

THE SHATTERED SHIELD

GHOST TRACK



A PREQUEL NOVELLA
BY PATRICK J HUGHES

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Also written by Author Patrick J. Hughes



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Dedication



For those who walk into the unknown and come out the other side.

*The scars of the past never fade, but you decide
how they define you.*

CHAPTER ONE - WELCOME TO THE FLEET

The CMV-22B from The Mighty Bison of VRM-40 settled onto the flight deck of the USS Harry S. Truman with a whine of its masive tilt-rotors, the heat and smell of jet exhaust mixing with the salt air. As the ramp lowered, Lieutenant Junior Grade Cameron Mitchell took his first steps onto the non-skid deck, adjusting his flight bag over his shoulder. The controlled chaos of carrier operations unfolded around him — deck crew signaling aircraft, tie-down chains rattling, and the distant thunk of the catapult launching another jet into the humid South China Sea air.

"Mitchell!"

Mitchell turned to see a tall, broad-shouldered officer in khakis approaching with two sailors trailing behind him. Lieutenant Commander Ethan Wallace, the squadron's Executive Officer, carried the confident stride of someone who had spent years on a flight deck. To his left was an older petty officer with grease-streaked clothing and a skeptical expression. To his right, a much younger sailor barely out of training, her eyes scanning the deck like she was already analyzing something the rest of them hadn't noticed.

As soon as Mitchell stepped forward, the older of the two sailors let out a short breath. "Another fresh officer. Just what we needed," Petty Officer Second Class John Delaney muttered, loud enough for Mitchell to hear.

"Watch it, Delaney," Wallace said sharply, shooting him a look. "He's one of ours now."

Delaney pressed his lips into a thin line but didn't argue, shifting his grip on the green sea bag slung over his shoulder. Beside him, Airman Danielle Lawson remained quiet, her gaze flicking between Mitchell and the surrounding deck crew. She seemed younger than Delaney by a few years but carried herself with a confidence that suggested she had already earned her place in the squadron.

Wallace didn't break stride as he led them toward the island. "We're two months into deployment, so you've got some catching up to do, Mitchell. CO wants you in the ready room after you get your gear stowed. Skipper figured you'd want your own

people showing you where you rack is.” His tone was neutral, but there was an expectation behind his words—Mitchell wasn’t going to get any special treatment just because he was late to the party.

Mitchell nodded. “Understood, sir.” He glanced at Delaney and Lawson. “Appreciate the help.”

Delaney snorted, adjusting the weight of Mitchell’s second bag over his shoulder. “Don’t thank us yet, sir. We’re just the lucky ones who got grabbed by the XO on the way here.” He shifted his gaze toward Lawson. “Besides, Lawson here was hoping to get back to the shop and dig through some radar data instead of playing chauffeur.”

Lawson shot Delaney a sidelong glance but didn’t deny it. “I had some anomalies pop up on the datalinks this morning while I was manning the alert aircraft,” she said, shifting the strap of her toolbag over her shoulder. “Didn’t match anything in our expected traffic.”

Wallace glanced at her but kept walking. “And did you report it to the intelligence shop?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. “They wrote it off as interference.”

Delaney scoffed. “Yeah, because God forbid something doesn’t fit into their perfect little picture. If it doesn’t light up red on their screens, they don’t care.” He adjusted his grip on Mitchell’s bag. “Still, weird stuff like that doesn’t usually just show up for no reason. Hawkeyes haven’t really had ghost tracks since the charlie model.”

Mitchell listened, his curiosity piqued. Radar anomalies weren’t his specialty, but any deviation from normal operations on deployment was worth noting. “What kind of anomalies?” he asked, looking at Lawson.

Lawson hesitated for a moment before answering. “Like AT2 said, ghost tracks. Returns without transponders or corresponding AIS. They blinked in and out, but the timing was odd. Too irregular to be a malfunction, but not consistent enough to match any known flight paths in the area. I ran a self check on the system to rule out equipment errors. Everything on the aircraft was clean.”

Mitchell frowned. They had discussed Ghost tracks in training, but if Lawson had already ruled out the usual suspects, that meant there was more to it. "And they just dismissed it?"

Lawson shrugged. "The intelligence shop said it was likely weather or interference from other platforms in the area."

Delaney shook his head. "That's their way of saying they don't want to do the work. Happens all the time." He glanced at Mitchell, his expression unreadable. "But you're the new expert, sir. What do you think?"

Before Mitchell could answer, Wallace stopped at the hatch leading into the island. "Enough of that. Mitchell, you'll have plenty of time to catch up on squadron issues once you're settled in. For now, I'll show you to your stateroom so you can get your gear squared away, then report to the ready room. CO wants to put eyes on you before the night's over." He pushed open the hatch and gestured for Mitchell to head inside.

Mitchell nodded. "Yes, sir." As he stepped through the hatch, he could hear Delaney muttering something behind him, though he couldn't make out the words.

Wallace turned to Delaney and Lawson. "Drop his gear off and then you two can get back to work. And Delaney, keep your opinions to yourself unless you've got something useful to add."

"Yes, sir," Delaney said, though his expression made it clear he wasn't taking the correction to heart.

Inside the passageway, the noise of the flight deck faded, replaced by the rhythmic hum of ventilation systems and the distant murmur of voices from other squadron spaces. The scent of jet fuel still clung to Mitchell's uniform, mixing with the ever-present smell of oil and metal that permeated the ship. He followed Wallace down the narrow corridor, stepping over a knee-knocker as they moved toward the squadron's ready room.

As they walked, Wallace spoke without looking back. "Delaney's one of the best avionics techs we've got, but he's got an attitude lately. Don't take it personally. He sizes up every officer the same way."

“Seems like he’s already got me figured out,” Mitchell said, keeping his tone neutral.

Wallace let out a dry chuckle. “Yeah, well, that’s his problem, not yours. Just do your job, and he’ll come around. Eventually. If not, you’re the officer, he’s the Petty Officer. I’m sure you can handle it. He toes the line, but he isn’t stupid.”

Wallace stopped in front of a stateroom hatch marked with Mitchell’s name taped to the frame in fresh label-maker print. “Here’s home,” the XO said, pushing the hatch open. “You’re sharing with Dice and Boss, so don’t spread your stuff all over. Welcome to the Seabats Mitchell. This is our first deployment since being reactivated so we all have something to prove.”

Mitchell stepped inside, ducking slightly through the hatchway. The space was as tight as he expected—three racks stacked against the bulkhead, a small desk crammed into the corner, and a pair of lockers that looked like they hadn’t been reorganized since the ship left port. A faint scent of old coffee and flight suits that had seen one too many long flights clung to the air.

Wallace leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. “Listen, Mitchell. I don’t care that you’re late getting out here. That wasn’t your call. What I do care about is that you’re walking onto a team that’s already running at full steam. No one has time to babysit you.”

“I understand, sir,” Mitchell said, setting his bag down next to the locker with his name taped to it. “I’ll get up to speed fast.”

Wallace studied him for a moment, then gave a curt nod. “Good. Because the CO wants you mission-ready yesterday.” He straightened and gestured toward the hallway. “Get squared away, then head to the ready room. And Mitchell?”

Mitchell looked up. “Sir?”

“Don’t let Delaney rattle you,” Wallace said with a smirk. “He gives every officer hell, but if something on on your aircraft breaks, he’s the guy you want fixing it. Treat him with respect and you’ll get the same. Like I said, he pushes but most of the time he knows when to stop.”

With that, Wallace disappeared down the passageway, leaving Mitchell alone with his thoughts. He let out a slow breath, taking in the space. Welcome to the fleet.



Delaney and Lawson made their way back toward the avionics shop, navigating the narrow, steel corridors of Trumans 03 level with practiced ease.

"He's gonna be fun," Delaney muttered, shaking his head.

Lawson gave him a knowing look. "You say that about every new officer."

"Yeah, because every new officer has to prove they're not an idiot before I start liking them," Delaney shot back.

Lawson smirked. "You realize that he outranks you, right?"

Delaney scoffed. "Yeah? And a lieutenant junior grade with no experience outranks a wrench-turner with eight years in. Rank doesn't fix airplanes."

They turned a corner and ducked into the avionics shop, the familiar hum of cooling fans and the faint smell of burnt wiring greeting them. The space was cluttered but functional. Toolboxes stacked against the bulkhead, a diagnostic station flickering with code, and a collection of parts that belonged in their hangar queen.

Petty Officer First Class Travis Davis looked up from his desk as they entered, raising an eyebrow. "You two get lost?"

"Nah," Delaney said, tossing his cover onto a nearby workbench. "XO grabbed us for escort duty. Had to make sure the new NFO didn't get lost between the flight deck and his stateroom."

Davis snorted. "So, how bad is he?"

Lawson crossed her arms. "He's not bad. Just new."

Delaney grinned. "Which means he's bad until proven otherwise."

Davis chuckled, leaning back in his chair. "Well, don't scare him off just yet. We need an NFO who actually listens and can give us a real debrief after the flight—not someone who just writes a gripe that says 'radar broke' and calls it a day."

"Oh, don't worry," Delaney said, cracking his knuckles. "I'll make sure he understands how things actually work around here."

Davis sighed. "You know Delaney, one of these days, an officer's gonna get sick of your mouth and actually write you up."

Delaney grinned. "Hasn't happened yet."

Lawson shook her head, pulling a toughbook laptop from a nearby shelf and flipping it open. "Speaking of busted systems, I want to take another look at those radar anomalies."

Davis gave her a skeptical look. "Didn't Intel already blow you off?"

"They did," Lawson said, eyes on her screen, "which means they probably missed something."

Delaney grinned and clapped Davis on the shoulder. "See? This is why she's gonna be in charge of all of us one day."

Davis shrugged. "Well, if she figures out what's causing those ghost tracks before the intel guys do, maybe she should be."

Delaney turned to Lawson. "No pressure, but if you solve this, I expect you to get a promotion and then immediately use it to make my life easier."

Lawson didn't look up. "If I get a promotion, the first thing I'm doing is making sure you have more work."

Davis laughed. "That's the spirit."

Delaney groaned, dropping into a chair and propping his boots up on a workbench. "I should've let the XO take someone else to carry the new guy's bags."

Lawson smirked. "Too late now."

They settled into their usual rhythm—Lawson typing away at her laptop, Delaney flipping through a maintenance log on the computer seeing if there was

something he could fix, and Davis pretending to ignore them both while actually enjoying the banter. Outside the stale air of their shop, the ship carried on, jets launching into the night, and below decks, a fresh lieutenant junior grade was about to step into his first real mission.

CHAPTER TWO – THE DRONE GOES DARK

The final launch of the night sent a roar across the *Harry S. Truman's* flight deck, the E-2D Hawkeye's twin turboprops howling as they reached full power, straining against the holdback bar like a caged beast ready to break free. The deck vibrated beneath their boots, the tension in the air palpable as the pilots ran through last-minute checks.

Petty Officer Second Class John Patrick Delaney stood just beyond the safe distance, his cranial secured tightly over his head, the scent of salt air and jet fuel thick around him. His eyes tracked the last movements of the deck crew, every hand signal, every last-second adjustment feeding into the moment of release.

A few feet away, Airman Danielle Lawson mirrored his stance, arms crossed, her gaze locked on the aircraft. The catapult officer snapped into position, dropping to one knee, arm outstretched. A final heartbeat of stillness—then the cat fired.

The Hawkeye exploded forward, rocketing from a dead stop to 150 knots in two violent seconds. The raw force stole breath and compressed bone, the engines clawing at the air as the aircraft ripped free of the deck, vanishing into the night sky.

Delaney watched it disappear before rolling his shoulders. "That's it for the night. Let's get below before someone decides we look too available."

Lawson didn't move right away. "That's twice now," she said, her voice barely carrying over the deck noise.

Delaney frowned. "Twice for what?"

She turned toward him, tapping the side of her cranial. "The interference I told you about. Same pattern showed up again on the datalinks before launch."

Delaney let out a short breath and gestured toward the hatch leading back into the island. "You're really doubling down on this, huh? Fine, let's walk and talk. These jeta are too noisy tonight."

They fell into step, heading below decks as the flight deck crew continued launching aircraft into the black void of the night sky. The transition from the open

night sky to the steel corridors of the carrier was always a stark contrast—the confined spaces, the fluorescent red lighting to protect night vision, the ever-present hum of the ship's systems.

Lawson's voice was lower now, more focused. "It wasn't a malfunction. The ghost tracks were back."

Delaney sighed. "You sure it's not just garbage data? You know how the higher-ups love writing stuff off as 'anomalies.'"

Lawson shook her head. "It's not random. There's a pattern. Same kind of intermittent signals as last time, only a little stronger."

Delaney pushed open the hatch to the avionics shop and stepped inside, the familiar hum of equipment filling the air. Before he could respond, the ship's intercom crackled to life.

The ship's 1MC crackled to life, the voice of the Trumans XO carrying through the passageways and over the noise of the flight deck.

"All squadron commanding officers and department heads report to Ready Room Three immediately."

Delaney slowed his pace for half a step before exchanging a glance with Lawson. "That's new."

Lawson nodded, adjusting the straps on her float coat. "They don't usually call an meeting unless something big is happening."

