, leaving little to the imagination.

Gino was a man the same as me, with exactly the same male desires. The unfairness of my enjoying the company of Miss Abidar in my private quarters while he did without up forward was rather stark. Victor had been alone by choice, not by policy. Now that Gino was beginning to flesh out, I could see that he would have little trouble finding female companionship, not with his friendly and outgoing personality.

“Signor Bracciano: on your first day as my crew you are asking to bring a woman onto my boat, a woman you haven’t even met?”

“Don’t worry, boss, I *know* I’m gonna meet her. So, I can bring her on the boat?”

“This woman you haven’t met? Only if she’s beautiful.”

“Boss, I’m a man *Italiano*—what other kind of woman is there?”

Tala folded her arms across her chest, rolled her eyes, and attempted to redirect our focus. She pretended to be serious, but it was obvious that she was enjoying the male attention. “So, after *Las Canarias*, then we are going to *les Caraïbes*? That is where the wind goes, *oui*? Maybe we can visit *les îles françaises*? *Mon français* is more better than *mon anglais*.”

Tala would enjoy the Francophone Caribbean, where she would be able to use her stronger second language rather than her broken English. Like

most Italians, given a few days Gino could probably speak any of the Romance languages well enough to get along anywhere from Chile to Romania. I would even pick up some *français* with Tala as my tutor.

There was a lot to like about the civilized French islands. The Brits often expressed antipathy toward the "Frogs," but as ocean sailors they were undeniably top-notch. And since the economic collapse and European civil wars, the saying was that the French Antilles were now more French than France itself. If former standards of civility were being restored anywhere, it would be in the French *département* of Martinique, a place where Miss Abidar could easily blend in with the local population.

In previous decades French girls in the Caribbean had often gone topless at the beach and on private yachts, and if not, then in the skimpiest of string bikinis while striving for an all-over tan. Soon I would learn what a few peeling sunburns might do for Tala's back, especially with me applying plenty of aloe vera gel. For that matter, we didn't have to sail all the way to the Caribbean to begin this process of exfoliation; we were already at the latitude of Florida.

She said, "Then maybe after we visit *les Caraïbes* we can go to Europe. That is the way of the wind, yes?"

"That's right, from the Caribbean and the Bahamas you sail to Bermuda, then to the Azores, and then to anywhere in Europe. But you should only try it in May or June."

I finished placing a stone atop the growing cairn and went to look for another. Most of them were the size of textbooks but broken into irregular pieces. Soon we became experts at free-standing masonry, striving for tight fits. My arms still could not reach all the way around the cairn when it reached my shoulder height. Eventually we were leaning against the tower to place stones higher on its narrowing apex.

During a rock-collecting walk, Tala suggested, "Maybe someday we can go to France. I want to know if it is possible to discover my mother. I know it is only a small chance, but someday I am wanting to go."

"Maybe next May. After the Canaries, and after the Caribbean. And the Bahamas, you have to see the Bahamas."

The pinnacle of the cairn consisted of one flat stone of diminishing size laid atop the last, and these required climbing up the side to place them. The capstone was no larger than my fist, and the top already being well over our heads, we agreed it would be the last. Standing by the finished tower, we

could see Rebel Yell below us on her mooring, so I knew it would be visible from down below and far out to sea. We were done. The sun had passed its zenith, we were nearly out of drinking water, and we had a multi-stage rappel ahead of us to get back down to the beach.

After a few minutes of quiet, Gino asked, “Are you no going to say a prayer, boss?”

“A prayer? Well, I suppose I should, even though Victor wasn’t a religious man. At least we never discussed religion, not for years, but I guess that he believed in a higher power. I mean, it was Victor who convinced me to go to Morocco, just by his example. And he told me that even just trying to rescue the girls would mean that our lives had meant something. But mean something to whom? To the girls, and maybe to their families? Or to God? If we failed, who else would know but God? But we *did* try, and we didn’t fail. And if it wasn’t for Victor, there would have been no bus, and the girls wouldn’t be free today, and we would still be trapped in Morocco. And now we’re here on Alegranza, and Victor will be here forever, and I guess it’s fair to say that he gave his life to get us out, to get all of us out. And I think that’s about all the praying that Victor would be able to tolerate. I think he would say to just enjoy the view.”

After a little while Gino said, “You know what says *San Giovanni*, what you say Saint John: ‘*Nessuno ha un amore più grande di questo: dare la vita per i propri amici*.’ This means there is no love more great than to give away your life for your friends. Victor gave away his life for getting so many girls out from that hell. So what I think is, if there is *un paradiso*, you say a heaven, then, yes, Victor is in the heaven. And if there is no heaven, this a very good place for him to be. But I believe there is a heaven, and Victor is in the heaven.”

I could add nothing to that. We each found a spot to sit and absorb the view while finishing our water. I thought about Bert and Pat and Rainborow and the others, but I didn’t bring them up aloud; this was Victor’s time and place. After we had finished the dirty and dangerous business of rappelling down to the beach, it was a certainty that we would return here only in our memories, so we were in no hurry to leave the tower we had built, or Victor beneath it.

In the distance Graciosa and Lanzarote were joined on the horizon. Much nearer, a frigate bird floated on the thermals. Cotton-ball trade wind clouds moving in a procession toward the southwest cast matching shadows on the

blue Atlantic.

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“I see a ship,” said Gino. He had the binoculars then.

Then I saw it too, with my bare eyes, a gray dot crawling over the horizon west of Lanzarote.

After a minute Tala said, “I hear something.”

Her younger ears were better than mine; it took me a little longer to sense the nearly inaudible subwoofer beat that I remembered from Iraq and Afghanistan. Before I found it with the binoculars, I knew that a helicopter was on the way. It rapidly grew in size from ant to mouse and then to elephant as it came sweeping in below us toward the moorings and banked into a turn circling twice around Rebel Yell. Then it shot back seaward, made a climbing turn and passed fifty meters above our cairn, roaring over us with its rotors beating the air. It was painted haze-gray and had the profile of an American Black Hawk, so it was a Sea Hawk, the naval version. There was a red-yellow-red bulls-eye emblem on the tail, and ARMADA, the Spanish word for navy, was written in a darker gray.

