

THE
PRESIDENT'S
VAMPIRE

CHRISTOPHER FARNSWORTH



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK

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ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER FARNSWORTH

Blood Oath

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

Publishers Since 1838

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA •
 Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada
 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London
 WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
 (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,
 Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd,
 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ),
 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) •
 Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Farnsworth, Christopher.

The president's vampire / Christopher Farnsworth.

p. cm.

ISBN : 978-1-101-51424-5

1. Vampires—Fiction. 2. United States. President—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3606.A726P

813'.6—dc22

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<http://us.penguin.com>

*To my grandparents, Ben and Dorothy,
who always protected us from the monsters*

This world is a farm, and we are the crop.

—*CHARLES HOY FORT*

PROLOGUE

NOVEMBER 29, 2001, NEAR PARACHINAR, PAKISTAN

Nathaniel Cade watched the men from his hidden perch as they walked up the narrow mountain path.

One was clearly in pain. He stooped, despite his height, and a younger man helped him along, at times almost carrying him.

To the north, the bombing at Tora Bora continued. The 10,000-pound daisy cutters slammed into the caves, one after another, the impact felt more than heard as earth and sky shook with each explosion.

It would have been impossible to block all the treacherous, winding paths out of the area, but the Americans had not even tried. That job went to the Pakistani military and a few warlords who switched sides only weeks before the invasion.

At least, that was the cover story.

Cade recalled how the general swore when told to keep this escape route open. Cade had been around a long time, but the general managed to surprise him with the inventiveness of some of the obscenities.

The order came direct from the president. The general probably assumed it was a political deal with the Pakistani military—a chance to prove themselves in the War on Terror. And a chance to conveniently forget all the help they'd given to the bad guys in the past. The general could not imagine they were actually going to let the target leave.

And yet, Cade watched as the most wanted man in the world simply walked away. Stumbling and weak, but still walking.

Osama bin Laden was almost free.

IT HAD TAKEN SOME DOING to convince the president. Seventy-two hours earlier, in the Presidential Emergency Operations Center below the White House, Cade did not think it would happen.

“Gonna cost me the damn election,” the president said, face pinched with anger. He'd already been stewing about reports that questioned his absence on September 11—fleeing from one secure location to the next, while the wreckage still burned in New York and D.C.

Griff, Cade's handler, sat across the table. He'd been on the receiving end of many presidential tantrums in his career. He was used to it.

“Sir,” he said. “You want to use Cade. This is the only way we can do it.”

“We can't at least, I dunno, bring back the sumbitch's head, or something?” the president asked.

“All missions related to Mr. Cade are above top secret. You know that,” the vice president reminded the president.

The president gave him a look.

“Sir,” the veep added.

“I just want people to see what we do to the bastards who do things like this to us,” the president insisted.

“Believe me, so do I, sir,” the veep said. He stood and placed a hand on the president’s shoulder. “But there are things here . . .” He paused, looking for the right words. “Things here are complicated. Things it’s better for you not to know.”

The president squinted. “You mean that spooky shit, don’t you? I don’t like that.”

“Which is why Mr. Cade will handle this.”

The president appeared to waver. Then the vice president spoke again. “Besides, George—there might be advantages to always having Bin Laden out there. Nice to have a boogeyman whenever you need it.”

“Yeah. All right,” the president said. “Do it.”

He walked to the door, still grumbling. “Gonna cost me the damn election.”

At the door of the PEOC, he stopped and turned. He addressed Cade directly—something he rarely ever did. “Least you can do is make it messy, right? You make the sumbitch hurt.”

Cade nodded. He could do that. It would be little enough payment for the wounds inflicted on the United States. He was still a patriot. Even if he was no longer human.

CADE LOOKED DOWN at the Arabs again. At this rate, they would take another fifteen minutes, at least, to reach him at the crest of the ridge.

Cade shifted, feeling the wound in his gut. It was healing, but it hurt. The only thing keeping his intestines inside his body was a heavy-duty neoprene sheath. Of course, anyone else would have been killed.

