

Undersea Prison

Duncan Falconer

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Major Hillsborough, British Army Intelligence Corps, buckled into the rigid nylon seat of the Merlin troop-transport helicopter. A portly crewman sat by the open cabin door, chatting into his headset. The major was the only passenger; the other two dozen seats folded up against the bulkhead gave the cabin the vacant look of an empty biscuit tin. He couldn't hear a word the crewman was saying above the high-pitched whine of the engines and he leaned forward to look through the narrow opening into the cockpit where the co-pilot was talking into his mouthpiece while consulting a checklist and flicking overhead switches.

The view through the open cabin door revealed nothing but rough angular slabs of concrete: tall interlocking blast-walls that surrounded the helipad and large pebbles covering the ground to reduce the dust. The crewman slid the large door smoothly shut, muffling the higher and more irritating noise frequencies. These only got louder as the engine power increased and the heavy beast made a great effort to pull itself off the ground.

Hillsborough cleared his throat as he stretched around to look through the large square window behind his seat. The dust swirled under the thundering rotors, working its way out from beneath the pebbles. The old city beyond the camp's precast angular walls came into view. He had been in Afghanistan only a couple of weeks but that was long enough to acquire what was commonly known as the Kabul cough, an irritation caused by the fine grey

dust common to the region. Locals described it as so fine that it could work its way through the shell of an egg.

The helicopter rose to reveal a view of the north-eastern outskirts of the city, the squat dilapidated sandy-grey habitats intermingled with shiny new metal warehouses owned by the UN, Red Cross and various Western food and hardware corporations. The craft slowly turned on its axis, giving Hillsborough a view of the rest of Camp Souter, the British Army Headquarters in Afghanistan, ringed by layers of imposing walls topped with interlocking spools of razor wire. A soldier stood in the doorway of the nearest sentry tower inside a corner of the wall, watching the helicopter as it climbed above him. The Merlin continued to turn and Hillsborough saw a massive Antonov cargo plane taxi along the runway of Kabul International Airport. A pair of military C130 transport aircraft were parked near a row of hangars, along with several Apache gunships and some Chinooks.

The chopper dipped its nose slightly as it powered ahead and Hillsborough looked beyond the airfield at a parched mountain range. He had to crouch in order to see the highest point of Khwaja Rawash, a craggy hill he had fancied spending a day walking up but had never got around to. He felt a tinge of guilt about the failed expedition and tried to console himself with the rationalisation that it would have been a pointless risk anyway. But this excuse was quickly negated by the initial justification he'd come up with for doing the walk alone in the first place – which was that he had about as much chance of being mugged on the coastline near Dover where he lived as he had of running into Taliban fighters in that deserted terrain. He knew that better than most since he was the Regiment's senior intelligence officer – or, at least, he had been until that morning. An aide from the Embassy had arrived unexpectedly in the operations room with a high-priority assignment that had to be carried out by someone who held at least the rank of major and Hillsborough was the only one available.

There was no shortage of men who would have jumped at the prospect of a jolly to London but Hillsborough was not one of them. He had climbed out of bed that morning, as he had every day since his arrival, looking forward to getting his teeth into his new appointment. It was his first senior command posting and having completed his handover from the previous IO the day before he was imbued with an invigorating feeling of his own importance. Now, suddenly, he was nothing more than a messenger carrying an important diplomatic package to Bagram Airbase where a plane was waiting to fly him to the UK. He had no idea what was inside the briefcase chained to his wrist and he didn't particularly care. This trip was a bloody nuisance and he already knew that he wouldn't be able to wait to get back to Afghanistan.

Hillsborough checked his watch, a shiny steel Rolex analogue that his wife had given him on his last birthday. Not more than twenty minutes, the pilot had told him. But Hillsborough displayed none of the sense of urgency and importance that the embassy attaché had ascribed to the mission. The man had not even given him a guesstimated return date and the worst-case scenario was that he could be gone for weeks.

