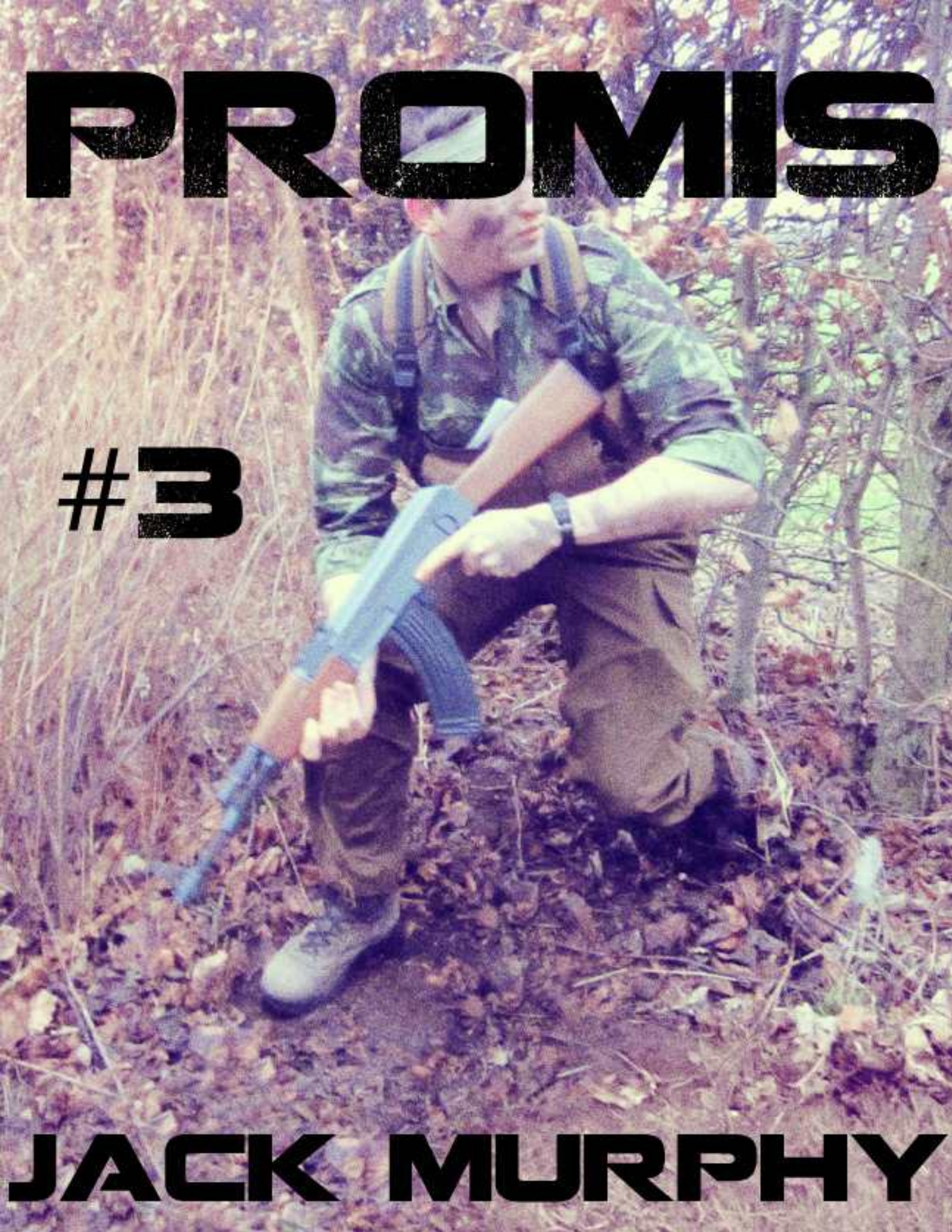


PROMIS

A man in camouflage gear is kneeling in a wooded area with autumn foliage. He is holding a rifle and looking off to the side. The background consists of trees and fallen leaves.

#3

JACK MURPHY

12SEP83
0032hrs
South Africa

Streetlamps cast golden light down on the long empty roads that twisted throughout the Eastern Cape, insects creating a steady buzz that filled the darkness of night with their presence. The occasional window was still illuminated, only to be dashed as the locals tossed a curtain into place and prepared to bed down for the night. Although not still, the night was calm until the blast rocked through several neighborhoods, shaking people from their beds and setting off alarm systems on several warehouses located in the area.

South Africa was having another one of those nights.

0030hrs

An aluminum ladder thudded silently against the side of the prison wall, the strips of rubber tire treads tied to the top of the ladder damping the sound as it made contact. The ladder had been specially cut for one specific task, to help two black-clad men scale that specific wall. After scrambling up the rungs, the first man tossed a carpet over the barbed wire before uncoiling a rope ladder down the opposite side of the wall.

Crawling over the lip, the two operators did their best to keep a low profile as not to silhouette themselves against the moonlit skyline. Sliding down the rope ladder in a kind of controlled fall, they then slung their AK-47 rifles off their backs. The safeties slid off without the normal distinctive click, the levers wrapped in black electrical tape during mission rehearsals that had been conducted over the past week.

Finding themselves in the courtyard of Middledrift Prison, they sprinted to the heavy steel door that led into the prison itself, their rifle muzzles leading the way and scanning for threats. Black ski masks concealed their features from the ever watching CCTV camera on a pivot mount above the doorway.

Reaching into a satchel, the larger of the two operators produced a specialized door charge made of P4 explosives. Developed years prior during the Rhodesian Bush War, the charge was often called by its nickname, the *Gate Crasher*.

If there was anyone on the other side of the door they were in for a world of hurt from the steel bending and giving way under the explosive force of the detonation. The charge lived up to its name. The two assaulters stood on either side of the door as the plastic explosives blasted a shower of debris out between them, rattling windows for blocks in every direction.

Inside, the cell blocks consisted of cinder block walls that were covered in peeling paint, the walls themselves seeming to stretch on forever. The black-clad interlopers cut right and sprinted down a side corridor, knowing exactly where they were headed. A scale mock up had been constructed with wooden planks and Hessian cloth where they familiarized themselves with the floor plan. Together they had run rehearsals through the improvised prison again and again until they knew the layout like the palm of their hands.

Approaching the wing of the prison where the target was being held, they saw two guards as they rounded a juncture in the hallway. With AK-47 muzzles bearing down on them, one of the guards threw his hands in the air. The other reached for the revolver holstered on his hip just a second too late as one of the intruders butt stroked him across the cheek, drawing blood and knocking him to the concrete floor.

“You,” the attacker said to the remaining guard who had prudently surrendered. “On the fucking ground!”

The prison guard could see the edges of the man's lips and eyes under the balaclava he wore. He was the smaller of the two, also white, but his accent was not that of an Afrikaner. It was a strange voice like he had never heard before except maybe on television. American?

In seconds the gunmen had handcuffed the prison guards to a pipe sticking out from one of the nearby walls and were hurrying down the hall to complete their mission.

Turning another corner, their boots thudded down the corridor towards the entrance to the wing that housed solitary confinement, usually reserved for those deemed to be too dangerous to be left in general population. However, there was also another type of prisoner consigned to solitary confinement. Political prisoners.

At the sliding barred metal gate that served as an entrance to solitary, a lone guard sat behind a desk half asleep. When he saw two men storming up to him with Kalashnikovs held at the ready he jolted fully awake, his heart rate suddenly skipping up well over a hundred beats a minute. Reaching for the pump-action shotgun lying across the desk, a spray of 7.62 bullets

shredded the wooden desktop, sending the shotgun spinning to the floor. The guard retracted his hand as it was now bleeding from several shrapnel wounds.

The larger assailant strode up to the guard and punched him in the face, toppling him over. No demands, just another obstacle to crush on the way to their objective.

Reaching for a key ring in his pocket, the shooter with the American accent produced a key, jammed it into the lock on the gate and turned it open. The key, and others, had been given to the operators several days prior by a guard who was currently off duty. The American had used some key impressioning techniques to make copies before rushing the originals back to the prison before anyone noticed them missing. The door slid on its rollers until it came to a stop with a loud *clang* that resonated throughout the solitary confinement block.

The jail breakers took off, jogging down the hall as prisoners reached through the bars of their cells attempting to catch hold of them. They screamed and shouted in a half dozen languages and dialects. Aside from the actual prisoners, the cells themselves were empty cement cubes with a lone slop bucket, the only amenity provided. It was no wonder that they begged to be released. Most of them looked malnourished; some looked positively sickly with boils across their skin and covered in feces.

In cell Twelve-Alpha they found their target, Josef Menzi.

Although it could be debated whether or not Josef was a psychopath, he was kept in solitary for purely political reasons. The ruling government, particularly the current president of the breakaway state of Ciskei, didn't want Josef spreading his political ideas among the other prisoners, afraid that it would lead to another coup attempt. It didn't help that the current President of Ciskei was also Josef's brother.

One by one, the various black ethnic groups were granted strategically located black homelands, Ciskei being one of them. The idea was purely Machiavellian on the part of the South African government. With black homelands granted, the rest of South Africa was reserved as a white *Volkstaat* by a matter of deduction. Besides, with the various black tribes split up into separate provinces it was even easier for the Apartheid-state to play them all off against each other.

With the fall of Rhodesia and the expansion of the communist menace, the South Africans weren't taking any chances. That was where Josef came

in.

Frail and underweight from years of captivity, Josef looked up at the two white men as he sat with his back against the wall. Were they liberators or murderers? Hard to tell.

“Tell us your mother's name,” one of them demanded, slinging his rifle over his shoulder. This one's accent was Australian, he was sure of it.

“Your mother's name dickhead!” The other sounded American.

“Phelisa,” Josef croaked.

“Where were you born?” the American asked.

“Bisho.”

The American pulled out a key ring and quickly located the appropriate key while the larger Australian kept an eye out for armed guards. Swinging the barred door open, the paramilitary soldier reached in and helped Josef to his feet.

“He sounds like a fair dinkum,” the Aussie said.

“You stay with me, you do what I do,” the American told Josef. “If you so much as shit your pants without me giving you permission first and I will put a bullet in the back of your fucking head. Understand?”

Josef nodded.

What else could he do?

The next few minutes were a blur as the two black-clad gunmen half dragged, half carried Josef through the prison, shooting their way out as several guards gave a half-hearted attempt to prevent them from escaping. After the quick exchange of gunfire, both guards threw down their weapons and made a run for it. Dying was simply outside their paygrade.

Walking right out the front door of Middledrift Prison, the three of them stood silently as police sirens sounded in the distance. Headlights flashed and a white van ground to a halt in front of them. Flinging open the side door, the two commandos pushed Josef inside and piled in behind him. Before they had the door closed the driver stomped on the gas and accelerated down the street.

Their driver made the first right hand turn they came to. A half dozen police cars missed them by a margin of several seconds as the police vehicles skidded to a halt in front of the prison.

Josef was handcuffed, gagged, and blindfolded before being laid down on the floor of the van. The prisoner needed to be safeguarded at all costs. A lot of people had a lot riding on him tonight.

“Don't move,” Sean Deckard ordered the political dissident as he yanked off his balaclava.

“Are we clear?” Robin asked from the driver's seat.

“I think so,” James responded, tugging off his own mask to reveal a massive caterpillar of a mustache on his upper lip. “Looks like we lost them.”

Sean dropped a half empty magazine from his AK, topping it off with a fresh one from his chest rig. Golden light flashed through the van as Robin gunned it down a labyrinth of side streets. They had a long drive to their destination, and he knew it was going to be an even longer night.

For years he'd been fighting one war after another. From Vietnam, to Laos, to Cambodia, Rhodesia, Zambia, Mozambique, Angola, and now in South Africa he plied the ancient trade of soldiering whenever and wherever he could, but tonight would be different.

Tonight he was fighting to prevent a war.

If he failed, the resulting genocide would make Mugabe's reign over Zimbabwe look like a walk in the park.

Holding on tight, Robin nearly balanced the van on two wheels as he rounded a corner and sped off into the darkness.

13AUG80

2117hrs

Angola

Like ghosts slipping into the night, the recce commandos worked quickly and quietly. Their Klepper kayaks were cached in the high reeds that sprang up in the shallows on both sides of the river. Weapon and equipment checks were performed at the admin site before the ten soldiers pulled on their fins and kicked into the main current of the river, carrying them towards their destination.

Hours prior, a Puma helicopter had dropped the combat swimmers off even farther upstream where the sound of beating rotor blades would not be heard by the communist backed rebels swarming throughout the jungle. The Kleppers had carried them halfway, the soldiers paddling into a shallow cove where the kayaks could be recovered later. From there on out, the 4-Recce commandos would surface swim down the river, submerging and breathing off of their rebreathers when the enemy was close by.

Deckard thumbed the button on his buoyancy compensator device to add a little bit of air to help keep him afloat. They were all a little heavier than usual. Besides a combat load they also wore waterproof backpacks filled with explosive charges.

The SADF commandos spread out into an extended file in the water to prevent the entire patrol from being taken out by a single burst of machine gun fire or a hand grenade. Gently bobbing up and down in the water, Sean swam on his side, kicking out in a scissoring motion with his fins. With his head parallel to the waterline, and his nose just above the surface, he and the other swimmers would maintain a lower profile, hopefully making them harder to spot.

While most of his late comrades in the Rhodesian Special Air Service had been absorbed into their own detachment within the SADF, 6-Recce, Sean had been invited to become a member of the maritime specific 4-Recce with the caveat that he first complete the attack dive school.

As it turned out, several of the 4-Recce Sergeants remembered Sean fondly from a covert operation that they had run together with the SAS, destroying the Beira fuel yard in Mozambique. Someone must have thought that the American would be a good addition to the unit. That, or they just wanted to see him suffer in the attack dive course that he had to graduate from as Sean had half suspected at times.

