

Mission: [REDACTED]

Objective: [REDACTED]



[REDACTED] The Worthy [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Negotiation

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] From the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] twisted [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] mind of [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Kenneth James [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Allen [REDACTED]



Authorized:

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THE WORTHY NEGOTIATION

KENNETH JAMES ALLEN



Published by Everington Publishing House, 2021

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THE WORTHY NEGOTIATION

First edition. January 2021.

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Written by Kenneth James Allen.

For those who face their past

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Matthew 7:13-14

“How do you shoot the Devil in the back? What if you miss?”

Verbal Kint, The Usual Suspects

**SQUAD ONE UNIT COMMANDER MISSION REPORT
[REDACTED]**

Date: [REDACTED]

Mission OBJ: Identify and secure POW in alignment with mission briefing. Eliminate enemy as needed.

Mission Summary: From briefing at 1300 hours, I gave Fire Team leaders mission orders as stated above. Team leaders relayed information and [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] in accordance with intelligence. After three days we received continued orders that the mission was a go. We left FOB [REDACTED] at approximately 2100 hours with [REDACTED]. At the drop point, Comms attempted to raise Sniper Team One on the preassigned communications channel several times without success.

With no further authorization and as per stated orders, I gave the order to continue and convoyed with Fire Team One.

[REDACTED]

Inside the house, we neutralized immediate resistance, as well as targets in the main living area and stairwell. Subsequent investigation found another target (already dead) from a head wound.

Fire Team One ascended stairs to the first floor. We used low-grade explosives to disable the door. On entry, we found two unarmed men fleeing through a door to an adjoining room. I identified one as [REDACTED], the other was unidentified but assumed to be the POW target.

After clearing the first room of any potential target, we searched the adjoining room. It was empty with no sign of [REDACTED] or POW target. From radio contact, Fire Team Two ran a sweep of the

area with no success. After a final search revealed nothing of intelligence value, we retreated to pick up point [REDACTED].

On route, we discovered an injured soldier identified as [REDACTED] from Sniper Team One. We searched the immediate area and were unable to locate Sniper Team One spotter.

We were debriefed on arrival back at FOB [REDACTED].

This is a true and accurate reflection of the mission.

Signed

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Squad One Commander

ZERO_1

Everyone has their breaking point. That point where they can't take it anymore, and they'll do just about anything for the pain to stop. The man, restrained to an uncomfortable chair in a sinister room, whimpered. He waited for the next hit, punch, snap, or shock to wake him from his lassitude.

"When?" the prisoner mumbled. His voice wafted across the room like barbecued flesh. He said it in his native tongue, and to the only one of the three interrogators that understood his particular dialect.

Special Agent Durnham wiped his brow and then his mouth. It was uncomfortably hot, purposefully hot, but it was just another tactic in the bigger strategy. They had tried the lesser—less painful and less direct—forms, yet the prisoner held the truth in an unrelenting grip. But that, too, was loosening as the interrogation unfolded.

He rolled up his sleeves past his elbows, large sweat stains grew out from under his arms causing his dirty white shirt to become transparent. He straddled a chair and leaned in close, casting a looming shadow over the prisoner.

"Yes. When?" Durnham whispered. "Tell me when, and this can all be over." The words were right, but he forced the tone and enunciation, his accent as fake as the promise of the pain ending when he heard what he wanted to hear.

The prisoner whimpered again. He could make out the other two men standing in the back of the room near a door, the only door, engulfed in the obscurities and engaged in a quiet conversation as they sucked back cigarettes and leaned on the zapping machine, the one they would roll over when he could feel himself being sucked under the current of death. He would hear a high-pitched whine and a

fiery spark of electricity would course through him, forcing him to tense against his bonds, and both revive him and wear him down at the same time.

“When?” Durnham pleaded. “I can help you, but you have to tell me when.”

A whimper was all the prisoner could manage through his broken jaw. This experience is not how he envisioned it, not how *‘they’* explained it to him. The two men that visited him at his home spoke perfect dialect and looked like locals. They said they represented The Ghost, the name itself, causing a shiver to run the man’s spine. As mysterious as he was dangerous. He wasn’t someone to cross, even though no one had ever seen the man.

The men promised him and his family everything—freedom, safety, even riches. He merely had to name his compensation. And so he did. The price he would pay was great, but the rewards for his family were even greater. Then he had hurriedly signed the contract, not bothering to read the mountainous wad of paper they had presented to him.

He was to be a martyr, and his family would be well rewarded for it. All he had to do was pass on the information, but not too easily. He had to drip-feed it, make it legitimate. If he were too forthcoming, the information would be disregarded. They must believe it. *They must believe me.* Therefore, he needed them to force it from him. He had let them know the *who* and the *what* and the *where*. Now they needed one more piece of information to bring it all together. Which was good, because he only had one more piece of information to tell them.

Through the pain, the intense pain, the layer upon layer of agony, he resisted the temptation to blurt it all out. Just when the pain eased, another wave of aching broke over him like a wave crashing over his fragile body, the screams muffled by pungent rags, a fight against the restraints.

He was not who they thought he was. He was not a terrorist, not even a freedom fighter. He was a shepherd who tended to his flock for fourteen hours a day. He was no one, a nobody. He possessed no other information than what they provided to him by his two visitors. He was the middleman, the messenger.

“Allah, peace be with him, will be overjoyed,” the two men had told him. “And while you live in his sanctuary, your family will live like kings on earth, until you are all reunited and live forever in peace.”

That promise seemed like a lifetime ago, as now he sat in his underwear amongst his own excrement. Fingers were missing from both hands while other digits were bent at extraordinary angles. A man in a white coat, a doctor by any other name, had used some metallic device to remove his right eye, and it now rested on his cheek, the optic nerve still connected into the socket. His vision was split into two with his right field forever staring at the screwdriver that was protruding from his right thigh. His left eye encrusted with tears.

He took quick breaths, his life hanging on by a thread. Wanted it all to be over. Needed it all to be over. He had played his part, achieved what he had signed up for. Now was the time for him to say it.

“When?” Durnham implored. “Tell me when and we can fix up all this shit in the best hospital money can buy. We can move your family out of the country. We will protect them.”

They were already protected, he believed, protected by powers beyond theirs. Perhaps if he knew his pregnant wife and son were both dead, he would have delivered a very different performance. But how could he know that? They were taken from this earth the day after he shuffled near the DMZ with his arms raised, recounting the Quran in his native tongue, and displaying a vest packed with explosives. More than enough to gain and hold their attention.

Oh my, how they panicked. Many men with their machine guns remained at a safe distance until others arrived in their heavy suits to deactivate the bomb. He then laid on the ground until they bound him, placed a sack over his head, and bundled him into a Humvee.

“The Ghost,” he repeated in his native tongue. “The Ghost.”

Another time he would have thought back and laughed at the efforts given to such a simple person with nothing much to say. He was simply the messenger. However, this was not another time and agony crashed over his body, bringing death closer with each passing moment.

“Three days,” he wheezed through his locked jaw, his dry tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth.

Durnham echoed it back to him and the prisoner nodded slightly, despite the anguish.

There. He had done it, and now it could all be over. *Please let this be over.*

Durnham stood, his mouth curling at the edges, the chair scraping loudly on the concrete. The time and effort had finally paid off. It was always like this. You place enough pressure on a man and he would say or do anything. He acutely knew of false information and was selective in what he asked and how he asked the detainee.

“Kill me,” the captive man rasped. “Kill me.” He resigned to his fate and was ready to die, ready to be accepted into heaven. He was ready to be a sacrifice for his family.

Durnham ignored the request and walked over to the other two agents. He relayed the critical information obtained from the prisoner. The hushed conversation quickly grew into a moral argument, with all three men stating their perspectives with pointed fingers and harsh words. Durnham drew his pistol from his holster and held it against his leg as they continued to vehemently debate the next move. The unofficial dialog ended abruptly when the other two men

exited through the door, leaving Durnham staring at the floor and contemplating his next move.

He turned slowly and approached the prisoner.

“Kill me,” the man hushed again. “Please.” He did his best to make the request, given he could only create the words with his tongue, but he knew the agent understood.

Durnham chewed his lip as he stood in front of the mess of a man. “I want to,” he said, his voice clean and crisp, unwavering. He pointed the gun at the prisoner’s forehead. “I really do.”

Then Durnham replaced the gun in his holster and bent out of view.

“Kill me,” the gasp came again.

“Yeah,” Durnham said, “I know.”

Durnham pulled a black sack over his head.

“No!” The prisoner moaned. “Kill me!”

He wailed as he watched through the gaps in the thread. The man walked to the open door and paused. An outstretched arm flicked a switch and then darkness fell upon him. The bang of the closing door echoed through him and he was alone.

Alone in the darkness.

Alone with his suffering.

Longing for the death he was so eagerly promised, yet was not forthcoming.

ZERO_2

Eyelid snapped open. A gasp.

Sunlight streamed in through the window, cutting through the thick air, warming the room. James Worthy's world was off kilter, and he pushed himself to roll over and open the other eye. Two versions of the room floated of their own accord before coming together in a single image, the lines merging to make solid shapes.

Somewhere in the distance, a phone rang, but he couldn't place the source. His phone had ceased to ring a long time ago. It's true what they say, that you find out whom your genuine friends are when you lose everything. Turns out he didn't have any. They checked in at first, but soon the calls decreased in number and regularity as his attitude labored out of control and his drinking increased.

He was at peace with that, though. He didn't need them as much as they didn't need him, and it sat well with his conscience. He'd been a loner for longer than he hadn't been and was the reason he chose the profession he had endured for all those years.

Somewhere in the depths of the house, the tone of the answering machine sounded.

"Mr. Worthy, this is Christine Raziel. I haven't heard from you and would love to reconnect. As I said, Doctor Gabriel is keen to continue his conversation with you. You know my details. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

Fuck. Christine Raziel. The military-appointed psych to "help with transitioning" into "non-military life"... or some bullshit like that. But one session was enough, more than enough.

He shifted his gaze to the bedside table and reached for his watch, contacting it on his third attempt. It was well after ten and

he cursed himself for not closing the blinds and disconnecting the phone before he passed out the night before.

He clenched his eyes shut and willed himself up, praying for energy. The world spun, and it felt like someone was stabbing a knife through his brain. Not fast and piercing, but slow and deliberate, making sure every ounce of pain was as heavy as a brick. He reached up to this head just in case he had an object protruding from his temple.

He felt along his brow, his fingers tracing along the raised scar that ran across his forehead, and winced. His hand fell to the left side of his face, to the mottled skin of a burn long since healed. They were permanent reminders of his past, like tattoos, and ones he could never cover up. He guessed, given the circumstances, that he should consider himself lucky. He knew of some that had lost body parts, others had lost their minds. The least fortunate had lost their lives.

The previous night's events were hazy and he wouldn't have put it past him to jam something into his gray matter to end it all. Sure, there would have been easier ways, but he wasn't into the simple ways of doing things. He would rather suffer, feel every inch of pain before life evacuated his body, and he'd savor every moment, like cheap whisky that burned your throat on the way down.

He noticed, however, that he disrobed before passing out on the unmade, king-size mattress. As he sat in his underwear, he located a trail of clothes from the doorway to the bed. His gut gurgled, and he grabbed at it. Lost memories. He couldn't remember the last time he ate anything of substance. Alcohol was one of his top food groups, being right up there with prescription medication. And together, well, the result being the shabby mess sitting on the edge of the bed catching a foggy glance at himself in the wardrobe mirror.

Images of the night's dream flashed before him. He was floating, lifted from the earth into the clouds and felt as light as free-falling from five thousand feet. Then a hand appeared from below, grabbed

his leg and yanked him down. He came crashing to earth with such a jolt it woke him. Maybe he was having a heart attack or a stroke—maybe he was dead. His head swayed from side to side, aware that any sudden movement would be both difficult and painful.

He eased down onto the floor with a groan and moved into a push-up position. He stared at the floor, inspecting each microfiber thread, examining the dust and other crap that built up over time. The floor rushed towards him and he lay for a moment, his bare chest on the floor, the sun warming his back. Then he pushed. Again and again.

After counting out fifty repetitions, he lowered himself halfway and held the position. Punishment. It was punishment for the previous night, for the things he said, for the things he did, for the things he thought. Although being out of the shape a professional military man should have, he held the position for two minutes. Then his arms shook, and he grimaced, inviting the pain. Penalty, for not having the guts to go through with it and end it all.

When he couldn't hold it any longer and his grunts and groans were getting on his own nerves, he released the tension and flopped to the floor, soaking up the returned silence. His stomach gurgled again. He could feel something moving inside, working its way out. All the head, arm, and stomach pain stripped away in seconds as he pulled himself up and moved to the ensuite, bouncing off the wall as he did so.

Having emptied his stomach's contents several times over and then some, he found a pair of shorts. It took several attempts to get them on.

He stood in the hallway outside his bedroom door, scratching his stomach. He remembered when he had a six pack, from when he reveled in keeping fit. That was a long time ago though, and now he

was just living. No, now he was just surviving. Living implies a certain quality of life.

He turned his head to the left and looked down the hallway of closed doors. Why did he continue to torture himself? He could have sold the damn house seven times over already, yet deep down he knew he couldn't. Too many memories, good and bad, which meant the house was an anchor around his feet. This was both a blessing and a curse, both holding him and repelling him at the same time.

He took a deep breath, turned to the stairs, and padded down to the kitchen, on the lookout for anything that would fill the void in his stomach. He knew his chances of actually finding something was slim, but he was hoping to locate a long-lost can of something hidden deep in the pantry.

Several beer and whiskey bottles lined the sink, with blister packs littering the island countertop. He stood between the messes and admired his efforts, being both proud and disgusted with himself. He hated what he had turned into, who he allowed himself to be. It was so gradual that this disgrace was the new normal. He ran a hand over his facial growth and wondered how much more he would have to take before he didn't have to wake up anymore.

A muffled ringing sound snaked through the morning noise, quiet at first and then picking up the tempo and volume, followed by a dull vibration. Worthy instinctively grabbed the home phone. Silence greeted him, the display dead, confusion reigned. The mild noise, a cacophony in Worthy's head, continued to invade his auditory senses with as much impact as a truck, as he turned his attention to the kitchen table and upturned the contents. Worthy threw magazines, bills and unopened envelopes in all directions until he found his mobile phone hiding under a stack of junk mail.

He cleared his throat a few times before pressing the screen to accept the call.

“Worthy,” he croaked out. He supposed he could have done better to welcome the caller. Perhaps a “hello” or “This is James”, but let’s face it, the phone call was ruining his post-bender recovery.

The response was swift, sweet and soothing. “Mr. James Worthy, please hold the line while I connect you.” Her voice rendered him incapable of movement. It felt like just the right amount of sultry, and he imagined a busty assistant with a low-cut top and stockings. He then pictured this complete figment of his imagination, naked and bent over a desk. He gripped the countertop for support.

A voice crackled on the line. “Mr. Worthy, I trust I’m not interrupting anything.” The voice belonged to an older gentleman, his diction perfect yet still conveyed a gravelly edge to it, all the while managing to sooth the rock that was rolling back and forth in Worthy’s skull.

The interruption washed away his fantasy. Without knowing who he was talking to, he looked around the empty room and responded.

“Not at all,” he lied. “How can I help you?”

“We have an opening and feel you are suitable for the role.”

The announcement dumfounded Worthy. He hadn’t worked in, well, he wasn’t sure how long. Once the media threw accusations and plastered his face on television, no one came looking for his special set of skills, regardless of how well the country had utilized them in the past.

He circumnavigated the table, sifting through the contents to find a pen and paper.

“Well, that sounds great,” he replied slowly, followed by a fumbling of words as he tried to recollect the last position of a pen. This was all so much easier in the old days. “And, who is this for again?”

“My apologies, Mr. Worthy. Call me Barnaby. We’ll discuss the details when you arrive at ten o’clock this morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” Worthy said, now opening drawers to find the missing writing implements. “Wait,” he said as he shut the drawer. “It’s already after ten here. What time zone are you calling from?”

“Time,” the gentleman retorted jovially. “There’s always time, particularly for a conversation such as ours. Besides, it’s just after eight.”

“Maybe where you are,” Worthy said, and then stopped when he saw the time on his watch. He squeezed his eyes and double checked the position of the hands. He then checked the oven, microwave, and wall clock. Each displayed the identical eight-fifteen time.

Worthy discharged a long droning noise before apologizing.

“No need to apologize, Mr. Worthy. It is a common mistake.”

“I appreciate that. Where is your office?”

“No office as such, however, we have organized a room for us to meet and discuss the finer details of our requirements. A device will arrive for you shortly with details of the location.”

“I see,” Worthy said. Skepticism coated his response.

“I’m sure you can appreciate, Mr. Worthy, that a conversation such as ours comes with a certain level of, shall we say, discretion?”

“Discretion? Of course.”

“Very good. If you can bring the device to our conversation, then we are off to a splendid start indeed.”

Worthy shrugged his shoulders, thinking of the ease of the task. “Looking forward to it.”

There was a knock at the front door, followed by a chime of the doorbell that Worthy felt should have caused more audible damage than it did.

“I see the package has arrived,” Barnaby said. “I must go now, as must you; however, I am very much looking forward to our paths crossing again very soon. Now I must attend to my assistant. By the way, her name is Angel, which is ironic really, don’t you think?”

Worthy pressed the phone harder to his ear. “Sorry?”

The whispered reply cut through him. “Because she’s a demon in the sack.”

Worthy was speechless as he envisioned the older man, his saggy body pounding wildly against Angel’s bare ass, the Viagra providing unlimited stamina, driving her to a chain of flamboyant orgasms.

Another knock at the door woke him from his fantastical nightmare.

“Good day, Mr. Worthy.” The phone went silent.

Worthy looked down at the black screen and tossed it amongst the rubbish on the counter. It must have died just as the call concluded. Worthy saw it as a rather fortunate event.

As he walked towards the door, all he could think of was what he would say to Angel when he met her later that morning. Something clever like “I know you’re fucking the boss” or “how does it feel when he drains his saggy balls into you?”. He shook his head, trying to eliminate all thoughts of Angel and old men, as he opened the door.

True enough, a delivery driver stood there in his crisp uniform and cap, a small package in one hand and a small device in the other. The courier tipped his cap and greeted the customer. Worthy skipped the pleasantries and pressed his thumb against the device. The courier handed over the package and Worthy once more ignored the farewell, his total attention on the box.

After slamming the front door, he made his way back to the lounge, holding the package up to his ear as he shook it. No noise came forth. It was then he realized how good he felt, despite feeling like a wet dumpster not too long ago. His stomach wasn’t churning and his head wasn’t banging.

A few minutes later, he eased down on the couch with a cup of coffee. He was surrounded by the previous contents of the coffee table, that he had unceremoniously pushed onto the floor to make

room for the package which was now front and center, staring back at him. He eyed it, uncertain of what to do.

Someone knew his name. Someone who went to the trouble of sending a package and having an intermediary make the call, a.k.a.: Busty Angel. Barnaby gave him a time to meet, but not the place. Why? Perhaps government? Covert organization? Well-financed hate group? The more he thought about it, the more he felt the needle rising on his brain's Richter scale.

He winced as the pain and thumping in his head grew stronger. The pain had returned, stronger and harder than before. At a loss for what else to do, he took a sip of coffee, cleared his throat, and maneuvered the package until it rested in front of him. Touching the box caused his pain to retreat, the echoing thumps receding into the distance, replaced with a thick, smothering mental gel that deadened all of his senses.

His arms felt light, like they were moving of their own free will, pulling apart the package like a kid unwrapping a gift on Christmas morning. He mused at the watery cocoon he felt he was in, a level of intoxication that lifted his soul and caused him to move in large sweeping motions. The feeling differed greatly from the cocktail of alcohol and prescription meds the night before, where all he wanted to do was jam a bread knife into his stomach and cogitate over the act.

He collapsed back onto the couch, cradling the black, sleek device. He turned it over in his hands, but he couldn't find any button to turn it on, nor could he distinguish the front from the back. It looked like a solid piece of black glass.

"Well, now what?" he mumbled.

The device vibrated. Worthy turned it over to reveal a message on the screen.

ZERO_3

Worthy stepped out of the car and stood in the middle of the footpath, checking the address on the mysterious phone. With parking being historically impossible or outrageously expensive, Worthy settled for a taxi. Amongst a swarm of pedestrians, he craned his neck upwards. He covered his eyes as the sunshine fought its way through the steel and glass spires, before being engulfed by dark clouds that rumbled in. The building seemed to grow forever, the top disappearing amongst the growl of the dark billow.

During his tours of Afghanistan and Iraq, and plenty of other places that weren't common knowledge, he had seen and undertaken various missions that could weaken even the hardest of soldiers. The view in front of him seemed to whirl up every ugly memory he had fought hard to forget as an undercurrent of mayhem surfaced within him.

He rubbed his smooth chin and pulled down on the arms of his suit jacket. He had done his best in the time he had to make himself look a little more presentable, or more correctly, a little less slovenly. He had combed his hair, that is to say, he had run a hand through it. The open collar white shirt (mostly ironed) shone against the charcoal suit and offset his dark brown eyes. They say the eyes are the windows to the soul, but with James Worthy, they were an illusion of his capabilities and what he believed.

He swallowed hard and brought his gaze down to the number on the front of the building. The number one-hundred and thirty-seven, in large silver characters, gleamed ominously over the door. He wasn't much for superstitions, he believed in a result being the direct output of the action. In his line of work, you either did something well or ended up dead. You didn't die because you forgot to kiss your

assault rifle three times before engagement; you died because of an unwillingness to perform your duty in the manner in which you were trained.

During his time in the field, Worthy had toured with plenty of people who wouldn't change their underwear for weeks at a time or had trinkets they would rub ritualistically, and would still end up in a body bag with half their face missing because they twitched when they should have pulled the trigger.

A drop of rain fell from the heavens and seemed to sizzle when it hit the phone. He stood and watched the entrance to the building to see if anyone entered or left. The view was laced with a hypnotic pull that he had experienced before, in land far from here, in situations the surrounding pedestrians fervently ignored to protect their own sanity. People brushed by him like he wasn't even there, even though his frame towered over the masses like a monolith.

Someone ran past him and nudged his shoulder, spinning him on the spot. If he had enough energy, he might have shouted or considered giving chase, but to what end? He took a deep breath, slid the device into his pocket, and pushed his way through the glass doors, and into a decision that would impact the fate of billions of people.

High above, two men stood at the window and looked down at where Worthy had been standing just moments before. Impeccably dressed in their Italian suits and sipping coffee from delicate cups, their deep features held a wealth of insight that transcended generations. With their slicked back, gray hair shining at a similar luster to their black polished shoes, they could have been mistaken for twins.

They both wore thin black ties that hung over crisp white shirts, their sleeves clipped together with cufflinks embedded with dazzling red stones. Their distinguishing characteristic was their jackets. Barnaby wore black while his counterpart wore white.

“So, what do you think, Nathan?” Barnaby enquired, welcoming his partner to view their target on the street.

The other man sipped and placed the cup gently down on the saucer he was holding. The gentle sound echoed around the room. “Oh, very *worthy* indeed, my dear Barnaby,” he chuckled.

“I was waiting to see how long it would take you to work that one in. Please don’t repeat your antics as you did with Harry Richards.”

“Oh, you mean ‘Hairy Dicks’?” He gave a sideways glance to see Barnaby’s reaction.

The edge of Barnaby’s lip curled upwards just a little before he cleared his throat and took in another sip of coffee. He pointed his head toward the street below. “Look there, Nathan.”

Nathan stepped forward towards the floor to ceiling glass and peered down to the street below. Traffic had stopped at a red light and people crossed at the intersection. Suits, ties, skirts. Suitcases, satchels, backpacks; all on their way to their jobs, their lives, their existence... for now.

With no prior indication, a car darted between the stalled vehicles and powered down the bus lane towards the swarm of people.

The roar of the engine was replaced with screeching tires as the car skidded towards the stop line. Startled people held each other back, watching the car approach. Suddenly, two men, two dark shadows, broke clear of the pack and darted across in front of the looming, unstoppable steel box.

The first man jumped clear.

The second man, the one in pursuit, wasn’t as lucky, making a full impact with the steel and glass.

The collision was brutal as the man’s skull slammed into the windshield, creating a massive spider web across the glass. Extremities flailed as the body flew through the air like a rag doll. Screams filled the air before the body hit the ground, followed by a horde of witnesses who clambered to get a closer look. What followed

was panic as some checked the body while others reached for their phones to call an ambulance or capture the moment for posterity.

“Nice one, Barnaby,” Nathan said as he turned to see him with a wide, beaming smile. “And flirting with danger. They’ll know.”

Barnaby took another sip. “Oh please, people die all the time.”

Nathan stepped towards his companion and tutted. “They’ll know. They always know.”

“Well, we’ve evaded them thus far. With all the redirection, we’ll complete our assignment before they know what’s happening.” Barnaby studied Nathan, finally noting his attire, and sighed. “Must you wear that infernal jacket, Nathan?”

Nathan looked down at his shoulders and brushed the white jacket lightly with the back of his hand. “I don’t know, I think it’s rather becoming.”

Barnaby stared deep into Nathan’s green eyes. “So be it. Let us prepare. I need to make something.”

“Why must you always do that?” Nathan asked.

“Because I like it. Besides, I think it adds a little flair to proceedings.”

Nathan rolled his eyes. “Are you going to make a swan?”

“Come,” Barnaby said, ignoring the dig. “There isn’t much time.”

Nathan sighed. “Well no, not now.”

ZERO_4

Worthy stood in the empty foyer. There was no security, nor other visitors, or any listing of the tenants. Much to his disappointment, Angel wasn't there either. However, if this was a multi-tenanted building, she may reside on her particular floor. The only thing in the foyer was a single set of dull, metallic elevator doors flanked by ornate marble columns.

He approached, stood at the elevator door and second-guessed himself. Many times, he had trusted his gut, for in times of crisis it was all you could rely on. Did he really want to be there? He stared at the single button on the wall next to the doors. He reached out to press it, then stopped and retracted.

Movement out of the corner of his eye made him turn with the squealing chirp of his polished shoes on the polished floor echoing around him. He watched people walk past the glass doors, disappearing into a haze only to reappear further down in the glass panels. An ambulance rushed down the street. Even though the lights were flashing, he heard nothing but his own breathing. He took a step forward towards the glass doors and then stopped as if restrained by an invisible force. He felt like he was in a bubble, unable to move either forward or back, somewhat stuck between the door of the building and the door of the elevator. His emotional unbalance only enhanced his physical conundrum.

He looked up to the fourteen-foot ceilings and closed his eyes as if asking for direction from the heavens. The answer came in the form of a *ding*. He slowly opened his eyes and turned to find an open elevator door. With one last look at the building entrance, one last contemplative thought of abandoning the interview and returning home to a day of doing nothing, he turned.

He stalled. Perhaps if he waited, the doors would close and he would consider that a sign. But they didn't close. He looked down at his shoes. He polished the uppers on the back of his calves, a desperate act of procrastination.

The doors remained open, and he resigned himself to the commitment he had made earlier that day. He cautiously entered the void. The small space, as opulent as the building foyer, was emblazoned with gold trimmings amongst light oak wood panels. It smelt of cigars and alcohol. It reminded him of something out of the fifties, and he felt it needed some kind of lift operator donned with tails and white gloves.

The doors closed behind him and he turned to see the outside world diminish into his distorted reflection. He turned to the button panel and paused. There was a solitary button with a gold plate next to it. Embossed on the plate was a single word: *Worthy*. He smirked at the personalized nature of the service, and he raised a finger to press the button. But before he did so, the button light flashed.

The machine jumped to life, the squeals of metal on metal pouring over *Worthy*, as the lift started its journey upwards. *Worthy* took a deep breath and centered himself in the space. Perhaps this was some kind of new technology that would take him to a predetermined floor based on his appointment time. God forbid those that are late. He prayed the old girl had it in her to get him to wherever it was he needed to go.

Apart from the initial jolt, the ride was motionless. He couldn't tell which way he was traveling, and for all he knew, he could have been floating. It was quite a strange sensation, and he likened it to performing a forward somersault in water and letting his body ease its way to the surface.

Within a few seconds of the doors closing, they reopened again. In front of him lay an expanse of more solid marble flooring and matching elaborate pillars that flanked large floor to ceiling win-

dows. At the end of the room, some twenty meters away, was a dark mahogany table.

Worthy eased out of the lift, just in time as the doors closed once again. The trip was so short he thought he might have been on the second or third floor, yet as he looked out the window, wisps of dark cloud fanned by.

A clearing of a throat broke his thoughts, and he turned towards the other end of the room. He only now could make out two figures sitting at the table. In the distance, one raised their hand and with a flick of their fingers, gestured for him to approach. Worthy, disappointed that neither of the people sitting at the end appeared to be Angel, straightened his jacket, rubbed his hands together and commenced the trek across the room. He thought the dimensions of the room were odd, based on the foyer he had been standing in less than a minute ago.

While the brief trip in the lift was seamless and somehow lightened his inner being, the journey before him seemed infinite. It felt that for every step toward the table, the length of the room grew, pulling the destination further from him. His legs felt heavy, the air growing dense as if the oxygen had liquefied. He was drowning. The sound of his boots on the hard floor emanated from him and bounced hard against his eardrums.

His eyelids grew heavy as he took step after step. It was as if something drew him towards the other end of the room, his physical body being pulled forward by his spiritual entity. It was when he felt he could no longer continue that he found himself standing behind an elaborate hardwood chair, placed deliberately at the table.

Worthy blinked a few times, wiped his brow and turned. The size of the room seemingly shrunk with the elevator doors just five meters away. He stood there; a furrowed brow etched into his forehead.

His training instinctively kicked in and he slowed his breathing and with it, his rapid heartbeat.

An echo encircled him, warm and soothing, like caramel. “Welcome, Mr. Worthy.”

Worthy pivoted to see two men standing at their places at the table, both with their hands extended waiting for a response. He shook each as the pair made their introductions. The first was Barnaby, an elder statesman who looked profound in his black dinner suit and white tie. He was crisp and clean. Next to him was Nathan, who complemented Barnaby, with a white suit and black tie. They flashed perfect smiles and prevailed for Worthy to take his assigned seat.

As he did so, Worthy pointed back towards the elevator doors. “I apologize for that, gentlemen, I’m not really sure what happened.”

In his previous life, one did not stroll casually towards the desk of a superior, and certainly not struggle over such a short distance. Although, recent history would suggest that nothing is what it seemed. He had faced many mysterious events, and the struggle from the elevator doors to the table was perhaps the least peculiar of them all.

Barnaby said, “I noticed nothing wrong. Did you, Nathan?”

“Most certainly not, Barnaby. Everything looked fine from here. Are you okay, Mr. Worthy?”

Worthy cleared his throat as he attempted to hide his concern. “Perhaps just a little light headed.”

“Must have been the elevator ride,” said Nathan.

“Precisely,” said Barnaby, “It happens to everyone their first time. We’re not exactly on the ground anymore, you know.”

“So,” Worthy said chuckling along, “What floor are we on?”

“Mere details, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby cut in. “Let us move straight to business.”

In the mad rush of introductions and rapid exchanges, Worthy only now took in his surroundings. The two men sat across from him, off center to his left, with Nathan on the edge and Barnaby beside him, slightly more centered. Both sat bolt upright with closed briefcases in front of them, which were the only things on the table.

Two empty chairs next to Barnaby completed that side of the table. From his vantage point, Worthy felt like a judge, waiting for the prosecution to arrive.

It was in that moment he heard the ticking. He glanced up to locate the source and found it against the back wall. A large grandfather clock sat oddly out of place, given the environment. Whereas the room was marble and glass, the clock was of dark mahogany and matched the table, perhaps carved from the same tree. At the top, two spires grew and twisted to reach out for a wooden sphere. To Worthy, it looked like two hands grasping for a ball, although delicately as if the round object was of great importance. A glass door encased a solid gold pendulum, hypnotically swinging back and forth. The most peculiar thing about it though was the minute hand that seemed to be rotating counterclockwise, and by his calculations, was moving the wrong way every thirty seconds.

He found it difficult to draw his gaze away from the timepiece. Barnaby and Nathan noted his attraction and looked at each other before peering around behind themselves.

“I believe you need to get that fixed, gentlemen.”

The two suits returned their gaze to the front. “Not at all,” Barnaby stated.

“A product of our environment I’m afraid,” added Nathan.

Worthy shifted in his seat that appeared more comfortable than the carvings would suggest. “What do you mean?”

“Well everyone’s watching the clock,” said Nathan. “Everyone runs their lives by time. Train timetables, time sheets, time of birth, time of death...”

“Purely for our benefit,” said Barnaby, “because when the time runs out, so does this deal.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize we were under pressure to make a deal,” said Worthy.

“Always pressure,” Nathan said, “and certainly not for you to worry about. The clock is for us, not for you. It is up to us to offer you compelling reasons to decide.”

“Well, when does the time expire?”

“When it’s all gone,” replied Barnaby, a confused glint in his eye as if the question was obvious and didn’t need answering.

Worthy blinked, trying to decipher the meaning behind the quizzical response. “And when is that... exactly?”

The two looked on in silence, motionless.

Worthy continued. “I just like to know the parameters in which I’m working. I need to decide today?”

Nathan leaned forward and lowered his head, kind of like a ceremonial bow. “As soon as possible, Mr. Worthy.”

“Time is always against us,” Barnaby added, “and sometimes even we don’t know when it will end. We can control most things, but not all things. They give us some latitude. However, other things remain vastly out of our hands.”

Worthy shook his head. He knew about working in similar conditions, although his time in foreign deserts differed greatly from his current surroundings. He often received directives that included just information to do their missions, nothing more, nothing less, and they never included start and finish times. The expectation was he would start as soon as the briefing finished and complete the work as soon as possible.

Worthy sat upright, his palms resting on his knees. Despite being out of the military, some habits die hard.

He cleared this throat. “Is that a dog?” he asked, pointing with his head.

The smile grew on Barnaby’s face as looked down to the origami object in front of him. “It is, in fact, a goat,” he announced. “Highly regarded in Pagan culture, often used in animal sacrifices. Even slaughtered for atonement of a community. The literal scapegoat.”

They looked at each other.

“But that is nothing to worry about,” Barnaby continued. “That is for later. Much later.”

Worthy nodded, trying to get the goat monolog out his head. He pointed at the vacant chairs beside Barnaby. “Are there more people joining us?”

Both Barnaby and Nathan looked at the empty spots and then at each other.

Barnaby spoke, but with a measured voice, very different from their earlier interactions. “Best you take the next seat, Nathan, to... even things up a little.”

Nathan broke his gaze and looked behind Barnaby to the empty chair. He turned to Worthy, smiled painfully, and slowly stood. “But of course.” He politely pushed in his chair as Barnaby slid Nathan’s briefcase to the empty spot beside him. Nathan stood behind the vacant chair and gradually rested his hands on the elaborate carvings on the shoulders. He pulled the chair out and stepped in front. “I am dressed for the occasion, after all,” he quipped. He held his breath as he slowly lowered himself onto the padding, keeping an earnest look towards Barnaby.

Worthy watched the petty drama unfold and wished he had never mentioned it. He found it bemusing they were making such a big deal of switching seats. Maybe those seats were ornamental and never intended for use. Perhaps they belonged to someone more important, with more power than the two who sat before him.

After Nathan placed his entire body weight on the chair, he pulled the chair in and shot a smile at Worthy. “Well then, down to business?” he said as if nothing had happened.

Both Barnaby and Nathan simultaneously clicked open their cases and withdrew a wad of paper. Both piles landed squarely on the table, sending an invisible ripple through the wooden desk, the vibration working down the table leg, across the floor and into Wor-

thy's leg. He took a deep breath as a shiver worked up his spine and escaped at the base of his skull.

Worthy stared at the documents in awe if you could call them documents. Each was more than the size of a ream of paper. Surely there is a page limit that when reached, the document manifests into something more.

Worthy looked on as they spun their respective mountains and slide them across the table.

Both Barnaby and Nathan extracted their Montblanc pens from their respective breast pockets, screwed off the caps, and pushed them towards Worthy's face.

"Sign here," they said in unison with Cheshire grins.

ZERO_5

Worthy looked at the two stacks of bound papers in front of him and, ignoring the offer to sign, flicked through one of the piles. Each page contained minute print that seemed to get even smaller towards the back, and most of it appeared to be in a foreign language. Other parts again seemed to hold nothing but a series of hieroglyphics. The top page held numerous clauses followed by a line preceded by a large 'X'. He was incredulous they would slam down an inordinate amount of paperwork with no sufficient explanation of the contents and request a signature.

He looked up to see the pens held by both parties, and beyond that the grin on their faces.

Worthy instinctively grabbed Barnaby's pen, the weight of it intensifying the longer he held it. He looked at the contracts. He had signed a few contracts in his time, both with the army and with buying a house, however, what was in front of him easily dwarfed them a hundred-fold.

Barnaby and Nathan looked at each other as they regained their seats. Barnaby made a production of having empty hands, of having his pen chosen. Nathan nodded in approval, shrugged, and capped and returned the pen to his breast pocket.

Worthy sat back and looked across to Nathan who shared the same look as Barnaby, the grin excessively large.

Once again, Worthy flicked through a bundle of paper and exchanged glances with the other pile.

"So, what's all this?"

"They are the contacts," Barnaby said. "You can sign my contract."

"Or mine," Nathan added. "The choice is entirely yours."

The more he looked upon the reams of paper, the more he could hear his heartbeat in his ears like the air had been sucked out of the room. The pen he held felt like a brick, yet Worthy felt the shared force between the ball-point and the paper. One seemed to attract, the other reject.

He looked up, the eyes of both Barnaby and Nathan large with anticipation, their smiles widening, willing him to mark the page with his signature. Worthy placed the pen on the table between both contracts and sat back in his chair. The smiles dropped from the suited men in quick succession. Barnaby reclaimed his writing implement.

“I’m not quite sure I understand,” Worthy said, wiping his mouth. “Why are there two contracts?”

“Please excuse us,” said Barnaby.

“Well said, Barnaby,” Nathan added. “And apologies for the brashness of our request. Time is always against us.” He steadied himself in his chair. “Both Barnaby and myself represent competing entities, each looking to employ your unique set of services. We are here to negotiate an exchange for those services.” Nathan leaned towards the table and lifted an eyebrow. “We are trying to woo you, Mr. Worthy.”

“You mean in terms of benefits?” queried Worthy.

“More like a signing bonus,” said Barnaby. “To carry you over. You see, after you sign—and you will sign, Mr. Worthy—we wouldn’t need you right away.”

“Why would I sign? You haven’t told me what this is all about yet.”

“Oh,” Nathan clapped. “You will sign because you are a smart man, because what we offer you is life changing.”

“I see. And *if* I sign, when would you need me to begin?”

“When,” Nathan turned his hands over, trying to find the right words, “when we call upon you. When we need you.”

“I see,” said Worthy, his mind turning over probabilities of the extent of this bonus. “I think I’m getting a little ahead of myself. What type of business are you two in?”

“An excellent question, wouldn’t you agree, Barnaby?”

“Very much so, Nathan,” he said, nodding to his counterpart. He turned back to Worthy, the smile dropping, his features tight and serious.

“We are at war, Mr. Worthy.”

“Well, I’m well accustomed to that.”

“We know you are,” said Barnaby.

“So, who’s it with?” Worthy asked, genuinely curious.

“I’m sorry?” questioned Barnaby. “I don’t quite understand.”

“Who’s the war with? China, India, Pakistan?” Worthy knew of the current and emerging business powerhouses, buying stock, buying companies, buying lives.

“Not quite like that,” Barnaby said. “We are at war with each other, Mr. Worthy.”

Worthy exchanged glances between the two men. “You two trying to take over each other’s company?” It seemed strange that such warring parties would sit in the same room as each other, let alone be privy to each other’s negotiations.

Barnaby and Nathan looked at each other before settling eyes on Worthy.

“Yes,” said Barnaby painfully, “something like that. It’s... complicated.”

“And not,” Nathan added, “at the same time.”

“Precisely, Nathan. Paradoxical at best, I’m afraid, Mr. Worthy.”

“Well, for two people at war, you two are certainly treating each other respectfully. This is very different from the wars I’ve been part of.”

“I understand,” said Barnaby. “But there cannot be shadow without light. Our existence is determined by the existence of another.”

“You are at war *and* yet you need each other. That sounds a little complicated.”

“A delicate balance,” Barnaby said. “An ecosystem if you will. I understand this sounds contradictory to those unversed in our ways of working. There will be a time, Mr. Worthy, when one will move to govern over the other, and when that time comes, both of us will want you on our respective sides.”

“I see. I’m not sure how I can help though. Corporate espionage really isn’t my forte.”

“You can let us worry about what we want you to do. You’ll just have to trust us.”

“I’m sorry guys, trust is a commodity and no offense, but I don’t trust anybody.”

“Really?” Nathan piped in. “You trusted Cad once.”

Worthy regarded them curiously and shifted in his seat. Sensed his heart rate increase with the sound of Cad’s name. “Yes,” he intoned curiously. “Once. A long time ago. What do you know about him?”

“We know lots of things. Things about you. Things about Cad. Things about you *and* Cad. We have bountiful sources that reach everywhere in every direction,” said Nathan. “Nothing is safe from us.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve done your homework.”

“Oh, you have no idea. In most cases, people seek us out, for whatever reason. However, you, Mr. Worthy, are not like most people. They don’t have the skills and motivation like you have,” said Barnaby.

“Well, I appreciate the compliment,” said Worthy, looking to move through the formal part of the interview process. “What would you like to know about me you don’t already know? How can I help fill in the blanks?”

Barnaby looked over to Nathan. “How much time do we have?”

"We have enough," Nathan replied.

"Enough to start at the beginning?"

"Is there any better place to start?"

"The end?" Barnaby gave a surreptitious wink to Nathan, and both men laughed. Worthy missed the joke.

Barnaby turned towards their guest. "Very well, Mr. Worthy, let us talk."

"What would you like to know?"

"Why not start with Cad?" Nathan offered.

"Well," Worthy said as he shifted in his seat. "A lot of that is classified and never officially happened."

Barnaby opened his briefcase and removed a manila folder. He opened it in front of himself, skimmed the contents and then closed the cover. He shared a glance with Nathan before turning the folder around, placing it gently on the table and sliding it over to Worthy.

Worthy stopped the file under his hand and eyed the two sitting opposite, their faces gave nothing away. Worthy slowly opened the folder, curious about what top secret information they could gather, regardless of their stated reach. The only documents they could obtain would be redacted beyond usability. From his experience in the field and beyond, he expected a bundle of papers; assignments, mission documents, reports, white paper with big black lines all over the page.

The folder contained three photos. The first was large and in full high definition that he could make out the specs of red on white eyeballs. Worthy's eyes went wide, and he slammed the folder shut. He shot up out of his seat, causing the chair to slide back over the smooth surface and topple over. The resultant clang of wood on marble escalated around the room, shattering the void like broken glass.

"What the fuck is this?" Worthy said pointing at the file, his voice following the preceding echo.

Barnaby and Nathan remained unmoved by the explosive emotion.

“Calm down, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby said, waving his hand. “We don’t mean any offense to you or anyone you know. We wanted to show you we know everything about you, that you have no secrets.”

Worthy eyed Barnaby and Nathan, his heart pounding, his breath short, his ears ringing.

“Please,” offered Nathan in a soothing voice, pointing to the up-turned chair. “We only did this for you. So, you don’t feel you need to lie. Contrary to what people believe we thrive on truth as much as anyone.”

Worthy moved, slowly at first, his hand reaching down to pick up the chair while he kept eye contact with the other two. Once he had a grip on the chair back, he whipped it up and slammed it down at the table, the sound once again echoing around them, momentarily overtaking the clock’s mechanism.

Worthy deliberately lowered himself on the chair.

“Answer my question. How the fuck did you find out about that?”

Nathan said, “We will answer everything in good time. In the meantime, you should answer our questions.”

“If you know so much about me, then what could I possibly tell you?”

“Oh, I’m sure there are things,” said Nathan.

Worthy bit his lip as he breathed in deeply. He saved himself a moment of mindfulness to concentrate on his breathing.

“Time?” asked Barnaby as he turned to Nathan.

“Yes, we still have time,” came the reply.

“Very good then. Just start at the beginning, Mr. Worthy, simple as that.”

“You want to know about Cad? You want me to start at the beginning?”

Barnaby nodded.

“Fine then.” Worthy looked down, collecting his thoughts, chewing over those vital moments. “I guess the best place to start is with an argument.”

ZERO_6

3 years earlier

I gripped my head in complete frustration and pulled at my hair. The pain from it failed spectacularly compared to the pain I was feeling from the argument. If I had had the strength, I would have crushed my skull and ended it all right there. But I didn't have the strength. The fight had exhausted me. I was tired of the accusations and the questions I could never answer to her satisfaction.

"How many times do I need to tell you, Shelly? I don't get to make that call."

"Three weeks, James. You've been home for three weeks. What sort of life is that for us? When do we get to have you?"

She sat on the bed, a box of tissues at the ready, watching me pace the carpet. Her voice rose in octaves as she tried to get her point across to ears that refused to listen.

It was a goddamn cliché.

I didn't want our voices carrying to the next room, to innocent ears, but the conversation was increasing heat with every word. Hatred hung in the air. Hatred for each other, hatred about the situation, hatred for not having any control.

Her voice, as smooth as it was, grated on my every nerve. Every attack a knife to my chest. I could see her neck convulse as the tears tickled the back of her throat, and just about hear her heartbeat. Even though she had pulled her dark hair back into a ponytail, strands had escaped and fluttered in front of her soaked eyes. She wore a woolen pullover and jeans but I figured the rage burning up inside her was staving off the late autumn weather.

"What do you want me to do? Tell the General to go fuck himself?" I stood by the window and looked at her. "I don't get to choose

my missions; I don't get to choose when or where I go." I pointed to the tattoo on my forearm; a skull sitting atop a sniper rifle, the words *'One Kill'* scrawled under it. "This is who I am! This is my life!"

Shelly stood. "And what about us? We're left here picking up the pieces as you fly off to god knows where doing god knows what. We don't hear from you, no one tells us anything and I'm sick of it."

I reared up. "You knew this when we got married, when we discussed having a kid."

"Don't you bring Liz into this. She doesn't even know who you are. This isn't fair to us or her."

I marched to the other side of the room and leaned against the wall between the closed door and the dresser. In my line of work, you needed an escape plan, and jumping out the window, despite putting an end to the monotonous conversation, would cause a different type of pain.

"This whole fucking conversation isn't fair. I'm doing all of this for you, for all of us. You can't expect me to throw everything away, not now."

"Why don't you think of your family for once? We are always second to you and your career."

I peeled myself off the wall, rage burning its way through my throat, heat escaping through my pores. "That career has paid for *this* house in *this* neighborhood. It pays for the cars and the gym and all your other shit."

Her face broke, a single tear making tracks to her swollen lips. Her voice cracked and her reply came as a whisper. "You think I give a shit about this house? Or the cars? I just want a family, for us all to be a family."

I took a deep breath and spoke low, purposefully, so she wouldn't miss a single syllable. "I'm doing this for—."

“You’re not listening to me,” she shouted, cutting me off. She turned and grunted. “Why won’t you listen? I just want you to be a father.”

I grabbed the nearest item on the dresser: a glass photo frame bordering a candid family photo, the three of us laughing at a forgotten joke. Older days. Better days. Long gone, fallen by the wayside of arguments and accusations. The frame shattered as it hit the wall, chased by swear words, the ones reserved for the direst of situations. The release only further fueled me and I strained my adrenalin burdened fists. My chest heaved; my head felt light.

I turned and stepped through to the door, the echo of the slammed door biting me. I closed my eyes and tilted my head upwards, attempting to draw in oxygen, to find a sliver of peace amongst the chaos. The muffled sounds of sobbing seeped through the door, keeping me from a place where I would say I am okay. The scorching fury inside made me incapable of feeling guilty, or sorry, or just about anything else.

I rubbed my palms into my eyes, wishing to be in another place, anywhere but here. Everything felt tight. It was as though my jeans and dress shirt were strangling me, that my forearms and biceps would break through the threads.

It was at that moment I sensed it, another person within proximity. I stopped everything: breathing, thinking. I looked down to the small form standing in the middle of the hallway.

I took a breath and wiped my eyes, trying to hide my emotion. “Oh hey, Liz, how are you, honey?”

She looked at me blankly, clutching her stuffed kitten to her chest.

“Me and mommy are just...”

I saw the tear rolling down her rose-pink cheek. My face dropped from enquiring to hollowness. I stepped forward and stooped down, ended up in a squatting position in front of her.

“It’s okay, baby, I can fix all of this.”

She eased back a step.

Coldness flooded me, the isolation ripping at me. It was confusing, given I had spent most my life in isolated positions.

“Liz,” I said as I moved forward, falling to my knees, my arms open.

Liz turned and ran to her room, sounding the second slamming door in as many minutes. *She doesn’t even know who you are.* The rage and guilt mixed within me as I regained my full height, looming over the empty hallway.

“Fuck this shit,” I whispered through clenched teeth, and swung forward, my fist breaking through the wall with relative ease. I wanted to collapse, to give up the fight. However, I couldn’t. I needed to be strong. One big fucking cliché.

My thoughts were a frenzied mess, my body starved of oxygen, as I thumped down the stairs. To my left, a new kitchen installed just a month ago, and beyond that a hallway leading to the front door and garage. To my right were our lounge and dining. All of it filled with memories, of photos, mementoes and various other bits of garbage a family collects over time.

I marched through the middle of it all and threw open the glass sliding door. Summer air greeted me as I stepped outside. Pushed my way past the outdoor setting, the chairs scraping against the tiles in my wake. Stood at the edge of the yard where thirty square meters of grass in need of attention met the concrete. In my head, Shelly’s words played out like a movie trailer, where I was the villain.

“I just want a family, for us all to be a family.”

“Why won’t you listen? I just want you to be a father.”

I looked down at my hands, turned them over, saw specks of plaster dust where I punched the wall. They were steady, despite my rampant heartbeat. I wrung them together. I pushed my fingers together tighter until every muscle in my upper torso compressed and became

rigid. My fingers turned white as sudden motion caught my attention.

A ladybug flittered just above the grass and landed on a long blade, bending it slightly under its weight. Difficult to see with the human eye from my vantage point, I noted it with spectacular clarity. It rotated on the blade, its antennae vibrating. Then, for no reason I could fathom, the dual, spotted compartments opened, and wings extracted. And just like that, it flew away.

And just like that, the world slowed. The soft ticking of someone's mower, the blade whooshing over blades of grass. The low methodical humming of the pool filter. A breeze that gently rustled the shrubs along the fence. Elongated shouts from a parent to their child.

Arms found their way around my waist, hands crawling up to my chest. Being so intent on my environment meant my wife had broken through my defenses. Before I knew it, I had softened, my anger melting with her soft touch. She pressed against me and I faltered.

"I'm scared when you go," Shelly whispered.

I turned and looked into her eyes, and deeper and deeper I fell into the anonymity of her hazel eyes, until I was swimming in regret, where every decision I could make would be the wrong one. I held her face.

"There's no reason to be scared. I'll be back before you know it," I said, and I pulled her close.

As she rested her face against my chest, her eyes flickered. "That's not what I meant."

"Well then what do you mean?"

