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Nerdish Mum



NOMAD

James Swallow is a veteran author and scriptwriter with over fifteen years of experience in fiction, television, radio, journalism, new media and video games.

He is a three-time *New York Times* bestselling author of thirty-eight novels with over 750,000 books currently in print, in nine different worldwide territories.

He was nominated by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) for his writing on the critically acclaimed DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION, 2013's blockbuster videogame with over 2.18 million copies sold.

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ZAFFRE



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*For Mum and Dad,
who drew the map,
and for Mandy,
who had the compass.*

This book is dedicated to the memory of Darren Mills.



ONE

The day was coming to an end, but still the heat fell like hammers.

Barcelona shimmered as if it were a mirage, the air lensed by the warmth of the day escaping from the narrow streets, back into the cloudless sky. As he walked, Pasco patted his shoulder with a rolled-up copy of *El Periodico*, tapping out an aimless rhythm across the top of his *sergent's* chevrons. His uniform shirt was sticking to his barrel chest, but he didn't notice it. Pasco was a son of this city, fourth-generation, and he'd grown up in the Balearic sunshine. His old face attested to that, careworn like good calf-skin leather.

He navigated around the knots of tourists and locals without really being aware of it. The uniform did most of the work for him, the pale blue of the Mossos d'Esquadra and the red-banded cap on his head cutting a path through people on the busy street. Now that the sun had dropped below the rooftops, the first wave of revellers were shaking off their siesta and coming out to play. Joining them were pale Germans and paler British, yet to build up a tolerance to the heat and grateful for the cooling atmosphere and the open-air cafes in this part of the old town. Minor criminals – pickpockets and opportunist thieves – would already be among them.

But few would be found near this corner of the Ciutat Vella district, thanks to the imposing, slab-sided shape of the main police station on the Nou de la Rambla. It was a charmless building, all heavy white stone and blue-tinted glass, built with the modernist ethic that had swept over the city in the last few decades.

He crossed the station's courtyard, passing Enrique going the other way, and the two policemen exchanged nods. Enrique pointed at the newspaper. 'Hey, Abello. Finish it today?' He smiled, showing tobacco-stained teeth.

Pasco snapped open the paper with a flourish. It was a little ritual that they shared once a week, when the cryptic crossword was published. He offered it to Enrique to show him that every clue had been filled in, the letters written in a careful hand.

The younger man scowled. Pasco knew the other *sergent* hadn't completed the puzzle himself, which meant that Enrique would be required to buy him a packet of the good cigarillos, as their regular competition demanded.

'You've got better all of a sudden?' Enrique asked, with no little suspicion.

Pasco gave a shrug. 'The warm air. Makes me smarter.'

Enrique's scowl deepened. 'If I catch you cheating, I will fill your desk with cat shit.' He gave a rueful smile of defeat and walked on.

Pasco snorted. Soon, perhaps in a week or two, after he had made up enough wins to redress the lead Enrique had on him, he would reveal his secret. A birthday gift from his grandson, an electronic gadget that kept all his names and address, birthdates and phone numbers. It was a clever thing, packed with a huge library of words and phrases in different languages, and it had come in useful more than once when Pasco had found himself dealing with foreign tourists. It also had a dictionary in it that was excellent at suggesting whole words when you only had a few letters to go on.

Thinking about the boy made him think about his son, and guilt stirred in his chest. He was supposed to call him yesterday, but after work a few of the men went to the local bar and he had lost the rest of the evening with his colleagues and their rough good humour.

Pasco sighed. His son worried about him now that his mother was with the angels. *Papa, a man like you should not be walking the streets*, he would say. *Policeman is a job for men of my age, not yours. Let them give you a desk.*

A desk; the very idea made Pasco's heart shrink in his chest. He loved this city like it was his own private property, and to see it

from behind a desk, day in and day out . . . His son didn't understand that it would be a slow death for him, slow and hard, like the cancer that had taken his beautiful Rosa.

Through the glass doors into the precinct hall, a steady mutter of conversation and office noise washed over him. Stepping through the arches of the metal detectors, he nodded absently to the man on duty there as the scanner bleated. The other police officer waved him through with a distracted nod.

Pasco doffed his cap and he tried to push his thoughts of family aside. There were bigger problems for Pasco to deal with. Sometimes, his son seemed like he had come from another planet, with all his talk of things like the global warming that made the summer heat murderous, the scandals of the impossibly rich, and the men of other countries who seemed to kill each other for reasons Pasco couldn't begin to fathom.