The swimmers were in the water for half an hour by Sean's watch, the luminescent hands giving off a faint glow in the night, when they saw headlights approaching from a road adjacent to the river. Checking for a good seal on his snorkel mask, Sean bit down on his air regulator and submerged himself in the dark waters, letting out a little bit of air from his BCD.

Underwater, darkness closed around him. Holding his hands clasped together at his waist, he calmly paddled forward with his fins. Diving at night carried its own specific types of hazards. Inexperienced divers could become easily disoriented and work themselves into a frenzy. Panicking at a hundred feet underwater was a sure bet that you'd be sleeping with the fishes, but it could happen even during a shallow dive, getting people killed and compromising the mission.

The rebreathers they used were a closed system so that they didn't leave the telltale sign of bubbles breaking on the surface. However the diver had to breathe constantly while submerged to recycle the air rather than breathe slowly to conserve it as with oxygen tanks. Canting his head to the side, he could see

the yellow headlights flash across the water before disappearing. Sean waited an additional minute to make sure the enemy troops had passed before breaking the surface. Spitting the regulator from his mouth, he saw the rest of the patrol emerge to the surface of the water to his front.

Drifting in the center of the river, the powerful current pulled them downstream even faster than they had anticipated. Despite the recent rainfall, the decision had been made to launch. The cold water rushed over the back of Sean's neck and scalp, the slight chill leaving him thankful for the wetsuit he wore.

The night seemed to linger in the air as they gently floated downstream. The combat swimmers spotted Angolan troops on the shores several more times, submerging once again until they had passed the threat.

Sean was counting the bends in the river, calculating how much farther they had to travel to their objective. Each patrol member carried a waterproofed map but had to memorize the hydrography of the river itself, getting quizzed about its twists and turns several times during the planning phase of their mission.

A couple clicks out from their target, the patrol was swept down towards a foot bridge. Sean could already see several communist troops standing on the bridge, peering over the railing and probing the water with their flashlights. Hearing them yell in their native language, the American's guts churned into knots. It was as if they knew that the Recces were coming.

Putting the regulator back in his mouth, Sean slipped below the water with the rest of the patrol. The current was far too strong for them to swim to the shore and detour around. The best they could do was hope that they passed under the bridge undetected.

Sean was biting down on his regulator hard enough to chew through the rubber.

They were in for a ride.

The first detonation tossed him like a rag doll. If he hadn't been in the process of exhaling, the pressure surely would have burst both of his lungs. As it was, the rush of running water was replaced with a dull ringing in his ears. Letting air escape from his buoyancy compensator, he dove deeper below the surface even as enemy gunfire raked across the river.

Bullets crisscrossed into the water, searching him out like angry hornets. Staying well below the surface, he felt confident that the water would quickly bring the velocity of the bullets to a halt, but it was still unnerving to have a

half dozen Kalashnikovs blasting away above him.

Thrashing through the water as another grenade went off in the depths of the river, Sean's leg slammed into something, his calf muscle temporarily numbed. Struggling to kick away, he finned back into the center of the river. Staying low he managed to avoid the searchlights above and the over pressure from several more grenades. His breaths were short and frantic as he sucked recycled air from his rebreather. Getting a handle on himself, hours of dive training kicked in and he was able to slow his breath rate.

The seasoned Special Operations soldier didn't dare to break the surface and knew that the other Recces would also be diving deep until they reached their objective. Finally catching his breath, the soldier set back into operational mode, counting turns and watching the needle on his compass.

Rounding the final bend, Sean began kicking his fins and arcing himself up to the surface. He needed to get a good look at the bridge they were targeting before making a final approach. Breaking the surface, he looked up and his heart skipped a beat causing him to quickly duck back under just in time for a double strand of razor wire to pass over his head.

Coming back up he spat out a mouthful of water. This time he had to dodge to the side, barely missing a giant steel caltrop that barely revealed a steel I-beam above the surface. Glancing to his sides, he saw that the river was full of the giant anti-tank obstacles. Strands and strands of razor wire were unraveled across its width. Intel hadn't mentioned any of it.

Ahead of him, he spotted the large two-lane bridge. Communist troops allied with Cuban and Soviet advisers regularly transported men and war material across the reinforced concrete bridge by vehicle. Even T-55 tanks had been spotted rumbling over it during major offensives fought against the SADF.

Sean took a mental snapshot before ducking back underwater. The jungle on the sides of the river was thick and several searchlights lit up the water approaching the bridge. The Angolan troops on the footbridge had surely called ahead to their comrades as a warning, but deep down Deckard knew that his team had been compromised before ever crossing the Angolan border.

Someone had fed his patrol into the steel jaws of this death trap.

Maneuvering away from the steel obstacles, he finned under the searchlights and surfaced just in time to grab onto one of the concrete pillars before the current could sweep him away. Pulling his mask onto his forehead,

Sean spotted Viljeon being supported by Nel as they held onto another concrete pylon.

Even under ambient light Sean could tell that his teammates had not fared well. Corporal Viljeon was white as a sheet, blinking but barely conscious. Nel looked to be in better shape but completely exhausted. Above them they could hear the Angolans shouting excitedly as the searchlights pitched back and forth. They were expecting to see the divers at any moment, but with the reeds running along the edges of the river and the razor wire strung everywhere, they hadn't posted guards under the bridge itself.

"Hi, boet," someone whispered behind him.

Turning around he saw Sergeant Terblanche with his backpack half open, pulling his charge out and preparing it for placement on the pylons. Harder than woodpecker lips, the Boer soldiers were as tough as they came and would drive on with the mission as long as they were able.

"This is all that is left of us?" Deckard asked.

Suddenly, two more heads wearing snorkels popped out of the water with the splash. It was Lieutenant Venter and Sergeant Droskie who caught a helping hand from Sean and Terlanche.

"Has anyone seen the rest of the patrol?" their commanding officer asked.

"That's what we were just wondering," Terblanche answered. "I think this is it."

"Damn," the officer cursed. "Someone should have known that this place was swarming with obstacles."

"Viljeon was shot through the thigh back at the footbridge," the Sergeant explained. "We've got the bleeding under control but he's going into shock."

Venter froze for a moment, the water surging over his broad shoulders as he hung onto one of the bridge supports. The decision was in his hands now.

"Corporal Nel," he whispered to the two men on the other side of the supports.

"Sir?"

"Put Viljeon on a guide rope and tie it off to yourself. Get under the surface and move to the extraction point as fast as you can."

"I can still-"

"You have your orders, Corporal. Leave your charges with us; you've done everything you can. Now get Viljeon out of here and wait for the Puma. We'll meet up with you soon enough."

"Yes, sir."

“Terblanche, Deckard, Droskie. Get to work.”

“Roger, sir,” Sean replied, tearing open his own backpack.

Nel helped his injured teammate get his mask back on before placing the regulator in his mouth. Viljeon signaled that he was good-to-go despite looking anything but. Sean held his breath as they disappeared into the dark water. He hoped to see them at the extraction point, for both their sakes.

The spotlights were still sweeping across the river as they went to work. Every so often the Recces shuttered as one of the communist troops conducted some recon by fire by shooting into the river. Their commander watched nervously, all of them praying that they wouldn't see a friend's body float up to the surface.

The shaped charges were lashed into place, the Recces making sure that each had good surface contact with the pylons. With half the patrol missing, they were also short half of their charges. They had packed enough plastic explosives to take down the bridge even if they suffered a few casualties, but operating at half strength left them at a serious disadvantage.

Based on his previous experience in Rhodesia and Vietnam, Sean knew that they probably wouldn't have enough explosives to bring down the bridge immediately; however, they would probably be able to weaken the structural integrity enough that it would drop the first time another Soviet-made tank rumbled across.

The explosives were cone shaped, pressed into the hollow of a PVC pipe, another charge that had been adopted from the earlier Rhodesian design. Each of the four remaining Recces attached their charge to a separate pylon before rigging the initiation system, long water proof fuses that would have to be lit simultaneously.

Suddenly another round of AK fire sounded from the bridge followed by a chorus of cheers. A lone body floated to the surface, the wetsuit and dive gear illuminated by one of the searchlights before the corpse drifted under the bridge. Struggling against the current, Corporal Droskie reached out and snagged the body by the web gear.

The body was so mangled it was impossible to tell how Sergeant Weitsz had been killed. The long slash marks that tore through his wetsuit and into flesh indicated a losing battle when he'd become ensnared in the razor wire. Dozens of bullet holes punctured his torso and head sometime afterwards. Droskie looked as if he was going to be ill.

“Treblanche,” the Venter snapped. “Take control of Weitsz. You will

swim the body downstream to extraction.”

“My charge is already in place.”

“Then move out.”

Treblanche relieved Droskie of his grim task and set about a final check of his explosives and personal equipment before diving underwater, towing the body with him. The dead weight would normally float on the surface, especially in a rubber wetsuit, but the Recce was able to let some air out of his late comrade's BCD, the weight belt around Weitsz's waist dragging him under.

The Recces were putting the finishing touches on the initiation system when Sean snapped around, eyes piercing into the reeds that lined the shore near the bridge's foundation. Looking slightly above the reeds helped lined up the cones in the human eye, allowing slightly better night vision when looking at an object indirectly. Scanning the shore, he could have sworn that he heard something. Going back to work on his demolitions charge, sweat beaded on his forehead in the jungle humidity.

Hearing the crunch of broken reeds under a booted foot, Sean Deckard tore his 1911 pistol from the holster at his side. Holding on to the pylon with one hand, he aimed into the reeds he had looked at previously, lining his sights up on a silhouette and squeezing the trigger. The .45 barked, kicking upwards in his hand. A Kalashnikov pattern rifle fell into the river with a splash.

Multiple muzzle blasts lit up the night, a trio of Angolan soldiers having crept down into the reeds and through the razor wire while the Recces were at work. Cement dust rained down on Sean as 7.62 autofire chipped away at the pillar his charge was set on.

Droskie fired his Browning Hi-Power, dropping one of the communists and sending him spinning downhill to the water where he became entangled in a strand of razor wire. He screamed and thrashed, succeeding only in tearing open more wounds in his flesh.

Sean acquired a second target who was squatting behind a boulder, and bounced several .45 rounds off the rock. The bullets created a spark in the night, ricocheting as shrapnel into the gunman's eyes that sent him howling to the ground.

Lieutenant Venter freed his own pistol and attempted to fire on the remaining Angolan, but in the process he lost hold of the pylon that he had been working on. The current quickly swept him downstream as he attempted

to swat his other hand out, desperate to find a hand hold. Flailing one final time, the officer was carried out from under the bridge where he was riddled with bullets from the troops that lay waiting above.

Sean's aim was wavering as he fought against the current, firing from a one handed grip. Expendng the rest of his magazine, the 1911's slide locked to the rear on an empty chamber. The corpse of a dead Angolan rolled down the hill and into the razor wire where it hung limply.

Now the one remaining Recce was looking to him, both he and Droskie feeling equally frightened and nearly alone.

“Light the charges,” Sean ordered as he tucked his pistol back into its holster. “We're getting the fuck out of here.”

Flicking a Zippo, he lit the time fuse running to the shaped charge, Droskie doing the same. Letting go of the pylons, they allowed themselves to drift down to the charges set in place by Venter and Terblanche, repeating the process. With less than two minute lengths on each fuse, they were burning fast.

The two remaining Recces dived underwater just as the first grenades splashed down from above.

Rocked by the explosions, Sean tumbled through the water, enemy gunfire spiking through the river on his flanks. Feeling something tug at his dive gear, he suddenly found himself being dragged down to the bottom of the river. Trying to achieve neutral buoyancy became an impossibility with his BCD shot through. Pulling on his regulator for air was without result; the rebreather had been shot as well.

Fighting off a rising panic, Sean undid the straps on the rebreather and shrugged out of the harness. Before letting go, he reached down and unbuckled his weight belt with one hand, letting it disappear into the murky bottom. Kicking upwards, desperate for air, his head broke the surface with a splash.

He found that he was less than a hundred meters downstream from the bridge. Angolan soldiers swarmed over it like an anthill that was getting rained on. Large searchlights vectored in, settling on his head and shoulders bobbing in the water. A literal sitting duck.

A two and a half ton flatbed truck was parked in the middle of the bridge, a ZPU-2 Anti-Aircraft gun bolted to the bed.

Sean scowled as the twin barrels rotated into position, the gunner aiming straight at him.

12SEP83

0057hrs

“Are we going to make it?” Robin ground his teeth from behind the wheel.

“We'll make it,” Sean said, subconsciously contradicting himself as he spoke by shaking his head.

“We had better, mate,” James grunted. “We're running out of wars to fight, and I'd hate not to be welcome down here any more.”

“I wouldn't worry about that,” Sean answered, hooking a thumb in their prisoner's direction. “If we don't get this jerk off to the rendezvous in time, we'll have more war than any of us know what to do with.”

The van rocked on its suspension as Robin took another hard turn. Josef squealed as he bounced off the cold metal floor.

“What do you want with me white man?” Josef managed to speak around his gag as it had gotten loose. “I can get you money, guns, whatever you want!”

“Stop that earbashing us,” James ordered, delivering a kick to the prisoner's ribcage.

The situation in South Africa got more convoluted by the day with dozens of terrorist organizations, nationalist groups, anti-war movements, apartheid hardliners, intelligence agencies, and trade unions all pressing different political agendas. Rhodesia fell with the communists advancing hard into Angola and Mozambique, tightening the net around the South Africans while the communists fanned the flames of revolution internally with domestic front groups.

Meanwhile, the apartheid government was composed of a very particular group of white families, holding a type of oligarchical power over the nation. While the South African Defense Force was composed of a professional military made up of both white and black soldiers, the government appeared increasingly sloppy in what were supposed to be covert operations.

