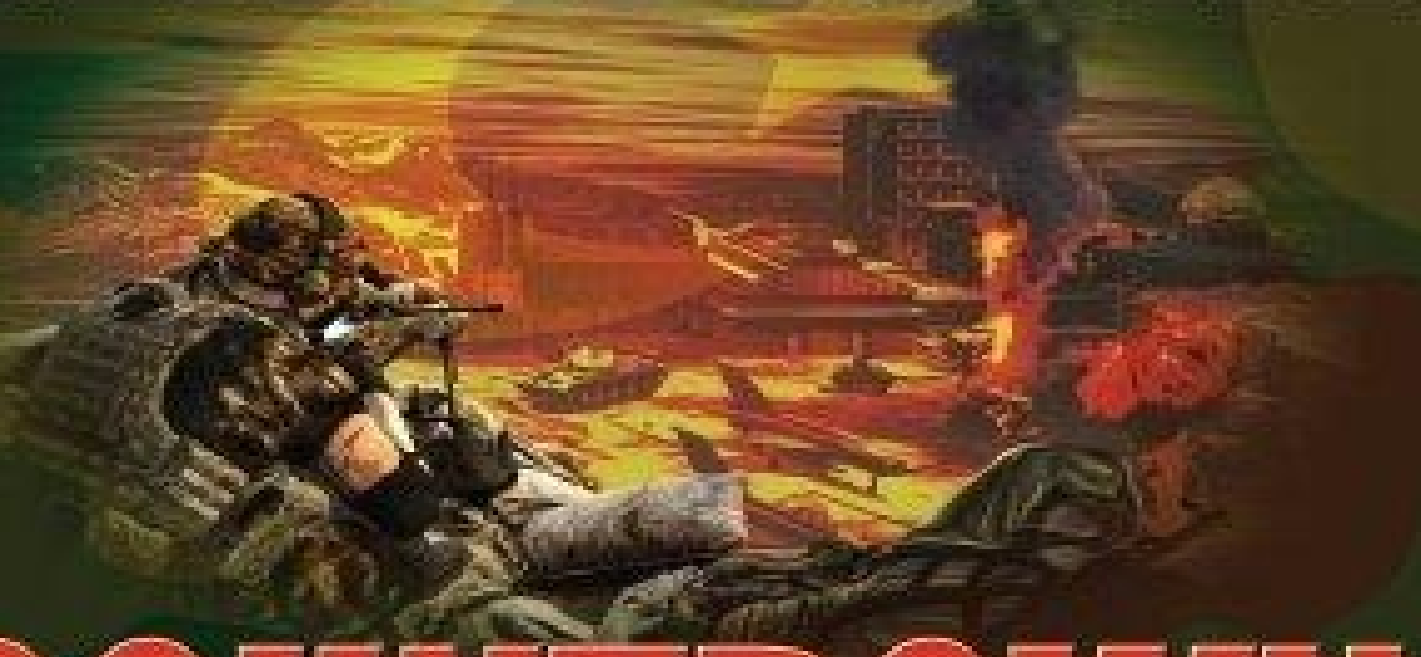


TOM KRATMAN



COUNTDOWN
★ **THE LIBERATORS** ★

COUNTDOWN: THE LIBERATORS – ARC

by Tom Kratman

Advance Reader Copy
Unproofed

Countdown
Countdown: The Liberators
Countdown: M Day*

Desert Called Peace
A Desert Called Peace
Carnifex
The Lotus Eaters
The Amazon Legion

Caliphate

A State of Disobedience

Legacy of the Alldenata (With John Ringo)
Watch on the Rhine
Yellow Eyes
The Tuloriad

COUNTDOWN: THE LIBERATORS

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For my mother, Agnes Quinn, nee Henchey
8 January, 1936, Boston, MA
10 October, 2008, Radford, VA

PROLOGUE

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains
And the women come out to cut up what remains . . .
-Kipling, "The Young British Soldier"

D-815, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan

No one had intended it as a joint op, let alone a combined one, but the nearest support to the beleaguered SEAL team had been a team of Army Special Forces, under a captain named Welch. Because of that, once they were committed, the next echelon in had been the green beanie's boss, or Colonel Wes Stauer. And Stauer had come with a company of Afghan commandos, trained by his own people and paid for directly by the United States.

The valley was high and the air thin. The passengers on the Blackhawks could feel the rotors straining to keep the things in the air. They could look up and still see mountains. But they could also look down and still see clouds.

It was a relief, then, to almost all concerned, when the choppers, nine of them, touched down in a staggered trail formation along either side of a dirt trail running between two ridges. It was a relief even though the air around the landing zone went from still and clear to a thick, choking cloud of dust in half a second.

First off was Stauer, though the ninety-odd Afghans accompanying him weren't far behind. The latter bolted for the ridges, to relieve the American Special Forces currently providing a thin guard.

He was a big man, Stauer, six-two, graying but still with all his hair. Framed by deep crow's feet, his eyes were a pale blue that both saw too much and had seen too much. He was widely considered to be a son of a bitch. Most of those he worked for were of that opinion; though only a small percentage of those who worked for him shared it. And even they were more often than not of the "but he's our son of a bitch" persuasion.

This was his straight third year in Afghanistan, this time. He'd had four year-long tours previously, unusual in special operations. But why not? No wife, no kids; Stauer was married to the Army and had been since graduating Notre Dame ROTC thirty plus years before.

Stauer didn't think they were going to win the war. He hadn't thought so in a long time. Oh, the troops did well. Washington's influence he found baleful. Sometimes he wished it were over. But what else do I know how to do?

He stepped off the chopper into the dust and ran, bent over, to a point outside the sweep of the rotors. Though he had a pistol in a shoulder harness, he also carried a rifle in one hand. He didn't wear any armor. Up this high, in air this thin, the protection the armor gave just came at too high a cost protecting the enemy as much as the wearer, or perhaps even more so.

Stauer's beanie was stuffed into a pocket against the chance of it being sucked into one of the Blackhawks' engines. He wouldn't put it on until either the helicopters left or he was well out of range.

A SEAL with a recruiting poster jaw met Stauer about fifty meters past the rotors. If Stauer was big, the SEAL was effing huge. "They've got my lieutenant and one of my SEALs," the SEAL told him. Stauer read the swabbie's nametag, "Thornton," and thought, So this is Biggus Dickus, himself. Gotta help a man with that kind of rep.

