

**ARROWS
OF THE
LEVIATHAN**



JEREMY RAY

DOOLEY

ARROWS OF THE LEVIATHAN PREVIEW

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All the characters and companies in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons or corporations, living or dead is purely coincidental.

V.1

Colophon:

Minion Pro is used for the text. Headlines are set in Aviano Future.



PROLOGUE

IN 2020, the world's economies collapsed. The cost of food and energy skyrocketed to unimaginable levels. The nations of the world ground to a halt. The people desperately cried out and demanded their leaders provide answers.

Amid the chaos, a mysterious new cryptocurrency became adopted as a de-facto world currency. Commonly known as the Ducat, it provided a shelter from confiscation and the means to anonymously transfer money, establish contracts and provided marketplaces for assets, goods and services.

*But the stabilization provided by the Ducat was for naught. After three years of chaos, the world's politicians, blaming the crisis on income inequality, unveiled **Central Planning Committee for the Equitable Distribution of Wealth**, a worldwide government ultimately requiring all nations and people of the world to be subject to the laws and taxes of the **CPC**. The new organization, amidst other shows of power, immediately declared the cryptocurrency illegal. Despite the opposition, the Ducat continued to thrive outside of the law.*

And then emerged the Emerson Corporation, introducing a world changing innovation: an inexpensive, environmentally friendly and easily transported form of energy. With the power hold of the elites in question, everyone watches to see how the CPC will react. As a threat to the strength of the CPC, will the new energy see the same fate as the now illegal cryptocurrency?

ONE

MAY 7, 2024

0200 Z

PORTREE, ISLAND OF SKYE

SCOTLAND

A town in a quiet part of Scotland, Portree was known for its beautiful scenery. Surrounded by lush greenery on three sides, the little town's harbor sat on a deep loch that lead to the ocean. A cobbled pathway made up a waterfront, and during the day tourists strolled happily beside multi-colored stuccoed houses. There were just a few hundred plain townhomes, none more than three stories high.

A bell tolled softly as waves rocked a buoy. As the evening darkened, cool air from the sea moved over the sun-warmed land, covering it for the night. It rolled in like a thick carpet, blanketing the area in an ethereal mist. Fog so thick, one could feel the oppressive and heavy moisture. Even the fingertips of an outstretched hand were difficult to see.

Despite the damp fog, a man patrolled the wet cobblestones. Seemingly on alert, he paced to and fro in front of a plain, somewhat dilapidated house facing the village harbor. Dressed in a London Fog great coat replete with a warm hood, he never felt the temperature change. His mind was focused on his task and his eyes darted to find the source of every sound. The man held a submachine gun inside his coat, ready for use. Outside this house, he protected the interests of those inside. Their cause was his cause. The fact they paid him generously was a bonus.

The guarded house faced outward to the loch and from the street looked abandoned. In a dimly lit second story room, Leonard Cromwell peered at a computer screen that pulsed with life. Across the screen, a complex visualization of the process he was engaged danced and weaved. His pop-bottle thick glasses reflected a mass of information spilling across the screen. Cromwell needed to perch precariously on a shabby chair to keep his tall, beanpole frame erect. He wore an ancient and threadbare argyle sweater, the colors faded after years of heavy use. This favorite argyle, a holdover from his London years, was now wholly insufficient for the task of keeping him warm in the damp clime.

In another life, Cromwell had emerged unscathed from the dot-com crash of 2000 with a tremendous fortune, managing to sell his tech company just before the collapse. The man had decided to study the dismal science and had worked to be a professor at the London School of Economics. After achieving that goal, he had decided academia was a waste. From that point, he had floundered a bit, starting his own fantastically successful hedge fund and investing in world changing technology. By midlife, he grew weary of his passive role and choose a different path. A path that combined his entrepreneurial spirit, political outlook and computer skills.

The two men standing behind Cromwell were not technical wizards. They were experts in the art of intimidation and its follow-through. Cromwell looked ever so shabby and slovenly in contrast to Beckett DeGroot. With his military bearing, small sub-machine gun and shaved head, he created an air of intensity. The man loomed over the seated Cromwell as he undertook his computer borne maneuvers. The South African chomped on a cigar under his thick mustache, but other than that one vice, DeGroot stood stoic and unemotional. He was taller than the average man, closer to six foot five. Beckett was muscular, his bulging biceps covered in black tattoos. His vein-laced forearms always seemed ready to unsheathe the omnipresent machete strapped to his back. There was something about Beckett that inspired fear, a fear that seemed to be emanating from his rich dark green eyes. At first, DeGroot had found it hard to make a living in the real world, apart from the trade he first learned as an 18-year-old. His military service, so many years ago in Pretoria had shaped him into the man he was today. Loyalty. Training. Discipline. Those were the things that were important to DeGroot.

South Africa had not been the right place for him and upon leaving, he had entered a world in which he belonged. He slid into place in the mercenary world like a key fit into a lock...or a knife into a chest. He worked in the field of battle, he had thrived off creating rivers of blood in his quest for revenge, in the

search for purpose and a country. Those lawless and wasteful days were past. Cromwell's goal was now his goal. DeGroot both trusted and respected Cromwell.

DeGroot's Ghanan deputy looked on. Complete with a mohawk, the man was somber and enormous. Like DeGroot, he was impeccably groomed. Unlike DeGroot, he was completely silent. In fact, for the last two weeks, neither men heard this man say more than three to four words at a time. His eyes, however, were alive and alert.

Beckett had met the Ghanan just two weeks prior. Cromwell had provided the introduction, convincing DeGroot the man shared their ideals and had skills that would be of use to them. Upon Cromwell's recommendation, DeGroot had explained to his new deputy he stood to gain a lot of money, and his skill with the sniper rifle would truly matter to all humanity.

DeGroot's own experiences had taught him that motivation and incentives were key, and he wanted to ensure those under him were properly encouraged across the spectrum. To DeGroot, that was a matter of trust. At this point in his life, DeGroot was motivated solely by duty, but he'd come to a sad realization that not all men were like him. The more incentives for the men under his command, the more he could trust them. That also was one of the guiding principles of the organization the men gathered in the room represented. The Liberari.

Perhaps the most interesting thing in this room was not the men inside, but a small box plugged into an ancient LCD monitor. About the size of a man's hand, it pulsed with an almost alien blue light. An eerie sound quite unlike a computer's electrical hum emanated from the device.

The Englishman continued to work intently on his task, and sweat poured down from the Brit's wild looking hair. Cromwell knew he looked as though he hadn't showered for days. His nerves were well and truly shot, he surmised. More than that, Cromwell found the cigar smoke wafting around him irritating and disgusting, but there was much he chose to put up with from a man with as much skill and drive as DeGroot. Despite being close to his friends, he was on the edge. "How have things deteriorated to this point?" he asked himself aloud.

DeGroot's patience was wearing thin. "We're overdue. It's never taken this long before. There's something wrong."

"The CPC has been busy. It's taking Genesis longer to break through the firewalls. The key generation is complete, but they haven't all been distributed. Five more minutes." Cromwell explained. His tone was optimistic, but his posture at the computer indicated defeat.

"By now they've got our location!" DeGroot fumed.

"They've had it for the last 7 minutes," came the distracted rejoinder from the slender professor.

An alarm tone split the air. With a tap of the screen, Cromwell brought up a new display and showed it to the military man. "Genesis has intercepted traffic on the CPC military band. Incoming military assets."

DeGroot pointed to the blinking red marks on the monitor. "How many."

The tall man studied the flickering LCD. "One counterterrorism team on a stealth chopper." Cromwell turned to face DeGroot and their eyes met. "A destroyer has also been routed to our location."

DeGroot nodded to his quiet companion. The Ghanan exited the room without a word, hefting a large sniper rifle he had left leaning beside the door frame. He knew what he had to do, and headed into the bleak fog.

DeGroot thought through the situation. The chopper, manned by an elite squad of SAS men would arrive first. The destroyer? Well, that was another matter entirely. All in due time. The fellow outdoors would have his hands full, but it was good that he was not alone. A skilled marksman was also hidden in the fog. The sniper's thermal recognition goggles would allow him to take out the CPC team long before they reached this upstairs room. The whole group would just have enough time to disappear into the mist before the destroyer arrived. His men would put this counter-terrorist team in the morgue. It was a sordid business, and DeGroot took no pleasure in it. DeGroot now had a reputation, one that had kept him busy for the last few years. Soon, soon, it would be over. There would be rest, and there would be peace.

The sound of swishing blades cut through the town. A highly classified stealth helicopter with a full suite of features to minimize visual, radar and acoustic signatures swooped over its destination. Despite the stealthy features of the helicopter, it still made enough noise to rouse a few citizens from their beds but not enough to entice them to enter the dense, cold fog outside.

Over a small courtyard near the rear of the sleepy village, the pilot expertly held the humming helicopter two stories off the ground. Had any of the villagers still been paying attention, they would have seen six dark and mysterious men drop down coiled ropes and roll into crouched positions.

"Alpha team in position, move out on my signal," whispered the CPC commando's leader, Major Dirk Handley. The fog, Dirk thought, would provide the perfect cover as they crept toward this nest of terrorists. He watched as the helicopter pilot pulled away, glad to be done with his part of the mission and eager to down a few pints back at base.

"They're a well-oiled machine," assured Dirk's commander, a General Maximilian Karneas, when the major had first met his new command. "The best of the best." Prior to being folded into the CPC special reaction force known as Javelin, some of Major Handley's team members had performed these actions a thousand times before as Special Air Service commandos in service to the Queen. From the dust of Iraq to the scrub of Africa, they had seen it all. But that was a different time. The team was no longer made up of English officers. Instead it was a multinational force. Cobbled together from various nationalities, the Javelin squad had been in operation just a few scant months, and their training had been fraught with misunderstandings and a realization that their capabilities were widely disparate. But a few of Handley's

SAS men were with him. It was strange to be seemingly at home but still under threat. His men were on edge, but they reached their target swiftly and began to take up attack positions.

A local suddenly opened the back door to a pub, spilling golden light and noise out into the street. "Is that you, Har-" There was a quiet crack.

"Bollocks!" yelled Dirk into his headset. "That was a friendly!" The nearest CPC man, an Indonesian by the name of Soweto, pulled the body into the shadows.

A louder crack resonated from nearby. A CPC commando dropped with a thud to the cobblestones.

"Sniper! Get down!"

There was a burst of automatic gunfire, and another CPC man hit the floor. The rest of the commandos ran for cover, returning fire, still unsure where the sniper was hiding. The placid village then erupted with the sounds of a raging firefight as the CPC commandoes proceeded to unload their weapons at anything that moved.

Dirk was out of his element. While his experienced SAS comrades showed their mettle, the rest of his untrained men were panicking. He had to bring them back into control. "Bravo lead, take point behind the fountain, get our sniper into position! Alpha team, maintain cover fire!" Handley screamed into his headset. He wondered how this simple operation had lost two of his best men and the life of an innocent in the flash of a moment. As if in a dream, he saw one of the silenced bullets from his C8 Carbine put an end to an enemy wearing a thick trench coat and carrying a KRISS Vector submachine gun. Two of his men gained flanking positions and crept into the house.

Six of my best men, thousands of hours of training, and here they were, to die in the middle of nowhere in the Scottish highlands? There had better be a bloody good reason. As soon as we've dealt with this, I'll make whoever's responsible spill the beans.

From above, DeGroot watched the battle with the air of an ancient Roman tactician. He knew it wouldn't take long for the Javelin operators to find him here despite Cromwell's best efforts. People were so predictable, especially hunters. He heard the front door open, then close quietly behind two enemy

commandos. DeGroot pulled a grenade from a deep pocket. With a yank, he removed the pin and casually dropped it over the side of the balcony into the room below. He could hear the panic in the frantic muffled voices downstairs as he stepped into a decrepit bedroom and shut the door firmly behind him.

The explosion shook the frame, and a grim look crossed DeGroot's face as he thought of the confusion that was happening below in the mind of the leader of this ill-fated attack. "Probably didn't expect a fight, did he?" he mused as the dust from the explosion filtered under the mahogany door. "Ah well, time to end this." DeGroot reached for the Vector SMG hanging around his neck, opened a window and began firing at the two remaining targets in the courtyard area.

Dirk hissed orders into his headset. *Four men down and only one poor bodyguard to show for it.* There was nothing Dirk wanted more than to eliminate this terrorist, this man about to turn their hard-fought order on its head. "Bravo lead, rocket fire, top floor, second window." A raised arm signaled the order had been received, and two seconds later an enormous roar echoed across the cobbles. The rocket raced towards the house.

Seeing the rocket, DeGroot had already hit the floor. The missile blew the back bedroom to shards of stone, covering him in dust and rubble.

Cromwell appeared, seemingly oblivious to the chaos and disorder around him. DeGroot looked through a hole that had opened into the room where Cromwell had been working. A twisted piece of metal had pierced the decrepit old chair that Cromwell had been sitting on, but the slender Brit was nonplussed. In Cromwell's hand he held the small blue box still pulsing with light.

"Distributed transactions are secure. The network is stable. Let's go, if you please."

"Why the two-dollar words all the time?" DeGroot muttered. "Can't he just say what he means?" The South African frowned at Cromwell, but at this point he was used to the unusual mannerisms of his companion. DeGroot reached for his headset call button. "Return to the dinghy, heading back to *Arkangel*." Still hidden but his cover blown, the sniper picked up his Accuracy International AX338 sniper rifle and began to make his way towards the inflatable dinghy moored along the harbor wall.

Major Dirk Handley took a deep breath. Time was running out, and Dirk feared that the mission had failed. The lull in the fighting allowed him to hear the waves in the harbor lapping gently in the darkness, and the CPC commando took a risk and peered out over the water. He saw a rubber dinghy, moored to a harbor pier. At that moment, he knew what the terrorist's next move would be. Dirk took the chance to sprint towards the dinghy. His footsteps echoed loudly in the cold air, one knock on the cobblestones after the next.

At that moment, DeGroot and Cromwell began their dash to freedom across the road. The cobbles shined faintly in the light of the few street lamps that dotted the harbor's edge. DeGroot and Cromwell both jumped into the dinghy, joined soon after by DeGroot's sniper, making for three substantial men in this small watercraft. DeGroot untied the vessel and threw the rope to shore.

DeGroot spotted a figure dashing towards them, his outline nothing more than a dark shadow. DeGroot quickly pulled his firearm and opened fire on the soldier, shells from his automatic weapons splashing faintly as they were consumed by the harbor's waves, swept away and never to be seen again. The warrior fell backward, maimed or dead.

While DeGroot was emptying rounds at the CPC commando, the Ghanan sniper took the wheel. He turned the key in the dinghy's ignition and the watercraft roared to life, its motor roaring in the dark night.

All were grateful for DeGroot's experienced eye and sharp aim, but the Liberari men wondered and feared whether they would fall victim to the perils of the night or make it back home safely. The Liberari soldier turned the wheel sharply and sent the dinghy speeding out into the harbor. As waves splashed up and over the dinghy's walls, DeGroot looked out across the harbor. The waters weren't as calm as he'd hoped.

A monumental destroyer rounded a bend into the harbor. A top of the line Type 45 British destroyer, its angular stealth hull loomed above the water, its engine churning the water frothy in its wake. Two searchlights suddenly fired up, each a glaring beacon in the Scottish night. The beams swept from one side of the ship to the other, carefully scouring the waves.

DeGroot acknowledged the hulking destroyer with a slow whistle. He looked at his companions and shook his head solemnly. "This will be tight," he said to his comrades, who nodded in affirmation.

Cromwell continued with his nonplussed attitude, but the younger, greener sniper was unused to watercraft and promptly tossed his cookies into the waves.

Suddenly, the destroyer opened fire. An enormous flash of light that outshone even the searchlights emitted from one of the destroyer's massive cannons. A sound loud enough to match the brightness of the flash erupted from the ship, and the commandos all tensed in the small dinghy. A large plume of water jetted up into the air.

“Warning shots. They need us alive,” Cromwell declared, unmoved, standing forward and erect like some sort of heroic British general in a World War II film. The dinghy began to make evasive maneuvers as more rounds fired from the destroyer's main gun, each shot accompanied by some harrowing near-misses. Freezing water splashed the commandos as they gritted their teeth and continued their evasive maneuvers.

Without warning, a massive submarine breached directly in front of them. The massive ship splashed down like an enormous killer whale, making for an impressive display. The *Arkangel*, their avenger, lived up to its name. Gargantuan clamshell doors opened just aft of its conning tower, and the rubber dinghy steered itself to slide directly into the *Arkangel*'s retrieval bay.

THREE

DeGroot and Cromwell walked in to an unusually tense atmosphere on the command bridge of the *Arkangel*. The command crew, usually reassured by the duo's presence and experience, now barely noticed them. As the destroyer bore down on them, all assembled focused on their tasks at their stations. Some of them seemed a little uneasy, but they were alert. There had been close squeezes before, but this was perhaps the most danger they had ever faced. Bearing down on them was a top-of-the-line British warship.

Cromwell wondered about them, his crew. He reflected for a moment on their families and children, who their friends were, and if they had considered they would be in serious peril. Sure, they had all trained for this day, but reality was a far cry from any training exercise.

Even though Cromwell was a tall man, he was not built like the soldiers and sailors around him. Though he was their leader, Cromwell was not the alpha in the room. That honor belonged to DeGroot. Cromwell radiated force of character and was respected for his genius level of intelligence, but he was not known for making quick decisions.

The bridge, despite being lined with pipes and instrument panels, was one of the most spacious areas in the submarine. Few on board had clearance to be there, and with the addition of DeGroot and Cromwell there were only six men present. Nonetheless, it felt claustrophobic.

The captain glanced up from where he stood in the middle of the deck, feet widespread and hands behind his back. He was a middle-aged man whose impassive face, lean figure, and gruff manner displayed his years of military leadership and command. His uniform was pristine, the folds sharp, the buttons gleaming. To complete the caricature, he bore a salt-and-pepper beard of intermediate length.

"We've already submerged," he said gruffly. "We have a firing solution for the destroyer. It's closing on our position and will have a fix on us shortly."

The hollow sound that always filled the submarine echoed unpleasantly in DeGroot's ears. Most sailors learned to tune it out after a few days, but in times like this it asserted itself. It accentuated the anxious footfalls and heavy breathing of the crew as they rushed around, preparing to fire. The sounds of the instruments were louder than usual. Even the needles on the gauge panels seemed to tick as they moved back and forth.

DeGroot gave a slight nod at the captain's words.

Cromwell lifted his chin and tightened his jaw, his body radiating his dissent even before his reply. He looked to DeGroot. "Find another way." Cromwell's mind couldn't work out how it had come to this. He wished he were any place else but here. What he wouldn't give to go back to before, back before this had started.

DeGroot heard the emotion in Cromwell's voice despite his attempt to control his tone. He ignored it, knowing he could offer his friend no reassurance. There were no other options and no more time. DeGroot's hand shook, but his voice did not waver.

"We've no choice. They're blocking the harbor. There is no way out."

"There has to be another way!" Cromwell pressed, his voice filled with desperation. He took an anxious step forward. "There has to be..."

DeGroot was a man who lived by a code dictated by reason. He despised emotion and tried his best to purge it from his body, but now it was a losing battle. He felt his temper flare. This wasn't the time to expect the impossible; it was fight or die. DeGroot clenched his fists. He emphasized each word as he hissed, "There is no way out of here except through that ship."

He paused, then added quietly, "Freedom has a price. We knew this day would come."

Cromwell just stared, feeling lost. Emotion after emotion flickered across his face. With those words, Cromwell felt like he had lost something valuable. At least he didn't have to be the one to give the command. No, that was on DeGroot's shoulders.

DeGroot nodded at him curtly, not willing to show that he too felt the despair evident on Cromwell's face. He said a small prayer to himself as he turned to the weapons officer. The South African blew out a breath and straightened up to his full height. "Fire."

The *Arkangel* fired a VA-111 Shkval, a missile of the ocean. After a prior close call, the crew of the *Arkangel* had concluded it was time to acquire defensive armament. Through DeGroot's contacts, they found a shady FSB agent in St. Petersburg who could make a few torpedoes disappear from the Russian arsenal.

The weapon was designed to create a gas bubble by deflecting the water from the nose cone, and by keeping water from coming into contact with the torpedo, drag was nonexistent. This design allowed for a rocket engine to propel the Shkval at 230 miles per hour.

The torpedo found its target and hit the HMS *Dauntless* with staggering force. Cromwell braced himself as the *Arkangel* rocked from the massive explosion and he felt the shockwave vibrate through the submarine.

Flames from the wreck reflected on the water and bathed the Scottish Harbor in a red glow. The water surged with waves filled with debris.

Underwater, the *Arkangel* cruised by the burning shell of the ship that had once carried hundreds of lives. The sub traveled toward the vast Atlantic and the refuge the abyss ahead afforded. They were free of the threat, but Cromwell felt something akin to physical pain. He thought only of the lives that he had just extinguished.

FOUR

EIGHT HOURS LATER

MAY 7, 2024

1030 Z

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Lazy streams of gold light appeared through the tiny slit of a window. Dawn slowly filtered across the jail cell, creeping up on its sole occupant.

A man sat alone, his eyes red from hours of weeping. He had been awake all night, hoping the dawn would come and wash away his anguish. Daniel Locke rubbed his hand across the stubble on his chin, massaging what was probably a colorful bruise blooming across his jawline. He was a powerfully built man who stood six feet four inches. He commanded respect, and whenever he walked into a room his presence was noticed. His closely cropped blond hair, strong jawline, and intense blue eyes drew attention. He was the kind of person that people wanted to be near. And yet, despite these physical qualities, Daniel Locke was a quiet man who rarely spoke. He lived a hard life, a life of sacrifice, duty, and honor. Though he had seen much death, his eyes were not dulled and uncaring. They had a sharp kindness to them.

The contrast between the man and the room could not be starker.