To stall the tide of resentment, the South African government had taken to granting so-called black homelands. Ciskei, Transkei, Lesotho, Kwa-Zulu, and others were all designed to racially segregate the blacks by tribal affiliations, theoretically reserving the rest of the country for Afrikaners.

After the Bush War, large swaths of the Rhodesian military were absorbed by the SADF. In the case of Special Forces units like the Selous Scouts and Special Air Service, they were laterally transferred intact as entire units. Sean and his two SAS buddies ended up in different Recce teams and although they had worked together at times, it wasn't until later that they rejoined as a team. The prison break was their latest contract. Whether or not any of them survived to see another payday seemed debatable at the moment.

Soldiers like Sean, and especially Rhodesians like Robin, didn't care for apartheid. In fact, they had known very few Recce operators during their time in the SADF, white or black, who felt they were fighting for a racially based government. Rather they were fighting against communist subversion which seemed to pale in comparison to the injustices in South Africa.

“Shit,” Robin growled. “They caught up with us.”

Looking out the back window James and Sean saw the red and blue strobe lights of police vehicles. They were on a straight away that lasted for miles, taking them farther away from Middledrift Prison. With the police back on their tail, there really wasn't anywhere to evade to.

James hefted a canvas sandbag they had brought along for just such an occasion. Filled with rusty bent nails and screws, it would help them chew up some more distance between the prison and the rendezvous by getting the police off their backs.

“This should take care of those coppers,” the Australian said with a laugh.

Throwing open the rear door, he upturned the sandbag, scattering the metal spikes on the pavement behind them.

Several moments later they watched the police strobes and headlights jackknife in opposite directions, careening off the side of the road as their tires picked up the nails and burst.

“That settles that,” the big Aussie said, grinning ear to ear as he closed the door.

Sean pulled his 1911 from its holster, easing the slide back to make sure a round was properly seated in the chamber.

He wished that he shared the same confidence.

14AUG80

0120hrs

The ZPU-2 machine gun's barrels blazed as twin muzzle flashes lit up the entire bridge and the surrounding jungle. Green tracers streaked downstream, chasing after Sean as he floated away at what felt like a snail's pace. The stream of fire was racing up to greet him when the four charges suddenly detonated with a hollow thud that echoed above the sound of the Anti-Aircraft gun.

While Sean attempted a futile sidestroke to avoid the enemy gunfire, the bridge lurched downward, throwing the gunner's aim low and to the left, missing the American by less than an arms length. Under the sustained weight of a couple dozen soldiers and a deuce and a half military truck, the supporting columns finally gave out.

In a cloud of cement dust, the bridge toppled over into the river. Soldiers clad in olive fatigues were sent flying, arms pinwheeling as they tried to cling to something before being flung into the dark water. The two and a half ton truck splashed down on its side, the double barrels of the ZPU hissing as the red hot metal sank into the river.

With the spotlights also offline, Sean was left alone in the darkness. That was when he realized he had been holding his breath.

"Yank," a whisper came from the shadows. It was Droskie. "Over here."

"Close call," Sean muttered, as he swam over to his fellow Recce.

Both were more than happy to let the powerful current drag them downstream and away from the wreckage of the bridge. It was abundantly clear to both soldiers that they would not be able to make the primary extraction. They'd have to find somewhere to hole up during the hours of daylight and wait for nightfall. They could move on foot from there to one of the secondary extraction points that had been established for them. The Puma helicopter would be out looking for them when they didn't show up at the primary pick up point.

The maritime commandos were silent as the river propelled them forward. Having ditched his damaged dive gear, Sean held on to Droskie's kit to help conserve what was left of his strength. With his rebreather still intact Droskie could remain buoyant.

Half an hour later it looked as if they had cleared the immediate danger area until they spotted another foot bridge spanning the river up ahead. Submerging, the Recces took turns on Droskie's regulator, sharing air until they were safely past the bridge. Emerging on the other side, the river mellowed up some, the current going soft. Long shallow, swampy areas fed

off the river on both sides where deadfall and thick brush collected.

The night was overcast, their mission deliberately timed for it, but with the scant illumination that existed, Sean could make out black lumps coasting their way through the water. At first he thought that it was just more deadfall, some downed trees floating in the current. It was only as the Recces got closer that his eyes widened with recognition.

“What is it?” Droskie asked, sensing that something was wrong.

“Flat dogs,” he answered, reverting back to Rhodesian slang.

Just above the surface, he could make out the flat reptilian head and nostrils belonging to dozens of crocodiles. The ancient creatures preferred the slow moving water and thick swamp during the day but moved out into the river at night to hunt.

“There must be fifty of them out there,” Droskie stuttered.

“We can try to skirt around where it looks open on the left. Moving through the swamp to the shore would be even more dangerous. For sure one of us would step into the jaws of one of these fuckers.”

“*Ja*, stay calm and swim evenly. If they sense an injury they will move in looking for an easy kill.”

The Recces dog paddled forward, careful not to splash around and draw attention to themselves. Several of the large predators came dangerously close, scoping out the humans and sizing them up before moving on.

One of the beasts got close enough that Sean could stare right into the animal's dead reptilian eyes. Gently drifting in the current, the crocodile looked to be well in excess of ten feet long.

Sean looked over his shoulder at Droskie while swimming around a half submerged tree branch covered in moss. They were halfway through the shallows, the crocs seeming to take little interest in the two intruders.

“Watch out Yank, I think we-”

Droskie's words were cut off as he was pulled underwater, his arms thrashing as one of the creatures tore into him. Sean swam back to his partner, reaching out and grabbing Droskie. His icy cold hand was torn from the American's grip as the crocodile suddenly twisted into a death roll, dragging the Recce down into the depths of the river.

Inhaling sharply, Sean drew his Ka-Bar fighting knife and dove under after him. Feeling his way through the dark water and between slimy undergrowth, he reached out, hoping to grab hold of his teammate, knowing that the jaws of another reptile could easily be lying in wait for him. After

nearly a minute of searching he had to return to the surface, taking another gulp of air before continuing.

Remembering that sound carried underwater, Sean froze in place and listened, hoping to hear the vicious animal making a racket as it fought Droskie somewhere underwater. The water was still, eerily quiet. Nothing, not a sound.

Sean surfaced, looking across the river, hoping to spot his friend somewhere waiting for him with a dead crocodile and a bloody dive knife in his hand. There was nothing.

“Droskie!” he said just under his breath. “Droskie, where the hell are you?”

Suddenly voices in Portuguese came from the shore on the other side of the swamp. The voices were urgent, the glow of flashlights shimmering between the branches.

“Droskie?”

Sean swam forward, his head on a swivel, he scanned the water for signs.

More voices could be heard over the low hum of jungle insects, splashes, and cracking sticks interrupting the quiet as the enemy came crashing through the wetlands. They must have been searching the banks when they heard the croc attack.

Minutes passed and the Recce had yet to surface. As maritime soldiers they were like fish in the water, but no one held their breath that long. A shiver went up Sean's spine. After a croc killed its prey it would find a log or something else under the water to wedge it's victim under. The reptile would wait days for the carcass to begin to rot, making the meat easier to consume.

Swimming onward, he got away from the approaching Angolans as fast as possible. Making a beeline out of the swamp, Sean was yanked under, swallowing a mouthful of disgusting swamp water in the process. Sean was pulled down to the bottom of the river by an impossibly strong crocodile, the monster also went into a death roll. Twisting over, the croc ripped the fin right off Sean's foot, freeing him. Breaking the surface, Sean coughed and gagged while attempting to side stroke away.

Reaching the end of the shallows he was picked up by the current once again, rushing him down the twisting jungle river as the Angolan's flashlights reflected off the lifeless yellow eyes of the crocodiles skimming across the surface.

Sean found himself hyperventilating, shaking uncontrollably.

It had nothing to do with the temperature of the water.

0448hrs

Two pairs of polished leather combat boots stomped across the hardball road, the boot steps landing in unison almost as if the two military officers had planned it that way.

“*Cono!*” one of the two foreign advisers cursed.

The bridge had been knocked over sideways as if struck by a sudden surge of water, the tidal wave lifting it up and depositing the bridge back down on its side. Shattered concrete with exposed metal rebar stuck out of the water as the river continued to gush around the wreckage. Whatever bodies or material had been dumped into the river were long gone now.

The Angolans had arranged their trucks with headlights facing across the river so that their communist allies could inspect the damage.

“We should have expected as much from those Boer savages,” the second adviser growled in his thick East German accent.

“No one expected this,” the Cuban said defensively. “Not this deep inside our territory.”

The communist model of warfare precluded them from the blitzkrieg and commando attacks that the Afrikaners seemed to favor. Careful allocation of resources and proper propaganda quotas had to be in place before initiating a military surge across enemy lines, taking large swaths of terrain across all fronts. Such were the orders from Moscow.

“*Scheisse*, with the bridge out, the offensive next month will have to have its left flank diverted fifty kilometers west.”

“There will be no offensive,” a voice came from behind them. “Not until winter.”

Stepping into the path of the transport truck's headlights, a wiry man in olive colored fatigues moved forward. His steps were light to the point that it looked to some as if he were gliding across the ground. Deep lines were set in the creases on his face, the face of a man who had seen and done more than any of the other East German, Cuban, or Russian advisers cared to know.

This particular Russian wore no rank or insignia on his uniform. He called himself Fedorovich, but rumor had it that neither the name nor the uniform reflected his true duty position. The man had simply showed up in their headquarters one day with a squad of GRU operatives and began

initiating his own operations. He gave few orders and answered fewer questions. Moscow's reply to protests from the formal command group in Angola resulted in sheepish replies as if they didn't know what to say, themselves.

"What makes you so sure?" the Cuban asked, wedging a cigar into the corner of his mouth.

"Because that is how long it will take our engineers to clear the mines laid across the second and forth quadrants of our front. The Recces have been ranging deep into our rear areas for months now."

"This is one small attack, a stroke of luck on the part of the South Africans and nothing more."

"Incorrect. I've seen these Boers laying the mines, myself. They work in small teams, sometimes in pairs, sometimes alone. They slip through our lines at night to do their work. The engineers will begin their task next week, and you will supervise the entire clearing operation."

The cigar now tumbled from the Cuban's lips as his jaw hung open, looking like he'd been slapped in the face.

"Recall the search parties on both banks of the rivers. They will not find anything but dead bodies."

"I must protest," the German spoke up. "One of our teams just missed one of the Boers about ten kilometers down stream."

"They won't find him. Spreading our forces up and down the river is a waste of precious resources."

"What do you suggest?"

Fedorovich unfolded a topographical map and held it so the two advisers could see it in the beam of the headlights.

"The entire team was probably dropped somewhere in this vicinity by helicopter," he said, pointing far upstream."

"That far?"

"They probably had another means of travel before going subsurface with SCUBA tanks or rebreathers. More than likely they used rafts or canoes that they had loaded onto their helicopters. In the coming days we will search upstream. Somewhere near this bend in the river is where we will find their rafts cached."

The East German and the Cuban glanced at each other.

"Dawn is only minutes away. The survivors will find hide sites to bed down in during hours of daylight. They will have missed their rendezvous

and will have to move to secondary or emergency extraction points tomorrow night. We will begin positioning our forces today for the next night. There is no point searching the swamps; they won't find them. They will move at least twenty kilometers away, far enough that the rotors of approaching helicopters cannot be heard from the forward bases that these reconnaissance teams have no doubt spotted during previous incursions. That means that any survivors will be moving to these three open areas where there is little vegetation and a large troop transport helicopter can land.”

The Russian pointed out the three areas where the jungle opened up into small fields.

“This is where we will focus our efforts.”

1028hrs

Sean Deckard came awake with a start.

Struggling to catch his breath, his heart nearly beat out of his chest until he was able to reorient himself.

In the early morning twilight he had swam hand over hand through the reeds, burying himself deep in a copse of swamp growth. Exhausted, he fell into a restless sleep. Dodging water obstacles, getting shot at, blown up, and attacked by wildlife, on top of trying very hard not to drown had drained Sean's resources. He didn't have much left in him, and by dawn it was a question of holing up until nightfall or not making it out of Angola at all.

Half submerged in the wretched swamp water, he was now baking under the sun as it crept into a cloudless sky. Unzipping his wetsuit, he pulled it down around his waist to allow his skin to breath. The sun was already beginning to sting his shoulders. The day seemed to drag out forever as he dozed off and on, waking each time with his heart pounding and his mind racing.

Several times he thought that he heard something closing in on him but it was merely his mind playing tricks, exhaustion and dehydration leaving him at wits' end.

At last, the sun began to slip back down to the horizon, the air quickly cooling around him. Taking long minutes to stretch and work the knots out of his legs, Sean crawled through the muck, hand over hand. Coming upon a large chunk of deadfall in the water, the Recce commando pushed it out into the river where the current quickly took hold of it. Grabbing onto the

branches, he held himself underwater with just the top of his face above the surface. The tree would serve as camouflage as he drifted the rest of the way down the river.

Darkness set in minutes later.

Sean had expected to find fast moving patrol boats speeding up and down the river, dismounted patrols on both banks, maybe even air support backing them up as the Angolans searched for the remaining Recces. Instead, he was greeted with the gentle buzz of nocturnal insects.

Somehow, the silence made his situation all the more disconcerting, his combat instincts warning him that he was being lulled into a false sense of security. The enemy would surely have an ambush laying it wait just around the next river bend.

But that ambush never came.

After hours of drifting, he released the deadfall and paddled to the shore. Removing his remaining fin, he cast it into the water, not sure what use it had been to begin with. Hopefully, the enemy would find it washed up somewhere downstream and assume he was in the vicinity. Maybe it was just wishful thinking, he thought, frowning as he came ashore.

