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LIGHT TROOPS—an Eleven-Bravo light infantryman, according to the United States Army’s MOS (military occupational specialty) system—are supposed to be “pretty” spit-and-polish troops with spotless uniforms and clean-shaven faces, but First Sergeant Sam Driscoll wasn’t one of those anymore, and hadn’t been for some time. The concept of camouflage often involved more than patterned BDUs. No, wait, they weren’t called that anymore, were they? Now they were called “Army combat uniforms,” ACUs. *Same, same.*

Driscoll’s beard was fully four inches long, with enough flecks of white in it that his men had taken to calling him Santa—rather annoying to a man hardly thirty-six years old, but when

most of your compatriots were an average of ten years younger than you . . . Oh, well. Could be worse. Could be “Pops” or “Gramps.”

He was even more annoyed to have long hair. It was dark and shaggy and greasy, and his beard coarse, which was useful here, where the facial hair was important to his cover and the local people rarely bothered with haircuts. His dress was entirely local in character, and this was true of his team as well. There were fifteen of them. Their company commander, a captain, was down with a broken leg from a misstep—which was all it took to sideline you in this terrain—sitting on a hilltop and waiting for the Chinook to evac him, along with one of the team’s two medics who’d stayed behind to make sure he didn’t go into shock. That left Driscoll in command for the mission. He didn’t mind. He had more time in the field than Captain Wilson had, though the captain had a college degree, and Driscoll didn’t have his yet. One thing at a time. He had to survive this deployment still, and after that he could go back to his classes at the University of Georgia. Funny, he thought, that it had taken him nearly three decades to start enjoying school. Well, hell, better late than never, he supposed.

He was tired, the kind of mind-numbing, bone-grinding fatigue Rangers knew only too well. He knew how to sleep like a dog on a granite block with only a rifle stock for a pillow, knew how to stay alert when his brain and body were screaming at him to lie down. Problem was, now that he was closer to forty than thirty, he felt the aches and pains a little more than he had when he was twenty, and it took twice as long to work out the

kinks in the morning. Then again, those aches were offset by wisdom and experience. He'd learned over the years that despite it being a cliché, it was in fact mind over matter. He'd learned to largely block out pain, which was a handy skill when you were leading much younger men whose packs undoubtedly felt much lighter on their shoulders than Driscoll's did on his own. Life, he decided, was all about trade-offs.

They'd been in the hills for two days, all of it on the move, sleeping two to three hours a night. He was part of the special operations team of the 75th Ranger Regiment, based permanently at Fort Benning, Georgia, where there was a nice NCO club with good beer on tap. By closing his eyes and concentrating, he imagined he could still taste the cold beer, but that moment passed quickly. He had to focus here, every second. They were fifteen thousand feet above sea level, in the Hindu Kush mountains, in that gray zone that was both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and neither—at least to the locals. Lines on maps didn't make borders, Driscoll knew, especially in Indian country like this. He'd check his GPS equipment to be sure of his position, but latitude and longitude really didn't matter to his mission. What mattered was where they were headed, regardless of where it fell on the map.

The local population knew little about borders, and didn't especially care. For them reality was which tribe you were in, which family you were a part of, and which flavor of Muslim you were. Here memories lasted a hundred years, and the stories even longer. And grudges even longer than that. The locals still boasted that their ancestors had driven Alexander the Great out of the

country, and some of them still remembered the names of the warriors who had bested the Macedonian spearmen who had up until then conquered every other place they'd wandered into. Most of all, though, the locals spoke of the Russians, and how many of those they'd killed, mostly by ambush, some with knives, face-to-face. They smiled and laughed with those stories, legends passed on from father to son. Driscoll doubted the Russian soldiers who made it out of Afghanistan did much laughing about the experience. No, sir, these were not nice folks, he knew. They were scary-tough, hardened by weather, war, famine, and just generally trying to stay alive in a country that seemed to be doing its best to kill you most of the time. Driscoll knew he ought to feel some sympathy for them. God had just dealt them a bad hand, and maybe that wasn't their fault, but it wasn't Driscoll's fault, either, nor his concern. They were enemies of Driscoll's country, and the powers-that-be had pointed the stick at them and ordered "Go," and so here they were. That was the central truth of the moment, the reason he was in these goddamned mountains.