Unidentifiable dirt covered the walls. Not a single piece of the furniture was free from graffiti and scratches. The blood that covered Locke's shirt didn't look out of place from the stains on the bedding, and only his tears served to clean the room. The room appeared that it had not been cleaned in months, maybe years. Piss, vomit and blood from past occupants discolored every inch of the floor, but somehow the stench usually associated with such decor was absent.

A patch of red on his shirtsleeve caught his eye and he plucked at the fabric. Did the blood belong to him or someone else? He couldn't remember. He shook the thoughts from his head and sat trying not to think about the dirty prison he found himself in. The sun rose and threw the cell into sharper relief. He attempted to think of anything else than the little predicament he'd gotten himself into.

FIVE

ABOUT A YEAR EARLIER

JULY 6TH, 2023

1237 Z

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

McLaren's was always busy, day or night. The downtown location played its part, as did the two-for-one deals. The noisy hubbub and cheap drinks made it a favorite weekend haunt of Daniel and Gideon's when they were in Washington, an occurrence that seemed all too common.

Their perky waitress gave them a knowing wink as she guided them through the throngs of heavily drinking lawyers and single women looking for C-Suite catches to a table toward the back of the bar. The two had been in town for just a few days and were practically fresh off the plane. Both had changed into civilian clothes, jeans and button-down shirts. Although dressed up, both still looked rough and hardened by the sun, their faces scruffy and unshaven. Daniel had a few new scars around his neck and face, and he looked down at his hands as they walked in. They were rough and calloused, and he felt out of place.

The bar was a relatively pleasant establishment that many locals enjoyed on weekends. The duo liked it because it was not some seedy dive bar and not over the top. It had a good vibe, Daniel had noted one night. Gideon had guffawed at Daniel's rather unusual and uncharacteristic word choice. The middle-class crowd liked to chat and have some fun, and it was not the usual D.C. establishment with an endless discourse of politics. It was homey, and that made it comfortable to talk and relax.

The two friends sat down and ordered some drinks. They both still had “the squint” from looking across sunny desert landscapes for months. No amount of protective eye gear could block out the harshest rays of the Iraqi desert, not by a long shot.

The bar was divided equally among groups of men and women, and Daniel looked around and noticed a beautiful girl sitting with some girlfriends, chatting casually.

She saw him from across the bar with her dark eyes and gave him a slight smile. Gently flipping her dark long hair to the side, she greeted Daniel with a nod of her head. The light color of her two-piece suit emphasized the lovely bronze color of her skin. She was slender and graceful, like a dancer.

Lebanese, he thought to himself, entranced. Daniel did not give the women surrounding her a second glance. From that moment, he saw only her.

"It's that girl again," Daniel said. He gave a strained smile and fiddled with the drink the bartender had placed in front of him.

"She's a beaut. Go get her."

"Nah, she's the Capitol hill type. They don't hang out with grunts."

"I know, too smart for you." Gideon smiled in his lackadaisical way and went back to sipping his drink.

"Careful, I watch your back in dangerous places." Daniel was only half-joking. He was trying his best not to stare at the beautiful woman or think about her. Gideon laughed and shook his head.

"Maybe it's too soon anyway," Daniel said. "We just got back from the sand."

"Do what you gotta do, man." Gideon had learned long ago Daniel took advice from no man. He took another sip from his beer.

The music stopped, and in between songs Daniel felt building anticipation. He looked back and saw the girl as she approached the bar to grab another drink. *Now or never*, he thought. Gulping as he gathered his courage, he stood and walked up to her as she waited for her drink.

"How's it going?" he asked.

He smiled his best smile, but he knew it looked strained. She looked at him, and for a moment he thought there was a small sneer on her face. If it was there, she quickly dismissed it, then smiled curiously.

"You look like you just come back from somewhere," she said.

"Northern Iraq," Daniel said. He tried not to sound bitter. He looked into the distance over her head. The bar had a display of local history, and he pretended to look at it.

"How interesting. I work for Senator Westmore Cowell. We were briefed today by General Samson. He says the stabilization is going very well." She smiled with evident pride in her job and career choice.

Suddenly forgetting where he was, Daniel retorted, "I don't know who you're hearing that from." It came out louder and harder than he meant it to. "It's an absolute mess, genocide waiting to happen."

"What?" The shocked look on her face might have been comical in another situation.

"All your hearings are coming through the filter of people who will do anything to look good," he said, his romantic curiosity momentarily blocked by a dark cloud.

Sana was taken aback, but she was also deeply curious to hear the unfiltered truth. "Look, let's talk over here." She pointed toward a darker corner of the bar.

They took a quick look around, then slid into a private booth. Tall wooden divisions cut them off from the rest of the bar. Daniel tugged nervously at his collar, then slid onto the scarred wooden bench seat.

Sana Kuri noted that Daniel was a tall man but still built like an athlete. Probably some college football, she thought. The booth was a bit of a tight squeeze for him. Broad in the shoulders, narrow at the waist, his eyes were kind, a pale blue that hinted at vulnerability belied by his square jaw and strong features.

She sat primly, knees together, back straight. She was stunning, he thought, but distant. Her dark hair hung in shining curls around her shoulders. She wore a dark blue tailored suit and black pumps. Her only concession to the heat was that she wore no stockings. She wore little makeup, but what she did wear was impeccable. The faintest hint of perfume reached him, something exotic and exciting. It seemed as if she never perspired, as if nothing could break her calm composure.

"I guess I should introduce myself. Daniel Locke. I've been in Northern Iraq with a Special Forces team for the last three months."

"Sana Kuri. I guess you already know who I work for." She stopped and regarded him for a moment, and decided the man was not just making a play. He had information she needed. An insider like this could make or break her career. "Let's dispense with the formalities. I'll cut to the chase. I'm very interested to hear what you have to say."

"Well, let me start with this." Daniel reclined a bit and lowered his voice. "The Kurds have no desire whatsoever to have anything to do with the Iraqis. Without a doubt, they will declare their independence in a very short time."

Before Sana could respond with her burning follow-up, a waiter arrived and rudely interrupted to take their order. The two replied with their drink preferences, if only to get on with the conversation. After the waiter had left, Sana let out a low whistle, her dark eyes widening. "We are hearing that the Kurds are happy with the status quo and that they are not agitating towards that end at all."

Daniel couldn't believe she bought that story. Regardless of his lack of history with the beautiful woman sitting across from him, he wasn't going to let her mollify him with fabrications.

Daniel shook his head impatiently and ran his fingers through his dark, short-cropped hair. "That's probably what they're hearing from the Kurdish leadership. But that's not the reality on the ground. Mid-level officers speak openly of a fully independent Kurdish nation. To be frank, it's about time."

He spread his hands, as if to apologize for his lack of restraint. He could see Sana raise her eyebrows as she realized that this wasn't the easy brush-off that she was so used to receiving. She hadn't realized that Daniel wasn't just a pretty face, with his chiseled jaw line and inexpensive clothes. It made her feel slightly uncomfortable in her prim skirt and neat blouse.

Sana shook her head, her brow knit with concern. "Well, that would not be in the interest of my boss," she countered. "He's really gone out on a limb with this stabilization plan." She tapped her fingers on the scarred tabletop in a quick, soft staccato. He noticed her nails — short, painted a dark red.

He scowled. "So freedom through independence is no longer in the interests of the United States?" Daniel couldn't believe that the corruption had spread this far and was reasonably sure that he had utterly failed to keep the contempt out of his voice.

"With the CPC coming into existence, no. More fragmentation is not in the interest of the CPC administration efforts. We need fewer nations, not more."

With that definitive statement, she reached into her dark brown leather handbag, rummaged for a second and produced a business card and pen. The pen was silver, heavy, and likely expensive. In her clipped, businesslike script, she wrote her personal cell number on the back and reached across the table, tucking the card into Daniel's top pocket.

The waiter returned with their drinks and started to say something, so Daniel reached up and grabbed Sana's hand, holding it until the waitress retreated to find more talkative clients.

"I appreciate your candor," smiled Sana, unsure how she felt about having this rough man hold her hand like this. Her boss would be furious, she knew, but part of her had always enjoyed breaking the rules and marching to the beat of her own drum. At this moment, she wasn't sure what that beat was.

Daniel considered her dark brown eyes. "I'm off tomorrow," he said with a grin. "What would you like to do?"

She leaned toward him, her body language changing. She smiled at him. It was a warm smile, and genuine. There was a long pause. "I like to hike," she said, her statement a tentative invitation.

Daniel grinned. "I know just the right place for it," he replied.

He looked over to see Gideon beaming. No doubt he'd be full of comments about Daniel's "game." It was tough having a married friend. Daniel stifled a smile.

A YEAR LATER

MAY 7, 2024

1030 Z

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Locke sat with his head in hands, unable to accept that he was in this situation. He was broken. Here he was, waiting for the gummed-up wheels of justice to slowly turn him out of this cesspit of a cell.

Footsteps echoed down the dark hall and Daniel looked up for the first time. A stout man approached wearing a police uniform, complete with the now standard heavy armor that went with the job. Daniel remembered when police officers carried just handguns and rarely wore body armor.

A sudden flash ran through his brain as he realized that the guard was walking for his cell. Another time, another day, another country and Daniel would have been ready with an escape plan. But this was his country. Daniel had spent most of his life overseas fighting for the United States Army, eventually as a member of the counterterrorism team Delta Force. After that, he had worked freelance for the CIA with his friend Gideon. He had been in many a tight scrape with some very nasty characters but had never been captured. He was mentally prepared and even trained to resist as a prisoner of war. Nothing, however, had prepared him to be a prisoner of his own nation.

Daniel didn't move as the cop peered into the cell. His eyes darted from one side to the next, his thick brow furrowed. A jerk of his chin in Daniel's direction was accompanied by a whisper. "Get up. We gotta go," whispered the guard, much to Daniel's surprise. The quiet voice suggested something unusual, whilst the baton said "do what I tell you" in a much louder voice. "Come on! Follow me!"

A keycard appeared in his hand from a pocket. Daniel stood but hesitated. Was this a trick? Stranger still was the quiet whir and click before the door swung open. The officer had to wave Daniel on before he moved again. He hadn't spent too much time in jail cells, but he was pretty sure this was not how things generally went.

A firm grip took his left arm. The officer pushed him along the hallway and through the station. It was bustling far more than it had last night. The hum of conversation, phones, and general office activity reverberated within the station's walls. All seemed to quiet in his speedy passing. Wide eyes and whispers followed him and his escort. He tried to swing around, swearing he had heard his name whispered. The police station went silent as he and the guard entered a main room. Two officers, who had been debating the weekend's football, stopped open-mouthed, their coffee cups halfway to their mouths.

The guard led him through a series of narrow corridors, ignoring the wide-eyed stares of every police officer they walked past. The passage ended at a door marked "Emergency Exit," which the guard pushed open, leading to a darkened alleyway. The emerging dawn couldn't reach this far down into the city at any time of day. The iron hand of the cop propelled him forward right out the back door into an alley as dirty and dark as his cell had been.

The officer stood half in the doorway, another furtive look darting down the alleyway. The same concerned look narrowed his eyes. "Listen, you were never here." He gave Daniel another small shove. "Move. I understand that you have a job to get to," he growled.

Daniel looked up the alley toward the street. Part of him urged him to run toward freedom, the other left him frozen and dumbfounded. He looked back at the cop. "What's going on?"

The policeman looked over his shoulder before replying in a whisper as if someone might be eavesdropping. "Look, apparently you've got some pretty powerful friends. He wanted you to know his name was Markus Gallery. Mean anything to you?"

Another glance urged him to continue. "He also told me to tell you this." He stopped now, over-articulating as if Daniel might be too dumb to understand. "You have a job to do. For Sana."

Locke's eyes flew open in surprise and appreciation. For the first time this morning Daniel felt something more than numbness and confusion. The name Markus Gallery meant nothing to him, but it struck him like a gunshot. He was determined to remember that name as long as he lived. He ran a hand through his hair as he contemplated the situation, still in shock. He hardly heard anything as the cop continued to speak.

"Listen, they paid enough to make sure that everyone in the know could set up their kids for a long time! Ducats. Not CPC dollars!" The guard's eyes almost glittered with the thought of the price he was being paid.

Daniel gazed at him from a few steps away and then at the alley as if he'd only just seen his surroundings. "What?"

The guard hissed through his teeth and gestured for the bloodied man to leave, pointing him toward the street. "Get moving!" The cop smiled and closed the emergency door with a quiet click behind him. Daniel stood alone in the alley. His first few steps were tentative, but they came quicker as he headed toward the street.

SEVEN

TWO HOURS LATER.

MAY 7, 2024

1230 Z

DULLES, VIRGINIA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Daniel couldn't believe his luck. Less than 24 hours ago, he had been sitting in the most disgusting jail cell that he had ever been in, and now here he was, a free man pulling up outside Obama International Airport.

Daniel thanked the cab driver and pulled his battered tactical pack from the trunk of the car. As always, it attracted a few curious stares from the travelers pulling along their slick Samsonites on wheels. This bag had seen him through his fair share of adventures and foreign destinations. One boring day in the Syrian Desert, he personified the pack and began to refer to it as Alice, his faithful companion. This raised more than a few eyebrows and elicited a cursory conversation with the unit's shrink. The patches and badges were testaments to the last decade of hard use that Daniel and his trusty bag Alice had been through.

A quick glance at his watch told Daniel that despite the cabbie's best effort, he was still going to be running. He hoisted the bag onto his shoulder and broke into a jog, murmuring apologies at the passengers around him as he brusquely knocked them out of his way.

Huffing through the airport, Daniel dodged travelers milling about. Hardly anyone could afford to travel by air, and the CPC security bureaucracy was lazy and ineffective, but by some miracle, the security line

was short. Daniel held his breath when he passed over his passport to the officer, but the security man decided to skip the interrogation. Daniel was waved on with a bored-looking flop of the hand.

After passing the millimeter wave scanner, Daniel did a quick check to his left. Gate one. Gate 14 was his destination. Almost there. His heart pounded. He couldn't afford to miss this flight. If he got out of the country, he would feel a lot safer. Even if some bureaucrat realized his mistake he'd probably be safe, away from the reach of domestic law enforcement.

He wasn't excited about what awaited him at the other end, and for a moment, Daniel wondered if he ought to be fleeing in the other direction. His mind was filled with emotions and thoughts, a strange feeling for a man who rarely saw shades of grey. At this moment, he felt somewhat disgusting, and he'd give anything for a shower and shave. He pushed forward, mostly because couldn't let down his best friend, Gideon. He hoisted Alice higher on his shoulder, pushed onward and thought of his lovely Sana. Daniel danced nimbly around a wandering toddler, and the child wailed as the big man came close. Daniel thought back to just this morning, and considered the name Markus Gallery. That morning in jail seemed like another lifetime and he grimaced, wondering just how many more close calls he could handle.

Gate 13. Daniel could hear engines roaring to life outside as the Emerson Transportation EA-258 Saga Transport flexed its variable geometry wings and prepared to take flight.

As Daniel approached the entryway, he saw a familiar figure waving at him, hurrying him along the corridor. Gideon Caro would stand out in most places with his six-foot six running back frame. His skin was a dark ebony that made his straight pearly white teeth glow whenever he grinned, accentuated by his slight goatee. He was dressed in khakis and a tight-fitting shirt that was so snug Daniel worried that he would pop out of it, Hulk style, if he turned in the wrong direction. Gideon also sported headphones which Daniel knew played not music, but sermons. As he got closer, Daniel could see the worried expression clouding Gideon's generally smiling face.

"Good to see you, brother!" A big meaty hand, the size of small dinner plate, landed on Daniel's shoulder as Gideon bear-hugged him in greeting. "Let's get outta here."

Outside the window, Daniel caught a glance of the sleek, next generation Emerson Airways plane with a delta wing and the ever-present Emerson logo that would be his ticket out of this mess. He showed his

boarding pass to the pretty stewardess, looking stunning in her slim gray Emerson uniform. Her eyes and mannerisms vaguely reminded him of Sana, but as the barcode beeped green under her delicate hands, he shook his head and told himself to snap out of it. "Have a pleasant flight" she purred as Daniel and Gideon entered the jetway. A click and a beep signaled that they were the last passengers expected and they picked up their pace to a run.

"I didn't think you were going to make it." said Gideon, running beside him at a full sprint. Daniel was always amazed at how physically fit his friend and colleague was. At PT, Gideon could still outsprint every operator, no matter how young or old, without so much of a hint of training. At thirty-four, the men were not at their physical peak anymore, but their years of experience made them formidable enemies that no terrorist or government wanted to tangle with. Gideon's last few months at home in Detroit with his wife and kids hadn't stopped him from keeping his stamina up.

"Neither did I, preacher." A couple of seconds passed as Daniel thanked his lucky stars for whoever was pulling the strings behind the scenes. A clear passport, a delayed flight? Too good to be true.

"These Emerson birds always depart on time. This one is 10 minutes overdue. You got lucky. What happened?"

Daniel considered for a moment but didn't share. "I don't know. I was going to be locked up for a really long time."

"What?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you about it on the way. We just need to get out of here."

"Get your head on straight, man! We're walking into a big mess." The conversation came to end as the two men slowed down in front of the open door to the jet. "Here we go."

EIGHT

TWO MONTHS LATER

JULY 10, 2024

0700 Z

RIYADH

SAUDI ARABIA

Thierry Greer stood in his boss's office and looked out the window. The weather was stifling, undoubtedly 110°F or better. No clouds filled the highly saturated blue sky. The sun's bright beams blasted the landscape with heat and light and it hung above, a perfect white-hot circle in the blue sky.

Side by side amidst the heat, two flags fluttered beside each other when the faint breeze decided to gently blow. The first flag represented the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, while the other flag stood for the United States, the stars and stripes billowing ever so slightly in the wind. Above each rested the new flag of the CPC, signifying its supreme importance.

The sky may have been clear and cloudless, but that was contrasted with the crowd that had gathered below. Their many individual shapes were hardly distinguishable in the distance, but their purpose was clear. They seemed numberless, and it seemed that the crowd slowly grew larger as Thierry continued to watch from the window, more people teeming with anger and outrage. They were protesting with signs and banners, and the roar from the crowd, too distant to make out the slogans being shrieked, was still quite audible from the ambassador's office. From his perch high in the embassy, Thierry Greer chose instead to focus on the smoggy horizon.

Thierry always made it a point to dress well, but his creased suit jacket was wrinkled slightly. That was the only outward sign the last few days had been anything but calm.

Thierry had been born in New York City to two United Nations translators, both of French citizenship and descent. Despite his love of his French heritage and frequent visits to his extended family there, he saw himself as an American through and through. Thierry looked back at his boss, Thomas Santander, the American ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He sat behind him with his head buried in paperwork, indifferent to his underling's actions. Thierry looked out at the mob and observed that perhaps this was why he had gone gray. Although he was in his later thirties, his silvery hair was generally associated with a man of much greater age. Thierry, an optimist, hoped it communicated his wealth of wisdom and experience to his fellow State Department employees.

Thierry had frequently been in this office and had grown bored of perusing its' sparse decorations. When it came to occupying his time in the ambassador's office, Thierry had read over the spines of the various volumes on the ambassador's bookcases so many times he could practically recite them by memory. There was truly nothing else to do this morning, besides watching the proceedings from the window.

The ambassador read with the focus of a well-educated man, an expert in politics more than any other discipline. He read on, not distracted by Thierry or the substantial flat screen television playing in the room. Thierry could hear the drone of the television as he stood at the window, but he too had blocked it out. Everything aired this morning had been a rehashing of stories from earlier in the week. He watched the crowd as it moved and roared, far beyond the barriers to the entrance to the embassy compound. He looked at the long banners and flags that waved like some medieval army sending signals to coordinate with one another.

Thierry noticed a nondescript truck making glacial progress toward the entrance barriers creeping through the protesting throng. The truck was unremarkable, a dusty plain white Toyota box truck that was like so many that passed in and out of the embassy's gates. He wondered what it must be like for the van driver, more than likely some Filipino or Indian that had been imported into the kingdom. In his moment of reflection, Thierry decided to give him a name. Nikhil, he decided, was a man who had decided to remain in this country in conditions an American might akin to slavery. And yet, in Nikhil's mind, being here was preferable to being home in his own nation. He was happy to take abuse just to send home a little bit of cash to his family. Nikhil was in the thick of it, unlike Thierry, who watched through

the thick glass and concrete walls of the embassy, isolated from the spectacle of the protestors. Thierry watched it with a detached sort of interest. The truck was like a foreign body consumed by an amoeba.

He considering the crowd once again before speaking. "Looks dicey," he muttered, as much for himself as for the ambassador sitting behind him.

Thomas Santander looked up and out the window, grunting before looking back at the report, stirring from his documents for the first time since Thierry had taken post at the window.

Previously a source of monotonous background noise, the television came to the forefront of their attention when the broadcast suddenly transitioned to a breaking news bulletin. A handsome and well-dressed newscaster with dark hair and shining eyes smiled at the camera, before speaking text from a teleprompter. "Good morning," the news presenter stated, in the genuine, yet scripted way all newscasters mastered. "This is a breaking news alert from RXN. We take you to the CPC Palace of Justice for an announcement from the Supreme Secretary of the CPC, Lorcan Dubhloach."

Outside of the CPC headquarters, Lorcan Dubhloach stood before the cameras surrounded by reporters. He was a tall, stark and rail-thin figure in the oppressive greyness of the Belgian morning. His medium brown hair clung to his neck, wet from the thick mist. Lorcan had a habit of looking past the camera or object when he spoke. His eyes seemed to focus on something in the far distance, squinting through the air. It made him look perpetually concerned, a stern father figure for the world, and yet there seemed to be an ever-faint, ever-present, tease of a smile. The Irishman was in so many ways the most confident man that ever strode the earth.

The sky in Belgium was overcast and dark this day, and the faint fog hung over the green trees that ran parallel with the gardens. The news reporters looked on, their eagerness palpable. Lorcan Dubhloach cleared his throat again, before adjusting the podium's microphone slightly up. Then, he began to speak.