After making a circle up toward the rim of the caldera it returned, slowing, and then settled above a flat patch of the limestone shoulder a hundred meters inland from us, coming down until it was just above the ground, broadside to us with its nose to the east. Its rotor wash blasted us, but there wasn’t much debris light enough for it to throw, just some dust, and Victor’s cairn didn’t shift a millimeter.

The starboard sliding door was already rolled back, and a crewman hopped out when the aircraft was still a half meter above the ground. He was wearing a tan flight suit, a survival vest, and an aviator’s helmet. The helicopter lifted a few meters after his exit but remained in a hover as he jogged over to us, pushing his visor up as he came. He had a flag patch of Spain on one shoulder and a squadron patch on the other.

What could we say? Welcome to my friend’s funeral service? We weren’t Spanish citizens, and this was Spanish territory, so we were illegal aliens, foreign trespassers who had not cleared in through the proper bureaucratic channels.

After an appreciative glance up and down at Tala, the young Spaniard scanned Gino’s face and mine. “I am seeking for the *Capitán Daniel Keelmare*. Is one of you this man?”

I took a step forward. “I’m Dan Kilmer.”

He turned around to face his helicopter and gave them two thumbs-up with raised arms. Another air crewman leaned out the open door to spot the touchdown of their three wheels. The bird settled in place, the shriek went out of its turbines, the four rotor blades slowed and finally stopped, and the engine noise faded to silence. The crewman who had queried us jogged back over to his airship. The pilot on our side had his own cockpit door, and he stepped down, his helmet off. He was joined by two others, so with the crew who had already jumped off, there were now four of them on the ground, all in tan flight suits. None of them had any visible weapons, but they might have had pistols in their survival vests.

They had a brief huddle by their aircraft, then three of them walked toward us, helmets off and left behind, seemingly unconcerned. The one who remained by the helicopter kept his helmet on; it was probably connected to the aircraft’s radio. The young crewman who had originally approached us now had a camera with a telephoto lens on a strap around his neck. The other two would be the pilots. And I could see that one of them was a woman with her dark hair tied back from her face.

We were apprehensive, but they remained nonchalant, as if strolling over to join a picnic. After the constant stress of Morocco, their calm and friendly manner seemed remarkable. I guessed that the oldest was the male senior pilot—he might have been all of thirty-five, with black hair and blue eyes. He addressed me when they stopped a few meters from the cairn. “You are *Capitán Keelmare*?”

“Yes, I am.” I stepped forward and put out my hand, and he shook it. He told me his rank and his name, but they flew out of my mind unremembered. All of them had Spanish flags and matching squadron patches on their shoulders.

“And this is your sailing vessel on the anchorage?”

“Yes, that’s correct, it’s mine.”

“And you are knowing of *Capitán* Simon Dansekker and the girls of *Irlanda*?”

I smiled with relief. So they weren’t here to arrest us for illegal entry, at least. “Oh, yes, we know all about Captain Dansekker and the Irish girls.”

His eyes widened. “Then perhaps you have been with him in Puerto Zerhoun?”

“That’s right, we were there with him, and with the girls.”

"*Capitán* Dansekker, he saves many kidnapped girls from *Irlanda*. With his *patrullero*, he brings away the kidnapped girls from Puerto Zerhoun, this is what we have learned from our reports. And this is true, what we have been told?"

"That's all true, that all happened, we were there. It was seventy-two girls. And we couldn't have escaped without Dansekker's patrol boat, the Storm." I threw in the number of girls and the name of his ship to prove my bona fides.

The female pilot said, "Now our ship is coming, you can see it? We have come from our base in Las Palmas when we received the news about the rescue of the girls. We have orders to bring you to our ship, all of you." I guessed that she was close in age to Tala, not older than thirty, with almost the same shade of brown hair, and about her same height.

"*Capitán Keelmare*," the male senior pilot asked, "of what country you are?"

Rebel Yell was flying no national flag. "I'm an American and I have a passport, but it's old. *Capitán* Manresa from the *fragata Cristóbal Colón* can confirm our story. I met him last week on his ship, and I'm sure he remembers me very well."

Gino stepped forward. "I am *Italiano*. One month before, my ship is taken by *il pirati musulmani*, and Captain Kilmer is saving me from that. But on today I possess no *documento di identificazione*."

Tala said, "I am of Maroc, and I possess my *identification nationale*, but this moment it is in the boat, down the below."

The male pilot replied, "If you were helping *Capitán* Dansekker in Zerhoun, then I am sure there will be no problem with *los documentos*."

Gino's eyes went wide. "*Helping* Captain Dansekker in Zerhoun? *Helping*? We are not *helping*, we are climbing the wall to the fort with this rope, yes, this rope! Me, and him, and she, *we* are bringing the girls out from Fort Zerhoun, *not* Dansekker!" As usual, his facial expressions and hands communicated even more emphatically than his spoken words.

I wanted to say that Dansekker was a prisoner chained on the bridge of his own ship until the moment we arrived, but I didn't. If they thought that Captain Simon Dansekker was the big hero of the Fort Zerhoun rescue operation, then let them. Why rain on his parade? After all, it was his own private warship that had brought us all out of Morocco.

The female pilot asked, "And this *torre de piedra*, this tower of stone,

what is the meaning? This is where you put some person who has died?" The cairn's base was two meters long by one wide, so its purpose was rather evident.

"Yes, that's right. My friend Doctor Victor Alemán died on the mission to bring the girls out." For their benefit, and for what help it might provide to our cause, I pronounced Victor's name the Spanish way. "He died on the last night in Port Zerhoun, during the mission to rescue the girls."

She asked, "And with that rope you have lifted him?"

"Yes, that's exactly what we did."

"He must have been a very good man to merit such a high honor from his friends."

"Oh, Victor was a *very* good man. Without him, the girls would still be in Morocco. *We* would still be in Morocco."