Delaney exhaled through his nose. "Yeah. And 'something big' usually means more work for us or steak and lobster for dinner down on the mess deck." He jerked his head through the hatch. "Come on, let's get out of this gear before they decide we need to be part of it."

They continued down the passageway, stepping out of the controlled chaos of the flight deck and into the familiar maze of steel corridors leading to their avionics shop. Inside, the sharp bite of hydraulic fluid mixed with the stale tang of metal and sweat, a scent so familiar it barely registered. The air was thick with the residue of jet exhaust, clinging to every surface like a second skin. One of thier junior techs was

already working looking at the first gripes from one of the night's earlier launches, their focus locked on diagnostic screens.

Delaney dropped his cranial onto the workbench with a dull *thunk*, unfastening his float coat as Lawson did the same. "All right, where were we?"

Lawson leaned against the counter, arms crossed. "Ghost tracks."

Delaney sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Right. The ones that totally aren't a problem, according to Intel."

Before she could reply, the shrill ring of the shop's phone cut through the air. Delaney shot it a look before walking over, picking it up with a slight edge of reluctance. "Seabat Avionics."

On the other end, Petty Officer First Class Travis Davis's voice came through, clipped and direct. "Delaney. Get Lawson—you're both wanted in the SCIF outside Ready Room Three. Now."

Delaney's brow furrowed. "Any idea what this is about?"

"I wasn't told," Davis replied. "But I suggest you guys hustle. It sounds important."

Delaney hung up the phone and looked at Lawson. "Looks like we don't have a choice after all."

Lawson grabbed her cover and headed for the door. "Told you they'd listen eventually."

Delaney rolled his eyes but followed her out. Whatever was waiting in the SCIF, it wasn't going to be good.

The walk to Ready Room Three was short, but the tension in the air stretched the distance. The passageways were unusually busy for this late in the evening, officers and enlisted alike moving with a purpose that hadn't been there earlier. Something was shifting, and Delaney didn't like the feeling settling in his gut.

They reached the SCIF entrance, where an armed Master-at-arms stood watch. The First Class barely spared them a glance before pressing the intercom. "Delaney and

Lawson here," the man announced. A few seconds later, the door buzzed open, and they stepped inside.

The room was already crowded. At the center of it all, Commander Oakley Hall, the squadron CO, stood with his arms crossed, his usual sharp gaze sweeping over the assembled personnel. Beside him, Lieutenant Commander Ethan Wallace, the XO, was flipping through a folder thick with classified documents. Several intelligence officers stood along the wall, their expressions unreadable. At the far end of the table, the ship's intelligence officer was bringing up a satellite image on a large display.

Delaney and Lawson had barely taken a step inside when Hall's voice cut through the quiet. "Glad you could join us." He didn't sound irritated, which was almost worse—Hall only skipped past pleasantries when something serious was happening. He gestured toward a section of the screen where the grainy satellite image showed an area of open ocean, framed by a string of disputed islands. "One of our assets went missing here less than an hour ago."

Lawson's eyes flicked to Delaney. Neither of them needed further explanation. This wasn't just a missing drone—this was the kind of thing that got entire strike groups re-tasked. And judging by the silence in the room, they were about to be right in the middle of it.

Lieutenant Commander Wallace turned another page in his folder before speaking. "At 2217, we lost contact with a classified reconnaissance drone operating in international waters. Last known position was inside a disputed zone, just outside the recognized boundary of a foreign military's maritime claims." He looked up, his expression sharp. "Its payload is not something we can afford to leave out there."

The intelligence officer at the screen zoomed in on the map, overlaying radar data on top of the satellite imagery. "The drone's signal cut out abruptly. Not a gradual systems failure—one second, it was transmitting, the next, nothing. Spikes in radio interference were detected in the area shortly before it went dark."

Lawson shifted slightly, her lips pressing into a thin line. Delaney knew exactly what she was thinking before she even spoke. "That matches what I've been seeing in the datalinks while manning up the aircraft."

Hall's gaze snapped to her. "Explain."

Lawson glanced at Delaney before stepping forward. "Sir, we've been picking up intermittent signal interference over the past few days—small anomalies in the datalinks, nothing that triggered alerts. At first, I thought it was just background noise, but the pattern is too structured. It's the same kind of interference we're seeing here." She gestured toward the radar overlay. "If it's connected, someone's been probing us before this drone went dark."

Wallace's brow furrowed as he processed her words. "And you reported this?"

"Yes, sir, more than once." Lawson said, her voice steady. "Intel dismissed it as environmental interference."

Delaney crossed his arms. "Like they always do."

Hall's expression didn't shift, but Delaney caught the slight tension in his stance. "Noted," the CO said. He turned back to Wallace, his voice measured. "This isn't just about a missing drone anymore. If this interference is intentional, it means we're already being targeted—and whoever did this isn't just relying on luck."

The room fell silent for a beat before Hall exhaled sharply. "Seventh Fleet wants a rapid response. So we're sending a detachment to locate the asset."

The hatch creaked open again, and Lieutenant Junior Grade Cameron Mitchell stepped inside, still adjusting his flight suit from what was likely a rushed summons. He barely had time to scan the room before Hall waved him in. "Glad you could make it, Mitchell. Close the door."

Mitchell did as instructed, taking a spot near the back. His gaze flicked between Delaney, Lawson, and the others before settling on the map. "I take it this isn't a routine briefing."

"No," Delaney said flatly, arms still crossed. He looked back at Hall. "With all due respect, sir, what does this have to do with us? Lost drones are an intel problem at the least. Someone else's problem. We work on Hawkeyes, not recon assets."

Hall's eyes locked onto him. "Because this isn't just any drone." He gestured at the intelligence officer, who tapped a few keys on the console, bringing up another screen. "Everyone in this room has the clearance to see this, and no one else on this ship does. That's why you're here."

The image on the screen shifted, revealing the schematic of an advanced reconnaissance platform—one that clearly wasn't standard-issue. Even Delaney, who wasn't an intel guy by any stretch, could tell this thing was classified way above the usual surveillance drones they launched.

Wallace spoke up. "This drone was carrying next-generation surveillance and electronic warfare capabilities, including experimental signals intelligence sensors and some of the same gear on your Hawkeyes. If it falls into the wrong hands, we don't just lose a piece of equipment—we lose critical technology that gives us an edge. And right now, we don't know if it crashed, was shot down, or if someone took control of it."

Delaney clenched his jaw. That changed things. A routine recon loss was one thing, but if this drone had been carrying sensitive gear, it meant someone had a reason to make it disappear. And judging by the looks in the room, they were being sent to figure out who and why.

Hall let the weight of the situation settle before continuing. "Seventh Fleet's priority is simple: we locate the drone and assess the situation before we decide on the next step. We're not sending anyone in until we confirm its location and determine who else might be looking for it."

Wallace took over, flipping to the next page in his folder. "At first light, we're launching a recon flight to sweep the area where it disappeared. We'll use the Hawkeye to pinpoint the wreckage—or what's left of it—and get a real-time picture of what we're dealing with. That's where you come in, Mitchell."

Mitchell nodded, his posture straightening as he absorbed the assignment. "I assume we're running with full surveillance payloads?"

"That's right," Hall confirmed. "ELINT, radar, and optical tracking—we want everything we can get before making any moves. Once we have confirmed the drone's status, we'll determine our next course of action. But based on the interference Lawson detected, we're expecting company."

Delaney crossed his arms. "So what happens if someone else already found it?"

Hall's expression darkened slightly. "Then we'll adjust. But that's not your concern yet. Right now, we find it first." His eyes swept across the room. "Be ready. This just went from a training cycle to an active deployment."

With that, the meeting was over. As Delaney, Lawson, and Mitchell stepped out into the passageway, the tension hung between them. No one spoke at first. Finally, Lawson broke the silence.

“You still think this is nothing?” she asked, glancing at Delaney.

Delaney exhaled through his nose. “No. I think we just stepped into something a lot bigger than they’re telling us.”

No one disagreed.

Chapter Three - Into the Unknown

The E-2D Hawkeye sat poised on Truman's flight deck just aft of catapult 2, its twin turboprop engines humming steadily as the catapult crew made their final adjustments. The sky was caught between night and dawn, the first hints of daylight painting the horizon in muted streaks of orange and violet. Steam hissed from the catapult track as the deck crew moved with the practiced efficiency of muscle memory. Inside the aircraft, Cameron Mitchell adjusted his headset, running through his preflight checks alongside Lieutenant "Dice" Evans and the squadron's Commanding Officer, Commander Oakley "Oak" Hall, both strapped in beside him at their radar stations. Up front, the pilots signaled their readiness.

"Lone Warrior, Drawdown 07. Cat two. Ready for launch."

"Drawdown 07, Lone Warrior. Winds steady, 090 at 12 knots. You are cleared for launch."

The holdback bar released, and the Hawkeye rocketed forward, the catapult slamming them into their seats as the aircraft hurtled down the deck. A moment of weightlessness followed as the plane left the bow, the dark water below flashing past before the wings bit into the air. The aircraft climbed steadily, banking to port as it fell into the steady hum of level flight. Mitchell exhaled slowly, watching the carrier shrink below them as the open sky stretched ahead.

"Lone Warrior, Drawdown 07. Airborne, switching to departure."

"Drawdown 07, Lone Warrior. Radar contact. Continue mission."

Inside the Hawkeye, the crew settled into their roles. Dice adjusted his radar scope while Oak monitored the systems feed, his voice steady over the internal comms. "Let's see if this thing can find more than just sea clutter, boys."

Mitchell smirked as he keyed his mic. "If this drone is out there, we'll see it first."

With the coordinates of the lost drone last contact locked in, the Hawkeye pressed eastward, disappearing into the thinning morning haze.

As Drawdown 07 leveled off at altitude, the cabin hummed with the steady rhythm of the aircraft's systems. The radar displays flickered to life, casting a soft glow over the consoles in the dimly lit back end of the Hawkeye. Mitchell scanned his screen, watching the digital map populate with friendly contacts—the Truman and her escorts were already falling behind them as they pressed deeper into open waters. He keyed his mic. "Dice, let's get a full sweep running. We'll pick up the last known ping from the drone and see what we're working with."

"Already on it," Dice replied, adjusting the gain on his scope. "The drone's last transmission came from roughly two hundred miles ahead. If it's still broadcasting, we should be seeing something by now."

Commander Hall leaned forward slightly, his voice even. "Unless someone doesn't want us to see it." The implication was clear—electronic interference. It wouldn't be the first time they'd encountered jamming in contested waters. "Mitchell, pull up the ELINT suite and cross-check for anomalies."

Mitchell nodded, his fingers moving across his console. A moment later, the screens filled with raw data—normal radio traffic from commercial ships, encrypted signals from other assets in the region, and something else. Something faint, barely registering against the background noise. "I've got a signal spike near the last known location, but it's weak. Could be distortion, but..." He trailed off, narrowing his eyes. "It's pulsing."

Dice frowned. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Oak's voice was sharp. "It's artificial. Someone's out there."

The Hawkeye continued its course, slicing through the early morning sky, closing in on the last known coordinates of the missing drone. The mission had just taken a turn—whatever had taken the drone offline, they weren't alone in the search.

The faint pulse on Mitchell's screen remained steady, irregular enough to suggest it wasn't just natural interference, but controlled—deliberate. He adjusted the filters on his display, trying to isolate the source. "It's not a standard transmission. Someone's either masking their signal or running low power to stay off the grid."

Dice leaned in closer, his expression tightening. "It's too clean to be random noise. If I had to guess, I'd say someone's using a low-frequency burst transmission. That's not civilian."

Oak considered the information for a moment, then reached for the radio. "Lone Warrior, Drawdown 07. We're detecting an intermittent signal near the last known location of the drone. Possible interference, possible contact. Continuing to investigate."

A brief pause, then the reply from Truman's Combat Direction Center came through, steady but cautious. "Drawdown 07, Lone Warrior. Acknowledged. Maintain course, but keep an eye out. We don't need you spooking any neutrals."

Mitchell exhaled through his nose, rolling his shoulders as he refocused on the scope. The signal remained faint, almost taunting. "If someone's out there, they know we're coming."

The Hawkeye pressed forward, each passing mile drawing them deeper into the unknown.

As Drawdown 07 neared the last known location of the drone, the interference on their systems intensified. Mitchell watched as the radar screen flickered, momentary disruptions appearing and vanishing in irregular patterns. It wasn't random. "I'm getting degradation across all bands," he reported, adjusting the settings to compensate. "It's not a full blackout, but someone is trying to muddy the waters."

Dice swore under his breath as he worked his own console. "This isn't standard jamming. It's layered—pulse bursts, frequency hopping. Someone's actively working to keep us blind."

Oak's voice was firm. "Keep digging. If they don't want us seeing something, then we need to see it even more." He keyed his mic again. "Lone Warrior, Drawdown 07. We're experiencing active electronic interference at the target location. This isn't environmental—it's deliberate. Requesting confirmation of other assets in the area."

The reply came a moment later, tinged with a slight delay, as if the Truman's Combat Direction Center was cross-checking their own data. "Drawdown 07, Lone Warrior. Negative on known friendlies in your immediate vicinity. You're alone out there. Proceed with caution."

Mitchell exchanged a glance with Dice, the unspoken understanding passing between them. If no other U.S. or allied forces were in the area, then whoever was running this interference wasn't friendly. Dice tapped his screen, enhancing the filtered feed. "I'm still picking up faint bursts underneath the jamming. Lawson called this before we even launched — this isn't just blocking us, it's a form of deception. Someone's playing games."