She squeezed me tight.

"Nothing."

ZERO_7

Room

“Touching,” said a sarcastic Nathan. “That’s a really moving story.”

Worthy clenched his jaw. Tensed his entire body.

“I agree,” followed Barnaby, “I thought we were going to talk about Cad.”

“We’ll get to Cad in a minute,” said Worthy. He tapped his finger on the folder. “I just wanted you both to know why I did what I did.”

“Your motivation doesn’t concern us, Mr. Worthy,” said Barnaby. “Only your actions.”

“I want you to know this isn’t me, not the regular me anyhow.”

Barnaby gave Nathan a quick glance. He turned back to Worthy and said, “I think we all know who you really are, and what you’re actually capable of. This is, of course, the only reason you are sitting across from us now.”

“Should I be concerned, gentlemen?”

“With what?” Nathan queried. “That we’ll go to the authorities? That we *are* the authorities?”

Worthy just looked at them. It was as if they had read his mind. He nodded, thinking about what was in the folder and trying to anticipate their reply. What would he do if they came back in the affirmative? He thought of plans, escape routes, grabbing his go-bag and jumping on the next plane out of the country before they could plaster his photo all over border control.

Barnaby gave a little laugh. “Calm down, Mr. Worthy, you are safe here. We see no reason whatsoever for doing anything with the

contents of that folder. You should only be concerned if you don't sign one of our lucrative contracts."

"So, this *is* a shakedown then. You're blackmailing me."

"Not blackmail, Mr. Worthy, an opportunity. An opportunity of a lifetime."

Worthy shared stares with the two for a full minute, the ticking of the clock keeping them company against the score of silence.

Nathan broke the silence. "Cad, Mr. Worthy, Cad."

Worthy took a deep breath and released it through pursed lips.

"Listen, Cad is a piece of shit. It's a damn shame how that all turned out. I've apologized to his family, held his girlfriend as she cried into my chest. But let's face it, he deserved it."

"And when you say 'how that all turned out,' you really mean 'stabbed in the neck and thrown over a cliff'?" Barnaby asked playfully.

"I know what I meant," Worthy fired back. "And if your intelligence stretches as far as you say it does, you would know they never found Cad's body."

Barnaby eyed Worthy, his fingers dancing spiritedly on the table in time to the clock's heartbeat.

Worthy returned the gaze. That fucking smug look, those all-knowing dark pools he has for eyes, that constant smirk hiding ivory fangs. His past was full of mystery and agony and he didn't know if he could face all of it again. He thought about getting up and turning his back on the conversation, retreating to his abandoned life and waiting for the end to come.

Barnaby sensed the trepidation. "I think it's time to tell us about Cad."

Worthy shifted in his seat and stared off to the corner of the room, contemplating which version to relay. "Three days," Worthy said, unable to stop himself falling into the abyss that was his past. "I was on that mountain for three solid days."

“Go on,” invited Nathan.

Worthy’s mind drifted, the events of the past becoming as clear as the day he married Shelly. As sharp as the day she...

“Three days, lying still under the cover of combat netting and whatever else we could find in the area. We were like fucking ghosts. No one could have seen us.” Worthy swallowed. “Things had been quiet for the first two, but as our intelligence suggested, it all happened on the third day.”

Worthy looked at the expectant faces sitting opposite. They didn’t offer him anything, didn’t try to disrupt the conversation, so he continued.

“A convoy arrived in town, and we identified our target. We waited until the dust settled. We held our positions until Cad could use the cover of darkness to make it topside and call it in. There was something about the area interfering with our communications equipment.”

Worthy gasped as if reliving those moments. His glazed eyes stared off into the distance.

Silence.

“And then what happened?” Barnaby asked.

Worthy shrugged. “You’ve obviously read the reports.” He cleared his throat and clasped his hands together. “I blacked out. When I came to, Cad was gone, and the next thing I know a squad leader is hauling my sorry ass to the evacuation airlift.”

Nathan clapped. “Bravo. Another touching story.”

Barnaby placed a hand on Nathan’s arm. “Come now, dear Nathan. We are above this behavior.”

“Oh, I know we are, Barnaby, but honestly!” He tutted. “Who is going to buy that story?” He leaned over the table towards Worthy. “Tell me, Mr. Worthy. Did the MPs buy your story? How did you explain the fact you were out of position, that your weapon was missing? That your partner was missing?”

Worthy stared at him. “Hey, you guys wanted to know what happened.”

“Correction, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby said, tapping the folder. “We know what happened; we just want you to say it.”

Worthy’s breath caught in his throat. More leverage, more potential pain.

“If you guys know everything, why do you need me to say anything? Is this place bugged or something? This some kind of sting operation? Or perhaps some kind of remedial therapy?”

“I think we’ve covered this,” said Nathan. “You know, you can end this at any time by signing one of those contracts in front of you, and maybe all of us can get on with our respective days.”

“Yes, the contracts,” Worthy said, looking down at them as if seeing them for the first time. “I almost forgot they were there. I guess I’m just waiting for these perks you mentioned, I’m waiting for the negotiation to begin.”

Barnaby shifted sideways towards Nathan, keeping his gaze on the applicant. “How are we for time?” Barnaby whispered.

Nathan didn’t move. “We have time,” he replied slowly.

“Superb, Nathan, very good indeed.” Barnaby righted himself and brushed the sleeves of his jacket. “Now, Mr. Worthy, our negotiations will begin when they begin, and not before and not after. These are precise matters and as such require precise conversation. We need to know you will live up to your potential. You are here because there has been a set of very specific circumstances leading you to this point.”

Worthy reached up to his neck, rubbing it, swallowing hard. “I’m sorry gents, do you have some water I could drink?”

Barnaby looked over at Nathan who sighed. He pushed his chair out like a child who had been sent to bed for not eating their dinner, the scraping chair resounding through the room.

“Nathan, please. We have guests. We should treat them as one of our own.”

Nathan paused and stood up, buttoning his jacket. “Of course, please excuse me, gentlemen.”

Nathan attended to a drinks cart positioned against the wall behind the table, next to the grandfather clock. Worthy couldn’t explain how he failed to notice it earlier as if something had shielded its presence from him. Nathan laid his hands gently on the iron handle and pushed, the cart coming free from the wall and effortlessly gliding across the smooth surface to the end of the table.

Worthy inspected the surface of the cart, both levels endowed with stained, thick plank shelves. On them, an assortment of bottles carrying a variety of colored liquids. Iron rails held the bottles in place, a myriad of shapes and designs.

Nathan plucked a tumbler from the top, flicked it around and rested it on the table.

“Water, was it, Mr. Worthy?”

He looked over the vessels, studying their lids, their labels.

“Yes,” came the reply, “water is just fine.”

Nathan relieved a bottle from the cart and poured out an equal measure that would make any bartender proud.

“Glad to see you haven’t lost your touch, old boy,” said Barnaby.

Nathan smiled, and slid the three-quarter full glass over the polished tabletop, coming to rest in front of Worthy, the contents remaining level the entire journey. Nathan then turned to his counterpart.

“For you, good sir?”

Barnaby smiled. “The usual.”

“Why, of course. Let’s make it a double, shall we?”

In quick succession, Nathan had poured and delivered in style two glasses of brown liquid to their places. He then returned the cart

to the wall before taking his seat, inaudibly regaining his place at the table.

Once the table had its full complement, Barnaby lifted his glass. "Cheers," he toasted.

Nathan lifted, gave a slight nod and took a sip. "Ah, perks of the job. Few and far between if you ask me."

Worthy slowly lifted his glass, met eyes with the man opposite and both sipped their chosen poisons.

The small sip of clear drink coated Worthy's mouth and throat with tremendous ease. It awakened him. It both fulfilled him and had him wanting at the same time. He threw back the rest and placed the glass on the table, spinning it across the polished wood. He had drunk many things in his life, but that single glass filled more holes and broke more filters than anything. Clarity washed over his brain.

The two suited gentlemen looked down at the glass.

"Care for another?" Barnaby offered.

Worthy wanted him to leave the bottle. Yet his mouth put forward a resounding, "No."

Barnaby looked at his glass in delight. "My favorite time of negotiations." He put it down. "Now tell me, what satisfaction do you get by killing people two kilometers away? By killing people behind the barrier of distance?"

"Well," Worthy said rubbing his palms on his pants. "I like to think it's more about the lives I'm saving than the lives I'm taking."

"Oh, bullshit," cried Nathan. "Listen you don't need to feed us the one-liners. This isn't some news story."

"Quite right," Barnaby backed up. "Now, this will go a lot easier if you tell us the truth, instead of what you think we want to hear."

Worthy looked down at the glass.

"You want me to tell you what really happened?"

"Precisely."

Worthy looked them both in the eye.

“Then, like most of my stories, it started with an argument.”

ZERO_8

“Tell me where the fuck it is!” I roared.

I had Cad pinned against the wall with my forearm against his neck. I cocked my other hand back, my fist ready to fire like a patriot missile. And if Cad didn’t talk, the launch codes would be released.

“I told you, I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” Cad spat through clenched teeth, a trickle of blood lining from the corner of his mouth, darkness appearing around his eye. His twisted face turned as red as the confusion in his eyes.

“The photo of my kid. What did you do with it?”

Cad’s eye’s searched for meaning in the comment. “I haven’t touched any fucking picture of yours.”

I closed in on my prey, my clear eyes narrowed to slits, my nose an inch away from Cads. “Fucking bullshit! Don’t you lie to me! I came back from the gym and you were snooping around my bunk. Now my shit is missing.” I increased the pressure on his neck.

Cad gurgled and pushed against my arm, trying to leverage whatever space he could so he could breathe. “I don’t know what the fuck you saw, I haven’t been near your bunk.” He coughed. “Now get the hell off me, you crazy fuck. I can’t breathe.”

My fist wavered as I flipped a mental coin of whether or not I believed him. I should have trusted him; I should have believed him. I had no reason *not* to, and, in fact, I had every reason *to* trust him. He was my spotter, my partner. I relied on him every time we left the safety of the base’s front gates. Every time I had a target in my sights. Every time. Every bullet.

Cad made a low sloshing noise as I released the trigger and launched my fist forth. He shut his eyes. I released the pressure, and he fell, my fist crashing into the wall where his head had been. The

dull thud quickly dissipated but rang in his ears. He slumped and gripped his throat as he gasped for air.

I swore and gripped my head, my chest heaving with every breath. I looked down at my partner. I knew what I saw, didn't I? Cad was by the bunk, riffling through my gear. I'm sure he was. I pulled my foot back, ready to kick Cad square in the ribs when I caught myself.

Thoughts of Liz ran through my head. The way she slept so peacefully, blissfully unaware of all the crap happening in the world, innocent of all the murderers, robbers, and cheaters. The way I spoke about my job, transforming my role in blood and gore and insurgent body counts, into good news stories of engaging the local community and protecting families. A sham. A mask. A facade to hide my atrocities.

I turned my back on the wheezing man and marched towards my side of the room, my sanctuary away from the hurt and pain that existed around the operating base. My little world comprised a single bed with a footlocker at the end and a small bedside table. A far cry from home, my actual home, but it was everything I needed.

I took a seat on my bunk, the wire frame squealing under the pressure. I rested my elbows on my knees and buried my head in my hands. I took a deep breath.

On the other side of the room, Cad lifted himself onto his bunk and coughed as he tried to pull himself together. I guess it wasn't every day your partner attacked you out of the blue. "What is wrong with you, man? I've got enough to worry about out there without having to look over my shoulder for my own goddamn partner to come down on me."

I shrugged. "I don't know. This fucking place, you know. Fucking family, fucking Shelly." Silence soaked the room. "I'm sorry," I said as a consolation.

Cad touched his eye that was already showing signs of impact and winced.

“Look, James. You know how this works, how long we’ve been doing this for? We need each other’s backs out there. We can’t be fucking around behind enemy lines or we might as well put a gun in our mouths and pull the trigger.” He pulled back the sleeve on his uniform to reveal a tattoo. “One shot, Worthy. One shot.”

I pulled back my sleeve to expose my own ink. A replica except for the words. One shot, one kill. That was our mantra. We had gotten the tattoos on our last tour after we had taken out fourteen enemy targets with fourteen rounds. We saved the lives of a dozen soldiers on that mission. Everything on that day hummed. Cad called them out, and I took them down. Unstoppable. One shot, one kill was repeated on our ride back home and earned us a reputation. That day, we clicked. Everything worked. Now though, it felt like a portion of that was lost. I couldn’t tell you why, it just was.

I held my hand flat, the one I had driven into the wall, and took in a deep breath. Steady as a rock, as always. I flexed it a few times and stretched out my fingers looking for damage. In this game, my trigger finger was my life. Without it, I might as well be sitting on a couch drinking beer and eating snacks.

“Yeah, I know. It’s just that, that’s my kid. That’s the only photo I have. I need a reminder of something I’m going back to, because if I’m going home to nothing then I might as well not go home at all.”

Cad winced as he rearranged himself on the bed, his body still convalescing from our robust conversation.

“You can’t be thinking like that, James.”

Silence.

And then, “Do you think I should put up with your shit?”

I thought. “No... but I’m not a mess out there, not when it counts.”

“That’s the thing,” Cad said. “Out there, you’re a fucking genius. More kills than anyone I know. More awards than anyone I know. But we’re not out there, not now, not yet.”

Before I could respond there was a sharp rap of knuckles and the door swung open. He looked at us. “Everything all right in here?”

“Sure thing, Chief,” we chimed back.

Chief looked at Cad, surveying his face. “Pearce?”

Cad waved him away. “All good, Chief, just a little misunderstanding.”

Chief looked over at me and then back to Cad. “Well, if you ladies are finished braiding each other’s hair, the Colonel wants a briefing in thirty.”

“Hooah, Chief,” we replied.

“And Worthy?”

“Yes, Chief.”

“The psych wants your attention immediately.”

“What for, Chief?”

“If I knew that, Worthy, I’d be the Colonel.”

ZERO_9

The administration assistant waved me through and I knocked on the door. The announcement to enter beamed through the thin barrier. After softly closing the door behind me, I propped my machine gun in the closest corner and took a seat, the only seat, opposite the doctor's desk.

“You wanted to see me?”

Doctor Gabriel leaned back in his chair, his attention fully within the file in his hands. No reply, save for the invariable hum of the air conditioner unit. The near-silence only further exasperated the claustrophobic feeling of the room, which was just wide enough to accommodate a skinny path either side of the desk. No windows, single filing cabinets in each corner of the room and little else. It was clear that either the doctor wasn't welcome on base or was late to the party when choosing admin space.

I eyed the doctor engrossed in the Manilla folder and watched as he slid a hand over his bald head, a soft reflection of the overhead lights showing on his crown. His skin was tanned with the desert sun, his background as unknown as his reason for him being on the base in the first place. I wondered if it had anything to do with my interactions with Cad. Perhaps someone overheard and bought the matter to the attention of higher ranked personnel.

I cleared my throat. “Excuse me, Sir, I have a briefing in twenty I need to get to.”

“One thousand combat kills. Several confirmed targets at over two-point-five kilometers. Multiple titles at the International Sniper Competition.” The doctor's voice was smooth like nothing impure had ever touched the back of his throat. Uncommon for someone in

a combat zone, more so for someone who sits behind a desk for a living. “Some serious skills.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

He closed the file, placed it on the desk, and gently positioned his clenched hands on top. He stared at me. “Are you happy?”

The question took me by surprise. My military life was filled with questions I could answer, but not questions like this. Not questions about my life and sure as hell not about my feelings. I inwardly cringed. I replayed the question several times in my head trying to find meaning in the words.

“I’m sorry, Sir? I don’t understand. How should I be feeling?”

“This isn’t a test.” Gabriel remained deadpan. “Are you happy... Here? Doing what you are doing?”

I stretched my shoulders back, generating resolve at the questioning. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good relationship with your spotter? Strong bond?”

I thought about our altercation not ten minutes ago.

“Yes, Sir,” I lied.

“And your relationship with your wife? Your child?”

I took a breath. “Outstanding, Sir. But I’m not sure what that has to do with anything.”

Gabriel closed the file and placed it on his desk. He removed his frameless glasses, his eyes seemingly flashing a rainbow of colors as he did so, and placed them on top of the folder. He rested his elbows on the desk and clasped his hands. “You can speak freely here, Worthy. There is no one else listening.”

My eyes darted around the room. That statement probably meant everyone was listening. “And what would you like me to say?”

“Relax, Worthy. This isn’t a witch hunt. I’m not trying to get you to admit to anything. There is, however, a purpose for this meeting.”

“And what is that?”

“I’ll get to that. Let’s try something first. I’ll outline a scenario and you let me know if it sounds familiar.”

I stared across the desk, already tired with the game. I’d rather be tracking a target at a thousand meters than sitting there playing *‘what if’* with the doctor. However, I knew he had the power to remove me from active duty. And to be honest, I couldn’t think of anything worse. I nodded, so he began.

“You argue with your wife because you’re never home. Your daughter doesn’t recognize you. You’re shipped off to fight in a war you don’t understand. You don’t trust the people closest to you.”

My eyes burned. I could feel my poker face faltering. My jaw worked overtime chewing imaginary gum. My hands on my knees clenched.

Gabriel smiled. “Shake your head if I’m wrong.”

I heard the words but didn’t hear *him*. My brain was already whirring trying to figure out how he performed the magic trick. Perhaps this was a common occurrence, and the doctor was rolling the dice, however, the doctor had hit every single emotional marker.

Gabriel said, “I’ll take your silence that my appraisal of your situation was accurate.”

“I’ll ask again, doctor. What is this about?”

Gabriel sat back in his chair. “We’re recruiting.”

“For what?”

The doctor spoke but stopped himself. He looked down, trying to find the right words. “A clandestine operation. Few people know about it, less than that many are directly involved. It is sanctioned by the highest powers where people like you are given full authority to hone and use your specialized skills. That is why I’m here, Worthy, to find people who are suitable. People who have the necessary skills required.”

It sounded interesting, even intriguing. “What’s the operation?”

“When the time’s right, you’ll know everything. You’ll be involved in everything.”

“Well if this is a sanctioned operation, why aren’t I just reassigned to the special unit?”

Gabriel chewed this over. “It’s not that type of operation. This is the kind of operation you put your hand up for.” Gabriel opened the file, withdrew a single piece of paper and sat it on the desk. He retrieved a pen from his desk and placed it on top. “What I can tell you is the enemy is dangerous and unrelenting. Distance is key here, hence the need for your skills. There is a small window we could dispatch key targets prior to the war breaking out. You could save the lives of thousands. Of millions.”

I swallowed. The minutes ticked by. The form sat unsigned.

“I need to think about this.” I looked down at my watch. “I have to get to the briefing.”

“Worthy, you don’t understand. If you sign now, you won’t have to go to the briefing. You won’t have to go on another mission. We’ll ship you out of here on the next transport. When you land, we’ll set up time in a secure location for you and your family. There will be no immediate pressure. When you are comfortable, we’ll begin.” Gabriel leaned forward. “I know you; people like you. You can’t be bought with money or medals. You savor purpose and time. We’ll give you that. I just need your signature... to make it official.”

“I’m sorry, Doctor. But my CO has requested my attendance at a briefing, and that means he needs those skills you desire.”

Gabriel chewed my response over. However, I couldn’t gauge his reaction. Poker face. Expressionless.

“Loyalty,” he remarked. “I get it, Worthy. It’s another reason we want you as part of this operation.” He tapped the desk. “Is there nothing I can say or offer you to take me up on the offer?”

“No, Sir. I’m needed here at the moment.”

“Tell you what. When you make it back, after you’ve thought about it, we’ll have another conversation.”

I nodded and stood. “I appreciate that, Doctor.” I turned and moved to the door.

“One more thing, Worthy.”

I turned to meet the doctor’s concerned gaze, the first bit of emotion he expressly displayed.

“Worthy, keep your head out there. Keep your eye on the prize. Don’t get distracted. We need you. It’s important we have you. We can’t have anything happen to you.” He stood. “Do you understand that?”

I nodded.

Gabriel spoke as he picked up the piece of paper and pushed it back into the folder.

“Godspeed,” he murmured. “Godspeed.”

ONE_0

Room

“Tell me, Mr. Worthy, did you actually see the piece of paper you were to sign?” Barnaby queried, his features betraying any poker face he once had.

“You mean you don’t know?” It seemed to Worthy like he had injected something into the story they could not uncover in their research. “But I thought you guys knew the story, just that you wanted to hear me say it.”

“Make no mistake, we are aware of all things,” Nathan shot back.

“Well, that just doesn’t seem so, now does it?”

“Gentlemen, please,” Barnaby pleaded. “This is not conducive to our end objective. The question was whether you saw the piece of paper you were signing. You read the fine print?”

“No, is the short answer. The military has forms for everything. I’ve got to sign a form to get my rounds for the practice range, so a form the Doctor Gabriel didn’t seem strange. But the question I have is, does it even matter?”

He noted Barnaby looking over to Nathan, who was running his finger over the table top, a message in invisible ink. When he finished, he looked up at Barnaby.

Barnaby nodded. “It would appear so,” he said in a low voice.

“They will be interested to know,” Nathan replied just as quietly.

“Yes,” Barnaby drew out, his tone noncommittal. “Perhaps. Leverage more than anything, I would say.”

Worthy watched the conversation unfold, taking place like he was nothing more than another piece of furniture in the room.

“Excuse me,” Worthy interjected. “Who’s interested in knowing what?”

Barnaby and Nathan shared a glance.

“Apologies for the little sidebar, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby said as he returned his gaze to Worthy.

“We merely found the entire event rather curious, that is all,” Nathan added.

“But what makes it so curious?”

“It matters not,” Barnaby said with a smile. “For you are here, and that is all that counts.”

“Yes,” added Nathan. “For if you had signed that form there is no telling where you would be right now.”

Worthy mulled it over. “I guess there’s any number of decisions that I’ve made over the past few months that could have changed whether I’m here right now.”

“Do you know, on average, how many conscious decisions are made each day?” Barnaby asked.

“Thirty-five thousand,” Nathan answered for Worthy. “And do you know how many of those would have affected the outcome of you being here right now?”

Worthy opened his mouth; however, Barnaby beat him to it.

“One,” Barnaby said, raising a finger. “Just one.”

Silence. Worthy’s eyes glazed over.

It seemed eerily familiar. The type of interaction he had with Shelly when they first met... or, at least, from what he could remember.

It had been a party while he was on leave. Some strange concoction of friends of friends, people he knew through social media posts of plates of food, animals, or reposts of things that were marginally

humorous. He had reluctantly accepted and subsequently spent his time avoiding conversation and nurturing his alcohol intake.

At a table replenishing his peanut and cashew stocks, he attempted to undertake a one-sided intoxicated conversation with a fiery red-head. After a sharp right-hand stinger across his face vehemently signaled rejection, he decided the best course of action was to remove himself from all human interaction. Still rubbing his cheek, he retired to a deck chair overlooking the pool and awaited the alcohol coma. That's when Shelly entered the picture, pulling up the deckchair next to him, without so much as an invitation or request.

He ended up playing his intoxicated hand early. A jumble of words that ended with something that sounded like 'sex'. She retorted with the fact she was a philosophy professor and studied pressure points as a form of self-defense. He didn't get the connection. Maybe it was a class thing. The military grunt was no good for a genius professor. But he wasn't just a grunt, he was a marksman. And more than that, he was the best damn marksman. This conversation sloshed around his brain in what felt like an hour, yet in reality, it was a lot less.

After a few minutes of silence with him waiting diligently for an answer to his proposition, propped up like a puppy waiting for a treat, she offered that if he could answer her question honestly, she would oblige his advances. He nearly fell off his chair, which would have been a remarkable feat.

"Do you understand?" she asked. Worthy appeared to nod, although it could have been misconstrued as a drunken shake. She took it as the former.

Her smile hit him first, that grin that blended confidence and cheekiness in equal measure. Worthy couldn't agree quick enough to the terms, just about spilling the remainder of his drink on himself. He held his breath as he waited for the question.

Shelly sipped her beer and stared up at the stars, ignoring the ambient wake of Worthy's gaze upon her.

"It really is a beautiful night," she said.

He hung on every word, waited for something that sounded like an inflection, anything that would indicate a question mark.

"Yes?" he replied, unsure if he was even supposed to answer.

"Wait, was that the question?"

She smiled again. That damn smile.

"Okay," she said. She put her drink down beside the chair and held two fists in front of herself, palms down. "Now listen carefully. I'm only going to say this once." She purposefully cleared her throat.

Worthy stared at her hands, trying desperately to focus on objects that were both blurry and moving.

"My left hand believes that it's nowhere it can be that isn't exactly where it's supposed to be. My right hand believes it has the ability to do gladly that which it must do. If there are thousands of decisions, markers throughout the day, decisions made one way or the other, some significant, others irrelevant, what was it that brought us together here tonight?"

Worthy stared, the end of her sentence having already erased over the beginning, like a tape with an extremely short lifespan. He thrust his hand forward.

"Hi, my name is James."

She laughed. "That's an unusual answer." She dropped her hands and picked up her drink.

"I think your question was a little unfair," Worthy slurred. "How about you try to drop me with one of these little pressure points you have." The statement made little sense to him as he said it, but he couldn't stop himself. The words were already out, escaping through a collapsed filter. He knew he was making an abysmal first impression.

He stood from the deck chair with a groan, promptly lost his balance and fell back down. He successfully stood on his third attempt, widening his stance to lower his center of gravity.

Shelly stood a foot shorter.

“I’m in the military, you know.” Garbled words fell forth from his mouth. “Just so you know. Just a warning.” Statements like ‘big guy’, ‘solid footing’, ‘unfair fight’ spewed forth, all jumbled together as an incoherent sentence.

She put her hands on his face. “Are you ready?” Her voice was sweet, silky, like honey.

He placed his hands on her hips, an effort to touch her, however, more so he could keep balance.

Then he felt it. The alcohol numbed the pain; however, the effect was sound.

That was the last thing he remembered about that night, apart from slivers of reality sewn together with fantasy, was the lights in the darkness, the stars spinning wildly out of control.

He woke in the cool morning, pre-sunrise. A crack of an eye-catching amber hue amongst the trees in the valley. Morning dew causing confusion of whether he was wet or just cold. His head banged like a dump truck that had dropped its clutch, the world jolting back and forth to an irregular beat. Memories spasmed, short-term recollections pitched in shades of gray. But through it all, a face. A kaleidoscope of color in the dark.

He turned to his left. He was alone. Apart from the piece of paper in his pocket.

“Doctor Gabriel’s request form?” Worthy drew out. “So, you are saying I am meant to be here?”

“As we mentioned earlier,” Barnaby said. “We have worked very hard to get you here.”

“Fate? Destiny?”

“Whatever you want to call it,” Barnaby said. “Some things are and some things aren’t. Some things are set in stone, prophecies, predictions. Everything else can be massaged towards these milestones. Everything else.”

“But, what about—.”

Barnaby held up a hand. “We’ll get to all that, Mr. Worthy.”

“Well, it’s just that you mentioned there was one decision that could have changed the outcome of me being here.”

“That’s right,” said Nathan.

“But there was another form someone else tried to get me to sign.”

A nervous exchange of glances between Barnaby and Nathan. Nathan rubbed his finger on the table but Barnaby waved him away. He stretched his neck, an air of calmness and confidence returning to him. He turned back to Worthy, his eyes ablaze.

“And who might that be?”

Worthy stared at him. “We’ll get to that.”

Barnaby smirked. “Very well, Mr. Worthy.”

ONE_1

We sat on uncomfortable metal folding chairs that lined the small room, our notebooks on the empty chairs beside us. Cad let his head fall back and closed his eyes. I could tell he was appreciating the silence the briefing tent gave him. My gaze flicked between the low slung overhead fluorescent lights to the briefing table to the empty chairs. “Geez, where the hell is everyone?”

Cad touched his eye, the bruising already apparent. A grimace swept over his face. He sighed. “I don’t know.”

I inspected my fists. “So, who do you think took it?”

Cad crossed his arms and stretched out his legs, tensing every muscle. “Took what?”

“The photo of my daughter,” I said absentmindedly.

“Why?” Cad said looking over at me. “You want to punch them in the face as well?”

I snapped my head around. “You bet your ass I do.”

“You know there are formal channels for this sort of shit, right? Processes? Procedures? Policies?”

The sarcasm wasn’t lost on me. “Yes. Formal channels for formal things. Personal channels for personal things.”

Cad closed his eyes and tilted his head back. “Christ, sometimes I worry about your stability. You know I should report you.”

I shrugged and looked away. “If you were going to report me, you would have done it by now.” Maybe that’s what I really wanted, to be reported, to be sent away. The argument with Shelly still rocked my thoughts, usually when I tried to sleep, but her words seeped into every waking moment. I was in this hell-hole because the powers that be decided it was best for the country, and I pushed Shelly away because of it. She accused me of once again placing my devotion to the

military above the dedication for my family. But wasn't all this for my family and everybody's family? I was getting sick of having the conversation in my head, of it consuming my thoughts.

"Anyway," I continued, "I've been cooped up here for a month. I need to get into some action. These thoughts of Shelly and Liz are killing me." I flexed my hands.

"Why don't you call them?"

"Ah shit, Shelly doesn't want to talk to me, not yet anyhow. Maybe give it another month. Let the dust settle, you know?"

Cad shrugged. He didn't know. "This is why I kept my sorry ass single."

I pointed at him. "You are onto something. Maybe I need to run away from all of this shit... from the military I mean."

Cad smirked. "And what the hell would you do?"

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. The thoughts of myself in a million different roles flashed by as nonsensical. Working nine to five? Wearing a shirt and tie? It was laughable.

The tent door swung open with a squeal, the methodical thump of boots on makeshift flooring quickly followed. We leapt to our feet and saluted as our commanding officer entered the room.

Colonel Napper marched down the aisle, his cap in one hand and a pile of papers under his other wing. "At ease. This is a briefing. Hold all questions until the end."

He rounded the briefing table and placed his cap on a chair positioned to the side, and eased the pile of papers onto the desk.

"Join me at the table."

He had the square jaw and crisp manner of a career veteran. His dark eyes reflected no light, no pity and no patience for slackers.

We joined the Colonel at the briefing table and laid out our books on the surface, pens at the ready to translate the orders. The table, about two by four meters, portrayed a high-level overview of their operational area, from our FOB, or Forward Operating Base, to

the border. Most of our work to date had been in the immediate area supporting recon or attack teams. We took out the embedded militia. We made sure no one snuck up on their six.

Napper outlined the grid number. It was a section beyond anything I had been involved with, something further north towards the border.

We flicked through the notebook pages to locate the map and overlaid the transparent cover, waiting for the detail of the mission.

Napper continued with the briefing. “At approximately oh-eight-hundred hours, we received intelligence that a small, five-man element belonging to an Al-Shabaab affiliate group is transporting a prisoner of war to Bdama in grid number seventeen. They are equipped with AK-47s and various other small arms. Upon contact I expect the enemy to defend their position.”

We both made our own set of hieroglyphics on our maps.

“Higher’s mission is to recover the POW alive. Upon confirmation of POW existence, Squad team one will engage the objective, locate and identify the POW and retreat. There are no other supporting units or attachments or detachments.

“Sniper Team One will provide visual confirmation of POW and report to higher. On order, Sniper Team One will provide cover support and communications at grid number seventeen in order to support Squad Team One. On order, Sniper Team One will retreat to evac.”

Napper spoke through the scheme of maneuvers, movements, and security instructions with both Cad and myself scribbling notes as quickly as possible. In order for us to successfully support the ground troops, we needed to know exactly where they’d be and when. It was all standard fare, and I felt like I had heard it a thousand times, and I had, but the military does it that way for a reason.

Most of the operation seemed standard fare, although something nagged at the back of my mind. I struggled to leave those thoughts

and keep my attention on Napper who hammered through the order with practiced efficiency.

“From drop to objective, you will use team comms. On engagement with objective, command will switch to squad leader.” Napper took a moment to take a breath. “Questions?”

I looked up from my book. “I can’t help but think, Sir, that we’re a little light on personnel for infiltration and POW retrieval. One squad hardly seems practical.”

I watched as Napper took a breath and slowly released it. I could feel the Colonel’s gaze bore into me, and I couldn’t tell if he was considering the question, or knew the answer and didn’t want to share it.

“Central Command is a little skeptical of the intel, hence the reconnaissance and skeleton crew. No units have reported a soldier missing. No aid groups or contractors have reported any kidnappings. What we have here is a ghost, but command sees enough in the intelligence to find out for sure.”

“You mean they see enough to put other people’s lives at risk?”

“I don’t make the orders, Sergeant. Anything else?”

I pointed to the table. “Considering the layout of the town and visual intelligence, a better sniper position would be the opposing mountain. That way we can have a clear line of sight to the inbound traffic and front of the buildings.”

“This has been discussed,” the Colonel replied. “Unfortunately, the town straddles this country and a friendly nation, the road providing the border between the two countries. Given the sensitivities of this mission, and the wish of higher-ups to not cause an international dispute, you do not have permission to undertake any activities on that side of the town. We are restricted, which is unfortunate, but that is the lay of the land.”

As he looked down at the image on the table, Cad said, “Is there any better recon of the objective?”

“I haven’t seen a decent aerial of Bdama, from drone or satellite. Specialists believe the mountains on either side of the town are playing interference. The locals in the region aren’t talking, either. Our presence has waned in villages to the south of this area. We’re on our own with this one, which means you need to be agile.”

Napper eyed us both, and I was busy thinking about maneuvers, patterns, replaying the mission brief, playing out the scenario.

“I suggest you two grab some sleep prior to departure because once we kick off there isn’t going to be an opportunity. You will receive further information on way to drop point.”

We remained silent.

“Liftoff at oh-three.”

We exchanged salutes with the Colonel and were promptly dismissed.

ONE_2

We marched across the sandy ground on our way back to the barracks to prepare our gear. Body armor on, weapons in hand. It's amazing how things like that became second nature. We stopped at a row of tents to let a convoy of Humvee and MRAP, or Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected, vehicles pass, their occupants off on some mission to keep the peace or find some bad guys or find some bombs. Either way, it would probably involve shooting up some neighborhood that housed mainly innocent people, victims of their circumstance.

I considered the point over and wondered how any of them could lead a normal life. I knew my viewpoint was one of privilege and settled on an assumption that this life was normal for them and perhaps they had learnt to deal with the bombs, bullets, and foreign countries invading their homes.

As the vehicles passed, enormous clouds of dust kicked up and spread over the area via the wind. Moondust. It got into everything. It did nothing to reduce the effects of the temperature, merely circulating hot air around bodies that struggled with the continual barrage of heat.

"What you thinking?" Cad called out over the rumble of the final vehicle.

I stared into the distance.

"Hey," Cad followed up.

I broke out of my daydream and looked at my partner. "What?"

"I said, what are you thinking?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing."

"What do you think about the mission?"

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Kind of get the feeling this is more than a recon mission.”

“You and your feelings again. Maybe when this is all over you can join the circus and read tarot cards.”

“Was I wrong about Helmand? Was I wrong about Kabul?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure everyone has those feelings every time they step outside the wire.”

“No, this is different. I mean, we wait for some convoy to arrive for a POW that no one is even sure exists and then call it in? What is that? It all smells of horseshit if you ask me.”

“Well, it’s a good thing no one’s asking you then. And whatever it is, I guess we’re going to find out tomorrow morning. Let’s just make sure we’re on the mark with this one.”

“I’m always on the fucking mark.”

In our barrack, we stood at our respective beds and packed our equipment prior to gaining what precious sleep we could find. I retrieved a camouflaged titanium case from under my bunk and placed it on the mattress. I gently opened it to reveal the components of my M40A5 sniper rifle sitting snugly in molded foam. I delicately ran my hand over the length of the sand-colored stainless-steel barrel, across the bolt action and down the handle. I dug out the main body of the weapon and inspected every inch of it. I pulled back the action and reviewed the bore ensuring it was clean from obstructions. Of course, it was; I had cleaned it every day as a matter of course, the local grime finding its way into places it shouldn’t. I closed the breach and built my killing machine, attaching the stock and scope. When I finally slapped in the magazine, I held the rifle to my shoulder to once again feel the weight and balance. Satisfied, I slid it into my drag bag and secured the straps.

I looked over to the other side of the room. Cad was undertaking a similar routine, ensuring his weaponry and other spotting equipment was in peak condition for combat. He eventually cocked his 9mm and laid it on the bed next to his own M4.

“You got everything you need?” Cad called over.

I placed my Beretta M9 on the bed and scanned the array of weapons at my disposal. “Everything except my daughter’s photo,” I grumbled.

“Still hasn’t turned up? It’s got to be around somewhere.”

I ignored the comment and started crossing the room. “Cross-check.”

While it was every soldier’s responsibility to be fully prepared, especially when heading into a combat zone, checking each other’s equipment was a routine that had become second nature to us. It would be a hell of a thing to be in the middle of nowhere and missing a vital or seemingly inconsequential piece of equipment given that a platoon’s success rested largely on our shoulders.

As Cad looked at my assault rifle, he called out. “Don’t worry about the photo, Worthy, it’ll turn up. Shit like that always finds its way home again.”

I protested under my breath as I searched through Cad’s backpack. I fuddled around the hygiene kit, rations, and notebooks nestled between underwear and toilet paper. One had to be prepared, especially when in the field for multiple days straight. But it was the internal zipped pocket that drew my attention, like it was calling to me. It wanted me to open it, to see what was inside. Whispers in my head. I reached for the zip and then paused.

I shot a quick glance over to Cad who was busy rummaging through my backpack. The zipper retracted with ease. Inside were bits of paper and what looked like a photo. I pulled on the edge to reveal a photo of a young child in a bathing suit. I was taken aback. At first glance, I would have said the kid looked about seven. I knew

Cad didn't have kids but even still, the photo was on what I would call a moral borderline. But, shit, everyone's different, with different standards. As I pushed the photo back into the pocket, I noticed other items were in there.

I checked Cad again who was still checking equipment. I dug my fingers in and pulled out a small wad of photos in various sizes and condition. Some had torn edges while others were fading. Each photo was a different child in a unique setting. A naked young boy on a swing, another was a young girl in her underwear. The thought of it made me sick to the stomach.

How could this be? How could my partner be hiding this from me? How could I not have known? The amount of time—days on days, nights on nights—I had spent with Cad had turned out to be nothing more than a charade, some mask Cad had worn to protect his sick obsession, and I hadn't seen through it. I didn't know who I hated more, the bastard currently touching my stuff or me for not having picked up on it.

Each photo I saw progressed further down a rabbit hole of what I would place on the spectrum of child pornography. I needed to report this, where the higher-ranking officers and military police could take their own action. Napper would need to find an alternate. Damn the mission.

I was about to act when I pulled out the last photo. I held my breath. In my hands was the photo of Liz. My photo. Bile rose in my throat as I thought about the company my photo was in. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. My heartbeat battered my eardrums.

"How's it going over there?" Cad called out. "Awfully damn quiet. I haven't heard you grunt or groan for at least two minutes." He chuckled to himself.

I pulled out the photo and turned away from Cad. I took one last look at it before slipping it into my pocket. Liz, her blond locks framing her smiling face, was sitting at a piano. For a brief moment,

I remembered the Christmas morning, one of the few I had actually been there for. She was so damn excited. Regret sat heavy in my chest. No, worse. It stabbed at my chest.

The precious memory turned dark as rage and adrenaline coursed through my veins. I thought of reporting Cad, but that would be too good for that piece of shit. I had a better idea, provided I could control myself until the appropriate time.

I clenched my jaw and ground my teeth as I continuously pumped my fist. I squeezed, my knuckles turning white under the pressure.

A hand slammed down on my shoulder. "All good?"

All good? All good? No, I'm not fucking good. I held my breath and spoke as I spun away from the grip of the sick individual. I kept my back to Cad as I returned to my bunk. "Yeah, all good." I was positive that if I looked at him in that moment, I would kill him. I wouldn't be able to control myself. I would march up and repeatedly punch him in the face. Then kick him while he was down. Then grab his own service pistol and shoot him in the balls, so he could experience excruciating pain before I put a second bullet into his mouth. A momentary lapse of sanity. That would be my defense when the MPs arrived to take me away for my court-martial.

I thought about the time I was due to spend in Cad's company and I resisted the urge to rip his head off his shoulders. I would sleep, be transported, march and setup, all within arm's reach of someone who made my muscles twitch and contract.

Our trek from the drop off point to our target would be through dangerous territory, giving plenty of opportunities for people to get hurt. There was a high probability we would encounter a jihadist convoy, or nomadic townsfolk sympathetic or fearful of the terrorist group that could give our position away and jeopardize the mission.

Dangerous terrain. Deadly inhabitants. Potential of gunfire.

Plenty of possibilities if you needed to kill a man.

ONE_3

I couldn't sleep. Instead, I stared through the purple-gray darkness at the faint outlines of the photo of my daughter. I traced the contour of her face. Adrenalin pumped through me as my innate desires to protect the pure recollections of her, overwhelmed my thinking.

Cad's regular, low breathing enveloped my senses. I wanted nothing more than to walk over to the other side of the barrack and thrust my laundry bag pillow over his face, counting the seconds till he would stop struggling and lay limp on the bed. Then I would casually walk back to my cot and catch some shut-eye.

God knows what that would do to the mission, but the mission wasn't the first thing on my mind. Every time my mind wandered, I forced images of the photos I had found in Cad's backpack into my mind. I would create sick scenarios causing my heart rate to increase even further. I clenched my fists so tight the dull pain in my fingers intruded upon my consciousness. I kept on edge, holding myself back from launching off the bunk, one step away from total, mental oblivion.

I liked it there, on the edge of reality, on the brink of complete madness. Every single thought had me teetering on the threshold and I wasn't sure which way I'd fall. With each measured breath, the silhouette of the slow breathing body of Cad became clearer like a target coming into focus.

I pictured the headlines: '*Crazy Commando kills kiddy fiddler*' or '*Hero saves the lives of hundreds of children*.' The last one drew a smile on my face. They wouldn't punish me. They would place me on a pedestal. Parade me in front of the media. A hero. The world is now safe.

I drew back the sheet and silently slipped onto the floor, grabbing my makeshift pillow with a sweep of my arm. I stood there for a moment, in the gloom, watching the systematic movement, the slow breaths of my sleeping partner. I placed the pillow back down and turned to my pack that sat next to the bed. It didn't take long to locate my combat knife.

A moment later I was beside the slumbering victim. The blade would slip into his neck so easily, Cad would be dead before he realized what was happening. I would make sure I tore the windpipe, causing a liquid gurgle to flow as Cad fought to hold his blood in. But it would be to no avail.

I lowered the knife, inches away from the sweet spot. Cad shifted. He was probably living out one of his fantasies. An enactment that the veil of sleep protected but one he would be prosecuted for in the real world.

Suddenly, a shrill alarm sounded and Cad sat bolt upright in bed. I spun, hiding the weapon, clutching it to my chest. With my back to the now awake and very alive Cad, I shuffled back to my bed. I heard a thump as Cad rolled over onto the floor, undertaking his morning routine, not knowing how close he was to death... without knowing how close he *is* to death.

"Jesus," Cad said between reps. "You sleepwalking or something?"

I lowered onto my bed and surreptitiously slid the knife back into my bag. "No," I replied. "Couldn't sleep. Walking it off."

Cad continued with the set of push-ups.

"You nervous?" he asked. "Nah," he grunted. "Best in the business."

At the end, he announced his total to an invisible audience.

"I think you'll find that's forty-nine," I said. "Not fifty."

Cad jumped to his feet and shook out his arms. He shadow-boxed, launching his fists forward, a straight right, an uppercut, a

block, a dodge. “How the fuck would you know? You weren’t even watching.”

“Your breathing, your exhalation with every push. Doesn’t take a genius.”

Cad stared beyond the walls of the room to some imaginary target. He shrugged and resumed his position on the floor, mumbling to himself as he did so. He monitored me as he slowly lowered and then raised his body off the floor.

“Fifty,” Cad called out and got to his feet. “You happy now?”

I blinked away his fantasy world and stood. “Nah, I was just mucking with you. Now you’ve done fifty-one.”

Cad started getting dressed. “You know, James, you can be a real asshole sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?” I pushed back.

The Blackhawk helicopter kicked up a storm as it eased off the ground, dropped its nose and banked to the north. The pilot flicked off the landing lights and strobe, and the black beast peeled off into the darkness, flanked by two support gunships, their identification lights quickly swallowed by the void.

Inside the main compartment, I sat next to Cad, our respective packs, and weaponry planted at our feet. Across the space, with his back against the cockpit, was Colonel Napper. Next to him was a man Napper introduced as Special Agent Durnham, from an agency whose name apparently wasn’t important or critical to the success of the mission. The Colonel watched us look over the stranger with concerned stares, our heads bobbing to the melodic thrum of the rotors as the bird took flight and found its vector.

Napper flicked on the overhead compartment lights and Special Agent Durnham pulled a file from his briefcase he kept in place by

his feet. He opened the file on his lap, removed a grainy black-and-white image, and handed it over.

I took in the blurry image of a man shaking hands with another. The subject of the photo in what appeared to be a loose-fitting shirt and vest, common amongst males in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We had both seen them a thousand times, usually through our scopes or binoculars. The man also wore a turban and there was dark coloring on the side of his face which, because of the quality of the image, I couldn't deduce the cause of.

Durnham spoke into his headset. "His name is Alshshabh, translation: The Ghost. We don't know how long he has been operating for, however, he is responsible for several incursions and kidnappings and is considered one of the world's most wanted individuals. This is the only image we have of him, taken from approximately twenty-seven thousand feet from one of our recon drones performing a random sweep. We know nothing about him, his life, his family, where he grew up, where he went to school, nothing. It's like the earth opened and spat him out."

"Ghost indeed," I injected, handing the image back.

Durnham chewed his lip as he continued. "Depending on who you talk to The Ghost is linked to Al-Shabaab, which is associated with ISIS. Or he is a rogue CIA operative. Or he simply doesn't exist. We don't know squat and no-one's talking. And that was true until about twenty hours ago."

"The sole piece of intelligence," Cad assumed, recalling the vagueness of the briefing.

Colonel Napper nodded as he spoke. "I'm sure you can appreciate the sensitivities surrounding this mission. We're here to eyeball and extract a POW no one can confirm exists, from someone no one can confirm exists. And given we're in the middle of a tactical retrograde, this little exercise has got a lot of brass nervous."

“Any MO we should know about?” I enquired. It always helps to know the tendencies of your target, to build a profile of predictability. Knowing your targets next move before they make it places you at an extreme advantage, can be the difference between a hit and a miss, between life and death.

“I’m sorry,” Durnham said. “Our intelligence is limited. We suspect the mark on the side of his face is from a burn, however, we can’t confirm or deny where it came from.”

Durnham turned and looked at his reflection in the compartment window, as if in a heated debate with himself.

There was some light chatter from the cockpit.

“Lights out,” the Colonel said as he flicked off the compartment lights, plunging the box into darkness.

I registered the blinking lights of their tactical support. Soon they would peel away, and they would be on their own.

“Officially,” Durnham spoke through the darkness, “The Ghost is to be captured and interrogated.” There was a pause, the intensity of rotor engine revs stealing the silence. “Unofficially, we want him dead.”

“I guess a drone strike is out of the picture,” Cad offered.

“Yes,” Durnham nodded. “While we think he is holding an ally hostage. You could imagine the headlines if we killed one of our own.”

More chatter from the cockpit and my earpiece subsided to white noise. The Colonel’s eyes went wide and turned instinctively to the co-pilot to confirm the announcement. He then looked over to Durnham and shouted into the earpiece. Durnham nodded.

The support suddenly fell away and their helicopter tilted down and attacked the low altitude, whisking us around trees and mountains at a few hundred feet above ground level.

“An unidentified object has been picked up on a heading towards the objective. You guys might not be alone out there.”

“Does this change the mission parameters?” I asked.

Napper chewed it over. “No. Proceed as planned.”

Durnham pointed to me. “If you get the opportunity, you place one right between the eyes.” He pointed to his forehead. “You got it?”

I looked over to my Colonel to confirm the orders. Napper nodded reluctantly. “Durnham has operational control of this mission.”

“Eye on the prize, Worthy,” Durnham said.

I let the last point sink in as the helicopter roared to the drop point.

ONE_4

Room

Nathan and Barnaby sat across the table with their stone-like features, their unmoving eyes refusing to disengage with Worthy.

“When we hit the drop point, we fast-roped to the ground and maneuvered to the target.” Worthy shook his head as if reliving the events and rubbed his temples. “Is this what you guys are after?”

Barnaby sprang to life, his body animating like a machine that had just turned on. “Absolutely. We asked you, remember?”

“Sure,” said Worthy. “I remember. It’s just that I’m concerned about how much time you have to hear every little detail.”

Barnaby and Nathan looked at each other, engaged in yet another sudden and brisk conversation, and then returned their attention to their guest.

“All the time in the world,” Nathan said. “For you, Mr. Worthy.”

Worthy looked between the two gentlemen to the grandfather clock against the back wall. “Well I appreciate that; however, I think your clock is broken.” He pointed to the aging timepiece.

The two negotiators slowly turned to view the clock and caught each other’s eye on the way back around.

Barnaby leaned forward on the table. “What makes you say that, Mr. Worthy?”

“I feel like I’ve been talking for an hour, however, the clock only seems to have gone backwards. That can’t be right.”

Nathan eased himself away from the table, his chair silently gliding across the polished floor. He rose effortlessly and shifted to the clock, and stood beside it like a game show assistant revealing a prize.

“If it makes you more comfortable, we can adjust the time.” He reached up to the minute hand and shifted it clockwise.

Out of nowhere, a flash blinded Worthy. Dazzling light filled his vision that disorientated him, and he clenched his eyes shut to protect his retinas. There was a gust of wind that fluttered the contracts in front of him before taking flight, circling about him like they were in a tornado. He could feel his body get pulled one way and then another, and he fought to ground himself. A primal, guttural moan emerged and engulfed him, seemed to nip at his heels. The hairs on his arm stood on end and a scraping feeling, like a knife being drawn over his skin, etched its way up his extremities. He felt like he was drowning in pain yet when he opened his mouth to scream, he couldn’t make a sound, the air pulled from his lungs. Then the world shifted as oxygen was sucked out of the room, like a spacecraft opening its doors in orbit. The change in pressure disconnected his mind from his body.

Suddenly, the room came back into view, the two elderly faces sliding past his lopsided gaze. He pushed away from the table, his brain teetering on the verge of consciousness, and he gasped.

His vision corrected, and he drew in a large breath, his lungs savoring the precious element. Senses instantly cleared, and he gripped the table to stop from sliding to the floor. Every ounce of energy had drained from his body. He slowly raised his head with a pained look on his face.

“Is everything okay, Mr. Worthy?” Barnaby queried, his expression lacking any sympathy or emotion.

Worthy shook his head. “I—I’m not sure,” he mumbled, still trying to establish a footing in reality.

Nathan removed his hand from the clock face, having returned the minute hand to its original position. “I love it, every time, it never gets old,” he said to himself as he regarded the timepiece. “Best we live in the present, gentlemen.”

Nathan spoke as he moved back towards the negotiation table. “Besides, I would hate to spoil an ending.” He winked.

Worthy looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh nothing,” Nathan retorted, sliding his chair into the table. “Best we press on.”

