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Pandemic

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Prologue

Eastern Mediterranean: June 1972

'So what the fuck did you do?' Jonas snapped, loosening his seat belt and looking across the dimly lit cabin at the tall thin man in the leather seat opposite. The Lear had reached top of climb at thirty-five thousand feet out of Cairo, and was heading west into the gathering dusk.

This atypical expletive – Jonas was the senior man and almost always calm and controlled – shocked Wilson. 'I just did what the three of you refused to do,' he said, looking back at the hostile expressions of the other men. 'I had to – my conscience wouldn't let me ignore it. You know *exactly* what we were doing back there.'

'No,' Jonas said heavily, 'we don't *know* anything. You're just guessing, and you could be guessing wrong.'

Wilson laughed shortly. 'You've seen the file,' he said, 'and you've seen the research. How can you ignore it?'

'Quite easily,' Jonas replied, and turned to glance out of the window at the navigation lights of their escorting F-4E Phantom jet, a dimly seen shape a quarter of a mile out to starboard and slightly behind the civilian aircraft. Then he turned back to face Wilson. 'Look, why didn't you just do what you've been paid – and very well paid – to do?'

Wilson shook his head, rimless spectacles glinting in the cabin lights. 'I couldn't.'

'So you reported it?' Jonas asked, and Wilson nodded. 'Who to?'

For the first time, Wilson looked uncomfortable. 'I knew there was no point in going through the usual channels. That would just make sure whatever I said got buried in a file somewhere.'

Jonas and the other two men stared at him. 'I'll ask you again,' Jonas said, his tone now low and threatening. 'Who did you tell?'

'The President,' Wilson blurted out. 'I wrote to the President, and copied it to the Director of Central Intelligence.'

For a moment, Jonas just stared across the cabin at his subordinate. His voice, when he spoke, was quiet and laden with infinite sadness. 'You fool,' he said. 'You stupid, meddling, ignorant fool. You've probably killed us all.'

'Lima Charlie, this is Tango Three.' The Phantom pilot sounded calm and controlled on the discrete frequency the two aircraft were sharing. 'I have unidentified traffic on radar, sixty miles to port, two contacts, high speed and heading towards. Suggest a precautionary starboard turn onto three zero zero while we check it out.'

'Roger, Tango Three,' the Learjet captain replied, as he disengaged the autopilot and eased the control column to the right.

'I wonder who they are?' the co-pilot asked.

'I don't know, but we're not that far from Libya, so it

might be Gaddafi starting to flex his muscles. Probably nothing to worry about.'

The Learjet steadied on its new heading, a track that would take it over to the west of Crete and towards the Ionian Sea.

'Lima Charlie, Tango Three.' There was now a clear note of urgency in the Phantom pilot's voice. 'We're being illuminated by fire-control radar. Recommend you head north. Dash speed. We're—' The transmission broke in a sudden burst of static.

'Oh, shit,' the Learjet captain muttered, pushing the throttles fully forward and moving the control column further to the right.

Wilson had leaned forward, reaching for the case at his feet, then fell back in his seat as the Learjet banked rapidly to the right, the engine noise suddenly increasing.

'What the hell's going on?' Jonas demanded.

Above the cockpit door, the 'Fasten Seat Belts' sign suddenly illuminated, and the cabin speaker crackled into life.

'Buckle up, back there. We've got company, and this may get rough.'

'Tango Three, this is Lima Charlie. Respond.' Silence. 'Tango Three, Lima Charlie.'

'Leave it,' the captain said. 'He's got his hands full, if he's still flying. Kill the lights.' The co-pilot obediently extinguished the Learjet's navigation and anti-collision

lights. 'A waste of time if these bastards have got radar-guided weapons.'

'Who the hell are they?' the co-pilot asked again. 'We're not at war with anybody, as far as I know.'

'Who cares? Let's just get the hell away from here. Make a broadcast on twelve fifteen. Give our position and tell anybody who's listening that we're under attack by two unidentified fighter aircraft.'

