

CHAPTER 23

The Senator from Boston was reviewing status reports sent in by two of the three Nephilim Eradication Units, when the middle satphone chimed amid the lineup on his nightstand. The sound startled him, restoring the distinctive grim symmetry to his lips which an amused smirk had begun to tamper with. Given the delightful kill tallies reported by Units One and Two, and the absence of a report from Unit Three so far today, he suspected this was Three's commander calling with an excuse. He slid the warm laptop across the duvet to the perpetually unoccupied side of the queen bed and answered on the second ring.

“Yes?”

“Sorry for disturbing you at this hour, sir, but we have a developing situation here in San Diego you'll want to know about.”

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He felt a small thud in the vicinity of his colon. “San Diego?” a petrified piece of cauliflower perhaps.

“Affirmative. San Diego.”

San Diego was the last place he needed another situation. “Go on.”

“This is urgent, so I’ll get right to the point: we have a target in the water, directly below the Coronado bridge, dead center. Bottom line: he’s vulnerable and quite possibly injured, but we don’t have any boats in the water, or the manpower to sufficiently cover the shoreline for an intercept. Plus we’re losing daylight.”

“And I can fix this how?”

“Sir, as much as this pains a former Delta Force squad leader to say, I recommend calling in a SEAL strike on this bastard. The Naval Amphibious Base is only a mile away, and rumor has it Team 3 is home for a two-week training operation.”

The Senator bit at his bottom lip and pictured Mister ‘I-didn’t-call-you-to-negotiate’ being sodomized with a knotty oak shillelagh. A SEAL strike; brilliant! Why didn’t I think of that?

“What about your snipers? He has to breathe.”

“Of course. I’ve got one setting up right now on a cargo crane. But line of sight is a big problem, low light another, and as you’ve made emphatically clear, we’re doing our best to avoid a spectacle, so we can’t stay on the bridge.”

“You’re engaging a target on a major landmark? Sounds like a spectacle already.”

“Don’t worry sir, we’ve already dispersed. We were long gone before the first police arrived...probably a 911 call--they jumped off--I’ll brief you later--but right now we need to take advantage of this opportunity before they make it to land.”

“They?”

“The target was assisted in his escape by a woman. She left behind her purse in their ditched rental vehicle. I didn’t want to tell you this until after, but...she’s ‘Mercy Anne,’ the woman who--”

“I know who she is.”

“Of course,” he said, clearing his throat. Then added, “he’s nowhere near your yacht, sir.”

“Which one is he?”

“The car was rented to a ‘Patrick Daly.’ Bogus, obviously, but I think he’s the same one who killed two of my men in Sarajevo. He’s spooked, so I doubt we’ll get another shot like this. Bastards are hard enough to kill when they don’t we’re coming for them. Please sir, if you have the authority, call in the SEALs, and let them do what they do.”

Authority? He’d pay for that remark when this was over, but the Senator’s voice betrayed no sign of offense. “How long have we got?” he asked.

“Ten, twenty minutes, max.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

The Senator ended the call and placed satphone number two back on the nightstand between number one and number three. Then he picked up satphone number one and dialed the President.

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CHAPTER 24

After Mercy kisses me--after I kiss her back...let's just say it's good to be neck-deep in cold water. The warm and fuzzy feeling won't last long. Coastal California in late October makes hypothermia a real possibility.

So I have to get us to shore sooner rather than later. While staying submerged long enough between breaths to make it difficult for the shooters, and then evading capture after we beach. All without alerting Mercy (anymore than I have already) that I can't be possibly be human.

By out-swimming a dolphin, say.

Overtaking a boat. For instance.

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Daylight's on our side. The sun well below the horizon, Coronado Island's shadow greyscaling across the bay toward the half-lit downtown skyline. As long we stay beneath the bridge, they don't have an angle to shoot us from the roadway. They can, however, station men at both ends beneath the bridge and simply wait for us to come to them. We'll have to head for a landmark less obvious and more distant. Which makes for a much longer swim. Already my hands and feet are going numb.

Not knowing the total manpower we're up against isn't helping me formulate an evasion strategy. And *who* we're up against, for that matter. SOJ hired help, sure. But private? or government? Paramilitary? or law enforcement? American only? or International?

