

CHAPTER 9

**USS TOWERS (DDG-103)
NORTHERN ARABIAN GULF
WEDNESDAY; 09 MAY
18:26 hours (6:26 p.m.)
TIME ZONE +3 'CHARLIE'**

Standing on the port side main deck of USS Towers, Captain Bowie was just about as hot as he could ever remember being, and—for a man born and raised in San Antonio, Texas—that was no small feat. He was facing west, into the setting sun, but the sky was still painfully bright. Behind him—the coast of Iran was only a few miles over the horizon, and the winds blowing in from the Iranian desert showed no signs of cooling down. The back and armpits of his blue coveralls were dark with sweat. The bill of his USS Towers ball cap drooped across his forehead like some dead—but still-soggy—sea creature.

He propped a steel-toed boot on a Kevlar life rail and looked out across the five hundred or so yards of water that separated his own ship from the merchant ship that was causing all the trouble.

The Motor Vessel *Lotus Blossom* wallowed uneasily on the water, bulling her way through the waves rather than cleaving them cleanly. She was an ancient rust-bucket of a freighter, probably built in the post-war ship building boom of the mid nineteen-fifties, and she had not aged gracefully.

Bowie watched the old cargo ship bob and roll. The seas were calm, the waves low and almost lazy under the fierce Arabian sun, but the *MV Lotus Blossom* heeled alarmingly with each swell that passed under her keel. To Bowie's trained eye, it was obvious that the old ship's weight was not properly trimmed; in all probability, her cargo was not distributed evenly. Such an obvious oversight spoke of sloppiness and neglect. Not that Bowie needed any clues to tell him that the aging vessel was poorly maintained (and probably poorly manned). The ship's appearance told that story all by itself.

The *Lotus Blossom* was a Type-3 freighter, with her superstructure situated well aft. The forward three-quarters of her deck were dominated by two large cargo hatches and the v-shaped booms of a cargo crane that had once lowered crates and pallets into the twin cargo holds. The crane was gone now, or mostly gone. At some time in the past—possibly in the nineteen-seventies, when containerized shipping had become the cargo industry standard—the old ship had been converted from a bulk cargo carrier to a container ship. The conversion had been none too neat. The crane, which had obviously been too light to handle the standard 20 foot long steel shipping containers, had been hacked off with welding torches, leaving two truncated stubs sticking out of the winch housing like the stumps of poorly-amputated arms.

The ship's superstructure had been white once, and the hull had been green, but the colors were nearly masked by the scabrous orange and brown of new rust over old. The ship's name, painted across the stern in two-foot high capital letters, had faded into near invisibility.

Bowie looked at the ship and exhaled slowly through his teeth. *Lotus Blossom*. What an utterly inappropriate name. He had trouble associating the battered old tub with any sort of flower. To his mind, it required a liberal stretch of imagination to call the damned thing a ship—never mind a flower.

The *Lotus Blossom* looked harmless enough, though. Even from five hundred yards away, the old girl looked tired to the bone, as though she might decide to give up the ghost in a minute or two, and slip beneath the waves for some long overdue rest. And, for all Bowie knew, the old freighter might do just that, which certainly didn't make the ship any less dangerous to his crew. To make the situation worse, the *Lotus Blossom* was a suspected smuggler, and Bowie's Visit Board Search and Seizure teams were preparing to board the ship to search for contraband cargo. His men would have their hands full confronting and controlling a potentially hostile crew, and trying to worm their way through every nook and cranny of an unfamiliar vessel while covering each other's backs. They didn't need the added angst of worrying about whether or not the ship was going to sink out from under their feet.

From a tactical standpoint, Bowie wasn't crazy about being this far away from the ship that his men would be searching. His teams would be armed, but that didn't make them invulnerable if things turned ugly over there. His gun crews were standing ready to rake the freighter with machine gun fire, or even the five inch deck gun, but Bowie couldn't very well order them to shoot at the ship if his own men were aboard.

If he could bring the Towers in closer, his gun crews would be able to see the tactical situation clearly and pick their own targets. For years, that had been the Standard Operating Procedure for Visit Board Search and Seizure teams. But the

terrorist attack on USS Cole had demonstrated the folly of allowing any unknown vessel to get too close to a warship. The Navy had learned the hard way that the most powerful warship afloat is vulnerable to a close-in suicide attack.

