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The target took a shortcut, unwittingly shaving another four minutes off of life as he knew it. His appearance surprised me, because I had parked in an alley specifically to get out of his line of march, figuring he'd go the long way around the block. He was about fifty feet back and walking at an unhurried pace. A minute later he passed me, unaware of my existence. He was so close that I could have flung open the door and knocked him to the ground. From there, it would have been easy to thump him on the head, throw him in the back, and haul ass. That would have been a bit extreme even for me, so I let him go. Better to stick with the plan.

I keyed the handset of my radio. "All elements, this is Pike. Target just passed by my location and intersected Twenty-second Street. He's crossing it now."

Pike's not my real name. It's my call sign. We use them because nobody in my unit wants to use military ones like "Victor-Bravo Three-Seven." I'd like to say that I got mine for doing something badass, but you don't pick your call sign. It picks you, and usually for something that's not flattering. In my case it came from a stupid comment I'd made during training. I grew up in Oregon, spending my time hunting and fishing. I was

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trying to describe how we should do an ambush, but wasn't communicating things right. I finally said, "You know, like a pike attacks when it catches another fish." Everyone looked at me for a second in silence, then broke out laughing. For the next two days every time I tried to suggest something, someone would say, "You mean like a pike would do it?" The name stuck. It's not too bad as call signs go. I suppose I could have been "Flounder." All in all, it's much better than my given name, which I despise.

The Foggy Bottom street in front of me was starting to clog up with the noontime lunch crowd, all out enjoying the summer sunshine. This would make it easier for my team to track the target without compromise, but the heat was turning my car into a sauna. Why the hell this guy liked wandering aimlessly around outside was beyond me, but the pattern he had created would be his downfall. Humans are creatures of habit. What looks absolutely random once will look like the same ol', same ol' over time. We had reached the same ol' stage with this target and were within minutes of taking him down.

After crossing the street, the target entered a coffee shop and took a seat at an outside patio. *Right on schedule.* I saw the team settle around him like an invisible blanket. The crowd flowed around them all without a clue what was going on. That always gave me a perverse sense of pleasure. While rushing to catch the Metro or get lunch, they were brushing past some of the finest predators on earth and didn't even know it. Sometimes I'm tempted to grab one of them and yell, "Don't you know what's going on here? Can't you see what's happening? You ought to get on your knees and thank the

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Lord that people like me are out here protecting your sorry ass.” Yeah, that’s arrogant and unfair. I suppose executing the operation without anyone knowing is pleasure enough. After all, if they did know, that would mean we had failed. In the end, they could go about buying their Starbucks or bitching about the price of gas because my team and I would have prevented something much, much worse, like a suicide bomber at their kid’s school.

In my mind, the world is split neatly into two groups: meat-eaters and plant-eaters. Nothing is wrong with either one. Both are necessary. One contributes much, much more to society than the other. The other is necessary to protect the contribution. I’m a meat-eater. My existence allows the plant-eater to contribute. Some plant-eaters, living in a so-called civilized world, call me evil, but at the end of the day, when the bad man comes and the plant-eater’s praying for a miracle, I’m what shows up.

I scanned behind me after the target passed and was surprised to see another man at the entrance to the alley, large, bald-headed, and looking out of place. He loitered for a couple of seconds, then began moving my way. *He’s following our guy.*

“All elements, this is Pike. We’ve got a trailer with the target. Stand by.”

Bull, the trigger for the takedown, said, “You sure it’s not a ghost?”

Bull was asking if I was seeing things that weren’t really there. “No, I’m not sure, but he refused to enter the alley until the target was clear, then walked at a pretty fast pace to catch up.”

If he was tracking our man, I had no idea why. We had no intel indicating the target had any security, or that

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anyone else wanted him. The guy could be police, a rival group, or even a countersurveillance effort protecting the target. Or he could be a lost tourist and I was jumping to conclusions. Either way, Baldy—and anyone else with him—would have to be separated from the target. If he was a tourist, it would take care of itself. If not, that left my team. And once we executed, we would need to be pretty damn swift, because after we got rid of this guy, his people would know someone else was on the ground and interested in the same target.

