THE WILD BLUE

"Pilot"

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EXT. SOME EQUATORIAL FUCKING HELLHOLE - DAY

MUSIC UP: CHEMICAL BROTHERS, “CHEMICAL BEATS.”

Open HOT in the middle of --

A PICKUP BASKETBALL GAME, and brother it is fucking ON. OUTSIDE under a blistering sun, shirtless ripped DUDES balling like their lives depend on it.

No rules no fouls -- throwing ELBOWS, charging, yelling, wild with testosterone. Playing basketball like it’s football, one step shy of prison-yard ball.

HARD TO TELL WHERE WE ARE under the glaring naked sun -- Cabo or Phuket or Miami Beach, it’s GLORIOUS, the air LIQUID with humidity. Until suddenly --

THE SKY RIPS APART -- as TWO F/A-18 HORNET FIGHTERS shred the air directly overhead -- barely fifty feet above the game, the very air RIPPLING with their jetwash under FULL AFTERBURNER -- SONIC BOOM, like the end of the world, blowing the whole game SIDEWAYS for an instant --

THE BALLERS SCARCELY NOTICE, picking up the rock and diving right back at each other undeterred. ONE BALLER flips a middle finger skyward for good measure -- *Assholes!*

BALLER
Bitches from 187 trying to mess up my game, Bambi.

BAMBI
Gonna let that sit?

BALLER
Hell no, they got to PAY!

ANOTHER PLAYER (O.S.)
How about you two knock off the grabass and get back in the game?

All this aggro posturing, they could only be one thing: UNITED STATES NAVAL AVIATORS -- the most insanely competitive alpha dogs alive. BEST OF THE BEST, and they goddamn well know it. And we realize where we are, as we FOLLOW THE JETS--

EXT. HIGH ABOVE THE USS LEXINGTON STRIKE GROUP - DAY

The aircraft carrier USS LEXINGTON and her Strike Group of DESTROYERS, CRUISERS and various TENDER SHIPS. The full grey weight of American might stacked in tight formation on the pellucid blue ocean, flexing muscle in unmistakable fashion.

The Lexington herself is 95,000 tons of diplomacy through superior firepower, nearly five acres of flight deck space running full tilt all the time. HELICOPTERS buzzing between the ships, a constant churn of motion and visceral power.

EXT. NOTHING BUT SKY - DAY

As one of the F-18s in question SLIDES INTO VIEW -- the graceful, almost delicate lance of its nose giving way to the COCKPIT, the pilot inside illuminated by the ORANGE GLOW of instruments. Two enormous air intakes, twin tailbooms canted outwards for stability, giant EXHAUST PORTS glowing orange.

It's about as close to Star Wars as you can get on this planet, a $50 million machine built to fly faster and harder than anything else in the sky. Driven by --

INT. F-18 COCKPIT - DAY

PILAR "MAYTAG" ROBLES, 27, rapturous at having just BUZZED THE RIVAL SQUADRON'S GAME on the deck. She keys her UHF mike to talk to the F-18 glued to her WING, ten feet away --

PILAR
Ho! You see that, Shepherd? Forty feet off the deck, Bambi about bricked in his pants.

SHEPHERD
(radio, filtered)
I saw it. You see that helo we about clipped back there?

PILAR
Shake and bake, baby! Woke their asses up.

SHEPHERD
Yeah. Think that maybe might've been Admiral Merrick's bird.

Pilar quiet for a beat. Then --

PILAR
I don't think so. They'd've squawked two-four-niner --

A VOICE comes over the UHF RADIO -- RED CROWN, callsign for the LEXINGTON herself, addressing them both. All business --

RED CROWN (O.S.)
BLACK ANGEL ONE-ONE-TWO, RECALL. SHEPHERD AND MAYTAG, GET YOUR HORNETS ON THE DECK RIGHT NOW.

Oh, shit. She glances over at SHEPHERD'S FIGURE in his own cockpit. Sees him SHRUG -- told you.

PILAR
(into COM)
ROGER ONE-ONE-TWO.
(beat)
RED CROWN -- HOW MUCH TROUBLE ARE WE IN?

RED CROWN (O.S.)
ANOTHER PASS LIKE THAT, WE'RE AUTHORIZED TO PUT A SAM UP BOTH YOUR ASSES.

SHEPHERD
Definitely Merrick's helo. Breaking right --

They RIP BACK ON THE THROTTLE and their F-18s WHIP SIDEWAYS on a dime at 700 mph, leaving the air in their wake violated and confused by the disturbance.

EXT. FLIGHT DECK - DAY

Back on deck, the ROTOR WASH from Merrick's chopper PEELS THE BASKETBALL OUT OF THE NET -- sends it BOUNCING down along the deck in the artificial windstorm -- AVIATORS SCRAMBLING to chase it down before --

THE BALL CAREENS OVER THE SIDE of the Lex, churned under the screws. General DISAPPOINTMENT of the ballers, thus denied their game. At the edge of the game, find --

CAPTAIN RANDALL "STICK" HENLEY, CO (Commanding Officer) of the Lexington, good-looking 40s, seen it all, a born leader.

HENLEY
And that is game over, gentlemen.

BAMBI
Aw, come on, Cap! This a tiebreaker --

HENLEY
Requisitioned 5 balls for this cruise, Bambi. Down to three and we hadn't even got to Japan yet.

BALLER 1
Got two more for you right here, Bambi. Come and get 'em.

BAMBI
Watch I don't take you up on it.

As the AVIATORS continue breaking balls, WHIP AROUND, following Henley's eyes TO FIND --

REAR ADMIRAL CAL MERRICK, 50s -- disembarked from his chopper and moving hard towards Henley, who snaps him a smart salute. Merrick whips one back, dismissive -- friendly demeanor masking an unpredictable temper --

MERRICK
The hell kind of cruise are we running here, Captain Henley?

HENLEY
Admiral Merrick. Little deck ball, sir. Keep everybody loose --

MERRICK
Loose. We giving out spa treatments too, get everybody nice and relaxed?

HENLEY
Told me the mission is morale, get this ship back on track. Got DV embarks coming out from Seoul --

MERRICK
DV embarks are canceled. No visitors today. Get your Hornets on deck and get flight ops up.

HENLEY
Right away, sir.
(beat)
Anything else, Admiral?

MERRICK
You're aware of the situation you've got here, Stick.

HENLEY
Two months since I took command of this ship, I've managed to pick up a thing or two along the way.

MERRICK
Lexington's last tour was a disgrace to the Navy. Edgars was a piss-poor CO, and this crew has suffered for his excesses. They need a leader now to take on the mess, put the ship to right again. New sheriff in town.

HENLEY
Yes sir.

MERRICK
Not gonna lie, Stick -- you were not my choice for the job. No offense, you are amazing at what you do. But, way I see it, you're an aviator, not a ship's captain.

Henley with no response, the tight false grin on his face says it all -- these two dogs have a history of clashing, and are never going to play well together.

Then Merrick slips back into good-guy mode. Claps Henley on the shoulder, no harm done --

MERRICK (CONT'D)
Hell, Captain. Maybe you can change my mind. Meantime, you can show your new aviator around.

Merrick steps aside to reveal -- DEREK "VANDAL" FREHLEY, 25, pretty sure he's the hottest thing ever to kick in afterburners. Hell, he just might be -- definitely got the charm and the looks. Snaps a crisp salute to Henley.

VANDAL
Frehley, sir. Callsign's Vandal. Pleasure to meet you, Captain.

Henley visibly BRISTLES at the sight of Vandal. Returns the salute with minimal commitment.

HENLEY
I know who you are, Vandal.

Henley shoots Merrick a look -- "are you fucking kidding me?" Merrick claps Henley on the shoulder, moves on.

MERRICK
Let's get it done, Captain.

Leaving him there with Vandal. Vandal smiles.

INT. USS LEXINGTON - JR. OFFICER STATEROOM - DAY

Tight on two FIGURES -- kissing hard, working their way onward from there. TIGHT QUARTERS, tiny stateroom used by junior officers, all hard surfaces and no comforts of home, now occupied by SARAH CURTIS (23) and JOAQUIN TATE (20).

Sarah is startlingly beautiful even in her Navy blues, beauty-queen-gone-military; Joaquin is black, urban, Muslim.

A RED-SHIRT ORDY, the guys who load bombs and missiles on planes. Tearing at one another's uniforms, hot, DRIVEN --

SARAH
(breathless)
-- Oh God, this is bad --

JOAQUIN
All your bunkies're up in CVIC right now, stateroom is all ours --

SARAH
No, this is serious like court-martial stuff, I can't do this --

JOAQUIN
Look to me like you're already doing it, girl.

SARAH
I'm your superior officer, you can't call me "girl".

JOAQUIN
Call you "Ensign", that ain't sexy. Callin' you "girl" is. Watch now --

He's just about got her blouse unbuttoned, up by the door as--

A KNOCK, perfunctory and sharp raps -- then the door SWINGS OPEN, slamming into them both. Joaquin JAMS IT SHUT --

JOAQUIN (CONT'D)
Oh, hell --

The Knocker is PETTY OFFICER DONNA BLUTH, 26, junior to Sarah in rank, unbeautiful and severe --

SARAH
Just a minute!

BLUTH
Commander Sykes needs you, ma'am. Says now.

She FORCES THE DOOR OPEN, pins JOAQUIN behind it, hidden for the moment. Bluth steps in as Sarah finishes buttoning --

SARAH
(crimson)
Petty Officer Bluth.

Bluth hands her a WRITTEN COMMUNIQUE. Sarah looks at it.

BLUTH
You're to read and respond.

SARAH
Got it. Thank you. Dismissed.

Bluth lingers a half-beat, then turns to go. On her way --

BLUTH
Missed a button, ma'am.

Sarah fixes it, closes the door.

JOAQUIN
Oh hell, you are in it now, girl.

SARAH
Shut up. I can't...

She trails off, reading. Her face goes WHITE at the words --

SARAH (CONT'D)
Oh my God...

JOAQUIN
What?

But she's in motion, intense --

SARAH
I have to go.

JOAQUIN
I got it. Secrets. All right.

She turns, kisses him deeply one last time. Then pulls back, looks him in the eye.

SARAH
Joaquin, listen -- you're thinking of making a call home? Do it now, don't wait.
(turns to go)
You may not get another chance.

