SEAL TEAM 11

Spartan Squadron

Chapter 1

Dragon's Lair

SEAL Team 6 Chief Jachen, Jake, Wilkins raised a gloved fist. The motion meant to stop. Instantly, the signal passed back through the lines of ninety Tier One Assault Force operators. A tense expectancy settled over the SEALs, Rangers and Delta Force operators as each man dropped to a knee and immobilized into a crouch. Two barely discernible hisses as if a cobra exhaled before striking its prey. Shots from silenced fifty caliber sniper rifles were accurate as muffled sounds from two Taliban sentries collapsed to the ground a split second apart. Their last breath wisped out in a white cloud in the cold air and disappeared ghost-like.

The code word for the assault, to begin with, a vengeance issued from the Red Squadron commander. "Dragon! Dragon! Dragon!" came over the helmet coms. Jake’s lips sneered away from clenched teeth at the thought of Mustafa's family being tortured to death by these savages. Rage tunneled through him. He’d worked with a number of Pashtun villages in Afghanistan, getting them medicine, dental care, food and clothing for the long winter. Mustafa's three children, five, eight and ten, called him "uncle." He loved being all of that and more to those three kids.

The Taliban made examples of the children, stripping their flesh from their thin, naked bodies, hoisting them up on ropes to hang over trees near the village as a warning. Those son-of-a-bitches would pay for what they did to them. With an explosive breath, Jake controlled his rage and focused. "Let's get those bastards," he hissed into the mic to the troops behind him as respiration white vapor touched the atmosphere and was gone, with just an hour away from sunrise the time when the night was dead quiet and cold as a grave.

The Afghanistan Hindu Kush lorded over them like jagged old men with a front row seat to the fierce battle about to rage. The relatives of Mustafa wailed and sobbed, women, tearing their hair, beating their breasts with their fists as Jake and his team gently and carefully took down each dead child and tenderly wrapped them in clean blankets. No dry eyes in his troop but his. Several of his teammates were fathers and wept, too much for them to take. His cheeks remained tear free at that time, filled with a numbing kind of grief.

In the last two days during the hunt for the animals at almost nine thousand feet, tears leaked unexpectedly out of his eyes from time to time, freezing on his lashes and cheeks. They moved stealthily throughout the night to catch up with them, over ten miles of narrow goat trails, often with treacherous sheer cliffs. Now ready to enter the elusive Taliban's lair nestled in a secret cave system their enemy thought secured. Jake's legs trembled, calves cramped from the relentless trek to reach the underground complex before dawn. Payback time!

Jake gave the move forward signal, hand slashing forward. The pace picked up faster and faster. The assault force closed the distance toward the dark and foreboding cavern entrance set hidden between craggy rocks and snow. His heart pulsed several beats, and he consciously willed himself to take deeper breaths. "Slow down," the words resonated through the team's comms and each man's inner ear. The reaction instantaneous.

Fingers manipulated switches on Surefire infrared light systems mounted on the top of helmets and under the barrels of weapons. The combined lights would illuminate the inner earth but still be invisible to the naked eye. The caves of Tora Bora taught the elite teams that night vision goggles (NVG's) proved useless without some sort of ambient light. Now the power of the stars allowed them to see in the darkness of the subterranean system.

With his four-lensed, wide-angle, NVG's he clearly distinguished the group of lead assaulters. Their weapon-mounted infrared lasers danced and flitted about like fireflies in the black night.

The men of the Red Man Squadron penetrated the craggy entrance to the cave for the first and last time. Rebel, the point man of his troop and his best friend, intuitively knew when Jake wanted him to move. He would be the first to enter the black maw. The dry, warmer air of the underworld rushed by him and the familiar but never welcome smell of Taliban body odor and human waste assailed his nostrils and almost made him gag.

They moved like ephemeral ghosts in the night. A downward sloping narrow rock passageway opened abruptly into a vast cavern with a dark, menacing 100 - foot high ceiling. "Break right Troop Two," Jake said in an undertone into his helmet's boom mic. Pacing in step beside him Troop One's leader made the call for his troop to "break left."