Cade had spent most of the day of 9/11 in an underground parking garage, pinned to a concrete pillar by a sword driven through his torso.

He was still annoyed by that. He decided he’d waited long enough.

With one leap, he was out into empty air. He fell the length of three football fields and landed on his feet without a sound, directly in front of the man in the lead.

The man’s reaction time was admirable. He was one of the elite of al-Qaeda’s fighters assigned as Bin Laden’s personal bodyguards. He had been hardened by years of combat, first against the Soviets then against other warring tribes. Now he had taken the most punishing bombardment the greatest military in the world could dish out—and lived.

Still, he barely touched his rifle before Cade pulled out his larynx.

The second man didn’t waste time trying to unsling his rifle. He had a knife in his hand before his comrade fell, and he stabbed Cade in the side. It was a perfect strike—it should have driven up, between the ribs and into Cade’s heart, ending him.

That is, if the knife’s point had not skidded off Cade’s skin, which was tougher than Kevlar weave.

Cade twisted the second man’s head completely around. His body fell nerveless to the trail.

Now he faced Bin Laden himself, and his supporter. He shoved them to the ground, not wanting the man dead.

Not yet.

The fifth Arab used the clear shot at Cade to unload half a clip from his AK-47. Several of the rounds tore through Cade’s wrapping, opening the wound again. He nearly doubled over from the pain.

But he didn’t drop. The fifth Arab’s eyes went wide as Cade took the rifle from him. He whispered

the start of a prayer and choked on his own blood as Cade drove the rifle through his chest.

The man supporting Bin Laden was the youngest of the group—a boy, really, perhaps seventeen at the most. Despite what had happened to the combat veterans on each side of him, he did not hesitate to protect his leader. He reached for the grenades strung on the belt around his chest.

Cade snatched the belt away and tossed it to the ground before the boy could blink. Then Cade flung him into the abyss over the side of the trail. For a second, his arms scrabbled at the empty air as he began to drop. It would take a long time for him to hit the bottom.

Less than two minutes after it started, the fight was over.

Cade turned to Bin Laden.

The most feared and hated man alive did not look particularly scary, especially when compared to Cade. He had been injured in the bombing, it was obvious—one side of his robes had fresh patches of red blood, and he panted heavily, struggling for breath. Cade could smell disease in him as well. This weak, sickly creature had brought the whole world to a halt, if only for a little while.

Bin Laden seemed to know he was no match for Cade. He remained on his knees, glaring. Cade wasn't about to kill him. He had questions.

Due to a number of chemical and psychological causes, Cade's memory, like every member of his kind, was perfect. He did not forget. Time did not dim his recall of anything. He could play it back with perfect clarity, even reliving scents and feelings.

Touching the wound in his abdomen, he was there again.

LATE AT NIGHT on September 10, he followed a target into a parking garage. He'd been tracking the man for weeks—it should not have been so difficult, and that should have tipped him off. He was searching the lower levels of the underground garage. He saw nothing. Then the man appeared as if from nowhere, moving faster than even Cade could see, and impaled him with a sword, driving it into a concrete pillar.

It shouldn't have been possible. No one was supposed to be that fast, or that strong. No one human at any rate. But Cade didn't waste shock on that. He was more concerned with the weapon that pinned him, like a moth to cardboard.

The sword was on fire.

Nobody believed him on this—not even Griff. But his memory was perfect.

The sword burned with a blue-white flame until he finally managed to pull it free from the pillar, and from himself. It had looked ordinary then, a piece of forged steel, but he knew: the blade was on fire when it stabbed him.

It turned out he'd deliberately been kept out of the action. Someone had wanted him out of the way so the hijackings could succeed and the planes could hit their targets.

Whoever had enough resources to know about Cade's existence—and then take him out of the game—was more dangerous than a hundred al-Qaeda fanatics with a backpack nuke each.

That meant Bin Laden had a great deal to answer for.