He sighed. It was because of those things that he didn't buy the paper for the news anymore. All too depressing. It was just the crossword now, and nothing else.

Pasco noticed the boy then, and chided himself for being too deep in his own head. It was no reason not to remain observant.

The youth was in his late teens, but the pallor of his face made it difficult to be certain exactly how old he was. He had a heavy brow and dark eyes, filled with worry. The ends of black curls peeked out from under a tan painter's cap, the rest of him hidden inside a nondescript tracksuit the colour of tilled earth. He walked like his training shoes were too tight for him, stepping awkwardly as he made his way toward the big desk where Tomás the duty officer was growling something at a junior mosso.

The youth became aware of Pasco looking directly at him and flinched as if he had been struck. The *sergent* got a good look at him then, head on. He was washed out, filmed with sweat, and there was a line of bruising on his neck.

His eyes, though, were what caught Pasco. The teenager's eyes were so very serious, in that way that only the young were capable of. He saw his son and his grandson in them.

The youth in the tracksuit gave him an owl's blink, as if he was going to say something, and then his legs bent under him. He landed hard on the tiled floor and skidded. People heard the impact, the heavy noise of it echoing in the hall, and they turned to stare.

Pasco was immediately at the teenager's side, kneeling down to look him over. He looked ill; not like a junkie dragged through withdrawal, but someone afflicted with the sort of bone-deep sickness that ate away at a person. 'Are you all right, boy?' asked the *sergent*. 'What's the matter? Do you need a doctor?'

The look Pasco got in return told him that the youth didn't understand a word of Spanish. Part of his mind – the trained, focused part of him that was pure police – was already evaluating the boy, thinking of him in terms of how he would be logged and reported in the day's paperwork. 'Where are you from?' He asked the question without thinking about it. The silent youth looked back with his serious eyes.

The *sergent* cast around and found a familiar face in the yellow and orange of a paramedic's jacket. 'Noya!' He shouted the girl's name, but she was already on her way to him, the toolbox-shape of an emergency kit in her gloved hand.

Noya was a regular at the precinct. The petite Catalan girl was part of an ambulance crew from the local hospital, and more often than not, when a medical crisis arose at the station, her team was the one that answered the call. Pasco liked her even though a lot of the other men didn't. She was brisk and severe, but fiercely competent.

'Help me get him over to a bench,' she demanded. Between them, they helped the youth stagger to a wooden seat in the waiting area, the paramedic yelling at the people sat upon it to vacate. They scattered and Pasco laid the boy down.

His breathing changed, coming in short gasps like a frightened animal.

The level of noise in the entrance hall dropped as people began to notice what was going on, pausing in the middle of their own little dramas to watch the unfolding of this one. Some were coming closer to get a better look.

Noya snapped her fingers to attract the youth's attention. 'Hey. Can you hear me?'

'I don't think he understands,' Pasco told her.

She had her fingers at his neck, checking his pulse. 'It's not heat-stroke,' Noya replied. She reached for the zipper on his tracksuit jacket and the boy snatched at it, preventing the paramedic from opening it. A new emotion crept into his eyes; *fear*. He tried to speak, but all that came out was a dry gasp.

'I need to open your shirt.' Noya said sternly. She wagged a stethoscope at him. 'To listen.' She was speaking loudly and over-enunciating each word, as if talking to a slow child.

The youth looked past her to Pasco, and again he tried to say something. Licking dry lips, he forced out a word, and the effort seemed to cost him.

The *sergent* only caught part of it and he leaned in. The boy tried again, and this time Pasco heard the whisper clearly.

'*Shahiden*.'

The word meant nothing to him. He frowned.

'Get back,' Noya snapped at Pasco. 'Don't crowd me.' She tried to grab the zipper, and again the youth resisted her. She scowled. 'I don't have time for this.' The paramedic pulled an ingot of bright orange plastic from her pocket. A rescue tool, it was typically used for cutting the seatbelts off victims of traffic accidents, but Noya could wield it like a surgeon, and with a single swift motion she hooked it in the tracksuit collar and sliced it open.

Pasco did as he was told, falling back a step or two, giving Noya room to work. Her partner, a skinny Portuguese lad, came across

the hall with a folding stretcher in one hand. The youth said the word again, and without thinking about it, Pasco pulled out his birthday gift and thumbed the tab marked *Translator*. As best he could, he repeated what he had heard into the device's pinhole microphone.