"Good morning," he said, his bass Irish voice commanding and sure, growling like a piece of heavy earth moving equipment. "Today, I'm joined by the new President of the United States, Sharon Arenas-Katz, and the UN Secretary General Vigee Diome to make a crucial announcement."

Thierry looked over the cast of characters before him. President Sharon Arenas-Katz's brown eyes surveyed the situation as those gathered around shifted uncomfortably. Her coiffed hair was carefully styled, no doubt in consultation with a hundred political operatives who determined that 37% of the electorate favored her hair styled this way. Her brown skin revealed her Cuban heritage. With her statuesque figure and brooding countenance, the President always commanded attention, whether intentionally or not. What first caught people's attention were her broad shoulders and almost masculine bearing. She had sex appeal, sure, but it was camouflaged by her powerful physicality.

The UN Secretary General, Vigee Diome had dressed for the long day in her traditional ankle-length Senegalese cotton robe, matching drawstring trousers and cap. Her coral dress was trimmed with white brocade at the neck and wrists. She shook out the robe's bell sleeves and stood solemnly. The very dark-skinned woman looked down her nose at the assembly, resplendent in her African dress clothes. Her coffee-colored hair came down low on her forehead and emphasized her round face. The organization she helmed, the United Nations, was held in such universal disdain that instead of using the United Nations as a template for the new government, it was completely bypassed. A new entity, the CPC was created, ex nihilo. The United Nations continued only to hold a symbolic role and to interface with the few nations that still held the CPC at arm's length, particularly China, India and Russia.

The reporters shifted their weight restlessly. Balding men lugging large video cameras and middle-aged women and men in professional dress dotted the lawn.

"For the last three years, the terrorist Radchenko has been eluding our justice," Lorcan continued. "This reign of terror can continue no longer. Effective today, the bounty on Radchenko is being increased to three hundred million CPC dollars."

An audible gasp escaped from the crowd of reporters.

"Radchenko," Lorcan continued amidst the twittering reporters. He now recognized that he had the captive attention of his audience, and the next words would be vital to presenting a display of strength for the public. "I know that you're out there, and I know that you can hear what I have to say. We will find you, and the full force of the CPC will come down on you."

The crowd murmured and reporters hastily scribbled notes on the back of legal pads or the laptops or

tablets they carried.

"I will now take questions," Lorcan Dubhloach said.

Immediately, there was a questioning reporter who quickly rose his hand, a pen still balanced between his middle and forefinger. "Have there been any new leads since the sinking of the HMS Dauntless?" he asked, his voice distinctly nasally.

"No additional leads," Lorcan Dubhloach said, confidently but dismissively. "We know a bomb was planted on board."

Much to the other journalists' dismay, the nasally correspondent pressed him further, "Reports continue to circulate that there was a shootout in the village beforehand. Some say there was a submarine present in the harbor. Any comment on those rumors?"

Still smiling the broad grin of a politician, Dubhloach rolled his eyes. "Where do you guys get this stuff?"

His deflection sent laughter through the crowd, an evident success of the response. Amidst their mirth, two members of the security detail quietly hustled the curious reporter away.

A second reporter in a bright blue blazer and shining black heels raised her hand.

"Mr. Secretary," the writer began. "Today, the Emerson Corporation announced higher prices for stabilized hydrogen. It seems that we've moved from a cartel that controls oil to a new master. David Michael Emerson."

The secretary nodded grimly. "Yes," Lorcan said. "That is a great concern to me. The Essential Development Collective has discussed this in great depth. We are considering a response to Emerson's price hikes."

The reporter in blue was not satisfied with this answer. "Mr. Dubhloach," she pressed further, "Can you give me an idea of the response that you are considering?"

"Not at this time," Dubhloach said, making it clear with his body that he was already in search of another question. He found a man with thick glasses raising his hand and motioned that he should proceed with his query. The other reporter impatiently continued her line of questioning.

"Mr. Secretary," she said. "The rumor is that the CPC has no response, that Emerson has all the power since he is the only one who can create stabilized hydrogen."

Hastily, Lorcan cut her off. "No further questions," he stated, curtly. The appearance of a lack of transparency was a better option than appearing wholly unprepared. "No further questions."

He did not close on that note, as defensive as it was. Instead, he raised his voice confidently again to the crowd, calling back the strength of his initial statements. "Again Radchenko, we will find you." Lorcan Dubhloach coughed, the wrenching sound causing feedback in the podium's microphone. "We will find you."

Ambassador Thomas Santander leaned back in his worn, leather chair. He had sat in this chair for many years and had faced a variety of hardships and challenges. Each time, he met each obstacle with all the political strength he could muster, remembering the essential characteristics of a diplomat his father had embedded into him. This time he was taken aback.

Thierry recognized the ambassador's mood. "You look surprised," Thierry said, gently probing for an answer. After all, the ambassador was a master poker player and politician. Through long years in the State Department, all traces of inappropriate emotion had been washed from his leathery features.

The ambassador nodded, solemnly. Thierry knew him too well. "Yes," he said, the corners of his mouth forming the slightest of grimaces. "That was not the announcement I had been anticipating." The ambassador shook his head then, once again he spoke, this time the grimace spreading wider across his neatly shaven face. "Not at all."

Outside, at the gatehouse for the American Embassy, the truck that had been slowly making its way through the crowd had made it through the first checkpoint. It now was winding its way through a series of barriers and was soon stopped by a guard. The truck looked reasonable enough, and yet, as the Pakistani security contractor sauntered up to the drivers' side, he noticed the lorry driver's casual

demeanor soon began to fail him. The driver, drenched in sweat, encouraged the guard onward with a friendly hand motion, but the guard could sense that there was something wrong with this vehicle. Other security guards soon joined the first in encircling the truck, more curious than alert. Then, the driver was pulled back by someone into the cabin, disappearing from sight.

From the corner lookout, a United States Marine had his eardrums blown out by the incredible pressure wave. An immense boom resounded throughout the embassy's grounds, followed by the sound of raining metal on the neatly trimmed lawn. The heavily reinforced gatehouse had been obliterated by an explosion. All that remained was a deep crater.

On the embassy wall, a Marine slammed a wall mounted alarm, blood drizzling from his shattered eardrum. The Americans began to respond, while two simple white Toyota pick-up trucks drove through the crowd, which had parted at a pre-arranged signal. A tarp ripped from the tops, and the two pickup trucks revealed M134 miniguns mounted on the back. They pushed into the deep chasm that was once the primary gate and unleashed a stream of gunfire. The American forces reacting to the alarm were no match for the heavy weapons. As outgunned Marines collapsed to the ground, five hundred screaming jihadis charged into the embassy courtyard, producing AK-47s from underneath their white robes.

The ambassador had, after hearing the earsplitting boom, immediately dashed forward to discover the source of the commotion. Thomas Santander looked out his window in horror. Waves of shock swept from his brain to his heart to his stomach, then back up to his brain again. He wiped his brow, his palms dampened with sweat. How could this be happening? The State Department was all about politics, and now war had just arrived on his doorstep.

Thierry and the rest of his staff frantically bustled about, hastily destroying classified documents, computers, and other highly sensitive materials. Marines rushed into the room, motioning for the ambassador to follow them under their protection. As the ambassador was hustled along, a Marine hit a panel on the wall of his office, revealing a secret passageway. Santander didn't need any instructions. He stepped into the tunnel, escorted by the Marines. As the door slid shut behind him, the ambassador turned for just a moment and watched Thierry continue to burn documents. He hated leaving his confidant and friend behind, but he had no choice. The CPC could not afford to have an American ambassador captured or killed.

In any other situation, the view from the top of the embassy would have been worthy of a long look or at least a photo to examine later. It captured the rhythm and flow of the city below, allowing anyone standing over the railings to see the glorious mirrored skyscrapers that had been put up by so much oil money.

From the roof, Daniel could hear the crowd raging below, punctuated by gunshots and automatic weapons fire that could be heard even over the ear-splitting shriek of an Osprey V-22 Tiltrotor. There were screams as well, presumably from the staff and the Americans who manned the embassy. Other transports waited their turn, following the strict battle order of an embassy evacuation. Daniel and Gideon had been in this scenario before, the politicians and their personal staff getting out first, the lower echelons watching and waiting their turn.

Daniel and Gideon had been tasked with providing security for Thierry as he performed his various tasks in the restive city of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. It was assumed that the embassy was a safe zone. When Thierry was in his office or his quarters here, Daniel and Gideon were off duty, though on call at any hour of the day and night. Their lodging was a mere cargo container, converted into a living space with the addition of an air conditioner that was not nearly large enough. Although spartan, the two didn't mind and had spent their days reading, Daniel with his astronomy blogs and Gideon with his theology books.

When the explosion had gone off, Daniel and Gideon immediately grabbed their M4 rifles and headed for the roof where they assumed Thierry would be.

Daniel and Gideon spotted the ambassador from across the roof as they exited from the stairwell and sprinted across the hardtop towards the helicopter. A large figure stepped out in front of them as they got near, his blond hair blowing in the downdraft from the blades. At nearly six feet six, Maximillian Karneas loomed over Daniel. His sheer physical presence rivaled even Gideon. His prominent Swedish jawline matched the severe tone of his voice as he shouted to be heard over the roar of the tilt-rotor.

General Karneas walked on the rooftop helicopter pad with the imperious stride of a man having absolute certainty of his place in the world and issued orders to the Marines scurrying about. He was dressed in the desert uniform of his nation, Sweden, complete with an arm patch on his shoulder identifying that fact. His battle dress uniform's dazzling array of earth-toned geometric shapes reminded Daniel of a World

War Two battleship, but he had to admit it did an excellent job of confusing the eye. The emblem of the CPC the man wore on his floppy boonie hat made it clear the Karneas oversaw all of the CPC military forces in this country.

Karneas had a sinewy, well-toned physique, more befitting a man half his age. His weather-worn face was carved as if from granite, all sharp angles forming a whole that inspired both intense fear and unqualified loyalty. The general surveyed the pad with eyes narrowed to hard, dark slits that masked any hint of humanity. Taken in its entirety, his presence was a man not to be ignored or trifled with.

A battle-dressed Marine guard held tight around the middle-aged ambassador during the transfer, watchful, tight-jawed and calm. General Maximilian Karneas escorted the ambassador onboard an Osprey tilt-rotor craft painted the serene blue of the CPC. The ambassador looked worried as he was strapped into the CPC aircraft, watching to make sure that the rest of his staff were being evacuated

Gesturing for Daniel and Gideon to approach, Maximilian screamed to be heard above the thunk of the chopper blades. His pale blue eyes were vivid in his Nordic face, his unusual pupils tiny. "It's a coup. A simultaneous attack on all the CPC installations. We've got to get out of here. Now."

Daniel leaned in to answer him, biting off each word sharply to get his message over the pulsating sound. "Sir, we've got to go back! We have orders to protect Thierry Greer!"

"Forget him," barked Karneas, eyes swiveling around the roof, watching each group of employees as they ran towards the Ospreys. "If he's still in the ambassador's office, he's dead by now, or soon will be. They've completely overrun the embassy. I've already spoken to the Premier Secretary of the CPC. He's ordered your President to have your armed forces evacuate the country immediately. That includes contractors."

Gideon shook his head, unable to believe what he was hearing. If he had understood right, CPC had gone to dictating policy to the President of the United States almost overnight. He exchanged a familiar look with his long-standing partner, a look that had been exchanged a thousand times and had launched a thousand adventures.

"We're going back. We don't work for you."

Karneas grimaced at the disrespect, shook his head like a disgusted and angry bear getting rid of a small fly. Turning away, he threw a brief backhanded wave over his shoulder, dismissing the men as he climbed back onto the waiting Osprey and sat down beside a now panicked ambassador who seemed to have shrunk into himself. Leaning forward, the general called to Daniel. "Then I'll see you in hell."

Karneas signaled to the pilot, and the rear ramp slowly raised. The Osprey began to lift into the sky as Daniel and Gideon backed away in the prop wash. Without the need for discussion, they moved off the pad rapidly, cutting across the roof towards the stairs that led down to a city in flames.

The Americans evacuees were clustered on the roof waiting their turn, and the native staff had gone home or joined the mob. Daniel and Gideon turned as they heard a familiar gravelly voice shouting their names to be heard over the roar of the engines. A tall and skinny light skinned black man strode toward them with concern in his eyes.

Hayden Dawson's dedication to his work and fluency in over a dozen languages made him an invaluable asset the world over. Dawson was most definitely CIA, smart, cagey and just a little bit nerdy. An African American who'd moved up in the diplomatic service despite never having attended Georgetown U, he wasn't supposed to know anything about Daniel and Gideon's assignment.

"Thierry?" He asked, already knowing the answer. "There's a secret entrance to the ambassador's office. If you move fast, I can show you."

Dawson was waving them over to a slab in the floor that suddenly opened as he approached. Daniel and Gideon raised their eyebrows at each other, then followed the directions of their slender colleague back into a dark embassy that was starting to smell like Hades itself.

When this day had begun, Thierry had expected an easy day at the office. His 10 o'clock appointment had canceled, giving him an unexpected two hours to catch up on his emails and send a few out of his own. The order to evacuate had come halfway through that golden time, during his daily call with the ambassador. Rather than running with the herd to the rooftop departure, he had done his duty. Greer had stayed behind to destroy classified equipment and burn secret documents.

Now, he found himself bound and gagged while a group of insurgents trashed the ambassador's office, blindly ignoring those same relevant documents. They slashed its beautiful paneling, tossed the quietly elegant furniture and shoved it aside. Soon there was a standing crowd of a half-dozen terrorists, all bearded, all dressed in the traditional long white tunic, the thawb. In the middle of the chaos, a man entered the room who was called Kahtani by one of his minions, and he now raised his hands for silence.

The man was short, perhaps just 5 foot 5, and wiry. He moved with a slow grace, carefully practiced to give the impression of pious wisdom to his followers. Thierry noticed his scrawny arms which bulged with sinuous veins. A prominent callous on his forehead came from touching his forehead to his prayer mat five times a day. He wore combat fatigues but accessorized with a gutra headdress. Achmed al-Kahtani seemed to be in his mid-30s, and just a trace of a scraggly beard was visible on his face.

Thierry recognized the man. He'd read intelligence reports indicating he had possibly returned to his country, but most of his analysts had dismissed those rumors. Kahtani was known to the FBI after they thwarted his attempt to purchase surface-to-air missiles in New York City ten years ago. Somehow, the man had gotten away and gone to ground.

Twenty years ago, Kahtani was just another spoiled and directionless punk, of which there were many in the Kingdom. His uncle had whisked him out of the country after he'd been caught drinking banned alcohol and driving his Land Rover haphazardly with a roguish group. It would not do to embarrass his father, a prominent Imam in Jeddah. Young Achmed found himself in a boarding school in Switzerland, and applied himself to chasing blondes. Later, Achmed went to study political science at Oxford. His father had died when Kahtani was in his late 20s, leaving him a fantastic fortune. Faced with a moral crisis, he promptly used it to finance worldwide terror. His own first attempts at terrorism were amateurish and haphazard, but somehow, he'd survived to this day. His expertise was producing horrific propaganda.

Along with the man came a crew of two others, carrying laptops and a large video camera. One of them cleared the desk of the ambassador with a sweep of his arms and onto it placed the camera on a tripod. Thierry watched as a picture frame containing a smiling image of the ambassador's wife smashed on the floor. The technician typed a few buttons into a laptop, turned to Khatani and nodded.

Thierry looked up and noticed that the newscaster was now broadcasting a live view of the ambassador's office. There he looked up and saw a man, bound and gagged, blood streaming down his face, and suddenly realized that it was himself. Another time, another place and he probably wouldn't have thought much about the impotent, humbled man on the screen. He'd seen enough of these videos to know how they ended.

What was his play now? He could try to convert, but he'd also seen someone try that before. It didn't end well for him.

"My name is Achmed Al-Kahtani" the wiry man said in a perfect Oxford British accent, without a trace of an Arabic inflection. The rest of the men bowed low and murmured something that Thierry's panicked hearing couldn't quite catch. "The immorality of the ruling family has grown now to the point that they were to sell us out to the infidels in the CPC. Know this. We will never surrender our sovereignty to the godless Kuffar!" This last statement was met with a loud roar and cheer from the underlings, and Kahtani appeared to ride the wave of this noise to stand in front of Thierry. He grabbed Thierry's hair and shook it fiercely, forcing him to nod in agreement.

"Here, a representative of their government. And an object lesson in non-interference, if you will." Letting go of Thierry, Kahtani pulled a gold-plated .45 caliber M1911 pistol and pointed it at the terrified official. He squinted down the barrel, smiled and pushed the hammer back into place. He admired the weapon for a moment, then returned the pistol to his shoulder holster, snapping its flap shut sharply. Thierry let out an audible sigh of relief, and the men around him smirked. The one closest to Kahtani reached down to his side and pulled from a scabbard the longest sharpest sword Thierry had ever seen.

Thierry recalled he most certainly had seen this sword before. Not two months ago, he'd stood in the office of Prince Shadi, minister of the interior, had seen this very golden sword. The Prince had been a great friend of the American people, and Thierry and the ambassador had been thanking him for his help in years past. The Prince had noticed Thierry admiring the sword hanging above his desk. Shadi had explained he had personally picked out the emeralds at a market in Thailand and purchased the rubies from a gem dealer in India. He went on to describe the maker of the sword, an expert who catered exclusively to Middle Eastern royalty. Thierry had not dared to guess how much the sword cost.

The sunlight caught the golden hilt and reflected into his eyes, temporarily blinding him. He noted that there was a slight amount of dried blood on the weapon. It would seem Prince Shadi no longer had use of the sword.

His thoughts flashed to his girlfriend, at home in the United States, probably sleeping soundly in her silky underwear, unaware that Greer wouldn't be coming home. Thierry figured she wouldn't care that much. After all, they fought all the time, and she was looking for someone else if she wasn't already sleeping with a new man. He hadn't yet inclined to confront her; after all, his Gallic good looks and *je ne sais quoi* had ensured that his time in Saudi Arabia had not been lonely. The ambassador's secretary was most a Francophile or to be fair, had come to be one. He decided the thing Thierry Greer would miss the most was not the French food his grandmother prepared for him as he was a young child in Provence and that he had so carefully prepared for himself. It was women.

Kahtani swished the sword through the air a few times, experimenting with different grips, finally finding one that he liked. He stepped towards Thierry with an evil grin which remained frozen in place as the mahogany bookcase burst open.

At that moment, something bounced and rolled along the carpet, breaking the intense concentration of the gathered cabal. As they turned to the unexpected sound, a deafening blast and blinding flash stunned the unprepared jihadis.

Thru the smoke, Thierry saw the vast bulk of Gideon and the athletic body of Daniel appear as if they were his rescuing angels. Bullets sprayed from their automatic rifles, mowing down half a dozen of the insurgents in mere seconds.

Kahtani blinked twice to purge the smoke from his eyes, once too many for the situation. Daniel took careful aim and pulled the trigger as the wiry man tried in vain to jump to safety behind the ambassador's desk. The bullet ripped through his right eye, shattering the socket and sending shards of incomprehensible pain into Kahtani, tearing his eyeball from his skull. Like a rock trying to hold back a waterfall, he clutched his hand to his wound, letting out a piercing, blood-curdling scream.

Gideon ran to Thierry, ka-bar fighting knife in hand. Seeing the fear in their friend's eyes, Gideon picked him up off the ground and slashed through his bindings.

“You all right, man?”

“I’ve been better.”

To cover the escape, Daniel fired a few more shots from his M4 rifle. The bullets sailed through the air, down the main entrance to the outer office where a few lower-ranking terrorists stood guard. The guards took cover, and the trio used the opportunity to return to the secret exit, Thierry limping but making good speed.

As Gideon and Thierry stepped inside the tunnel, Daniel pulled the entrance closed behind them. As he did so, Daniel watched Achmed al-Kahtani writhe on the floor like a wounded snake. Surely the little man was nearly dead.

Daniel ran point. Small blue emergency lights illuminated the bottom of the walls, leading the way. Soon, the tunnel branched in two directions, one up and one down. They paused.

“If we get to the airport, there should be a State Department Lear jet on standby,” offered Thierry helpfully.

Daniel pointed downwards, knowing the helicopters were long gone. Their only hope remained in the motor pool that lay a few floors below.

In the windowless motor pool, the three men stood together on the concrete floor. Old-style florescent lights flickered in the slightly arched ceiling, one buzzing and popping. The men were inspecting three Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, each equipped with a Vee hull designed to deflect IEDs, and six five-foot-tall wheels to carry its 15-ton weight.

Daniel had trained on simulations of the Emerson Corporation's new autonomous Durandal XR34 MRAPs, but didn't believe the technology was far enough advanced for them to be in active service. But, here were three massive machines, waiting in the embassy's motor pool. They towered over the standard SUVs next to them and looked as fierce as fifteen tons of metal can be. The wheels stood as high as his chest. Tan colored advanced ceramic armor protected the underside and sides of the MRAP from explosions. The windows were jet black, made from shatterproof tempered glass. Infused with a lattice of graphene, these windows could withstand point-blank 50 caliber machine gun fire.

"Might as well saddle up," he said. "Which one you want, Gideon?"

"Set the others to autonomous escort, I'm driving this one!" Gideon sounded like a child who had just discovered his birthday and Christmas presents at the same time. Daniel rolled his eyes, remembering countless cross-country journeys with Gideon at the wheel. The number of times they had almost spun out of control or overtaken a car in the face of an oncoming truck laden with goats or a camel was almost too many to count. While the ride would be wild, Daniel knew that he would be in safe hands. He ushered Thierry into the back and took his traditional shotgun seat.

“Set the others to autonomous escort,” Gideon commanded with a grin. “I’m driving this train.”

Gideon took the driver seat as Daniel and Thierry climbed inside the beastly machine. Caro set the destination for the Riyadh International Airport, and one of the autonomous vehicles hummed to life and took the lead.

The three MRAPs leaped out of the underground garage onto a side street of the city, the three men sealed securely inside the second one in line. At the corner, the convoy turned onto Embassy Row, swiftly sweeping by the local mosque, and turning right at an abandoned traffic circle.

