Khaveyrim

by In_Defilade

Summary

Spin-off AU of Per Ardua Ad Astra.

Harry lost his magic and became a soldier. Ziva lost her sister and became a spy. Theirs is an unlikely bond, a friendship forged in fire, blood and loss that endures despite divergent commitments to duty, country, service or agency. At first friends, who became something more - something deeper, more powerful. They are, and always will be 'khaveyrim'.

Rating: Mature
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: F/M
Fandom: NCIS, Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling, Covert Affairs
Relationship: Ziva David/Harry Potter
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe, SAS!Harry, Military, Israeli character(s), Alternate Universe - Military, British Military, mossad, Special Air Service, Afghanistan, Episode: s04e01 Shalom, Pre-show, Iraq, Originally Posted on FanFiction.Net, Global War on Terror, The Royal Navy, HMS St. Albans, I'll bet that's the first time that's been used as a tag, Washington D.C., London, Naval Gunfire Support, first time that's a tag too i'll bet

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Please read the pre-script, it's there for a reason.

This is a spin-off AU of another ongoing story of mine, *Per Ardua ad Astra*, (a Harry Potter/Stargate Atlantis crossover) and was requested by 'BlackOpsCommander,' who asked for a crossover between 'my' version of Harry, an elite soldier, and NCIS, specifically interacting mostly with Ziva. The title should give away the general idea.

For readers of *Per Ardua*: assume the prologue and first two chapters occurred, then the story diverged. Some aspects of Harry's own tale between killing Voldemort and the Atlantis Expedition will stay constant, but the Stargate does not exist (or he doesn't know about it) so he stays on Earth. This may give stuff away that I've tried to foreshadow in *Per Ardua* though.

To summarize for those who haven't read *Per Ardua*: Harry loses his magic at the end of 'Order of the Phoenix', but gains a supernatural ability - basically, weather manipulation, with a few little extras - but the superpowers aren't the point of the story, and he doesn't use them much. Read the first couple of chapters of *Per Ardua* to get more detail on that, (or hell, just read the whole thing. More readers are always welcome). After leaving Hogwarts (no magic, remember), he attends a military prep school, then joins the RAF, trains as a pilot then switches career tracks and joins the SAS because of the whole supernatural power thing, and he becomes a top operative (obviously, wouldn't be interesting if he didn't). With the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places, he's been kept busy ever since.
Harry was used to desert climate, by now. Two years of near-constant fighting in Afghanistan meant he was intimately familiar with the odd cycle between the scorching heat of daytime and the biting cold of night; which made Eilat an extremely pleasant change. A coastal resort at the very tip of the Israeli portion of the Negev Desert, the arid climate extremes were tempered somewhat by proximity to the warm waters of the Red Sea.

He’d spent the last fortnight out in the Negev itself, alternating between student and instructor with the Sayerat Matkal - first learning how the Israelis did things, then describing and showing how combat experience in Afghanistan had affected the desert and mountain warfare techniques of his own unit, the Special Air Service. The Sayeret Matkal - literally 'General Staff Reconnaissance Unit,' but nicknamed just 'The Unit' by the IDF - had been based on the SAS, even borrowing their motto, 'Who Dares, Wins', and there was a long history of cooperation and cross-training between the two units.

So when they were done training, the Unit team he’d been getting to know pretty well over the previous two weeks invited him to tag along on their own thirty-six hour leave trip to Eilat, the nearest decent-sized city. He’d been due some time off anyway, so after checking in with London he’d tagged along. See the world, meet new people and all that.
Which brought him to here. 'Here' was a massive open-air rooftop club overlooking the Gulf of Aquaba, somewhere west of Eilat's towering hotel district. Harry wasn't exactly sure what the name of the place was - the sign had been in Hebrew, after all, but he was fairly certain it was simply called 'View.'

As might be expected from the name, that view was spectacular. With an onshore breeze blowing the desert dust haze away inland, the sunset was turning the western sky into a kaleidoscope of orange-peach tones slowly fading out to purest blue above, unblemished by clouds.

Never much of a dancer, and not really a fan of crowds, Harry was wallflowering, leaning on a railing at one end of a raised bar with a glass of Ballentine's in one hand - he could afford it, after all, being Lord Potter and all that, even if he chose to ignore it - observing the spectacular view and the enthusiastic crowd, while letting the noise of the club wash over him and taking the time to not think about anything involving bombs, blood or ballistics for the first time in what seemed like years. Not, admittedly, that he would have chosen another life if he had to do it again; the last few years had been hard, but he found satisfaction in this job. He was one of the best, part of the most elite unit in one of the most respected military forces on the planet.

Absently, he traced the straight scar across his cheek, under the left eye.

*It leaves its marks, though.*

He was still armed, however, despite his relaxed state, and he was still paying attention, which was why he didn't jump at the appearance of tall, dark-haired man who joined him in his little corner, leaning back on the railing next to him - Eyal Lavin, the leader of the Israeli team.

"*Shalom,* Harry."

"*Shalom,* Eyal. Good night?" Harry sipped his drink, still eyeballing the crowd.

"Hell yes, I'm a city boy. Two weeks in the desert is two too many, in my opinion ... is something wrong?" The IDF officer half-turned, surreptitiously scanning the crowd himself with commendable subtlety.

"No, just healthy paranoia."

"Anything interesting, then?"

"Hmmm." Harry's eyes flickered across the club again, made a small gesture with his glass. "See that group in the booth over there?"
"Yeah." Eyal looked at the indicated spot a few meters away, in a roped-off VIP quarter of the massive rooftop terrace, which seemed the focal point of about two dozen people, all in their late-teens and early twenties, predominantly female too.

"IDF conscripts. Having a party to celebrate the ending of their two-year service stint, from the toasts. From those same toasts, I'm fairly certain it's that dark-haired girl's birthday too - the one in a red shirt - probably twentieth or twenty-first, but it's loud and my Hebrew isn't up to much."

Harry's watchful eyes rested on the woman in question for a moment, cataloging and memorizing automatically. Long black hair, pulled back in a lose tie. Dark eyes, face slightly flushed from a mix of dancing and alcohol, but not enough of the latter to impair anything yet. Beside her was another girl, who was almost a carbon copy, but was clearly a few years younger.

Little sister maybe? Doesn't look eighteen ... false ID maybe. Heh, I remember those days ... wait a minute.

Harry continued to watch the older sister, more closely than before.

There.

It was subtle, but she was scanning the club herself, much like he was. Not continuously though, because she was putting most of her attention on her friends, having a good time, but about every fifteen seconds or so she looked around quickly, covering a different section every time.

Might be trained. Too focused on the main club though, with her back to the VIP section, but that could just be because her friends sat down first. Or she's not that worried.

Or she's just looking around. I need to stop reading so much into it.

Eyal hadn't noticed the pattern. "She is something special. Looking to get lucky? I didn't get VIP tickets, so you're on your own for getting in there."

"Oh, she's way out of my league," Harry laughed. "Besides, one-night stands aren't my thing."

"Really?" Eyal raised an eyebrow, surprised, maybe even astonished. "In our business, what else is reasonable? Where you might die any day and, in your case, spend months overseas? In war zones, no less?"

"No. I prefer longer-term relationships. Not that I've had many," Harry admitted.

"Anyone right now?"

"Sort of. Henrietta, an army officer I went to school with." Harry shrugged. "We have an arrangement."

"What kind?"

"That if neither of us is attached and we have overlapping leave time, we spend it together. You can read whatever you want into that." Harry smirked. "Friends with benefits, so they say. Also, if neither of us have found 'the one' by the time we're thirty, we get more serious about it."

"Lucky you; wish my various ex-girlfriends had been that reasonable." Eyal pushed upright. "Anyway, I came up here because the guys are heading out, we're splitting up and going to a couple of different places. You coming?"
"Nah, I'm good. Don't want to ruin your boys' night out babysitting little old me, the clueless tourist." Harry saluted him with the glass. "Besides, early flight tomorrow, remember?"

"You know the way back to your hotel?"

Harry just gave him a flat look; one Eyal had no difficulty interpreting. Do I look like a complete moron? The Israeli just grinned. "You did describe yourself as the clueless tourist."

"I think I can manage, thanks all the same." Harry said dryly. "Get going, I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"Sure, see you later."

Ziva David was indeed celebrating her twentieth birthday, and the ending of her and her friends' conscript service in a month's time. Her sixteen year old sister Talia had come down from their mother's house in Tel Aviv to join her Ziva for her few days of leave before the final stretch.

Talia, while incredibly energetic and bubbly, was usually something of a rule follower … which was why she had utterly astonished Ziva earlier that evening by producing a fake ID and announcing she was going out with her older sister this night, come hell or high water. Very much against her better judgement, Ziva had given in, mostly because she'd been running late, but also due to the laser-targeted pathetic-puppy-dog-eyes bombardment Talia had turned on her. She'd never been able to stand up her adorable, not-so-little-anymore sister when she did that.

Ziva David, trained IDF soldier, prospective Mossad agent; brought low by a single look. My father better never find out - or worse, mom. Mom would be much, much worse, actually, because then I'd have to explain exactly what I gave in to letting Talia do.

Shoot me now.

Turning her head slightly, she looked over the dance-floor again, checking the crowd instinctively, like her father drummed into her throughout her childhood.

It took some time for her to spot the anomaly. One lone, dark haired man wearing a lose white tropic shirt and leaning on the rail up on the end of the raised bar. His face was pretty distinctive - with a long straight scar across his face under the left eye and another above his right, mostly hidden by his hair, he would be easy to remember. He'd been there for a while - a long while, now she thought about it. Due to the gathering dusk, and the flickering lighting, it took several seconds for her to notice his eyes were shifting in a regular pattern even as he raised a glass to drink - door, DJ, dance floor left-center-right, VIP area, bar, door again, repeat.

Perfectly positioned to see the entire club…

She watched him for a few seconds, before he looked away from the mass of bodies and out over the side …

And the view. Well, it is the name of the club after all.

Abruptly, he looked back. Straight at her.
He didn't quite react as expected. Actually, Ziva amended, she wasn't exactly sure how someone should react upon realizing they were being watched, stalker-like. Angry, probably. Creeped-out, certainly. But not … amusement? Was that -

He winked at me! Arrogant bastard … or not. He wasn't the one caught watching, after all. God this is embarrassing.

Ziva held his gaze defiantly for a few seconds, before looking away. When she looked back, he had turned away.

A couple of hours later saw Harry heading back to the hotel. Despite the temptation to let it all go, he'd paced his drinking carefully; anything more than slight inebriation tended to make him lose control of his powers somewhat, which would be rather bad - random lightning strikes landing in a city were never good news.

He'd just passed a bus station, a sizable crowd building up there waiting for transport to the resorts and hotels several miles away down the coast, or to the airport, with a scattering of police officers around the edges. IDF and police presence in Eilat was, while not minimal, fairly low-key as it was tourist hot-spot and appearances were important.

As he turned a corner, he was nearly run down by one of the two sisters he'd observed earlier. Catching her by the shoulders, he just about managed to keep both of them upright.

"Oh, slicha, slicha!" Then, apparently realizing he was a tourist. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean-"

"It's fine," Harry interrupted with a smile. "No worries."

"Okay. Sorry again. Got to go, bus to catch, bye Ziva!" This last bit was thrown over her shoulder at her laughing presumed-sister, the older one.

"L'hitra'ot, Tali'. Try to be a little more careful." The woman shook her head as her younger clone disappeared around the corner in a rush. "I'm sorry about that. She's very … energetic."

"I can tell." Harry grinned as he drew level with her. "Sister?"

"Yes … how did you know?"

"It may be dark, but I do have eyes. She looks very like you."

"That's true. So, hmmm, I'm guessing tourist?"

"That obvious, huh?"

She laughed again. "Yeah, it is. At least you don't have a fanny pack."

In the background there was a shout that rose above the rest of the city noise, but it was too faint to hear properly.

"I'm not an American, thank goodness." Harry replied, ignoring the shout. "Or over sixty." That elicited another laugh.

A really good operative can just read the patterns of the street around them without really thinking about it, see things out of place that trip mental alarms and give advanced warning of impending
threats.

Harry was good, but not that good. He'd only been in the special forces for about two years, and his natural habitat was field combat, not plainclothes espionage work. He did have good reactions though, so when a bomb detonated somewhere behind them, and the concussive wave nearly knocked both of them off their feet, he didn't freeze up.

Instead, he pushed his conversation partner into some form of cover provided by a parked car, eyes scanning the street as he crouched down beside her, clawing for his sidearm, a customized MEU(SOC) .45 1911, from the small-of-the-back holster under his loose shirt.

Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (MEU(SOC)) 1911

The bomb had been in the bus station … Crowds, maximum impact. The loud shout beforehand … probably 'Allahu akhbar' or similar, suicide bomber. Vehicle coming to a screeching halt in front of them, over the trunk of the car … Transit van, door slightly open.

Kidnapping? Shit.

He braced his wrist on the flat trunk of his cover, and waited a half-second as the door finished opening, framing two people poised to jump out.


He fired. One, two. Shift targets. One, two. Both hostiles went down almost as their feet touched the tarmac as they jumped out of the van thinking their targets were surprised, unprepared for opposition, weapons still holstered.

Movement. Driver.

Harry ducked, as a burst of automatic fire shattered the passenger side window of the van, and raked the car he was taking cover behind, before raking uncontrollably up the concrete wall behind him.

Micro SMG, firing one handed, lot of recoil. Going to take him a second to re-aim.

Harry popped up again, and unloaded another three rounds at the shadowy figure behind the wheel. One hit the near-side door, and another smashed the far-side window, but the third connected. The driver's head jerked sideways, and he slumped forward. Very unlike Hollywood, the horn did not go off.

Cold steel against his neck.

What the ...

"Who are you?" The woman demanded. "Why were you in the club? Were you following me?"
Crap, didn't see that coming. Not so much of a damsel in distress, it seems.

"Harry Potter, British military," Harry said clearly, "on leave after training with the IDF. And you are?"

"No one in particular. Why should I believe you?

Paranoid much? Well, I did think earlier that she was trained … hmmm, maybe this wasn't aimed at me after all.

"ID's in my back right pocket. And you're welcome, by the way."

"Chachmolog."

*I have no idea what that means, but it doesn't sound particularly complimentary.*

"Smartass."

Ziva kept her weapon on the suddenly-very-dangerous stranger as she reached for the pocket indicated. A thin leather wallet opened to reveal a white-and-green photo-ID card with a hologram security tag, which proclaimed, line by line:


*And the night had been going so well until this point.*

"Fine." She slid it back, removed her gun. "What now."

"Now, we need better cover. That bomb can't have been a coincidence …"

The British soldier's words vanished into a haze of white noise.

*Talia! She was going to the airport, she was in the bus station … where the bomb went off!*

"Tali', I need to get to Tali', she was …" Ziva's lunge off the ground was stopped by a powerful hand on her shoulder, shoving her back down behind the car.

"Your sister?" Ziva nodded frantically, all trace of calm swept away by overwhelming panic.

Potter cocked his head, listening to the night. There were screams, cries, the crackle of something burning, general hubbub, but over all were the ever-closer sirens of responding emergency units. She could see the judgement he made, almost as he made it.

"There's no point. You won't get there before the ambulances anyway, and there might be secondary devices. Fairly common tactic." He pinned her with a piercing look. "Any reason you might be targeted for a kidnapping?"

Ziva nodded. "My father, he's …" she trailed off, unwilling to tell a complete stranger, and a foreign soldier to boot that her father was the head of Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service. Allied nation or not, that was just common sense.

The man seemed to sense that. "Can't talk about it?"

Ziva nodded again.
"Fine. I can't think of any reason anyone'd come after me here, so it was probably for you. Which means protecting you just became the mission, so you are going to listen to me or I'll just knock you out and do it anyway."

She glared at him challengingly. "So sure you can?"

He snorted derisively. "You're trained, but not to my level. Now shut up and do as I say."

Suiting actions to words, he pulled her up and along the street away from the bus station, away from Talia. Živa entertained some notion of pulling away, but the iron-hard grip on her shoulder and the way he was shielding her with his body from as much as the street as possible persuaded her it would probably be unsuccessful. At the first building - a large, glass-fronted hotel - he pushed her in the doors and yelled at the staff.

"Call the police!" When no one moved: "NOW!"

The night manager scrambled to obey.

Harry pushed his new principal - SAS shorthand for the 'principal' person being protected when on close-protection duty - down into cover again, this time behind the flashy front desk; it was thick, proper wood rather than chipboard, which would do for cover for now, and had an etched glass sign above for 'King Solomon Hotel Eilat.'

"I've got the Border Guard; what do you want me to tell them?"

"Tell them that the bomb just now was a cover for a kidnapping, which I stopped, and I need backup here right now to protect the target of that kidnapping."

Seven rounds fired. Harry ejected the magazine and slid in his spare. Harry didn't bother to rack the 1911's slide, as the last round of the previous mag was still in the chamber. Eight rounds left.

"You, whatever your name is -"

"Ziva."

"Ziva then, call your father, who I presume is somebody important or in government at least." A nod. "Good, tell him what happened, let him know you're all right and I could use some bureaucratic help to cut through all the crap the cops are undoubtedly going to throw at a foreign soldier illegally carrying a concealed firearm without a licence who just shot three people dead, regardless of justification."

"Be'seder." She turned to another phone behind the desk, staying low as she dialled.

I'm going to assume that means yes.

Tyres screeched to a halt outside, but Harry couldn't see the car.

"Is that the cops?" Harry asked the manager. She shrugged.

"Maybe; apparently traffic's all backed up blocking the roads from the bomb. Dispatcher said it'd take a few minutes to get someone moving this way."

"Okay."

Can't see any police lights reflecting off anything though.
"Here." Ziva was holding out a phone handset, which Harry took. "He wants to speak to you."

Cradling the phone, Harry kept an eye on the doors. "Go ahead."

"Thank you, whoever you are. My daughter said you were British, yes?" The accented voice on the phone was gruff, an older man with what Harry immediately categorised as a 'command voice' - a hallmark of an experienced leader.

"Pilot Officer Harry Potter, yes sir." Harry caught sight of something, movement, but it was difficult to make out through the reflections in the windows; lights on inside, dark outside … "Shit, DOWN!"

__________________________
Mossad Headquarters, Tel Aviv, Israel - 32° 8'39.87"N, 34°48'15.66"E
November 12, 2002 - 2350 Time Zone Bravo

Two hundred miles away in Tel Aviv, Eli David stared at his phone handset in open shock - a truly alien expression for the always-in-control Deputy Director, and one that scared his section heads in the late-night meeting nearly witless when they saw it on his face.

"That was Ziva, she's been attacked, in Eilat. Tali' as well, I don't know exactly …"

He was rambling. That would never do. Taking a breath, he shoved all emotion - worry, panic, concern included - to the back of his mind. They weren't helping, and he had a job to do.

"Find out what's happening in Eilat, and inform the Director. Get me a plane on the tarmac right now, I want updates on the way. And get me a file on a British military officer, Harry Potter who's involved somehow, probably Royal Air Force."

His subordinates scattered.

The plastic handset cracked in his grip.

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The hotel's glass front shattered under a hail of gunfire. Harry crouched over Ziva as they and a couple of staff members were showered in a rain of wood splinters and shattered glass granules from bullets hammering the no-longer-so-smart backdrop of the front desk above and behind them.

Four shooters. Nine mil sub-guns. If they were using AK's, they would've gone straight through the wood. Apparently they're not interested in kidnapping any more.

The fire stopped abruptly. Risking a glance over the top, Harry saw three of them run inside through the shattered windows, as another turned to fire at something outside. Blue and red lights flickered on the remaining glass panels higher up.

Police. They're pinned from two sides, and not aiming at me any more. Perfect.

Harry braced on the edge of the desk again, only his forearms and head above the eyes exposed to fire - pretty much the best shooting position in the circumstances. His ever-reliable 1911 roared again, and one of the figures went down as he shifted to the next of the three.

Absently he noted the fourth gunman go down outside as multiple high-powered rifle rounds tore into him.

Another shot. Six left. Another black figure went down, but the first was still moving on the ground.
No way he survived a .45 to centre of mass … body armour, son of a bitch!

He ducked again, as the third hostile skidded to a halt and opened up on the desk once more.

Click.

The target's SMG, a Micro-Uzi, locked open on an empty magazine. He looked at it, then back up just in time to see the .45's barrel reappear, and the impact of the Remington jacketed hollow-point snapped his head back in a gory geyser of blood and brain matter that splattered over a brightly coloured poster of cheerily smiling tourists on a local beach.

Target down.

Harry knew he was damn near out of ammo, and although the girl - Ziva - still had a gun, it was a pocket pistol, a backup weapon designed to be concealed in an ankle holster, and probably only just about accurate enough to be useful in a shootout in a crowded elevator.

Where the hell are the cops?

The two others were still on the floor, disoriented. Being shot with armour on was better than not having it, obviously, but it still hurt like a bitch and usually broke ribs, and they'd both dropped their weapons. Judging from their performance tonight, the assailants seemed enthusiastic but amateurish, a part of his mind noted absently. A lot of mistakes.

The Border Police unit, a pair of paramilitary officers in grey uniforms and olive green tactical gear and armed with M-4 carbines moved cautiously through the broken glass, weapons up and covering the gunmen. Harry ducked again - he really didn't want to get shot by some adrenaline-hyper cops after all that. That would just be embarrassing.

The Israeli officers were, fortunately, not trigger-happy. They pounced on the still-winded kidnappers and had them zip-tied in a matter of seconds. Harry revealed himself with Ziva and the staff, and after a short exchange surrendered his weapon - reluctantly - and began the usual bureaucratic roundabout that results from shooting people and breaking things in somebody else's country without a diplomatic passport.

Two hours later, Harry had finished giving an exhaustively detailed statement and was sitting on the tailgate of an ambulance outside, after the officer questioning him belatedly realized he still had cuts on his face and shards of glass down his collar and neck; something Harry hadn't himself noticed until that point. Ziva was a few meters away in another ambulance, parked at ninety degrees to his. The paramedic behind him finished patching up his neck and said something in Hebrew. Harry took that to mean 'I'm finished,' and stood up, making his way over to her. She didn't look up as he waved another over-concerned medic away and leaned on the door.

And the prize for Awkward Conversation Opener of the Year goes to ...

"How are you doing?" She looked like hell, and had clearly been crying earlier, but that was all he could think of.

She glanced up long enough to see who it was, then down at the floor again. "Fine."

"You know that's an acronym, right?"

A spark of curiosity. "No?"
"Freaked out, insecure, neurotic and emotional? Never heard that one?"

"I'd rather not hear any jokes right now." Her voice was weak, almost inaudible in the din of the officials, vehicles and so forth around them.

"Sorry," Harry muttered. "I'm not very good at this, if it wasn't obvious." That got a slight nod at least, meaning: *Yes, it is very obvious.* "Any word on your sister?"

"Tali'. Dead, she's ..." She hunched in on herself again. "That's all they said."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You didn't kill her ... and I probably would have been dead or captured without you." Dark eyes regarded him with a more lively expression than he'd seen since the shooting ended, and the grief had set in. "Who are you, really?"

"Harry Potter. Royal Air Force." She raised an eyebrow.

"Pilots don't react like that, or shoot like that. You were body-shielding me, that's what a trained bodyguard would do." She pointed at his cheek. "And that scar is from a knife. Unlikely a pilot would pick that up."

"Well spotted, Sherlock. It was a machete though, not a knife." Harry smiled slightly. "Special Air Service to be exact."

That really did get her interest. "Why is a British Special Forces soldier in Eilat, of all pla -"

Ziva cut herself off when a trio of large black SUV's pulled around the police blockade at the end of the street and came to a halt near the ambulances.

"My father, possibly," she said to Harry. Under her breath, she added, "In person. I feel so honored."

"Ah." *Clearly not much love lost there.* "He came, didn't he?"

Dark eyes met green. "True," Ziva admitted. "He doesn't normally. Come to anything, I mean. Even before mom left him." Her tone was bitter as she looked back to the vehicles. A veritable sea of men and women bearing a wide range of weaponry poured out of the SUVs and spread out in a protective cordon before an older man - medium height, grey hair, expressionless face, cold eyes - got out of the second one, and approached at a measured walk.

"Ziva?"

"Hello, father." *Ouch.* Harry didn't quite wince at the icy formality Ziva had shifted into, and nor had he missed the word choice and tone - there was a world of difference in the warmth she gave 'father' and 'mom.'

"I'm glad you're all right."

Father and daughter embraced, but to Harry's carefully expressionless gaze it seemed mostly initiated by Ziva; her father seemed to regard it as required - just something you did as a father.

*I dislike this guy already.* Harry knew his own history - as an orphan who was repeatedly told his parents were practically halo-wearing angels - probably made him expect parents to be far more loving, caring and affectionate than most ever were, but Ziva's father was clearly less than stellar in that role.
"And you would be the mysterious Pilot Officer Potter, I suppose?" The man in question turned to him, held out a hand. "Eli David. Thank you for saving my daughter."

His grip was cold, mechanical, and Harry could tell he was being evaluated.

"Always. And I'm hardly mysterious." Harry smiled politely, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Really? Then why is your entire personnel file completely redacted other than your name and date of birth?"

Woah. How did he get a look at my file?

Wait a minute. Eli David, where have I heard of Eli David ... hmmm ... oh hell, the Deputy Director of Mossad. Just my bloody luck. I really should have asked for Ziva's surname. Not that that would have helped, it's fairly common.

"I don't know, Deputy Director." Harry stressed the title. Yes, I want you to know that I know. "I'm sure Whitehall have their reasons."

And I'm sure they're going to be just fascinated as to how you could get your hands on my official RAF file in less than two hours.

"Indeed. Any thoughts on tonight's attack?"

"They were amateurs. The bomb was a distraction - messy, but effective. The kidnapping itself was sloppy beyond belief. The van pulled up while Ziva and I were behind cover, not in an open stretch of the sidewalk where we'd have been vulnerable. They should have bailed then rather than tried their luck. Then the firefight in the hotel - I presume that was the backup team. Another good idea, but they should have aborted when their pointmen were downed; with the police just around the corner, they panicked. Also, when the ones in armour were shot, a professional would have been up and moving a few seconds later. Those guys lay around on the ground like landed fish." Harry shook his head. "Being shot in armour hurts, but not that much."

Eli's eyebrow rose, somewhat impressed at the analysis, but only asked, "Personal experience?"

Harry's hand rested for a moment on his lower left abdomen before he pulled it away again, reluctant to give away any more details. "Yes. But I wasn't wearing armour then."

The second eyebrow joined the first for a moment. "I see. Thank you again, Mr Potter, for saving Ziva. Now, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to speak to my daughter now."

Thus dismissed, Harry left to find whoever was in charge. He thought about sticking around - Ziva had returned to her almost catatonic state once her father arrived, which was disheartening after her flashes of curiosity. Nonetheless, it really wasn't his business, and he had a plane to catch.

Ten minutes later, he was free to leave and returned to his hotel to sleep for what little remained of the night. By the next evening, he was in Vauxhall Cross, London. Known locally as 'Legoland,' the building was more formally described as the headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Service, or MI-6, and there Harry did his debrief on the incident and his short meeting with Eli David: intelligence agencies spy on everyone, even their allies, and any information about a senior foreign intelligence official was interesting to 'The Firm.'

The fact that the Mossad had apparently extensive access to the supposedly classified personnel files of British Special Forces officers worried the brass; fortunately, Harry's own actual file - the single unredacted version in existence, and containing the full details of his magical background and unique
'powers' resided solely in a hidden safe in the classified documents storage at Hereford, in the room known as 'The Vault' in the basement of the headquarters of the SAS: it was decidedly not available for anyone else to read.

It wasn't Harry's problem, anyway. He was back in Afghanistan less than a week later, his meeting with Ziva David just one interesting but ultimately relatively minor incident in an exceptionally active career. He never thought he'd meet her again, never thought that it'd be important.

How wrong he was.
This chapter's storyline is based in real events, specifically the 2003 invasion of Iraq. While I did research as much as I could online, it is (obviously) not factually accurate. Just thought I should put that out there; don't want anyone thinking I'm Dan Brown-ing around with this.

For fans of Per Ardua Ad Astra, this event is basically the kind of thing Harry will eventually explain to Teyla when describing his previous career in the PAAA storyline, but should not be considered 'canon.' Unless I change my mind about that.

Wow. I now have my own 'canon.' This is getting Sirius … sorry, serious.

I also apologise for butchering the Arabic and Hebrew languages, they're beautiful languages that really doesn't deserve the mutilation I give them but transliteration into Latin phonetics (i.e. Western letters) for either is hard and unreliable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf."

George Orwell

Tikrit, North-Central Iraq - 34°36′36″N / 43°40′48″E

April 11, 2003 - 2212 Zulu (GMT) / April 12, 2003 - 0112 Charlie (Local)

The scene was almost biblical.

Not in the sense of shock, awe, and wrath of God, although that was happening somewhere to the east, just over the horizon, as Western jets pounded defensive positions set up by some still-intact units of the Iraqi Republican Guard. Those positions were much reduced now, after several weeks of heavy air attack, but they were still holding for the moment.

No, this scene was rather more pastoral. Specifically, a shepherd boy - teenager, actually - watching over a herd of goats in the chilly desert night, under the vast, timeless constellations that turned the darkness of a new moon night into a half-lit wilderness of rock and sand, rendered in greyscale tones in the absence of normal sunlight.

Yusuf drew his heavy woollen cloak tighter around himself in the lee of the dry-stone walls of the shepherd's shelter on the hillside. His father, a mid-level official in the Iraqi foreign ministry, had sent
his wife and sixteen year old son back to his tribal home of Tikrit, to live outside the city with a Bedouin tribe they were related to, in order that they might avoid the anticipated coalition air assault. Despite the exhortations of the ever-more insane-sounding Iraqi Information Minister, a rather comically nutty figure well-known to Western audiences as 'Baghdad Bob,' anyone with memories of the last time Western jets had ruled their skies knew exactly what kind of storm was coming. Anyone with a modicum of common sense could've worked it out.

Yusuf was a child of a more modern, mostly secular Iraq, and was not used to the harsh life of the desert tribes. However, while he personally thought that staying out all night watching over farm animals was just plain dumb - *just fence them in!* - he knew that if he lost any of them the chief, his great-uncle, would not go easy on him. So he fought to keep his eyes open, paying drowsy attention to the herd and mostly ignoring the destructive light-show to the east that had become boring several hours before.

It was a quiet sound, at first. The faintest trace of *something* not quite normal that disturbed the utter stillness of the desert night. A strange, thudding sound, as if someone was hammering rapidly on something some distance away.

The sound grew louder. The goats were disturbed too, the sudden clanking of their bells accompanied by worried bleating.

With a thunderous roar, four black silhouettes exploded over the top of the ridge above him, causing Yusuf to duck reflexively and the goats to scatter in panic as they were battered by downdraft and swirling dust.

Raising his head, Yusuf watched the four shapes - two massive leviathans followed by two smaller ones - and debated whether or not to run to the encampment, at least seven or eight miles away, to tell someone about the probably American helicopters.

He quickly decided not to - if he lost any of the goats, he'd probably be thrashed soundly … and, looking around, he realised he'd already lost all of them. With a sigh, he got up to start rounding them up again. With luck, he'd have found all the Allah-cursed animals by dawn, and no-one would know of his screw-up. The war wasn't his problem anyway.

 Completely unaware of the havoc they had wreaked on one very irritated teenager's night, the four aircraft continued east-south-east towards the city of Tikrit, flying in a standard two-down, two-up formation.

Lower down, flying side-by-side were two MH-47E Chinook heavy-lift helicopters of the US Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, colloquially referred to as the 'Night Stalkers'. These two behemoth cargo carriers were escorted by two AH-64D Apache gunships on loan from the 1st Cavalry Division's Aviation Brigade, flying above and behind the massive tandem-rotor helos to avoid their enormous roiling downdraft, their Longbow radars and thermal vision systems probing the rolling ridges and wadis of the Iraqi desert for any unwelcome visitors.
The soldiers inside the Chinooks were not, however, American. The sixteen men of Mobility Troop, Sabre Squadron Delta of Her Majesty's 22nd Special Air Service Regiment sat quietly in the four Land Rover 110 DPV Desert Patrol Vehicles, two to each aircraft, keenly aware that the long flight was coming to an end. To avoid contact with remaining Iraqi forces, the Chinooks had looped almost a hundred miles to the west of the known enemy locations to deliver their payload behind enemy lines; soon, it would be their part of the show.

Flight Lieutenant Harry 'Storm' Potter was even more aware of that fact than most of his men. Tonight's mission was a shoot-from-the-hip immediate action Charlie Foxtrot that he'd had almost no time to plan - a troubling state of affairs for a small team being inserted behind enemy lines. A communications intercept decrypted by the STORM TRACK and PALM BOWL listening stations on the Kuwaiti border strongly suggested that a high-level meeting would be taking place between several key members of Saddam Hussein's regime, probably the last before they went into hiding. It was to take place at a villa on the banks of the Tigris River - designated Objective DRAGON - belonging to Wataban Ibrahim al-Tikriti, a former interior minister under Saddam Hussein. According to a further intelligence brief Harry had been given before taking off, the CIA was giving credence to rumours that Saddam himself might be in attendance, grading it Triple-A quality intelligence.

Harry did not grade it as such himself. He and his men were extremely leery of trusting CIA intel right now, as they had spent the previous three weeks running around Basra and Al-Amarah checking out several dozen sites that 'Triple-A grade' CIA intelligence had labelled as WMD storage and research houses.

All of them had all been completely empty. Not some, not even most. Every. Single. One. In several cases, according to the locals the buildings had been abandoned for at least a decade. Top work there from Langley, who were thoroughly earning their current nickname of Certified Idiots of America.
Some things were on their side, however. Global Hawk recon drones had already been in the process of scouting Tikrit in preparation for a major offensive by Task Force Tripoli, a USMC mechanised regiment that was forming up somewhere down near Baghdad for a northward offensive. The drones had revealed that Iraqi military presence in the city itself was minimal, having been drawn off south to set up defences, which meant there was a clear shot through the city from the north-west to the manor house.

So the plan was reconnaissance, then mount a smash-and-grab raid for the HVI's. If the villa had too many guards for his small troop to take on, they would avoid contact and laser-designate the mansion for an air strike before falling back back into the desert for extraction via helo.

Harry's world-weary, cynical second in command Colour Sergeant Sprayson had taken one look at the mission brief and interpreted the 'smash-and-grab' order as the CIA's not-very-subtle way of screaming 'We need evidence on WMDs NOW, GOD-DAMMIT! Before Congress or CNN find out we screwed up!'. Harry agreed with his experienced troop sergeant's viewpoint; they'd seen several other increasingly desperate attempts from the Agency to find evidence to support their crap intel already.

Harry let none of this apprehension show. He was an experienced officer, and displaying worry would mean it spread to his men, regardless of their professionalism: if the boss starts cracking from the pressure, the rest of the unit suffers for it.

With a sudden jerk, the Chinooks set down five miles from the outskirts of Tikrit, out of audible range and hidden behind a low ridge. The loadmaster flipped out the vehicle 'planks' on the tail ramp and the four modified Wolf Land Rovers modified for desert operations surged down them before pulling away, assembling in a east-facing line outside the dust cloud.

The Chinooks lifted off to go and tank up from an air-to-air refuelling aircraft somewhere a long way out over the desert, followed by the Apaches. Their fuel requirements would force them to fall back, to be replaced by another pair that would meet up with and escort the Chinooks back in for their extraction in, hopefully, about three hours and preferably before sunrise.

"What a lovely place, boss. I think I'll take my next leave here."

Harry rolled his eyes as he looked at Colour Sprayson in the vehicle parked next to him - not that the
Colour Sergeant could see, in the darkness and behind the night-vision goggles attached to his helmet. "I'm sure your wife would love it, Paul. There must be a five-star Bedouin-run resort around here somewhere." He heard a guffaw from the troop sergeant as he thumbed the radio pressel.

"This is Mike One Zero to all vehicles, sound off and give vehicle status, over."

"Mike One One here. Vehicle good."

"Mike One Two, all working"

"Mike One Three, present, same here."

"Good. One Zero to all vehicles, proceed in file to Checkpoint Alpha. Make ready on the heavy weapons, permission to engage if contacted but not before. Call out any possible contacts as we move so we can evade. I want this fast and quiet, people. Zero out."

Above and behind Harry the gunner, Corporal Hamilton, racked the charging handle on the M2 Heavy Machine Gun mounted on the Land Rover's roll bars. The HMG made a satisfying *cha-CHUNK* that was simultaneously comforting and intimidating as hell.

Harry switched channels as the driver - Sergeant Beeler - shifted into gear and pulled out, headlights off and using night vision only, for obvious reasons.

"Hello Eagle One, Eagle One, this is Mike One Zero, Mike One Zero, come in, over."

A few seconds later, the crackling response of a Boeing E-3 Sentry's signals officer came in, orbiting somewhere south of Baghdad and functioning as a relay to the J-SOC main HQ all the way back in Saudi Arabia.

"Mike One Zero, Eagle One. Authenticate, over."

"Eagle One, One Zero. Authentication Zero-Alfa-Zulu-Tango, over."

"One Zero, Eagle. Authentication confirmed, send traffic, over."

"Eagle, One Zero. Relay for King Cobra. Mike One is on the ground and moving to the objective, ETA one hour. No enemy contact at this time. Going EMCON until Checkpoint Alpha, but will break EMCON if under contact. How copy, over?"

King Cobra was the frankly rather ludicrous Hollywood-esque callsign of the Joint Coalition Special Forces Headquarters - unsurprisingly, it was an American callsign. British doctrine favoured bland designations based on the NATO phonetic alphabet that rotated daily to confuse enemy eavesdroppers. Most American callsigns were apparently chosen for sounding cool.

Well, Harry could sympathise with that. He wouldn't give up his nickname - 'Storm' - for anything. It might have been Roach, or *Soap*, like that unfortunate new guy in G Squadron. Shudder.

"One Zero, Eagle, solid copy on relay for King Cobra, good hunting and any further traffic, over?"

"Negative Eagle. Mike One Zero out."

Harry replaced the handset and cocked the General Purpose Machine Gun (GPMG) in front of his seat, while activating his 'powers'.

His left eye was hidden behind the rubber eye ring of the monocular night vision headset, but his right was visible. If it hadn't been night-time, an observer would have seen his eyes turned an
opaque, obsidian black.

Harry 'connected' with the air molecules around him instantly, and 'pushed' out his awareness in all directions as they drove. His ability gave him control over several aspects of the atmosphere - at first, it had been the ability to create storms and lightning through manipulation of the temperature and electromagnetic polarity of the air molecules - basically, the way storms and lightning were created naturally anyway.

However, after about a year or so - while still at Duke of York's military school, the institution he went to after being expelled from Hogwarts for no longer having magic - he started noticing he could control the wind directly, as in stopping and starting it whenever he wanted. With meditation, which Hetty taught to him, and much patient experimentation, he eventually figured out he could directly influence the molecules physically - nitrogen (N2), oxygen (O2) and hydrogen (H2), to be exact.

In combat, he could use quick thrusts of air molecules to knock people off balance but not much more - they were too light to do any real damage. And because water was a molecule made up hydrogen and oxygen (H2O) he could sense it, but it was too dense to influence with EM or thermal alterations, let alone manipulating it physically.

Due to this close connection to the actual air molecules, he could also 'see' voids or outlines of objects where there were none, allowing him to map the area around him with more or less complete accuracy in real time for about two miles, although he couldn't focus on all of it at once.

It had taken a lot of training to be able to multitask the 'scanning' and soldiering or indeed any other task at the same time, but he'd cracked it shortly after finishing SAS selection, which he'd completed without using those powers, just to prove he could (and mostly to prove to himself he was capable of doing this soldiering lark and wouldn't get all his men killed through sheer incompetence.)

There was nothing but rocks, dry riverbeds and occasional small mammals in the one-mile radius. Excellent.

Twenty minutes later, the jeeps pulled up in a sandy wadi bed - Checkpoint Alpha. They were about half a mile from the city limits, clearly defined by a major road that ran along the west edge of the urban area.

They'd already crossed Iraqi Route One - the main north-south highway - two miles back. Civvie traffic had been non-existent, thanks to the USAF's enthusiasm for hammering road infrastructure - major junctions, roundabouts, etc - with ground-penetrating ordnance to mess up the road surface and disrupt transport; most Iraqi highways had been rendered impassable already.

They'd had to wait a few minutes for the headlights of a north-bound military convoy to disappear, but it appeared as if all civilian refugee traffic had ceased. Harry called in the location, direction and speed of the convoy just in case some Coalition ground-attack pilot had the spare ordnance to make some pretty explosions.

Anyone with sense would have left by now. It's only a matter of days until Coalition forces arrive.

Harry and the Colour Sergeant both jumped out to have a peek over the wadi's edge. From this angle they were at the top of a long, gentle slope down to the town. The wadi itself cut away south shortly ahead, which was why they had located this exit point on satellite earlier.

There was only some sort of industrial facility on this side of the main road. Lights were out, with no movement.
Then the main road. Some traffic, but nothing military as far as Harry could see. All heading north. The streetlights were out across town, as well. Also, thanks to the USAF's predilection for breaking other peoples' infrastructure.

The run from here was a straight shot. Down the hill, across the highway and then a two kilometre road to the target by the river.

"See anything unwelcome, Colour?" Harry asked, as they both scanned the terrain in front with high powered night vision scopes.

"Actually, boss, it's ain't so much as anything unwelcome, as a lack of anything unwelcome, if you get my meaning."

"Intel did say they pulled most everything to the South."

"Oh, I know that, sir. But at the target itself, I mean. There's no vehicles, boss. Nothing obvious, anyway."

"Huh." Harry refocused on the three-story manor house. No lights on inside or around it, but that was a basic precaution during air attacks, with which Iraqis had a lot of recent experience. No vehicles in front. No men on the gate.

"Oh joy. Intel fucked up again?"

"Maybe. Or the tangos are just being smart, sir."

"True. We haven't seem much of that from them, though."

"No sir, but there's always a first time."

"We assault as planned." Harry decided. "Two Rovers in through the front, two round the back to cut off escape."

"Mega, boss. Let's get on with this and go home." There was a crackle of gunfire in the city, some distance away to the north of the objective, marked by tracers going straight up.

"Someone's a bit trigger happy."

"Just hope they don't spot us, sir."

The Iraqi refugees fleeing the fighting up the Tariq-Tikrit road were already pretty worried, especially since the main highway was already out. The view they received now did nothing to alleviate that.

One by one, four vehicles roared out of the darkness of the desert to the West. Each was a four-by-four blocky, wide oblong military jeep, with four seats.

Perhaps a little history is in order.

The SAS is made up of three 'regiments' - one regular (22 SAS), and two reservist (21 and 23 SAS). 22 SAS has four operational Sabre Squadrons - A, B, D, and G. Each Squadron is about sixty-four men strong, made up of four sixteen man troops, each with their own specialty - Air (HALO and HAHO parachutists), Mountain (Arctic and alpine warfare), Boat (maritime and scuba) and Mobility (desert and vehicle warfare).
The Mobility Troop could be said to be the true roots of the SAS, despite their name, the Special 'Air' Service.

When the Regiment was conceived by Colonel (then Lieutenant) David Stirling during the Second World War, he envisioned a force of parachutists who would drop in near Nazi airfields and supply routes in North Africa, conduct reconnaissance and sabotage missions then be picked up for extraction by vehicles.

However, on their first mission, many members of the sixty-man force broke bones on the rocky, boulder-strewn deserts of Libya. The rest of the mission was a disaster too, with over thirty percent casualties.

Clearly, parachuting was out. For a while, it looked like the SAS might become one of those 'awesome-but-impractical' wartime ideas that would be consigned to the shelves of military history archives.

But Stirling was a creative soul. He instead reached out to the unit that was supposed to extract the SAS by vehicle - the Long Range Desert Group. Pre-war, the LRDG had been a bunch of eccentric British Imperial expat explorer types who had found a hobby in exploring the Egyptian desert in trucks. In the process, they adapted and perfected a number of originally maritime navigation techniques that proved perfect for determining their position in the landmark-less dune seas and rocky plateaus of the Sahara.

Thus the SAS got a second chance. The LRDG would provide both infil and exfil in vehicles - nicknamed 'Pinkies,' because they were painted in pink desert camouflage - and Stirling's trained saboteurs would provide the muscle. It worked - and worked damned well. 60 enemy aircraft were destroyed at three airfields on their first joint mission alone.

However, due to the fact the LDRG was primarily used for the all-important reconnaissance of the German supply route from Tripoli, and 8th Army command was not terribly keen on losing that precious source of information, the SAS were issued their own vehicles in 1942 - the iconic Land Rovers - and were told to do it themselves. Not content with just using the vehicles for transport, the SAS attached twin Vickers machine guns to the overhead roll bar for fire support. Then they added another one, on the back. Then another one on the front passenger side, for the commander. Sometimes yet another one, for the driver to use one-handed. A running joke from the unit's early days was that their badge should have been a hedgehog spitting fire.

Hence, the long-lasting idea of the desert gun-truck was born. The SAS no longer parked the jeeps near the target and sneaked in at night to plant bombs, because the Germans had stepped up security; now, they brazenly rammed through the perimeter fence in broad daylight and drove down the line of landed aircraft, shooting them up with as many weapons as they could lay their hands on, throwing grenades, satchel charges and - probably - inventive insults.

Just kidding. Or probably not, actually, given that the SAS was mostly composed of the roughest, toughest sons of bitches Stirling could round up. Case in point, his second in command, a hulking 6'2' former Irish rugby international by the name of Robert Blair "Paddy" Mayne, who at the time of his recruitment into the SAS was actually under arrest for striking his commanding officer and chasing him out of the Officer's Mess waving a bayonet in a drunken rampage.

Paddy Mayne was what the British Army would normally describe tactfully as 'a bit of a character.' More on him in a moment.

Whatever their sense of humour under fire, they were very successful. Hard numbers are difficult to find, but most historians credit the Regiment with slightly under 400 individual planes destroyed on
the ground in the North Africa theatre, including one entirely accurate event when Paddy Mayne ran out of ammo and explosives and decided to disable a plane by ripping the instrument panel out. With his bare hands.

While Mayne was rather famous for his anger management issues, that is certainly not all he was. After Stirling’s capture in January 1943, Mayne took command of the SAS as a whole and was promoted to Lt. Colonel himself a year later, leading the Regiment with flair and distinction throughout the rest of the war, being awarded the Distinguished Service Order a total of four times - an award for gallantry under enemy fire only one tier down from the Victoria Cross - and was one of only seven soldiers to achieve that frankly insane number of DSOs. Subordinates described his personal combat prowess as 'magic,' and his leadership skills as 'soldierly genius.' Bruiser he may have been, but he was one of the most highly decorated officers in the British Army for a reason.

Ahem.

The author's obsession for military history trivia dealt with, back to the story.

The LR-110 Desert Patrol Vehicles that Harry's troop drove were the direct descendants of the Land Rovers driven by the LRDG - just with bigger guns. All of them carried GPMG’s mounted in front of the commander in the left-front seat (as a British vehicle, it was of course right hand drive - only true barbarians drive on the right-hand side of the road), and the fourth man sat facing the back with his personal weapon. In the DPV's turret ring, however, were mounted the true heavy hitters that converted the sixteen-man infantry troop into a veritable hurricane of heavy firepower. Two vehicles had .50 HMGs, another a 40 mm Grenade Machine Gun and the last a MILAN missile launcher.

Woe betide anyone who got in their way.
Fishtailing slightly as the tires protested the sudden high-speed change from sand to tarmac, the four DPVs sped across the motorway and into the city proper. The soldiers riding them must have appeared almost alien in the headlights of the surprised Iraqi drivers - bulky armour and helmets in tan-white desert camo, with 'horns' of night vision sets flipped up, goggles and black balaclavas covering their faces.

Once across the road, they pulled their NVGs down again. The headlights of the civvie traffic would have blinded them if they had kept them down.

"Mike One Zero to all drivers, gun it lads, we don't have all night."

The drivers reciprocated gleefully, hurtling down the deserted road towards the house.

"Eagle One, Mike One Zero. Passed the line of departure, two minutes to objective. Out."

One minute, fifty-five seconds later, the target compound's gate - fortunately not a properly reinforced one - caved under the impact of two tons of Birmingham's finest automotive engineering.

The house had a long oval drive that split at the gate and ended at the house. Two DPVs went down each, just in case of return fire … of which there was none yet.

"Contact!" Hamilton yelled. It was obvious what he meant.

"Speak of the devil, and he shall appear."

Two guards rushed out the front door, holding AK-47s. They weren't in uniform, so they probably weren't Iraqi military; just thugs playing at bodyguard. They hesitated, just for a moment, apparently unsure of which pair of Landies to fire at.

A moment was a moment too long.

"Weapons free!"

Hamilton's HMG immediately hammered out two five round bursts of half-inch lead. The guards fell, jerking awkwardly as the heavy rounds tore into them. A small drifting cloud of marble dust surround them, from where the bullets had gouged foot-wide craters in mansion's stone steps after
passing through the men.

Two DPVs pulled up at the front door while the others sped around the back. The weapons operators remained in the turrets, covering the gate in case any Iraqi quick-reaction forces showed up to crash their private party.

Harry jumped out and sprinted up the steps, joined by five other troopers at the still-open double doors. There were some sounds, faint panicked shouting and boots on stone floors coming from inside. They stacked up, three to each side.

"Flash and clear."

Two and half seconds later, an M-18 flashbang detonated inside with a thunderous roar.

Harry was the second man in through the left hand side of the double door. The pointman in front of him, Sergeant Beeler, double-tapped a stumbling, blinded armed man straight in front of him then turned left, covering his sector with the crisp movements of a long-practised professional. Harry was just a pace behind him, covering straight in front. His powers were still 'on', tracking movement in the house.

Four on the ground floor at the back: the other team would deal with them. One remaining upstairs, running to the foyer.

The infrared aiming laser of Harry's M16A4 - brand new, 'borrowed' from a friendly USMC armorer - rose to cover the railing, glowing bright green in the night vision system.

Movement.

A man rushed out of a room and up to the banister, bringing an AK-variant carbine to his shoulder.

Harry fired, two three-round bursts that send the target flying back and struck sparks from the decorative wrought-iron railing.

A second flashbang announced the entry of the other team at the rear of the building.

"Clear left!"

"Clear right!"

"Clear centre!" Harry announced. "Room clear. Ryder, Archer, Sprayson, upstairs. Hamilton, Beeler, with me downstairs."

'On it." Colour Sprayson headed up the stairs with the other two in tow.

It took fifteen minutes to clear the rest of the house. His men reported in via radio as he walked back into the lobby: six targets down, including two more the backdoor team had killed, and two HVIs captured.

"Anyone interesting?" Harry asked as the second team dragged two already zip-tied and black-hooded prisoners in. One was walking; the other was literally being dragged.

"Aye. This one's the Ace of Diamonds, and the other's the Five of Spades, boss."