Thornton pointed at the adobe and scrap rock village down below and added, "And none of the people will tell me shit. I want my people back, sir." Thornton's voice was plaintive, remarkably so for

a man who exuded as much strength as he did.

~~Thornton was a senior chief, the rank equivalent of a master sergeant in the Army. Enlisted from a Midwestern town so far from the sea he'd never actually seen it before joining the Navy as a young man, he'd started real life as a Navy corpsman, a very thoroughly trained medic, supporting the Marines, before switching over to SEALs. He probably had more decorations than Stauer and, given that the Navy was cheap with medals and that the Army overly generous, especially with officers, that was saying something.~~

"What's your case that they know where your men are?" Stauer asked.

"We watched 'em drag our people through the town, leading 'em by ropes around their necks," Biggus said. "They sure acted like they knew each other, the Muj and the townsfolk. Sir, you know what's going to happen to my people if we don't get them back quick."

Stauer nodded and said, "Yeah, I know. Lemme think for a minute."

"Okay, sir," Thornton replied, as all but one of the Blackhawks began taking off again, raising a still more enormous cloud of dust as they left.

It had been a long war, and a hard one . . . and, so it increasingly appeared, a losing one. After a few years, all the treasure, all the blood and pain, the tide of victory was receding. First Russia had cut off reliable transport through it or its satellites; though they still occasionally let some things through when they needed some concession or other. Then Pakistan had openly and officially granted the enemy safe asylum across the convoluted, mountainous border. This, naturally enough, had caused the United States forces – though not generally NATO allies-to treat the border with no more respect than the enemy did. Indeed, once Pakistan effectively ceded sovereignty, it could hardly claim to still have it. Nonetheless, the U.S. incursions had had the unfortunate effect of bringing down the Pakistani government and seeing installed one still more firmly committed to helping the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Of course, the Pakis had also cut off surface transportation. Worse still, they used some of their own special operations forces, by no means contemptible, to support the enemy, just as they sometimes had done against the Russians, decades before.

Now the war was being waged purely on the aerial resupply ticket. And it wasn't enough. Five divisions were needed to win, at least five. They had the equivalent of, and could barely support, three, one of these a mixed NATO formation that sucked up logistics but added little or nothing to the war effort. (There were feelings, among Americans, Brits, and Canadians, that, but for the latter two, the non-U.S. NATO contribution represented a net minus.) It was a formula for eventual defeat.

And everyone who mattered, not least the enemy, knew it.

These were not the first Americans Stauer knew of who had been captured. What had happened to the others, except in the rare case where a timely rescue had been possible, was horrible beyond belief. And frustrating, as the entire war had been frustrating. As the idiocy emanating from Washington had been frustrating. As the refined idiocy coming from Kabul had been frustrating.

Seven years of war can do odd things to a man. Thinking about the fate in store for his countrymen, Stauer felt something give inside him. It might have been his sense of restraint.

Pacing, Stauer clasped his hands behind his back. Never mind that you wanted stars, Wes. That's your most important value you don't deserve to have them, just like most of the motherfuckers wearing them. So skip that. Even if what you have to do costs you stars; you haven't lost anything you could have saved.

He looked down at the villagers, the men from Welch's team surrounding them in the village center. One man alone, Welch's medic, was watching the women and children, who were kept separate.

And what's the worst case if all this gets out? Again, forget prison. If you're afraid of that you're also not worthy of stars. What's the worst case to the war effort?

He snorted softly but with profound derision. What difference? Since Jesus Christ in his second coming occupied the White House, we've been losing anyway. About the only good news is we've kept the Pakistanis out of the country, if not officially out of the war. But every troop that can be spared is holding the passes, now, leaving not a lot to clean out the guerillas. Now it's so far gone I doubt we even can win, not without carving a chunk out of Pakistan. Silly, arrogant, slick-talking bastards have micromanaged us all the way to defeat.

Stauer considered some of the stars sitting in Kabul and thought, Not that they didn't have some help, silliness and arrogance-wise.

Okay, forget all that, too, for now. What about the rights and wrong of the thing? Again he snorted. Wrong to lose a war, terrible, morally execrable, in fact. And wrong to let your men be led on and butchered.

"Captain Welch!"

"Sir!" answered the bright-eyed-team commander. Terry Welch was not so tall as Stauer, nor so broad in the shoulders as Biggus Dickus Thornton. He was, however, an intensely strong West Pointer and former captain of their weight lifting team.

"Back me up in this. You and your men aren't going to like it."

"Whatever you call, sir, however you call it."

"Major Mosuma?"

"Sah?" the Afghan commander replied. He, too, knew the war was being lost, that he'd backed the wrong side, and that his life, in the medium term, was forfeit. He spent every cent he made supporting his extended family, now in India.

Stauer handed the Afghan his rifle. "These people your tribe? The tribe of any of your men?"

"No, sir. None of us."

"Stand by to translate, then."

Without another word, Stauer glanced around at the three score or so adult male villagers assembled. One, in particular, caught his eye for the arrogance and confidence the Afghan showed under what should have been very frightening conditions.

Stauer drew his .45. Special Forces, never liking the Italian 9mm forced on the rest of a unwilling army, had had its own order of .45s specially made by Heckler and Koch. He walked to the arrogant looking Afghan and crouched down in front of him. The Afghan sneered until, in a single smooth motion Stauer placed the pistol almost on the bridge of the Afghan's nose and pulled the trigger. Just before that moment the sneer had disappeared as the eyes widened in shock.

Of late, Special Forces also tended to ignore the rule against frangible ammunition. Given the size of the bullet and the fact that just about all of its energy was suddenly dumped inside the Afghan's brain, his head exploded like a melon, the wide eyes popping out, breaking their optic nerves, and bouncing off Stauer's chest.

Welch's Special Forces people stirred. The Afghan commandos took it in stride. Better than Americans, they understood that sometimes the medium is the message.

"Major Mosuma?"

"Sir?"

"Translate now please. Tell these people that I have seventy-one rounds in my ammunition pouches and in my pistol. Inform them that one of two things is going to happen. Either we get our people back, alive and well, or every male in this village old enough to sprout a beard will be killed and the women and children will be sent to market in Kabul and sold as slaves."

Stauer had to change magazines, just once, before the information was forthcoming.

