

Excerpt from *The Zeus Payload* by Steven G. Jackson

September 11, 2012, Benghazi, Libya

Nick King crouched on top of the Benghazi Medical Center under a collage of stars peeking in behind wisps of reddish-brown dust with a sniper rifle in his right hand. Remnants of the day's heat cascaded off the concrete roof in ripples of scorched air, and his drenched body begged for relief from the black covert gear covering him from forehead to sneakers.

"Any sign of Saleh?" King whispered into his comm unit as he focused on the main entrance below, wiping sweat away from his eyes. The pungent smells of the region, mixed with his own sweat, brought images of spoiled fish covered in curry.

Dean Wright watched from the far side of the roof in matching garb. "That's a negatory on the rear emergency exit. Nobody in, nobody out."

King looked over his shoulder at his roommate and coworker. "Thanks for coming. I know it's a long shot he's here."

"Dude, it's a long shot he's even alive. It's been almost thirty years since a confirmed sighting. Even if he moonwalks in the front door, you might not recognize him."

"After he killed my parents in the embassy bombing in Beirut, my grandfather made me memorize CIA photos of him. I'll recognize him."

"I hope you're right. Those photos were from the early eighties. I don't look anything like I did in the eighties."

"We were four."

"Don't sweat the technicalities. Let's hope my intelligence network is right about him needing heart surgery and coming here tonight for a second opinion."

The arid breeze chafed King's face. "Remember, we want Saleh alive. I want him to know I found him, and he'll be prosecuted for my parent's deaths. For me and my grandfather."

"I'm down with the whole 'killing is a sin' Catholic deal you've got going, but what if he's surrounded by armed guards? A shot from up here might be your only chance."

Before King could respond, a half-dozen black, open-bed trucks pulled around the corner, stopping in front of the main entrance below. King signaled to Wright, who ran across the roof.

"This might be him," King whispered as Wright set up next to him. "If so, we'll never take him alive. Too many bad guys."

"It's not too late to call in some support," Wright said.

"Nobody in our government believes me. And the local authorities aren't going to be any help."

"Still, it can't hurt to clue in your CIA contact, Agent What's His Face. After all you've

done for him and the agency, he'll listen."

King squinted as the passenger door of the second truck opened up. "His name is Agent Rock, and there's no time to call now."

King drew a conflicted breath and aimed his sniper rifle at the open front door.

"Want me to take the shot?" Wright asked.

"No. This is my responsibility."

A figure dressed in black exited the truck, checking his surroundings in all directions, but not bothering to look up.

"Is that Saleh?" Wright asked.

King paused. "No. Bone structure is wrong. Maybe he's still in the truck."

The figure signaled toward the entrance and dozens of men, all dressed in militant gear, stormed the trucks from the medical center. They climbed into the truck beds, each carrying automatic assault weapons.

"What the hell?" Wright said.

King set his rifle down and pulled out a secure phone. "This isn't a doctor's visit. It's a militant gathering." He speed-dialed a direct number at Langley.

The call connected with a gruff voice. "Rock."

"It's King. I think I've stumbled onto a militant excursion in Benghazi."

"What the hell are you doing in Libya?" Rock asked.

"I'm on vacation. For my thirty-fifth birthday."

"Your birthday's in April."

King watched as the militants finished loading. "I postponed. Too busy saving your ass with those computer worms in Iran."

"Yeah, right. Did anyone remind you Americans aren't so popular in Libya?"

"I guess I need a better travel agent. She said this place is the bomb. Besides, people hate me wherever I go."

Rock laughed. "True that."

"Listen, six trucks are filling up with armed men in full attack gear. They're going after something."

"Describe the trucks."

"Black with a company logo. I've seen it before. It has a finger rising from a book, pointing up at a black flag with rifles on each side."

"Shit. That's the logo for Ansar al-Sharia. Remember, we came across their names on

Iranian computers when you deployed the Flame worm.”

“Yeah. Islamist militants. Aren’t they helping the local government with security here in Benghazi?”

“That’s them. Do not, I repeat, do not engage. I’ll send a transport, but it’ll take a few hours. Hide out until I call you back with the details.”

King looked at Wright, who leaned in closer. “Any idea what they might be up to?”

“Al-Qaeda released a video yesterday,” Rock said. “Called for attacks on Americans in Libya to avenge the drone strike that killed Abu Yahya-al-Libi in Pakistan last June.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. You picked a hell of a time to go walkabout in a terrorist state.”

“Have all Americans been pulled out?”

“No. State hasn’t done anything.”

“What are they waiting for?”

