



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Authors: AeroGirl and Daenar

Email: michaerogirl@hotmail.com, daenarchurill@hotmail.com

Websites: <http://aerogirl.dhs.org>; <http://www.daenarsjagfanfiction.com>

Rating: PG-13 for violence

Classification: JAG Story, Romance (Mac/Harm)

Spoilers: Essentially everything up to mid-season 8

Authors' Notes: This story alternates points of view by chapter, with the exception of one chapter that alternates more than once. Dae wrote one person's POV: AG wrote the other. We leave it to you to figure out which is which. Not that it should be too hard, considering AG's mild fixation with a certain character ...

This story is set in spring 2003, approximately a week into Operation Iraqi Freedom. The basic premise that begins this plot has its origins in reality. Three ships really did leave port in Iraq this winter without a clear destination or cargo, causing confusion and some concern. Beyond that point, though, "ripped from the headlines" takes a break, and fiction steps in. The story is set at the beginning of the recent conflict in Iraq, and therefore ignores the end-of-season story arc in Paraguay. (If you'd care to think of this as a more shipper-centered stand-in for those eps, go right ahead, because there are some basic similarities. But this was conceived quite a while ago, so we had no intentions of borrowing too much from the show.)

A disclaimer seems appropriate: though we are focusing on an al Qaeda cell and its associated motivations, we have no wish to imply that Islam and terrorism must go hand in hand. Quite the opposite, as we hope the ending will demonstrate. If our portrayal offends anyone, we sincerely apologize.

Now, the thanks.

From AeroGirl: Dae, you've been an absolute joy to write with. Thank you for trusting me to do justice to your idea. Your friendship is truly one of the best things I ever could have hoped to get out of this hobby, and I will forever admire your strength and your outlook.

From Dae: AG, I feel incredibly honoured that you agreed to work this out with me. Few things have happened to me in the fanfiction world that I've enjoyed so much as I have this truly inspiring cooperation. But there's more: just when we had decided to get started on this project, RL suddenly knocked me off the track big time. You managed to get my thoughts off the bad things and helped me come back to my normal self. Although we're oceans apart, it

felt like I had a kindred spirit right next door. Thank you a million times for being such a good friend, I really owe you, my dear.

And, of course, thanks to Valerie and Heather for beta-reading!

Chapter One

The loud clicking of the door behind me made me sigh contently. It was the audible line that I had gotten used to mentally drawing under a day filled with an intense workload, the sound that always marked the beginning of my 'Hard Day's Night,' to cite the Beatles. The one moment I looked forward to each day, because it meant that I could finally breathe and be myself again.

True, the real relief would still have to wait a little. As long as I wasn't home or, to be exact, in the place that I had accepted as 'home' for the time being, I would still have to be on my guard. But deep inside, I felt that the sound of the key turning in the rusty lock of the school door was tantamount to being at least free to let my thoughts flow in whatever direction they liked - which was mostly west, to a place thousands of miles away, where a pair of blue eyes would just now be perusing some file; where a warm, velvety voice would just now be trying to coax information out of some frightened person; where a noble, crystal-clear mind would just now be engaged in the quest of serving truth and justice. I'd never have imagined how badly I would need this one image in front of my inner eye to keep me from slowly going insane.

Briefly closing my eyes, I savored the feel of the gentle evening breeze on my face, before I gave in to the inevitable and pulled the thick cloth of my *Chador* in front of my mouth and nose. This would be a beautiful spring evening to take a walk alongside the Potomac. But as it was, it would be just another beautiful spring evening to be confined to my house. Just another spring evening in western Afghanistan.

1823 Local - 1353 ZULU
Suburbs of Zaranj
Afghanistan

"Maryam!"

I turned my head in the direction the voice had come from. The old white pickup with the red half-moon painted on the hood had pulled up about thirty yards down the dirt road, right in front of Mr. Salimi's tailor shop. Leaning against the passenger door was my husband, impatiently motioning for me to join him. I flung my bag over my shoulder and hurriedly complied, throwing him a subdued *"Mote asefam!"* to apologize for letting him wait.

Just before getting in the car, I made another silent apologetic gesture and slipped into the shop. The owner's face lit up upon seeing me. The distinguished old man in the decidedly western-looking light suit immediately put away what he was working on and walked towards me with the help of his cane, the impressive polished brass knob shining. When I had first

known Ahmad Salimi, I had been very astonished about his appearance. But as we had soon gotten to like each other - unlike many locals, I was a well-dressed woman under my *Chador* and knew about style - we had often had nice conversations about society and I had soon learned that Salimi had perfected his skills in Europe with a London high-society tailor, back in the golden sixties when the former Afghan king had still tried to open his country to the west, before the Soviet occupation and the Taliban.

As soon as the post-Taliban law had permitted him to cut his beard and turn back to the clothes he had come to like in Europe, Salimi had returned to his old habits and had even found a way to obtain a subscription to the International Herald Tribune. With me, he talked in Farsi, of course. He had no way of knowing I spoke English.

"Mrs. Goshtasbi, it's a pleasure to see you," he addressed me in his melodious Farsi, handing me a parcel that contained the new shirt I had ordered for my husband three days ago. "What else can I do for you?"

"Nothing right now, Mr. Salimi, thank you," I answered, smiling. "My husband will come to see you next week for the new jacket we talked about. Would that be all right?"

"Of course, ma'am." Noticing the nervous glance that I cast out of the window, Salimi's expression turned a little compassionate. "You don't have time for a little tea today, I assume?"

"Unfortunately not. Next time, I promise." I paid for the shirt and turned to leave.

Salimi insisted on walking me to the door and held it open for me. "I am looking forward to it. Good bye, ma'am."

"So am I, thank you. Good bye." I gave my old friend a last friendly nod and then mentally prepared myself to face my husband's anger.

The pick-up's motor was already running. With a scowl, my husband opened the passenger door and roughly slammed it shut as soon as I had climbed aboard, not caring that part of my *Chador* had ended up between the door and the doorframe. At least I was allowed to sit in the driver's cabin. After all, things had changed a little once the Taliban regime had been defeated. Thus, the life of Mrs. Vajih Goshtasbi was something I could handle enduring.

I barely had the time to take a firm hold on the handle above the side window before my husband forcefully stepped on the accelerator and, with screeching tires, sped off, leaving a cloud of dust in the street behind us.

During the entire ten-minute ride, neither of us said a word. My husband never spared me a glance. Once again, I firmly tucked my *Chador* in place, wincing at the sound of ripping cloth as I tugged a little too forcefully at the side that had caught in the door. My husband only frowned. Finally, he came to a rough stop in front of our small house. Yanking my door open, he again impatiently called out to me.

"Maryam!"

Suppressing a sigh, I got out and let him usher me through the door. As soon as I was inside, he turned and firmly locked it. Only then did he take off his traditional cover, throwing it on the low table and letting out a deep breath.

"How was your day, ma'am?"

In the fraction of a second, Vajih Goshtasbi had reduced to the mere initials of his name. The Red Half-Moon charity worker from Isfahan wouldn't be needed any more right now. Smiling easily, Victor Galindez stepped up behind me and took my *Chador* away as I let myself fall onto the couch.

"Thanks, Gunny, same as always."

"Same here, ma'am," I heard him agree from the adjacent room, my bedroom.

"We still need to work on your 'a', Gunny," I called back and had to grin as I heard him sigh.

"Yes, ma'am," he said obediently, returning into the room and sitting down himself. At least he had somehow gotten used to moving about the house without always jumping to his feet whenever I got up or waiting to be offered a seat. That was quite an achievement, given the fact that we had only been 'married' for about four weeks.

"You know, Gunny, I understand that for you, being married to me may be easier if you keep on pronouncing my cover name like some slurred 'ma'am', but I think you should reconsider your priorities on this point." I couldn't quite keep the smile out of my voice.

