

Chapter One - Down the Rabbit Hole

Kovalenko hated the desert. He'd seen more than his fair share of it during the Gulf War, with sand that seemed to stretch on endlessly in every direction, and the sun... the goddamned sun that beat down relentlessly, enough to reduce even the hardest man into a sweaty, grunting pig. The Mojave Desert was not Iraq, of course, and he might even have found it beautiful had the circumstances been different. Presently, however, he was in a military Humvee, barreling down a cracked, dusty dirt road headed to God-knows-where.

The private at the wheel, whose name Kovalenko didn't know, wasn't making things any easier with his reckless driving and every bump they hit served to drive a deeper crack into his already dangerously thin patience.

"Where're you taking me, Private?" Kovalenko demanded.

"Sorry, sir, but I'm not at liberty to discuss that. The general will brief you himself when we arrive."

Kovalenko's grimace tightened. It was a typical Army non-answer answer which basically translated to 'shut up, sit down and wait.'

"This is bullshit," he muttered. "I'm outta the Navy. Have been for almost fifteen years. What right do you grunts have landing a goddamn chopper on my ranch, spooking my horses, then whisking me off to the middle of ass-fuck nowhere without so much as an explanation?"

"Sorry, sir, but I'm not at liberty to--"

Kovalenko cut him off with a gesture. "Forget it."

It was true, though, how they had shown up earlier that morning unannounced at his Montana ranch, landing an MH-6 Little Bird in one of his corrals and presenting him with a uniform and recall orders signed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs himself. He'd told them where to stick the uniform in no uncertain terms, but there wasn't much he could have done about the orders except obey, unless he wanted to face charges. So, two hours later, here he was back in the desert – hot, sweaty and cursing a blue streak.

About a half-hour of shakes and bumps later, they stopped in front of a heavy metal barricade with a guardhouse on one side and an armed MP standing in front of it. Another MP was entrenched behind a .50 caliber machinegun and sandbags on the other side of the barricade. The MP in front of the guardhouse stepped over to the Humvee as they stopped and Kovalenko produced his I.D. Satisfied, the MP stepped back and saluted.

"Welcome to Camp Cheshire, sir!" he said. "The general's waiting for you in his office."

"Thanks, Corporal," Kovalenko replied, curtly returning the salute.

The MP walked over and raised the barricade. They drove through and made a left, headed for a low, sand-colored building.

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The hallway down which the private led Kovalenko was naturally lit, golden facets of sunlight spilling in through a long, narrow window at head-height which ran the length of the corridor and overlooked the rest of the base. The opposite side of the hallway was lined with inset wooden doors, each with a frosted glass window and a room number stenciled on it. The private stopped in front of one such door and knocked smartly on the glass.

"Come in," said a voice on the other side.

The private opened the door for Kovalenko and shut it behind him after he'd entered. The lights were off, but Kovalenko could make out the shape of a man sitting behind the desk, his hands clasped in front of his face. Kovalenko snapped to attention and saluted.

"Sir, Commander Nicholas Kovalenko reporting!" he barked.

"Hit the lights please, Commander," the general replied.

"Sir, I'd really appreciate it if you could tell me what's going on here," Kovalenko said, turning around to hit the light switch. "The private who—" He stopped in mid sentence when he turned back and finally saw the general's grinning face. "Bill? Goddamn, it's great to see you!"

Brigadier General William Grier laughed heartily and came around the desk to trap Kovalenko in a crushing bear hug. The two had met decades ago in Vietnam, but ever since Kovalenko retired, had grown distant save for the obligatory card at Christmastime.

"Jesus, why didn't you tell me it was you, huh?" Kovalenko said. "If I'd have known, maybe I wouldn't have given your driver such a hard time! Keeping me in the dark like that, what the hell?"

"Sorry, Nick. I couldn't resist," Grier said. "But it was worth it to see the look on your face."

Kovalenko punched his friend in the shoulder good-naturedly. "You're a bastard, you know that. How the hell are you, you old dog?"

"Hey, who're you calling an old dog?" Grier said, feigning offense. "You're older than Snoopy!"

"Goddamn right, which is why I retired," Kovalenko shot back. "What'd you bring me out here for, anyway?"

"Short answer? I need your help, Nick," Grier said, sobering up.

"Well, there's a shocker. What is it this time?"

Grier laughed. "Long answer, then. A few months back, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs personally made me C.O. of a very special joint-service task force made up of eight people, pulled straight out of the Army, Navy and Marines. They're to be the first of a new breed of warrior, but this is uncharted territory we're plowing full-steam into." He took a breath. "Nick, I could really use a navigator. Someone who knows enough to point out potential obstacles and guide us around them, even if they don't know the exact path to the destination. I think you'd be perfect."

