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A COVERT-ONE NOVEL



THE ARES DECISION

SERIES CREATED BY ROBERT LUDLUM

WRITTEN BY KYLE MILLS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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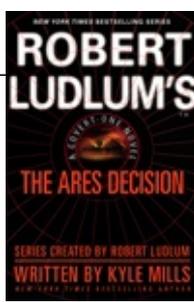
A COVERT-ONE NOVEL

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Above Northern Uganda

November 12—0203 Hours GMT+3

THE ROAR IN CRAIG RIVERA'S ears combined with the darkness to make everything he knew—everything real—disappear. He wondered if astronauts felt the same sense of emptiness, if they wondered like he did whether God was just at the edge of their vision.

He looked at a dial glowing faint green on his wrist. The letters were Cyrillic, but the numbers tracking his altitude and coordinates were the same as the government-issue unit he trained with.

Rivera tilted his body slightly, angling north as he fell through fifteen thousand feet. A hint of warmth and humidity began to thaw the skin around his oxygen mask, and below the blackness was now punctured by widely scattered, barely perceptible points of light.

Campfires.

When his GPS confirmed that he was directly over the drop zone, he rolled onto his back for a moment, staring up at a sky full of stars and searching futilely for the outline of the plane he'd jumped from.

They were alone. That, if anything, had been made perfectly clear.

He knew little about the country he was falling into at 125 miles an hour and even less about the man they'd been sent to find. Caleb Bahame was a terrorist and a murderer so cruel that it was difficult to know if the intelligence on him was accurate or just a bizarre tapestry of legends created by a terrified populace. Some of the stories, though, were undeniable. The fact that he demanded his men heat the machetes they used to hack the limbs from infants, for instance, had considerable photographic evidence. As did the suffering of the children as they slowly died from their cauterized wounds.

The existence of men like this made Rivera wonder if God wasn't perfect—if even he made mistakes. And if so, perhaps his hand was directly involved in this mission.

Not that those kinds of philosophical questions really mattered. While Bahame wasn't good for much, he would probably be just fine at stopping bullets—a hypothesis that Rivera was looking forward to testing. Preferably with multiple clips.

He glanced at his altimeter again and rolled back over, squinting through his goggles at the jungle canopy rushing toward him in the starlight. After a few more seconds, the glowing numbers turned red and he pulled his chute, sending himself into a fast spiral toward a clearing that he couldn't yet see but that the intel geeks swore was there.

He was just over a hundred feet from the ground when he spotted his LZ and aimed for it, beginning a sharp descent that sent him crashing to earth with a well-practiced roll. After gathering up his canopy, he ran for the cover of the jungle, dropping his pack and retrieving his night-vision goggles and rifle.

The well-worn AK-47 felt a little strange in his hands as he swept it along the tree line and listened to his team touch down at thirty-second intervals. When he counted four, he activated his throat mike

“Sound off. Everyone okay?”

~~These kinds of jumps were impossible to fully control and he felt a little of the tension in his stomach ease when all his men checked in uninjured.~~

Rivera moved silently through the jungle, the roar of the wind now replaced by the buzz of insects and the screech of tropical birds. They’d picked this area because the brutal terrain discouraged people from settling it. About twenty miles into the hike out, he imagined he’d be cursing the choice, but right now the fact that no one was chasing them with red-hot machetes was a big check in the plus column.

His team coalesced into an optimally spaced line as they moved north. Rivera fell in behind a short, wiry man wearing a black sweatshirt with cutoff sleeves revealing arms streaked with green paint. The Israeli machine gun in his hands swept smoothly from left to right as he glided over terrain that would have left a normal man stumbling hopelessly from one tree to another. But he wasn’t a normal man. None of them were.

Their equipment and clothing were a patchwork collected from around the world. None of them had any tattoos or other identifying marks—even their dental work had been altered to make its country of origin indeterminate. If they were captured or killed, there would be no fanfare or place in history. No heroic stories for relatives and friends to take comfort in. Just a tiny headstone over an empty grave.

“Approaching rendezvous point,” the man on point said, his voice slightly distorted by Rivera’s over-the-counter earpiece. “Approximately ten meters.”

The neat line of men dissolved into the jungle again, surrounding a small patch of land that had been recently burned by a lightning strike. Rivera peered through the foliage at the blackened trees, finally spotting a tall Ugandan standing alone in the ash. He was completely motionless except for his head, which jerked back and forth at every sound, as though the earth was jolting him with leftover electricity.

“Move in,” Rivera said into his throat mike.

He’d seen it a hundred times in training, but watching his men melt from the jungle always made him feel a twinge of pride. On neutral ground, he’d put them up against anyone in the world, be they the SAS, Shayetet 13, or hell’s own army.

The man in the clearing let out a quiet yelp at the ghosts materializing around him and then threw an arm over his face. “Take off your night-vision equipment,” he said in heavily accented English. “It was our agreement.”

“Why?” Rivera said, peeling his goggles off and signaling for his men to do the same. It had been a bizarre precondition, but it was indeed part of the deal.

“You must not look at my face,” the man replied. “Bahame can see through your eyes. He can read minds.”

“Then you know him?” Rivera said.

The Ugandan was only a shadowy outline, but he sagged visibly as he answered. “He took me as a child. I fought for many years in his army. I did things that cannot be spoken of.”

“But you escaped.”

“Yes. I chased a family that ran into the jungle when we attacked their village. I didn’t harm them though. I just ran. I ran for days.”

“You told our people that you know how to find him.”

When he didn’t respond, Rivera dug a sack full of euros from his pack and held it out. The Ugandan accepted it but still didn’t speak. He just stared down at the nylon bag in his hands.

“I have six children. One—my son—is very sick.”

“Well, you should be able to get him help with that money.”

“Yes.”