"Yes, ma'am." The Gunny's voice wasn't entirely sober either. He met my mock frown with a guilty grin of his own. Shaking my head, I got up and went into the kitchen to prepare dinner.

Generally speaking, I had no reason whatsoever to complain about my private student. As long as I kept overlooking his reluctance to leave off the formal address due an officer, he was diligent and had, in amazingly little time, reached a fluency in Farsi that enabled him to pass for genuine Iranian, as long as he pretended to be one of the glum and seldom-speaking kind. In the evenings, we still employed a considerable amount of time to smooth and polish his pronunciation and just keep talking, but I had to admit that by now, Gunnery Sergeant Galindez would beat any of the most ardent students in the district elementary school when it came to doing a grammar test or writing a story.

When Webb had first briefed us about our mission, which was to infiltrate the local al Qaeda cell and find out about their plans, I had all but laughed in his face at the idea. Only the fact that the conversation had taken place in Admiral Chegwidden's office, my CO being present, had prevented me from bursting out laughing. An elementary school teacher, me? Married to Gunny Galindez who would have to pose not just as a member of the local Iranian minority but as a charity worker from Iran itself? Impossible. Utter madness. Well, Webb. Still, although I despised him for it, Clay had once again been proven right. We could in fact pull this off. People respected Vajih Goshtasbi and included him into their social lives. And Maryam Goshtasbi had soon become a well-liked guest in every housewife's tea circle, being a rather elegant woman from the big city of Isfahan. We only hoped that our efforts would soon begin to pay off. Life was beginning to get boring as hell.

I had admitted to Harm in one of the few cherished emails that I had been able to send that I had actually come to like being around the kids of my class. I had been assigned the first grade, thirty children about the age of six, luckily including girls as well as boys. Not that I'd have been afraid to put up with a bunch of children who already knew their teacher to be inferior to them because of her sex. After all, who better than a female Marine officer to know about prejudices? But still, having girls around rendered school life a whole lot more agreeable. Not only could I count on having a few allies, but I could also do some good and try to help them

brace themselves against the society in this 'Man Country,' as Harm had once so eloquently put it.

Of course, whenever he got the chance to get in touch, Harm would mercilessly tease me about having found my true mission in life. And as I told Gunny when, every once in a while, undercover life threatened to squash my real personality, these little episodes that I lived at school, the little joys, the hidden heartaches of my students and my efforts to mend them if I could, were the only things that helped me think straight. Everyday routine was becoming overwhelmingly monotonous at times, being forced to play the dutiful Muslim wife. I needed every straw of diversion that I could get my hands or mind on, including the aforementioned images of my best friend on Earth doing all by himself what we usually did together. At least, in his last email, he had between the lines admitted that he missed me, too. There's indeed something to the concept of sorrows shared being sorrows halved.

While I was at school, Gunny was working at the nearby Red Half-Moon base, coordinating the distribution of food donations with an efficiency that fatally resembled that of a U.S. Marine organizing an office full of military lawyers. Webb had picked the ideal job for him. He got in touch with all the local VIPs, including those who only thought they belonged in that category. Gunny's police background had proven indispensable in this respect. He was used to seeing people for who they were. As he pointed out to me, there wasn't too big a difference between people fighting for some influence in a small American rural community and people doing the same in the suburbs of a mid-sized Persian-Afghani town. The Gunny had a trustworthy gut feeling for the characters of the people he came across. This would surely come in extremely handy one day. I was glad that he was in this with me.

We were about halfway through our curried chicken when a sharp knock at our door startled us. I rushed to get my *Chador* even though we were at home. You could never know if there was a man in front of your door. I wouldn't want to offend any visitors by forcing them to see my face. Afghan law permitted women to go without the traditional Burqa ever since the Taliban had been chased away. But as a good Iranian housewife, I knew when my *Chador* would be required. Wrapping myself in the warm, black woolen cape, I sat down at the far side of the room, pretending to knit and hoping that whoever came to visit wouldn't notice that I didn't have the slightest idea about what I was doing.

Galindez opened the door. From the corner of my eye I noticed two middle-aged men, clad in local costume, but obviously belonging to a slightly wealthier class of society than the average population of the district. Their clothes seemed less worn-out and shabby. Gunny reverently bade them come in and accommodate themselves at the table. Then he sternly looked at me.

"Maryam. Tea."

I nodded acknowledgement and withdrew into the kitchen, keeping my ears open, praying that Gunny wouldn't choke on his Farsi. We had never yet received a social call this late in the evening. I couldn't fight the feeling that things were finally beginning to get interesting. While I was waiting for the hot water to turn the right color, I listened intently.

"Vajih, you know my brother Rokneddin," said the elder of the two men whom I knew to be called Kourosh Maghari. Gunny had told me that he was the head of the district's fire watch.

"Yes, I do," Gunny answered in perfect intonation, if maybe a little slow. *"I am very pleased to finally meet you in person."*

"So am I," Rokneddin replied in an amazingly melodious voice. I decided to choose this moment to carry the tea inside, rather than risking an interruption of any vital conversation. Putting the tray down, I nodded silently and became invisible again.

"*Although we always like spending time with you,*" Kourosh continued, getting straight to the point, "*You may have guessed that this isn't a strictly social visit.*"

Galindez waited.

"*We... uh... believe that you and some of us... share a few fundamental convictions,*" Kourosh ventured cautiously. I felt my hands starting to sweat and tightened the grip on my knitting needles.

"*In what respect?*" Gunny only asked, careful to keep his tone respectful.

"*As to how Allah wants this world to be,*" Kourosh answered enigmatically, casting a pointed look in my direction.

Gunny instantly understood. "*Maryam,*" he ordered, "*Leave us.*" I did. In my room I pressed my ear to the wall to catch any words. They went on very low, but they obviously hadn't counted on my Recon-trained ears.

Rokneddin took over. "*There are a lot of people around here who devoted their lives to Jihad. Apt men who are convinced that the rightful leaders of Holy War aren't to be found anywhere in political positions. That the only righteous way to follow Allah's command is to follow his appointed warrior who has already fought so many glorious victories against the unfaithful.*"

"*Osama Bin Laden,*" Gunny cut in in a low voice, apparently intimidated by the fact that he was indeed about to be invited to join the cohorts of our sworn enemy.

Rokneddin had paused to let the news sink in. "*Look, Vajih, Jihad needs people like you. People with organizing talent, with capacity of reasoning, with authority. We hold out our hands to you, asking you to join our brotherhood of faith and honor. But be warned: we only make this offer once, and may Allah have mercy on your soul if we misjudged you.*"

Even from my room, the distinct threat in his voice became apparent. Gunny, however, was as cool as ice. "*You didn't, brothers,*" he answered in an amazingly calm voice that sounded as if he could lure anyone into trusting him. "*What will be expected of me?*"

"*You have to come with us now to be questioned by our brotherhood's counsel of elders.*"

"*Who are your brothers?*" Gunny asked, still applying the amazing, open tone he had used before.

"*We are people who trust in nothing but the Holy Koran. The Brotherhood of True Faith.*" Rokneddin's voice had taken up a tinge of reverent awe. "*Although we aren't directly part of them, Allah's enemies see our parent organization in al Qaeda.*"

There was the monster's name. al Qaeda - The Base. I felt my gut clench. Although this was exactly the contact that we had been hoping to establish, having the word hanging in the air made the whole scenario seem strangely surreal. This was it. 'You can do this, Gunny.'

I was reluctant to let him go into the lion's den all by himself, but right at that moment it couldn't be helped. Or so I thought. But I hadn't counted on my 'husband's' readiness of mind.

"I will come with you," he acknowledged calmly. *"But may I make a suggestion?"*

Obviously intrigued, Kourosh told him to do so.

"Let me bring my wife." Gunny's voice had sounded as if he had just asked if he could simply go to the bathroom. Our guests gasped audibly - and so did I, by the way.

"Of what use could that woman possibly be to us?" Rokneddin's voice was full of contempt.

