

Robert Brooks

Arness opened the door. Three G2A2 assault rifles aimed at the opening; three masked faces stared down their sights. Lt. Arness stepped to the side, allowing a moment to pass. None of his men reacted.

Nothing.

Arness nodded. The other three members of fire-team Bravo moved through the door, scanning all angles. Arness let them pass, and then followed them out of the stairwell, raising his rifle and sweeping right.

“Bravo on floor fower,” Arness reported. His voice-activated microphone transmitted his report to both Captain Puller and Command. Command acknowledged; Puller did not.

‘Command doesn’t have to worry about making noise,’ Arness noted wryly. He hung back as Bravo cleared the nearby row of offices, watching the hallway behind them.

“Clear.” Arness could hear his team moving back towards him, but only with effort. The soft-soled boots issued to Delta operators for urban environments were close to silent on nearly every type of flooring, and more importantly, D-boys stepped lightly.

“Alpha out of stairwell, floo—“ Captain Puller’s transmission cut off.

“Alpha One, repeat transmission,” Command came on the air strong.

“Alp...well, over.” Static blotted out most of Puller’s transmission.

“Alpha One, repeat,” Command said. “Over,” came the belated ending. Arness’ hair tried to stand up on his arms. The new radios that SFOD-D used transmitted on twelve different wavelengths, with six different, dynamic encryption keys. You simply don’t have transmission problems anymore.

Theoretically.

“CCI,” Arness said. “How is my signal strength? Over.”

“Loud and clear,” came the reply. The communication technicians – CCI – didn’t share the operatives’ penchant for old procedures. “No loss.”

“Alpha, can you read?” Command repeated.

“Loud and clear. We’ve moved out of the stairwell.”

“Roger, we read you.”

Listen for sound, watch for shadows. Fettel. Hostages. The only two reasons to make contact with anyone.

Arness hated recon.

Bravo Two -- Sergeant Darby -- peered through an opening on the right side of the wall, weapon high. “Clear.”

“Bravo,” Command said. “We have you on visual.”

“Roger,” Arness replied. He looked up, and saw a black dome hanging from the ceiling. They had been hopeful that they would be able to monitor them over the security system once they got inside, even though they hadn’t had access at the time of the briefing.

Arness could also see a dim green light on the camera. It wasn’t comforting. “Command, could anyone else be watching us?”

The technicians responded. “Not on the security system. We have root access, and nobody else is logged on right now.”

“Roger.” Bravo cleared two more rows of offices, and returned back to the main hallway.

“Alright, Bravo,” Command said. “We’ve cleared the next three rooms of cubicles visually, but the fourth row on the left is dark for us.”

“Roger.”

Bravo stepped to the row in question. Arness and Darby began sweeping down the left side, Bravo Three and Four – Marion and Jones – swept down the right.

The last office on the left was pitch black. Not even the faux-light of the Armacham screensaver was lit. No phone LEDs, or clock displays. It felt quite unnatural. Arness flipped up his flashlight. It was clear of enemies.

But not clear.

Reflexively, he began counting. So did Darby. Flesh and bones.

“...six,” Darby breathed. “Jesus Christ.”

Arness could only nod. Six dead civilians. Armacham employees. The air in the office was thick. With blood, and something else.

Four of them lay in what could loosely be called a row. “Executed,” Arness murmured.

Darby spat, then grimaced.

“Sorry sir,” he said. “It’s on the back of my mouth. I mean, back on the roof, in the throat, you know.”

It tastes like death, Arness thought. Most D-Boys had been around dead bodies, if only in training, and his unit had seen action in Afghanistan. But it had never – cloistered in the back of his throat like this. He resisted the urge to try to cough it up.

“I know,” Arness replied. “It happens.” He glanced the fifth dead civilian. All that was left was a blackened skeleton. The smell...

Hmm.

Arness shined his flashlight at the wall behind the bones, and was surprised to see a circular burn mark, almost directly above where the bones lay.

A circular burn mark.

Darby saw it, too. “Son of a bitch.”

“Particle weapons,” Arness agreed. He turned and looked in a straight line away from the impact. Line of sight, he mused. Through the window, across the cubicles, through the doorway --

-- and the shot would have come right from the elevator. He bit down on a particularly vile oath.

“Command, we have dead civilians.”

Silence.

“Command, come in.”

Nothing.

“Over.”

Still nothing.

“Does anyone read me?”

Captain Puller answered swiftly. “Alpha reads.”

Arness frowned. “Can you get through to Command?”

“I just checked in with them.”

Damn radios. “Can you relay a message for me?”

“Go ahead, Bravo One.”

“We’ve got dead civilians and evidence of particle weapons being used.”