He held out a piece of paper and Rivera took it, sliding his night-vision goggles in front of his eye for a moment to examine the hand-drawn map. The level of detail was impressive, and it seemed to more or less match the satellite photos of the area.

“I have done my part,” the Ugandan said.

Rivera nodded and turned back toward the trees, but the man grabbed his shoulder.

“Run,” he said. “Tell the men who hired you that you could not find him.”

“Why would I do that?”

“He leads an army of demons. They cannot be frightened. They cannot be killed. Some even say they can fly.”

Rivera shrugged off the man’s hand and slipped back into the jungle.

Hell’s own army.

Off the Eastern Coast of Africa
November 12—0412 Hours GMT+3

YOU MUST UNDERSTAND, ADMIRAL, that it is precisely the destructive reign of Idi Amin that makes Uganda such a shining example. We have made tremendous strides—economically, politically, the control of disease. But the world doesn't see this. It doesn't see how far my country has come. And because of that, donors are pulling back. Problems that were so close to being eradicated are reemerging.”

Smoke from one of Admiral Jamison Kaye's personal stash of Arturo Fuentes flowed from Charles Sembutu's mouth as he continued to pontificate about the world's moral obligation to the country he led.

Kaye kept his expression impassive, exercising his well-practiced gift for hiding his distaste for politicians. He himself had grown up dirt-poor on a farm in Kentucky, and no matter how bad it got, his family had never gone looking for a handout. His father always said that no one had the power to pick you up. Either you did it yourself or you stayed the hell down.

“So you can see the importance of what we're doing here, Admiral. You can understand the magnitude of the threat.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. President.”

His wife constantly admonished him for judging politicians too harshly, and she was usually right. Not this time, though. Sembutu had taken over Uganda in a bloody coup that had ended in the deaths of the former president, his family, and no less than a thousand of his supporters.

There was a quiet knock on the door, and the admiral watched gratefully as his captain entered.

“The feeds are up and running, gentlemen. If you could please follow me.”

The control center for this operation was buried in the depths of the carrier—a cramped space designated for monitoring events that weren't ever going to hit the papers.

The two women manning the room's sophisticated electronics leapt to their feet when the admiral and his guest entered, but a dismissive wave sent them immediately back to their seats.

“These are pictures from your soldiers?” Sembutu asked, pointing to five live monitors. Each cast a greenish glow, depicting a hazy view of the jungle as it slid slowly past.

“Each man has a camera on his uniform that transmits to us via satellite,” Kaye said.

Sembutu moved forward, reading the names of the individuals scrawled beneath their respective monitors while Kaye dialed a number into a secure phone.

He was feeling distinctly queasy as it rang. As far as he was concerned, fighting was the natural state of Africa—war didn't occasionally break out there; peace did. Sending his boys into a situation that they didn't fully understand and, in his opinion, was none of America's business had too many shades of Somalia. But there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. This wasn't some

harebrained operation dreamed up in a forgotten corner of the Pentagon. Not by a long shot.

The phone clicked and the unmistakable voice of Sam Adams Castilla came on.

“Yes, Admiral?”

“They’ve made contact and are on the move.”

“Anyone hurt in the jump?”

“No, Mr. President. So far, everything’s by the numbers.”

Northern Uganda

November 12—0609 Hours GMT+3

THE LIGHT OF DAWN WAS beginning to penetrate the jungle canopy, dispelling the darkness that had become so comfortable. Lt. Craig Rivera slipped past the man in front of him, wanting to take point personally until the confusing twilight finally gave way to day.

The condensation on the leaves was already starting to heat up, turning into mist that weighed down his clothes and felt thick in his lungs. He eased up a steep, rocky slope, dropping into a prone position at its crest. More than a minute passed as he scanned the tangle of leaves and branches for a human outline. Nothing. Just the endless shimmer of wet leaves.

He started to move again but froze when a voice crackled over his earpiece. “Keep your eyes on the sky.”

Rivera pressed himself against the broad trunk of a tree and looked up, putting a hand to his throat. “What have you got?”

“Bahame could swoop down on us at any minute shooting fireballs from his ass.”

The quiet snickers of the men closest to him were audible in the silence, and he started forward again, trying to decide how to respond. “Radio discipline. Let’s not forget what happened to the other guys.”

An African Union team had gotten a tip on Bahame’s location and come after him about six months ago. All that was left of them was an audio recording.

He’d never admit it to his men, but Rivera could still hear it in his head—the calm chatter and controlled fire devolving into panicked shouts and wild bursts on full automatic, the screams of attackers who sounded more animal than human. And finally the crash of body against body, the grunts of hand-to-hand combat, the bloody gurgles of death.

After he and his team had listened to it, they’d blown it off with the expected bravado. African Union forces? Hadn’t they gotten taken down by a Girl Scout troop in Cameroon? Weren’t they the guys whose mascot was a toy poodle?

As team leader, though, Rivera had seen the dead soldiers’ files. They weren’t reassigned meter maids from Congo as one of his men had suggested after polishing off the better part of a twelve-pack. They were solid operators working in their own backyard.

Rivera threw up a fist and crouched, aiming his AK through the trees at a flash of tan in the sea of emerald. Behind him, he could hear nothing but knew his men were fanning out into defensive positions.

He eased onto his stomach and slithered forward, controlling his breathing and being careful not to cause the bushes above him to sway with his movement. It took more than five minutes to cover twenty yards, but finally the jungle thinned and he found himself at the edge of a small village.

The woven straw wall of the hut in front of him was about the only thing that hadn’t been burned—

and that included the residents. It was hard to determine precisely how many blackened bodies were piled next to what may have once been a soccer goal, but forty was a reasonable guess. It seemed that their intel was good. This was Bahame country.

Behind him, he heard a quiet grunt and something that sounded like a body hitting the ground. Swearing under his breath, he headed back toward the noise, finger hooked lightly around the trigger of his gun.

