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reflections and orders

21:57 Local Time
Judge Advocate General Headquarters
Washington Navy Yard
Washington, D.C.

Commander David Reese sat at his desk, illuminated by a dim lamp while reviewing his case load for tomorrow. The office was quiet this evening. Only the occasional pop from the coffee machine in the room next door and the copier broke the silence. He rose from his desk and propped himself against the door frame surveying the room. The lights were low in the main room where clerks and assistants were burning the midnight oil. He had for-gone dinner to wait on an important call from the Secretary of the Navy. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. All the paperwork this evening had blurred his vision. A break was in order.

Reese walked into the next room to pour himself a cup of coffee. He guessed you could call it that. It hadn't been made that

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long ago, but Admiral Grant Anderson's aide tended to brew pots that could strip wallpaper, they were so strong. Such was a pot of Navy coffee. His own assistant, Lieutenant Mason, entered the room just as he finished adding some creamer.

"Sir, I have those depositions copied and ready when you need them."

"Thanks, Mason. Didn't you have a final review tonight for the bar exam?"

"Yes, sir. But I knew you needed those depositions. I also finished the research for the article thirty-two hearing on Petty Officer Barnes next week. I have it in the computer and arranged for his transport here."

Mason looked intently at the Commander. His thoughts seemed far from his job this evening.

"Sir?"

"I'll look at the case in the morning. You've done enough this evening. Go home. I'll see you tomorrow."

Reese took his cup and made his way out to his office. Mason followed and picked up his belongings to leave. He secured his area and noticed the Commander sitting at his desk staring blankly at the papers in front of him. He had been concerned over Reese as of late. The Commander was more than a work colleague. Reese had encouraged Mason all through law school and helped him prepare for the bar himself when he had time. They had known each other for six years now, three professionally at JAG. Mason respected the senior attorney immensely. He was brave and stood for the truth, always. The Commander embodied the Marine phrase *Semper Fi*, always faithful, even though he was Navy. He cautiously approached the Commander's office.

"Sir, I don't mean to pry, but are you okay?"

"I will be, Mason."

"Can I get you anything before I leave, sir? Maybe some

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dinner? I think I heard your stomach over the copier a few minutes ago.”

“No, thank you. Tell Cassie I said hello. See you in the morning.”

The Commander lowered his head a bit and began turning pages in a file.

“I will. Good-night, sir.”

Mason knew the Commander well enough to know he would talk when he was ready.

Reese watched the retreating form of Lieutenant Chad Mason. He couldn't just lay it out there, at work, to Mason. He couldn't say that he felt something was missing from his life as of late. At forty-two, he knew something had been missing for a while. In actuality, someone was missing. His career was what he had wanted. He could depend on it to be there for him. But in truth, his career was all he had. He envied Mason sometimes. Mason had managed to secure his future with the Navy and have a loving fiancée. They were to be married next year. He had seen the two of them together. They were so in love. He wanted that for himself. That meant letting someone in, and that wasn't something he was good at.

After losing his parents and growing up with Aunt Margie in Georgia, he had trouble getting close to people. He figured if you only let someone so close, it wouldn't hurt as much when they left. That had been his philosophy since he was eight. Few people really knew who David Reese was. Women who got close enough to him and his life, scared him. If they didn't end it when things got too comfortable, he did. It was how he protected himself. Loving someone meant being vulnerable to them. Loving someone meant trust from both sides. He had never had that.

Only one woman had managed to infiltrate his defenses and she had disappeared from his life two years before. She was

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wrapped in a mystery and cloaked in a conundrum. She appeared when he needed help on a case, helped to solve the problem and would promptly leave. He was desperate to find her again. He needed her like he needed air to breathe. His waking hours left him clinging to the hope that she would come breezing through his door. His sleep consisted of the dream of having her in his arms.

Petty Officer Duke St. Clair, the Admiral's aide, knocked on the open office door. Reese raised his head.

"Sir, the Admiral would like to see you. SECNAV cancelled the call. He's on his way."

"Thank you, St. Clair."

Reese retrieved his dress blue jacket from the back of his chair and slipped it on. He held up his right cuff and looked at it. He had worked hard for those three stripes. He was up for promotion to Captain soon, and another would be added. His stripes and the mill rind, the JAG symbol, were constants to him. He straightened his tie and made his way to the Admiral's office. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

Reese stood at attention in front of the Admiral's desk. The Admiral's chair was turned away from him.

"Commander Reese, reporting as ordered, sir."

