

WINGMAN

BOOK 3

THE LUCIFER
CRUSADE



MACK
MALONEY



Wingman

The Lucifer Crusade

Mack Maloney



Contents

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Preview: Thunder in the East](#)

[A Biography of Mack Maloney](#)

Chapter 1

THE F-4 PHANTOM JET fighter touched down on the deserted runway and taxied towards a nearby row of hangars.

Just off the landing strip, next to the aircraft parking area, the remains of a MiG-21 were still burning. Another MiG had crashed through the roof of one of the hangars, and the resulting fire had burned down half the building. Still another Soviet fighter had crashed into the base's only radar antenna, scattering pieces of the huge, once-revolving dish all over the tarmac.

Smoke from the three smoldering fighters had spread out over the small airbase like a dark and dirty fog.

The F-4 came to a halt in front of the burning hangar and its pilot popped the airplane's canopy. Standing up in the open cockpit, Captain "Crunch" O'Malley removed his flight helmet and looked around.

"Welcome to the Azores," he muttered.

Crunch's rear-seat weapons officer, a lieutenant named Elvis, also stood up and surveyed the damage. "Do you think he's been here?" he asked Crunch.

"Well, we got three MiGs shot down here and two more burning on the beach," Crunch said. "A pilot apparently iced by one person. Only one pilot I know that could do that."

Then Elvis noticed an odd thing: through the smoke and next to the burning hangar, he could see a man tied to a chair. "Captain," he said pointing toward the bound and gagged man. "Who the hell is that?"

The two pilots climbed out of the F-4 and cautiously walked toward the man. Crunch was armed with an M-16, Elvis with a 9mm pistol.

The man sat silently as they approached. The only noise was the jet's engine winding down and the crackling of the three MiG fires. Directly above, the noon sun was beating down unmercifully.

Crunch took out a knife and immediately cut off the man's gag.

"*Gracias, señor,*" the man gasped, taking a quick succession of deep breaths. He was about sixty years old, with a slight build and wearing the sweaty remains of a mechanic's overall. The two pilots themselves clad in sleek dark-blue flight suits, towered over him.

"How long you been here, Pops?" Crunch asked, hesitating to undo the ropes holding the man's hands and feet to the chair.

"Two days," the old man answered, with a slight accent. "They come. Wreck my home. Wreck the base. Look at that hangar. It's ruined. Burnt. I'm an old man. I cannot repair it myself."

"Who wrecked this place?" Crunch asked, deciding the man was harmless enough to untie. He quickly undid the ropes.

“Air pirates. Russians. I don’t know,” the man answered, rubbing his wrists made raw by the twine.

“Russians?” Elvis asked, catching Crunch’s eye.

“Si,” the man said, stretching his arms and legs. “Russian air pirates. Bounty hunters. They landed here, three days ago. Five MiGs. They don’t call ahead. They don’t contact me in control tower. They just land, with no permission. Steal my fuel. Steal my food.”

“This sounds interesting,” Crunch said, wryly. “Go on, Pops, tell us the whole story.”

“Start by telling us who you are and what the hell you’re doing here alone,” Elvis added.

“My name is Diego de la Crisco,” the craggy-faced man began. “I run this base. Used to be for a hundred men. Now just me. Airplanes, flying from America, used to stop here all the time. For fuel, food, ammo. Now not as much. But those who stop, I sell to them food. Fuel. Maybe fix an engine blade sometimes.

“Three days ago, the MiGs came. The pilots, they bust in, slap me around. Keep me locked up. They don’t talk my language, but I can tell they are waiting for someone.”

“Who’s that someone?” Crunch asked.

“The American pilot,” the man said. “He is my friend. He saved me. He is the man who shot the MiGs all down.”

Crunch and Elvis exchanged winks. “Go on, Diego,” Crunch said.

“The MiG pilots,” he continued, “they knew the American was coming. They are very excited because there is a reward for shooting down the American’s airplane. They wait until he shows up on radar, then they take off, all five of them. They plan beforehand how they will attack him. Like an ambush.

“Ah, but the American, he’s way too smart for the MiGs. He knows somehow they are waiting for him. He has more Sidewinders on his jet than anyone I have ever seen. The MiGs jump him, right over the base. But he flies like a demon. Twisting. Turning. Diving. One minute he’s here. Next second he’s way over there. One by one, he blasts all five MiGs from the sky. I watch the whole thing, cheering. My throat still stings I cheer so much. Trouble is, the wrecked MiGs, they fall on my base.”

“After the battle, did this American land here?” Crunch asked.

“Well, of course, *señor*,” Diego said, slightly taken aback. “This American is now a very good friend of mine.”

“Did he tell you what his name was?” Elvis asked.

“Yes,” the old man said with a sly smile. “But I know who he is before he even lands his airplane. I have heard of this American pilot. He flies a red, white, and blue jet. The powerful F-16. I know many airplanes. I know no one flies the F-16 anymore, except for this American.”

“Was his name Hawk Hunter?” Crunch asked.

“Si, *señor*,” the man said excitedly. “But I know him by his other name. He’s the pilot they call The Wingman.”

Crunch and Elvis looked at each other and nodded.

“The Wingman stays only a day,” Diego went on. “Then he says he must go.”

“So, if you and he are such good friends,” Elvis asked, “who tied you up here?”

“The others, *señor*,” Diego said, anger coming back into his voice. “The others land hours after Hawk Hunter leaves. They too are looking for him.”

“Who were these ‘others’?” Crunch asked. “More Russians? Were they flying Russian jet fighters?”

“No,” Diego answered. “They come in only one airplane. An American P-3. Big, four propeller engines. Old US Navy. But these men are not Americans. They are Arabs, I think. The plane is painted all black. I know they stole it somewhere.”