Each troop moved with seven to eight enlisted men and one senior enlisted troop leader. Four troops made up a squadron. Two troops combined made up an element. Two junior officers or element leaders assigned to one of two elements helped provide leadership. With a senior officer as squadron commander and a senior enlisted, a squadron usually consisted of upwards of thirty-six operators. Element one, the lead assault group contained two combined troops moving down the rock hewn passageway followed close by element two. They flooded through the opening like a destructive tsunami devouring the landscape.

Dozens of safeties on silenced Heckler and Kock, H&K 416 caliber 5.56 weapons clicked into a semi-fire position when they spotted their threat. Fifty fighters spread out before them packed across the stone floor, sleeping and unaware. Jake allowed his grief and rage for the dead children to flow through him.

Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants wrapped up in their ever-present winter cloak of a brown wool blanket lay before them. Untouched beside each man lay an AK-47. These devils from hell will be completely caught off guard Jake thought with dark satisfaction. "Switch on thermal," he whispered. The red heat outlines of figures inside the bundles came alive in their scopes like demons from Dante's Hell. All four troops moved laterally heel to heel in the quick shuffle along the wall of the cathedral-like cave. Carbines poised to fire.

Jake and his squadron trained in shooting hundreds of rounds every day at their base in Afghanistan. He and many of the Red Men snapped out three headshots in less than a second. He reflected on his years as a star fullback in his high school in Charleston, South Carolina. He often compared how athletes in colleges and professional teams throughout the world competed against each other. Ecstatic crowds cheered their favorites as leather balls moved back and forth across a small field. The Red Men ran stress tests in how fast they shot targets smaller than the size of a pinball. No adoring fans would cheer them, no flashing billboard lights or excited announcers as they transacted their deadly skill. They would be rewarded with silent darkness if they won or lost.

Jake's low snarling order came through the mic, "Commence fire!" Thirty-two assaulters spit death from their silenced H&K 416's. Frangible ammo penetrated skulls and bodies and then fragmented so that they would cause the most internal damage. Designed to not penetrate through the body to cause collateral damage to the team. Several creatures bolted upright but gunfire mule kicked them back down in a hail of bullets. He observed with the dispassion gained from years of combat experience tinged with hatred as the corporality writhed and jerked in death throes. Would they go to his hell or their heaven he wondered? His hell he hoped believing no God throughout time would accept these demonic bastards.

The acrid scent of cordite stung Jake's nostrils but was soon replaced with the metallic, coppery aroma of blood. "Search teams out!" in a hushed tone his eyes staring transfixed over the corpses contorted in the agony of death just moments before in the repose of peaceful sleep. Through their own choice to be a horror to mankind, they reaped a slumber in wretched silence for eternity. He kept an eye peeled for movement as two pairs of designated men from each troop began to quickly move amongst the blood-soaked bundles. They surgically delivered the silenced coup de grace headshots to ensure the dead wouldn't spring up later like some bad horror movie. From the moment of their entrance into the cave, they completed the initial gory work in little more than a couple of minutes. The glow from the Tango's (Terrorists) began to fade in the thermal scopes. Death covered the dusty stone floor with its black cloak. Silence hung heavy.

The children's screams carried out across the village and no one there dared stop the Taliban from torturing them. Parents and relatives shrieked and screamed, begging for the innocent children's lives. Frustrated villagers turned away, sobbing, eyes shut, hands over their ears, helpless. Their religious mullah a man in his sixties with a long white beard, ran out to the antagonist, pleading, begging them not to harm the crying, frightened children. The commander calmly turned, pulled out the Glock handgun gotten off an American soldier he killed months earlier, and shot the old man in the head.

With eyes transfixed on the lifeless forms, Jake whispered into his mic "Initial chamber clear, Red Leader." Sweat stung his eyes, and he blinked several times to clear them. A tingling satisfaction spread throughout his chest as he surveyed the carnage.