“Sorry, boss. Nothin’ I could do. She came right up on me.”

The woman was cowering against a tree, holding her hands in front of her in frozen panic. Her eyes darted back and forth as his men materialized from the foliage and surrounded her.

“Who you figure she is?” one of them said quietly.

“There’s a village up there,” Rivera responded. “Or at least there was. Bahame got to it. She must have given him the slip. Probably been living on her own out here for the past few days.”

There was an infected gash in her arm and her ankle was grotesquely twisted to the right, bones pushing at the skin but not quite breaking through. Rivera tried to determine her age, but there were too many contradictions—skin the color and texture of an old tire, strong, wiry arms, straight white teeth. The truth was he didn’t know anything about her and he never would.

“What are we going to do with her?” one of his men asked.

“Do you speak English?” Rivera said, enunciating carefully.

She started to talk in her native language, the volume of her voice startling in the silence. He clamped a hand over her mouth and held a finger to his lips. “*Do you speak any English?*”

When he pulled his hand away, she spoke more quietly, but still in the local dialect.

“What do you think, boss?”

Rivera took a step back, a trickle of salty sweat running over his lips and into his mouth. He didn’t know what he thought. He wanted to call back to command, but he knew what Admiral Kaye would say—that he wasn’t there on the ground. That it wasn’t his call.

“She’s no friend of Bahame’s based on what he did to her village.”

“Yeah,” one of his men agreed. “But people are afraid of him and don’t want to piss him off. They think he’s magic.”

“So what are you saying?” Rivera said.

“If we let her go, how do we know she won’t talk? Hell, we can’t even tell her not to.”

He was right. What was it their contact had said? That Bahame could see through people’s eyes? Legends had roots in reality. Maybe people were so terrified of the man that even the ones who hated him told him everything they knew in hopes of working their way into his good graces.

“We could tie her to the tree and gag her,” another of his men said.

This was stupid. They were exposed and wasting time.

“Boss?”

“We can’t tie her to a tree. She’d die of thirst or an animal would get her.”

The man standing behind her silently unsheathed his knife. “She’s not going to last out here on her own anyway. We’d be doing her a favor.”

Rivera stood frozen for what he knew must have seemed like far too long to his men. Indecisiveness was not a particularly attractive quality in his profession.

The knee-jerk reaction was always to fall back on his training, but this kind of situation had never been dealt with in a way that meant anything when actually faced with contemplating ending the life of an innocent woman.

“We’re moving out,” he said, turning and starting in a direction that skirted the burned-out village. There would already be a lot of explaining to do in the unlikely event that he ever laid eyes on the Pearly Gates. Murdering helpless women wasn’t something he wanted to add to his list.

Southern Namibia

November 12—1358 Hours GMT+2

DR. SARIE VAN KEUREN THREW a hand out, grimacing as her fingers closed over a branch covered in thorns. There had been no rain for weeks, and the dirt on the embankment she was scaling could barely hold her fifty-four kilos.

She ignored the blood running down her sweaty palm and hauled herself forward, fighting her way to the tripod-mounted video camera set up on the ridge.

She blew the dust from the lens and peered into the leafy bush it was trained on. Even under the glare of the African sun, it took her a few moments to find what she was looking for among the berries—an ant from a nearby colony.

Normally, members of this species were slim black ground dwellers. But this individual had been transformed by the invasion of a tiny parasite. Its abdomen had swollen and now gleamed bright red, perfectly mimicking the surrounding berries. Even worse, the parasite had infected the ant's brain, compelling it to climb into the bush, clamp its jaws around a stalk, and stick its colorful abdomen in the air.

At first, it had fought to get free, six legs pulling mightily against the grip of its jaws. But now all its appendages appeared to be paralyzed—probably because its clever little invader was chewing through the nerves.

She glanced into the washed-out blue of the sky, looking for the birds the parasite was trying to attract. This particular nematode could breed only in avian guts and had no means of transportation of its own. A match made in heaven. Unless, of course, you were an ant.

Van Keuren sat, wrapping her arms around her knees in an effort to get as much of herself as possible into the shade of her oversized hat. Below, the dry landscape stretched endlessly in every direction. The only way she could be sure that the modern world even existed was her Land Cruiser, broken down at the base of the slope.

She tried to calculate how many species she'd discovered over the years but soon found her mind drifting back to the first. It had been twenty-five years ago this week that her father had come home with a slightly dented VCR and a box of tapes—an unheard-of luxury in the Namibian farming community where she grew up. She'd been barely eight at the time and was absolutely mesmerized by the children's videos, sitting for hours examining every nuance, memorizing every line. After a while, though, they'd started to get boring and she'd dug into the box again, finding a worn copy of *Alien* beneath a flap at the bottom. Her father had insisted that it would give her nightmares, but she'd watched it anyway, transfixed by the creature that grabbed people's faces and gestated inside them.

Who would have thought that a horror movie hiding in the bottom of a box would spark an obsession that would define her life? Thank God it hadn't been a copy of *Rocky*. She'd probably be getting beat up in some ring right now.

The angle of the sun continued to dip, but that did nothing to diminish the temperature she guessed was creeping up on forty-five Celsius. Time to retreat back to the shade of her truck.

Down was easier, the loose dirt allowing for a semicontrolled standing slide to the bottom. Once back on solid ground, she dabbed a little water on a rag, looking in the side-view mirror as she unstuck the blond hair from her cheeks and wiped the dust and salt from around her mouth.

Her hat was large enough to border on sombrero but wasn't enough to keep her skin from turning deep red and her nose from looking like it was molting. Despite her family tracing its history in Namibia back for generations, she was cursed with the smooth, fair skin her mother had taken such pride in.