Captain Bowie gave the MV *Lotus Blossom* another careful once-over with his eyes. The crew of the old freighter probably had some small arms aboard, possibly quite a few—if they really *were* smugglers. But, he was ninety-eight percent certain that the old tub was not crammed to the gunwales with explosives, and rigged for a suicide attack on a U.S. warship.

Odds were, he could order his ship in nice and close to the old girl so that his gun crews could give good cover to his VBSS teams as they boarded. Unfortunately, he was not *one hundred* percent certain. And, like it or not, it was tactically smarter to risk *some* of his crew by maintaining a stand-off distance, than to risk *all* of his crew (and the ship) by getting in closer.

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A watertight door opened behind Bowie, and he looked over his shoulder in time to see a small group of junior Ensigns file out onto the deck. There were five of them: three men and two women. They stood for a moment, blinking and shielding their eyes against the unexpected brilliance of the setting sun.

Bowie looked them over. They were a good crop of kids. Young, physically fit, and so desperately eager that their enthusiasm nearly shone out of their eyes like the beams of searchlights.

Bowie had been a junior Ensign himself once, and he had a pretty fair idea of what was racing around in their minds. Each of them had spent the last four years having his or her head crammed full of information on a dizzying array of subjects, from Naval History, to Tactical Doctrine, to Theory-of-Leadership, to Uniform Regulations, to Military Custom and Law, to formal dining etiquette, to Shipboard Fire Fighting and Damage Control. And now, they were itching to put all that knowledge to good use.

In their own eyes, they were educated and dedicated professionals, ready to seize the reigns of authority and prove themselves as warriors and leaders of men. To the men and women who served under them, they were *sea puppies*—no experience, no common sense, and prone to sticking their little puppy dog noses where they didn't belong.

It was Bowie's job, with the assistance of his Officers and Chief Petty Officers, to turn these sea puppies into by-God Naval Officers. Hands-on training would do some of the work. So would practical experience and the time-honored School-of-Hard-Knocks. The majority would be well on the

way to becoming useful Officers by the end of this deployment. The real trick would be making sure they didn't get anybody killed along the way.

The hardest part for most of them would be the eventual realization that they would never master the technologies under their command. It would be a difficult and painful lesson for them to learn. They were intelligent, educated, highly motivated, and hungry for the respect of their peers and subordinates. It was natural and predictable that they would want to become experts on the equipment and procedures under their control. And many of them would spend their first sea tours trying to do just that. But Bowie knew from experience that it was an impossible task. The equipment and tactics involved were so complex that a person could spend half a career mastering *one* warfare area, and the other half of that career studying and working to stay on top of the rapid changes brought on by evolving technologies.

An effective Naval Officer had to be the proverbial Jack of All Trades and Master of none. He or she needed a strong working knowledge of radar systems, sonar systems, cruise missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, communications systems, combat support logistics, torpedoes, turbine engines, fire fighting systems, chemical warfare defense systems, navigation technologies, ship handling techniques, weather patterns, electrical power generation, naval gun systems, infrared sensors, and about a hundred other disciplines, *each* of which required years to master. It simply wasn't possible to become an expert in all of them, so a good officer had to be satisfied with becoming a capable leader for his subordinates: the enlisted men and women who were the Navy's *real* experts.

Successful Officers learned to accept the limitations of the human brain, and concentrated on knowing enough about each discipline to command effectively. Naval Aviators tended to learn that lesson quickly. You didn't need to know how to field-strip an F-18 engine in order to fly the aircraft.

But some junior officers never quite got the message. They drove themselves unmercifully, trying to learn *everything* about *everything*, piling more and more pressure on themselves to achieve the impossible, until they either burned out or snapped.

Bowie scanned the faces of his latest crop of junior officers. How many of them would not make it over the hump? How many of these bright young men and women would resign their commissions and limp home with their spirits in tatters, never really understanding where they had failed? One of them, probably. Perhaps even two. But wouldn't it be great if, just once, *all* of them could make the cut?

"*If wishes were fishes,*" Bowie said under his breath. He turned his attention back to the Motor Vessel *Lotus Blossom*. He would do everything in his power to help these puppies along, but only time would tell.

“Gather round, Ladies and Gentlemen,” he said over his shoulder. “School is now in session.”

Still blinking as their eyes adjusted to the sunlight, the young officers collected around him in a loose semi-circle.

“Let’s start with your assessment of the tactical situation,” he said. “And then we’ll go from there.” He looked at Ensign Patrick Cooper, the ship’s Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer. “Why don’t you kick us off, Pat? Take a look at our problem child out there, and tell us what you see. Throw in anything you think might be tactically useful.”