It would not have been an exaggeration to say that Jadeed's room was the most expensive space he had ever been in. The executive suite on the upper floor of the Hilton was alien to him in a way he found difficult to articulate. It wasn't something he would have spoken about to the other men, for fear that they might be amused by it and consider him parochial and unworldly. He didn't like to be thought of as inferior.

But the suite could quite easily have encompassed the entire footprint of the slum apartment in Jeddah where he had grown up. The first night, he had not been able to sleep in the huge, soft bed, interrupted by dreams of being swamped in a vast, empty space. He took sheets and made a place instead in the living room, arranged in the lee of a long sofa where he wouldn't be seen by someone entering through the doorway. It served him much better.

Jadeed sipped from a tumbler of water as he crossed the room toward one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. It seemed wrong to him that so much space should account for the needs of a single person. He felt that in his bones, as if it were a violation of some kind of law. It was wasteful. But then, it was *Western*.

At the open window, he felt more comfortable. A low moon was already visible in the sky, and lights were coming on across Barcelona, all along the Diagonal Mar and out toward the city centre. Sounds reached up to him from sixteen floors below, where restaurant terraces in the shopping mall across the street were taking in their early evening business.

He sat before a low table and lit one of the Czech cigarettes that were his sole vice, taking a long draw. He tossed the match into a glass ashtray before exhaling a cloud of blue smoke.

Next to the ashtray were a pair of compact but powerful Bushnell binoculars, a wireless headset and the flat, glassy tile of a smartphone. Jadeed nudged the phone with his finger, turning it idly in a circle where it lay. Although the device outwardly resembled any one of a number of next-generation handsets, it had been heavily modified. Beneath the brushed aluminium surface, there was barely a single component still in place from the original design. Jadeed remained suspicious of the technology, but more intelligent men than he had told him it was safe to use, and he knew enough not to question them.

The smartphone buzzed and he blinked in surprise. Stubbing out the cigarette, he hooked the lozenge-shaped headset's loop over his right ear and tapped the phone's screen. The panel immediately illuminated with a number of coloured icons and an oscillating display showing the rise and fall of a signal waveform.

He heard a resonant voice in his ear. *'I am watching.'* Khadir's words were strong and clear, almost as if he were standing at Jadeed's shoulder. Only the ghostly whisper of static beneath them betrayed the fact that the man on the other end of the line was thousands of miles away. There was a fractional delay, doubtless some artefact of the complex course taken by the call's clandestine routing around the globe and back via satellite relay, through encryption filters at both ends.

Jadeed nodded. 'Very soon now.' He reached for the binoculars and scanned the rooftops. He quickly found his sightline. After a moment, he looked away to the smartphone, carefully tapping one of the application icons. It grew into a window containing a count-down clock, and Jadeed watched the numbers tumble toward zero. Khadir would be looking at the exact same display.

The clock reached the two minute mark and blinked red. *'One hundred and twenty seconds,'* murmured the voice. *'We are committed.'*

Jadeed smiled slightly. 'Has there ever been a moment when that was not so?'

Khadir didn't rise to the comment. *'Were there any issues with the sample before deployment?'*

He glanced down at the fingers of his right hand. They were still a little red and inflamed from where he had been forced to use them to inflict a moment of discipline, wrapping the steel spheres of his *misbaha* prayer beads in a tight loop like a knuckleduster. 'No,' he lied. Silence answered him, and he reluctantly amended his reply. 'Nothing of note.'

If Khadir heard the pause in his voice, he didn't comment on it. *'I appreciate you handling this personally,'* he said. *'You understand that I need eyes I trust to witness this?'*

'Of course.' The fact was, there were many men that Khadir could have given this assignment to, men they would have been more than willing to leave to take the blame after the fact; but this was too important to be left to inferiors. 'I have my departure arranged.' Jadeed had paid for the room for another day, but he would be leaving it in little more than . . .

He glanced at the smartphone. Only sixty seconds now. The binoculars came up again and found their mark. 'This is what the Americans would call the moment of truth,' said Jadeed, almost to himself.

'How apt,' offered Khadir.

The boy tried to stop Noya, but his effort was weak and half-hearted, as if he couldn't muster the energy to do it. He moaned as Noya pressed the disc of the stethoscope to his chest. Her other hand moved lightly over the youth's torso, stubby fingers clad in blue latex probing at his flesh. Each touch got another pained reaction.