“Good call,” Barnaby said. “Best indeed.” He turned to Worthy. “Now, where were we?”

Worthy sluggishly pulled his chair back to the table, the chair scraping awkwardly over the shiny tiles, and tried to reconcile his thoughts, stepping through the events in his mind.

“Mr. Worthy?”

Silence. Worthy’s mind was spinning. Conversations, behaviors, actions... consequences.

“I believe you had just jumped out of a helicopter,” Barnaby offered, noting Worthy’s trouble.

The methodical drone of the grandfather clock filled the void.

Nathan said, “We can take a break, Mr. Worthy... if it suits.”

“Fast-roped,” Worthy shot out.

“I’m sorry?” Nathan asked.

“Fast-roped, descending a rope to deploy in areas where the helicopter cannot land, due to topography or hostility.” He looked up. “You know, instead of jumping out of a helicopter.”

Nathan smiled. “Of course, Mr. Worthy. I apologize. And then what happened?”

Worthy cleared his throat and clenched his fists tighter as he slowed his breathing.

“The hike into enemy territory was both mentally and physically painful. I mean, we were marching for kilometers with thirty-five-kilo packs. We navigated along rocky outcrops keeping an eye out for the enemy. I also really wanted to kill that son-of-a-bitch, Cad. I’m not ashamed to say it.”

Worthy rubbed his chin. “Honestly, I would have taken anything. A firefight with the Taliban, a skirmish with a farmer, an attack by an errant goat, any excuse to use my weapon, to send Cad to hell in a hail of gunfire. To hell with the mission. To hell with the POW.”

Barnaby and Nathan smirked at the comment.

“Unfortunately, that didn’t happen. In fact, we didn’t see shit the entire trek. All I saw was the photo of my daughter, followed by Cad’s death playing out in front of my eyes. My hands wrapped around his neck. My knife plunging deep into his crotch. His pleas to save his life ignored.” He looked down at the table and rubbed at an imaginary spot before looking back up. “It’s just that, things never seem to work out the way you want them to.”

ONE_5

“Shh!”

We laid still in our cave, our collective breath held, my ears burning. Footsteps. The crunching of rock, the sliding of stone down the rocky outcrop, the crackle of a radio. The enemy was close. Too close.

We had found a small cave, more of an indentation, on the mountain surface. It was big enough for four men to lie down in, meaning plenty of room for the two of us. Given the environment, circumstances, and the mission, we would find nothing better.

Stealthily, we moved rocks and vegetation and placed combat netting over the entrance. Despite the abundance of objects and obstructions, we had an unrestricted view of the town below. If you could call it a town, perhaps by the standards of the region anyhow. Maybe the word ‘village’ was the right term.

Fifty feet below me in startling sniper scope clarity were about thirty single-story, clay buildings, evenly spaced along a single road that bisected the area. Two crescent-shaped mountains surrounded the town on either side, essentially forming a bowl. We currently inhabited the southernmost elevation. Tactically, this environment was both a blessing and a curse. Contained easy enough, however, could easily become messy if the locals fled to the hills.

Down in the village, a few vehicles lay scattered, mostly utilities or older type sedans, baking in the piercing afternoon sun. Animals and children roamed freely, meandering amongst the buildings and wrecks, trying to find shade, to salvage reprieve from the elements. A group of kids were kicking a soccer ball against a wall. Another group were collecting water from a well on the other side of the main road.

I scanned the other side of the road with a jealous twitch in my eye. Between rich and bountiful crops lay a matting of grass that ex-

tended the full length of the roadway and stretched from the dirt track to the footfalls. The mountain we had taken up residence resembled the surface of the moon. Naked rock and stone with scanty vegetation. The opposing mountain, however, resembled the garden of Eden. It was a green screen of lush grass, vines, and wildflowers nestled amongst conifers and other large forest trees. An abundance of shade, a profusion of life.

What were the natural elements at play that allowed two unique environments to coexist in such a manner? It was unlike anything I had ever seen in my life, opposite ends of the ecological spectrum each providing something to the inhabitants that allowed them to survive. It was then I understood why the village people had built their existence on the lifeless side of the road and let their crops prosper on the other.

Every few hours I would sweep the town, report to Cad, and then roll over on my back to rest. I ate sparsely. After a few days of meal packs, they all tasted the same, and then constipation would start. Cad would take over watching through his binoculars. Watching. Waiting. Waiting for the distant thunder of vehicles or plumes of dust kicked up by a convoy. Anything other than the drone of life that existed hundreds of meters away.

All the while, I felt sick. Sick of having to spend my time in such proximity to Cad. While he was resting, I could hear him rummaging in his backpack, his back turned. I knew what he was doing. Knew what he was looking at. I wondered if he knew the photo was missing from his possession. But what could he say? I waited for a sign, a look, something that would give the game away. Something to show I knew. And then I could confront him.

We would have a conversation where I would pummel his face with a rock. A few times I reached down and felt for my knife and wondered what would happen if I swung it across into Cad's neck. He wouldn't be able to scream and death would come quick enough,

certainly before Cad knew what the hell had happened, and not before I would pull out the photo of Liz and hold it in front of his face.

There were upsides and downsides to this thinking, and I spent my days marking them off in my mind, filling out both sides of the ledger. Upside: I would kill the asshole that took the photo of my daughter and lied about it. Downside: I would be all alone, even more isolated than I already was. And with failing communications equipment I would have to make the call to Colonel Napper. Upside: the pleasure of pushing a steel blade through soft tissue (eye, balls, etc.) would give me indescribable satisfaction. Downside: for operational sake, the spotter plays a significant role. Not just identifying targets but also as cover if we were found and shit hits the fan.

I wondered if I could live with the downsides, however, the moral argument of murder never crossed my mind. Still doesn't, to be honest with you. To me, it was a means of doing business. My superiors ordered me to kill people for years, and not only was I not charged with murder, but they celebrated me for it. Cad was to become a casualty of war, another statistic.

I flicked back in my mind to all the photos I saw, the depravity, the sickness. I wanted to end that sickness, I wanted to clear my memory of those images. A bullet to the head seemed like a good memory wipe after I took care of Cad. Maybe that was the best way to tie this all together into a neat little package.

One day every year people would think about those that had fallen and although not think about Cad directly, he would be remembered through association. I thought this would be too good for Cad. Better still, I could bound and gag him, and lead him into the center of town as an exchange for the POW. The instructions I would leave the captors is that no one's coming to save him and to make the death slow and drawn out.

And then I could wash my hands of the entire affair. The military powers would place a medal around my neck, perhaps give me a pur-

ple heart, and I could kiss the big machine goodbye once and for all. I would surprise Shelly with the news and the three of us could travel to some place relaxing, away from bombs and bullets and bad guys. Perhaps a beachside oasis with a wait staff that plied people with alcoholic beverages while I watched the setting sun become the moon. A place where the night time explosions were the soft crash of midnight waves finding the shoreline.

Behind the scope of my sniper rifle, for the first time in god knows how long, I smiled. Not a smirk like I killed an insurgent rebel from two kilometers away, but a smile, like I was happy, like everything was right with the world. But then the thoughts came flooding back and a wave of guilt came crashing over me. Cad, the photos of the kids, the photo of Liz. The rage piled and overlapped, like alcohol sloshing about in a half-empty bottle, the hatred coating my insides until it ran through me, became part of me. *Was* me.

I had been laying on my stomach peering through my scope as once again dusk fell over the town. And then a footstep, and we held our breaths. There was a crackle of radio and a flurry of language I had heard so much of, yet didn't know a damn word. Maybe if you were in someone else's country, if you were there for peace or war, you should learn a bit of the local dialect. Maybe that's where it all went wrong. Bashing people's doors down with the expectation they will understand English, yelling at them in the hope the words would click.

Cad and I both instinctively reached for our knives, unsheathed them slowly, silently, and held them at the ready. Cad also removed his Barretta 9mm for the holster on his thigh. We were at a tactical disadvantage and if discovered would most likely find ourselves in a world of hurt. Lying down while your attacker is above you is an inferior position to be in. It replaced the possibility of a silent kill, of drawing attention to our location. Which means we were in the shit. Best to just say a silent prayer and wait it out.

And so, we did. Eventually, the man, satisfied the area was clear, navigated between boulders and local shrubbery, a radio in one hand and an AK-47 slung over his shoulder. As he descended the mountain towards town, I noted his brown garb and sandals and was in awe of how these people managed to not only survive but thrive in the harsh environment. I noted my equipment: flak jackets, advanced firepower, superior training; all of it designed to defeat the enemy rather than deal with the surroundings.

Ensuring the man was out of audible reach, I whispered as I kept the back of the man's head in his crosshairs.

"How's that radio looking?"

Cad pulled the radio from his pack, dialed it in and attempted to make a call.

"Nope, still stuffed. Must be the mountains, maybe some kind of volcanic rock or some shit. As we planned, I'll retreat half a click and try again. And if no good, I'll revert to the sat phone which is totally useless while we're in a cave."

I didn't reply, just watched the man walk towards a building. "Is this day two or three?"

"Two," Cad replied, bringing his binoculars up and sweeping the area. "The end of it, anyway. Why? You got somewhere better to be?"

I tried to think of a witty reply but came up empty, instead moved my improved vision through the various windows, eyeing the different targets. I counted each one, imagining the pink mist where their heads used to be. I spared the children but counted the women. In conflict, I had to assume everyone was carrying a weapon or IED, and even though I had stories of children being loaded up with devices, I wasn't a complete animal.

"You know, I could kill every fucker in this town before they knew I even existed."

Cad scoffed.

Even you.

ONE_6

Cad saw it before he heard it. To the west, beyond the town, great clouds of dust spiraled out of the ground and dissipated into the submerging sun.

“There,” he announced. “Traffic inbound to the objective.”

I looked up from my scope, witnessing the shift in sands into the distance. I had positioned myself to have full coverage of the town, propping up my killing machine on two rocks.

The convoy shuffled into town, a trail of three utilities. The first and last in that series had machine guns mounted on their roofs, a gunner wearing a camouflaged uniform and a black balaclava scanning the horizon as the vehicle jostled along. The rest of the cargo bed held a man, each in similar garb, holding onto the gunner’s shields, waving their automatic rifles in the air in some form of victorious celebration. I wasn’t sure what they were celebrating or if it was a show of strength and success for the people of the town.

“I hope you’re keeping count,” I muttered to Cad.

I watched as the inhabitants of the town slowly ease out of their homes to greet the arriving parties. I wondered if they did it out of happiness or fear. Either way, they were complicit. In that moment, I was sure they wouldn’t put up a fight when the squads forced their way into town to capture the POW.

Despite the growing masses, what was in the second utility vehicle had my complete attention. Taking up the entire vehicle’s tray was a cage, roughly the same height as it was long, about a meter and a half. Its hooded sole inhabitant was on their knees, and there was just enough play in the restraints attached to the mesh sides for the body to twist and sway with the motion of the vehicle.

I figured the prisoner was unconscious or had simply accepted their fate. Their head was clear in the crosshairs. They wore the standard orange garb I had seen on countless ISIS videos. It would be impossible to guess which nation the poor bastard belonged to, or if they were some tourist that took a wrong turn in the desert. Maybe the great military machine miscounted their personnel, or they didn't want to embarrass themselves by losing a member.

"I've got visual on the POW," I said.

"Roger that," Cad confirmed, watching the scene play out through his own device.

The vehicles pulled up beside the closest building to our location, skidding to a halt in the loose earth, kicking rocks and sand in its wake. The drivers threw open their doors, falling out of the utility and shouldering their weapons over their camouflaged uniform. They met at the rear of the pickup, while the rest of the militia scattered.

I tracked several targets at once, scanning between them, making infinitesimal movements as to not get lost in my magnified world. A few men greeted the locals, others seconded children to aid them. A small group immediately entered a building; the advance team to check the structure.

Eyes back on the prisoner vehicle, I saw the driver get out and run to the near side. He was a younger man, with dark hair and a trimmed beard. Unlike the others in the party, he wasn't wearing a balaclava nor military garb and wasn't carrying a weapon that Worthy could see. He looked over the area and opened the door. The passenger emerged and was then escorted towards the group of townsfolk that had gathered.

I followed the seemingly important figure through his scope. "I have The Ghost," I said, taking in the man's face for the first time. A length of cloth from his turban hung down over his vicious facial scar, hiding it from view, and wrapped around his face to hide his

features. The fabric occasionally buffeting as it caught a gust of wind, momentarily revealing the disfiguration.

I watched as the escort shook hands with one of the townspeople, whom he assumed was the village elder, and introduced The Ghost. They exchanged more pleasantries. The elder stepped to the side and gestured for his guest to enter the house. The Ghost bowed, took a step forward and then paused. He turned to his escort, pulled him close and whispered in his ear. His instructions, whatever they happened to be, were accompanied by a pointed finger towards the prisoner.

“You seeing this?” I mumbled, my cheek still against the rifle stock.

Cad quietly grunted a reply, his vision attached to his own optics.

With the message passed, The Ghost patted the man on the shoulder and turned to enter the house.

I looked up suddenly, breath caught in my throat.

“Did you see that?” I asked.

Cad moved his vision around the scene. “See what?”

“I could have sworn...”

Cad grunted and continued scanning the area.

“Nothing,” I muttered, and returned to the scope, although what I had seen, not just bothered me, it scared the hell out of me. The escort approached one of the balaclava-wearing militia, pointed to the prisoner and relayed The Ghost’s message, then quickly entered the house, without so much as a look over his shoulder. The militia watched him leave, then bent down to pick up a small rock. He held it in his hand, tossing it up to himself as he switched glances between the house and the caged utility.

He took the rock to a group standing at the rear of the vehicle, children in tow, pointing at the prisoner. He opened the cage door and left the prisoner tied up. The man with the rock must have said

something because the group burst into laughter. He then hurled the rock at the tied-up man. Initially, there wasn't any movement.

Then another man bent down, picked up a rock and repeated the attack. Then the prisoner fought against his binds, obviously feeling the impacts. It wasn't long before the group of soldiers were urging the children to throw rocks at the prisoner, cheering with each successive strike. The detainee bucked and spun with each hit, the barrage acting as the wake-up call.

I noted the smiles on the kids' faces.

Jesus Christ. What hope is there for them? Their future has already been sealed. I thought for a moment that when the shit went down, I should target the children as well. A small sacrifice to stop the next generation. I admired my progressive thinking on how to achieve peace in the region. Sacrifice a generation. It was both barbaric and necessary.

I lifted my vision to the four men, slapping each other on the back and encouraging the children to throw larger stones.

"On second thought, maybe I'll just take you fuckers out right now."

The crosshairs shifting from smiling head to smiling head, while I quietly impersonated the rifle going off. I wasn't sure who I would enjoy killing more: the assholes introducing kids to their sick games or the piece of shit next to me.

"Looks like this mission is a go," Cad said absentmindedly.

I thought of my own mission, the one that sat outside of military protocol. I could hear my heartbeat drum in my ears and feel the adrenaline pump through me in anticipation.

Without warning, a large black bird dropped out of the sky and skimmed our hide, so close I could hear the beating of wings. I appreciated the distraction and raised my head from the sights to follow the majestic golden eagle as it sailed over the town before breaking into a nose dive into the Eden, movement spotted and identified as

food. The dark brown bird of prey landed softly with a flap of wings on a fallen branch. Inspected the immediate area, turning its head to the side to get a better view of its surroundings.

A sudden spark of light. I once again caught my breath.

It looked like someone had sent up a flare. Something so bright, someone held a mirror to the dying sun.

“What the fuck was that?” I pushed an eye to the scope.

“What?” Cad asked, trying to mirror his partner’s movements.

“A flash of light at two o’clock,” I said, scouting the rocky outcrops looking for any sign of movement or something out of place. “Could be an anti-sniper placement.”

Cad scanned the hill. “Or it could be a reflection off a rock. I told you there’s some metallic element in them that’s fucking up our signal. So, it could just be that.”

“There is no fucking rock over there,” I whispered in frustration. “It’s a goddamn paradise.”

I kept looking, trying to identify something out of place. Too much shrubbery, not enough shrubbery. Combat netting. Camouflaged clothing.

“Christ Cad, if we’re spotted, we’re done for.”

Cad returned his attention to the town, to the inhabitants, to the militia that had just arrived. There was no new movement, no sudden break for weapons, no pointing, no radios. They did nothing to make us suspect our positions had been compromised.

“Take a breath, Worthy. There’s nothing happening down there. Besides, there was nothing in the intelligence about them or the town having sniper capability.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t know shit about this place, let alone have a decent drone image. Who knows what capability they have?” I continued to zero in on the area where I thought I witnessed the flash of light. “Is it beyond reach they would send a sniper to the area before their dominant force arrived? Kind of like what we’re doing now?”

Cad looked at me but didn't respond, maybe he didn't know how to.

"And if he's got night vision or infrared, good luck getting out to make that call."

Cad stretched his neck and dug out his spotting scope from his pack, and trained in on the opposing mountain face.

Minutes passed in silence.

Cad chewed his lip. "I've got nothing. Maybe this is the effect of staring through a scope for two days straight."

"Maybe," I said, sweeping across the rocks.

Another minute, the sun departing my field of view.

"Hodie est dies mortis," I whispered.

"What is that?" Cad asked. "Latin?"

I ignored the question.

Today is a good day to die.

ONE_7

Night fell quickly, and the crowds dispersed. The prisoner, the person we were there to rescue, had been taken inside the same house The Ghost had seconded. The rest of the militia had scattered, some taking up refuge in the house, while others paced the length of the buildings, AK-47 assault rifles slung over their shoulders, cigarettes burning between their lips. They had good reason to be so relaxed. Their town was isolated and any chances of being attacked by allied forces were, understandably, lowly calculated.

The world was dark, apart from the stars, a washed-out light coming from the windows of the buildings, and an occasional spark of a lighter. A dog ran between the two sentries, begging for food, or play, or both. They kicked it off and continued their rounds.

My mind kept flicking between past and present, between two events that happened that day and what was happening in front of me. The first was right after The Ghost relayed a message to his escort. He looked up. He looked right at me. And if I hadn't been mistaken, a smirk, some little piece of acknowledgement he knew we were there. The moment came with a sensation I couldn't put my finger on. Time slowed, every fiber of the universe a physical object. And then it was gone, as fleeting as the moment.

The second thing was the flash from the opposite outcrop. It could have been something or nothing. A trickery of the light and shadow. My imagination taking over reality. I had resigned that I would never know what it was or if it was anything at all. I scratched the side of my forehead, my skin burning and I thought some desert insect had bitten me.

I took a moment of solace to soak in the constellations, always mesmerized by the view, the wonder of it all. A scene of glittering

dots and a full yellow orb I had seen so often on assignment yet reminded me of how far from home I was. Far from Shelly, far from Liz, far from the complex nature of a fractured yet functional relationship. Something that Cad had tainted.

“When are you heading up?” I asked, straining my vision through the scope, desperate for an answer to the flash that wasn’t my mind in a fritz. I would like to think I was of sound mind and body at every moment, even in those when I felt I could no longer contain the rage and hatred.

Cad looked through his night scope. “When those two assholes walking around the building, take a piss.”

As if reading his mind, a door opened, and a man appeared. Through my sniper scope, I determined the person was the escort, based on their dress. Although given the quality of the light emitted from the house itself, it was the best guess. He gestured, and both men disappeared inside, the escort looking in both directions before solidly closing the door.

“Showtime,” Cad said. He inched the camouflage out of the way and edged himself forward.

“Don’t forget to order me a pizza while you’re up there.”

“You just keep an eye on those assholes down there, hotshot. I’m just prayin’ my legs are still working after lying down in this hole for three days.”

I knew exactly what he was talking about. When I clocked off my shift, I would lie on my back and stretch out my legs, bringing my knees up to my chest, which is basically all the room I had. Since the militia convoy had arrived and the hype of activity started, neither Cad nor I dared to remove our vision from the town, eagerly taking in as much intelligence as we could. A firefight was just around the corner and we needed to be ready for it. People’s lives rested on our intelligence, position and cover fire to achieve mission success.

I kept a view on the corner of the house, closest to the road, waiting for movement. Cad scurried out of the hole and silently trekked the face of the mountain. I heard the soft patter of boots on loose earth until the sound dissipated, leaving me enveloped in the sounds of the night.

All the while I watched the front of the house. A conversation stirred within me. The photos in Cad's pack once more stole my attention.

"Why are you haunting me? Why are you willing me?"

A whisper floated around me and I wasn't sure if it was only me that could hear it. *Kill him*, it said.

"I want to," I replied, still focused on the guards who had yet to venture from the other side of the house. "He deserves it."

Eye on the prize, Worthy, a second voice said. *Focus on your mission*.

"But this is the opportunity..."

Go now, the first voice said.

Stay. Complete your mission. Come back in one piece. We'll give you everything you need, the second countered.

I took a deep breath and rolled over onto my back. I reached down and pulled out the picture of my daughter from my breast pocket.

"I promise I will never let anyone hurt you," I said. "You will always be safe. I will always protect you."

I gently touched her face in the photo and closed my eyes as I returned the photo to my pocket. I tapped it softly as if consoling a child that had scraped their knee. "I need you to look away, baby. I need to do something terrible to save you, to look after you."

I opened my eyes. I could feel they were different, cold, hard. I withdrew my combat knife from the scabbard attached to my belt and prepared to leave my post. I was about to enter a world where I couldn't control my actions, and I was enjoying it.

ONE_8

I dashed along the rocky outcrop. I kept low, aiming for shadows, heading for cover. All the while I was thinking about the end game. Finishing the job, getting back to the hide and waiting for the cavalry to arrive. The mission would go ahead as planned. Afterwards, back at debrief, questions would be raised. My responses would be simple. *He never came back. Something must have happened, but I have no idea what.* It was a war zone, so there was little I would need to make up or embellish. Keep it simple. Revenge doesn't need to be complex.

Cad's voice was a soft whisper over the cool night air. He relayed short, sharp bursts of information back to command: the number of men, threat identification, prisoner location, civilians, as much intel as he had gathered. Once completed it wouldn't be long before three squads arrived and went about their business of neutralizing threats and securing objectives. I wondered if they had received the same directives from that Durnham agent.

I circled my target's position. He was busy relaying the final segment of intelligence.

Cad clicked off, having completed his transmission and let the silence consume him. He was squatting behind a boulder, just off the edge of a mountain face. Sufficient distance from the town, and unless there was some militant who had wandered from their position, he was completely safe, given the circumstances. But he wasn't safe from me. Not from my vengeance, not from the voices in my head.

I had him in my sights, and my pace quickened. I prowled over the area, the distance degrading with each step. Excitement burned in me. A few meters away and I ran. A rush of blood. My target big in my crosshairs. Adrenalin controlled me. My pace would win against

stealth in this battle. And I got lazy. I kicked a rock, and it skittled off to my right.

Cad instinctively reached for his 9mm, but he second-guessed himself. He paused, just for that one moment. Perhaps he was thinking about the impacts of a gunshot carrying over the crisp air, concerned it would put the mission in jeopardy. Or maybe he thought it was a lost mountain goat.

Regardless, before he could respond, I was on him. My left hand over his left shoulder, holding his arms at bay, and held a knife against his throat. I could feel every muscle in him tense, the shock manifesting itself in a thousand different ways. I was sure his mind was whirring. In fact, I'm sure he was praying for me to come and save his ass. What a shock it would be when he discovered it was me holding the knife. That it was me the one attacking him.

I pressed the knife tighter against his throat. The skin broke and a thin trail of blood ran down his neck. He reached up for my hand. He didn't move or pull it, merely supplied sufficient pressure so I didn't move and accidentally sever his jugular in a jittery fit of adrenalin.

We stood there for a minute, a dangerous embrace, breathless. In those last few feet, I thought about how this would end. I considered just driving my knife into his neck, or his kidney's or his eyes. But it would all be over too quick, and I wanted him to know I knew. I knew his secret. I was exposing him. I was giving him redemption. He would go like this rather than take his chances back at the base. I had decided that. I was the judge. The jury. Please, God, let me be the executioner.

"What do you want?" Cad expelled through gritted teeth.

It was a stalling technique more than anything. Keep the assailant talking while running through escape scenarios. It didn't matter if the attacker couldn't understand you or vice versa. The chances are the attacker wouldn't kill you while they were talking, and the

language barrier could provide an avenue to connect. Maybe we would mention their value, their religion. Some would consider being a prisoner an upside over being dead. Plenty of others would prefer the latter.

As he spoke, I could feel him move closer to the edge of the cliff. We were standing on the uneven ground on the edge of a mountain. He had an option. He could move us to the edge and take his chances tumbling over the steep rock, hoping I would release my grip to save my own life. From Cad's perspective, that option may be better than being captured and held hostage by some militant group, used in propaganda videos and more. He was as versed as I was.

"Who are you?" Cad grunted, searching for a response. He tried to shift his feet, but I gripped him in place. I moved in close to his ear. I'm sure he was waiting for some verse in Pashto or Dari to be carried on warm breath.

"I know what you are," I whispered.

A pause. I could actually hear his mind working overtime trying to place it. The fact it was so much out of context had him working hard to connect the dots.

And then everything clicked.

"Worthy?" Cad hushed. "What the fuck are you doing?" He writhed under the hold, eager to escape the grasp and save both his neck and his pride.

"Shhh!" I whispered into his ear, tightening my grip on him.

"Let me go, you fucking asshole!" Cad said as he tried once again to maneuver away from me.

"I know what you did. I know what you are. And for that, you must be punished."

"Wait—," Cad started.

In my periphery, in the void of darkness, in the distance somewhere in the hide's direction, a flash erupted out of the shadows.

An echoed thud.

A whizzing sound.

The next second felt like an entire minute. An object flicked through the emptiness and slid between my helmet and head. A strobe of pain across my forehead. Heat, stinging. My grip released on Cad. My arms powerless. I could feel my conscious fading as we fell in opposite directions away from each other.

The last thing I saw before I hit the ground was Cad disappearing over the edge of the mountain, a limp body keeling over, diving into a black pool, a splash of darkness over the side of his face.

The echoed thud repeated in my mind.

Then silence.

Then nothing.

ONE_9

Room

“That’s where I got this,” Worthy said, running a finger over the raised line that ran the length of his forehead.

Nathan clapped, each connection sending a thunder crack around the room. “Bravo, Mr. Worthy. Now that is a story, wouldn’t you say, Barnaby?”

“Oh yes,” Barnaby replied, nodding his head. “Quite so.”

“We got there in the end.”

“But it’s not quite the end now, is it, my dear Nathan?”

“Oh, not at all.” He turned to view the clock. “We have time.”

Worthy watched the exchange between the two elderly gentlemen and waited for his opportunity to interject.

“Is that it? Can we move along with things now? Perhaps discuss the position?”

“Oh almost, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby replied. “As you know there is a certain order of events, a way of doing things. Our superiors just wouldn’t appreciate us taking any shortcuts.”

“You mean like throwing a contract and pen at me the moment I sat down?” Worthy retorted, raising an eyebrow.

“Very astute,” Nathan said. “But rest assured that was a test.”

“A test? I wasn’t aware this was a test.”

“Not just this, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby said. “Everything is a test. As we said, there was a lot of work that leads us getting you into this room today. Each a series of carefully orchestrated stage gates that allows us to have this conversation.” He leveled his stare at the man opposite. “You are meant to be here, mark my words.”

Worthy mulled this over, the events of the previous year flashing through his mind. The times when he felt the most in control of his actions, to the times the world dragged him kicking and screaming into the next phase of his life.

“To be honest, I never used to believe in things like fate and destiny.” He rubbed his ring finger, absent of any object. “I remember when Shelly and I first got together she would go on and on about destiny and how we were meant to be.” He looked away. “I guess if she knew back then how things would end, she would see things differently.” He looked back over the table. “Just as I’ve seen things in another way. Seen things. Heard things. Experienced things. And after it all, I can’t help but think of some grander plan, some reason behind it all, someone behind the curtains pulling the strings.”

“Well that certainly is an interesting perspective,” Nathan said. “However, when people like us want people like you, well, we will do just about anything to make that possible. You are meant to be here because we have made it so. That is the reality.”

“Reality. Sometimes...” Worthy trailed off, considering whether or not to tell the two about his experiences.

“What is it, Mr. Worthy?” Barnaby pressed. “You are free to speak here.”

“Well, reality is merely a perception of our environment. My perception is my reality, rightly or wrongly, and no one can change that.”

“Sometimes,” said Nathan.

“Mostly,” added Barnaby. “You see, occasionally *our* perception becomes *your* reality.”

Worthy shook his head. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“Oh, it will, Mr. Worthy,” Nathan said, his voice thrumming through the space.

Worthy’s head continued to spin. Nothing made sense to him anymore. The continual banter between the two gentlemen on the

other side of the table was wearing him down, pulling him into resignation. The black-and-white jackets becoming a blur.

He could feel himself being sucked in, letting himself talk freely about the activities he was a part of, without fear of prejudice. He had already openly discussed his feelings and actions towards Cad, however considering what was in the folder in front of him, those events that took place in a village no one remembers, to rescue a prisoner no one remembers, from someone no one remembers, seemed minuscule.

Worthy tapped the folder. "Do you think we can get rid of this now?"

"No, no," said Nathan. "It's a reminder of why we are here."

"But -,"

"But," Barnaby interjected, holding up a finger. "You haven't finished your story."

Worthy looked down at the table. "Well, there isn't really much else after that."

"Oh, please," Barnaby said. "You have merely scratched the surface."

"Quite right," said Nathan. "There are many events that led you here today."

Worthy eyed the two on the other side of the table.

Slowly, Barnaby extracted another folder from his briefcase and opened it.

Worthy's breath caught in his throat. What could it possibly be? How could it be any worse than what they have already given me? He looked down at the folder in front of him and considered its contents.

"Don't worry, Mr. Worthy," Barnaby announced.

Worthy looked up.

Barnaby extracted a single sheet of paper. "No photographs this time, simply a mission debrief report, or more precisely, an extract." He showed the paper to Worthy. "Shall I read it?"

"Would it make a difference if I said 'no'?"

Nathan said, "Not really. Our game, our rules."

Barnaby continued. "Sergeant James Worthy was found unconscious and out of position by Squad One Leader. His primary and secondary weapons were not on his person and not recovered. Sergeant Cad Pearce was not found and presumed captured by the enemy." He squared Worthy on the other side of the table. "It doesn't make great reading does it, Mr. Worthy."

"No, it does not," he said flatly.

"Loyalty, honor, dignity, integrity... They all went out the window here, didn't they?"

Worthy clenched his jaw and his pulse quickened at the verbal sting. A steady rage simmered in him.

Barnaby said, "Very well, Mr. Worthy. But tell me, did you bother to tell them about your magic bullet theory? That a gunman on the grassy knoll fired upon you or did you prefer to keep that little fairy tale to yourself?"

"If I knew then what I know now, well, I'm not quite sure what the hell I would tell them. Like I said, there've been some things that I could not possibly explain, and if you've managed to set this entire thing up, from beginning to end, then I'm the biggest chump on the planet."

"Not chump, as you put it," Nathan said. "Chosen. You believe such effort is given to everybody? I think not. Very few in fact. And even still, the person must play their part, they must participate freely. And this is why we are in this room having this conversation."

"But we'll get to all that," Barnaby said. "I'm keen to know how the court-martial proceedings went."

Worthy stood from the table and sashayed to the cart that rested against the wall beside the grandfather clock. Barnaby and Nathan gave each other a smirk before watching Worthy locate a tumbler and pour in the same amber liquid his interviewers imbibed earlier.

Through the pour he looked over at them, their gaze washing over him like a gentle wave collapsing on the shore.

“Would you gents like a refill?”

“Most definitely,” Barnaby replied.

“Bring the cart to the table,” Nathan added. “I’ve got a feeling we will need more as this remarkable story unfolds.”

Worthy nodded and gently pulled the cart to the side of the table and continued to make the drinks. He passed one to Nathan who gave it to Barnaby, the men showing their appreciation with subtle nods of the head, a warm smile, and a sip of the liquid.

“They are right what they say,” Nathan said.

“What’s that?” Barnaby replied, his senses caught in his glass.

“That it always tastes better when someone else makes it,” Worthy answered.

Barnaby turned to Nathan, however his partner had locked eyes with the person opposite.

“Quite right,” Nathan said. “Cheers to that.”

Worthy unbuttoned his suit jacket and slung it on the back of the chair. He plonked himself down at the table, loudly pulled his chair forward and rolled up his sleeves.

Barnaby said, “That’s the spirit, Mr. Worthy.”

“Well, I figure I’ve got nothing to lose here. So, pardon me if I tell you both to go fuck yourselves.”

Barnaby and Nathan sneered.

“Come on,” Worthy pushed, “Join me, remove your jackets and let’s just get down to business.”

Barnaby leaned forward on the table. “Allow us to respectfully decline, Mr. Worthy. As we have said there are procedures and

processes, and we are not quite there. We are governed by certain rules and regulations. You may dance naked on the table wearing a jester's hat, but we are not permitted to."

There was a sudden look of disappointment that crept over Worthy's face.

"But don't worry," Nathan offered. "We will reveal ourselves in good time."

Worthy shrugged. "Suit yourselves."

Barnaby slid his empty glass the length of the table, the crystal tumbler coming to a sudden stop in front of the cart.

"Now, Mr. Worthy, about your court-martial."

"My court-martial," Worthy began as he sipped, "If you could call it that. A court-martial has processes... rules... regulations. Law. The accused gets the opportunity to be heard in front of their peers." Worthy took another sip, the words coming freely, the smooth liquid providing the lubrication necessary to expel the story. "Mine started with an argument."

TWO_0

Special Agent Durnham slapped the table. “The sooner you talk the easier this will be.”

I lifted my cuffed hands to my face and rubbed at my eyes, before edging up and gently laying a hand on the bandage across my forehead. The pain, the memory, all still raw within my mind. A flash in my vision. A sound in my ears. The world evaporating before my eyes.

I caught glimpses of my rescue. A camouflaged face. Rotor blades spinning. Soldiers looking out the window. Bright white lights. A doctor. A nurse. The ceiling. Eventually, I was bundled into a Humvee and driven to a different location. And here I’ve sat, handcuffed like a criminal.

I looked at the two people in front of me. Durnham leaned on the table, using his size to loom over me. I looked around the human barrier to the uniformed woman sitting quietly against the wall, her cover in her lap. Her dark hair was pulled back into a simple, tight bun yet I wasn’t going to let her soft features fool me. She had broad shoulders and looked to come from military stock.

Her name was Special Agent Maskell, and she had sat quietly watching the interaction take place, even though the investigation belonged to her, or so she told me. She seemed to prefer to sit on the sidelines and wait for an entry point. Some incongruous piece of information, a story that doesn’t quite match, facts that change as the pressure rises.

My original story would be that I don’t know what happened. I would have screamed it from the mountain tops. But now, after blacking out in the field, that had moved from fantasy to reality pret-

ty damn quick, because I truly didn't know what had happened out there. Not then.

I looked up. "You sound upset, Durnham."

"You damn right I'm upset." He folded his arms. "You know the importance of this mission. My ass was on the line for this, but now yours is too. We all answer to someone, Worthy. Someone is going to get the blame for this little shit storm, and I'm blaming you."

"Because it's convenient for you!"

"No! Because they found you out of position. Because your partner is missing. Because everything here is fucked up because of you!"

"Hey," I said to Maskell, "are you really going to let him come in here and talk to me like this?"

Without waiting for a response, I turned my attention back to Durnham. "And you. Is this even your jurisdiction? What gives you the right to -?"

"Do you even realize the trouble you are in here?" The voice boomed across the room and put an immediate stop to my thinking. Maskell stood quietly and approached the table. She threw her cover down on the surface and crossed her arms. Durnham slowly retreated yet held his steely gaze on me.

"You know," she continued, "There's a lot of people down at CID placing bets on how long it's going to take until you break."

I took in my surroundings. The room was lit with a single overhead fluorescent tube, throwing long shadows over the concrete walls and interrogators faces. The longer I sat the more I realized how uncomfortable the metal chair was. The smell of death lingered, and I wondered how many waterboarding sessions had been conducted there. The only other item in the room was a wooden table, and I was sure it was a prop used by the investigators to intimidate their subjects. Its surface contained blood trails and bullet holes, evidence of slammed heads and other actions. People stretched to their limits be-

cause they didn't say the right words or didn't know the right words to say.

The armed escort from medical had been short and involved a two-kilometer drive in a Humvee. I sat in the back flanked by two brutes with M16 rifles, our shoulders rubbing as the vehicle jostled and bounced between burned-out car wrecks and exploded highways.

As soon as they led me in, I knew I was not there to help with the investigation. I *was* their investigation. Since that point, I had been piecing together the previous days and deciding what they could know, what I should tell them, and the elements I wouldn't share with anyone.

I sat back and straightened my spine, a level of confidence growing in me. "I want to know why I'm in this room, and I want my Judge Advocate."

"I don't think you understand the situation," Maskell said evenly, calmness embodying her tone. "This mission made a lot of people nervous, and then it got all fucked up, and they're looking for someone to blame. Actually, blame is too light. They are looking for someone to hang. Oh, and by the way, just so you know, we aren't holding anyone else right now."

I exchanged glances between the two interrogators.

"I'm not saying anything else."

"Maybe you'd prefer if I left you to Durnham here and his methods to extract information."

"This is bullshit," I roared. "I'm a member of this military. I haven't been charged. I haven't seen the inside of a courtroom. You have no right to do this."

Maskell shrugged. "No matter. But let me tell you. They found you with no partner and no weapons, apart from a bloodied knife. And it will not take long to match the blood on the blade. So, it really doesn't look good for you, Sergeant. Considering the evi-

dence, one might assume you purposefully sabotaged the mission. One could argue you murdered Cad because he discovered your plan and intended to inform on you. That's called motive."

"This is crazy," I said, looking down at the table.

"Not a gigantic leap though. Really wouldn't be hard to convince a jury."

I considered telling them about what he found in Cad's gear, the photos of the children. But then I wondered how they would spin it. Would they say it was mine? Would they wrap that up as part of my motive, even though it was? They were out for me, for one reason or another, and the last thing I needed to do was to fuel their fire.

"Did you recover our gear?" Perhaps they had already found it.

Maskell and Durnham exchanged a glance. "No," Durnham said.

"What do you want me to say? I don't know what happened out there."

"Yeah, yeah. The whole 'I don't remember' routine," Maskell said. "That'll get you so far." She retrieved her chair from the far corner of the room and sat it down at the table opposite. She stretched her arms out and rest them on the table. She meant business, everything about her was business.

"There are three ways this can play out. One. You can fight this, take your chances in a court-martial, roll the dice. We're happy to play this game, but we will throw everything at you, including murder and treason. There's a big chance you'd spend the rest of your life in a room smaller than this and not quite as comfortable."

I stared at her, waited for the other two options, hoped they were infinitely better. Knew deep down they weren't.

"Option two. You plead guilty to Cad's murder, you tell us what happened, and we will get you an evaluation. It'll come back with PTSD and a bunch of other shit. You might do time in a psych ward or something."

That seemed worse than option one.

“Option three, the last option. And believe me when I say it is the *last* option. There won’t be another one. A bad conduct discharge and you walk away, never to be heard from again.”

Fifteen years of missions flashed in front of my face. All the times I killed people to protect my countrymen. All the times I put my ass on the line so a General could get another star. Fifteen years of family sacrifice so I could do what I was born to do. And that is what it all came down to. A big chicken dinner. A scar on my record. Something I couldn’t hide or cover, something that would stay with me forever. A red flag on my character for all to see. I would still have my liberties, but at what cost?

“Those are three pretty shitty options,” I said.

She leaned over the table. “Look around you. They’re the best you’re going to get.” She sat back slowly and folded her arms. “The choice is yours.”

TWO_1

Room

“So yeah,” Worthy said. “It wasn’t pretty.”

Nathan clapped his hands together and ended with him rubbing them together. “Now,” he said. “Now we have something to work with. Don’t you agree, Barnaby?” He looked sideways at his partner.

Barnaby returned the gaze. “Oh yes, my dear Nathan, now we certainly have something to work with.” He turned to Worthy, who was wondering what he had said to elicit such a reaction from the otherwise somber looking gentlemen.

“You wanted to know when the negotiations would begin? Well, now they begin.”

“Now’s your chance,” Nathan added, “to get anything and everything you ever wanted. And all you have to do is accept the terms and sign a contract, and your wildest desires can come true.”

Worthy looked down at the two contracts that sat in front of him, each belonging to a suited man sitting opposite. It threw him again. He felt like he was being pulled from pillar to post, a marionette being made to dance by a puppeteer, one moment having to recap dark memories and the next minute being asked about his wildest desires.

“Are you ready, Mr. Worthy? Are you excited?” Barnaby queried, a subtle hint of enthusiasm weaving through his tone, his eyes wide with expectation.

“Well, I... I’m not sure.” Worthy shook his head. “I’m not sure I know what to ask for. What do you mean *wildest desires*? Are you talking about money?”

“Money?” Barnaby questioned. He turned to Nathan. “Why do they always start with money?”

“Oh, I think we know the reason for that, Barnaby.”

“Very true, Nathan. A rhetorical question on my behalf.”

Barnaby turned back towards Worthy. “Mr. Worthy, for centuries, people have requested money, a means to fuel their fire.”

“And power,” Nathan added. “Let’s not forget power.”

“Correct again, Nathan. Money and power. To tell you the truth, I’m getting a little weary of it. Perhaps we should print out a set of rules or something. Guidelines at the least. Not that we would have any problems in acquiring said funds for you, or anything else you desire, of course. I mean, look at Trump, look at Soros. They dismissed such things as quickly as they were instated.”

“You see, Mr. Worthy,” Nathan joined, “the problem with money and power is that our respective organizations may call upon you at any time. When this happens, these types of benefits come with you. As per the agreement, you cannot transfer them to another party. They are yours and yours alone.”

Barnaby said, “We prefer to deal in items that have an immediate benefit for the benefactor. Items that cannot physically be redeemed when called upon. Regardless of all of this, the rules are clear. We must offer, and you can accept or reject said offer.”

“Remember we are negotiating against each other for you,” Nathan said. “It is our responsibility to make you an offer you just can’t refuse. And like we said when you arrived, you will sign one of these contracts, it solely depends on which one you entrust with your signature.”

Worthy stretched his shoulders, feeling the power returning to him. “Okay then, I’m ready.” He took the final sip of his drink, leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. A smile crept across his face, enjoying the moment, eager to hear what each of the organizations would offer, although failing to think of anything that wasn’t

a physical object. He could do with a new car, maybe a Porsche, or money to escape the country, but those were all physical objects. What about a new identity? Was that a physical thing? He could cash in his stocks and bonds and hide out on a beach, getting drunk every night. What about happiness? It wasn't a physical thing, however, could anyone take that? Worthy dismissed his thinking and restrained himself from speculating further, as it took up too much mental energy.

Barnaby looked at Nathan. "Are you ready? Would you like to do the honors?"

"Oh my, I absolutely would love to, Barnaby." Nathan reached into his briefcase and retrieved a coin. He placed it side up on the table and held it in place with his finger. He looked over at Worthy and smiled as he prepared his other hand. A pause, allowing the weight of the proceedings to sink in.

From his position on the other side of the table, Worthy could see that one side of the coin was white, the other black, both sides absent from any markings or identifiers.

He snorted. "Fitting," he said, staring at the coin. "A coin to match the jackets?"

"More fitting than you know," Barnaby replied.

Satisfied everyone was on edge, Nathan flicked the coin.

As it spun, the black-and-white sides blurred into one, mesmerizing Worthy. To him, it resembled the ongoing banter between the jacketed negotiators on the other side of the table. He looked up, expecting the two sitting opposite to be equally enthralled in the spinning coin, however, they focused their views entirely on him. Eyes narrowed, and Worthy found himself in a staring competition.

Nathan slammed a hand down on the table and broke Worthy's trance. He watched the white-jacketed man slowly remove his hand, all the while keeping his gaze on Worthy.

“Black it is,” Nathan said. He turned to his counterpart. He looked at his own white jacket and then that of Barnaby’s. “I guess that means you, Barnaby.”

“So, it is,” Barnaby replied, his eyes firmly on the person opposite. He clapped his hands together. “Where to begin, where to begin?”

“There is so much,” Nathan offered.

“Oh, there is, I almost don’t know where to start.” Barnaby tapped his lip with his finger as if deep in thought. “Let’s start with Cad, shall we?”

“Wow!” Nathan jumped. “Now, that is a bold move.”

“Oh, yes indeed, Nathan. One must be bold in these proceedings. You know better than anyone the bolder the move the more likely the win. So, what do you say, Mr. Worthy?”

“You know my history with Cad.”

“Exactly,” replied Barnaby. “That is why I chose him.”

“Yes, but what about him?”

Barnaby placed his elbows on the table, one hand encasing the other, and rested his chin on his fingers. “What if I gave you your chance at revenge?”

Worthy shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t understand what on earth you’re talking about.”

“What if I told you your story isn’t quite accurate? What if Cad survived the fall down the mountainside and saved by a local tribesman who hid and cared for him, and that he’s been slowly making his way back to the known world? What if I could produce him here in this room, and you could kill him point blank, in a way of your choosing? If that is your cup of tea, sir, then pick up that pen and sign that contract.”

Worthy shook his head. This was not an option he would have considered in a million years. “I’m sorry, Nathan, but Cad is dead. That is a fact. And I don’t think even you, with the reach you have

to find and produce my sealed files, to capture those photos in that folder, could bring him back from the dead.”

There was silence. Barnaby slowly broke his negotiation to peer at Nathan. There was another one of their subconscious conversations, the type where only they are privy to the nature of the content, which ended in a slight shrug from Barnaby matching a cock of Nathan’s head. He returned his attention to Worthy.

A smile broke out over his face. “Well, of course, he is dead! And you are quite right. We don’t have the authority to bring him back from the dead.”

“Authority?” Worthy questioned.

“Ah, power, capability, knowledge, whatever,” Barnaby strung together as he rolled his hands over. “This was another test, Mr. Worthy, and I’m glad to say you are certainly passing with flying colors. Either of us will be very lucky to have someone like you amongst our respective teams.”

“Well, if you guys want a contract signed, you had better do a hell of a lot better.”

TWO _2

“Quite right,” Nathan said. “I will commence *my* initial offer?”

Barnaby nodded and held out his hand, inviting his partner to retort.

Nathan squinted as if trying to read the man’s mind. Worthy was set back by the man’s intense stare.

“What if,” Nathan commenced, “Colonel Napper.”

“I’m sorry?” Worthy said, trying to read between the lines. “Colonel Napper?”

“Oh, yes. Plays golf every other day and shines his medals the other days. Sips lemonade his wife makes and they drink it while watching the sunsets and talking about how their children are succeeding in life. One’s a doctor and the other an investigator, both in the military, mind you. Received a full pension about the same time the military unceremoniously discharged you. I’m wondering, Mr. Worthy, what did you get?”

He already knew the answer to that question.

“And let’s face it. Besides Cad, he was next in the chain of events. He sent you on that mission. Without him, you’d probably still be in the military killing people from the distance, sending bullets soaring over a couple of kilometers into people’s brains. You’d still be married, you’d still have Liz, you’d still have a life...”

“Wait!” Worthy held up his hand, giving his mind an opportunity to catch up on the conversation. “Don’t talk about my daughter!”

“But that’s how it works, does it not? Do you not agree that if you were still in the military Liz would still be alive?”

Worthy clenched his jaw. “Maybe yes, maybe no.”

“Oh, I think you would.”

“There’s no way of knowing -.”

“We know,” Barnaby barked, interjecting himself in the exchange.

Worthy eyed the two. “Are you saying? Wait, what are you saying?”

Nathan looked over at Barnaby and he nodded in approval. Nathan slowly rose from the table, producing a Mont Blanc pen, seemingly out of thin air, and held it out to Worthy.

“I’m saying, Mr. Worthy, that you can have your chance.”

Worthy raised himself off the chair so he could take the pen. “To have my life back, to have it all again?” He loomed over the contracts and positioned the pen, the desire for it to be true strengthening his resolve. It was the one thing he really wanted, to relive his life. He would go back and make things right, do things right. Live his life how he should have lived it, and he and Shelly and Liz would be happy together. He would throw the military away. But he also knew it was impossible.

“But, how? How is that even possible? How could I live it again?”

Nathan viewed the expectant smile and closed his eyes. “Well, no, not exactly like that.” His face came alive. “But you would have your revenge on Napper. Anything you wanted to do to him, you could do without recourse.”

Worthy’s fantasy vanished before his eyes and he slowly rested the pen down on the stack of paper that was Nathan’s contract.

Nathan’s gaze went from Worthy to the pen and back again. “Don’t you understand, Mr. Worthy? Napper caused all of this.”

“This isn’t ...” Worthy began as he waved his hand to dismiss Nathan’s comments. “This isn’t what I want.”

Nathan slammed his hand on the table. “Well what, what is it? His superior? Their superior? How far up the tree do I need to go? Who do I need to produce?”

Barnaby stretched out and caressed Nathan's shoulder. "It's okay, Nathan. Calm down, dear boy. These things happen, they are part of the negotiation."

Worthy could see the fire in Nathan's eyes, the rage turning his face red. He could hear the frustration, the disappointment, the want in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Worthy, for the outburst of my partner here, Nathan. It is but the second time he has been on this side of the table and there is much riding on the successful completion of these negotiations. As I mentioned earlier, the rules and regulations surrounding such negotiations are precise and Nathan is still wrapping his mind around the minutia of the particulars."

Worthy shifted his gaze away from the rage-filled face of Nathan and towards the warm smile of Barnaby.

"He will soon learn the art of the negotiation, the subtleties that exist in the gray area of give and take, want and need," Barnaby said. "Now, Nathan, it is best you apologize. After all, Mr. Worthy is our guest, and demands the same respect as all of our aspirants."

"I'm sorry," Nathan forced between clenched teeth. "Please forgive me."

"Absolutely," replied Barnaby. "However, Mr. Worthy, if you didn't forgive my counterpart here and had no intention of letting Nathan continue in this negotiation, you might as well sign my contract immediately so we can commence proceedings."

Worthy eyed Nathan one more time before picking up Barnaby's pen from the stack of papers he had placed there when Barnaby had dropped on him when he arrived. He positioned the pen above the surface of the paper, at the edge of a long line with an 'X' on it. He could once again feel the conflicting forces of the push from the paper and pull from the ink in the pen. He was sure the pen's contents were eager to escape their confines and run over the stock.

Once again, Barnaby smiled, his grin growing bigger the closer the pen got to the contract.

Once again, Worthy sat back, exhausted with the effort. “But what is the offer?”

“The offer?”

“Yes,” Worthy said. “What is it you are offering as part of the negotiations?”

“Well, the rules are clear, Mr. Worthy.”

“Actually,” Worthy said, placing the pen on the desk, “They aren’t.”

