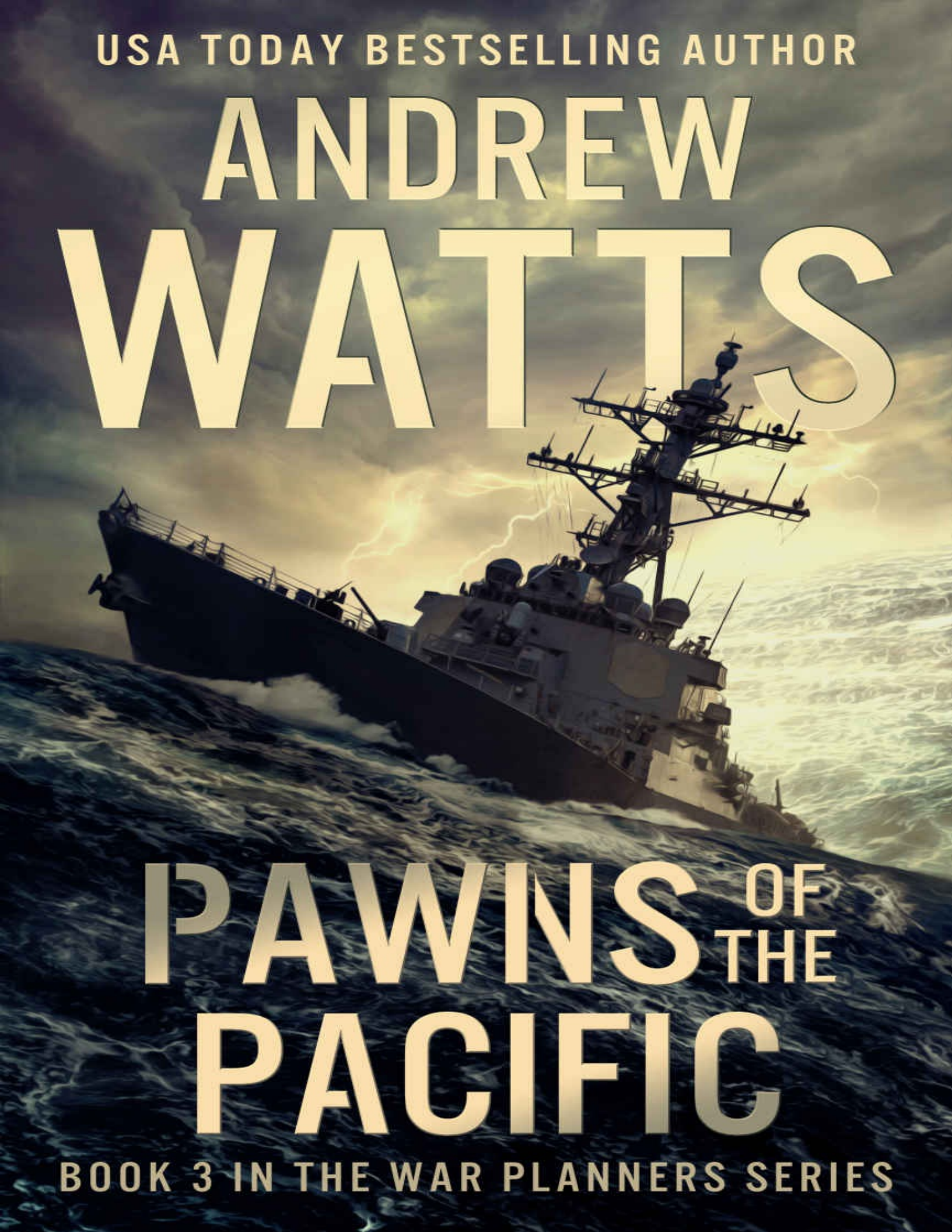
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANDREW WATTS



PAWNS OF THE PACIFIC

BOOK 3 IN THE WAR PLANNERS SERIES

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PAWNS OF THE PACIFIC

The War Planners Series

Book 1: The War Planners
Book 2: The War Stage
Book 3: Pawns of the Pacific

andrewwattsauthor.com

The world is in a constant conspiracy against the brave. It's the age-old struggle: the roar of the crowd on the one side, and the voice of your conscience on the other.

— Douglas MacArthur

1

Langley, Virginia

"What is this place?" David asked.

They had arrived at a high-ceilinged room that reminded David of a NASA command center. Dim lights. High-tech. Lots of people with headsets on, each neatly spaced throughout rows of computer screens. The people in the room were a mix of what David assumed to be CIA and uniformed military.

David had been showing up to Langley every day for the past few weeks. Each day, he was taken to interrogation rooms or conference rooms, where he was asked repeated questions about the Red Cell, China, and Iran.

But they never took him to a setting like this. Chase and the other man stood silent, waiting at the entrance of the room.

An enormous wall of monitors stood at the front of the large room, each screen showing different bits of data. Many of the men and women in the room were gathered around a screen that showed the live feed on one of the monitors.

It showed an aerial view of a small land mass, surrounded by water. The land mass looked familiar to David. It had a large runway that barely fit on the island. A few scattered buildings next to the runway. Beaches that were several shades darker than normal. The rest of the island was covered in green vegetation, right up its mountainous center.

A flash of recognition hit him. David was looking at the Red Cell island.

David looked at his brother, confused. Chase had that same knowing look

in his eye.

David said, “What are these people working on in here?”

Chase replied, “What’s it look like?”

David took in the room once more. Some of the screens showed tactical displays of the South China Sea. Others monitors were zoomed out to focus on the entire Western Pacific theater.

Tiny blue and red digital shapes covered each map. David knew that these were the ships, submarines, and aircraft. Blue shapes for allied forces. Red for enemy forces.

David observed a man sitting nearby. He monitored three computer displays. Thick headphones covered his ears. The man typed furiously, and Chase noticed that the text looked to be Chinese characters.

“It looks like they’re taking the Chinese threat seriously after all. They’re monitoring the Red Cell island, at least.”

Chase nodded.

“You aren’t surprised. You’ve known about this? Why the hell have I been led to believe that we weren’t doing anything about it?”

He leaned in close to David’s ear. “Keep cool and try not to be pissed off. You can yell at me all you want once we get to the car. But the fact that they’ve invited you here means that you’re going to get read in. That’s a good thing. Don’t spoil it.”

David looked at his brother a moment. Part of him was angry that he had been kept in the dark. But he understood that it couldn’t have been a choice. Secrets were the norm for Chase’s line of work.

The automatic doors let out a whoosh as they opened behind them. The room got quiet as about half of the personnel turned to look in David’s direction. There was a brief moment of panic as he mistakenly thought they were looking at him. They weren’t. They were all looking past him.

David turned around and saw two men. One, David recognized right away. He had seen the face on TV. Director Samuel Buckingham—head of the CIA, in the flesh. The other man was military. An Army three-star. Starched uniform and gleaming medals.

A woman with an air of authority said, “Director Buckingham, we’re ready to start whenever you are. We have seats for you over here.”

“Thanks, Susan.” The CIA director checked his watch and frowned. “Alright, ladies and gentlemen. As you all know, business is booming around here right now. I need to brief the president on Iran later this morning, and

that conflict is using up the majority of our resources. But I want you all to know that the work you are doing here is vital. Please don't misinterpret my lack of time for you this morning as an indication of the importance of your mission."

He looked at the Army general. "I've asked General Schwartz to step in and serve as the sponsor for this task force. He'll be briefing me every day on your progress. Now I've got thirty minutes free and I need to use two of them. Susan, I beg your forgiveness. Please give me a moment."

"Of course, sir," the woman said,

The director and the general turned to look straight at David. He walked a few steps, closing the distance between them, and stuck out his hand. He lowered his voice. "Gentlemen, I'm Bob Buckingham. This is General Schwartz." The men all exchanged handshakes and then sat down on couches facing each other.

The general said, "You're Art Manning's boys?"

"Yes, sir," said Chase.

"He's a good man. We were at the Navy War College together."

The brothers smiled politely.

Director Buckingham said, "Let's get a little privacy for a minute before the briefing begins. I'm afraid every goddamn person in this room will be eavesdropping on us. You'd think I was surrounded by spies." The CIA director had the broad smile and easy manner of an experienced politician.

They climbed a narrow set of metal stairs to an enclosed room that overlooked the larger space. The room reminded David of a box seat at a football game. They were above the worker bees here, and the chatter from below was being piped in by a speaker somewhere.

There were seats in the room, but no one sat. The director said, "Gentlemen, I would first like to thank you for your service to our country. Without the brave acts each of you performed over the past few weeks, we would be completely in the dark on the Chinese Red Cell, and the role that the Chinese played in Iran."

Chase didn't say anything.

David, still feeling his way around the situation, said, "I appreciate that."

"Now, I will ask you both to serve your country once again. General Schwartz and I have been directed by the president to put together this task force in hopes of…well, in hopes of preventing World War Three. If we can't stop it, then we are to ensure that we are at least prepared for it."

Sounds familiar, David thought to himself.

“David, I’m going to be frank. I always am. I find it saves me time, my most precious commodity these days. There are some members of the government that expressed concerns that you may have compromised your nation.”

David was very familiar with the charge. Over the past few weeks, he’d been through countless classified debriefings and interviews with various agencies, including closed session hearings with congressional intelligence committees.

There were also news stories on him, which he was still getting used to. He wasn’t allowed to comment, of course. But that didn’t stop the damn press from speculating on what had really happened. Some of them came pretty close to the truth. Others—at some of the extreme ends of the journalistic spectrum—thought he was a traitor and should be shot.

Everyone—government and press—wanted to try and get to the bottom of David’s allegations that the Chinese had kidnapped him and tricked twenty Americans into disclosing classified information.

The director said, “These people would have me believe that you gave too much information to the Chinese and were an unwitting agent of a foreign adversary. What say you?”

David clenched his jaw. He could see Chase giving him a look as if he were ready to hold him back from socking the director. It took all the patience David could muster to respond calmly.

“I would say that I did the best I could under the circumstances. I never willingly gave classified information to the Chinese. And as soon as I discovered that the Red Cell was not what it appeared to be, I made every effort to organize an escape.”

The director seemed satisfied with that answer. He looked at the general. “General Schwartz has recently been assigned to us. He is the Associate Director of the CIA for Military Affairs. I’ve asked him here because the four of us need to discuss a part of Operation SILVERSMITH that might become very important. I’ve known General Schwartz here for over two decades. I trust him implicitly. He tells me that he knows your father. He swears to me that you’re from good stock.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I will also note that I think it’s very easy to second-guess someone if you haven’t walked a mile in their shoes,” the director continued. “So—if anyone

gives you a hard time David, you just let me know. I, for one, think you're a fine American. I think what you did showed ingenuity, and tenacity. And I need scrappy, intelligent fighters on my team."

David looked at his brother, and then back at the director, not sure what to say.

Director Buckingham went on, "I also need someone who's seen what we're up against. Your experience will be an invaluable asset. And I'd rather have you helping us here than sending my interrogators to try and tease out bits of information that may or may not be the most relevant. I can't think of anyone who would be a better contributor to Task Force SILVERSMITH than you. You not only have the knowledge of what these bastards are up to, but you've also got the motivation to disrupt their plans. So, what do you say?"

"What do I say, sir? I'm sorry. About what?"

"I would like you to join us here at Langley for the foreseeable future. We'll work out the admin details with In-Q-Tel, but it should be manageable. We'd like you to work as an analyst and advisor for us as we evaluate the Red Cell and any potential Chinese war plans. Do you accept this request?"

He blinked. "Um. Yes. Yes, of course."

"Excellent. I apologize for the inconvenience of all those Q&A sessions we've been putting you through. But as you'll see, we are putting the information to good use. Now let's go back downstairs and get this show on the road."

Marching down the steps behind the other three, David felt dozens of eyes on him. He caught a few of their gazes. Not all were friendly. He wondered what they thought of him being here, given that he had been part of the Red Cell.

The director said, "Ladies and gentlemen, as most of you now know, we have been directed by the president to form a joint task force to defend against the Chinese threat to our national security. If you are in this room, Operation SILVERSMITH is now one hundred percent of your work plan. Drop everything else. Don't talk about what goes on here to anyone. What we do over the next few days, the next few weeks, and the next few months is crucial to the security of our nation. I have no doubt that each of you will give it your very best. Alright, that's my pep talk. Susan, I understand you're going to bring us all up to speed?"

"That's correct, sir."

“Alright, hit it. I’ve got…” He looked at his watch. “Twenty minutes.”

They all sat. The lights dimmed. The woman whom the director had referred to as Susan spoke. Her voice was amplified through a small microphone attached to her collar.

“Director Buckingham, General Schwartz, good afternoon. My name is Susan Collinsworth and I’m the staff operations officer lead for this team. This is the introductory brief for Task Force SILVERSMITH. Our objective is to identify and counter the Chinese threat to our nation, with a specific emphasis on the recently identified plans of Cheng Jinshan and the Chinese Red Cell. The following is a brief timeline of relevant events.”

David looked over the room. The scattered audience sat in rows, many behind computer terminals. They each looked up at the big screen, where a presentation showed a timeline of events and pictures.

Susan said, “On October second, twenty Americans are flown from various locations in the continental United States to a small airport in California—Half Moon Bay Airport, near Oakland. From examining satellite feed and FAA records, we have determined that nine private aircraft were used in all. Each of these aircraft was owned and operated by a shell company connected to Cheng Jinshan—more on him later in the brief.”

She took a sip of water, then continued, “These aircraft then refuel and fly the twenty Americans to what we shall refer to as the Red Cell island—it has another name, but frankly, it’s a bear to pronounce. The Red Cell island is located north of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. We assess that none of the Americans knew their true whereabouts or who was planning and operating the Red Cell.”

David saw a few questioning glances in his direction. “We *assess*” was not the same as “we *know*.” He wondered what the others in this room were thinking. Perhaps that he and the others in the Red Cell were fools? Or worse…traitors? The thought made him sick.

“From October third until October twelfth, these twenty Americans participate in a Red Cell operation on the island. There they are told that China is planning to attack the US, and that the goal of the Red Cell is to plot out ways in which the attack might be conducted. As many of you know, the group of twenty Americans was comprised of military and intelligence experts, as well as civilian experts in technology, communications, utilities, and several other fields.”

Groans could be heard throughout the room. There was David’s answer

about how people felt.

The director said, “I’ve heard much of this before, but let me ask the obvious question. How were these people duped?”

Susan glanced at David and cleared her throat. “Sir, in each instance, there was a legitimate source within their chain of command that triggered the participation request. Each of the American experts thought they were going to be participating in a work-related project that was vital to US national security interests.”

“So who were the people telling them to travel?”

“Sir, we’ve identified at least five personnel that we think were responsible for triggering the travel and participation requests for the Red Cell participants. These five people had positions of authority in various defense and intelligence agencies. For example…” She looked down at her notes. “A GS-15 in the Defense Intelligence Agency used a contract with a Boston-based consulting firm to send one of their consultants on the trip. This consultant was a former Army officer and held a TS/SCI clearance. She had expertise in multiple classified Army weapons systems.”

“So to be clear, this looked legitimate to the members of the Red Cell.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And where are these five people who triggered the travel and participation requests? What happened to them?”

“Four of them are missing. Each appears to have fled the country or gone into hiding.”

“And the fifth?”

“Tom Connolly turned up dead on the shores of Bandar Abbas the day of the Gorji assassination.”

The director nodded. “Ah, yes. Tom Connolly. *Delightful*. Please proceed.”

David thought it was odd that the CIA director would have asked these questions today. David had been home for weeks. He had been interviewed many times by various government agencies, and especially the CIA. So the investigation into the Red Cell would have been going on for at least that long. The director must already know these things. *He does know.* He’s just trying to give the members of the Red Cell credibility. To show that while they were duped, they should be considered loyal Americans.

“On October twelfth, the jig is up. Chinese military personnel storm the island and—we assume—take all the Americans into captivity. In the

confusion, David Manning and Henry Glickstein escape from the island on a small Chinese watercraft. A few days later, the two men are picked up by an Australian fishing trawler. They spend fourteen days at sea and arrive in Darwin, Australia, on October twenty-fourth.

“This is the same day that two other events occurred. First, the Iranian politician, Ahmad Gorji, was killed, along with his wife, on the highway outside Bandar Abbas, Iran.”

The screen changed to show an overhead drone’s video feed of a highway near the ocean. A freighter truck was parked at an odd angle, blocking the highway. Three black cars stopped in front of it. A gunfight erupted. Then the screen went bright green as an explosion flattened the whole scene.

Susan continued to speak as the video played.

“The attack was extremely well-executed. Our own analysis corroborates the Iranian claims that US and Israeli-made weapons were used. About a dozen armed men emerged from the truck here and began attacking the politician’s convoy of cars. We think that these men were a diversion. Hired Iranians who didn’t know too much about their target. Once the firefight ensued, claymore mines and a very talented sniper finished everyone off.

“The former CIA employee, Tom Connolly, was found dead near the beach, one mile away. This is the same man who had worked at In-Q-Tel and convinced several members of the Red Cell to attend a few weeks earlier. Also, Lisa Parker—aka Lena Chou—sent an unclassified email to several CIA employees indicating that she was a part of the mission.

“It was an obvious framing. But because of these US connections, the Iranians think that we really were responsible for the assassination. Our analysts also stress the personal connection between the Iranian leadership and the people who were killed. Emotional responses are not usually rational ones.”

The lights were dimmed, but David could see a few people were shaking their heads.

The director said, “Tell me about this Parker woman.”

“Lisa Parker, aka Lena Chou. Graduated from the University of Maryland. Division 1 track athlete there. The Agency recruited her out of college. She’s been with the CIA for almost fourteen years. Started out in Central America. Spent a few years there working anti-narco-terrorism operations. Top evaluations got her a slot in Iraq in 2007. She’s done some work in Japan for us, but most of her time has been in either the US or the

Middle East. She's a political action group officer, but she's also reportedly an expert at unarmed combat. Her file says that she spends a lot of her personal time training in martial arts."

"Married?"

"No significant others or kids."

"Family in the US? I'm assuming that she's US-born?"

"She was raised by an aunt in the San Francisco Bay area. Her birth certificate says she was born there. And records show that the people that were supposed to be her parents were killed in a car crash in 1997. In San Fran. That's what the file says, anyway. And that's what all the background checks have stated, but…a recent investigation indicates otherwise."

He cocked his head. "Please elaborate."

"We now think she arrived in the US as a teenager right around the time the people she claims were her parents died in the car crash. Our analysts have been evaluating pictures of Lena Chou both before and after her parents' death. They don't match. Immediately after the car crash, the daughter went to live with an aunt in the suburbs of Baltimore. But no one who knew the daughter in San Francisco could identify Lena Chou when we showed them pictures. Granted that it would be fifteen years later—but still."

"Meaning what?"

David couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Meaning that we think Lena Chou was swapped for this daughter of the car crash victims," Susan said. "The aunt took her and God knows what happened to the real daughter after that. But then the aunt picks up Lena Chou and takes her to Maryland. Then she starts working for the Agency, and her cover name becomes Lisa Parker. But the big news is that we now think she took the girl's identity as a teenager."

"How sure are you of this?"

"We're still investigating. We should know more by next week."

David watched as video on the screen changed to an image of Lena Chou looking up at the sky. The camera was overhead, so it was easy to make out her features. An official CIA photograph of her was displayed on the screen.

Susan said, "Lena Chou/Lisa Parker was involved in the Iranian assassination. We know that from this drone feed. Only weeks earlier, she was a CIA employee with a sterling record, working in Dubai. When word of a mole in Dubai Station was received, a counterespionage team was sent over to investigate. The team flagged Miss Parker for inconsistencies and asked

her to fly back to Washington. She was told that she had been cleared of any suspicion, and that the flight back to D.C. was for training purposes. Apparently she knew better."

"Why was she allowed to travel back to the States by herself?" the director said.

Susan squirmed. "Sir, this is obviously not standard procedure, and we've reprimanded the counterespionage team member who made that decision. Apparently, he had a prior relationship with—"

The director's hand went up. "Alright. Please see me about that detail later. Continue."

"The second big event on October twenty-fourth, none of you need reminding about. The Blackout Attack. We have with us Mr. Diaz from the NSA to go over what happened."

A squat man in a V-neck sweater took the small microphone in his fingers. "Thank you, Susan." The screen changed to a map of the US. "The Blackout Attack, as people call it, was actually two distinct attacks. Each was executed simultaneously on October twenty-fourth. The first, we now know, came from the ARES cyberweapon. The transmissions emanated from several locations in Southeast Asia and affected approximately seventy-five percent of all satellites in orbit. I can't emphasize enough how complex an attack this was. The GPS satellites are beyond repair. This alone has caused massive problems. Estimates on getting replacements launched are at six to twelve months."

Chase whispered, "That's insane."

The NSA man continued, "What's worse—Internet and telecommunications have been greatly damaged by attacks on data centers and root servers."

"What are root servers?" the director asked.

The NSA man cleared his throat. "Yes, sir…uh…think of root servers as the decoder keys for the Internet. Instead of typing in a sixteen-digit number into your browser to take you to a website, you can type Walmart dot com, for instance. But in actuality, the website is really identified by a sixteen-digit number. Thanks to the root servers, when you type Walmart dot com, it automatically syncs those letters to the correct number identifier and takes you to the correct website. But with these root servers down, there is no longer a decoder key. So technically, the Internet still works. But it's rendered useless to ninety-nine point nine nine percent of the population."

“Anyone but people like you?”

Nervous chuckles.

“Yes, sir, I’m afraid so.”

The director said, “So why are we able to use Internet now? It went down for, what, thirty-six hours? It’s slower, but it’s back up. What happened?”

“Director, it appears that the ARES cyberweapon was effective in bringing down several of these data centers and root servers, but the Internet has just become too big and strong. It’s developed immunities, if you will. Technology companies have built so many redundancies into the network that, unless the attack was perfectly coordinated with the physical destruction of undersea cables and other backup data centers, it was only going to be a partially successful attack. What we’re living through now is a damaged Internet. But the tech companies are working hard each day to get it back to full strength. Effectively, we’re going to have another one or two months at low performance before we get back to where we were.”

General Schwartz said, “It’s still killing my IRA. Stock market’s down lower than in 2009.”

“Yes, sir. The psychological impact, and the economic impact of the disruption, are very real.”

“Thank you, Mr. Diaz,” Susan said.

The man nodded and returned to his seat.

The director looked at his watch, then back up at Susan. “Tell me more about Jinshan.”

“Cheng Jinshan has multiple roles—he’s a Chinese national, the billionaire head of multiple Chinese Internet- and media-related companies. His companies make up a large portion of the cybersecurity and censorship wings of the Chinese technology industry. We also have strong evidence that he started off as, and continues to be, a covert agent within the Chinese Ministry of State Security. The confluence of these two positions has made him a major power player in the Chinese government. To put it another way, he has his hands in everything. Jinshan has a personal relationship with the Chinese president, who recently appointed him head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection. This is the Chinese agency intended to *root out* corruption in the government. But the CIA’s Chinese bureau thinks that Jinshan may have been using the CCDI to insert loyalists across the government.”

“Sounds like a busy guy,” said General Schwartz.

“Yes, sir. Our sources tell us that Jinshan has been trying to prepare China for what he sees as a coming collapse of their economy. Our own analysts agree that a Chinese economic downturn is inevitable.”

The general said, “I thought the Chinese economy was booming. They make everything over there.”

“Sir, while Chinese manufacturing is robust, their manufacturing boom occurred between ten and twenty years ago,” Susan said. “Now, the money from that economic boom has made many Chinese citizens wealthier. People have moved from the poor rural areas to the wealthier and more congested cities. While it is still a communist nation, the Communist party has been propped up by the furious pace of economic growth. But that rate of growth is now slowing. The low-hanging fruit has been plucked from the tree, so to speak. China has effectively put off the bubble bursting by using artificial currency manipulation. But even that can only do so much to keep reality from taking hold.”

The director said, “So is that what all that Dubai Bitcoin stuff was about? Currency manipulation so that China could keep its economic advantage?”

Susan nodded. “We believe that’s part of it, sir. Cheng Jinshan had a team of hackers that was trying to manipulate the value of Bitcoin. He then helped to influence the Chinese government to partially adopt backing its own currency with Bitcoin. But the hacking and criminal manipulation of the Dubai Bitcoin Exchange became public thanks to the work of our CIA team in Dubai. Now, proper safeguards are in place, and that artificial manipulation cannot take place. However, the Chinese economic situation is looking more dire by the day.”

“So the bubble is about to pop, and the owner of the largest army in the world, a communist nation, will have hell to pay if it can’t make its citizens happy.” The director looked at General Schwartz. “You have any questions?”

“What else do we know about Jinshan’s background?” Schwartz asked.

Susan looked down at her notes. “He is highly intelligent. He was a competitive chess player in college. He’s charismatic—a gifted orator, when out in public. But he prefers his privacy. We’ve only recently been made aware of how deep his influence goes. He has no family—never married. No vices that we know of.”

The director looked skeptical. “Everyone’s got something. Keep looking.”

“Sir, there is one thing, although it’s not a vice. It’s his health. Our

investigation in Dubai uncovered that he may have visited a cancer specialist while he was there."

"Really? That's interesting. Any chance this situation is going to resolve itself in the near future?"

A few laughs from the group.

"We aren't sure, sir. That's all we've managed to find out thus far."

The director looked at his watch again and then stood up. "Alright. The general and I need to run. I want updates twice a day, and any time there is any urgent news. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."



One Hour Later
The Situation Room, The White House

THE PRESIDENT SAT at the end of the long conference table. "Please proceed, Admiral."

"Mr. President, at twenty-two thirty local in Tehran today, electronic surveillance aircraft picked up a conversation between the Iranian Supreme Leader and his head of the Iranian naval forces. In that conversation, he told the Iranian Navy head to prepare two Iranian Kilo-class submarines to deploy under what we in the US military would term as a weapons-free ROE."

"Mr. President, under the weapons-free rules of engagement, a military asset would fire at anything not identified as friendly," the chief of staff said.

The admiral continued, "Sir, for a submarine—especially an Iranian submarine that doesn't have the sonar capabilities and training that our subs do—this would mean that they would start sinking just about everything they see. This order is in addition to movement we have witnessed indicating that the Iranians are preparing to lay mines, sir."

The president shook his head. "Now what in the Sam Hill is that madman thinking?"

Finishing the thought, the chief of staff said, "He likely intends to shut down the Straits of Hormuz, sir."

The president waved for him to keep going.

"Sir, we have a location of all of their subs right now. One is at sea. The

other will take twenty-four hours to get underway. The mini-subs are all on alert. We recommend a preemptive strike on all Iranian submarines and mini-submarines within the next twelve hours. We also recommend striking all SAM sites, surface-to-surface missile sites with ranges greater than ten miles, and a cluster bomb strike on their go-fast gunboats. This will neutralize their medium-range and submarine threat."

"What about their aircraft?" the national security advisor asked.

The admiral said, "We feel confident that our combat air patrol would be able to neutralize any Iranian air threat on short notice if they take off and show any indication of hostile behavior. The ROE we agreed to last week gives our CAP aircraft that leeway. In short, we don't feel the need to attack their air force—yet. And we'd rather minimize our strikes, per the president's instructions."

The president looked at the CIA director. "Do you still think China may have been behind the attacks in Dubai?"

The CIA director chose his words carefully. "Mr. President, I believe that there are people working for the Chinese government and/or military who were at least partially responsible for the attacks over the past few weeks. Both the attacks in Dubai and the cyberattacks in the US."

The president said, "And what do you base this opinion on?"

The CIA director spoke up, "Sir, multiple sources, including information from the two gentlemen who escaped captivity in the South China Sea—"

"Yes, I'm quite familiar with those two," said the president.

There was audible laughter from the others at the table, particularly from the national security advisor, Charlie Sheppard. The director tried to ignore it.

The story of the Red Cell was controversial. Half the media thought it was just a miscommunication. An understandable cross-wiring of information during the confusion of the past few weeks. The other half of the media thought that it was a crazy conspiracy theory.

The US government leadership was also split on their feelings about David Manning and Henry Glickstein's Red Cell claims. Some in the government believed that David and Henry were lunatics, and that the whole story was some type of hoax. The NSA fell into this camp.

The more extremist news agencies were calling it a conspiracy theory. The national security advisor loved to quote these reports, when it suited him. The CIA director had his suspicions why that was. The NSA had done lobbying work for a lot of different firms. Some with heavy ties to China.

That was something that he was quietly looking in to.

Director Buckingham was on the other side of the fence when it came to the Red Cell. He had seen enough to know that there was a good amount of truth behind David Manning's story.

These extremist news agencies, Director Buckingham knew, sometimes got tidbits of news from sources that *originated* in China. Some NSA reports even showed that Cheng Jinshan's cyberoperations center pumped up these extremist news networks by using millions of fake social network accounts.

But there was just enough doubt in David Manning's Red Cell story to cause the US to go soft in its objections to China. A few of the eighteen "missing" personnel had contacted their loved ones, for instance. They had left messages that supported the idea that they were on legitimate personal or business trips. Director Buckingham's CIA analysts thought that these messages were coerced or outright faked. But the CIA's own intelligence reports in China had found that no one in the Chinese government leadership circles knew *anything* about the Red Cell. And that was very odd.

The aligned US strategy was to use trusted Chinese back channels and organic intelligence to gather more information on the Red Cell. Only then would they present options to the president.

The Iran-US conflict was the bigger issue, the argument went. The problems with China were considered second-tier.

The CIA director knew better. So too, he thought, should all the members sitting at this table. But there were too many politicians in this room. Men who should have been chosen for their nonpartisan expertise in military, intelligence, or international relations. But these days, many elected officials were mixing up their politics with national security policy. And so men like the NSA were now advising the president, relying on information stripped from partisan news columns, and downplaying the US intelligence agencies' daily briefings.

The thought infuriated Buckingham, who himself had been both a politician and a military officer in his past careers. But when he had sworn the oath taking this job, one hand on the Constitution of the United States, he'd promised himself that no matter what, he would always put country over party affiliation.

The president held up his hand at the laughter. "Gentlemen, that will be enough of that. Director Buckingham, please continue."

The CIA director took the slide clicker and advanced to his section of the

brief. On the screen at the front of the room, a zoomed-in image of the Red Cell island appeared. There was a long runway with a dozen aircraft visible on the line. Several hangars. A few helicopters. A scattering of buildings in several locations.

“This is the island where we believe the American Red Cell operation was held.”

The screen changed from a satellite image to an infrared image. Dozens more jets and helicopters were visible under the hangars. On the opposite side were several areas of intense heat.

A red circle came up around the heat signatures. “From our interviews with David Manning and Henry Glickstein, as well as our recent intelligence collection efforts, we believe this is where all eighteen Americans are *still* being held. The island is getting daily heavy transport flights in from several mainland air bases. And we’ve confirmed at least one submarine is in the island’s pen.”

“The island holds a submarine?” asked the president.

The director nodded. “The island is constructed to hold at least one submarine in a protected pen. Our reconnaissance analysis showed several design features on the island intended to shield submarines and aircraft from EMP attack. We’ve seen this feature at other Chinese military bases, including their submarine base at Yulin. It’s essentially a big cave in a mountain—big enough to fit multiple vessels inside. Our theory is that the Chinese would neutralize US military assets in the region with a large-scale EMP attack and come out relatively unharmed themselves.”

“Would that really work?”

The chairman of the joint chiefs of staff said, “We have modeled a few scenarios, sir. In theory, it could provide them with a distinct advantage. Especially if they were privy to the timing of the attack, and we weren’t.”

“Wonderful. Continue, Director Buckingham. I’ve got about five more minutes. Let’s get to the part where you tell me what the hell you think they’re up to, and what you want my approval to do about it.”

The slide changed to show several images of US ships, aircraft, and troops. There were also insignia for a few military units on the bottom of the slide.

“Sir, I understand that we can’t ignore the threat of war with Iran,” the director said. “While the seeds of this war may indeed have been planted by the Chinese, the continued threat from Iran is very real. You’ve been briefed

on this, and we are committed to a strong military response. This may, however, play into the hands of the Chinese if they did intend for an Iranian conflict to tie up our military. General, if you would." The director handed the clicker to the Army general.

General Schwartz said, "Sir, this is Task Force SILVERSMITH. Each of the military units on this slide is in one of two camps. Either they are special operations units that have not yet been activated for the Iranian response plan, or they are units that are so new, they are not yet operational."

"What does that mean, not yet operational?"

"Sir, for example—the F-35 units depicted here are brand-new. They're conducting their initial training and readiness qualifications. We didn't expect to deploy them for at least another year. But the men are capable, and the equipment works. The same goes for the aircraft carrier, the USS *Ford*."

"Understood."

"Mr. President, our request is this: we want to activate these assets in secret, moving them to strategic locations that would allow them to respond to an imminent Chinese military threat, if needed."

"So you are just going to move everyone over to West Coast bases?"

"No, sir. We're going to move these assets to places where they wouldn't normally be stationed. Based on the Red Cell debrief, we're worried that staging these assets in regular locations could be too risky. If the balloon goes up, they could be taken out. We will treat these alternate locations with the utmost secrecy. These units will be used as insurance in case the Chinese really do attempt an attack on American forces."

The NSA said, "Sir, I'm not sure about this. Shouldn't we slow down and think for a moment? The Chinese have denied having possession of these Americans. We have reports that some of these guys are just on business trips, and have actually called their wives and families. I think all this talk about China is just a distraction. Let's be more deliberate. Iran is the obvious issue that needs to be dealt with. For crying out loud, they attacked us in the Persian Gulf. We have *evidence* of that. The China evidence is tenuous at best."

The president rubbed his chin, looking around the table. "Director Buckingham, I think it's always prudent to buy a good insurance plan. Your request is approved. Admiral, if the Iranian submarines sink anything, then I want a swift and immediate response. Until then, no preemptive strikes. Clear?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Anything else?” the president asked.

The general said, “Sir, we’re going to modify the communication procedures as discussed earlier, due to concerns that the Chinese cyberoperations teams may be intercepting our movement orders.”

“Alright. Anything *else*? What about the Americans on that island? Do you have a plan to rescue them yet?”

“Yes, sir, but as the national security advisor correctly pointed out, the Chinese have been refuting any claims of participation in the Iranian attacks, as well as denying that the Red Cell island holds any American citizens.”

“So what help is needed there?”

“We’ll have something for you soon, sir,” the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff said.

The president stood. “Good. Tell me when you’ve got more.”

“Yes, sir.”

2

Victoria said, “You have twenty minutes of fuel left.”

“Roger. Can you tell me what you see below us?”

She craned her helmet to the left, looking through her night vision goggles. The dark Pacific Ocean that lay five hundred feet beneath their helicopter didn’t give her much, but it didn’t matter.

“There’s a family of three down there,” Victoria said. “The father is injured. Their boat just sank. The child looks to be about eight years old. None of them have flotation devices. They’re treading water.”

Juan gripped the cyclic stick a little tighter, scanning the horizon through his own night vision goggles—a constant side-to-side sweeping motion. But he too saw very little out there in the green abyss. There just wasn’t enough light for the goggles to pick up. A flash on the horizon from a far-off thunderstorm. But nothing else.

His trained scan shifted to his cockpit instruments. Airspeed—eighty knots. Altitude—five hundred feet. Fuel—about one thousand pounds.