The paramedic swore under her breath and bunched a handful of the boy's t-shirt in her fist, and she bared his chest with another slice of the cutter.

Pasco heard her partner gasp. He actually heard the sound of the Portuguese recoiling in that sharp breath, the man's face twisting. He knew that expression too, of disgust and horror being swiftly shut away beneath a professional façade of detachment. One of the tourists watching the scene unfold made a gagging noise and went ashen.

Pasco was compelled to take a look at the boy and he regretted it immediately, crossing himself as he realized what had been done to him. '*Santa Maria . . .*'

Suddenly he felt his age, right there in the marrow of his bones, heavy like lead. It disappointed him to think that someone could inflict such horrors as the young man had suffered.

A soft digital *ping* brought his attention back to the electronic gadget in his hand. Pasco had forgotten he was holding it in his thick fingers. The device offered a translation of the word he had given, and his blood ran cold.

Shahiden (Arabic, Noun), it read. Martyr.

Noya began to speak. 'I think there's something—'

The wet gasp the boy gave was the last thing Pasco Abello heard.

One moment there was nothing but a sea of red-tiled rooftops, and the next a grey-black blossom of haze and debris filled the optics of the binoculars. Jadeed let them drop just as the sound-shock of the explosion crossed the two mile distance to the balcony, buffeting him as it passed, rattling the tall windows.

He closed his eyes and visualised the effect of the weapon, almost basking in the thought of it. The first blinding flash of the detonation itself and the ring of compacted air radiating out through the interior of the police station, glass and plastic shattering under the catastrophic overpressure. The bodies of those closest to the ignition point would

have been utterly destroyed. Blood would atomise into vapour, flesh becoming cinders. Supporting pillars and walls would distend and crack, ballooned outward by forces they were never meant to contain. In a few microseconds, the building would break apart and begin to die. The structure would collapse under its own weight, the discharge churning outward in thunderous torrents, channelling destruction into the surrounding streets.

He opened his eyes. Behind the rush of the blast noise came a shrieking machine chorus of honking horns and bleating sirens as every car alarm within a mile radius went off at once. In the cool evening air there was no breeze to stir the motion of the pillar of smoke that spiralled upward. It hung like a great black dagger pointing into the heart of the ruin.

He waited, straining to hear, and was rewarded by a long, low rumble that resonated in his chest, blotting out the chatter of the people on the avenue below, as they struggled to understand what had just happened. A second, larger dust cloud projected itself into the air as the stricken building collapsed. Jadeed couldn't see the station house from where he sat, but he could see the mark its demise left behind.

'Broad dispersal,' noted Khadir, with clinical focus. *'There are fires.'*

Jadeed wondered exactly how his superior was seeing that. *A spy satellite or a drone, perhaps?* He absently looked up into the darkening sky. 'The gas lines will-' he began, but before he could fully voice his thought, the dull concussion of a secondary detonation joined the unfolding chaos. New streamers of smoke rose with the main plume, illuminated from within by gas-fuelled fires.

Jadeed rose from his chair, gathering up the phone and binoculars.

'I am satisfied,' said the voice in his ear. *'The sample meets with my approval.'* The last words sounded like they were being directed at someone else.

'I am leaving now,' Jadeed replied, but when he looked down at the smartphone, the display was static, the waveform signal a flat

line, the countdown frozen at zero. The phone went into his pocket, clattering against his prayer beads.

He took the small case containing everything he needed from where it lay on the bed, securing the compact Beretta 84F pistol sitting next to it in a hip holster, which was concealed by the cut of his clothes.

In all the noise and confusion, the sound of the Hilton's fire alarm shrilled away unnoticed as he left the hotel through the emergency exit, and threaded away between the people pointing and gawping at the column of smoke.

TWO

The interior of the warehouse was filled with sharp-edged shadows cast by skeletal yellow work lamps, surrounding a line of collapsible benches at the rear of a Renault truck. The vehicle was painted forest green, and it sat inert with the rear doors hanging open. Figures in black clothing moved around it, a ready sense of urgency in their motions.

Marc Dane blew out a breath and turned away from watching them, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket, walking in a slow circle in the semi-darkness. The pre-dawn air was cold and damp, and he could smell the salt and rust of the nearby seaport. Through the grimy windows it was possible to make out the sodium-bright glow of the Dunkirk docks and the square hills of cargo containers along the lines of the wharves.