The crewman sat with his elbows on his knees, supporting his large helmeted head while he stared at the floor as he did a rough calculation of his own. He had three days left of his tour of duty and his name was on the operations board under just two more scheduled trips. But since this particular excursion had been unexpected he wondered if he might not have to do only one of his planned trips because of it. At the end of the day it didn't matter, though, as long as in seventy-eight hours he was on that big beautiful C130 and heading for England. He could already taste that first pint in his local and hear the boisterous laughter of his mates at the bar.

Hillsborough sat back in his seat and concentrated on easing the tension in his neck muscles that had tightened since boarding

the Merlin. He wasn't sure where the stress had come from, since he was generally a relaxed individual even on helicopter flights. He put it down to the anxiety of this unexpected and disruptive mission. He raised a hand to scratch an itch on his eyebrow, inadvertently pulling on the short chain attached to the briefcase, yanking it off his lap and forcing him to make a quick grab for it. Having something chained to his wrist was a new experience for him.

The crewman glanced at the major, wondering if he was nervous. 'You OK, sir?' he called out, leaning forward.

'What?' Hillsborough shouted back, unsure what the man had said.

The crewman was about to repeat himself when he changed his mind, reached above his head, removed a headset from a hook, unravelled the cable wrapped around the earpieces and handed it to Hillsborough who put it on.

'Be there in fifteen,' the crewman shouted.

'Yes. Right,' the major said.

The crewman shook his head as he touched his helmet alongside his ear and pointed to a small control box on the cable at Hillsborough's chest.

Hillsborough found the box and pressed a button on it. 'Yes. Thank you.'

The crewman gave him a thumbs-up and Hillsborough looked back out of the window to see the city already in the distance a couple of thousand feet below. A lonely black road directly below grew from the urban sprawl like a vine and passed below the helicopter. He turned in his seat to examine it as it weaved ahead across a vast, open, treeless land known as the Shomali Plains where half a dozen small villages or hamlets were spaced out on either side, some of them miles back from it. At the end of the plain the road snaked tightly up into a range of lumpy hills before disappearing short of the crest. What appeared to be some kind

of ancient fortress came into view almost directly below: a hundred or so neatly spaced blocks of houses surrounded by a high rectangular mud wall. It appeared to be abandoned and Hillsborough studied it until it moved out of sight beneath him.

The Merlin banked easily when it neared the craggy hills, the highest crest a thousand feet above them. Instead of climbing the craft remained at the same height and changed direction once again to fly parallel with the range.

‘Two vehicles, eleven o’clock,’ said a scratchy voice over Hillsborough’s headset. The sighting was on the other side of the craft and he looked away from the window at the crewman who was grabbing the handle of the large cabin door. With a well-practised sharp yank he slid it open a couple of feet. The wind rushed in and the crewman leaned out against it to take a better look, staring ahead of the helicopter.

‘Seen,’ the crewman said. ‘Looks like they’re static.’

‘People climbing out, I think,’ came a voice from the cockpit.

Hillsborough had an urge to unbuckle his belt in order to take a look out the door but immediately thought better of it. Helicopter crewmen could get testy about their passengers moving around the cabin without permission. Instead he took in the dramatic view of the hills that he had from his window. He had read many books about the British occupation of Afghanistan that had happened more than a century ago and he tried to imagine what it had been like for soldiers in those days: the oppressive heat and dust of the summers and the bitter cold of the winters. In many ways life for a rural Afghan had not changed a great deal since those times. Hillsborough wondered what the locals truly made of the Westerners and all their mind-boggling technology. Did they envy them or did they truly want to remain as they were? He was inclined to believe the former, suspecting that most so-called Islamic extremists were nothing more than political tools in the hands of men who could not otherwise vie for power.

‘EVADE! EVADE! EVADE!’ the crewman suddenly screamed. The last word had barely left his lips before the heavy machine jerked upwards, banked heavily over and dropped out of the sky on its side.

Hillsborough grabbed his seat in sudden panic as his stomach leapt into his throat and the briefcase clattered against the floor.

