

Dawn Crescent

David and Daniel Dvorkin

Chapter One

**January 1991
Saudi Arabia**

“Fold,” Rick said, and put his cards face down.

“So let us see what you have,” Sharon said.

Rick shook his head. “You don’t get to see those cards.”

Sharon laughed. “I’m still in the game, big boy. You wimped out. Let’s take a look.”

“We’ve had this argument a million damn times . . .”

“And I’m still right.”

Rick cracked his knuckles and looked at Harry for support. “Harry, would you tell this blue beanie I don’t have to show her my cards if I fold?”

“That’s another thing,” Sharon broke in, before Harry could answer. “Security police know how to address our NCO’s with respect. By rank, not first name. Unlike Club Med here.”

Harry smiled. “Which is why you’re playing cards with us instead of polishing your boots with your buddies, right?” He lowered his voice an octave. “Well, as the senior ranking NCO present at this time and place —”

“— please tell us the answer,” said Ben, “Master Sergeant Elkins, sir —”

“— I insist that Airman First Class Welton and Senior Airman Alcazar answer a question which, in the fine tradition of senior NCO’s everywhere, I have been pondering for some time.”

Rick sat at attention in his chair: like watching a mountain straighten its spine. “Sir, Airman First Class Welton reports as ordered, ready to answer the question, sir.”

“Airman Welton, Airman Alcazar, the question is this. Which of you two can do more push-ups?”

Rick and Sharon stared at him for a moment, then at each other. Rick was four inches over six feet, blond with chiseled features like an SS recruiting poster, and so muscular he had to have his uniforms tailored to fit. Sharon was a foot shorter, dark and delicate like her Arab and Iberian ancestors, and probably half Rick’s weight — but that weight was composed of muscle like steel cable. She’d been a gymnast in high school; Rick had played football. No surprise either way.

Ben laughed and threw down his cards, a straight flush. “Pot wasn’t that big anyway, and this is going to be *much* more interesting.” The medic and the cop kept staring at each other, and Harry thought, with a sudden chill, that it wasn’t going to be funny after all.

The moment broke. Rick shook his head and said, “Harry, you’re kidding, right? No offense, Sharon, I know you’re tough and fast. I’ve *seen* you knock a quarter out a tree with an M16. But come on.” He flexed, perhaps unconsciously, and the sleeve of his fatigues threatened to pop.

Harry leaned back and took a puff from his cigarette. He wasn’t in either of their leagues physically — never had been, really. He was no athlete when he joined the Air Force in 1970 to keep from getting drafted into the Army, and years of the Old Service tobacco-and-booze lifestyle hadn’t helped any — but twenty years as a medic had given him a good understanding of the capabilities of the human body. And how those capabilities weren’t always what people thought they were.

“No,” he said at last, “I’m not. Indulge me here.”

Rick shrugged, stood up, and peeled off the BDU shirt he’d been wearing for protection against the cold desert night. The light of the Coleman lantern threw his muscles into sharp relief, and even under his t-shirt — stretched skin-tight by his bulk — his washboard stomach and weirdly cut pectorals were clear. Have to put in a lot of hours at the gym to go around looking like an anatomy textbook, Harry thought, feeling his belt buckle cutting into his own stomach.

Sharon gave a quiet smile and did the same. She was a hill next to Rick's mountain, but equally impressive for her size: arms like carved and oiled hardwood, small breasts supported by ridged pectorals, the same washboard abdomen in a smaller size. Quite nice, Harry thought with the kind of impersonal lust which was all he was allowed to feel for women so junior in age and rank. Wish there'd been more like you when I was your age. Quick memory-flash of Joy, as pretty as Sharon but softer in the way typical of that generation of soldiers' wives, which he pushed away with the ease of long practice. This was already perilously close to not being fun anymore.

"Sergeant Carpenter," he said, and Ben took his eyes off Sharon for a moment. "Start calling cadence when they're ready, please. Airman Welton, Airman Alcazar, assume the position. These will be four-count pushups, on Sergeant Carpenter's call, until one of you stops."

Both of them got down on the ground, holding the ready position of straight arms and board-stiff bodies without any sign of strain. Christ, Harry thought, I'd already be shaking. "Whenever you're ready, Ben."

"*One-two-three-four two-two-three-four three-two-three- four four-two-three-four . . .*" Harry looked at his watch. Thirty seconds, forty-five, a minute. He'd had to do fifty pushups in two minutes to graduate Basic. These days he might be able to knock out twenty in a minute, and then collapse on the ground, if someone had a gun to his head. A minute and a half.

"*Forty-two-three-four one-two-three-four . . .*" Eighty pushups in a minute and a half and neither of them was having any trouble at all keeping up with the cadence. Christ. He choked back laughter at the thought of Ben and him sitting bleary-eyed as the sun came up, watching these two automatons going up and down.

"*Nine-two-three-four sixty-two-three-four . . .*" Ben was getting hoarse.

Rick faltered in his rhythm, and Harry smiled. "You're falling behind, Airman Welton." He squatted beside the sweating airman. "Are you going to get beaten by a girl, Airman Welton?"

"No sir!" Rick's pushups picked up, running ahead of Ben's count for a moment before they settled into the same rhythm as Sharon's. Jesus, Harry thought, why did I do that? I start goading them on and they really

will be at it all night, just to show the fat old sergeant what they're made of.

"*Seventy-two-three-four . . .*" Harry straightened and decided he was going to call the whole thing off in a minute. Rick and Sharon were both clearly in agony, and he regretted asking the question in the first place — it wasn't a joke anymore, and he'd never been the sort of NCO who took pleasure in torturing his subordinates. The only real question, he thought, is if they'd be angrier with me for calling it off than if I let them go on.

Rick faltered again, stopped, held himself stiff-armed for a whole count before resuming the rhythm. That's it, Harry thought with relief. Sharon had stumbled a bit too, her left arm refusing to straighten completely a couple of times, but he was ready to declare her the winner.

He'd just drawn breath to speak when the alarm siren made speech impossible.

The piercing wail cut off after a minute. Harry knew it would start again soon enough — one minute on, one off, until Headquarters decided everyone had got the message. Not the up-and-down banshee cry or short on-and-off blasts of an attack, though, at least it wasn't that . . .