Marc was wound tight with energy, already regretting the cocktail of coarse instant coffee and Red Bull that had been his morning eye-opener. Inside the jacket, his fingers drummed as he tried to find a quiet spot in his thoughts. It took effort.

It was like this on every sortie, and every time he thought that the *next* time he would be free of the unease. But it hadn't happened yet, and the corner of his lip pulled up in a crooked smile as he considered that it probably never would. Marc's left hand went to his unruly shock of dishwater blond hair and ran through it. He had a face that was young for a man in his late thirties, pale with it, and the dark clothes he wore made him seem rail-thin.

He took another long breath and spotted Leon climbing into the back of the truck. Leon Taub was old enough to be Marc's father, but he was still fit and sharp-witted. Behind a pair of thick glasses perched on an unlovely nose, there was an intelligence that had not been dulled by forty years of covert operations in darkened

buildings, wet alleyways and harm's way. Taub saw him looking and gave a wan salute with the plastic coffee cup in his hand, disappearing inside the vehicle. Owen Davis followed the older man up into the truck; Davis's face was set in the continual grimace that was his default expression. Marc watched the dour Welshman survey the preparation area around the truck with a sour, judgemental air, and looked away.

The remainder of the team – the tactical element – were gathered together near the benches, and Marc picked up their dry laughter and the metallic sounds of weapons being made ready. Like Marc, Leon and Owen, the others were all dressed in dark colours, but unlike his military-surplus jacket and nondescript jeans, they wore black outfits of heavy rip-stop materials and leather tactical boots. They sported vests studded with gear pouches, armour inserts, encrypted radio rigs and holsters. The group resembled an armed response team from some law enforcement bureau, but none of their kit sported agency sigils, rank patches or any kind of identification. Their equipment was an eclectic mix sourced from manufacturers all over the world, nothing bearing a tell-tale serial number that could be traced if it were to fall into the wrong hands.

None of them carried the same primary weapon; the members of the group were variously armed with Heckler & Koch submachine guns, Mossberg tactical shotguns or carbine variants of the workhorse Colt M4 assault rifle. The only common denominator was the cylindrical suppressor fitted to every firearm, enough to smother any muzzle flash and reduce the sound of gunshots to a gruff cough.

Marc's own duty sidearm – a Glock 17 semi-automatic – was lying unloaded in the back of the truck, along with a custom-built laptop computer, remote surveillance console and the rest of the tools of his trade. His operational role, a job that headquarters euphemistically designated as 'forward mission specialist', meant that he wasn't expected to use a gun – but it was a requirement

for all field-rated personnel to have some form of protection. Still, carrying the pistol on a mission always made Marc feel as if he was inviting trouble.

Out in the real world, where normal people lived and worked, the group assembled in this vacant French warehouse did not exist. Marc Dane's world, with its guns and its secrets, was a dark parallel reality existing alongside it, hidden in the long shadows.

It was nearly two years since he had joined Operations Team Seven, call sign 'Nomad', one of ten rapid-reaction units run under the covert aegis of the British Secret Intelligence Service. Long months since the head-hunters had come, after his tour ended with the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm. Months of intensive training, and counter-terrorism and counter-espionage operations. Months of being a ghost to the real world. Marc Dane had dropped off the face of the earth, and this was where he found himself.

He pulled at the cuff of his jacket to peer at the battered Cabot dive watch on his wrist, Marc's sole remaining connection to his naval service. An hour at most before sunrise. He nodded to himself and tried without success to shake off the last of the tension, which despite his best efforts had gathered in a knot at the base of his neck.

'Told you to switch to decaf,' said a voice from the shadows.

He turned as she approached. Samantha Green was a head shorter than Marc's six foot two inches, but she had a way about her that made it seem like it was you that had to look up to her. She grinned at him from under the peak of a dark ballistic mesh baseball cap. Even with streaks of night camo on her face, her looks were striking. 'I'm cool,' he told her.

'Oh, you wish that was true,' Sam replied, not unkindly. She let her hands rest on the MP7A1 submachine gun hanging at her waist, sizing him up. 'Don't sweat it. We've done this a hundred times before.' She nodded toward the rest of the tactical squad. 'Boss knows what he's doing.'

