

MERC

by
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WGAw REGISTERED

BLACK SCREEN

A man speaks rapid-fire Arabic. CAR HORNS HONK and BLARE in the distance. Beneath this, a Mercedes V8 engine PURRS.

INT. MERCEDES - HIGHWAY 10 - FALLUJAH, IRAQ - AFTERNOON

Weaving through traffic at 110 mph, in between a LEAD SUV and REAR SUV. Up ahead, dead-stop congestion at a security checkpoint looms between the clean-shaven heads of private security contractors KELLIS and GARRITY.

In the backseat, TRAVELLER-- mid-30s, the team leader with a slightly shaggier buzz cut-- scans his moving perimeter from behind wraparound Oakleys. He locks in on the side mirror.

HIS POV: Through the tinted window, a fast-gaining white Opel sedan, also weaving at 100-plus. Tinted glass and no tags. Closing in on the Rear SUV.

Kellis, the driver, spots Traveller's hard stare in the rearview, glances to the side-view. Notes the gaining Opel.

KELLIS

Call it in?

Traveller nods silently. Garrity, listening from the front passenger seat, grabs his Motorola handheld.

GARRITY

Base, this is 2 Car. Potential unfriendly spotted. Requesting secure secondary route.

BASE TECH (O.S.)

Roger, 2 Car. Alternate route processing...

Garrity checks the screen of the dash-mounted "Ares Security" GPS as it re-configures a real-time route off the highway...and straight through the middle of the city.

GARRITY

When's the last time we went sightseeing in downtown F-J?

Kellis grimaces, spits some Skoal juice into his dented Red Bull can, veers toward the exit ramp.

In the backseat, Traveller tightens the grip on his lap-held shorty M4. Concentrates on the disappearing Opel in the side-view. Tries to ignore the RAPID-FIRE ARABIC PHONE CONVERSATION coming from his right.

EXT. HIGHWAY 10 - FALLUJAH, IRAQ - CONTINUOUS

As seen from above, the three-vehicle PSD (Personal Security Detail) exits the highway for the narrow, littered streets of the bombed-out desert city.

INT. MERCEDES - FALLUJAH STREETS - CONTINUOUS

Traveller notes they've dropped the trailing Opel, surveys the passing urban landscape. Corner shops, rooftops, parked cars, potholes. He scans for sniper perches, IED wires, suspect antennas.

Beside him, the "principal"-- AL-SARI, 50s, an Iraqi government minister in traditional thawb-- ends his satellite phone call, turns to the three PSCs dressed identically in black polo shirts, armored vests, tan slacks and Oakleys.

He smiles casually. Maybe too casually, considering the circumstances.

AL-SARI

I'm forgetting. Which one of you
is the Slinky?

GARRITY

That would be me, sir. Call name's
Slinky.

AL-SARI

And what is the meaning of this
"Slinky" again?

Garrity and Kellis exchange a glance-- this one's a talker.

GARRITY

It's an American toy. Like a big
coiled spring. They call me that
because I'm usually the first to
spring into action.

KELLIS

(off-handed)

Thought it was because you were
"fun for a girl and a boy."

AL-SARI

(to Kellis)

And you are Sniff? Because of the
tobacco?

KELLIS

"Snuff." Yeah. Because of the
chew.

Al-Sari turns his gaze on Traveller, who's trying to ignore this impromptu get-to-know-you, focus on the job at hand. Namely, protecting this inquisitive man's backside.

AL-SARI

And you, sir?

Traveller doesn't answer, keeping his eyes on the roadside. Garrity answers for him.

GARRITY

Call name's Lockjaw. He don't talk
unless it's real important.

Al-Sari studies the man to his left from within the safe perch of the steel-armor reinforced Mercedes.

AL-SARI

You think these pleasantries
unimportant, Mr. Lockjaw? And my
destination-- afternoon tea with a
friend on the far side of Fallujah--
I suspect you find this unworthy of
so much risk?

Again, Traveller doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. It's palpably obvious to everyone in the Mercedes what he thinks.

Garrity finally answers for him.

GARRITY

A contract is a contract, sir.
Don't worry. Ares Security will
get you where you need to go.

Al-Sari ignores Garrity, keeps his eyes on Traveller. He seems to want something more, from him specifically.

AL-SARI

We may be in a war zone, Mr.
Lockjaw. But amid all the madness
my country has seen, I've found
it's these small pleasantries that
remind us we're human. They're as
important as the bullets in your
gun, don't you think?

