

TITLE: Middle Man

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RATING: T

WARNINGS: Adult language

DISCLAIMER: Characters belong to their corporate parents. I'm just playing with them and I have no money worth going to court over, though the zine collection might be worth something.

Chapter One

The house was in darkness as Hawke eased the Jet Ranger into approach. In the moonless night, the starlight alone wasn't enough to clearly identify the outline of the landing pad. Sighing, he flipped the switch for the spotlight, illuminating the ground below. Tapping the collective to maintain the proper angle for approach was automatic, awareness of the process operating in the background of a distracted mind.

Fifty feet above ground, the landing pad lights switched on as motion detectors kicked in.

"Bout time," Hawke muttered.

He watched the house for lights but the windows remained stubbornly dark and unyielding, giving no indication of occupation or awareness of visitors, though Hawke was pretty sure that perimeter alarms had registered his approach and landing.

Touching down, he shut down the helicopter, scowled at the still dark house and dug into his pack for the .45 automatic he'd stowed earlier. Caitlin had been after him for months to consider switching to a 9mm – less weight to carry, greater capacity -- but the Colt had yet to fail him in the crunch and Hawke knew himself well enough that he would continue to rely upon what he knew from personal experience worked, statistics be damned.

The landing pad was a good quarter mile from the house and Hawke wondered, not for the first time, as he trudged across the grassy landscape, at the vast expense of land surrounding a house so rarely occupied by its owner, and then only for sleep and occasional meals.

Landscaping was minimal: California lilac, scrub oak, and other plants native to the Topanga canyon area scattered the property adding contrast and color, but none grew within two hundred feet of the house.

One hundred feet from the house's stone walls, Hawke grimaced and turned his head as exterior floodlights temporarily blinded him. The floodlights cast broad swathes of light, overlapping so that each square inch of ground was illuminated. The lights themselves, built into the eaves of the low-slung house, were nearly impossible to identify individually, and Hawke was fairly certain that even if one went out – or was deliberately put out -- backups existed to ensure that the house's occupant had clear line of sight to whoever approached.

Squinting, he slowly adjusted to the light and continued forward. He rounded the corner of the house to its front, eyes professionally scanning the curved walls of the entry alcove for the security cameras

expertly concealed. He had been told that there were at least four different cameras, each at a different height or angle, and suspected that there were probably more than four. Grudgingly, he conceded that the security designer knew what he or she was doing; he was only able to identify one potential.

He rang the doorbell and then stepped back so that the overhead light of the entryway clearly identified him.

The front door opened almost immediately, though only a scant inch or two, and Hawke heard the quiet slide of a gun's safety being reset.

One of the side benefits of a working relationship with The Firm's Deputy Director was that unexpected arrivals at 3:43 AM didn't generate a litany of complaints, merely a measured appraisal, a nod, and a step aside to admit Hawke.

"Hawke, I'd say this is a pleasant surprise but we both know I'd be lying."

For someone who'd very probably been soundly asleep before Hawke's arrival, Michael Coldsmith Briggs was surprisingly clear eyed and mostly dressed, though probably in the trousers and shirt he'd removed only hours earlier. Briggs placed his handgun – another .45, Hawke made a mental note to mention it to Caitlin – on the hallway console as he glanced behind him to the stairway.

"It is Hawke," he said, surprising Hawke who hadn't expected anyone other than Briggs to be at the house.

Marella, of course, he noted as the woman rose from a crouch at the bend of the staircase. She tucked her handgun into the pocket of her white silk robe, tightened the belt and descended quickly until she stood just behind Briggs.

Hawke tucked his own gun into the back waistband of his jeans, and reconsidered. No 'of course' about it, he decided. Marella might be Brigg's senior aide, his sounding board and second-in-command in all but official title, but even that demanding a job didn't require a 24 by 7 attendance upon her boss. Factoring in that the robe was too large for her, probably Michael's and the time of night, Hawke concluded that he had just acquired an additional negotiating position.

Briggs lifted the receiver of the telephone set resting on the hall console, tapped three numbers and held the receiver to his ear.

"This is Archangel. Yes. Clear code is Alpha X-ray 8-1-1-2-4-7." He listened silently for a few seconds. "Yes, that's right. Good night."

He turned back to Hawke. "I really should let them deploy some time to give my neighbors something legitimate to complain about. Perhaps then they'd cease their endless carping about the helicopters."

Gesturing to the dimly lit living room, Briggs tapped a number of wall switches to increase the lighting and followed Hawke into the room, taking the couch opposite to Hawke's armchair.

Marella trailed behind them, stopping when she reached a midpoint between living room and kitchen.

"Is it going to be coffee or something stronger?"

Briggs turned to Hawke. “Hawke?”

Hawke just shrugged.

Briggs sighed and turned back to Marella. “Let’s start with coffee. Do you mind?”

Hawke felt his eyebrow tick up slightly, wondering the last time that Briggs had even thought about whether or not one of his aides minded fetching his coffee. Impeccable manners usually yielded to exigency and Briggs was long accustomed to a position of authority.

Marella’s smile was aimed solely at her boss. “Assuming you actually have coffee in the house, and I can figure out how to use the new machine, it’s not a problem.” Her silk robe swished softly as she slipped into the kitchen.

Hawke, watching Briggs, noted that the other man’s eye lingered for a second on Marella before turning intently on his guest.

“Do you want to talk about it now or wait for coffee?” Briggs asked as he ran a hand through his hair, failing to smooth the sleep-tangled blond mess.

Faced with the subject at hand, Hawke suddenly felt a surprising reluctance and stalled. His eyes flicked between Briggs and the kitchen.

“I doubt that’s why you’re here,” Briggs said, his cool tone and steady glare a clear warning.

Hawke translated that as ‘leave it alone’ and filed it away for later use. From the kitchen, he heard Marella running the tap for water and filling the pot. He idly wondered what coffee maker Briggs was currently using; the man had an endless fascination with new gadgets, whether they were kitchen appliances, avionic upgrades or breakthroughs in weaponry.

“Dom’s missing,” he finally blurted out. “He’s been kidnapped.”

Briggs leaned forward, the look on his face softening with concern. “Are you sure? When was the last time you saw him?”

Marella walked into the room quickly, eyes widened and lips slightly parted as if to speak. Instead she bit her lip and leaned against the wall of the living room, eyes fixed on Hawke.

Under the penetrating gaze of two senior intelligence agents, Hawke stood, agitation driving a need to pace. The living room was large and gave him the space to expend nervous energy.

“Two, three days. We were supposed to meet for dinner two nights ago after his charter to Sacramento, some group of businessmen... Anyway, he didn’t show. Thought maybe he’d stopped off to see that lady friend he used to see, in Calaveres...”

“Lucy,” Marella said.

“I didn’t think too much about it because the dinner plans were a little vague, not a specific time or anything. Then I got a call about 6:00 last night, some guy saying if I wanted Dom back in one piece, I’d better show up with...”

“Airwolf,” Marella and Briggs said simultaneously.

Hawke shook his head and focused his attention on Briggs.

“Not Airwolf. They want you, Michael.”

Briggs’s eyebrows shot up and he leaned back against the back of the couch, one hand rubbing his mouth and chin as if to cover his reaction. A thumbnail scraped at his jaw, testing the slight hint of stubble, left it alone.

Hands in her robe pockets, Marella joined Hawke in pacing the room, apparently randomly until Hawke noticed that she’d positioned herself exactly between Hawke and Briggs.

“That’s not an option,” she said quietly.

Hawke was pretty sure Marella’s right hand was on the handgun in her pocket. He was equally sure she’d use it if she thought it necessary.

The coffee machine in the kitchen gurgled and the smell of brewing coffee drifted into the living room. The note of domesticity contrasted sharply with the tension in the living room. The very idea of trading one man’s life for another’s seemed far-fetched in the midst of brewing coffee and the contrast unsettled Hawke.

Briggs sat forward suddenly, eye narrowed and focused on Hawke.

“They *called* you?” he asked.

“Not at the cabin,” Hawke answered; the cabin was too remote for telephone service. He relied upon short-wave radio to reach most of the world, and a scrambled satellite phone to reach, or more usually be reached by, Briggs. “I was at the hangar. After I hung up, I went to Dom’s house, asked around at the airfield, called a couple of his buddies, even called that lady in Calaveres.”

“Are you sure he left Sacramento?” Marella asked, sitting finally, on the arm of the couch Briggs had claimed.

“He made it back to Van Nuys; the Jet Ranger was in the hangar yesterday morning ...”

“Someone local then,” Briggs mused. “When do they want to do the exchange?”

Marella’s gaze settled uneasily on her boss. “Michael...”

“I’m not agreeing to play lamb to the slaughter, Marella. I just want to know the details.” To Hawke, he repeated, “When? Where?”

“I don’t know where. I’m supposed to have you in the helicopter with me at the hangar and then get on a specific channel at 2:30 this afternoon. The guy said I’d get coordinates then.”

“How do you know they even have Dom?” Marella asked.

Hawke hoped Marella would stop shooting daggers every time she looked at him; he rocked uncomfortably on his heels.

“They put him on, for about 3 seconds. He said ‘Don’t do it, whatever it is.’”

Despite the nagging worry that sapped his spirits, the corner of Hawke’s mouth twitched upward at the memory at the memory of Dom’s spirited defiance.

Briggs smiled. “I would have thought he’d offer to deliver me himself.”

“That was six o’clock last night,” Marella said evenly.

“Yeah,” Hawke said, all too aware of what she was implying.

He toed the rug, lost in his own grim thoughts about what might have happened in the past ten hours, let alone what could happen in the next ten and a half. He reminded himself that whomever had taken Santini had taken him only as a bargaining chip, but that thought immediately led to the next. The kidnapper or kidnappers had no real reason to keep Dominic Santini alive past a certain point, and had a strong motive to make sure Santini couldn’t identify them.

Hawke scowled, his foot seeking something to kick and finding only the edge of the rug.

“What answer did you give?” Briggs asked.

“What do you think I said?” Hawke growled. “I asked him how the hell he thought I was going to drag a goddamn Deputy Director of the Firm out to wherever. For all I knew, you were in Washington, Berlin, or Hong Kong. I told him that there was no way I could deliver you.”

Briggs’s right eyebrow quirked up in an unspoken question.

“He told me that was my problem. For what it’s worth, he knew you were in town.”

Marella visibly shuddered and turned to Briggs. “You still want that coffee?”

“Assuming Hawke doesn’t plan on abducting me while you’re in the kitchen, yes. And I think I’ll add some of that ‘something stronger’ to my coffee.”

Throwing a suspicious glare at Hawke, Marella headed for the kitchen.

“Think she’ll poison my coffee?”

Briggs rubbed the lobe of his ear and grinned. “I don’t think she’s planning on making any coffee for you. If you want a cup, you’ll have to get it yourself.”

Marella returned carrying two steaming mugs and headed across the room to the cabinet Briggs used as a bar. “You’re out of everything,” she called over her shoulder. “No arsenic, strychnine or common rat poison anywhere.”

She added a splash of bourbon to each mug and returned to the couch. Handing one mug to Briggs, she sat next to him, tucking her long legs underneath her, wrapping both hands around her mug and smiling serenely at Hawke.

Smiling back despite himself, and the situation, Hawke headed for the kitchen, looked at the new coffee machine with slight curiosity and poured coffee into the mug that Marella had left on the counter. He sipped it gingerly, burning his upper lip on the steam. He lifted the mug – white, of course – and wondered again how and when Briggs had decided to adopt the color – the absence of color, he corrected himself – as a signature motif.

Returning to the living room, he heard Briggs and Marella speaking quietly and despite his better than average hearing, he only made out a handful of words: “Committee will never.... tell Zeus... Use of Airwolf...compromise every mission...”

Hawke cleared his throat, but neither seemed disturbed by his entry into the conversation.

Tapping his right index finger against the top of his coffee cup, Briggs looked away, his eye slightly unfocused. Hawke recognized it as a sign of serious data collection, sorting, and analysis. The computer in Michael’s brain, he’d called it, whenever he gave it a thought.

“What can you tell me about the caller? Voice? Accent? Did he give a name? Background noise? Static over the line?”

