



**NAVAL
POSTGRADUATE
SCHOOL**

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**IN OTHER WORDS:
CRAFTING FICTION TO UNDERSTAND THEORY**

by

Nikolaj Lindberg

March 2022

Thesis Advisor:

Michael E. Freeman

Co-Advisor:

Siamak T. Naficy

Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.				
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)		2. REPORT DATE March 2022	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's thesis	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE IN OTHER WORDS: CRAFTING FICTION TO UNDERSTAND THEORY			5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) Nikolaj Lindberg				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A			10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE A	
13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words) Fiction is an underappreciated tool for learning in defense analysis. Reading and writing fiction built on academic theory and models in defense analysis could help strengthen students' understanding of the motivations of people on both sides of conflicts. This capstone project breaks ground by showing how short stories can be written over the framework of established theory related to terrorism and how those fictional narratives can increase students' comprehension of select theories. This paper also shows how writing and analyzing these stories can help students conceptualize the thought processes of the people in real-world situations related to the theories depicted. By examining four pieces of acclaimed fiction that engage the reader in topics related to defense analysis, the project identifies techniques used by authors to relay their messages. Using similar techniques, this project's author constructs four stories based on terrorist radicalization, coercion theory, theory of special operations, and terrorist deradicalization. Read individually, the stories can strengthen comprehension of their respective parent theory or model and, if read in sequence, can clarify the connections between various topics and models in defense analysis. The project provides practical guidance on the use of fiction to strengthen students' comprehension of theory and models in defense analysis and encourages its expanded use in the Naval Postgraduate School's curriculum.				
14. SUBJECT TERMS fiction, storytelling, terrorism, Moghaddam's staircase, radicalization, coercion theory, deradicalization, SOF, theory of SOF			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 189	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.

IN OTHER WORDS: CRAFTING FICTION TO UNDERSTAND THEORY

Nikolaj Lindberg
Orlogskaptajn, Royal Danish Navy
B, Royal Danish Military Academy, 2007

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS
(IRREGULAR WARFARE)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
March 2022**

Approved by: Michael E. Freeman
Advisor

Siamak T. Naficy
Co-Advisor

Carter Malkasian
Chair, Department of Defense Analysis

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

ABSTRACT

Fiction is an underappreciated tool for learning in defense analysis. Reading and writing fiction built on academic theory and models in defense analysis could help strengthen students' understanding of the motivations of people on both sides of conflicts. This capstone project breaks ground by showing how short stories can be written over the framework of established theory related to terrorism and how those fictional narratives can increase students' comprehension of select theories. This paper also shows how writing and analyzing these stories can help students conceptualize the thought processes of the people in real-world situations related to the theories depicted. By examining four pieces of acclaimed fiction that engage the reader in topics related to defense analysis, the project identifies techniques used by authors to relay their messages. Using similar techniques, this project's author constructs four stories based on terrorist radicalization, coercion theory, theory of special operations, and terrorist deradicalization. Read individually, the stories can strengthen comprehension of their respective parent theory or model and, if read in sequence, can clarify the connections between various topics and models in defense analysis. The project provides practical guidance on the use of fiction to strengthen students' comprehension of theory and models in defense analysis and encourages its expanded use in the Naval Postgraduate School's curriculum.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
	A. INTRODUCTION.....	1
	B. RESEARCH QUESTION AND PURPOSE.....	1
	C. PROJECT STRUCTURE	2
	D. MOTIVATION	5
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW	7
	A. ACADEMIC LITERATURE INFORMING THIS PROJECT	8
	1. Terrorist Radicalization	8
	2. State Coercion, Deterrence, Proliferation, and Counter Proliferation.....	9
	3. Special Operations Force’s Role in Targeting of Terrorist Organizations	10
	4. Terrorist Deradicalization.....	11
	B. WORKS OF FICTION INSPIRING THIS PROJECT	13
	1. The Moon Is Down.....	13
	2. All Quiet on the Western Front.....	15
	3. Starship Troopers	17
	4. A Farewell to Arms.....	20
III.	CONSTRUCTING A WORK OF FICTION TO UNDERSTAND TERRORIST RADICALIZATION	25
	A. MOGHADDAM’S STAIRCASE TO TERRORISM	25
	B. CREATING THE NARRATIVE	27
	C. THE SMILE	28
	D. UNPACKING THE NARRATIVE	45
IV.	CONSTRUCTING A WORK OF FICTION TO UNDERSTAND COERCION THEORY	49
	A. BIDDLE’S BASIC INTRODUCTION TO COERCION THEORY	49
	B. CREATING THE NARRATIVE	50
	C. THE FOG	51
	D. UNPACKING THE NARRATIVE	77

V.	CONSTRUCTING A WORK OF FICTION TO UNDERSTAND SPECIAL OPERATIONS THEORY	81
A.	ADMIRAL MCRAVEN’S THEORY OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS	81
B.	CREATING THE NARRATIVE	83
C.	THE UNCHARTED	84
D.	UNPACKING THE NARRATIVE	115
VI.	CONSTRUCTING A WORK OF FICTION TO UNDERSTAND TERRORIST DERADICALIZATION	121
A.	JOHN HORGAN’S PATHWAY INTO, THROUGH, AND OUT OF TERRORISM	121
B.	CREATING THE NARRATIVE	125
C.	THE PLAN	126
D.	UNPACKING THE NARRATIVE	165
VII.	CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS	169
A.	CONCLUSION	169
B.	IMPLICATIONS	171
	LIST OF REFERENCES	173
	INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST	175

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

2IC	second in command
AFSOC	Air Force Special Operations Command
AK	Avtomat Kalashnikova
CBRN	chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Company
COM FST	Commandement des Forces Spéciales Terre
CT	computerized tomography
CTX	combatting terrorism exchange
DA	direct action
DGSE	Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure
DGSI	Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure
DRM	Direction du Renseignement Militaire
EOD	explosive ordnance disposal
EXFIL	exfiltration
G2	general staff intelligence
GFC	ground force commander
GIAT	Groupement des Industries de l'Armée de Terre
HELO	helicopter
ICOM	intercepted communication
IED	improvised explosive devise
INFIL	infiltration
INTEL	intelligence
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAS	Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād
JCPOA	joint comprehensive plan of action
KIA	killed in action
MA	military assistance
MILAN	Missile d'infanterie Léger Antichar

MINUSMA	Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali
MRE	meal ready to eat
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
OPS-room	operations room
PT	physical training
QRF	quick reaction force
SOF	special operations forces
SR	special reconnaissance
TACLEAD	tactical leader
TIC	troops in contact
U2	utility-plane 2
UNIMAID	University of Maiduguri
USB	universal serial bus
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my two advisors, Dr. Freeman and Dr. Naficy, without whom this project would have never developed to become what it is now. Their guidance and unwavering confidence in my ability to see it through is the reason that this contribution to the discussion on fiction's role in academia ever came to see the light of day. Thank you for having my six.

I want to thank my brilliant friend Sune De Souza Schmidt-Madsen for always finding time to discuss and offer feedback on my thoughts and my work. It kept me on the straight and narrow.

My gratitude to Dr. of Analytical Biochemistry Anders Holmgaard Hansen from Denmark's Technical University and BSc of Chemical Engineering Peter Skovhus Lind from Haldor Topsøe for their advice on how to keep the chemical weapons development as realistic as possible without giving away potentially dangerous instructions.

Police Detective Jeppe Permin, Special Investigation, Economic Crime, Central and West Zealand Police, deserves thanks for his counseling on the methodologies in cognitive interrogation and his appraisals of money flow in international criminal networks.

I must also direct my appreciation to Preben Brandenhoff, MD, associate clinical professor and CEO of Thoracic Transplant Consultants, Inc., for his expert guidance on all things medical related.

Last but not least, I want to extend my gratitude to Miss Pieken from the Thesis Processing Office for her guidance and patience. It meant the world to me.

I thank everyone who contributed to making these fictional stories believable.

To my Gorilla-buddies from La Mesa, thank you for the beers and the good times. I will see you at the pointy end of the spear.

Finally, I want to thank my awesome wife, Lisa, and raucous baby girl, Mathilde, for enduring and supporting me through my studies and for adding most of the color and flavor to my life. I don't know where I would be without you.

I. INTRODUCTION

Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't.

—Mark Twain

A. INTRODUCTION

Human beings are storytellers. We create narratives for almost everything. We understand ourselves, the people we interact with, and the societies we live in through our stories. They exist for sense-making, to create context, and to justify actions. They help us predict behavior and coordinate what we can expect from our surroundings. Narratives have permeated every organization, society, religion, and nation—ancient and modern. As a species, we tell stories for those exact reasons, but we also generate narratives that serve to entertain and to inspire, and we tell stories to educate and understand. For generations, science fiction writers have envisioned what future societies could look like, have imagined the potential for human greatness, and warned about humanity's inherent weaknesses and the risks of moral deterioration. Authors of counterfactuals have imagined how our current world would have developed if history had turned out differently and have helped us conceptualize how the many moral rights and wrongs of history have shaped the world we live in today. The idea that academic theories can be described through the medium of fiction is hardly new, but to use specific academic models to create a fictional narrative is. This capstone project endeavors to break ground on this particular topic and explore how fictional narratives can be used to demonstrate academic theories in operation and their indirect interactions with other academic topics used in defense analysis.

B. RESEARCH QUESTION AND PURPOSE

The objective of this project is to examine, by example, how fictional narratives can be utilized to describe, teach, and better understand academic theories or theoretical models across several subject matters in Defense Analysis. The project also demonstrates how these elements interact. Specifically, the project aims to use recognized academic models or theories from various topics taught at the Naval Postgraduate School's Defense

Analysis Department as the foundation to develop a series of interrelated, modular short stories. These narratives are intended to serve as individual simulations of scenarios that demonstrate how the models and theories function and are intended to be understood. The short stories, thus, serve to both explain how the theories could play out in reality and also elucidate how various topics in Defense Analysis interrelate.

C. PROJECT STRUCTURE

Apart from this introduction chapter, this capstone project is composed of three elements:

1. A chapter describing the fundamental objective of using fiction as a means to convey particular messages. A review of the scholarly literature used to inspire the narratives, as well as an evaluation of messages and techniques employed by four renowned authors of fiction is presented as a foundation for the narrative chapters.
2. Four individual narrative chapters. Each chapter consists of a description of the theory or model used to create the narrative, followed by a main story and an unpacking of how the narrative helps to explain the academic theory or model.
3. A chapter recommending how this project could be expanded by other authors to apply it more broadly in teaching academic theory and models in Defense Analysis.

To examine how fiction can be used to visualize and convey messages, I evaluate a handful of well-known novels that have inspired many of my ideas. Specifically, I examine what the messages of these narratives were and by what techniques the authors attempted to persuade their readers. The novels examined are Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down*, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. These authors intended to relay very specific ideas and shaped their respective stories toward an already given and often morally value-laden conclusion. I use the same techniques but shape the narrative over established academic

theory, without looking to establish a specific moral message at the story's conclusion. The models used to create the narratives cover four different topics related to International Terrorism but also touch on related topics across the spectrum of Defense Analysis. The four main narratives that make up the bulk of the project touch on Terrorist Radicalization, Proliferation and Counter Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, Coercion Theory, Theory of Special Operations, and Terrorist Deradicalization.

With this in mind, I take a closer look at Professor Fathali M. Moghaddam and his Staircase to Terrorism Model to generate a narrative of Terrorist Radicalization.¹ In generating a narrative that describes why and how some state actors would use untraditional and indirect methods to amplify their bargaining power or coercive strength, I take inspiration from the work of Professor Tami Davis Biddle and her description of coercion theory in practice.² Further inspiration comes from Dr. David Lai and his description of China's indirect GO approach to strategy to explain Chinese motivations for engaging in such an endeavor.³ Unclassified information from Joint Publication 3-40, *Joint Countering of Weapons of Mass Destruction* provides realistic insight into ways of countering the production of chemical weapons and how dual use technology from civilian industry complicates the countering of chemical weapons production in my narrative.⁴ In generating fiction that describes how modern Special Operations Forces (SOF) engage in combating and targeting terrorist organizations, I quite naturally glean substantial inspiration and knowledge from personal experience in the field. To substantiate this further in academic theory, I examine the work of Vice Admiral William Harry McRaven and his book *SPEC OPS, Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, and garner additional inspiration from the 2017 book *Interdisciplinary*

¹ Fathali M. Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Explanation," *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (Feb.–Mar. 2005): 161–169.

² Tami Davis Biddle, "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 95–109.

³ David Lai, *Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China's Strategic Concept*, Shi, (Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).

⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Countering of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, JP 3-40 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 27, 2019), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_40.pdf.

Perspectives on Special Operations Forces published by the Royal Danish Defense College.⁵

In order to produce a narrative that convincingly covers the subject of terrorist deradicalization, I take a closer look at “The Pathway Into, Through, and Out of Terrorism,” as described by Dr. John Horgan in his book *Walking Away From Terrorism* while also drawing inspiration from accounts of deradicalization and disengagement from Ken Ballen’s book *Terrorists in Love* and Julia Reynold’s *Blood in the Fields*.⁶

The four major narratives based on this research, which comprise the bulk of the project, are presented in Chapters III through VI. They are intended to give an inside perspective of an unfolding international, terrorist-induced crisis and follow the several players involved in the events. The stories are intended to portray characters on every level of involvement, from a lowly suicide bomber to the French Minister of Defense. Using this method, I show how the theoretical models taught in the academic sphere of Defense Analysis overlap and involve various individuals who observe and understand the world around them through those same dynamics. The intent is not only to generate a series of stories that can be read and understood as one coherent narrative but to create a string of stories that are themselves individually created to explain the functions of specific academic theories and how they could unfold in reality.

Chapter VII concludes the thesis with an evaluation and offers perspective on the project. In this final chapter, I evaluate how successfully the study has demonstrated the utility of fictional narratives to portray the chosen academic theories, thereby making them more accessible for the audience. Based on this evaluation, I conclude with the results of my study and findings and offer guidance on how to broaden the application of this study’s approach from the perspective of other scholarly disciplines in the military realm.

⁵ William Harry McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996); Royal Danish Defense College, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Special Operations Forces* (Copenhagen: Rosendahls A/S, 2017).

⁶ John Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2009); Ken Ballen, *Terrorists in Love: True Life Stories of Islamic Radicals* (New York: Free Press, 2011); Julia Reynolds, *Blood in the Fields: Ten Years Inside California’s Nuestra Familia Gang* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Incorporated, 2014).

D. MOTIVATION

I joined the Danish Defense Forces in 2002, following the terrible events of 9/11. I had many discussions about my decision with friends and family, most of whom encouraged me to apply. An older friend, who was himself a former U.S. Special Forces soldier, gave me several pieces of good advice on how to make the most of my time. One of the things he told me was to: “Always have a book in your pocket. You will be hurrying a lot and you will be waiting a lot. If you spend your waiting time reading, you’ll read a book every month.” I took his advice, and he wasn’t wrong. Much later in my career, I was sharing a ride with a much younger lieutenant. I noticed he was reading the newly published “Resistance Operating Concept” and asked if he was studying for an exam. He answered that he was just reading the concept for fun. I was impressed by his discipline and admitted that I had never read a piece of non-fiction for entertainment alone. When he asked me what I was reading, I answered “almost the same thing” and showed him a copy of John Steinbeck’s *The Moon is Down*, a significant example of how fiction was used to encourage European resistance to Nazi occupation in the Second World War. The point of this short conversation returned to me several times as I worked on expanding the idea of this capstone project. Should we not be taking fiction more seriously as an academic tool within the area of Defense Analysis and Military Studies? And if so, how? Through this project I hope to produce a first example of how this could be done.

THIS PAGE IS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This capstone project garners inspiration from several authors of fiction but uses academic theory to create narratives to further the understanding of said theory. Therefore, this part of the project is organized somewhat differently from a conventional literature review. This literature review aims to validate the chosen theory and to describe the messages and techniques used in four fictional narratives that serve as inspiration for me. It should be noted that a mindboggling number of fictional and post-factual works immerse the reader in subjective depictions of historic military campaigns or contemplate the “what-ifs” of history. To choose inspiration from one author alone, I would have risked limiting this study based on my personal preference for a particular writing style or a specific narrative to the extent that it borders on plagiarism. Therefore, the fictional writings in this capstone project take inspiration, but stand distinct, from the works of Hemingway, Remarque, Steinbeck, and Heinlein. The reason it is valuable for this project to look at the aforementioned works of these authors is that they have been attributed messages that continue to resonate with their audience. Steinbeck’s *The Moon is Down* has been understood as a fictitious example of a resistance operations guide,⁷ while Nazi Germany perceived Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* as a pacifist manifesto that risked undermining the German people’s will to fight.⁸ Similarly, Italian Fascists considered Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* to be harmful to the reputation of the Italian Military,⁹ while Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers* was criticized for venerating militarism in society and for having fascist undertones.¹⁰ It is important to emphasize that this project does not intend to relay a specific political narrative or standpoint. Despite being written by a

⁷ “*The Moon is Down*,” National Steinbeck Center, accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.steinbeck.org/learn/>.

⁸ Patrick Sauer, “The Most Loved and Hated Novel about World War I,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/most-loved-and-hated-novel-about-world-war-I-180955540/>.

⁹ “Why Italy Banned Hemingway’s Novel *A Farewell to Arms*,” Books on Trial, accessed August 19, 2021, <https://www.booksontrial.com/why-italians-banned-hemingway-novel-a-farewell-to-arms/>.

¹⁰ Sam Jordison, “Blasting Bugs Is More Complicated than you Think,” *The Guardian Book Blog*, *The Guardian*, July 23, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/jul/23/blastingbugsismorecomplicatedthanyouthink>.

Western SOF operator, who was raised, educated, and indoctrinated in a Liberal, representative democracy, these stories are not intended as narratives to change the reader's perceptions of the political-strategical approaches of the Great Powers of the World. Nor is it intended to influence the reader in any given political direction. As explained, I intend to build the individual narratives over the framework of already recognized academic theories with the aim of using fiction as a pedagogical tool to increase students' understanding of subject matter. This project does not aim to specify by what didactic process this learning is to be obtained. Students could be assigned readings of already existing pieces of fiction relating to topics relevant to their field of study, could be asked to write fiction themselves similar to the narratives found in this project, or professors could produce pieces of fiction tailored to describe and unpack theories for their students. This project aims to evaluate, by example, how such pieces of fiction could look and how it would work to further student learning.

A. ACADEMIC LITERATURE INFORMING THIS PROJECT

In the following four subsections, I will describe the academic theories and models that serve as foundation of the development of the fictional narratives in this project.

1. Terrorist Radicalization

The root causes for terrorism and pathways to radicalization have been academically described by several prominent scholars, many of whom offer inspiration to the radicalization narrative included in this capstone project. Most important of them is Professor Fathali M. Moghaddam and his Staircase to Terrorism Model. Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism offers a clear progression of an individual's radicalization which serves well to create a narrative.

The model explains six levels that the vast majority of terrorists ascend before carrying out an act of terrorism.¹¹ Professor Moghaddam portrays how an otherwise law-abiding individual can be exposed to an escalation of factors, beginning with Psychological Interpretations of Material Conditions and continuing through Perceived Options to Fight

¹¹ Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Explanation," 161–169.

Unfair Treatment, Displacement of Aggression, Moral Engagement, Solidification of Categorical Thinking and the Perceived Legitimacy of the Terrorist Organization, to conclude in *The Terrorist Act and Sidestepping of Inhibitory Mechanisms*. Professor Moghaddam's model asserts that classical conceptions of terrorists as hailing from impoverished conditions or suffering from mental illnesses are wrong, and that the motivations to commit atrocious acts can be found in people from all walks of life and understood if analyzed through the individual levels of the staircase. Through the use of his model, Professor Moghaddam stipulates that policymakers can gain an understanding of a terrorist's motivations, to address the root causes of radicalization and reduce the chance that individuals will begin ascending the staircase. Professor Moghaddam's Staircase delivers not only a nuanced academic perspective on what motivates people to commit acts of terror but an entire framework upon which a narrative for understanding and portraying terrorist radicalization can be built.

2. State Coercion, Deterrence, Proliferation, and Counter Proliferation

Professor Tami Davis Biddle's description of coercion theory in practice is a keystone portrayal of how countries and alliances use compellence and deterrence to either change or maintain the status quo between states.¹² Professor Davis defines not only the terminology and language behind coercion theory, she clarifies some of the evident misconceptions and miscommunications that exist between military practitioners of state coercion and the civilian, political decision makers who are responsible for commanding said practitioners into action.¹³ Through her precise explanation of Deterrence by Punishment and Deterrence by Denial she gives a language for describing the mechanisms of coercion theory in general but also delivers a valid explanation for why any actor, state or otherwise, would pursue weapons that could be used to coerce stronger adversaries. Furthermore, her explanation of the fundamentals in coercion theory helps clarify why some states would look to proxies to assist them in coercing their enemies, simply to

¹² Biddle, "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners," 95–109.

¹³ Biddle.

minimize the chance of retaliation.¹⁴ This capstone also draws inspiration from Dr. David Lai and hints at his understanding of China's GO approach to strategy. By comparing China's Grand Strategy to the encirclement tactics of the Chinese game GO, Dr. Lai unpacks and clarifies China's approach to the Great Power Competition with the United States and the West. Through game analysis Dr. Lai provides an explanation of China's understanding of warfare; an understanding that is much broader and involves several more arenas of war than is commonly understood in classical Western thinking.¹⁵ Dr. Lai's work functions as an inspirational backdrop but does not establish a specific narrative in this capstone. As previously mentioned, I intend to draw some inspiration from Joint Publication 3-40, *Joint Countering of Weapons of Mass Destruction*. JP 3-40 gives insight into not only the ways of countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) but also includes entire sections on the production of chemical weapons and identifies dual use technology from civilian industry that can serve as elements in chemical weapons production. It is important to note that no production specifics are mentioned in my narratives, which employ sufficiently general terms to be realistic but not replicable in the real world. Without going into specifics this understanding is paramount to produce an accurate description of the size of the logistical operation, the knowledge and know-how required, and the variety of components and materials required if a terrorist organization was to undertake such an operation in cooperation with a state actor.¹⁶ JP 3-40 furthermore gives inspiration to what problems such an operation would likely face, and how it could be successfully countered.¹⁷

3. Special Operations Force's Role in Targeting of Terrorist Organizations

Admiral William Harry McRaven and his book *SPEC OPS, Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* are akin to a kind of bible for many SOF

¹⁴ Biddle.

¹⁵ Lai, *Learning from the Stones*.

¹⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Countering of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, JP 3-40.

¹⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff.

operators across the Western hemisphere. Through analysis of eight case studies of historical special operations, Admiral McRaven applies his theory of special operations to confirm that correct use of simplicity in planning, security, and repetition in preparation, and surprise, speed, and purpose in the execution yield the best possible chance of achieving the relative superiority needed for SOF success.¹⁸ The Danish Naval Special Warfare Group “raised” me to understand these SOF truths and to live by them when conducting missions at home and abroad. I have operated in adherence to those principles and understand how and why they function in real life. Therefore, I draw inspiration not only from theory but from real-life experiences in creating my narrative but lean predominantly on the work of Admiral McRaven to validate these experiences theoretically.

The created narratives in the following chapters also incorporate thoughts on leadership characteristics and leadership development from the 2017 publication *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Special Operations Forces* published by the Royal Danish Defense College. The book identifies the difficulties that SOF leadership face in their changing roles across the spectrum of operations that Special Operations Forces are expected to handle. The book further recognizes that finding the right man or woman for the job may change with the circumstances and characteristics of the mission at hand.¹⁹ The latter of the two SOF-related publications serves only as a source of inspiration for descriptions of the importance of selection of personnel in Special Operations.

4. Terrorist Deradicalization

In his book *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements*, Dr. John Horgan investigates the relationship between the causes for entering into and ultimately leaving terrorism. Horgan examines our present knowledge in the field of terrorist disengagement and deradicalization by discarding some of the classic misconceptions of terrorists as being criminally inclined or insane.²⁰ By

¹⁸ McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare*.

¹⁹ Royal Danish Defense College, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Special Operations Forces*.

²⁰ Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism*.

discarding stereotypes, Dr. Horgan establishes that there are many reasons why people would join a terrorist cause and therefore just as many reasons for leaving. Through a series of case studies of actual terrorist deradicalization and disengagement by former members of groups such as the Ulster Volunteer Force, Al-Qaeda, and the Provisional Irish Republican Army, Horgan proceeds to establish a linear model to describe a way into, through, and out of terrorism while recognizing that the individual causes for these steps may differ from one individual to the next.²¹ The model is thus open to interpretation, and thus, it makes predicting the specific means by which a person may become radicalized imprecise. Even so, it can be used effectively as a step-by-step theoretical framework for a narrative description of radicalization and subsequent deradicalization.

Similarly, I draw inspiration from Julia Reynolds's book *Blood in the Fields; Ten Years Inside California's Nuestra Familia Gang*. As the title indicates, Reynolds spent a decade interacting with and interviewing members of the Nuestra Familia gang and describes the stories of these notorious gangsters. Her descriptions depict many of the same dynamics seen in members who join and subsequently leave terrorist organizations. Reynolds both establishes who the individuals were before joining, what drew them in, what kept them there, what alienated them, and what subsequently caused them to deradicalize, leave, or even initiate cooperation with law enforcement.²² Her book therefore provides excellent inspiration for the complex description of the terrorist's journey through initial radicalization to ultimate deradicalization.

Likewise, inspiration is drawn from Ken Ballen's book *Terrorists in Love*. Similar to the work of Reynolds, Ballen's book offers no models for understanding the complexities of terrorist deradicalization but offers much inspiration as his compilation of interviews contain first-hand stories from radical Islamists. Ballen's book also describes the fate of terrorists at every level of engagement, from the disgruntled Saudi youth persuaded by misinformation to the hardcore ringleader who fervently believes in the

²¹ Horgan.

²² Reynolds, *Blood in the Fields*.

destruction of all that he perceives as impure.²³ These interviews serve as inspiration for some of the individuals portrayed in the fictional narrative covering terrorist deradicalization and disengagement.

B. WORKS OF FICTION INSPIRING THIS PROJECT

In the following subsections, I will describe four important pieces of fiction that inspire this project and evaluate the messages and techniques used by their authors.

1. The Moon Is Down

a. The Story

A town is invaded. Quickly, effectively, and not least, surprisingly. The people of the little town are both physically and psychologically overwhelmed and put up little in the way of resistance. The colonel who leads the foreign invaders meets with the town's mayor and explains that the entire country is now under the invaders' control. With assistance from a local sympathizer, the invaders have managed to put the town's few defenders at a disadvantage and have gained victory with minimal bloodshed. The invaders claim they want no trouble with the townspeople. Indeed, they have only invaded the small town to ensure that the local coal mine remains operational and continues to fuel the invaders' war machine. Confused and concerned, the townspeople grudgingly accept the enemy presence. The colonel who leads the invaders is a veteran of a similar campaign in Belgium some twenty years past. He warns his officers to be vigilant of the public and work hard to gain their trust. He fears a reiteration of the experiences he previously had, namely a resentful populace who will stop at nothing to make the invaders suffer. Though the invaders are initially confident, they become increasingly apprehensive. An officer is soon killed by a local man whom the invaders put to death for his transgression. The conflict fuels the increasing animosity and fans the flames of discontent in the local population, who begin to show little fear of death. Within months, their dissatisfaction has turned to outright hatred and a campaign to disrupt the invader's operation is well underway.

²³ Ballen, *Terrorists in Love*.

Eventually, soldiers and officers are being killed, locals escape to join the resistance abroad, and the town's coal mine is sabotaged. When Allied forces begin dropping dynamite to increase the effectiveness of the rising rebellion, the invaders try a last, desperate attempt to quell the efforts of the locals and take the town's mayor hostage. The mayor knows that the threat of killing him will not cause his determined population to stop the resistance and accepts that he is going to die. He makes an ominous prediction to the colonel in charge of the invaders: "You see, sir, nothing can change it. You will be destroyed and driven out. The people don't like to be conquered, sir, and so they will not be. Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars. You will find that is so, sir."²⁴

b. *Message and Techniques*

Originally published in 1942, *The Moon Is Down* is an excellent example of fictional literature written to convey a particular message. Steinbeck wrote the book to serve as Allied propaganda while working for the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI).²⁵ The book was covertly published and distributed in many nations across Europe and subsequently the rest of the world to strengthen the narrative of resistance against the Axis powers in conquered populations. The book became immensely popular in those beleaguered nations and was outlawed by all the Axis powers—but was also heavily critiqued in the United States. Steinbeck was criticized for humanizing the enemy and for depicting the invaders (the German soldiers) as sympathetic people with real emotions and dreams, who longed for their homeland the same way as any other normal person would do.²⁶ Steinbeck's choice to do so was a technical stroke of genius. By internalizing both the experience of the invaders and the conquered, he put words to emotions rather than excuse the actions of the invaders. His description helped to underscore the disastrous demoralization the invading soldiers experience by being stationed amongst an

²⁴ John Steinbeck, *The Moon is Down* (New York: Penguin Group, 1995), 111.

²⁵ Donald V. Coers, *Introduction to The Moon is Down* (New York: Penguin Group, 1995), vii–xii.

²⁶ Coers, *Introduction to The Moon is Down* (New York: Penguin Group, 1995), xii–xxiv.

unwelcoming and increasingly resentful local population. Steinbeck's choice to describe the experiences of those involved on both sides of the conflict put the entire experience into perspective. Detestable as the actions of the invaders are, the invaders remain human. They have human emotions and can be saddened, and they have human spirits which can be broken. Peaceful, as the conquered population is, they are similarly human. They have emotions and can be angered and have spirits that can be stiffened in determination for the defense of their nation. Enabling the reader to empathize with the enemy not only humanizes the enemy but promotes the reader's understanding of what drives those we oppose. Furthermore, Steinbeck's descriptions of the determination of a conquered people demonstrates how desperation and helplessness can become a fierce motivator for individuals to oppose an invader – perceived or otherwise. This lesson, imparted in *The Moon is Down*, if taught to and understood by Western political and military leaders could have led to a different international approach in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The technique of empathizing with and humanizing the enemy will likely prove effective in describing radicalization and deradicalization narratives, and may, if used in combination with recognized theory on the subject, bring us closer to understanding terrorist motivations.

2. All Quiet on the Western Front

a. The Story

All Quiet on the Western Front follows the young German soldier, Paul, who has signed up voluntarily for service in the First World War. Paul is stationed on the German Western Front with several of his old classmates who have also signed up to serve. Paul and his fellow soldiers are already veterans of many battles when the reader first meets them. When new recruits arrive, the group is slow to establish friendships with them, knowing full well that many of them will be killed within the first weeks of fighting. Many of the new recruits are almost certainly doomed until they have learned the rules and rhythm of combat that keeps the veterans alive. By distancing themselves from the recruits, the older veterans attempt to psychologically protect themselves. The soldiers are involved

in several bouts of heavy combat, suffering serious casualties among their own and delivering similar losses among the enemy forces.

Life in the trenches reduces Paul and his friends to beings that exist for the simple things in life. Food and safety are the most crucial concerns for the men at the front. After another bout of heavy fighting, Paul is given leave to go home. His experience is unsettling to him. Everything looks the same but has also strangely changed for him. Paul no longer feels at home. His mother is terribly sick, and his father only seems interested in parading his son around in uniform to show off the family's contribution to the war effort. Many of the townsfolk welcome him with overly romantic notions of life at the frontline. It sickens Paul. Even his old room feels like it isn't his anymore, and his possessions feel like they belong to someone else. He decides it was a bad idea to come home on leave.

When Paul finally returns to the front, he is selected for a patrol to gauge the strength of the enemy lines but is quickly separated from the others. Caught in no-man's-land, he hides in a shell hole. When a French soldier lands on top of him in the middle of a French counterattack, Paul stabs him to death. He watches the French soldier slowly die and is afterward horribly grief stricken. When he finally manages to get back to the German lines, Paul confesses his guilt to his comrades who try to console him. Slowly he gets over the experience and can function as a soldier again. Paul and his friends are then tasked with guarding a supply depot and enjoy some time with enough food and rest. Paul and one of his friends are wounded by enemy artillery fire and end up in a Catholic hospital. His friend loses a leg, but Paul is deemed fit for service and is returned to the front. Soon the German lines begin collapsing, and Paul and his few surviving friends fight on for a few more disastrous months. The book ends with one of Paul's closest friends dying, followed by Paul himself, just weeks before the armistice.

b. Messages and Techniques

Erich Maria Remarque served on the German Western Front in France in the First World War. He uses his own familiarity with the horrors of trench warfare to effectively portray how the war created a disconnect between those who knew fighting from personal experience and those who did not. Remarque was evidently inspired by his years as a

soldier and depicts the dread of industrial war with precision and detail. By describing the de-humanization the soldiers experience in the face of an all-encompassing war, he manages to explain and contextualize the divide any war creates between the soldiers fighting and the society from which they hail. Remarque was later described as a pacifist, but he does not waste pages explicitly judging the concept of war as being morally unjust.²⁷ Instead, he depicts the conditions under which the soldiers serve, allowing readers to visit the front line and draw their own conclusions from that experience.

Nazi Germany found the book defeatist and damaging to morale and outlawed Remarque's writing.²⁸ Yet, *All Quiet on the Western Front* appears more focused on describing the personal consequences war carries for the humans fighting it rather than decrying the concept of war altogether. It often describes scenes of enormous individual courage and does not portray the German soldier as weak or incapable. The book is both a look into the circumstances under which our great grandparents fought, a personal journey into the zeitgeist of Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century, and by extension serves as a case study in Nazi distaste for any critique of war. *All Quiet on the Western Front* uses words other than a modern writer would; it is set in a different context from recent wars and is of course set in different times—but Remarque warns of one of the hardest lessons learned from the past two decades of conflict: That we can armor the car and armor the men, but we cannot armor their hearts. The techniques Remarque uses are particularly effective in generating a narrative to substantiate the theory behind the work of modern special operations forces, and similarly effective in describing the struggles of the terrorists who stand against them.

3. Starship Troopers

a. The Story

Juan “Johnnie” Rico is a young man living in the twenty-third century. The society he lives in is vastly different from contemporary societies. The Earth is at peace. Humanity

²⁷ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), Foreword.

²⁸ Sauer, “The Most Loved and Hated Novel About World War I.”

is organized in The Terran Federation and is slowly spreading across the galaxy. The Federation has encountered two alien civilizations that they are at war with. One is a humanoid race referred to as “the Skinnies,” the other a lethal race of insects called “the Arachnids.” In the Terran Federation, citizenship is not guaranteed. Citizenship, entailing the right to vote and hold public office, can only be obtained through military service. Johnnie is from a well-off and privileged family and has never had any intentions to join the armed forces. When two of his best friends sign up after college, not least inspired by their teacher Mr. Dubois who taught History and Moral Philosophy, Johnnie follows along and sets his mind to joining as well.

Johnnie’s father is very much against his son entering service and cuts ties with him. Johnnie is enrolled in the Mobile Infantry, a tough branch of the Armed Forces, who fight their enemies while encased in high-tech battle armor. With their armor, the soldiers of the Mobile Infantry can jump or fly great distances and have devastating weaponry at their disposal. Johnnie does his basic training in Camp Currie. The training is outright brutal and over the duration of their training and selections course, the recruits are exposed to untold rigors. Of 2,009 recruits only 187 graduate. Fourteen of those who did not make graduate died during training; one of them was executed for crimes he committed.

When Johnnie has finally made it all the way into the Mobile Infantry, he is immediately deployed to battle. The war is extremely costly in human and alien life. After years of service, Johnnie signs up for Officer’s Candidate School (OCS) and is selected. Before arriving at the school, Johnnie meets his estranged father, who has also signed up for military service. He explains that his distaste for his son’s service was rooted in knowing that, in fact, service would have been the right thing. Johnnie finds OCS very challenging but is eventually promoted to third lieutenant and sent back to the front. He is deployed to Planet P where humanity is hunting a special kind of Arachnid to gain the upper hand in the war against the enemy race. The mission is successful, but Johnnie is critically injured. When he has recovered, he is promoted and reunited with his father who now serves as Johnnie’s platoon sergeant.

b. Messages and Techniques

Service to a higher cause matters. So does the willingness to put oneself in harm's way to secure the safety of your fellow man against a foreign enemy. Society would be more peaceful and stable if those who could vote and those who could hold office belonged to a cast of tried and tested selfless people who understood these values. Heinlein's book, humorously rendered in the modern movie classic of the same name, is not only about fighting aliens in the future.²⁹ Only four of the book's fourteen chapters are spent describing combat operations or its elements. Heinlein spends a similar number of chapters describing the society Johnnie grows up in, the moral obligations, as well as the means of punishment and the understanding of discipline in that culture.

The greater part of the book follows Johnnie's mental and physical journey through the terrors of basic training and later in the story his struggles to pass OCS. Heinlein was himself a former navy officer and took inspiration from his own experiences to imagine what such a training and educational regime might look like in the distant future. In *Starship Troopers*, Heinlein also imagines future systems of governance, challenges both his fictional society's and his contemporary society's moral stances, and discusses the value of rights given freely. As science fiction, *Starship Troopers* focuses surprisingly little on how developments in science would change human civilization. Instead, Heinlein effectively uses the element of fiction to imagine future ideals about the virtues of service, self-sacrifice, and the connections between duty and rights.

After the publication of *Starship Troopers*, Heinlein was broadly criticized for supporting militarism and espousing the idea that only certain members of a society should be entrusted with the privileges that we see as the basic tenets of modern-day democracy.³⁰ Without making an evaluation of Heinlein's political standpoint, I am certain that *Starship Troopers* was intended to cause reflection and discussion on the previously mentioned topics.

²⁹ Jordison, "Blasting Bugs Is More Complicated than You Think"; Calum Marsh, "*Starship Troopers*: One of the Most Misunderstood Movies Ever," *The Atlantic*, November 7, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/em-starship-troopers-em-one-of-the-most-misunderstood-movies-ever/281236/>.

³⁰ William H. Patterson, Jr., "Robert A. Heinlein, A Biography," The Heinlein Society, August 2011, <https://www.heinleinsociety.org/2011/08/robert-a-heinlein-a-biography/>.

Heinlein's technique of imagining systems and describing them with inspiration garnered from real-life experiences is effective. It can prove useful in describing selection criteria of foreign special forces units and in describing combat operations in circumstances I have not been deployed in myself.

4. A Farewell to Arms

a. *The Story*

A Farewell to Arms follows the American lieutenant Frederic Henry who serves as an ambulance driver in the Italian Army in the First World War. Hemingway initially depicts his protagonist as someone who serves loyally and to some extent also courageously behind the lines of the main Italian attack along the Isonzo river. At the front, Henry meets the beautiful English nurse, Catherine Barkley, and falls deeply in love with her. When Henry is seriously wounded by shelling, he is evacuated to Milan where he spends an entire summer recovering from his injuries with Catherine at his side. During their time together Catherine becomes pregnant, and they decide to keep the child. When redeployed to the frontline, Henry arrives just in time to witness the Italian military disaster that was the Battle of Caporetto. During the Italian retreat he is pulled aside by the military police who are summarily executing officers for cowardice and for causing the Italian defeat. Henry narrowly manages to escape and finds his way back to Catherine. Together they escape the country and flee to Switzerland, where they spend the remaining months of Catherine's pregnancy in peace and quiet having left the war behind them. The book concludes tragically with Catherine Barkley and the couple's baby boy both dying during childbirth.³¹

b. *Messages and Techniques*

I believe that all the people who stand to profit by a war and who help provoke it should be shot on the first day it starts by accredited representatives of the loyal citizens of their country who will fight it.³²

—Ernest Hemingway

³¹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Scribner, 2014).

³² Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*, Introduction, IX.

I do not recall ever seeing a more evident distaste for warmongering than expressed by Hemingway in his foreword to *A Farewell to Arms*. Famously, the book was outlawed in fascist Italy because Mussolini thought the book described the Italian Army unfavorably.³³ However, I would argue that this does not appear to be Hemingway's intention with *A Farewell to Arms*. Hemingway's personal feelings for the Italian Army, his distaste for Mussolini, or even his hatred for war do not cause him to turn his book into a brutal critique of rising Italian fascism, a cry for pacifism, or even a suggestion that violence is impossible to justify. Specifically, his distaste for war seems bound to notion that there are people who would bring about the end of days to line their own pockets or strengthen their political positions. He effectively describes the disillusionment that arises from being ordered to fight for a cause one has lost faith in.³⁴ Yet, the political tendency Hemingway critiques could be said for many world leaders, previous and current, and was therefore not an explicitly Italian issue.

A veteran of the First World War, Hemingway knew that war simultaneously could bring out the best and worst in the people fighting it and through his writing invites his readers to witness both acts of remarkable greatness and of abhorrent wickedness, of great love and friendships, and of the loss of those as well. Hemingway portrays the immersion in war and describes the emotions tied to the experiences of the protagonist. Not only does this make the narrative convincing, but it also evokes recollections of Henry's experiences that are tied to a sense empathy. We remember not only what things looked like, but what they felt like.

