



COMPANY ORDERS

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ONE

Mid-July. Only four in the morning and already eighty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, humidity maybe ninety. The man they called Otoe—he was one-quarter Native American—cut the lights on the ancient Ford Bronco and turned where the sign said *Avenida del Convento*.

“‘Avenue,’ my ass,” he said, easing the stolen, mud-caked Bronco forward through near-total darkness. The A/C was out and his clothes—5.11 tactical pants and loose-fitting sport shirt—were soaked through. “More like a goddamn alley. We meet some vehicle coming the other way, Tree, we’re screwed.”

“I figure the door to be twenty yards up,” his buddy said, “on the right.” He was tall and lean and hard—thus the name ‘Tree’ he’d picked up in the SEALs—with skin the color of black coffee. “And there won’t *be* any vehicles. It’s all taken care of. A pre-paid package.”

“I know. I’m just saying...”

“Just flappin’ your lips, like usual, ’fore the fun starts.”

“Shouldn’t *be* any fun,” Otoe said. “Not if it’s ‘all taken care of.’” He leaned forward, peering through the windshield. “Jesus, gimme some light here.”

Tree slipped the night ops torch from a low pocket in his cargo pants and held it out the window, throwing a thin beam of light ahead of them along the wall that lined the street on their right. “There!” he said.

They parked and walked to the door of what everyone still called “the Convent,” though no nun had stepped inside for over a hundred years. They were each packing maybe fifteen pounds of weaponry

and gear, but they were large men and their clothing hid it well. Tree knocked, using a pre-arranged pattern, and the wood plank door was pulled open by a short, skinny, dark-skinned man in a blue uniform. They stepped inside.

The uniform was too big for the little man, and the old .357 Magnum on his hip seemed oversized, too. He looked up at the two *gringos* towering over him and said nothing, just handed Tree a ring with two keys on it and pointed to their left.

“*Pasaporte,*” Otoe said, and the guard gave it to him. He glanced at it, then showed it to Tree. “*Gracias,* little *amigo,*” Otoe said, and he and Tree turned and headed down the hallway.

The floor was unvarnished wood and the walls concrete, painted a faded green and blotched with dark stains here and there on both sides, mostly around head level. Blood. Or brains, maybe. The only light came from one low-watt bulb behind a wire screen in the twelve-foot ceiling. Enough to see the big dark cockroaches that darted around on the walls and the floor.

About fifteen feet down, the corridor ended at a locked, windowless door. Tree looked at the lock, then the keys. He tried the smaller of the two keys. It worked.

“Genius,” Otoe said, and then squashed a two-inch-long centipede against the wall with his palm and wiped the gooey remains off on his pants.

Tree pulled open the door and they stepped through. The stench was overpowering—sweat, urine, feces; vomit, too, and dead animal, maybe a rat. The wall on their left, the one running along the street, continued on, with two small windows up near the ceiling. On the right, though, the walkway was lined with iron bars. Behind the bars the space opened up into a single concrete-floored cell, maybe twenty-by-twenty, with cots bolted to the walls and a stainless steel toilet smack in the middle of the floor. A pit toilet—no plumbing in this cell.

Again the only light came from a dim, bare bulb in the ceiling above the walkway, and the closely set bars kept much of the cell in shadows. There was enough light, though, to see lots more roaches, and to see

COMPANY ORDERS

maybe fifteen men crammed in there, all in dirty white pants and shirts. Most were lying down, about half on the cots and half on the shiny, damp floor. Heads turned and dark eyes stared at the intruders, but no one said anything.

“Jesus!” Otoe murmured. “You can *taste* shit in here, like it’s floatin’ in the air. *This* where they keep the guy?”

“This here’s a holding tank. I understand he’s usually deeper inside.” Tree held up the larger of the keys. “Let’s get to it,” he said, and unlocked the barred gate and pulled it open.

Both men stepped into the wide opening to the cell.

“Hey! Listen up!” Otoe yelled. “*Atienda, atienda!*”

Some of the prisoners sat up, and a few even got to their feet. Many growled protests in Spanish. No one, however, moved any closer to Tree and Otoe, because Otoe, crouched in a shooter’s stance, was sweeping the area in front of them with a .45 caliber semiautomatic, a Heckler & Koch MK23, looking all the more threatening with a suppressor attached.