BIN LADEN STARED AT HIM, on his knees but his face still a mask of contempt.

“Who is the man with the sword?” Cade asked, voice perfectly level.

Bin Laden spat on the ground, replying to Cade's English with Arabic: "I will not foul my tongue with the language of the Great Satan. I am at peace with God. Do your worst. Know this, though: you are sending me to Paradise. I welcome death with open arms, for I am—"

Cade grabbed his face and squeezed. Bin Laden's voice died to a strangled little yelp.

"I do not believe you," Cade answered, in perfect Arabic this time. "I believe you know where you are going. And it is not to Paradise. I want answers. Who is the man with the sword?"

He released Bin Laden so the man could reply. "The sword is the sword of righteousness," he spat. "God's will is the fire in which it is forged, and your disgusting perverted nation will be split open . . ."

More gibberish. It appeared Bin Laden did not know any more than his own part in the operation. He thought himself to be the center.

Then Cade realized: Bin Laden had stopped talking. He looked at Cade, his eyes dancing with a hidden joke.

"I know what you are," he said. "I did not believe they would send you. But they did."

Cade grabbed him again, pulling him close. "Who told you this? How do you know me?"

"You are not the worst thing this world has to offer," he said, grinning. "I know the truth. The shee cannot hear it, but I have known for years. There is no God. Mohammed was not His prophet. My master will show you. This world belongs to him."

Cade usually showed no emotion. He usually didn't feel any. His face was almost always an impassive mask, as still as the body in a funeral-home viewing.

But now his mouth narrowed to a thin line as he scowled.

"Belongs to who?" he demanded.

Bin Laden's grin only grew wider. Cade was ready to do whatever it took to get answers. But Bin Laden did know who—and what—Cade was.

He proved it by removing a small cross from inside his robes and jamming it against Cade's face. It felt like a railroad spike between his eyes.

Cade's lips peeled back as he screamed, and his fangs jutted out from his mouth. His human veneer dropped away. Cade already wore one cross around his neck as a ward against the thirst that constantly haunted him. The pain of another on his skin was almost unbearable.

"Vampire," Bin Laden laughed at him, shoving the cross forward again.

Cade recoiled involuntarily, giving another few feet of distance and another few seconds of time.

That was all Bin Laden needed.

The Saudi curled in on himself. Cade hesitated, not sure what was wrong with him. He wondered if Bin Laden's illness was about to claim him.

In a split second, Cade realized his mistake.

Bin Laden wasn't sick. He was *changing*.

His head and jaw jutted forward as black bile dribbled from his mouth. His skin shredded as muscle and bone moved beneath it like snakes under a tarp.

He locked eyes with Cade, and Cade saw his pupils had become diamond-slitted. His mouth gaped like a fish, revealing dozens of cruel, piranha-like teeth. The new flesh under his torn skin was dark green, almost black, and covered in scales.

Bin Laden's hands whipped out from under his robes, grabbing at Cade. But they weren't hands anymore.

Now they were long, yellow claws.

Cade barely had time to scramble away.

A harsh, snakelike hiss escaped Bin Laden's throat. To Cade it sounded like laughter.

Cade lost his footing as he nearly tumbled over the edge of the path. Bin Laden pressed his advantage and slashed again with his claws. He caught Cade's wound, tearing it open further. Cade began to lose blood.

Cade flung one leg out in a desperate kick, but Bin Laden had been walking these mountain trails for years. He was even nimbler now, scrambling around on reptilian feet. He dashed up the side of the cliff and came down behind Cade, claws darting, tagging Cade on the side, costing him more blood.

Cade spun, threw a punch, and missed. His momentum nearly took him over the edge again. He managed to avoid the fall, but only by landing in a belly flop on the path.

Bin Laden didn't let up. He leaped on Cade's back and began shredding him. Cade rolled over and tried to get his hands around the al-Qaeda leader's throat.

Bin Laden locked his claws around Cade's throat at the same time. His snakelike head darted forward, jaws snapping inches away from Cade's face. His neck seemed to extend like a spring. It took all Cade's strength just to hold him back.