Deciding it was hopeless, she reached into a cooler full of melted ice and pulled out the makings of a gin and tonic. A couple of prospectors had driven by six days ago and assured her that they'd tell the Toyota people in Windhoek that she was out there, but now she regretted refusing their offer of a ride out. Sometimes her single-mindedness could be a virtue, but mostly it just got her into trouble.

Sarie pressed her back against the vehicle and slid down the hot metal, settling in against the slightly cooler rear tire. She had no more than a day's water left in her primary container, but there was a spring a few kilometers away. Her food stores were a bit better, but it didn't really matter—she could live off the land pretty much indefinitely if she had to. The real problem was the gin. There were only a few centimeters left, and that was just unacceptable.

She frowned and sighed quietly. When the sun went down, she'd have to start walking out. It was probably two days to the road and another day of waiting around for someone to drive by. What had happened to the note she'd written herself to buy a satellite phone? Probably in the glove box with all the other unread reminders.

Halfway into her third drink, a distant shape began to form in the heat distortion. At first she just thought it was the alcohol, but soon it coalesced into an outline that was distinctly human. She reached back through the truck's open door and pulled out her rifle, sighting through the scope at the approaching figure.

It was a boy of about sixteen with skin turned almost obsidian by a life spent outdoors. He was shoeless, wearing only a pair of khaki shorts and carrying a canvas sack over his bare shoulder.

She poured the last of her gin in celebration, sipping happily at the hot liquid as he drew nearer. "Howzit!" she said when he came within earshot. "If you have an alternator in that sack, bru, then you're my hero."

He stopped in front of her, a look of confused concentration on his face. She tried Afrikaans with no more success and finally succeeded with the now very rusty Ndonga she'd learned from the people who had worked her family's farm.

"Yes," the boy responded, nodding wearily. "The car men in Windhoek gave it to my father and he told me to bring it here."

She dug a Coke and some food from her sweltering cooler, handing it to him before crawling into the back of the vehicle for her tools. "Rest in the shade. With a little luck, we'll be driving before dark."

Northern Uganda

November 12—1739 Hours GMT+3

L T. CRAIG RIVERA DROPPED TO one knee and reviewed the hand-drawn map again before scanning the jungle ahead. The foliage had thinned somewhat, with trees spread out at about ten-foot intervals in a sea of knee-high bushes. Easier to punch through, but not much in the way of cover.

He glanced back, managing to pick out the man closest to him—low to the ground and stone still. The rest of the team was completely invisible, even to his practiced eye.

“We’re getting close,” Rivera said into his throat mike. “Anybody have any problems?”

All negatives.

They’d been hiking almost nonstop for fifteen hours, and he thanked God for the grueling training they’d undergone in Florida. His CO’s philosophy was “Train twice as long, twice as hard, and ten degrees hotter than you’d ever have to face in the real world.” It was ops like these that made all the suffering worth it.

“Everybody stay sharp. We’re moving.”

According to the map, the camp they were looking for would be fairly spread out, with equipment under camouflage netting and most of Bahame’s soldiers sleeping on the bare ground. The outer ring would be children armed with light assault rifles—cannon fodder to warn Bahame of incoming danger. The next ring would be more-seasoned adult troops, and then the guerrilla leader’s personal guard.

Assuming they actually found the camp, the plan was to quietly penetrate its outer defenses under the cover of darkness, dig in, and wait for Bahame to wander into range of their sniper rifles.

Unfortunately, that plan left a lot to chance. Would they be able to find positions that allowed them to stay hidden but still offered a decent line of sight? And even more important, would they have a clear path for an extremely hasty retreat after they put a bullet in a guy whose troops thought he was God-made-flesh?

All were questions that had been left up to his discretion. There just wasn’t enough solid intel to do anything but show up and get creative.

Ahead, the trees became even more sparse and Rivera spotted a stump that had the mark of human tools. He signaled for his men to stop and dropped to his belly again, crawling forward to investigate.

The winding, grassy track that he finally stopped at the edge of was a good fifteen feet wide but seemed to have been created specifically to be difficult to spot from the air. He slid fully beneath the bush next to him and looked down the path to the south, seeing nothing but a lone cow grazing on a small patch of flowers.

“I found the road,” he said quietly into his throat mike. “We’ll parallel it heading... Wait. Stand by. I’ve got activity.”

A young girl appeared around the corner, naked except for a three-foot-long chain hanging from her

neck. Her breathless wailing was shockingly loud as she ran, and Rivera tried unsuccessfully to make sense of the words she got out between sobs.

The cow broke from its daze as she passed, but instead of watching her, it looked back the way she'd come. Dust billowed from its back as it stamped and bucked nervously, seemingly uncertain what to do.

Rivera remained completely motionless, wanting the girl to be well out of sight before he broke cover. Instead of passing by, though, she crashed into the jungle less than ten feet from him and began desperately pulling back the edges of bushes as though she was searching for something.

A moment later, what she had been fleeing became visible around the bend in the road about a hundred yards to the south.

It looked like the entire population of one of the tiny local villages, each person sprinting so desperately that they could barely stay upright. Blood coated their faces, mixing with sweat and fanning out across their clothing and skin. Adult men and women were in front, with children and the elderly lagging a bit—physically slower, but apparently just as motivated.

“Hostiles coming from the south,” Rivera said quietly into his radio.

The leaves above him parted and he grabbed the girl, pulling her to the ground and clamping a hand over her mouth. She squirmed beneath him, but her size and exhaustion made her easy to control.

Using his free hand, he touched his mike again. “Thirty-five, maybe forty total. No weapons visible. Pull back. We’re going to try to walk away from this fight.”

He began sliding from beneath the bush but then froze when he saw the cow bolt for the jungle. At least five of the people coming up the road changed their trajectory and hit the frightened animal broadside, knocking it off its feet. Rivera barely noticed when the girl squirmed from beneath him and started pulling on his sleeve, trying to get him to run.