The crewman had had his suspicions the instant he’d heard the co-pilot sight the vehicles. They only increased as he watched several figures moving hastily around them. He had not seen much in the way of action throughout his tour other than the time when his crew had dropped off a Royal Marine fighting troop on a hillside during a battle taking place some distance away. The Yanks had lost two helicopters in those months, brought down by ground-to-air missiles, and it remained in the back of every crewman’s mind each time he took to the air. The route from Kabul to Bagram was considered reasonably secure because of the relatively few numbers of attacks along it in the past six months. The wreckage at the head of the Shomali Plain of a US Blackhawk, shot down the year before, was a reminder to all that no helicopter was safe anywhere in this country.

The crewman had held himself back from hitting the panic button when he’d first thought he could make out the men taking something from the back of one of the trucks. He prided himself on his coolness and his caution against overreacting. But there was no mistaking the sudden flash from within the group and the instant cloud of smoke rapidly expanding behind it, the tell-tale signs of a launched missile.

The pilot had seen the threat and had initially increased power to pull the craft upwards, hoping to get above the missile’s altitude limit. But after an instant recalculation he took the lift out of the rotors and banked the chopper away in an effort to gain downward speed and move out of the weapon’s horizontal range. As he gripped the controls tightly, willing more speed into the

lumbering beast, he knew in his heart that they would not make it. If the rocket was a Strela-7, rumoured to be the most common in use in the region, he needed to be over four kilometres away and above two thousand metres to stand a chance of evading it. He was short of both distances. They were in God's hands now.

The crewman could do nothing but squat in the doorway and stare at the head of the trail of smoke that twisted and curved towards them. The helicopter swung dramatically over onto its other side in an effort to shake its pursuer but the missile's computer nimbly adjusted the projectile's tail fins to compensate for the move. The smoke trail corkscrewed several times in a tight curve, cutting through the crisp, clean air as it homed in on the heat signature of the Merlin's red-hot exhausts.

Hillsborough did not know the nature of the threat but it was evident from the crew's reactions that the situation was a serious one. He put a hand to his seat belt to unfasten it in order to have a look for himself but then he remembered the helicopter crash drills he'd been taught, the fundamental rule of which was to stay strapped into the seat. If they landed he would want to get out of the craft as soon as he could and he focused on the open door in front of him, keeping his hand on the buckle in readiness. The crewman suddenly leapt from the doorway, throwing himself to the floor, and for a split second Hillsborough could see, in the bright sunshine outside, the instrument of their deaths as it homed in.

The impact struck above the cabin at the back of the engine compartment and the blast rocked the craft violently. A second later the fuel tanks ignited, exploding down into the Merlin's interior. The engines died instantly and the tail buckled as the chopper descended in a tight spiral, its nose dipping to lead its dive.

Hillsborough covered his face with one hand as flames engulfed him. The other was restrained by the chain, the briefcase having jammed under the seat. Even so, he managed to undo his seat

buckle with his tethered hand and as he fell forward he saw that his body was on fire. He felt the scorching heat pour into his throat as he took his final breath.

‘Mayday! Mayday!’ the pilot screamed as he and the co-pilot pulled at the controls in a futile effort to get the craft’s nose up. Then flames burst in from behind to fill the cockpit and as the men struggled blindly to release their seat belts the helicopter slammed into the ground.

Durrani followed the course of the missile with wide, anxious eyes, his heart pounding in his chest in excited expectation. As soon as he saw it strike and the side of the Merlin burst into flames he shouted for his men to get into the two battered pick-up trucks. He was first into the cab of the lead truck. Its engine was still running, and Durrani yelled again for his men to hurry as they scrambled for the back. Impatiently, he floored the accelerator and the wheels spun in the dry soil before they gained traction and shunted the vehicle forward.

Two of the men gave chase. One of them managed to grab hold of the tailgate and hang onto it, his legs racing at a speed they had never achieved before. Durrani only had eyes for his prey as it dropped towards the horizon. The truck picked up speed as he steered it resolutely across the rough terrain, doing his best to avoid the worst of its hazards. The man hanging onto the tailgate lost his hold after a desperate attempt to pull himself into the back and after sprawling briefly on the ground he scrambled to his feet and leapt into the back of the other vehicle.