The bleeding got worse. Cade could feel the power draining out of him. He didn't have much time.

He made a decision. He released Bin Laden with his left hand while still fending off the jaws and teeth with his right. He began scrabbling in the dirt with his free hand.

Bin Laden never looked away. He was enjoying Cade's humiliation. He let loose with the same hissing laughter as before.

Cade's fingers found what he'd been looking for—right where he'd dropped it on the trail.

The belt of grenades he'd taken from the boy.

He managed to pull one into his fingers.

His arm trembled. Bin Laden redoubled his efforts. He was nearly at Cade's throat now. His teeth clicked only a few millimeters away.

Bin Laden saw the desperation in Cade's eyes. The al-Qaeda leader spoke.

"This world is his. But you will never see it, vampire."

Cade's arm bent, just a little more.

Bin Laden lunged, jaws wide, ready to latch down on Cade's neck.

And before Bin Laden could stop himself, Cade's left hand brought up the grenade and stuffed it in his mouth.

In the same moment, he kicked with both feet and sent Bin Laden flying.

The pin to the grenade stayed where it was, hooked around Cade's finger.

Bin Laden's body spun out into the empty air over the chasm. Then he exploded.

Green-black blood painted Cade and the rocks all around him. Bits of scales and skin fell in wet chunks to the ground.

Cade stood and tried not to think of the wasted opportunity. He'd had questions, and they would never be answered now. It was his own fault. His wound had slowed him down. And he'd underestimated his opponent. He'd failed.

Still, there was one small victory. He would be able to tell the president Bin Laden's death was, in fact, very messy.

ONE

Every culture in the world has a history of serpent people—reptilian or lizardlike humanoid creatures—in its folklore. The Yaqui of Mexico have their Snake Men. The Hopi have the Lizard People. The Chinese had the Dragon Kings. The Greeks had Glycon, a snake god with the head of a man, while the ancient Egyptians had Set, the serpent god. Early Judaism and Christianity put the serpent in the garden on his own two feet, and the Hindus had the Naga, a reptilian race that lived underground and warred with humanity. The Zulu in Africa have legends of a race of lizard people called Chitahuri or Chitauri who secretly rule the world. Nobody knows why this idea is universal across human history, or why snakes are so universally reviled as the source of all evil because of it.

—Cole Daniels, *Monsterpaedia*, entry “Lizard Men”

ONE YEAR AGO, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, NEAR THE UGANDAN BORDER

In a better world, Joseph Kitambala would have been asleep in a warm bed with loving parents in the next room.

In this world, he was on his thirtieth hour awake, his eyes nearly closing despite all the brown-brown. He didn't think he could inhale any more of the noxious mixture of amphetamine and gunpowder without getting sick, but he knew better than to protest when it was offered to him. No one said no to the men of God's Army.

Joseph's brother, Daniel, had tried when they came to the village two months before. He stood his ground, chin up, defiant and proud, when they told him to get in line with the others.

A second later, Joseph saw his brother's head split open as the bullet tore through it.

The soldiers in God's Army beat him until he stopped screaming. They would not allow him to wipe Daniel's blood from his face or clothes. The dark brown stains still obscured the Nike swoosh on his T-shirt, a gift from a well-meaning church group overseas.

He never refused an order after that.

He was tied with a wire looped around his waist that linked him to every other child in his village. They were told to march. Anyone who fell from exhaustion or hunger was killed. By the time they reached other villages, they were half mad and starving, and they descended on the homes like plagues of locusts.

Many died. But it didn't matter to the men from God's Army. There were always more children to add to the line.

Today, God's Army was on the move toward the edge of the bush, where a unit of the government's soldiers camped. Many times, the God's Army soldiers told Joseph and the other children how the government soldiers were evil, how they were the minions of the Devil, and how they had to be stopped.

Joseph supposed some of the other children believed it, but he doubted anyone cared. They were barely alive. They would do what they were told. Believing took more resources than they had.

