

A dark, saucer-shaped UFO with a glowing light on its underside is positioned at the top center of the image against a blue, cloudy sky.

SENTINELS OF ETHER

ALVA DOUGLAS



PROLOGUE

If it wasn't for the patches of waist-high indigenous plants that patterned the flats of the desert landscape just north of Cayome, Mexico, the place would be indistinguishable from Mars. Marked by scars of ancient water flows and vertical tectonic movement, Planet Earth showed her age here. Canted mesas—unevenly pushed up over millions of years—brandished varying shades of rust and cream-colored layers of sedimentary rock that streaked like diagonal pinstripes down the canyon walls. Ages of harsh geo-activity had also left large boulders littered about like shrapnel. Some of them were stacked in such precarious formations they appeared to defy physics, looking less like artifacts of nature and more like the commissioned art pieces of a progressive sculptor.

The light pollution factor out here was dead zero, and on nights like this, without a moon, darkness would soon be stark. The kaleidoscope of stars above would do nothing to help illuminate the ground tonight; their only practical contribution was that they would soon highlight the threshold between terrain and sky.

CHAPTER 1

March 23, 2004

Alex McEwen knew when he enlisted in the military that he could die in any number of ways—shot, blown up, drowned, beheaded, tortured, or by colliding with the earth at terminal velocity. If he were given a thousand guesses, he never would have imagined he would die like this.

His earpiece crackled. “Scout. this is H1 over.”

The voice in Alex’s earpiece was fuzzy but loud, louder than the last transmissions from his teammates who he hadn’t heard from in several minutes.

“This is Scout, go ahead,” he said, his heart beating fast.

“Scout. H1. We are here for extract. LZ is 100 meters ahead of you to the south.”

His heartbeat grew stronger and began to blend with an audible *thwack, thwack, thwack*, splitting through the air from somewhere off in the distance.

He raised his rifle in the direction of the noise and peered through his optic. With a 1-8 x 24 zoom/objective scope, he could make out the silhouette of a helicopter flying nap-of-the-earth (low to the terrain) about a mile down canyon. Alex, a Tier 1 Operator, returned his rifle to his chest and scanned his immediate surroundings.

It was approaching dusk. Sunlight had transitioned to twilight and the faces of the weary travelers under his care were becoming more easily recognizable by the whites of their eyes than the features of their faces. Alex turned and squinted back in the direction of the incoming rotorcraft and raised his rifle again. About 100 meters in front of him, and on the same line of sight, was a small, confined area just big enough to accommodate the rotor disc diameter of a large helicopter.

The HLZ.

The arrival of a helicopter for extraction is usually a welcome site, but the aircraft was early... way early, and exfil without the rest of his team was not part of the plan. Admittedly, none of

this was part of the plan. The plan as it too often does had gone to shit hours ago. Taking in the condition of the ramshackle group around him, Alex bit down on the end piece of the hydration tube routed over his shoulder and drew in a mouthful of 98.6° water warmed by his own body heat radiating through the neoprene wall of the hydration bladder. His earpiece blared again. “Scout, H1. Do you copy? Advise when you have the LZ in site.”

“H1 standby.” Alex wiped a bead of sweat from the tip of his nose.

The day’s events had led to this. Escorting a group of refugees across a jagged and treeless terrain, about 2 dozen of them, all women and children. Additionally, he was now solo. This was not ideal. The rest of his team was somewhere behind him trying to catch up. He keyed his mic. “H1. Scout. LZ in site, you guys are a little early,” he said with a tone more asking a question than making a statement.

H1 returned coms instantly. “Negative! exfil is now, rally sir.”

Puzzled, Alex looked back to the north for any sign of his team. There wasn’t any. “H1, what’s your 20?”

It is commonly known by anyone familiar with basic CB communication that the number ‘20’ is a code—a code used by cops and long-haul truckers to inquire about someone’s location. This, however, is not what this was. This was a Verbal Interrogation Identification (VII) used for Identifying Friend or Foe (IFF). The code Alex was using today was not known by anybody; anybody, that is, except for those directly associated with the classified mission still at hand. This code was proprietary. A specific call and answer system for rendezvous with other players - friendlies. How it worked was operators could securely I.D. each other by initiating a verbal interrogation, a “call” that must pair with a specific “answer.” By design, the verbiage is always arbitrary and temporary. The words are made up.

Consistent with bottom-up mission planning, the call/answer verbiage is chosen at the pre-mission briefing by the team itself. If an old or incorrect code is used during the VII process in the field, the operators assume compromise and defensive positions are taken. Today the call word to be used, either by itself, or in a sentence, was ‘20.’ And the correct answer was ‘Matchbox,’ intentionally backwards for Matchbox 20, which was chosen earlier this morning during the brief in honor of the intel officer’s favorite 90s band.

Alex adjusted his posture, poised for the response. He pressed the earpiece hard into his ear with his left index finger. His right index finger pressed hard against the frame of his rifle’s lower receiver.