“And they were also looking for Hunter?” Elvis asked.

“Yes,” Diego continued. “They come and *they* slap me around. I’m an old man. I can’t take all this. They are mad that Hunter has shot down the MiGs. These men have paid for the MiGs to shoot down Hunter. Now they are mad that it is the MiGs that have crashed.”

“So they tied you up and left you out here?” Crunch asked.

“*Si, si, señor*,” Diego said, spitting for emphasis. “They are *pigs*. They could have just shot me. But they leave me to die the slow death. But I knew that either Hunter or his friends would rescue me.”

“What else did these other men say?” Elvis asked.

Diego shook his head. “They say a big battle is soon to happen. Out in the eastern Mediterranean. Out in the desert. These men, like the MiGs—they are on the bad side. But they are afraid.”

“Afraid?” asked Crunch. “Afraid of what?”

A wide smile creased Diego’s face. “They are afraid, *señor*, that they will have to fight Hunter.”

They gave Diego some food packs from the F-4 and also a cask of brandy they always carried. The old man ate heartily and drained the brandy, then immediately went to sleep. Retreating to the base’s control tower, Crunch and Elvis discussed their mission so far.

They were looking for Hawk Hunter. He, like they, belonged to the Pacific American Air Corp, the air defense arm for the territory formerly known as the states of California, Washington, and Oregon. Hunter was one of PAAC’s commanders, and in a strict military sense their commanding officer. But he was more their friend than anything else, and an unusual friend at that. Formerly a pilot in the Air Force demonstration team known as the Thunderbirds, Hunter was also a genius (certified at a young age), a doctor of aeronautics (at seventeen, being the youngest student ever to graduate MIT) and had trained to pilot the Space Shuttle.

He was also widely regarded as the best fighter pilot who had ever lived ...

There were many stories about how Hunter had fought so bravely in World War III. But no one

was more bitter than he when America was tricked into signing an armistice with the Soviet Union—supposedly to end World War III, a non-nuclear struggle that the US and NATO had won on the battlefield of Western Europe. But no sooner was the ink dry on the treaty—and the traitorous US Vice-President safely transported to Moscow—when the Kremlin ordered a devastating surprise nuclear strike against the center of the American continent. It was the most dastardly sneak attack in the history of mankind.

Mortally wounded, the US had no choice but to accept Russia's terms. The punishment was called The New Order. Its major demands had the US Armed Forces immediately disarmed and their weapons destroyed. Then the US itself was dismembered—broken up into a mishmash of countries, republics, and free territories. Dividing the continent down the middle was The Badlands, the radioactive netherworld that stretched from Oklahoma to the Dakotas, courtesy of the Soviet ICBMs.

Ever since they were broken up, the many American states and countries had frequently been at war with one another—wars started in large part by Soviet agents and their agitating terrorist allies. The latest battle had pitted the democratic forces of the West against a Soviet-infiltrated, cultist Eastern army known as The Circle. The leader of The Circle had been a Soviet agent named Viktor Robotov. Hunter had successfully led the air forces for the West in defeating The Circle, despite the fact that Viktor's Russian allies had secretly infiltrated thousands of SAM anti-aircraft batteries and troops into the American Badlands.

The victory was a costly one for the West, though. Many major cities as well as small towns had been destroyed in the fighting. The vital air trade routes between Free Canada and Los Angeles—planned by convoys of airliners now turned into cargo carriers—had been disrupted for a long period of time. Shortages of all kinds had been felt on both sides.

What was worse, thousands of Americans on both sides had died in the civil war. And this was the *real* reason Viktor and the Kremlin had started The Circle War. Their aim was to continue the destabilization of America, thus forestalling any notions that the American states and territories might have about reuniting and carrying out their revenge on Mother Russia.

But the fighting aside, The Circle War had had a very personal effect on Hawk Hunter. Before the war broke out, Viktor had kidnapped the pilot's true love, a stunning Bardot look-alike named Dominique. He had drugged her, forced himself on her, and used her viciously—through a kind of pornographic psychological warfare—to control his Circle troops. Hunter had finally rescued Dominique, literally crashing in on a party being given for Viktor atop one of New York City's World Trade Center buildings. Once she was safe, Hunter had made arrangements for her to live in the relative security of Free Canada.

But he could not let Viktor get away with his crime. The man had violated the two things that meant the most to Hunter—his country and his woman. Hunter had vowed to track Viktor down.

He was gone the day the war ended. Somehow, he had gotten to New York City and retrieved his

F-16 from its hiding place at the abandoned JFK Airport. Then he had set out across the Atlantic in pursuit of Viktor. Crunch and Elvis had no idea how Hunter knew Viktor had headed for the Mediterranean after The Circle War ended. *He just knew.* The fact was that Hunter had been born with an amazing aptitude for ESP. Hunter's extraordinary abilities were particularly acute in detecting enemy aircraft. Besides being the ultimate fighter pilot, Hunter was also a kind of human radar. But he also had an astounding sixth sense about many things. Knowing where Viktor fled to after the war was one of them.

Everyone—from the Russians to the PAAC pilots to the air pirates that roamed the North American skies—knew that a man of such intelligence and skill as Hunter was an automatic threat to those who ran The New Order. These Soviet puppets, firmly ensconced in the Bahamas, had put a price of \$500 million on Hunter's head. He was wanted—dead or alive—for “crimes against The New Order.” Crimes such as carrying an American flag. Or espousing reunification of the states. Or even uttering the words “United States of America.”

But Hunter had decided long ago that if these were the kinds of crimes that made The New Order put a price on his head, then he would continue to commit them freely and openly.

Besides, the amount of money a bounty hunter could get for his hide was source of amusement for the pilot. He would tell people that he wasn't worth even half that much.