Al-Sari nods to the M4 in Traveller's lap. Traveller flashes his Oakleys the man's way long enough to register a glance. But not a second more.

INT. LEAD SUV - MOVING, FALLUJAH STREETS - CONTINUOUS

A freelance JORDANIAN DRIVER eyes his dash-mounted Ares Security GPS as he steers, its display blinking out.

He smacks the dash. It comes back on, signalling him to make a turn off the main road-- "CONGESTION AHEAD." He curses the device in Arabic, signals the Mercedes, makes the turn.

In the passenger seat, a silent JORDANIAN GUARD holds his AK-47, eyes the narrow street ahead.

INT. MERCEDES - MOVING, FALLUJAH STREETS - CONTINUOUS

Kellis spots the Lead SUV making the turn ahead, checks his own display-- still advising the original route.

KELLIS

What's Asef doing? There's no new detour request.

He follows the turn anyway. He has to-- it's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP).

GARRITY

(into Motorola)

Car 1, this is Car 2. Why are we turning?

In the backseat, Traveller scans the new street ahead. A line of squalid abandoned buildings. Trash piles everywhere. This is not good.

INT. LEAD SUV - MOVING, FALLUJAH STREETS - CONTINUOUS

The Jordanian driver reaches for his dash-mounted Motorola to respond until--

A LARGE CUBE TRUCK pulls into his path from a blind alley, blocking the narrow street with its bulk.

The driver SLAMS the brakes, hits the HORN, cursing in Arabic.

INT. MERCEDES - MOVING, FALLUJAH STREETS - CONTINUOUS

Kellis hits the brakes too, enough pocket not to rear-end the SUV. Immediately scans for an exit route.

KELLIS
Street's too narrow. Can't pull a Y in here.

Garrity hits the Motorola, eyeing his side-view.

GARRITY
Car 3, do not make the turn.
Repeat, do not make the turn.

Traveller flashes to the driver side-view. Too late. The Rear SUV is pulling onto the narrow street behind them, boxing them in.

LEAD SUV

The Jordanian Driver BLARES his horn at the Cube Truck, cursing its driver.

The Guard rolls his window, mounts his AK, lay down a short burst of WARNING FIRE near the Cube Truck's tires. T-T-T-T!

For a moment, no response from the Cube Truck...and no movement.

And then...an UNIDENTIFIED IRAQI DRIVER hops out, hurries down the street, abandoning the truck. Never a good sign.

MERCEDES

Traveller whips to his side-view. Through the smoked glass, he can just make out the SECOND JORDANIAN DRIVER and GUARD in the Rear SUV front seat.

He grabs the Motorola from Garrity's hand.

TRAVELLER
Car 3, back it up. Now.

He watches the Rear SUV put it in reverse, back up until-- WHAM! A SECOND CUBE TRUCK appears, RAMMING its driver side from another alley, crushing driver and guard against the building across.

A SECOND UNIDENTIFIED DRIVER hops out, hurries from the wreckage, leaving a larger rear roadblock as...

Traveller spots AK muzzles appear on rooftops from both sides of the street. No question now: this is an ambush. He hits the red "Panic" on his belt-mounted transponder, pulls a confused Al-Sari down to the seat, body-covering him as...

EXT. NARROW STREET - DOWNTOWN FALLUJAH - CONTINUOUS

AK fire RAINS DOWN on the two trapped vehicles, PLINKING off their armored shells like hailstones, gunfire spider-webbing their bullet-proof windows but not cutting through.

LEAD SUV

The Jordanian driver's curses turn to MUMBLED ARABIC PRAYERS. He throws the SUV in gear, floors it toward the First Cube Truck, ramming its cargo hold until-- BOOM!

Both vehicles ignite in a BLACK-ORANGE FIREBALL, leaving the forward roadblock worse, CHOKED IN FLAMES.

MERCEDES

Garrity is the first to spring from the stalled Mercedes, spray suppression fire from his M4 at the adjoining rooftop.

Kellis follows, using the armored car door as cover, spitting angry bullets at the masonry on the opposite roof.

In the backseat, Traveller speed-assesses as Al-Sari flails beneath him: Multiple AKs on rooftops at both sides, a shady abandoned building the only cover nearby, AK bullets plinking harmlessly off the bulletproof roof above.

He shoves Al-Sari down in the rear seat, drops the metal-reinforced seat back over top, sandwiching him and buckling him in. Al-Sari SCREAMS in well-protected protest as...

Traveller KICKS open the rear door, ducks to the trunk, joins the street fire-fight. He tags the right-side ROOFTOP AK GUNMAN, sights one on the left until-- WHSSSK-SSSMP!

