

Chapter 5: The Bargaining Chip

At seven o'clock in the evening, Courtesan Amber and another woman arrived in the caliph's suite. The other woman delivered a tray of food and drinks for the two boys while Amber led the caliph back into the elevator. When the door had closed, she tapped a sequence of buttons while shielding the panel from the caliph's eyes, and then the car began to move downward. Ahmed could not keep his eyes off the woman. This evening, she was wearing an elegant gown that was cut low in front and back. The material was very sheer and her nude body was covered only by folds of the gauzy fabric as it followed her every movement. She noticed his stare and asked, "Do you approve of my outfit, Caliph?"

"Actually, no, however, the customs of my people are clearly different from yours. You are a beautiful woman, Courtesan." She blushed slightly, smiled, and lowered her head for a moment. The caliph looked around at the inside of the elevator car to avoid staring at her body any longer. After a minute, he said, "This seems to be taking much longer than the ride from the lobby."

"Well, security for our queen and this site are paramount, Caliph. This is the core of our existence after all."

"What does that mean?" Just as he said those words, the elevator shaft became a clear wall around them. The caliph had not noticed the glass walls of the elevator car earlier and wondered why.

The area outside the shaft was unbelievable. The shaft continued at least a hundred feet to the floor below. The open chamber was at least the size of four football fields arranged in a square. Massive crystal chandeliers hung from long chains all around them, providing light for the room below. At one end of the giant room was a kitchen that was open to the rest of the room. Between that area and the elevator shaft was a large banquet hall. Dozens of male chefs toiled in the kitchen while more than fifty male waiters were busily setting tables for the feast. Beyond the elevator shaft was a large dance floor, and then the rest of the area was filled with seating groups, each containing at least two large chaise lounges, which were big enough to hold two or three people.

"What is this place?" the caliph asked as the car approached the floor of the room.

Amber took the caliph's arm and pressed her body against him. "This is the queen's living room, silly. Didn't I tell you that this place is a residence and not a castle?"

He grunted. "It looks a lot like a palace to me." She only giggled, squeezed his arm, and rested her head on his shoulder. When the doors opened, she took his hand and led him out into the room. Almost immediately, they were surrounded by more than one hundred women, who seemed intrigued by the male guest in their home. The women were all dressed very provocatively, with loose folds of fabric barely concealing their bodies. After his other encounters with the Orenites, the caliph was surprised to see that none of these women bore tattoos. As they progressed through the throng, he was more surprised to see many of the women were pregnant.

"I have a really bad feeling about this," Jack said and then took a bite of a carrot.

"We have to trust the caliph."

Jack smirked. "I've heard that tune before. We were always taught to trust the government too. When we found out they were working with the cannibals and wanted to turn us into hamburgers, we learned better."

“My uncle is not like that, Jack.”

“Unlike your dad and grandfather, right?”

Mohammed groaned. “Well, we are here. What do you think we should do?”

Jack stood. “I think I’ll go stay in one of the crawlers. I’d feel safer there. At least I could fight back if they try to kill me. Here, I’m a sitting duck.”

“You don’t know any of the security codes, Jack.”

“Do you?”

“Only for the crawler we rode in. I used that one in Las Vegas all the time.”

“Give me the code, Mohammed.”

“Maybe I should go with you. Let me write a note to my uncle so he knows where we are.” He got up and went over to a small desk, retrieved a pen and paper, and began to write.

Jack walked over and watched him. “What language is that?”

“It’s Arabic. I doubt any of these people will be able to read it.” Mohammed folded the paper, wrote something else on the outside, and then turned to Jack. “Let’s go.” The two boys went to the elevator, and Jack pressed the call button. Moments later, the door opened and they stepped inside. Mohammed pressed the button with the star, and the doors closed. When the doors opened again, they stepped into the same hallway they had entered hours earlier. They hurried toward the door, opened it, and discovered the lobby was deserted. They hurried across the room to the double doors. Jack pushed lightly on the door to see if it was locked or alarmed and was surprised to see it was not. Through the glass, they could see the three crawlers sitting where they had been left. They walked out of the pyramid and hurried over the one of them. Mohammed’s hand was trembling as he typed the code into the keypad. The door unlocked and the flashing red alarm indicator turned green. They climbed inside and secured the door.