"Shit!" came from both the airmen on the ground, as they collapsed into quivering heaps.

"Get up," Harry told them, in the sort of voice calculated to produce obedience in anyone who'd spent time at Lackland. They did it, even though they could barely use their arms to lift themselves from the ground, even though as they stood there at semi-attention their muscles twitched uncontrollably, already chilling in the desert night.

"Airman Welton, Sergeant Carpenter, get back and make sure the entire flight has their shit together before we get in the Blackhawks. The *entire* flight, you understand, and if it's necessary, tell them I sent you." They nodded; they knew who the troublemakers were, and how to deal with them. Ben's rank and Rick's size should be plenty, with Harry's borrowed authority to be used only as a last resort. "Airman Alcazar, if you want to get back to the SP barracks, I'll understand. If you don't, we've got a seat for you."

The sweat on Sharon's face was only partly the result of exercise. "If I receive an order from a senior NCO — well, the rest of my squadron isn't going anywhere. Sir."

They understood each other. “Is your weapon racked?”

“It’s with the NCOD.” Who was Linda Lewis, a tech sergeant who didn’t much care for rifles and would be happy to give Alcazar’s back before the choppers lifted. “Good. Retrieve your weapon and join me on Rodeo Three.” Which was strictly speaking a violation, having combatants in a craft with a Red Cross on its nose, but no one was going to be checking ID cards. “We may find it useful to have a good shot along.” And she spoke Arabic, some kind of getting-in-touch-with-her roots thing, and you never knew.

They turned and ran for the chopper pad.

Harry tried to ride with the rocking motion of the Blackhawk and keep his mind on his training. It was easier to think about this as a mass-casualty exercise than the collection of real cases it would inevitably become. He’d be one of the very top people on the ground — the Army sent flight surgeons out for this kind of work, but the Air Force didn’t — and his first responsibility would be triage. Don’t think about them as real casualties, he told himself. Just think of them as items, to be labeled green or yellow, red or black. Just tags.

That worked until the chopper shook so hard they all nearly went flying around the cabin.

Outside, flak came up like giant softballs from the toy-sized ZSU four-barrel anti-aircraft guns they could barely see in the pre-dawn light. None of the softballs came very close, but Harry knew their detonations could invert the choppers, and then everyone on board would die just as surely as if they’d been blown apart in the air. The Blackhawks were wonderful birds, much tougher and more stable than the Hueys they had recently replaced, but there were limits. He hoped the pilots got them down soon.

Something — several somethings — passed *under* them, moving too fast to see until they were some distance away, tailpipes glowing with afterburner exhaust. “Those aren’t ours,” Linda said next to Harry, her voice tight with fear.

“British planes,” someone else said, as calm as it was possible to be under the circumstances. “Tornadoes. Going after the ZSU’s.”

He was right. The RAF pilots snuffed out the Iraqi AA, making it look as easy as shaking out a match, and the last half-klick of the medics' flight was smooth. When they hit the ground, the Marines were already driving out to meet them, vehicles packed with Navy corpsmen and their patients. Harry's mind rebelled at the word — "patients" were people with sore throats and twisted ankles, people you saw in brightly lit sterile rooms, people who talked to you instead of screaming and thrashing around or, worse, lying quiet and still.

Whatever these people were, they weren't just colored tags.

One of the corpsmen was covered in blood and looked like he was about to fall out of his vehicle. No matter what the rules say, medics always take care of their own first: if the medics die, after all, what happens to the rest of the wounded? When Harry got up to him, he shook his head and said, "The blood's not mine. Here, help me get this sonofabitch out."

They lifted out a Saudi private whose left leg was hamburger from mid-thigh to knee. The corpsmen had done all they could for him on the ground, packing the wound with an ABD pad and what looked like fifteen field dressings, but he needed definitive treatment. The corpsman gave report as they ran for the choppers, lugging the stretcher with the Saudi on it between them and trying not to dump the poor bastard. "B/P's eighty by palp, resps twenty-eight, LOC responsive. Tried to get an IV in him but he's avenic."

The Saudi grabbed at Harry's sleeve and said something, quite loudly. "What's he trying to tell me?" he asked the corpsman.

The corpsman shrugged. "Been saying that ever since we picked him up. Hell if I know Arabic."

Linda was standing at the door of the chopper, her hands and forearms covered in blood and other body fluids. "We've got three red tags in here and a couple of black in the back," she warned them. "Dustoff in less than one. Your boy need to go that bad?"

"Might be a femoral. Hard to tell with the pads." He was still talking, but if there were a bone fragment too near his femoral artery, one twist or jolt in the wrong direction and he'd bleed out in minutes.

Decision flickered across Linda's face. "All right, bring him on board." She was loadmaster for this trip; although Harry and a couple of

others on the rescue flight outranked her, there had to be someone with the authority to decide when to stop loading. On the ground, the loadmaster was God, the same as the pilot was in the air. Next time out, Harry thought, maybe I'll get to be God for a while. What fun.

They had him halfway on when they heard the M16 shots.

For God's sake don't drop him, Harry thought, and set his end of the stretcher poles on the floor of the chopper, where they should be all right for a minute or two. Then he turned, very carefully keeping his hand away from the butt of his pistol. They carried the weapons because even with the Red Cross on their arms they were still soldiers in a war, but no one expected ever to have to use the damned things, and it might still be possible to avoid such use even now.

Depending on why those shots were fired, of course.

Sharon knelt in a textbook firing position, her weapon still at her shoulder, still sighting in on a knot of Saudi walking wounded who had come in with the Marines. One of them wasn't walking anymore, and the neat hole in his forehead said he never would again. The other Saudis stood around him with expressions that promised more death in the near future.

"I'll tell the pilot to hold the dustoff," Linda said.

Harry nodded and walked slowly toward Sharon. "Airman Alcazar," he said, raising his voice to be audible over the engine noise but carefully not shouting, "what exactly do we have here?"

"Son of a bitch made a grab for me, sir," she replied in the same level tone, still aiming her M16.

"And you shot him?" Harry let his hand drift toward his pistol. He liked Sharon, thought she was a good troop and a good cop and a good human being, and if he had to shoot her to save the lives of a group of people he'd never seen before in his life and didn't particularly care for, he would.