"Roger Red Two," said Ed Summers, Red Squadron leader, and force commander.

Jake commanded the assault force while Ed and the Squadron senior enlisted "Bud" positioned themselves outside at the entrance to the cave.

"Initiate Dragon Knights," Commander Summers commanded. Delta and the Rangers moved like hungry lions into the tunnel.

A week earlier, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) surveillance drone detected the large movement of Tango's into Afghanistan across the Pakistani border. Although several weeks before the normal spring offensive, this did not come as a surprise to Jake as he often distinguished the subtle shifts in the climate. After years of fighting in Afghanistan, he sensed unseasonably warm weather for this time of year. While his troop provided security for CIA Case Officer Diana Mazur over the last year the two of them drew inexorably close to each other in the shared tension of working in a combat zone. Through Diana's human intelligence (Humint) sources they learned that none other than the number two in Al Qaida led this group. The Egyptian physician Al Zawahiri leading joint Al Qaida and Taliban forces stunning and unexpected. The CIA's Humint sources confirmed that Al Zawahiri's operatives that killed the innocent children, their parents, and the village elder were in the hollowed-out earth.

Jake leaned over to his best friend and shooting partner, Jordan, also from Charleston, SC. and in a hushed tone said, "That felt good," a relieved sigh followed. The karma he had been shouldering for the children thrown off with the death of the terrorists littering the cave floor.

Jordan said, "Nothing like a little payback for Mustafa's kids."

Jake discerned the vengefulness shining in Rebel's eyes.

Their troop came into the hamlet a day after the massacre. All of them experienced in the horrors of war, but none of them prepared for the scene that met them.

The parent's lifeless forms lay sprawled with a single bullet in each of their heads. Silent witnesses below the bodies of their beloved children swaying above them in the cold morning air. Rebel helped him take down the youngest child and cried openly, unashamed, as they wrapped the boy in a hand-loomed wool blanket. Now, he looked triumphant, a grisly smile across his mouth. Pay Back!

Jake motioned to the Delta operators entering the large cave. Bending his head upwards to survey the dome stretching upwards like the inside of a French cathedral without stained glass windows. As directed they positioned close to their pre-designated tunnels on the left. Like the spokes of a bicycle wheel, seven passages radiated out from the primary chamber. Jake's troop would hold security on the larger center complex until they cleared the tunnels. The Red Men would divide an underground passageway between the remaining three troops and simultaneously penetrate three burrows on the right, while Delta took down three on the left.

Amazingly the angel of surprise still protected them. Noiseless also because the rifles silencers muzzled the sounds of shots. unconventional mesh bags attached to the side of the guns caught the extracted shell casings so that all sound could be absorbed entirely within the cavern itself. Not a shell dropped to dance on the floor to awaken the sleeping enemy in the other recessed chambers.

Jake held his thumb up from a center position in the chamber. "Thumbs up troop leaders, when you are ready," he whispered. Jake glanced swiftly around and saw six of them raise left thumbs. Satisfaction flowed through him as he called out, "Execute, Execute, Execute!"

Trains of heavily armed warriors packed one behind the other, penetrated the six tunnels. Multiple rooms branched off each tunnel laden with more insurgents. Jake hoped the force could maintain surprise and not be compromised to the forces located on the lower levels of the cave system. The Red Men and Delta methodically began eliminating more sleeping fighters in each room.

The CIA secretly improved the entire cave complex during the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. That time the Taliban fought the Russians with weapons supplied by the Agency. Now the tables turned against the Americans. An Analyst within Diana's CIA team at Jalalabad, J-bad, came across old Agency cables mentioning the cave's location used for raids on Russian forces during her investigation of historical information related to the area. The blueprints arrived the next day from CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia through the secure internet. Details of that map were branded into his brain. Nostrils flaring, Jake took in the sour smell of himself and the men sweating around him.