“That was too easy,” Jack noted.

“That woman did say we could leave at any time.”

“Yeah, but they still think I’m your cousin Omar. Also, we’re still inside the walls and in the middle of a city with millions of cannibals. I suppose they knew we can’t get away, so why bother.”

“You are such a pessimist, Jack Kennedy.”

One hundred miles to the south, Tom Wainwright, Scott Naughton, and Steve Caster walked into the situation room in the basement under the administration office on Coronado Island in San Diego. Simon Peter Carter and Anthony Wright stood when the others entered the room.

“Welcome home, guys, and good job!”

“I need two flyers ready in ten minutes,” Tom demanded.

“We need to think rationally now, Tom,” Simon replied. “We have no idea where Jack or the others are.”

“What others?” Scott asked.

Tony sighed. “It would seem that Abe Gregory, Joe Kennedy, Simon Johnson, and Mila Revshenko have gone to find Joe’s son.”

“Crap! Now, we’ve got to find all five before they’re chopped into hamburger.”

“First of all, remember that he is with the caliph and in disguise,” Simon began. “The caliph has promised to get Jack back here safely.”

Tom slammed his fist on the table. “Damn it! The caliph doesn’t know the Marshalls like I do. Odds are that they are locked up already, just waiting for their turn on the kill line.”

Simon held his head in his hands and moaned. Tony replied, "Tom, I know you're worried, but we are not going to allow any of you to go on a suicide mission."

Simon looked up. "We know where they are. A Mexican satellite has found a massive pyramid east of downtown Los Muertos. This thing is so massive that it has to be the palace of their queen. If that's true, then the caliph and Jack are there."

"A pyramid?"

"Yea, and the satellite also spotted three crawlers just outside. They were all black, which is typical for caliphate military vehicles. Tell them the plan, Tony."

Tony pressed a button, and the room lights dimmed. He pressed another and a projector displayed a satellite view of the Los Muertos coastline. Tony used a mouse to move a red arrow over the screen. "This area is what used to be the Port of Los Angeles. You'll note several ships waiting to dock."

"Those aren't container ships," Scott noted.

"Yeah, we know that. The ships are personnel transports, and each ship in this shot is from a different country. Mexico has activated their agents in those countries, and what they've found is very disturbing."

"They're selling people to the cannibals," Tom guessed.

"That's close, actually. In fact, those countries are paying the cannibals to take their criminals and elderly off their hands. They had paid them in cash in the past, but now the only payment they'll accept is military hardware."

"Turn it off, Tony." Simon stood. The screen went dark, and the lights came back on. Simon put his hands on the table. "The Orenites are not arming for defense. They are going to bring the fight to us very soon. Oren's family has been helping to train their forces, and their progress has been rapid. We believe they will attack San Diego in the coming weeks. They think that if we're wiped out, Mexico will hide behind their borders. Then all of Calnevona will be theirs, including the Tucson Ranch and Las Vegas."

"So, what do we do?"

"The Mexican Navy is sending ships to cut off the port," Tony started. "Unfortunately, since the Panama Canal silted up fifty years ago, they have to go the long way. While the Ice Age is ending here, it's still bad at Cape Horn. It could be months before their ships arrive. In the meantime, it's up to us. If you're willing, the three of you will join a small flotilla that will go out to one of those ships and take it over. We'll replace their crew with our own. When you dock, arrange some shore leave for the crew. That's your opportunity to find your friends."

"What about their human cargo?" Scott asked.

"That's not our priority at this time."

"That's crazy! I'm out then. We can just take a small boat and land on some deserted coastline and do it ourselves."

Simon moaned and sat down. After a moment, he looked up. "There's more to it than that, Steve. We intend to plant a nuclear weapon at the bottom of the hold. At the right moment, we will detonate it. That will close the harbor for years and likely kill a lot of those cannibals."

Scott stood. "I have a better plan. Tom, Steve, and I will take a smaller boat as Steve suggested. Your flotilla will rescue as many captives as possible. Focus on the elderly first. When you think the time has come to detonate, give your crew a few hours' notice to run for their lives. We'll look for the others and find a way back here while staying away from San Pedro."