In broad strokes, *A Farewell to Arms* reads more like a Greek tragedy than it does a contemporary critique of Italy's role in the Great War. As Frederick Henry is pulled into and out of the jaws of death, experiences the staggering losses at the front, and the absurd cowardice and cruelty of the Italian Gendarmerie following the Italian defeat at Caporetto, he begins to distance himself from his commitment to the war. His animosity is not particularly with the Italian Military, it is with the war in general. Hemingway uses his

³³ "Why Italy Banned Hemingway's Novel *A Farewell to Arms*."

³⁴ Hemingway. *A Farewell to Arms*, 155–157.

memories from Italy to convey these feelings convincingly. It is particularly through his merging of fiction and reality that his story is made believable and realistic. Hemingway was not present at the battle of Caporetto, but with extensive research and based on his own experiences with the war, he was successful in depicting the event for his audience.

The text contains no indications that *A Farewell to Arms* was written to relay the messages attributed to it by the Italian fascists. Unlike the works of aforementioned authors John Steinbeck, Erich Remarque, and Robert Heinlein, I do not believe Hemingway intended to hammer home a particular point with his story. Most likely, Hemingway wanted to talk about people. He was interested in the human condition—in love and loss, in life and death—and his book revolves as much around those themes as it does war. Does this then mean that *A Farewell to Arms* becomes irrelevant for this project? I do not think so. Hemingway's ability to describe emotions both big and small is an effective method to make his characters relatable and the situations they are in believable. His ability to take inspiration from his own time at the front line to effectively describe the experiences of other people immersed in similar situations serve as a relevant source of inspiration if similarly combined with research. *A Farewell to Arms* is also instructive in considering how to describe characters and the sentiments and thoughts the protagonists express as I develop the written narratives of this capstone project.

From my literature review of *The Moon is Down*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Starship Troopers*, and *A Farewell to Arms*, I found that most of the authors did indeed set out to deliver particular messages and not simply to entertain their audience. Most significant in the field of Defense Analysis is John Steinbeck's *The Moon is Down* which was overtly created to function as propaganda and to encourage the conquered nations of Europe to resist German occupation. I do not believe that *All Quiet on the Western Front* was written as a pacifist manifesto as such, but it certainly is intended to make decision makers and voters reflect on the horrors and immense human costs of conducting war on an industrial scale. This reflection is likely what caused Nazi Germany to show such disdain for the book, as that message would discourage participation in the world war they were looking to ignite.

Starship Troopers, on the other hand, serves as a tool to educate on the values of service and self-sacrifice in a democracy, and even to criticize the notion that rights are given for free, rather than earned through blood and sweat. Only in the case of *A Farewell to Arms* do I find the attributed message to be off the mark. There may well have been no love lost between Hemingway and Mussolini, but the story seems much more centered on an interesting storyline. Similar to Remarque, Hemingway did critique industrial war and the consequences it inflicts on society, but the narrative is centered around love and loss, and life and death. These four novels are excellent examples not only to draw inspiration from but good illustrations of how narratives can be created to explain theory in Defense Analysis. This begets the question: How then can narratives be used to strengthen the understanding of academic theory and models?

THIS PAGE IS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

III. CONSTRUCTING A WORK OF FICTION TO UNDERSTAND TERRORIST RADICALIZATION

A. MOGHADDAM'S STAIRCASE TO TERRORISM

In 2005 Professor Fathali Moghaddam developed his *Staircase to Terrorism* to improve our comprehension of the processes that those few individuals who carry out terrorist acts go through.³⁵ Professor Moghaddam theorized that any person engaged in terrorism must progress up these steps or phases. It is Professor Moghaddam's central thesis that comprehension of these steps and having the ability to identify them through the actions or rhetoric of an individual can increase the chances of timely intervention by authorities to prevent further escalation towards a terrorist act.³⁶ Professor Moghaddam's staircase has six steps that are examined in the following sections.

Step 1—Ground Floor: Psychological Interpretation of Material Conditions

Most people are to be found on this floor and have not begun an ascent up the staircase. Individual interpretations of conditions are key to understanding why some people eventually leave this floor. Despite the appearance of Material Conditions in the section heading, terrible material conditions are in themselves not essential to explain why some people radicalize. On the other hand, the perception (whether real or not) of unfair treatment is. In this way, unfair material conditions may well be the cause that begins the ascent, but so can a perceived threat towards religious or ethnic identity or even another perceived unfairness altogether. It is the perception of unfairness that is key.³⁷

Step 2—First Floor: Perceived Options to Fight Unfair Treatment

Unfair treatment or the perception of unfair treatment alone will not lead individuals to climb further up the staircase. Most will not look to violent means to improve their situation of perceived unfairness. Some people have only limited or even no options

³⁵ Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism," 161.

³⁶ Moghaddam, 161–162.

³⁷ Moghaddam, 162–163.

to fight the unfairness, often because of the lack of proper institutions or societal support. This can lead to further escalation up the staircase.³⁸

Step 3—Second Floor: Displacement of Aggression

Amongst those who are incapable of standing up against the perceived unfair treatment by legitimate means, there are some who will subscribe to an “us vs. them” rhetoric, namely that the cause of the injustices done to them is to be found in the actions of other nation-states, people of other ethnicities, or entire religious groups.³⁹

Step 4—Third Floor: Moral Engagement

When the “us vs. them” narrative of displaced aggression has been accepted, the individual will have bought into a narrative, real or contrived, that makes distinctions between the in-group and the out-group by moralizing and exaggerating those differences. That individual has now become an opportune target for recruitment into a terrorist or terrorist-affiliated organization. Through increasing engagement, the individual will become isolated from those who disagree with his or her respective viewpoints, establish a new place of belonging, become privy to secrets of an otherwise closed organization, and may become fearful for his or her own safety because of the actions of security forces or even the organization itself. This moral engagement causes an increasing vulnerability to persuasive arguments for violence against the chosen out-group.⁴⁰

Step 5—Fourth Floor: Solidification of Categorical Thinking and the Perceived Legitimacy of the Terrorist Organization

The more time the individual spends immersed in the new in-group, the more he or she will become accustomed to the rhetoric and actions of the organization. This normalization will in turn help justify the actions of the group to the individual and help to validate extremist violence and the killing of civilians.⁴¹

³⁸ Moghaddam, 161–169.

³⁹ Moghaddam, 164–165.

⁴⁰ Moghaddam, 165.

⁴¹ Moghaddam, 165–166.

Step 6—Fifth Floor: The Terrorist Act and Sidestepping Inhibitory Mechanisms

With the fourth floor reached, the last obstacle remaining in the completion of a terrorist act is the act of an actual attack against a civilian or predominantly civilian target. Most often, but certainly not always, a means of sidestepping the common human inhibitory mechanisms is used. Simply put, most terrorists prefer to kill from a distance using firearms or bombs to prevent them from having second thoughts about going through with the act.⁴²

B. CREATING THE NARRATIVE

How then can Moghaddam's Staircase be used to construct a work of fiction to increase understanding of the model? First and most importantly, the story should unfold in a credible setting. The observations made by professor Moghaddam are based on tendencies observed in the real world and for the model to work as fiction, the narrative must be realistic, too. This entices me to use some of the literary methods used by both Steinbeck and Remarque. Like Remarque does in his novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* my story takes place in a setting similar to some I have experienced myself and in the midst of an existing conflict, using actual locations.⁴³ Like Steinbeck's description of the invaders in *The Moon is Down*, I attempt to put myself in the place of the radicalized man and humanize his actions rather than dehumanize them.⁴⁴ This is not to excuse his radicalization and subsequent fiendish behavior—it is to attempt to empathize with the feelings *not* to sympathize with the rationalizations a human being must go through to successfully climb the staircase.

This means that the story must become an internalization of the six steps to the extent that we not only understand why someone might choose to continue to escalate up

⁴² Moghaddam, 166–167.

⁴³ Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

⁴⁴ Steinbeck, *The Moon is Down*.

the staircase, but we must also be able to understand the internal logic of the main protagonist, even if we ourselves disagree with his point of view.

C. THE SMILE

This section was previously published by *CTX* under the title “At the Very End, I Smiled.”⁴⁵

Fight with those from among the people of the Book, who don't believe in Allah or in the last day; who don't make unlawful that which Allah and His messenger have made unlawful, and don't adopt the Right way as their way. Fight them until they pay Jizya with their own hands and are humbled.

—Surah Tawbah (9:29)

The explosion is a muffled noise, but the tremor in the ground discloses the enormous power of the blast. I blow my whistle and we get up. A second later, the muzzle flashes make the night glimmer and sparkle. Half of all the world's sounds fall away as the explosive bangs of the gunshots mix with the metallic noises of rifle actions. We fire as one, all eight of us, and death rains on the kuffar. The stock punches hard against my shoulder, adding a liberating sensation of numbness to the fight.

The fear is gone now. Our tracer rounds draw bright lines through the darkness, leaving purple and green echoes of their passing on the inside of my eyes. Through the waning moonlight I see the fruits of our endeavors, as figures collapse to the ground while struggling to leave their burning armored vehicle. The hard rounds clink off the side of its armor in a whining cacophony. My magazine clicks empty. I swipe my hand past the release, yank the sickle shaped canister out with a hard tug, grab another from my rig and click it into place. I reach over and pull hard on the tap. The bolt slams home and I resume fire. Suddenly, explosions blossom in the air around us and dirt sprays over me. It feels like a giant's whip is splitting the air with vicious cracks. The air is boiling with heat and blinding lights. Instinctively, I crouch in the ditch, water spilling into my pants. I realize my error the second I am on my knees. Commander Jayamma and Abu-Mazen were adamant about this: “When they shoot back, and they will, do not flinch, do not cower or

⁴⁵ Nikolaj Lindberg, “At the Very End, I Smiled,” *CTX* II, no. 2 (2021): 6–15.

show fear. Keep shooting. It is the key to your victory and survival. Or if you should be defeated the very keys to the gates of Heaven. Keep the words of the Prophet, *alayhi as-salām*, in mind: If failure befalls you, do not say; Oh, if only I had done otherwise. Rather you should do what Allah decrees. Saying IF opens the door to the deeds of Satan.”

Madi is on his knees next to me. I can hardly see him through the darkness of the night, but I can tell he is contemplating the same as I am. I snarl in frustration and try to stand but fail utterly. The second I crest the top of the ditch, more explosions rain down on us and I am showered in dirt and heat. My legs refuse to accept my desperate command, my body does not comply. I fall back to my knees and stay down. Madi gets up and fires his AK. The weapon appears to be silent as it repeats in his hands in an absurd slow-motion. Even the muzzle flashes look sluggish—disjointed from reality. I try to get up, but then, with a sound unlike anything I have ever heard, Madi is struck. The entire lower part of his face breaks open. I am showered in blood and bone fragments and scream soundlessly in shock. Madi crouches oddly towards me, his tongue lolling absurdly from the gaping hole that was once his jaw while blood and bile gushes out of him in impossible quantities. He stumbles over me, and I land on my back in the water-filled trench. I stare into his malformed face and lose every measure of self-control I have left. Screaming, I punch and claw at him, pushing his profusely bleeding body away from me. I scramble down the ditch away from the explosions and my dying friend. I run and stumble, crawl, and stagger through the muck, all the time trying to keep my head low. The trench leads me to the end of the next tree line, and I clamber over the edge.

Whip-cracks of gunfire follow me, but I feel no pain and run into the night. I run and run until I cannot hear them anymore—until I cannot hear anything. No gunfire, no shouting, no nothing. I keep running through the night without stopping, several times I stumble and scrape my hands and knees on the hard dirt. When I realize dawn is coming, I stop. I have never been this tired in my life. I have no idea where I am. It is then I realize, with horror, that I have lost my rifle. I must have left it in the ditch or dropped it in the night. I feel so worthless. I have betrayed the responsibility I was granted. I am a failure to the cause, and this is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back. I have failed my father’s memory; I have failed the *Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād*, I have

failed God. I collapse under a tree, and as the first rays of the sun touch my face, I cry. I cry for the first time since my father died. I am destroyed.

My father's name was Bunamo. He used to drink his chai hot. Boiling hot, straight out of the pot. I would sit and cradle my cup in my hands or let it rest for minutes on the floor while it cooled enough for me to drink it, but he would stir his a few times and then happily swill down the near-boiling liquid while I stared in amazement. There was always something impervious about him, as if the toils of life didn't wear him down. The long days working the fields under the sun wouldn't faze him, his hands and feet wouldn't crack or blister like mine, despite the many hours of hard labor and many miles of walking. I swear by Almighty Allah, I even saw him shake off the bite of a carpet-viper once, as if the creature's venom made no impact on him at all. He was a tall man, even for a Kanuri, and he would be easy to spot from afar. Even if I had to run all the way across our fields to fetch him, I'd be able to see his sinewy figure rising above the landscape. When we finished work for the night, he would often carry my tools as well as his own, as we walked the long way home to the village. Before bedtime he would tell stories to my brother and me, as mother swept the floor and rolled out mattresses on the ground. He would talk about the ancient times when the Kanuri were masters of the Bornu Empire. He would recite the Quran for us and have us observe our prayers. He was like a rock, solid and unflinching. Maybe that is why his death still seems so impossible to me and so unfair.

It happened on a Wednesday, and it happened fast. Two men were passing through our village on a motorbike and shouted out to some of the women on the street that they had seen Fulani herders nearby coming this way. My mother's face turned bleak with concern. "Best let Bunamo know," she said. "He is in the north field—but please be careful!" I remember running like the wind. When I found my father, his face turned equally solemn. "Did they say from where?," he asked me, and I had to answer him that the men hadn't said, but that the two men on the motorbike had come into the village from the east. "Good boy, Obi," my father said and gave my cheek a pinch before grabbing a reaper and running out across the fields as swift as a leopard. Best as I tried, I couldn't keep up with him, but his tall figure was hard to miss. I followed him through several hedgerows

and across many fields that weren't our own, until he reached the farthest end of old-man Ngwari's fields, more than a mile from the village. Hundreds of cattle were trotting through the field, herded by hard looking men and a few big boys roughly my own age. Although they were giving the village itself a wide berth, the cattle herd had already trampled much of Ngwari's field, destroying the crops, while others were grazing on seedlings. My father and two other men from the village, Yuram and Ishaq, were engaged in a heated argument with some of the herders. I stopped at the last hedgerow about a hundred paces away on the edge of the field trying to make out what they were yelling about, surmising the details were related to the damage done to the crops. The only words I could actually make out were profanities. All three men from our village were brandishing some kind of farming tools, aggressively pointing to the ruined field. It didn't seem to upset the herders much, maybe not least because all four of them had rifles slung over their shoulders. After a few minutes, something suddenly seemed to rile the youngest of the herders who violently unslung his rifle, which to my confusion spurred both my father and Ishaq to become even louder. The argument continued for another few minutes before the same man suddenly gave Ishaq a violent push and cocked his weapon with a loud metallic clang. The other three men unslung their rifles, and everyone froze. Now I could hear my father's voice clearly enough. It was trembling, something I had only heard once before, when my little brother, Rahim, was very sick. He was pleading with them, asking them to forgive Ishaq's insults and be reasonable. He pointed to the trampled field and said something about crops coming and going under the will of Allah. For a while, the men didn't answer him, and I could hear nothing except the sound of my own heart racing. I started to feel as if his words had appeased them. Then, a thunderclap split the world in two as the young herder fired without warning. The others immediately joined in, shooting in cold blood. My father, Ishaq, and Yuram were shredded with blasts and fell to the ground, limbless like ragdolls. My screams vanished in the noise of their demise. I felt dizzy. The world went black around me. The next thing I remember is my mother's face contorted in pain and her endless wailing screams as the other villagers tried to console her. How I managed to escape with my life, I could not tell you to this day.

The shooting caused exactly nothing to happen. Life carried on. A part of me wanted it all to end. I was at my wits' end with grief and anger but tried to stay strong for my younger brother's sake. I bit my tongue in anger and sorrow and didn't shed a tear. What initially frustrated me was that no one came to our village to investigate the murders. No policemen from Maiduguri cared to make the trip. No one cared. No one asked any serious questions, no one attempted to pursue and apprehend the Fulani herders, no one investigated a motive for the brutal and meaningless killings. What did happen was simply so unforgivable that I lack the words to describe the indignity. Someone did care about my father's death as it turns out—but not about who killed him or why he died. A month after we had buried our dead, my uncle Mavdé came to claim his brother's lands. Despite my mother's pleading and the many heated comments he received from the village's other farmers, he insisted that the land was his family's property and that with no children of age, the land was legally his. In the end, my mother accepted to let a court of elders serve as takhim. They discussed the matter for less than an hour before referring to the fiqh that Mavdé should offer my mother marriage in exchange for the land. He of course did, knowing full well that she would never accept. We packed our few belongings that same afternoon and left our home on foot with my mother in tears. It was at that point I swore to Almighty Allah that I would right the wrongs that had been done unto me.

Maiduguri was noisier and messier than I had ever imagined it could be. Back in the village, things were tidy enough, people could be trusted, and a car would come by every other day. In the state capital, cars and people were everywhere, the locals cheated and lied, and trash littered the streets. We stayed for almost a year with my mother's sister, Súma, and her husband, Yacub, until my mother and I had scraped together enough money to rent a shed for her and my brother to live in. I spent my days working for a cement shack, carrying heavy bags and mixing mortar for the masons. That's where I met Madi, who worked the mortar same as me. He was a year older than I, a whole head taller, and had turned sixteen a week before my fifteenth birthday. We got into the habit of saying our daylight prayers together and started frequenting the Bama Road Mosque for Friday

prayers. Here we met Hakeem al-Yaoundé, a man who helped open my eyes. I am not sure how he noticed us, Madi and me, but he did.

One evening after prayers, as we were getting ready to leave, he walked straight up to us and asked if we had liked the sermon. It had been a reading on the Prophet, alayhi as-salām, his years in Medina and his preparations to return to Mecca. He looked like a person of influence to me. He was tall and dressed in a clean, white thawb. I answered him that I had liked it very much. Not only because I liked the story, but because it proved to every Muslim that patience is a holy virtue. He smiled at my answer and nodded. “You two strike me as men who can think for themselves,” he said and nodded enthusiastically while shoving a business card into my hand and putting one in Madi’s shirt pocket. “My name is Hakeem. Hakeem al-Yaoundé. The two of you should come to one of our Friday prayers. We talk about the teachings after sermon! I think you would like it. Our imam is the best in town. The best in the whole country maybe even.” He laughed with a self-assured way about him. “Because we talk about the meaning of the readings, we only invite people who are bright enough to form their own opinion. It’s not for everyone.” I looked at Madi who smiled at Hakeem’s poorly concealed flattery. I didn’t really know what to make of him and though there was something likeable about him, my own smile failed to manifest. That didn’t seem to faze him, and he smiled back to both of us. “Anyway, think it over. We are a bit further down the road, but it is worth the walk.” He winked at us, shook our hands, and walked away. “What was that about?” Madi asked as we left the mosque. “I don’t know,” I answered, “maybe he just meant what he said. That he thinks we are able to make up our own minds about things....” I looked at the business card he had given us. It only had an address on one side and as-shahada on the other. Madi was silent for a while as we walked home together. Such was his way when he became pensive. “Should we give it a try? The other mosque, I mean?” he finally asked just as we were about to part ways. I had given it some thought myself and decided that something new might be interesting. “I am game if you are,” I answered. “Alright then, let’s do it,” he said. We bumped fists and parted ways.

Three major things happened over the following six months that shook my world. The Abu Bakr Mosque turned out to be an amazing and eye-opening experience, Madi, my best friend, turned out to be a Fulani, and we both got fired by our fat, Christian overseer. To begin with, I was surprised by the Abu Bakr Mosque. It was much smaller than the Bama Road Mosque and did not have near the same amount of décor, but the imam, Abu-Mazen, was an incredible preacher. He came from out of town, and not only was he convincing in his explanations and well-versed in all the holy texts, he also encouraged discussions on the topics of the day after his sermon and welcomed all deliberations that weren't haram. Madi and I soon became devout followers, we engaged in the talks after Khutbah, and were entrusted with many responsibilities. Most important was screening of other hopeful candidates for the mosque. We would be given the responsibility of watching them closely for a time to make sure they didn't have anything to do with Maiduguri's corrupt police force, and we would help introduce them to the mosque. Most importantly, to the after Khutbah meetings. It was during one of these that I realized that Madi was a Fulani.

We had been regulars at the mosque for five months and had both brought another young man with us to sermon. Hakeem al-Yaoundé had eyed them out in some of Maiduguri's many mosques and we had screened them. It seemed more and more reasonable to me that Abu-Mazen demanded screening of all new members of the congregation. His preaching was not for the faint of heart, and unless you had pure convictions, you might take offense to his descriptions of the kuffar, the Yehudis or the Shirk. The preaching of the day had been on the role of the traitor and his painful rewards on the Day of Judgment. Madi, I, and a handful of other young men, including Hassem and Ekong whom we were mentoring for the evening, were discussing the reading with Abu-Mazen. I had finally built up the courage to talk about what had happened to my father that fateful Wednesday a year and half before, because the treacherousness of the act seemed to fit the discussion well. "The worst thing was probably not even the slaying of my father," I explained. "The worst thing was that they were traitors. They were Fulanis and Muslims, the men who shot my father, but they acted like traitors and pigs!" Madi looked like he had been struck. "I am Fulani," he responded, and the room fell silent. It had never even crossed

my mind that he could be. He was tall, yes, but his muscular build was much more akin to a Kanuri. I felt like hitting him. I felt like charging headlong towards him, the gall of eighteen months of grief rising in my throat as a bitter taste in the back of my mouth. Drops of cold sweat formed on my forehead. I started shaking. Then Abu-Mazen spoke. “Be still, brothers. Be still and say nothing more, for The Lord weighs every spoken word on his golden weight and we will answer for our wrongdoings with grief.” The sound of his voice was like a balsam to my temper. “Behold the division of friends,” he said to the rest of the room while indicating Madi and I. “It is the kuffar at work. This I do tell you; it is the function of the kuffar to cause dismay and unbrotherly feelings within the Ummah. Brother Obiefune and brother Maduka are now at what they perceive as a justified impasse. But in reality, it is not justified. They should be even closer brothers because of this wrongdoing. One has lost his father to the actions of a small group of Fulani traitors, the other hails from the Fulani tribe, which by association makes him a traitor as well...?” He looked at both of us and then slowly looked at the faces of everyone present. “Does it?” he asked. “No! It does not! The treacherous act that led to the death of brother Obi’s father is a perfect example of the workings of the kuffar. None of the two men present are guilty of any wrongdoing in the eyes of Allah. Both are devout Muslims, both are good sons and loyal brothers, none of them were involved in these killings or the cause of them, but they are at each other’s throats. The lands of the Fulani have been diminishing for a hundred years as the Christian government in Abuja take away the land of their forefathers and give it to Christian people from the south. They build churches where Mosques once were, and they build villages in the land of the Muslim Fulani, leaving the herders to look for new land under the threat of death. The herders cross into the lands of the Kanuri farmers and understandably trouble ensues. Does this justify the actions of the killings? Never! It merely explains it. But what it also explains is that the grief that now fills this room did not begin with the killing of brother Obi’s father, it began with Christian kuffar stealing Fulani lands and sowing the seeds of division in the Ummah. Therefore, I tell you, behold; here are two friends, close as brothers, and the hatred between them was planted by others. It shall be my wish that the two of them serve as an example for the rest of us. Their continued

friendship will prove to all of us that the brotherhood of the Ummah is stronger than the divisions sown by kuffar and traitors.” He smiled and nodded at the two of us.

I felt completely drained of strength but got to my feet. So did Madi, and a strange elation surged through me. I could tell from the look of him, he felt the same as I—relieved to understand by the words of The Book that the two of us were not enemies and never would be. As we hugged, the whole room cheered.

Not two weeks later we were fired from the cement shack without warning. Joseph, our fat, Christian overseer, gave little in ways of a meaningful explanation. He started off with some insulting bullshit about the two of us not working hard enough, but as that was easy enough for us to refute—we were the oldest and strongest of the “mortar-boys”—he continued on a rant about there not being enough projects to keep everyone on the shack. Neither of us felt like pleading with him, and in the end, there was nothing to be done about it. He was going to have it his way no matter what, so we collected our last week of pay and left. Two days later he took on two scrawny-looking kids from his church congregation instead. I was fuming when we arrived at the Abu-Bakr Mosque to pray. Abu-Mazen, in his wisdom, could tell something was amiss with Madi and I, and he asked us to stay and talk after sermon and classes. We explained the entire situation to him. As our story gained momentum, it felt like there was much more to tell than I had realized. Joseph’s many snide comments, the advantages given to the Christian workers, the unfair treatment of the Muslim brothers, the poor pay and finally, our completely unjustified sacking. We ended up talking for more than an hour. Abu-Mazen listened intently but asked only few questions. Afterwards he sat back with a contemplative look on his face. After a while he said, “The Surah Tawbah 9:29 reads: “Fight with those from among the people of The Book, who don’t believe in Allah or in the last day, who don’t make unlawful that which Allah and His messenger have made unlawful, and don’t adopt the Right way as their way. Fight them until they pay Jizya with their own hands and are humbled.”

He leaned forward and spoke in a more hushed voice. “Not every Muslim realizes, but The Holy Quran tells us what to do about this. Though the Christians are of The Book and are not Shirk, they should be mindful that they are not of the Ummah. They should be paying Jizya for our tolerance and they should most certainly be humble. Here in

Maiduguri, they are not. In all of Nigeria, they are not! A reckoning is coming in Borno. For too long have we tolerated how the Christian subdues the Ummah, when in fact it is they who should be subdued. I think your time has come.” He turned around and signaled Hakeem to come over. Hakeem knelt beside us so that the four of us could whisper in confidence, then Abu-Mazen said. “It shall be my wish that Brother Obiefune and Brother Maduka be shown the good work. I will offer them a job worthy of their devout beliefs.” Hakeem smiled broadly. “Finally!” he said. “Finally!”

Madi kicked like a horse. The corrugated iron door almost flew off its hinges and we stormed inside. The first room was a living room with a stamped dirt floor covered in carpets. Across the room another doorway was covered by drapes. An oversized flatscreen television stood on a table facing a large sofa. Joseph was struggling to get up, surprised at our violent entry. He seemed terrified at the look of us in our uniforms and balaclavas, and he exclaimed something in a language I didn't understand. We didn't give him time to recover. In an almost synchronous motion, Madi and I brought the AK's up and opened fire. The noise was absolutely deafening in the confines of the room, the heat and clap of the rifle fire was like a slap in the face. Joseph was riddled with shots and spatter flew from his fat belly and chest. He staggered and swayed for a moment, trying to hold his hands up in defense. When a shot hit him above the left eye, his face contorted slightly, his eyes went blank, and he collapsed in a disorderly heap. Blood pooled around him on the floor. A feeling of rightful vengeance blossomed in my chest. I felt like laughing but ended up snarling in spite. Four months. Four months of preparations, four months of training with the Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, all to prepare for this moment, to prepare for our initiation, to prove that we were true soldiers of Islam and not just young hotheads. Four months to finally get our revenge on that fat bastard. Then a woman screamed. She stood in the other doorway clinging to the frame. She was probably his wife. A stout, little woman in a colorful dress. Most likely Igbo from the look of her. Her screams seemed endless. I brought the rifle up and shot her in the face. Then we ran into the night. We followed the planned route down the street and left across the first field, along the hedgerow at the end and across two more fields before we knelt down and listened to make

sure no one was following us. Not surprisingly, there was some kind of clamor in the distance as people came out to see what had occurred but nothing to indicate that anyone was in pursuit. We took our balaclavas off, changed magazines on the rifles, bumped fists and started the long walk to the agreed rendezvous point.

“The Ummah, as the Prophet, alayhi as-salām, saw it does not require the populations of the world to be its subordinates. The Ummah includes, it does not exclude. It preaches love and respect. But it does so only within the Ummah. This I tell you, there is one people who stand above all others, but they will not be known as superior because of the color of their skin or because of their ancestral heritage. They will not be known as superior because of their wealth in coin, whom they know or whom they are related to. They will be known as superior because of their faith and their pious submission to Allah. The Ummah requires the peoples of the world to submit and become as them. And a joyous day it will be when the Shariah rule the lives of all men.”

We sat in the sand surrounding Abu-Mazen. He spoke with fervor and there was truth in every sentence. All the brothers were in military fatigues, rifles slung over their shoulders, balaclavas around their necks. The black flag of The Ummah flew behind him. We hung on his every word. “The kuffar are everywhere. They spin their web to make a rule of law in all Nigeria that strives only to divide the faithful. They will come with their stories, their books and films and claim to be knowledgeable. They are not. There is only one knowledge for mankind, only one book that we need. It is the Holy Quran—It holds all knowledge for all mankind for all eternity. The other books are Haram as declared by the holy Sheikh Ustaz Mohammad Yusuf. This past Saturday one of the kuffar was granted the justice of the Ummah. Joseph Kuta, a Christian racist and apostate to the faith, was given what he had deserved.” A murmur of agreement spread amongst the brothers. “We will now let it be known in every town in Borno that this was the judgment of the Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād. We will let it be known that when the kuffar employs a member of the Ummah he should be thankful and humble and show respect, or he will have judgment passed on him as well. We owe a debt of gratitude for this act of goodness to Brother Obiefune and Brother Maduka. Let us therefore embrace them as our own. Come forth, little brothers, it is time.” We all got up and one after another the brothers

embraced us. I had never been prouder, but somehow the smile wouldn't manifest. Abu-Mazen noticed. "We should call you *The Solemn One*," he said. "Never a smile from you, even on such a day of joy." I forced a weak smile which only made him laugh. "No need to smile on my account," he said. "I know your solemnness. I was like that for years after the Sheikh died. There is pain in your heart still after your father's death. It will go away, I promise. As you become the instrument of Allah's justice, it will go away." I nodded but said nothing. "Look at me, Brother Obiefune," he said. "You are one of us now. I and brother al-Yaoundé will continue to recruit new brothers, but you will get to deliver the justice of the Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād to the infidels of Borno! Don't worry about your heart. Allah will make it glad again when you kill His enemies."

My mood didn't lighten over the following months though. We received enough money in taxes and Jizya from farmers and villagers to make a good life for ourselves even though we were almost constantly on the move. Village to village—camp to camp. Sometimes we were many, sometimes we were few. We were asked to do many larger or smaller tasks for various commanders, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups. I managed to meet with my little brother Rahim once a month on the outskirts of Maiduguri to give him money for the family. I participated in three attacks from February to May. Close to the village Gudda, Madi and I killed two farmers by slitting their throats. Their farm was half a mile from the village, and everyone knew that those two men lived as man and wife. Why the locals tolerated it, I couldn't say—we most certainly did not.

In April, Madi, six other brothers, and I shot eighteen southern forest workers who were stealing both jobs and firewood from the Gamboru Village's Muslim community. That even caught the President's attention, and Abu-Mazen was very pleased.

In early May, I snuck one of Abu-Mazen's chosen around two army checkpoints to the outskirts of the town of Mubi. He went into a mosque where a fallen imam had condemned the actions of God's Chosen. Madi escorted another brother who went to the nearby market. I could feel the force of the blasts from more than a mile away and I was touched by the selflessness of their sacrifices. We killed eighty six apostates. Allahu-Akbar!

In the end of May, the kuffar army had begun to ramp up operations in Borno again. Check points popped up everywhere, and six brothers were caught and executed without warning. It was nearly impossible for me or anyone else to get to Maiduguri and we lived in villages close to the Cameroon border. It was then I was approached by Commander Jayamma and Abu-Mazen. “Solemn One, I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” Commander Jayamma said. “Yes, Commander,” I replied. “You have been doing well these past many months,” he said. “Don’t think we haven’t noticed. I have been talking with Sheikh Abu-Mazen about entrusting you with more responsibility.” I wondered at the term Sheikh. Abu-Mazen had always been an unofficial leader of us. The wisest and most trusted of the clerics but he seemed to always eschew the use of titles himself. I nodded in consent.

“I will give you seven of my men and entrust you with a dangerous mission. It will not be easy, this much I tell you.” “I stand ready to serve the Ummah,” I replied. Abu-Mazen smiled at my answer. “Good,” Commander Jayamma replied. “Not far from here, just outside the town of Gwoza, the kuffar have built a base for their soldiers. From there, they come and go to do their check points in this area. We need to punish them. We need to strike fear and grief into their hearts. They need to feel the judgment of the Ummah, so that they stay in their camp and fear to tread the very ground outside.” I nodded in understanding. “I understand, Commander. I will have Brother Ifechi prepare one of his bombs,” I said. “We will scout out the place and prepare an ambush for them. They will burn and bleed and they will curse the day they volunteered to fight the Ummah.” Abu-Mazen was still smiling. He nodded at Commander Jayamma. “Did I not tell you? Brother Obi is the right man for the job.”

We prepared tirelessly for a week. I drew out a trench in the dust and we practiced moving in and out and opening fire in unison. We hid in a village not far from the base. Ifechi and two of the brothers ground out the aluminum and mixed it carefully with fertilizer and diesel fuel. Madi and I scouted out the location and all the roads in the area. The kuffar had built their tiny outpost in conjunction with a dirt road not far from Gwoza. There was a decent amount of traffic in the area which was both good and bad. It was easy enough for us to walk past the base, sit in one of the fields for a while and look, or even to buy some food at the local market without drawing suspicion.

The kuffar worked on a schedule. Every morning, half of their soldiers would roll out and every night after sundown, they would come back home. Their vehicles were truck-like, armored cars with five or six men in each. They would go out in groups of two vehicles and be gone all day. They were predictable. The farmers in the surrounding fields were not. For that same reason, placing the bomb was difficult. It would have to be done at night and just before the attack. I concluded that we would be unable to use a pressure plate to set off the bomb. One of the locals might trigger it and waste the element of surprise. We would have to place it the same evening and use a wire to activate it.

After a week, we were ready. The was moon was waning, the bomb was complete. It was so big it required two of us to lift it. Commander Jayamma and Abu-Mazen gave us a speech on the seriousness of the mission before seeing us off. One of the older brothers drove us just before sundown. We sat crammed into an old, worn-out truck with the bomb between us, trusting in Allah's mercy and Ifechi's work to keep it from going off. We stopped at our agreed point, an adjacent dirt road about a mile from the base. We hauled our prize through the darkness and arrived less than an hour later. I helped brother Ifechi and Mfoniso place and conceal the bomb, while Madi got the rest of the brothers in position in a semi-dry watering trench that ran parallel to the road. At 2100 we were ready and in position. We waited for another hour, but nothing happened. The soldiers normally returned at around 2130. I whispered to Madi what he thought we should do. He just shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Maybe wait another hour and see? I don't know, Obi. You are in charge." I shook my head and cursed under my breath. "Make sure the brothers aren't sleeping," I answered. He nodded and disappeared, sloshing down the trench. Five minutes later, the kuffar appeared. The sound of their armored vehicles was unmistakable, their headlights bright as the dawn. I have no idea why they were delayed. Madi appeared by my side, panting hard from running. "They are ready," he whispered. "Time to bring the justice." I nodded and waited for the explosion.

It is late afternoon before I start coming to my senses. I have remained under the tree where I collapsed trying to stay out of the sun. I haven't seen a living soul all day. Not surprisingly. I am in the middle of nowhere. I don't even know where I am myself. Worse

even, I don't know what to do. I cannot return to my mother and brother; I wouldn't even want to if I could. I would endanger them. The kuffar would take my actions out on them. I cannot return to the Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād. I have failed them and fled from the responsibility they bestowed on me. My fear of death sufficient to drive me to abandon my martyred brothers. I am a failure—a coward and a failure. Should I just start walking and try and make a new life for myself somewhere else?

It is nighttime before a revelation descends upon me. I must give myself up for the judgment of Allah. I must return and confess everything. My life may very well be forfeit but The Lord is Merciful, and, in His glory, He will find a way to forgive me. But not if I run away again. I get up and start to walk. It takes me a few hours to catch my bearings and it takes me all night to find my way back to the village. The sun is coming up when I stagger in. Brother Chikezie sees me coming in and his reaction surprises me. I halfway expect him to shoot me dead on sight, but instead he embraces me. He leads me to one of the houses where Brother Abegunde is cooking breakfast. They ask me questions and I answer them as best I can. After a while, they tell me to eat and rest. They will find Commander Jayamma and bring me to him.

I wake sometime in the afternoon as Brother Abegunde tells me to get up and come with him. He brings me to another house. Sitting on the floor is Abu-Mazen. I avert my eyes in shame, but he gets to his feet and embraces me. "Sit down, Brother Obiefune," he says. "Relax. You are home now. Tell me what happened." A knot builds in my chest, my eyes sting, and a sobbing rises in my throat. "There now, Solemn One," Abu-Mazen says. "This is not like you." With a massive effort I calm myself down and explain the events of that fateful night not two days ago. As always, Abu-Mazen listens intently while only asking a few questions. Without ever averting his attention, he brews a pot of chai. The words flow more freely from me as I calm myself down. Abu-Mazen serves the chai as I talk. He drinks his boiling hot, straight from the pot. When I finally finish, he nods to himself and begins to slowly work through his Misbaha. We sit in silence like that for almost an hour as his lips move silently and the beads pass through his fingers one after the other. Finally, he turns to me. "Brother, Obi. When the devout say insha'Allah, we mean insha'Allah. In other words, we accept the decision of Almighty Allah, we accept

His will in all things. Therefore, you are here for a reason. We suffered a defeat two nights ago. Seven brothers were killed, brother Maduka with them. But the defeat was not absolute. Five kuffar soldiers died at the hands of you and your men, and Allah, in his endless wisdom, spared your life. I have contemplated why. I do believe He has great plans for you!”

The truck is rumbling along. The discomfort of being hidden in a crate with airholes doesn't even upset me anymore. I am aching to be delivered unto Allah. It is not my body that hurts, it is my soul. I am ready. I will make up for all the injustices served unto me by weaker souls. We've been on the road for seven days now. The past five months have been terrible. I have been moved from safehouse to safehouse as kuffar operations have spread across Borno State. I have had very little contact with others even though Abu-Mazen has been good to me and has stopped by once a month to test my convictions. I have remained pure in purpose. I am ready to be the Prophet's chosen son, alayhi as-salām.

It is dusk when the truck stops. They let me out of the box. I climb out and stretch my tender limbs. The driver, Chiemeize, who looks Fulani to me, hands me a bottle of water. I drink a sip and hand it back to him. “No, no,” he says. “It is for you.” I drink the rest. Abu-Mazen appears from the front and looks at me. “How are you, Solemn One?” he asks. “Good, Sheikh,” I reply. “I am ready.” He smiles and nods. We are parked at the side of a seemingly empty dirt road. Apart from a few farmhouses in the horizon there are no discernable terrain features. After a few minutes, a car appears. Two men jump out. The look of them is so different that it makes me wonder just exactly where we are. I need not wait long for the answer as the taller of the two blurts out; “Welcome to Gao.” His accent is thick and hard for me to place, but I know well that the Ummah here in Mali is struggling. I suppose this is as good a place as any to meet The Lord.

Abu-Mazen speaks with the two men for a while before turning to me. “Brother, Obiefune. This is where we part ways. It has been a pleasure and an honor to get to know you. I have seen you become a man, and it pains me that I will not be there to share in your ascension.” “The honor has been mine, Sheikh Abu-Mazen,” I answer. “No, Brother,” he replies sternly. “The honor is genuinely mine. The end comes to all men. It is what we do with the time given to us and how we choose to leave the Earth that matters in the eyes of

Almighty Allah. You are truly one of His chosen. You, by your selfless act, will rectify any and all wrongdoings done by yourself or against you. This righteous act will save a hundred souls. It is written, little brother, it is written. Your ascension will be on the wings of angels, and for your valor you shall feast in golden halls. A special place will be reserved for you, and when the time comes that we meet again, it is YOU who will teach ME, and I who will call YOU Sheikh.” He embraces me in a rare show of genuine emotion, and we hold each other tight. We stand like that for a minute before he releases me and nods. Tears are welling in his eyes. “On the wings of angels,” he says and walks away. He and Chiemeize climb into the truck. It starts with a growl and spits black smoke. Then they rumble on down the road. The tallest of the two men walks over to me and props out his hand. “I am Ousmane,” he says. “It is an honor to meet you.”

Ousmane drops me off on a dirt trail next to a field. It is dawn. The rising sun is chasing away the darkness of the night and the sky is turning a crisp and beautiful blue. He helps me strap the heavy sack to my back. It is packed exactly like that of the local rice farmers coming to market but contains a hundred pounds of explosives instead. He checks the detonator, wiring and trigger. Then he pulls the wire through my neck collar, down through my sleeve and carefully places the trigger in my palm. He looks at me intently and speaks slowly in his heavy accent. “Brother, you are ready now. Across the field, you’ll find the road to Tassiga. It is right after the bridge across the river. The French kuffar are there, checking everyone who comes and goes. When you squeeze the trigger, the bomb will arm. When you let it go, the bomb will explode. Do you understand?” I nod. “Yes, Brother Ousmane,” I answer. “We’ve been over this. I understand, and I am ready.” He smiles and claps my cheek. “On the wings of angels,” he says, repeating Abu-Mazen’s departing words. Then he gets in the car and drives off.

