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Desert Fire

Written by Phil Champion

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CHAPTER TWO

Steve Range lowered his burly frame into the chair and cast his eyes around the room. A dozen of the old faithful were gathered, and with several he exchanged a glance of welcome and a few words – mostly wisecracks about absent friends or speculation about the coming mission.

As was the norm with Blackstone Six (B6) operations, none of the private operators knew what the mission entailed until they gathered for the briefing. If they took the tasking, they'd deploy directly from here to a forward mounting base and under strict communications silence.

They'd hand in their mobile phones and other comms devices, so there was no chance of the nature of the task before them leaking out following an indiscreet phone call home. It wasn't that the men didn't trust their close families, but it was always possible to make someone talk under the right kind of torture.

At the front of the room, the man they knew as The Colonel was having an easy chat with Tony Hogan, the boss of Blackstone Six. The Colonel played some kind of

shadowy liaison role between the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), the various branches of the armed forces, and people like those gathered in the room. Range liked The Colonel and trusted him as much as you could anyone in this kind of business.

The door opened and a tall figure slipped into the room. As far as Range was concerned, Nigel Champion was the opposite of men like The Colonel, or Tony Hogan, the boss at Blackstone Six. To those in the business of ultra-covert black operations, Nigel Champion was known simply as 'The Fixer'. His role was to take orders from his political taskmasters and translate those into language men like Range and his fellow private warriors could understand. Plus he was the firewall. The politicians spoke to The Fixer. The Fixer spoke to Blackstone Six. That was the key link in the chain of deniability that surrounded all of their missions.

The Fixer made his way across to the battered desk at the front of the room, his feet gliding across the linoleum floor almost without lifting them, as if he were a human hovercraft. With his long, chalky, effeminate-looking hands, his snow-white hair and lifeless pale-blue eyes, The Fixer had a distinctly alien look about him. He had briefed Range on several previous occasions, and with each Range's dislike and distrust of the man had grown. He was the last kind of bloke that Range would have wanted beside him when the bullets started to fly.

Fortunately, their only contact today was going to be the overall mission briefing: the tasking. Once that had been outlined in full, The Fixer's job was done, and he'd hand over to The Colonel plus one or two of the Intel boys so they could get down to the real business of planning the thing. That's if Range and the others from Blackstone Six decided to take the mission.

The Fixer exchanged a few words with Tony Hogan and The Colonel before turning to face the room. 'Gentlemen, if I might have your attention. Thank you for coming. The mission I am about to outline is being contracted by Her Majesty's government only. There are no private partners or funders, and no other governments with any role – so no other interested parties apart from HMG. Consequently, above and beyond the normal expectations of secrecy, this mission will remain off-limits to our usual allies, including the Americans.'

The Fixer paused for effect, letting his words hang in the air. As every man in that room fully appreciated, for a black op to be secret and deniable even where Britain's foremost ally, the Americans, were concerned, it had to be some kind of hyper-sensitive tasking.

'As you are all aware, the former Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, was toppled from power by a rebel coalition. This took place within a wider movement that has been called "The Arab Spring". Part and parcel of the Libyan uprising was the hunting down of

Colonel Gadaffi and his family. Mostly, they were captured by the rebels and dealt with – ahem – rather summarily.’

‘Executed, you mean,’ Range interjected. ‘Slotted on the spot.’

‘They were dealt with in a way which our new allies, the Libyan Freedom Coalition, feel was appropriate.’

‘Dead’s still dead.’

The Fixer stared at Range in silence for a long second. Range stared back into his unblinking, lizard-like gaze.

‘However the Gadaffi family may have met their end is not germane to this briefing,’ The Fixer grated. ‘What matters is which of the Gadaffi family members *are still alive*. The Libyan leader is believed to have had perhaps a dozen children. There are rumours of many illegitimates and bastard offspring—’

‘They can join the club, mate,’ Range muttered.

A ripple of laughter ran around the room. The Fixer’s lifeless gaze took on a distinctly icier hue.