D-814, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan

What the mixed team of SEALs, SF, and Commandos brought in the next day didn't resemble anything too very human. After they were cornered in a small complex of caves, and when it was obvious there was no escape, the guerillas had soaked their bound captives down with gasoline and applied a match. After that, whatever they'd done to the captive SEALs beforehand was impossible to tell.

And, of course, there were no guerilla prisoners taken so they weren't going to say anything about it.

Stauer walked over to the first of the stretchers and pulled back the poncho that had concealed the remains. These were curled into a fetal position, and charred beyond all recognition, except for blackened metal dog tags and chains with bits of burnt flesh stuck to them. Stauer said nothing, but walked to the next stretcher and did the same. He didn't want to even think about what these men had suffered. When he'd finished inspecting he called, "Major Mosuma?"

"Sir!"

"I'm a man of my word. Kill all the men. The women and children belong to you and yours."

Then Stauer boarded a helicopter and winged back to Kabul to turn himself in. He wept the entire way back.

Seven years of war will do odd things to a man.

D-803, Kabul, Afghanistan

An air conditioner whined in the office window. The office was outfitted with the kind of furniture that looked good but didn't last. It was expensive, though, and still more expensive for having been shipped by air, at government expense. Nobody much cared about expense to the government, but everyone who wore or aspired to stars cared about image. And, it had to be admitted while it would last the furniture gave the right image.

"Why won't the son of a bitch just resign and go away?" whined the commander of all special operations forces in Afghanistan, Major General Jeff McPherson, a tall, confident-looking redhead with a careful touch of distinguished gray at his temples, who harbored a deep suspicion that unauthorized persons had been test driving his young and lovely wife. The not-entirely-unfounded suspicion tended to cloud his judgment, especially his moral judgment. Still, to be fair, for ordinary purposes, when he wasn't doing stupid things like having his subordinates, though tasked to blend in with bearded local men, shave, or salute in the field, or any number of other things that set his troops' heads to shaking, he could be competent. And no one had ever questioned his physical courage.

The problem, from the general's point of view, was that while one could court-martial low ranking officers, noncoms, and junior enlisted, court-martialing a senior officer indicated a flaw in the system. From the Army's point of view, this was highly suboptimal. People, as individuals, could be flawed but to admit to a systemic problem? No, no; that was just unthinkable unless the blame could be pinned on some outside, malevolent, foreign agency. The KGB had once been good for that.

And since colonels had been promoted five times, and gone through numerous other checks, to include what amounted to a Department of the Army Inspector General witch hunt, court-martialing one indicated a systemic problem, indeed. Why, the Army had been known to promote a colonel to brigadier general, after discovering that the man was guilty as sin of forcing a subordinate to comm

an act of forgery and fraud, to get him to resign. Anything but publically admit to a systemic problem. And a general officer who let a systemic problem out into public view? No more stars for him.

"Because he wants a court-martial," answered the one starred Val-for Valerius-Pettigrew, tall, slender, and café au lait. "He told me, when I talked to him, that a court-martial is the only way he's ever going to be able to rake-and I quote-'those miserable, incompetent, son-of-a-bitch, anti-Christ pseudo-messiahs in Washington and Kabul over the coals as they so richly deserve,' unquote."

"But doesn't he understand what this will do to the Army? To the war effort? To himself?"

"He says the war is lost anyway, that it was lost, and again, I quote-

"Spare me," said McPherson, holding up one halting palm. "So what do we do, Val? What do we do when the press gets wind of this?"

"I don't think they will, sir," Pettigrew answered. "Everybody in the village is either dead or dispersed to various well-guarded harems, or slaving in a factory somewhere in Pakistan or, maybe India by now. The Afghans won't talk; they made a good profit off the sales and probably got the dicks wet as an added benefit. The SEALs and Welch's A-Team aren't going to say shit. Look up the word 'reticence' sometime. Any decent dictionary will show a picture of an SF operative, or a SEAL, or a Ranger, or even a Marine, seated on a witness stand, with his mouth thoroughly closed."

Pettigrew's face grew soberly amused. "Besides which, sir, do you realize we haven't had a lick of trouble anywhere within fifty miles of that village since the . . . ummm . . . incident. In an area that used to see firefights two or three times a day. The people there are scared shitless of supporting the other side now. Course, that will change as soon as word gets out that Stauer's on trial."

"There'll be no trial," McPherson insisted. He went quiet then, thinking hard.

"Go back to what you said before," McPherson ordered, rolling his hand in a backwards circle over his desk.

"We haven't had a lick-

"No, not that. Before that."

Pettigrew thought hard for a moment. "You mean about reticence and our people, SEALs, Rangers and Marines?"

"Yeah . . . those." McPherson's face lit with a wicked grin. "So he wants a court-martial, does he? I wonder if he wants all those others, people just like the ones he committed mass murder for, court-martialed, too."

Man, you really do have shitty moral judgment, thought Pettigrew. Makes me glad I boffed your wife.

"And that's the deal, Wes," Pettigrew told him later that afternoon. "You retire, without prejudice, or Welch and his team, and Thornton and his team, get tried as accessories. Moreover, the red-headed bastard is going to turn your man, Mosuma, over to the Afghan authorities. They'll hang him, no drop."

"What a piece of shit," Stauer said with a sneer. "Almost makes me wish I'd fucked his wife."

"You mean you didn't?"

Stauer looked at Pettigrew with great suspicion. "You don't mean you did?"

"Well, what was I supposed to do? I gave her a ride home from the O club, where she'd been drinking, oh, to excess. Next thing I knew, her head's over my lap, and my brain is being sucked southward. Right on Riley Road. I fucked her in the post stables."

Stauer was about to chew out his long-time friend, viciously. But then, what's the point?

He laughed. "How was she?"

Pettigrew sighed. "Words can't describe, Wes. Words just can't describe."

"He'll do it, sir," Pettigrew told McPherson. "But there's a little problem."

~~"I see no problems."~~

"Well . . . both Biggus Dickus Thornton, Terry Welch, and the entire teams of both of them are punching out, too. That's Wes' condition; we have to let them go if we want to get rid of him and they want out."

"Fair enough," said McPherson, relieved that the problem was going to go away. "Do they?"

"To a man, sir. Every one of them said the war is lost and it just isn't worth it. They said other things, too, but you don't want to hear those."