I look around. I can make out the road easily enough from here. A few people are strolling along on their way to sell goods at the market. Dew has fallen across the field next to me. It looks like a heavenly bed, beaded with a million pearls. I make my way across the field and up on the road. Liquid sloshes in my pack. They have added fuel to the explosives, a fireball of righteous vengeance. The heavy smell of wet dirt is beautiful to me, the Niger River’s green waters emit a fragrance of life and promise. I notice everything

around me. The fine, red sand. The intense, blue sky. The humming of the farmer in front of me. The chiming of cow bells. Busy ants working on the side of the road. The sound of the river. A bird soaring high overhead. What a marvelous world this is. What a day to be alive. My lust for life has never been greater, my joy has never before been so manifest. My fingers tingle, butterflies fill my stomach, my pack feels lighter than air. Ahead of me, the farmers bunch up to cross the bridge into Tassiga.

Seven French kuffar are checking them one by one, their armored vehicle parked close by. I get in line and wait my turn, giddy with joy. I squeeze the trigger as hard as I can. Then one of the kuffar signals me to come forward. He gives me a strange look and begins to smile as I walk towards him. I realize that he is mimicking my expression and my heart is fit to burst with glee. Finally, I have held my promise. I have avenged the wrongdoings done unto me. The kafir's expression suddenly becomes apprehensive. For good reason. I am fulfilled. I smile. I let go.

D. UNPACKING THE NARRATIVE

You have just read an example of how to use fiction to explain and detail the individual steps of Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism, in this case described through the increasing radicalization of the young Nigerian man named Obiefune. Like many people in the Borno province, he has grown up under very humble circumstances, yet the poverty of his existence is no problem for him. He lives a comfortable life with his family and expects nothing more than what he already has. He is in other words on the ground floor and perceives no injustices done onto him. Through no fault of his own he is subjected to a tragedy at the hand of a band of roaming Fulani herders, who slay his father, causing the subsequent displacement of him, his mother, and his younger brother. The tragedy of his father's murder and following displacement of his family are the first perceived injustices in Obiefune's life. Based on this experience, he develops an understandable if disagreeable distaste for Fulanis. The senselessness and absurdity of the event causes Obi to exaggerate his distaste for an entire ethnic group whom he sees as responsible for his difficult situation. He feels an urge to retaliate but has neither the means nor the opportunity. In this way, Obiefune has arrived at the first floor. In Maiduguri he befriends Madi with whom he works

in one of the local cement shacks. Unbeknownst to Obiefune, Madi is a Fulani. The two friends, both devout Muslims, are approached and invited to participate in sermons at another Mosque, where they become steadily more involved with a fundamentalist, Islamist crowd. When Obiefune realizes Madi is a Fulani, things are at a tipping point for the two friends, but Obi's anger is swiftly struck down by the preacher Abu-Mazen. Understanding that Obi and Madi will look for any opportunity to remain friends, the preacher deftly directs Obi's efforts and loathing towards the "real" enemy, namely the Nigerian Christians in Borno. Obiefune has now arrived at the second level, and when Obi and Madi experience injustice at the hand of their Christian overseer, it confirms their building prejudice, and they quickly ascend to the third level. Obiefune becomes increasingly more involved with the congregation. He takes responsibility for new inductees, engages in in-group, out-group rhetoric, and begins to genuinely project his pent-up frustration at the perceived enemy. The success of the moral engagement causes him to be invited into the heart of the organization. He is recruited in the rank and file of Boko Haram and receives proper training to begin avenging the perceived injustices done onto him. His training causes him to ascend to the fourth floor, and he fully accepts the categorical thinking and perceived legitimacy of the terrorist organization. For Obiefune, the training is directed specifically at obtaining the fifth and final level, namely the terrorist act of killing his former overseer. It is important to note that this act simply serves as a kind of rite of passage to prove and cement his commitment. After his arrival at the fifth level, Obiefune is a fully-fledged member of Boko Haram. He believes the narrative, owns the ideology, and is prepared to kill repeatedly for the cause. Though he continues to prefer sidestepping inhibitory mechanisms, Obiefune becomes an increasingly sinister being, capable of calculated mass-murder. His journey is, in fact, so complete that when faced with choosing to leave the organization or to die for it, he chooses "a glorious death" in a last attempt to rectify the original perceived injustices and prove to himself his commitment to the cause.

How does this narrative help us better understand Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism? The story takes us on the journey that Obiefune undertakes. By internalizing the experience, we get to climb the staircase with him which involves us directly in the events

that cause his increasingly fiendish view of the out-group. We similarly experience how Obi's understanding of who comprises the out-group is effectively manipulated by the preacher Abu-Mazen until it has narrowed almost to the point of being Obi against the World. Every step up Moghaddam's Staircase signifies a serious increase in radicalization which, despite the obvious quality of the Staircase Model, can be hard to empathize with. Internalizing Obiefune's radicalization and the horror of his original perceived injustice helps to make the ascent more tangible and ultimately relatable. When I set out to create the narrative, I had set my mind on attempting to make the motivations of a suicide bomber more understandable. This proved to be a major challenge, which takes up a large part of the story. Much of the narrative therefore deals with Obiefune's life as a dedicated member of the terrorist organization, where he has already arrived at the fifth level of the staircase. Searching for a way to describe how he would in the end completely disregard all inhibitory mechanisms, I decided the key to the ending would be found at the start and used the original perceived injustice as the trigger. By explaining how "the selfless act" of suicide bombing can work to undo previous injustices, I let the preacher Abu Mazen be the manipulator who pushed young Obi over this last, terrible edge.

THIS PAGE IS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

IV. CONSTRUCTING A WORK OF FICTION TO UNDERSTAND COERCION THEORY

A. BIDDLE’S BASIC INTRODUCTION TO COERCION THEORY

In her 2020 article, *Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners*, Dr. Tami Davis Biddle describes the fundamentals of coercion theory. As the name of the article indicates, Dr. Biddle attempts to increase the practitioner’s—namely the soldier’s—understanding of how states and some non-state actors can use methods of coercion to deter adversaries from pursuing military objectives or to compel adversaries to take specific actions. Dr. Biddle states that: “The word “coercion” itself sits uneasily with military professionals. It has overtones of blackmail and manipulation, which are anathema to their self-identity. In general, they also do not take readily to Schelling’s emphasis on threats. While they fully understand deterrence, they may draw back from the idea that they are in the business of “threatening” others (and sometimes making those threats credible by punitive actions) in order to deter and compel.”⁴⁶

As a military professional, I can attest to the viewpoint described. It is not because the military practitioner is incapable of comprehending the inherent logic of coercion theory, but because there is an emotional connection to a career that entails putting one’s own life on the line for God and Country. Serving to achieve a military objective makes absolute sense to the soldier in the midst combat—but reducing the act of killing the enemy and putting one’s own life at risk to being an act of coercion between competing states reduces this experience to the mundane. It is difficult to come to terms with this central element of the military profession. We, the soldiers of the world, are the extended arm of those who would seek to change the status quo either through direct military action or through actions that compel others to do as our parent state wishes them to do—or we are the extended arm of those who would seek to maintain the status quo either through direct defense or through deterrence by denial or punishment.⁴⁷ Yet, the central point of Dr.

⁴⁶ Biddle, “Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners,” 95.

⁴⁷ Biddle, 98–104.

Biddle's article stands. It is paramount that military practitioners understand what exactly these terms entail and strive to use them consistently. Importantly the military practitioners must fathom why both our adversaries and our own politicians and decision-makers pursue strategies of coercion and compellence to obtain their goals.

Not understanding them may render the practitioner less effective by leaving room for misunderstandings or misinterpretations of exactly what the intended purpose of military action is in any given situation. It is of course similarly important that our elected decision makers are well-versed in the intricacies of coercion theory. If those giving the orders are uncertain what they want the military professionals to achieve, the chances of success are slim from the outset. In an increasingly complex world, our political and military leaders must simultaneously balance the existential threats of strategic competition and the harassing challenges of international terrorism. But how do our civilian and military leadership interpret and understand the threats that are being arrayed against them—and importantly for the purpose of this project—how can fiction help us understand these mechanisms by putting us behind the eyes of the decision makers themselves when posed with hostile coercion?

B. CREATING THE NARRATIVE

How can a work of fiction evolving around coercion theory be constructed to increase the understanding of the concept in action? First and foremost, I feel the need to state that this has already been done outstandingly in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 classic movie *Dr. Strangelove*. The only issue with Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece is that it takes place in a bi-polar world at the height of the Cold War and thus does not consider just how complex the world has become in recent years. A current piece of literature simulating modern coercion theory in action should take more things into account than end-of-the-world scenarios and could bring players other than state actors to the stage. Similar to Kubrick's film, it does not have to be absolutely realistic but rather consider the "what-ifs." In this case, the narrative will contemplate state and non-state actors in direct cooperation with each other, using coercive methods to obtain very different objectives. By placing the main protagonist in the upper tiers of a coerced government, the fictional

narrative should be capable of describing just how convoluted such actions would be to understand for those facing them and therefore further underline the issue of possible misconception that Dr. Biddle warns of.⁴⁸

In contemplating a scenario that has yet come to pass, I use some of the literary methods used by Heinlein and Steinbeck. Like Heinlein does in his novel *Starship Troopers*, the story should outwardly appear to be about one narrative but simultaneously revolve around another. In Heinlein's case, the story is outwardly about fighting alien races in the future, but in actuality it is just as much the author's contemplation of concepts such as duty, self-sacrifice, governance, and citizenship.⁴⁹ In this case, my story outwardly appears to be a drama about terrorist action and state conspiracy, but most of its content is devoted to imagining how a system could and should operate in facing a terrible, asymmetric, coercive threat. As Steinbeck does in his book *The Moon is Down*, albeit on a much smaller scale, I attempt to put myself behind the eyes of the leadership of a nation pushed past the brink of disaster and imagine the human consequences of making desperate choices in the eleventh hour.⁵⁰

C. THE FOG

Know your enemy and know yourself, in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The noise cuts through the darkness like a knife—insisting and incessant. I wake, utterly confused. A strange dream slowly dissipates. For a second, I am unsure of where I am, until recollection begins to manifest. The Embassy in Washington. Is my alarm clock ringing? I scan for it in the darkness. It reads 1:47 a.m. It is the middle of the night. My telephone. I reach for it on the table and sit up. Not that one either. I look around. Across the room, my secure phone is ringing. Pain stirs in the pit of my stomach. I cast the covers aside and stumble out of bed, crossing the room in three strides. I kick my briefcase by the

⁴⁸ Biddle, 96–97.

⁴⁹ Robert Anson Heinlein. *Starship Troopers* (New York: ACE, Penguin Random House, LLC, 2010).

⁵⁰ Steinbeck. *The Moon is Down*.

side of the bed, sending it flying. I manage to find the light switch by the desk, turn the light on, and grab the ringing telephone. The screen reads Unknown Caller. I pick up. “Yes?,” my voice is grainy. The speaker on the other end is not. His voice is stern and composed, his accent slightly northern. “Pardon, Madame Minister, I must be waking you up. It is General Lecointre.” The pain in my stomach turns into a cold knot. “No need to apologize, General. What is wrong?” There is a moment of hesitation before he answers. “We have lost five men in Mali this morning, Madame Minister.” The knot in my stomach turns into a cold shower that washes down my back. I exhale slowly, compose my breathing, and calm myself. I sit down. “Go on,” I answer. General Lecointre continues. “A suicide bomber detonated his bomb at a check point close to the village of Tassiga in Gao Province. I have only just been notified. It has not hit the news yet, but it will soon enough. I thought it best that you hear it from me.” I exhale heavily again. Five men. Five soldiers in one enemy action! My mind is racing. The news will be all over it. There will be political consultations, discussions on the necessity and validity of our mission in Mali, hundreds of questions on the standards of the Army’s equipment. And, my God, the families. “I am sorry. That’s terrible news, General,” I answer. “Have we notified the families?” “Not yet, Madame Minister. The men are from three different places in the country. Paris, Toulouse, and Rouen. We are putting teams together to go and make the notifications. We will make sure they are notified before we release the names of the fallen to the press. “Right. Make sure you do. I have full confidence that you will handle this with appropriate discretion and honor, General. Have Army staff begin the preparations for the repatriation of their remains. If you forward me the details you have at this hour on the secure net, I will begin preparing a statement immediately.” He cuts me off. “Madame Minister. Please do not worry about repatriations or statements, we will handle that. You need to come home.” I frown at his abruptness. “Come home? I have a meeting with Secretary Mattis in the morning.” “I know,” he answers. “I know, Madame, I am sorry. There’s...” I interrupt him back. “General, I realize the severity of the situation, but the meeting with Secretary Mattis is to discuss our common goals and align our efforts as the President intends. I will of course explain the circumstances and skip the meetings with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I will come home tomorrow evening.” He hesitates for a second.

“Madame Minister. There is something else. There are more than thirty confirmed civilian deaths and almost a hundred wounded, including three of our soldiers.” “What...?” I exclaim. “How big was the bomb?” “Sizeable, Madame Minister, but that is not the issue. There are clear indications that the bomb contained some kind of chemical agent. Probably a blister gas of sorts. We can’t say for sure before our CBRN-teams have assessed the site.” “Blister gas?” I stutter. “But how?” Horrendous images from World War I flicker past my mind’s eye. Images of men with red, running eyes and terrible boils—deformed and swollen. There are another few seconds of silence before General Lecointre speaks again. “We don’t know for sure, Madame Minister. There are many unknowns at this hour, but we must address the situation. You need to come home.” It feels like the walls are creeping in on me. I am on my feet without consciously realizing it. “I... I’ll be home as quickly as possible. Thank you, General.” I hang up without waiting for his reply. I take another two deep breaths to calm myself before dialing Captain Bernard. He picks up the phone immediately, only his voice gives away that he has been fast asleep. “Madame Minister,” he says. “How can I be of assistance?” “I am sorry to wake you, Sebastian,” I answer. “This is a matter of the highest priority and utmost urgency. Wake and scramble my staff for a short meeting in my suite in fifteen minutes. Please alert Ambassador Araud. He needs to be part of this meeting; we’ll have to cancel our appointments with the Pentagon. Get a hold of our pilots and have them prepare for departure immediately. We’ll have wheels up for Paris in two hours.”

It is raining in Paris and completely overcast. Somewhere beyond the grey clouds, the sun is slowly setting. The dull light reflects on the wet surfaces. There is a greyness to our romantic capitol this evening that does not belong. From up here, it looks like some other city. It could be German or Scandinavian. Gothic almost. There is something ominous or ill-fated about it. It feels like a foreshadowing of the coming briefing. Beyond the silence of my headset, the rotor blades of the helicopter are beating a noisy circle. Rain is streaking sideways down the windows. My eyes hurt. It feels like I haven’t closed them for two nights. A whole day of endless meetings before going to the U.S., no sleep on the flight, two hours rest at the hotel, and now back home to this without sleeping again. I feel fit to keel over. I lean back and close my eyes, hoping to pass out for just a few minutes. It

doesn't work. A hundred thoughts immediately cloud my mind. Disturbing images of gassed civilians, a hundred concerns about the coming hearings, decisions to be made—briefing of the president. To his credit, Secretary Mattis was an absolute gentleman about the cancellation of the planned meetings in Washington, even going so far as to extend a pledge of absolute solidarity with France. “Two minutes, Madame Minister.” The pilot's voice cracks over the intercom. I open my eyes and immediately regret having tried to sleep. It feels like grains of sand are grating on my retinas. Captain Bernard is sitting next to me, his uniform spotless. The look on his face reveals nothing, but I know that he is contemplating the situation same as I. Time and time again he has proven to be an invaluable resource. He may be a junior officer, but he understands the political game and knows his way around military planning and lingo. He is foresightful and effective. As an aide-de-camp, he is everything I could have wished for. The helicopter lands on the road in front of Hexagone Balard. The Gendarmerie have closed off the road. The co-pilot gives me the thumbs up. Captain Bernard is out before I manage to open the door on my side. He helps me out and we run in an awkward crouch under the rotors to meet the four waiting officials. General Lecointre is one of them. We hurry inside, out of the rain, and make our way to the elevator. The General does not waste time with formalities and jumps to it. “Welcome back, Madame Minister,” he says. “I am sorry to inform you that another of our soldiers has succumbed to his injuries, while you were in transit. We expect as a result of the chemical agent he was exposed to, but we'll have to wait for the coroner's report to be certain. The family has been notified.” I nod, the elevator doors open. “We have just received notice that ISWAP have claimed responsibility for the attack.” I nod again but do not reply. He, too, falls quiet. The elevator stops at the top floor. We move in silence thorough several security doors, handing over every electronic item we have on us before arriving at the conference room. It is small and has heavily insulated walls. The acoustics are like that of a sound studio. We are closed off from the outside world. Captain Bernard holds out the chair at the end of the table for me. He grabs a thermos from a serving table and pours me a cup of coffee. The General hands him a folder marked “Top Secrète” from where he pulls out two stacks of files and pictures and places them in front of me. He then turns towards General Lecointre, stands to attention and leaves. I take a sip of the steaming

hot coffee and lean back. The General's otherwise handsome features are crisscrossed with wrinkles. He doesn't just look tired; he looks like he is struggling against a deep-seeded weariness. He may well be a war hero, but he is under an extreme amount of pressure. I can absolutely sympathize. "Pray do begin, General," I say. "Do not spare any details. Start at the beginning. Tell me everything you know."

I let my hands run down my bodysuit to straighten creases. There aren't any. Old habit. The President hands General Lecointre the report back, leans forward, and looks at me. I begin. "The attack was carried out at exactly 7:52 a.m. on Wednesday, 6th of October, Monsieur President. The attack itself was uncomplicated in nature. We believe that a single suicide bomber detonated somewhere between twenty-five and forty kilos of homemade explosives at a check point on the road leading into the village of Tassiga in Gao Province. The suicide bomber likely carried the device disguised as a sack of rice. The bomb also contained what we now believe to be a sulfur-mustard chemical agent. We do not know exactly how much, Monsieur President, maybe as much as twenty-five liters. An infantry platoon of soldiers from 1^e Compagnie, 1^e Bataillon, 27^e Brigade d'Infanterie, 4^e Régiment de Chasseurs was on operations in the area and had established check points north and south of the village as part of a larger security operation intended to instill confidence in our presence." The president raises an eyebrow slightly at my last remark as an almost unnoticeable comment to the lack of confidence the local population must be feeling at this hour. I continue without hesitation. "The force of the explosion immediately killed five soldiers and seventeen civilians and wounded another two soldiers and thirteen civilians. Several of the wounded farmers were also doused in an unknown liquid which we now suspect to have been a sulfur-mustard agent. Those who had been exposed soon began forming blisters and four died from asphyxiation. The explosion also caused a cloud of the suspected agent to rise into the air from which it soon after descended on the village and the surrounding area, wounding another of our soldiers from the northern check point and one hundred and ninety-two civilians." The President grimaces in sympathy. "Of the civilians an additional fourteen succumbed to the effects of the gas, also reportedly dying from asphyxiation. The rest of the infantry platoon immediately radioed for assistance and began performing first aid to the best of their abilities. Their actions may well have saved

many lives. The company commander, Captain Dubois, arrived at the scene fifty-four minutes after the blast with the rest of his company and established an effective cordon around Tassiga to prevent other civilians from entering the area. Medical Evacuation arrived at 9:10 a.m. and evacuated our wounded men and some of the most severely wounded civilians. Over the past twenty-four hours we have cordoned the area off completely and moved in a battalion to secure the scene. We have established a mobile surgical hospital to treat the wounded on site. Our CBRN-teams are presently collecting and analyzing the suspected chemical agent and are cleaning the village to prevent further casualties. The remains of our fallen will be transported home tomorrow—as soon as we can guarantee that they are uncontaminated and are safe to release to our coroners for autopsy.” The president nods but says nothing. “As you were briefed, Islamic State West Africa Province claimed responsibility for this atrocious action a handful of hours ago. We are still unable to determine whether they are behind it, and if they are, where they got these chemical agents from. Whether ISWAP were behind it or not, I would recommend that we align with the recommendations of the chief of the defense staff. Thus, I agree that we should suspend operations in Mali pending the distribution of better CBRN-protection equipment to our units and further knowledge of the chemical agents.” I look to General Lecointre who nods in confirmation. President Macron steeples his hands in front of his face and taps his lips, looking from me to General Lecointre. He is silent for a few long seconds before he nods. “I concur with the recommendation. Suspend operations for all regular units but double-time the effort to bring better CBRN-equipment to our troops. We need to get operations back up and running. I will not have France cowed by a band of ragtag fundamentalists. Extend our recommendation to MINUSMA, our international partners in Operation Barkhane, and to the G5 Sahel.” He looks at the General. “What do you think, François? Could they be behind it?” General Lecointre takes a deep breath. “Yes, Monsieur President. They most certainly could. But I doubt they were alone in doing so. The U.S.-led actions in Iraq and Syria have ISIS on their heels. Their chemists have been known to dabble in weaponizing chlorine gas and have supposedly attempted to make stronger and more lethal chemical concoctions. They’ve mostly used it in combination with off the shelf drones or small grenade type weapons. We know that ISIS have their eyes on

the Sahel now that their perverse Caliphate is coming to a definitive end. That said, I have read no reports from DGSE that describes anything even remotely as potent as this, and I would venture the analysis that ISWAP did not do this on their own.” President Macron nods to himself. “So, what do you think? Is this an ISIS chemist at work or do you think they have a sponsor? A state sponsor, I mean?” General Lecointre looks at me. There is understandably some apprehension there. I signal to him to continue. “Speak your mind, General Lecointre,” I say. “We appreciate your experience and would hear your concerns.” “Alright,” he answers with a nod. “Yes, Monsieur President and Madame Minister. I would not go on record with this at the present hour, but I fear that they have a state sponsor behind them. I cannot substantiate this fear in much more than a gut-feeling, but if I were a betting man, I would put my money on a state actor being involved. We know a lot about sulfur-based mustard agents. They were widely used in the First World War. They are very incapacitating indeed. They cause massive blistering, reddening of the eyes—even blinding. They cause irritation or even rupture of the mucus membranes, and in very severe cases, asphyxiation. That said, when used during the First World War, only about five percent of the contaminated soldiers died from exposure and many of them because proper treatment wasn’t readily available. Also, mustard gas evaporates fairly quickly in heat, which makes it less effective in Mali than it would have been on the Western Front. For a mustard gas to kill as many people so fast as we just saw in Gao, it would have had to be a refined substance. It would have to be a modern age, military-grade, chemical weapon. A weapon of mass destruction, if you will. I simply don’t believe that ISWAP could cook up a modern chemical agent in the desert of Mali without someone else’s help.”

The Hexagone Balard is bustling with activity, even in the middle of the night. General Lecointre, Captain Bernard, and I enter the secure department and head straight for Briefing Room 3. Five men and a woman are waiting for us and stand as we enter. I already know two of them; Bernard Émié, the Director of DGSE, and General Jean-François Ferlet, the Director of DRM. Bernard Émié is a white-haired gentleman in his late fifties and a former diplomat. Though he is new to the job as director of DGSE, he is a very competent case handler and a man who immediately instills confidence. General Ferlet,

though also extremely competent, is almost his exact opposite; a dark haired, introvert who smiles rarely and reluctantly. Also new as head of his agency, his reputation speaks volumes. A former head of joint operations for Operation Barkhane, he has firsthand knowledge of the Sahel. I am happy to see him. Director Émié immediately takes the floor. “Madame Minister and General Lecointre, allow me to introduce Colonel Martín, Director of Field Operations. Also allow me to introduce Monsieur Christoph Bisset and Madame Julia Paquet, two of our finest analysts.” He nods to General Ferlet, who continues, “Madame Minister, General Lecointre. Allow me to introduce Lieutenant Colonel Jerome LeBlanc from DRM’s Mali Department.” “Thank you, General Ferlet. Thank you, Director,” I answer and take the time to shake hands with everyone in turn, thanking them for their continued service. As we sit down, Director Émié turns grave. “Madame Minister, as you were informed, ISWAP released a videoed statement just over two hours ago. Our Cyber Warfare teams in the BRGE are in close cooperation with our colleagues in the CIA, the NSA, and MI6 to limit the spread of the message. Presently no conventional search engines show it, although Monsieur Bisset has informed me that several dark websites continue to relay it. The released material appears to be a planned follow-up to ISWAP’s claim of responsibility for Wednesday’s attack in Gao. I will courteously warn you that the new material contains several serious claims as well as some disturbing footage, the exact meaning of which our team will help elucidate.” He taps a remote-control unit in the desk and a video begins on the flat screen on the back wall. The quality is peculiarly low compared to the productions of the Middle Eastern branch of ISIS, but the message is equally disturbing. A masked, but clearly African man in a khaki military uniform speaks to the camera in French with the black flag of ISIS in the background. He drones in a curious, almost prayer-like fashion. His accent sounds Malian or maybe even Nigerian to me, but his vocabulary is very good. “We are the Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād. We are the loyal children of the Islamic State West Africa Province. For too long have we endured the involvement of Colonialist France and her allies—the coward and heathen governments of the Sahel. We will endure them no more. Today we declare ourselves a state unto the world. To the cowards in Bamako, in Niamey, in Ouagadougou and Abuja, take heed of my words. We claim the lands of Timbuktu, Taoudénit, Gao, Kidal,

and Menaka provinces from what used to be Mali. We claim Northern Tahoua, Southern Agadez, and Diffa provinces from what used to be Niger. We claim Nord, Sahel, and Est provinces from what used to be Burkina Faso, and we claim all of Borno province from what used to be Nigeria. These lands are now the new Caliphate, the lands of the chosen of the Prophet, alayhi as-salām. As Caliph we name the truest faithful among us, the most righteous and noble Sheikh Abu Mohammad Abubakar bin Mohammad al-Sheikawi. Surely, there are those amongst you who will say: “Why should we bow and be humbled?” I will give you the answer. Islam is submission to Allah as ordered by the Prophet, alayhi as-salām. You should bow because He commands it. We now hold the weapon. We hold the wrath and retribution of Allah in our hand, and already we have graced the infidels with His judgment. We are the Ummah in Medina and you the Quraysh in Mecca. We are coming. We have declared the Caliphate and like the Quraysh, you would be wise to accept it without objection, lest you face His judgment. Allahu Akbar.” The image fades and changes to that of a crying African man, tied to a chair. He is in a poor state and appears to have been beaten. He is sitting in a poorly lit room with a similar black flag in the background. He squirms and struggles in vain as two men in hazmat suits approach him holding an unmarked metal canister. General Lecointre reaches over and pauses the video. “Is it necessary to see what happens next?,” he asks in direction of the two analysts. Madame Paquet shakes her head. “No, General, it is not, but allow me to explain. The two men in the hazmat suits spray the victim with what has now been confirmed as a sulfur-mustard agent. Not surprisingly, it kills him. What is interesting is the speed with which the aerosols first cause blistering, then cause rupturing of the mucus membranes, and lastly cause the victim to choke to death. There is a speed and effectiveness to the agent that is not previously known in sulfur-mustard gas. Administered in the amount shown in the video, a common blister agent of this type wouldn’t cause symptoms to appear immediately. Even if ingested, symptoms typically wouldn’t manifest before fifteen minutes later. In this video, the victim begins to develop visible blisters in less than a minute, and the other symptoms follow soon thereafter. He dies from asphyxiation in less than eight minutes, most likely from profuse bleeding in the lower lungs.” I look from Madame Paquet to Director Émié. He nods and continues. “Yes, Madame Minister. The

effects are extremely fast as compared to previously known versions of sulfur-mustard agents. Our CBRN laboratories are attempting to work out precisely in what way the agents produce the effects so quickly but are presently unable to ascertain exactly how. Naturally, the point of this videoed murder is to demonstrate the effectiveness of the agent and to prove that ISWAP's claim of responsibility in Gao is true." He clicks the remote control a few times to fast forward to a different scene. "You need to see the last part of the clip." The same masked man appears. "Behold the Weapon of the Ummah, behold the Sword of Allah. We, the Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, claim lordship of the Caliphate. Under pain of death, we warn you, colonialists and heathens. Respect our borders and withdraw from our lands or we will let sing the Scimitar of the Prophet, alayhi as-salām. We will decimate your ranks. We will reap through the populations of the infidels. We will shell your cities and villages in all the provinces where you remain, and we will bleed the capitols of your nations. We will give you a week to obey. Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar!" A plethora of voices join in with his chanting. The video zooms out, showing a whole company of similarly dressed men standing in lines around two artillery pieces, before fading to a waiving black flag with Arabic-style music playing in the background. "If you will allow, there are a few things to notice, Madame Minister," Colonel LeBlanc continues. "The hazmat suits in the middle clip are heavy PVC suits with a self-contained breathing apparatus. They are specifically made to handle chemicals but are for civilian use. They could have been purchased on the open market or stolen from a laboratory. The two artillery pieces are old Soviet M/46 Howitzers. They were captured from the Nigerian Army in Borno province in a surprise attack by ISWAP in 2016, but they are believed to have been smuggled out of Nigeria. Despite the implied threat of being able to deliver a chemical payload by means of artillery, we do not believe they possess this capacity yet. In fact, we have no reports to confirm that the two Howitzers have ever been used. As Wednesday's means of delivery was a suicide bomber, it is very likely that a suicide attack is the only viable means with which ISWAP can deliver the agent and be sure to hit its targets. This limits their capacity to attack. Storing and transportation of a such a potent sulfur-mustard agent is not easy, which also limits the scope of their options. Therefore, their implied threat of an attack with sulfur-mustard gas in France is not

presently considered likely. From the accent of the speaker, the look and accent of the victim, and the color of the sand in the last frames, we believe this to have been filmed in Eastern Mali or Western Niger, and we estimate it as likely that the production facility is there as well. We are presently intensifying HUMINT collection operations across Mali in order to zero in on its exact location. We have extended a request to our U.S. counterparts to do the same, which they have agreed to do, of course. I might add that they have significantly better outreach in Niger than we do.” “Colonel, do you believe that it is unlikely that they will be able to carry out another attack, before we can find and destroy their operation? They have only given us a week,” I ask. Before Colonel LeBlanc answers, Colonel Martín from the DGSE interjects. “That is simply impossible to say, Madame Minister. We will naturally do everything in our power to achieve that goal, but there is an unaddressed dark horse in all of this. We do not agree with all the DRM’s conclusions for one reason. The DGSE do not believe that ISWAP has developed the means to produce and refine chemical agents on their own. It seems more than likely that they have received outside assistance. With that assistance could also come other skills or foreign investments in equipment and hardware which changes the picture in its entirety.” He opens a file in front of him and pushes it across the table to me. They are personnel files with pictures of three distinctly Asian-looking men. “These three gentlemen are Yuàn-bó Zhang, Míng jié Liu, and Te Dan Wei. They are Chinese chemical engineers. Scientists working for China’s CNOOC, a government-owned oil and natural gas company, operating in the Gulf of Guinea. The three of them were reported kidnapped in September 2016 from their oil platform in the Usan Field some ninety kilometers offshore from the Nigerian coast. There had been a series of similar attacks in the Egina Field just a few weeks prior. The Egina Field is even further out to sea, so we were surprised to hear that the Chinese security was lax enough for kidnapers to board the platform undetected, moreover successfully get them off the platform. Nigerian attempts to recover the three of them have failed. Their kidnapers disappeared into the depths of the Niger Delta, where the government has almost no influence. For a while we tracked the negotiations for their release, but as Chinese government negotiators generally show little interest in the fate of their citizens in Africa, we didn’t give the case much attention before now.” He points almost

demonstratively to a series of titles at the bottom of the files. “These three gentlemen are not only exceptionally skilled chemical engineers. They are also two majors and a lieutenant colonel of the reserves from The People’s Liberation Army. They have worked both in the military and for the Chinese Government for decades. They specialize in chemical warfare.”

I stare out of my office window. The clouds and rain in Paris seem relentless. It has been overcast for a week now and the deluge this afternoon is supposedly the strongest Paris has experienced since 1880. I know it makes no sense but I cannot escape the thought that somehow all of this, even the weather, is connected. It feels unnatural. My eyes hurt. I can feel my pulse beating on them. I take a deep breath. “It is lack of sleep, Florence, nothing more,” I tell myself. The ultimatum expired yesterday morning. The seven days have now come and gone, and ISWAP have failed to deliver on their threats. Frustratingly, the intelligence community is feeding us conflicting messages. For all their informants and spies, they have found little in ways of proof. For all the hundreds of analyzed reports, tapping of communications, and scrutinizing of satellite imagery they’ve ended up pointing in two different directions. DRM sees the situation as a confirmation of their initial analysis. They believe that there are indications that ISWAP has not been successful in producing vast quantities of the sulfur-mustard agent, and that it is likely they have difficulties storing it. Moreover, they do not believe in DGSE’s suspicions of direct Chinese involvement. DRM believes that the relatively ineffective approach of using a suicide bomber as method of release attests to this. A collaboration with the Chinese state would have meant that rockets, artillery, or even drones would have been used for the attack. From interviews with captured ISWAP fighters, they have found only hearsay and intangible hints at something big going on within the organization. They have not found a single enemy officer with knowledge of a larger logistical operation to transport the agent to other nations, nor anyone who knows of an artillery, missiles, or drone program for means of delivery. DRM deems the enemy to have gone all-in on a bluff that we have now called. They believe that the use of the sulfur-mustard agent is simply an attempt to level the playing field against the relentless onslaught of Operation Barkhane and coerce their enemies to halt ongoing military operations against them. If that is the case it is a short-

sighted solution. Operation Barkhane has reduced its operations, but within days they will be fully operational once again. DRM's analysis is in stark contrast to the report DGSE has just given me. It is terrifying reading. DGSE have jumped headfirst down the rabbit-hole and followed every lead that could confirm their suspicions. They have attempted to track hundreds of misplaced shipping containers with chemical compounds from Lagos, Cotonou, and Accra only to lose track of them in the depths of the Malian Desert or the Niger Delta. They have found reports from across the Sahel of stolen hazmat suits, laboratory apparatuses, and dual-use medical equipment usable in the production of chemical weapons that have disappeared from hospitals, clinics, and universities never to be seen again. They have found disconcerting reports of ridiculously lucrative smuggling operations to bring unmarked crates and boxes to the middle of nowhere or into the hands of known ISWAP sympathizers with no questions asked. They have followed trails of money from middlemen in Egypt and Saudi-Arabia into offshore accounts affiliated with Chinese front companies in Mali and Nigeria. They have even found an informant ready to swear that he has heard commanders refer to Asians helping them temper the steel of the Scimitar of the Prophet. What both reports are sorely missing are actionable targets. There are several mentions of villages in the ISWAP-controlled areas in Mali and Niger and even references to a Tuareg village in the southern Algerian desert but nothing concrete enough to justify direct action. DGSE will not rule out that a large-scale attack is under way and that it could be on European soil. It sends a shiver down my spine. I think of my son, Cyril. It could be him and his friends, attacked on the streets. It could be anyone. I imagine the horror of what an attack in Paris with that sulfur-mustard agent would look like. Bataclan would become a footnote in history in comparison. If they were to follow Aum Shinrikyo's example and release it in the subway, thousands of people would die under horrendous circumstances. In my mind's eye I see the explosions shake the underground stations. I see glimpses of people fighting to escape the gas. A screaming horde of drowning, desperate civilians, crawling over one another with blood gushing from their mouths, black tears streaming down their faces, and blisters swelling across their bodies. It cannot happen. There is a smart rap on the door, the calling card of Captain Bernard. "Come in," I say, and the door opens. He crosses the office in four strides and stands to attention. "We are ready

for you, Madame Minister,” he says and forces a smile. I appreciate the gesture. Everyone is feeling the pressure. “Thank you, Sebastian,” I reply and get up. “How are you?” I ask. The smile reaches his eyes and becomes genuine. “Thank you, Madame Minister, not too bad at all. I managed to sleep in my own bed last night and got to eat breakfast with Colette and Noelle this morning. I can’t complain.” “Good,” I answer. “I am glad to hear it.” I find the thought of him eating breakfast with his wife and baby girl comforting. It is a soothing thought that all across France people are still going about their business in the face of this evil. Life will not so easily be stopped. “Shall we?,” he asks. We leave the office together and walk down the hall for this morning’s decision briefing. The past week we have been pushing four lines of operations in preparation for another attack. We have had all law-enforcement units in the country on highest alert and have had DGSJ follow every conceivable lead to find indications of domestic preparations for an attack. In Mali all operations have ceased except for HUMINT and intelligence collection. Every French unit now has reviewed its CBRN equipment and procedures, and every frontline unit received full CBRN warfare equipment. We have been in direct contact with the governments of Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso to reassure them that France is unwavering in her support to their struggles against ISWAP, and that we will not sit idle in the face of their threats. And lastly, we have been working to coordinate military and intelligence efforts with our partners in the U.S., UK, and Germany. All these lines have required a series of decisions on my part, and every briefing from the various security branches has presented me with a series of courses of action with which to continue. To his commendation, General Lecointre is an expert in leading his chiefs of staff. The decisions to be made are sanitized of unnecessary clutter, the pros and cons made clear, and the next objectives on the lines of operation distinctly emphasized. He is accustomed to working with the political level and knows how to cut to the chase. We turn the corner and walk the last few meters to the briefing room. The door opens to a scene of unexpected chaos. Everyone is on their feet, staring at the television screens. General Lecointre is the only one with enough presence of mind to notice my arrival. He turns towards me. He has a look on his face like he has been struck. I stare at the nearest screen. It is a TV5 Monde Live Broadcast. The pictures are unmistakably from Africa but are as confusing as they are terrifying. The audio is

distorted by desperate and hardly comprehensible yelling and wailing screams. The only discernable images are of scores of dead people scattered on the ground with bleeding mouths and eyes and horrible, oozing blisters.