Hawke sipped at his coffee to buy time as he tried to remember the conversation. He remembered clearly the shock of realizing that Dom was in trouble, the sudden anger at himself for not realizing the seriousness of Dom’s absence, and a cold fury at whoever had taken the other man.

“No accent...”

“You mean American?” Marella interrupted.

Hawke nodded.

“California? Midwest? Southern? New York? New England?”

He shook his head. “Hell, I don’t know. I didn’t hear an accent so that probably means California.”

Briggs nodded. “What else?”

Hawke shrugged. “No name. It wouldn’t have been a real name if he’d given me one.”

“But it might have given us a clue to who it is and why he wants Archangel,” Marella said.

Hawke noted the shift back to code name, could see the gleam of the hunt in both their faces, the satisfaction of planning, maneuvering, and influencing events that drove their lives. Hawke would take straightforward strategy, tactics and action any day over this less direct approach.

“One man? Any voices in the background? Traffic? Announcements?” Briggs prompted.

“One man,” Hawke agreed. “Which doesn’t mean anything. He could have a partner, he could have twenty guys with him.”

As for background noises, Hawke tried to remember but all that came to mind was the buzzing in his own ears as his blood pressure rose in response to the caller’s threats: the immediate threat to Santini, the implied threat to Briggs.

He shook his head in frustration.

“Okay, let’s go over exactly what he said.”

Hawke ground his teeth, forcefully reminding himself that he’d come to Briggs’ house exactly for this kind of help, because every plan he’d conceived in the last ten hours carried enough risk that either Dominic or Michael, or both, would be killed. Assuming Michael cooperated. Assuming that the Firm didn’t whisk its Deputy Director to a safe house, surround him with a protective detail, and wait out the risk.

Head down, staring but not seeing the rug, Hawke tried to replicate the conversation, word for word.

“He addressed me by name, told me that he had my friend, Dominic Santini. That Dom was alive and in one piece and if I wanted to keep him that way, I should listen very closely.”

“Jesus, B-grade movie dialogue,” Briggs whispered in an aside to Marella.

“He said he knew that I knew how a prisoner exchange operates.”

Hawke sensed rather than saw Briggs and Marella’s increased level of wariness, Briggs’ cocked head.

“And then he said that he wanted Archangel, and that if I didn’t deliver Archangel to him, he’d kill Dom.”

Briggs and Marella remained silent; Hawke felt the weight of their combined watchfulness.

“I told him I didn’t know who he was talking about, played dumb ...”

Briggs snorted.

“...finally told him there was no way I could deliver you. He said that I had until 2:30 this afternoon to figure out a way to do so, or he’d kill Dominic. Then he put Dominic on.”

“Is that it?” Marella asked.

“No,” Hawke shook his head. “After Dominic finished, he said not to even try sticking some dumb bastard in a white suit and trying to pass him off as Archangel.”

He raised his head and looked at Briggs.

“He said that he’d recognize you, Michael. He also said that if he saw a white helicopter or a single person from the Firm in the vicinity of the exchange, he’d kill Dominic and he’d do his best to kill both of us. And then he said that if I just followed the rules, no one would end up hurt.”

“Well, you’re not naïve enough to believe that,” Briggs said.

Marella frowned, distracted.

“Deauville?” she asked Briggs.

“God, I hope not!” He tapped a bent knuckle against his upper lip, considering. “For Dominic’s sake and my own.”

“Phillippe Deauville?” Hawke asked, his voice just barely concealing a rising anger. “You playing arms dealer again, Michael?”

“Eduoard,” Briggs corrected. “You’re a bit out of touch, Hawke. Phillippe died last year. His son has taken over the family business.”

“And he wants you dead?” Hawke said tightly.

Briggs looked remarkably unfazed. “Possibly, but he’d hardly need a ‘prisoner exchange’ to accomplish that.”

Hawke glanced surreptitiously at Marella, noting the white knuckled grip on her coffee cup and the grim set to her jaw. Archangel might present a convincing lack of concern but his senior aide was far less sanguine.

“He said he’d recognize Archangel?” she asked, steering the conversation away from speculation back to the facts. “He didn’t say he knew him?”

With a glare at Briggs and a mental promise to come back to the Deauville family, Hawke nodded. “He said he’d recognize him.”

Marella looked back to Briggs. “It doesn’t definitely rule out someone you know, someone you’ve met, someone with history, but probability wise...”

“Or he could have a picture,” Hawke interrupted.

“Did he give any indication of why he wanted Archangel? Any hint of his intentions?”

“What Marella is so carefully not asking is whether or not your mystery caller wants me alive or plans to kill me on sight,” Briggs clarified.

Registering Marella’s almost infinitesimal wince, it occurred to Hawke that perhaps the real reason she’d switched to Briggs’ codename was that it was easier to deal with the situation in the abstract, easier to calculate the risk to Archangel, infinitely harder to consider putting *Michael* in danger. And if, as he suspected, they’d become involved on a more personal level...

“Didn’t say,” he shrugged.

“What else did he say?”

“That was it.”

Briggs turned his wrist, squinted at his wristwatch. “That gives us just over ten hours. I assume you have a plan?”

Hawke scowled at no one in particular, trying to hide his relief. He’d anticipated Briggs’ support but he hadn’t dare counted on it.

“Yeah. We take a Santini Air chopper, wait for the coordinates, fly there. Caitlin tracks us in Airwolf, stays off radar, stays out of visual range. We do the exchange.” He saw Marella’s neck stiffen, and continued before she could object. “When you and Dom reach the midpoint, when you’ve even with each other, you both drop to the ground. Caitlin brings the Lady between you and the guys who took Dom, acts as a shield. You get in, we all go home happy.”

Briggs frowned, rubbing his thumb on the rim of his coffee cup. “It could work,” he said slowly, a hint of doubt in his voice as if waiting to be convinced.

As Hawke expected, Marella was shaking her head.

“Too risky. Even with a bulletproof vest, you’re exposed far too long. As soon as you get out of the helicopter, you’re a target.”

“That assumes the objective is to take me out,” Briggs countered, with what Hawke thought was an unnatural level of composure considering the subject matter.

“Sir, if they want you alive...” Marella hesitated, biting her lip.

Hawke watched her closely. The Firm would never knowingly allow Archangel to fall into enemy hands; he knew too much. With enough time, he would be made to talk and would compromise operations and operatives; it would take the Firm years to recover. Hawke was pretty sure Marella was under direct orders to prevent that from happening, at any cost.

“I understand the risk. Humor me, please, Marella.”

Marella nodded and continued briskly. “We’ve no idea of the range in the exchange area and no idea of the terrain. Caitlin may be a couple hundred yards or ten miles away to stay out of visual range. Even with Hawke providing covering fire, you and Dominic would be totally exposed and there’s nothing to stop them from taking you by force or killing you both.”

Hawke tried to control his breathing. He’d considered all of Marella’s objections, countered with a dozen different scenarios without coming up with anything better.

“Give me alternatives,” Briggs said to his aide.

“Hawke gets the coordinates, sends it to us and we send in a team in a Santini Air chopper. They take out everyone but Dominic.”

“Standard Firm response,” Hawke argued. “They’ll be expecting something like that.”

“He’s probably right,” Briggs agreed with a shrug.

“We put a sniper in the back of your helicopter,” she immediately responded. You get out of the helicopter, let them think you’ll do the exchange, and our guy takes out the bad guys.”

“Not before they kill Dom,” Hawke objected.

“Okay... They told Hawke that he had to figure out a way to get you there. No offense, Hawke,” she said with a glance in his direction before returning her focus to Briggs, “but I don’t think anyone would be terribly shocked if you took the bulldog approach.”

Hawke wondered for a second if she’d slipped into some type of Firm shorthand, a standard operational tactic code-named “Bulldog.”

“Dragging Archangel there by the scruff of his neck,” she explained with a hint of smile, “or at gunpoint in your case. You hold the gun on Archangel up to the point of exchange and then use it.”

“Preferably not on me,” Briggs interjected.

“That assumes he lets me keep the gun and there’s no one else with him,” Hawke said.

“Hard to control an unwilling prisoner without it,” she suggested. “Hawke would be at a point to provide covering fire until Caitlin or other backup could arrive, and more importantly, he could prevent them from taking you.”

As Hawke had anticipated, their number one objection was the chance that the exchange might actually happen. The risk of Briggs, in enemy hands for any amount of time, might, in their eyes, completely outweigh the benefit of saving Dominic.

“Hmmm,” Briggs replied, frowning. “It appears that we do not have sufficient information for a credible plan.” He pulled himself to his feet, set the coffee cup on the side table. “I’m going to shower and get dressed. You, too,” he nodded at Marella. “Then we’ll see what we can dig up at the office.”

“Great,” Hawke grouched. “Suppose I can catch up on my beauty sleep while you two make yourselves presentable.”

“You,” Briggs said pointedly, “can make breakfast. See what you can do with whatever’s in the kitchen.”

Hawke grumbled, mostly because he thought it was expected, and watched Briggs trail Marella up the staircase. If they were up to what he thought, he’d have to give the man credit for excellent taste. Even woken in the early morning hours, with no makeup or time to clean up, Marella was a stunning woman, and one of the few who could keep up with Briggs on almost every level. She was also just as ruthless as her boss, when necessary, meaning Hawke would have to be careful around her if she thought he was putting Michael at unnecessary risk.

Which he was going to do, he conceded. No way to avoid that and still get Dominic back alive.

Sighing, he headed into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

“Jesus, Michael.”

A dozen eggs, a quart of milk, half of loaf of bread, a partial stick of butter, some cheese just going to mold, six bottles of white wine, and a takeaway container from a restaurant.

He opened the freezer with less optimism and wasn't disappointed: a container full of ice, a half empty bottle of Stolichnaya and a small carton of ice cream, surprisingly not vanilla.

"Scrambled eggs, it is," he grumbled and set most of the contents of Briggs's refrigerator on the counter next to the stove and began searching for a skillet.

Michael Briggs had expensive tastes and the money to indulge them. Cabinet after cabinet offered a superior selection of bone china, hand-cut crystal glasses, and professional grade cookware, but little in the way of foodstuffs. Hawke finally located the battered cast iron skillet he sought; the one that he'd seen Briggs use on the rare occasion the other man cooked a meal.

To his surprise, it was Marella who returned first, hair curly and damp from a shower, makeup perfectly applied and dressed in a simple white suit. Hawke raised an eyebrow at her.

"Michael's shaving," she said in reply, refilled her coffee cup, and leaned against the counter to watch him.

"We gonna have a problem?" he asked after a few silent minutes passed.

She shrugged. "If anything happens to Archangel..."

"You'll come after me."

"I won't have to. The Committee doesn't like you, Hawke. Zeus *really* doesn't like you. You have no idea how much Archangel has acted as a buffer between you and the rest of the Firm these past few years. If he's injured, or killed, and they think you had anything to do with it, they'll crucify you."

"My tax dollars at work."

"And when they're done, then I'll come after you," she concluded without any hint of humor.

"Got it." He met her eyes with an unyielding stare. "You want Michael alive. I want Dominic alive. Now that we're clear, think we can eat?"

Her dimpled smile was as disconcerting as it was bright.

"Sure. I'll set the table."

He heard Briggs' careful tread on the stairs and poured the egg mixture into the hot skillet, listening to the snap of the sizzling butter while he watched Marella collect plates and utensils.

"What are you going to tell Zeus?" he asked with deliberate casualness.

"We decided it would be premature to tell Zeus anything at this point," she replied slowly, as if carefully selecting her words.

Hawke scrambled the eggs a little harder than necessary. "Not what I asked."

“Not a goddamn thing,” Briggs said, entering the kitchen, dressed for the office in his customary white three-piece suit. “I see it’s scrambled eggs again.”

“Try food shopping for a change,” Hawke said. “What would happen if Zeus found out?”

“Depends,” Briggs said. “Probably give me a direct order to remain at Knightsbridge or ship me across the country for some trumped-up meeting. That assumes he wants to keep me alive, some days I think he’d happily hand me over himself.” He shrugged. “You he’d probably arrest on some pretense to keep Airwolf safe, then deploy a team to rescue Santini.”