The man she indicated caught her look and nodded back. Gavin Rix was Nomad's mission commander on the ground, a decorated former Special Air Service sergeant, a stocky and well-muscled soldier with a boxer's craggy features and a shaven head. He gave them both a thumbs up and a smile that was almost fatherly.

'Yeah.' Marc meant that to sound convincing, but failed. 'Just, y'know . . . Be careful.'

Sam gave a mock-pout. 'Oh, that's sweet.' She cocked her head. 'Would you feel better if I gave you a cuddle?'

'I don't know.' Despite himself, Marc laughed. Sam could always bring that out of him. 'Do you want to see?'

Her brown eyes flashed. 'Keep it professional.' She started to walk away.

'I think we're past that point,' Marc added, in a low voice.

Sam stopped and looked back at him. She had that expression again, the one he could never read. 'Job on,' she said. 'Job off. Don't mix them up.'

'Sam . . .' Marc frowned, groping for the right thing to say. 'I get it, but—'

'Job on,' she repeated, all the warmth suddenly gone from her expression.

The long night in Tunisia that had found them alone the first time had been months ago, but Marc still didn't know where he stood with her. Fraternising within a unit wasn't supposed to happen, but if Rix or the others knew something was going on, they didn't say.

Sam was all about the moment, the rush of the now, and that was attractive to him. He knew that in the army she had served two tours as an explosives ordinance and demolitions specialist. She liked the taste of adrenaline.

But Marc had no map with her. Sometimes he thought he had a read on the woman, in those moments when she was almost like a normal person, like someone with a real life. But then that cavalier

streak of hers kicked in and he was left wondering. It seemed like the only thing Sam was ever honest about, ever serious about, was the mission.

Part of him knew he should let it drop, but Marc was stubborn, even as he could see her manner cooling toward him. ‘Sam–’ he began.

‘Sammy!’ The moment snapped as one of the men from the tactical squad strode over, calling out her name. Iain Nash was the unit’s second-in-command, and he had the kind of swagger in his walk that Marc always connected with the tough kids he’d avoided as a teenager, growing up on a council housing estate in South London. Nash gave him a dismissive nod. He had a gaunt face framed by dark hair and a stubbled chin. There was a whipcord look to him, a manner that seemed coiled too tight for a covert operations specialist. But Nash was an accomplished operator, drawn, like Sam, from the British Army, cherry-picked by men in the upper echelons of the security services.

Along with Rob Bell, who had been a copper with the Metropolitan Police’s CO19 firearms division, and a former Royal Marine named Bill Marshall, Nash filled out the part of OpTeam Seven that dealt with the sharp end of their assignments. Marc, Leon and Owen were their information and on-site support crew, what Rix called the *blokes in the van* as opposed to the *blokes with the guns*.

‘Need a word,’ Nash told Sam, and raised an eyebrow in Marc’s direction. ‘Tick tock,’ he added, watching him. ‘Better get your toy box working, yeah? Almost kick-off.’

‘Right,’ Marc nodded after a moment, accepting the implied dismissal, and he began a slow walk back toward the truck. He heard the mutter of a low, guarded conversation strike up between Nash and Sam the moment his back was turned, and frowned.

Marc wasn’t a fool, and so far he wasn’t allowing his feelings for Sam – *whatever the hell those were* – to get in the way of the

job, no matter what she might have thought. But there was something going on with the tactical operators that was being kept from the rest of the unit. This wasn't the first time Marc had seen Sam or Nash or Rix take a moment for a conversation away from prying ears, and none of them appeared to have any intention of explaining why.

He thought about Rix's definitions. The *blokes in the van* and the *blokes with the guns*. There was always going to be a gap between the support team and the strike element, that was a fact of life in this kind of group dynamic. They didn't tend to drink with each other after the fact, didn't cross over that much beyond the needs of the job, but Marc felt the distance more keenly than he wanted to admit.

He could have been one of them. The MI6 recruiters had offered him the chance to apply for field officer status in the OpTeam program, but he had let it pass. All this time afterward, and still he wasn't sure what had stopped him. He had said no, chosen to play it safe and not to take the risk.

Marc looked back at Sam as he climbed into the truck. She was nodding intently at something Nash was saying, and didn't seem to notice him.

Talia Patel had not slept in the past sixteen hours, but she would be damned if she was going to let that show on her face. Stealing a yawn inside the confines of the empty elevator, she pulled at the rumpled silk blouse under her Prada jacket, standing straight as the door opened.