The cow struggled to get back to its feet, but the weight of the people on top of it kept it pinned on its side. They screamed in rage and frustration as they tore into the helpless beast with fists, feet, and teeth. A man wearing nothing but camo shorts got kicked powerfully in the face and Rivera assumed he was dead when he collapsed in the dirt. A moment later, though, he was crawling unsteadily back toward the weakening animal.

Rivera leapt to his feet, grabbing the girl and starting to run back the way he'd come. They hadn't made it more than ten yards when he heard the unmistakable crash of people entering the jungle behind.

A muzzle flashed in front of him and then another and another. The reassuring crack of gunfire drowned out the otherworldly screeching of his pursuers and he felt the hint of panic that had overtaken him dissipate.

His boys never missed. Never.

Finding a defensible position between two large trees, he stopped and turned, taking in the entire scene through the sights of his AK.

No one was chasing him anymore—they had been distracted by the more obvious fixed positions of his men and were going down left and right as they ran into withering fire. Their compatriots didn't seem to notice, running past—and sometimes over—the fallen, focused only on the men shooting at them. In some cases, the people who had been hit didn't seem to understand what had happened. They tried repeatedly to get up before finally succumbing to a wound that should have dropped them like a sack of potatoes.

His second in command had four people bearing down on him from fifteen yards away. One was a child no more than six years old and another a woman with what appeared to be a badly broken arm.

Rivera ignored them and trained his gun on one of the two uninjured adult men in front, taking a gulp of air and holding it before pulling the trigger. The target went down but the other three got through, colliding with his old friend in an impact that reverberated through the trees.

Rivera tried to get another clear shot, but it was impossible—all he could see was a jumble of flesh, the flash of a knife, the color of blood. There was nothing he could do. His friend—a man he'd fought and trained with for more than five years—was never going to leave this place.

“Retreat!” he said into his throat mike.

His men broke cover and he tried as best he could to slow their pursuers.

Donny Praman was running hard for the relative safety of a ditch with a plump woman in the bloody tatters of traditional dress angling in on him. Rivera initially dismissed her but then blinked hard, thinking his eyes were playing tricks. She was overtaking him.

He fired a round, but his heavy breathing and confusion caused him to go wide, taking a chunk out of a tree next to her shoulder.

Gunfire was becoming more uncontrolled and the shouts of his men more desperate as he lined up for another shot. She was nearly in his crosshairs when she leapt on Praman's back and they went rolling down a steep embankment together.

The girl behind him was crying and babbling again, but he barely heard, stunned by the image of a fat woman taking down the best soldier he'd ever worked with. Maybe the best alive.

She finally jumped in front of his gun and pointed. When he followed her finger he saw that his shooting had attracted the attention of no fewer than five Africans, who were now bearing down on them. Fast.

Rivera fired into them, knocking the lead man down and causing two others to trip over him. They didn't look down as they fell, seeming unconcerned by any rocks or branches that could injure them, instead staying locked on him and the girl.

He lined his sights up again, but it was hopeless. The two who had fallen were already back on their feet, and there were another three coming in from the east.

He grabbed the girl's arm and ran, trying to ignore the intermittent fire and shouts of his friends going silent.

South Dakota, USA

November 12—0830 Hours GMT-7

DR. JONATHAN SMITH SHUFFLED slowly through a stack of charts as the nurse gave him a rundown on the changes in his patients' conditions. He glanced up at her every few seconds—mostly so she knew he was paying attention but also to admire the red hair flowing over her shoulders and ivory skin unblemished by so much as a freckle.

“Jon Boy!”

Dr. Derek Canter appeared at the end of the hallway and began hurrying toward him, huffing audibly. The gray halo of hair ringing his bald head bounced in rhythm with his belly and, combined with the outsized wingtips slapping the floor, made him look a bit like an off-duty clown. It was one of many reasons the kids in the ward loved him.

“Derek. Just the man I wanted to see,” Smith said. “I was at the grocery store yesterday and they still won't let me pay.”

“I talked to them, JB, but the fact is, your money's no good here. Hell, I'm actually looking *forward* to writing a check to the tax man this year.”

Smith scowled. This was getting out of hand. The owner of the old cowboy motel he was staying in brought him home-cooked dinners every night, and yesterday, when he'd flagrantly run the stop sign in front of the police station, the sheriff had just smiled and given him the thumbs-up.

Canter pointed at the nurse hovering over Smith's shoulder. “So how are things looking, Stace?”

“I think we're out of the woods.”

“Even Tina?”

“Visibly improved since last night.”

Canter clapped his hands together loudly and then darted off, his voice echoing through the building. “I wonder if there's a line for tips on the 1040. Somebody call my accountant!”

Smith went back to his chart, shaking his head and laughing quietly.

“It's starting to snow,” Stacy said. The nervousness in her voice was obvious enough to make him look through the window at the widely spaced flakes. Not a storm that should concern a girl born and bred in this little South Dakota town.

“Dangerous driving for people not used to it,” she continued. “I could give you a ride back to the hotel tonight...”

He tossed the chart on the counter between them and searched her face for even a hint of a wrinkle. Coming up empty, he silently calculated her age at about twenty-five—nineteen years his junior.

“Oh, and you know, Jon, my brother owns the best restaurant in town. We could maybe stop off and grab a bite on the way.”

It was likely that she took him to be significantly younger than he actually was. His shoulders were still broad and his waist trim, but she would be blissfully unaware of the ever-increasing effort it took

to keep them that way. His short black hair was still thick, complementing naturally dark skin that had so far proved impervious to the brutal conditions he regularly subjected it to.

Smith's initial reflex was to say no—the lifestyle he'd chosen didn't really lend itself to personal entanglements. On the other hand, dinner with a smart, beautiful woman looked pretty good when compared to another night watching reruns on the one channel the hotel got.