"He was still armed. Grabbed at my tits with one hand, had the weapon in the other, told me to put down my weapon and do what a woman should do." A pause. "Doesn't translate well out of Arabic, but you get the idea. Sir."

Two ideas, Airman, he wanted to say but didn't. One is that it was an attempted rape, in front of his God and his buddies, which I can well

believe, and you did the right thing. The other is that you overreacted to a crude remark and killed an allied soldier and earned yourself a one-way trip to Kansas. God damn.

“Yes,” he said. “I think I do.”

A shout behind him, “Get down, Gunny!” A hand in the middle of his back, pushing him off balance, and he fell hard and rolled away and tried to get his weapon out of the holster and there was more firing, from Sharon right in front of him and the chainsaw sound of a SAW somewhere to his right, and three more Saudis went down. The others scattered, half and half in two directions, taking up firing positions behind nearby vehicles and Blackhawks. More shots now, the general racket of a firefight instead of individual bangs. Bullets snapped over his head, as much felt as heard. Fifty meters downrange a grenade went off, muffled but immensely loud, throwing up a shower of sand.

What the fuck?

Someone grabbed at his leg. He crunched sideways in the dirt, finally got his weapon out, pointed it at a terrified face pale under Arab coloring and desert tan. The wounded Saudi, the one he’d been about to load for evac before everything went crazy. The guy was still babbling, gesturing with his free hand while he gripped Harry’s ankle, but he didn’t look hostile. Harry looked around, saw Sharon wriggling backward toward the cover of the chopper strut.

The Blackhawk’s rotor started to spin up until a mortar round shattered the hub. Two blades flew away like huge javelins, almost too fast to see.

“Alcazar!” he shouted. “Get the fuck over here!”

She saw him, nodded, and wrapped herself around the strut, holding herself off the sharp edge of the wirecutter with one hand and still doing a decent job of aiming her M16 with the other, an unconscious display of strength. “What can I do for you?”

“Find out what this guy’s trying to tell me.” Maybe the Saudi could explain what the hell was going on. On the other hand, maybe he just wanted to say, “I’m dying, Sarge, tell my Mom I did my best.” Whatever. Harry wanted to hear it either way.

Sharon’s face went carefully neutral. “Yes, sir.” She couldn’t be happy right now about talking to an Arab instead of shooting him. Fuck

it, Harry thought, she's a good troop, she'll do what she's told. And if she gets me good intelligence, something that helps us get out of here alive, I'll make sure she doesn't go to Leavenworth. Somehow.

Sharon put her face close to the Saudi's, then looked up at Harry in disbelief. "He wants you to, to take him back to the fight. He says he's not that badly hurt and he doesn't want people to think he ran away."

"Tell him he took a hit from a fifty-one-caliber machine gun and he's not going anywhere for a long time."

More Arabic, somehow guttural and musical at once, and Sharon said, "He still says it's not that bad."

"Fucking raghead wants to be a fucking hero? Get him to tell us why half his buddies are dead and the other half are trying to kill us, then. I'll pin a fucking Silver Star on his chest myself if he tells us that."

They talked in Arabic for a good while after that, or at least it seemed so to Harry, pinned down as he was in the largely illusory cover of the Blackhawk while bullets ricocheted off its metal skin a foot above his head. It probably wasn't more than a minute in real time.

Finally Sharon shook her head and switched back to English. "I'm not sure I get all this. There's some kind of guy, this . . . not a priest, but a religious leader of some kind — excuse me." She flattened herself against the wirecutter, ignoring the sharp metal for a moment of fierce self-control, and squeezed off three quick shots from her M16. The volume of fire in their vicinity seemed to slack off for a moment. "Okay. Or a politician, something like that. Whatever.

"He's got like a, a cult following with some of the guys. Some of the Saudi troops, I mean. They shouldn't be fighting Iraq, the Iraqis are their Moslem and Arab brothers, they should band together to fight the Great Satan instead. Same kind of shit you hear from the Moslem CO's back home. But these guys aren't CO's. They're the guys shooting at us. It's like half-and-half. Half the troops think this guy's an asshole, the other half think he's Mohammed incarnate. They've been waiting for this."

"Fuck," Harry said in the quietest voice he'd used since the shooting started, and rolled over to try to get a good firing position. The little nine-millimeter pistol wouldn't be much in this kind of fight, but it was what he had. And if they were going to be fighting half the Saudi brigade here at Khafji — with a battalion of exhausted Marines and a few Air

Force medics armed largely with pistols — the Geneva Conventions wouldn't get much respect from either side, and every shot would count.

Not that it would keep them from dying in the end. They would tell stories about Khafji the way they did about Thermopylae, was all. It was something.

The Marine who had pushed Harry to the ground now wriggled forward to join them beside the chopper. "Gunny," he said, "I can see their MG gunner. He's set up behind that deuce over there. If you cover us, I bet we," a nod toward Sharon, "can get in a good firing position and take his ass out."

Gunny? Harry thought. The Marine must have looked at his rank stripes and come up with the best equivalent. It would work for now. "All right," he said. "Tell me when. Try not to die."

The Marine nodded, looked at Sharon for confirmation, and jumped up and started running. He and Sharon leapfrogged each other, one going to ground and firing while the other dashed forward a few meters, faster than Harry could have covered the ground at a run. I'm definitely too old for this, Harry thought. Should leave it to the young ones. Join the Air Force to stay out of Vietnam and look what happens. Then he gave up thinking for a while, tried to concentrate on giving what covering fire he could to the two superbly trained homicidal kids in front of him.

The light machine gun fire stopped, leaving only the heavy slow sound of the fifty-calibers and the chattering of the SAWs. He supposed that was a good sign. He squeezed off another shot for luck, the pistol bucking in his hand with familiar force, and realized with amazement that his magazine was empty. Where had all those bullets gone?

Without the machine gun, the turncoat Saudis didn't last long. The Marines had lived up to their reputation for fast action, and two RAF Tornados still circled this small section of the battlefield like hawks, dipping occasionally to unload napalm or high explosive. That would do for the local bunch of ragheads, probably no more than a platoon in total. Harry looked toward the center of the town, where there was still steady fighting going on. That was where the Iraqi tanks were, and their new-found allies if the wounded Saudi were to be believed, and they would come this way very soon.

