

GENERAL QUARTERS

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By

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Chapter One

KINGSTON EXCELSIOR

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Haiphong, Vietnam

2205 Hours

“Boss.” IT2 Paul Boyd’s voice had the hushed intensity that SEAL Team leader Lieutenant Commander Jim Dawes expected after countless missions together. “You have two Tangos in the pilothouse and one roving the deck on the starboard side, forward,” Boyd rasped into the radio.

Dawes and SEAL Medic Greg “Doc” Kincaid concealed themselves in the starboard anchor housing of the container ship. He keyed the transmitter on his radio to transmit a “click” in acknowledgment.

Dawes smiled at his SEAL teammate’s announcement of his arrival in position, conducting a good over-watch. He checked his watch. He was impressed. Now atop one of the ship’s forty-foot cranes, Boyd had completed the climb in less than five minutes without detection.

“Hold fast. Tango will be over you in five, four, three, two, one,” Boyd counted down slowly over the radio.

In addition to their full allotment of combat gear, Dawes and Kincaid wore relatively bulky cold-weather wet suits. And if that were not enough, each of them also carried another half of a wet suit for their “package.” The packs that each of them wore, still wet and heavy from the swim, seriously impaired their mobility.

The team’s collective focus now fell on their mission to retrieve “Varsity,” the codename given to a defecting high-level Chinese Government official. The two special forces operatives held a deathlike stillness. Even before the smoke from their adversary’s cigarette wafted over the bow to his nostrils, Dawes felt the man’s warmth. He ‘shallowed’ his breathing so much that his breath only fogged for a split second when he exhaled.

Dawes shifted his gaze to Kincaid. His eyes transfixed with excitement; the younger SEAL also stood frozen in place. Dawes turned his mental focus toward Boyd. No need to radio him. His sniper would notify them, one way or the other, when they could move. If the sentry detected them, Boyd would silence him.

Moments ticked by at a glacial pace. “He’s moving away, down the port side of the ship,” Boyd reported. Dawes finally blew out his breath and some tension. He flashed Kincaid a “thumbs-up,” and his teammate returned the gesture.

“Where is Junior?” Dawes asked Boyd, checking on LT Cody Wells. Tonight’s mission was Dawes’ last mission, and Wells was set to take his place.

“Junior Boss is covering your insertion from a lifeboat on the port side,” Wells replied over the net. “Let’s get going,” he said to Kincaid.

“Passing Tesla,” Dawes said into his radio. Those simple words notified those monitoring the mission from the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) of the team’s progress. USS PASADENA, submerged some twenty miles away, served as the base of operations for tonight’s mission.

Submerged below the container ship’s waterline, BMC Darrell Jackson and BM1 Carlos DeSilva, both garbed in full cold-weather wetsuits, swam the longitudinal axis of the ship toward the stern. Re-breather units kept telltale exhaust bubbles from giving away their presence. They kept watch over the team’s means of extraction. Lighting from the ship’s sides provided plenty of illumination, even at thirty feet underwater. The plan called for using three submersibles to rendezvous with USS PASADENA.

Perfect meteorological conditions prevailed for tonight’s mission. A moonless and overcast sky with only ten knots of wind aided their concealed intrusion. Casting the ship and surrounding area into complete darkness when the time came should prove easy.

Under the deadly cover of Boyd’s and Wells’ sniper rifles, Dawes and Kincaid crept onto the KINGSTON EXCELSIOR’s main deck. Crouching with their H&K MP5 automatic weapons at the ready, they took each step with concentration.

Just like the drone photos in their mission briefing had shown, high container stacks held in place by steel cables dotted the deck as far as Boyd could see. The multi-colored metal boxes formed equally shaped canyons along both the longitudinal and athwartship axes of the vessel. While lights bathed the waters around the ship, heavy shadows covered most of the deck. He and Kincaid stole their way under the cover of the cargo, with equal portions of speed and stealth. Dawes peered toward the rear of the ship that featured a superstructure and a lighted pilothouse. Several other forward-facing portholes glowed, but darkness engulfed the rest. With the ship in port and most of the crew ashore, intelligence reports led mission planners to believe KINGSTON EXCELSIOR sat relatively unoccupied. Regardless, they proceeded as if each space held an armed sentry. Dawes and Kincaid alternated taking the lead as they advanced, keeping their weapons always pointed ahead and upward at the portholes .