No response yet. There was a delay.

Alex prodded again. “H1. Scout. What’s your 20?”

A half a moment later the voice returned loud and clear: “Matchbox.”

Hearing the word Matchbox, Alex’s tension dissipated.

He turned towards the refugees and waved his hand signaling for them to move. He keyed his mic one last time. "Roger H1. Moving."

The large helicopter was now on short final to the LZ. It flew slower and lower as it progressed through translational lift on glide slope for the confined area. Alex and his travelers hunkered down and watched. The beast flared as a pair of twin dust cyclones manifested behind it, appearing to swallow the helo tail-first.

Squinting, Alex raised his hand to his brow in preparation for the ensuing sand blast, while the others clung tightly to their garments. He continued to observe, though struggled to take in the scene through his eye's narrowed slits. The cyclones were swelling, now spanning the width of Alex's field of vision. Suddenly, his eyes darted. *What is this?* Something above and behind the LZ caught his attention. *A second helicopter.*

The second helicopter was even bigger and on a higher approach profile than the first. Even more oddly, 150' below the helicopter, slightly canted and slowly spinning, hung a steal seatrain shipping container. It was a Conex with what looked like a small generator or maybe a mini split H-Vac unit attached to the roof. Alex stood to better observe the bird and its sling load but was instantly engulfed by a complete brownout. The gritty blast from H1 washed over the small crowd as they buried their faces. The helicopter's engines roared with a high-pitched overtone so unpleasant that several of the refugees plugged their ears.

Almost a full 30 seconds passed before the pilot lowered the collective pitch of H1 - removing the source of air disturbance and dissipating the small dust storm. Alex raised his head and returned his gaze to the LZ. The audible irritation lessened as the engines began to wind down to idle. Straight away, from out of the earthy nebulous surrounding the helicopter, three figures materialized and were instantly on the move. Alex watched like a hawk.

The men were not small, but their footwork was fast and smooth. The 2 lead men advanced quickly on a hard line towards the group while Man 3 bounded up the hill to Alex's left like a cat. Man 1 and 2 were now clearly running directly at Alex, barrels first, with articulate strides. Uneasy, Alex adjusted his footing. Their movement was aggressive, linear, and they appeared as deliberate as ancient hunters about to throw spears.

Choking back his mild intimidation, Alex settled and flipped his rifle's selector switch from Safe to Burst.

As the men closed the distance, Alex shot a quick glance at the third figure already above him on the hill. Alex had presumed this guy was positioning to provide cover. Looking at him now however, it was clear that Man 3's attention was not on the perimeter, rather, all his attention including the business end of his rifle was pointed dead at Alex.

Alex's head snapped back to Man 1 and 2 approaching rapidly. He raised his rifle... then realizing his mistake, immediately lowered it.

“Shit,” he muttered.

Man 2 shouted first. “Good evening, Alex!” he said with a strong but almost sing-songy tone.

Then Man 1: “Don’t even fucking blink, bro.” Man 1’s tone was blunt and serious.

They know my name.

But he wasn’t comforted. Comfort was not the emotion charging his nervous system now. On the contrary, he was keyed up. Alex put his selector switch back to safe and opened his mouth to speak but Man 1 beat him to it. “Drop your fucking weapon now!”

“I agree with him,” Man 2 added.

The men stopped their advance just at the tip of Alex’s long shadow that stretched out in front of him on the ground—about 20 feet away. The shadow ironically appeared to highlight the stand-off space between the parties—the unofficial no-fly zone. Alex’s shadow also visually echoed his unambiguous body language that said he was declining to “drop his fucking weapon.”

The two Men’s guns were so perfectly pointed in line with Alex’s face that they appeared two dimensional from his point of view. As a gesture of compromise, Alex kept his rifle pointed at the ground rather than back at either of them. Tension grew rapidly. The ball was in Alex’s court. It would only take him seconds to decide what to do next, but it felt like minutes. Alex looked back at his castaways, their little sea of white eyes all gazing back at him as if to say, “Are we safe here or what?”

Relax, Alex, he thought to himself.

Digesting it all rapidly, he reviewed the circumstances. He expedited his thoughts; Alex had to assume this would all deescalate and work out if he gave these guys the control. Even if he was wrong in conceding control, it didn’t really matter. He was outgunned, flanked, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to shoot first.

Man 2 started whistling the tune from the game show Jeopardy.

Keeping eye contact with Man 1, Alex unnervingly placed his weapon on the ground.

It’s about time, asshole, Man 1’s look conveyed. “Now put your hands on your head and take five steps back.”

“Are you kidding me?” Alex scoffed.

“Nope.”

Alex complied.