Harry whistled. "Well, it's a good night for us in Vegas."
The most-wanted Iraqi playing card deck had been issued a month ago, and was now used as shorthand even in official reports for the various HVIs that appeared in it. The 'Ace of Diamonds' was Lieutenant General Abid Hamid Mahmud al-Tikriti, the fourth most wanted on the list after Saddam and his two sons. Mahmud had been the dictator's bodyguard, later personal secretary and head of the Special Security Organisation, a secret police outfit. He had been Hussein's right-hand man, from his home tribe, and one of his most trusted subordinates - a big fish.

The other, the 'Five of Spades,' was the owner of the house: Wataban Ibahim al-Tikriti. He had been interior minister until an incident in 1995, when he'd been repeatedly shot in the leg and stomach by Saddam's son Uday Hussein in an argument, and had retired after his leg was amputated in surgery. He was a smaller fish, but a target nonetheless.

"Caught them heading towards the back door. There's a civvie helo out there on the lawn. Guy in a pilot's helmet was one of the ones with them."

"Escape via helicopter? That's pretty suicidal with the Americans holding air superiority." Harry looked up. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, boss." Sprayson handed him a stack of files, a few inches thick. "Found 'em in an office upstairs. You might find the top one somewhat amusing."

Harry raised an eyebrow and flipped open the top folder. He read for a few seconds, then started laughing.

"What?" Hamilton asked.

"It's a memo, in Arabic, detailing the many reasons why Iraq should not pursue weapons of mass destruction. Including the likely risk of invasion by the United States of America." Harry shook his head as he folded it shut. "A painful irony, considering nobody's found a single trace of WMD's, but it's not our problem. Get these two stashed securely in the jeeps out back then bring them round to the front again. I'll call it in."

The Land Rovers didn't have much room what with all the extra weapons mounts, but for such a short-term mission they hadn't been loaded down with days-worth of supplies this time, so there was some empty space either side and behind the rear gunner's seat. The prisoner's wrists would be handcuffed to a stanchion prevent them causing trouble or escaping. It was going to be a bumping, bruising ride for them, but they'd survive.

Harry and the men from the front ran back out to their vehicles.

"Eagle One, Mike One Zero, relay for King Cobra. Direct patch, priority message, over."

"Copy Mike One Zero, patching you through." There were a few seconds of static, then a few more of random beeping tones, like a dial-up modem as the radio's crypto software synchronised with Coalition Joint Special Forces Command.

"Mike One Zero, King Cobra. Eagle says you have traffic, send message, over."

"King Cobra, Mike One Zero. Sit-rep. Objective DRAGON secured. Six times enemy KIA, two times hotel-victor-india captured. Say again, two times hotel-victor-india captured. Identities are King of Diamonds and Five of Spades, over."

There was a couple of seconds of apparently stunned silence. "Good hunting, Mike One Zero." Harry was fairly certain he could hear cheering in the ops centre behind the radio operator, which he sympathised with. The Spec-Ops portion of the invasion had mostly consisted of failure after failure
due to bad information on WMD locations; they could use some good news. "Don't suppose there's any sign of the Ace of Spades as the intel suggested, over?"

"Negative on Ace of Spades, King Cobra. Advise ground forces secure objective to do a more detailed check for intel. We've already found some good stuff just during the assault, over."

'Copy that, One Zero. Will relay that to Task Force Tripoli. Wait one for further orders."

Further orders? What the hell, we just finished the mission. Hmmm ... the gunfire earlier. Someone else's team getting shot up maybe?

"Mike One Zero, this is King Cobra Actual."

Holy shit, the big cheese.

Actual was an American three-star named Major General Doug Brown, the deputy commander of US-SOCOM and field commander of the Joint Special Forces Headquarters, coordinating the actions of the various multi-national SF groups spread all across Iraq during the invasion phase.

"Priority mission tasking, approved by CENTCOM. Tel Aviv is requesting - politely - that we extract some of their operatives from Tikrit. They have come under contact and have a man down, with hostile forces believed to be closing in. Since you're in the area, I want you to get to them first, over."

Well shit, that's a first. The Israelis NEVER ask for help. And the gunfire earlier was only, what, about half an hour ago? Wow. The bureaucracy's moved fast on this one.

"Corporal, any movement out there?"

"Yes sir, got a convoy that just came into sight on the road. Two klicks, fifteen miles an hour heading north. One armed technical, two ... No, four three-tonner trucks, one armoured unit at the back, can't make out the type, might be a BTR, or BMP."

Harry pressed transmit. "We have positive on enemy movement, heading north into town. Send mission, over."

"Two friendlies located at grid three-two-five-five-eight-two-one-niner. Mossad says they've bunkered down in a building with bare cinderblock walls, with a big green sign above the front window. Challenge will be Charlie-Charlie, response is Oscar-Oscar. Get there double-time, One Zero. Readback on orders, over."

"Copy grid three-two-five-five-eight-two-one-niner, cinderblock building with green sign, challenge Charlie-Charlie, response Oscar-Oscar. One Zero is Oscar-Mike, out."

Harry grabbed the map, quickly found and circled the Israeli's building, handing it to Beeler with a shouted "Get us here ASAP," above the roar of the V8s as the second team pulled around in front of the house. Beeler pulled out in front, as Harry pressed on the team radio's transmit button.

"Happy days, lads, the brass just gave us a new snap mission." He ignored the groans. "We're to extract a couple of Israeli operatives from a building just over half a klick north of here. Enemy forces are moving in on them. Follow my tail, weapons hot, let's make this quick; I want to get out of here before those Iraqi forces show up."

Ziva swore creatively under her breath as she crouched by the window of her and her partner's impromptu safehouse, and kept an eye - and her gun - on the unfortunate civilian occupants of the
shop above which they'd hidden.

This was not what she'd had in mind for her first Kidon mission.

They'd been tasked with assassinating a mid-level Iraqi internal security operative here in Tikrit who had been an Mossad asset - or at least they'd thought he had been. He'd been a double agent, and had betrayed his Israeli handler to Iraqi intelligence; the handler had been captured, and later tortured and killed, and the tape of the torture sent to Mossad HQ as a kind of perverse, gloating warning that was all too common when dealing with Saddam's thugs. At first, Mossad assumed it was just bad luck - shit happens, as they say, especially in a business as dangerous as covert espionage - but when intel surfaced that the 'asset' in question had been a plant all along, then it became a matter of professional honour.

No one screws with an espionage agency and goes unpunished. Especially Mossad. And especially not a bunch two-bit amateurs who fondly referred to themselves as Iraqi Intelligence. Professional pride demanded reciprocity.

While not ideal from a timing perspective, the chaos of the invasion would have made it unlikely the hit would be traced back to Mossad. Random looters would be a more likely explanation in these conditions. Once the target was down, they'd sit tight and wait for coalition troops to pass by their position before getting out of town using pre-arranged covers as war reporters.

It hadn't gone down like that. While scouting the target's house, a two man patrol of Iraqi soldiers had spotted them climbing a wall and had opened fire, assuming they were looters. Ziva and her partner, Eyal Lavin, had returned fire but he'd been hit in the leg, the heavy rifle round nicking an artery or something from the sheer amount of blood. If he didn't get proper medical help soon, Eyal would bleed out.

She'd dragged him back to this building and secured a makeshift tourniquet and bandage before calling Tel Aviv on a secure satellite phone and reporting in. Mossad HQ had told her to stay put, that they were going to try something a little off the wall.

Unbeknownst to Ziva, her father had called a contact in the American intelligence community; specifically, Doug Brown, and damn near begged for help. Brown, surprised that a legendarily stubborn bastard like Eli David would beg for anything at all, cleared it with his superior, CENTCOM's commander General Franks, and checked to see who was in the area; re-tasked a nearby SAS patrol, then informed Tel Aviv.

All Ziva knew of this process was that their handler had told her that extraction was a few minutes away, and the challenge response.

The result, from Ziva's point of view?

Deliverance. In the form of four heavily-armed open-top Land Rovers, engines purring loudly in the quiet desert night, slowing to a halt outside the shop.

Then, in a British accent, "Charlie Charlie!"

With great relief, Ziva answered. "Oscar Oscar! Up here!"

"Okay, I'm coming up."

A clattering of booted footsteps announced his arrival on the second floor. The door swung open, admitting a six foot soldier in bulky armour and helmet, the desert uniform outlining him in the dark room like a ghost. A very well-armed one.
"Higher said you had a casualty. How bad is he?"

"Bad." Ziva replied, getting up from the window. "He's hit in the leg, I had to put a tourniquet on."
For some reason, the guy seemed familiar but she couldn't place where ...

"Beeler, Archer!" the Brit yelled. "T-One casualty, catastrophic bleed, right thigh. Room at the top of
the stairs."

From outside, a muffled, "Coming boss!"

The SAS commander flicked a flashlight over the room, settling on the cowering civilians, a
husband, wife and two kids, in the back corner. "Oh hell. Wn'hun luun y'edyke, t'kun had'eha."

Arabic. 'We're not going to hurt you, be calm.' Impressively fluent too, with a ... Jordanian accent
maybe?

The father of the family still looked scared, but nodded.

Two more men burst in. One went straight to Eyal, the other started unfolding a stretcher. The first
man, the commander she assumed, also joined the medic, to give him light to work with. The
outburst that followed was unexpected, to say the least.

"Eyal! Son of a … wake up! Eyal."

Wait, he knows Eyal?

Groaning, Lavin opened his eyes, drowsy from the morphine she'd given him. "Harry? What the hell
are you doing here?"

"Pulling your ass out of the fire, man. I thought you were with Sayeret Matkal?"

"How about that?" Even drugged to the gills on morphine, Eyal wasn't going to give anything away,
even to an apparent friend. "Small world."

"Fair enough. Archer, how long?"

The medic finished wrapping another bandage around Eyal's thigh, and checked the tourniquet.
"Seems fine. We need to get him to the chopper ASAP, sir, before he loses his leg to the tourniquet."

"Got it. Get him on the stretcher, then into the back of Sprayson's vehicle. You, miss …?"

"Ziva."

The flashlight spun to her face, blinding her for a moment. "Ziva David? I knew I knew that voice!"

Wait, what the hell? The only member of the SAS I've ever met was that guy in Eilat ...

Oh. Eyal called him Harry, so ...

"Pilot Officer Potter, I presume?"

"Flight Lieutenant now, Miss David."

"You know both of them, boss?"

"Yeah. Talk about coincidences." Potter was interrupted by his radio, to which he listened for a few
seconds.

"Move it lads, Colour Sprayson says he can see enemy infantry just a few hundred metres back the way we came, but they haven't seen us yet. Ziva, you'll ride with me. Beeler, stay with the casualty when you've got him loaded."

"Yes sir. Archer, ready?"

"Yep, on three. One, two, three!" They hefted the stretcher and manoeuvred it down the stairs, with Ziva and her newly re-acquainted saviour following, after telling the Iraqis not to call the authorities, and apologising to them for the blood.

Of all the strange coincidences …

Harry shook his head as he slid into the driver's seat of One Zero. Very few things in the intelligence community were random events, but sometimes it was just too ludicrously improbable for anything else.

Meeting up with Ziva and Eyal - with whom he'd exchanged some emails since their joint training exercise - in the middle of war-torn Iraq? Not even Mossad could have come up with a plan so convoluted it required one of their agents to be shot just so they could be rescued by a foreign spec ops team that might never have been sent in at all.

Still, it might become irritating. Not Ziva's fault of course, but British intelligence had blocked several increasingly Machiavellian attempts by Mossad's deputy director to find and get his hands on Harry's unredacted file in the last few months. It seemed he was an item of some interest to Ziva's father, an unknown quantity, a wildcard who might change the game.

And if there is anything spymasters dislike, it is an unknown element in their future schemes.

Harry had a feeling this little rescue op - the second time Harry'd saved his daughter - would heighten that curiosity.

Even as he was putting the DPV into gear and moving out, Harry reached across to Ziva's side of the vehicle and retrieved the radio handset. Ziva herself was already manning the GPMG in a very professional manner without needing to be told how. No longer the shaken-up partly-trained girl like she was Eilat, it seemed.

"King Cobra, Mike One Zero. Message, over."

"Mike One Zero, King Cobra Actual. Send traffic."

Merlin, the three-star's still on the line? He must be very interested in this rescue op.

"Secondary mission complete, friendlies retrieved, one wounded. Extracting to LZ Alpha now, ETA one hour, over."

"Copy that, Mike One Zero. Stalker One One and One Two will be at LZ Alpha in seven zero minutes, repeat seven zero minutes."

"Copy extraction in seven zero minutes. Mike One Zero out."

Harry clipped the handset on his side, nearer to hand. "So, following in the family business, Ziva?"

"Yes," was her clipped answer. "How do you know Eyal?"
"Joint training mission with Sayeret Matkal, last year," Harry answered easily as he drove one-handed around a car abandoned in the street. "Just before that incident in Eilat."

Ziva closed her eyes for a moment. The pain, grief and raw anger of Talia's death still remained, barely decreased. She'd channelled it into her Mossad training, which combined with the 'training' her father had given her in her childhood had accelerated her through the basic programme.

"I'm sorry about your sister, Ziva." The British officer said, in a quiet tone that barely carried over the engine noise. "I didn't really say it properly that night."

Ziva looked over at him, evaluating him properly. She'd been first embarrassed, then panicked, then grieving the last time they'd met. She'd admit the memory of him protecting her, with his own unarmored body no less, and gunning down those Hamas bastards who tried to kidnap her had risen to the surface a few times during training, mostly when she was being introspective - weak, her father would likely call it - wondering if joining Mossad had been the right thing, if she'd done it for the right reasons.

She'd applied to join even before that bloody night in Eilat, but Talia's death had twisted her thoughts more than she'd thought. Whereas before she'd thought of joining Mossad in terms of serving her country, Ziva had come to realise she now saw it as a means of revenge, which was decidedly not conducive for a long career, or other important things, like continued breathing. She was still working through that rough patch when this mission came up; her first, with Eyal, who had been one of her primary instructors, along as her partner.

She'd often wondered why Harry'd bothered to protect her that night. Sure, he was in the firing line too, but he'd gone well out of his way to save her, even using his own body to shield her in the street, and again behind the hotel desk. He'd had no reason to sacrifice his life for hers - hell, he hadn't even known her name for most of it, and she'd had a gun to his head! She was of course thankful, but that unthinkingly altruistic attitude had intrigued her, made her wonder if she could ever act so selflessly.

Looking at him now, it was clear he was a soldier to the core. He was in his natural element, comfortable in the directed chaos of warfare, secure in the knowledge that he knew how to manage that chaos, how to steer his team through the dangers and accomplish the mission. In fact, it was so obvious she wondered how on earth she had't seen him for what he was when she first caught sight of him in that club.

Ziva kicked herself back into gear. This was getting uncomfortably close to … something she didn't want to think about. She turned back to the machine gun.

A few seconds later they pulled out of the side streets and across the main road west of Tikrit, and all hell broke loose.

Harry cursed his stupidity as they pulled out onto the road … and not twenty metres away to the left was the lead vehicle of that slow-moving Iraqi convoy Hamilton had spotted earlier. He should have stopped short and checked the route was clear, dammit. Too late now.

"CONTACT LEFT! ENGAGE ENEMY VEHICLES!"

Hamilton, apparently prescient, already had his HMG swung in the right direction. He immediately squeezed the double-thumb butterfly trigger of the M2, the heavy calibre rounds pulverising the engine and cab of the pickup-truck technical in the lead, which had a Russian-made PKM light machine gun mounted on its roof. The enemy gunner didn't stand a chance, as the armour-piercing-
incendiary-high-explosive (HEIAP) bullets punched straight through the thin metal of the unarmoured vehicle and turned the driver, the gunner and the four men crouching in the cargo bed into a bloody mess before Hamilton walked his fire onto the next truck.

Ziva joined in a half-second later, the 7.62mm GPMG spitting tracers into the driver's compartment of the second vehicle, a canvas-sided three-ton military truck. Harry was very aware of her vulnerability right now - she was completely unprotected, as the SAS-modded Land Rovers had no doors, and little armour. She didn't even have personal body armour like he and his men did.

Staying professional, he issued orders into the radio net in a calm voice as he accelerated straight across the dual carriageway. There are very few things more panic-inducing to a military unit than a superior officer losing his cool on the radio, even for truly elite soldiers like the SAS.

"All vehicles, breakaway, breakaway, suppress the enemy, maximum rate fire and Stay. On. My. Six."

Hamilton continued to rake the remainder of the convoy with HMG fire, but Ziva's dashboard-mounted GPMG now couldn't traverse around far enough as they had crossed the road and were heading back out into the desert.

The Iraqi's seemed to be recovering, as infantry dismounted from the trucks and spread out to either side of the road.

Their cohesion lasted only momentarily, however, as first Mike One Two, with another HMG, then Mike One Three, with the automatic grenade launcher, sped out of the side street behind the MILAN-equipped Mike One One which, armed with anti-tank missiles, wasn't equipped for firing on infantry. The second HMG immediately started chewing up the sand and tarmac around the dispersing soldiers, while the rapid-fire 40mm grenades marched deadly explosions up and down the convoy.

Needless to say, the not very well trained and badly-led Iraqi conscripts panicked.

Harry debated for a moment whether or not to bring in some lightning - he'd been keeping the local environment suitably primed for it with his powers, keeping the clouds mostly negatively-charged and air near ground level positive-charged. At a moment's notice, he could ramp up the polarity of both at precise locations, which would result in an immediate lightning discharge between the cloud and whatever target he aimed it at on the ground.

He decided against it immediately. Not only was it probably unnecessary, but with no storm to explain it as anything other than as a completely freakishly convenient occurrence, Ziva, and by extension her father might start wondering if it had something to do with why his personnel file in London was so protected.

Which would defeat the whole point of keeping it secret.

The four Land Rovers sped off as fast as the the terrain would allow. It was rocky, but within the tolerances of the suspension and ground clearance, which made for a fast but rather bouncy ride.

Two hundred metres into the desert, a tracer from a much bigger gun zipped past overhead.

"Shit! BMP REAR! At the back of the convoy!"

"Engage with MILAN." Harry ordered. "All vehicles split up, all heavy weapons focus on the BTR to throw his aim off."
Thank god for shitty ex-Soviet equipment, Harry thought as he stamped yet again on the accelerator and spun the wheel left to avoid a large, low boulder. Driving a two ton vehicle offroad at night using no headlights and only night vision while under fire was proving to be quite challenging.

The BMP (the acronym standing for some unpronounceable Russian name) was a full-on Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV), essentially a light tank with room for infantry and so had a bigger weapon - a 73 mm anti-tank gun - than most APCs, or Armoured Personnel Carriers, which usually just had machine guns.

The gunner would certainly have basic optics, but was unlikely to have night vision in an ageing ex-USSR vehicle, which meant he could see something moving out in the desert but probably couldn't get a proper range on it to engage. This was precisely why Western armies preferred to engage in night fighting, as their better equipment gave them significant advantages over armies who couldn't afford to buy night-vision equipment for general issue. If the BMP gunner had had night vision, at least one of his vehicles would have been flaming scrap with that first shot.

Another enemy shell chewed up the ground between One Zero and One One, now thirty metres behind and stationary to allow the anti-tank launcher to be stabilised.

A few seconds later came the 'THUMP-hiss' of the MILAN wire-guided missile being fired. Given the short range and high speed of the projectile - 200 metres a second - the heavy missile impacted the side armour BMP before the gunner could fire again.

The BMP's claim to fame was that it was the first ever tracked IFV, a revolutionary design allowing soldiers to fight more effectively in extremely adverse conditions, whether that be intense conventional warfare or zones of biological, chemical or radioactive contamination.

Unfortunately, it has a long list of weaknesses - first of which, the design was nearly forty years old. While its frontal armour might have withstood many of the weapons ranged against it at the time of its introduction, it sure as hell didn't stand up to the punishment it was receiving now. Fifty-calibre HEIAP rounds from the two British jeeps were delivering significant damage to the steel armour, fatigued by age, and even penetrating it in places, distracting the gunner from returning fire properly.

Secondly, the main gun was slow to reload, taking a full ten seconds due to the badly-designed autoloader, which gave them time to aim and fire the MILAN.

Thirdly, the MILAN missile is designed to take out late-80s era Soviet Main Battle Tanks with multi-layer explosive-reactive armour systems. A dinky little badly-made IFV from the 60s was no trouble at all.
The missile's shaped two-stage HEAT charge (High Explosive Anti Tank) could penetrate a full ten centimetres of Western-quality hardened steel armour. The BMP only had 1.8 centimetres at the point of impact and it was probably at least twenty years old. The first-stage charge, designed to defeat modern first-layer explosive-reactive armour, punched straight through, allowing the main warhead to detonate inside the vehicle instead of cutting though the second armour layer as would be carried by a more modern vehicle.

The second stage charge went off about six inches away from its ammunition storage and two feet from the fuel tank.

A kerosene fuel tank, as it happened. Very volatile stuff, kerosene.

The resultant secondary explosion was enormous. The armoured turret blasted ten metres straight up on a pillar of white-orange fire, flipped at the top of its arc, and came down the wrong way up next to the vehicle it originated from. The rear door and drivers hatch also burst open, and the BMP ignited in white-hot flames that would burn for days, probably.

"Target destroyed," said a very satisfied voice on the net.

"Good shooting," Harry answered. "All Mikes, regroup at Checkpoint Alpha in fifteen, out."

Sixty-four minutes after picking up the Mossad operatives, Patrol Mike One pulled into a defensive formation a hundred metres from the landing zone.

"So, what exactly were you doing in Tikrit?" Ziva asked, after he'd turned the engine and checked in with the other vehicles.

"Prisoner raid." Harry jerked a thumb at the other jeeps. "NSA got intel on a meeting at Wataban Ibrahim's house in Tikrit, and some sketchy reports that the biggest fish around might be swimming in."

"You caught Hussein?"

"No such luck. We got Ibrahim, and Abid Hamid Mahmud. No sign of Saddam."

"Damn. That would have been a good break." Ziva commented.

"True. I'm just as happy he wasn't there, really. Probably would have had better guards, and more of them. We're very good, but it only takes a lucky bullet and suddenly I'm a man down with a casualty to extract. Doesn't matter how elite you are, a seven-six-two taking a chunk out of you is going to take you out of the fight."

"Yeah. I'm … familiar with that now." Ziva said tiredly. "Which one has Eyal in?"

Harry swung out. "Follow me."

He led her over to One One. "How's he doing, Sergeant?"

"Stable for the moment boss. I've replaced the emergency tourniquet with a proper, wider one of ours - tightened it before removing the first one. Blood loss is minimal, he shouldn't lose the leg."

"Good." Harry checked his watch as Colour Sprayson joined them. "Helos here in five, Colour."

"Great. This was easier than most, but that last bit was a tad hairy."
"It's the job we chose, Colour."

"And I'm getting too old for it. Now what's this about you knowing our Israeli guests?"

"Well, I did a joint training mission with Eyal here in Israel last November. I met Ziva at the end of that, on leave in Eilat down on the Red Sea, in that shootout I mentioned. Hamas tried to kidnap her, rather incompetently."

"Huh. Small world, it seems." Sprayson nodded to Ziva, then looked up and gestured to the West. "There they are."

The thudding beat of rotor blades could indeed be heard. "Okay, same two pairs as before Colour."

"You got it, sir."

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A few minutes later saw the two Land Rovers driven up into the bellies of the Chinooks, tied down and secured. Harry and Ziva stayed in the front seats while the rest of Harry's men crashed on the deck, the two of them talking privately through intercom headsets kindly separated from the rest of the net by the loadmaster for the trip home. Four hours of flying definitely gave them time to chat.

Harry was reticent, at first, aware that his file - to Mossad, at least - was thin at best, and he would prefer to keep it that way. But he still opened up a bit, telling her about his parents and stories from his time at Duke of Yorks, RAF Cranwell training and going through SAS selection. Ziva also relaxed quite a bit, talking about her own childhood and amusing anecdotes from IDF service - of which they were many, as the IDF was largely formed of bored conscripts with very little to do. Eventually, she got around to asking something that, up until she asked it, she hadn't actually realised she wanted to know.

"Why do you do this?"

"What, soldiering?"

"Yes."

"Why did you join Mossad?"

_Evasion. Answering questions with questions._

"You first."

Potter - Harry, she corrected herself, laughed. "Damn. Well … a good friend of mine once said I have a 'saving-people thing.' Joining the military … seemed like a logical extension of that."

Ziva looked at him curiously. He noticed. "Does that surprise you?"

"I was expecting something along the lines of 'for Queen and Country.'" Ziva admitted. "By 'saving people' do you mean other soldiers, or anybody?"

"Anyone," he said firmly. "Anyone who needs it, who deserves it."

"So you're judge, jury, executioner?"

He grimaced. "I suppose, in a way, although I don't usually see it like that. I just have to make my own decisions out here. On the surface, to the public back home, the world's a reasonably happy place. Government's accountable, mostly transparent, democracy rules, etcetera, etcetera."
But we don't live in that world, do we? We're in the shadows, fighting battles no-one will ever hear about, in a war that will never end.”

"Iraq?"

"No, not just Iraq. Since the Second World War, there has only been one year where no British soldier has died in combat with the, or perhaps more accurately, an enemy - nineteen-sixty-eight, if you're interested. History remembers the big conflicts, but the general public hasn't really recognised yet that war is no longer about states battling in the open for economic or political supremacy. The new war is in the shadows, and as I said, it'll probably never end. It may wax and wane in intensity, but for people like us, the covert warriors, there's always going to be some new threat to track down and eliminate. Doesn't matter if that's a terrorist, a drug kingpin or a black market weapons dealer - there will always be those who profit off, or find power from playing off human misery; and most of the world is pretty miserable. That produces desperate people, and desperate people often lash out or do other stupid things, which requires our governments to send people like us to deal with them in order to protect our citizens, preferably away from the public eye so the stock market doesn't take a hit, which would cause economic damage to livelihoods, and so on and so forth, since everything is interconnected these days. There's a George Orwell quote that's rather relevant to this, you probably know it."

"The rough men."

"Yep."

"Is that how you see the War on Terror? Economic and political, rather than religious fundamentalism? Al-Qaeda?"

Harry snorted. "Al-Qaeda? Al-Qaeda's platform is phrased in traditional Islamic fundamentalist terms, sure, and I have no doubt that it's not 'just for show'. But their end objective is the formation of a world-wide Islamic caliphate - that's a political and economic objective, not just an ideological one. Nations require rulers, and budgets, and economies, and laws. Their much-beloved Sharia Law is medieval, completely outdated and frankly the top extremist leaders and preachers have probably realised it - after all, the Iranian theocracy hasn't done all that well since 1979, have they? The 'Islamic Fundamentalists' spend as much time trying to find loopholes in or simply outright ignoring the tenets of the Koran to attack their political - and more importantly, their Islamic political opponents like the House of Saud, or the Jordanian and Egyptian governments than they do fighting us. Obviously its more complex than that, but that's something to chew on."

He turned back to her, smirking. "Red herring's over. Your turn to answer."

Ziva shrugged. "I asked because ... because I don't know why I want to do this job. Or more precisely, I'm not sure why."

"Hmm … hate and anger will lead to the dark side, you know." Harry said, astutely.

Ziva stared at him. "How on earth did you get that from one sentence?"

"When I mentioned Eilat before, you looked … sad, I guess. Not really something I can put my finger on, I just saw it."

"You don't miss anything, do you."

"Missing stuff gets you killed in this business." Harry grimaced. "Like I should have parked up out of sight and recce d the road before just driving straight across in front of that convoy like a complete
FNG. You're deflecting again, give it up."

"You're right." Ziva admitted. "I haven't been able to separate Tali's death …" she stopped to take a breath, which proved her point really, "from the job. When I train, or get handed a mission, all I see is a way to hit back at the mamzers who murdered my little sister."

"And that's the trick, isn't it? Sorting out the job from the anger."

"Any ideas?"

Harry shrugged just like Ziva had done. "No, sorry. I don't have all the answers, and this one is yours to find. But you need to sit down and figure out why your doing this. If the answer's purely revenge, that might be a problem. If revenge is only a part of it, then you need to learn to control it; to channel it and ride the tiger, so to speak, or to block it completely. Either way, you need to recognise when you're motivated by revenge and not duty."

"Duty." Ziva repeated, thinking about it. "Strangely, I don't think I'd thought of it like that. Service to my country and people, yes. Revenge, yes. Duty … not so much. I wonder why?"

"Duty is a defined as a moral obligation," Harry looked at her piercingly. "I doubt your father cares much for ethics."

Ziva flushed slightly and looked away as she worked out what he was implying, that her father's endless lectures and 'training' of her and her sister - that she'd just told him a bit about - had indoctrinated her to a life of 'service' in Mossad and to Israel as a whole rather than instilling an ethical responsibility to the same, that would have made it a choice she'd made rather than him. A man who rose as high as Eli David in an agency famed for its ruthless devotion to Israel's security probably didn't care much for ethical quandaries in his work … or raising his children.

What does that make me? A slave to my father's manipulations?

"But that doesn't define you." Harry continued, as if he'd read her thoughts. "You're good at this, Ziva. You're well trained, cool under fire. Don't throw the idea of 'service to Israel' away just because your father put the idea in your head. Just make sure you recognise that it's a duty, as well. Make the choice to serve your own."

"What does that mean, though? That I should decide which orders to follow?"

"Yes," Harry answered bluntly, surprising her, before shrugging. "And no. We aren't mindless drones. 'I was just following orders' wasn't a defence at Nuremberg for the Holocaust, and it doesn't work now either - especially not for Israelis given the context of that example, no offence intended."

"None taken. A point well made." Ziva nodded, then raised an eyebrow. "Anything more to say? You are, how do they say, on a turn here."

"I do, actually." Harry told her mock-reprovingly. "And it's 'on a roll.' What I was going to say was that a good soldier follows orders, but in my opinion the best soldier knows when to disobey them. Orders can be illegal, or unethical, or just plain wrong if your superiors don't have all the information that you might have on the ground. So follow orders, but actually think them through too, if you have the time, which won't always be the case. At the end of the day, we are responsible for our own actions, and the consequences rest on our own shoulders, not those who give the orders."

Sunlight burst in through the left hand windows, as the loadmaster pushed up the covers on the windows. A brand new day.
"How far from Camp Udairi?" Harry asked him.

"Thirty minutes, sir."

"Fantastic, thanks." Harry turned back to Ziva.

"Found some answers, I hope? Half an hour more of free consultation time, beyond that the rates for my Dr Phil impression go up quite a bit."

Ziva laughed, a lighter, genuine laugh, feeling happier and more secure than before. She might not have the exact answers just yet, but she was a hell of a lot closer than she'd been before this mission. "Thanks. I needed that. All of that."

Harry grinned at her, the harsh scars and weathered look vanishing, leaving behind a man about her age with a wide, genuine smile. He had his secrets, she was sure, but there was no way in hell Harry Potter was anything less than totally honest and honourable in everything he did. Of that, she was completely certain. There was a spark there, an indomitable will and commitment to his principles she was sure nothing would ever break.

Of course, it didn't hurt he was pretty easy on the eyes, despite the tiredness and the dust.

Just before they landed, Harry scribbled something on a notepad and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"We're in roughly the same business, Ziva. Mine might be a bit more direct, but similar. And in this business, it's as much about who you know as what you know. Friends you can rely on, people you can trust. They're few and far between, here in the shadows and out in the cold. If you ever need a favour, need someone to pull you or someone you care about out of the fire and Mossad can't or won't do it for you, or you yourself need help on a mission for the same reasons, call one of these two numbers."

Ziva opened the page. Harry pointed at the top one. "That's my cellphone, but I won't always have it. The other's for when I'm out of contact, it goes to an answer machine monitored by someone I trust, who will know how to contact me quickly."

"You don't hand these out to just anyone, do you?"

"Nope. Third time only."

"Who were the first two?"

"Friends." Harry smiled.

"Okay." Ziva tucked it away in a pocket. "Todah."

"No worries."

Ziva eventually interpreted that phrase a little more literally than Harry had probably intended.

Two days or so later, after Eyal had received medical treatment at the Coalition base, and both of them had said goodbye and been flown back to Israel, Eli David was wrapping up the debriefing.

"Anything else you wish to add, Ziva?" His tone was professional, almost cold.
Ziva thought about the note Harry'd given her, which she'd quickly memorised and burned, and the long personal conversation they'd had on the flight back from Tikrit. She'd be able to add a lot to the file on Harry that her father was still working on filling.

She'd mentioned neither so far.

**Harry. I'm thinking of him as 'Harry.' That says it all, really.**

**Khoveyrim. Friends. Comrades.**

She looked her father in the eye.

"No, nothing at all."

Chapter End Notes

A/N 1: In the interest of promoting actual historical accuracy, Abid al-Hamid Mahmud al-Tikriti was captured in Tikrit in June 2003 by the 4th Infantry Division and the Green Berets. Wataban Ibrahim al-Tikriti was taken into custody by American forces in April 2003, the day after this story is set actually, somewhere near the Syrian border, but before that he lived in Tikrit (possibly even at the manor house I found on Google maps for the SAS team to 'raid!')

A/N 2: It's been noted several times even by NCIS's own producers that Ziva's career is patently, ridiculously impossible. She joins NCIS in her early twenties - stated birthday is 1982 - after having graduated school, served two years with the IDF, attended university, applied for Mossad and apparently been immediately tapped for an elite, highly competitive and even more secretive spec-ops unit that sure as hell doesn't take rookies, and still have completed other missions in Cairo, Paris, Eastern Europe, Iraq, and six months worth of liaison work in the UK.

Busy girl. I've done my best to splice it together, and removed her supposed three-year university attendance, but it's still ridiculous - the last chapter only took place six months before this one. Most MI-6 or CIA officers don't become field agents until they're at least twenty-eight to thirty, after exhaustive training.

In her defence, 'my' version of Harry's had a pretty accelerated career too. Joining the SAS straight out of Flight School? Unlikely, in the real world the SAS requires at least three and preferably six years of service before even applying. By way of explanation, the MoD have sped up his training because of his awesome powers which they want to get into action.
Chapter Notes

A/N: No 'action' in this one. For fans of Per Ardua, this will be - at least in part - a 'parallel-universe' take on the rather dark scene from the end of Ch9, Eternal Memory. However, while it is similar, be reassured I didn't just copy and paste. The circumstances are different - Harry's had longer to adjust to the event in question, for example. As usual, Glossary for jargon is at the bottom.

Eagle-eyed NCIS fans may recognise some interesting foreshadowing/tie-ins being set up in this chapter. Muahahahahahaha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Khoveyrim

Chapter 3 - A Calmer Interlude

"It has been said, 'time heals all wounds.' I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone."

Rose Kennedy

29 January 2005 - The Israeli Embassy - Knightsbridge, London, UK

"Officer David?"

Ziva looked up from the briefing papers she was wading through at her desk in the bullpen. "Yes, Amira?"

"You have a call, line one, from Thames House."

"Okay, thank you." Ziva reached for the phone, but didn't pick it up yet, instead spending a few seconds trying to anticipate what whoever was calling her would want.

Thames House was the headquarters of the Security Service, better known as MI-5, Britain's internal security and counter-intelligence agency, as opposed to MI-6, the Secret Intelligence Service which covered external security and espionage. Ziva had been stationed in London for two months now, working as a counter-terrorism liaison to the British government. This was probably just a routine request for information or clarification on something she or Tel Aviv had sent them; she couldn't think of any specific events that might have triggered a call, anyway.

"David."

"Ziva David?" asked the voice on the phone. Male, British, and of course proper Oxford English accent that was practically ubiquitous to the British security establishment.

"Speaking."
"My name is Harold Pearce."

_The Chief of Section D, Ziva remembered_. The most senior MI-5 department head, pretty much deputy director. Also should be 'Sir Harold, for some still-yet unknown 'Service to the Realm' about seven years ago, but he doesn't use the title. Interesting.

"What can I do for you, Mr Pearce?" _If he doesn't use it, I won't either._

"We have a mutual friend, a scarred one."

**Who … Harry?**

When she'd arrived in the UK, Ziva had bought a pre-paid burner phone and sent a text message to the mobile phone number Harry had given her, just to say that she was working out of the Embassy and would like to meet, to catch up.

_Hopefully a little more than that_, Ziva had thought with a smirk, but knew it'd probably never happen.

All intel agencies prohibited relationships with foreigners as a routine security precaution; a secretive relationship with a foreign spec ops soldier with top secret clearance who routinely undertook high level missions for the British, American and sometimes other NATO governments?

Very unlikely her father would approve of that unless she could convince him there was some sort of objective in play.

She'd used a burner phone because she wanted to keep her friendship with Harry secret from Mossad. They'd exchanged messages occasionally the past few years, but Harry was often on deployment and therefore not carrying his phone, and any regular calls on her own phone to an overseas number that might be traceable to a British SF operator would be bound to raise big, big red flags in Mossad's internal security department; even though she of course wasn't _actually_ betraying her country or agency, it would _look_ strongly as if she was - and that wasn't even taking into account her father's ongoing low-priority interest in developing further information on the enigmatic RAF-SAS officer in question.

Mossad had eventually turned up his birth certificate from UK public records, and his parents'. Mother and son each disappeared off the face of the earth at age eleven; apart from a birth record, his father appeared to have never existed at all. There were no school grades, no employment histories, no financial statements, and no death certificates.

Ziva of course knew they'd died when Harry was a baby, but Mossad's assumption was that they were either deep-cover British spies or _dead_ British spies, which frankly was logical given the available information. Normal citizens didn't disappear into thin air at birth or in their early teens; only people who've had their records completely scrubbed by the government disappear so completely.

Harry hadn't told her what they'd done for a living, but given his own profession - and his dedication to it - it wasn't out of the question to assume his parents had been On Her Majesty's Secret Service themselves in some shape or form when they were murdered.

"Okay." _Non-committal._

"Five-thirty, centre of St James Park. You'll get a text message."

_It's nearly five. Nearly an hour to walk, just under half an hour by public transport. Smart, since they_
must know the Ambassador banned me from driving in London, and that doesn't give any time for recon. Plus the working day is essentially over, so no time limit on the meeting.

It was still a point of contention in the Mossad office whether the Ambassador should have ordered Ziva to stop using her assigned car or not, after a large number of complaints about her driving from the Metropolitan Police.

On the one hand, she had diplomatic immunity and therefore couldn't technically be charged with the repeated speeding and reckless driving offences Scotland Yard were yelling about - record numbers, apparently … but on the other, Ziva's driving style really was a tad … aggressive. That had been the word the Ambassador used.

Considering it scared other hardened Mossad operatives, that was a masterful understatement.

"Understood."

He hung up.

No one questioned her leaving. Agents on liaison duty were often went out for meetings with British security bureaucrats and officers; as Harry had told her two years before, it was as much about who you knew, and by extension how well you knew them. The meetings helped Mossad judge people's personalities, their opinions and on, to build a profile.

Of course, the Brits were profiling her too; that was just part of the international espionage game. There were other reasons too - even encrypted electronic communications could be intercepted, and while physical meetings in public places could be eavesdropped on, it was much harder. A trained agent could easily spot tails, as unwelcome followers were relatively easy for a decent operative to pick out in a crowd unless the tail was really, really good at blending in. Of course, because of that, most organisations like MI-5 used teams of ten or more - often many more - operatives to tail targets, and the agents rotated out to prevent being ID'd.

Fortunately, Mossad didn't know about her under-the-radar friendship - as far as she knew - so it was unlikely they'd tail their own trusted agent to a simple, non-urgent meeting set up by an allied nation. MI-5 would have little reason too either, since they'd set it up.

Staying alert for tails anyway, Ziva walked out to High Street Kensington Underground Station and rode the District line to St James Park Station in Westminster, where she waited to cross Birdcage Walk - actually a major road - and continued into the oasis of green that was St James Park proper.

She stopped on a bridge running over a large lake, and leaned on the railing, surreptitiously studying the people crossing the bridge. Nobody stood out, none of the hurrying pedestrians were lingering as if waiting for her to move again. It was a cold night; the sun set around around 4.30PM at this time of the year.

Her phone buzzed.

\textit{Dinner. Inn the Park. 300m NW. HJP.}

The directions led her to a modern wood-and-glass restaurant, 'Inn the Park.' She hadn't been here before. Although she'd walked through St. James Park before when she was exploring London in her off hours in the previous few weeks, she'd only been passing through. The restaurant seemed popular, the early evening crowd a mix of professional suits and a scattering of tourists.
She slowed as she walked towards it, scanning for Harry. He was pretty distinctive, after all, scarred and probably, like plenty of career soldiers, a little uncomfortable in anything but a uniform.

"Shalom, Ziva."

She almost jumped, but managed to turn her reflex into a smooth, normal looking turn, coming to rest looking at a six foot, black haired man who'd sneaked up behind her, wearing a leather jacket over a black fleece, boots and grey cargo trousers, his green eyes laughing at her even as he did his best not let his amusement at her skittishness show. Clearly her only-just-about controlled reaction hadn't fooled him.

"Harry!" She recovered, stepped forward to greet him, reaching out to touch his shoulder, an Israeli greeting. "Don't do that to me," she warned. "I have a … what happened to you?"

He had a new scar, revealed by the light from a lamp beside the path, a brutal, slightly curved slash that started at the bottom of that odd lightning-bolt scar he'd already had above his right eye. Now it continued down from there in an angry red line, bisecting his eyebrow; he clearly wasn't blind in that eye, fortunately, but the scar resumed about a centimetre below the socket, and swept down his cheek to end a couple of centimetres away from the corner of his mouth. It had healed well, but still stood out.

"Long story. And not an especially pleasant one, at that. It's good to see you again, Ziva."

His look was different. Not cold, or distant, or as if he was uncomfortable, like he - hopefully - would look if he'd been induced to use their friendship for espionage purposes, just … different. Harder. The smile was genuine, just … not the same.

Torture does that.

In the restaurant, the staff greeted Harry by rank and name, surprising Ziva, and led them both to a table in the back, where Harry let Ziva take the seat facing the door, which he pulled out for her.

"And who said chivalry was dead?" Ziva smirked.

"A gentleman may not always be an officer, Ziva, but an officer should always be a gentleman," Harry pronounced as he took the seat across from her. "So, I presume your circumspect means of communication was due to needing to keep mum about, ahem, 'us', to your dear old dad."

"Us, Harry? There's an 'us,' now?" Ziva teased. "Yes, he's still interested in you. Not obsessed like he used to be, but at the very least there's an alert on your name, so when a Mossad file mentions you
he gets an update. Beyond that, I'm not sure."

"Lovely." Harry grimaced. "He's made a couple of attempts to get my file physically, too."

"What happened?"

"Your predecessor was ordered to guilt-trip a Jewish RAF officer into retrieving my file 'for the security of Israel.' Didn't get anywhere, because there's only one real copy in existence, all the rest are redacted or just plain fakes."

"What happened to the RAF officer?"

"Charged with espionage, but released and deported when Mossad traded some intel we badly wanted with a promise not to try that kind of crap again, whatever that's worth. He's in Israel now." He shrugged. "Shame really, guy was a good officer from what I saw in his file."

"And my predecessor?"

"PNG'd."

Declared 'Persona non Grata.' No longer welcome in the United Kingdom, full stop, ever. Ouch. That's not going to look good on his resumé.

But is there a connection there? The last guy got shown the door for trying to reach Harry's file, and now I'm that guy's replacement? Does Father know about the phone number … does he know about this meeting?

Ziva scanned the restaurant's customers and staff, controlling the sudden empty feeling of fear in her stomach.

No … no … not her either … no … wait, an earpiece? Oh shit …

"What is it?"

"If my predecessor was expelled for trying to find your file … and, of all people, I'm chosen to replace him? Can't be a coincidence … and the blonde guy in a suit over there has an earpiece."

Harry twisted around to look. The man with an earpiece caught his eye and incrementally tipped his glass towards them. Harry gave his own almost imperceptible nod and turned back.

"He's one of ours."

"Oh. Why?"

"Watching our six, to make sure no Mossad operatives come following you."

"Oh. Okay. You know," Ziva said hesitantly, "the more this goes on, the more I look like a traitor if my father finds out."

"What do you want to do? Tell him?"

"It might be for the best," Ziva sighed. "I do not like sneaking around behind him, deceiving my own agency. You clearly do not have to do the same."

"True. But the British government owes me. A lot." Harry shrugged again. "I've earned their trust and good favour. If you want to tell him Ziva, I'm not going to talk you out of it. I would like to be
able to just meet without any cloak and dagger stuff. Just tell me what I can do to help make it
easier."

"Thank you. That might help. Now, moving away from work," Ziva smile widened, feeling as if a
weight had been removed from her shoulders, "do you come here often? The staff clearly knew
you."

Harry grinned. "Yep. This is, in the eyes of most government workers, the perfect restaurant.
Combination cafeteria and proper restaurant - with quick service, too - does carry out, decent food
and reasonable prices; well, reasonable for central London, anyway, which isn't saying much."

"It is an expensive place to live," Ziva agreed.

"More importantly, it's within two hundred metres of Downing Street, the Foreign Office building
and the Ministry of Defence, and within half a kay of Parliament. So yes, whenever I'm in London
for meetings, briefings, etcetera, I tend to come here. The owner knows I'm a soldier because I'm
often in uniform, and believes from the scars I've done 'more than my duty,' in her words, so I get
preferential treatment, which I shamelessly take advantage of on the few occasions I'm home."

Ziva felt a momentary - very momentary - surge of irritation at the 'her' but pushed it down as being
completely ludicrous and irrational.

"So, what would you recommend?"

"Hmmm … they change the menu a lot, but … salmon, probably. Chicken's good. Pork's out, I
assume. How strict are you on kashrut?" asked Harry, referring to the Jewish dietary laws.

"Um … mostly?" Ziva shrugged. "I keep to it normally, unless … unless I think I'm really missing
out on something."

"Oh? So what could be so very tasty that it would tempt a tireless defender of Israel into sin, Officer
David?"

"Well … pepperoni pizza. Very bad for my soul, so don't tell the Rabbis," Ziva looked around mock-
conspiratorially, and added, "also for my arteries, so don't tell my doctor."

"Your secrets are safe with me," Harry promised, smirking.

The owner personally came over to chat to Harry and take their order - grey haired and clearly well
over fifty, which made Ziva feel like an idiot again.

When she'd gone, Ziva sat forward and examined him intently.

"Are you okay? Actually okay? We both know that scars are just the injuries on the surface."

Harry didn't say anything for a few seconds, just gazing back, and she recognised the look in his
eyes.

_Tired. Not physically, but mentally. He's pushing himself too hard, but why …_

"I lost someone," he admitted.

_His 'saving people thing,' I remember._

"Someone close to me. But … not here."
Oh …

Ziva was experienced with loss. She'd lost her sister, her mother and her childhood best friend to the violence in Israel.

When she'd last seen him, she'd thought nothing could break this man.

Now, she wasn't so sure.

This is how he defines himself. This self-assigned role of 'saver' - he's not arrogant enough to label himself a 'saviour' so that doesn't really fit - is what drives him, what pushed him to join the RAF, the SAS, to stay in despite the death and destruction. Now he's in a crisis of faith, faith in himself and his abilities, and his will to continue.

Well, he helped me get over my crisis of faith; the least I can do is help Harry with his.

They both kept the conversation light through the meal, which meant mostly talking about the varied places they'd travelled to. Both now had extensive knowledge of the Middle East, unsurprisingly. Ziva mentioned visiting Cairo, Paris and various places in the old Soviet Bloc but avoided the purpose of her visits, which Harry took to mean she hadn't exactly been there on vacation. Both were thankful that the two years of silence hadn't weakened the easy camaraderie and conversation they'd had when they last met in Iraq.

When they were done, bill just paid (by Harry, ever the gentleman), Ziva looked innocently at Harry and asked, "Your place or mine?"

She thoroughly enjoyed Harry's mildly shocked expression before he recovered and replied, "Mine. Since walking into your Embassy room might be just a bit awkward."

"True. Where do you live?"

"The Docklands, in Tower Hamlets. About twenty minutes drive."

"Ah. You have a car?" A nod. "Well, good thing you didn't drink much."

Harry smirked. "Is that a subtle reference to the fact your driving nearly caused an international incident, Ziva?"

"So you heard about that?"

"Oh yes. Pearce couldn't stop laughing when he told me. Fourteen speeding tickets in your first week in London? Two a day? We do have these things called 'cameras' all over the city, you know. Thousands of them, all waiting to catch your little Mini going round a corner on two wheels."

"It was not on two wheels!" Ziva defended her technique. "It's the best way to avoid ambushes and roadside bombs."

Harry shook his head, amused. "In London?"

"It isn't paranoia if they're not out to get you," Ziva frowned. "That wasn't right."

Harry couldn't help but laugh at her expression as she worked through what she'd just said. "No, it wasn't."

Harry's car, parked just fifty metres away on the edge of the Park turned out to be a gleaming black
Aston Martin Vanquish.

Ziva looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow. "If I may ask, how can a soldier possibly afford this?"

"The Regiment's hazard pay is very generous."

"I'm sure, but it wouldn't cover a car like this."

"Damn, busted. Family inheritance."

Ziva's other eyebrow rose to join the first. "This car costs at least … well, a lot. Quarter of a million? Assuming you didn't blow it all on the car, and I know you wouldn't, why would someone with that kind of fortune join the military?"

"Idealism. Patriotism." Harry shot back as he slid in. "Same reasons you went straight into Mossad out of the IDF."

"Touché."

"You don't need to check in or anything, do you?"

"Wouldn't hurt." As he pulled out, Ziva fired off a text to the Embassy so they knew she'd be out for another few hours at least.

The drive to Harry's apartment was, for an inner city route, actually rather pleasant, taking them along the north bank of the Thames past, amongst other things, the Tower of London.

Since Ziva had already seen the car, she wasn't too surprised when Harry pulled into a garage under a towering slab of metal and glass, just north of the 'Isle of Dogs' and the recently redeveloped docks that were once the busiest port in the world.

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West India Quay, London

Harry's home was on the twenty-fourth floor of the thirty story building. "About as secure as I could
find," he'd noted as they ascended in the elevator. Ziva had to agree. Between the security cameras and employees of the Merriot Hotel that occupied the lobby and lowest five floors, to the unobtrusive but extremely secure retinal scanner Harry'd put in on his own front door - which was almost certainly steel-core behind the wood - it was indeed as much of a fortress as could be managed under the circumstances.

The entry hallway was L-shaped, leading off to the right after about five metres. There were three doors, two closed around the corner she assumed were bedrooms, and one in the left-hand wall, just before the turn in the L.

Harry opened that one and entered. Ziva, following behind, stepped through, and stopped dead.

The room was on the south-west corner, and it was well after dark. Ziva noted in passing that windows were thick bullet-resistant plexiglass, but was distracted.