Careful not to leave any spoor on the riverbank, he took stock of his situation before stepping off. He wore his wetsuit, had a map in a plastic bag, his compass was long gone, he had his 1911, still in a leather holster rigged to the belt he wore. A single seven-round magazine remained.

It took a few moments for Sean to orient himself to the terrain before moving off towards the emergency rendezvous point.

Checking over the 1911, he slammed the final magazine home and slipped the gun back into its holster.

2212hrs

“This is him,” Fedorovich stated. “He wears the same footwear as the Rhodesian forces once did. Lightweight canvas shoes that can be worn under diving fins.”

One of the GRU paramilitary operatives knelt down next to his commander. Squinting in the dark, the baldheaded man looked over the faint footprints.

“He heads east. As you expected.”

“We know where he is headed. It is just one man, and we need to cast as

wide a net as possible,” their leader explained. They had ridden in on the top of a Soviet Armored personnel carrier as far as the roads could carry them. Part of the way was over asphalt, almost all of it through muddy, red paths that were completely overgrown in certain portions. Once the vehicles could penetrate the jungle no longer, the paramilitary team moved out on foot.

“Split up,” Fedorovich ordered. “Sweep eastward. We should overtake him in a matter of an hour or two, if not in mere minutes.”

The six GRU operatives fanned out, disappearing into the deep shadows provided by the jungle night.

2254hrs

Sean Deckard knew he was being followed.

They were good but not that good. The American had spent long, tense hours punctuated by bursts of sheer terror in the thick jungles of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Years later, he had become an expert in navigating and fighting in the African bush in Rhodesia, Mozambique, and Zambia.

He initiated a number of counter-tracking measures, but simply didn't have time to put them all into effect. They slowed his hunters down but wouldn't stop them. They would circle back around, retrace his spoor and begin anew. Whoever they were, they weren't Angolans. They were quiet, maintaining noise and light discipline. This enemy was nothing like the Angolans who had sounded like a herd of elephants while breaking bush near the swamp the previous night.

During his early days as a cherry soldier with a LRRP company back in Vietnam, his team leader had told him not to look directly at the enemy as they began to pass through the kill zone of their ambush. More importantly, he was told to never, ever look them in the eyes as they approached. Somehow, humans could tell when they were being watched.

Glancing over his shoulder, Sean could feel eyes on him.

By his estimate he was halfway to the rendezvous.

A cackle sounded behind him as a flock of birds left their roosts for the night, departing for a safer canopy. Picking up the pace, he broke into a light jog. Knowing his way through the bush, he pushed the tall grasses and broad leaves aside, pushing through them and moving forward without concern for what kind of trail he was leaving behind. Whoever it was at least had his cardinal direction and wasn't going to give up.

He was beginning to feel that even if he was able to outrun his pursuers that it would just lead to a firefight at the rendezvous where he'd be cut down in short order as he crossed the open area towards the helicopter.

Coming to a small clearing, Sean acted on instinct, buttonhooking back on his own trail. At least he could get an idea of who was after him. If he could assess what he was up against, he'd be able to formulate a better idea of how to escape and evade, knowing what the enemy's size, strength, and composition looked like.

Looping back around on the spoor he had surely left behind, the American took cover behind a tree surrounded with the thickest brush he could find. He held his 1911 in a white knuckled grip, waiting.

It wasn't long. A fallen stick snapped under a booted foot, brush being parted before a single figure emerged into the clearing. Silhouetted under the moonlight, the Recce watched his hunter pause and looked down at the ground in front of him. Only the most skilled Selous Scouts had been able to track enemy at night and none of them as fast as this man.

The hunter carried a short barrel variant of the AK-47 rifle, wore no head gear, and looked to wear a cut-down improvised combat rig. Deckard ground his teeth. His communist reflection, a Special Forces soldier.

Picking the up the trail, the tracker hurried back into the bush. Sean detected no further enemy movement, no signs that he was a lone scout sent ahead of a larger party. Of course there was no way to be sure and he couldn't wait much longer.

Breaking from his hidden position, he sailed through the jungle, the hunter becoming the hunted.

Sean waited for a gust of wind to rustle the jungle vegetation before making the final push, closing the remaining twenty feet. Sean knew from his own tactical experience that it was highly unlikely that the tracker was out in the bush alone, more than likely there was a platoon of reinforcements out there somewhere. For that reason, he needed to keep the takedown as quiet as possible.

The tracker's bald head turned at the last moment, sensing Sean's approach, the butt of his 1911 glancing off the side of the soldier's head hard enough to draw blood rather than knocking him unconscious. His footwork was the product of intense training, pivoting his body around in an instant, seemingly oblivious to the pain of the American's attack.

Sean brought his .45 back into play just a moment too late as the tracker's

hand wrapped around the pistol's slide in an iron grip and forced it away from his body. Instinctively reaching out, Sean similarly grabbed hold of the hunter's AKS-74U rifle.

The soldier reacted with an immediate head butt that sent Sean stumbling backwards, tripping over a spiderweb of tree roots. To his surprise, the shorty Kalashnikov came free in Sean's hands as he fell. Still hanging on to the 1911, the tracker was yanked off balance and pulled forward. Looking up at the bald headed trooper, Sean realized that he wasn't dealing with some Cuban or East German adviser. No less than Russia's elite was chasing him through the jungle.

Letting the Russian have his pistol for the moment, Sean flicked the Krinkov's selector from safe to rock-and-roll, letting the Russian Special Forces operative have half a magazine's worth of 7.62 from less than a arm's length in distance.

The Russian jumped into the air, transported by parasympathetic reaction as the bullets tore through him like a sieve and deposited him on the jungle floor.

Reaching down to retrieve his pistol, Sean regarded the short barrel AK with a nearly invisible nod.

“Son of a bitch,” he growled to himself.

2308hrs

Fedorovich knelt over his second-in-command.

Their quarry had gotten the drop on him. The AK fire sounded for kilometers in all directions, quickly drawing in the rest of the GRU operatives. They expected to find a dead Recce, not one of their own stripped of his rifle, ammunition, grenades, canteens, flashlight, and combat knife.

Rising to his feet, Fedorovich found himself in the same position as when they had first begun the hunt. One step behind and staring at footprints.

The others looked to him for orders.

Snapping his fingers, the Russians surged forward in an all out sprint, caution thrown to the wind as they moved to overtake their prey.

2321hrs

Sean ran for the rendezvous as autofire cut over his head.

The extraction window had opened up, and he still couldn't hear the thump of rotor blades in between bursts of gunfire. Maybe they had gotten held up somewhere. Maybe they had been shot down. Maybe they weren't coming. He wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. At any rate, he knew it would all be over in a few minutes.

Yanking the pin on one of the Russian football shaped fragmentation grenades, Sean over handed it into the jungle, not waiting for the explosion before pulling the pin on another grenade and throwing it in a different direction.

As he hugged the ground, both blasts rocked over him in a wave of heat and flying metal.

With his ears ringing, Sean grabbed the AKS-74U and sprinted for the clearing. His ride home was coming for him or it wasn't. One way or the other, this was his last stand. Shouldering the AK, he struggled to hear the screams of injured enemy above his ringing ears.

When enemy muzzle flashes lit up the night, he was forced back to the ground, bullets tearing through the foliage. This enemy was aggressive, charging forward and ignoring whatever casualties they might take in the process.

Vectoring in on one of the golden blossoms coming from the jungle, Sean fired a stunted burst of his own at the Russian commando. Back down on his knees behind a tree, he reloaded a fresh magazine.

More gunfire rained down on his position. Rolling left, the Recce fired on another muzzle flash before continuing to roll. A line of bullets stitched across the position he had occupied just seconds prior as he took a knee amidst the high vegetation.

Three more Kalashnikovs flashed, surrounding him from three sides, forcing him back down.

Rotor wash pushed the jungle aside, blowing Sean's hair as it came in close.

Reaching for the flashlight he had recovered from his tracker, the Vietnam veteran gave the chopper three flashes as it passed over. The visible light allowed the Russians to home in on him, their gunfire growing more precise by the second, but it was a zero sum game.

The .30 caliber machine gun rained down lead from above, hosing the enemy's position with automatic fire.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Sean leopard crawled away back in the direction of the clearing. The machine gun was still rattling away as he stumbled out into the field. Long wisps of grass were blown flat against the ground as the Puma swept over the kill zone behind him and came in for a landing.

Flaring, the helicopter seemed to lean back on its tail for a moment before gently setting down. Sean gave the crew chief and gunner another two flashes to confirm his identity and the gunner waved him forward.

Sean clamored up the back of the helicopter, his mouth dry, his bones cracking with each step. He was mentally and physically spent. The pilot lifted off and banked hard, avoiding some incoming fire from whoever was left on the ground below.

Hanging on to the fuselage, the American smiled as he spotted Nel and Viljeon packed into the back of the helicopter. Both were in stretchers being attended to by a flight medic. They'd made it to one of the other emergency extraction points.

It was only then that he looked down and noticed the blood dripping from his forehead. In the confusion it all felt the same. Sweat, blood, piss, he was just happy to be alive.

As the helicopter shook, he moved hand over hand to the stretchers and tapped the medic on the shoulder.

The door gunner let off another burst into the jungle.

“Got any morphine, Doc?”

12SEP83

0120hrs

The battered mini-van rumbled as Robin brought the vehicle to a halt in a cloud of dust. Sliding the side door open, Sean threw Josef to the ground before following him out.

They had only made it this far by the skin of their teeth, and now it was time for a change in tactics. As masters of deception techniques, the former Special Forces soldiers had pre-positioned several sedans along their primary and alternate egress routes. They were still on their primary, or green, exfiltration route, and a blue four door beater was waiting for them in the open field they had parked in.

It might have looked like a rusted out piece of garbage, but their employers had rebuilt the engine, replaced worn parts, and put a new set of

tires on it. Of course the three-man black operations cell had test driven it themselves during rehearsals as well.

James knelt down and readjusted Josef's gag as he began to fidget around again. Like scolding a child, they had threatened to turn the van around and drive him right back to prison. The Australian grunted as he tied an extra knot in the handkerchief behind the inmate's head.

"Dickhead," he muttered to himself.

Robin popped the trunk on their new ride and retrieved a gas can.

Securing an extra rope around Josef's legs, Sean picked him up and dumped him in the trunk. Slamming it shut the, the soldier locked him in, sighing as he heard their prisoner begin to thrash around inside. If he only knew.

The situation in South Africa was...complicated.

Josef Menzi was one in a long line of shady political characters that had come onto the scene in the last ten years. Some of them were apartheid puppets, propped up by the intelligentsia. Others were communist backed. Some were double agents, many were triple agents, and almost everyone had as many or more agendas at the same time.

South Africa had installed Josef Menzi as the president of Ciskei from the very beginning. The blacks could have their homeland, just as long as the white intelligence agencies could call the shots from behind the scenes. Not more than a year later, he was deposed by his older brother, Comrade Paul Menzi, a devoted communist.

The thing about communism was that very few members of the African National Congress, or any other communist inspired or backed group, seemed to know much about communism itself or how it worked. Usually it was just one tribe wanting to subjugate the other. The whites had apartheid, the blacks had communism. Those caught in the middle ended up dead before they could ever declare an allegiance.

It was a relatively bloodless coup. Josef was sent packing, but sent packing alive. Exiled, he got in with all kinds. Eventually he went down for the count, trumped up charges dumped on him for an act of right wing terrorism. It was the bombing of a protest led by South Africans Against Conscription, a terrorist attack dreamed up and carried out by a faction of a shadowy intelligence apparatus, as Sean had found out later. Somebody had to go to jail, and Josef was the perfect patsy.

Things got even more complicated in 1980 when the Rhodesian operators

began flowing into South Africa. Some, like Sean, Robin, and James, had found a home in the South African military. Others went freelance. The neighboring black homeland, Transkei had hired the former second-in-command of the Rhodesian Special Air Service to train their own Special Forces unit. Training began immediately and aggressively, the former SAS officer bringing in many of his old unit and whipping the African troops into shape.

The Transkei Special Forces had soon executed a number of successful operations, putting the fear of god into their tribal enemies in Ciskei. Paul Menzi quickly reached out to a number of former Selous Scouts, hiring them to train a Ciskei Special Forces unit that would specialize in intelligence gathering and wet work. The fact was, back in Rhodesia, the Selous Scouts and the SAS had a blood feud of their own. Both units were rivals, often with separate agendas. Behind closed doors some members would accuse those of the other unit as being responsible for them losing the Bush War.

Of course hiring the hated countrymen of Transkei's Special Forces was a shrewd political and military decision on the part of Ciskei's Comrade Paul Menzi.

In the last few months, the situation had gone from bad to worse. Each black homeland had its own Special Forces units launching covert and clandestine operations against the other. The sabotage had been kept fairly low key; only a few deaths had resulted, and nothing that could be proved led back to anyone. Intelligence gathering was a twenty four hour activity on both sides. Then Paul's third cousin on his mother's side was killed during the course of a covert Transkei-led operation.

His cousin had been a security guard at the motor pool. Two former-SAS members had crept in during the night, probably to bug the President's vehicle, maybe to put sugar in the gas tanks, for all the fuck Sean knew. It was obviously a botched job. No one was supposed to have died that night, but someone did, and that was enough for Comrade Paul. The fuse had been lit, and now the remnants of the SAS and Selous Scouts, working for two rival homelands, were prepared to break into an all out scorched earth, total war the likes of which not even South Africa had seen since the Boer War.

Thankfully, not everyone involved was completely bat-shit crazy. Several former Sergeants in both Ciskei and Transkei had reached out to Deckard through back channel connections. They knew Deckard from his war years in the Special Air Service. They knew he was solid, and they had heard the

rumors of who he was working for. Secretly they had plotted the prison break together, executing the mission with only hours to spare.