Man 2 moved in. With Alex’s rifle now out of his reach, he could only watch as Man 2 dug his toe into the space between Alex’s rifle’s muzzle and sling attachment point and dragged the gun towards himself. Continuing to use his toe, Man 2 popped the rifle up by the buttstock and caught it with his hand. He then tactically cleared the weapon, displaced the rear take-down-pin,

separated the upper and lower receiver, and removed the charging handle and BCG (Bolt Carrier Group). He carelessly tossed the charging handle to the ground and flipped the BCG up in the air. It completed a 180° revolution before landing back in his palm. Next, taking a wide step and lowering his hips, Man 2 drew back and accelerated his arm sending the BCG hurling into the dry creek bed below.

It was always a good policy for there to be no more weapons than free hands of the good guys in the same proximity, the problem was, by Alex's math, his hands should be tallied with the good guys'. The man eyed Alex's pistol holster next. It was vacant. Alex's pistol had been lost earlier in the day's events. *At least my pistol would be spared the humiliation of this guy's theatrics.* The optimism that Alex was in the company of brothers was fading. *Who in holy hell are these guys?*

Man 2 slung his own rifle around to his back and removed a set of large zip ties from his cargo pocket. Alex could assume what those were for. Thoughts spinning and with no options, he simply continued to observe. The men weren't wearing boots. Man 2, who had just hacky-sacked his rifle off the ground and side armed its parts out of site like a second basemen, was wearing two-hundred-dollar Brooks running shoes. Man 2 also had what looked like burn or chemical scarring covering most of his neck, tracing his jawline. His jawline must have acted like some sort of firewall during the incident that caused the scarring because his face was free of disfigurement. Also, his ear was missing on the left side of his head. Where his ear should have been, was similar scarring and a gnarled hole which led into his ear canal.

The fussier Man 1's face appeared common, like one that would be hard to remember. He was sporting calf high black-on-black Converse All-Stars with his pants tucked in the tops. The pants didn't match his BDU (Battle Dress Uniform) top. Nor did Man 2's. In fact, nothing really matched. They were both outfitted head-to-toe with a fatigue mash-up straight off the clearance racks at Old Serge's International Guerilla Surplus Store. Their body armor, judging by the girth, or lack thereof, under their tops was lightweight. This clearly indicated speed and mobility was a higher priority than protecting their center of mass from anything bigger than small arms fire. This meant they obviously had confidence in what to expect today. In contrast, their helmets and audio equipment were top notch. And they both wore black and olive green Nomex flight gloves that did in fact match.

Their weapons were a curiosity, too. Although Alex couldn't make out what Man 3 on the hill was shouldering, the two men in front of him carried standard M4 Carbines. Nothing special at all. Man 2 was running classic iron sights on his M4—no optic—while Man 1 had a picatinny rail mounted optic the likes of which Alex had never seen; this is saying a lot for a guy with eleven years in the military, four of which were in the teams. Mounted on the end of each Man's rifle was an augmented IR laser illuminator.

Abruptly, Alex's mental note taking was rudely interrupted.

Man 2 grabbed one of Alex's wrists atop his head and twisted it down and around to the small of his back, torquing his shoulder. He winced. "Aaah! Goddamn it. What are we doing here guys?"

Man 1 grumbled an almost now predictable, “Shut the fuck up.”

Then Man 2: “Down on your knees, please.”

Alex begrudgingly complied.

Man 2 reached for Alex’s second wrist.

Alex piped up, “Easy asshole, I’ll do it.”

But it was no use, before he could lower it himself, Man 2 snatched, twisted, and zipped it next to the other hand in just as unfriendly a manner as he had before. He then placed his gloved index finger across Alex’s lips and whispered, “Shhhhh... talkie talkie, no talkie,” coining a phrase from Adam Sandler’s blockbuster Billy Madison.

Alex was at a loss. With both of his hands secured tightly behind his back and turning purple, his eyes scorned.

Man 1 and 3 kept Alex at gun point while Man 2 continued to work, reaching back into his cargo pocket and pulling out a bandana. In what must have been a sick primal display of dominance, after Man 2 placed the bandana over Alex’s eyes, he then made a face and let out an utterly obnoxious flatulence. Incredulous, Alex scowled just as the pungent smell hit his nose. The man apologized: “Sorry, I’m nervous.” But he wasn’t nervous at all, he was uncannily calm.

Alex was blind and bound. His best guess was that he was about to be escorted somewhere, and when he got to that somewhere, he wasn’t supposed to know where that somewhere was or how he got there.

Man 1 pulled out a small electronic device with an illuminated circler wand attached to the side of the device’s rectangular housing and tossed it to Man 2. Man 2 slowly moved the device over Alex’s head, then up and down each side of his body. The illuminated wand blinked every time Man 2 changed direction, but it never made a noise. He keyed his radio. “We are all clear here. He doesn’t have it... that’s affirmative.”

Alex listened intently, trying to imagine the other half of the conversation.

“Copy.... yes. So, are we going with plan A or B? Roger, Bravo it is.”

Man 2 spoke to Man 1: “You heard it, he is staying here.... we are going with Bravo. Who’s turn is it today?”

Man 1 glanced at Man 3 on the hill, keyed his mic, and said, “Yours!” Man 1 then stuck his arm up high in the air and playfully flipped Man 3 the bird. Man 3 smiled and flipped him the bird back. “Three tries. That’s it. I get the fourth.”