The male pilot said, "*Capitán Keelmare*, we are on orders to fly you to our ship, *el Meteoro*. There are special persons on board of our ship today. They have come from *Gran Canaria*, and they have very much interest in what has passed in Zerhoun. I know that they want to be speaking with you as soon as possible. Your sailing boat is safe on the anchorage, and there is no danger if you accompany us to our ship for a short time of some hours."

"I have an inflatable boat tied on the beach below here. A rubber boat. If the waves come up it will be destroyed. *Será destruido*. It's very important for us, this rubber boat."

"It is safe where it is located for a few hours more? Our ship is coming to here, and in a few hours you will be back on your *velero*, your sailing boat. Then you will bring your boat to Arrecife, where now are located the girls of *Irlanda*, and also the patrol boat of Captain Dansekker. But in this moment the special people are on my ship, and they are wanting to be speaking with you immediately. Even now we are learning that the army of Morocco is moving into Puerto Zerhoun, and these men have many questions about the situation. And I am understanding that a number of the stolen girls are from Spain, so this is also a very important thing for our country."

"There are *six* girls from Spain," Tala clarified. "Yes, we are knowing very well all the girls."

Both pilots looked at her with something like awe.

The young crewman brought the camera up to his face, trying to frame a shot with the cairn behind us. Tala saw the lens and turned away. The female pilot put her hand up to block the camera and gave him instructions that were

too rapid for me to catch, but the crewman immediately trotted back to the helicopter and then returned with a white towel and four identical plastic half-liter bottles of drinking water. We were each given one, which we opened and drank from. Amazingly, their plastic was perfectly clear, their labels newly printed, and we even had to break the factory seals on their blue caps!

The female pilot poured some water from the fourth bottle onto the towel and led Tala a few meters away from us men. They spoke animatedly in French while Tala wiped off her face, neck, and arms, then the female pilot checked her up and down, tucking loose strands of hair back into her braid. Only when Tala was deemed ready for the camera did the smiling ladies rejoin us, now instant friends. The junior crewman took pictures of us in front of the cairn with the volcano behind us, then the other way, with the ocean and Lanzarote in the background. He took pictures of just the three of us, then with the pilots on either side, then just the two women, and finally all of us in a group with their Sea Hawk behind us.

When they had taken all the photos they wanted, they asked us if we were ready to leave, and we agreed that we were. I went to retrieve my pack and Tala grabbed the coiled rope from the ground. I thought she was going to carry it to the helicopter, but instead she climbed partway up the cairn and tossed it over the top. She hopped off and worked the coil down until it lay evenly around the stones at shoulder level.

It was a beautiful gesture, one I wished I'd thought of. The fifty-meter rope was already old and worn when Tala had brought it to the compound in her father's pickup, and now it was officially retired. The faded gold *corde Allemande* would accompany Doctor Victor Alemán to heaven, or Valhalla, or wherever he was bound for eternity.

The pilots returned to the aircraft and climbed aboard, but the young crewman held us back a good distance from the radius of the blades. While we waited, he handed us foam earplugs, which we put in. The other crew member stood outside with a fire extinguisher while the turbine engines wound up. When the rotors were spinning, we were led to the open door. I remembered doors on both sides of Army Black Hawks and troop seats for a squad in between. This Spanish Armada Sea Hawk had no sliding door on the left side, and instead of troop seats, the back of the cabin was occupied with naval mission equipment. In front of that to port was a side-by-side pair of pipe-and-fabric seats, with a meter-square window next to them. The junior crewman pointed at Tala and me, then at the seats, and said, "Please, for you

to be sitting."

I was holding Tala's hand to help her inside, and quite without thinking I said to her, "Ladies first." Of course, I had to shout this to be heard over the engines. She looked at me quizzically, then with sudden understanding she burst into a dazzling smile, climbed aboard ahead of me, and seat-belted herself in next to the window. I took the seat beside her and strapped in. A helmeted crewman tugged on our belts to be sure that we were correctly secured. There was only one other seat, to starboard and behind. Gino climbed in and began to sit on the deck, but the crewman pointed at the seat and insisted with his words and gestures that Gino take it as their guest.

There was another meter-square window in the closed sliding door, so we could look out to either side, as well as forward between the pilots. The entire aircraft shook, the shaking whipping to a fast vibration, turbines screaming, the smell of kerosene strong. Tala found my hand and squeezed it hard. Finally we lifted off the ground and started moving forward, picking up speed. The Sea Hawk retraced our path down the cinder field above the precipice, then rolled to the right and we were flung out over the edge of the world, instantly floating high above the blue ocean while leaning into a clockwise turn.

Tala's shoulder pressed against mine and she clung to my hand. I'm sure it was her first ride in a helicopter, and though it had been years since my last, I was thrilled, so I knew that it had to be an even more exciting experience for her. Rebel was visible through the starboard window, then the Sea Hawk rolled the other way, made a climbing turn above the cliff, and banked hard to port so we had a final view of Victor's cairn. The horizontal coil of rope gave the stone tower the appearance of a cross from every direction. After making a few tight orbits, we leveled out and streaked toward Lanzarote.

So maybe we would hang around the Canaries while the Spanish were in a generous mood. Maybe we could wangle free dock space out of our newfound hero status, or even milk it for a haul-out and bottom paint. Hank Landry would know the best boatyards. Gino Bracciano might stay aboard, or he might move on—with or without his as-yet-unmet beautiful woman companion—but I hoped he would remain for a while.

Maybe later we would visit the Caribbean, in particular *les îles françaises*, where Tala might be the happiest. But no matter where we found ourselves dropping anchor, in a few months her presently flat belly might be

showing the result of our first night of passion in my bed, and I was perfectly fine with that. And if last night hadn't quite done the trick, tonight might, or the night after well could, and that thought filled me with immeasurable joy. But if Tala Abidar was going to have my baby, and the odds were high that she would, then I would have to convince her to marry me—and in a church, in front of a padre. Victor's bastard origins had brought him pain for his entire life, and this was not a legacy I would inflict on a child.