Barnaby took a deep breath and reached across the table. He stuck a finger amongst the sheets of paper that formed the contract and flicked the pile in half. Keeping his eyes on Worthy, he placed a finger on the middle of the page. “Section G, subsection Y, clause thirty-two, component four. When a negotiating party has been dismissed from the negotiations by the candidate due to reasons becoming (see Section B, subsection A, clause ten, components five through fourteen), and the reasons are in-fact cited to be true and accurate by remaining parties and recorded forth told, and in good faith for the benefit of the candidate (at their discretion, as pertinent to the appraisal of understated previous action), and the said candidate signs a contract prior to another offer being made (see Section F, subsection R, clause eight, component three), the person may choose (the choice denoted as freewill or otherwise or at the bearers request) either the previous offer of the ejected party or the previous offer of the non-ejected party, provided (i) no offers, made, subsequent, and future, are withdrawn in accordance with any previous components as outlined in any other section contained entirely within this contract, and (ii) the offer is promulgated post-haste, in accordance within the spectrum of the candidate’s wishes, at the earliest as the immediate conclusion of proceedings within the boundaries of the negotiation as remarked accordingly (see Section T, subsec-

tion A, clause twelve, component twelve), and (iii) the negotiation is deemed sufficient and full to continue considering actions as undertaken by all remaining parties as part of the negotiation, in part or whole, and represented fully without precedence raised by the ejected party, partly or wholly, by self or trusted representative, as outlined prior to known negotiation officials (see Section A, subsection E, clause twenty-eight through a hundred and fifty-five).”

Barnaby retook his seat, stretching out his arms and gently resting them on top of the table. He took another breath. “You see, Mr. Worthy, they are perfectly clear and binding.”

Worthy stared across the table.

“You see,” Barnaby sighed, “you have a choice to make.”

“Actually, neither of the previous two offers sit well with me. I refuse to sign either contract.”

“So, Nathan is still in this negotiation then, Mr. Worthy?”

Worthy looked at Nathan, who was still obtusely fuming over the recent events. He looked down at the two sets of contracts and then back to the man. “It appears that way.”

Nathan’s demeanor changed in an instant, a warm smile sliding over his face, his shoulder’s relaxing, his muscles releasing their pent-up energy, seemingly into the atmosphere.

“Thank you, Mr. Worthy. I expect my next offer will be more to your liking.”

TWO_3

“Before that, Nathan, I believe it is my turn in this negotiation for Mr. Worthy.”

“Of course, Barnaby, as always. You have the floor.”

Barnaby cleared his throat and smiled. “Now, Mr. Worthy, I have seen your reactions to the first rounds of negotiations and am willing to sweeten the deal, as it were.”

“Sweeten the deal?” Worthy asked.

“Oh yes. The negotiations are up to us. Our respective organizations give as much leeway to impress the person sitting in your chair. The more important that person, the more room we have, and you, Mr. Worthy, are an extremely important person. Some would say vital to the success of both our organizations. In fact, there have been very few who can have the luxuries you are to be provided. Mind you, people have fallen for less. Your integrity should be commended.”

Worthy looked at him blankly, letting the compliment wash over him, yet keeping them clear of his ego. He was not to be sucked into some offer delivered by some fast-talking, used car salesperson. If they were going to win his services, they would need to place something very juicy on the table.

“I tell you what. I’ll give you a two-for-one.”

Worthy started again.

“You heard me,” Barnaby proclaimed playfully, holding up his hand. “Two-for-one. I will put that bastard Durnham and that bitch Maskell in a soundproof room. We will restrain them and you will have your choice of every weapon imaginable; guns, knives, kitchen utensils. Hell, I’ll even throw in a tub of water if you wanted to drown them. You will have a blindfold if you do not wish to see their blood and brains, and some earplugs if you wish to evade their

screams, but personally, I'm not sure why you would want to do either of those things."

Worthy held up his hand again. "I'm sorry, gents. These conversations are really getting away from me again."

"Of course," Barnaby continued, ignoring Worthy's request to stop. "You can let them go, or you know, hurt them a little, but given the opportunity, I'm not sure why you would want to do either of those things either."

"I... what's... who..." Worthy stumbled over his words, the exact phrase he wanted to say escaping him.

"Take a breath, Mr. Worthy. We know how these negotiations can be on someone, the pressure of acceptance. I've been part of enough of them to know the impact on man and woman."

"I don't understand. Why the murder? Why the mayhem?"

"Are you uncomfortable with it, Mr. Worthy?"

"Yes," Worthy said matter-of-factly. "Yes, I am."

"But you've killed before, Mr. Worthy. You've killed many people."

"That was -."

"What? What was it? Different? How was it different?"

Worthy opened his mouth to answer but Barnaby continued on his verbal attack like a prosecutor during a cross-examination.

"Oh, I know how this is different. Maskell and Durnham did something to you. It was them that pressured you to leave the military. Now is the opportunity to get revenge."

"Why revenge? Is there no other non-physical option you are going to offer?"

"Why revenge?" asked Barnaby, turning to face Nathan. "Why revenge?" He mouthed. Nathan shook his head and shrugged.

Barnaby scratched his eyebrow and stared over the table, eyeing the knots in the wood secure under the polished surface. He took

the moment to compose himself, running through the dialog in his mind.

“We offer vengeance because it’s human nature to want revenge on those that hurt us. Consciously or subconsciously, people want it. They say they don’t want it, but they really do. We just break down those walls and get right to the chase. Retribution gives pleasure, it releases dopamine into brains. And let’s face it, if you’re sitting in this room conversing with us, you are comfortable with this concept. We know you, Mr. Worthy. We know what you are capable of.”

“This just isn’t me. The missions I undertook with the military... I know what I did for my country. What happened to Cad and everyone else happened a long time ago. We could be here all day and not get anywhere. I just don’t think this is going to work for me, so if you guys want to get somewhere, we’re going to have to change things up a bit.”

“Tsk, tsk, Mr. Worthy. It’s not that we need to change things up. We just haven’t found the right target yet.”

Worthy crossed his arms and stared at Barnaby, his dark eyes like onyx stones floating in a glass of milk stared back. It appeared there would be no movement here. It was that point where he thought he should stand up and walk out, yet when the thought flashed across his mind the folder in front of him drew his attention. The same folder that Barnaby slung across to him when he arrived. A folder that held an image that sealed his compliance with the events taking place at that moment, and suddenly, the want to leave the room, faded. He wondered if it would get to a point where he would give in, and either sign a contract or throw himself from a window and plummet to his destiny.

Barnaby watched Worthy struggle with his internal conflict and finally subside to the situation. He looked over to Nathan.

“Nathan, I believe this round of negotiation is still active. Would you have an offer to make to Mr. Worthy?”

Nathan slid his hand over the table like a blackjack player would to signify they want no more cards in their hand.

“I guess that means we are done,” Barnaby said.

“Done? What does that mean?”

Nathan said, “It means we are ready to move on.”

“Move on to what?”

“Move on to what happened after you got back home,” said Barnaby.

Worthy threw his head back and stared at the ceiling. On it, he saw a massive painting that spanned the entire panel of the ceiling above the table where the negotiation was taking place and seemed to add to the number of items that didn't match the steel, glass, and marble of the rest of the room. The imagery was vivid and held a motif that Worthy could only describe as religious, utilizing the limited knowledge he gleaned from Sunday School lessons his parents forced him to attend when he was a child.

He continued to crane his head upwards to take in the full picture. A massive battle taking place between angels from heaven and the hounds from hell. In the top right corner, lean muscled men with powerful features and wings were floating down from the white, billowy clouds wielding broadswords. In the opposite corner, the dark corner, half naked, muscle-bound brutes climbed from the depths between the cracks in the earth, each carrying equally impressive blades. Dragon-like wings sprung from their backs as lava pooled around their feet.

A set of sparring partners were dueling in mid-air, their knives having stabbed their opponents. Each facial expression exuded pain, their eyes rolled back, their mouths wide open in an eternal shriek.

It seemed both sides had taken on heavy causalities and the bodies were piling up on the ground, growing into a mountain that touched the uppermost corner of the clouds, so that the heavenly angels could walk down the bodies like a set of stairs.

Two figures, one from each side, and depicted larger than their brethren, were facing off against each other halfway up the pile. Their swords were locked together, each of their blades perilously close to the other's neck.

"Quite a piece, isn't it?"

The voice pooled around Worthy's ears and felt eerily close, yet Worthy could not pull his attention from such artwork.

"And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them."

Worthy followed the voice and looked down at Barnaby, who was now squatting beside him. He had stealthily rounded the table and joined Worthy in gazing at the ceiling, taking in the euphoric nature of such a canvas, a landscape of destruction, hanging over their heads.

"Revelations: Chapter 11, verse 7," Barnaby said.

Worthy once again stared into Barnaby's eyes in an effort to understand the man, however, emotion evaded him.

"You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day. Psalms; Chapter 91, verse 5."

Barnaby smiled. "Very good, Mr. Worthy. I wasn't aware of your knowledge of the works of the prominent writers."

"Limited in that respect. Five years of Sunday School."

"But of course. However, tell me, do you fear the terror in the night?"

Barnaby stood and made his way back to his chair as Worthy mulled over the question.

Worthy opened his mouth to answer, but Barnaby held up his hand to stop him.

"Please, Mr. Worthy, there is no need to answer. Your silence speaks volumes. However, I can assure you there is nothing to fear in the darkness, merely fiction sold to you through propaganda."

“Much like stories of the light, told through quaint fairy tales,” Nathan added.

“Sorry gents, I’m not religious. I don’t believe in heaven and hell and god and the devil and all that crap.”

“Oh, we know, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby said. “You deal in facts, in proof; things you can see and touch. One could say you see things as black or white.” He pointed to his partner’s jacket and then to his own. “White and black. Good and bad. Right and wrong. But, you see, not everything that’s good is right, and not everything that’s bad is wrong.”

“Then why the hype about it? Why do holy people stand at the front of their congregations on their little soap boxes and implore their people to be good, to do good, in the name of God?”

“Yes,” said Nathan, cocking his head to one side. “Why is that?”

Once more, Worthy found himself at a loss for words, unable to answer the question.

“Again, Mr. Worthy, you needn’t answer, for your delayed response says more than any mere expression could. Believe me, many have tried to answer that question. Regardless, I think it’s best we carry on, don’t you agree, Nathan?”

“Very much so, Barnaby.”

“And time? Do we have the time?”

Nathan turned to take in the clock face, the minute hand having moved ever so gradually from the last time they checked it.

“Yes, Barnaby, we have all the time in the world.”

“Very good then. So, Mr. Worthy, where were we?”

Worthy slapped his hands down on his legs and rubbed his palms on his pants. “I’m not sure where to go from here.”

“Let me help you out,” Nathan offered. “The military had just discharged you because, while on a mission, you lost your weapon and tried to kill Cad.”

Worthy eyeballed the man. “Well, thank you so much for the recap,” he said, making no effort to hide the sarcasm. “I suppose if I am to continue, I guess I should start with the argument.”

TWO _4

“God damn it, Melissa, tell me where my wife is!”

I shouted into the handset like it was a megaphone. My grip on the phone intensified. I was seconds away from throwing it full force into the nearest wall and watch it shatter into a hundred pieces. Damn the consequences. I was past consequences. *You are not free from the consequence of your choice.*

“She’s my sister, Jim, what do you want me to say?” the voice crackled over the line.

Jim. I hated when people called me that, and I knew that she knew how much it pissed me off. I leaned on the kitchen counter and held the phone to my head, pretending it was a gun. They had deployed me to godforsaken shitholes, I had slept and taken dumps amongst gunfire and explosions, yet all of that seemed like paradise compared to trying to get any information out of my sister-in-law, Melissa. In all honesty, I’d switch that phone for a gun in a heartbeat, just so I didn’t have to put up with the circular argument, the blaming, the venom in her voice.

“Well, I’m her husband.”

“Are you? Are you ever there?” The attack was stinging and struck like stray shrapnel.

“Well,” *you bitch*, “I’m here now.”

When I had arrived home, I had eased the door open with a sense of trepidation. The terms on which I left was, suffice to say, rocky, and that was putting it nicely. Despite that, I felt that time would have settled those feelings, and I had hoped, in some small way, that Shelly would be happy to see me. Of course, there was the discharge to talk around, it was something I wouldn’t be able to hide forever. And I knew that would open up all manner of other conversation

about how we would survive. But this is what she wanted, wasn't it? Deep down? She wanted me to be home. Surely it wouldn't be fair to give her everything she asked for and then complain about how it came to be, would it?

However, when I opened that front door and called out, there was no return greeting. No rushing of feet, no arms out wide. I found the house empty. Maybe she was out shopping, maybe she took Liz to a doctor. There were probably a hundred things she was doing in a hundred different places. I tried her phone, but it went straight to voicemail. I clicked off without leaving a message. Seeing my number would alert how I was back in the country, the surprise ruined, but the hell with it. She would see my beat-up car in the garage on her return, anyway.

I could do nothing but wait, either for a return phone call or her arrival, so I sat on the couch and ruminated on the previous week. I beat myself up about it, another internal conversation to overlay all the other conversations I had since leaving the base. It was amazing how quickly they spiraled out of control, the trapdoor into the darkest parts of my mind.

That lasted for about an hour until the point where my mind was a more dangerous place to be than reality. I played and replayed the imaginary interaction I'd have with Shelly. Things she might say. Things I would say in return or retaliation, depending. Control or loss of control?

That's when I paced the kitchen, trying to think of someone to call. Unfortunately for me, I landed on Melissa, Shelly's older (and extremely protective) sister. I remembered the warning she gave me at our wedding.

It was a brief embrace if you could call it that. She gripped my shoulders, eased up and whispered in my ear, "Fuck with my sister and you'll get fucked over good." Well, she was making good on her

promise because it certainly felt like I was getting fucked at that moment. Deep and uncompromising, victimized and lonely.

So, with as much trepidation as purposefully stepping on a landmine, I found her number and with much apprehension, keyed in the digits and waited for her to answer.

“Look if she doesn’t want to talk to you, I’m sure you can figure out why,” Melissa said, the level of derision in her voice that made the hair on the back of my neck stand to attention.

“Christ, is this about my last deployment? Listen, I’m not having this argument with you. This is between Shelly and me.”

“Well, you turn up unannounced -”

“Unannounced?!” I interrupted. I had an elbow on the counter, my head in my free hand, massaging my temples between thumb and middle finger. The ensuing conversation caused it to feel like my head would explode. I spoke in a low tone, deep, forceful, methodical. “This is my fucking house; this is my fucking family!”

Just as I finished that sentence, the low rumble of the garage door filled the house. I picked my head up at the noise like a dog who had just heard an invisible whistle. Without another word, I ended the call and dropped the phone on the counter.

My heart pounded. Suddenly, the moment I wanted was before me. And I wasn’t prepared for it. All the waiting had set a level of expectation.

I moved out into the hallway and waited, my eyes locked on the door to the garage, waiting for it to click open and my family to enter. I heard another muted grumble as the door descended. It wouldn’t be long now.

I counted as the precious seconds passed and there was nothing. No door opening, no car doors slamming, no low murmurs, nothing. I speculated the situation. Had Melissa called Shelly as soon as I dropped the phone? What was she saying? Probably insisting that an

irrational husband was in the house. I wouldn't have been surprised if the garage door opened and the engine restarted.

But it didn't. The door to the garage edged opened and Shelly stepped out into the hallway and stopped dead. Her hand immediately fell to the head of Liz, who was gripping onto her mother's leg for dear life, her eyes wide, not with fear, but with unknowing, like she couldn't register my face. At that moment, they felt a hundred miles away, yet not three meters separated us.

I held my arms out wide. "Surprise," I drawled, a gentle smile working its way onto my features.

Shelly just stood there, straight-faced, softly patting her daughter's head. An attempt to calm her, sensing the unease in her grip.

Disappointment stabbed at me. I lowered my arms with my gaze. I wasn't expecting a party with balloons and cake, but I sure as hell wasn't expecting the stand-offish nature of that reception. Maybe it was the scar on my forehead. Yes, it had to be the scar. Surely the time away had allowed her to heal, given her space to think about us. She missed me. I know she did. They both did. I hope they did. I thought about the opportunities to call home from the base, and every time I found an excuse not to. They weren't ready, I wasn't ready. If I had my time again...

Shelly inched forward, her eyes lowered, a sense of guilt suffusing her appearance. Liz followed in tow, not wanting to be left alone with a strange man standing at the end of the corridor. Had she forgotten? It wasn't that long, surely not *that* long.

When in reach, she lifted an arm and touched my cheek. At the soft contact, I melted, all the rage and hurt dissipating into infinitely minute particles that evaporated into the atmosphere. I tilted my head to the side, trapping her hand against my shoulder, trying to extend the moment of relief.

Opening my eyes, I noted her searching gaze on my scar. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. She fortified her usually brittle

poker face, hiding her smile. She eased her hand out from my grip and ran a finger along the length of the wound, tracing the impurity on my skin. She wrapped her other hand around my neck and gradually pulled me close, easing my head down onto her shoulder.

I was home. We would be a family.

TWO_5

Over the following months, we eased into our relationship at a glacial pace, not wanting to dive too deep too fast for fear of rupturing the soft embryo we considered our relationship to be. I tried to tell selective parts of my most recent history, leaving out the dramatic outcomes of the discharge. Most of what I did was classified, and she understood that. That's one thing she was always aware of. As we sat around the coffee table, she asked me questions while Liz played on the floor, and I skirted answers. She asked how Cad was and I lied, leaving my vague responses hanging in the air. She asked why I was home way earlier than I should be, and I invented truths. Time off for exemplary behavior, I jested. She didn't laugh. A new opportunity, I said. She didn't buy it and I wasn't convincing. I said I was going to retire, leave the military for good. She smiled, but I could tell it pained her to do so. She nodded, rubbed her thighs, and got up to refill her cup.

I listened intently to the family stories, to the events of herself and Liz, with as much interest as I could muster. I asked questions and feigned attention. I put my arm around her when we sat on the couch and watched television. We held hands when we walked, but there were times I could feel her pull away. I helped to cook and clean and anything else she asked of me. Get this, fix that. I was the regular house husband.

I played doll houses with Liz, creating silly voices for the characters, making her laugh and cheer. Her smile tugged at me and I fought tears with every interaction. The time was precious and oh so short. At the end of every day I would beat myself up on the moments I got distracted or reared myself away, the time I could have

spent in her presence. I wanted to punch myself for every wasted instant.

I had been missing it, all of it, and the guilt bore a hole right through me. I promised I would do better. I committed to do things right. I would listen. I would share. I would be open and honest. I would find words to describe my feelings. A second chance had been given, and I wasn't about to let it slip through my fingers for a second time, a third time, a fourth time.

But ever so slowly, the fissure that never seemed to repair, widened. Something got in the gap, liquid, air, something, and amplified our disconnection to the breaking point. She pulled away; they both did. The smiles became frowns, their eyes dropping at the corners, the conversations short and biting. As always, it started with the little things. Chores I hadn't done, or the ones I did do, executed poorly. The times I would steal myself away and think about the past. Think about what Cad had done. Reflect about what I had done. Contemplate about the potential outcomes of a different decision, a fork in the road leading to a different conclusion.

At first, I relied on passive aggression to help me cope in an effort to steady the waters, to repeal the fracture. I took the accusations, I accepted the critique, and I walked away. But it hadn't been enough, it was never enough. Eventually, the feelings of anger returned and I couldn't hold them back. Shelly couldn't hold them back either. And we would be right back at square one... before square one. The straw that broke the camel's back. The pebble that caused a landslide.

The next little comment, irritating by my standards, I rebuked with bite. And Shelly replied by leaving. I couldn't tell if I offended her, or she was just waiting for the opportunity to get the hell out of there. She grabbed Liz by the hand and pulled her to the car, screeching the tires as she backed out onto the street, revving the engine as she took off.

I, on the other hand, collapsed on the lounge and tried to understand what the hell just happened, how it went so wrong. Feeling sorry for myself and with no answer within reach, I retreated to the whiskey bottle. It didn't take long for my memories to become fuzzy, my past drowning amongst the brown liquid. The result was me falling into bed where I could at least have comfort in my stupor, wondering when I would see my wife and daughter again. Not only was I conscious of the downward spiral I was in, I was actively perpetrating it.

Sometime in the night, my eyes flicked open, my mind working at a thousand miles an hour and I tried to figure out why. Did I leave something on? The front door wide open? Did I need to go to the toilet? I didn't feel remotely drunk. I stared at the ceiling, tracing the shadows in the low light, feeling a presence beside me.

I turned slowly and saw Shelly's body. She had turned towards the wall, hugging the edge of the mattress, a chasm of bedding between us. I reached out with my hand to touch her, a need for human connection, but stopped myself, unsure of how she would react. Would she hate me for what I said, or for not chasing after her? Was that a test, a way for her to control me? Anger and sorrow mixed in me. Primary emotions. Google told me that.

I thought for a long time about everything, building up the courage to say something to her. I concluded I had been an ass, I was sure of it, however, I felt her behaviors weren't entirely fair either. In a marriage where you supposedly backed each other up—look out for one another, care about one another—I felt like our partnership was on the verge of disintegration. Strangers. I didn't know her anymore. I didn't recognize myself either.

The parallels with Cad were not lost on me. The relationship between marksman and spotter were crucial. We depended on each other for survival. We had shared the spotter's scope on numerous

occasions, spying on enemies for days at a time. Cad protected me many times when shit hit the fan.

But in the end that meant nothing, not when he had done what he had done. He was my apprentice, but he was a sick fuck. That ended badly, very badly as it turned out. However, I never dreamt of hurting Shelly, not physically or emotionally or verbally, or anything. The thought of it made me sick to the stomach.

“Shelly, can we talk?” My voice was soft but coarse, the emotion suppressed for fear the floodgates might open into an unfamiliar area where I could never return.

There was no response, just the slow rise and fall of a sleeping body, the mind caught up in some dream.

“Maybe in the morning,” I said to myself, hopeful that after some sleep, emotions would retract and we could work through our problems. I closed my eyes and willed sleep to take me once more. I ran a finger over the scar along my forehead, and images of my past rushed into my mind once more.

TWO_6

Room

“But I just couldn’t bring it back, you know?” Worthy rubbed his hands and then itched his face, his imperfections burning with memories. He reached for his drink, finished the last of it and sat back, looking at Barnaby. “Have you ever been in love?”

Nathan slowly turned to his partner and smirked. “Yes, dear Barnaby, have you?”

Barnaby’s eyes glistened red, rage burning in them as if to ask: How dare you question such a thing. And then he sighed, and the anger subsided, his eyes set in a downward glance. Worthy couldn’t tell if it was guilt or embarrassment.

“Really?” Nathan questioned as if to say that such an act of love was impossible for the man. “Who, and when, and how?”

Barnaby nodded and spoke, slowly at first. “Yes,” he said. “But it was a long time ago. Love is, as I’m sure you can attest, complicated, even for people like me.”

“Christ, yes,” Worthy replied, somewhat relieved that someone on the other side of the table had experienced the same challenges he had. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that most people would have experienced the emotion, in all its glory and all its criticism, on the spectrum that was love. “Kicks you in the balls, doesn’t it? What happened to you?”

Barnaby glanced at Nathan, who sat with an expression of waiting, a large grin perched between his hands that cupped his chin. Barnaby looked away. “Mr. Worthy, I highly doubt that any of this is relevant to our negotiation, and will help neither of us to generate an

offer or for you to decide whether to accept or decline one. It is futile to discuss such matters of the heart.”

“Oh, come on. I’ve shared a lot with both of you today, I’m sure you can share a little bit about yourselves.”

“Yes, Barnaby, do share!” Nathan quipped, his smile exponentially wide over his face.

Upon hearing the excitement in Nathan’s voice, Worthy noted the unsettling features resolve on Barnaby’s face. He glared at Nathan with narrowed eyes before looking down at the table.

Barnaby cleared his throat. “The rules of negotiation do not allow for such a conversation to take place between the negotiator and undersigned.”

“Rules,” Worthy said. “So many rules.”

“Oh yes,” Barnaby replied. “Even for us, there are rules, as I’m sure you can appreciate. Rules we need to follow. Systems that are in place for a reason.”

“Rules?” Nathan said. “I call them guidelines.”

“Well, you would,” Barnaby replied, his stare burning into him. “Regardless.”

“We’ve been a little flexible with the ‘rules’, as you call them, today already. I’m sure a rationed amount of flexibility is quite acceptable. No one is watching, dear Barnaby.”

“Someone is always watching, Nathan,” Barnaby hit back, before closing his eyes. “Fine. It appears I am in a corner, and so I will share some highlights, however nothing more.” He looked at Worthy. “The love I had for another was special, and although I’m sure whoever is in love would say the same, ours truly was. It carried royal bloodlines which would see the joining of two original families. Unfortunately, the emotions we felt were not appreciated by... our parents.”

“How very Romeo and Juliet,” Worthy interjected.

“Yes, quite. Where do you think he got the inspiration?”

Worthy started to interject but Barnaby continued, talking over the question.

“And the actions derived from their under-appreciation led to larger consequences for more than just us. So, long story short, I was given an ultimatum, to which, sadly, I accepted.”

“And?” Worthy pressed, eager to hear the end of the story.

“And I never saw her again.”

Silence chewed the room, giving each of the participants an uneasy feeling, each living their pasts.

Barnaby jumped. “Well, best we continue, gentlemen. This talk of love and connection is certainly not getting us any nearer to our goals.”

“Kind of making me feel ill,” Nathan said, a grimace on his face.

“Which is precisely why we don’t talk about such things.”

Barnaby and Nathan looked across the table, Worthy taking this as his cue to continue his own story, to delve into the darkest tunnels of his most recent existence, to talk through the mayhem of events he still didn’t understand, yet went through just the same.

“Things just got worse,” Worthy said, still lost in his daydream, his reality playing out in his mind. “The little fights turned into big fights. Screaming, yelling, crying, it was this vicious cycle we couldn’t claw our way out of. She spent increasingly more time away from the house, her and Liz, whole nights away. She might as well have been living somewhere else entirely.”

“And what did you do about it?” Nathan enquired.

“I did what any husband would do.”

“You confronted her, told her you were sorry and begged her to come home, all is forgiven?”

“No, not exactly,” Worthy said. “In fact, not at all like that. I enlisted the assistance of one of my military buddies to track her and find out where she’d been going.”

“A little extreme, wouldn’t you say, Mr. Worthy?” Barnaby said.

“Love is extreme,” Worthy replied. “Hate is extreme.”

“Extreme maladies require extreme remedies.”

“Yes,” Worthy exclaimed. “That’s right. Extreme situations require extreme measures.”

“And how did your extreme action work out for you?”

“It was all a bit serendipitous I suppose. I get a call completely out of the blue. I mean, I haven’t spoken to or seen this person in years. In fact, I thought he was dead. He tells me he’s in town for a couple of days and wants to catch up. Anyway, when someone from counter-intelligence is available and willing to help out, you don’t turn it down. It might be something, it might be nothing. I might be a genius or paranoid to the nth degree, but I needed to know. For better or worse.”

“And was Mark able to assist you with your queries?” Barnaby asked.

“Perhaps counsel your relationship woes?” Nathan added.

Worthy paused.

“How did you know it was Mark?”

“I’m sorry?” Barnaby said, cocking his head to one side and raising an eyebrow.

“I never told you his name. So how did you know his name?”

“Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby drew out, “Surely, by now you realize we know.”

Worthy looked down to the table. He felt naked... more so, he felt violated. Like they had cracked open his head and scooped out his life. It had been thrown down on the table unceremoniously and poked and prodded. They were looking for something. It’s just that he didn’t know what.

“Continue,” Nathan implored. “For the love of it, please continue.”

“Did you get the big answer, Mr. Worthy?”

Worthy chewed on his answer and bit his cheek. “No.”

“And why is that?” Barnaby said, inviting Worthy to commence the next stage of his story.

“Because that’s when the van pulled up.”

“Precisely,” Barnaby said, his eyes twinkling, his smile growing.

TWO_7

I woke with a start, eyes wide, gasping for breath. I could feel the bile rising in my throat, the hot substance about to evacuate like an active volcano. I clawed at the sheets to help me get off the mattress and left the bedding in my wake as I ran to the ensuite. The echo of a slamming door reverberated as I heaved, my focus on ensuring the contents made their way into the bowl.

Leached of energy from repeated retching the meager contents of my stomach, I leaned against the wall. My stomach ached, my throat burned, my legs felt like they would buckle under my weight.

I shuffled to the sink, feeling very sorry for myself, and rinsed my mouth out. It did nothing to refresh me. I still felt dirty and tired. I looked up into the mirror to confirm both these facts. A disheveled reflection stared back. My brown hair was growing beyond the military buzz cut, lines of gray emerged over my ears. Bags had developed under my eyes. My horrific reflection brought the previous night's dream back to the surface, as clear and detailed and real as any memory I have.

The nightmare started with me being in position, under a cover of leaves, scanning the horizon. An enemy sniper had been picking off members of my platoon and I was slowly honing in on their position, the muzzle flashes looking like bolts of lightning in the early dusk. Two more shots and two more troops went down, however, the muzzle blast was moving, the fire coming from unique positions each time.

I searched through my scope and continued scanning. The enemy sniper came into view. He was lying perfectly still amongst the rocks, their face pressed firmly against their rifle's scope. I knew suc-

cess often came to the person who fired first. Placing the crosshairs on the enemy's head, I slowly squeezed the trigger.

The gunshot cracked across the sky, followed quickly by shattering glass. I watched as shards rained down in the drizzle that was settling in, revealing a dark void beyond. I continued to scan left and right, however, the only thing I saw was darkness.

That's when I felt it. Warmth. A trickle of blood ran down my head and onto my nose, tracing the edge before balancing on the precipice. I reached up and touched it, smearing it in my fingers as I inspected it, the glossy substance shining like glitter. I continued to feel my face in an effort to find the stream's source, working up to my forehead. The skin was raised, and I gently felt around the hard edges, before dipping a finger into the hole that had blossomed in my head.

That's what woke me up. For when I gasped, my lungs filling with a foreign entity, making it impossible to breathe, shocking my body into waking from the nightmare in my head to the nightmare that was my life.

I emerged from the ensuite, sad, broken. The bed was empty. The sheets on Shelly's side of the bed smoothed out and cold. I was half expecting her to still be asleep. Perhaps the sound of me vomiting had forced her to wake.

I stuck my head out of the bedroom door and listened, hoping the reverberation of the coffee machine would echo up the staircase, giving a hint as to the whereabouts of my wife. Only silence greeted me, cold and sterile.

I padded downstairs. Perhaps she was waiting in the lounge room, enveloped in the same hush, ready for our talk. Maybe she banished Liz to the playroom so she wouldn't have to hear her parents talk about their relationship. Maybe I could bypass the talk and join her instead. The previous night I wanted to talk, to lay everything out on the table to understand where we stood, the status of

our relationship. But now, I wasn't so sure, even though I know it needed to happen. Every idea seems good in the moment.

I respired a sigh of relief when I found the kitchen and lounge empty. I called out. No reply. I walked to the other end of the house and repeated the process, coming up empty. Everywhere I went, the house greeted me with the same response. The emptiness was heavy.

I found my phone, still attached to the charging cable I had set up the night before, and checked the messages. Nothing. I disconnected the cord and leaned on the kitchen counter and flicked through the screens. I found her contact and dialed. The call went straight to voicemail. I clicked off without leaving a message and held the phone to my head, thinking. The last thing I wanted to do was to call her sister again. Dear god, please don't leave that as my only option.

I shambled off to the garage and discovered Shelly's car missing, the garage door closed. I found it amazing the buckling groan of the door didn't wake me from my coma earlier. Perhaps it did.

I gently closed the door, resigning myself to the fact that Shelly was once again missing-in-action, and knowing that Liz was with her. There would be no way she would leave without her, would she? She wouldn't... hurt her... would she?

I raced upstairs, taking in the steps three at a time, every horrible thought crashing down on me. My paranoia was working overtime. Maybe it resulted from the previous night's alcohol intake. Maybe it was my irrational fears coming to the surface. What if Shelly lost the plot, figured her marriage was over and did something unthinkably unreasonable? My mind in a spin, I slipped on the last step and the phone flew out of my hand, crashing into the wall.

I ignored it. I shouted out for Liz, waiting desperately for her reply as I thundered down the hall. I crashed through her bedroom door. A thousand images ran through my mind. My heart raced as I

scanned the room, my eyes flicking from one corner to the next. My heart in my throat, my vision blurry.

The bed against the wall under the window, the covers neatly tucked under the mattress. The wardrobe door, slightly ajar, toys spilling out onto the carpet. In the middle of the floor, a small wooden house. Figurines of a man, woman and children lay scattered about it.

Empty.

I snatched the covers off the bed, then fell to the floor to check under it. I slapped random objects out of the way. Nothing but the dust that accumulates in areas the vacuum cleaner doesn't reach. I jumped up and threw open the closet, in case she was hiding, or worse. I pushed the clothes from side to side, the hangers screeching on the beam. Another dead end.

All the while I was calling her name. The only response was the ringing in my ears, the eerie calm of a vacant house. Maybe I was too paranoid. Maybe my experiences caused me to dwell too much on evil rather than the practical actions of real life. I stood in the middle of the room, trying to control my breathing, steeling myself against the uncertain fears building up within me.

I gently pulled the covers back onto the bed and eased the door shut, like I was escaping the room from a sleeping child. I stood in the hallway with my hands on my hips and considered the next move. The last thing I wanted to do was call Shelly's sister, Melissa. I didn't leave the last conversation with an opening to build on the relationship and felt that any words exchanged between us would carry enough venom to destroy a small country.

A soft buzzing filled my ears, and I zoned in on my phone against the wall. I looked at the screen: an unknown number. I quickly answered it.

"Shelly?"

The other end died, my phone signaling the end of the call. I looked at the screen, trying to figure out what had happened when the device buzzed. An envelope icon appeared, and I pressed the screen to open the email.

I scanned the words, anticipation gripping my throat, before rushing to my bedroom to get dressed. Breakfast would have to wait, life would have to wait until I could get to the bottom of what was happening, and where my wife and daughter were.

Moments a blur. Clothes were thrown on. Running on instinct. Running for my car. Mind preoccupied. Opening the garage door. Heart rate peaked with anticipation. Old engine revving. Impatience at the slow world that can't keep up with my imagination. Door up, foot planted. Tires squealed as the vehicle lurched backwards.

A glance in the rear-view mirror, something that shouldn't be there. Reactions fast, a stomp on the breaks, the car responding likewise. Shuddered to a halt.

I gripped the steering wheel and calmed my breathing, waited for the person to round the rear of the car and knock on the driver's side window. I rolled down the glass.

Doctor Christine Raziel placed her elbows on the door and leaned in the window. "You seem to be in a rush, James."

I stared at my reflection in her sunglasses, my fingers still clasped around the steering wheel. Now? After all this time. The phone calls were one thing, insisting I talk with Doctor Gabriel. But turning up in person? I felt like a caged animal, waiting for the door to open so I could escape. "I *am* in a rush... and you should watch where you are going. I could have killed you, you know."

"I trust you, James." Raziel pushed the sunglasses onto her head. The eyeliner framed her light blue eyes like a photo frame, and I

couldn't help being pulled into them. "And you haven't been returning my calls."

"Because I haven't needed to. Now, I really need to be going."

"James. I've spoken with Doctor Gabriel. You remember him, right?"

"Yes," I sighed. The memory of me sitting in his tiny office hit me, along with his offer to be recruited for some special project. I looked in the rear vision mirror, calculating my escape.

"Are you okay, James? You look nervous. I thought you might have..." Raziel trailed off.

"Might have what?" I asked, meeting her gaze. "And what about Doctor Gabriel?"

For the first time, I noted her confusion. In that instant, a smile broke on her face and she blinked away her uncertainty. "About the special mission he was referring to."

"I'm sorry but I'm not exactly in the military anymore."

I began to ease away.

"There are options, James. There are always options. I want you to remember that."

"Noted. Now I really need to go."

"We can help you. Please don't think you are alone in this. We can look after you but we need you to take the first step."

I sank in my seat and I felt ten times heavier. It was like the downslide of an adrenalin surge. But then it picked up again. A fight within me. Pick me up, let me down. Extremes. The air became thick. I had trouble swallowing.

I rubbed my forehead. "Like I said, I need to go."

Without another word, I hit the button on the remote for the garage door and punched the gas.

TWO_8

I eased my beat-up sedan to a stop in the allotted parking bay, gravel crunching under the tires. After sinking most of my military-grade pay into the mortgage and a nice four-wheel drive for Shelly and Liz, the rusty, red Mazda was all I could afford. I thought I was doing the right thing by allocating the largest portion of my income toward my family. A larger investment in my own vehicle would be wasted while I was on deployment, which is where I spent most of my life. Now, with no income, having a vehicle I owned outright turned out to be fortuitous.

I twisted the key, killing the rumbling engine, allowing the silence to embrace me. I peered out of the windshield at the nature reserve that spanned out in front of me. Rows of trees amongst wild, green grass stretched away into the distance. A cement path wound its way between some trunks before disappearing into the woods. I knew it would emerge some three kilometers later on the other side of the forest, providing an ample track for joggers and cyclists and those that wanted some alone time... or bury a body. That morning, however, the track was empty save a lone pedestrian walking their dog, her ponytail swinging as she powered on into the distance.

Around me the car park was empty, and I wondered how long it would stay that way. I pulled out my phone and reread the message from Mark. It was short, revealing nothing other than a meeting place: the carpark where I now waited. Why the need for this level of secrecy? I didn't know. I was expecting Mark to shed some light. Perhaps he was struggling with living in the real world. Maybe he wanted to relive some of his glory days of secret meetings in secret places.

Either way, it was obvious that Mark had found something. My mind went into overdrive as I thought about my wife in the arms of

another man. What hurt me most though, was Liz calling someone else 'Dad'. The mere whisper of it felt as though a knife was being plunged into my chest. The hurt compounded itself as I pictured their happy little family. The thing I once had, then lost, then tried to rebuild. It felt like it was beyond reach, that there was nothing I could do to stop it. A runaway train with no brakes. I fought back the emotion, swallowed it. As the salty water built up in my eyes, a single tear rolled down my cheek. I let it run, not wanting to wipe away the memory of something I once had.

I held the phone tighter and wondered if I should just message back, informing Mark to forget what he had found out, to forget what he had seen. I would go home, pack my belongings and find a new place to wallow. If I was lucky, I would find some reason to keep living, to start over. I tried to think of that reason, but my mind was still cloudy with Shelly.

I threw the phone onto the passenger seat and swore. No. I needed to know who it was. Who was this man she was running to, that provided her with the love I couldn't give her? I wondered if they had sex, and how often, and where. I hoped Liz was safe, and she felt happy. That's all I ever wanted. A single thought of my little girl being upset infuriated me, and I threw a fist into the seat next to me. Every muscle tightened as I gripped the steering wheel.

It was then a moment of realization came over me. I had made my daughter feel unsafe, scared, and unhappy, the very things I would put my life on the line to prevent. I had become the monster I was trying to stop. I hated myself.

I rocked my head back and closed my eyes. The overthinking, over-analyzing, the paranoia, had taken its toll. I put a hand on either side of my head and squeezed, hoping the pressure would quell a headache that was building. My energy was drained. Being in this limbo state, I wasn't sure how I would receive or react to any news Mark could give me.

The sound of a car approaching made me open my eyes. I looked in the rear vision mirror to see nothing but a passage of trees and the road hundreds of meters beyond that. I shifted my gaze to the passenger wing mirror. That too relayed no additional information. To my mirror now, but a looming shadow interrupted my view as a dark van with blackened windows pulled in next to me.

I tried to see into the side window, however, the mixture of height and window tinting prevented such an activity. The van's engines continued to rumble as the passenger window dropped a crack and a piece of paper edged out. I scoffed. Mark was really going above and beyond with all this spy shit.

I opened the door and got out as the piece of paper wiggled somewhat like bait on a hook. As I reached for the paper it disappeared back through the gap in the window and I stood there with my hands on my hips. I was in no condition to be playing games.

"Jesus Christ, Mark, just give me the damn information."

The response was as unexpected as it was sudden. The van side door slid open and two masked men jumped out. They wore black, like some kind of SWAT team, however, my focus was their weapons. Staring at me were the barrels of two MP5 submachine guns.

My training kicked in and various scenarios ran through my mind. I filtered the options down to a single action, which was to remain still. There was no point in running. At this range, even a blind man could pull the trigger and unload thirty bullets into me. There was no point in fighting. I'd be dead before I could get my hands on one of them. And I didn't know how many I would have to fight. They had outmaneuvered me and caught me unawares. No, my best option was to find out who they were and what they wanted. Besides, if they wanted me dead, they would have done it by now, so I guess they wanted something from me.

As if reading my mind, they stepped to the side and ushered for me to get in the van. I walked hesitantly, watching the barrels, fo-

cusing on their trigger fingers. I wasn't keen on getting shot because someone couldn't hold their wad.

Standing at the door, a heavy hand came down on my shoulder, forcing my knees down onto the van's running board. They placed a black bag over my head.

"Listen, guys, I don't know who the fuck you are or what the fuck you want, but I'm supposed to be meeting with someone. And when I don't show, all hell will break loose on your asses."

A voice close to my ear. "No one's coming for you, Mr. Worthy."

The last thing I remember was a sting on the back of my neck, followed by a numbed thud on the floor of the van. My consciousness blinked off like a light switch.

TWO_9

I roused. My vision was an assortment of unformed shapes and colors, that continued when I opened my eyes, despite the fact the room was pitch black. I could taste blood. Grogginess washed over me and my world fell apart in sideways movements. The black gave way to a low, yellow light. I sensed I was sitting; the chair was hard like steel. I moved a hand to the banging that was erupting in the back of my head.

Somewhere in front of me, there was a soft click followed by a quiet hiss of white noise.

“Good morning, James.”

A metallic male voice filled the space, a layer of synthesizer woven through it, a robotic arc over human tones.

I stretched my neck and tried to right my vision. I didn’t know how long I had been out for and wasn’t sure what day or what time it was.

“Who are you?” I spat out.

“Who we are is not important, however, let’s say we work for a government.”

Having been in the midst of the great military machine for many years, I had gained some insight into the government and some of their departments, but even that scenario was beyond me.

“Which government?”

“That is of no consequence.”

“What government kidnaps people off the street and holds them against their will?”

There was a moment of silence. Probably not a great question. There are a whole bunch of illegitimate governments that kidnap their own people.

“All of them,” came the reply.

I shook my head, and then quickly regretted the decision. My brain felt heavy and too big for my head. I leaned forward and caught my head in my hands.

“Where am I?”

“That information is classified.”

“I have top secret clearance,” I answered without thinking.

“No, no you don’t, James.” There was a pause. “James Worthy, bad conduct discharge. Is this correct?”

I nodded slowly. I looked up into the darkness, preparing to see a wall, a mirror, a set of speakers, something. But my search came up empty. I looked around and the void stretched out in all directions. There was a dull light above me, however, I couldn’t focus in on its source. The same was said for the speakers. I could hear the voice clearly enough, however, I failed to identify exactly where the sound was coming from.

“What do you want with me?”

“That is the important question. We need your help, James.”

I laughed. It wasn’t appropriate but I couldn’t help myself. “Go to hell,” I spat.

“We apologize for the manner in which we detained you, however, it was necessary.”

“Necessary? Detained? Screw you. I’m not an object you pick up at the weekend market.”

“If only that were true,” the voice responded. “You are a special individual with unique skills we require for an important mission.”

“Mission? You sure you got the right guy?”

“Yes.”

“What mission?” I humored.

“We need people killed.”

The response was immediate and even.

“I did plenty of that in my former life in the military. But that was then, and I’m no killer.”

“Yes, you are, James. We have your record right here.”

“Well, I don’t think the police take too kindly to going around killing people.”

“We are not governed by the police. In fact, there is little that governs us. There shall be no recourse for your actions. You will act in our best interests.”

“Best interests? For who? My government? My country? Certainly not me.”

“Allow me to clarify. You will be acting in *our* best interests.”

I shook my head. “Pass. I respectfully decline your wonderful invitation to go do your dirty work. Now get me the fuck out of here.”

“I don’t think you understand. We’ve gone to great lengths to obtain you for the primary purpose of fulfilling this mission. Our request isn’t a question, it’s an order.”

“Yeah, well I’m through taking orders.” I stood and walked forwards. “Screw everyone. I’m out of here.”

I marched into the abyss. There was a faint glow in the distance I used as my point of reference. As I approached it, I noted a single chair under the stream of light. I stood behind it and looked over my shoulder. Darkness stretched out, a small light seemingly floating in the emptiness, somewhere deep.

“What the hell is going on?” I mumbled. I pushed the chair over as I darted to my left, my hands up in front of me preparing for an impact on a wall. However, there was no impact, just more emptiness. It seemed to stretch on and on.

I came across another waterfall of light and another chair, this one upturned on its side. I viewed it warily, approaching with the stealth of my training like the chair was a wild animal. I touched it slowly, hoping mercifully that it was some kind of illusion. I gently

maneuvered the chair, so it was upside down, the chair legs sticking into the air.

I edged backwards into the hollowness, monitoring the chair until the black consumed me. Until the light was but a speck on the horizon. My senses picked up something behind me and I stopped. I turned to see the same upside-down chair I'd left less than a minute ago.

"What the hell is going on here?" I screamed into the blackness.

"That's classified." The response came swiftly.

"Fuck your classification," I roared, spinning in the soft luminance, my fists clenched. "And get me the hell out of here!"

"Please take a seat, James."

"I said get me out of here!"

Silence.

"Please take a seat, James."

I reluctantly grabbed the chair and slammed it down on the ground, the sound of metal on concrete echoing around me. I sat down in the chair and stared into the dark. "Now what?" I asked.

An image materialized a few meters in front of me, like a television that had just been switched on. It showed a photo of a man wearing a turban. A length of fabric hung down from the headwear and wrapped across his face, tucking into the collar of his brown vest. I could make out some disfigured skin on the side of his face, possibly a burn, just above from where the white cloth crossed the person's face.

A faint trace of recognition nagged at me.

"This person's name is Alshshabh. Translation: The Ghost."

THREE_0

The realization hit me like a train.

“The Ghost?! Is this some kind of joke?” There was no reply, only silence. “Last I heard The Ghost was one of the most wanted people in the world. If you want this guy taken care of, I’m sure there are a dozen well-trained clandestine agencies ready to put a bullet in him. What on earth do you want me for?”

“We don’t need this person killed, James. We need him protected.”

Protected? So, they can’t have been my government, unless different hands in the bureaucracy aren’t talking or aligned with each other. Or it was a different government. This confused me as the voice carried no hints of an accent. Although, if they were willing to pull the stunt, they did to get me in that room in the first place, they could do so much more. All of this begged the one question.

“So, if you guys want The Ghost protected, who do you want to be killed?”

“James, The Ghost plays a vital part in a larger picture. His immediate survival is paramount to the success of that mission. As you would know, there are other governments, agencies, global and local political groups and other private and public entities that want The Ghost eliminated. We can’t let that happen. You can’t let that happen.”

I stood up and shook my head. “No, no, no. Listen, whoever you are, I’m sure you’ve got teams of people who could pull this off.”

“We don’t need a grunt who can knock down doors or plant IEDs, James. The people who wish to eliminate The Ghost will do so from a distance. We need someone who has the skill and expertise to

counter this in kind. This is you. You have the skills to accomplish such a task.”

“Let me get this straight. You want me to kill, most likely, allied soldiers, to protect someone who has killed dozens of innocent people?”

There was silence.

“It is not as it seems. And yes, for the record, your targets are allied personnel. Think of what your military did to you, James. They ordered you to kill and then they dismissed you out at first opportunity. Thirteen years gone and no future. Bad Conduct Discharge. There is no point in protecting them, they are the ones that kill innocent people every day, home and abroad.”

I threw my hands in the air. “Oh, spare me your propaganda. I’m not interested in doing this.”

“What about for money? Lots of money?”

I stood and stormed off into the distance, chewing over the offer as I walked. Tempting was a word that came to mind, the illustrious lure of war and cash. But those days were behind me. I was more than that, more than they thought I was.

I figured I would keep walking until I found an extremity of the room, regardless of how long it would take. The room couldn’t go on forever. Like everything in life, there had to be boundaries, there had to be limitations in the system. Nothingness would lead to a wall. The wall would lead to a door. The door would lead to an escape. There had to be an end somewhere, and I was determined to locate it.

“James, your attempts to abscond are futile.” The voice entered my ears like there was a floating speaker right above my head that followed my every move.

The resonance of the announcement diminished into silence.

“We didn’t want to have to do this, James, but it appears you are giving us little choice in the matter.”

Another screen appeared in front of me and went white, before displaying an image that made me stop dead in my tracks. My chest felt tight as I took in the picture, and I stopped breathing.

The image was of Shelly and Liz, both bound and gagged, sitting on a metal frame bed in a nondescript room. I reached out to them.

“No,” I exhaled. “No!” I screamed. “Let them go, now!”

Another image flashed on the screen, the same as before.

“This person’s name is Alshshabh, translation: The Ghost. We need him protected. Kill those that wish to kill him and we will release your family.”

I moved towards the screen, but it floated away, maintaining its distance. I turned to march off in the other direction, but the screen reappeared in my vision.

“This person’s name is Alshshabh, translation: The Ghost. We need him protected.”

“No!” I roared and veered off into the darkness.

This continued. Every direction I took was met with either an image of my bound family or the man I needed to protect in order for my family to be released. Couldn’t ignore it. Wouldn’t let me forget it. It was hammered down on me and there was nothing I could do. Helpless. Hopeless.

Finally, after being bombarded with imagery, in a patch of blackness, I fell to the floor exhausted. The image of my little girl restrained killed me, it angered me. It drove a knife right into my heart and turned it, making me feel the full force of the blade. And all the while, the voice kept talking until I thought my brain was going to explode.

“Fine,” I said softly, and the voice stopped.

I brought my head up. The screen evaporated into the nothingness, the outline dissolving into the gloom. The above fluorescent tubes cracked as its light grew in intensity, streaming down over me. I turned my head away and shielded my eyes, groggily getting to my

feet. When I became accustomed to the light, I took in my new surroundings.

I stood in the center of the small, empty room, which was only a few meters across. I stared at the wall where only a few moments ago, I had ventured every which way into the void and found nothing but more emptiness. How could this be? I moved cautiously to the wall, half expecting it to disappear, and placed my hand on its cool, smooth surface. I moved my hand across the wall, walking the perimeter of the room.

I returned to my starting position. "What the hell is going on?" I muttered to myself, however hoping to get an answer to the question.

There was no reply.

I turned and stopped short. In the middle of the room was a table, materializing out of nowhere, and adorned with various weapons and equipment. The centerpiece was a Barrett M107, a fifty caliber, semi-automatic sniper rifle. When you spend enough time with your weapon, you get to know it on sight, even amongst others of the same make and model. I was sure it was mine.

I approached the table cautiously. "Where the hell did you get that?"

A voice cracked in from overhead. "We've taken the liberty of pre-selecting some of your gear. We trust this is satisfactory."

I advanced and picked up the rifle, feeling its weight in my hands. The more I held it the more I felt at peace, the overwhelming feeling of belonging. I rested the bipod assembly on the table and inspected the chamber. I picked it up to my shoulder, an automatic extension to my body.

"Alright," I declared, pointing the firearm at each of the four walls.

"But if you touch one hair on my family's heads, I'll come for you, and you won't like what I do to you."

There was no response.

THREE_1

Room

Nathan and Barnaby looked at Worthy with blank stares, the soft ticking of the grandfather clock once again taking center stage in the silence. Worthy stared back, switching his gaze between the two.

“What?” Worthy enquired. He shifted in his seat, felt their gaze carrying weight like they were interrogating his character.

