THE E-TEAM

PROJECT MOGUL

Sample Chapter

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Chapter 1

Javelin and the Ghost

High over the Syrian-Turkish border, an Air Force CV-22 Osprey's mission was a high-speed, low-level insertion to drop off a team of Air Force Combat Controllers to a dusty landing zone, just inside the friendly Kurdish sector.

At the controls was the seasoned pilot, Captain Russ "Javelin" Garner, dark-haired and compact, with the kind of calmness that came from having done this a hundred times and never quite trusting the hundred-and-first. On his left sat co-pilot Captain John Miller.

They nicknamed the aircraft 'The Ghost,' a name that would soon prove fitting.

In the cabin behind the cockpit was the four-man combat team with their gear.

It was nightfall by the time they reached their destination.

The insertion was quick and professional. Captain Garner set the Osprey into a low hover and lowered the ramp. The first two operators went down the ramp and onto the ground, carrying their heavy packs. They surveyed the situation and waved back at the crew chief, and the last two members of the team joined them on the ground. The crew chief signaled a "thumbs-up" to Captain Garner. The ramp closed, and the Osprey lifted away as the heavily laden team disappeared into the night.

The entire process took less than a minute.

The mission was simple, but it unraveled within seconds.

The AWACS controller's voice delivered the first warning.

"Vagabond 2-1, be advised, comms traffic in your area indicates possible air defense activity."

Captain Garner scanned the horizon as the jagged brown ridges slid below at 250 knots. Just then, an alarm screamed for attention.

"Radar lock! SA-22 'Greyhound'. Pantsir-S1." Miller's voice tightened. "Bearing zero-niner-zero at our altitude. They've got us. What are the options?"

Garner's hand tightened on the cyclic. He knew the SA-22 Pantsir's dual-tracking would ignore his flares; standard countermeasures were useless against a system that could see him even when its radar couldn't lock.

"Flares and chaff won't cut it. That's what they're expecting. Hold on. We're about to violate the hell out of the flight manual."

Normal procedure would have called for the pilot to dive or turn away. But Captain Garner did what the manual said not to do. He pulled back on the aft cyclic, pitching the Osprey's nose up in a sharp, energy-bleeding climb. At the same time, his left hand slammed the nacelle control, which forced the massive rotors to shift from aircraft to helicopter mode. Loose gear floated through the cabin in a near zero-G moment.

The aircraft groaned in protest as the sudden deceleration jerked both pilots forward against their harnesses.

"We're stalling!" yelled Miller as the blare of the stall warning rendered his protest redundant.

Before the Osprey could fully stall, Garner reversed the process, shoving the nacelles forward, dipping the plane's nose down. The turbine engines screamed as they grabbed the air, and the Osprey dropped like a stone into the radar shadow of a deep ravine.

The G-force pressed the crew back into their seats.

"Lock broken, missile gone!" Miller's voice was still shaking.

Garner leveled the aircraft without answering.

"Vagabond 2-1 to AWACS, we encountered a …" He paused. "Navigational anomaly. Proceeding to alternate LZ."

AWACS replied simply, "Acknowledged." Both pilots knew what had nearly happened, but nobody wanted to say it aloud. The repercussions were yet to come.

A week after the incident, Captain Russ Garner was flown back to Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan, for a debrief. He stood at attention in the office of Colonel E. Vance, 353rd Special Operations Wing. The aircraft Garner had put through "Dip and Zip" calisthenics was one of the Ospreys assigned to the wing.

The senior officers were not impressed.

Garner remained standing as the officer slid a sheet of paper across the desk.

"The official report says in-flight emergency necessitating an unconventional recovery maneuver to preserve airframe and crew. I call that a masterpiece of fiction. We know what really happened, don't we?"

"Sir, I responded to a direct threat to my aircraft and crew."

"That 'Dip and Zip' stunt isn't in the Dash-1. Every flight model says you should have left your wings in the dirt over Syria." Vance's cold stare bore into Garner's face. "You got lucky. I would say, incredibly lucky. But in

my wing, luck is not a sustainable operational doctrine."

Garner remained silent. He knew every system on the aircraft. There was nothing to say.

Colonel Vance leaned forward. "Your tour is concluded. Effective immediately, you are transferred stateside to Edwards Air Force Base for simulator instruction duties."

"Sir, I …" He realized protest was pointless.

"Dismissed, Captain."

As he left the building, Garner headed to the BX, hoping to shake off what he was feeling in a cup of coffee, or something stronger.

"Captain Garner?"

Garner turned to see a man in a crisp civilian suit, standing next to a black government sedan.

"Who's asking?"

"You can call me Mr. Smith. That's no matter. I'm with a … liaison group from the Department of the Air Force. We have a proposition for you." He gestured to the car. "A short drive? Somewhere we can speak privately?"

Every instinct said keep walking. He stopped anyway. The demotion was already issued; whatever this was couldn't make it worse. He got into the car, expecting to be taken to another office on base. Instead, he was driven to a private hangar on the far side of the flightline.

Inside the bare space were a small table and two chairs.