Garrity goes down on the other side of the Mercedes, an unseen sniper round tearing through his vest armor.

Kellis finishes off a LEFT-SIDE AK GUNMAN, turns back for Garrity until-- WHSSSK-SSSMP! He takes a sniper hit as well on the other side of the car.

Traveller drops behind the wheel-well as Kellis falls nearby, clutching a hole in his armored vest.

TRAVELLER'S POV: Kellis in the middle of the street, GASPING, reaching out to him with lost eyes.

Instinct tells him to go for his fallen teammate. But his training tells him to stay put, protect the principal, find the sniper source.

MERCEDES ROOFTOP

Armor-piercing sniper rounds tear at stainless steel roof plating. Precision shots one after the other, slowly burrowing a hole toward its target below-- Al-Sari, sandwiched beneath the back seat.

MERCEDES REAR

Traveller listens to the rounds impact above. He's sure now-- this is not an impromptu Iraqi car-jack. This is a highly-coordinated, targeted kill.

He glances over the window ledge, locates the sniper's perch in the far second story balcony-- a tell-tale Barrett M82 long barrel jutting through a seam in the masonry.

MERCEDES ROOFTOP

More rounds tear through, digging a deeper hole.

MERCEDES REAR

Traveller makes his decision. Waits out the sniper's mag, pops from behind the wheel well, riddling the far balcony with cover fire as he SPRINTS for the exact same building.

SECOND STORY BALCONY

The keffiyeh-clad SNIPER locks in a new mag. Only his exacting eyes are visible through the checkered cloth. He re-aims the long M82 barrel. Keeps firing on the Mercedes roof.

FIRST FLOOR, ABANDONED BUILDING

Traveller reaches the building, drops his spent M4, pulls his Glock 19 from his side holster as--

A HIDDEN GUNMAN appears from the shadows, AK aimed.

Traveller puts two precise shots in the gunman's forehead, dodges the falling body, racing up the creaky stairs, silently counting the distant sniper shots as...

MERCEDES ROOFTOP

They pound a deeper hole into the reinforced Mercedes roof, reaching its inner lining.

MERCEDES INTERIOR

Al-Sari SCREAMS OUT, hearing the pounding sniper fire above, trapped beneath the reinforced, safety-belted rear seat.

SECOND FLOOR HALLWAY, ABANDONED BUILDING

Traveller hits the top of the stairs, running for a closed door at the end, FIRING his Glock repeatedly at the lock.

SECOND STORY BALCONY

Wood debris and bullets ZING all around him, but the sniper doesn't flinch. Keeps FIRING rounds on the Mercedes roof.

MERCEDES ROOFTOP

A bullet WHISKS through the inner lining layer.

MERCEDES INTERIOR

The next one ZIPS through the open hole, impacts the reinforced metal seat-back above screaming Al-Sari, making a DEEP DENT. One more shot-- it's upholstery, then flesh.

SECOND FLOOR DOORWAY, ABANDONED BUILDING

Traveller reaches the bullet-riddled door, kicks it wide as...

The sniper lines up his last shot, pauses, catching Traveller in his periphery. Through his keffiyeh-obsured gaze, a flash of recognition.

Traveller does not pause, immediately firing two shots into the sniper's robed chest as CLICK--

The swinging door triggers a wall-mounted IED which--

EXPLODES on Traveller's right hand side, throwing him across the room in a HOT, DEAFENING BLAST of dust and shrapnel. His body slams against the far wall, drops to the floor feet away from the balcony's edge.

TRAVELLER'S POV (DISTORTED BY SMOKE AND DUST)

His charred, smoking right arm lays a foot away from him, bone shattered and jutting. His lifeless right hand still holds the Glock.

Further beyond, the fallen sniper, his face still shrouded by the keffiyeh. But his robe sleeve has been pushed up in the blast, revealing a small tattoo on his right arm.

A black rose tattoo.

CLOSE ON TRAVELLER

His hollowed-out eyes staring past his own detached arm to the one across the floor.

Eyes which glisten with recognition, flicker, then...

FADE OUT.

INT. FORD PICKUP - ON ROUTE 17 - NORTH CAROLINA - AFTERNOON

Doing a leisurely 55 mph through Currituck County, just south of the Virginia State Line. This is "God's Country," a far cry from Fallujah's parched desert highways. Too much water here, the Great Dismal Swamp festering nearby.