Robin flicked a Zippo lighter and tossed it into the van, setting the vehicle ablaze. Wisps of fire flicked into the night sky as he turned his back and got behind the wheel of the sedan. Deckard rode shotgun, James taking a seat in the back. Josef was still bouncing around in the trunk and making a ruckus.

Putting the car in reverse, Robin backed out onto the street before shifting back into the gear and gunning it down the street.

Josef, you dumb bastard, Deckard thought to himself. *You're the idiot everyone is counting on and you don't even know it.*

24NOV81
0057hrs

Sheets of rain belted down on the rural African village.

Dressed in native garb, they were soaked to the bone leaving them with no doubt that they were in for a long and chilly night. Hands tightened around the pistol grips of AK-47 rifles, their eyes scanning the shadows not illuminated by a lone streetlamp. Silently, they cursed themselves for not having one of their operatives sneak into the operational area and shoot the light out a few days prior to D-Day.

Sean Deckard walked towards his teammates, doing a final sweep of the area before waiting for the order to come in over the net that would launch their mission. James and Robin waited at the corner of a walled off compound, crouching in the shadows between mounds of trash. The rain water seeped into the garbage, the black runoff leaving a stench in their noses that was ubiquitous in the third world hellholes that they were used to working in.

“What you doing?”

Sean turned to see an old man who had approached as near as he dared, his footsteps muffled by the soft ground and the steady hum created by the rain.

Sean grunted, waving him off with an offended hand. Infiltrating close to their objective in indigenous clothing with *black is beautiful* cream smeared on their faces, the disguise would hold up at a distance just as long as no one actually expected him to speak in the native tongue.

The local staggered off, hopefully writing his presence off to a drunken mirage.

It was almost H-hour. They were still waiting for the call, no signs of hostiles. Sean checked the safety on his rifle one more time before coming around from behind the compound and joining the rest of his team.

Pursing his lips, he made a low whistle, letting his friends know he was coming. Just in case. They were all on edge. Everyone had a lot riding on this mission.

Robin looked up at Sean as he knelt down next to them. The Rhodie was hugging himself in a futile attempt to keep warm.

"I'll be happy to get this over with and go home," the Robin whispered.

"What are you talking about?" James looked back. "We are home."

Deckard knew there was an ugly truth in the Australian's statement. None of them would ever be worth a damn at any other line of work other than soldiering.

Lesotho was an independent but landlocked state north of both Ciskei and Transkei. The African National Communist's terrorist wing called MK had been using the small country as a staging ground for attacks for years, taking advantage of Lesotho's sovereign status and jumping back across the border after each strike.

That situation would end tonight.

"If this is home then what do we have to go back to?" Robin asked.

"Nothing," James answered. "This is what we do so we might as well be good at it."

"That and it beats sucking the farts off bus seats in Johannesburg," Deckard interrupted.

"Any second now." James had the radio's handmic held to his ear, waiting for the correct code word that would launch the sixteen assault teams that were spread out through Lesotho.

They had crossed the river at dusk, making a stealth infiltration into the small country and proceeding on foot. Pilot teams had walked the infiltration routes several times during the last month to make sure that each team could flow to their holding positions within the bounds of their time line. The assault elements ranged in size from two to twelve, depending on the size of the objective and expected resistance they might encounter.

Sean, James, and Robin had been brought back together as one since the conclusion of the Rhodesian Bush War over a year prior. The Colonel in

charge of the mission had done his best to group individual Recce operators with those they had established trust with in the past. Everyone needed to bring their A-game. No mistakes could be afforded on this night.

Steam began to waft from their soaking bodies, the rain refusing to let up.

A hiss of static sounded over the radio, a muted voice spoke.

“Big Bang,” James whispered. “It’s a go.”

Robin answered by drawing a suppressed .22 pistol and shooting out the streetlamp. Blending into the shadows, the three commandos trotted down the street to their objective building. Bounding up to the door, James provided security with his AK at the ready while Sean moved up and placed small knock-knock charges on the front door, connected by a length of cordex.

Sean thought he heard Robin say something just as he detonated the charges, something that sounded like, *I hope we're good at this tonight*.

The explosives popped and James stepped up to provide one of his tree trunk legs to knock the door the rest of the way off its frame. The sound of similar blasts echoed across the countryside. Recce teams were hitting their targets all over Lesotho. Terrorist leaders, propaganda ministers, financiers, smugglers, and anyone else who supported terrorism was getting some unexpected house guests.

Robin tossed a flash grenade through the door, and the team flowed in behind the blast.

Sean cleared right, his rifle muzzle sweeping across the first room as James opened fire, a storm of bullets passing inches from the American's flank. A lifeless body rolled out of bed, a pistol slipping from limp fingers.

Another terrorist came flying in from an adjacent room, the machete in his hand swinging on a downward arc destined for Robin's head. Sean put his AK into action, pouring a burst of fire into him at close range. The machete wielding man spun around in a macabre dance of death before collapsing to the floor.

Tonight they were good at this.

12SEP83

0155hrs

Sean managed to brace himself for the impact a split second before they got broadsided by the oncoming truck. Being lighter than the engine block,

the ass end of the sedan spun around in a shower of broken glass. Sean's head banged up against something, and everything went black for a moment.

As the darkness faded away, the neurons in his brain sputtered, continuing to fire without any conscious decision-making process. Flailing out for the car door's latch, he was an automaton doing the bidding of some primitive survival instinct. The door swung open, metal grinding on metal as gravity carried him out where he landed in a heap on the pavement amid shards of glass.

Every movement was a struggle. His joints felt as rigid as the creaking metal of the hinges on the car door. He was dizzy, unable to focus, images carrying a ghostly blur as his eyes darted back and forth.

A heavy foot squashed him into the pavement.

“Nou toe nou. Kyk na die fokken gat kruiper.”

“Is dit die Doos?” a second voice asked. “Hy lyk nie na iets nie.”

The steel toe of the boot kicked under his shoulder and flipped Sean onto his back. A hand the size of a catcher's mitt relieved him of his pistol.

“Mooi skietding!” one of the voices said with a chuckle.

Sean's quadruple vision narrowed down to double vision. Blinking he realized he wasn't seeing double. He was looking up at the McManus brothers, Etienne and Olaf. They were identical twins with identical blonde mullets. They were also workout partners at the gym, standing at six foot three and six foot four, their broad frames were ripped with steroid induced muscle.

“Fuck,” Sean mumbled.

“Jy het dit reg my vriend,” Olaf grunted.

Etienne smashed his fist through what remained of the driver's side window and wrenched Robin's wrist, snatching his Browning Hi-Power from his hand a life time before he could ever bring it into play.

James slipped out from the opposite side of the sedan, zig-zagging his way towards the McManus brothers. Assuming an abbreviated boxers stance in his almost inebriated state, the Aussie began boxing the wind, swinging in beautiful, textbook worthy jabs and crosses, ducking and weaving while attempting to strike the odd body blow. Etienne and Olaf stood not more than ten meters away with surprised expressions before bursting out laughing.

The Australian was having it out with his own quadruple vision. Pushing himself up on an elbow to get a better look, he had to give his teammate credit. Countless hours in the boxing ring had perfected his form, but there

wasn't much a man could do while suffering from a concussion.

James was still swinging away when Olaf kicked Sean in the side. An explosion of pain rolled over him as he saw stars a second time.

“Bly l Bliksem,” Olaf ordered. “Waar kruip die swart gat weg?”

The driver's door was hopelessly imploded from the crash, the metal bent and twisted with the frame of the vehicle. None of which seemed to deter Olaf. He pried the door open with his bare hands. Grabbing Robin by the shirtsleeve, he effortlessly flung him down alongside Sean. Popping the trunk, the brothers walked around James, as he shadowboxed invisible opponents and glared down at their prisoner.

“Is dit Josef?”

“Ek dink so.”

“Lewe hy?”

“Dit lyk so.”

“Kom ons sit hom in die trok.”

“Kom ons doen dit.”

“Dan skiet ons die bliksems en ry.”

“Dis die plan!”

Sean tried to sit up but was overcome by the pain exploding behind his eyes and in his abdomen. The brothers walked back to their pickup truck and flung Josef into the back. He landed with a thud. If he was still alive, he wasn't showing it.

The Rhodie got back up, staggering to his feet. The kid was tough, standing on shaky feet as he fished inside the car for his Kalashnikov. Sean tried to shout a warning but it was too late. Olaf snatched the rifle right out of Robin's hands. When the huge South African punched him in the face, Robin's head bounced off the side of the car as blood flowed from his nose.

Struggling to concentrate, Sean reached into his pocket, his hand closing around something he'd been hanging onto for just such an occasion. With practice he'd gotten pretty good with it even if it wasn't the most reliable weapon. The brothers took notice of the black metal cylinder that had appeared in his hands, both holding their breath, thinking that it was some kind of explosive. When Sean pulled the metal cap off one side to reveal a knife blade, the McManus brothers just looked at each other and smiled.

“Wat gaan jy daarmee maak?” Olaf laughed.

Sean depressed the button on the side of the hilt, engaging the spring release. The five inch blade shot forward through the air and speared Olaf in

the neck. With a cry of panic the South African heavy grabbed at the end of the blade with fingers now slippery with blood. The ballistic knife had done its job, slicing through the carotid artery in his neck, spurts of blood spraying into the air.

Olaf's face went white as he collapsed to his knees, Robin's AK-47 clattering to the asphalt as the bodybuilder tried to pull the knife out of his neck with both hands. Etienne's face was a mask of confusion. Sean grinned. For the first time in his life he was grateful for Soviet military advisers. The knife had been a gift from a dead one in Angola.

Etienne lunged at Sean, his massive hands closing around his neck. Robin's AK barked fire, tearing through his attacker's side just as the black walls were closing in on Sean. Etienne collapsed to the ground, Sean wiggling free and prying each of the South African's bratwurst sized fingers from his neck.

Exasperated, Robin helped Sean up to his feet.

"Gather up the weapons and find which one of these cheese dicks has the keys. We'll take their ride." Deckard struggled between words. Olaf must have cracked one of his ribs when he had kicked him. "I'm going to try to talk some sense into James."

"Good luck," Robin said, staggering off to the pickup.

Clutching his side, Sean headed towards the Aussie pugilist. He had tired out a bit but was still doing his Muhammad Ali impression.

"James!"

His footwork was getting sloppy, causing him to almost trip over himself as he boxed invisible enemies.

"James!"

It didn't look like his eardrums had burst, but his ears were definitely ringing. It wasn't until Sean was right on top of him that James turned to face him.

"James, we are fucking leaving!"

With that, James executed a perfect right cross that struck Sean in the jaw, knocking him unconscious.

16MAR82

"Who the fuck is that?" Sean asked as he peered through his binoculars.

In a specially modified company vehicle, the two sat in a parking lot that overlooked a government building.

“They're called the McManus brothers,” Gert Steyn told him.

“Nice haircuts,” the American said dryly. “Business in the front, party in the back.”

“You wouldn't want to cross those two,” Gert warned him. “They are both hardened killers, both working for the Civil Cooperation Bureau.”

Sean watched the two giants as they flanked South Africa's ambassador to the United Nations. The ambassador and his bodyguards were arriving for a meeting with a UN appointed human rights investigator in Pretoria.

“Why the hell is CCB protecting this guy? I thought they were in the business of eliminating so-called enemies of the state.”

“The ambassador is certainly that. I'm not sure what the CCB angle is in this case, which is why we are monitoring the situation.”

Operation Barnacle had started off as a legitimate intelligence gathering operation which hired former South African and Rhodesian military personnel under non-official cover. The operatives would live in deep cover in multiple African nations, acting as sleeper agents who could support covert operations or act as spies actively gathering information. As the project grew, mission creep set in, various unseemly characters drifting through the program as it came to be called the Civil Cooperation Bureau.

CCB activities were organized into compartmentalized cells known as regions. Region Six covered South Africa itself, targeting internal domestic threats and dissidents. As a veteran intelligence operative, Gert had kept a close eye on CCB. The organization was completely in the black, working through proxies which made monitoring their activities difficult, to say the least.

Region Six had also become guilty of the worst excesses and corruption, as Gert and his newly recruited team had quickly discovered, suspecting them in being involved in numerous bombings and assassinations directed at civilian targets.

There were so many competing agendas behind the scenes that it made Sean's head spin. Mission creep, conflicting orders, blackmail, bluffs, triple agents, and political ambition mixed with the communist terrorist infiltration and right-wing militia buildup in South Africa that had all become a part of his daily life as a covert agent in Gert Steyn's private intelligence organization.

After the Lesotho operation, Sean and his pals had come up on Gert's radar. He'd been watching from the sidelines for years, his superiors shifting him from one lame duck posting to the next. As a man with no political affiliations, his superiors were never quite sure what to do with him. Now he was busy putting together his own network, the spy's attention now on growing threats from within South Africa's intelligentsia rather than from external influences.

Sean had participated in a number of operations with 4-Recce, which had their security compromised from the get go. Sometimes military intelligence would report that the targets they had been planning and training to hit had had their troop strength increased, fortifications built up at the beachhead to prevent amphibious landings. A few times they had gotten combat swimmers right to the insertion point only to discover the enemy lying in wait.

Now it was to the point that 4-Recce operators were refusing to go out on missions if the UN ambassador had been briefed beforehand.

This was when Gert had introduced himself to Sean. He had a pretty good idea of who was compromising the Recce targets in Angola but needed proof before going to high level government ministers with the information. Sean had served in a number of armies that had known him as being the kind of guy who shot from the hip and asked questions later. He was a soldier, not a political operative. A soldier with a foreign passport, just the kind that Gert was looking for.

Resigning his post in the SADF, Sean was brought into Gert's organization, Directorate K. Soon they had brought Robin and James on board as well. On paper they drew their paychecks from one of the many nondescript security consultancy groups in South Africa while in reality they were busy watching the watchers.