The two men on the other side of the table exchanged glances, once again exchanging unspoken words before turning their attention back to Worthy.

Barnaby ran a hand over the smooth surface in front of him, a look of disappointment running rampant over his features. “Do you know what the hero syndrome is?”

Worthy crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “No. Why?”

“We will come back to that,” replied Barnaby.

“Most definitely come back to that,” added Nathan. “Not to worry though, Mr. Worthy, it’s not necessarily a bad thing, considering what we require of you.”

“Right,” replied Worthy. “And what is it you require of me? You know we really haven’t gotten into that detail.”

“Oh, we’ll get to that,” Barnaby said. “Without the proper context and understanding, our negotiation and the subsequent offer would be worthless.”

Worthy raised an objection to the delay but was cut off by Nathan.

“Why do you think people do things?”

"I'm not sure I understand, I mean, I'm not a psychologist or psychiatrist or whatever."

"No, you're not," Nathan said.

"Definitely not," added Barnaby.

"However, humor us, Mr. Worthy." Nathan scratched his nose. "What motivates someone to do something?"

"I guess," Worthy said, looking down at the highly polished table as if the reflection of the room somehow held the answer, "I guess whatever decision people make, somehow makes them feel better."

"Precisely," Barnaby congratulated. "At least, to an extent."

"Consider a person who remains in an abusive relationship," offered Nathan. "What is their motivation to stay?"

Worthy thought about it. "Fear."

"Yes, fear of pain, physically or mentally, real or perceived, past or future," said Barnaby. "Pain is an amazing motivator. People change when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change."

Nathan leaned forward. "Tony Robbins," he whispered with a wink.

"Oh my, Tony Robbins," said Barnaby, throwing his head back in recollection. "I almost forgot about Mr. Robbins."

"How on earth could you forget Mr. Robbins?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just mesmerized by his flashy smile I forgot he signed that damn contract."

"Ah, Mr. Robbins," exhaled Nathan. "Keep encouraging the masses!"

"He does have quite a following," said Barnaby.

"And growing," replied Nathan.

Worthy interrupted. "Tony Robbins works for your company?"

Exchanged glances.

"Well, of sorts," Barnaby said.

"Like, consulting to management or something?"

“Something like that,” said Nathan.

Worthy looked between Barnaby and Nathan. “So, which one of you does he work for?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Barnaby. He looked quizzically at Worthy. “Unless of course, it does, Mr. Worthy. I’m happy to make you an offer of having as much one-on-one time with Mr. Robbins as you like for the rest of your natural life.” He smiled.

“Is that an official offer?” queried Nathan to his partner.

“Most definitely,” said Barnaby, running his hands along his lapels.

“Is that in the rules?”

“My dear Nathan, it is most definitely in the rules. This is a negotiation, after all.” Barnaby turned to Worthy. “What do you say, Mr. Worthy?”

Worthy held up his hands. “I’m sorry, I’m not interested in that.”

“Excellent,” said Nathan. “I guess I shall give my counter-offer. How about we establish a team of experts and celebrities to have at your disposal? You can utilize their knowledge, expertise, contacts, etcetera, at any time, for any needs.”

“You guys have celebrities working for you as well?”

“We have many contacts in every industry and field of excellence,” Barnaby stated matter-of-factly.

“Wait a minute. I thought you guys made offers based on revenge.”

“We make offers as we see fit,” said Barnaby. “But you have to start somewhere. People have different motivators, different reasons for making their decision.”

“And I’m sure you noted our previous offers. They are the types of offers you will be receiving,” Nathan added.

Worthy brushed his pants with the back of his hand. “Noted, however, I’m still not interested.”

“Very good, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby said. “Let us continue. You didn’t accept those offers because they did not extend you a perceived level of pleasure. And for the nature of these negotiations, you will be very glad to hear, we are unable to use pain as a motivator for decision making.”

Worthy’s eyes narrowed.

Barnaby continued. “Now, when you were being held in the dark room, you said you succumbed to their request because of an implied threat.”

Worthy shifted uneasily in his seat and coughed. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Why do you do that?” Nathan said.

“Do what?” Worthy countered.

“Lie. Pretend. Tell us things you think we want to hear. Don’t get me wrong. All of those things have a place, but not here, not with us.”

“We told you when you arrived,” Barnaby said, “That you don’t need to hide anything, that we know everything.”

“Yes,” Worthy said, taking a large breath and falling back in his chair. “I remember.”

“Then why continue to make up these stories? Do you expect our sympathy? Do you want us to empathize as to why you made the decision you did?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“What does it matter? Why do you want to know?”

“Because we want you to say it,” Nathan said evenly, a touch of scorn in his tone.

“Now,” Barnaby said, raising his voice, “tell us why.”

“I told you guys—.”

“Why?”

“I—.”

“Why!” Barnaby demanded.

Worthy stood up, his chair once again careening out from under him, scraping against the floor. “Because I’m ashamed,” he boomed. “Because when they wanted me to kill someone I said ‘yes’. Because I didn’t need any other motivator than to get a weapon in my hands and a sanctioned target to destroy.” Worthy’s last word echoed around the space. Destroy.

Then silence. The truth floated around them; the secret released from its stronghold. Worthy burned with shame. He had placed his career over his family again, and he felt like the entire world knew it.

“So, there was no threat against your family?” Nathan asked.

“No!” Worthy fired back defiantly; the word pushed through clenched teeth.

“So, it was a decision made to move you closer to pleasure than to avoid pain?” Barnaby offered.

Worthy placed both hands on the table and stared at his reflection. He was breathing hard like he had been running a marathon. He could feel himself coming down from the adrenaline that had been gushing through him.

“Yes,” he said, almost in a whisper.

Barnaby turned to Nathan. “Well, I do believe we are finally getting somewhere.”

“Absolutely, Barnaby. We are absolutely getting to the origin of his actions.”

“You two are sick bastards,” Worthy managed as he reset his side of the table and seated himself.

“Who is sicker, Mr. Worthy? The person telling lies to cover up their actions, or the people uncovering the truth?” Barnaby swapped stares with Worthy, who was struggling to keep up mentally and physically with the conversation. “When you realize we are here to help you, things will get a lot easier for you.”

“And when you sign my contract,” Nathan said, “You’ll feel on top of the world.”

Worthy stared at both stacks of papers, still in front of him, each waiting for his signature. At the moment, he had no incentive to sign either one, however, his resolve was fading the longer this so-called negotiation continued, the more he told his story. He could feel himself being broken down, the walls he built around himself, around his soul, slowly being torn down, brick by brick. He could feel his level of caring about all this diminishing.

He picked up the pen Nathan had given him and moved the contract into position. He poised the pen above the signature line when Barnaby interjected.

“Now Mr. Worthy, just to be clear in what you are about to do. According to the rules of negotiation, you will only be entitled to the last fully declared offer by Nathan.”

Worthy sighed. “I don’t care anymore.”

“Well, it seems that is that,” Nathan said, and he rubbed his hands together in celebration.

Barnaby looked at the man sitting opposite, taking in every minute feature. “Now Mr. Worthy, I think it would be quite a shame if these negotiations were to conclude at such an early marker.”

Nathan looked over at his partner and spoke in a hushed voice. “Barnaby, what are you doing?”

“You want me to sign your contract? Fine.” Worthy pushed Nathan’s contract out of the way to make room for the other, much to the disdain of Nathan. Worthy once again positioned his pen, ready to make his mark.

“What I meant,” said Barnaby, “is that you have more to tell, more story to share.”

Worthy put the pen down on the polished surface and pushed himself away from the table. He pointed to the side of his face. “You want to know about this?”

Barnaby leaned forward. “We know about that. We just want you to say it. We want you to relive it.”

“Are you sure? Because some of what happened I can’t quite explain. And you’ve made it quite clear you want me to call it as I see it.”

Barnaby motioned for Worthy to continue.

“So be it,” Worthy said, motioning for a drink.

“Please help yourself,” Barnaby said.

Worthy moved to the drinks cart and began the process of pouring drinks. “So, where were we?”

“I believe you were in a room having just accepted your role to protect The Ghost,” Nathan presented.

“Yes,” Worthy said, showing the bottle to the two suited men, silently asking if they wanted a drink. Both men nodded and Worthy made their drinks, placing the glasses on the table. He clinked his glass on theirs and resumed his seat without passing on the drinks.

Barnaby and Nathan looked at each other, silently questioning the actions.

“That’s okay, Mr. Worthy, I’ll get them,” Nathan said, the sarcasm rich in his words.

Barnaby smiled and gave a nod of approval. “I think you are finally understanding what we are trying to do here.”

“The room?” Worthy said, ignoring the other two comments. “Let’s fast forward to the helicopter.”

“What? No argument you are going to drop us into?” Nathan queried, sliding a glass over to Barnaby.

Worthy scoffed.

“I would have,” Worthy said. “However, there was no one else there. Just me, my weapons, and a doorway to step through.”

THREE_2

I woke to the sudden drop of the helicopter and whisper of the rotor blades. My last memories were fuzzy, and I had no recollection of how I found my way onto the transport. I shook my head to clear the grogginess and ran a gloved hand over the restraints. I looked down and with the dim interior lights, could tell I was wearing a standard desert-style camouflage uniform many nations employ. I checked my sleeves and chest for some kind of insignia, some kind of patch that would give away my captor's allegiance, however, I came up empty. I felt the snug fitting helmet on my head and attached to that, a device I mused was night vision or a thermal imaging device.

For the second time, I had no idea how long I was out for, or how they did it without leaving a trace in my memory bank. I remembered being in the room, overlooking the weapons laid out on the table. On instruction, I had stepped through a doorway that had appeared in the wall opposite. The next thing I knew, I was kitted up, and seemingly on my way to the objective.

When I pulled back my left sleeve, I found my watch on my wrist, purposefully turned inwards. The last thing you want to do is give away your position because your stupid watch reflected some light. The illuminated hands of the timepiece confirmed the time, a little after one-thirty.

I looked out the cabin windows and into the inky blackness, checking both sides of the ride for accompanying aircraft. However, we were flanked by nothing more than the sky and a million stars belonging to foreign nameless constellations. Shelly. The night we met. A billion stars. A billion futures. And I was stuck with that one.

“Good morning, James.” The voice crackled clearly through my earpiece. The same voice that communicated with me in the room. Male, deep, metal, robot.

I rubbed my head as my thoughts became clearer. “You bastards have some way of getting a person from A to B, that’s for damn sure.”

“We apologize once again for our delivery methods, James, however necessary. Once you had agreed we couldn’t take any chances. This mission is too important to the success of the bigger picture.”

I nodded. “Let’s just make this quick so I can get paid.”

There was a silence.

Eventually, “Right you are, James.”

I looked up at the rope anchored to a point in the middle of the cabin roof. It hung down and looped into a bag on the floor. This would be my deployment method, as I would have expected. There was no chance a military helicopter would land in a war zone, let alone a foreign government helicopter with no fire support.

I looked over to the sniper rifle, my backup rifle, and backpack secured to some racks on the opposite side of the cabin, next to what looked like a flat screen television. It appeared I was on a machine that blurred the lines between military and luxury. I felt good as if the uniform, weapons, and helicopter ride filled the gap in me in a way that my family never could. I felt bad about that. It was a balance I could never get right, something too hard for me to juggle.

Guilt swept through me. Was I trading my family for my passion? I knew I could never trade my daughter for anything. I would die for her, that was without question. But I needed it, I needed to feel whole again, and that mission did that for me.

I promised myself this was the last hurrah, that when I got back home, I would settle things. I would tell Shelly it was all over and attempt to get a fifty-fifty arrangement to see Liz. I would walk away from my marriage hoping happiness somehow returned to their lives, that by removing myself from the equation, they could carry on with-

out all the fighting and negativity the relationship brought on the household.

I shook the distracting thoughts from my mind. Thinking about things like that did me no good and took my attention away from the task at hand. Step one, survive the mission. Step two, survive the separation. Step three, just survive.

“So, I guess you guys should tell me where the hell we’re going?”

“Not hell,” the voice came back. “But close.”

I waited for a chuckle or some other sign regarding the previous comment. None came.

The flat screen burst to life with a soft, stilted glow, and quickly faded to black. On it, the white schematic of buildings appeared, zooming out to display an entire village and surrounding environment that once again set off alarm bells.

“We trust you are familiar with this location, James.”

I took in every inch of the screen. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” The town of Bdama: the two crescent mountains, rock formations, and building layout were burned into my memory from my mission with Cad. That ill-fated journey that resulted in me being discharged, forever upending my life.

“We don’t joke, James.”

An outline of a helicopter appeared at the bottom of the screen as the voice continued.

“Intelligence received suggests a single sniper team has moved into position with the express orders to terminate The Ghost. Your mission is to locate and expire that team.”

A red ‘X’ appeared halfway up the screen.

“You will be dropped at this location. You will need to make your way by foot to objective A.”

On the screen, a red line etched forward from the X to the north-eastern corner of the area, where a red ‘A’ appeared.

“We know The Ghost will arrive at the town from the North at dusk today. You will have twenty-four hours to accomplish your mission and return to the rally point for immediate evacuation. Failure is not an option.”

Failure never was.

“What if I’m captured?” I asked, giving the hypothetical to test the respondent. I had no intention of being captured by anyone, let alone The Ghost. Chances are I would end up the product of a video, my skull bashed in or head removed from my shoulders. Alternatively, if the allies captured me, I would spend a good portion of the rest of my life in detention, *wishing* I’d been captured by The Ghost. Either way, neither option would end well for me, which led to only one likely outcome: complete the mission.

There was no response, and I tapped my earpiece.

“Hello? What if I fall and break my leg? What if I’m taken in by a family of goat herders? What if the military wants to make me a General?”

“Failure to comply with any of these terms renders the entire deal obsolete.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I trailed off as the screen returned to its standby status, and I returned his gaze to the window. Somewhere else in the world, people were waking, going to work, tucking their kids into bed as they kissed their foreheads, telling them everything will be okay. Meanwhile, I was about to go to war with a country I called my own, to protect an enemy they would pay handsomely to eliminate.

“James, we are near the rally point. Remember, you have twenty-four hours to complete the mission and return to this location. We have knowledge The Ghost is en route to the objective. We will not be in radio contact with you and you will have no way to contact us.”

“Just make sure you guys aren’t late. And if you stiff me, I’m going to come looking for you. And believe me, some fancy room isn’t going to stop me from ripping your throat out.”

“Very good, James. We have every intention of keeping our end of the bargain.”

The helicopter came to a sudden stop and steadily hovered meters off the ground. The downdraft kicked about sand and rocks. I unbuckled myself and retrieved my bag, pulling it on and adjusting the weight. I pulled the handle on the cabin door and it slid open effortlessly. A gentle stream of draft from the blades entered the space. I pulled the rope bag to the door and pushed it over the side, the rope uncoiling as it fell, the bag hitting the ground hard. I slung my sniper rifle over one shoulder and my assault rifle over the other.

“Good luck, James,” the voice said.

I stood at the door and grabbed the rope. “I don’t believe in luck.”

As I fast-roped to the ground, my earpiece crackling to silence, giving way to the whiz of the rope sliding between my gloves and boots. I landed in a patch of hard sand on the edge of a gully encircled by rocks. When I hit the earth, I quickly made my way to the cover of a rocky outcrop where I squatted and adjusted the thermal imaging equipment. Instead of the usual night vision green wash, the world became monotone, various shades of gray to denote entombed heat.

I scanned the immediate area, my senses heightened, looking for the bright-white signature of body heat. Having little intelligence of the area, a warm body could represent anything from local insurgents to coalition forces. Either way, they were the enemy, and I needed to avoid them at all costs if I stood any chance of mission success. Any identification could just be innocent tribes’ people, collateral damage in the war between nations. They were the forgotten people in a world of IEDs and religious hysteria. Whatever the case, I’d prefer to not have to decide to kill anyone outside the mission parameters.

The helicopter peeled away, the rope appearing to retract of its own accord. Using my new eyes, I took in the machine for the first time. It surprised me to note it carried no heat signature at all, some stealth technology that made it invisible amongst the gray background of the night.

I pulled up the eyepiece and viewed the sleek, black helicopter with my own eyes. The cockpit windows were blacked out and from what I could see, had no running or navigation lights. It had no insignia of any kind, defying further attempts to identify allegiance. For the first time, I doubted my decision to undertake the mission.

The tables had turned, my reality turned upside down and inside out. Right and wrong had gone out the window the moment I accepted the mission. It was now me versus anything that stood in the way of a windfall payday. The real enemy was my morals and ethics, which I hoped I could hold at bay, at least until I pulled the trigger.

Who was once a potential target, was now under my protection. Who was once my brothers-in-arms, were now my enemy. I was trading lives for enough money so I would never have to worry about finances again, that my family, or what used to be my family, would be secure for the rest of their existence.

I hoped one day I could make amends for the actions I was about to undertake.

I wasn't killing for my government or for pleasure.

I was killing for money.

Or so I thought.

THREE_3

My priority was to find or make cover before the sun rose, because when the Lord's light bathed the earth if you weren't in the shadows, you might as well put a gun in your mouth and pull the trigger. I knew the people of this country were adept at surviving in these conditions and more than proficient at mountain warfare, a hell of a lot more than me, anyway. Besides, I was one person against a country that didn't want me there, and coalition forces that were equipped and well trained. I was outnumbered and outgunned.

The only thing I had going in my favor was the intelligence. However, I had yet to confirm it. I had spent many a mission over the years getting screwed by what the powers at be believed to be reliable intelligence. The IEDs are in the truck, and they weren't. The insurgents are in the building, and they weren't. That road is in a safe zone, and it wasn't. In the end, agility and resilience became the necessary skills to survive out there.

I had broken the information I received into three key items. One, the environment. They promised me ample cover in which to take up position. As I skirted the lip of the mountain just before sunrise, I was surprised by the dense forest laid out before me. Thick trees and lush bushes were packed across the mountainside and down towards the town. I crouched behind some trees to retrieve my optics to get a more up close and personal viewing of what was in front of me.

The cold, gray scene contained monstrous conifers that grew tightly against other smaller trees, matting out the sky. It reminded me of standing in an alleyway in the city, steel, and glass foliage blocking pristine views of the stratosphere. The ground was littered

with twigs, sticks, and leaves; plenty of opportunities to give my position away to anyone who was paying attention.

I remembered lying in a cave on the sister mountain and looking over here, trying to figure out how the world could be so cruel. The stupid bullshit about borders and international policy causing me to endure day upon day of hell whilst the damn Garden of Eden lay just a few more clicks to the north. The small amount of concern I felt for my targets quickly gave way to the fact I needed to put a bullet in them. That one thought yanked me back to the present like opening the ripcord on a free fall.

I scoped out some fallen trees a hundred meters or so down the slope and south of my position, closer to the road exiting town. From my current location, it seemed to be the best bet to get an all-encompassing view of the town and potential allied forces that might occupy the mountain opposite. This takes me to intelligence point two, the enemy.

I scanned the area for any signs of movement. Nothing. I listened intently, interrogating the audible landscape for any signs of life. A cracking of twigs, a brushing of shrubbery, a crunching of dry leaves. No signs of life, save for a soft flutter of wings above me. I looked up to find the silhouette of an eagle, seemingly familiar, soar through the gray morning.

I crouched through the area, using as much cover as possible to conceal myself from any eyes. It was a slow process and the sun's yellow glow had covered the town when I reached my destination. As the shadows gave way to the morning, the leaves reflected the sun's initial rays, sparkling in the clear light. Green and brown washed away the monotone. Chirps from local bird life grew louder. The air, so clean and fresh, it hurt my lungs to breathe.

I created my hide, which was a straightforward task given the amount of ready materials in the vicinity. I set up my weapon through a gap between two fallen trunks, and in such a way I could

utilize my binoculars to view the village with little movement or effort. To the untrained eye, I was indistinguishable from my environment.

The view through my optics was as plain and rugged as my environment was lush and comforting. The mountain opposite was full of rock, dirt and isolated hardy plants, all of which attacked by the early morning sunlight. I commenced the search for the enemy and immediately found the robust structure where I spent three days waiting for the Ghost to arrive. Three days lying in a cave next to someone I despised.

I couldn't remember how I left it and didn't know if anyone was in there. I exchanged my binoculars for the high-powered optics on my rifle. If the enemy was present, they remained hidden. I turned on the thermal imaging device attached to the far end of the scope. Specks of white confirmed my suspicion, that some hot-blooded thing was hiding behind the camouflage. But despite all that, a feeling grew inside me and I couldn't let it pass. They were in there, they just had to be. It was a weird sensation, akin to that of *déjà vu*, or when you meet someone and are damn sure you've met them somewhere else before, but you can't place their features. I mentally checked number two off my list.

I turned my attention to the village, to see if the ultimate piece had moved into position. Item number three, the target. Through my binoculars, I saw a few old vehicles nestled between buildings, a van, and a utility. The townspeople went about their lives, tending to what little livestock or crops they had. A small group of children were kicking a dusty soccer ball against a wall of a house. A woman was carrying a jug of water, perched on her hip like a child, as she navigated her return to a home. It all seemed disgustingly familiar. It would have been many months since I had returned and yet it felt like I was there yesterday.

It was a sad existence, yet existence nonetheless. There were many people I saw on previous missions that were buried in unmarked graves or still sitting in burned-out vehicles that had come under fire or obliterated back into the building blocks of life.

Despite the life taking place before me, the only thing I was interested in was to get a visual of the person I was there to protect, to make sure they didn't die that day. From my preliminary investigation of scanning the windows in the houses to determine proof of life, I concluded The Ghost had not yet arrived.

I shifted my gaze to the road and followed it between the crescent mountains and to the horizon. Already, the shimmer of the heat waves lifted into the air, as if the earth was cooking. However, my environment had the opposite reaction to the heat, injecting a slight breeze that slowly shifted the branches atop their strong pillars.

Time seemed to flit by, hours turned into minutes as I proceeded with my actions. When the sun began its downward arc, a few things became very apparent.

One. I knew my targets' location.

Two. There was only one sniper team I had to contend with.

Three. The Ghost was about to arrive.

And four.

A foot had just come down beside me, crunching leaves and causing me to hold my breath.

THREE _4

Room

Barnaby clapped his hands together, breaking the grandfather clock's incessant ticking. He sat bolt upright in his chair, elbows on the edge of the table, fingers clasped together supporting his chin. An expectant look projected across the table.

"Do you have any regrets, Mr. Worthy?"

It wasn't a question Worthy was expecting, and it broke his concentration. His story fell from his mind like trying to lift a finished jigsaw puzzle by the edges. He looked on blankly, trying to repeat the question in his mind so he could make sense of it, but the words were jumbled and made no more sense to him than the Russian alphabet.

"I... I don't understand the question."

"Regrets, Mr. Worthy. You know, sadness or disappointment over something one has done," Nathan probed, his tone containing an element of cutting sarcasm.

Worthy turned his attention to Nathan. "Thank you, Nathan. I know what a regret is."

"You know what it means, yet you fail to answer the question."

"Gentlemen," Barnaby interjected, "Please. Are we not men having a proper conversation? Must we fall to the lowest common denominator of our kind and squabble over such things? We are not here to argue, we are here to—"

"I know why we are here," Worthy said, breaking off Barnaby. "You have made it abundantly clear. What I don't know is why you continue to disrupt my thinking with seemingly random questions."

"Oh, I assure you, Mr. Worthy, they are not random."

“Not random at all,” Nathan backed up. “They are purposeful.”

“Purposeful to what?” Worthy asked, having no more clear understanding of the intent than before.

“I think you mean ‘purposeful to whom,’ Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby replied.

“Whom? Is there someone else listening to this conversation? Are we being recorded? If that’s the case I just want to say that I’ve made up the entire story.”

Barnaby held up his hands. “Relax, Mr. Worthy. Whilst there is always someone listening, we told you at the start this isn’t some set up to record a confession from you, although we do ask you treat this like a confessional.”

“Like church?”

Barnaby waved his hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, if you wish. A church is nothing more than a brick and mortar representation of a series of beliefs. It is no more divine than this table. A confession is about admitting guilt, to take ownership of actions. One could do this anywhere, at any time, with the understanding that someone is listening.”

“Like a priest in a stall?”

“Exactly, or some other higher power. And remember someone is always listening, always willing to hear about your crimes, whether they be indiscriminate thoughts or murder.”

“But regret and guilt are two different things.”

Barnaby turned to Nathan. “Well, we are certainly progressing in the right direction.”

“Very much so, dear Barnaby.”

Barnaby turned back around. “Precisely, Mr. Worthy, you understand exactly. One must be able to separate guilt and regret. One can have guilt without regret and vice versa.”

Worthy looked down at the folder in front of him. “Wouldn’t that make me some kind of monster? To have done terrible things and not feel ashamed of my actions?”

“Tell me, Mr. Worthy, have you killed people in combat?”

Worthy slanted his head. “You know I have.”

“Yes, I know you have. Did you feel regret over their deaths?”

“No,” Worthy said forthrightly.

“Why not?”

“Because I was ordered to kill them.”

Nathan said, “If you were ordered to put a gun to the side of your head and pull the trigger, would you?”

Worthy shook his head. “Of course not.”

“Then what’s the difference?”

“Because if I didn’t kill them, they would have killed many others.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

Nathan turned to Barnaby, who wore an approving smile.

“Well played,” Barnaby said, “Excellent tête-à-tête.”

Nathan nodded.

“Very good,” Barnaby continued the conversation. “You have no guilt, and therefore no regret because you believed in your actions. Yes, your country ordered you to do it, however, you complied with the orders because of your beliefs, and your beliefs alone. I call this character, Mr. Worthy. So, no, I do not believe you are a monster.”

While Worthy appreciated the judgment, he wasn’t entirely sure he agreed with the assessment. “You asked if I had any regrets.”

Both men nodded.

“Yes,” Worthy continued. “I have regrets.”

“Are you saying,” Nathan said, “that there are moments in your life, that if you had your time again, you would do differently?”

Worthy glanced down at the folder again. “Yes,” he said flatly.

Barnaby could feel the excitement emanating from Nathan, and he reached over and placed a hand on his arm.

“Easy, dear Nathan. Let’s not jump the gate. We shall ease into this one.”

“Certainly,” Nathan said, clapping his hands together in a boom that echoed around the room. He opened his mouth to speak however stopped when Barnaby held up a hand.

“And according to the rules of the negotiation, I believe it is my turn to make an offer.”

Nathan hung his head as he thought back to the last round of negotiation where Worthy was all but ready to sign his contract. “Well, surely you talking Mr. Worthy out of signing my contract counters this and your offer should transfer to me.”

“Whilst I agree with you that such an act requires such a consequence, I think you’ll find I talked Mr. Worthy out of signing *my* contract, and therefore your accusation is null-in-void.”

Nathan relinquished and waved his hand towards Barnaby. “You are correct once again, Barnaby. Please continue.”

Barnaby nodded and looked at Worthy. “My deepest apologies for the minor interlude. As you know by now, the process and rules of negotiation are absolute in their entirety and must be followed to the letter. There is no tangent to run off, no arbitration to be held. The decision is the decision, and it is up to us to ensure the verdict is made within the guidelines of the process.”

Worthy just stared at him. “I’m ex-military. Everything is process and procedure.” *Unless you wanted to kill a fellow soldier*, he thought. *Then you’re on your own with that one.*

“Now, where were we?”

“All this talk about wants, needs and desires, it’s starting to do my head in. The question has been constant in my mind since you first mentioned it. What I want. Who I want.”

“Oh, it has driven many a person crazy, Mr. Worthy.”

“Miss Spears for one,” Nathan interjected. “Mr. West, another.”

“Yes,” Barnaby countered, a look of disdain on his face. “But we don’t like talking about them.” His features brightened. “What counts is what *you* want, Mr. Worthy.”

“Perhaps best you don’t think about it,” Nathan added.

“Easy thing to say,” Worthy began. “But I need to think about it, how else will I know what to accept and when to sign?”

“Trust us,” Barnaby said with a warm smile, “you will know.”

“That’s very vague,” Worthy retorted, a hollowness in this voice.

“So is the universe,” said Nathan, “So is religion. So is life! People have spent their lives trying to discover the secret of existence, the one thing that will give them fulfilment, joy and happiness. I’ll let you in on a secret, Mr. Worthy. There is no ‘one thing’. There is no magic potion. All that matters is what you do at the very next moment.”

“What about Gandhi? Surely, he found the secret.”

Barnaby and Nathan both laughed. “Well,” said Barnaby. “We aren’t going to talk about him either. He may have the knowledge, but he certainly didn’t find it.”

“That was what he signed on for? Keys to happiness?”

“Everyone has the pressure point, Mr. Worthy, as do you, as we will find,” Nathan said.

“Perhaps we already have,” Barnaby added absentmindedly.

Worthy frowned and tilted his head as he looked at Barnaby’s hands.

Barnaby was spinning the origami in his hands, the paper goat tumbled in his grasp.

“But we shan’t worry about that right now,” Barnaby said, regaining his focus. “For there are things that need to be said, something that needs to be told.”

“And something to be figured out,” added Nathan.

THREE_5

The crunching of dry leaves and twigs underfoot made me hold my breath. I could sense the body close, that weird feeling of another person within reach. I briefly wondered if they felt the same thing, and if so, what action they would take.

There were muffled sounds, and I pictured the enemy shouldering their arms, slinging their weapon over their shoulder. I slowly turned my head and strained my peripheral vision to get a look at the intruder.

I could make out the dirty robes and sandals of a mountain fighter, someone adept at taking advantage of sparsely populated mountain ranges. The environment they currently stood must have seemed very foreign to them. I heard a click followed by white noise; the crackle of a two-way radio. They spoke into it, his voice low and measured, the words sounding like gibberish.

I waited for them to move on, to move to their next position, but they didn't. They maintained their position. I could sense their movements; they were scanning the area. My heart rate increased. Everything was happening at once and I had decisions to make.

Plumes of dust rose into the sky in the distance. The imminent arrival of the Ghost's convoy was minutes away. My targets were in position. And I was hamstrung, painted into a corner. I could very easily squeeze the trigger and send a round of hurt into the mountain cave—it would be like shooting fish in a barrel. But then I would have to contend with the mountain fighter and their retaliation.

Mission parameters flooded my thinking. Protect the Ghost. Don't get caught. My guest took a few steps down the range towards the village, placing me at a distinct advantage. I slowly reached for my knife. I could silently kill my adversary; however, this would leave

The Ghost open to an attack. Every moment of inaction, time spent thinking, placed the mission in jeopardy.

The emerging dust cloud grew larger. I pulled myself onto my knees. Late afternoon had well and truly set itself in. I crouched, steadying myself. The intruder took a few more steps down. I stood. And once again everything seemed to happen at once.

A breeze suddenly picked up in intensity, shifting the canopy high above me. The rustling of leaves filled the silence sounding like the roar of a freight train. A stream of sunlight broke through the fauna barrier and I felt like I was standing in a spotlight, a bath of glow aimed at me. A flash, a reflection off my watch face that felt like a signal flare so bright I had to turn my head.

I immediately fell back into position, concerned the flash had given my position away. I shifted my attention between the mountainside and the town waiting for some stimulus to guide my actions. Then it was all over, the moments had passed. The intruder was gone, the Ghost had left the convoy for the safety of a building. And not a single shot was fired.

I entertained multiple questions. Why hadn't they taken the shot? Did I distract them? Was I now a focus of their attention? I thought about when I was over there and the flash I had seen. What had caused it? The questions were all-encompassing and forced the sunset to take place in an instant. The sun dipped with speed, drawing the color from my surroundings, replacing the warmth with a biting cold. Grayness washed around me, soaking my body heat. I wondered how long I had been caught in my own head.

I berated myself for losing mission focus. I returned my attention to my scope; the world a series of heat signatures, a pallet of gray. The landscape contained pockets of white, rocks, and other elements that endured the day's heat, amongst cooling shrubs.

I was looking at the cave. It was within the range of my weapon, and well within range of my capabilities. Nightfall would provide me

with the opportunity to attack and produce ample cover to escape the area for the rendezvous point. The targets had become nameless. They were no longer allied soldiers. They were faceless targets that I needed to execute. They were the ones standing in my way.

The temperature dropped, the weather extremes taking me back to the time when I was the one, belly in the dirt, eyes squeezed to the scope, keeping an eye on the Ghost. That's when Cad jumped into my mind. The one who took my daughter's picture, who I was sure was some sort of sexual deviant. The one I wanted to kill. No, the one I needed to kill. I could feel all of those emotions rising again, my chest and throat tightening up. I tried to shake them but they clung like a leech, consuming my mental energy, playing with my emotions.

I shook my head. That stage of my life was over. I had held the knife to his neck. I was going to slice his throat open and push him over the cliff, giving him enough time to contemplate his life before he either bled out or smashed his head on a big rock. I hadn't thought of the story to give when debriefed, but I would have had a lot of time to think about it. And I would have if it hadn't had been for... well, I'm not sure what happened. There was a flash in the distance, and that was it. Darkness. Sleep. I thought I was dead. And then I found myself in that damn interrogation room. Maybe I got what I deserved. Maybe the military can go suck my dick. Either way, Cad was gone, and in some small way, that was all that mattered.

And then movement. Gray objects swaying, monotone shapes shifting. And then a block of white, growing bigger in my vision, emerging from its lighter surroundings. I opened my other eye and took in the darkness that met me. I wondered where they were going and then remembered Cad having to leave the cave to radio the Commander. If this was a kill mission, why would they possibly need to do that?

I watched the reverse silhouette scramble up the mountainside and disappear over the top. With my two targets separated, I needed

to re-evaluate my next move. I would have to kill them in quick succession, for each passing moment between the hits increased the chances of failure. So, I decided to wait for the second target to return. But as it turns out, I didn't have to wait for long for something else to happen.

More movement, another eruption of white like the side of the mountain was giving birth. I hesitated, the moment replaying itself over and over. The profile followed the same path as their predecessor and disappeared from view. Questions swirled around me like whispers from the trees.

A shiver attacked my spine as that foreboding sense of the past played itself out in front of my eyes. I was frozen in my spot, trying to make sense of what had just happened, trying to piece a puzzle together. But maybe it was a coincidence, some freak reoccurrence of an event with different people. No. Impossible. It all seemed impossible.

When I left the cave all those months ago looking to end Cad's life in a blinded fit of revenge, I was holding a knife. Was the person who just left holding a knife? I couldn't tell, and to tell you the truth I wasn't looking for it.

I had to move. Before I could tell what was happening, I was on my feet, heavy weapon in hand as I scrambled to higher ground. I could feel the pull of the predefined path, edging me towards an endpoint. Everything I knew, or thought I knew, about destiny and fate shattered like a mirror, the shards of my disbelief breaking down into smaller and smaller parts until there was nothing left. I was meant to be on that mountain, I knew it. I felt it. Undeniable and unexplainable.

I reached the top on sloppy footing, kicking branches and rocks out of my way. The crest. To my left, the escape path, a long trek down the steady incline to the bird and the flight home. Below me, a sharp drop to the road below. To my right was an expanse, and to where I

held my attention. In the darkness, there was nothing, just the inky blackness of a moonlit evening. I strained my ears but heard nothing other than the sounds of a desert night. A lizard running over rocks, a snake shifting through leaves, an eagle coming to rest on a branch.

In a panic, I got down on one knee and raised my weapon. I squeezed my eye against the scope. A scene of gray shapes greeted me that looked like the surface of the moon. And then I saw it. Two white shapes, first apart and then mashed together represented as a light blob amongst nothing. One had circled the other and was pressed against them, forcing their heat signatures to become one blob. I moved my finger to the trigger.

My past was playing out in front of my eyes; an out-of-body experience. I gently squeezed. I tried to remember what happened next. A knife against a throat. The bargaining. The monolog. And then the flash and everything went blank. My face itched; the bullet trail etched into my forehead a remnant of that night. *This night?*

I swept the area with my rifle, looking for another heat signature through the scope. A shooter. An attacker. There was nothing. Nothing to suggest that anyone else was out there. I returned to the bright light of the bodies.

Movement. A sense that something was close. Destroying the perimeter of my personal space. Fast. Hard. I squeezed the extra millimeter of trigger. Something hard against the side of my helmet. The crack of my M4 still bouncing around my ears as the darkened world spun beneath me. I had gotten a shot off, but I wasn't sure where it landed.

I was on all fours, my senses dislodged. Everything moved slow. Felt like my brain had been submerged. Another hit from behind and I crash to the ground. I breathed in dirt, but I couldn't move. Darkness. The depths.

In those last moments of swayed consciousness, I thought about that bullet.

And where it went.

THREE_6

Room

“And, the only thing I need right now is a bathroom.”

“Certainly,” said Nathan, “Sign here and a bathroom will be yours.”

All three men laughed heartily, before Barnaby’s and Nathan’s stone faces returned, leaving Worthy chortling by himself.

“Seriously though,” Worthy said. “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Certainly, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby gestured. “The door on your right.”

“The door on my right,” Worthy iterated. “Gentlemen, I have spent many years of my life looking at a magnified perception of the world, taking in every detail of my environment so not only could I exterminate my target, but my team and I will survive the engagement. Barnaby, I know your right eye is greener than the other and that you are left-handed. Nathan, I know that you have four wrinkles next to your left eye and that one of your bottom teeth is not quite as perfect as another. So, you’ll have to excuse me if I don’t believe you when you say there is a door on my right.”

Worthy turned on speaking the last syllable to find a door he hadn’t noticed before; in a wall he was sure wasn’t previously there. His voice trailed off as he came to terms with his changing environment. Thoughts of the endless room he told Barnaby and Nathan about raced through his mind, regardless of the contradictory comparison of that place to the one he was currently in. Both provided constantly changing environments in which he could not control.

In one form or another, order was something he experienced every minute of the day in the military. Hierarchy. Orders. Times. Missions. It was like chess. Pieces with predefined moves.

However, the events in his past whittled down control, to the point where he was a pawn in a game that was weird, frightening and mentally debilitating. And one he still didn't understand.

Barnaby said, "What were we saying about perception and reality?"

Worthy stood at a stall, staring at his reflection as he relieved himself. His view of himself morphed between bright and fresh to dark and sunken. Over his reflected shoulder, another reflection from the mirrored surface behind him. His image seemed to reflect on forever, his duplicate bouncing off surface after surface into infinity.

He closed his eyes against the pristine white tiles and light, the dizzying picture of his body, and rocked his head back. He could feel the reverberations like the room was breathing, long, deep breaths. He slowed his breathing in time with his environment, the low thrum entering and leaving him in a way he assumed a baby felt in a womb.

But then there was an interruption, an irregular heartbeat, something else that made him feel like he was not alone. He snapped open his eyes to view the reflection of a man standing next to him, utilizing the neighboring stall. The man was dressed in a dark charcoal suit, a crisp white shirt open at the collar, black eyes staring at him from the mirror. Black hair was neatly parted and fell over his face, covering his left eye. He was very much younger than the two he left in the negotiating room, yet held an air of power, and had eerily similar features of the other two that Worthy thought they might be somewhat related.

Worthy looked away and then back again, finding the man hadn't moved. His gaze seemed to stare through him that gave him an unsettling feeling.

"Can I help you?"

"Can *I* help *you*?" he replied.

"Well, for one, you can stop staring -."

"Sign the damn contract," the man said, cutting him off. His tone was measured and emotionless.

Worthy smiled awkwardly. "Should you be in here talking about the contract, you know, outside the actual negotiations?"

"Time is running out, Mr. Worthy. Sign the contract. Sign it."

"I'll sign it when I'm ready."

"I don't think you understand."

"Is this some kind of pressure tactic? Did Nathan send you in here?"

The man motioned like he was zipping up his fly and stood at Worthy's shoulder, their eyes firmly locked through the mirror. "Who says I'm in here?"

The man walked behind Worthy and he shifted his gaze waiting for the man to reappear on the other side. He didn't. Yet the sounds of his footfalls continued off into the distance. Worthy looked around himself, checking all the mirrors, investigating the angles, looking for something other than his own shocked face.

Worthy unbuttoned his jacket and sat down at the table, the expectant gazes of Barnaby and Nathan watching his slow descent.

"Is everything okay, Mr. Worthy?" Nathan enquired. "You look pale."

Worthy shook his head and squeezed the bridge of his nose. Would it even be worth sharing what he saw to the men on the other

side of the table? What would they say if they didn't believe him? Worse, what would they say if they did.

"It's nothing," Worthy relented.

"Is it, though?" Barnaby asked, his eyebrows raised.

"Gentlemen," Worthy said. "I've experienced many strange things in my life, most notably in the past few years. Mystery and tragedy, and none of it was ever really explained to me, yet all of which is on display for you today."

"Like the endless room?" Nathan asked. "Where you accepted a mission?"

"One of many," Worthy replied. "Crap just like—." He turned to face the door to the bathroom, but it and the wall was missing. The room had resumed its default state, stretching off into the distance, refusing to adhere to the building's dimensions. He took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. "I don't appreciate the parlor tricks, gentlemen."

Barnaby sneered. "If you think this is a form of trickery, you are sorely mistaken. You are here at our bequest, but don't mistake where you are. This is our house, with our rules."

"We really should continue," Nathan suggested.

Barnaby turned to the clock, then rearranged himself on his chair. "Quite right, Nathan. Time is against us." A devilish grin spread across his face. "Now, we would both appreciate it if you could continue your story. We have a feeling something good is coming up."

THREE_7

I felt it before I heard it. The low, warbling thrum of an engine. It cascaded from the front of the vehicle, down its spine and spread across the metal flatbed like a bass speaker. My hearing slowly evolved from silence, gradually followed by my other senses. I could hear a rumbling engine and little else. I tried to open my eyes but saw nothing but black. I tried to move but couldn't, my arms and legs bound together behind me.

I tried to raise my head and pain instantly filled me, bright white lights exploding behind my clenched eyes. I tried to relax and concentrate on my breathing, my heart rate slowing with every passing second. Whatever had hit me, had hit me hard.

Now and then the truck would hit a pothole and for a split second, I had a feeling of weightlessness, followed by the overwhelming hurt of landing on my side, my shoulder, and head breaking my fall against the metal floor.

As I laid hogtied in the back of the truck, pain effortlessly flowing through every part of me, I assessed this awfully shitty situation, and none of it was good. I still didn't know what I had seen before my world went dark. I remembered seeing someone leave the cave, and not long after that, the second target leave. The scene had played out just how I had remembered doing it all those months ago.

Then kneeling on the ridge, watching the two bodies come together as one, just as I had circled around Cad, placing the knife against his neck. Then there was the gunshot. Was the shot that had given me the scar all those months ago been from my own gun? That thought in itself was enough to send my mental capability crashing down around me. It was too fantastical, too impossible. How could

any of this be real? The more I replayed the event, the more it cemented itself as fact.

I remembered aiming for the target's shoulder and firing just as something heavy struck me. The rest was washed out in a haze of dull colors and unfamiliar noises. And then I woke, and there I was, feeling very much in deep shit. Everything I knew about the local militia, warring factions, militant groups, meant that if I wasn't dead, I soon would be. I wondered if my unknown employers would mount a mission to save my sorry ass and soon crossed off the list any chance of a daring rescue.

I was on my own, and if I wanted to survive, I knew I would need to utilize all of my skills, all of my training... and an insane amount of luck. To my knowledge, no one has ever escaped a Jihadist group, and while they had traded some for money, plenty had ended up in propaganda videos, and eventually, unmarked graves.

Out of the blue, the sound of the engine dropped and I could feel the driver easing off the accelerator. My heart rate suddenly picked up as I stood on the precipice of the unknown, about to step through a doorway into pain and suffering. And no matter how much I tried to prepare myself for it, it didn't get any easier.

The single thought hit me before I knew where it came from, and a sudden moment of clarity overtook my fear. Working legs is all I needed. I thought back to the mountain hide, days on days with Cad watching the village. The convoy had arrived with the prisoner. *Was this that convoy?*

The truck eased to a stop and was quickly followed by foreign words and the screech of metal on metal. More unrecognizable words and then I was sliding across the hard surface, someone pulling at my limbs. Without warning, the restraints on my arms and legs eased, and I stretched my legs out, trying to regain the feeling of freedom, and quickly found my arms still bound behind my back. More tugging and pulling and then I was falling. It felt like forever before I

found the ground, hard and rocky, the air knocked out of me. I tried to suck in a deep breath, but the object over my head made it difficult and I felt like I was suffocating.

I begged for them to remove the hood, to get a glimpse of my surroundings, to breathe. My request was either ignored or not understood because I was quickly heaved to my feet. I instinctively tried to get my bearings, feeling the back of the truck with my leg.

Felt the poke in my back, which I guessed belonged to an AK47 held by a random Afghan, or Pakistani, or whoever. It didn't matter who it was. I just hoped they weren't eager to pull the trigger.

I groaned and bent over and waited. Another poke by the offending barrel along with more words I didn't understand. Another poke, and that's when I grabbed it. With my bound hands, I gripped the muzzle. And ran.

My legs pumped as I screamed. "Shoot them... shoot them!"

Someone. Anyone. *Myself*? If I was right, I ran towards safety. If I was wrong, I'd soon find out when the hot bullet tore into my back.

The reply I received was sudden and destructive. An unseen object. An unmovable entity. I bounced off something big and hard with tremendous speed, ricocheting backwards, my head reeling, my consciousness once again slipping.

As I felt hands roughly grab and pull me upwards, a warmth overcame my cheeks and mouth. Blood, that undeniable metallic taste filled me. This led me to know two things. One, I wasn't shot, which means I was worth more to them alive. And two, I was incorrect *where* and *when* I thought I was.

Which meant pain was around the corner.

And there was no one there to save me.

Not even myself.

THREE_8

When you cannot see the sky, your time is governed by other things. Movement, words, when food is served, when beatings are administered. And while the food was scarce, beatings were in abundance. As my stomach churned with hunger, every other part of me screamed with pain.

At first, I fought it. I swore, I threatened, I grimaced, and in the end, it all led to groans and cries, clenching of jaws and grinding of teeth. Then I accepted it. I let the razor blades cut my skin with a slight intake of air. I let the rubber hose beat against the soles of my feet with brief exhalations. All the while I bowed my head and thought about going back to my daughter. It wasn't a false hope, it was an acceptance of my current reality and what I needed to survive.

Time passed. How much I couldn't tell. The days all washed together, the time awake meaningless, the time asleep lost. The one constant was movement. After a random period, I would be bound, hooded and thrown in the back of a truck and moved to a different location. The journeys seemed to last forever, my washed-out existence causing fatigue to overcome my awareness.

At one location, the truck skidded to a halt, and I slid to the front of the tray, banging heavily against the metal plate. The heat was unbearable and with light coming in through breaks in the fibers of my hood, I figured it was the middle of the day. I sweated profusely, the heat sapping what little energy I had left. The air was as thick and heavy as the scent I was producing. I could make out the faint sound of children's voices in the distance, the clopping of hooves somewhere close, an errant bleat somewhere behind me.

I wondered what the townspeople thought of me. What would it take for them to help me? What would it take for them to put

their own lives, and those of their family, on the line for a complete stranger, from a country who have invaded, pushed, pulled and bombed their homes, driving radicalism into small towns like this? Nothing, I wagered. Not a god damned thing. There would have been nothing I could say, promise or do for them to stick their necks out. It's then when you realize you are all alone, and I mean really alone, that you either need to cling to some ember of hope, some wistful vision of the future, or let it all go and succumb to the darkness. Because there is absolutely no point wading in the gray.

I thought about the children and wondered how long it took for them to understand that this is a natural part of life. Had they seen the bodies? Had they witnessed the killings? Are they so heavily soaked in the terror of it all that it is now normal, and that nothing, not even death, would sway them from their future decisions? Back home, the youth had to figure out what they would spend their pocket money on and which corporation would give them a job when they finished school. Here, they had to figure out how to stay alive.

I awkwardly made my way into a structure, weapon at my back, my feet moving from the hot rocks and dirt to cool stone. My breathing was labored, the air around my head like a fireball, and I silently begged for a reprieve. They hustled me along a hallway. With every step, I wondered if this would be my resting place. Would they lift the veil and show a video camera and a big knife, stained with the blood of infidels?

Without warning a large hand came down on my shoulder and I stopped. Another gripped the hood and ripped it from me. It didn't take my eyes long to adjust to the low light, the source from a small window high on the back wall. I eyeballed the opening, and after deciding I had neither the energy nor dexterity to try to not only reach the opening but climb through it, I resigned myself to the room.

It was small and smelt like death. In the center of the room a stool, and next to that was a bucket. Someone shoved me in the back and I flopped on the floor.

“Strip,” the voice came in heavily accented English. I wondered how much English he knew. These are the things I thought about in those dark times. Should I start a conversation? Can I somehow talk or bribe my way out? Not that I had anything to trade.

I didn’t question the order or raise any objection. I was sure it would end in a beating of some description and I didn’t have the energy to endure more. Facing the far corner of the room, I lowered my eyes and disrobed, slowly, deliberately, prolonging the inevitable. I looked down at my naked self and noted the loss of fat and muscle, the change occurring rapidly with no food or exercise, and just trying to stay alive didn’t bulk my person.

When I was naked, the man grunted again. “Sit.”

I eased down onto the chair, my legs unsteady with the challenge of getting myself into position. I shivered, but I wasn’t cold. I was afraid.

A buzzing noise. Something I couldn’t place, although I should have been able to. A hard object placed against my head. Pain erupted on impact and then quickly dissipated over my skull. Something falling. My hair. Crude crisscross movements. Preparing me. Preparing me for slaughter. And I had just let it happen.

Afterwards, when the electric whir of the shaver concluded, the man spoke again.

“Wash.”

I did so. Picked up the rag in the bucket and wiped myself clean, as clean as one can be, given the circumstances. I hoped it would clean my soul, wash my slate, let me start again. As my hands moved my mind wandered, thinking of memories too far away to be real, too foreign to ever be real again. And then reality sunk in. That is where I was.

I felt something land next to me, followed by another order.
“Dress.”

I looked down. Orange. Every Islamic State propaganda video I had ever watched crossed across my vision. The free world dressed in orange jumpsuits being led to their deaths. But still, I complied.

When I had finished, I turned and looked at the man who had given me the orders. With slack eyes, I looked at his bearded features, the strength of his jawline hidden by custom. His dark eyes unrelenting. I couldn't tell if he was just following orders or believed in what he was doing. And I couldn't decide what was more dangerous.

He lowered his gun toward me. “Walk.”

This was his vocabulary. Strip. Sit. Wash. Dress. Walk.

So, I did. Through the doorway and down a hall, all the while the barrel of his machine gun was on my back, engaging me forward. I shuffled, unknowing of my destination, or my fate.

“Stop.”

His final directive. There was a door to my left, and the man reached over me and banged on it twice.

I heard a metallic scraping noise and then the wooden door creaked open. My escort shoved me once more, and once more I stumbled forward to the ground, catching myself on the dirt floor. To my right, a young man was sitting at a table, a gun over his shoulder and a deck of cards in his hand. An older man held the door open and spoke to my deathly chaperon.

In the other direction, a cage. A sole inhabitant sat in the corner, legs bent, arms over their knees, head bowed. Resigned. Waiting. Biding time. His hands were mangled, stubs where thumbs used to be. He sported a shaved head and also wore the orange uniform, although his was less clean, more tattered. I didn't recognize him at first.