Oak exhaled sharply. "Well, let's make sure we don't play right into their hands." He leaned forward, eyes locked on his display. "Keep us on course. Let's find out who else is out here."

The Hawkeye held steady, pressing deeper into the interference, the morning sky ahead feeling less like open air and more like a trap waiting to be sprung.

The Hawkeye pushed deeper into the interference field, its sensors struggling against the deliberate jamming. Inside the aircraft, the glow of radar screens flickered as Mitchell worked to refine the signal, filtering through the noise. His fingers flew over the controls, tweaking the system to punch through the interference. "This isn't just scatter jamming. They're targeting specific frequencies — whoever's doing this knows exactly how to blind us."

Dice nodded, his tone edged with frustration. "If this was just broad-spectrum noise, we'd have an easier time cutting through. But they're shifting, adapting. They see us coming, and they don't want us looking."

Oak tightened his grip on the armrest of his seat, eyes locked on the displays. "That tells me two things. One, they've got sophisticated EW gear. Two, whatever they're hiding is something they don't want us to see." He turned slightly toward Mitchell. "Can you get me anything? Any kind of track, even a partial return?"

Mitchell exhaled slowly, adjusting the filters again. For a brief moment, the interference parted just enough to catch something — an echo, barely distinguishable, sitting right at the edge of their detection range. Not a drone. Something bigger. Then, just as quickly as it appeared, the signal vanished back into the static.

"There!" Mitchell tapped his screen. "I had something. It was brief, but it was there. A hard contact, not just a ghost track. It's moving slow, maybe even stationary."

Oak's expression darkened as he processed the implications. "If they've got a ship or an aircraft out there running this jamming, that means we're not just looking for a missing drone anymore. We're walking straight into someone else's operation."

The Hawkeye continued forward, the unseen enemy tightening their grip on the electronic battlespace. Whatever was out there, they weren't alone—and the mission had just changed.

The tension inside Drawdown 07 thickened as the electronic interference pulsed through their systems. Mitchell fought against the degradation, tweaking the filters, but whoever was on the other end of this jamming knew what they were doing. "They're adjusting to us in real time," he muttered. "Every time I compensate, they shift. They're actively countering us."

Oak's expression was unreadable, but the tension in his jaw gave him away. "Which means they're watching us just as much as we're trying to watch them." He keyed his mic again. "Lone Warrior, Drawdown 07. Be advised, we've got confirmed electronic warfare activity at our location. We have an intermittent contact, possible surface or airborne asset in proximity to the drone's last known coordinates. Request guidance."

The delay was longer this time. When Truman's Combat Direction Center finally responded, their tone was clipped, professional—but there was no mistaking the concern. "Drawdown 07, Lone Warrior. Stand by. We're running additional analysis on your sector. Hold current course, but do not—repeat, do not—proceed past your objective without further authorization."

Dice shook his head, his voice low. "That's the nice way of telling us they don't like what we're walking into."

Oak didn't respond immediately. He was already thinking three steps ahead, weighing their next move. He glanced at Mitchell. "You said the contact was barely moving?"

Mitchell nodded, eyes still locked on his screen. "Yeah. If I had to guess, it's either drifting or holding position. Could be an ISR aircraft running airborne jamming, or it's a ship sitting dark, waiting for us to leave."

Oak exhaled sharply. "If it's a ship, it's probably not alone."

Before anyone could respond, Drawdown 07's entire radar display glitched. The screens flickered, then went completely dark. Every console in the back of the Hawkeye shut down in unison, leaving the crew in stunned silence.

"We just lost everything," Dice said, his voice unnaturally calm. "Radar's out. Comms are still up, but every sensor just went cold."

Mitchell's pulse pounded in his ears as he desperately tried to restart the system. Nothing responded. They had walked into the heart of the interference field, and now they were flying blind. Whatever—or whoever—was out there had just shut them down completely.

Oak's voice cut through the haze, controlled but sharp. "That's not random. Someone flipped a switch." He yelled towards the cockpit, his voice firm. "Get us the hell out of here. Now."

The pilots didn't hesitate. The Hawkeye banked hard, turning away from the last known coordinates of the drone, the early morning light glinting off its fuselage as it clawed for safer airspace. Behind them, the electronic void swallowed their sensors whole. Whatever was out there, it had just sent a message—they were not alone, and they were not welcome.

Chapter Four - Mayday

The cockpit was eerily quiet except for the whine of the wind outside and the faint hum of emergency battery power. Drawdown 07 was flying dark—no radar, no comms, no navigation. Dice was already flipping switches, trying to bring something, anything, back online, while Oak maintained his grip on the situation, his voice steady despite the rising tension.

"Flight controls are responsive, but we're running dead stick on nav," Dice called out, his hands moving in precise motions over the darkened screens. "We've got no ILS, no TACAN, no GPS—nothing."

From the back of the aircraft, Mitchell swallowed hard, keeping his hands steady on the console, even if the displays were useless. He was the junior officer here. No decisions, no calls—just follow orders. "Copy that. Everything is dead back here too," he reported, knowing it was pointless but needing to confirm what they all already knew.

"Stay on the emergency procedures. If this is EW, it's sophisticated as hell," Oak ordered, his voice calm, measured. "And if it's not? We just got taken out by something worse."

The aircraft held altitude, the pilots working off nothing but dead reckoning, banking the Hawkeye into what they hoped was the right direction. With no nav, they were flying by instinct, estimating their position based on time and airspeed. It was a terrifying throwback to an era long past.

"We still have the standby compass," the cockpit called back. "Gonna fly the last known heading and hope we're not drifting. I tried to transmit a mayday, but it was probably just dead air."

Dice muttered under his breath, his fingers tapping rapidly over his kneeboard as he recalculated their estimated position. "It's a big ocean, boys. We screw this up, we end up fuel-starved with no idea where the carrier is."

Mitchell kept his eyes on the screens, even though they were dark, willing them to flicker back to life. He wasn't here to make calls. He was here to work the damn

problem. Whatever had just shut them down wasn't random—it was intentional. The enemy knew they were out here, and now they were testing just how blind they could make them.

The Hawkeye rocked slightly as the pilots made another course adjustment, keeping them steady on what they hoped was the right heading back to the Truman. The cockpit was dim, lit only by the faint glow of emergency indicators, and the outside world was an abyss—nothing but endless sky and ocean, no references, no guidance. Then, something moved.

"Fuck, did you see that?" the co-pilot's voice was tense, almost disbelieving.

The pilot's head snapped toward the left window. A shadow, barely visible against the darkening sky, just at the edge of their vision. A sleek, fast-moving shape—too distant to confirm, but just close enough to make their stomachs tighten. Then it was gone.

"Jesus, I think that was a J-20," the pilot muttered, his hands tightening around the yoke. "Or something damn close."

"We don't have time to play 'What Did I See?'" Oak's voice cut in, sharper now. "If they're out here, they already know we're blind. They're testing us." He turned in his seat and pointed toward Mitchell. "Get forward, start working on resets. See if we can get at least one goddamn system back."

Mitchell unclipped his harness, heart hammering as he maneuvered toward the forward equipment compartment, moving in near darkness as he braced himself against the aircraft's sudden shifts. The compartment was tight, a maze of exposed avionics racks, circuit breakers, and tangled cables. He'd trained for this, but this wasn't a drill.

As he reached for the first breaker panel, he hesitated, remembering Lawson's voice from before the flight. The interference—it wasn't random. Someone was flipping a switch. He glanced back toward the cockpit, voice low but urgent. "Sir, Airman Lawson mentioned something before launch. She said the jamming patterns weren't just noise—they were structured. If this is EW or targeted jamming, we might not be able to override it."

Oak exhaled sharply, his frustration evident, but he didn't argue. He just nodded once. "Try anyway. We're out of options."



The humming fluorescents of the squadrons maintenance control office barely cut through the tension in Delaney's gut as he leaned against the workbench, arms crossed. Master Chief Calloway stood across from him, the veteran tech's expression unreadable, but there was a weight behind his words.

"You checked 602 before launch, right?" Calloway asked, his tone more of a statement than a question.

Delaney gave a sharp nod. "Yeah. No gripes. We did a full check before she taxied. Radar was clean, datalinks solid, no anomalies. That bird left the deck in perfect shape." His brow furrowed. "Why?"

Calloway exhaled through his nose, his arms folding over his chest. "Because we lost 'em." He let the words sink in for a second before continuing. "No comms, no Mode 4 or 5, nothing. Combat says they think they still have 'em on radar, but they're dark. No beacons, no data, not a damn thing."

Delaney straightened, his stomach tightening into a knot. He'd heard of comms blackouts before, but not like this—not with an entire Hawkeye vanishing from the net mid-flight. "They're still airborne?" he asked, voice quieter now.

"For now best we can tell." Calloway's jaw tightened. "But we're blind as hell, and if they're in trouble, we won't know it until they're already falling out of the sky."

Master Chief Calloway let out a slow breath, forcing himself to think, not react. The Hawkeye wasn't just another jet—it was their eyes, their command and control. If it was out there flying blind, so was the entire Truman strike group. "Could be just a bad link," he said, though even as the words left his mouth, he didn't believe them.

Delaney shook his head. "No way in hell. If it was just a link issue, they'd still be squawking IFF, still be feeding us something. This? This is worse." His voice dropped

slightly, a rare show of unease from the seasoned avionics tech. "I don't like this, Master Chief. I've been doing this too long. Something's not right."

Calloway's fingers curled into fists at his sides as he stared at the maintenance board where 602's status was still marked as airborne, mission active. But that was a lie, wasn't it? The bird was out there somewhere, alone, cut off. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.



"You sure you saw something?" Dice asked, his voice sharp as he glanced from his radar display—still dark—to the pilot's side window. The Hawkeye was blind, deaf, and running on hope, and the last thing they needed was an enemy fighter shadowing them.

"I know what I saw," the pilot snapped back. His knuckles were white against the yoke, tension radiating through his posture. "Could've been a shadow, sure, but it moved like a damn jet. I'd bet my wings on it."

Mitchell frowned, gripping the side of his seat as the aircraft rocked slightly in the wind. "We're still inside the interference field. If they're out here, they know we can't see them."

The cockpit fell into silence, everyone listening for something—anything—that might signal their unseen observer was still lurking.

Then the aircraft lurched violently.

A shockwave of turbulence slammed into them, sending loose gear rattling against the bulkheads. Mitchell's harness dug into his chest as the Hawkeye rocked to the side, nearly tipping into a bank before the pilots fought it level again.

"Jesus, what was that?!" Dice barked, his hands flying to the panel, instinctively trying to compensate for a system that was already dead.

The pilot swore under his breath, yanking the yoke hard. "Left side! Left side! — That bastard nearly clipped our wings!"

Through the left cockpit window, a dark silhouette flashed past—fast, sleek, moving with precision that sent a fresh spike of adrenaline through the crew. It had come dangerously close. Close enough that if the pilot had reacted even a second later, they would have collided midair.

"That was no damn shadow," Dice muttered, his voice tense, watching as the J-20 disappeared into the haze. "They just let us know exactly how screwed we are."

The cockpit remained deathly quiet, the only sound the steady hum of the engines and the occasional rustle of gear shifting against the bulkhead. Nobody had to say it out loud—the J-20 had just played them. It had slipped in, flew so close it nearly took out their wing, then disappeared like a ghost. A show of force. A taunt.

"That was deliberate," Dice finally muttered, voice low but sharp. "That bastard was right on top of us."

"A test," Oak said evenly. His hands remained still, clasped loosely in his lap, but there was an edge to his voice. "They detect an aircraft flying dark, no radar, no comms, and they want to see how we react."

Mitchell exhaled through his nose, his heart still pounding. "They know we're blind."

Before anyone could respond, Mitchell's eyes widened. Through the starboard window, a dark-gray silhouette emerged from the haze, sliding into formation. His voice shot up with renewed energy.

"Starboard side! We got a friendly—Fat Amy!"

The tension inside the Hawkeye didn't break immediately, but a shift was undeniable. Relief, muted but real, settled into the crew as the F-35 held steady, its pilot clearly assessing the situation. Unlike the J-20, there was no aggression, no provocation—just a reassuring presence, a promise that they weren't alone anymore.

"I've never been so damn happy to see a one of those in my life," Dice muttered, shaking his head.

"Who is it?" Oak asked, his voice still measured.

The F-35 pilot wagged his wings—standard for recognition. The jet edged slightly ahead, falling into a lead position. He was taking charge.

The cockpit dimmed slightly as the pilot reached for the Grimes light, flicking it toward the F-35C's canopy. The first burst of Morse code was slow and deliberate, ensuring their escort had time to read it.

"N-O C-O-M-M-S."

The F-35 pilot responded almost instantly, wagging his wings once in acknowledgment before flicking his own light back.

"C-O-P-Y."

Another pause, then the Hawkeye's pilot signaled again, this time more urgent.

"J-2-0 C-L-O-S-E."

The F-35 hesitated, then banked slightly to the left, scanning the skies before returning a quick flash.

"U-N-D-E-R-S-T-O-O-D. S-T-A-Y W-I-T-H M-E."