Traveller's at the wheel, in an ill-fitting shirt and tie.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
...and in international news, three
U.S. Serviceman were killed in
Najaf, Iraq when a rocket propelled
grenade--

He switches the channel with his right-hand to a COUNTRY MUSIC station. Something odd in his movement. Something stiff in the way he brings his right arm back to the wheel.

EXT. GUARD GATE - ARES SECURITY COMPOUND, N.C. - AFTERNOON

The pickup pulls up to an electrified gate bearing the Ares Security logo-- a Greek warrior helmet traversed by spears.

A GATE GUARD comes out of the booth to check his ID. Traveller hands him his Ares card with his left hand. The guard swipes it through the handheld card reader. The legend "JOHN TRAVELLER, EX-EMPLOYEE, PSD" pops up on his screen.

GUARD

OK, Mr. Traveller, just need a thumb print.

Traveller puts his left hand thumb to the screen. It BEEPS twice, verifying his identity.

GUARD

Thank you, sir. That'll be the second building on your right.

The gates buzzes open. Traveller drives through.

EXT. FRONT ENTRANCE - ARES COMPOUND, N.C. - CONTINUOUS

Traveller steers toward the main cluster of gray concrete buildings. In the far distance, RECRUITS train on firing ranges, driver courses, a model Middle Eastern city street.

Parked nearby are armored cars, vans and trucks. All the best gear government contract money can buy.

INT. FRONT ENTRANCE - ARES COMPOUND, N.C. - AFTERNOON

Traveller approaches the lobby security desk, another Ares logo emblazoned on its front. A haggard front desk guard-- SMITTY, 50s-- stands from behind a sea of security monitors.

SMITTY

All metal items in the tray. Walk through the poles when I say go.

Traveller empties his pockets into a plastic tray-- car keys, spare change. The guard starts to pull the tray away until--

TRAVELLER

Hold on.

Traveller reaches his left hand inside his shirt collar, quickly undoes a few Velcro straps, presses a suction release. He detaches his right arm from within his shirt sleeve, puts it in the tray.

Thrown, the guard glances down at the prosthetic arm next to Traveller's car keys and change. Apart from the straps and suction attachment, it's a pretty convincing artificial limb.

TRAVELLER

It has some metal in it.

The guard hesitantly picks up the arm, looks it over, trying to hide the awkward sense of shame that comes with handling an amputee's false limb. Traveller stares back, blank-faced and one-armed, his right sleeve sagging.

The guard finally puts the arm back in the tray, hesitantly pushes it to the other side of the metal detector poles.

SMITTY

OK, sir. You can walk through.

Traveller walks through. No alarm. He collects his car keys, his spare change, his right arm. Continues down the long hallway.

BRANNIGAN (PRE-LAP)

Quite a grip you got on that thing.

INT. BRANNIGAN'S OFFICE - ARES COMPOUND - AFTERNOON

Traveller shakes his prosthetic hand with TOM BRANNIGAN, 60s, a military industrial complex lifer making better money in the private sector. Even his smile has stock options.

TRAVELLER

Need any walnuts cracked, just let me know.

BRANNIGAN

Hell, John, you know if I want my nuts in a vice I'll take 'em back to Langley. They'll crush 'em all over again, along with my spirit.

Brannigan pulls his hand from Traveller's firm myoelectric grip. Stands there for an awkward second.

BRANNIGAN

Have a seat. Let me tell you why I
dragged you all the way back down
to The Swamp.

Traveller takes a seat opposite Brannigan's desk, littered with the usual kid and grandkid photos beneath various wall-mounted military medals, diplomas, decorations of service.

BRANNIGAN

You asked in your email if we had
any menial work around the
compound. Well, I don't have that.
What we are looking for is a new
PSD instructor. Tactics, route
recon, evasive driving, close
quarters contact. We have one or
two fellas on rotation now, but
they're just teaching textbook.
These new recruits know about the
shit-storm out there. They want
real-world scenarios, more bang for
their buck before they're contract-
ready. And, to be honest, so do
we. If all we wanted were textbook
operatives, we'd order a supply of
Army Field Manuals from Amazon,
send them to the Marine Corps
Firing Range and call it a day.

Traveller doesn't respond. Just lets Brannigan do the talking. There's a reason his call name was "Lockjaw."

BRANNIGAN

We want you to teach the Fallujah
Ambush, John.

(points to his arm)
The one that got you that powerful
grip.

TRAVELLER

Teach it?

Brannigan leans back in his polished leather swivel chair, locking his fingers, showing his shiny USMC ring.

BRANNIGAN

The whole detail. What went right,
what went wrong. How it could have
gone better. In the classroom and
out on the course. Think you can
handle it?