She leaves him that way, registering her intensity --

INT. USS LEXINGTON - DAY

Downstairs, THE INNER HIVE of the Big Lex. TIGHT CORRIDORS, SAILORS moving sidelong to let one another pass. Sarah moves through in a hurry, taking a LADDER up to the next level --

SARAH
Make a hole! Coming through!

Moving through, close to a run. On her way up to --

INT. HANGAR BAY - DAY

An absolutely enormous room full of FIGHTER PLANES, HELICOPTERS and RADAR PLANES... CONTROLLED CHAOS, everything moving at once, the intricate ballet of manpower and machinery -- an absurdly dangerous work environment. SEE IT ALL HAPPEN, moving through with Henley and Vandal --

VANDAL
Told ‘em I wanted on the Lexington, like my dad. Used to be the greatest ship in the Navy...

HENLEY
Still is the greatest ship in the Navy. Just needs a little nudge, get her back on course.

VANDAL
Why they brought you on, sir? Put a fighter ace in the drivers’ seat.

HENLEY
That’s the idea.

Hear PLANES SMASHING INTO THE DECK, caught by the guidewires in CONTROLLED CRASHES -- every time it happens, the WHOLE SHIP SHAKES from the IMPACT on the deck above. Vandal and Henley joined by --

ALLISON BURKE, 33, attractive but wrapped tight -- senior NCIS INVESTIGATOR, responsible for investigating all crime aboard. She’s a civilian, so don’t salute her -- but she holds your career and your freedom in her hand, so don’t fuck with her either. Walking and talking --

BURKE
Captain Henley.

HENLEY
Allison.

BURKE
Who’s this?

VANDAL
I’m Vandal, ma’am.

BURKE
“Vandal?”

VANDAL
It’s my callsign, ma’am.

BURKE
(to Henley)
So shiny. Like he’s right out of the box.

HENLEY
(to Vandal)
Burke is our resident NCIS Special Agent. Screw up enough, you’ll be hearing from her.
(to Burke)
What can I do for NCIS today?

BURKE
You're not gonna love this.

HENLEY
Allison --

BURKE
Okay. Special Investigative Unit is commencing a full inquiry into the misfired ordnance Monday at 0800. Official, no more delays.

HENLEY
They really think we got Ordys intentionally screwing up weapons?

BURKE
Missiles aren't breaking on their own, Stick. They say somebody's tampering with laser guidance systems on JDAMs and Sidewinders.

VANDAL
(breaking in)
Wait. You're saying, sabotage?

Burke and Henley look at him.

VANDAL (CONT'D)
Sorry. Just, what I heard --

BURKE
(forgetting him)
The two Ordys from 187, Kincaid and Tate, are in the hotseat. I'll brief you if you need to come.

Henley sighs.

HENLEY
Could've retired, be driving the Vegas run for Southwest Airlines. Or teach school, maybe...

BURKE
You'd never make it. Flat top is where you belong, Stick. Besides, what would I do without you?

HENLEY
Tell my wife that.

The TINIEST HINT OF REACTION as Allison considers this. SARAH moves up on them all --

SARAH
Captain, sir.

HENLEY
Any possibility this is good news?

She sees VANDAL eyeing her. Grins that devil grin, inviting.

SARAH
(eyes on Vandal)
None whatsoever, sir. But you need to hear it.

Henley turns to Vandal, snaps him out of eyeballing Sarah --

HENLEY
Your carrier quals are up to date?

VANDAL
Rock solid, sir.

HENLEY
Find the squadron room, get yourself squared away. May be getting your feet wet right off.

Vandal salutes. As he moves off --

BURKE
He's a lively one.

HENLEY
Kid's on deck ten minutes, already he's a pain in my ass. Thinking he's Maverick and Iceman all rolled up in a tamale.

BURKE
Ah, so there's history.

HENLEY
Turned down his application out of flight school -- Merrick went over my head, jammed him into 187 squadron.

BURKE
Man's got it in for you, Stick.

HENLEY
Tell me something I don't know.

SARAH
Sir --

BURKE
(to Henley)
I'll see you later?

He nods. She leaves. Sarah follows Henley, onto --

INT. THE BRIDGE - DAY

THE BRIDGE of the USS Lexington -- SIX STORIES UP over the deck, the whole great OCEAN bearing the Strike Group visible out GIANT WINDOWS all around, a HIVE of uniformed sailors of all ranks driving this city at sea.

PLANES LANDING out the windows right in front of us, the NEXUS of this behemoth war machine.

ND SAILOR
Captain on the Bridge!

All present SNAP TO, return to working. Admiral Merrick is already here, looking out over flight operations.

HENLEY
Talk to me, people. What are we looking at.

Henley's Executive Officer (XO), LT. COMMANDER RIEBERT, 30s, all business all the time --

RIEBERT
Sir, we are currently two hundred miles off the North Korean coast. Satellites have picked up a buildup of troops and armament along the DMZ that can only be characterized as colossal. Fifty minutes ago, they started shelling Yeonpyeong Island and haven't let up since.

HENLEY
Usual North Korea craziness, or is this an actual thing?

RIEBERT
Most aggressive troop buildup in decades; doesn't look like they're playing games. Ensign Curtis?

All eyes go to SARAH, feeling small amongst all the brass. She clears her throat, finding her voice --

SARAH
Sir, they're claiming it's their right to move forces into South Korea and take back areas they ceded sixty years ago. Difference is this time, they're calling us out personally. Intelligence got a communique saying they've drawn what they're calling a "Red Line in the Sea." Say if the Lexington Strike Group crosses it to defend South Korea -- we'll be destroyed.

HENLEY
Well. They're feeling froggy, let 'em jump, see how it turns out for them.

SARAH
There's more. According to CVIC, North Korea may have procured a nuclear electromagnetic pulse warhead from China. If the Strike Group makes any move to attack or defend, they're threatening to detonate it over the Lexington.

RIEBERT
EMP hit on the carrier would kill every electronic circuit on the ship, every plane. Leave us blind and deaf, sitting ducks.

HENLEY
We seriously believe these clowns got EMP?

MERRICK
What we don't know about North Korea's arsenal? Just about fit in Shea Stadium.

HENLEY
Anything else?

SARAH
Transmission from Pyongyang, intended for us to hear. Korean's a little picturesque, but...

HENLEY
What did they say?

SARAH
"Comrades, the great time is at hand.
(MORE)

SARAH (CONT'D)
Prepare to throw yourselves against the imperialist warmongers off our shores. Once we blind them with the Great Light, we will cut them down like summer flies."

Quiet as everybody considers this.

MERRICK
Nearest sister strike group is a thousand miles away at Pearl, so this is our ball. Department of Defense wants to downplay the threat, so this stays top-secret for now. No more calls on or off the ship, no unauthorized communications. No leaks.

All eyes on Henley --

RIEBERT
What are your orders, Captain?

HENLEY
Want to draw some red line on a map, they gotta know it cuts both ways. They're calling us out -- let's see how serious they are.
(to Ship's Pilot)
Turn us thirty degrees to port, tack to the grid just east of the line, and get ready for a fight.
(beat, serious)
This is what they pay us to do, shipmates. Let's get to it.

Off the Bridge Crew of the Lexington, everybody knowing this is the real deal -- getting down to business...

END TEASER

ACT ONE

EXT. FLIGHT DECK - DAY

ROAR! -- Shepherd's twenty-ton F/A-18 drops at 150 mph onto the flight deck, SMASHING DOWN onto an area the size of a 7-11 parking lot. A CONTROLLED CRASH -- SPARKS, shearing metal-on-metal as the tailhook snags the 3 wire and the bird SLAMS to a full stop. It's suicidal, absolutely insane -- and in this world, completely routine.

INT. PILAR'S F-18 - DAY

Pilar vectoring in to land on the tiny flight deck heaving in the Sea of Japan -- toughest maneuver in aviation, deadly. Pilar's focus laser-sharp as she hones her approach with the LANDING SIGNAL OFFICER (LSO) on deck guiding her in--

LSO (O.S.)
ONE-ONE-TWO, YOU ARE UP AND ON THE GLIDE PATH. CALL YOUR NEEDLES.

PILAR
Needles, right and centered.

LSO (O.S.)
INCREASE YOUR RATE OF DESCENT, CALL THE BALL.

PILAR
One-One-Two, ball.

As she angles the plane down, just above stall speed, trying to match the pitching deck with her approach --

SMASHES into the deck, the TAILHOOK CATCHING THE WIRE and SLAMMING her plane to a dead stop. Another successful controlled crash, she's already on her way out, onto --

EXT. FLIGHT DECK - DAY

Find our three Ordys -- JAMES, THOMAS and JOAQUIN, all about 19 or 20, decked out in their red shirts and "cranial" headgear and eyewear, loading MISSILES on another F-18. We'll meet them more formally in a moment, but for now --

JAMES can't help but stare at Pilar as she climbs out of her F-18 and onto the deck. Catches her eye, WAVES to her. She drops a wave back, keeps going. He STARES after her.

WHACK! Joaquin smacks him hard across the back of the head, the cranial catching the impact. He bristles, looks at Joaquin like "what the actual fuck, man?" --

JOAQUIN
Got your eyes on the wrong boom, Kincaid. Focus on the work, boy.

James returns to his work, casting a longing glance after Pilar as she vanishes, into --

INT. HANGAR BAY - DAY

PILAR joined by SHEPHERD, just out of their planes, heading in to meet their fate. Pilar has a heat coming off her beyond the Naval Aviator swagger. BORN FOR THIS, a natural overachiever -- athletic, supple, graceful.

Shepherd's a few years older, not yet grizzled but clearly a veteran. She hews close to him as they cross the BUSTLING HANGAR, their conversation kept low --

SHEPHERD
Warned you it was a bad idea to buzz the deck.

PILAR
You could've ordered me not to.

SHEPHERD
I did order you not to. And yet here we are.

PILAR
(then)
How bad you think it's gonna be?

Shepherd shoots her a look as they leave frame. Hear --

QUAID (O.S.)
(prelap)
Are you two idiots out of your goddamn minds, buzzing my deck?

INT. VFA-187 SQUADRON ROOM - DAY

Find Pilar and Shepherd at attention before FRANK QUAID'S desk. Air Wing Commander (CAG) on the Lexington -- tough, empowered, 36 --

PILAR
Two-oh-seven squadron's been uppity since Pearl, sir. Had to be done.