Cooper nearly flinched at the sound of his name, and then stood up straighter and squared his shoulders. “Yes, Sir.” He looked out at the *Lotus Blossom* for several seconds. “Aft superstructure,” he said slowly. “So she’s a Type-3 freighter. It looks like she’s a converted bulk carrier. From here it doesn’t look like the ship-fitters did a very clean job.”

Captain Bowie smiled. “Is that a tactical observation, or are you just offended by sloppy work?”

Ensign Carol Harvey snickered until Bowie caught her eye, then she chopped it off instantly.

Ensign Cooper reddened. “It’s...ah...a tactical observation, Sir.”

Bowie’s eyebrows went up. “Explain your thinking.”

“Well, Sir,” Cooper began, “it seems to me that those old cranes make for a lot of deck clutter. They’ll provide good concealment for anyone who wants to hide from our search teams. It probably wouldn’t take much for someone to stage an ambush from one of those old cable housings. On another note, I wouldn’t be surprised if our guys run into that same sort of crappy workmanship in other parts of the ship. Bare electrical wires, rusted ladder rungs, leaky steam pipes, missing deck plates—that sort of thing. A lot of opportunities for our people to get hurt over there, especially with the sun going down.”

The Captain nodded again. “All good points, Pat. These are the kind of things you have to think about *before* you send your people into a tight spot.” He shifted his eyes to Ensign Harvey. “Let’s talk about the *sunset* issue for a moment. Carol, why *are* we sending our teams out to board a potentially hostile vessel while the sun is going down? More specifically—why don’t we order the *Lotus Blossom* to heave-to and drop anchor? Then we could sit here and keep an eye on her until the sun comes up, and send our boarding teams over in daylight.”

Ensign Harvey cleared her throat. “I can see two reasons for boarding tonight, Sir. First, if the *Lotus Blossom* really is a smuggler, any contraband cargo she’s carrying is going to get tossed over the side as soon as the sun goes

down. The only way to prevent that is to seize the ship now, and post a guard on the crew while we search the cargo.”

“Good,” the Captain said. “What’s your second reason?”

Ensign Harvey grinned. “I just came from Combat Information Center, Sir. The *Lotus Blossom* is still ignoring all attempts to establish contact. They won’t respond to our signal flags, or our flashing light, and they refuse to answer on Bridge-to-Bridge Radio Channel 16, which International Law requires *all* major vessels to monitor at *all* times. In other words, Captain, they’re ducking our calls. And we can’t very well order them to heave-to and drop anchor if we can’t even establish communication with them.”

“True,” Captain Bowie said. “I’ll bet ten dollars against a month’s pay that—when we *do* finally establish contact—we’ll discover that their Bridge-to-Bridge Radio is broken, and somehow they just didn’t see our signal flags or our flashing light.”

“By the looks of things,” Ensign Elliot La’Roche said, “they haven’t noticed us at all. Personally, I think if I had a ninety-seven hundred ton destroyer cruising a few hundred yards off my starboard beam, I’d probably notice.”

“I agree,” the Captain said. “And that brings up another point of discussion. Why did we position ourselves on her starboard beam? This puts us close to Iranian territorial waters, and the Iranians do *not* like foreign warships in their water. If we crowd the line too closely, they’ll send a couple of missile boats out to keep us company. Wouldn’t it have been smarter for us to come in on *Lotus Blossom*’s port side? That would have kept us farther away from Iranian waters, and less likely to provoke a nasty international incident, or—worse—a missile attack.”

Ensign La’Roche rubbed his chin. “It might have been a little *safer* to do it that way, Sir, but it definitely wouldn’t have been *smarter*.”

The Captain nodded once. “Go on.”

“When we first picked the *Lotus Blossom* up on radar,” La’Roche said, “she was well east of the established shipping lanes, and hugging the territorial waters of Iran. According to our TACMEMOs, that’s a tactic favored by smugglers who are trying to penetrate the naval blockade against Siraj. It gives the smugglers a chance to dart into Iranian waters if they think they’re about to be intercepted. As I understand it, Iran has no particular interest in harboring smugglers, especially ones who are bringing aid to *Siraj*, but the Iranians are fiercely protective of their national waters. If we go in there, even in pursuit of a known smuggler, we’re going to get shot at. By coming in on *Lotus Blossom*’s starboard side, we cut off her escape route into Iranian waters.”

“Excellent,” the Captain said. “You kids have done your homework. One final question before recess...” Something caught his attention: the sound of approaching footsteps. He held up a hand. “Just a second.”