Juan said, “Is he ambulatory?”

“Yes.”

“Water temperature?”

“It’s warm.”

“How far away is the ship?”

“Thirty miles.”

“That’s about fifteen minutes at a max range airspeed of one hundred and twenty knots, so that gives me five minutes to rescue them.”

The lone enlisted man on the aircraft, AWR1 Fetternut, spoke into his

helmet's microphone from the back of the aircraft. "Sir, we'll need ten minutes to be able to do the rescue."

"Uh…well, I could go single-engine and save more fuel," Juan said.

He knew as soon as the words came out of his mouth that it was a stupid thing to say. He could feel his boss, Lieutenant Commander Victoria Manning, shaking her head in disappointment.

"Sir, remind me not to fly with you when you make aircraft commander," came the sarcastic voice of the aircrewman over the internal communications system.

Fetternut was both a rescue swimmer and a sensor operator for the MH-60R Seahawk helicopter. He was a petty officer first class—lower-ranking than the two pilots, who were commissioned officers. But he had much more experience than Juan, who was the junior pilot.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Juan "Spike" Volonte could feel his blood pressure rising under the evaluation of his aircraft commander. She was not only the senior pilot on this flight, but the air boss on the ship's aviation detachment. That meant she was the senior officer of all thirty members of his helicopter squadron who were embarked on the USS *Farragut*. She was the third-highest-ranking person on the ship, with only the captain and the XO above her.

Juan raised his eyebrows to try and get the sweat to stop beading down from his helmet and into his eyes. He hated being grilled by his boss.

It was true that she could be patient. Her style was to be a teacher—not like one of those instructor pilots from flight school that got off on making the student look like an idiot for not knowing the answer. Still, when you flew with her, you always had to be *on*. She never stopped training. And oftentimes it was in the form of these pop quiz scenarios. That's what flying as a junior Navy pilot on deployment was: one continuous pop quiz.

She said, "You would take one engine to idle?"

"No. Sorry. That was dumb."

"Why?"

"Because I would need to go into a hover to rescue those people. And I would need both engines to do that. Otherwise we wouldn't have enough power to hover, and we'd start sinking towards the water." Sweat dripped down from his soaked hair under his helmet and onto his forehead.

Air boss said, "Okay. Just checking."

He could practically hear her breathe a sigh of relief that her copilot

wasn't a total idiot. She wouldn't recommend him to go to his HAC board unless he could consistently prove himself as a competent decision maker under pressure.

Then she said, "Maybe you can make up for it. *Simulated*."

Simulated. Every pilot attached a special meaning to that dreaded word. It was used to denote that whatever happened next was a simulated emergency induced by the other pilot.

The ENGINE FIRE light illuminated on the master caution panel in front of him.

"Engine fire in flight procedures…" His voice increased an octave as he began announcing each step in the emergency procedure from memory. "Uh…confirm fire…"

He instinctively used his right hand, which was gripping the cyclic control, to place the aircraft into a steady turn.

Victoria said, "AWR1, you see a fire?"

"I don't know, ma'am, it's pretty dark out. I don't see any smoke."

Dammit, what was this? Now they were teaming up on him.

"Okay, Juan, now I want you to keep troubleshooting the engine fire emergency as if this scenario with the three survivors in the water below you was still going on. What's your plan?"

He had inadvertently put in too much forward stick in the turn. The helicopter's AFCS computers had reacted by increasing the target airspeed for the autopilot system. *Autopilot*. Now there was a bullshit term. It was more like cruise control—it would help you out, but you sure as hell better keep driving.

Now they were going ten knots too fast. Not a lot, but it showed shoddy airmanship…and they were still in a turn.

Juan couldn't believe how dark it was, flying over the water on these moonless nights. It was much easier to fly during the day. Then he could use the horizon to determine the aircraft's pitch, roll, and yaw. But now, at night and over the dark ocean, he was completely reliant upon his instruments.

Instruments. Shit. He was still turning, and he didn't mean to be.

The digital readouts in front of him glowed a faint green. A collection of numbers and shapes. Airspeed indicators and altitude. Columns of pixels and an artificial horizon. Engine oil pressure and transmission oil pressure. And fuel. He *couldn't* forget about fuel.

Goddammit, was he still turning? She was still waiting for him to answer

her question. This flight was not going well.

"Juan?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Aviate, navigate, communicate. Check your airspeed. I've got you ten knots fast and twenty degrees right wing down."

Juan found himself fixating on his gyro, the round center of his digital display. It was what was telling him up from down. He had a twenty-degree turn in still. But he felt like he was straight and level.

He realized that he was tilting his body and neck to the left. *Dammit*. He was getting a case of the leans.

Vertigo. Spatial disorientation. His body had grown used to being in the turn and began to consider that normal. It had to do with fluid in the inner vestibular of his ears or something.

All Juan knew was that it took every ounce of concentration for him to shift his stick back to the left and get wings-level. Of course, he couldn't talk during that effort. So there was an awkward silence before he was able to answer his boss's question.

"You alright?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Now he was sweating profusely. It was humid, but it was more than that.

"So you've got three people down there waiting and an engine fire light with an unconfirmed fire. What's your next move, HAC?" Her voice was calm, but firm.

HAC stood for helicopter aircraft commander. It was the qualification that Juan hoped to achieve after they returned from deployment. A grueling multiyear process to get there. Once achieved, he could then sign for his own aircraft as the pilot in command.

Then he would go to work every day with his name as the primary pilot on the flight schedule. Uncle Sam would lend him his very own thirty-five-million-dollar helicopter, complete with his own copilot and aircrewman. *He* would then be in charge of the mission. It was essentially the equivalent of reaching adulthood in the naval helicopter world. But he had to get there first.

"Well, the fire is not confirmed, so I should land as soon as possible," he said.

"Let's say that the fire light just went out," said Victoria.

Juan said, "Okay. Then I'd contact the ship and tell them the situation and let them know that I will be conducting search and rescue and to make best

speed for my position."

"But with the fire light on, you would go home? You would fly back to the ship?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Even with the three people down there? And twenty minutes of fuel?"

"Uh…"

"Don't let her trick you, sir."

Victoria said, "AWR1, you shut your trap, please. Let the man talk. Juan, I still have you in a turn. Level off and check your speed."

"Sorry, boss," said AWR1.

Juan said, "Roger, leveling off. Getting back to eighty knots." He gritted his teeth and fought his body's telling him that they were leaning to one side. He lined up the instrument wings so that they were straight and level, got the airspeed to exactly eighty knots, and trimmed it in.

Victoria said, "So would you turn back to the boat with three people in the water and twenty minutes of fuel, with an unconfirmed fire?"

Juan said, "Yes, ma'am. If the light stayed on, I would declare an emergency and land as soon as possible on the ship."

Victoria said, "But with the fire light out, you'd stay on station and rescue those people."

"Yes."

"Why? Either way, the fire is unconfirmed. What does NATOPS say?"

NATOPS. The Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization Manual. The bible for all naval aviators. It had all the checklists, emergency procedures, systems limits, and diagrams that Juan had to memorize to become qualified in the aircraft. Juan and the other copilot spent at least six hours each day studying from that manual, quizzing each other and memorizing every minute detail. For it would help them reach HAC, and potentially save their lives if they ever needed the knowledge to get out of an airborne emergency.

"NATOPS says if the fire is unconfirmed, to land as soon as possible."

"So the fire is still unconfirmed, right?"

"Yes…but—"

"Are there 'buts' in NATOPS? Sorry, I haven't been flying for very long. Explain to me when it's okay to violate NATOPS."

"Well…I…uh…well, operational necessity…"

"And what's that? Don't quote me fancy words unless you want me to

ask you what they mean."

"Well…uh…ma'am, the instruction says that operational necessity is a mission associated with war or peacetime operations that justify risking the loss of aircraft or crew."

"That's not what it says. Not exactly. You need to know what it says *verbatim*. Keep going with the problem."

Juan said, "Is that twenty minutes until bingo or twenty minutes until the low fuel light?"

AWR1 piped up, "Ah, he's getting smart!"

"Until bingo."

She was being nice. Giving him more fuel—and more time—in the scenario. Bingo fuel was the point at which the helicopter had to turn back to the ship, lest it run out of fuel prior to landing.

"Alright, then. AWR1, let's set up for SAR."

"Sir, my rescue swimmer is all ready to go. Our checklists are complete."

The enlisted man spoke like he had said this a thousand times. He probably had. A senior petty officer, he was up for chief this year. He had probably helped to train hundreds of junior officers as they went up for their HAC qualification.

"Cutlass 471, *Farragut* Control, the ship is setting flight quarters." The radio call came from the external communications system. It was broadcast over the UHF radio from the ship to the helicopter. *Farragut* Control was one of the ship's enlisted personnel who manned the radar scope and acted as a controller and tactical operations relay between the ship's combat information center and the helicopter.

Juan responded, "*Farragut* Control, 471, roger."

The ENGINE FIRE light came on again.

"Simulated."

Juan said, "Is the fire confirmed?"

"Yes."

"Roger, Engine malfunction in flight procedure—perform." His tone of voice uncontrollably increased in pitch under the stress of remembering the steps of the emergency procedure.

"Go ahead."

"Control Nr. Contingency power on. Establish single-engine conditions. External cargo/stores/fuel jettison/dump. Identify malfunction—okay, we have an engine fire."

AWR1 said, “Ahhh, sir, it’s really hot back here.”

Juan said, “Engine power control lever of affected engine—simulated off.” He used his leather gloved finger to wipe sweat from his eyes.

Victoria placed her hand up on one of the engine power control levers. “Okay, I’m ready to take off engine number one, do you concur?”

Juan glanced up quick, barely able to see her leather gloved hand in the dark. His bulky NVG set, two black plastic tubes, protruded from his helmet outward from his eyes.

“Roger, engine number one…oh, wait! Ma’am, that’s the wrong engine.”

She had her hand over engine number two. In a real emergency she would have been pulling back the only functional engine. That would have been a pilot-induced disaster.

Victoria said, “Alright, Juan, you’re done for tonight. Good catch. Take me home. And don’t drop the pack. You’re landing and you better stick it.”

He let out a sigh of relief. He had a lot more of that emergency procedure to regurgitate. But they had been flying for almost three hours, and much of the flight had been like this. Constant training. Constant questions. He knew it would make him better, but he longed for just a quiet flight.

Now for the hardest part: landing on the back of a boat at night.

Juan repositioned himself in the seat, trying to get psyched up. They ran through their before-landing checklist, flipping switches and changing the lighting configuration. The night vision goggles became useful again as Juan began to make out lights on the horizon. The ship was still about twenty minutes of flying away. But the powerful NVGs could—

A flash of bright light in front of them bloomed out his vision through the NVGs. Lightning.

Victoria said, “*Farragut* Control, Cutlass 471, are you guys going through a storm?”

“Uh, stand by.” Deep in the hull of the ship, he probably had no idea if it was raining or not. He would need to get someone on the bridge to let him know.

AWR1 said, “You kidding me? They found the only storm cell within fifty miles. They probably went towards it knowing that we’d be coming in for landing now.”

Victoria said, “AWR1, what do you see on radar?” Their radar was meant for picking up surface contacts. And while it was not technically certified to detect the storms, it *was* sensitive enough to detect a submarine’s periscope

and did a pretty decent job at telling her which clouds to stay away from.

"I have the controls," Victoria said.

"You have the controls." Both pilots had their own set of pedals, cyclic, and collective sticks. The pedals controlled yaw, the cyclic controlled pitch and roll, and the collective controlled the power of the aircraft.

Free from flying, Juan typed a few keystrokes into his multipurpose display and saw the radar image that AWR1 was bringing up.

The crew of three was flying an MH-60R helicopter about one hundred and fifty miles off the coast of Central America. The deployment was supposed to have been a counternarcotics operation—they should have been looking for speedboats full of cocaine and other drugs on their way to Mexico. Instead, the Navy had seen fit to assign them to an international training exercise. Most of the participants were from Central and South America. *Farragut* was the only US Navy ship.

Most of the last two hours had been spent performing over-water surveillance—flying circles in a pitch-black sky that could only exist over a hazy and humid ocean. The dark night sky was occasionally lit up by lightning from a band of thunderstorms that had been steadily getting closer throughout the flight.

While Juan normally loved watching summer thunderstorms roll over his home in Atlantic Beach, Florida, he was significantly less comfortable tonight. Watching thunderstorms from the comfort of your covered porch was one thing. Dodging them at a few thousand feet over the water was another.

AWR1 Fetternut made calls from his radar scope in the back of the helicopter. "Come left to two-two-zero. That should get us through these two cells, and it should be clear on the other side."

"Okay, that looks good, left to two-two-zero," responded Victoria. The aircraft veered left and then leveled out.

Juan sucked back water from his CamelBak straw. After three hours of flying in this heat, he was very dehydrated. The heavy gear, constant concentration, and late hour were all taking their toll. He just needed to nail this approach and get it in the trap. That combination of efforts had proven elusive to him on many nights this cruise. To put it bluntly, he sucked at landings.

"Cutlass, *Farragut* Control, the ship is at flight quarters."

"471, Deck. I've got numbers when you're ready." That was the voice of one of the other junior pilots on the ship. Now that they were landing, he had

manned his station behind the protective glass overlooking their landing spot on the rear of the ship.

"Stand by," Victoria said. She said internally, "Juan, your controls."

"I have the controls."

"You have the controls." The three-way positive change of controls was one of the many safety precautions aviators took. Most mistakes were made when everyone assumed that someone else was doing a very simple task. Bad things often happened when something taken for granted stopped working for a moment. The three-way change of controls made sure that one of the pilots was always responsible for controlling the aircraft.

Juan said on the external radio, "Deck, 471, ready for the numbers."

"Seven-one, Deck, roger. Ship's course and speed is one tree at ten, winds one-niner-zero at two, pitch one, roll tree, how copy?"

"Ma'am, you got it?"

"Yup," Victoria replied, penciling the numbers down on her kneeboard.

"Copy all, Deck," Juan said, and then took a deep breath. He looked at his distance measuring equipment. It gave him a distance estimation to the ship, accurate to the tenth of a mile. He also had twisted in the ship's course. A needle on the compass in front of him centered up as he maneuvered the aircraft to be on centerline while flying his approach.

The needle used information from navigational instruments on board the helicopter combined with a beacon on the ship. The needle started sliding away from centerline as Juan began to stray off course.

Staying on course required constant adjustments from the pilot. He had to make these adjustments based on barely noticeable changes from his instruments. All the while, he had to lower the aircraft's altitude and reduce speed on a specific profile. Failing to do this would cause them to crash or wave off.

Victoria said, "I've got you a little left of course." He could feel his stick move in his hands as Victoria made her own inputs on her controls, "helping" him to make the correct control input.

"Roger," was all he could say. His tired eyes were racing from one gauge to the next. Altitude. Airspeed. Ball. Fuel. Distance to the ship. Repeat.

"One point two miles, starting the approach. On instruments." He lowered the lever in his left hand that decreased the power and collective pitch of the aircraft. The radar altimeter began ticking down.

"Passing three hundred feet…" He blinked away a drop of sweat. It

blurred the vision through his NVGs. As they got lower and closer to the destroyer, more and more detail came into view. Now he could make out the wake of the ship.

“Still a little fast, Juan. I have you at eighty knots. Start bringing that airspeed back.”

From the back, AWR1 Fetternut double-checked the altitude and distance. He said, “One mile.”

Juan pulled aft on his cyclic with his right hand and continued to take power out with his left hand. The faint glow of the green flight deck lights was now visible on the aft end of the ship.

Juan still felt dizzy. He realized he was cocking his head to the left.

“Two hundred feet,” he said.

“Point four miles.”

Victoria said, “You’re high and still fast. Take out some more power. Aft cyclic.”

He tried to do what she said. His scan of instruments was all over the place. He fixated on his airspeed, which started getting really slow. There was that dizzy, sliding feeling again.

He tried to look out the chin bubble, the glass floor of the helicopter, at the ship. They were way too high. He needed to get lower. Dammit, how had they gotten so high on the approach?

“Juan, aft cyclic.”

“Point one mile.” They were almost there.

Juan said, “Radalt hold off.”

Victoria reached down and depressed the button that would turn off the radar altimeter, an autopilot function. She must have only taken her eyes off what Juan was doing for a split second.

“*Power, power, power!*” came the call from the rear.

The helicopter was descending behind the ship. Juan looked in horror at his airspeed—now reading zero.

Airspeed was life. His vertical speed indicator, which told him how fast he was descending, was below five hundred feet per minute. He gritted his teeth and pulled power, pushing the nose forward. The altitude warning was going off in his helmet with a series of loud beeps. They were below fifty feet, and he was staring at the stern of the destroyer growing larger in the window.

“I have the controls,” said Victoria calmly, but loud enough that everyone

was sure to hear.

He didn't let go, but he could feel her forcing the correct inputs through her controls. She immediately pulled in a lot more power, gained altitude, then adjusted the attitude of the helicopter so that it floated neatly over the center of the flight deck.

"Deck, 471 waving off," Victoria said.

Juan felt ashamed. He had nearly put them in the water.

Victoria climbed and accelerated, turning in a racetrack pattern to reset for another approach. She said, "Juan, shake it off. You alright?"

"Yes, boss. I…I think I just felt a little dizzy."

She said, "Do you have vertigo?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Alright, you've got to say something if you start feeling that way, okay? We do not play 'I have a secret' up here. If something is wrong or doesn't feel right, speak up. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am." He wanted to crawl into a hole.

Victoria turned the helicopter again and lined it up behind the ship. "On final."

"Roger."

Her approach was flawless. She hit every number—altitude, airspeed, distance.

Once over the flight deck, she smoothly hovered the center of the aircraft over the steel square known as "the trap."

AWR1 called, "Over the trap."

Then a sudden drop, and the twenty-thousand-pound, thirty-five-million-dollar aircraft sunk onto the flight deck, its robust suspension and thick tires cushioning the impact.

"471, Deck, you're in the trap. Nice one, ma'am."

"Chocks and chains," called Victoria.

Juan wasn't moving. He was too embarrassed and horrified that he had almost just put the aircraft into the water…or into the stern of the ship…to comprehend that he was supposed to do something.

"*Juan*, chocks and chains."

He snapped out of it and grabbed his green flashlight from the calf pocket of his flight suit. He turned the light on and moved it in a side-to-side motion. The plane captain, the enlisted man who stood outside in front of them on the flight deck, made a series of motions with two glowing wands. Then several

more enlisted men were running with their heads down under the rotor arc, placing the chocks and chains on the aircraft.

"Air Boss, Deck."

"Go."

"Ma'am, the captain's been asking for you. He requests you to swing by as soon as you're done."

She didn't say anything for a moment. Then she double-clicked her radio to acknowledge the request.

She flipped up her goggles. "Keep with me, Juan. Are you alright to do the engine wash?"

"Yes, ma'am." He knew he had really screwed up. That was a truly awful approach. Thank God she was a good pilot.

"Alright. Let's shut down and then you've got it."



A FEW MINUTES LATER, Victoria Manning approached the door to the captain's cabin. She stunk, and was sweaty from the flight. Her hair was a mess. Not that she cared how she looked right now. She would have liked to grab a shower, though. But if she showered first, she wouldn't have an excuse to leave the captain's cabin. She hated these nightly sessions.

Each night the captain called his XO, the air boss—Victoria—and the ship's master chief into his room and had them sit there while he regaled them with stories about his past, and complained about how hard his current assignment was. No ship captain should do either of those things, in her opinion. Leadership was about others, not self.

Victoria's opinion of the ship's captain had not improved over the last year that she'd been assigned to his command. Now she stood outside the captain's cabin door, eyes closed momentarily, summoning the patience to put up with this bullshit for another night. She could hear the voices inside. She opened her eyes and saw that the red light was on. Like a traffic light, the captain had a light installed outside his door that would switch between green and red, to signify when it was acceptable for ship's personnel to enter. He always kept it red.

The silly part of that was that he couldn't bring himself to delegate. He demanded that his personnel update him constantly. He had standing orders

to be informed of every minute detail of the ship's activities, wanting to make as many decisions as possible. As a result, his officers grew used to not making decisions themselves, and the captain almost never slept more than an hour at a time and was perpetually in a bad mood.

Dealing with this ship's captain was part of the job, however. She took a breath and knocked on the door.

"Sir, it's the air boss."

"Enter."

She walked in to see the captain slouched in his chair behind his desk. He wore his khaki uniform. His cheeks drooped, and when he looked at you, his neck hunched down at an angle, so that his eyes were looking up. He rarely left this spot. Victoria had heard some refer to him as the ghost captain. He rarely ventured out to the many parts of the ship, preferring instead to be at the comfort of his desk in the captain's cabin.

The XO and the master chief sat next to each other on an ugly grey couch. She nodded to them and they nodded back. Polite, respectful smiles. She liked them both.

The XO was reasonable, and sharp. A good listener, he knew what he didn't know. He was constantly asking Victoria questions about helicopter operations, wanting to make sure that the ship operations ran smoothly while seamlessly integrating the required flight operations.

The captain said, "Well, nice of you to join us, Air Boss. You have fun flying?" He turned to the couch with his forced sidekicks. "XO, I bet you'd like to get off the ship tonight, but we surface warriors actually have to work on deployment, right?"

The XO forced an awkward smile.

The captain said, "Air Boss, it looked like your landing got a little tricky out there tonight."

She looked up at the small black-and-white TV screen situated in the corner ceiling of the small room. It showed the helicopter, strapped to the flight deck. Her young copilot was shutting down the engines, the routine postflight wash complete.

The captain watched all of their landings. Partly for entertainment, she suspected, and partly out of worry. Flight operations were one of the riskiest evolutions conducted on Navy ships. An aviation mishap could ruin the career of a ship captain. And he wasn't about to let that happen. The most important thing to him, she knew, was his career.

She gave a courteous smile, careful never to give away her utter distaste for the man, “Well, sir, it was a bit of a rough approach, but it was a dark night. Good training for my 2P.”

“Hmph. I’ve certainly trained my share of junior officers how to drive ships in bad weather. Some people just don’t have the skill like you and I do, huh, Air Boss?” He grinned.

“I guess so, sir.”

The phone rang. “Captain,” he answered. “Well, alright. Thank you, CS1. Yes, send them right up. Coffee too. Yes.” He looked up at the XO. “XO, how are you feeling about our preps for this weekend?”

“I think the ship’s ready, sir. We’ve been drilling hard. Two GQs a day.” The XO had assumed that the captain was talking about the anti-submarine warfare exercise with the Colombians. They were sending one of their diesel subs out here to partake in the training. The group of international ships would play cat and mouse, trying to find the Colombian submarine before it could get close enough to “shoot” them.

The captain rolled his eyes. “Not that. What about *the Crossing the Line ceremony*? Are we ready for that? This is big, XO. *This is big*. Think you can handle this?” He smiled and winked at Victoria. He tried to be charming, but it just came off as creepy.

Victoria should have known. The captain wouldn’t have been so excited about ASW training. But the Crossing the Line ceremony…now that was right up his alley.

Crossing the Line was a tradition which dated back at least two hundred years. It celebrated the first crossing of the equator during that crew’s underway period. It was a ceremony that reminded Victoria of a fraternity initiation. Lots of gross and physical trials for the first-timers, known as Pollywogs. And lots of laughs for the already-initiated, known as Shellbacks.

This would be Victoria’s fourth time. While she was happy to allow her men to partake in the ritual, it was starting to get old for her. She had more pressing things to do.

A knock on the door. “Sir, CS2 with—”

“*Enter*,” bellowed the captain.

An enlisted woman brought in a tray with a pot of coffee and a plate of cookies. The captain looked it over, rubbing his hands together. “Alright! Now this is…wait. Now what the hell is this? These are *chocolate chip*. Now SUPPO told me that CS1 was making me *sugar cookies*.” He looked at the

young enlisted woman, who was clearly terrified to be in this room with the most senior officers on the ship. "*Where are my sugar cookies?*"

"Sir, I'm not sure…um…if you want, I can…"

The captain frowned and waved her off. "No. Forget it. You're dismissed."

When she was gone, the XO said, "Sir, in answer to your question, the master chief and I have gone over the schedule for the Crossing the Line ceremony. We've reiterated to the chief's mess to make sure that safety and respect come first."

The captain ignored him and picked up the phone. "CS1, this is the captain. I thought you were making me sugar cookies. Where are my sugar cookies?"

Victoria's face reddened. She looked at the XO and the master chief. They were looking down at the ground, expressionless. This was embarrassing behavior for a ship captain. He was supposed to be an example for all the ship's officers and crew. Above reproach. Instead, he often behaved like a child king.

One of her life's greatest disappointments was when she'd realized that not all commanding officers were like her father. He had surrounded himself with similar leaders, so she had never seen the bad ones. To her, every military officer was a gentleman and a scholar. The type that put his men first and worked hard to get the job done right. Victoria had assumed that all leaders in the military were like this. Then she'd finished flight school and gone on her first deployment.

It was like finding out that there was no Santa Claus. They didn't always put the smartest and most capable leader in charge. Just the highest-ranking. And while the US military's bureaucratic personnel system did well in selecting many great leaders for promotion, many subpar ones also slipped through the cracks.

In his famous novel about the Civil War, *The Killer Angels,* Michael Shaara had written that there was "nothing quite so much like God on earth as a general on a battlefield." She wasn't sure about generals on the battlefield, but she had seen ship captains at sea. Their power was absolute, and often unchecked. They had absolute control and absolute responsibility. They were held accountable for everything, but only if it was made known to their superiors. When mistakes were made public, commanding officers were often fired for "lack of confidence." Many commanding officers became

extreme micromanagers to ensure that their men didn't make any errors. That was when one would encounter situations like the captain who insisted on being notified of every change in status, no matter how minute the detail.

Oftentimes, the ship captain's bosses were hundreds if not thousands of miles away. Everything the ship captains did was private. If they screamed at their subordinates like madmen, no one would know. If that got the best results, it became a part of the culture. Many times, junior officers not used to making their own decisions would replicate this leadership style, because that was what they had "grown up" with.

With that absolute power, and the Navy's long tradition of hierarchy, tradition, and etiquette, came a sense of entitlement. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Ship captains in the Navy needed to be strong-willed and determined not to succumb to the temptation to behave like a tyrant. While it could be effective and gratifying in the short term, it was also demoralizing and counterproductive in the long run.

The captain said, "Alright, fine. Next time." He hung up the phone and shook his head.

The master chief said, "Excuse me, Captain, XO, Air Boss. I must attend to something."

The senior enlisted on the ship, the command master chief was well respected by all the officers and crew. Victoria had only known him for a few months, but she knew the type. He had seen it all, and dedicated his life to the Navy. She had instantly liked him. He was also adept at getting out of these sessions with the captain, a skill Victoria needed to improve.

The phone rang again. "Go." He looked surprised at what he heard. "What. Now? Alright, tell him I'll call him immediately." The captain hung up. "You two will have to excuse me. The commodore wants me to give him a call."

The commodore was the captain's boss. He was deployed on an aircraft carrier in the Middle East. Due to the time differences, meetings were often at odd hours.

The news that Victoria would be able to get out of this room earlier than expected was a welcome surprise. "Alright, sir, thanks." Both she and the XO left the captain's cabin and went their separate ways.

Victoria walked back to the hangar. Her men had finished the engine wash, and both helicopters were now folded and stuffed in the two hangars. The flight deck was quiet. The ship must have been traveling slowly, as she

could hear the waves gently lapping the hull.

A bright white moon began to rise over the horizon, washing the calm Pacific Ocean with its light. She stayed for a few moments, enjoying the tranquil view. Victoria needed these moments. The pressure that she placed on herself was enormous. She recognized it, but wasn't able to stop it.

She was incredibly self-driven. The type of person who had to be number one at everything she did. Even now, she couldn't relax. For someone like her, relaxing was a chore. Another self-imposed task that she thrust on herself in hopes of some type of productivity improvement.

Still, she tried. Victoria had seen the statistics on the effect of prayer and meditation on performance. She had read up on the habits of other successful people, and many of them included time for this in their daily routines. So every day, she scheduled time to meditate alone for twenty to thirty minutes.

That time slot had once been allotted to prayer—until her mother had died. She didn't pray anymore. Like having conversations with her father, it only made her resentful.

The 1MC announcer came on. "Taps, Taps. Lights out in five minutes. Stand by for evening prayer." She rolled her eyes. Evening prayer on Navy ships was a nightly ritual. It was nondenominational, of course. Or multidenominational. Whatever. To her it was just a reminder of her own complicated relationship with God.

The XO's voice came on. The XO was a good man. He had a tough job—cleaning up the messes of the child king. "Shipmates, as we sail in calm seas, and prepare to cross the equator in a few days, we are reminded of how lucky we are. Lucky to be born in a freedom-loving country. Lucky to serve alongside such great shipmates. As we all know, right now our nation is facing a growing conflict in the Middle East. So it is important for us to remember that many of our brothers and sisters in arms are *not* in calm waters like we are. It is with this in mind that I will read part of the Navy Hymn. The original hymn was written in the 1800s by an Englishman named William Whiting. When he was thirty-five years old, he was in a violent storm. He believed that God had spared his life by commanding the raging seas to calm. The hymn is thought to have been inspired by a passage from Psalm 107, in the Bible. With that, I'll read…"

Victoria smiled. The XO was a devout Evangelical Christian, and a historian. It was probably hard for him not to say too much.

"Eternal Father, strong to save,

Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea.
Amen.
Goodnight, *Farragut*."



PLUG SPOKE while furiously pressing the buttons and moving the directional pad of his controller. "It's a long story."

"Come on," Juan pleaded. He was the odd man out, the only one without a video game controller.

The pilots were playing a World War II multiplayer shooter game. One of the 2Ps (the term commonly used for 2nd pilot or copilot) had brought his PlayStation on the ship. On nights when they weren't scheduled to fly, the junior pilots took over the unused wardroom and played for a few hours, using the big screen on the far wall.

The wardroom was the eating and gathering place for the officers on the ship. A few of the surface line officers played cards on one of the tables. A few others were about to go on the midwatch—the zero dark thirty duty section that controlled the ship while everyone else slept. They chowed down on midrats. Midnight rations. The fourth meal of the day, where sailors standing the midnight watch grabbed leftover grub to get them through until sunrise.

"It's pretty tragic," Ash "Caveman" Hughes said. He was one of the two other 2Ps.

"Come on. How'd you get it?" Juan pressed. He was just glad that he didn't have to keep talking about his awful flight. He needed a funny story to cheer him up.

Plug never took his eyes away from the screen, but he told the story like a man who had told it many times before, and usually at a bar.

"So there we were. A few dozen miles off the coast of Colombia…"

"You did your first cruise here too?" Juan was surprised. It was pretty rare for ships to come down to do Eastern Pacific deployments nowadays,

with the cutbacks and all. Pretty much everyone either went to the Middle East, to the Eastern Med, or to the Western Pacific.

"Let me tell the story, alright?" Plug paused for effect. "So there I was, starting up the engine for maintenance rotor turn, when out of nowhere comes this freaking little seagull—"

"I heard it was an osprey," Caveman said.

Plug glared at him. "Don't interrupt, 2P. Like I was saying, the seagull came out of nowhere, flew through the rotor disk, and miraculously didn't get chopped in half…"

"That's such bullshit."

"No way."

"'Tis true, my friends. We have video—"

"Do you?"

"Well, actually, now that you mention it, in the video it is hard to see. Some say that the avian in question may have just been blown by the rotor wash and then slammed into said hangar. But one should never ruin a good story with the truth, so…the osprey…it gets injured—"

Juan said, "You said it was a seagull."

"Whose story is this? The *bird*…it gets injured. And I, having studied zoology and biology at one of the great academic institutions in the world—"

"I thought you said you were a general sciences major. Isn't that for guys who flunk out of—"

"Hold your tongue. I studied a lot of female biology."

The group in the wardroom, all paying attention to the story now, laughed.

"And I watched the TV series *Planet Earth* about fifty times. Plus, graduates of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute like myself are held to a higher standard than you mere mortals. A general science major there is like a PhD at most schools. The point is, I was the only person *qualified* to nurse this animal back to life."

Juan looked at the other 2Ps. They were smiling, but also not taking their eyes off the video game screen as they tried to kill each other.

Plug said, "So for the next two weeks, we kept the albatross in a cage in the hangar—"

"Did the captain know?"

"Yes, the fucking captain knew. How the hell could the captain of a goddammed ship at sea not know there was a fucking pelican on board in a

cage? Come on, junior. Listen up. So the albatross was nursed back to health by none other than yours truly. I fed him little bits of fish from the galley. I filled his little water bowl with…well, with water." He turned his head from side to side, emphasizing the greatness of his achievements.

"Until one day, when that cute little bastard was ready…when he looked healthy and could flap his wings in a strong and vibrant fashion…we released him—triumphantly—into the wild."

Caveman took his eyes off the screen and raised his eyebrows. He coughed to signal that there was more to the story.

Plug said, "And to our delight, the great winged beast flew up into the sky and lived happily ever after…" He finally took his eyes off the screen and looked at Juan.

"So how'd you get your call sign, then? I thought this was the story about how you got your call sign."

"Ah, well—perhaps I left out one minor detail. You see, the ship drivers—"

One of the surface line officers listening smiled and said, "Now don't go blaming it on the SWOs, Plug."

Plug sighed. "But it was their *fault*. You see, Juan—may I call you Juan? Of course I may, I'm a HAC, and therefore I can call you whatever the hell I want. You see, Juan, one thing you'll learn about these goddamned SWOs is that, for all their prowess in nautical navigation, they don't always think about the bigger picture. Like, for instance…if you take an injured bird onto your ship, and you're near land, then travel west one thousand miles into the freaking Pacific for two weeks straight, and *then* release the bird, you're pretty freaking far away from *land* at that point. You're a pilot, Juan. How far can you fly before you need food or water? Or a freaking break from flying."

Juan smiled. "How far were you from the coast?"

"When we picked up the seagull, we were about fifteen miles from the coast."

"And when you released him?"

"I want to say it was about two hundred and forty nautical miles out to sea. So there was no freaking way that bird was making it to land. The SWOs had condemned him to a short life of starvation and panic."

Caveman said, "Dude, take responsibility. Seriously. We haven't even gotten to the good part."

Juan said, "What's the good part?"

Plug said, “Well, this seagull must have had its own navigational instincts. Because we let it go, and I shit you not, the thing just circled around the boat for a couple of days. Like a poor old puppy, coming back to its master. He kept coming down to the flight deck, and people would give it crackers or a piece of their dinner. Come to think of it, everyone probably fattened him up so much I wonder if he wasn’t over his gross weight limits. Didn’t anyone do a weight and balance on that thing before he flew?”

Caveman said, “And *then*…” He motioned for Plug to get to the point.

“I’m getting there. Easy, son. *And then*…I was starting up the engine on our helo one Sunday morning. And there he is…the albatross…flying around. I swear he was looking at me. He was gliding there, into the wind, just off the starboard side of the ship. I can still see him. That magnificent orange beak. Those puffy white and grey feathers. He was such a noble creature. Full of pride and wonder. But he kept getting closer. I thought it was awesome that he was showing so much affection for me. Gratitude, even? Not like you shit 2Ps who don’t know what the word means.”

Caveman held up his middle finger.