"We studied the telemetry from your incident," Smith began without preamble. "The maneuver you executed was certainly not luck, Captain. It was genius, showing a level of instinctive, fluid understanding of your aircraft. They can't teach that in flight school because it comes from experience. Colonel Vance could not appreciate that, but what you have is the very thing we need."

Garner studied the man for a moment before asking, “Who is ‘we’?”

Smith responded, “We are a group that operates beyond the standard chain of command. We deal with the kind of problems that, if they became public, would make your recent border incident look like a diplomatic spat. If you are interested, we have an opening for a pilot with your specific talents. A permanent transfer.”

Smith let the last two words hang: ‘permanent transfer.’

“To where?”

“You might say to a place that does not exist,” Smith replied with a knowing smile. “You’ll be flying a significantly modified platform, an improved version of the Osprey. The mission profile will make your work here seem like an airline route.”

“What’s the mission?”

“It could be described as preserving a truth that would redefine human history. May I assume you are interested?”

Garner’s eyes swept across the vastness of the empty building.

Here was a chance to avoid a career death sentence. But it was also a leap into something unknown: a shadow organization, unaccountable chains of command, missions that would never make it into official reports. Everything his academy training had warned him against.

He thought of what was waiting for him if he walked away. The reassignment to simulator instruction. The end of a flying career.

It was an easy choice. It just didn’t feel like one.

“What is the next step?”

“You sign some papers.” From a drawer in the desk, Smith produced a thick stack of documents bound with a

security seal. “Your new home is Groom Lake. Welcome to Project Mogul.”

Before Garner could speak, Smith added, “Officially, that program ended in ’49, but some government programs don’t really end.”

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Ten hours later, Russ Garner was aboard a commercial flight from Okinawa to Las Vegas, sipping bad coffee over the Pacific. The man who introduced himself as Mr. Smith had provided a first-class ticket and a new identity as “Robert Evans.” His instructions were to go to the south terminal of McCarran Airport and find the US Air Force ticket counter.

In Vegas, the desert air hit him like a blast furnace. Following the instructions, he moved through the crowds of tourists and found the small, unassuming counter in a secluded part of the airport. A plain blue-and-white sign read “JANET.” The woman behind the counter wore a typical airline uniform, but her posture was ramrod straight.

“May I help you, sir?” she asked as he approached.

“Robert Evans. I believe I have a reservation.” He slid his new ID across the counter.

The clerk scrolled a digital tablet and responded with a curt nod. “Gate S7. The aircraft will be boarding in ten minutes. Have a pleasant flight.”

There was no ticket, no boarding pass, only a gesture from the clerk pointing to a door marked “AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY”.

A dozen people waited at Gate S7, mostly a mix of men and women in civilian clothes. No one made small talk. No one looked at their phones. Garner assumed they were engineers, scientists, or security personnel.

Outside the gate, the aircraft taxied into view exactly on schedule. The stark, unadorned white Boeing 737 had a single red stripe running the length of its fuselage. There was a tail number N319BD, but no airline logo, only the lettering “JANET” in all caps below the cockpit window, identifying the covert shuttle to America’s most secure base.

On board the plane, the flight was short and silent. The flight attendants looked more like a security detail: broad-shouldered men in dark suits. They offered no drinks or snacks.

The plane passed over the neon sprawl of Las Vegas to the vast emptiness of the Nevada desert until it reached a cluster of runways and buildings. The official name of the airfield at Area 51 is Homey Airport, but there were no signs making that identification as the plane rolled to a stop at a hangar. Passengers disembarked onto the hot tarmac where a base shuttle bus idled nearby, its windows completely blacked out. A driver in coveralls stood by the door.

“Evans, Robert,” the driver said, not as a question. Garner acknowledged with a raised index finger and boarded. He sat alone in the dimly lit interior of the bus and monitored the scene through the windshield as the other passengers boarded another bus at the entrance to the hangar.

The driver boarded, took his position, and the door hissed shut.

“Just you and me, Captain,” the driver said as he put the bus in gear and pulled away from the hangar.

Garner’s fingers tightened on the duffel strap. “Where are we going?”

“Your new office: S-3.”

Garner frowned. “Don’t you mean S-4?”

The driver chuckled as he glanced at the captain's reflection in the mirror. "Your clearance is for S-3."

The bus picked up speed as it followed a dirt road that snaked into the foothills until it seemed to be headed straight for a solid rock face. The road made a sharp turn into a narrow canyon. As they approached, a large section of rock and scrub slid sideways, revealing a massive door seamlessly integrated into the mountain.

Inside, the bus pulled into a colossal cavern, illuminated by banks of overhead lights, as the closing of the hangar door rumbled behind them.

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What caught Garner's attention under the brilliant glow of spotlights was a familiar sight. It was a V-22 like no Osprey he had ever seen. Its skin was radar-absorbent black, devoid of any insignia. He noted that the engine nacelles were slightly more angular.

The bus pulled to a stop. The driver opened the door and turned in his seat.

"Welcome home, Captain. Go through that door and they'll set you up with your new living quarters."

He picked up his gear and went through the door. He had no way of knowing what lay ahead.