The UN ambassador would be their big payday. Gert and Sean both suspected him of leaking information about classified Recce operations to handlers that he met while at various UN functions. Many of the Recce targets were oil pipelines and refineries that kept the communist forces awash in liquid capital. The international corporate conglomerates that owned the oil companies wanted to protect their assets in sub-Saharan Africa, using the Ambassador as their early warning system. Once they knew who was targeting what, the oil companies could inform the communists before the strike could occur.

Sean set down the binoculars as the two hard men and their principle

disappeared into the building.

“I'm not looking forward to going through those two meatheads.”

“You'd better not,” Gert said, as he lit a cigarette. “Not without a Vickers machine gun anyway.”

12SEP83

0221hrs

Sean bounced off the bed of the pickup as it rocked over another pothole. He squeezed his eyes as tight as he could, gritting his teeth. The world was exploding behind his eyelids every time the truck blasted over a gap in the crumbling road.

Robin drove with James riding shotgun, still in a stupor. Sean was in the back with Josef, who had in fact survived the crash if only just. Working feverishly, he made use of the medical supplies they had brought with them, getting the prisoner's bleeding stopped before shooting him up with some morphine to keep him calm. Reaching into the medical bag, he popped the top off a bottle of aspirin before washing a few tablets down with warm water from his canteen.

He felt like hammered shit, the aspirin making the dizziness only somewhat manageable.

Robin beat on the rear window with his fist, the Rhodie warning of something up ahead. Reaching for his Kalashnikov, Sean looked around the truck's cab and saw a hasty roadblock that had been thrown up in front of them.

By now elements within Ciskei had been warned about Josef's prison break. The three man team was getting close, the enemy preparing for an intercept before they could reach their destination.

“Go straight through it,” Sean yelled.

They wouldn't fair well in another standup fight. In fact, Sean was almost sure that they'd be cut down in an instant as one of them was still incapacitated and the other two were working at fifty percent, at best.

It was an ad hoc checkpoint set up by three Ciskei irregulars, just a few rocks and a rusty oil drum propped up in the middle of the road to stop any traffic coming through. Robin flicked off the truck's headlights and drove blacked out. Dropping down a gear, he slowed so that he didn't drive faster

than he could see the road in front of them.

The three Ciskei trigger pullers meandered around, smoking dagga under the streetlight with their AK-47 rifles casually carried in the crook of an arm if not stacked up against the oil drum.

Coming up on the checkpoint, one of them cocked their head towards the sound of the approaching pickup. Squinting in the night, he was surrounded by a cloud of marijuana smoke. From fifty meters away, Sean planted his elbows on top of the cab and sighted in. Stroking the trigger, the AK spat a single 7.62 round, drilling the suspicious roadblock guard in the chest.

The remaining duo snapped to life, reaching for their weapons as Robin gunned the engine. Maneuvering off road and into the gravel lining the side of the street, the Rhodie knew that how you drive is more important than how fast you drive. Churning through the ground rock and dirt, Robin bypassed the roadblock as Sean's gun barrel tracked a second target, letting off a staccato burst of fire before the Ciskei thug could bring his weapon into action.

The third man squeezed the trigger, the hammer landing on an empty chamber as he had forgotten to properly load his rifle. He was still working the charging handle when Robin spun the wheel, nearly throwing Sean out of the back of the truck. Holding on as tight as he could, images swam across his vision.

The vehicle bounced again as they rolled over the human speed bump, bringing the confrontation to an end.

Josef screamed into his gag.

It was almost over.

04JUN82

Cape Town

1127hrs

No names, no faces, no memory.

The words ran through his head sounding like a help wanted ad, the kind you don't respond to unless you want to be tied to a wall and tortured for weeks on end by some weirdo in a clown costume. Sean's hand tightened around the Uzi Sub-Machine Gun as they waited. Gert had spent an ungodly amount of money to place Sean as a bodyguard to South Africa's UN Ambassador. The McManus brothers had suddenly become violently ill, not

by coincidence, and the spot needed to be filled in a rush.

An old friend of the Ambassador had conveniently reached out to him, offering the name of a trusted operator. The old friend worked in military intelligence, Gert having caught him red handed selling intelligence information to the Israelis. He didn't just owe Gert a favor for looking the other way; he owed him everything.

The named passed through the intelligence grapevine was Sean Deckard.

The reception committee was in place at a small dock adjacent to the main industrial port in Cape Town. A single flickering light bulb illuminated the boardwalk as a private yacht silently slid into port. The normal dock hands and security personnel had been given the night off and replaced with CCB operatives. Now they scrambled about the docks, quickly helping the boat crew moor the ship.

As the gangway was lowered, Sean frowned as he read off the name of the yacht, printed across the stern of the ship:

007

Mickey Mouse, here we come.

The dock was temporarily converted into a pallet yard with dozens of heavy wooden crates covered up with canvas stretched across the top. Deckard had taken a look under one of the tarps when no one was watching but was unable to ascertain what was in them. He and Gert had both suspected an arms shipment, based on inventory sheets they had clandestinely procured from several South African arms manufactures. They had excess inventory in stock but no destination for the weapons. They could have been headed for Namibia or Mozambique, but there was no way to be sure. The crates he saw had had their markings painted over.

When the boat crew called them forward, Sean fell in step behind his principle, the Uzi held at the ready position. The ambassador waddled forward, almost as wide as he was tall. Sean's eyes darted from side to side, taking in every detail as he slowed behind the fat ass on the gangway. The ambassador was only halfway up and already out of breath.

Knowing that the ambassador had gotten untold numbers of his fellow soldiers killed, it was a constant struggle for Sean to resist putting a bullet in the back of his head and being done with it. Gert had assured him that the ambassador's date with destiny would come, but for now they needed him to

get to more important players.

The ambassador and his sponsors appeared to be linked to some kind of international think tank, a circle of retired intelligence people that he and Gert had maddeningly little information on.

James had him covered from a concealed over watch position. Sean knew from grim experience that the Aussie was a scary good shot with a sniper rifle. That said, Sean be on his own inside the yacht, the arrangements calling for only the principle, an allowance made for a single body guard.

The former SOG commando didn't get it. These guys showed up in the middle of the night, told the ambassador to jump and his only response was to ask how high? Sean wanted to know what kind of game was being played. So did Directorate-K.

On the deck were a dozen rough looking men with AR-18K carbines in their hands. The rifle was the predecessor in some ways to the M16 rifle and CAR-15 he had carried in Vietnam. The K variant had a shortened barrel with a stubby fore grip mounted in place to help shooters get into a steady firing position. Many of the rifles were fitted with some type of suppressor that Sean had never seen before.

His eyes swept over the heavies, sizing them up at a glance. Sean knew the type. Did a few tours in 'Nam, got out, washed out, blacked out, whatever. Went broke, maybe found some work as a bodyguard, maybe as a merc in Angola or somewhere. Maybe got busted, maybe more than once, maybe did time for it.

One of the triggermen held a door open and ushered the ambassador inside. The corridor was lined with dark stained wood and new age paintings that Sean didn't understand. It looked like the inside of the Playboy mansion rather than any boat he had ever been on. The ambassador used a handkerchief to blot sweat from his forehead while Sean noted the position of several security cameras. Escorted by two of the gunmen, they were led into a large stateroom at the stern of the ship.

Three men stood around a table smoking cigarettes. One wore a scruffy old suit with a massive green tie snugged up to equally large lapels at the top of his dress shirt. The two other suits stood aside as the older man moved towards the ambassador to shake his hand.

"Good to see you again," the American greeted the South African.

"Good to see you too, George," the ambassador said, smiling like a jackal.

A large bank of computers lined one entire wall, Sean noting them only after his eyes scanned for lumps under suit jackets, searching out telltale signs of concealed weapons.

"I take it everything is in place?"

"The shipment is outside. You can have your men begin loading the merchandise as soon as I get what I came for. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever show. Ronnie boy has been in office over a year now."

"These things take time," George said with a dismissive shrug.

"The munts in these damned workers' unions are running wild. We need a way to track and locate them now, not in another ten years."

"Okay, okay." George turned to one of his sidekicks. "Bring Petraska out here."

Sean's fist went white knuckle around the grip of the Uzi sub-gun, every instinct in his body telling him to start shooting and not stop until he was standing ankle deep in blood and brass. Petraska was a name he hadn't heard in years, thirteen of them in fact.

The assistant walked back out into the corridor to find his man.

"Just be thankful," George warned. "Back in Chile they were still using a card filing system."

"Correct," a new voice stated flatly.

Sean turned to see Leon Petraska enter the room with a couple goons close behind. His flared sideburns reached all the way down the jowls hanging off the side of his face. He wore a button down with mandatory pocket protector. The commando gritted his teeth, quickly looking away as not to draw attention as he sized the man up from the corner of his eye. They hadn't seen each other since 'Nam. The former CIA scientist didn't give the faintest hint of recognition as his eyes passed over him.

"We had to install automatic encryption on their Condortel telex terminals or the system never would have been possible."

"I don't care how it works," the ambassador snarled. "I did my part. We are struggling to keep our heads above the water, no thanks to your government. Why did I bother helping you in October if not for a payoff?"

Petraska set a black suitcase onto the table where it landed with a dull thud.

"This will make the old catalog systems look like child's play," the scientist informed the South African. "570,000 lines of code, this is the most powerful software that never existed. It can tag, track, and locate anyone,

anywhere.”

Releasing the latches on the suitcase he retrieved a heavy circular spool and set it down on the table.

“That's it?” the ambassador said, apparently unimpressed.

“This is the magnetic tape drive. Give it to your technicians and they will know what to do. Make sure they boot it up with a SPARC or Itanium based mini-computer. This software is going to eat up every bit of processing power you have.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“The instruction manual is in the suitcase with it,” Petraska said, putting the software spool back in inside the case.

Sean didn't understand all of the techno-jargon but knew enough to be worried.

“You'll have the ANC sorted out soon enough,” George said with a chuckle.

As the ambassador turned towards George, they both began to laugh. Temporarily distracted, the private security thugs were not paying attention as Petraska opened his fist against his thigh, a small white rectangle of folded paper wedged between his fingers. Flicking his hand, the paper tumbled into the potted plant directly to Sean's side.

Thinking on his feet, Sean stepped between the plant and the line of sight of the security camera mounted on the ceiling above them.

“These kaffirs have the sense of a field mouse,” the ambassador began his diatribe.

Reaching into his pocket, Sean pretended to accidentally drop a couple Rand notes on the deck of the cabin as he pulled his hand out. Letting the Uzi hang by its sling, he picked up his money with one hand while the other surreptitiously reached behind him and into the potted plant. Palming the folded paper, he quickly slipped it between the bills and pushed the entire wad back into his pocket.

What the fuck had Petraska gotten himself into?

“Yeah, we have the same problem back in the States,” George responded to the ambassador's racial manifesto. “We're using crack to solve it.”

The ambassador hefted the suitcase off the table and handed it to Sean.

“See you next time,” the South African smiled.

Walking towards the exit, Sean glanced at a plaque hanging on the wall. There was a glossy photo of George sitting behind a desk and smiling, the

gray at his temples giving a calculated hint of executive sophistication. An etching at the bottom extolled his virtues: *Thank you for your dedication and leadership, from everyone at Carmichael Incorporated.*

“Take care of yourself Mr. Ambassador,” George said, waving goodbye.

“I will,” the South African said, shaking his head irritably. “Be sure to give me a call the next time you need help electing a president.”

12SEP83

0302 hrs

Robin cut the wheel and turned the pickup onto a patch of crumbling blacktop in front of a mechanic's shop where straw-like dry grass was sprouting from between cracks in the pavement. The oblong building consisted of six garages side by side with the doors securely shut tight. The garage door on the far side of the building rolled up and a camouflage clad man waved them in. Robin pulled in as the soldier rolled the door back down behind them.

“Howzit ouens?” the former Selous Scout greeted them.

“We've been better,” Robin said wearily.

“No rest for the wicked I'm afraid,” the Scout said. An older man, he carried himself with an air of rugged self confidence. Despite having a head of gray hair he projected a level of fitness expected of men half his age. Maybe that was why his soldiers knew him as someone who had a slew of girlfriends hanging off his arms. “Follow me.”

Sean recognized the older Rhodesian from when he had been a student in the Dark Phase of Selous Scouts training during an exchange program. In his mid-forties now, Gavin Dennison had ran with Mike Hoare's 5-Commando in the Congo when he was barely old enough to shave back in '64. Over a few glasses of scotch, a few close friends of his were known to whisper about the work he did for the Brits in Yemen. Later, he rose through the ranks in the Selous Scouts. A living legend in certain Special Forces circles, Gavin was known for conducting solo recce operations, infiltrating his way into ZIPRA training camps.

Today he was one of the lead operators in Ciskei's freshly minted Special Forces unit. As 2IC he worked under the big boss who at the moment was aligned with Comrade Paul Menzi, if not in ideology then in the general

premise of waging war with Transkei and their former SAS advisers.

Robin and Sean hooked an arm under each of Josef's armpits and dragged him along with James trailing behind. Gavin flung open the door that led into the rest of the mechanic's shop.

"Kit up! We roll in two!"

Inside the garage were five Land Rovers lined up and ready to go, Mag 58's and PKM machine guns pointing out in each direction from the vehicles. Former Selous Scouts, both white and black were sent scrambling, shrugging into assault harnesses and slinging rifles over their shoulders. The seasoned combat veterans wore a mish mash of non-standard uniforms. Rhodesian, Transkei, and Ciskei camouflage patterns were mixed in with civilian clothing. Scouts never did play by the rules.

Two very unofficial representatives from Transkei stood in the corner, silently observing.