The caliph continued forward, now enveloped in a cocoon of beautiful women. One had taken his free arm, and others were all around him. "What's the meaning of all of this, Courtesan Amber?"

She leaned over and kissed his cheek just as the crowd began to open in front of them. Moments later, he and Amber stood at the foot of a very large chaise lounge. An older woman with bright red hair and makeup and wearing a gold lame gown was lying on the chaise with very pregnant women on either side of her. Amber curtsied deeply. "My dear Caliph, may I introduce you to my mother, the Queen?"

"Your Majesty, it is my pleasure to meet you," the caliph said as he bowed.

"Your Holiness, welcome to my home. Since we'll be working together, you may call me Candy. How may I address you?"

"Ahmed is fine, Candy. I must say your home is magnificent, confusing but magnificent."

"Please sit down, Ahmed. We have no need for ceremony here. I would have stood, but I have some problems with my back and knees."

He bowed. "Candy, in my culture, it is unseemly for a man to sit or lie with a woman who is not his wife or family." Almost instantly, one of the other women brought over a chair, and the caliph sat. "Thank you."

"Please sit, Daughters!" All the women sat on chairs or on the floor where they stood.

"You see, Candy, that is part of the confusion. Certainly all of these women cannot be your children?"

The queen laughed. "Well, in the context you are accustomed to, they are not my daughters by birth. However, in our culture, all children are my children. I decide which man will mate with which woman. Their offspring do not belong to them, but instead belong to the collective, of whom I am the mother."

"That arrangement seems oddly familiar, Candy."

"That isn't coincidental, Ahmed. We call this place our hive. I suppose I am the queen bee, but unlike a bee, I could not possibly bear all the children, and so I have my surrogates here."

"Ah. I thought it odd that none of these women are tattooed, and now I suppose I know why."

"Yes, the citizens outside these walls must fight for attention and earn the respect of their cohorts, and tattoos have proven an effective method. These women do not need to prove anything to me. In essence, they are a part of me. Once they are no longer able or willing to bear offspring, they will be able to stay here and perform other functions. At that time, they may well choose to wear the markings of our faith."

"Faith? Is this a religion as well?"

"In our way, yes, it is. We worship the word and creed of my brother, Oren Marshall."

"You worship the former Secretary of Health and Human Services? Frankly, that is odd."

"While you worship a man who died more than a thousand years ago after writing a book. And others worship a man who was crucified by the Romans two thousand years ago, whose life story was not written down until hundreds of years later. Who is to say which is more valid, Ahmed?"

The caliph bristled with anger at the demeaning of his faith and glared back at her.

"Please do not take offense, Ahmed. I was just trying to make a point. Before we go to the other side of the room for dinner, please allow me to change the subject dramatically." He only stared back. "Where is Jack Kennedy? I know your men kidnapped him."

The caliph did not react, but looked at the queen and replied, "He is being held in Las Vegas, pending our negotiation and my return there."

Abe avoided the main roads as they drove north. At eight o'clock in the evening, they stopped at the crown of a small rise. "What the hell is that?" A giant pyramid sat far in the distance. An extremely bright searchlight was at its peak, shining directly up into the night sky.

"That has to be what we're looking for, Abe," Mila replied. "Let's try to get closer."

Far to the south, the inflatable boat punched through the surf, heading out to sea. Tom, Scott, and Steve wore all black and huddled at the bottom of the vessel to avoid detection as they turned northwesterly. Steve manned the engine with his night-vision goggles in place to look for danger. "Might as well get some rest you guys. It's going to be a long and bumpy ride."

Jack and Mohammed were trying to sleep on the floor of the crawler. They had been able to get their sleeping bags from one of the external compartments, but that did not lessen the difficulty of sleeping on the reinforced steel floor panels. Jack rolled over and tried to ease the stiffness in his back. Suddenly, he noticed the beams of two flashlights moving across the front seats. He knew that the rear compartment was not visible from outside, so he waited for a moment until the lights moved on. He could hear muffled voices and footsteps heading away. He glanced at his watch and noticed it was almost eleven o'clock, which made him wonder why the caliph had not come looking for them or, at least, sent some of his guards to find them. Jack was again glad for his decision to leave the suite in the pyramid. Something had to be wrong for the caliph not to have returned yet. Then he noticed that Mohammed was awake and checking the time on his watch. "Something's wrong."