"At ease, Commander. I'm sure St. Clair informed you that the SECNAV is on his way." Admiral Anderson spun around his chair to face Commander Reese. "What he didn't tell you is that at seventeen twenty hours this evening, a crate of missiles were taken from a base in Germany that were on their way to Washington. Intelligence is on it right now."

Reese's face dropped.

"Have a seat, Commander."

The Admiral was a by-the-book Navy man through and through. He had weathered his time on submarines and destroy-

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ers. Fifteen years before, after losing his taste for having sea spray in his face, he decided to use his law degree and transferred to JAG. He was in command of the Naples office-before arriving in Washington eight years later. He was tall, fair skinned and having a bald head suited him perfectly. He liked everything cut and dried.

Reese sat down as the Secretary of the Navy, Thomas Regis, came bursting into the office. Regis was in his middle fifties, of average height, dark hair, and piercing green eyes that seemed to look right through you. His temples were showing the first signs of gray. He wore glasses that were streamlined rectangular frames that fit closely to his wide face. Regis was a no-nonsense man whose face never betrayed his emotions-despite what he might be thinking. His presence in a room alone was enough to command your attention.

“Gentleman, we have a highly intense situation on our hands, and it calls for extreme measures.” He sat down quickly beside Reese and nodded his head to acknowledge the two men. “The two missiles in question just came from research and development and are used in conjunction with Navy attack fighters. They have the latest guidance system imbedded in their software.”

The Admiral’s brow furrowed. “Why are you telling us this? Isn’t this something the CIA and Navy Intelligence can handle?”

“Ordinarily, yes. But these missiles were in a guarded warehouse that only two people had access to. One of them was a Department of Defense official over Navy projects, Cole Peterson, who has gone missing. I want Commander Reese to be on the scene handling the investigation personally. Our Navy Officers in Germany are facing serious charges over this. I want my JAG officers on it, not just the one’s in Germany. I also want someone to go with him. We don’t know all the parameters of the situation, and he’ll need someone to watch his back and help with the inves-

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tigation.”

Reese smelled something fishy. “What aren’t you telling us Mr. Secretary?”

Regis knew better than to hold back from Reese and Anderson. They would get it out of him one way or another. They had before.

“These missiles can be loaded with chemical weapons set to detonate over the intended target with precision accuracy. When the missiles left R&D, they were loaded with a biological payload to be brought back to the United States and stored. They were under rigorous security because of it.”

“What kind of payload?” Reese’s face gave away nothing.

“I’m not sure.”

Admiral Anderson had jumped to his feet. “What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“I’m not sure. It could be anything. The lab they were testing at has any number of agents.”

“Like?” Reese continued to stare at the SECNAV.

“Like H1N1, Sarin, Anthrax, you name it.”

“No wonder you want these missiles back so badly.” The Admiral sat back down, his face a mask of anger. “Why would they leave a payload like that inside a missile? It should have been shipped back separately.”

“It was done together to save time and money. Our budget cutbacks have been enormous. You know that.”

“Why send Commander Reese?”

“Truthfully?”

“That’s the only answer I want right now, Regis.”

“Commander Reese was an aviator. If we can recover the missiles, they’re to be flown back. The same person I’m sending to help will brief him on the way.”

“You want me to fly these things back?” Reese was shocked.

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“I haven’t landed a Navy bird in...”

“But you have been flying, on your own time. Yes?”

“Yes. I still don’t see why you couldn’t get another man.”

Reese swallowed hard.

“Commander, you’re the best here at JAG. You’re also a pilot.” Regis zeroed his gaze on Reese. “A damn good JAG officer and a Naval Aviator is what we need. Are you willing to do this to get yourself back into a cockpit officially?”

Reese took in the words, processing them slowly. Did he have the courage to get back in a plane after what happened in Nevada? He hadn’t been an active pilot in twelve years after surrendering his wings and going to law school instead. He missed the feel of being in a jet. He yearned for it every time he set foot on a carrier for an investigation or the smell of jet fuel hit him square in the face. He had been up in a Navy bird several times on investigations but only when it called for it. He was still listed as an inactive aviator. An F-14 was an expensive machine and couldn’t be handed over to just anyone. He had dreaded knowing the Tomcat’s were to be retired soon and he would be unable to fly one anymore, period. He would be a relic of the past with his plane gone. All he could do now was borrow a friend’s civilian bird and take it up once in a while.

“Commander?” Secretary Regis was waiting on an answer.

Reese deferred to the Admiral. “Sir?”

“It’s up to you. It’s your ass on the line in a plane if they find the missiles.”

Reese licked his lips quickly and wheezed out, “I’ll do it.”