

Too Loud

On the outer edges of Lamang, far from *ground zero*, the four-man squad of mercenaries land comfortably one kilometer from a lonely depilated building covered by dense jungle. The men had learnt to ignore *the emergency tag* on the mission bulletins, and instead look for other risk indicators. This rescue mission was posted later than usual, and with a much higher payout sum, implying that the buyer was confident in their intel. ‘Saint’ had already accepted the mission by the time the squad was informed. The brief was quickly skimmed between all the small pauses that occurs while they prepared their gear. No warning signs stood out to them.

“This seems *routine*,” said ‘Tiny’, as the room goes quiet.

The brief pause was interrupted by the sound of more packing.

Tiny’s boots hit the spongy wet ground, as the rest of the squad follows from the landed helicopter. Whatever comforts they feel with the cool winds generated by the turbines will soon disappear, as the squad prepares their second dosage of insect repellent some distance away from the landing zone. Air traffic has become common at all hours around Lamang, so landing closer was not an issue, and the longer conversation of the pilot was probably another cargo pickup. The turbines of a second helicopter begin approaching as their transport start leaving. No words were needed, *the routine* was about to show itself. The cargo drop is a well-groomed Asian man of standard stature in his forties wearing a cream suit.

“Not much different from where I usually *summer*.” the man says. He requests being called ‘Suit’ as he handshakes each member of the squad; none respond. The humid heavy air and heat start enveloping from all sides. Towering over Suit, Tiny readies the insect repellent but then stops, “Lavender?” he asks. “Good nose.” Suit says, “my tailor assured me that the oil would not damage the Italian wool.” Suit starts shifting his body in discomfort, “but he forgot to mention that this kevlar didn’t fit my continental cut.”

The sweat is already starting to show on all the men's faces, mosquitos are buzzing around their ears and arms. Tiny gives Suit something that looks like *a stick with a weight on the bottom*, giving his team member a quick glance. Suit grabs the item, causing his body to pull forward. 'Panther' catches him from the side, pulls out Suit's pistol from his inner jacket, followed by a swift magazine grab and ejection. He then hands the gun back, as the squad begins their march into a single file path into the jungle towards their target.

Their walk speed is deliberately slow, with Panther *on point* followed by Tiny. Suit looks behind him to find 'Tripod' followed by Saint. A few minutes into the short march and his stride begins to wobble, while the sweat stings his eyes. With slight difficulty he sees the others on occasion grab the *stick with the weight on the bottom*. He grabs it too, feeling his palms cool, blood rushing through his arms, clearing his mind and correcting his stride. He wipes his face with the cuff of his suit, suppressing the disgust. His body shudders as he takes a deep breath to regain his composure, preparing himself to break the suffocating silence.

"As *the buyer* I feel it's necessary to inform you there were details left out of the brief."

No response as they continue walking.

"The target we are rescuing is my son." he says, unable to read the men's faces.

They stop walking.

"Hah! Be ready to pay up, Motherfuckers!" Tripod says in a hushed tone.

The squad struggles to remain quiet.

"Fucking shit...", Tiny says.

"Merde." Panther says.

"Faen." Saint says, followed by a string of other Norwegian curse words.

Suit is stunned.

"The brief was too clean; we knew some rich fuck was joining us," Tiny explains, "The three of us thought this smelled like a *Bosnian sniper tourist*, and Tripod thought otherwise."

The banter continues in hushed tones.

"I may have angered one of those *tourists*." Suit says.

For a moment, even the mosquitos leave them alone.

"Wait... Who wins the bet?" Tripod asks.

The hushed bickering over the details of the bet simmer down as the lonely depilated four-story building block comes into view some distance away. Arriving from the east, they begin their preparations at the edge of the clearing. They can hear *the locals* from within; their equipment confirms global coordinates with that of the brief. Saint begins lugging his gear towards the southern nearby water tower to setup his nest, and preparing the single road should matters escalate. Suit observes the suppressor on Saint's M4A1, but not in the rifles for Tiny and Tripod. "Easier to maneuver in closed spaces, gives the locals less to grab," Tripod says, putting on his earbud followed by ear covers "and since the weapons be loud as hell and bright as fuck, it keeps'em off-balance." Suit's vision blurs a bit, either by heat or fear. He remembers that his shooting range training were only with suppressors, at his request. His mind returns as they're all leaning towards a wall, preparing to enter the basement backdoor on the north side; the padlock already on the ground. Tiny performs a final transceiver check, leaving his channel open.

"Keep your eyes open for a teenage male, 150 centimeters, black hair, slim build." says Tiny.

"With *the locals*, that doesn't narrow things down." says Panther.

"Yeah, my bad. Just stop when Suit spots his kid."