Lieutenant (junior grade) Mitchell Hayes walked up to the little group. He came to an abrupt stop about two paces away from Bowie, drew himself up to attention, and snapped out a salute. "Sir! All equipment checks and communications checks are complete. The boats are ready and at the rail. VBSS teams Blue and Gold are manned and ready to deploy."

Captain Bowie returned the salute. "At ease, Mitch."

LT(jg) Hayes relaxed his posture a notch and held a radio headset out to Bowie. "Your crypto is loaded and keyed, Sir."

The Captain nodded and took the headset. "Thanks. Your boys can stand easy for a few minutes. We have to establish comms with our suspect vessel."

"How are we going to do that, Sir?" Ensign Harvey asked.

"We're going to give them a little technical assistance in repairing their radio," the Captain said. He pulled the radio headset over his ears and positioned the throat mike in front of his mouth. When he was satisfied with the setup, he keyed the mike. "TAO, this is the Captain, over."

The Tactical Action Officer's voice came back in his ear a second later. "Captain, this is the TAO. Read you lima-charlie. Standing by for orders, over."

Bowie keyed the mike again. "TAO, this is the Captain. Lay a five inch round across the bow of Motor Vessel *Lotus Blossom*. You have batteries released, over."

"Captain, this is the TAO. I copy—lay a five inch round across the bow of suspect vessel. I understand I have batteries released, over."

The Captain reached into the pocket of his coveralls and pulled out a pair of flanged rubber earplugs: a standard part of the at-sea uniform. "Well, kids...I suggest you put your hearing protection in."

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A few seconds later, the five inch gun mount spun ninety-degrees to the left with a speed that seemed impossible for so large a machine. The rifled barrel of the large-bore cannon locked instantly on the bridge of the *Lotus Blossom*, and tracked it with an eerie electro-mechanical precision, continuously making minute adjustments to compensate for the pitch and roll of the Towers and of her target. It hung there for a few seconds, and then suddenly, it swung forty degrees to the right and fired. The ninety-six pound steel projectile rocketed out of the barrel with a flash and a thunder that would have shamed a Norse God. Bowie knew that it had broken the sound barrier before it was even clear of the gun.

The shell impacted the water less than fifty yards off the *Lotus Blossom's* bow, throwing up a surge of spray that looked like a golden fountain in the failing sunlight.

The spray had barely settled back to the wave tops when a voice came over Bowie's headset radio. "Captain, this is the TAO. Apparently the Motor Vessel *Lotus Blossom* has repaired her Bridge-to-Bridge radio. Her Captain is on Channel 16 screaming his head off in Arabic, over."

Bowie smiled and keyed his mike. "TAO, this is the Captain. Put our interpreter on Bridge-to-Bridge Channel 16 and ask the Motor Vessel *Lotus Blossom* to kindly heave-to and drop anchor, over."

"TAO, aye."

Bowie looked at his small group of junior officers. Every one of them was grinning from ear to ear. "I do believe," he said, "that those boys have managed to repair their radio."

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Forty minutes later, LT(jg) Hayes stood on the starboard bridge wing of MV *Lotus Blossom* and looked out across the five hundred yards of water that separated the old freighter from his own ship. The destroyer's phototropic PCMS tiles were darkening steadily in response to the failing sunlight, making the warship's squat angular profile increasingly more difficult to see as the sun went down. On the one hand, it was impressive to witness the technology at work. On the other hand, this mission was making Hayes nervous enough, without having to watch the vessel that represented home and safety pull a slow-motion disappearing act. Although the logical side of his mind was well familiar with the limitations of phototropic camouflage, his imagination harbored a tiny (and admittedly irrational) image of the ship continuing to fade until it vanished completely, perhaps with a tiny plop, like a burst soap bubble.

Hayes turned his eyes back to the ship he was standing on and keyed the mike built into his headset, "Towers, this is VBSS Team Leader, over."

Captain Bowie's voice came back in his left earphone. "VBSS Team Leader, this is Towers. Standing by for your report, over."

Hayes keyed the mike again. "Towers, this is VBSS Team Leader. VBSS Gold Team has secured the Bridge and Engineering spaces. The vessel's crew is assembled on the fantail, under guard. The head-count is fourteen, that is one-four. VBSS Blue has completed an initial sweep of all spaces with the exception of the cargo holds, over."

The Captain's voice came back. "Towers, aye. Say again your head-count for the crew, over."