Dice let out a slow breath, his grip finally easing on the console. "Well, at least somebody knows where the hell we are."

"Yeah, but let's hope he brought some friends," Oak muttered, watching as the Lightning II adjusted its position, settling in like a shepherd guiding a lost sheep home.

The F-35 pilot flashed another message—short, efficient.

"F-O-L-L-O-W."

The Hawkeye crew didn't hesitate. Their pilots adjusted their heading, falling in behind their escort as best they could with nothing but dead reckoning and hope. Outside, the F-35 held formation, a steady guardian cutting through the darkened sky.

"How much longer?" Dice muttered, eyes flicking to where their navigation display should have been giving them answers. Instead, it was just another dark screen, another reminder that they were still flying blind. Another series of flashes to their escort provided an answer.

The F-35 flashed again. "T-W-E-N-T-Y M-I-L-E-S."

Oak exhaled slowly. "Almost home. Keep it steady."

For the first time since the aircraft blacked out, Mitchell unclenched his fists. The tension in his chest hadn't fully eased, but it was starting to loosen, just a little.

Oak glanced at him, studying the way he was still hunched forward, shoulders tight with focus. His voice dropped slightly, not quite as sharp as before.

"Hell of a ride, huh, Mitchell?"

Mitchell blinked, letting out something close to a breathless laugh. "Wasn't exactly how fun Sir."

Oak smirked. "It never is." His tone softened just a bit. "You did good. Kept your head on straight. That's what matters."

Mitchell hesitated for a second, unsure what to say. He wasn't the decision-maker here—hadn't been the one calling the shots. But Oak wasn't talking about that. He was talking about how Mitchell hadn't cracked under pressure, how he'd worked the problem, kept himself in the fight.

"Thanks, sir." It wasn't much, but it was earnest.

Oak nodded once, a rare show of approval. Then his gaze shifted forward again, locking onto the faint lights on the horizon. "Now let's get this thing on deck before something else decides to ruin our night."

The carrier's lights finally broke through the darkness, barely visible against the night sea. It should have been reassuring, but without comms, without navigation aids, without so much as an altitude callout, they were still flying in the dark. The Hawkeye's pilots had no way to coordinate with the LSO crew, no verbal clearance to land—just instinct, training, and sheer luck.

The approach was brutal. Without ILS guidance, they had to judge their glide path entirely by visual cues from the ships Improved Fresnel Lens Optical Landing System and the talents of a good LSO. Landing the large 81 foot wingspan of the Hawkeye on a pitching carrier deck was difficult enough, doing it at night and in this condition was damn near impossible. The deck loomed closer, their descent almost too shallow—then too steep—then just barely within margin.. The meatball couldn't talk to

them, but it was there, swaying in the blur of cockpit glass. The pilots corrected at the last second, the deck rushing up to meet them.

The impact was jarring. The main gear slammed into the deck, the arresting hook scraping uselessly for a second before finally snagging the wire. Not nearly the graceful landing normally demonstrated by the pilots of VAW-127. The Hawkeye lurched forward, every muscle in the crew's bodies tensing against the violent deceleration. The aircraft jerked to a halt, dead still in the middle of the landing area.

For a long moment, nobody spoke. Then, Dice let out a shaky breath. "Fuck me... that sucked."

Chapter Five - A New Mission

The Hawkeye sat motionless on the flight deck, its props winding down as the deck crew moved in, securing it with chocks and tie-downs. The midday sun bore down, making the non-skid surface shimmer with heat waves as the hum of flight operations continued around them. Mitchell exhaled slowly, unclipping his harness, but his hands were still tense—like his body hadn't caught up to the fact that they were finally on solid ground.

"Well," Dice muttered, rolling his shoulders as he unbuckled, "ya'll wanna do that again. Maybe on one engine this time?"

Mitchell didn't answer right away. His heart was still hammering, his mind replaying the last few minutes of the flight—the silence, the drift, the J-20 that had nearly ended them. Finally, he swallowed and muttered, "Yeah... you've got an odd sense of humor."

Oak didn't say much, just gave a small nod. "Let's get inside."

They stepped down onto the deck, the heat hitting them immediately. The carrier's operations continued around them, indifferent to their return. In the distance, a Super Hornet roared down the catapult, afterburners kicking up waves of heat as it launched off the bow.

Over the 1MC, a calm but firm voice carried across the flight deck.

"Launch the Alert 5 aircraft. Alert 5, launch the Alert 5."

Mitchell barely reacted to the announcement, but Delaney heard it and took a quick glance toward the deck crew moving with purpose. The Alert 5 meant something had higher-ups nervous—not a routine scramble.

Delaney stood near the tail of the Hawkeye in the forward hummer hole, his arms crossed as the crew passed by. His gaze briefly flicked over Mitchell, taking him in—not the officer, not the fresh-faced new guy, but the fact that he'd just come back from something that should've killed him.

He didn't speak right away. Then, finally, he gave a small nod. "Hell of a flight, sir."

Mitchell met his eyes. There was no sarcasm. No jab. Just a quiet understanding.

He exhaled, the weight of the flight still on his shoulders, but he nodded back. "Yeah. It was."

Delaney didn't push the moment. He just turned toward the island. "They're waiting on you in the ready room Sir."

The passageway was cooler than the flight deck, but the stale air and fluorescent red lighting made it feel just as suffocating. The sounds of the ship—muffled conversations, the distant thrum of machinery—pressed in as Mitchell walked in step with Oak and Dice, his boots heavy against the deck.

They reached the ready room, and Oak pushed open the hatch. Inside, Lieutenant Commander Wallace was already waiting, his uniform crisp despite the long hours. He stood near the table, flipping through a folder thick with classified documents.

Wallace didn't look up immediately, just turned another page before speaking. "Glad you all made it. Welcome back Skipper. Take a seat folks."

Mitchell lowered himself into a chair, his muscles still stiff. Dice sat next to him, rolling his shoulders before leaning forward, elbows on his knees. Oak remained standing, arms crossed, watching Wallace carefully.

Wallace finally closed the folder and looked directly at them. "The drone's wreckage has been located."

That snapped Mitchell's attention fully into focus. His hands clenched slightly on the table. "Where?"

Wallace tapped a spot on the map spread across the table. "Roughly eighty miles from where you guys lost radar contact. Close enough that whatever shut you down might still be in the area." He paused before adding, "And we're not the only ones who know it's there."

Dice muttered a curse under his breath, rubbing his jaw. "Who else?"

Wallace exchanged a glance with Oak before answering. "Satellite imagery picked up multiple fast-moving surface contacts converging on the site. We don't know if they're military or something less official, but they're closing in fast. If we want to get to it first, we move now."

Oak exhaled slowly, arms still crossed as he studied the map. "How intact is it?"

Wallace shook his head. "Unknown. We don't have eyes on it yet, but we can't assume much is left intact. The biggest concern is the classified components." He glanced at Delaney. "You know these systems better than anyone else on this ship. We need your expertise on the ground."

Delaney gave a short nod, his face unreadable.

Wallace turned his attention to Mitchell. "And you volunteered for this, so you'll be going as the Officer in Charge. Two SEALs will handle security, but you'll be responsible for ensuring this team gets in, recovers what we can, and destroys the rest."

Mitchell straightened slightly, his stomach tightening. Volunteering had been easy. Hearing it framed like that made it feel more real.

Dice let out a breath, shaking his head slightly. "This is insane." He glanced at Oak. "We don't send Hawkeye crews on combat zone recoveries. We send a separate team—intel, specialists, not our own people."

Oak gave a short nod. "You're right. This isn't how we usually do things. But we don't have the luxury of a proper recovery unit." He turned back to Wallace. "Seventh Fleet signed off on this."

Wallace sighed. "They don't love it either, but they approved it. We're the only ones with personnel who have the clearance and technical expertise to handle the wreckage. This has to be done fast, and we're it."

Delaney crossed his arms. "So we get in, grab what we can, and blow the rest?"

Wallace nodded. "That's the plan. You launch at 0200. Get some rest while you can. You're going to need it."



The SCIF was cramped, filled with the low murmur of voices as the team went through their final pre-mission checks. A detailed satellite map of the crash site was pinned to the wall, and a whiteboard was covered in hastily scrawled notes—extraction times, comm frequencies, contingency plans. In the corner, the two SEALs sorted through weapons and gear, double-checking their loadout.

"Alright, listen up," the team lead, Chief Petty Officer Beckett, said, adjusting the sling of his rifle as he addressed the group. "Rules of engagement are simple. This is a rapid in-and-out. We're not here to pick a fight. If we take fire, we disengage and extract. We're covering you while you work—nothing more. Got it?"

Delaney let out a breath, arms crossed over his chest. "So, let me get this straight, Chief. Our job is to run straight into a crash site in the middle of nowhere, rip out some classified hardware while hoping nobody shoots at us, and then blow the whole thing sky high before sprinting to a helicopter?" He tilted his head. "Just wanted to make sure I had that right."

Beckett didn't blink. "Pretty much."

Delaney grinned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Sounds perfectly reasonable. Can't wait."

Lawson was quieter, standing slightly apart from the others, her hands fidgeting with the straps of her plate carrier. Mitchell could see the tension in her shoulders. She was scared. Hell, they all were. But she wasn't saying it—none of them were.

Hayes, on the other hand, was practically bouncing on his heels, adjusting his helmet for the third time. "Man, this is insane. We're gonna be on the ground, doing an actual op." He grinned, looking at Delaney. "You ever done anything like this before?"

Delaney scoffed. "Oh yeah, all the time. Between maintenance checks and coffee breaks, I just love doing special operations raids." He patted Hayes on the shoulder. "You let me know how that enthusiasm holds up when we're actually getting shot at."

Mitchell watched the exchange, trying to maintain control of the room, but deep down, he felt exactly the same way as Delaney. This was way beyond their wheelhouse—they weren't special operations, they were avionics techs and a nugget

flight officer. But now, they were about to be dropped into enemy territory, and it was his job to lead them.

Beckett didn't react to Delaney's sarcasm, just pulled a grease pencil from his pocket and circled a section of the satellite image. "This ridge line here is our biggest problem. It's high ground, and if someone's already in the area, that's where they'll be watching from." He tapped the screen twice. "We'll approach from the south to avoid a direct silhouette against the skyline, but once we're at the site, we're exposed. You guys work fast, we'll keep eyes on that ridge."

His teammate, Petty Officer First Class Torres, slung his rifle over his chest. "We're carrying suppressed weapons, but that doesn't mean we're invisible. If something goes loud, we don't get into a gunfight. We break contact and move to exfil. The moment you have what you need, we leave. Understood?"

The tension in the room thickened, but Mitchell nodded. "Understood."

Before anyone could say more, the hatch swung open, and Commander Oak Hall stepped inside. The conversation immediately died down. Oak wasn't one for dramatic entrances, but his presence alone carried weight. He shut the hatch behind him and looked at the four who weren't SEALs—Mitchell, Delaney, Lawson, and Hayes.

He didn't speak right away, just studied them. Then, in a voice calm but firm, he said, "I know this isn't what any of you guys signed up for." His eyes passed over each of them. "You fix aircraft. You run diagnostics. You keep our birds flying. And now, we're asking you to go into the unknown, without the tools you're used to, without the safety of the carrier deck under your feet." He exhaled. "I won't lie to you—this is dangerous. It's not fair. But it's necessary."

No one spoke. Even Delaney, normally quick with a remark, just listened.

Oak nodded. "I picked you because I trust you. Not just because you're good at your jobs, but because you know how to hold things together when the plan falls apart. That's what this is. It's already fallen apart. And now, you're the ones who have to put the pieces back together." His voice softened just slightly. "I don't need you to be heroes. I just need you to come back."

The weight of his words settled over them, heavier than the gear they carried. Mitchell swallowed hard, nodding once. The others followed. There was nothing else to say.

The hatch to the SCIF swung open, and the team stepped into the dimly lit passageway, moving with the weight of what was coming. The ship's normal rhythms carried on around them—distant voices, the hum of ventilation systems, the faint vibration of the carrier's massive engines pushing them through the sea. But for the four who weren't SEALs, everything felt different now.

Hayes, still bouncing slightly with restless energy, adjusted the straps on his plate carrier for the tenth time. "This is gonna be insane. I mean, how many avionics guys can say they've done something like this?"

Lawson shot him a sharp look. "Calm down, Hayes." Her voice wasn't harsh, but it was firm. "You need to get your head right before we step onto that helicopter."

Hayes swallowed, his enthusiasm fading just a little. He gave a small nod and exhaled, forcing himself to still his movements.

They climbed the narrow ladderwell leading up to the flight deck, stepping out into the open air. The rotors of the HH-60M Seahawk were already spinning, the noise deafening even through their helmets. The crew chief signaled them forward as the SEALs moved with casual efficiency, heading straight for the cabin.

As they walked toward the bird, Delaney leaned toward Mitchell, his voice just loud enough to be heard over the rotors. "Hell of a thing Sir, sending the newest officer on the trip."

Mitchell didn't miss a beat. He shrugged as he climbed in, gripping the straps overhead for balance. "Guess they figured I was expendable."

Delaney snorted, shaking his head, but the tension in his shoulders seemed to ease just slightly.

They took their seats, strapping in as the crew chief gave the final thumbs-up to the pilots. The Seahawk shuddered slightly as the engines powered up, and the deck crew stepped away.