The cave appeared warmer than the outside air because of the insulating factor of the earth giving the dark chambers a constant temperature year-round. Jake recalled a brief memory that his Cherokee grandfather planted in him long ago as a boy. His gramps said, "The earth is like a warm and comforting mother that lovingly embraces you if you are open to her love." Invigorated by the emotional charge from the memory he felt a quickening in his red pulse.

The Rangers began the macabre task of taking IR, infrared, photographs of the faces of the dead and stacking them in the center of the open hall. An explosion rumbled from a tube on the right. Jake and his shooting partner, Jordan, glanced at each other with concerned looks. Everyone froze and looked expectantly towards tunnel one.

"Tunnel one, situation report?" in a strained tone.

A tense pause, and then came the reply. "All okay, Red Two," Jay said. With a feigned southern drawl came, "An attempt to throw a hand grenade by one of the insurgents backfired."

Jake could almost see Red One's silly assed smirk while he embellished the account. Jake grinned darkly and muffled a chuckle. Jay intentionally sounded like the time he vacationed with him, sitting out on the front porch of Jake's mother's southern mansion bed and breakfast in Charleston. A picture in his mind of Jay rocking idly in his rocking chair, not a care in the world, looking out over the harbor towards Fort Sumter. Jay lounged holding a cold sweating glass filled with ice in the humid summer air as he sipped sweet tea spiked with Captain Morgan Dark Rum. A satisfied grin crossing his face as the rum coursed through his veins. Experienced soldiers developed a dark sense of humor, the way hospital Emergency Room staff and first responders do, to alleviate stress and maintain a low-key atmosphere in an electric, unpredictable situation. Jake's grin widened, and the tension sloughed off his shoulders.

"Red Leader, tunnel rat operation proceeding as planned, all okay." The deep, husky reply from Bud, "Roger, Red Two," Ed's right-hand man during missions. Jake chuckled knowing that the information from the conversations and visuals from helmet cameras live streamed to an expectant Langley headquarters by encrypted satellite communication. The CIA staff would be enraptured monitoring their progress on flat screens. The Agencies interest and involvement in the mission pronounced from the beginning. He blinked the burning sweat out of his eyes.

Three Star SEAL Admiral Joseph McCafferty, Commander of Special Operations Command in Tampa, Florida, also monitored the operation. Fighting Joe McCafferty gave the approval for the undertaking, to begin with. His decision to mount it viewed as an unorthodox and dangerous undertaking, by many in the upper echelons of power but Jake knew his leader never took risks without careful deliberation. McCafferty fathomed more about this type of tactical pursuit when it came to caves and the enemy they were up against than anyone else in the business. The SEAL Admiral approved Jake's first fighting course, which incorporated several aggressive martial fighting techniques for the Navy SEAL Teams early in his career. Jake liked his style and he liked the man who shadowed him with the best of intentions.

Jake tensed as AK-47 fire echoed hollowly in tunnel six where the Delta operators cleared. The excited voice of the Delta leader burst across, "One minor wounded in tunnel six coming out."

"Roger, send him out," Jake replied, no longer in a whisper. The words came out tight. Worried. "Wounded coming out of six," Jake called out behind him.

Two Air Force Special Forces Pararescue Jumper (PJ) operators positioned themselves to receive the wounded Delta soldier. These PJ's were part of the military's medical elite and when it came to the revivification of imperiled souls with devastating combat injuries Jachen witnessed them perform miracles several times over the years. That Delta operator would be in the best of hands.

Jake's earpiece blared, "Tunnel Two, Tangos, (Terrorists), KIA (Killed In Action)14, Oscars, (Operators), all okay. Coming out." "Roger. Come out," Jake ordered. From his position within the cave, he began to pass the information to Bud.

Red Men started streaming out of Tunnel Two, hustling soundlessly, H&K barrels pointed up toward the ceiling and began to position themselves in line to descend into the dark space below them. They needed three troops at a minimum to begin penetration of the next deadly level. No one knew what lay in wait for them in the dark recesses below. A Delta troop joined them in a rush, hungry for more.

"We are in position and ready to assault the second floor, Red Leader," Jake said, suppressing his excitement.