Hawke dumped the eggs on three plates and sat down at the kitchen table.

“Rescue being the current euphemism for shoot to kill?”

Briggs shook his head as he and Marella sat down. “Special Order 11 is used in unusual situations, where an intelligence officer is thought to be a national security risk. It’s rarely used for field operatives or contract employees of the Firm.”

“Usually just the Senior Intelligence Officers,” Marella added. “Zeus wouldn’t want to jeopardize the Firm’s relationship with you, and our ability to use Airwolf. The team would be ordered to shoot to disable and to kill anyone who threatened Dominic.”

Hawke fought back a momentary weakness, a temptation to let Briggs and Marella take over Dominic’s rescue, to let the trained assault team take out whoever had taken Santini. He shuddered internally.

“I get him,” with a toss of his chin towards Briggs, “killed and you’ll take me apart with a pair of pliers. The Firm puts a bullet in his head and you’re okay with that?”

“Not okay,” she said quietly, “but I’d have to accept it.”

“I’d really hoped you two had moved beyond threats,” Briggs said with a narrowed glare, fork poised over his eggs. “We do not have time for this.”

Hawke glared at the eggs on his plate until hunger set in and he began eating with gusto.

He and Marella often debated, disagreed, outright argued and Briggs tolerated it up until a point at which he somehow managed to shame both into silence with his icy disapproval. The closest comparison Hawke could make was when Dominic was disappointed with him. He could handle Dominic angry, annoyed, furious, or yelling. A silent, disappointed Dominic did things to his conscience that he thought himself too hardened to be affected. He swallowed and the eggs were leaden in his throat.

“You were listening on the intercom,” Marella accused.

Hawke raised an eyebrow in surprise. Marella was usually the first to apologize.

“I was *not* listening on the intercom,” Briggs replied with some heat. “You’re both extremely predictable in how you react to an external threat to people with whom you’re close. That kind of predictability can get you killed and *both* of you know that, or you damn well should.”

Hawke kept his head down but shot a glance over at Marella. He'd bet that in her ten plus years in the field, she hadn't let herself get close enough to anyone to deal with the emotional turmoil of risking someone she loved.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir" she said, looking stricken.

"Don't be sorry," Briggs said more calmly. "Sorry isn't going to get Dominic back and it's not going to come up with a plan to keep us both alive this afternoon." He stabbed at his eggs with a sharpness that belied his controlled expression.

He's worried, realized Hawke, and his own uneasiness rose.

They finished the rest of the meal in silence, each keeping thoughts to themselves until Marella stood, grabbed her empty plate and reached for Briggs's.

"No, Marella, I'll take care of this," he said, nodding to the dirty dishes. "I need you to get everyone in as soon as possible. I want current status and location on everyone on the Watch List. I want a report on INS entries for the last two weeks, no, make that four weeks. I want to know the names of the businessmen that hired Dominic for that charter to Sacramento and I want his steps over the past week retraced."

"Yes, sir." She headed towards the back room that he used as a home office.

"Track down all helicopter charters, rentals, purchases over the past three weeks," he called after her. "And any police reports involving a stolen helicopter."

Briggs pushed back from the table, stacked the three plates and assorted cutlery and headed towards the counter.

"You're going to do the dishes?" Hawke asked doubtfully from his seat at the table.

"Don't be ridiculous. That's why I have a dishwasher." Briggs bent over, loading plates, cutlery and the whisk Hawke had used into the machine.

"Cast Iron doesn't go in a dishwasher, Michael."

Briggs dumped the skillet in the sink. He turned on the tap just enough to partially fill the skillet and then turned away to empty the coffee machine.

Hawke sighed, got to his feet, and walked over to the sink.

"You are not leaving a seasoned cast iron skillet sitting in water."

Shaking his head in disgust, Hawke grabbed for a scouring pad and quickly washed the pan. As he reached for a drying towel, he scowled at the realization that Briggs had probably done it deliberately.

"Is Eduoard Deauville on that Watch List?"

Briggs paused, in the middle of dumping coffee grinds into the trashcan.

“Yes, I imagine that he might be. Donovan’s department maintains the list; I haven’t seen it recently.”

Hawke didn’t believe that for a minute. He finished drying the pan, tossed the towel towards the sink and leaned back against the counter so that he could watch Briggs’s face.

“You want to tell me why he wants to kill you?”

Hawke could have sworn that he saw a shadow of a smile play around Briggs’s lips.

“I never said that he did, I only said that he might.” He dumped the coffee filter and empty pot in the sink “About 14 months ago, the Deauville family business suffered a loss. A business transaction…”

“An arms deal,” interrupted Hawke.

“...with a certain paramilitary organization went bad. The payment was \$50 million in diamonds, put forward by an African militant group.” Here he turned to Hawke. “Did you know that approximately four percent of all diamonds mined on the African continent each year are stolen by African militants?”

Hawke rolled his eyes.

“Anyway, the diamonds never reached the Deauville family and the \$50 million in anti-personnel mines and missiles never reached the buyers. All were particularly put out, especially the militant group that was bankrolling the paramilitary organization.” He grinned. “Let’s just say that the armament and the money ended up in more friendly hands.”

“Stop bragging, Michael.”

“There was an unintended consequence: shortly after all that, Phillippe Deauville had a massive stroke. He didn’t survive.”

Hawke nodded slowly. “And it took Eduoard this long to track down who arranged for the deal to go bad.”

“Or so we think.” Briggs walked back to the kitchen table, sat down and put his feet up on another chair. “Hawke, I don’t think Deauville has anything to do with Dominic’s kidnapping. Eduoard may be something of a sociopath, but he knows it was simply business. He’d have me shot, not waste his time or money with a kidnapping.”

“He may hold you responsible for his father’s death,” Hawke replied, unconvinced.

Briggs laughed. “Eduoard *loathed* his father. If he wants me dead – and there’s no evidence or suggestion that he does – it would be for redirecting \$50 million from his business. I don’t consider him a current threat; we’re just simply keeping an eye on him.”

Hawke frowned. “Just how many people are on this Watch List?”

“Fifty-eight,” answered Marella, re-entering the kitchen. “We’re getting current statuses on all of them, but the ones we have to worry about are the ones with both a reason and the means to act right now.”

“A half-dozen, more or less,” Briggs said.

“Closer to nine,” Marella corrected, tucking a small sheaf of papers into the briefcase she’d brought with her from the office.

“Jesus, Michael. You’ve got nine people who are trying to kill you?”

Suddenly the security measures at the house didn’t seem nearly enough.

“Nothing so personal, I assure you,” Briggs responded with a wry grin. “The Watch List isn’t a list of people or organizations with a vendetta towards me specifically. Think of it as potential threats to operations within my division.” He turned his attention to Marella, raised an eyebrow.

“We’re all set, sir. Do you want me to call for the car?”

Briggs stretched out his bad leg and shifted in preparation to standing. “That depends upon whether or not Mr. Hawke plans to give us a lift. It would certainly save some time.”

Hawke swallowed. Here we go, he thought.

“Marella should call for the car,” he said, turning carefully to block their view of his right hand, which slid behind him. “You and I are going to stay here.” His fingers closed around the handle of his automatic and slowly brought it out of his waistband and down towards his right leg.

In his seat, Briggs had gone very still.

“Hawke, you’re making a mistake.”

Hawke moved his gaze quickly between Briggs and Marella, whose hand was back in her briefcase. He raised his gun, trained it on Briggs.

“Leave the briefcase, Marella. Just back away.”

Angry brown eyes shifted rapidly between Hawke’s gun, his eyes, and her boss. Hawke’s finger tightened on the trigger and Marella swallowed and moved slowly backwards towards the entry to the kitchen, eyes fixed on Hawke. He’d wager that she was calculating distance, assault tactics and possible weapons.

“I’m sorry, Michael, but I need you to get Dom back.”

Briggs eyed Hawke’s gun. “Perhaps you weren’t paying attention, *Stringfellow*, but our best chance of doing that is to try to determine who has him and why, and our best intelligence is at my office.”

Hawke shook his head. “You go to the office and it’s just a matter of time until one of your analysts figures out what’s going on or *somehow*,” a quick glance at Marella, “Zeus finds out about this. You’ll have a protective detail around you so tight you won’t go to the john without an escort and you won’t leave Knightsbridge. Not today, not until they think the risk is over.”

Briggs pushed himself to his feet. “You shoot me now and you’ve lost any chance of getting Dom back alive.”

Hawke backed up, covering both with his gun. “I don’t need to shoot you. You cooperate and she gets to leave in the car.” He left the threat unsaid.

Surprise flashed across Marella’s face, cold fury across Briggs’s. Hawke felt a wave of regret, a loss of something he never realized that he’d had.

Briggs’s hand clenched on the head of his cane. “You’ve crossed the line, Hawke.”

Yeah, I know, Hawke thought. He’d once told someone that he couldn’t shoot Archangel. He had hoped that Briggs wouldn’t put that to the test today. Even with Dominic’s life on the line, Hawke wasn’t sure he could pull the trigger. So he’d done worse. Briggs took personal threats in stride – or at least worked very hard to project that image – but a threat to any of his operatives or staff invited a proportionate and occasionally violent reaction. A threat to his favorite aide, to someone Briggs cared for, perhaps more than he’d admit, promised something disproportionately painful, possibly lethal.

“Go ahead and make that call,” Hawke said to Marella, his voice rough and not giving away anything of his discordant emotions.

“What makes you think I won’t come back here with Zebra Squad?” she asked coolly.

“Because you love him.” He might as well have slapped them both for the frozen expressions he saw. “And you won’t risk getting him killed in the crossfire.”

He swallowed. “I’ll bring him back in one piece. You have my word on that.”

Chapter Two

They waited for the car in almost absolute silence, which both aggravated and soothed Hawke's jangled nerves.

Marella's café au lait complexion had been stained red for a good five minutes after Hawke's words. He thought that it was mostly embarrassment, mixed with anger, but wasn't entirely sure of the proportion of each. The flare of anger was a nice counterpoint to the glacial look he received any time he happened to catch her eye.

Dom had once warned him that women invented the concept of scorched earth warfare. Right now, Hawke wouldn't leave his cabin, art collection, dog, or anything of personal value within a hundred miles of Marella Duval.

Briggs, on the other hand, had gone silent, like a submarine diving deep and listening. Even his gaze was remote. A silent Archangel was a plotting Archangel and Hawke knew no one with a more devious and calculating mind. He was fairly certain that whatever the other man was planning was only partially related to the 'prisoner exchange.'

Hawke had shepherded Briggs and Marella into the living room, taking the opportunity to grab her briefcase just before following them. He bit back a smile as Marella chose a seat as far from Briggs as possible, while still close enough to Hawke to make it impossible to cover both at the same time. A quick jerk of the gun directed her to the same couch as Briggs.

Hawke was a man of silence himself, but the tension between the three of them made this silence nearly excruciating and he was relieved when Briggs broke it.

"I will want that vest," he said, calmly, almost conversationally.

Marella turned her head, caught his eye and apparently read something there, nodded.

Briggs twisted the head of his cane as if wrestling with a decision. "And it will be necessary to go to Plan B, of course."

Hawke's eyes narrowed and he watched Marella for a reaction without any luck. "Cut the cryptic," he growled.

Briggs looked at him, and blinked as if surprised that Hawke was in the room. If Hawke hadn't known him better, he might have believed it.

"If Marella hasn't heard from me by 3:15PM, she is to change all access codes, passwords, and alert Donovan's team," he said, as if in explanation.

Hawke didn't buy it. Briggs only explained himself when it suited him and in full Archangel mode, his explanations were probably additional instructions to Marella.

"The Committee?" she asked quietly.

“Zeus is in Washington until midday tomorrow.”

Hawke scowled with annoyance: that fact had been withheld and might have let him play this differently. On the other hand, he hadn't directly asked and he knew from past experience that Briggs rarely offered information unless directly asked, and then only when he chose. Not to mention that Zeus didn't need to physically be at Knightsbridge to scuttle Hawke's plans.

“You'll provide a status report to Marella?” Briggs said to Hawke, more command than question.

Hawke nodded.

“I'd hold off on notifying the Committee until you have something to tell them.”