‘The offspring that interests us is one of Gadaffi’s legitimate children, his last and youngest son, Sultan Gadaffi. Before you on your desk you’ll find a buff envelope. If you decide to take this mission, there are photos in there to ID the Gadaffi son. Officially, all of the Gadaffi family is either dead or in the hands of the rebel coalition authorities. However, we happen to know that Sultan Gadaffi escaped the net. Your mission is to go in and get him.’

‘You are all familiar with the term The Maghreb?’ The Fixer continued. ‘It refers to the region of North Africa that largely equates to the Sahara desert. The Maghreb encompasses southern Libya and Algeria, plus parts of Niger, Chad and Mali. It is inhabited by a nomadic desert tribe, the Tuareg. They call themselves “The Free People”: they move across this vast, lawless region largely without let or hindrance. Traditionally, they ran trade caravans across the trackless wastes. More recently, several thousand of them were recruited into the late Colonel Gaddafi’s armed forces, becoming his most loyal fighters.

‘Gaddafi championed the Tuareg, and they in turn championed his regime. When the rebels began to win the war – with us and our French allies providing joint military support – the Tuareg melted into the desert. They took several of the Gaddafi family with them, providing sanctuary. One only interests us: Sultan Gaddafi. Your mission is to head into their territory and to snatch him, so as to bring him back to the UK to face justice – essentially on charges of war crimes.’

The Fixer gestured to the two men standing behind him. ‘Tony Hogan, your boss at Blackstone Six, is briefed in more detail on the mission, and he believes it is one that you will want to take. As per usual, The Colonel will be your liaison. He is able to brief you on the minutiae of the tasking, including what, if any, support Her Majesty’s armed forces can provide. Are there any questions?’

‘Only one for you,’ Range remarked. ‘Why us? Why not give it to The Increment?’

The Increment – formerly known as the Counter-Revolutionary Warfare Wing, or The Wing for short – was the British government’s own black ops outfit. It employed serving members of the Special Forces on black missions, carrying out official government business that was best kept quiet. By contrast Blackstone Six did the ultra-deniable work – the kind of stuff that even The Increment couldn’t risk dirtying its hands with.

‘Range has a point,’ Tony Hogan remarked. ‘It’s something that troubles me. This is a classic mission for The Wing. It’s not dirty enough for us. So why not use them?’

‘For reasons I’m not able to go into, it’s seen as being too risky for The Increment to get involved,’ The Fixer replied. ‘It needs to be rather more at arm’s length than the Inc can deliver, so hence we’ve come to you.’

‘Bullshit,’ Range snorted. ‘You’re asking us to go after a suspected war criminal so he can be tried for war crimes. We did just that in the Balkans when myself and several others present in this room were serving with the SAS. We tracked down and nabbed Milan Kova-something . . .’

‘Kovačević,’ a voice interjected. It was Mike The Kiwi, a hard-as-nails New Zealand operator sitting just behind Range. ‘Op Tango. I remember it well, mate, especially when you fell out of the bloody chopper.’

‘Piss off,’ Range retorted. ‘I only fell out ’cause I’d necked a bottle of that rough-as-fuck Serbian hooch – what’s it called?’

‘Slivovitch.’

‘I was celebrating capturing Kovačević.’

‘Range is right,’ The Kiwi remarked, turning back to The Fixer. ‘Grabbing Gadaffi is the kind of mission the Regiment could well handle, let alone Inc. It doesn’t need us. Not unless there’s something about it you’re not telling us.’

The Fixer narrowed his gaze imperceptibly. ‘That’s as may be, but it’s not your need-to-know. This mission needs to be considerably more off-the-books than Inc can deliver. That’s as much as I can say, and probably more than I am cleared to tell you.’

‘Fair enough.’ Range shrugged. ‘That’s likely the least of our worries. If you don’t mind me saying, Tony, this one’s too much risk for the money.’

The Hogan smiled, indulgently. ‘Absolutely, Range old boy. I couldn’t agree more. I’m never one to baulk at trying to bargain up Blackstone’s fee for the job.’