He was, however, very valuable to PAAC and all the democratic peoples who wanted to reunite America again. That's why his overall commander at PAAC, General Dave Jones, had sent Crunch and Elvis after Hunter. Crunch and Elvis made up one half of a free-lance F-4 fighter unit known as the Ace Wrecking Company. They were, in effect, under contract to PAAC. So General Jones was their employer. Jones knew Crunch, a veteran F-4 Phantom pilot from way back, was best suited for the mission. At best he and Elvis could convince Hunter to return to America. At worst, they could give him protection in his search for Viktor.

But they would have to find him first.

“Well, we know he was here in the Azores two and a half days ago,” Crunch said, looking at a large map of the Atlantic and Mediterranean. “He could be in Portugal, Gibraltar, maybe North Africa by now.”

“Well, he had no trouble icing those MiGs,” Crunch said, shaking his head in admiration. “Maybe he doesn't need any help in tracking down Viktor either.”

“Well, I agree that Hunter is the best to ever fly, and so he's very valuable to PAAC right now,” Elvis said. “But I also know him pretty well, as you do, captain. And when he gets something set in his mind, it's impossible to talk him out of it. Viktor fooled with his lady big time. Screwed up the country too. That's playing with fire as far as Hawk is concerned. I don't blame him for going after Viktor. And he could probably track down the creep better if he is alone.”

Crunch ran his fingers through his hair, then continued. “Hunter's a good friend of mine and

good friend to all the guys in PAAC. But Jones is the boss. He says find him and drag him back. So w
find him.”

“Well, it’s not the finding him that will be difficult,” Elvis said. “It’s the ‘dragging him back
part that worries me.”

Chapter 2

THE SKIES OVER CASABLANCA were busy the night Hunter arrived.

He had seen the lights of the city from seventy miles out, reflecting off the atmosphere and the nearby Atlantic. Now, as he descended from 55,000 feet, the city's blue-green glare got brighter, shining out like a beacon on the otherwise pitch-black Moroccan coastline.

Fifty miles out, he brought his F-16 down to wavetop level and throttled back to a 350-mph crawl. The jet fighter's terrain-radar-acquisition system had painted an infrared picture of the city and airport onto one of his control panel's TV screens and he had been studying it with much interest.

He had assumed that the airport—and the city—would be deserted. But just the opposite was true. In fact, there were so many airplanes circling Casablanca, it looked like a typical stack-up over Chicago's O'Hare in the old days.

Suddenly, his radio crackled.

"Casablanca control to approaching aircraft," a high-pitched voice sang over the static. "We have you on our radar screens. You are on an unauthorized landing pattern. Break off! Break off!"

Hunter calmly pushed his radio transmission button. "Casablanca Control, this is an aircraft from the Pacific American Air Corps. I am requesting emergency landing clearance. I am low on fuel."

"Break off," the shrillish reply came back. "We are at over-capacity. Our airspace is at the critical point. We have no open landing zone for you. You are unauthorized."

Hunter checked his instruments. He was twelve miles off the coast. He tapped the back of the throttle bar twice, slowing the F-16 down further.

"Casablanca Control, I am down to a hundred pounds of fuel. I must land."

"We have no fuel for you," the air controller came back. "You are unauthorized ..."

Hunter was carefully watching the action over the airport on his TV screen. The aircraft were stacked up ten high over the airport. More than forty airplanes at various altitudes were traveling around and around on the same lazy circling pattern. At the same time, other aircraft were taking off every thirty seconds from the airport's single runway.

Hunter could tell that most of the air traffic was made up of airliners. 747s, 707s, DC-10s, and Airbus. Some appeared to be riding on each other's tails. Airplanes were taking off just as incoming aircraft bounced in. The radio chatter was a storm of pilot's voices, yelling out their coordinates and doing everything they could to avoid a midair collision. It was the most confusing aircraft handling pattern he'd ever seen. But somehow the overworked air controllers were making it work.

He checked his instruments again. Ten miles out, fuel getting lower. Time to negotiate.

"Casablanca control," he said into his microphone. "What is your 'landing authorization' fee?"

There was only the slightest of hesitation, then the answer came back. "Small aircraft. Jet fighter"

One bag of gold, or five silver.”

Steep, but expected. But he didn't intend to pay anywhere near that just to land.

“Casablanca control,” Hunter called just as he reached the coastline. “I have one bag of silver. It's yours if you give me landing okay.”

“Two bags,” came the reply.

“Bag and a half,” Hunter said.

“Land clear on seven,” the controller said, his shrill voice rising yet another octave. “Right behind the Air-India Jumbo.”

Welcome to Casablanca.

Hunter inserted the F-16 into the melee of landing and departing airliners. A fog bank in the night sky over the airport made the approach even more hazardous. He dodged at least a half-dozen airliners, nearly clipped the tail section of a stray 727, and actually landed *ahead* of the red Air-India 747. As his wheels touched the ground, a DC-10 was lifting off no more than 500 feet ahead of him.

He followed the line of yellow runway lights to a taxiing path lined with blue. The number of aircraft above the airport was nothing compared to what was on the ground. The place was a traffic jam of airliners.

“What the hell is going on here?” he asked himself as he rolled up to a very thin empty stationing point near the bustling terminal. There were people everywhere—some carrying luggage, others just bags on their backs. Men, women, kids. They were in the terminal, on its roof and walkways, even on parts of the runway. There were flashing lights everywhere and he could hear sirens even over the noise of his jet engine.

He noticed there was a slight twinge of panic in the way the crowds were behaving. The loading of a nearby DC-9 was not going at an orderly pace. People were pushing and shoving each other—*squeezing* themselves up the loading ramp and into the airplane. Fistfights were breaking out near other airplanes.

This isn't just another busy night at the airport, he reasoned. It looked more like an evacuation.