Upon hearing his answer, I resolved never to play poker with Galindez. *"Her father was a driver for the American embassy in Teheran when the Shah was still in power,"* he calmly explained. *"Maryam grew up to despise America, but nevertheless she learned their language so perfectly that she could pass for an American wherever she wants to. She might be of infinite use to our cause and I know that she would pledge her life to Allah, even though she may only be a woman."*

Had the situation not been so deadly serious, I would have had enormous difficulties stifling my laughter at the Gunny's bold explanation. I sent a silent prayer heavenward that Kourosh and Rokneddin bought it.

"Bring her here."

"Maryam!" Gunny sounded like a drill sergeant.

I quickly entered the room and looked at the three men, waiting in silence.

"You speak English?" Rokneddin asked in Farsi. His stare could have stabbed me.

"Yes, I do," I said in English, shyly lifting my eyes.

The brothers exchanged a surprised glance. Then Kourosh pulled out a scarf and blindfolded the Gunny. A moment later Rokneddin did the same with me and we were swiftly led outside and seated in a car that instantly drove off.

Half an hour later
Unknown location
Near Zaranj
Western Afghanistan

I blinked several times once they removed the blindfold. They had brought Gunny and me into a poorly-lit hut. We were standing in the middle of the small, dirty room, in front of us a row of middle-aged and elderly men, scrutinizing us in silence. I braced myself and waited, unconsciously seeking shelter behind my *Chador*.

"You are Vajih Goshtasbi?" the eldest in the row quietly addressed Galindez.

"I am," he answered calmly. In an odd little mental side-note I resolved to mention in my report the Gunny's excellent command of Farsi under considerable pressure.

"And this is your wife Maryam?"

"Yes."

"Vajih, who is your most powerful enemy?"

"The United States of America."

"Maryam, whom do you hate most in this world?"

I swallowed and quickly asked for God's forgiveness. *"The Americans,"* I answered very low.

"What is the maxim of your existence?" The whole jury was looking at the both of us.

Glancing at me, the Gunny took my hand, silently bidding me to go along with his reaction. I hoped I understood what he had in mind.

"There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet," we said simultaneously.

"Do you pledge your life to Allah and this brotherhood so that you can become His tools to fight new victories even more glorious than the holy deed of Mohammed Atta?"

Feeling Gunny's grip tighten painfully and fighting the overwhelming urge to throw up at the thought of what we were asked to swear, I implored God to take our following actions for what they were truly intended to be.

Again, my colleague and I spoke together. *"I do."*

After what seemed an endless half-hour, the terrorists again dropped us off at our humble abode, giving us directions to attend their next meeting, two days from that time. From what we understood between the lines, something big was in the planning and we, especially I, were part of their plans. I fervently prayed that we might get the chance to do anything that would annul our dreadful oath.

When he had closed the door behind my back and lit the little petroleum lamp, I saw that Gunny's face was just as ashen as I believed my own to be. For a short moment, ignoring rank and only seeking comfort with a friend, we hugged tightly.

"Semper fi, ma'am," Gunny whispered.

"Semper fi."

Chapter Two

1317 Local -- 1817 Zulu
JAG Headquarters
Falls Church, Virginia

Her innate sense of timing had finally begun to rub off on me.

While it must undoubtedly be a useful trick in many cases, it was driving me insane at this particular point in time. I didn't want such a keen awareness of just how long she'd been gone, and yet I couldn't find any way of turning it off. It was like a set of tumblers turning endlessly in my mind, clicking through the hours, days and weeks since she boarded that plane.

I'd had a file open on my computer for a few minutes already, but I honestly had no idea what it contained. My thoughts were scattered in a dozen different directions: the latest theater report from western Afghanistan, the calm yet cautious tone of her last email, the likelihood of me finding a justifiable reason to join her out there ... That last one stretched the bounds of logic a little. I would have been about as inconspicuous as a Starbucks in her current location. Still, I hated the idea of being utterly superfluous while my partner -- no matter what, I'll never stop using that term -- took on possibly the most difficult and risky assignment of her life.

"Commander?"

It was a moment before I realized that someone was addressing me, and I wondered how long Coates had been standing there. Maudlin introspection really wasn't my style. "Sorry, Petty Officer. What's up?"

The young woman started to open her mouth, but seemed to change tactics in midstream. "Permission to speak fr - "

"Granted."

Coates looked apologetic as she spoke. "You need to stop watching the clock, sir. It won't bring the colonel home any sooner, and you're just going to give yourself an ulcer."

Busted by the office staff. That was a new one. I offered a smile to keep her from worrying about having overstepped her bounds. "Am I that transparent, or are you just perceptive?"

"Maybe a little of both, sir?"

I shook my head, the false smile suddenly too tiring to maintain. "I can't *not* think about it, Coates."

"I know, sir. Um, the admiral wants to see you, so maybe he's about to give you an assignment that will take your mind off things for a while."

"One can hope." I stood up from my desk. "Thank you, Petty Officer."

When I reached the admiral's office and recognized his visitor, I was struck by a momentary flash of cold fear. Clayton Webb was sitting in one of the chairs facing the desk, and Admiral Chegwiddden waved me into the other one. I swallowed all the questions about Mac's status that immediately rose in my throat. If something had happened, surely it would be the first topic of conversation.

"Admiral, Webb," I acknowledged, working to keep my voice even. It took more effort than I'd expected.

"Commander, a rather ... important and unforeseen situation has come up," the admiral began. "Mr. Webb has been sent by the DCI himself, with coordination by the CNO's office, to bring us up to speed."

I swiveled to face Webb, cocking an eyebrow. The past year had cooled some of the tension between the Navy and the CIA, but not by much. If the Director of Central Intelligence and the Chief of Naval Operations had found something worth ignoring that mutual animosity for, it must have been something substantial.

"Am I to assume that this is unrelated to the operation in Afghanistan involving Colonel Mackenzie and Gunnery Sergeant Galindez?"

"That's correct." Webb opened a folder and handed over a stack of photos. "Satellite imagery from the port city of Umm Qasr in Iraq, taken six days ago, before the port was secured by coalition forces. Those three cargo haulers are registered to a front company -- repeated inquiries have found no evidence of a legitimate shipping business. They left port in convoy approximately ninety minutes after these pictures were taken. Our analysts have reason to suspect that they may be carrying biological and/or chemical weapons, which forces in the Baath government may be attempting to keep hidden from U.S. troops or UN investigators."

To say that the idea was chilling would be a severe understatement. American intelligence had been telling anyone who would listen about the threat of such weapons in that country for months -- years, even. But in an age when politics could color even the smallest perception, and in an arena where revealing information could compromise lives, it was all a storm of chaos -- and so the possibility hadn't fully registered with me until this.

"It's possible, of course, that the ships aren't Iraqi government property at all. They could be controlled by any one of a number of terrorist cells, not the least of which is al Qaeda. To be honest, I'm not sure which contingency is worse. And it's also possible -- likely, even -- that whoever controls the ships is prepared to use any or all of their weapons in retaliation for U.S. action in Iraq, or simply as an act of fundamentalism. We can't say for sure what their capability to attack is, because so far we haven't been able to confirm the cargo."

"Where is the convoy headed?"

"Nowhere, apparently."

I glanced up from the photos and leveled a disbelieving gaze on Webb. "Nowhere? I know those ships are old, Webb, but six days is enough time to go a long way."

"They keep changing course. Sometimes they cut their engines altogether. Satellites and reconnaissance drones pick them up every few hours, but both platforms can only hold their position for so long. As far as we can tell, they're going in circles in the Gulf area. If they haven't met up with any tankers yet in order to take on fuel, they'll have to do so soon -- those old boats can't sail indefinitely."

"If their holds are full of stored diesel instead of normal cargo, they could hold out longer than you'd expect," I felt obligated to point out.

