

**USCG Cutter *Kauai*, AUTEC Weapons Range,
off Andros Island, Bahamas
10:04 EDT, 3 April**

When the message arrived, *Kauai* was nearing the turning point at the end of the radar sensor range. Ben had the OOD watch with Zuccaro monitoring navigation and sensors and, by default, the message center on the bridge's C2 console. "XO, incoming operational immediate message."

"Right, standby." Ben waited another minute to clear the southernmost buoy, then turned to the helmsman. "Left ten degrees rudder, steady on three-five-three, belay passing headings."

"Left ten degrees rudder, steady on three-five-three, belay passing headings, aye, sir."

Kauai listed slightly to the right in the gentle left turn, and Ben took one last scan to port as a final safety check, then strode to the C2 console to read the message. Sent by the Seventh District Commander in Miami, it immediately ended the testing operation and transferred *Kauai's* operational control to JIATF-South. As if that were not surprising enough, they were to return to port at AUTEC at once, meet Admiral Pennington himself at the AUTEC Command Building and transport him to Key West. With raised eyebrows, he lifted the telephone and called Sam. "Captain, we are receiving incoming immediate tasking you will not believe. Could you come to the bridge, please, sir?"

"On the way," Sam replied. A minute later, he arrived on the bridge and walked straight over to the console.

"Captain on the Bridge," Ben announced.

"Thank you, carry on, please." Sam sat at the console to read the message as Ben resumed his OOD duties. When Sam finished, he walked over to Ben for

a quiet conversation. “The DARPA guys won’t like this one bit.”

“From the tone of that message, I don’t think we’ll be high-fiving either, sir.”

“Well, it is what it is. Let’s set special sea detail and return to port. Now that we’re suspending testing, who’s in the rotation for the mooring?”

“Bondurant, sir. He was planning to let Lee try with him over-the-shoulder.”

“Sorry, but not today,” Sam said as he glanced back at the console. “Get things rolling while I break the news to the head geek.” As he strode aft, he stopped and turned with a smile. “And when you contact Harbor Control, be sure to say *please*.”

Ben smiled back as he picked up the microphone for the 1MC public address system. “It’s what I live for, Captain!” He keyed the microphone. “Now, discontinue all testing and secure test gear. Set the Special Sea Detail for entering port.”

An hour-and-a-half later, Sam, Ben, and Hopkins were hurrying toward the Command Building in fresh tropical blue uniforms. If it hadn’t left them disheveled and sweaty, they would have been running—junior officers and chiefs do not keep admirals waiting longer than necessary.

There was no question Pennington had arrived. An army helicopter made several orbits of *Kauai* on her way in, and there was a two-star admiral’s flag flying on the flagpole near the building. Hopkins had left Lee and Zuccaro rummaging through *Kauai*’s flag locker to rig a similar display once the admiral came aboard. The three quickly passed through the reception desk to the center’s secure compartmented

information facility and were ushered in by a navy sailor. They stood at attention as Pennington came around the table to greet them.

“Carry on, please. Hoppy, is that you?” Pennington asked with a smile. “My God, what a terrific surprise. How are you?” He stepped up and shook her hand.

“I’m fine, thank you, Admiral.”

Pennington turned to Sam and held out his hand. “I hope you’ll forgive the breach of protocol, Lieutenant. But Hoppy and I were shipmates on the *Escanaba*. Do you go by Sam or Samuel?”

Sam shook Pennington’s hand. “Sam, sir. May I present my XO, Ben Wyporek?”

Pennington shook Ben’s hand, “Pleased to meet you, Ben. I’ve heard some pretty amazing things about both of you guys.”

“Likewise, sir,” Ben said.

“Come over here and sit down, please.” Pennington beckoned to the table. “Before we start, I’m going to be talking about a project called JUBILEE.” He directed a glance toward Hopkins.

“We are all read in on that, sir,” Sam said.

“Outstanding. I just got the full brief this morning, and my head’s still spinning. Have you folks heard anything about it since your little dustup last January?”

“No, sir,” Sam replied as they sat around the table.

“Well, it seems our otherworld friends have been pretty quiet until a month ago. Then they started once weekly visits.”

“Once a week, sir?” Ben asked. “That doesn’t sound like the normal operations they described to us.”

“It’s not. This is apparently a rogue element taking advantage of the alien sentry ship’s absence. They’ve been buying up opium and cocaine and smuggling it off-world. They were doing a good job keeping a low profile—not even the alien embeds knew it was happening until a couple of days ago. Then they got themselves in a jam—landed in the middle of a drug war, and now they’re hostages. The boat and the aliens are being held in Barbello, just north of Roatan.” He pulled a high-resolution chart from a leather case on the table, and they all stood to look at it. “The island is an ancient volcanic caldera, with the remaining topography roughly crescent-shaped. It has an almost enclosed lagoon, with the buildings and quay here.” He pointed at the center of the interior shoreline. “It’s all shoal water except for a channel leading into the lagoon, passing a quarter-mile south of this point.”

Sam looked at the chart in deep thought. “Yes, sir, I remember. When I was assigned to *Spencer*, we staked it out for a few days. Good harbor, not much else. We thought it was a drug transshipment point, but nothing came of it.” He looked at Pennington again. “Was it the 252s who grabbed them, sir?”