QUAID
This ain't about breaking 207's balls, Maytag.
(MORE)

QUAID (CONT'D)
You put your admiral's helicopter in your jet wash, kicked him around like he was in a washing machine.

PILAR
Okay, that wasn't awesome...

QUAID
About to take this ship into a wartime evolution, you wanna pick right now to play games?

Pilar and Shepherd, nothing to say at the mention of combat --

QUAID (CONT'D)
Got your attention now? Headed into a fight, I hope so.

A KNOCK at the door mercifully interrupts --

QUAID (CONT'D)
Enter.

VANDAL pokes his head in, sees what's going on.

VANDAL
Bad time?

QUAID
New fish. Get in here.

Vandal enters, stands next to Shepherd and Pilar.

QUAID (CONT'D)
Got yourself squared away, Vandal? Find your berth, put up all your pictures, all that?

VANDAL
I did.

QUAID
Good. Here it is: Shepherd, Maytag-- I'm splitting you two up.

PILAR
Wait, what?

QUAID
Maytag, meet your new wingman.

He indicates VANDAL, who turns, flashing that devil grin -- puts a hand out to Pilar.

VANDAL
Vandal. I stick pretty tight, hope you can handle it.

She ignores the hand, back at Quaid --

PILAR
You have got to be kidding me.

QUAID
Rest assured, Maytag -- I am not.

PILAR
Barely got his feet wet. We're headed into live fire, I have to babysit the newbie?

QUAID
Look at it as a learning opportunity for you both.

PILAR
Can we just --

QUAID
No. Dismissed. You too, Vandal. Shepherd, you stay.

Vandal heads for the door. Pilar lingers -- a look from Quaid, "go." She follows, still pissed. Once they're gone --

SHEPHERD
Little hard on the nugget, maybe?

QUAID
Which one?

SHEPHERD
Going into action. Sure Pilar's ready to fly point?

Beat. Quaid looks hard at Shepherd.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)
What. Why the look?

QUAID
Anything I need to know about, you and Maytag?

SHEPHERD
Oh, come on, Frank --

QUAID
NCIS has knives out for this ship, Air Wing included. Something catches their radar, they will make an example.

SHEPHERD
There's nothing. Nobody here's that kind of stupid. Okay?

Quaid holds his eyes, not entirely buying it. Off this--

INT. CORRIDOR - DAY

Pilar moving down the hallway, Vandal hurrying to catch up.

VANDAL
Robles, wait up. Got off on the wrong foot, here --

PILAR
Are you gonna be a problem?

VANDAL
Excuse me?

PILAR
Am I gonna have to deal with a lot of crap from you, thinking you're the hottest thing ever strapped an F-18 to his ass?

VANDAL
You might have to deal with some of that, yeah.

Pilar shakes her head, keeps moving.

VANDAL (CONT'D)
Look, I gotta fly as your Dash-2, I need to know you got ice in your veins. Because I damn sure do.

PILAR
You don't need to worry about me, Vandal. You just sit on my wing and watch my six. Can you do that?

VANDAL
I can do that, yes ma'am.
(moving on)
Got something in your teeth, by the way.

After he goes, hating herself for it -- she feels around her teeth with her tongue. Liar. Shepherd draws up behind --

PILAR
Cocky little no-load feet-dry peckerwood...

SHEPHERD
You got nothing to prove to him. Just fly your bird and let the nugget make his own mistakes.

The look she gives him -- very definitely SOMETHING GOING ON HERE. Controlled, bitten back -- but DANGEROUS nonetheless.

PILAR
(confidential)
See you later?

SHEPHERD
You asking or telling?

PILAR
Telling. I'm gonna see you later.

An ND SAILOR moves down the passageway between them. They part, playing it cool until he passes. Then --

SHEPHERD
Teach you to buzz the deck.

PILAR
I would love to see you try.

She brushes his arm, the closest thing to anything like sex permitted -- a forbidden THRILL in this restricted environment, she SHUDDERS with it. He grins, moves on, leaving her that way. Off this --

CMC BOWMAN (O.S.)
(prelap)
Sit down, Kincaid.

INT. COMMAND MASTER CHIEF'S OFFICE - DAY

James -- the ORDY we saw staring at Pilar earlier -- in a hard chair across from Command Master Chief DONALD "BUMMIN'" BOWMAN -- mid-40s, flagstone hard, the DIRECT BRIDGE between Upstairs and Downstairs on the ship -- senior enlisted man, responsible for every non-officer on board.

BOWMAN
They're gunning for you, son. And I want to help you. I do.

JAMES
Chief -- you got to know, whatever it is they're saying is going on, it ain't me doing it.

BOWMAN
Nine documented cases of ordnance failing to deploy properly in theater at Afghanistan. That's nine incidents of our soldiers on the ground in danger. Angels on their shoulders ain't worth a damn if the bombs don't work.

JAMES
You know me, Chief. Think I'm gonna dick around with my weapons load, put a soldier in harm's way?

BOWMAN
Doesn't matter what I think, shipmate. Matters is what's in your NCIS jacket, all that paperwork they love. They pin a sabotage charge on you? Spend the rest of your life buried under a stockade, they be pumping down sunshine to your dead ass.

James shakes his head --

JAMES
Why is it everybody think it's me, pulling this crap?

BOWMAN
Ain't any accidents out here, Kincaid, you know that. Somebody always accountable.
(then)
Now I gotta ask you, because it's my job to do it. Are you good to go, shipmate? Can I put you on the line today, let you do your job?

Off James, stewing in the face of the question --

SHEPHERD (V.O.)
(prelap)
Gonna be earning our hazard pay today, One-Eight-Seven. The ride we all stood in line for, here.

Shepherd's VOICE CONTINUES OVER as we go into --

INT. VFA-187 SQUADRON READY ROOM - DAY

-- where Shepherd is briefing the PILOTS, suited up, chewing gum, eyes on the board -- the EDGE they all have --

SHEPHERD
Some of you've seen action already, some of you this is gonna be new. North Korean fighters'll try and shake us up the old fashioned way. Airborne Combat Maneuvering, chance to dust off our dogfight skills.

VANDAL looking at Pilar, who's watching Shepherd, RAPT. Feeling the look, she GLANCES OVER, meets his eyes -- he HOLDS THEM, doesn't look away.

SHEPHERD (CONT'D)
You will be flying sorties right at the edge of their Red Line. Which means you need to be aware of your positions at all times -- stray into disputed airspace, we got an international incident. Let's not end up watching ourselves on Fox News because we screwed up.
(serious)
Telling you we need to be careful out there is an understatement. Fly hard, fly aggressive, but watch your six and be ready for anything.

MUSIC UP: AC/DC, "HELL'S BELLS," fuck yeah. Takes us to --

EXT. FLIGHT DECK - DAY

The BUSINESS of arming and fueling and checking these $50 million dollar machines played out by a HOST of air crew --

The various CREWS responsible for the all-important JETS and their well-being -- red-shirted ORDYS loading bombs and missiles; purple-shirted "GRAPES" refueling; Yellow-shirted "SHOOTERS" catapulting these machines into the air. Clockwork, the most dangerous jobs on the planet --

CLOSER as we find PILAR'S F-18, her name and callsign stenciled below the cockpit seal.

ORDYS, including JAMES -- finish up hand-loading SIDEWINDER MISSILES on the wingtips -- bolting them, checking their fit. JAMES hand-signalling to the others -- Done, move on. As --

PILAR hurries towards her plane, to meet --

WORLEY, barely 20, her PLANE CAPTAIN. Captain in name only, he's the enlisted Airman entirely responsible for her bird on deck -- she breaks it, he fixes it -- ready for her pre-flight. SHOUTING over the jet noise --

WORLEY
She's fed and watered. Not gonna bang her up, are you?

PILAR
When have I ever?

WORLEY
Only every time you trap.

PILAR
Kick the tires and light the fires, Worley. I want first off the deck.

WORLEY
She's all yours, ma'am.

Pilar HURRIES through her WALK-AROUND of her jet, examining hydraulics, weapons attachments, anything that can go wrong, last chance to catch it. But she's DISTRACTED, seeing --

VANDAL, suited up, headed for his own Hornet. PILAR shakes her head, abandons her preflight --

PILAR
She's good, Worley. Let's fly.

She climbs up the ladder into her bird's cockpit. Determined to beat Vandal into the sky --

TAXIS OFF, locking her nose wheel in the CATAPULT SLOT --

INT. PILAR'S F-18 - DAY

AIR BOSS (O.S.)
BLACK ANGEL ONE-ONE-TWO, YOU ARE GO FOR CAT SHOT.

Pilar salutes the deck, tightens up in anticipation as she's--

CATAPULTED -- slamming her back in the seat, 0-120 mph in two seconds, ROCKETING skyward with unbelievable force.

PILAR
ONE-ONE-TWO, UP FOR CHECKS.

RED CROWN (V.O.)
BLACK ANGEL ONE-ONE-TWO, SWEET AND SWEET, CLEAR TO SWITCH.

Before she dons her O2 mask, you can SEE IT ON PILAR'S FACE -- the sheer JOY of flying at this velocity, it's like a drug. Then -- she puts on the mask and gets down to business --

EXT. FLIGHT DECK - DAY

VARIOUS SHOTS of F-18s BEING LAUNCHED -- Shepherd, Vandal, Thumper, Fungus, VFA-187 squadron going airborne hot. Forming up over the assembled STRIKE GROUP.

HENLEY (O.S.)
Strike Group crosses 38th parallel, we get frosty and we stay that way.

INT. BRIDGE - DAY

Merrick and Henley oversee from the Bridge windows. The BRIDGE CREW serious, eyes on the horizon, knowing what's out there could kill them one and all. THIRTY or so sailors and air crew, FOCUSED on their various jobs with laser intensity.

HENLEY
We're going to go sit right on that line, probe their airspace and see if they really want to fight. They make a move on us, come anywhere NEAR our carrier, we will strike.

Merrick sidles up to Henley at the helm. Lingers there.

MERRICK
You feel that, Henley? You feel the weight of it?

HENLEY
Yes sir. I do.

RIEBERT
Sirs, we got eyes and ears on everything within a thousand miles. Missile countermeasures fully operational. We're ready.

QUAID
First Hornets are approaching the line now.