Marella nodded again, watching her boss, who gave her a slight smile of encouragement.

“It occurs to me that Neil Burnside in SIS once faced a situation with similarities to this one,” Briggs said.

Marella stiffened, her eyes widened and then narrowed on her boss. “Absolutely not,” she said firmly.

Hawke felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, his aggravation with enigmatic Intelligence officers nearly as powerful as his curiosity.

“You want to clue me in?” he finally asked, letting curiosity win.

“That would require a level of trust not commensurate with certain behaviors already evidenced.”

Which meant Briggs would tell Hawke, but only in trade for something Briggs wanted. Hawke wasn't sure he wanted to give up any of his few advantages for something that might well prove to be a red herring. He shook his head.

Briggs shrugged and turned back to Marella. “You'll arrange the vest?”

Hawke saw a light go on in her eyes and a corner of her mouth quirked up as she nodded.

Damn, not a red herring, he decided. There was a subtle shift in the emotional balance of the room, a slight decrease in tension, as if the two Firm agents had agreed upon a plan.

“I'll leave it at the hangar,” she said.

Briggs and Marella remained silent until a chime near the front door alerted them that the car was approaching. Both stood: Marella quickly, Briggs more slowly, leaning heavily on his cane.

“Stay there,” Hawke said to Briggs, eliciting a scowl from the other man.

“I'll need my briefcase,” Marella said.

Hawke kept his eyes and his gun trained on them as he felt through the bag for her handgun. Removing it, he ejected the cartridge and then popped a shell out of the chamber. He dropped the empty gun back into the briefcase and gestured towards the door.

Briggs took one of Marella's hands, lifted it to his lips, and then smiled at her. "Don't cancel those dinner reservations just yet."

Hawke wasn't sure whether the act was for Marella or for him, or if indeed it was an act. He'd seen Briggs turn on the charm full force, had seen both women and men unknowingly yield to the dazzling smile, the Southern gentility, the graceful request. This smile was quieter, softer, and, Hawke finally realized, something not meant for him at all.

God help him, Briggs was going to cut his heart out and feed it to Tet.

Hawke heard the limo come to a stop outside the front door and cleared his throat, loudly. Backing slowly towards the front door to keep an eye on his two 'hostages,' he scooped up Briggs's gun from the hallway console, tucked it in his back waistband and waited for Marella.

She walked toward him, her gaze more aloof now than angry and he knew whatever had passed between Briggs and Marella had strengthened their hand, whatever it was.

She held out her hand for her briefcase, took it and went out the door without another word.

Hawke glanced over at Briggs, who'd watched the byplay with a small smile.

"Don't fuck with my plan, Michael," Hawke warned.

Briggs raised both eyebrows. "Your plan? A plan, if one could even give it that appellation, which lacks the most basic knowledge of the enemy or his true objectives? A plan that lacks any knowledge of the terrain? That's not a plan. It's a one-size-fits-all instinctive response. It's an autonomic nervous system and just as primitive."

Hawke scowled. "Yeah."

He leaned down and carefully placed Briggs's gun, the cartridge and shell from Marella's gun and then his own gun on the coffee table. In his peripheral vision, he could see Briggs watching him with open curiosity.

"Okay," Hawke said, standing up and walking within a few inches of Briggs. "Let's get this out of the way. You get one shot at me; get it out of your system. I don't need you taking a crack at me while we're in the air."

Briggs raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Hawke nodded, took a step back for better weight distribution and balance, and never saw the cane coming.

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He woke, sometime later, and gingerly shifted his jaw. He opened his eyes gradually, closed them again as lamplight seared his optic nerves. Rolling on his side – and somehow, he wasn't on the floor, but on a couch – he tried opening his eyes again. Slowly. Very slowly.

Gradually, he could focus them on the coffee table, then the chair across the room, and then the slant of daylight coming through the window of Briggs's living room. He groaned internally, afraid that making any noise would exacerbate what he already knew would be a vicious headache.

Slowly swinging his legs to the floor, he propped his head against the back of the couch and listened.

The house was silent, which made absolutely no sense.

Briggs had clocked him, at his own invitation Hawke remembered with frustration. By all rights, the house should be crawling with Firm agents, all of whom would happily drop Hawke out of the nearest helicopter hovering at 500 feet or higher. Instead, there was an unsettling silence.

Not entirely, he realized as his heartbeat steadied and stopped drowning out his hearing.

"You'll want some ice for that jaw, I imagine."

Hawke glanced to his right, accepted the bag of ice from Briggs as gracefully as possible under the circumstances.

He closed his eyes, rested his head on the back of the couch, laid the ice on his aching left jaw and shifted his jaw around to verify that nothing was broken.

"That was a cheap shot, Michael," he complained.

"You're hardly in a position to cite Marquess of Queensbury rules," Briggs replied. "Aspirin?"

Hawke glanced at the coffee table to confirm what he'd seen when first waking; the guns were indeed all gone. He was well and truly screwed.

"Probably a good idea," he conceded. If he was going to have any chance at saving Dom, it would have to be with a clearer head than he currently possessed.

He heard Briggs limp towards the kitchen, the damned cane punctuating each step. Listened to the man rifle through a cabinet or two, pull open at least three drawers, swear softly, and then hum with satisfaction.

Briggs returned with a bottle of aspirin, an extra-large bottle Hawke noted with some amusement, and a glass of water, both of which he deposited on the coffee table.

"I removed the hardware," Briggs said.

Hawke leaned forward, regretted it immediately, but grabbed at the aspirin bottle, determined to hide his sudden bout of dizziness.

The aspirin tablets were bitter on his tongue and he gulped the water greedily, both to wash away the taste and to satisfy a sudden powerful thirst.

He sat back on the couch and studied Briggs, now seated opposite him in an armchair.

"Where're your attack dogs?"

Briggs nodded. “Hmm.” His lips twisted slightly upward, a hint of a smile, not at all friendly. “This...” his left hand raised in a sweeping gesture encompassing Hawke, the living room, the situation, “provides me with a certain operational latitude.”

Hawke started to laugh, immediately stopped as his aching jaw reminded him it was a bad idea. Readjusting the ice pack, Hawke watched Briggs, waited warily.

“You pull a gun on me again, Hawke and I’ll use your guts to restring your cello.” A single glittering blue eye dared Hawke to argue. “You even *think* of pointing a gun at Marella, or at any of my staff, and that cello will be firewood, along with several million dollars of irreplaceable artwork. I’ll have the FAA pull your license, bury Santini Air under so much red tape, Dom won’t get a bird in the sky for the remainder of his natural life and feed your dog to the damn eagle.”

Hawke raised an eyebrow. Even that hurt, damn it. “You pull my ticket, who’s gonna fly Airwolf for you?”

“I have half a dozen pilots qualified on Winchester’s simulator.”

Hawke kept his face rigidly still, knowing that his very lack of reaction was more than he wanted to give away, especially to a man who knew him as well as Briggs.

“You’ll have to find her first,” he replied coolly.

Briggs’s smile didn’t reach his eye and Hawke realized with a sickening lurch that the mystery of Airwolf’s Lair was just another example of ‘operational latitude.’ He wondered if Briggs knew Airwolf’s location already or just hadn’t bothered to look yet; the latter, he thought. Easier for Briggs if he didn’t have to lie if subpoenaed about Airwolf’s whereabouts.

Head throbbing and stomach turning over at the sudden knowledge that his ace in the hole existed only at the pleasure of the man he’d just attempted to kidnap at gunpoint, Hawke held his hands up in the air, a classic ‘I surrender’ pose. “Got it.”

Briggs nodded, still prickly. “Don’t make me regret not having you arrested for that stunt you pulled earlier.”

Hawke nodded his agreement, noticed with some surprise that sometime while he’d been out cold, Briggs had changed out of his suit and into more casual clothes.

Briggs noticed the appraisal. “As I’m not going to the office...”

“You gonna help me get Dom back?” Hawke asked cautiously.

Briggs rubbed his upper lip. “I should tell you to go to hell.”

Hawke slowly let a breath escape, felt cautious optimism seep back into his battered body. “So, what now?”

“Now?” Briggs sighed as he pushed himself to his feet using his cane. “We check in with Marella. See what information we’ve obtained.”

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Hawke was reminded once again why he flew helicopters and didn't push a desk job like Briggs or Marella, both of whom would probably be highly indignant at his assessment. The endless parsing of a particular piece of information, who was known to be in the Western United States, which parties could not be located, the approximate meaning and associated risk of a sequence of events bored him after the first hour.

Daybreak had come and gone while he recovered from Briggs's sucker punch. The clock now inched toward 10:00AM and each tick of the second hand twisted the knot in his stomach.

He'd no idea how long Dominic had been held or what condition he was in. His own headache was held at abeyance by a combination of aspirin and the contents of most of the fresh pot of coffee he'd brewed while Briggs reviewed the analysis of the INS reports and Watch List.

"Try Caitlin again," Briggs ordered distractedly with a wave in the general direction of the kitchen. "The house phone line is separate from this one."

Walking the short distance between Briggs's home office and kitchen for what seemed to be the twenty-fifth time in the last hour, Hawke wondered where the hell Caitlin was, felt a vague frisson of worry, worry that he should have felt after Dominic hadn't shown for their planned dinner.

Grimacing at the phone, Hawke punched in Santini Air's phone number again, listened with escalating impatience to the droning ring at the far end. Five rings. Ten.

"Santini Air," Caitlin answered breathlessly. She'd probably run for the phone.

"Cait," he said, letting relief wash through him and trying to squash the annoyance that rose to fill the gap left by his fear. She'd no idea he was looking for her or why.

"Hawke!" she cried. "Where are you? Where's Dom? I called earlier to tell you that my flight got in really, really late last night and I wouldn't be in but no one answered and so I thought I should come in anyway and when I got here and the place was all locked up..."

"Caitlin," he interrupted.

"...and I asked Bill Fairbanks if he'd seen either of you but"

"*Caitlin*," he interrupted again, his voice firming just enough to catch her attention.

"Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Hawke suddenly felt unable to go through the explanation again. "I'm gonna need your help," he said gruffly.

"Okay," she said, her voice small and worried.

“Dom’s in trouble. I’m at Michael’s. I’m going to come pick you up in about an hour. I’ll fill you in on the way.”

“On the way where?”

Hawke almost smiled, knowing that no matter how worried she was, she’d be thrilled by his next comments. “You’re going to fly the Lady, Cait.”

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It had taken nearly thirty minutes to get Briggs out of the house.

“We’ve by no means concluded our analysis of the situation,” Briggs had said, gesturing at the piles of faxed reports cluttering his desk.

“It’s not like you’re doing the work,” Hawke argued. “You can call them from the air, get updates. It’s almost 10:30. Flight time from here to Van Nuys is 45 minutes. I’ll need time to refuel, take Caitlin to get the Lady, and get back.”

Briggs frowned, looked at his wristwatch.

“And before you ask, I’m not coming back here to pick you up. Round trip, that’s 90 minutes that I just don’t have, Michael.”

Cutting off the man from his information must be like forcing a junkie to go cold turkey. Now in the co-pilot’s seat, Briggs had his briefcase balanced on his right knee, scrambled satellite phone receiver tucked between his chin and left shoulder, fingers tapping on the laptop computer inside the briefcase.

Things had worked out unexpectedly well, Hawke concluded reluctantly, knowing that anything working well was sure to be followed by some unexpected disaster. There were consequences yet to come for drawing a gun on the Firm agents, he knew that Briggs’s angry words earlier were simply an opening salvo in negotiations yet to begin. They’d attempt to set the terms, Hawke would refuse some outright, others he’d ignore. Eventually, Briggs and Marella would feel vindicated and Hawke would pay the price – whatever it was -- once Dominic was home, alive and well.

Now for the hard stuff: get Dominic back without giving up Archangel, and without getting either killed.

Briggs tucked the satellite phone back into its compartment and sighed, but remained silent. Hawke risked a glance; the other man was staring at the laptop screen but his gaze was unfocused. Hawke elected to remain quiet, let Briggs sort things out in his head.

He gave him ten minutes.

“You going to tell me why you’re helping me rescue Dom?” he asked.