Oh Jesus, he thought, the casualty. Back to being a medic for a

moment. He turned to look at the Saudi and saw him lying slack, half-in and half-out of the wrecked Blackhawk, quite still. “Oh,” Harry said, and Linda stumbled out into the dawn sunlight, blinked, started to speak, and fell across the Saudi’s body with a fist-sized hole in her back showering red froth across Harry’s face. There was no sign of air moving through the hole that Harry could see.

Sharon and the Marine walked back toward him, a movement quite different from either their bent-over, under-fire run or the swagger Harry usually associated with rifle troops. “Good work,” the NCO told them as he tried to wipe the blood of his friend and his patient off his face.

“Gunny,” the Marine said, his face tight and his voice thick with tears and very young. “Just got some people from Battalion. The ragheads, they — oh, shit.” He stopped where he was and collapsed, going first to his knees and then putting his head to the ground as though imitating a Moslem praying to Mecca, and began sobbing.

Sharon looked at him with what might have been compassion, then back to Harry. “What he’s trying to tell you is that the entire Marine Battalion command has been wiped out. Throats cut at HQ by Saudis. All the officers, most of the NCO’s, all the Saudi officers who weren’t part of the plan. And every senior ranker we had out here in this part of town is dead. I think,” a cough, “you’re in charge now, Master Sergeant Elkins.”

Harry pulled himself upright and looked around. Iraqi armor right ahead of them, in the center of town, that was a known quantity. But all around them, somewhere in the desert, were Saudi formations of unknown allegiance. They had a few RAF birds overhead still, no functioning choppers — those must have been the Saudis’ first priority — and a shitload of wounded. What was left of the Marine Battalion and those Saudis who hadn’t turned their coats was scattered for miles around. Unexpected assumption of command seemed like a minor problem if viewed in that light.

“All right,” he said. “Thank you, Airman Alcazar. See about assembling the flight, and find me a Marine with a couple of stripes, would you?” She nodded and turned away.

Harry squatted beside the sobbing Marine. “Lance Corporal,” he said, and then, louder, “Lance!”

“Gunny?”

“Get up. *Get the fuck up!*” The Marine straightened by reflex and stood at rigid attention. Tears and snot still streamed down his face.

“Good,” Harry said, returning to a normal tone. “Now, listen. I am going to assemble every Marine and airman and Saudi good guy I can find, and I am going to march us out of here, and we are going to kill everyone who tries to stop us. Just like Chosin, you understand? Chosin, except with better weather.”

“Aye aye, Gunnery Sergeant.”

“Good. Go round up your buddies.” Harry watched him go, then slumped against the chopper strut. He’s taken care of, he thought, and Sharon, and whoever else they can find. Who’s going to take care of me?

Chapter Two

January 1991 Washington and Moscow

“Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, members of the United States Congress. I come to this house of the people to speak to you and all Americans, certain we stand at a defining hour. Halfway around the world, we are engaged in a great struggle in the skies and on the seas and sands.”

Bush looked down at the faces looking up at him — the depressed faces of those Democrats who had been harboring presidential ambitions, the glowing, cheerful faces of his fellow Republicans.

This is great, he thought. This is super. The kid’ll be leaving for Norway right after the speech. Out of my hair. All’s right with the world. Top of the world. Riding high.

“For two centuries we’ve done the hard work of freedom,” he told the joint session. And the cameras. And the millions of watching voters. “And tonight we lead the world in facing down a threat to decency and humanity. What is at stake is more than one small country, it is a big idea — a new world order.” He grinned at them, and they — the majority of them — grinned back at him. “The world has said this aggression would not stand, and it will not stand.”

He talked about the end of the Cold War and about America’s leadership. “My leadership” he could have said, but he didn’t need to. This way, everyone could join in and feel proud and resolute, warriors bringing peace. But the implication of his personal leadership was clear nonetheless.

Payback's coming, he thought. Presidential election. *My* reelection. I'll show them a landslide. Out from the shadow. Come into my own.

"The principle that has guided us is simple: our objective is to help the Baltic peoples achieve their aspirations, not to punish the Soviet Union. In our recent discussions with the Soviet leadership we have been given representations, which, if fulfilled, would result in the withdrawal of some Soviet forces, a reopening of dialogue with the republics, and a move away from violence. We will watch carefully as the situation develops. And we will maintain our contact with the Soviet leadership to encourage continued commitment to democratization and reform."

Hold on, Gorby. Never, never, never let go. You can do it.

"Tonight, we work to achieve another victory, a victory over tyranny and savage aggression."

Good line. They love it. Now stuff about the legislative program. Thousand points of light. Help your neighbor. Free trade, jobs, competitiveness. Fighting crime, fighting drugs. Red meat. Lots of good stuff.

Some kinda trouble in that Saudi border city. Don't remember the name. Doesn't matter. Smash 'em up, grind 'em up, and move on. Probably all be over by the time I go to bed. Maybe by the time I finish this speech.

Okay, that's enough of that part. Back to the war. Make them stiffen their spines, throw out their chests. All warriors together.

"Almost 50 years ago, we began a long struggle against aggressive totalitarianism. Now we face another defining hour for America and the world. There is no one more devoted, more committed to the hard work of freedom, than every soldier and sailor, every Marine, airman and Coastguardsman — every man and every woman now serving in the Persian Gulf."

Lip service to diplomacy. Gotta do that. Name the foreign leaders who tried to prevent the war. Don't say they're pussies. Leave that for the commentators. Gotta pay lip service to the other countries' troops there, too. Then back to America. Leadership. Strength. Technology. Noble motives. We'll do the job, then we'll get out. No occupation for us. Warning to any other despot. We'll do it again, if we have to. We're riding high. We're top of the world. Eat our dust.

“Our cause is just. Our cause is moral. Our cause is right. . . . The winds of change are with us now. . . . We move toward the next century, more confident than ever that we have the will at home and abroad to do what must be done.”

The applause that followed, the handshakes, the near adulation — he drank it all in, he gloried in it. He *was* the Commander in Chief.