“Do they have steak?”

She smiled broadly, though it wasn't enough to conjure even a small crease in the corners of her eyes. “Like you've never had.”

He started toward the makeshift quarantine unit they'd set up in back of the facility. “Then you've got a deal.”

At the end of the hallway, Smith slipped through a duct-tape-and-plastic curtain, then through a set of double doors.

“All right, how is everyone feeling?”

There were eight children in beds lined up neatly against the walls—some playing video games and looking about ready to go home while others struggled a bit to sit up.

“Good morning, Colonel Smith,” they said in a practiced chorus.

He sat on a low stool and kicked off, gliding gracefully to the bed of a young girl who had just entered the fifth grade. “I hear you're kicking butt, Tina.”

She coughed, clearly trying to make it sound better than it was. “I'm feeling way better than yesterday.”

“Well, I'm very glad to hear it,” he said, slipping on a pair of gloves and checking her lymph nodes.

Growing up in a small, close-knit community could be wonderful, but, like everything, it had its downsides. This town happened to have a very charismatic woman who was convinced that vaccinations caused her son's autism and had gone on a devastatingly successful campaign to get her neighbors to skip or delay vaccinating their children.

The first case of measles had sprung up about a month ago in a six-year-old boy living on a ranch to the north and had been passed to his classmates in the town's only school. The speed with which the disease spread surprised everyone, its transmission bolstered by the fact that the vaccination rate had dropped below what was necessary for herd immunity.

When a young girl died of complications, the overwhelmed medical staff started making desperate calls to the government and Centers for Disease Control. Eventually, word had made it to Fort Detrick where Smith was an army infectious disease specialist. It had been too long since he'd actually sat down with a patient, and he immediately volunteered.

“How's my neck feel?” Tina said, looking up at him hopefully.

“Feels great. You're officially on the mend.”

“Really?”

“Swear to God.”

His cell phone rang and he reached into his pocket to check the number, frowning when it came up all dashes and a tiny encryption symbol appeared.

“Who is it?” Tina asked.

“My mom,” Smith lied smoothly—a skill he'd picked up during his time with Military Intelligence. “And you know you can't blow off your mom, right?”

Northern Uganda

November 12—1853 Hours GMT+3

L T. CRAIG RIVERA DROPPED his empty rifle and yanked a pistol from the holster on his hip, concentrating on not letting his pace slow even a fraction. A jumble of loose rock beneath the carpet of vines nearly tripped him, and he dared a quick glance over his shoulder as he regained his balance. There were still four of them and they were gaining fast. The young girl next to him had been keeping up out of sheer terror but was now starting to fall behind, fatigue finally trumping adrenaline.

He put a round into the chest of a man in a blood-soaked Manchester United shirt and scooped up the exhausted girl, trying to coax a little more speed from his cramping legs.

The incomprehensible truth, though, was that the people chasing him were faster than he was on his best day. And with the added weight of the girl, it was now a matter of seconds before they ran him down. Rivera angled right into a stand of bushes with leaves the size of elephant ears, hoping to confuse his pursuers as they plummeted in after him.

The wet vegetation slapped painfully at his face, obscuring his vision and throwing off his equilibrium as the girl began to squeal and squirm. They were no more than a few paces behind. He wasn't going to make it.

Rivera felt a hand claw the back of his neck, and then the gloom of the rain forest suddenly gave way to blinding sunlight. The sound of his footfalls and those of the people behind him went silent, and he was tumbling through the air, his mind trying to make sense of a spinning universe—the red and brown of the people falling with him, the green of the jungle, the blue of the sky.

The pain of the impact surprised him. Based on the length of the fall, he'd expected to die instantly. Muddy water swirled around him as he fought to keep hold of the girl and figure out which way was up.

The burning in his lungs started quickly, but he ignored it as long as he dared, waiting until he was in danger of losing consciousness before surfacing. Only one of his pursuers was visible, thrashing wildly, unable to keep his head above the churning river. The others seemed to have already gone down for the last time.

Rivera looked up at the sixty-foot cliff he'd fallen from, focusing on the people standing at its edge. Their eyes were locked on him, but they seemed unsure what to do.

He turned to face the direction the water was taking him, adjusting his grip on the motionless girl to get a more solid hold. When her head hit his chest, though, he saw the unnatural angle of her neck beneath the chain still secured there, and he reluctantly let her body drift away.

Above, the Africans were beginning to track him, following along the top of the cliff, trying to find a way down. He swam for the opposite shore, but the current was too strong, funneling him and all the other debris to the river's center.

A submerged tree trunk hit him hard from behind, flipping him forward and pulling him under. He

tried to kick away from it but found that his right leg was useless. Water filled his mouth and forced itself into his lungs as he struggled to get back to the surface.

He could see the light of the sun, he could imagine its warmth, but the more he fought the more distant it seemed to become. He remembered the lake that he and his family used to go to when he was young, and suddenly he was there swimming with his brothers. He was so tired. Wasn't it time to rest yet?

* * *

CHARLES SEMBUTU WATCHED impassively as Admiral Kaye barked orders at the women manning the computer stations. Three of the video feeds had gone black, and another was permanently fixed on the sky. The fifth showed a motionless Caucasian hand holding a knife buried in the throat of a young boy.

"Can we get anything on Rivera?" Kaye said, though the answer was obvious.

"Radio's dead, sir. Along with the video feed."

He leaned over one of the women's chairs. "Replay the last thing we have from his camera. Slow it down this time."

She brought the monitor assigned to Rivera back to life and they watched leaves colliding with the lens, a flash of the people chasing him, and then the fall.

"Sir, that looks like water at the bottom of the ravine, and our satellite photos confirm that there's a river cutting east to west close to where the skirmish started. He could still be alive. Can I give the extraction team his last known coordinates?"