One more ridge was the other central truth, especially here, it seemed. They'd legged it fifteen clicks, almost all of it uphill and over sharp rock and scree, since they'd hopped off the CH-47 Chinook helicopter, a Delta variant, the only one at their disposal that could handle the altitude here.

There . . . the ridgeline. Fifty meters.

Driscoll slowed his pace. He was walking point, leading the patrol as the senior NCO present, with his men stretched out a

hundred meters to his rear, alert, eyes sweeping left and right, up and down, M4 carbines at ready-low and trained at their sectors. They expected there to be a few sentries on the ridge-line. The locals might be uneducated in the traditional sense, but they weren't stupid by any measure, which was why the Rangers were running this op at night—zero-one-forty-four, or a quarter to two in the morning—according to his digital watch. No moon tonight, and high clouds thick enough to block whatever light came from the stars. Good hunting weather, he thought.

His eyes traced more down than up. He didn't want to make any noise, and noise came from the feet. One damned rock, kicked loose and rolling down the hillside, could betray them all. Couldn't have that, could he? Couldn't waste the three days and fifteen miles it had taken them to get this close.

Twenty meters to the ridgeline. Sixty feet.

His eyes searched the line for movement. Nothing close. A few more steps, looking left and right, his noise-suppressed carbine cradled to his chest at ready-low, finger resting lightly on the trigger, just enough to know it was there.

It was hard to explain to people how hard this was, how tiring and debilitating—far more so than a fifteen-mile hike in the woods—knowing there might be someone with an AK-47 in his hands and his finger on a trigger, the selector switch set to full auto, ready to cut your ass in half. His men would take care of such a person, but that wouldn't do him any good, Driscoll knew. Still, he consoled himself, if it happened, the odds were that he wouldn't even know it. He'd dispatched enough enemies

to know how it worked: One moment you're stepping forward, eyes scanning ahead, ears tuned, listening for danger . . . the next nothing. Death.

Driscoll knew the rule out here, in the badlands, in the dead of night: Slow is fast. Move slow, walk slow, step carefully. It had served him well lo these many years.

Just six months earlier he'd finished third in the Best Ranger Competition, the Super Bowl of special operations troops. Driscoll and Captain Wilson, in fact, entered as Team 21. The captain had to be pissed at the broken leg. He was a pretty good Ranger, Driscoll thought, but a broken tibia was a broken tibia. When a bone broke, there wasn't a whole hell of a lot to be done about it. A torn muscle hurt like hell but got better rapidly. On the other hand, a broken bone had to knit and mend, and that meant lying on your back for a few weeks at an Army hospital before the docs let you put weight on it again. Then you had to learn to run again, after you relearned how to walk. What a pain in the ass that would be. . . . He'd been lucky in his career, having suffered nothing worse than a twisted ankle, a broken pinkie, and a bone-bruised hip, none of which had sidelined him for much longer than a week. Not so much as a bullet or shrapnel graze. The Ranger gods had smiled on him for sure.

Five more steps . . .

Okay, there you are . . . Yep. As he'd expected, there was the sentry, right where he should be. Twenty-five meters to his right. It was just too obvious a spot for a sentry, though this particular one was doing a piss-poor job of it, sitting there, looking backward mostly, probably bored and half asleep and counting the

minutes until his relief arrived. Well, boredom could kill you, and it was about to kill this guy in less than a minute, though he'd never even realize it. *Unless I miss the shot*, Driscoll reminded himself, knowing he wouldn't.

He turned one last time, scanning the area through his PVS-17 night-vision goggles. *Nobody else close. Okay.* He settled down, tucked the carbine to his right shoulder and centered the sights on the guy's right ear, controlled his breathing—

To his right, down a narrow trail, came the rasp of leather on rock.

Driscoll froze.

He did a quick mental recheck, placing the rest of the team in his mind's eye. Anyone down that way? No. Most of the team was spread out behind him and to his right. Moving with exaggerated slowness, Driscoll rotated his head in the direction of the sound. Nothing in the night vision. He lowered his carbine, laying it diagonally across his chest. He looked left. Ten feet away, Collins crouched behind a rock. Driscoll gestured: *Sound to the left; take two men.* Collins nodded and crab-walked backward out of sight. Driscoll did the same, then laid himself flat between a pair of scrub bushes.