He shut down the 16 and punched up his exotic anti-theft computer program. Once it kicked in, the airplane was not only theft-proof but, thanks to a zapping electrical charge that ran throughout its body, it was also tamper-proof. Convinced the airplane was secure, Hunter popped the canopy, grabbed his M-16, and climbed out.

The noise was deafening. He walked across the crowded tarmac, avoiding the crowds as best he could. He could see desperation in their faces, but they weren't a refugee rabble. They looked well-fed and mostly well-clothed. Yet people were battering each other to get on the airliners. But why? He noticed another curious thing: the incoming aircraft were not discharging anyone. They were flying

empty, loading up, and taking off without so much as a wipe of the windshield.

There were a lot of bad vibes in the air. He felt like a full-scale panic could break out at any moment.

Instinctively, he looked around for some kind of police force or military presence. There was none. Nor were any of the aircraft of non-civilian design. His F-16 was the only military aircraft in the airport.

He made his way through the confusion to the control tower and found it too was a madhouse. There were more than forty air controllers, all barking orders into the microphones and frantically looking into their radar screens. The place was strewn with plates, half-eaten meals, pots of bubbling tea and coffee, and more than a few empty wine bottles. Hunter felt lucky he had made it down in one piece.

He was here to pay his landing fee, and perhaps get a little information. He sought out the head of the place, figuring this would be the man who should receive his “authorization fee.” A man sitting at a desk slightly away from the pandemonium seemed to fit the bill.

Hunter threw a bag and a half of silver onto his desk. The man looked up immediately from the Arabic-language newspaper.

“I own that F-16 that just came in,” Hunter told him.

The man looked him over. “Aren’t you *Hawk Hunter*?” he said with a surprised look.

Hunter was taken aback slightly. Who the hell knew him way out here?

“Yes,” he replied, looking into the older man’s steel-black eyes. He was completely bald: a smart, tough, a very distinguished-looking Arab. “My name is Hunter. I’m from the Pacific American—”

“—from the United States Air Force,” the man said, cutting him off knowingly. “And the Thunderbirds. And the Northeast Economic Zone Air Patrol.”

Hunter was speechless. He knew he had made somewhat of a name for himself back in America. But had news of his exploits carried all the way over to North Africa?

The answer was no. However, a less-than-flattering mug shot of him had made the trip. The man reached inside his desk draw and came out with a bounty poster. It was for Hunter. His old service picture was on it, as were these words:

ONE BILLION DOLLARS IN SILVER OR GOLD FOR THE CAPTURE OR PROOF OF DEATH OF HAWK HUNTER, CRIMINAL WANTED BY THE NEW ORDER. COLLECTION POINTS: PARIS, THE BAHAMAS, MOSCOW.

“One billion?” Hunter blurted out. “Christ.” He knew The Circle had put a price of a *half-billion* on his head about a year ago. *But a billion?* Apparently the New Order had doubled the pot.

This would only mean more trouble for Hunter.

“I could shoot you right now and collect, major,” the man said.

Hunter had his M-16 off his shoulder and ready in an instant.

“But I won’t,” the man quickly added.

“What’s the matter? You don’t *need* a billion dollars?” Hunter asked defiantly.

“No, it’s because I know who you *really* are, major,” the man said, confidently lighting a long dark cigarette. He was a native Moroccan. Hunter could tell by his accent. “And I know you’re not criminal.”

The man rose, gathered in the silver, and motioned Hunter to a miniscule office at the rear of the control tower. They went inside and the man closed the door, effectively blocking out the noise and confusion of the air controllers.

“Said el-Fauzi,” the man said, introducing himself, extending his hand. “It’s an honor to meet you, major.”

Hunter shook his hand. “Really? ‘An honor’?”

“Yes, major,” el-Fauzi said, producing a bottle and pouring out two drinks into miniature porcelain cups. “I worked with US Naval Intelligence during the war. We—everyone—knew of your F-16 squadron and the big air battles. After the war, the Russians let everyone know that you and your squadron were officially ‘war criminals.’ That’s what you get for kicking their asses.”

“But you also knew about the Zone Air Patrol,” Hunter said.

“You mean ZAP?” el-Fauzi said. “Oh, we hear a lot of things here, major. All the time.”

The office’s window looked right out onto the tarmac. Hunter couldn’t help but be distracted by the pandemonium outside.

“What’s going on here?” he asked.

“Those people?” el-Fauzi said, sipping his drink. “Well, they’re escaping, of course.”

“Escaping?”

“Yes, major,” el-Fauzi said, looking surprised. “Escaping. Getting out. Flying to South America. All of them. Before the war breaks out again.”

“That seems to be on everyone’s minds these days,” Hunter said, tasting the thick, ultra-bitter liquor. His friend, Diego on the Azores, had talked about the imminent war.

“As well it should be, major,” el-Fauzi said. “But isn’t that why you are here in Casablanca?”

“To fight?” Hunter asked.

“Why, yes,” el-Fauzi answered. “To join The Modern Knights.”

“I don’t know anything about any Modern Knights,” Hunter said, reaching into his pocket. He produced a picture of Viktor.

“I am chasing this man,” he said, handing the photo to el-Fauzi.

El-Fauzi took the photo and instantly dropped it as if it were on fire. “That’s him!” he nearly screamed, his unflappable manner temporarily leaving him. “That is Lucifer!”

“Lucifer?” Hunter said. “Who the hell is Lucifer? That man is Viktor Robotov. He’s a Russian agent. Caused a rather large misunderstanding back in America—one that left a couple hundred thousand or so people dead. So now I’m tracking him. Heard he might have passed through here.”

“This man is the one they call *Lucifer*,” el-Fauzi said, downing his drink and pouring another. He was slowly regaining his composure. “He passed over us, some time ago.”