“We want the American!” he yelled. “*El Americano!*”

Several heads turned toward the right rear corner of the cell. When whoever was back there in the shadows didn’t move, Tree took the torch from his pocket, widened the beam, and shone it on two men. One sat on his rear, his head slumped between his knees, his long greasy hair hanging down. The other, a much larger man, crouched beside him. The larger man was Mexican, with thick black hair slicked back from his forehead. He had his hand on the smaller man’s shoulder, and wore on his face the ugly scowl of a professional prisoner—made even more threatening because his left eye was just a slit looking out from a lump of swollen, purple-and-red-mottled skin.

“So whatcha think, Tree? See anyone else in this sty that looks like our man?”

“Nope.”

“You!” Otoe called. “Sitting in the corner. Look up!”

The head started to rise, but the larger man quickly pushed it back down. “You don’t do nothing with this one, *gringo*,” he said. “This one, he is under my protection.”

“Really?” Otoe fired just one shot, the suppressor keeping the pop to about that of a .22 caliber pistol, and splinters of stone flew out of the wall near the big Mexican’s head. “That change your mind, *amigo*?”

The Mexican stared back, showing no fear, but then smiled and took his hand off the other’s head.

The sitting man looked up, and wiped his hair out of his eyes. His pale, thin face showed no sign of a beard. He was very young. Upper teens, maybe.

“That’s him,” Otoe said.

“C’mon up here, son,” Tree drawled. “We’re goin’ for a walk.”

“No, I...I can’t.” The boy’s voice was thin and weak, and he was obviously terrified. “When I come back he’ll...he’ll be mad.” He nodded sideways, toward the man beside him.

“Well, then, y’all *both* come up here. We’ll all go for a walk together.”

“Good idea,” Otoe said. “You come up here too, *amigo*.”

The man made no move to comply and Otoe fired again, almost as though without meaning to. More chips flew out from the wall beside the Mexican, but closer this time. He stood up. He was about the same height as the two Americans, but stockier than either of them. Fat, actually.

No one else moved, but the young American stood up and then he and the Mexican came slowly forward. When Otoe finally raised his hand to stop them they were maybe a yard away. The young man in front of Otoe, the Mexican in front of Tree.

“Who is this gentleman, son?” Tree asked. “He really your protector?”

The boy was trembling. “He...that’s what he said.”

“Well, now...that ain’t what I asked, is it? What’s he done...to *protect* you?”

“He...I guess...he kept the other men away from me. I mean... earlier tonight.”

“You know him before you were put in this here cell tonight?”

“No. He was already here. They all were. Most of them are being transferred here from some other prison, I think.”

“But the two of you got to be friends?”

COMPANY ORDERS

“No.” That came out louder. “No, he’s not my friend. He...he...” his voice trailed off.

“This dude ain’t really been protecting you, has he, son?” Tree’s voice was very gentle.

“No, he...I fought...tried to stop him, but he...” The young man was shaking so hard now that even his head was moving.

The Mexican leaned forward then, as though to do or say something, but a slight wave of Otoe’s HK stopped him cold.

“Tell me, son. You tell ol’ Tree what this sumbitch done to you.”

“He...he raped me.”

“Well, damn,” Tree said. “That ain’t the kinda thing a ‘protector’ does, is it? A ‘protector’ should—”

“We got business here,” Otoe interrupted. “What’s done is done.” He stepped to his left and gestured with his head, and the young man went past him and stood just outside the cell.

The Mexican shrugged and gave a sly grin. “You two, you are professionals, yes? You understand, I think.” He pointed to his swollen eye. “This *muchacho*, he is a fighter. I *like* that. You know how it is.”

“Yeah, we know,” Otoe said. “These things happen.”

“They *do* happen,” Tree agreed, and he suddenly shot his left hand up high in the air over his head.

The Mexican couldn’t help but look up, which is when the knife in Tree’s right hand—how it got there, who could say?—slashed through the air...from right to left...across the man’s throat.

Just one cut, and then Tree leaned in and wiped the blade—one side serrated, the other razor sharp—on the man’s own shirt, and folded the knife and put it away again.

Otoe and Tree backed out of the cell as the dying man dropped slowly to his knees, his mouth wide open, clutching his throat as though he could hold the blood inside.

Tree locked the cell closed behind them. “You see, son?” he said, taking the young American by the arm and guiding him away. “*That’s* the kinda thing a ‘protector’ does.”