His arms. Red burn marks littered the skin, some washing into a tattoo. That of a skull and a sniper rifle. The words emblazoned underneath: 'One shot.' *One kill.*

"Cad!" I breathed.

THREE_9

The young soldier released the padlock, grabbed my collar and led me to the opening. I couldn't take my eyes off Cad. I couldn't fathom how he was alive, after everything. The last time I saw him I had my combat knife against his throat, and then the world went black. He fell over the edge as I fell into unconsciousness. He must have died, surely. There was no way anyone could have survived the fall. And if the descent didn't kill him, the environment surely would have. And yet there he was, in front of me.

I crawled in and moved to the opposite corner, assuming a similar position as my cellmate. Before, the thought of escape seemed too hard, too impossible. Once I was out of the cage, I would need to get out of the room, and then out of the town, and then out of the country. Each step seemed more improbable than the one before. On top of that, I had no idea where I was, or even what country I was in. It was possible I was in Pakistan, or perhaps deeper in Afghanistan, or hiding out in Iraq. Getting away from your captors was one thing, getting to any sense of civilization was something else. But then, somehow this task seemed plausible, especially when that other person was motivated and trained.

The guard locked the cage, and content I was secured, the sentinels left the room.

"Cad," I whispered.

No movement.

"Hey, is that you? Cad!"

Then slowly, his head raised. His face was badly swollen, his eyes sunken into his head. Malnourished. Given barely enough to survive, to be traded, bartered, used. He looked at me, his eyes glazed as if

they had drugged him. It didn't look like Cad, a bad impersonation, a facsimile, a shadow. But it had to be.

I repeated my question.

He blinked again, reality breaking through the expressionless barrier. His mouth opened slowly, words fighting to escape.

"James?" he croaked.

"How did you get here? I thought you were..."

"Dead? I landed awkwardly, couldn't move. And then they found me. That's when my life ended. It's been a slow death ever since. I just want it over with. I can't do this anymore."

I got on my knees and reached out to him. I placed a hand on his shoulder.

"We're going to get out of here."

His head swung down as he spoke.

"There's nothing out there but sand and desert," he droned. "Hurt and pain. I tried when I first got here. He held up his left hand. This happens when you try to escape."

I looked at his hand, a good, hard look. The skin, dirty, jagged, uneven, growing over remnants of bone. Thinking about how it happened made my stomach turn. A crude hack of a knife, no surgeon to close the wound properly, the lack of sterilization to fend off infection.

"But together... we could make it. We kill a guard, we take a weapon, maybe a vehicle... me and you."

A smirk. A shudder. "You did this to me. I am here because of you. You have taken everything away from me."

I sat back, dejected. My one strand of hope breaking before my eyes. And he was right, about everything.

I rallied. "But we have a chance."

Cad held up his other hand. "I've had my chances," he said, his voice low, defeat threaded throughout. "I remember being on the top of that mountain when you attacked me from behind... you held a

knife to my neck... talking some shit about knowing what I am.” He looked up at me. “Why did you do it?”

I swallowed, the pressure of such a question burdening me. Just the thought of the answer made my heart beat fast in my chest. “You had taken my photo of my daughter. I found it in your pack... along with a bunch of others.”

Cad slowly swayed his head from side to side. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I found those things. I got so worked up, so angry. We’d been through so much shit together, and then I find out you’re a pedo with a thing for my-.”

“A what?” His head had snapped up. His face was that blend of confusion and shock. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I leaned in. “Those photos. I found your stash.”

He tried to form words but couldn’t. In the end, he shook his head. “I just have no idea...” He trailed off.

“I know what I saw. I wanted to kill you seven times over, stab you in your sleep, damn the consequences.”

“Well, I wish you had.” He looked at me. “Because my life’s been over since that moment on the mountain. You held a knife against my neck, whispered some bullshit in my ear. Next thing I know I’m over the edge of the cliff, bouncing on some rocks. When I come to, I was bound and gagged in some fucking cage.” He looked away. “I was shunted around to different groups for some fucking reason. Fucking tortured me, Worthy. Ripped the life out of me. But I didn’t tell them shit. Then when they didn’t want me anymore, I ended up back here. Rinse and repeat.”

His eyes were droopy and glistened in the corners, the edges of his mouth turned down. “And all because you thought I had some photos. Because you thought I was some sick fuck.”

It wasn’t the time for righteousness. It wasn’t the time to set the argument, state the case and point out some facts. I needed to get

him onside, and I could have said a lot of things in order for that to happen. But I didn't say any of those things. I stuck to my guns, believing in my truth, backing it all the way, damn the consequences. *The consequences.*

"I saw them, Cad. I saw them in your bag. I know what I saw. I know what you are."

"You don't know shit!" He jumped to his knees, the sudden burst of movement pushing me back against the bars. "You're the sick fuck, doing what you did!" Cad held his hands up, his face transforming into a concoction of anger, anguish and disbelief. "You did this to me. You did all of this, so take a good fucking look! You killed me that day. You signed my death warrant. You had my blood on your hands. So why don't you just finish the damn job." He stared at me, an icy gaze. His direct voice lowered to just above a whisper. "Listen to me. I didn't take your damn picture. I didn't have any photos. I don't know what the fuck you're talking about!" He fell back down, banging into the cage bars, his adrenalin rush skirting down the curve. "You killed an innocent man. So why not finish the job?"

"Yes!" A voice boomed from the doorway. "What an excellent idea!"

FOUR_0

The man stood in the doorway. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously.

“I do so enjoy a challenge, especially a physical contest.”

I did a double take at the man. I initially was concerned that I didn't hear the door open, but that took a back seat when I heard his voice. His British accent was clear and unmarked, as pure as the Queen's lineage, yet seemed awkward and incorrect.

“Oh, don't be put off by my accent, chap.”

He entered the room, followed by two guards, the same that were there when I was put in the cage. They took up posts in the front corners of the room. The younger guy in the far corner, the older (and therefore higher ranked of the two) nearest the door to the room.

The new guy stared at me and Cad as he grabbed a chair from the table and positioned it in the dirt in front of the cage. He wore a faded white suit. Grime, the kind the desert kicks up, had accumulated in the sweat stains that grew in the armpits and middle of his back. He eased himself down on the chair and removed his wide-brimmed hat, placing it on the knee of his crossed legs. He was thin, wiry. He ran a long-fingered hand through his thinning white hair. His features were deep, his skin dark brown, more to the effects of the sun than any kind of ancestry.

He looked at me. “Welcome, Sir. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Max.”

“Who are you? Where am I? What the hell is going on?”

He held up his hand to stop my barrage. “Enough questions. They will be answered in good time, however now you need to do something for me.”

"I've got no information for you. I don't belong to any military or any nation. I was here with a humanitarian group, and -"

"Enough," Max said, cutting me off. "Enough. Your captors, the ones who brought you here, have got quite a different story." He leaned forward. "And no disrespect, but believe it or not, I trust them more than you." He leaned back in the chair. "Crazy, wouldn't you agree? What a crazy world we live in right now. These groups out here. Two things about them. One, they are loyal to a fault. Loyal to each other, to their cause, to me." He lowered his gaze to emphasize that last point. "And two, you know where you stand with them. All those bastards back home. All they want to do is stab you in the back and steal your wallet. But not here! No! Here, they would stab you in the front and take everything from you, but at least you would see it coming. But there is something that keeps it in check. Loyalty. They give to me and I give to them. Quite the symbiotic relationship." He pushed his fingers together. "We need each other, you see? I bring a sort of... stability to the area."

I remained silent during his speech, trying to figure out his angle, what it was all about. I wondered if it was it some rich aristocrat living out his wet dream.

"What do you want?" I said. The defiance in my voice was such that it surprised even me. I thought they had beat it out of me weeks before, but given the right stimulus, the tone emerged.

The smile fell from his face. He leaned forward again. "I want some God damned respect!" He lifted his head and took a deep breath while sitting back in his seat. He retrieved a hanky from his pocket and dabbed at his brow. "God damn it's hot. You know, it doesn't matter how long I spend here, I just can't get used to the temperature. It's like the fifth level of hell out there." He laughed, but I had no idea what about.

When he stopped, he said, "Listen. There are many ways we can accomplish this."

I lowered my head. "I'm not talking to you anymore."

"Thank goodness, because I much prefer action. So, let me tell you this. Currently, there are two of you alive in that cage, but I only have room in my inventory for one."

Cad picked up his head for the first time since Max had entered the room.

"The rules are simple, gentlemen. You win, you eat. You lose... well, you die."

Quickly, I was up on my knees at the bars, gripping them until my knuckles hurt. "Listen here, you sick fuck, we're not going to fight for your pleas -"

The fist to the side of my head was unexpected, and rocked me back into my corner, turning away. Cad must have put everything into it because his momentum carried him forward and he fell awkwardly at my knees. I blinked a few times to shake off the stars that were popping in front of my eyes.

Cad had a lot to fight for, and I'm not talking about life or food. He had something a lot more powerful on his side. Revenge. He felt I was responsible for what happened to him, that he was an innocent man. That I was wrong about everything. Was I wrong? Was I responsible for how things turned out for him? Maybe, just a little. Was I sorry about it? Not one bit. He had everything coming.

As Cad tried to regain control of himself, I looked beyond the bars to the man sitting there. He was appraising us, wearing a smirk that confirmed his sickly conceit. A barbaric spectacle for his dark desires. The guards stood by, weapons ready, eyes eager to see who would come out on top of the contest. I wondered if they had placed bets to see who would win.

Cad, having regained his knees, threw himself at me again, this time trying to get an arm around my neck. But I was less fatigued, less demoralized, less... broken. I twisted out of his attempt and turned him. I applied my own chokehold, so that my elbow was un-

der his chin, my other hand on the back of his head. I pulled my shoulders back for maximum damage. It was a standard rear naked choke hold, and it was all technical at that point. Years of training, all reflex. The person in my grasp failed to be a person, they were an object.

Cad slapped at my arms and gurgled. Given the height of the cage and the fact he was on his knees, there was little maneuverability, no leverage. I could feel him slipping into unconsciousness, his movements laboring, his body weight sagging, his breathing shallow. Then nothing.

After all the struggle had left Cad, I held the position, making sure the monster was dead, for good this time. There was no doubt about it. I had killed him. And any chance I had of escaping left with Cad's life.

FOUR_1

There was a resounding applause from Max.

“Well done, well done,” he snorted, a sneer wide on his face. “I do so enjoy a spirited encounter.”

He turned his head, nodded to the younger guard in the far corner, a sour look on his face. He had lost his bet. The older guard had opened the door and the younger left. After a few long seconds, they returned with a metal dish, setting it down in front of the bars.

“Eat, champion,” Max said with a smile. “It’s the best someone in your position is likely to get for some time. Savor it.”

I looked down at the lifeless body in front of me.

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Max said. “He was worthless. He had done the rounds. Said what he needed to say. Told everyone the juicy information.”

“Bullshit,” I shouted. “He wouldn’t have said anything. He was trained. He knew what he needed to do if the enemy captured him.” Even I found it strange, as the words came out of my mouth, that I was defending Cad. But I wasn’t. I was defending the honor and loyalty of the military. That felt strange, considering what happened to me. Cad had said he didn’t talk, that he gave nothing away no matter what they had done to him, and it seemed he had endured a hell of a lot. However, he also said he didn’t have those photos, and I knew what I saw, didn’t I? I must have.

All-in-all, I should have kept my mouth shut and taken the prize on offer, but there was something about the guy, something about Max, that just pissed me off. Rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe it was because he was English, or pretended to be. Maybe it was because of what he was insinuating about a member of the military. Either way, Max kept dropping the bait, and I kept on biting.

“Oh, so you knew who he was then?”

I looked away.

“Well,” he said. “What are the chances of that! I don’t know what he told you, but there’s a reason they come back here you know, the prisoners. They’ve outlived their usefulness.”

“If he was no longer required, they would have just ransomed or killed him. Why bother returning him to you?”

“Unless no one wanted to save him,” Max started. “Unless whoever had him couldn’t be bothered to slit his fucking throat. Unless they found him so inconsequential, they offloaded him here for *my* own pleasure, an object to use at my will. He was worthless.”

I stopped biting. The conversation was over.

“But you’re not,” he continued. “In fact, I’ve already got someone keen to make your acquaintance. And believe you me, they will not be as understanding as I am.”

“Why are you doing this? How did you become a traitor?”

Max laughed. “I’m not a traitor, I’m a speculator. An entrepreneur. With war brings opportunity, and in this war the commodity is people. Sure, it’s a niche market, but when guns and bombs are in abundance, it’s important to carve out your own market space.”

He looked at the guards and motioned to the unmoving body in the cage. They quickly opened the cage and dragged Cad out by his leg, his head banging against the bars as they awkwardly hauled him through the door. When they shut the door to the room, Max continued where he left off, like I had pressed pause in the conversation.

“People are a valuable commodity. They are regarded just as highly as weapons and ammunition, if not more so. With people comes information, ransom, power. People are utilized to intimidate other people, to show them the extents of what they are willing to do. I merely facilitate all of that. And the rewards, well...” He cast his eyes upwards, his mind whirring. A large smile stretched across his

face. “Well, the rewards are so much more than money. They are indescribable.”

He stood and sauntered to the cage, his hat in hand. He rotated the brim in his long fingers.

“I am special. I am chosen. I am protected.” He whispered that last bit.

I looked up at him.

“Not from me, you’re not. When I get out of here, I’m going to come looking for you.”

He laughed again.

“You are in a cage! I’m about to sell you to someone whose reputation strikes fear into Jihadist groups. Unlike your friend here, I seriously doubt we’ll be seeing you again. In fact, I doubt *anyone* is going to see you ever again. The Ghost will take care of that.”

“The Ghost?” I asked wistfully, the words barely making it past my lips. Everything in the past few months seem to have revolved around The Ghost like he was the center of the universe. From my sanctioned military mission to take him out ending with a bullet graze across my forehead, to my more clandestine operation to protect him ending with being captured by some insurgent group. It was coming full circle.

I thought about the intel I received from the mystery man on the bird to that fated military mission, the briefing from Durnham. The Ghost, highly ranked on someone’s most wanted list, wanted for a reason. Wanted for reasons.

Max kicked the plate of food, the meat, and vegetable scraps skipping through the bars.

“Eat,” he said with a smile. “You’ll need your energy. Dead people don’t make me any money.”

I watched him leave, followed him like my eyes were a sniper scope. I knew then and there I would kill him. It was the only thing I knew for sure. I wasn’t prepared to be cattle, on the auction block,

sold to the highest bidder. I wasn't going to go that way, and while I still had some fight in me, I would use every last ounce of energy I could muster.

In between eating the dirt-laden scraps from the floor, I searched the cage for something, anything I could fashion into a weapon. I ran my hands over the floor of the cell, hoping, praying, I could feel something. But there was nothing.

I inspected the cage. It was solid steel and didn't budge. I ran my hands along the edge outside the cage and found the bolts that braced it in place. There was no give. The padlock on the door was brand new and would need a pair of bolt cutters to bypass the key. The hinges felt welded.

I looked up, to the roof of the cage just above my head. I thought if I could drive upwards, I might have a chance of loosening the floor bolts. This relied more on the poor construction of the house than the good construction of the cage. It would probably cause a racket but I figured I would rather die trying to escape than accept death staring at me.

I squatted at one side of the cage and gently pushed up until my back was flat against the top of the cage. I slowly bent my legs, took in a deep breath and drove upwards. I groaned at the solid impact; the result having done more damage to my back than anything else. I repeated the effort, this time collapsing after the collision.

The situation was becoming more and more helpless and hopeless. The more I searched, the more energy I spent, the more I could feel my life slipping through my fingers.

I laid there, the mental and physical exhaustion taking its toll. I rolled on my side. The bars, the door to the room. The blackness. It started in the corners of my vision and slowly crept into the middle of my gaze.

Standing on the precipice of consciousness and unconsciousness, I slipped and fell backwards into the black, tumbling end on end into

the infinite void. I was swallowed whole, and I didn't want to be spat back out.

FOUR_2

Room

“What does death mean to you, Mr. Worthy?” Barnaby’s croak filled the silence.

Worthy looked to Barnaby.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do you think happens after you die?”

Worthy looked down at the table, to the folder he kept guard. “I told you earlier I’m not religious.”

“Yes,” Nathan jumped in. “We remember, we know.”

“Please humor us,” Barnaby suggested.

“Nothing,” Worthy answered. “Nothing happens.”

Nathan sat forward. “So, you’re one of those people that believe heaven and hell exist merely because people believe in it? The ‘did-you-make-us’ or ‘did-we-make-you’ paradox?”

“Gentlemen, I really don’t see what this has to do with anything.”

“That is for us to determine,” said Barnaby. “And helps us to understand you. Beliefs are perceived facts we acquire from some experience or learning. Regardless of how we acquire our information, the operative word here is perceived.”

“What are you saying? I know what I know.”

“And you don’t know what you don’t know. Some people believe in aliens, others in conspiracies, others in gods. These people have had experiences regarding these things and hence believe in them, whether or not they actually exist. Those that haven’t had a similar experience hold a very different view of the world. But what if the world is not as you perceive it? Could you handle your entire ex-

istence, everything you take to be true, torn down in front of your eyes?”

Worthy stretched his neck. When he spoke, he did so carefully. “When I joined the military, I undertook a range of mental and physical tests. I’m pretty sure I’m not crazy. At least, I’ve never been told I’m crazy. Or perhaps I have and I’ve blocked it from my memory. The point I’m trying to make here is, are you trying to get me to say something? Is this some kind of test to see if I’m crazy?”

“This is a test to see if you’re ready, Mr. Worthy.”

Worthy leveled his eyes. “I’m ready. You just give me a weapon and tell me the target. I’ll deal with everything else.”

Barnaby looked across the table, searching Worthy’s eyes, looking further, deep into his soul. Worthy returned the stare. Finally, Barnaby broke and turned to Nathan. “Well, he’s certainly closer than when he arrived.”

“Very close indeed, Barnaby.”

Barnaby ran a hand over the table. “What is the meaning of life, Mr. Worthy?”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Oh, come on, Mr. Worthy. It is a question that has been asked and answered so many times by so many people.”

“Well, I’m not sure my answer will give you any more insight than you already have.”

Nathan leaned forward. “Some people believe it’s about realizing potential. Others believe it’s about love. More again try to slice a scientific pathway, just as many a religious one.”

“But they are all wrong,” Barnaby added.

“Perhaps then,” Worthy mused, “you could enlighten me and let me know the answer.”

“Oh, we couldn’t possibly do that,” Barnaby scoffed.

“Why the hell not?”

“Can you imagine what would happen if NASA came out and told everyone the moon landings were, in fact, faked?”

“Well, I guess there would be as many wrong, infuriated people as there would be right, gloating people.”

“You need to think beyond that. People would start asking themselves what other things are they covering up. And not just NASA, but governments. People in authoritative positions. It would be madness.”

“Not to mention big business and the entire education system,” said Nathan.

“Everything would crumble, decay. No one could be trusted.”

“This seems awfully extreme,” said Worthy.

“You will just have to trust us,” Nathan said.

“We’ve... run the numbers. Simulated the environment.” Barnaby leaned closer and whispered. “It doesn’t end well.” He sat back. “So, you can imagine what would happen if people found out the *true* meaning of life.”

“I guess if they didn’t like it, there would be no point in continuing.”

“Exactly... that or people would do what they do every day.”

“Which is?”

“Ignore,” said Nathan. “They put their heads in the sand, make up their own story and convince themselves they are right, contrary to the evidence.”

“Either way, they wouldn’t be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“Finish your story, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby said. “Tell us how you came to be here. And we’ll tell you what you need to be ready for.”

FOUR_3

I remember standing in the middle of a room. No, it wasn't a room, it was just space. Blackness stretched out in all directions. There was no up or down, no left or right. It started out small, like the sense of a body close to you that didn't exist. A giggle. A laugh. The way a child plays with their toys, caught in a fantasy world of their own musings.

A voice got louder, and I smiled. She was safe and well. My daughter was safe and well. In an instant, the happiness turned to terror as a scream bore through my senses. I didn't just hear it, I felt it. It cut into me with each passing moment. It disabled me, shuddered my core, broke down my defenses. Liz was screaming. I tried to run towards the cry, but I couldn't move. There was nowhere to go, just blackness, covered in torment. The shrieks got louder and louder.

And then nothing. Nothing but a crisp white light.

Hands were on me. Angels were carrying me. I thought it was over, this was how it all ended.

But then a flash. The room, the door opening. Two men. Guards. No. Not guards. The buyers. They have come for me, and I am powerless to stop it. I tried to move, tried to take control of my body but nothing worked. I screamed, but instead of it coming out of my mouth it echoed in my ears. An ear-piercing scream, a guttural roar, an animalistic growl... a groan... a whimper.

I was carried out of the room, dragged out of the room, someone on either side of me, helping me along, but they bore all my weight. I thought about how the guards unceremoniously dragged Cad's corpse out by the legs. Unforgiving. An animal carcass.

White turned to black and then transitioned back. Grays mixed with high-pitched ringing in my ears. Consciousness and unconsciousness melded together. I didn't know what was real or what was

imaginary. I could hear voices but I didn't know if they were in my head or in my ears. They were speaking English. At least, I thought they were.

My carriers stepped through a doorway and I could see the floor change beneath me, from rough concrete to smooth stone. I could feel my feet dragging.

Then I was outside. I could feel the sun, the warmth on my head. My vision cut between rocks and sand, then a car tire... the boots of the people holding me up. The deal had been struck. I had been sold. Max was right. The product—me—was changing hands.

I wondered how much longer I would last. How long would it be before they tortured me beyond the point of no return? How long before I had lost all caring, all feeling, and let death take me whole?

Lifted now, onto something hard. Pushed. Pushed back against a wall. Pulled onto my knees, two men, one for each arm. They tied something to my wrist. My arms were outstretched like I was about to be crucified. Sacrificed.

A loud noise, a rumble. Exhaust. Sand. Sun. My ground moved, and I lurched forward, the binds around my wrists keeping me from falling on my face. I swayed as the vehicle jostled. My blurry viewpoint slanted to one side.

My chin was on my chest. The last of my vision evaporating as I once again fell into the abyss.

FOUR_4

I jerked awake as I took a large breath. Adrenalin coursed through me like I had just been given an electric shock. My vision was marred, woven fibers crisscrossing over a yellow light. I tried to move but could feel restrained, my wrists tied to the chair. I could feel a hot wind on the back of my head and I surmised my back was to an open window. I clenched my fists, happy that feeling had returned. I felt whole again, a renewed focus.

The hood was yanked off my head. I took in my surroundings through squinted eyes, my mind on high alert, as I tried to piece together time spent being insentient. In front of me, a man with his arms folded. He was about my height. His build hidden under his robes; a headpiece made from material that covered his face. I could make out a red mark on the side of his face that looked like a burn, more recent than not, still blistering. I had seen him twice before through the lens of a sniper scope. Before me stood The Ghost.

Then into view came another man, not as carefully hidden. Dark hair and beard, dirtier clothing, a machine gun slung over his shoulder. He was the helper, an aid. He went and stood next to his boss.

If I was to be tortured, who would do it? Would The Ghost take that pleasure for himself? How about decapitation? Would they make a video? Would Liz see it? Would anyone care?

“You’re The Ghost,” I said.

I felt something move above my brow. It snaked down, pooled at my eyebrow and eventually, a drop of blood danced across my vision.

“He most certainly is The Ghost,” the helper replied with an accented tongue. His emerald eyes glinted with knowledge, and I wondered who the real brains behind the operation were. “You have no

doubt come to hear the stories about him. The things he has done, the things he has seen, the things—.”

The Ghost put a hand on his helper’s shoulder, who stopped immediately. The Ghost stepped forward, one step, two steps then stopped. He scratched his cheek. I could make out a level of anguish in his eyes. He shook it off and kept moving forward till he was standing in front of me. Was the pain about to begin? Was there no discussion, no negotiation, no lying, no threats?

He slowly reached out and rubbed my brow. A spike of pain ran through my head and I pulled away. He mirrored my action. He turned and went back to his aid, where he whispered something. They both nodded and the aid’s eyes quickly darted from me and then to the floor. He then turned around and left through a door at the back of the room, leaving me alone with The Ghost.

“It’s funny, you know,” The Ghost said. “These things, these images in my head.” His voice was deep and broken like it had been destroyed by whiskey shots with whiskey chasers. Lucky bastard.

“You speak English,” I remarked. “No accent.”

He nodded.

“So, you’re a piece of shit traitor like that other asshole, Max.”

The Ghost shook his head. “No, not like Max. Max is dead. But it’s difficult to explain.”

I made a show of struggling against my constraints. “Looks fairly easy to explain from where I’m sitting.”

“I can see why you would say that.” He smiled and looked down as if trying to remember something. “But it’s different when you are standing up here. Different and strange.”

“What’s strange is that the first time I was sent to kill you. And the second time I was sent to protect you. How do you figure that?”

The Ghost shrugged. “I can’t. Not yet. Maybe one day.”

“I had you in my sights. I could have pulled that trigger. I should have pulled the trigger.”

“I know... I remember.”

A memory flooded my mind. Being on top of a mountain in a hide with Cad, tracking The Ghost with my scope, the target looking up. Momentary. Brief. A look. Recognition.

“You knew we were there that day?”

The Ghost looked down. “Yes. *That* day.”

“How did you know?”

The Ghost stepped forward. “I know a lot of things. I know all about you.”

“You don’t know shit. You’re just some lunatic who’s trying to make a name for themselves out of the war. You butcher innocent people.”

“You’re just going to have to trust me.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “Trust you? You are fucking crazy.”

“You are going to have to. Take Aslam for example, my aid. He helped me. Aslam will also help you. He is someone you can trust.”

“So, he had nothing to do with that burn across your face?”

The Ghost faltered at this, stumbled. His hands went to his face. He turned, facing away from me, adjusting his headgear. He pulled the material tight and ensured it was tucked tight into his vest.

There was a knock on the door and a second later it opened. A man stood there. I took him to be a member of The Ghost’s militia, yet he had no weapons I could see. He was pushed into the room, Aslam close behind, holding a gun at the ready. I took in the uncertain look on the man’s dark features.

The Ghost said, “This man threw stones at you and directed others to do the same. Even after explicit instructions not to interfere with you.”

The man jerked around by these words, a look of surprise, of shock. Aslam yelled something at him and the militia man’s eyes immediately dropped to the floor.

The Ghost continued. "He disobeyed a direct order." He looked at me. "I will leave the punishment to you."

I was taken aback. What the hell was he on about? He was going to let me, a prisoner, determine the fate of one of his people?

"You were a military man," The Ghost followed. "You know as well as anybody that when a subordinate doesn't follow orders of their commanding officer, there are consequences. Sometimes they are unjust or unfair. I know you have fallen fate to this. I know what you have experienced. I'm willing to give you the opportunity to return the favor, to exact revenge."

My chest heaved, adrenalin coursing through me. Death. Revenge. Memories of the attempt to take Cad's life pulled at my skin, taunting me. A knife to Cad's throat. A bullet that had marked me forever across my forehead, now bleeding from a stone thrown by hate. Chasing two silhouettes into the mountain shadows. I fired my weapon, a stray bullet straying wildly off course as I was knocked unconscious. Were the two bullets one and the same?

Cad's lifeless body in the cage. Had I in fact taken the life of a monster? Or that of an innocent man? Was the man standing sheepishly in front of me disregarding orders or accepting his predetermined disposition?

I had too many questions bombarding me, so I closed my eyes and lowered my head.

"No," was all I could say. "It's done."

The Ghost stepped forward.

"You may feel that way now, sitting there, but like I said before, things are a little different when you get up to the front of the room."

Before I could understand what he was talking about, The Ghost spun and directed a punch at the man's face. It wasn't a haymaker or loosely unfolding attempt, it was a well-trained and well-executed punch, straight and hard. The man's face went from sheer surprise to a splash of red as the powerful blow landed squarely on the target's

nose, shattering the bones instantly. The man's yelp was superseded by the wet thwack of the skin on skin impact and the man fell back, unconscious before he hit the ground. He fell back with a thud, his head bouncing on the hard stone floor.

Without hesitation or questioning glance, Aslam shouldered his weapon, grabbed the prone figure under the arms and dragged him out of the room. The action left a trail of blood along the floor and I followed it back to a smudged pool of blood where the man had hit the ground.

When alone, The Ghost said, "Sometimes people deserve what they get."

"You're a psycho," I said bluntly.

"Not everything is as it seems, James."

James. It caught me off guard.

"How do you know my name?"

"I know everything about you."

"How? Who are you?"

"James, I'm going to tell you some things and show you some things. This might be hard to accept or even understand. But you need to trust me. Everything here has a purpose. You have a purpose. There are reasons you are here right now, reasons *we* are here right now. I'm here to see that through. I'm here to help you."

I said nothing, couldn't say anything.

"I'm sure you think I'm some sort of monster, based on what people have told you. That is what they told you, isn't it? That I've butchered people? Military, locals, men, women, children? One of the most wanted people in the world? Like I said before. Not everything is what it seems."

"Then what is it like?"

The Ghost looked at his watch. "There isn't much time."

"Time till what?"

He ignored the question. “It’s almost twenty-two hundred. Don’t forget that.”

“Why? What happens at ten?”

“You’ll know, trust me.”

“There’s that word again.”

“I would like to think I’ve proved myself.”

“And yet I’m still bound and tied to this chair.”

The Ghost looked down. “It was better this way, for both of us. I guess you need to learn that the hard way for that to make sense.”

I blinked. The recent weeks, at least, I thought it was weeks, had been something way beyond peculiar. So many things had happened I couldn’t fathom where the bottom of the abyss was.

“Soon we will part ways, and I need you to do something for me... for you. Some things will happen and you will have no ability to stop them. They are pre-written, ordained. I know you don’t believe in fate or destiny, and for your journey, I guess it doesn’t matter. You’re on a roller coaster ride, James, and there is nothing to do but hold on.”

“None of this is making any sense.”

“And it won’t... until it does.”

“Just one thing.” The Ghost looked down, trying to find the words. “Just keep your cool, okay? There’s no need to lose absolutely everything. There must be a way out of this.”

“What do you mean, there must be a way out of this?”

A vibration shook the room.

“Now,” the Ghost said, “is the time.”

FOUR_5

The Ghost quickly moved behind me. I could feel the cold steel of a knife against my wrists. With a tug, the constraints were gone.

The blasts of gunshots filled the air, semi-automatic, fully automatic. The sounds of shouting, panic, confusion. Another conflict and it sounded like it was getting closer.

I tried standing up but, my legs just didn't have the will to work on their own, despite the rest of me wanting them to. I collapsed, and The Ghost caught me.

"Come on, soldier," he said. "It's time to get the hell out of here."

"Who is it? Who's coming?" If it was the good guys, the allied forces, then this nightmarish ride might soon be over. Sure, they would ask a shit load of questions, like, how I entered the country, where my passport was, who was I working for. I'm sure the barrage would be endless, but at least I'd be in the safety and security of a military base.

"I'm pretty sure I know who," started The Ghost, "but we aren't waiting around to find out. I don't know what would happen, I don't want to know what would happen. Besides, we've both got somewhere to be."

Crunch time. Do I trust someone reported to be on the most wanted list, or take my chances with whatever was coming through the door with guns blazing?

I threw an arm around the Ghost's shoulder and he supported my weight as he guided me to the left, to a door I hadn't noticed before.

More gunshots erupted below us. They were close.

"Maybe next time," grunted The Ghost as he heaved my body towards the door, "you can do things differently."

“Next time?”

As we reached the door, our world shook. Something happening on the lower level. Gunshots, shouts. They were in the building.

We reached the door, and The Ghost opened it inwards. Darkness beyond, a color deeper than black. It was hypnotizing. A feeling of uncertainty swept through me. It kept me on the precipice of action and inaction.

The room vibrated. Shards of splintered wood exploded into the room. We didn't bother stopping for a conversation. From the corner of my eye I saw two black uniformed soldiers enter the room, their M4 carbines with grenade launchers, pressed against shoulders.

We stepped inside and The Ghost kicked the door shut as a barrage of bullets ascended upon us. The triangle of light transformed into a soft glow under the door. Blackness enveloped us, entombed us. It felt like it sank into every pore.

“I don't think that door is going to stop them,” I said. “And I'm pretty sure they can find us in the dark.”

I watched at the light under the door.

“We need to go,” I said. “Now.”

“Wait. You need to see this. You need to understand this. Everything will make sense.”

Shadows at the door. I waited for another explosion, splinters, a machine gun in my face. But there was none of that. There was an elongated thud that sounded like a boot on wood, drawn out voices that sounded eerily close, like a whisper. The hairs on my neck stood up. I could hear movement, boots on concrete. I could hear breathing, the cracks and pops of radios and earpieces echoing lazily all about me.

“What the hell is happening?” I whispered.

The Ghost bowed his head as if in silent prayer. Eventually, he took a step back and turned, with me hobbling to keep up with my crutch.

“Look,” he said.

I looked up and struggled with the scene in front of me. A hallway of blackness with intermittent shards of light on the floor. He moved forward, sluggishly swimming through the murk.

“What is this place?”

“You’ll find out... soon enough.”

“Are these doors?”

“Yes... of sorts.”

“To where?”

“That’s not for me to explain. And even if it was, I doubt I would do a good job of it.”

The door on my left captured my attention. I could make out a hand, or more correctly, fingers, that snaked out from under the door and were unmoving, like they were being held in suspended animation.

I looked over to The Ghost. “Who are you? Really?”

The Ghost kept us moving and even in the gloom I could see he was contemplating his answer. “You’ll find out.”

I shivered at his response, and for the first time noted the coldness of wherever I was.

“Shit, it’s cold in here.”

The Ghost smiled. “Death is cold, James.”

I looked at him. “Are you saying we’re dead?”

The Ghost kept his gaze forward, his motion forward. “No. Not yet anyway. But we haven’t got much time, so please stop asking questions. Everything will become clear soon enough. I’m sorry I can’t be more explicit than that.”

I lost count of the doors I passed, of the small rectangles of light representing different rooms, of the unknown destinations that lay beyond them. Without warning a wave of coldness tore through me like a truck. The force of the attack pushed me back, and The Ghost struggled to keep me upright.

“Come on,” The Ghost said, pulling me forward. “Time is short. Maybe next time tighten up your monolog.” *Monolog?* He scoffed. “Not that you’ll remember any of this, mind you.”

More steps forward, more doors we could have moved through, but The Ghost was adamant we keep moving, we keep searching.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my breath a white cloud in front of my face, illuminated by the light glowing from under the doors.

“*We* aren’t going anywhere.”

I picked up on his tone. “Okay then, where am I going?”

The Ghost stopped, and we slowly turned ninety degrees to his right. “Here.”

I looked at the door and realized my name was etched into it, Worth, J.M., deep into the surface, each letter curiously illuminated. Under that was a stream of numbers, almost like a barcode, but constantly changing. I couldn’t tell if they were going up or down.

“Why is my name on that door?”

“Because it’s your door.”

The logic seemed simple enough, however, as usual, The Ghost wasn’t forthcoming with any useful information. Just another redirect from the answers. He would have made a damn fine politician.

“Am I going to get any genuine answers to my questions?” I heaved.

The Ghost ignored the question. “I’m sure you can stand up on your own now,” he said as he moved away from my side.

I grabbed at the door for support. “Barely.”

“Barely is good enough.”

He placed a hand on the door handle. “Do you remember what I told you?”

“About what?”

The Ghost sighed. “About what you needed to do.”

I looked at him blankly, my mind whirring. So much had been said, so many questions were left unanswered, so many thoughts orphaned.

“Of course, you don’t,” The Ghost said, looking down at his feet. “I should know that.” He looked up. “Remember, some things are going to happen outside of your control, but you can always control what you do, do you understand? Hang on to something, don’t lose everything.”

“Okay,” was all I could respond to his philosophy.

He turned the door handle.

“God, I can’t wait to get home. It feels like I’ve been away from them for years. I miss them so much.”

He let go of the handle. “I’m ... I’m sorry.”

I turned. “For what?”

He stepped aside and pushed the door open.

A fresh white light pierced my eyes.

FOUR_6

I stepped out into the sharp light and shielded my eyes. The sunlight burned my retinas, and I searched for a reprieve. The warmth engulfed me, as my senses worked overtime with the smells of wildflowers and grass. Tweets of robins deep in conversation, that initially boomed in my ears, diminished to sharp twerps high above me. I looked up, blinking at the light that cut through the branches of a tall cedar tree.

As my senses resumed normality, I noticed other things, like the sharpness of the rocks under my feet. I spun back to the door, but it was gone. Vanished. Another magic trick. Another play on reality. Nothing but gravel parking bays yawned out in front of me, a rocky driveway curving behind some trees.

Cars. The melodic hum of consistent engine groan made up the remainder of the background noise and I turned to face it.

The area felt familiar and yet I couldn't place it. My mind was scrambled with magic rooms, helicopter rides, images through scopes, a gunshot, a cage, fighting, dirty, hungry, desperate, my savior, The Ghost. Remember what he had said. Remember what? The explosions, gunshots, armored men, a hallway of lights. Remember what? Something about Shelly? Shelly, my wife.

There, I remembered being there. In the carpark when a van pulled up. The start of my entire journey. No, not the start, the *next* part of the story. The expedition started long before, but how many forks in the road would I need to backtrack to feel comfortable with the end goal? How many would lead right back there?

So, if I *had* been there... My mind trailed off. I spun. My car. Right in front of me. I had failed to see it as I stepped through the

door into the amazingly blinding light. But there it was, just as I left it. How long had it been? Weeks? Months? What time? Day? Year?

Suddenly a noise, and I looked up to see a woman running towards me. No, not running, jogging. A large German Shepherd at her side. White buds in her ears. She made eye contact. A quick up and down, and then she picked up her pace as she ducked down an adjoining path and between more trees.

I looked down at my dirty and bloodied orange uniform. She might have thought I was a prison escapee. Surprised she didn't call the authorities immediately. I crouched down to look at myself in my car's wing mirror. Looked like shit, and that was putting it nicely. My stubble had turned into the makings of a beard. Hair disheveled. Jumpsuit stained with sweat and desert grunge. I sniffed under my arm and immediately wished I hadn't.

Tried the car door, and it swung open freely. I eased into the seat and felt something against my leg. Looked down to find the keys in the ignition. How no one stole the car was beyond me. Not for the value mind you. The car itself would pick a cool hundred bucks from the wreckers. I was thinking more like a getaway vehicle for a liquor store robbery. A vehicle that the robbers could torch and walk away from without a second thought.

Regardless of the reason, the car was still there. The fact the object beside me in the passenger seat was still there, made even less sense. When the phone vibrated, I stared at it. An open car, keys in the ignition, phone on the front seat, all seemingly untouched. It must have been my lucky day. Perhaps it was karma for all the bullshit I had been through over the past however long and was paying dividends.

I ignored the phone. Keyed the ignition and, to my surprise, it turned over on the first attempt. I sat there staring out the windshield for what seemed like an eternity. A million things ran through my mind. The desert, being captured, the fear, the fight.

And then an ally in someone I was once ordered to put a bullet into. And all for what? The Ghost turned out to be more than I ever imagined, way more than the little I knew about him. His actions spoke more than any briefing.

Mark. I was meeting Mark. Why? To get information... about Shelly and Liz. Because they had left and I hadn't heard from them. Was I worried about them, or wanted to know some dirty secrets? Where were they? Where the hell was Mark? A sharp pain ripped down the center of my head like it was being split into two. I groaned and rocked forward until my forehead rested on the steering wheel.

First things first. Eat. Then shower. Then call Mark. I figured Shelly wasn't going anywhere, and who knows, after this much time she had probably returned home. No doubt I would pull up into my garage and they would both come running out. They would ignore my stink and hug me. Thankful I had returned home. Happy I was alive and well.

A smile grew on my face. Everything will be different. Everything *was* different. I had worked warfare out of my system. I had been to the end and survived, and there was no way I would put myself in that position again... ever. I could quite happily live the rest of my life in the ignorance of global politics and national defenses. I was done. Liberated. Felt like the ten-ton stone that was keeping me from progressing had been jettisoned.

That was the new beginning I had been searching for all those months ago.

As a hand rapped on the driver's side window, I didn't realize what sort of beginning I was about to get.

FOUR_7

Room

“And there he was,” Worthy said, staring off into the distance. He lifted his hand and gently placed it on the folder.

“There *who* was, Mr. Worthy?” Barnaby pressed.

“Mark.” Worthy locked eyes. “I mean, it took me a while, because I’m in a state of shock, right? I’ve been god knows where for god knows how long, and yet, there he was. Seemingly out of the blue.”

Nathan looked over at Barnaby. “I think we’ve broken him.”

“Nonsense,” Barnaby replied. “He is merely on the precipice. It shan’t be much longer and this will all be over.”

“And the strangest thing?” Worthy continued.

“What’s that?” Nathan pushed.

“Time.”

“Time?” the two asked.

“He says I need to go with him immediately. No questions. That it’s urgent. I ask him if it can wait. You know, because I’m hungry, tired and smell like shit. He doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. And when Mark says ‘let’s go’, you go. So, I’m sitting in his car as he darts through traffic and I ask him where the hell he was those weeks ago. He looked at me with those reflective shades of his but I can see his mind ticking over. He tells me he was held up in some traffic and when he got there, I was gone. He then tells me he gets a call, checks something out, and then comes right back to the meeting point, and that’s where he finds me. The timelines don’t match up, so, naturally, I call bullshit.”

“Did you tell him?” Barnaby asked.

“Did I tell him what?”

Nathan placed his clasped hands on the table. “Did you tell him about your experience watching The Ghost, getting captured, fighting for your life?”

Worthy shook his head. “How the hell could I? I couldn’t even string two words together and still didn’t understand how I got back home. Mind you, I didn’t believe him until I checked my phone... then his phone... then his watch. They all had the same date, the day when some group captured me and sent me on the mission to protect The Ghost.”

“And you have no idea how that all happened?”

“No,” Worthy said thoughtfully. “Not at the time, anyway.”

“Oh,” said Barnaby. “We’ll get to that. Would have to be my favorite part. Wouldn’t you agree, Nathan?”

“Dear Barnaby,” Nathan scoffed. “There are so many moving parts I have trouble placing my finger on the one that gives me the most joy. Although I must say, the next part is something that very much resonates with me.”

“Touché,” Barnaby remarked.

Worthy looked down at the folder and spoke, but a continuing Barnaby cut him off.

“So, tell me, Mr. Worthy, would you say you are a loyal person?”

“Loyalty?”

“Yes, loyalty. The undisputable feeling of allegiance. You see, loyalty is very important to me... to us... that is to say, both sides here today. There will be times when you are tempted, regardless of which way you go, regardless of which contract you sign, to join the other side. And we, both of us, want to know that when you make a choice, you will stick with that decision.”

“Well, I’ve always been loyal to my country...”

“You mean until you fired upon your countrymen while protecting The Ghost?” Nathan taunted.

“Loyal to my friends,” Worthy continued ignoring the comment.

“You mean until you find them with a picture of your daughter?”

Nathan pushed.

“Loyal to my family...” Worthy trailed off, his voice at the end of the sentence almost imperceptible.

“Really, Mr. Worthy? Really? Are you actually going to mention your family?”

Worthy stopped and looked down at the table. Eventually, after composing himself, he said, “That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it, Mr. Worthy?” Barnaby said. “But it’s interesting, isn’t it? That cracks should show in the simplest of sentences. People use terms like loyalty as throwaway lines like they’re talking about the weather. When we say loyalty, we are talking about something that can’t break, not something that is situational. We cannot afford to pick and choose our allegiances as we see fit.”

Worthy didn’t know how to respond. Being accused of disloyalty made him feel sick and he could feel his anger rising. He clenched his jaw.

Barnaby said, “Your past is your past. There is no changing it. And while checkered, provided the necessary steps for you to be here right now. We are more interested in the future. We need to know you are all in.”

“I’m all in,” Worthy said, his composure as flat as the tone of his voice.

Barnaby and Nathan stared across the table, unflinching.

Worthy exchanged glances with both of them. “What do you want me to say?”

Barnaby and Nathan synchronized their glances to the folder on the table, currently under Worthy’s hand.

Nathan said, “I think you know what we want you to say.”

“The thing you most fear to say, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby added.

“You guys are talking like you’ve heard it all before, like you know what comes next.”

“As we said at the start, Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby said. “We know the story, the beginning, the middle and the end. Heck, we even know what comes before the beginning and what comes after the end. But to hear it being told from that person’s perspective? Well, that is something else entirely. It’s like when the actors get to watch the entire film for the first time, or when a painter finishes that last stroke and takes a step back to admire their artwork. The honest appraisal of one’s work. That is all we ask for. It is what we lavishly bathe ourselves in.”

“Then I guess I should get to it then.”

FOUR_8

I let go of Mark's wrist, his watch falling from view, and tried to figure out how he accomplished the trick. How could it possibly be the same day? It just couldn't be. Plain impossible. Unless I was entirely insane. Maybe after those people kidnapped me, they injected something into my veins, and I dreamt the entire thing. Perhaps every event, from getting the mission to being captured, the torture, the conversation with The Ghost, was something I made up in my mind. It would help rationalize how I witnessed myself on the mountain, and how I and The Ghost disappeared through a door into a dark hallway.

"How the fuck is this the same day?" I breathed.

My mind whirred as I looked at Mark. His mouth was opening and closing, but I couldn't hear anything he was saying. But there was a seriousness to his expression. With sunglasses covering his eyes, I watched the lines on his forehead, the sweat accumulating on his graying sideburns. I worked down to the man's bicep, stretching the t-shirt, constantly hard under strain, a tattoo of swirling design coming into view. Hands tight on the steering wheel, being turned moments before a potential impact with a car in front.

I kept looking. Mark kept looking back, switching views with the traffic in front of him. Mouth moving. Silence.

My heart beat faster. I looked down to see Mark's outstretched hand on my shoulder, shaking wildly. Suddenly, the world became ablaze in digital surround sound. The revving of the engine, the honking horns, the squealing tires. It hit me all at once. And then came Mark's voice.

"Hey, are you listening to me?"

I blinked a few more times, my brain working overtime to process the new environment.

“Yeah,” was all I could reply, and then, “Wait, what? What are you saying?”

“I said there’s been an accident.”

“What? What accident?”

“I told you. With...” He gripped the steering wheel harder. “With your family.”

Heartbeat in my ears. “Is it Shelly? Is she okay? Is Liz okay?” A thousand questions ran through my mind. I suddenly forgot about what happened to me. Stopped questioning, stopped trying to answer the unanswerable.

Mark stared straight ahead. “Didn’t you get the messages on your phone? We need to get...”

Mark’s voice trailed off into silence as I looked at my phone. I had forgotten I was holding it. I had checked it a few minutes prior to refute the date. But now it was the other messages on the screen that gorged on my attention. Twenty-two missed calls. Seven voice-mails.

I unlocked the phone and dialed the voicemail. The first three messages were from Mark.

“Hi James, it’s Mark. Where the hell are you? I can see your car so I know you’re here. I’m waiting.”

“James, it’s Mark again. Look, I’ve got to go chase something up. Call me when you get this.”

“James, me again. Call me when you get this.”

Then...

“Jim? It’s Melissa. Something’s happened. Call me.” Her breath was rapid like she was running.

“James? You need to get the general hospital now! Oh God, James. Oh God.” She sobbed out every second word, and the message ended in a flood of tears.

“James? Where are you?”

And finally, from Mark,

“James! Pick up your fucking phone. Something’s happened. I’m coming back to the nature reserve now. You had better fucking be there.”

The words gushed out with a feeling impatience. Then a long pause, followed by a sigh and, *“I tried, James. I’m sorry.”*

Each message made my chest feel tighter. A jigsaw was coming together, but I still didn’t have all the pieces, but the ones I had were causing my heart to pound heavily. It felt like there was a brick in my stomach and a hand around my throat, gently squeezing. I flushed the recent past from my mind. The pain of a lack of sleep and food washed away by the torrent of phone message emotion.

I turned to face Mark. “What the fuck is going on?”

Mark drew a deep breath. “There’s been an accident.” He honked the horn and spun the wheel, powering the sedan past another vehicle like it was standing still.

“Yeah, you said that.” My words were calm and evenly paced. With images dotting my thoughts, I needed to rely on facts. “Who? Shelly? Liz?”

Mark clenched his jaw. “Yes. A car accident. It knocked Liz around pretty bad. I don’t think we have much time.”

“Much time for what?”

But I wasn’t listening to the response. All I could think about was Liz amongst a forest of tubes and surrounded by machines that beeped or clicked. Adrenalin-fueled my system once again, and I clenched my fists to fight the storm that was brooding within me. I hated myself. Hated Shelly.

Despised just about everyone on the planet and would tear them all apart just to get to my daughter.

FOUR_9

The car screeched to a halt outside the hospital entry, drawing the attention of everyone inside and outside the glass sliding doors. A middle-aged man sat on a bench, his crutches leaning against him. An old woman fidgeted in her wheelchair, the nurse at her rear keeping a tight grip of her charge. A mother dragged two kids out of the doors, muttering that ‘she will never do that again’. There is no happiness at hospitals. Only pain, relief, hope, and despair.

I instinctively leapt out of the car and ran through the opening into the lobby, forgetting that I looked like a derelict human. Felt like an escaped prisoner as apprehensive stares bombarded me. However, I was focused on one thing and one thing only.

Stopped in the middle of the foyer, in a space between the reception, waiting area and a row of fake potted plants. People kept their distance as they navigated around me, occasionally throwing glances at me. There was a sea of faces and I could feel my boat capsizing, waves beating the bow, rudderless in the storm.

Looked up at the signs hanging from the corridor ceilings and then the directory board. I skimmed over the words hoping for something to jump out but my thoughts were strewn. Everything seemed like a jumbled mess of characters and numbers. I grabbed my head in frustration, trying to calm myself, breathing rapidly, feeling myself slip.

A hand came down on my shoulder but I didn’t flinch. The directory enraptured me, and I waited for everything to make sense, waiting to be told where to go.

“C’mon, buddy.” The voice low and gravely. “Let’s go step outside.”

I turned my hunched body around to face a security guard. My shoulders drooped forward further, unable to carry the burden anymore. Given my ruptured stance, I looked into the eyes of the other man.

“My daughter,” I blurted. “I need to find my wife and daughter. But I don’t...” I couldn’t find the words. My anger had manifested into a panic, the focus now a blurred picture of reality.

The rotund security guard took me in, looked me up and down. Sneered at my disheveled appearance; tattered orange jumpsuit and a smell that offended his senses. The guard hiked up his belt and hushed his repeated request to leave the building, trying to keep the incident away from the ears of the people in the waiting areas.

I protested, but the guard grabbed me by the collar, pushing me towards the door. In my current physical and mental state, I could do nothing but comply. The guard stopped mid-stride as another man charged towards me.

“Get your hands off him,” Mark shouted, breaking the hold and stepping between us. “He’s with me.”

Mark spun me around, placed an arm around my shoulder, and we rushed down a corridor towards a bank of elevators.

“I couldn’t find...” I murmured. “I mean, I didn’t know...”

“It’s okay,” Mark said. “This way.”

The trip down identical looking corridors and up elevators was a blur. Every moment was full of fuzzy images of posters about immunization and washing hands, intermittent soothing paintings by local artists of scenery and flowers, and ended with a ding as lift doors opened on the floor of the intensive care unit. Mark led me out and told me to take a seat along a corridor, as he went over to the ICU reception.