Tala's fingers, interlaced with my own, squeezed with almost painful pressure. She pushed her shoulder against mine and stared at me with a savage glint in her eyes, drawing me close to rub noses and then steal a kiss. She had been whipped hard but not beaten. I wasn't sure if I was the man to tame her, or if I would even want to try. Did any true rose grow without a few thorns?

I looked forward between the pilots as the islands grew larger and details began to emerge on their shores. We were skimming above the ocean toward another Spanish warship and, I hoped, an appreciative welcome. If their intelligence analysts wanted to know what had happened in Port Zerhoun, I was their man. And after that, the future was wide open.



A historical note to readers

William Rainsborough, Zymen Danseker, Thomas Pellow, Jan Janszoon/Murad Rais, John Harrison, and Sidi Mohammed El-Ayyachi are all historical figures from the Barbary corsair era, and their exploits exceeded anything described in this novel.

For example, the Dutch traitor (and convert to Islam) Jan Janszoon, also known as Murad Rais or Captain Murad, did, in fact, lead the pirate cartel in the Moroccan corsair port of Salé. In 1627, he led five ships and hundreds of Janissary troops to Iceland, where after days of plunder, rape, and mass murder, the Muslim raiders kidnapped 400 Christians into slavery.

In 1631 Murad led another group of raiders to the village of Baltimore, Ireland, and abducted more than a hundred local inhabitants, mostly women and children bound for sex slavery. Between 1627 and 1632, pirates under the command of Murad occupied the island of Lundy in the mouth of the Bristol Channel, only twelve miles from mainland Britain. The island then served as a holding pen for captured Europeans prior to their being sent onward to the slave markets of Barbary.

It is estimated that at least a million Europeans, mostly Spanish, French and Italian, were captured and taken to North Africa as white slaves between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of the land raids were massive and prolonged, such as one in Naples in 1544, when 7,000 Italians were captured, or Granada in 1566, when 4,000 Spanish were taken.

But for every major land incursion, there were hundreds of smaller slave-catching raids and European ships captured at sea during the three-century-long "sea jihad." Sea trade was crippled in the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic coasts of Europe. Vast regions were depopulated, their Christian inhabitants either kidnapped into Muslim slavery, or forced to flee inland, abandoning their coastal towns, villages and farms.

If you would like to learn more about this curiously untaught European history, I recommend the following books:

Caliphate, Tom Kratman, 2008, (Fiction, for mature readers, free download on Amazon Kindle.)

Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500–1800, Robert C. Davis, 2003.

Pirates of Barbary: Corsairs, Conquests and Captivity in the 17th-century Mediterranean, Adrian Tinniswood, 2010.

Slavery, Terrorism and Islam: the Historical Roots and Contemporary Threat, Peter Hammond, 2005.

The Stolen Village: A Thrilling Account of the 17th-century Raid on Ireland by the Barbary Pirates, Des Ekin, 2006.

Thomas Jefferson and the Tripoli Pirates, Brian Kilmeade and Don Yaeger, 2015.

White Gold: The Extraordinary Story of Thomas Pellow and Islam's One Million White Slaves, Giles Milton, 2004.

Wholly Different: Why I Chose Biblical Values Over Islamic Values, Nonie Darwish, 2017.

(If you read only one of these books, read the last.)

(Bonus Story)

The Alienork Way

A Cautionary Tale For Civilized Humans

—Recommended for all ages—
By Matthew Bracken
January 2016

My name is Naku. This is the story of my people, who live on the great Island of Plenty. Our island is so vast, and the need for travel so small, and it being very difficult to cross the high mountain ridges, people most often live near where they are born. Food is easy to grow or to pick everywhere and at all times of the year, and there are plenty of fish to catch as well. But from time to time a traveler might visit, sometimes by boat, and sometimes by climbing over the sharp-topped mountains between the numberless valleys. As you may suppose, because of the difficulty of distant traveling, news from afar does not travel quickly on the Island of Plenty.

But I did hear a few years earlier about some new people from the outside, people who had landed on the other side of our island, in the place we call Far Plenty. These new people were said to be very strange, and not so pleasant. They did some unusual praying at night, possibly to the moon. They were called the Alanok people, if the tales were truly reported. It was said that they had come from a very terrible island, an island full of war and hunger and catastrophe, and that they needed to find a new home where they could live in peace.

Now, on the Island of Plenty, we have two very important rules or laws that we must all always obey. The First Law of Plenty is that anybody can believe anything that they want to believe, or not believe anything they don't want to believe, and that is okay, because all ideas are equal on the Island of Plenty. The Second Law of Plenty is that if you give kindness and plenty to other people, they should always give kindness and plenty to you in return. After all, it is the Island of Plenty, and the bounty should be shared. Why not? There is plenty for all. These Laws came from our distant ancestors, who once suffered wars and hunger, until they learned the Two Laws. Then, the Island of Plenty also became the island of peace and contentment.

So it is understandable that when the Alanok people escaped from a

terrible place and first came to Far Plenty, that they should be warmly welcomed. The Alanoks had severe needs, and the people of Far Plenty possessed a great bounty to share with them. But, according to the rare visitors to our valleys, the Alanoks were rather strange, and unpleasant, and did something odd at night when the moon had risen.

That was all I knew about them, until the day came when a man about my age, with a very weak and sickly wife and a young daughter, climbed down the steep cliffs and crawled into our village almost at the point of perishing. His name was Napok, which means Hawk in your tongue, and he had the most incredible tale to tell. He had lived all of his life on the other side of Middle Plenty, in a valley almost as distant as Far Plenty. Napok and his wife and daughter had been driven out of his valley by the Alienorks, as he called the Alanoks, barely escaping, most of his extended clan and family being wiped out.

This was a most alarming story. The Council of the Wise met at the Council Bluff by the sea to discuss the matter. Was Napok crazy-in-the-head insane? Was his presence here a danger to us? His tale was completely unbelievable. All of the tribes and clans of the Island of Plenty had learned to live in harmony many generations before. This was accepted and understood by everyone as the normal condition of all people. That the Alanok visitors to Far Plenty could be so dangerous and violently aggressive was simply implausible. Clearly, Napok must be insane. Perhaps climbing over all the steep ridges and down the even steeper cliffs for many weeks had driven him mad.