Down the trail, another sound now: liquid splattering against stone. This brought a smile to Driscoll's lips. *The call of nature.* The urinating tapered off, then stopped. Footsteps began padding down the trail. Twenty feet away, Driscoll estimated, around the bend.

Moments later a figure appeared on the trail. His gait was unhurried, almost lazy. In the night vision Driscoll could see an

AK-47 slung over his shoulder, barrel down. The guard kept coming. Driscoll didn't move. Fifteen feet . . . ten.

A figure rose up from the shadows along the trail and slipped in behind the guard. A hand appeared over the guard's shoulder, then the flash of a blade came over the other shoulder. Collins twisted the man to the right and down to the ground, and their shadows melted together. Ten seconds passed. Collins rose, ducked off the trail, and dragged the guard out of sight.

Textbook sentry takedown, Driscoll thought. Movie portrayals aside, knifework was something of a rarity in their business. Even so, Collins clearly hadn't lost the skill.

Moments later Collins reappeared on Driscoll's right.

Driscoll returned his attention to the sentry on the ridge. Still there. Hadn't moved at all. Driscoll brought his M4 up, settled the sights on the nape of the man's neck, and then tightened his finger on the trigger.

Easy, easy . . . squeeze . . .

Pop. Not much of a sound. Hard to hear at all at a range of more than fifty meters, but the bullet flew true and transited the target's head, leaving a puff of green vapor behind, and he went off to see Allah, or whatever god he acknowledged; at twenty-odd years old, growing and eating and learning, and probably fighting, came to an abrupt and unwarned end.

The target crumpled, folding sideways out of sight.

Tough luck, Gomer, Driscoll thought. *But we're after bigger game than you tonight.*

"Sentry down," Driscoll said quietly into his radio. "The

ridgeline is clear. Move on up. Keep it nice and tight.” That last bit wasn’t really necessary—not with these guys.

He looked back to see his men moving a little faster now. They were excited but under control, ready to get down to business. He could see it in their postures, the economy of movement that separated real shooters from wannabees and in-and-outers who were just waiting to return to civilian life.

Their real target might be less than a hundred meters away now, and they’d worked hard over the previous three months to bag this bastard. Mountain climbing was not anyone’s idea of fun, except maybe for those nutjobs who pined after Everest and K2. Be that as it may, this was part of the job, and part of their current mission, so everybody sucked it up and kept moving.

The fifteen men formed up in three fire-teams of five Rangers each. One would stay here with their heavy weapons—they’d brought two M249 SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon) machine guns for fire cover on overwatch. No telling how many bad guys there might be about, and the SAW was a great equalizer. Satellites could give you only so much intel; some variables you just had to deal with as they came to you. All his men were scanning the rocks, looking for movement. Any movement. Maybe just a bad guy who came out to take a dump. In this neck of the woods, there was a ninety percent chance that anybody you encountered was a bad guy. Made their job that much easier, Driscoll thought.

Moving even more slowly now, he stalked forward, eyes flicking from his feet, watching each placement for loose rocks

and twigs, then ahead, scanning, scanning. . . . This was another benefit of wisdom, he thought, knowing how to quash the excitement of being so close to the goal line. This is often where rookies and dead men made their mistakes, thinking the hard part was behind them and their target was so close. And that, Driscoll knew, is when Old Man Murphy, of Murphy's Law fame, usually snuck up behind you, tapped you on the shoulder, and handed you an ugly surprise. Anticipation and expectation were lethal sides of the same coin. Either one in the right dose at the wrong moment would get you killed.

Not this time, though. Not on my damned watch. And not with a team as good as his.

Driscoll saw the ridgeline looming ahead not more than ten feet away, and he hunched over, careful to keep his head below the lip, lest he present a tantalizing silhouette target for some alert gomer. He covered the last few feet on flat feet, then leaned forward, left hand flat against the rock, and peeked his head up.

And there you are . . . The cave.

2



LOW FUEL,” whoop, whoop, “low fuel,” the computer-generated voice announced. “I know, I know,” the pilot growled in reply.

He could see the necessary information on his instrument/CRT display panel. The onboard computer master-trouble light had been blinking for fifteen minutes. They’d crossed the Canadian coast ten minutes earlier, and they could look down at what in daylight would have been green terrain covered with stunted trees. Unless he’d really screwed the navigational pooch, they’d see some lights soon. Anyway, they were feet-dry, which was a relief.