The briefing room is full of charts and pictures. Headshots of what I can only assume to be ISWAP leaders are plotted into surprisingly comprehensive organizational diagrams. Screens with maps of Mali and the broader Sahel-region line the wall. There is something slightly more self-assured about both Director Émié and General Ferlet this morning. Yesterday's disillusioned behavior has been replaced by a more optimistic demeanor. I can only hope they have good news for me. We are alone, the three of us. The two heads of intelligence have requested a meeting without analysts or staff officers. I silently pray that this is not going to turn into a discussion or another series of mutual accusations. I need facts. I need intelligence and not information. And I needed them a week ago. The past forty-eight hours have been insane. The ISWAP attack hit three locations at once. They attempted to hit Operation Barkhane's Regional Operations Base in Gao but failed. A drone spotted a truck moving towards the base from more than two kilometers away. Warning shots were fired and as the truck failed to slow down, perimeter defense subsequently destroyed it. The attack was poorly executed. No wounded or dead. CBRN teams were on site within the hour and confirmed a severe contamination of the area. ISWAP also hit a Senegalese MINUSMA base in Eastern Mali. Two suicide bombers walked up to the base and detonated their belts. Despite being bold as brass, the two bombers appeared to have lost their nerve before getting all the way into the compound. The walls took the brunt of the force of the explosion and minimized the spread of the sulfur-mustard agent. Miraculously only nine peacekeepers were killed in the attack and a further six wounded, though the base was subsequently abandoned. But in Bamako a suicide bomber detonated a truck laden with gas and explosives in a busy marketplace, not far from the Cité du Niger, the city's diplomatic neighborhood. The sulfur-mustard agent was vaulted upwards and turned into a lethal aerosol cloud that spread inland with a breeze from the Niger River. It rolled down several adjoining streets, slaying like a biblical plague as it moved and caused a terrible stampede of desperate civilians. In less than twenty minutes it killed more than 1,400 people and wounded three times as many, including the

TV5 Monde crew who were on site. Even as their cameraman began to succumb to the gas, they broadcast scenes of the aftermath to the world. Completely incapable of handling a mass casualty event of such proportions, the local authorities and hospitals reacted slowly. Though rudimentary treatment facilities were erected on the outskirts of town and the contaminated area evacuated and cordoned off, the death toll soon rose to 1,600. This morning the reports claimed a total of 1,900 dead from that single attack. This is an event that will be seared into the memory of the world—an African 9/11 and I cannot escape the feeling that we are at fault. We should have found those devils before this happened. France is better than this and the two gentlemen in front of me know it. President Macron took the stage only a few hours after the attack and spoke like a true statesman. Composed, but visibly moved by the indiscriminate carnage, he promised not only solidarity with and help to the Malian people, he also promised to hunt down those responsible and bring them to justice by any means necessary. He publicly declared three days of mourning in France and encouraged the world to remember and assist Mali in her time of need. An hour after his address he released a statement to denounce religious violence and further the work for peace and coexistence signed by himself and religious leaders from the Catholic and Protestant Churches, The French Jewish Community, and the French Council of the Muslim Faith. The entire world has reacted to the attack with abhorrence. From across all continents declarations of sympathy have been descending on Mali. In a public address from Brussels, Secretary General Stoltenberg made the defeat of ISWAP one of NATO's primary objectives. In an uncharmingly direct fashion President Putin promised an increase of Russian military action in Syria to grind the last strongholds of ISIS to dust. President Xi declared that China will not only send military advisors to the Malian Army but also send CBRN teams to countries across the Sahel to help defend against this new terrorist threat. President Trump was comparatively slow to react and gave a speech that was as cryptic as it was worrisome. In a slow, droning voice he promised incomparable retaliation and complete annihilation of those who had perpetrated this heinous act, before somehow managing to change direction. He went on to accuse the previous administration of not taking proliferation issues seriously enough, criticized the JCPOA, and left the room without taking questions. The African Union declared not only sympathy with Mali but

called for a summit to discuss how to protect the Sahel from the scourge of Islamic Terrorism. All these declarations are a step in the right direction. Soon after the attacks, ISWAP released a pre-recorded message and claimed responsibility. They threatened further attacks soon but this time without giving deadlines. I am incapable of comprehending what they hope to achieve. In their heavy-handedness ISWAP have shown the world what monsters they actually are and have alienated the few that still supported them. Only ISIS and a splinter-group of Al-Qaeda have expressed sympathy for the act, calling for the Scimitar of the Prophet to rain death on the kuffar across the globe. At this hour the world is appalled by their actions and is waiting for a response. France must be first to move. “We believe that we have good news for you, Madame Minister,” Director Émié begins. “Our allies in the CIA have approached us with intelligence from a source in Niger. It is single source, but it looks promising.” “Good,” I answer. “Don’t keep me waiting. We could certainly do with a breakthrough.” General Ferlet stands and points to a mugshot of an African male in his late teens or early twenties. “Madame Minister meet Hassem Abdullahi, a former ISWAP mid-level commander. He claims to have been hoodwinked into the organization. He is from Maiduguri in Borno Province, Nigeria. He is a former student of UNIMAID, the University of Maiduguri, where he studied Chemical Engineering. He claims to be a devout and non-radical Muslim but was recruited to an ISWAP friendly mosque from the Bama Road Mosque in 2016. Patrons of the Mosque lent him money for his studies. When incapable to repay them, the patrons instead required him to engage in active support for the organization. Before long he claims to have been in over his head, had been estranged from friends and family, and had given up on his studies at the university. He kept operating within ISWAP but fled the organization after having been part of a failed attack on a Niger Army base some seven days ago. With Nigerien soldiers on his heels, he took a desperate chance, killed one of his allies, and surrendered. After interrogation the Nigerien Army handed him over to U.S. Army Special Forces some five days ago where he has been interrogated thoroughly ever since.” “Five days!?” I exclaim. “Five days!?” General Ferlet’s confident expression vanishes immediately. “You mean to say this man was in CIA custody three days before the Bamako attack, and the U.S. hasn’t deemed it important enough to share the intel they gathered from him before now?” “I am

sorry, Madame Minister,” General Ferlet continues, “the CIA wasn’t sure his intelligence was credible and have spent quite some time confirming elements of it. Moreover, like ourselves, the CIA did not believe the threat of a large-scale attack to be credible.” For a second, Director Émié looks like he is about to interject, but I silence him with a raised finger and a look that could kill. Wisely, he stays quiet. “Well, we all now know how precise that estimate turned out to be,” I answer him, seething with barely contained fury. “I am sorry, Madame Minister,” General Ferlet answers in a defensive tone. “But it would likely have made no difference at all. This man has no knowledge of any concrete plans of attack or the enemy’s lines of operations. He is a mid-level commander, equivalent to a sergeant. He has been responsible for various tactical missions like extortion of locals, ambushes of enemy convoys, and assassinations of critics. Interestingly, he was also charged with providing security for some of ISWAP’s own logistics. He and his men have been responsible for protecting a series of convoys transporting heavy equipment from various pickup locations to a small village in the eastern Malian desert. What is particularly interesting is the fact that this man has a relevant education. He was able to identify that several of these transports contained laboratory equipment and construction materials. Some of the apparatuses he saw are dual use, meaning that they could be utilized in the production of chemical weapons. When he realized what his organization was attempting to do, he decided that ISWAP’s intentions had become so immoral or downright evil and that he had had enough. He decided to leave the organization and seized the opportunity when it presented itself. The intelligence he is handing us is exactly what we have been hoping for. This man is presumed dead by his own organization, and he quite possibly knows the location of ISWAP’s chemical weapons production facility.”

“We are ready for you, Madame Minister.” I nod, get up, and follow him out the door. We walk in silence to the briefing room. If there is one thing, I have always respected the military for above all else, it is their ability to plan and execute complicated operations at incredible speed. It is a mere twenty-six hours since President Macron authorized direct action against the expected chemical weapons facility and COM FST is already set to strike. We walk to the briefing room in silence. There are only seven other soldiers present:

General Lecointre, Admiral Isnard who is the head of SOCOM, and a handful of technicians. They stand as I enter. Admiral Isnard welcomes me. I shake hands with everyone present. “Madame Minister, the men are assembled and ready. The tactical orders are given. The connection is secure, and the floor is yours.” I thank the admiral and ascend the tiny podium they have set up for me. A surprisingly clear picture is broadcast on the back wall. More than fifty Special Forces operators are staring back at me from Barkhane’s Regional Operations Base in Mali. They are seated in neat rows in what looks to be an operations room. The walls are lined with timelines, pictures of suspected militants, operations charts, satellite photos and maps. They are hard-looking men, and they are staring expectantly at me. I take a deep breath. “Gentlemen. France thanks you for your service. The President thanks you for your service. I do as well. The mission you are about to undertake is undoubtedly a dangerous and complicated one. The risks we are asking you to take upon yourselves are not lost on anyone of us here in Paris. It is specifically because of the nature of this mission that you have been tasked with this job. You are the best France has to offer, you are amongst the best in the world, and you, for what you are about to do, are already heroes. The horrible attack that hit Bamako three days ago has left us all in profound sorrow. It was an unspeakable act of terror that no one would have believed possible just a month ago. Like the events that unfolded on September 11, 2001, it has changed everything. A weapon of mass destruction was brought to bear on defenseless civilians. It cannot go unanswered. It must be countered. It must be stopped, even if it cannot be reversed. France has taken upon herself the burden of ridding the world of the Islamic State West Africa Province. We have taken upon ourselves the task to uproot this evil. It is paramount that it is we who act. It is paramount that WE strike down this disease. You fine men are the fire that will purge this plague. Every asset France and her allies have is now at your disposal. Though I will not be quoted on this, I will allow myself to be blunt with you. I expect you to hit them hard! I expect you to put them down! Destroy their operation once and for all. Bring us the scientists who created this weapon and bring us every shred of evidence you can find. Make no mistake, gentlemen. The world is watching and those few malicious individuals who still align themselves with this ideology must be thoroughly dissuaded.” Smiles are spreading amongst the operators. I can sense their

eagerness through the screen. “I know that once again the many are asking much of the few. I want you to know there is no fighting force in the world I should sooner hand this great responsibility to. From here on in, the fate of us all is in your hands. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you!” I step down and nod to Admiral Isnard who takes the stand. He addresses his men in a cordial fashion, even greeting a few individuals by name. He keeps his speech short, finishing with the words: “Men, you hereby have Green Light.” I look at General Lecointre. He has a weary smile on his face as we leave the briefing room together. “This is it, Madame Minister,” he says. “Alea jacta est.”

It is the middle of the night, but the OPS room is buzzing. Everyone is here. President Macron and I are seated in front of three massive screens. General Lecointre, General Ferlet, Admiral Isnard, Director Émié, and a score of staff officers from all other branches are either seated next to us or are hard at work coordinating the imminent attack. Four U.S. AFSOC Liaison officers are coordinating additional U.S. assets on call. A U.S. U2 spy plane is circling the area at an unbelievable 70,000 feet and is feeding us a thermal and night vision image of the area in astounding resolution. Two Tigre attack helicopters from four Regiment d’Helicopters des Forces Speciales have just checked in. They are in holding position some 30 kilometers from the target. They can be on station within ten minutes upon the Ground Force Commander’s request. Further out a U.S. AC-130 Spectre Gunship is loitering, ready to add its terrible firepower to the fight if needed. The reinforced platoon from COM FST have spent the first night infiltrating on foot. To take the enemy by surprise and prevent them from destroying evidence or killing possible hostages, they have opted not to use a HELO INFIL or to land directly on target. Instead, they conducted a decoy operation and attacked an ISWAP-controlled area two days ago and proceeded to stage a post operation EXFIL to throw off any suspicions. They have walked more than fifty kilometers to the positions they now occupy. They have effectively boxed in the village. They have the area under control and remain undetected. I have hardly been able to sleep for the past two days from a combination of anxiety and expectation. Part of me can’t wait for this to commence, simply so it can be over with. The village, if it can even be called a village, is a group of buildings consisting of one larger compound and six smaller houses close to a hard packed dirt road. The informant has identified the compound

south of the road as the suspected fabrication facility. It is here, he claims to have led the transports he has overseen. The rest of the houses are farmsteads that belong to local farmers. The area surrounding the village is open terrain with very little cover apart from random bushes and the occasional tree. Satellite imagery has confirmed steady vehicular traffic to and from the compound, and the COM FST has verified that there is a rotation of armed guards protecting the entrance and circling the village on semi-regular intervals. The battle-captain approaches the President. "Monsieur President. All units are Green Light. Any objections at this time?" "No, Major," he answers without hesitation. "You are clear to proceed." The battle-captain nods and returns to his station. Within seconds the COM FST set into motion. The U2's thermal image reveals their figures in a stark white against the dark backdrop. They close on the village with blinding speed and slow to a creeping pace as they reach the rear of the compound. Slowly they clear the corners and divide into two groups moving in separate directions. They close on the patrolling guards and the front of the compound simultaneously. A second later they strike, the thermal image blinking with their gunfire. "Shots fired," the battle-captain says, calmly. The guards collapse. The two groups quickly link up, break open the gate and slowly move inwards through the courtyard. A door appears to open suddenly. The motion causes the lead soldier to fire again. A man falls headlong out the door. Several more of the assaulters open fire, though I cannot tell what they are shooting at. The train of men push aggressively forward. "Contact, wait, out," the battle-captain says. Both the President and I lean forward. My palms are sweaty. The majority of the men charge forward into the building and disappear from view. A handful of them clear the rest of the courtyard and take up defensive positions. Minutes pass with no communications. The two Tigre Helicopters arrive at incredible speed. They circle the outskirts of the village like wolves searching for prey. After a few more minutes, one of them suddenly peels off and opens fire on something I cannot make out. Whatever it is, it is vaporized in a cacophony of gunfire. "Squirter," one of the AFSOC Liaison Officers say. "There must have been an underground exit." There is an incredible chatter of communication in the background suddenly. The battle-captain approaches. "We have cleared the top of the compound and found a large, functional elevator and a staircase to a lower level. Fifteen enemy combatants are killed so far. COM

FST report no injured or wounded.” The President nods with a smile but says nothing. An elevator in a Malian compound? Butterflies tingle in my stomach. This has got to be it. More than thirty terrible minutes pass. Scattered reports reach us of sustained firefights in the depths of the building. A grainy helmet camera feed flickers on and off with several minutes delay, giving us fractured images of what appears to be a shockingly sophisticated underground installation. To my horror, two operators are reported wounded, but the COM FST presses on. At the end of the hour, the battle-captain finally says the words, we have all been silently praying to hear. “Target clear! Gold 2 and 3 are Jackpot. Gold 1 KIA. Commencing search and secure.” The OPS room detonates in celebratory cheers. Everyone is on their feet. I find myself hugging the President.

“Explain the findings of this report to me as you would a five-year-old,” I say. The question makes both General Ferlet and Director Émié look uncomfortable. The report on my desk is a massive thing, several hundred pages long. I have read as much as I had time for, but focused my efforts on the abstract and conclusion. “It has not been often that you two gentlemen and your agencies were in agreement this past month, but now you are?” “Yes, Madame Minister,” General Ferlet answers. “We are. After having assessed all the collected data and material from the installation. After having read the interrogations of Gold 2, Gold 3, and the four ISWAP survivors.... Yes, our analysts have done a formidable job. We are in agreement. That is why our agencies have co-authored this report.” “Be that as it may, the conclusion borders on the insane,” I reply. There is a long silence. “I was not joking,” I continue. “I want you to explain this to me. I want you to speak the words out loud. I want you to explain it and feel how unhinged it is to say this, because I am the one who will be briefing this to the President. Moreover, it is I who will authorize the possible sharing of these conclusions with our allies.” The two men eye each other. For a split second they remind me of children. Director Émié takes the lead. “As you wish, Madame Minister. We believe that the arming of ISWAP with the sulfur-mustard agent was an act perpetrated by North Korea, and that it was supported by agents of the Chinese Government. In early 2016, at the end of the Obama administration, Pyongyang decided that it needed to investigate avenues other than nuclear weapons to coerce the international

community to reduce sanctions on the country. In the style of the proxy wars of the Cold War Era, they decided to supply an organization already at war with the West with a new weapons system. Rather, they helped build a facility capable of producing a WMD. They decided that ISWAP would be the optimal choice, as the organization is radical enough to wage war by any means necessary, but also an organization not directly at war with the United States, Russia, or China. North Korean agents contacted ISWAP sympathizers through a Salafist network working out of Egypt and Saudi Arabia and were smuggled into Eastern Mali along the so-called Contested Route through Libya and Algeria. Here they entered negotiations with al-Sheikawi who happily accepted their offer of assistance. The agents scouted out a location to build a sophisticated underground laboratory and provided ISWAP leadership with a wish-list for construction materials, dual-use equipment, and required components. ISWAP leaders agreed to channel considerable funds to the project, under the impression that they would receive a production facility capable of producing nearly unlimited amounts of the proposed chemical agent. We believe that they were convinced this would successfully compensate for the military discrepancy between them and us. By means of deterrence they hoped that the chemical weapon would provide them with a Caliphate to call their own, just in time to pick up the mantle of the collapsing Caliphate in the Levant. Though ISWAP was able to provide most of the material needed to build the laboratory, they remained absolutely dependent on North Korean support for fabrication. Simply providing components and instructions was insufficient. North Korea promised to provide experts to manage the production but failed to deliver on this promise. After several failed attempts at smuggling scientists out of North Korea, agents of the Reconnaissance General Bureau approached Chinese counterparts to request help in the undertaking. For reasons unknown, China decided to get directly involved instead of only assisting North Korea. Chinese operatives planned and executed a staged kidnapping of three chemical warfare engineers from the Usan Field off the Nigerian Coast and proceeded to pretend they were negotiating for their release. Major Yuàn-bó Zhang, Major Míng jíe Liu, and Lieutenant Colonel Te Dan Wei then proceeded to assist ISWAP leadership in building their installation, supported by the North Korean operatives, who provided blueprints and know-how. The installation appears to have been finished in early 2017.

From then on, they commenced with the production of this new and highly refined sulfur-mustard agent. It seems that production was slower than ISWAP's leadership had hoped and that storing of the finished chemical substance was a challenge. Also, both North Korea and China appear to have been unwilling to provide weapons systems for delivery, explaining why ISWAP had to rely on suicide bombers for attack. At some point the cooperation between the Chinese, the North Koreans, and ISWAP appears to have soured over this question and the chemists became actual hostages. Supposedly, the North Korean operatives disappeared around the same time. Whether they escaped the Sahel or ISWAP made examples out of them to put pressure on North Korea, we are unable to ascertain. With shortages of components, the production began to run dry. When Mosul fell in July, ISWAP leaders decided the time had come to establish a new Caliphate. They threw themselves into a desperate gamble and began preparing for an attack intended to put pressure on France and the governments in Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. When we failed to comply with their demands, they decided to go all in and spent most of the sulfur-mustard agents in the attacks on our COB, the Senegalese MINUSMA base, and Bamako. From the captured production manifest, we gather that most of their stockpile has been spent. The success of Operation Barkhane's renewed thrust, and the speed with which the Nigerian Army's campaign in Borno province is advancing these days, seems to validate this conclusion." I click my tongue involuntarily and Director Émié falls quiet. "It is not that I disagree with your work in its entirety," I begin in a consolatory tone. "I understand.... No, rather, I fathom the motivations for ISWAP. I see how they could be misled to believe that ownership of a WMD would be in their interest. But there is a *Lex Parsimoniae* element missing in the conclusions of your report. Particularly the accusations of China's but also to some extent North Korea's involvement in all of this. It just doesn't sit well with me. Neither of those two states has any particular love for religion in general or Muslim extremist organizations in particular. Why would they agree to help the most insane organization of them all? Is it not more likely that things are as they appear to be? Is it so unlikely that the scientists were kidnapped and forced to work for ISWAP? Can we not entertain the possibility that they provided the know-how for the construction of the facility and production of the agent at gunpoint?" General Ferlet raises his eyebrows in ill-

concealed irritation. “Pardon, Madame Minister, but we believe not! If you had had the time to read through the report in detail, you would have known that these conclusions were not simply drawn out of thin air. Our contacts in Mossad have confirmed North Korean links to Wahhabi networks in Saudi and Egypt. We found individual components in the production apparatuses that were produced in North Korea. We have found copies of correspondence between three named North Korean military construction engineers and ISWAP leaders on USB drives, and a partially destroyed North Korean chemical weapons production manual on site. Both Gold 2 and Gold 3 have independently confirmed the involvement of the Guoanbu, the Chinese Ministry of State Security. We have found copies of financial transactions from a well-known Chinese front company to pay for a significant part of the construction materials needed to produce the laboratory. And may I remind you that Gold 1, Lieutenant Colonel Te Dan Wei, who was formally in charge of the Chinese scientists seized a weapon off the body of a dead ISWAP fighter and proceeded to not only open fire on our operators but to shoot himself in the head rather than be taken alive! The conclusions of this report are a not a fantasy, they are not guesswork. They may not sit well with any of us, but they are the product of thorough and unbiased intelligence work.” General Ferlet’s face has turned red and his breathing heavy. Though part of me feels a sting to my pride for being berated in such a manner, I cannot fault his arguments. Director Émié smiles cautiously. “Madame Minister, I understand your concern. You are justified in searching for the *why* in all of this. There are many possible reasons. For North Korea this operation is likely viewed as a success. We have known of their chemical weapons program for decades. They have mostly used it for assassinations of critics, but frankly, we always believed their large-scale chemical weapons operation to be intended for deterrence by denial. We believed that they would use it to contaminate U.S. bases in South Korea in case of the outbreak of war. They have chosen to use it in a way we never saw coming. They have proven to the West that they are both willing and able to arm our enemies with these weapons. Even if they themselves are incapable of lashing out from fear of retaliation, others may be willing to do their dirty work for them. They know we will not engage in a full-scale war over this and thus expect a low cost in retaliation. They, on the other hand, have now introduced another bargaining chip to leverage against the West in future

negotiations. China will categorially deny any involvement in all of this. They will likely free-ride the zeitgeist of disinformation and stick to the Occam's Razor explanation you just presented yourself. Chinese military advisors and CBRN-team have been welcomed with open arms across West Africa, expanding Chinese influence there even further. They have managed to field-test a new and terrible chemical agent on civilian and military targets but still manage to play the role of the savior. Cleverly, they have not provided any means of delivery that could potentially be used to target Chinese forces in retaliation in any meaningful way. What changes this new chemical weapon will bring to the great power competition remains to be seen." He sighs deeply. "We might even ask ourselves whether their involvement serves an internal rather than an external objective. I would not be the least surprised if the CCP uses this whole ordeal to increase surveillance of the population, restrict movement of critics, give further authority to the Guoanbu, and increase the oppression of the Uighur minority." I suddenly feel tears welling up and blink them away in irritation. Émié falls quiet. I take a deep breath, clap my hands down on the desk, slowly stand, and turn towards the windows. The afternoon sun is shining lazily over Paris, distantly a siren wail. "What does one do against such remorseless evil?" I ask. The question is as much to me, as it is to them. "How am I to advise the President? We have no tools to compensate for such blatant disregard for human life. France sees herself as a beacon of democracy, of human rights, of truth. It is not just a national motto. Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood are ideals we live by. We aim to use our military capabilities to defend and further those ideals. What do we do now?" I turn towards them. The look on their faces would suit a funeral. I can feel tears running down my cheeks. I don't care. "We are faced with opponents who will kill thousands of civilians for an advantage. We are faced with an enemy who will use any means necessary to tighten their control not only over their own nations but over the entire world. This is reminiscent of Germany's actions in '38 and '39. They will hide behind lies and denial. They will reject, dispute, or simply ignore any proof we leverage against them, knowing full well that we are not interested in another world war. They will obscure everything in a dense fog of falsehood through which the beacon of truth can never shine." Director Émié stands. He forces a tired smile, reaches into his blazer, and hands me a handkerchief. "Madame Parly," he says. "You have proven

to be a formidable Minister of Defense. You have handled yourself without reproach during these trying times. I would not have wanted to be in your shoes these past months, and I am confident that history will remember you fondly no matter what you choose. Our advice is that you recommend to the President that France share this knowledge with as many of our allies as possible. Even if the consequence is that two separate narratives will come to exist again in East and West. Even if this is the first step into another Cold War, it is paramount that our allies be told the truth of the enemy we are up against. We cannot keep our eyes closed and pretend this did not happen.” I blink and stare at him a few seconds, attempting to appraise whether he meant his little speech as a slight, but his smile seems genuine. After a while I nod. “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,” I answer with poorly concealed annoyance. There is a smart rap on the door. “Come!” I say. Captain Bernard enters and stands to attention. “Madame Minister, they are ready for you.” “Thank you” I answer and look at General Ferlet and Director Émié. “Good work, gentlemen. I will brief the President.”

D. UNPACKING THE NARRATIVE

You have just read an example of how to use fiction to explain and detail coercion theory in action, in this case seen through the eyes of the French Minister of Defense, Florence Parly. The story begins with her soldiers in Mali suffering a suicide attack involving the use of a modern chemical weapon. The attack is carried out by the terrorist group known as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which follows up the use of the chemical weapon by declaring the founding of a new Islamic caliphate established across four African nations. ISWAP proceeds to warn their enemies that the boundary of the new caliphate is to be respected or France and her allies will risk a war involving the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against their civilian populations. ISWAP is attempting to use the coercive tool known as Deterrence by Punishment against their enemies to achieve their political and military goals.⁵¹ Incapable of winning a land war by conventional means, thus Detering by Denial, ISWAP attempts to level the playing field against their superior enemy with the threat of inflicting unacceptable pain on their

⁵¹ Biddle, “Coercion Theory,” 101–102.

adversaries.⁵² The strategy is only partly successful. ISWAP has used their new WMD to show the world that they possess the power to seriously hurt their Western enemies. But, in delivering the mustard gas by means of a suicide bomber rather than a ballistic weapons system, they have also hinted at a serious lack in their capabilities to inflict casualties on the European continent.⁵³ France temporarily stands down their operations in Mali but is thoroughly unwilling to allow such coercion from a non-state actor. A game of nerves is under way, and ISWAP is forced to prove their willingness to escalate and attempt to dominate France in the Sahel.⁵⁴

France's—and indeed the world's—most serious worry is that ISWAP has received outside help from a state actor, and that this may mean the enemy possesses further capabilities yet to be revealed. Intelligence operatives have at this time found indications of Chinese involvement in the WMD manufacturing process but is unable to discern whether the assistance is being provided voluntarily or under duress. When France fails to live up to the given demands, ISWAP decides to attempt Escalation Dominance and carry out three large scale attacks, one of which is successful, killing almost 2,000 civilians in Mali's capital Bamako. They proceed to threaten further attacks, but already the strategy is beginning to fail. Rather than buckling under pressure, the attacks send shock waves across the world and cause leaders to denounce radicalism and threaten all sorts of retaliation. On the intelligence front, France and her allies manage to locate the enemy's WMD production facility and strike it. The attack cripples the enemy operation and captures two of the three involved Chinese scientists and overwhelming evidence of Chinese and North Korean involvement in the project. The French Minister of Defense reels at the confirmation of state involvement, but the leaders of her intelligence agencies insist on the conclusions of their final report. They explain that the North Korean motivations are to be found in introducing a new bargaining chip in negotiations with the West. By proving their willingness to arm the enemies of our enemies with modern chemical weapons, they expect to be able to use Compellence to force the West to give

⁵² Biddle, 102.

⁵³ Biddle, 103–104.

⁵⁴ Biddle, 106.

concessions to the strict sanctions on their country, while relying on our reluctance to engage in a world war to avoid sweeping retaliation.⁵⁵ From the Chinese side, the involvement in this operation is deemed to be an opportunity to bring a new weapons system to the fore in the ongoing great power competition with the West, to further their own interests in Africa and to tighten control over their own population at home. The chiefs of intelligence encourage the Minister to brief this to the President, knowing full well that this knowledge may cause a new cold war to erupt.

How then does this narrative help to further the practitioner's understanding of coercion theory? As before, the story allows the reader to share the experience of the decision makers and the challenges they face when attempting to mitigate coercive pressure on their state from other states or third-party actors. What the story does very successfully is portray the distance that exists between the political and military strategical layers and operational and tactical practitioners on the ground. If anything, the story is arguably too kind to the practitioner and could have easily spent more time investigating the depth of this gap as is so patiently explained by Dr. Biddle in the article that inspired the narrative. I decided not to go down this path for fear the story would simply become too long for this project. The title is also not coincidental. In the classic understanding of coercion theory, the actions conducted to change or maintain the status quo are carried out by state-actors whose intentions are interpretable and understandable to the recipient state. By throwing the use of a third-party actor into the mix, the story helps to underscore the threats of an increasingly convoluted world where great powers use other, substantially more risk-willing organizations to serve as agents of coercion.

⁵⁵ Biddle, 101–106.

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

V. CONSTRUCTING A WORK OF FICTION TO UNDERSTAND SPECIAL OPERATIONS THEORY

A. ADMIRAL MCRAVEN'S THEORY OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

In his 1995 publication *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Admiral William H. McRaven presented his Theory of Special Operations.⁵⁶ The publication is an edited version of his 1993 thesis from the Naval Postgraduate School and analyzes eight case studies of historical Direct Action missions to confirm Admiral McRaven's hypothesis.⁵⁷ McRaven identified a lack of theory of special operations and decided to develop one which could outline not only why, but how, special operations forces manage to defeat significantly superior forces in number and can successfully execute missions that outwardly appear nearly impossible.⁵⁸

Simply explained, the theory rests on one guiding principle: The attacking Special Operations Forces (SOF) must as quickly as possible obtain relative superiority over their enemy and complete their objective before the enemy can thwart the efforts of the SOF. The attacking SOF must adhere to the six principles of special operations, namely Simplicity, Security, Repetition, Surprise, Speed, and Purpose, if relative superiority is to be achieved. A simple plan contains as few steps as possible and is therefore less likely to fail than a complex plan with many moving parts. Security must be tight to prevent knowledge of the impending mission to reach enemy forces. Repetition of skills or even full dress rehearsals of the action will hone required abilities and expose potential dangers to the mission. Choosing a surprising solution increases the chances of catching the enemy unprepared. Focusing on conducting the mission with speed will minimize the chance that the enemy can reorganize and counterattack or can call in reinforcements. Finally, understanding the purpose of the mission will not only enable the attacking force to act with determination, it will further the understanding of the plan so that all members of the

⁵⁶ McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare*, 1–25.

⁵⁷ McRaven.

⁵⁸ McRaven, 1–25.

team can take over in case colleagues fail to achieve success in their element of the plan. Should the SOF fail to adhere to these principles, their chances for success will suffer as a direct consequence.⁵⁹ McRaven's ideas and conceptualization of his Theory of Special Operations are widely recognized, and I can personally attest to the impact they have made on Western Special Operations Forces.

But, the theory is of course not perfect. Admiral McRaven limits the scope of his study to combat operations of a strategical nature, defining a special operation as one "conducted by forces specially trained, equipped, and supported for a specific target whose destruction, elimination, or rescue (in case of hostages), is a political or military imperative."⁶⁰ Hence, Admiral McRaven deliberately chooses to discard the majority of special operations by leaving out Special Reconnaissance and Military Assistance and Direct Actions missions of a less than strategic nature. Though Admiral McRaven attests to his theory being: "Applicable across the spectrum of special operations, as defined by Joint Pub 3-05," his definition does limit the scope of opportunity for fictionalizing his theory.⁶¹

Given the limitations of his theory, a story generated to explain how it is applicable in a realistic setting must focus almost entirely on the preparations and execution of a Strategic level Direct Action mission, or in other words, an attack with almost unlimited resources available to it. In his conclusions Admiral McRaven does leave an interesting element open for a fictionalization, namely the element of selection.⁶² Modern SOF are put through rigorous testing and training to select not only those who are most skilled for the mission but those who have the right mindset to fit into the particular SOF unit. This is done partly because SOF operators rarely have the time for repetition and rehearsal that Admiral McRaven describes in his case studies. Though repetition remains crucial for success in modern Special Operations, these repetitions are made in much broader settings

⁵⁹ McRaven, 4-23.

⁶⁰ McRaven, 2.

⁶¹ McRaven, 3.

⁶² McRaven, 389-391.

to have the SOF operators ready to engage an enemy under almost any conceivable circumstance with minimal time for preparation. In other words: The months of training to strike one particular target has been substituted by years of training how to strike a broad variety of targets. To be able to endure the stress and hardships of not only the missions they are required to handle, but also the training environment they are expected to endure in daily life, the selection process is essential to understand what it means to be a special forces operator.⁶³ Selection is so intense that it often simulates the conditions of actual missions in harrowing detail and tests both the skills and the personality of the aspiring operator—each of which is of similar importance. Therefore, selection will be a central element in fictionalizing Admiral McRaven’s Theory of Special Operations.

B. CREATING THE NARRATIVE

How can a narrative based on Admiral McRaven’s Theory of Special Operations be constructed to further the understanding of the theory and model? Most importantly, it must be credible. I cannot write a story that includes ridiculous exaggerations of SOF operators as superhuman creatures capable of enduring punishment that would kill an ordinary human being. Nor can the story contain descriptions of the impossible, neither physical nor technological impossibilities. Though SOF is historically known to be equipped with cutting-edge equipment and weapons systems, anything portrayed in this story must have been plausible in 2017 when the story takes place. The story must demonstrate a specially trained, equipped, and supported unit adhering to the six principles of special operations in planning and in execution. The story must likewise provide a valid explanation for the need to achieve relative superiority against an enemy with lesser capabilities than a modern SOF unit has.

To achieve this, I lean on some of the same literary methods used by Hemingway and Heinlein. As Heinlein does in his book *Starship Troopers*, I allow myself to imagine what the training regimes and selection criteria could look like in a unit I know very little about (the French Para Dragoon Regiment). Despite my best efforts, I have been able to

⁶³ McRaven, 389–391.

find only minimal open-source information about what the Dragoon's selection course looks like. Being a SOF operator myself I know many of the traditions of the Danish SOF units, and I imagine that our French brothers use many similar techniques to select those candidates who have both the right outlook, personality traits, and skill set to serve in their units.

In his book *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway places his main protagonist amid the Italian defeat at Caporetto, which Hemingway did not experience himself. Similar to what Hemingway did, I use a combination of research and imagination to envision what combat operations in Gao Province would look and feel like.⁶⁴ I have myself served in Mali but primarily in and around the capitol, Bamako, which is a very different area both in its geography and in its ethnic composition. Though my lack of experience from Gao Province is undoubtedly a drawback, I have extensive experience, including combat operations, from Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Africa which will help me describe the split-second decisions that operators have to make despite their meticulous preparations. Such decisions often win or lose entire operations.

C. THE UNCHARTED

I am first and foremost a weapon, sir. What I think of the mission is of little importance. What is of great importance is that you use me correctly. I do not envy you the burden of bearing that responsibility.

—Lance Corporal Dinesen, C-Coy, Helmand Province, 2009

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I look at her. She is getting older. The wrinkles around her eyes and on her upper lip are showing more prominently. I haven't been visiting as much as I should these past years since I joined. I've been too busy. It feels like she has aged a little every time I see her. It is incredible that she insisted on driving me all the way down here for selection. I of course objected in every conceivable way. Even dad tried to talk her out of it. No luck. I suppose it is what a mother does; take care of her children. “Yeah, mum. I am sure. This is my dream.” She nods but doesn't take her eyes off the road. We are getting close to Martignas-sur-Jalle. It has been a six-hour drive. She'll be driving

⁶⁴ Hemingway. *A Farewell to Arms*, introduction, xv-xvi.

home on her own. “You could stay the night in a hotel in town and drive back in the morning,” I try. She shakes her head almost imperceptibly. “No. I don’t want to stay. This town will rob me of you.” “You don’t know that.” “Don’t I?” She shakes her head. “A mother knows. You’ve always accomplished what you set your mind to. This town will rob me of you, so I don’t want to stay.” I smile. Her faith in me is heartwarming. I wish I had as much faith myself. We sit in silence for the last twenty minutes. The radio plays some pop song. Gwen Stefani, I think. I recognize the beat, but it is turned down too far for me to hear the lyrics. We pull up in front of the gate. We are on a dark road well outside of town. A handful of lonely streetlights illuminate the darkness. The wire fence looks endless. I can see one of the guards on watch talking to another hopeful recruit. “Well, Albert,” she says. “Here we are.” I nod. It has begun to rain. I suddenly feel like a mountain is crushing me. The selection ahead feels smothering. I don’t want to get out of the car. I want to drive all the way back home with her. I take a slow, deep breath and feel my lungs push against my ribs. I exhale gently. Calm settles in. “Right! Time to go.” I lean over and give her a kiss on the cheek. Her eyes are welling up. I get out, retrieve my two rucksacks and my duffle bag from the trunk and walk up to the gate without looking back. I push the buzzer outside and the guard lets me through. I present my ID to him on the other side. “Sergeant Albert Chastain, 35e Régiment d’infanterie, reporting for pre-selection.” The guard looks at my ID and nods. “Welcome,” he says. “Continue down the road and past the two first buildings. You’ll see a building with the lights on. Go up the outside stairs and find a bunk inside. Breakfast is served from 0630. Be ready in PT clothes at 0800 hours.” “Thank you,” I answer and begin making my way towards the building. “Good luck,” he shouts after me. Outside the gate I hear mum driving off.

Next morning, we scurry to eat and be ready on time. When the bell chimes eight we are more than a hundred hopeful recruits standing to attention in the gym hall in rows of four. In front of every row a heavy sandbag is resting on the floor. Thirty or more instructors are present. Everyone is dead quiet. You would be able to hear a pin drop. I try to blot out my nervousness, but my fingers and toes are tingling. What the hell am I doing here? Many of the other recruits look like beasts. I bet they could devour me whole. Everyone knows that there is a limited number of spots in the program. A week from now

they will have chosen forty of us for selection. How on Earth will they break so many in such a short time? An instructor steps out in front where everyone can see him, the rest line up behind us. “Welcome,” the lead instructor says. “Pre-selection screening begins now. Congratulations on even making it this far. It takes courage to put yourself up for evaluation. Over the coming week we will screen your aptitude for operations in hostile environments. If at any point you are asked to step aside, do so like a man. It simply means that you are out. If it happens, accept your failing, improve, and then apply again. If you complain, we will ban you permanently.” He pauses needlessly for dramatic effect. “And I mean permanently.” He looks up and down the lines of recruits. Everyone is looking straight forward. “Now, first row step forward to the sandbags and pick them up.” First row moves ahead and lifts the forty-kilo bags from the ground and slings them across their shoulders. It takes a few seconds for everyone to get ready. The instructor looks up and down the line. “On my order commence with fifty lunges.”

I run along a hedgerow in the dead of night, break right at the end of it, and run into the open. The wind is picking up but blessedly there is no rain tonight. I jog across a muddy field, and after a few hundred meters, I reach the forest edge I was looking for. It turns out to be an incredibly dense pine thicket. It is like a wall almost. I turn left and follow the edge of it almost to the very end. The post I am looking for is in a depression somewhere in there. I force my way inside. It is nuts. I stumble around like an idiot for a few minutes, finding nothing. I get my act together and struggle my way back out. The pines close almost hermetically behind me, leaving no trace of my incursion. Dammit. I can spend all night here. I run all the way to the end of the forest and count my steps backwards. I stop seventy-five meters from the end. The post should be thirty meters into the thick of the trees. I keep my compass in front of me, put the map away, keep my head down, and begin struggling inwards again. I move slowly, counting my paces as best I can, avoiding tree trunks while branches lash against my face. I count to fifty and almost stumble into a hole. Yes! Found it. I turn on my tiny red light and shine it into the depression. It is empty. Shit! What am I doing wrong? I lie down for a map check. It doesn't help. This is the only pit marked on the map. I should be in the right place. I get up and move around the edge of it. From the

far side I look back the way I came. Something catches the weak glimmer of my red light and returns a feeble reflection. I climb down into the hole. There it is. The post is dangling from a pole inside a crevice. A hole in a hole. I curse the instructors, clip my scorecard, and struggle back out through the trees. I look at my watch: 3 a.m. I am just over half ways. No sleep tonight.

I feel like a walking corpse. I am asleep on my feet, trying to pack up my stuff. Everything is moving in slow motion. Cuts and chafes are spread across the entirety of my body, like a spiderweb of lacerations. But I am here. I look around. It is Friday noon. We are thirty-five guys left. A week of grueling physical punishment is over. A handful of instructors enter the room. We stop what we are doing and stand to attention. The lead instructor indicates for us to sit down on our bunks. We comply. He looks around the room, taking his time to dwell a second or two on every one of us. "My name is Instructor Dumond. This concludes the pre-selection screening," he says. "You did terribly, but less terribly than the sad saps who are not here now. You have next week off. We will notify your parent commands that you will begin selection in earnest the week after next. I will be honest with you. Several of you need to shape up if you want to maintain any hope of making it through the sixteen weeks to come. Your land navigation was generally not impressive, the water drills neither. Your teamwork needs improvement, and your pace in marching was not entirely outstanding either. You will have to remedy this if you are to prove worthy of becoming Dragoons. I would encourage you to pack up your vanity and hide it in a very deep and dark vault, because you won't be needing it in the foreseeable future. I likewise encourage you to strengthen your resolve. You will be going to some very lonely and very unfair places. We will certainly not be kind to you. You think this past week was something?" He smiles. It looks strangely threatening. Like the smile of a big cat. "Things are about to get a whole lot more intense where you are going, gentlemen. If you are made of the right stuff and are lucky enough to not get yourselves injured.... Well, then you may just be so incredibly lucky as to make it to the other side." He pauses and the room falls quiet. In the distance I can faintly hear the roar of jet engines. The noise is a strange disruption to my thoughts. I had forgotten that there is a whole world out there somewhere. "I will say this only once," he continues. "And it will never again be repeated,

so I encourage you to take it to heart. Do not quit. WE will evaluate you. If we don't like what we see, you will be taken out of the course. So long as you are still here, well, you are still here. Any questions now?" No one answers. After a while he nods. "Okay, then. Congratulations on making it to selection." Without further ado the instructors leave. We get on our feet and commence with packing our stuff. I remember wondering how on Earth they would manage to cut us down from more than a hundred to about forty in less than a week. Now I know.

The morning run is deadly fast. The lead instructor is setting an insane pace. I am a good runner, but I have a hard time keeping up. The rolling hills are taking a toll on all of us. The other instructors are giving some of the slower recruits hell. Voland stumbles in front of me. I help him up and we keep running. This is week two. We are thirty-two left. Three have already quit of their own volition. We keep running for a good long time before reaching a beach. "Get in the water," the lead instructor shouts. We jump in and duck under. The water is icy cold. After a minute or two he signals for us to come back in. We struggle onto the sand and get in line. "Sing," he says. We sing the La Marseillaise in the direction of the ocean with the rising sun behind us. As we get ready to run back Instructor Dumond pounces on me. "That was very kind of you, Chastain, the way you helped Voland." "Thank you, Instructor Dumond," I answer. "No, I really mean it," he says. "It is important to share what you have with your team. If I you are putting in ninety percent while your buddy is putting in a hundred, then you should be ready to give your extra ten percent to help him. That is how you get your team to the finish line." "Thank you," I answer. His smile disappears. "Are you telling me, you are only giving ninety percent when we run?" he asks. I manage a feeble "Eehh." "You are!" he shouts, his face suddenly contorted in anger. "Get back in the surf, you goddamn, half-assed recruit." I turn around sprint back to the water's edge with Instructor Dumond on my heels. "Sit down," he shouts. "Sit down and pull up your trouser." I do as I am told. The waves break over me, water and sand fill the inside of my pants. "Now get up and catch up. Don't ever let me see you slacking off again." He gives me a kick in the rear end. The others have several hundred meters of head start. I have to sprint for more than a kilometer before I catch up. My thighs are sandpaper. My crotch is bloody and raw when we reach the barracks.