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
-Tennyson, "Ulysses"

D-127, San Antonio, Texas

Like watching fish in a tank, Wes Stauer thought, looking at the thin traffic making its way along East Evans Road and down Bulverde. No, that's not quite right. It's like watching paint dry. Not even enough cars on the road to provide the hope of a decent accident.

He watched one of two identical two-seat cars pass the other anemically and sneered, Battle Song of the Proletariat Specials. Painted "Green," of course.

He shook his head. He could afford a decent, which these days meant an imported, car. Most couldn't anymore, after the tax bite took. Indeed, most who could afford any kind of personal transport these days could only support one of the designed-by-committees-of-special-interests things, like those two seat jobs asthmatically chugging up the road in front of Stauer's house.

Stauer didn't really care that much about the tax rates, personally. His home was held by a corporation masquerading as a religious organization he'd set up in Lebanon once upon a time. He paid the corporation, which is to say, himself, a very modest rent. The rent just matched depreciation and expenses, so there was no tax burden there. Likewise most of his money was overseas where Uncle's sticky fingers couldn't get at it. Oh, yes, the Internal Revenue Service took a whopping bite out of his retired pay, but that, in relation to his overall finances, was "mere."

Unpatriotic? Stauer mused. It's never unpatriotic to keep your government from wasting your money on things that shouldn't be done anyway.

Not that he was necessarily all that illiberal in every particular. He wasn't really, at least as far as domestic issues went. Student aid, for example, to send someone to school to learn to be an engineer. Or a doctor. Or, just as good, a machinist or plumber or farmer? Those kinds of things he was fine with, though he was rather finer with them if there was some price involved; teaching poor kids providing health care in Appalachia, for example. Or military service, of course.

To take a masters on the public ticket resistingbadevilhonkywickednaughtydeadwhitemaleoppressionandrepressionlittleEichmannismbadbad I'm not precisely enthusiastic about that.

And he had the strong sense that the money collected to help the poor and even out the playing field was, in fact, mostly being spent on upper middle class drones with sociology degrees, who do not; neither do they reap, and construction contracts for the very well connected.

Case in point, he mused, that program to pay school girls not to get pregnant. They pay a hundred thousand inner city girls a thousand or so dollars a year, each, and ten thousand social workers nine thousand a year, each, to administer it, and half the girls end up getting knocked up anyway. Case in point, the senatrix from California whose husband somehow just managed to land a three-billion dollar contract to build wind farms in a place with no wind, because, unfortunately, the Senator from Massachusetts has a vacation home overlooking the place where there really is wind. Case in point. ah, what the hell's the use?

And it's not entirely fair to blame the President for this, either. It was building up for years, since the nineties, anyway. Maybe the eighties. And maybe President Wangai made it worse; but maybe he didn't, either. Nobody was going to make it a lot better. You drink enough; you get a hangover. You

spend enough; you get broke. Maybe we could have spent our way back to prosperity. I doubt it, but maybe. But, if so, we'd have to have spent on the right things. We haven't.

At least it's a little better here in Texas. A little.

Stauer'd thought he knew why he'd retired to San Antonio. To use the PX and commissary, to have Brooke Army Medical Center nearby when the time came for that. That's what I thought I was doing.

It wasn't those things, though. Or, at least, it wasn't entirely those. What the hell did I want? The facilities-he mentally shrugged-yeah, okay, sure. But I wanted the facilities someplace where I wouldn't be reminded of what I was missing. No sharp young troopers, fit as a fiddle and ready for a fight. No listening in the morning air for the distant cadence I can't join in any more.

I do miss the Army.

And I didn't want to be in a purely Air Force town. And at least my arthritis isn't too bad here. And home . . . well, it hasn't been "home" in a very long time.

"It sure sucks to get old," Stauer muttered, "and I'm not convinced that the alternative is worse." He sighed, looking down toward his feet. Briefly, his eyes rested on his stomach. "Two years ago, you miserable bastard, you were flat." Traveling further downward, he scowled and said, "And don't you even think about getting old. At least you still have a purpose."

From inside the residence he heard the purpose's plaintive call, "Honey, come to bed."

Philomena Potter-Phillie, for short-stirred in the big bed, reaching for the man who should have been there but who now stood on the balcony. Her questing hands coming up empty, she awakened and sat up. Immediately she called out, "Honey, come to bed."

Phillie, ER nurse, aged twenty-seven, five foot, ten inches, thirty-five, twenty-three, thirty-six was a quarter English-eighth German-eighth Irish-half Mexican self-propelled monument to mixed marriages. She had short blond hair that had not come out of a bottle, large emerald green eyes, and skin that was essentially white but tanned really, really well. Long legs were a given. She was quite pretty without being painfully so, having a regular, straight nose, full lips that were almost pouting, high cheekbones and a rather endearingly delicate chin.

She was also one of those not entirely rare human females predisposed toward older men. Perhaps "hard-wired" would be more accurate. Indeed, Phillie was so hard-wired for older men that she'd hung on to her virginity-technically, anyway-until well after turning seventeen, precisely so she'd be legal for the class of men that interested her. At the time, the minimum age for that had been thirty-five. She'd added a year and a half, on average, every year since. Her current lover-Wes Stauer-presumably sitting on the balcony watching life crawl by-was a little young by those standards. Young, he was also a soldier, had been, anyway, for about thirty years. That had the effect of making him look older. It was also the other area in which Phillie was hard-wired: Soldiers; yum.

Oh, she'd tried doctors, naturally enough, being an RN and all. Leaving aside the potential problems at work, she'd decided they were, on average, a bunch of arrogant pricks, and especially the specialists. She'd also tried Air Force types. The student pilots from Randolph AFB were interesting but they were mostly arrogant pricks, too. And she tended to be taller than them, which was awkward and operated against the third area of her genetic predispositions. At six-two Wes is just about right. Why won't the bastard come back to bed?

The Special Forces medics, training at Fort Sam, downtown, had been her most enjoyable group. She'd even thought about marrying one of them. Then he'd been killed in Afghanistan and a colonel had come to tell her how very sorry he was and all, and how much the country appreciated . . . and the colonel had led to another colonel and that colonel . . .

"I'll be there in a few," Stauer called back. No I won't. Not tired, not horny, not even lonely. Just miserable. "Go back to sleep."