The view was incredible. Only a few hundred metres to the South were the massive glowing corporate monoliths of Canary Wharf, one of London's financial centres and the closest thing Britain had to Manhattan Island; enormous skyscrapers containing the world or European headquarters of dozens of major firms. West overlooked a vast sweep of twinkling London suburbia, with one of the looping meanders of the Thames in the very near distance, the one with the Millennium Dome, lit up a brilliant white by floodlights.

Looking around inside, Ziva saw the apartment itself was furnished in an elegant, understated minimalist modern style that felt rather ... clinical. The kitchen was off to the left, stainless steel, white wood cupboards and black marble surfaces. To her right was a glass-and-steel dining table with upholstered chairs in a similar style, and beyond it a short three-step stair down into a seating area, dominated by a large couch in black leather with a few similar armchairs scattered around.

"Coffee? Or something stronger? Take a seat, by the way."

"Coffee's fine thanks. Milk. no sugar."

At first glance it was, as she first thought, clinical. Not lived-in. With a longer look, she started to see indications of Harry's occupation around the place. On the dining table, positioned his back would be to the wall, there was a closed mil-spec laptop, with an organised stack of files to one side … and a snub-barrelled backup pistol half-visible under them. On the wall behind that chair was a wood-and-glass presentation frame containing a row of badges - RAF and SAS insignia, qualification badges for piloting (Tornado), marksmanship, languages, parachutists' wings; and a line of increasingly prestigious awards.

Campaign medals ... Sierra Leone, Iraq, Afghanistan.

Silver cross pattée with laurel wreath, red-white-blue ribbon ... Conspicuous Gallantry Cross with extra bar for a second award .... Impressive.

Next to it was ...

Red ribbon, bronze cross pattée with a lion and crown, with the words 'For Valour.' Wow. Victoria Cross. That's the highest one available, and often posthumous. When the hell did he get that? Looking closer, she saw a 'C' icon attached to the blood-red ribbon above the black iron of Victoria Cross itself … and above the CGC too.

Probably means it was awarded clandestinely, for covert actions. They couldn't acknowledge the mission, so he can't wear it in public. He isn't much older than me; he must have spent his entire
"We call it a love-me wall." Harry said, smirking, as he turned back from the coffee maker and spotted what she was looking at. "All military officers have one eventually, usually when working Staff positions in Whitehall. It's usually a little more substantial than that though. Photos of them with VIPs and dignitaries; Navy guys have photos of their ships, RAF pilots have ones of them in their jets, Army officers have ones of their regiments, and so on. It all goes up behind them on their office wall, so their visitors can see how much good work they've done and how important they are."

"And yours is in your apartment?"

"I don't, as such, have an office, and I can't acknowledge that most of the battles those were awarded for took place, so wearing things as distinctive as a VC would attract attention. While some missions I've done haven't exactly sat extremely well on my conscience, the ones I got those for," he indicated the cabinet, "I am proud of, so I keep them out."

"I'll bet. A Victoria Cross? Wait … can't tell me?"

"Not any time soon, no. We do have the 'thirty-year rule' declassification law though. Come find me in three decades and I'll check."

"I'll hold you to that, if we're both still alive."

Ziva continued towards the lounge area, not really bothering to hide her assessment of his place. There was a wide array of framed photos of various sizes - not related to the 'Love-me wall' idea as far as she could tell, since they weren't ego-boosting shots of him with dignitaries or similar.
There was a large landscape shot, of arid, knife-edged mountains … Afghanistan, probably. The prettier parts of it at least; the mountains could be jaw-droppingly spectacular from what she'd heard. That image certainly came close.

There were some heartwarming shots of smiling, cheerful Afghani kids as well, and a group shot of a whole family-tribe group, and some of Harry standing with small teams of soldiers beside their vehicles. She recognised some of the insignias: British, American, Canadian, Polish; NATO military units he'd worked with, presumably.

Not all were of his work; some were apparently of close friends. There were two particular individuals that stood out. One was a young woman about Ziva's age with long, slightly wild brown hair that she could see in two images; one, a portrait shot where she was smiling, brown eyes sparkling with fierce intelligence and humour, and the other a candid shot of her sat at a library table, leaning over a book and taking notes, completely absorbed in her work.

The other was a beautiful woman with red-auburn hair in the same age bracket, who featured in several more pictures than the first. In one she was marching in formation, rifle over one shoulder, in a black uniform with red-banded cap that Ziva recognised as a formal British officer cadet uniform, so was probably a graduation photo from Sandhurst Military Academy.

The others of her were also mostly in uniform; one laughing, face smeared with camo paint; another one posing with a ludicrous amount of weapons, with a goofy self-deprecating grin that made Ziva smile just looking at it. The last one she found was of both the woman and a younger, unscarred Harry standing side by side, smiling broadly, with his arm around her shoulders, hers around his hip.

*Happier times.*

Then she noticed that the pictures of the second woman had black ribbons over the top right corners.

*Memorial pictures. This must have been who he meant … 'someone close to him.'*

Harry *was* rather proud of some of those medals, not that he really cared that much for them. He'd protested being awarded them at the time, but when the Queen of England (and also your ultimate Commander-in-Chief) sits you down and explains that because of the fact you're already filthy rich, already have a noble title and are already on the promotion fast-track, there really wasn't anything else she could think of to give you as a reward so 'man up, stand to attention and accept them,' you stop arguing.

Harry stopped arguing. That woman was truly *scary* when she got going on something.

Of course, Elizabeth hadn't actually *used* the words 'man up', but that had most certainly been implied. Even though he hadn't been a serving member of the military at the time of the event in question - a technical requirement of the VC award - the Queen had signed whatever it was she signed after he graduated Cranwell, thus sort of avoiding that problem. It wasn't like many people knew about it. There were some plans to announce it as an award for unspecified actions in Afghanistan so he'd be able to wear it, like they'd done for the CGC's, but it hadn't happened yet.

The Victoria Cross had been for Voldemort, back in '97, which he definitely wasn't going to tell Ziva about, much less add that he'd won it at seventeen. Apparently strolling up to, exchanging witty banter with and then dramatically electrocuting the mass murdering bastard with lightning bolts was enough for the medal by itself. Since old Tommy-boy had also been leading an army of stuck-in-the-seventeenth-century insurrectionist psychos on a campaign to destabilise and eventually take over all of the UK, the Queen had felt the award *especially* well-deserved.
Turned out the Ministry had a bounty on Voldie from the first war; a cool half-million galleons. Of course, that had been only a drop in the ocean when deposited in the main Potter family vaults, which had themselves burgeoned considerably over the two years before when Harry had allowed it to be aggressively invested in the various non-magical stock markets under the expert guidance of the Gringotts Goblins and their secret front into and partners in the non-magical world, Coutts & Co. They had only expanded in the seven years since. It was far, far more than enough to pay for the car, the apartment and the extra custom gear he mostly spent it on.

While entirely true, 'family money' had been something of an implied understatement. The 'Duke of Clarence''s personal wealth made him a serious player in the financial world now - for a single individual's wealth fund, anyway. Not that Harry really had much input into it; he just let the goblins and Steward of his estate, Remus Lupin, get on with it; and they, being a warrior race at heart, respected him immensely for his career choice.

Although not enough to give him better interest rates. They were bankers, after all.

The CGC's had been for Operations TRENT and CONDOR in the early years of Afghanistan, two large battles against entrenched Taliban opposition. Not anything as dramatic as the Battle of Hogwarts, though.

Behind him, the coffee maker buzzed, finished.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Lived, or owned?" Harry replied as he carried the two mugs to the sofas. "Owned, about a year. Actually lived in, under a month."

"Busy?"

"Yeah. Iraq's the seventh circle of hell right now. About seventy bomb attacks this month. Governor of Baghdad Province was assassinated a few weeks ago, and the National Assembly elections are taking place right now, with all the violence and voter intimidation the insurgents can manage." Harry pushed the mug over to her and sat down heavily. "Afghanistan's not much better. It's been pretty manic.

Ziva sipped at the drink, then bluntly stated. "We're tiptrotting around the original subject."

Harry winced. "Tiptoeing, Ziva."

"Sorry. Still." Ziva gestured over her shoulder with her mug at the photos behind her. She was sitting facing West, Harry sat at ninety degrees to her facing South. "I have an inkling."

"Yeah. That's First Lieutenant Henrietta Kirkland, Royal Artillery, Hetty for short. I went to school with her. She … dragged me out of a very dark part of my life. I'd found out why my parents were murdered, why the man who murdered them was still doing his best to kill me."

"Why? How old were you?"

"Fifteen. And … classified." Harry shrugged, unaware he'd just accidentally confirmed Ziva's belief that his parents were spies. "Sorry."

"Why? I'm very familiar with the word; wouldn't be surprised if it had been my first. It cropped up regularly at home, as you can imagine."
"Heh, I'll bet. Anyway, Hetty cut through all the broody crap I was putting out at the time, simply by being relentlessly cheerful, flirtly, which shocked the hell out my very sheltered fifteen-year-old self, and incredibly nosy. I was behind on my education at that point, and she was assigned to tutor me for homework assignments. She taught me meditation, which I still use to keep myself focused, and her father taught me a variety of martial arts - Eskrima, Taekwondo, and an Israeli favourite, Krav Maga."

*Oh really? I'd like to test your skills on that one.*

"We were close, very close. Her father practically adopted me, and we were damn near inseparable by the end of sixth form. Girlfriend, boyfriend, best friends, friends-with-benefits, whatever …" Harry leaned back and studied one of the pictures, the one of the two of them together, "We didn't really label it. We just were, we didn't feel any particular need to define it by any normal convention. We always knew both always knew what was going right or wrong for the other, even if they tried to hide it. No secrets, which could be irritating, but was a good thing nonetheless."

"She went into the Army, I went into the RAF, then was fast-tracked into pilot training - jet and helicopter, then into the Special Forces. We didn't get much time together by that point - we only had a few weeks leave every so often, and wasn't always possible to overlap. Didn't matter; I always took time out to answer her letters or call her back."

"But it was pointless trying to maintain a true relationship with so little time together, so to avoid the usual military relationship pitfalls, we came to an … amicable agreement, shall we say, just before Nine-Eleven kicked off the War on Terror and I got really busy. We agreed that if we had leave time at the same time, we spent it together, and if neither of us had found 'the one' - which we both thought was unlikely - by the time we were thirty, we'd get more serious about our relationship, consider leaving the forces."

"Very open minded of you."

"Wasn't it just? I'll admit, it saved us both from all the usual stress most soldiers who try to maintain long-range relationships suffer from. I was happy in the knowledge that I had someone I loved who loved me in my life, even if it wasn't exclusive, and I didn't feel any particular need to stray. I know Hetty didn't, because I was given her diary after … and anyway, given how open we were with each other, she probably would have mentioned it at the time. She knew it wouldn't have hurt my feelings."

"When?"

Harry looked at her for a moment, startled out his reverie. "Afghanistan, late 2003. October 28th, to be exact. Her convoy was hit, she was captured … kidnapped really, because I was the target."

"But everything you do is classified?" Ziva sat forward, surprised. "How could they know to target you personally?"

"Colonel Michael Hajji Sahar."

Ziva blinked in surprise. "The US Marine who was charged with treason?"

"You've heard of him?" Harry smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes now. "I thought the Americans kept it under wraps?"

"They did, but we still hear things."

"Hmm. Not terribly surprising, I suppose. Anyway, Sahar said at his court martial saw the two of us
together on base, flirting around in our off duty time. He worked as a watch commander in the Kandahar Joint Special Forces Operations Room, so he had access to operational data, like my general location when in the field, and knew I was known to the Taliban as 'Storm Bringer,' and that I was so wanted there was a bounty on my head, although he didn't know my name."

"Wait, you're THE ahasifa ja'be? We thought that was just a rumour!"

"Heh, not so much. That's me. I often go lone-wolf to minimise risk of detection, so I favour attacking when visibility conditions are really, really bad, like in the heavy thunderstorms you get in the mountains. A couple of repetitions of that tactic led to the Taliban's rank and file coming up with their version of ghost stories, all this 'Storm Bringer' stuff to discuss around the campfire at night, which in turn led the Taliban's top council to put a bounty on me to raise morale, which was very flattering."

_They do more than talk about it. Even though Mossad thought it was a load of superstitious crap, all the jihadi groups' rank and file have heard the story, even the ones outside Afghanistan by now. I wonder if Harry's aware of that. MI-6 doesn't have the contacts we do in the Middle East, they might not know._

"Sahar passed all of the above on to the Taliban, which led to an ambitious mid-level local commander targeting Hetty to get to me; Saleem Ulman. Long story short, I eventually found out Hetty was missing, and lost my focus. I was assigned to check out a possible holding site, Sahar warned them which, and I got captured like a complete rookie."

"Saleem wanted to execute both of us for a propaganda video, but he also wanted intel from me, since he knew I was SAS he thought I'd have all kinds of useful stuff. He worked me over for a while," Harry dragged a finger down the scar over his right eye, "but I've had worse. Then he dragged Hetty in to try to get me to break. Beat her up, then … then he had one of his goons rape her." Harry's voice faltered for a moment, then he continued. "When that didn't work, he used a knife for a while, then shot her in the leg. I still didn't talk. Hetty would have killed me herself if I'd given up anything that would have got other soldiers hurt."

Harry looked up, his eyes looking past her into nothing, haunted by the memories. "Saleem got a call from Sahar, warning him that Coalition forces were closing in on him - an incorrect warning, as it turned out. Sahar thought Saleem was at a different hideout. An OPSEC fuckup on their part, but a useful one for me, as Saleem left to avoid capture, and ordered his men to execute us pronto, tape it and email it to him. The four mooks left me alone; I got free, found a knife, took them out, found my gear, patched Hetty and myself up as best I could and hotfooted on out of there.

"Sahar was on duty in the HQ. He vetoed the rescue bird, said it was too hot. He couldn't call off fire support without looking too suspicious, but someone else did that for him. An Apache got shot down while giving me cover an hour after I escaped - pilot's name was Captain Holland - then a Blackhawk too was shot down, flown in against orders by a guy called Major Sheppard, a friend of Holland's, who was hoping to rescue his buddy - and us, if he could. Some REMF further up the chain than Sahar then called everything else off, some paper-pushing idiot who was more concerned with the damage that a few shot-down, multi-million dollar helos would do to his resume than rescuing us. Self-centred prick thought our lives weren't worth the damage to his rep; apparently, he didn't realise that leaving men to die without even trying to support them would completely kill that same rep."

"I found the pilots. We cooperated, and moved south-west towards the edge of the Taliban's area of influence and towards the British zone in Helmand. I'd been in Saleem's hands for about thirty-six hours, Hetty for forty-eight, and I'd escaped about midnight. It took all day, but we eventually made
the top of a goddam huge mountain that just about gave us the radio range to contact a FOB in Helmand.

"Hetty was drifting in and out from bloodloss, and I'd had to put a tourniquet on and give her morphine, but she was toughing it out in her lucid moments, cracking god-awful jokes to keep my morale up and so on. A trooper, as we say."

*Sounds like it. And … if she was unconscious, he'd have to use a fireman's carry. He carried someone for twenty-four hours on his shoulder through enemy territory across some of the most inhospitable mountain terrain in the world?*

"FOB Gibraltar relayed the message to Camp Bastion, and Bastion HQ screamed at the Americans to pick us up. The same idiot as before refused them. I later heard he got court-martialed for it when one of his superiors in the Coalition command chain, who happened to be British, took a rather dim view of his decisions and had him charged with dereliction of duty."

"We had to wait for a rather nerve-wracking three hours on top of that mountain for an RAF medical Chinook and full flight of four Apaches to make it to us for extraction. I'd had to fight through three Taliban patrols on the way up the mountainside; their bodies had been found at some point and a sizeable force was out looking for us. Would have been on us in a few minutes if those Army Air Corps Apaches hadn't shown up. After that, they were just target practise for the helos.

"The MERT guys, the medics in the Chinook, they're very good. They kept Hetty alive all the way back, a two hour flight. The hospital at Bastion's one of the best trauma care centres in the world, but … she didn't quite make it. She … died on the way between the pad and the operating room, and they couldn't revive her.

"I'd let my guard down when the helos picked us up. You know how it is; mission feels over, and after a desperate few days of imminent death hanging over my head like the Sword of Damocles I let myself think it was done, that nothing else would go wrong. Then … then Hetty just crashed, right when I'd convinced myself she'd be fine, that if she'd hung on this long, she had to survive. Heartbeat stopped. And that was it. No last words. No more making fun of me like she always did. She just … slipped away. Doctor's called it and I sat there for hours staring into nothing.

"I was a fucking mess for a few weeks, pissed off at the world and lashing out at just about everything. I wanted to kill those two bastards in Kandahar. Saleem got away, hasn't been seen since although GCHQ thinks he might've hooked up with Al-Qaeda in Yemen or the Horn of Africa from the chatter. Eventually I realised I wasn't doing any good, least of all for myself, by tearing myself to shreds over it.

"I went back to work. Shut all the grief and pain and anger up in a box and shoved it to the back of my mind. That didn't help either, long term. Had a pretty catastrophic breakdown when I was on leave. That was when I finally moved into this apartment last March, unpacking those." Harry nodded at the images. "But I got over that, too. I'm done grieving. Mostly."

*I'm surprised he still has the photos. I know I only have one of Tali left. Couldn't bear to look at them all the time. And how catastrophic is 'catastrophic'? It isn't like him to use adjectives like that, he's always understated about everything."

"What was she like?"

"Hetty? Pretty, tough, quick-witted, vivacious. I'd go on all day. You'd have liked her, I'm sure of it."

"You loved her." It was a statement, not a question. Just a confirmation.
"Yes," was his simple answer. "She was my heart, my soul. I've had a pretty god-awful life, Ziva. My earliest memory is my parents' murder. I spent the following ten years of my life and the summers of the four years after that with abusive, alcoholic relatives who treated me like a slave. They threw me in a cupboard under the stairs whenever they felt I had done something wrong, which was often. Broke a few bones too. I went to boarding school at eleven thanks to a trust fund my parents left behind, but I didn't know that; I found out about the inheritance much later.

"The school was a big old castle up in Scotland, very atmospheric, very exclusive. It was more of a home to me than my aunt and uncle's house, which most certainly wasn't. But I was expelled from there at fifteen for something I had no control over, and was generally ostracised for various things before that. I wound up at Duke of York's Military School with a new state-appointed guardian who actually cared, and that leads to where I am today.

"Hetty gave me a lot of things. She was a friend I could truly trust, and trust was something I'd been short on my entire life by that point. She showed me what love is, which I hadn't had any experience with at that point, at all. True, unconditional love that made me feel worth something. And for that, I am going to kill Saleem, because he tore out my soul, Ziva, my reason to live."

"Like Tali's death was for me," Ziva said quietly. "How do we go on when we lose the person that makes it worth something."

"Exactly."

"After Tikrit, you said you joined up because of your 'saving-people-thing,'" Ziva said carefully, watching him closely. "Is it vengeance, now? Like it was for me."

"I … don't know," Harry admitted, "but probably yes. I didn't enjoy killing before. After Hetty died … I started to. Sometimes. Usually it was just business as usual, but when I hunted down some bastard who'd thrown a grenade into an Afghani girl's school, for example, or someone hiding behind human shields … I realised that the only time I felt happy, or satisfied was when I put down some fundamentalist prick who thinks everyone should live in the Dark Ages … the same kind of person who hurt Hetty. Imagining Saleem's face on them. Without her … I have no compass, no checks on what I am willing to do, on what lines I'm willing to cross."

*Put down? That's not a good word choice. Seeing the enemy as ... animals leads to ... well, nothing good.*

"I don't really know how normal people behave when confronted with this stuff, Ziva. My life has been anything but normal. Abuse, followed by snobbish boarding school, followed by military prep school, followed by the Academy. In some ways, I'm as indoctrinated towards this life as I suggested you were to Mossad two years ago, except I really chose it. And what does that make me? Just another psycho with a gun? How long until I snap? What if someone gets killed because of it when I do?"

"But you haven't yet."

"No. I suppose not." Harry heaved a sigh, a long, shuddering exhale. "I came close. That 'pretty catastrophic' breakdown I mentioned. I put a gun in my mouth, Ziva. I sat there for what felt like fucking hours, but I didn't pull the trigger."

"If you're about to say that makes you a coward, it doesn't."

"Feels like it."
"Bullshit!" Ziva said succinctly. The harsh word and tone, louder than they'd been speaking, snapped Harry's head up to look at her. "That's a load of crap, you are anything but a coward. I saw the same thing in Eilat, and after Tikrit, and right now, and now I'm saying it, Harry. You are the strongest, most determined and most stubborn son-of-a-bitch I know. I thought that before, without knowing anything about your past, and now I do know the rest and what you went through in Afghanistan I am certain of it. Anybody else I know would have pulled the trigger, would have given up and let someone else carry the load. Believe me, I know how much that kind of thing hurts, and how ashamed I felt of myself when I realised I saw everything as everything as revenge.

Harry looked down, no doubt those very same feelings resurfacing. Ziva put her mug down beside his and shifted across to his side, grabbing Harry's jaw and pulling his head up and around to bring his face back to hers.

"But you haven't. You persevered. Don't you dare give up now, Harry, because that would be cowardly. You think Hetty would want you to shoot yourself? I'm your friend too Harry, even if we haven't been able to talk much in the last two years, and I am not letting you go, you hear me? I doubt that Hetty, or your parents, or that other woman in the photos up there on the wall wants you to shoot yourself, or become some husk of who you are? There are people that care about you, people that would be hurt if you did that. That is not the end for you, got it? We're not giving up on you. Ever. Because you, of anyone, of everyone, deserve so much more."

There was a long silence. They both just sat there for several seconds, as Harry, surprised by Ziva's abrupt shift to his side, searched her eyes for … something. Sincerity, perhaps. Or something else.

Ziva became aware that her previously firm grip on Harry's slightly-stubbled jaw had turned into something more akin to a caress. Embarrassed, she went to pull away, but his larger hand covered hers and his eyes held her there, as his other arm pulled her into an embrace.

She was a little startled, but reciprocated. She'd seen something in his eyes herself just then, a flash of the little boy he'd once been, abused and abandoned again and again, vulnerable in ways she would never have expected. And that he trusted her with those vulnerabilities … that took her breath away, that this unbreakable, indomitable warrior would expose his soul this way - to her, as well.

While they had gotten along well and shared a lot of things on the long flight back from Tikrit, and there'd been a foundation for trust between them from the Eilat incident, she was still Mossad. She was an officer of an agency famed for its ruthlessness, for its willingness to use anything, or anyone; that he trusted her in his weakest moment was … empowering. Ziva had resigned herself to a life of secrets and looking over her shoulder; the price any warrior in the shadowy, forgotten recesses of the world's 'underworld' pays for doing their duty. She didn't like that feeling, didn't like that someday she might someday have to lie to friends or colleagues, or that they might do the same to her. That someone trusted her like that, to such a private level … that was a gift beyond price.

It was not a conscious decision.

Their lips met halfway. Two lonely, damaged people looking for something they weren't sure of … absolution, or companionship, maybe something deeper. Two people who had given, and continued to selflessly give everything they could and more in the service of a higher ideal, now seeking something for themselves, selfish just this once, wanting something to make their sacrifices worth it all. Two people who connected, who understood the other intimately without needing details, who wanted to support the other in any way they could.

Such is true friendship … and true friendship is the foundation of something greater, deeper, and even more powerful.
After the initial rush, Ziva broke the kiss with a gasp, to find she'd shifted to sit astride Harry's lap, his hands on her hips and hers on his shoulders, looking down at him.

"Are you okay with this?"

Harry knew she meant after Hetty, and after the renewed pain of recapping her death.

"Yes." Another silence, but not an uncomfortable one. A rather potent one, given the new type of tension. Ziva felt his hand slip behind her head, sliding off the tie that had kept her long dark hair in a ponytail.

"Can I ask you for something?" he asked as her hair tumbled loose down around her shoulders. "It's ... selfish, but ..."

"Yes. I don't care." Ziva looked down into his eyes, caught once again by the startling vulnerability he was allowing only her to see.

"Be my neshama shali, Ziva?"

Her breath caught; again, she was struck by how this powerful, strong man needed her, and how much he affected her. Neshama Shali. My soul. An intrinsic part of me. "Yes. Absolutely. Although I'm surprised you know that phrase."

"I know some Hebrew." He smiled, blindingly happy at finding something to live for again. "Thank you, Ziva."

She didn't reply, but just shifted off him and pulled him up.

A few minutes later there was a rather clichéd trail of clothing beginning at the sofa. Harry's jacket, then Ziva's. Then their boots, then shirts, then jeans. Somewhat incongruously, their respective sidearms were placed with much more care on a shelf in the corridor half way there.

Now just in bra and panties, Ziva straddled him on the bed, having practically tackled Harry onto it, which got a raised eyebrow.

"Um … dry spell, Ziva?"

"Oh shut up, you." Ziva leaned down again, but found herself flipped on her back, Harry on top pinning her wrists above her head, laughing.

"Not so fast, neshama. Slow down, savour it."

"Oh really?" she challenged. "Make me."

"Oh, I will."

He did.

Ziva was, to say the least, a tomboy. Her mother Rivka had always preferred her to play with dolls rather than 'boy games' like Battleship or GI Joe. One of her earliest memories was her father taking her and Tali into a forest blindfolded and leaving them to find their own way out.

Growing up, Ziva had always been fiercely independent, often standing up to her father, especially where her sister was concerned. That, plus two years of military service and then Mossad meant she was used to men in authority, working with - or around - them; she wasn't afraid of them either.
On the flip side of that, very few men could keep up with her. She was always the leader, a role she assumed without really thinking about it, but it had taken her years to figure out that it had eventually put off her more narrow-minded (ex-)boyfriends, who eventually broke up with her because she made them feel emasculated, by being faster, tougher, more take-charge than them.

Thus it had surprised her to suddenly find the man she'd jumped into bed with was a seriously alpha personality, at least in the bedroom. Harry wasn't exactly controlling, but he was dominant. Relentlessly so. Eventually she just let him have his way, although she wasn't sure if that had been before or after her second earth-shattering climax. Although giving in … she carefully didn't call it submission in her mind … had been incredible. Definitely worth it. He was attentive and inventive; two very likeable traits in a lover, Ziva decided.

Ziva lay alongside Harry in the half-gloom of the darkened bedroom, lit only by the twinkling lights of Canary Wharf from the outside, half-on half-off him with her head on Harry's heavily muscled chest, his heartbeat a quiet, steady rhythm in her ear. One of her arms was thrown across his stomach; one of his hands tangled in her hair. They'd been at it for a long time, and it was now well into the early hours of the morning.

"Where did that come from?"

"Hmm? What?" _Half asleep. Typical._

Ziva shifted to look at him, resting her chin on his chest. "You seemed like a regular guy. Well, a deadly one, yes but-"

"Why, thank you."

"- then you went all cave-man on me."

"You, uh, seemed to enjoy it."

"… Yes, which surprised me slightly. But I was more surprised I didn't see much hint of it before."

"Because I keep it locked away like all my other little demons." Harry shrugged slightly, his right hand now playing with her hair. "Army shrinks said it comes from my childhood, that because I couldn't control anything in it I seek to have absolute control over as many aspects of my adult life as possible; apparently that makes joining the military an odd career choice. I kinda lost control of the control there. You have that effect on me. Besides, it's been a pretty long dry spell for me too." His voice shifted to concern. "I didn't …"

"No." Ziva placed a finger on his lips. "No, you didn't hurt me, or scare me, or do anything … except make me scream. A lot. And loudly."

His mouth quirked in a sly smile. "That you did. Good thing the apartment's soundproofed. Surprised there's still glass in the window though."

"Careful …" Ziva warned, but she was smiling.

"What? You were the one who remarked on my prowess."

"Heaven help me, I've unleashed a monster."

They both laughed, and were comfortably silent for another few minutes.

"What are you going to do?" Harry eventually asked.
"What about?"

"About telling your father."

"That was before you ravished me."

"Heh. You say that like it was a bad thing."

"Oh, it definitely wasn't. But it does … confuse things. Telling my father we were simply friends would be a lot easier than hot and heavy lovers. He might have a heart attack, and as much as I resent his manipulative games, he's still my father."

"Let me know what you decide."

"Sure." Ziva pushed up, sitting astride him again. "And now, my turn."

The next evening, Ziva sat at her embassy room's desk, staring at the phone pensively. Tel Aviv was two hours ahead of London, and she wanted to catch her father at home rather than in his office, shifted out of 'work' mode; well, as much as Eli David ever stopped thinking of work.

Worst case scenario? He orders my arrest or something … although I haven't actually broken the espionage laws, just Mossad regulations, which means he might fire me, but he can't put me in prison. I think. Would he?

Taking a steadying breath, she picked up the handset and dialled.

Once the international connection went through, there was one ring and a curt, "Ken?"

In Hebrew, she answered. "Hello, aba."

"Ziva! How are you doing?"

"Fine, aba." They chatted for what felt like several aimless minutes to Ziva, as nervous as she was.

"What is it, Ziva? You seem distracted."

"I … I have a confession to make."

"Oh?"

"Remember the man who saved me in Eilat, and Tikrit?"

"Potter, yes, the RAF officer. What about him … did you run into him again?"

"Yes, and a little more than that, aba." Ziva sighed. "Might as well get it over with. I lied to you, after Tikrit."

"About what?"

"About Harry … in the debrief, you asked if I had anything to add about him."

"Harry, hmm?" Ziva blushed - game's up on that one - despite being thousands of miles away. "What about?"
"We had a long conversation on the flight back. Talked about … well, all kinds of things, really, everything we could while avoiding work. His past, childhood, and mine … and Tali."

"Ah. I'd wondered. You came back from that mission with a very different outlook, as I recall."

"Yes. He helped me get past the … hate, the anger." Unspoken was the 'something you didn't do, father.'

"Why did you feel it was necessary to protect him, Ziva?"

Of course, the job comes first. What a surprise.

"Because I valued his friendship, and because you were obsessed with finding out anything about him."

"I was not!"

"Really? Then there must have been a different reason my predecessor Officer Ben-Shahar was declared persona non grata by the British government!"

"That is not your concern. Why did you withhold this, Ziva?"

"He gave me a way to contact him, a friend outside Mossad, in case I ever needed outside help."

"Why would you ever need something like that?"

"Don't try to play me, aba. You taught me about this business, about how you can't trust anyone."

"And yet, you trust him more than your countrymen, Ziva? He's a high-level British operative, he's probably playing you, and you're buying every word like a complete rookie!"

"I know he isn't, aba. He's a top soldier, not a spy, an honourable man." Ziva didn't quite manage to keep the bitterness out of the last phrase. Something you aren't. "He can't lie to save his life."

"But you can, Ziva. If he's as good as the British government seems to think he is, he knows that. Do you really think he will ever trust you?"

That stung, but she could see his game, starting to undermine her side of any relationship since he couldn't shake her faith in Harry. "Even if he doesn't, I will never betray his trust, aba."

Her father's voice hardened. "Even if Israel asks it of you?"

How arrogant can you get! "Mossad is NOT Israel; you most certainly aren't." She decided to paraphrase Harry's comment from two years before. "True friends are few and far between in the shadows, aba. Harry is one of mine. Don't tell me you don't have a few people you would never betray no matter what."

There was a long silence. "I suppose," Eli David grudgingly admitted.

"Even non-Mossad contacts? In other governments?"

"Perhaps."

Ziva stayed silent, letting her father think it through.

"I don't want you to get burned by this, Ziva. Professionally or personally."
Is that actual concern? Wow. I feel so honoured, if he's actually trying to be a father for once.

"I won't, aba. If I've ever been certain of anything at all, it's this."

"You'll forgive me for not fully sharing your confidence in this one, Ziva. I'd be worried for you about this even if you weren't Mossad; but you are, and that makes it much more complicated. He's a dangerous man; the security issues alone ..."

"I understand. Harry and I don't talk about Mossad or the SAS, or work at all, really; not in any specifics, although we had a long talk about parts of a mission of his from a few years ago. It was ... his equivalent of Tali's death, to put it into context."

"Tell me."

"Careful, aba, your obsession is showing through there."

A huff of exasperation. "I'm not obsessed, Ziva, I just want to know why the British think this guy is such an asset. They've covered his trail with a thoroughness we haven't seen since the Cold War, and the threats they delivered when they kicked Ben-Shahar out were far more aggressive than the usual diplo-bluster."

"What do you mean?"

"Ziva, they threatened to deport our sayanim assets in London."

Sayanim were 'assets' rather than agents, untrained Jewish citizens of non-Israeli nationalities who volunteered to provide support for Mossad wherever they lived, usually out of a sense of kinship-slash-patriotism for the Jewish State, even if they weren't actually Israeli.

They were the perfect sleeper agents; all over the world, dedicated and willing to be kept in the dark about the operation's actual details that they were activated for. Although they usually only provided minor support; financial transfers, equipment drops and suchlike, they also passed on any information they could, and were were an invaluable part of Mossad's long international reach.

Eli continued. "MI-5 and -6 usually leave the sayanim alone. They know we aren't the enemy, and our ops in London are usually only directed at gathering intel on financial transfers between terror groups, which benefits Britain indirectly, and sometimes we pass it on to them. But when Ben-Shahar went after Potter's file, they sent him packing with a list of two hundred sayanim in London - an entirely accurate list, by the way - and told us flat out they'd deport every person on it without warning if they ever caught us snooping around that file again. They threatened two hundred people who were completely unrelated to this, Ziva. MI-6 usually play the espionage game the civilised, gentlemanly way, hell they pretty much wrote the rules themselves. Then, suddenly they start playing hardball to protect this one man, and we still have no idea why beyond his capabilities as a soldier, which, while evidently impressive, just don't warrant this level of protection if he is only what they say he is."

"In that case, I'm surprised you haven't already asked me to seduce it out of him."

"So you are sleeping with him? I thought about it for a few seconds when I guessed a minute ago, but I know you, Ziva. You clearly respect this man, and I myself owe him - after all, he's saved my daughter's life twice. I'm not going to push, because I know you'd just get angry at me. Besides, Mr Potter is obviously not an imminent threat to Israel, but anything you feel you can share, I'd like to know."

"You just don't like not knowing."
"Well … yes. I can tell already I'm not going to change your mind on this."

"No."

"Well then. Moving on. You're in London until the end of May, then I have another assignment in mind, a high-priority control agent position in Washington."

"You've already decided."

"A few days ago, yes." Ziva didn't think he was lying, and if he'd decided a few days ago it wasn't a reaction to this argument, so it probably wouldn't be a bad assignment.

"Okay then. Thank you for telling me. Anything else?"

"No. Shalom, Ziva."

"Shalom, abba."

"How long are you going to be around for?" Ziva asked Harry the next evening, back in his apartment. He'd cooked dinner - a fantastic one, which surprised her - and Ziva had just finished describing the conversation with her father.

"Until the end of the week. Then it's back to the Rockpile." They were cuddled up on the sofa, Ziva resting her head on his shoulder, with the lights off, just watching the man-made starscape of London, which Harry had claimed was relaxing for him. Ziva agreed; it was an incredible view.

"You ever think of quitting?"

"Sometimes." Harry's hand played with her hair - again. He seemed to have a thing about it. "There's a lot of pressure in the field, but I'm good under pressure. Hell, its when I'm at my best. I don't really suffer as much on long deployments like other guys do. When does your posting in London end?"

"Mid-May. Then America." Ziva reprimanded herself mentally for letting that out but decided she didn't care.

"Hmm. I might have to start taking leave again, come see you there. I've built up enough of it."

"Couldn't you stay a little longer while I'm in the UK?"

He thought about it for a few seconds. "Prep for a priority mission starts next week. A fortnight after that I could be back though, when the mission's done, for a few weeks at least. I'll call Pearce and tell him tomorrow."

"Why Pearce?"

"He's my handler. Sort of. Runs my missions when I'm in the UK or Europe at least, which is rare these days. He's more like my mover and shaker, helps cuts through the bureaucracy when I can't. In Afghanistan I work for ISAF, or the US-UK governments directly, not through Pearce."

"Is that why he set up the meeting a few days ago?"

"Yeah. I'm part of the reason he got a knighthood, so he likes me."

"Oh?"
"Sorry, neshama, classified. Very, very classified."

Pearce got that knighthood seven years ago ... Harry's only, what, twenty four, so he was about eighteen? Seventeen? What could he possibly have to do with Pearce's success back then?

Ziva mulled it over for a few seconds, before mentally shrugging. Nothing to do with me. Maybe Harry'll tell me someday. Just one more part of the mystery that is Harry Potter. Instead, she chose to comment on something else.

"You like that word, don't you?"

"Neshama? Yes. I don't speak Hebrew fluently - yet." Ziva rolled her eyes at him. They were both polyglots, although Ziva spoke several more than he did, mostly European languages Harry hadn't bothered to learn yet because the Arabic-Afghani languages he spoke had been enough. Now, however, he had a new project. "It's very appropriate. Thank you, Ziva."

The out-of-the-blue thanks puzzled her for a moment, until his words came back to her.

"Be my neshama shali, Ziva."

"Always, Harry."

Chapter End Notes

Trivia/Jargon

Ken - Hebrew for 'Yes'.

aba - Hebrew, for 'my father.' Slightly more familiar form of 'ab', (pronounced av) which is just 'father.'

Ahasifa ja'be - Arabic for Storm Bringer, Harry's, ah, memetic badass nickname amongst the Taliban, for his habit of summoning storms with his powers and attacking during them. Not really important, but I'd like to note that Afghani's actually speak Pashto and Dari, not Arabic except for learning the Koran.

OPSEC - Operational Security

REMF - who doesn't know this? Rear Echelon Mother Fucker, a Vietnam-era term for someone not on the front lines. In all fairness, it's not like frontline forces can function without REMFs to run the logistics, and Loggies usually get shot at just as much as everybody else, so it's a rather unfair term to most of them.

ISAF - International Security Assistance Force, the proper name for Coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Neshama - Hebrew, for 'my soul.' Used as an endearment, sometimes casually between friends, a bit like 'darling' or 'honey' but also more emphatically, between lovers.
Another time-skip in this chapter. I skipped Ari's death because although it's a significant event for Ziva, I don't want to make it look like she and Harry are leaning on each other for every little trouble in their lives. They're both strong personalities and skilled operators who are perfectly capable by themselves; I don't think anyone familiar with NCIS characters would disagree that Ziva is capable of handling herself. Although she does have an alarming ability to kill suspects in her custody - a grand total of three now, isn't it? I certainly wouldn't want to be arrested by her, that's for sure. Your life expectancy would decrease markedly.

Some fairly blatant shout outs. Meta-cookies to whoever spots them.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Government is all show when it isn't murder in the dark … or soldiers in the open."

Orson Scott Card

"Hold on a minute, Ziva."

The thudding roar of a Chinook and escorting pair of Apaches taking off from the flight line drowned out the satellite phone as Harry sheltered from the downdraft and swirling dust-cloud behind an earth-filled Hesco barricade. When the helos had moved off he spoke again.

"Okay, let's try that again. Shalom, Ziva."

"Shalom, Harry, but I don't have much time to talk."
Ziva's worried tone instantly made Harry concerned. "What's wrong, Ziva?"

"There was a bombing just a few minutes ago. I'm not exactly sure who the victim was, but I'm pretty sure I saw him on Mossad's kill list and at least two other people were also killed."

"So … why does this get you in trouble?"

"Harry, another Mossad agent was there. Namir Eschel, he was my partner in Paris before I was in London. I was driving past it, my car was disabled by the explosion, so I got out to secure the scene. Namir was right there, walking away, and I froze up at the sight of him when he turned around. I was so shocked I just let him go. I'm headed to the Embassy for some answers."

"Do you think you'll get any?"

Ziva's appointment in the USA after London had been to act as the handler for her half-brother Mossad deep-cover agent Ari Haswari. She had gone out of her way to tell every federal agency that would listen that he was innocent of the accusations levelled by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service that he was a traitor, a mole in Mossad, and the murderer of one of the NCIS' best field agents back in May of '04.

She had been wrong.

Ari had been a double agent for years, first in Hamas and later in al-Qaeda. His father - also Ziva's father, Eli - had seduced and gotten his mother, a Palestinian doctor, pregnant as a long-term plan to produce a deep-cover agent with the right ethnic background to enter Hamas as a spy for Mossad. When Ari's mother Hasmina had been killed in an Israeli 'retaliatory air strike', he had come to believe that Eli had arranged it, in order for Ari to have a convincing reason to hate Israel.

Well, it worked. Ari really had come to hate Israel, and his manipulative father in particular, and had turned traitor. That was now going to come back to haunt Ziva - she had vouched for Ari to several key US agencies including the FBI, and been wrong. Now, when she was accused of murder? Why would they believe her, even after the past year of rebuilding credibility through her work with NCIS?

Ziva had given him the whole story when Harry had visited her in Israel in July, although she had told him some of it on the phone. The sheer ice-cold calculation of such a plan on Eli's part was what made Harry's blood boil though; things like this twisted game of manipulating Ari's life from the very beginning to be an agent were what made even their key allies start wondering where Mossad would stop, what lines they would not cross - or if there even was anything they would baulk at in defence of Israel.

It had been worse for Ziva on a much more personal level too. The parallels between her life and Ari's were undeniable; groomed from birth to be a Mossad killer by Eli David. Ziva's conversation with Harry back in Iraq had helped settle her worries then, and she had come to believe that joining Mossad was her choice, not something programmed into her. Or at the very least, her continuing service was a choice, if not the original beginning.

The whole dark and sordid tale of her older half-brother's manipulated upbringing had badly shaken both her self-confidence and what little remained of her trust in her father, and threatened to turn the previously solid foundations of her life and work into a house of cards.

Getting away from Mossad's twisted morals and working with the NCIS team's more black-and-white law-enforcement perspective for the last twelve months had helped, given her an insight into why other people chose to serve, and that had brought her back onto an even keel.
It wasn't just the parallels though. Her father had ordered her to kill Ari, in order to build trust with NCIS and to 'dispose' of him, two birds with one stone; apparently the fact he was ordering his own daughter to kill her brother escaped him completely.

Ziva had done so, but out of respect for the NCIS team leader Ari had been trying to kill, a man named Gibbs, and the director of NCIS, Jenny Sheppard, who was a good friend and former field partner of hers. Eli however appeared to regard her appointment to NCIS as a 'way in', an opening for potential future exploitation of the two agencies' relationship, but Ziva admitted to Harry she was already drifting further and further away from the 'for the good of Israel' mindset Mossad officers were meant to view everything through.

If push came to shove, she wasn't so sure she'd go back to her father after all his games.

And right now, this bomb attack seemed like yet another one.

"Is this Eschel guy working for Mossad still?"

"I don't know, Harry. I don't know what to think any more."

"What's your plan? It's going to take me … damn, probably at least twenty hours to reach DC from here."

"It's only been about twenty minutes since the bombing. I'm half way to the Embassy already on public transport, going to try to get some answers from the station chief. Can you head back here or are you needed there? I have a feeling this is going to get worse; my father's been even more distant than usual lately, like he doesn't trust me any more. It would be just like him not to tell me about something like this."

"I'm free. I'll cover with headquarters and get on the next flight out."

"Are you sure? I don't want to get you in trouble. This might be all cleared up by the time you land."

"No matter. I haven't received warning orders for any upcoming ops, and I'm due some leave. I'd be coming to Washington anyway to see you, obviously. You are more important to me than some mission that some other team can handle instead of little old me."

"Thank you, Harry."

"No worries, neshama. Are you keeping this phone?"

"No. I'll text yours with the next one to give you the number."

"Is there anyone there who can help you faster than I can?"

"Yes, the team at NCIS, but if this gets worse, Tony isn't senior enough, Jenny maybe, but even though she's the director, NCIS is a pretty minor agency. Gibbs … maybe, he knows a lot of people in this town, but he's retired to Mexico."

"Can you contact him?"

"No, but our forensics tech Abby might have his number. She and Gibbs were - are - like father and daughter. I don't want to yet though. He's earned his peace."

"I'm sure you can get it out of her if you need too, he'd probably be of assistance. Stay safe, neshama."
"You too, Harry."

Harry hung up and jogged towards the Southern Afghanistan Special Forces HQ building, several hundred metres away. Clumps of pedestrians moved quickly out of the way as he came through. Harry was relatively easy-going when not on a mission, but most people's first assumption on seeing him was that he would snap them in half if they got in his way. The SAS beret and large black AFO patch was part of, but certainly not all of that.

Ten years of living in a 'give 110%' military environment; two in school, two in training and six - nearly seven, now - of active service - had radically changed him from the scrawny, beaten-down fifteen-year old he'd been when he'd 'burned out' his magic in the Department of Mysteries fighting off Voldemort's possession of his mind. He didn't really mourn the loss; he'd destroyed the Horcrux in his head with the same effort, and survived. It had certainly been a better option than Dumbledore's original plan, that was for certain.

And there had been some side benefits, too. With the removal of the dark energy lodged in his forehead, his eyesight had cleared up overnight, and over the following months Harry became aware he was remembering things more accurately, and thinking quicker and with greater clarity. The leading theory was that the Horcrux's dark magic had been exerting a kind of 'pressure' on his brain, impairing both his optical nerve and central neural synapses from functioning correctly; Harry's brain - probably assisted by accidental magic - had 'evolved' to cope as best it could, keeping him functional. Harry himself hadn't even been aware of the problem, of course, but once it was lifted it had felt like something akin to being relieved of a migraine that had affected him his entire life without his even noticing. His learning ability had rapidly increased - useful, since he was having to catch up on a non-magical education at the time - and his already impressively quick reaction times had improved somewhat too.

He was now a six-foot, broad-shouldered officer whose scarred face, non-standard custom weapons - including a pair of straight-blade short swords strapped to his back - non-reg Multicam uniform and ever-present heavy Level IV body armour practically screamed 'Don't Fuck with Me.' The beret just multiplied it. Plus, Kandahar was one of the more secure areas; not many personnel were in full combat rig, so he stood out quite a bit.

Flashing his ID at the Military Police guard and verifying his ID on a handprint scanner, Harry headed down the hall to Colonel Pierson's office. Pierson had been a Green Beret before being wounded in Bosnia, and was a graduate of West Point Academy and the Army War College, but didn't let it go to his head. He was therefore both humble and competent, and didn't have even a hint of the condescendingly superior attitude that plagued a number of American officers Harry had met; no surprise he was the non-American's preferred point of contact within ISAF Special Forces HQ.

"Bob, you in?"

"Yeah, Harry, you need something?" The tall, greying colonel looked up from his computer.

"Anything you need me for in the next week or so?"

"Well, let me see …" Pierson examined his computer again. He was the 'Special Forces Operations Coordinator - South Afghanistan,' who amongst other things handled the divvying out of assignments between the various Tier One units operating in his area of responsibility. "No, nothing specific. Just one low-priority target designation mission I was going to give you to keep you from getting bored, but I can give it to Sergeant Major Blane's unit. Why?"

"Personal emergency."
"Specifics?"

"Um … my significant other stands a good chance of being accused or at the very least investigated of the murder of three people in Washington DC."

To his credit, Pierson didn't question it, or even blink. "So you need transport to get stateside?"

"Yep. As quickly as possible."

Pierson worked his computer again for several minutes. "You're jet qualified, right?"

"Yes."

"What in?"

"Tornado GR4, and I've done familiarisation flights on Harriers and some American jets in my off-time too, F/A-18s, F-15s and -16s. Why?"

"Perfect. There's a flight of Super Hornets being ferried to Naples, leaving in half an hour. Being familiarised will allow you to ride as the backseater, as normally it's just the pilot for ferrying runs. That'll get you to Naples in three hours. From there I can get you on a F-15E being ferried back to Andrews AFB in Washington, a five hour flight at cruise speed. Nine to eleven hours total, with a few aerial refuelling join-ups along the way."

Harry stared at him, mute in surprise. Pierson stared back, deadpan.

"That took you … what, two minutes?" Harry asked incredulously.

"New personal best."

"How the hell did you set that up in two minutes?"

"I'm a black belt in bureaucracy," Pierson replied dryly. "I've been stuck in the Pentagon's Office of Special Operations Liaison and other desk jobs since I was wounded in the Balkans in '96. I know exactly how to work the system. My position here gives me a lot of authority, plus my high security clearance gives me all sorts of unusual openings. In this case, I just put you on the plane, tagged the order codeword-clearance level, and no-one in the chain will ask questions; they'll just assume you're some Jason Bourne-type and so long as it's authorised by someone higher, i.e. me, their ass isn't on the line. Mine is, however, because I authorised it, so don't crash the plane or anything."

"Black belt?" Harry grinned, shaking off his surprise. "More like the god of bureaucracy, Bob."

"And don't you forget it. In case you're wondering, you owe me a six-pack of Mountain Tiger beer and the full tale of whatever mess you're about to get yourself involved in when you get back."

"Ah, and there's the catch. No problem." Harry got up to leave.

"One more thing." Pierson picked up his phone. "Security desk, Master Sergeant Neagley please … Frances? I need you to give someone a ride, first to the British quarters area then to the flight line. Top speed. Yes. Thank you. Owe you one."

He put the phone down. "You know how hard the MPs enforce the speed limit on base. Neagley's the MP's shift commander for this building. Her car's got all the pretty flashing lights to get you where you need to go, very quickly."
"Once again, you are a god. I need to call London as well to clear this. See you soon, Colonel."

Ziva was fuming, but controlled. The station chief, Michael Bashan had been downright obstructive, keeping her waiting for nearly two hours before meeting her, hearing her initial report - and dropping the bombshell that her own agency had had her under surveillance, and apparently believed she might be having a relationship with Tony of all people - then disappearing for another five hours to verify it.

The only reason she'd been this patient was that Michael was an old friend of her father's whom she had known throughout her childhood, almost a surrogate uncle to her; and as the Washington station chief, he had access to more classified information than she ever did.

Field officers like her were obviously restricted in access lest they be captured, and even as a liaison officer Ziva had little reason to know anything about any ongoing operations that did not involve either her participation or that of NCIS. While Ziva did spend most of her time with NCIS's Major Case Response Team ('Team Gibbs,' as Abby called it), the 'Navy cops' had a surprisingly long international reach. Wherever the United States Navy went, so did NCIS, and as such they had far more interaction with foreign agencies like Mossad than other Federal agencies like the FBI or ATF.

The bombing's target had been a former Syrian officer, Colonel Abdul Wazir who had agreed to provide intelligence on al-Qaeda in Iraq to the Americans. Hence, the two FBI agents who had also been killed protecting Wazir.

Specifically, protecting him from Mossad, who wanted him dead for 'Crimes against the State of Israel.' The 'crimes' were not specified, which basically meant they just didn't like him very much.

That wasn't the worst of it. Bashan claimed Eschel was believed to be dead even by Mossad, which meant he had to be rogue.

But why did he go rogue, and manage to fake his own death? Or maybe it was a dark-op she wasn't read in on, and her own agency was lying to her, framing her? Did her father no longer trust her, after revealing her relationship to Harry, and the mess with Ari? Was he selling her out to the Americans for some Machiavellian reason?