“He was grateful that I was able to nurse him back to life. Until he came over the flight deck and tried to cross to the other side. The rotor wasn’t turning this time. But the engine was. And he must have gotten too close because…” He shook his head for effect. Mock sadness.

Juan said, “He got sucked up in the engine intake?”

Plug nodded. “I could see it happening and pulled back the engine power control lever into the off position. But it was too late. A poof of white feathers, and he was gone. We scraped up his remains and had a short ceremony. I mean *very* short. Okay, we pretty much just threw pieces of that damn bird overboard as we found it. But I will tell you this—every bar we hit at every port stop for the rest of the deployment, I swear to you that we toasted that damn bird and his unwavering dedication to duty. He was fearless…” Plug feigned wiping a tear away from his eye.

Juan said, “And the callsign?”

“Well, you know the soft cushiony engine plugs that we put in the intake and exhaust ports to keep them clean of debris, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, the guys on my last deployment kept making jokes about how I used the bird as the engine plug. So, there it is. Plug.”

Juan slapped his knee and nodded. Big smile. “Ah. I finally get it. Good

story."

Plug said, "Yup. How'd you get Spike as your call sign?"

Juan shrugged. "The senior pilots thought that my hair was spikey."

"Huh. Well…that's a good story, too."

The door opened and the air boss walked in. "Good evening, gentlemen."

The pilots paused the game and sat up a little straighter. "Evening, ma'am."

She looked at the screen and then at the three 2Ps and one HAC. "Plug, did you get done with the maintenance plan for next month?"

"Uh…"

"The one that I asked you to have on my desk tonight?"

He put the video game controller down on the table. "I was about to get started."

She looked at her watch. "Please have it on my desk within the next hour."

"Will do." He got up and walked towards the hangar.

Victoria turned to the junior pilots. "You guys don't have anything more productive to do than play games?"

The three 2Ps stared at her, each looking slightly scared of what she was about to say. "Which one of you am I flying with tomorrow?"

Caveman raised his hand sheepishly.

"You have all your emergency procedures memorized?" The 2Ps were required to know all of the helicopter emergency procedures verbatim.

Caveman nodded.

Victoria looked at each of them in the eye. "You know, if you three were studying right now, and you made a mistake on your emergency procedures, or couldn't draw out the electrical system from memory, or couldn't name all nineteen functions of the automatic flight control system by heart tomorrow when I ask you…I could be okay with that. But if you *can't* do one of those things—and I *will* ask you tomorrow—if you *can't* do one of those things and you've been playing video games while you have enlisted men performing maintenance on your aircraft—well, that would *piss* me off."

After a moment of silence, all three of the junior officers quickly got up, turned off the video game, and went back to their stateroom to crack open the books.

Once in their room, with the door closed, Juan whispered, "What's up boss's ass tonight?"

Caveman said, “That’s just her, man. She’s intense. But I think it’s gotten worse since workups last year. After the accident.”



One Year Earlier…

VICTORIA MANNING GRIPPED the galley table as the ship rolled to a very unpleasant angle. Sea spray and rain pelted the tiny black porthole to her right. They’d been at sea for two weeks on the USS *Farragut*, an Arleigh Burke–class destroyer.

The bad weather had begun as a tropical storm down near Cuba. The warm waters of the Caribbean and a lack of wind shear had fueled the system into a massive hurricane, which was now moving northeast over Georgia, and out to sea.

While the path of the storm was predicted to miss the two carrier strike groups that were training in the Atlantic, the winds and low pressure system still made for some of the most horrendous seas that Victoria had ever encountered in her eleven years of naval service.

The phone rang in the wardroom. She picked it up, saying, “Air Boss.”

“Boss, can you come down to the hangar? We’ve got news on the bird.”

She could tell by the sound of his voice that it wasn’t good.

“Sure, I’ll be right down,” she said and hung up the phone. She began the balancing act of marching down the ship’s passageway as it rolled from side to side.

Aside from the weather, the helicopter’s maintenance had been the other disaster of their time at sea. Helicopter squadrons worked year-round to get their thirty-five-million-dollar helicopters in top condition for their underway periods.

There were thousands of complex parts in each of these aircraft. It was up to the twenty-somethings turning the wrenches and checking the electronics every day to keep each aircraft flyable. But in an isolated and harsh saltwater environment, with so many moving parts and almost no way to get spares, things often went wrong.

The USS *Farragut* had a single helicopter on board for this training period. They would deploy with two helicopters—one in each hangar—in a

few months. The ship had been at sea for two weeks now. The weather had made it impossible to fly during at least seven of those days. And a plague of maintenance issues had kept them grounded for another five. It was embarrassing.

She arrived back in the hangar. The glum faces of her maintenance chief and maintenance officer stared back at her.

The maintenance officer, a lieutenant, said, “Boss, it ain’t looking good. We had to replace the AFCS computer.”

“So we’ll need a maintenance flight?”

“Afraid so.”

She left out a defeated sigh. Maintenance flights were not just flights. They were long diagnostic checks that took place both on deck and in the air. These events had to be completed before any other type of mission was permitted. It was as if they had just replaced a piano and now would have to spend the next few days tuning it before they were allowed to play any songs. Meanwhile, the ship’s captain and the admiral’s staff would have their arms crossed, asking for status updates every hour until they were ready.

The ship took another roll, and the three of them each grabbed hold of something sturdy, bending their knees and trying to stay upright. If she didn’t feel so sick from the never-ending motion, it would be fun. But the constant rolls of the ship got old after a few hours of heavy seas. After a few days, it became torture.

She thought about the problem. The automatic flight control system provided stability to the aircraft when flying. Without it, it would be very hard to hold a steady hover or maintain altitude with precision. Some of their missions required them to hold a steady hover only a few feet above the water. On nights like this, the fifteen-foot swells would cause the flight deck to pitch and roll violently. Because of the clouds, there was no visible horizon to hint at which way was up. Flying in this weather would be hard enough. Flying without an AFCS computer at night would be near suicidal. That’s why it was forbidden by the manuals.

Victoria said, “Okay, let’s plan to start the maintenance turns tomorrow. Hopefully the weather improves. Are you going to order a backup in case this computer doesn’t work?”

“Yes, ma’am. We should be able to pick it up from the carrier when we get in range.”

Because of the hurricane, the fleet had been scattered over an area of

several hundred square miles. They were well out of range of any supply ships or carriers right now.

They looked shamed. She realized that her men took maintenance setbacks as personal failures. Victoria smiled and said, “Gentlemen, you’re doing the best you can in a lousy situation. This isn’t your fault. Tell the team that it isn’t their fault either. We’ll get the bird up. With any luck, this godforsaken weather lightens up soon—maybe we can even get her fully mission-capable tomorrow.”

The men nodded.

The 1MC speaker announced overhead, “Air Boss, your presence is requested in the captain’s cabin.” It was like getting called to the principal’s office.

She was a lieutenant commander, and an O-4 in the Navy. Destroyer captains were O-5s, holding the rank of commander in the Navy—equivalent to a lieutenant colonel in the other services.

Victoria had been promoted early to lieutenant commander and been made a department head. She had leapfrogged many of her more senior peers to get this assignment, which was considered prestigious.

While she would never admit it to anyone else, she had expected nothing less. Victoria had been on the fast track ever since she’d set foot on the hallowed grounds of the US Naval Academy, fifteen years ago.

Victoria had not always wanted to go into the military. Quite the opposite. While her father was an admiral, she had been turned off to the idea of military service. This was partly due to the natural teenage need to rebel against one’s parents, and partly because the military career track had just never seemed that interesting to her.

That is, until she had gone to a college fair in the fall of her junior year in high school and heard the word *no*.

Her grades and high school resume had been exemplary. But the man behind the US Naval Academy desk didn’t seem impressed. Victoria didn’t even know why she had stopped at the table. Maybe she had just wanted a USNA brochure so she could tell her parents that she had at least given it a look.

But when she asked the aged alumnus behind the booth for a brochure, he didn’t immediately hand her one. A disapproving frown on his face.

“Honey, maybe you should look at one of the other schools instead. No offense, but the Naval Academy can get pretty rough.”

That was all it took.

Victoria was an excellent athlete. Always had been. She had broken her nose playing lacrosse, but she joked with her brothers, “You should have seen the other guy.”

She worked just as hard at her studies as she did on the athletic field. That work ethic came from her father, she knew. As did her inability to *accept* being told no.

Ironically, her father had tried many times to convince her to look at one of the service academies or ROTC programs. Nothing her father said had ever swayed her thinking. But this sexist old dinosaur, passing judgment on her with one look…*that* lit a fire under her ass.

She hadn’t even applied to any other colleges. She’d aced her exams, received a nomination from her senator, and been recruited by the Navy women’s lacrosse team.

Victoria had accepted her appointment in the fall of her senior year. Early admission.

When she arrived on campus, Victoria discovered that she actually kind of liked the military lifestyle. It gave her a sense of purpose. And she liked that the military rewarded disciplined, hardworking, and capable people like herself. She excelled in all aspects of Academy life, earning top marks, starting on the lacrosse team all four years, and being selected for Navy pilot upon graduation.

Flight school was a continuation of her successes. She was a natural pilot. Victoria suspected that her talent came from the coordination and ability to judge relative motion that she’d developed playing sports. But what really set her apart from her peers was her intellectual ability. Everyone there was smart. They had to be. Still, Victoria was better than ninety-nine percent of her fellow flight students at memorizing all the books filled with numbers and procedures. She could then rattle them off under pressure, and—most importantly—she was able to make sound decisions based on her newly learned knowledge.

Once in her fleet squadron, Victoria was ranked as the number one pilot of more than thirty competitive junior officers. While many of her fellow pilots went barhopping on the weekends, she drove right back into work. She didn’t have a personal life. Nor did she want one. She had goals, and nothing else mattered.

Victoria knew that some thought she was judged favorably because she

was a woman, and she deeply resented that. It was hard work and ability—anyone who said otherwise was just jealous. Her success earned her a sterling reputation among her commanding officers, and she was rewarded with the most coveted assignments. After finishing her tour as a junior officer, she'd spent several years as a flight instructor, then as an admiral's aide.

She was promoted early to lieutenant commander and sent to a HSM-46 in Mayport, Florida, to become a department head. She was to get her own helicopter detachment—to be sent off with two helicopters and thirty men somewhere halfway around the world.

Her early promotion, and selection to department head were both her reward and her expectation. Stepping stones to someday becoming a commanding officer—and, hopefully, well beyond. They were not a surprise.

The surprise came after she began her work in the new leadership role.

Prior to becoming a department head, she had only had the opportunity to lead small teams. Now, she was the third-highest-ranking person on a ship of over three hundred. She was in charge of thirty highly trained aviators, rescue swimmers, and mechanics. And for someone who was used to being judged and rewarded based on her individual performance, it was a challenge to constantly be held accountable for the sometimes-substandard work of her men. And in the short time she had been on the destroyer—the helicopter detachment had only just joined the crew a few weeks ago—she had grown frustrated working with the captain.

The captain was a surface warfare officer. A ship driver. While he had worked with aviators before, his career had predominantly been spent aboard ships that did not have helicopter detachments. So the constraints of working with an aviation unit caused a lot of consternation between his young, newly minted O-4 air boss and him.

Every time they wanted to fly—even many of the times when they just needed to do maintenance and move or start up the helicopter—it required the captain to drive his ship a certain way. A certain direction, or a certain speed. It was limiting. And the captain had a schedule to keep. A *busy* schedule, written by the admiral's planners on the carrier.

It infuriated the captain that Victoria's helicopter had been grounded for maintenance for so long. She was having a major negative impact on his ability to meet the ship's daily schedule of events.

The captain made sure that Victoria understood his disappointment. The captain's boss was on the carrier, and he was putting pressure on the captain

to get it fixed. The captain made sure to let her know that he was writing to Victoria's own helicopter squadron commanding officer, who was on the carrier, letting him know of how bad it was going.

There were also personnel issues to deal with in her own air detachment that were so numerous she couldn't keep them all straight. One of her young sailors was about to lose his security clearance over financial problems. Another had a pregnant wife at home who had just sent him divorce papers. One of her junior officers couldn't land the helicopter without almost crashing—which might be normal for this stage in his career, but it was still scary as hell to deal with.

Pressure in the aircraft had never gotten to Victoria. But the pressure of command—and the feeling of helplessness that accompanied it—was the hardest obstacle she had yet faced.

Thank God she had her own stateroom with a satellite phone—and her mother's calming voice. She kept the calls very short, never completely sure that there wasn't some crewmember in the communications office listening in. Victoria's mom was her only confidant. Her mom knew the Navy, having been a Navy wife for several decades. And she knew Victoria, and the amount of pressure she placed on herself. He mother calmed her down, restored her self-confidence, and acted as the sounding board she knew her daughter needed. Thank God for her.

Now, walking to the captain's cabin, Victoria took a deep breath. She could get through this.

"Air Boss?" The chaplain poked his head out of the wardroom door. "May I speak with you a moment?"

"I'm sorry, Chaps. I need to run up to the captain's cabin. Can it wait?"

He looked apprehensive. "Yes. Sure. But please come find me when you're finished there."

She was curious, but simply said, "Will do. Sorry."

Victoria climbed up a ladder and kept walking down the passageway, swaying with the waves. She wondered if her father was feeling these seas on his carrier.

Admiral Arthur Louis Manning IV, the commander of the Harry S. Truman Strike Group, was about two hundred miles from her right now, she knew. This was the first, and likely the only, time they had been in the same area while acting in their official capacity in the Navy.

He was on one of the two carriers that were out here. His carrier was not

supposed to be in charge of Victoria's ship. However, due to the hurricane, with the ships being sortied into irregular groups, Admiral Manning actually had tactical control of her ship for the next week. Her mother would get a kick out of that.

Victoria knocked on the door to the captain's cabin. "Sir, permission to enter?"

The captain opened the door and waved her in. He was on a phone.

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I'm about to discuss it with my helicopter officer in charge. I'll get back to you in five." He hung up the phone, then picked up another and said, "TAO, this is the captain. How far away is the *Porter*? Alright, let's make best speed there now. No, hold off on calling flight quarters." He hung up the phone.

"What's going on, sir?"

The captain stood up. "I understand that your aircraft is having maintenance issues. But I need a no-shit best effort here, Air Boss. The USS *James E. Williams* just had their helicopters go down. Since the fleet is so spread out, we're the only ship that has a helicopter in range."

Her face went white. "*Down*, sir? Should we go into the CIC? Look at the tactical picture? I can—" CIC was the Combat Information Center. Also known as Combat, it was the central command and control space on the ship.

"Now, hold on. The admiral read our ship's daily status report and knows that your helicopter is not flyable due to maintenance problems. He only wants you to launch if you have those issues fixed. He was very clear on that point." The captain looked uncomfortable. "And he said he wants to speak with you directly about it as soon as you're available."

Victoria went over the scenario in her mind. By the book, it was an absolute no. There was no way she should allow her aircraft to fly with an AFCS computer that hadn't passed a maintenance check flight. Especially at night, over water, and in horrendous weather.

But she *knew* those pilots. The helicopter detachment on the USS *James E. Williams* were from her own squadron. Those were her brothers in arms. They would do anything for her, and she needed to push herself, her men, and her aircraft to their absolute limit if at all possible.

She said, "Sir, I think I can do it. I'll fly it."

The captain nodded. "Alright. I'll let you explain it to the admiral. We're supposed to call him back in five minutes."

The operations officer knocked on the door and entered. "Sir, you asked

for an update?"

"Yes, what is it, OPS?"

"Sir, the suspected crash site is about ninety miles to our north. We've confirmed with Strike Group that we're the only ship with an air asset that would be able to get there in time. But we would need to launch soon, sir. With the water temperature and heavy seas, the SAR planners say we need to get there quick to give them a chance of survival."

The captain waved OPS away. "Very well." He picked up the phone and pressed a button, connecting them by satellite to the aircraft carrier.

As the captain waited to be connected, Victoria cursed herself. Who was she kidding? The winds were out of limits. The seas were out of limits. She didn't know if the AFCS would work. She would be risking the lives of whoever she took with her.

"Yes, sir. My air boss says that her aircraft is flyable, sir. Excuse me, Admiral?"

Victoria just realized something. She had assumed that the captain referred to the admiral on the IKE. But now that they were under the Truman Strike Group's control…God, was that *her father* on the line?

"Uh, yes, sir. Here she is." The captain looked torn as he handed her the phone.

Her father's voice was garbled. "Lieutenant Commander Manning, good evening."

Her face was turning redder by the minute. The captain watched her. "Yes, sir?"

"The captain tells me that you want to do the search and rescue, is that true?"

Her father had used her rank when he'd addressed her. He was speaking to her in his official capacity. She was dizzy. Was he second-guessing her? He was an aviator. Not a pilot, but a Naval flight officer. It didn't matter. He knew how it worked. He understood how strict the Navy was with its aviation safety protocol.

"Sir, our helicopter had a bad AFCS computer. We just replaced it with a good one. Technically we're supposed to test it before we fly. But in this situation, I'm willing to accept the risk."

Silence.

Finally, he said, "So you are saying you do *not* have a good aircraft?"

Victoria said, "Sir, that's correct. But in this situation—"

“This is a yes-or-no question. Is your aircraft maintenance up or down?”

She hesitated. “Sir, technically it is down, but I request that you waive—”

“No, Commander. I do not give my consent. You stay where you are.”

A wave of fear washed over her as she realized what that would likely mean for the aircrew. If they were alive, she was their only hope of rescue. If her father didn’t let her take off…

“Admiral, with all due respect, I can handle this. I would be flying the aircraft during a maintenance flight tomorrow anyway. What’s the difference? People’s lives are at stake. Please, sir. Allow me to launch.”

A pause. “Commander, I don’t want to lose these men, but there are limits to how much loss…how much risk is acceptable.” His voice was emotional. A higher pitch than normal. A part of her brain couldn’t believe it. This wasn’t like her father. It was…inappropriate. He needed to weigh the two sides impartially, and he wasn’t doing that. He was making this call because it was her, not because it was the right call.

“Sir, are you ordering me not to go?”

“That’s correct.” She heard a click as the line went dead. Her mouth was agape.

She said, “He said no. We are not allowed to launch.”

The captain looked at her like she had leprosy and he might catch it. He took the phone and hung it up.

They both stood there a moment, swaying with the heavy seas. “That will be all, Commander,” the captain said, disappointment in his tone.

She walked back out of the room and headed for her stateroom, trying to hold herself together. When she reached her room, the chaplain was standing outside.

The lord works in mysterious ways. She could probably use a little chat with him right about now.

The chaplain said, “Air Boss, is it alright if we speak privately for a moment?”

“Sure, come in.” She opened her door and attached the latch that would keep it propped open. “Would you like to take a seat?”

“Let’s both sit down.”

She eyed him. “Well, who is this about?” She sighed. Which one of her men had a problem now?

“Lieutenant Commander Manning, I’m very sorry to tell you that your

mother has passed away. She died this morning of heart failure."



Present Day
USS Farragut
Eastern Pacific Ocean, 200 Nautical Miles West of Columbia

AFTER LIGHTING a fire under her pilots, Victoria retired to her stateroom. She looked at her watch. It was 2300. Time to start her evening routine.

She took out her notebook from her desk, and flipped to the last written page. Victoria crossed off several items on her to-do list:

SIXTY MINUTES OF CARDIO EXERCISE.

Listen to one of the TED talk podcasts (while working out).

Complete five personnel evaluations—finish reviewing the E-4s and below.

Improve aircrew training plan.

AFTER CROSSING the items she had completed, she looked at the items that remained.

ONE HOUR OF PROFESSIONAL STUDY.

Empty email inbox.

Meditate twenty minutes.

GETTING those items done would cost her sleep if she wanted to wake up before 0500, which she did every day.

Victoria clenched her teeth and got to work. The more she got that feeling that she didn't want to do something, the more she pushed herself. There were two things that Victoria hated most in life: laziness and pity. Especially self-pity.

She spent the next hour studying from the helicopter manual. While she knew the three-inch thick book by heart, the knowledge was perishable. She believed that as a leader, she must always hold herself to a higher standard than she did her men. After all, she had to be their example.

When she was done studying, she spent the next hour catching up on email. She responded to several work-related emails, and saved the personal ones for last. David, her brother, had written her. His note was short and to the point. Like the rest of the Manning family, he wasn't one to get overly emotional.

Victoria was glad to hear from him. It sounded like he was doing much better. But she worried that there were still several unresolved issues from his recent run-ins. She didn't have all the details, but between phone calls with David and reading the news, she knew that something terrible had happened involving the Chinese. He'd promised her he would fill her in when they could speak in person. But he had asked that she refrain from asking him any more over the phone or unsecured email.

Her reply to him was the typical deployment family message. Generic musings about the daily routine. A few humorous complaints. And the promise that she missed him dearly.

Ever since David had been on the news a few weeks ago, Victoria had become a minor celebrity among the officers and crew on the ship. At first, she had received a lot of questioning looks, back when the news was reporting that David was tied to criminal acts. But after his name was cleared, the questions had become less accusatory. And now, all the news was about the potential war with Iran. People had stopped asking about her brother.

There was one email she didn't respond to. Her father's. Admiral Arthur Manning was now heading up the USS *Ford* Carrier Strike Group. It was an unusual assignment for someone who had been transferred out of another carrier command only a few months prior. But the *Ford* was the newest carrier in the fleet, and not yet ready for deployment. It was, she assumed, a retirement posting.

Victoria's father had written her once a month for the past year. His emails always had the same formula. First, a vague message about what he

was doing professionally. He would then recount a memory from their childhood. Sometimes it would be about Victoria's mother, which often pained her to read. She didn't like thinking about her mother. Lastly, he would write that he hoped to hear from her soon.

She hadn't replied to any of the messages since her mother had died. But her mother's death wasn't the reason.

Victoria couldn't speak to her father because she associated him with the worst moment of her life. The night that he'd refused to allow her to launch and rescue her downed squadron mates, a year ago. She partially blamed him, and partially herself, for their deaths.

She knew that everyone said it was just an accident. A one-in-a-million electrical failure. But when you fly a million hours, and many of those hours are at night and over water, that one time is deadly.

People also had tried to tell Victoria that her helicopter wouldn't have made a difference. That it was unlikely that anyone had survived the crash. But no bodies were ever found. So no one could know for certain that she wouldn't have made a difference.

She kept thinking about how she might have saved them, had her father not intervened. Yes, it would have been dangerous and against the rules to take her helicopter out that night, with its AFCS problems. But it would have been worth the risk.

The admiral had put his foot down, however. Victoria couldn't help but think that he might have chosen differently if it had been an unrelated male officer, instead of her.

When her peers looked at her in the squadron spaces, she wondered if they questioned her bravery. Or if they whispered that daddy's little girl was the reason that those three men never came home to their families.

It was a horrible thought. Partly because it made her feel guilty, and partly because she knew that her squadron mates were above that line of thinking.

She read her father's email three times, and her cursor hovered over the reply icon. She shook her head and hit DELETE.

Crossing off another item on her list, she looked at the last one. Meditate. She checked that the door was locked and put her headphones in. She played music from her favorite composer, Max Richter. The sounds of violins, cellos, and modern synthesizers filled her ears. She sat on her thin mattress, feet up, hands on her knees. As she closed her eyes and concentrated on her

breathing, she tried to force all the anger, stress, and frustration out of her mind. It was not easy.



A FEW DAYS LATER, Victoria was pleased to see that Juan's skills as an airborne tactician were much better than his ability to fly and land the aircraft.

Juan said, "Come right to zero-nine-zero."

"Roger, zero-nine-zero."

Juan typed a few keystrokes and manipulated the small stick on his multipurpose display. "Okay, I have waypoints for you to fly to for our first sonobuoy drop. Just follow the needle."

She looked over at his screen. "Nice job."

Juan called to the ship, "*Farragut* Control, Cutlass 471, we're ready to start the exercise. Any word from the Colombian submarine yet?"

"Negative, sir," the ship's enlisted air controller replied over the UHF radios. "But the captain says to proceed with the exercise."

"Roger."

Juan asked Victoria, "Is it normal for a submarine not to communicate when they said they were going to?"

"Not really. But I haven't worked with the Colombians much. I'm sure that someone just mixed something up. They gave us the coordinates and the start time, so we should be good to go."

"Okay. Well, please continue to fly to your waypoints that I put in. We'll lay down the first sonobuoy pattern with DIFARs."

"Sounds good."

When they reached the first waypoint, a *thunk* sounded throughout the aircraft as the first buoy flew out the port side. A small parachute slowed its descent into the water. Several more buoys were shot out shortly after.

"AWR1, let me know when you've got them tuned up."

A few moments later, he replied, "Sir, buoy number one's tuned up. Working on the others."

Once the sonobuoys were working, Juan hoped to be able to triangulate the position of the Colombian submarine and develop a track. The more information he got from the sonobuoy, the more he could refine the track's

course and speed. Then they would simulate a torpedo drop. The goal was to attack the Colombian submarine before it could get too close to their own ship, the USS *Farragut*.

AWR1 said, “Sir, we’ve got a submarine. Sounds kind of funny, but here—you should be able to start seeing something on your screen.”

“Yup. Okay, I’ve got it.” Juan began manipulating his keyboard. A few minutes later, he said, “There. Okay, we’ve got the submarine twelve miles south of our ship, headed towards her at five knots.”

“Not too shabby,” Victoria said. “Send the information back to the ship.”

Juan relayed the message to the *Farragut*’s controller.

“You ready to start pinging?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Victoria lined up the helicopter for the maneuver that would allow her to lower the dipping sonar into the water. They were in an out-of-ground-effect hover, the most intensive activity for a helicopter pilot. The heavy aircraft required just about maximum engine power to maintain altitude as the AN/AQS-22 Airborne Low Frequency Sonar lowered into the ocean.

“Alright, let’s start pinging AWR1.”

Victoria heard the off-key tone in her headset.

Juan began typing again. “Hmm. That’s weird.”

Victoria looked over at Juan’s screen. “What is it?”

AWR1 said, “Ah, I think the Colombians are going crazy on us.”

“Yeah…I’m getting multiple returns,” Juan said. “Do they have a decoy? Or is this just bad data?”

“I think that’s a system error, maybe.”

“How could it be a system error? This dipper is supposed to be brand-new.”

“I don’t know, sir, I just work here.”

Victoria said, “Guys, slow down. What are you seeing?”

Juan said, “The Colombian submarine is heading away from us at like… hold on…at like forty knots. That can’t be right.”

“Yeah, that’s garbage.”

“You said you’re getting multiple returns?” Victoria looked out of the aircraft to the right, scanning the surface of the water for any sign of a periscope.

“No, I think that was just the old track,” AWR1 said. “One looked like it was on the same course and speed, but I think…well, hold on.”

Victoria sighed. As well as Juan was doing, she was ten times faster. It was frustrating to sit there in a hover and have a less experienced tactician feed her slow bits of information. Teaching a subordinate something new took a lot of patience. *But it pays off,* she reminded herself.

"Actually, I'm not getting that second track anymore," Juan said. "Alright, let's set up for our attack run."

Victoria frowned. This didn't sound promising. They reeled up the dipping sonar and began forward flight. She looked at her copilot. "Give me somewhere to go."

"Roger, boss. Hold on. Almost got it. There."

Her needle spun around and she began heading towards the next checkpoint Juan had placed in the system.

"Alright, let's do the attack checklist." Juan began spouting off items, with the two other crewmembers responding every few seconds.

"Cutlass, this is *Farragut* Control. The captain wants you to return to the ship."

Victoria shook her head. "We're on our attack run, Control."

"Negative, ma'am. The captain wants you guys to return now."

Victoria frowned. This was ridiculous. It had taken them days to get ready for this rare and valuable training. "*Farragut* Control, please put the TAO on."

"Roger, ma'am."

The tactical action officer was the senior officer on duty in the ship's combat information center.

"Boss, it's OPS."

The operations officer was standing TAO right now. Good, he was smart. He would help sort this out.

"OPS, hey—can you tell me what's going on? We're about to go on our attack run of the Colombians, and we're being recalled to the ship. But we're scheduled to fly for the next two hours. The next crew is supposed to fly after us."

"Boss, the captain is cancelling the flight schedule." His voice sounded defeated.

"Why?"

"We just got sunk, boss. The Colombian submarine radioed us a minute ago. We're dead."

~

TWO HOURS LATER, Victoria and her crew stood in the ship's combat information center with a dozen of the ships personnel. The anti-submarine warfare officer, a lieutenant junior grade, was briefing the ship's captain on the results of the exercise.

The captain pounded his fist down on the chart table. "ASWO, you are telling me that a Colombian diesel submarine sunk our boat? Are you kidding me?"

"Yes…yes, sir," the young officer stammered.

Victoria couldn't believe this. It was training. Crucial training, rare training with an actual submarine. If she were the captain, she would have just asked the Colombian submarine to reset so that they could try again. But for some reason, the captain wasn't looking at this exercise as a training opportunity, but instead as some black mark that everyone needed to be shamed for.

The captain looked around the room. His eyes got to Victoria. "Air Boss, why did this happen? Didn't you guys find the submarine?"

"Sir, we had good contact, but then it appeared as if there were two separate tracks. They were diverging. So we went for the one that we felt was most likely the Colombians."

"And?" said the captain in an accusatory tone.

"And…it appears that we had the wrong contact, sir." She spoke without emotion. Better to get it over with and give the man what he wanted.

"Exactly. You were too late. Your aircrew, and everyone on this ship, failed me." He looked at his ASW officer. "ASWO, I take this as a personal insult. Let this be a lesson to you. Do not fail me again."

It was not often that Victoria witnessed a commanding officer treat his men like this. He was speaking to them as if they were children. The XO stayed silent behind the captain. His was a hard job. He was a good man, and his instinct was surely to say something constructive. But anything he said right now would be seen as going against the captain—as a sign of disrespect. Something that would hurt his ability to influence the captain behind closed doors.

When she saw that no one else was going to speak, she decided to see if she could salvage anything. "Captain. Sir, we had originally been scheduled to fly two bags of ASW today. With your permission, sir, I'd like to launch

my second flight so that we can get some more training."

"*Your* second flight, Air Boss?"

She held her breath, trying not to show any of her exasperation.

"It's not *your* flight, Air Boss. It's *mine*. *I'm* the captain. *I* own these aircraft. Or did you *forget*?"

"Sir, I meant no disrespect."

He shook his head. "Fine. I don't care. XO, *you* take care of it." The captain stormed out of the room.

When he was gone, the XO spoke in a softer tone. "Alright, folks. Everyone, let's just learn from this. Air Boss, why don't you have your second crew go get ready to launch? I'll speak with the captain."

She nodded and made the call. The XO kept speaking with the team in combat, going over what they had seen. She called Plug and the senior chief, who were waiting back in the hangar. She told them to get the helicopter ready to fly again, and that they would continue the ASW training in a little while.

When she was off the phone, the XO called her over. "Sorry about that." He said it softly enough that no one else heard.

She shrugged. "Nothing you could really do."

He gave her a knowing look. "Yeah. Hey, on another note—I was just going over the tapes with our sonar tech and your AWR1. You got a sec?"

"Sure."

They walked over to the two enlisted men, who were standing next to the ship's high-tech sonar equipment. The XO said, "Tell her what you guys told me."

"Boss, we were looking at the tapes," AWR1 said. "You know how we had two tracks?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I had assumed that we just got some bad data back when we were pinging our dipping sonar, but we looked at the replay here. And it looks like the *Farragut* was getting contact on the two separate tracks as well."

Victoria frowned. "What do you mean?"

The ship's sonar technician pointed to his screen. "You see this here? This is the Colombian submarine. We know that because it corresponds to the location of the Colombians when they said they sunk us."

"Okay. What about that one?" She pointed to the obvious other marking on his screen.

“That’s what we aren’t so sure about.”

“The second track we had was going ridiculously fast,” AWR1 said. “Like thirty-five or forty knots fast. I just assumed that was fake. And I think I mixed them up. It was actually the other track—that turned out to be the Colombians—that was going five knots. The one that we were chasing was the second track. And that one really did appear to be going over thirty-five knots.” His face was a mix of worry and skepticism.

Victoria looked up at the XO. “We don’t have any US nukes around here, do we?”

He shook his head. “Not that I know of.”

“What about the acoustic signatures? You get anything?”

The ship’s sonar technician said, “Almost nothing.”

“Almost?”

“Well, there was this one line here…but at that frequency it could have been a couple different types of subs, if it really was a sub.”

“What types?”

“Well, it could have been a Los Angeles class. Or…”

“Or what?”

“Well, supposedly the Chinese have a new type of nuclear fast attack submarine that just came out that has the same characteristics at that frequency range.”

“Chinese?”

“Yeah. But that would be kind of crazy for them to be operating out here, near the Galapagos.”

Victoria nodded. “Alright. Let’s make sure that we’re looking at this stuff during the next flight. Let’s see if we hear it again.”

“Roger, ma’am.”

Victoria remained in the combat information center for the second training flight. It went better than the first one, with Plug’s helicopter and the ship both claiming to have successfully attacked the Colombians.

And this time, no more suspicious second track.

That evening, the XO checked with COMSUBPAC and verified that there were no US submarines in the area. It had to be a system error.

The only other alternative would have been that it was the new Chinese Shang-class attack submarine. That would have been highly unlikely. The Chinese didn’t deploy their submarines to this area of the world. Plus, it would have been near impossible for them to operate out here in the vicinity

of the USS *Farragut* and remain undetected.

After going over the data with the sonar experts on the ship, the XO and Victoria agreed that the second track must have been a fault in the sonar computer system.

3

Red Cell Island

Lena lay on the infirmary mattress. A window revealed the dark green jungle outside. She looked at her arm in disgust.

Natesh sat in a chair next to her. “You saw my report?”

She nodded. “I did. It was well done, as always.” He too was looking at the grotesque burns on her arm and shoulder. Then he must have realized that he was staring and turned away, looking instead at the bare stone wall.

She hated him for making her feel insecure. It was a very rare emotion for her. The permanent burn scars that traveled up her side were hideous, she knew. But she had never cared about her looks. Or at least that’s what she had thought until they were ruined. She had been beautiful. A fact that she had always taken for granted. But that beauty had been burned off by fire on a Dubai rooftop. Perhaps some of her confidence had been burned off as well. In its place was a growing anger.

Lena closed her eyes and lay back down on the bed. Her mind still a bit foggy from the pain meds. She would stop taking them today, she decided. A clear mind was needed for her role here on the island.

She said, “Your conclusion was not optimistic.”

“When we drew up the plans, we expected six months to a year of preparation.”

“You sound like you’re complaining.”

“When a project that is supposed to take six months to a year gets moved up by six months to a year—I think it’s justifiable to complain.”

“And the projects you worked on in corporate America were always on time? Every part always going to plan?”

Natesh tilted his head, annoyed at the remark. “Of course not. But it’s one thing to switch to alternate plans. It is quite another to have no alternatives.”

She opened her eyes and rolled out of bed. She walked over to the window. “Talk me through the problems.”

“The container ships are not ready. The troops are not trained. Not only that, but we don’t yet have the numbers of troops that I expected. Our initial landing spots in the Americas are just now getting their first infusion of Chinese Special Forces soldiers. And most of those units have no clue why they are really there.”

He paused until she opened her eyes. He leaned forward to emphasize his words. “And the *psychological* operations have not yet begun.”

“In China, you mean?”