Durrani watched the helicopter as it fell out of sight. A second later a mushroom of smoke and flame spouted into the air.

He sped towards it, desperate to complete the planned follow-up phase of the attack. His eyes flickered left and right – he was keenly aware that the road across the plain was a regular military

route between Kabul and Bagram and that there was every chance that the attack had been seen by the enemy somewhere.

The trail of black smoke twisting into the clear blue sky was a fast-dissolving record of the doomed helicopter's flight path from the point the missile had struck to the Merlin's impact with the ground. Durrani fought to keep the rising black smoke in his sights but the dust blowing in through his open window was getting in his eyes.

Bright orange flames came into view as Durrani closed on the wreckage. He kept the accelerator to the floor as the pick-up bounced up onto a tarmac road and across it. He looked quickly in every direction, including skyward. If anything remotely military-looking came into view he would turn around and head towards the nearest village at the foot of the hills behind him, his only chance of escape.

The helicopter lay on its side like a gutted beast, its ravaged carcass burning, its rotors buckled, its tail broken off. The cabin and cockpit were fiercely ablaze and Durrani drove in a wide arc around it until he was upwind and away from the direct heat and smoke. He slammed on the brakes, slid to a dusty halt, opened the door and stood out on the sill to inspect his handiwork. His first thought was that it did not look possible that anyone could have survived. Prisoners were a bonus but rare in such attacks.

The other vehicle halted behind Durrani's but the men were more concerned for their own safety, anxiously scanning every quadrant of the horizon like meerkats. As far as they were concerned Durrani was putting their lives at risk by remaining in the area.

Durrani took a long and patient look, scanning the wreckage for anything of value. The destruction appeared to be complete and he was about to swing back inside his cab when something caught his eye. Several metres from the wreckage, lying on the scorched earth, was a twisted, broken body, as charred as the

surrounding debris and clearly dead. But a small metallic object lying in the midst of the remains and reflecting the strong sunlight was impossible to ignore.

Durrani stepped down onto the ground.

The anxiety among the others increased as they watched their leader walk casually towards the wreckage. One of them called out that they should be going. The others quickly echoed him. Durrani ignored them, his stare fixed on the body. The wind suddenly changed direction and the searing heat from the flames struck him. He was forced to shield his face with his hands and move back several steps. The wind changed again and he saw that the glinting object was a chain attached to what appeared to be a small case.

Durrani moved in at a crouch and picked up the case, the attached limp arm in a charred jacket sleeve rising on the end of the chain. The metal handle burned him and he quickly dropped it. He drew a knife from a sheath on his belt, pulled the arm straight and dug the tip into the wrist joint, slicing through the sinews until the hand fell away. He looked for the end of the other arm lying awkwardly across the body's back and wiped the thin coat of carbon from the face of the watch to reveal the clear, undamaged glass, the second hand rotating beneath it. The watch was cool enough to touch and he pulled it off the corpse's wrist. He picked the chain up by using the point of the knife. The smouldering case dangled beneath it and, after a quick check around for anything else, Durrani headed back to his pick-up.

He climbed in behind the wheel, dropped the briefcase onto the passenger seat, slipped the scorched watch onto his wrist, put the engine in gear and roared away.

Durrani felt exhilarated as he looked around for the enemy, confident that they would not appear. He was wise enough not to celebrate until his escape was complete but seasoned enough to trust his senses. He bounced in the seat as the pick-up roared

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back over the tarmac road and headed for the safety of the hills and the villages that ran along the foot of it. Any doubts that he would fail to escape vanished. It had been a well-executed plan.

Durrani looked at his new watch, the shiny metal exposed where the carbon had rubbed off. His gaze moved to the case on the seat, the cracks in the charred brittle plastic exposing more metal beneath. He looked ahead again but the briefcase and its as yet unknown contents remained at the front of his thoughts.