

1

Jacob Driscoll watched the four men, fascinated that they showed no resistance whatsoever. Completely resigned to their fate. A fly landed on the forehead of the nearest one—the one he was to kill—and the captive let it crawl about, tasting his sweat.

Jacob listened to the spokesman continue to rail in Arabic, a small crowd gathered in the square, outnumbered two to one by the gunmen. He didn't understand the language but could guess at what was being said.

These men are traitors. This is the fate that befalls all who oppose the Kalipha. Stand with us, or suffer the same.

Far from cheering, the small grouping of people looked cowed, as if they wanted to be anywhere but there. Well, that wasn't exactly true. They'd rather be on the outside watching than on their bellies with their necks stretched out.

The spokesman droned on, building toward a grand spectacle, his black tunic covered in dust, the AK-47 swinging about with his body language, and Jacob knew it was coming close. Execution time. His first.

In the seven months he'd been inside the cult of death known as the Islamic State, he'd witnessed many, many executions, acting as a gunman on the periphery, but he'd never done one on his own.

Not that he minded killing. It hadn't bothered him in the past, but the action had always been at the barrel of a gun, and he wondered how this would feel. In a detached, almost scientific way, he wondered if it would be different from carving the carcasses of the rabbits he'd killed in his youth. When he'd literally had to hunt for survival.

He looked at his partners, seeing Hussein fidgeting, the nervous tics growing more pronounced. He wasn't built for this cauldron, and Jacob thought it ironic that Hussein was the one who had recruited them. Convinced them to come to this faraway land.

Not that they had many alternatives after fleeing the cesspool of "rehabilitation" they'd been placed within. Killing the guard had ensured that.

Carlos and Devon, now known as Yousef and Talib, showed no such hesitation. They had embraced the cult of death completely, changing their names and fervently soaking up the Salafist ideology like a cactus in the rain. They were on board one hundred and ten percent, considering this day a sacred one.

Jacob played the role, but he'd long since lost belief in religion. Any religion. He'd had that whipped out of him by the pious Christian guards in the white house.

No, it wasn't the religion. It was the power. In this land, from Mosul to Raqqa, all that mattered was the courage of the battle-axe, and he'd found a skill that he didn't realize he possessed. He knew he would die here, but it caused no angst. In truth, he had died long ago. All that remained was for him to slip the coils of his mortal frame. The difference was a cause. He wouldn't end up as a page-two news story, caught stealing hubcaps and gunned down in the street. And neither would the men he had brought.

Hussein may have recruited him, and the other two may have changed their names, diving headlong into the myth of the Islamic State, but he was the leader of their small group. Just as he had been inside.

With that mantle came a responsibility.

A man in black, completely covered from head to toe, like something out of a *Star Wars* movie, began walking his way. Jacob inwardly grimaced.

His name was Abu Yabba Dabba Do, or some other unpronounceable Arabic crap, but Jacob called him Ringo. As in the Beatles. An Islamic fighter from England, he and others like him considered themselves above Jacob and his band because they were of Arabic descent. Ringo was Yemeni. Jacob was a mutt.

“So, Jacob, are you ready for your first kill?”

He drew out the name *Jacob*, showing his disdain for the Biblical reference and the fact that Jacob refused to take an Arabic one.

Jacob said, “It isn’t my first, you shit.”

Ringo smirked and said, “Death with a gun is not killing. You’ll see. This is absolute control. Absolute. As Mohammad dictated. But your little band of Lost Boys wouldn’t know about that.”

He was being tested, which was what he expected. Ringo had beheaded many men, and had developed a cult following on Twitter and other social media, but he was an ass. A small man who gained importance after the fact. After the fighting was done, using his knife and a camera to become famous. At his core, Jacob knew Ringo felt a challenge from him and his friends.

Four tightly knit brothers, forged by a fire outside the Islamic State, with—except for Hussein—no attachment to any Arabic or Islamic heritage, they were an anomaly. True foreign fighters in a foreign land. They called themselves the Lost Boys because of the iconic ’80s movie, but the analogy was apt. They lived in a world of the shadows.

And they killed better than most.

Jacob said, “Ringo, step away.”

That was all.

And Ringo did.

Ringo had seen the punishment the Lost Boys had endured. With two blond Caucasians, one African American, and Hussein, the one who had recruited them, their arrival had been anything but welcoming. Convinced they were spies or, at best, journalists, the emir had subjected them to inhuman conditions and cruelty. And they had thrived.

Because of the white house.

Ringo said, “You are not the future. *We* are the future. *Kafir*.”

Jacob looked up, catching Ringo’s pompous eyes with the dead ones he possessed, and said, “The future is dictated by the man who isn’t afraid to die. Is that you?”

Ringo said, “I am not afraid. I have proved that multiple times.”

“Do you wish to die today? Without fear?”

Jacob knew his reputation from Mosul preceded him. Knew that

Ringo hated the fact that he was a blond-headed, blue-eyed American, with no ancestral ties to the coming caliphate, but he also knew that Ringo couldn't get past the stories that had grown into legends.

Ringo snarled and said, "We'll see, Lost Boy. We'll see."

And walked away.

The man on the square finished his speech, which was like every other one, and not unlike speeches given by the blowhard preachers Jacob had heard every night in the reform school. There was a flourish at the end, then a knife placed in his hand.

He looked at the four men prostrate in front of him, and felt the hatred.

They were snitches. People who'd sold out the clan for money, giving information to the enemy for targeted air strikes and intelligence on how the Islamic State functioned. Jacob would have had qualms about killing someone for eating pork or not wearing a head wrap, but he had none for traitors.

They were the ones who had caused the pain in his past. Had caused the trips to the white house.

He looked at his man, a Kurd. Strange that such a person had been able to penetrate so deeply, given the fight against the Peshmerga, but he had. And he'd given massive information about the Islamic State to the Americans. Now he would die.

But the fly on his forehead would live.

He swished the man's face and saw it buzz away. Then leaned down, wrapping his hand into the hair, pulling it up.

As he had as a child, when the next "new" father had come into the room, stinking of whiskey and taking off his belt, he let his humanity float away, flying on a cloud. Gone.

He became a man of stone.

He looked down the line, seeing the ubiquitous cameraman recording the killing, then Carlos and Devon eagerly snatching up their own heads and looking to him for guidance. He waited on Hussein.

He caught the tears on Hussein's cheeks and wondered if the man would go through with it. He saw Ringo advancing and shouted, "Hussein!"

His friend looked at him and Jacob said, “For the white house. Do it for the white house.”

Hussein rapidly nodded, then pulled up the head.

Jacob turned to his own man, seeing his eyes rolling back, feeling the shaking in his body, the bright orange smock soaked in sweat.

The first swipe brought a gout of blood. He reached bone, and began sawing.