“Deal,” transmitted Man 3.

Alex could only listen. His mind reeled. He scoured his thoughts for an explanation, but then quickly stopped himself. With the remaining senses he had at his disposal, he needed to remain calm, observe, and make a plan. Alex sensed movement.... a transition. Man 2 moved out and

Man 1 moved in. Alex heard the crunching of rocks under shoes as the men switched places. Man 2 stepped back and whipped his rifle back to his front side. Man 1 now stood closest to Alex. He placed his hand on Alex's shoulder and led his kneeling body to rotate a few degrees to the left. Alex awkwardly shuffled on his knees following the guiding pressure. Man 1's grip tightened on Alex's shoulder; he then looked up to Man 3 still poised on the hill. Man 1 and Man 3 exchanged a thumbs up.

What happened next luckily could not be seen by Alex. Man 1 held his hand high and pointed a single digit straight up in the air. Keeping visual with Man 3, Man 1 stepped back and lowered his hand parallel to the ground. His arm out straight with the palm facing the ground, he made a fist. Flexing at the wrist, he then gestured two consecutive knocking motions above Alex's head.

Immediately following the second knock, Man 3 pressed his trigger finger and sent a 7.62 x 39mm round crashing into Alex's right shoulder. Alex roared in agony. His trapezius and posterior deltoid were blown open, and his clavicle pulverized. He fell landing on the wounded side of his body. Lightning bolts of pain rattled his consciousness.

Alex was now prone, facedown. Using his foot, Man 1 rolled Alex back onto his shoulder facing him broadside to Man 3. Man 1 looked again at Man 3. In the same fashion as before, he held up a finger, then knocked twice over Alex's now horizontal body.

The AK-47's muzzle flashed, the echo from the shot muted instantly by the idling rotor engines nearby. In a spray, Alex's throat ripped open from its center. Some of the children were screaming. Many of them covered their faces to avert their eyes.

As Alex gurgled and choked from the gaping cavity in his throat, Man 1 reached down and grabbed a fistful of Alex's bloody hair. He pulled Alex back to a vertical kneel using only the mechanical advantage of Alex's scalp and hair. Alex wobbled and wavered. Man 1 released the hair and took a step back. He pointed and knocked. Alex's face exploded. Alex's head whipped backwards over his heels; his torso immediately followed. With his hands still bound, he plopped in a heap with his chest facing the sky.

A few of the refugee women, having witnessed unimaginable scenes of horror in their past, did not look away. Rather they watched blankly as the blood mixed with dirt on its path towards the creek bed.

It had taken Man 3 all three tries to get the head shot.

The mass of carnage and clothing that now lay in the crimson mud no longer bore the likeness of Alex McEwen. What lay there was no longer the precious vessel of a patriot. It was merely biological litter.

It was done. A dark prophecy dating back to his childhood had been fulfilled. Alex McEwen had died serving his country, or at least that is what he thought seconds before his brain went black, forever.

CHAPTER 2
Joint Special Operations Command
Pope, AFB NC

E.M.P. is an acronym for Electromagnetic Pulse. An EMP is widely considered one of the most catastrophic and realistic threats to the planet, for which there is no mitigation plan. A large EMP, like one from a solar flare or other extra-terrestrial sources, could permanently disable all electrical systems on planet Earth. A localized EMP, like one created by an atomic bomb or lightning strike, can permanently disable all electrical systems within their impact area. A weaponized EMP, like one created from advanced technology, can decimate small specific moving targets like vehicles and aircraft.

The red phone rang. A JSOC staffer picked it up and instantly identified herself. The bustling, windowless operations center at Pope Air Force Base went silent.

“Get me General Stinemaker,” the Secretary of Defense barked, barely giving the officer time to finish her standard greeting.

“Yes sir, stand by.” She stretched out the coiled phone cord and handed the receiver to General Dale Stinemaker, the Commander of Joint Special Operations Command.

“General Stinemaker here.”

“What just happened out there, Dale?” the Secretary of Defense spat.

The General didn’t answer. He too was wondering what the hell just happened out there. After a confident pause, he adjusted the collar of his heavily-adorned uniform before expertly volleying the question: “Mr. Secretary, tell me we don’t have agency guys out there?”

“What? No, of course not.”

The SecDef continued, “I need not remind you, everyone is at war, including the Special Activities Division... no one should be in goddamn Mexico, including you.” Special Operations Forces were over tasked department wide. For the first time in U.S. history, SOF were being used as the primary offensive force in a war, and not just “a” war, but two. Thanks to 911, the DOD was currently at war both in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the three short years since 911, the

task force that had always been nimble and nuanced had morphed into a bit of a behemoth. For the first time in their 24-year history, JSOC was conducting business as a large scale force. General Stinemaker deeply resented the metamorphosis taking place in the new millennium. Numerous with personnel and more technically advanced than ever, JSOC was quickly becoming painfully bureaucratic and cumbersome.