"Ziva, the FBI has already issued a warrant for your arrest."

"On what charges?"

"Espionage. And murder." Ziva didn't reply, stunned that she'd messed this up so badly. If she'd stayed at the bombing, used her connections to NCIS she might have had a chance at fixing this. Now her car was evidence against her, as was her 'fleeing the scene.' At least Harry was on his way back. And she needed to call Gibbs, soon.

"This is a political nightmare, I'm asking for your patience, Ziva," Bashan said as he put on his jacket. "We need time to deal with this."

"You would hold me against my will, Michael?"

"I will do what's best for you!"

Oh shit, he's serious. I am so glad I called Harry before I got here. The Embassy had been her safe place; as sovereign Israeli territory, she couldn't be arrested here. But if Mossad were going to detain
her 'for her own good' while they tried to manipulate events and messed this up even more, she was going to need somewhere else safe to stay.

*Harry doesn't own anything in the area as far as I know. None of the NCIS team, obviously. Gibbs ... maybe. He's certainly not at home any more.*

Michael calmed down, and put a hand on her shoulder as he left the office. "Your father, he will find a solution to this, Ziva."

Once he was outside the door, she replied without turning to face him. "Like he did for my brother Ari?"

Bashan didn't reply, instead ordering the guard to take her to the Embassy's guest quarters. "Do not forget to confiscate her weapons."

"I'm sorry about this." Ziva said, still without turning around.

"As am I." Michael left, and the guard closed the door, and stepped up behind her.

"I was talking to you," Ziva told the guard evenly, before driving a vicious elbow strike into his solar plexus, winding him, then grabbing his wrist and flipping him to the floor - hard.

Drawing her weapon, she jammed it under his chin, switching to a distinctly non-combative, flirtatious tone that had no place in a fight.

"You ever been tied up by a woman before?" she almost purred. The guard froze in surprise.

This wasn't in the manual. Apparently realising she wasn't just going to shoot him he nodded, and smirked slightly.

"Ah-ha, did you like it?" He nodded again.

*Harry would never have fallen for this. Hell, even frat-boy DiNozzo wouldn't have fallen for this.*

*On the other hand, I might be setting my standards too high.*

"Then today is not your lucky day."

Ziva pistol-whipped him across the temple, knocking him out.

*The only person I'm tying up in that context is Harry. Although, with him, it'd probably be the other way around. Hmm ... that's an idea, he can be so very creative ...*

Ziva stole Bashan's laptop and strolled right out of the Embassy front gates to hail a taxi. Apparently he hadn't yet passed the word on her to-be-detained status, so nobody stopped her.

She called Abby after reaching Gibbs' house, and wheedled his number out of her.

Her call to Gibbs left her upset, even if he hadn't intended it. He'd just hung up without saying anything; while this was normal practice for Gibbs, he hadn't even said if he'd come back to Washington or not. Intellectually, she realised he probably would, but it suddenly hit her how much she'd come to rely on him for advice; how she'd unconsciously replaced the father figure in her life by substituting the honourable, recalcitrant but caring Leroy Jethro Gibbs for the duplicitous, calculating and emotionally detached Eli David.

*In only a year, as well. My family is so messed up.*
She sat lost in thought for several minutes, until she realised she hadn't sent the number of the burner phone she'd bought to Harry, which she quickly did.

The reply came moments later.

*Was getting worried there. Where?*

*38 Magnolia Walk, Bethesda, Maryland.*

*On the way. Just landed. Hour and a half.*

---

Ziva sat watching the front door from the kitchen, out of sight of the front windows, holding her pistol loosely, but ready. The knock, however, came not from the front door, but the back.

When she opened it, Harry slipped inside with a backpack.

"Hey, Ziva."

He had to push the door shut with his heel as Ziva practically tackled him, throwing her arms around his neck and delivering a searing, almost desperate kiss. Harry didn't resist, let her reassure herself that he was here. When they broke off for air, Harry pulled back a couple of inches, and pushed some of Ziva's unruly curls back behind her ear, before tangling his hand in her hair at her nape.

"That bad?" Something must have gone very badly at the Embassy.

"Yeah. Mossad's got their head where the sun isn't shining, the FBI has a warrant out on me for murder and espionage. NCIS is almost certainly under scrutiny for 'harbouring' me. It's all gone to hell in just a few hours. Sometimes …" Ziva looked up into her lover's scarred but still strikingly handsome face, caught not for the first time by his eyes; a shade of green she'd seen nowhere else. "Sometimes you feel like the only permanent thing in my life, Harry."

"I'll always be here for you, neshama."

"Yeah. Mossad's got their head where the sun isn't shining, the FBI has a warrant out on me for murder and espionage. NCIS is almost certainly under scrutiny for 'harbouring' me. It's all gone to hell in just a few hours. Sometimes …" Ziva looked up into her lover's scarred but still strikingly handsome face, caught not for the first time by his eyes; a shade of green she'd seen nowhere else. "Sometimes you feel like the only permanent thing in my life, Harry."

"I'll always be here for you, neshama."

"I know." That was just who he was.

"How are you holding up?"

"Fine."

Harry raised an eyebrow, a reply in itself. *Riiight. Pull the other one.*

"Yes, I know there's an acronym." Ziva rolled her eyes. "It does fit, somewhat, but I'm doing okay, it's just all gone to hell so fast. Speaking of fast, how did you get back so quickly?"

"A guy in headquarters, who I now owe a case of beer got me a backseat on a fighter jet to Naples,
then another one to Andrews Air Force Base. Very uncomfortable, but very, very fast. Give me the
details?"

"It's really bad." Ziva quickly laid out what she'd learned at the Embassy. "I just can't figure out why
Eschel is involved, and what those motorbikers have to do with it."

"It's a frame-up, Ziva."

"Of who?"

"Of you. Well, also of Mossad, and Israel as a whole. A Mossad-style hit and a known Mossad
agent's car found at the scene paints an ugly picture, and the FBI seems to be buying it, despite the
glaring flaws in the scenario."

Ziva froze, then groaned. "Oh God, I'm an idiot."

"No, you were too close to the action rather than seeing the big picture. I had plenty of time to think
about it on the flight back, and you just put the final pieces into place. I'm trained to think like this
Ziva, I'm given missions with strategic-level implications all the time."

"So what are the implications of this?"

"This attack could radically mess up relations and American trust in Israel, destabilise or maybe
completely disrupt the Israeli-US link, which is a core part of regional politics. The only people who
gain from it are our enemies, not Mossad. Even if they wanted Wazir dead, Mossad doesn't ever kill
openly like this, for the simple reason that if they get caught, it makes them look like the bad guy.
Sure, sometimes things are linked back to them, but rarely with any concrete proof. The idea of
Kidon, or Metsada, or whatever it's called this day of the week, is far more effective if it's a subtle
threat - a knife in the dark rather than a bomb in the daytime. Second, Israel doesn't gain from killing
someone who is already supplying the Americans with intel. Thus, Qui Bono?"

"Who benefits?" Ziva translated the Cicero quote, rhetorically. "Our enemies."

"Exactly. Thus, we should assume Eschel is being sponsored, or hired, by a radical Islamist faction
or government. Assumptions can be dangerous, but this is a pretty obvious one."

"Any ideas?"

"Probably a state, for two reasons. One, because terrorist groups don't usually think this strategically.
They're usually small scale, but al-Qaeda and a few others might. AQ in particular are well-known
for big, ambitious plans which are usually flawlessly executed if they aren't interdicted in time by
people like us. For example, the USS Cole bombing, or Nine-Eleven obviously; this Colonel Wazir
was informing on AQ cells in Iraq, you said."

"I see what you mean ... two birds with one throw, yes?"

"Stone. But yes, essentially."

"And the second?"

"Islamic terrorist groups are basically amateurs. I would know, I track them for a living. That said, it's
a very Darwinian profession. The stupid ones get weeded out fast, by us, and other terrorist groups;
they can be quite factional when they put their minds to it. Those that survive, that rise up the ranks
are usually skilled, creative, experienced and bloody dangerous, but nonetheless amateurs. Some
may have received more formal training from rogue agents, or directly from the agencies of Iran,
Syria, or other rogue states, but they're still amateurs."

"What's your point?"

"That unlike professional spies, they are motivated by emotion. They became terrorists out of passion. Or fervour, if you prefer. Or zealotry. Do you see a person like that, motivated by that, trusting a former Mossad operative? The very agency that hunts them to the ends of the Earth? On the other hand, an operative from a state like Syria or Iran is properly trained, is considerably less likely to be motivated by emotion and thus can see past Eschel's former association. Plus even a rogue state would have the financial reserves on hand necessary to pay for his services, and while terrorist groups don't lack for funding, they certainly can't throw it around like it grows on trees either."

"So your conclusion is ...?"

"Iran or Syria. There aren't really any other states that benefit. While Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia don't particularly like Israel, neither is it a direct threat to them. They all enjoy positive relations with the United States and would put that relationship ahead of the risk of being caught doing something like this. The ISI ... maybe. They have some rather influential extremist elements. But again, Pakistan's too far away from Israel and relies too much on the Americans to make the risk worth the reward."

Ziva nodded in agreement, and changed the subject. "I called Gibbs too. I … think … he's coming."

"Err … you think?"

"He hung up without saying either way." Ziva shrugged. "It's his thing. One of his many 'things.' Along with dumping cellphones in jars of paint thinner if he doesn't want to be disturbed from building his boat downstairs in the basement."

"Heh." Harry grinned. "Born in the wrong decade?"

"Yeah." Ziva laughed, rested her forehead on his chest, glad just to find something to laugh about after the last day. "Something like that. Utterly hopeless, or perhaps pretending to be. That'd be something he'd do as well."

"Takeout?"

"Yeah. There's a Chinese place near here."

Harry trawled through the Mossad station chief's laptop as they ate in the basement. Harry had ordered the food delivered to a small office building a few hundred metres away, then stood outside the false address until they were delivered so that no-one linked it to Gibbs' bungalow.

Bashan was paranoid; of course, he was a spy, so that adjective might as well be changed to 'alive' instead of 'paranoid.' The only part Harry could get into was the section on Eschel that had been unlocked when Ziva stole it. Every other section and probably every sub-folder had individual passwords.

Harry considered for a few seconds the idea of handing it over to the MI-6 station in the British Embassy for crypto-breaking analysis, but decided against it. Ziva would be in enough trouble for stealing classified materials from her own agency; letting those materials get compromised would be even worse for her, not to mention the betrayal of her trust on his part.

"Have you got anything useful in the backpack?" Ziva asked as they finished eating. "Cut off from
support as we are, we'll have to improvise."

"Never fear." Harry unzipped the medium-sized black military-pattern pack. "Guy from the embassy dropped by when I landed at Andrews to give me a ... care package, so to speak, arranged by Pearce." He pulled out a silver Samsonite hardcase about half the size of the bag, opened it and poked around the tightly-packed interior. "Basic surveillance kit: small camera, listening devices, re-transmitters, digital recorder. Comms set: two-way Motorola handhelds, earpieces, microphones. Spare ammunition, two mags of forty-five for my Colt, and a telescoping baton for close combat. It's nice to have friends in high places."

"They can't get me out of this, can they?"

"Doubt it. It's nothing to do with Britain, they'd probably be ignored, or told to sod off. Politely. I do have friends on this side of the pond, but they aren't in law enforcement."

"What now?"

"We should get as much sleep as possible." Harry pulled out a micro sleeping bag roll mat. "Do you know when Gibbs will be here, if at all?"

"I think he will. Probably around six or seven."

"Alright. Reveille at oh-five-forty-five then."

"Actual sleep." Ziva said warningly.

Harry smirked. "There'll be time enough for the other kind of 'sleep' after we've cleared your name."

They dragged the cushions off the living room couch and bedded down in the basement, where no casual or accidental surveillance would see them. Sharing a sleeping bag was a new one for them, but neither was complaining; they always slept all tangled up together anyway, regardless of their sleeping arrangements.

Ziva slid into the bag and into Harry's embrace, letting herself relax for the first time since the bombing, luxuriating in the heat and safe feeling he radiated, allowing her guard to drop now that she was in his arms. With one of his hands gently resting on the back of her neck and the other lying possessively on her hip, pulling her into him, she drifted off to sleep, feeling secure again for the first time since the bombing that morning.

Harry awoke with an armful of Ziva; definitely a favourite way to start a new day, even if a sleeping bag in a basement wasn't the most salubrious of accommodations. They'd ended up almost cheek to cheek; her face buried in his neck, her breath a light caress across his skin.

Once it would have surprised him, given how light a sleeper he normally was; now he just accepted it - loved it, actually, a subconscious proof of how much he truly trusted Ziva, that she'd tunnelled through his many emotional walls that far.

For Harry, with his abusive childhood and constantly-under-threat adolescence, not to mention the uncertainty of his line of work and the treachery - first from Dumbledore, but also of that bastard Sahar and the other incompetent idiot who killed Hetty by preventing their quick extraction to a hospital, true trust on this kind of deepest level was a truly precious commodity, and was not something he distributed freely.
He was pretty sure Ziva felt the same way, or was coming to do so. With her father's games, the ever-present uncertainty of being 'out in the cold,' (even if Washington had been a relatively safe posting from that perspective, until the day before), they both had deeply rooted trust issues that, both strangely and somewhat ironically, didn't apply to each other. It was certainly an unusual relationship, but it worked; they were each other's anchors in a shifting, inconstant underworld.

Right now, however, Harry wasn't analysing anything so philosophical, as Ziva's hand had begun tracing small circles on the skin of his collarbone, the leg lying between his own moving slightly so her smooth thigh rocked against him gently.

Oh yeah. Ziva was definitely awake. Minx.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, so they say. It certainly made other parts fonder, that was for sure. Their occasional long weekends and weeks together, snatched from the demands of duty were always … passionate, to say the least.

Loud might also be an alternative description. Her neighbours had complained last time.

And the times before that.

"Shalom, neshama."

Ziva raised her head and smiled at him, resting her chin on his shoulder, curls cascading across his chest in a wave of dark brown, so dark it was almost black. "Boker tov, Harry."

"Yes, it is a good morning. Certainly from my point of view."

Ziva's hand slid lower. "And mine." The hand stopped, inches short of its' destination, and Ziva cast a sly look at the clock. "Unfortunately, Gibbs will be arriving in fifteen minutes - "

Harry's head thumped back against the mat, as Ziva continued, smirking, " - and much as I love what you do in bed, a quickie really isn't going to be acceptable after four months of anticipation. You're just going to have to wait. I'll make it up to you later."

"Fine." He raised his head again. "But you are a tease, and I'm going to have to … punish you for that." Harry looked back into her dark eyes; his serious, humourless expression belied by the amusement and desire sparkling in his own.

"Oh? I'm quivering in terror! What did you have in mind for my … punishment?" Ziva masterfully managed a simultaneously half-terrified, half-interested expression that had Harry laughing.

"Wicked, wicked things." Harry's hand stroked up her spine. "You're going to have to spend all day wondering about it. Because you know I have a very … active imagination. And tonight, Ziva? Or whenever this is over? Then, you're going to find out the true meaning of the word tease."

"Oooh! Promise?"

Harry laughed again. "You are insatiable."

"You bring out the best in me."

Retired Supervisory Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs was more than a little annoyed that his aforementioned retirement had been interrupted.
However, even though he'd never admit it, he sort of welcomed the interruption. God help him, but he was bored. Although less stressful in a not-getting-shot-at-anymore sort of way, the mind-numbing emptiness and similarity of each and every day, day after day, was getting to him. He simply wasn't really enjoying retirement.

Well, he hadn't enjoyed the red eye flight over from Mexico either, but here he was anyway.

He'd done his time. Fifteen years in the Marines and thirteen at NIS, now renamed NCIS; at four years short of his fiftieth birthday and after being blown into a coma for the second time in his life he was getting a little too battered to keep up with the youngsters like DiNozzo, McGee or David.

Again, not that he'd ever admit it.

At least he'd left Tony in charge. Goofball the kid may be, but DiNozzo was the best junior agent Gibbs had ever met, even before spending the last few years learning from Gibbs himself, much like he had from Mike Franks.

Once again, not that Gibbs would ever tell Tony that directly. A lessened amount of head slaps would have to do.

And, he decided as he reached his house, at least Ziva hadn't called him on some trivial issue. She really did seem to be in a boatload of trouble, the kind that Jenny even as Director couldn't fix by herself, although he didn't know the specifics of it yet.

He parked, entered, and made his way quietly towards the stairs down. It was likely Ziva had used his place as a safehouse, as she'd known he would have been out of the country.

With a hand on his Beretta, Gibbs made his way to the door, and then down the steps into his boatbuilding basement.

The first person he saw was Ziva, over by the workbench. She smiled broadly when she saw him, the open relief clear on her face; surprising considering how hard she usually was to read. Then his radar tripped - someone behind him - and he spun, drawing his weapon, not expecting anyone but Ziva.

"Check fire!" Ziva shouted, the universal military command for 'Don't Bloody Shoot!'. Gibbs moved his finger off the trigger, noticing the stranger doing the same.

"Harry!"

"Paranoid equals alive, Ziva," this 'Harry' replied, lowering his weapon, a phosphate-black, Kimber Model MEUSOC Colt 1911 back in a hip holster. "Just being safe." Gibbs too lowered his Beretta.

As the man stepped out from the shadows behind the boat, Gibbs finally got a good look at him. Six foot, wearing a black leather jacket, olive green T-shirt, tan cargos and suede desert combat boots; military-short black hair; incisive, evaluating green eyes, and a lot of brutal scars. One horizontal one under the left eye, and one … no, two more: an older, faded lightning-bolt shaped scar over his right eye that led to another slightly jagged tear, healed but more recent, that led from the bottom of the odd zigzag over his right eye and across the cheek to just outside of the corner of his mouth.

Gibbs' gut, the cop part, was screaming 'danger!', as his Marine one interjected with a more
Clean-shaven, short haircut - military. Wary eyes, with a lot of scars but dedicated enough to stay in the military - probably special forces. Probably not Israeli with that accent, which is British, but uses an American-issue custom modified .45, moves lightly on his feet, always balanced, like a martial artist - definitely special forces.

Coming up behind him, Ziva broke into Gibbs' sizing up of the newcomer, her tone slightly nervous as if she was desperate for them to get along.

"Gibbs, this is Flight Lieutenant Harry Potter. Harry, meet Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs."

Ziva's boss was an intimidating fellow, as she'd said. Even wearing old clothes, worn out from the long flight and with at least a few weeks worth of beard this guy radiated command.

Gunnery Sergeant, are you kidding? If I didn't know better I'd have sworn he was a Colonel just from sheer presence. I can see why Ziva decided come back to DC to work with this man instead of her father at Mossad.

Harry took a step forward and held out a hand. "Agent Gibbs."

Gibbs also took a step forward and reached out to shake Harry's proffered hand slightly warily. "Don't call me that. I'm retired."

"And yet ... here you are." Gibbs' eyes narrowed.

"So what unit are you?"

"I'm a Royal Air Force pilot who branched out into being a rockape, been attached to the SAS since mid-2000, and just flew back from deployment with Task Force Black in Afghanistan. More pertinent to this situation, however, is that I'm Ziva's ... boyfriend, I guess."

"You guess?" Gibbs asked archly, obviously going from evaluating Harry as a soldier to whether or not he'd be good for Ziva.

"We're not exclusive. We both spend long stretches of time in and out of high levels of danger on opposite sides of the Earth connected only by sat phone, which isn't really a proper or particularly stable relationship." Harry shrugged. "But regardless of whether or not the 'boyfriend' label is accurate, I promised a few years ago to be there for Ziva whenever she called. So here I am."

"You were deployed? Are they going to declare you AWOL?"

"No, I cleared it with London. I get to pick my assignments, and if I want to run half-way round the world to help my girlfriend when she's accused of murder, they'll go along with it, so long as it doesn't take too long or impede other missions."

Cleared it with London? Is he MI-6 or just a soldier? Granted, with those scars he'd never make a good conventional spy, too distinctive by far, but paramilitary, maybe? Although I'm not sure MI-6 even have paramilitary operators, since ... since they usually farm them out to the SAS. Should have
remembered that. Hmm. Interesting.

Ziva's phone rang, distracting Gibbs from his continued analysis.

"It's probably Abby. I've only used this phone to call both of you and her." She put it on speaker.

"Ziva?" DiNozzo's voice. Oh boy, is he going to be crushed when he finds out that not only does Ziva have a lover, but that lover could snap him in half.

"Tell Abby I'm going to kill her."

"We love you too," was Tony's sarcastic reply. That wit was one of the main reasons Gibbs had picked DiNozzo as his protégé. Any officer of the law who yelled, "You can't outrun me, I'm wearing tube socks!" as he chased a fleeing suspect had to have been either an idiot or some sort of a maverick genius. Fortunately, Detective DiNozzo had proven to be the latter, even if most of Tony's habits; endless movie references, ogling just about everything female to come within his line of sight, and pretending to be a slacker when he was actually one of NCIS' top young agents were incredibly irritating.

"I'm hanging up now."

"You're going to tell me what the hell is going on here."

"Your phone could be tapped, Tony."

"I don't have anything else. I'm also trying to get ahold of Gibbs right now, but I'm not having any luck."

Ziva's eyes met his, asking a silent question.

No going back now.

Oh come on, another part of him argued; the part that had seized on his team as a family to protect after Shannon and Kelly's deaths, and the subsequent three failed marriages. I jumped in with both feet when I got on the plane. This is well past 'no going back.' He gave Ziva a slight nod.

"Gibbs? Well, why didn't you say so?" She passed over the handset.

"DiNozzo. You have ten seconds to tell me why I am not building a teak hot tub in Mexico."

Stunned silence.

"Nine."

"Uh … Boss, I …"

"Eight."

It took Tony twenty minutes to drive out to the house; the phone wasn't secure enough for this conversation. Ziva covered him as he came down the stairs; Harry had once again disappeared into the shadows behind the boat with sufficient stealth even Gibbs was impressed; as a former Force Recon Sniper, and therefore a man well acquainted with the relevant skills, not to mention just plain difficult to impress at any time, that was quite an achievement.
"According to the FBI, I should be aiming my gun at you … whoa!" Tony had reached the bottom of the stairs, and finally caught sight of Harry lurking in his peripheral vision. He had much the same reaction as Gibbs, except he didn't draw his gun; but he did reach for it.

"Tony, this is my boyfriend, Harry Potter."

Tony continued sizing up Harry. "Boyfriend. You've never mentioned him before."

Ziva rolled her eyes. "Your opinion to the contrary, it's called a private life for a reason, Tony; because it's private. Harry and I have been together for slightly over eighteen months, and friends for longer than that. Besides, his very existence is considered classified information by the British government; I wouldn't be doing his covert status much good by mentioning him to anyone who asked, now would I?"

"Where did you get those scars?" was DiNozzo's only comment. Ziva winced, knowing that Harry hated strangers asking about the scars. They were so distinctive it was inevitable, really, but they were also savage enough that most people were too intimidated enough to work up the courage.

Tony apparently had no such sense of self-preservation.

Harry's face became very … controlled. "Killing people and breaking things."

"Ooookay. So what do you do? How can you help? And why the hell should we trust you?"

"I'm a member of her Majesty's Twenty-Second Special Air Service Regiment." Harry replied flatly, and clearly not in the mood to put up with any crap from Tony. "I'm trained as a pilot, in long-range marksmanship, demolitions and EOD, stealth, close quarter battle, hand-to-hand, interrogation and intel analysis. I can break down, strip and clean or disable the majority of weapons systems in the world, from sidearms to nuclear warheads, and am considered a black belt or Grand Master of three different martial arts. Your own Department of Defence ranks me as one of the top ten deadliest and most effective soldiers in the world. As for trust, I really don't care what you think of me, Special Agent DiNozzo. Make up your own damn mind. My only priority here is Ziva. Understood?"

DiNozzo just nodded.

"And you will trust him, Tony, because I do." Ziva interjected. "Harry has saved my life twice, both well before I joined NCIS. And if you don't trust my word by now, I may as well just go straight back to the Embassy and forget ever coming back to NCIS."

"Ziva!" Tony began to protest, but backed down at her glare, and flicked a glance at Gibbs, who showed no reaction; that was a reply in itself. If Gibbs had nothing to say, then there wasn't anything immediately wrong with Potter. "Fine. I realise I can be a bit nosy -"

"A bit?" Ziva muttered.

"- but dropping this on us in the middle of a crisis wasn't helpful. As if we didn't have enough unknowns in this case, now we have a British Special Forces operator running around D.C.? Doesn't that sound like 'International Incident' to you?"

"Any more so than allowing the FBI to continue thinking Israel is blowing people up in Georgetown?" Ziva shot back. "Thus far, I've done a lot to prove myself guilty and not much that makes me look innocent. I ran from the scene, to the Embassy, then left there and vanished again. I've spent long enough at NCIS to know that if I was a complete stranger, you would probably be agreeing with the FBI right now."
"True." Tony admitted. "But you are innocent, and you aren't a complete stranger. So fill me in."

It didn't take long for Ziva to walk Gibbs and Tony through what they knew, and her own eyewitness account.

"Next move?"

"I want to check out a few of the possible safehouses I think Eschel might be using."

"Not Mossad ones, surely, if he's gone rogue?" Tony asked skeptically.

"No, some that I set up for Ari when I was his handler." Ziva looked at Gibbs with no small amount of guilt. "Eschel was part of his extraction team when he infiltrated the NCIS morgue."

Gibbs didn't respond verbally to that, but it was almost as if he underwent a sudden density shift, becoming much more intense. Clearly that particular incident was a unwelcome memory.

"So … if you set it up, Eschel knows that you know where it is?" asked Harry.

"He's right. It's too obvious, but we've got nothing else." Gibbs turned back to Ziva. "How many safehouses?"

"Three, but one was used for the op and discarded, so just two now."

"One of them will be a trap. Ziva's his loose end."

"Or all of them." Harry slid the mug across the desk to Gibbs, handing one to Ziva.

"Well, we can't just sit here!" Ziva exclaimed.

"Yes, you can, Ziva. You're being hunted by the FBI, sitting in a safehouse is the most prudent course of action for you right now. No one will look for you here." Tony told her.

"But no one else is working to prove her innocent, DiNozzo." Gibbs said. "You, and NCIS as a whole are constrained by the FBI watching your every move. Ziva, Harry and I are free to act, so long as we avoid Ziva getting arrested."

"What do you want to do, boss?"

"I'm retired. It's your team now, DiNozzo."

"Fine." DiNozzo didn't sound happy about it though. "Check out the safehouses, McGeek and I will try to put out a BOLO without the FBI noticing, although I have no idea how right now."

"All right then. Let's get this guy before he leaves the country. Where're the safehouses?"

"Apartement in Reston, and a house in Fairfax."

"It's been several years now. Wouldn't they have been sold on, if Mossad didn't continue paying the rent after the op went down?"

"Oh, but they have. Through slush funds to be used at agents' discretion. They aren't audited very much, or tagged too classified for the accountants to know about them, so it's amazing how much
they can miss." Ziva smirked. "I kept them paid up for my own use, if something went down like ... well, like this. Didn't think I could use them after I ran from the Embassy though."

"Sneaky. I love it." Harry grinned.

"We could split up, cover them faster?"

"No." Harry and Gibbs said simultaneously, shaking their heads. They looked at each other for a moment, then back at Ziva.

"For a start, we've only got two vehicles including Agent Gibbs', strength in numbers and all that, plus you're, um ..."

"What?"

"Liable to go off half-cocked on this case, Ziva." Tony finished. "You're on edge."

Ziva glared at Harry, who was nodding, but relented. "Fine. Just for that, I'll ride with Gibbs."

"What? I didn't say anything!"

"But you were going to."

"Fine." Harry grumbled. Gibbs would want to talk to her in private, about him, so there was no point obstructing that conversation. "Let me get my gear and we can get going."

Harry's rental car was a mid-sized SUV, a new-model Cadillac SRX, parked in a public lot several hundred metres away. Harry threw his pack containing the 'care package' into the back seat before getting in and starting it up.

In Reston, a suburb in Virginia some thirty miles west-south-west of the actual District of Columbia, Harry parked behind Gibbs' old pickup truck by the side of the road a block from the first of the safehouses, got out and walked up to the passenger side window.

"Plan?"

"Not sure." Ziva answered. "I'm a fugitive with my face all over the news. Gibbs sure doesn't look like a cop any more, more like a homeless person really, sorry Gibbs, so we're hoping you have something."

"Yeah. Back in a minute."

Harry returned to his vehicle, and opened the Samsonite case. He quickly removed a tiny wireless earpiece and microphone, the latter of which he clipped to his watch strap. Both linked into to a more powerful transmitter about the size of a cigarette pack that went on his belt, which also connected to a standard handheld radio.

He walked back to the pickup. "You still got your badge?"

"Yes. Here." Ziva handed it over.

Harry passed the handheld over to her. "What's this?"
"I've got an earpiece and mic." Harry gestured. "Part of any surveillance kit. You can listen in as I 'investigate,' but you have to hit transmit to talk to me."

"You're going to impersonate an NCIS agent? Not only is that a felony, Harry, but you don't much look like a cop. And you have a British accent."

"First, only if I get caught. Second, I'll have your badge and the rest I'll improvise, and third, I can do an American accent, it's not that hard."

"You're sure?"

"Yep. Why, neshama, worried for me?"

"This isn't Afghanistan, Harry. This isn't exactly your normal environment."

"All SAS troopers are trained in basic plainclothes work, even if I haven't done it recently. I'll be fine, Ziva. It's not like I'm trying to break into the White House or anything, it's just talking to some building's super. Besides, you always do like role-play. That badge has so many possibilities. Perhaps we should tweak the whole scenario a little, later this evening, hmmm?"

Ziva blushed at the sexual banter in front of her former boss, and shot a look at Gibbs, who was looking away. However, even Gibbs' ironclad poker face couldn't hold in a tiny smirk; that was practically the equivalent of rolling on the floor laughing for the stoic former Marine. Seeing this, Ziva blushed even more, scrabbling for a comeback.

"Only if you're the one wearing the handcuffs, Harry."

Harry laughed. "Oh, I don't know, Ziva. The thought of you -"

"Enough already!" Ziva interrupted. "Don't you have a felony to commit?"

Harry wasn't done yet. "You'd make such a convincing 'fugitive in handcuffs,' Ziva," was his parting shot. "Oh wait, you've got the first part covered. I suppose I'll have to help you out with the second bit. Tonight, that is."

"Harry!"

Gibbs watched silently for a few seconds as Harry walked off towards the apartment building and Ziva turned up the sensitivity on the mic, avoiding meeting his eyes and trying not to blush furiously.

"He isn't what I expected."

If Ziva was surprised at the sally, she didn't show it; that was part of why he liked her - always professional, always in control of her emotions, but it also intrigued him this suddenly-appearing 'Harry' could get a rise of out of her so easily. Their easy flirtation and banter were indicative of a deep and solid relationship, which frankly was something Gibbs thought Ziva had been lacking, outside of her working relationships within NCIS, which weren't really the same thing. Considering he'd worked with her for eight months last year and hadn't even picked up a hint of such a relationship, "What do you mean?"

"As a boyfriend, for you, he isn't what I expected."

"What did you expect, Gibbs?"
"Well, that he'd be in Mossad, for one, or at least Israeli. How did you end up with a British soldier in your life?"

"He saved my life. Twice in two years, both times pretty much complete coincidences."

Gibbs held back from quoting Rule 39.

"We got to talking after the second one, and stayed in contact. Aside from that … well, let's just say we've been there for each other in the other's darkest hours."

"Ari?"

"Yes.. And my sister's death in '02, although our talk about that came a few months later. For Harry … well, that's not my story to tell. But it was bad." Ziva shrugged. "He's a very dangerous man, but he's an honest, honourable professional soldier, despite how much crap the world has thrown at him."

"Does your father know?"

"Yes. And no, he doesn't approve." Ziva laughed. "That might have had something to do with it, a delayed teenage rebellion on my part, but only a small part. The rest was all just ... Harry. He made me believe in something again."

"Do you love him?"

Ziva took some time to think about that, but eventually answered, "Yes."

"You don't sound too sure."

"I'm not. We don't see each other much, Gibbs; we might well irritate each other no end if we were together for long periods of time, but I don't know that for sure. What we have together right now works well enough. He's very dedicated, spends most of his time on deployment, and volunteers for extra tours because he can handle the stress. Even when he's between missions or on leave, I'm usually somewhere else on a mission myself, although now I've been stationed continuously in Washington for the last year we've been able to get together more regularly. But I do trust him, completely and without reservation; as much as I trust you, Tony, or Jenny. There was a reason I called both you and Harry, Gibbs."

"Speaking of that, how did he get here so fast? Mexico's a lot closer than Afghanistan."

"I called him immediately after the bombing, before I even knew I was in this deep, but I didn't call you until the evening. I didn't want to interrupt your retirement. When I learned the FBI put a warrant out for me I knew I was going to need your help too. Apparently a friend of his arranged for a relay of passenger slots on fighter jets being ferried in the right direction."

She was interrupted by Harry's voice from the radio.

"Excuse me, sir, you the super fer this building?" Harry's voice was now a flawless Chicago-Illinois accent, no hint of his normal London one remaining. Down the block, Gibbs could just about make out Harry standing at the top of the steps leading into the apartment complex,

"I surely am, and you are?" By contrast, the super's accent was true Deep South, Texas or Louisiana.

"Special Agent Evans, sir, Naval Criminal Investigative Service." Harry swept his jacket aside,
flashing the NCIS gold shield - and his Colt sidearm - on his belt. "A suspect in one of my cases rented Apartment eight-oh-four in this building. It's a long shot, he's probably long gone, but I want to check if the apartment was occupied."

The super eyed Harry for a few seconds, taking in the scars, the impressive physique and, obviously, the federal shield, and apparently came to the conclusion that he was police despite the unusual appearance.

"Ah don't think so. Eight-oh-four's been leased for a while now, by a very polite young woman about two years ago. What's your man look like?"

Harry pulled out a picture of Eschel. "Like this."

"Can't say ah've seen him here. Like ah said, that apartment was rented by a young Hispanic lady as ah recall, said she was from Chile."

"Mind if I check?"

"You got a search warrant?"

"No sir, I've not got a search warrant, but I don't need one fer this. Just want to knock on the door and see if anyone's home, you're not obligated to allow me entry, unlock the door or anything like that. Just a quick knock on the door, to see who answers. If he's there, well, I'll just take the subject up with him, shall I?"

"Well … no harm in that ah suppose. This way."

Harry entered the building, out of sight. Sounds from the mic indicated they were entering the elevator.

"He's good." Gibbs observed. "That was very smooth."

"I've never seen him do anything like this," Ziva admitted. "I know he's calm under pressure though. First time we met was before I even joined Mossad. Hamas tried to kidnap me, and he immediately protected me and took the kidnappers down without even breaking a sweat. Second time was in Tikrit, during the invasion of Iraq. My partner was wounded, and Mossad reached out to the invasion forces to rescue us. Harry commanded the SAS troop which was rerouted to extract us, and there was a firefight with an Iraqi convoy on the way out; again, over in a minute or two, and he was clearly respected by his men."

Gibbs nodded but didn't reply. Harry was back a few minutes later, after the super had banged on the door while Harry listened, but no response.

"Well, that was a bust." Harry passed Ziva's badge back.

"Oh, I don't know, you look good with a badge on your belt, Harry." Ziva teased. "Maybe NCIS needs a British liaison too?"

"Tempting." Harry said, grinning. "It would make that role-play more convincing." Ziva spluttered as he blithely continued. "Fairfax next?"

Back at NCIS, McGee had just finished writing up the BOLO they intended to put out to catch
Eschel.

How to avoid the FBI finding out? Simple.

Blatant lies.

McGee had come up with the idea of telling the county police forces in the DMV area (DC, Maryland and Virginia) that Eschel was wanted for spousal abuse. It wasn't terrorism related, and although it was a multi-state notice - and thus technically the FBI's jurisdiction - this kind of notice was so common, given the geography of D.C., that the FBI probably didn't even get notified of them any more. Metro PD alone probably issued thousands of notices a year about possible fugitives; the one about Eschel would, to the FBI, be lost in the bureaucratic chaff. Hopefully the local forces would get lucky.

"Done. You said you had two things for me to do?"

"Yes." Tony glanced at Abby; the forensics tech still didn't particularly like Ziva; she had been particularly close to Kate, and still associated Ziva with her murder, although she was no longer as cold towards the Israeli as she had been. "Ziva's boyfriend was there as well."

"There? As in, in Gibb's house?" Abby was instantly all over it, frowning. "Who is he, some Mossad hitman? We're already chasing one, why not throw another into the mix."

"No, he was British. A soldier, or so he said. Ziva clearly trusts him."

"And you?" McGee asked.

"I'm … not entirely convinced. He was … pretty intimidating, actually."

"How so?"

"Like … Jason Bourne kind of intimidating." Tony clarified with his usual means of communication: movie references. "Lots of scars, big scars, right across his face. Clearly knew a dozen ways to kill me with just his pinkie. Apparently the DOD thinks he walks on water or something."

"Name?" McGee was already turning back to the computer.

"Potter. Harry Potter."

A few minutes of typing produced a two files, one with a CIA tag, the other with a DOD one. The CIA one was thin, entirely bare-bones; the kind of file that didn't tell you anything, and only indicated that a much thicker file existed somewhere much, much more secure, and therefore beyond Tony's security clearance - the highest on the team, since he was its' present leader.

The DOD one on the other hand was accessible to Tony's clearance level, but was also pretty dry. A list of qualifications headed it; a very, very long one. A basic career jacket followed, the kind of thing the Brits would have sent over if Potter had been attached to an American command. Towards the end, they found a notation referencing 'the Sahar incident.'

Anyone in the Navy with a top-secret security clearance knew what the Sahar Case was. Quite possibly the worst - and most humiliating - penetration of Navy-Marine Corps security since John Walker Junior; a double agent inside the USMC with the rank of colonel, the highest-ranked active-duty known traitor in recent history. Not as damaging as some, perhaps; Ames, Hanssen and Walker especially did far more damage to American interests, but that was to be expected; they were being run by the KGB at the height of its Cold War prowess, not some two-bit group of tribal warriors.
living in caves.

The fact that the Afghani-born Sahar's extremist Islamic views had gotten through years of security screening had been a major embarrassment to the Office of Naval Intelligence and NCIS, since both had reviewed the man's clearance on a yearly basis, and his exposure - by, according to the file, none other than 'Flight Lieutenant Harry J. Potter' - had forced an enormous internal security review. The repercussions were still reverberating around the Navy; heads - including the former SECNAV and some very senior multi-star admirals - had rolled. The file mentioned little other than his involvement, however.

"The Sahar case?" McGee muttered. "That was right around the time I started at Norfolk."

"You've come a long way since then, Probie-wan." Tony said.

"Thanks boss."

"Of course, you've still got a long way to go to get to my level of mastery," Tony added. McGee just rolled his eyes, used to the hazing, and continued studying the ID photo from the DOD file. Intimidating was indeed one pretty accurate word for Harry Potter. The formal in-uniform, unsmiling ID photo, including the beige British special forces beret and winged dagger badge, practically exuded menace.

"I don't want to meet him in a dark alley," was Abby's opinion. "Glad I have a taser."

"I don't think that would stop him, Abs." McGee remarked. "According to this, the DOD ranks him as the fifth most capable soldier in the world. He and an Australian called Jack West at number four are the only two guys on the top twenty list that aren't American. Given the DOD's rather blatant bias … they're probably understating his skills."

"So, Tony? What do you think?"

"Me?"

"Well, you are the boss." McGee said, deadpan. "As you've so helpfully reminded us every so often for the last few months."

"Like every day." Abby chipped in.

"Every hour, on the hour sounds more like it."

"Enough already!" Tony studied the photo for a moment longer. "If he exposed Sahar, he's probably one of the good guys," he decided, albeit somewhat grudgingly. "He made it very clear his only priority was Ziva, and clearing her name. His first action after she called him was to clear the decks with his commanding officers and hop on the fastest plane to DC; he wouldn't have risked his own career like that if he didn't care about her."

"So why do you sound so worried?"

"This guy isn't a cop, McGeek. He's apparently one of the world's deadliest soldiers. He's just come from a warzone, and that means he probably has a 'shoot first' mentality. My concern now is what kind of body count he's going to leave behind."
The bungalow house seemed perfectly normal, with - obviously - no hint that it was a place of refuge for agents of one of the world's more infamous spy agencies. Gibbs and Ziva drove around the front, Harry took the back, now using normal two-way radios with clear earpieces rather than the lower-profile surveillance gear used in Reston.

"How do you want to play this?" Harry asked.

"Let's get this over with." Gibbs replied. "We'll go in the front, hard. You cover the back door, catch any leakers. Don't enter, we don't want crossing lines of fire."

"Sure. On your mark."

"Mark."

Harry continued forward slowly again, stopping about fifteen metres short of the building and opening the door. Drawing his weapon, he kept it down, out of sight - the house was in a small wood, part of a designated park area but there might be passers-by - but ready to brace and aim through the gap between the door and the frame of the car.

He heard Ziva's loud, "Move and we shoot!" through the radio, and listened in as they found a dead body - one of the motorcyclists - and discovered a camera, through which Eschel had been watching them.

Eschel then called, speaking to Gibbs, but Harry couldn't hear that through the headphone. Then Ziva cut it short.

"He's delaying us."

"Why?"

"I'm his loose end, remember?"

"He'll have called the FBI! Isn't that enough?"

"That's not what I'm worried about. When our safehouse was compromised in Paris, Eschel blew it up! Harry, get in here!"

Five seconds later, Harry kicked in the locked back door, the frame around the lock caving in a small spray of splinters. "Plan?"

"The body and camera are evidence, so we need to get them to NCIS."

"Which car?"

"Mine." Gibbs was already levering the leather-clad, helmeted corpse into a fireman's carry. "I'll get the evidence to NCIS. You two go to ground again, I'll call you when we know something. Ge her out of here before the FBI arrive, Potter."

"Got it." Harry and Ziva ran to his SUV, and he reversed at speed back up the dirt track. Once Harry judged he had enough momentum, he spun the car into a J-turn as they reached the tarmac street, accelerating out onto the - fortunately empty - access road, he slowed down to match the speed limit after a few seconds, as they approached the turning onto the main road.

"Was that necessary?" Ziva had only just got her safety belt on in time. "And they say I'm a crazy driver."
No reply from Harry was necessary, as it came in the form of a convoy of six black Chevy Suburbans that turned onto the street about fifty metres ahead, complete with flashing red-and-blue lights, heading back towards the safehouse at high speed.

"That enough reason for you?" Ziva ducked down below the dash, out of sight.

Once they had passed, Harry asked. "You still got that phone?"

"From the safehouse? Yes. Why?"

"Got the number Eschel called from?"

"Wait a minute." Ziva pressed at the cheap burn phone for a few seconds. "Yes. 703-377-8896."

"Okay." Harry pulled out his own secure cellphone and dialled an international number, driving one handed.

"That's another misdemeanour, right there."

"Bite me."

"Oh, I intend to," Ziva purred in a throaty voice. Harry's eyes went unfocused for a split-second, before he concentrated on the road again.

"Damn it, did you have to put that image into my head? I'm trying to drive here." As Ziva laughed, Harry's call connected.

"Government Communications Headquarters, how may I direct you call?"

"Code Seven. Ops room watch officer please." Ziva, unable to hear the call, looked at him oddly.

"One moment please."

"Who are you calling?" Ziva asked.

"GCHQ in Cheltenham. British version of the National Security Agency, hackers and communications specialists. They should be able to get an exact fix on Eschel's location through the number, even if he followed SOP and removed the battery."

"GCHQ Operations, Ruth Evershed speaking," a professional but clearly bored female voice answered.

"Scramble code four."

"Code four, roger." Harry activated the encryption module, pressing # then four on the keypad, and waited several seconds for the warbling dial-up-tones to sync and re-connect the call. The security algorithm would make it appear as nothing but white noise to eavesdroppers; theoretically it could be cracked - no security was absolute - but it would take even the NSA's banks of Cray super-computers decades to brute-force it.

"Go."

"This is operative codename Storm. Authentication follows. Colour of the day is blue. City of the day is Calcutta. Word of the day is sparrow. Personal identifier papa-oscar-eight-eight-seven-four-two-five-charlie."
"… Identity confirmed. Authorisation for tasking verified … full clearance, unrestricted authority? Never seen that before. Anyway, send tasking."

"Got a target cellphone I need the location of traced and tracked live. If you can, activate the mic and start listening in. It's probably somewhere in the region of Washington D.C."

"In Washington? I'm going to need confirmation this is a sanctioned op, Operative Storm. If it is, I can get the Americans to do it in a fraction of the time it will take if secrecy from the US is required; it will take a while to hack in and do it ourselves, maybe a day or so, and if we get busted, it'll snowball into a shit-storm of epic proportions. If this is unsanctioned, then it won't be happening at all, regardless of your blanket authorisation codes. For obvious reasons, we don't make it a habit to hack our most important ally on a whim."

"Call Sir Harold Pearce of MI-5 first, he should be in the office. If not, then call Brigadier Shaw, Director Special Forces."

"Checking. Send me the number you want tracked while I'm at it."

Harry read out the number and hung up. Ziva looked mildly impressed.

"What?"

"You just call them, say, 'jump' and they ask, 'how high'?"

"Within reason. I don't know anyone in the NSA, so GCHQ can liaise with them and get us the location. Probably going to take a while to get them to do it, this might well be the first time GCHQ has ever asked them to do something like this ... domestic."

Behind them, there was a faint sound of an explosion. They were far enough away that the detonation was only a quiet echo, like a far-away gunshot.

"This Eschel guy's a real subtle operator, isn't he?" Harry observed wryly. "Explosions here, there and everywhere."

"It's a misdirection; it's supposed to attract attention."

"Perhaps. But if he's killed any more FBI agents with that stunt, the Feds are going to put him six feet under. I understand they can be pretty vengeful when dealing with cop killers."

"I'm more worried if they continue to think I'm the one blowing up FBI agents."

They were nearly to the Gibb's house on the other side of D.C. when the GCHQ watch officer, Evershed called him back.

"Section Chief Pearce confirms your authorisation, but wants you to call with an explanation as soon as practical." Harry winced. That was not going to be a fun conversation. "I'll shoot this over to the NSA's ECHELON sub-station in the UK at RAF Menwith Hill, and they can send it to Ford Meade, who will have to get an emergency FISA warrant. That won't take too long though because the system is designed for short deadlines, but they might have to pass it to the FBI. Or not, depending on their lawyers' interpretation of the American Constitution on this particular day of the week."
"How long?"

"With Pearce's and our authority behind the request, it'll get a high priority tag, so providing they say yes, the Yanks will have something in about three to six hours. Do you want them to call you, or reroute back through us?"

"Calling me is fine."

"Got it, I'll give them this number. Anything else?"

"No. Thanks for the quick response." Harry hung up again as they turned into the parking spot. "They said about three to six hours."

"Seems you have a 'thing' for hanging up without saying goodbye as well." Ziva observed, smirking.

"Once again, bite me."

Harry called Pearce from the kitchen; once he was done he returned to the basement where she was getting changed.

"That was a very one-sided conversation." Harry leaned at the bottom of the stairs, admiring Ziva openly as she slid into a tight grey tank top; she noticed him watching, and put on a bit of a show of it.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Consisting mostly of being yelled at for utilising British strategic resources for a personal, technically unsanctioned mission. I may have originally put to him that my purpose in coming here was to hold your hand and generally support you in your time of need. Possibly to pay for a really good lawyer. Chasing down bad guys all over Washington DC was certainly not in the itinerary."

Ziva arched an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Hold my hand? Do I look like the kind of bimbo girlfriend who needs her big strong manly-man to come hold her hand?"

Harry winced. "I'm going to pay for that in some subtle way later, aren't I?"

"Not going to be that subtle about it." Ziva leaned in close, putting a hand on his inner thigh and enjoyed the way Harry's entire body tensed up, staring playfully into his eyes as her hands roved. "As previously mentioned, biting may be involved.

"You're all talk."

"You know I'm not. Besides, you like it when I talk dir-mmmumph-"

Harry smirked at Ziva's outraged, then narrowed eyes glaring at him over the hand he'd placed over her mouth, his other hand s the nape of her neck preventing her from escaping.

"Yes, I do, but can we please clear you of multiple counts of murder before I jump you right here and now? You might not be in a fit state to do anything after I ... have my way with you." Ziva's eyes glinted mischievously. "Don't you start." He removed his hand.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." Ziva said innocently, before reverting to work, standing and turning away. "NCIS might be able to do trace the phone faster."
"Hell. I should have thought of that. But aren't the FBI watching them like hawks?"

"We're very inventive. Tony and McGee will find some way to get around them. If they can't think of anything, they'll just screw with the FBI to distract them, and because they find it amusing."

Harry thought it was rather interesting - and revealing - that she referred to the NCIS team as 'we.' Clearly Washington was no longer 'just another assignment' to her; she'd really put down roots here. He'd known that already, to a point, but it was usually the unconscious actions and word choice that were often the real clue to sounding out Ziva's emotional state on any particular thing, because she usually was so controlled on the surface.

"Got it, we'll send them the number too. The problem is that we still have no idea what to expect here. Eschel might not be working alone despite his apparent accomplice's death. Probably isn't, in fact; a two to five man cell is more likely. Anything larger is difficult to coordinate and maintain operational security, but precisely timed bomb attacks like the Georgetown bombing are difficult to plan and execute singlehandedly, too many things to go wrong."

"The motorcycle that lured me to Georgetown had two riders, only one of whom is now dead." Ziva reminded him. "Eschel was wearing a suit when I saw him at the scene, not motorcycle leathers. That's at least one more accomplice unaccounted for."

"True. What about Eschel himself? What're his skills? Explosives, obviously."

"He was a Krav Maga instructor for Kidon."

Harry was impressed, albeit reluctantly. "He was an instructor in the Mossad's favourite martial art, in a unit full of very highly trained Krav Maga practitioners?"

"Yep."

"Can you take him?"

"At gunpoint? Sure."

"Not what I meant, Ziva."

"In hand-to-hand? Not a chance."

"And we have to take him alive … and he knows that."

Ziva grimaced. "So he'll run, because he knows we won't shoot him." She shot Harry a look. "Can you take him?"

Harry shrugged. "Possibly. But if we do get into it, it's probably going to be brutal."

Harry's phone rang a full seven hours later, well after midnight.

"Flight Lieutenant Potter?"

"Go ahead."

"This is Colonel Irving Lambert, National Security Agency. I have the location data you asked for, contingent on a few questions."

"That sounds ominous."
The NSA officer chuckled. "It's not that bad. I called Sir Harold to confirm the reason for the request. Unsanctioned vigilante missions aren't the kind of thing we normally condone, Flight Lieutenant, but apparently you're one rock-hard reliable operative, and Pearce says when you cry wolf we should bloody well listen. His words, by the way."

"Sounds like him."