“Yes, Lena. We can plan while we are on this tiny island. We can plan all we want to, but that only gets us so far. You know as well as I do that without the alignment of Chinese leadership, none of this is going to happen. All we have so far are *plans*.”

“Look at me.” She pulled her shirtsleeve up her arm so that he could get a better look at the burns. He looked, a pained expression on his face. “Do my scars look like we have been *just* drawing up plans?”

“No. I’m sorry. But Jinshan promised that we would have more by now. We need more *of everything*. More ships, more troops, more aircraft. The wheels need to start moving if he expects the timeline to move up as far as he does. I’ve been following the headlines in China. It’s business as usual. This isn’t what Jinshan said…”

“I know what Jinshan said.”

“Well, will he follow through? We’ve identified the fixes needed to finish the network outages. I know that the Chinese military readiness has increased in the south, but everywhere else it’s the same. But if we’re going to stick to the schedule…We need manufacturing to shift from commerce to a wartime footing. I just don’t see Jinshan’s promised results happening on time.”

Lena said, “He’s asked to speak with us in person.”

“He has? When?”

“After the Washington, D.C., operation is executed.”

Natesh’s stomach turned at the mention of that operation. He had been horrified to learn the details.

“Alright, so we can speak to him about this.”

“Yes, in Guangzhou. He has asked us to come to him.”

“Why?”

She looked at him, not wanting to reveal anything about Jinshan’s health. “Because he is a busy man.”

A knock at the door, and then one of the Chinese intelligence officers popped his head through. “It’s time. You asked to be alerted when the Washington, D.C., operation was to begin.”

Lena looked at the clock. Right on time. “Thank you. We’ll be right there.”

The man nodded and shut the door. “Natesh, things will work out. Cheng Jinshan has devoted the majority of his life to this cause. I have devoted my entire adult life to this cause. We will not fail. *I* promise you.”

He sighed. “Okay.”

She got up and said, “Alright, let’s go watch the fireworks.”

4

Tysons Corner, Virginia

"So you've known about this for how long?"

David Manning stared at his brother from the passenger seat. They were in heavy traffic on Chain Bridge Road.

Chase said, "I'm gonna take the Beltway."

"Don't take the Beltway. Traffic will be worse there."

"I'll take it to 66."

"They're both going to be parking lots."

Chase drove his Ford Mustang onto the on-ramp of the Beltway. David didn't say anything.

"Yes, I've known about it for a while. Come on, man." He took his eyes off the road for a split second, making eye contact with his brother. "You know that with my job…I can't talk openly about everything."

David stared out the window. The Beltway was a sea of red taillights, inching along slower than a person could walk. He looked over at his brother. A former Navy SEAL. Now an elite member of the CIA's Special Activities Division. But he was still human. Stuck in traffic, like the rest of D.C.

"I warned you," he said, looking at the logjam.

"It'll give us more time to talk," Chase said.

David's phone vibrated, and he scanned his new text message.

Lindsay: You on your way home yet?

David: Yeah in traffic

Lindsay: How'd it go?

David: Not bad I'll tell u more when home

Lindsay: K Love you

David: love u 2

David said, "On the one hand, I'm glad to hear that they're taking the stuff with China seriously."

"But?"

"When we were in that meeting today…the way a lot of those CIA guys were looking at me…"

"Relax," Chase said. "They wouldn't have asked you to be on the team if they didn't trust you."

"I don't think they *all* trust me."

Chase shot another look at his brother. "You passed the background check. You've had multiple polygraphs with some of the best analysts in the world. Your stories check out. And a lot of good people in the military and intelligence community have vouched for you."

"But some people still question whether I intentionally gave information to the Chinese…or if I was just too dumb to realize…"

"You gotta let it go, man. Forgive yourself. Focus on your new mission. Help save the people on that island. And help make sure our country is protecting itself from any Chinese threat. The director personally gave his approval to have you on the team. *David*. They believe you."

David shook his head. "So why are we still about to go to war with Iran? If they really trusted me, they would listen to my warnings. To your warnings too, for God's sake."

"Because it's hard to stop the drums of war," Chase said, "and Iran has killed Americans. Whether it was orchestrated by the Chinese or not, whether they were manipulated or not—they've killed Americans."

He referred to the Persian Gulf attacks a few weeks earlier. After Lena Chou had assassinated the Iranian politician near Bandar Abbas, Iran had retaliated by conducting a surprise attack on US military assets in the Persian Gulf. While the US Air Force and Navy had made quick work of the attacking parties, hundreds of American lives were lost. A tenuous ceasefire was declared. Things had settled down for now. But while Iran and the United States weren't technically at war just yet, American forces had been building in the region for weeks. And most of the American public was calling for retribution. War might be only days away.

David shook his head, looking back out the window. "We're playing right

into Jinshan's hands."

"I don't disagree."

"Then why aren't you angrier?"

"Because Iran is a destabilizing force in the region," Chase said. "They're the largest state sponsor of terrorism in the world. There are lots of people in Iran who would relish a free and democratic government. Maybe all they need is a little help in getting there."

David turned to him. "You mean help from our military?"

Chase shrugged as he changed lanes. "Sure. Why not."

"Come on, Chase. You can't just bring democracy to countries. It isn't that simple. You of all people should know that. You've seen a lot of the results of that sort of thing."

Chase shot his brother a dark look. "You're right. I have seen a lot of the world. Where the American military has tried to bring democracy to other countries. And you're right. It is complex. It's not easy. But every country is different. Iran is not Iraq, and it definitely ain't Afghanistan. All I'm saying is, it sure would be nice if Iran had a free and open democracy. One where they weren't ruled by an extremist leader. It might be one of the keys to peace in the Middle East."

"Alright, I can appreciate that. But still, this whole Iran situation is a setup. It's been staged by the Chinese. We both know that."

"Right, but we can't prove it. Not to John Q. Public. And that's what matters."

"So then we just let China get away with it?"

"No."

"Then what?"

Chase looked at his brother. "That's what you're on the team for."

David sighed. "You're saying I need to be patient."

"Yes. You still have a lot to be briefed on. Trust me."

David said, "Alright."

A motorcycle puttered and snarled next to their car as its rider revved its engine, his feet touching the ground as the already-slow traffic came to a full stop.

Chase shook his head. "I forgot why I don't want to work an office job. It's this damn traffic."

David looked out ahead. Columns of cars, SUVs, and eighteen-wheelers stood still on the Beltway. David heard a few cracks that sounded like

fireworks. He looked at the motorcycle next to them, trying to figure out if it was having some sort of engine trouble.

Then he saw Chase's face. His brother placed the Mustang in park and reached under his seat, moving fast. He pulled out a canvas black container about the size of a lunch bag and unzipped it.

"What is that?"

Chase didn't respond, just looked up out the window, scanning the horizon. His hands working the bag, reaching for its contents.

"*Chase*. What's wrong?"

Chase held up his finger. "Shhh." Then he removed a Sig Sauer P226 9mm handgun from the black bag.

"*Dude*. What are you doing?"

He was still looking forward, through the windshield. David turned to follow his gaze. An overpass stood about a quarter mile in front of them. A plume of black smoke began to rise up from the highway in front of it.

David said, "Chase, chill out, man. It must be an accident."

But as he watched his brother prepare his weapon, he began to suspect that it wasn't. Chase had been in war zones all over the world. He wouldn't have retrieved his weapon unless he knew something was amiss.

Chase shook his head. "You don't hear that?"

"What?"

"Gunfire."



"HURRY UP," the first man said to the second over the sound of liquid splattering on the ground as he poured gasoline onto the highway. Horns blared at them. They had stopped the minivan in the middle of the Beltway, only a few dozen yards before the overpass.

"I'm going as fast as I can. It won't come out any faster." The two men had started pouring gasoline on either end of the minivan. They walked the streams of pungent liquid in a straight line to either side of the highway. Together, the line of gasoline and the minivan would form the blockade.

The third man stood with his rifle behind the minivan, out of sight of the jammed traffic. A few cars near them realized something menacing was occurring and screeched around the blockade. Engines revved up as they

panicked and zoomed past.

"*Now*. Light it, light it!" The gasoline vapors ignited before the flame of the long gas grill lighter made contact with the liquid. The spreading fire engulfed the highway in one long strip, cutting off traffic and filling the air with black smoke.

"Good luck, brothers," the first man said as he raised his rifle. Both the retractable doors to the minivan were open. The three men hobbled through the opening and out to the other side, where the traffic stood motionless. They fanned out and began marching through the bumper-to-bumper traffic jam. In unison, they raised their rifles and began firing into the cars.



THERE WERE twelve of them in all. Divided into three groups of four. Three separate attacks conducted simultaneously on different parts of the Beltway. That was what the instructions specified.

Their leader, Javad, had been in the Iranian Ministry of State Security. The others were mere foot soldiers, chosen for their loyalty and competence. But that was a long time ago.

They held only loose affiliations to each other. A few prayed at the same mosque, but most didn't attend anymore. Two of the men were roommates. None were married. None participated in any online activity that might get them flagged.

In truth, most members of the Iranian sleeper cell enjoyed living in America. The weather was nice. There was good food, and plenty of activities to keep them occupied. They enjoyed themselves. They were just good old Americans, who had been living in the United States for almost a decade.

Waiting for orders.

Most in the group had thought they would never be called upon. If he was honest about it, Javad had thought that too. Their sleeper cell was a nice weapon for Iran to have in its arsenal. But like other weapons of mass destruction, it could only be used once, and it would trigger swift retribution. So it was illogical, when one thought about it, that they would ever be used. Because that would mean…well, that Iran had reached a decision to irreparably harm itself, and sacrifice the lives of Javad and his men.

Javad and his men weren't terrorists. They were *soldiers*. *Patriots*. Few of them had any desire to be martyrs. They were too smart for that. But ideology, religion, and nationality were very closely related in Iran. And he had been briefed on the many ways his group might be used. Suicide missions and suicide attacks were very different in his mind. In a suicide mission, one still held hope that they might overcome all odds and make it out alive.

He reminded himself that suicide attacks had been used several times throughout history, often in military campaigns. Most notably, the Japanese had launched Kamikaze bombers at the end of World War II, sinking around fifty ships. It could be an effective weapon, Javad told himself. Iran must have a great need for it.

Over the past few weeks Javad had grown increasingly worried as he watched the news. Iran and the United States had already fired shots at each other in combat. While outright war still had not broken out, the media made it seem like it could happen at any time.

A part of him wished he could be in Iran, serving his countrymen. But another part of him was thankful that he was here, safe from the guided munitions of the deadliest military in the world. Despite what the Iranian propaganda machines would tell them, Javad knew the truth. No country on earth could make war like the United States of America.

The growing probability of war between the two nations brought his life's most important question to the forefront of his thoughts. Would they be called up into action? He'd made the rounds. He had spoken to his team leaders. And they had spoken to their team members. All twelve men had been told to be on the alert, but not to do anything that might raise suspicions. They didn't want the Department of Homeland Security or the FBI knocking on their door.

A few weeks ago, Javad had been almost certain that his network would not be activated. In the face of an almost certain military defeat, even the Ayatollah would know not to provoke America by using Javad's team. Javad was like one of the American soldiers that manned a nuclear missile silo. A highly trained overseer of a terrible, never-to-be-used weapon. This was the way he had thought of himself.

The activation order had come three days ago.

It was in the form of an email from a clothing company, and it went straight to his spam folder. His handlers—or, more accurately, the people

they hired—could make any message appear as if it had originated from a different and innocent source. Javad was trained to check both his inbox and spam folder each day, looking for the right passphrase. The body of the email, to the untrained eye, would also look like a normal advertisement. But it contained coded instructions.

He immediately headed to the predetermined location and found the vehicle. It was an unmarked minivan. An older model. Blue. American-made. The keys in the glove compartment, inside a manila envelope. Also inside the envelope were detailed plans. A timeline with targets and locations. Where to get equipment. And a lighter, to burn the instructions.

The van was unlocked, parked in an alleyway and sandwiched between two windowless brick buildings. A trashy apartment complex rose up across the street in front of him. He wondered if there was a team of FBI agents watching him behind one of its dark windows. He looked up as he read, knowing instantly that he was being watched. There was no way whoever had left written plans like this would allow them to fall into the wrong hands. If it wasn't the FBI in that building straight ahead, it was whoever had left these instructions. He could feel their crosshairs on his forehead.

When he finished memorizing the plans, he got out of the vehicle and lit the papers on fire, just as the instructions has prescribed. The alleyway kept any wind from blowing out the flame, and he didn't let go until the last morsel of paper was consumed. Then he got back inside the van and drove away.

That had been only three days ago, but it seemed like it had been a lifetime. The others were excited when they found out that they were to be activated. Their time had finally come. They would carry the sword. Strike at the heart of America. *Death to America*. They would show the West that Iran was not to be trifled with.

Javad hoped he could fulfill his duty without being caught. He gave himself about a one in four chance that he would execute his mission and get away alive. He had little confidence that his men would survive, but that was not something he would ever tell them.

When the day came, they found the minivans unlocked and parked behind a grocery store, just as the instructions had said they would be.

Each of Javad's men wasted no time putting on the heavy protective vests that they were each to wear. A phone was strapped to each one of the vests, facing outward so it could record and transmit everything. Javad assumed

that someone in Iran would then weaponize the footage, putting it out to the media and on social networks.

The vehicles also contained firearms. One semiautomatic long gun for each of Javad's men. Boxes of 5.56mm ammo. And several plastic five-gallon gas cans, each one filled.

For operational security, Javad hadn't told his men exactly what their assignment was until they were ready to execute. They only knew to be prepared for bloodshed.

When he told his team what they were to do, they grew excited. A few had fear in their eyes, but Javad quickly spoke words of confidence to them. At exactly the right time, just before rush hour, he sent the three vehicles away to complete their mission.

He drove a fourth vehicle. As he turned onto I-495, the Washington, D.C., Beltway, he wondered if there was really a God. After all the time he had spent in America, he now knew that the Americans were not the demons his government made them out to be. If there truly was a God, he wondered if He would forgive him for what he was about to do.



CHASE KEPT LOOKING FORWARD through the windshield of the Ford Mustang.

"What is it?"

Chase's instincts were honed from years of experience on battlefields around the world. To the uninitiated, the sputtering of a motorcycle or the crack of fireworks might sound an awful lot like gunfire. But Chase's fine-tuned ears were the first defense of a highly trained operative.

"Stay here. Get in the driver's seat," he said to his brother. "We're in the outer lane, so if you see someone coming, drive off the road and get the hell out of here."

David looked aghast. "What are you gonna do?"

Chase opened the door and shut it behind him, walking forward with his arms extended, his weapon pointed toward the ground.

His eyes scanned down the lanes of traffic as he weaved in between vehicles, searching for the source of the gunfire.

A wall of black smoke rose up about fifty yards ahead. A few people honked their horns. Then he heard some screams, and more of the loud,

unmistakable cracks of semiautomatic weapons.

The left side of the highway was a five-foot-tall median barrier. On the right side of the road rose a sloped area of grass. The grass ended at a twenty-foot wall—a sound barrier, separating the busy highway from suburbia. There was nowhere for people to run.

When the gunfire erupted and the screams began, Chase could see car doors ahead of him flying open, the passengers fleeing to either side of the stopped traffic, running away from the black smoke. A heavyset woman in heels ran right by Chase as he jogged toward the noise. She was panting and saying, “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” tears rolling down her red puffy face.

Chase side stepped to the left side of the highway and began making his way forward, faster now. He brought his weapon up, scanning the horizon by tracing the gun sight along his field of view. A yellow school bus motored in place a few cars ahead. He needed to find the shooters before…

Target.

The man wore blue jeans and a dark grey vest, and held what looked like an AR-15. He walked toward Chase along the highway shoulder. The same section of the road that Chase was using. Every few steps, the man fired into the traffic. A few more seconds and he would be at the school bus.

Chase opened the rear door of the bus and found himself staring at a group of middle schoolers. “Come on, hop down!” He called. A large man appeared next to the kids. Chase asked, “You the bus driver?”

The man nodded.

A woman in a sedan next to them saw what he was doing and got out of her car to help. Chase looked at her and the bus driver and said, “Help get everyone out the back door. Bring all these kids that way, away from the gunfire.” He pointed back in the direction he had come from.

The woman and the bus driver nodded and started helping the kids hop down and run away from the screaming.

Chase left them and headed towards the gunfire.



LENA STOOD in the back of the room, watching the operation unfold. Chinese satellites were still effective. The ARES cyberattack had only affected US

satellites—GPS and military birds, mostly.

With David Manning and Henry Glickstein escaping, she knew that there was an increased level of surveillance on the island. But now that the US network of reconnaissance satellites was inoperative, that greatly reduced the information they could obtain.

The biggest threat to the secrecy of this operation was US submarine and aerial reconnaissance. US Navy EP-3s and Air Force RC-135 aircraft routinely flew through the area. But the island had received several upgrades —electronic countermeasures, mostly—that would help shield their work. This island was still the best place for her. While Jinshan's power and connections protected him from the political scrutiny he faced after Dubai, *she* was a different story.

Officially, Lena Chou was not, and had never been, a citizen of China. She was an American, despite what the US intelligence agencies were now saying. That it had taken them ten years to realize her true identity was a testament to her ability, and the professionalism of Jinshan's operation.

"Ms. Chou?"

She looked at the Chinese military intelligence officer that was in charge of the room. "Yes?"

"Ma'am, it's time. You can now see our satellite feeds from over Washington, D.C., on screens one through three." He pointed to a set of displays strung out along the ceiling.

"Thank you."

The resolution was, surprisingly, good enough for her to be able to make out individuals. The video all came from a single Chinese intelligence satellite, in a permanent geosynchronous orbit above Washington, D.C. It was used to eavesdrop on the US government agencies and officials who ran them. But it also had great cameras.

All three screens showed different sections of the circular highway that ran around the capital of the United States: I-495, the Washington, D.C. Beltway.

She looked at her watch and did the math in her head. It was time. The afternoon rush hour was picking up. Exactly what they wanted. Maximum impact. Maximum casualties.

"Teams one and two have begun," said one of the Chinese intelligence personnel.

She saw two of the screens zoom in on the highway. Each showed similar

scenarios unfolding. A minivan stopped on the Beltway, slowing and eventually blocking traffic. Then the third screen showed that the last of the teams had done the same thing with their minivan. At each location, men from the minivans got out and began pouring gasoline across lanes of traffic. Then they stepped back and lit the liquid, transforming it into a flaming barrier. The smoke distorted some of the overhead view, but it was still good enough for Lena to decipher what was happening.

In each scene, three men spread out across the highway. One man on either side, and one in the middle of the major road. Then they raised their black semiautomatic weapons to their shoulders and began firing into traffic.

She checked her watch. Right on time.

Lena heard a few muffled gasps from the Chinese personnel in the control room. She took a mental note of who seemed the most disturbed. She would have to give their names to the duty section head.

Loyalty and dedication were very important at this stage of the operation. Everything they did was still highly confidential. If word of their operations were to get out to the wrong people now, it could ruin everything.

It was understandable that some of these Chinese military and intelligence personnel were upset by this operation. This team hadn't participated in anything this gruesome before now.

Innocent women and perhaps even children would die. But it was necessary, Lena reminded herself. Was she rationalizing? Yes. But the ends justified the means, however horrible they were.

Lena watched one particular woman, manning her station. She looked to be about thirty years old. The woman covered her mouth as she watched the Iranian men on the screen, gunning down civilians stuck in the traffic jam.

Lena cocked her head. She wondered if this woman had a child at home. Unlikely, as the group assigned to this island was well-screened. But this woman was quite upset. That much was clear. That was fine, Lena told herself. Let them be upset. As long as their being upset didn't transition into anything more dangerous, like dissent.

The Beltway attacks hadn't been planned by the Americans in the Red Cell. Jinshan's covert team from the Ministry of State Security had come up with this one.

The operation still fit the Red Cell's overall strategy—frame Iran as the most dangerous enemy of the American people. An enemy that needed to be dealt with immediately. Get the US committed to war with Iran. And while

the Americans are focused on Iran, China will make her move.

Jinshan's group of Chinese spies operating in the US had been there for years. Some of his agents had even been there for decades. Lena herself had begun her work for Jinshan that way. A deep seed into the heart of America.

One the objectives Jinshan had laid out for his team was to uncover agents from other nations who were also conducting espionage inside the US. All the major players had operatives in the D.C. area. The Russians, the Israelis, the British.

Jinshan's team had stumbled onto the Iranian sleeper cell a few years ago. At the time, Lena had been working as a mole in the CIA, stationed in the D.C. area. Jinshan had notified Lena of the Iranians and asked her to gather more information on the group. Information of that sort could be very valuable, should they ever desire to conduct a false flag operation in the future.

When the CIA had transferred Lena to Dubai, she'd handed off the work to another of Jinshan's men. Jinshan's team had continued to find out everything they could about how the Iranians conducted their communication. What were their methods of communication? Their chain of command structure? Who made contact with whom? How often? What types of missions were they intended to conduct? What were their standard operating procedures?

And, important to Lena's current operation, what activities would the Iranian sleeper cell perform on short notice, without having any in-person communication?

Lena had been surprised to hear how amateurish the Iranians were at some things, but how disciplined they were at others. They were great, for instance, at keeping low profiles. Out of the thirteen of them, including the group's leader, only one of them had ever shown up on a US government watch list. Lena had used the CIA's database to check.

But when Jinshan's cyberwarfare hackers had infiltrated the Iranian intelligence organization's computers in Tehran, they had been astounded to find out how many details were kept on file about the group. Everything was there. Their identities, their codenames (which were comically unoriginal), and their method of communication.

Jinshan had been very pleased to find out that they would not use steps to double-verify orders if they were to be executed within one week's time. Double-verification of an action order was standard practice with Chinese

sleeper agents. This prevented another foreign entity from exploiting the group.

Once Lena and her team had gotten their hands on the Iranian files, they'd begun to draw up plans for what they wanted the Iranian sleeper cell to do, and how they would anonymously communicate it.

The consensus was that an attack on a soft target—highly visible, easily achievable for this group of amateurs—would work best. But it would have to be done in a way that would tie up all loose ends.

"Sir, we're getting video feed from the phones on their vests."

"Please show it on screen," said the duty officer.

One of the large screens in the front of the room changed from overhead satellite footage to a cross-section of twelve video feeds.

"Why are we seeing only twelve?"

"The leader's feed isn't on for some reason."

Lena frowned. That wasn't part of the plan. "Is the cleaner crew ready if we need them?" She had a two-member group ready to take out any of the Iranians that survived the attack. But she didn't want to expose them unless she absolutely had to. It defeated the whole purpose of using the Iranians in the first place. The cleaner crews had connections to the Chinese.

"The cleaners are standing by, if needed," the duty officer said, looking at Lena.

The video feed from the phones was surprisingly clear, but not well focused. The gunmen were walking and jogging, shooting passengers as they sat in their cars or ran in the streets. Lena heard some more gasps from inside the room.

"It looks like one of them has been hit," the duty officer said, pointing to a video screen.

Lena saw the lone video feed that was no longer moving. The image was now half-covered by pavement. She looked up at the overhead satellite feeds until she found the one where the man lay.

A dark patch spread out on the ground next to his now-misshapen head. She searched and found the man who had shot him. A white man with dark hair and civilian clothes held a handgun and was taking cover behind a school bus.

Lena looked at the duty officer and said, "You know what to do." The man nodded and walked over to one of his men. The one who was able to send signals to the phones connected to the heavy vests the men wore.

~

JAVAD WATCHED his men from the overpass. Every instruction had been followed to the letter, except for his own participation. His men didn't know any better.

Instead of four attackers at this location, there would be three. Javad was supposed to leave his own vehicle and get in one of the vans. He was supposed to take his rifle and do exactly what his men were doing. Firing at innocent civilians. But he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Instead, he had driven his own van and parked on the overpass next to one of the target locations. Javad had decided that he would watch the scene for a few moments, and then get a head start on his escape.

He'd arrived seconds before his men had stopped their van on the Beltway. Stopping their vehicle may have been enough to prevent traffic from moving, but the next step would ensure their success. Javad watched as they opened the five-gallon gas cans and poured them onto the highway, lighting it on fire to ensure that traffic stopped.

So many people, sitting in their cars. Looking ahead at the rising smoke. Long tongues of flame whipping up. It was such an eye-catching sight that most of them didn't even see the three of Javad's men fan out amongst them, wearing their protective vests and raising their weapons.

The cracks of gunfire changed everything. Screams erupted from the trapped bystanders. A few of them tried to slam on the gas and force their cars out of the traffic, but those attempts only served to make them the first targets of Javad's men.

The Iranian sleeper cell had been activated. Mobilized into a weapon of—he hated to use the word, but he knew it to be accurate—*terror*.

Spiderwebs of cracked glass appeared on windows and windshields. Dark red blood seeping out of the doors. Cars became coffins. The highway pavement and grass strip next to it became a slaughtering ground.

Javad had wondered if any of his men would object to the orders. Or perhaps they would become less interested when they found out the nature of their target? But it hadn't mattered. He wasn't sure if he should be proud of how efficient they were being, or horrified.

Javad had reminded his men that the greater the cost to the Americans here, the better chance they gave to the Iranian people in their homeland. If the Americans understood the cost of war, who knew how many Iranians they

could save? They were defenders of their great nation, Javad had told his men.

He wondered if they had all believed it. They certainly hadn't looked like they had reservations. Once they had the rifles in their hands and moving targets in front of them, perhaps the killer's instinct had taken over.

Javad saw a man in a charcoal suit who lay quivering and bleeding next to his luxury SUV. One of Javad's men shot him in the head and marched on, firing at the fleeing passengers and into the cars.

Javad gripped the metal fence atop the overpass, his mouth agape. He hadn't even bothered to put his own vest on. He didn't feel there was any need. The three men had walked fifty meters by now. Dozens of bodies lay strewn in their wake. Every few seconds, more cracks of gunfire. Changing of the magazines. Aim. Fire. Repeat.

Then one of Javad's men fell to the ground.

At first Javad thought he had stumbled, but then the second team member —the one who had been walking in the center of the highway—fell backward as well. That one's head turned into a bloody mess.

Javad should have expected it, but it still came as a shock. He hadn't seen any source of resistance. The surprise evaporated by the time he saw the third man killed.

The third man saw the second go down and began walking toward that direction, looking for the attacker. The third man went down in a similar manner. A single headshot. No clear shooter. All three of Javad's men had been killed inside of twenty seconds.

Javad had known that they would die. But he had expected a grand, televised shootout with police. After all, they were killing civilians. Who would be fighting back in this group? He didn't see any police cars. He supposed that it was possible there was an unmarked law enforcement vehicle out there in the sea of stopped traffic.

Javad suddenly felt the powerful urge to walk back to his van and grab his own rifle. From his vantage point, he could pick off his men's killer. But that would alert people to his position, and make any attempt to escape much less likely to succeed. Perhaps he could…

The section of highway where his dead men lay exploded into a mix of grey dust and yellow flame.

Javad felt the heat and pressure of the burst and dropped to the ground, alarmed by the explosion. What was going on?



CHASE DROPPED the third shooter with a single shot to the head and continued to scan for targets. He found none on the highway. The shooting had subsided. Now the only sounds were of car engines, moans, and cries. Cries of anguish and cries of fear.

Chase had used the school bus for cover. Now he walked past it, around the flaming wall that lit up their section of highway.

He found his next target.

The man stood on the overpass, nearly hidden behind the green exit sign that read *Rt 7 Leesburg Pike Falls Church Tysons Corner*. He had a rifle in his hand. The same kind that these gunmen had. Was he a spotter? Or was there more violence to come?

Chase sprinted underneath the overpass and out of view of the man. Then he began to run up the grass hill behind the overpass, to where he would be able to jump the fence and get to the man with the gun.

It was during his climb that the highway behind him exploded.



THE SATELLITE FEED had red dots that overlaid the locations of the phones the Chinese were using to activate the vest bombs.

Each vest was filled with a combination of plastic explosive and shrapnel material. They were designed to look and feel like bulletproof vests, but the phones that were hardwired into them connected to the detonation switch.

The satellite feeds showed that two of the Iranian machine gun teams were still at it, walking their fire through crowds of screaming civilians, stuck in traffic. One of those two feeds now had the flashing blue lights of police vehicles arriving on scene.

But the third satellite feed showed the most “advanced” scenario. Once the gunmen were determined to be killed, the Chinese duty officer here on the island sent the signal to detonate their vests. Red blinking dots overlaid the satellite feed with a reference number to be sure that they were detonating the right vest.

These explosions served two purposes. They increased the casualties and destroyed much of the evidence. The Chinese team that had put this mission

together had used Iranian suppliers when obtaining their explosive materials.

The FBI and ATF would still undoubtedly uncover the identities of the Iranian team. That was expected and intended. But there would be no interrogation. It was always possible that the Iranians might have seen something that would lead a professional investigator to discover that Chinese hands were involved with this operation.

That couldn't happen.

Lena looked at the monitor. On the screen, all three of the Iranian gunmen had been killed before the vests were detonated. But in some of these other sections of the Beltway, where similar attacks were being executed, it was possible that the Iranian attackers might surrender or be captured. The explosive vests made sure that interrogations would not happen.

Lena walked closer to the screen where the vests had already been detonated. "You just detonated three of them. But I see four red markers on that screen. Why has that one not been detonated?"

The duty officer walked over to one of his personnel at their computer terminal and spoke rapidly to him in a low voice. Then the duty officer looked up and said, "Ms. Chou, it looks as if that one is not being worn. It is inside this van here, parked near the top of this highway overpass. We think that this man here is part of the team—one of the Iranians. He is standing on top of the overpass, watching. But he is not wearing his vest."

"Is he in the blast range?"

The duty officer again asked the man at the computer terminal something. Lena saw on the display that a cursor measured the distance from the unexploded vest to the man standing on the overpass.

"He's right on the edge of the kill zone. But if that vest is inside the vehicle, it could affect—"

Lena held up her hand. The duty officer followed her intense gaze back to the satellite feed.

One of the personnel in the room said, "Sir, in scenario number two, all three men have been either killed or captured. Permission to detonate their vests?"

"Yes, execute."

"Proceeding."

Lena said, "If that is indeed the Iranian not wearing a vest, it appears he is being taken into custody."

A white male jumped the fence of the overpass behind the Iranian. The

man held up a handgun and walked towards the Iranian. Lena was pretty sure this was the same man who had killed the three attackers just a moment earlier.

The Iranian was much closer to the vehicle than the approaching man. Lena wondered if the Iranian would make a run for the van. That would be preferable, increasing the chances he would be killed the closer he got. But he didn't run. The Iranian kneeled down and placed his hands on the back of his head, obviously following orders.

"Ms. Chou, should we send the cleaner team?"

She said, "No. Detonate the vest immediately."



CHASE WALKED TOWARD THE MAN, aiming his 9mm Sig at the guy's center mass. The man had dark brown hair and Middle Eastern features.

"Get down on your knees and put your hands on your head," Chase yelled.

The man was already on the ground. Chase thought it looked like he was deciding whether to make a run for it, but then he saw the gun and did as Chase commanded.

Chase took a knee and pulled out his cell phone, careful to keep his weapon pointed at—

The minivan on the other side of the overpass exploded into a burst of smoke and metal.

Chase fell to the ground, instinctively shielding himself from the explosion. He felt pain in his leg but ignored it, retraining his gun sight on the man ahead.

As he looked up, Chase pocketed his phone and huddled closer to the side of the highway, not sure what was going to happen next. He stayed low and hobbled towards his target.

The man was injured and unmoving. He lay on the ground about halfway between the exploded van and where Chase had been positioned. The man had been wounded in several places. Shrapnel from the explosion, Chase realized. It looked like a piece had torn through his arm. A few cuts on his face and legs. But his eyes were open, and at first glance he looked like he would pull through.

Chase huddled over him, keeping his weapon trained on the man. He looked at him, wondering what kind of sick bastard would take part in this sort of thing. There was nothing in his eyes that answered that question.

5

Contadora Island, Panama

Victoria lay on her beach towel, reading her book under the shade of a palm tree. She reached over, grabbed her coconut drink that was resting on the sand, and took a long sip.

She could hear the hollers of her tribe in the distance. Her four pilots had convinced her to come on this trip. A one-day excursion while the USS *Farragut* was in port in Panama City, Panama. They had taken the ferry to Contadora Island. Now, the four men were attempting to surf the endless swells of turquoise-blue water that drove into the bay.

She watched through her sunglasses as Plug got up on a wave, his legs shaking. Caveman pushed him off balance as he went by and sent him cartwheeling and laughing into the water.

It was good that they were getting a break. She hated to admit it, but the sooner this deployment was over, the better. With the majority of all Naval deployments right now headed towards the Persian Gulf in preparation for a war with Iran, it was maddening to be stuck here in the Eastern Pacific. Everyone wanted to be “over there.” The only saving grace was the excellent port stops that this deployment had. Like surfing on a remote island off the coast of Panama, for example.

Victoria wasn’t quite the surfing type. Or the bathing suit type, for that matter. She was, however, more than content to place her toes in the sand and sip on her rum-based drink. A good book and a light breeze was all she needed. For once, she left work on the boat.

She actually had brought three books. The first one for fun—the latest by Rick Campbell. The other two books were more for self-improvement. One was on leadership, and the other was Tim Ferriss's *The 4-Hour Workweek*. While she wasn't sure she could get away with working for four hours on deployment, she had heard good things about his way of thinking.

She was a fast reader. She figured if she could get five hours of reading in today, that would knock about half her reading list out. Tomorrow, she was on duty and could probably finish the rest. But it was always good to be prepared in case she went fast, or decided she was in a different mood. As with everything she did, Victoria had a list of books. One of her favorite things to do was cross off items on her list.

Later she would attempt to call her brother David. While they had spoken briefly a few weeks ago, she wanted to catch up with him and make sure that he was alright.

It was incredible what he had been through, and troubling to Victoria that all of his claims weren't being taken seriously by the government. She had read a few newspaper articles that implied his allegations against the Chinese were considered conspiracy theory. But she knew her brother. He was an honest, reliable man.

Much like their father.

She closed her book and lay back against the towel, looking up into the swaying palm leaves and deep blue sky. She needed to reconnect with her father. It was time. It had been long enough. Almost a year since they last had spoken. Since her mother's funeral. Dammit. She needed to return his email. She just didn't know what the hell to say.

Victoria took another sip from her straw and got the slurping sound of a finished drink. She looked at her watch. Well, it was after noon. When in Rome, she decided, and walked barefoot to the tiki bar.

"Another?" the bartender asked.

"Yes, please." She placed her purse on the bar, shuffling through it to find her wallet.

The bartender thumbed up at the TV. "I am very sorry to hear about this. Is crazy, no?"

Victoria frowned in confusion.

"Sorry about what?"

"What is happening in the US. Did you not see?"

She squinted up at the TV, reading the scroll.

IRAN TERROR CELL ATTACKS AMERICANS ON WASHINGTON D.C. BELTWAY

Over two hundred people confirmed dead. One suspect in custody.

The four pilots' boisterous voices grew louder behind her. "Hey, boss, easy on the sauce. It's barely lunch!" one of them yelled.

She turned and waved them over to the bar, pointing up at the TV. "Check it out."

Seeing the serious look on her face, Plug said, "What is it?"

"Holy shit." The group called out other variations of the same as they saw the news.