Tonight however, JSOC's operation in Mexico had nothing to do with either war. It was completely pre-911-esque both in mission scope and method. The senior but greener Secretary of Defense, naive to the surgical and ethereal pre-911 nature of JSOC, was on edge.

The position of the Secretary of Defense had felt impossible the last 24 hours. At the end of the day this would be his mess in Mexico—the poor bastard was inherently accountable without being in control. He was also highly insecure about JSOC's lack of transparency and abundance of autonomy. Making it worse was the fact that there was really no one to complain to about it. When it came to dealing with their “superiors”, JSOC acted like they didn't have any.

“What are you saying, General? Are you suggesting this is blue on blue?” The Secretary's stomach sank at the thought of fratricide at this level.

“You mean black on black, sir,” the General corrected. “Someone else who is *not supposed to be there* just took out my whole SMU, clearly *not everyone is at war*.” The General paused a moment, unsure of how his words had just landed.

His words had landed like boulders. Silence hung like a body from a noose.

The whole Special Missions Unit? The Secretary of Defense swallowed hard, his fragile poise evaporated instantly. The live video footage, courtesy of a predator drone orbiting high above the Chihuahua desert, was being streamed both to the General's team at the Joint Operations Center (JOC) and to the *Tank* in Washington where the Secretary, although not entirely sure what he was looking at, had just watched the encounter unfold.

The Predator served as the unit's Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) providing live infrared footage. Shortly before the red phone rang, Alex McEwen's teammate, the Special Mission Unit's Combat Controller, had made a desperate call for close air support from his observation post using his iridium satellite phone. But before the 24 STS controller could finish communicating his request, he bled to death. His body's thermal image was now one of 6 that lay cooling and motionless in the sand.

The General pressed on: “Mr. Secretary. ISR has pinned the sat phone call. We are vectoring F-18's out of White Sands with real world tasking as we speak. This is an air show now. We will keep you advised.” The General boldly hung up the red phone. He stared at it a moment, gently tapping his knuckles against the receiver before looking up to address the room. His intense face panned around the JOC. All eyes were locked on him. He turned his broad shoulders square to the center of the room and pressed his knobby knuckles into the large conference table. “I want every eye in the sky we have on those two helicopters and wherever they are going, we are going to get there first.” Silence. Spit sprayed from his lips. “Well? What are we waiting for!” The room burst back to life.

The small, specialized command center went to work. Fingers clacked away at keyboards and dialed phone numbers as eyes darted around the giant video grid. Within minutes, multiple

satellites were redirected to Coyame, Mexico, and a half dozen other airborne resources were queued for dispatch. Soon the 9-panel grid of flat screen tv monitors in the war room were live streaming a plethora of advanced imagery. The fleeing helicopters, H-1 and H-2, were the star of every show.

Inside H-1, the pilot donned his night vision goggles (NVGs) and scanned his instrument panel. He toggled through an 8-inch display screen taking note of the distance, speed, and time as it counted down...

Waypoint: 13.8 miles

Ground Speed: 61 knots

ETE (Estimated Time Enroute): 18:12...18:11...18:10...

H-1 led the flight of two at an air speed that the bigger H-2 could manage while slinging the spinning shipping container under its belly. Like cockroaches in the night, the two enemy helicopters scurried along, oblivious to the fact that just minutes away, tasked with their extermination and traveling at nearly ten times their speed, were two Navy F-18s.

Restricted Area 5107 at White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico, sat 170 miles north of Coyame and was the largest military installation in the United States, encompassing almost 3,200 square miles. WSMR is famous for being the place where the first atomic bomb, code-named Trinity, was test detonated near the northern boundary of the range on 16 July, 1945. It has since become infamous for being a war games wasteland. Contrary to the implication of the name, it wasn't just used as a missile range. The vast, highly restricted air space above the territory made it an ideal dog fighting playground.

147 miles north of Cayome, the two twin-engine fighters streaked across the border. Eagle 1, the lead F-18, radioed for an updated bearing, range and altitude.

The controller reported back immediately, "Target is BRAA one-four-seven, one-five-zero, two thousand, two contacts."

Eagle 1 acknowledged. At their current vector and speed, and with a fuel range of nearly 600 miles, the fighters would be on top of the helos in less than 12 minutes with enough fuel to play for 30 mins and return to R-5107.

The controller called back: "Command wants to know your loadout, what ordnance you guys carrying?"

Having picked up real world tasking directly from a dog-fight training mission meant the fighters would have no live munitions. This was a routine safety protocol, broadly known as 'hazard trapping.' One could think of it as risk management. There was no way someone could flip a switch and fire a missile accidentally if there wasn't one attached to the wing.

Eagle 1 waited to finish laughing before keying the mic to respond. "Uh... sorry gang, we are fast but not fatal today. We are negative for ordnance. We can't offer a kinetic force option, but I would assume the bad guys don't know that. How about a show of force to get things started?"