The co-pilot switched to the civil aircraft emergency VHF frequency – 121.5 megahertz – and started speaking into his microphone. Almost immediately he stopped.

'What is it?' the pilot asked.

'It's just been jammed. There's a tuning tone or something being broadcast. I can't break through it.'

'Try a different frequency. Try Guard, then Athens, or Cairo or Malta.'

The co-pilot tried four, then six frequencies, UHF and VHF, but the result was the same each time. He shook his head. 'They're all blocked,' he said. 'One of those fighters must have an ECM pod fitted.'

The captain's face was noticeably white in the dim cockpit lighting. 'That's real bad news,' he said. 'That means they don't want us to tell anybody what's happening up here.'

'Can we out-run them?' the co-pilot asked.

The Learjet 23 was a very rapid aircraft, with a top speed of almost five hundred miles an hour and a service ceiling of over forty thousand feet. Its performance made it as fast, or faster, than many civilian airliners, but not as quick as most fighter interceptors.

'No idea. We're at maximum velocity now. There's nothing else we can—'

His voice was interrupted by a muffled crump from the port side of the aircraft. Warning lights flared red across the instrument panel, needles on gauges span wildly, and the aircraft lurched to the left.

'We're hit!' the captain shouted. 'Missile in the port engine. Hit the extinguishers.'

The co-pilot pressed the buttons as the captain wrestled with the control column. With the port engine destroyed, the aircraft immediately became asymmetric as the thrust of the remaining turbojet tried to turn the aircraft to the left. The extinguishers fired their foam into the wreckage of the engine, quenching the flames. Hydraulic fluid and aviation fuel bubbled out of ruptured pipes, to be instantly carried away by the slipstream.

'We're losing height! Cabin's depressurizing!'

The altimeter needles unwound in a blur as the Learjet tumbled out of the sky.

The missile that had impacted with the port engine had also blown a two-foot hole at the back of the cabin on the left-hand side. Oxygen masks dropped down in front of the startled passengers from the overhead baggage lockers.

Three of them immediately pulled the masks over their faces. When Wilson didn't follow their example, Jonas turned to shout out to him – but his voice died in his throat. A foot-long shard of aluminium was sticking out of the back of the man's seat, while another six

inches protruded from Wilson's throat, thick red blood pouring over it.

In the cockpit, the two pilots pulled oxygen masks over their faces as they struggled to regain some semblance of control.

'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday,' the co-pilot shouted automatically into his microphone, before again hearing the tone in his earphones and realizing nobody would be able to hear his transmission.

At fifteen thousand feet, the captain managed to get the aircraft straight, and more or less level. 'Closest land?' he demanded.

The co-pilot already had the navigation chart unfolded. Using his out-spread fingers as a crude measuring tool, he calculated distances. 'Crete,' he said. 'Come right. Steer zero two zero. Distance about fifty miles to the southern coast, around eighty to the airport at Irakleío.'

'If we can keep this thing in the air that long,' the captain muttered, as he cautiously eased the control column to the right, depressed the right rudder pedal and reduced power slightly on the starboard engine. The flight controls felt soggy and vague, and the gentle turn cost him another three hundred feet of altitude. 'And if whoever's flying those fighters lets us, more to the point.'

The co-pilot's eyes scanned the instruments in front of him. Red and orange warning lights studded the panel, and yellow and red captions had erupted everywhere.

'The fire's out,' he said. 'That's the good news. The bad news is we're losing fuel. We'll be tanks dry in about thirty minutes. The bigger problem is that hydraulic fluid's pumping out of the hole where the port engine used to be. Flight controls are heavy and mushy, and that'll only get worse, and we'll probably have to do a wheels-up flapless landing.'

'If we get that far, I'll be happy to. Tell our passengers what's happened,' the captain said.

As the co-pilot selected cabin broadcast, a stream of tracer shells screamed past the left side of the cockpit, and both men felt the impact as they crashed into the port wing. Panels ripped and buckled, the aileron and flaps were torn away, and then the last eight feet of the wing lifted upwards and backwards before ripping off and tumbling away behind the aircraft.