Passersby, both innocent civilians and some of the rioters, gawked at the size of the vehicles, unaware that only one of them had a human driver. Gideon led the armored cars towards the main highway out of the city, smashing any cars who didn’t move fast enough out of the way. On a typical day, Riyadh traffic was a lawless melee. Now, it was official. Panic had set in, and thousands were desperately trying to leave the country for the safety of CPC controlled nations in Asia, Europe or the United States. Their odds of succeeding, Daniel guessed, were poor.

Daniel, beside Gideon up front, glanced up through the transparent roof portal and then out his side window. Covering all fronts was a useful habit. Daniel turned around to see how his passenger was coping with Gideon's rally style of driving. Thierry simultaneously looked sick to his polyester dress socks and deeply worried. He caught Daniel's eye and gave an unhappy smile.

"This is a significant wrinkle in the CPC's plan. They can't afford any rogue nations," Thierry offered.

Gideon snorted loudly as he rocketed past a convertible, sending a wave of air through the driver's gutra. "You mean that someone has a problem giving up their sovereignty?" A sad look crossed over Thierry's face as he turned to face out of the window.

Daniel was about to say something when a sudden movement caught his attention. A roadblock was ahead, designed to capture any escaping westerners, either for beheading, extortion or ransom. These terrorist-preneurs had underestimated the size of their catch, and it was going to cost them. Two guards stood by, dumbfounded at the massive vehicles headed their way. A bearded figure was fiddling with something wrapped around his waist and looked up as the convoy of MRAPs approached.

As they neared him, he ran from his hiding place, stood in front of the first MRAP and shouted.

Then Daniel was too busy to think. The terrorist pressed a detonator, and a massive explosion destroyed the first MRAP in the group. Engulfed in flames, it flipped front to back towards the men's vehicle as Gideon took sharp evasive action. The unmanned vehicle landed on the other side of the road, scattering cars and pedestrians.

The terrorist's scream was lost in the massive explosion that ripped his body apart. The thought flickered through Daniel's mind that the man looked deeply unhappy for someone supposedly on his way to paradise.

Daniel instantly threw open the top hatch when he saw another man in flowing white rushing forward to Gideon's side of the MRAP. Daniel cut the terrorist down with automatic fire from his m4 rifle.

To his side, Gideon wrenched the steering wheel hard, careened around the flaming wreck, its metal sides glowing amidst the flames and billowing smoke. Sensing additional danger, Daniel readied his assault rifle. Sitting in shotgun, he knew that he was on the first line of defense. Daniel wished that one of these MRAP's had come with an automated minigun turret that he'd trained on, but there'd been no such luck. He guessed that these had been intended for VIP transport between the embassy and some prince's palace to avoid the omnipresent IED's that had plagued the kingdom for the last few years.

Gideon grabbed the mike from the seat in-between them and squeezed the transmit button hard. "Crazyhorse, we've been engaged!" Gideon said into the cold, metallic receiver. "We request assistance, we're over ten mikes from the airport, over." That ten minutes was going to feel like ten hours if they couldn't shake their assailants. Nothing about their journey so far suggested their enemy was going to give up and go home.

The radio crackled with static. Crazyhorse's rough voice mixed with the radio interference. "This is Crazyhorse," he said, grimly. "We are unable to assist. Saudi National Guard units are defecting to Kahtani. You're on your own."

He couldn't tell for sure, but Daniel thought he could detect a smile in his old pal's voice. It would be just like him to find this situation humorous. As he gripped the door handle as the MRAP swung hard around a corner, he felt thankful that Gideon had the wheel. He looked across at his enormous friend whose scowl alone could kill. Gideon was focused on the road and world ahead of him. Without a doubt, Daniel knew that he wouldn't want anyone else with him in this desperate situation.

A gasp came from the back of the vehicle as Thierry saw the enormous roadblock that had been erected across both lanes of the wide city street. Whoever was funding these guys also had the police in their pocket. Numerous armed Saudi police milled amongst the ragtag insurgent uniforms.

"Is there another way round it?" he asked Gideon, knowing the answer before he'd even asked.

"Can't round it, can't go over it, got to go through it" yelled his partner. Daniel could hear the bullets from the automatic rifles on the street rattle off the windows and doors and told Thierry to duck. The small arms fire was harmless, but Daniel knew Gideon would not appreciate comments from a backseat driver. This was a fine way to make sure the diplomat wouldn't resort to his default setting of spewing hot air.

The rate of fire slowed as their assailants realized what Gideon had in mind for their little roadblock. The MRAP ripped through the central car, hurling it into the air and sending a spray of broken glass to the ground. The glass tinkled as it rained against the MRAP's sturdy siding, and Gideon turned the MRAP sharply into a narrow alley.

The darkness of the alley swallowed the MRAP, and Gideon and Daniel began to warily look around. Something didn't feel right to Daniel and some ancient part of his brain reacted to the movement on the roof. Before his rational mind could intervene, he yelled "RPG! RPG! RPG!"

The terrorist missed the MRAP which Gideon and Daniel were occupying, but the enhanced penetrator round did connect with the trailing XR34. Behind them, the autonomous Durandal detonated in a flash of light and heat. Other men on the roof appeared, took aim with rifles and began to pepper the MRAP.

From inside the armored vehicle, Gideon knew that going it alone wasn't going to work. "I've got a plan," he shouted to Daniel. "See if you can get the Emerson contractors on the horn."

The sound of automatic rifle fire followed them as they spat out of the alley onto a street running parallel to the highway. Daniel picked up the radio receiver, twisted a few knobs, and then passed it to his friend.

"We're under attack at grid coordinates 24X, requesting support. We are on an escort mission with a VIP." He turned and smiled to Thierry in the back. "If the CPC won't protect us," Gideon said in the most soothing voice he could muster. "Then maybe Emerson will."

The MRAP careened into the narrow street, bouncing off parked cars and dodging RPGs from the rooftops. An abrupt turn took the vehicle down a narrow alley, where the MRAP's sides gouged lines in the sunbaked brick homes.

"Come on, come on, where are those VTOLs?" Gideon muttered, his eyes on watch constantly for trouble, his hands tight and agile on the controls.

As if to answer him, the comm crackled. "This is Firefly six, we are prepared to engage."

“Firefly, you are cleared hot, danger close, engage hostiles.” Gideon snapped out.

Down the alleyway, all was quiet. A small cat scurried from one overflowing dumpster heap to the next in search of the day's meal. Suddenly, a ripping sound filled the air as the GAU-9 35mm Gatling guns opened up. Two wholly owned, designed and operated Emerson Outcomes A-11's unleashed their fury on the rooftops, sending up a plume of choking smoke.

The A-11 had been designed as a replacement for the United States Air Force A-10 Warthog. A close support weapon, the A-10 had been beloved by allied ground forces and regarded with terror and fear by the enemies of the United States. When funding cuts threatened to eliminate the aircraft, David Michael Emerson had personally designed the A-11 in just two months. The A-11 Razorback was the unholy union of a pancake and an A-10 Warthog. The wing surface was a large flat circle, with a cockpit tacked onto the front with two vertical stabilizers in back. When the mission required it, the A-11 had the capability to open its wing surface like an aperture to reveal a large ducted fan. This gave the Razorback the abilities and range of a fighter jet with the ability to hover in place and loiter for a long period of time. The A-11 was optionally manned or could be remotely piloted. With the United States due to join the CPC and facing severe budget cuts, the United States Air Force was unable to purchase the craft. Emerson pressed the ten speculative prototypes into service with his private military corporation, Emerson Outcomes.

The cat dashed for cover as the massive rounds landed all around. In front of them, Daniel watched as a robed figure jumped from the four-story roof to get away from the inferno of fire, screaming all the way down. He landed just before the charging MRAP. He and his gun were crushed beneath the enormous wheels.

“Plenty more where he came from,” Daniel remarked, still scanning the sky, the road, and the crude latticed balconies that hung off the tan buildings of the old quarter.

Seeing movement, he stood, flipped open the top hatch of the MRAP and aimed automatically. There was a piercing shriek, and the man fell from his balcony hiding place behind a screen, dangling a RPG as he fell.

“Another one for the good guys,” Gideon muttered.

When the MRAP reached the mouth of the alley, they turned right, speeding up on the smoother surface of a well-traveled road. More white-robed men lined the edges of the flat roofs along this commercial street, crouching behind the rooftop walls and lying in wait. At street level, Daniel caught sight of what had to be a woman enveloped in black, just two terrified eyes peering out through a shop window. He barely held his fire.

The A-11s carried on with their grim reaper routine, eliminating the insurgents with bursts of depleted uranium rounds. The rebels decided it would be a good time for tea instead of glorious death and the streets became nearly deserted. The local’s cars pulled off, often all the way onto the sidewalk, and dashed for safety in shops. Gideon drove the multi-ton weapon like a fierce banshee, the GPS guiding him forward. His goal became the temporary security of the desert. If they could get there, their chances of survival went up exponentially.

At last, the vehicle broke out of the urban area and crossed the ring road. They were on open ground in the eerie silence of the sand dune covered desert. Through a shifting haze of dust, they could see the airport away to the north. A commercial jet slowly lifted into the air, as those with the pull to buy tickets and pay bribes to the new Caliphate got out of this freshly minted hell.

The comm crackled again. “Sweep complete. See you on the flipside.”

“Thanks, Firefly Six.”

Ignoring the palm-lined entry road that led to the air terminals, the MRAP approached the airfield directly from the south. Effortlessly, the vehicle broke through the feeble chain-link fence that made the only barrier. They roared onto the tarmac. Though they were not of the woods yet, there was a palpable sense of relief.

The same could not be said for the hundreds of US Marines desperately searching for transport away from this desert. They scurried around the area, like an anthill underfoot, each Marine more desperate than the last. The scene was barely controlled chaos. US Marines were hurrying to get out of the area and load onto a sole contracted Emerson Outcomes Transport. Mortar fire cracked the earth and sprayed the skies with debris.

At last they heard from Crazyhorse. "Move quickly," Crazyhorse said, his urgent tone filling the cabin. "Our ticket out is almost here. You have three minutes."

Daniel turned to speak to Gideon, his voice flat. "We're not going to make it."

Gideon was not concerned. He was a glass-half-full kind of guy. He had not always been, but that was another time and place. Gideon and Daniel had been in worse scrapes. In his mind he listed them. There was that time in Venezuela, Djibouti, and, oh yeah, that time in Saigon. This was under control, and they would surely meet far worse in the future. "Chillax," he said, a faint grin on his face. "We always make it."

As the trio's MRAP made its way down the apron of the airport, two Humvees with markings of the Saudi National Guard suddenly peeled out from a hangar complex and began to pursue. In top mounted turrets, two men with .50 caliber machine guns opened fire on the lone Durandal.

Gideon desperately tried to evade, dodging back and forth as mortar fire fell all around. The two pursuing Humvees raked the MRAP with machine gun fire. The assault was harmless, but they had to lose their tail before they got to the transport.

As a bureaucrat, Thierry was considerably less experienced with life or death situations. Somehow, the dust from the street had managed to make its way even inside this new MRAP and Thierry was covered in it. Deathly afraid, he thought back to his girlfriend as he slid around in the back of the heavily armored vehicle. Maybe, just maybe they could patch things up and make it work, he decided. Maybe settling down wasn't the worst thing.

The radio crackled with the voice of their old friend, Crazyhorse. "We're trying to hang on here, but we can't hold out much longer!"

Thierry leaned up to the front and spoke into the receiver. "What happened to that State Learjet? They're supposed to be on standby, waiting for me."

"Learjet? State Department?" Crazyhorse responded. "Oh, yeah, they took off 15 minutes ago. Got shot down by a Manpad. You lucked out."

"That remains to be seen," grumbled Thierry as he sat back.

Daniel was keeping an eye on the situation behind them and noticed that one of the Saudis in the pursuing hummer was standing up and preparing to fire an enhanced RPG. Gideon jerked the wheel hard to the right. The MRAP, despite its incredible bulk, went into a spin.

In a perfectly smooth motion, born of years of practice, Daniel popped the top hatch and took careful aim despite the spinning Durandal. He fired one bullet, which hit the man with the RPG directly in the forehead. The Saudi slumped forward and his brain sent one final neurological impulse to his trigger finger. The RPG fired inside the hummer, blowing it sky high.

The wind had picked up and dust and sand began flew like a swarm of angry bees. Visibility was almost nil as the MRAP powered its way across the desert runway. Gideon and Daniel desperately charged towards the rendezvous point.

THIRTEEN

Col. James Reign of the United States Marine Corps, callsign Crazyhorse, could just about make out a large hexacopter on the horizon. It was making headway toward the pickup point, and his men were ready. As he surveyed the scene from the control tower, he could see three light blue CPC Osprey tilt rotors loading up and preparing to take flight.

Col. Reign cursed under his breath and picked up the radio. "EDC flight one, do not leave, we have reports of SAMS in the area." He hollered over the airwaves, struggling to make his booming voice audible over the sound of the straining engines. "A weasel flight is coming to clear them out, ETA three minutes." Possibly the longest three minutes of his life, he thought as he sought to find any extra inch of leverage to convince these men to wait.

A gruff accented voice came back. "We're not going to die with you cowboy Americans!"

Great, thought Crazyhorse. Your funeral. Outside it's a perfect storm of mortars, shells and tank. This dumb CPC punk decided to throw in a bit of anti-American sentiment to really help the situation. If he made it out of here, Col. Reign decided, he'd be sure to give that guy a good punch in the nose.

The three CPC Ospreys climbed into the air, and just as they were rotating their blades forward to leave the area, three surface-to-air rockets shrieked through the air. The stinger missiles picked off the three V-22's one after the other.

From the MRAP, the blooms of fire filled the sky. Debris rained down on the runway. As the MRAP approached the rendezvous point, Gideon played with the brake pedal. He still had one hummer on his tail.

BOOM. A shell exploded less than two feet from the side of the vehicle, rocking the whole machine to its chassis. Out of the corner of his eye, Gideon saw and cursed a Saudi M1 Abrams tank. It trundled out from between two aircraft hangars and began to line up a second shot.

"Looks like I'm playing myself at this game" muttered Gideon. Violently, he swung the MRAP around a full 90 degrees and drove straight towards his assailant, relying on the element of surprise to buy him some time.

As the tank's turret rotated wildly to match his change of course, the Abrams suddenly erupted in a ball of flame. Pieces of shrapnel whizzed past the viewing plate of the MRAP and Daniel swore he could feel the heat of the fireball. Seconds later, the Humvee that pursued them also exploded. The trio's F-35 Lightning II savior roared past, just twenty feet off the runway, targeting a nearby AA battery with its next missiles.

"Thank God for the cavalry!" whooped Gideon as he spun the wheel, put his foot to the floorboard and raced towards the hexacopter which was coming down for a landing on hot tarmac.

The Durandal XR34 MRAP's automation system registered that it had interfaced with the hexicopter's computer and was ready to automate the docking procedure.

Unsure whether he was still being pursued, Gideon kept the gas pedal pressed down and rocketed into the cargo bay of the aircraft. A zoom and click of the magnetic locks told him that the MRAP was safely secured.

Daniel, Gideon and Thierry stepped outside their XR34 and into the cargo bay of the USAF Emerson Aerospace C-6 Hexacopter. Around them, Marines streamed into the aircraft, including their new friend, Colonel James Reign.

They were never happier than when the hexacopter spun its six massive blades and roared into the dusty sky.

FOURTEEN

TWO DAYS LATER

JULY 10, 2024

1000 Z

MOUNTFAIR, VA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Daniel drove his truck up the mountain that led to his friend Lindsey Fletcher's cabin. The sun was just about to dip below the horizon as Locke's pickup truck bounced up the dusty mountain road. She was a noisy jalopy, and Daniel had christened the dirty old Ford 2010 F-150 Sue. Sue could be heard for miles around.

Sue screeched to a halt in front of a small but clean looking house, painted white with light yellow shutters. The front door was red with a welcoming wreath of evergreens. A white picket fence surrounded a neat and trim yard. Flowers sat on the windowsills and around the house. The small abode overlooked a scenic panorama of mountains.

The sounds of the speeding truck had alerted Lindsey Fletcher, who approached the fence and awaited the truck's squealing stop. Lindsey was a woman who knew how attractive she was. An avid gardener, and given the summer heat, she wore a red cotton tank top and cutoff dark denim shorts. A sly grin spread across her face as she saw the truck door open. Her eagerness was hard to contain, and she cautioned herself with the unspoken word, patience. She had shoulder length brown hair that she usually swept back

into a ponytail and a headband. Today, it hung free on her shoulders and was shining in the dawning sun.

Daniel was about to open his mouth when he heard a bark. A large golden retriever came bounding out from behind the house, golden hair streaming behind. “Stonewall!” The dog ran to his master as he opened the fence gate and gleefully welcomed Daniel with slobber. Daniel let the dog vent his excitement as Lindsey stood by and smiled. She cared for the dog for extended periods of time, but she always knew the real person he always wanted was Daniel.

“Daniel,” Lindsey said with a smile. “Welcome back. It's good to see you. Are you doing ok?” She gave him a hug that was more of an invitation. “Do you have time for a cup of coffee? I just put some on.”

“I'll have to take a rain check on that,” Daniel said reluctantly. “Unfortunately, I just got a notice on my secure line. Sounds like I'm needed again.”

Lindsey looked disappointed but tried not to show it. She gave his dog one last pat and then turned back towards the lovely little house. Daniel looked after her, appreciating the attractive form so evident in the brief summer outfit. He thought about the unopened invitation that had been given him earlier, and a sad look crossed his face. While he could not see the sadness in her eyes, he felt it in his heart. He just wasn't ready.

Daniel got back in the truck, and Stonewall immediately jumped into the back of the pickup. His dog was an excellent companion, but the golden retriever was no Sana. Daniel drove off in a cloud of smoke and dust as he vented some frustration against his accelerator. The hard road was not helping his mood, but he eased off the gas to not damage his truck.

The truck drove up a remote rocky mountain road to a small but comfortable looking mountain cabin. Leaving the vehicle, Daniel and the golden retriever walked purposely to the bungalow. They had no time to enjoy its comforts or the view from the rocky outcrop to the Shenandoah River Valley. There was work to do, and Daniel needed to focus.

The quietness of the cabin would have unsettled most people. Its owner had deliberately picked a place deep in the forest. Previously abandoned, Daniel had spent the first few months of re-construction removing squirrel's nests from the attic and dealing with a rather dramatic raccoon infestation.

This cabin had been his dream. In all those long years on foreign soil, he had looked forward to the day that he could retire to the woods, where he could fish and hunt and especially look at the stars. Far away from any big city, there was minimal light pollution. At night, the sky above was an utterly pristine inky blackness adorned with the beauty of the cosmos.

Daniel had made sure the surrounding trees were carefully pruned back each year. The effect was peace and serenity that was unmatched and made it almost impossible for anyone to approach the cabin unannounced. Daniel had installed a sophisticated security system that was overkill for his tiny reclaimed cabin, but for him, it was a necessity.

For Stonewall, there were rabbits to chase across the broad meadow the cabin sat on the edge of, shy moles and teasing gophers to dig after. Hedgehogs could be smelled from a safe distance, and there was a small, clear stream to drink. The trees in the woodland behind the cabin were full of chattering, scolding squirrels, and deer noiselessly made their way among the trunks to graze on the meadow grasses. Both field and forest held a cacophony of intriguing, delicious scents no dog could resist.

And now, it all seemed so hollow.

During the short drive from Lindsay Fletcher's cabin to his own, the dawn had given way to night. An enormous moon began to rise. As Daniel walked to the front door, he performed his usual checks to make sure that his privacy hadn't been disturbed. The door handle was still correctly pointing at 40 degrees, the fake spider web was still attached to the door, and there were no indentations in the permaspong doormat. He had been surprised once in the past, just a group of teenage stoners, but that was enough. After that incident, word got out in the town below not to mess with the "Rambo type" who lived up on the mountain.

Daniel pushed open the heavy door and sighed the sigh of contentment one felt when returning home after a long absence. He filled a bowl, grabbed a beer and called Stonewall over. Man and dog slaked their thirst in silence. Stonewall bounded past him and settled down into a big dog bed in the corner of the living room. There he would stay for the rest of the night.

The walls were papered with posters of the constellations, the Milky Way, and the solar system. There were magnificent pictures of stars and star clusters taken by the Hubble telescope, the Mars Rover, and by various probes the wealthiest governments had sent into space over the years. Several large telescopes huddled sleepily together in the farthest corner of the main room, waiting for the darkness of night to once again reveal the stars, planets, satellites, comets, clusters, and asteroids. The room was dominated by an oversized and incredibly detailed image of a vast, white, flattened oval of the Milky Way against a dark blue-black background. A large, white arrow labeled “You are here” pointed at a spot just to the left of galactic central point.

The moonlight caressed the brown leather couch and the cluttered coffee table in front of it, glaring off the glossy covers of magazines. It illuminated the astronomy-themed coffee table books barely visible beneath the litter of mail, telescope pieces, tools, keys, and the ever-present empty coffee cup.

Daniel flipped on the large flat-screen television perched on the rustic, rough-hewn-log mantelpiece. He smiled to see the dog laying on his bed, head on his front paws. The dog’s tail softly thumped against her bed in reply to Daniel’s smile, but otherwise, she was as still as a statue.

The news was on. Most days, Daniel could tune it out as he read, but today his ears picked up on some keywords coming from the talking head, and he turned up the volume. The evening news was just coming on, and as a thin, balding newscaster began reading the evening’s top headlines, Daniel suddenly grabbed the remote and turned the volume up.

“...and things got even more intense for anarchist Debyan Radchenko today as the CPC announced that the price on Radchenko’s head has been increased by one hundred million dollars.”

Daniel felt as if his stomach dropped down around his knees and he sat down heavily. His thoughts raced, screamed through his head as he stared hopelessly, angrily at the screen.

Four hundred million dollars?!