It was decided that Napok and his wife and daughter could live with us in the middle valley of Near Plenty, but only if he stopped his bizarre public rantings about the Alanoks, given that his speeches of warning to passers-by were extremely disturbing, and upset everybody, especially the children. This demand was put to Napok, and with some reluctance he agreed to our conditions — no more crazy talk about the Alanoks, or the Alienorks as he spoke their name.

His family was given the hut that belonged to an old widow before she died. It turned out that Napok was quite good at making useful items from bark and vines, and soon we all had very nice foot coverings, that were especially useful for walking on shallow reefs and sharp rocks. Except for the occasional paranoid and conspiratorial whisper about the Alanoks, Napok was a fine addition to the people of Near Plenty. His wife was weak and frail,

but his daughter, Nona, was pretty and popular with our young men. Some of them were courting her, hoping to be paired with her when she came of age, which would make Napok and his family a full part of the people of Near Plenty.

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A few years after Napok joined us, another stranger, alone, climbed down the cliffs into the middle valley of Near Plenty. He was an old man with white hair and a white beard, but he was very fit and full of vigor for his age. His name was Amok, and he was the first person that I had ever met of the Alanoks, as I still called them until then. He said that he was an elder and a teacher of the Alienork people, pronouncing their name just as Napok had pronounced it. Alienork was a very strange word to our ears, and not easy for us to speak. It had no meaning in our tongue. Alienork only meant Alienork. The bearded elder corrected me until I spoke it to his satisfaction: ah-lee-en-ork, but said quickly. Amok didn't look so different from my people on the Island of Plenty, and he was rather pleasant and seemed as intelligent as any. He had certainly learned the tongue of the Island of Plenty very well. He told me that The Alienork Way was the way of peace, and that we would surely live together in harmony on the Island of Plenty.

Amok asked if he could stay with us near our village, and in return, he could give lessons in The Alienork Ways, and the Alienork tongue as well. He said it would be wise for us to learn these things. A volunteer teacher in the valley was always welcome. He could also teach anyone who wanted to learn about Far Plenty and other distant islands. At his request, we offered him an empty private hut. Amok was mostly quiet, didn't eat much and caused no problems, but he did have a few peculiar requirements. First, he said that he needed a little more land for his hut, because he was required by his beliefs to pray to the moon anytime it was up at night. And to do this correctly, he needed to make a little ring or circle of stones around his hut, and this ring needed more space than he had been offered.

And also, he declared, it was the sacred custom of Alienork men to always wear a ceremonial dagger or sword on their belt, as a symbol of their manhood. The dagger of Amok was thin and as long as my arm from elbow to fingertip. He kept it tucked beneath a red sash around his waist. Unlike my people, who always wear the light wraparound pareo cloth, which also dries

quickly, Amok wore a thicker robe of black cloth. He explained that the ring of stones and the sword and the moon praying and the black robe were all part of The Alienork Way. And, as Amok reminded me, because of our First Law of Plenty, we had to allow him to believe as he chose, which was, of course, completely true.

The Council of the Wise met and we decided that if Amok would agree to always obey the Two Laws, we would also comply with his wishes concerning his private beliefs. He readily agreed to this, so we let him take a fallow field over past the other bluff, and a group of our men even moved his hut over there for him. He then placed a circle of stones around his new dwelling, the circle being about five paces across from side to side. And sure enough, after nightfall and when the moon came out, he walked around the inside of his ring and he prayed a strange song like a lamentation. Otherwise, Amok was a normal man in most every respect, very wise and learned and well-traveled, and a good speaker of our tongue. He quickly attracted a following of our younger men, who trailed behind him as he walked along the beaches and he spoke of his Alienork ways, and as well he taught them the Alienork tongue.

Now, our prior visitor and long-time guest Napok was very upset by the introduction of the Alienork elder into our midst, and he came to me when I was alone at the lower fishing pool. He warned me not to trust Amok. He told me that everything that Amok said was a lie. It was very disturbing to me that Napok was acting crazy and paranoid again, and I considered whether I should notify the Council of the Wise about the degrading condition of his mind. But on the other side, I had to admit that at least Napok had been correct about the ring of stones, and the moon singing. And the black robe. And the sword.

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After a moon had passed, one morning when the village arose, we could see that there were now three huts where there had been only one hut for Amok, and the ring of stones was now about twenty paces across. A few of us villagers walked over out of curiosity, and we saw that Amok was now joined by two young men and a boy almost a man. Each of them wore a black robe, each with a sword longer than Amok’s in their red sash. I said to Amok, Grandfather, who are these people? And Amok said they are my nephews.

They have escaped from Far Plenty, where there is currently much war and hunger. They need to have a new place to live in peace and safety. Do you see, Naku, that we have already erected more huts, so these newcomers will be no trouble at all? And Amok reminded us that the Second Law of Plenty demanded that we must extend our full bounty to these needy newcomers, and that they were very hungry after their long and difficult travels.

We began to walk over to inspect the new huts, to see how they were built in the Alienork method, but when our feet touched the ring of stones, the three new Alienork men became filled with sudden anger, and began to pick up other stones, and threw them at us! It even seemed as if they were aiming at us, intending to cause us actual pain and harm! We all retreated back into the trees.

Finally, Amok came out of the circle of stones, his arms extended in apology. The new boys had seen much war and privation. They were a little jumpy. But, he said, we must understand that it is a part of The Alienork Way that we people of the Island of Plenty, whom Amok said the Alienorks call Notorks, should never, under any circumstance, ever enter inside of the circles of stones without a direct invitation. He said this in a pleasant way, but he made it very clear to us that there would be serious trouble if any Notorks intruded within the sacred Alienork stone rings uninvited.