"Towers, this is VBSS Team Leader. Head-count is fourteen, that is one-four personnel, over."

There was a brief pause before the reply came. "VBSS Team Leader, this is Towers. Be advised, the vessel's paperwork indicates a crew of seventeen, that is one-seven personnel, over."

"VBSS Team Leader, aye. My interpreter has been questioning Captain Isam on the matter. Supposedly, two of the crew jumped ship in Jakarta, and the third was medically evacuated at sea due to an apparent heart attack. We've asked for documentation on the changes to the crew manifest, but Captain Isam is putting a lot of effort into carefully misunderstanding our questions, over."

"Towers, aye," Captain Bowie's voice said in his ear. "I'd say the good Captain is giving you the runaround. His vessel is based out of Singapore. Unless he's fluent in Cantonese, it's a pretty safe bet that he speaks English, over."

Hayes wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of a sleeve and grimaced when some of the stinging liquid found its way into his left eye. He squinted and rubbed at the eye. "Towers, this is VBSS Team Leader, copy that and concur. GSM3 Rashid tells me that Captain Isam switches back and forth between Farsi and an Egyptian dialect of Arabic, depending on whichever gives him the best opportunity to be obscure and difficult. The man is definitely taking us for a ride, over."

"Towers, aye," the Captain said. "That's why we're boarding his vessel in the middle of the night, over."

LT(jg) Hayes nodded to himself. "Roger that."

Yusuf Isam, the Captain of the *Lotus Blossom*, had been acting suspiciously almost from the second his ship had appeared on the Towers' radar scopes. The issue of the three missing crewmembers was just the latest in a whole string of evasions, accidents, and deliberate misunderstandings on the part of the Arab Captain and his crew.

In view of Isam's evasive behavior, Hayes was in total agreement with Captain Bowie's decision not to wait until morning to board the *Lotus Blossom*, despite the fact that he didn't care for night-time boardings. He glanced over his shoulder in time to see the last sliver of the sun sink behind the horizon. He did not like this at all. The fact that he agreed with the necessity did not make him any more comfortable about being on an unfamiliar ship in the dark. Factor in the thinly-veiled hostility of the crew, three of whom were missing, and the situation became even sketchier.

He keyed his mike again. "Towers, this is VBSS Team Leader. Request permission to set Modified Security Condition Two, over."

Captain Bowie's voice came over the headset almost immediately. "VBSS Team Leader, this is Towers. Do you have an emergency or an escalating situation? Over."

“This is VBSS Team Leader, that’s a negative, Sir. But I’m not crazy about the vibes we’re getting from Isam and his crew. Nobody’s done anything snaky yet, but I get the feeling they’ve been waiting for the sun to go down. Don’t ask me what they’re expecting to happen, but they do outnumber my teams by two men, even if we don’t count the three who may-or-may-not be missing. If those guys are hiding on board, we’re outnumbered by *five*. They might be armed, and they *definitely* have the home field advantage, over.”

He didn’t voice the other half of his thought; any or all of the crew under guard could be armed as well. The United Nations guidelines did not permit VBSS teams to conduct body-searches of suspect crew members unless they committed acts of physical hostility. Hostile attitudes and general lack of compliance were not considered sufficient grounds for a personal search. VBSS teams were permitted to *ask* the crew members if they were carrying weapons, which worked about as well as asking politicians if they were crooked.

“VBSS Team Leader, this is Towers. Understood. Stand by on your request, over.”

Hayes suppressed the urge to lay a hand on the butt of the Navy-issue 9mm Barretta automatic riding in the speed holster on his web belt. The sky was full dark now, and though a few operational deck lights had come on, they didn’t seem to be making much difference. He keyed his mike. “VBSS Team Leader, aye.”

Hayes had expected a delay. VBSS Teams normally operated in Security Condition One, with their Barretta 9mms loaded, but holstered. Condition One would cost the team a few seconds if they encountered a threat, but the risk caused by the delay was balanced by the fact that holstered weapons were less threatening and (theoretically) less likely to provoke a hostile response from the crew of the seized ship.

It made sense that the Captain would want to think for a few minutes, and maybe call in a couple of senior officers for a quick pow-wow before deciding whether to authorize the change to a more aggressive posture.

Security Condition Two, which called for the teams to operate with their weapons drawn, was inherently more threatening. It also slowed down the search process, as it required his men to work one-handed (the other hand being constantly occupied by a weapon).