“Beats me. I’ll make another call over there. Maybe this will force them off their politically correct asses.”

“Good luck with that. Hey, does the video show anybody?” King asked.

“None other than bin Laden’s replacement, Ayman al-Zawahiri.”

“What’s he look like?”

Rock paused. “I don’t know. Like all those al-Qaeda douche bags, I suppose. Beard. Cowardly eyes. Robes covered in sheep shit. Why?”

“There’s a group of guys down there matching that description. I’m going to tail them.”

“Don’t be stupid. Go be a tourist, somewhere with sandy beaches, topless women, and lots of alcohol.”

“There’s a beach not far from here. My roommate’s been dying to teach me to surf.”

“Funny guy. I’m serious. Get the hell out of there.”

King watched as the convoy started to leave. “They’re on the move. I’ll call later.”

King hung up before Rock could protest.

“You hear all that?” he asked Wright.

“I heard topless women and surfing. After that, I kind of lost focus.”

King pulled a magnetized GPS device from his pocket. As the first truck passed below him, he dropped the device, and the magnet stuck the landing on the metal roof. As King expected, the talking and shuffling around masked the noise. “There. Now we can track them.”

Wright helped King pack up their gear. “We’re not equipped to take on a group this big.”

King ran to the fire escape, followed by Wright. “My gut says something big is going down. We need to find out what.”

“Okay. But after you save the world again, can we go find those women and beaches?”

An hour later, King watched four Libyan guards milling around the main gate on the US consulate’s grounds from his vantage point halfway up a palm tree. A spattering of lights in the consulate building, two hundred yards beyond the gate behind an orchard of fruit trees, glowed. Half of the trucks they’d followed waited along the road near the gate, the other half around the corner.

“What’s the sitch?” Wright asked from the base of the tree.

“They’re going after the consulate. Only four Libyan guards as a first line of defense. They won’t stand a chance.”

“What’s our play?”

King answered while redialing Agent Rock. “Change the odds. There’s a compound full of US and Libyan soldiers in the guard barracks on the right. They need to mobilize before it’s too late. It’ll be an hour before reinforcements arrive from Tripoli.”

“King, where are you now?” Rock answered.

“US consulate. The militants are gathering. You need to alert the guards in there.”

“Jesus. I’ll alert the guards myself. Meanwhile, you stay out of it.”

“Yeah. That’s not going to happen.”

King hung up and glanced down at Wright. “The CIA wants us to stand down.” He checked the scene with his night goggles. “Remember grade school? I always failed citizenship. I never did become a better listener.”

“I kept you from expulsion in college, like a hundred times.”

“At least. Any ideas?”

“We’ve got explosives. If we can ignite one, it will both distract the terrorists and alert the guards.”

“Good plan. Let’s go.”

Before King could scurry down the tree, the militants fired their first shots, a signal for the armed men poised around the consulate to breach the compound walls and charge the consulate building. The consulate alarms sounded, and King could hear the American contingent inside starting to return fire.

King dropped to the ground and charged the breached front gate, Wright running alongside, each holding a sniper rifle. “Try to find the leader. Maybe losing him will slow them down.”

King turned the corner at the main gate, stepping over four dead Libyan guards. The lights came on at the guard barracks to his right, but King could see the majority of the militant group already entering the consulate building.

As King ran into the compound, barrack guards fired on him.

King dove to the ground, followed by Wright.

“Jeez,” Wright said through a mouthful of dirt. “Those jar-heads think we’re with the militants. You learn any secret handshakes in the CIA so they’ll know we’re the good guys?”

“Afraid not. They don’t provide those to computer geeks. There’s no way to convince them we’re on their side. We need to retreat.”

King watched the guards who’d fired on them run screaming toward the consulate, which was now in flames. The sight of the building brought back the horrifying memories of the 1983 Beirut embassy bombing.

“Too many lives at stake,” King said. He ignored the gunfire and leaped to his feet before racing toward the consulate building.

Another shot rang out, this time hitting King in the chest.

King slammed into Wright’s arms. He knew the vest should have stopped the bullet, but the pain in his chest spoke of a different reality.

“Hang on, dude,” Wright said. “Hit you square in the vest. I’ll carry you back to the car.”

King lost consciousness to the sound of gunshots and screams.

Larkana, Pakistan

Abdullah Hamadei, dressed in a full-length beige robe, assuring no skin could be exposed, sat alone at a circular table in the darkness of the cafe’s outdoor patio. The aromatic mixture of earth-laden Arabic coffee and curry swamped his sense of smell.