It is the end of week seven. The instructors are not impressed with us. They make us row an old Zodiac dinghy with no engine all Friday afternoon. Backwards and forwards for hours on end. An instructor with a loudspeaker is yelling abuse at us from the pier. It is the same kind of stuff that we have gotten so used to by now. “You are quite likely the worst recruits I have ever seen. Would you put your back into it, already? How weak can eight grown men be? Boat team one, the others are overtaking you, don’t you want to win? Are you sure you even want to be Dragoons? We don’t need your kind.” It feels hopeless. Maybe that is the lesson here—I am struggling to make sense of this. He is right, though, the two other boats are overtaking us. Dammit. I try and row harder. It makes no difference. The last hundred meters we gain a little on them, but they finish before us anyway. The instructor moves over to us. He yells through the loudspeaker: “Second and third boat team, you can get out of the Zodiac. You’re off the hook. Enjoy your weekend.” The other recruits climb up on the pier, lift out their boats and scuttle off towards the boat house. Instructor Garnier gives us an evil glare and continues his rant. “Boat team one, you didn’t have what it takes to win today, so you get to spend the evening with me.” He fetches a large, cumbersome bag, jumps down into our Zodiac and order us to push off. He attaches a line and a handle to the rear of the dinghy, orders Corbin to jump in the water, and hands him a pair of old water skis from the bag. “Right, then” he says calmly. “Row.” And we do. Up and down the pier, pulling a man after us like dead weight. Every fifteen minutes, he changes out the man in the water. Within two hours, we are not only exhausted—we are also wet and miserable. When we finally return to shore, night has fallen. We climb out and lift the boat up, bodies shaking. Instructor Garnier puts down the loudspeaker. “What is tonight’s lesson?” he asks. “That we need to try harder, even if it can’t be done,” one of the others reply. Garnier promptly slaps him across the face. “Any of you other idiots want to venture a bet?” he asks. Silence greets him. With exaggerated sluggishness he pulls out a smartphone. He shows us a YouTube clip of a man water skiing after a group of professional rowers in an Olympic rowing boat. “What is he doing,” he asks. “Water skiing after a rowing boat,” I answer after a few seconds of silence. “Water skiing after a goddamned rowing boat! Of course, it can be done. Only, these guys have three things you idiots lack: Proper training, proper equipment, and most importantly a will to succeed.”

They march us relentlessly at a blinding pace. Our rucksacks are packed to the brim with nearly fifty kilos of equipment. The instructors march without kit and almost as fast as they physically can. We keep up. The slowest of the group must run from time to time not to fall behind. Stragglers will not be accepted. Instructor Rossier yells and screams like a madman. Sometimes directed at me, sometimes at the others. I don't know anymore. I try to blot him out. Hour after hour it goes on. I lose track of time. The only break from the monotony is the short stops the instructors give us every other hour to adjust socks, restock water, and grab an apple or a banana from the accompanying truck. I have a chafe. A bad one. It feels like there's a hole in my thigh. One of the seams in my combat pants keeps gnawing at the flesh. It was a small thing to begin with, now it is all I can think of. The pain grows until it fills my world. I don't even notice the rucksack anymore. Every time we stop, I try to adjust my underwear to prevent the gnawing from destroying my resolve. It only helps sporadically, granting me a few minutes reprieve, before the pace causes the underwear to snake upwards and the chafe to begin again. I should have put on my tights. I decided in a split-second decision that it would be too warm. Bad call! My crotch has been sore since week two. This can't be it for me. Dammit, I know I am a good soldier. I pass the weekly land navigations as one of the best, every single time. I ace the shooting drills, I am strong and resilient for my size, I am a fast runner, I am an excellent patrolman—I can do this. I must hold on. We are twelve weeks into selection and only another four weeks remain, but the march goes on and on and I struggle. At the next stop, one of the instructors tells Belgard not to go any further. Belgard is an NCO like me and an excellent soldier. He is hard as nails, but he's been lagging behind for the past hour or so despite the instructor's yelling and snarling. He's out. We won't see him again. The march goes on for another eternity until Instructor Dumond suddenly veers off course, takes a few steps into the forest, and stops. He indicates for us to form a circle around him. I suddenly notice that Voland is missing, too. They must have taken him out earlier. We are only twenty left. Instructor Dumond looks at every one of us in turn. He looks disgusted. "You all look terrible. Anyone want to quit?" No one answers. He shakes his head disapprovingly. "Is this really all it takes? Fifty kilometers in nine hours and we lose two men? You need get your shit together if you want to be Dragoons. I still have a month to

break you. You can rest here for the evening. Set up camp wherever you like. Non-tactical rest. You can refill water by the truck. Ready to march again tomorrow at 0800.” He strides off without further orders and joins the other instructors. We all stumble a few meters further, drop the rucksacks, and slowly begin to prepare our bivouacs. I feel ruined. I can’t believe we marched for only nine hours. I set up my shelter, rummage through my kit and find my tights. At least I brought them. I could cry with relief, maybe there is still a chance that I can struggle through the coming days. I wolf down an MRE and take off my uniform to dry it. There is a bleeding gash on the inside of my left thigh. I bandage it and take a look at my feet. There are three blisters to pop which I see to immediately. The nail on my right big toe is a dark shade of purple and I can feel the pulse thump underneath it. I decide to gently wiggle the tip of my combat knife in under it. There is no sensation as the knife slides effortlessly into the soft tissue. Blood spurts out and the pressure subsides. I lie back with a sigh of relief. Time to rest now, ready to do it again tomorrow.

We are ready to give feedback and present results on the week’s operations. Special Reconnaissance and Direct Action. I have been team leader for second team. We’ve done a good job, but we are so tired it is unbelievable. I’ve spent the past thirty-six hours moving from post to post keeping my teams awake and observing the target. I should be asleep on my feet, but I feel strangely elated that we are home. We are at the end of week fourteen. The final exercise begins Monday. We are sixteen left. Win or lose, in two weeks this will all be over soon. Three of the instructors enter the room and sit down in the back. “Patrol unit two reporting ready for washup,” I say. The lead instructor indicates for me to commence. I begin to go over the past week in meticulous detail. I explain our routes of advance, rendezvous points, the two troops in contact situations, our time for eyes on the objective, and the subsequent strike after positive identification of our target. From time to time, I ask one of the team members to explain a particular event or detail. The instructors listen intently and ask few questions. Over the past two weeks they’ve begun to show us a modicum of trust. We know our craft by now. I turn around and ask Bleach to explain the EXFIL route, but he is fast asleep. A bubble of pent-up frustration bursts inside me. I instinctively throw the chalk I am holding across the room. It hits him squarely in the face

with a resounding snap, and he wakes with a frightened yelp. “Don’t you sleep, you son of a whore,” I scream at the top of my lungs, ready to charge over and strangle him. The whole room reels from my outburst. I immediately regret my actions, not just because I genuinely like Bleach, but because I realize that I absolutely overreacted. The fatigue! Oh, man, what have I done? Is this it? Am I out? But the instructors do nothing. One of them stifles a snigger and quickly gets up to leave the room. The others are biting their lower lips and looking down. Then Bleach begins to laugh, and I do too, then all the other recruits—and the instructors, too. Everything suddenly feels ridiculous and carefree, and just for minute or two we are all peers, and the horrible days of selection are miles away. When everything has quieted down, Bleach gets up and explains the EXFIL as if nothing has happened. They let me off easy with only two hundred push-ups for my transgression. The next morning the instructors gather us by “The Bucket,” a huge industrial metal pail containing over two tons of water. They ask me to stand underneath it, and I am fit to burst with pride. I am the last of the batch to be given my operator’s name, and I was beginning to fear that the instructors didn’t believe in me. Instructor Dumond steps forward. “Sergeant Albert Chastain. You have had some hard times here, like everyone else has, but you have also had some good ones. In many ways this characterizes you as a soldier. We, the instructors, have noticed that you have two sides. A good one and a not so good. A calm and an agitated one. A tranquil and an explosive side. We believe that this defines you. Now, hum!” he orders the other recruits. They all begin to drone away, and three instructors start pulling on the rope to the bucket. The water drips, then pours, and I stand to attention with tears in my eyes. Instructor Dumond roars: “Albert Chastain, you will henceforth be known as Split.” The two tons of water crashes over me and knocks me to the ground.

We gather by the gate in the early morning. The sun is up but the air is cold and crisp. Instructor Garnier is waiting for us—alone. We line up, all fifteen of us and sing *La Marseillaise*. Then we run out the gate and into the meadows. We move at a leisurely pace. There is no hurry. The sixteen weeks are over. We pass a tiny grove and continue across a wet field. Instructors Rossier and Leroy suddenly join us out of nowhere. They must have been hiding amongst the trees we just passed. As we move through the terrain, more and more instructors appear until there are more of them than there are of us. My heart soars.

After half an hour we stop at the foot of the “The Knoll,” one of many hills the instructors have been drilling us up and down during the endless PT-sessions. At the top, a single man is waiting next to a table with white cloth and glasses of champagne. It is Colonel Toujouse, the regimental commander. Instructor Dumond steps out in front. He looks as stern as always. “Gentlemen, we are almost at the end, but I would caution you to think that it is over. Even with the objective in sight the ground may yet fall out underneath you.” The other instructors begin milling up the side of the hill. “If you would be Dragoons, you must make it past these fine men. They are a fierce bunch, and they will not willingly let you by. Is it impossible?” “Nothing is impossible,” we shout as one. He nods, smiling in his feline way, and screams at the top of his lungs: “Go!” We charge forward. I make it exactly three meters up the incline before one of the instructors drop-kicks me back down. I land hard on my back. I am winded and struggle to get up. All the others are being pushed, knocked, or kicked down as well. Drake lands next to me, physically thrown by two of the instructors. I get up and charge again. I crash headlong into the nearest instructor and put him on his ass. I push past. The next one tries to grab me but misses. I am halfway up. I take four more steps, almost there. Then a huge instructor intervenes. He blocks my path, grabs me with a vise-like grip, and pushes me down on the ground. I fight him tooth and nail but to little avail, he is much bigger and stronger than I. Another recruit blasts past us and roars in jubilation as he reaches the top of the hill. My assailant suddenly leans sideways, trying to interdict another recruit struggling past. It is all that I need. I put everything I have into the fight and the giant topples from my back. I get up and run. Then suddenly the top of the hill is there, and I roar. Colonel Toujouse smiles. It takes another five minutes for the last of the recruits to make it to the top. Then the instructors join us. They laugh and smile, their entire demeanor is immediately different. They hand us glasses of champagne and put the red berets on our heads. If feel like crying and laughing at the same time. The Colonel gives a speech, but I can hardly make sense of the words. The lazy morning sunlight warms my face, the champagne makes my fingertips tingle, I have gone beyond the possible. I am a Dragoon.

I don't even have to look to know that it is a hit. There is an infinitesimal difference in the sound even though he is shooting at a paper target a hundred meters away. Had he missed, the whip-crack sound from the back wall would have been flatter. I look through the spotter scope. "You are centered but you need to correct two inches upwards," I tell him. Onion grabs the adjustment tool and makes his correction, opens the top of the Minimi, adjusts the belt, closes and pulls hard on the cocking handle. His second shot is perfect. "Spot on," I tell him. "Too easy." He repeats the action five times, before removing the belt from the weapon. I scan the target and nod in approval. The grouping is smaller than a Euro from a hundred meters away. "That's the last of them," he says. We pack up the weapons and pull down the targets in silence. Carrying eight machineguns, rifles, and pistols between us we look like something out of an 80's action movie as we make our way to Alpha platoon's temporary armory. We lock up the long-barreled weapons and head for the chow hall. It is late in the afternoon and the shadows have already become long, but the temperature is still around 30 degrees Celsius. There is an odd smell in the air. Dust, weapons oil, jet fuel, and feces. It reminds me of every operations base I've served in over the past decade, from Afghanistan to Africa—from Congo to the Levant. It smells like deployment. This is already my second tour in Mali and just like in Afghanistan, things go back and forth. To begin with, it didn't seem as discouraging as "the Forever War" against the Talibs. But now, like the Afghans, the Malian tribes fight over everything. They struggle for power over territory, influence in government, and control over smuggling routes. The web of allegiances and counter allegiances between the various tribes is unbelievable. Some of them simultaneously side with both sides of the ongoing conflict depending on what territory you encounter them in, some of them agree on religious matters but disagree about customs, some of them are at each other's throats over grievances a hundred years old but stand side by side in protecting their rights to graze cattle on a third tribe's land. It is enough to make your head spin. The struggle over religion seems to wax and wane. From my first deployment in '14 to now, the Jihadis have become fewer, even though the war has become more brutal. Many of the zealots seem to have been killed or have left Mali, probably to die in Iraq or Syria. Of the ones that keep up the fight, Islamic State West Africa Province or ISWAP are the worst. A week ago, they

changed the game completely. Close to the tiny village of Tassiga in Eastern Gao, a suicide bomber claimed the life of five French soldiers and fourteen Malian civilians. The bomb turned out to be laden with an unknown but highly refined kind of blister agent. The gas subsequently killed another French soldier and a further eighteen civilians. It was a show of force. The world was stunned. As were we. No one, even in their wildest dreams, would ever have imagined that a motley band of radicals like ISWAP would have been capable of producing such a horrific weapon. By direct order of the President, we suspended most of our operations, pending the arrival of further CBRN equipment. I've been spending the time getting Alpha ready. Weapons have been zeroed daily. We've run Close Quarters Battle drills in gas masks, chemical detection training and Tactical Combat Casualty Care exercises. The work keeps the boys from getting too restless. They want to strike back. It almost seems like ISWAP has been expecting us to seize operations. They were quick to snatch the initiative, proved they were responsible for the attack, and proclaimed the creation of a new Caliphate, claiming vast regions of Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali for their own. It is almost tragicomical. Just as the Caliphate in the Levant collapses, a new one is proclaimed in the Sahel. ISWAP has given the world a week to recognize their new state or face the consequences. I find myself hoping that West Africa is too far away, too poor, or honestly speaking, too black for the world's jihadis to come charging in. Onion opens the door to the chow hall; we enter to a scene of confusion. More than two hundred men are on their feet, staring at the four television screens on the back wall. I push past a few Legionnaires and grab Vega by the arm. He hardly reacts to my touch. "What's going on," I ask. He answers without looking at me. "They've attacked Bamako." I stare at the screen. It is a TV5 Monde Broadcast. The pictures look like something out of a nightmare. The cameraman is not trying to record, he is trying to escape. His camera swerves left and right catching only short glimpses of the terror surrounding him. He is in the middle of a panic-stricken throng fleeing down a street with small houses on either side. People are dying before our very eyes. They desperately fight to escape something I cannot make out. The press of bodies pushes the cameraman sideways into a wall. He falls but manages to get up and scramble onwards. Broken French words filter through the screams from the crowd. "Hail Mary, full of grace..." Yelling and crying, the people around him meet their

demise. Scores die while retching bile, collapsing with bleeding eyes and swelling, oozing blisters that seem to develop almost instantaneously. One of the Legionnaires behind me throws up. I hardly notice. A few seconds later, the cameraman finally collapses, and the picture settles in an uneven angle. The camera continues to film the rampage with the discordant sound of people coughing to death in the background. It goes on like that for another few seconds before the scene shifts to a news anchor. He is white as a sheet. His mouth is slightly agape, but somehow, he manages to have enough presence of mind to begin speaking. I hear the words but cannot make out their meaning. I feel lost. Forlorn. My eyes are burning and my heart pumps. My hands are shaking. Vega turns and looks at me. Tears are streaming freely down his hard-looking features. "Goddammit, man!," he says. "Goddammit!" I embrace him. I am lost for words. With a deafening noise, the base early warning system suddenly begins to wail.

This has got to be good news. I can tell just from his walk. There is a swagger about Captain Wallin this morning. He looks happy or excited maybe. It bodes well. He is accompanied by two men in combat fatigues. I know Major Aubert from G2, but the other I do not recognize. He is a grey-haired fellow in a well-worn uniform without rank distinctions. There is something rough-cut and predatory about him. He reminds me of an old wolf. The three of them are laughing at some implied joke that I cannot make out from the distance. The captain skipped the morning briefing today and ordered Alpha and her enablers to be ready at platoon room at 0900 hours. They must finally have a target for us. It is about time. We are all itching to strike back. The past sixty or so hours have been torture to us all. The attack in Bamako was not a standalone action. ISWAP launched three strikes simultaneously. A minor attack hit a Senegalese MINUSMA base in Eastern Gao causing a few casualties, but the monsters also attempted a major attack on our Central Operations Base. A loitering Puma drone spotted an incoming truck, driving at high speed. As it failed to react to warning shots, the Land Phalanx opened fire and destroyed it well outside the perimeter. Though it never got close, hundreds of square meters were contaminated with the sulfur-mustard agents it carried. Just the thought of the destruction it would have caused if it had detonated at the main gate makes my stomach turn. The whole base was ordered in full CBRN-suits, until the decontamination teams had the

situation under control. Despite the precautions, an entire platoon from Force Protection was hospitalized for observation because of breathing difficulties. For thirty-six hours, we were in masks and suits in the blistering Malian heat because ISWAP had the audacity to lash out directly against us. Gloves are off, it is personal now. The boys are chilling out in the shade of the awning next to the team rooms. Everyone is hoping to start a planning and preparations cycle. “Alpha, on your feet,” I yell. “Get inside, ready at the stations.” They start filing through the door, while I move to greet the officers. “Morning, Major, Captain... Sir,” I say greeting them with a smile. “Morning, Split,” the captain answers. “You know Major Aubert from G2,” he says nodding in his direction, “and this is Chris from our friends in the CIA,” he says, indicating the old wolf. “Split here is my platoon sergeant and 2IC.” Chris smiles and shakes my hand. “Split,” he says in almost perfect French, “how did you get that name?” “Well, there are two persons inside me,” I answer. “Nice and not so nice. They joust for control from time to time.” “Am I talking to the nice one now then,” he laughs. “Absolutely,” I answer with a grin and indicate for them to step inside with me. I close and lock the door behind us. Alpha platoon is standing to attention. The captain sends me an awkward smile, drops a stack of maps and what looks to be an INTEL package on the table, and orders them at ease. “How formal,” he says, addressed to me. “Did you put them up to this? Are they going to do a human pyramid next?” I shrug apologetically. “Alpha Wolves, sit down,” he says. “Let me present Major Aubert from G2 if y’all don’t already know him, and this handsome fellow is Chris from our friends in the CIA.” Turning towards our guests he continues, “This is Alpha platoon and her enablers, the finest fighting men of the Parachute Dragoon Regiment. Chris and Major Aubert come bearing good news, but before we begin, let me make one thing absolutely clear: The content of the coming briefing is NATO Cosmic Top Secret. Only a select few are currently privy to the information it contains. You will not communicate what you are about to learn to anyone outside this room. You will not refer a single word of it to the other platoons, not the flight crews, not your families. No one! Do not even discuss this knowledge outside the confines of this room, even amongst yourselves. If I catch you doing it, you’re off the team. I am not kidding, Alphas! There will be no calls home. If you need to coordinate support from enablers not currently present it will happen through me and me only. You

copy?” There is a cacophonous roar of agreement from the men. “Alright then. Major, if you please.” Major Aubert attaches an external hard drive to the secure computer and turns on the projector. A massive slideshow fills the back wall. The first image is of a young African man. To say that he has seen better times would be an understatement. He looks like he has been beaten and dragged through the mud. His face is swollen and discolored. “Gentlemen, allow me to present you to Mr. Hassem Abdullahi. This young man is a former sergeant of the Islamic State West Africa Province. He is a Nigerian national from Maiduguri in Borno Province. He claims that he was more or less hoodwinked into the organization. Although he is from Nigeria, he was surrendered to a U.S. Special Forces base in Niamey in Niger by a unit of the Niger Army just over six days ago. Our U.S. allies have been interrogating him ever since. Despite what some of you may think, none of our people have laid a hand on him. The reason he looks so worse for wear is that his unit was caught in an ambush by a Niger Army unit a few weeks ago. The ambush cut them to pieces, his entire unit was destroyed, and he barely managed to escape with his life.” The major clicks through a series of bloody images presumably taken by the Niger Army in the wake of their attack. Dead ISWAP fighters are sprawled in a ditch and in an adjacent hedgerow. “He surrendered to the Niger Army after the ambush and was treated less than kindly. He has seen some very hard times indeed and has been struggling to survive. Mr. Abdullahi is a former student of UNIMAID, the University of Maiduguri, where he studied Chemical Engineering. Apparently, some of the patrons of his local mosque lent him money for his studies in exchange for services. At some point, these services led him into the depths of ISWAP, and he was isolated from his family and ostracized by his friends. He claims he kept operating within ISWAP because he felt he had no other alternatives. He was at odds about what to do, but once he realized that ISWAP was producing a military grade chemical agent, he decided that his former friends had to be stopped. When his unit was attacked, he saw a window of opportunity to make a new life for himself and surrendered, killing one of his former allies while doing so. He took a wild chance that could have just as easily backfired. Now, Mr. Abdullahi has mostly been responsible for tactical operations. His little band of fighters was tasked with running security for some of the enemy’s logistical convoys. Interestingly, he was tasked with a kind of quality

assurance of lab equipment, and with close protection of transports from random sites in the desert to the same tiny village in Eastern Gao. I know this sounds like business as usual when it comes to ISWAP, and it would be if it wasn't for one thing in particular. As I told you, Mr. Abdullahi is a trained chemical engineer and noticed that some of these transports carried both dual-use laboratory equipment, compounds, and construction materials of the kind needed to build and supply a chemical laboratory.” The major stops, almost as if for dramatic effect. The guys are nodding their heads, cracking knuckles, and whispering amongst themselves; you could cut the excitement with a knife. Seamlessly, Chris takes over. “Gentlemen, you might well ask why we haven't shared this knowledge before now? It is a fair question. There are three reasons. First and most importantly: Like every other intelligence agency on the Western Hemisphere, we miserably miscalculated how large a quantity of this substance ISWAP had been able to produce and store. I'll own up to that. We all outright underestimated them, and the result of that blunder was the Bamako attack. Secondly, this is single source intelligence. For this to become actionable we had to have confirmation of its validity. In other words, we had to be sure that Mr. Abdullahi was not lying to us. God knows I can think of enough reasons why he might be. We now believe we have confirmation that he is speaking the truth—or at the very least that he believes that he is. We have confirmation from informants with contacts to ISWAP that Mr. Abdullahi is believed dead. We have had time to collect satellite imagery and overfly the identified village with U2s.” He taps the clicker and draws up a bird's eye image of something that can hardly be described as a village. It consists of a few farmhouses and cottages and a single, large compound next to a hardpacked dirt road. “This is Bila. It is a tiny place in the middle of nowhere. A good distance east of Ménaka and located in hardcore ISWAP territory. We have proof of vehicles coming and going with semi-regular intervals, from heat signatures we can tell that there is at least one building dedicated to running generators, and there appears to be a pattern of patrolling guards in vicinity of the identified target compound. These observations corroborate Mr. Abdullahi's story. To his credit, he also passed a polygraph test a few days ago. At this time, we feel certain that his INTEL is good. This building, gentlemen, is likely ISWAP's chemical weapons production facility.” “Please tell me you're going to ask us to hit that damn compound, sir.” The exclamation

comes from Sulky, one of the operators, who is unable to keep his cool. I flinch at his lack of discipline, but the captain raises his hand to stall me before I berate him. “Yes, Sulky, of course we are. But you need to shut the hell up and listen, because this is about to get significantly more complicated!” He nods to Chris who continues. “The third reason we’ve been slow to react is because of expected state actor involvement. I know military communities across the globe have been discussing this since the first attack at Tassiga. How on Earth could ISWAP develop this new agent on their own? And as it turns out, they couldn’t.” He pushes the button again and a picture of three distinctly Asian looking men appear. “Without further ado I give you Major Yuàn-bó Zhang, Major Míng jí Liu, and Lieutenant Colonel Te Dan Wei. These gentlemen are officers of the reserve of The People’s Liberation Army and are Chinese chemical engineers. They used to work as scientists for China’s government-owned oil and natural gas company. In September 2016, the three of them were kidnapped from an oil platform in the Usan Field off the coast of Nigeria. Their captors smuggled them into the Niger Delta from where they proceeded to disappear off the face of the Earth. Along with your own Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure, we tracked Chinese negotiations for a few months but as they seemed to become increasingly fruitless our interest waned. Until now for obvious reasons. The DGSE have found a series of indications that these Chinese scientists are involved in the production of the WMD.” He presses the button again and a split screen appears, showing a route from the Mediterranean to Mali and a picture of a report that appears to be in Hebrew. “Moreover, a source in the Mossad have confirmed that a Salafist network has provided arrangements for North Korean agents to be transported into Mali along the so-called Contested Route....” Chris stops and looks around the room as if he expects a reaction. “You heard me right, by the way. I did say North Korean,” he continues. “We are still uncertain exactly what the connection here is, but the best of our analysts deems it very likely that the North Koreans are providing hardware and construction expertise, while the Chinese are providing production knowledge for ISWAP’s operation. We cannot say for certain that the three Chinese scientists are helping voluntarily. They may be working at gun point. It may even be that the North Korean support is part of an arrangement to secure the release of the Chinese scientists. It may also not be the case—which is what we all fear

and what we must find out. No matter what, we believe that bereft of these elements, ISWAP's WMD capabilities will come to an abrupt end. The fulcrum of your coming operation is therefore these three objectives: To capture the Chinese scientists alive to confirm or deny deliberate Chinese and North Korean involvement, to collect as much intelligence as possible to determine exactly how this refined sulfur-mustard gas was developed, and to destroy the laboratory, the fabrication facility, and any stockpile of chemical production materials you may find." The boys nod, whistle, and high-five. My stomach tingles with butterflies. "Settle down," Captain Wallin interjects and takes the clicker from Chris. "Attention, men. The following are the orders for Operation Marianne's Reckoning. 1) Situation, a) Enemy Forces...."

"You look tired, Split." I glance at the captain. He honestly looks haggard with swollen, bloodshot eyes, and dark lines chiseled across his face. "We can't all have your permanently youthful looks, sir," I answer as we walk to the platoon room. It is only 9 a.m. but the heat is already coming on. After fourteen straight hours of planning, we presented the final decision brief to the Operations Section yesterday evening and had it approved. After that, the captain and I sent most of the boys off to bed and spent a few more hours coordinating air space with our Terminal Air Controllers and detailed every element of the first phase of the operation with Lieutenant Colonel Dejardin from the Legion who had been drawn in to help. Most of Alpha platoon is already waiting in the shade outside the room, a few stragglers come running from the chow hall behind us. I indicate for everyone to get inside, asking only for the team leaders to stay behind. "Status, guys? Any concerns?," I ask. The four team leaders shake their heads. "No, we're good. Everything is packed and we had time to run four break contact and six breaching drills yesterday evening with all the assaulters. We did the breaching in masks and snakeskin chem-suits," Bleach answers. I nod. "Good work, Bleach. Snipers?" "We are good, Split," Monte replies. "We know the route forwards and backwards. We've drilled the rallying points with the guys several times, we've found some decent approaches, even though the terrain is terribly open. Oh, and we've zeroed everything one extra time just to be sure." "Nice," I answer. "Sir, do you have anything?" Captain Wallin smiles and shakes his head. "No, well, nothing else than to say that this is it, guys. The operations section has sent our decision

brief directly to the Hexagone Balard. If we get the green light now, there's wheels up in three hours. Remember that they asked for us specifically. We were made for this. We can really do some good. Now let's go, we shouldn't keep them waiting." We enter the platoon room. All of Alpha platoon and her enablers, almost fifty guys, are seated in neat rows facing the back wall where a clear picture is broadcast directly from the Hexagone Balard. We are staring at an empty wall and a small podium with the Ministère des Armées logo. As we sit down, Major Aubert gives a thumbs up to someone on the screen. We wait in silence for a few minutes before the Minister of Defense, Florence Parly, suddenly enters the frame and takes the stage. She has been in office for less than six months, but when she speaks it is with determination and in a lingo we can relate to. Not only does she thank us for our service to the nation, without hesitation she refers to us as heroes for what we are about to do. A shiver runs down my back. They must have decided to approve it. Without flinching she tells us to hit them hard, to destroy their operation, and to bring us the scientists who built this terrible weapon. The boys almost begin to clap. They are like attack dogs straining on the lead now. The minister finishes her speech and leaves the podium for Admiral Isnard, the Head of SOCOM. He greets Captain Wallin and a few of the operators by name in his common cordial fashion before suddenly turning grave. "Alpha platoon, I will make this short. It is not within my oratory abilities to improve on the powerful words of the Minister. What I will tell you is simply this: Every one of you volunteered and were chosen amongst a very select few. For years, you have trained for this. You have worked with your enablers until their special skills became an extension of yourself. We ask you now to take upon yourself a mission akin to no other. Not even the Gunnerside sabotage will stand in comparison to this. You are about to go behind enemy lines to dismantle and destroy our enemy's entire WMD operation. We are sending you into uncharted lands. There may be dragons where you are about to go. Remember who you are. There are few people in the world who can endure what you have already endured. I know because I did it myself. There are few people in the world as skilled as you. I know because I've seen it. There are few people with as many assets working in their support as you now have. I know because I approved it. The plan is risky but the potential for success is unprecedented. I

have no reservations about sending you forth. Men of the COM FST.... My Dragoons, I hereby give you the Green Light.”

The air turns white-hot. Screaming whip-cracks snap past my head, one of them so close that I can feel the beat of air pressure against my face. I instinctively break right, throw myself to the ground and return fire. A spurt of gunfire misses me by less than a meter and showers me in dirt. One of them has his sights on me. Shit! We are drawing way more fire than expected. How was there no warning? Nothing on the enemy radio chatter. I see more than a handful of firing points from the compounds in front us but can't tell which ones are shooting at me. The outskirts of Jobu are teeming with enemy activity. The storm of incoming bullets is tearing us up. I see movement in one of the positions and lay a magazine-long salvo on it. With a quick maneuver, Onion and Vega sprint out past me and take up position on my right. They let their Minimis rip. The streams of concerted machinegun fire silence the two firing points farthest on the far right. I jump up and run backwards and left with near misses streaking past me. I clutch at my radio switch and am about to scream at Colonel Dejardin when the Legionnaires finally open up. From the treeline on our far-left flank, a whole platoon's worth of rifles suddenly fire. They soak the enemy positions in barrage of rounds. The air shimmers and cracks. I drop and shoot, while One-team fire and maneuver. A few feeble tracer rounds whistle out from the enemy positions but are too far off this time to have been directed at any of us. We've gained fire supremacy. With a roar, a MILAN missile streaks from the Legionnaires' position and hits one of the firing points dead center. With a thunderous detonation the entire wall crumbles inward and collapses. I move. I sprint and dodge, though I am certain no one is shooting directly at me anymore. I drop and take three deep breaths while I try to assess the situation. Two-team has moved past the hedgerow from whence we came and are in position. They are shooting steadily, conserving ammunition. That's good! Although their fire is more suppressing than it is effective at this range, they are keeping the enemy's heads down. Explosions blossom along the outskirts of Jobu. The Legionnaires have gotten their mortars up and working now as well. They have taken over the fight as planned and are pummeling the village. I now have everyone from One-team with me, we are ready to break contact. I

give the order. The guys start moving more concertedly and Two-team step up their covering fire. Two minutes later we are through the hedgerow and leave Jobu behind us with all men accounted for. We sprint the next mile to the rendezvous and link up with Three and Four-teams. Behind us the battle still roars. "One and Two, reorganize," I order with sweat dripping from the chinstrap. Captain Wallin looks at me intently. "Y'all okay?," he asks. "Looked like you took a beating out on the right flank." I nod. "We're all okay, though I must admit it was wildly more intense than I had thought it would be. Did you pick up any ICOM chatter before they started shooting?" He shakes his head. "Nothing. Not even transmission clicks. They must have been well-prepared." I sigh and run a hand down my face. "Dammit. Only blind luck saved me from getting hit in the first volley. How did you guys fare?" He shrugs. "We came up the middle, but the terrain was nice and uneven. Hundreds of nooks and crannies to duck into. Their fire was ineffective. It was you guys who drew their attention. It looked insane. I was almost sure you would have pulled one or two wounded or killed. That would have been an expensive price to pay to get flown this close to the target." He pretends to type on a keyboard. "Lesson Learned: Jobu village is not just semi-defended." I smile. "I hope we don't have too many more surprises like that. Dejardin took long enough, huh? He gave me the go-ahead before we started moving through the trees. I half expected him to lose his cool before the TIC was drawn." The roar and boom of another MILAN missile in the background makes me flinch. "Well, he's got them entertained now, that's for sure," the captain chuckles. "The sun is setting. We should get going." I nod and bring the mike close to my lips per reflex. "All units, this is Alpha Five. Prepare for darkness. Ready to move ASAP." A few minutes later, I get the last of the ready signals and we set into motion with the snipers jutting out ahead of us and the roar of the ongoing battle behind us. The oncoming night envelopes us as we move into the Malian desert. Half an hour later, the distant sound of helicopters signals that the battle of Jobu is ending. The furious roar of GIAT 30 mm cannons spell death in the darkness. Unrelenting fire from the Tigre Helicopters is tearing up the enemy positions as the Legionnaires disengage and move to the LZ, feinting a tactical retreat. The flashes of gunfire and missile-detonations light up the night behind us. I whisper a silent prayer that the legion will get out of there without any losses. I pray that the enemy swallowed our

deception hook, line, and sinker. I pray they believe the subterfuge of a failed attack on the Jobu stronghold as we slip away silently into the darkness. We are as close to the target as we can come without raising suspicions. The rest of the way we will cover on foot. The millions of stars in the night sky wink and glitter through the green lenses of my four-tubes. We have fifty-five kilometers of marching ahead of us. The night is nearly moonless, the mild breeze has a silky feel to it. We march at a good pace, stopping only for map checks and to give the operators a short rest every other hour. We maintain strict radio silence, so I spent the short rests moving between the individual teams to check on the men. I needn't bother as it turns out. The terrain isn't particularly difficult, and if there is one thing we do better than almost anyone, it is INFIL. A calm falls over me. We are committed now. On schedule. The operation is unfolding. We march at a blinding pace, stopping only when absolutely necessary. As dawn approaches, we settle under a series of rocky outcroppings in a depression fifteen kilometers from the target. We've managed forty kilometers in a single night without incident. It's good work. The snipers have set up a position overlooking the mouth of the gulley and a position to cover the open terrain above and in front of us. Two of the machine gunners have set up shop to cover our rear. I check in with the captain. "How was your night, sir," I ask. "Beautifully boring and uneventful. Yours?" "Same, sir," I answer. "My mind kept drifting back to the 200K march." He chuckles. "Damn, those were a tough few days! Last night was a leisurely stroll in comparison. Are we good?," he asks. "We are, sir. The men are in excellent shape. We still have plenty of water, but the day-light hours will eat up quite a bit of it. Four-team has set up a forward observations-post and a covering position at the valley mouth," I answer and indicate the directions. "One-team has set up a covering position behind us at the lip of the gulley, just left of that odd boulder we passed coming in. They've coordinated rotations for watch within the teams." He nods. "Good work, Split. I am going to catch a few hours of sleep then." "Me too," I answer. "I've asked Two-team and Three-team to check their snakeskins and masks before sleeping. I'll ask Two-team to wake us at noon. We can coordinate the rest then." He flips me a peace sign.

The night is dead-quiet and black as pitch. The earth has an oddly heavy scent to it. There's likely an underground body of water somewhere nearby. No water, no life. We've

had eyes on target for an hour now. We approached from the south. Monte and his snipers have split off and set up two positions, one on a small hill eight hundred meters to the west and a riskier one in a small patch of thorny shrubbery almost four hundred meters southeast of the target. They've got the area boxed in; there's no going in or out. The compound is the single notable structure in the entire area. Situated just south of the road, it is a big building surrounded on all sides by a high wall. We steered clear of a few huts, farms, and a lonely well coming in, but the ground surrounding the tiny village of Bila is almost completely open. Only a few scattered bushes and dips in the terrain offer some modicum of cover for our many men. The moon has set completely now, and Two-team and Three-team are creeping closer to the compound inch by inch. I observe the building and what I can see of the road through a thermal scope from my position a few hundred meters behind the forward teams. Two sets of guards patrol the road at irregular intervals but appear to be the only security on watch. Judging from their movements, they do not suspect an imminent attack. The captain and his radio operator are a few meters behind me. They have set up an HF-connection for tac-chat back to base. They've been working away under the tarpaulin for half an hour now. I am getting restless, hungry for information. Finally, Captain Wallin crawls out under the cover, edges up to me, and whispers in the dark. "The Spectre is loitering 40 minutes out and the Tigres reported wheels up ten minutes ago, inbound full throttle. We're still waiting on the U2 for the live feed. Where are the boys?" "Have a look," I answer and pass him the thermal binoculars. "Two and Three-teams have moved up and are within striking distance. We can take down the guards simultaneously, pop the gate open afterwards, and proceed as planned. I'll move up to the front and lead the charge as soon as you give the go-ahead." "Good," he answers. "You should get going. IR-strobe me when you're in position and be careful." "Yes, sir," I answer and slowly secure the rifle on my back. I start edging forward towards Two and Three-teams. It is a discipline of patience, moving one limb at a time. Every little brush against the dirt or scrape against a bush sounds like a thunderclap to me, although nearly imperceptible to the human ear. It takes me just over an hour to move the two hundred meters to the teams. They are flat on the ground with weapons at the ready. In dead silence, they observe the guards. I inch forward and find Grumpy, team leader of Two-team. "You ready?" I ask as silently as I

can manage. “He leans toward me and whispers into the microphone of my headphones. “They change guards every hour or so, but they don’t follow a strict pattern. When we move, we need to be fast and get up to the compound wall. We’ll wait there until the first two have moved up the road. The other two are probably resting in front of the compound. We’ll split up by the road. Two-team will take out the guards going west. Three-team will take out the guards in front of the compound. We’ll rendezvous at the gate.” “OK,” I whisper back. “IEDs?” “Juno says, he doesn’t think so,” he whispers. “With ground like this, we’d be able to see if it had been disturbed.” I squeeze his arm to indicate my agreement. “Good. Remember: Simultaneously! If we lose the element of surprise, they may kill the hostages.” “Hostages...,” Grumpy repeats. I can’t make out whether he is asking a question or scoffing at the notion. His voice sounds laden with doubt. I let it go. I reach back and flick on the IR-strobe on the battery pack of my helmet. I let it blink a few times for the captain to see and turn it back off. We lie in silence and wait. Minutes go by. I am about to give the captain another burst when he suddenly breaks radio silence with two words. “Alpha, go!” No one moves. The guards are lazily walking down the road away from the compound into the dark night. We wait until they pass almost out of sight. Grumpy slowly takes a knee and signals Two and Three-teams to move. We are all on our feet within seconds and sprint towards the compound wall with weapons in low port. We cover the distance in twenty-five seconds or so. As we get close, Grumpy gives two beats with his arms outwards and down, indicating us to spread out and kneel. We follow his lead. One of the EODs makes a lightning-fast, visual sweep of the area and signals us to continue. We move to the compound wall and up to the western corner. The first operator clears it, and we push towards the road. The teams slow down to a creeping pace. Smooth movements, rifles panning. They read each other’s body language and indicate who covers which angles. The front two operators nod their barrels, and the teams divide and speed up again. Two-team moves quickly along the road, chasing after the guards. I follow Three-team, turn the corner, and move along the compound wall towards the gate. In front of us, a light flickers in the darkness. For a second, I mistake it for a bonfire before realizing that my night vision goggles are amplifying the light of a lantern. Two guards are seated next to the gate relaxing their backs against the wall. Their AKs are resting in their laps. The

first two operators open fire and litter them with shots. Though the rifles are silenced, the repetition of their weapons sounds like firecrackers in the night. The guards collapse without so much as a whimper. From behind us, the sound of Two-team's weapons echo. "Shots fired, shots fired," I send on the radio. Captain Wallin confirms. We quickly pull the bodies to the side, unload their weapons, and snap handcuffs on them. Blood is soaking the ground around them. I listen for reactions from inside the compound. There are none. I can hear the humming of generators but nothing else. The gate turns out to be made from solid wood. Somehow, I had imagined it would be made from corrugated metal. The breachers are just getting to work as Two-team come up behind us. Grumpy gives me the thumbs up. Good work. We remain undetected, as far as we know. I give Drake, the team leader of Three-team, the go-ahead. His lead breacher, Achilles, is an unnaturally large and strong soldier. He chooses to go manual and manages to slowly nudge a crowbar into the divide between the two doors. He works away silently but the second he puts his weight behind it, the wood starts creaking like an old tree in a storm. Shit! With a splintering noise the gate pops open. Achilles jumps out of the way. The front operators clear the open gate and slowly move into the compound. The main building is in front of us, the generator room to our left. The operators check their corners, but as soon as Two-team presses in to control the courtyard, Three-team presses forward toward the main building. The lead operator is less than ten paces from the door, when it suddenly swings open with a crash, and light floods the courtyard from inside. A person strides out. The forward operator immediately squeezes the trigger and shoots him twice in the face. The man collapses like a marionet puppet with cut strings. "Go, go!" I yell. The guys rush forward. Something moves in the corner of my eye, but before I see what it is, half of Two-team fires. We rush through the door. "Main building breached. Troops in contact. Wait, out," I yell into the mike.