Nice girl, though, he thought. And, unlike most women that age, I can't say she has neither the charm of innocence nor the skill and grace of broad experience. And she's not even immature. She'd be a good match for an old fart like me. If I wanted a match. Family? I put all that off-"married to the Army"-and never missed it. And now I've no Army and no family. She says she wants kids. I just don't know if I'm up to it. Or if I'd be a decent father. And why the hell am I even thinking about this? I don't want to get married. Christ, I'll "be stone dead in a moment."

A car was pulling into the complex's parking lot as Stauer stood up. He ignored it. Walking inside and gently closing the sliding glass door behind him, Stauer padded quietly on stocking feet to the bedroom he'd set aside as an office. The hardwood floor underfoot didn't so much as creak.

Which is just as well. Phillie will put up with my staying on the balcony. She's good about leaving me space. But if I've come inside and not to her she's likely to get a little testy.

Instead of returning to bed, then, Stauer went into the office and closed that door even more gently and quietly than he'd closed the glass one. Only then did he flick on the light.

Even after two years of living here, most of his books were still packed up in boxes in the upstairs bedroom. Thus, the fifteen book cases were half empty. They'd have been even emptier if Phillie hadn't brought down, unpacked, and shelved about a thousand volumes. The walls were marked, too, with little holes, the only remaining traces of the various nick-knacks he'd picked up in service. He'd put them up when he'd first moved in. After a year or so he'd discovered they depressed him more than anything. Fortunately, there were the empty boxes from Phillie's unpacking of books. The plaques, awards, certificates, commendations . . . they'd all gone into the empty boxes and up to the upstairs bedroom, there to await the judgment day or the auction that would surely follow Stauer's eventual death.

He'd left some things out, still up on the walls, or in cases, or on stands. These were his weapons: forty-seven odd bayonets, knives and daggers, two dozen swords, including a matched fifteen-century daisho that had set him back forty thousand dollars, two crossbows, one modern, one medieval, sixteen rifles of various calibers and capabilities, nine pistols, one morning star . . .

Man without a family ought to have a hobby, at least.

He sat down, as lightly as he'd closed the doors and then cat-footed across the apartment.

Maybe I actually should have taken a job, Stauer thought. But what was there available? Office work? Being a body guard for some State Department maggot? Supervising guard details on a gate in Iraq or Afghanistan for seven hundred bucks a day? That shit got old when I was eighteen. And if I wanted to do direct action the options were not only limited, I'd have been reporting to some ex-SEA who inherited a pile of money. Maybe I should have gone with that Ph.D from King's College London . . . but what would have been the point? It's not like I need the money. Military pay isn't extravagant but when you don't have a family to support, and have no moral qualms about keeping Uncle's finger off your money, you can invest yourself to a not inconsiderable wealth. Toss in the retired pay and it comes to quite a sum.

But I'm just so bored . . .

And it isn't just me.

Stauer flicked on the computer monitor, a twenty-inch flat screen, and pulled up his email. He tried to keep in touch with old comrades, such as wanted to keep in touch. And the refrain from them was so common as to be stereotypical. "I'd give up a year's pay for just one day back in the jungle . . . I am bored out of my gourd, boss . . . What the hell was I thinking when I punched out? . . . There's no work, sir, not for people like me. Not that isn't government make-work . . ."

Guys, if I knew how to help, I would, Stauer sighed. Maybe we should all get together sometime

But . . . nah . . . when it's over; it's over.

Alone in the bed, Phillie lay on her back, hands behind her head and fingers interlaced. I've never felt this way, she mused, and I don't just mean horny. He looks right, acts right, smells right. Everything's right. I'd be proud to be his wife and bear his children. And I think he cares for me. Love me? I wish I knew. But if he doesn't, it isn't for anything I've failed to do. He loves history so I enrolled in a couple of history courses at UTSA so we could discuss it. That helped some, but would have helped more if he hadn't thought all the profs but one were idjits. Rollin, Wes said, knows what he's talking about. But then Professor Rollin left for greener pastures, so . . .

And, of course, I can't talk to him much about my job. "Phillie, honey, most of us are quite content to go through life without thinking of ourselves as animated bags of skin filled with obnoxious glop." He won't even admit he stole that line from that antiwar science fiction writer.

Besides, since the government introduced medical rationing, I've come to hate my job. What should I talk about something I hate?

Still, we have good times together. We have enough in common to make a go of things. He's married to my mom, so he knows I'm going to age really well. We could-

Baaaringngngng.

Now what inconsiderate son of a bitch would be ringing a doorbell this time of night?

"I'll get it, Phillie," Stauer shouted from the office. He picked up a pistol from atop a bookcase standing against one wall and, after checking the magazine well, pulling the slide, and letting it slide forward to ensure the pistol was loaded, walked to the front door muttering foul imprecations the whole way. The federal government, quite despite some recent rulings from the Supreme Court, was being difficult about personal arms, but Texas and a number of other southern and Midwestern states were being equally difficult right back. It was a bad sign, really; everyone said so.

"Dirty, miserable, ill-mannered bastard! Who the fuck calls on someone at three in the fucking morning?" Wes made sure that his muttering wasn't so low that whichever rotten SOB was at the door wouldn't be sure hear it.

He continued cursing while fumbling with the door chain. If there was someone at the door with criminal intent, he didn't want a narrowly opened door restricting his field of fire. No, he wanted a clear path to shoot the son of a bitch, quite despite that the Feds were likely to prosecute these days on civil rights grounds no matter what the local Castle Doctrine laws said.

Chain unhooked, hand grasped around his pistol, Wes flung open the door and stuck the muzzle right against the nose of-

The muzzle didn't waver. Rather, Stauer's head rocked from side to side, as if to bring a jumble of memory to the surface. The scars on his face seemed familiar. The medium tall, slightly pudgy black man slowly and carefully raising his hands over his head looked like . . . but no . . . it's been freakin' years.

"Wahab?" Stauer asked.

The pudgy black face rocked, the nose moving the muzzle up and down with it. "Yes, Wes," the man said in a clipped, almost British accent, "it's Wahab. And I need help."

CHAPTER TWO

God preserve us from our friends.

-Lenin

D-165, Commonwealth Avenue, Boston

Rain came down in a steady drizzle, filling the low points in the streets and soaking everyone in cold, wet misery. From the left, headlights dimmed by the thin, half-frozen deluge, an automobile came. Ignoring pedestrians, the car passed through a muddy puddle, casting up the filth therein on the sidewalk and foot traveler alike. Overhead, icicles were beginning to form on the trees that lined the broad green strip that divided the street.