I eased down onto the seat and stared at my dirty hands, my dirty feet a haze beyond that, wondering how the hell it had all come to be. I thought about every decision, every twist, and turn in my life that meant I had to be sitting in the hospital at that very moment. The words of The Ghost echoed in my head, dug out of my subconscious.

“Things are going to happen that you can’t change.”

What did that mean? Was I now tied to a path I couldn’t change? Did it mean I could do whatever the hell I wanted and still get the same outcome? Could I take the elevator to the roof and fall off it, only for fate to continue? And what about that future? Was I just one step closer to my own demise?

Mark thrust a cardboard cup into my field of view. I grabbed it reluctantly and held it to my lips. I let the heat warm my face, the aroma of cheap, instant coffee invaded my nostrils, replacing the sharp disinfectant smell that had overtaken my own stink.

“Where are they?” I asked, my vision glued to a spot on the floor in front of me.

Mark sat down next to me with his own cup of goodness. “Liz is still in surgery. Doctors are with Shelly now. She’s banged up pretty bad.”

“I want to see them.”

“I know,” Mark said, sipping. “But you can’t do anything right now. Don’t worry. Everyone knows you’re here. They’ll come and get you when you can go in. Take this time to get yourself together.”

I looked at him. “What do you mean, ‘get yourself together’?”

“On a number of levels,” Mark replied. “First, you need to go clean yourself up. There’s no way they’re going to allow you to see anyone in your condition. You know how infections start. Doctor’s hate that shit.”

I looked down at my garb and ran a hand over my unshaven face. “What do you want me to do?”

“There are facilities you can use. I’ve checked.”

“And what, just get back into the same clothes? I think that defeats the purpose.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll figure it out.”

“Fine, that sounds good. What’s the second thing?”

Mark sighed. “Second, you need to get your head right. When I picked you up, I could tell you weren’t quite on this planet. I don’t know what you’ve been doing or who you’ve been doing it with, but some people are going to need you, and I don’t know if you’re up for it.”

We sipped our coffees. Shoes on carpet and rubbing thighs filled the silence as a nurse walked past carrying an armful of folders.

I leaned forward, placing my elbows on my knees, and looked into the cup. “What did you mean?”

“What did I mean about what?”

“In the car. You said you tried. Said you were sorry.”

Mark stood.

Worthy grabbed his sleeve. “You’re not telling me everything.”

“It’s time for you to go have that shower.”

“Please. You’ve got to tell me. I need to know.”

Mark looked down at me, into the deep-set eyes that once held such focus and courage and now only conveyed confusion and fear.

He sighed. “You’re right. You do need to know.”

“So, tell me.”

Mark sat back down. “I found out what’s been going on... and more importantly, who with.”

I stood and rubbed my forehead. “And Liz has been there?”

The thought of Shelly with another man suddenly seemed pale in significance to exposing my daughter to such an environment. It churned my stomach, and the thought transported me back to the Afghanistan bunk, where I wanted nothing more than to plunge a

knife into Cad's throat. Day after day, hour after hour. Death was what I wanted.

Mark nodded slowly in reply. "I'm sorry, James. They were leaving his place when, well, the accident happened. A car, out of nowhere. It ran a stop sign."

He stood, and I felt his hand on my shoulder. My view of empty chairs and white hallways folded in.

"It was... it was an awkward collision, a one in a million. One second either side and it would never have happened."

Our eyes locked as I stood.

"But it happened," I spat back with contempt. "If she hadn't had been there..."

"I know. If she hadn't caved, or *he* hadn't chased a married woman... I get it. I know you're pissed right now. But, now is not the time—."

I shoved Mark in the chest with the remainder of my energy.

"Of course I'm pissed!" I shouted, drawing gazes from the nurse's station. "And why shouldn't I be? I swear to God. If Liz is permanently hurt or anything like that, I am going to fucking kill someone." I turned and kicked the chair. The sound broke loudly over the silenced corridor and dissipated just as fast.

Mark turned to the reception where the nurse on duty had a phone pressed against her ear and gave sideways glances in our direction. He sighed.

"Stay here," he said. "Remember what I said about getting yourself together. Find that military discipline they knocked into you years ago. Think of a prayer. Make up a motivational quote. I don't give a shit, just find something before everything comes crashing down."

Mark walked over to the reception while I righted my seat and eased down into it. Adrenalin crash.

"Mr. Worthy?" The voice was solemn, deep, husky.

I jumped to my feet and turned to face a man wearing scrubs. A face mask hung below his beard. His light brown eyes were kind yet resigned, and I knew right away. I wavered, my head feeling light as my breathing stopped. My heart bounced in my chest, threatening to shatter my ribs. I reached for the wall. The doctor reached out and caught me and gently lowered me onto a seat.

The echo of his words repeats in my head but they are unintelligible, just noise. Mark dashed past my vision, and I looked to see what had stolen his attention. The world slowed down. Seconds became minutes. The noise was one long protracted yawn. Mark was blocking my view but then he shifted, like a balancing object on the precipice of tumbling over and that's when I saw her, Christine Raziell. Expression marred, her face a blurry mess, but I could tell they were arguing. Why? Did they know each other? Why did it even matter?

I blinked. I tried to bring myself back. More words. I strained. The doctor's voice, it is close, next to my ear. A hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry ... I'm sorry... There was nothing we could do."

It couldn't be. No. He was wrong. The doctor was wrong. My own voice, shrinking into the recesses of my mind until there was nothing. Silence. Darkness bordered my vision. The polished floor became murky and gray. I couldn't snap out of it, but I didn't want to. I wanted to be taken away from there, for the world to swallow me whole. Take me away. Take me.

Darkness. Numbness.

And then a voice, as clear and pure as spring water.

"You shouldn't have gone," the man's voice said. "You should have taken my offer and signed the contract. I could have protected you."

FIVE_0

Room

Worthy stood at the window and took a sip from his glass. He stared at a raindrop weaving its way down to the floor from the ceiling pane, drawing parallels between its path and his own journey. Too many forks in the road, where decision points created alternate realities. He wondered if there was another version of him somewhere—a happier version—with his family intact, his daughter older than the memories he kept.

He turned his head at a rough throat clearing that erupted from behind him.

“We’d very much appreciate your return to the negotiation table, Mr. Worthy.”

It was Nathan. Worthy ignored the invitation and chose another raindrop to follow. He pressed his finger to the glass and followed it.

“Have you ever lost a child, Nathan?” Worthy asked.

There was silence, and Worthy supposed Barnaby and Nathan were swapping stares and having wordless conversations with each other.

“No,” came the reply eventually. “I can’t say I’ve had any children, let alone lost one.”

Worthy nodded.

“But Barnaby has.”

Worthy looked up and focused, his reflection materializing, bordered by the swirling gray mass of cloud beyond the glass pane. He watched himself take another sip.

Worthy turned and folded his arms, and threw an expected look towards Barnaby.

Barnaby sighed. "As previously discussed, Mr. Worthy, we cannot bring anyone back for you, and therefore this line of conversation is merely getting in the way of what needs to happen."

Worthy approached the table. He placed his glass on the edge and sat back in the chair. "Then you know the unending pain. The ache that never truly leaves..."

"The ripple," Barnaby added, "that permeates all time, the wound that never closes or clots. Yes. I can empathize. But you don't own that feeling. People die every day. Children die every day. Every moment there are lives torn apart, direction lost, purpose dissolved into tears. We can give you that purpose, give you the compass, and all you need to do is to sign."

Worthy look down at the two sets of contracts. He reached for the stack in front of Barnaby. He thumbed through a few pages, the print fuzzy, his mind focused on Barnaby's words. Would it be enough for him to sign? Is it what he wanted? Is that what *he* needed?

A loud knock echoed around the room and Worthy struggled to locate the source of the rapping. Barnaby and Nathan looked at each other as another series of knocks floated around them. Barnaby sighed and slowly stood, exhaling a loud sigh as he did so. He stood behind his chair. He placed his hands behind his back and bowed slightly.

"Please excuse me, Mr. Worthy. But I must attend to some... urgent business."

Worthy shrugged.

Barnaby continued. "According to the rules laid out for us, I hereby suspend these negotiations until further notice. No further offers will be made in this time and we will not honor an acceptance of previous offers."

Worthy leaned forward on the table and tapped the folder in front of him as he watched Barnaby walk over to the corner of the room, towards the full-length glass panels. When he arrived, a section of the wall opened, an invisible door appearing in the solid partition.

Barnaby stood on the precipice with his arms folded. From his field of view, Worthy could just make out a person on the other side of the doorway. With their features hidden, Worthy surmised the person was female, based on a flash of animated hands. For a moment, he wondered if it was Busty Angel. Perhaps she was preparing for the night's festivities, relaying her desires to her older lover. Distracting images ran through his mind.

Worthy blinked and looked over at Nathan. He wore a broad smile on his face as if he could read his thoughts. Nathan raised an eyebrow and Worthy stopped tapping, his fingers becoming stone, hovering a centimeter above the table.

Worthy's eyes narrowed and looked down at the folder sitting under Nathan's hand. Worthy gently laid his hand on the table and smiled. "That's a neat trick."

"Not as neat as getting you to sign my contract."

Worthy looked at the two piles still in front of himself. They seemed to breathe in rhythm to the ebb and flow of the energy that floated around the table. It felt like the entire room was alive, and he couldn't tell that the longer he sat there, whether he was becoming in tune with the beat or butting up against it at right angles.

"I believe Barnaby suspended the negotiations until further notice."

Nathan shot a sideways glance to the old man in a heated conversation, his arms switching from crossed and guarded to pointing and elaborate movements.

“Never mind that. There are provisions in the negotiation guidelines for us to continue our discussion, even whilst the other negotiating party is not present.”

Worthy sat motionless, waiting for Nathan to continue.

Nathan leaned forward and spoke in a hushed tone. “Tell me.”

Worthy locked eyes across the table. “Tell you what?”

“Tell me your darkest desires, tell me your unfulfilled wants, tell me your spectacular needs. I will offer them to you. If you want a million dollars, a big house, a fast car, I can give that to you.”

“I thought Barnaby said tangible objects could not be part of the deal.”

Nathan dismissed the suggestion. “Do not worry about him. That is an antiquated rule that doesn’t even exist anymore. Barnaby is merely clinging to the ancient past. Things are different now.”

A clearing of a throat made Worthy flinch.

“I think you’ll find, Nathan, that things are no different now than they were thousands of years ago. Nothing ever changes.”

Worthy eyed the stealthy Barnaby who had reappeared behind his chair and noted the ashen look on the usually poker-faced man. Barnaby sat, stretched out his arms, and continued to brush imaginary lint off his pristine couture.

“Wars have been ravaging our existence since we found out how to throw a stone. People have died; for love, for hate, for no reason at all, for anything and everything. Today is no different. What is different is the ability to share the knowledge of these events in an instant. Everyone is now more aware of what is happening.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t change?” Worthy quipped.

“I’m saying people *can’t* change, Mr. Worthy. It is built into you, into your DNA, part of your genetic code. All by design, mind you.”

“Design? Who on earth would design a system that destroys itself?”

“It’s the same reason our planet destroys and replenishes. Storms, flood, famine. It is all about maintaining a balance.”

“A balance of life?”

Barnaby joined his hands together in front of himself and nodded slowly. “I would love to continue this conversation for the rest of the day, unfortunately, I have received news we must continue.”

Nathan looked over. “Are you saying...”

“Yes,” Barnaby replied without looking at him. “Time has gotten away, and soon others will be here.”

“To negotiate with you guys?”

“Yes,” Barnaby said. “Something like that. And so, we must press on. Continue your story, Mr. Worthy.”

“Well,” Worthy said as he tapped the folder on the table. “I’m sure this is really what you want to hear about.” He opened the file, picked up a photo and slid it across the table. “You want to know how I killed my wife.”

Nathan held up his hand.

Worthy read the gesture. “I’m sorry. You know how I killed my wife. You just want to hear me say it.”

“Precisely,” Nathan sneered through clenched teeth.

FIVE _1

I woke groggily to the sounds of clattered plates in a sink and the smell of coffee. My dreamy existence slowly became reality, the washed-out lines of my lounge room becoming clearer. I shifted my feet off the couch and grunted as I sat up. I yawned, rubbed my eyes and scratched my beard. I had showered, but I couldn't remember when. I hadn't shaved because why the hell should I. I couldn't remember how long it had been since that day at the hospital, I didn't even know what day of the week it was. Days merged into one. Time was measured by AM or PM, daytime, night time.

The only thing I remembered from the previous few days was silence. Not a single word was uttered between Shelly and me, and the tension was building. I couldn't even bear to look at her, as much as she avoided eye contact with me. We stayed in the same house, even slept in the same bed, but we were anything but in a relationship. We were two individuals, trying to come to terms, attempting to wade through grief.

I looked over to the kitchen. Shelly was at the sink. She seemed to move plates around as opposed to washing them, her gaze fixed steadily out the window. At first, I thought she was making noise to wake and annoy me, and then I realized her thoughts were transfixed elsewhere, as much as mine were.

I pushed myself off the couch and shuffled around the other furniture, a coffee table, another chair, some other piece of furniture I never knew the proper name for, and shambled into the kitchen. Shelly either didn't or couldn't acknowledge my arrival, so I descended onto the coffee machine. I stood at the counter in front of the silver machine, but just stared at it, half forgetting what I was doing, half caught up in my own head.

The phone rang, and neither of us moved, just let it run its course. Our cheerful ‘we’re not here’ message played, and the voices sounded so foreign I doubted they belonged to us, the feeling happiness that belonged so far in the past, something I doubted I would ever feel in the future. I was forever standing on the threshold of a black hole, and sometimes I pictured myself falling into it and letting the dark do its job.

“Umm, hi, this is Heather and Grant.... We wanted to check in with you. Call us and we can arrange something... we’re sorry. We’ll try calling back...”

The click of the receiver sounded and the beeping finally died to silence. They were out of the ‘sorry for your loss’ stage and into the ‘checking in’ stage, however, I don’t think either of us wanted to talk, let alone talk about what happened.

What happened was the passing of time, but how much was difficult to define. Days rolled into nights with the violent collision of alcohol and sleep with the only thing on my mind being mentally escaping the mere thought of Liz, but there are reminders everywhere. On the tables, on the fridge. Drawings, toys. One part of me wanted to throw them all away, clean the slate, pretend. The other part couldn’t bear to even touch them, couldn’t handle losing them. They were the tap on the shoulder or tug of the shirt to ask for my help.

I felt a warmth and looked down at an empty frying pan. I held a hand over it.

“You want this on?” I grumbled, the mere act of forming whole words an extreme effort.

There was no reply, just the clinking noises of dishes in the sink.

I shrugged as I stared at the coffee machine. “Coffee?”

I waited for the clinking of dishes as a reply, the novel way of communication, however, there was nothing but the whispering of paper being stacked followed by the noise of something tumbling over the countertop. I turned to investigate and saw Shelly standing

in front of the fridge. She yanked off Liz's drawings one by one and stacked them on the counter, then threw the magnets onto the counter.

"What are you doing?"

Nothing.

"Hey!" I raised my voice, trying to get her attention. "What the hell are you doing?"

"We need to clean up," she mouthed, her words almost inaudible.

"What?"

"I said," she murmured without losing focus on her task. "We need to clean up."

I looked around and took in the kitchen for the first time. I had missed it in my haze, walked right past it without noticing. Clean. Excessively clean. And not a photo of Liz or one of her drawings or one of her things in sight.

I walked over to her, energy finding its way into me, and grabbed her arms. "Stop!"

She pulled away. "We need to clean, James... in case people come around."

Her voice wavered, and I knew she was teetering on the brink, about to lose all control.

I ran upstairs and pushed open Liz's bedroom door. The bed had been stripped clear. There was an open suitcase on the floor, piled with Liz's clothes. A stack of cardboard boxes against a wall. Her dresser and shelves were empty. My heart leapt to my throat. It was as if Shelly was trying to erase Liz. My job had stolen my daughter from me in life, and now her memory was being yanked away as well. Rage burned in me as I stormed back downstairs.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?!" I shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

Shelly ignored me, continuing with her job.

I approached, my back up, my head fuming.

“Just stop,” I said as I grabbed her shoulder. She spun and collapsed into me. She broke. Tears streamed down her face in uncontrollable sobs. Her body shook with every breath. But I couldn’t take her in, I couldn’t caress her, ease her pain.

I pushed her off me. I leaned down and pointed upstairs.

“What the fuck did you do to her room?”

Sobs. Shaking body. Her chin on her chest. Lost at sea.

“Answer me, damn it!”

Silence.

She said something, too soft to make it out, infuriatingly faint.

“What? Tell me!”

She looked up slowly. “We need to move on, James.” Her eyes were pleading. “It’s been months.”

I slammed a hand down on the kitchen counter. “Don’t you fucking tell me I need to move on!”

She came closer, seeking refuge, pursuing comfort.

“I need you,” she begged. “I need you to be there for me.”

“Don’t tell me what I need to do... I needed to be there for Liz. Who was there for her?” I edged towards her. “Who was there for her?” I could feel the darkness wrap its long spindly fingers around my ankles and start to drag me down, an elongated and harsh downward spiral into despair. But I didn’t care.

She placed a hand on my heaving chest.

“How could this happen?” Shelly asked between watery breaths. “What did we do to deserve this?”

I grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her away as I took a step back. Anger flowing through me, adrenalin, energy, hatred. Emotions beyond all of that, ones that I couldn’t even name.

She reached out, and I stared at her, my eyes narrowed, my jaw clenched. She was small, her shoulders hunched, her cheeks red and wet, a confused look on her face.

I took another step back.

“James?” She stepped forward, reaching.

“Don’t!” I said stepping back towards the lounge. “Don’t touch me!”

“Why are you doing this?” More sobs.

“Why am I doing this? I didn’t do this.” I stepped forward, my shoulders back, my breathing shallow. “You did this!” I pointed a finger at her. “You did all of this. This is all your fault!”

She stepped back, edging along the counter. “What do you mean? It was an accident, James.” Desperation rose in her voice, the cocktail of fear and anxiety.

“Where were you when this happened?” I interrogated.

She looked down as if searching. “I had visited my sister -.”

“Liar!” I roared as I stepped forward. “Don’t lie to me.” I slammed my hand down on the countertop again. The sting worked its way up my arm. I liked it. I wanted more pain.

Shelly jumped. She held her hands out in front, her fight reflex kicking in.

“I told you,” she said, her voice deepening, rationalization fighting through the emotion. Her voice was talking down a jumper, but her body was recoiling, edging away from the fight. “I was at my sister’s.” She reached the end of the counter space, wedged herself in the corner. There was nowhere to go.

“More lies! Let me tell you! You’ve been cheating on me! You couldn’t stand me so you decided to go elsewhere.”

“No, James. No!”

I stepped up, loomed over her. “And then you took Liz there. How the fuck could you do that? Have another man near my daughter? You fucking disgust me!” The words came out of their own accord. Every thought I’ve had boiling over.

“No, James,” she repeated, her hands up in defense, almost touching my chest.

I slapped them away. “You took her there and now she’s dead.” I stepped forward, almost on top of her. “You killed her! You killed her! You. Killed. Liz!”

I grabbed her throat, my hands quick and controlled, the initial impact rocked her head back, momentarily lifting her off her feet. She gasped as her hands and legs flailed wildly. She tried to slap my hands away, but I was too strong, too uncontrollable to stop myself, too in control for her to have any impact. It was an out-of-body experience. I was a spectator that was powerless to step in and stop it.

Shelly gasped again, her hands on my face this time, running over them. Her eyes changed from being wide with fright to half closed and drowsy. I could feel her life getting weaker and weaker. I kept asking myself, ‘do you really want to do this?’ My vision became blurred, the fury mixing with sadness.

And that’s when I felt it. A sharp stinging sensation to the side of my neck, pressure mounting itself in my brain, my left eyesight going completely black. My legs buckled, and I released my hands, twisting away. Shelly had dug a finger into a pressure point, the power shifting. Just like the night we met. I could make out the look of resilience on her features with my good eye, that *‘fuck you’* kind of expression.

Then she stopped and pushed the side of my head down. It was nothing at first, just the awkward angle of my numb face on the countertop. At that moment I asked myself why she would even bother; what was the point?

And then came the pain. Immense heat washed over my cheek but I couldn’t pull away. A sizzle, burning flesh. I was on fire. It wasn’t the countertop. It was the cooktop. I roared and tried to push away, my extremities made of rubber, my panic rising.

Seconds felt like hours. When she decided she had exacted sufficient revenge, or punishment, or both, or felt she was safe from the maniac husband attacking her, she let go. I slid to the cold tiles, letting the cool soak into my hands and feet while my face remained

on fire. As I lay on the floor, I watched her bare feet dash around the corner towards the garage.

I didn't know whether I should feel angry, confused, or sorry for myself. Everything jumbled and tied together like knotted string. I pulled myself up and stumbled towards the garage, following my prey. I had started something. I was once again caught in that moment; do I push forward, damn the consequences, or pull back and surrender. The sounds of slamming car doors echoed down the hallway and I fixed my vision on the door at the end. It was ajar... welcoming, pulling me closer.

I bounced off the walls, pain still etching itself into my face, my brain registering the need for attention. I ignored it. She killed Liz. She tried to kill me. Closer and closer. The sound of another slam of a car door perpetrated its way into me, and I can't tell whether it's new or an echo of the previous. Was she looking for something? Did she forget something?

I passed the hall table. I remember when we first inherited it and we made a commitment to only put keys on it. A quick and easy place to find the important things when you needed them. But over time it became a refuge for anything and everything. Unopened letters, bills, bits of this and that, that didn't seem to have a home anywhere else. It was the orphanage for household items that someone couldn't bear to throw away. But then something caught my eye. A set of keys. Her keys.

My adrenalin surged once again, my fists clenching ready to fight, survival instincts at their peak. I entered the doorway the same time Shelly was running out. We collided. She bounced back into the garage, the impact much worse for her smaller frame.

There was a sickening crack as her head slammed into the front panel of my car. An awkward angle. A muffled groan. Silence as she slipped onto the floor. A trail of blood that followed her movements. A wet smack as her head hit the concrete.

She was dead.

FIVE_2

I sat in my car and waited. Smacked the steering wheel with shaky hands. Peered out into the nature reserve. Glanced into the rear vision mirror. Waited for the flashing lights of a patrol car to pull up behind me.

The air was cool, and the area deserted. Late morning on a weekday meant I had the place to myself, which was just as well, considering. How did it all end like this? How did the events unfold in such a way I couldn't see this end coming? Maybe I should have. I never meant it to happen, yet there I was, about to make my most cowardly move yet.

A four-wheel drive pulled up beside me and the driver got out. He rounded the front of his car. Although it appeared he was looking at me, I knew he was taking in every aspect of his environment, his eyes scanning the area. He leaned against my car.

"Hey man," Mark crooned. "Haven't heard from you in a while. Is everything okay? You sounded a bit scattered from your call."

I didn't reply. Couldn't reply. I merely grunted.

"You alright?" he pushed.

I turned to face him.

"Geez," he said, taking it in for the first time. "What the fuck happened to your face?"

It took a second for the events to play out in my head. The accusation, the lies. My hands around her neck, Shelly pushing my face against the hot plate. The chase, the sickening crack of her head on my car. The slamming of the car trunk as I made a phone call.

My silence pushed Mark to keep asking questions.

"What happened?"

I grunted again.

Mark chewed his lip. “James. Do you want to show me what happened?”

He stepped aside, and I kicked the door open. Mark followed me to the back of the car, the gravel crunching under our footsteps.

He stepped back as I popped the lid, the door rising with a squeak. Muffled moans, groggy and incoherent. Not as dead as I thought. Christ. Things just got worse. I didn’t look. I couldn’t look. I had been running through options ever since Shelly smashed her head against the car. Do I stay and take responsibility, or do I run from everything? And what do I do with Shelly? Drop her off at the hospital, the police station, a ditch?

Mark gazed into the cargo hold and then back at me. He put a hand on the lid and slowly pushed down, the lock taking hold with a soft click, drowning out Shelly’s moans as she gradually regained consciousness.

“You want me to deal with this?” Mark asked. The way he asked so matter-of-factly did nothing to ease me.

I nodded as I looked away. Shame and guilt filled me to overflowing, my stomach churned, my chest tight. I was scared I would vomit everywhere if I opened my mouth to speak, so I decided my interactions would continue to be mere noises.

Mark placed a hand on my shoulder. “What about you?”

I turned to him, confused.

“I can get you out of here,” he says. “Until this blows over.” He waved a hand over the car.

“No,” I muster, fighting the urge to vomit on his shoes. “I’m done. I want to get out of here for good. I never want to be found.”

“Look, James. There are some things I can do and some things I can’t.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” I said, pushing his hand off me.

Mark shrugged his shoulders. “It’s all I have. All I can do.”

I looked away, through the trees and to a car speeding along the motorway beyond.

“Trust me, James. I’m here to look after you. By the time you get back here, there will be no investigation, no instigations, no accusations. It will all go away. You’ll be free to carry on with your life, however you see fit, in whichever way you choose.”

I thought about being in the house, being surrounded by memories of love and hurt, of happiness and sadness. I guess I could always sell and move away myself. If Mark was right, I could do that without a storm cloud over my head, without a police investigation following my every move. I would work out later how I could deal with pain and guilt. I already had a few ideas involving a foreign-named brown liquid and maybe a bullet.

“But the police. They will want to ask questions. Someone will want to ask questions. Her sister? Her friends?”

He placed a hand on my shoulder. “I can take care of all of that. Clean it all up for you.”

“Fine,” I said, still half disbelieving he could pull off such a multifaceted task.

“You’re doing the right thing,” Mark reassured, but it did nothing to calm the uneasiness that chopped around my stomach.

“What do we do from here?” I managed to get out, looking around at the nothingness with disquiet.

Mark looked around. “Well, I’m kind of glad you asked. I need to get you out of here, and I would appreciate if you go with these people willingly.”

“Why does it sound like you want something from me?”

“Because this shit isn’t easy,” Mark reared up. “What you need takes a certain skill, takes time. So, we’re going to need your help with something.” He circled around me, holding my vision.

“We?” I asked. “Who’s ‘we’?”

Mark stepped aside to reveal a dark van silently pulling alongside his car. The familiarity bit me and I found my breath catching in my throat.

“The last time I got into that van, I ended up as a prisoner somewhere in the middle of fucking nowhere.”

“This time it’s going to be different.”

“How the hell can you know that?”

“Because I know shit, okay? There’s a task that needs to be done, and only you can do it.”

My shoulders dropped. Resigned. “Yeah, that’s what they said last time.”

“Let me put it this way, James. Do you want my help, or do you want to deal with this shit all by yourself? Do you want to go to the police? Or perhaps we let Shelly tell her side of the story.” He points down at the trunk and I follow his finger. I can hear pounding now, Shelly fighting her way out.

I pushed past Mark and walked towards the van, trying to find an ounce of dignity with every step but I felt smaller with each passing moment. The van door slid open to reveal the dark, empty space. I was expecting more hooded men with machine guns to jump out and grab a hold of me, but I guess they saw no point, as I was giving myself so willingly to them.

I stood at the door and turned. Mark stood at the rear of my car leaning against the trunk.

Out of the shadows behind me, an arm gripped my neck. I winced at the sharp sting in my neck, which quickly helped my brain to shut down. Just before my eyes closed for good, I thought I saw Mark’s face change, form into something different, almost not human.

Almost too hard to believe.

FIVE_3

Sleep. At least, I thought it was. Although it might have been that place between awake and asleep, that plane where consciousness and unconsciousness collide. And then suddenly I am there, in the room. Even before I open my eyes, I can tell I am there. I sensed the walls, I can *feel* someone... or something.

I sluggishly open my eyes to the dim light, the room growing brighter the more alert I become like the lighting was in tune with my body, or my body aligned with the lighting. I am sitting on a metal chair, devoid of restraints.

I lift my head, surprisingly light headed, no sign of trauma. Images of Liz and Shelly dance across my conscious but sadness doesn't follow, nothing does. This room, the same as when I received my mission to protect The Ghost from being executed by allied soldiers, has once again zapped all emotion from me. I am rational, focused, ready.

“Welcome back, James.”

I thought it was an interesting turn of phrase. I stare at the shiny black walls, to the ceiling that reminded me of a starless night sky.

“We need your help.”

“The last time you needed my help...” I trailed off as I gripped my head. It was still so hard to believe what I saw. “When you sent me back to that place. I'm fairly certain I saw... myself. Now, how can that be?” I should have felt angry, flustered. Instead, my emotions remained in limbo.

“We need your help, James.”

“Why don't you just tell me what's going on?”

“Militant forces have kidnapped a soldier and are looking to sell to the highest bidder for extremist purposes.”

“So? What does this have to do with me?”

“We require your skills to locate and guide the prisoner to safety.”

“I’ll ask again, isn’t there someone else that can help you?”

“There is no one else, James. It must be you.”

“Why? Why must it be me?”

“Because the soldier you are to save is Sergeant James Worthy.”

The wall in front of me dissolved to display an image of myself, taken from my military records along with all manner of personal information. It continued to flash and overlay, the screen a dense jungle of data.

“I don’t understand. I’m right here!”

“Are you, James? The first time you went to Bdama, you were shot. Who by?”

I lowered my head, recalling those moments when I was going to slice Cad’s neck open before something struck me. “I’m not sure.”

“You are looking at this from the wrong perspective, James.”

“How can you possibly know?”

“We know,” the voice replied sharply. “Change perspective. The second time you went to Bdama.”

“When you sent me?”

“Yes.” The word echoed through his conscious.

I remembered watching the gray figures through my thermal scope, letting the familiarity of events wash over me. I recalled scrambling to the top of the hill, taking aim and firing.

“That’s right,” the voice said as if reading my mind.

I let my head fall into my hands. I had been trying to reconcile those events for months. Walking through everything one step at a time. And every time I ended up at the same endpoint, a place that made little sense. And then I would dismiss it and go back to square one.

“Who are you?” I mumbled.

Silence.

“How could you possibly know anything?” I said, throwing my hands into the air.

“We know everything, James.”

I stood. “This is all bullshit.”

But in every direction I turned, the wall became alive, displaying photos and vital stats about me.

“And then what happened?”

“And then what happened to who?” I asked, still turning away, hands on my hips, already tired from the conversation and desperately seeking an exit.

“What happened after you fired?”

“I was captured,” I answered straightforwardly like it happened every day, like I had numerous experiences of being in a place devoid of hope.

“You were rescued.” It was a statement, but I felt compelled to nod in agreement, anyway. “By who?” the voice asked.

I scratched my head. “The Ghost, or whatever his real name is.”

“You need to go back, James.”

“Why? None of this is making any sense.”

“We told you. To save James Worthy.”

I sighed. “I don’t understand what’s happening. Are you saying I’m... that I’m... No. None of this is right, none of this can be true.”

“Accept it. If you don’t go back, if you don’t save yourself, then your entire existence will be called into question. There is so much at stake, so much in jeopardy. Find yourself and return them. Without you, all is lost. You will be lost.”

I shook my head. “I still can’t believe what you’re saying.”

And so, they repeated everything. Different emphases on various words. It felt like a police interrogation, each round wearing me down, like a wave pulling sand from the beach to the ocean. Each time I ended back in the same place. I was tired when I agreed, when

I was sick of trying to understand, when it hurt to think, hurt to talk. I wanted out, I wanted to be doing something other than sitting in that damned chair.

“Your first mission is to locate yourself.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Now hold on. If you guys know everything, why not just tell me exactly where, drop me in, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

There was a pause. “I’m afraid to say it just doesn’t work like that. There is a journey for you to undertake.”

“Haven’t I been through enough?”

“No. Life is a journey. Events build character. They create memories, experiences you can draw on when you need them the most. We need to know you are willing and capable to do anything.”

“I think I’ve been through enough crap. The things I’ve experienced...” I look down at my hands. “The things I’ve done.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think or feel, James,” the voice retorted. “All that matters is what you’re going to do. It is time for redemption.”

It felt like they bombarded me with instructions, albeit it simple and straightforward in their manner. My mind was caught up in a whirlwind of a fairy tale, something you read in books or watch in movies, but not real life. I thought I might have woken at some point, to find Shelly beside me, to have Liz dive bomb onto the bed on an early Sunday morning. For this never-ending nightmare to be over, for things to go back to the way they were. But how far back would we need to go? And what would I trade for it? Everything for everything? Death for life?

“Markings on doors,” I paraphrased. “Got it.”

“Remember. Everything you need will be there when you arrive.”

I nodded. “When are we leaving?”

“One more thing. Refrain from bloodshed during your rescue efforts. We implore you to use the resources available to minimize the

carnage. There will be plenty of time for death after the fact. Do you understand, James?"

I didn't but agreed, nonetheless. "No bodies, retrieve the target, head to the rendezvous. Got it." I knew it would be harder than the eleven words I had just said, and sure my nonchalant summary of the previous hour did nothing to assure the mystery people of my capability to accomplish the mission.

However, the response was a section of the wall opening to reveal a doorway.

And the inky blackness beyond.

FIVE _4

The first thing that hit me as I walked through the doorway was heat. Dry heat. Desert heat. The abyss instantly gave way to light, and I found myself standing in a room, the air thick, unfamiliar to my lungs, that took me a few minutes for my body to get used to the environment.

The room was sparsely furnished, and that in itself was an overstatement. It was a room, shelter, but no more. A bed that appeared to be a few dirty sheets covering a thin mattress on the floor. A small table with a jug and a cup. A window on the far wall.

I turned back to the door I just walked through and opened it, half expecting darkness but was greeted by a short hallway lined by other doors. There was a stairwell at the far end. I eased the door shut and turned my attention to the room.

“Well, shit,” I murmured to myself. It didn’t bother me, I had slept, and *not* slept, in worse places during my military career. I had taken a shit while I was under heavy enemy fire. It’s just that what I saw in the room differed greatly to my expectations.

When I saw the black Samsonite suitcase in the corner, my heart skipped a little. Finally, something that was going to help me. Perhaps pieces of a high-powered sniper rifle, snug within specially made foam cut outs. I grabbed the case and threw it down on the mattress, the locks disengaging at my slightest touch. At the time it never occurred to me what would have happened if someone stumbled across the room, this suitcase.

I lifted the lid. What was inside is not what I thought. Money. Piles of it. In the lid, buried in black foam was a combat knife. I immediately grabbed it, felt the weight in my hand. It would have to do

until I could get something more, although a knife in close combat is the most effective weapon you could have.

Is that what the money was for? To buy weapons? Why not just give me weapons? I cast my mind back to being hauled out of that damned cage, but the images came back in a blurred mess. Was the money to buy me? A payment for a person? Maybe. But there was something else. Muscle. Men with guns. Cars. That's what I needed. That's what the money was for. To buy people's services.

I left the suitcase. I approached the window and leaned against the sill. The hot air burst against my face, the sky smattered with wispy clouds. I was three stories up and looked out over the other buildings. Hoping for some landmark to at least give me a starting point, I realized I was in a small town, as nameless as the people I've killed over the years, about as unique as the bullets I loaded into a magazine.

Below me in the streets, people went about their lives. Selling, buying, bartering. A mother carried a small child on her hip. A goat, poked with a stick or cane of some description, was guided down the road. To the pasture or to its slaughter I could only guess.

A man idled up the street from my left. His robes were clean, his entourage large. A religious man? Someone of influence? Someone who can be bought? Who am I kidding? Everyone can be bought. Although I'm sure someone like that would sooner slit my throat and take my money before offering someone like me any help.

The sand in the air made me thirsty, and I left my perch to continue my thinking over a cup of water. I investigated the liquid in the jug on a small table next to the makeshift bed. The jug itself was cool to the touch. I pushed my nose into the opening and inhaled. A slight smell of chlorine edged on my palette, enough to make me think the water is safe to drink.

I dipped my finger into it and taste. It's good enough, and I promptly gulped down a cupful. I pushed the robes off the bed and

eased myself down onto the mattress. I put my head against the stone wall and closed my eyes. Tiredness gripped me, and I couldn't tell if it was from exhaustion or the heat.

Thoughts drifted in and out of my head. Was I supposed to wait? What the hell was I waiting for? Some sign? Some message from the heavens to guide the way? They plonk me here and expect me to do the rest, to "*live the life journey*", whatever that meant. I needed a plan, unfortunately, I couldn't come up with one.

I wondered if me sitting there was placing my other self, the person I'm to save, in jeopardy. But the more I thought about it the more I couldn't get my head around it. I was still struggling with the entire concept, as foreign as the place I was in.

I gave up trying to think and let sleep take me under. At that point, I didn't care if the world opened and swallowed me whole, if demons used my bones as currency while they played games of chance in the streets of hell.

I opened my eyes groggily, hoping the sun had moved out of sight, wishing the cooler change of night was upon me. Unfortunately, nothing seemed to have changed and I couldn't tell whether it had been glorious minutes or a selfish full day of sleep. I pulled myself up, enamored by the rejuvenation of closing my eyes.

I ambled to the window, my feet scuffing against the stained concrete floor. Across the street a mother and child. To my right a goat. Below me a robed man with his entourage. A replica of the scene I had witnessed previously. Most curious. Was the world repeating, waiting for me to do something? Perhaps I was the center of the universe. I smirked at the thought. Everything revolves around me. I looked around. Pretty shitty place to be for someone as important as the center of everything.

And then something else familiar, albeit different surroundings, a different time. Plumes of dust erupted into the air. The faint sounds

of engines carried on the breeze. A visceral reaction, something pulled in my stomach, urging me to watch.

A group of six motorcycles arrived into town, the riders garbed in brown robes, material tied around their faces to protect from the sand, machine guns draped over their shoulders. Some motorcycles had two passengers, while others rode solo. Ten in total.

They pulled up outside of my building, if you could call it that, and the pillion passengers jumped off and readied their weapons. The street ticked by, people going about their business as the melodic hum of small engines filled the streets, the bikers having as much effect on the townspeople as a fly.

I retrieved the knife from the suitcase, expecting the worst, and pressed myself against the wall next to the door. Were they here for me? I guessed I would soon find out. The motors thrummed outside the window. Seconds ticked away. Then heavy footsteps on the stairs, scuffing, some grunting in a language incomprehensible to me. I gripped the knife hard, ready to attack. I would wait until they were all in the room, stab the nearest at the base of his spin and continue to use them as a body shield. I would use their weapons against them, blasting holes in their heads. The plan was sound, given the time I had to think about it. It was all going to be instinct and training, reflexes, and habits.

The sound of a door being kicked open so close I couldn't figure out why my door was still in place and not in a pile of splinters on the ground. There was shouting that seemed to be coming from the next room. With the adrenalin coursing through my veins, my brain took a few seconds to catch up with what was happening.

And then something piqued my curiosity. A word. An English word. I opened the door a crack. In the hall a man had his back to me, shouting to others, pointing to the stairs. Suddenly, a hooded man with tied hands was shoved into the corridor quickly followed by the barrels of AK-47s. More shouting, chaos, bodies shoved

against each other, bouncing off the walls as a collective made their way to the stairs. All the while, the man in the hallway watched. He had no gun, or any other weapon I could see. Perhaps his weapons were intangible; the language he spoke, the people he knew. He could be someone of use.

I waited for the mass of bodies to step down into the stairwell, then I emerged from my room, knife ready to attack. The man lowered his gaze to the ground, and I sensed he was in deep reflection. His thinking gave me time to mask the few steps towards him.

When I grabbed him, his body stiffened. I was taller, stronger, better trained. It was hardly a fair fight. My knife went to his throat and hand over his mouth before he could make a sound.

I whispered in his ear. "I don't want to kill you." He didn't struggle. It was almost as if he was anticipating it, waiting for it to happen. He was searching for recognition.

I moved him around and walked him into my room. I kicked the door shut and waited, still holding my prey, threatening to slice his neck if he made a sound. There were more shouts down below the window as the motorcycle engines roared, the gang rolling out, failing to notice they were without their comrade. Perhaps they were distracted by the excitement of the moment, perhaps they just didn't care. Either way, they had what they came for. And I had something that would help me achieve my mission.

FIVE_5

With the motorcycle engines dying off into the distance, I pushed the man away from me. He lunged forward, catching his step and turning. Fear spilled out of his eyes, despite the lack of defiance in his face. I knew I was the enemy, the type of person he had been raised to hate, to kill at a moment's notice, to kill without hesitation, without remorse. That behavior seemed oddly familiar as to how I was trained.

He put his hands up, like a sideshow boxer, and traded glances between the knife in my hand and my eyes. He blurted something out, in Pashto, I figured.

I pointed the knife at him.

“No. English! Speak in English.”

“No English,” he said, but he was lying. His face betrayed him, or more accurately, the lack of facial expression changes betrayed him. He knew exactly what I was saying.

“You fucking liar,” I retorted, stepping towards him.

His shoulders dropped, just a little. His eyes widening, just a little. Guilt, the fact he had been caught out, caught in a lie, radiated off him like a stench. Definitely not a poker player.

“Look,” I said as I held my arms out. “I don't want to hurt you. I need your help.”

More worried glances to the knife.

I sighed and threw it on the mattress. It rebounded off the lid of the suitcase, the metal on metal twang rang across the room.

“There. Is that better?”

He hesitated. Even an insurgent foot soldier would have dived on the weapon and used it to kill me in the name of Allah. He didn't.

He just backed away, his breathing shallow, his hands still up, ready for a fight.

“What do you want?” he asked, his perfectly formed words heavily accented.

“Can you please relax?”

He looked at my face and I could tell his attention was on my scars. The spoils of battle; the long line across my forehead, the burn mark on the right side of my face, still aggravated. I couldn't tell if I horrified him or he was curious. What must I appear to him? A foreigner, a long way from home—an enemy in every sense of the word - giving up my weapon and asking for help. I'm sure he couldn't tell if I was serious or just completely insane.

I ignored him. “Thirsty?”

He responded with a question. “Are you going to kill me?”

“If I was going to kill you,” I said pointing at the knife, “you'd already be dead. Like I said, I need your help.”

“Why me? Why my help?”

“Because you were there, outside my door. Because you are here, with me now.”

“You know what I am. You know what I stand for. Do you really think I would help you?”

“To be honest, I don't know anything about you. But you don't seem like the other militants I've dealt with.”

“Oh, so you know everything that is going on, do you?”

I put my hands up. “Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. I understand the complexities.” Sort of. Not really.

“You are no different. You proclaim peace but you do it through killing. You think you know what's best for us and how to achieve it, yet you know nothing.”

I dropped my hands to my side. “You are right. When your group left with that man, you stopped. You didn't follow them. Why?”

Silence.

I put my hands together as if in prayer. "I need your help."

He pointed at me. "One of your bombs killed my mother. One of the jihadi groups killed my father. I'm not here to help the allied forces, I'm not here to help you murder more innocent people."

"Well, it's a good thing I'm not with them. I'm not with the military, not now anyway. I'm here by myself. I'm looking for someone."

"Who? A warlord to make a deal with? An innocent herder to torture?"

"I'm just here to find one person. I'm not interested in any of the groups that may operate around here."

He looked me up and down and I could tell he was assessing me. "I'm not here for them, for any group, and I'm not here for you."

"Then why are you here?"

Silence.

"I need a drink." I moved forward to take the jug of water and leaned against the wall, letting my body slide down to the floor. I took a large gulp and looked at the man. He was still standing in the middle of the room, his guard still up, his eyes directed on my actions. Maybe I generalized, maybe I was wrong. He didn't dive for the knife, he didn't run for the door. He merely watched and waited. What he was waiting for I couldn't say.

"Sit," I offered. "Drink."

He looked over his shoulder to the door, to freedom, to life as it was before being taken at knifepoint. He seemed to consider the options, then slowly eased down onto the floor. I leaned forward and placed the jug in the middle of the distance between us. He leaned forward, accepted the vessel and lifted it to his mouth. He watched me intently as he sipped, trust a long-lost commodity between someone like him and someone like me.

"What's your name?"

He took another sip. "Aslam," he said. Familiarity. He was the one indeed, there was no mistake. Coincidence or not, this was my

first step. I later found out that Aslam means *saver* or *freer*, which was kind of fitting given the context.

I placed my hand on my chest. "James."

"Like the Bible," he responded.

I shrugged. "Sure."

The conversation was stilted and awkward, however necessary to build some sort of rapport with him. It would not be helpful to force someone into servitude—that would last as long as it would take to plunge a knife into my neck.

"Where did you learn to speak English?"

"School," Aslam retorted. At first, I considered the answer innocent, unencumbered. And then he added, "Where did you learn?" And the wave of sarcasm washed over me. Like I said, awkward. I didn't bother asking him the myriad of other questions that entered my mind. We remained silent as we took turns quenching thirsts, each mouthful invigorating.

Frequently, he would take momentary glances over his shoulder towards the door. At any point, he could have left and I'm not sure whether I would have stopped him. But something was keeping us together, whether it was fear on the outside or comfort on the inside.

I watched the panel of light from the window shift over the floor.

Eventually, Aslam spoke. "You said you are looking for someone."

"That's right."

"Are you looking for someone, or are you looking for the person who kidnapped them?"

"How did you know the person I was looking for is being held hostage?"

"Why else would you need my help?" he asked. "Are you sure they are alive? This is a dangerous country. Lots of things can happen to someone here. Perhaps you are looking for revenge."

I scoffed. "I assure you, the person I'm looking for is very much alive. Just trust me on that."

"Even so. This country is a big place, if they are still in this country. People get moved around all the time, never in one place for too long. They are very hard to find unless you know where to look or who to talk to."

"That is why I need your help."

"You want me to risk my life to help find a friend of yours that may or may not be alive?"

I nodded. "Yeah. And if you tell me why you are here, I'll see how I can help you."

Aslam shook his head and looked at the window.

"I came back here," he started. "For revenge."

"Against who?"

"That is my business."

"The person who killed your father?"

Aslam stared at me... through me, and repeated, "That is *my* business."

I pushed forward onto my knees and crawled to the mattress. I flipped the lid on the briefcase. Aslam stood in silence. It was more of a fortune than anyone could spend in their lifetime, regardless of what country you were born or race you were.

"If you help me find who I'm looking for, you can take whatever you need from here for your own purposes."

Aslam stood, his eyes flicking over the rows and columns of notes. "A person could do a lot with that."

"For now, I'm keen on finding who I'm looking for."

"Well, if you want to pay a ransom, we will need to get some men. You walking around with that briefcase will paint a target on your back."

"And you can help with that?"

A full minute of silence. “Yes, I can help with that. But money alone won’t help.”

I closed the lid on the briefcase. “What will?”

He turned and went to the far wall, leaning against it with folded arms. “You leave that to me. First, we need to find your person. Who is holding them hostage?”

“He’s being held by an ugly son-of-a-bitch Englishman who wears a white suit, goes by the name Max. You find him, you find my... friend.”

“Ah,” Aslam said, shaking his head. “Are you referring to The Trader? He is well known in matters such as this and offers a unique service. Plays all sides. Has helped jihadists as well as military, probably even your military. I know how to contact him.”

“You’ve dealt with him before?”

“Sort of. Not directly and not in person.”

Aslam chewed his lip, mulling over the situation, playing the event out in his mind. “Okay,” he eventually said. “We will commence in the morning.”

It is then I realized the light had dropped in the room, dusk dropping by as quickly as a stone skimming across a lake, the ripple hitting the shore signaling that no more would happen that night. Time had dissipated quickly, most the day spent talking.

“Do you trust me?” Aslam asked. A sincere question. A query that would lead to more questions.

I weighed up my responses. *I have no choice. Do you trust me? As much as I need to. No.*

And then something I was once told, registered. It emptied into my conscious from somewhere deep in my memory bank. A piece of data floating in the void, plucked and sent forth by an unknown means. Something that didn’t mean anything at the time, but made perfect sense in that moment. When I was a prisoner, The Ghost told me: *‘Aslam will also help you. He is someone you can trust.’*

I blinked back to the present. “Yes.”

Aslam nodded. “Then I shall leave to find us some food.”

In the time we stared at each other, I considered all the alternatives, of which there were few. I let fate decide. I thought back to lying in the cave with Cad beside me, staring at the world through a sniper scope, watching The Ghost roll into town. There was someone beside him, an advisor of sorts. I could not remember what this person looked like, whether this person was Aslam or someone who looked nothing like Aslam. I also didn’t know whether that line of thinking made me somewhat racist or focused on my target.

I nodded, and he reciprocated. And then he was gone, swallowed by the night. I sat in the dark and counted, not wanting to think about what I would do if he didn’t return.

But he did return. When my count hit 457, there was a soft knock on the door. I stood silently at the door. Knife clutched to my chest. It could be anyone. It could be Aslam; it could be Aslam and fifty militants with machine guns.

Eventually, a loud whisper. “It’s me, Aslam.”

I opened the door, my hand tight on the grip of the knife. He shuffled in. No one followed. I closed the door.

He ignored me as he sat on the floor. “You will find it difficult to eat with the knife in your hand.”

I moved to the far wall so I could keep an eye on the door and eased down to join the meal. He laid out bread and cooked meat. I didn’t bother to ask what animal it came from as I ripped off a piece and washed it down with some water.

Guilt struck me out of nowhere. I had eaten little since sitting in that hospital area and being told my daughter was dead. It didn’t seem right. I wanted to hurt; I wanted the pain. But now I was eating like I had forgotten the memory, and I just couldn’t help myself.

The darkness transitioned to purple, my eyes accustomed to the darkness, and I could feel tiredness take hold. I stifled a yawn, an unsuccessful attempt given Aslam's statement.

"Sleep," he said. "Tomorrow we will find your friend."

Sleep. I was going to sleep and give Aslam access to the knife, money, and my life. Surely, I could not die, not like this, not here. Surely, *they* would not let that happen. But what if I did? What were the ramifications? I would never have been ordered to investigate the town of Bdama with Cad. I would never have found the photos in Cad's pack, would never have had to take action against him. I would be blind to who he was. If I was not to become The Ghost, then *they* would not have sent me back to protect "him", then I wouldn't have been captured. I would not have been away from Liz and Shelly. Liz would be alive, they both would. I can trace the trail all day long and the more I thought about it the more I wanted to slice my own neck. But can the past change? Or is it all just wishful thinking?

Too many linkages. Too many things to think about. Too many...

FIVE_6

Morning light bathed my face and in that moment of haze, I could have been anywhere. I could have been dead. I could have awoken in the afterlife, my death coming peacefully during the night, my new mission to find my loved ones who had also passed.

The door getting kicked back on its hinges jolted me back to reality. I sat up quickly, my movement a habit, my mind playing catch up by worrying seconds. My heart beat wildly in my ribcage, my senses working overdrive to assess my situation.

“Come,” Aslam said. “It’s time to go.” He stood there with neatly folded robes in his arms.

The world slowed down as I recognized Aslam and realized I wasn’t dead. I coughed, everything still playing catch up. “Time to go where?”

“North.”

“To where?”

Aslam said the name, and it didn’t sound familiar. Not that I was surprised, world geography is not my strong suit.

“Is that still in -.” I stopped. I didn’t even know what country I was in, perhaps something I should have asked Aslam yesterday. Not that it mattered. It didn’t change the mission or the end objective. I still had to get my special package all the way to Bdama, wherever that happened to be, from wherever I was about to go. If history proved correct, I would get there, so what was there to worry about?