Webb looked impatient. It was an expression I was very used to seeing from him. "Well, if they've got a non-standard cargo load, someone in that port has to know about it, so that should probably be your starting point."

His choice of words immediately set off a warning chime in my head. "What do you mean, *my* starting point?"

The admiral took over. "This situation needs to be remedied with as little chatter as possible on normal intelligence channels. Apparently someone at the Agency -- far be it from me to speculate on who -- suggested that a JAG with extensive investigative experience might be able to track down some information on those ships, and also accomplish the associated task of developing rules of engagement regarding the convoy."

I took a moment to absorb the gravity of the assignment, and even then it didn't completely take hold as being reality. "Rules of engagement based on what, sir?"

"The threat posed by the convoy, and the likely targets of that threat. If there are in fact biological or chemical weapons aboard any of those ships, they could be delivered to a number of populated ports in the region in a matter of hours. Should we confirm the presence of such weapons, the contingencies for a preemptive strike would have to be addressed."

Another frightening option instantly came to mind, and I voiced it almost without thinking. "If, on the other hand, those ships turn tail and start steaming toward Kuwait or Qatar, and we don't have confirmation of their cargo ..."

The admiral regarded me coolly, but I could see that he wasn't impervious to the dilemma. "You can see, then, why we need to get an experienced JAG into the region at the first available opportunity."

"Yes, sir."

The steady acceleration of my pulse during that exchange had everything and nothing to do with my own personal anxiety. I'd had lives in my hands before, and I had plenty of knowledge about both maritime law and wartime ROEs. If a theater commander were to ask for my recommendation on whether or not to destroy a convoy of three ships, I knew I'd be able to give it without hesitation. But I also knew what it was like to live with recriminations, and the death of a young RIO would pale in comparison to the deaths of dozens of civilian merchant sailors on those ships -- or the deaths of thousands in a chemical or biological attack.

There are days when I seriously question my decision to become a judge advocate. This wasn't one of them, though. Tough decisions are an inevitable part of life. If someone had to make these particular decisions, it might as well be me.

"What specifically is my assignment, Admiral?"

"Get out to the Seahawk first," the admiral instructed, "and talk to the battle group commander about some basic preliminary ROEs. Then, travel to Umm Qasr and see what you can find out about these ships. But if you hit a dead end, cut your losses and return to the ship. Better to stay on top of the situation from there."

"The port has been secured," Webb added. "All the same, go in as a civilian. We'll fake you some media credentials: you'll probably get more information as a reporter. If that doesn't

work, you can pretend to be from the Red Cross, UN Relief, or whoever the hell you want. Just do what you have to.”

Admiral Chegwiddden reached for a file on his desk. “Personally, I’d suggest taking an aide along, if only for strength in numbers. You can commandeer a legal officer from the battle group, or if there’s someone you’d prefer to take from Headquarters - ”

I knew at once what my choice would be. “Sir, with your permission, I’d like to take Petty Officer Coates.”

Webb scowled. “The delinquent?”

“That’s former delinquent to you, Webb. She was closely involved with Lieutenant Roberts’s ROE work in Operation Enduring Freedom, and she’s good at finding ... creative solutions. Admiral?”

“I’ll add her to your travel orders. Better go let her know that your transport leaves in two hours.” The admiral’s voice was grim, but resolute. “Good luck, Commander.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I ducked back into my office to tie up a few loose ends. Before shutting down my computer, I fired off a quick email to Mac:

*Hey, Marine --
I have to go out to the Seahawk. No, not to fly. I’ll explain when I get a chance. But at least our emails won’t have to travel quite as far for a while.
Take care - Harm*

Already preparing myself for the road ahead, I went out into the bullpen. “Petty Officer.”

Coates straightened. “Sir?”

“Still got friends on the Seahawk?”

“A few, sir.”

“Let’s go pay them a visit.”

Chapter Three

Two days later
2112 Local - 1642 ZULU
Suburbs of Zaranj
Afghanistan

Why did it have to be so damned cold?

I tried not to moan as I took my hands out of my *Chador*, blew on my icy fingers and wriggled them to somehow keep up the blood flow. The damp air I had just exhaled hung around my reddened fingertips in small clouds. T plus two hours 14 minutes and counting.

Gunny was sitting only a few yards away from me, included in a circle of about 25 men gathered around a low campfire. As the only woman present, I had been granted the grace of lowering myself in a corner of the small courtyard that I knew stretched behind the house of one of the men in the congregation. I had no idea which of them was tonight's host. Gunny and I had again been picked up blindfolded.

The past two hours easily figured among some of the most trying experiences I had ever gone through. I had expected that religious extremists wouldn't just meet up and at once get to their business. But what I definitely hadn't counted on was having to endure an entire conference on Koran exegesis circling around the forty-eighth sura, the one titled "The Victory."

A man that I had immediately recognized as the imam of the nearby mosque had started the discourse. While he had been talking I had kept telling myself to grit my teeth and just try to ignore the cold. Whatever I was here for tonight would soon be disclosed to me and then I would be allowed to go home and warm up in my bed.

Drat that muezzin.

After having listened patiently for 35 minutes to his parish colleague, the man who normally called out to the faithful to gather for prayers suddenly spoke up and violently contradicted the argumentation of his imam. While the Man of God had been preaching about the unfaithful being destined to eternally suffer after their death, the muezzin had fervently argued that it wasn't Allah's will for us to quietly wait for that to happen, that we ourselves had to be the means of making them meet their destiny. From there things had gone downhill. A heated discussion had set in about what exactly was the definition of Jihad, if ridding the earth of the unbelievers was more important than forcefully establishing Islamist structures in places where already there weren't any unbelievers left.

"And that He may punish the hypocritical men and the hypocritical women, and the polytheistic men and the polytheistic women, the entertainers of evil thoughts about Allah. On them is the evil turn, and Allah is wroth with them and has cursed them and prepared hell for them, and evil is the resort." The imam had his gaze fixed on the muezzin. *"So says the Prophet in sura 48, verse 6. Where does he speak of us taking up Allah's work for him?"*

"And whoever does not believe in Allah and His Apostle - then surely We have prepared burning fire for the unbelievers," the muezzin fired back, citing verse 13 of the same sura. *"This is exactly what we are doing here, Imam, preparing the grounds for His glorious venue!"* Faint murmurs of agreement were heard among the men present - you didn't raise your voice too openly against a Man of God. Had anyone else given the imam's argument, loud protest would have risen immediately.

I admired the Gunny's patience. Once again he was doing the sullen-man routine, surely hoping just as much as I was that no one would ask him for his opinion.

Too late. *"Vajih, you haven't said anything yet,"* Kourosch now addressed him, making my stomach knot. Curious glances were fixed on the silent newcomer.

Gunny pulled himself up a little and took a slow breath as if in deep thought. My fingers were crumpling the cloth of my *Chador*, my thoughts imploring God to help my 'husband' come up with a diplomatic answer, preferably in grammatically correct Farsi. The last thing we needed right now would be to upset half the group with an answer that would satisfy the others, let alone making everyone suspicious about an educated Iranian who didn't master his own mother tongue.

"I think Allah will reward any action that brings the world nearer to perfection," Galindez stated quietly, speaking as slowly as he could without giving away that instead of taking time to think about theology, he was desperately fumbling with grammar. "Be it with fire and sword or be it by firmly installing the wise law of the Sharia. The only constant by which we shall lead our lives must be the struggle for His kingdom to come. This way we could never do anything against Him."

Bravo Zulu. Sometimes a thorough Christian education provided you with the most surprising faculties, I mused. Or where else if not in church should Gunny have learned to meet the standards of religious speech? With all the verbal detours and tightrope walks needed to satisfy each and everyone listening? I had a hard time biting back my grin.

Ironically, the only Christian present in the circle of Muslim extremists had thus managed to smooth the seas. He had effectively ridded the others of their arguments. After having exchanged a few astonished glances with his brother, with the imam, the muezzin and a couple of elders, Rokneddin addressed the Gunny with a slight smile.