Victoria heard a buzzing sound from her purse and pulled out the phone the ship had issued to all the department heads.

She answered, "Air Boss."

"Ma'am, this is Ensign Gorsky on board the USS *Farragut*. Ma'am, the captain has ordered all personnel back to the ship. Liberty has been rescinded until further notice, ma'am."

She closed her eyes. "Alright. Thank you." Hanging up the phone, she held up her hand as the bartender tried to give her another drink.

"Thanks, but we'll all need to close out. Can you tell me when the next ferry arrives?"

Plug said, "Aw, you've got to be shitting me."

"What is it?" asked Juan.

"We're getting recalled back to the ship."

Victoria looked at her men. "Let's keep things in perspective. A lot of people just lost their lives. Don't complain about liberty today, alright, gents? Especially in front of your sailors."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Come on, let's get our stuff. We've got a ferry to catch."

6

Langley, Virginia

"They found something."

Chase looked up from his computer screen. He sat in one of the multiuse conference rooms that the SILVERSMITH team was using, scrolling through the *Washington Post* on his secure laptop. He had spent much of the day giving interviews to both FBI and CIA investigative teams.

"Let's have it," Chase said.

David and a man Chase knew to be an FBI agent came in, shutting the door behind them. The FBI agent's name was Peter Weese, one of the FBI's liaisons to the CIA. When the SILVERSMITH Task Force had been created, he had become the lone FBI agent on the team.

The Beltway attacks were being portrayed by the media as state-sponsored terrorism. All thirteen men were Iranian. It had been a little over twenty-four hours since they had occurred. FBI interrogators were going to work on the lone Iranian survivor.

Why that asshole hadn't been wearing his suicide vest was unknown. Chase figured he'd just gotten cold feet. But what had triggered the device to go off?

Chase thought it seemed like he hadn't expected it. Did that mean that there were others in the area who might carry out more attacks on behalf of the Iranians?

Chinese threat or not, this was a new level of danger that Iran posed to the US. Most inside the CIA hadn't thought much of Iran's ability to strike

within the United States.

While Iran claimed to have "thousands" of Hezbollah clones waiting around America, Chase had seen CIA threat assessments that those figures were greatly exaggerated.

With this latest attack, though…it had him nervous. It wouldn't be the first time the analysts had been wrong.

Weese looked around the room like he didn't want anyone to hear him when he spoke. "They've been interviewing the Iranian. And they have a few leads."

"And?"

"He gave up a few details that prove to be *very* interesting to our task force here. *Chinese* connections." He nodded his head as he spoke.

"Really?" Chase looked at his brother David and then back at the FBI agent. "Who knows about this?"

"Susan's briefing the director right now. You and I are about to go join her. But she asked me to come fill you in first. She said that we'd likely require your expertise."

"How so?"

"The Iranian received a communication a few days ago. Then they received minivans filled with weapons and the explosive vests. We were able to trace the vehicles, weapons, and explosive residue. The results are preliminary, but…it looks like it will be a dead end."

"Come on, Weese. Don't slow-play me. Give me the punch line."

He smiled. "Alright. It was the initial communication. They left some folder in a van in an alleyway in Maryland. There were no cameras in that area, so we couldn't see who put the van there. But there was only one building that had a view of it. The Iranian said he had to destroy the envelope. We figured they would want to be able to see that, to make sure it got done right. So we went over footage of the only building that had a vantage point on that alleyway. It's a big brick apartment complex. Lots of people coming and going every day. But only one of them showed up on our watch list."

David added, "The Chinese counterespionage watch list." Chase noticed that David was still a little awkward in his delivery. He was still finding his way in the conversation, getting comfortable in his new line of work.

Peter said, "FBI Counterespionage has been following a particular employee at the State Department for a few years. They are very confident

that he's a Chinese plant. He feeds his handlers anything and everything he gets."

"How do you know?"

"We've had an ongoing blue dye operation. We provided specific details to single individuals. Single-variable testing. This allowed us to see which version popped up on the other end. Like I said, we are *very* confident he's working for the Chinese."

David hadn't thought about that part of the problem. He leaned forward, incredulous. "Wait, so you've known that this guy was working in our government, and you just kept letting him work there?"

The FBI agent looked at Chase and then back at David. "That's how the game is played, my friend. Sometimes it's more valuable to know who the spies are and leave them in place. It allows us to control the information flow."

David shook his head.

Chase didn't blink, saying, "And this Chinese spook was in the building across the street from the Iranian dead drop? The one that gave them orders to conduct the Beltway attack?"

"Yes, sir."

Chase shook his head. "Why the hell would the Chinese have the Iranians go through with this? They have to know that eventually we'd get to the bottom of it."

David said, "You know why. It's the same reason that the Chinese have eighteen Americans in a prison in the South China Sea. The same reason they're staging a war between us and Iran. This is just one more piece of evidence for what I've been saying this whole time. We've got to wake up. The Chinese want us to go to war with Iran. It's in their best interests to keep us otherwise occupied…"

The FBI agent looked at Chase. "Susan said to join her in the director's office in ten minutes."

Chase stood. "Alright, well…let's go."



CHASE AND SPECIAL Agent Weese arrived at the director's office a few moments later. Susan, the CIA staff operations officer in charge of

SILVERSMITH, was waiting in the chamber room outside the office. The director's administrative assistant motioned for Chase and Special Agent Weese to sit next to Susan.

"The director will be with you all momentarily."

"Thanks," Chase said.

Despite his confident demeanor, he was still a little uneasy about being brought into such a high-level meeting for the first time.

Susan leaned over to him as he sat down, whispering, "Has Weese briefed you?"

"Yes, just now."

"Do you have any questions?"

Chase gave her a look that said, *Of course I have questions*. "A few."

The secretary rose from his chair and opened the large wooden door leading to the director's office. "The director will see you now."

Susan whispered, "Just follow my lead. Try not to say anything provocative."

The three of them walked into the director's office. There were two leather couches that faced inward, and a small coffee table in the center. An older man in a suit sat on one of the couches. Chase thought he looked familiar, but couldn't place the face. The other couch was bare. The director sat in a wooden chair on the far end of the coffee table.

"Come in, folks."

The director of the CIA was a former congressman. He had been on the House Intelligence Committee for several years before the new president plucked him out of a safely red state. Before he had been a congressman, he had served as an Army JAG for twenty years. While Chase didn't like lawyers or politicians much, he respected the fact that the man had military service. And from what he heard, the director was one sharp cookie.

"Mr. Manning, I was reading the file you put together on what happened in Dubai a few weeks ago. A most interesting read. Especially the part about Miss Parker. Or should I say Miss Chou." Their eyes locked.

Chase reddened a bit. He had rightly included everything in his post-mission report, including his own relationship to the woman he now knew to be Lena Chou.

"Yes, sir" was all he could think to respond with.

"Well, I can't fault you, son. If the counterespionage group didn't know about her, we couldn't expect you to. And I'm very impressed with how you

handled the situation. I'm sure that your brother is grateful as well."

"I believe he is, sir."

"And Susan tells me that his information has been quite a value added to our new China task force—SILVERSMITH."

"Sir, David is glad that people are taking action on his knowledge. Although he is concerned—and I share this concern—that there are still Americans being held captive by the Chinese on the Red Cell island."

Out of the corner of his eye, Chase saw Susan grimace.

The man on the couch said, "That has been vigorously denied by our counterparts in China. And some of our most reliable sources are not able to corroborate that information."

Chase had two voices in his head. One was Susan's, telling him to hold his tongue. He thought that might be wise, considering he didn't even know the name of this man on the couch who was challenging him. The other voice was his brother's.

"Sir, respectfully, if you were an adversarial nation who had just conducted an act of espionage—an act of war—I wouldn't expect you to be the most honest source of information on the subject."

Director O'Malley smiled. "Susan, Chase, please…have a seat." He motioned to the couch and sat back down in his chair. "Chase, this is the president's national security advisor, Charlie Sheppard."

Chase felt like an idiot for not recognizing who he was.

The director said, "Susan has just finished walking us through the update on a possible Chinese connection with the Beltway attacks."

"It's circumstantial," said the NSA. "Maybe this Chinese spy was in the building across the street for another reason. Or maybe he was even watching the Iranians, but he wasn't the one who had planted the orders to strike. We need to give the FBI more time to do their job and investigate."

Chase stayed quiet. The public fury over the attacks was like nothing he'd seen since September 11, 2001. There were over two hundred innocent civilians dead. Many of them were government employees or family members. Everyone in the D.C. area knew someone who had been affected. And the reports from the media all pointed to one source: Iran.

Chase wouldn't argue with that. It *was* the Iranians who had attacked. He saw that with his own eyes. But just like the attacks in Dubai a few weeks ago, there was more to the story.

"Susan? Anything you want to add?" the director asked.

She crossed her legs. “Gentlemen, I agree that the FBI needs time to complete their investigation. But there are other things at play here, as you well know. Right now our military is preparing to strike in Iran. This is the second Iranian attack on US military or civilian personnel in a few weeks. Both times, there have been links to the Chinese. We can’t ignore that.”

“And we won’t ignore it,” Sheppard said. “But the president can’t ignore that a radical Islamic nation that hates everything we stand for has just attacked our country. We need to strike back, and strike back *hard*. To send them a message—to send the whole world a message—that you can’t mess with the United States and get away with it. And you know what, I don’t care if the Chinese *were* involved. They didn’t pull the triggers. The Iranians did. So don’t you tell me that the Iranians were innocent.”

“Sir, with all due respect, I was there on scene. I know that the Iranians weren’t innocent.”

The director spoke softly. “Chuck, Chase was driving home on the Beltway when it happened. He took down three of the terrorists, saving a lot of lives. And he helped capture the only one that was taken alive. Please cut him a little slack.”

The NSA raised an eyebrow. “You did all that, huh? Well, I thank you for what you’ve done. But you must understand that these are tense times. We can’t be playing games here. You of all people should realize that.”

Susan spoke up. “Sir, I think what my colleague Mr. Manning is trying to say is that, if the Chinese were involved—if they triggered the attack somehow—then attacking Iran won’t be the right response.”

The NSA said, “Tell me how attacking the country that just attacked us isn’t the right response.”

Susan said, “Sir, the Chinese wouldn’t have done this without a reason. We have evidence that they’ve been fanning the flames of a conflict between the United States and Iran for several weeks now, if not longer. If we attack Iran, we’d be playing into their hands. And with the intelligence David Manning has given us—”

The NSA scoffed. “David Manning. This is the guy that we arrested a few weeks ago for cyberterrorism with Iran?”

The director held up his hand. “Now, Chuck, that was a misinformation campaign. Which we also believe had roots in China. David Manning has been completely cleared. I can speak to that. His interviews and background checks over the past few weeks have been extremely thorough.”

“But you know that not all the information he’s given us checks out,” Sheppard said. “Our own assets in China are saying that they have no idea about any Americans in captivity on an island, and that they had nothing to do with the Dubai attacks.”

Director O’Malley held up his hand. “We’re looking into that further.” The director looked at Chase. “Chase, I apologize for any discomfort it causes you for us to discuss your brother like this. I assure you that we trust him; otherwise, I would not have invited him to be a part of the SILVERSMITH operation. And, quite frankly, you wouldn’t be in this room. But there are, as Mr. Sheppard points out, *inconsistencies* with other bits of intelligence coming out of China.”

Chase fumed but stayed quiet. He noticed that the NSA cast a glance at him when he mentioned his brother’s name. Chase knew there were members of the government who didn’t trust the information coming from his brother. But he hadn’t seen such an overt questioning of the accuracy of David’s word at this high a level.

Chase also began to wonder just why *was* he was in this room. A high-level meeting like this wasn’t something that someone in his community—the CIA’s Special Operations Group—was normally invited to.

Director O’Malley said, “We have human intelligence coming out of China—sources in both the PLA and the Chinese government. And they don’t match up with a large-scale Chinese military attack. For instance, aside from the military buildup at the Red Cell island, there aren’t any indications of troop movements.”

The NSA said, “It’s the Central Committee that I care most about. The PLA wouldn’t do anything unless the Central Committee okays it. And your sources in the Central Committee have always been good, right?”

“I am familiar with these sources, sir. And that is correct, they’ve always been very reliable,” Susan said.

Sheppard said, “And to be clear, the Central Committee sources have reported nothing unusual. No reports of military activity, buildups, increased training…”

“That’s correct, sir.”

“And no secret plans to kidnap Americans and bring them to the Red Cell island?” he persisted.

She shifted in her seat. “Sir, while that is accurate, our current hypothesis is that Jinshan’s group in the Ministry of State Security might have—”

“Aw, that’s bullshit, and you know it. There’s no way an operation of that size and scope could have gone through Jinshan alone. Yes, I understand that he’s got a lot of pull over there. But—and this is information coming from you guys”—he pointed at the three CIA members, leaning forward and raising his eyebrows—“there is no military movement that indicates the Chinese are going to attack American forces. Is that right?”

Susan sighed. “Sir, I admit that we have more work to do. The human intelligence sources in China don’t fully corroborate David Manning’s information. But I would point out that we still have eighteen missing Americans, some of whom are high-level clearance types from our military and intelligence communities. These are the same people David Manning and Henry Glickstein say were on the Red Cell island.”

The NSA raised his voice. “Well, it sure would be nice if you could get us on that island, or get the Chinese to give us a tour. But all our channels, including our military and intelligence backchannels, have assured us that there are no Americans on that island, and that all that information David Manning gave us is conspiracy theory bullshit.” He looked at Chase. “Son, I mean no offense.”

Chase looked at the NSA. He clenched his fists under the coffee table. *I’ve killed better men than you*. He said, “None taken.”

The NSA said, “I’m sure your brother believes he is telling the truth. And he might be. But the president needs to take action on real, hard evidence. Verifiable proof. And this Beltway attack…the Persian Gulf attacks…ladies and gentlemen, I can say without a doubt that the Iranians were responsible in a *big* way. Let’s focus on that.”

Silence.

Chase now knew that any arguments he made would be falling on deaf ears with the NSA. This guy was a politician, and a certifiable idiot. He was reading the papers and reacting to the press and the fury of the people. What he needed to do was make smart, rational decisions based on intelligence information, even if they were hard and unpopular decisions.

But as Chase thought about the men, women, and children he had seen killed on the pavement of I-495, he realized that he couldn’t blame anyone for reacting emotionally. Chase wanted to hit someone. To strike back, and take revenge. It was human nature.

However, if China and/or Jinshan had orchestrated these Iranian attacks on the United States, that would be the exact response they wanted us to take.

Susan said, “Gentlemen, we also now have a significant amount of evidence built around Lena Chou and Cheng Jinshan’s involvement in the Dubai Bitcoin Exchange conspiracy—as well as Lena’s espionage while within the CIA.”

“I’ve read your reports tying Lisa Parker to the Chinese,” the NSA said. “And I saw the footage of her in Bandar Abbas. The Chinese deny that she was ever in their country. They say she wasn’t a Chinese citizen. We don’t have much ground to stand on there either.”

Susan was visibly annoyed. “Sir, we are very confident that she was a Chinese agent. And we know it was her in Bandar Abbas. She was the one who assassinated the Iranian politician, Ahmad Gorji.”

“That may be true. But the president isn’t convinced that Parker’s actions in Bandar Abbas absolve Iran of any culpability in the Persian Gulf attacks. They actually killed Americans. They shot missiles at our Navy ships. That is real. That matters. Cold, hard facts. And I’ll say another thing.” He pointed his finger at the group. “You guys might not like hearing this, but the fact that you had a Chinese agent working in the CIA for years actually *hurts* your credibility. Not *helps*.”

No one spoke for a few moments.

The director took a deep breath and said, “Susan, let’s talk about next steps on the Chinese connection to the Beltway attacks.”

Susan, red-faced and flustered, tried to regain her composure. “As I was briefing you earlier, we have a very high degree of confidence that there is a US State Department employee who is a member of Cheng Jinshan’s espionage ring. He’s the one who was spotted at the building across the street from the Iranian dead drop. We believe”—she looked at the NSA—“that there is at least a *possibility* that he activated the Beltway attacks.”

The director said, “What would you like to do?”

“We’ve been going back and forth on this with the FBI.” She looked at Special Agent Weese, who hadn’t said a word this whole time. “We’d like them to take this Chinese operative in for questioning, and would ask that the FBI allow us to listen in on the interview and share information. We feel that there is a high enough threat to our nation that it is warranted.”

The NSA shook his head. “Do you realize what a headache that would be if you’re wrong? The president will never sign off on that. Like I said, your evidence is based on conflicting and circumstantial reports.”

Special Agent Weese said, “Sir, we at the FBI feel that we would have

support from the courts. We've gotten a FISA warrant on this particular person already. The evidence gathered there supports taking him in for questioning."

"I don't care about the courts, I care about what State and the president will say—do they already know about this? What are you going to say when they go on the news and say that the CIA just grabbed a US citizen on American soil because of China? Not *Iran*, who everyone knows just killed innocent Americans, but China?"

Chase glared at the man. "I would say that the Chinese are holding eighteen of our own citizens as part of an espionage operation. And that this State Department employee is a known spy, who may have contributed to one of the most heinous terrorist attacks ever to have been committed on US soil. And that we should go after the source of the attacks—the root cause—not just whoever pulled the trigger."

"Watch your tone, young man. I'll remind you that I am the national security advisor. I outrank you by just a little bit."

Chase caught sight of the director placing his palm upward, signaling to Chase to tone it down. The director looked at Susan. "What do you hope to get from this guy—the Chinese operative that works in the US State Department? If he really did this…"

Susan said, "Our ultimate objective is to get hard evidence on China's connection to these attacks, and to find out why our human intel reports out of China aren't matching up with David Manning's information."

The NSA looked at his watch and stood. "I'm sorry, folks. But I haven't seen enough to sign off on that. And I know the president will feel the same way. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a meeting in the Oval Office in about forty minutes, and I can't be late."

The group stood, and the NSA left the room. Director Buckingham walked him out, saying something that Chase couldn't hear.

When the door was closed, the director sat back down, this time on the couch across from Chase and Susan. He looked at each of them.

"What do you guys think?"

Susan said, "Sir, from my understanding, we have a matter of days before the US begins its shock and awe campaign on Iran. At that point, there'll be no turning back. If this is China's doing, they'll have achieved their goal. Maybe they already have, since we have such a high concentration of military forces redeployed to the Middle East."

Director Buckingham said, “You don’t have to sell me anymore, Susan.”

He looked at all three of them, a deadly serious expression on his face. “This Chinese spy in the US State Department—take him. Soon. Find out what he knows. And use our best interrogation team. The contractor.”

Susan said, “But what about the—”

“*I’ll* handle the national security advisor.”



THE NEXT NIGHT, Chase and Susan arrived at Joint Base Andrews as part of a convoy of two CIA-owned SUVs and an ambulance. The area had been cleared of nonessential personnel. They used the same security procedures for moving the president during times of national emergency. No one wanted a wayward set of eyes to witness who they had on the stretcher.

The vehicles drove right up to the Gulfstream G-V, and people began moving. The ambulance doors opened, and three men transferred the man on the gurney, and his IV, up the stairs of the aircraft and into the specially designed back compartment of the cabin.

A group of five other government personnel sat in the forward part of the aircraft cabin. They were the customers. The note-takers. The ones who would have the interrogator adjust his line of questioning in the same manner that a marketing executive would ask the interviewer to change their questions with a focus group.

Only now the subject was a Chinese spy.

“Manning, right?” One of the five counterespionage agents shook Chase’s hand.

“That’s right.”

“Thanks for joining us. I read about Dubai. Sounds like you were right in the middle of the action.”

“I guess so.” Chase nodded to the back of the plane. “You helped with the grab and bag?”

“Yeah. We picked him up about twelve hours ago. The IV’s in, so he’s getting in the right state of mind now. The Doctor’s giving him a little bit of time to let the drugs do their work, and then we’ll get started. The Doctor is something else. Interesting ideas, that’s for sure. We had to conduct a simultaneous operation in Chengdu.”

“What for?”

“Ah, you’ll see, I’m sure.”

“The Doctor,” as he was known, was a retired warrant officer, who had effectively written the book on modern interrogation techniques. He was fifty years old and now performed his work as a contractor. The CIA and other US military and intelligence units flew him around the world whenever they had information that absolutely needed to be extracted. He was widely considered to be the single best interrogator in the Western world.

Chase had heard of the man when he was in Iraq. Whispers about this magician who was ten times better and faster than all the other interrogators. But he’d never seen him in real life. Until now.

One of the agents shut the door of the aircraft. “Alright, time to get started.”

On the monitors, Chase could see that the Chinese operative was stripped down to his underwear and tied to a gurney. The gurney was tilted at an angle so that the Chinese man’s head was about six inches lower to the ground than his feet.

“Are you cold?” the Doctor asked. He spoke in English, although he knew several languages. A CIA translator sat in the cabin of the plane, in case he was needed.

“Yes,” the Chinese man replied in English.

The plane’s engines began warming up. Chase looked at the men next to him.

“Are we taking off?” Chase asked. He spoke softly, even though he knew that the Chinese prisoner couldn’t hear him behind the closed compartment in the back of the aircraft.

“Yeah,” said the CIA man who had picked him up. “It’s part of the theatrics—and since we’ll be in international airspace when the interrogation is conducted, it allows us to get past some legal issues. Don’t worry, though, we’ll be landing back at Andrews.”

Chase and the others put on headphones so they could hear the interrogation better.

The Chinese handler said, “What is that noise?”

“We’re on a plane, my friend,” the Doctor said. “We’re headed to Cuba. Guantanamo Bay.”

A twitch on the Chinese man’s face. If he was a Chinese intelligence agent, he no doubt had training in counterinterrogation techniques. The

Doctor would be earning his money today.

The Doctor said, “Let’s start with what I already know. I know your name. All of them. I know where you’re from. I know what you ate for breakfast this morning. I know whom you are sleeping with. And I know that you work for Cheng Jinshan, and the Chinese Ministry of State Security.”

The Chinese man didn’t move.

The aircraft began to shake as it rolled down the runway, the jet engines pushing it into the air, climbing upward.

“Your life is over. Everything that you ever knew is now gone. All the training they gave you to prepare you for this moment—just throw it away. You see, that counterinterrogation training presumes that somehow, someday, you will be freed. That the United States will let you out, or trade you back to China. But that will not happen. Because we will make it look like you are dead. It is a certainty that you will stay in Guantanamo Bay Prison for the rest of your life, however long or short that may be. But no one outside a small group of Americans will ever know that you are still alive. The only thing you can do now is to affect the quality of your life in that prison.”

The Chinese man stared back, slightly shivering. He didn’t say anything.

“Are you willing to discuss Cheng Jinshan, and matters that relate to him?”

The man said nothing.

“Alright. I want you to see something. Think about a life in prison, with no outside contact. Think about that while you watch and listen to this.”

The Doctor placed headphones on the Chinese man’s ears and pressed a button on a device. A video appeared.

The man’s face contorted. After a few seconds, he began crying. Slowly at first, but as the video played, the crying turned into uncontrollable sobs.

On one of the monitors, a cute little girl, probably about age three or four, stood cuddled next to her mom’s leg. She was speaking to the camera, smiling and laughing.

Chase said, “What is that?”

“Recordings from his family. The guy has a wife and daughter in Chengdu. We had our agents in China reach out to them at the exact same time that we bagged this guy. Our agents posed as a holiday greeting card company. They got the daughter to answer a few questions about her father. Our agents told them that they were sending him a loving message. The one from the daughter is especially touching.”

On the other monitor, Chase saw the Doctor as he removed the Chinese man's headphones. He stayed quiet for a few moments. The occasional sniffle from the Chinese man was the only sound from the interrogation room.

"Would you like me to play it again?" asked the Doctor.

The man shook his head no. The altitude of the aircraft leveled off.

"We know that you aren't the one that ordered the Beltway attacks."

Silence.

"And I promise you that you won't be blamed. But you were part of it. You passed on information to the Iranians. We know that, too."

No response.

"You will need to go to prison for the rest of your life. Here. Please watch the video again. I want to make sure that you understand what this will mean for you."

The video of his wife and daughter appeared again. They answered more questions, laughing and smiling. The video lasted a full minute.

When it ended, no one spoke for a few moments. Then the Chinese man said, "What do you propose?"

"I will not ever lie to you," the Doctor said. "I want you to know that. As a testament to that relationship of honesty, I will tell you something that you will not be happy with now. You will need to go to prison for the rest of your life. That will not change. But your punishment could be much worse. And there are many different types of prisons. You see, I can also promise you that if you help us get information that we need, you'll be able to get more videos and recordings of your daughter and wife. That surely would be a more desirable alternative than any other circumstances, would it not? It is better to have something to look forward to. Better than decades of looking at a wall, in between interrogations."

The man tried to control himself, but he kept crying.

"But this is a one-time offer. You only get one chance at this. Again, this is the honest truth. I will always be honest with you. I know from experience that honesty between me and my subjects is the only way to get a mutually beneficial exchange."

The Chinese man did not reply.

"Are you uncomfortable? Can I make you more comfortable?"

The man was upside down and mostly naked. On the high-definition video, Chase could see goose bumps on his arms. But he said nothing.

The Doctor said, “I will now be honest with you about the consequences of not accepting this arrangement. We are airborne now. It will be several hours until we reach our destination. Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. When we get there, our relationship will end. I will be forced to hand you over to another interrogator. He is not kind like I am. He believes in pain. He will hurt you. For the rest of your life, he will hurt you. And once you are his prisoner, I will have no control over what happens to you. He doesn’t make offers like I do. He only threatens and punishes.”

The man sniffed.

“Let’s watch the video again.”

The video played again. The man cried some more. Chase realized that the Doctor was using a form of emotional waterboarding. It was like he was dunking his mind into and out of the only thing that could really get to the man—his wife and child. The interrogator was using the video and audio to immerse him in that environment. Over and over and over. It was breaking him down. Forcing him to consider a life of misery, without the only thing that truly made him happy.

When the video was over, the Doctor said, “Let’s start with something simple. I will ask you a question. If you tell me the answer, which I already know, then I will let you put your clothes back on. Another truthful answer, and I’ll let you sit up while we finish our discussion like civilized men. Will that work?”

He nodded. “Alright. Alright. Please.”

It took them a full five minutes to get the Chinese man upright and clothed. He looked groggy. Probably from whatever was getting pumped into his bloodstream. They conversed for over an hour. About little things at first. A lot of questions about the Chinese man’s family.

Chase marveled about the ease with which they talked. If this man was really a Chinese spy, he would know what to do and what to expect when being questioned. But the Doctor had found the single weak point in his defenses and exploited it masterfully. His emotional reaction to his daughter cut through everything else.

When the Doctor finally got to the questions about Jinshan and China’s part in the Beltway attacks, he became very cooperative. The CIA men furiously typed notes and sent information in real time to the SILVERSMITH team at Langley.

When the interview was done, the Doctor made a hand gesture as if he

was ready for the check at a restaurant. That was the signal to take the aircraft back to Joint Base Andrews.

The CIA team had been hopeful that they would find evidence of a connection between the Chinese and the Iranian attacks. Even so, none of them could believe what they had just heard.



WITHIN TWO HOURS OF LANDING, Chase and Susan were once again in the office of the director of the CIA.

The director said, “Let’s hear it, folks. What did you find?”

Susan gave him the important points, providing details when asked. After speaking for about ten minutes, she finished with, “Sir, to summarize, it appears that Cheng Jinshan has been micromanaging this all himself. We believe that he has someone in the People’s Liberation Army Navy—probably the South Sea Fleet Commander—working with him. That’s the only way he could have pulled this off. Jinshan has his own intelligence network—a team of spies that he has been grooming and working with for decades. Many of them, including Lena Chou, have apparently infiltrated US government agencies and institutions.”

“Do you have more names?”

“A few, sir, yes. The counterespionage teams at the CIA and FBI are both on it.”

“Good.”

“Sir, on the issue of providing evidence to American and Chinese leadership—a lot of this won’t be provable. It won’t be the smoking gun that we need to prove it to the Chinese president.”

“Why not?” the director asked.

“If the Chinese don’t accept that Lena Chou was a spy, we wouldn’t expect this guy to be any better leverage. Jinshan likely operated his network of spies in such a way that almost no one in the Chinese government had access to their names.”

The director stood up and paced around his office. “I see. What next? Folks, we need something clean cut.”

Susan replied, “We’re working on that, sir. Our best lead is that the Chinese spy seemed to think that there might be some Chinese military

movement in Latin America—he called it pre-positioning. The interrogations are continuing. And we're following up on all the leads that we've developed so far. We have started to look into this Vice Admiral Song—he's the South Sea Fleet Commander of the PLA Navy. So far it looks like he's the senior military conspirator aiding Jinshan. This guy was stationed in the same locations as Cheng Jinshan on several occasions of the past few decades. Our contacts in Guangzhou are telling us that they have been seen together several times this year. This lead shows promise."

The intercom on the table came on with the secretary's voice saying, "Director, General Schwartz is here to see you."

"Send him in, please."

The Army three-star general marched in. He had close-cropped grey hair and wore his Army service uniform.

Chase glanced over the uniform. One thing he appreciated about the military was that you could learn a lot about someone just by looking at their chest candy. The RANGER tab, the Master Parachutist Badge with two Combat Jump Devices, the United States Special Operations Command Badge, a Silver Star, a Bronze Star with four oak leaf clusters, Afghanistan Campaign Medal and Iraq Campaign Medal—both with multiple campaign stars. This man was the real deal.

"Good evening, team."

"Thank you, Susan," the director said, "that will be all."

Chase and Susan both got up to leave.

The director said, "Chase, please stay seated."

Susan and Chase looked at each other, and then Chase sat back down. Susan departed the room.

When it was just the three of them, the director said, "The general needs to provide you with a new set of orders."

"Yes, sir."

The general looked at Chase. "Let me ask you a question, son. Do you know why we named this Operation SILVERSMITH?"

"I must confess that I don't, sir."

"There was a famous silversmith in our nation's history. That man rode through the night on horseback, warning of an impending invasion by soldiers cloaked in red."

"Paul Revere."

"The one and only. You see the symbolism there, don't you? Don't ever

say that a West Point grad can't be a poet."

Chase smiled politely.

"You're our Paul Revere, son. The analogy isn't perfect. We don't yet know if we're about to be attacked by the largest standing army in history. Paul Revere was warning of an impending attack. Your role will be to warn certain elements of the American military and set them into motion."

The director chimed in, "Chase, we're going to need you to act as a messenger for a select group of military and intelligence assets. Ones that we need to get moving now, in case we need them later."

The general lowered his voice. "Your actions will allow Operation SILVERSMITH to fulfill its two main objectives. One, to confirm the threat we are facing. And two, to move some of our chess pieces on the board in a way that will counter that threat."

Chase said, "Understood. What do I need to do?"

The general handed him a file. "Some light reading. We'll go through it quick. You've got a plane to catch."

7

Eighty Nautical Miles East of Norfolk, Virginia

The two grey MH-60S Seahawk helicopters flew in a loose trail formation, two hundred feet over the water. Chase was in the first aircraft. He wore green digital fatigues, a large black cloth Trident sewn onto his left breast, above the US NAVY lettering. MANNING was on the right breast, a Velcro American flag on his right shoulder, and a small dark suitcase handcuffed to his right wrist.

Upon landing, the aircrewman shuffled him to someone wearing the white shirt and headgear of the air transfer officer. Everyone on the carrier deck had a distinct color that was associated with their role on the flight deck. The man in white motioned for Chase to follow him under the spinning rotors and into the superstructure of the enormous new aircraft carrier.

Moments later he stood at the door of the captain's cabin. His father sat on the couch. Another man, who he assumed to be the captain of the USS *Ford,* sat in the dark brown leather chair next to him. A small coffee table was in the center of the room, on top of a rug with the ship's crest.

"Chase, this is Captain Chuck Stewart."

They shook hands. The door was closed, and Chase unlocked the handcuff and opened the briefcase. He handed a single envelope, marked with the purple TOP SECRET/SCI stamp, to his father. There were several pages in the orders, and his father looked up at Chase a few times while he read.

When Admiral Arthur Louis Manning IV, Commander of the USS *Ford*

Carrier Strike Group, was finished reading, he handed the orders to the captain. He read the first few paragraphs and said, “You have *got* to be shitting me.” He kept reading and then looked up.

Admiral Manning said to his son, “What these orders tell us to do…there is only one reason for that.”

Chase nodded.

“Why the hell are they sortieing all our military assets to the Middle East and having *us* do this?” Captain Stewart said. “If they’re worried about China, why don’t they strengthen the Pacific theater?”

The admiral raised an eyebrow. “Why, indeed?” He stood up and walked to the back corner of the room, looking out a porthole that revealed the flight deck.

Chase said, “CINCLANT wants me to reiterate that this is for your eyes only. No one on your staffs can know about these orders right now—not until authorized.”

His father snorted.

The aircraft carrier captain said, “That’s ridiculous. Now how the hell are we supposed to get aircraft, parts, and supplies on board? It’s our staff that’s gotta do all the work and planning to make this happen.” He held up the papers. “This won’t happen unless we tell our staffs what to do.”

“Yes, sir, I understand that you’ll need to communicate what to do. The request is that you don’t inform them why, until it becomes absolutely necessary.”

“Chase?” His father spoke gently.

“Yes?”

“How many people know about this?”

“I asked the same question.”

“And?”

“Fewer than one hundred. It has the highest level of classification.”

“I see.” The admiral walked over to the couch and sat back down. “I’m going to speculate here. There could be two reasons for secrecy of that magnitude. One, they want plausible deniability. That just doesn’t fit here. We’re talking about taking protective action, not about launching a strike.”

“Not yet,” said the captain. “But those orders say to be prepared to—”

“Yes. But still—they aren’t keeping this a secret because they’re afraid of the public finding out. That’s my point.”

The captain said, “Why, then?”

“Because they don’t trust the normal channels of communication.” The admiral stopped. He looked at Chase and said, “Why on earth are you delivering this to me?”

Chase smiled. “General Schwartz is working at the CIA. I’m on Task Force SILVERSMITH with him. He made the connection and thought that my going here might be appropriate. Yours is not my only stop.”

The admiral nodded.

The captain said, “We’re going to have to break a lot of rules to get this done.”

“Yes we are,” said the admiral.

“And we’re going to have some coconspirators. Who’s gonna tell the USS *Michael Monsoor* and the F-35 guys about the plan?” He looked at Chase.

“Sir, I briefed the *Michael Monsoor*’s skipper yesterday. They’ll be at the rendezvous in a few days. And as soon as we’re done here, I’ll be headed to Eglin Air Force Base and then to Yuma to round up the F-35 support. Most units already have an activation order, but they don’t have all the information. I’m to provide that on a need-to-know basis to the unit commanders.”

The admiral shook his head. “Look at you. Secret agent man. You try to get out of the Navy, and the CIA throws you back at us.”

Chase smiled. “Sir, do you have any further questions about your orders?”

His father smiled. “No, son. That will be all. Come on, I’ll walk you back down to the flight deck.”

~

A FEW DAYS LATER, Admiral Manning stood on the admiral’s bridge, watching a flight of four F-35Cs conduct the break overhead. One by one, each aircraft banked hard left, then came around and landed on the carrier.

It had been a whirlwind few days, and there were many more to come. The USS *Ford* had pulled back into Norfolk for a day. Thousands of personnel immediately had come aboard from the air wing and spent hours furiously unloading parts and supplies.