Hayes had requested *Modified* Security Condition Two instead, which would require only the odd-numbered members of his teams to operate with weapons drawn, allowing them to protect their even-numbered buddies. To Hayes’ mind, it was a decent compromise; half of his men would have two hands to work with, and all of them would have some protection.

Isam was a snake. The VBSS teams hadn't found any contraband yet, but Hayes was certain the man was a smuggler. Everything about the cagey old bastard and his crew pointed in that direction.

Hayes leaned on the railing of the bridge wing and looked down toward the darkened forecabin. The fore deck was cluttered with equipment and deck fittings, visible now only as dark shapes. There were a hundred places to hide down there. A hundred good places for somebody to ambush his teams. "Shit," he said softly.

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Three decks below, OSC Harry Deacon stood at the entrance to the forward cargo hold. He scanned the darkened compartment and felt his jaws begin to tighten. "This looks like a real good place to get somebody killed," he said softly.

The cavernous space was crammed with Conex boxes. The huge shipping containers were stacked far closer together than International Shipping Laws allowed, forming a maze of narrow passageways with walls of corrugated steel.

The lighting system, inadequate when the ship had been designed, had seen thirty-odd years of hard use. Less than half of the fixtures worked, and those had been fitted with energy-saving sodium-vapor lamps. What little light they produced was largely eclipsed by the towering rows of shipping containers.

Deacon counted thirty Conex boxes in this hold. With the twenty-two they had found in the aft cargo hold, his team had fifty-two shipping containers to search. Deacon had six men, including himself, to do the job. There were no ladders or catwalks to the containers on the upper level, so his team would have to haul themselves up with climbing harnesses.

He shook his head in disgust. The United Nations bureaucrats who had drafted the Security Council Resolution that mandated these searches had not had a clue of what they were really asking; that much was patently clear. He shook his head again. This was going to take all goddamned night.

"Come on," he said. "Get that first box open. And don't forget to write down the number off the box car seal *before* you cut it off."

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EW2 Paul Allen stepped up to the doors of the first Conex box with a pocket-sized notebook and a pair of orange-handled wire cutters. The Electronics Warfare Technician was Chief Deacon's second in command on the Blue Team. "We've got it, Chief."

The Chief nodded. "I'm going to head aft and check on Carlin and Finch." He turned, and disappeared into the darkness.

Allen nudged his partner, an eighteen year old Seaman named Steve Blandy. "Get your flashlight on this box car seal so I can get the number off of it."

Blandy pointed his flashlight as ordered. "God damn! It smells like a stable in here. What the hell are they shipping? Yaks?"

Allen ignored him. It *did* stink down here, but that wasn't exactly a surprise. A lot of these old freighters smelled like shit.

Blandy looked down and prodded the deck with the toe of his left boot. "One of these days, one of these rusty old bitches is going to fucking sink on us."

"Pay attention to what you're doing," Allen said. "Hold the light steady."

Blandy switched his attention to the flashlight. "Sorry about that," he said. "I'm not kidding, though. Last week, when we were searching that Omani freighter, Jenkins put his foot right through a deck plate. It was rusted as thin as paper."

Allen scribbled the last few digits of the serial number from the boxcar seal and slid his pen and notebook into his hip pocket. "Jenkins is always saying crap like that. He's so full of shit his eyes are brown."

"Not this time," Blandy said. "I was there. I saw it happen."

Allen latched the jaws of the wire cutters onto the thin metal of the seal. "Eye hazard—look away."

Both men turned their faces away from the door of the shipping container, and Allen squeezed the handles of the wire cutters. The seal parted with a metallic twang and fell to the deck.

Allen turned back toward the container. "Clear." He retrieved the errant seal and shoved it into a canvas pouch attached to his belt. He grabbed the latching handle of the Conex box and lifted. The handle moved slowly, with a groan of protest. "Give me a hand with this," he said.

Blandy went rigid. "Shhhh..." He swung the beam of his flashlight around to cover a narrow corridor between two rows of stacked shipping containers. "You hear that?"

Allen gave him a sour look. "Knock it off, goofball."

Blandy's hand went to his holster. He unsnapped the strap and wrapped his hand around the butt of his 9mm. "I'm serious," he said, playing the beam of the flashlight around in the labyrinth of shadows. "Somebody's down here."

"We're still in Security Condition One," Allen said. "That weapon stays in its holster."

"Do you see me drawing the damned thing?" Blandy whispered. "Anyway, we can cock and lock if we're threatened, even in Security Condition One."

"I don't see any threat," EW2 Allen said. "And I don't hear anything."