There was a sense of unresolve in the brief radio silence before the controller acknowledged: “Control copies. Command confirmed. You’re cleared for a show of force – no kinetic effects. We want every hostage and hostile taken alive. Priority is HUMINT. We need you to try and get them to land.... safely. ISR will stay at 15,000, you guys are cleared unrestricted surface to 12,000.”

Kinetic force is a euphemism for active lethal force. It seemed being negative for loadout was precisely in line with what the doctor ordered. Collecting human intelligence (HUMINT) was top priority.

Eagle 1 scratched a note on his kneeboard, “Wilco (will comply), cleared surface to 12k, showing 11 minutes out.”

Eagle 2 then called Eagle 1 on the aux radio over their tac (tactical) frequency. “Hey Skip, easy for them to say huh.... just make them land?”

“Right? Let’s see if the bad guys will talk to us. If not, perhaps we can *motivate* them to land.”

The two raced on, punching hot holes in the virgin night sky.

A few miles ahead in the darkness, the enemy helicopters drew closer to their destination:

Waypoint: 6.3 miles

Ground Speed: 62 knots

ETE (Estimated Time Enroute): 8:12...8:11...8:10...

At 5 miles out, the helo captains both decreased power, established a normal rate of descent, and fell below the apex of the sidewalls of the gorge. As soon as they did, their blip vanished from the controller’s radar.

The controller waited only one radar pass before calling back to the F-18’s. “Radar contact lost. They must have descended below my coverage. You guys should be *merge plot* in 4 miles. Let me know when you have them in sight. Last position was two o’clock low – tracking south”

“Roger, looking...” Eagle 1 said.

Eagle 1 retarded the throttles, slowed the fighter jet to 300 knots and looked outside. Eagle 2 followed suit. The two bled then altitude aggressively with a steep angle of descent before leveling off at 8,000 feet above mean sea level.

Radar was a line-of-sight technology that the curvature of the earth and terrain could block. An aircraft not wanting to be detected by radar could take advantage of this by flying very low to the ground. This is known as *nap of the earth* flying. “Merge plot” meant the F-18s were inside the same mechanical radar resolution cell as the target they were being vectored to—in simple terms, according to the last radar hit, the fighters would be right on top of the helos in seconds. It was time to go eyes outside.

Their eyes narrowed. Both pilots visually scanned outside for any sign of the helicopters, then back inside on their IR targeting pod displays.

“You see anything yet?” Eagle 1 said.

“Negative, looking...” Eagle 2 toggled the pushbuttons in his cockpit, cycling through display modes and zoom levels to see if the onboard system would pick up the helicopters first.

Then Eagle 1 sounded off: “Bingo, tally two! One o’clock, 45- low”

Eagle 2’s head darted back outside and confirmed: “Tally two!”

NVGs made detectable what wouldn’t have been to the naked eye. The helicopters could be seen flying low, hugging the terrain in a wide but narrowing dry river canyon. Both helicopters were blacked out—no exterior lights. However, there were interior lights. Interior lights that made the helicopters visible thanks to the optoelectronic image enhancement of the NVGs. The low-level red cabin lights luminating out the aft compartment windows and up through the spinning rotors highlighted the helos just enough. From above and through the NVGs, the subtle red-light signature produced a glowing green strobe outline of each helicopter.

Eagle 1 switched his radio to guard frequency 243.0 MHz and attempted to establish comms. “Copter flight of two 5 miles east of Cayome, this is a United States Navy F-18, how copy?”

A long moment passed. No response.

Eagle 1 knew establishing radio comms was a long shot, but he made the call anyway. National Security Protocol required all aircraft operating to or from, within, or transitioning the U.S. Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) to monitor the guard frequency 243.0 MHz UHF, and to comply with intercept procedures when engaged. Non-compliance with the procedure, even for an innocent civilian pilot taking a Sunday stroll in his private airplane, could result in the non-compliant aircraft being justifiably shot down. But today wasn’t Sunday, and at this point H-1 and 2 were not presumed to be innocent nor assumed to be compliant. He tried again. “Copter flight of two with the external load east of Cayome, Mexico, this is a United States Navy F-18. You are instructed to land immediately. I repeat, land immediately.”

The helicopters said nothing and stayed the course, their noncompliance the result of indifference more than oblivion. They had heard the call.

Inside one of the helicopters, Man 2 spoke over the intercom: “Since we’re not going to converse with the *soggy pricks*, do you mind turning that rubbish down?” He was complaining to the front seaters about the repeated chatter in his headset. The co-pilot of H-1 looked down at the flickering amber light that indicated comm traffic on guard and reached for the volume knob on the radio receiver mounted in the center console and turned it down.

Eagle 2 chimed in to Eagle 1: “Either they’re not monitoring guard or they’re giving you the Bueller treatment.”

“Maybe we’re not speaking their language, how about that show of force?”

“Sounds good to me.”