Petty Officer Third Class Hans Zurcher raised his head slightly from the deck chair so he could look out over the ocean. The water was a blue so intense it almost hurt to look at it. He felt a touch of synesthesia, fancying he could *hear* the blue and the glitter of sun off the waves and the thin white line of surf, far away at the edge of vision, where the sea met the Iraqi coast. Between there and his seat on the deck of the *Bunker Hill*, fishing boats dotted the unreal calm water. Hans wondered how their crews felt, trying to do their jobs in the middle of a war. Their ancestors had fished this water for millennia, a span of time the American sailor could barely get his mind around; in a matter of months, or at most years, the Americans would be gone and the fishermen would still be here. If I were in their shoes, he thought, that wouldn't be much comfort. The whole damned US Navy was out here *right now*. If the shooting started, the boat crews would die in seconds, and their age-old traditions would provide no succor at all.

Growing up in Minot, North Dakota hadn't prepared him for any of it. Not the age of the traditions just about everywhere they put into port, not the endless open sea bigger even than the prairie back home, certainly not lying out on the deck of a warship sunning himself in sight of enemy territory.

Hans laid his head back down and prepared to cover himself with more sunscreen. Even in winter, the Gulf sun was murder on the milk-pale skin his own ancestors had bequeathed him. He got a tiny drop in the palm of his hand, then the farting sound of an empty bottle. “Damn,” he said. “Chief, you got any more?”

Senior Chief Petty Officer David Ellis, a couple of feet away, shook his head and laughed. “Zurcher, why the hell you spend your time out here anyway? You look like a lobster.”

“Gets me out of F-Division,” Hans said. “You know, all that air conditioning, coffeemaker going all the time, nothing to do but tweaking the fire control systems . . .” His voice was earnest. “Hey, I just put on PO3, it’s time for me to get more experience with the rest of the ship. Being out here teaches me a little about how the deck apes live.”

“Bullshit,” Ellis said, but Hans could tell he was trying not to laugh. That was the secret to dealing with chiefs, Hans had learned long ago. Make them laugh enough to like you, but not so much that they decided you were too much of a smartass. Ellis had more of a sense of humor than most. That came from his history, Hans thought. The petty officer turned his head fractionally so he could see the chief.

Ellis was nut-brown everywhere except his left leg, where a huge white scar ran from ankle to hip. It was a fascinating thing, that scar. It looked like an organism in its own right, a small tree or a vine, rather than something on a human body. It had its own knots and whorls and even branches. Ellis was the first gunner’s mate on the ship, a hard job, and he could keep up with any of the younger men; but everyone had seen him limping badly after a long day, probably more than the Navy should have allowed. And no one ever said anything about it, because the experience inside Ellis’ grizzled head was worth more than any set of whole legs.

Seaman Apprentice David Ellis had been a machine gunner on a PT boat in the brown-water Navy back in 1969, cruising up and down tributaries of the Mekong. That was hard work of a different sort, boring and tense and terrifying all at the same time. The US boats were the toughest thing out on the open water, an absolute terror to the sampans they were there to police — but the banks were dense jungle where anyone could be hiding, and heavy weapons could be dragged up almost to the water’s edge and still be invisible from the river. An NVA rocket attack had blown Ellis’ boat to hell and embedded pieces of metal all up and down his leg. Then the Communists had opened up with a machine gun, shooting the survivors in the water.

Ellis had submerged himself in the muddy water, yanked off his belt and tied it around his leg by touch to act as a tourniquet, then managed to grab an even more badly wounded crewmate and swim to the opposite bank. There the two of them crawled half a mile through the jungle to an

Army firebase. Ellis said he remembered nothing between the attack and waking up in a MASH, but there had been a Silver Star hanging from the frame of his bed when that happened. Hans figured, and apparently the Navy did too, that the whole chain of events pretty much excused a man from a bum leg.

Which was why when Ellis' eyes snapped open and he sat up to look out over the sea at the fishing boats, Hans did the same.

"Something wrong, Chief?"

"I'm not sure," the older sailor replied, but the tone of his voice said something was *very* wrong, he just didn't know yet what it was. "See how those boats are arranged?"

Hans felt a chill, despite the heat of the Middle Eastern sun. Before, the boats had been scattered randomly across the waters of the Gulf. Now it seemed as though they were neatly arranged in a vast semicircle, its center nearly touching the Iraqi coast and its arms reaching for miles in either direction around the American fleet. "A lot of activity on deck," he said, trying to keep his voice calm.

Smoke billowed from the boats. "Uh-oh," Ellis said.

Hans felt his ears assaulted by a roar like he'd never heard before, not even when the *Bunker Hill* fired its five-inch gun, a huge sound felt as much as heard, and going on and on. Where only the sun had glittered on the waves before, now the sea was lit by red sparks trailing smoke, and as the sparks grew closer they became lean black shapes moving so fast they were just beyond the edge of clear vision.

Behind Hans, there was another roar, this one familiar and comforting: the Phalanx missile-defense system springing to life. Hans felt a moment of pride in his work, the endless hours spent fine-tuning the machinery for just this moment, the delicate circuits and switches which controlled the high-speed guns' monstrous power. In less than a second, many of the shapes coming toward them just *stopped*, blossomed into smoke and flame and then became pieces of scrap metal sinking into the suddenly oil-slicked water. But not enough of them, and not fast enough. Plenty of the shapes were still coming.

The deck heaved worse than in the heaviest seas. Hans was thrown from his chair, felt the breath go out of him as he slammed against metal. Chief Ellis was already rolling with the blow, rising very fast despite his

leg, and then standing. “Antiship missiles on the fishing boats!” he bellowed over the noise. “Goddamn ragheads! Keep this fucker floating long enough for us to kill all those sons of bitches!” Hans had barely managed to get to his feet when he saw Ellis disappear down a hatch. Headed to his post, presumably, which reminded Hans he ought to do the same. The machinery wouldn’t fix itself, and after this, it would need *plenty* of fixing.

Another one of those shapes streaked by him, very close, and the bridge disappeared in a shower of flame.