"I'm getting the impression that inviting you along was a good thing to do, Vajih," he said. "So, are you prepared to hear what your wife must do?"

Thanks be to Allah, Sunday school was over at last. I swallowed my anger about being talked about as if I weren't present and had to follow orders like some slave. Instead I fine-tuned my ears, every fiber of my body becoming yet another antenna prepared to catch even the slightest bit of information.

"What will be expected of her?" Gunny asked.

Kourosch pulled a small stack of paper out of his inside pocket. Knowing that Vajih Goshtasbi was able to read, he spread out the documents on the ground for Galindez to see.

"Your wife must meet with an American who claims to be able to provide us with surface-to-air missiles."

I needed all of my willpower not to suck in my breath. I would have to politely talk and negotiate with a man who worked with our fiercest enemy. This wasn't the first time I had come across people from my own country who were willing to put that country in grave danger just for their personal monetary benefit. The espionage trial connected to the Krylov affair was still vivid in my memory. But still, whenever a traitor of that kind was unlucky enough to get near me, he would normally be sure to meet my wrath. I swallowed. Nothing but my Marine-trained iron will would keep me from strangling that man once I'd met him.

While I was still trying to get my temper in check, Kourosch went on laying out his plans to the quietly listening Gunny. *"The man's name is Benjamin Kalesky. He was recommended to us by our friends in Kandahar. The man seems to have connections to Russia and can apparently supply us with 25 short-range missiles, Russian copies of the well-known Stinger type. He says*

he could also help us acquire the much cheaper Soviet off-the-shoulder SAM-7, but they are too old and too imprecise in handling. We want quality."

Gunny nodded. "A wise choice," he agreed. "Why does this American sell weapons that he knows will be used against his own kind?"

"For some reason he feels he can't go back to his country and he claims he has to earn his living," the Afghan answered.

Again I felt a flush of cold fury. Poor creature. He was forced to trade weapons to save himself from starving because his cruel country wouldn't have mercy on him! I resolved to learn as much as I could about the whereabouts, the past and the connections of this man, and once I got back to D.C. Benjamin Kalesky would be sure to hear from Sarah Mackenzie.

"What will be my wife's story?" Gunny wanted to know.

"She will say that she fell in love with an Afghan who was a student at an American university. She converted to Islam and followed him to his country. He died the martyr's death when the American aggressors attacked us in the terror scenario they called 'Enduring Freedom'. So now she wants to savor her revenge."

"Will she go like this?" Gunny nodded in the direction where I was sitting, for the briefest moment meeting my eye. Somehow this glimpse of mutual readiness to fight for what we believed in steeled my will.

Kourosh shook his head. *"No. She will have to dress improperly, like all indecent women do, except for the scarf she will wear around her head and shoulders. I must ask your forgiveness for having to see your wife thus disgraced, Vajih. She must wear this."*

He handed Galindez a sack that apparently contained ordinary clothes. I wasn't really surprised that people felt the need to apologize to Gunny for the fact that I would offend him by wearing what they ordered me to. Why should they bother if a timid housewife might feel offended by having to wear indecent clothes? Female thoughts didn't matter, I thought distractedly. This was when I noted in slight panic that I was obviously getting way too acquainted with my role, if reasoning like this didn't make me angry.

Gunny artfully feigned a frown as he examined the sack's contents. *"I guess it can't be helped,"* he muttered gruffly.

With a few last instructions concerning my meeting with Kalesky that was scheduled for the following night at 2100 local, the meeting ended with a joint prayer that our future endeavors might be granted Allah's grace.

We were taken home, this time without being blindfolded. We could see that the session had taken place a lot nearer to our house than we had guessed. When he had picked us up for the meeting, the driver must have taken quite a few extra turns to make us lose our sense of direction. Now it was obvious that the Muslim brothers trusted us so far as to disclose their conspiratorial meeting-place to us. Should we really be proud of that?

As soon as the door had closed behind my back, I dropped my *Chador* on the ground, sat down on the old sofa with a deep sigh and rested my head against the wall, eyes closed. I felt nauseous at the thought of procuring missiles for terrorists. My brain kept refusing to accept that I was actually doing this for the benefit of my country, and for a fleeting moment I

pondered whether or not I should take my sidearm with me and just plant a bullet straight into Kalesky's head.

At moments like this, life decidedly sucked.

The following day
2043 Local - 1513 ZULU
Mac and Gunny's house
Suburbs of Zaranj
Afghanistan

"I've never looked so crappy in my life!"

Gunny glanced up and quickly stifled a smile as he saw me enter the living-room. "It's not that bad, ma'am," he tried without sounding too convincing.

I shot him a look. "Yes, it is, Gunny. Be honest."

He chuckled softly. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

Frustrated, I turned to the old mirror and took in the sight of my reflection. The jeans that Kourosh Maghari had dug up ended five inches above my ankles. What they were lacking in length, they offered in width instead. A tight belt held them in place, but the trousers looked as if I were wearing a dirty dark-blue potato sack. Together with an oversized pink sweater, my old sneakers and a sandy-brown cotton scarf on my head, I looked like someone who usually bought her clothes at the Tijuana flea-market.

"God, I'm only glad Commander Rabb doesn't see me like this!" I stated in disgust.

As the Gunny let out another low chuckle, I turned to find Galindez watching me openly.

"What?" I asked, unnerved.

"I don't think he would mind, ma'am," he observed.

His words didn't clearly register in my brain. "Of course he would, Gunny!" I heatedly replied. "And I could never live it down! The commander may be insufferably dumb when it comes to personal issues but he's incredibly perceptive when it comes to teasing..." I stopped in shock, mentally biting my tongue and slapping myself for once again losing control. First Sturgis and now...

I must have given the Gunny a frightened-deer-in-the-headlights look because after a few seconds of just staring at me, his expression softened and a compassionate smile spread over his features. "Permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

Heaving a defeated sigh, I nodded. "Go ahead."

"I didn't say that Commander Rabb wouldn't notice if you were poorly dressed, ma'am," Gunny said, still smiling. "I said that he wouldn't mind. Respectfully, ma'am: I'm sure you

could show up in a sewage worker's suit and he'd still ask you out if it weren't for the chain of command."

That and a few other things, yeah. Still, Galindez's words were balm for my battered soul. My anger faded away and I flashed him a grateful smile. "Thanks, Victor."

"You're welcome, ma'am."

"Umm... Gunny?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

I uneasily cleared my throat. "Could we... ah... could we keep this conversation confidential, please?"

Gunny gave me an innocent grin. "What conversation, ma'am?"

I couldn't help chuckling. "Thanks."

**2114 Local - 1544 ZULU
District elementary school
Suburbs of Zaranj
Afghanistan**

Benjamin Kalesky was late. Not very late, but given the fact that I already hated him, keeping me waiting didn't really improve my opinion of him. I had to steadily remind myself that I was on a mission out here. Let him live, Marine.

Gunny had driven me to my school and was right now inconspicuously hanging out in the small teahouse on the other side of the street, just in case I needed him. I was waiting for Kalesky in a quiet corner of the playground where there were a couple of benches for the teachers who watched the children during their breaks.

I looked up when a flashlight was aimed at my face. Shielding my eyes against the bright beam, I recognized a man in his mid-thirties, of average height and build, clad in trekking clothes.

"Suzanne Greene?"

My cue. "Yes. Mr. Kalesky?"

The flashlight was immediately switched off and the man held out his hand to me, grinning self-confidently. "Yep. Call me Ben. Nice to meet you."

"Same here," I said, giving him what I hoped would come out my most charming smile.

Kalesky sat down beside me, still smiling at me in a way he apparently thought was irresistible. "So, Suze, what brings you to this goddamn country?"

"Husband," I said curtly. "Our charming countrymen killed him in 'Enduring Freedom.' So I joined the other side." The quicker we got this over with the better.