Kovalenko shook his head and sighed, sinking into one of the chairs in front of Grier's desk. "Bill, when I told you that if you ever needed anything, don't hesitate to call me, I didn't think you'd take it so literally."

Grier spread his hands. "I didn't know who else to turn to. The Chairman expects this unit to be operational in six months and—"

"Six months?" Kovalenko interrupted incredulously. "You realize that your typical special forces operator has had at least two years worth of training, right?"

"I'm not asking you to make them SEALs," Grier said. "Sorry, I should have made that clear at the beginning. These guys aren't F.N.Gs, in fact, some of them are even combat veterans. Thing is though, with the job I'm being asked to prepare them for, that may not be enough. The instructors we've got have all done their job and technically, there's nothing wrong with these guys. They're going through all the motions correctly, but I still get the feeling that they're missing... I don't know, *something*. And in my strictly amateur opinion, I think it may be mindset."

Kovalenko cocked an eyebrow. "So, you're asking me to run a philosophy class?"

"Something like that, yeah," Grier said. "Right now, they're all thinking linearly – point A to point B, which makes them predictable. I was thinking you could teach them some of that stuff you always used to tell me about. You know, all that *unconventional warrior* stuff?" Grier waggled his fingers as he said it, like he was telling a ghost story.

Kovalenko's expression didn't change. "I guess I could," he said slowly, "But I still don't see why you needed me personally, instead of somebody who wasn't already out there enjoying the sunshine and fresh air on his own ranch."

Grier spread his hands. "Well, you're my friend, Nick. You've been with the special warfare community since the beginning, so you know your stuff. And more importantly, I know you can be trusted. Besides, it's not like you were doing anything anyway."

"I know," Kovalenko said, scowling. "I thought that was the point of retirement."

"Aw, c'mon," Grier said with a salesman's smile, "At least the money's good. And you won't be in any physical danger."

"Point. But still, why? What's so special about these guys?"

Grier got to his feet and gestured for Kovalenko to follow. "C'mon. I'll show you."

Grier led Kovalenko down the hall to an elevator, where he produced a keycard from the inside pocket of his uniform jacket and swiped it through a reader before tapping a PIN code into a recessed keypad under the button console. Finally, he thumbed the button for the lowest level and the two rode down in silence. The doors opened into a cold, gray concrete corridor and further on down the hall, Kovalenko could hear voices. They followed the voices and ended up in a large room with two rows of desks lining opposite walls, each with a soldier behind it, hard at work on a computer. A large, flat-panel TV hung on the wall furthest from the door with a color-coded world map on its screen. As they entered, the man at the desk nearest to the door glanced up at them, then jumped to his feet and saluted.

"Ten-hut!" he shouted, and the others instantly dropped what they were doing and came to attention. The two officers returned the gesture.

"As you were," Grier said, then turned to Kovalenko. "Nick, let me introduce you to the team. This is Staff Sergeant Thomas Chaplain," he said, indicating the young man with sandy-blond hair and a five o'clock shadow who had ordered the others to attention. "Platoon sergeant and Alpha Team's element leader. Staff Sergeant, Commander Nicholas Kovalenko."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Chaplain said to Kovalenko.

"Behind him is Lance Corporal André Burnett," Grier said. "The team's heavy weapons specialist."

A large, black man wearing a blaze orange do-rag and with a bandage on his nose stepped forward. "How ya doin', sir?"

Kovalenko eyed the bandage. "Have you been in a fight, Lance Corporal?"

"No, sir," Burnett replied wryly. "This is a snore strip. Some of the guys have been complainin'."

This brought forth a few stifled snorts from the others, but Grier ignored them, moving on to an olive-skinned man with languid gray eyes and raven hair tied back into a neat ponytail with a length of parachute cord. "This is Corporal Rodrigo Garcia, our designated marksman."

"Good afternoon, sir," Garcia said, with a slight Mexican accent.

"And behind him, Warrant Officer Jennifer Koehl," Grier said as a sharp-featured young woman with charcoal-streaked brown hair stepped forward.

"Hello, sir," she said with a polite smile.

"You won't find a better rotary wing pilot anywhere on the base," Grier said.

They crossed over to the other side of the room where the remaining four soldiers stood. "Meet Piotr Lubomudrov," Grier said, motioning to a tall, hulking man whose russet hair was sheared high and tight. "Second in command and Omega Team's element leader. He's our liaison to the CIA's Special Activities Division."