The picture shifted to a blank, black silhouette of a man with a white question mark where the face should be. A text box filled with Radchenko’s vague physical description, last known whereabouts, a list of his possible present locations as the newscaster read them. Next, an infographic labeled “EDC Office of Public

Information” issued a stern warning, also read aloud by the newscaster, to any civilians who may spot the intensely sought-after anarchist.

“Notify the police and never, ever approach the armed, brutally violent, extremely dangerous, murderous, traitorous, and very likely insane anarchist.”

Daniel’s expression changed from deep sadness to fury. “Absolute power and untold resources and they still don’t even know what Debyan Radchenko looks like,” he said aloud.

Daniel looked at the dog, “Well, I’m not the least bit impressed with the CPC’s handling of this situation. What about you, Stonewall?” he patted his thighs in his familiar “come on over here and let me scratch those ears for you” gesture. The dog, also unimpressed with the central government, but enthusiastic about the possibility of some ear scratching, happily obliged.

The newscaster continued: “The increased bounty is in response to the reports of an alliance between Debyan Radchenko and Achmed al-Khatani to destabilize and destroy the CPC, a threat that the CPC is, of course, taking very seriously,”

“Lorcan Dubhlaoch spoke briefly to the press today,” the newscaster continued. In response, the picture changed to the outside of the immense and famously grim-looking CPC building at the CPC capitol in Brussels. On a raised platform carpeted in blood red, there was a podium draped with crimson, navy blue, and white silks. A forest of microphones on stands stood on top of the podium, their roots decorously covered by the dignified colors the too-rich silk. Lorcan appeared at the podium in a hail of camera flashes and respectfully shouted questions. He did not smile and with one hand gestured a command of silence which was immediately given.

Lorcan Dubhlaoch spoke quickly but with absolute, deadly clarity, “We will find this anarchist, this rabble-rouser who believes himself outside the walls of our perfect union. Private military contractors have been granted more leeway and given additional tax advantages as an incentive to find Debyan Radchenko. They will either neutralize or capture him. They will find him.”

With that, Dubhlaoch again held up his hand, this time indicating that he was done speaking, and stepped

away from the podium. He strode purposefully away, appearing utterly unaware of the explosion of camera flashes and shouted questions that were now noticeably tinged with urgency and frustration.

Moonlight streamed into the room through the white curtains of three wide windows framed in dark wood. Daniel paused to glance for a moment at the lawn that ran down to the trees. Then he walked across the shining wood floor towards a rustic fireplace where two overstuffed armchairs looked at each other across a dark bearskin rug.

A shadow box hung nearby. It contained an array of different ranks that Daniel had held in the United States Army, eventually culminating with the rank of Captain. His gray West Point uniform hung inside, and his treasured Green Beret was also present in the box. Also, a secret patch, known only to members of the secret and elite Delta Force perched in a place of prominence. A few pictures were here as well, including one of Daniel wearing dusty goggles on his forehead. He was carrying an M-4 rifle at the ready and wearing a long bushy beard that would not have been out of place on an Amish farm. Behind him was a mud hut, and Daniel was standing beside his enormous friend Gideon.

A small porcelain vase sat among the memorabilia on the wooden mantle. Daniel picked it up carefully and cradled it in his palm for a moment, appreciating its elaborate Eastern design and dwelling on a memory. The vase was decorated with intricate green and red scrollwork. A fierce dragon was its most prominent characteristic. For a moment, Daniel examined the dragon, who responded in kind, bearing its vicious teeth at him.

He had bought the vase long ago, during a stop in Korea. He liked it, he had told Gideon, because the dragon seemed to be telling him something with its enigmatic eyes. Gideon had replied only with a dismissive head shake.

The dragon had provided a metaphor for something else. Danger yes, but also an opportunity. But that was another time, when he was a younger man when he was just spoiling for a fight.

Daniel shook it sharply three times. Behind him sounded a loud click and a brief whirr.

FIFTEEN

Daniel had equipped the vase with a small microchip that detected a specific motion. In turn, it would send a wireless signal to unlock a trap door. Replacing the vase on the mantle, he turned and threw back the rug to reveal a varnished floorboard sticking up like a handle. He reached down and heaved open the trap door. Slowly, he walked down a set of painted concrete steps into the darkness.

As he descended, dim artificial light came up to greet him. Monitors started to light up as he entered the room, awakened from a long sleep. In the windowless room below, a bank of computer screens provided the primary illumination. Many rifles and other war material hung on the walls, amid masses of computer cables and dense thickets of wiring. Nestled in a corner was a highly illegal 3D printer, capable of printing custom metal weaponry. The only sounds were the quiet hum of the machines and a hiss of the air flowing out of the ductwork.

At an oversized monitor, Daniel seated himself in his chair customized to his proportions by sophisticated measuring instruments. The finished output had come from a multi-material 3-D printer.

The mercenary entered a few keyboard commands and watched as the image of Gideon slowly came to life before him. Gideon's voice was slightly fuzzy, and his image continually broke up into squares and then resolved. They were using the Ducat transmission network, the only way they could be secure that no one was spying on their communications. For the right to use the system securely, Daniel would pay a nominal fee. That small fee would go to all the interconnected nodes along the network, incentivizing them to allow connections to pass through. Although ubiquitous, there was still danger from the CPC

from using the Ducat network. Daniel could see that his friend sat against an unidentifiable background of brick.

The Ducat network had come to prominence during the economic collapse. The governments of the world had instigated a period of hyperinflation unparalleled on earth. Prices for food, clothing and energy skyrocketed and would change by the hour. In less than a week, the price of bread went from three dollars to three-hundred. Billion-dollar fortunes were decimated overnight.

But there was a refuge from the hyperinflation, found in the Ducat network. The cryptocurrency could not be manipulated by government, so its value remained relatively stable. Vital staples, like food and energy, maintained a constant price denominated in Ducats. Hundreds of thousands of euros, Renminbi and US dollars poured into the network, making a single Ducat worth nearly US \$35,000. Soon most of the world's economy was running efficiently on the Ducat network, outside of the control the world's governments. Due to millions of disenfranchised who had not bought into the Ducat network, the world's governments rushed to implement the Essential Development Collective Directive, which introduced its new currency, the CPC dollar. The Ducat network was immediately ruled illegal, with intensive penalties for buying and selling with it, but its widespread use made that threat and law impossible to enforce.

Daniel had been lucky. A friend of his had told him to invest in Ducats. He wagered a small amount, just \$5000. That had quickly come to be worth millions of inflation adjusted dollars and allowed him to buy all the toys in this secret basement.

The Ducat network was adaptive, and it had to be to stay ahead of the CPC's Internet scanners. The system had been created, supposedly by one man: Debyan Radchenko. The Ducat network was not only a crypto-currency that allowed payments from one entity to another. It also allowed for smart contracts and marketplaces.

There were marketplaces of every sort on the network. For most people, the way they interacted with the marketplaces was purchasing property, intellectual and physical. There were blueprints and models for physical objects that could be outputted by 3-D printers. Musicians could post their songs on the network with different characteristics specifying the royalty rate or the amount that they would accept for a song play. Creators could either sell the property or the right to play or use an artwork. Even breaking out and selling shares of individual intellectual property was a common practice. A whole new investor class that

invested solely in art and creative work of all kinds had arisen. Novelists could post the written word. Decentralized curated marketplaces added value, and chose to curate artists, while others chose a more general approach. The Ducati network allowed anyone with any kind of intellectual property to monetize it.

Everything on the Ducat network provided value and the system was highly decentralized. In this day and age everything had a microprocessor. Nearly every device had some level of computing power. Even small devices, such as a refrigerator or blender had spare processing capability which they could use to at least communicate with other appliances, which made them necessary cogs in the Ducati network. Additional computer resources such as processing power and storage space could be rented out on the network and could allow the user to at least recoup a few Ducats.

For Daniel, most significant market was Panther, where mercenaries came together to form teams and employers posted contacts.

All of this was deeply illegal. The CPC had seen to that, but the reality was that everyone used it. In addition to the threat of hyperinflation, the CPC had gotten into the habit of going into people's bank accounts and taking 10 or 20%. They called it a haircut, and said that it was for "essential services." This was in addition to inflation, effectively a yearly 5% haircut without the intrusion into a bank account.

"Daniel. I'm sorry. I meant to wait. I know we just got back," began Gideon tentatively and apologetically.

"Gid, I told you. I'm done."

"I know, I know. How many times have I wanted to walk away myself? I know you can afford to. But look, I'm desperate. The less you know the better, but the truth is I had to write out a smart contract to make ends meet a few months back."

Daniel shook his head. "And you can't entirely pay."

"It's more than that." Gideon paused, somewhat ashamed. "I...kind of took matters into my own hands. They've threatened my family."

Daniel said nothing. He had warned his friend about this before. Gideon had a habit of selling shares of his earnings on Panther to investors for upfront Ducats. Although these contracts could be structured to pay only on completion of a job, apparently Gideon had chosen to guarantee the outcome, making him personally liable for the screw-up in Saudi. His investors had likely hired a hacker to find him, despite the anonymity of Panther. If done carefully, anonymity was guaranteed, but it didn't take many mistakes to be found.

His friend took a breath and began to speak again.

"This job should be easy money. No politics and money up front."

Daniel's smile held no real humor. "There's always politics," he said.

"Not this time. It's quick, in and out."

"Like that time in Odessa?" joked Daniel.

"No." Gideon laughed as he remembered. "It's a good man setting it up this time. I know him and I know we can trust him. At least, as far as the logistics goes." His voice trailed off, then picked up again. "So there's good money, and a reliable agent. The client promises a bonus too."

Daniel sighed in resignation. "Tell me the story."

"His name is Markus Gallery, and he is representing a group of investors..."

Daniel sat bolt upright in the computer chair. The wheels squeaked and the back of the chair made a loud noise as the seat rebounded too fast. He was breathing intensely and remembered the last time he had heard the name Markus Gallery.

"Markus Gallery?" Daniel asked.

"You know him?" Queried Gideon.

“Yes.” murmured Daniel in wonder. After his release from incarceration, Daniel had searched around for information on the enigmatic Markus Gallery. The trail went cold, frigid, sometime in 2017. Prior to that had been in the U.S. Army, an officer who reached the rank of Major, and a Ranger at that. When the trail went that cold, it meant the man had gone deep into some very black project.

"You know him! Great!" Gideon was always overly enthusiastic when he started a job. “Anyway, he has put together a team to find Radchenko. That guy has been loose too long, and I know you think so too. This way, we might get him, and we get a payday for getting him. Or even if we don't," Gideon continued with the hard-sell. “Markus has a reputation as an excellent commander. Super-super-smart, although he is a bit...ambitious. We start in Hong Kong. It's a simple escort job, Daniel. Just pick up a guy with the codename Loki.”

Daniel leaned to his left and tapped an auxiliary screen awake. Working fast but fully encrypted, he started a deep search on Loki. Panther had a catalog that included information brokers, ex-special forces operators, computer hackers and honeypots for hire. He added Loki and Markus Gallery, trying to see what the intersection was and to explore any connection.

Gideon continued with what he knew. "Loki's Polish, short, compact, super smart. He's apparently been concentrating on locating some information, working his contacts, you know. Markus won't give specifics."

"No. Of course, he wouldn't give any details." Information was too valuable to just give away. Even on the Ducat network there was a nominal fee for this kind of deep search, with several advanced providers all hawking their own algorithm. For the right price, Daniel could sic some pretty serious information brokers on the problem, but the fee was a little high for him, and there were risks with this kind of search. Even asking an information broker for information became a valuable piece of information to the right people.

Glancing at the rundown on the secondary screen, he saw that Loki would be an unusual prize. Born on the Polish resort island of Jastarnia, he'd grown up right next to the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. From old social media pictures, it appeared the young man had partied hard as a young man and learned to dance well. His reputation profile on the Panther network listed his technical qualifications under his callsign. He also seemed to have made his way to South China, and he listed some jobs that he had done in

Vietnam and Thailand. That was all well and good, but nothing stood out. Just another run of the mill hacker, a dime a dozen these days.

"What's so special about this Loki guy?" Daniel asked. He leaned forward in his chair again to look closely at the big computer screen in front of him on the wall.

"Loki's been working on locating some information," Gideon said. "Markus won't give specifics. Need to know, but it has something to do with Radchenko."

"I guess Markus' investors are after the bounty," Gideon said. "400 million from the CPC... In any condition." The Central Planning Committee for the Equitable Distribution of Wealth paid a high price for many things, including returned computer terrorists.

"Yeah, but that also means that every two-bit soldier of fortune is looking for him too. The pay better be good..." Daniel started to say.

"Trust me, it is," Gideon interrupted. "Ducats. Enough to get us out of the US and get to an CPC special development zone. Are you in?"

"I'm doing this for you and your family, especially Fontaine," Daniel said. He was fond of Gideon's wife Fontaine, as she had provided a stabilizing influence on the brash young Navy SEAL. "Don't you forget it."

"I won't, old buddy," Gideon said. He was smiling, Daniel knew, because Gideon always enjoyed the jobs they had done. "See you at these coordinates tomorrow, 1200 hrs."

Daniel nodded and switched off the display. Daniel was still startled at hearing Markus Gallery's name and, he wondered what it would be like to work with him. It was sure that Daniel owed him a favor. How much of a favor? What did the man want from him? He slumped in his chair, aware again of his bone-deep exhaustion borne from life.

SIXTEEN

JULY 11, 2024

1200

RAPHINE, VA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Daniel drove onto the tarmac of a decrepit airport on the very far mid-eastern edge of Virginia. Once used by crop dusters, few knew about this tiny deserted airfield. Its pavement needed some of those herbicides now. Weeds were growing up everywhere, cracking the taxiways and even the runway itself. The office buildings and hangers had fallen into similar disarray, with rotting paneling, and torn roofing. Daniel ignored the decrepitude, and spotted Gideon standing on the tarmac. He drove his truck directly out and close to the standing Gideon, obviously awaiting Daniel's arrival.

The sky was blue, the sun was shining, and a few fluffy clouds could be seen in the sky. Daniel was not impressed. If there were no stars, it was a waste of his time.

Gideon was in civilian gear, but for a moment sun glinted off Gideon's standard issue sidearm which was tucked under his right arm. Gideon never strayed from his 1911. Gideon didn't seem very concerned about carrying an illegal firearm openly. If the CPC knew, he could go to jail for fifteen years, and that was just for the pistol.

Daniel got out of the truck and went to stand by his friend. Gideon looked stony, but Daniel saw worry underneath. Daniel hurried to grab his gear out of the back of his rugged old truck.

Approaching within earshot, Daniel let out a simple impatient question. "Well?"

Gideon responded with a shrug, still trying to keep up the stony face. "Dunno."

Right before them, the two men saw a large craft emerge with something of a shimmer.

Daniel and Gideon found themselves looking at a slate grey Emerson Transport RX48. There were few craft on earth anything like the behemoth. Over the years, Daniel had seen and flown in a lot of aircraft. The C-5 Galaxy, a 747 or a 380 Airbus were ho-hum to him. One time he had even watched the famous Antonov 225, originally designed for the Soviet space shuttle program, load up a mini submarine.

Daniel figured that the craft was about the same height as a C-5 Galaxy, an Emerson Airlines XP44 Mercury or an old Boeing 747, about four stories high. But the plane fuselage was wider than any of these. This was no simple metal tube with wings. It had a sleek design, a blended wing body that made it look more like a spaceship than a cargo hauler. The four engines, two on each wing, were contained within the semi-wing portion itself, but instead of facing forward, these were pointed straight up, toward the sky. These engines could be rotated to position themselves independently, allowing for vertical takeoff and landing.

Daniel had seen several RX48's, but this one appeared to have a few more unusual protuberances than usual around the bottom of the craft. There were two large blisters over the wing that also piqued his interest.

While they were assessing the suddenness of its silent appearance, a side door opened noiselessly, and a platform extended. The imposing figure of Markus Gallery stood securely on the platform which lowered him gently to the ground.

Gallery was a tall, powerfully built man with sandy hair that was slightly longer than regulation length. Daniel was impressed by his ramrod straight military bearing. He was wearing a unique camo outfit that seemed to comprise all the usual elements of combat gear.

"Good to see you again!" Markus shouted with a smile that showed the laugh lines in the corners of his eyes. His tanned face exaggerated the grooves and made him look older than he was. Desert did that to faces.

Gideon and Daniel looked at each other for a moment, unsure how to respond to such a familiar greeting from a man that neither recalled ever meeting before.

Markus stepped off the platform and shook Daniel's hand. Daniel figured Markus for a hard handshake, and he was not disappointed. He refrained from grimacing as the man shook his hand. "Daniel," Markus said as he let go of the punishing handshake. "I've heard a lot about you. I know you do good work. In fact, I owe you and Gideon a debt of gratitude."

"I just do what I do," Daniel said. He let himself grimace slightly. "I take no pleasure in it."

"You, like so many others," replied Markus diplomatically.

Daniel looked briefly at a scar on the man's right hand. Daniel knew what that scar meant. That was a scar from trying to put out a fellow soldier who was on fire. Those scars never faded, no matter how much time passed.

Markus decided it was time to jog their memories. "Venezuela. 2019. Ring any bells?"

Daniel and Gideon looked at one another quizzically.

"You were on the Beta team. You defied your standing orders, and you saved my life."

Daniel thought back to that day. The strike team had been compromised before their mission was given a green light. Daniel and Gideon had made it to safety, but they'd received word that a second CIA team was in deep trouble. They'd ventured out of their second safe house, defying good sense and risking their lives that night. With an RPG, they'd managed to pick off a vehicle in pursuit of the Alpha team.

Gideon piped up. "How did you know? That was a top-secret CIA operation. Our teams never even had contact with one another!"

"My investors have access to all kinds of privileged information and technology," answered Markus, clearly hiding something. He tried changing the subject. "On that note, climb on board the *Norseman*. I'll give you a tour."

Gideon excitedly gave Daniel a fist bump as they entered the aircraft. Whatever his worries were, Gideon always looked forward to new missions in a way that Daniel never had, and probably never would.

"Did I call it or what?" Gideon whispered into Daniel's ear.

Daniel mulled that over. He hoped Gideon was right and that Markus could be trusted, but one of Daniel's favorite sayings was "Trust but verify."

The group stepped onto the transport and entered a cavernous space inside. Daniel and Gideon gaped like tourists.

Markus led them up a flight of metal stairs to a platform that overlooked the bay. Daniel and Gideon followed slowly, studying their new environment intently. Two pilots swiveled around to evaluate the newcomers as they finished the climb. From the top of the stairs, Daniel could see a bank of computer stations ranked around the walls. A large center table held the equipment for projecting a hologram. Daniel could not quite tell what placeholder image was currently on display. It seemed to be corporate or governmental logo or insignia. It was in constant motion, and it seemed vaguely familiar, though he couldn't see it from his current angle. At any rate, the technology was impressive, and Daniel could tell from Gideon's expression that he thought so as well.

One of the pilots stood up to greet them and shake hands. She was of average height, a brunette with soft skin, a secure grip, and a brilliant smile. "I'm Costanza Rossi," she offered in a tangibly Italian accent spoken with sharp clarity. Stunning smoky eyes sparkled, and she flashed Daniel a flirtatious grin as he shook her surprisingly strong but small hand. Daniel could feel small callouses on her hands from many hours at the controls of flying machines. Her curves were only accentuated by the tight-fitting flight suit that she had unzipped halfway, revealing a tightly fitted army green shirt underneath.

"This is my navigator and ace gunner, Ye Joon." She gestured at the slightly doughy man she had been sitting beside. Joon, a short Korean man, awkwardly stood to greet them, offering a shy smile and a soft handshake.

Daniel nodded to both, trying to keep his face neutral while looking at Costanza. Attractive women generally made that difficult, especially those with a smile like Costanza, not to mention her other physical

attributes. "A pleasure," Daniel said as he smiled again at the well put together pilot. "You fly an impressive ship. Where on earth did you get it?"

"It is impressive," Costanza agreed. "We call her the *Norseman*, and she's the best thing in the air."

"And where did you get all this gear?" Daniel asked in wonder. "I've never seen anything like it, especially inside an aircraft."

"Yeah, our employers somehow have access to technology the likes of which I have never seen before. This aircraft was apparently a prototype Special Forces insertion base. The adaptive camo system can not only hide the craft; it can also impersonate the liveries of cargo companies that use the RX48. We can sneak in and out of any commercial airport without raising any eyebrows."

"Hardcore," Gideon enthused.

Costanza nodded. "Yes, it is. It has all the capability of the largest transports with the firepower of four AC-130 Spectre gunships. I'm told it was commissioned by a private military company a few years back, but they couldn't afford it. Couldn't even pay for its upkeep, I heard."

She paused, and then turned slightly to speak directly to Daniel, her eyes sending a message that might be a warning. "Somehow our investors acquired her."

"Stuff happens," he said lightly, quickly moving the conversation on from what might have been an indiscretion. "It's none of my concern."

"You're right, of course," she agreed at once and pivoted toward the aft of the craft. "Check out the view."

Daniel looked down from the command center and into the gigantic cargo bay. He saw two vehicles. One was a solid-looking, but sleek MRAP of a make and model he'd never encountered before. He couldn't see the underbody, but it was plainly equipped with a large rotating turret on top. It was painted in a desert tan color with small protected windows on the sides and a small windshield facing front. Just behind it was an armor-reinforced dune buggy that looked fast and agile.

A lanky man with long black hair was inspecting the dune buggy, bending down to examine its undercarriage and then standing to enter his findings on a tablet computer. Looking up, he waved to the men above. He attempted a bad-ass smile, to a negligible effect. To Daniel he appeared of Southeast Asian descent, most likely Thai.

Markus somehow materialized at Daniel's shoulder. "That's Lawan Tawsin. He's a bit green, but still an asset."

Daniel grimaced a little when he thought about others he'd known who had been green and lost their lives because of it.