“‘Passed over’?” Hunter asked.

“Yes,” el-Fauzi said. “In his horrible black airplane. He had several free-lance fighters with him. Ran right through our airspace, shot down several planes, simply for being in their way.”

Sounds like Viktor, Hunter thought.

“But, we know him as Lucifer,” the Moroccan continued. “He’s the most powerful man left in the Mediterranean. Europe. The Middle East. Anywhere. His allies hold every piece of major territory east of Tunisia all the way to the Sinai. He controls everything east of that. It is *he* who is to make war on the rest of the Mediterranean. People know it’s coming. They’re trying to get out now.”

“And that’s what this is all about?” Hunter asked, motioning towards the mass of humanity outside trying to fit onto the waiting airliners.

“Yes,” el-Fauzi said, refilling their cups. “World War Three, major, is about to heat up again.”

Hunter shook his head. That’s just what Diego had said. He still couldn’t believe it.

“Where is this Lucifer?” he asked. “Where’s his base? His headquarters? Where is he right now?”

El-Fauzi laughed, then quickly became dead serious.

“He is *everywhere*,” he whispered.

“You mean, his spies are everywhere?”

“Spies too,” el-Fauzi said. “But the man himself. He walks among us, they say. He’s seen frequently. Here. In Tunis. On Crete. Cairo. And farther east. Spreading terror. People are afraid just to look on his image. The poor believe him to have god-like powers. His face appears in the night sky, they say. Even looking at his photo can cause death.”

Hunter closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. He realized that he hadn’t been giving Viktor enough credit. He had sown his seeds of fear and hysteria in Europe and the Mediterranean just as effectively as he had in America.

“Who knows where he *really* is?” Hunter asked.

El-Fauzi laughed again. “One man, in town,” he said. “The Lord. He’ll tell you. He knows where *everyone* is. Come. I’ll take you to him.”

Chapter 3

A HALF-HOUR LATER THEY were in a jeep bouncing over a cratered highway, approaching the city of Casablanca. Or at least Hunter assumed it was Casablanca.

The city before him was brilliantly lit up, like a neon oasis in the middle of the desert. In fact, Hunter felt it was *too* bright. A dozen multi-colored searchlights dashed across the night sky. From this distance, every building seemed to have all its lights on at once. Everywhere was blazing electricity. No wonder the light of the city could be seen from seventy miles out.

But, as a city, it also looked, well ... too small to Hunter.

El-Fauzi, behind the wheel for the breakneck trip, roared into the city. Almost immediately the jeep was forced to slow down to a crawl, so crowded was the street. Everywhere were shops, eating places, gambling dens, rug stores, whorehouses, and cafes. And despite the late hour, the streets were filled with people, some dressed in authentic-looking Moroccan clothes, others wearing strange 1940ish styles.

And everything was so goddamn bright!

Hunter had to shield his eyes to look at some of the streetlights. Finally he saw one that was broken and he realized it was a Kleig light, an ultra-powerful piece of illuminating equipment used for filming movies.

Then he noticed the buildings were very authentic. *Too* authentic. Nothing seemed out of place. That was the problem. From the stucco-type construction to the grand Arabic and English lettering, the “perfect” buildings looked more like movie props.

El-Fauzi knew what he was thinking. “It *is* a movie set,” he explained. “Years ago, right before the war broke out, a Hollywood movie company came here, built this place. The real Casablanca was destroyed in the war. It’s over the next hill—or what’s left of it.”

“Are you telling me that all these people are living on a movie set?” Hunter asked.

“That’s right,” el-Fauzi said. “Oh, they’ve added to it. And it’s barely one-tenth the size of the real city, and that’s only counting downtown. But when the war cooled down, there were a lot of people passing through this part of the world. We had a fairly serviceable airport, and we knew if it were operational, we could make money and survive. And why build another city? Hollywood built this one for us!”

“God, this place is wired,” Hunter said, seeing mules of thick electrical cables stretching everywhere. “How can you afford to burn this much juice?”

“‘Juice’ is one thing we have a lot of, major,” el-Fauzi said, turning a corner and heading for the center of the small prop city. “Natural gas. It’s everywhere. Under the ground. We’ve got gas turbines. A bunch of them. They drink the stuff. It’s pure and they love it. They run like charms. So we g

more electricity than we need.”

It was all starting to make sense to Hunter. The crazy kind of sense that served as normalcy in the New Order world.

The jeep screeched to a stop in front of a well-lit cafe. Crowds of people were streaming in and out. Many of them were beautiful women. A piano tinkled inside. A bright neon sign above the placard featured a flashing palm tree and the establishment's name: “Rick's American Cafe.”

“I think I've seen this movie,” Hunter told el-Fauzi.

“We all have.” El-Fauzi laughed, jumping out of the open jeep. “That's why they built this place. They were going to film it again!”

They went into the cafe and el-Fauzi hugged the *maitre d'*. They were soon escorted to the best table. A bottle of champagne appeared out of nowhere. Normally, Hunter would have felt silly. Most of the women present were wearing evening gowns; many of the men were in tuxedos. He was dressed in his flight suit, baseball cap on his head, flight boots on his feet, his helmet dangling from his belt, and the M-16 on his shoulder. Yet no one seemed to notice he wasn't exactly formal.

There were many soldiers there too. Officers mostly, wearing a wide range of dress uniforms, most with flashes of medals on their chests. Each officer appeared to be holding his own personal court with two, three, or four women. Those fancy uniforms did it every time. Most of the officers appeared to be unarmed. But Hunter could see their bodyguards lurking in the shadows, drinking at tables on the periphery of the action.

The air was thick with the smell of incense, hashish, cooking food, and sweet liquor. A beautiful young woman was singing on a stage nearby. A courtly black gentleman played a flawlessly moodful piano. Again, everything was script-perfect.