"God, this weather is shitty," said one of the party, a black man, tall and thin but with refined, almost Arab, features.

"Shitty it is, Gheddi" agreed an older man, likewise black, "but at least it isn't California."

"What's the matter with California, Labaan?"

"Californians," the older man, Labaan, replied. Though he often, even usually, wore a smile, Labaan lost it everytime the subject of California or Californians came up. And he would never say why.

The car reached them, splashing filthy water from the street onto their coats and trousers.

"Sharmutaada ayaa ku dhashay was!" Gheddi shouted. He shook his fist as he swore at the splashing car. Fuck the whore that bore you. When the car ignored him, continuing on its way without a backward glance, he began to reach under his coat.

"Easy, Gheddi," said Labaan. It was said gently but was an iron-bound order nonetheless. The older man placed a hand on Gheddi's wrist, advising, "We have other business this evening. And we don't need trouble from the local authorities."

Gheddi seemed inclined to argue the point, at first. At least his hand continued to attempt to move under his long woolen coat. After a few moments of vain struggle, he gave it up, returning his hand to his pocket for warmth. "You're right, of course, Cousin," Gheddi admitted. "God will have to avenge me on the ill-mannered pig."

"God will do as He will do," answered the cousin, Labaan, leader of the little family group and the only really fluent English speaker among them. Gray-haired, desert-and war-worn, Labaan spoke calmly. He alone knew this city, having studied here as a young man. Indeed, Labaan had studied at the same school as the group's target. That, however, had been many years and several wars in the past. Now, studies abandoned as useless in the violent, anarchic world he inhabited, Labaan led a small team in the service of his clan. And why not? It wasn't as if he had a country anymore.

No, all I've got left is blood. The whole nation thing turned out to be a lie, and the whole international thing turned out to be worse than a lie. In the end, only blood matters, only blood counts, only blood lasts. Everything else is illusion. Everything but blood is a fraud.

Labaan's was not a high-tech team. They had Bluetooth equipped cell phones, recently purchased at a Wal-Mart. They had pistols; this was what Gheddi had been reaching for, of course. They had a rental van, currently idling a few blocks away on Gardner Street under the control of the fifth member of the group, Asad, the lion. The van was GPS equipped, and there was also a hand-held device, which would be used to find the ship that would take them home. They also had tape to secure their target, the tape likewise courtesy of Wal-Mart. Lastly, for the delicate time between confronting their target

and getting him on the ship, they had two surplus atropine injectors, the atropine having been removed and replaced with a cocktail of various drugs that the clan's chief chemist—Come to think of it, Tahar—the pharmacist studied here, too. Wonderful city, Boston! Well . . . except for the weather—had assured them would render the boy half insensate but calm and cooperative in a brief instant.

"He should be coming out soon," Labaan said. "Abdi, you and I are the only ones who can identify the boy. You and Delmar go past the entrance to his apartment building. Wait. If you take the boy, I'll call for Asad. If he turns toward us, you call."

"Haa, Labaan," Abdi agreed. Like his cousins, he was tall and slender, with café au lait skin, an delicate of feature. He and Delmar walked briskly to the public transportation stop, a partial Plexiglas enclosed and fully covered shelter from Boston's execrable weather. In theory, the thing had radiant heaters. In practice, these helped little if at all. The two men shivered in a night far colder and infinitely wetter than the worst their barren country had had to offer since sometime around the last ice age. The shelter reeked of piss despite the cold.

"And Gheddi? You get that hostile look off your face. Now."

The air shimmered around the closing door, the result of the overheated air of the apartment meeting the frigid air of the second floor landing. Adam Khalid Hodan, twenty years of age and so designated successor to his father, Khalid, chief of the clan of Marehan and leader of the Federation of Sharia Courts, shivered in his coat as he locked the door behind him.

Khalid was approximately as religious as Richard Dawkins, but he knew how to mouth the right phrases. Adam, the son, was considerably more religious, though he wanted nothing whatsoever to do with some of the more extreme elements in his father's domain. For that matter, he avoided the big mosque on Prospect Street precisely because it seemed to him to be dominated by the nuts.

And besides, as the boy often thought, there's no requirement to have any man interpose himself between oneself and God.

The apartment was on the second floor, of five, in the converted townhome. Whatever heat there might have been outside of the twenty small apartments of the building had risen to the upper floors.

"God," whispered Adam, "grant that spring come soon to this frozen place."

Physically, Adam, too, was a near match for the men outside who sought him. Perhaps he was a bit darker, as coming from a more southerly province. About them, of their existence or their mission, he had not a valid clue. His father had sent him here—ordered him, really, and much against his will—to further his education for the day he would lead the clan. If his father had thought there was any danger to the boy, he'd neglected to mention it.

Steeling himself against the coming wet and cold, Adam turned toward the door and began to walk the tiled landing to the steps that led down and out. His father could be very touchy about allowances if grades were not maintained. Adam had business at his school's library, across the river.

"Warya, Adam," someone called out before Adam's feet touched the glistening street. He looked and saw someone he'd met, very briefly, in the restaurant down in Roxbury, a countryman, though of a different clan. Odd it was, how clan lines blurred in this foreign place.

"We define ourselves by what we are not," one of Adam's professors had said once, in a lecture. He'd found that true, once he'd thought on it. For that matter, what passed for a girlfriend here, Maryam, was not even of his own country, but of a neighbor. Though she'd hardly lived at all in the Dark Continent, she, too, defined herself as "not American, but African," and so she, too, seemed close to kin here in Boston.

Pretty and to spare, Maryam was pleasant to be around, except of course when she started speaking politics. Some of what she said, what she had learned from her UN father and his progressive

friends, Adam agreed with. But she was depressed, so often, by things beyond her control, and let the depression bleed over to things that were, that the boy wasn't sure their relationship was going anywhere.

Who, after all, wants to live with a steady diet of "brain drain," "rule of law," "reparations," "colonialism," "aid," or "Bob Geldof?"

"Warya . . . Labaan," Adam returned, raising a hand in polite greeting. He'd had to search his mind for the name, which had, at least, taken his mind off Maryam's obsessions.

Abdi saw that the target had turned toward Labaan. He immediately pushed the dial button on the cell phone hidden in his pocket.