A show of force was a tactic of intimidation, a display of superior air power which essentially had three elements. The first element was the visual shock of an enemy fighter appearing out of nowhere at an incomprehensible speed and unimaginably close range. Second, was the sound. A shrill so thunderous and violating that it rumbled your bowels and made you think the universe was being ripped in half by the hands of the Devil himself. Lastly, was a devastating tsunami of compressed air carrying supersonic dust and debris.

Eagle 1 made the call to the controller: “Eagle Flight tally two. No joy reaching them on guard. Commencing show of force.

“Roger that, cleared show of force.”

“All right Skip, showtime,” Eagle 2 said.

“Back me up.” Eagle 1 said, “Let me know if you can figure out where these guys are going.”

“Eagle 2”, Eagle 2 acknowledged.

“Eagle 1, detaching low and right.”

Eagle 2 remained at 8,000 feet, and circled overhead, maintaining a ‘God’s eye view’ of the situation via the SA (situational awareness) display in his cockpit.

Eagle 1 looked outside his cockpit.... then back at his instruments.... then back outside, visualizing his maneuver. His body stiffened with contained excitement. He consciously activated his left hand, and muscle memory took over. The pilot, one with his machine, stood the throttles up, snapped the stick right and rolled inverted 135 degrees, then pulled back on the stick with 4 times the force of gravity—pointing the nose of the aircraft down towards the earth like a lawn dart. The vertical speed indicator topped out as he raced toward the desert floor. Within 20 seconds, the F-18 had descended 6,000 feet, rolled out and stabilized aft of the helos, completing the maneuver. He was in his element; the aircraft felt like an extension of his body. He visually confirmed his new range from the helicopters before springing back into action. Thrusting both the throttle and stick forward, he accelerated his F-18 to over 700 MPH in another aggressive plunge. As the fighter passed below 200 feet, below the tops of the surrounding terrain, the terrain radar sprang to life. Pilot 1 pushed lower, descending further to within 100 feet of the jagged rising river drainage below. He fixated on the near ‘bin’ display of the 6 x 4-inch radar screen. He trusted his life on its abstract 2D representation of the terrain. It showed the desert rising sharply beside him. His fixation on the near bin however caused him to omit the far ‘bin’ which showed the terrain 12+ miles out.

As he glanced outside for a visual cross check of the helicopters’ positions, his attention instantly diverted to the dramatic black swell in front of him. The mountain was enormous. A massive lone feature that breached the horizon like a killer whale against the backdrop of the star-filled sky. His eyes shot back inside to the far bin and confirmed its existence. The dry river gorge was a one-way bottle neck that dead ended into the only mountain for miles.

The ability to make near instantaneous risk assessments that resulted in immediate action was a regular matter of life and death for fighter pilots. It was referred to as the 80:20 rule. 80% information was enough for extreme time-sensitive decision making. Pilots had to trust their ability to adjust to the 20% unknown as it became known. Historically, not making a timely decision was worse than making a less than sure decision. In short, paralysis by analysis was an unacceptable reason to die.

The show of force maneuver had just become extremely time-sensitive. Time and space were now in short supply for both Eagle 1 and his prey. As Eagle 1 barreled toward the mountain, he did a quick calculation of the space required for turnout after the fly by. The 20% information he didn't have for the calculation echoed in his head a couple times before making its way to his lips: "Where the fuck are these guys going?" He radioed Eagle 2. "You see anything that could work as a helicopter landing zone (HLZ) yet?"

"Negative. Not in the direction they are headed."

"Yeah man, it is all no bueno down here, you see *Mt. Mexico* out there... It's a sheer 1,500-foot cliff on this side. What's their end game?"

Eagle 2 quickly responded. "I see it all right. There is no way they have the juice to climb over the mountain from their position and if they had planned to circumnavigate it, they would have had to adjust their course half a mile ago."

"Copy that. I'll be cutting it close myself. I need to do this now. Keep a lock on the lead helicopter."

"Wilco, stay safe Skip. You don't think they are planning to..."

Eagle 1 cut him off, knowing exactly what he was going to say before he said it: "Don't even go there..." Despite just having the same thought—the possibility that the flight of two was on short final for mass suicide—was not data he wanted to contend with at the moment. Eagle 1 reinforced his hand position and pushed the F-18 past Mach 1, driving it even closer to the ground. A pair of amber cones torched from its tail as the F-18 screamed towards H-1 and H-2 with a wrath of dust and rock in tow.

The helicopters continued their relative creep, rising and falling, banking left and right, following the subtle changes down the gorge. The pilot of H-1 scanned his instrument panel again.

Waypoint: 2.4 miles

Ground Speed: 63 knots

ETE: 1:35...1:34...1:33...

From the JOC, the drone operator widened the ISR camera's aperture, now capturing both predator and prey in the same moving video frame.

Then it happened.

With the whole of the JOC on the edge of their seats and their eyes glued to the 9-panel grid, the four screens that displayed the drone feed went out. The screens flashed fuzz-grey followed by the momentary appearance of a thin set of grainy horizontal lines. The lines buzzed, splitting each screen in half.