Mitchell adjusted his helmet, exhaling slowly. The time for nerves was over. They were in it now.

Chapter Six - Into Hostile Territory

The HH-60M skimmed just feet above the ocean, the dark water rushing past mere meters below as the pilots held a precise, unwavering course. The Seahawk's vibration hummed through the cabin, the steady chop of the rotors muffled inside their headsets. Low and fast—that was the plan.

"I can taste the damn salt spray," Delaney muttered over the ICS, shifting in his seat. "This is lower than I'd like."

"Good thing you're not flying then," Beckett replied dryly from his seat across the cabin. The SEAL's voice was calm, like they weren't a few bad air currents away from plunging straight into the Pacific.

"Relax, Delaney," Hayes chimed in, clearly enjoying the ride. "This is some real Land of Bad shit right here."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" Delaney shot back.

Mitchell kept his eyes forward, his grip firm on the harness strapped across his chest. The altimeter on the Seahawk's panel hovered dangerously low, but the pilots made every adjustment with surgical precision. The closer they stayed to the water, the less likely they'd show up on radar. The mission depended on it.

"One minute to LZ," the crew chief announced, his voice sharp over the comms.

Ahead, the dark silhouette of the island took shape, the narrow beach barely visible in the faint moonlight. No turning back now.

The Seahawk flared slightly, kicking up a thin spray of sand as its wheels barely touched down on the beach, the aircraft hovering just long enough for the team to deploy. The side doors slid open, and Beckett was the first out, weapon up, scanning the treeline.

"Go, go, go!" the crew chief barked.

Mitchell hit the sand hard, knees bending to absorb the impact as he moved quickly away from the rotor wash. Delaney, Lawson, and Hayes were right behind him, following the SEALs' lead as they pressed forward toward the treeline.

Delaney's voice cut through the night as the Seahawk lifted away, its rotor wash fading into the distance. "Well, that's it. Bird's headed back. It's just us now."

The jungle beyond the beach was thick, a wall of darkness that swallowed sound. Beckett gave a sharp hand signal, and the team moved in a loose formation, stepping carefully, every movement deliberate. The faint glow of their night vision optics bathed the world in eerie green, revealing twisting roots, thick undergrowth, and the faintest sign of a trail.

Delaney kept his voice low as they moved. "Anyone else feel like this is already going sideways?"

"Cut the chatter," Beckett murmured. His eyes scanned ahead, pausing at something in the mud. He knelt, pressing his gloved hand against the imprint. "Tracks. Recent."

Beckett's words sent a fresh wave of tension through the group. Mitchell tightened his grip on his rifle, scanning the darkness ahead. Someone had beaten them here.

"We move fast," Beckett ordered, his voice low but firm. "Stay sharp. If they're still in the area, we don't want to meet them on their terms."

The team pressed forward, each step bringing them closer to whatever—or whoever—had gotten here first.

The crash site wasn't far now, but every step forward felt like pushing deeper into something that wasn't right. The jungle was too quiet, the usual hum of insects and distant animal calls muted, like the whole island was holding its breath.

Beckett halted suddenly, raising a clenched fist. The team froze, weapons up. In the faint green glow of their night vision, disturbed foliage and crushed underbrush marked a clear path toward the wreckage.

"They came through here recently," Torres whispered, scanning the ground. "No more than a couple of hours ago."

Delaney muttered under his breath, adjusting his rifle. "Great. Love being late to my own disaster."

Mitchell ignored the comment, his pulse hammering as he peered ahead. Through the gaps in the thick vegetation, he could finally see it—the remains of the drone, a twisted mess of metal and carbon fiber scattered across the jungle floor.

"Visual on the wreck," Beckett murmured. "Move in slow. Watch for surprises."

The team advanced carefully, boots sinking into the damp earth. Mitchell swallowed hard, scanning the wreckage, knowing that whatever they found here was going to be worse than just a pile of mangled tech.

Something about this felt off.

Delaney ran a hand over the drone's shattered airframe, fingers tracing the jagged edges where metal had crumpled on impact. "This thing didn't just crash—it got knocked out of the sky." He stepped back, tilting his head as he scanned the damage. "Look at these." He gestured to a cluster of small, clean punctures along the fuselage, the edges blackened from heat. "That's gunfire."

Lawson crouched beside the wreckage, squinting at one of the holes before reaching into the twisted metal. After a moment, she pulled out a warped slug, turning it between her fingers. "Small caliber, probably anti-aircraft fire. Somebody lit this thing up before it went down."

Mitchell exhaled, glancing toward the ridge. "So it didn't just fail mid-flight. Someone took a shot at it and they were accurate." His grip tightened around his rifle as he scanned the dark treeline. "If they were watching it come down, there's a good chance they're watching us right now."

Delaney crouched next to the drone's shattered fuselage, running a gloved hand over the wreckage. "Alright, let's get this over with. Hayes, pull the panel on the avionics bay. Lawson, start working on the data module."

Mitchell stood just outside the wreckage, rifle slung but ready, a checklist in his hand. "Call it out as you get it. We're confirming everything before we move."

Hayes grunted as he pried open a warped panel, using a multitool to rip out the tangle of exposed wiring underneath. "I've got the primary power bus. Looks fried."

"Not our priority," Delaney said. "We need storage media. Lawson?"

Lawson was hunched over the core electronics bay, her hands moving quickly but carefully. After a few tense seconds, she let out a breath. "I've got the memory module. Intact."

Mitchell checked it off. "That's a big one. Keep going."

As they worked, Beckett and Torres stood at the tree line, scanning the darkness beyond. Beckett adjusted his grip on his rifle, eyes still on the ridge above them.

Lawson paused, glancing toward the jungle before muttering under her breath. "I don't like this. Feels like something's about to happen."

Delaney reached deeper into the drone's gutted electronics bay, his hands moving through the tangle of burned-out components and severed connections. His movements slowed. Then stopped.

"Wait a second." His voice was sharper now. Focused.

Mitchell turned, scanning the checklist. "What?"

Delaney leaned in closer, pulling a small, empty harness free from the wreckage. It had been disconnected—not ripped out, not destroyed in the crash. He turned it over in his hand, then looked up. "The AI module is gone."

Lawson's fingers froze mid-motion over her current task. "You sure?"

Delaney held up the empty slot. "Yeah. And whoever took it didn't just grab and go. They disconnected it clean. This wasn't scavenging—someone knew exactly what they were looking for."

A tense silence settled over the team as the weight of that realization hit.

Beckett cursed quietly, eyes sweeping the treeline again. "That means we're already compromised. Whatever's missing is in someone else's hands." He turned toward Torres. "Get the charges set. We're not leaving anything else behind."

Torres nodded and moved to work, pulling a pack from his ruck and laying out the small, precise demolition charges. Meanwhile, Delaney, Lawson, and Hayes hurried to grab everything salvageable, moving faster now.

Mitchell stepped back from the wreck, adjusting his rifle against his chest. The unease was no longer just a feeling—they had confirmation. Someone else had beaten them here.

Delaney stuffed the last of the recovered hardware into his pack, then glanced back at the drone's gutted electronics bay, his jaw tightening. "Somebody took that module, and they knew what they were doing. That's not good."

"How bad are we talking?" Mitchell asked, slinging his rifle back over his chest.

Delaney adjusted the weight of his pack before answering. "Depends on who took it. That module isn't just another circuit board—it's what made this thing special. Advanced autonomous systems, adaptive signal processing, real-time battlefield decision-making. This wasn't just a spy drone. That AI module gave it teeth."

"So, worst case?" Lawson pressed, shifting uncomfortably.

"Worst case?" Delaney exhaled. "Somebody reverse-engineers it. We just handed them a future battlefield advantage on a silver platter. Hell, with that they could take over our hawkeye and we'd never know they were there. It's the same module that powers our intel suite."

A beat of silence. Even Beckett looked uneasy at that.

"Then we don't leave them anything else," the SEAL muttered. He gave Torres a nod. "Set the last charge. We're not sticking around any longer."

Torres placed the final demolition pack, carefully securing it beneath what was left of the drone's airframe. With a few quick presses on his handheld detonator, the timer was armed. "Charges set. Five-minute countdown once we clear the blast radius."

"Let's move," Beckett ordered, and the team slipped away from the wreckage, keeping low as they maneuvered through the jungle.

After putting two hundred meters between them and the drone, Beckett signaled for a halt. "We're good here. Setting it off."

A brief, charged pause—then a dull, concussive whump rolled through the jungle, followed by a brief flash of orange light behind the treeline. A few birds took flight, startled by the explosion, but otherwise, the island remained unnervingly still.

Beckett turned toward the team as the smoke dissipated. "Alright, here's how this works. We split the gear. No single person carries everything. If someone goes down, we don't lose it all. Delaney, you keep the memory module. Lawson, you take the optical sensor data. Hayes, you get the flight recorder." He shifted his gaze to Mitchell. "You're carrying nothing but the map and radio—we need you thinking, not weighed down."

Mitchell gave a tight nod. "Got it."

Beckett looked toward the others. "Extraction is two clicks east. We hold a staggered formation—I'm up front, you four in the middle and Torres will pull up the rear. No unnecessary talking. If anything feels wrong, we break and evade. No second-guessing. Clear?"

A round of quiet nods.

Lawson shifted uncomfortably, gripping her rifle tighter. "I don't like this."

Delaney shot her a glance. "Yeah? Join the club."

She shook her head. "No, I mean... this ain't right. Something's off. Feels like we're walking into something."

Beckett exhaled through his nose. "Could just be nerves. Could be something real. Either way, we stay sharp. Let's move."

As the team pushed forward, Mitchell kept his focus ahead, but Lawson's words sat heavy in his chest. Something was off. He could feel it too.

And they were about to find out what.

Chapter Seven - Firefight

The team moved through the dense jungle in a tight formation, every step deliberate and every sound scrutinized. The echoes of the explosion still lingered in their minds, but there was no time to dwell on it. Beckett led the way, his rifle raised and eyes scanning ahead, while Torres kept an eye on their flanks. The humid air clung to them like a second skin, and every rustle of leaves or distant call of wildlife felt like it could mask something far more sinister. They weren't just retreating—they were surviving.

A sudden shift in the atmosphere made Lawson stop in her tracks, her instincts on edge. "Something's off," she whispered, glancing at Delaney. Before he could respond, a faint metallic click echoed through the underbrush. Delaney's heart pounded as he raised his weapon. "I don't think we are alone," he muttered, signaling for everyone to get low. The jungle, once merely oppressive, now felt like a trap waiting to spring shut around them.

As quickly as they ducked down, a sharp crack split the air—then another.

The first bullet ricocheted off a tree, hissing past Mitchell's ear like an angry wasp. The second found its mark.

Beckett jerked violently, his rifle slipping from his hands as a mist of blood erupted from his chest. His body slammed backward into the underbrush, the breath leaving him in a single, choked gasp.

"Contact!" Torres bellowed, his rifle already up, firing blind into the treeline.

Mitchell threw himself to the ground, his heart hammering as gunfire erupted around them, the jungle erupting into chaos.

The gunfire came fast and precise, snapping through the jungle with deadly intent. Muzzle flashes flared in the distance, revealing glimpses of shadowed figures moving through the dense undergrowth—trained, disciplined, but not uniformed.

Mitchell rolled to his side, raising his rifle. He barely had time to think—just react. He squeezed the trigger, sending controlled bursts into the foliage ahead, but it was impossible to tell if he hit anything.

Torres moved like a man who had done this a hundred times before, dropping to a knee and returning fire in short, deliberate bursts. "Eyes up! We're not dealing with amateurs!"

Delaney hit the dirt behind a fallen tree, wrenching his rifle up as bullets tore into the bark just inches above his head. "Yeah, no shit!" he barked, shifting to the side before letting off a quick burst.

Lawson was pressed flat against the ground, gripping her weapon but not firing yet, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. This wasn't a simulation. This wasn't a drill.

Hayes was beside her, grinning despite the chaos, firing off rounds in bursts that weren't exactly precise but still forced their attackers to stay low. "Man, this is insane!" he shouted over the gunfire. "How the hell did they find us this fast?!"

"Shut up and shoot!" Delaney snapped, shifting position to cover a new angle.

Torres moved swiftly toward the tree line, ducking behind a thick trunk as he reloaded. "We need to fall back—get to the beach! This is a kill zone!" he called out, urgency tightening his voice. The team exchanged quick glances, understanding the unspoken command. The beach wasn't just their extraction point—it was open ground, where they had a better chance of seeing the enemy before the enemy saw them.

Before anyone could respond, a new burst of gunfire shredded through the air—a brutal, concentrated volley. Torres barely had time to turn before a round punched clean through his temple. His body dropped instantly, lifeless before it hit the dirt.

Mitchell felt his stomach twist, but there was no time to react or grieve. They were pinned down, and now they had lost two men.

Mitchell felt the panic clawing at his chest but he didn't let it take hold. They had to move. Now. His rifle kicked against his shoulder as he fired another burst into the treeline, buying them seconds of breathing room.

"Fall back! Get to the beach!" he shouted, not waiting to see if they followed. He turned, dropping low as he sprinted to a new position, trying to cover their retreat as bullets chewed through the jungle around them.

Delaney was already moving, dragging Lawson with him as she fumbled to reload, her hands shaking just enough to slow her down. "Come on, come on—" she muttered under her breath, finally slamming the magazine into place.