In the belly of the giant craft, Daniel and Gideon eyes wandered about until they found themselves looking at a section of the plane that appeared like a compact clinical setting. Varied emergency equipment was available, heart paddles and oxygen tanks, as well as a select array of treatment gear. Daniel could see a portable ultrasound, and what looked like a setup for doing echocardiograms or something similar. But none of that held Daniel's attention. His eyes were focused on a miniature bay with a sealed glass door.

Inside were four undersized humanoid robots, side by side. Each were hooked to what looked like a juiced-up charging station for household cleaning equipment. An array of blinking lights danced along the walls of the bay, apparently meant to indicate the state of readiness of the pair of automatons, each about the size of a chimpanzee. Daniel pointed this spectacle out to Gideon.

"What are we looking at there?" Gideon wondered aloud.

"Looks to me like we're soon to be replaced," Daniel replied with a smile.

"Hey, Gallery," Gideon called out. "What are these things?"

Markus leaned over, excited to tell them all about his pride and joy. "Our little friends? Those are our prototype Detectors, series 3T3. We haven't had a chance to use them yet, but I have deployed the prior generation quite successfully. This model and its successors will revolutionize warfare. No more will the powerful send grunts like you and me to fight and die."

“So, a robot,” countered Gideon dubiously.

“No. A robot is controlled by a computer, a so-called artificial intelligence. There is no creative thinker on earth better than a human. A combat situation is far too complex for a computer to be making decisions.”

Despite Markus’s enthusiasm, Daniel had doubts about these 3T3s. There was no substitute for being there. Situational awareness would be dramatically impaired. Running a Detector must in some ways be like driving a car, in other means like playing a video game. It would take practice for sure, but Daniel was slightly hopeful. He remembered how many buddies he had lost. It was like losing a member of his family, except worse, because his buddies were always there for him when his family was not. With these, perhaps warfare could be changed to be something that only robots engaged in.

"So, somebody has to boss the things," Gideon said defensively. "Somebody has to tell them what to do and how to do it."

"Yes, you are correct, to a degree. Like any drones, these are remotely piloted and controlled from a station; basically, each is a remotely operated soldier. But enough of this," Markus directed. "We need to move. Take seats and strap in."

Markus made a spinning signal to dark-haired Costanza to begin take off. She nodded and took her place at the console. Joon also took his place at her side. They spoke to one another tersely and without emotion, as fliers do, running efficiently through their preflight checklist. Almost immediately, the cabin air filled with a growing hum and a light vibration.

Then, all at once, the *Norseman* lifted off with a roar from its powerful engines.

Daniel looked through a small portal and could see the exterior wing of the aircraft. He watched as the two engines started to rotate towards the stern of the plane as they flew through the sky. Soon the engines were parallel with the ground, flying as any other ordinary aircraft would. Then, the wings began to rotate backward, turning the craft into an enormous delta wing for high-speed. “A variable geometry wing,” mused Daniel. “This plane is full of surprises.”

Markus spun a chair that was anchored to the floor and took a seat. The others gathered round for a clue as to their next move.

"As you know, we're en route to extract a hacker with the codename Loki." Markus said, smiling at the thought of a hacker naming himself after the Norse god of mischief and mayhem. "He's currently in a hotel in Hong Kong, laying low. He's being pursued by the local authorities who think he has information on the whereabouts of Debyan Radchenko."

"Does he?" Gideon asked.

"At the very least, he has a superb lead." Markus looked down at his watch. "We're traveling at Mach 2. We're about five hours out." He looked up at the team and regarded them for a moment before continuing. "There're some racks below. Grab a few hours of rest."

Daniel and Gideon sauntered down the stairs to the lower level. Daniel looked over at a far section of the bay and noticed that there seem to be a private cabin. No doubt it was for the use of Markus Gallery. Directly across from the private pod, past the two vehicles several pods were open, revealing some comfortable looking accommodations.

Daniel pulled himself up onto an upper pod and settled down inside. He pressed a prominent switch and a pneumatic door enclosed the space. The pod was quite comfy, and he figured it could even accommodate Gideon's enormous bulk. He was thankful for some privacy. Lying down he noticed above him was a monitor which he presumed he could have used to surf the Internet, access mission information or watch some other form of entertainment. He wasn't particularly tired, but he tried his best to drift away.

His thoughts turned to Sana and he found himself thinking about their first date, on the Shenandoah Vista.

SEVENTEEN

JULY 7TH, 2022

1135 Z

SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK, VIRGINIA
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

After their first meeting at McLaren's, the next day Daniel and Sana made their way to the trails of Shenandoah National Park. Its hundreds of thousands of protected acres sheltered wildlife unimagined just 75 miles away in Washington DC.

It was their first date and he and Sana had first shared their hopes and dreams with each other. As the two scrambled over rocks with Daniel leading the way, Daniel found himself looking back over his shoulder at her as they climbed. There was something about Sana that he couldn't resist; maybe it was her dark hair, maybe it was the way she laughed, but whatever it was he knew that he wanted more. He stopped at the peak of a massive rock and surveyed the area. He was happy to take a break and enjoy not only the view of the landscape in front of them, but of the beautiful woman beside him.

After hiking deep into the wooded Piedmont trails, they reached the Pinnacles Overlook and rested on the rocky outcroppings. The granite was firm, yet bore markings of many other weary hikers. The view took their breath away. Dark evergreens staggered among bare deciduous trees filled the valley. The sun had risen to its full height for the day and warmed their resting place.

"This looks like a good place for lunch," Daniel said, running his fingers through his hair as they sat.

Sana moved to sit next to him, crossing her tone and tanned legs. "I've never been here."

"This one my favorite places to be, aside from my native Tennessee," Daniel started to explain, looking out over the terrain. "That's why like it. It reminds me of home." He turned and looked for a spot in the far distance, then continued. "I have a cabin not far from here, but my real home I haven't seen in years. No time in between deployments. That, and it's not the same. The opioid epidemic has taken its toll on the people and my hometown. Conscious he had taken the conversation in a dark direction, he tried to recover "Where is your home, Sana?"

The woman paused at his question, taking in the breathtaking scenery of lush forest. She sighed heavily before responding. Home had never been a favorite topic of hers. "I don't have one, Daniel."

There was a pause as Daniel waited for an explanation. Sana reluctantly continued.

"I was born in the United States when my father was working on an engineering degree. He returned to Lebanon, but we had to leave the Levant when I was just an infant. It was not safe to be Greek Orthodox then...So, I grew up in DC, went to college there, everything." There was sadness in her voice, a loneliness that Daniel could relate to.

"A lot of people nowadays don't have good thoughts about the capital," he mused.

Sana nodded her head solemnly, running her fingers through her silky dark hair. "It's just politics. Do you follow it?"

"I used to, but now I don't care," Daniel admitted, shrugging his shoulders apathetically. "I don't have any hope of influencing the direction of my country."

Now was time for Sana to wait for the story.

"My entire adult life, all I've done is gone from war to war, and warfare is the only trade I know. I've done what my country asked me to do."

Daniel was cautious about oversharing, but he decided that this person was someone he could confide in. "If you think about it too much, it makes you too angry. Too many of my friends have found that the hard way. Suicides, DUI's, domestic assaults. So, I stopped thinking about it. Now I just do my job, try to survive. Just like most Americans, now." He paused for a few moments and then turned to catch Sana's gaze, realizing that she had turned to look at him while he spoke. "We can't just let things work out naturally. Politicians don't get elected with that message."

"I understand." She replied.

Daniel wasn't sure if she did understand, but he couldn't help but give her a half smile at the response. He turned his attention to the plains and cliffs in the distance. The two had sat in silence for a few more moments before Sana spoke again, this time with an optimistic tone. "The CPC will change that. A single world government will provide stability. It will end the inequality that causes wars and stop bubbles in the economy. When the CPC takes over the healthcare system, care will be free! There will be a guaranteed job and minimum income for everyone, and no one will ever worry about poverty! Education will be a right; we will arrest climate change and end unjust incarceration."

She paused for a moment before continuing. "I truly believe we are on the brink of humanity's greatest moment!"

Her earnest enthusiasm was what had attracted Daniel to her. She wasn't jaded like the rest; yes, even like himself now. She still believed. She was different, and even if he wasn't sure he believed her philosophy, he knew that he wanted to. He wanted to believe in something, anything, that would give him hope for the future again.

Daniel kept his eyes on the horizon, bringing his knees to his chest. "Well, I hope you are right. I'm tired of fighting. I've seen my share of bad guys though, and I'm not sure they share your sentiments."

That afternoon with Sana was now just a memory, a daydream he replayed over and over to remember happier times. Daniel was overcome with intense sadness as he slipped into sleep.

EIGHTEEN

JULY 12TH, 2024

1600

SOMEWHERE OVER THE PACIFIC

Bombs went off. Men shouted incoherently as they scrambled about. Confusion washed over Daniel. He wasn't sure of his mission. He had a heavy bag on his back, and the sense it was filled with explosives. Gideon appeared, bloodied, and screamed something. A building collapsed, sending dust spraying over everything. He knew he had to get the pack of explosives off his back if he wanted to survive. He looked down, and saw that his hands were on fire.

Daniel sat bolt upright and he pulled himself out of the dream that haunted him in so many different forms. He woke in a sweat despite the chill that lay over the pulsing *Norseman*. His head was pounding, and his heart was racing. He closed his eyes as he tried to get rid of the images that would not let him sleep. Normally when he was on a mission the dreams were worse. Glancing at his watch, he decided it would be best to walk around the bay to clear his head. He sighed in annoyance. The pod had been quite comfortable. While on an assignment he was lucky to find a nice rock to sleep on.

He walked out of the sleeping area and started exploring the dark *Norseman*. The hum of the engines was strangely soothing, and it seemed that everyone besides the pilots was sleeping. Then Daniel saw Markus, who appeared like a ghostly apparition in the dim light of the *Norseman*. He was leaning over a lower

porthole and looked out onto the vast ocean below. Curious, Daniel walked up beside him to see what was so fascinating to the former Army Ranger.

Markus didn't look up and barely acknowledged Daniel's presence. Daniel, in turn, answered his silence with more of the same. Markus finally spoke.

"Take a good look down there, Daniel," Markus said. "See that?" He pointed to a cluster of lights gleaming on the inky dark ocean below. Gallery's face contorted with emotion. "That's Joachim Soren's relay station. He's an incredibly powerful man. Politically connected with the CPC. He made a fortune by establishing this relay station between Hong Kong and New York."

Markus looked up to see if Daniel understood. He found that he had.

"From there, he detects patterns and intercepts financial trades. The latency between the two positions makes it so he's amassed \$1 trillion. By not providing a shred of value, not inventing a new widget, not figuring out a new way to take a product to market."

Markus looked disgusted. "We know someone is after Loki, and our intelligence says this guy is probably pulling the strings."

"What's his motive?" Daniel asked, glad for something to distract him from his nightmare.

"You've heard the story that Radchenko is an international terrorist that invented the Ducat protocol?" Markus asked cryptically. "To destabilize the world's governments? Well, some of that is true." Markus rubbed his eyes sleepily, deciding this line of questioning was not in his best interest to continue.

"Are we after Radchenko for the bounty?" Daniel asked. "Or on behalf of the government...?" he asked, trailing off with a vague and indecisive hand gesture. He was trying to play it casually, but he wanted to know whose side they were on. He was used to top-secret missions, but this was unusual.

"We'll be in Hong Kong in less than an hour," Markus said, ignoring Daniel's question. "We'll meet another member of the team there. She's been on the ground assisting Loki." Markus looked concerned for a moment, but then added "I've never worked with her before, but she was the only one on the Panther

Marketplace available and in position. She has a fantastic reputation and credentials. Beggars cannot be choosers.” Markus said. “Her name is Reyes.”

NINETEEN

JULY 12TH, 2024

1721

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

It still amazed Daniel that an aircraft the size of the *Norseman* could fly so gracefully, cruising steadily as it entered the skies over Hong Kong. The plane had dropped out of supersonic speeds to prepare for a landing. Standing behind the pilots on the upper deck, Daniel looked out of the wide cockpit window at the familiar ramble of skyscrapers in the far distance. Distant hills and boats became larger. He remembered happier, less complicated days spent in this city. He had spent a month here and met a delightful Irish banker. A redhead, full of energy, and flush with cash. They had spent an exciting few weeks together. He saw a tiny glass spire and recalled that it contained Tia's apartment, he remembered, in the tony Midlevel area. Where was she now? He wondered. Probably down there somewhere, flashing her beautiful smile at a joke or maybe out on her usual run along the harbor. A small part of him still ached to be down there, planning drinks after work and worrying about bills like normal people.

Hong Kong was still firmly under the control of the Chinese government. China had successfully held the Central Planning Committee's efforts at arm's length and had steadfastly refused to join the world government. Despite the fact that the regime was nearly as oppressive as the CPC, China was one of the few economic bright spots left on earth. Her citizens were consumed with the purpose of forging a great nation and carried forward with determination towards this goal, unconvinced by the pleas for "social justice" that had weakened the west's purpose and economy. China pursued her own interests, and as a

result had to actively defend her borders from millions of refugees that desperately wanted to escape from the poverty and despair of the CPC. An enormous wall on the border of CPC signatory nations had gone up, rivaling the great wall in size and complexity.

The aircraft gracefully glided in towards their destination, a magnificent hotel. Daniel consciously cleared his mind and focused on the on the task ahead. An enormous blunted dome topped a tall skyscraper, the structure had a modernistic honeycomb lattice ornamenting the exterior. Daniel wondered if Joon and Costanza meant to land this massive vessel on the gaudy mini-palace's roof. The main airport was on an artificial island to the east, and it seemed too late to swing around towards it. The massive dome of the hotel loomed up in front of them, shifting his thoughts back to the here and now. God knows how many hours it to design, let alone make, but the honeycomb effect reflected the sunlight back, making it appear it was encrusted with diamonds.

Lawan's husky voice came loud and clear over the intercom. "Boss, we just got a call from Reyes. She says that Loki's in trouble and we have to move."

Markus took immediate control of the situation. "Order her to protect him at all costs and provide cover." Daniel could hear Lawan rogering the command and relay it back to Reyes on the ground. Markus turned to him and Gideon. "We're going in hot. Lock and load, gentlemen." He dragged out a white box marked in Cyrillic from a shelf in the nearest bay. Yanking it open, he pulled out a pair of headsets and tossed them to Daniel and Gideon.

As he pulled it over his head, a part fell over his eyes, and he put his hand up to correct his mistake. He felt Markus' hand on top of his hand, fixing the eyepiece into place.

"Prototype Augmentation systems. Vision enhancement, the whole deal." Markus smiled grimly. "Trust me, you'll like them. Precise distance vision, even in low light or thick air. Turn on the crosshairs with that blue button on the outer rim of the left eyepiece. Notice how it shows you the range?"

The men tried the crosshairs briefly, "Nice toy," Gideon offered. Daniel wasn't so sure. He was deeply skeptical of any new gadget, especially one he hadn't trained with. As he panned about the interior of the plane, he saw the goggles pick out Gideon and Markus in solid green, and highlight the weapons by their side in blue, indicating their characteristics. The displayed range and average accuracy of the weapon

allowed Daniel to make some quick figuring about how he could best his opponent. He decided this could be useful. He looked over at Gideon, who was looking back at him with a quizzical look on his face. The headset made for a rather unusual fashion accessory on Daniel's oversized friend. He couldn't help but laugh as the two headed over to their gear to pick up their rifles.

Over the intercom, Lawan asked, "Switchblade?" Markus nodded, prompting Lawan to press a small lever by his side and an elevator dropped from the ceiling.

Daniel was just reaching into his bag to pull out his IWI X95 Micro-Tavor assault rifle when a command from Markus made him pause.

"Gentlemen, your new weapons!" Markus couldn't contain his childlike excitement at this unveiling of new technology. He walked over to the smooth wall directly behind the elevator and pressed a black button. For a moment, there was a small whirring sound. A movable panel raised up to reveal several small square items with a carrying handle. Markus took one out, shook it, and to Daniel and Gideon's amazement, a spring-loaded mechanism activated and a fully formed assault rifle appeared as if by magic. Markus reached into the cavity and pulled out two more devices and threw them to his partners, who caught them with looks of surprise on their face.

Gideon was intrigued, but after a moment replied with a "No thanks," and tossed the item back at Markus. He reached into his sea bag and pulled out his specially modified Mk 48 Mod 3 machine gun. Daniel knew this was Gideon's favorite weapon, going all the way back to his first days as a SEAL. The machine gun fired heavy rounds, 7.62×51mm, which Gideon greatly preferred when engaged in a firefight. This firearm was suppressed, and Gideon had made several alterations to the weapon, including a carbon fiber butt to reduce its weight and make it more compact. Special optics completed the package.

"I need something with a little bit more power," deadpanned Gideon.

"Suit yourself," replied Markus. "But that thing is pretty hard to conceal."

"I have my ways," said Gideon as he replaced the large machine gun into his sea bag and swung it over his shoulder. The large duffel looked like a toy on the back of the enormous man.

Daniel considered reaching into his bag and pulling out his rifle, but decided that the advantages of these new and highly concealable assault rifles outweighed taking the larger Tavor.

Markus pressed a button on the side of the rifle which snapped back into its original position, and he entered the elevator followed by Lawan, Gideon, and Daniel. It probably could have held one or two more battle-dressed special forces operators, but it would have been tight. The elevator ascended smoothly to one of two convex bulges that stood out from the *Norseman's* ceiling. When they reached the side of the bulge, Lawan depressed a lever on its near side. A panel slid open at once, revealing an interior just large enough for four men.

Lawan entered the doorway, and one at a time the others followed him. The three in the back strapped themselves into deeply padded seats set into the walls. Lawan climbed forward into what appeared to Gideon to be a cockpit area. Gideon was confused. The last few minutes had been like drinking from a fire hose. And now here he was on the top of the *Norseman*, in a cabin of seemingly a separate aircraft.

"Prepared for takeoff!" Markus barked as he tapped away at a tablet.

Daniel and Gideon exchange a quick quizzical glance at each other. *Prepared for what?* thought Gideon. Suddenly, the door they had climbed through slammed shut; then a second door slid over as well. "Some pressure lock" mused Gideon. Suddenly, another door on the exterior of the *Norseman* instantly slid back, revealing beautiful blue sky through the cockpit. *No turning back now*, thought Gideon. The machine and their lives were now in the hands of their green pilot, Lawan.

Gideon opened his mouth to ask Markus a question, but the sentiment was forced out of him by sudden acceleration. As Gideon's heart ended up in his throat, he considered the experience was not that different from the launch of a catapult from an aircraft carrier. The craft, which Lawan and Markus continually referred to as a Switchblade, was thrown forward, then hung in the air. Then they began to fall, tail first.

Even though he had flown in helicopters and other aerial craft a thousand times before, nothing could prepare Gideon for the Switchblade. He had never flown in one that was going backward, and he was sure this was not correct.

"Woahhhhh!" Gideon bellowed a half whoop, half scream as he felt his stomach drop. His face twisted into a look that combined both shock and amazement. He did his best to not show fear to his fellow passengers. He mentally said a prayer asking for forgiveness and mercy.

Out the window, Gideon watched with a mix of fear and awe as the *Norseman* sprinted away from them, then banked hard, leaving them in a freefall in this infernal contraption. Gideon's mind started a mental checklist for a parachute jump.

The switchblade was a small craft. Gideon noted that it had a lot of windows, and it could not survive very long in a fight. *Probably designed to piggyback on the Norseman and use speed and stealth to get in and out and survive*, thought Gideon.

A loud thump ended his thought process. Out of the Switchblade's window, he could see a thick blade detach from the roof and begin to rotate. The blade whirred softly as it rotated around to form wings.

Though the ride made him a bit nervous, he couldn't help but feel the excitement of it all. His attention was grabbed by a plume of smoke in a rear window. Afterburners heated up and flames burst out, accelerating the plane over the city skyline. "Woooohoooo!" enthused Gideon, surprised by the sudden acceleration.

Gideon turned to Markus in amazement and was surprised to see a slight smile on the man's face. Of course, he had done it before, thought Gideon, but it would have been nice for him to share before we took off.

The switchblade banked and cruised over the massive *Norseman* that it had just detached itself from, then dove straight for the bay. The view below the men was unparalleled as the switchblade soared over the bustling city, heading for the massive domed skyscraper. The Switchblade swerved between the buildings as the wings unfolded from the delta configuration into parallel and then began to spin, picking up thousands of RPMs each second. The little switchblade had transitioned from an airplane to a helicopter.

Markus grabbed a tiny cable that was attached to a clasp that was hanging from a roof winch. The cable was as thin as fishing wire. He looked at his colleagues. "Time to hook up," he ordered. He clipped the line onto his harness. Daniel and Gideon followed suit, reluctantly.

"These lines aren't nearly thick enough to support our weight!" challenged Gideon.

“Carbon nanotubes. They could support the weight of an elephant. Even in your case, I think they’ll manage.”

The passengers went silent. The switchblade was surprisingly loud and bumpy, and Gideon mentally reviewed the mission ahead. He subconsciously checked their various pockets and pouches for all the necessary equipment.

Like a patient fisherman over an ice hole, Lawan brought the Switchblade to a virtual standstill hovering over the roof of the hotel. Gideon wasn't sure, but he could have sworn that he heard a giggle from the cockpit as the floor suddenly dropped away beneath their feet and Gideon hung in space. He decided an imprecatory prayer was appropriate for whichever egghead had designed this damned machine. The floor fell away below them, and Markus and Daniel disappeared. With a final glare towards Lawan, he checked his line and depressed a button to drop him to the hotel's roof.

The craft hovered above the garden roof of the Great Spire Hotel. The three men landed one after another, each swiftly detaching himself from the line. Markus waved to Taksin, who saluted sharply in return. The floor door closed smoothly like a bomb bay, but then both side doors of the switchblade opened, revealing the interior as the transport whirled away.

With their eyes sweeping before and behind, the trio ran towards the helipad entrance of the hotel. Once inside, they coolly stepped onboard an elevator. The hotel was decorated lavishly. Even the elevator that the trio entered was ornate, with a domed top and hexagons of crystal clear glass.