“Shut up and listen!” Blandy hissed. “There it is again!”

Something thumped in the darkness, followed by a scraping sound. Then there was silence.

Allen put his hand on the butt of his own 9mm. “I heard it that time.” He keyed his headset mike and spoke in a low voice, “Blue One, this is Blue Two, over.”

Chief Deacon responded immediately. “This is Blue One, go ahead, over.”

“Blue One, this is Blue Two. We have somebody moving around down here, approximately ten yards forward of my position. Do you have any teams working in this part of the hold besides us? Over.”

“Negative, Blue Two. Our personnel are all accounted for. I am in route your position. Take cover and don’t do anything until I get there, over.”

“Blue Two, aye.”

Allen touched Blandy’s shoulder. “Shut off your flashlight and get down.”

The beam of Blandy’s flashlight vanished, plunging them into the yellow-tinged gloom of aging sodium-vapor lamps. The cargo hold was not completely dark, but the shadows were numerous and thick, and the feeble glow of the overhead lamps did little to penetrate them.

Both men crouched against the doors of the steel shipping container. They were still exposed to the sides and the rear, but at least they had cover against attack from the forward end of the compartment—the direction from which the sounds had come.

They heard the noises again. They seemed to be closer this time.

“That’s it,” Blandy said. “I’m drawing down.”

“No you’re not!” Allen whispered fiercely. “Keep your weapon holstered. That’s an order.”

“This is bullshit!” Blandy hissed. “At least three of these fuckers are unaccounted for, and there could be a half dozen more who aren’t even listed on the crew manifest. You can bet your ass *they* don’t have to get a note from Mommy to draw *their* fucking weapons.”

Allen held up a hand. “Shhhh...”

Something else was moving—something behind them. Allen looked over his shoulder. Damn. They had no cover in that direction. Hopefully it was the Chief. But what if it wasn’t?

Allen bit his lower lip. Maybe Blandy was right. Maybe it was time to stop thinking about the rules and start thinking about self-preservation.

In the pre-mission briefings, the Combat Systems Officer was always saying, “*No matter how spooked you are, it’s nearly impossible to accidentally shoot a man with a holstered weapon.*” When you were suiting up on the boat deck, that sounded like good common sense. At the moment—crouched in near-darkness

in this foul smelling cargo hold, with possible hostiles coming from two directions—Allen thought it sounded a little thin.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Calm down,” he said. “And keep your weapon holstered.” He realized that he was talking to himself, more than to Blandy.

The sounds from behind them grew nearer. Someone was moving toward them rapidly. Allen was about a second and a half from throwing his safety training and Security Condition One out the window, when OSC Deacon’s voice crackled in his earphone.

“Blue Two, this is Blue One. I’m coming up behind you, over.”

“Copy, Blue One.” Allen relaxed a fraction. At least *one* thing moving around out there was friendly.

A shape appeared, moving toward them in the gloom. After a few seconds, it resolved itself into OSC Deacon. He stopped at close whispering distance and crouched down. “Have you seen anything yet?”

“Negative, Chief,” Allen said softly. “But we definitely heard something.”

Chief Deacon nodded. “I’ve notified the Lieutenant. He was already in the process of getting clearance to upgrade to Modified Security Condition Two. In the mean time, he’s authorized me to use my judgement in accordance with the tactical situation.” The Chief paused for a second and then drew his own 9mm Barretta. “We’re going to go cocked and locked. But, I swear to God, if either one of you shoots at anything, it had better be armed and in the process of cutting your fucking throat. Are we clear on this?”

Allen and Blandy both nodded and drew their own weapons.

“All right,” the Chief said. “These corridors aren’t wide enough to do right-left properly, so we’re going to have to do high-low. Blandy, you’re the shortest, so you’re low. I’ll take the high position. Make sure you keep your head down after we turn a corner so you don’t foul my field of fire. Allen, you’re jackrabbit.”

Allen frowned. In the jackrabbit position, his job would be to lag behind whenever the others turned a corner and opened themselves up to attack. Allen would only follow when the new stretch of corridor was proven to be empty of attackers, or if Blandy or the Chief went down, in which case he would jackrabbit around the corner with his 9mm blazing—providing rapid and (hopefully) unexpected backup. “Chief, I’m taller than you are,” he said. “I should be high and *you* should be jackrabbit.”

Chief Deacon shook his head. “Negative. You’re the best shooter on the ship. I don’t want you hit by the first bullet that flies. If one of us goes down, you’re our best chance of getting out alive.”