El-Fauzi knew half the people who walked by the table, rising and kissing most of them once on each cheek. A waiter appeared, said nothing, and snapped his fingers. A searing rack of lamb materialized an instant later.

Hunter was legitimately hungry, and apparently so was el-Fauzi. The man attacked the piece of smoking meat with vigor. That's all Hunter needed. He started carving off pieces of the lamb for himself.

They sat and ate and drank two bottles of champagne. The band played, people danced. Hunter spent half the time eyeing the many, many beautiful women in the place—the other half wolfing down his meal.

They finished off the lamb in about twenty minutes. The meal cleared away, they sat sipping after-dinner drinks. Suddenly el-Fauzi said, “That's him.”

Hunter turned to see a large man, wearing a white suit and a fez, stroll into the cafe and head for the dinner booth near the wall. Within seconds, other dark figures moved toward the booth. Some stopped briefly to whisper something to the large man, then hurried on their way. It was obvious he was some

kind of top dog.

“That’s the Lord,” el-Fauzi told Hunter. “Lord Lard. Very rich. Very powerful. He’s big in arms sales. He can get fighters, tanks, SAMs, ammo. He has connections. No one is sure just where. Italy, some say. Some say Sicily or even Sardinia. But he sells to anyone, any side, any leader, any flag. Deals only in gold, no silver.”

“And this is the guy who’s going to tell me where I can find Viktor?” Hunter asked.

“If anyone knows, Lard does,” el-Fauzi said. El-Fauzi rose and walked over to the man. A second later, he was motioning Hunter to join them.

Hunter squeezed into the man’s booth and found a martini sitting in front of him. El-Fauzi whispered something to Lard, then turned to Hunter. “You’ll excuse me,” he said, with a wink. “There’s an old friend of mine—a stewardess—whom I must absolutely buy a drink for. We’ll talk later.”

El-Fauzi’s quick exit seemed designed to leave Hunter and Lard alone.

“So you’re the famous criminal, Hawk Hunter,” Lard said, a smile wrinkling his plump face. His accent was vaguely British. “What’s the asking price for your head these days, major?”

“I understand it keeps going up all the time,” Hunter replied.

“Not many criminals will The New Order pay a billion dollars for, Hunter,” Lard said, swigging his martini. “A man could buy a country and rent an army with that kind of money.”

“Spoken like a true businessman,” Hunter told him.

Lard laughed. “But I understand you are not here to fight, Hunter. This surprises me. There are probably more mercenaries per square mile between here and Algeria than anywhere, ever, in history.”

“Well, there’s never been a shortage of mercenaries,” Hunter said. “The world can get along without another one.”

“Oh, major, this is no time to stick to your lofty ideals,” Lard said. “Do you realize that when the war starts up again, half the troops on both sides will be paid mercenaries? Hundreds of thousands of soldiers, millions of dollars. You, Hunter, alone could make millions, probably hundreds of millions. If you’re worth a billion dollars to The New Order, you’re worth at least half that to whoever wants to win the most when the war kicks back up.”

Hunter reached inside his flight suit and pulled out the picture of Viktor. He passed it to Lard.

“Who is this guy?” he asked.

Lard produced a monocle and examined the photo. “Ah, Hunter,” he said, handing it back to him. “Don’t tell me you’ve got yourself tangled up with the almighty ‘Lucifer’?”

“Forget this ‘Lucifer’ bullshit,” Hunter told him. “I know this man as Viktor Robotov. I’m damn sure he’s a Russian agent. He was recently in America engineering a war that set us back four to five years. He’s a master terrorist.”

“Terrorist? Oh, but he is also a ‘god,’ this Lucifer,” Lard said mockingly.

Hunter was getting aggravated. “Look, I know he’s a manipulator and a genius for brainwashing the masses. But pumping this guy up like he’s a god—it’s a joke. Who the hell can believe it?”

Lard laughed again, and gulped down the rest of the martini. “Major Hunter, get with it. This is The New Order. Look at yourself. You’re sitting in a movie set that people have turned into a religion. *They* believe it. So it’s real. They’ll believe anything. People want to follow gods, major gods. ‘Lucifer’ makes sense to half of them. And he’s paying the other half.”

Hunter didn’t want to waste any more time. “Where is he?” he said. “Where’s his HQ?”

Lard opened his mouth as if to say something, but only one word came out. It sounded like “Algiers.” Then a bloody foam flowed up from his throat and out his mouth. His eyes turned up and his head slammed down on the table in front of him with a loud “wham!”

Lard was dead. Poisoned. Probably by the martini. Luckily Hunter had never cared for the petrochemicals in the gin bombs, and he had left his untouched.

The sound of Lard’s head cracking on the table had been loud enough to stop the singer singing and the piano-player playing. Two soldiers—undoubtedly Lard’s hired security people—appeared and helplessly shook the body. They knew they’d fucked up. Someone should have been testing the drink.

More soldiers appeared. Guns were being drawn. All of a sudden it seemed as if everyone in the place was carrying a piece. Hunter turned around and tried to catch sight of el-Fauzi, but the man was long gone. He immediately had the sinking feeling that either he or the big fat slob on the table in front of him had been set up.

Hunter knew it was time to leave. A dangerous tension ripped through the cafe. Suddenly the lights went out, and that’s when the lead started flying. Women screamed, men yelled as there was a mad dash for the darkened door. Guns were going off all around him, though he never figured out who was shooting at whom, or why. He had dropped down to the floor at the sound of the first gunshot, glad he was carrying his flight helmet. He quickly put it on and checked the clip in his M-16. As usual, it was filled with tracer rounds.

He made his way along the line of tables, feeling in front of him with the snout of the M-16. The only light around him was coming from the many gun flashes erupting all over the club. Soon the place was thick with the smell of spent gunpowder.