Hayes fired wildly, his rounds hitting nothing but air—until one found its mark. A distant shout of pain cut through the gunfire, and Hayes' face lit up. "I got one!"

"Great, shoot the rest of them!" Delaney snapped, barely stopping to fire before pulling Lawson behind the cover of a thick tree.

Mitchell dropped to a knee, squeezing the trigger, feeling his shots connect by sheer luck as another figure jerked sideways and disappeared into the underbrush. Their attackers weren't invincible—but they still had the upper hand.

"Keep moving!" Mitchell barked, his voice rough from adrenaline. The team staggered backward, firing blindly, their weapons loud, unfocused, desperate.

The gunfire didn't stop, but for the first time, it seemed less intense—their return fire had done something. Maybe they'd taken out a couple, or maybe their attackers were just repositioning. Either way, it wasn't over yet.

The team staggered through the jungle, lungs burning, the crashing of their footsteps barely drowned out by the sporadic gunfire still snapping through the trees. The beach was close, but not close enough.

"Keep moving!" Mitchell shouted, his breath ragged. He could feel the exhaustion creeping in, but there was no time for it—they were running for their lives.

Hayes was just ahead of him, still gripping his rifle tight, still moving fast and reckless, his energy not fading like the rest of them. "We're almost there!" he called back, glancing over his shoulder with that same wild grin he'd had since the start.

The shot came without warning. A single, brutal crack.

Hayes jerked mid-stride, like someone had grabbed him by the back of his vest and yanked him off his feet. His body pitched forward, arms flailing, his rifle tumbling away into the brush. When he hit the ground, he didn't move.

Mitchell skidded to a stop. "Shit! Hayes is hit!"

Delaney turned, but the moment he did, bullets tore into the dirt around them, ripping into the ground just inches from where Hayes had fallen. Another volley snapped through the air, forcing them all to duck and stumble forward.

"We can't get to him!" Delaney shouted, his voice strained, furious. "They'll cut us down if we try!"

Mitchell's hands clenched around his rifle. They had already left the SEALs. Now Hayes. But one look at the sheer wall of suppressing fire raining down on them made it clear—they had no choice.

"Go! Move!" he ordered, his voice raw, and with that, the team turned away, leaving Hayes' lifeless body behind as they sprinted for the beach.

Their boots pounded against the jungle floor, breath ragged, adrenaline still spiking through their systems. But something had changed. The gunfire behind them had stopped. No more rounds snapping past their heads, no more branches splintering under incoming fire. They were still running, still desperate to reach the beach, but the attack had ceased.

Lawson was the first to say it, her voice sharp in the humid air. "They're not following us."

Delaney didn't slow down, didn't even glance her way. His rifle was still gripped tight in his hands, eyes locked ahead as they barreled toward the thinning treeline. "Doesn't mean they won't. Keep moving." His breath was ragged, his posture coiled, like he expected the next shot to come at any second.

Mitchell wasn't sure what was worse—the chase or the fact that it had just stopped. There was no way their attackers had simply given up. They had cut down two SEALs and put Hayes in the dirt without hesitation. Why break contact now? It gnawed at him, sent an uneasy pulse through his gut. But he wasn't about to slow down and find out why.

The scent of salt and the distant sound of waves crashing against the shore told them they were close. Lawson's voice cut through the tension, quieter now but steady. "I am scared shitless." She didn't sound like she was cracking—just stating a fact. "Like, borderline 'I should rethink my life choices' scared."

Delaney let out a short breath, something between a laugh and exhaustion. "Yeah, well, welcome to the club." He shot a glance toward Mitchell. "How about you, sir? You pretending this is just another day in the office?"

Mitchell didn't bother playing it off. "If I was pretending, I'm not doing a great job of it." He adjusted his grip on his rifle, chest still heaving from the sprint. "I don't think I've ever been this scared in my life."

The jungle began to thin, the dark canopy giving way to the gray-blue of the approaching evening sky. They were running out of daylight fast. Delaney slowed first, scanning ahead, then motioned toward a break in the undergrowth. "We need to get off the open sand before we call this in. No cover on the beach. We're dead if they spot us out there."

They peeled off toward a cluster of large rocks jutting from the earth, their surfaces smooth from years of ocean spray. Hunched low, they pressed into the natural cover, Mitchell immediately pulling out his radio as Delaney and Lawson turned back toward the jungle, weapons up. He dialed in the frequency, adjusting for interference as the fading light made the jungle feel even more suffocating.

Lawson kept her rifle tight against her shoulder, scanning the tree line for shadows, for movement, for anything that looked remotely human. "We didn't get everything," she muttered, voice low but tense. "The parts Hayes had—they're still with him."

Delaney exhaled sharply, shaking his head as he kept his aim steady. "Yeah. And it's not like we can just walk back and ask for them." His voice carried that same mix of anger and resignation—anger that they'd lost more than people today, and resignation that there was no way to change that now.

Mitchell, still focused on his radio, shifted slightly and muttered, "Maybe they'll send in Marines. More SEALs. Go get the bodies."

No one responded right away. They all knew the odds of that happening weren't great. The mission was already compromised, the chain of command probably scrambling to figure out their next move. But still—none of them wanted to say out loud that Hayes, like Beckett and Torres, would likely never come home.

He keyed the radio, voice steady despite the exhaustion, the pain, the sheer weight of the last two hours pressing down on him. "Lone Warrior, this is Echo One-Five. Three survivors at LZ. Ready for extraction."

Mitchell turned his head, finally taking in Delaney and Lawson properly now that they weren't moving. That's when he saw it—blood. A dark streak ran down Lawson's sleeve, soaked into the fabric of her flight suit. Delaney's vest was torn, a deep red stain spreading across his ribs.

"You two are hit," he said, brow furrowing.

Lawson looked down at her arm as if just now noticing, then gave a small shrug. "Just shrapnel." Delaney did the same, pressing a hand to his side before exhaling through his nose. "Same."

Mitchell blinked, glancing down. Sure enough, his pant leg was torn, blood soaking into the fabric just above his knee. He hadn't even felt it until now.

A low, rhythmic thumping carried over the ocean breeze. At first, it blended in with the sound of crashing waves, almost lost in the noise of the shifting tide. Then it grew louder—closer.

They all dropped lower against the rocks, weapons still ready, but no longer against an enemy—just waiting, listening as the familiar, steady whump-whump-whump of rotor blades echoed over the water.

Extraction was coming. And not a moment too soon.

Chapter Eight - Escape

The rhythmic thump of rotor blades grew louder as the MH-60 Seahawk dropped lower over the darkened beach, its searchlight flicking across the sand before switching off. Mitchell, Delaney, and Lawson ran toward it, their boots sinking into the wet ground, adrenaline still spiking after their brutal retreat. The deafening explosion of the drone's remains and their running firefight still echoed in their ears. There was no time to process it—not yet.

As they neared the open door of the helicopter, gunfire erupted from the treeline behind them. The sharp crack of rounds snapping past sent them diving for cover, but the Seahawk's door gunner was faster. The M240 machine gun roared to life, sending a withering stream of fire toward the unseen attackers. The sudden onslaught of tracers cutting through the night bought them precious seconds.

Rounds chewed through branches and kicked up dirt, forcing their pursuers to scatter. The gunner didn't let up, sweeping controlled bursts across the treeline, cutting down anything that moved. The rhythmic thump of the machine gun echoed over the roar of the rotors, a wall of lead standing between the strike team and certain death. Every spent casing that clattered to the cabin floor was another second bought, another enemy forced to keep their head down.

"Move it! Come on!!" The crew chief bellowed over the noise, waving them forward. Mitchell pushed Lawson ahead, then grabbed Delaney's vest, yanking him toward the door as another burst of rounds kicked up sand at their feet.

Lawson leaped into the cabin first, landing hard on the deck as she scrambled for a handhold. Delaney followed, nearly losing his balance as the helo lurched slightly. Mitchell was last, dragging himself inside just as the Seahawk lifted off. Below, the gunner continued hammering away at the treeline, sweeping bursts across the jungle to suppress any pursuit.

The helicopter banked hard, pushing them against the cabin walls. The air inside reeked of sweat, gunpowder, and burning metal. The rescue swimmer, strapped in near the medical gear, was already moving. "Anyone hit?"

“Just grazes,” Delaney grunted, shifting to check himself over. His uniform was ripped, but nothing serious. He turned to Lawson, who was pressing a hand against her shoulder. “You good?”

“Yeah,” she said, voice tight. “Just a scratch.” Blood slicked her fingers, but the wound wasn’t deep.

Mitchell exhaled sharply, wiping sweat and dirt from his face. “That was too close.” His hands were still shaking, but he clenched them into fists, forcing himself to steady his breathing. He turned to the crew chief. “Get me comms with the ship.”

The crew chief nodded, adjusting his headset as the Seahawk leveled out and sped toward the carrier. Behind them, the jungle disappeared into the night, leaving behind only the wreckage of their mission—and the bodies they couldn’t bring home.

The rescue swimmer worked quickly, checking each of them with practiced efficiency. Lawson winced as he pressed gauze against her shoulder. “You’re lucky. Straight through, no major damage.” He looked at Delaney and Mitchell. “Just shrapnel burns and scratches on you two. Nothing deep.”

Delaney leaned back against the cold metal of the cabin, exhaling sharply. His hands still felt jittery, the surge of adrenaline refusing to fade. “I swear to God, Lawson—how many times have you said you ‘feel like something’s gonna happen’ in the last three days?”

Lawson shot him a tired glare. “I don’t know, Delaney. Maybe because things keep happening?”

“That’s not the point,” Delaney grumbled, shaking his head. “Point is, every time you say it, it happens. It’s downright Spooky.”

Mitchell let out a breath of laughter, rubbing his face. “Yeah, that’s about right.” He glanced over at Lawson. “Guess we better start listening to you, huh, Lawson?”

Lawson rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. Delaney, despite himself, smirked. “Great. Now she’s gonna think she’s psychic.”

The crew chief handed Mitchell a headset, cutting off their banter. “We’ve got comms with the ship.”

Mitchell took the headset and pressed it against his ear. "Lone Warrior, this is Echo One-Five. Exfil in Progress. Package Secure. Mostly."

A pause. Then the reply came, the voice calm but firm. "Copy Echo One-Five. Understood. Be advised—due to the nature of the mission, strike fighters are Inbound Hot to neutralize the site. Estimated strike in five minutes."

Mitchell's expression hardened. He lowered the boom mic of his headset and glanced at the others. "They're wiping the site."

No one said anything. They all knew what that meant. Whatever was left of Hayes, whatever remained of the SEALs—they were about to be erased in fire. No grave, no marker, just smoke and silence where they had fallen. The only ones who would remember were the ones sitting in this helo, bruised, bleeding, and still breathing.

Mitchell sat back against the bulkhead, his grip tightening around the headset as the reality settled in. The jets would be there in minutes, turning the crash site—and anything left behind—into nothing but scorched earth. He exhaled slowly, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He knew it had to be done, but it didn't make it any easier.

Delaney must have read his expression because he muttered, "I don't know if it makes it better or worse that we don't have to watch it."

Lawson didn't say anything, just stared at the metal floor beneath her boots, still gripping the strap of her vest like she was holding onto something that wasn't there. Mitchell hadn't know Lawson long but he already knew that look—she was processing, filing everything away the way she did. He let the silence stretch for a moment before forcing himself to speak.

"For a minute back there, I thought we were all dead," he admitted, his voice quieter than before. "And you know what I was thinking? Not about the mission, not about the ship. Just my dad's cabin. Up by the lake."

Delaney scoffed, leaning his head back against the vibrating hull. "That where you go in your head when shit hits the fan? A nice little retreat in the woods?"

"Yeah," Mitchell said simply. He let his head rest back, eyes closing briefly as he pictured it. "Quiet mornings, cold beer, a beat-up old dock that creaks when you walk

on it. That place was the first thing that came to mind when I thought we weren't making it out."

For a second, he just listened to the hum of the rotors, letting the vibration of the airframe settle into his bones. He cracked one eye open, glancing at the night sky stretching beyond the cabin door. The stars were sharp and cold, scattered across the darkness, the same ones he'd stared at from that dock as a kid.

"Guess I've always had a thing for looking up at the stars," he mused, his voice quieter now. "Just figured I'd be doing it from somewhere a little less life-threatening."

Lawson glanced at him, finally breaking her silence. "Sounds nice."

Mitchell smirked slightly. "It is. And you two have an open invitation. When this deployment's over, first round's on me."

Delaney shot him a sideways look, then grinned. "Long as you're covering the second and third, I'm in, Sir."

Mitchell shook his head. "You can drop the 'Sir' crap, Delaney. After all this, I can't sit here and hide behind my rank."

Delaney didn't miss a beat. "And that's exactly why I think I like you, Sir."

Lawson just laughed.

For a moment, the tension lifted, the weight of the mission and everything they had lost giving way to something else—something unspoken but understood between them. A bond forged in fire, the kind that didn't fade when the mission ended.

Lawson shifted slightly, adjusting her shoulder strap before clearing her throat. "We should talk about who the hell was shooting at us," she said, steering the conversation back to reality. "Because that wasn't just some local militia. They were trained, equipped, and with that AI module we found missing, it's obvious they got to that wreck before we did."