Nearing the edge of the cargo area, Dawes held up his left hand and shaped it into a fist. At the silent signal to “Halt,” Kincaid knelt, holding his weapon at the ready. An open, well-lighted area lay between them and the door to the superstructure. Taking a breath to calm

himself, Dawes scanned the area like a jeweler examining a diamond for flaws. Except for the roving security patrol, all seemed quiet.

“Boss,” Boyd called from his perch. “The Tango is back on the bow, smoking another cigarette. I’ve checked each of the portholes and you look clear to proceed.”

Dawes raised his hand behind him and gave his sniper a thumbs-up. He nodded at Kincaid before stepping from the darkness toward their next objective. Kincaid stayed a step behind him, weapon at the ready.

On either side of the superstructure door, the SEALs steeled themselves. Dawes pushed up on the metal handle and quietly pulled open the access. The heavy metal door creaked as it swung.

“Passing Maserati,” Dawes heard Boyd report to the TOC.

Kincaid leveled his weapon toward the interior as it opened. He nodded to signal that it was clear. Kincaid stepped in as Dawes closed the door behind them, securing it with an almost imperceptible thump.

Dawes took his place as point of the incursion. The job now was to find “Varsity” as quickly as possible and without detection. Traveling under an assumed name and forged credentials, “Varsity” berthed in a stateroom on the superstructure’s third deck.

The intelligence report seemed accurate. Six cabin doors lined each side of the passageway. The stairwell leading to the upper decks stood just beyond the last set of cabins.

Dawes somehow knew things would not go according to plan. They hardly ever did.

They advanced on the first door. Dawes pulled open the door as Kincaid pointed his weapon ahead, ready to deal with whomever they encountered. The two SEALs crossed the threshold into the passageway.

IT2 Boyd pulled a candy-bar from his chest pouch. *Shoulda had more for dinner.* He consumed half the Payday with a single bite. He made sure to keep a watchful eye on the deck below as he enjoyed his small snack. “What’s this?” Taking his final bite, engine noise from an approaching boat caught his attention.

A powerboat, at least forty feet in length, churned the water as it surged toward the ship, him, and his team. Mostly white, the blue stripes did not become visible until the craft slowed and drew near the ship. Three men occupied the craft’s cockpit.

Shit! Dawes’ heart almost leaped from his chest as the sound of approaching voices reached his ears. He shot an alarm-filled glance toward Kincaid. Doubling back to one of the unoccupied rooms as quickly and quietly as possible, Dawes shut the door just before the crewmembers entered the passageway.

“Boss. Heads up. We’ve got a boat coming alongside. You might want to take cover,” Boyd’s voice announced over Dawes’ headset as he and his teammate positioned themselves. “Looks like Vietnamese Coast Guard.”

“Yeah. No shit,” said under his breath to Kincaid. They leveled their weapons at the door, just in case.

It sounded as if five to six men passed by the door toward the main deck. Raised voices spoke Russian in excited tones. Dawes could not hear the entire conversation but made out enough to know they were anticipating the arrival of an important person. The commotion faded as the crewmen exited the passageway.

“Boss. Two men are exiting the boat and climbing up the accommodation ladder. I count six greeters, three with rifles.”

The arrival of the Vietnamese Coast Guard probably meant the compromise of the mission to take “Varsity”. Dawes did the math quickly. One or two guys likely remained to guard the package. This meant the total Tango force probably numbered only eight or ten. He considered this a manageable number.

“Boss,” Boyd began again. His voice had a slightly elevated tone now. “The boat’s carrying a senior Coast Guard officer and an Asian civilian. I’m betting Chinese Government.”

Dawes nodded. Boyd’s announcement fit in with what he overheard and had surmised. “Call it in,” Dawes replied just above a whisper.

“TOC, situation X-ray. I say again, X-ray,” Boyd called per Dawes’ order.

“Roger. TOC copies. Mission completion is an imperative.”

“Roger,” Boyd replied.