"Roger Red Two," came a raspy, gruff reply from Bud. "I will assume operational control of level one," he replied.

Bud came hastily down the tunnel where they waited, and he gave them the thumbs up to proceed when he arrived. Ed Summers remained on the surface. With him would be an Air Force Combat Controller that would be relaying communications with the controllers of two MQ-9 Reaper drones providing surveillance and each carrying fourteen Hellfire missiles. Jake thought momentarily of the Rangers holding security. They came from a long lineage that traced back to his home state of South Carolina. Revolutionary commander Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox," developed irregular methods of warfare against the British army and the father of modern guerrilla fighting. The twenty-first-century version of what Marion created was here before him, the Swamp Fox must be proudly smiling down from above.

Jake was eager to get back into the fight and got the thumbs up from the other two troop leaders. He turned and looked towards the metal grate stairs leading to level two. Below them lay a large operations room determined to be the heart of the whole complex. Several more tubes led off to more barracks like rooms similar to the ones on the floor they worked on clearing. The last troops finished and began passing their Tango KIA information.

Jordan held security on the stairwell to the next plane, his weapon at the ready, a coiled panther ready to spring on its prey. Jake gave him a firm squeeze on the shoulder signifying the silent communication for begin movement and he darted out as point man once more.

With rifle pointing down the stairs, he was ready to deal the ace of spades. Jake and the rest of the force followed on his heels like a band of Greeks descending fearlessly into Hades. Their swords magically transformed into tricked-out H&K 416's.

*Ting, ting, ting!*

Automatic gunfire rang out from below and impacted on the steel railing and thudded into the packed earthen walls like tiny rockets of death the moment they reached the stairs.

"Give 'em the hot lead boys!"

Jordan, Jake, and several Troop Two operators opened up into the abyss with their weapons selector switch thumbed to full auto, sighting the numerous figures firing up at them. Several forms fell like scythed wheat to the floor. Several Tangos limped or ran out of the range of their shots.

"Move!"

They ran down the stairs with their H&K's at the ready. Their boots pounded out heavy footfalls on the rusting steel grating of the staircase that dropped into the long ago drilled out hole and into the cavern below.

Jake sent out a silent prayer that the metal wouldn't collapse and impale them on rusting, jagged, steel spikes as the staircase gyrated and groaned like a wreathing dragon from Hades.

They shot at anything without IR glint tape fastened in a strip from the top of their helmets and down the back with two patches on the sides. This not only helped pilots identify them from above but proved instrumental in keeping them from shooting at each other. Gun battles raged through the passages of level two as the rest of the available force avalanched into the next cavern.

Jake and Jordan aggressively entered a small chamber together. Jake turned right along the wall of the rock-hewn room when suddenly a ponderous metal bunk bed slammed against him, trapping his slung H&K weapon and right arm against the wall. Two Taliban leaped out from behind their makeshift trap towards him. His left hand shot down to his left hip and unsheathed a 6-inch double-edged knife blade. He thrust the blade to the hilt into the nearest attacker's neck and severed major veins, arteries, and nerves leading to and from the brain across both sides of the throat. The first attacker collapsed, his scream reduced to a frothing gurgle. Hot blood shot out in spurts from the entrance wound, soaking through Jake's gloved hand and spattering his face.

Jerking the razor-sharp blade upward and out through the windpipe as the body dropped, Jake grunted, twisted and stabbed into the neck of the second attacker descending on him. A raised arm holding a bayonet over his right shoulder was poised about to hammer it into his skull. The second Tango's arm collapsed useless after having his brachial plexus nerves in the neck severed, and he slumped unconscious, due to massive hemorrhage from the blood pressure dropping to his brain. Death would occur for both in less than a minute, as the heart stopped due to rapid loss of blood volume through the wounds.