"Jack, I'm sure my uncle is still negotiating with the queen. You cannot expect these things to be quick. As I said before, you worry too much." Now, they could hear more voices, still muffled by the steel and bulletproof glass between them and the outside. Some of the voices were elevated and seemed to be barking orders.

Before Mohammed could speak again, Jack motioned for him to be quiet. Jack moved noiselessly toward the machinegun turret. He pulled himself up far enough to where he could glance outside, and then he climbed back down and moved next to Mohammed. "Listen, don't talk. Five Orenite soldiers are escorting the guards who came with us across the parking area. Our men are bound together like prisoners. I know what happens next." Mohammed moved to look himself, but Jack held him back. "Can you start and drive this thing?" Mohammed nodded. "Okay, this is what we're going to do."

Abe drove his crawler toward the pyramid, which was now less than two blocks ahead. The sides of the road were crowded with Orenites who seemed to be headed toward the pyramid. Mila suggested they remove their robes and resemble those outside, who were covered with outrageous tattoos and very little else. A naked woman began to pound on the driver's window, which Abe lowered. "Are you going to the audience with the queen?"

Mila leaned over and replied, "Yea, I'm Mash and this is Ape. In fact, this crawler is our offering to her."

"Bless you for your offering. I am Notorious, and I used to be one of the Chosen Ones. Can some of us ride with you?"

"Any of you who want can ride on top. After all, you don't want to hide your tattoos from anyone, right?" She nodded, and Abe stopped while twenty Orenites climbed up on the hood, roof, and rear deck.

After Abe raised his window, Joe asked, "Are you out of your mind?"

Abe turned his to face him. "It's the perfect disguise, don't you think? No one has a clue why we're here, and that's just the way we want it." As the crawler pulled through the open gates, the crew looked out on a massive amphitheater, large enough for fifty thousand or more supplicants to see their ruler. A soldier carrying a machine gun approached the crawler and began arguing with the riders. Abe opened his door and stepped out.

"Who the fuck are you, and what is this vehicle doing here?" the guard asked.

Abe bowed slightly. "General, I am Ape, and these are my friends, Mash, Jinx, and Stink. We liberated this crawler from those bastards in San Diego and have come to give it to Her Serene Majesty."

"Ding, show some respect for these brave Orenites!" Notorious shouted from the top of the crawler.

The soldier bowed to her and then turned to Abe. "The amphitheater is almost full. You and your friends can stay in the crawler until after the speech. Then we will take your gift. May the queen's blessing be upon you, Ape."

Abe bowed deeply, and the soldier left. He turned to Notorious, saluted her, and climbed back inside. He then drove forward as far as he could before the mass of humanity forced him to stop. The riders on the outside of the vehicle disembarked and headed into the amphitheater. "Any great ideas now? You know, we look as crazy loco as those people outside. I hope our own soldiers don't mistake us for them."

The group of men was almost at the small bus now. Jack had slowly pulled himself into the machinegun turret and was crouched down to avoid detection. Mohammed sat in the driver's seat and had slowly lowered the side window halfway and tried to listen to the discussion outside. A nude man whose entire body was covered with tattoos of the face of Oren Marshall seemed to be the commander. The sides of his head were shaved and the long hair at the top was spiked into a red Mohawk. "Okay, boys, it's time to go on a little field trip. Everyone on the bus."

"We must remain and protect the caliph," one of the guards exclaimed. "And we are your guests. Why are we bound like dogs?"

"Field trip, that's funny," another Orenite laughed.

The lead guard walked up to the first man in the line and held a pistol to his head. "Get on the bus!" Just then, a bright light illuminated them from behind. The guard spun around and saw bright lights on either side of the machine gun turret. He turned again to shoot the cuffed men. Mohammed shouted something in Arabic, and the twelve guards dropped to the ground.