"Uh, I see," Kalesky said smugly. "Vendetta, right?"

"Sort of. You?" Quid pro quo, man.

"I jumped ship."

"Er... excuse me?"

Kalesky's grin took up a slightly sheepish edge. "I was in the military. Ironic, isn't it? I was supposed to kill the men who're now paying me."

Luckily, my fists were hidden in the big front pocket of my sweater, so Kalesky couldn't see them clenching as my fury grew. Not only an American, but a soldier who had sworn an oath to protect his country! Immediately the investigator in me surfaced.

"How did that happen?" I casually asked, tingeing my speech with a slight incredulous chuckle. Brushing back a stray strand of my hair, I loosened my scarf a little and shoved it back, hoping my smile would have a little effect.

"Oh, no big deal," he replied carelessly, obviously content that he had managed to impress me. He moved a little closer and leaned in conspiratorially. "I was doing special ops in Pakistan, even before 9/11. Chasing Osama, you know?" He shrugged. "Don't even know what made me do it. The thrill, I guess."

I nodded, looking up to him with wide, awed eyes. 'Keep talking, buddy, I'm listening to whatever story you'd like to share,' I silently invited him. "What made you leave?" I asked with the smile of a co-conspirator.

He chuckled, enjoying himself in the role of the adventurous hero. "At some point, I befriended a few locals and they convinced me that there was a lot of money just waiting to be pocketed. All they wanted in return were a few lousy weapons. I knew what they needed and where to find them. So I let my comrades do their hide-and-seek games and left. Semper fi." His grin was exuberant.

I nearly choked on my own saliva. "Semper what?" I managed to croak out, covering my lapse with feigned laughter.

His chuckling intensified, glad that he had obviously made a good joke. "'Semper fi.' That's something the Marines keep saying whenever they think it fits. Latin. Means 'always faithful', or something like that."

"So you were a Marine?" I was amazed that I still managed to smile a little seductively while my whole interior was screaming at me to strangle that man.

"Yep." Still grinning widely, he snapped off a mock salute. "Lance Corporal Benjamin Kalesky, ma'am."

"I see," I said with yet another chuckle that threatened to catch in my throat. I decided I'd better get down to business. "So what have you got for my friends?"

Kalesky handed me a few papers. "I'm told Soviet SAM-7s aren't their favorite?"

"Nope."

"Too bad. Would have been a real bargain." He offered me yet another sly grin. "Then tell them to have the money ready next Friday."

"How much?"

"Five million dollars, the usual Swiss numbered account. These are the coordinates of your nearest training-camp, right?" He showed me a note and I compared it to the information Webb had given us before we had flown out here. I nodded.

Kalesky went on. "Good. These are the coordinates that we'll deliver the babies to." He handed me a second note. I quickly calculated that the spot had to be just a few miles from the camp. "As soon as we have a confirmation that the money has arrived safely, we'll contact you about the appointment," Kalesky added.

I frowned, eager to find out if he knew something about what the Magharis and their friends were up to. "Won't that take too long?"

"Don't worry, Suze," Kalesky replied, good-naturedly patting me on my back, "Didn't your friends tell me that they won't need the Stingers for next week anyway? I thought they'd decided to use the Al-Husayns for that one."

Next week. 'Think, Mackenzie,' I implored myself. I had to get my hand on whatever crumbs of information he would be able to feed me. "Uh, sure," I replied with yet another seductive grin that had a visible effect. "It's just that I'm not entirely up to speed on the day and time they have in mind and I thought they might have planned to have the Stingers in store, just in case."

Kalesky tapped his index on the tip of my nose. "Aww, you're sweet, Suzie. Always thinking about backup for your friends, right?" He winked. "Just tell them to get the money transfer done right away and they should get the cargo in three or four days. Special treat for you, babe."

I leaned in a little closer, thanking Kourosch for the oversized sweater that I now let slide sideways, accidentally baring one shoulder. "Ben," I said in a coaxing voice, pouting a little, "You know how those people think about women. They're using me when English comes in handy but they won't tell me what they're planning. I don't think that's fair. You wouldn't know a few details...?" I let my voice trail off.

The American shook his head. "Sorry, hon, but you'd have to ask your friends. I'm only a little merchant doing them a favor. Don't ask, don't tell, that's my credo." He was now decidedly invading my personal space, making me want to throw up, but mentally gritting my teeth, I continued the play.

"It was worth trying," I said with a wink, shoving my sweater in place and rearranging my scarf. "I'll let my people know what you're offering."

As I got up, Kalesky followed suit, once again offering me a handshake. "Thank you, Suze. It was fun working with you. Maybe we'll meet again?" His voice was ringing with barely veiled innuendo.

I matched his smile. "I'll hold you to that." 'And I'll personally make sure that we will, Corporal,' I silently added. 'In the courtroom.'

I waved as he left the playground, already preparing the closing argument that would seal Kalesky's fate. Having waited a few minutes, I then signaled to the Gunny to get to the car and a few minutes later we were headed home.

"You look like hell, ma'am." The Gunny was genuinely worried.

"Oh, it's nothing." My words were dripping with sarcasm. "I just got to know a Marine who sells weapons to al Qaeda. How was your day?"

I could see the shock mirrored in Galindez's eyes. "A Marine, ma'am?"

"Yes. But don't worry, Gunny. I'll nail his sorry ass once we're done here."

Gunny chuckled. "I'm sure you will, ma'am. Any useful details?"

"Actually, yes. They seem to be planning something big for next week. I don't have any ideas as to what they're aiming at, but given the fact that they're planning to use Al-Husayn missiles for the attack, everything within a range of about 650 miles could be a possible target."

"Al-Husayn missiles, ma'am?"

"A Soviet Scud type that was improved by the Iraqis. Not as good as our own but fairly deadly if carefully aimed and handled."

"Ma'am, if I may - I think we should call Mr. Webb."

"My thoughts exactly, Gunny." We had arrived home and I immediately went in search for our secure sat-phone. Hopefully, Webb would just listen and not ask too many questions that I wouldn't be able to answer. Only after that could I hope to activate our makeshift sat-phone internet access and finally get everything that had happened off my chest.

Maybe tomorrow my favorite long-legged sounding board could spare a few minutes from hanging around his beloved jets and help me keep up my morale by sending a few lines.

Chapter Four

**0723 Local -- 1123 Zulu
USS Seahawk -- at a deployed location in the Persian Gulf**

"JAG on the bridge!"

I still haven't entirely gotten used to hearing that, and if it hasn't happened by now, it probably never will. Regardless of how secure I am in my career and my choices, the vast majority of my time at sea has been spent as an aviator, and aviators just don't get announced on the bridge. Aviators almost never have a reason to be on the bridge in the first place.

Still, after about a million investigations, I'd managed to learn how to ignore the inherent strangeness of being up here. Poor Coates, on the other hand, actually jumped when the call rang out.

"Reporting as ordered, Captain," I said crisply, coming to attention.

Captain Johnson returned our salutes with a world-weary expression. "There's never going to be an occasion when I can truthfully say that it's good to see you again, is there, Commander?"

"Unless it's at your retirement ceremony or mine, sir, probably not. Have you picked up the convoy again?"

"Global Hawk had 'em for a good eighty minutes this time before it hit bingo fuel and had to break off." The skipper gestured to an anxious-looking lieutenant standing nearby. "Lieutenant Harris has been coordinating all the data we've got on their movements so far, in hopes of establishing some kind of pattern to their course changes."

I directed my attention toward the young man. "Any leads so far, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing to speak of, sir. It's a little like trying to work a jigsaw puzzle with only half the pieces. Less than half, really."

"Well, hopefully we'll have a few more pieces for you after doing some poking around in Umm Qasr."

The lieutenant's expression suggested that he had no problem staying behind on the ship during that particular mission. "The COD going mainland is set to go at 1210 Zulu," Captain Johnson said. "In the meantime, we need to talk about contingency plans."