Jordan entered a split second after Jake to clear the left wall. Two Tangos pushed another bulky bed into him, completely pinning him to the wall. Out of the corner of his eye, to his horror, two more figures ran towards Jordan as they kept his friend imprisoned. With a hiss, Jake threw the knife spinning through the air. The blade struck Jordan's closest assailant. A cracking sound snapped through the air as the razor-sharp tip penetrated the rear of the man's skull. The cold steel severed the brain stem and, as quick as a light switch being flipped off he crumpled to the floor the light gone from his body.

A moment after the blade left his hand, Jake hit the quick release on his chest-mounted rifle sling. Breath exploded out as he pushed the bed off him, releasing him so he could protect his friend. He ignored the wet, sticky blood oozing down across his H - (harness) gear and chest. Wiping spattered blood from his lips with the back of his left gloved hand, he spat to the left against the cave wall and dug his toes into the fine dirt of the rock floor. Hurtling toward his shooting partner and closing the distance a nearly 7-foot giant Tango.

Jerking his right arm free from the bed he drew the SOCOM .45 caliber Desert Eagle handgun on his right hip. As the pistol rocketed free of the holster, Jake rotated it at the hip and began flicking his trigger finger in rapid firing into the second attacker. The first rounds tore into the center mass of the Tango at chest level with an almost imperceptible slowing, more hollow silver tipped ammo pierced through the surface of the skin and burst into deadly projectiles into his heart from the side freezing the giant in midstride. As Jake continued firing repeatedly, bringing his weapon up to eye level, he squeezed off a well-aimed shot into the brains kill switch of his fourth Tango in as many seconds. The massive Taliban toppled over like a giant Sequoia tree from the last chop of a woodsman's ax and crashed into the stone floor sending up a dust cloud.

Jake walked over and pushed on the imprisoning metal bed, freeing Jordan still squirming to gain freedom.

Jordan turned and surveyed the carnage in the room with mouth ajar in disbelief. Mouth moving as he tried to form words to speak.

"I'll tell you later," Jake said, as his friend looked back and forth at him and the four dead men splayed out on the cave floor. "Come on quit lollygagging, we've still got work to do," feeling the high of adrenaline streaking through him.

Just then, a thunderous noise cracked the air louder than the mayhem still raging outside the main chamber. The earth rumbled and quaked as if angry at being disturbed from her slumber. Jake and Jordan shot a wide-eyed look at each other and then rushed out into the maelstrom.

A long tense pause ensued after Jake finished his combat operation brief on the cave system and the Tango's they would be up against. The ringing in his ears grew louder as the blood pounded in his head. The years of carrying heavy weapons, being an explosives breacher and all the diving left him with the dull ringing of tinnitus that during stressful times seemed to increase in intensity. Jake narrowed his eyes as he connected with each of the combat-proven operators in the room numbering over 100. A hard lump grew in his throat as he thought about the children. Anger flowed through him.

"This Taliban unit is full of ruthless bastards. They aren't like other Taliban units we've encountered. They're barbaric against local, defenseless civilians." His voice turned steely. "My troop witnessed what these bastards are capable of after seeing three young children skinned alive and hung a few days ago at Mustafa's village. They wanted to make the kids examples so that the villagers would not consort with Americans."

He observed with satisfaction as everyone's lips thinned, their jaws compressing with anger. The look in those eyes told Jake that they would wage war like King Leonidas's Spartan Warriors resurrected. Jake smiled inwardly as everyone stood and began to gather their weapons and gear for the next step in the operation.

Dust still fell from the ceiling of the third and last level of the underworld as Jake's troop led down the decrepit, worn metal stairs.

Jake expected to see what Dante saw before entering the gates of Hades as they descended, an inscription on the dark earthen wall dripping with red blood that read "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

I wouldn't hesitate to follow these Taliban bastards into Hades if that's what it took to exterminate them from the earth forever!

Several of the men stifled coughs from the fine dust that rose into the air from the battle. Their black Adidas GSG9 assault boots made muted metallic echoes in the darkness.

Surprisingly no gunfire rang out. After the noise of the engagement above, it seemed like they entered a crypt, the silence unnerving.

The hair on the back of Jake's neck rose. Something is terribly wrong.