"So, FBI has a warrant out for one Officer Ziva David, liaison to NCIS, concerning the triple murder of one Abdul Wazir and two FBI agents two mornings ago. She was seen at the scene, fled from it, was observed again leaving the Israeli Embassy that evening, and has now been implicated in the bombing of a house the FBI were just gearing up to raid, resulting in the injuring of two more agents. Again, normally we'd just leave this case be; being inside the United States, it's very much the FBI's jurisdiction. However, Sir Harold relayed your theory concerning all the very many reasons Israel shouldn't have done this, and I happen to agree. This incident makes no sense."

"I'm glad somebody's finally noticed that."

"Do you have any further information to add? Sir Harold said that you said you couldn't tell him everything over the transatlantic phone line. I assure you this link is as secure as we could make it."

Harry filled him in on Namir Eschel's involvement, and the events of the past day. "Convinced, I hope?"

"Indeed. Unfortunately, the FBI seems to have have their collective heads up their asses right now, refusing to consider any other theory. In their eyes, Miss David is their only suspect, and nobody over there is listening to me. Mossad isn't answering the phones either; tensions are still running high between our agencies from an op we pulled in Jerusalem in '04, when one of our agents shot dead a Shin Bet operative who was about to betray him on Mossad's orders. They've been unwilling to play ball with us ever since."

"Let me guess; Eli David was behind it?"

"That's our guess; we don't like him, and we certainly don't trust him. His daughter, however, seems cut from a different cloth. She's been under surveillance by us and other agencies on and off while in the States; perhaps of interest to you, the reason we decided to lay off eventually was that we also observed Mossad was keeping tabs on her. Clearly Eli doesn't even trust his own daughter; we took that as a positive character reference."

Harry laughed. "So would I. Ziva mentioned it; apparently they accused her of having a relationship with one of her team-mates at NCIS, just because he was visiting her apartment one night a week."

"One night? If they were having an affair, they'd be meeting outside of work far more than that. Mossad always has been too paranoid for their own good. Sometimes that drives their agents away, the lack of trust always gets to them in the end; possibly this Eschel guy as well, although my analysts believe he's most likely in it for the money, since he's unlikely to be a convert to radical Islam. Does Mossad know about your relationship with Officer David?"

"Her father certainly does; she told him. Whether or not he's kept it to himself, I couldn't tell you. It certainly wouldn't look good for Eli from the point of view of other senior Mossad bureaucrats, if his daughter was in a relationship with a foreign soldier; that makes her a potential security risk, and after that mess with Ari Haswari, Eli's rep inside Mossad is probably lowered somewhat already, particularly with regards to his childrens' … unreliability."

"Possibly. He's still number one to be the next Director though. Enough on that. The cellphone you
wanted tracked has been on the move. It's now in Woodbridge, Virginia, at the Fairfield Inn, a motel just off Route Ninety-Five, on Prince William Parkway. Can't tell you which room, unfortunately. If it was a sat phone, maybe."

"Thank you. I have to say, I wasn't expecting such cooperation for such a … personal mission."

Another chuckle. "I'm not allowed to deploy agents inside the US. Neither is the CIA, and the FBI's too hot on this case to not notice if NSA or CIA agents suddenly start showing up on their radar. NCIS is under scrutiny. Nobody else wants to get involved in this particular bureaucratic pissing match. The FBI director's being a stubborn bastard and insisting his agents are pursuing all leads, while telling us to get the hell off his turf - which, admittedly, he has every right to do. However, for those of us who can see the big picture, it's obvious Mossad, and by extension your girlfriend didn't kill Wazir. As for you, you're on the ground, up to speed, you're not barred constitutionally from doing anything, and while your decidedly unusual presence in this case might cause some tensions later, I'd much rather save our nation's diplomatic relationship with Israel first and worry about the FBI's bruised institutional ego tomorrow. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, as they say."

"So I'm your expendable asset."

"Exactly. You have literally no connection to the NSA, or to the United States bar that dual-citizenship you picked up a few years ago as a … consolation prize, let's call it, after the Sahar screwup in '03. That, plus your skill set, makes you perfect for this."

"Well, I'm glad you're being honest at least. Could you at least bail me out if I get arrested?"

"Possibly. I'll certainly tell Sir Harold if that happens, and the Embassy can do it. As for being honest, well, he said you appreciated straight talking, and you know how this game is played. If I'd danced around the topic, you would have been suspicious of me at least. Which leads me to my next point."

"Oh?"

"We're interested in recruiting you. Your skill set and mission records are very impressive. Just the kind of thing I'm looking for."

That's interesting, Harry thought. Just the thing 'I'm looking for. Not 'the NSA' or 'our agency,' but 'I'm looking for.'

That would imply this Lambert guy is high up enough to cut through enormous amounts of red tape, if he can just make employment offers like that over the phone to a foreign soldier, regardless of dual nationality. And I've never heard of him, not even the slightest hint of his name has ever come up - which it probably would have, if he was that senior.

But he knows Pearce … personally, from the sound of it … interesting. Inconclusive, but interesting. I'll ask Pearce later. Although he probably won't tell me anything useful, at least he'll be aware that I know something's going on here.

"Thank you for the compliment, but I'm not interested in leaving Her Majesty's Service right now. In a few years ... perhaps."

"I understand. However, for someone with your skills, you can consider that an open offer."

Again, that implies he's very high up.
"Very generous."

"Isn't it just? Keep me informed on the Wazir case if you would, please. This number will be put straight through to me."

"Certainly." Harry ended the conversation.

"Who was that?" Ziva asked, from where she was cleaning her gun with obsessive detail over by the workbench.

"NSA. They located Eschel." Harry didn't see any point in mentioning the job offer. He wasn't intending to take it anyway.

On the plus side, now he had a number for a senior NSA official who seemed to think highly of him. Excellent. As he'd told Ziva before, it was all about who you know.

Ziva immediately bounced up. "Then let's go!"

"Not so fast. Call NCIS first. Then we'll go and put the place under surveillance."

Stakeout was boring.

Harry had long, long experience of waiting; he was a sniper, after all. But experience didn't prevent it from being boring, but made it easier not to get frustrated with it.

Well, at least this time I get to sit in a car with Ziva. Infinitely more comfortable than a hole in the jungle with my spotter. Better conversation too. Definitely better looking.

The Fairfield Inn was a two-story motel, like any one of thousands all over the United States. A bit higher quality than most, perhaps, but nonetheless still the kind of cheap, anonymous accommodation craved by spies and other people trying to hide. Harry had done a quick walk-around when they arrived, mapping out the area to note possible escape routes on foot while Ziva did the same for a vehicle, in case Eschel tried to run.

Or if the FBI arrived, and they had to run.

The team at NCIS were still working, running down leads on the corpse found at the bungalow safehouse, and performing an autopsy. Harry and Ziva meanwhile had been unable to confirm Eschel's presence in the Inn; they'd been here only about five hours, and didn't really expect him to appear before the morning.

Harry could have pulled the fake federal agent routine again and showed the rogue agent's photo to the night clerk, but the bored woman watching TV in the back office might not have been on duty to see him check in, and might behave oddly if she saw Eschel again.

To an experienced operative, that would be enough to justify shifting locations again, and Harry was unenthusiastic about successfully vehicle-tailing such an agent. He and Ziva were good, but Ziva hadn't actively operated as a spy for over a year while at NCIS, and despite having some training and his success in Reston, this really wasn't Harry's field of expertise. That meant they were both a bit rusty, and Eschel's skills were clearly razor sharp if he'd managed to fake his death sufficiently well to fool Mossad, and continue to hide for the six months since.
When they did see him, they'd call NCIS and get some backup first.

Ziva woke in the passenger seat, stretching out the kinks from the uncomfortable position.

"What time is it?"

"Oh-eight-ten. Want to take over? I'll get us some food. Coffee?"

"Oh, yes please." Ziva looked out the windscreen. "Wait."

Harry paused, one hand on the door release, and followed her gaze.

About twenty metres away, a dark haired man had his back to them, closing the door of a ground floor room, third from the end.

"Is that him?" Harry reached for the camera.

"Maybe … right height, hair colour …" The man turned. "That's him." About five-ten; short, slightly spiky black hair, facial hair trimmed in a somewhat scruffy 'short box' style.

Hello, Namir. You're about to have a very, very bad day.

Eschel set off walking, heading north. "Where's he going?"

Ziva studied him for a few more seconds. "He's got no bags."

"So he's not leaving … probably." Harry thought out loud. "But he might have a vehicle parked away from the motel, for security like I did at Gibbs' place the last two nights, and left his bag in that vehicle."

"Then we need to follow him." Ziva made to open the door, but Harry stopped her.

"Ziva, he knows what you look like. Call NCIS, I'll tail him." He flipped open the 'care package' and quickly picked out the low-profile mic kit they'd used in Reston. "Be ready to move the car."

"Harry, you're about the most distinctive person possible! Tails are supposed to be unremarkable."

"And who else is here?"

"... Fine."

Harry slipped out of the car, sliding the mic, earpiece and transmitter on as he walked after Eschel, doing his best not to appear to be hurrying. The Israeli had quite a lead on him now, but was still in sight, having crossed a road into the parking lot of the group of superstores a few couple of hundred yards away.

"Radio check."

"I hear you." Ziva's voice replied. "I'm moving the car."

"Got it."

A few hundred yards north, Harry followed Eschel to the entrance of a Starbucks in a just-opened Target megastore.
Harry debated what to do. He could wait outside, and maybe be tagged when Eschel came out again - if he'd noted Harry on the way over, which he was likely to have done - or he could enter the coffee shop and make like he had been heading over here anyway, as a guest of the same motel.

In the latter, his scars might actually work for him. He was so blatantly familiar with violence, so blindingly obviously a potential threat Eschel would disregard him as a threat for that very reason; a risky double bluff, but Harry just didn't look like a counter-intelligence agent. He would keep an eye on him, sure, but probably estimate Harry was a wounded veteran or law enforcement; someone to be wary of, but not someone actively looking for him. If Harry took pains to reinforce that by not acting like a proper good little counter-intel G-man, for example standing directly behind Eschel in the queue, he'd dismiss him even more. Plus it would give him an opportunity to judge the man's situational awareness and other such skills without actually having to do anything.

Unlike the District of Columbia immediately north of it, which pretty much never issued concealed permits, Virginia was a very pro-gun state; concealed permits were not unusual, so his sidearm - which would certainly be noted immediately by someone of Eschel's calibre, pun intended - would not be an immediate cause for alarm.

Ziva would probably tear him a new one for violating operational procedure so much, but hanging around outside the glass-walled coffee shop would pique Eschel's suspicions even more.

"Ziva, please don't yell at me." He muttered into the mic, pretending to read a text on his phone screen.

"Why? … you're about to do something stupid, aren't you." Suspicion laced her voice even with the lower-quality radio link. Harry winced.

"You could call it that. I'm going silent for a few minutes."

"You could have blown the whole thing wide open! You could have let him know he was under surveillance!"

"But I didn't, did I?" Harry protested.

He'd done exactly as he'd planned; standing behind Eschel in the line - a very short one - he'd ordered - using his Chicago accent - two coffees and pastries, after hearing the former Mossad man order a couple of ciabatta sandwiches that would need to be heated up. Harry's order had been completed first, enabling him to leave first, having confirmed Eschel was simply getting breakfast and not meeting a handler or anything similarly nefarious.

The seating area was entirely empty, as the store had been open for just fifteen minutes, with no possible contacts in sight - and Eschel's own order had been to go. That meant he wasn't planning on sitting around for ten or fifteen minutes like he would if he had a scheduled meet, scoping the place out for … well, for people like Harry, and would be leaving again quickly.

While that seemed thin evidence to base such assumptions on, spies were actually extremely predictable - if you knew their playbook. Although of course different agencies had different styles, 'tradecraft' was designed specifically around blending in, following the pattern of life to the absolute letter, dotting every I and crossing every T in order to appear as absolutely normal, unremarkable and unmemorable as possible. If Eschel had been waiting around for a face-to-face meeting, he would have ordered in; to do otherwise might attract attention, and since it was a controllable variable,
Eschel would not have changed it. It was as simple as that.

Eschel had given him a quick and thorough look over when he'd entered, and had remained tense the entire time Harry had been in the shop, shifting so he always had him in view. When waiting for his order to be heated, he'd chosen a chair facing both Harry and the door - again, classic tradecraft.

Harry had had his own opportunity to look him over too. There had been no tell-tale bulge of a weapon anywhere under his lightweight jacket, but Ziva had been right; the man was clearly hand-to-hand trained, moving in a way that said he was very aware of his body, always balanced, knowing his centre of gravity and so forth.

Harry himself had deliberately walked differently, faking a slight limp, favouring his right side to further the illusion of a previous severe injury, the kind of thing that would lead to the scars and a medical discharge. Leaving first had been a calculated risk, but loitering around would have been suspicious: having ordered two coffees to go, he had no reasonable excuse to sit around, as clearly there was somebody else waiting for the food.

So he'd left, spotted the SRX a few rows back and Ziva drove them back to the motel's lot, parking in the same space. To all intents and purposes when the rogue agent returned, the car would appear not to have moved.

Ziva, however, was not happy. It had been an insane move, completely against the playbook. Which, as Harry had already pointed out, had been the point.

"It was reckless!"

"And I brought you coffee and an apple fritter, too."

Ziva's incensed glare - annoyed he'd taken such a risk - relented in the face of the offering and Harry's clearly unruffled demeanour. She cracked a smile. "Fine. But only because of the apple fritter."

"I know your every weakness."

"Shut up."

"Where are the boys from NCIS?"

"Twenty minutes out. Traffic's pretty thick. D.C.'s gridlocks are legendary."

"So I've heard." They pulled back into the motel's lot. Eschel, walking, arrived a few minutes later. He knocked on the door …

"Knocking?" Harry wondered rhetorically. "If it's his room, why … oh." The answer was quickly apparent, as a brown-haired, olive-skinned woman opened it and greeted him … enthusiastically.

"What do you think?"

"Honeypot." Harry started to chuckle. "Classic honeypot. Oldest asset recruitment technique around. Probably sweetened the deal, pardon the pun, with a lot of money."

Ziva nodded. "Eschel's too smart to fall for just the honeypot technique. Money must have been involved somewhere."

"Ten dollars on her being Syrian," Harry said.
Ziva hid a smile. "Done. Ten bucks says Iranian." They shook theatrically, before Ziva continued. "The dead motorcyclist? From the cabin? He was an Iranian student. Gibbs told me when I called him just now."

Harry groaned, reaching for his wallet. "Oh, that was low, Ziva. Very, very low." A ten dollar note landed in her palm. "Foregone conclusion."

"I am a spy." Ziva smirked. "You should expect this kind of thing by now."

"Indeed, you are a spy. What would your next move be here? Either as Eschel or as this mystery woman."

Ziva thought about it for a few seconds. "Namir was always overconfident, assured in the success of his plans. To be fair, he is very competent, and always prepares contingencies diligently, but he probably assumes I was killed in the bomb yesterday. The FBI still haven't made a statement, so he's proceeding on the assumption that I'm dead. Even if I'm not, so long as he isn't caught, I can't really prove my innocence. Either way, his objective is to leave the country without being caught."

"And the Iranian agent? If you had been both paying Eschel and keeping him in line by seducing him?"

"Similar. Get out of the country. However ..." Ziva frowned. "Eschel is now no longer required. Mossad would require me to kill him, if he was a foreign asset with no further use. He can prove Iran's involvement if caught, and the most likely point for him to be caught will be ... leaving the country."

"So ..."

"So she will kill him before he can reach it."

"Ah. So we need to stop her." Harry sighed. "Should we wait for backup?"

"No. We can't risk it." Harry expected Ziva to reach for the door, but she didn't, instead nodding at his little box of tricks. "Wasn't there a recording device in there?"

"Yes."

"I'll go in wired. They may say something useful as evidence, and if we have to shoot them both ..."

Harry didn't need to reply. *Then we won't be able to prove anything.* Instead he opened the case and began setting up the listening device, a simple microphone connected to the digital recorder which went on Ziva's belt. That done, Harry pulled out his phone, dialling the retired NCIS agent. "Agent Gibbs?"

"Potter? What is it?"

"We're moving in now. We've observed a woman with Eschel. In case it all goes to hell, her description is that she's about five-five in height, has brown hair, light brown skin, seen wearing a loose brown vertically striped shirt and jeans. Since the other accomplice was an Iranian student, and since it seems likely Iran benefits most from the whole plot, we're assuming she is an Iranian agent. If that is the case, Eschel is a loose end who will need to be eliminated, and we need him alive if possible. While I would like to wait for backup, we need to move now."

"Understood. We're stuck in traffic ... wait, McGee, take that opening. Get on the hard shoulder." In the background, a siren started. "Correction, we were stuck in traffic. Ten minutes out."
"Got it." He closed the phone. "Ten minutes." His hand came to rest first on the telescoping baton clipped to the back of his belt, and then on the butt of his .45 calibre Kimber-model MEUSOC 1911, checking that the hammer of the single-action pistol was pulled back.

Harry had been trained to always combat-carry the 1911 at Condition One - round in the chamber, full magazine, hammer cocked, safety on. It was the least safe mode of carrying a firearm (short of Condition Zero, leaving the safety off, which was just stupid, but the 1911's single-action design meant it was the most practical for returning fire quickly. Ziva noticed the action, and flicked him a glance before again focusing on the door.

"Alive, Harry."

"I know, I know. One more thing." Harry dialled the NSA colonel, Lambert.

"Update for me, Flight Lieutenant?"

"Yes. Your information was spot on. Eschel and an unknown female, unidentified but presumed a hostile agent are at the motel. We're moving to capture them before she eliminates him."

"Thank you for telling me first. How soon do you want the FBI to arrive?"

"How do you intend to control that?"

"Well, some traffic lights between the Hoover Building and Woodbridge might suffer some unexpected malfunctions. Or the cellphone towers that FBI Agent Sach's phone is relaying off might mysteriously lose power for an hour. Just hypothetical conjecture, of course, you understand."

"Of course. Give it an hour or two, let NCIS have a head start in arresting Eschel, getting him in the system."

"You got it. Good luck."

Harry flattened his back to the right hand side of the door, drawing his weapon. The lock was a cheap brass thing, but contrary to popular opinion, it is actually pretty hard to kick in a door. It is possible, but isn't especially reliable - and if you fail, the kick has the extremely vexing effect of alerting the room's inhabitants of the armed and presumably unfriendly visitors outside the door.

Ziva pulled out a set of lockpicks. Fifteen seconds later, the lock clicked open.

Now a kick would work … but Harry opted for the quiet version anyway, sliding the handle quietly down and pushing inwards, while keeping all but his wrist and weapon just outside the door frame. Ziva stayed low, in a crouch. When the door was open, any return fire would likely be at chest height - at Harry. When he ducked back, she would still be able to shoot back.

Inside was silent. As subtle as Harry had tried to be when opening the door, the room was small. Either his opening the door or Ziva's lockpicks had probably been heard.

A hand extended a silenced Makarov around the end of the short corridor inside.

Oh, yes, definitely heard us. They both ducked back. The nine mil rounds zipped past, three shots, hitting the shrubbery bordering the path and punching through the windscreen of a car parked opposite the door.

"Is that you, Ziva?" An accented voice shouted from inside. "You're more persistent than I gave you credit for."
"You always did underestimate everybody else, Namir." Ziva replied, peeking round the door frame, looking for an opportunity. She ducked again as another two shots sliced the air.

A crash from inside; glass breaking. Harry risked a glance. Eschel had thrown a solid-looking wooden chair through the window on the far side; he was just a step away from leaping through into the car park on the far side even as Harry saw him.

Then the silenced Makarov fired again, but not at them - blood blossomed on the left sleeve of Eschel's white T-shirt. Two, three, four shots, but only the first hit.

"Harry! Cut him off!"

"On it!" Harry took off running for the end of the building, as Ziva fired two rounds down the corridor; suppression fire, keeping the Iranian woman from following Eschel through the window, before entering herself. Makarovs only had nine-round capacities, so the Iranian agent was all out of ammo - and luck.

Harry didn't envy her; assuming she didn't immediately surrender with a gun pointed at her, and managed a disarm, fighting a pissed-off Ziva was probably going to short, painful and ultimately futile.

Harry sprinted past two more rooms, turned left, and rounded the building into the parking lot, moving out past the first rank of parked cars.

Eschel was nowhere in sight.

Harry began moving down the line of vehicles, quickly checking between each one, while keeping an eye out in other directions for the Israeli's white T-shirt. Audi hatchback. Jeep. Lexus. Chevrolet SUV. Ford Transit -

As he pivoted around the Transit, a pair of hands grabbed his wrist and barrel of his gun. The angle of his hold turned the Colt's barrel into a lever, allowing Eschel to effortlessly twist it out of his grip. Fortunately, the disarm didn't put the pistol grip directly into Eschel's hands - that would have been really bad.

On the other hand, being disarmed was still pretty bad. But even being disarmed, for people like Harry, did not mean defenceless.

Still gripping the gun barrel, and with no time to reverse it to shoot, Eschel whipped it back and went for an overhead strike. Harry blocked high, forearm to forearm, and slammed his right knee up under Eschel's unguarded arm, just under the ribcage. The already injured Israeli grunted, winded, as he was thrown into the van. The Colt was thrown clear, skittering along the tarmac to rest against the wheel of the next car, two spaces over.

Eschel recovered quickly, throwing a quick flurry of blows intended to throw him off balance. Harry blocked most of them, but was forced to let a few land; accepting damage to stay in close and to prevent Eschel from executing more powerful kicks that could disable Harry enough to let him escape. Neither said anything, although Eschel's eyes had widened in recognition; they fought in a grim silence that said both men understood it was deadly serious confrontation.

Taunting was for amateurs.

Krav Maga is an explicitly tactical martial art - it is most emphatically not for competitions. It focuses on real-world situations and brutally efficient counter-attacks, derived from a variety of sources - boxing, Muay Thai, Wing Chun, Judo and jiu-jitsu to name but a few.
Perhaps surprisingly, it also emphasises avoiding fights - in a military context, hand-to-hand is quite literally the last possible resort. Soldiers carry rifles, pistols and combat knives as well for a very good reason - all of them are more efficient than bare hands. However, if a fight is required or unavoidable, it should be finished as quickly as possible - which was exactly what Krav Maga was oriented around. Common techniques are designed to strike at the body's most vulnerable points - eyes, throat, face, groin, knee joint, solar plexus, etc.

However, Harry had noted in the coffee shop that Eschel was left-handed; the bullet graze to that arm was clearly inhibiting him.

Thus, Harry was not particularly surprised when Eschel's next blow was a powerful right hook at his throat. The rogue agent's off-hand strikes were still powerful, but clearly not as coordinated as his dominant hand.

That was one disadvantage.

The other was his narrow technical focus. He was clearly extremely proficient in Krav Maga, as Ziva had said. However, Harry was close to being the SAS's top hand-to-hand combatant; in terms of technique he was the best, as his almost inhumanly quick reaction time and constant practise gave him natural advantages in that department, but the twenty-year veteran Colour Sergeants and Warrant Officers who made up the bulk of the Regiment's instructors were far more experienced than he, and could still best him by virtue of knowing more underhanded tricks than he did.

Nonetheless, Harry's sometimes bruising defeats at their hands were always learning experiences, and he thus he had been exposed to a wide variety of fighting forms beyond his personal favourite of Eskrima, both through the aforementioned NCOs and operating or training alongside foreign special forces units. He liked learning new styles and techniques, both for his job but also for personal interest; to him, it was almost as much fun as flying, a natural outlet for his physical capabilities.

For that 'personal interest' reason, he had also become proficient to a basic level in Judo, Karate, Wing Chun, Brasilian jiu-jitsu, SCARS (learned from the Navy SEALs he'd served with in Afghanistan) and the US Marines's MCMAP (learned from deploying alongside Force Recon in Baghdad), amongst others. This allowed him to mix up his own style, stay unpredictable, and right now that broad base of experience gave him an opening.

As Eschel's right fist sailed in, Harry leaned back out of reach even as his right arm came up, pushing Eschel's arm outwards. The blocking arm continued to move up, back and fired forwards up the line of the Israeli's still outstretched arm; this little trick came from Indonesian Silat. By combining the block and the strike into a single action, the time Eschel had to respond was reduced to just tenths of a second.

The force required to collapse the human larynx was seventy-six pounds of force. Harry's closed fist impacted Eschel's throat with six less than that. They still needed him to be able to talk, after all.

Nonetheless, it would still hurt like a bitch.

Eschel staggered back, choking, one hand rising to his throat. Harry closed in again, only to receive a brutal snap-kick to his thigh that sent him to one knee. Even disoriented and barely able to breathe, Eschel was no pushover. His hand grabbed the back of Harry's head, and rammed it towards the side of the van.

Harry took the blow full on the forehead - fortunately, Eschel hadn't been able to put his full weight behind it. If he had, Harry would probably have a concussion. Still, the blow left him dizzy, and bleeding from a long shallow cut on his forehead, but he was still functional.
Eschel had been desperate, however, sacrificing his defence to attempt the potentially fight-ending blow. A brutal elbow strike hammered up into the ex-Mossad man's groin without him being able to give even a token effort at blocking it.

As fight-ending blows go, that was a pretty terminal one.

Harry didn't stop there; he wasn't going to risk being blindsided again by someone who had already managed an effective counter-attack even when his throat had nearly been collapsed.

Even as Eschel doubled over, staggering a few steps away to the side, Harry's right hand whipped back to the ASP baton riding on the back of his belt. A short tug on the lanyard landed the grip in his hand, and he pushed off the ground to his full height. Ahaking off the disorientation from the head blow, he took one step and swung the baton in full reverse rotation; round in a loop into an upwards strike. The baton was a friction-lock design; the very momentum of the swing caused it to expand to full length, and its mid-point impacted the bridge of Eschel's nose with an unpleasant wet crunch.

Unconsciousness was immediate, and the blow threw the spy onto his back, spreadeagled. Probably a skull fracture too, or a broken cheekbone at least to go with the nose - contrary to Hollywood's opinion, it is functionally impossible to kill someone by driving the bridge of their nose into their brain. It's mostly cartilage, not bone, and the force required for such a punch would be equivalent to using a jackhammer on someone's face.

A police officer would probably call it unreasonable force - a court certainly would - but Harry didn't live in a neat, black-and-white world where application of force was a neat, regulatable sort of thing. Eschel was a threat, and he needed to be removed as one. The fact that he still needed to be alive at the end of that process simply meant Harry had to be a little more … creative, but didn't mean it couldn't be any less permanent than shooting him.

Serves him right.

Of course, the emotional satisfaction of beating the guy who tried to frame his girlfriend for murder into unconsciousness was quite powerful, too.

Harry checked Eschel's pulse, even though he was fairly certain the Israeli would survive it; it was steady, so he just left him there. The chances of the assassin regaining consciousness before being cuffed by the imminently arriving NCIS agents were slim to none anyway.

Speaking of those agents … he could hear voices, more than two, through the destroyed window of the room a few metres away.

"Harry?" Ziva's voice called out.

"Over here!" Harry yelled back. "I've got Eschel. He's … uh … going to need an ambulance."

The team arrived a few seconds later.

Gibbs took one look at Eschel, looked Harry in the eye, and simply nodded once.

McGee took in Eschel, the fallen weapon, the baton, then the scarred, bleeding man holding it - whom he'd not yet met in person before, even if he'd seen pictures - and very sensibly pointed his weapon at Harry. Ziva, bleeding from a broken nose of her own, pushed his arm down with a glare.

Tony did the same pattern - suspect, gun, baton, man holding it - but just shot Harry a wary look and moved forward to cuff Eschel once McGee lowered his weapon.
"Gee, what is it with you two and beating the suspects half to death?"

"What?"

"Ziva." Tony hooked a thumb over his shoulder towards both his teammate and the motel. "She KO'd the Iranian."

"Really?" Ziva nodded. Harry grinned. "Nice going, grasshopper."

Ziva just rolled her eyes. "Chachmolog. " Smartass. "Did you forget the last time we sparred, Harry? As I recall, you were the one who ended up on his ass."

That had been true, but mostly because Ziva had broken his concentration with some particularly … interesting suggestions in the middle of the fight; Harry changed the subject quickly. "Did the recorder work?"

"It better." Ziva muttered tiredly. "I let myself get beat up for it."

The aftermath was almost worse than the fight. If there was an award for the most anally retentive prick on the face of the planet, FBI Agent Sachs would certainly be in the running for it.

Harry and Ziva had been bundled back to NCIS to be patched up with Eschel and the Iranian agent, whose name they still didn't know. And for the home turf advantage when dealing with the FBI.

Agent Sachs had arrived in high dudgeon and not in possession of the full facts. Fortunately, he was professional enough to recognise there was something he didn't know; that didn't prevent his questioning of Harry and Ziva being excessively aggressive. His temper hadn't been improved when the British military attaché and a lawyer from the Embassy arrived, apparently on the orders of the MI-6 Station Chief; Harry took that to mean Pearce, or more likely Lambert had 'suggested' their presence.

Either way, Harry had been glad for the backup. It had been worth it just to see Sachs' face when the lawyer went on the offensive and started ripping into him, alluding not-so-subtly to the agent's 'incompetence' in not pursuing the Eschel angle.

Of course, Sachs' hadn't even had a hint of Eschel's involvement, because Tony hadn't been able to tell the FBI agent without revealing his own contact with a then-fugitive Ziva, so it wasn't really his fault. On the other hand, his close-mindedness had forced them to go around him, and made him look like an idiot in the process. It probably wasn't going to be good for his career … which just made him more angry.

Fortunately, Gibbs knew people. A gruff senior agent called Fornell showed up after a few hours of the shouting match, taking over the case and ordered Sachs to lay the hell off.

Strangely, Harry and Ziva's cooperation increased markedly at that point, and the lawyer's obstructionism disappeared. Odd, that.

Eventually, they were done, and were left alone. For all of five seconds, until a petite redhead woman strolled in as if she owned the place.

"Welcome home, Ziva!" Ah. Director Shepard, probably. So she does own the place, metaphorically speaking.
"Thank you, Jen."

"And welcome to NCIS, Mr Potter." Green eyes evaluated him in a manner not unlike Gibbs', but with a different emphasis. This was the look of a politician - which the director of a Washington DC-based federal agency was by default - judging how this man fit into the general picture, and into her own plans.

Harry didn't take offence. It wasn't vocalised, after all, and it was the Director's job to anticipate and plan for everything.

"Thank you, Director."

"No, thank you. For being so ready to rush to Ziva's side and defend her, and by extension this agency. I certainly would have lost my job if the FBI had caught Ziva and charged her, so thank you from me personally. Although you've attracted some rather high-level attention; I just had the FBI Director yelling at me, demanding to know just when I started hiring active-duty British soldiers as NCIS agents. He also wasn't terribly pleased that even he couldn't access your file. Fortunately, however, you have powerful friends, and so they aren't charging you with impersonating a federal agent. Or interfering in a federal investigation."

"What will happen to Eschel and the Iranian?"

"Her name is Faatin Amal, of VEVAK, Iranian intelligence. She'll be charged with terrorism, espionage, and murder. The student, Sassnid Balash was killed with her weapon. Abby has found only Amal's fingerprints on the shells in the magazine, and on the working parts, which strongly implies it was her gun."

"Will she be traded to the Iranians?" Ziva asked.

"Possible, but unlikely. She may have learned quite a bit about Mossad from Eschel. Even if we can't confirm that from him, neither we or the Israeli's are willing to take the chance."

"And Eschel?"

Shepard smiled. It wasn't a particularly happy expression; more bloodthirsty. "The FBI will throw the book at him, then offer to lay off on the death penalty in return for information. When the big three - FBI, CIA, NSA - have drained him of any information they think they can get, Mossad gets him."

"Ouch. That's pretty much a death penalty by itself."

Shepard nodded. "And it's entirely possible we will use that to sweeten the deal. Whatever happens, he certainly won't be released."

"And where's he being held?"

"As of sometime tomorrow, North Branch Correctional, a level-five supermax on the far side of Maryland. He'll get his day in court, but he's too dangerous to go through normal protocol."

"I'm sure he'll enjoy his stay." Ziva smirked. "What now?"

"Now, you two can go home. Do you know where Gibbs is?"

"Squadroom, I think."
"Thank you. How much time on leave do you have, Mr Potter?"

"Until the end of the week."

"Then Ziva, you have that long off work. Don't even try." Sheppard cut Ziva off as she opened her mouth. "Go heal, and relax. Get out of the mindset."

Harry knew what she meant. British soldiers coming off six-month deployments were given two weeks leave in Cyprus along the way to decompress, do their best to get out of the war-zone state of mind where anything and everything might be a threat, and readjust to living again in a 'peacetime,' civilian environment.

He'd never personally had a problem with it; part of the reason he made such a good soldier was his ability to shift mental gears like that instantly, but even after just forty-eight hours of the high-pressure stakes of being hunted by the FBI, Ziva was likely to be a little jumpy. Throwing her straight back into work wouldn't help. Besides, Shepard seemed to have other reasons for giving them both some time off, if the mischievous gleam in her eye was any indication.

Down in the squadroom, Gibbs was … nowhere to be seen. "Gibbs left, ma'am. Said he had a plane to catch." McGee said in answer to the Director's query.

"Seems like par for the course with Gibbs." Harry observed.

"It is." Shepard said with an expression half-way between fond and exasperated. "It really is."

Ziva's apartment in Bethesda was the third floor of a fairly unremarkable townhouse; one of many in the area, which was exactly the way she liked it: security through anonymity. It was four in the afternoon by the time they reached it - the arrest had been at about nine, and the rest of the day had been spent at the FBI's displeasure.

"Takeout?" Harry asked as she unlocked the door.

"Oh, yes please." Ziva walked inside, threw her keys in the bowl she kept for the purpose, and collapsed on the sofa, eyes closed.

"Pizza?" Harry walked over to the phone with a smirk. "Pepperoni?"

Ziva opened one eye - the non-black-eyed one. "You know, I think some forbidden greasy fast food is exactly what I need after the last few days."

"Agreed." Harry placed the order, then sat next to her. "Unless you think that this whole Eschel mess might have been your pepperoni karma coming back to get you."

"Ahh. I'll risk it."

"Let me take a look."

Ziva let him tilt her head to one side without protest, without even opening her eyes. If it had been anyone else, she would have pushed their concern off unless it was truly critical; she'd fought hard to project an image of independence and self-reliance, in Mossad and NCIS, and didn't like to show weakness.

But this was Harry, and it was kind of nice to have someone around who noticed she got a little
banged up, was around to take care of her. And right now, she was feeling selfish.

So when Harry was done reassuring himself she wasn't badly injured, she pushed into him, sliding into his lap and tucking her head under his chin. He smiled, if the movements against the crown of her head were any indication, and his arms locked around her.

"You know, takeout might not have been such a great idea." Ziva mumbled. "Because now I really don't want to move."

Harry laughed quietly. "Same." There was a long, comfortable silence between the two, until Ziva broke it.

"Does it ever strike you as odd?"

"What?"

"Our relationship."

"You mean … long absences, interspersed by short but intensely passionate reunions, occasionally leavened by races against time to disprove accusations of murder?"

Ziva slapped his chest lightly, smiling. "Well, that too, but that's not what I meant."

"You mean, 'the British soldier and the Israeli spy?'" Harry moved one hand to her hair, making Ziva smile again. He really did have a thing for it. "It is rather … unlikely, on the surface."

"What I want to know is … how long will it last?" Because she couldn't … see where this was going.

Harry shifted position slightly under her. "That thought has occurred to me too."

"And your answer?"

"Don't know. But I don't exactly see us settling down, exchanging vows and having kids, do you?"

"No." Ziva smiled at the incongruous image. It really hadn't occurred to her. This relationship was so far beyond whatever she supposed to be normal she'd never even considered it might follow normal dynamics.

Besides, she wasn't the motherly type. Not yet, anyway. She was only twenty-three, going on twenty-four, after all.

And wasn't that a shock? From the hectic police work of NCIS to this unanticipated, powerful relationship with Harry, so much had happened in the last two years.

"I'm not saying we're incompatible, or that this is a mistake. Just that neither of us have lives suited for long-term planning beyond generalities. You're still Mossad, although this NCIS gig is more … stable than espionage work, it probably won't last for ever; hell, it came pretty close to ending two days ago. I'm still SAS, and I'm not ready to give up on that yet. We live every day half-expecting a bullet in the front or a knife in the back. Or perhaps an IED underfoot, in my case. Let's just take it as it comes. If you meet some mythical 'Mr Right' in the future and want to break it off, you know I'll still be there for you if you need me."

Ziva pushed out, looked up at him. "That's …"

"Remarkably open-minded?"
"Yeah …" Ziva was thinking something a bit different. It was similar to Harry's relationship with Hetty … did that mean Harry was over Hetty, that he'd finally thrown off the soul-crushing grief he'd been struggling under when they'd met in London? Or that she had replaced Hetty in his heart?

Ziva had never honestly considered applying the word 'love' to her relationship with Harry until Gibbs had asked her the day before. Their lives were too separated, too impermanent to lock it down like that. Despite her earlier question about how long it would last, it had been more of an idle thought; Ziva hadn't really been wondering about it, just taking each day at a time, just like Harry had suggested. Even muted by the grief of her loss, Harry's love for Hetty had been a powerful thing when they'd talked in London.

Have I … replaced Hetty?

Problem was, Ziva didn't want to 'replace' Hetty. She didn't feel anyone could … or should. Harry had told her many, many stories of their school days, but she had never felt that she was competing against a ghost - or competing at all. From those stories, she thought she'd probably have gotten along well with the woman; her feisty, challenging nature shone through clearly in every one. Harry himself didn't seem to think their relationship spat on her memory or anything …

"Ziva, neshama, even though we need the fire brigade anytime we get together," Ziva chuckled at the memories, as Harry went on "you know the sex is incidental to our relationship."

"Trust. You mean trust." Ziva knew he was right. Even if they'd never fallen into bed together - so very many, many times, some low-down part of her reminded her - it wasn't the bedrock of their relationship.

And that was the heart of it. What she had with Harry was similar, but a different kind of relationship to the one he'd had with Hetty. After the trauma of her death - emotional and physical combined, since that scar on his face would remind him of the incident every time he looked in a mirror - he was a different man, needed different things in a partner.

Harry's relationship with Hetty had been one of understanding, and love. Two people who were so in-sync they barely had to say anything to help or support the other; and her open heart had given a lonely, abused and rejected teenager a reason to go on living.

With Ziva, the primary component was trust, as he'd said; similar, of course, but different, as despite their best efforts, Harry and Ziva still hadn't had enough time together to build more than that. Nevertheless, it was a strong foundation, a rock-hard knowledge that no matter what, he - or she - would be there for the other; like Harry, flying to Washington on a moment's notice on Ziva's hunch she might be in more trouble than she knew. Ziva knew Harry used 'what she would think of him' as a yardstick for judging the more … amoral aspects of his work, too; he hadn't required that when he was with Hetty, hadn't lost his way that badly before her death derailed his life.

"Of course. You know that with my history, trust is far more precious to me than anything. Which, by extension, makes you more precious to me than anything. I don't need to sleep with you to trust you, Ziva."

"Okay. I can live with that. What next?"

Harry's phone went off. He checked the number, and gently ushered Ziva off him onto the couch. "Pizza. Then shower. Then sleep. Tomorrow … we'll deal with when it comes."

His last comment floated back to her as he passed out of sight. "And I haven't forgotten about those
I'm not entirely sure 'regulatable' is a word, but what the hell, you know what I mean.

In Hebrew the name Eschel is pronounced 'Esh-el,' and the station chief Michael Bashan's first name is pronounced 'Mik-hael', as if he was Russian.

Glossary

AFO - Advanced Force Operations, or forward air observers behind enemy lines; basically, most uber-tough Tier One Coalition Special Forces units.

Rockape - RAF and British Army slang for the RAF Regiment, a small unit of infantry trained and deployed by the RAF specifically for conducting perimeter and local area security for their airbases in unfriendly theatres of war. Used by extension here to describe Harry's infantry/SF career, even though he is not and never was a part of the RAF Reg, skipping right over it into the SAS.

Despite being derided as being 'not proper Army' by regular army soldiers, and thus suffering from a rather poor reputation for being REMF's, the RAF Regiment has served with distinction in Afghanistan and Iraq, ironically gaining a reputation in-theatre for quick response times to incoming fire and other threats to the critical airstrips at Kandahar and Bastion. RAF-Reg mortar teams in particular have been noted for being able to return fire at the origin points of incoming Taliban indirect fire with such speed and accuracy that in one incident they scored direct hits on the firing vehicle three times before the enemy rockets had even landed.

EOD - Explosive Ordnance Disposal, i.e., defusing/disabling of explosive devices. See 'The Hurt Locker,' for further details.

SOP - Standard Operating Procedure.

FISA - Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, a law which governs rules and regulations of eavesdropping on non-US citizens inside the continental United States. Particularly topical at the moment.

SCARS (Special Combat Aggressive Reactionary System) and MCMAP (Marine Corps Martial Arts Program) are both modern American military fighting styles. SCARS in particular is noted for its brutal system of debilitating nerve and joint strikes, and is apparently favoured by the SEALs, although that is not confirmed. The style contains NO defensive moves whatsoever, all defence is offensive, ie cripple the threat before he can hurt you. MCMAP was developed in 2000-2001 to be taught to Marines. Both styles lack the spiritual aspect of Eastern Martial arts, focusing instead on mental preparation - ie decision making under stress, like in a fight - responsible use of force, and include weapons techniques not readily available to other styles, like bayonet fighting or using a rifle as a close combat weapon.
Another timeskip. Last chapter was in (story-wise) 2006, now we're jumping to late 2009.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Khaveyrim*

**Chapter 5 - Lies, Damned Lies … and Mossad**

"Evil doesn't die. It never dies. It just takes on a new face, a new name. Just because we've been touched by it once, it doesn't mean we're immune to ever being hurt again."

*Tess Gerritsen, The Surgeon*

51°30'25.14" N, 0°01'17.23" W

West India Quay, Docklands, London, UK

12 May 2009

"Flight Lieutenant Potter?"

"It's Squadron Leader now, Special Agent DiNozzo. What can I do for you?" Harry leaned back in his chair, raising his eyes wearily from the screen to focus on the view from his apartment to the south, over Canary Wharf and the Thames.

"I have a question."

"Shoot."

"Are you familiar with a man named Michael Rivkin?"

That was pretty out of the blue. "I don't see why you care, but yes I know the name. He's Ziva's boyfriend."

"When did you two break up?"

"When your Director Vance sent her back to Israel last year."

"Why?"
"Why do you care?" Harry countered.

DiNozzo sighed. "Because Rivkin's been implicated in a series of murders here in the US, and Ziva's hiding her relationship with him. She's lying to me; she's never done that before. I'm worried ..."

"You're worried the last four years have all been an elaborate lie and now Mossad's using her to screw with NCIS." Harry completed. "Of course, the second is not actually dependent on the first, you know, and she may not even be aware if the second is going on."

"I know. But Rivkin's bad news."

"How bad?"

"One of the only known photos of Rivkin has him talking personally to Eli David."

"Okay …" Harry said slowly. "He is Mossad, that doesn't seem terribly out of the ordinary."

Ziva and Harry had broken up, amicably, after her return to Israel almost exactly a year before. Ziva had been angry, but not at Harry; her father was the one who insisted that, now Ziva was back to working for Mossad full time and in the homeland that her relationship with Harry was now inappropriate, for security reasons.

She had been furious, but Harry had been the one to calm her down. They had both known their respective careers made for both precarious long-term close relationships and shortened life expectancies; eventually, their being lovers had been certain to cause trouble for Ziva with her agency.

Harry had persuaded her that remaining friends on their own terms was preferable to the other choices. If Ziva stayed with Mossad and ignored her father's ultimatum, that order might be escalated to not having any contact with him whatsoever.

The alternative, resigning from Mossad, either now or later was also not attractive to her. Before, she might have been able to wrangle a position with NCIS despite not being a citizen, but with her friend Jenny Sheppard dead and Ziva's liaison position terminated - temporarily, as it turned out - that was unlikely to happen … and the legal employment options for former spies with Ziva's particularly lethal skill-set were limited.

They'd stayed in touch, much as they had when separated before. Theirs was a bond of trust, acting mostly as each other's ethical and-or personal soundboards. Physical intimacy was not required for that.

Harry knew Ziva had started seeing Michael Rivkin about four months after their breakup, after the two of them had been partnered on a bad mission in Morocco where Ziva had been injured in an explosion.

Ziva didn't mention Rivkin much in their conversations since; he was Mossad, and giving Harry too many details would have made her a security liability she was determined to prove she was not. Harry trusted Ziva's judgement, and had resisted the urge to start poking around for information on Rivkin. It was none of his business, and if Ziva thought he was being overprotective she'd be more than a little irritated with him - Ziva being irritated tended to result in the focus of said irritation getting bruised.

"Rivkin seems to be Eli David's personal hitman. He was running around LA murdering suspects last week, and Ziva lied to Gibbs about how close they were. Or misled him, at least. I wanted …" DiNozzo hesitated, but ploughed on, "I hoped you would have better contacts than I do
internationally, maybe find out some more about Rivkin. And since I know you and Ziva are still talking, since I heard her answer the phone with your name last week, that means you still care about her. I don't want her caught in the crossfire over this."

"You're cleverer than you appear, Agent DiNozzo."

"Hmmm ... still, better than looking cleverer than you are," DiNozzo fired back in a fairly decent John Cleese impression.

"And extra points to you for the Die Another Day quote," Harry laughed, then grew serious. "If your concern is that Ziva's first loyalty is Mossad, then why are you surprised? She is Mossad! If Rivkin's pulling a sanctioned operation in the USA, either Ziva's lying to protect him, which is her duty, or far, far more likely she isn't briefed in on it at all. Either way, why are you surprised?"

"Because ..!" DiNozzo started, then hesitated. "Maybe I've forgotten that. She's ... family, alright? She's watched our backs for four years; and now I can't trust her any more. I don't want to have doubts, I want to get rid of those doubts ... so I'm investigating. Because that's what I do."

"And if Ziva finds out how much you're prying?"

"She'll probably hurt me. In special super-secret ninja ways that can't be detected at autopsy," DiNozzo said, somewhat ruefully. "But neither am I going to let a murderer slip away just because he's Ziva's boyfriend."

"All right ... I'll shake some bushes and see what falls out. I'm not promising much; I have friends in Tel Aviv, but Mossad are a closemouhted bunch at the best of times. I'll get back to you in a few days. Have you got any pictures you can send me?"

"Yes, and thank you."

"By the way, who'd he kill?"

"Two members of an Al-Shabab cell in LA, and he's closing in on the rest."

"Killing terrorists is a bad thing?"

"Ziva said exactly the same thing, but this is Los Angeles for god's sake!" DiNozzo exploded. "We needed to interrogate these guys, roll up their handler, and any other cells he has dealings with. We can't ask dead suspects any questions. Mossad was deliberately obstructing that for some reason, in our own backyard! And don't even get me started on the need for oh, I don't know, maybe Rule of Law and our obligation to act lawfully and give these extremists fair trials. That's why we're the good guys, and they aren't."

"Who, Mossad or the terrorists?"

"That's a very good question."

"Mossad do have a habit of messing their allies around ... I'll see what I can do."

Harry put the cellphone down, drumming his fingers on the desk for a few seconds. He was in his apartment in London, in the second bedroom, which he'd never used for that purpose. Instead, as befitting the sort-of-wannabe-Batcave of a professional military officer used to working alone, it was part armoury, part office and part planning room.

The innocent-looking wardrobe built into the wall by the door hid a sizeable array of his personal
custom weaponry and armour that would probably give the Metropolitan Police a collective seizure, as well as a safe for classified documents. There were several worktables around with walls with various folders stacked in an orderly fashion on them, and on the desk rested two computers, a desktop and a laptop, both positioned to face away from the window, and both opened to classified intel reports he'd been reading before DiNozzo's call. They were set up to access DII, or the Defence Information Infrastructure, the UK's secure information network that was separate from the Internet.

One wall was covered with a large corkboard, to which was pinned maps of the Middle East, North and East Africa, with sticky notes tacked on at various places marking the last-known locations of various high-value targets. All of the notations were in his own shorthand and abbreviations; Harry's apartment in the high-rise was pretty secure: protected by guards downstairs, multiple numeric code locks, a keycard for the elevator and a retinal scanner on the door, and he swept it for surveillance devices regularly, but he wasn't taking any chances. Anyone who got inside or got photos from outside - unlikely, since he was on the twenty fourth floor - would hopefully be mostly baffled.

Who could he call? Granted, he had a few friends in the Israeli intelligence community, but most of them were special forces or Army intel rather than Mossad. Of the three Mossad officers he did have contact details for, two were barely acquaintances and highly unlikely to stick their necks out on this.

He didn't particularly want to ask them to do so either. This might be a wild goose chase, and he didn't want to burn bridges in pursuit of nothing at all.

Only one choice really. Harry dialled a number.

"Shalom, Eyal."

"Shalom, Harry." Lavin sounded like he was in an airport, somewhere busy; not unusual for the globetrotting Mossad officer. "How are you?"

"Can't complain. Busy, but I haven't been shot with an AK or blown up much in the last few years. I'll count that as a win." Harry answered in Hebrew.

"You speak Hebrew now?"

"Fluent for a while now." Eyal made a sound of understanding; he'd been Ziva's training officer, and was still good friends with her, so he likely knew of their relationship. "Listen, I … I need a favour. Can we meet at any point in the next few days? Anywhere you name, I can get there."

"Um … Paris, but I'm leaving in about eight hours. I can't spare much time, just passing through. Shouldn't be too hard for you if you're in the UK. Why?"

"Personal." Paris … it was 1700, which meant DiNozzo had called him about midday Washington time … on the Eurostar he could be in Paris, meet Eyal that evening and have some answers by the time DiNozzo finished work for the day.

"So … Ziva?"

So he did know. "Good guess."

"I thought you guys broke up. Director's orders. Heard it through the grapevine."

Harry snorted. "I'm somewhat scared to hear that Israel's tireless defenders have a normal human propensity for office gossip."

"I know, it's disturbing, right? So what's wrong?"
"Her coworkers at NCIS think she's … in trouble." Harry hesitated. He had to do this right or Eyal would clam up; the only reason he hadn't hung up already was that he'd trained Ziva, and was something of a big brother to her.

"Okay, be all cryptic, see if I care. I'll text you the place and time. I'm not promising anything, though."

"I know."

Harry caught a Eurostar cross-Channel train from Waterloo thirty minutes later - taking advantage of the MoD's arrangements for last-minute priority bookings by British officers working on NATO business - and met Eyal just four hours later at a rooftop bar on the Galleries Lafayette, one of Paris' most upmarket department stores, located on Boulevard Haussmann in the north-central 9th arrondissement. It had a spectacular view of the Parisian night-time skyline to the south, the searchlight beam atop the Eiffel Tower sweeping the city.