Jack opened fire. Mohammed raised the window as he started the crawler. He slammed it into gear and raced toward his men. The five Orenite guards were cut to pieces by the fifty-caliber slugs. Sirens began to sound, and spotlights played across the inside of the compound, looking for the source of the trouble.

The throng of devotees in the amphitheater panicked at the sound of gunfire. Abe threw the shift into reverse and accelerated backward to get out of the gates before they could be closed, trapping them inside. He slammed on the brakes, turned the wheel hard, spinning the vehicle around to face the gate, and then accelerated again.

Mohammed stopped the crawler between the bus and the group of men. Jack jumped out and began cutting through the ties with a pair of bolt-cutters. As each man was freed, he climbed into the crawler and tried to make room for his comrades. Gunfire from the walls beyond the park riddled the bus as hundreds of Orenite soldiers emerged from the walls and the pyramid to join

the fight. Jack followed the last man into the crawler and sealed the door. He pushed through them and back to the turret and climbed inside. One of the freed men stuck his head into the turret and said, "We have to get another crawler, Jack! We need the howitzer to blast our way out."

Jack nodded.

Mohammed had heard everything and accelerated toward the other crawlers, which were already swarming with Orenites. The attackers were pounding on the side of one with no effect. At the other crawler, an Orenite was typing codes into the keypad, hoping to find the right combination. After the fifth attempt, the crawler detonated, blasting the enemy with shrapnel. A large section of tread slammed into the windscreen of Mohammed's crawler and cracked the bulletproof glass.

Abe drove as fast as he could away from the gate, not knowing what could be happening inside. Joe was sitting on the jump-seat behind Abe. "It's Jack. I know it."

"Yeah, that's what I figure too. But it wasn't on this side of the pyramid. We have no idea what to look for."

Mila noted, "Pictures from a Mexican satellite show only two gates in the wall. One here and one on the north side." Abe nodded, took the first left turn, and accelerated again.

Mohammed braked and spun the wheel, spinning the crawler which slammed into the side of the other, crushing several Orenites in between. He moved it while Jack kept Orenite reinforcements away with withering gunfire. The door opened, and one of the caliph's guards tapped a code into the second crawler's keypad. The door opened. Ten of the men moved quickly into the other tank, and then both crawlers began to move toward the walls. The driver of the second crawler spoke over the loudspeaker. "Caliph Mohammed, we must stay away from the gates. They have too many guns there even for us. Follow me!"

"Okay, Hossein." The two crawlers were now followed by five Orenite crawlers. Jack concentrated his fire on them. The Orenite gunners were poor shots, and most of the rounds zipped by harmlessly. Others slammed into their other tanks and even the ground troops trying to help. Suddenly, the rear hatch of their crawler opened. One of the caliph's guards stood there with a grenade launcher. He fired and the projectile slammed into the windscreen of the lead Orenite crawler and detonated. The crawler exploded and flipped, crashing in flames on the nearby grass. The guard smiled and climbed back inside. "Yes, I see it, Hossein," Mohammed said as he slowed to a stop. The howitzer on the lead crawler fired and then fired again.

The concussion of a large explosion caused Abe to stop their crawler in the middle of an intersection. The area was deserted with the wall of the pyramid compound less than a quarter mile to their left. "Why did you stop?"

A second blast knocked a hole in the wall in front of their eyes. Then two black crawlers drove through slowly over the broken bricks and stones. Heavy machine gun fire ricocheted off both. Then they accelerated toward Abe and his team. Abe took the microphone and said something in Arabic. Mila looked at him dumbfounded.

"Jack, someone on that crawler up ahead just asked for you," Mohammed shouted.

"Who?"

"He just said your name and then semper fi."

"Tell everyone not to shoot. That's Abe. I know it's him."

"How can you be sure?"

"Well, if they don't shoot at us, we'll know for sure."

They drove up to the other crawler, which sat quietly. Mohammed and Jack noticed the tattooed faces inside. Three Orenite crawlers were almost through the rubble, ready to pursue when the door of the other opened and a tattooed man stepped out and approached the caliph's crawler. He looked up at Jack in the turret, smiled, and waved. "What do you want?" Jack asked.

"Jack, these tattoos are fake. I know you don't recognize me, but I'm your dad."

"Huh?"