"G'day," one of the former Special Air Service soldiers said, clasping Deckard's hand. The burly soldier was a native of New Zealand, another former comrade from numerous cross border operations. The second operator nodded curtly in recognition of a job well done, words unnecessary.

"So this is him, eh?" the bearded Rhodesian said, pointing at Josef.

"We've got a lot on the line with this guy," the Kiwi emphasized to Sean.

"Don't we all," the American said, exhausted and delirious from the beating he had taken over the course of the night.

"Just make sure you get him where he needs to be to make the call."

"We're done here. Gav is gonna-"

"Hey," Gavin shouted from across the garage. "What the fuck are you three malingerers waiting for? Josef's brother dispatched a forty vehicle assault convoy half an hour ago. You're late. They are half way to Transkei, ready to start this war of theirs. I had to send three of my best men to tail them and radio updates back to us. I need all hands on deck. Kit up and get on the fucking trucks!"

"God damn," Robin and Sean muttered in unison, dropping Josef on the hard concrete floor.

"Sorry brother," the Kiwi apologized. "We would go instead but if we get caught in Ciskei we are right back where we started from."

"We've got another twenty minutes tops to make this happen," Gavin stated. "Or it will all be for nothing."

Pushing Josef into one of the Land Rovers, the three man Directorate-K

team began refilling their own assault rigs with loaded AK-47 magazines. An entire table had been laid out with the metal banana shaped magazines, Gavin running a professional operation within an operation, a Special Forces commander launching a counter-coup to defuse a war. Now everything seemed to be coming apart at the seams at the eleventh hour.

“Good luck,” the bearded Transkei operator said with a smile.

Sean turned his back and got into one of the Land Rovers, slamming the door. The two former SAS men and a few Scouts rolled up the garage doors, and they were off, assault vehicles screaming down the road and into the night.

Charging handles were racked, belts of ammunition flopped into feed trays, and feed tray covers slammed shut. Sean looked back as the garages disappeared behind them, his old SAS buddies slamming the roller doors shut. He was battered and bruised but felt alive, already getting his second wind.

Now the question was whether or not the former Selous Scouts could run a pseudo-operation on a pseudo-operator. Paul Menzi was still protected by the commander of Ciskei's Special Forces. Neil Lancaster had been a Captain in the Scouts and had hated the SAS with a special passion. Whatever the grudge was, it went so far back that no one could even remember what it was about. Lancaster was so mad that he welcomed Paul's war of tribal retribution and was only too happy to set loose Ciskei's Special Forces on his old SAS rivals in Transkei.

Driving up to the first check point as they approached the Presidential compound, the guards waved the convoy right through. The trucks were cleverly disguised as Ciskei Special Forces vehicles because that was exactly what they were.

“We're running out of time,” a voice came over the radio. “The Ciskei convoy is about fifteen minutes away from the Transkei border.”

“Stay with them,” Gavin replied from his command vehicle, his thick accent booming over the radio net. “We are almost on target.”

It had been the team Gavin sent to tail the Ciskei military convoy en route to Transkei. As they had reported in, Sean could hear the nervousness in their voice. They were cutting this damned close.

The black trooper sitting in the passenger seat pulled his Mag 58 tight into his shoulder as they rounded a street corner and made the final approach. Sean felt his fingers getting tingly as his body flooded with adrenaline.

At the Presidential compound the guards looked confused as Gavin's unit came rolling towards them. The lead vehicle came to a halt, a single trooper stepping from the truck. Sean used his fingers to plug his ears just as the soldier raised a 90mm recoilless rifle to his shoulder and depressed the trigger. The High Explosive round shot down the street as back blast flashed behind the gunner.

Making impact, the shell detonated with enough force to shatter nearby windows. As the smoke began to clear, the wrought iron gate was revealed as being completely destroyed, the iron bars twisted like gnarled claw fingers on either side of the compound's entrance.

The recoilless rifle gunner hopped back in his Land Rover and the convoy sped the rest of the way down the road, the convoy passing two crispy critters as they rolled through what was left of the gate. Sean's nose wrinkled at the stench of burned flesh. It was one thing he never really got used to.

Coiling into the courtyard in a semi-circle, the convoy halted once more as machine gunners immediately began suppressing two guard towers and several sandbagged positions on the rooftop of the military barracks with long bursts of automatic fire.

The assault element moved for the double doors leading inside the Presidential compound, Gavin taking the lead. Sean and his team man handled Josef and acted as his bodyguards while trailing behind. Nearly to the entrance, two Ciskei loyalists came pushing through the doors, flinging them open only to be greeted by a hail of lead from the former Selous Scouts. AK's barked in both directions with staccato bursts of fire. Making entry, the Mag 58's mounted on the Land Rovers cut figure eights of fire across the upper floors of the barracks as enemy gunmen attempted to port the windows.

Inside, the assault group got hung up in the hall as enemy gunfire ricocheted down the concrete walls. Gavin primed a frag grenade and let the spoon fly before rolling it down the hall. The Rhodesian contingent rode out the over pressure that washed down the hall and proceeded forward. The Ciskei Special Forces were now moving so fast towards their objective that Sean was having trouble keeping up.

Surging forward, the assault team was streaming up a stairwell as James and Robin kicked and prodded Josef onward, his eyes as wide as saucers, gunfire erupting all over the compound. Frustrated, James flopped the skinny dictator-in-waiting over his shoulder and followed Sean up the stairs. They carefully stepped over the corpses lying prostrate on the downward angles

that the assaulters had left behind for them.

Reaching the landing on the second floor, Sean panned his barrel towards the exit as a six man element burst through, the door slamming against the concrete wall with a bang that echoed over the gunfire. They were reinforcements, chasing after Gavin's men as they had already ascended to the third floor. The lead man froze in his tracks, shocked to see Sean standing there. His comrades bumped into him as he had stopped short, sending him stumbling forward as his buddies pushed into the stairwell. Their half second hesitation at seeing three white faces was all it took.

Robin and Sean's rifle barrels tracked horizontally across the gaggle of Ciskei soldiers, riddling them with 7.62 rounds in interlocking sectors of fire. A bullet cored through the neck of one of the gunmen, spraying the wall behind him in crimson before he fell in a heap with his late comrades. The four survivors shook their heads. The ringing in their ears felt like someone was driving an ice pick into their skulls.

Sean stayed back to pull rear security while James huffed Josef up the final flight of stairs with Robin taking point. As he stood in the sickly sweet smelling cloud of gun smoke, the American's mind briefly drifted to thoughts of the near death experience that had happened seconds prior. Strangely, he could only vaguely remember it, like a dream that faded as reality set in.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw that his teammates had made it up the stairs and followed after, even as gunfire thundered somewhere behind him.

James nodded as Sean made it up the stairs and the Directorate-K team jogged down the corridor until the hall elbowed at a junction. The assault element was hung up again, occasional fire bouncing off walls from around the corner. Gavin and his boys were crouched down, shouting down the hall in a variety of African dialects.

"What the hell is going on?" Deckard screamed, unable to hear his own voice above the gunfire and the ringing in his ears.

"It's that fucking President of ours," Gavin said, gnashing his teeth. "The bastard has taken one of his wives hostage in his office. He already killed the first one. Now he's on to the second."

"Okay," the Vietnam veteran responded, handing Gavin his rifle. "I got this."

"What in the bloody hell to you mean, *I got this*?"

"Don't worry," Robin assured him. "Sean was the best shot we had in the SAS, right behind this behemoth." He pointed to James.

Gavin glanced over at the Aussie, and it was apparent that despite having tree trunks for legs and carrying Josef over one shoulder, that those legs were currently made of jelly. He was barely able to stand. How he was still on his feet was beyond the Rhodesian.

Checking the load in his .45, Sean flipped off the safety and pushed the nearest soldier out of the way as he inched towards the corner where the hall turned. Paul Menzi was screaming in some guttural African language as he sent another six round burst down the hall.

“Sean!”

Looking back at Gavin, the mercenary pointed to his wristwatch before mouthing the words, *five minutes*.

Now or never.

He took a deep breath and hoped that he was good at his job tonight.

“President Menzi!” Sean called. “I’m coming down the hall to negotiate on behalf of the rebellion.”

Holding the 1911 flat against his thigh, Sean broke from cover and strode confidently around the corner of the hall.

It happened in an instant. Menzi's lips curled back in a rictus snarl, the hot barrel of his AK-47 burning into his young wife's neck. The body of his other wife lay at his feet, her brains splattered everywhere. Sean stood alone, the 1911 now flung out in front of him in his hand. Sights up, aligned. On target.

He rode the recoil as it went vibrating down his forearm and across his bicep as the pistol rose into the air. His elbow bent, the arm acted like a giant piston as the slide was pushed rearward. Propelled forward by its inner spring, the slide rocked back into its original position, stripping a bullet off the top of the magazine and ramming it home.

Cordite stung the soldier's bloodshot eyes.

He was still standing in the middle of the hall, a single wisp of smoke trailing from the barrel of his Colt as Gavin ran around him and retrieved Menzi's wife. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her hands held over her mouth. She was quickly ushered into a side room that had already been cleared of hostiles where she could be kept safe.

Paul Menzi's brains were spread in a trail behind him as he lay dead on the hardwood floors in his office, next to his late wife. It looked like someone had cut open the top of his skull with a can opener.

Gavin's men stormed the Presidential office, dragging Josef inside. Sean stood at the door as they cut Josef free, undid his gag, and sat him down in

what had been his brother's leather backed chair up until a few seconds ago. James stood back with his arms folded in front of him. Sean glanced over and could have sworn that he saw a ghost of a smile cross Robin's mouth.

Sweat beaded on Gavin's head. A veteran of countless wars, he had just minutes if not seconds to spare. He held his Uzi Sub-Machine Gun to Josef's temple as one of his assault team members flopped a stapled, prepared document down on his desk in front of him. Another strode forward and pressed a ink pen into Josef's hand.

Gavin's incisors showed as his lips curled back in a snarl.

“SIGN IT.”

Josef flipped through the document, quickly signing on each dotted line. No sooner had he done so and the document was put into a folder for safe keeping.

Gavin reached across the desk and retrieved the hand mic attached to the radio that sat on the bookshelf next to them. The curly wire stretched out as he put the mic into Josef's hand.

“Call off this war.”

There was no room for argument in the statement. The Uzi had never left the new President's temple.

“The leader of the strike force is your third cousin.”

“Which one?”

“Mani.”

“I see.”

Josef cleared his throat, depressed the hand mic, and ended the war that never was.

* * *

Sean leaned against a wall and fished around inside one of his pockets absentmindedly. The Ciskei invasion force had turned itself around and was on their way back to the barracks. With a little luck they'd arrive back just before day break and no one would be the wiser. Josef had warned Mani that they would be thrown to the wolves if they attacked Transkei. There was a new president and that came with a sudden shift in policy.

Lighting up a cigarette, Sean rubbed his forehead. The lights were too bright. His head felt like the calloused heel of a Shona witch doctor. Inhaling

deeply, the commando blew out a cloud of smoke as he held the cigarette in shaky fingers.

Stumbling farther down the hall, he again leaned against the wall, his fatigued mind struggling to make sense of everything that had happened. Taking another deep drag, Sean exhaled, watching the smoke drift in the air for a moment before it suddenly shifted.

He snapped back to reality in an instant, moving on the balls of his feet as something slashed across his forearm. Pulling his bloody arm back, he parried the second bayonet thrust, but only just, the triangular shaped point gouging a chunk of cinder block off the wall.

Sean registered the white skin and the camouflage fatigues but not much else as the bayonet was spearing back towards his abdomen. Pivoting away, he avoided the bayonet and grabbed the AK-47 rifle by the receiver. Knowing he'd never have enough time to slap leather for his .45, the soldier jabbed his opponent, striking him in the jaw.

His attacker staggered back as Sean attempted to pry the AK from the would-be killer's hands. Exhausted from a full night of one contact after the next, the American was simply too slow. Twisting the AK out of Sean's grasp, the butt stock came swinging towards his head. Getting an arm up, the rifle glanced off, the arm now covered in blood from the gash left by the bayonet, but failed to connect with his skull.

It was now apparent to Sean that his attacker was trying to kill him as quietly as possible so that he could get the drop on Gavin's team. Otherwise, he could have easily shot him and been done with it. The bayonet slashed again, this time attempting to cut him open at the belly. Sean again sunk his claws onto the rifle, the two playing tug of war with it, each grunted in exertion as they attempted to gain the upper hand.

Sean's attacker found an opening first, head butting him and knocking him flat on his ass. Just as he made contact with the floor, muscle memory took over. Some primitive nerve in his body took over, taking a final life saving measure that he couldn't do himself, finding it impossible to react fast enough in his exhausted state of mind.

The 1911 filled his palm as he lay on his back on the linoleum.

A single shot blew out his enemy's kneecap. The camo-clad man collapsed in a fit of rage, his growl of agony filling the hall.

"You fucking cunt," he bellowed at Sean. "You fucking cunt!"

Sean grunted his way back up onto his feet. Heavy bags hung under his

eyes, blood dripped from his gun hand. He was literally seeing stars.

“Bloody fucking Yank, we should have back scuttled your kind-”

Sean rolled his eyes.

“Nothing personal pal.”

Sean shot him between the eyes.

“Son of a bitch!”

Turning, he saw Gavin and his men gawking from behind.

“You just slotted Neil Lancaster.”

04JUN82

Robin looked up from his game of solitaire as the buzzer went off.

Depressing the call button he waited, hoping he didn't hear the distress word.

“Egon Spengler,” Sean's voice came over the intercom.

The Rhodie smiled and buzzed him in.

He could hear Sean sprinting up the stairs as if he were in a hurry, which was strange since he gave the all clear. Bursting into the room, James came off glass, setting his Marlin .444 rifle aside as Deckard sat down at the table next to Robin.