Harry arrived first … or at least, he appeared to. He was good, but this cloak-and-dagger stuff was Eyal's bread and butter; if the Israeli didn't want to be seen in the crowd, he simply wouldn't be. He slipped in a few minutes later, having probably been watching outside to check to see if Harry was tailed, and took a seat where he could see the door.

"You bring me to the nicest places," Harry quipped, referencing the night out on leave with Eyal's unit in Eilat - which he'd first met Ziva on - while raising a hand to the bartender. "Un Sazerac pour mon ami, s'il vous plaît."

"You know me too well," Eyal grinned. Sazerac, a complex cocktail from New Orleans made with cognac and absinthe, amongst other things, was his weakness, but only when served at the correct temperature - very cold. "What are you drinking?"

"Elijah Craig."

"Ah, the dubious original inventor of bourbon whiskey."

"I don't care about the inventor, Eyal, I just drink it." Harry smiled back; unlike so many spies - pardon me, intelligence officers - of his acquaintance, who were often somewhat amoral, humourless, and utterly paranoid anywhere except inside their agency headquarters, Eyal was fun to be around. He was also the only person Harry knew who could manage to pull of being a real-life James Bond expy - sharply dressed, permanent five o'clock shadow, ladies man; oh, and let's not forget the concealed weapons - without being a complete prick about it.

"You, my friend, lack class." Eyal told him as he kept an eye on the bartender, making sure he was preparing his ludicrously complicated cocktail properly. "That is why I spend my days jetting around the world seducing beautiful women and you spend yours in a ditch in Afghanistan."

"Yemen, Oman and Pakistan occasionally too, these days." Harry told him. "With Iraq occasionally thrown in for good measure."

"Is that so?" Eyal mused. "So what did you want to know?"

"Michael Rivkin. You know him?"

Eyal blinked. "Yes, quite well actually."

"A friend?"
"I wouldn't go that far."

"Ah. I see."

"Why?" Eyal's eyes narrowed at him. "Wait a minute … speaking of your breakup and Mossad's office gossip, aren't he and Ziva together now?"

"Yes."

"Harry, if you're playing the crazy stalker, I want no part of it."

"I'm not, my word on it. Ziva and I have been separated for a year now, and she's mentioned Rivkin a few times. I didn't pry, it wasn't my place, but now … something has come up, and I'm worried."

"Why?"

"Because he's under investigation by Ziva's coworkers at NCIS for murder. She's trapped between a rock and a hard place; specifically, her loyalty to a fellow Mossad operative and boyfriend, and her ... family at NCIS."

"Family?" Eyal raised an eyebrow, as his drink arrived.

"Family." Harry confirmed. "Unless you think Eli counts?"

"No. He's a crap father. I would know." Harry filed that away; did Eyal have a kid? "But … speaking as a Mossad operative, I'd say the decision's clear cut."

"Except ..." Harry showed Eyal the image DiNozzo had emailed him, of Rivkin talking to Eli David, 
"... that this is exactly the kind of thing I'd expect her father to pull."

"Ah ... you think Rivkin is deliberately causing an incident on Eli's orders, specifically involving NCIS, in order to force Ziva to leave and go back to Israel?" Eyal examined the photo, then nodded slowly. "That ... fits. Somewhat."

"Anything you can tell me?"

"Well ... Rivkin's not exactly the kind of guy I expected to be involved with Ziva." Eyal told him, leaning in on his elbows. "He's the perfect agent as far as Director David is concerned. Never questions orders, willing to kill without a second thought. He was fast tracked through Kidon shortly after he qualified."

"Why wouldn't he be close to Ziva then?"

"He's practically a controlled psychopath," Eyal began.

"So are both of us, by most people's definitions." Harry pointed out.

"We may be violent when necessary, but we don't lack basic empathy. Rivkin's very, very good at faking it, but I've worked with him several times. He's practically a machine. Orders go in, bullets come out. It's unusual; Mossad usually pulls those kind of agents. They're unreliable. I honestly wouldn't have expected him to be involved with Ziva though, because he doesn't really bother with socialising with other Mossad agents ... unless ordered to."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your question is connecting some dots. I've been hearing rumours that various senior
Mossad and Israeli government figures are concerned about Eli David's questionable parenting record … and Rivkin is Eli's jack-of-all-trades, exactly the agent the Director would send to … keep an eye on her. For his own peace of mind, and to silence those dissenting voices."

"They can't think Ziva's another Ari?"

"No, but they aren't certain she's loyal either; for that matter neither is Eli. She's too close to the Americans at NCIS, and no one's sure which way she'll jump if, or rather when push comes to shove, because it always does in this line of work. That's why you broke up on your own terms, wasn't it? Before something or someone else did it for you."

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Anyway, as I said, the Director's been under pressure again - same as he was during that Namir business - to prove his daughter isn't already half-way off the reservation … so your theory might not be too far off the mark."

"So Rivkin really is engineering a test of loyalties?" Harry mused. "I thought that might be possible, but I didn't think he might have been ordered to seduce Ziva. I thought it would be more like Eli just took advantage of their relationship when the necessity arose. Would Eli do something like that? To his own daughter? Every time I think I have a handle on that man, he shows me he can always be colder."

"Possibly," Eyal emphasised the qualifier. "I couldn't confirm any of that without digging deeper than would be noticed. On the other hand … I wouldn't have thought Ziva would fall for something like that. Rivkin can seduce targets when he needs to, but Ziva's smart, she's trained, and he's not that charming. Unlike me." Harry shook his head, smiling at the aside.

"Unless …" Eyal continued slowly.

"Unless what?"

"Bluntly? She's missing you, even if she's persuaded herself otherwise. She's filling the void you left with Rivkin, and he isn't up to the job. Not by a long shot."

"Wow. That almost sounds like a compliment, from Mr. Kiss-Kiss-Bang-Bang himself."

Now it was Eyal's turn to shake his head. "You were a good couple. Fix this, Harry. Don't fight the current."

Harry rolled his eyes at the mention of Eyal's little life philosophy - basically, 'live your life, just go where the river takes you,' - it was all very Lion King. Eyal had been in medical school when his sister had been killed in a terrorist attack on a peace summit in the Golan Heights; he'd joined Mossad, and claimed never to have regretted the choice, as 'that was where the river took him.'

"And if the current seems to be pulling us apart? Wouldn't that be fighting the current?"

"No. Her father is fighting the current, you and Ziva aren't. You were good together, like Yin and Yang, you fit together." Now he was just being facetious.

"The pop-psyche and New Age Zen routine are rather odd coming from a Mossad operative."

The tall Israeli ignored his jibe. "Ziva was happier, far more balanced and secure in herself since she's been in a relationship with you, and all the more capable for it." Eyal raised an eyebrow at Harry. "And you miss her, a blind and deaf man could tell that."
"That obvious, huh."

"Yeah. That obvious." Eyal finished his drink. "I've said all I'm going to say, and I have a plane to catch soon. Much like you did in Eilat. I just hope I don't end up in a firefight on the way back to my hotel or the airport. Shalom, Harry."

"Back at you."

Harry called DiNozzo back before he reached the Gard du Nord and gave him the information Eyal had relayed, and then called Ziva after he arrived back at his apartment three hours later.

She didn't pick up, either on her cell or her apartment.

Neither did DiNozzo. Harry didn't have Gibbs or McGee's numbers, or any other NCIS contacts. He was worried, but not that worried. Ziva could look after herself, as could the rest of her team. He couldn't do anything from the other side of the Atlantic, and he couldn't just hop across to D.C. without more information.

He didn't want to call the next morning, because London was five hours in front of D.C.; it would be the middle of the night for Ziva. He spent all day helping to plan an upcoming mission in a secure room at Vauxhall Cross, MI6 headquarters. No cellphones were allowed inside the building, and the phones inside were certainly tapped. Harry wasn't betraying his country or anything, but private conversations were private, and paranoid counter-intelligence agents sometimes jumped to incorrect conclusions on minimal evidence, and such mistakes would require time and endless paperwork to sort out. That, he could do without.

So he waited, and called after he left the building at six thirty.

Ziva's apartment got him a disconnected message. Her cell was turned off, as was DiNozzo's. They were Federal Agents - both of them were supposed to be reachable at any time, which made this state of affairs very odd.

What the hell was going on?

When he got home, he searched online for a local D.C. news channel and started hunting. It didn't take long; a gas explosion at an apartment in Bethesda that morning was their top story.

Ziva's apartment. When an apartment belonging to a spy blows up 'accidentally,' it's unlikely to be an accident.

Clearly, there was something seriously wrong, but if he couldn't get through to Ziva, what could he do about it?

"Good friends are like stars ... you don't always see them, but you know they are always there."

Unknown
Ziva was furious; in fact, she was well beyond that, but couldn't think of a better word.

In about twenty-four hours, everything about her reasonably stable life had just been yanked out from underneath her.

Michael was dead, killed … murdered by Tony.

Gibbs hadn't said anything, but she could see his hesitation; he had no reason to disbelieve Tony, his protégé in everything but his phlegmatic attitude.

Vance didn't really care either way, as far as she could tell. He'd sent her home once before, and seemed indifferent to the idea of her staying as liaison at NCIS. His only concern was limiting the diplomatic fallout.

Her father was practically hopping with glee. Now he had a way to extort favours from NCIS and Vance, and to drag her back home again. Ziva enjoyed NCIS; scratch that, she loved NCIS, she'd found friends who became as close as family - real family - at NCIS, or at least she thought she had. She didn't want to leave … but right now … she didn't see a way to stay, either.

And what had Tony been thinking? Or not thinking, which was more likely. Why had he gone to her apartment; why had he shot Michael four times in the chest when one shot to wound him would have done; why didn't he just call her first; why, why, why, so many questions and no bloody answers!

He'd snooped around her desk, answered her calls, pried into her private life and generally stuck his nose in where it didn't belong … and all he'd had to do was to ask her earlier to introduce them and all this would have been avoided. She was certain Tony was jealous, she'd even accused him of that, but he wouldn't admit it.

And Harry … how was Harry involved? Tony's Internal Affairs report on the shooting said that he'd contacted Harry for information, and that Harry had returned with the answer that Michael was 'quite probably' a seriously dangerous sociopath who'd been playing Ziva all along, 'possibly on Mossad's orders.' That was what the report had said, so she presumed Harry had said that. Or at least, that was how Tony had interpreted it. Why had Harry said that? Had Tony even talked to him at all? Ziva was sure he was lying about what happened during the fight itself to protect his worthless ass - there was no way Tony could outfight Michael - so why not this?

But she didn't want to know, which was why her cell was still off. She didn't want to find out that the man who'd been her rock for the better part of a decade might have stabbed her in the back.

And now Tony was in interrogation - or rather, a conference room with a distinctly unfriendly atmosphere - with her father. She, Gibbs, and Vance were watching it remotely. Ziva didn't expect him to withstand the pressure of being under her father's gimlet eye for very long.

"You send all your rogue agents to D.C., make it our mess, huh?" Tony said derisively on the screen. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised about Rivkin, considering you did the same thing with Ari, and he was your son … speaking of family, what kind of a father would throw an out of control
assassin at his own daughter? What kind of show are you running here, huh? Everyone just runs around, doing whatever the hell they want?

Her father lost his temper, grabbing DiNozzo by the collar, speaking in a low, deadly tone that sounded deceivingly similar to his usual one; Ziva had been on the receiving end of it a few times, and knew the difference. "They do what I say."

"Rivkin?"

"Always!"

Tony cast a glance at the camera lens. Her father looked too, and grimaced at his mistake.

Ziva would have been impressed; getting the ice-cold Director of Mossad to admit to something he clearly didn't mean to was not easy. But now she had a different issue; Tony had been right, even if she still didn't trust him again - Michael had clearly been on orders - and if he'd been telling the truth, then Harry had been right, although how he had anything to do with this she still wasn't sure.

She didn't know what to think any more.

Had it all been a lie?

"Harry?"

"Ziva! What the hell is going on?"

"I'm back in Israel." Harry paused for a moment, analysing that. Ziva loved Israel, why would she sound so depressed about that?

"Michael is dead."

He'd never heard that kind of ... desolation in her voice before.

"Tony shot him. Mossad blew up my apartment to cover for Rivkin's mistakes."

"Ziva -"

She spoke right over him, her tone flat, emotionless, devoid of her usual energy and fire. "Tony said he was acting on intel from you. What did you tell him?"

Harry paused for a moment before speaking. His next words could destroy Ziva's trust in him forever. "My source said that Rivkin was your father's personal agent, the officer he used when he wanted to have a personal touch on a situation. It was also implied that Rivkin was the agent that would be chosen if your father wished to keep an eye on you. They also said Rivkin didn't normally socialise with other agents, that he lacked basic empathy and could only fake it, albeit rather well, when required, and that meant he was unlikely to have become involved with you by accident."

"Who was the source?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Why do you ask? Of course I want to know!"
"Because you sound like you might shoot them."

"Maybe I will."

"Ziva ..."

A sigh. "Fine. I promise I won't shoot them."

"Eyal." Ziva was silent. "You know he only had your best interests at heart."

"Yes. Yes, I know he does." Ziva sounded defeated again, denied an outlet for her anger. "Gibbs chose Tony."

"Chose?"

"I wasn't going to be able to work with Tony ... even though it seems like he was right ... and that you were right. I asked him to chose, to transfer one of us out."

"And now?"

"And now I'm going to be back with Mossad. With my father." She didn't sound enthused with the idea.

"Ziva ... I'm sorry ... this was not the result I had in mind."

"What did you have in mind?"

"When I passed on what I found out from Eyal to Tony yesterday evening, he said he was going to talk to you that evening. From what you said last week sometime I gathered your working relationship with Tony had become strained recently, but not so much that you would point-blank refuse to hear what he had to say, and at least take it seriously enough to do your own checking."

"I still don't know. I asked my father if ... if any of it was real, and he said he didn't know."

"Did you love him, Ziva?"

"Yes. Maybe. I don't know. I'm confused, Harry. It felt ... it feels like the walls are closing in; collapsing in on me. How could everything go from so right to so wrong so fast?"

"I don't know, Ziva."

"And even if he didn't love me, Harry," a tired laugh; he could see her slight smile from thousands of miles away, "I know you do."

"You'll always have me, Ziva." Harry paused. "I'm sorry, that came out rather more suggestive than I intended."

Ziva laughed. Again, it sounded tired, but this time it seemed genuine; the beginning of healing, he hoped. "I know. Harry, I'm sorry I doubted you. You were ever my rock in this twisted world."

"Neshama, you know you don't need to apologise for anything between us. Ever." Harry changed tack. "This isn't the kind of conversation we should have over the phone, even secure ones. Do you want me to come out to Israel? I can hop on a flight from Heathrow ..."

"No. I'm leaving very soon, on a mission."
"Already?"

"My father called it my aliyah." Aliyah was a Hebrew word, meaning 'Ascent,' referring to the immigration of Jews from the Diaspora to Israel; it was a core idea of Israeli nationalism, a symbolic 'coming home.'

Harry thought Eli was laying it on a bit thick. "That's a bit of an exaggeration."

"He says he can't trust me - doesn't know who I answer to any more, after years at NCIS and my relationship with you. He wants me to finish off the mission Rivkin started, to prove myself again. I don't know exactly what it is yet; the briefing is … now, actually. I'll be out of contact for a while on this, I suspect. Whatever it is, I'm going to finish it. I can't go back to NCIS now."

"Okay. Good luck, Ziva. Can you give me a rough estimate? I'm heading back to the Sandpit next week myself, so I'm going to be out of contact too. If you can't reach me, leave a message like usual. We need to have a longer talk, Ziva."

"I know. I'd say about three weeks. If not I'll call you, Harry, or leave a message with Pearce."

"Stay safe, neshama."

38°52'24.04"N 76°59'45.89"W

NCIS Headquarters, Washington Navy Yard, Washington District of Columbia

20 June 2009

"Special Agent DiNozzo?"

"Yes, what!" Tony barked down the phone.

"This is Officer Yates, on front desk security. You have a visitor down here, sir. He wasn't precleared, and doesn't have an appointment."

"Who is he?"

"Says he only wants to speak to you, sir, and he has the clearance to withhold his name from me. He's wearing a British uniform, kind of scary looking."

"... Harry? Send him up."

"You got it, sir."

Two minutes later, the uniformed escort - required for all visitors to this floor, due to the classified material often being worked with on investigations by the MCRT team and other senior agents - stepped out, followed by Harry Potter.

DiNozzo leaned to one side to see. Behind him, Tim did the same. Their view was slightly obstructed by the small queue of women waiting to be interviewed; the two of them had eventually forced Gibbs to consider filling Ziva's empty desk.
Neither of them had seen Potter much in the last few years; there was the Eschel incident, of course, and the week afterwards during which he'd hung around on leave. They'd had a team dinner out during that time, and Harry had been friendly but slightly aloof; not antisocial, but standoffish. DiNozzo didn't blame him; both he and Tim had been curious about the enigmatic and unusual British officer, and had probably pushed a little hard, been a bit nosy.

DiNozzo was self-aware enough to know his definition of 'nosy' was a little different to everyone else's, and had adjusted for that, too.

Potter had cropped up from time to time during the year after that incident too, mostly hopping over to see Ziva when he had a week off every few months. He'd come into the Navy Yard headquarters once to surprise her when he'd been in the USA on official business, too. All those times, the then-Flight Lieutenant had worn civilian clothing, usually a leather jacket to hide his pistol holster and otherwise simple, practical clothing; boots, cargo trousers, that sort of thing.

This time he was in full service dress; Tony was, through working for NCIS, very familiar with the military's manic requirement for ridiculous numbers and types of uniforms.

Service Dress was usually called 'Number Two's', the level of formal uniforms after full 'Number Ones,' or Full Mess Dress (actually, for the RAF it fulfilled both functions, but Tony didn't know that particular detail). Most of the American military branches' uniforms were broadly similar, being a jacket, trousers and peaked cap or sometimes a beret with colour differences between services - olive green for the Army, blue for the Air Force, khaki-green for the USMC, dark blue-black for the Navy.

The RAF one, which Tony had not seen before, was blue-grey, and in a roughly similar style to the American ones. What distinguished this particular example was the rack of serious-looking medals across his left chest; Tony had known Potter was a dedicated soldier, but the number of those medals were a clear indication he may have underestimated just how dedicated.

Potter made his way past the queue of hopeful applicants and nodded thanks to the security guy who had brought him up. "Agent DiNozzo. Agent McGee"

"Squadron Leader Potter." Tony replied in a similarly formal tone. Potter rolled his eyes.

"Fine. Tony, then. How's the arm?"

"Oh, it's fine. It'll get better." Tony followed the Brit's eyes to … Ziva's very empty desk.

"Ah. Not a social call. So you haven't heard from her either?"

Potter refocused on him. "No. And you haven't either." It wasn't a question; Tony's question had answered it.

"No. She'd be far more likely to contact you than us … specifically me, anyway. There's no specific reason she wouldn't have called Abby or McGeek here, other than taint by association."

"Yeah, you weren't exactly in her good books when we last spoke."

"When was that?"

"May 14th."

Tony's eyebrows went up, and he exchanged a look with McGee. "That's the day after we left Israel."
"I know." Potter stressed the word. "I need to talk to Gibbs, and Director Vance. MI6 believes he and Eli David are friends."

"Yeah, something like that."

"Excuse me?" It was one of the interviewees, presumably wanting to get on with hers. Tony couldn't quite believe she'd interrupted what was rather obviously an important conversation; that didn't exactly scream 'I can be tactful.'

Harry looked at the woman with an expression that, much like Gibbs', was intimidating in its very blankness. He didn't glare, didn't frown, didn't do anything but look at her. Nonetheless, she shrunk back.

"We're interviewing to fill Ziva's position," McGee said quietly, by way of explanation.

"Yeah. I guessed." The military officer surveyed the line, looking each of them in the eyes for a second, before turning back. "None of 'em. You're wasting your time."

"In one look?"

"I'm good at judging people. Keeps me alive. And Ziva's ... irreplaceable." He shrugged. "Then again, I've been in love with her for several years. I'm not exactly what you'd call unbiased."

"In love?" Tony said, not quite hiding ... something.

Harry focused on him. "Yes." He left it at that; it didn't need any exposition. Tony's feelings weren't his problem, nor did he want to alienate the agent by engaging with that question in public, which wouldn't be professional for either of them. "Gibbs and Vance?"

"Vance's office is there," McGee pointed upstairs, "I'll walk you up. Gibbs is ... somewhere else."

"Coffee run?"

"Probably," McGee confirmed with a grin.

"Alright. I'll go see Vance, and through him hopefully I'll find out what Eli David has to say for himself."

Leon Vance opened his office door to talk to his secretary only to come face to face with a very ... serious looking individual. He recognised him immediately. Gibbs had mentioned him in passing, and Leon had, mostly out of curiosity, attempted to access the British officer's file.

He'd been distinctly ... peeved when he found he was denied access - he'd skimmed and ignored the files in the DoD and CIA servers; they were clearly heavily edited and-or redacted; in some places he suspected they were outright lies or misdirection. The other file, one comprising of intel gathered directly by American sources was beyond his reach. The CIA was like a toddler with toys sometimes; not so good at sharing.

Considering his agency was Navy's primary security institution, and one of the US military's major overseas counter-terrorism and counter-intelligence services, there wasn't all that much he couldn't access, which made it all the more galling. NCIS might be small and not very well-known to the public, but it generally punched well above its weight. The fact he couldn't reach
something concerning an allied foreign national - hardly likely to be a state secret - was highly irregular, and the CIA had yet to admit they even had a more detailed file on Potter, never mind let him see it.

Unfortunately, Leon knew his political capital was partly limited by the other bureaucracies' mistaken views of NCIS; his agency was viewed either as too small to bother with or as a bunch of maverick cowboy cops, neither of which were particularly accurate.

Although … that second part he laid firmly at the door of one former Force Recon Gunnery Sergeant.

"Well," Vance checked the rank tabs … "Squadron Leader Potter, this is an unexpected surprise."

The scarred man turned from the secretary's desk. "Director Vance. Pleased to meet you. If you have a moment?"

"I do." Vance waved him in, waving a little gesture at his secretary to cancel whatever was next.

Once the door was closed, Vance dropped the pleasant façade. That was not to say he was unpleasant, just that he didn't bother keeping up a fake smile with a man he knew would see right through it.

"Ziva?"

"In a manner of speaking." Potter appreciated the businesslike switch, if that slight twitch of the lip was anything to go on. "MI6 says you have a friendly relationship with Eli David."

"That's … pretty generous, but okay."

"Anything, even a hint of an explanation about Ziva's silence?"

"No. If Eli is confiding about Ziva in anyone, it isn't me. I will say that he was very … agitated about your relationship with her when I saw him in Israel. That is to say, that even though you'd broken it off he was still agitated about it."

"Really?" Harry put on a thoughtful expression. "Ziva said he seemed to take it reasonably well."

"He put on a positive face for his daughter. Not entirely sure why."

"Well, I do have very good marksmanship scores." Vance nearly did a double take at the implied suggestion. Surely Potter hadn't threatened Eli David? Eli would have mentioned such a ballsy - and stupid - move, wouldn't he?

"Anyway," his visitor continued blithely, as if he hadn't obliquely threatened the life of one of the most ruthless spymasters in the world, "if Eli hasn't said anything about Ziva, then I'm going to have to get creative, because I'm not going to leave this alone until I have some answers."

"Anything you need in particular?"

"Director David's private phone number."

"Why?"

"So I can irritate the hell out of him until he gives me an answer."

"Eli is … not a man who reacts to such provocations."
"Really? Perhaps Agent DiNozzo has a particular x-factor of annoying-ness, then. At least, that's what my … low friends around Mossad's water coolers tell me. Rumour has it he nearly got strangled by Director David out of sheer frustration."

Vance had to work not to chuckle at the memory of the - on the surface at least - shallow, dull-witted and tactless DiNozzo getting under Eli's skin so thoroughly. It had been something of a high point in that otherwise unproductive trip to Israel. Vance had to admit, Tony DiNozzo was a very easy man to underestimate, even by those who knew him well. He seemed to be able to make people - even those he'd had long and close friendships with - completely forget he was a smart, highly capable investigator with over a decade of experience in all kinds of areas of police work.

"That particular rumour may have grown in the telling," Vance said carefully. He'd already decided to accede to this request; Eli's own vexing habit of leaving his allies in the dark deserved some minor retribution, and this would be both relatively harmless - probably - and Potter was sufficiently removed from NCIS it wouldn't get back to him. Plus it might give him something to pass on to Gibbs about Ziva, since his senior agent was becoming increasingly cantankerous on the subject as of late.

Actually … Gibbs was cantankerous about everything. The subject of Officer David just added multipliers to his behaviour.

"Nonetheless, a kernel of it is probably true." Harry countered with a smirk. "What say you?"

Leon leaned down, scribbled a number on a pad and handed over the sheet. Potter in turn dropped a card on his desk. "I'll call you if I get anything. I'd appreciate it if you could do the same."

"Certainly." Vance shook the man's hand, and watched him leave.

Which just left him with one burning question.

"Who the hell is that guy?"

"Lovers and warriors are not bound by the rules of fair play."

Wayne Gerard Trotman

51°29'37.99"N 0° 7'31.27"W

Thames House, London, UK

22 June 2009
A few days later, back in London, Harry was accosted by his handler, Sir Harold Pearce. More precisely, Pearce called him into his office at Thames House, the Security Services' headquarters building.

"Harry! What the hell did you do this time?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"This!" Pearce slapped a message printout on Harry's side of the desk. "This is from C."

C was the codename for the head of MI6 - no, it wasn't M. That's Hollywood for you, always getting the details wrong. Although there really was an actual MI6 'Quartermaster' who really did go by 'Q.'

Harry read the e-mail printout, then put it down carefully and put on a carefully neutral expression.

"Apparently, Director David likes a pepperoni topping. Bit odd, since pepperoni is proscribed under kashrut, but who am I to judge? Ziva likes it too, must be a family thing. What does this have to do with me?"

"Someone," Pearce growled, "ordered a pizza to be delivered to Director David's secure and secret compound residence on the outskirts of Tel Aviv last night. At three in the morning. And they, by which I mean you, gave Eli David's personal private line as the number for the deliveryman to call as he was arriving."

"I assure you ..."

"Mossad were, rather justifiably, concerned at this breach of security," Pearce went on. "Minor though it may seem, Director David assured his security chief he did not order a pizza. But the fact his private phone line was involved meant it was deliberate, since that number is highly controlled and not known to many people. So Mossad investigated. They went to the pizza company, and found out which call they received was that particular order, and traced the phone number, which, amazingly enough, was international, and came from a burn phone bought here in London. Interestingly, it was bought at Heathrow about forty-five minutes after you stepped off the plane coming back from D.C. And at the time of the call, it was relaying off of the cellphone tower nearest to MI6 headquarters."

"Seems MI6 has some in-house pranksters."
"No, it's where you went after landing at Heathrow; the building logs have you signed in then. So Mossad went to Shin Bet," Pearce continued the story relentlessly, his voice growing slightly more agitated as he went on. "They actively monitor, or at least record most international calls in and out of Israel. It so happened they had a recording of the pizza order. They matched it to a voice sample from another recorded call, Harry. One last year between Ziva David and you! And it wasn't Ziva who ordered the damn pizza!"

"No, it wasn't." Harry looked 'Old Harry' in the eye. "Because she's been out of contact far too long, and Mossad are being their normal, recalcitrant selves."

"You ruined my entire morning dealing with an irate head of MI6 just so you could send Eli David a message with a pizza? David blamed C! Said she must have given you the number, or let it slip. C can't decide whether to laugh at the prank because god knows David deserved to have his security humiliated in front of just about every Western spy agency, or have your head on a silver platter!"

"Well, I didn't get it from C, deliberately or unintentionally, so she can tell David that."

"Who did?"

"Who did what?"

"Don't dodge the question, who gave you the damned number? David says less than a dozen people have that line!"

"NCIS."

"Vance. Of course. His people are probably as interested in Miss David's location as you are." Pearce fixed him with a gimlet eye. "Director David is waiting to videoconference upstairs, secure conference room 5. Go talk to him, and no more pissing around."

"No more." Harry agreed. "Unless he tries to play me for a fool, in which case I'm going to get progressively nastier. You have met the Weasley twins, haven't you, Pearce?"

Pearce was the Head of Section D, which handled UK counter-terrorism. Because of Voldemort, he was also head of Section D's subdivision Section M, which unsurprisingly stood for 'Magic.' Because the wizards required secrecy, and MI5 was extremely secretive, Pearce had quietly spearheaded the non-magical government's push into magical society since Voldemort's death at the Army's (specifically Harry's) hands.

So yes, he had met the Weasley twins. He had even considered recruiting them, but realised he preferred his headquarters to still be standing at the end of the working day.

Faced with such a threat, Pearce reacted the only way he could.

"I need a drink."

Harry grinned. "It's eleven in the morning."

"You drive me to alcohol. Go answer the damn video call."

"Director David, this is a surprise." Harry put on his best innocent expression for the camera. "What can Her Majesty's Government do for you today?"
"Spare me the crap, Potter." David snapped. "What are you playing at?"

"No small talk? Very well. Where's Ziva?"

"None of your business."

"I'm making it my business."

"She's on a mission."

"Bullshit. She talked to me on May 14th, and she told me she'd call or leave a message within three weeks. It's been six. Spill it."

Eli sighed; Harry had a very bad feeling he knew what the Mossad director was going to say. "She's missing."

"Since when?"

"May 30."

Harry controlled his fury. "She's been missing even to Mossad for most of a month and you didn't think there might be some people who might want to know this little nugget of information?"

"It is not your concern."

"As I said, I'm making it my concern. I won't repeat myself again. Give me the rest of it." Harry stood easily, affecting outward calm, unruffled by the Mossad Director's glare. Eventually, Eli capitulated.

"We believe her to be dead."

At first, Harry couldn't believe he'd say something so … momentous … in such a normal voice. It seemed like Eli was just feeding him another load of crap. Maybe he'd point-blank ordered Ziva not to contact anyone outside Mossad, and this was his way of severing her ties to her past - just another decision made without emotion, in a career filled with such.

But Harry knew better. Eli's version of parental love was twisted, but it was there; it was just wholly focused through a lens of service to agency and country. He might've ordered her not to call NCIS, but cutting her off from Harry would probably have ended any hope he had at bringing Ziva back into the Mossad fold.

Which meant Eli was telling the truth. Or at least, what he believed to be the truth, which was not necessarily the same thing despite Mossad's customary efficiency.

"Dead." Harry repeated flatly. "How certain are you?"

A slight hesitation. "As certain as we can be."

"I see. Are you going to tell me anything more?"

"No."

"Did you enjoy your pizza?"

A ghost of a smile. "I've changed my private number."
Harry raised his eyebrow. "Oh, that doesn't matter, Director. Believe me, it doesn't matter."

Despite those fighting words, no prank war on Eli David was forthcoming. The pizza stunt had just been to get his attention and throw him off balance; any further attempts would have no effect, now that he was prepared and knew who was behind them. But he would be expecting them, and that would keep him looking in the wrong direction.

In the meantime, the teleconference had revealed some useful information. Mossad believed her to be dead, but weren't certain. The crap Eli had spouted about being 'almost certain' was an answer in and of itself; if another Mossad agent or asset had seen Ziva go down, or seen her body, then Eli wouldn't have equivocated.

That meant she was 'missing,' and that was a word Harry could work with. It was hard to motivate people to help in or to allocate military or intelligence resources to a search for a body just to confirm someone's death, especially if that person was a) not a friend of theirs, and b) a foreign agent to whom they bore no responsibility; however, searching for a hostage, regardless of nationality or affiliation usually generated more enthusiasm, because there was still hope.

Harry considered his options. He needed Ziva's last known position and intentions, or at least that of her team. Mossad would have a file on the operation somewhere; he'd try to get that first. Second option would be British and NCIS assets, but he didn't know where to start looking yet.

Eyal would once again be his best shot for the Mossad info. Once he knew where Ziva had been going, he could start using normal channels to gather more information.

Eyal came through for him again a couple of days later.

"I can't get you the file," Eyal told him; this time they were at a restaurant in Zurich. "But I have seen it in passing."

"Because you're also Kidon," Harry finished for him. Eyal gave him an irritated look.

"What?" Harry shrugged. "Mossad aren't the only people in this game, you know. The rest of us have some tricks too. You're far too skilled to be some run-of-the-mill katsa."

"Hmm. Well, since that cat's out of the box - " Harry winced; did all Israelis mangle English idioms? 

"- yes, I'm Kidon. Ziva was deployed to Africa, after a target affiliated with al-Shabab and the Taliban. I don't have the name because I'm not briefed on the op, but it was an assassination mission. I heard the man in question killed a Mossad officer last year, and the Director wanted to send a message."

"Africa where?"

"Not sure. Sudan, Eritrea, maybe Somalia? One of them. It was a training camp, they move around all the time."

"Anything more?"

"Yes. Their infiltration into the region was to be aboard freighter called the Damocles, out of Aqaba."
"Familiar ground." Harry muttered, referring to their visit to Eilat; Aqaba was about five miles away over the border from the Israeli city, on the Jordanian side of the bay.

"Indeed. There's something else. Officer Ben-Girion was the team leader; he returned to Israel, with one other officer, sometime about the end of the first week of June. Both were quite badly wounded."

"Can you ask him?"

"No." Eyal shook his head. "Malachi's a good friend, but he's the Director's man, through and through. Any prying by me will get reported."

"Okay. Damocles, team leader and one other man returned wounded. What about the rest of the team?"

"Don't know. Sorry."

"No worries. Thanks, Eyal. You've put a lot on the line for me. I owe you one. Or several."

"Yes, you do. Shalom my friend." Eyal stood. "Call me when you find out something about Ziva."

"Will do."

"Potter, go."

---

"Got something for you, youngster."

A sigh. "Hello to you as well, O wise elder."

Sir Harry - 'Old Harry' - Pearce grinned. "Insolent whipper-snapper. Anyway, the Jordanian-flagged 10,000 ton freighter Damocles is listed as missing, as of May 28th. Hasn't reported in since then, during a storm."

"Anything we have in the area to run a search?"

"Yes, Royal Navy has several ships in the region on anti-piracy duties; part of the big multinational counter-piracy task force off Somalia. The Admiralty says they can spare the sonar mapping ship HMS Echo to search for a wreck, and the Nimrod maritime surveillance squadron out of Dubai for a surface search, which are part of both their duties anyway. If Echo finds it, they'll have to call in a salvage ship to do some dives on it; that'll take a while. If it's on the surface, HMS St Albans will be dispatched to board and secure it."

"Thank you, Harry."

"No problem, kid. Where are you headed next?"

"NCIS. I need to talk to Vance again. I suspect he knows more than he's telling."

"Alright. I needn't remind you that your semi-leave of absence for this personal mission isn't endless."

"I remember. Until the end of July." Harry paused. "Wait a minute, did you say, 'May 28th'?"

"I did."
"Eli David told me Ziva had been missing from the 30th."

"Interesting …" Pearce rocked back in his chair, analysing that. "That would imply she and the other officers, the wounded ones your friend mentioned survived to be rescued, or reach the shore."

"So where is she? Why didn't she go home with the rest of them? And when and how did they get wounded?"

"Maybe they attempted to accomplish their mission, whatever that was."

"Which is why I'm going to NCIS. I'm pretty certain they know, or have a good idea what that mission might have been."

"Understood. I'll call you if I find anything else."

---

"Intelligence is essentially a banal trade of sifting through huge amounts of random information in a search for a single enlightening gem or illuminating link."

*Markus Wolf*

38°52'24.04"N 76°59'45.89"W

NCIS Headquarters, Washington Navy Yard, Washington District of Columbia

25 June 2009

This time, Harry had an appointment. His escort took him up in the elevator, bypassing the squadroom to the balcony above it, and he was shown into the conference room. Inside he found both Vance, Gibbs, DiNozzo and McGee waiting for him.

"So, what can we do for you, Squadron Leader Potter?"

"Oh, no Director, I'm not that easy. You first."

"Fine. We've got Ziva getting on a cargo ship called the *Damocles*, bound for East Africa."

"Reported lost at sea in a storm, May 28th," supplied Gibbs.

"Same. The Royal Navy's looking for it, but I don't think that's the place to look."

Vance's eyebrow went up at that statement, and the seniority and authority it implied. Harry didn't see any reason to disabuse him of that notion, even though it was Pearce who had the seniority to order it.

"Ziva and at least two other members of the team including the team leader, Malachi Ben-Girion survived." Harry continued. "Ben-Girion and one other were wounded, and are known to be recovering from those injuries in Israel."

"But the *Damocles* never made land." Vance objected.

"No, but the Mossad team did, probably including Ziva given that Eli David implied to me that
Mossad 'lost contact' with her was on the 30th. As to where, MI6 is making discreet inquiries at East African ports from Zanzibar northwards and Aqaba southwards. Unfortunately our assets are pretty thin in the region and focused on other things, so that'll take some time and probably not be very fruitful."

"You have a better idea?"

"Yes. You." Vance's eyes narrowed. "I think Eli David is a lot more friendly with you than anyone else knows for certain. Amsterdam, wasn't it?"

"You're very good at this." Vance observed, not really admitting anything. Gibbs was observing the byplay with his customary reticence, watching them both over one of his ever-present takeaway coffee cups.

"Thank you. Ziva told me that her assignment would be to finish Rivkin's mission. I don't know exactly what that is, but you are the most likely person outside of Mossad to know."

"Rivkin's mission was to locate a terrorist training camp in North Africa."

"A camp? One camp? Come on, Mossad wouldn't go to all this trouble for one camp amongst the dozens if not hundreds that exist in the region. What makes this one special?"

"Not the camp, but the man who ran it." Both Gibbs and Vance were watching him carefully, now. What were they looking for? The two junior agents were looking at their bosses. Apparently they hadn't known this part. "An al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban-affiliated terrorist, now a senior member of al-Shabab."

"Called?"

"Saleem Ulman."

Harry's eyes widened, and he quickly spun away from the group, towards the window. Overhead, thunder boomed. Just once, but loud, close and unmistakable.

As one, all four NCIS agents looked out the window … at a near cloudless, typical June day in D.C., all blue skies and sunshine. All four were capable detectives, trained in logical, deductive reasoning, and all four of them knew of the link between Ulman and Potter through the Sahar incident.

All four immediately considered the possibility that the unpleasant news they had just imparted might be linked with the sudden thunderclap on an otherwise perfect day.

Two - DiNozzo and McGee - immediately dismissed the possibility as being fanciful and unrealistic.

Gibbs and Vance's eyes narrowed. Both had higher clearances than their juniors, and more experience and personal contacts in the special forces, including people who had known Potter in the field. They had both, independently, discovered enough about the man to know that the overtly-helpful but actually very bland and uninformative files provided by the British were hiding something very, very … unusual.

Both senior agents exchanged a look, and mutually decided that the possibility was outlandish beyond belief, but was still another piece of evidence to file away on the mystery of Harry Potter.

Over by the window, Harry was struggling to contain his emotions.
His ability to compartmentalise was one of his fundamental strengths as a soldier. Too many of his fellow veterans became desensitised to the violence, falling victim to PTSD and battle fatigue, returning home unable to distinguish between a car backfiring and a gunshot. Harry's mental robustness was what enabled him to pull tour after tour in high-risk war zones without more than a few weeks or months time off between them.

Only one thing could break through that shield.

Saleem Ulman, once a mid-level Taliban commander in Herat Province was the man who had taken her from him, who had tortured, raped and eventually shot his best friend, lover and fiancé in all but name in order to break him.

He hadn't. He'd known Ulman would have killed both of them as soon as he had the information he wanted. He'd known Hetty would have been furious with him if he had broken, and thus betrayed and endangered potentially dozens more British soldiers on the base Saleem wanted intel on.

In the years since, Harry had consciously avoided seeking intel on Ulman, fearing a potential descent into a self-destructive spiral of revenge and hatred.

Well, just revenge. Given his history, hatred of Ulman was a given. Forgive and forget? Piss off. More like *Fire* and forget.

And now, that one name produced an instant burst of grief, loss, hurt and intense hatred that shredded Harry's years of mental discipline.

Normal people might have screamed, or shouted, or broken something.

In Harry's case, it produced a momentary loss of control - just one or two seconds - over his powers. His eyes shifted colour, from the usual emerald green appear into unrelieved black, and a two-mile radius hemisphere of atmosphere became immediately electrically charged; negative on the ground, positive at higher altitudes.

Not far away, a lightning conductor atop the Washington Memorial - tallest building in the District of Columbia - became the sudden target of one hundred and twenty thousand volts of 'naturally occurring' electricity rushing down the path of least resistance offered by the conductor.

Harry detected the breach and clamped down, preventing the impromptu cloudless lightning storm from continuing. He fought down his rage and grief, and took a deep, steadying breath.

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry didn't reply immediately, forcing himself to think clearly. Ziva had been sent after Ulman. She was missing, presumed dead.

Harry had been directly responsible for ruining Saleem's career as a Taliban commander. Harry's capture, and the information he could have provided if broken would have compromised Kandahar AFB's perimeter, and potentially allowed a successful attack on the supposedly secure interior where Coalition prisoners, munitions and documents could have been captured to further the Taliban's cause, not to mention the psychological value of destroying or crippling a major regional NATO base, which would have had global repercussions.

His failure to break, and his subsequent escape, had turned what Ulman had thought would be a triumph into an unmitigated disaster. Even though Harry's priority during his escape had been getting Hetty to a hospital he had taken note of everything he saw; every camouflaged AA-gun nest and fighting trench, and particularly the numerous caves containing anything and everything, from...
ammunition dumps and command centres to troop quarters.

After his escape, vengeful British Harriers, Tornadoes and Apaches had used this information to inflict forty percent casualties on Taliban forces in the area over the next thirty-six hours. Ulman was no longer some anonymous mid-level commander but had become a high-priority target for the now severely pissed-off UK forces in Afghanistan.

The USA is not the only military that subscribes to the code of 'leave no man behind.'

Saleem had shot up the watch lists, and was forced to go on the run. He was evacuated by al-Qaeda affiliated organisations through Pakistan to Oman in '04, and then Yemen in '05 and later Eritrea in '06, each time with MI6 or SAS grab teams nipping at his heels. Sightings had ceased for the last few years, and as a result Ulman had slipped down the priority list. There were more pressing threats than a man who had vanished, hopefully into obscurity.

Nonetheless, obscure or not … if Ulman found out about Ziva's connection to Harry, he would certainly use her to take out his frustration at Harry foiling his grand plan; the mistreatment Hetty had suffered at his hands was clear proof of that.

Ulman was intelligent (Yale educated, actually) as well as rational (at least as much as any jihadist ever would be), and very ambitious. A Mossad agent could be an extremely valuable source of intel if broken, and Ulman understood information was power. Harry had personal experience of that.

"What was the Israeli's interest in Ulman?" Harry asked, to draw attention away from his internal struggle. He already knew the answer.

"Revenge." Gibbs said shortly.

"He killed a Mossad officer." Vance added.

"Wasn't the only person he killed." Harry muttered. He locked down his powers, returned his eyes to their usual colour, opened them and turned around.

"Where was the training camp?"

"Mataban. Middle of Somalia, near the Ethiopian border."

"I'll need precise GPS coordinates."

"It'll have been moved."

"I know. That isn't the point."

Vance opened a file on the table, checked it, and scribbled something down.

"Thanks," Harry took it. "Can I borrow MTAC?"

"What's your clearance?" Vance asked.

"British or American?"

"You have an American clearance?" McGee asked, confused.

"I'm a dual UK-US citizen. I work a lot of missions for the alphabet soup agencies, and cooperate with various of your special forces units in the field all the time." Seeing their looks, Harry shrugged. "With my record, my integrity is considered above question on both sides of the Pond, so eventually
the Pentagon just gave me an American security clearance to streamline the whole situation. Saves them from having to file the paperwork to get me cleared on every little individual thing I do for them every week when in theatre. It's Top Secret SCI Plus, in case you were wondering."

"That's higher than me!" DiNozzo complained quietly to McGee, who just gave him a look.

"Tony, practically everyone has higher clearances than us."

"Yes, you can use MTAC," Vance said, ignoring Tony.

Five minutes later, Gibbs and Tony followed him into the secured room. MTAC, or the Multiple Threat Alert Centre, was a data collation centre, which synthesised information gathered by NCIS's highly varied collection of assets into a coherent whole.

NCIS's rather unique role, ranging from law enforcement like Gibbs' team to overseas intelligence and counter-intelligence operations more akin to those of the CIA meant they had access to a global and multi-faceted network of sources. All of it was fed into MTAC in order to produce the 'big picture' analysis, linking terrorism, counter-intelligence, intelligence, cyber, criminal, and security information to produce summaries and updates not only for distribution to NCIS but also to the Navy and Marine Corps and other agencies.

"I want a video-conference with this number." Harry instructed one of the MTAC technicians.

It took a few minutes for the recipient to answer. Eventually the hold screen, a picture of the NCIS badge was replaced by a round faced man with thinning, receding blonde hair, sitting behind a desk.

"Hey, Pearce."

"Youngster, what've you got?"

"GPS on the camp Ziva was sent after. Five point one nine nine seven degrees north, forty-five point five two five six degrees east. Harry …" 'Young' Harry paused, the words he was about to say producing a fresh, but now controlled surge of mixed emotions, "Mossad sent her after Saleem Ulman."

"Ah."

"Yeah."

"Give me a few minutes to get some satellite pictures. I'll send them to you at NCIS?"

"Yes. MTAC."

"Alright." Pearce's eyes flickered to the NCIS agents. "Call me later."

"Got it." The MI5 department head hung up.

"How long to get those images downloaded?"

"Half an hour for full resolution once they arrive, sir," the tech replied.

"I need a coffee." Harry turned to Gibbs. "I'll bet you do too."

Gibbs nodded.

"Black? You, Tony?"
"Milk, cream and sugar."

Potter grinned. "Sweet tooth?"

"Yeah, it's my weakness."

"Alright. I'll be back in twenty."

Once the door swung shut behind him, DiNozzo rounded on Gibbs.

"Why is Saleem Ulman important?"

"He was the Taliban commander Colonel Sahar was leaking intel too." Gibbs replied, still facing forward.

"I know Potter was involved." DiNozzo said slowly. "You know anything other that?"

"I'm not sure exactly what happened. Vance does; he headed the stateside part of the investigation back in 2003. Potter got captured by Saleem, and was a prisoner for several days. He and a fellow prisoner escaped - another British officer, a woman - but I don't think she survived."

"She died in the hospital." Vance said from behind them. DiNozzo jumped - how on Earth the Director managed to enter the room silently through the heavy pressurised doors, he had no idea. Gibbs didn't even twitch; obviously, he'd been aware of Vance's entry. "Her name was Henrietta Kirkland. She was Potter's girlfriend, although from what I heard at the time from some British colleagues of mine, girlfriend would be understating the depth of their relationship. He kept them both alive through thirty-six hours of escape and evasion through some of the most inhospitable mountains in the world, only for her to die in the Operating Room shortly after landing."

"And now …"

"And now Ziva, also Potter's girlfriend, albeit a former one with which he still had a friendly relationship, has most likely been killed by the same man. What do you think is going to happen, DiNozzo?"

Tony recalled his comment to Abby the first time he'd heard of Harry Potter, worrying about the bodycount he was going to leave behind. "This is not going to end well for Saleem."

Forty-five minutes later the images were ready, one selected from each day for period beginning June 1st. They were all centred on a collection of buildings a kilometre west of Mataban, Somalia; the al-Shabab training camp.

Harry went through the images on an MTAC terminal, one by one, zooming in when he saw something of interest. All showed exactly the same image from the same angle, although not always at the same time, from daily passes over the region. Harry noted sentry and defensive positions with interlocking fields of fire, a central motor pool, several shooting and grenade ranges, and a collection of possible barracks and classroom buildings and tents - everything the modern jihadist needed to be turned from an untrained zealot into a martyr of Allah.

The emphasis being on the word *martyr*, especially if men like Harry had anything to do with it.

Then on June 8th, the image changed. A collection of three still-burning vehicles - a pickup technical and two trucks - littered the road just about fifty metres outside the main entrance checkpoint, the dirt road scorched for metres around them. The rest of the camp was empty, except for ten graves out by
the ranges - the disturbed earth was clearly visible on the high-resolution image. All the tents had been removed, and the camp was empty. It had been abandoned within the previous day.

"Throw this up on the big screen."

The NCIS agents had been waiting in MTAC for him to finish, and they all perked up as the image was displayed.

"Why this one?" McGee asked.

Harry pointed at the burned out trucks. "Distraction at the main entrance. Probably planted remote detonated C4 on the road the night before. When the vehicles go up, all the guards look that way, allowing the attackers to achieve maximum shock and surprise -"

"- by attacking from the rear." Gibbs finished. "A good plan for a team with limited numbers. A speedy assault straight for the main building while the enemy is looking the other way, gun down the target and extract to vehicles hidden in the desert nearby."

"So they made it off the Damocles in good enough shape to finish the mission." Vance observed.

"I don't think they did finish it." Harry said. "For two reasons. One, there would have been more graves. Kidon was here to make a statement; don't fuck with us. Half a dozen bodies is not, in the grand scheme of things, enough to send that message. Second, al-Shabab wouldn't have packed up and moved camp so quickly if Mossad had been successful. It takes time to take down this kind of infrastructure - the tents, the ranges, digging the graves, that kind of thing. If Mossad had killed Ulman, they wouldn't have moved out so quickly, because the camp's leadership would have been in chaos."

"And Saleem's lieutenants wouldn't have been able to achieve the same efficiency he could?" DiNozzo said skeptically.

"Saleem's lieutenants wouldn't even have been there. This is a terrorist organisation; it's a very Darwinian career choice. A drone strike - or, for that matter, a Mossad team - might take them out at any time; the leadership would have been distributed for safety, running other camps and cells like the one in L.A. There might have been some veteran instructors, but they would be more like experienced non-coms than leaders."

"So if Saleem had been taken out, they'd be looking for orders from their command." McGee said speculatively

"And contacting the al-Shabab hierarchy for orders would have taken time." Harry finished. "Especially since Mossad would have gone for the radios too, to prevent al-Shabab from mobilising to pursue them. It would have been too much time to be already packed up and gone by the time the satellite came round again. The gap between passes was about sixteen hours between this image and the one before it, and I doubt Mossad bothered to time their attack exactly as the satellite passed out of range, so we're looking at a smaller window than that."

"So …?"

"So Mossad were probably unsuccessful, based on what we see here. Which, admittedly, is very thin, but it's what we've got." Harry turned to Vance. "Think you can get Eli David to admit to the failure? And what happened to Ziva? And, well, just about anything else useful he might tell you?"

"You don't ask for much, do you?" Vance said dryly.
"Nothing worth doing is easy." Harry replied glibly.

"Fine. I'll do my best. Where are you going to be?"

"I'm going to CENTCOM's regional headquarters in Bahrain. I know some people in the regional intel shop there who might be able to help, and I want to be ready to move if something comes up."