"Those other crawlers will be here any minute. We have to get out of here, Son. Just follow us."

"No. I think it's best if you follow us, okay. We know exactly where to go for help."

"That sounds like a plan, Son." Joe got back into the other crawler, and the three headed away as fast as they could.

Far away on the coast, the black boat approached a group of luxury homes clinging to a beautiful beach. It was after midnight, and the only sound came from the surf. As the boat hit the sand, Steve, Scott, and Tom jumped out and pulled the boat onto the shore. The men moved quickly over to a wall separating the property of two residences. They heard the sound of a patio door opening. They hid on the far side of the wall and listened. Tom thought he heard the sound of ice tinkling in a glass, but it was very slight compared to the sound of the ocean. He shook it off as his imagination. The door opened again and a woman's voice said, "Dad, it's way past your bedtime. Why are you still up?"

"I don't know, honey. I just couldn't sleep. It's probably the sound of the ocean. We never got that in the dome in DC. Good night."

"Good night, Dad," the woman said and then the door closed. Tom was staring into space with his mouth open. Scott pressed his mouth to Tom's ear and asked, "Are you okay?"

Tom motioned that he needed a moment and then moved slowly around the end of the wall. He glanced out for an instant and moved back. He motioned for the others to wait, then dropped to the sand, and began to crawl forward. Tom moved quietly, trying to stay behind whatever furniture or bushes were available. After a minute of moving, he acted. He grabbed the man from behind, held his hand over the man's mouth, and then dragged him back to the others, who now had their mouths open. Oren Marshall looked at his captors and knew his luck had run out. The four moved back to the boat where their prisoner was gagged, and then the boat headed out to sea.

Deep beneath the pyramid in a six by eight cell, the caliph sat on the small metal bed. He had no idea why the queen had ended their discussion early and thrown him in here, but he worried about his nephew, believing he was still in the suite they had been provided. The heavy steel door had a small panel that could open from the outside only. A single fluorescent bulb glowed faintly over the center of the cell. Besides the bed, the only furnishings were a small sink and toilet. Feeling totally helpless, he sighed deeply and held his head in his hands. The sound of the door unlocking got his attention, and he looked up to see a large female guard pull the door open. She carried a machine gun and waved it menacingly at him.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"You have a visitor." A thin tattooed man walked into the room. He wore only a loincloth. He waved the woman off, who then stepped out and closed the door behind her.

"Who exactly are you?" the caliph asked

Acton Marshall smiled broadly and replied, "In our faith, I am called the savior."

The caliph laughed and then smiled back at the other man. "Frankly, you don't look much like a savior."

"Well, I suppose it depends on what you choose to worship, Ahmed."

"I don't believe I gave you permission to use my given name, young man."

"Since you are our prisoner, I suppose your permission doesn't count for much here." The caliph stared back without emotion. "Since you are not of our faith, it is acceptable for you to call me Acton."

"Now that we have cleared up, what do you want?"

"I want you to tell me how you were involved in the plot to kidnap my uncle."

"Acton, since I have no idea who you are, I certainly cannot comment on your relatives. Who is your uncle?"

"Oren Marshall. He was kidnapped from his home less than an hour ago."

"Really? That's a surprise. Honestly, I came here in good faith to negotiate with the queen. Now, I have been kidnapped myself. I do not know what has happened to the rest of my entourage, but I must assume the worst. I know nothing about a planned kidnapping of your uncle or anyone else. I demand that you release us now!"

Acton rapped on the door, and it opened immediately. Two female guards stepped inside, and Acton moved behind them. "I don't believe you, Ahmed. Our spies recorded your meeting with Presidents Dawson and Bush Figueroa just last night. Clearly, the kidnapping was part of your plan. It's obvious, no?"

"No, that isn't true!"

"As I just said, I don't believe you. Your guards have been sent to the closest slaughterhouse for processing, and your nephews are in other cells on this level. Don't bother calling out to them because the walls and doors are soundproof. First, we will bargain their lives for my uncle. If that doesn't work, they will also be processed. Then we will bargain for your life, Ahmed. You should pray that Dawson and Bush will save you." He turned and walked out with the guards, one of whom then closed and secured the door.