“They've almost got all the cargo loaded on the double-oh-seven,” James said sarcastically. “Who are these chuckle heads?”

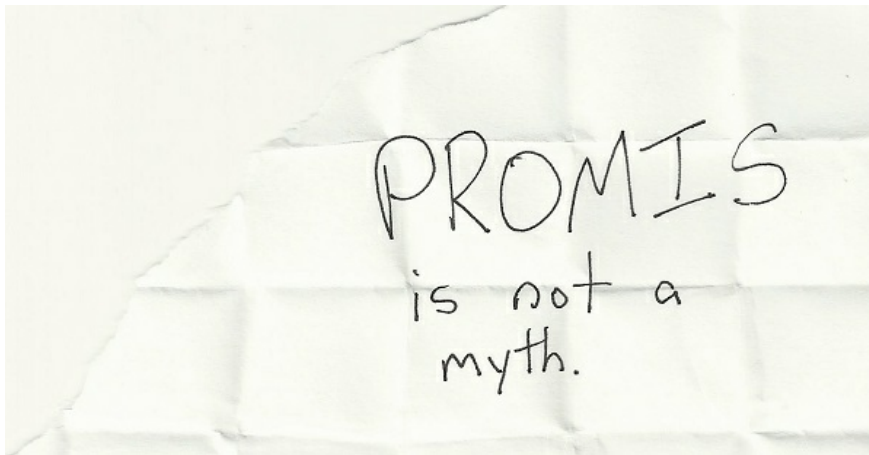
Dumping the Uzi SMG down on the table, Sean pulled a corner of folded paper from his pocket.

“Hey, what's that Sean?” Robin asked.

Sweat ran down their friend's face as he began unfolding the paper.

“Yeah, what is that you've got there?” James seconded the question.

Sean's eyes went wide as he opened the note and stared at the hastily written words:



12SEP83
0550hrs

He felt his knees crack as he sat his tired ass down on the tailgate of a VW van. Sean felt like he was a million years old. 'Nam, Rhodesia, and countless shit in between. Maybe it was time to take a vacation, he thought to himself.

“Drink up, boet.”

One of his debriefers handed him a beer after thoughtfully popping the cap off for him.

“Thanks,” Sean said as he took it.

The VW van and another beater sedan were parked out in the bush, well away from civilization. It was an improvised campground where the debriefings would take place and some of the operators involved in the night's prison break and counter-coup could wait out the coming media storm and police sweeps through the cities as they went out looking for someone to blame.

Larry and Thomas were members of another Directorate-K team, and although Sean had never worked with them, Gert had vouched for the South Africans. Gert was nothing if not thorough. Even though they were an off the book black ops team, the boss had still insisted on getting all of their observations down for intelligence value during a debriefing.

As *de facto* team leader, Sean had taken responsibility for the task so that James and Robin could get some much needed medical attention before racking out. Looking down at the black stitches running up his forearm, Sean winced as he felt the burn run deep. The painkillers were already wearing off.

“Got any morphine?” he asked.

“In your hand,” Larry quipped.

Sitting across from him on the hood of the sedan was a one of the black operators who had been present at Paul Menzi's barracks during the assault. As a former Selous Scout, the black soldier had operated as Gavin's mole, reporting what was going on between Paul and Neil up until the last moment. Taking into account the favor that Directorate-K had done for Gavin, Gert had asked to have his people debrief someone intimately familiar with what had happened in Ciskei, and the former Scout had been the most informed.

Upturning the brown bottle of beer, the former Scout chugged down half of it in one gulp before wiping his lips with a shirt sleeve.

Sean's head was pounding. The beer bottle touched his lips and stopped moving as something caught his attention. Sitting on top of a crate that Thomas had unpacked was what looked like a giant cartoonish revolver.

“Holy shit,” he said, setting his beer down. “Is that a Milkor 40mm grenade launcher?”

Weapons had always been his passion. Even in his darker drunken years, he preferred the shooting range to the bottle.

“Uh, yeah,” Larry mumbled. “That's brand new, barely out of the prototype stage.”

Pushing Thomas out of the way, Sean snatched the six-shot grenade launcher off the crate, wincing as the weight of it stretched his recently stitched up wound.

“Damn it's heavy.”

Thumbing open the catch release, he swung the over sized cylinder open, noting that it was fully loaded before slamming it back into the grenade launcher where it caught with a metallic snap.

“Very nice,” Sean said admiringly. “You guys zero these sights yet?”

The American commando looked down the sights, lining up a tree in the cross hairs as the dawn light was already peeking above the horizon.

“Maybe we can find a place to shoot,” Sean said, as he lowered the grenade launcher and swung around. “Pretty amazing design-”

His jaw hung open as he saw the former Selous Scout sprawled out on the hood of the sedan, white froth collecting at the corners of his mouth, his dead eyes staring into the morning sky.

Larry and Thomas followed Sean's eyes, looking back at the dead man in unison before rushing for concealed pistols under their shirts.

Sean leaned into the grenade launcher, flicking off the safety, and squeezing off the first round. The 40mm High Explosive grenade spiraled out of the barrel and slammed into Larry from a range of ten feet. It wasn't even far enough for the grenade to reach arming distance. The 40mm projectile pounded into Larry's chest before he could clear his holster and suddenly he was airborne, if for only a split second, with arms flailing into the air.

Shifting his weight, Sean brought the Milkor grenade launcher into alignment with his second target. Thomas had his Browning Hi-Power out of its holster and rushed the first shot, yanking on the trigger too hard. The bullet went wide, buzzing over Sean as he fired again. The grenade launcher bucked into his shoulder, the South African's head snapping back in a red aerosol spray.

It was over just as fast as it had begun.

12SEP83

0812hrs

Sean's booted foot jarred open the locking mechanism, the door swinging open with a crash as it smashed into the wall. Flowing through the door, his 1911 led the way. He was hyperventilating. His face covered in sweat, the soldier was struggling to maintain control over his body as it wanted to shut down on him.

Once you went into the drone zone everything took on a surreal quality; the mind processing slower, reflexes reacted a half second more than usual.

He swept through the house, room to room, through the hall, kicking open several more doors, frantically throwing open closets. In the kitchen he stopped, looking from side to side.

Empty.

His house had been stripped bare, his wife and son gone. Missing.

The soldier's hands trembled as he held onto the counter and retched up what little liquid was in his stomach into the sink. His mind was in worse shape than his battered and exhausted body. He couldn't string any logical thought together, everything having gone numb.

When the phone rang he didn't jump in surprise. His eyes rolled towards the sound absently. It took several seconds before he recognized the sound for what it was. He didn't feel the receiver in his hand as he palmed it and brought it to his ear.

“Sean?” A familiar voice asked.

“Yeah.”

“Damn, I thought I'd lost you.”

“Gert?”

“Who else would it be? What the fuck happened back there? We found the bodies, everyone is losing their minds back here.”

“They tried to kill me.”

“We found Gavin's man. Poisoned. Somehow the team had been compromised, maybe by CCB, I don't know. I'm sorry Sean. I promise you that I never could have known. Those were operators who I trusted implicitly.”

“They've got my family Gert.” Sean said the words, but his shocked mind was unable to wrap itself around them.

“No they don't,” Gert sighed. “Since we found Larry and Thomas splayed out on the ground I've been calling your home phone every couple minutes. We just put it all together though.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She left a note with Robin's girlfriend. Bianca was pissed about your work, boet. She packed up the house and moved out with your son. I made some phone calls when Robin told me this half an hour ago. He just found out himself. I confirmed that they both caught a flight to Australia an hour ago. Furniture and bulk items are being shipped out by freight and will catch up with them in a week or two.”

“What the fuck?”

“Look, I know what it's like. Believe me, I've been married three times. You are barely on your feet as it is.”

“I don't know what to do,” Sean said for the first time in his life.

“I'm getting you out of the country. Someone obviously has a hard-on for you, and the farther away from your family the better, at least for now. I'm going to hide you on one of our external operations. I've had it pending for a month. The intelligence isn't fully developed but it doesn't matter. Our situation has changed and there is no time like the present since we have a need to get you out of South Africa anyway.”

“I have to go after her, she's got my boy.”

“Leave that to me. She's going to be covering her tracks well. Australia is probably just a way point between here and wherever her final destination is. You take the plane ticket I have for you and leave with Robin and James

this afternoon. I'll use my resources to track down Bianca for you.”

Sean swallowed.

“Where to?”

Now a preview from Issue #4, PROMIS: Lebanon:

17SEP83

Spirals of black smoke rose above the ruins, back lit by the occasional stream of tracer fire.

The city looked like a sick experiment in pre-emptive archeology, human civilization dashed against the rocks well ahead of its time. What was left in the wake of war were the hollowed out remains of what had once been human dwellings. Shattered concrete cast ragged shadows with twisting metal rebar poking out in all directions. Human forms darted between buildings in the night, pausing only long enough to return fire at enemies, real or perceived, in the darkness.

At the shore front, the captain of the small ship cast a line to the dock hand that had been waiting on them since they ran naval blockade, coming in from Cyprus. Lashing the boat to the dock, a suspect looking wooden plank was lowered for the travelers to cross on.

Slinging his pack, Sean Deckard stepped across the gangplank and into another war zone.

He'd prevented a war in South Africa only to be rewarded with another. Smelling the heavy stench in the air, he knew this one would be different. Automatic gunfire thundered, echoing down the streets. RPG's thudded somewhere in the distance. A single shot reverberated across the urban battlefield, the muzzle blast sounding as if it originated everywhere and nowhere all at the same time.

The sounds of war greeted him home.

James hefted an oblong dufflebag and carried it off the boat to stand next to the American.

"Here we go again, mate."

Robin picked up his own bag and joined them, running a hand through his sand colored hair.

"Think this is what Jo-Burg will look like in a few years?"

The awkward silence was broken by another sniper shot off in the distance.

"Probably," James and Sean answered at the same time.

"Jo-Burg and the rest of the goddammed world," Sean said, spitting the words.

“Just stay locked on a little while longer,” James cautioned. His friend had been fuming since the three of them had been exiled from South Africa. Sean was quieter than usual, and it was clear that murder was on his mind. Normal men were dangerous in that sort of mental state. Abnormal men like Sean were a human wrecking ball once they derailed. James would know, he'd done hard time for it himself. “We do our job and let Gert do his. When this is over, we will go and find her. Together.”

“I think this is us,” Sean said, nodding towards a jeep that had pulled up in front of the docks, successfully changing the subject.

Gert told them that once the team hit the ground that one of his deep cover operatives would meet them. His code name was Afonso, a former South African intelligence officer who worked external operations, mostly intelligence gathering. The code name was probably a reference to his Portuguese origins. Not every South African was a Boer after all.

“Nice night for a stroll in the park,” Sean said as he approached their contact men. James and Robin remained a cautious distance behind him, their hands sliding inside their bags for weapons, just in case it went south.

“But it does not look like a nice night for a swim in the ocean,” the contact responded with the correct *bonafides*.

Sean waved his teammates forward.

“Get in,” Afonso ordered, the squat man cocking his round head towards the jeep.

The three commandos tossed their bags into the open-top jeep and piled in.

“Where now?” Robin asked.

“Don't worry,” Afonso said. “I've got a safe house not far from here.”

Shifting into gear, the intelligence officer gunned it down the street, zigzagging across the road to avoid debris as much as incoming fire.

Five minutes later another jeep pulled up to the docks. A young South African approached the dock hands, slipping some money into their palms as he asked about three new arrivals. The boatmen told him that they had just departed with someone else.

The South African looked exasperated.

He had been late only because of a militia checkpoint that had kept him delayed. He had a relationship established and arrangements made, but at the last minute they had detained him and detained him just long enough to make sure he missed his contact time with the team.

Getting back into his jeep he stared at the windshield for a moment, contemplating his next move. Why hadn't Gert's Directorate-K team waited for him? If they didn't leave with their contact then who in the hell had they left with?

Brian Feirra, code name Afonso, shook his head.

What the hell was going on?

An incoming mortar round exploded in the ocean not fifty meters from the dock. The spray of water rained back down around the shore, reminding him why a simple plan had turned to bat-shit at the last possible moment.

Any damned thing could happen in a city like Beirut.

Authors Note:

This novella may be controversial in some circles so I want to add a note of clarification. The general premise that Ciskei and Transkei employed former Rhodesian soldiers from the Selous Scouts and Special Air Service is historically accurate, however there is no evidence that a war of the nature I describe in this work occurred or even came close to occurring.

It's true that the Selous Scouts and Rhodesian SAS had their differences, both in terms of strategy and in personality, but I don't believe that the antagonism ever reached the levels I wrote about here. It is also true that there was tension between the black homelands in South Africa during the 1980's, to put it mildly.

From what I've been told off the record, the Rhodesians who trained and advised in Transkei and Ciskei were put into place by South African intelligence services. It wasn't a mistake that they were there and they followed orders throughout their tenure. Of course this work is too short to really do justice to the type of confusion and overlapping agendas that were, and perhaps still are, present in South Africa.

Two books I drew on for research purposes were "The Silent War" and "Warfare by Other Means" both by Peter Stiff. Both books give thorough academic treatments of South Africa's secret history. The Silent War details Recce operations, including D-Squadron, Rhodesian SAS which was made up of South Africans. Warfare by Other Means is the type of book that never could have been written if there had not been a regime change in South Africa. This book goes in depth into state sponsored executions and political manipulations.

I hope that readers who found this novella interesting, and perhaps enlightening, will be curious enough to turn to the source material for more information.

Also by Jack Murphy:

[PROMIS: Vietnam](#)

[PROMIS: Rhodesia](#)

PROMIS: South Africa

PROMIS: Lebanon (forthcoming)

[Reflexive Fire](#)

Non-Fiction

[US Special Forces: Weapons Report Card](#)

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