If they have hundreds of men at their disposal—for instance, the entire San Diego Police Department--then we don't come ashore *anywhere near* a road. But if they're just a handful of contractors, we'd want to swim to an inlet where roads are plentiful, because they won't be able to cover all the streets we could take.

Mercy says,

"I'm not getting any warmer. We ready?"

I read somewhere that women hold all the endurance records for cold water swimming. Supposedly, their higher percentage of body fat provides better insulation. Pretty sure that theory doesn't apply to Mercy, though.

I've made my decision. I point in the direction of the Convention Center east of our position. Plenty of roads there. And it's reasonably close: three-quarters-of-a-mile from our position as the crab swims.

"Remember: quick breaths, no bubbles. And tap my leg when you need more air."

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We submerge and start swimming.

Based on their long past of maintaining secrecy, and Whitmore's bogus statement the press was all too eager to run, I figure the SOJ don't want the police involved. Or press conferences. Which means that whomever they've contracted to hunt me down, it's an off-the-books operation. No paper trails. Mobilizing a large force to cover miles and miles of shoreline isn't an option they're likely to have. Plus, men with guns who *aren't* the police can road block a major artery into the city for only so long before badges and cameras show up. Unless they want to make the evening news, along with grainy camera phone clips of our X-Games-esque escape, our pursuers will need to get off the bridge and regroup.

I'd like to kick and stroke as hard and as fast as I possibly can. For warmth and expediency. But being raised in the land of ten thousand lakes, Mercy will know the difference between 'impressive' and downright inhuman lung capacity. A good minute-and-a-half passes before she finally taps for air.

A little higher than my leg, and a little lower than my back, actually.

More of a squeeze than a tap. In truth.

Time to find out our odds of making it to shore alive. We'll never surface any closer to the bridge--to the shooters if they're still there--than now.

We break the surface. Gulp down another lung-full of air. Make like sea beavers paddling for the safety of our lodge. Still wet. Still freezing my balls off. Still alive and kickin'. Either the hit men have already retreated from the bridge, or distance plus growing darkness made it too hard to get a shot off.

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We repeat the kick-suck-duck style of synchronized swimming several hundred yards before I risk a look back: more flashing lights than Paris Hilton arriving fashionably late to a laser show. In Vegas. Nude. If our pursuers aren't already long gone, then they're in handcuffs. So, short of colliding with a speedboat, or ingesting who-knows-what the Navy leaks out of their docked aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, it looks like we'll make it to dry land alive.

Or not.

Mercy's kicking begins to slow. Not gradually; not from fatigue--all at once. And she's shivering in brief but violent bursts. She loses her grip on my shirttail and I stop so she can reattach herself. Her once nimble hands paw and grope for a handhold--which she loses again as soon as I start kicking. I help her to the surface. She's shaking; convulsing really, to the point she can barely draw a breath. She's going hypothermic.

"Mercy, you OK? Talk to me."

She doesn't answer right away. She looks behind us, then back at me, then toward the skyline.

"W-w-where are w-w-we g-g-going again? I c-c-can't remember. It's t-t-too c-c-cold where w-w-we're at r-r-right n-n-n-now."

She's disoriented. Pupils dilated, skin pale, lips blue. Her arms and legs have gone numb to the point of useless as her body shunts blood away from her extremities and to her core to keep her organs alive. She could die if I don't get her someplace warm in a hurry.

I wrap my arms around her; ease her chin up on my shoulder and start rubbing every inch of her body I can reach as I scissor-kick us far too slowly toward the downtown shoreline. At this pace, she'll be gone before I even halve the distance.

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The alternative—which I’ve been steadfastly avoiding—is to stop with this human frailty façade, and freestyle us to dry land like a carbon-fiber go-fast boat running cocaine from the Coast Guard. I’d have some explaining to do—explaining The Codes explicitly forbids--but I can’t just let Mercy die.

Why not? My conscience parroting the voice of my father; challenging me anytime I imposed limits on what’s possible.

She’s the only one who can help me find Whitmore.

Whatever helps you sleep at night; because:

I could bite her.