“No, they were the ones working with the aliens. The grabbers are an outfit called the Salinas Cartel.”

“Are they new, sir? I don’t remember hearing that name.”

“Yes, they’re oozing up to the top in Honduras and Guatemala. They’re really bad news. Think of a gang of a hundred guys too sadistic for MS-13 standing up a drug-funded death cult. Anyway, they are about to get some genuine experience in total war. The 252s don’t take insults or prisoners.”

“Sir, why us?” Sam asked. “I mean, Delta Force or the SEALs would be the right choice for a rescue mission.”

“It’s not a rescue, Sam. I wouldn’t lift a finger to save those bastards, much less risk your lives. The problem is they brought in their technology, and we can’t let that loose. That’s what we’re sending you in to get. What happens to the aliens is incidental.”

“I don’t understand, sir. Surely, the 252s have everything now. What would it accomplish if we succeeded?”

“Great question.” Pennington nodded. “They *don’t* have it, according to the defector that brought us the news. They furnished the ship and crew, but they were trying to build a relationship with the aliens they could cash in on later—very forward thinkers, the 252s. Now, the deal is screwed, and the aliens are likely dead, so the 252s will grab what they can.

“And you won’t be able just to grab the devices and run. Our source says they are attached to the ship and using its generators as a power source. You wouldn’t have time to pull it all out before you got swarmed. So, you’ll slip in, hook up a tow line, and pull that boat out before the Salinas boys know what’s happening. You’ll tow her beyond the five-hundred-fathom curve of the Cayman Trench and then scuttle her.”

“What do they have that is so important, sir?” Ben asked.

“They have one of the alien matter transport devices. They need one at each end to transfer material to a ship in orbit. I believe you have experience with this device, Ben.”

“Unfortunately, yes, sir. Twice. I would not recommend it.” Ben’s “rides” through the device induced vertigo so severe he would have been disabled without a head-shaking mitigation technique shared by the alien they encountered. “So, we’re worried the 252s will clone these things and use them for smuggling?”

“Spot on, Lieutenant.” Pennington nodded approvingly. “It’s a true nightmare scenario.”

“Excuse me, Admiral,” Sam interrupted. “Why not bomb the boat?”

“No, Sam, it’s in Honduras territory. We can’t launch an airstrike against a Central American country without provocation. Neither can we run a search and destroy commando raid that leaves a sunken ship at the dockside. How would we justify it without revealing the alien presence? Also, we can’t trust to luck that the tech is destroyed without a follow-on damage assessment. You’re read in on JUBILEE and know the stakes. We have to be sure to get everything without leaving evidence of alien incursion.”

“Sir, stealing a ship violates sovereignty too.”

“Only if we’re caught, Sam. The Hondurans ceded that island to the cartel—they have no presence there. We go in at night, steal the ship from a criminal organization who stole it from another criminal organization, and dispose of it. If called on it, we’ll claim it held a classified weapon of mass destruction, which is fundamentally true. Even if the Hondurans figure out it was us, a nasty problem is solved, and they still have plausible deniability. The 252s will hit that place and leave no one alive, anyway.”

“Admiral, I suppose we could get in there undetected if we waited until moonset and used the batteries. But as soon as we hit that ship, all hell will break loose. We’ll have a running fight from the moment we board until we clear harbor. Assuming we aren’t sunk before then.”

“Sam, you think I would send you in alone?” Pennington shook his head. “There’s a SEAL team en route to Key West as we speak. As you guys glide in there, they’ll have taken the ship and discreetly knocked out any lighting on the quay. A Rivet Joint

plane is heading in tonight and tomorrow night to read the pattern of life, patrols, and radio comms. During your penetration, they'll be there to control the ground force and keep you advised of any hostile activity. Your biggest challenge will be running the gauntlet of this point of land here." He pointed at the chart. "It's fortified and has an armed watch. But if you clear it before first light, there's a good chance you can slip by unseen and unheard." Pennington paused and scanned the faces across the table. They all focused on the chart before them and were long with worry. "Anything else?"

After a second, Sam looked up with a stony expression. "Yes, sir. What about casualties? It will be a miracle if no one is wounded. Given what you've told us, we can hardly cruise into a nearby port to put them in the hospital, and it's seven hundred miles easy to a US facility."

"You'll be taking an army combat surgeon and two medics on board *Kauai*. I'm pre-positioning *Thetis* with a Clearwater H-60 twenty miles away and *Northland* off Cozumel as a lily pad. It's five hours of flying from Barbello to the nearest trauma center in Miami, but the surgeon will stabilize any casualties before they're lifted."

"Yes, sir." Sam nodded, then continued. "Admiral, suppose the worst case happens, and they pop open our hull with a couple of RPGs. What's the contingency plan? I need to know my crew won't be sacrificed for nothing."

Pennington gave a solemn look. "In Key West, you will also take on board a DIA agent who will find the devices and destroy them with thermite charges."

"And the aliens?"

Pennington locked eyes with Sam. "They'll be enough thermite for them, too."