He stood and began the process of zigzagging the sandy streets of Larkana, going in circles, doubling back, all the while assuring himself no one followed him. After an hour of careful maneuvering, he arrived at Saleh’s modest two-bedroom home on the outskirts of town.

Two armed guards met him at the gate of the ten-foot concrete wall surrounding the complex and searched him, going so far as to remove the lint from his pockets. The guards let Hamadei pass, and he stepped into the home, illuminated by dancing candle flames as he walked to a small bedroom at the far end. There he bowed before Saleh.

Saleh’s eyes, despite him being a wisp of a man, bored into Hamadei with a sturdiness like steel pellets. He wore a black Shalvar, Jameh, and Kamarband, topped by a Sarband covering most of his graying hair.

“Did you capture King?” Saleh asked.

“No.” Hamadei’s voice hinted of his Oxford education.

Fury spread across Saleh’s face. “Unacceptable. The trap worked. He was *there*. How did this happen?”

Hamadei shrugged. “He took a friendly fire shot to the chest before we could capture him. Fortunately, he survived. Unfortunately, he escaped.”

“Can’t you find him before he leaves Benghazi?”

“He is well connected. He will be hard to locate.”

Saleh stamped his foot. “I don’t have to remind you that we need him to fulfill my destiny.”

“I have it under control. I have a backup plan to get him to finish the cyberweapon. And the attack on the consulate was successful. Two cars escaped with American survivors, but the ambassador is dead. Word has already spread throughout the region. You accomplished what the interim leadership of al-Qaeda asked for. Your plan to become their new emir is on schedule.”

“Soon I will reclaim my rightful place in the jihad. After I blew up the embassy in Beirut they said I couldn’t be accepted as the face and voice of Hezbollah. That I was too stubborn to handle the politics required.”

“You will show them all.”

“Who were they to dismantle everything I built in the name of diplomacy? Such a waste. It set us back thirty years. We’ve lost resources, momentum, and respect, both among those who should fear us and those we’ve considered allies.”

Hamadei concurred with a nod. “Yes. There are some in US intelligence who now feel al-Qaeda is a brand name, used by decentralized, geographically isolated groups.”

“Fools. They think because they don’t feel our wrath for a decade, we’ve gone away. They forget we think of our wars as lasting for a millennium. They will be reminded soon.”

“You will see to it.”

Saleh scowled. “The war would be won by now if I’d been in charge all this time. Israel gone. The United States cowering in fear of our next attack, their economy in ruins, as we did to the Soviet Union for their crimes in Afghanistan. Sharia law would be applied across all Muslim states.”

Saleh looked up at Hamadei. “Complete success can only be achieved with Nick King and his grandfather dead. Do you know why?”

“Because they escaped in 1983?”

Saleh shuddered. “No. It goes back a decade before that. My father was instrumental in overthrowing the shah of Iran. When the CIA invaded to rescue the shah, my father fought them and was assassinated. My mother was killed in the cross fire. I lost them both. That is the day I committed myself to the jihad.”

“I did not know. No wonder you have the passion to lead.”

Saleh squinted at Hamadei. “King and his family have empowered the CIA for decades. They must die for their sins.”

“Yes, but we need King to finish the cyberweapon first.”

Saleh frowned at him. “How will we get him to finish it without him in our control?”

“The CIA is being ordered to stand down on developing the next-generation worm built from King’s Stuxnet and Flame products that sabotaged the centrifuges at the Natanz refining facility. That will drive a rebel like King crazy.”

Saleh nodded. “He is a rebel. We have much in common that way. Of course, he is evil.”

“King will find a way to finish it,” Hamadei offered. “When he does, I will acquire it, and you will have it to attack the US computer infrastructure. Imagine the power. Imagine the leverage you’d hold with al-Qaeda. They’ll have no choice but to anoint you.”

“We do not have the luxury of patience. I must have the technology in hand to persuade the Shura Council that I am the obvious choice to replace al-Zawahiri as emir and senior operations chief. Otherwise, having you tip the Americans on bin Laden’s hiding place was in vain.”

Hamadei shifted his weight and exhaled. “It will be done, Excellency.”

Eagle, Idaho

Hans Schulz, President of the Supreme Aryan Alliance, ran his hand through a full head of white hair, capping a tall, lean build. Dressed in black slacks and sweater, carry-overs from his years as a CIA operative, he leaned forward in his burgundy leather chair.

“I’m tired of being ineffective,” Schulz said in a thick German accent. “We formed this group to make real change.”