HENLEY
All right. Here we go.

INT. PILAR'S F-18 - DAY

Pilar watches off her wing as VANDAL'S PLANE joins her, pinning itself there in formation.

PILAR
Nice of you to join us, Vandal. Hope you paid attention in flight school.

VANDAL
Sure, totally. Hey, what do all these buttons and lights do?

PILAR
Funny. Try and stick close --

She PEELS LEFT in a tight diving turn, arcing earthward with shocking speed. He's RIGHT THERE WITH HER, on her wing, not gonna be outdone -- As aerial jockeying continues, we hear--

The planes flatten out at the bottom of their arc, just off the waterline, recovering from the brutal maneuver. Pilar looks off her shoulder for Vandal --

PILAR (CONT'D)
Still with me?

In response, his F-18 SHRIEKS into position just over her, blotting out the sun.

VANDAL
Tighter angle on the curve, came in a little ahead...

PILAR
You're my wingman, Vandal. That's not my wing.

He snuggles into position, ten feet off her wing. She shakes her head, Jesus. Taking us to --

INT. THE BRIDGE - DAY

Henley overseeing, Merrick nearby. A RADAR OPERATOR speaks up, breaking in --

RADAR OPERATOR
Sir, we got multiple bogeys incoming from the from the Korean peninsula. Closing at 900 knots, hundred-twenty miles out.

Henley and Merrick look at each other.

HENLEY
Send 187 to enforce the engagement line, hundred miles out. Make it clear: do not shoot unless that line is violated.

INT. PILAR'S F-18 - DAY

PILAR
RED CROWN, THIS IS ONE-TWELVE, WE ARE ON STATION.
(to Vandal)
This is it, Vandal. They come any closer, we cut 'em down.

SHEPHERD (O.S.)
CONTACT, MAYTAG. FOUR BOGEYS. THIRTY MILES, CLOSING.

Pilar's POV -- FOUR NORTH KOREAN MIG-21S close to the deck.

PILAR
TALLY HO. FOUR MIGS, ONE-O'CLOCK.

The MiGs suddenly SPLIT -- TWO BREAKING HARD RIGHT, the others left. Enveloping.

VANDAL
Splitting up. What are they up to?

Shepherd's voice over the com --

SHEPHERD (O.S.)
MAYTAG, VANDAL, YOU'RE ON MIGS ONE AND TWO. THUMPER, YOU'RE WITH ME ON THE OTHERS. LET'S GO TO WORK.

Pilar WHIPS HER PLANE AROUND to follow the southern-flying MiGs, Vandal right on her wing.

They drop in above and behind their two TARGET MIGS. The STAR OF NORTH KOREA prominent on the wings, the MiG-21s low-slung, malevolent, foreign against our familiar F-18s.

PILAR
I'm on Bogey One. Watch my six, Vandal.

VANDAL
Show these bitches what's what --

As she moves in, the BLIPBLIPBLIPBLIP tone SHRIEKS in her headset.

PILAR
What the --? I got a six strobe, MiG Two's trying for a lock on me --

The game changed, Pilar flying to shake the MISSILE LOCK on her plane, cutting back and forth along the MiG's sightline.

PILAR (CONT'D)
Vandal, get him off me!

VANDAL
Chill, Maytag. I got it, I got it--

The tone in her ear grows STEADY -- BEEEEEEEEEP --

PILAR
That's missile lock! He's locked on me, Vandal --

Suddenly Vandal's plane SHRIEKS BY IN BETWEEN PILAR'S F-18 and THE MIG -- a RIDICULOUS move, but it works -- the MiG yaws wildly in the ripple wash, losing RADAR LOCK ON PILAR.

SHEPHERD (O.S.)
KEEP YOUR HEADS. THEY'RE JUST MESSING WITH US, UNLIKELY TO SHOOT--

VANDAL
Hope they do. Say the word and we'll splash these pricks --

PILAR kicks rudder, whips the stick, screams into a tight turning roll and dives after him. Slams the throttle forward to ZONE 5 AFTERBURNER --

PILAR
I'm on MiG One now. See how he likes it --

Pulling hard, but the MiG veers just out of her sightline --

PILAR (CONT'D)
Can't get a lock on him --

VANDAL
Knife fight in a phone booth. I got a better angle, Maytag. Peel off and let me in.

She goes to engage missile lock on the MiG, her OWN TONE SOUNDING, BLIPBLIPBLIPBLIP -- Then, AN ALARM in her cockpit.

PILAR
Got a bad Sidewinder. Switching --

SHEPHERD (O.S.)
MAYTAG, BREAK LOCK AND JETTISON THAT MISSILE. I'M EIGHT HIGH ON VANDAL NOW, WE'RE RIGHT WITH YOU.

PILAR
I can still get lock on him --

SHEPHERD (O.S.)
BREAK OFF, I SAID. LET VANDAL GET THE MIG, YOU DUMP THAT SIDEWINDER.

VANDAL
Get out, Maytag, I got the shot!

PILAR
One more second --

Vandal doesn't wait -- VEERS HIS PLANE TIGHT NEXT TO HERS, forcing her out of position, jostling her ride.

PILAR (CONT'D)
Hey!

And then -- IT ALL HAPPENS SO FUCKING FAST --

EXT. PILAR'S F-18 - DAY

The missile TEARS LOOSE UNDER THE G-FORCE OF THE TURN -- SHREDS her wingtip, sending her into a WILD FLAT SPIN and whipping her out of pursuing the MiG.

PILAR
Oh sh--

Cut off as --

EXT. VANDAL'S F-18

A PIECE OF HER WING is SUCKED INTO THE AIR INTAKE of Vandal's F-18 -- Vandal's engine FLAMES OUT, sending his plane careening UP and SIDEWAYS -- directly into SHEPHERD'S TRAILING F-18.

BOTH PLANES EXPLODE -- the CHAOS of velocity and impact raining FLAMING DEBRIS seaward. Off the SHOCK of it --

THUMPER (O.S.)
SHEPHERD! BLACK ANGEL ONE-TEN, ACKNOWLEDGE! BLACK ANGEL ONE-OH-FOUR, ACKNOWLEDGE!

EXT. PILAR'S F-18 - DAY

She SCRAMBLES to control the spin. Drops her landing gear, slowing the spin, keeping it from corkscrewing out of control. Breathing hard, GRUNTING against the G-forces --

GETS THE PLANE BACK UNDER CONTROL, exhausted and beaten down by the process.

PILAR
WHO'S GOT EYES ON SHEPHERD AND VANDAL?

RED CROWN (V.O.)
ANYBODY SEE CHUTES?

THUMPER
NEGATIVE CHUTES, RED CROWN. IN THE CLAG, VISIBILITY ZERO.

RED CROWN (V.O.)
BLACK ANGEL ONE-TWELVE, WHAT IS YOUR STATUS?

PILAR
WING'S SHREDDED. AERODYNAMICS ARE TANGO UNIFORM, SHOT TO HELL --

RED CROWN (V.O.)
BRING HER HOME, ONE-TWELVE. YOU'RE NO GOOD UP THERE. THUMPER WILL REMAIN ON SCENE.

Pilar's face, desperate to stay, fighting to keep the plane in the air -- it's no use, she can't win -- whips her afflicted Hornet back towards the Lexington...

INT. THE BRIDGE - DAY

Tense and anxious as the word comes down. Riebert briefs him, Merrick and Quaid --

RIEBERT
We got two Hornets splashed in the Sea of Japan. Shepherd and Vandal.

HENLEY
Where are they?

RIEBERT
Unclear, sir. Right on the Red Line when they went down --

QUAID
Vandal popped a flare, he's in the drink, got Angels dispatched to get him now. No sign of Shepherd.

RIEBERT
Korean bogeys bugged out, headed back towards the mainland.
(MORE)

RIEBERT (CONT'D)
No sign of further escalation -- they're holding tight.

MERRICK
Waiting to see what we're gonna do. Like as not they'll claim we instigated the furball, rub our face in it for the world to see.

RIEBERT
What are your orders, sir?

Henley looks at Merrick. Merrick gives him nothing.

HENLEY
Get every Angel we have in the air looking for our guy. Do it now.

MERRICK
Watch your step, Captain. If he's down behind their Red Line, we violate our Rules of Engagement.

HENLEY
Gentlemen, let me be clear: I don't care if he crashed in downtown Pyongyang -- we are gonna do what we have to do to bring back our man. Anybody got a problem with that?

The question directed at Merrick.

MERRICK
Your bridge, Captain.

Merrick turns to leave the bridge. At the door --

MERRICK (CONT'D)
But Stick -- I'd think about how much you want to go down in history as the rookie CVN skipper who kicked off a war.

Merrick leaves him with that. As we go --

EXT. HIGH ABOVE THE LEXINGTON STRIKE GROUP

As Strike Group Lexington heaves sharply as one body to port, in PERFECT FORMATION to search for their missing man...

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

INT. SICK BAY - DAY

VANDAL on a gurney getting patched up in the wake of his ejection. He looks banged up but more or less okay.

Flanked by Quaid and LT. COMMANDER SCAPEROTTA, the Flight Surgeon -- female, 30s, borderline hostile bedside manner, beautiful and formidable. Vandal FLIRTING shamelessly with her as PILAR lingers near the door, waiting on them --

SCAPEROTTA
Don't move.

VANDAL
You got a velvet touch, doc. It's a beautiful thi -- ow! Jesus --

SCAPEROTTA
Told you, don't move.

QUAID
You see if Shepherd punched out?

VANDAL
Negative, sir. Blacked out when I ejected. Came to at the water.

SCAPEROTTA
We can work on that shoulder, but otherwise you're fit for duty. Pretty remarkable, considering.

VANDAL
Seriously, doc, what do you do when you're not healing? I gotta know.

Unable to hide the half-smile --

SCAPEROTTA
Don't make me break your heart, nugget.

Vandal watches her go. Pilar moves in -- you can SEE THE DAMAGE done from the crash -- it's hit her on a visceral level, a mix of fury and fear --

PILAR
Nice you can be so flip, skipper bobbing around the Sea of Japan --

QUAID
Easy, Maytag.

PILAR
I had lock on that MiG, you slide in between for your own shot?

VANDAL
I had the better angle.

PILAR
(to Quaid)
Sir, I need to get back up there. One-twelve's banged up, but I'll take anything we got.