Markus spoke into an inconspicuous sensor grill beside the elevator door. "Room 1343," Markus muttered in a gruff voice. The elevator began to travel sideways without a sound, hugging the side of the tall atrium that ran up through the hotel from the elegant ground levels far below.

Gideon watched in amazement as the exuberantly decorated interior of the luxurious hotel appeared all around him, fragmented, reflected and fractured by beveled seams in the hexagonal sheets of glass. The elevator was suspended on a vertical structure that pivoted on an axis around the inside of the entire building at the top level. The configuration allowed direct access to rooms without any pampered guest having to walk more than three paces.

Ignoring the overdone decor, Gideon watched as Daniel looked down from the moving elevator and took notice of two men dressed in black, rapidly ascending in an open-topped elevator across the atrium from them.

As the shady characters rose past an open bar level about halfway up, each man noticed the trio above and pulled FN SCAR assault rifles from under black trenchcoats. They opened up with automatic fire on the vulnerable group.

Daniel had already registered that something was not quite right. Just before the bullets flew, he screamed out to his group, "Down!" The mercenaries hit the floor with a thud.

The glass shattered all around them as bullets destroyed the transparent exterior and hit the reinforced floor. Their elevator continued to move sideways, but far too slowly for Gideon's taste. The elevator began to bounce slightly and wobble from the impact of the high-energy ammunition.

Markus and Daniel hit the release on their rifles, which extended into combat-ready weapons. Gideon swung the duffle off his back and cocked his Mk 48. After a quick nod, Daniel and Gideon scrambled across the plush carpeting and broken glass of the elevator. The duo took up positions to shoot over the edge at the enemies below.

Markus pulled a device that appeared to be a flash-bang grenade from a concealed pocket and pressed a button on the weapon's housing. A sequence of lights blinked, and he pressed the button again to make a selection. He heaved it out into the middle of the atrium where it exploded in midair, filling the building with blinding light. The attackers howled as they were instantaneously blinded. Without hesitation, Markus bounced to his feet and put a bullet in each of the assailant's heads.

The elevator came to a stop, and the door popped open with a cheerfully ironic ding. Before them stood a stunningly attractive woman with clear olive skin. Her high cheekbones and thick dark hair that revealed a Latin American heritage. Her brown, nearly black silky hair was noticeably long with only wisps of curls framing her face.

Her cheeks were slightly rosy, and her lipstick was a dark red that could seduce any man. She was the perfect package, an incredible body, dainty yet strong, with a gorgeous face. Despite her beauty, she

looked cold, dark, and dangerous. She wore a dark, skintight athletic outfit that left little to the imagination. Gideon guessed that she was the honeypot version of going loud, breaking down the door and mowing everyone down with a submachine gun. She held an M9 Beretta pistol pointed at the ground.

She looked at the trio with dark brown eyes. She spoke with authority, a slight Colombian accent evident in her words.

"I'm Reyes," she announced in a voice that was all-business. "We need to move."

TWENTY-ONE

JULY 12TH, 2024

1800

KOWLOON, HONG KONG
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Her new employers fell into line behind her, and Reyes flung open the hotel room door where she had first met with the slovenly hacker Sobek.

Reyes had arrived in Hong Kong a few days ago, expecting to pick up a few easy jobs for quick money. It was on her regular circuit, and she had quickly decamped to a familiar hotel in Kowloon. After a hot shower, she had updated her location status on Panther and indicated that her skills were available. Almost immediately, an anonymous user contacted her with a protection request.

Reyes had many skills. Often, she took jobs extracting information from overly chatty businessmen...or, at least they were chatty, once she did her work on them. For the most part, industrial espionage was what she did. After all, it was one of the most lucrative fields on Panther. Despite the fact there was a never-ending cavalcade of skanks moving in on her territory, she was one of the best. What stood out to her employers was that she was a kind of Renaissance woman. Her Mossad training had prepared her for much more than wearing high heels and small black dresses. Her repertoire was mostly consensual extraction, but if required, enhanced interrogation methods were an option she offered for an additional fee. She hated getting her hands bloody. It wasn't a moral issue; she just hated the mess. Reyes was familiar with all kinds of weapons and was an exceptionally talented marksman, but what motivated her most was

revenge. She longed to find the man who had killed her father. Money was a means to that end, and until she had the intelligence or the opportunity to do that man in, she would continue to take these sorts of jobs on Panther.

Reyes had been born to a Venezuelan father and a French mother. Her skin was lighter than most Latina women, and Reyes had implanted subdermal electronic ink. If she wished, she could alter her skin color to dramatically change her appearance, instantly becoming a black African when she needed to shake a tail or even alter her entire skin with a shapeshifting, living tattoo.

But the augmentation did not stop there. Reyes had installed adaptive micro-lattice implants in her face to alter her appearance, in addition to her breasts and buttocks. Prior to a job, she would hire a competent hacker who could extract the target's internet history to find out exactly his type and preferences. Then it was a simple matter to enlarge her assets to exactly the client's taste. She could easily alter her facial structure to approximate ethnicities, and even her eye color could be modified. Her hair however, was long and black. In the past, she had shaved her head and used a wig, but her long, raven black hair was adaptable to many circumstances.

Her micro lattice augmentations and subdermal implants were incredibly useful tools to get closer to targets, escape pursuers or cross borders with new identities. Both operations were enormously expensive, and her surgery had been completed by her former employer.

Once she had been engaged, Reyes had made her way to Hong Kong's brand new five-star hotel, The Spire, and met with Sobek. Loki looked just as she had imagined him to look. The Pole was short and compact. He wore a wrinkled, faded tee shirt that advertised a techno band on the front. They didn't have much to talk about. Sobek was reluctant to talk about his patron and whatever information that he had, and that was fine with Reyes. She decamped to the lobby to identify any questionable characters on the way up and to give Sobek a call to run.

She first noticed the man a few minutes after settling into an oversized chair and picking up one of the complimentary tablets. He looked deeply familiar, and after a moment she realized she had most definitely had seen the man before. He was some low-level mercenary, and she couldn't remember if she'd run into him in Sudan or Argentina. It meant no difference. Muscle was here, and more than likely, they were gunning for Sobek. She'd contacted him on her watch communicator, given him their agreed upon

code for “get out” and she casually made her way to the elevator. A quick call also informed her new employer and his intermediary, Taksin, that he had better come quickly, or not at all.

In the hotel room, Sobek had wisely smashed all his computer gear. In a corner of the room, a battered heap of laptop computers lay against the wall, abandoned. Some of the screens were splintered, and some of the machines had been cracked open and had their drives smashed, or taken. A quick glance around the room told the group that they were alone. The steamy air of Hong Kong diluted the canned atmosphere of the hotel, but the most intense smell was one of burning. There was an open window, burnt open with the assistance of some moldable thermite Sobek had on hand for his escape.

"Gideon, grab and bag," the one she knew as Markus yelled to the large black man. The man obliged, hurrying over to the computers and shoving the technology into his enormous pack, which he then slung onto his back.

"C'mon, move it!" The Boy Scout looking soldier named Daniel exclaimed. A master of reading men, she knew his heart was pumping hard from the rush of adrenalin as the combination of fear and excitement coursed through his body. She guessed that he was experienced, but he'd not imagined he would find himself in a firefight in Hong Kong.

She motioned for the group to follow her out the window, and Markus and Daniel followed her onto the gritty gray tile of the adjoining building roof. The trio looked to their side to see another group of four men in dark civilian clothes, but wearing vests that affiliated them with their attackers. They were also running along Sobek's route, but were on the roof of a building two stories below.

Reyes's group immediately took cover behind some large industrial air conditioning and ventilation units. Even though the three had never met one another, they immediately fell into a pattern of providing protection and advancing toward where Loki had made his planned escape route. The large pieces of industrial size ventilation equipment provided ample cover. Reyes moved along until she was behind a large piece of equipment.

"Taksin, we need support," Markus yelled into his headset.

"Roger that," Lawan replied, "I'm right behind you...Hang on bro. I got this!"

Markus shook his head in apparent disgust. Reyes, in her conversations with Taksin, had noted the greenness of this new colleague. From Markus's actions, she determined that he was unimpressed with Taksin's somewhat disrespectful and unprofessional attitude, but had, for some reason decided to take the young man under his wing. Likewise, for Taksin, he looked up to Markus as a father figure.

Reyes felt a little more hopeful when Markus announced reinforcements were on the way, but she was starting to think her chances of getting off this rooftop were slim. This whole thing had gone badly. Now she might be spending her last few moments on earth stuck on a roof with bumbling nitwits.

Before Reyes could wallow too deeply in despair, the sound of heavy caliber gunfire rang like music to her ears. She saw the large black man, Gideon, emerging from the hotel firing a heavy machine gun, catching the agents below wholly unprepared. He took two men down with well-placed fatal shots. One of them was thrown back to the floor. Another fell over the ledge of the building roof, screaming over the ledge the dozen or so levels to the sidewalk below. The enemy group scrambled to take cover as Gideon showered them with automatic fire.

"Reyes, Daniel, move up!" Markus yelled.

Before Reyes could finish the thought, "maybe I'm not going to die today," Reyes and Daniel cautiously moved closer to the roof's edge. She tentatively glanced over the edge and saw her charge, well below them, staring up into her eyes. He wasn't supposed to be here. His route was supposed to lead him out of the adjacent building and into the transit system, but his fear was palpable.

"There's Loki," Reyes yelled to Daniel. The long-haired man quickly disappeared into the adjoining building. Before Reyes could react to Loki's presence, Lawan Taksin roared over the group in an unusual helicopter. The fuselage looked like an inverted knife, and no one seemed to be flying the helicopter. The Thai was leaning out of the window, firing a rifle down at the enemy. Lawan was channeling every kung-fu commando movie he had ever seen. "Yeah, get some!" Taksin screamed in fury and triumph.

As Reyes watched, two more men in black vests appeared from the hotel room they had just left. One of the men pulled a device that seemed to be a tri-bladed boomerang and threw it into the air. Rocket motors on the three tips ignited, and it sailed through the aether. It impacted with a thud of metal on the side of

the little helicopter and the flying machine ignited in a bright orange burst of exploding fuel. The resulting firestorm was so hot it scorched Reyes's face.

"Nooooo!" Markus screamed in fury. In his rage, Markus stood up from behind his cover and mowed down the two men that had just emerged from the hotel.

Reyes did not take a moment to consider what Taksin felt before he died. She had enough problems. Taksin had been employed to do a job, and had failed. Too bad. To salvage the situation, they had to move fast. Their enemy had many men in this area.

"We're going to have to jump," she indicated to Boy Scout and dropped down onto the adjacent building's fire escape. Daniel followed. More of the enemy had moved up on the adjacent roof and fired at them from above. Bullets ricocheted off metal pilings and the side of the building. Chips of white granite flew everywhere. Reyes swung around a corner and fired three shots from her Beretta at their pursuers. Daniel indicated a ledge across the way that would help them escape.

"We've got to jump for it," Daniel said quietly. She considered Daniel's eyes and saw his resolve and determination. Her jaw tightened and she gestured for Daniel to go first as she laid down cover fire.

TWENTY-TWO

Daniel made a running leap and jumped onto the opposite balcony. With one last burst from her pistol and with her heart in her throat, Reyes followed close behind.

They landed on a balcony, which led into a smelly fish market that had been there for decades, unchanged by technologies that had so altered the lives of those who ate their delicacies. Perched on a balcony above the scrum, they were still a good six stories from the ground level. Below them was a warren of tattered stalls where grandmothers of indeterminate age sold their wares, fish, and other accouterments.

The smell of fresh fish was almost overpowering. Even Reyes, who was intensely fond of sushi, was taken aback. They made for the stairs that would take them to the lower level, where there were even busier stalls, knowing that their pursuers couldn't be far behind them. Daniel and Reyes pushed their way past the stalls further and further into the market. Reyes looked at her watch and held her wrist to her ear, listening for any sign of communication from Loki. Nothing. Reyes shook her head at Daniel to indicate there was no contact as they rounded a corner underneath the old rusty balcony.

Some shopkeepers were still watching the passing throngs, waiting patiently for customers. All in all, it was an ordinary day until the gunfire changed everything. Soon the seasoned fish mongers were covering their goods and taking cover.

Two men in dark vests clanged onto the walkway above and immediately took up firing stances. Reyes and Daniel came crashing through the crowds, sending buyers and sellers into an indignant frenzy until

they realized the danger and dove for cover. Reyes and Daniel sprinted around a corner, the sound and heat of bullets whistling past them. Screams could be heard from the central area of the fish market as the two gunmen continued to lay down fire. Daniel and Reyes sprinted in the opposite direction, arriving at a set of stairs leading to a lower level of the market.

The shots from above could still be heard as they made their way downstairs to a fabric market. Shopkeepers and shoppers themselves moved to the atrium to see what was happening.

After a dash through the fabric stalls, and down another flight of stairs, an enormous hallway opened at the bottom of the stairs with numerous doorways and passageways leading off on both sides. At the far end, another two black vests stood waiting for them, raising their weapons as Daniel came into view. Daniel spun to the right, drawing the fire of both of his assailants, allowing Reyes to duck down and find cover in a doorway. Bullets slammed into tile and Reyes watched as Daniel did his best to make himself small. A broken mirror allowed her to watch the two enemy operators. They looked at each other across the expanse of floor and a series of complicated hand gestures fluttered between them, previewing their next movements. The men were sure of their kill. Proud of their superior position, they were caught off guard.

"Where's your man?" whispered Daniel.

"Straight ahead, I think," replied Reyes.

"Better hope so." With almost choreographed movements, Daniel pushed himself out of the passageway. He fired off a couple of shots to keep the attackers guessing before launching himself into a foot first slide along the floor.

Reyes was impressed, and she had to snap out of it to take advantage of the situation. The momentary distraction was all Reyes needed. She erupted from the doorway, and took up a shooting stance. Without taking a breath, she put a bullet through the forehead of the two attackers. The two men dropped like stones and Daniel and Reyes leaped over them back towards the hustle and bustle of the lower marketplace.

The aroma of meat hit them, almost stronger than the fish, if that was possible, as if the smell had

thickened in the lower levels. Despite gaining a couple of seconds through the action in the hallway, Reyes was still aware there were a large number of enemies intent on capturing Sobek and willing to put a bullet in her beautiful body. Straining to listen over the sounds of the market, she was sure that she could hear at least six trained military personnel talking tactics and moving through the market. She shook her wrist and signaled to Daniel to wait as she tried to raise Loki.

She raised her hand to her lips. "Loki, come in! Where are you?"

"Almost to street level." Reyes was relieved to hear her charge's voice after so much radio silence. The contract had stipulated just 20% up front. Usually, that was hardly enough, but the full amount had been so generous she had decided to roll with it. If Sobek died, that remaining 80% didn't enter her Ducati wallet.

"He's almost at the surface. We need to catch up," she shared with Daniel. They moved from their hiding space, breaking into a run. "We have a place to go?"

Daniel filled her in, obviously clued in by the odd-looking device strapped to his head. "Gideon and Markus are fighting a delaying action on the roof. The plan is to lose our tail and fall back to Macau. We link up with our ride there." They moved down a wide set of stairs to the lowest level. Reyes's neck was hurting from continuously switching her attention between the chaos behind and the dangers ahead of her. To her side, Daniel was breathing hard, arms pumping hard and nostrils flaring. They reached the end of a long hallway and burst out into the sunlight, the brightness momentarily catching them by surprise.

Automated cars, bikes, and pedestrians of all kinds were passing them on all sides. The sunlight gleamed dully from the tall buildings around them. Street vendors, businesses, and the cries of taxi drivers who were looking for a fare all combined to confuse Daniel and Reyes. Reyes looked around and tried to locate Loki.

Reyes's subconscious brain kept her alive, not for the first time.

She saw Loki after she finally could get her mind around the miasma of lights, noise, and dirt. Loki was sporting long, wild blonde hair which hung to his shoulders in greasy unwashed locks that framed his

unshaven face. His scruffy beard was several shades darker than his long blonde hair. He was wearing a jean jacket with enough pockets to hide just about anything. Dirty jeans and scuffed brown boots added to his ruffian like appearance. He saw Reyes and his eyes widened.

He pulled out a Walther P99 and fired a few shots just as Reyes and Daniel ducked. The two men suited in black who had just emerged from the building weren't as quick. Two thuds were quickly followed by two gurgles and Reyes heard two bodies hit the deck behind her.

It was brave or reckless of Sobek to attempt the shootings in broad daylight, and Reyes wasn't sure which. The shots were instantly drowned out by the sound of pedestrian screams, giving Daniel and Reyes the opportunity to disappear. Sobek, Reyes, and Daniel ran into the rushing traffic, thrusting their hands out in front of them to stop the oncoming cars. This raised a cacophony of horns, warning tones and swears from the few humans still driving. *Thank God for automated technology*, thought Reyes, as another car efficiently and smoothly swerved around her, its ethical subroutines deciding that Reyes would not make a very good hood ornament.

They reached the far side of the six-lane highway and turned to see more of the black-vested men. The trio ducked into an alleyway. Reyes decided that now would be a good time to alter her appearance. She activated her subdermal implants to alter her facial structure to approximate an attractive Asian woman to more effectively blend into her surroundings. She also altered her breast and buttock implants to draw a bit less attention.

Daniel looked over, shocked to see Reyes's facial figures reconfiguring and her skin tone changing. Apparently, the boy scout had never seen augmentations like she owned. Not surprising, really.

Loki was not phased, apparently familiar with the technology. "What took you so long?" asked Loki as they took a moment to gain stock of the situation. Reyes opened her mouth to respond, but spotted two more agents emerge from the building on the other side of the road. They dashed over to their dead colleagues. As quick as a flash, she grabbed Loki and Daniel and hurled them down the nearest alleyway as bullets splintered the bricks over their heads. Their muscles screamed as they hurtled down between the tall buildings, waiting for the snap and sting of the bullet in the back.

Reyes reached the end of the alleyway first and spotted a bored taxi driver standing with a cigarette

dangling from his lips. Without a word, she ripped open the front door and gestured for the driver to get in. The driver looked at Reyes, smiled and folded up his newspaper. Loki and Daniel arrived breathlessly and threw themselves into the back of the vehicle.

"Where to?" The taxi driver asked. Reyes noticed that he eyed the trio with a slight suspicion in his eyes. He knew they were trouble and wasn't sure he wanted to get caught up in their problems, but times were tough with these new automated taxis. He needed the fare. Reyes subtly enlarged her breasts to enhance her persuasive ability.

"Macau ferry." Daniel's voice barely betrayed the fact that he'd spent the best of the last hour at a full sprint.

The driver decided his passengers were harmless. After all, how could they be anything but, with this stunningly attractive woman with them? He nodded at her with an appreciative smile. Not for the first time, Reyes was appreciative of how simple men were when confronted with an attractive female. He pulled away from the curb and into traffic heading down the hill.

TWENTY-THREE

JULY 12TH, 2024

1800

VICTORIA HARBOR, HONG KONG

PEOPLES REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Daniel Locke, a country boy at heart, was strangely drawn to Hong Kong. He'd been here just a short time, and that many years ago. He had fallen in love with the city, not to mention the girl. It was unlike other cities that he'd seen and, to be frank, hated. New York City with its bustle and chaos was not for him. His second home of sorts, Washington DC was filled with obnoxious people who were utterly convinced of their own efficacy. Daniel knew better, and to him that was reason enough to dislike the place. Hong Kong held a different allure. Maybe because it was foreign, yet somewhat familiar. Unique, crowded, vibrant and vital, all at the same time.

The grass is always greener on the other side, Daniel reminded himself. As great as it was to visit the place, Daniel needed the wide-open spaces that allowed him the solitude he needed. Had he chosen to live here, he would have come to hate it as surely as he hated Washington DC.

Just hours after being shot at, the trio was now strolling casually through the ferry boarding area, knowing they still had plenty of time. Although they continued to look around warily, both Reyes and Daniel agreed they had lost their pursuers. Reyes had altered her appearance again to approximate an unremarkable Spanish woman.

The Macau ferry was late, as usual. It had been late when Daniel had been here, and it had been late every day for as long as anyone could remember, regardless of the numerous attempts by different multinational companies to improve the service, clear the shipping lanes and bring in highly experienced sailors. However, none of the locals seemed to care, and the beauty of the sun setting over Hong Kong

harbor made for a relaxing wait.

The warning horn sounded for the first time as they made their way up the metallic gangplank, showing their tickets to the attractive stewardess. Daniel gave her an appreciative once over while Loki tried to engage her in small talk, to no avail. The newest owners had clearly aimed for class and style over pleasantries and the trio was impressed, if not a little disappointed.

Daniel led his colleagues out to the stern of the boat to catch the last rays of the setting sun as it disappeared between the skyscrapers. On the horizon, they could just see the beginnings of a thunderstorm making its way towards them.

Victoria Harbor was vibrant and chaotic, and it bustled day and night with vessels of every conceivable size. A junk, complete with sail cruised alongside a sophisticated looking Emerson Corporation cargo vessel sleekly cutting through the water, propelled onward by its Magneto-Hydro propulsion system.

Tourists hung on the railing of the ferry, mesmerized by the lights of the city and the darkening of the water. The noise of the engines gave them some privacy to speak. After a couple of minutes admiring the majestic colors over the busy harbor, the trio turned to business.

"So, what do you know that's so valuable? Some especially sophisticated bad guys want to kill you." asked Daniel, curious as ever to find out more about his opponents.

Loki looked over his shoulder, cautious to the last. To give him credit, his left knee still bore the scars of the last time his words had gotten into the wrong hands. Satisfied that the locals were more interested in the pre-departure drinks, he turned back to face Daniel.

"I found the next piece of the puzzle, the best lead I've had yet. An arms dealer by the name of Rupinder Schurani."

A look of confusion washed over Daniel's face. As he mulled it over, he decided it was not a name that rang any bells with him. In this day, that meant nothing. His friends and enemies alike went by pseudonyms to avoid detection.