Some time later, Hans picked himself back up off the deck, which now seemed far from level. It was hard to be sure, because something was wrong with his balance: as soon as he stood up, he fell over again, and felt as though he were about to vomit. That didn’t make sense; he’d never been seasick. And the battle had somehow grown a lot quieter. He couldn’t hear anyone shouting anymore at all, and even when the five-inch gun fired, its noise was only a mutter. He reached up to touch one of his ears and encountered something that felt like raw hamburger. He pulled his hand away and stared without comprehension at the red liquid and white spots, like paint chips, covering his fingers.

He had just begun to feel the pain when a wall of flame crossed the deck and tossed his smoking body into the sea.

Yazov entered without knocking.

Gorbachev looked up in surprise. He had been frowning over a diplomatic communiqué, trying hard to absorb the subtle complications it warned of. “Marshal, what —” He switched immediately to a different tone. “Dmitri, what’s the matter?”

“What did you promise the Americans? Did you offer them the Baltic states?”

“Ah, that speech. Yes, I heard it, too. Bush gets carried away. Ignore him.”

“But did you promise him the Baltics? He said you did. He said you had promised a withdrawal of our forces, and he said the Americans will open a dialogue with the Baltic republics. What else can that mean? You told him he can have the Baltics!”

Gorbachev stood up, walked up to the defense minister, and put his hand on the man's shoulder. He put all his sincerity into his voice. "Dmitri, I promise you I have done nothing to compromise our country's security. You should know me better than that, despite our disagreements."

"I do know you better than that," Yazov said reluctantly. "I know you mean well. But meaning well isn't good enough. Our forces are deteriorating, our country is crumbling, and now I hear these words from the American president. Even if I can trust you, I don't know if I can trust your foreign minister. He's like his predecessor, too friendly with the American Secretary of State. Shevardnadze and Baker used to use nicknames with each other when they talked on the telephone. Did you know that? Jim and Shev." He grimaced. "It's an outrage."

And how do you know such a detail? Gorbachev wondered. No doubt from the GRU. It had its tentacles everywhere. It had even known of the Iraqi plan to invade Kuwait but had neglected to tell him, the president. No doubt they know what I say to Raisa over the phone, too, Gorbachev thought. A chill ran down his spine. "We have to get through the current crisis," he told the defense minister, "and then we can discuss these other matters."

"The current crisis," Yazov grumbled. "The current crisis isn't that the Americans wage war against one of our allies and we do nothing to stop them. That's just a symptom. The real crisis is that you have let the country grow weak and you refuse to stop the decline."

"As you have already said. Dmitri, you must let me deal with the most pressing matter, and right now that is indeed the American war in the Middle East. When that's over, then we can discuss longer range matters."

Bush was awakened at just after 1 a.m. on January 30 with the word that something had gone terribly wrong.

By the time he reached the Situation Room in the basement of the White House, Powell and Cheney were already there. Powell looked worried in that placid, almost bland way Bush had become used to. Cheney looked uncomfortable, as though he couldn't find a good

position in his chair. Baker and Scowcroft came in as Bush was taking his seat at the conference table. Cups of coffee had been placed in front of each chair.

“All right, what the hell’s going on?” Bush asked. “Some kind of setback? We’ve lost some troops?”

“It’s more than that, I’m afraid, sir,” Powell said. “Our friends have lost control of the ground in northern Kuwait, and we’ve lost contact with some of our ships in the Gulf.”

“That’s impossible! When I went to bed, our guys were rolling them back into Iraq. Out of that little town. Whatever it’s called.”

“Khafji, sir. Everything looked okay at first. We were taking their armor and artillery out from the air, and the Marines were retaking positions on the ground. Midmorning local time, we started having communications problems with the troops in Khafji.”

“Local glitch,” Bush said. “No big deal. Air power. Still in control.”

“It appears to be a wider problem,” Baker said. “We’re getting reports of trouble throughout the region. Uprisings, mutinies, assassinations. I wish I could be more specific, but the communications problem Colin referred to is a general one.”

Bush stared at him in horror. “What are you saying, Jim? The Coalition’s shaky? My Coalition?”

“We just don’t know for sure yet. That’s the whole point: We know something’s happening, but we’re not getting the kind of information we usually depend on.” He broke off and looked at Cheney. “Dick, are you all right?”

Cheney was pale. Through the combed-over hair, sweat gleamed on the top of his head. He waved his hand. “Yeah, fine. Just not awake yet.” He picked up his coffee cup with a trembling hand. “This is awful,” he muttered.

“Try more sugar,” Bush said. “Listen—”

The Vice President burst into the room, face glowing with eagerness. “Sorry I’m late!”

“Why the hell aren’t you in Norway?” Bush growled. “For the funeral?”

“I got a message from Brent about what happened in the Gulf, so I had them turn back. I knew you’d need good military advice.”

Cheney said, “Awful.”

Bush motioned toward the empty chair on his left. “Sit down, Dan. Listen carefully.”

A Marine in dress uniform entered the room, saluted Powell, and said something quietly to him. “General Schwarzkopf is on the speaker, sir.”

“Norm!” Bush said loudly. “What’s happening there?”

Schwarzkopf’s voice crackled from somewhere overhead. “We’re in a shitload of trouble, sir. Something’s going on out here. It’s like an uprising, a general uprising. There’s some kind of religious leader behind it. His people have taken over a bunch of radio and television stations, and they’re broadcasting the weirdest stuff you’ve ever heard — all about purifying the Arab nation and brother not fighting brother and getting rid of the Crusaders. By which they mean us.”

Bush looked at Baker, who held up both hands, palms up. “First I’ve heard about this,” the Secretary of State said. He raised his voice, “General, how widespread is this? How good is your intelligence?”

There was a crackling sound from the speakers, through which the men in the Sit Room could hear only a few words in Schwarzkopf’s distinctive voice. Then it cleared up. “Sorry about that, gentlemen. We’re having all kinds of trouble. Jim, this was all new to us, a real surprise. Right now, our intelligence consists of a bunch of Saudi officers we captured when they tried to sneak in here and kill me. We’re questioning them right now. I wouldn’t have believed their stories, but — Hold on.”

They could hear him talking to someone in the background. “Shit,” he said loudly. “Fuck.”