Exiting on the operations floor, she crossed through the security checkpoint, touching the smartcard in her hand on the RFID scanner in the wall. The armed guard at the monitor waved her through and she walked as quickly as decorum would allow toward the room designated as Hub White.

Branching off every fifty feet along the length of the corridor were doors with digital displays hanging at eye level. Some were dark, others lit with text showing that the rooms beyond were *Secured* or on *Standby*, and in some cases in a state of *Lockdown*. If you ignored the guard with the gun, the unremarkable look of the place resembled the same kind of business space that existed in dozens of office blocks all across the city of London; but this corridor was two hundred feet beneath those streets, deep in the sublevels below Albert Embankment and the glass and stone of Number 85, Vauxhall Cross. This was the factory floor of MI6, Great Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, where the task of ensuring a nation's security went on around the clock.

Despite the early hour, the building was busy. The work at MI6 did not follow the usual rules, something that Talia had come to learn the hard way as senior intelligence analyst for K Section, the command-and-control division in charge of field actions for the OpTeam program. She hesitated, discreetly checking her reflection on the surface of the book-sized digital pad she was carrying. Her sharp, but not unattractive features were framed by straight black hair hanging to shoulder-length, and she had hazel eyes in a tawny face. Talia was satisfied; she looked professional, and above all, *awake*.

At the door to Hub White she gestured once more with the smartcard, this time following up with a four-digit day code on an input keypad, and the magnetic locks opened with a quiet thud. Talia entered, passing through a second sound-deadening door before she found herself on the raised gallery that ringed the busy operations centre. In a nod toward the classic design of a theatre, the gallery was nicknamed 'the circle' while the level three steps down was 'the stalls', an open space lined with digital map desks, communications panels and computer monitors. Above it hung large screens layered with signal feeds from dozens of data sources. The size of a tennis court, from this small nerve centre, K Section were equipped to run an active mission anywhere in the world.

At present, every system in Hub White was directed towards the Port of Dunkirk across the English Channel, all monitor stations filled, all screens active. Talia stepped down into the stalls, catching sight of a weather map of the French coastline. It had been a cold, moonless night, and the nearest front of rain clouds wouldn't arrive over the coast until at least mid-morning.

She found Donald Royce at the map table, the flat display resembling a desk strewn with documents – only here, the 'papers' were actually virtual panels that could be moved around and manipulated by touch. Royce was engrossed in one of the panes of data. Her superior was average height and slight with it, soft in his features but possessed of a focus that could be directed like a laser when circumstances demanded. He was Eton-educated, betrayed as such by his meticulous Middle-English manners, and there was a dogged kind of intensity to him that Talia found intimidating at times.

He looked up, peering across his frameless spectacles. 'You're cutting it fine.'

'Sorry, sir,' she replied. 'I wanted to make sure we had the most recent hourly reports from Signals.' Talia handed him the data tablet.

'Thorough as ever,' he said, paging through the report with sweeps of his index finger, skimming the content with a practised eye. The reports from the all-seeing information specialists at the GCHQ facility in Cheltenham were as thorough as ever. 'Anything here we need to worry about?'

She shook her head. 'Not a peep. Nomad's presence remains unnoticed, as far as we can tell.'

'Good to know.' He handed the tablet back and peered at the map screen.

Talia glanced at the mission clock on the wall, two displays showing Greenwich Mean Time and the local hour in Dunkirk. They were less than ten minutes away from the point where OpTeam Seven would be given their final go or no-go command.

Royce steeped his fingers, studying a still of the *Palomino*, a freighter of Turkish origins, flying a Dutch flag. It had been docked at the port for the last twelve hours, and the picture showed it lying high against its moorings. Nothing of any bulk had been loaded on or off the vessel in that time, not even fuel and provisions.

‘We are certain, aren’t we?’ Royce asked, in a subdued voice that only Talia heard.

‘You saw the capture from GCHQ yourself, sir,’ she reminded him. ‘Cellular trace from a known arms dealer. Along with signals intelligence from the web and our other sources, we have probable cause to commit.’ She was business-like about her reply, but both of them understood the import of what was about to happen. This would not be bloodless. Those sort of missions were not what the OpTeams were used for.

‘We have to be sure,’ he continued. ‘Because if . . . Because *when* the French get wind of this, we will truly be knee deep in the *merde*.’