He spied the front door and noticed that most of the crowd had made good their escape. However, an unhealthy barrage of pistol fire was coming from very close to the exit. It was concentrating on some unseen enemy located at the back of the room. Bullets were pinging and ricocheting around the darkened cafe, sometimes accompanied by a groan or a scream when one of them found flesh. There was no place to be, he thought. Still, he couldn’t help thinking that this sort of thing must apparently happen quite often at the cafe.

He decided to create a distraction, something that would cause everyone to take cover and give him the precious four or five seconds he would need to make a break for the front door.

He raised the M-16's nose until it was pointing at the ceiling, then ripped off a long burst of tracers. The bright trails of white-hot phosphorous illuminators lit up the interior of the cafe brilliantly. The bullets scraped the plastered ceiling, causing a rain of cracked and sparkling material to fall. The chatter of the automatic weapon filled the walls with a loud, echoing, dangerous sound. Immediately all the gunmen dove for cover.

Hunter was out the door in three seconds ...

He found the jeep unattended outside the cafe. El-Fauzi was nowhere to be seen. Despite the gunplay in the club, the people in the streets of the movie set town seemed unaffected. Hunter started the jeep and headed back for the airport, glad to be out of the strange place.

The airport was even more crowded, more confused, more desperate than before. The F-16 was sitting untouched. He resisted the temptation to go looking for el-Fauzi; whatever the man's motives had been, Hunter was sure he would be impossible to find. Besides, with the situation at the airport deteriorating rapidly, he wanted to get off as quickly as possible. His search for clues to Viktor's whereabouts would have to continue in some other place.

He climbed aboard the F-16 and started to warm up the avionics. A wave of a bag of silver was all that was needed to flag down a passing fuel truck, and soon his tanks were full. Without bothering to contact the control tower, he taxied out onto the runway and took off on the tail of a battered Brazilian 707.

Minutes later, he turned northeast. Lard's last word had been "Algiers," and Hunter figured that was as good a place as any to resume his search for Viktor.

Chapter 4

HUNTER WAS GLAD TO get away from Casablanca. The place was just too weird for him. Movie-s towns. The airborne evacuation. El-Fauzi. Lard. The gun battle at the cafe. All the talk of war and armies of mercenaries waiting to go at it was particularly disturbing. So was the billion-dollar bounty on his head. He'd have to be extra careful about watching his tail. That poisoned drink could very well have been meant for him instead of Lard. And he was sure that word would spread quickly that he was in the area. It all had such an unreal atmosphere about it.

And he couldn't help thinking that the spectre of Viktor—or Lucifer—was lurking behind it all.

He set a course low over the Moroccan desert, heading for Algeria and the unknown. He had to expect the unexpected. Play it smart. If war were about to break out in the region, he'd have to assume that any population center would be equipped with SAMs, maybe interceptors. Both of which he wanted to avoid. The sand-skimming course over the desert seemed to be his best choice.

Suddenly he *felt* trouble. His well-developed sixth sense—particularly attuned to nearby hostile aircraft—had his body tingling. He checked his long-range radar, which soon confirmed his feelings. There were two fighters approaching him from the northwest. They were moving fast and they were heavily armed.

He instinctively checked his instruments. Everything looked good until he went to test-fire his specially designed “Six Pack” of M-61 Vulcan cannons in the nose of the F-16. To his surprise, a push of the trigger produced nothing. Another push, still nothing. According to his panel lights, everything was in order. Strange ... He quickly rerouted the fire command through his flight computer. Still nothing.

Someone *had* tampered with the airplane while it was parked at Casablanca, he knew it. He punched up his air-to-air missile-arming program. It too was drawing a blank. Sabotage! He should have expected it, although the electrically charged alarm system had never failed him before. An expert had done the dirty deed. But he'd have to figure out who the culprit was later. Right now, he needed to concentrate on the approaching interceptors.

He booted the 16 up to full military speed and was glad to feel the afterburner kick in so smoothly. The saboteur had apparently only tinkered with his armaments and not the airplane's power plant. He stayed down low, hoping to skirt the look-down radar the interceptors might be carrying. His pursuers were just twenty miles behind him. He was sure he could outrun them to Algiers, but what would happen then?

“F-16, F-16.” His radio suddenly burst to life. “This is the Gibraltar Defense Force. You are in an unauthorized air zone. Prepare for interception.”

He was “unauthorized” again. Yet he didn't feel threatened. The voice on the radio was British.

Oddly, it did not sound hostile. Just serious. Hunter felt instinctively drawn to trust it.

“Gibraltar Defense,” he radioed back. “This is Major Hawk Hunter of the Pacific American Air Corps. I was unaware this was restricted air space. Request permission to leave the area at once.”

“F-16.” The voice came back. “You are not only in a restricted airspace, you are also traveling illegally high rate of speed. You must be cited. We are tracking you with long-range missiles. We will fire if we have to. Please reduce speed and prepare for interception.”

High speed? Cited? What the hell was this?

Hunter decided to slow down and let the interceptors catch up to him. He was unarmed, and although he knew he could have outran the long-range air-to-air, with all the twisting and turning required more than half his fuel would be burned up uselessly. Anyway, the interceptor pilots didn't sound menacing.

They were Tornados. Impressive fighters that had been made back in the old days by a group of European companies. Hunter had seen many of them during the air battles over France. They were rugged, versatile, even-flying aircraft, one of the best in the world.

They came up on either side of him. They were definitely British—both airplanes had Union Jacks painted on their tail sections. One moved in closer to his port wing and gave a gentlemanly wave.

“Sorry, F-16, but you'll have to follow us,” he radioed over. “Course seven-two-niner Tango. Our base is thirty-four kilos northwest.”