More background conversation. Then Schwarzkopf came back on the speakers. “Okay, here’s the deal. We don’t know who we can trust anymore. We’re completely out of touch with about half our ground troops. Carriers are still okay, but we’ve lost contact with smaller vessels. One of the carrier pilots reports that he flew over the *Bunker Hill* in the Gulf, and it was listing badly and smoke was pouring out of it. Shouldn’t be possible to get anywhere close to an Aegis vessel. Must be sabotage.”

Powell cut in. “Norm, are you saying we’ve lost contact with, what, a couple of hundred thousand troops?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“But it’s just a communications glitch, right? Just a problem talking to

them?”

“I’ve got a feeling it’s a lot worse than that.”

“A *feeling*?”

“Right now, that’s all I’ve got to go on.”

Powell said, “Mr. President, I have to get back to my office. This is no time for a committee meeting.”

“Sure,” Bush said. “Go ahead.”

Baker stood up. “And I have to find out what’s really happening. My people will know the real picture.”

One by one, they stood up and filtered out. Bush was left with his Secretary of Defense and his Vice President.

“Dick, we gotta know what’s going on. The big picture.”

Cheney stared back at him unblinking, a look of surprise on his face.

“Dick? Dick? Holy shit!”

“If he refuses to answer you, I think you should fire him,” the Vice President said.

Quayle had skipped the funeral for King Olav V of Norway, but he would be forced to attend the funeral for Dick Cheney, whose weak heart had just given out.

The scope of the disaster became clearer during the hours that followed.

Obeying a summons, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency arrived at the Oval Office at noon. Bush met him at the door and motioned him, not toward one of the chairs facing the large desk, but toward the couch in front of the fireplace at the other end of the room. Bush sat in one of the comfortable, armless chairs next to the couch, with his back to the crackling fire.

Given the circumstances, Webster thought, the setting was deceptively peaceful and inviting. In fact, at the best of times, he disliked the way sitting on the couch put him at a lower level, looking up at the man in the chair. It made him feel trapped, as though he wouldn’t be able to escape if he had to.

“Bill, I’ve seen the reports your people have been sending me. What I want from you is an overview. Executive summary. Why in God’s name didn’t we see this coming?”

That last question was the one Webster had been sending down through the ranks repeatedly all day long. The replies had boiled down to little more than blank stares. Something more than that was required from him now.

“They were under our radar, Mr. President. I wish I could tell you more than that, but I can’t. We’ve known for a few years that radical Islamists have been trying to infiltrate military organizations in the Arab world, but ever since the Sadat assassination, all the governments in the region have been on the lookout for them. They’ve become pretty good at finding those people and weeding them out. A lot of those terrorist outfits came out in the open too soon. You’ll remember the big pro-Saddam demonstrations in Amman last summer. The Muslim Brotherhood was behind that. So they exposed themselves prematurely. This . . . this was something else. Much cleverer.”

“And this guy, this Grand Mufti? Whatever he calls himself.”

“Grand Master. The Grand Master of the Ismailites. He goes by the name Rashid-al-Din Sinan, which is surely not his real name.”

“Why not? What do you mean?”

“Er, it’s a reference to an historical figure, Mr. President. The leader of the Hashashim, the Assassins, during the twelfth century. Everyone was terrified of him and his men. Not just the Crusaders. The Arabs were scared of him, too. The Crusaders called him The Old Man of the Mountain. The mountain being the fortress of Alamut in what’s now northern Iran, near the Caspian Sea.”

The first broadcast had come an hour before, when it was evening in the Middle East, announcing to the world that a new government had been established, centered in Beirut, under the control of the Grand Master of the Ismailites. Rashid, the Grand Master, claimed the right to rule all of the Muslim world. It was an astonishing claim, and the CIA had at first dismissed it as coming from a lunatic who had managed to gain temporary control of a Beirut radio station. But in light of the chaos into which Desert Storm had deteriorated, America’s intelligence analysts had been forced to conclude that this was a lunatic who could not be ignored.

“Northern Iran, huh? That reminds me. Jim Baker got a call from the Iranian foreign minister. Suddenly, they want to be our friends.”

Webster smiled. “That’s the first amusing thing that’s happened today. Maybe they wouldn’t be so eager if they knew how little we’re able to help our real friends right now. Or even ourselves.”

Webster might have been even more amused if he had known that at that moment Jim Baker was on the telephone with his colleague and friend Eduard Shevardnadze, who was calling from an airplane over the Pacific, headed toward California. Also on the plane was Raisa Gorbachev. Shevardnadze was asking for diplomatic asylum for both of them — and in advance for Mikhail Gorbachev, who was expected to be following within hours.

“What about those friends?” Bush asked. “Can they hold on? Can we extract them?”

“Yesterday, I would’ve said, ‘No problem.’ Today . . . This Grand Master element throws everything up in the air. You can’t put down a rebellion if your own troops have been infiltrated and you can’t trust your own commanders. As for pulling the leaders out of there, you’ll have to ask Powell to be sure, but I guess we’re having enough trouble extracting our own troops right now. It’s happening throughout the region. Looks like we’ll have to write off Syria, Lebanon, Jordan. And Iraq and Kuwait, of course. Saudi — well, the whole damned peninsula. Even Turkey is getting worried. Egypt should be okay. But there’ve already been riots in Tunis. We’re getting reports of at least two attempts to assassinate Khadafi, and I don’t think the people who’re trying to kill him are on our side. We know they’re not working for us.”

Bush shook his head. “I don’t know, Jim. We’ve been trying to be good friends to these people for years. Keep them on our side. They were supposed to keep things calm and level. Bring their people into the twentieth century. Be our friends. When Saddam invaded Kuwait and scared the piss out of the Saudis, I thought we were finally okay.”

“We were pushing some very old buttons, Mr. President. Nerves that have been raw for a long time. To a lot of the people there, we’re the Crusaders. They actually use that term. We’re Christian invaders, just like the Crusaders in the Middle Ages. Maybe this Grand Master took that too seriously. Unfortunately, he’s talked a hell of a lot of other people into taking *him* seriously. His people even seem to be using infiltrators for assassination, just like the historical Assassins. We’ve

been getting word that the loyalist troops who were holding out around Damascus and in northern Jordan are being overrun or are switching sides to support the Grand Master, and part of that is because their commanders are being murdered.”