“What? Briggs hauled his attention back from wherever it had been. “Oh... The thought of Dominic in my debt does provide a significant amount of anticipatory pleasure.”

That was probably part of the reason, but Hawke doubted it was anything near to Briggs's primary motivation.

"Uh-huh," he said.

That elicited a real smile.

"I may be a manipulative, cold-hearted bastard, Hawke, but I don't take any pleasure at the idea of leaving an old man with those who wish him harm. Even if it is Dominic."

Except that they didn't wish Dominic harm, he was only a tool.

"Or wish me harm," Briggs appended, smile fading.

"You're not feeling guilty?" Hawke asked, with a good deal of skepticism. Briggs was far too pragmatic, had a lifetime of brutal choices behind him that made guilt an unlikely motivator.

"Sorry, but no. I could spin you a line about how guilt is something I can't afford in my line of business – which would be true, but beside the point. You and Dominic have pulled me out of a bad situation. More than one, actually. This is simple payback."

And it probably was just that simple, thought Hawke. Briggs had a funny code of ethics, a clear sense of right and wrong that didn't correspond to any societal norm, but provided enough structure for him to be reliable to those who knew him.

"Even if it is 'reckless, imprudent, irresponsible and in direct conflict with the advice of more objective observers, not to mention a deliberate disregard for Firm policy.'"

"Marella's not too happy with you," Hawke concluded.

Briggs blew out a breath. "Something of an understatement, and she has good reason. Our analysis isn't by any means definitive, but the conclusions are that this isn't a hit, it's not personal and it's not a trade. This is an information purchase."

Hawke understood the need for allusion, but the sheer understatement of the phrase 'information purchase' caught him off guard. It didn't nearly begin to encompass the interrogation tactics required to extract that information from the man sitting next to him.

Won't happen, he reminded himself. It was his job to make sure that whomever had Dominic didn't take Michael.

Not just *his* job, he remembered suddenly.

"She going to try and stop you?" he asked, suddenly worried, wondering how much Briggs had relayed to his senior aide.

Hawke watched Briggs chew that question over in his mind.

"Only if she has to," he finally answered, quietly, in a tone that didn't leave room for argument.

Hawke suddenly felt a wave of sympathy for Marella. He'd never entirely warmed to her, nor she to him, but he respected and trusted her, almost as much as he trusted Briggs – to the extent that he actually trusted Briggs – and more than anyone else in the Firm.

He gave Briggs a few more minutes of silence – he could afford only a few more, as they were almost entering Van Nuys airspace.

“You and Marella?” he asked, only partially a question, not expecting an answer.

Briggs shifted in his seat and stretched out his left leg, all very real side effects of sitting too long in cramped quarters with a surgically rebuilt leg, but also a common Briggs stalling technique. Hawke just waited him out.

“It was unnecessary to embarrass her, back at the house,” Briggs finally said, staring straight ahead.

If Hawke had been a jaw-dropping man, he would have let his jaw drop. Instead, he blinked, once, and stifled a smile.

“How long?” he asked, trying for a casual tone.

“Why on earth do you care?”

Hawke considered that for a second. He'd rarely given thought to the personal lives or emotional states of Briggs or Marella. They were The Firm, a devil to be paid for the joy of flying Airwolf and the hope that someday his brother would be found and returned to him.

He'd spent considerable time with them, social occasions as often as mission planning or debriefing. He genuinely liked Briggs, if he thought about it. The man was charming and gregarious, had a wicked sense of humor and appreciated many of the things Hawke himself did: fine wine, beautiful women, good music and helicopters. Most importantly, Briggs possessed the rare ability to be companionably silent. By all definitions, Briggs might have qualified as a friend, a good friend, were it not for the manipulations, half-truths, and outright deceptions that Hawke had learned to expect.

“Because if you screw up this thing with Marella, whatever it is, I'm going to have to deal with the fallout.”

Briggs nodded, tapping a finger against his briefcase. Hawke's answer seemed to satisfy him, even if it felt like a half-truth to Hawke himself: a convenient way to not deal with the emotional reality of a relationship between his two primary contacts at the Firm. And it didn't get him an answer to what exactly was going on.

“Do you love her?” he asked, gruffly, carefully not looking at Briggs.

“That's a private matter, Hawke.”

Which was Briggs-speak for ‘mind your own business.’

“Don't screw this up, Michael,” Hawke warned, suddenly more interested than he would have ever thought in the personal lives of his two favorite – well, not favorite, but the least objectionable – intelligence agents. “God knows why, but I really do think she loves you.”

He'd have to be satisfied with Briggs's nod, as answer to his questions and his warnings. It was all he was able to elicit through the remainder of their flight and subsequent landing in front of the hangar belonging to Santini Air.

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Caitlin's face was scrunched up under the headset that always seemed too large for her. "I don't understand why you're calling it an information purchase. It's kidnapping, pure and simple. Trading one kidnap victim for another doesn't make it not kidnapping, you know."

Ah, for the clear-cut certainties of a police office, thought Hawke, long inured to vagaries and shifting alliances of Briggs's world. Your world too, he reminded himself, despite what he chose to pretend. He'd spent as much time flying Airwolf now as he had in Vietnam, each profoundly changing him: Vietnam for the worse, the jury was still out on Airwolf. The helicopter herself was pure joy, but the baggage that came with her was treacherous.

Briggs, in the back of the Jet Ranger now where he could stretch out a little more comfortably, had to lean forward. Even with the headsets on, it was sometimes impossible to carry on a conversation, between the cockpit and the passenger/cargo bay.

"It refers not to the transaction this afternoon, but the ultimate objective," he said. "Knowing your opponent's true objective is critical in determining the appropriate strategy to defeat him."

Caitlin shook her head, eyes large and doubtful. "This isn't a chess game, Michael. We're talking lives, yours and Dom's."

"And ours," she added after a moment of thought.

"Just higher stakes, Cait," Hawke said, anticipating Briggs's response. He looked back at Briggs, who shrugged his agreement.

Briggs usually called it The Business, capital letters clearly enunciated, but others called it The Game, Hawke knew. There were rules, there was strategy and there was an element of luck. Those who made it to Briggs's position knew how to play, knew how to make the Game work for them. Others played more cautiously, dropped out, or lost. Doctoral theses could be written on how the Intelligence Community used metaphor and allusion to maintain the emotional distance required to survive, assuming that graduate students could get anyone in the community to talk about it in something other than hypotheticals.

None of which was making Caitlin any happier with the situation.

"So where does the purchase part come in?" she persisted. "You're saying that some guy took Dominic to trade for you so that he can sell information that you know...." She trailed off. "God, I sound stupid, don't I?"

She'd learned fast but the sheer viciousness of the Game, or the Business, eluded her at times. It was her innate innocence that aroused Hawke's most protective instincts. The idea of Caitlin jaded and matter-of-fact with people's lives held absolutely no appeal.

Caitlin screwed up her face, this time with determination. “So how does knowing that this is an ‘information purchase’ help us?”

Hawke heard the shrill tones of Briggs’s satellite phone and shot a quick look over his shoulder. Briggs removed part of his headset to take the call.

“For one thing,” Hawke said, “we know that this guy needs Michael alive, preferably in good condition.”

He saw Caitlin’s contemplative nod.

“Since we know he’s not going to take a shot at Michael...”

“Not with a bullet,” she interjected.

Damn, she really did learn quickly. He shook off his surprise. “Yeah. But even if he uses a tranq, he’s not going to risk really hurting Michael, which means our primary objective is to make sure Dom doesn’t get hurt.”

“So I come in as a shield and a getaway vehicle. What are you going to be doing and what stops this guy from shooting you?”

“Keeping my promise to Marella.”

Caitlin nodded. She knew Marella, knew the woman’s absolute loyalty to and protectiveness towards Briggs. Hawke wondered what else Caitlin might have picked up, whether there was some truth to the notion of women’s intuition. Or maybe they just paid attention to things that others missed.

“Yeah, but what stops this guy, or his associates, from taking a shot at you?” she repeated.

Hawke shrugged. The answer was ‘nothing.’ He was just the conduit for the trade, completely expendable, but there was no way Caitlin would accept that answer.

“I’m allowed to shoot back,” he said.

Hawke checked his position, grimaced. They were fifteen minutes out of Van Nuys airfield and it was time to change direction, to head toward the Lair.

“Michael. Blindfold. Now.”

“Is that really necessary?” Caitlin looked behind her, shook her head at the request. “Okay, so we’re pretty sure he’s not risking his life to save Dom, but he’s risking a lot, isn’t he? I mean, if he’s captured...”

“Now,” Hawke said, jaw clenched. Whether Briggs knew the location of Airwolf’s Lair or not wasn’t the issue. If they were to keep playing by the same rules, he couldn’t be the one to give it away.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Caitlin wave the black cloth at Briggs. Briggs ended his call and protested, naturally. He always did; it was part of the rules that neither acknowledged. Caitlin tried to look firm, ended up shooting a guilt-ridden glance at Hawke and then leaned behind her seat to tie the blindfold over Briggs’s eyes.

Hawke made the turn gradually enough that the blindfolded pilot in the back seat would have a difficult time determining if the course were changed at all.

Hawke could make this flight every day and never tire of the scenery, the sharp contrasts between earth and sky, the giant shadows that haunted his path. He was content to be silent for this stage of the trip, even if he missed Dominic's chatter, the jokes he'd heard a thousand times, the stories that always began with "One time when me and your old man..." Or some other compatriot of Dominic's past. He'd always let Dominic do the talking when they flew to the Lair. Caitlin and Briggs either picked up on his mood or were preoccupied with their own thoughts.

Hawke landed the Jet Ranger right outside the entrance. No point in hiding it since he was going to be flying it back to the airfield before the engine finished cooling. Leaving Briggs in the helicopter, he followed Caitlin inside the Lair, turned his back like a gentleman when she changed into a flight suit, and wondered why they all felt it necessary to don Airwolf's uniform before flying her.

"If Michael's captured, they'll force him to talk, right?" Caitlin asked quietly, coming around the nose of the aircraft, still adjusting the collar of her flight suit.

"They can try," Hawke said and then looked away, regretting his flippancy. Caitlin deserved a serious answer; she'd seen Michael after they pulled him out of East Germany. "Some people will pay whatever it takes, do whatever needs doing to get at what he knows. He could always just tell them what they want to know..."

"He won't, though, will he," she said, her face bleak.

Hawke forced a smile. "Cait, Archangel's been doing this since you were in pigtails. You just get Dom out and let me worry about Archangel."

She nodded, turned away and started to walk back around Airwolf's nose, towards the co-pilot's position.

"Hey," Hawke called after her. "The other hatch."

She looked down, her face suffused with a red that washed out her freckles. "Yeah. I knew that."

Hawke grinned at her and stopped himself from offering to fly Airwolf out of the Lair, knew she'd interpret it as a lack of faith. The best vote of confidence he could give her was to walk away and fly the Jet Ranger back to Van Nuys without a second glance, but it took a will almost physical to walk away from Airwolf and fly another helicopter. Like riding a tricycle, or a bicycle with training wheels after spending years on a dirt bike, he thought, and then rejected the dirt bike as too common for comparison. He heard the whine of the engines as they turned over and kept on walking.

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"Harry Jenks," Briggs announced with more than a hint of satisfaction.

"That supposed to mean something to me?" Hawke glanced over his shoulder, suppressed a smile. Even Briggs had difficulty looking triumphant while wearing a blindfold, though the black contrasted nicely with the white trousers and the off-white casual jacket.

“We’ve had some dealings with him in the past, used him ourselves a few times,” Briggs said. “He’s an Information Broker.”

“And you think he’s our guy?” Hawke asked, his attention on flying the Jet Ranger while keeping an eye out for Caitlin in Airwolf.

He’d waited to take off until after she’d cleared the top of the Lair, let loose a breath that he’d been holding, and then suppressed a surge of jealousy when she passed him effortlessly. That was more than twenty minutes ago and while they had agreed she’d stay off radar and out of visual range, it was starting to bug him that he didn’t know her position, while she easily tracked him using Airwolf’s scans.

“Something of a step up for Harry to traffic in kidnapping. When we used him, he was pretty much just data collection, but the Spanish authorities suspect him in the disappearance of one of their leading biochemists last year. He looks good for it, based on what we’ve learned.”