Not that Joseph particularly cared what happened to the government's soldiers, either. They were the ones who told him it was safe.

He'd been looking forward to his holiday trip home from the boarding school in Butembo. While he was away, he worried for his family. He remembered the sounds of gunfire, the times his mother would scoop him up and run with him into the bush to hide whenever the men came. But the government said the problems had been resolved. The rebels, like God's Army, had been sent back over the border to Uganda and Sudan. There would be no more raids or attacks.

He came home in December. Everyone was proud of him.

Then God's Army killed everyone he loved.

Since that day, Joseph had learned more than he ever wanted to know about the world.

The government troops were useless at best. The war was not over, as the government people had said. It had simply become quieter and more convenient. Refugees driven out of Sudan and Uganda had their own militias. Competing groups were hungry for fresh recruits. Even the government's soldiers were not above taking boys and girls and putting guns in their hands. All the armies needed bodies. Joseph and the other children were both soldiers and the spoils of war.

Joseph was a bright student. He'd absorbed knowledge like a sponge, picking up languages as if he'd been born to them. But his mind had shut down. Every one of his days had a distant, dreamlike quality. Too little food and too much horror. He barely knew his own name anymore.

So he was surprised when the talk of the soldiers at the head of the line shifted into something unfamiliar and yet recognizable. In a moment, long-ignored parts of Joseph's brain began to work.

English. The soldiers were speaking English.

They were talking to a man wearing all black. His clothes were neat and clean. He handed the men from God's Army a large bag of powder. It wasn't like the drugs that were usually mixed together before a battle. It seemed to have a bright green tinge to Joseph, even against the plants around them.

They were all given the powder and told to swallow it. Joseph and the other children complied. They were released from the long wire that held them together.

In a moment, Joseph knew, they would be told to run, screaming, out of the bush and into the clearing below. They would draw the fire of the government men, while God's Army would wait in the trees and watch to discover the enemy's positions.

But something was different this time. Somehow, Joseph found himself anxious to run. He felt stronger. Angrier. He was ready to tear the government's soldiers apart with his bare hands. He didn't care who they were or what they'd done. He just wanted them dead.

He noticed the other children on the line stamping with the same kind of impatience. Their mouths opened in wide grins.

"Go," one of the soldiers shouted, and they were off.

Joseph found himself running faster than he ever had before. Bullets sang into the air all around him, but for once, he was not scared. He simply wanted to rend, to tear, to bite, to kill.

He hit the first government man in the chest. The man's eyes were wide with terror. He was frightened—frightened of Joseph. It felt wonderful. To finally be able to strike back, to take revenge, to have someone scared of him for a change.

Joseph realized the man was screaming at the top of his lungs. He had not heard it until then. The pounding of his heartbeat in his ears had drowned it out.

He found he was up to his elbows in the man's viscera, pulling things from his chest one after

another. Blood and gore slicked his hands and his face. He finally found something that made the screaming stop as he crushed it between his fingers.

The government man wore a look of pure terror on his dead face. Joseph looked at the thing he'd torn from the man's body. A wet, black and red lump of meat.

His heart.

It was almost up to his mouth when he realized what he was doing.

He dropped it, recoiling from the body. He almost shrieked, but nothing came out of his throat.

It was only when Joseph brought his hands to his face did he learn how he was able to reduce the man to bloody ribbons.

His hands were no longer his own. Instead, he looked at the talons of some kind of lizard. Sharp, yellow claws protruded from dark-green scales.

Joseph heard a hissing noise, and for an instant, he was back on his family's bicycle, the one with the constantly leaking inner tube.

The hissing came from his own throat. It was the only sound he could make now.

He turned and saw another soldier—this one wearing sunglasses that reflected the daylight back at Joseph.

In the tiny mirrors on the man's face, he saw a horrible creature: a fishlike head on a man's body, lizard skin and needle-sharp teeth and claws.

The fish-mouth gaped back at him, and he realized that when it moved, so did he.