"That we do, skipper."

Harris, Coates and I followed the captain to his conference room, where the ship's JAG was waiting. She introduced herself as Lieutenant Brandt, and promptly deferred to me, looking relieved to be taking direction for a change rather than giving it. Tough to blame her. I've been a JAG for eight years now -- wow, that's a scary thought -- but other than a couple of brief stints filling in for someone, I've never been a shipboard JAG for any length of time. And especially not a shipboard JAG in wartime. Not the kind of job that's conducive to long, restful nights of sleep.

But anyway. Time to get this show on the road. "Under most recognized laws of maritime transport, we have no stated right to board those ships while they remain in international waters unless they're carrying war materiel," I began, aware that I wasn't telling them anything new. "However, international law only extends as far as the willingness of the parties involved to abide by it. It's not like the UN has patrol boats out here -- that job is basically left to us. In fact, we have an obligation under various treaties to protect our allies, and of course our own troops -- so if one or more of those ships makes a course for the coalition headquarters in Qatar or possibly this battle group, then preventative action is both lawful and necessary. And international law would obviously also forbid a chemical or biological attack, so if we have evidence to suggest that these ships are so armed, the picture changes considerably."

"If we have evidence," the captain repeated. "But we don't have that yet."

"Not to the extent we'd want to have before launching a strike," I admitted, wishing I had a better answer. "CIA picked up some chatter about weapons before the convoy left port, but there's been nothing since. Even though their behavior suggests that their motives aren't innocent, there's no concrete evidence of anything."

Johnson sighed. "So we're waiting for them to make the next move?"

"Not if the petty officer and I can gather conclusive information regarding their cargo, sir."

The captain rose from his chair and walked the length of the room. The weight of all these possibilities was clearly evident to him, but he bore it well. I suppose I wouldn't have expected any less from a man who'd already faced the threat of a nuclear attack on his ship.

"In the event that you *do* find evidence of chem-bio weapons before they make any kind of move," he said at last, "is there any contingency in which you recommend making an attempt to board?"

That was essentially the question I'd been dreading most, and I'm willing to bet that he knew it. There were many areas of this situation that were less than clear-cut, but this was probably the murkiest of them.

I took a deep breath and gave my answer. "In my opinion, Captain, the likelihood of those weapons being used is directly tied to the likelihood of terrorist involvement. If the ships belong to Saddam, they could be either an attempt to hide the weapons or a plan to use them, possibly even on his own country in hopes of deterring coalition forces. However, if the ships are his, it's possible that the crews may have been forced into service and may not choose to carry out an attack, assuming that one was even ordered. The fear that has been keeping most of Iraq loyal seems to be fading by the day.

"On the other hand, if the ships are controlled by a terror cell ... Osama bin Laden recently called for suicide attacks on any government which supports the coalition actions in Iraq. If members of al Qaeda or some other faction were to be confronted by a boarding party, there is a very strong chance that they would choose to detonate their weapons and try to take as many Americans as possible with them. Based on the likelihood of that threat, sir, boarding would be an extremely hazardous option."

The captain nodded grimly. "I guess we don't have much choice but to worry about that if and when it becomes necessary. I assume you see our alternative as an alert sortie, ready to fire on the convoy if given the order?"

"It's the safest course of action for both the battle group and the possible targets, sir." I didn't add that it was the riskiest course for the members of the convoy: everyone was aware of that, but the odds of those ships being manned by lost innocent merchantmen were extremely low, and everyone was aware of *that*, too. "If we have reason to believe that the weapons either do not exist or will not be used, I'd recommend a disabling airstrike, to be followed by a SEAL insertion to board the ships and neutralize the crews. Is your supply of standoff weapons adequate?"

"Ordnance isn't our problem: op-tempo is. We're already pulling a lot of sorties in country as it is. To my way of thinking, this threat merits a constant patrol in the air, separate from the normal battle group patrol. Even adding just two jets to the rotation and augmenting with alert jets as needed will be stretching our capabilities."

"Well, sir, you've got an extra pilot on hand if necessary." The skipper and I exchanged a resigned smile. I'd only met Captain Johnson the year before, during the first ROE flap of the Afghan campaign, but I got the sense that he and I understood each other somewhat. Certainly better than any of the other three present, since all of them had yet to reach the age of thirty. Besides, the man nominated me for a Silver Star. That wasn't something I'd be likely to forget anytime soon.

"Duly noted, Commander. We'll make it work. Even if we have to call in a few more favors with the Air Force."

Lieutenant Brandt had been scribbling furiously on a PDA, and she spoke up after her CO had finished. "Sir, can I just get you to summarize your recommendations so that I can run them by Central Command for approval?"

"By all means." I turned toward her. "Continue to monitor and take no action until the presence of chem-bio weapons is confirmed or refuted. If the convoy takes a direct course toward the Arabian Peninsula, contact the nearest port if at all possible to determine whether the ships are expected, and stand ready to interdict. If we receive either a negative from the port or evidence against the presence of weapons, take them out." I looked up at the captain, who gave a brief, silent nod.

"You can use temporary quarters to change into your civvies for the ride mainland. Check in at eight-hour intervals whenever possible, and contact the local command post to arrange pickup when needed."

"Aye, sir." We stood up, waiting to be dismissed.

The captain paused. "Commander, I honestly don't know whether I want you to find what you're looking for or not. But regardless of that, Godspeed." As he started toward the hatch, he added. "Good to see you too, Petty Officer."

Jen Coates's eyes widened, and she hurriedly called, "Thank you, sir," as the Seahawk contingent left the room. "I didn't think he'd remember me," she said awkwardly, looking a little starstruck. "There are five thousand other sailors on board, and it's not like I was a big part of anything when I was here."

"He's a good skipper, and you're tough to forget." I flashed a quick smile in her direction as we headed into the passageway, but she still seemed hesitant. "Coates, you're ready for this, right?"

"Yes, sir," she replied immediately, drawing herself up taller. "Sir, what did the captain mean by that last part? About not knowing whether he wanted us to find what we're looking for or not?"

"Well, if we find evidence that the weapons aren't there, this is pretty straightforward, but that's only the best-case scenario. If we find positive evidence of chem-bio weapons, that means there's an immediate danger we'll have to figure out how to act against. If we don't find evidence one way or the other, it doesn't necessarily mean they're not there -- it just means that we don't know whether we'll have to act or not. The devil you know beats the devil you don't, as they say."

"Right." Slightly behind me, I could see Coates shaking her head. "I'm glad I'm not an officer."

"Why's that?"

She gestured helplessly as we turned toward the visitors' area. "Look at what you just did, sir! You got handed this information an hour before you got on the plane to come here, and the call you just made is basically going to decide what happens to that convoy. It could affect the lives of thousands of people and sway public opinion in the Arab world, and you had to just lay it all out and say what you thought. I don't know if I could do that."

The comment made me stop and think a little. I don't usually get the luxury of wondering whether or not I can do something. It's just kind of expected that we'll do whatever's needed of us. Still, that expectation didn't come about by accident. "First of all, what happens to the convoy is going to depend on a lot of factors, not just my recommendation, which by the way has to be reviewed on about six different levels. But besides that, do you think I made the right call?"

"It's not my - "

I stopped walking and faced her squarely. "Coates."

She locked it up and held her ground. "Yes, sir, I think you did."

"Then that's the important thing, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. Let's get ready to go, all right?"

With a few minutes to spare before I had to be on deck, I turned on my computer, logged into my email, and found precisely what I'd been hoping for. Thank God for remote secure webmail. Otherwise I would have had no idea what Mac was up to, and between her crazy mission and mine, I might have hauled off and kicked something out of pure nervous energy.

>> I swear to God, flyboy, I want to kick something ...