Families—and the ship’s personnel—were told that it was a last-minute

additional training mission. But the admiral suspected that many of them knew better. Modern carrier strike group movements were planned years in advance. To conjure one up out of thin air—in a week's time—was unprecedented.

Two days later, the USS *Ford* joined up with her surface ships. Two destroyers, including the latest of the Zumwalt class, the USS *Michael Monsoor*. A supply ship, two littoral combat ships, and a Los Angeles–class submarine. Although only a select few knew that the submarine was tagging along.

"Afternoon, Admiral." Captain Stewart was all smiles. He loved getting aircraft aboard. That was what this ship was meant to do. He was tired of all the training and certification the *Ford* had been doing.

"Hello, Chuck. Anything new?"

"Sir, I triple-checked the Panama Canal for you. I am now one hundred percent sure that even with the widening they just did, we still can't fit through. We're gonna have to go the long way."

The admiral shook his head. "Unbelievable. The United States made the damn canal, and we're the only navy in the world that makes ships that are so big that they can't fit through it. How long will it take to get to the other side?"

"Sir, the trip around South America will take several weeks."

"How many?"

"Well, the *Ford* can do it in two. But we've got to wait up for the slowest ships in company."

"I'm familiar…how many weeks, Chuck?"

"We think we can do it in three weeks at seventeen knots. We'll have to plan for about four replenishments at sea during that time."

"I know I don't have to tell you this, but just in case there is any confusion—we aren't stopping in port."

"Yes, sir. I've made that clear to the navigator."

"Alright. Thanks, Chuck."

"Yes, sir. Oh, and the supply officer told me to tell you that we're having steaks tonight."

The admiral smiled. "Well, now you've done it. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry on board will know that something awful is about to happen if we give them steak."

"Yes, sir." The carrier captain smiled and left the space.

Admiral Manning resumed watching the jets land. The F-35s had all been retrieved. Now it was time for the Growlers. A pair of F-18s zoomed overhead, the first one entering the break…followed shortly by the second.

He could see an Arleigh Burke–class destroyer several miles away, pitching and rolling in the sea. A Seahawk helicopter was landing on her. The admiral sighed as he thought about his daughter. She was right where they were headed. He prayed that this all turned out to be nothing.

8

Beijing, China

The Chinese president, general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, and chairman of the Central Military Commission, was not having a good day. He placed his elbows on his large oak desk, closed his eyes, and rubbed his temples.

"Would you like some more tea, sir?" the stewardess asked.

The Chinese president waved the woman away without looking up. "No. Please give us privacy. No calls or visitors."

It was just the two of them—the president and his most trusted member of the Politburo, who was also one of the few members of his National Security Commission.

The Chinese president said, "You must understand the sensitivity of this matter. If it appears in any way that there is dissent among the party…that I am not in complete control of the military or intelligence community…then that would not bode well for us."

The Politburo member said, "I agree. That is why I have asked to speak with you alone."

The Chinese president shook his head, holding out his hands. "Why do the Americans keep pressing us on this? They *must* know that we are being truthful."

"As I said, Mr. President, they have a very sophisticated intelligence apparatus. For my contacts in Washington to be reaching out to me for a third time and speaking to me in this manner is very unusual. *Unless there is*

something to it. Something that you and I are not aware of."

The Chinese president looked up. "The Americans are getting paranoid. They have been attacked and are about to go to war in the Middle East again."

"And you think that explains this line of accusation, even through backchannel communications?"

"I truly don't know. I just don't understand why these rumors of Chinese meddling persist. There is too much for us to lose if we were to behave this way. The Central Committee would never jeopardize trade with the United States by allowing the kidnapping of American citizens. And for what, they say? For a few bits of classified information? And the American suggestion that we would support an Iranian attack on the United States is nothing short of preposterous."

The Politburo member hesitated. He knew from previous conversations that the president trusted Cheng Jinshan implicitly. He had known Jinshan, a successful businessman and member of the Chinese intelligence community, for over two decades and had even appointed him as the head of an agency that would root out corruption in the Chinese government.

Most members of the Politburo considered Jinshan a patriot, someone who would always put the Chinese people first. But everyone had enemies. Some in Beijing would like nothing more than to see Jinshan gone. He had grown too powerful, they argued. The president was oblivious to this notion. To the president, he was an invaluable asset.

Jinshan's work in the business and intelligence worlds often overlapped. His businesses were mainly information technology related. They created and operated data tracking software for China's Internet-based companies. Some of Jinshan's companies also oversaw the control and censorship of Chinese media. Many considered him a puppet master. He controlled the strings that influenced peoples' thoughts.

"Mr. President, my US counterpart apologized to me for asking again. But many of us—our diplomats, intelligence operatives, and government leaders—are getting the same inquiry. So it is with great hesitation that I broach this subject with you. The Americans want to know if there could be any possible truth to the rumors that Cheng Jinshan has organized Chinese participation in the Iranian cyberattacks, and the holding of American citizens in the South China Sea island. They say that they have information leading them to believe that Cheng Jinshan is indeed involved."

The president frowned. “How many times must we tell them? This is insulting.”

“I understand, sir. I apologize for bringing it up again.”

“We have gone to Jinshan and to our PLA generals. They were upset at the questioning.”

“Are you satisfied with ending it there, sir?”

The president locked eyes with the Politburo member, a trusted advisor, and whispered, “They would never keep anything like that from us. It would be *treason*.” The president sounded like he was trying to convince himself, more than anything.

The president looked out the window of his office. A peaceful scene outside. A well-trimmed garden. Giant goldfish making ripples in the surface of a quiet pond. The Chinese president sighed and said, “I am going to ask you a question that must never leave this room.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Do you think that there is any chance I am being lied to by my own people?”

The Politburo member noticed that he couldn’t bring himself to say Jinshan’s name. He chose his words carefully. “Sir, I think that…after this much consternation by the Americans…it would be prudent to have an outside party look into the matter.”

The Chinese president did not respond, so the Politburo member took that as a sign to continue. He said, “This would have to be done in a way that would not lead to us. But I find it most concerning that eighteen Americans are still reported missing, and that two of them claim to have been abducted by Chinese forces. It is very unlike the American government to make up such a claim.”

“Many of their newspapers are calling it conspiracy theory—lies.”

“Yes, sir, but my sources tell me that many in the American intelligence circles do not put stock in these media reports. They are still investigating the matter.”

The president nodded. “Without the situation in Iran, this would be dominating their newspapers.”

“I agree, sir.”

“In that respect, we are lucky.”

“Sir, do I have your permission to look into this some more? Outside of our normal channels?”

The president didn’t reply verbally, but he looked into the man’s eyes and nodded.



JUST OUTSIDE THE president’s office, the steward pushed the teacart into a small kitchen area. She picked up her phone to check her messages.

Her phone was very warm. She hated when it was like that. It was almost hot. She tried to tell her husband that the battery must be broken and that he needed to fix it. But her husband just shook his head at her, saying that it was normal, as if she knew nothing about technology.

Her husband had texted her, telling her to pick up some pork at the market on her way home tonight. He was going to make dinner. She smiled, as he seldom cooked. Only on special occasions. She wondered if he had finally gotten the promotion at work that he so desperately wanted.

A jingle at the door told her that the Politburo member was leaving. She walked back in to see if the president needed anything else, leaving her phone on the cart.



Two Hours Later

THE SOFTWARE PROGRAM on the phone was one of the latest and most sophisticated in the CIA’s arsenal. A joint project with the NSA, the program could turn any phone into a very capable listening device.

The challenge hadn’t been placing the program on the phone. That had been relatively easy. What had been harder was finding the right phones to listen to. The stewardess had left her GPS location information active on her phone, however. While all the high-profile members of the Chinese government had secure phones that were protected from this type of surveillance, she did not.

It was easy for the NSA to cross-reference GPS coordinates with important government locations around the world. They used this information to identify which phones would serve as the best candidates to allow them to listen in on military, intelligence, and political leaders. It took a lot of juice to

record and send all that data, which was why the phone was so warm to the touch.

While the CIA's technical experts had to do a lot of ambient noise cleanup on the recording, they found—incredibly—that they could usually pick up the voices of the Chinese president from the next room when surveilling this stewardess's phone.

Susan Collinsworth handed over the transcript. "Mr. Director, something interesting from one of our NSA collection reports."

He took the purple folder stamped TOP SECRET/SCI and reviewed the printout of the translated conversation. He looked it over for a full minute.

"So, they really don't know."

"And they're beginning to suspect the same thing we are."

"That Jinshan isn't the loyal Communist that he says he is?"

She nodded.

"Alright. I'll see if I can get this to the president today. It might be hard to slow down the wheels of this thing right now, but this will certainly help if we can find evidence that links Jinshan to the Iranian attacks. Keep at it."

"Yes, sir."

9

Guangzhou, China

Natesh fought back another wave of nausea as their minivan curved around a corner. Everything in this godforsaken city made him sick. The food, the weather, the driving.

The strange food they served him at the Chinese military base was awful. The Chinese security men who brought them their meals must have thought it would be funny to give Natesh a local delicacy—cow brain. Natesh didn't eat it, but just watching them go to town on it, and then eat actual chicken feet, disgusted him. The odd taste of their tea made him want to vomit. He gave it a try, but then decided to stick with bottled water, not trusting what might come out of their tap. He missed the sushi houses of Silicon Valley.

A constant smog filled the Guangzhou air. It was so thick that it limited visibility to a few hundred yards. It was like being stuck in a bad dream—the world fogged over in toxic brown. By the end of each day, he grew nauseous, and a massive headache consumed him.

The pollution was much worse this time of year, he was told. During the winter months, the coal factories kicked into high gear to provide electricity and heat for the burgeoning population. People walked around in it, coughing and complaining. Many of them wore little white masks over their noses and mouths. Many locals even had an app on their smartphones that told them how intense the pollution was that day. For Natesh, breathing that crap in just made him want to puke.

It didn't help that he had to be taken to and from his living quarters in the

back of a dark-windowed van. Security precautions, they were told. Driving in Chinese cities was like a mad derby race. Lots of honking horns and unexpected braking. Angry passengers.

Natesh and Lena had arrived on one of Jinshan's jets the night before last. They were kept in hiding at a local military base until called upon. Finally Jinshan had summoned them for this strategy session, and their handlers had sped them through the crowded city streets.

The van came to a halt outside what Natesh now recognized as Jinshan's residence here in Guangzhou, the third-largest city in China. A guard conversed with the driver, and then the entrance gate rose.

As they moved forward, Natesh glanced at the seat behind him. Lena stared back, that same cold look on her face. He turned back around to face forward.

The elevator was cramped. Tiny by Western standards. Lena, Natesh, and their three armed escorts squeezed in for the ride up. No one spoke. The escorts disappeared when they arrived at the penthouse.

The décor was similar to what Natesh had seen in high-end hotel suites. Modern furniture and paintings. Well decorated. No personal effects.

Natesh was glad that they were having these strategy sessions in Jinshan's penthouse, rather than the godforsaken military base Lena and he were holed up at. The air in the penthouse smelled cleaner, and the food wasn't the local cuisine. It was high-quality gourmet dining—fit for the billionaire that Jinshan was. Plates of steamed dumplings, but also Western-style sandwiches and salads. Two glass bottles of carbonated water in an ice bucket. A stocked liquor bar was off to the side, although no one approached it.

"Mr. Jinshan will be with you in a moment," said one of the assistants.

"Thank you," Lena said, unconsciously rubbing the burn scar that ran up the side of her neck and face. She did that a lot, Natesh noticed.

Jinshan had summoned Lena and Natesh to discuss the current state of their operational planning and make changes where needed. Natesh had previously made a living consulting for some of the best companies in the world. He had been around the block enough to recognize a nervous executive when he saw one. Jinshan was worried—with good reason. It wasn't all supposed to happen this way.

The Bitcoin mess was not one of Natesh's ideas. He'd tried to tell Jinshan that it wouldn't work. Frankly, it wasn't necessary. If the Chinese army was going to conquer the West militarily, why did they need to attempt economic

warfare?

But Jinshan didn't like putting all his eggs in one basket. He had argued that if enough nations began using the Bitcoin-backed currency, and Jinshan was able to manipulate the value, it would be an enormously powerful tool in their arsenal. But that idea had fallen apart before it could get off the ground. The CIA had uncovered the plot. And when David Manning and Henry Glickstein had escaped from the island, that had triggered a chain of events that moved all their plans up by several months.

Natesh had explained how critical it was to conduct all the information warfare attacks at the same time—the cyberattacks, the EMP attacks, cutting the undersea cables, destroying the US satellite communications. But they had not executed that way. Instead, some of these information warfare tactics were used for diversion. Jinshan and his planners were worried that the two escaped Americans—Manning and Glickstein—would shine a light on Jinshan's entire operation.

Perhaps Jinshan was right. One thing Natesh had to admit was that he knew how to manipulate the media, and as a result, people's opinions. When David and Henry had escaped, Jinshan had insisted that they use a few of the weapons in their arsenal immediately. *Months* earlier than Natesh had recommended.

So Jinshan's cyberwarfare team had used the ARES weapon to disrupt the American Internet and permanently damage many US satellites. The results were mixed. US-owned GPS satellites were out of commission until they could be replaced. Most military satellite communications were damaged to a similar level of harm. But the US Internet, as Jinshan had warned, was a self-healing monster. It had grown so large and interwoven that attacking only some data centers and root servers would only create a temporary setback.

Still, Jinshan's foresight into the behavior of the media, and the minds of the people, proved incredibly accurate. The Chinese intelligence team had inserted false information to several media centers about David Manning and Henry Glickstein providing the Iranians with a classified cyberweapon. Couple this with the Blackout Attack, and a media disinformation firestorm soon erupted.

The next few days were days of record-setting ratings for the TV news stations. First, Iran and two American traitors were implicated. Then, the Americans were captured in Australia. Then, they escaped captivity somehow. Then, the Iranian politician was assassinated. Then, the Iranian

military attacked US forces in the Persian Gulf region. With the Internet down, everyone was glued to their TV.

With so much confusion, there was almost no coverage about China. Even after it came out that David Manning and Henry Glickstein had nothing to do with the Iranians, their claim that the Chinese had kidnapped Americans wasn't widely believed. The US government's own penchant for secrecy helped there. The two men weren't allowed to do interviews.

When news that China might have been involved did break, it was widely discredited. Many of the more extreme media outlets cried cover-up—claiming that certain political and media groups desired to appease Iran, and blame China. Jinshan's cyberwarriors fed this, of course. They paid third parties to write and publish articles that pointed to David and Henry as Iranian sympathizers. Spies. Traitors.

This disinformation strategy prolonged the time that the US government spent investigating and questioning the two men, and reduced their credibility. It also gave Jinshan and China enough cover to deny any involvement in the Iranian incidents, or the "ludicrous" idea that the Chinese could actually be holding American citizens on an island in the South China Sea. With all the Iranian-US hostilities, the Chinese connection was soon buried.

Jinshan's plan had worked beautifully. Even with the two men escaping, Natesh admitted that there was still a very high probability that their war plans would succeed. However, Natesh was frustrated that Jinshan's team had lost their most important advantage—the element of surprise. But he also knew that surprise often couldn't be counted on. Competitive advantage needed to be about much more than just being a first mover. And it would be.

Natesh and Lena sat in silence on thick cushioned chairs, on opposite sides of a large glass coffee table. He looked at his watch. They had another ten minutes before Jinshan was supposed to see them.

He glanced outside. Shadows of skyscrapers rose up through the smog. A part of him wondered if his efforts would do nothing more than expand China's problems around the globe.

No. Jinshan was not the cause of China's missteps. He reminded himself of why he had chosen to go down this path.

In his Silicon Valley job, Natesh could create and improve businesses. It was entertaining, but not fulfilling. But in this role, Natesh was truly changing the *world*. While Natesh had some disagreements with Jinshan on

tactics, he firmly supported the man's big-picture strategic objective. At first, Natesh was seduced by just the size and scope of the challenge, and the promise of power as payment.

Now, though, he saw the same thing that Lena saw in Jinshan. Greatness. Vision. Jinshan was what those in Silicon Valley referred to as a thought leader. He was one of those rare men who envisioned a plan to change the world for the better, and made it happen.

After all, Jinshan was right. Democracy *didn't* work. Natesh had seen it with his own eyes. It led to populism. Populism meant that every common person was in control. Regular people. *Uneducated* people. Commoners who were too stupid for their own good.

Natesh believed that a group of elite experts were needed to carve out the best path forward. Jinshan believed that as well. But what Jinshan also believed, and had convinced Natesh of, was that a strong and forceful enforcer was needed to control it all, lest men fall victim to their own imperfections.

It sounded frighteningly like a dictatorship. It was, Natesh realized. But in his talks with Jinshan, Natesh had come to understand that there was one crucial difference. The goals of this new world order were utilitarian. Jinshan argued that you couldn't please all the people, and that you shouldn't try. Decisions shouldn't fall to the people *or* to the politicians. There was another choice. Decisions should be made by the *experts*. But who would decide who the experts were? And who would keep them in control? That was the crux of Jinshan's plan—there had to be a strong and just enforcer.

The challenge, as Jinshan saw it, would be to make sure that this all-powerful leader was acting in the best interests of the society. Guiding principles needed to be followed, and subsequent leaders would need to be groomed and chosen to follow those guiding principles.

The world had outgrown democracy, Jinshan preached. It was the duty of the great and capable few, like Natesh, to gift the next great form of government to the world. The hard part for Natesh to come to terms with was the cost of this transition. If their guiding philosophy was Act Utilitarianism, then the greater good would be worth the pain and suffering of those lost in the war to come.

Natesh took deep breaths of the clean air inside Jinshan's building. He closed his eyes and breathed out through his mouth in long, deliberate blows. Stress breathing. He had been doing that a lot lately.

Lena saw him and said, “Are you alright?”

He opened his eyes. “Yes. Just trying to relax.”

Her scarred face stared back at him. He wondered if *she* had ever felt stress, or if she was immune.

The double doors opened, and in walked Cheng Jinshan and a man in a military uniform. Both Lena and Natesh rose.

Jinshan said, “Good afternoon. I hope that I have not kept you waiting too long.”

“Not at all,” replied Lena.

“This is Admiral Song. He is our closest ally in this endeavor. Please feel free during this discussion to share with him anything that you would share with me.”

Natesh noticed the “during this discussion” qualifier. Jinshan was a very secretive person. He had to be.

The group sat, and a woman came to pour them each tea. When she left, Jinshan said, “The two of you will be leaving the island soon. Tomorrow for you, Mr. Chaudry. Lena, you will remain on the island for a few more days and take care of any remaining details there. Then you will follow.”

Natesh looked at Lena. He tried not to look surprised. He looked back at Jinshan and said, “Where will we be going?”

The admiral said, “Manta, Ecuador. I believe that you are both already aware, but we have begun deploying a small number of our forces in South America. We have many assets there that have been pre-staged over the last few years. Under the guise of foreign arms sales. These groups will partake in consolidating our military assets in the region and preparing for the arrival of Chinese armed forces en masse.”

Natesh was familiar with the location and plans. After all, he had helped to draw them up. Manta, Equador, was supposed to be the first of many bases at which the Chinese would begin massing troops in preparation for an invasion. The bases would be throughout Central and South America, and some would even be in Canada. These locations were still months away from seeing any Chinese forces, however. According to the plans, they weren’t even supposed to head to Manta for another month.

Lena said, “Admiral, if I may be so bold, how does this match up with our timeline of increased military readiness? The plans called for troop transports and increased training beyond current levels.”

Admiral Song looked at Jinshan, and then back at Lena. “Our plans are at

different stages in different locations. Chinese leadership is not fully aligned yet."

Or aware, Natesh thought. Jinshan looked tired. His eyes had a yellowish tint. Natesh thought he looked like he was losing weight. Hmmm. Was he doing alright?

Jinshan said, "I must confess that not all of our political changes have been implemented yet. It is regrettable. However, a good plan is one that must be continuously modified. For now, Admiral Song has provided the capable assets of the PLA Navy's South Sea Fleet to serve our needs."

Lena glanced between the two men. "And senior PLA leadership? Are they aware?"

Jinshan didn't bother looking at the admiral, who shuffled in his seat. Jinshan said, "They are not."

Lena said, "Mr. Jinshan, you know that I have great respect and admiration for you. But…is this *wise*? How will we reach the levels of readiness and—"

Natesh said, "Mr. Jinshan, to be frank, we need bodies. We need truck drivers and logisticians. We need planners and button-pushers. That is the stage we're at right now. If we are to move millions of personnel across the Pacific Ocean, we need to get prepared for their arrival on the other end. And that means stocking warehouses full of food and materials, building barracks. I've drawn up the flowcharts—right now, I'm capacity limited. I need bodies, sir."

Jinshan took a sip of his tea and nodded. "Yes. I am aware, Mr. Chaudry. That is one of the things I would like to discuss here today. I believe the minimum number of personnel you said you would need for this part of the plan was twenty thousand workers, is that right?"

"That's correct."

Jinshan said, "Admiral, would you be able to provide that many people?"

The admiral shook his head. "I'm afraid that would be hard to do at this time. Not without alerting my superiors, which we don't want to do yet."

Jinshan said, "What kind of people do you need?"

"They can be unskilled," Natesh said. "Educated, preferably. And able bodies. We can teach them what they need to do, but I need workers who can help to participate and manage supply chain and logistics work."

Lena said, "What about Junxun?"

The admiral frowned. "What about it?"

“Could we send some of them? Call it training?”

“If you will excuse me saying so, that doesn’t seem like a good idea. It would be very unusual to send students like this away. Junxun is supposed to be held during the summer. It is still wintertime. And Junxun is normally held at local schools or military bases. What would we tell the students and their parents? There would be much complaining, I think.”

Lena said, “We already have a way of hiding the movement of our military assets from our leadership, do we not?”

The admiral again looked at Jinshan. “We do.”

“We could enact a special Junxun during the winter months, and say that we are flying them to the Red Cell island,” Lena said. “That would allow us to switch the flight to where we really need them, would it not?”

Jinshan nodded. “Yes, that could work. By the time the complaints get serious, we will have come to an agreement with our political and military leadership on the way ahead. But this personnel transfer will ensure that we are ready for our large military movements across the Pacific when the war begins in earnest.”

“What of the Americans on the Red Cell island?” Lena asked.

Jinshan took a sip of tea. “Are you still able to get information from the Americans that you consider helpful?”

“Yes.”

“Then keep them where they are. My men on the island can oversee them now.”

Lena nodded.

Natesh said, “I apologize, but I’m confused. What is Junxun?”

10

Guangzhou, 1997

Li stood at attention next to her classmates. Most were older. But while she was only seventeen, she had also just graduated from secondary school. Her stellar marks and off-the-charts scores on aptitude tests had helped her gain early acceptance into one of China's most prestigious universities a year early. It didn't hurt that her father was a colonel in the PLA.

Like all incoming university students, Li was expected to participate in the two-week military indoctrination course known as Junxun. Each summer in China, over seven million students gathered at their schools or at a nearby military base. Students were taught by members of the People's Liberation Army how to march, salute, and perform basic military drills. There were different levels of rigor at the various training sites. Most students considered it a rite of passage. A patriotic boot camp.

Li was in her third week of Junxun, and she had several more to go. While she had started out at her local high school, the military drill instructor there had picked her out as an overachiever right away.

Always a gifted runner, she had lapped the fastest of her male classmates in the five-thousand-meter race, and her academic test scores were all perfect. That too, had raised eyebrows.

So after the first week at her hometown location, they had plucked her out of her class and sent her to a *special* Junxun location near the city. Guangzhou in the summertime was sweltering. When she got off the bus, she

quickly learned that she was the only girl in her class. And the boys were all gifted. The military men who trained them here carried clipboards, marking down notes on each student as they went through the training.

This Junxun was not a two-week summer camp. It was something very different. The boys—and they were all boys, aside from her—were much bigger and leaner. They didn't joke around in class, and each had an intense look about him.

On the first day at the Guangzhou camp, there were over one hundred of them. Those numbers were whittled down fast. The physical activity picked up and many of them couldn't take it.

Their instructors woke them up each day before dawn to start physical training. Push-ups and other calisthenics. Long, arduous runs. They attended classes during the day and got tested each afternoon on what they retained. The classes were a mix of military recognition and academic aptitude. Those who did not score above a ninety percent on any given test were sent home.

Most quit. After the first week, there were only forty of them. The ones who were still here at the completion of camp would be promised entry into a special government program. If they could make it that long. No one was told what that program was, but they all wanted to be chosen.

Now they stood at attention in the hot gymnasium.

"Li!"

The instructor, a short, red-faced man, liked to yell in her ear.

"Yes, Sergeant?" she answered.

"Step forward and put on the boxing gloves and headgear."

"Yes, Sergeant."

She raced forward, throwing the smelly equipment on over her head and hands. She took a mouth guard and washed it off in the sink, then scurried to the center mat.

Today was her first day of live hand-to-hand combat training. They had been taught technique for the past three days but hadn't actually fought each other yet. As with most new endeavors, Li had mastered it right away. The PLA sergeant who taught the class tried not to show favoritism, but he was clearly thrilled at how much promise Li showed.

The instructor called on another pupil to face her on the mat. She could feel all the students' eyes on her, wanting to see what would happen to the girl who embarrassed them on the track and in the classroom.

Her classmates treated her differently. Some respected her for her

exceptional ability. But most showed disdain. She deemed their attitudes a product of jealousy or sexism. Many of them teased her at meals. During exercise, some gawked at her body, the sweat causing her clothes to cling tight.

Her chosen opponent walked out onto the mat in front of her. His name was Fang. He was one of the ones who called her names. Not to her face. In whispers, in the cafeteria. Out of earshot of *most* of the military instructors.

One of the military instructors, however, was quite aware of her treatment. A lieutenant in the People's Liberation Army. One of the heads of this camp.

It was this lieutenant, by the name of Lin, who began causing her real problems. He saw what the boys were doing by making fun of her, and instead of stopping it, he actually encouraged it. Perhaps he didn't think she deserved to be there with the rest of them. Perhaps he knew her father from the military and didn't like him. Whatever the reason, Lieutenant Lin and his favorite student, Fang, made Li's life a living hell.

Lunch earlier that day had started like any other. She sat at her table, alone. A group of boys, including Fang, sat at the next table. Fang had used a derogatory term for female genitalia and nodded in her direction. The other boys laughed. She had pretended not to hear it.

Now he smiled. She knew a little English and thought his name appropriate. He had the smile of a wolf. He was a bully. She had dealt with bullies before. She tried to ignore him, but that wasn't going to work here.

They had hand-to-hand combat class after lunch. In the gym. When she arrived, she glanced at the rows of her male classmates. Their eyes were alive with excitement, their fists clenched and legs locked at attention. She fell in line in the back row, wondering why everyone was so quiet.

She darted a glance behind the rows of students and saw something she didn't expect. Two of the instructors were speaking with a man in a suit. One of the instructors was Lieutenant Lin. The man was nodding and listening. The instructors were pointing at her and making gestures. The man in the suit was looking at his notepad and made a face that implied he approved. Lieutenant Lin shook his head vigorously, frowning and speaking to the man in the suit. Li realized that the man was watching her and she quickly faced front.

Lieutenant Lin walked in front of the group. He called out two names: Chou and Fang. The sergeant quickly echoed his commands.

Lieutenant Lin walked to the center of the mat and smiled at her, whispering so only she could hear, “Let’s see how *exceptional* you really are.”

He stepped away from the two students, now standing in the middle of the mat, and exclaimed, “Fight!” The voice of the lead instructor broke her spell and she focused on the boy in front of her.

Li looked at Fang and felt a rage swelling up inside her. Her heart beat faster as she bobbed lightly on her feet. He came at her fast, his gloves rising to the fighting position, but she was ready.

Li had always been an exceptional athlete. While growing up, she had run track at a local running club for girls. She swam competitively, but she had never played a contact sport. She had never really fought anyone. As the bully crept closer to her, the anger inside her mixed with the familiar excitement that she got during her most competitive races. The thirst for victory pulsed through her veins. She desperately wanted to teach this boy and the lieutenant a lesson.

Fang was a foot taller, at least fifty pounds heavier, and much too confident. He started in on her with a left jab. It was quick, but not as quick as Li. Using the lessons her hand-to-hand combat instructor had taught her over the last week, she ducked under and snapped her hips to the right, using the motion to drive her clenched right fist into his undefended stomach. It was a quick, twisting movement, and a powerful, targeted blow.

He doubled over, eyes wide, unable to breathe. Fang’s mouth came open and his mouth guard fell out just as her left knee came up into his face, her kneecap crunching into his nose and teeth. A mix of blood, saliva, and two teeth spilled onto the floor, and the boy fell like a sack.

Li kept bobbing, light on her feet. She watched her opponent, waiting to see what would come next. But he didn’t get up. The instructor, alarmed at the blood, called off the training and sent one of the other pupils to get the nurse.

Lieutenant Lin began yelling at her. “What did you do that for?”

She didn’t know what to say. She shrugged, saying through her mouth guard, “Because you told us to fight.”

The man in the suit kept watching her, a wide smile on his face.



THE MAN in the suit watched the girl from the other end of the gymnasium. She had just put down a much larger male candidate. “How has she been doing?”

Lieutenant Lin was back over with him now. Begrudgingly, he admitted, “She has received high marks, Mr. Jinshan. She has excelled in each evaluation that we have given her. But I don’t think she has the fortitude for the People’s Liberation Army.”

Jinshan looked at Lieutenant Lin with skepticism. “Fortitude?”

“Yes.”

“Are we talking about the woman who just embarrassed a much larger man in physical combat?”

Lin scowled. “She got lucky. That boy was complacent.”

Jinshan asked, “How does she get along with the others?”

“She is an introvert. We have not observed her speaking much with the other candidates beyond that which is required.”

The boy who had just been pummeled was walked off to the side by a nurse. She held a bag of ice and a blood-soaked gauze pad to his mouth.

“That boy won’t be happy when he heals. She just humiliated him.”

Lieutenant Lin didn’t reply.

The annual Junxun programs for China’s rising college freshmen served several purposes. They helped serve as a method of drilling a sense of discipline and patriotism into an increasingly pampered generation of teenagers. They registered the best and brightest of China’s children for the military, in case there ever came a time that a dramatic military expansion was needed. And they served as an excellent recruiting tool for China’s military and government agencies.

Many of these students would be sent around the world to foreign universities. Those students were flagged by China’s intelligence organizations. It was crucial for the well-being of the motherland that these students brought back what they learned to benefit China. Some of them were asked to perform *extra* work on behalf of China’s intelligence agencies. Refusal was not permitted.

In some cases, Junxun was used to identify students who were not already planning to attend a foreign university, but who showed all the qualities that Jinshan’s special team of spies would want in a sleeper agent.

This Junxun location pulled all the top recruits from the Guangdong region. The group that started with more than one hundred would eventually

go down to about ten. All but one of them would be sent on to various government programs.

Every year, Cheng Jinshan came and got the pick of the litter. This year it looked like it would be this girl named Li.

Lieutenant Lin said, “Her father is a colonel. Did they tell you that? He has asked to be notified if she is selected for any particular government programs.”

Jinshan said, “Give me this colonel’s name.”

Lin wrote it down and handed him the paper, which Jinshan stuffed in his pocket. He looked at the girl. She had gone back in line and stood at attention. Two other boys were fighting on the mat now.

This girl was special, Jinshan could see that. He wanted her on his team. This would be one of the ones that he sent to America. She would need to modify her identity. No ties back to China. The work she would be doing would be too important. This girl wouldn’t just be a student there. Jinshan wanted her to become a US citizen. To stay there and infiltrate an agency of his choosing.

He would decide what role she would play later. For now, he needed to find a way for she and her father to part voluntarily.

He looked over at the boy being tended to by the nurse. The one she had just dispatched in short order. The boy’s eyes were ablaze. He looked straight at the girl. There was a great deal of anger there. That could be useful.



LI’S ROOM was the only one occupied on her floor. The male candidates all slept in the dorm rooms one floor below. So when she heard the footsteps that night, it not only woke her up, it alarmed her.

Mosquito netting covered her bed. They all had it. They slept with the windows open, as there was no air conditioning. A luxury for the rich. The bugs were something awful this time of year. She lifted up the net and checked her alarm clock. It was just past midnight.

In the three weeks she had been at the camp, no one had come up to her floor at night.

Her relationship with the other candidates had remained poor. After defeating Fang in front of the others a few days ago, she had temporarily

thought that she might have won increased respect. She had been sadly mistaken. The chiding at meals had increased, and Lieutenant Lin glared at her. After hours, when the other candidates would gather to socialize, she retreated to the solitude of her own floor. It was a lonely existence, but there was an end in sight. She only had to do this a little longer. Then she would find out what, if any, government assignment she would get, and head off to university.

The footsteps grew closer. Was it an instructor? Was this part of the training? The hard floors of the hallway carried the echo. Just one person, by the sound of it. But her door was locked, and only the instructors had the keys. So she need not worry about…

A jingle of keys, and the sound of the door handle turning.

Her pulse began pounding. The door opened and she sprang out of bed, flipping on her light.

Fang stood in the doorway, holding the keys.

She attempted to cover herself with her arms. She wore only a thin tee shirt and white cotton underwear.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

Fang looked back at her, anger and lust in his eyes. He closed the door behind him.

“I *asked you* what you are doing here.”

“I came to see you,” he said, the wolf’s grin on his face.

“How did you get the keys?”

He took a step toward her. She wasn’t sure whether to continue covering herself or get in the fighting stance. She wanted to scream for help, but her pride wouldn’t let her.

He smirked. “You won’t catch me by surprise this time.”

“If I scream, the instructors will be here in an instant. They’ll punish you and kick you out of the program.”

Fang laughed. “Who do you think gave me the keys? Lieutenant Lin said you needed to be taught a lesson. No instructors will come.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe you.”

His eyes wandered over her body. “It’s true. They told me to teach you a lesson. They said that you needed to be humbled.”

He took another step toward her. “We don’t have to fight, you know. I won’t tell anyone. We could just…”

She gritted her teeth. “Stay where you are.”

If he was telling the truth…the thought made her sick. To think that one of the instructors would betray her trust in such a way. She wanted to serve China, like her father. She had done nothing but excel in the program. She wished only to perform with honor.

She had admired the instructors. They served in the PLA and had always been professional and courteous to her, except for Lieutenant Lin. But the others had treated her fairly. A few times they had even given her words of encouragement as she'd bested her classmates in the various evolutions.

Li didn't want to believe that one of them would have given him the keys to her room—even if it was Lieutenant Lin. If Lieutenant Lin had handed Fang the keys, he had done so with the knowledge that he would do something reprehensible. That made Lin complicit.

She looked at the larger boy approaching her.

"I said to stop. Don't take another step."

"What can you do to stop me?"

She might win again if she fought him. But he would have his guard up this time. She was getting better at the martial arts they were teaching her, but it had still only been a few weeks of training. If she screamed, they might not hear her. If they did, her reputation would suffer. Or maybe Lieutenant Lin would hear her scream and just ignore it. Either way, everyone else would see her as weak. The colonel's daughter who couldn't take care of herself. What if they kicked her out of the program? What would her parents think?

Whether she fought him or screamed, she did not like her options. Then she thought of another alternative. The idea disgusted her to no end. But if she could get through the worst of it…

"Fine," she said. Her eyes conceded defeat.