"I hear you," Asad answered, from the rental van idling not far away.

"Come," Abdi said. "Labaan has the target close at hand. We are moving in."

"Two minutes," Asad answered.

Adam consulted his watch. Sighing, as if with sincere regret, he told Labaan, "I've a girl waiting for me, friend, at the library. I really must be going."

Maryam was not waiting, however. She had nothing to do with his desire to leave the area. Instead, it was the look in the eyes of the one accompanying Labaan, the one introduced as "Gheddi." He looked hostile, however much he tried to hide it. He seemed a lion, about to spring.

Waving farewell, Adam turned toward the trolley stop. He wasn't looking forward to the urine stench, but at least it would be out of the rain, now falling steadily. As he turned he discovered two men standing right in his path. Neither of them so much as attempted to hide the hostility in their eyes.

Adam opened his mouth to call out for help. The cry never came. Instead, he felt a fierce stabbing pain in his right buttock, followed by a feeling of complete weakness and confusion. Distantly, he was aware of his arms being pulled over the shoulders of the two men who had blocked the path behind him. He barely felt or heard the scraping of his toes being dragged across the concrete of the sidewalk and the asphalt of the street. Of being stuffed into the back of a van, of the clammy feel of the rubberized sheet between him and the corrugated metal floor, Adam had no knowledge whatsoever.

D-165, Constitution Marina, Charleston, Massachusetts

It was useful, Labaan had reasoned, to change jurisdictions in case anyone had witnessed Adam's kidnapping and called the police. Given the place, Labaan had thought this unlikely. Still, an advantage that can be squeezed out, should be. And the extra time could mean the difference between spiritedly Adam away to the ship and being caught red-handed. It also allowed them to take the more circuitous route across the river along Massachusetts Avenue and through Cambridge.

Thus, wipers pounding a steady beat, the party had driven across the Charles River, along Memorial Drive, across the Gilmore Bridge, and finally to the marina.

There, on the dock, next to a small boat that had been bought on the team's behalf, stood a less-than-functionary of the big mosque on Prospect Street. Neither the mosque nor the functionary much cared about the mission. They'd gotten a request, a check to cover expenses and then some, and had, dutiful members of the Umma, the Family of Islam, cooperated. The functionary, who had met only Labaan, simply handed over the keys to the boat and left for his own vehicle. He never even saw Adam, still laid out in the back of the van.

Labaan watched as the unnamed functionary drove off, cold, muddy water spraying to either side.

He sighed. Mouth the right words, utter a few pious phrases, and a devout Muslim will just assume you're on the business of the faith. Idiots. What I am about has nothing to do with Islam, and everything to do with the position of my clan. When he was convinced the man had truly gone mad, Labaan made sense in having an unnecessary witness—he ordered, "Put him in the boat and get our bags."

Abdi and Gheddi hastened to comply, opening the van doors, wrapping Adam carefully and fully in the rubber sheet, and carrying him to the waiting boat. Gheddi looped all five bags, including one Labaan had filled with necessities for their captive, over one shoulder. As he hefted the last bag, Gheddi thought, What a waste to be so solicitous of an enemy's welfare. Labaan's softheartedness would be his ruin.

Rain running down his face, Labaan walked around the van and stared intently into Asad's eyes, demanding, "Tell me again what you do from here."

Asad sighed. Labaan could be so anal about things. Even so, the driver answered, "From here I will take the van back to our hotel and clean the thing with a lice comb. Then I put the seats back in place. After that, I check us out from the hotel. I return the van to the rental yard by the airport, before the rain opens. My flight to Amsterdam is tomorrow, KLM 8526, departing at twelve fifty-five in the afternoon."

"Off with you then," Labaan ordered, slapping his hand to the van's driver's door. "And God bless you with you."

The van began pulling away as Labaan turned his attention back to the small boat. He saw Gheddi pulling at the starter rope. Even from this distance he could sense the frustration growing in his younger comrade. You should have cut lawns here for some extra spending money, Cousin, Labaan thought. Then a little outboard would not vex you so.

By the time Labaan reached the boat he could see, more than just sense, that the younger cousin was about ready to kick the outboard overboard and use the oars that lay in the small boat's bottom half concealed by the rubber sheeting surrounding Adam.

Carefully descending the few wet wooden rungs of the ladder and stepping into the boat, Labaan bent over and checked to ensure the tank vent was open. There was no time for tact. He pushed Gheddi aside and tilted the propeller into the cold salt water. He then set the gearshift for neutral. After adjusting the choke, Labaan took the handle of the starter rope. He gave the thing a smooth pull. Nothing. Another pull likewise produced nothing. On the third, the engine coughed but did not start. With the fourth, it did catch, spewing out a cloud of noxious fumes. Labaan nodded sagely, then called, "Cast off the rope."

The stars were hidden behind the clouds, the half-frozen rain, and the sheen of the city glancing off them. The moon was no more help if, indeed, it was even risen. Labaan couldn't actually tell. Instead, they had a good GPS with an integral compass, a Magellan Meridian Platinum, in fact. It hadn't even been all that expensive. This Labaan held in his left hand while his right controlled the motor.

"Call the boat," Labaan said. "They are waiting."

Gheddi did, likewise relaying their position. "On your current course we're about three kilometers, dead ahead," the boat answered. "On our port side you'll find we've lowered a boat. Put your cargo in it, then board yourselves. Dump your outboard and drag your own boat in after you. We can raise the whole mess. We'll dump the boat at sea, after we prepare it."

"We'll show a series of lights, red-green-red, to guide you."

~~The walls of the inner room were hung in banners of green, the sacred color of Islam. It would be stretching things to say that the people in the room were all that devout. In a place this arid, and with most of what wasn't dry being salty seacoast, hence mostly devoid of plant life, it wasn't hard to understand why here, as in Saudi Arabia, green was something between pleasing and divine.~~

Because the local people shared considerable affinity-culture and blood, both-with the Arabs on the other side of the Red Sea, the floors were covered in carpets and cushions, with the dominant color of the former being red. Between the red and the green, and the gold of some of the cushions, the overall effect was not displeasing to the local eye, though a westerner might have found it garish, even Christmassy.

Few or none of the locals, of course, celebrated Christmas. This close to Mecca and Medina, Christians were few and far between. Of those few, the bulk were slaves. Nonetheless, the ambient mood in the room was as joyous as any western Christmas.