Bob White and Joe Green, who made up the balance of the leadership council for the Alliance, sat with Schulz in his living room, each with a neat whiskey within reach. The lights were low, but their faces showed the tension of high stakes, as if playing with money they didn’t possess. The stuffed heads of buffalo, cattle, moose, and deer hung on the wall in the space serving as both the organization’s headquarters and Schulz’s billiard room in his rustic home.

“We *are* different,” White said. The tubes from his oxygen tank were jammed in his nostrils. “What other organization is made up of former members of the US intelligence community? We’re adding a network of capable and motivated professionals every week. Using the model of the Nazi Party from the 1930s, we *shall* stem the tide of cultural pluralism and diversity.”

Schulz’s landline, only used for Alliance business, rang. He stared at the incoming number, which he recognized as international.

“You guys expecting an overseas call?” he asked.

White and Green shook their heads in unison.

Schulz shrugged and decided to answer it, hitting the speakerphone button.

“Yeah?” he said.

“Herr Schulz,” a voice in a heavy German accent answered. “My name is Herr Metzger. I’m calling from Nazi Party headquarters in Germany. I believe we have some common interests.”

Schulz looked at his cohorts while speaking toward the phone. “How did you get this number?”

“Our reach is wide, Herr Schulz. I have a proposal for you. One that will benefit us both.”

Schulz leaned in. “I’m listening.”

“There is an opportunity to acquire a unique weapon. This weapon will give us both great power and assure us victory in the war we’ve been waging for decades. We know your organization is filled with current and former intelligence assets. I believe you are in a unique position to get it for us.”

“What kind of weapon?”

“A computer program called a worm. Once completed, whoever possesses it can infiltrate any computer network in the world.”

Schulz frowned at his peers, who remained silent. “Big deal. Worms have been around for decades. Hardly a game changer.”

“Ah, perhaps I failed to mention the key aspect of this worm. It will be undetectable. By anyone. Ever. With it, we can alter every computer record on earth, and no one will ever be able to prove it was done at all. We can send communications from anywhere to anyone, saying whatever we wish, and it will be an authentic message. Do you see why this is so valuable? It is the ultimate cyber-attack.”

Schulz paused, watching White and Green huddle closer to the phone.

“You mentioned it needs completing?”

“The programmer is dying to finish it, but will be told to stand down. You can get around that issue with your assets. Once completed, your people can acquire it for us. By us, I mean both of our organizations.”

“Who will complete it?”

“The programmer’s name is Nick King. Since you will be providing the personnel, the Nazi Party will provide the funding for everything. Now, in case you’re thinking of getting it for yourselves and not sharing, let me remind you of the clout my organization still has. You do not want us as an enemy, Herr Schulz.”

“Hang on,” Schulz said, putting the phone on mute.

“What a break,” he told his peers. “A chance to get in tight with the Nazi Party. To get their backing and influence in this country. Who knows where it could lead.”

White frowned. “Can we trust him?”

Green, a round man in his forties, thus twenty years younger than the other two, shook his head. “How do we know it’s not a setup? It smells like the FBI to me.”

Schulz shook his head. “We have FBI agents on the inside. I would have been warned.”

“How do we know this guy’s a legitimate member of the Nazi Party?” Green asked.

Schulz glared at Green and White. “We did not form this group to live on the fringe, publishing propaganda on web sites. We created this organization to make change. To see racial order restored. This can be our defining moment.”

White looked at Green. “He’s right. If not now, when?”

Green let out a deep breath. “I’ll agree under the condition we verify all this with our own people.”

“We should also have some insurance,” White said.

Schulz narrowed his eyes. “You want to hire Heydrich?”

White nodded. “If, for any reason, we discover a trap, or a double-cross, or even if our operatives can’t secure the product, we need protection in place. Heydrich can be our backup plan to acquire it, and he can clean up any mess without any trail back to us.”

Green cleared his throat. “He’s a rogue psychopath. The Nazis themselves couldn’t control him. They let him go, even though his grandfather was a legendary assassin for Hitler. What makes you think we can control him?”

Schulz eyed them both. “He’s never failed me before.”

“I know you believe he is loyal to us,” Green said. “In my experience, men like that cannot be trusted.”

“Men like Heydrich,” Schulz countered, “have a unique skill set. He has never failed a mission, for us or the Nazis before he was ostracized. I’ll risk some uncertainty for those results any day. We were all CIA operatives once. We can handle him if he gets out of line.”

Green and White nodded their acceptance.

Schulz took the phone off mute. “Herr Metzger, we have a deal. Let us discuss the details.”

“I prefer secure e-mail. I will be in touch.”