QUAID
Negative, Maytag. Search is under control. You'll be debriefed when we're done here.

Pilar can't bear to let it go. Then, all eyes on her, she surrenders, turns and exits.

INT. HANGAR BAY - DAY

A RIOT of activity with the ship, shuttling HELICOPTERS and PLANES up to the deck for the search-and-rescue operations.

FIND James, Joaquin and THOMAS (20), the eternal peacemaker, offloading Pilar's damaged F-18, checking out the SHREDDED WING, Joaquin shaking his head --

JAMES
What do you want me to say, man?

JOAQUIN
Once again -- it's <u>our</u> heater goes tits-up, cause all this mess --

JAMES
Right, 'cause missiles don't ever break on their own, Joaquin --

JOAQUIN
You seriously gonna lay this on the machine? Middle of a full-on NCIS fustercluck, you like, "missiles fail, yo..."

JAMES
Sick of getting blamed for this. Checks up and down the line -- if the shit's breaking, then it was messed up to begin with.

THOMAS
Easy, James. Nobody's saying --

JAMES
Everybody's saying, Thomas. Get pulled in to Master Chief, it's Kincaid, you sure you didn't miss something? Lives depending on you, Kincaid, you sure you got this?

JOAQUIN
Are you?

James wheels on Joaquin, hot. Thomas intercedes.

THOMAS
Hey, man. Come on --

JOAQUIN
I got my rating, James. Worked for it, studied, got the promotion. What that means is, now I got to watch your ass and mine. You screw up now, it's on me.

JAMES
Saying you already made up your mind, I screwed up.

JOAQUIN
Ain't nothing ever your fault, is it? Mister Clean.

THOMAS
Man, come on. Everybody knows James got a thing for Maytag, why would he mess her up like that?

JAMES
Thomas, don't help, all right?

JOAQUIN
Look, you know I got your six, bro, I always have. But if this is on us, I need to know now.

James spits on the deck. Up in Joaquin's face --

JAMES
Tell you what. Next sonofabitch comes down here saying ordnance ain't going off and it's my fault? Don't care who he is, I'm gonna push in his goddamn teeth for him.

He stalks off, pissed. Thomas shoots Joaquin a worried look.

INT. THE BRIDGE - DAY

Henley with Riebert --

RIEBERT
Searched all grids east of the Hwanghaenam archipelago. Push it any farther, we're over the line.

HENLEY
Dammit, Riebert, that's where he is. You and I both know it.

RIEBERT
Yes sir. I'd agree.

HENLEY
Water's fifty degrees. He's been out there two hours in it. We don't find him in the next two, he's done. Cold don't kill him, the sharks will.

RIEBERT
Yes sir. Nonetheless --

SHIP'S WATCH
Admiral on the Bridge!

HENLEY
(under his breath)
Jesus.

Merrick moves in, adjusting his coat.

MERRICK
Need a word, Henley.

RIEBERT
(excusing himself)
Sir.

Riebert moves off. Merrick and Henley --

HENLEY
Anything?

MERRICK
North Korea's all of a sudden playing victim, saying we picked a fight and they shot down our F-18s.
(MORE)

MERRICK (CONT'D)
Stopped their shelling and mobilizing while the U.N. goes flaccid on us, saying cease our “aggressive operations.”

Henley’s jaw goes tight. Merrick seeing it --

HENLEY
Navy I joined doesn’t leave its own out in the water, sir.

MERRICK
You’re not flying an F-14 anymore, Captain. This is what command looks like. It’s making hard decisions with shitty options. You think you can handle that?

Henley hates it. Nods anyway.

MERRICK (CONT’D)
Keep the search up within the grids, but stay out of disputed waters. It’s an order, Stick.

Merrick exits, leaving Henley staring out over the open sea.

INT. READY ROOM - DAY

Pilar finishes up in front of her locker, slams it shut. Looks over at SHEPHERD’S LOCKER nearby. After a beat, she goes to it -- does the combination from memory, OPENS IT --

Starts going through the few personal items in his locker. A PHOTO -- Pilar and Shepherd on leave, Hawaiian shirt on him, bikini top and shorts on her -- PORT OF CALL shot, grinning, goofy, inelegantly candid. She looks at it a long time.

Suddenly OVERCOME -- fighting hard against tears she’s not permitted to shed, her head against the cold metal.

VANDAL enters, the door banging shut in his wake. She jumps at the sound. Puts the picture back, slams the locker shut.

VANDAL
Isn’t that Shepherd’s locker?

PILAR
(pulling it together)
Ever consider maybe minding your own business, Vandal?

As Vandal passes her, heads to his own locker --

VANDAL
Look, he probably punched out. It happened pretty fast --

PILAR
It happened because you were too close, trying to get an angle on that MiG.

VANDAL
I did have the angle on that MiG. You didn't want to lose position.
(then)
Anyway, none of that would've happened if your heater'd worked in the first place.

Pilar says nothing. Not engaging. He considers, then --

VANDAL (CONT'D)
My dad flew F-4s off the Forrestal. Vietnam. Nobody wanted to fight by the time he was up, this is like '73, everybody's sick of the war. Sailors start throwing wrenches in the works, get their deployments reduced, get 'em out of action. Had these symbols, kids willing to do the dirty work. A matchbook with one match turned down, or a sailor'd wear a coat without a pocket button? Let people know, he's willing to break something, keep from having to fight.

PILAR
Man, what are you saying --?

VANDAL
This ship's got a nasty reputation, Maytag. Call her "Halftime Lex" -- 'cause that's how often the bombs work. And the Ordy team, eye of the storm in all this -- same one loaded your Hornet, isn't it?

Pilar's thinking about it now. Vandal heads for the door, leaving her with it. A parting shot --

VANDAL (CONT'D)
Got to wonder -- how well do you know your Ordys, Maytag?

He leaves her there, a RUSH OF NOISE growing in her head --

INT. ORDY WING - DAY

Where the red-shirt Ordnance Department berths and hangs. ENLISTED QUARTERS, packed tight with young men and women living in tough conditions, doing ridiculously dangerous work. This is the Downstairs, rough-and-ready equivalent to the FIGHTER PILOT CULTURE upstairs.

Now PILAR steps into it, officer in an enlisted world. Ordys SNAP TO as she comes through, getting out of her way, eyeing her askance -- she doesn't BELONG HERE. She cuts through the red-shirted mass, to spy --

JAMES across the room. Heads over towards him --

THOMAS sees her, moves across to intercept her --

THOMAS
Lieutenant, everything good?

PILAR
Need to talk to James.

THOMAS
May not be the best time --

JAMES sees her coming, the heat coming off her. He moves to meet her in the middle of the bay. Ordys noticing, moving closer to see --

JAMES
Listen, Maytag --

PILAR
No, you listen. You the one loaded my Hornet, last hop?

JAMES
You know I was.

PILAR
Yeah, I know you were. What I need to know now is, I pull the trigger up there -- am I gonna get my boom?

JAMES
Long as I been on your crew, ever been a time you didn't?

PILAR
Not until today, all of a sudden I'm up there with my dick in my hand because a 'Winder won't fire.
(MORE)

PILAR (CONT'D)
Now we got a man in the water because of it --

Her anger boring into James, one more person who doesn't trust him. He shakes his head, eyes going hard --

JAMES
Maytag -- You come into my house, tell me your boyfriend took a ride on the splash comet -- that ride's on <u>you</u>, not me.

POW! -- Pilar PUNCHES HIM HARD IN THE MOUTH. He goes down, shocked, a split lip for good measure. Checks, sees red --

JAMES (CONT'D)
Jesus, Maytag --!

The place EXPLODES into chaos. James struggles to right himself -- ORDYS pulling Pilar off, she's still after James --

PILAR
Something else you want to say about Shepherd? Huh?

JOAQUIN
What the hell is this?

Joaquin steps up, pulls James away. The scrum dissipating as he moves in -- right in Pilar's face, as she struggles to break free and fight on --

JOAQUIN (CONT'D)
You need to leave now, ma'am. Before what just happened turns into something bigger than it already is. You feel me?

Pilar, the rage draining, starts to realize what she's done. Looking around at ENLISTED FACES -- she relaxes out of the hands holding her. One last hard look at Joaquin, then at James -- then she TURNS AND STORMS OUT, leaving the Ordys polarized in her wake.

Off James, watching her go, furious --

<u>END ACT TWO</u>

ACT THREE

INT. EXERCISE ROOM - NIGHT

Find BURKE as she RUNS THE TREADMILL below decks, sprinting hard like her life depends on it, ROCKING OUT to HAIR METAL on her earbuds.

BURKE
(half-singing, intent, quiet)
Round and round... comes around goes around...

A HAND reaches in, touches BURKE on the shoulder. She FREAKS, music CUTS as she LEAPS onto the side of the treadmill, off the moving track --

BURKE (CONT'D)
Jesus God!

WILKINS
Sorry, sorry, sorry. You told me --

BURKE
I know what I told you. Jesus.

WILKINS
I should have waited --

BURKE
I was listening to Ratt. It's just -- okay, I'm okay. What is it?

WILKINS
You sure you're okay?

Burke nods, out of breath, switches off the treadmill. Turns, to behold -- PETTY OFFICER BEN WILKINS, her attache -- young, earnest and a little tone-deaf, comes to people --

BURKE
What have we got.

WILKINS
Report of a scuffle -- aviator from 187 Squadron picked a fight, struck an enlisted AO below decks --

BURKE
Anybody hurt?

WILKINS
No injuries, simple assault. Came after the crunch-up in the air.
(MORE)

WILKINS (CONT'D)
Aviator threw the punch is a female, one of the pilots involved in the accident.

BURKE
And the Ordy?

WILKINS
E-2 James Kincaid. Person of interest in the whole...

BURKE
I know who Kincaid is.
(sighs)
All right, start with the lower berths, find our suspect and our victim. Beef up the Master-at-Arms presence in case this starts getting spun up like last time.

WILKINS
Okay. Sorry I scared you.

BURKE
Go. I'll handle the brass.

INT. ORDY WING - NIGHT

The wake of what went down with Pilar and James -- Ordy Mafia is PISSED, ten or fifteen RED SHIRTS all hollering, angry --

We'll get to know this insular group well as time goes on -- including MEGAN, 22, the only female in evidence, one of the boys; TUCK, 23, black, linebacker HUGE; and BUGS, so known for the coke-bottle glasses that amplify his brown eyes.