Range and the boss at Blackstone Six had as close to a father-son kind of relationship as you could imagine when there was no blood relation. Range had been abandoned at birth and brought up in a string of kids’ homes. He had no real family to speak of. ‘The Hogan’, as he was known, had two sons, but both had chosen a career in investment banking, and he felt he had lit-

tle in common with them these days.

The Hogan had hands the size of shovels, and he'd been a prize boxer in his youth and whilst serving in the military. But he'd never made it into an elite regiment and he'd never seen any significant combat, although not for the want of trying. To The Hogan, Range was everything he'd wanted to be, or at least how he'd have liked one of his sons to turn out.

'For our normal rates,' Range continued, 'a grand a day after The Hogan there has taken his cut, you're expecting us to fly down the gun barrels of a bunch of desert warriors who outnumber us a thousand to one, I'd imagine. We're to do so in the heart of their territory, which has been Tuareg Central for centuries. It's hardly going in to battle at the time and place of our choosing, is it? And what will it be, a week-long mission at the most? So we'll walk away with seven grand apiece if we're lucky. It's never worth the hassle, is it?'

'We suspected that might be your position,' The Fixer smiled, oilily. 'So, there is the mission-plus option. More risk, but potentially fantastic rewards.'

'Go on,' Range nodded. 'Mission-plus sounds better than mission-zero.'

'In essence, we pay you nothing to go in and do the job. The Tuareg do.'

Range snorted. 'We go lift the Gadaffi boy, murder most of the Tuareg in the process, and they pay us handsomely for doing so, is that it? I may be thicker than a

whale omelette, but I seem to be missing something vital here . . .’

‘You are.’ For an instant a sneer flashed across The Fixer’s features. He did his best to hide it, but it wasn’t lost on Range. ‘The late Colonel Gadaffi bought the Tuareg’s protection. He paid for it, and very handsomely. We estimate the Gadaffi gold is worth in excess of one hundred million dollars at today’s values. It’s stored in the same fortress as the Gadaffi son. We’re happy to pass you all our intel on the gold, if that’ll convince you to take the mission.’

The Hogan let out a delighted chuckle. ‘Ingenious suggestion, old boy. My men get their usual fee, plus the gold as a bonus, I take it?’

‘We were thinking of something a little more equitable,’ The Fixer replied. ‘If you go for the mission-plus option, you reduce your fee to zero, and we allow your men to keep the gold. We – HMG – turn a blind eye, as it were.’

‘I always did say if I turned fifty and hadn’t made a million I’d go rob a bank,’ Range remarked. ‘I’ve got five years before I’ve got to grab my sawn-off and pop down to my local Halifax. This sounds like a far better option.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ The Hogan smiled. Then, to The Fixer: ‘But Blackstone will need fifty per cent of its normal fee guaranteed.’ There was a hardness that had crept into The Hogan’s voice that belied his cheery

exterior. 'The gold remains a high risk. How certain are you that it's there for the taking?'

'We're entirely certain. You'll get our full dossier of intelligence on it, including satellite images of the underground bunker where it's stored.'

'What logistics and back-up do we get?' Range asked.

'You get your airborne means of insertion and extraction,' The Fixer replied. 'You'll be going in by helicopter, I presume. No way to penetrate into the heart of the Sahara unnoticed overland, not even for you boys. That's as far as HMG's support goes. There's no air support, not this far into the territory of a sovereign nation with whom we are not at war. We'll ferry you back and forth, but that's about it.'

'Same as normal, then. Only this time, you ferry us *and the gold* in and out, right?'

'Absolutely,' The Fixer confirmed. 'Absolutely.'

'I'll be sure to get the paperwork watertight on that one, Range,' The Hogan added. 'The last thing we'd want is HMG snaffling up the gold as illegal contraband or something, wouldn't you agree?'

The Fixer waved a hand dismissively. 'I'm sure we can get all of that squared away. It's the Gadaffi boy that we're after. Bring him to us, and you're welcome to the gold. After all, you and your men will have more than earned it.'