"It's a question of mind over matter. I don't mind, and you don't fucking matter."

Royal Marines Drill Instructors

1°36'4.60"N 57°55'48.99"E

Two miles West-north-west of the MV Damocles, Indian Ocean

28 June 2009

Harry was now running on very little sleep. Fortunately, he was used to that.

The RN found the Damocles, eventually. The search for the ship had assumed it went down in a vicious tropical storm off Somalia on May 28, and had focused on looking for wreckage on the surface; the sort of random flotsam and jetsam that comes off a sinking ship.

They found nothing … because it hadn't sunk.

A ship similar to the MV Damocles, a coastal trading vessel (Photo: Norbert Kaiser, Source: Wikipedia)

Crew or no crew, no one could know before the boarding party searched it, but its engines had still been running at a slow but steady six knots, and it had headed out to sea. Caught by the Mid-Equatorial current running Eastwards out into the centre of the Indian Ocean it was swept further and further from the shipping lanes.

Only warships mounted true high-resolution radars; merchant vessels relied more on transponder beacons and radar blip enhancers, as well as radio and visual watch-standers to check for other ships in the area. As such, with the Damocles in an area not often under observation it had taken several days to find it; the powerful look-down radars of the Nimrod search squadron had trawled across
thousands of square miles of ocean surface in the process.

The crew had given him some odd looks when he'd parachuted onto the flight deck of 'The Saint,' as the St. Albans was known in the Navy. They'd been diverted from their merchant protection duties without notice and ordered to undertake a full-speed sprint across the Indian Ocean towards a spot some 350 nautical miles north-north-east of the Seychelles, some 600 nautical miles from their starting point just south of the Horn of Africa.

Even at thirty knots it would take nearly twenty hours to catch up to the Damocles. But it would only be thirteen to get into range for its two helicopters to deliver a heavily-armed cargo of eight Royal Marines and one SAS officer.

"Thirty seconds!" The crew chief, on the intercom.

The two helos skimmed at very low level across the surface, running at night with lights out on final approach to the target's stern. The Lynx was the fastest helicopter in the world, capable of two hundred miles per hour as well as some incredible acrobatics including barrel rolls at low altitude; the Ferrari of military helicopters. It was also one of the most versatile battlefield rotor-craft as well, being designed for light transport and reconnaissance duties as well as anti-armour, anti-submarine and anti-ship duties; these demanding specifications meant the end product was one of the most manoeuvrable as well.
"Fifteen seconds!"

The RN pilot of the Lynx also happened to be the squadron commander of the unit it was drawn from, with an enormous amount of experience from combat tours in Iraq. Therefore Harry was surprised, but not excessively worried when the helo was abruptly slammed over into a hard 90 degree left spin just as it passed the stern of the Damocles, so the nose was pointed straight at the unyielding steel of the hull. The pilot also tilted the bird over to the left at a large angle and slightly back, using the normally downwards-directed thrust to slow his forward momentum while increasing power to gain altitude. Through the headsets, the chief counted down.

"Five!"

Watching from the jump seat between the two pilots, Harry watched with a mixture of professional respect and envy - he was a good pilot on jets or helicopters, but this kind of flying was simply art, born of a decade or two of constant practice.

"Four!"

The battered, partially rusting hull of the tramp freighter slid past at high speed barely a few metres away outside the cockpit windows.

"Three!"

Then the Lynx was climbing past the railing and nosing forward to hover over the forward cargo hatch.

"Two!"

This in itself was a complex manoeuvre, as hovering a helicopter is complicated at the best of times.

"One!"

Hovering while holding station over a moving target for thirty seconds or more to allow infantry to disembark doesn't make it any easier, especially when there are cranes, the foremast and other obstructions on the deck that can swat the fragile helicopter like an irritating fly if the pilot loses concentration for even a microsecond.

"GO!"

The Marines sitting in the doors threw the ropes out and grabbed on. One by one the Marines slid down, taking up defensive positions as they hit the deck.

"Nice flying, Commander." Harry slapped the pilot's shoulder as he unstrapped from the jump seat.

"Thanks. " The pilot acknowledged, but didn't take his eyes from the windshield. "We'll be back on station in three hours. One-Two will stick with you for thirty minutes for fire support before they're at bingo fuel. Good luck."

"Roger that."

Harry slid down to the deck and stepped away, unclipping his Kriss Vector SMG's sling and pulling out the extendable stock. Behind him the thick ropes collapsed to the deck as One-One ditched the extra weight before pulling away. As the downwash and the high-frequency thudding rotor chop of the Lynx receded, Harry crouched by the Marine Officer Commanding (OC) - identifiable by a slightly luminous name tag reading 'O'Sullivan' on the back of his body armour's collar - and slapped
"Last man in."

"Alright." The officer grinned, white teeth flashing oddly bright against the cam paint darkening his face. Harry had ceded tactical command to Lieutenant O'Sullivan for this op, as the RM lieutenant was the St. Albans' boarding officer and had both specialist training and far more experience of hostile boarding actions. "This is much more fun than I was expecting on this tour."

O'Sullivan reached for his Personal Role Radio, or PRR, the British military's section-level tactical radio system. "Proceed as planned, with no opposition yet apparent. Check your corners. Move out."

The Damocles' deck was a mess - it was not a container ship, with lots of neat stacks of shipping crates, but a tramp freighter, whose crew lived practically hand-to-mouth between each port, on the ragged edge of being completely unprofitable.

The nine British soldiers spread out across the deck and advanced towards the stern, where the bridge superstructure towered above the deck. The second Lynx hovered off to the side, playing a high power spotlight across the scattered crates and cargo netting, then shifted it up to the bridge. The Royal Marines - the St Alban's detachment included - had been among the first issued with the new Multi-Terrain Pattern uniforms, a lighter, tan-based pattern than the old green, woodland-optimised Disruptive Pattern Material fabric, and the boarding party showed up slightly in the darkness as pale, indistinct silhouettes flitting from cover to cover.

A Royal Marine boarding team

On the bad side, they were slightly more visible at night than before. On the plus side, Harry's customised Multicam gear - Multicam being the camouflage design that MTP was itself based upon - no longer stood out, so he wouldn't be the first to get shot. Probably. Then again, with his luck ...

"Boarding party, Bandit One-Two. No movement on the deck or the bridge. All clear," the pilot reported.

"Roger that." O'Sullivan replied, taking cover beside Harry behind a crate as the section halted for a 'soak period' - watching for the enemy, getting a feel for the area before moving on. "What do you think?"

"I think we've landed on the Mary Celeste," Harry muttered back. "Why aren't the deck or nav lights on?"
"Good question. One of the lifeboats is missing." The Marine pointed out.

"That was expected."

"Sir, if I may ask … what the fuck is going on?" Harry had given the Marines a basic brief - crew list, blueprints, official cargo manifest, what MI-6 thinks is really on it - which really was a black-market weapons shipment bound for the al-Shabaab terror group - but O'Sullivan wasn't stupid. There was no reason for Harry to come personally; the Marines could have cleared the whole thing without his presence.

Now that they were here … why the hell not?

"Officially or personally?"

"Well, both, sir, so long as you don't have to kill me afterwards."

"Personally, I'm looking for a friend, a Mossad operative. She was on this ship with her team, but the rest of her team is back in Israel already and Mossad aren't giving me shit about where she is. Or was. She may be KIA, or worse. I don't have many friends, Lieutenant. The ones I do have, I never give up on unless I have no other choice. I'm retracing her steps, and this ship was one of them."

"Leave no man behind, sir. Or woman. I get it. And the official version?"

"Officially, you are here to confirm, secure and seize an illegal weapons shipment bound for a terrorist cell. And I was never here."

"Of course, sir." The lieutenant's grin flashed white in the darkness again. "First time in my career I've had the chance to do any of the cloak and dagger stuff."

"A bit of redacted text on your service record is always good for promotion," Harry confirmed with an answering grin. "Makes you look mysterious and hardcore in front of the promotion board."

O'Sullivan chuckled. "I hope so."

Over the PRR net, one of the Marines piped up. "Skipper, we're in international waters, aren't we? As in, not our jurisdiction, so isn't this, you know, piracy?"

"If the ship still has a crew, then yes, it could be argued that way." Harry answered before O'Sullivan could. "On the other hand, we have a warrant from the Jordanians, whose flag this ship flies. When the International Piracy Center asked for one, on evidence of illegal arms trafficking, the Jordanians were happy to oblige. As for the crew, don't kill anyone unless they are a clear danger to us; I want to know what happened to this ship. If there's anyone still alive, take them that way, please."

"Arrgh me hearty!" was the reply. "There be treasure aboard the Damocles!"

O'Sullivan chuckled, shaking his head. "You've done it now sir. Corporal Duncan?"

"Sir?"

"Stop the smartass routine or I'll make you walk the plank."

"Aye aye, skipper."

"Sorry, my bad. Shouldn't give the lads ideas," Harry said, grinning. "Let's get on with it."

The section split up. O'Sullivan led a fire team down to the engine room, and Harry led the other up
the wing of the superstructure to the bridge wing, where they stacked up beside the heavy watertight door. One pulled a shotgun from a sling over his shoulder.

"I like to keep this for close encounters."

"Too right mate," his partner muttered back, smirking.

"Open and clear." The lance corporal spun the locking wheel and hauled the heavy door open. Harry was first in, followed by the other four.

"Check those corners!"

No enemy greeted them. Just the stench of decomposition. One of the Marines gagged, but didn't throw up.

The bridge was a mess. The helmsman was lying face down beside his station, three holes in his back, and an undrawn sidearm was still jammed into the back of his belt. The door to the radio room was open, another body sprawled in the hatch, a bloodstain on the bulkhead marking where he'd slid down it. The radio had been disabled with a burst of gunfire, as had the radar screen, GPS system and helm station.

No one bothered to check for pulses.

The rest of the ship was in a similar state of borderline disrepair to the hull. In pairs, with tac-lights sweeping ahead of their L22A1 rifles - the short-barrelled carbine variant of the SA80 family of weapons - the Marines cleared it compartment by compartment, deck by deck.

O'Sullivan checked in from the engine room - two more long-dead casualties down there - before he shut the diesels off manually, killing the speed. The *St. Albans* would be able to catch up to them a bit faster now. The lights throughout the ship were out, because a burst of gunfire had taken out the main junction box outside the engineering compartment, and the backup. Methodically clearing the ship would take considerable time with only eight men - they would probably only just be done by the time the helicopters got back. Harry had already waved off Bandit One-Two to go refuel early; they didn't need fire support for searching inside.

They found more bodies, all with weapons, scattered throughout the corridors, as well as separate bloodstains on handrails and watertight hatch handles which indicated someone or someones that were probably wounded had been moving around the ship.

The sickbay was below the superstructure on one of the lower decks, so it took them a while to reach it. Harry edged the hatch open … to find a light on inside. By the weak yellow glow it was an emergency lamp of some sort, and low on juice at that.

The hatch had been well oiled - despite the outwardly tetanus-infested look the *Damocles* projected, that was more because of its age; most of it was still in serviceable condition. It might not look pretty, but it worked and maintenance had been done properly. Harry paused in swinging the hatch open and looked at his partner, Marine Robinson. A quick flurry of hand signals followed: Harry pointed at his eyes with two fingers, then at the door - *look here* - then made a fist, and made a short jab towards the hatch - *assault and clear*. Robinson nodded, and hefted his weapon nervously, safety off, but with his finger lying along the guard. Good drills.

Harry took a breath, then rammed the hatch with his shoulder, holding the Vector one handed.

Inside, a man had been asleep on one of the sickbay bunks, a clearly self-administered bandage wrapped around his left shoulder. He wasn't sleeping too deeply though, as he rolled off the bunk
and tried to bring up a two-tone silver-black pistol.

Too late. The sickbay was a small compartment, and he was only a quick step or two away. Harry was inside the man's guard and knocking his pistol away with one hand before he could bring it to bear; the SMG firmly planted into the wounded man's stomach, shoving him against the wall, and controlling his left wrist with one hand.

"Don't fucking move!" The man froze. He was white, caucasian, short brown hair, heavily built - clearly unlike any other member of the crew, who had all been African or Middle Eastern.

Harry backed off, out of range just in case the guy tried a desperate lunge, and brought his weapon up again, shining the bright light into his eyes to disorient him. Behind him, Robinson was covering the door and passageway, but casting quick glances at the situation behind him.

"Name."

The wounded man groaned, and moved his hand to his wounded shoulder. "Daniel Shalev."

"Mossad?"

Shalev's eyes widened. "No." But he clearly knew why Harry might ask about them.

"Bullshit. Talk."

"Who are you?"

"British Special Forces." Harry gravelled, doing a credible Batman impersonation. "Mossad. Talk."

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because right now there's just you, me, and several thousand miles of ocean between us and the nearest witnesses who aren't under my command. There isn't anything around to keep me in check, tough guy. Do you like your kneecaps?" Harry flicked the torch down for emphasis.

Shalev's eyes widened again. "They hired me to get them onto the Damocles, passage to Somalia. I know … knew the captain."

"Fine." Harry switched on the radio. "Lieutenant?"

"Here sir."

"We've got a live one, but wounded. I need two extra men, preferably one of them a medic, for prisoner detail in the sickbay, aft end of deck five. Double time."

"Understood. Jesse, Mack, that one is yours."

"Roger that, skipper, on our way."

"You." Harry said to Shalev. "Turn around."

He did so. Harry pulled plasti-cuffs from his armour and secured him … when he noticed a chain around the man's neck. The kind of chain normally only seen on dog tags.

Harry gripped it and pulled them out. "Well, well. You should have ditched these, Staff Sergeant Daniel Cryer, USMC. You're a long way from the Corps, Staff Sergeant."
Cryer said nothing to that. *Is he Marine intel? Unlikely. He wouldn't be stupid enough to wear the tags, that's against basic SOP. Ex-Marine freelancer most likely. Agencies like Mossad like to use such people as middlemen.*

*Staff Sergeant Daniel Cryer (Eric Palladino)*

"You the only person aboard?"

"No."

"Who else is left?"

"The first mate." Cryer twisted his wrists, testing the cuffs. Harry pressed the muzzle into his back a little harder.

"What happened?"

"The Mossad team started shooting everything up. There had been a lot of tension the last few days before it all went to hell."

Harry pulled up Ziva's photo on his phone. "What about her?"

Cryer eyed the picture, then looked back at Harry. "What about her? She was the Mossad's second in command. We had a standoff during the firefight, and her boss put one in my shoulder."

"The boss' name?"

Cryer raised an eyebrow. "I knew him as Malachi, no last name."

"After that?"

"I ran, she let me go. We'd had a few chats during the days before. She saved my ass when I was snooping around the ship."

"Why did she let you go?"

Cryer shrugged. "She said she'd had a rough few weeks."

"Yeah," Harry muttered. "That she had." Behind him, Robinson moved back to the door, looking out.

"You know her?"

Harry pinned Cryer with a glare. "Yes. She's one of my best friends. And if you don't help me find her, I'll feed you to the sharks. Clear, marine?"
"Yes sir."

"Excellent."

A gunshot, abnormally loud in the confined metal interior of the ship. Robinson jerked back and swore, one hand clamping over his right arm, blood welling between the fingers.

Harry turned back to Cryer and kicked him the groin - hard - to disable him before he could say or do anything. The American was an unknown and a possible threat even though he was cuffed; Harry wasn't about to take the chance he'd cut the plasti-cuff or anything like that.

He grabbed Robinson's shoulder armour and pulled him back. "Get that wrapped up." Not waiting for a reply, he went to one knee and edged one eye around the bulkhead.

Another gunshot, whining off the metal above him. Harry couldn't see the shooter in the darkness outside.

Shit. I'm silhouetted in the light from that lantern.

Harry turned off the tac-light on his weapon. "Robinson! Turn the light out. Rifle torch too. Use NVG's."

A click, and the sickbay was plunged into darkness. Harry reached up and pulled his helmet-mounted night-vision goggles down.

The NVG's worked with ambient light … of which there was none down in the belly of the ship. So he had to provide some.

Harry cracked a handful chemical light sticks, but rather than glowing a visible colour, they emitted infra-red radiation. He threw one to Robinson, hooked another through his armour's MOLLE straps and tossed the third down the passageway towards the shooter.

The clattering of the lightstick prompted another couple of shots, followed by footsteps moving away, echoing off the metal walls. Not running, more like shuffling - the shooter was moving in the dark, not the green-grey twilight Harry was now seeing - but still quick, like a crew member who was familiar with the ship.

"Sitrep!" O'Sullivan, checking in on his men.

"Potter. One shooter, outside the sickbay, deck five, now moving away forward. Robinson's wounded, so's the prisoner, both staying inside the sickbay."

"Roger that. Mack, head to sickbay. Jesse, give backup to Sport And Social."

"Aye aye."

"You know, it's not all fun and games at Hereford, you know." Harry muttered into the radio as he edged out into the passageway, the infra-red torch attached to the Vector swaying to side to side in the night vision.

This ship was undoubtedly the most creepy place he had ever had to fight in, Harry decided. With no lights, the infra-red torch and chem-light attached to his armour only illuminated things within direct line-of-sight, and only for about ten metres, meaning that opened doorways off the passageway were yawning caverns of absolute blackness until he was able to point his weapon into them. The rolling motion of the ship and the battered interior surfaces also lent it a particularly horror film-esque
feeling, like some T-Virus infected person was going to leap on him at any moment.

He'd caught a glimpse of someone slipping through a hatchway in front of him and going left, so he followed … to find the passageway empty, stretching for at least thirty metres further down the long axis of the ship.

Moving slowly, footfalls muffled by special foam-soled boots, used by the Marines for exactly this kind of sneaking around during boarding operations, he edged down the passageway, stopping to listen every few metres.

Abruptly, a hatch on the left hand side swung open with a clanking, squealing sound of metal on metal. Only a scant two metres away, a man of East African origin - presumably one of the crew of the Damocles from his worn clothing - leaned out, scanning the corridor.

It was pitch black. Lacking any light source, the sailor couldn't even see his hand in front of his face, let alone the heavily armed enemy just out of arm's reach.

Harry had no such limitations. The Vector's aiming laser rested squarely on the sailor's forehead, clearly visible in the infra-red goggles. But there was no point pulling the trigger; this man's death served no purpose. Alive, he might have information, which was the whole point of this little jaunt across the Indian Ocean.

So Harry waited, not even breathing, as the man squinted into the darkness, before swinging the hatch shut with a slight clang - but the locking wheel didn't spin. That was what had produced the squealing metal-on-metal sound from before, and apparently the tango didn't want to produce so much noise. Footsteps again sounded as he retreated away from the hatch.

Harry switched the radio to whisper mode. "This is Potter. One tango, aft cargo compartment, just closed the portside hatch. O'Sullivan, what's the layout?"

"Wait one." Both officers had the ship plans on them, but O'Sullivan wasn't on top of the enemy and was thus free to look. "Two personnel hatches, yours and one opposite on starboard. Other access is a ladder up to the cargo hatch, but that's battened down from outside."

"Dimensions of the cargo compartment?"

"Ten meters high, twenty wide, thirty long."

"Cut him off at the starboard side."

"Roger that. Jesse, where are you?"

"One deck up, sir. Just a few seconds away."

"Good. McNeil, Parker, back him up."

A pause, about twenty seconds. "In position, sir. The others just arrived too."

"I would strongly recommend ear defence, lads. Prepping flashbangs. Opening the hatch."

Harry pushed in his earplugs, held around his neck on a string tied at the back of the collar, and pulled out an L107A1 stun grenade, holding it in his left hand with the safety lever pressed securely between his thumb and forefinger. He pulled the pin, arming the device, and with the safety lever still held down, he wedged his fingers into the gap between the door and the bulkhead and slowly tugged it open enough to peek inside using the night vision goggles.
No one in sight.

Opposite him the starboard hatch swung open slowly, revealing a kneeling marine - Lance Corporal Jesse Clarke - clutching a grenade, same as Harry, with another two standing behind, one of them aiming over his shoulder, the other covering the passageway. Identifying Harry as a friendly, McNeil swung his weapon away, sweeping the part of the cargo compartment he could see.

Harry held up three fingers. The grenadier opposite nodded. There were some scuffing sound from out of sight, like someone opening a crate with a crowbar.

Two. One. Harry and Clarke hurled the grenades into the compartment, towards the bow of the ship, and ducked back. Harry clamped his hands over his ears for an added layer of protection. He was only just in time - the grenades only had a one second fuse, and it felt like they went off immediately.

The L107A1s were 'six-banger' stun grenades, meaning they had six distinct magnesium-based charges that detonated in sequence, producing a blinding flash that overloaded the eyes' photoreceptor cells for approximately five seconds, and a loud blast that caused temporary loss of hearing and balance, by disturbing the fluids of the inner ear.

In the metal confines of the cargo compartment, the effect of the latter was magnified significantly. And with eyes adjusted to the darkness - even though he still couldn't see - the crewman in there would be affected worse than usual by the flash as well.

Ears still ringing despite the two layers of protection, Harry was up and around the corner of the hatch a second later, the infrared torch and laser beam sweeping in front of him. The three marines were likewise entering in a clearly long-practised move, clearing individual sectors and moving more like one organism with three weapons than distinct individuals. They moved up the far starboard wall, checking between each cargo pallet as they went.

Harry let them get ahead, just in case they had to fire at someone in one of the lanes between the pallets. He didn't want to be at the other end of that lane - friendly fire isn't, after all.

They found the crewman rolling around in an aisle towards the other end, an opened wooden crate and crowbar next to him. He had his hands over his eyes and was gabbling out nonsensical Arabic, having been hammered by the amplified effects of the concussion grenades from both sides. The Marines pounced, zip-tying him and hauling him out.

"We'll take him to sickbay, watch both of the prisoners there."

"Got it. When they're treated, get them on deck for evac." Harry watched the Marines leave before flipping up his NVGs and switching on a normal light source. The helmet cam wasn't infrared, and he wanted to record the cargo around him, because unless he was severely mistaken …

The opened crate revealed a cargo of AK-SU submachine guns packed in straw; the tango had probably been trying to up-gun when they took him down. Harry recorded the discovery with his helmet camera, making sure to catch the serial number on the crate - written in Cyrillic text, surprise, surprise - and walked up and down through the cargo space to document all the crates' numbers.

The radio crackled. "Skipper, this is Sergeant Hammett. We just found explosive scuttling charges taped to the hull on the lower decks. The timer's counted down; I'm not sure why they haven't exploded."

"Can you disarm them?" O'Sullivan replied.

"Yes sir. It's a simple setup, a NATO standard timer and electronic detonator wired into three blocks
of C4 backed by a steel plate to make it a shaped charge; there's detcord lines running off down the
passageway too. I'd expect at least six or seven more charges to be scattered around deck seven or
lower. There's blood all over the connections, and on the deck, which might have shorted it out.
Whoever set this up was wounded, or had a lot of blood on their hands."

"Squadron Leader Potter?"

"Leave them be." Harry ordered. "If the timer's counted down and they haven't gone off, they aren't
going to go off. We can deal with it later. I've found the 'suspicious cargo.' It's been recorded. Check
the other cargo compartments and continue sweeping the ship, making a note of any demo charges
for the prize crew to deal with in a more controlled environment. I'm going to the captain's quarters
and then the ship's office. Maybe he kept some record of where the weapons were going."

"Pearce."

"It's Harry. Is the line secure?"

"Yes. What've you got?"

"Mossad was definitely here. We've got one survivor, a former US Marine of some description
named Daniel Cryer. He survived the shootout that started when Mossad started 'cleaning house,' by
which I mean killing the crew. I wouldn't mourn too much, they're a mixed bunch of terrorists and
thugs. I doubt anyone's going to miss them. We've got one in custody, and ID'd him from the ship's
files. He shot at us, but mostly because he was scared witless than anything else. He claims not to be
a member of any terrorist organisation, and took work aboard the Damocles six years ago to get
away from the chaos back home in Somalia."

"Why didn't Mossad scuttle the ship? Hide the evidence? That'd be their usual M.O."

"They tried. Their demo-man isn't as good as he thinks; he screwed it up. Charges didn't go off. The
Damocles headed out into the Indian Ocean, locked on an autopilot heading. As I said before, Cryer
survived, then did his best to patch himself up in the sickbay, including pulling the bullet out and
stitching himself up."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, he's one tough bastard. He says he didn't know a damned thing about the ship itself or how to
work it; the radio was trashed, main power and lights were out, so he just left it as is, hoping
someone would spot it and did his best to survive in the meantime. I roughed him up a bit, but he
probably would have cooperated anyway."

"Cryer isn't important in the grand scheme of things, though."

"No. The ship's captain kept detailed records of both his legal and illegal transactions. The latter I
had to hunt around for, hidden in a slick in his quarters, in the light fitting. I don't know where the
weapons' final destination was, but I can tell you they were bound for al-Shabaab's territory around
Mogadishu, and that the final customer would have been Saleem Ulman."

"That is promising."

"Indeed. I've also got the name of the go-between in Mogadishu. Mohammed Waraabe."
"Waraabe ... don't know the name." Pearce mused. "Gun runner, hmm? I'll look into him, and Cryer."

"Uh-huh. You could discreetly check with NCIS to see if Cryer is officially undercover, or just freelancing. If the latter, he might be worth recruiting; as I said, he's a tough bastard, and evidently Mossad thought him reliable enough for this. He might have some good local contacts."

"I'll pass that on to the Middle Eastern Desk at SIS."

Harry hesitated for a few moments. "I'm not sure what to do now. Thus far, it's just been chasing leads. Getting boots on the ground in Somalia ... that's a different level. Somalia's as bad a badlands as they come right now. I don't want you to put your head on the block for me on this."

"Of course I will." Pearce snorted. "I've backed you up this far, haven't I?"

"Thank you."

"However," Pearce continued, "you can consider this an order Harry; you aren't going anywhere near Somalia until we have a hard lock on Ulman's location. You're too distinctive, and too valuable to us by far. You know how many operatives come along with your kind of natural skill at this paramilitary stuff? Never."

"Aww, you're making me feel all mushy inside, old man."

"Piss off," was the heartfelt reply. "I'm only as old as I feel. What's the next move?"

"Can MI6 start looking for this Waraabe character? I'm going to call in a favour from the NSA to pull surveillance on the sat phone number."

"GCHQ not good enough for you?"

"You know damned well GCHQ doesn't have the resources Fort Meade can throw at this tasking. Our mutual friend Colonel Lambert can dig deeper and faster than Cheltenham could even on their best day."

"That he can. But even though he's a good man whom I count as a friend, Harry, he's going to want his pound of flesh, so to speak. He's not going to help you without something in return."

"I know. Last time he tried to recruit me ..."

"No dice." Pearce interrupted. "We're not giving you up."

"Nice to be needed." Harry commented dryly. "but I was thinking more along the lines of a short term arrangement. I get access to the NSA's vast resources, and he gets me for a couple of missions."

"Hmmm." Pearce mulled it over. "Fine. One or two. That I can accept."

"Okay then. There's something else, though."

"Yes?"

"Cryer reported that there were four people on the Mossad team, including Ziva. One was killed - we've found the body, with an Israeli Jericho pistol next to him. Two were wounded - Malachi Ben-Girion and the other officer recovering back in Israel. According to the captured crewmember, Ben-Girion was shot in the shoulder, the other in the leg. Both those are mission-kills; there's no way they would have continued the mission after that."
"And yet someone attacked the camp …" Pearce trailed off as the full implication of that hit them both at the same time.

"So the whole attack on the camp at Mataban … was just Ziva?" Harry said in disbelief. "Jesus. She made a hell of a mess for someone working alone."

"Like you usually do?" Pearce asked dryly. "We don't know that for certain."

"No, but short of Eli David giving us the operation file it's the most plausible explanation. Eyal told me Malachi and the other wounded man were back in Israel by 'sometime around the first week of June.' The camp was attacked on the 8th. Eyal's date was vague, but they couldn't have gotten back to Israel within anything less than 48 hours of that, not unless Mossad committed far more resources to this operation than we are aware of. But why did Ziva go on alone?"

"It's easy to forget what intelligence consists of: luck and speculation. Here and there a windfall, here and there a scoop."

John le Carre

38°52'24.04"N 76°59'45.89"W

NCIS Headquarters, Washington Navy Yard, Washington District of Columbia

29 June 2009

The MTAC screen shifted abruptly from the hold image, revealing Squadron Leader Potter seated at a communications panel on a ship somewhere, with a headset on.

"Evening, Director."

"Morning, Mr Potter," Vance said in reply. 0900 in Washington made it 1800 in the Indian Ocean area north of the Seychelles, where the St. Albans was.

"You're just on time," The British officer continued. "NSA just came through. They hacked the satellite phone service Waraabe uses, got his call history and listened in to his subsequent calls. He answered a call six hours ago from Saleem. They didn't use names on the line, but NSA voice print analysis confirms the ID. Colonel Lambert also got a rough GPS ping off of Saleem's phone somewhere in southern Somalia, near the city of Kismayo. The call was too short for anything else, so they'll keep listening."

"Lambert?" Vance raised an eyebrow. "Which limb did he take in payment?"

"Just my services for half-a-dozen missions. No big deal. Why? You sound like you don't like him."

"Like? Not especially. Respect, definitely." Vance shook his head, clearly remembering some past incident. "He's a lot easier to work with and more cooperative than most NSA bureaucrats, but if you get on the wrong side of him … you will regret it. He puts Niccolo Machiavelli himself to shame."
"Point taken. I originally offered two missions." Harry grimaced. "He does drive a hard bargain. Anyway, now we have a hard target."

"Yeah. About that."

"What?"

"Gibbs and his team ran down a lead. It was a long shot, but it seemed viable simply by how outlandish it was. They're heading in-country to follow up."

"What was it?"

"Caf-pow."

"I have no idea what that is."

"It's a caffeine energy drink sold here in the States. Several of Ulman's friends at college mentioned he had a taste for it when he was at Yale. McGee and our forensics tech Miss Sciuto nailed down a low-key, high-priced personal supply line running into East Africa, which we believe is Saleem's little personal addiction supply."

"That's ... so thin it might actually be outlandish enough to work out to something. Are they already in Somalia?"

"Flying towards Kenya as we speak. They'll head into Somalia tomorrow."

"Jesus." Harry rocked back. "They have no local experience. They don't know the language."

"True."

"White skin, no beards, presumably in Western dress, they'll stick out like a strobe beacon at night."

"Uh-huh."

Potter's eyes narrowed. "You want them to get captured."

"DiNozzo's idea, actually. They tagged themselves with subcutaneous GPS chips that only respond to microburst pings from Navy satellites; almost entirely undetectable unless someone happens to be scanning them at the exact moment the chip is pinged. Officially, of course, I know nothing about such a moronic plan. Unofficially, Gibbs will be shadowing the other two; that man can just ... disappear practically anywhere. He'll provide overwatch, keep them safe until the rescue. I'd like you to go with him. Snipers work with spotters, after all."

Without even a moment's hesitation, Harry agreed. "Sure. The St. Albans can helicopter me to the Seychelles. Could you get a Navy jet of some description to pick me up there and fly me to Kenya?"

"Absolutely."

"How do you know they'll get taken to Saleem?"

"He's the regional commander, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's a good point. High-value American prisoners will intrigue him. He fancies himself an interrogator." Potter grimaced, one finger tracing the scar across his eye. "Personal experience of that. So I'm the rescue party, huh?"
"Indeed. And, of course, since American agents are now in harm's way, with the added bonus of Saleem Ulman being on the high-value targets list, Uncle Sam will provide a certain measure of support."

"Such as?"

"Local assets include a platoon of Force Recon assigned to the counter-piracy Task Force. Plus some … extras." Vance's smirk was telling; the extras would be something special, clearly.

"Wonderful."

"Additionally, for your personal peace of mind, NCIS assets have reported rumours that back when Saleem shifted camp after the Mossad attack on June 8th that a woman was with the convoy. Dark hair, no ID. Only a glimpse, no idea if she was a prisoner or not."

"Thanks." Potter closed his eyes, rubbed his temples. "Thank you, very, very much."

"It isn't confirmed," Vance warned.

"It's enough!" Potter snapped, before calming. "Sorry."

"No problem. Perfectly understandable. You'll need to liaise with the USS Boxer, an LHD amphibious assault ship currently acting as the flagship of the multinational anti-piracy Combined Task Force One Five One. That's where any rescue force will be staging from. Go bring my people home, Mr. Potter."

"With pleasure, Director."

"Bidden to make war their work, Americans shoulder the burden with intimidating purpose. There is, I have said, an American mystery, the nature of which I only begin to perceive. If I were obliged to define it, I would say it is the ethos - masculine, pervasive, unrelenting, of work as an end in itself. War is a form of work, and America makes war, however reluctantly, however unwillingly, in a peculiarly workmanlike way."

Sir John Keegan, Lecturer on Military History at RMA Sandhurst

There are various analogies one could use to describe military operations.

Chess is of course one of the most popular, but in this case a jigsaw puzzle might be more accurate; all the pieces slotting into place, one by one.

The NCIS agents ended up being captured on July 2 and taken to a training camp about ten miles up the River Juba next to a village named Yoontoy, shadowed the entire way by Special Agent Gibbs and Harry. The pair had set up an OP on a ridge a kilometre further inland and provided intel on the layout and garrison of the camp, sending it back to the USS Boxer off the coast.

That was one piece. The second was the infiltration.

Hostage-rescue situations are always dicey. The initiative was almost entirely in the hands of the enemy, who were unrestricted in their use of force while the rescuers had to be careful at every stage
not to either induce the hostage-takers to execute their captives or to accidentally frag them
themselves.

Thus, to this end, Harry had decided, in concert with the planning staff back on the Boxer, to pre-
position himself inside the camp. When the raid went down, he would secure the captives - providing
they were in the same place, which seemed likely since they knew McGee and Tony were being
held in the same building. Once he had located and secured them, the assault force could go all-out
weapons free to mop up the rest of the camp.

Harry was under no illusions; this would probably be the more 'interesting' missions of his career if it
all went to hell; he'd be trapped inside the compound, outnumbered fifty-to-one while trying to keep
multiple - and probably injured - hostages alive. The J-3 Operations officer back on the Boxer thought
he was insane, but the commander of the Force Recon team who would conduct the actual assault -
one Captain Shane 'Scarecrow' Schofield - had confirmed Harry's abilities, having actually operated
with him in the past.

That was the second piece. The third would of course be the actual assault. The fourth would be the
extraction. For this, a squadron of riverine gunboats would be heli-lifted to a point just off the mouth
of the river and would pick them up a few hundred meters away on the River Juba, hopefully under
the watchful eyes of fast air and attack helicopter support from the Boxer.

That was the simple version. There were many other pieces of the puzzle; to take just a few
examples, the Marines would require airlift by Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft to their parachute drop points;
those Osprey's would need air-refuelling after dropping off their loads. The assault force needed
extra personnel to maintain numerical superiority - these men would be drawn from some spare
manpower from SEAL Team 9, under the command of Lt. Cdr Steve McGarrett. The objective was
barely fifteen miles away from the port city of Kismayo, one of Al-Shabab's strongholds in southern
Somalia. There would undoubtedly be other patrols in the area as well, and they wanted to be in and
out as fast as possible; hence, the extra manpower.

So, far from being a two-dimensional game of chess with only sixteen pieces per side, the operation
was rather an extremely complex and fully three-dimensional game - air, land and sea - a puzzle in
which every single piece had to fit together absolutely, lest the entire thing fall apart … with far more
terminal effects than any board game.

Chapter End Notes

Arrrgh ... cliffhanger! Well, not really. You know perfectly well what's going to happen.
Saleem's going to die a very painful death ... or is he?

Some people are undoubtedly going to ask why I included this chapter; after all, it all
seems very pedestrian. Boring. Humdrum.

That's the point. I always say I strive for realism, and the reality of intelligence work is
that a lot of it is spent looking for that one clue that breaks the whole thing wide open.
Much like the hunt for Bin Laden only ended with Operation NEPTUNE, this chapter
is intended to show how determined, intelligent analysis can find a needle in a haystack
the size of the Horn of Africa.
Okay, I had to go with Rule of Cool quite a bit in this chapter because, let's face it, one man SF operations just don't happen in real life that often. In fact, at all, really. Let's just say Harry's channelling his inner Sam Fisher and leave it at that. There's a few crossovers; Matthew Reilly's Scarecrow and Hawaii 5-0's Steve McGarrett in particular. Not very much of the NCIS crew in this; bluntly, they aren't the stars of this story anyway, only Harry and Ziva are.

20 June 2014 - Chapter updated and partially rewritten to reflect new research.

Khaveyrim

Chapter 6 - No One Gets Left Behind

All great things are simple, and many can be expressed in single words: Freedom, justice, honour, duty, mercy, hope.

Winston Churchill

0° 6′52.79″S - 42°34′5.62″E

Yoontoy - 16.5 miles north of Kismayo - Somalia

4th July 2009 - 2310 Time Zone Charlie
Left: Map of southern Somalia with major urban centres and rivers marked. Right: the status of the Somali Civil War in July 2009.

Ziva was holding out. Only just, but holding.

The physical abuse was bad - obviously - and painful and humiliating and so many other words, but she was trained for that. Saleem was not a particularly good interrogator, but he was smart, and ... enthusiastic. He figured he could hold her pretty much indefinitely, and had time to break her, so after a few days he'd just leave her alone for two or three days, to let her body heal. Not from altruism, obviously, but so she didn't die.

No 'professional' torturer would have done that. They would have kept the pressure on until she cracked, and probably employed much, much nastier methods - electricity, blowtorches, and power drills had featured in the 'what might happen to you' of her training - but Ulman seemed to be
somewhat squeamish in that regard. Not surprising, actually; Ziva knew that when he'd been torturing Hetty to break Harry, much of the abuse had been done by others, under his direction. Here, Saleem's men seemed to lack anything more than basic respect for him; she'd overheard some of the guards calling him alamera - Arabic, for 'princeling' - presumably in reference to his privileged upbringing.

In some ways he was right, however. Some of those rest-days had been the worst of all, when she had been at her most despondent - not that she let Saleem see any hint of that. When Saleem was working her over, she could focus on the pain - had to focus on it, using the adrenaline it released to fight down her natural inclination to want it to end and force herself to think, so she didn't blurt out something without meaning to.

But in the silence, those days when he left her alone, he left her alone, she couldn't keep the adrenaline going. They usually cut the zipties when they left her like this - if left on for too long, they could cut deep into her flesh, and the wound might get infected. Saleem did not want her to die ... yet.

Having her hands free allowed her to exercise as much as her sore muscles would allow, followed by muscle relaxation exercises to ease the pain of her injuries as much as possible. She kept her mind active, keeping track of guard and meal schedules as best she could by listening to people moving around in the house above her, for conversations in Arabic rather than the local Somali, which she could not understand, and for the distinctive sound of the adhan, the call to prayer from a nearby town, wherever that was.

When there was nothing to hear, or she was too tired to move, she tried to focus on positive thoughts and memories. The satisfaction of wrapping up a case. Childhood holidays on her maternal grandparents' ranch in the Negev. Film nights with Tony, Abby and Tim. Bowling with Abby's friends from the convent. Helping Gibbs work on his boat. Spending time with Harry, infrequent and intense as his snatched days or weeks of leave in Washington always were.

It had taken almost a week for her to notice that Michael did not feature in those memories. She pushed that away - it wasn't positive.

But sometimes, even though her training emphasised that focusing on thoughts of your own guilt, for mistakes made, or weakness for getting captured was counter-productive, Ziva could not force those thoughts away even though she knew it was dangerous - knew it pushed her closer to her breaking point. But she had too many regrets, too many mistakes,. Saleem may have been her captor, but she'd had plenty of chances not to get captured. She could have turned back at any time in the days between coming ashore from the Damocles and her assault on the camp. She'd let her father get inside her head again, back in Israel, let him start to direct her decisions again like he'd tried to her whole life.

_I don't know who you answer to any more Ziva! ... make this your aliyah! ... your return to me, to us!_

_Aliyah._ Literally, 'Ascent,' and meaning immigration to Israel. The opposite was yeridah, 'descent,' or leaving Israel. The words were emotionally evocative and, sometimes, politically charged for Israelis and the population of the Jewish Diaspora. _Yerida_ was often seen in a bad light, as an abandonment of Israel, although the antagonism between emigrants and those who stayed was far less than it had been a few decades before, when Israel was frequently balanced on the knife-edge of complete destruction, and any emigration would harm her long-term survival. Most who make yeridah today do so because of the high cost of living in Israel - oh, and the bombs, and the rocket attacks, and the general uncertainty of day-to-day survival that comes from living in a low- to medium-intensity
warzone. Even the most fiercely patriotic Israeli generally admit that those are pretty good reasons.

Ziva had not made yerida - she had been serving HaMossad on an extended overseas assignment. She had not given up her citizenship, or applied for dual citizenship elsewhere, or done anything else that be construed as such. Eli's exhortation implied as such, however, and the idea that anyone had thought she had given up on Israel - let alone her own father - had cut very, very deep. People who joined Mossad did not do so on a whim; Ziva was no exception, and she was deeply committed to Israel and its survival.

But the fact remained that her father had got inside her head - again - and manipulated her - again. After Ari, finding out she was under surveillance during the Eschel incident in Washington, Rivkin being sent to seduce her, and so on and so forth she should have learned not to listen to him. But she had, and from that decision she'd rejected her friends at NCIS - friends as close as family - and returned home, and taken on Michael's mission in his stead.

And this was the result. Waiting to die an ignominious death in a dusty basement in Somalia.

Her misplaced determination to prove to Eli that he really could trust her, combined with her blinding, stubborn, idiotic pride had sent her onwards to complete the mission when she should have aborted and returned to Israel with Malachi and the others. At the time, it had seemed rational, although now that was clearly fallacious in the extreme. But she had been given a mission - she would see it through. Because that was what Mossad agents did. And she was the director's daughter, with all the baggage that entailed. She had to be the best, to prove she deserved her position, and that it wasn't just nepotism.

So she had gone on, against all logic, against all sanity, fought her way through Saleem's defences and come within a fingernail of completing the mission - and avenging a woman she'd never even met. She'd had Ulman quite literally in the sights of her pistol when a rifle butt had cracked down on the back of her skull.

She'd somehow forgotten that there were people that cared for her, that loved her - even Eli in his dysfunctional duty-first way. She'd failed them, she'd betrayed them by continuing on this suicidal quest for a redemption that she didn't need to pursue in the first place.

"There are people that care about you, people that would be hurt if you did that."

Ziva had told Harry that, back in his apartment in London, when he told her he'd been contemplating suicide after Hetty's death. She'd told him that giving up and committing suicide after losing Hetty would have been the cowardly and selfish action to take, and she understood all too well what it was like to lose somebody.

Now, that hypocrisy was tearing at her.

She should have just called Harry. At the time, after their phone call on the 14th and after being informed of the target, she had held off on calling him again. Partly because Mossad and her father might take that as a sign of unreliability, but mostly because she feared he would send himself into a vicious circle of revenge. 'Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves,' Confucius had said; she hadn't wanted that to happen to Harry.

Instead, she'd done it herself, and even though she had never met Hetty Kirkland, she had always felt a connection to Harry's late first love. She should have considered the proverb as it applied to her, too.

She also now realised she shouldn't have taken that decision for him. He was one of the most self-
controlled and self-disciplined people she had ever met; he would have been able to keep his emotions in check. Maybe if she had called him, she wouldn't have spent the last few weeks in this godforsaken hellhole.

She'd made so many mistakes. Even if she did get out of here, how could she ever trust her own judgement? How could anyone else? How would she be able to look Harry in the eye and tell him she'd failed to kill the man who'd hurt him so badly?

In the first two weeks of her capture, Ziva had nearly broken under the combined physical abuse, drugs and her self-inflicted emotional turmoil. She knew the chances of someone finding her decreased markedly as soon as Saleem shifted camp after the attack, and continued decreasing every day since. Furthermore, she knew Mossad or the IDF didn't have the resources to pull off a rescue in this region by itself, and probably believed her dead anyway.

Civilians or inexperienced 'professionals' who are taken prisoner - soldiers and spies alike - usually believe, in spite of everything, in spite of all evidence to the contrary that someone is coming to rescue them.

Eventually, the realisation that the cavalry is not coming, that there is no light at the end of the tunnel is what breaks them. The aim of a good interrogator is to accelerate that process.

When it comes to trained professionals, who know from the start that the rescue is not on the cards, the interrogator's job is made harder, not easier. For such people, who are always in the job out of patriotism or any passionate belief in the cause – whatever it may be - not breaking is simply the last thing they can do to further the mission; one last act of defiance, denying the enemy access to the secrets inside their head.

There is only one thing that can keep such a decision, such determination to resist in place even when all hope is lost, and that is sheer bloody-minded stubbornness.

Ziva had that in spades.

But even though her professional training told her no rescue would be forthcoming, there was some little part of her, deep down, buried under the cynicism imparted by a childhood spent in a warzone followed by a decade-long career as a soldier, a spy and a cop - three professions that saw the worst humanity had to offer - that knew, knew with unflinching certainty that there was someone out there who really would be looking for her.

Because if she knew anything about Harry it was that he, if anything, was even more stubborn than she herself was.

---

This training camp was more like a small military base. Far from a collection of ramshackle tents and battered buildings in the desert like the previous camp, the core of this complex had once been the mansion of some long-departed colonial overseer, a legacy of Somalia's period under the Italian Empire before World War Two.

Various factions had had possession of it since. Full independence came in 1960, and after a decade or so of democracy, a relatively bloodless military coup led by Major General Mohamed Siad Barre installed a half-Communist, half-Islamic military junta that lasted until 1990. Initially friendly relations with Communist Russia gave way, rather ironically, to an alliance with the United States in 1977 after the USSR chose to support neighbouring Ethiopia in the Ogaden War. Those two
successive alliances with both the major superpowers of the Cold War had allowed the Somali military government to build the largest army in Africa at the time; said Army had used this mansion as a regional headquarters and supply depot for the southern provinces, and had added garages, workshops and ammunition magazines in a linear arrangement along the long drive up towards the original colonial structure from the main road to the south.

These were facilities that the newest owners – technically called Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (HSM), meaning 'Movement of Striving Youth,' but most commonly known as just al-Shabaab - had put to good use.

al-Shabaab was in the midst of a civil war against the Transitional Federal Government, the legitimate UN- and African Union-backed democratic government of Somalia, and they were doing quite well. The TFG had been in existence since 2004, and had initially experienced considerable success in pushing the powerful 'Islamic Courts Union' Islamist group out of the south and centre of the country. Al-Shabaab was an off-shoot of the ICU, formed when that group splintered after a series of defeats in late 2006. Despite their successes, Ethiopian and Somali forces had been fought to a near-stalemate since then, and the continued drain on their resources combined with the TFG's continual internal disagreements had caused Ethiopia to withdraw from Somalia in early 2009. With their opponents thus weakened, al-Shabaab had gone on the offensive against the TFG and had quickly extended their influence in the southern provinces, expanding outwards from Kismayo, which they had taken the year before.

This base was an important logistics and training hub for al-Shabaab, but fortunately they also regarded it as a rear-area facility, not under much threat from TFG forces. As such there was a permanent guard and instructor force equivalent to an over-strength platoon – about forty-five men – and two platoons worth of newly arrived recruits who had only just been issued weapons.

The camp perimeter was a thick, three-metre high mud-brick wall built closer to the house than any security specialist should really have allowed. Elevated wooden guard towers at the corners and one over the main gate watched out over the surrounding desert – fortunately without searchlights. It had once been cleared of obstacles to allow clear lanes of view and fire, but al-Shabaab had allowed the low, tough desert shrub bushes to encroach back into the area.

The centrepiece of the camp was the old mansion, fronted by colonnaded steps, with the camp arranged in a long linear pattern around the drive leading up from the road. Sixty metres directly in front of the house, down a slight hill was the main gate, always guarded and well lit by floodlights. A collection of low buildings used as munitions storage warehouses ran up the hill between the two, in a linear arrangement either side of the access road.

A sizeable garaging and vehicle workshop area for vehicle repairs surrounded what had once been the top of the drive. At the back was a more recent mud-brick accommodation block behind and to the sides in a wide C-shape, which was also built directly up against the perimeter wall; this was one of several tactical mistakes on the part of the defenders that tonight's attackers intended to fully exploit.

The thing about non-government, paramilitary organisations – like guerrilla or terrorist groups – is that when they try to run their activities like a full-on military campaign instead of playing to their usual strengths of hit-and-run and terror tactics, and instead start using pseudo-military styled organisational structures, logistics and particularly tactics, they usually make mistakes no professional force would.

After all, terrorists groups are essentially passionate amateurs. Very dangerous ones, to be sure, and those that survived long enough could add 'experienced' or 'battle-hardened' to that, but nonetheless
amateurs.
And war is an endeavour best left to professionals.

Harry, dressed in a ghillie suit matched to the local terrain, had spent the previous night crawling into a position about thirty metres from the perimeter wall. He'd lain up through the daylight hours in a patch of the shrubs that *al-Shabaab* had so thoughtfully allowed to grow back, another camouflage net pulled over his prone figure. He'd slept for some of it, watched over by Gibbs and the newly arrived Marine and Navy SEAL snipers on the ridge, and he'd also mapped out the camp using his powers, watching the guards shift changes and making a best guess on the location of the hostages.

Tony and McGee were being held downstairs, in a basement room with a large window. From the outside, the window appeared to be at ground level, but in the cell it was just above head height, two metres off the floor. There were several more prisoners in the basement, in other rooms further down the corridor. Harry could, most of the time, identify gender by the 'silhouette' of the air molecules around them which he could sense; all the other prisoners were likely female. There had been reports of Red Crescent aid workers going missing while distributing American food aid in Kismayo, barely fifteen miles away; that was his best guess as to who they were. Unfortunately, he couldn't tell which was Ziva.

Through the day he had spent outside the wall, several of them had been raped by some of the militants.

Harry had been tensed to move, practically vibrating with anger and the need to act, but had forced himself to stop, and think. The assault force was not in place, it was daylight, he was alone and stood no chance of succeeding in a rescue. He wouldn't even make it over the wall.

So he had forced himself to stop, but that had not prevented him from torturing himself with the guilt that he *should* have thought of something, come up with some other plan to stop it.

Now, that part of the wait was over. Last light had been hours ago, and it was a new moon night, black as pitch except for the weaker light of the stars; the minutes had trickled by like molasses, but it was to the attackers benefit to begin when the night was darkest, and night-vision would give them more of an edge.

Now, he was waiting for a sign. Or perhaps *the* sign.

No, not a sign from God … although, having been a Gunnery Sergeant, most US Marines would probably insist Gibbs was the closest any mere mortal was ever going to get to being such an entity.

In his ear, Gibbs' gruff voice murmured, "*Standby, standby … he's turning … standby … go now.*"

Harry was up and moving before the second word was finished, moving the final distance in a crouching gait that was deceptively quick. The rumble of portable generators just the other side of the wall and a couple of engines inside covered the minimal noise he made.