"How do you do, Commander?" Lubomudrov asked in a thick Slavic accent that Kovalenko thought might be Russian.

Behind Lubomudrov, a young man with a shock of messy brown hair and a soul patch stepped forward and introduced himself with an easy, lopsided grin. "Sir, I'm Specialist Damien Leitch. Nice to meet you."

"Specialist," Kovalenko said, with a nod of acknowledgment.

"This is Lance Corporal Joseph Rainbird," Grier continued, introducing a tall, Native American man with intricate tattoos running up and down both arms.

"Sir," Rainbird said simply and bowed his head a fraction of an inch.

“And last, but certainly not least, Petty Officer Third Class Brendan Reese,” Grier said, as the palest, scrawniest kid Kovalenko had ever seen stepped forward. Reese was young, probably only in his early twenties, with hair that was so light blond it almost looked white.

“Hello, sir,” the kid said, smiling nervously.

“Finally, another Navy man,” Kovalenko said, grinning. “Go Navy, son!”

“Beat Army, sir,” Reese responded shyly, shrinking away from the odd looks given him by Koehl and Leitch.

Grier just allowed himself a quiet smile, then stepped back into the center of the room. “Nick, may I present the Paranormal and Occult Intervention Task Force. We call it POINT, for short.”

Kovalenko was speechless for a long moment, looking at each soldier in turn, then burst out laughing. “Jesus, you really had me for a second there!” His knees felt weak and he had to lean against the wall for support. “Oh, sure, let’s get Nick out here and have him train the Ghostbusters!” He laughed some more until his sides started to cramp. Wiping tears from his eyes, he tried his best to keep his voice steady. “No, but seriously, what’s this about?”

A sea of curiously sober faces stared back at him, and Kovalenko felt the mirth slowly drain from his body to be replaced by morbid dread. “Oh, God, you *are* serious?”

Grier put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I know it sounds really far-fetched, but trust me, I said the same thing when the Chairman introduced me to these men for the first time.”

Kovalenko turned to Grier and spoke gravely. “Bill, we’ve been friends for what? Almost forty years? So please don’t get insulted when I say this, but you really shouldn’t stay out in the sun for so long without a hat.”

Grier nodded. “I see you could still use some convincing.” He turned to Leitch. “Specialist Leitch, would you please demonstrate for the Commander what you showed me the day I arrived here?”

“Yes, sir,” Leitch said, stepping nonchalantly into the center of the room. He turned to Kovalenko. “Brace yourself, sir. I’ve been watching *2001*.”

Kovalenko frowned, trying to figure out what the man meant, when without warning he suddenly found himself hurtling at breakneck speed through open space as stars and colorful light patterns exploded all around him. He reeled backwards from the sensory assault, losing his balance only to be caught by Grier.

“What... the fuck?” He managed.

“Specialist Leitch is what we call an illusory projectionist,” Grier explained. “He has the ability to generate illusions and project them into the minds of others. In fact, everyone here has their own particular talent, but Specialist Leitch’s is by far the easiest to demonstrate.”

Kovalenko stared, mesmerized by the dancing swirls of light. “Okay, you’ve got my attention.”

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Back in Grier’s office, the two friends sat across from one another at the desk, each nursing a tumbler of scotch. Kovalenko reached out a trembling hand for the bottle and topped off his glass, the neck of the bottle rattling against the glass’s rim as he did so. He’d been given a firsthand demonstration of what each man could do and wouldn’t soon forget it.

“So you see why we couldn’t just get special forces to form this unit,” Grier was saying. “It just so happened that these guys were regulars, so we had to make do.”

Kovalenko wasn’t listening. “How the hell did you even get involved with this?” He asked.

Grier laughed. “You know, I have absolutely no idea where they got my name from. I was just as skeptical as you when I first reported here and I actually thought this was a joke command I was being given as punishment for something. But they convinced me, the same way they convinced you.”

Kovalenko shuddered. "Don't remind me."

"But you'll still help, right?"

"Do I have a choice? It's not like I can just walk out of here with no questions asked, considering everything you've shown me."

"Well, true, we've already brought you into the fold, so that complicates things a little, but if you really want out, I won't keep you here."

Kovalenko considered it. "Well... it's only six months, right?"

Grier nodded.

"And *per diem* pay?"

"That's right."

He mulled it over in his head. "Ah, hell. You had to go and intrigue me, didn't you, asshole? Sure, count me in."

Grier smiled and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Great! Welcome aboard!"

The two men raised their glasses. "Cheers," Kovalenko said.

"To new horizons," Grier replied.

They drank.

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