We take the first ones by surprise. It is a long shot from being the smoothest entry we ever managed, but we have immediate superiority. Five enemy combatants occupy the first room. Four are seated at a table eating, with their weapons on the floor. Another is working by a kitchen sink in the far end of the room. They hardly manage to move before the first two operators open fire. The seated enemies are killed in an instant. The one by

the sink hardly even manages to turn around. He throws himself to the ground with his hands over his head. There's a door on our left and one in the back wall at the far end of the room. The Team-leader indicates for the operators to cover the left door and move to the door in the back of the room. Two of the men independently decide to pull the prone enemy away from the line of fire. It turns out to be a mistake. The far door is suddenly flung open and an AK roars. The whole room reverberates with the discharge of the rifle. The rounds strike the wall immediately above the heads of the two operators. They drop headlong to the ground, while the ones at the door move and fire. The enemy shooter is riddled with small arms fire as the two of them push through the opening with rifles blazing. A third and fourth operator move forward and follow them into the room. The two guys on the floor get back up and pull the whimpering enemy to the far wall and proceed to cuff and hood him. I push after the attacking operators. It turns out to be a dormitory of sorts. Five enemies are sprawled on the floor, three of them dead, the other two look catatonic with terror, as the operators are handling them. The room is clear. The Team-leader rushes back to where we came from and indicates for the rest of his men to proceed. The first operator pops the door on the left open. There is no reaction from the inside. He slowly begins to pan the door and is suddenly met by a spurt of gunfire. He is hit and knocked backwards but somehow manages to return fire. To my surprise, he immediately regains his footing and pushes forward through the door. The man next to him follows inside, turns in the opposite direction, and begins to shoot. Two more men are hot on their heels, but no more shots are fired. I clear forward to investigate the room. It is a large space, sparsely lit, with several tables along the rear wall. The floor is covered in clean white tiles and there are two old school radios in the back of the room next to an oddly large and modern-looking door. Two enemies lie dead on the floor, a third lies face down with an operator on his back. "Cuff him and put him with the others," Drake orders. "Who was hit?" I ask. One of the operators lifts his hand. "I was. It hit the plate." He indicates a massive impact squarely in his chest. One of his magazines on the chest rig has been shot clean through. "It winded me, but I'm fine." I shake my head incredulously. "Lucky bastard. Go find Shadow and have him check you out. Just to be sure." He nods in affirmation and moves out. Drake and his men move toward the door at the back of the room. It opens effortlessly into a short but

broad corridor at the end of which is a downward staircase and an industrial size elevator. “There’s a lower level,” Drake says, asserting the obvious. “Bingo! Hold here and mask up your men,” I answer and move back out into the courtyard. Two-team have set up perimeter defense; we’ll need them inside now. I hail the captain. “Alpha Six, Alpha Five here. We have secured the top section of the compound. Fifteen enemy combatants are KIA; four are captured. No sign of the hostages. We have no wounded or dead. We’ve found a staircase and an elevator to a sub-level. I need you to move up with One-team to take over the perimeter if we are to proceed. And activate the Tigres and the Spectre. There are radios in here. They may have activated their QRF.”

I have never seen anything like this, nor had I ever imagined I would. The sub-level is a laboratory. An installation of incredible sophistication and size, something akin to a French medical clinic and not what I would expect to find in the midst of the Malian desert. Two and Three-teams have donned their CBRN masks and clear through the halls. Twice they almost set off improvised devices latched to door openings. Only the sharp eyes of our assault EODs save us from disaster. We slow down and clear two laboratories and a production facility, killing a further five enemy fighters in short, brutal shootouts. In a locked room, we find Gold 2 and Gold 3. Major Yuàn-bó Zhang and Major Míng jíe Liu are chained to the wall. They look like they’ve been through hell and back. They put up no opposition as we first release them and proceed to cuff them, hood them, and move them out. There is no sign of Gold 1, Lieutenant Colonel Te Dan Wei, until we move to clear the very last of the laboratories, that is. Out of the blue, a barricaded shooter, firing from a brilliantly concealed, sandbagged position, suddenly sprays us with machinegun fire. Drake is hit in the head and collapses. We return fire at close range but to little avail. We only manage to suppress him long enough to squeeze back out of the door. One of the other assaulters leaps forward and succeeds in pulling Drake’s limp body out of the line of fire. I lean toward the wall, considering my options. The assaulter behind me misunderstands my hesitation and begins to pan the door. The shooter opens again and hits him in the shoulder before he manages to squeeze off a single shot. Blood sprays the wall. I yank the wounded operator out of the way and yell for a medic. I unhook a frag grenade from my chest rig, show it to the assaulters behind me, and toss it through the door. The blast follows

a few seconds later but only seems to enrage the enemy. He fires off another burst through the door. “F...! Barricaded shooter,” the assaulter behind me growls. “Can’t be done. We need a thermobaric grenade.” I feel like strangling him. “Don’t tell me what can and cannot be done, you son of a whore,” I snarl. “Ready a smoke grenade. I’ll toss one of mine as well. We will blind him. He will fire to suppress. As soon as he empties his magazine, we’ll go get him.” “But we will be blind as well,” the operator interjects. I suddenly recognize his voice. It is Surf from Three-team. He is an old dog and a good fighter. I calm myself down. “Just follow my lead,” I answer. A few seconds later, Surf gives me a squeeze to indicate that he is ready. I kneel and we fling the two grenades into the laboratory. A hail of fire greets us, the concussive rap of the near misses pulls at my helmet. A few seconds later the grenades detonate, and thick, white smoke begins to envelop the room and the corridor. The shooter panics. He fires more than a hundred rounds blindly. We move backwards as the slaps of the projectiles against the back wall litter us with debris. Then the shooting abruptly stops. We move silently forward through the smoke, tracing along the wall to the door and creep inside. A single shot suddenly rings out. I flinch and stall, fearing that I have been shot, but feel no sensation. I can hear frantic fumbling from behind the sandbags. He is still trying to reload the machinegun. We continue to inch forward and I almost stumble over some sandbags on the ground. The position is right in front of me, I can hear his desperate clattering within arm’s length. Without a sound, I stroke my gloved hand along the sandbags, find the embrasure, jam my rifle into it and open fire. The noise absorbs my hearing. Deprived of my senses, I act on instinct. I keep squeezing the trigger until I empty the clip. I pull the weapon back and reload with numb fingers. Then I move along the barrier to the wall to find an entrance. Surf senses my movement and follows behind me. I sweep my hands along the barrier to find an entrance. There is nothing there. We fumble around for a minute or so until the smoke begins to dissipate. Then Surf finds a small hatch at the floor. It looks like something made for a dog. I grit my teeth, secure my rifle on my back, and draw my pistol. “Ready to pull me back out,” I whisper. He nods and takes a step to the side. I lie down, swallow hard, and almost vault myself through the hatch. The space on the other side is dark and snug. I struggle up into a crouch and on a whim decide to use the flashlight on my pistol rather than my tubes. The back of the

barricade is claustrophobically narrow. Two bodies are on the ground. The nearest one looks African. He is slumped against the back of the wall, his hand still resting on the machine gun. He is quite evidently dead, littered with bullet holes. The other is on his back in a pool of blood. Behind me Surf squeezes his way in through the hatch. When he is on his feet, I begin to inch forward. I point the pistol at the presumably dead enemy and pop open the lid on the machine gun to secure it. The shooter's blood makes everything sticky. I cuff him and clamber over him. The second body turns out to be an Asian-looking man. There is a still smoking revolver on the ground next to him. He has an entry wound underneath his chin and a gaping hole where the top of his head used to be. There is quite literally blood and brains all over the place. "F...!" I mutter and squeeze the radio switch. "All operators, this is Alpha Five. Barricade breached. Shooter neutralized. Gold 1 is dead."

"It was a good plan, Major, and it was well executed. There were many assumptions, but most of them proved true. We expected that the enemy would want to protect his installation but that he wouldn't have hundreds of men on the site. Secrecy would be his best option and since people talk.... Well, too many guards and security would suffer. We expected a platoon size of enemy fighters on site, which held true. We knew there was a risk that the enemy would kill the scientists and destroy any proof of foreign involvement in case of an attack on the installation. That was why we opted not to land on target but to create a diversionary action and sneak in on them. I'll grant you that assumption only proved half true, but the diversionary action worked. We achieved initial surprise even if it was lost just as we breached the main complex. The INFIL was naturally slow, sir, but the action on target most certainly was not. We cleared a company size objective in less than 45 minutes. Our attack was only stalled momentarily when Hex and Drake were wounded. I might add that Split here was the one who kept up the momentum of the attack. The enemy QRF was destroyed by the Spectre Gunship and never really posed a threat to us." Major Aubert nods and scribbles a few more things, Chris takes a sip of his coffee. Captain Wallin continues, "The men knew exactly what they were doing and just as importantly why they were doing it. They understood their individual

responsibilities and their respective roles in the larger plan. As GFC, it was evident to me that my men acted with purpose and that it contributed to our success. The security surrounding the operations was outstanding; you gentlemen saw to that yourself. We could of course have used more time in the preparation phase, but since time was of the essence, sir, it made sense to strike as soon as possible.” Major Aubert puts down his pen and looks at Chris who seems to shrug almost imperceptibly. “Wallin, you’re not on trial. Hell, posterity will study this operation. It was a very well executed! You managed to destroy the enemy’s WMD operation, you captured endless amounts of data and evidence, and you brought us two of the Chinese scientists alive. Our only real concern is Gold 1, Lieutenant Colonel Te Dan Wei. His autopsy indicates that he shot himself. He was undoubtedly the most important individual in this entire undertaking, and we are simply trying to piece together the events as best we can.” “Sir, if I may,” I interrupt. The major indicates me to proceed. “Sir, as stated in the After-Action Report, I personally cleared the enemy stronghold with Surf from Three-team. I killed the barricaded shooter, but I heard a single gunshot just as we breached the room. I thought it might have been a weapons malfunction but when we broke into the bunker, we found Gold 1 dead, next to the terrorist who had manned the machinegun. His revolver was still smoking.” Major Aubert scribbles a few more things. When he looks up, he has a pensive look about him. “I believe you, Split. Actually, the evidence speaks for itself. There are just many unanswered questions at this point that we are trying to wrap our heads around. We find it strange that the senior-most of the Chinese officers took up arms against his liberators and opted to commit suicide, rather than be rescued, all the while his two colleagues were chained up in their own filth. We find it disconcerting that you brought home scores of machine parts of North Korean origin, a USB-drive with records of correspondence between North Korean operatives and ISWAP leadership, and even fragments of a chemical weapons production manual written in Munhwao—yet there was not a trace to be found of North Korean agents on the site.” He taps the pen on top of his notebook. “It feels sinister. Like something underhanded is going on.” “Underhanded?,” Captain Wallin exclaims with a disbelieving laugh. “You mean like Chinese and North Korean intelligence agencies arming a terrorist organization with a modern sulfur-mustard agent to kill Western soldiers and African civilians? Yeah,

I'd say something pretty underhanded is going on here." Chris smiles. "Fair enough, Captain. We know what the evidence is pointing to. We're simply hoping to iron out some of the contradictions. Like any good Special Operation, we were driven to action by solid intelligence. The evidence you have brought us will shape the recommendations we will be giving up our respective chains of command. Proof of Chinese and North Korean involvement is a massive thing. There is no room for misinterpretations." Captain Wallin nods. "I understand. I know we're not on trial. Look, I have honestly told you everything as I experienced it." "Me too," I add. "Alright," Major Aubert replies. "I'll let you two off the hook, then. If you should remember any other details, no matter how small, you know where to find me." We get up, shake hands, and leave the INTEL building. I am tired. It has been three days since we came back, but I still feel exhausted. "I am going to go over to the field hospital to check on Drake, sir," I say. "I'll come," Captain Wallin answers. We walk for few minutes in silence. "Imagine having the top of your skull sheered clean like that," I say, just to make conversation. "He was lucky," the captain answers. "Fifty odd stitches and a minor skull fracture is cheap. If he had been hit one centimeter lower, he would have been stone dead." "True," I answer. "Sir, can I ask you something?" "Anything, brother," he replies. "What do you think will come of all of this?" He doesn't answer immediately as if the question has weighed heavily on his mind as well. "Honestly, Split, I don't know, man. I try not to think too much about it. In many ways, I prefer to just perceive myself as a weapon for our commanders to use, as a hunter of terrorists, and an instrument to punish the enemies of the free world. I'll go crazy if I have to spend too much time contemplating the multitude of possible outcomes of this operation. But since you're asking, my honest opinion is that nothing will probably come of it. The North Koreans have nothing more to lose. We can't really punish them any further without risking war. The Chinese are bold as brass. They will deny any involvement and accuse us of being the instigators. Our politicians will probably yell, scream, and object on the floor of the United Nations and any other forum they can find, but in the end that is as far as it is going to go. The nations of the West have become entirely too complacent to really rock the boat. Even though we present them with a smoking gun.... No, let me rephrase that, even if we can present them with a smoking gun and a videoed recording of the Chinese firing it, they'll

prefer cheap crap from Wish over a third world war. I know this is a new situation, but people will go to incredible lengths to avoid moving into uncharted lands.” He hesitates for a second, as if contemplating the weight of his words. “I can’t really blame them, though. It is like the admiral said, Split. There may be dragons.”

D. UNPACKING THE NARRATIVE

You have just read an example of how to use fiction to explain and detail Admiral McRaven’s Theory of Special Operations as seen through the eyes of the French special forces operator Albert Chastain, also known as “Split.” The first and smaller element of the narrative unpacks the mental and emotional journey Albert undertakes during his selection to become a Para Dragoon. His experiences in the selection course for the Para Dragoon regiment are absolute fiction—but all the instructors portrayed and the experiences he goes through are inspired by my own time in selection, or by things I have done as an instructor myself. Central to those first many pages are one of Admiral McRaven’s main points in the conclusion of his book: “This elite training program did not necessarily make the soldiers either morally, ethically, or even physically stronger than the average soldier. What it did accomplish was to strengthen the bond between the graduates of the selection course. It also developed exceptionally strong unit cohesion and improved the self-esteem and confidence of the graduates.”⁶⁵

In every element of SOF selection, I have experienced exactly what Admiral McRaven here attests to. The approach of the instructors can be brutal or fiendish at times, but it is always intended to either instill courage, impart life-saving lessons, correct unwanted behavior, teach, or test skills, improve self-esteem, or bring to light weaknesses that the individual recruit will need to address to pass the course. Instructor hostility is a carefully orchestrated illusion intended to generate a perfect storm through which the individual recruit must navigate. The finished product is an individual who will stop at nothing to succeed in the missions the unit is given. By the end of selection, Split has become exactly such an individual.

⁶⁵ McRaven, *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare*, 390.

The second and larger element of the narrative takes place several years later and describes Split's role as a Platoon Second in Command and Tactical Leader in Operation Marianne's Reckoning. The story opens with a massive chemical weapons attack on the Malian capital of Bamako, carried out by the terrorist organization known as ISWAP, which is of course an immediate strategic concern as well as an outright tragedy. A few days after the attack, the Para Dragoons receive actionable intelligence from their U.S. allies with which they begin preparations for a raid against the enemy production facility. There are indications of Chinese and North Korean involvement in the terrorist plot and uncovering the extent of this involvement is a fulcrum of the operation. France and her allies can easily destroy the suspected compound marked as a chemical weapons factory but will likely be unable to retrieve any evidence of the extent of the enemy's involvement unless they can strike the compound quickly and surprisingly. The Relative Superiority in this mission therefore rests not only on being able to build up the necessary fighting power to overwhelm the enemy, it also rests on being able to do it so quickly that the enemy is prevented from destroying the evidence needed for mission success.⁶⁶ With this knowledge the Dragoons and their enablers begin a hasty planning phase in order to be able to initiate the attack as soon as possible. But is this plan strictly based on the six principles of special operations?⁶⁷ Let us have look:

1. Is it simple? Yes. The plan calls for largely dismounted infiltration phase initiated by a diversionary attack on the ISWAP stronghold in Jobu village, to cast off suspicion of an imminent attack on the main operation. The unit is then to proceed to the target area and box in the compound to prevent anyone from getting in or out. The main assault is to commence by taking out the patrolling guards, before attacking the main building, securing the hostages, and evidence, and subsequently exfiltrating by helicopter. By and large, this is a simple operation as special operations go.

⁶⁶ McRaven, 4–8.

⁶⁷ McRaven, 8–23.

2. Is it secure? Yes. From the moment the first words are briefed; security is locked down tight. No operators are allowed to call home, to speak of the mission at hand with anyone else in camp, or to even discuss the mission amongst themselves outside the briefing rooms.
3. Is it rehearsed? Partly. The officers and NCOs make sure their operators practice some of the central elements of the maneuver, but the planning cycle is under such time pressure that the leaders must rely on the inherent skills and personalities of their operators to generate the necessary success on target. Had more time been available, further repetition would have been a priority.
4. Is it surprising? Yes. Surprise is a central element in the mission. The diversionary attack is undertaken to cast off suspicions of why a massive helicopter force would move into Gao Province. The long infiltration phase on foot is carried out at a blinding pace to make sure the men are in position to surprise their enemies in the middle of the night.
5. Is it fast? Yes and no. The long infiltration phase means that the mission is not fast if counted from the time the operators leave the Main Operations Base until mission completion. But the mission hinges on surprise and gaining relative superiority, which will be obtained through speed in the crucial phase of the attack on the main enemy compound.
6. Is it executed purposefully? Certainly. Not only are the operators all fully aware of why it is necessary to carry out the mission and risk their lives in doing so. Also, every conceivable asset and enablers within the toolbox of the French Defense Forces has been allocated to them to guarantee success, showing the purposefulness of the French nation in destroying the enemy operation.
7. Does the mission go as planned? Again, yes and no. The Dragoons have a difficult start when the diversionary attack on the Village of Jobu very nearly turns deadly. Only through a combination of excellent

marksmanship and well-practiced Individual Movement Techniques are the operators able to suppress the enemy long enough for their supporting elements to open fire and take over the fight. This part of the narrative describes both a classical intelligence misinterpretation and SOF's absolute reliance on outside support to achieve mission success. Jobu Village has been wrongfully evaluated to be a light-to-medium defended position which should not cause the attacking unit much trouble. Despite the significant support for the mission, the plan could well have gone wrong from the beginning. The Dragoons have planned for redundancy in the attacking force, so the unit could have carried on with some losses, but an intelligence blunder of that magnitude could have been catastrophic.

The second element of the infiltration phase is smooth but with the time available, only manageable because of the remarkable physical stamina of the unit undertaking it. From then on the mission runs according to plan until the Dragoons breach the main compound. By chance, an enemy combatant leaves the main building just before the unit is about to breach, and the Dragoons must charge to maintain surprise. This shaky start means the unit makes a few mistakes clearing the top floor of the building. Two operators attempt to secure an unarmed enemy and are nearly hit by enemy fire, and another operator is shot but saved by his bulletproof vest, all examples of how sensitive even the most well-trained unit is to deviation from the plan. The unit quickly pushes on into the depths of the compound to press the element of surprise. They obtain initial success and quickly secure several rooms full of evidence and two of the three hostages. Not before the very last room does the team experience serious opposition. In a brutal firefight against a barricaded shooter the unit suffers two wounded operators, which stalls the speed of the attack. A barricaded shooter is a difficult and dangerous situation to handle. Only through individual resourcefulness and courage, some of the central traits they were originally selected for, do Split and a fellow operator succeed in finally killing the last enemy combatant and securing the compound. During the debriefing phase we learn that a supporting C-130 Spectre Gunship has destroyed an enemy Quick Reaction Force, indicating that the initial element of surprise has only been partly successful. This part of the story helps to underscore the

determination of the French operators. Their ability to keep the enemy on their heels from the Point of Vulnerability, that is the first shot fired, enables them to stay above the Relative Superiority Line until Mission Completion.⁶⁸

How does the story contribute to Admiral McRaven's Theory of Special Operations? It obviously does not add to the theory or bring to light a new doctrinal approach. The story succeeds in depicting the thoughts of a modern special forces operator through the selection that shapes him, all the way to the pivotal moments of his soldiering career as TACLEAD on operation Marianne's Reckoning. Showing the principles of special operations in action helps not only to further our understanding of them, it makes the use of them less abstract and further validates Admiral McRaven's Theory of Special Operations. Depicting the operator's journey into SOF, the planning considerations of the leaders balancing risk vs. gain, and the fierce unit cohesion that makes Special Forces stand out helps us not only to understand the qualities of the theory but to empathize with the men that carry it out. It helps convey McRaven's theory in a less abstract, more emotionally direct, and didactic manner.

⁶⁸ McRaven, 6-7.

THIS PAGE IS INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

VI. CONSTRUCTING A WORK OF FICTION TO UNDERSTAND TERRORIST DERADICALIZATION

A. JOHN HORGAN'S PATHWAY INTO, THROUGH, AND OUT OF TERRORISM

The first narrative in this thesis was an example of how to use fiction to further the understanding of Moghaddam's "Staircase to Terrorism." This first piece of fiction was published in *CTX* and was generally well-received.⁶⁹ Bringing to life and reflecting on the process of radicalization piqued my interest in why some individuals accept radicalization fully, arriving at the highest tier of the staircase, and why some decide to stop, turn around, and descend the stairs again. I made up my mind that this would be an interesting and worthwhile topic to investigate further, both to understand the theory behind it and also to examine how to explain it using fiction. I subsequently read several books on the subject, beginning with *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, which examines case studies of terrorist disengagement from across the globe. Twelve different authors contributed examinations of how both individuals and groups abandon the praxis of terror, and based on the contributors' observations and reflections, Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan offer suggestions as to how governments can assist in facilitating disengagement programs.⁷⁰ The book gives examples of just how different the reasons for disengagement can be: From an individual's disillusion with methods, or changing priorities in life, to the entire organization losing popular support or being successfully repressed by the authorities.⁷¹ Importantly, the book also establishes a clear distinction between deradicalization and disengagement. Whereas disengagement refers to either assuming a role in the organization which no longer engages in violence or to being physically removed from the group, deradicalization requires the individuals to distance themselves from the ideology and methods of the organization.⁷²

⁶⁹ Elizabeth Skinner, "From the Editor," *CTX* II, no. 2 (2021), 1–2.

⁷⁰ Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan. *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 246–255.

⁷¹ Bjørgo and Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, 49–65.

⁷² Bjørgo and Horgan, 27–29.

Meanwhile, Ken Ballen's *Terrorists in Love: True Life Stories of Islamic Radicals* consists of six interviews with former Islamic terrorists who have abandoned "the cause." Ballen's interview style is almost akin to the method I used to create my first narrative, and it gives good examples of the motivations that trigger the beginning of both disengagement and deradicalization processes for Islamic terrorists. In his interviews, Ballen gives concrete examples of how a radicalized individual may be disengaged from the organization without giving up the ideology, but also how a person may be deradicalized and yet still have very few options other than to remain engaged.⁷³ The latter point is reiterated in Julia Reynold's book *Blood in the Fields: Ten Years Inside California's Nuestra Familia Gang*. The book is an inside view of the notorious Norteño gang, Nuestra Familia, and is written in a fictional style without actually being fiction.⁷⁴ Reynold's book serves as an excellent source of inspiration for how to create a deradicalization narrative, and interestingly, portrays how many of the same mechanisms that create strong bonds in terrorist groups are the same ones we observe in organized crime gangs. Both groups offer a sense of belonging, a narrative of connection to a faction, and a cause to serve, as well as physical protection and societal status. *Blood in the Fields* reiterates just how difficult disengagement can be, even for the deradicalized individual. Making up one's mind to renounce the ideology is not the same as suddenly being able to leave the group.⁷⁵

Though these books did a lot to increase my understanding of the mechanisms of deradicalization, they failed to deliver a specific model or overarching theory on which to base the creation of a narrative. This is not to say that it would be impossible to write a story that could serve to strengthen the reader's understanding of the complexities of terrorist deradicalization, but for the sake of this project, I would like to have a model to unpack, to further substantiate the process an individual goes through to cast aside violent, radical views. In his 2009 book *Walking Away from Terrorism*, Dr. John Horgan did just that.

⁷³ Ballen, *Terrorists in Love*, 3–43, 79–113, 293–298.

⁷⁴ Reynolds. *Blood in the Fields*, xv–xvi.

⁷⁵ Reynolds, 277–307; Ballen, *Terrorists in Love*, 45–77; Bjørge and Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, 7–29.

Horgan's book addresses just how difficult it is to draw up a theory that can precisely explain why a person would engage in terrorist behavior, and therefore, it is likewise difficult to explain why a person would choose to disengage from it. Through interviews with both disengaged and deradicalized individuals, Horgan gives examples of how different this journey can be from one person to the next. This is excellently exemplified through the following quote from his conclusions: "There is neither one route to terrorism, one route through terrorism, nor one route away from terrorism; there are individual routes and progression through those routes as experienced by individuals changes over time."⁷⁶ Horgan critically summarizes and adjusts his previous findings in the field of terrorist disengagement and deradicalization and in his conclusions draws up a simple model called the Pathway Into, Through, and Out of Terrorism.⁷⁷ The model is intended to show what this route could look like but is described and arranged sufficiently loosely to make room for the individual motivations of the person undertaking the journey. The model consists of seven overlapping stages. Dr. Horgan emphasizes that: "Progression through these stages is not necessarily linear—not everyone experiences the same pathway, and as illustrated by the case studies, the disengaged terrorist may not necessarily be deradicalized." He furthermore stresses a point also mentioned in the other publications, namely that there is a direct correlation between the disengagement and initial involvement phases. Simply put, the perceived failure of the organization to live up to the expectations of the individual is often paramount to understanding why disengagement or deradicalization begins.⁷⁸

Dr. Horgan's model includes seven steps that are intended to explain how we can understand the individual's journey into, through, and subsequently out of terrorism.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism*, 145.

⁷⁷ Horgan, 151.

⁷⁸ Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism*, 151–154; Reynolds, *Blood in the Fields*, 220–221; Ballen, *Terrorists in Love*, 32–43, 104–113.

⁷⁹ Horgan, 151–154.

- **Pre-radicalization:** Background, upbringing, family structure, schooling, and the societal norms the person grew up with all assist in shaping why the individual would develop radical views.
- **Radicalization:** Caused by perceived or actual injustice which leads to acceptance of radical religious or political views.
- **Pre-involvement searching:** The individual's exploration of options to support "the cause." These may be, and may remain, non-violent but are the forerunners to the violent radicalization.
- **Violent Radicalization:** The plunge. The actual process that makes the use of violence toward the out-group legitimate in the eyes of the radicalized individual. For this to be successful, the individual must have the option not only to act on the radical views but to make up his or her mind to actively participate in violent action.
- **Remaining Involved and Engaged:** The challenge to remain actively involved in violent, extremist behavior. Individual may find expectations met and agree fully with "the cause" in which case they will likely remain dedicated. They may eventually disengage just to assume a less militant role in the organization—but in many situations, disappointment with life in a terrorist organization, disillusionment with double-standards in the group, disagreement about methods, or disenchantment with real-life violence will challenge the individual's wish and ability to remain involved and engaged.
- **Disengagement and/or Deradicalization:**

Either: The act of disengaging by being removed from the military branch of the organization or being physically removed from the organization altogether. This includes death or incarceration.

Or: The act of disavowing the ideology and methods of the organization and subsequently attempting to distance oneself from it altogether.

B. CREATING THE NARRATIVE

How can a work of fiction be constructed to help explain the process of terrorist deradicalization and John Horgan's Pathway Into, Through, and Out of Terrorism? Dr. Horgan's model serves as a script through which the main protagonist can move. This requires the creation of a narrative in two parts. The first explains the pre-radicalization, radicalization, and pre-involvement searching of the main protagonist, meaning a thorough description of the individual's upbringing, family setting, and surrounding society. The first part of the story then also needs to include a description of a cause for sympathizing with radical views and an element of searching that causes the protagonist to establish a connection to the terrorist organization. The second part of the story explains the violent radicalization, the increasing disillusionment with the organization, and subsequent struggle to remain involved and engaged, and finally the deradicalization and disengagement. For the first part of the narrative, I draw inspiration from the societal descriptions used by Steinbeck in *The Moon is Down*. I attempt to imagine the feelings that exist in a society under the scourge of civil war and the complex emotional reactions of an unarmed populace to the experience of sudden violence in their midst.⁸⁰ Unlike Steinbeck, I do not have the luxury of describing an enemy in the form of a foreign invader. Thus, the narrative is written from the perspective of a person who feels discontent with central elements of the society he lives in and is willing to portray other members of that same society as the enemy. For the second part of the narrative, I draw inspiration from both Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* to describe the conflicting emotions of an individual who has signed up for combat but who abhors the concept of war on an industrial scale.⁸¹ I also take inspiration from some of the interviews with deradicalized terrorists that appear in Ballen's *Terrorists in Love: True Life*

⁸⁰ Steinbeck, *The Moon is Down*.

⁸¹ Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*; Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*.

Stories of Islamic Radicals to portray a character who is persuaded by “the cause” but disillusioned by the cruelty and double standards of the organization he eventually enters.⁸²

C. THE PLAN

In any attempt to understand the process of terrorist disengagement, you must understand the process that led to involvement in the first place.

—Dr. Michael Freeman, NPS, Fall 2021

I have never claimed to immediately know what other people are like. Some people have a strange sixth sense about everyone else around them, of strangers even, and can tell the most incredible things about them from a mere glance, a handshake, or the shortest of conversations. Men like Abu Mazen certainly can. Not me. Don’t get me wrong, I am not obtuse about other people. I can most often tell if they are good-natured or naïve, whether they harbor resentment against me or others, and sometimes even if they have hidden agendas. But I certainly do not have the ability to tell whether a stranger is inherently good or evil before I have gotten to know them properly. Maybe that is what got me into this whole mess to begin with. Yet even I can tell that Sergeant Nathaniel is a vile creature. He was the first to reach me. Even though I had dropped my weapon and kept my hands raised above my head, he butted me straight in the face with his rifle and damn near knocked me unconscious. His men pulled here through the forest bed just a few hours ago. It was easy to forgive his immediate inclination toward violence. I would probably have done the same in his place. We never spoke, him and I, but I almost immediately pegged him as bad company. Now I know there is a sickness in him. As if something almost otherworldly wicked and cruel inhabits his earthly body. To begin with he seemed almost hesitant. Some of my captors were officers and immediately began questioning me, but Nathaniel kept his distance. I didn’t hold back, I told them what I knew. They needed to be warned. Of course, they didn’t immediately believe me. I gave them too much information too soon. I must have sounded incredible to them. As soon as they had decided that they didn’t trust my ranting, the officers left the room and Sergeant Nathaniel moved into action. A strange, leering grin spread across his face. He slowly donned a pair of gloves with hard plastic

⁸² Ballen, *Terrorists in Love*, 3–77.

knuckles and theatrically punched at his own palms. The power of those strikes was staggering to me—the air shook. I tried my best to convince him that violence was unnecessary, but to no avail. If anything, it only seemed to goad him. He is the man beating me now. As angry as he is, you would think he would let loose and punch with a feral fury, but he doesn't. He strikes methodically but with outrageous strength. He must be a professional boxer. Every punch is harder than anything I have previously experienced. The walls blur in and out of focus. Struggling against unconsciousness, I realize he beats me not because he needs to, but because he wants to. He takes his time and systematically punches my cheekbones and forehead but avoids my jaw. The blows are akin to that of a sledgehammer. The beating rattles my skull. My insides shake. At the third blow, white, searing flashes burst in my mind's eye and chase down my spine. At the fourth blow, I bite my tongue; at the fifth, I throw up. Drool, blood, and bile runs from my mouth. My neck stiffens and burns. I am suddenly a guest in my own frame. My head feels disjointed from my body, like it has been cut from my shoulders and put on a fence post. Maybe it isn't my head at all? No, wait, it is. Then my eyelids swell. I can feel the blood rushing in like water through a sluice, it blankets the world in darkness. At the sixth punch, I can hardly see; at the eighth, I am blind. I lose count. He punches and punches until my jaw tenses beyond my control, and it suddenly feels like I have tiny grains of sand in my mouth. I cough and whimper and incoherent pleadings of mercy ramble out of me. A warm feeling begins to spread across the entire right side of my head. It feels like someone has splashed hot water in my face, and my ear is on fire. Nathaniel laughs. "Not looking so good now, are you, you Daesh bastard," he says in his heavy, French accent. "Please," is the only word I manage to blurt out before another ringing blow crashes across the left side of my face. The skin breaks. I can hear it tear. Blood gushes down my cheek, dripping onto my puke-lathered chest in shocking quantities. "C'est assez, Nat," someone else suddenly exclaims though I cannot see who it is. One of the officers, most likely. "You will crack his skull open. He will die before we figure out if any of the crap he is serving us holds true." Sergeant Nathaniel replies something in French that I cannot make out, much less understand. A few moments later someone pushes a rag or a bandage of some sort into the gash in my ruined face. Slowly the bleeding stills to a trickle. I try to open my eyes. I can

only see the outline of the person treating me. I don't recognize him, but it is not Nathaniel. That's good enough for me. My consciousness surrenders. I disappear into oblivion.

They move me the day after. Or maybe it is two days after, I have a hard time telling. The unconsciousness is entirely unlike sleep. It is complete obscurity with no sense of self. I come to as they put me on a stretcher. The sudden movement startles me, and I manage a few garbled sentences and some limp spasms before several sets of strong hands push me down. They tie me thoroughly and pull a loose-fitting hood over my head. It reeks of onions, but the darkness and the unkind embrace of the restraints somehow feel soothing to me. They carry me for ages before loading me onto what I assume must be the back of a truck. Two people get in next to me. They have a short conversation in a language I don't understand, but their accents sound like Fulah. As the vehicle begins to move, bursts of pain stab from my face and down my neck. For a few hours, I lie awake and struggle with my pain before unconsciousness mercifully reclaims me. This time nightmares come rushing in. My uneasy sleep is bifurcated by a vision of Usman's destroyed face slowly turning into my own and by the lingering dream of being suspended in a completely encompassing and abysmal darkness below a thousand voices screaming with fear and dread. I wake as the truck comes to a halt. My body aches. I must have slept for a long time. I can hear someone yelling and what sounds like radio chatter. It goes on for some time, but then the truck starts rolling again. We are on concrete roads now for sure, the surface is even. I wonder where we are going. We keep driving for a while again until the exact same situation repeats itself. The truck stops followed by radio chatter and inaudible conversations in a language that sounds like French. Their voices are suddenly drowned out by the roar of jet engines. Before the noise subsides, we are moving again. This time we stop after a few minutes and pull to the side. The back of the truck is opened, and my guards jump out. They grab the end of the stretcher and lift me. Bright, unnatural light beams down through the hessian weave of the hood. They carry me off while two men converse in French behind us. Light and darkness fluctuate as they carry me to our destination. One of the voices speaks in a different accent. My guards suddenly set me down directly below one of the bright lights. A voice speaking in a hard English accent

orders someone to do a full sweep. Rough hands start working their way meticulously down my body. Nothing is left untouched. They pull the hood off for a few seconds. The light blinds me, but the silhouettes look like soldiers to me. They put the hood back on and wipe my hands with something that feels like a piece of cloth. Somebody waves a beeping apparatus up and down the length of my prostrate frame. It takes a few minutes to satisfy them that I am not armed. “He is clean, sir,” one of the strangers says. “Bit of gunpowder on his hands, but that’s it.” “Solid,” another voice replies before addressing a third person in perfect French. They converse back and forth for a few minutes before saying their goodbyes. My previous captors are walking off. Something breaks inside me, and I begin to cry. I don’t even know if it is from fear or relief. My new custodians grab the stretcher and march off with me. I haven’t had the impulse to utter a single coherent word since Nathaniel beat me within an inch of my life, and my voice sounds strange and grating as I lie there sobbing like a child. Doors open on creaking hinges, and they carry me inside a building. Even through the reeking hood, I can smell the chemical disinfectants of a hospital. They put me down, untie my restraints and shackle my hands and feet. They then lift me onto a hospital bed and remove my hood. The lights are dim, but I can easily see the three large men who are working around me. They look like something out of a Hollywood movie, faces covered in masks, wearing futuristic looking helmets and body armor, and armed to the teeth. One of them has a series of badges on his left shoulder. Topmost is the Stars and Stripes rendered in grey and black. Underneath it are three bent tags with some sort of writing hovering over a sword with traversed lightning bolts. They roll me down a corridor and into a brightly lit room. I squint and see a doctor and two nurses awaiting my arrival. The soldiers hand me over to their charge and leave without exchanging a single word with the medical personnel. One of the nurses pushes a button on the side of the bed, slowly bringing me to an upright position. The doctor steps closer. He is surprisingly young-looking. “They tell me you speak English,” he says. “Is that true?” “Yes,” I rasp. “I am from Nigeria. English is my first language.” “Good,” he answers. “My name is Dr. Lewis. I am the Group Surgeon with 3rd Special Forces Group here in Niger. Can you tell me your name, please?” “Yes. My name is Hassem Abdullahi.” Dr. Lewis nods, writes something in a notebook and leans forward. He looks pensively at me for a

few long moments before writing something else down. "I'll need to examine you, Mr. Abdullahi. To do this I need to touch your face. I will be careful, but it may hurt." He looks so kind. I attempt to force a smile and a nod, but my face is so stiff I can hardly imagine it is recognizable as anything but an ugly grimace. He carefully begins touching me, his fingers feel along my jawline and the upper lip. He asks me to open my mouth and shines a light on my teeth and the back of my throat. He feels my cheekbones, edge of the eye sockets, and across the back of my head. The pain is intense, but his touch is careful, and I try and compose myself. He then cautiously touches my swollen eyelids and shines a light in my eyes, one after the other. "Well, Mr. Abdullahi," he says after a few minutes of examination. "You do not appear to have any skull fractures. We are of course going to do an X-ray to be sure, and I'll have to run a CT-scan to rule out any brain hemorrhage, but from the intensity of your facial swelling and the severity of the subconjunctival bleeding alone I'd say you are lucky to be alive. What were you beaten with? A baseball bat?"