Disappearance, my ass, Hawke thought, wondering for a second what had happened to the scientist afterwards, wondering what the authorities had told the scientist’s family.

“If it’s Jenks, he’s got a client.”

“He plans to sell you,” Hawke said flatly.

“Or already has a contract,” Briggs agreed. “He’s not one for getting his own hands dirty.”

Hawke digested that for a minute. If Jenks was the middleman, they could expect any interrogation of Briggs to be delayed until he was transported to the buyer, which gave them time to mount a rescue if necessary. It would help if they knew who and where the buyer was.

“What makes you think he’s our guy?”

“He’s avoided this area for the past five years, then suddenly appeared on our radar last week. He’d tried to do some data collection on a project I was running a few years ago,” Briggs said, his voice now amused. “His approach is, or I should say, *was*, more social engineering than anything else. He tried it on one of my staff.”

“Didn’t work, huh?” Hawke said, trying to remember who was on Briggs’s staff five years ago.

“They are hand-picked for a reason, Hawke.”

Five years ago? Hawke thought. Five years ago, Briggs’s top project was....

“Airwolf?”

“That shouldn’t surprise you. He hot-tailed it out of the United States when he realized that she was on to him and feeding him disinformation. He’s avoided us since and we cut all ties on any projects we’d had with him.”

“And now he’s back in California?”

“Confirmed sighting in Los Angeles last week,” Briggs said. “A man matching his description chartered a Sikorsky out of Sacramento three days ago. Neither the pilot nor the Sikorsky returned.”

“Sacramento,” Hawke muttered.

“Those businessmen Dominic flew to Sacramento paid him with a stolen credit card.” Briggs sounded grim. “Too much coincidence for my liking.”

Hawke unconsciously clenched his jaw. “Can Jenks fly the Sikorsky?”

“Not when I knew him. Either he has someone who can or he still has the pilot,” Briggs replied. “He used to work alone, but this type of work is not his specialty. He’s either hired muscle or taken a partner.”

Hawke nodded, relieved to hear that the pilot might still be alive. “Who’s the buyer?”

“I’d be interested to learn that myself,” Briggs said dryly. “We’ve got nothing. Can I take this damn thing off yet?”

“Nope. There’s one sure way to find out.”

“I’ll pass, if you don’t mind.”

Twenty minutes out of Van Nuys, Briggs’s phone rang again.

Briggs answered but Hawke had a difficult time making out his end of the conversation until there was an emphatic “Damn!” from Briggs.

It wasn’t truly possible for a heart to jump into one’s throat, or for a stomach to drop to one’s feet, but the internal falling sensation Hawke felt still fit the bill. He stilled sudden shaking hands.

“Hawke, turn her around. Right now.”

Hawke had a dozen questions, asked one. “Dominic?” Waited, reluctant to hear an answer but needing to hear an answer.

“This has nothing to do with Dominic. We’re flying into a trap.”

Hawke turned his head, gave Briggs a skeptical look. “This has everything to do with Dominic and we already know what they want: you.”

Briggs yanked at the blindfold, let it fall around his neck and glared back. “Hawke, there is no 2:30 broadcast. There’s no meet to do the exchange. They’re waiting for us at the hangar.”

Hawke swore, reached for the radio. Hand on the transmitter, he stilled. “You had someone watching the place?”

The rules had been clear: no Firm agents or Jenks would kill Dominic. Just as clearly, Briggs and Marella had ignored those rules. He really shouldn’t be surprised, he thought, and then decided that he wasn’t surprised at all. He was, however, pretty damn angry.

“Michael...” he growled.

“Two of my best, neither worked for me when Jenks was last in the area. One is applying for a job as a mechanic with Bill Fairbanks, the other working as a temporary receptionist at Bachman Cargo and Freight.”

Briggs didn't sound the least bit repentant and Hawke let his anger dissipate this time. Briggs had a right to protect himself and it sounded as if Marella had taken care to hide their agents in clear sight by blending them into airfield operations.

Hawke grabbed the radio, called Caitlin, told her to pull back, and then stopped, having no idea what to say next, his plans all askew.

“Rendezvous at the following coordinates,” Briggs ordered, anticipating Hawke's confusion, taking charge.

Hawke repeated the coordinates to Caitlin and then changed course, trying not to think of Dominic being held as a hostage in his own hangar. His thoughts jumped from trying to adapt his original plan to wondering how Briggs had come up coordinates that quickly. The meet point was uncannily close to their current position, he realized with a sudden unease. Hawke cast his thoughts back through the day, searching for a clue, worried at each detail like a terrier and then seized it: Briggs twisting the head of his cane just before he made a cryptic comment about Plan B.

“You've got some kind of homing beacon in that cane, don't you?”

It was overdue, in Hawke's opinion. The Firm could save a lot of man-hours and aggravation keeping track of one headstrong Deputy Director using some of the very technology that they nurtured and developed.

“*Very* good, Hawke.”

Hawke scowled. Briggs sounded like a pleased parent after a child's performance. He might have to put up with that from Dominic occasionally, but Briggs was only a decade older and damn sure not a relative; he didn't get to use that tone.

“Surprised you didn't break it when you hit me.”

Briggs laughed. “I was careful not to hit you with the transmitter for that very reason.”

“You got a way to turn that thing on and off?” Hawke would bet his art collection that Briggs didn't want the Firm knowing where he was all the time.

“Of course.”

“Turn it off,” Hawke ordered.

“Sorry.” Briggs didn't even try to sound apologetic. “It stays on until I get back to Knightsbridge.”

Hawke wondered if it was part of Briggs's agreement with Marella, or maybe the man was just hedging his bets, giving his own people a way to track him if Hawke couldn't keep his promise.

“How does it work?” he asked, suspicions increasing.

“Proprietary technology, still under development. Marella has the only control module for this frequency. You can relax, Hawke, it doesn’t record. No one tracked us to Airwolf.”

“I’ll bet.”

He’d sooner invest his life savings in lottery tickets; they were more of a sure thing. Might be time to move Airwolf; find another hiding space.

Coming up on the coordinates Briggs had given, Hawke flew a careful 360-degree reconnaissance of the empty construction site. He scanned the site for workers, noted the padlocked chain fence around the exterior of the site.

“Builder filed for bankruptcy,” Briggs said.

Typical that the Firm would have tabs on even that level of detail.

There was only one other helicopter in the vicinity and it wasn’t white, but a dark blue Bell with streaks of gray and red. He approached slowly and then more confidently when he saw the pilot step out. Even with a baseball cap covering her distinctively curly hair, it was easy to recognize Marella’s tall and willowy figure in a navy blue flight suit.

He landed nearby, kicking up enough dust to send Marella back into her helicopter. He heard rather than saw Airwolf coming in behind him.

Stepping around the nose of the Jet Ranger, he noticed that Marella was trying, and failing, to hide her relief at seeing Briggs, as if she hadn’t been on the phone with him on and off over the past six hours.

“Sir.” She stepped forward and began untying the blindfold now draped around Briggs’s neck. “We have Dominic Santini, Harry Jenks and four other men inside the Santini Air hangar as of fifteen minutes ago.”

“Dominic okay?” Hawke quickly interjected as Caitlin approached.

“From what we can see, he appears to be perfectly all right. One agent reported that he appeared to be angry or annoyed, but that agent’s never met Mr. Santini,” she said, pulling the blindfold free of Briggs’s neck.

Hawke could have sworn she was hiding a smile.

“Inside,” Briggs said, speculatively. “That eliminates our little surprise.” He looked at Airwolf with regret. “And Mr. Jenks is forty minutes early, which is rather unsporting of him.” He looked a question at Marella.

“We’re in position but that won’t help you if you’re inside,” she said.

“We go inside, it’s way too easy for Jenks to shoot Dom and walk out with Michael,” Hawke concluded. “We have to get him outside.”

“Hmmm,” Briggs rubbed his upper lip. “Tell me, how did our little gathering arrive? What’s their means of transport?”

“In the Sikorsky. Parked about fifteen yards outside the main hangar doors.” Marella stepped back and eyed him. “I can’t believe you’re even considering this, sir.”

Hawke shoved his hands in his pockets, his gaze shifting between Briggs and Marella. Something was up.

“Fifteen yards?” Briggs said thoughtfully, made a face. “Not a lot of territory in which to maneuver.”

“Who’s going to be maneuvering?” Hawke asked, curiosity giving way to suspicion.

“This is *not* a good idea,” Marella said, folding her arms across her chest. “Did I mention the potential risks?”

Briggs nodded. “Several times, in fact. How do we get Jenks and company outside?”

Caitlin sidled up to Hawke. “What are they talking about?” she whispered.

Hawke shrugged. “Man’s got a plan.” To Briggs, he said, “Land outside, like we don’t know they’re in there. Sit in the bird, wait for the 2:30 contact. Either they come out or we tell them to come out to do the trade.”

“Sir, our team is in position,” Marella repeated.

“We go with Hawke’s plan,” Briggs said, his face set, decision made. “Caitlin brings Airwolf in between Jenks’s people and Dominic and myself, Hawke provides covering fire.”

“And?” Hawke asked, looking for the catch.

“Caitlin will need enough room to maneuver,” Briggs said. His gaze slid from Hawke to Marella to Caitlin and back to Marella. “If for some reason, she can’t get in there, we’ll go to the contingency plan.”

“Which is?” Hawke prompted.

Marella shook her head in disgust, walked back to her helicopter and reached into the back. Returning, she handed a package to Briggs, who smiled reassuringly at her and took the package.

“We make the exchange,” Briggs said calmly.

## **Chapter Three**

“This has got to be the stupidest plan you’ve ever come up with, Michael.”

Briggs was blithely ignoring him, busy adjusting the drape of his off-white golf jacket so that the bulletproof vest was completely hidden from view. The jacket was slightly big on Briggs and Hawke could see now why Briggs had changed out of the suit he’d worn earlier; the vest would have been obvious.

Hawke eased up a little on throttle, timing the flight so that they arrived at the airfield no earlier than 2:25 PM. He pushed aside the anxiety for Dominic, rode the high of the pre-mission adrenaline rush.

He’d done a systematic weapons check before they left Marella. He was armed with his own .45, returned to him by Briggs before they’d left the house. Briggs had his own automatic, tucked under the vest in the small of his back. Each carried an extra clip of ammo.

Marella had brought additional weaponry, which Hawke accepted, knowing that if they couldn’t handle the situation with Airwolf and their handguns, the additional guns probably wouldn’t help. But it wasn’t the sort of thing to say before a mission, even one in which the very foundation of their plans kept shifting.

The thing about Briggs’s plan was that it was simple enough to work perfectly and the chances of Jenks or anyone anticipating it were probably extremely small. It would work best if Jenks followed the rules he himself had outlined, but even if Jenks deviated, as expected, it could still work. Hawke and Caitlin would still make getting Dominic out their top priority as Briggs would be beyond risk, technically.

Devil in the details, Hawke thought, then brushed that thought away.

“Norris is an excellent shot,” Briggs finally responded.

“You’d better hope he’s as good as you think he is,” Hawke said.

Unacceptable margin of error, Marella had called it.

“Surprised he’s not a she,” Hawke said, after a minute.

Briggs managed to recruit what Hawke would have to agree were some of the most beautiful and intelligent women in the world, as if he had happened upon a universe of talent somehow untapped by government or business. His agents, in turn, were fiercely loyal to Briggs, who groomed them, promoted them, and built a cadre of support throughout the Firm.

“Norris may be outside my division but he is an artist with a high-caliber rifle. Makes those of us rated expert feel like kids with a pop gun.”

Norris and another sniper were positioned to fully cover the airfield outside and around the Santini Air hangar. Two other Firm agents were undercover in nearby businesses and Hawke knew Marella would be nearby, though she’d neatly dodged answering any questions about her planned position.

Hawke looked at his watch: 2:23 PM.

“Here we go,” he said for the second time today, this time aloud. He looked to his left, got a calm nod from Briggs, and put the Jet Ranger in an approach to the airfield.