There was a significant pause. Particle weapons were not supposed to be issued to anyone yet. “Roger that. Any live hostages?”

“Negative. Also, it appears that at least some hostiles are using the elevators.” Captain Puller had ordered Bravo squad to stick to the stairs only. The briefing had specifically mentioned the multitude of things the security system could do, and if the OpFor had control of it, using an elevator would be suicide.

“Good to know, Bravo One. Continue the sweep of that floor, maintain fire team cohesion. I’ll be back to you with further instructions.”

Arness flipped away from Captain Puller’s frequency. “Three, Fower. Regroup.”

Marion and Jones stepped around the cubicle corner, and took up defensive stances, looking back towards the hallway.

Jones looked at Arness. “Got some dead civvies in that other office, sir.”

Arness gave Jones a hard look. “How many civilians?”

“Five.”

“How’d they die?” Darby asked.

“Natural causes,” Jones snorted.

“Shut it,” Arness said. “Marion, what happened to them?”

Marion turned towards him. “Shot, I guess.”

“Anything unusual?”

“Anything in particular?”

“One of them in here got it with a particle gun,” Arness replied, pointing back towards the dark office.

Jones’ face darkened, Marion’s did not. “Is that so?”

Okay, Arness decided. “We maintain formation from here on out. We don’t split up for any reason.”

“Bravo One, report.”

Arness turned back toward the gruesome scene in the corner office, and then spoke: “This is Bravo One.”

"I've having problems getting through Command. So, here's the..." Another wave of static.

Again? "Captain, can you hear me?"

"Ma...ain radio protocol, Bravo One," Puller snapped back. "I read you fine."

There was a flash of light in the hallway.

"Contact!"

"Alp – "

Silence.

And then, earsplitting feedback through the entire squad's earpieces. Arness dropped to his knees, desperately clawing his helmet, mask, and earpiece off of his head.

"Shit!" That was Jones, reaching underneath his mask to rip off his earpiece.

'I didn't know.'

Arness froze. That sounded like Puller. He looked towards the rest of Bravo. They were all looking at him. None were showing any signs of pain from the radios.

They had heard it.

"Okay," Arness began.

'I had no idea.'

His words locked in his throat. The eyes looking at him were now fearful.

"Okay," Arness started. "This is what we're going to do: we're going to get back to the hallway, meet with Alpha Team, and get out."

And let someone else finish this, he didn't say. There was nobody else besides Delta.

Right now, Arness didn't care.

"Let's move, right now."

Darby wordlessly strapped his helmet back on, leaving his radio lying on the floor. Marion followed. Jones didn't argue.

Marion's breath caught. "Fettel!" He whispered.

Arness looked. A shadow.

An opportunity.

“Pursue!”

Bravo fireteam raced down the main hallway, following the fleeting glimpses of shadow. All D-boys were trained to shoot while moving, but Fettel was only visible for moments. They could hear him, see his shadow. See him disappear around the next corner.

They ran back towards the stairwell. Darby kicked open the door, and aimed up. The distinct sound of boots hitting concrete came from above them. Arness nodded, and Jones began sprinting up the stairs, rifle ready. Marion and Darby followed. Arness brought up the rear.

Three flights up. The door was open, and Jones burst through it.

“Keep it tight,” Arness hissed.

Ambush. Arness stopped dead. Fettel was supposed to be highly trained, but he was acting reckless. He almost gave the order to hold.

But then he saw Captain Puller. His skin was gray, his uniform bloodied, his eyes gone.

'I didn't know.'

And then, ashes. Bravo squad remained motionless. There was no sound. Only a flickering light down the hall.

Arness tried to speak, but no sound arose from his mouth. Down the hall, a shadow.

Contact. Arness could not process what he had just seen. He could only act.

Instinct.

He moved forward. He issued no command, but his team followed. There was nothing else to do.

They moved into a wide room, dimly lit. There was red, and then there was chaos.

Darby disappeared into the shadows. Jones screamed, and was jerked upwards by his shoulder. There was a crunch, and the gun dropped from his hands. Arness heard a splash behind him, and Marion screamed from under water, which didn't seem to make much sense. He had little time to process it. His finger closed on the trigger.

Nothing happened, and everything.

Alma.

She was there. Here.

Arness knew -- because she told him -- that he would be last. They were gone.

To say that his life flashed before his eyes would be wrong. He relived everything.

He was born, he lived. Every moment was blood. Every moment, he and the people he loved were ripped from each other, killed, stolen, gone.

A life full of nightmares. Like hers.

Every moment.

And he deserved it.

They all deserved it.

In that moment of everything, of clarity, of rebirth, his body wanted to weep.

In that moment of everything, there was nothing.