The North Atlantic winds had been far stiffer than pre-

dicted. Most of the night traffic was eastbound this time of day, and those aircraft carried a lot more fuel than a Dassault Falcon 9000. Twenty minutes' more fuel. Ten minutes more than they needed. Their indicated air speed was just over five hundred knots, altitude twenty-five thousand feet and falling.

"Gander Approach," he said into his radio microphone, "this is Hotel zero-niner-seven Mike Foxtrot, inbound for gas, over."

"Mike Foxtrot," came the reply, "this is Gander. Winds are calm. Recommend runway two-niner for a normal approach."

"Calm winds?" the copilot observed. "Damn." They'd just come through more than a hundred knots of jet stream right on the nose for three hours of minor buffeting, not too bad at forty-one thousand feet, but still noticeable. "This is about as long a hop over water as I like."

"Especially with winds like this," the pilot replied. "I hope the engines work on fumes."

"We set with customs?"

"Should be. We've done the CANPASS, and we're cleared into Moose Jaw. Do immigration there?"

"Yeah, right." Both knew better. This flight would be a little on the unusual side from Gander on in to their final destination. But they were being paid for it. And the euro-dollar exchange rate would be working in their favor. Especially Canadian dollars.

"Got the lights. Five minutes out," the copilot said.

"Roger, runway in view," the pilot said. "Flaps."

"Flaps coming down to ten." The copilot worked the controls, and they could hear the whine of the electric motors extending the flaps. "Wake up the passengers?"

“No. Why bother?” the pilot decided. If he did this right, they wouldn’t notice a thing until the acceleration for the next takeoff. Having earned his spurs and twenty thousand hours with Swissair, he’d retired and bought his own used Dassault Falcon to charter millionaires and billionaires across Europe and around the globe. Half the people who could afford his services ended up going to the same places—Monaco, Harbor Island in the Bahamas, Saint-Tropez, Aspen. The fact that his current passenger was going none of those places was a curiosity, but as long as he paid, the destination was none of his business.

They passed downward through ten thousand feet. The runway lights were easy to see, a straight lane in the darkness that had once accommodated a wing of United States Air Force F-84 interceptors.

Five thousand feet and descending. “Flaps to twenty.”

“Roger flaps twenty,” the pilot acknowledged.

“Gear,” he commanded next, and the copilot reached for the levers. The sound of rushing air entered the cabin as the landing-gear doors opened and the struts came down. Three hundred feet.

“Down and locked,” the copilot replied.

“One hundred feet,” the computer voice said.

The pilot tensed his arms, then relaxed them, easing the aircraft down, gently, gently, picking the proper spot to touch down. Only his skilled senses could tell when the Falcon touched down on the ten-meter concrete squares. He activated the thrust-reversers, and the Dassault slowed. A truck with blinking lights showed him where to go and whom to follow as he headed off to where the fuel truck would be waiting.

They were on the ground for a total of twenty minutes. An immigration officer queried them over the radio and determined that there were no changes from the CANPASS data. Outside, the fuel truck's driver disconnected his hose and secured the fuel valve.

Okay. That's done, the pilot thought. Now for the second segment of the three-part flight.

The Falcon taxied back out to the north end of the runway, going through the pre-liftoff checklist, as he always did, after waiting at the end of the runway. The acceleration went smoothly; then the wheels came up, then the flaps, followed by the climb-out. Ten more minutes and they were at thirty-seven thousand, their initial assigned altitude from Toronto Center.

They cruised west at Mach 0.81—about 520 knots, or 600 miles per hour true air speed—with their passengers asleep aft while the engines gobbled fuel at a fixed rate of 3,400 pounds per hour. The aircraft transponder broadcast their speed and altitude to the air-traffic-control radars, and aside from that there was no need for radio traffic of any sort. In rough weather they might have requested a different, probably higher, altitude for more comfortable cruising, but Gander tower had been correct. Having passed through the cold front that had opposed their flight into Newfoundland, they might not have been moving at all, except for the muted roar of the jet engines hanging on the

tail. Pilot and copilot didn't even speak very much. They'd flown together enough that they knew all the same jokes, and on such an uneventful flight there was no need to swap information. Everything had been planned, down to the proverbial gnat's ass. Both wondered what Hawaii might be like. They could look forward to a pair of suites at the Royal Hawaiian, and a long sleep to ward off the inevitable jet lag, sure to accompany the ten hours of additional day they were going to experience. Well, both liked a nap on a sunny beach, and the weather in Hawaii was forecast to be as monotonously perfect as it usually was. They planned a two-day layover before proceeding back east to their home field outside of Geneva, with no scheduled passengers on that leg.