Delaney nodded, his face still unreadable. "I've been thinking the same thing. The way they moved, how fast they got to the wreck—it was planned. They knew exactly what they were looking for."

Mitchell wiped a hand down his face, still piecing things together. "We assumed we'd be the first ones on site, but they beat us there. That means either they were monitoring the drone before it went down, or..." He hesitated.

"Or they were the reason it went down in the first place," Lawson finished for him.

Delaney exhaled through his nose. "Shit. That would explain why they hit us so fast. No hesitation, no probing—just straight to the kill."

Lawson adjusted her grip on her vest. "And that's what bothers me. If this was just some opportunistic group, we would've seen some signs of looting. But they weren't scavenging. They were looking for something specific."

Delaney's brow furrowed. "Or someone."

Mitchell turned to him, eyes narrowing. "You think they were expecting us?"

Delaney shrugged, but there was no humor in it. "I don't know. But I don't believe in coincidences."

Lawson sat up a little straighter. "If they knew we were coming, it means there's a leak somewhere. That kind of timing doesn't happen by chance. Either they had eyes on the drone before it went down, or someone fed them intel."

Mitchell let out a slow breath. "That's above our pay grade. But we'll put it in the debrief and let the Admirals figure out where the hell this went sideways."

Delaney leaned his head back against the cabin wall. "Yeah, assuming they actually listen this time."

No one had a good response to that. They all knew how intelligence reports had a way of being explained away, reinterpreted to fit an official narrative. But this time, it felt different. This time, they had come face-to-face with something bigger, something that wasn't just going away.

For a long moment, the three of them sat in silence, listening to the steady drone of the helicopter's rotors, letting the exhaustion creep in now that the adrenaline had started to wear off.

Then, Mitchell glanced out of the open cabin door as the Seahawk adjusted its course. The silhouette of the Truman came into view, bathed in soft floodlights against the dark ocean.

Delaney followed his gaze and let out a tired smirk. "Haze gray never looked so good."

Chapter Nine - Echoes of Fire

The fluorescent lights in the ship's medical bay were too bright, stark against the dull ache settling into every muscle. Mitchell sat on the edge of an examination table, stripped down to his undershirt, watching as a corpsman pressed an alcohol swab against a jagged cut on his forearm. The sting barely registered—his body was still running on whatever reserves of adrenaline hadn't burned out. Across from him, Delaney and Lawson were in similar states, each with their own corpsman tending to them, their uniforms torn and stained with dried blood and jungle dirt.

"Hold still, sir," the corpsman muttered, dabbing antiseptic over the wound before reaching for a set of butterfly strips. "Lucky this wasn't deeper, or you'd be getting stitches."

Mitchell flinched as the antiseptic stung, letting out a sharp, "Ouch! Yeah, thanks for the reminder, doc—I hadn't noticed the pain at all."

He gave a half-nod, forcing a faint smirk as his eyes flicked to Lawson. She sat on the next table over, a bandage wrapped tightly around her upper arm where a bullet had grazed her. Her expression was unreadable, but her white-knuckled grip on the edge of the table gave her away.

Delaney, sitting with his back against the bulkhead, let out a slow breath as another corpsman pressed a fresh dressing against a shrapnel graze on his shoulder. "I don't know about you two, but I could sleep for a damn week."

"Sleep," Lawson muttered, shifting slightly as the corpsman tightened the bandage. "I'm just happy we're not in pieces like the drone."

Mitchell exhaled through his nose, his mind still replaying the firefight, the flashes of gunfire, the sickening moment Hayes went down. His gut twisted, but he forced himself to push it aside. They were still here. That had to count for something.

The flight surgeon, a lieutenant with sharp eyes and a clipboard tucked under his arm, finally stepped into the room, glancing over their charts. "You're all banged up, but nothing serious. Scrapes and bruises. You guys will heal just fine. You'll be sore as

hell for a few days, but you're good to go." He looked at Mitchell. "Mitchell, you're the senior man here. You need anything before I clear you?"

Mitchell shook his head. "No, sir. We're fine." He glanced at Lawson and Delaney, making sure they didn't have any objections. Neither of them spoke up.

Before the flight surgeon could sign off on their release, the hatch swung open, and Commander Oakley Hall stepped inside. His eyes swept over them, taking in their exhausted postures, the bandages, the weight in their expressions. He didn't say anything at first—just nodded once at the flight surgeon. "They clear?"

The doctor nodded, scribbling something on his clipboard. "They're good to go."

Oak exhaled, then looked at Mitchell. "Come on. We've got a debrief waiting for us."



The SCIF was colder than the rest of the ship, the recycled air running just a little too strong, adding to the sterility of the room. The low hum of servers filled the background as Mitchell, Delaney, and Lawson stepped inside, following Oak. Around the table, several officers were already seated—CAG, the ship's CO, a handful of intelligence officers, and Wallace, the squadron XO. Their eyes locked onto the three as they entered, some scrutinizing, others impassive.

"Take a seat," the ship's CO said, his voice level, unreadable. "Let's get to it."

Mitchell lowered himself into a chair, feeling the stiffness settle into his joints now that the adrenaline had worn off. Delaney and Lawson flanked him, neither looking particularly comfortable under the weight of the room's attention. A large screen at the front of the room flickered with satellite images of the now-destroyed crash site—just smoldering jungle and craters where the wreck had been.

Oak leaned forward, elbows on the table. "First off, let's be clear—this tasking was only a partial success and came at a high cost. We recovered some components, but

the wreckage was compromised before we got there. And we weren't alone." His eyes flicked to the intel officers. "You have the floor."

A lieutenant commander from the intelligence shop adjusted his glasses, clearing his throat. "We've reviewed your after-action reports and the ISR footage from the F-35s. The strike eliminated any remaining evidence, but that doesn't answer the bigger question—who was on the ground before you?" He tapped the tablet in front of him, pulling up a grainy feed from a drone. Shadows moved through the trees—figures in tactical gear, working fast, methodical. "We believe you encountered a non-state actor, possibly a PMC or an intelligence proxy force. They weren't local militia."

Delaney let out a short breath. "No shit."

The CAG gave him a sharp look but didn't correct him. Instead, he turned back to the screen. "They moved like professionals, operated like professionals. That means someone with money and resources had eyes on that drone before we even knew it was down."

Lawson, arms crossed, tilted her head slightly. "So either they got lucky, or someone tipped them off."

The intel officer nodded. "And we believe we know what they were after." He tapped the tablet again, bringing up a classified document. "The AI module was missing from the wreckage. That's the most sensitive component, the one piece of hardware that couldn't be allowed to fall into the wrong hands." His gaze swept across the room. "Whatever else they left behind, they made damn sure they got that."

The ship's CO exhaled sharply, lacing his fingers together. "We don't deal in assumptions. We deal in facts. And right now, the fact is we still don't know who they were or what exactly they took." His gaze shifted back to Mitchell. "Lieutenant, from your perspective, what was their intent? Extraction or elimination?"

Mitchell thought back to the fight, to the way the enemy had engaged them. He met the CO's gaze and answered without hesitation. "Both."

The fantail of the USS Truman was quieter than usual, the steady hum of the ship's engines the only background noise as the squadron gathered, joined by members of the ship's crew. The sun had just started to dip toward the horizon, casting long shadows across the deck. The ceremony was small, but that didn't make it any less significant. A row of sailors stood at attention, their uniforms crisp despite the salt-heavy air.

Mitchell, Delaney, and Lawson stood near the front, side by side, their fresh bandages hidden beneath their uniforms. In front of them, three folded American flags rested on a table, each one prepared for the solemn moment ahead. Hayes and the two SEALs were gone—officially listed as KIA, their bodies unrecoverable—but the Navy didn't let its own pass without recognition.

Commander Oakley Hall stepped forward, his hands clasped behind his back, his gaze sweeping across the assembled sailors. He took a breath before speaking, his voice carrying over the wind and open ocean.

"We serve knowing that we may be called to sacrifice," he began. "Some of us do. Some of us don't. But none of us get to decide when our number is up. We can only choose how we face it." He glanced at the flags, then back at the crew. "Petty Officer Noah Hayes and the two operators who stood beside him died in service to something greater than themselves. They fought, they gave everything, and they never backed down. That is the measure of who they were. And because of them, others are still standing here today."

Silence followed his words, heavy and unmoving. The ship's CO stepped forward next, offering a few words of his own, but Mitchell barely registered them. His focus was on the horizon, where the sky met the sea in an endless stretch.

As the service concluded, a sailor lifted a small brass bugle to his lips, and Taps echoed across the deck. The sound was thin but carried deep, curling through the wind like a final farewell.

Delaney exhaled slowly, hands clasped in front of him. "Damn shame," he muttered, voice barely above a whisper. "Kid barely had time to figure out what kind of sailor he wanted to be."

Lawson nodded, her arms folded tightly across her chest. "He looked up to you, you know," she said, glancing at Delaney. "The way he watched you work, the way he tried to keep up."

Delaney let out a quiet breath, shaking his head. "Yeah, I know." He stared at the flag nearest to him, his jaw tightening. "Just wish I'd told him that."

Mitchell looked between them, then back out to the water. "None of us are ever ready for this part," he said. "Doesn't make it any easier."

They stood there a moment longer as the final note of Taps faded into the wind. The ceremony was over, but the weight of it would linger. It always did.



The ship's intelligence office was a far cry from the sterile calm of the SCIF. This space was functional, cramped, and filled with the soft hum of computers processing encrypted data. The air was thick with the scent of coffee and recycled air as screens flickered with satellite imagery, intercepted signals, and operational reports.

Mitchell, Delaney, and Lawson sat across from a pair of intelligence officers, the same lieutenant commander from earlier and a younger ensign who had been furiously taking notes since they walked in. CAG was absent this time, as was the ship's CO, but Oak and Wallace remained, standing near the back of the room, watching.

"Alright," the intel officer began, adjusting his glasses. "This is our second pass. If anything didn't make it into the first debrief, now's the time to say it. Let's start with the basics—walk me through what you saw from the moment you reached the crash site."

Mitchell folded his arms, leaning slightly forward. "Site was already compromised when we got there. No doubt about it. Wreckage was stripped in places— whoever got there first knew what they were looking for. They weren't just scavengers."

Lawson nodded. "And we know they got what they came for. The AI module was missing." She tapped a finger against the table, frustration creeping into her tone. "If they had enough time to pull that out, they either had inside intel or a way to track the drone before we even got there."

The intel officer pursed his lips, flipping through his notes. "So you believe they weren't just opportunists? That this wasn't a random recovery?"

Delaney let out a quiet scoff. "No way this was random. Whoever was here knew exactly what they were after. This wasn't rushed—they had a plan. And that means someone gave them a reason to be here."

The ensign across the table jotted something down quickly before looking up. "Do you think they expected resistance?"

Mitchell hesitated for a moment, replaying the attack in his head. "If they did, they didn't expect us," he finally said. "They hit hard, but they didn't have overwhelming numbers. It felt more like they were securing a package, not staging a full-on ambush."

Lawson exhaled sharply. "Still doesn't answer the biggest question—who the hell were they?"

The intel officer exchanged a glance with Wallace before turning back to them. "We've been combing through satellite data and SIGINT from the region, trying to cross-check any known PMC movements. So far, nothing conclusive. But the way you describe them..." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "We may be dealing with an independent force. Something off the books."

Delaney frowned. "Mercs?"

"Or worse," the intel officer admitted.

The room fell silent, the weight of that statement settling over them like a thick fog. This wasn't just about a lost drone anymore. This was something bigger, and the more they uncovered, the worse it seemed to get.

Mitchell rubbed his temple, exhaustion creeping in despite the tension still coiling in his chest. "So let's say it was a merc outfit, an independent force. That still

doesn't explain how they knew about the drone before we did. Someone tipped them off, or they were watching us long before this op even kicked off."

The intel officer nodded. "That's our concern too. If they had real-time tracking on that asset, we have a major security issue." He glanced at Oak and Wallace. "We're widening our net, looking for signals traffic that could indicate early coordination. If there was a leak, we need to find it."

Lawson leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. "And what if it wasn't a leak? What if they didn't need one?"

Delaney glanced at her. "You thinking tech?"

Lawson nodded. "It's possible they had a way to track the drone's signal directly. The AI module alone would've been a prime target for any nation looking to reverse-engineer our latest surveillance and EW capabilities. Maybe they didn't need intel from the inside—maybe they had the capability to find it themselves."

The intel officer exhaled, tapping his pen against the table. "That's a hell of a theory, but it's not impossible. Either way, we're dealing with an enemy who had the advantage before we even hit the ground. That's what keeps me up at night."

Mitchell let out a slow breath, glancing at Delaney and Lawson before pushing his chair back. "Yeah, well, they're not the only ones losing sleep over this." He stood, stretching slightly before looking at Oak. "We done here, sir?"

Oak studied them for a moment before giving a curt nod. "For now. But this isn't over."

No one disagreed.

As they stepped out of the intel office and into the cool, steel corridors of the carrier, the weight of the mission still hung over them. They had survived, but the answers they needed were still out there—hidden somewhere in the wreckage they never had a chance to fully recover.

And whoever had gotten there first... they weren't done, either.