Kaye glanced back and Sembutu met his eye, making sure to hide his anger. Normally, when someone failed him, that person's life became very short and very unpleasant. No such remedies were available when the Americans were involved.

It had been a perfect scenario for him—let the foreigners get rid of a man the world had come to despise and then take credit for it. In one brief moment he would neutralize the growing threat to his own power and make himself a hero to the rural population taking the brunt of Bahame's attacks.

But the Americans had botched the operation as he had suspected they would. For all their skill, first world soldiers were too mired in tradition and meaningless moral codes to operate effectively in Africa.

He now had no choice but to accept the partnership the Iranians had offered. It was a dangerous gamble, but he was quickly running out of options. Bahame's army continued to creep south, trying to get into a position that would allow a full-scale assault on Uganda's capital. Something had to be done.

But it had to be done with the utmost care. If the Americans discovered the Iranians' plot and his involvement in it, there was little doubt that their retaliation would decimate his country and leave him dead or on the run.

Kaye took a hesitant step back, demonstrating his weakness through his concern for a single, inconsequential soldier.

"No," the admiral said. "Tell the extraction team to stand by at the rendezvous point."

"But, sir, the fall. He's probably—"

"You heard me, Lieutenant. We'll wait seventy-two hours. After that, we're pulling the plug."

Washington, DC, USA

November 12—0900 Hours GMT-5

PRESIDENT SAM ADAMS CASTILLA put his feet up on a heavy pine coffee table he'd brought with him from the governor's mansion in Santa Fe. The décor in the Oval Office had evolved since he'd first moved in, objects from home being slowly replaced with things he'd received on his official travels. A constant reminder of the magnitude and scope of his responsibilities.

"Any questions, sir?"

Lawrence Drake, the director of the CIA, was sitting across from him in a wingback chair that had once been a gift from the French—a people that would immediately declare war if they ever saw the native American blanket it had been reupholstered with.

"About North Korea?"

"Yes, sir."

Castilla frowned thoughtfully. It seemed like these intelligence briefings got more complicated and more depressing every time he sat down to one. China, Russia, Israel, the Middle East—impossibly complex individual pieces intertwined into an utterly unfathomable whole.

"No, let's move on, Larry. What's next?"

"Iran."

Castilla's frown deepened. There was only one thing he wanted to talk about that day, and it seemed they were never going to get around to it. He waved the DCI on impatiently.

"Thank you, sir. The antigovernment demonstration last week in Tehran numbered at least ten thousand—"

"Were there casualties?"

"Our information is a little shaky, but we're estimating a little over a hundred injured. Two confirmed dead—one person was trampled after tear gas was thrown by government forces, and one died in the hospital from injuries sustained in an attack by riot police."

"I saw the video on CNN," Castilla said. "A lot of chaos for a country that likes order."

Drake nodded gravely. "Iran's destabilizing faster than anyone anticipated, sir. Ayatollah Khamenei is getting more and more hard-line in the face of the opposition. We have reports of the secret police going after dissidents' families all the way out to cousins. And there are rumors of an upcoming purge of government workers who've been deemed too liberal. We've seen this a thousand times throughout history. When the paranoia hits this pitch, collapse can't be far behind."

"Time frame?"

"Hard to say. There are a lot of variables and we're fairly blind in that country. Having said that, I wouldn't be surprised if we saw it happen within the next eighteen months."

Castilla drew in a long breath and let it out slowly. "Can't say that I'll be sad to see them go."

The edges of Drake's mouth tightened perceptibly.

“What?”

“Sir?”

“I know that look, Larry. What?”

“The enemy of our enemy is not necessarily our friend.”

“Farrokh.”

Drake didn't bother to hide his distaste at the utterance of the Iranian resistance leader's name.

“The sanctions we put in place have been somewhat effective, but much more important is the fact that the government just doesn't have the support of young people or intellectuals. And let's face it, building a nuke without those two groups can be pretty time-consuming.”

“But Farrokh *does* have the support of the youth and intellectuals.”

“Yes, sir. We still don't know much about him, but we know he's a wizard with technology—particularly cell phones and the Internet. The way he uses music from alternative Middle Eastern artists and historical video to drum up support would put most Western campaign consultants to shame. What we have to focus on, though, is that his message isn't pro-West. He wants change, but at his core, he's a nationalist.”

“Come on, Larry. You can't be suggesting that having a progressive democracy in there could be worse than what we have now.”

Drake didn't answer immediately, and Castilla waited. He'd made it clear from his first day in office that everyone was free—in fact obligated—to speak their mind inside the walls of the Oval Office. The best way to lose your job in his administration was to hand out politically sanitized information that caused him to get caught out in front of a camera.

“Sir, fundamentalists tend to be backward-thinking people who can be played off each other, isolated, and bribed. Farrokh is different. Under someone like him, Iran could very easily get over the technical barriers keeping it from becoming a nuclear power. But that's not all. So far, Khamenei's success in using the region's instability to increase Iran's influence has been fairly limited. People are suspicious of the Iranians, and the Sunnis aren't anxious to see an increase in Shia power. Farrokh is seen as being much less divisive by the people trying to shake up the status quo—and I'm not just talking about liberals and progressives. There's a very real danger that, under someone like him, we could see the Middle East unify into something resembling the Soviet bloc. Only with a much more convenient and effective weapon...”

“Oil.”

“Yes, sir.”

Castilla leaned back and sank a little deeper into the leather sofa.

Farrokh was a ghost. In fact, many people in the intelligence community didn't even believe he existed, hypothesizing that he was just an avatar for the people pulling the strings of the Iranian resistance. As a career politician, though, Castilla knew better. Composites couldn't take the reins of power—that was something reserved for individuals. And whoever this Farrokh was, he wanted his hands on those reins something awful.