After the scanning and some more tests, Dr. Lewis administers an intravenous infusion of some sort and gives me pain killers. Surprisingly, it does me a world of good. I don't know what or how exactly, but the next day the swelling has begun to come down and the stiffness in my face has started to subside. I manage to eat a large meal for both lunch and supper and can feel my strength slowly returning. In the evening two of the masked soldiers come to my room. They carefully stand me up, cuff my hands in front and remove the ones around my feet. They are neither rough nor unkind, but I find their covered faces and almost synchronous movements disconcerting. They work silently without talking to each other and order me to stand, bend, move, and stop without ever putting two words together to form a sentence. Graciously, they do not drag another hood over my head. As we step into the night, we are again met by the growl of jet engines. The area is brightly lit by several floodlights along a tall perimeter fence. We are in the middle of a military base of some kind, full of low, grey buildings that have a curiously temporary look about them. In the distance, a large commercial airliner is coming in low with its wheels out for landing, but I can see no other signs of activity around us. The two soldiers lead me to another building, march me inside, and through several doors before we arrive at a room that is nearly empty. A large table, two metal chairs, and a small cot make up the only

furniture. The sounds in the room are strange and dull as if the walls absorb noise. The soldiers sit me down and attaches a short chain from my cuffs to a metal ring in the table, reattaches a pair of shackles to my feet, and leaves the room without further instruction. I look around. The chair underneath me is cold and the room is depressingly bare. The floor is made of naked concrete, and both the table and the chairs are fastened to it with bolts. From the upper right corner behind me and the upper left corner in front of me, two cameras stare blankly down. Through a small window above the cot I can see the waning Hilal shining upon the world, heralding the ending of another month. I am startled as the door suddenly opens and two men enter. The first one is dressed in overalls and has the look of a technician or a janitor about him. He wheels in a small apparatus with a computer screen that he leaves next to the table and departs without even acknowledging my presence. The other is an enormous man dressed in a military uniform. I notice the same badges on his arm as on the other soldiers. In the bright light of the room the yellow writing stands out clearly: Special Forces – Ranger – Airborne. He sits down across from me, pulls out a notebook and a pen and looks contemplatively at me for a few seconds. Then he rummages through one of his pockets, produces a small key and proceeds to remove the chain that links me to the table before opening and removing my handcuffs entirely. I rub my wrists and mutter a “thank you.” “No problem,” he answers. “My name is Andrew,” he says and pops out a huge hand for me to shake, which I do. “Actually, everyone except my mother calls me Andy.” “Alright, Andy,” I answer. “My name is Hassem, but I don’t have a nickname.” He smiles. It makes his face look friendly. “I like that. Nice to be called by your actual name. Hassem, first things first, man. Would you like a coffee?” I stare blankly at him. “I am not joking. Personally, I love coffee. One of my guys really knows his way around a grinder and he roasts his own beans. You’ve gotta try it, it’s something else.” I compose myself. “Yes, please, I would like a cup of coffee.” “You won’t regret it,” Andrew replies and holds two fingers up in the direction of the camera behind me. “While we wait there are few things, I want you to know. First and foremost is that you are safe now. No more running, no need to fear. We are going to help you, Hassem, you are secure here with us. Some things have happened over the past few days that make it very interesting for us to confirm whether the things you told our friends from the Niger Army are true.” “Did

they use it?" I interrupt him. He looks at me for some time. "You'll forgive me if I don't get into specifics at this time?" "Yes, of course," I mutter. He smiles. "Look, at this time we just want to confirm your statements, Hassem. This device here is called a polygraph." He indicates the apparatus next to the table. "You may have seen one of them in a movie? Anyway, doesn't matter. The machine monitors your stress response when you are posed with a question. From that reaction we can determine with some degree of certainty whether you are speaking the truth or not. Because it is important to us that we can discern the veracity of your testimony...." He stops mid-sentence and smiles again. "I mean, because it is important that we can tell whether your statements are true, I would like your permission to attach you to the machine?" "You are asking my permission?" I ask. "I am." I sigh deeply and look down. When I blink, I can see Usman's face shattering. I suddenly feel the months and years of bitterness pressing on me, and I feel ashamed. I have already decided that he will hear the truth from me. "Are you a Christian, Andy?" I ask as I look up. "I mean, are you a good Christian?" He shrugs. "I'd like to think so," he replies. "But then we are all sinners, aren't we? I have done many things that I am sure the Good Lord disapproves of, and I have tried to make amends. I trust God will forgive me." His reply makes me laugh. I haven't laughed in ages. It sounds more forced than I intended it to. "I've always liked that about the Christian interpretation of the Prophet Isa," I say. "That he tried to carry the weight of all the wrongs in the world for the forgiveness of mankind. Imagine that. To bear the weight of all of humanity's countless sins on your shoulders. Impossible." Andrew nods. "We believe that he was not just a man." "I know," I say. "So do we. We believe that he was the penultimate prophet, before the Prophet Mohammad, alayhi as-salām, but we do not believe that he was God. La Ilaha Illa Allah. There is no God but Allah and everything else is Blasphemy." Andrew's smile fades but he still doesn't look threatening. He is so white it is unbelievable. His head is shaven and even his eyebrows are blond. He is certainly the biggest man I have ever seen. He looks to be more than two meters tall, and the sheer size of his bulk is outrageous. He has big hands and arms, broad shoulders, a large head. He is a formidable presence. Even though we are sitting across from one another he still towers over me. It dawns on me that he could be incredibly intimidating but isn't. He comes across as a friendly giant. Is it deliberate? He

holds my gaze without flinching. The smile returns. I look away again. "I am sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to offend you." He shakes his head. "You didn't offend me, Hassem. It takes a good bit more than a comment on the divine status of Jesus Christ to send me flying off the rails. To answer your question: Yes, I try to be a good Christian and to care for my fellow man." I nod. The door opens without warning and another soldier enters the room with two cups of steaming coffee. He is dressed similarly to Andrew but has a pistol in his belt. He sets the mugs down in front of us and leaves. "Thanks, Baker," Andrew calls after him. The door shuts. "Now, try this on for size," Andrew says, takes a sip of his coffee, and smacks his lips. I pick up the cup. It smells fantastic but turns out to be blistering hot and a little bitter for my taste. We drink a few sips together before I decide to break the silence. "This is good, Andy. I mean good to meet you, and nice to share a cup of coffee. I have always tried to be a good Muslim, just like you have tried to be a good Christian. So, I won't lie. There is no need for that thing. I was raised to follow the teachings of the Book. My Mother, bless her heart, insisted I attended Quran-school every Friday even if most of the other boys played football instead. I did my readings and I aspire to live by His teachings. I even thought of becoming an imam myself, but my father always insisted I had too good a head to only read one book." Andrew puts his coffee down. "I don't think you have been lying, Hassem. I really don't. But right now, you are the only one who can verify your story in its entirety. I need to know that you are who our friends from the Niger Army claim you are, and I need to confirm what you have told them is true." "Can't you confirm the details I have already given you?" I ask. "I thought you Americans had satellites that can see the color of a man's clothes from space. Wasn't that how you found Sheikh bin Laden?" He raises an eyebrow, the look on his face suddenly disapproving. "Believe me, we are doing the best we can to verify the things you have told our allies, but you need to understand that such things can take a very long time to investigate with any degree of certainty. Time we may not have. It would be extremely helpful to all of us if you would tell me your story in your own words, but this time attached to the polygraph." "So, really you don't believe me?" I ask. He shakes his head. "I do, Hassem, but this is not just about what I believe. It is about what those I report to believe, and they will trust my analysis even more if I can support it with a polygraph." I take a deep breath. My head still hurts.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll do it if it will help you convince your superiors.” “Excellent,” he replies. He gets up and attaches a cuff to my arm, electrodes to my fingertips, and wraps a strange band around my chest before sitting back down across from me. “Now, please tell me your name again.” “Hassem Abdullahi,” I answer. “Where are you from?” “Maiduguri in Borno.” He looks at the screen and nods. “Are you a good Muslim?” he asks. “I try to be.” “Are you a member of the Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād?” “No,” I answer. “But I was, up until very recently.” He nods again. “Do you have truthful information about their chemical weapons program?” I nod. “Yes, Andy, I have. But it is a long story. Where do you want me to begin?” He smiles warmly. “Please start at the beginning, Hassem. I’ll ask for clarifications if there are things I don’t understand. I truly want to hear your story. Just lay it on me, man.”

I was born and raised in Maiduguri in Borno Province, and to be honest, I never really went to other places before I joined Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād. Sure, from time to time we would visit relatives in nearby villages, but by and large I stayed in the same place my entire life. I love Maiduguri. I had a nice childhood there. I used to play in the street with friends from the neighborhood, and some afternoons we would scurry around the Monday Market and see if we could land a piece of candy or fruit from the vendors. When I was in my teens most of my friends began talking incessantly about leaving and I would often go along with them. “I can’t wait to get away. I’ll get a good job in Abuja, you’ll see. I’ll move to Europe and be a Chemical Engineer or move to the States and do whatever.” But honestly, I never really meant it. Maiduguri was the place for me, it still is, and it always was. There are so many people of all kinds there: Kanuri, Hausa, Shuwa, Marghi, Bura, Fulani, even some Europeans and Asians. I am Kanuri. I don’t know if that even means anything to you. We are an old people, a proud people—descended of the Caliphs of the Bornu Empire, and we are good Muslims. My father is an educated man, a chemist who used to work for a local business for many years making fertilizers. It was a good job. He was well a respected man, and we had enough money. We used to live in a nice house in the northern district not too far from the airport. My parents wanted good things for my two younger sisters and me. They provided for us but also wanted us to put

in an effort. We were expected to tend to our schoolwork and to our prayers, to make something of ourselves. My father sent me to a private school at the age of six. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps and become a scientist. It was my mother who insisted I go to Quran-school every Friday and tend to my soul as I tended to my mind. I liked both. I knew twenty-six of the Surahs by heart and told my father I was considering becoming an imam. “Absolutely not. You will not read only one book. You will be a scientist like me,” he told me and that was the end of it. I never really questioned his ambitions on my part. I understand the value of honoring your father’s wishes, and besides, I honestly liked math, physics, and chemistry even more than the Holy Readings. I had a good life in Maiduguri, is what I mean to say, but things started to change when the fighting began in 2009. I remember hearing how the police had struck down a peaceful demonstration in Bauchi, rounding up Muslims simply because they had the courage to demonstrate against the burning of mosques. Some even said that the police had shot at the demonstration and had killed people just for publicly showing their concerns. The next day JAS struck back. Do you know that abbreviation? It is what we call the Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād; the ones you used to call Boko Haram and now call ISWAP. They attacked a police station and there was a brutal firefight. The word spread that many Muslim brothers had been killed, but also that some policemen and soldiers had died. I remember feeling a strange elation about it. The police in Borno are so corrupt, mind you; it felt like someone was finally standing up to them. Soon after they arrested Sheikh Yusuf and executed him in the street. Imagine the grief! Of course, the fighting began in Maiduguri after that. JAS attacked several police stations, checkpoints, and government buildings. They killed a lot of the Government’s men in Borno, and the Army’s response was brutal. I was only sixteen at the time; I was still in school. At the height of the fighting things got so dangerous that my mother wouldn’t let me out of the house. The school was closed for more than a month. So many people died or disappeared. Almost seven hundred were killed in Maiduguri alone. Then the fighting ebbed away, and life returned to a new kind of normal. There was such a military and police presence in all of Borno that you wouldn’t believe it. I remember that state television showed hundreds of pictures of dead JAS fighters, and told stories about the Army’s many victories, but they said nothing about the burning police stations

and nothing about all the soldiers killed in combat. Looking at the television screen and looking out the window was like two different worlds. Many of us in Maiduguri felt that someone had finally taken a stand against the authorities. When I talked to my friends about it and talked to people in the Mosque, most agreed that it felt right that JAS had struck back. Only, my mother and father did not share that point of view. They towed the official line from Abuja and referred to JAS as terrorists, so I ended up having mixed feelings about the whole thing. It certainly wasn't a topic we'd discuss at home. But JAS were so committed. I found that admirable. From time to time a bomb would go off somewhere in Maiduguri. First, it was very deliberately against hard targets such as police and army checkpoints. Later, they began targeting other places, like the Christian marketplaces and churches. The Army responded like men possessed. It was terrible. They rounded up people left, right, and center. Random civilians, I might add, even people my parents knew. Some disappeared for weeks and came back destroyed—like ghosts of their former selves. Some fell off the face of the Earth and never reappeared at all. It seemed to me that the Army didn't care whether they got the right or the wrong people so long as they got some Muslims to grovel in fear. It was bad. I remember thinking that what JAS was doing was too indiscriminate, but what the Army was doing was systematically evil. But life goes on, you know. In 2011 I took my final exams and prepared to enroll in UNIMAID. I was so excited. It was a bright light in an otherwise dark period. My parents had already paid my tuition, 150,000 Naira for both entry and for the entire bachelor's program. I know it probably doesn't sound like a lot of money to you. A few hundred dollars is all, but it is a lot to most people in Borno. Whatever we earn, we put against paying the rent and living expenses. For most, it can be hard to make ends meet and inconceivable to put that kind of money aside. I want you to appreciate that it was a big deal for me that my parents made it happen. I was going to become a chemical engineer. I was going to make something of myself.

“Was university not what you had hoped it would be?” Andrew throws a quick glance at the polygraph and then looks at me scrutinizingly. “Excuse me?” I answer. “Was university not what you had hoped it would be? Did it fail to satisfy your expectations, I mean?” “What? No! No, I really liked university.” He cuts me off. “Look, I meant no offense. The reason I ask, Hassem, is that there seems to be an awfully long way from

being a successful university student on his way to becoming a chemical engineer in Maiduguri in 2012, to....” He looks me directly in the eyes and stops. I sigh and nod. “Just say it, Andy.” “Okay. There seems to be a very long way from being on your way to realizing your dream in Maiduguri in 2012 to being a member of a radical group fighting in Niger in 2017. What happened?” I can feel my cheeks growing warm and my face beginning to throb. I look down in shame. My eyes begin to well up. Andrew leans forward and places a big hand on my shoulder. “Dude, take it easy. I know it must have been bad.” I swallow an oncoming sob, take a few deep breaths, and compose myself. “Yes, Andy. You are not wrong. There is a long way from one place to the other, and it was partly my own fault, partly due to the actions of some very unscrupulous people, and partly bad luck.”

I found my first two years at university to be absolutely exhilarating. Gone were all the boring subjects. No more English classes, no more history, no more geography, and no more classes in French—which I incidentally hated more than anything. I could never get the grammar or pronunciation right. At UNIMAID I could concentrate on organic and inorganic chemistry, mathematical analysis, thermodynamics, and process chemistry, just to name a few. We had classes Monday through Thursday, but rarely more than four classes on any given day. Friday was always kept holy, but the laboratories were open on Saturdays. There was a lot of reading and though I was busier than I had been in undergraduate school, it was a good kind of busy. I even liked the professors. They were interested in teaching and seemed to view it as a calling. To be honest, I liked Dr. Ikande more than anyone. He taught both process chemistry and chemical process engineering. He was a very bright and good teacher, but also tough. He was the kind of professor who demanded we did our studies properly—and I mean genuinely read and understand the material. He would take questions before the beginning of each class, but after that, he would have at us with a vengeance. He would ask questions out of the blue that you would have no chance of answering if you hadn’t done the required readings, and he had no time for slackers. We all feared him the first semester, but when we had figured out his modus and understood that there was no cutting corners with him, he became everyone’s favorite teacher. He was still tough, but also funny and genuinely interested in his students. I knew I wanted him to supervise me on my bachelor’s degree. He was the kind of teacher who

would ask the necessary questions to produce an excellent piece of work. From talks with my father, I had developed a personal interest in the use of ammonia in fertilizers. Actually, that is not entirely true. I learned about it from my father's work with fertilizers, I should say. It was ammonia's properties after being catalyzed that interested me. I had this notion, that it could be applied to produce an alternative fuel source for use in propulsion, and not as an explosive, mind you. I wrote my entire BA just about those properties as footwork to continue with a master's dissertation. I genuinely intended to concretize the use of ammonia as a propellant for large engines—like ships, trains, or trucks. Imagine what it could mean to the shipping industry. Anyway, I digress. I never finished it, the master's degree I mean. In early 2014 the Government outlawed the production of fertilizer in Borno. Most of the bombs JAS uses are made from a mixture of fertilizer, diesel fuel, and ground aluminum. So, if you control the fertilizer, you take away their weapon of choice. It turned my world upside down. The company my father worked for shut down its operations immediately and began to set up shop in a suburb in Abuja. They were good enough to offer him to keep his position with them. He had no alternatives on hand, so he accepted and moved to the capital. He hoped that it would be a temporary situation, maybe just a year, so he wanted my mother, sisters, and me to stay in Maiduguri, which of course we did. Abuja is just a ridiculously expensive place. His expenses tripled, but the pay didn't and before long we were scraping by, and I mean scraping by. My mother had to take up housekeeping in our neighborhood, and I took a job doing accounting a few hours a week at a masonry business on the outskirts of Maiduguri, just so we could pay the rent. I was quite upset about the whole situation. I knew that I would be able to finish the BA, because the money had been paid in full, but I would never be able to pay for the master's degree. It felt so unbelievably unfair to me. The Government had literally taken away my chance to do something extraordinary just to protect themselves from a problem they had created to begin with. I talked to my father about the issue and proposed that I go to the bank and take up a personal loan. He was dismissive at first. In our family, we don't borrow money to make our way in the world. His father had put him through university and made him promise that he would in turn put his own sons through university, too. He saw the whole situation as a failure of his ability to provide for his family. He had been blessed with only

one son, and now he was failing to provide a future for him. I had to reassure him that he wasn't letting me down and that this was because of events beyond his control. I finally managed to persuade him that I would be able to repay the money eventually and that I would allow him to help me do so. The next day I requested a loan for 350.000 Naira to pay for my studies. I went to seven different banks the first day and another sixteen over the following week. The only ones that would assist me were the Microfinance Banks, but none of them would lend me anywhere near the amount needed. I proposed all kinds of repayment options to them, even offering to accept usury interest rates if they could postpone the first repayment until after I had completed the degree. No one would even hear me out. I was shattered. I knew my father would not risk a loan himself, and no one would grant me one no matter how hard I tried. I complained to my friends, I complained to my fellow students, I complained to my brothers at the mosque. I suppose I shared my misfortune with anyone who would listen. I've never felt so much like a pariah. The second you begin talking about financial difficulties, most people will just nod or shake their heads and begin answering in short sentences. It is like they don't really listen. I think it is a way of dodging out of the embarrassment of the conversation and the self-bestowed humiliation that comes from discussing something so personal. Anyway, as it turned out, someone had listened. A man approached me one day after mosque. He was a round-faced and stout man, dressed in a white thawb and looked to be in his forties. I had noticed him a few times before, but I didn't know his name. He introduced himself as Mr. Odafe Akerele and said that he was a Godfearing businessman, who had heard I needed a loan. His directness immediately made me apprehensive. I remember initially thinking that he might be a sodomite, and later simply being relieved that he was not. I kept thinking that it would probably be wisest to politely decline his help and just walk away. But I didn't. I was running out of time and options. By the Prophet, alayhi as-salām, how I have berated myself for not simply saying no. He wasn't a sodomite—he was something far worse. He was a hypocrite. He offered to lend me 350.000 Naira without paying any Riba. In other words, he wanted no payment for the loan and no interest at all. When I asked him what he expected in return for lending me the money, he simply answered that knowledge was the strength of the Ummah, and that good people would probably benefit from my well-spring

of wisdom at some later stage in life. It all seemed quite benign, and I told him I would consider his offer. During lab hours the next day I talked to a friend from UNIMAID about my worries. To my surprise, he told me that he knew of Mr. Akerele. He said that he was known as an honest man and a Hadji, and that he normally attended the same mosque as him, namely the Deribe Mosque in the northeastern part of town. I found it surprising that he had come to my mosque in the northeastern districts, but when I contemplated it further it seemed to make sense. Word had it that he had investments in oil, and because my thesis topic was on a competing technology, I thought to myself that maybe his sudden interest in my education was directly related. Maybe it could even be a first step to a much broader investment in alternative fuel sources. I went to Friday prayers at the Deribe Mosque the following week and found Mr. Akerele. I told him I would graciously accept his offer. As if expecting me to show up right there and then, he pulled a heavy envelope from inside his thawb and handed it to me. I was flabbergasted. He was walking around with 350,000 Naira on him without a worry in the world. I hurriedly put the envelope in my backpack and asked him whether he needed a contract or at least a signature as some sort of proof that this loan had taken place. He made a dismissive gesture and pointed a finger towards the heavens. "Allah knows," was all he said and that was the end of it. I felt incredibly vulnerable as I made my way home through Maiduguri's afternoon traffic. I felt like my car was see-through. That someone could stop me and take my money and my dreams away in one fell swoop. I didn't want such worries hanging over me, so I paid the tuition first thing Monday and proceeded to pay the education in full. Dr. Ikande was absolutely delighted to hear that I would be continuing my studies and our collaboration on my thesis. He knew full well that I had been struggling to find the money, but ever the gentleman he never deigned to ask me where I had obtained the loan. I lied to my mother and father; one of the very few times I ever have. I told them that UNIMAID Microfinance Bank had granted me the loan, and that the interest rates were reasonable. They accepted my story willingly, confident that I would be able to manage the eventual repayment. It felt wrong to be dishonest with them, but I knew that they would worry if I told them that I had borrowed the money from a private person. Secretly, I worried too.

The war in Borno continued to wax and wane, and over the next two years it spread to many other countries in the Sahel. Not surprisingly, the Government did not change its stance on fertilizer production in Maiduguri. Though my father would come home and visit us from time to time, it was now evident that this would not be the short-term thing we had hoped. It upset all of us, myself not least, because I loved sharing professional thoughts and experiences with him. Instead, I concentrated on two things: My thesis and my religion. I know how those two things may sound a little at odds with one another to you, but I come from a simultaneously religious and scientific family. I grew up knowing that the pursuit of knowledge is the pursuit of understanding of Allah's great work, despite the many claims Sheikh Yusuf made to the opposite. I kept coming to the Deribe Mosque even though I had to struggle down the A3 through downtown traffic every Friday. I felt compelled to show my presence there so Mr. Akerele could see that I, too, was a Godfearing and hardworking man and hadn't simply run off with his money. The first year he hardly acknowledged my presence apart from the occasional nod or smile from time to time, but in early 2015 he suddenly approached me after the khutba and asked how I was doing. I told him that everything was going fine, thanked him for his generous loan and explained that my work was making steady progress. He asked if he could buy me lunch and hear about my efforts, which I of course accepted. We found a quiet hole-in-the-wall a few streets away and shared a simple meal of jollof rice while I tried to explain what my work was all about. Mr. Akerele seemed genuinely interested, listened intently, and asked questions from time to time, which I remember as being short and to the point. Knowing that he had ties to the oil industry, I tried to sneak in the argument that early investments in alternative fuel sources would be a wise play for any larger energy provider. This seemed to pique his interest and he asked about the potential to develop it as a replacement for heavy fuel oil in shipping. I was over the moon and entertained him at length about its potential, whilst we shared a pot of chai. When my rant finally came to an end, he leaned back in the chair, looked at me for some time, and then suddenly asked me what I had thought about the khutba. I found his change of topic a bit confusing. The reading had been on the Hira Cave revelations of the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Mohammed, alayhi as-salām, and if I was to be honest, I had found it a bit bland. I told Mr. Akerele that I thought it had been good enough and that the

core message was both holy and right, but that the khutba itself hadn't been particularly interesting as such. He nodded contemplatively to himself and told me that he appreciated my honest opinion and how important it was to be able to make an independent judgment. We talked a few minutes about favorite passages from the Quran before he suddenly got up and made to leave. He thanked me and asked if I would mind sharing lunch with him again the following Friday. Once again, I agreed.

I met with Mr. Akerele every Friday for the next many months, and I felt that we began to develop a friendship or at least a professional relationship. Mr. Akerele was unmarried and had no living family in Maiduguri, so I expected he was a lonely soul who appreciated the company. He remained interested and inquisitive about my work but also insisted on discussing religion. He seemed quite conservative to me, but at the same time he was a businessman and invested his money in science, so I welcomed the discussions without giving it much thought. From time to time, he would ask my opinion on sensitive issues such as the police's or the military's conduct in Borno, but I felt that our conversations were in confidence and answered his questions without fear of reprisal. It was no secret that I had mixed feelings about the actions of JAS, but I absolutely harbored ill will towards the Government for their actions in Borno, and maybe partly because I blamed them for exiling my father to Abuja. This seemed to please Mr. Akerele, and one afternoon he showed up with a ring binder under his arm that he wanted me to see. The contents were downright sickening. It was full of pictures of men and women who had been exposed to horrendous mistreatment. Some had been beaten to death or within an inch of their lives; some had been sexually violated; some were electrocuted, cut with knives, or even drowned. I felt nauseous. Mr. Akerele told me that these were pictures taken at the Giwa Barracks and that the victims were both JAS fighters, the innocent families of JAS fighters, and random civilians with no relation to the struggles. He asked me if I had ever wondered what happened to all the people who had disappeared over the past couple of years in Maiduguri. Right here was the hard evidence of what the Army had been up to. When I asked where he had obtained the pictures, he told me that good Muslim fighters had claimed them from the corpse of the vile Army lieutenant who had been second in command at the barracks. I looked at the photos and drank my chai in silence. It felt like

falling into a black hole; tears clouded my vision. After a while Mr. Akerele leaned forward, patted me on the cheek, and told me there were some people he would like me to meet.

The first man Mr. Akerele introduced me to was a tall and very persuasive man called Hakeem al-Yaoundé. We met up after prayers the following Friday and sat down together afterwards in our usual place, where we shared some food and chai and talked about the readings. Like Mr. Akerele himself, Hakeem was dressed in a clean, white thawb, but his mood and temper was inversely enthusiastic. The khutba had been about the years after the Prophet's death, *alayhi as-salām*, and the terrible divide the change of Caliphs had eventually caused within the Ummah. Hakeem had liked readings and talked at length about the importance of understanding that there is such a thing as a right and true Muslim and such a thing as a false believer. He explained how those who fail to follow the teachings are on a direct path to becoming apostates and that they can pray all they want to but still have no chance of entering Heaven. He smiled in a reassuring way that left little doubt that he considered himself to be on the right and true side of things. When I cautiously asked him whether he felt that he understood the will of Almighty Allah well enough to be sure that he was adhering to His will in all things, he laughed so sincerely that Mr. Akerele began to laugh, too. He told me that he was absolutely certain. That it was all given to us in the Book and that I would be surprised how many people didn't take the time to read and, furthermore, discuss Almighty Allah's commands. I found those words enviable. To have such religious conviction would matter a great deal to me. He told me that he had been taught by a wise and learned imam and that maybe someday I would get to meet him. Out of courtesy more than anything, I answered him with an *Inshallah*, which made them both smile and nod. The next Friday I didn't see Mr. Akerele at prayers, but Hakeem al-Yaoundé showed up along with a surly-looking young man who simply introduced himself as Obiefune. We talked for a few minutes before prayers, but I didn't see them afterward. Over the coming month, I didn't see Mr. Akerele or Mr. al-Yaoundé at all, but I suddenly began to see the enigmatic Obiefune all over the place. He began coming to the mosque, I saw him buying fruit from a vendor in my neighborhood, he crossed by me on my way to UNIMAID, walked past me in the marketplace, and sat alone at a table across from us one

evening when I took my mother and sisters out for dinner. He was obviously keeping an eye on me. The first few times I noticed him I didn't really know what to make of it, but he didn't come across as unfriendly or dangerous and hardly recognized my existence. It somehow felt like he was keeping an eye out for me, and after a week or so of passing encounters, I began smiling or waving at him when I saw him. He would only ever recognize my greetings with the slightest of nods, but he never once smiled himself. After a month's time, he suddenly approached me after mosque and asked to talk to me. We sat down together in the eatery I used to frequent with Mr. Akerele, where he courteously apologized for having followed me around for the past many weeks. He told me that the congregation he belonged to only offered membership to the most fervent of the faithful. He said that a respected member of the brotherhood, Mr. Akerele, had recommended me as a simultaneously contemplative and devout Muslim but that he had kept an eye on me to make sure himself. I told him I was honored, and he subsequently presented me with a business card. It only had an address on one side and as-shahada on the other.

"Is it similar to this one?" Andrew asks and pushes a white business card across the table. A jolt of painful memories whips through me at the sight of the card. "It is," I answer. "Where did you get this?" "We have friends in many places, but does it really matter?" "No, I suppose not," I answer. I suddenly realize how sapped of strength I am. My face has begun to hurt again. I lean back in the chair and stare blankly out the window for a few moments. The Hilal has disappeared beyond the horizon, and the black night sky is slowly turning blue. Dawn is coming. "I am exhausted," I say. "How much longer do we have to continue?" "We don't have to continue tonight," Andrew answers. "You can have a few hours of sleep and something to eat, and then we can begin again. Would you like that?" "Yes, please," I answer. He makes a gesture in the direction of the camera behind me and gets up to unhook me from the machine. A few moments later two of the masked and armed soldiers enter the room. They roll the polygraph out and proceed to remove the shackles around my feet. One of them unfolds a prayer mat by the far wall. They exit without saying a word. Before he leaves, Andrew fills a tall glass of water for me and puts it on the table along with some painkillers. He knows I'll need them without even asking. He points to the back wall. "Mecca is that direction," he says. "Sleep well, Hassem." I feel strangely

naked in the face of his hospitality. They could have shackled me but have not; they could have deprived me of sleep but allow me to rest; they could have shown me no mercy but have treated my wounds as if I was one of their own. I feel hopelessly undeserving of their kindness, knowing full well that my former brothers would never have shown similar leniency. “Thank you,” I stutter. Andrew smiles and closes the door. I sit down for a few minutes, overwhelmed by the compassion of strangers, before composing myself and gulping down the water and painkillers. I use the last few drops to wash my hands and my face in imitation of Wudu. Then I adjust the prayer mat, kneel, lift my hands to my ears and whisper, “Allahu Akbar.”

The other Mosque was very different from the Deribe Mosque, much smaller and less decorated, but it had a nice, exclusive feeling to it. Obiefune, or brother Obi as he was known, had been appointed as my sponsor. The first time I went there, he followed me around and told me how things were done. He showed me where to perform Wudu and told me I was expected to be extra thorough, he introduced me to the other members of the congregation, and he explained that I was expected to stay after the khutba to participate in a discussion. The preacher was an awesome presence, calm but strangely fierce at the same time. He was a tall man with piercing dark eyes and was known as Abu-Mazen. I couldn't exactly place his accent, but he looked Yoruba to me. I was standing in the back with Brother Obi and another newcomer called Ekong when Abu-Mazen entered. He immediately began to walk around the room and welcomed everyone, even us newcomers, by name. He took his time. When he eventually took the Minbar, his khutba was fiery. It was a thorough, fair, and well-orchestrated warning against the act of treachery and the terrible dangers to the soul for the perpetrator. I hung on his every word; the minutes flew by like seconds. When he was done and the prayers had been completed, we all sat down to discuss the meaning of it, and I summoned the courage to speak. It felt natural and was welcomed, even though I was new to the congregation. I decided I would talk about the indiscriminate actions of the military in Maiduguri. My hands shook a bit as I talked and at one point, I felt like I was rambling, but my words still drew many approving nods from the others. Abu-Mazen listened intently and never interrupted me. When I had finished, he

thanked me, looked around the room and said that we were all to take heed of the words spoken, because many of those who serve in the military are Muslims themselves. That when good Muslim servicemen do nothing when heathens and apostates hurt the Ummah, they might just as well have carried out those vile acts themselves. That their inaction would make them traitors and eventually apostates. My mentor, Brother Obi, seemed encouraged by my words and spoke next. His story was genuinely heartbreaking. His strong frame visibly shook with tension as he told of the loss of his father, a good and faithful man, to a group of marauding Fulani herders. The tribesmen had killed both his father and other members of their village in cold blood because of a minor dispute over trampled crops. Brother Obi concluded that the deed had been particularly cruel not just because of the act itself but because it was perpetrated by Fulanis, who as Muslims should have known better. Then another man confessed to being a Fulani. I initially thought nothing of it. Maiduguri has many peoples, so I was slow to realize that something had suddenly gone awry. The room had fallen silent, and I understood that the two of them knew each other well but had never discussed ethnicity before. Brother Obi obviously carried genuine animosity against all Fulanis and now looked poised to kill the other. He stood up with his fists balled, his face contorted in anger, and his body trembled with barely contained rage. The Fulani man was also on his feet and looked both insulted and terrified. For a second, I thought the two of them would begin throwing punches at each other, but then Abu-Mazen spoke with a soft, measured voice. He asked them to be wary of their words, lest Almighty Allah weigh them, and then told us all to behold the division of brothers. With carefully chosen words he explained how this was the perfect example of the work of the Kuffar and the traitors of the world; how all this had begun with Christians driving Muslims from their homes and forcing Fulani herders to graze their cattle in Kanuri lands. More than anything, he said, this was the hallmark of the Devil, to inspire acts of evil in good souls and to sow division in the Ummah. His soft words seemed to envelope the room, and I could see how Brother Obi's shoulders began to drop. Slowly his angry shaking subsided, while tears began streaming down the other man's face. When he had finished, Abu-Mazen slowly stood and held his arms out in front of him with his palms turned upwards in prayer. With his eyes closed, he whispered a few words under his breath

and then loudly said that he had prayed for this to be the example for others to follow—that these divided brothers would reconcile by the will of Allah the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Then something stirred through the room like a breeze. I don't know what it was, but I swear that for a second there was a smell of roses and jasmine. Seconds later the two men embraced each other, and the room nearly burst with jubilation. I just sat in my chair with my mouth agape like a fool, unable to fully comprehend what I had just witnessed. From across the room, Abu-Mazen caught my eye. He smiled at me and nodded, as if he knew exactly what I felt. I realized that Allah had answered his prayer and that I had witnessed His direct involvement. I sat and cried with joy.

That experience was a turning point for me. I know what you might think. I should have suspected from Abu-Mazen's preaching that I had gotten involved with a congregation that was sympathetic to the work of JAS. You know what? I did. It didn't scare me off. It is not so strange when you think about it. I genuinely hated the Government for what they did in Borno in those years. A lot of people wanted to stand up to them, and I really felt like I had been invited to be part of something special. So, I began going to the new mosque every Friday and participated in the discussions afterward. Many kinds of people came there to pray. People with money, power, and influence, and lowly, ordinary people like me. I found it inspiring that no one there cared for status or renown, they cared for the Ummah and for Shariah as it is laid out in the Holy Quran. I felt a sense of belonging there, like I used to when I went to the mosque as a child. I still focused on my studies as well, though. It was almost like living in two worlds, a world of the mind and a world of the soul. Not long after that, I noticed that Brother Obi and his friend Brother Madi stopped showing up. When I asked Hakeem al Yaoundé what had become of them, he smiled his broad, convincing smile and said they had been chosen to go and do some work for the faithful in a different place. Again, I am not stupid. I realized that maybe they had been asked to join the fight, but I didn't find that wrong. I remember being almost envious, but I also knew not to inquire further. The less I knew, the better. At UNIMAID I was in the final testing stages of my experiment phase and things were looking incredibly promising. Dr. Ikande told me he was considering nominating my project for The Nigeria Prize for Science award if I could finalize my thesis with the predicted results. The prospect of

national recognition for my work really gave me a push and I labored tirelessly to finish my research and my testing. I thought this would be my break, that I was going to make it big. But then it all came crashing down. In early 2016 I was asked to stay after discussions at the mosque one Friday evening. Hakeem and Mr. Akerele were waiting for me outside. They greeted me warmly, as if we hadn't just been present in the same room together, and asked me to take a walk with them. We strolled a few blocks while we talked about my progress in chemical engineering, before suddenly turning down a dark alleyway where a third man was standing watch outside a door. Mr. Akerele walked straight in without knocking and I followed him into a surprisingly lavishly decorated house. Two other men were lounging around a table in the back of the room. They seemed jittery and almost flew out of their seats when we entered. Mr. Akerele introduced me in flattering terms and presented the two men as brothers of the Ummah. I am sure the two strangers gave their names as well, but thirty seconds later I was unable to recall them. I was so wary of the whole situation that my concentration was anywhere else. The strangers had a tired look about them, as if they had been on the road for a while, and there was something daunting about the way they spoke. A sort of clipped, monosyllabic English that I had a hard time placing. We sat down at a big table in the middle of the room. I remember there being a beautiful picture of the Kaaba on the back wall. They wasted no time with pleasantries and immediately began asking me about my studies at UNIMAID. I answered them as best I could, but they obviously weren't scientists themselves, nor were they interested in the details of my thesis work. They kept pushing for information on the types of protection equipment we used in our laboratories, specifically what types of hazmat suits were available on campus. I explained that there were many different types, ranging from Type 6 suits against minimal exposure, which we had in abundance, all the way up to Type 1 fluoropolymer-coated hazmat suits with self-contained breathing apparatuses, of which we only had a few. That seemed to be their cue. The second I was done explaining, they asked me if I could acquire a few of the Type 1 suits for them. I was simultaneously insulted that they would so brazenly ask me to steal and confused as to why they would need such equipment. When I asked what they needed them for, one of the men nearly went through the roof. He got to his feet and began yelling and screaming all kinds of profanities at me.

Somewhere in his tirade, he managed to explain in no uncertain terms that I should mind my own business if I knew what was good for me. I was in no doubt that he would be willing to make good on the multitude of threats that spurted out of him. Then Hakeem intervened and promptly told them both to take a walk, which they were surprisingly quick to comply with. When they had left the room, Mr. Akerele and Hakeem sat down across from me. They apologized on behalf of the two brothers but reiterated the request and said it was of utmost importance. I almost died inside. I told them it would be impossible for me to do so without someone noticing, but this didn't seem to faze either of them. Rather, Mr. Akerele looked extremely disappointed. He shook his head and said that he had had such high expectations of me. I began to realize that I was trapped. I asked if he couldn't buy some from somewhere else, but he snarled at me and asked whether I thought he hadn't tried already and whether I fully appreciated the restrictions and monitoring the lands of the Ummah were under? I tried to change strategy and apologized. He didn't take well to that either. He ground his teeth and looked at me with a strange look of distaste and said that if I wasn't willing to help my brothers when they needed me, then I had similarly proven myself unworthy of his assistance. He would have to insist that I return the loan immediately and ask that I find a different place to pray as well. I almost got physically sick. I did not have that kind of money. Nor did my parents. I realized that I was on the precipice of losing everything that mattered to me—my study, my friendships, my congregation—maybe even my future. I don't know how long the two of them worked me. It could have been a few minutes or an entire hour. I was shaking and cold sweating profusely; I could hardly concentrate. In the end, I folded and promised to help, which terrifyingly prompted them to return to their usual cheerful selves, as if nothing had happened. Mr. Akerele even said that I could disregard the loan entirely, if only I came through on this. What good would that loan be to me if I didn't finish my degree? Like I said—he turned out to be a hypocrite. He poured my entire career down the drain. He planned on using that loan to put a squeeze on me all along. I am sure of it. When they walked me back to my car later, the streets looked different. It was like watching myself from the outside. I don't remember one word of what we talked about. I ended up sitting behind the steering wheel for an hour before feeling well enough to drive. There was no

way around it for me. There was no one I could tell. The police would likely just arrest and torture me if I tried to go to them for help. If I refused, Mr. Akerele would demand the money back, ruin my family, and leave us ostracized. If I did steal the hazmat suits for them, my days in UNIMAID would be over. We have to sign in and out of the laboratories every time we go there, and the guards at the gates know us. I could see no way of getting the suits out without making myself the prime suspect. There would be terrible consequences no matter what I did.

“In the end, I decided that I had to bear the burden of responsibility. After all, it was my own poor judgment of character that had gotten me into this mess. The next evening, I stole three Type 1 hazmat suits from UNIMAID and handed them over to the two strangers.” “Would you tell me how?” Andrew leans back in his chair and takes a sip of his coffee. The steam sparkles in a ray of sunlight as it rises from the cup. “Sure,” I answer. “There was nothing to it really. Like I said, the guards at the gate know many of the students, particularly the ones in the master’s program. We often work in the laboratories after hours when no one else is using them. Gaining access was no problem at all. I literally parked my car right outside the lab, put the suits and air tanks into duffle bags, and put them in the trunk of my car. Then I waited for half an hour so as to not rouse suspicion, locked up the lab, returned the key to the guard, and drove out the way I drove in.” Andrew frowns. “But everyone would know it was you who took them?” I nod. “Yes, despite my best efforts I couldn’t find a way around that problem. I had told Hakeem and Mr. Akerele as much. Even if I had signed a false name, the guard would have remembered me. I couldn’t sneak into campus. It is much too risky. There are walls and cameras, and I would still need a key from the guards to get into the lab. I would likely have been seen and maybe even shot. The school was bound to find out who had taken those suits, and they would go to the police immediately. This was a one-way trip. Stealing those suits would be the end of me, pure and simple. They didn’t seem to care. On the contrary, they told me not to worry. They said that they would look after me, that this was important work for the Ummah, and that I would be honored for my endeavors.” “You believed them?” Andrew asks. I shrug. “Maybe. I don’t remember to be honest. I was at my wit’s end. I

recall making up all sorts of justifications. You know, like matters of the mind are less important than those of the soul, that if anyone was to be put in danger then I would prefer it to be me, that maybe I would become an honored member of JAS. All kinds of nonsense.” “Did they make good on their promises?” I take a sip of the bitter coffee myself. “To some extent,” I answer. “But no, not really, I suppose. I don’t think I even expected them to. I felt betrayed by Mr. Akerele and Hakeem, but in those desperate days, I tried not to let my distaste reflect on the other brothers. I still felt I had seen the works of God through men like Abu Mazen and Brother Obi. Some part of me hoped that this would be seen as a glorious act.”