On the other hand, Amok's three nephews would walk freely through our village and our market, and even down by our pools for fishing and our pools for swimming, and when they walked among us, they spoke in their Alienork tongue in ways that suggested that they were insulting us. They also clucked their cheeks and wiggled their extended tongues at our women and girls in a quite disgusting manner. Some of our Near Plenty men became angry, and threatened the Alienork youths with violence if they did not stop their bad behavior, but the three drew their swords in a menacing manner at the approaching group of Near Plenty men, and both sides withdrew cautiously, the Alienorks throwing presumed curses and insults at our men in their tongue as they departed.

The Council met again, and I volunteered to speak to Amok about their bad behavior. I went to their circle of stones and called to him, and he came out to the ring. Opening his arms widely in welcome, he stated that I was bid to come inside as a special and valued guest and dear friend of a considerable time now. We walked into his hut, and that was the first time that I saw that there were not only the three new male Alienorks, but also about a hand of

females, and that was only counting the females in Amok's hut! These new females had never been seen outside of any hut, and not only that, but each one of them was squatting on the ground, completely covered by a black blanket extending to the ground! I only knew they were females by low keening wails that they made as they rocked front to back.

I exclaimed to Amok, what is the matter with your women, are they sick with a disease? I recoiled in alarm. Amok gently took my arm and led me to them. No, he said, they are not sick, but it is The Alienork Way that our women should stay inside our huts, and must always be covered in a black blanket when Notork men are near. Just as Notorks must never cross the sacred circle of stones without an invitation, Notorks must never see the uncovered Alienork women. This is The Alienork Way, he said.

Amok reminded me of our First Law about freedom of beliefs, and said that these beliefs are all part of The Alienork Way, and so they must be respected. I pondered this, and looked at the crouching women under their black blankets. I asked of Amok, said I, Elder, what of the freedom of belief of these women? Do they too agree with The Alienork Way?

Amok crossed the small room, spoke sharply in the Alienork tongue, and nudged one of the women with his foot. All of the women in unison began to sing a strange high-pitched La-la-la-la-la song, until Amok nudged the nearest again, and they all stopped as one. You see, said Amok, this is how our women express that they are very happy. They prefer to live under their black blankets, inside of our huts, where they can feel safe from any harm. It is The Alienork Way, and you must respect our beliefs. I know, I agreed. It was our First Law again. All beliefs are equal.

I then said to Amok, your young men are causing great difficulties in the village and the market and at the pools. They are upsetting our women and they are angering our men. A big fight almost happened today, and it could have lead to the unimaginable: actual physical violence. Physical violence, which is the demon's burning hell compared to the heaven of the Island of Plenty. Physical violence, which is the opposite and the antithesis of the Two Sacred Laws of Plenty.

Amok agreed with me that it was a most lamentable situation. But it was The Alienork Way that if Alienork men are around any women who are not covered by a black blanket, then the Alienork men may make such use of the women as they should so desire at that moment. This is a very important part of The Alienork Way, declared Amok with finality. If the Notork women and

girls do not wish to experience the overtures of our healthy and strong young Alienork men, who are acting only according to nature, then they must indicate this feeling by wearing the black blanket, and by staying inside of the huts of their men.

I said to Amok that this is certain to cause a lot of problems, and that I am only a spokesman, and that the Council of the Wise will never agree to this. We decided to meet again, after the next meeting of the Council. Amok escorted me to the circle of stones, and wished me well. The Council met several times more, but no decision could be made.

Napok also sought me out, and warned me in the strongest terms not to make any agreement with Amok, but to drive the Alienorks out of the middle valley of Near Plenty while we still could. He said that the Alienorks always lie, and that The Alienork Way is not peaceful, but the path of war and violence and slavery and death and conquest. I was beginning to suspect that Napok had been more right than wrong about the Alienorks, back when he first came to live with us with his wife and daughter. Indeed, our situation had changed much for the worse since the appearance of Amok.

In that time before the final decision of the Council, and on the first morning after the new sliver moon makes its brief appearance at nightfall, I went over to meet Amok, to ask a point of clarification for another member of the council. I also wanted to ask him if he was indeed telling me the truth when he had told me that The Alienork Way means peace. He met me at the edge of the circle of stones, but he did not invite me across it.

I was astounded to see that the circle had been enlarged to at least one hundred paces across, and there were now more than two hands of huts, and many more men and older boys, all of them with swords in their sashes! Not only that, but I recognized two young Notork men among them, men who were now wearing the black robes, the red sashes, and the sharp metal swords of the Alienorks!

A crowd of these young men sauntered up behind Amok, and began saying words in the Alienork tongue that made me feel very much afraid for my safety. Some half-pulled their swords from their sashes, and others made the gesture of slitting their throats with a drawn finger, then pointing their fingers at me. One of the boys cried out, Notork — monkey-dung! These were the first words in our tongue that I had heard spoken by any of the Alienorks except for their elder, Amok. Obviously, Amok or one of the Notork men now dressed in the Alienork manner had taught them the

insulting words. The other boys took up the chant: Notork — monkey-dung! Notork — monkey-dung! Notork — monkey-dung!

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I was in a state of bewilderment and turmoil, and I forgot the questions that I had come to ask of Amok. He said that now, because there were many more Alienorks who had escaped from the wars and hunger in Far Plenty, they had need of many more huts, and their circle of stones now extended even into our village, and inside their sacred circle of stones, our own villagers must vacate their huts, or take them off, but either way, there must not be even one single Notork living within the circle of stones before the sun went down!

I said, Uncle, Elder, how can this be? You yourself said that The Alienork Way is the way of peace! Amok said to me that if we obeyed The Alienork Way, we would be able to live in peace. I said that our people did not want to live in The Alienork Way, that our people preferred to wear the cool and convenient wraparound pareo which dried quickly, and our women did not want to wear the black blankets and stay inside their huts. He said, then we will not have peace. Only if the Notorks comply with The Alienork Way, can there be peace. We Notorks must also live according to The Alienork Way, there is no choice in the matter. That is what Amok said.