“But...”

The Chief grabbed Allen's shoulder and squeezed it. "You've got your orders, Sailor."

His words were gentle, but Allen knew him well enough to know that they were utterly nonnegotiable.

Allen nodded. "Aye-aye, Chief."

The Chief stood up and shifted his 9mm to a two-handed combat grip. Allen and Blandy did likewise. The Chief nodded. "Let's go."

Blandy went around the starboard corner of the Conex box, low and moving fast, his weapon swinging from side to side in short, precise arcs as he covered the shadowed corridor ahead. The Chief swung around the corner a half-second behind him, his own Barretta carving a similar back-and-forth arc above Blandy's head. They moved forward at a fast walk, their eyes and weapons ceaselessly scanning the gloom ahead of them.

In accordance with jackrabbit doctrine, Allen counted to three before swinging around the corner and following at the same brisk pace, his own weapon tilted up at a forty-five degree angle so that an accidental discharge wouldn't hit one of his teammates.

They covered the distance up the length of the first row of Conex boxes without incident. There was a five or six foot gap between the end of the first row of containers and the start of the second row. This space formed another makeshift corridor that intersected their corridor at a right angle, leaving short left and right hand passageways to investigate. They halted just short of the intersection.

OSC Deacon tapped Blandy on the shoulder and pointed to the left passageway, then he touched his own chest and pointed to the right passageway. *'You check left, I'll check right.'*

Blandy nodded. Still in his low-man crouch, he swung around the corner to the left and screamed.

Allen jumped so hard that he nearly squeezed off a round before he caught himself. He flattened himself against the steel wall of the shipping container to his left, trying to see what was going on.

Blandy threw himself backwards, his arms and legs flailing as he struggled to get away. Still scrambling in a sort of crazy crab-walk, he crashed into the back of OSC Deacon's legs, bringing the Chief down on top of him. Blandy screamed again.

What the hell was it? Allen lowered his 9mm to a shooting angle and rushed forward to cover the threat. He had covered about half the distance to the intersection when something rounded the corner in front of him and charged up the corridor in his direction. It was low and moving fast through the darkness, its rapid steps drumming on the deck plates. It was some kind of animal, shaggy and four-legged. A dog? Allen's 9mm jerked downward to cover the

animal as it ran toward him. He sighted in on it, ready to shoot it before it could attack him the way it had attacked Blandy. Would it go for his throat or his groin? His finger began to squeeze the trigger, and then he got a good look at the animal. He broke into laughter.

It wasn't a dog. It was a goat. Blandy's terrifying attacker was a *goat*.

Still laughing, Allen stepped aside and let the frightened animal run past him.

OSC Deacon crawled to his feet and began dusting himself off. "Was that what I think it was?"

"That," Allen said with a grin that threatened to split his head in half, "was a highly-trained attack goat. It's a miracle Blandy wasn't killed."

Blandy got to his feet. "That's not funny. That's not funny at all."

Chief Deacon holstered his 9mm and bent down to retrieve his boonie hat from the deck. "That is where you're wrong, kid. I can tell you already that this is one of those stories that's going to get funnier every time I tell it."

Allen holstered his own 9mm and turned on his flashlight. "You can count on that, Goat Boy."

Allen turned and walked back down the corridor to the doors of the container they had been set to inspect. Blandy and the Chief followed him a few seconds later.

Allen grasped the latching handle of the Conex box and pulled. It wouldn't budge. He clipped his flashlight to his belt, freeing up his left hand. "Hey, Blandy, come help me with this."

The Chief stepped forward. "I'll help. Blandy, you keep an eye out for goats, sheep, and other farm animals with terrorist leanings."

"Cute, Chief," Blandy said. "Real cute."

Between them, Allen and the Chief were able to wrestle the reluctant latching handle up into the released position.

Allen swung the door open and shone his flashlight inside. He whistled through his teeth. "Uh...Chief? I think you need to take a look at this."

OSC Deacon looked over his shoulder. "What have you got?"

The beam of Allen's flashlight revealed stacks of gray crates with stenciled lettering in yellow spray paint: *FALKE ANTI-AIRCRAFT RAKETENWERFER*.

"Holy shit," Chief Deacon said. "I don't know what Ratken-worker means, or whatever the hell that is, but the *anti-aircraft* part I can figure out."

EW2 Allen sounded the syllables out slowly, "Rak-eten-werf-er...I think that's Arabic for '*somebody's in a shitload of trouble*.'"