"Moose Jaw in forty minutes," the copilot observed.

"Time to get back to work, I guess."

The plan was simple. The pilot got on the HF radio—a hold-over from World War Two—and called Moose Jaw, announcing his approach and his early descent, plus estimated time of arrival. Moose Jaw's approach control took the information from the area control systems and spotted the transponder alphanumeric on its scopes.

The Dassault began bleeding altitude on a completely normal approach, which was duly noted by Toronto Center. The local time was 0304, or Zulu -4:00, keeping homage to Greenwich Mean/Universal time, four hours to the east.

"There it is," the copilot announced. The approach lights for Moose Jaw showed up on the black countryside. "Altitude twelve thousand, descending one thousand per minute."

"Stand by the transponder," the pilot ordered.

“Roger,” the copilot replied. The transponder was a custom installation, done by the flight crew themselves.

“Six thousand feet. Flaps?”

“Leave ’em,” the pilot commanded.

“Roger. Runway in view.” The sky was clear, and the Moose Jaw approach lights strobed in the cloudless air.

“Moose Jaw, this is Mike Foxtrot, over.”

“Mike Foxtrot, Moose Jaw, over.”

“Moose Jaw, our gear doesn’t want to come down. Please stand by. Over.” That notification woke people up.

“Roger. Are you declaring an emergency, over?” the approach radio inquired at once.

“Negative, Moose Jaw. We’re checking the electrics. Stand by.”

“Roger, standing by.” Just a hint of concern in the voice.

“Okay,” the pilot said to his copilot, “we’ll drop off their scope at one thousand feet.” They’d been through all this, of course. “Altitude three thousand and descending.”

The pilot eased right. This was to show a course change on the Moose Jaw approach radar, nothing serious but a change nonetheless. With altitude dropping it might look interesting on the radar tapes if anyone cared to look, which was doubtful. Another blip lost in the airspace.

Two thousand,” the copilot said. The air was a little bumpier at the lower altitude but not as bumpy as it was going to get. “Fifteen hundred. Might want to adjust the descent rate.”

“Fair enough.” The pilot inched back on the yoke to flatten out the down-angle so that he could level out at nine hundred feet AGL. That was low enough to enter Moose Jaw’s ground clutter. Though the Dassault was anything but stealthy, most civilian traffic-control radars primarily saw transponder signals, not “skin-paints.” In commercial aviation, a plane on radar was nothing more than a notional signal in the sky.

“Mike Foxtrot, Moose Jaw, say altitude, over.”

They’d be doing this for a while. The local tower team was unusually awake. Maybe they’d flown into a training exercise, the pilot thought. Too bad, but not a major problem.

“Autopilot off. Hand-flying the airplane.”

“Pilot’s airplane,” the copilot replied.

“Okay, looping right. Transponder off,” the pilot commanded.

The copilot killed power to transponder one. “Powered off. We’re invisible.” That got Moose Jaw’s attention.

“Mike Foxtrot, Moose Jaw. Say altitude, over,” the voice commanded more crisply. Then a second call.

The Falcon completed its northern loop and settled down on a course of two-two-five. The ground below was flat, and the pilot was tempted to reduce altitude to five hundred feet but decided against it. No need. As planned, the aircraft had just evaporated off the Moose Jaw radar.

“Mike Foxtrot, Moose Jaw. Say altitude, over!”

“Sounds excited,” the copilot observed.

“I don’t blame him.”

The transponder they’d just shut down was for another plane entirely, probably parked in its hangar outside Söderhamn,

Sweden. This flight was costing their charter party seventy thousand extra euros, but the Swiss flight crew understood about making money, and they weren't flying drugs or anything like that. Money or not, that sort of cargo was not worth the trouble.

Moose Jaw was forty miles behind them now, and dwindling at seven miles per minute, according to the plane's Doppler radar. The pilot adjusted his yoke to compensate for the crosswind. The computer by his right knee would compute for drift, and the computer knew exactly where they were going.

Part of the way, anyway.