He saw himself.

Joseph couldn't move. The soldier was equally horrified, but he had a gun. And with a simple pull of the trigger, he stitched a line of bullets across Joseph's chest.

They thudded heavily into him. He felt blood pour out of himself. He sat down on the grass.

But he didn't die.

The soldier ran away before finishing the job. The bullets alone were not enough, but Joseph knew he wouldn't be able to stand again. Cramps bent his legs. He felt bones cracking. Whatever had changed him wasn't done yet, but his body couldn't take any more.

All around, he saw the other children from the line. They were twisted and changed as well, but some had not transformed as fully as Joseph. Some were like large tadpoles, their bodies fusing at the legs and waist. Others collapsed into a heap, unable to take the strain. He saw scales and fangs like his own, claws and ridged backs, gill-like protrusions under snapping jaws. But he saw nothing remotely human. One by one, they all dropped. Even the ones still breathing, like Joseph, could not move.

The government men were long gone. They left their jeeps, their equipment, even their guns. Men from God's Army came down from the bush and began scavenging whatever they could find. They were careful to walk around Joseph and the rest of the lizardlike bodies.

Joseph heard the familiar and unfamiliar strains of English from behind him. His heart was beating slower now. There didn't seem to be enough blood to go through him anymore.

He recognized some of the words. It was almost a pleasure to recall learning the language.

“—how you have any right to complain,” the first voice said.

“Every one of them died,” the other responded. “Now we'll have to find more.”

Joseph twisted his head around, despite the pain. He couldn't turn his neck as far as he did before.

But he saw the men who were talking. One was a commander in God's Army. He was speaking to the man in black, the one who brought them the powder.

“I'm sure you'll have no trouble filling the ranks,” the man in black said. He kicked one of the bodies nearby. It squealed. He aimed a gun at the body and fired. It let out a hiss that trailed into

nothing. He moved on.

“You didn’t say it would kill all of them.”

“That’s the nature of science,” he said, stepping closer to Joseph. “You keep on trying until you eliminate all the mistakes. That’s how you learn.”

Joseph wasn’t scared. He realized how futile it was, waiting for salvation all this time. He understood now: he was dead. He must have died and gone to Hell a long time ago. He wondered how this could happen to him. What could he have done to deserve this? And now he knew: God had abandoned him. With that knowledge, a kind of peace settled over him. At the very least, he no longer hoped for anything better.

The commander scowled. “And what did you learn here?”

The man in black looked down at Joseph. For a moment, there seemed to be a dark mix of pity and amusement in his eyes.

“Enough,” he said. “Enough for now.”

He pointed the gun at the space between Joseph’s eyes and fired.

TWO

If eyewitnesses and conspiracy theorists are to be believed, the Lizard People are still among us. Reports of reptilian humanoids range from Florida to as far north as Canada. There's the Gatorman of New Jersey, the Lizard Man of Scape Ore Swamp, the Loveland Frogman, and the Thetis Monster, to name a few. But these Bigfoot-like monsters are nowhere near as frightening as the alien-human Reptilians (or Reptoids) who allegedly control the world through a global secret society.

—Cole Daniels, *Monsterpaedia*

TWO DAYS AGO, GULF OF ADEN, OFF THE COAST OF SOMALIA

Alex Howard sat in the bridge of the luxury yacht and listened to the sounds from the party below. It was past midnight and they were just getting started.

Howard drank coffee. The first part of the trip, from Miami to the Riviera, was pretty dull. His boss wasn't on board for the long haul across the Atlantic; he couldn't be away from his investments that long. He joined them when they reached the Riviera, bringing his entourage and a half dozen women who looked like strippers along.

At first, Howard joined the party at night. It was a huge mistake. Piles of cocaine and meth, bathtubs of liquor, a rainbow of pills, all from the boss's seemingly endless supply. Around day five, it began to seem like a grim endurance match. Even the women, longtime experts at faking delight, were strung out and snappish. He'd started to make mistakes. Piloting a 140-foot craft wasn't something you wanted to do hungover, even with the help of GPS and electronics.