Fang, approaching her with caution until now, stopped in his tracks. A confused look on the bully's face.

"What do you *mean*, fine?"

"When we are done, you will leave immediately. And speak of this to no one."

His eyes grew wider. His smile faded. His words were shaky now. A nervous teenager. "Yes…of course."

She turned out the light. "Then hurry up and get it over with."



WHEN FANG LEFT, she remained in her bed, silent. Stewing. Humiliated and defiled. She waited a few moments and then went to the shower down the hall. She kept the lights off and turned the water on hot. She scrubbed and tried to get his stench off her. Steam filled the room. She wanted to cry. If there ever were a time to cry, it would be now.

But the tears wouldn't come. She wouldn't be defeated. She wouldn't feel sorry for herself. Li focused all the emotion into anger.

Like the races and the fights and the physical competitions, this was just another challenge to overcome. Li must win it. And after what Fang had just done to her, the only way to win was vengeance. Li dried herself off in her room and put on her clothes. It was one o'clock in the morning now.

She worried that he would still be awake. Or worse, awake with the other boys. Telling them about his conquest. So she waited another full hour before making her move. She needed to be sure that he was asleep.

In her desk drawer there was a long, sharp pair of metal scissors. She fit it neatly into her pocket and walked out into the hall. No shoes. She wanted her entrance to be as quiet as possible.

Li crept down the stairs and then along the hallway where all the other candidates slept. The lights were off. She waited outside Fang's door for a full five minutes. Listening.

Nothing. Just the sound of two men breathing in their sleep.

She cursed herself as she realized that his door might be locked and she didn't have a key. She tried it anyway. It twisted open. A bit of luck. Either he didn't lock it at all, or he had forgotten to when he came back into the room.

Bullies didn't worry about their prey coming after them in the night. This one would, soon enough. And for the rest of his days.

Her footsteps were silent on the linoleum floor. There was barely enough light from the window to discern which of the two boys was Fang. It would be a shame to make a mistake. Like a surgeon amputating the wrong leg.

She figured out which one was which. Li crept up to his bed and stood over him, watching his chest rise and fall. Deciding how to do it. There would only be one chance. Then she would need to be quick.

Fang slept with his mouth open. Big mistake.

She lifted up the thin mosquito netting over his bed, removed the scissors from her pocket, and held them firm in her right hand. With her left hand, in one quick movement, she reached into his open mouth and grabbed hold of

his tongue with the tips of her fingers. She pulled up on his tongue as hard as she could. With her right hand, she sliced the scissors hard and fast, pushing them forward into the tongue muscle and squeezing.

His eyes shot open as the top inch of his tongue was sliced off like a thick rubber band being cut in half. Warm dark blood splattered over the scissors and both of her hands.

Then the screams began.

Blood-choked, gargling screams. High-pitched and terrified. Shocked in pain, Fang screamed loud enough to wake up everyone in the building.

Li raced out of the room and up the stairs before the roommate awoke and realized what was going on. The lights behind her flicked on, but she was already out of sight. She kept her bloody hand and scissors in her pocket, making sure that no drops fell to the floor as she ran.

Once on her floor, Li first darted into the bathroom and threw the tongue piece into one of the toilet holes on the floor. She flushed it down several times, and then began thoroughly scrubbing her hands, arm, and the scissors. She scrubbed using the same pair of pants that were already bloody. She only gave herself a minute to finish. If anyone had seen her, they would be up here soon. If not, she would have longer. But she wasn't sure exactly how long.

She looked out the bathroom and into the dark hallway. No one was there, so she sprinted into her room and placed the now-clean scissors back in her desk drawer. She took the bloody pants and climbed up on her desk. She lifted a ceiling tile and shoved them up top, into the unused space above. Later, she would have to get rid of them. She then scurried under her sheet and pulled the mosquito netting back over her bed.

She could hear the commotion downstairs. Yelling from one of the instructors to get the nurse. Fang's continued screams of agony. Li listened for the footsteps down her hallway, but they never came. She kept imagining a trail of blood droplets leading up the stairs and to her room. She told herself that there wasn't one. That she had been careful.

The noise died down an hour later. It was the middle of the night. Only a few more hours until dawn. She smiled to herself. A deep feeling of content filled her, and—as she thought of the moment when she had cut off Fang's tongue—an excitement that she had never known until now.



TWO DAYS LATER, Jinshan marveled at the girl sitting on the other side of his desk. Had he known what would happen, he might not have suggested that Lieutenant Lin give Fang the keys to her room. No one would ever know the details of that particular transaction. Even Fang didn't know of Jinshan's role.

Jinshan had thought that Li would give Fang a black eye, or vice versa. Either would suit his purpose. The fight would be grounds for dismissal or even legal trouble for Li. Jinshan would be able to use this as cause to have her removed from the school, and she would join his own team. He would then talk to her father, the colonel, insisting that it was the only way to keep her out of trouble. Eventually, with the influence of Jinshan's contacts in the PLA, the father would give his approval.

But all had not gone as planned. This girl was quite unpredictable.

As soon as Jinshan had become aware of what had happened to Fang that night, he'd had Lieutenant Lin transferred to another district. Anything Fang said—or wrote, since he would never speak again—would be denied by Lin. Jinshan had made sure of that.

But Fang wasn't communicating anything. The investigative team, who were reporting through Jinshan, said that Fang didn't write anything about the keys, or paying the girl Li a visit in the night. His story was that he didn't know who had sliced off his tongue, or why. And he didn't want to know.

The poor boy was a neutered animal without his tongue. He just wanted to be left alone. And Jinshan didn't want anyone to find out that one of the instructors had a hand in this mess.

Jinshan had made sure that Li was not questioned about the incident. Fang's roommate had said that Fang had left his room for an hour earlier that evening, but that was all he knew.

So this interview, in the office of the supervisor of the Junxun camp, would be the first time that Li was confronted about the incident. Jinshan wasn't sure exactly what had happened that evening between Fang and Li, prior to Fang's tongue being sliced off, but he had his suspicions.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes, sir, thank you," said Li.

She looked calm. Jinshan was surprised at that. He thought she would be terrified to be in his presence.

"Do you know who I am?"

She said, "No, sir."

"But you have some idea of my role here?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell me what you think I do.”

“I think you are evaluating us. For which role we will go on to next.”

Jinshan nodded. “This is partly true.” He looked down at his notepad. “You’ve done exceptionally well here.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He watched her eyes as he asked his next question. “What happened the night that you cut off Fang’s tongue?”

Li’s composed demeanor shattered, but only for a microsecond. She then stared at the wall and remained silent.

“You heard my question,” he persisted. “What is your answer?”

“He came to my room and…”

“And what?”

“He attacked me.”

“Did he?” Jinshan let the question hang in the air.

He expected her to fill the uncomfortable silence with an excuse, or with an apology. But she offered none.

“If he attacked you, why don’t you have any scars or bruises?”

She stopped looking at the wall and faced Jinshan. “Sometimes an attack is not easily recognized.”

Jinshan pursed his lips. “Why didn’t you bring this information to the attention of the instructors?”

“After he lost his tongue, that seemed unwise.”

His mouth formed a slight smile. “What shall we do with you now?”

She didn’t reply.

“I am of two minds. One, Fang was the aggressor and I would say that he got what he deserved. Two, you took matters into your own hands and committed an illegal act of violence.”

She said nothing.

“Punishable by prison.”

No response.

“Your father is a colonel in the People’s Liberation Army. You would bring much dishonor to your family if it were to get out that his daughter was the psychotic girl who sliced off the tongue of the university student in Guangzhou.”

At that, she looked worried.

Jinshan’s instincts were right. She was selfless. Service and sacrifice,

devotion to family, to country. These were her motivations. Jinshan could work with them.

Her eyes moved as she was thinking of what to say. “I am sorry.”

Jinshan said, “Your father’s career would be over. Your family name would be associated with this violent act for decades. Instead of university, you would be behind bars. These are all things that a thoughtful person would have considered before taking such drastic action.”

Her head was down. Looking at the floor now. Shame was a powerful drug.

Jinshan held up his hand. “There is an alternative, however. Li, you have performed brilliantly here. I would hate to lose such a talented young woman to one careless act. An act that could be perceived by many as *justified*.”

She looked up at him, her eyes watery.

He reached down for her file, thumbing through the pages. “Like I said, you’ve done quite well here. With training and discipline, you could learn to harness your talents. You could help our nation in extraordinary ways. But the path that I am thinking of…it requires a great sacrifice.”

She nodded. “I am willing to sacrifice.”

“I am sure you are. But would you be willing to sacrifice everything you have? The life you know? Even your identity?”

She looked confused. “If it meant that I would not dishonor my family. If it meant that I could serve my country, yes. Of course. I will sacrifice anything.”

Jinshan smiled. “Then I think there is a way to remedy this unfortunate situation. I can take care of Fang and the incident here. I think you would be a valuable asset to my team.”

“Your team?”

“Yes, Li. You see, each year, I look for the best recruit at these types of camps. Some years I don’t find anyone suitable. This year, I have found you. The personnel that I select go on to serve China in ways that are dangerous but extremely crucial to our national security. We export many students to overseas assignments each year. Many of them do work for the Ministry of State Security while they are there.”

At the mention of the Ministry of State Security, Li raised her eyebrow. “The Ministry of…”

“Yes. We work with students before they travel, to ensure that they keep their eyes open while they are abroad. We use these Junxun camps to identify

the best candidates for this type of work. They will go for a few years. Perhaps they will be asked to make a copy of a particular file, or sometimes to take certain pictures. Tens of thousands of these types of activities funnel in to my office each year. The Ministry of State Security is able to use all this information to improve China's standing in the world."

"I see."

"But while it is very helpful to have so many temporary personnel performing these activities, we need to have a long-term presence as well. This allows us to better position ourselves for the bigger pieces of work. Long-term human resources, living and working alongside our adversaries. These are the type of people that I recruit."

Li nodded, understanding. She said, hesitantly, "Spies?"

Jinshan smiled. "In a word, yes."

"And when you say that I would need to sacrifice my identity…it is because I would become a…*spy*?"

"I am offering you the opportunity to serve your nation as a covert operative."

"What types of things would I be doing? If I may ask?"

"Of course you may. The Ministry of State Security has many arms. We engage in counterintelligence, the collection of our adversaries secrets and technology, and if needed, a variety of special activities that we don't need to go into right now."

"It sounds…*exciting*."

"It can be. It can also be incredibly boring. For every exciting day, you will have two hundred days of the mundane. But the work is very fulfilling. And there is no greater way to serve China with honor."

She took a deep breath. "I accept. What do I need to do now?"

A wide smile crossed Jinshan's lips. "Excellent. Tomorrow you will leave this camp to begin your training. It will be different from anything you have done in your life. Much more rigorous. Military training. Language schools. Schools in espionage tradecraft. We must prepare you, Li. You will remain in China for another year or so. Then you will move to the United States and live under your new identity. You will become an American citizen. You will attend an American university and get an American job after you graduate. We will help with that."

He slid over a manila envelope.

"What is this?" She reached for it.

“Open it. This is your new identity.”

She looked down at the sheet of paper. “A new name?”

“Yes. A more *American-sounding* first name. I thought it was similar enough.”

She looked down at the name and the life summary beneath it. The name had a nice ring to it, she thought.

Lena Chou.

11

Langley, Virginia
Present Day

Susan walked over to David's desk. "I just sent you a link. Check it out."

David searched his email for the message from Susan and clicked on the link. It took him to a Top Secret portion of the share drive where recent intelligence data was stored. He pressed his thumb up against the biometrics reader to open the folder to gain access, and then began scrolling through the imagery.

David said, "What am I looking at?"

He scrolled through pictures of…

"Is that the island? Who took these?"

The profile was not an overhead view. All he had seen so far were images from reconnaissance drones. But these pictures were taken from the surface. As if someone had taken them from a boat.

Susan said, "Your access just went through, so now you'll be able to see all our surveillance intel on the Red Cell island. This one comes from the USS *Jimmy Carter*. It's a Seawolf-class submarine. Ultra quiet. She's orbiting around the island, gathering as much information as she can. But since almost all of our satcom is down, we're only getting her reports and data sporadically. You'll also get electronic eavesdropping information from our surveillance aircraft in the area. The updates come in about every hour."

David kept scrolling through the files. "This is great stuff."

She said, "Yes it is. Anyway, take a look. We're meeting at two p.m. to

go over the latest information. Can you join us?”

Until now, David had been asked to provide information almost solely based on his experience on the island. This was different. Now they wanted him to help out with the analysis of the collected intelligence.

Part of this change in his treatment might be due to being short-staffed. Some of the men and women who had been assigned to the SILVERSMITH project were reassigned to the Middle East desk after the Beltway attack. The war with Iran was going to happen. It was no longer a question of if, but when.

This China theory, as some called it, was becoming a lower priority, despite interest from the director. While it frustrated David, he found that the more noise he made, the less credibility he had. Chase kept telling him that he needed to earn their trust first, and then give his opinions. This seemed to be the first evidence that the strategy was working.

“I’ll be there.”

She nodded. “Good.”

He sipped on his coffee and resumed scrolling through the images on his screen, taking notes.



THE NEXT DAY, David watched an interrogation of the Chinese operative with a mix of intrigue and frustration. He sat next to Susan and a few others on the SILVERSMITH team, in a darkened room behind a two-way mirror. Some of them wore headsets so they could hear the interrogation through the speakers. Two video monitors showed the Chinese spy’s face at different angles as he answered questions. But the man’s answers didn’t help David get any closer to the answer to his problem.

For the past twenty-four hours, David had been studying the data from the Red Cell island that Susan had granted him access to. His job was to look at the data coming from the USS *Jimmy Carter*, which was surveilling the Red Cell island, and compare it to other bits of intelligence.

Thinking he might have found something, he decided to look at the tail numbers of the large Chinese transport jets that were now landing on the island every day. Among the information they had access to were the details from the flight plans that the Chinese pilots filed before takeoff. Each of these

files contained the tail number and takeoff time of the aircraft.

Next, David used the imagery and written summary provided by the USS *Jimmy Carter*. Its mission was to monitor everything that happened on that island, using its high-tech sensors to gather a variety of information. They were able to get pictures of almost every aircraft that landed on the island.

What David found interesting was that the tail numbers and the time stamps provided by the USS *Jimmy Carter* didn't match the filed flight plans. He was about to tell Susan about his find when the director stepped in.

"Morning, Susan," the director whispered, not wanting his voice to carry through the two-way mirror. While the rooms were supposed to be soundproof, they weren't perfect. "I've got about ten minutes. What have you got for me?"

"Sir, we're starting to hit a wall," Susan replied quietly. "He has confirmed his own role in instigating the Beltway attacks, but links to China are tenuous. We have a list of potential personnel within the US who might have assisted him. None of them have any ties to the Chinese, though. They're just third parties he has used."

"So where did he get the orders from?"

"He claimed that they were verbal orders, from Lena Chou."

"Another person the Chinese don't claim to own."

"Correct, sir."

"Anything more on Latin America and Chinese military movements?"

"No, sir, just that they are taking place. No distinct locations yet, although we're working with US Air Force and other reconnaissance assets to narrow down a few possibilities."

"What about the Red Cell?"

"He claims not to know much about the Red Cell. Our interrogator told us he would be digging more on this today. It seems the initial shock of being captured has worn off. Now he's sticking to his script more, and giving us less."

The director nodded. "Alright. Anything more from our friends in Beijing?"

He was referring to a human intelligence source within the highest levels of the Chinese Politburo.

"Sir, our source has triple-verified that the Chinese president and top generals in the PLA know nothing of any Chinese participation in the Beltway attacks. They aren't convinced one way or another about Jinshan's

participation."

"How is Jinshan doing this? How is he able to use so many Chinese military and intelligence assets without the consent of Chinese leadership?"

Susan said, "Sir, we now believe that one of Jinshan's main allies within the Chinese government must be the South Fleet Commander of the PLA Navy. He would be the one in charge of the Red Cell island, based on the island's location. He would also have been able to grant access to the types of military assets that are supposedly supporting Jinshan's operation."

The director leaned in. "So you're telling me that Jinshan and one rogue general are really the ones doing all this?"

"An admiral, not a general. But yes, sir. That's what we now think."

"Unbelievable. The president wants to show the Chinese president proof. Assuming that we think his reaction would be favorable."

"Our China analyst team thinks that the Chinese president would consider Jinshan's actions high treason, if confirmed, sir. And our China station is doing everything they can to help find out more and bring it to the attention of the Chinese leadership. But to be honest, sir, we still have very little proof, other than our word against theirs."

"But what about all the military buildup on the Red Cell island?" the director said.

"That particular military buildup is approved by the PLA leadership, sir. As you know, part of the Chinese military strategy is to build up military outposts and bases in the South China Sea. This extends their territorial claim and defensive capability."

The two were quiet for a moment, watching the interrogation going on in the next room, and David went back to looking at the Chinese flight records for the transports taking off and the images taken from the *Jimmy Carter* off the coast of the Red Cell island.

"Something doesn't match up here," David said to Susan.

Susan looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I'm looking at the records of the Chinese military flights to the Red Cell island. Not all of the planes are actually landing there."

The director overheard this. "What do you mean?"

"Sir, the submarine that's monitoring the island has been taking pictures of just about every aircraft that lands on that runway. I've been comparing them to the Mainland Chinese flight records. Only about a third of the jets are actually landing at the island when they're supposed to be."

Susan's voice was skeptical. "The submarine probably can't monitor everything. Maybe some of the aircraft were missed because it had to submerge or something."

David shook his head. "I thought about that. But I looked at the timestamps. That can't be the only explanation. At least two-thirds of these Chinese Air Force transport jets are supposed to be landing at the Red Cell island, but they aren't."

The director asked the obvious. "So if they aren't landing on the island, but that's what their flight plan is filed for, then where are they going?"

David said, "That's an important question. But what I think we also need to know is…well, I heard you talking about the Chinese leadership denying knowledge of Jinshan's Red Cell program. But they know that there's a military buildup there. What I can't understand is how these aircraft could be landing anywhere else and not alerting Chinese leadership."

The director said, "Say more."

"Well, sir, at In-Q-Tel, I worked with a lot of military technology from around the world. As I'm sure you know, network-centric warfare has been the big trend since the late nineties. The Chinese are following that trend with all their military equipment modernization. Military leaders want to be able to go to a tactical screen and see every asset they own and where they are at any given moment. In order to accomplish this, the Chinese have always used a system of transponders and GPS antennas."

Susan said, "So…you are saying that the Chinese military leaders would have been alerted to their aircraft not going to the Red Cell island."

David nodded. "Yes. Military leaders in Beijing should be able to look at a map and see if they have transport aircraft flying to…let's say, South America."

The director said, "Is there any other explanation here?"

"It's possible that this is part of another covert operation. But for"—David looked down at his notes—"twenty-two brand-new, massive military cargo jets to disappear without the top generals knowing about it, that seems pretty odd to me. And for that to occur when their destination is Jinshan's Red Cell island—that seems like too big a coincidence."

The director said, "How do we find out where these aircraft are going? And how they are hiding it?"

Susan said, "Give me a few hours. I think I know who might be able to help."

~

DAVID AND SUSAN sat in a windowless meeting room at the NSA Headquarters in Fort Meade, Maryland. David remembered the man sitting across from them as Diaz, the NSA person who had briefed them at Langley.

Diaz said, “So I was able to look into what you asked.”

Susan raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“Actually, I found something quite interesting. But first let me explain. Chinese military aircraft—as well as many of their other assets, like ships and submarines—all use encryption for their communications.”

David said, “What about location information? Do their military assets broadcast their location to each other?”

“Eh. Some of them. Aircraft all do, sure. That’s called IFF. Identification Friend or Foe. Some ships have transponders of sorts. Submarines don’t. Tanks don’t. Soldiers don’t. At least not normally. The reason is obvious. If your enemy were to gain access to your network, they would be able to locate all your assets. And that would mean they could target you very precisely. It would be a huge advantage. But it’s also important for battlefield commanders to know where their units are, right?”

“Right.”

“So, modern military forces encrypt all their data. We often shorten the word *encryption* to *crypto*. But we in the signals intelligence world don’t need location-transmitting technology to find your location. We just need you to communicate. If you’re broadcasting any electronic signal, that gives away your position.”

Susan said, “So if the Chinese are operating a secret army in places that they haven’t told all of their military and political leadership about, you would be able to use their communications broadcasts to prove their whereabouts?”

Diaz said, “In essence, yes.”

Susan said, “Well, this is great! Do it.”

Diaz cracked his knuckles. “Right. Well, two things. One, I’ve already found your secret army. They’re in Ecuador.”

Susan said, “Ecuador?”

Diaz held up his hand. “And two—this is the interesting thing that I’ve uncovered—they aren’t using the same crypto that the rest of the Chinese are using. Their communications and location information is hidden, even to the

regular Chinese military."

David said, "What do you mean?"

"This secret army of yours is using a different crypto key. A piece of hardware with their codes for encryption. There are a whole slew of Chinese aircraft, ships, and submarines, as well as many land-based units in Ecuador, that are using this unique crypto key. It's the same technology that the PLA is using. But the codes are separate. I've looked at it, and I can tell that it's being changed every ninety-six hours. But we can't break it. The technology is state-of-the-art."

"So what's next?"

Diaz said, "We need one of those crypto keys."

Susan said, "What do you mean, we need one? Why?"

Diaz said, "You told me that you need evidence on what the Chinese are up to, right? Evidence that will prove to the Chinese leadership that there is a rogue element—a secret army—operating without its approval?"

"That's the idea, yes," said Susan.

"Well, we can't very well show them our own signals intelligence that they're operating in Ecuador. But if you get me one of those crypto keys, that's China's own technology. It would allow me to show the Chinese hard evidence of their own creation that would be easier for them to understand. Plus, it wouldn't divulge any of our own closely guarded secrets."

David said, "So we need to get one of the crypto keys from the Chinese?"

Diaz said, "Yes."

"That doesn't sound easy."

"I imagine it wouldn't be. But there's something else. You know how I said that it operates on a ninety-six-hour reset?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's another obstacle you're going to have to worry about. It's a security measure. Every ninety-six hours, they change the codes. So if you steal one of these suckers, the codes it's holding will only be good for ninety-six hours. After that, it turns into a big, heavy, useless black box."

David said, "Oh. Good. So we have to steal one of the Chinese crypto keys, but it'll expire ninety-six hours after we steal it?"

"Yes."



SUSAN, David, and the director met with General Schwartz as soon as the interrogation finished.

"Sir, we hit the jackpot. It appears that the Chinese have been sending transport aircraft to Manta, Ecuador. Air Force reconnaissance drones just confirmed the location, and our friends at the NSA confirmed the method of hiding the military assets. We believe that they're sending troops and supplies there. Some of the transport jets remain on the Red Cell island. When the aircraft that are headed to Ecuador overfly the island, they are changing out their identification, using special crypto keys. These are the pieces of hardware that identify the military asset on the Chinese network. We now believe that the military assets working for Jinshan and Admiral Song have their own unique crypto keys. They can use these to talk with and locate each other, without the rest of the Chinese military leadership knowing about it."

The general said, "Why would they do that?"

"Because they aren't telling everyone in their chain of command what they're up to," the director of the CIA said. "We don't yet know how many of these Chinese military and intelligence personnel are aware that this is a rogue operation. But it *is* a rogue operation. We know that Cheng Jinshan and Vice Admiral Song are in on it. They're not being forthright with their leadership."

The general shook his head. "Unbelievable. So what then? We just need proof to show the Chinese president? They'll execute Jinshan and the admiral tomorrow, right? My God…does this mean that we're about to go to war with Iran all because of these two men?"

No one spoke.

Finally the director said, "We need to get hard evidence to show not just to the Chinese leadership, but also to our own politicians. I'm facing some fierce resistance in our own government whenever I broach the subject of China. There is so much intensity on Iran after the Beltway attacks, it's hard to sway opinions. So, general, we'd like your help in drawing up plans to get that hard evidence."

The general said, "Of course. What do you have in mind?"

Susan said, "We want to steal one of their new crypto keys from their base in Manta, Ecuador. They must have one there. These crypto keys would have the unique data, which our folks at the NSA can then clone. It would provide irrefutable proof of what they're up to. It would also provide us a

snapshot of where all these Chinese assets really are. We can then show this both to our political leaders, and to the Chinese leadership. If we can do that, our hope is that the Chinese hostilities would cease immediately, and we might even be able to scale back what's going on with Iran."

12

Two Weeks Later
USS Farragut, *Panama City, Panama*

A loud whistle sounded over the 1MC throughout the ship, followed by, "Liberty call, liberty call. All hands, liberty call." A muffled cheer could be heard below decks.

Victoria stood on the fantail, looking out on the pier. Seagulls flew over the vendors' shops. The vendors were the local salesmen from Panama City who would sell trinkets and cigars to the throngs of sailors about to go out on liberty.

They had left port shortly after the terrorist attack on the D.C. Beltway, two weeks ago. It was a security precaution, ordered by the Navy. But Victoria agreed that it had been the prudent course of action. But after several months at sea with only a few port calls, everyone was pretty upset that they had only been able to get away for a few hours before being recalled.

She had given the same speech several times now. *We need to be thinking about the lives of the men and women who were just taken from us. Our job is to protect and defend. No one should complain about something as petty as going out on liberty at a time like this.* The speech rang true. She could see it in her men's eyes.

But after two more weeks at sea, when Big Navy had reset the threat level in Panama, they had been allowed back in for another port stop. The captain had given his own speech about how the crew needed to represent the values of our nation, especially after something like the Beltway attack.

She wondered what was going on in the world. There were too many "Attacks" lately. The Dubai attacks. The Blackout Attack. Now, the Beltway attack. Was everyone losing their minds?

Victoria walked through the wardroom and found her pilots already in civilian clothes, chomping at the bit to get into the city. She shot them a crooked smile. "Where the hell do you guys think you're going?"

Plug smiled back. "I'm taking Juan here into Panama City. He's my liberty buddy. And he also happens to be a native Spanish speaker. Might come in handy."

Juan rolled his eyes. "I don't technically think you would call me a *native* Spanish speaker since I was born in the US, but my mother is Mexican and I can speak Spanish."

Plug said, "Did you acquire your Spanish speaking skills at an early age?"

"*Sí*."

"Are you able to produce fluent, spontaneous discourse in said language?"

"*Sí*."

"That's native enough to make sure I don't get ripped off by the bartenders."

"*Sí*."

Victoria chuckled. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Plug said, "You sure you don't want to go out on the town with us, boss?"

You could hear a pin drop as they waited for her to answer.

While they had invited her out with them the last time they pulled in, that had been the appropriate thing to do. She had accepted, and the polite "hanging out with her men" box had been checked, even if it had ended early. But she knew that the last thing any of them *really* wanted was for their boss to be out on liberty with them today. Especially Plug.

She said, "Well…I could have one of you guys stay here on duty tonight instead of letting you go out, now that I think about it…"

She looked at the expressions of the four junior officers. She made a face like she was thinking about it, trying to inflict as much pain as possible before declining.

The four pilots held their breath at the threat of losing the only thing that really mattered to them right now. Liberty was more than a meal and a few beers. On ships with little to no Internet, liberty was often the only time they could speak to their wives, families, and significant others. And *that* was the

fuel that kept spirits alive during military deployments.

She waved her hand. “Nah…you guys go. I’m going to get some work done.”

A simultaneous exhale from the group. “Okay, well, we’ll see you tomorrow.” They bolted. She had never seen them go so fast.

The 1MC speaker announced, “Air Boss, your presence is requested in the captain’s cabin.”

Hmm. Now it was her turn to try and avoid dinner with her boss. That was a much taller task. Oh, well. She would be the good lieutenant commander and take one for the team.

She marched down the passageway, turning the corner to the captain’s cabin. She nearly fell down when she saw who was waiting for her.

The captain had a broad smile on his face, standing behind Victoria’s brother Chase. Chase wore a sly grin, happy to surprise his sister. They embraced, joy in her heart.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked after finally giving him room to breathe.

His expression didn’t change, but the captain’s did, she noticed. The captain looked serious.

Chase said, “It’s a work-related trip.”

She nodded. “I see.” There was another man—a Navy commander—sitting in the captain’s cabin. She didn’t recognize him.

The captain said, “Air Boss, your brother has a very interesting job. He’s done briefing me, so I’ll let you two catch up. He and his colleague said they’d only be able to stay for a few minutes, so I can’t invite them with us tonight. But when you guys are done talking, come find me. I’m dragging you and the XO out for dinner.”

She smiled politely. “Yes, sir.”

She motioned for Chase to follow her. She decided to take him back to the hangar. “Come on, I’ll show you the seventy million dollars in helicopters the taxpayers are trusting me with.”

“Well, there’s a mistake,” he joked.

She didn’t bother introducing him to her men, some of whom were in the hangar working on the aircraft. Victoria didn’t want to be rude, but she knew that Chase’s work was very sensitive stuff. And while she knew that she might be fanning some rumors with her wide smile and the good-looking man at her side, she wanted to do her part to protect his privacy.

“So you can only stay a moment?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ve got to keep moving.”

They leaned on the metal railing of the flight deck nets, overlooking the water that fed into the Panama Canal. Passenger jets flew overhead every few minutes, landing at the international airport.

“How’s David?” she asked.

“Honestly? He’s been better. You spoke to him, right?”

“Yeah. I called him a few weeks ago. He sounded scared and frustrated. He couldn’t say too much over the phone.”

She looked around to make sure they were out of earshot. “Anything you can fill me in on? The last thing I saw was what the news put out—saying the whole thing with them being apprehended on cyberterrorist charges was a misunderstanding at Interpol. Then this shit with Iran started happening and the news didn’t care anymore.”

Chase looked at his sister. “Can I tell you something that’s going to sound crazy?”

“Yeah.”

He whispered, “It’s not *Iran* that we need to be worried about.”

Victoria frowned. Half the US Navy was being deployed to the Persian Gulf. Shots had already been fired between Iran and the US. Her father had debarked the USS *Truman* only days before it had been attacked by Iranian cruise missiles. The news was nonstop coverage about an Iranian terror cell attacking American civilians on the D.C. Beltway. Now the United States was getting ready to put an end to the extremist Iranian regime once and for all. The military buildup in the region was similar to the Iraq wars. Any day now, the balloon would go up, and a US-led invasion into Iran would begin.

“How is *Iran* not what we need to be worrying about?”

He shook his head. “I can’t go into it.”

“Come on, little brother, you can’t say something like that and not give me any more.”

He looked at her. “Your captain just got orders—he knows what he needs to do. He’s got a sealed mission brief that he’ll give to you if we need you. Otherwise, I can’t go into it.”

She crossed her arms. “What the hell are you up to?”

Chase looked at the helicopters, folded and stuffed in the hangers. He said, “What type of mission are you doing here?”

Victoria said, “What do you mean? In the EASTPAC? Counternarcotic,

mostly. Some training exercises with the UK and some South American countries."

Chase looked grim. "That could change."

She didn't like this. Chase never got rattled. A former officer in the SEAL community, he had been on several deployments in the Middle East. Her brother was, although it was still hard for her to fathom, a decorated war hero. When he'd left the teams a year and a half ago, he smiled as he told her that he was going to be working for the Department of State.

She knew that men like Chase didn't take jobs like that. Not that there was anything wrong with working in the diplomatic community. But serving in that capacity wouldn't have scratched the itch for him. He was an operator, and an adrenaline junkie. She knew that Chase was involved in something more…*exciting*.

The night of their mother's funeral, the three siblings had drowned their sorrows at McGarvey's Pub in Annapolis. Chase always had loose lips when he drank. That was when Victoria usually pressed him about his relationships, so she could report back to Mom. Back when Mom was still around. But that night at the pub, Chase had admitted to her that he was going to work for the CIA as a member of their Special Operations Group. It would be similar work to what he was already doing, but it would open up a host of other opportunities within the CIA.

Victoria thought about the reason the CIA would send him here, to her ship. It was highly irregular. She tried once more. "What are you doing here, Chase?"

He shook his head. Then he looked down at the water. A school of fish were causing ripples on the surface, going after bugs. "I can't tell you what I'm doing here. But you saw me meet with your ship captain. If you guys are needed, we delivered a mission packet to the captain of your ship. Even he isn't supposed to read it unless you get the call. And Victoria, if you *are* needed…" He looked up from the water and into her eyes. "Just be careful. Okay?"

"My God, Chase, you're starting to scare the shit out of me. *Something* must be really wrong. Does this have to do with the Beltway attack?"

He looked at his watch. "Time for me to run." He reached over and gave her a great big bear hug. "Love you, sis. Good luck."

She watched him walk down the pier, hop in a cab and disappear. The executive officer, the number two in charge on the ship, walked up next to

her on the flight deck. He was already wearing his civilian clothes.

"Air Boss," he greeted her.

"XO."

"Just had a talk with the captain. Seems like we're going to be changing our operating area for this international exercise next week."

"Oh? Where are we headed?"

"Somewhere in between the Galapagos and Ecuador."

"The captain say anything else? Like what the hell those two men just briefed him on?"

"Not really. Just that we need to go into a geographic box next week and stay there in case they need us."

"Need us for what?"

He shrugged. "He didn't say."

The XO pulled out a cigar. They were selling Cubans on the pier. He probably got it there. He looked up the dock and saw that they were getting ready to fuel the ship. He cursed and placed the cigar back in his breast pocket. "Come on, Victoria, I ain't got all day. Get your civvies on. Let's get out of here. We all need to have a stiff drink tonight."

She rolled her eyes. "Alright. I guess it's time for our mandatory fun."



WHILE VICTORIA WASN'T EXCITED about hanging out with the captain, she had to admit that the meal was excellent. Steak and lobster at one of the best local restaurants, and as an appetizer, the most delicious ceviche she'd ever tasted. They hadn't stayed out long. The duty van brought them back almost as soon as their meal was done.

Now, the captain, Victoria, and the XO sat at a picnic table about one hundred yards down the pier from where the USS *Farragut* was parked. The captain wanted to smoke his cigar before they got back on the ship.

She had no objections. There was a distinct pull that all seafaring men felt. Whenever in port, it was best to be off the ship.

The captain removed two more cigars and handed them to the XO and her.

"No, thank you, sir."

"Suit yourself."

She was a little tipsy from the wine from dinner. “Oh, what the hell. Pass it over. I don’t think I’ve had a cigar since college.”

The XO smiled. “This stuff is the secret to happiness.”

The rich, pungent aroma of Cuban tobacco filled the air.

The captain began, “Alright, folks, here it is.”

She had wondered when he would get down to business. It had been all small talk and football over dinner. A few sea stories. But oddly, nothing about what was coming up. And nothing about the mysterious visit from Chase and the other commander.

“We’re going to get underway tomorrow afternoon.”

The captain turned to the XO. “When we get back on board in a few minutes, tell the officer of the deck to cancel all leave and liberty starting at zero eight hundred tomorrow. Once people return, they are to stay aboard. I don’t even want people getting off the ship to go to the vendors. Air Boss, you are to start drilling your aircrew for multimission operations. XO, I want a general quarters, unannounced, right at lunchtime tomorrow.”

“While we’re ashore, Captain?”

“Yes.”

Victoria said, “Sir, what exactly does ‘multimission operations’ mean?”