I had to smile, somewhat ruefully. Great minds think alike. As I read further, though, I got a sense of just how frustrated she must have been. To have to stand there and allow such a despicable person to betray his country and aid avowed terrorists ... Well, Mac had always been better at keeping her cool than me. Yet another reason why it was better for all concerned that I wasn't along for her trip.

The rest of her message was deliberately vague - from her tone, I could tell that she'd discovered something that she didn't trust even to the secure-mail system. That thought was a little disturbing, but I didn't have time to worry about her any more than usual, because the COD would be on deck in a matter of minutes.

I tapped out a reply, explaining that I had a little undercover work of my own to do, related to a threat against the coalition headquarters in Qatar. I guess I didn't fully trust the secure-mail system, either. I also offered a few suggestions of "non-judicial punishments" for her new acquaintance, hoping that at least a couple of them would make her smile. A guy could get seriously homesick for that smile. Gunny Galindez had no idea how lucky he was.

Time to go to work, though. I shut down the computer and headed for the flight deck.

1024 Local - 1324 Zulu
Umm Qasr, Iraq

"How are you doing, Jen?"

"Wishing I could take this thing off, thanks." Coates adjusted the scarf over her hair for the eleventh time that morning. It wasn't strictly necessary for her to cover up, but it kept us from sticking out too much, and that was reason enough. "How long until we can go home?"

"Hey, it could be worse. You could be wearing the veil, too."

"Thanks a million."

The two of us exchanged a tired smile. For the past few days, we'd been fundamentally living our roles as journalists, keeping up the cover practically twenty-four hours a day. It had taken her a while to get acclimated to calling me by my first name, but once I felt confident that no one would see us as military personnel, we had immediately started the search for answers.

"Get anywhere with the dock workers?"

Coates smiled with a hint of satisfaction. When we'd arrived at the dock to interview the port authorities, the manager had been willing to speak to me and only me: my female companion was not invited. Possibly out of a desire to stick it to him a little, Coates had shown no hesitation in going out to the pier on her own while I met with the dock manager.

"I promised to get their pictures into a big American newspaper," she said, patting the camera bag slung over her shoulder. "They were all too happy to show me around. Kept telling me I was pretty and asking me to bring more Americans to Umm Qasr."

"American soldiers probably aren't what they have in mind," I theorized.

"Anyway, they said that the March 20th departures were pretty typical. The containers were marked and treated as fragile cargo. A local exporter's logo was on the crates -- some kind of ceramic dishware."

"Their city was about to become a battlefield, and they were worrying about shipping dishes?"

Coates met my disbelieving look without a flinch. "Respectfully, if you knew your hometown was going to be attacked and your livelihood disrupted, wouldn't you try to grab as much profit as possible while you still could?"

"Fair point," I admitted, once again glad to have brought her along. "The cargo manifests match up to that story for the most part. There are a few containers listed without cargo specified, though, and that worries me a little. Also, they obviously didn't follow their stated route. There's an address for the exporter, though. Of course, what with all the upheaval, we may not find anyone there."

Coates shrugged. "Best shot we've got."

I could tell it took some effort for her not to add a 'sir' to the end of that sentence. "Supposedly the office is only a few blocks down, maybe a mile and a half. We might as well walk it."

"Lead the way."

The streets of the port city were relatively quiet that day, only a couple of weeks removed from the chaotic fighting that had begun the liberation of this country. Checkpoints manned by coalition soldiers kept a tenuous calm in the city. We passed building after building with shattered windows, and dozens of cars burned and abandoned by the side of the road. Few people were about, and the ones who were confident enough to travel seemed focused on getting food packages from the aid workers.

"This isn't what I expected freedom to look like," Coates said in a low voice.

To a certain extent, I was inclined to agree. But I remembered the stories told by the Kosovar woman rescued by that misguided sailor from the Patrick Henry, and the gratitude in her eyes for the chance she'd received. "Give it time, Jen. There's a lot of work to do, and we're going to make sure it gets done."

As we turned a corner, I took the opportunity to glance back in the direction from which we'd come. There was a man walking on our side of the street, a few yards back, and I had a suspicion that he'd been back there for a while.

"Out of curiosity, how long have we had that shadow?"

"Pretty much since the dock, I think," Coates replied promptly, not sounding rattled at all. Maybe her somewhat tarnished background was coming in handy. "Should we try to lose him?"

"He might have useful information."

"He might also have a gun."

"Five bucks says he doesn't."

She gave me a look that plainly displayed her assessment of my sanity, but she didn't protest. "What, then?"

I scanned a couple of alleys as we passed by, trying to gauge the distances. "Okay, I'm going to get ahead of you by a few steps, turn down the next alley, and duck into a doorway. You just walk straight down the alley and see if he follows."

"Whatever you say," she replied, sounding slightly dubious.

I lengthened my stride and reached the alley a full three steps before her, flattening myself into the first recessed doorway and drawing the sidearm I'd secured under my jacket. Coates walked right past without so much as a glance to give away my position, and when the man followed her into the alley, he had only a moment to wonder where I'd gone before the question was answered for him.

The instant he passed into my sightline, I reached out and shoved him against the wall, bringing my weapon to bear. "If you don't speak English, we're in for a long day," I said coolly, watching his eyes bulge with fear.

"N-no, friend," he stammered, raising his hands in surrender. "Friend!"

"Si- Harm," Coates broke in, as she got a good look at him for the first time. "He works at the dock. I remember seeing him."

I relaxed my grip on his shoulder and lowered my sidearm, patting him down for weapons, of which he had none. The man was probably fifty or so, and slightly built for a dock worker. "I'm sorry," I told him. "Do you speak English?"

"Small," he said, holding up his fingers an inch apart. "You ask about cargo?"

"Do you have something more to tell us?" Coates asked warily.

He nodded vigorously. "The men who talk to you, they only load normal cargo. They use -- machine ..." Searching for the word, he mimed the action of picking something up.

"A crane? They operate the lifting equipment?"

Another nod. "They do not see the front hold, special cargo."

"And you did?"

"Most boxes marked with this." He bent down to trace a design in the dirt, a rough sketch of the exporting company's logo. "Only this. But some boxes look older. They have this and also some of your writing." He pointed a finger at both of us.

"English?"

"English letters, and numbers." Coates quickly handed him a pen and paper, and he drew something that sent a surge of adrenaline through my veins.

Coates frowned. "FIM-92A," she read. "What - "

"It's the U.S. designation for a Stinger missile." I holstered my weapon immediately. "Sir, was there anything else you noticed? Any other markings like this, but different?"

"No. Just this." The man looked hopeful. "You see I am friend now? You help?"

"What kind of help do you need?" Coates asked.

"Doctors." With a shaky hand, he withdrew a picture from his pocket. The weathered photo was of a girl, maybe fourteen years old. "She is sick. There is no more medicine."

"Your daughter?" When he nodded, Coates turned to me with pleading eyes. "Commander - "

I didn't bother to correct her for using my rank. By this point, there was no use in playing reporter any longer. "Relax, Jen. Sir, what you just told us is very important, and we thank you for talking to us. If you'll come back with us to our post, we can try to help you, okay?"

Tears filled his eyes, and he grasped my hands gratefully. I had to pull free to root around in my pack for the radio. Relaying our location, I requested a ride back to the command post and informed them that we had a local who had earned some medical assistance.

"When we get back to the CP, we're not even going to slow down," I informed Coates, stowing the radio. "We're getting right on a helo and getting our sixes back to the Seahawk."

"And then what, sir?"

"Those ships are carrying war materiel, but a Stinger isn't an effective platform for a chem-bio weapon. We'll signal a warning, and if it's ignored, we'll hit the convoy, disable it, and take it."

A Marine Hum-vee pulled up at that point, and the three of us scrambled aboard. On the surface, our assignment looked to be complete. But until those ships were either flying an American flag or sitting on the ocean floor, there was still room for trouble, and I knew I wouldn't be getting much sleep for quite some time yet.

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