MEGAN
Same as last tour, officers thinking they shit don't stink --

TUCK
Girlfriend crossed a line, James, come down here looking to fight --

BUGS
Look at my boy here, all banged up. Time we say enough's enough, you know I'm right.

Talking about JAMES, seated on a rack of JDAM 1000 POUND BOMBS, stewing and holding ice on his mouth.

JAMES
Man, leave me out of it. I got enough damn trouble as it is.

MEGAN
Ordy mafia takes care of its own, you know that's correct.

BUGS
Maytag's time is comin', son.

THOMAS
Y'all need to go easy. Got one in the water, she's tore up over it.

TUCK
Saying we ain't? Gonna be a whole thing now, pulled down to testify, what'd we see, what'd we hear --

THOMAS
She's an officer took a swing at an enlisted. Her ass is on the line --

TUCK
Please. Cost the Navy two million dollars to train that aviator. She's a goddamn national treasure compared to your BB-stackin' ass. Who you think they gonna nail to the wall? The redshirt, or the brownshoe?

JOAQUIN
Everybody shut the hell up.

Joaquin steps up; all defer to him naturally --

JOAQUIN (CONT'D)
Y'all know I play by Navy rules. I got no problem with that, far as it goes. How I got where I'm at.
(looks at James)
But Maytag walk in here like she owns the place, take a shot at one of my crew -- tell you what, heads are gonna roll, feel me?

They settle, hearing their NCO's got their backs. Nodding, serious, a crew --

JOAQUIN (CONT'D)
But meantime -- we got work to do. So let's get to it, Ordys.

Back to work. Once it's all in motion again, Joaquin walks over to James, claps him on the back --

JOAQUIN (CONT'D)
Forget her, brother. Told you -- I got your six.

James nods. Joaquin leaves him that way, looking miserable.

EXT. NIGHT FALLS ON THE PACIFIC

SWELLS growing larger, the ocean churning as HELICOPTERS and SEARCH PLANES probe its reaches with LIGHTS. Carving up the mammoth waters into grids, searching every coordinate.

THE LEXINGTON heaving on a black ocean, corkscrewing through massive waves CRASHING over the deck.

INT. THE BRIDGE - NIGHT

Henley on the Bridge, staring out into the whorl of darkness and the encroaching storm as though willing the sea to yield his Aviator.

BURKE (O.S.)
Captain Henley.

HENLEY
Special Agent Burke.

BURKE
Rocky night out there.

HENLEY
Storm blowing in. Got a man missing out in it.

BURKE
I heard. Shepherd. I'm sorry.
(off his nod)
Also heard about Maytag taking a shot at the Ordy downstairs.

HENLEY
Guess you're gonna have your hands full when this is all over.

BURKE
I could say the same for you.

Henley shakes his head.

HENLEY
Told Jess they'd given me Captain's rating, trying to sell it like it's this good thing for us all. She begs me not to take it, get out of the Navy, come home.
(MORE)

HENLEY (CONT'D)
Deployed out here ten, eleven months a year, barely seen my boys. Can't even call them, tell 'em what's happening. Thing goes to hell, they'll find out on a news ticker.

Burke watches him. Sighs.

BURKE
I was on the Lex's last evolution, when Edgars was CO. Tore this ship apart, set officers against enlisteds, blackshoe Ship's Company versus Air Wing, playing everybody off each other until the ship was about to go up like a powderkeg.

HENLEY
Trying to do a better job of it.

BURKE
You <u>are</u> doing a better job of it. But sometimes being the leader means doing things not everybody's gonna like.

HENLEY
Allison -- I got a missing Aviator I myself got a hundred hours in the air with. I got a belligerent, unpredictable asshole threatening to blow my ship out of the water, Merrick watching every move, waiting for me to screw up -- sure a scuffle below decks can't wait?

BURKE
Not about the fight, Stick, you know that. You got sabotage happening on your watch; somebody's trying to make this machine break. This crew is hurting, looking for somebody to pull them together. Things are spinning up fast over this. Unless you want to add a mutiny to your list of problems -- you need to get a lid on it.
(off Henley's look)
Look, I hate that this is all on you. It kills me. But at the same time -- there isn't a man alive I believe can do better. Think about what you want, and make it happen. You understand what I'm saying?

She's intense, close. He looks at her. Off this --

INT. READY ROOM - NIGHT

Pilar with Quaid --

QUAID
Maytag, I don't even know what to say.

PILAR
(then:)
I need to get back in the air, sir.
I need to look for Shepherd.

QUAID
And you seriously think that's going
to happen, after what you just pulled?

PILAR
I lost my head. I know --

QUAID
I wish I could help you. This
ride, you gotta take on your own.

Quaid sees it in her eyes, the just wild fear and need to do something. Then --

A KNOCK at the door, perfunctory and sharp. Without waiting for authorization -- two MASTER-AT-ARMS petty officers step in, all business. COPS -- Navy's version of Military Police.

M.A. 1
Lieutenant Pilar Robles?

PILAR
I'm Robles.

QUAID
What's this about?

M.A. 1
Captain's orders. Here to escort
the lieutenant to the bridge.

PILAR
Wait -- what does this mean?

QUAID
Means you're about to get an
example made out of you.

M.A. 1
This way, ma'am.

Pilar gets up, starts to go with the M.A.s. Shooting a look at Quaid, concerned.

QUAID
Chin up, Maytag.

INT. THE BRIDGE - NIGHT

Pilar escorted in by the M.A.s, a corner of the Bridge off the main work area. Finds JAMES already waiting. They share a look, then both stare at the floor, waiting on --

HENLEY to finish what he's doing. Looking out over the ocean with binoculars. Starts talking while he's still at it --

HENLEY
The People's Republic of North Korea has informed us it is in possession of an electromagnetic pulse weapon deployed on a long-range ballistic missile. Threatening to pop the cork on it, kill every electronic circuit on this ship, put us in the dark, hunk of dead steel floating around with an uncooled nuclear reactor.

He lowers the binoculars, looks at them both.

HENLEY (CONT'D)
This is real, it's happening right now right here. You two understand?

PILAR/JAMES
Yes sir.

HENLEY
Good. Because it is for this reason, and this reason only, that I am not having the both of you dragged behind this ship on a dinghy all the way back to face a tribunal in Japan.

PILAR
Sir, if I could just --

HENLEY
You can just shut your damn mouth, Lieutenant, that's what you can do. Or I will see to it you never fly so much as a crop duster the rest of your natural-born life. You'll have to clear it with the FAA to throw a goddamn paper airplane. And you --
(to James)
If I find out you're diddling with my ordnance, son, I will sink your traitorous ass so deep under this ocean nobody'd find you even if they cared enough to look.
(both of them)
(MORE)

HENLEY (CONT'D)
As it stands, now -- we are on the verge of a large-theater conflict, while I got one of my top aviators bobbing around in the Sea of Japan like an overtrained cork. Means we got work to do. Any other scenario, two of you'd be parked in my brig on bread and water rations. Am I clear?

PILAR/JAMES
Yes sir.

HENLEY
Whatever it is between you, you bury it, right here, right now. Muster on station and do your goddamn jobs. And when this is over? There will be a reckoning, you can rest assured of that.
(at Pilar, pointed)
You remember what your job is, Maytag?

PILAR
Yes sir. I fly.

HENLEY
You fly.
(then)
Ought to be damn ashamed of yourselves. Now get the hell off my bridge and out of my sight. Dismissed.

Pilar and James, deeply chastened, march out towards the door past eyes that won't look at them. On her way, Pilar looks up to see --

VANDAL, off towards the side, near Merrick. He meets her eyes, then looks down himself. Pilar goes CRIMSON. Then leaves the bridge. Off the silence in their wake --

HENLEY (CONT'D)
Show's over. We all got work to do, let's get back to it.

The crew does just that, falling in with new quickness in their step, not wanting to fuck up.

We go off HENLEY, chewing over the trouble, eyes peeled out over the vast ocean before him...

END ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

EXT. VULTURE'S ROW - NIGHT

VULTURE'S ROW, a jutting prow off the ship's tower overlooking the FLIGHT DECK. JETS taking off and landing mere yards below.

Find MERRICK overlooking flight operations under the roiling sky, the deck heaving and groaning under the sea. Joined after a few moments by VANDAL, who moves up next to him.

MERRICK
I'm gonna miss being out here. Miss the swells, that churning of the world beneath me. I belong on a ship, Derek, not behind a desk.

VANDAL
I know what you mean.

MERRICK
That was a nice piece of flying, jumping in front of that MiG.

VANDAL
Thank you, sir.

MERRICK
Nice piece of flying. Your father would've been proud to see it.

The merest of hesitation before Vandal answers. Nothing on his face gives anything away, but the mention HITS HIM --

VANDAL
Yes sir.

MERRICK
I wish you'd known him before. Man was a bona fide ace in air combat, 'til it did a number on him. No shame on you over what he did, you know that.

VANDAL
Respectfully, sir, I'd rather not talk about him. My father made bad decisions, got good men killed. I'd rather not let that get in my head.

An EA-6B PROWLER SLAMS into the deck, hitting the 3 wire, stopping dead in front of them. Another catch.

MERRICK
Fair enough. Keep your eyes open, but don't make too many friends. I need your view of the inside, how this ship works.

VANDAL
Yes sir.

MERRICK
Few wrinkles to iron out in this Strike Group, starting with your Captain.

VANDAL
Henley, sir?

MERRICK
Henley's not cut out for command. Good aviator, but -- this ship is damaged goods, he can't contain it. You watch him, see what not to do.
(off Vandal's look)
Get that situation squared away, you're gonna fit in here real good. Hell, someday -- maybe this is your boat, your strike group. Be you up here, boring some hotshot aviator kid on his way up, while you wait to get old and fat in D.C.

VANDAL
I can only hope, sir.

MERRICK
Listen. Good as he was in his time -- you're a better man than your father. You're a better pilot. Want to clear your family name, this is the way to do it.

Merrick claps him on the back, heads back in.

MERRICK (CONT'D)
(on his way)
Keep playing the game, impress the right people -- you'll make your mark on the Lexington, son.