Hunter waved back. Something about the British. No matter what, they always *sounded* civilized.

The Tornados pulled ahead and turned northwest. Hunter followed.

The air base was actually a small, straight stretch of abandoned highway with a half-dozen large tents on either side. A long fuel truck sat off on the edge of the makeshift runway jeeps and personnel carriers moved about. Several Rapier anti-aircraft missile batteries ringed the base. Two other Tornados were parked on metal plates that served as temporary parking stations on the highway shoulder.

The two British interceptors landed in formation and Hunter came in right after them. They taxied to their assigned metal plates, while Hunter rolled along to the center of the base. Several men waited there. A ground mechanic directed him in with a pair of red flags and gave him the thumbs-up when he was in the correct parking position. He shut down the engine, popped the canopy, and climbed out to meet the men.

They were all officers of the Royal Air Force, dressed in the correct desert fatigues. As one, they snapped to a perfect opened-palmed salute. Hunter returned it as best he could. One officer stepped forward—a man with bright red hair and an enormous mustache to match. He walked over and shook

Hunter's hand.

"Captain Stewart Heath," he said in a slight Cockney accent. "Sorry about all this, Major Hunter."

"Well, it's been a hell of a long time since I've got a speeding ticket," Hunter said.

Heath pointed to the two taxiing pilots. "They're just young bucks, major," Heath said. "Just tad, shall we say, 'enthusiastic'?"

Hunter smiled for the first time. "They're just doing their job," he said.

"I'm glad you see it that way, major," Heath said with a grin. "Now there will be a smallish fine. But not too much. Say, a quarter bag of silver. And if you pay it up right now, I can invite you to have breakfast with us with a clear conscience."

Hunter reached into his flight-suit pocket and came up with a small bag of coins. A lieutenant appeared, and Hunter handed him the bag. He returned the gesture with a salute.

Heath clapped his hands once loudly. "Smashing," he said, beaming. "Now, major, please. Will you join us?"

Although it seemed as if he had just finished his roasted lamb feast at the cafe, Hunter found himself hungry again. Plus he genuinely liked the Brits.

"Okay," he agreed. "Could always use a little more chow."

The entire group of officers, along with the two intercepting pilots, adjourned to a large tent where a meal of scrambled eggs, rolls, and tea was already waiting for them. Everyone helped themselves and settled down at the cafeteria-style benches to eat. Heath sat next to Hunter.

"We've heard of you, of course, Major Hunter," Heath told him. "When our boys radioed in they were tracking an F-16, well, there's only one F-16 flying these days, so we're told."

"What are you guys doing way out here?" Hunter asked him.

"It's a long story," Heath said, sipping his tea. "After the war cooled down, we—our wing of the RAF, that is—came into possession of the land on both sides of Gibraltar. We must patrol this far, to watch our southern flank. The speed-limit rule is simply one more way we can control the airspace. It keeps the troublemakers out, plus if we see anything coming our way at full boot, well, we'll know he's an enemy, won't we?"

Hunter couldn't argue with the typically British logic.

"Are you here to join the war, major?" one of the other officers asked across the table.

Hunter shook his head. "Believe it or not, the answer is no," he said. "In fact, up until a short time ago, I had no idea this war—or any other war—was going on."

"Oh, but you are out of touch over in America," Heath said. "It's not the 'quick jump over the pond' that it used to be."

"How true, captain," Hunter agreed. "We are very isolated. And we're embroiled in so many of

our own problems, we don't have time to catch up on what's happening over here. But, by God, would never have thought the big war was still going on."

"Well, in fairness to you Americans, the war did calm down a bit for nearly two years," Heath told him. "Became sort of a 'phony war,' actually. The Soviets were too weak to lift a gun right after ... well, after the dirty bastards nuked you. Many countries had entire armed units still intact. Most settled where they stood. We were at the RAF base on Gibraltar when the armistice was declared. We sat there—on our base—for close to seven months. No one came to disarm us. Only then did we realize the Russians couldn't throw together five working divisions in Europe on a bet. So we started moving well, moving about a bit."

He courteously refilled Hunter's plate with eggs and his cup with tea. Then he continued.

"It was about a year ago when we realized that the Russians were suddenly desperately light on the surface-to-air. That's when we started flying long-range patrols. With nothing to shoot at us, we were flying as far north and east as Berlin. For the most part, we didn't see any appreciable Russian strength anywhere."

"You said they were short on SAMs," Hunter said.

"Yes, it was the most curious thing," Heath said. "We had our eyes on them, of course. And we were in contact with other RAF bases. And it seemed as if their SAM forces just dwindled overnight. It was such a strange thing for them to do, leave themselves open like that. They gave up whatever control they might have had over the European airspace. And there weren't enough MIGs around to make much of a difference. Plus a lot of their men defected."

"They withdrew their SAMs and sent them to America," Hunter told him. "They tried to split the continent right in half. Came close to doing it too. We just got through with them. It was rough."

"By God, major, are you serious?" Heath said. "We had no idea you were having a go with the Russkies over there."

Hunter settled back and told them the whole story. The formation of The Circle, the SAMs hidden in The Badlands, the ferocious battle between the democratic Western Forces and the fanatical, Soviet puppet armies of The Circle. The British officers were at once fascinated and flabbergasted by the tale.

"They took a huge risk," Heath said at the end of the story. "They were so intent on keeping you Yanks down."

"Well, they've set us back," Hunter said with bitterness in his voice. "And that's why I'm here."

He reached inside his pocket and pulled out the picture of Viktor.

"I've been tracking this man," he said, handing the photo to Heath. "He's responsible for the whole Circle War."

Heath looked at the photo. "Why, this is the Lucifer bloke," he said. "The Madman of the Mediterranean. He's behind all the war talk right now."

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