‘The DCRI are being monitored,’ she noted, indicating a junior analyst working a keyboard. The analyst had one job only – to continually sift the communications feeds of France’s domestic security service in real-time, looking for any indication that the Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur were aware of the covert operation taking place in their backyard.

It had not been an easy sell for the senior mission director, getting the Prime Minister, the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Foreign Office to sign off on a red-rated assignment that would take place on the soil of an allied government, all without the DCRI’s knowledge. Cutting the French out of the operational loop was a calculated but necessary risk.

The data did not lie. There was a strong possibility that the DCRI had been penetrated by assets connected to the mission targets, and the plain fact was, this operation was too important to jeopardize. Royce suggested that it would be better to seek forgiveness rather than ask permission, and so the tasking orders for Nomad had been

drawn up in deep secrecy. They would deal with any repercussions if they happened, but the hope was that OpTeam Seven would complete the mission under the radar and the French would never even know they had been there.

Talia was confident that they could do the job. Nomad were a highly proficient unit. With their proactive mission mandate from the PM, Nomad and the other OpTeams had been instrumental in seeking out and neutralising several Category A dangers to British national security interests, and tonight the *Palomino* was at the centre of just such a threat.

Talia had known from the moment she had seen the news footage of the Barcelona explosion that this atrocity would come into the orbit of K Section. Terrorism in Europe was a cancer spreading without concern for borders or nation-states, and among the extremist cadres who claimed responsibility for the deaths in Spain, a name that rang a warning rose above all the others.

They called themselves Al Sayf. *The Sword*. Outwardly, the face they showed to the world was of radical Islamic origins, men sifted from the dregs of Al Qaeda, the Soldiers of God and other splinter groups, but inwardly they were a far more complex organisation that MI6 were only beginning to understand, that extremist religion was only one part of. In their manifesto, they had threatened to kill a British city before the end of the year; not *attack*, but *kill*. They had used that exact word.

And they were ghosts. Al Sayf had learned well the lessons of their fellow radicals, killed running to ground in the Afghan hills or destroyed from within through subversion. These were men equally at home building improvised explosive devices in Kandahar hovels or directing cyber-attack sorties from million-dollar corporate enclaves in Dubai. The development of MI6's OpTeam program was a direct reaction to such terrorist threats.

British Intelligence couldn't follow the men, so they followed the weapons. Al Sayf were agile and dangerous, but they were small and

scattered. They needed a support mechanism, one large enough that it would not be able to exist without showing up somewhere.

Royce was poring over the Combine file, his thoughts doubtless paralleling those of Patel. That was the name they went by inside Vauxhall Cross. Just the vaguest outline, the faint shadow of a power group on the edges of the global stage. Moving outside of issues like ideology and creed. Independent of national identity. Motivated not just by money, but by some larger design that had yet to become clear.

The weapon Al Sayf deployed in Barcelona was suspected as having come from Combine sources. They were in the business of brokering weapons technology and support capacity to terrorist and para-military groups around the planet. They were the armourers and quartermasters of desperate and ruthless men, and if Al Sayf were like ghosts, then the Combine were less than breath on the wind.

‘We’ve been tracking these slippery buggers for years,’ Royce said, almost to himself. ‘Tonight we’ve got a good scent.’ He stared at the image of the *Palomino* again, as if he was willing it to give up some new piece of information through the strength of his scrutiny.

It represented a rare conjunction of events. The possibility of gathering new intelligence that would lead both ways along the chain of connection, to Al Sayf and to their Combine partners.

A fragmentary intercept of cell phone traffic had led them to this, the suggestion that the freighter’s cargo was a weapon in transit from the Combine to a terrorist buyer. In the wake of the Barcelona attack, the Spanish Centro Nacional de Inteligencia were still picking up the pieces and had provided precious little results from their investigation to their European partners – a sure indicator that they had nothing to give.

Somehow, an extremely powerful explosive device had been smuggled into a police station through a gauntlet of trained officers and state-of-the art metal detectors without setting off a single alarm,

and a hundred people had died in the ensuing blast. If the *Palomino* was carrying a similar device, something invisible to conventional security methods . . .

Talia felt a dull chill run through her. There were a dozen major cities within hours of Dunkirk, any one of which could be an intended target. Brussels. Paris. Amsterdam. *London*.

She glanced at the mission clock. ‘Sir? They’re in position. It’s time.’

Royce didn’t look up. ‘Nomad is green for go.’