Let the curse in my blood course through hers, enhancing all that’s human, damning her--saving her--with hell-bound double-helices. I’d be over my quota thanks to the girl in Sarajevo, but that’s a far less severe infraction than revealing our nature to a woman we don’t plan to--

A bright red dot of light appears on the back of Mercy’s head. I shove her hard under the water; grab her wrist and use her downward momentum to pull myself below the surface, too. I have no idea how much air she has, if any. Lack of oxygen we can deal with later. Unlike, say, lack of brain. One thing’s become clear: neither Plan A: “swim fast,” or Plan B: “bite her” gives us much hope of ever enjoying a heat lamp again. The bastards have laser sights.

Since they’ll be expecting us to surface again closer to shore, I propel us as far as I dare tax Mercy’s lungs in the direction we came from, *away* from downtown. And I swim as fast as my Naphil biology will allow in such a hydro-dynamically awkward position: the two of us basically ‘spooning’ our way through the water so I can warm her with my arms and torso as I kick. I use my hand to seal off her mouth and nostrils so she can’t inhale a lungful of saltwater.

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Three-hundred yards and I take us to the surface for what could be our last breath if the shooter anticipates the feint. He doesn't. I gulp down the sweetest air my burning lungs have ever tasted; watch as the amber beam from his rifle scope lances through the sea mist, tracing dark water where we *should* have surfaced.

Yippee! I've prolonged Mercy's life just long enough for her to die more slowly from exposure. Her shivering has ceased. Her limbs are stiff and inert. I check for a pulse...three seconds pass before her heart beats. One time, and weak.

"Don't you even think about dying!"

Strange. Even though I can feel the raw pressure in my throat from screaming these words, they sound muffled. I must've busted my eardrums when we splashed down off the bridge. Which explains why I'm not hearing the engine noise of the double-decker dinner-cruiser bearing down on us.

Five seconds, tops, to get out of the way, or to--*shit, more like three...*

I am a frothing, foaming blur of rescue swimming.

Two seconds.

I am--

One second.

--*so not gonna make it.*

The steel bow of the *Magnolia* rams into my left shoulder as I pivot Mercy away from the collision. A glancing blow, but still untold-tons worth of boat mashing into me. Instead of crushing my skull, the angled prow deflects us off to the starboard side of the vessel, leaving my head intact to grind against the hull as it lumbers past, while barnacles tear at my clothes and

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gouge into my ribcage. I still cling to Mercy, thought, and for what I'm about to attempt, I'm glad she's lost consciousness.

The *Magnolia* is a paddleboat. I hug Mercy tight against me, burying her face into my chest.

One shot. Gotta time this right...here it comes...

I use my free hand to grab hold of a wooden paddle just as it breaks the surface and begins its arc upward and onward. Immediately, we're jerked out of the water, and I turn face up, shielding Mercy from the mallet-like blow of the next paddle which catches me in the small of my back—*ouch*—hyper-extending my spine—*fuck that hurts*—which will be the least of our worries if I can't maneuver us off these spinning planks and onto the rear observation deck before our makeshift Ferris Wheel grinds us into chum between it and the—*crack*—the sound of a chiropractor's worst nightmare, but it's not my spinal column exploding, it's the board we're riding, splintering loose from the hub, never designed to support a load concentrated at the midpoint of its span.

What goes up...

Someone shrieks, and there's the icicle-hitting-asphalt sound of a dropped martini glass (they'll tell stories to their grandchildren about the mermaids they saw in San Diego bay), and now *I* shriek as a splinter jousts into my left ass cheek, and--*splash*--we're back in the drink.

I haven't liked to swim since Noah created the world's first floating zoo. Tonight I like it even less. Completely spent, all I can do is hold Mercy in my arms and tread water in the wake of her last hope.

"Mercy, wave goodbye to the tourists."

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To my astonishment, she mumbles the words ‘see you later.’ opens her eyes, says,

“I prayed for us, remember? We’ll be fine.”

She nods at something behind me; whispers in my ear:

“See.”

She’s hallucinating. Has to be. But I play along...

And I’ll be un-damned if it’s not a sailboat.

A sleek, custom catamaran. Sluicing silently through the water in our direction. Must be a thirty-five or forty-footer. Two long, window-lined hulls spanned by a center cabin hovering several feet over the water in between them. Looks vaguely like a scaled-down Starship Enterprise from this angle; with a mast and sails.

Later, if someone asks me the name of this cozy looking boat, I’ll feign ignorance, but stenciled in pearlescent gold and script are the words ‘*Answered Prayer.*’