He touched down at 2:26 PM, placing the Jet Ranger at an angle to the hangar so that it formed a triangle with the hanger and the Sikorsky S-76. He’d framed the playing field, leaving enough room for Airwolf to land in between and, hopefully, keeping any innocent bystanders out of the line of fire.

“Well done,” Briggs said quietly.

Hawke shut the engine down, and tuned the radio to the channel he’d been told. He removed his harness, checked his gun again, and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. At 2:30, the radio came to life.

“Santini Air calling Sierra Alpha Eight Four Niner, come in, Hawke.”

The voice wasn’t the same as the man who’d called him the previous night.

Hawke pressed transmit. “This is Sierra Alpha Eight Four Niner. Go ahead, Santini Air.”

A pause. The door to the hangar slid open about six inches and Hawke felt eyes on him, but couldn’t pick out any detail in the shadowy interior of the hangar.

“Sierra Alpha Eight Four Niner, you are good to bring your cargo in.”

Hawke rolled his eyes. Someone was a little too much into aircraft identification language. He guessed it wasn’t a pilot.

“Negative,” he responded.

A different voice came over the radio. “Hawke, confirm you have your cargo.”

Hawke looked at Briggs, who nodded. “That was Jenks,” Briggs said very quietly.

“Sitting next to me,” Hawke said into the radio. “But it’s a nice day and I’m not stupid. Come outside if you want to do this thing and stay off the goddamn radio. Tower’s gonna have a field day with this.”

“The FAA will fine you for that kind of language,” Briggs remarked mildly, gaze sweeping the airfield.

“Pot calling kettle black,” Hawke responded.

The hangar door slid open another foot and he saw movement. “Here we go,” he said again, unnecessarily.

Hawke walked around the back of helicopter, keeping it between him and the hangar, came around on its left side, opened the hatch and nodded at Briggs, who climbed out awkwardly, and leaned heavily on his cane.

Okay, you're going to play it that way, Hawke thought, drawing his gun. It would probably look realistic if Briggs fell, Hawke decided, but taking Dominic down with him would be a clear giveaway.

He strained his hearing, listening for Caitlin in Airwolf, heard a whisper of her distinctive engine whine. Nearby. Close, but not too close.

Dominic was first out of the hangar, followed closely by a large man holding Dominic in a gross parody of an embrace, with a 9 MM pressed behind Dominic's right ear. Each stepped in sync with the other.

Dominic's face was a swirl of emotions: anger, embarrassment, and frustration. He was probably itching for a fight, thought Hawke. More importantly, he looked perfectly fine, no hint of any physical or other damage.

Dominic and his shadow were followed by four other men, three of whom slipped sideways to secure the space between the hangar and the Sikorsky. Each took a kneeling position, trained rifles in the direction of Hawke and Briggs.

Hawke studied the other man, who was obviously Jenks, and who was studying Hawke and Briggs with equal interest.

Soft, concluded Hawke, at first glance. Used to using his good looks and charm to winnow information from unsuspecting marks, but now getting on in years. With a tan and Hollywood good looks, it was difficult to know for sure, but Hawke put Jenks in his mid-fifties. He wondered if it was the fading looks that drove Jenks to a different game.

A man that looked like that had to be half out of his mind to take on Archangel or he was damn good at presenting the image he wanted people to see.

Jenks nodded at Hawke, said something to the man holding Dominic and the three of them started forward.

Damn, damn, and damn it again, Hawke thought with a grimace. He caught Briggs's eye, read cold calculation there, and the two men began a slow progress towards the hangar, Briggs in front, Hawke holding a gun at the back of Briggs's head.

As they moved, Hawke watched Jenks, read the flash of surprise at Briggs's cane and half-dark glasses. Jenks covered it almost immediately, and adjusted pace so that his trio would end up covering no more distance than his opponents.

Ten feet from the Jet Ranger, Hawke started listening more actively for Airwolf. If Caitlin was going to come in, she'd do it now, but Hawke didn't think he could take out the guy with the gun pressed so closely to Dominic's head before it went off. Two men with Dominic was one more than he'd expected. Briggs was a damn good shot but it would take precious seconds for him to reach his gun.

If he had a radio, he'd have one of the snipers try to take out Dominic's shadow. *No radio, play the hand you've dealt yourself, damn it.*

Fifteen feet from the Jet Ranger, Hawke put his hand on Briggs's shoulder, and stopped walking.

“That’s far enough,” he called to Jenks, who’d immediately stopped as well. “No need to get in kissing distance. You send Dom forward, I’ll send Archangel.” He dug the muzzle of his gun into Briggs’s right shoulder as if prompting forward movement.

“String,” Dominic called out and Hawke read a myriad of phrases in that single word, most of them starting with ‘don’t.’ He squashed his emotions and ignored Santini.

Jenks stood watching him, apparently considering the request. Hawke could hear Airwolf coming now. There wasn’t much time.

Jenks looked around the airfield, frowned, and then finally nodded. Dominic’s shadow pushed Santini forward, stepped back and kept his handgun aimed at Santini, who stood still for a long moment, watching Hawke and then finally stepped forward as Briggs limped towards him.

*God, let this work.*

Hawke kept his gun loosely aimed at Briggs, which meant it was pointing in the right direction. Jenks and his muscle stepped away from each other to make it more difficult for him if he decided to try something.

*They’re not going to hurt Michael, get Dom to safety.*

Hawke could tell from the slight tilt of Briggs’s head that the other man heard Airwolf, knew that she was coming and that he had seconds to move. The two men were still five feet apart.

Briggs took two quick steps, appeared to stumble, his left leg giving out under him as he tried to stop his fall.

Hawke watched Santini, saw his face register surprise, followed immediately by suspicion, saw the light dawn as he heard the familiar engine whine. Dominic darted forward to catch Briggs before he hit the ground. Hawke heard an outraged cry as Briggs dragged Dominic down to the ground with him.

Hawke sank into a crouch; gun aimed, and started firing at the big man aiming a gun at Dominic. He saw the man go down, but couldn’t tell if he’d hit him or if the man had dropped for cover.

Airwolf came screaming around the corner of the hangar, chain guns chewing up the tarmac between Jenks’ team and the two men on the ground.

Gunfire now was pouring in from the three men by the Sikorsky. Hawke dropped for cover, winced as he hit the ground, started crawling towards Dominic and Briggs.

Briggs, prone, was firing towards the Sikorsky. Dominic, without a weapon, was keeping his head low, belly-crawling, as he probably hadn’t since his Army days, towards Hawke.

Caitlin banked Airwolf, came in from a different angle, chain guns chattering at the Sikorsky, kicking up a hell of a cloud of debris.

Hawke ground his teeth. “Damn it, Caitlin, get her down!”

They were too spread out: Briggs was nearest Jenks's team, Dominic midway between Briggs and Hawke. And Hawke was totally exposed, his only cover behind him with the Jet Ranger. He plastered himself into the tarmac as much as possible, left arm covering his head.

The downdraft of Airwolf's rotors was as welcome as a lover's touch. He lifted his head as Caitlin settled the aircraft onto the ground, heard the pings as gunfire ricocheted off Airwolf's shell.

Hawke pushed himself upward, started running before he even had his balance and had his left hand under Dominic's arm only seconds later. Tugging at the older man, he kept moving, running towards the safety of Airwolf, frantically scanning the ground for Briggs.

*Just get Dom to safety.*

He pulled open the left hatch, gut twisting with anxiety, pushed Dominic into Airwolf, scanned the airfield.

"Hawke!"

He turned to Caitlin. The helmet shielded her face; he could only hear her nervousness.

"Hawke, get in!"

Swallowing, he climbed in, knowing that if he couldn't see Briggs, it meant that Jenks already had him.

"Do you want...?" Caitlin gestured at the stick, looked at her seat.

Hawke shook his head, reaching behind him for a helmet. Dominic was settling in at the engineer's station, a very welcome sight and Hawke spared Dominic a rare, warm smile.

"It's good to see you too, kid," Santini said with a smile; the smile fading almost immediately afterwards, replaced by a face that said he was ready to get a little payback. "You wanna tell me the plan?"

Hawke shrugged as Caitlin lifted Airwolf from the ground. "Fly around, shoot the bad guys," he said with a smirk to reassure Dominic.

From the copilot's seat, he could see what Airwolf herself had blocked before: Jenks, with two other men, dragging Briggs towards the Sikorsky. Briggs was struggling, had somehow retained possession of his cane and used it to strike one of the men in the face. The man went down, blood gushing through the fingers of the hand he used to cover his face.

Jenks turned, pressed the barrel of what looked like a .45 against Briggs's right temple, and Briggs stilled, raised his hands, dropped his cane. Jenks stepped to Briggs's side, kept the gun muzzle firmly against Briggs's head, gestured to the other man. Briggs raised his chin.

"Oh God, *Michael*," Caitlin said quietly and Hawke knew she was tempted to close her eyes, but wouldn't because she was in command, she had Airwolf hovering just above the roof of the hangar.

Hawke knew what was coming, prepared himself for it.

Over the roar of Airwolf's engines, he couldn't hear the shots but he saw Briggs's body jerk as the bullets slammed into his chest, saw Briggs's knees give way, body hit the ground awkwardly.

He knew it was coming, knew it was planned, and his insides still changed to liquid, eyes not believing what his mind insisted was true.

"*Mother of God,*" Dominic breathed.

"He's wearing a vest, Dom," Hawke said immediately. "This was planned, it was the backup if we didn't get him into Airwolf with us."

Jenks stood staring, gun in hand, at the man he was supposed to capture. Briggs lay unmoving, sprawled on his back at Jenks' feet and Hawke felt a certain panic that Jenks would *know*, would know to check the 'body.'

"He's *bleeding,*" Dominic said, horrified. "He can't be wearing a vest. I can see the blood!"

Hawke swallowed, shaken despite himself. The 'blood' was pretty damn convincing from a distance. Even more convincing was that the 'blood' had stopped flowing.

"It's not real," Caitlin insisted. "Just like a stunt, Dom."

Jenks took a step towards Briggs, jumped back as a shot hit the ground by his feet. He looked indecisively at Briggs for a second as if evaluating the value of bringing a body back in place of a living, breathing font of information. A scattering of shots hit the ground around Jenks; he bolted then towards the Sikorsky, followed by what remained of his team, one staggering, blood still flowing from between his fingers. They climbed into the helicopter as the Firm's snipers kept up a steady stream of fire.

Why?" Dominic asked, his voice cracking, sounding a slight plaintive note.

"Firm couldn't let them take him, Dom, you know that," Hawke explained, even as he wondered again if there was another way. "And once they'd grabbed Archangel, we figured that if the Firm snipers tried to pick them off, there'd be a good chance that Jenks, or one of his guys, would kill Archangel."

"But they wouldn't shoot him if they thought he was already dead," Caitlin appended, her voice still shaky. "I still can't believe they did it."

"Besides, the Firm wants Jenks alive," Hawke continued. "They want to know who hired him, where he was planning on selling Archangel."

Hawke watched as the Sikorsky's rotors started to move.

"Do we take them out?" Dominic asked, his voice still stricken.

"Not exactly," Hawke said, eyes still fixed on the motionless figure on the tarmac. The bulletproof vest stopped the bullets from entering the human body; they didn't stop the shock of the impact. Briggs wasn't acting; he was probably unconscious.

"Take out their tail rotor, Cait," he ordered calmly, watched as she positioned Airwolf, thumbed the firing switch. Watched with satisfaction as 30 mm chain guns shredded the tail rotor of the Sikorsky.

Main rotors kept moving for the next few minutes. Hawke could imagine the scene of desperation and panic instead the Sikorsky.

Two figures bolted from behind the Jet Ranger, took up positions between Briggs and the Sikorsky. The Firm undercover agents, Hawke decided, as each trained a standard Firm issued M16 on the Sikorsky. The M16s, as useful as they were in inflicting damage, seemed toys next to the armament that Airwolf carried. Like Michael's pop guns, Hawke thought with a wince.

The Sikorsky's main rotors finally slowed and Hawke nodded. "You can put her down," he said.

Two white vans screeched to a halt just outside the Jet Ranger and Hawke wasn't surprised to see a familiar white helicopter approach. The agents from the vans deployed rapidly and surrounded the Sikorsky.