"*Hold.*"

Harry froze, crouched at the base of the wall. The human eye is drawn to movement, particularly at night, and although he would be less visible lying down, that would do him no good if he was seen in the process of doing so.
Fortunately, the sentry towers were built inside the perimeter, so their wooden structural supports were not exposed; however, this seemingly sensible precaution created a blind spot half-way along the wall between the two, where a guard would actually have to lean out of the tower to see ... exactly where he was now. Harry and Gibbs had identified this as the weakest point on the perimeter for a one-man intrusion. It wasn't much of a weakness, but it was all he needed.

But it was enough.

"Standby ... go."

Once again, Harry was moving almost as soon as Gibb's spoke; he could sense exactly when the sentry was turning away, but followed Gibbs' calls in order to keep his abilities secret.

A grapnel thickly wrapped in neoprene rubber to muffle it landed and caught on the top of the wall. Harry grasped the knotted rope that trailed down from it and pulled himself up the wall.

The top of the wall had another simple but effective defensive measure – broken glass embedded in the mud brick. This was a tactic Harry had encountered regularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, and he had a long-prepared countermeasure ready. Reaching over his shoulder, he pulled out a thin, tough rubber mat from where it had been rolled up and pushed into a flexible canvas bag attached to the back of his armour, and slid it quietly to rest over the glass. With that protection, it was a simple matter to roll over, keeping his body low to the wall to minimise his silhouette.

Once on the other side, hanging by his fingertips, the drop was reduced to less than a metre. He landed in a dark patch at the base of the wall – another reason they'd chosen this spot, the noise again muffled by the nearby generators and by landing correctly, with his knees bent and all his equipment taped up to prevent it rattling.

Harry took cover behind some stacked crates of something in sacks with Red Crescent markings - food aid, probably - and stayed there for almost thirty seconds with his sidearm in hand, waiting to see if anyone had heard his unauthorized entry. He'd stuck with the Vector SMG for tonight's mission, because of its winning combination of recoil-reducing bolt, relatively light weight, and the effectiveness of its .45 calibre round on unarmoured targets. He'd forgone the silencer, as it was too long and bulky, but he had his blades, a combat knife, and his favoured MEUSOC 1911 sidearm for that kind of work.

They had identified three ground floor entrances into the mansion: the front, obviously, but that was well lit and guarded. The other two were on either side at the back and also guarded. Both had
staircases leading down to the basement nearby inside the house.

Harry had timed his entrance to be just before the shift change. The night before, he and Gibbs had observed the guards rotated on three-hour watches … meaning it would hopefully be some time before anyone found any bodies he left behind on his way in. Most of the positions were static, but there was a roving two-man patrol that moved around the perimeter from the gatehouse every half an hour or so; they would be a nuisance, but not an insurmountable one.

So the guard should be changing … right about now.

The nearest entrance swung open and another militant stepped out, weapon slung. He exchanged a few words with the man he was relieving, opening a packet of cigarettes.

Harry's grip tightened on the pistol grip. They were discussing when their next 'session' with the prisoners would be.

He waited for several minutes behind the shack until the first guard stamped out his cigarette, said something indistinct that made the other laugh, and entered the house.

Harry moved quietly forward to the corner of the house. A quick look either way to make sure his 'sixth sense' was still functioning correctly, and then he was across the ten metre gap between the two, back pressed to the exterior wall of the house right next to the corner.

The next bit would be … tricky. If he managed to take down the guard silently, all well and good. If not, and the alarm was raised, then the assault would commence and Harry would have to proceed under the cover of the chaos generated by it.

Harry clicked the radio transmit key three times, receiving three in response. He was barely five metres from the guard now, too close to talk. Now he just had to wait for the next signal …

Harry holstered his pistol and silently slid one of his swords out of its oiled sheath, holding in his right hand. Sword was a little generous, as it was more of an oversized fighting dagger, really: at a total length of 22 inches (five for the grip and seventeen for the anodized black blade), the twin tactical blades were a little impractical for most soldiers on the modern battlefield, where hand to hand weapons were usually restricted to bayonets or sometimes a tomahawk – that was a Navy SEAL specialty in particular – but they held sentimental value for Harry.

Hetty's father Daniel had been his first martial arts instructor, and he had given these blades to Harry upon his graduation from Special Forces Selection. At the base of each blade, just above the minimal hilt was engraved a small monogram.

Two H's, intertwined.

A playful and not-so-subtle hint from a man who had become one of several surrogate fathers for the young ex-wizard; a hint that he thought that Harry and his daughter should stop pratting around and get married already. It was one of Harry's greatest regrets that he had never heeded that hint.

But Hetty was gone. Harry was well past the 'seven stages of grief' by now, and his memories of her no longer brought echoes of pain with them. But it seemed fitting that using a weapon with her stamp on for both avenging her death and rescuing the woman who had filled that void in his life.

Harry waited in a crouch, ready to move, just waiting for an opportunity to dart around the corner and silently relieve the guard of his duties. Unfortunately, Murphy's Law waits for no man. The roving patrol was making their rounds early. Apart from that, if they stuck to the usual pattern, they would come around the far side of the house, exchange some words with the guard there, then check
in on the two sentry towers before reaching his present position in about five to six minutes time, which meant he had to move soon.

Fortunately, good luck can strike almost as easily as bad.

The roving patrol met the guard on the door on the far side. Harry couldn't hear the conversation, but one of them raised his voice and directed a question at the man on Harry's side; it was too dark for them to see each other clearly.

As the guard took a few steps away from the door. "An aqwl muruh akhra?" Say that again?

Harry slid out from behind the corner, staying low.

The question was repeated, "Hew anek Wahid?" Is that you, Wahid?

"Nama." Yes.

"Hel tiryd syjarah?" Do you want a cigarette?

"La shakra, kan mjrad wahad." No thanks, I've just had one.

"Hasana. Nerakem fey bed'deqa'eq." Okay, see you in a few minutes.

"Hasana."

The guard didn't get a chance to turn back. A gloved hand snaked around his mouth, clamping it shut as a seventeen inch blade was driven up at a forty-five degree angle from just under his ribcage through his right lung, heart and aorta.

Clamping the guard's corpse to him to hold it upright and watching the roving patrol carefully, Harry withdrew the sword, wiped it on the guard's tunic before sliding it away. Then he quietly let the body slide down, lifting the AK-47 from its slung position around the guard's shoulder and leaving it on the ground by the door, before carefully pulling the guard's body into a fireman's lift. Walking slowly, half-crouched, he moved the body back around the other side of the crates.

That might buy him a minute or so once they found the guard missing. The body was heavy, but he was used to that; carrying upwards of sixty kilos of kit on a long-range patrol was, if anything, below average for the SAS. Right now all he had was 'fighting order' - a combat-oriented loadout of armour, ammunition, medical and water supplies, with no unnecessary weight. If anything, it felt oddly light.

With that unpleasant task done, Harry returned to the door, picking up the AK-47 and slung it over his left shoulder so it wouldn't clatter against the Vector. After a quick glance to check the roving patrol wasn't looking his way, he flipped up the NVGs and pushed the door open.

"Entering the house." That wasn't Harry, but Gibbs, who, along with the other snipers, presumably had their crosshairs centred on the guards' forehead through the entire evolution. Now Gibbs was keeping up a running narrative of what he could see for the benefit of the other teams.

The sudden light of the bare light bulbs inside was jarring, but Harry forced himself to keep his eyes wide open; there were enemy combatants in several rooms along this corridor; most sleeping, but a few were sitting around a table a few doors down chatting. He didn't need to go far, as the basement door was just a few metres away. He sidled up to it, covering the corridor with his 1911 in one hand, sliding silently past a door on each side, and eased the latch open with his left hand.
The heavy, old-fashioned wooden door creaked. Harry winced and paused, but the quiet murmur of conversation from down the corridor continued uninterrupted, so he pushed it open and quickly entered. Even if someone did notice the creaking, hopefully they'd assume it was one of their men, but if they caught sight of him in the corridor – and he was obviously not an Islamic militant – that would be just a tad more suspicious.

The staircase was steep and narrow, with old wooden steps. Harry descended it keeping to one side as best he could, where the joint was strongest and was less likely to make noise.

The basement was shaped in a kind of reverse capital E shape, with the longest side running under the front of the house. The cell Tony and McGee were being held in was at the outer end of the middle bar; the staircase Harry had just descended exited at the outer end of the bottom bar, mirrored by another staircase on the far side. Along the walls between the top and bottom bars were small rooms, some filled with stores, some empty, and some converted to cells, with heavy doors barred from the outside. No doors opened onto the central bar, leaving one open uninterrupted corridor to where the NCIS agents were being held. Harry could feel one man in the room with them, and one outside.

Harry extended a small handheld mirror around the corner. No one in sight. The mantra of room-clearance drills was: \textit{Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast.} Rushing into it caused mistakes, which delayed and cost you even more than if you took the extra few seconds to avoid them.

Harry walked slowly down the corridor, keeping his weapon in a two handed stance, passing three barred doors to his right on the way. A quick glance through the small barred window into each revealed still forms lying on bare mattresses or the bare ground, all female. There were some other barred doors on the other side of the central bar. Once he reached it, Harry had to once again control his fury and stop himself from just shooting the guard down the corridor out of hand.

An angry, wordless yell echoed down the corridor, followed by raised voices from inside the larger cell. English, clearly with a New York accent. Anthony DiNozzo, letting loose with his unique brand of annoying the hell out of the bad guys.

"Hey, it's just a little chemical addiction, don't worry." \textit{Addiction ... the Caf-Pow thing? Was he talking to Saleem right now?} "Maybe you picked that up at your American college!"

Harry could sense Saleem – the college reference made it almost certain – moving towards the corridor. There was only one passageway out of the cell and Harry was standing at one end of it.

He could ambush Saleem now, when he reached the end of the corridor, but the other guard would plainly see it and if he got so much as a single shot off the whole thing would be blown. Technically, Harry's primary objective were to rescue DiNozzo and McGee, and Ziva only 'if' she was found. Harry was certain she was, but the mission profile and objectives had been developed from the intel they had, which hadn't been conclusive on that point, and his 'gut feeling' did not constitute confirmed intel. But Ziva or no Ziva, he would be damned if he didn't even try to save the other captives who were all still vulnerable in their cells.

He was only one man; he couldn't protect all of them at once unless they were gathered in one place. The best place for that would be in the cell with the NCIS agents, with only one entrance – an easily defended chokepoint – and the large window, which was protected by the snipers on the hill. There were six more prisoners down here, three on each side, and he still didn't know which was Ziva. So he had to avoid contact, then improvise.

That was fine. Harry was \textit{good} at improvising.
"You know, maybe we aren't so bad!" Down the hall, the door to the bigger cell was flung open with a crash.

Harry turned and took two steps to the nearest cell door, sliding back the bolt as quietly as he could, slipping inside and pushing it closed. The bolt was a similar colour to the door, hopefully Saleem wouldn't notice if he passed. If not, well that was a .45 calibre pistol was for.

"You ought to rethink your master plan!"

Heavy, stomping footsteps along the passageway. Someone's pissed! Harry crouched low beneath the door's barred opening, holding it shut with one hand.

Saleem went the other way, to the second cell on the far side, unlocking the bolt with unnecessary force.

The woman whose cell he had hidden in raised her head, lying on a dirty mattress with her hands ziptied in front of her. Her tired, bruised eyes widened as she saw the man who was clearly not yet another jihadist come to rape her. Harry saw, and held a finger to his lips, gesturing for quiet.

She was probably one of the missing Somali Red Crescent aid workers, although Harry couldn't match the brutalised, dishevelled woman in front of him to any of the ID photos in the briefing document he and Gibbs had been emailed to a secure laptop over the sat link a few days before. Two were Egyptian, one Syrian, one Sudanese and one Moroccan. If anything, their treatment made his blood boil as much as the knowledge the same had been done to Ziva.

Saleem and his ilk had a long-standing grievance with Israel – obviously – which Harry partially sympathised with in one aspect only; the previous few decades’ treatment of the Palestinian people had often been less than ethical on Israel's part. But to kidnap, rape and torture peaceful aid workers from other Muslim countries who were only trying to alleviate the suffering of refugees from a civil war simply highlighted the inherent hypocrisy of the extremists' so-called 'Holy War.'

Down the corridor, Saleem dragged one of the other prisoners out. No, not yet.

Saleem dragged his new guest to the big cell, pushing her down on a chair in front of DiNozzo.

"Questions are being asked in town about missing NCIS agents. They are concerned that US forces might mobilise." Harry could hear him clearly, the angry tone echoing up the stone-walled corridor. "One of you will tell me the identities and locations of all the operatives in the area, and the other one will die."

Harry tensed to move, just in case Saleem tried to carry out this threat in the next few seconds. It didn't seem likely.

Ulman pulled the hood off his prisoner – Harry was now certain who it was. There was no one else he would use to threaten Tony with, no other female prisoner with some reason to know information about NCIS.

Ziva. The urge to intervene redoubled.

"I'll give you a moment to decide who lives, and who dies." Saleem left the cell, the guard pulling the door shut behind him. He passed Harry's hiding place without noticing anything out of place, and climbed to the ground floor.

Now's my chance. Harry hefted his pistol into clear view of the woman on the bed, and nodded at her. The message was clear: I have to go shoot some of these bastards first. I'll be back for you. She
nodded.

Harry was glad to see that they hadn't completely broken her; Stockholm Syndrome was not something he had the time or inclination to deal with right now, and it could crop up in the oddest of situations. If she had shouted out or otherwise attempted to warn the hostiles, he would have been forced to incapacitate or kill her for the sake of the other captives' lives.

He exited, pulling and bolting the door shut behind him just in case someone else happened past. He paused for a moment at the corner, giving himself half a second to mentally prepare himself for combat rather than sneaking around, and turned the corner with his weapon already raised.

Saleem Ulman

"The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him."

GK Chesterton
"I'll give you a moment to decide who lives, and who dies."

Ziva stared at Tony as Saleem walked out, not believing her eyes. *Am I hallucinating? It can't be him …*

"Well," Tony said flippantly, "how was your summer?"

... *Yes, it is.*

There was a long silence. "Out of everyone in the world who could have found me," Ziva said slowly, incredulously, "it had to be you." She still hadn't truly forgiven him for shooting Michael; other than noticing he didn't really feature in her positive memories, she hadn't really had the inclination to think about that relationship for these last few weeks. It hadn't seemed important.

"You're welcome. So, are you glad to see me?"

"You should not have come."

"All right then. Good catching up. I'll be going now." Tony bounced his chair a few inches across the floor. "Oh yeah, I forgot. Taken prisoner."

"Are you all right, McGee?" Ziva said quietly.

"I'm just glad you're alive," Tim said from the floor behind her.

"You thought I was dead?"

"Oh. Oh yeah." Back to Tony.

"So why are you here?"

"McGee … McGee didn't think you were dead. Neither did Harry. And I wasn't about to disagree
"with him."

"Tony," Ziva repeated insistently, "why are you here?"

Tony rolled his head around as if he was struggling to stop himself from … ah, yes, Saleem's personal truth cocktail.

"Couldn't live without you, I guess."

"So you will die with me."

There was a pair of thuds outside the door, followed by a third one.

"Not if who I think that is has anything to say about it."

"Gibbs?" Ziva asked, as the door opened. She tried to turn to look, but her ribs screamed in protest and she slumped back, breathing through the pain.

"Hey man, about time you arrived." She barely heard Tony's remark. Then someone was kneeling beside her chair, and a careful, gentle touch brushed over her jaw with gloved fingers; she knew who it was even before he spoke.

"Neshama." There was a world of meanings in just that one word. Love. Commitment. Hope.

She looked up, straight into those familiar green eyes, and saw exactly why she'd fallen in love with this man in the first place. Determination and willpower, hard as steel. Courage and conviction, solid as stone. Tenderness and love, pure and blinding as the sun.

"Harry."

The guard died even as he spotted the intruder, the silenced .45 lined up on his centre of mass before he had time to even so much as touch his weapon. The guard slumped against the corner of the wall milliseconds later,

Harry ran down the corridor and unbolted the door. The occupants had clearly heard the guard fall. Tony was wide-eyed with relief at his appearance, as was McGee, who was now sitting up having been faking unconsciousness. Ziva was trying to twist around to see, but her battered, bruised body couldn't quite manage it.

"Hey man, about time you arrived."

Harry ignored him, grabbing the guard's webbing strap and dragging him inside before kicking the door shut; he shut off his powers at the same time, letting his eyes return to their natural colour, as he didn't want Tony to see his 'other' look.

Then he knelt by Ziva's chair and reached up to touch her face; she was his reason for being here, after all.

"Neshama." It was all he had to say.

Ziva looked up into his eyes, and a connection was made between them, as powerful as one of his lightning bolts.

"Harry."
"Shalom, matok. Mizman loh hitraehnu." Hello, sweetheart. Long time no see. Harry couldn't stop himself from smiling, so broadly it really did feel like he was grinning from ear to ear. "Ready to bust out of this place?"

Ziva closed her eyes and let her forehead fall forward gently against the rim of his helmet. "Lah'levityen." Absolutely.

"Great. Who's combat capable?"

"I am." McGee said, and Harry quickly left Ziva's side to cut his zipties off with his knife. The emotional reunion was over; now he had a job to do. "Tony's high on truth serum. Ziva, how about you?"

"I can shoot, not so sure about walking."

Harry quickly cut them both free in just a few seconds before turning back to McGee. He pointed to the dead jihadist on the floor. "Get dressed in his tunic and webbing. Wrap a shemagh around your head and pretend to be him. Make sure you stand in front of the blood spatter."

"Uh, blood spat-? … Okay?" McGee got to work. Harry turned to Ziva, unslinging his borrowed AK and passing it to her. "Take cover against the wall in the corner opposite the door, under the window."

"Why there?" Ziva took the gun, checking it over instinctively. "We'll be in plain view of anyone coming in."

"No time. I have my reasons. Trust me."

"Always." Another brief connection, green into dark brown. "Tony, help me up."

Harry didn't wait to hear any more, sprinting back down the corridor to the cells. He unbolted the one he'd hidden in, and made short work of the zipties, and picked her up in his arms bridal-style.

"Aledy?" Who?

"Al'gewat ael'hasah al'breytane'yeh" British Special Forces. Harry replied quietly in Arabic as he negotiated his burden through the door, unfortunately jostling her somewhat awkwardly as he pulled the door too and pushed the bolt home. "Ma hew as'mekah? What's your name?

"Yasmine."

He was half-way down the corridor, moving as fast as he could without hurting her more. "Wayen anet men, Yasmine?" And where are you from, Yasmine?

"al-Magrib." Morocco.

"Wen'en sewf thesl 'ela alemnezl qeryeba, Yasmine," We'll get you home soon, Yasmine, Harry promised, laying her down in the corner under the window, beside Ziva. He doubled back and did the same with two more cells; each time he left the sight of the NCIS agents he quickly scanned the house, keeping track of Saleem.

By the time he got back with the third woman – Simrah, from Egypt – McGee was in position at the door, dressed in the ward's thigh-length white tunic - bloodstains artfully concealed by the trailing end of the shemagh, although McGee's expression was rather eloquent on that topic - Russian webbing and weapon with the black-and-white headscarf wrapped around his head, covering his
face. His dusty cargo trousers and boots were similar enough too. "Saleem's coming back. Pretend to be the guard, open the door for him. If he gets suspicious, blow him away. I'm not terribly concerned for his well being." McGee nodded, pulling the door shut behind them.

Harry laid down the newest rescued hostage and grabbed the guard's body again, pulling it to the inside wall, out of sight of the door.

Saleem was at the bottom of the stairs, turning the corner.

As the terrorist leader strode down the corridor he ignored the guard's sudden change in dress. There was a lot of dust and sand in the passage, indeed the building as a whole; it was old, not in terribly good repair, and the desert night was chilly although it was mostly mitigated by the thick walls. He saw no reason to comment, simply nodding brusquely for his subordinate to open the door.

As he stepped over the threshold, he saw the empty chairs and scrabbled at his pistol holster. "What the -"

The pistol cleared leather just as he turned to the left, noting the prisoners in the far corner but more concerned with the much closer and bulkier figure that he thought was …

As he stepped over the threshold, he saw the empty chairs and scrabbled at his pistol holster. "What the -"

The pistol was still pointing downwards when a gloved hand grasped his wrist and twisted it inwards, forcing him to turn left, back towards the door. He had a brief impression of a helmeted, armoured man looming over him.

Another hand pushed his shoulder down, inexorably continuing his turn that had begun with twisting his wrist, and a knee collided with his stomach, knocking the breath out of his lungs completely.

His pistol, a Makarov, was knocked away, clattering across the floor. A hand grasped his throat, pulling him upright and nearly picking him off the floor with enormous strength, slamming him into the wall and squeezing, cutting off his air supply that he needed so desperately after being winded. Another hand continued to control his right wrist, preventing him from reaching for his knife; his left was clawing ineffectually at the iron-hard grip on his trachea.

Then, in the dim light of the bare lightbulb, he saw the eyes. Deadly, flint-hard, ice-cold green eyes that told him he was going to die by this man's hands. Either now or in fifty years, it didn't matter. It would happen.

It wasn't the first time he'd seen that look.

Then he saw the scars, the horizontal one under his assailant's the left eye, and the long one over his right eye that Saleem had himself inflicted, and even though he'd never known the real name of the man he had targeted all those years ago in Afghanistan, he knew exactly who held his life in his hands tonight.

"Mer'heba Saleem. Te'dekr ley, la'lek?" Hello Saleem. You remember me, don't you?

Saleem Ulman had, thanks to his targeting of this man, been chased for several years through almost half-a-dozen countries by some of the deadliest and most determined men in the world. British intelligence had nearly caught him half-a-dozen times - they'd been just seconds behind him in Sana'a, but never before had he felt fear as visceral as he did now. Neither had he ever prayed harder to the God he claimed to serve so righteously.
Harry didn't wait for a reply, letting go of Saleem's throat and twisting his wrist once more, this time into an armlock that forced him to the floor, kicking the back of the terrorist's knee to help him on his way down. Harry knelt on his back, with one kneepad on Ulman's head, grinding the side of his face into the dirt.

"You are surrounded." Saleem's voice was muffled, but understandable. "You will be shot down like dogs. And we are legion. You are outnumbered, and underarmed. My men will –"

"Asekt!" Harry snarled. Shut up! With one hand, he unzipped an admin pouch on the front of his armour. It contained things like a notebook, pens and the like – but secure and easy-to-hand in a couple of the pen-sleeves were a pair of syringes: one to use, one for a backup. He pulled the first out, uncapped it and pushed out a little bit of the clear fluid inside to clear out any air bubbles. "Mewsath alhedyeth, wana kint defin'fe'y je'eh, melfereh Fey jelved aleh'henaze'y." Continue talking, and I'll bury you in pieces, wrapped in pig skins.

Harry generally left political correctness back at the FOB.

He jammed the needle into Saleem's shoulder and pushed down the plunger on a shot of powerful, fast-acting barbiturate tranquiliser that would put him out for at least eight hours. Ten seconds later, Saleem's tirade trailed off into incoherence, then silence.

"I kinda expected you were going to kill him," Tony observed, still under the truth serum. "You know, after what he did the last time the two of you met."

"Nah. I'm not going to give him a chance at his seventy-two virgins just yet. He's going to have to spend some time at a lovely resort run by the CIA first." Harry pulled out his own plastic zipties and began arranging Ulman's arms in the right place. "McGee, get the other prisoners."

Harry dragged Ulman over to the other rescued hostages before going to help McGee with the last two. As they laid both of them down beneath the window, Ziva asked him, "Are you the entire rescue, Harry? Because I don't think we're getting out of here with half-a-dozen hostages who can barely walk and an unconscious prisoner."

Harry snorted. "Course not." He gestured at the NCIS agents, as he began handing out ear defenders from a large pouch. "In your experience, does Uncle Sam ever do anything the subtle way? Amerikayim. Melkevet dermh mesveg zeh," he added in Hebrew. "Americans. Such drama queens. Ziva smiled at his dig, injuries ignored if not forgotten as the adrenaline kicked in.

His radio crackled. "Storm, Sierra One. The roving patrol is about to find the bodies, how copy?"

"Roger, Sierra One. Scarecrow, this is Storm. I have eight times hostages secure, one times enemy captured, say again eight times hostages secure, one times hostile captured. You are clear to commence Phase Two." He turned to the hostages. "You might want to put that ear defence on now."

"Copy that Storm." Schofield's calm, professional voice came back to him. The Marine captain was commanding the rest of the op, despite Harry's seniority, as he was outside the perimeter and therefore had a better view of the situation. "All strike elements, this is Scarecrow. Confirm readiness move to phase two of the operations timeline, over."

"Mother here." A gruff female voice answered him first; the speaker sounded like she smoked several packs a day for the last decade. "Neptune One, ready to rock, over." That would be the first twelve-strong Force Recon team, with Scarecrow himself in command, off to the south-west.
"Fox, Neptune Two, ready, over." Another female voice, this from the younger lieutenant in command of the second Force Recon team, to the north.

"Trident Six, affirmative, over." Commander Steve McGarrett with his fifteen-man platoon of Navy SEALs lurking to the south.

"Sierra One, ready." Gibbs and his Force Recon spotter, on the ridge, seven hundred meters away.

"Sierra Two, ready." Another Force Recon sniper team on the ridge.

"Blackbeard One, ready." A Navy SEAL sniper pair, also on the ridge.

"Blackbeard Two, ready." Another pair of Navy SEAL marksmen, to the south-east, on the other side of the river, only about three hundred meters away.

"Blackbeard Three, green." Again, a SEAL sniper team to the south.

"Whiplash, reaching insertion point. ETA twenty minutes. Ready for phase two, out." The extraction team.

"All strike elements," Scarecrow again, "weapons free on my mark. Three, two, one … mark."

"There is only one tactical principle which is not subject to change. It is to use the means at hand to inflict the maximum amount of wound, death, and destruction on the enemy in the minimum amount of time."

General George S. Patton Jr.

At this point, several things happened at once.

The guards in the tower simultaneously jerked, spun and fell as heavy-calibre sniper rounds fired from three directions intersected with their paths. The roving patrol, just in the process of raising the alarm after having found the body outside, went down next, as did the guard on the second door. Then the snipers started the free-for-all; just firing on every confirmed enemy target they could see. The assault force had clearly-defined no-go areas, like the first floor and above of the house; the snipers would engage anything that moved in those zones.

Trident Team opened up on the defensive positions around the gate with a vicious hail of 5.56 and 7.62 millimetre machine gun fire from Minimi and M240B LMGs. This was partly to secure their evac route, but also to distract the still-surviving on-duty guards from what was to come next, from the opposite direction.

Out in the desert to the south west and north, four marines threw off camouflage nets and rose to their knees, taking aim with tubular Shoulder-launched Multi-purpose Assault Weapons, or SMAWs. From a range of a hundred meters, the first two – one from each direction - fired into the walls of the compound … the ones that were also the walls of the accommodation blocks.
The explosions produced were small, however; muted flashes of light throwing up clouds of dust, hardly the earth-shattering kaboom required to do any real damage to the enormously solid, thick-walled mud brick structures.

That was the point, however. The first salvo had been shaped-charge anti-armour warheads, intended only to punch a hole through the wall.

After waiting a few seconds for the dust to clear, the second pair of rocketeers sighted on the holes produced by the first set, and fired in turn.

The second salvo were NE rounds, standing for 'Novel Explosive.' That was the Marine Corps’ euphemism for thermobaric warheads. Normally, the thermobaric rockets’ fuses would allow the explosives to go off a few milliseconds after penetrating the walls of a structure, thus detonating inside. The walls of the al-Shabaab compound had been judged too thick for this to work, however, so the first salvo of wall-breaching rounds had been required.

Because when an earth-shattering kaboom is needed, it doesn't come much more impressively than a thermobaric weapon.

Conventional explosives work by having a mix of fuel and oxidiser contained within the explosive compound itself – gunpowder, for example, has a 25% - 75% mixture. Thermobaric explosives rely on oxygen from the surrounding air, producing a significantly more powerful explosive - they quite literally turn the air itself into an explosive device. Another type of thermobaric weapon is the infamous 'Daisy Cutter,' or Fuel Air Bomb of Vietnam fame.

That detonation is also amplified when limited by a containing structure such as bunkers, tunnels, caves … or buildings with thick walls.

The large C-shaped barracks block completely disintegrated, along with its occupants: the entire complement of jihadist recruits and about a third of the permanent guard force and instructors. The other two thirds were either on duty – now mostly deceased as well – or slept in the main building.

The inner walls and roof were considerably thinner than the massive four-foot thick exterior wall, and thus the blast was channelled vertically and horizontally, towards the mansion. This was why Harry had gathered the newly-rescued hostages under the window.

Every window in the house blew inwards in a hurricane of flying slivers of glass. The window into the cell did too, but well over the huddled occupants' heads. The windows also channelled the blast wave of the explosion safely into the opposite wall, while the ear-defence protected them from the bleed-over.

Harry rolled back to his feet, and pulled McGee up too. "That corner." He pointed at the wall with
the door, off to the right. "Cover the window."

"Got it."

Harry himself went prone a metre back from the doorway, covering the passageway, which was now filled with a hazy dust thrown up by the explosion. Only his weapon, head and right shoulder would be visible around the doorframe from the other end of the corridor, and the door itself was within arms reach if he needed to slam it shut.

He acquired the end of the corridor in the holo-sight and waited. Even from several hundred metres away he could hear the booming reports of the Barrett M82 anti-material rifles that the Blackbeard callsigns were using, engaging targets as they presented themselves through the windows of the mansion.

Footsteps rattled down the steps into the basement.

"Saleem, Saleem! Nhen thte alhejwem!" We're under attack!

Yeah, no shit Sherlock. This is clearly the brains of the organisation, right here. Harry fired as the runner rounded the corner, a short three round burst. And now it's all over the wall. What a shame.

Vaguely, Harry reminded himself that he needed to reign in his dark side or he was going to loose himself in the battle-lust. But it didn't seem quite so important as it had before. The red mist was descending, his vision tunnelling until all he could see, all that seemed important was the view down the sights of his weapon.

"Harry!" Ziva's voice, snapping him out of it. "What next?"

He shook his head, clearing the last of the rage. "Move to the other side, opposite the window! McGee, help them!" He fired at another militant who appeared around the corner, the almost-recoilless Vector slamming all three rounds straight through the man's centre of mass.

Thumping explosions from outside announced the entry of the Marines into the compound itself, using 'mouseholing' charges – blocks of C4 on a wooden frame shaped like a cross, which caved the thick exterior wall inwards, producing a small hole just about large enough to walk through. The Force Recon teams poured in from opposite sides, two taking defensive positions to watch around each side of the house and the remaining twenty soldiers stacked up on the back doors.

In the basement, Harry caught a flicker of movement through the haze at the end of the passageway. He fired at nothing, the heavy bullets chewing into the brick walls but keeping the enemy's heads down.

A tango extended an AK around the wall and fired blind, mostly hitting the ceiling. Harry's SMG blazed a short response, clipping the man's wrist. The .45 rounds nearly took his hand off, and definitely severed the artery. His target fell back with a cry, the weapon clattering to the ground.

"Storm, Scarecrow. Confirm hostages still in the basement?"

"Confirmed!"

"Copy. Neptune One and Two, frag and clear."

Sharp cracks announced the detonation of the fragmentation grenades.

"Fox here, Two down. Clear. Doorway right."
"Mother here. One down. Cle -" The speaker broke off, firing a short burst. "Tango down. Now it's clear, two down. Doorway left, two doorways right."

"Move up."

Unfortunately, the Marines' grenades gave some other people ideas of their own.

Harry caught another flicker of movement through the haze, someone taking a quick peeking around the corner. He caught a quick smattering of Arabic words, including 'yedweyh.'

Then came the tell-tale ping of a grenade safety-lever flicking off.

Yedweyh finally registered on him. Grenade.

"GRENADE!" Harry yelled, scrambling up onto all fours even as one hand grasped the edge of the door and slammed it shut. As it closed he could see a hand in the process of throwing the weapon from the other end of the corridor.

Grenades are one of the most terrifying weapons on the infantry battlefield. They are, on the surface, overtly non-threatening little metal spheres. But they can, and will, pepper you with high-velocity, very sharp fragments of metal from ten to twenty metres away – and those are the small offensive varieties. Larger 'defensive' grenades are meant to be used from entrenched positions, like the Mills Bomb or the Russian F1, and have a kill radius of thirty to forty metres, with shrapnel dispersion of up to two hundred.

Al-Shabaab were probably using ex-Soviet equipment, meaning the incoming was probably a smaller RGD-5 'offensive' device. If the tango had been stupid enough to use an F1, they were all dead including the man who'd thrown it.

The grenade bounced off the door with a solid thunk and rolled away – obviously, Harry couldn't see where from his new position huddled against the wall to the right of the door, between the blast and the hostages where his armour might absorb some of the shrapnel.

The wooden door shattered with a thunderous explosion and flash of white-hot heat, throwing Harry forwards onto somebody, he couldn't tell who. It took him a few seconds to get his bearings, to understand that this time wasn't the end yet.

He rolled off whoever it was and looked towards the door … and up at the shemagh-wearing terrorist now stepping through the door, weapon pointing straight at him. Harry's weapon was lying across his chest on its sling, his sidearm was holstered. There was nothing he could do about it.

The grenade might not have been 'his time' but this certainly seemed to be.

Someone fired, but it wasn't the enemy. A burst of automatic fire shredded the terrorist's chest and neck from behind, staining his white overtunic red, and he fell face first at Harry's feet.

A man in USMC Desert MARPAT uniform and coyote-tan body armour stepped through the door a few seconds later, clearing the room with his MP7 sub-machine gun. Despite it being night outside, he still wore silver reflective lenses over his eyes; those lenses covered matching, disfiguring plus-sign shaped scars over both of his blue eyes.

Captain Shane 'Scarecrow' Schofield had once been a Marine Harrier pilot until he was shot down over Bosnia in the mid-90s. Correctly guessing he had been performing reconnaissance of their positions for later raids by Navy SEALs, his Bosnian captors had cut his eyes with razor blades as he had 'seen too much.'
Time and a fantastic surgical team at Johns Hopkins had restored his eyesight, but Marine Corps regulations wouldn't let him fly again. So he'd taken a demotion and returned to Basic School, taking every non-flying course they had. His dedication and skill had been obvious, and he had been selected to lead a Force Recon team as a lieutenant.

Harry had first met him in Yemen all the way back in early 2003, fighting a brutal close-quarters battle through an old mineshaft, hunting a stolen Russian suitcase nuke in the hands of an Islamic terrorist group. They'd reached the nuke, but found it armed and counting down on a timer. Since none of the surviving Marines or Harry knew how to defuse a nuke at the time - Harry had since corrected that oversight - they'd gotten the hell out of there; the explosion had been covered up as an accidental detonation of an old, and large, ammo dump. Harry had received up-close and personal experience of Scarecrow's sometimes … insane idea of tactics, often involving his gas-powered Maghook grappling gun, as well his penchant for blowing up improbably large objects with the kind of regularity usually restricted to a Michael Bay film. That latter part was somewhat legendary in the special forces community.

"Was the explosion large enough for you, Scarecrow?" Harry asked from the floor, referring to the thermobaric warheads.

Scarecrow's unrepentant grin was clearly visible in the dusty half-light. "Well, it wasn't a nuke, that's for sure." He reached out a hand and pulled Harry to his feet. "But it sure was pretty." Harry laughed.

"Team leaders, sitrep over."

"Mother here, ground floor secure, over."

"Fox here, vehicle park secure," a burst of automatic fire, "suppressing the upper floors of the house, over."

"Blackbeard callsigns, Sierra callsigns, sitrep over."

"All clear, no targets." A loud gunshot over the net, echoed a second later through the window. "Not any more, anyway. Over," the SEAL added as an afterthought.

"Sierra, same here." Gibbs' voice.

"Trident Six, sitrep, over."

"Gatehouse clear. Trident has entered the compound. We are about half-way up the drive, clearing the warehouses. No contact yet, seems empty. ETA to the house is two minutes, over."

"Whiplash, ETA to extraction point?"

"Whiplash here, ETA is five minutes, Scarecrow."

"Copy that. Trident, secure our exit. Sierra One, Sierra Two, Blackbeard One, disengage and proceed to your extraction points. Blackbeard Two, Blackbeard Three, continue to suppress the front of the house. Neptune Two, get those vehicles running. Neptune One, split up. Charlie fire team will evacuate the hostages. Delta fire team will keep the first floor secure, Scarecrow out."

Pounding footsteps in the corridor resolved themselves into a file of five more Marines, who slung their weapons out of the way and each picked up one of the non-ambulatory casualties. Tony and McGee were both able to walk, and Saleem was dragged out suspended between two burly Force Recon soldiers. Harry himself picked Ziva up, cradling her in front of him.
"Fox here. Four vehicles up and running. Two pickups, two old Soviet Ural six tonners."

They hustled up out of the basement and out to the vehicles; there couldn't have been more than five to ten hostiles left, and the barrage of fire from Neptune Two, the SEALs and the intermittent, but deadly precision shooting of the two snipers were keeping their heads firmly down.

Harry lifted Ziva gently into the back seat of one of the pickups, before jumping in the cargo tray behind. The Marine drivers set off, driving about fifteen metres down the drive before braking to pick up the SEALs, who jumped in wherever there was space. Their commander, McGarrett, vaulted in beside him, in the back of the trailing pickup.

The two six tonners led the way, with the shooters in the back of the pickups continuing to suppress the house. A desultory grenade was tossed out of a window, but fell short and only succeeded in totalling one of the other pickups left behind. Another man popped up in a window with an RPG, but was immediately peppered by a storm of fire, forcing him to duck back down again below the windowsill.

A moment later, a .50 BMG round - capable of piercing three feet of reinforced concrete - punched through the much-thinner-than-three-feet wall below the windowsill. The RPG-wielder did not reappear.

Then they were through the gate and fishtailing on the dirt track, turning right. Another few hundred meters further and they turned left off the road, bumping over the desert scrub towards the river, which would be their extraction route.

A droning roar announced the arrival of their extraction force, callsign 'Whiplash.'

Known officially as the Special Boat Teams, and manned by the Special Warfare Combatant Craft Crewmen (usually abbreviated to SWCC, pronounced 'swick,') these fast, agile and heavily armed boats gave the USN with a unique, dedicated shallow-water infiltration and extraction force, and the only one of its type in the world, as no other nation had any requirement for this peculiarly specialised brand of warfare.

The six boats running upriver were one of two types of boats operated by the SBTs: specifically, they were 'Special Operations Craft-Riverine,' or SOC-R. Flat bottomed and low-sided, they had a special hull design that allowed the craft to plane along the surface instead of forging through it like most watercraft. Conventional outboard engines required propellers and rudders to drive and steer the boat; the specialised 'waterjet' propulsion systems of the SOC-Rs did not require either, both propelling and steering the boat via jets of water directed at high velocity through articulated nozzles that granted the lightweight boats incredible speed and mobility. With no below-water protuberances to snag on submerged obstacles, the SOC-R was capable of running at almost forty knots with much less risk than a normal boat, and could stop in nearly its own length if the pilot did spot an obstacle ahead that they could not pass over.

Five heavy weapon mounts - two GAU-7 miniguns forward, two M240-B machine guns midships, and one M2 Browning aft - provided a three-hundred-sixty degree field of fire. The SWCC boats had spent much of their time over the last few years in Iraq, running fire support and insert-extract missions along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, but despite their high speed they were extremely vulnerable, unarmoured craft that, unlike a boat at sea, had limited room to manoeuvre in the narrow waterways of Iraq. Engagement distances were frequently less than twenty yards, a distance that even an inexperienced insurgent could hit something at, so their best defence was a combination of bewildering speed and overwhelming firepower.

Just one SWCC boat could put out a weight of fire that was nearly biblical. Six of them together was
As they arrived, the SWCC boats displayed their incredible mobility to the full, slowing and turning within practically their own length as they reached the extraction point, before coming to rest against the riverbank with their stubby bows pointing back downstream. They came in two at a time, with two others waiting to take their place, and one focusing on suppressing the remaining enemy. The sixth boat nosed into the reeds on the far side, picking up the four SEAL snipers from the far side of the river. A few wild shots from the remaining al-Shabaab terrorists in the camp – at a range of nearly three hundred meters now – were answered with long, hammering bursts from dual-mounted .50 cal Browning M2s or the ripping, buzzsaw noise of a GAU-17A minigun.

"All aboard?" the SWCC commander asked, when the last boat pulled away from the shore.


"Copy that." The lead SWCC boat opened the throttles to the wall, the other six following in file.

Harry was aboard the last boat in the convoy, facing aft with his back to the helmsman's chair amidst
a sea of spent cartridge casings. He still held Ziva in his arms, keeping them both safely out of the way, and unwilling to let her go now he had no further part to play. Uncaring of the many regulations against it, he unclipped his helmet, and lowered his head to hers to speak over the roar of the engine.

"How are you doing?"

Ziva shifted in his arms, one arm coming up around his neck. "Fine."

Ziva felt more than heard Harry chuckle, the engine drowning it out.

"There's an acronym for that, you know."

"I know." She wanted to laugh, the adrenaline of the rescue, and the realisation that she was safe making the pain of her battered body and mind recede. "We've had this conversation before."

"Yeah."

His radio crackled; held securely in his arms, she could hear it clearly even if she wasn't wearing it. "Big George, Big George, this is Scarecrow. Phase two complete. Mission accomplished, say again mission accomplished. Eight friendlies extracted, and the Bravo has been captured. Say again, eight friendlies extracted, and the Bravo has been captured. We have rendezvoused with Whiplash and are extracting downriver, ETA to the sea is twenty mikes, say again ETA twenty mikes to rendezvous."

"Scarecrow, Big George. Roger your last. Clear to proceed to phase three?"

"Affirmative, Phase Three."

"All right, patching you through to callsign Parnassus. Call the shot."

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HMS Cumberland (F-85) Type 22 Frigate, with the Nimitz-class USS Eisenhower super-carrier (CVN-69) behind.

Ten kilometres off the coast, a grey phantom lurked. In the weak light of the stars, the only trace of
her passage was a v-shaped trail of slight bioluminescence marking her wake, as microscopic organisms in the water protested her passage through their home. The phantom in question was the Royal Navy's Type-22 frigate *HMS Cumberland*, on counter-terrorism deployment to the Horn of Africa and presently part of Combined Task Force 150. *Cumberland* was quite an elderly, ship, having been commissioned in 1989, but she didn't need all the bells and whistles to perform her duties now. Tonight's mission was old-school; a good, old-fashioned naval discipline that had existed for as long as cannons had been mounted on ships.

"Parnassus, this is Big George, we are patching Scarecrow through for fire mission. Confirm receipt of ScanEagle drone feed, over?"

"Confirmed Big George, we are receiving the drone, five by five, Parnassus standing by for fire mission, out."

All white lights were doused aboard the ship, replaced with blood-red tactical lighting that would not disrupt night vision. On the bridge, her commanding officer, Captain Peter Sparkey watched a dimmed display come to life, showing a black-and-white infrared camera feed from the ScanEagle drone that was circling over the target. Flashing IR strobes marked the position of the departing SWCC boats at the bottom of the screen.

"Hello Parnassus this is Scarecrow. Fire mission, fire mission, acknowledge over."

"Scarecrow, Parnassus, standing by, over."

"Parnassus, Scarecrow. Fire mission follows." In the SWCC boat, Scarecrow had pulled out a pre-written fire mission request. Artillery was not something you dicked around with, and he didn't want to die young from a misplaced decimal. "Adjust fire, over." This was the type of mission - ie. the observer would provide adjustment instructions to the ship. They also had the drone, but a human observer would help them make the adjustments quicker.

*Cumberland* acknowledged. "Scarecrow, Parnassus. Adjust fire, over."

"Target coordinates are zero degrees, six minutes, fifty-two point seven nine seconds South, forty-two degrees, thirty-four minutes and five point six two minutes East, over." Inland, Scarecrow listened carefully to the response.

"Roger, zero degrees, six minutes, fifty-three point seven nine seconds South, forty-two degrees, thirty-four minutes and five point six two minutes East, over."

"Negative, Parnassus. I say again, zero degrees, six minutes, fifty-TWO point seven nine seconds South, forty-two degrees, thirty-four minutes and five point six two minutes East, over."

"Ah, roger that Scarecrow." Whoever was on watch in CIC sounded apologetic. "Zero degrees, six minutes, fifty-two point seven nine seconds South, forty-two degrees, thirty-four minutes and five point six two minutes East, over."

"Parnassus, Scarecrow. Target is a four story building and surrounding structures, over."

"Roger, four story building, surrounding structures. Stand by."

"Target acquired, GPS coordinates confirmed."

The data was entered into the computer, which spat out an answer. The range was long, just under twenty-five kilometres – pushing the maximum range of 4.5 inch Mark 8 deck gun – they weren't going to miss. To do so - and in front of the bloody *Yanks*, too - would just
be *embarrassing*, and the Royal Navy had a five-hundred year history of professional excellence to maintain.

The *Cumberland*’s auto-loading deck gun could manage a staggering twenty-five rounds per minute; one every two and a half seconds, making that one gun the equivalent of a six-gun shore battery all by itself. For comparison, an army self-propelled howitzer like an AS90 or a Paladin could manage six rounds per minute, maximum, because they have to be hand-loaded. The Mark 8 was also and gyro-stabilised, meaning that every shot went out on the same trajectory despite the unpredictable rolling motion of the ship on the waves.

"*Bearing and elevation calculated,*" the captain heard from CIC. "*Target is a static, non-hardened brick structure. Flight time twenty seconds. Three rounds for spotting, followed by ten for the mission. Fuses are set to alternate impact and delayed detonation. Request permission to fire.*"

The captain grinned. He wasn't going to miss this chance. "Pass operational command to the bridge."

"*Roger, bridge has command.*"

His XO sounded amused - clearly, he'd known Sparkes was going to take over. Technically, the Captain should have been in CIC himself; the Combat Information Center was where the vast amount of data from the ship’s sensors was all fed into a coherent picture so that he, the captain, was as well informed as possible when taking decisions. But tonight, with the seas clear for twenty miles in all directions, his ship was not at risk, and he could reach the CIC in less than a minute anyway.

And tonight, for this one little piece of excitement at the end of a long and entirely too routine deployment, he gave in to the urge to conduct his ship from ‘up top’ rather than from the depths of the hull. This little operation tonight was what he’d joined the Navy to do; to him, this was what the Navy was, at its very core - to be the long arm of Her Majesty's government, and to rain down hell on anyone who threatened her people. And Captain Sparke was certain that if he didn't command from up here and observe in person what might well be his beloved but elderly ship's last ever shots in anger, he'd regret it for the rest of his life.

"*Scarecrow, this is Parnassus. Alternating fuses in effect, three rounds, walking back onto the target, followed by ten for the main mission, over.*"

"*Roger, Parnassus. Give 'em the good news, out.*"

"Load weapon."

"... gun loaded."

"Aim weapon."

On the foredeck, the turret rotated smoothly, lifting the black barrel to the starlit sky, pointing over the port side towards the dark landmass to the East.

"*Bearing and elevation set.*"

"Master safeties ... off. CPO Harkness?"

"*Sir?*

"Fire when ready."

"Aye Aye, sir. Fire one."
The deck gun blazed a single shot, the muzzle blast making even the solid bulletproof bridge windows rattling. The spent casing was ejected from a small port on the side of the turret, bouncing on the deck and over the side.

"Fire two."

The gun crashed out a second round.

"Fire three."

"Scarecrow, this is Parnassus, shot, over."

"Shot, out." Scarecrow acknowledged.

Then after a flight time of about fifteen seconds, to indicate five seconds until impact:

"Scarecrow, Parnassus, splash, over."

"Roger, splash, out."

The first of the three ranging shots landed. It hit long, just beyond the still-burning barracks block, kicking up a plume of dirt that was clearly visible above the mansion's roof in the light of the fires.

Three seconds later, the second landed in the fiery remains of the barracks.

The third demolished the top two floors on the North side in a thunderous explosion of muted flame and flying splinters.

"Good hit on target, Parnassus. Fire for effect."

"Roger, firing for effect ... shot, over."

"Shot, out."

Fifteen seconds later. "Splash, over."

"Splash, out."

Five seconds later, the mansion lost the rest of its roof to another ear-splitting explosion.

Two and a half seconds after that, the next round entered through the same hole, and its' delayed fuse detonated it on the ground floor, collapsing the building's entire left side.

Like a metronome, the shells landed every few seconds without variation; Cumberland had found the range. Harry was, he had to admit, impressed. Artillery was a difficult enough discipline, even with computer support, from a fixed position. Doing so from a moving, rolling ship was immeasurably harder; whoever was on the gun aboard the Cumberland was a proper Thomas Plunkett with that thing.

Bit by bit, the first five shells tore the mansion apart, razing it to the foundations. The sixth hit the vehicle park; a small secondary explosion blossomed from a fuel storage tank, a brief orange flash.

The seventh – only slightly over a minute after the first spotting shell had been fired – detonated
inside one of the storage warehouse al-Shabaab had been using to organise their offensive against Mogadishu. Warehouses that were presently stacked full of 120mm mortar bombs, AK-47 and PKM ammunition boxes, crates of land mines, Semtex explosive, and the main prize – three racks of reloads for an ex-Soviet BMD-20 truck-mounted 200mm multiple-rocket launcher.

The explosion was enormous, a giant mushroom cloud of orange fire and black smoke that dwarfed even the four-story mansion that had originally stood next to the warehouse. It was joined a moment later by the other munitions warehouses going up in a rapid series of sympathetic secondary detonations. It made the first five impacts of the medium-calibre shells from the Cumberland look like firecrackers; Harry felt the pressure wave smack him in the face none-too-gently even from over a kilometre away downriver.

"Scarecrow, Parnassus," the Cumberland spoke again. "I understand you Yanks like to have fireworks displays on July Fourth, over?"

It was sent on the general channel, meaning the entire assault force and the SWCC crews heard it. A round of only slightly hysterical laughter greeted the Cumberland's jest; they were all still juiced up on adrenaline, riding high from the victory and the dramatic explosions.

"That we do, Parnassus," Scarecrow replied, "and I recognise the irony that a British vessel is providing said Independence Day fireworks. But we aren't coming back to the Commonwealth, and that's final. Out."

"Now that, Storm, was an explosion." Schofield said on the radio in a satisfied tone.

"You need help, man," was Harry's reply. "I'm serious. Lots and lots of it."

"Nah, I like me the way I am. Your significant other all right?"

Harry looked down at Ziva. The red battle-lights of the SWCC boats' commander's station cast an odd, unnatural light over the scene, but she had heard the question. He saw her nod slightly in response before switching her attention to the still-dissipating fireball to the rear, and the strangely beautiful arcs of tracer cooking off through the sky from the still-detonating ammunition stores.

"Not yet. But I think she will be."

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