Boyd used the scope on his rifle to observe the eight men on the ship’s main deck. He tracked them to the left as they walked toward the same door that Dawes and Kincaid used just minutes before. As they entered the skin of the ship, he shifted his scan to the forward face of the superstructure.

“Boss. They’re entering the deckhouse now. Stand ready.”

Boyd did not hear a response, nor did he expect one. While there was a chance that someone might overhear them, the team members on deck would only transmit a voice message if necessary.

“Few more lights on now. Stand by.”

Boyd used the riflescope to examine each of the newly lighted portholes. The ship boasted six levels above the main deck. All the lights on the first and second levels remained extinguished. A few lights on the third and fourth levels now glowed brightly.

Boyd’s weapons sight allowed him to see a few feet into each room. He focused on a larger porthole enough to see the chairs and sofa of an unoccupied lounge. He noted the surrounding crew quarters.

The next level up appeared to contain offices and officer berthing areas. A couple of staterooms cast their light into the darkness. Three larger and illuminated portholes on this level revealed a single occupant, an Asian man sweeping the floor. He shifted his attention to the next space.

The next room, unoccupied, contained office furniture. Boyd surmised it served as the captain’s administrative area.

Boyd’s eyes bulged when he focused on the final room. Two Caucasian men sat at a table across from an Asian man. Mentally comparing the man to the pictures he had seen hours earlier, he confirmed the thin balding Asian in his late fifties was “Varsity.”

“Boss. Package sighted. Fourth Deck, port side, forward. Captain’s Office.”

With the sounds of passersby on the other side of the door gone, relative silence returned to the passageway. Only the throbbing of the ship's power plant and the warm air it shoved through the ventilation ducts above them cut into the quiet. The entourage passed their current refuge with no sign of detection, on their way to their destination, presumably to interview "Varsity".

Dawes and Kincaid acknowledged Boyd's news with only a slight nod. Dawes hoped he and his men could get in and out without detection, and without firing a shot. With yet another two guns aboard, the likelihood of that now seemed remote.

He pressed the eavesdropping device against the door. After determining all was quiet, Dawes placed his hand on the knob while his partner pulled his weapon up and aimed it at the door. They nodded at each other and pulled open the door on a three-count.

Once again, stark light blasted into their eyes, but that was all. The passageway, empty and still, made Dawes think of a ghost ship. He turned his attention to the stairwell at the end of the passageway while Kincaid covered their rear.

Dawes listened for voices as he climbed the first step. Silence. Like Kincaid, Dawes advanced with his weapon ready. The SEAL Leader stiffened his resolve to finish this Op quickly.

"Boss," Boyd called as they cleared the second level. "They've gathered in the room where 'Varsity' is located."

Boyd's stomach tightened as he watched the Coast Guard officer and suspected Chinese official enter the room. Even from 150 yards away and through a riflescope, the SEAL sniper saw bulging veins in the Asian official's face and neck as he berated "Varsity".

"Varsity" sat at rigid attention as the civilian shouted at him from across the room. When he did speak, he did so with open and outstretched hands as he shook his head. The Asian civilian responded by slapping "Varsity" across his face.

"Boss. They're interrogating the 'Package'."

"Take whatever action is necessary to protect the 'Package' We're almost there," Dawes transmitted to the entire team.

Boyd sighted in on the suspected Chinese official's head.

Cody Wells, once given the go-ahead from Boyd, made his way aft. He girded himself as he neared the equipment room positioned on the centerline. After taking a last look and listen, he shouldered his weapon and entered the space. "Boss. This is Junior. I'm in position," he reported.

Dawes and Kincaid stepped up their ascent, taking two and three stairs at a time. As they neared the fourth deck, a familiar tightness grew in Dawes' stomach. He ran through a mental checklist as he scanned the space around them. He longed to rid himself of the pack. It would make the climb much easier.

Approaching the top of the ladder, voices and heavy footsteps echoed in Dawes' ears. It was time. He signaled Kincaid by placing his hand over his eyes. The corpsman nodded, lowered his weapon and donned his night-vision goggles so they sat on top of his head versus over his eyes. Once set, Kincaid gave Dawes a thumbs-up. Dawes quickly followed his example and then quietly said, "Now, Now, Now," into his transmitter's microphone.