Airwolf settled onto the tarmac and Hawke turned his attention to his oldest friend and surrogate father.

"You okay, Dom?" he asked, a little gruffly. Dominic was already emotionally strained. Too much sentiment might upset him more than help.

"Yeah," Dominic shook his head but his eyes were far away. "Yeah, I'm okay, String. I guess I'm just a little shaken up."

"They treat you okay?" Hawke persisted. Santini looked fine but he was pretty good at putting on a front, didn't want anyone to think he couldn't handle whatever life threw at him. "They feed you and stuff?"

Life came back into Santini's face. "Well, they fed me but it wasn't what I'd call food."

"We'll have to do something about that, then," Hawke said with a smile that he only had to partially force. "After we get you checked out."

"Checked out for what? I'm fine!" Dominic assured him.

"Come on, Dom," Hawke bantered. "Pretty nurses?" He thumped his seat harness and removed his helmet.

"All dressed in white," Santini said sourly. "I can tell where this is going."

Hawke shrugged. "Free medical. Can't pass that up." He nodded towards the hangar. "I'm going to check on Archangel."

"Yeah," Dominic said, waving him off, pretending indifference.

Hawke jogged towards the small group of people clustered around Briggs. He sought and immediately found Marella, kneeling next to her boss, two fingers resting on Briggs's carotid artery, eyes on her watch.

Hawke waited until she looked up.

"He going to be okay?"

Briggs looked anything but okay. Even with his jacket opened and the bulletproof vest removed, he was giving a pretty convincing impression of a man who'd been shot. His one visible eye was closed, face pale, breathing audibly shallow.

"Unconscious and shocky," Marella said grimly. To the man kneeling opposite her, she said, "Pulse 120."

The man, some type of medic Hawke decided, was pressing gently on Briggs's chest, moving his hands, pressing again. "I've got one, maybe two broken ribs, a little tender but I don't think there's any internal bleeding."

The medic shifted back, pushed Briggs glasses up over his brows, shone a penlight into Briggs's right eye. "Pupil's dilated, probably concussed."

Damn, Hawke thought. Must have hit the tarmac pretty hard. The medic clicked off the light and Hawke could barely make out a rim of blue iris surrounding the enlarged black pupil. It was still a prettier sight than the scar tissue that covered what used to be Briggs's left eye, normally hidden under a dark lens or eye patch.

Marella gently replaced Briggs's glasses, hiding the left eye from view, and then looked up at Hawke. "We're medevacing him to the clinic."

It was a clear dismissal and Hawke could hear the fear underneath the anger.

"I could get him there faster," he offered.

The medic looked up, surprised, but Marella shook her head. "We'll need to monitor him."

Hawke nodded, his own worry escalating. "I'll get out of your hair."

He walked back to Airwolf, slowly, thoughts spinning through his mind as rapidly as he pushed them away. He saw, peripherally, Firm agents escorting Harry Jenks and his compatriots towards the white vans, felt a surprising lack of interest in their fate.

He opened Airwolf's left hatch, stuck his head in, thumbed in the direction of the Jet Ranger. "Dom, if you're sure you're all right, I'll meet you both back at the Lair. We'll head to the clinic from there, get you checked out."

Caitlin's eyes were wide, worried. "Michael?" she asked finally.

"Giving Marella serious gray hair," Hawke said. "They're medevacing him to the clinic, but I think he'll be okay. Unless Marella kills him herself for pulling that stunt."

His words had their intended effect: Caitlin visibly relaxed and Dominic stopped digging his fingers into the engineer's console.

Santini and Briggs's relationship was fractious under the best of circumstances; Hawke wasn't sure what effect Dominic's kidnapping would have upon it, whether Dom would blame Briggs for it happening or resent Briggs for his role in Santini's ransom. That was missing the point in Hawke opinion: Jenks was

an Information Broker, a middleman, and an accomplished manipulator. He'd expertly used Hawke to get to Briggs; Dominic was just the lever, one of Hawke's few vulnerabilities.

His thoughts kept him occupied during the entirety of the flight back to the Lair. He wondered how the Firm was going to hush up the gunfire at the airfield, wondered if the airfield would hold Dominic responsible, was relieved that Marella or one of Briggs's aides would somehow handle it, make it go away, as they always did.

Caitlin and Dominic reached the Lair long before he did. For a moment, he regretted flying the Jet Ranger, could have used the time in Airwolf to blow off some of the tension he'd been carrying for almost twenty-four hours. Flying Airwolf was technically demanding, fully engaging, leaving less time for musing. Or brooding, possibly even worrying, he admitted.

Dominic had used the time at the Lair well. When Hawke arrived, Santini had already inventoried and noted every bullet hole, every scrape, every mark on Airwolf's hull. Hawke knew Dominic would want to be back out again tomorrow, lovingly buffing out the smallest scrape on the aircraft he loved. Might not be a bad idea, he thought; the airfield would be a zoo, too many questions, too much of a hassle for the time being.

Struck again by the idea of Airwolf's flight suits as a uniform, Hawke noticed that Caitlin had changed back into civvies. And maybe they were soldiers, fighting Archangel's private wars and more than occasionally, finding their own.

He came back to awareness, heard Dominic's voice say "String," as if he'd said it more than once.

"Yeah," he said, an automatic response, all-purpose reaction.

Dominic was smiling, indulgently. Hawke would accept the parental smile from Santini, who'd raised him for the most difficult years of his life.

Which brought him back to Briggs, and the nagging concern that would hover until he knew that Briggs was all right. Despite the fact that Briggs had ultimately made his own decision to participate, Hawke had enlisted him, took full responsibility for putting the man in danger.

"Let's get you checked out," was what he said to Santini.

Grizzled brows pulled together, met in the middle of a wrinkled face; Santini knowingly nodded. "Mind if I fly us home?"

"As long as we make a stop at the clinic," Hawke replied, with a glance over the top of his sunglasses. Dominic wasn't getting away that easy, but Hawke was happy enough to give over flying duties. He knew his exhaustion was overtaking him, the early warning like dark clouds signaling a storm.

He was asleep three minutes after Dominic took off.

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"This was definitely the stupidest plan you've ever come up with, Michael."

Hawke wasn't really expecting an answer this time either.

“You do know that he’s asleep?” Marella said from behind Hawke.

Soundly asleep, by the looks of it, Hawke thought. With the exception of a sterile gauze pad covering his left eye – a substitute for the dark lens and unrelated to war wounds garnered that day – Briggs looked remarkably healthy for a man who had been shot twice in the chest.

Hawke took his attention off the sleeping man, turned to face Marella, hoping she’d sheathed her claws. He let his expression show the worry he’d been holding at bay since the airfield.

Her face softened. “He really is sleeping. He regained consciousness in the helicopter.” Her lips twisted in recollection. “He wasn’t making too much sense and was sick as a dog, but conscious nonetheless.”

“Concussion,” Hawke said, turning back to Briggs.

“And two broken ribs,” Marella said, coming to stand next to Hawke, her eyes also on the hospital bed. “The doctors want to keep him here for a minimum of two days and this time, he is not skipping out early.”

Hawke had little doubt that Marella would use restraints if she thought it necessary.

“If he was sick....”

“It’s not a mild concussion,” Marella agreed. “The doctors thought it might be a hairline fracture, but CT didn’t show one.”

Hard headed, thought Hawke, but it struck him as trite to say it aloud. Briggs was definitely one of the luckiest bastards he knew.

“You okay?” he asked quietly, keeping his eyes on Briggs.

Marella was silent for long enough that he wondered if he’d spoken too quietly.

“If you’re asking if I’m still angry with you, the answer is yes,” she said finally, turning to look at him. “You pulled a gun on us, threatened his life, threatened my life. You used me to force his cooperation.”

Hawke opened his mouth to reply, but Marella cut him off, her voice firming.

“I know it was Archangel’s decision ultimately to participate and I don’t blame you for what happened,” she said, with a nod towards the hospital bed.

If Marella was angry with him, Hawke could hear in her voice that she was furious with Briggs, who was only escaping a tongue lashing because of his injuries.

“He gave you a hell of a scare,” Hawke said, with honest sympathy, remembering how he’d felt watching the staged shooting.

Marella wrapped her arms around herself and Hawke noticed that she went without blinking for the next minute or two, which was a pity because she probably could have used a good cry.

Maybe if Caitlin was there, she might have yielded but he knew Marella wouldn't cry in front of him, just as she wouldn't accept too much of his sympathy.

"You used us against each other," she said, anger returning and banishing any display of emotion that she didn't want Hawke to see. "You prevented me from doing my job, and by doing so, put more than Archangel's life at risk."

Hawke nodded. It was all true and if he were in her position, he'd probably be taking a swing at the person who did that.

"And I'd do it again," he said in a quiet but firm voice, holding up a hand to stop her interjection. "Jenks used Dominic to get to me because he knew I could get to Michael. I don't like being used any more than you do."

She held his gaze for a long time, longer than he'd expected, and then nodded curtly. They'd never come to any real agreement, Hawke knew; the best he could expect was *détente*.

"Jenks?" he asked.

"Being interrogated as we speak," she said. "He's under the impression that the Firm killed Archangel."

"Think he regrets tangling with a company that kills its own people?"

"He's scared witless," Marella said, eyes flashing with the merest hint of grim satisfaction. "His associates have already told us that they were scheduled to travel to the Middle East. They didn't know any more than that."

Libya? Hawke wondered, glad that he wouldn't face a trip to the place that figured so highly in his nightmares.

"The doctors have checked out Mr. Santini. He's overweight and should modify his diet, but other than that, he's in perfect health."

Hawke looked at Marella. He shouldn't be surprised. She didn't get to be Briggs's senior aide without keeping tabs on everything and anything.

"And there's no sign of any..." she paused, searching for the right word, "manipulation, chemical or otherwise."

Hawke scowled. It hadn't even occurred to him that Dominic might have been brainwashed. Dominic had looked perfectly fine, acted perfectly fine, gave no indication of anyone tampering with his head, in short, hadn't looked like Briggs when they pulled him out of East Germany, hadn't looked like Hawke felt after people had played with his mind to get Airwolf.

"I'm sure Dominic appreciated the doctor's advice," he said and won something approximating a smile. "You tell Zeus about any of this yet?"

Her smile vanished and her expression was guarded as she nodded.

Hawke raised an eyebrow. "Not too happy?"

Marella licked her lips, took time with her answer. “Zeus realizes that Archangel took extraordinary measures to protect the Firm’s interests.”

“Can’t quite believe it either?” Hawke said, with a short laugh.

“He would have preferred a less dramatic approach.”

“Probably worried that Michael set a standard that he might have to follow one day.”

“Perhaps,” Marella allowed, with a sigh.

Hawke heard in her sigh the same exhaustion that had claimed him earlier, surmised that Marella wanted nothing so much as to pull the chair up next to Briggs’s bed and take advantage of an opportunity for a nap. She wouldn’t leave the clinic; he knew that.

Hawke looked back at Briggs. “He’s going to be okay, then?” he asked, as if their conversation hadn’t happened.

“Not after I get through with him,” she admitted. “But he’ll survive.”

That was as close to honest emotion as Marella would permit herself to share and she gave him a weary smile as if in mutual acknowledgement.

Hawke gave her a curt nod. “Guess I’ll take Dominic home, buy him some dinner. You get should get some rest.”

“Physician, heal thyself,” she said. “I think I’ll stay here for a little while longer.”

He looked back as he went out the door, saw her draw the chair up to the bed, interlace her fingers with Briggs’s. He heard Briggs sigh softly in his sleep, saw him turn his head in Marella’s direction. Marella’s face lit with a smile and her grip on Briggs’s hand tightened.

Hawke fought down an unexpected surge of jealousy. *Where the hell did that come from?*

“Hawke?”

He swallowed down his envy, closed the door and turned to Caitlin.

“You ready to go?” she asked, her eyes bright, face happy. “The doctors gave Dominic a clean bill of health and he’s mentioned dinner about, oh, I don’t know, six thousand times?” She grinned.

Dominic was okay. Caitlin was okay. Michael would be okay. All was well in Hawke’s world, and for tonight, he decided, that would be enough.

“Yeah,” he said. “Let’s go home.”