And then there was nothing anyone could do. The Learjet lost virtually all lift from the mangled wing, turned inexorably to port and began to spin rapidly down towards the sea nearly three miles below. The two men in the cockpit fought it all the way, and managed to straighten the aircraft for a few brief seconds at just under a thousand feet. But they both knew they were going nowhere but down.

'Brace for impact!'

As the glittering surface of the Mediterranean rushed towards them, both men saw a dark shape out to starboard, descending with them.

The captain shook his head in disbelief. 'That's—' he started to say, and then the Lear impacted the water at a little over one hundred and eighty miles an hour.

At that speed, hitting water is pretty much the same

as hitting concrete. The remains of the left wing and the nose of the aircraft struck almost simultaneously, the impact killing the men in the cockpit instantly. The aircraft fell onto its back, filled rapidly with water, and sank. Bits and pieces of debris floated up to the surface to mark its grave – but no survivors or bodies appeared.

The fighter aircraft that had followed the Learjet in its final plunge circled the impact site for five minutes, the two-man crew scanning the surface carefully, the pilot's finger hovering over the firing button of the cannon. Finally satisfied, he made his weapons safe, pushed the throttles forward and climbed rapidly away to the west.

Chapter 1

Present day – Monday
Southern Adriatic Sea

Paul Richter eased the control column of the Sea Harrier FA2 gently to the left, then pushed it further, turning the bank into a slow barrel roll. He levelled the aircraft for less than a second, then turned sharply to port and accelerated to catch up with the other Harrier, which was already opening to the south-east. He glanced down briefly at the surface of the Adriatic glinting far below, and waited for the Senior Pilot's inevitable rebuke.

'Tiger Two, Leader. Stop buggering about and stay in formation.'

'Sorry, Splot,' Richter said. 'Just checking I could still do it.'

The two Sea Harriers steadied on a heading of one two zero and continued their climb to thirty-one thousand feet, holding four hundred and twenty knots or about eight miles a minute. They were in battle pair formation, Richter holding position about half a mile to the right and behind Tiger One. It was his fifth Combat Air Patrol sortie since his temporary attachment to 800 Squadron, embarked on board HMS *Invincible*, for continuation training.

Richard Simpson, the head of the Foreign Operations

Executive and Richter's unloved superior, had bitched about it long and hard. However, Richter was still technically on the Emergency List and in the Royal Naval Reserve, and had argued that he was required to keep up his flying skills. If there had been a good – or even a faintly convincing – reason why he shouldn't have gone, Simpson would certainly have used it. But everything was quiet in London, and Richter had just been sitting in his office moving paper from one tray to another and getting increasingly irritated, so Simpson had reluctantly, and somewhat suddenly, consented.

The previous evening a signal classified Secret, and marked for Richter's eyes only, had been handed to him as he'd emerged from the dining room, and had explained exactly why Simpson had changed his mind.

'Tigers, Alpha Sierra. Snap one eight zero. Two bogeys bearing one nine zero at sixty, heading north. Low.' The voice of the observer in the Airborne Surveillance and Area Control Sea King Mark 7 was slightly distorted by his throat microphone, but perfectly understandable. The ASaC helicopter was positioned at about five thousand feet in a holding pattern some thirty miles ahead of the *Invincible* group.

'Roger, Alpha Sierra. One eight zero.'

Richter followed Tiger One round in a tight starboard turn, rolled out heading south and began to descend, pushing the throttle forward as he adjusted the aircraft's heading.

'Tigers established on south. In the drop passing twenty-eight for fifteen.'

'Roger, Tigers. Bogeys one eight five at forty-two. Low. Below five.'

Fifty miles to the north-west of Richter's Sea Harrier, the *Invincible* group was heading south-east at a steady twelve knots through the Adriatic Sea, about seventy miles off the Italian Puglian coast, and approaching the end of a two-day ship-controlled exercise after an exhausting port visit to Trieste. Accompanying the *Invincible* were two Royal Fleet Auxiliary supply ships, one of them a tanker to cater for the carrier's insatiable thirst for aviation fuel, and two frigates.