Everyone gasped, nearly sucking the air out of the small room.

Then two words appeared, centered on every screen.

LOST LINK

The ISR operator sprang out of his chair and pounded frantically on his keyboard, not even knowing the problem was worse than he imagined. Although the drone was preprogrammed to orbit in the rare case of link loss, it couldn't, because something even rarer had just happened. The ignition system had also failed. In short, the aircraft had lost its whole electrical soul. With no intelligent control and no power plant, the unmanned glider helplessly tracked away from the action slowly bleeding altitude. Meanwhile, at more than 14,000 feet below the drone, Eagle 1 watched his cockpit go black. His oneness with his machine decoupled as the flight control system went dead in his hands. At less than 200 feet AGL, near Mach 1, and with no mechanical linkage to the flight controls, the TOPGUN graduate panicked for the first time in his life. Both of his hands shot between his legs and grabbed the ejection handle. Then, he stopped himself.

Shit.

Another split-second risk assessment had to be made. He was going too fast. A supersonic ejection was certain to cause serious injury; more likely death. Time seemed to stand still but it was only milliseconds—he thought of the first man to perform a supersonic ejection, George Smith. Despite ending up blind in both eyes and in the hospital for seven months, Smith was not only the first to perform a supersonic ejection; he was also the first man to survive one, meaning the day after his event in 1955 the survival rate was 100%, 1:1.

With the spirit of George Smith in mind, Eagle 1 pressed his head back against the seat rest and secured a double fist grip on the handle between his legs and pulled.

8,000 feet above, the billowing ball of orange fire from the crash bounced off the canopy of Eagle 2 and set the cockpit aglow. The pilot screamed alone in his own dark and lifeless metal tube - expelling the air from his lungs. When his brain sent the signal to inhale, no air came. The reflex to breathe fired again, but again no air came. He was “sucking rubber”. The OBOGS (On Board Oxygen System) was gone, so were both generators...God knows what else. Eagle 2 ripped off his mask in a panic, gasping as his burning lungs filled with sweet ambient air.

He stared wide-eyed at his instrument panel, then outside. There was no way for him to know. Did the helicopters crash? Or was it the Skipper? He forced the question out of his mind and went to work on his own problems and initiated the Emergency Procedure for Loss of DC Essential BUS:

1. BATT switch - CYCLE

2. *Electrical RESET button - PUSH*

3. *GEN switches – CYCLE*

His power began to restore, but there was no rejoicing. He was too desperate to confirm who had crashed. He looked outside again, and the confirmation came. The two helicopters were still speeding along. The Skipper's F-18 was gone. Eagle 2's stomach turned. His nausea quickly compounded with the horror that the helicopters were seconds from impacting the face of 'Mount Mexico.'

Oh my God, they are going to kill everyone.

There was no time left to turn. There was no HLZ.

Inside H-1, the Estimated Time Enroute made its final countdown:

ETE: 0:03...0:02...0:01...

Man 2 peered over the backs of the pilot seats and looked through the front windshield as the helicopter came face-to-face with the mountainside. Grinning ear to missing ear, he keyed the helicopter intercom and said to his crew: "I love this part." Just as the tips of the spinning rotor blades appeared to make contact with the side of the cliff face, the ethereal hologram of the mountainside began to dematerialize.

A low frequency electronic interference could be heard pulsing in the crew's headsets as the 3d image transitioned to 2d, then pixelated away to nothing, revealing a vast interior cavern made of steel beams and stone. Like passing through from the front side to the back side of a waterfall, H-1 and 2 disappeared from the outside world into an enormous hidden private chamber. Echoes overwhelmed the unintentional auditorium as the roaring rotorcraft beat the cold damp air into submission. Now hovering in place, both helicopters made their final routine vertical approach to three large, marked landing pads below.

Touching down on Pad 1, Man 3 slid open the right side cargo door, looked down, and keyed the intercom: "Right clear."

Then Man 1 slid open the left side. "Left clear."

On Pad 3, a man wearing elbow high leather gloves and holding a static wand stood ready to receive the spinning container. Inside the container the nauseated human cargo embraced one another and contemplated their fate. H-2 hovered patiently behind H-1, waiting for hand signals as colossal clamshell doors slowly rolled closed behind his helicopter.

With the helicopters now safely sealed inside, the electromagnetic force field reenergized outside the hidden entrance to the subterranean base.

'Sterile Cockpit' was a term used for radio silence. During critical phases of flight only essential communication was allowed. With the helicopter now securely on the ground and the engines rolled down to flight idle, Man 2 was the first to break the silence: "Nice work, team. Anyone else hungry? I'm starving!"

“When are you not hungry?” Man 1 said.

“Never. It is Taco night, right?”

“It is Tuesday, at least for the next few hours.”

Man 2 slapped him on the shoulder. “You cook, I’ll clean?”

Man 1 just gave a confirming nod.

Man 3 said nothing. He just smiled.