Then I was burning with angry rage, but the newly-arrived Alienork men behind Amok were half drawing their swords, so I had to keep a calm face. From behind them the boys began to pelt me with pebbles and small stones, and they all chanted Notork — monkey-dung! at me, but I did not run away, instead I walked as normally as I could back to our village, pebbles striking my back and even my head, while inside my heart was filled with terror. Indeed, as Amok stated, their circle of stones now included the Alienork side of our very own village, snaking its way around a hand of our huts!

Napok came to see me urgently. He said that I must assemble all of our men and somehow produce or create or invent new weapons. We had no metal for swords, only sharpened bamboo stakes could be made quickly enough, but he said that we should nonetheless make them, and prepare to violently battle the Alienorks now, no matter the cost! What a shocking thing to say! Napok was clearly losing his mind again, due to the sudden stress of dealing with increasing numbers of our new Alienork visitors.

I immediately took the issue to the Council of the Wise. After much

discussion, it was decided that the Alienorks could retain the newly enlarged circle for their own territory, but that they must not enlarge it again, not by even one more pace, ever! And I was to encourage the Alienork men, by way of Amok, not to harass our women anymore, and in return, our women would wear a doubled pareo, high to the neck and down to their knees. (Our women very strongly did not want to stay in their huts under black blankets.) The Council of the Wise decided that we would meet The Alienork Way in the middle, and make a compromise. And that we would not sharpen any bamboo spears, because if the Alienorks found out, this provocation would only cause them even further anger.

After nightfall, all of the Alienork men did their wildest moon dancing yet, twirling and whirling and howling like demons. This lasted most of the night, until the moon fell near morning. Some of the villagers nearest the circle of stones, who had gone over to watch, reported that the Alienorks threw large rocks at them, and indicated that Notorks must never witness the moon dance, but rather that we Notorks must stay inside our huts during their moon dancing times. This was also part of The Alienork Way. The witnesses of their moon dance were told this in our own tongue, by our own Island of Plenty men, the ones who had followed Amok, and who had joined the Alienorks. Of course, under the First Law, this was their belief, and their choice, and had to be respected.

The next morning we arose in the village at the normal time, even if our sleep had been disturbed during most of the night by the wild dancing and howling of the Alienork men and the shrill Lalalala-ing of the Alienork women. But after dawn when the normal morning noises of village life began, we all at once heard angry Alienork shouting, and rocks began raining down on our village! Our many visitors cried out that we must not disturb the sacred sleep of the Alienorks, after their long night spent performing their sacred moon rituals! It was The Alienork Way, and under the First Law, we had to respect their beliefs! And under the Second Law, we had to extend them full bounty, and since they now had many new Alienorks among them who had fled the wars and hunger in Far Plenty, we needed to bring double the amount of fruit and vegetables and fish that we had been bringing. And while the boys chanted out Notork — monkey-dung! the older men shouted that we must continue to obey our two laws of belief and bounty, and nothing further would be said on the matter!

I made my way nearly to the edge of their ring where it was close to

some trees, calling out, Amok, tell them to please stop throwing the rocks! This is not right! We are sorry for waking you up, it is a misunderstanding! In a moment the rocks ceased raining down. While I was there, Napok accosted me from a bit further back in the trees, beseeching me, begging me, to assemble the men, sharpen many bamboo spears, and prepare to fight them all, no matter what the cost!

So back to the reassembled Council of the Wise I went. We met very quietly, whispering and tip-toeing from hut to hut and over to the bluff by the sea. The extra fruit and vegetables would be no problem, but double the fish would be more difficult to acquire in a short time. It was decided that just in case, in secret, a separate group of men should be set to making and hiding spears from sharpened bamboo poles, as Napok had been suggesting. As the sun went down, we all feared the events of the coming night with increasing dread and terror.

The wild moon howling of the Alienork men and the Lalalala-ing of their women set our hearts to thumping. Napok came to my hut, terrified and furious at the same time. He said that it had been reported that his daughter Nona had been taken and carried off, screaming, by two hands of Alienork men, while simply walking from the upper pool to the market. He said that we must prepare to attack the sleeping Alienorks the next morning soon after dawn. We could slip inside their ring of stones and kill many of them with our spears even while they slept. Then we could seize their swords and have a hope to win the battle and wipe them all out. And then he could find his daughter, and bring her home.

I told Napok that I would meet the Council very early the next morning, but a dawn attack was impossible. It was not a decision I could take on my own part. I said that I was very sorry about his missing daughter, but nothing could be done about finding her, not while the Alienorks were in their wild moon-dance frenzy. When the moon finally set, the Alienorks fell silent. The next morning when I awoke, rising very quietly as the Alienorks demanded, I went outside to the center of the village to draw a gourd of water, and I almost fainted. The headless and naked body of Napok was erected in a sitting position against our ceremonial platform, legs out. His bloody head was placed on the ground between his bare legs, facing me!

When the people of the village, and soon all the people of Near Plenty heard of this unbelievable atrocity, and saw the body of Napok which we quickly covered, the Council met at the bluff in front of the entire gathered

population. It was difficult to keep the discussion at a quiet level, so as not to awaken the now-sleeping Alienorks. It was decided that when they awoke, I must go to Amok to discuss this atrocity, and what it would mean for our two peoples. I was shaking in fear, waiting at the edge of their enlarged circle of stones for them to awaken at their normal hour in the late afternoon, but it was my duty.

Amok saw me and came to the edge of the circle of stones, standing on the inside across them from me. Perhaps he saw the fear in my face, but now he spoke in haughty disregard. He said to me I don't think we will have any more problems, because now we Notorks all understood The Alienork Way. Our Notork women must wear the black blankets and stay in their huts, and our Notork men must stop and bend low and look down at the earth when an Alienork man passes by. A Notork must never strike an Alienork, even if an Alienork man or a group of Alienork men are enjoying an hour or two of pleasure with a Notork girl or boy or woman. And if any Notork man ever strikes any Alienork, for any reason at all, a hand of Notork girls will be taken, and a hand of Notork men will be beheaded in the manner of Napok. And there must be no more talk of sharpened spears, as a spy from within the very Council had already reported to Amok before Napok had been killed.