"Do you think Rupinder is Radchenko?" he wondered out loud, as much to himself as to Loki.

"Ha. It's never Radchenko," laughed Loki. "Once I peel back another layer of the onion there's always another layer behind it. Rupinder is an expert in intelligence gathering and is a man of significant means, but he doesn't fit the profile. He's no idealist."

Daniel considered the Pole's words and agreed that didn't match Radchenko's *modus operandi*. From what Daniel had observed from the media, his actions were oriented towards brute force and aggression than intelligence gathering, but still something didn't quite fit right with Daniel. Over the years, he had developed a strong sense when something didn't quite make sense that had yet to fail him. His train of thought was disrupted by the riotous sound of the *Norseman* flying overhead making its way to Macau ahead of them. It had touched down in Hong Kong to grab Gideon and Markus, and now was making the brief hop over to Macau.

The ferry took them directly to the airport. Macau Airport was relatively small for an international airport, but it was a busy place day or night. The trio could see the hustle and bustle of humanity through the large glass windows. They received instructions from Markus, and they walked towards the private terminal owned by the Emerson Corporation. The busyness here was reflective in the volume of people, but the purposefulness and dedication of the Emerson employees was incredible to see. There were at least half a dozen women who put the ferry stewardess to shame. Every single employee wore a sharply pressed jumpsuit as they moved efficiently about their tasks. Daniel noted how the Emerson employees were organized not unlike a military rank system, and it appeared to him that the different colored jumpsuits belonged to different ranks and denoted their responsibilities.

Loki took the lead, guiding his colleagues towards the immigration desk. He was explaining how the process would work, when out of nowhere Markus suddenly appeared, and flashed a badge at the immigration officer who waved the trio through. Daniel was not altogether surprised to see the uniformed guard snap Markus a sharp salute as they walked by.

Daniel wondered at this and Markus noticed. "In the right hands money can buy you anything, even favor with the most powerful people on earth," he whispered. "Our investors are men of unlimited resources."

TWENTY-FOUR

JULY 12TH, 2024

1800

MACAU

PEOPLES REPUBLIC OF CHINA

Gideon couldn't believe the events of the last hours and just how far this mission had gone off course. What had started as a simple security job for quick cash had become a maelstrom of firefights, well-equipped enemies and a seemingly endless supply of people seeking to end his life.

Gideon needed the cash. He longed for a better life for him and his family. He had hoped he had forever turned his back on warfare. A few years back, he had purchased a building in a gentrifying area of Detroit, putting every dime he had into the place. It also became where his Church met. He hadn't counted on the taxes rising to astronomical levels, first from property tax, and then from the CPC declaring that religious organizations were no longer exempt from taxation.

A Navy SEAL, Gideon had never admitted defeat in his life. He'd been shot, not just a few times, but four times, counting the time an insurgent's bullet had grazed his head. That number also included when an Afghani translator, upon receiving his m9 pistol for the first time, had accidentally fired it. The ricochet had ended up in his enormous thigh. That same thigh had also been the resting place of a 9×18mm Makarov round fired by a Russian mercenary who had ended up on the wrong end of his MK 48 a few nanoseconds later. The last was a 5.45×39mm from an Iraqi insurgent who managed to shoot him in the shoulder after Gideon breached a door and was first inside the Iraqi's mud hut.

Hell week was a breeze for him. In Gideon's SEAL class, 35% completed the course, 10% more than usual. Gideon's instructors unanimously attributed this to Gideon's steadfast refusal to leave anyone behind. At

one point, he carried two sleep deprived, hallucinating SEALs back onto the beach when they had just tried their absolute hallucinogenic best to drown him.

Money had never been Gideon's strong suit, and Gideon never asked for help. He had come out of the Detroit ghettos, relatively unscathed. He had enlisted in the Navy to escape, but he knew a few people in the loan shark business. A few days later, his problems with the government were over, but new problems were just beginning.

Gideon stood on the reclaimed land of the Macau airport, looking back along a straight and narrow causeway to the mainland. The thunderstorm that had been on the rise had moved its way onto land, and thick heavy rain began to pour down on the tarmac all around. In the distance, he could see a group of four making their way across the tarmac to board the *Norseman*. Most importantly to him, Daniel was ok.

Shaking his head, Gideon turned to walk toward the huge *Norseman*. Gideon noted that the matte grey paint job was gone, replaced with white and red. Emblazoned on its side was the Emerson Corporation logo and Emerson Transport in the corporation's distinctive typeface. The craft's front nose ramp was down and open, awaiting the last of the returning men. He studied its deck plating dejectedly, then walked up the ramp to wait for the others out of the rain.

Gideon's wife Mercedes had softened him and made him a totally different man. A better man, a better friend than he had been. Before Gideon had married, he was known as a hard charging drunk. His team knew he could be counted on when it was time to do business, but when the man was drinking he was not fun to be around. Those days were in the past, and Gideon had not touched the stuff in nine years.

The group of four reached the *Norseman* and the *Norseman's* front nose ramp began to rise to seal off the interior. Daniel approached and slung his arm around Gideon's shoulders, giving his friend a comforting squeeze. At least he had his friend Daniel here, he thought as he continued to study the deck plating. The loss of Taksin bothered him. It was a senseless way to die. Gideon couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Taksin had no business being in the middle of that. He was just a kid!" Gideon raged aloud, to no one in particular. Visions of Taksin's death flashed in front of his eyes, and he had to shake his head to clear them.

Together, Gideon and Daniel watched Gallery climb to the command deck, his eyes fixed straight ahead. The pilots were sitting stiffly at the stations beyond him, where they'd probably been running pre-checks. Now, they carefully avoided turning around.

Daniel must have felt the need to stand up for his friend, or perhaps he was just doing his usual inquisitive thing. He yelled up to Markus Gallery on the bridge like structure above. "That was a lot more resistance than I signed on for. I was contracted to provide basic security, not to get into a massive firefight in the middle of Hong Kong."

Gideon added his voice to his friend's. "Those guys were elite. Top tier mercs, maybe even CPC Javelin Operators!"

Markus looked down and seemed to shrug. "We were on a mission. Stuff happens."

Gideon threw his huge hands in the air in disgust and moved to the back of the bay, muttering angrily under his breath. Daniel persisted. "Who were those guys?"

Markus didn't quite turn away, but he didn't answer. To Gideon it looked like he was putting together a speech in his head. It was clear Markus knew a lot more than he was willing to say.

"Come on," Daniel prodded. "Talk to me. Talk to us."

"Maybe they were Tangent Mercs. I don't know. Maybe they were CPC or Russian Mafia. What difference does it make? Everyone wants Radchenko!"

Olivet Reyes turned from whatever chart she'd been studying at a fold-out workstation along the wall, and came to her feet. She had returned her face and body to her natural form, a still stunningly attractive Latina female. The implants were somewhat painful for her when in effect, and a small implant administered a painkiller when they were in effect. "I say they were definitely Tangent Private Military Corporation Contractors."

"You can't be sure," Markus threw back at her.

"I am sure." Her slight Venezuelan accent became more prominent as her emotions rose, but otherwise her voice was cool and detached. "They had a top of the line Shillelagh Manpad, for one thing. Only the Tans would have access to something like that."

"You don't know that. It's Hong Kong. You can buy anything there."

"I don't think so." She spoke up firmly as she folded her arms across her chest. "Not anything that new, and nothing of that quality."

Markus leaned over the rail to talk at her. "Look, try to understand. Radchenko is valuable, and they know we are hunting him. That makes each of us a target."

"And they have excellent equipment to go target shooting with," Gideon threw in.

"I agree that somebody is putting money and manpower into this job." Markus then offered what he might have thought was a winning smile. "But, come on, we're better than they are."

"I guess we have to be." Daniel deadpanned.

"Look, somehow they found out about Loki, and that's what makes this less than a walk in the park. Either they got lucky or we have a leak," retorted Markus.

"A leak. Perfect," Daniel said as he threw up his hands. "Look. I need to know what you know, everything you know, or I'm out. Why do you really want Radchenko? There's something more than the bounty here."

Gideon watched with a detached interest at how this showdown was going, and his eyes panned around the room to see where everyone stood. Markus looked across at Loki who had kept quiet throughout the heated discussion. He nodded towards him, and Loki smiled and beckoned for the rest of the group to join him and Markus at the command center's main terminal.

TWENTY-FIVE

The *Norseman* continued to surprise Daniel. For what should be a spartan and utilitarian aircraft, it had a lot of internal space. The command deck was no different, and the large meeting table stretched to over 10 feet tip to tail. Whoever was running this show wasn't short of cash. As he looked around at the other fixings on this deck, he remembered the first time he had flown in an airplane, shortly after joining the Army. There was no space to walk around on that C-130, and there was only the bare minimum of equipment to get off the ground. Now, he wasn't sure if he could identify what half of the buttons and boxes were for.

As Costanza and Joon moved to join the four other mercenaries around the table, the aircraft abruptly rocked from the motion of the squall that had whipped up outside. Costanza was unfazed by the motion, but Joon quickly shifted his sinewy legs and jabbed out an arm midair in a feeble gesture to grab something- anything- to stop him from stumbling. Gideon grinned ever so slightly and put a big bear-like hand on the other man's shoulder to stabilize him.

Brighter lighting in the room might have revealed that Joon's face had taken on a sickly shade of green. He managed to conceal his discomfort since he was keenly aware that Markus had no tolerance for weakness. Markus met the approaching men with a menacing frown. He was not used to being challenged, Daniel thought. Markus was made more sinister by the light shining upwards from the high-tech computer display built into the middle of the control table.

The other men at the table straightened just a bit in a conscious effort to seem taller in the presence of

Markus. All but Costanza and Reyes, the only women in the room, who seemed completely at ease and were totally unwilling to play the measuring game.

Markus scowled at each of his associates in turn then spoke. "You've heard that Radchenko, whoever he is, invented the Liberari network. The CPC wants him gone, because the cryptocurrency network represents a threat to their control."

Several of the men nodded quietly and grunted.

"They have to control the world's money supply, otherwise their entire plan for a worldwide empire is for naught."

Markus paused to survey the room in satisfaction. He pushed a button and a tiny panel slid aside as an already poured glass of Scotch rose through the opening. He sipped the drink and squeezed his eyes shut in pleasure like a content house cat. He made no offer to share a drink with his fellow mercenaries, and he waited for someone else to pick up his narration.

Loki coughed, then typed in a series of instructions that caused a brightly colored hologram to spring out of the middle of the meeting table. At a first glance, it looked like someone had given a spider a dose of crack, but as the model revolved, tiny words could be made out, designating banking transactions over time and space.

From time to time, Daniel had heard Joon and Costanza consulting with a voice as they flew the *Norseman*. Here that voice was on full display. Some sort of artificial intelligence, Daniel marveled.

The *Norseman's* AI voice was a full baritone, and yet clearly artificial. Daniel was surprised that this AI could illustrate the ongoing complexities of international economics. Yet no-one at the table even batted an eyelash as the hologram illustrated a network of transactions.

"The Liberari network is an uncrackable decentralized currency and contract transaction network. Programmable value transfer. Anyone can easily transfer funds and make payments, participate or create marketplaces, or establish contracts." Complicated arrays of three-dimensional blueprints swirled around Loki's head.

"What you might not know is how the network continues to run. Despite the best efforts of the CPC to block transactions, the network continues. Most of you were contacted through the Panther marketplace, which exists as a series of smart contracts and decentralized web hosts. The CPC has an ongoing war to block transmissions from different nodes which are comprised of computers of all different varieties. Smartphones, tablets, desktops, even refrigerators that can connect to the internet act as nodes, sometimes connecting directly to one another, or tunneling through the internet through secure nodes. When the CPC identifies nodes, it attempts to firewall them or otherwise shut them down with raids." He paused and looked around. Everyone knew this, of course, and they were impatient for him to get to the real meaty information. "So, here's the point. Periodically, a quantum computer, named Genesis, facilitates these payments by creating backdoors in the CPC net and sending them to nodes on the network. When it connects and also sends voluntary upgrades to the protocol. Although the network is designed to be a peer to peer mesh, without these periodic updates the network would likely fizzle and die due to CPC interference."

A gently pulsating light appeared on the palms of Loki's hands as he brought them together. A constellation of other lights appeared throughout the room which soon resolved into images of little stick figures seated in front of personal computers and laptops used by consumers all over the world.

Daniel looked up at Costanza. Her eyes danced as she followed a sequence of animated key icons that the hologram depicted as emanated from Loki's palm and traveled in all directions to the other computers.

"Awesome." she said quietly.

"Let me explain. Nothing on earth is like the Genesis." Loki gestured at a hologram that seemed dull and undersized for the power it represented.

"Genesis represents a level of technology no consortium, no institution, and no government is likely to approach for many decades to come. This true quantum computer does not merely simulate the quantum state with conventional supercomputing power. It produces and controls the infinite variations of states between true and false that were Turing's dream and are now the CPC's waking nightmare. Quantum computing actually works on the same problems that digital computing does, but economies of scale kick

in quickly. Using properties like superposition and entanglement to manipulate data, these new machines require much less power, much less time and much less space to operate.”

This was beyond Daniel’s expertise. Still, he got the point. It was tiny. It was powerful. It was valuable.

Loki paused, breathless from his running monolog. “I estimate the Genesis is no more than the size of your hand. Computations that once took weeks or years like those surrounding the Higgs Boson could now be done in a matter of hours.”

"Radchenko himself told us the world would never catch up." He leaned forward and shifted the keyboard towards himself, and then tapped a line of keys, pulling up an old video file and the only known appearance of Radchenko himself.

The video showed a man whose hair was only slightly receding in the front. He did have a prominent widow’s peak, and his thick black hair was slicked back on his scalp. While someone else with a similar look might appear either sleazy or nerdy, the man on the screen managed to pull off looking mysterious and alluring.

"I will tell you, they are on the wrong track," they heard Radchenko say from the screen. "They scour the blind alleys with their crippled neural nets and their hobbled step-style qubits. It will avail them nothing."

Loki muted the video.

“I believe him. Every word. It’s a fact that nobody in the Western world has truly begun to figure out Quantum computing, despite decades of trying. Genesis can reconfigure the Liberari network to go wherever it pleases regardless of firewalls, either hardware or software based. Every other cryptocurrency has been shut down by the CPC. These are no obstacles to Genesis.”

The moving image of a dark bearded Radchenko remained on the screen before them. He was still speaking forcefully and gesturing angrily, though his voice could no longer be heard.

Gideon ignored the video and stuck to solid ground. "So, this Genesis runs through thousands of passwords to break past all the firewalls.”

"Among many other things. But it does have one potential vulnerability. The Ducat network was designed to be peer-to-peer, and indeed for its ongoing use, it needs to be peer-to-peer. Just looking at how Radchenko has designed this network, I doubt that even Genesis itself could break it." There was a brief pause, as Loki again looked around to see if he was being followed.

"But from time to time Genesis has to be plugged into the internet to update the protocol. At the same time, it also must reconfigure the system to keep the Ducat network going and to break through the CPC firewalls with a brute force algorithm. Without the backdoor keys, transatlantic transactions would be impossible and the network would fragment and likely die."

Beside him, the monitor once again flicked to electronic life. A representation of the distribution process appeared. Repeatedly looping, it showed the placement of keys at lower and lower levels, in finer and finer detail.

"So then, if they had Genesis the network could theoretically be cracked and the CPC could figure out who has what?"

"Yeah, conceivably. Then it could force the dark side users to pay taxes at the rate of 97% and throw users into jail. In theory, it could even control the network itself. Remember though, the keys produced by Genesis are encrypted at a level of cryptography that is currently uncrackable."

He touched the keyboard again and hit a few seemingly random keys. As they watched, a schematic representation appeared on the screen. Before their eyes, a supercomputer tried and failed to pick apart a transaction key. Ranks of moving green multi-armed figures that seemed to represent success faced an army of gray. The attackers turned red one by one, then disintegrated, slowly turning pale and fading away to nothing. The screen flared three times, as if in celebration, and slowly went dark.

"You see. No CPC computer, apart from Genesis or another substantially more powerful quantum computer could hope to crack the network."

Markus sighed and summed up the situation. "So, the bottom line is the Ducat network cannot be manipulated, and there is a finite money supply. Here's the central pertinent fact for us. When the

network was first created, Radchenko reserved 20% of the Ducats that came into existence. For himself. Right now, that 20% reserve of Liberari Ducats is worth 20 trillion CPC dollars. That makes him the world's richest man, by far."

Gideon whistled softly. "And that makes him worth getting to know."

There was a stunned silence around the table. Each person took the news, digested it and measured it against what they already knew about the world. In each circumstance, the result was shock, surprise, and awe.

Gideon was the first to speak his mind. "So the world's biggest terrorist is also its richest man. Wow!" He shook his head in disbelief. Daniel eyed Markus who in turn was staring at Gideon, obviously contemplating his next move. Daniel recalled a time a few summers back when he had been out running in the woods and had come across an enormous rattler on the path. It had stopped, stared for a moment at him, then slithered off into the trees, leaving him uncertain as to whether it would come back to attack him. He could see the same look in Markus' eyes as he glared at Gideon, and Daniel couldn't help wondering what was causing such a hostile reaction.

Markus went on. "We aren't after the CPC bounty. Five hundred million is chump change." He turned to face the rest of the group, his voice became more impassioned as the dollar signs flashed before his eyes. "We're after his hoard. If we get it, I promise 1% for each of you. If you choose to convert it to CPC dollars, which I don't recommend, that's two hundred billion each."

Another stunned silence fell over the group as they mentally spent their fortunes. Each of the listeners drew up mental shopping list. The group was incredibly stunned. Loki stared off into the distance, his traditional grin plastered on his face as he spent the money on fast women and fast cars, never having to pick up another hacking job ever again. Gideon salivated about leaving Detroit and the gangbangers behind. His own private island where no thugs would ever venture and his family could be safe. Daniel alone wasn't swayed by the image of more money than he could count. Instead, he watched Markus again, waiting for the strike.

Gideon returned from his reverie and rubbed his hands together. "So? What are we waiting for? Let's get going!" His enthusiasm was infectious, and at that moment, the mood changed to something akin to what

John Sutter must have felt upon finding gold in his creek. Loki reached into the middle of the desk, typed a series of complex commands into the computer and a blurry holographic image leaped up in between the group members.

"For years, there was no evidence that Radchenko was dipping into his hoard, until about a year ago." He pointed to the fuzzy image in front of him. "This is Radchenko taking delivery of a very large piece of equipment, shipped from Siberia."

Loki waved his hand through the image, scanning the scene till he found a second man captured on the hologram as he moved towards Radchenko. Daniel leaned in close. Before he could speculate, Loki provided him with an answer. "The man you see here is Rupinder Shurani. This is Radchenko's first purchase from Shurani, but far from his last."

Shurani. Of course. Unless Loki's information was wrong, here was conclusive proof that they were facing two problems, not one.

"So what is it?" asked Daniel.

The room felt empty despite the number of people who sat around the table. Maybe it was the cavernous space of the *Norseman*, or maybe it was the length of the holographic table, ensuring that each of the meeting's participants had a goodly amount of personal space. None of it was needed, however, as all attention was focused on Loki who was busy fiddling with his tablet.

He suddenly grinned his manic smile, pressed a button and a 3D display of a submarine appeared in front of each chair. It was incredibly detailed, obviously built up from thousands of photos, and each person reached forward to move it around to examine it further.

The three-dimensional holographic display model of the submarine spun in the air above their heads with eerie green light. The submarine looked like it was lit from inside out, glowing the various features of the submarine it was showing. Loki looked up at the display of the submarine owlishly through his greasy blonde hair.

The light emanating from the holographic representation of the sub hurt Daniel's eyes slightly. The green lines still gave enough information to give an accurate representation of an underwater Goliath that the display indicated was over 175 meters in length. Daniel cast his eyes over the external fitting, trying to work out which nation state had developed this beast.

The Navy man, Gideon, provided the answer. "Soviet. Typhoon class. Largest Submarine ever built."

"The *Arkangel*," clarified Loki. "Supposedly decommissioned, but the Russian Federation kept it in reserve."

Reyes looked up in surprise. "That thing has to be thirty years old!"

Loki gestured to several features that showed up on the 3D holographic display. Parts of the submarine were highlighted as he touched them with his finger. He turned a switch and the inside of the submarine became visible to everyone. The 3D model flickered each time Loki touched a different part with his finger. Parts of the submarine became highlighted as he pushed other buttons on his computer screen.

"Forty. But substantially upgraded with a new anti-detection surface. She's had her nuclear launch tubes removed. She's now a stealth command center and freighter. Since then, Shurani's freighters have been rendezvousing with the *Arkangel* in the South China Sea and off-loading cargo, personnel, you name it. Now, here's the most interesting part; a few weeks ago, the chatter from Radchenko picked up, then ended abruptly. Whatever Radchenko was preparing for, he's either done or nearly so."

The ship in front of them combined with Loki's intelligence suggested that their problem had just become more difficult. Whatever Radchenko was planning, the fact that he'd gotten hold of a Russian nuclear sub made it clear this was not going to be simple.

As ever, Daniel picked through Loki's last statement, looking for places where he needed more information. "What kind of cargo?" he finally asked.

"Random stuff. The computer can't put a finger on what they are building based on the components, but it's mostly exotic chemicals or raw elements. Not a lot of weapons, but a few." Loki sounded frustrated that his new toys were not figuring out Radchenko's plan.

The room fell silent again. Weapons they could handle. The idea of several tons of exotic chemicals and raw elements was more complicated. Radchenko had been blamed for chemical attacks on subways in Berlin and Nanjing.

"So what's our next move?" Every eye in the room spun around to Joon who normally was as quiet as the grave.

Markus and Loki looked at each other, an almost visible exchange of information running between them. Markus nodded and turned to address the rest of the group.

"Goa, India. Rupinder Shurani's main base of operations," Markus said. "He will have rendezvous coordinates for the shipments on his mainframe." Markus put his fingers through his hair and gestured toward the bunks below, apparently relieved his secret was out. "Get rested up."