Panther opens the door slowly, keeping his P90 close, checking all corners before moving through the dimly lit basement corridor. Nothing unexpected so far, a storeroom full of *product*, a small cupboard where the cleaning supplies are missing, and group bedroom areas with naked dirty mattresses of varying sizes. At the edge of another group bedroom, they find what looks like an adult *local* standing upright but motionless with his torso lunched forward. Panther sees used needles on the ground and says "Fentanyl zombie. Clear." as the group moves from the basement to the first floor.

The stairway upwards is blocked by various dusty and rotting furniture items, intended to keep the kids from escaping. They suspect the opposite stairway is behind better locks with more security as they try to peer through the small window on the door to find an open floor plan; stealth no longer being an option. Suit struggles to hear the conversation the squad is having over the sound of his beating pulse. Glass shatters, as he instinctively crouches and covers his head. The kids and young teens huddle to the ground below their worktables, as the *local security* shout instructions.

Panther enters quickly eliminating two with controlled spray. The shock of the noise freezes one of the untrained *local securities* while the other attempt to shoot back. Tiny and Tripod enters shooting controlled single fire. The frozen one slumps forward, as the one who attempted to shoot back clenches the trigger of the fully automatic AK-47 on his way down to the floor, shooting the nearby wall. More security responds to the unorthodox alarm. Even in the stairwell, Suit was struggling with the ringing of his ears. He fails to crawl up the few steps left as the loud automatic gunfire forces him to the ground. The loud uncontrolled weapon fire, ricochet shots, screams, and splinters are stopped by two different responses. Either quick controlled bursts, or loud two shots followed by a third. That quiet moment that follows is always broken by the sound of crying teenager or child, as they attempt to calm one another.

By the time Suit could stand up on his feet, the squad was already leaving for the second floor. Finding the railing of the stairwell, his grip tightens as he hears a loud “BANG!” followed by a series of successive automatic fire that was distinctively different from earlier. This pattern repeats across this floor, and by the third time Suit’s ears had somewhat acclimated. He finds the squad, leaning against the wall, all holding on to their *palm coolers*, sweat drenched yet with calm expressions. “Wanna open the fourth room?” Tiny asks, handing Suit a stun grenade. Suddenly he feels calm, he sees the training ground and his instructor, as his body automatically performs the motions necessary for a pin pull and follow up toss as the grenade flies down the hallway. This time he closely followed Tripod at the rear seeing the blinding muzzle flashes. His eyes sting, was that the light or the sweat? The sound wasn’t too bad this time either, he thought to himself.

By the time they went back to the stairwell, Saint had eliminated all the local security from the third floor as a mix of feminine looking children and teenagers quickly run away, some crying some elated. “Fun den?” Tiny asks on comms, followed by a nod. On the fourth and final floor the *local security* attempts to run away by blending into the group. Tiny grabs one of them from the crowd, carrying him by the neck to the central office. After some linguistically poor verbal exchanges, the kneeling security look towards a none-distinct door, while Panther secures the other rooms. Tripod checks all corners of the small room as Suit finds his teenage boy hiding under the bed. The thumbs up are signaled as the father hugs his son. They check for wounds and “other injuries”, to Suit’s relief his bosses somehow had influence, even here.

About 15 minutes later, Suit stands ready with his gun standing above the kneeling local.

"This is the third time my son has been kidnapped." Suit says ashamed.

"Got shit security?" Tiny asks.

"First was local mafia, an overstep caused by a communication error." Suit says walking away,

"Second was unpaid security, which was resolved once we found the guilty accountant."

He swiftly walks back and executes the kneeling local with a shot to the head.

A deep breath.

"This third was a completely avoidable mistake!" he says, "Now, their humiliation of me is complete. I too, am a *tourist*."

Sudden fire from Saint's rifle eliminates the final escaping local security.

"Does Saint hear us?" Suit asks.

Tiny nods.

"Pack your equipment Mr. Saint. We need not fear reinforcements. I commissioned two other mercenary groups to attack during the night to make sure this morning attack went smoothly."

Tiny gives Suit a skeptical glance.

"Suit, what do you do for a living?"

"Leverage buyout."

"Sorry?"

"Economic speak for *stealing from the working-class*."

A brief pause.

"Yes, I'm paying you with the very money I stole from people *like* you."

Another pause.

"I'm one of those who make the *working-class* poor, as my colleagues then offer them fentanyl. Partially to help keep the unemployment number low, while healthcare systems are saddled with endless bureaucracy to ensure the *working-class* savings are liquidated. I am a cogwheel in this very building. Eventually, I protested."

"And your superior made you an example."

Suit sighs.

"I'm not making that a routine."