But the real reason he was drinking coffee and not champagne was he nearly referred to his boss by his nickname, Moco.

Fortunately he caught himself in time. The last guy who'd called Jaime Carrillo by that name got a new nostril sliced into his face with a Tekna knife.

Howard didn't fool himself; he knew what he'd signed on for when he took the job. Carrillo loved to tell people he'd had the yacht custom-built, from its bronze sculpture in the main salon to the air-conditioned doghouse with marble flooring.

The truth was Carrillo had taken it for a fifth of its value when its previous owner, a real estate mogul, needed to liquidate his assets while facing the twin threats of a financial meltdown and a nasty divorce. The crew was given the choice of working for the new owner. Most of them left, but a few—including Howard—decided to stay.

Howard, who was first officer under the previous captain, wasn't entirely stupid. He would have known Carrillo was dirty even if his name didn't pop up on CNN every few months. The guy paid cash for everything, wore insanely expensive clothes and was guarded by enormous men with H&K MP5 machine guns slung under their arms.

But he wasn't currently under indictment for anything—rumor had it he owned several prominent Mexican politicians.

Carrillo was still living in the shadow of his father, a drug lord who belittled his son his entire life before dying, a casualty of cocaine and Viagra, in the arms of his nineteen-year-old girlfriend. He was the one who came up with the nickname "Moco" for his son's habit of picking his nose as a boy. End result: Carrillo had daddy issues, high-powered weaponry and limitless funds. Never a good combination.

Howard figured he could handle it. A job's a job, right?

He hadn't thought it through. Howard made it a point never to look in the hold, but he knew he was basically a smuggler now. As a fringe benefit, he spent long stretches of time in the middle of the ocean with a man who killed people for fun and profit.

But it wasn't like there were a lot of openings for yacht captains, and there were even fewer job opportunities for former Coast Guard officers in his landlocked Texas hometown.

Howard also had to admit Carrillo was pretty good at his job. As pressure had increased on the Mexican cartels over the past few years, he diversified. He reached out to the players who preferred their cargo not be examined by Homeland Security. He bought real estate. He recruited girls and women from the dirt-poor areas of Mexico and turned them into slaves in factories and brothels overseas. And he began smuggling guns—which were never in short supply in Mexico—to places that needed firepower.

Which was why they were anchored off the coast of Somalia now. Carrillo got a wild hair up his ass to see how his weapons were performing in the hands of some new clients, a loosely affiliated clan of pirates working out of Eyl.

Howard was skeptical about sailing the same waters as guys who carried RPGs on their speedboats but he knew better than to argue. Carrillo said that his clients had guaranteed safe passage, and he wanted to see the pirates in action. All Howard could do was hope they wouldn't have to experience it firsthand.

So far, so good. Carrillo was charismatic, Howard gave him that. Despite the language barrier, despite the mistrust and the haggling over money, he and the Somalis were becoming fast friends.

But Howard knew how quickly things could go bad. He spent more time on the bridge now. He warned the crew to stay sharp as well. He checked the radar and the surrounding waters. He kept people on watch around the clock, and kept the engines fueled and ready.

None of it would help.

NEARLY TWENTY THOUSAND FEET Straight up, a crewman in an MC-130H military transport spoke to a young man through the radios of the helmets they both wore.

"FLIR showed the shipment going into those buildings," he said, pointing to a screen that showed a nearly indistinguishable dot on the coastline. "But there's been a lot of activity in the past couple of hours. They're getting ready for a raid."

On the screen, a smaller group of dots moved out into the great black field of the water.

The young man looked behind him, to the seats behind the system operator.

"Cade," he said, "it's confirmed. They're moving now. They're going to hit the yacht."

"I understand," Cade said, and unlatched himself from the seat. He took off his helmet. Unlike the others, he didn't need the oxygen. He walked through the cockpit door to the back of the plane.

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