Leaves him that way, to gaze out over the churning ocean; something CHEWING at Vandal from the inside. Off this --

INT. VFA-187 SQUADRON ROOM - NIGHT

Vandal busts in on Pilar. She looks up --

VANDAL
Let's go find him.

PILAR
What?

VANDAL
You and me. Let's go find Shepherd.

Like he's fucking with her --

PILAR
You were on the Bridge, you heard what Henley said. Lucky I'm drawing air at this point --

VANDAL
What he said to you was "do your job." He didn't say you were grounded, and he can't give you a go order in front of Merrick. Read between the lines, Maytag.
(off her look)
We were <u>there</u>. Anybody got a chance at this, it's you and me.

PILAR
Told me to fly...
(then:)
Be nice if I had a plane.

VANDAL
Get us up in a Grizzly, just you and me in a two-seater. I can fly backseat, R2-D2 to your Skywalker. Keep bad things from happening while you find Shepherd.

Pilar, eyeing him --

PILAR
Just like that, all of a sudden, you're all about the team --

VANDAL
Say I got my reasons. Now are you in, or are you gonna sit here crying like a pussy?

Pilar sets her jaw. Decision made. But --

PILAR
Score us a ride, I'm in. But I got something I gotta do first...

Off this --

INT. ORDY WING - NIGHT

ORDYS gearing up, doing their thing. As PILAR steps in, all eyes go to her -- the fuck is she doing here? She moves in past them, awash in hostility, until JOAQUIN intercedes.

JOAQUIN
You lost, Maytag? Not sure this the best place for you right now --

PILAR
Looking for James. He here?

From behind Joaquin, in his rack --

JAMES
Let her back, man. Come on.

Joaquin lingers in her way a moment longer. Then steps aside. He and the others watch as she moves over to James, stands across from him, almost formal.

PILAR
I'm sorry I hit you. I was an asshole.

It hangs there waiting to be taken up or swatted down. After a long moment --

JAMES
Guys? Could you maybe --?

Joaquin moves off with the other Ordys, leaving James and Pilar relatively alone.

JAMES (CONT'D)
You got a mean right cross.

PILAR
Yeah, well. You got a hard head.
(then)
I rushed my preflight. Wanted up first, didn't check stuff I know to check. You were right: this is on me, and me alone.

Tense beat. He nods, okay. That's it. She turns to go --

JAMES
Hey, Pilar.
(she turns)
My sister, she's like a year older'n me? Name of Frida, but we call her Fudd, just to rattle her cage. She's with 204th Signal Battalion, Army. Anyway, back in '06, she drove over this IED in Sadr City? Pretty much vaporized her, like she's a mist. Hit my mama like a wrecking ball. She had a stroke right there when she heard.
(she waits)
I took a job on a ship 'cause I didn't want to turn out like her. Figure on a ship, ain't any IEDs or snipers. I'm a coward, Maytag, and I got to live with that.
(leans in)
But I swear on the life of my sister -- I did not, I would never, damage a weapon that could've helped protect her, or anybody like her. I need you to know that. Do you understand?

It hits her, the naked truth in his eyes, the real question in his question. She holds his eyes --

PILAR
You're no kind of coward, James. Believe me.

Tears in his eyes, he NODS, holding her gaze a moment. Then--

JAMES
We get through this, Maytag -- can you help me? They'll listen to you. Will you tell 'em -- it ain't me, did this thing?

PILAR
We get through this, and I still have a job -- I'm all yours. Okay?

Off his thankful nod, she moves out past JOAQUIN and a few other members of the ORDY MAFIA -- who eye Pilar yet with disdain and suspicion.

INT/EXT. HANGAR BAY - NIGHT

Vandal and Pilar across the desk from the FLIGHT OPS AIRMAN responsible for signing in and out airplanes. PERPLEXED as they're hammering him --

VANDAL
No, not One-Eleven, I said One-Six-Nine. It's gotta be a Grizzly, we need radar jamming capabilities.

FLIGHT OPS AIRMAN
Pretty sure you said One-Eleven, sir --

PILAR
No, definitely One-Six-Seven.

FLIGHT OPS AIRMAN
Wait, is it One-Six-Seven, or One-Six -- hold on, sirs, just let me call the Air Boss --

He goes to pick up the phone --

PILAR/VANDAL
No no no! Hold on!

-- looking at them like they're insane --

VANDAL
I mean, what I'm trying to say --

QUAID (O.S.)
Give 'em whatever they need, shipmate, and get 'em up where they need to be.

They turn to behold QUAID, striding up. He eyes Maytag hard. She returns his gaze, an understanding there.

FLIGHT OPS AIRMAN
Yes sir, right away sir.

PILAR
(to Quaid)
Thank you.

QUAID
Better bring him home, or it's all our asses in a sling.

Off Pilar, yes sir --

AIR BOSS (V.O., FILTERED)
(prelap)
GRIZZLY ONE-SIX-NINER, GO FOR CAT SHOT.

INT. EA-18 GROWLER - NIGHT

PILAR AND VANDAL -- Pilar in the pilot (front) seat, Vandal riding NFO (Non-Flying Officer) in the rear of a two-seater EA-18 GROWLER -- looks like the F-18 we've come to know, but the two-seater ELECTRONIC WARFARE version -- no missiles or bombs, just a dizzying array of ELECTRONIC JAMMING EQUIPMENT.

PILAR
ROGER ONE-SIX-NINER, WE'RE GO.

AIR BOSS (O.S., FILTERED)
GOOD LUCK, MAYTAG.

Pilar and Vandal CATAPULTED, jammed back in their seats as they streak --

UP INTO THE CLOUD COVER

Thick as stew over the Lexington. AFTERBURNERS glowing hot orange, swallowed in the swirling grey-black.

INT. EA-18 GROWLER - NIGHT

Pilar and Vandal, lit ORANGE by their HUD displays. Pilar back where she belongs, you can SEE IT -- up here, she is HERSELF again --

VANDAL
Currents pull past the channel islands up near the DMZ. He could've got pulled in close, maybe even onto land...

PILAR
Tell me where.

VANDAL
Coordinates right on your HUD.

PILAR
What's with you as a backseater? Seem to know your way around...

VANDAL
All right, I'm gonna tell you something. For a minute, just a minute -- looked like I might wash out of flight school.
(MORE)

VANDAL (CONT'D)
So I trained to be NFO as a backup. Point is, I know a few tricks, keep ‘em off us.

Pilar has to smile.

PILAR
Vandal as a washout. This, I like.

VANDAL
I’ll totally deny it, you ever bring it up again.

PILAR
(then, serious)
Do this, we’re all in. Agreed?

VANDAL
Hell. Anything happens, they’re gonna blame your ass for it anyway.

PILAR
All right. Better grab on to something, it’s pucker time...

She BANKS HARD LEFT, twisting into a STEEP DIVE --

INT. THE BRIDGE - NIGHT

RADAR OPERATOR
Sir, Black Angel One-six-niner’s veering off course.

HENLEY
Who’s up there?

RADAR OPERATOR
Looks like... Maytag and Vandal, sir. Should I pull ‘em back?

Sonofabitch. Henley thinks. Shakes his head. Then --

HENLEY
Let ‘em ride, see what they do.

RADAR OPERATOR
They are crossing into disputed airspace. What are your orders?

HENLEY
My orders are to let them go and pray that they find my pilot before all hell breaks loose.

EXT. OVER THE SEA OF JAPAN - NIGHT

SHRIEKING BY LOW over the churning ocean, just off the deck --

INT. EA-18 GROWLER - NIGHT

VANDAL
Just about put a load down the exalted leader's chimney from here.

PILAR
Come on, Shepherd, where are you--?

The radio SQUAWKS --

RED CROWN (O.S.)
BLACK ANGEL ONE-SIX-NINER, YOU HAVE MULTIPLE BOGEYS INBOUND, CLOSING OH-SIX-HUNDRED, TWO-FIVE-OH MILES OUT.

PILAR
ROGER THAT, RED CROWN.

RED CROWN (O.S.)
YOU ARE OUT OF POSITION. DRAW BACK BEHIND THE LINE OF ENGAGEMENT IMMEDIATELY.

PILAR
HAVING SOME RADIO INTERFERENCE. MUST BE CLOUD COVER. SWITCHING --

She switches off the radio, cutting off the reply --

VANDAL
(checking his HUD)
I got 'em. Four bogeys, closing.

PILAR
How long?

VANDAL
Not long.

PILAR
Can you do something?

VANDAL
Watch this --

Vandal works a few buttons, and --

EXT. OVER THE SEA OF JAPAN - NIGHT

The FOUR MIGS, inbound at warp speed, ready to kill. All of a sudden, ALARMS in all four cockpits --

The planes PEEL OFF, shrieking off in all directions --

INT. EA-18 GROWLER - NIGHT

Vandal, elated --

VANDAL
This is because I rule.

PILAR
What'd you do?

VANDAL
Standoff jammer, crammed the signal down their throats. They think they're chasing a squadron of F-18s up here.

PILAR
Nice.

VANDAL
Only got a minute or two before they wise up, so we need to --

BEEEEEP!!! A SIGNAL in the cockpit --

PILAR
Got a GPS blip. Faint but steady. Vectoring to two-four-niner --

INT. BRIDGE - NIGHT

Henley at the conn. Pilar's VOICE over the radio --

PILAR (O.S.)
(filtered)
I got him, I got him! EPIRB signal, sending you coordinates --

HENLEY
Where?

Off the crew working furiously --

INT. EA-18 GROWLER - NIGHT

VANDAL
Running out of time here, Maytag --

PILAR
He's here, we're right on him.

VANDAL
Don't find him pretty fast, it's gonna get hectic --

PILAR
(a prayer)
Come on, Shepherd. Come on...

INT. BRIDGE - NIGHT

Merrick storms onto the bridge, right up on Henley --

MERRICK
Captain, what the hell is going on?

HENLEY
We got a signal, sir. Chasing it down now --

MERRICK
You are in violation of the Rules of Engagement, Henley. I don't know who you've got up there, but you need to call them back right now. Understand? Who's up there?

HENLEY
Maytag... and your boy, Vandal.

Merrick reacts. Recovers --

MERRICK
I repeat my order, Captain. Withdraw that Grizzly, pull 'em back behind the line.

HENLEY
Negative, sir.

MERRICK
Excuse me?