The truth was that as unstable as the region looked, it was actually worse. The Iranians were financing any group sympathetic to them or antagonistic to the United States, the Israelis had their fingers hovering over the button, and the few remaining stable Muslim governments were using back channels to urge U.S. military action. Of course, if America did move against Iran, those same governments would provide little more than a quiet thank-you while publicly declaring jihad on the Christian invaders.

“The devil you know, right?” Castilla said finally.

“I think we need to consider that a takeover by Farrokh might actually turn out to be detrimental to our interests. And in light of that, I think we should act on—”

Castilla held up a hand. “We’ve been over this before, Larry. I’m not going to keep an entire country in the Dark Ages over a bunch of ‘maybes’ and ‘coulds.’ Change can be dangerous as hell, but it can also provide opportunities. Giving up the possibility of a decent relationship with a democratic Iran in favor of perpetuating the current disaster is too defeatist for my blood.”

“Is it defeatism, Mr. President? Or realism?”

Castilla folded his hands over a belly that seemed to expand and contract with his stress level. “I figure that when you have no idea what you’re doing, you’re better off not doing anything. Now, let’s move on.”

“But, sir—”

“We’re moving on, Larry.”

As usual, Drake’s face was an impenetrable mask—something that had always made Castilla uncomfortable. He relied on his gift for seeing through people and it made him nervous when he couldn’t.

“The only thing we have left on the agenda is the matter in Uganda.”

Castilla’s feet slid to the floor and he leaned forward, focusing his full attention on the DCI. “Have we figured out what happened?”

“Apparently, the same thing that happened to the force the AU sent to track down Bahame. We believe our entire team was wiped out, though it’s possible that the team leader survived. We have people waiting for him, but honestly, I think we’re wasting our time—”

“Like hell we are!” Castilla said, his voice rising to something just below a shout. “No one saw the man die, and we’re not going to abandon him.”

“I wasn’t suggesting we should, sir.”

The president stared down at the carpet for a moment. He’d sent those soldiers in against everyone’s recommendation. As much as it horrified him to get into bed with Charles Sembutu, the atrocities being perpetrated by Caleb Bahame had become too grotesque to ignore.

“I’m sorry,” Castilla said when he finally looked up again. “I know that’s not what you were saying, Larry. And I know you were against this from the start.”

Drake watched Castilla settle back into the sofa again. Politicians liked action without consequence—to create a show that would please their constituents but not actually cause anything to happen that would be tangible enough to garner criticism. And while Castilla was more impressive than most, he was no different. Sometimes you rolled the dice and lost. Sometimes you sent men to die.

“Did you watch the video?” the president said finally.

Drake didn’t allow himself to react but felt the anger well up inside him. Kaye. That overambitious navy hack had made an end run around him and sent the raw feeds from the soldiers’ cameras directly to the White House.

“Yes, sir. I reviewed it this morning.”

“Have you ever seen anything like that? What the hell was going on out there? Have your people been able to come up with an explanation?”

Drake considered his answer carefully. The information he’d been feeding the White House on Uganda was carefully massaged to include only the bare minimum necessary to keep the CIA from looking like it was withholding—and even that had been enough to get them into this pointless and extremely inconvenient skirmish. Did Castilla know more than what was included in the agency

briefings? Did he have other sources?

“I’m sorry, sir. An explanation?”

Castilla’s exasperation was obvious and expected. “Our top special ops team was wiped out by a bunch of unarmed Africans, some who looked like women and children to me. You don’t think that demands some sort of explanation?”

There was nothing in the president’s demeanor that suggested he was suspicious, and Drake had no choice but to move forward based on that very dangerous assumption.

“No, sir, I don’t. Bahame was tipped off that they were coming and he sent some of his soldiers to intercept them.”

“Soldiers? Those weren’t soldiers, Larry.”

“I respectfully disagree. That was a typical representation of the army Bahame’s put together by raiding villages and giving the people living in them the choice of dying or fighting for him. In the context of Africa, this isn’t new.”

Castilla was clearly shaken, as anyone who saw that video would be, and Drake decided to take advantage of the president’s momentary weakness.

“Sir, Bahame is as bad as they come, and you tried to help. I feel for the Ugandans, but this is an African problem. What can we do? Send a battalion? Neither the AU or Sembutu are going to go for that, and even if we could convince them, where would we get the troops? We’ve been down this road before, sir, and it doesn’t lead anywhere.”

“So you’re telling me that you don’t think there’s anything on that tape that’s unusual?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t. Our men were outnumbered eight to one by a bunch of people brainwashed into thinking Bahame is some kind of god. To some extent, a small team’s survival in this kind of a tactical situation hinges on generating fear—if you shoot enough people, the others will break and run. That didn’t work in this case.”

“Your recommendation?”

“We bury our dead and walk away.”

Castilla nodded slowly but didn’t speak.

“Is that all, sir?”

“Yeah. That’s all. Thanks, Larry.”

Alone again, President Castilla walked to the windows behind his desk and looked out at the clouds boiling over DC. He didn’t turn when the side door to his office opened. “You heard?”

“I did.”

“Thoughts?”

“I gave you that video because I knew you’d want to see it, Sam. But in this case, I have to agree with Larry.”

Castilla turned and watched Fred Klein settle into a chair. He looked a lot older than he did a few years ago—his hair had receded another inch and he’d lost so much weight that his suit seem to swallow him. Being the president’s most trusted friend wasn’t an easy job.

“I sent them there, Fred. And now everyone just wants to forget about them.”

“No one wants to forget. It’s just that this is a fight you’re never going to win.”

“You’ve spent most of your life in intel, Fred. Tell me you’ve seen something like that video before.”

Klein took off his glasses and wiped them on his tie. “I can’t say that I have.”

“Something isn’t right here,” Castilla said, taking a seat on the sofa across from him. “I want you

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