Traveller looks away, not answering at first. Then...

TRAVELLER
Do you, sir?

Brannigan leans forward behind his desk, earnest. Or as earnest as a former CIA man he can be.

BRANNIGAN
Here's what I think: I think you took a nasty hit out there in Iraq. I think it took two fine PMCs out of this world and the other permanently out of field service. Here's what else I think: You're the best this company has turned out. You stuck by us through the State Department's ass-handed inquiry into that dead sniper. I know you need a job, and I can't have my finest mopping lavatory floors-- bum arm or not. So, pile that one atop the other and, yes, I think you can handle it.

TRAVELLER
Then I'm in.

Brannigan leans back, a bit surprised the convincing was that easy. He pushes some files around his desk to mask it.

BRANNIGAN
One other thing. We're going to need you to take a psych evaluation. It's routine for all new instructors, same as recruits.

TRAVELLER
Not a problem.

BRANNIGAN
Oh yeah, and a working cell phone number. Email doesn't always cut it these days.

Traveller pulls a thin phone from his pocket, holds it up.

TRAVELLER
Just got a new smart phone.

Brannigan smiles, throws up his hands.

BRANNIGAN

Hell, you can't catch shad in the Pasquotank this easy. What kind of contractor are you? You haven't even told me on your price tag yet.

Something breaks across Traveller's battle-scarred lower lip. Something close to a smile.

TRAVELLER

I guess it has been a while.

INT. HEALTH CLINIC - ARES COMPOUND, N.C. - LATE AFTERNOON

Traveller sits across from the FACILITY PSYCHIATRIST-- 30s, pretty, serious. She studies his "Psych Evaluation Questionnaire," making check marks down his list of answers. A sign behind her head reads: "Know the Signs of PTSD."

PSYCHIATRIST

Looks like you scored perfect on the questionnaire. So either you're handling your past trauma very well, or you've taken enough of these tests before to know all of our little tricks.

She looks up from the questionnaire, exchanging it for his medical folder.

PSYCHIATRIST

No feelings of depression, anxiety, trouble falling asleep? No trigger events of any kind?

TRAVELLER

No. No triggers.

She looks back down to his file.

PSYCHIATRIST

How about paranoia, aggression?

Traveller shakes his head "no."

PSYCHIATRIST

Hypervigilance? For example, when you go to the Wal-Mart do you feel like people are watching you? Do you find yourself scanning the aisles as if you were on a detail?

TRAVELLER
I don't shop at Wal-Mart.

She ignores Traveller's straight-faced joke, spots something concerning in his file. Adjusts her glasses.

PSYCHIATRIST
It says here after your experience with the IED in Fallujah you requested the medics not surgically reattach your arm even though it was possible. That you opted for the prosthetic instead. Can you tell me a little more about that decision?

She looks up to Traveller earnestly. Traveller seems prepared for this, gives her the stock answer.

TRAVELLER
I didn't want to be in and out of hospitals the rest of my life. Rounds of reconstructive surgery. It just seemed cleaner this way. A fresh start.

The psychiatrist keeps her gaze on him, not convinced. He's going to have to work harder, tell her a story.

TRAVELLER
When I was a kid, I had one of those G.I. Joe dolls. You know the ones with the "kung-fu" grip?

The psychiatrist nods, but behind her glasses it's obvious: Where is this going?

TRAVELLER
Well, I made it do so many karate chops that, eventually, its arm fell off. I was devastated, of course. I loved my G.I. Joe. But a girl in my neighborhood had a ton of Barbie dolls and one Ken. She said I could have Ken's arm. She didn't much like Ken anyway.

Traveller glances to the psychiatrist-- now intrigued.

PSYCHIATRIST
And?

TRAVELLER

I was reluctant at first, as any boy would be. I mean, who wants a G.I. Joe with a sissy Ken doll arm? But when I snapped that Ken arm onto Joe it fit better than the old one. Held Joe's little plastic M-16 even better than that silly kung-fu grip. No matter how much I played with it, it never fell off.

The serious psychiatrist breaks a small smile, looks back down to his file, makes another check mark. She hands him a ready-made prescription.

PSYCHIATRIST

OK. I think we're good here. I'm giving you a prescription though. I'd like for you to get it filled.

Traveller takes the scrip with his left hand.

PSYCHIATRIST

It's a mild anti-depressant. To even out any feelings of anxiety or panic you might feel replaying your experiences in class.

Traveller nods-- ever the dutiful patient.

TRAVELLER

You're the doc.