HMS *Invincible*, like her sister ships *Illustrious* and *Ark Royal*, is officially known as a Through-Deck Cruiser – a 'CVS'. This somewhat bizarre appellation was forced on the Royal Navy by the political climate in the days when these vessels were constructed, after the word 'carrier' became unacceptable for a variety of reasons.

When the previous *Ark Royal* – the last 'proper' carrier belonging to the Royal Navy – had sailed into the scrapyard, the government of the day had decided, without apparently consulting anybody who might actually know what they were talking about, that in the future the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm would only require helicopters. Protection against an enemy unsporting enough to use aircraft to attack a ship would become the sole responsibility of the Royal Air Force.

In theory, and back in the English Channel, this might have worked, but any credible blue-water navy has to carry organic fighter aircraft, and within a short time their lordships at the Admiralty had realized that the *Invincible*-class ships were almost ideally suited to the carriage of Harriers. The result was the Sea Harrier FRS1, which first flew in 1978. Following successful

trials, Sea Harrier squadrons were formed and became the principal offensive weapon of the CVS.

The first practical test of the aircraft came in 1982, when Argentine forces invaded the Falkland Islands. A couple of dozen Sea Harriers flying from two small carriers – the *Invincible* and the ageing *Hermes* – were pitched against an air force that was vastly superior both technologically and numerically. The Argentinians fielded supersonic Super Etendards, Daggers and Mirage IIIs, and the small and agile Skyhawk light bombers. Theoretically, the Harriers didn't stand a chance: they should have been overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. But they weren't. In a short and bitter campaign, the Sea Harriers shot down twenty Argentine jet aircraft, and several other types, for no air combat losses whatsoever. The reliability and survivability of the type – not to mention its capability – were proved at a stroke.

In the Falklands, the Navy had used the AIM-9L Sidewinder air-to-air missile, but the current variant is the AIM-9M. The newer weapon offers one vitally important advantage – it can lock on to a target from any direction, not just from behind like the 9L, allowing head-on engagements. However, as every fighter pilot knows, the best possible place to engage an enemy is from behind, where you can see him but he can't see you, so air combat tactics have changed little with the introduction of this new weapon.

In its original form, the FRS1 Sea Harrier had usually carried four Sidewinder missiles on under-wing pylons, and a pair of Aden cannon beneath the fuselage. The FA2, the 'Fighter Attack' variant, which entered service

in the mid 1990s, added the highly capable AIM-120 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile, which, when matched with the excellent Ferranti Blue Vixen coherent pulse-Doppler radar, offered multiple target acquisition, long engage range and a fire-and-forget capability.

The only problem with the AMRAAM is that it's larger and heavier than the 'winder, and to enable the aircraft to carry more than two of them, the Aden cannon pods were removed, allowing a maximum armament of four AMRAAMs. But the Sidewinder is still an option, and a mix of two AMRAAMs and four 'winders is considered by many Harrier pilots to be the optimum air-combat load.

For exercises, the Royal Navy had decided that AMRAAMs made things just too easy, so most aircraft employed on CAP sorties still used Sidewinders only. The weapon has a maximum engage range of only five miles, and to obtain a kill against another Sea Harrier, with identical performance and armament, is a true test of flying skill and combat ability.

'Bogeys one seven five at thirty. Still low. Vector one nine zero.'

'One nine zero, Tiger One.'

The two fighters were heading directly towards the two inbound aircraft – another pair of 800 Squadron Sea Harriers playing at being bad guys – with a combined closing speed of well over one thousand miles an hour. The Sea King observer, known somewhat unflatteringly as a 'bagman' after the shape of the inflatable fabric dome covering the Sea King's modified Searchwater radar that dangled from the side of the aircraft like a

large grey pustule, was vectoring the CAP aircraft to a location above and behind the two targets.