I was shaking in fear and disbelief, but still I asked him if he had been lying to me when he first came into our valley, and told me that The Alienork Way is the way of peace. He said it was not a lie, because a lie only had meaning between Alienork men. To lie to Notorks about The Alienork Way was also a part of The Alienork Way, and thus, it was not a lie at all, but an even greater form of truth.

I suddenly remembered pretty Nona, the daughter of Napok, and asked after her. Amok said that she had joined the Alienorks, and therefore, I was not allowed to see her or to speak to her ever again. The men and the boys did not awaken this time with Amok, to draw their swords or throw pebbles at me or curse me as a Notork monkey-dung. Amok said that it was a very good thing that we Notorks had finally learned The Alienork Way, and that he was finally hopeful that our two peoples could now live side-by-side in peace. He also mentioned that we needed to provide them with much more food to keep up with their growing numbers, especially fish, in accordance with our Second Law of Bounty, which would be retained in full effect.

Instead of gathering the Council to report Amok's new demands, I took my wife and my two small sons to the beach behind the higher rocky point,

where we kept our village sailing canoes, because they were protected there from the waves. They are the boats that we used for fishing on the deep waters, and also for going out to meet the occasional even larger boats visiting Near Plenty from far away. We took gourds of water and baskets of food, and we set out downwind. After sailing two hands of days, we came to this island, your island, Happy Island as you so truthfully call it. And as you have seen, my two sons were in a condition near death when we arrived, and my wife has not spoken a word for a hand of days even before we landed.

I am happy that our tongues are not so different, and also that you are very kind and generous people here. And now I am asking your people, your Council of the Wise, your Assembly of Elders of Happy Island, if my family can please stay here, to live in peace, while my sons grow stronger, and my wife returns to her mind. When my sons grow to be young men, I will teach them to be warriors, and someday we will go together back to the Island of Plenty, to fight against the invading Alienorks, if that becomes possible.

But in the meantime, I am also before you to warn you, in the direst terms, that you must not, under any circumstances, never, ever, allow even a single Alienork to place his feet upon your beautiful Happy Island. For if even one single Alienork comes to your island as a visitor, and is allowed to have a hut within a circle of stones, and to dance and to howl to the moon, and to carry a sword about him on a sash, with each passing moon there will be more Alienorks upon your island, and they will badly mistreat your women and your girls, and they will force you to submit to The Alienork Way, and to serve them, even though you are not Alienorks like them.

Thank you for your consideration. Now, I will retire to the hut you have kindly provided to my family, to await your decisions.

Happy Island

The next day, the decision was announced by the Assembly of Elders after much discussion and reflection. The visitor Naku had stated that he had come from a place called the Island of Plenty, and he had then proceeded to spin a most bizarre, terrifying and even disgusting tale about a group of people called the Alienorks, whom he said behaved more like demons from hell than like any of the people who inhabited Happy Island. All of the members of the Assembly of Elders agreed, unanimously, that the Alienorks could not possibly exist, except as a twisted and damaged part of the visitor Naku's mind, probably due to the privations of the long and difficult sea voyage he had endured to reach Happy Island.

Therefore, it was decided that Naku could remain in our village, but only if he obeyed the One Law of Happy Island, that only happy thoughts and ideas may be expressed in public. He must refrain from blurting his darkly provocative and frankly insane imaginings among our good people, lest he upset the successful formulation for maintaining social peace that had been learned over many generations, ever since the last wars among our distant ancestors.

It turned out that Naku knew a very useful way to make foot coverings from bark and vines, much better for walking on the sharp rocky shore than our old coverings of dried sea kelp. He soon became a very useful member of our Happy Island society, except for a few dark asides randomly whispered about his imagined demons, the Alienorks. His frail wife passed away. His sons grew quickly, running and swimming with the other youth of our valley, popular among the boys and the girls alike. And everybody was glad for the better foot coverings that Naku taught us to make for ourselves. Otherwise, life went on as it always had.

Until, that is, the day that a small sailing canoe came into view, with a single man steering it. He was an older man with white hair and a white beard, it became apparent as his boat drew closer. His sail had been spotted near the horizon, so the Assembly of Elders was able to go down to the beach to greet him, even before his canoe touched the sand. The old man on the boat did not look much different than the gathered elders of Happy Island, except for his white hair and beard, and the unusual black robe that he wore. As he stepped ashore from his beached canoe he was smiling, his arms and hands open in a symbol of peace that invited a warm welcome.

But then suddenly from behind I was roughly shoved aside, knocking me to the sand, as Naku, our off-island guest of many years, dashed at full running speed toward the old man while screaming Amok! Amok! Amok! And as we all watched in complete horror, Naku plunged a sharpened bamboo spear straight into the heart of the visitor, driving him back over into his sailing canoe! Naku, still in a mad frenzy, screaming about Amok and the Alienorks, pushed the canoe back through the small waves, turned it around, jumped aboard and filled the sail, trimming it flat and sailing around the second rocky point and out of our view. We were in such a state of shock that almost none of us dared to speak of the matter. There was not a single happy way to describe the terrible incident, so we did not, in accordance with our One Law of Happy Island.

A few days later, Naku returned to our village afoot, and he was soon pulled and pushed by several of our strongest men before the quickly gathered Assembly of Elders. Naku freely admitted that he had killed the old man, and that he was glad that he had done it, and that he would do it again if another Alienork ever appeared on our shores. He said that only by his swift action had he saved us from a great disaster, a true calamity for the good people of Happy Island, and he begged us to believe that every single word that he had ever spoken of the Alienorks was true. He was even so bold as to suggest that we should actually reward him for his unprovoked and insane brutal murder of a single, harmless, elderly visitor!

Our worst punishment was banishment from our valley on Happy Island. The Assembly of Elders decided that Naku must depart and climb the sharp ridges to the next valley, and then go quickly on to the next, and the next after, and that he should not tell any people that he met along the way anything about his paranoid and dangerous so-called “Alienork Way” conspiracy theories, which, after all, only existed in his severely damaged mind.

Matt Bracken, January, 2016

(More of my short stories and essays may be found
on my website, EnemiesForeignAndDomestic.com.)

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