"We've got the little bastard," exulted Gutaale, chief of the Habar Afaan and ruler of this little experiment in anarchy. His ample belly, so unusual among his people, shook with unrestrained mirth. "Let, Khalid, that Marehan boy buggerer"-a charge even Gutaale knew was false-"balk us now!"

Despite the back slapping, the laughter, the cheers, one of Gutaale's advisors seemed very subdued. Old, thin to the point of emaciation, nearly bald and gray where hair remained, Taban, one of the senior of the sept chiefs, just made a frown while staring at the red carpet and rubbing his hands together, worriedly.

"What's the matter, Taban, old friend?" Gutaale asked.

"Precedent, Chief," Taban replied. "I'm worried about precedent."

"Well, I'm not," Gutaale said. "I'm more concerned with stopping the endless war among us which is getting our people their just due."

"Nonetheless, you have set a precedent," Taban said.

CHAPTER THREE

A dream, too, is from God.
-Homer, the "Iliad"

D-126, San Antonio, Texas

Neither the sun nor the chickens were quite up by the time Wahab had almost finished his story. Traffic had picked up a bit though; so much Stauer could hear from the streets and the nearby intersection. Even then, the traffic was much lighter than it would have been even a few years prior.

"So they have your chief's son," Stauer shrugged. "So what?"

"Not just his son, Wes," Wahab corrected. "His only son and his heir. They've got him-my chief, mean-by the balls. We just don't do these kinds of things back home. At least decent people don't. The someone has is frightening."

"And you've no idea where the boy is being held?"

Wahab shook his head, sadly. "We don't even know for a fact what continent he's on; Africa, Europe, even maybe still here. And none of the governments that are friendly to our faction have been able to find a trace. We asked for help. They all said the same thing: 'Tell us where he is and we'll be glad to help you retrieve him.' Oh, yeah, that was a big help."

Stauer stood up from the leather couch on which he'd been seated and walked across the room to the bar. There he poured himself another drink and held the bottle up in query of Wahab's desire for another.

"No thanks, Wes," the black said, holding up one hand defensively. "I'm a bad enough Moslem already and another would be pushing the willingness of the Almighty to forgive. Besides, it's a little early, isn't it?"

Stauer shrugged off the question and returned the bottle to its place on the bar counter. He said, "I don't see where I could be a 'big help' either. I mean, sure, if I knew where the boy was-this is what you were getting at, right?-I could probably assemble a team out of personal friends to get him back. But if I knew that it would be because you knew that. And if you knew that, any of a dozen countries with first class special operations forces would be willing to help. Maybe even for free." Provided one doesn't attach a monetary value to influence, anyway.

"Money wouldn't be . . . wouldn't have been a problem," Wahab assured his friend. "I mean, this is my chief's only son. Despite having four wives and a dozen concubines, all he throws are girls except for this one. For that one, Adam, all he has to give . . ."

"All he has to give," Stauer answered, "is still apparently not enough to find the whereabouts of his son. Get that and you can retrieve the boy."

"Would you be willing to come to help organize the intelligence effort?" Wahab asked. "We'll make it worth your while."

Unheard and unseen by either, just behind a corner, Phillie listened attentively as she had since shortly after hearing the doorbell ring.

She felt sick to her stomach. Please, God, don't let him go. We've just really gotten comfortable together. I mean, this might really be a match good for both of us. I don't ask for much, God, but this one little thing . . .

"I don't need money," Stauer answered, shaking his head. "Haven't in years. And the amount could really use would be beyond your chief's means, I suspect. I mean, maybe Mobutu could have funded my wildest dreams. But your guy? Nah."

Stauer laughed at the absurdity of his own "wildest dreams."

"You might be surprised," Wahab answered, chewing at the inside of a cheek. That was all he said on the subject, however. Whether that was because of a negotiating stance he'd been told to take, embarrassment at his clan's poverty, if they were truly poor, or even simple ignorance, Stauer didn't know and wouldn't guess.

"It's all academic, anyway, since I can't do a thing without knowing the boy's-Adam, you said his name was?-Adam's whereabouts. I can maybe give you the name of a really good intel guy or two . . . ummm, three, if that's any help."

Thank you, God, Phillie thought, turning green eyes ceilingward. Special prayers and candlelight. Promise. Also much fornication so I'll have something worthwhile to confess.

Phillie's theology was not necessarily sound, however sincerely held.

As quietly as she'd gotten out of bed and walked the hallway to eavesdrop still more so did she turn and slip off back to bed.

"Why me, anyway?" Stauer asked. "I'm nobody special."

"Exactly what I told my chief," Wahab agreed. "'This American neocolonialist bastard is nothing special,' I said, 'except that he seems to believe nothing is impossible and I have never seen anyone his equal for making the impossible possible.' My chief, of course, scoffed. Do but note, however, that he sent me here anyway."

"Not a total loss, that," Stauer said. "It's good to see you, and that's the truth. Will you be in town for a few days?"

"At least that," Wahab answered, "or my chief will not believe I truly tried."

"Where are you staying?"

"I've a reservation at the airport Marriott."

"Nonsense." Stauer was adamant. "You're staying here. Where's your bag, by the way?"

Wahab grinned despite his overall disappointment. "I seem to recall leaving it on the landing when some rude barbarian asshole stuck a pistol in my face."

When Wes laid himself down next to Phillie, after showing Wahab to his room, she sensed such a weight bearing down upon him that she didn't even think about offering sex. Instead she just asked in a voice full of concern, "What's the matter, hon?"

He told her a truncated version of the story, not that she needed it, having already eavesdropped on virtually every word.

"And you're disappointed about having to turn down an old friend?"

"That, yes," he admitted. "But more than that, for just a brief moment I had the sense that my youth was in my hands, to spend again as I wish. I thought I sensed purpose again. But . . . no."

This was not precisely what Phillie wanted to hear, since she rather hoped to become a purpose for him, full and entire in herself. Still, she clucked sympathetically and sidled over to lay her head on his chest.

"Sleep," she said. "And you're not useless. And you're most emphatically not old, that you would need some fountain of youth. And if you don't believe me . . ." Her hand wandered down to where he had the means of proof that he was not yet so very old.

Gently he moved her hand aside. "Not tonight, Phillie, because tonight I feel old and useless."

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