I gave a description of the trailer and watched him take a seat in the coffee shop, confirming my fears.

“Okay, listen up. We’re going to keep the plan. If Baldy’s not a ghost, he’ll follow our target into the planned kill zone. We’ll let the target go through, then take him out. Acknowledge.”

“Pike, this is Knuckles. . . . We can’t duplicate this hit twice in one day. We’re going to lose the target. We need to develop the situation, not start thumping people willy-nilly.”

“We won’t lose the target, because you’re going to tag him at his table. Using that beacon, we’ll take him down at the parking garage to his apartment. That was our contingency plan anyway. It’ll just be two hits instead of one.”

“Pike, that damn beacon hasn’t worked yet. We keep getting false positives. We’re liable to take out some old lady.”

Knuckles was my second-in-command, or 2IC. He’s a Squid, but I don’t hold that against him, since he’s a SEAL. He’s just like me, only he picked the wrong branch of service. His call sign was Knuckles, but it should have been Mother Hen, at least while we were preparing for

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operations. Once we were engaged it would be something like DeathDealingSlaughterMonster. Right now, Knuckles was in mother hen mode. He was a finicky perfectionist. Someone who wanted to ensure that every piece of kit, tactic, or technique was absolutely perfect before being used on an operation. It wasn't that he was rigid, since he was one of the best on fluid operations, and he did have a point. If everything's perfect when you start, then working through contingencies, or what we call "flexing," is that much easier. If you start with something that's faulty, then you'll be flexing from the get-go. The thing is, every operation goes to shit at one point or another—like right now. Doesn't matter how much you plan. You can either handle the curveball or not.

"Look, I get the risk, but we're running out of time. We don't have enough people to track both guys. Just tag the target and use your judgment. If you can't get him, you can't get him."

"What if the trailer's not alone?"

Knuckles was thinking right along with me. "I hear you. We'll develop the situation enough to confirm or deny he's alone. If he's got someone else working with him, we'll pass. If not, we'll take him down in the primary kill zone, leaving you and Bull with the contingency for the target."

There was a pregnant pause, then, "Roger. Out."

"Bull, keep your eyes on Baldy and see if he makes commo with anyone."

I watched a homeless man approach our target. *Jesus, now what?* This was turning into a circus. I was about to call Knuckles and warn him when I realized that was who I was looking at. Pretty damn good job of camouflage.

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He shoved a cup at the target, begging for some change. The man ignored him. Knuckles grew belligerent, bringing out the manager. *I'm never going to hear the end of this.* Knuckles was breaking the cardinal rule of surveillance by interacting with the target. On top of that, he was creating a scene that would be remembered after the hit. He was going to be pissed that I forced this on him.

The manager came out shouting. Knuckles waved his arms, slinging coins from the cup all over the place. Bending down around the target's ankles, he scrambled to get his precious money. In the blink of an eye, I saw him slip something into the cuff of the target's pants.

The size of a micro-SD card, it was a passive beacon that worked like an E-Z Pass on a toll road. It would register every time it passed a special receiver. The good part was that the card didn't need GPS or transmitting capability, along with the requisite battery source, so it could be made very, very small. The bad part was the beacon wouldn't give a specific location. It would only confirm our suspicions as the beacon passed our receivers, which we had placed throughout the target's habitual route. The final receiver was in the stairwell of the target's parking garage. A team, hidden in the shadows, would deploy when the beacon signaled. Unfortunately, with the receivers' track record, it could trigger if the wind blew the wrong way.

After watching Knuckles get chased away, I gave Bull a call. "Anything going on?"

"No. He's looking at the target, but so is everyone else thanks to Knuckles's little play. Hasn't communicated with anyone."

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“Roger. Retro, you guys ready?”

“Yeah. We just don’t know what the trailer looks like.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll trigger. If it’s no good—”

“Break—break. This is Bull. Target’s on the move.”

*Shit. That was quick.* Ready or not, the target was going to force our hand.