'Tigers, fence out.'

Richter clicked his transmit button once to acknowledge, and immediately began preparing his aircraft for combat. On a pylon beneath the starboard wing of his Sea Harrier was slung a dummy Sidewinder missile pod. Externally almost indistinguishable from a genuine 'winder, the pod contains an infra-red seeker head identical to that in the live missile, but lacks the rocket motor and explosive warhead.

Richter enabled coolant flow through the infra-red head, which would allow it to detect the heat signature of the target aircraft. He switched on the Guardian radar warning receiver, which would tell him if the attacking aircraft had obtained a missile lock on him, then pre-set the Blue Vixen radar to Air Combat mode. The agreed EMCON – emission control – tactics for the sortie required both Tigers to remain radar silent until almost within missile acquisition range of their targets.

The two last preparations were probably the most important. When engaged in high-energy manoeuvring, the airflow through the huge inlets of the Rolls-Royce Pegasus engine can get badly disrupted, and in some cases the compressor may stall or surge and effectively stop. The Harrier glides like the proverbial brick – pretty much straight down – so Richter selected the 'combat switch' to engage the short-duration high-power setting.

Finally, he checked his anti-g suit. In hard turns pilots' bodies are subjected to very high stresses, and if their anti-g suits don't function properly they can black

out, with predictably unfortunate – and sometimes fatal – results.

'Bogeys one seven five at fifteen. Low. Standby hard port turn.'

'Roger.'

'Tigers, turn now, now, now. Roll-out heading zero one zero.'

Richter grunted with the increasing g-force as he hauled the Sea Harrier around in a tight left-hand diving turn. He felt the bladder in the waist section of his 'speed jeans' – the anti-g trousers – inflate rapidly as the g-force increased. It felt like a slow but powerful kick in the stomach, but prevented the blood in his head and torso from plummeting down to his feet and causing a blackout or g-loc.

'Tigers steady on zero one zero, passing twelve for five in the drop.'

'Roger, Tigers. Bogeys zero one five at eight.'

'Tigers, radiate.'

Richter reached down, switched on the Blue Vixen and scanned the display in front of him. 'Tiger Two. Judy, Judy,' he called immediately, the code word signifying that he had acquired the two targets on radar.

'Roger that. Leader's taking west, Tiger Two take east.'

Richter's target – the easterly of the two contacts – was still over six miles in front of him, just outside the Sidewinder's kill envelope. The missile's infra-red seeker head is slaved to the radar antenna: in other words, wherever the radar looks, that's where the missile looks. Already he could hear the faint growl in his headset that told him the 'winder had detected the

target Harrier, but he was still too far out of range to engage it.

Richter watched the contacts on radar. As he expected, as soon as the pilots of the 'attacking' Sea Harriers detected the Blue Vixen radar transmissions on their Guardian sets, they split, breaking left and right and climbing. In air combat, height and speed are vital: an aircraft caught at low level is denied freedom of movement and is often an easy target.

'Bogeys splitting. Independent pursuit.'

Richter pulled the Harrier hard round to starboard in a 5g turn. His opponent was passing his level in a steep climb – the Sea Harrier FA2 climbs at fifty thousand feet a minute – and turning rapidly, just under six miles in front of him. The advantage Richter had was that he was still behind his assigned target, which was where he intended to stay until he could engage it with the Sidewinder.

But the other Harrier pilot was having none of it. Realizing that a CAP aircraft was on his tail, he jinked to the left and started a tight diving turn that could bring him up behind and below Richter's aircraft.

Richter saw the manoeuvre, stopped his turn, reversed direction and hauled the Harrier into an even tighter turn to port, following his target, then rolled inverted and powered downwards towards the sea eight thousand feet below. At four thousand feet he forced the Harrier back into a climb. Despite the anti-g suit, Richter felt the blackness of g-loc creeping up on him as he pulled over 6g. The g-force diminished rapidly as the Harrier climbed. Adrenalin pumping, Richter scanned the Blue Vixen scope.