Wells pulled a lever in the switch room, throwing the massive ship into darkness. Wells pulled down his goggles. With Infrared-green colored hands, he reached into the switchbox and removed several fuses, placing them in the pocket of his uniform.

The pilothouse occupied the superstructure's entire top level. The ship's windows, as large as they were tall, provided Boyd a clear view of the occupants as they scurried around in the dark trying one light switch after another, to no avail. He sighted in with the night-vision-equipped scope. As long as they stayed in the bridge area, no harm would come to them. If they headed for the door, Boyd would act to protect his two SEAL teammates and "Varsity" from harm.

Dawes and Kincaid rushed up the last flight of metal steps onto the fourth deck. Two light green silhouettes in the shape of men stood by the furthest door on the port side of the athwartships Passageway. Dawes hugged the left side of the passage while Kincaid slid to the right.

Just as one of the silhouetted men turned toward them speaking Russian and leveling his pistol, Dawes and Kincaid each fired one silenced shot. The men guarding the door fell dead right where they stood.

Dawes pulled a flash-bang grenade from his belt. He used his right thumb to pull and toss away the pin. The small explosive, meant to blind and shock, remained clenched in his hand. *So much for a quiet extraction.* Kincaid stood to the right of the door, behind the protection of a metal bulkhead.

Dawes, his back to the wall on the opposite side of the door, turned the doorknob. As he did, someone on the other side fired several rounds. Bullets tore through the wooden door's center and into the door on the distant side of the passageway. "Damn!" Undeterred, Dawes finished opening the door, tossed in the device and pulled the door shut.

Frantic voices shouting in Russian and Chinese preceded the explosion. Crouched, Dawes again placed his hand on the doorknob and turned it. He used his shoulder to push it open the rest of the way.

When he did, someone in the center of the room, with one hand over their face and the other holding a gun, began firing. Kincaid dropped him with a single shot, the man's body falling to the deck with a thud.

The room fell silent as the two SEALs scanned the room. Five men lay dead at their feet. Dawes' nerves were on fire. He knew someone else was there, someone other than "Varsity".

Where the hell was he? Had to be behind something, hiding. Dawes surveyed the room through the green haze. A single table near the center of the room gave the only shelter. Three portholes provided air into the room. The middle porthole stood six feet above the table on the forward bulkhead. Dawes keyed his microphone.

"Come on out. Don't hurt him and we won't hurt you."

"Ha. How about you put down your weapons, and I don't kill your prize?" the voice proposed in response.

Dawes reveled at the man's command of the English language. "That's not going to happen," he finally replied. His English bore a strong Mandarin accent.

The man started laughing. "This is like one of your cowboy movies – 'Mexican standoff'. No?"

"No, this is no movie," Dawes replied. He signaled Kincaid to move around to the right of the table.

Boyd shifted his scope back down to the porthole in the room where his boss and Kincaid were facing down the Chinese official. "I don't have a shot," he announced over the radio.

Wells, still wearing his night-vision goggles, crept toward the main deck and the canyons formed by the stacks of containers. With all the lighting extinguished; the darkness provided him great cover.

"Okay," Dawes said after a long moment. "How about you let him go? And you'll get to walk out of here. You show some goodwill, and we'll do the same."

"What if I don't shoot this bastard in the head? Is that enough goodwill for you?"

A flash of light on the deck caught Boyd's attention. The Roving Guard had a flashlight and a rifle trained on Cody Wells. "Boss. I've got a situation. Stall your Tango for a second." Boyd's voice was cool and nonchalant, as if he were offering a friend a beer.

He aimed the weapon at the guard as Wells, holding his eyes, climbed to his feet. Boyd aimed toward the man's neck. A flinching movement could inadvertently cause the guard's weapon to discharge. Boyd knew his shot must not miss. He took a breath, let half of it out

and squeezed the trigger. His rifle recoiled silently in the night. Far below, Wells' captor fell dead with a metallic thud.

"Okay, sir. You're clear. Get under some cover," Boyd said into his radio to the young SEAL officer.

"Thanks. I owe you one."

"Okay, Boss. Let's get this over with." Boyd returned his attention and aim to the lounge.