HENLEY
I won't do it. I am countermanding your order to withdraw. You may be admiral of the Strike Group, but I am captain of this ship and of this Air Wing. They're my aviators, Admiral. They fly when and where I tell them to.

Merrick eyeballs him a long time. Tense, terrible silence. Then --

MERRICK
Goddammit, Stick -- do you think I like this any more than you do? I've been in this Navy since I was nineteen years old -- it is all I have ever known. The man out there in that freezing cold ocean waiting on us to save him is my shipmate. It's like giving up on one of my own sons, it kills me to pull the plug. But Captain Henley -- this is what command is. It's ugly and it's real and good men will die because of decisions you make. If you're going to drive this ship -- you will have to face that reality, sooner or later.

The crew, nobody wanting to meet eyes, the tension UNBEARABLE. Henley hating it with every fiber of his being, but hearing it nonetheless. Merrick quiet, without bluster --

MERRICK (CONT'D)
Now Captain, I repeat my order -- withdraw that Grizzly, stand down on this search, follow the Rules of Engagement.
(beat)
Navy saw fit to give you got a shot at fixing this ship. It's time to decide whether or not you're up to the task. Right now, right here. What are you going to do?

Henley, pinned under the weight of command, shakes his head. The CREW, awaiting his decision. Off Henley, ready to make the call --

INT. EA-18 GROWLER - NIGHT

VANDAL
That's it. Standoff jamming ain't gonna hold, we gotta boogie --

PILAR
One more second, Vandal --

And then -- A FLARE POPS just off their port wing. Arcs into the sky as though conjured from the ocean itself, lighting up the clouds like a roman candle.

PILAR (CONT'D)
I got a flare! You see that?

VANDAL
Port. Swing around --

Pilar kicks the rudders, Bat-turns, GRINDING them into a 180--

EXT. SURFACE OF THE OCEAN - NIGHT

SHEPHERD, barely alive, floating on debris in the washing-machine tide, last of his strength used to fire the FLARE.

As PILAR'S PLANE ROARS BY OVERHEAD, wagging its wings to acknowledge -- THEY'VE FOUND HIM.

PILAR (O.S.)
(filtered)
Flare! I got him, he's alive --

EXT. OVER THE SEA OF JAPAN - NIGHT

With one of the MIGS -- HE SEES IT TOO, seventy-five miles away, you can't miss it, it looks like Hiroshima in the otherwise limitless black.

The PRK MiG SKIDS SIDEWAYS in its haste to home in on the spectacle. After a beat, THE OTHER THREE MIGS fall into formation with him, racing towards --

INT. EA-18 GROWLER - NIGHT

VANDAL
That's it, they're onto us. Gotta go, Maytag. They'll send Angels --

PILAR
I'm not leaving him.

VANDAL
Maytag. Every creature with eyes to see with got a fix on our position now, I can't hide us and we got no ordy on this ride --

PILAR
Vandal. I am not - leaving - him.

A beat, as Vandal processes.

VANDAL
Roger that. Staying on station.

Pilar's eyes fixed on the FIGURE IN THE WATER far below...

EXT. OVER THE SEA OF JAPAN - NIGHT

THE MIGS, formed up as a unit, race towards the signal flare. Full afterburner, they'll be there in a minute --

INT. EA-18 GROWLER - NIGHT

Vandal eyeing his scope. Something growing on it in ORANGE, a MASS of radar signal --

VANDAL
Uh, Maytag? Either I'm tracking a really fast-moving storm system, or we're about to have big company.

PILAR
How much company?

VANDAL
Like, the entire North Korean Air Force?

PILAR
How close?

Vandal looks up OUT OF THE COCKPIT, to see --

THE FIRST FOUR MIGS, closing fast on them. LOOMING --

BLIPBLIPBLIPBLIP!!!! The now-familiar signal of RADAR LOCK FROM MISSILES --

VANDAL
Close.

PILAR
Get ready --

RED CROWN (O.S.)
GRIZZLY ONE-SIX-NINER, RETURN TO BASE. REPEAT, R-T-B, RIGHT NOW.

PILAR
RED CROWN, WE ARE SITTING RIGHT ON TOP OF HIM, WE CAN'T --

RED CROWN
REPEAT ORDER, MAYTAG. RETURN TO BASE. THAT IS AN ORDER, DIRECT FROM ADMIRAL'S BRIDGE.

Tears in her eyes, lit up by radar, Vandal growing agitated -- Pilar looks ONE LAST TIME at the glow from Shepherd's flare --

VANDAL
Maytag. We gotta move if we're gonna --

WHAM!!! She SLAMS the Grizzly into FULL AFTERBURNER and ROCKETS AWAY from the North Korean MiGs, leaving them in the dust, as they settle in to circle over...

SHEPHERD'S POSITION. Now under North Korean watch, as we go --

INT. THE BRIDGE

Somber, waiting for word --

RIEBERT
Grizzly One-Six-Niner returning to base. Maytag's on her way back.

RADAR OPERATOR
Got a fix on Shepherd's position. North Korean choppers are already en route, MiGs guarding the scene.

HENLEY
So he'll live to be their prisoner.

Henley won't look at Merrick, furious, chewing his anger like it will fuel him from here on. Merrick bows his head.

HENLEY (CONT'D)
(clenched teeth)
Sir, if you don't need me -- I'd like to address my ship.

MERRICK
Carry on, Captain.

Off Henley, as we HEAR HIM SPEAK ON THE 1MC (SHIPBOARD RADIO) OVER THE FOLLOWING --

EXT. FLIGHT DECK - NIGHT

Scrambling to put helicopters in the air to run the rescue operation. The whole operation on a pitching deck at night, the unit working together as a whole with lives on the line --

HENLEY (V.O.)
Been a hell of a day out here, people.

MUSIC UP: FLEET FOXES, "YOUR PROTECTOR." As --

EXT. OVER THE SEA OF JAPAN - NIGHT

A FORMATION of MiGs RIPS PAST. Four-on-four, stacked perfectly in the night sky, AFTERBURNERS FLARING past the speed of sound, as NORTH KOREAN HELICOPTERS drift down over Shepherd in the water --

HENLEY (V.O.)
What we do -- the weight of it can fracture us, put us at odds with one another.

INT. PRIMARY FLIGHT DECK (PRI-FLY) - NIGHT

MUSIC CONTINUES, as --

James works assembling a SIDEWINDER, putting the pieces together expertly, done it a thousand times, maybe a thousand yet to come --

HENLEY (V.O.)
It is incumbent upon us to remember, shipmates -- we are a Brotherhood. And we need to pull ourselves together now.

-- as two MASTERS-AT-ARMS interrupt his work, beckoning him to rise and muster. After a beat, he does.

One MA steps forward, slaps HANDCUFFS on his wrists. They LEAD HIM AWAY, all the Ordys on deck STOPPING TO WATCH as James is marched off to the brig --

HENLEY (V.O.)
Our people, our country -- the mothers and brothers and sisters and wives we are sworn to protect -- we fail them when we fail one another.

INT. ORDY WING MISSILE GUIDANCE ROOM - NIGHT

Where we find THOMAS alone, assembling the GUIDANCE GYRO of a missile. Closer, as --

THOMAS BENDS THE GUIDE PIN with his thumb, **BREAKING IT. LOOKS AROUND TO SEE IF ANYBODY NOTICED.** Satisfied, he CLOSES THE CASE and carries the SABOTAGED guidance system OFF, and we realize --

THE SABOTEUR IS THOMAS. Still at it even now...

EXT. FLIGHT DECK - NIGHT

MUSIC CONTINUES, over --

TAILHOOK CAPTURE as an E/A-18 SLAMS DOWN and jerks to a halt. Pilar and Vandal, taxiing off the jetway --

HENLEY (V.O.)
Shipmates -- we are all we've got out here. We are family, and a family takes care of its own.

Pilar scrambles out of the bird, tears off her helmet, not hiding the tears streaming down her face. Fucking FURIOUS. Vandal a beat behind her, watching her move fast away from him. His face clouded...

HENLEY (V.O.)
Now, the real work starts.

INT. OFFICER'S MESS HALL - NIGHT

Everybody crowded around one of the many TELEVISION SCREENS onboard the ship, SHOCK on their faces, pointing.

HENLEY (V.O.)
We lost a man today. One of our Brotherhood, in the hands of those who would see us come to harm...

PILAR joins them, then VANDAL -- all looking up to see --

ON THE SCREEN: NORTH KOREAN TV NEWS IMAGES -- grainy, vidcam quality, jerky -- it's **SHEPHERD**, blindfolded, pushed on a gurney through a hallway crowded with NORTH KOREAN SOLDIERS, shouting and jeering the fallen American aviator.

A Prisoner of War. PILAR watching, her eyes going hard --

HENLEY (V.O.)
Shipmates, you got my word --

INT. BRIDGE - NIGHT

Henley alone at the mic station, all eyes on him, face determined and set --

HENLEY
We will bring back our man. We will use whatever force is necessary to pull him out of there. You got my word as your Captain -- we will bring him home. And God help anybody who tries to stand in our way.

The BRIDGE CREW, all watching Henley -- delivering that last bit DIRECTLY TO MERRICK --

HENLEY (CONT'D)
Now let's get to work.

And off that look between them, loaded with all they're carrying -- a look which SAYS IT ALL -- we EPILOGUE with...

INT. ADMIRAL'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Merrick alone by the light of one lamp. Carving into a richly marbled STEAK, eating alone. A KNOCK at the door --

MERRICK
Enter.

The door opens, revealing -- VANDAL. Stands there waiting to be invited in. Merrick nods curtly; Vandal steps in.

MERRICK (CONT'D)
Pretty early in your career to start biting the hand that feeds you, don't you think?

VANDAL
Had to be done, sir.

MERRICK
I can be your friend, Vandal -- or I can be your worst enemy. Up to you how you want to play it. But you better decide pretty quick.

VANDAL
Understood, sir.

MERRICK
Got nothing else, I'd like to finish my meal.

Vandal turns to go. Opens the door, turns to Merrick.

VANDAL
Sir?
(off Merrick's look)
Look at it this way -- <u>they trust me now</u>.

Merrick stops chewing, eyes Vandal in the doorway a long beat. Then, satisfied, he nods. Vandal exits, closing the door behind him.

Off Merrick, carving into his steak, all alone, we --

<u>END</u>. *