They transported me out of Maiduguri that same evening. I was put in the back of a truck along with two other brothers who had also been deemed ready to join. I tried to be brave about it, as we bumped into the night along the dark country roads, but I couldn’t keep the tears back. I had left my mother a letter explaining that I had to leave but it was horribly unspecific, and I realized even as I was writing it that it would leave her with more questions than answers. I felt it was the only choice I had; I did not have the courage to say goodbye to her face. I felt like a coward. Sitting in the back of that truck felt like being pushed out into the open sea. A brother named Ifechi tried to console me, but I could tell from his voice that he was simply trying to be brave himself. As the hours went by, I came to a kind of acceptance of the situation. I felt emotionally drained. I prayed to God that He had put me here to test me. I remembered a verse from the Surah Tawbah that “Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us; He is our protector and upon Him the believers must rely.” What I mean to say is, I accepted that this was my destiny, and that God had a plan for me. The truck didn’t stop driving the entire night and the sun was coming up before the squealing brakes revealed that we finally had arrived at our next destination. Two men in combat fatigues with rifles slung across their backs were waiting for us. I didn’t recognize either of them, and they did not waste time on introductions or small talk. After handing the driver two jerrycans and a handful of rifles they told us to follow them. We walked into the open countryside for an hour before reaching a surprisingly well-hidden camp in the middle of the bush. Finally, we were greeted by people we knew. Brother Obi and Brother Madi were waiting for us and welcomed us to

what would become our new home. Just like in the mosque they showed us the ropes. Where to sleep, where to pray, where to wash, where to eat—even where to shit, quite frankly. There were more than a hundred brothers in the camp in those first days, but after the first Friday sermon, the numbers dwindled to no more than a few dozen. Most of those who stayed behind were young trainees like me and Ifechi, but a couple of older brothers also remained to oversee our training and instruction. We stayed in the bush for three months. The days ran like clockwork. Up for sunrise prayers, a drink of water, and then weapons training until noon. Noon prayers were followed by a meal for lunch, and then by another kind of military training like running, or marching, or hand-to-hand fighting. Then afternoon prayers, followed by Quran studies and discussions, then sunset prayer, and the evening meal. The evenings were the only resting period before the night prayer and sleep. We'd typically catch about five or six hours of downtime at night but sometimes less if we were ordered on perimeter guard duty with one of the older brothers. We soon got into a rhythm, but it was like a fatigue hung over us all the time, and I welcomed the breaks that the prayers and mealtimes provided. Every other week or so we would pack up the tents, load the entire operation onto trucks, and move to a different location. I hated my new life at first. It was entirely different from anything I had previously known, but no one else ever complained, so slowly but surely, I started to settle in and accept my new role in life. Every so often the imam, Abu Mazen, would visit us. His visits were the absolute highlights of my time in training, his speeches and prayers were like nothing else. It made me see myself and all the hard training in a different light. I began to rediscover my purpose in life as a young brother of JAS and as a true believer. When he told us of the successes of the Ummah and the grave defeats that were being dealt upon the Nigerian Army and the many apostates of Borno Province, I tell you, we would cheer and laugh and feel vindicated. I began to look forward to the time when I would be allowed to go into battle myself, but for me it never actually went so far. I was as good a shot as the next brother, but I made the mistake of correcting one of our instructors when we had a lesson on how to prepare explosives. He didn't really seem to know what he was doing, and I told him in no uncertain terms that his approach was sloppy at best and dangerous at worst. We should be using sodium nitrate from fertilizer and not the slower reacting potassium nitrate from preservatives, and we

should be considerably more thorough when preparing aluminum for the reaction. It landed me a slap across the face for insubordination and an added promise of ten lashes with the whip. It never actually got so far, though. Later that evening I had a visit from Commander Jayamma, the leader of the camp. I thought he came to scold me for speaking up because he looked so solemn when he entered the tent. It turned out he just wanted to speak to me. We went out into the bush and sat down and talked about my past. When I told him that I had studied chemical engineering at UNIMAID he seemed to realize who I was and asked if I was the brother who had procured the hazmat suits for the Ummah. When I confirmed that I was, his mood began to lighten, and he told me that I had done a great service to the brothers. We talked at length about what needed to be done if our bombs were to become more stable and harder hitting. He honored me by saying he believed that God had sent me for a reason and asked if there were others of the younger brothers who knew their way about a laboratory. I told him that I didn't think there were, but that brother Ifechi had a good head on his shoulders. Three days later the two of us were picked up by a heavily armed escort and moved all the way to Niger.

I spent the following three months in an abandoned school in the northern Tahoua region in Niger teaching my friend Ifechi and twelve other brothers how to make proper explosives. Some of my students were from Nigeria but most were from Mali or Niger, so I had to teach in both English and French. It was an absolute disaster. After two wholly unproductive days, I asked the head of the camp, Commander Mamadou, for an interpreter to ensure that the French-speaking brothers understood what I was teaching them. I was assigned a bright young Nigerien by the name of Usman. The son of a rich, southern landowner, and a fervent believer in the cause, he had previously traded livestock and goods on both sides of the border and spoke both English and French to perfection. Because I was a newcomer, some of the older brothers seemed to have little faith in me, but Usman shut them up if ever they mouthed off. He had seen action several times, was unafraid of people twice his size, and knew his way around both a chemistry book and a Quran as well. He was an enormous resource to me. The area was largely under the control of the Ummah, and the Niger Army didn't dare attack any of our positions. Some of the local tribes on the other hand were not so easily discouraged, so our bases in the area still needed round-the-

clock security against enemy attacks. That was also where I saw action the first time. In the dead of night, some local tribesmen opened fire on our compound. Several rounds hit the school walls and the sound was deafening. We woke to a few seconds of utter confusion before realizing what was going on, but then got ourselves together, grabbed our weapons, and rushed to our defensive positions to take up the fight. The guards were already engaging the enemy, and the battle was short and overwhelmingly in our favor. When we cleared the surrounding fields the next morning, we found two dead Tuareg tribesmen. One of them was lying face-down in the hard dirt a hundred meters in front of my position, and I told myself that I had shot him. To be honest, I am not sure I did, but I felt like I had finally done something real for the Ummah. The brothers seemed to agree, and after that, I was treated with a different kind of respect. A month later I had finished training the first thirteen bomb-makers, and I thought I would be given another batch of students and begin again. I really thought this was God's plan for me. As it turned out, Sheikh al-Sheikawi had a different job for me altogether. The base at the school was being shut down due to rumors of a Niger Army offensive, but just as we were getting ready to roll out, Commander Mamadou suddenly approached me and told me he had been ordered to send me somewhere else instead. Orders had come down from the highest places that I was to be sent west to assist with a special project. When I couldn't conceal my disappointment, he offered to send Usman with me to make sure I fared well. Usman just gave me the thumbs up, so I took that as a tiny win even though I was still upset about being ordered to take up a new assignment just as I was getting the hang of things in my current function. So, while the whole group rolled north, I got in a truck with Usman and six brothers I had never met before and rolled off west, straight into the sunset. For a fleeting moment I felt important.

Usman and I were sent over the border to Mali to a farm in the eastern part of Gao province, where we reported to a high-level commander by the name of Oumar. He was a tall, awe-inspiring Malian who commanded several groups of fighters from across the world. Commander Oumar attached us to a mixed group of foreign fighters and Malian brothers who had all been handpicked, either because of their previous services to the Ummah or because they had special knowledge through previous education and training. I feared that the commander would separate Usman and me, but he didn't. Usman had an air

of extreme confidence about him, which Oumar quite evidently liked, so it was decided that we would stay together. Our new group was tasked with serving as “mobile security for special deliveries,” and I with “science equipment quality control.” Our leader was a Malian brother by the name of Youssouf who everyone knew as Yaya. He was from the area and seemed to know every country road, village, wadi, forest, and hideout in the area like the back of his hand. I was glad to be put in an operational group. Even though I had a hard time communicating with most of the others, there was feeling of togetherness and dedication to the cause. It felt like we would be doing important work, even though we wouldn’t be sent out on combat operations. The missions turned out to be a bit tedious, though. We would typically receive our orders directly from Commander Oumar and be told to meet a contact somewhere in the middle of nowhere, often with an extremely narrow timeline, meaning that we would have to race against the clock to be ready on site for when our contacts showed up. Smugglers are a dodgy lot, so Yaya always insisted that we keep the interactions to an absolute minimum. Normally he would meet the contact in person, along with one of the other fighters and the quality inspector. The rest of us would stay out of sight with the trucks and observe the transaction from a distance until the smugglers had left. A few of us were tasked with various kinds of quality inspection. A brother called Mahmud had previously been a construction engineer and would inspect deliveries of heavy building materials and machinery; brother Massa had been a foreman at a construction company and would assess the quality of mortar, bricks, tiles, and similar supplies. From time to time, I would be asked to inspect crates of laboratory equipment. Everything from microscopes, petri dishes, and centrifuges to rapid freezers, vacuum ovens, and titanium plate heat exchangers. I would inspect the contents of the many shipments to the best of my abilities but complained to Yaya about being left in the dark. Since I had no idea what the equipment was intended for, I had next to no possibility of assessing whether it was fit for the purpose. I merely checked the state of the equipment, and sometimes felt like any idiot could have been doing my job. Yaya understood my frustration but told me to forget about it. Word had it that Commander Oumar had shot one of his lieutenants for asking questions about the many expensive deliveries; the leaders wanted this to be a secret operation, so we all held our tongues and never spoke about our

work to other brothers. We of course talked about it in the group, and I suggested that they were building a proper weapons and bomb factory to keep the Ummah supplied for the war. This notion somehow caught on, and amongst ourselves we began referring to the deliveries as “The Factory Project.” We picked up the equipment at a different location every time, but we always brought it to the same place. There was a compound at the side of a dirt road, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, many kilometers from the nearest village. The place had the air of an old, abandoned farmstead, and only one guy lived there—an old brother that everyone called Baba. He would serve us chai, help us unload the equipment, and then see us off. The next time we returned, the equipment would have been picked up by someone else. Clean lines. I promise you, the first many months I had no idea what they were building, but eventually I began to suspect.

“What triggered your suspicions, if I may ask?” There is genuine curiosity in Andrew’s voice. He leans forward as he asks, his eyes scrutinizing my face as if he is looking for something the machine cannot detect—sincerity maybe. “Well, there were many little things,” I answer. “First and foremost, the amount of laboratory equipment. There was simply more of it than there was of the types of production equipment one would need for a factory line. What hammered home my suspicion, though, was something that happened this past summer. Like I said, I was asked to inspect a handful of old titanium heat exchangers at one time. From the look of them, they had been stripped from old ships down in Lagos, but they all appeared to be in working order. Titanium is an excellent conductor, and it doesn’t corrode, so such heat exchangers would be the natural cooling device choice for explosives production. Sometime later, I was asked to inspect a similar shipment, but the entire back of the truck was filled by a large metal cylinder. Initially, I thought it was a water tank or a cooker of some sort, but it turned out to be a double-jacketed stirred tank reactor.” Andrew’s eyes dart down to the pile of papers in front of him. He sorts through them at an incredible pace before picking out a page with a picture of an almost identical reactor on it. “Something like this?,” he asks. “Yes,” I confirm. “Almost exactly like that. Smaller, but intended to do the same thing. Jacketed tank reactors are basically apparatus used for mixing chemicals that need to be cooled during the chemical process. It is not an item normally used in the production of explosives or

gunpowder for that matter. It is used for cooling otherwise unstable exothermic chemical processes. But even nitroglycerin production doesn't require the degree of cooling a jacketed tank reactor provides; they intended to produce another kind of volatile substance." "But you had no idea what?" Andrew asks. I shake my head. "Nothing concrete, only suspicions. As you know, Sheikh al-Sheikawi had declared allegiance to the Islamic State two years before, and from time-to-time Commander Oumar would keep us abreast of the developments in the Levant. I had heard that their warriors had achieved great successes with chlorine gas used directly against enemy targets and in very small doses. To begin with, I hoped this would be a similar endeavor, but things didn't really add up. I began to suspect that they were building a full-fledged chemical weapons factory, and I made the mistake of telling Usman about my concerns." I take a sip of water. For a second I can almost smell the dust in the air and hear Usman's harsh laughter. "His reaction shocked me. He seemed to relish the idea," I continue. "He was genuinely happy anyway. I tried to explain the indiscriminate nature of chemical weapons to him, but that didn't faze him at all. He told me that the Ummah was the only thing I should be worrying about. He continued to go on a rant about all the evil apostates who fought against us, the Malis, the Nigeriens, and Nigerians, and how they were all just as bad as the heathens. He said he would gas all of them if necessary, and that it would require the obligatory sacrifice of a few innocent souls to secure the Caliphate. I died on the inside. Look, I realize that there is collateral damage in all wars. I had originally accepted that bombs would go off from time to time in Maiduguri, because they were targeted against known enemies or apostates, and not the public at large. Yet, they sometimes killed completely innocent people as well, as was to be expected. I had come to accept that. But this!? Killing thousands or even millions. That was never what I wanted. No one in their right mind can claim that is Islam. I don't think I have ever felt so alone, Andy." "Is that what made you want to leave, Hassem? Because you felt alone? Or because you wouldn't contribute to such wanton destruction?" Andrew leans back. His face takes on an entirely different character suddenly, an almost curious look. "That.... Well, both. No, not just those two reasons, Andy. You mustn't think that of me. There were many other reasons. As the days and weeks passed, I began reflecting on how trapped Hakeem and Mr. Akerele had made me

feel back in the day, and how they had left me no choice but to join. It still felt so unfair to me. I thought about how my departure must have broken my mother's heart. But I also thought about the tribesmen who fought us in Niger and Mali, and how I would have felt if foreigners encroached on my land. I realized that in all honesty, I had never believed in the possibility of creating a Caliphate in West Africa or in the resurgence of the days of Mansa Musa. But yes, the prospect of becoming an instrument in a plan to kill thousands and thousands of innocent people was probably the straw that broke the camel's back. I remember I had a dream that very same night. It still comes back to me now and again. It is like I am suspended in an empty, dark vastness, but there is a presence there with me; Thousands of screaming, agonized voices, reaching down from somewhere far above me. I woke up feeling guilty, and a sense of urgency began to settle in me. My talk with Usman had discouraged me from voicing my concerns to the others, so I kept my mouth shut and my head down for a couple of weeks. We kept on making our deliveries, but the nagging feeling that maybe I didn't belong kept getting stronger. I started thinking about a way out. In the end, I manned up and told Yaya my concerns about the program. He seemed just as shocked as I was and told me not to utter a word about it to anyone else if I wanted to stay alive. In hindsight, it was probably a bad idea to tell him. I don't think Yaya could keep his mouth shut. I remember we returned with a delivery of laboratory equipment a few days later, and after we had had chai with Baba, Yaya hung back and talked. The rest of us got ready to roll out, and we must have waited in the trucks for about ten minutes before he finally came out and joined us. I didn't think much of it at the time, but in retrospect I am sure he asked Baba some questions that he shouldn't have. Two days later Commander Oumar told us he had reassigned Yaya and promoted Usman leader of our team. We would be given a new important task. We never saw Yaya again, not even to say goodbye. I feared the worst, and moreover worried if he had mentioned my name in his conversation with Baba. We were handed over to the command of another leader, Commander Hamani, whose job it was to oversee the movement of the equipment from Baba's compound to its destination." A careful smile begins to spread across Andrew's face. "Can you show me where this destination is on a map?" he asks. "Of course, I can," I answer, "but I have already pointed out the location to your friends from the Niger Army." Andrew leans back.

“I know you have, but context matters, Hassem. As does trust. The United States and her Allies have not been sitting idle since you came in. We have quite naturally been looking to confirm your story through other sources, but you and I have now spent almost 36 hours in this room together. I feel I know you, and more importantly, I believe that you are telling me the truth. So, please, point it out to me.” He picks up a tablet and opens a mapping program. It takes me a few moments to orient myself, but slowly recognition sets in. I ask him to zoom in close to Mali’s Niger border. I search around for a few minutes and finally trace my finger along one of the tiny dirt roads. “Here. This little thing is Baba’s compound. This is where the equipment would be dropped off. We would then pick it up and drive it quite a bit south, all the way down to these houses here. It used to be a village called Bila, but it hasn’t been inhabited since the war began. A few farmers still live in some of the outlying farmsteads, but nowadays the southern building here is the only inhabited one. That is where we handed over the deliveries.” I point out the compound for Andrew. He zooms in. The resolution is impressive. I lean over and indicate two old houses. “These two small buildings north of the road are empty. Those two smaller structures inside the walls are a generator room and a fuel storage shed. The main building is this one. It has a regular entrance here and a service entrance on the side, where they receive the equipment.” Andrew looks at it for a while. “It is a big building, Hassem, but it looks too small to house a chemical laboratory.” I nod. “Yes, but don’t be fooled. Every time we made deliveries there, we would be ordered to drive truckloads of dirt away and dump it in the desert. I think the proper installation is underground.” Andrew nods to himself. “Thank you, Hassem, this has been very helpful. Let us stop for tonight. I will bring your information on to my superiors immediately. But tomorrow, after breakfast, I want to hear how you ended up here with me.” I try to smile and my stiff face aches. “It is not a very heroic story, Andy,” I answer. He shrugs. “Well, be that as it may, I would still like to hear it.”

The next few weeks the shipments began to dwindle and then eventually stopped entirely. It made me feel like time was up somehow. We were still assigned to Commander Hamani who kept us on hand to help guard the Bila compound. Usman and the brothers were happy with some downtime, but honestly, I was starting to feel a bit unsettled by the

whole situation and the sense of urgency didn't stop. I wanted to get away from that place; it had an off feeling about it. I began to worry that we wouldn't be allowed to leave. The other guys at the base were a strange lot. They were all Nigerians, which I would normally have found to be a good thing, but everyone in the group had vicious tempers and hardly ever exchanged more than a few words with any of us "transport boys." Also, it was hard to tell how many they were. Sometimes we would see four or five in a group, sometimes as many as ten. We weren't allowed into the actual building, we never shared meals together, and we were only tasked with sentry duty, so there was no way to tell. There could have been twenty people in there for all I knew. Bila was a derelict, abandoned place. No one ever came; no one ever left. Well, sometimes two of the Bila-brothers would borrow one of our trucks to do a supply run, but they never said where to. After a few weeks Commander Hamani suddenly wanted to talk to Usman about a mission. He told us he had been requested to support another commander with additional fighters but that he needed his own men here. Instead, he said, he would send us. He wanted us to drive all the way down across the border into Niger, link up with another commander and assist his men in an attack on a Niger Army base that had been causing trouble for the brothers in the area. Usman was thrilled about the prospect of getting back into the thick, and to begin with I was just happy that we were being sent away to another place. But again, that nagging feeling that something was wrong just wouldn't go away. We got on the road the next morning after packing the truck for the long journey, but annoyingly two of the Bila-brothers came with us. One of them got in with the driver and the other got in the back with the rest of us. It was a weird experience. They stifled all conversation just by being there. After spending two weeks with those fellows, we would rather sit in quiet than talk in their presence. We drove for four days, stopping only to refuel the truck by jerrycans, to pray, to change drivers, or to attend to nature's call. We hardly spoke in all that time. We crossed into Niger on the third day, and around noon on the fifth day, we arrived at the meeting point. Four brothers in a pickup truck with a machine gun on top were waiting for us and led us to a camp in the bush. We were greeted by a commander called Mukhtar, whom I immediately pegged for a Nigerian. His base was bustling with activity. Something like a hundred brothers were filling magazines, preparing rocket launchers, and refueling cars

and motorcycles. It was evident that something big was underway. Usman and the two Bila-brothers followed Commander Mukhtar into a tent, and the rest of us sat down with some of the local brothers to chat. They were very forthcoming and told us about a mission in Tongo Tongo that they had recently carried out. They claimed to have killed ten U.S. Special Forces and more than a hundred Niger Army soldiers in a massive ambush. Now the time had come to hit the Chingodar Army Base and bleed the enemy there. They thanked us for joining the fight, gave us cigarettes, food, and extra ammunition, and we began to prepare for the afternoon's attack. Usman returned an hour later and explained the orders. Our group would be driven to about five kilometers from the enemy base and make our way on foot from there. We would approach from the east, through an area dense with bush trees. From there we would be able to sneak up to about a hundred meters from the camp. At exactly 1650 we would open fire on the enemy base and draw their attention. We were supposed to keep up the fight for three minutes, after which the main assault would begin with a massive thrust from the north. We were then to disengage and withdraw back out the way we came to the pickup point. The plan sounded reasonably straightforward, and Usman was excited to command his first combat operation. I asked him where the two Bila-brothers were, and he answered that they had been assigned to the main force attack. A chill went down my spine. I must have made a strange expression because the look on Usman's face turned sour. He told me to get over myself, and that it was a great honor to be part of the main force attack. An honor that no one in our group had earned yet. He told me we should consider ourselves lucky and be grateful to come along in a supporting role. I didn't have the strength to offer up a reply. I had a bad feeling about the whole thing. This was a massive group like the one I was initially inducted into. Why did they need support from a small band like us? If they could defeat U.S. Special Forces, what value did we represent to them? Why would those two creepy Bila-brothers come along all this way and just leave us and fight with the main group here at the end? Why would we even be selected for any type of combat mission? We had always been a specialized unit, who served a very specific purpose. And as I sat there in the camp, surrounded by a hundred or more brothers preparing for battle, the question answered itself. They didn't need us. Our time was up. We had served our purpose. There would be no more deliveries. We had moved from being

an invaluable resource to an expendable one, a problem maybe even. I thought about Yaya's disappearance and suddenly felt like crying. I had to look down so that the others wouldn't notice. My mind began racing. How on Earth could we get out of this? Could we make a break for it? No, we would be killed instantly. Could I convince any of the others? I looked around, but everyone was just busy getting ready. I noticed Usman was still staring at me with a look of resentment in his eyes. I looked away. No solutions presented themselves. We were literally surrounded. Outnumbered and trapped. I didn't have time to come up with anything. A few minutes later orders were shouted through the camp and the first of the brothers began rolling out soon after. Usman got us on our feet and did a weapons and ammunitions check; then we were ordered to get in the truck. One of the local brothers drove us and he obviously knew his way around. We bumped along for almost two hours on dusty, uneven roads and through stretches of open desert before stopping in an area dense with bush trees and undergrowth. We got off the truck and Usman spent a few minutes doing a map check with the driver before we set off into the foliage. I was sweating profusely. My knees felt weak. I remember looking at my watch and realizing it was 1558. We had to hurry if we were going to make it on time. I prayed under my breath that this was what God had intended for me. Usman drove forward at an incredible pace, committed to the plan, and the rest of us hurried along behind him. The cover of bushes and trees soon became denser, obscuring our surroundings, but the hard ground still made progress quick. The terrain was surprisingly hilly, and we began making our way up a small gully towards a ridgeline when Usman suddenly stopped. We gathered around him, and he showed us all on the map that we were close to the enemy camp. From the ridge we would make our way down into another gully that led through a less dense part of the forest up close to the enemy camp. We would be in position to open fire at exactly 1650. We pressed on and came over the ridgeline and into the next gully. It was shallower and narrower, a ditch almost, and we moved forward at an odd crouch not to be seen. After another ten minutes or so we stopped again, and Usman crawled forward to look. He only moved a few hunched paces forward before he turned around and came back. He told us he could see the base over the side of the ditch, only a about a hundred meters away and that we should begin moving forward to get into position. Slowly, we began to spread out.

I moved a few steps forward just as Usman had done, and true enough, the base was visible through the sparse vegetation. I began to crawl forward and suddenly noticed scores of spent shell casings on the ground in front of me. They littered the place! I looked up the ditch and saw hundreds more, dispersed at regular intervals. I stalled. My intestines whined. Then the entire world exploded. Miniature detonations blossomed around us, and a cacophony of roars, smacks, and pings howled towards us from all directions. I was on my stomach. I am sure it saved my life. Immediately, everything was pandemonium. I looked up and saw uniformed soldiers bearing down on us, rifles blazing. Two came charging at me straight down the ditch. I fired in their direction, which stopped them, but I can't imagine I hit any of them. I managed to get up into a crouch and began stumbling backward with my head down. I almost tripped over two of my brothers who were dead on the ground. When I looked to my right in the direction of the enemy base, the whole forest was alive with movement. It looked like a hundred men were coming at us. I got out of the ditch and began running and shooting. A few of the others were with me. Brother Abdoul emptied his magazine and was shot in the chest for his efforts. I began zigzagging up the hill with rounds slapping against the dirt around me, tearing through the thin bush trees, and showering me in dirt and splinters. I fired blindly in their direction and saw brother Khaled get shot in the head. He dropped into an awkward sitting position with half his face missing. Usman pushed past me, firing on the move. I followed him and together we sprinted over the ridge. We ran. I can't say for how long. We scampered down the other side and onwards without any sense of direction, a desperate dash through the thick of the forest with the enemy on our heels. Shots careened through the trees after us, but we kept rushing forward. In the background, a massive roar of gunfire signaled that the main force attack had begun, but for us, the fight was over. After a long while, we felt like we had gotten enough distance from any pursuers and knelt in a small clearing. We changed magazines, sweat pouring like rain from our faces. I looked at Usman. He was grazed in the right shoulder, and blood was running freely from the open wound. He didn't seem to notice. He regarded me with a wild look in his eyes and started to whisper that we had to hurry back to the pickup location and get back to the others. I stared at him in disbelief. Still, he didn't realize. We had been sent to our deaths. Nobody back there cared whether we survived or not. Nobody

would be waiting at the pickup. They had sent us to a well-known firing position, from where the Nigerian soldiers expected an attack. We were only there to draw their attention and pay for it with our lives. We were considered as expendable as they came. My mouth began forming words that never came. Usman drank from his canteen. Darkness was slowly creeping in. Over his shoulder, I noticed movement amongst the scattered trees. Some of the Nigeriens were still on our tail. Camouflaged uniforms moved slowly towards us. For a second, I thought of fighting. I thought of dying, and I thought of the injustice of it all, of my entire miserable life, and suddenly fathomed how much I hated all of this. Even though I hated myself—no—I hated what I had become, and what I had helped others to achieve. I looked at the young man in front of me, his shoulder bleeding, his rifle on the ground, as he studied the map trying to find a way back. What would life have been like if we had both not joined this hateful group. We could have been friends. Real friends, not just collaborators bound together by a war that someone else had made for us. The soldiers seemed to have noticed us, they continued slowly forward in our direction without making a sound, rifles at the ready. Usman still traced his fingers up and down the map. It was tragic to watch. That map would never show him a way back. I lifted my rifle. He looked up and saw the weapon pointed directly at him. He blinked once, looked me dead in the eye, and I shot him in the face.

Tears are running freely down my face. I do nothing to stop them. Andrew gets up. He removes the cuff from my arm, the electrodes from my fingertips, and the band from my chest and knocks on the door. A soldier opens it. “Approve the transcripts and tell Chris we are good,” he says. The soldier nods and closes the door. Andy sits back down. I look out the window. It is late in the afternoon, I think. “What now?” I ask. Andrew says nothing. After a while I wrestle my eyes away from the window and look at him. He looks dead tired. I feel another sting of guilt. “You don’t need to bear my burden, Andy,” I say. “No, Hassem, on the contrary, I do,” he answers. “We talked about this. About being a good Christian and a good Muslim. I know you have told me the truth, but what you have also given me is a confession. It is the duty on any good Christian to hear a confession out. So, yes, I must help bear this.” “I don’t deserve your kindness,” I answer. “Do you know that, Hassem? Or is it simply something you feel?” I sigh. “I have done terrible things, Andy.”

He nods. “As have we all, my man. But let me answer my own question. No! You don’t know God’s intention any more than I, and you should be wary of any man who claims otherwise. You do not know whether you are deserving of my kindness. I think you are. As we are speaking, people are scrambling to destroy the operation at Bila, because you have helped us find it. As we are speaking the 3rd Special Forces Group and the Niger Army are mopping up the remnants of the fiends who attacked the Chingodar army base. I understand that you feel complicit. It is good that you show remorse for your actions. You will need that if you are ever to forgive yourself. But trust me when I say that your participation in this terrible matter is unimportant in the great scheme of things. Cogs are now turning that are infinitesimally larger than any of us. If JAS hadn’t found you, Hassem, they would have found someone else.” “Thank you,” I answer. “You didn’t answer my question, though. What happens now?” Andrew leans back. “Well, Hassem, I have spent the small hours of the night talking to my superiors, and they have talked to our people in Nigeria. The authorities have a hold of your parents and your sisters. They are safe and are very happy to hear that you are alive. We’ve moved them to a house in Lagos. When you have recovered here you can go and see them. We have assurances from Senator Gaidam that you will be offered a minimal sentence of four years if you enter into and complete the Operation Safe Corridor Program.” I stare at him with my mouth agape like a fool. “Andy,” is all I manage. His warm smile broadens. “Andy, I don’t deserve this.” He shakes his head dismissively. “Stop saying that. A man is judged by the sum of his actions. What happens now, Hassem? I’ll tell you. Now you return and find your path again. Now you own up and do your time. Now you finish your master’s degree. Now you begin the hard work of forgiving yourself. You need to try to accept that if God has a plan, you are still part of it, and this was meant to happen all along. Time to start over, my man. Time to start over.”

D. UNPACKING THE NARRATIVE

You have just read an example of how to use fiction to explain terrorist deradicalization built over the frame of Dr. Horgan’s Pathway Into, Through, and out of Terrorism. The story follows Hassem Abdullahi, a young, Nigerian man. The first part of the narrative begins, where the second narrative ends. This was written as a creative attempt to underscore the point that the initial reasons for radicalization (the beginning) are directly

connected to the causes for initiating deradicalization (the end).⁸³ When we first meet Hassem, he is being subjected to brutal, if understandable, mistreatment at the hands of his captors. After having ascertained that he is an asset with important knowledge of enemy operations, his captors eventually hand him over to their allies from the U.S. Special Forces who treat his injuries and begin interrogating him. Hassem is already at the point where he has made a conscious decision to discard the ideology of the organization and, though old tendencies toward in-group vs. out-group categorization still linger in him, he is a willing subject for questioning. His handler, Andrew, is a seasoned interrogator from the Special Forces, well-versed in cognitive interrogation, and meets his subject with deliberate kindness to gain Hassem's trust and prove himself similarly reliable. Andrew's kindness helps to confirm Hassem in his decision to leave the organization, and he accepts to be subjected to a polygraph test to prove the veracity of his statements.

Hassem's story begins by establishing his pre-radicalization life. He has grown up in a well-educated, upper-class family and has plans to follow in his father's footsteps and become a chemical engineer. We learn that religion is a matter of great importance in Hassem's family, which is a contributing but not crucial factor in the early stages of Hassem's radicalization. In 2009 the government of Nigeria carry out a state-wide clamp down on Boko Haram, or JAS as they are referred to in this story. The Army's operations are brutal and often indiscriminate, which causes increasing resentment in the largely Muslim population of Borno and helps legitimize the brutality of JAS as a resistance movement. Hassem perceives the army's brutality as unjust and begins to accept the "us vs. them" narrative. He begins slowly moving into a non-violent radicalization of a both political and religious nature. Hassem does little in the way of pre-involvement searching. The fact that his parents dislike the actions of JAS, and his determination to succeed in his studies, initially keep Hassem away from direct interaction with the organization, despite his increasingly extremist views. As it happens, two things must fall into place for Hassem to begin his journey towards violent radicalization: 1) Hassem's father is forced to take a job in Abuja, which causes the family end up in financial trouble; and 2) the organization

⁸³ Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism*, 151–154.

is actively looking to recruit men with access to university laboratories, which Hassem has. Hassem, who already blames the government for both the brutality of the Army and indirectly for his fiscal difficulties, is incapable of obtaining a loan to pay for the continuation of his studies. When a benefactor from a local mosque offers him a loan with no strings attached, Hassem accepts. The loan comes with hidden commitments, but Hassem is slow to realize that he is being manipulated. He is initially introduced to a new mosque and a new cleric who preaches a more radical interpretation of Islam, which leads him to further accept the notion of extremist violence. Still, the transition to violent radicalization is only partly successful. When his benefactor pressures him to steal two hazmat suits from the university, many of Hassem's dreams and aspirations collapse. These actions push Hassem into complete violent radicalization while also leaving a chink in his armor that will steadily increase.

The second part of the narrative begins with Hassem accepting his fate as a recruit in the armed branch of JAS. Over a period of many months, he is further indoctrinated to own the violent ideology of the organization and is tasked with teaching others how to build bombs. He finds a sense of meaning in his new life and makes a new friend in the dedicated radical named Usman. Hassem is elated when he is involved in actual fighting and lives up to his older comrades' expectations. He is now a full-fledged member of JAS and is loyal to the ideology of the organization. He manages to suppress his previous grievances and is sent to Mali to help with a special project. In the beginning the new-found sense of purpose helps to keep Hassem involved and engaged. He believes the group is building a weapons and bomb factory, which plays well into the narrative of armed resistance against the out-group that Hassem has come to accept. When the truth begins to dawn on him, namely that JAS is attempting to build a chemical weapons plant and produce a weapon of mass destruction to be used against civilian populations of their enemies, Hassem is horrified at the prospect. He is incapable of reconciling his religious and political beliefs with the organization's proposed brutality. Hassem is failing to remain engaged and begins to question why he joined in the first place. He is taking his first steps towards deradicalization. Though the process is initially slow, Hassem begins to mentally distance himself from JAS and becomes increasingly suspicious of the behavior of his friends and

allies. He is on a subconscious level beginning to look for a way out. When his group is tasked with a special mission to participate in an attack on a Niger Army base, Hassem is apprehensive. He suspects that the organization is trying to tie up loose ends and get rid of those who know too much about the chemical weapons project. When Hassem ends up in a lethal firefight and sees a window of opportunity, he makes up his mind and rises to the occasion. He kills his former friend Usman to disengage from the organization, surrenders to the enemy, and continues his journey of deradicalization.

How does this narrative increase our understanding of terrorist deradicalization and Horgan's Pathway Into, Through, and Out of Terrorism? As just explained, the story gives concrete examples of what the progression of the steps in Horgan's model could unfold. The story also allows the reader to share the experience of an educated person with a morally well-adjusted compass who is slowly drawn toward acceptance of violent extremist views. In this way, the story addresses the misconception that individuals who engage in terrorism are inherently dim-witted or psychotic.⁸⁴ By emphasizing Hassem's moral struggle through the radicalization phase, and in his attempt to remain involved and engaged, the story addresses just how vulnerable terrorist organizations potentially are to counter-radicalization efforts—and how many increasingly deradicalized terrorists potentially linger in their organizations from a perceived lack of alternatives to remaining committed.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Horgan, 3–14.

⁸⁵ Bjørgo and Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, 245–255; Horgan, *Walking Away From Terrorism*, 155–156.

VII. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A. CONCLUSION

At the start of this capstone project, I set out to examine, by example, how fictional narratives could be used to describe, teach, and comprehend academic theories or theoretical models in Defense Analysis. The intention was not to investigate whether it could be done but through examples *how* it could be done. First, this study examined narrative techniques four eminent authors employed in their novels to convey their intended messages. By looking at these fictional narratives through the lens of Defense Analysis, I identified some of the authors' techniques to create my own narratives, that illustrate theory from Defense Analysis and make those often complex concepts more readily accessible to and understood by students. By placing the reader behind the eyes of the characters experiencing those theories as events and engaging the emotions (as well as the intellect) of the reader, these narratives exemplify how said models and theories function and are intended to be understood. The stories of the radicalization of the young Nigerian men, Obiefune and Hassem, who experience two radically different ways into and later out of the same organization are good examples. Dr. Moghaddam's *Staircase to Terrorism*, which was used to develop the first of the two narratives, is in many ways self-explanatory. The model is mostly challenged by the fact that every step up the staircase requires significant further radicalization, which only a minority of people are willing to undertake. For a non-radicalized person attempting to understand the model, the transition through or up these steps can be easy enough to grasp cognitively but difficult to relate to emotionally. In other words, the model explains the "what" but leaves open the "how and why" and suffers as a consequence. Portraying the staircase through fiction helps the reader empathize with the experiences of a person undertaking the journey. It functions as a pedagogical tool to explain the model while also establishing an emotional explanation that further substantiates its relevancy. Similarly, the narrative of terrorist deradicalization built over Dr. Horgan's *Pathway Into, Through, and Out of Terrorism* helps to validate the model by clarifying just how tightly bound deradicalization (the way out) is to the original causes for radicalization (the way in). By portraying the radicalization of a well-adjusted,

morally upstanding, and mentally astute young man, this narrative challenges the misconception that terrorists are mentally deficient or criminally insane and further clarifies why deradicalization efforts deserve continued attention by authorities and government agencies. The fictional renditions of the Theory of Special Operations and of Coercion Theory achieve the same effects. They successfully explain not just how the theories are intended to be understood, but by including elements of inherent coincidence that comes from throwing human actions and interpretations in the mix, the narratives also help to elucidate just how fickle both statecraft and warcraft can be.

Based on my now comprehensive studies in this field and the work I have done in the execution of this project, I find obvious potential for using fictional narratives as an educational tool at the postgraduate level. Creating these fictional narratives has not only opened an opportunity to explain theory differently and to approach teaching theory from a direction other than the conventional one— but also a challenge for both writer and reader to empathize with the protagonists of each story and to relate to the intricacies of human interaction the theory is often intended to explain. The value of this proposed approach was validated before this project was completed when the first of the narratives, “The Smile,” was assigned as reading by the Naval Postgraduate School’s Dr. Leo Blanken in a class on Wicked Problems, as an example of a different way to understand the mind of a suicide bomber.

This project also set out to investigate whether short stories could be used to illustrate the correlation between various topics in the academic field of Defense Analysis. Any reader of this capstone project should be able to identify that this is the case. All four short stories in this project were created specifically to explain one particular theory or model and are intended as academic tools for use at the postgraduate level. Each story can be read as a standalone example of a particular theory or in conjunction with the other stories to illustrate how the individual theories depicted interact. In doing so, the reader will have to reflect on the nature of wicked problems. Obiefune’s story may be one of radicalization, for example, but his actions have direct impact on the politicians who attempt to thwart the organization he is part of. It is the French government’s decisions who stir the SOF operators into action in the daring raid in Gao Province, yet the entire

operation is built largely on the intelligence collected through the narrative of the ‘deradicalizing’ Hassem Abdullahi.

In the early stages of this project, one of my advisors cautioned that the project could become a mammoth endeavor I would be incapable of completing. In as many words he told me: *“There is no such thing as a theory of everything.”* I recognize this as being evident, yet I would add that this project suggests that maybe the art form of fiction will succeed to bridge the gaps between ‘the theoretical valleys of academia.’

B. IMPLICATIONS

My advisor was right to caution me that the premise of this project might be too ambitious and that it would potentially be capable of expanding endlessly. During my writing and development process, I contemplated creating narratives about a range of other related topics in Defense Analysis. I considered writing about post-traumatic stress disorder suffered by the French soldiers who were attacked by Obi at the end of the first story to investigate Psychology in War. I considered writing a story about the Tuareg tribesmen in Niger who fight to oust JAS from their territory to look at ethnic conflict. I considered writing a story seen from the eyes of the preacher Abu Mazen to explain religious violence. Indeed, it is obvious the foundational story could have been expanded almost endlessly to explain a multitude of theories as part of the same storyline. The stories ultimately presented in this paper forced me to become deeply familiar with the theories and models used as a storytelling framework. This work, therefore, served to improve my understanding of the subject matter greatly. In that regard, the project reveals that the writing of fiction can be as important a learning process in our understanding of complex topics as the reading of fiction is in illuminating them.

Evidently, this capstone project is a first take on the potential of fictional narratives to describe, teach, and comprehend academic theories or theoretical models in Defense Analysis. To prove the efficacy of this approach and to further develop it, I suggest that a next step could be to expand its use in Defense Analysis and allow students to read, analyze, and potentially write fictional narratives built over the framework of theory to examine if and how much this improves topic comprehension. If used systematically, this could

present an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed didactic method by measuring increased student interaction, quality of class discussions, or scoring of written tests and final grades.

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Ballen, Ken. *Terrorists in Love: True Life Stories of Islamic Radicals*. New York: Free Press, 2011.
- Biddle, Tami Davis. "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners." *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 95–109.
- Bjørge, Tore and Horgan, John. *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*. Abingdon, Oxon. Routledge, 2009.
- Books on Trial, "Why Italy Banned Hemmingway's Novel A Farewell to Arms," accessed August 19, 2021, <https://www.booksontrial.com/why-italians-banned-hemingway-novel-a-farewell-to-arms/>.
- Coers, Donald V. *Introduction to The Moon is Down* (New York: Penguin Group, 1995).
- Heinlein, Robert Anson. *Starship Troopers*. New York: ACE, Penguin Random House, LLC, 2010.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Scribner, 2014.
- Horgan, John. *Walking Away from Terrorism*. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2009.
- Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Countering of Weapons of Mass Destruction*. JP 3-40. Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 27, 2019. https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_40.pdf.
- Jordison, Sam. "Blasting Bugs Is More Complicated than you Think," The Guardian Book Blog, *The Guardian*, July 23, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/jul/23/blastingbugsismorecomplicatedthanyouthink>.
- Lai, David. *Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China's Strategic Concept, Shi* (Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).
- Lindberg, Nikolaj. "At the Very End, I Smiled." *CTX II*, no. 2 (2021): 6–15.
- Marsh, Calum. "Starship Troopers: One of the Most Misunderstood Movies Ever," *The Atlantic*, November 7, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/-em-starship-troopers-em-one-of-the-most-misunderstood-movies-ever/281236/>.
- McRaven, William H. *SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996.

- Moghaddam, Fathali M. "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Explanation." *American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (February–March 2005): 161–169.
- National Steinbeck Center, "*The Moon is Down*," accessed February 24, 2021 <https://www.steinbeck.org/learn/>.
- Patterson, Jr. William H. "Robert A. Heinlein, A Biography," The Heinlein Society, August 2011, <https://www.heinleinsociety.org/2011/08/robert-a-heinlein-a-biography/>.
- Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982.
- Reynolds, Julia. *Blood in the Fields: Ten Years Inside California's Nuestra Familia Gang*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, Incorporated, 2014.
- Royal Danish Defence College: *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Special Operations Forces*. Copenhagen: Rosendahls A/S, 2017.
- Sauer, Patrick. "The Most Loved and Hated Novel about World War I," *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/most-loved-and-hated-novel-about-world-war-i-180955540/>.
- Skinner, Elizabeth. "From the Editor," *CTX II*, no. 2 (2021).
- Steinbeck, John. *The Moon is Down*. New York: Penguin Group, 1995.

INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST

1. Defense Technical Information Center
Ft. Belvoir, Virginia
2. Dudley Knox Library
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, California