

The Tenth of Av

Chapter One · Mike Wendland

Nobody told Ruben Ochoa anything, and that was the deal, and he'd signed for it.

Fourteen pages, in a construction trailer outside Beit Shemesh, across a folding table from a lawyer who wouldn't give his first name. The pages said Ochoa understood he was accepting an assignment whose nature and location would not be disclosed to him.

The woman running the room let the lawyer finish and then pulled a chair around backward and sat on it.

"You've done confined space."

"Eight years. Mine rescue, mostly. Some cave."

"How small?"

"How small have you got?"

She didn't smile. Ochoa had been in that trailer three days by then and he hadn't seen anybody smile at anything, including a joke one of the drivers made on the second morning that was, objectively, pretty good.

What they told him in the end came to four sentences.

Somebody's down a hole. He's been out of contact nine days. You're going in after him and you're bringing him out. And whatever you see when you come out the far end, you don't look at it, and you never ask anybody about it as long as you live.

"Far end of what?"

"The hole," she said.

"Ma'am, that's not an answer."

“I know it isn’t,” she said. “Sign the last page.”

The throat took twelve seconds and Ochoa counted them, because counting has kept him from panicking twice in his life.

Four feet of rock. A squeeze at the halfway point that he had to exhale through. Then his hands came out into open air and he pulled himself the rest of the way and rolled onto his back in the dirt with his heart going and lay there getting his breathing back.

Then he sat up and looked at the hillside across the wadi and stopped breathing again for a second.

There were terraces on it.

He had walked that ground at first light. He had stood on the other side of the same wadi four hours ago drinking coffee out of a thermos cup, looking at that exact hillside, and it had been bare. Scrub and rock and a goat track running along the contour and a cell tower on the ridge behind it.

Now there were six terraces up the face of it, dry-stone, in repair, with olives growing on them.

No cell tower.

Ochoa was thirty-four years old and he had been awake since two in the morning, and the thought he had was: I’m in the wrong place.

So he got the compass out. North was north. He got out the laminated card with the bearing and the pace count. He shot the broken tooth of limestone on the north ridge, the one landmark they had given him. It sat exactly where the card said it would sit, to the degree.

He checked it twice. He sat in the dirt with the compass in his hand for a while.

Then he got up and went to find the guy, because that was the job. The whole job.

Two hundred and six feet. He paced it going out and again coming back because he wanted the number right for the report, and it was the same both times, and it is the number in the file.

Marcus Oyelaran was lying on his side in the open with his face toward the hole.

Ochoa had come up on a lot of people in eight years and he knew from forty feet away, from the color and from the way the shoulder sat, but he went the last forty feet anyway at the same speed, because this was not a time to rush.

No wounds. No blood anywhere, on him or on the ground. Nothing broken that Ochoa could find, and he checked, and he was thorough about it. He gave all of that afterward at a steel table, to somebody who never gave his name.

What he could not get past was the kit.

It was beside him, squared up. Not dropped. Set down and squared, the way you do at the end of a shift. The water skin was three-quarters full. The food was in it, sealed, untouched. His boots were off and standing together next to the pack with the socks folded on top of them.

Two hundred feet from the only way home, with water and food and daylight, Oyelaran had taken his boots off and lain down facing the door. And died.

“Okay,” Ochoa said, to nobody. “Okay. All right.”

Then he saw the froth at the corner of the mouth, dried, pink, and a lot of it, and he sat back on his heels and stopped touching him.

He knew what that was. He had pulled two men out of a flooded mine tunnel in West Virginia in 2014 and one of them had looked like that and had been breathing at the time and had still died in the helicopter.

It comes from the lungs.

Ochoa put his hood up and sealed it and pulled a second pair of gloves on over the first. The procedure called for it. When they briefed him on that he had assumed somebody was being careful for the paperwork.

The carry took him fifty-five minutes and it should have taken fifteen.

Oyelaran went a hundred and eighty pounds and Ochoa is a hundred and sixty and the ground is loose and it runs uphill the whole way to the slab. He did it in stages, forty feet at a time, and at the third stop he sat down beside the man and looked back at the terraces on the far hillside.

Somebody had built those. Somebody had cut the stone and stacked it and carried the soil up and planted the trees and had been pruning them, recently, because the cuts were clean and you could see them from where he sat.

He looked at that for about a minute.

Then he got his hands under the man again and went on up the hill to the hole.

Getting a body through four feet of rock and a squeeze is not a thing that can be described respectfully. It took two hours. Two of them came in from the near side to take the weight at the far end. Nobody spoke the entire time except to say ready.

They put him in the bag at 15:40. Ochoa came out at 15:52 and stood up in a corrugated shed in the Judean foothills with a poured concrete floor and a strip light overhead, and a woman in a white suit took him by the shoulder and walked him backward into a tent.

He was in that tent for six weeks.

On the fourth day somebody finally came and sat down across from him.

She was about fifty. She had the suit on and the hood off and she had a folding chair. She brought it around and sat in it backward, exactly the way the woman in the trailer had. It occurred to Ochoa a long time later that the two of them had probably been trained by the same person.

“I’m going to ask you four questions and I need you to be exact. Don’t be helpful. Just be exact.”

“Okay.”

“Out there. Did you drink anything at all?”

“No.”

“Didn’t eat, didn’t put anything in your mouth, didn’t chew on anything.”

“No.”

“Did you touch him with bare skin at any point?”

Ochoa went back through it. The forty feet. The pulse check at the neck. The gloves, both pairs, on the whole time. He was certain and he said so.

“No. Why?”

She was quiet for a second too long. Ochoa never forgot the pause.

“Because whatever’s in his lungs is still alive,” she said.

Ruben Ochoa signed more pages on his way out of the country and he has kept every word of it ever since. None of this is from him.

It is from the file. The file runs to three hundred and eighty pages and it contains one photograph, taken at 15:31 on the fourth of October, 2019. It shows a man lying on his side in open ground with his face turned toward a hole in the rock. His boots are off and set together. His kit is squared up beside him. The water is still in the skin.

There is no second copy of that photograph. It sits in a safe in Maryland, inside a program whose name does not appear in any document at any classification, and getting cleared to look at it takes longer than getting cleared for most of what this country keeps as top secret.

Everybody who has looked at it has asked the same question. Nobody has answered it.

He had food. He had water. He had daylight, and two hundred feet of open ground, and he knew exactly where the door was.

Why did he take his boots off?

End of Chapter One