“By who?”

“That’s just it. We don’t know. It’s happening in spite of all their guards. Maybe it’s being done *by* their guards.” Webster considered telling Bush the story of Saladin’s supposedly loyal bodyguards whom he had raised from boyhood but who turned out to be members of the Assassins. He decided not to bother. Reluctantly, he said, “We’re losing touch with all of our people in the region, one by one. We’ve sent warnings to all of them, putting them on their guard, but it doesn’t seem to matter. Someone knows who they are. Someone’s getting to them.”

“They’re being killed?”

“Well, they’re disappearing. Let’s hope they’re being killed. Quickly.” He didn’t have to remind Bush, himself a former director of the CIA, about William Buckley. Buckley, CIA station chief in Beirut, had been kidnapped by terrorists in March 1984, while the Lebanese civil war was raging. His “execution” was announced in October of the same year by the Islamic Jihad, but his body had never been recovered, and there were many in the CIA who suspected he was still alive somewhere

. . . and still being tortured.

“Damn,” Bush said. “I miss Dick.”

Once again, Yazov entered without knocking or being announced. Others crowded in behind him — Plekhanov from the KGB, Vice President Yanayev, and even Gorbachev’s own chief of staff, Valery Boldin.

This time, Gorbachev was half expecting it. Too late, he thought sadly. I’m sorry, Raisa. I waited too long.

He stood and, in a steady, calm voice, said, “Hello, Dmitri. What is it this time? And why such a crowd?”

“Mikhail Sergeevich, I’m sorry it’s come to this. I’m here as the representative of the State Committee of Emergency.”

“I have authorized no such committee.”

“We no longer wait for your orders! I’ve come to relieve you of your powers and to request that you place yourself in our custody. No harm will come to you. You must declare a state of emergency and then resign. You will be taken to your *dacha* in the Crimea and held there.”

He went on for a while, speaking of the decline of the country, the betrayal of a friend in the Middle East, the humiliating surrender to American power. Gorbachev heard little of it. He was pondering his future. He saw Yazov and the others as fools, but he thought he could believe them when they said he would not be harmed. Perhaps he would yet be able to join Raisa in exile after all! But what about this declaration of a state of emergency? He knew what that would mean — the end of all progress. He couldn’t sign such a decree. He’d commit suicide first.

Yazov’s face exploded, showering the room with blood and brains. His body jerked forward and flopped to the floor halfway to Gorbachev’s desk.

Shouting, the others shrank back, trying to get away from their suddenly dead spokesman.

Through the now-clear doorway strode a young Army officer Gorbachev had never seen before. He held an AK-74 cradled casually in his right arm. From beyond the doorway came the sound of gunfire and explosions.

Gorbachev was overcome by relief. His knees gave way and he sat heavily in his desk chair. The attempted coup was over. He could have wished for a more peaceful ending, but at least it had ended, thanks to this young hero.

The young hero said, “I am Lieutenant Aleksander Vassilievich Slonimsky.”

“And you’re most welcome,” Gorbachev said.

Slonimsky grinned. “Perhaps not.” He swung left and right. His gun burped three times. Plekhanov, Yanayev, and Boldin jerked backward and fell motionless, chests bloody.

Gorbachev gasped. “That wasn’t necessary! Even Yazov — you could have left him live. You could have let them all live.”

Slonimsky shook his head. “Softhearted incompetents. You heard him say you would not be harmed. Hmph.”

The truth sank in. Too late. Gorbachev grabbed for the phone. He realized that the line was dead even as the bullets slammed into his chest.

In his office, waiting for Schwarzkopf to call on the secure phone, Powell was also missing Dick Cheney. No man was irreplaceable. That was the essence of careful planning: that the plans went forward on their own, each element, whether man or machine, playing its part. That was the idea, anyway. When it came to the political side of things, though, personality and contacts counted more than anything else.

The telephone on his desk rang, interrupting Powell's thoughts. "General! What's the latest?"

"Worse by the minute," Schwarzkopf said. "There's still something like twenty, thirty thousand ground troops we can't reach. They're in small groups. We know where they are, but ground fire is too intense to send in choppers, and we can't reach them overland. We're using close air support to keep them alive, but I don't know how long we can keep that up."

"Yeah. I understand." All day, Powell had been getting reports of sabotage at air bases in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere — sabotage by Arab troops formerly believed to be friendly to the Americans. Nor was it limited to land. There had been numerous cases of explosions aboard ships, including carriers, in the Gulf. Bombs smuggled aboard somehow, or American munitions sabotaged. Exocet missiles, perhaps. Powell couldn't imagine a plane getting close enough, undetected, to fire an Exocet. Nor could he imagine saboteurs getting through American security procedures. And yet it had happened. With the result that the air support Americans had come to rely on was thin and spotty and unreliable.

Something potentially worse had just been reported to him.

"General, I've just gotten word that someone managed to scuttle some ships in the Strait of Hormuz. Oil tankers. They're lengthwise across the narrowest part, just off the coast of Oman."

"Shit. How bad?"

"Looks like nothing the size of a carrier will be able to get through until we clear the obstruction."

“We need that air power. How long?”

“Hard to say,” Powell told him. “The British and French have got their mine sweepers in the Gulf. They’re sending them down to the south end to see if they can shove the junk aside enough to clear a passage. I don’t know if that’ll work. It’s not what they’re designed for.”

“Hell, those minesweepers are up at the other end of the Gulf! They’re hours away from there! We can’t wait that long!”

“I don’t know what else we can do. I’ve ordered the biggest bombs we have dropped on the obstruction. I don’t know if that’ll work.”

“The biggest bombs? Nukes?”

“No, of course not. The long-term effects would be terrible. They’d hate us even more in the region.”

“You’ve been dealing with politicians too long,” Schwarzkopf said. “You’re thinking like them. Order in the nukes.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Can you lose tens of thousands of your kids?”

“General, for God’s sake! I—”

Over the phone came the sounds of war. There was a scream, and the line went dead.

Powell held the receiver, listening to the silence, praying it wasn’t what he imagined, knowing it was. Knowing, too, that it was too late for nuclear weapons to matter. Too late, perhaps, for anything.