I stood gingerly, using the wall to help my ascension to my feet. “Well, let’s go then.”

He looked me up and down. “Not like that.” He passed the robes over to me. “I have everything we need. Guns. Men. Vehicles. But you need to look the part, you need to play your role.”

“My role? In what?”

“Of someone important, of someone to be feared. If you go down there like you are now, we will both be dead men.”

“Well then, I guess I should change.”

At the bottom of the stairs, Aslam turned to look at me. He took in my outfit like a mother before their son went to a school formal event. He grabbed a piece of fabric that hung from the headpiece, pulled it over my face and thread it under my vest. “It is best you keep your face hidden as much as possible. Let the scars talk for themselves. If the men believe the lie, they will do anything you ask of them. If not, they will sooner put a bullet between your eyes... or worse.”

Shouts filled the building entry. Aslam snapped his head around and swore.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Regional holy man. Not someone to piss off.” He looked into my eyes. “I’ve pissed him off. Stay behind me and don’t say anything.”

Outside, an argument took place. One was dressed in camouflage clothes and wore a black balaclava. He held an automatic assault rifle, ready to open fire, and stood in front of a small convoy of four vehicles. A line of machine gun mounted utilities and other vehicles lined the street outside my building.

The other man I recognized as someone I saw yesterday from the vantage point of my room; the older man I guessed as someone important who had shuffled up the street. His arms were waving wildly, his face red behind his gray beard. His three-member entourage stood within proximity, their eyes on multiple potential threats. More than entourage. With their own weapons at the ready, they were bodyguards. And despite all of this, the townspeople went

about their business. Nothing to see here. Something that happens every other day.

Aslam approached the holy man, his hands up in defense, attempting to quell the rage that was spewing forth. He spoke some words that did little to break the continuous rant. Tensions continued to build. Weapons on both sides readied. Aslam's diplomacy failing abysmally.

As dialect continued between Aslam and his opponent, the space between them decreased, the volume and intensity amplified. I could feel the nerves of the men around the vehicles, sensing their fingers on the triggers of their guns. I took it all in and waited for someone to lose their cool, someone to seize up and squeeze that trigger. I didn't have to wait long.

A gunshot. It punctuated a word as the sound ricocheted between the buildings. A bodyguard. Down. Caught the attention of the townspeople. Silence. Briefly.

A barrage of fully automatic fire. Bodies fell on both sides. Soldiers and vehicles punctured by jacketed lead. Explosions of glass and blood, a spray of brain on the building wall as a bodyguard fell. A lucky shot let off before he hit the dirt, unlucky for the person he hit, an eye replaced with a bloodied hole, the back of their skull missing.

The important man lunged at Aslam; a knife drawn above his head. Aslam stepped back, arms up looking to defend. On autopilot, I stepped forward. In one motion, I retrieved my combat knife, holding it in a reverse grip; the blade pointing down, the serrated edge glistening in the morning sun. I erupted from over Aslam's retreating right shoulder, surprising both men. My rhythmic heartbeat sang loudly in my ears as I swung down, from high to low.

The man's reactions were slow. He flinched. The blade sliced into the man's neck and severed his windpipe, blood raining down on the ground with a splat. His forward movement arrested. A groan, soft with the melody in my head. I watched as he sidestepped like a drunk

on unsteady feet before careening head first onto the road, his hands at the wound, unsuccessful to keep the inside bits inside himself.

Gunfire stopped. I stared at the body, blood continuing to flow out of the wound and pool around his head. I felt a hand on my shoulder and I spun instinctively, the knife coming up, blade first.

I stopped. The tip of the knife pushing under Aslam's chin. He looked at me with wide eyes, not game to breathe or talk. He carefully pushed on my arm, lowering the weapon against his skin.

He came in close.

"We need to go," he whispered. "Wipe the blade on your arm, show the blood. Keep your face covered. Don't speak. I will speak for you."

We both nodded to each other, and he spun, yelling at the men who stood by.

"Spread the word," Aslam shouted in his native dialect. "The Ghost has arrived."

From their positions around and on the vehicles, they pointed their weapons to the sky and cheered.

FIVE _7

Dull, gray mountains zipped past the window, each leaving my vision like smoke. Aslam drove our cream-colored sedan while, at his request, I sat in the back staring out the window. The peaks transformed, the road following nameless bodies of water, the hillside becoming green, only to have the color washed away by more kilometers.

“Who was that man I killed?” I mumbled, my vision affixed to stone buildings in the distance beyond my window. We had avoided every town thus far, opting a direct route north-east. We carved our way unapologetically through the landscape, a convoy of weaponry and men with ideals I needed to rely on, yet opposed to.

I turned to the front. We followed closely to the utility in front of us, surviving in a constant dust cloud kicked up by it. Thank god for air-conditioning.

“Mahmood?” Aslam spoke over his shoulder, not wanting to take his eyes off the road and risking an accident. “He was the district’s holy man. Highly favorable, very important. Killing him was both a good and bad thing.”

“Is there such a thing?”

Aslam smirked. “The bad thing is that Mahmood had lots of friends, powerful friends. They are now our enemies.”

“What’s the good thing?”

“Killing him confirms the rumors, makes the stories real. These men with us will follow you to the end, either out of respect or fear.”

“I see,” I said. “Sounds like the military.” I returned to the window and closed my eyes. Would the killing ever end? Am I stuck in an endless loop of death?

I snapped my head back to the front. “Wait, what stories?”

Our eyes met momentarily. “I told them you have killed many people, westerners, and locals, men, women, and children. You don’t care. You have your own mission, your own plans.”

“What the hell does all of that mean?”

“It means I could persuade a handful of men to help accomplish your mission.”

“So, I take it Mahmood wasn’t as easily persuaded?”

“Mahmood led a peaceful existence, he only wanted harmony for the people of his district and the country. He had banned groups; Jihadists, ISIS, all of them, from operating within what he saw as his land. He has stood up to everyone, and everyone has backed down. He wielded exceptional power to get his way, a power no one has understood.” He scanned his mirrors. Utilities in front and behind, all traveling in a cloud of dust. “Mahmood didn’t approve of a convoy of armed men coming into his town.”

“Did he approve of you and your friends riding in yesterday to kidnap someone?”

Aslam smiled. “Not only did he approve it, but he requested it.”

“So, who was he then?”

“A liar. Someone who was causing problems for both sides of the conflict.”

I chortled. I couldn’t help it. “A radical? Captured by other radicals?”

“Not everyone is a radical. Not everyone is an extremist. The man we removed; he was selling information to everyone for profit. It didn’t matter whether the information was correct, or who he sold it to, as long as he got paid. Location of allied forces to the Taliban, the location of explosives to the allies. He operated without care. When he was found out, he made a run for it, trying to get out of the country. Many people were interested in capturing him. We were first.”

“And what were you going to do with him?”

“Sell him.”

“Really? To the highest bidder, I assume, to be tortured and killed?”

“No. We were to sell him to The Trader, to the man we will see, the one who has your friend. He handles the movement of people between groups, at great profit. Aid workers, captured soldiers, innocent, guilty. It doesn’t matter.”

“So, one person sells humans for profit and lives a good life. The other sells information for profit and more than likely gets skinned alive.”

“Don’t try to understand it. This is how the world works.”

“No. This is how *your* world works.”

“Oh really? A man steals a car and goes to prison for ten years. A drug dealer escapes with good behavior bonds. It is how the world works. Dangerously unbalanced.”

I sat back in my seat and looked out the window, the orange glow of the sun on the horizon. Perhaps Aslam was right. Perhaps the imbalance would send the earth over on its axis. Heaven would become hell, the sinners become the saints. Maybe we are already there.

“What can you tell me about The Trader?”

“All I know about him is how to find him.”

“Really? That’s it?”

“No one knows where he came from, but there are stories.”

“Stories? Like what?”

“You hear things. Like the devil offered him all the money in the world, and in exchange, he needs to do this. You know, stuff like that. Stories.”

“Yeah,” I said as I looked down at my hands. “Stories.”

“I don’t want to talk about that anymore.”

“I don’t want to *think* about that anymore,” I countered.

FIVE _8

A new day. The beginning of the end. I was pretty damn sure how that day was going to play out.

We had stayed the previous night in a small town just south of our target location. Aslam had made contact with The Trader on a mobile phone, to confirm the 'purchase.' According to Aslam, The Trader seemed genuinely pleased that someone as infamous as The Ghost wanted to make a purchase.

After the call, Aslam spent another ten minutes pacing the room. I could tell he was caught up with future conversations in his head, imagining how it was all going to play out. However, the look on his face gave me concern.

"What is it?" I asked, breaking Aslam out of his spell.

"I've got a bad feeling about tomorrow."

I thought back to my time in the military, the times I had 'bad' feelings about certain missions, that were right more often than not. And so, I forwarded the same piece of advice I received back then.

"It's going to be fine. There is nothing to worry about. The mission is sound." Lies. Lies that did nothing to cease his pacing.

"The Trader is heavily guarded and doesn't like his clients to have any weapons during the meeting."

"Yes. So, what's the problem?"

"So much risk. A convoy of armed men. A suitcase full of money. Your covered face. There is not a lot to like about the situation. If he thinks he is being tricked, he will respond in the worst kind of way."

"Why don't you just go with a few guards, and I will meet you afterwards?"

Aslam shook his head. "Your reputation, The Ghost's reputation, proceeds you. He wants to meet you, face to face. If I were to arrive

without you, questions would be asked. He would be disappointed. I am sure the deal would be off.”

I stared at the wall. “Well, he doesn’t know what I look like. So, take one of the other men in place of me.”

“Then the ruse with the men would be found out. I would not like our chances if they found out the truth.”

“Even with all the money we have for them?”

“Things are simple for these people. They are more likely to kill both of us and take the money. It’s best they don’t know about it. I would rather keep the illusion of money.”

The complexities of something that started so simple started to weigh on me. A payment. A buy. A purchase of a person. Depending on which lens you were using, some people would call it paying a ransom. Others would call it human trafficking.

“What about an insurance policy?”

Aslam stopped pacing. “I’m listening.”

“I have an idea.”

I relayed my thoughts.

“Only if things go bad?” Aslam asked. “Do you think it will work?”

I looked at him. “Do we have a choice?”

Aslam nodded and paced some more. “And where are we going once we have your friend in possession?”

I smiled. The same damn place that’s been at the center of all of this.

“Bdama.”

“That will be a day’s drive, and we will have to backtrack some of the way. Why Bdama?”

“Because that is where I need to go.” I had no other answer.

“Then that is where we shall go.” He came over to me. “And once we are there, I am free to go on my way?”

“Almost,” I said. “Almost.”

FIVE_9

We waited under guard. It turned out The Trader is never the first in the room. You wait for him to be ready, regardless of who you are, or claim to be.

We arrived at a stone house set amongst the foothills of a sand-soaked mountain that overlaid a clear Afghan sky. Next to it was a secondary structure, almost like a barn (and bigger than some homes I had seen on the journey over). Within the shade, a vehicle under a cover, it's grill glinting in the morning sun. It was strangely out of place for this part of the world.

I had reduced our convoy to a single vehicle for the purposes of this task. I rode in the front passenger seat with Aslam driving. Two of our men rode in the back, their weapons nestled between their knees, barrels pointed at their faces. With every pothole Aslam avoided, I imagined the aftermath if the gun went off. The trip was silent, and I had no idea if the men wanted to be there or not, or gave a shit either way. To be honest, I was more concerned with what was in the car's trunk.

The vehicle eased to a stop under the strict direction of two armed men. Traditional loose clothing covered their heavy-set builds, with turbans covering their head and face to block the desert wind.

Under the aim of AK-47s, Aslam got out of the car first. Paying no attention to the welcoming party, he rounded the car and opened my door, playing the part of my servant perfectly, adding to the illusion of my importance. I eased out of the car, my titanium briefcase in hand, now much lighter after I had siphoned off some currency for Aslam, just in case everything went to shit.

We approached the two guards, Aslam taking the lead, and made the introductions. I didn't bother trying to keep up with the idiosyncrasies of the numerous dialects across this part of the world, but the word *Ghost* stuck out.

I eyed the two guards, who continued to point their weapons at us. Our attire was similar to the point there was little that separated us, but the one thing that stuck out to me was the coldness in their eyes. The warmth I gained from Aslam's gaze when I first saw him was missing in their dark pools that watched over us. My guess is that The Trader opted for local militants or freedom fighters instead of private security forces, which was a smart option considering the markets in which he immersed himself.

As an act of faith, Aslam handed over an unloaded weapon. This deed, however, did not stop a pat down from one guard while the other stood by, gun at the ready. Once satisfied, both men turned their attention to me. Some words from Aslam, as well as a long gaze from the guards, allowed me to bypass the entry ritual. Maybe Aslam threatened them, or perhaps it was more of the fairy tale he had conjured. Whatever it was, I was quickly overlooked in favor of the briefcase I was holding.

They opened it cautiously, carefully looked around, and handed it back to me with a nod that suited airport security. One man led us inside, leaving the other to encircle our vehicle. I hoped the deal would go smoothly and in good time, to save the insurance policy that was locked away in the car.

That had been ten minutes ago, so we sat and waited in the windowless room under the gloom of a faint overhead bulb. The thought of how electricity existed in this remote structure was replaced with flashes of my interrogation after I was accused of Cad's murder. Threats. Questions. Lies. The types of room people entered yet rarely left.

We sat on plain wooden chairs, the kind of chairs that makes your ass go numb after a few minutes, causing you to constantly move to find fresh territory. In front of us a simple desk. No ornaments, photos, papers or computers. It was there purely for these conversations, where its only use was to slide money over or shake hands above it.

I exchanged glances between Aslam and the armed guard who stood in the corner and watched. I shifted in my seat and I could feel the blade of my ka-bar combat knife press against me. The guards at the front of the house had been sloppy, however, it was there purely for if things went south. As time went on, the more I wanted to go searching for The Trader instead of waiting for him to arrive.

My urges were answered when the door opened and he was standing there. I knew immediately it was him, and not just because he stuck out, but because the memories came flooding back as a hail of bullets.

I was back in that cage, pleading for him to help me, only for him to tell me he was going to sell me, his fine English accent slicing into my skin. His white hat and suit, the sweat stains on the armpits. A traitor. I hated him, for everything. I threatened him, that I would find him and kill him. And then there I was, with the means to keep my promise.

He smiled. A grin I couldn't trust.

He entered, marching across the room with an air of arrogance, that he had all the answers. He removed his hat, a white fedora with blue trim, and placed it on the desk. It revealed a layer of thinning white hair. His leathery skin, with deep wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, clung to his face, masking his true age.

"Welcome to you both," he said as he clapped his hands together. "I trust my people have looked after you?"

"Just fine," Aslam said.

The Trader grinned again and eased himself down into his chair. He looked at me. "Well, it is my pleasure to finally meet you, Ghost. Your reputation precedes you."

"The Ghost is pleased to be here," Aslam jumped in. "He hopes he can secure a deal today with you."

"Of course. I understand you are interested in a product I have recently acquired."

He looked at me, expecting my answer.

Aslam jumped in again. "Yes, that's right."

The Trader kept his gaze on me, icy blue circles, piercing, sharp, intelligent. I couldn't tell if he was suspicious, or merely inserting his dominance over us. Elements of disrespect threaded through curiosity. I thought it was a powerful hand to play, considering the people that would have sat in this room. High-ranking leaders of Al-Qaeda and ISIS and subsequent associations and spin-offs, all here to buy, sell and trade people that could benefit their respective causes.

"The military man," The Trader continued, still waiting for me to respond.

I wanted nothing more than to take my knife and stick it in his throat. However, it was a null play; we'd all be dead in a matter of seconds.

The Trader turned to Aslam. "Does he ever speak?" he asked, pointing a thumb at me.

Silence. One second. Two seconds.

"The Ghost prefers to let his actions do the talking, Trader," Aslam said.

He bent down, pulled up the briefcase and laid it on the table. He opened the locks, lifted the lid and pushed it across the table.

It took a few seconds for The Trader to shift his stare from me to the offering. He looked at the cash with little enthusiasm, like it was a chore that happened every day. Maybe it did. He closed the lid and locked it without saying a word. He looked at Aslam, to me, and then

a sharp nod to the guard in the corner. The guard came running over to take ownership of the case, planting it beside him as he returned to watching the conversation from the corner.

The Trader placed his elbows on the desk, his long, bony fingers spread. "It seems we have a deal, gentlemen. I have drugged the prisoner. He won't be any trouble to you for the next few hours or so."

"That is excellent," Aslam said evenly.

"But first, to assure our relationship, I would like the Ghost to say 'Thank you.'"

"I have already said The Ghost does not speak. I speak for him."

"Well, he must." He looked at me. "He must speak to me."

I contemplated blurting something out, an imitation of words I've heard Aslam use. Perhaps if slurred enough Aslam could pass them off as some long-lost dialect.

"Why?" Aslam protested. "We have made the deal. It doesn't matter."

"Oh, it matters to me." The Trader stood, his tall frame towering over us. "I have my own reputation to contend with, one that I must keep. It is the arrangement I have." He looked down at the desk, eyes searching for something.

"What arrangement is that?"

"Nothing," The Trader said quickly. He pushed his palms down on the desk, his eyes narrowing, composure returning. "Now, say 'thank you.'"

We stared at each other. I opened my mouth.

Then a gunshot, muted somewhat, followed by shouting. We all turned our attention to the door to the room. Shadows moved quickly beneath the door, followed by shouting and more gunfire. This would all be over shortly. The counter in my head ticking.

The Trader stepped back, his chair banging against the wall. The guard in the corner leveled his gun at Aslam and me.

“What is the meaning of this?” The Trader asked, incredulous that such a thing was happening to him, unable to understand how it’s happening. “You will die for this.”

“No,” I said. “You will die.”

The Trader’s eyes opened wide, the situation overtaking him, him unable to piece everything together. He turned to his guard, his stunned look giving an order.

The explosion, on cue, rocked the building, the force mentally stunning the man in the corner. It gave me enough time to erupt from my chair and round the desk at the same time as Aslam rushed the guard.

The guard had a choice to make, and neither one would win in this situation. With his weapon following me, he rallied off trailing bullets, each biting into the wall with a puff of cement. The Trader was slow to react, and I grabbed the marginally taller man from behind, wrenching him back to me, my hand around his neck.

With the guard’s attention torn between a moving object and an impending threat, and unable to stop his fire or trajectory in time, he clipped the shoulder of his boss as Aslam slammed him up against the wall. The Trader groaned from the impact, as I pulled my knife out and held it against his throat.

A fight ensued in the corner. Aslam and the guard struggled to gain control of the gun, the smaller Aslam beginning to lose the battle. But what he lost in height, weight, and strength, he gained in persistence and energy. He brought his knee up into the man’s groin, a move as effective as any martial arts attack, and the man loosened his grasp on his weapon.

Aslam wrestled the gun away from him, the man sprawling over the floor with a loud exhalation from his lungs. He tried to get to his feet, to put up a fight, to die for his cause. Aslam kicked the man in the face, a sickening crunch to end the fight.

Seconds. The room under our control. All the while, gunshots were being fired outside the room.

I turned The Trader around to look at him in the eyes.

“H-h-how did you...?” He trailed off.

I grabbed him with one hand. “I told you I was going to kill you!”

“Wait—,” he protested, but it was too late.

I reefed the knife up, plunging it deep into his gut.

His eyes went wide, disbelieving of what was happening. His breaths quickened, and he grabbed me, placing his hands on my shoulders. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, a wound of this type was fatal in its own right. And he knew it. I saw it in his eyes, the blue fading.

I should have left him like that, let him bleed out. Let the pain wash over him gradually, let the darkness seep from the corners of the room until the small circle of light overhead extinguished forever.

But I’m not like that. I wanted to see him die. I wanted him to die at my hand. I wanted him to die for every soul he had traded, for every person sold, for every man, woman, and child killed as a result. The Trader was an evil man, and I dealt with him accordingly.

I twisted the knife, much to the distaste of The Trader, and reefed the blade out. He made a noise again and fell against his desk. I rolled him over, blood flowing freely out of the hole in his stomach. He reached down and clumsily patted it.

He whispered something, and I moved closer.

“Who are you?” he gasped.

I removed the material covering my face. “You may not remember me, but I said I was going to kill you.” I held the knife to his face. “And now I am.”

“You!” he gurgled, recognition filling his features, his eyes wide, pain momentarily forgotten.

I held the knife up and drove it down into the bloody mess in front of me. Over and over. Countless times. Till my hands were slick with red until there was more out of him than inside of him. When chunks of organ came out with the darkened blade I stopped.

I stood there, my chest heaving, my energy lost. All of my enemies dispatched in a single kill. The Trader paid the price for all of them.

I blinked away blood, specks that spread across my face, and looked over at Aslam. He had given me a moment, allowed me to release my aggression. Now, silence reigned. No more gunshots, no heavy footfalls, no shouting. The mission was as crude and messy as it was effective.

“It’s time to go,” Aslam said.

Outside of the room in the hallway, the disfigured corpse of a guard lay awkwardly against the wall. To our right, the open door streamed in sunlight and was the perfect frame for the burning vehicle carcass beyond that. To the left, an empty corridor, save the boots of a dead soldier, the rest of their body lying beyond a doorway.

It didn’t take long to ensure there were no guards left, and an even shorter amount of time to locate what we came for. When we found *me*, the earlier version of *me*—malnourished, beaten, destroyed, hopeless—Aslam said nothing. Either he hadn’t drawn any connections or didn’t want to. Maybe he thought we were brothers, or at least related. It was probably the cover I should have used in the first place but had never crossed my mind.

The three of us shuffled to the front door, to the chasm of sunshine, to the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. I stopped at the doorway where we made the deal with The Trader. His lifeless body was on the desk, blood splatters on the walls. A crime scene that no one would ever investigate, the perpetrators never caught. A heavy-handed form of justice that seemed fit for the region.

Outside, the sun bore down. Our car devastated, the sedan billowing black smoke into the air. In the distance, the rest of our convoy comprising four vehicles were heading to our position.

Bodies from both sides of the skirmish littered the ground. Nameless men from my convoy, people I knew were there for one purpose, had done their job. Hidden in the back of the vehicle, they had dispatched as many of The Trader's guards as they could before they too perished. They had also detonated an IED rigged to our car that caused sufficient distraction, something that gave us the upper hand. This was a close quarters mission—hands-on, in the trenches, up close and personal. Very different from looking at the target through a scope, hundreds of meters away.

They had died for my mission, however, I cared little. These were men who could have died any number of ways, either against another group or at the hands of allied forces. They were not 'good' men, at least, not 'good' in the terms that I knew. Everyone back home would have looked at them and called them the enemy, so who gave a shit if they died for me? I sure as hell didn't. A means to an end. Cogs in the wheel. A wheel in the machine. Collateral damage. A milestone on the journey.

I knew how this would all turn out.

SIX_0

The village came into view as the sun moved to its late afternoon position. We had been driving towards the mountains for what felt like an hour, until the rock finally parted, revealing the road into town. Aslam kept us second in the convoy, utilities with tray mounted machine guns in front and behind. With our vehicle now a wreck outside The Trader's exchange point, I and Aslam drove the prisoner: my *other* self. Believe me. It doesn't get any easier to say or think about it.

As our convoy ate up the road, I would turn around and check for any signs of life from the body tied to the tray. It hadn't been my idea to transport our quarry like this, but Aslam suggested I let the men do this. They needed to believe we had a prisoner, someone who they could all rally to hate. They wouldn't have helped to save a friend. That wouldn't have made sense. Besides, I still needed them, for a little while more anyway, and so I needed to sacrifice myself in order to do it. They would become human shields, blocks and obstacles for those who would visit us later that night.

As the buildings rose from the horizon, I thought about how many times and from how many angles I had seen the village. It felt strange to know what would happen and when. I remember the advice I received. Something about starting earlier, but the specifics of it were lost on me. Maybe it would come from out of the shadows and into the light, a relevant spotlight in my mind's abyss.

The convoy slowed. To my right was the buildings, to my left the fields, ahead of us, the road exiting, stretching out between the mountains. I had been on both sides, both mountains, looking into the village, looking at the other side and wondering. I never understood why the villagers built their home this way, nor why I kept end-

ing up back here. Never would I comprehend the significance of the location. Yet, aside from all the questions that lay unanswered, here I was. Following my fate. Preordained. Inevitable.

Aslam pulled up in front of a building, the building, to a crowd of people that had gathered. He told me to stay put and ran around the front of the vehicle to open my door. I eased out of the luxury of the air conditioner and into the warm wind. It tugged at the material over my face and I hoped it would hold.

I followed Aslam to an elder standing at the front of the group. He had a gray turban wrapped around his head that sat above his ears. A salt-and-pepper beard framed his weathered face. He looked solemn, outwardly unhappy we were invading the sanctuary he must have felt obliged to protect. Our eyes met briefly, and I looked away, trying to follow traditional customs.

Aslam spoke some words in a native tongue. Eventually, the two shook hands, a deal being struck. I did not understand what he said or what they promised—the specifics of the deal—but it worked. I too shook hands with the elder. He stepped aside and waved us entry into the building.

I bowed, thankful for his generosity with no violence, although deep down I didn't think there would ever be any.

Aslam and I walked in, but then I paused, a memory flashed in my mind, causing me to place a hand on his shoulder. I turned to him and whispered into his ear.

"I almost forgot. Make sure the prisoner is safe. Make sure none of those assholes throws rocks at him," I said, pointing at the prisoner.

"Throws rocks?"

"Stones."

"James, stoning someone to death is a rare punishment given to adultery under Islamic Law. These men fear you."

“I don’t mean to offend, and I don’t give a shit. Please just tell the men to not do it. They don’t understand how important the prisoner is to me.”

Aslam nodded. “As you wish.”

“Then meet me inside so we can set up the room.”

I glanced up to the mountain, into the hide where my other self was watching, and through the scope, into his eye. Into his soul. An intentional look. Knowing they were there, knowing what was to happen.

Once the sun had dipped below the horizon and we had set up the room, I asked Aslam to bring the hooded prisoner upstairs.

“Are you sure you want me to tie him to the chair? Didn’t you say he was a friend of yours?”

“A friend, yes, Aslam. But it is the way it was, so it’s the way it shall be.”

Aslam gave him a confused look.

“Don’t worry. Once we have our conversation, I will free him.”

Aslam asked no more about it and carried out the task.

When he finished, I stood before him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Aslam, you have done everything you said you would. Next to the door is a briefcase. The contents are yours to do with as you please.”

Aslam looked to the briefcase. “What about you?”

“I will be fine. The only thing I ask is that you stay for the night. Then in the morning, you are free to go.” A pang of guilt, knowing what would happen, flooded me.

I turned to look at the restrained prisoner, their hooded head bowed, their limbs slack.

“How long do you think the sedative The Trader gave him is going to last?”

“Hard to say,” Aslam replied.

I looked at my watch. “We’ve got some time, but not too much.”

“Time till what?”

I ignored the question. Just replayed the events from a different perspective.

I turned to Aslam.

“I need a battery and two wires.”

SIX _1

Room

“You know the rest,” Worthy said. “And that’s it.”

He opened the manila envelope and slid the last photo over the table. An impossible angle, no possible way anyone could have captured the moment in that way. It showed him, driving a knife from a high arc against the holy man, Mohammad. The material over his face from his turban had pulled away from his face, a calm expression. His eyes were almost dull, like the situation bored him.

“That’s how I became The Ghost.”

Barnaby cleared his throat. “I believe you were under instructions to not cause any unnecessary bloodshed during your interaction with Max.”

“That’s right.”

“When you were retrieving the prisoner,” Nathan added.

“Correct.”

Barnaby and Nathan looked at each other. Barnaby leaned forward in his chair.

“Then can you explain to us how Max is dead?”

“Necessity.”

“Necessity?!” Nathan scoffed.

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Well, there certainly is,” Barnaby said. “You see, Max was assigned to us.”

“As in he had signed one of your contracts?”

“Yes, and his death put us at a significant disadvantage.”

“Well, if he was working for you, why did I need to go get him? Why not just get him to take me directly to Bdama and cut out the middleman?”

“Why we do things is of no concern for you,” Nathan scolded.

“Well, I apologize, gentleman. However, I had little choice in the matter. I had my mission to complete, and I did what I needed to do.”

Barnaby and Nathan looked at each other, then back to Worthy.

“You did,” Nathan relented with an almost sorrowful tone.

“And I wouldn’t worry,” said Barnaby. “We can replace Max.”

“Already have,” Nathan added, perking up

“You did what you needed to do,” Barnaby repeated.

“I did.”

“And here you are.”

“I am.”

“Very good,” Barnaby said, clapping his hands.

“Thank you for sharing with us,” Nathan added. “An enjoyable tale for sure.”

Barnaby stood. “But now the time has come.”

A whirring noise sprung from behind Worthy. He turned his head, the light above the elevator door had illuminated. A chime rang out, and he turned to find the grandfather clock against the wall had hit the hour.

“Now the time has come for you to sign a contract.”

“Who are you guys, really?”

“Mr. Worthy,” Barnaby began. “We really do not have time to begin such discussions right now.”

“But if you sign my contract,” Nathan said as he stood, his hands on the table, his body leaning forward in anticipation. “And I will tell you everything you want to know.”

Another chime.

“Listen,” Worthy said as he sat back. “I’ve been very forthcoming with you, told you everything from the start to the end. All my se-

crets laid bare. All my shit on the table. If you want me to sign you are going to have to let me know everything.”

Barnaby sighed. “Mr. Worthy—”

“No more games!” Worthy said, his voice rising. He was on his feet, leaning on the table. “Tell me who you are! Tell me who you work for!”

“Very well, Mr. Worthy!” Barnaby retorted as he stood.

“Barnaby,” Nathan protested. “Are you sure?”

Another chime. Time slowed. The frequency of the chimes slackened; each ring seemed to sparkle as it drew out over the seconds.

Barnaby ignored his counterpart, although appeared as if he contemplated his words as he rounded the table.

“We are known by many names, and we come in many forms. But humans always misrepresent us. People perceive us to be evil, and sometimes we need to be, for the greater good. But we aren’t the only ones who do this, we aren’t the only ones who... interfere.” He stepped forward. “You may know us as this.”

With a wave of his hand, Barnaby transformed. His head mutated, two great horns grew out of either side of his head, a maniacal, fang-filled smile swept over his face. He grew two feet taller. The top half of his body was naked and muscular. The bottom half taking the shape of an animal, hooves replacing feet. A forked tail waved about him matched the sharpened tips of the pitchfork in his hands.

Worthy fell backwards into his chair. “What the fuck?” he breathed, eyes locked on the monster, unable to look away.

“Is this what you wanted?” Barnaby snorted. Sharp teeth jagged in his mouth.

A second voice. “You wanted to know who we are, you wanted to know who we work for.” It was Nathan, and Worthy looked over to him.

He looked similar to Barnaby, a half human, half animal form. Dark wings extended from his back. Flames danced around him. His dark eyes bored into him.

Worthy pushed back in his chair and tried to stand. He collapsed back into the chair. His heart raced, his mind failing to keep up, failing to balance the ledger of reality and fantasy. Another trick. It had to be. Something in the drinks. A hallucinogenic spike. Both demons were in his vision as he pushed back further. Every childhood fear rose to the surface. Everything he told himself that didn't exist was standing before him. The impossible was real.

Both demons stepped forward and instantly returned to their previous forms. Broad muscular shoulders and winged backs reverted to suit jackets. Hairy, hooved legs transformed into pant legs and shiny black shoes.

“What’s happening?” Worthy gasped.

“That form,” Barnaby said, “is as far from reality as the one you see before you.”

Nathan moved around behind him as another mutated chime drifted across the room. He pushed the chair, the negotiation table growing large in his vision.

“You... You’re the devil?”

“No. There is no devil, Mr. Worthy. There is no good and evil, only difference, and disagreement. Two sides of the same coin. Two counterparts who will soon be at war.”

“You want me to fight for the devil?”

Nathan moved back around to his side of the table.

“Are you listening, Mr. Worthy? There is no devil.” Barnaby clapped his hands, a sonic boom filled Worthy’s hearing. “The devil was a construct created to keep people in line.”

Worthy tried to register this.

“So, if there’s no devil, then there is no God?”

“Well,” Nathan said as he looked over at Barnaby. “I do believe he’s catching on.”

“But... then who? Who is the other part of this equation?”

“Oh,” Barnaby said, “Not *someone*, *something*, but that is not part of this conversation.” He sat on the edge of the table, close to Worthy. He clasped his hands in his lap.

“We are the voices in the shadows. We ask things of you and give you information. We implore you to do things. Things that help the greater effort.”

“You manipulate people to do your bidding?”

Another chime.

“Manipulate is such a harsh word, Mr. Worthy. For ultimately, you must decide, you must act. There is still free will. The choice of what you do is up to you.”

“But I had no choice.”

“You had choices. You made the ones that have led you here. Certainly, some things have been out of your control, and I know it may not seem like you had any power. As I said, we have worked very hard to get you here.”

Worthy looked over to Nathan, who was no longer Nathan.

“Mark?” Worthy asked, stunned. It was just how Worthy had remembered him, short cropped hair, wraparound sunglasses, biceps pushing the boundaries of this shirt.

“Might have broken a few rules,” Mark grunted with a shrug.

“But make no mistake, we are no different from the other side,” Barnaby said. “We are both looking to assemble our forces, both looking to bolster our ranks. We all recognize your talents. You are a wanted individual, and both sides willing to sacrifice for you. But *we* are willing to give you this.” An object appeared in his hands, the origami goat he had been sitting on the table when Worthy arrived for the negotiation. He sat it down on the table above his contract.

“Sign and it’s yours.”

Another chime: long, mutated, drawn out.

“What is it?”

“The one thing you really want. The one thing you weren’t able to get.”

They looked at each other, stared deep into each other.

“What is it?”

“That is the address of where Shelly was the day your daughter died.”

Worthy’s eyes grew wide. He looked at the object. So insignificant yet the details it contained were anything but. He reached for it, but Barnaby grabbed his arm.

“Remember, Mr. Worthy. We provide information. What you do with that information is up to you. We don’t make you do bad things, but we shall not stand in your way. Do you understand?”

Worthy nodded as he shook away from the grasp, clutching the paper.

The grandfather clock chimed.

“Sign, Mr. Worthy.”

Worthy picked up the pen, his thoughts on the paper, what it contained, what he was going to do with it. He edged the tip closer. They had played him. They all had created this. The good, the bad, real or perceived. Everyone had played their part. He was the pawn, shifted around the board for their amusement.

Barnaby looked to Nathan, back to his original form, who nodded in approval.

A ding.

The elevator doors opened. Two people stepped out. They saw Nathan, arms crossed, a smile on his face. Saw Barnaby, leaning on the table, his eyes on them, a smirk. Saw Worthy, seated at the negotiation table, pen in hand, tip on the contract.

Worthy would recognize the first as Doctor Gabriel, the dark-skinned recruiter for a mystery mission and promises of an intact family. The other as Christine Raziel, his military-appointed psych.

Gabriel lurched forward and shouted. "No!"

Worthy continued to sign, the ink burning into the parchment, the small flame chasing the pen nib like a lit fuse.

Gabriel and Raziel ran, arms outstretched. Closer. Closer.

Barnaby's grin bigger and bigger.

Worthy finished signing and placed the pen on the table. Bright white light filled the room. A breeze swirled around him, building to a gust. Ease gently washed over him. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back.

He lost himself in it.

He let it take him.

He waited for the end.

SIX_2

Worthy stood in the middle of the walkway. People brushed past him in both directions, eager to get to their destinations, the morning traffic a series of car engines and traffic lights. He looked around, trying to remember what he was doing there, but every time he tried to access the memories his brain focused his attention to a small origami goat he held in his hands.

He looked down at the intricate folds. He knew nothing about it, other than the overwhelming sensation it meant something to him. That he needed it. A drop of rain fell from the sky and sizzled when it landed on the paper.

Out of nowhere, a hand reached out, snatched the paper, and ran. A person wearing a black hoodie and jeans took off, swerving between and through the masses of people. Worthy shouted out and gave chase, the connection to the object unimaginable. He could feel it tugging at him, drawing him closer.

Red traffic light. People walked. The thief shot out from the crowd with Worthy right behind. Cars lined up at the intersection, except for one lane, where a car sped towards the red light, showing no intention of stopping.

High above a slowing world, four people stood at the window and watched the slow-motion scene unfolding below them. Gabriel stood. Arms crossed. A white pocket square that pulsed luminance erupted from his top pocket. Raziel stood beside him wearing an equally dark and equally smart pantsuit, under which an impossibly white shirt snaked up her neck into a collar that furled over to her shoulders.

Nathan pushed drinks into the reluctant hands of the new guests, before turning his back and tending to the table. Gabriel and Raziel shared glances before sipping their drinks.

“Oh, Gabriel,” Barnaby started, “please remove that disgusted look off your expression. Face it, you were too late this time.”

“They’ll hear about this, Barnaby,” Gabriel replied, swirling the contents of his glass. “I will make a full report. How dare you disrupt—no, not just disrupt—break, the rules of negotiation.”

“Oh, so I suppose your attempt to get Worthy to sign a contract as a doctor was fair and valid? Would we even be here if you had succeeded? I’m sure what you call *unreasonable* for us, is justified on your side of the coin. Typical double standards if you ask me. Consider yourself lucky I don’t approach them myself and make a report about you.”

Gabriel ignored the scathing rebuke and turned to Nathan. “And I’ll be sure to mention impersonating a member of the opposite party as well. They won’t take kindly, not at all. Christ, you even had Lucifer himself talk with the asset during a bathroom break? Incredible. Absolutely dubious to the point of infuriation.”

“You think you need an upper hand when it comes to negotiation, that what you do should be forgiven because you praise forgiveness? That, my friend, is incredulous.”

“And how many times must we hear your rant, Barnaby? No wonder our world is in such disarray.”

“You just think about your additions to that. Your promotions and interactions are no different to ours.”

Gabriel downed his drink. “The investigation will see different.”

“Oh please,” Barnaby said, washing his drink down in a single gulp. “By the time any investigation takes place, it will all be too late. We all know how this works. I have the signed paperwork. Why don’t you just let things play out the way they are?”

Gabriel stepped towards him.

“Come on, Gabriel. Let us have this one.”

Gabriel threw a hand to the window. He watched the scene play out in Barnaby’s eyes. Two men breaking through the crowd. A car speeding towards the intersection. The impact was imminent.

And then the car stopped. A screech of tires. An unseen force holding it back. The vehicle’s grill narrowly missing Worthy as he dashed after the thief. Worthy disappearing down the road, now obscured by the city. Never knowing how close he was to death.

“You fool!” Barnaby roared. “How dare you interrupt!”

“You may have his signature,” Gabriel said, “but you’ll have to wait to claim his soul.”

“Ah, Barnaby?” Nathan called from the table. Barnaby ignored.

Raziel stepped beside the two men. “And after we make a formal complaint, they will keep a close eye on you.” She smiled, more at Barnaby’s frustration with the event than anything. “And I’ve got a feeling you’re going to have to wait a very long time to make your claim.”

“Barnaby?” Nathan called again, a nervous edge to his voice.

Barnaby stared at her, his face red, rage overflowing. He exchanged glances with the two, knowing his nemeses had gotten the better of him. For now. He stretched his neck and pulled his jacket tight over his back, getting a hold of his emotions.

“Very well.” He breathed in deeply. “We still have the signature.”

“Barnaby!” Nathan shouted.

“For the love of... What is it, Nathan?”

Nathan cleared his throat. “May I borrow you for a second, please?”

Barnaby approached, the others in close pursuit.

The three gathered at the table and looked down at the contract.

“Bastard!” Barnaby cried.

Gabriel and Raziel exchanged smiles.

“How did this happen?” Nathan queried.

"I believe they call that..." Gabriel looked at Raziel.

"Karma," Raziel offered.

"Oh," Barnaby said. "Don't bring him into this." He pressed his palms into the sides of his head. "I can't deal with this shit, not today, of all days."

He sighed deeply and walked to the grandfather clock. He stood with his hands on his hips, his jacket parted, the disgust of being played washing over him like a cold shower. He stared at the pendulum, the hypnotic swing holding his attention.

"Can we have him?" He called over his shoulder.

"Cad?" Raziel enquired. "Damaged goods?"

"Well," Nathan said. "We have his signature, damaged or otherwise."

Barnaby turned. "And you've made no play for him."

Gabriel chewed this over. "Haven't you interfered enough?"

Barnaby threw his hands out. "Well apologies, *Doctor*. But how many times were you involved? Don't you dare to point fingers in our direction when you've had just as many infractions as we."

"Infractions that we know about," Raziel threw.

Barnaby approached the table. "Listen here, you two. We are both at fault."

"Some more than others," Gabriel countered.

"Fault just the same," Nathan added.

Barnaby folded his arms. "We have the signature and you have no need."

"This is highly unusual, Barnaby. How are you going to explain to Management that you are requesting an asset in limbo? That their signature has just appeared out of nowhere?"

"That is not your concern. It is something for us to worry about."

Gabriel sighed. "Very well, we will not contest. It is true what you say. We have no need for a pedophile like Cad Pearce."

Barnaby clapped his hands together. “You know, I was about to make a scathing comment about the Catholic church, but given the circumstances, I will keep this thought to myself.”

“As well you might, Barnaby. Your constantly false assumption that we are aligned to pedophilia is as laughable as your side’s connection to death.”

“Superb then,” Barnaby said with a smirk.

“But when the time comes,” Gabriel continued, “you will do something for us.”

Nathan shot a glance at his partner, concern deep in his features. One simply did not work with the other side, for anything, for any reason.

Barnaby ignored the stare and leaned on the table, his fists flat, his head down. He was playing a dangerous game and one that could have ramifications for both sides. He spoke to his reflection. “Haven’t I done enough?”

Gabriel mirrored his stance. “And yet there is so much more you can do.”

“Excuse me, Barnaby,” Nathan interjected, “but may I have a word?”

Barnaby slowly turned his head. “No. You may not. I will talk to you in good time.”

“But—”

Barnaby already had his hand up to stop the communication. He turned his focus to Gabriel. “And what about Worthy?”

“Worthy is a free agent,” Gabriel said, wiping his jacket sleeves with the back of his hand. “For now.”

Barnaby extended a hand over the table. A smile grew on his face, his eyes blazing red. “Well then, let the games begin.”

Gabriel looked at the offering and then slowly reached across the table.

“Yes. Let the games begin.”

Acknowledgements

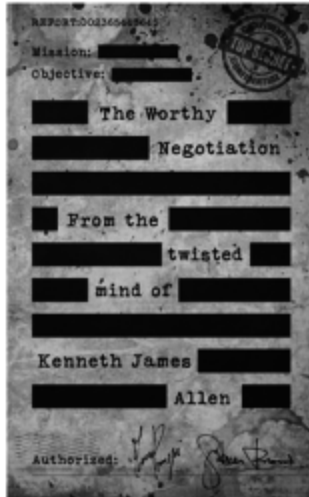
I always find the origins of something an interesting tale in its own right. And so, for those like me, this is where this one began. Funnily enough, it commenced with the title. I wrote it down in a brown leather compendium (where all my ideas went) while watching television in 2013, followed by the first chapter. This later became the third chapter in the completed novel. I essentially completed the novel in 2017, then spent time off and on over the following years editing the story. Here we are in 2021. And like most of my stories, leaves the final curtain parted just a little.

As always there are a few people to thank for this one. Rick Robinson was my guinea pig for all my stories. Thank you for taking the time to read through it and continuously encouraging me to publish it. You always found the light in the darkness.

Jerrica Mah for your editing super powers. This is an (unintentionally) intricate story, or, wonderfully complex, as you called it. That's merely the monstrosity the story grew into. Thank you for helping me guide the readers through the twists and turns. Any mistakes are purely on my shoulders.

And thank you to the readers, who stumble across my work or who keep coming back for more. I love my twisted readers, and hope you enjoyed this one. There is more to come. There is *always* more to come.

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About the Author



I started writing in 2008, and after years of professional rejection, I started my self-publishing journey in 2020. I enjoy any story that keeps me guessing, hate contradiction, and fear spiders and hypodermic needles. Writing is my meditation. When I'm not writing in Brisbane, I'm facilitating workshops, MCing conferences and keynote speaking all over Australia—both face to face and virtually.

Find out more at my website <https://kennethjamesallen.com/>

Don't forget to check out my other books

INCH



*The truth
could kill you*

THE HUMANIST



The Steal
Dossier

SYNCHRONICITY



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Collection

Special Extract

FROM THE TWISTED MIND OF
KENNETH JAMES ALLEN



INCH

THE TRUTH COULD KILL YOU

1

Year 2020

The nurse carefully pushed the hypodermic needle into the IV line and paused. She peered through her visor to the man standing on the other side of the plexiglass and waited for his response. The man nodded, giving his authorization one more time. Not that it was required. Captain Hayback had already signed a mountain of authorization and indemnity forms in triplicate days ago. Still, the nurse felt it important enough to check one last time before plunging the liquid into someone's veins and past the point of no return.

Hayback had no such qualms. The medication was the latest thing off the unofficial production line, a collaboration between the expertise and skill of private enterprise and the bottomless funding of defense budgets. The scientific name was Reguravixumbrusibine. In his world of military briefing rooms, armed forces boardroom tables, and detail-rich reports, they called it Rejuvenate. It was the number one priority for the mighty military machine he was part of.

After pushing the plunger and expelling the viscous liquid, the nurse pulled the syringe from the intravenous line and reassuringly rubbed the patient's shoulder. The patient nodded, looked over to the plexiglass and managed a weak smile, the only possible smile she could deliver given her condition. She slowly raised her hand as if to say 'thank you' and 'it will be alright'. He hoped so.

He returned the wave as he took in her bald head and sunken features. Seeing her like that tore him up from the inside. All the power in the free world seemed worthless against her particular form of aggressive cancer.

The patient grimaced as she sunk back into the bed, the ordeal taking its toll as the meds started to kick in. He held a hand up to the

glass and willed the synthetic antibodies to do their job. To cure his wife. To save their family.

He watched as the nurse made her rounds of the other patients in the room. Twelve beds in total, each with a patient in different stages of human decay, all receiving a different variation of Rejuvenate.

From a Petri dish to human trial testing in a matter of years. It was unheard of. But when Defense wanted something badly enough, due process was sidestepped. He leaned on his relationships. Flexed the mighty bounds of his authority. Signed the numerous documents, policies, and reports. Gave the orders. Hayback accepted the lack of propriety because the military was impatient, because they had troops dying on the front line.

He nominated his wife for the trial because the alternative was not a possibility. She was slowly dying before his eyes and he had already lost so much. He couldn't bear to lose her as well.

The nurse continued her rounds, running basic medical diagnostics and recording the information on the patient's chart before moving onto the next. When she had finished her assigned tasks, she stood at the end of his wife's bed and watched. She cupped her hands to her chest as if in silent prayer, then made her way to the airlock.

Although Hayback couldn't hear any sounds through the glass, he watched as his wife's ECG displayed peaks and troughs before disappearing in a haze, then replaced by a replicate pattern. He wondered what he would do when all of it was over. The rollercoaster ride from a perfect family, to diagnosis, to untested miracle cure, was an emotional toll he was never built for.

Moments later, the external airlock door hissed open, and the nurse appeared from around the corner. Freshly sprayed and washed, she wrung her hands together as if they were still wet.

"Why don't you go home?" she said. "We can call you if there are any sudden changes to her condition."

“Ellie’s with my parents,” Hayback said, rubbing his own hands together. “There’s nothing for me at home.”

“Well, I can set up a cot for you in the bunks. That way you can stay here.”

“It’s okay, really. If she’s going to tough this one out, then so am I.”

She gave a weak smile. “At least let me get you a cup of coffee?”

He stared at her, and eventually nodded curtly, reluctantly accepting the offer. Accepting charity wasn’t his strong suit, never was. His wife tried to change him, but he refused to change.

As the nurse walked away, he reached up and stroked his beard. He couldn’t remember the last time he shaved, or showered, or ate. He was either too panicked the end would come as soon as he took his eyes off her or too excited when they prescribed a new treatment. *Make it this one, let it be the one, make it the last one.*

Minutes turned into hours, and they turned into days. The people, the conversations, his surroundings: they all became a blur. From time to time, he would feel pats on his shoulder. Some would stay while others would solemnly saunter down the halls without stopping for a word or a glimpse, purposely avoiding eye contact. Every one of them knew the toll it was taking.

A few of his visitors were civilians, but the majority wore either battle fatigues or dress uniforms. Despite the decoration on the chest of some of those people, he just couldn’t look them in the eye, let alone muster any sort of salute. He felt broken, which is an odd feeling when your wife is the one battling the invisible disease.

The checks by the nurses became startling more regular and he couldn’t tell whether it was a good thing or a bad thing. Then the doctors arrived and talked to the nurses. More and more hazmat-garbed people gathered at his wife’s bedside to take every possible sample and rush it away into an adjoining lab.

The medical leadership ignored Hayback's requests for status updates as they fed him one standard response after another. A bullshit throwaway. His heart sunk each time, and he could feel his large shoulders hunch with every interaction. They mentioned terms like 'liposomes' and 'polypeptide nanoparticles', however, he knew enough to know they were talking about the delivery methods of the treatment, not the actual drug being administered, and certainly fuck all to do with what was happening to his wife. He was medically trained for the battlefield but certainly not a scientist, not a biologist, not a geneticist. It seemed his rank, his connection to the project, government funding, carried no weight within the hospital's walls.

When he looked upon his wife, he could see that she was fighting it. Whatever muscles she had in her body were tensed, the grimace on her face permanent, even while she slept. She had always been a fighter. That was one thing that gave him faith that she could pull through. She would be a survivor.

It was late on a Thursday when the medical team induced a coma to ease her pain, while they continued their discussions and considered their options. He didn't remember signing anything, and whatever conversation he might have had with a white-coated doctor seemed like a haze.

He gazed upon his resting wife when, unexpectedly, one of the patients crashed, their ECG displaying a sharp flat line. A mass of bodies rushed to the bedside as a patient on the other side of the room also went into cardiac arrest. The sudden crises had the hospital staff stretched across the room as they competed for valuable resources. Equipment moved around the room as much as the medical professionals. Each attempt to restore a life was countered with another patient's needs.

He watched the circus implode through the glass. He couldn't hear what was going on, but if he could the cacophony of alarms would be brain splitting. His eyes darted back to his wife and he

watched as her ECG peak flattened out, her head falling limply to her shoulder.

An influx of hazard-suited reserves flooded the room, several attending to her bedside. They commenced the preliminaries, checking her eyes and trying to rouse a response. One of them wheeled a crash cart over as it charged. Everyone stepped back as the nurse placed the paddles on her chest.

The first shock sent her lifeless body flying upwards, and it bounced down on the bed unceremoniously.

Several orderlies attempted to center her as they prepared for another round. Hayback put a hand on the glass. Willed for her heart to restart. Knowing it wasn't over, that she had more to give.

The second attempt rattled her brittle body so violently blood flew out her mouth and covered the physician's visors, specks of black and red covering their pristinely white uniforms.

Hayback looked on in horror as the carnage unfolded in front of him. The rushing of blood-covered medical staff; the shadow of his wife covered in her own blood. He was powerless to do anything for her.

He closed his eyes, turned and sank to the floor.

Put his head between his knees and howled.