Chapter Ten - Crossroads

The fantail was quiet at this hour, the usual hum of the ship's operations distant, muffled by the steady rhythm of the ocean against the hull. Overhead, the sky stretched wide and empty, the stars sharp and cold against the black expanse. A light breeze carried the salt air across the deck, but neither man seemed to notice.

Mitchell leaned against the railing, arms folded as he stared up, his expression unreadable. It had been hours since the intel debrief, but his mind still wasn't ready to shut down. Too many pieces left unaccounted for. Too many unanswered questions.

Delaney stepped up beside him, his movements slower than usual, the stiffness from his injuries obvious. He let out a low breath, crossing his arms as he followed Mitchell's gaze upward. The two stood in silence for a moment before Delaney smirked. "You know, you do a hell of a lot of star gazing for a guy who's supposed to be tracking threats."

Mitchell huffed a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "Maybe I just like knowing there's something out there bigger than all this." He gestured vaguely toward the ship, the mission, the weight of everything still pressing down on them. "Puts things in perspective."

Delaney nodded, his smirk fading slightly. "Yeah. I get that." He let the silence settle again before glancing over. "You always been like this? The quiet, brooding type?"

Mitchell smirked. "Depends on who you ask. Some people just call it thinking."

Delaney let out a short chuckle. "Yeah, well, too much of that'll drive you nuts." He shifted his stance, wincing slightly. "But I guess it makes sense. After the last few days we've had, hard to just flip a switch and move on."

Mitchell exhaled through his nose. "Yeah." His grip tightened slightly on the railing. "You ever think about how close it was? How fast it could've gone the other way?"

Delaney was quiet for a moment before answering. "Constantly." He drummed his fingers against his bicep, staring out at the dark water. "But you know what gets me the most? It's not the ones who don't make it. It's the ones who do. The ones who have to carry it."

Mitchell glanced at him, studying the way Delaney's jaw tightened, the way his shoulders tensed even as he spoke casually. He understood it. More than he wanted to. "Mm," he said, voice quieter. "That's the part they don't warn you about."

Delaney scoffed. "No, they don't." He hesitated, then added, "But we don't get to stop. Not really. We just figure out how to keep going."

Mitchell nodded, letting the words sink in. He knew Delaney was speaking from experience, the kind that didn't come from books or training but from surviving long enough to understand the cost. And for the first time since stepping onto this ship, he realized something—he wasn't alone in it.

The ship rocked gently beneath them, the distant sound of waves filling the silence between their words. Neither man was in a hurry to break it.

Delaney finally exhaled, glancing sideways at Mitchell. "You ever think about what you'd be doing if you weren't out here? If you hadn't gone this route?"

Mitchell smirked, still looking up. "I used to. But every time I tried to picture something else, it just felt... off. Like trying on a jacket that doesn't fit." He shook his head slightly. "I don't know. Maybe this was always where I was supposed to end up."

Delaney nodded, watching him. "Yeah. I get that." He rubbed a hand across his jaw, then sighed. "Still, there's gotta be something after all this. Can't spend your whole life in uniform and expect it to be enough."

Mitchell finally looked away from the stars, meeting Delaney's gaze. "You got something in mind for yourself? After all this?"

Delaney snorted. "Not a damn clue." He gestured vaguely at the ocean. "But I know it sure as hell won't be standing around in an office, pushing paper."

Mitchell chuckled. "Yeah, I don't see that working out for you."

They lapsed into silence again, but this time, it felt lighter. The weight of the mission, of the losses, of everything they'd been carrying—it wasn't gone, but it wasn't as suffocating.

Delaney glanced back up, watching Mitchell's eyes track the sky. He smirked slightly. "You really do stare at the stars a lot."

Mitchell shrugged, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Like I said—puts things in perspective."

Delaney shook his head, laughing softly. "Yeah. It's definitely a thing with you." He turned back toward the ship, stretching slightly before patting the railing. "C'mon, let's get some rack time before someone decides to send us to take over China or something."

Mitchell lingered for just a second longer, casting one last look at the sky before pushing off the railing. He followed Delaney back toward the hatch, knowing without a doubt—this wouldn't be the last time they stood out here, looking up.



The catwalk was one of the best places to be on the ship when you weren't working. Out of the way, quiet enough to think, but still close enough to the action to remind you where you were. Delaney leaned against the safety railing, watching as the deck crew prepped for recovery. The red glow of the wash lights bathed the non-skid in an eerie hue, the deep hum of the carrier's engines vibrating through the metal beneath his boots.

Beside him, Lawson sat on the edge of the catwalk, arms wrapped around her knees, eyes locked on the horizon where the Hawkeye's anti collision lights flashed in the distance. The aircraft was still a few minutes out, its approach steady as it closed in for its trap.

Neither of them spoke at first. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, just the kind that came after too much happening too fast. After all they had been through in the last few days, neither of them was in a rush to fill the quiet.

Delaney let out a slow breath, breaking the silence first. "You ever think about what's next?"

Lawson's brow furrowed slightly. "Next?"

"Yeah." He gestured vaguely toward the dark sky. "After this. After the deployment. Where you're headed."

She was quiet for a moment before shrugging. "Haven't thought that far ahead."

Delaney studied her for a second before shaking his head. "Bullshit."

Lawson shot him a look, but there wasn't any real heat behind it. "I mean it. This job keeps you busy enough that thinking about what's next feels like a waste of time." She exhaled, glancing back out at the approaching Hawkeye. "Besides, I like what I do."

"I know you do," Delaney said, nodding. "And you're damn good at it. But that's not what I'm talking about." He leaned against the railing again. "You ever think about commissioning? Going intel?"

Lawson blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

Lawson frowned, still processing what Delaney had just said. "You serious?"

"Dead serious." Delaney kept his eyes on the approaching Hawkeye, the winking red and green lights reflecting in his gaze. "You've got the instincts for it. Hell, you were seeing patterns in the enemy's movements before command even thought to check the tapes."

She scoffed. "That's just paying attention."

"That's more than just paying attention." Delaney turned to her, his expression unreadable. "You were three steps ahead of intel this entire op. You knew something was off before we ever left the ship. You think that's normal?"

Lawson exhaled, glancing down at her hands. "I don't know, Del. I like working on these birds. I like being part of the crew. Commissioning changes things."

"Yeah, it does," he admitted. "But it also puts you in the room where the real decisions get made. Right now, you see things, you catch things—but you don't have the rank to make them listen."

Lawson hesitated. That was a hard truth, one she had come up against more than once.

Delaney leaned against the railing again, his voice softer now. “Look, I get it. You love the job. But you ever ask yourself why you’re so damn good at finding the things no one else catches?”

She smirked slightly. “Because you don’t shut up about it?”

Delaney chuckled. “Yeah, well, maybe that’s my job. But seriously, you should think about it. You’re already doing half the work an intel officer does—might as well wear the bars and make it official.”

The Hawkeye was closer now, its engines roaring as it lined up for the approach. The deck crew moved into position, arms outstretched, bathed in the glow of the lights guiding the aircraft in.

Lawson didn’t answer right away. She watched the Hawkeye, the controlled precision of it all, the way every piece of the puzzle had to work in perfect sync. Her world had always been about keeping those birds flying, making sure the systems worked so the mission could happen. But lately, it felt like she was meant to do more.

“I’ll think about it,” she finally said, though there was more certainty in her voice than hesitation.

Delaney nodded once. “That’s all I’m asking.”

The Hawkeye’s wheels slammed into the deck, the arresting cable catching, jerking it to a stop. The thunder of its engines rumbled through the flight deck, shaking the catwalk beneath them.

Lawson let out a slow breath. “I don’t know if I want to be in that room,” she admitted. “But I don’t think I want to be stuck outside of it either.”

Delaney smirked. “Then I guess you already made up your mind.”

She looked at him, thoughtful, then back at the Hawkeye as the deck crew rushed in to secure it. A small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

Below them, the ship carried on, mission after mission, never stopping. The war wasn't over. The fight wasn't finished. But they were still standing. And sometimes, that was enough.

An excerpt from The Shattered Shield...

The flight deck thrummed with energy, the roar of jet engines mingling with the sharp tang of aviation fuel in the salty air. Crew members in brightly colored vests darted between aircraft, their movements honed by repetition and necessity. Beneath their feet, the deck vibrated with the constant hum of machinery, a reminder of the immense power at work. The sun hung low on the horizon, casting long shadows that flickered across the deck as if the routine of the day held its breath, waiting for the unexpected.

As John Patrick Delaney stood near the bottom of Catapult 2, surveying the bustling activity of the flight deck, a sudden gust of wind kicked up, stronger than the meteorologists had predicted. The deck crew braced themselves against the force, but it caught one of the junior sailors off guard. He stumbled, his hands flailing as he staggered dangerously close to the spinning eight-bladed propeller of the Hawkeye's starboard engine.

John's instincts kicked in. "Watch your step!" he shouted, sprinting across the deck with a speed that belied his years of service. His voice barely cut through the roar of the Hawkeye's engines, but it was enough to snap the sailor back to attention. The young man scrambled to regain his footing, but the wind and the slipstream from the spinning propeller fought him, dragging him dangerously close to the deadly blades.

John reached him just in time. With a firm grip, he hauled the sailor back, away from the propeller, and pulled him to safety. The rest of the deck crew acted swiftly, securing the area as the wind and turbulence from the propeller died down. The sailor, wide-eyed and breathing hard, looked up at John with a mix of fear and gratitude.

"You good, sailor?" John asked, giving the sailor a quick once-over for any signs of injury. "Y-yes, Chief," the sailor stammered, still shaken. "I didn't see it coming."

"None of us did," John replied, his voice firm but calm. "But you've got to stay sharp out here. One slip-up, and it's all over."

John patted the sailor on the back, offering a quick, reassuring nod. As he glanced up, Lieutenant Commander Cameron "Gazer" Mitchell caught his eye. Gazer

stood nearby, his signature duck-themed Hawaiian shirt fluttering over his flight suit. The shirt was a running joke among the squadron and even the ship, a charm of light-hearted defiance. Today, it stood out against the seriousness of the flight deck, but Gazer's grin remained steady. "Hey, Chief!" Gazer called out, his voice carrying easily over the noise. "You ready to let the bird fly?"

John shook his head, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Everything's set. But one day, that shirt's going to get you in trouble."

Gazer laughed, unperturbed. "Hasn't happened yet. You should try it sometime, Chief. Might bring you some luck."

Gazer laughed, then paused, glancing out over the horizon. "You know, after this deployment, I'm thinking of finally taking that trip to New York. Been putting it off for years."

John raised an eyebrow. "You've been talking about that forever, Gazer. You better make it happen this time."

Gazer grinned. "Yeah, this time I will. Gotta see those sunsets before it's too late."

John rolled his eyes. "Not a chance. I wouldn't be caught dead in that thing. Someone's gotta keep this ship looking respectable."

Gazer grinned even wider, clearly enjoying the banter. "Respectable's overrated, Chief. You never know—it might just grow on you." Gazer's grin faded for a second, his gaze drifting toward the horizon. "Feels like we've been doing this forever, doesn't it? Sometimes I wonder how much longer we can keep going."

John nodded, sensing the weight behind Gazer's words but brushing it off. "Yeah, but we're still here. Still got plenty more to do."

Gazer shook off the moment of unease, his grin returning. "Yeah, plenty more."

"Not in this lifetime," John shot back, though his smile lingered as he watched Gazer make his rounds.

"Everything's set," John replied, nodding toward the Hawkeye.

[Read The Shattered Shield to continue the story...](#)

About the Author

Patrick J. Hughes is a Navy veteran and author who brings authenticity and insight into military thrillers. He draws from over a decade of service, sharing realities of modern warfare and the personal battles service members face. His debut novel *The Shattered Shield* follows seasoned sailor John Delaney aboard the USS Ronald Reagan as he navigates naval warfare and the weight of grief. His follow up novel *Broken Shadows* follows Dolan Keane, former sailor, who is forced back into action when a terrorist plot threatens one of his sons. Follow him as he is forced to battle both external enemies and the PTSD and guilt from his past.

Patrick continued his commitment to the military community after service by working at Northrop Grumman and Sikorsky Aircraft. Now a disabled veteran, he advocates for mental health, encouraging others to seek support for service-related trauma. Through his novels, he breaks stigma and highlights that true strength comes from facing inner struggles.

Residing in Connecticut, Patrick is a full-time college student and father to twin boys, John and Kevin, who even inspired parts of his stories. His journey from a first-grade writer who once wrote, "I like to publish books," to a published author is both humble and inspiring.

For more on Patrick's journey through military life, mental health, and writing, visit his blog at funkyotter.blog.

Mental Health Resources

For anyone struggling with PTSD or mental health challenges, there are resources available to help. You don't have to face these battles alone. This is the most current information available at the time of publishing.

Veterans Crisis Line (for veterans and their families):

- Phone: Dial 988 and press 1, or call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1
- Text: 838255
- Online Chat: www.veteranscrisisline.net

For civilians:

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:
 - Phone: Dial 988
 - Text: Text "HELLO" to 741741
 - Website: www.988lifeline.org
- Crisis Text Line:
 - Text: Text "HELLO" to 741741 (free, 24/7 crisis support via text)
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI):
 - Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)
 - Website: www.nami.org
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA):
 - Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
 - Website: www.samhsa.gov

Reaching out for help is the first step toward healing. You don't have to go through this alone.