The captain shrugged. “Hell if I know. Everything, I guess. You’re the aviator.”

Victoria wasn’t sure if she should admit that Chase had given her any hints, but she had to try and get more information. “Sir, is there a mission packet for me?”

The captain eyed her. “There is. But my instructions were to leave it in my safe unless we get told to open it.”

Victoria said nothing.

The XO said, “Sir, may I ask what’s going on?”

The captain took a puff from his cigar and slowly exhaled. “I wish I could tell you, XO, but to be quite honest, other than the geographic box they want us to stay in, I don’t really know.”



JUAN WATCHED in amusement as Plug lost his shirt. The night started off innocently enough. The four pilots had gone to their hotel—the Marriot—in

Panama City. The other two junior pilots were both married and immediately attempted every possible method of communicating with their families. With much of the Internet's functionality still seriously damaged from the attacks of a few weeks ago, all video chat options—normally a mainstay of liberty stops—were out of the question. That meant that they had to call via good old-fashioned telephone.

Juan would have been happy to just grab a meal and hang out by the hotel's outdoor pool, relaxing in the seventy-five-degree December weather in Panama.

But Plug had other plans. He wasn't married, but he was always looking. And he was a HAC. A Helicopter Aircraft Commander. Aside from Victoria, Plug was the only other HAC on this deployment. So inside the aircraft, he was in charge when flying with one of the junior pilots. He was a rank higher than the three junior pilots but treated them as peers when they were out of the cockpit. Unless it suited his needs to pull rank—say, for instance, if he wanted to go out drinking, and others didn't.

In a way, the social structure resembled high school. Juan and the other junior pilots were like freshmen, and Plug was like a senior. It was cool to hang out with a senior, if given the opportunity. So Juan agreed to go "out on the town" with Plug.

What could go wrong?

When Plug finished off a twelve pack of beers before they even left the hotel room, Juan began to wonder if perhaps he had made the wrong decision.

Several hours of bars, "exclusive nightclubs," and casinos later, Juan sat nursing an ice water, exhausted. They were in a private poker room at the Casino Panama. Throughout the night, it had become apparent that Juan was going to be Plug's babysitter. As Juan saw it, Plug was going to drink, smoke, and hit on as many women as he could until he either self-destructed or passed out.

Juan looked at him and shook his head. Plug had just reraised the ante at his table before they had even dealt the cards. This was a faux pas in a friendly game of poker, let alone the high-roller table he sat at now. Plug had finagled his way into a seat at this private game.

"Sir, please wait until it is your turn," said the dealer in heavily accented English.

Plug scraped his chips back to the pile in front of him.

The other players all seemed to know each other. Juan could tell because they were having friendly conversations in Spanish together. Plug could barely understand English in his current drunken stupor, so he was at what one might call a disadvantage.

Juan was pretty sure the other players were colluding, although they didn't have to. Plug was quite capable of giving away all of his money without any help. Several times he had even shown his cards by accident. A mix of groans and laughter erupted from the table each time.

"Sir, are you with him?" The man who spoke to Juan looked like the manager.

"Unfortunately."

"I'm afraid that we'll have to ask him to leave after this hand."

"I understand. Thanks," said Juan.

Juan went up and tapped Plug on the shoulder.

He turned and looked surprised. "Juan! What are you doing here?"

"I've been with you all night."

"Tremendous! Have a seat. We were just playing cards. Me and my new buddies."

Juan glanced up at the table. A few waved at him. Juan said, "Plug, man, listen, we need to go after this."

Plug looked serious. "Got it." He turned to the dealer and said, "All in."

"Señor, you just folded."

"Okay, next hand, then."

The dealer shot Juan a look.

Juan tried another tactic. "Hey, Plug, I know a place where we can get some *really* good pizza near the hotel."

"*Really?*"

"Yeah, come on."

He turned back to the dealer. "Sorry, guys, I gotta run."

Smiles and waves. Card sharks loved drunks and amateurs more than they loved aces.

Once outside the casino, they ran into a horde of enlisted sailors from the ship. They were hailing cabs, about to head back to the pier. Only the E-5s and above were allowed overnights.

Plug yelled, "Hey! I know you guys! Say, you guys wanna have some fun?"

Juan tried to steer Plug away, but it was too late. Some of the sailors,

happy to laugh at a drunken officer and pilot, replied in the affirmative.

As the sailors got into their cabs, Plug took out a wad of cash from his wallet, handing what must have been two hundred American dollars to each cab driver.

He turned to Juan. “Okay. Now this is important. I need you to tell them something in Panamanian—or Mexican. Your choice. Tell the drivers that the money I have given them is for a *race*.” He said the word “race” loudly and slowly, while looking at the drivers. “They are to race each other back to the boat, and to show these men a good time.”

Plug swayed while he spoke. Then he looked at his shipmates, already packed into the two cabs like sardines. He held up his finger high in the air. “It is a race to the death!” The sailors cheered. Plug then looked at Juan, trying to focus on his face. “If they need more money, I can go back to the poker table. Tell them. Tell them in Spanish this time.”

Juan patted Plug on the shoulder. “Sure thing.”

He stood in front of the cabs. Both cab drivers leaned out their windows, smiling. They looked thrilled to get the extra cash.

Juan said loudly in Spanish, “My friend said to tell you to drive really fast until you get around the corner, and then to slow down and drive safe. Have a good night.”

The drivers gave a thumbs-up. One of them revved his engine, and the other followed. More cheers from the passengers.

Plug turned to Juan. “Did you tell them?”

“Oh yes.” He smiled as the first car sped off for the first fifty feet and then began driving normally. The second car followed suit. Boisterous cheers from both cars.

Plug slapped his knee. “Awesome.”

Juan smiled. “Come on, we’ve got to get back to the hotel.”

Plug nodded and held up a finger to wait. Then he turned and vomited on the sidewalk.

Juan sighed. He turned out to the street. “Taxi!”

Plug screamed at the top of his lungs, “*Whooo!* Glad I got that out of my system.” He looked at Juan suspiciously. “Did you put something in my food?”

Juan held up his hands and shook his head.

“Alright, well, it’s time for us to go start drinking.”

A taxi pulled up.

Juan said, “Plug, I really think we should go back to the hotel.”

A group of the ship’s officers stuck their heads out of a cab driving by. They screamed the name of another well-known bar. “Meet us there!”

Plug gave a thumbs-up. His eyes were out of focus. He dove into the waiting taxi and yelled. “Follow that car!”

Juan sighed and got in the passenger seat. He checked his watch. This would be the last time he would make the mistake of babysitting Plug.



PLUG AWOKE to the sound of knocking. Each knock struck his head like a hammer. His surroundings came into focus and he realized that he was in a hotel room.

He looked to his left and saw two women in his bed. One wore a bright red thong. The other was buck naked. Both were stunning Latin women. Dark hair, tan. Lots of makeup.

They were a beautiful sight, but he didn’t care. He only wanted his head to stop hurting. He wondered if he would make it to the toilet before he threw up. Thankfully, he did, barely. He turned the faucet on, washing the sour taste out of his mouth, wondering what god he had upset to deserve this horrible feeling.

Images of the night before flashed through his head. Through the pain of his massive hangover, he knew that they had started off in a hotel room. Those pansy-ass married 2Ps didn’t even want to go out. They just wanted to talk on their phones and make kissy noises with their wives. So he ended up going out with their most junior pilot, Juan. He was kind of a nerd, and a truly awful pilot, but a nice enough dude.

Plug remembered that they had gone to a casino. He was pretty sure that he lost money there, but he remembered they had a good time…then he didn’t remember much after that. He thought they might have gone to a nightclub. Some of the ship guys were there.

Plug looked over at the bed. The two sleeping beauties were still there. He honestly had no idea how the three of them had ended up here. Or for that matter, where they *were*.

Knocks at the door again, and he remembered what woke him up. The room was spinning. God, he was still drunk. He threw his clothes on,

hobbling over to the door. He cracked it open.

The three 2Ps smiled back at him.

Caveman, with the biggest shit-eating grin ever, said, “Have a nice night, HAC?”

Juan said, “Thank God. I was gonna be pissed if you were dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“*Dudes*. Why are you knocking? What time is it?” he asked.

Plug opened the door a little more, and the 2Ps looked beyond him. They saw two pairs of bare legs lying on the bed and their smiles got wider.

Juan said, “You’re not going to like this, but we have to go. We already packed up your stuff.”

Plug was confused. Maybe it was the alcohol. “Did you say we have to go? We have this hotel for one more night, I thought. What are you talking about?”

“Shore patrol’s been coming around. Everyone’s getting recalled to the ship. *Again*. We have to go now. Ship’s leaving today. Come on.”

He looked back at the women on the bed. One of them sat up, a coy smile on her face. She partially covered her chest with one arm.

Plug looked back at the 2Ps. “Have I ever told you how much I really hate you guys?”



A FEW HOURS LATER, Plug sat on the flight deck, leaning up against the hangar door, as the ship began to pick up speed. The breeze felt good. The rolling did not.

His head pounded. He wore sunglasses and a fitted dark blue squadron cap to hide how hungover he still was. His flight suit was zipped down a bit too low. A rim of sweat formed on his brow. He had a large plastic water bottle that he sipped from every few minutes. He needed some Advil.

“You alright, Plug?”

Air Boss walked over, a sympathetic look on her face. Of course she knew. She never missed anything.

He tried to sit up a little straighter in front of his boss. “They got me good on this one. Telling us that we’re going to have several days in port like that and then rounding us all up while we’ve been…”

“Drinking?”

“Relaxing.”

She smiled and pulled up a fold-up chair. “I’d like to tell you that you can hit the rack and recuperate, but there’s a reason we left port this morning, instead of three days from now.”

He sipped more water from the water bottle and then got off his ass and stood up. The combination of the ship’s increasing rolls and his blood alcohol mix not quite being back to normal made him almost fall down. He grabbed hold of the flight deck railing.

Plug said, “What’s the story?”

She told him what little she knew.

“So…multimission operations. What does that mean? Like—be ready for anything?”

Victoria nodded. “That’s the way I understand it. Can you gather up everyone and have them here for a quick meeting?”

Plug knew that by everyone, she meant the members of the aviation detachment. His eighteen enlisted maintenance men, the two enlisted rescue swimmers, and the three junior pilots.

“I can have them here in ten minutes, boss.” A part of his brain was fighting through the fog, telling him that her mannerisms signaled something big was going on.

“Thanks.” She smiled, crossed her legs and opened her notebook.

Plug walked carefully down the shadowy port hangar, squeezing through the narrow space between the helicopter and the hull, stepping over the chains that tied the helicopter down.

Plug found the man he was looking for. “Senior Chief?”

The senior chief was typing on one of the computers they used to keep track of all the maintenance done on the helicopters. The senior enlisted man in the aviation detachment, he was approaching his twentieth year in the Navy, and compared to most of the crew, he’d seen it all. This was his twelfth deployment. He’d spent a total of eight years of his life at sea. Two of his children were born while he was away.

When Plug had been selected by their squadron’s commanding officer to be the maintenance officer on this detachment, the first thing he’d done was go introduce himself to his new chief. Junior officers could go far if they were talented. But they went a lot farther with a good senior enlisted to serve as a partner and guide.

“Sir, how may I be of assistance?”

“Boss wants everyone on the flight deck in ten minutes.”

He grunted. “I was wondering when that was gonna come.”

Plug said, “I’ll go tell the pilots and aircrew. Can you send someone to round up the guys?”

“Sure thing,” he said. “This about why we left Panama so soon?”

“I reckon it is.”

He grunted again. A man of few words.

Plug walked through the ship and into the junior pilots’ stateroom.

All three of them shared a space that was about the size of a large walk-in closet, a triple-bunk on the far side. Juan was reading a novel on the top bunk.

The room was dark, just like every sleeping space on the ship. Ship life was twenty-four hours, and some people had to sleep during the day. It drove Plug crazy that the surface warfare officers were always running their freaking drills and making noise in the middle of the day when people on the night shift were trying to sleep.

The SWOs saw any complaint about lack of sleep as an admission of weakness. Their argument was that SWOs, like surgeons, needed to operate on very little sleep. And that pilots were all pampered prima donnas who slept too much and saw the ship as their personal cruise line.

Pilots considered the ship more of a helicopter barge than a cruise line and argued that while one might be able to drive a ship at twelve knots while fatigued, it was another matter entirely to be tired and try to land a helicopter on the back of a single-spot ship in the middle of the night. Also, pilots required more beauty rest in order to keep their great looks.

Plug actually had a lot of respect for the surface navy. It was, like almost every other military community, a group of hardworking and dedicated men and women. SWOs had long hours, tough living conditions, grueling deployments, and very little recognition compared to other members of the military. They were technical experts and nautical masters. But he would die before admitting as much to any of those bastards.

“Where are the other 2Ps?” he asked Juan.

“Working out.”

“Go get ’em. Boss wants us on the flight deck for a meeting in five.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Shut up, 2P.”

He smiled and slammed the door. While Plug was a HAC, and senior to the 2Ps, the pilot culture had an unwritten rule that none of the officers under the rank of O-4 were ever to be referred to as sir or ma'am. That meant that on this boat, only Lieutenant Commander Victoria Manning would be called ma'am by the pilots. And it was still more common in this environment to address her as "Air Boss," or "boss" for short. This was because she was the officer in charge of the helicopter aviation detachment on board.

Plug went to his stateroom and swallowed two ibuprofen pills, then walked back to the flight deck. He checked his watch. At least he would be able to sleep off his hangover after this meeting.

The twenty-six men who were part of HSM-46 Detachment Two were gathered around the air boss. It was a little funny having an all-male detachment and a female air boss. Not that anyone lacked respect for her, but a group of twenty-six military men led by one woman sounded like the premise for a sitcom. She was like their mother in some ways. A very smart, driven, whip-bearing, micromanaging mother.

Minutes later, the group was gathered on the flight deck. Boss stood in the middle of the circle, making light-hearted jokes with the men. She took good care of them. They respected her and worked hard to impress her. Plug had never heard her raise her voice. But she didn't have to. She had the ability to say things in a certain tone, to give you a certain look, which made whatever she said become your life's goal.

Boss said, "Everyone here?"

Plug, sunglasses still on, nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good. I'm not sure how much more time we'll have. Rumor has it"—she looked around to make sure no one aside from her air detachment was in earshot—"that we may be doing some training this afternoon. As in, general quarters type training." Groans from the group.

She held up her hands to silence them. "Gents, I need you to suck it up." She spoke in that serious tone that got things done. The group went quiet. "We got word yesterday that we may be participating in some pretty high-priority assignments over the next few weeks. If I could tell you more about it, I would. But here's what you need to know. We're going to be training. Hard. And flying a lot. From here on out, I want to always have an aircraft on the Alert Fifteen. We're also going to need to have two flyable aircraft, with as little maintenance downtime as possible. No self-inflicted wounds. If we need parts for maintenance, let's order extra now. Plug, Senior Chief, you

have my permission to order stuff that we might not even need, but that might be nice to have. If we need extra space, I can get it. If you run into any pushback, let me know. But we need to have two flyable aircraft, with all our mission systems working. Any questions?"

No hands were raised. Finally, the senior chief said, "Ma'am, what type of training will we be focusing on?"

She smiled. "I'm glad you asked, Senior. We're going to start practicing torpedo loads once per day. Hellfire loads once per day. It's also possible that we'll need to transport Special Warfare operators, so I need us to think about whether we would make any different configuration choices there."

A lot of raised eyebrows at that. Victoria had given herself an exercise the night before. She brainstormed on all the most important missions that someone like Chase—who worked for the CIA—might be involved in. While her helicopter detachments obvious roles were anti-ship and anti-submarine warfare, her one clue had been that he was a former Navy SEAL. She imagined that his work with the CIA was related. So if he was involved, her theory was that they might need their helicopters to provide transport. It was just a hunch, but it was something to prepare for nonetheless.

The ship's alarm sounded, and the 1MC let out a whistle. "*General quarters, general quarters, all hands man your battle stations. Set condition Zebra throughout the ship. This is a drill."*

Curses amongst the group. They looked to Victoria. Her men were clearly anxious to get to where they needed to be but were torn between that and their respect for her, not wanting to leave until dismissed.

She said, "Alright, folks, we'll continue this later. Get going."

The group quickly scattered. The pilots walked back to Officer's Country. They stopped in the wardroom. Plug said, "Special Warfare pax transfers?"

She looked at him and nodded. "We need to be ready for anything right now."

As if on cue, the 1MC sounded off with another whistle. This time the announcement was for flight quarters.

The air boss said, "Juan, who have you got on the schedule right now?"

He looked nervously around the group of pilots. "Uh…boss, we didn't have a schedule. We were supposed to be in port."

Plug said, "It's going to take us an hour to get one of the aircraft ready." His splitting headache was only getting worse.

She looked at her watch. "You've got thirty minutes. And when they're

done with the maintenance inspection, tell Chief that he will need to get ready for a torpedo load. I want that done this afternoon."

Plug opened his mouth to complain, but decided not to say anything. A torpedo load had taken them *forever* the last time they'd tried it. Boss was acting crazy.

She turned to Juan and said, "Are you good to fly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Alright, you're with me. Go get us an air crewman and have one of your sidekicks here"—she pointed at the other 2Ps—"write a flight schedule. We need a twenty-four-hour watch bill. Plug, you and whoever's on tonight should hit the rack soon."

That was the first good news Plug had heard all day.

The phone rang in the wardroom. Boss picked it up. "Air Boss. Yes, sir, I'll be right there." She turned to the group. "Alright, get your asses in gear, gentlemen. Vacation's over. Juan, follow me. The captain's going to have the TAO give us a mission brief. He wants it incorporated into their GQ exercise."

They left, and Plug looked at the two remaining pilots. "This is ridiculous."

The noise of the ship's engines increased as they left the channel. The high-pitched whine grew higher still. The white wake of the ship threw thicker and longer as they gained speed.

13

Manta, Ecuador

Lena clutched the overhead bar of the jeep as the vehicle bounced around on the weathered mountain roads. They passed several small villages. The sunburned faces of the poor looked back at her, their tired eyes squinting.

The villagers always stared at her longer than they did the soldiers she was with. At first, she thought it was because of her race. She had grown accustomed to those types of stares. When she had worked for the CIA, she had spent much of her time deployed to regions of the world where she looked nothing like the locals.

But that was not why they gawked at her. Not anymore.

Her fingers traced the ugly river of red skin up the side of her face and to her right ear. It was blotchy and wet looking. She was still beautiful, if you looked at her from just the right angle. But the frightened look in the children's eyes told her all she needed to know.

She thought of *him* when she touched the scars. *Chase*. A part of her longed for revenge. To humiliate him. To make him feel the same pain she had felt. The pain of fire igniting her clothing and melting away her skin. The pain of lifelong stares and humiliation.

She regularly had to shake herself out of her daydreams now. They always led her mind back to that horror-filled and helpless moment up on the rooftop of the Burj Al-Arab hotel in Dubai. They were close to getting away when Chase Manning had thrown Molotov cocktails at the helipad. She had lain pinned down by gunfire, helpless as the hellish bath of flame erupted

around her.

There was the other part of her inner psyche that was equally infuriating. The part of her that *longed* for him. All those nights they had spent together in Dubai. He was just a plaything at first. But then, oddly enough, it had morphed into something more.

Lena had looked in his eyes and seen a courage and conviction that demanded respect. She had slept with him. For professional reasons, at first. Her physical beauty and sexuality had always been a powerful weapon. It clouded men's vision and gave her access to a wide set of information. But if she was honest with herself, she knew that Chase was different.

Chase had amplified the clash of two emotions within her. Love and hatred. Beauty and ugliness. Her face had become an outward expression of who she truly was. Her lust for violence. The fulfillment she received from killing and maiming others—that was the ugliness. Something she could never explain. The quality had been with her since the incident at Junxun years ago. Logically, her euphoric reaction to inflicting pain on others—especially men—must have had something to do with her ability to control her own fate. To exact revenge and inflict pain upon the stronger sex, who had tried to harm her.

But what of the other side of the coin? Her beauty—what was that a symbol of? Goodness? Righteousness? That was what drove her each day, was it not? Serving China with honor. Creating the picture of the better world that Jinshan had painted for her so many years ago. That vision was now being executed.

And Lena was his chief executioner.

The jeep drove off the pavement onto a reddish muddy road. Jungle branches towered overhead. She could hear the troops conducting live firearms training. It sounded like fireworks. The jeep rounded another corner and pulled up to the range. A mile of cleared-out fields stretched in front of them. Wooden huts and tables. A makeshift military gun range. Dozens of men fired on paper targets. They trained on several different types of weapons. Two different style uniforms.

The Chinese Special Forces soldiers were training the Ecuadorian soldiers to use the weapons. She observed one of them demonstrating how to change the magazine on a QBZ-95 rifle.

She thought about what Natesh and the Chinese intelligence analysts had told her. Using standard Chinese weapons meant needing standardized

Chinese ammunition. And that meant a long supply chain across the Pacific. Natesh's solution was to get the factories in South America working on parts and materials so that when the war began, the supply lines were shorter.

He had set about accomplishing that as soon as he'd signed on to join Jinshan's team, over a year ago.

"Good morning, Lena."

Speak of the devil. "Hello, Natesh."

He dabbed at his sweaty brown skin with a handkerchief. "Warm day."

"Yes." Her voice was calm. Inside her mind was the pain and burning of ten thousand battles. Outside she was composed. "How are things coming?"

"Alright. I'll have a status report on your desk later today."

"Very well."

She looked down the firing range. About two platoons' strength, by the looks of it. Ecuadorian regular army. They were being instructed in how to use their newly purchased weapons by Leishen Commandos.

The Leishen Commandos were an elite Chinese Special Forces unit. They were part of the People's Liberation Army Air Force. For the past few years, this particular unit had been taking part in several training exercises a year in Central and South American nations. It was part of China's national security policy to strengthen relations with Latin America through training and education.

Lena walked over to a tarped area about twenty yards back from the firing range. The gunfire had ceased for the moment. A mixed group of soldiers—both locals and Chinese—were going over weapons-cleaning procedures. She approached one of the Leishen Commando officers. His head was shaven. His face looked gaunt and tanned. Glossy with sweat and oil.

"Good day, Captain." She spoke in Mandarin, her words measured. "Perhaps you have a few moments to spare?"

He looked up, a suspicious frown on his face. "Who are you?"

"My name is Lena Chou, and I work—"

Recognition hit him, and he nodded and spoke rapidly. "Of course, of course. My apologies for not recognizing you. They told me you would be coming. If you please." He held out his hand to direct her to the far side of the covered area. Out of earshot. "How may I be of service?"

Lena said, "How many of our men are now on this base?"

"As of today, we have two battalions of Leishen. And about two hundred support troops for support and logistics. More are coming in every day now,

including the Junxun recruits. Almost fifteen hundred in total."

"How are the preparations going?"

"We have been working with the same two Ecuadorian battalions for the past two weeks. Some of them are making good progress in weapons proficiency. Obviously, their knowledge of the local area is very good. But they have very limited knowledge of strategy and tactics. And…" He frowned, looking concerned.

"Yes?"

"They are lazy. And undisciplined. Not the same quality of soldier we are used to dealing with. These men have never seen combat."

"We don't need these men to win the war for us. We do need them to help support our supply chain as we begin to mass our forces. Do you foresee any problems with that?"

The captain shook his head. "I don't think so." He looked back at the gaggle of men cleaning rifles on the wooden counter on the other side of the covered area, then looked back at Lena. "If I may ask, ma'am, when will it all begin?"

"Soon," she said.



THE CAPTAIN TOOK her to his commander, a lieutenant colonel who recognized Lena on sight. It wasn't hard. Just look for the half-beautiful, half-scarred Chinese woman who was almost six feet tall.

Still, the Chinese officer showed her nothing but respect, and Lena thought to herself that he must have been briefed by his superiors. She wondered how that conversation went. *There will be a woman coming. Do whatever she says. She has the ear of our leadership. And a penchant for violence.*

"Good day, Colonel."

"Good day, Miss Chou. I am pleased that you have joined us. I have been instructed to make myself and my men available to you. I assure you, whatever you need is yours."

They sat at his desk, situated in the corner of the command post tent. Dim artificial lights. The sound of a generator running outside. Cables and wires ran along the floor. There were very few computers. Charts were sprawled

out over a large center table. Half a dozen Chinese soldiers were working on them, with a few Ecuadorian officers in tow.

A light rain fell outside. She could see it through the tent's open entryway, and could hear the pitter-patter of the raindrops on the tarp overhead.

"Colonel, what are your standing orders?"

He looked around the room, taking in who was in earshot. "My orders are to train our partners in Ecuador, and make preparations for a large influx of reinforcements on this base." He smiled. "Reinforcements beyond these young college students who I am told will start arriving soon."

He was referring to the thousands of Junxun candidates who were to begin arriving today. He continued, "I am told to expect heavy military reinforcements at any time—by sea and air."

She nodded. "And after the reinforcements arrive?"

He stared back at her, not saying a word.

"Good. That is the correct answer, if anyone asks. I take it that the Ecuadorian military is in the dark."

"That is correct. As are many of my own men."

"How is the training with the locals going?"

He took in a breath. "I have been a part of several cross-training evolutions over the past few years. As you likely know, our nation has begun supplying several Latin American countries with weapons and military systems. These pieces of hardware are not simple. They are quite advanced and require much training to become proficient."

She caught movement outside the tent. About fifty yards away, Natesh was headed toward them with a few Ecuadorian soldiers. One had a bright silver star on the center of his cover. She turned back to the colonel. "And?"

"And there is not the same sense of urgency and professionalism here," he said. "It's just a job to them. They don't think they will ever use these skills in combat. The Ecuadorian soldiers arrive in the morning, they do the minimum, and they are home each night. We've worked with the Venezuelans, the Ecuadorians, Bolivians and some in Argentina. I don't have confidence in the ability of these men to fight. The just don't have the motivation."

"I understand. What is their role at the Manta base?"

"They still see it as *their* base. So they are standing perimeter security. We are only just now beginning to get our defenses operational. Surface-to-

air missiles, radar, and such."

Natesh and the party of Ecuadorian soldiers entered the tent. Natesh had a worried look on his face. As he made eye contact with Lena, he mouthed, "Sorry."

She raised an eyebrow and shook her head. *No problem, my friend. This is what I want.*

The Chinese lieutenant colonel Lena had been speaking with rose to his feet. He saluted the Ecuadorian man with the star on his cover. "Good morning, sir. How may I—"

Red-faced, the Ecuadorian general spewed forth spittle as he screamed. Lena's Spanish wasn't as good as it had once been, but she understood what he said. "Who the hell is this Chinese *puta* who dares to summon me on my own base?"

All the people working in the command post tent stopped what they were doing and turned. No one spoke.

The general looked Lena up and down. He contorted his face as he saw her scars. "What the fuck happened to you? Are you the *puta* who thinks she can tell me what to do?"

He walked up to her, standing a foot away. "I am the commanding officer on this base. I am a *general*. You have no authority over me. I let you Chinese onto our base because our country has agreements with yours on training and weapons sales. But I can make you leave anytime I want. Don't you *dare* send your Indian servant to come get me ever again. Do you understand me?"

His men stood behind him, smirking at the dressing-down. They were fat, Lena noticed, and their uniforms were sweat-stained. One of them was eyeing Lena's chest.

Lena had come to her feet when they entered. She did so out of habit, more than out of respect. She said, "General, do you speak English? I assume that you don't speak Mandarin, and my Spanish is not very good."

He glared at her and said, "I speak English."

She spoke softly. A subdued tone. She wanted him to think that he had power over her. "General, I would like to apologize for any appearance of impropriety. Surely I did not mean to imply that you were subservient to me. Clearly, you are a great military leader. I expect that you are an accomplished strategic planner. A brilliant tactician who can teach our Chinese soldiers many things."

The Ecuadorian general narrowed his eyes at her. “I could teach the Chinese many things if I had the time. But I am a busy man. This is not my job. You Chinese are here to teach my men how to use the weapons that you have sold us. That is *all* we need.”

She nodded respectfully. “Of course, of course.”

The general said, “I don’t know why we need so many of you here. But if that is what our military leaders have agreed to, then so be it.”

She walked over to the large map spread out on the center table. The men who stood there, silently staring, moved out of the way. “Now, General, as you are in charge of this base, I hope you don’t mind walking us through the security positions that you have set up? Natesh, the colonel, and I wish to be well versed in what—”

The general held up his hand. “I told you that I don’t have time for this. I do not answer to you. Now you listen to me, *puta*, this is the last time I will be speaking with you. Who are you? Are you with the weapons manufacturer? The Chinese government?”

She said, “I represent the interests of China.”

He spat on the floor. “You will work with someone on my staff. Unless…” He smiled and examined her body, then turned and said something in rapid Spanish. Laughter from his entourage. “No, I think this Chinese *puta* is not good-looking enough even for that. Perhaps with a bag over her head to cover those scars?” He stood over her, smirking.

Lena could see Natesh flush, and the Chinese lieutenant colonel tense up, looking to her for direction. She didn’t flinch. She just stared silently into the eyes of the Ecuadorian general.

Uncomfortable with her gaze, he looked away and said, “Do not waste my time like this again.” He turned and walked out, followed by his smirking underlings. One of them, while looking at her scarred neck and face, make a comment, and the others laughed on their way out.

She stared at the Ecuadorian men as they left the tent. Then she gestured to Natesh and the Chinese lieutenant colonel. Lena said, “Colonel, could you clear the room for a moment? I wish to speak with you two alone.”

The officer looked at the Chinese soldiers in the tent and waved for them to leave. A moment later, the three of them were alone, standing over the large map on the center table.

“So that man is what you have been dealing with here?” She looked back and forth between the two of them.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Natesh said.

“Is he impeding your progress?”

Natesh sighed. “We have a host of impediments. He is just one of them.”

“Give me your update, Natesh. I don’t want to wait any longer.”

Natesh wobbled his head from side to side. “You need a supply chain created from scratch. That is what Jinshan has asked me to work on here. I’ve done the math. Do you know how big your inventories will need to be to support the flood of troops that you will have arriving?”

“How big?”

“In dollars, the inventory level is equivalent to that of the entire North American automobile industry. Enormous. But the automotive companies have had *decades* to put their supply chain in place. They have teams of *thousands* of expert purchasers and material supply managers. Men to plan the manufacturing, so that they have the right quantities of materials produced and available to them at the right time. Men to manage the transportation, so that it is delivered to the right warehouse at the right time. Men to manage the warehouses themselves, so that when one is filled up, the excess inventory gets moved to a backup location and doesn’t clog up the trucks and trains.”

She tapped her foot. “And you are saying that we do not have this in place?”

“I’m saying that there is a complicated network that needs to be set up, and no one has started filling those roles until now.”

The lieutenant colonel frowned and said, “The Chinese military has an enormous group dedicated to logistics—”

“The Chinese military isn’t fully on-boarded to this plan yet,” Natesh said. “You know that. And more importantly, the Chinese military has been static on Mainland China for *generations*. They have neither the experience nor the expertise to do this.”

The officer said, “I don’t see why it is so complicated. Just order the supplies. Get the fuel and bullets. We will do the rest.”

“You are kidding, right? These Chinese military and intelligence men I’ve been working with know *nothing* about what is needed. They can plan for how your army will attack just fine. But then they will run out of bullets and fuel and it won’t matter. You will need a river of supplies constantly flowing to feed your army as it marches through Central America and Mexico. The moment this Slinky of tanks and jeeps expands and slows, your

chances of success will as well. Trust me, I've read every book on war that I can get my hands on, and I know modern supply chains. The logistics and supply chain is quite possibly the most important factor in a military victory. And *this* one has yet to be created."

Lena observed him. She knew just how intelligent he was and took his words to heart. "What is your solution?"

Natesh held out his hands. "I mean…" He half-laughed in exasperation. "I mean, you are asking for a miracle. This timeline wasn't supposed to be so near-term. I was told—"

Lena raised her voice ever so slightly. "You were told what you needed to know. Do you have a solution?"

"I will need help. Assistants. Ones who have experience in this sort of thing."

"What do you need?"

"I need a team that can support me. A competent team. Not just college students from China. I need the members of my consulting firm to assist me in this."

"From America? You can't be serious." She thought about it. "We will get you help. Chinese consultants versed in the Latin American supply chain. We cannot risk using Americans."

He paced back and forth over the map, his words rapid. "Fine. Just make sure they are good. And get them here quick."

Lena crossed her arms. "Done. But we'll need them under close observation. And there will be strict rules on what they can communicate and with whom. You'll need to make that clear. I'll have some of the colonel's men overseeing things to make sure there are no security breaches."

Natesh nodded. "I understand."

Lena said, "So do you have any good news?"

"The tent camps on this base are being set up quickly and efficiently. The Chinese soldiers that are already here have prepared well for the imminent arrival of the Junxun students. The students will live in these camps. They will be trained by the Chinese commandos who are already here. The first step will be military indoctrination. After the first week, I will begin using them in logistics roles."

"Good. What else is working well?"

"I have been pleasantly surprised by how many Chinese-made weapons and weapons systems are already in place."

The Chinese colonel nodded. “We have built up a sizeable amount of Chinese weapons and military vehicles in Latin America these past few years. It is being used by different national governments. Different pieces of hardware are in different locations. For instance, many of our armored personnel carriers are at a single base in Venezuela. But there are several hundred anti-aircraft missiles located in Ecuador. And we have done a great deal of military trade with Bolivia, as well.”

Lena said, “How long will it take to transport all those supplies here?”

“To Ecuador?”

“Yes.”

“About two days by rail from Venezuela,” Natesh said. “But it’s through the mountains, and out of the way if the convoys will be heading north. What the colonel and I had discussed was sending a contingent of our men—those with experience using the vehicles that would be requisitioned—to Venezuela. They would meet us just north of the Panama Canal. The Bolivian convoy would be traveling about three days up the coast before meeting us here.”

Lena saw the nervousness in Natesh. “What’s wrong?”

“These movements would be open and obvious. They could only be safely executed after a total communications blackout occurs. And we would need air defense to ensure no reconnaissance flights picked up what was going on.”

“Colonel?”

“He’s right. That will be a major challenge. We will need to protect multiple large convoys from US air power. Once we get to Mexico and the continental United States, their aircraft won’t even need tankers to refuel. They will then be able to rapidly and continuously target our land forces at that point. How will we prevent this from occurring?”

Natesh looked at Lena.

“Colonel,” Lena said sharply, “that will be enough for now. While I respect your expertise and the work you are doing for us, you are not yet privy to the entire scope of our operation. When we are ready to divulge further information, you will be informed of our plans. For now, please continue to train your men and prepare this base for the imminent arrival of our troops. That information in itself is highly confidential, and I implore you to keep it to yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am. Of course.”

Lena looked at the map and then up at the two men. “Soon this base will become the first military outpost in China’s expansion into the West. Keep working to make that a success.”



THE COLONEL DROVE Lena around the base in his jeep, making sure that she was aware of the perimeter defenses, as well as the plans for growth.

A giant grey transport aircraft flew overhead, landing on the runway.

The colonel said, “Ah, so they have begun to arrive.”

Lena said, “Are those our new recruits?”

“Indeed they are, ma’am.”

She shook her head, amazed that Admiral Song had been able to get it done so fast. He had organized a voluntary winter Junxun for all first-year university students and those who would be attending university the following year. The deal was sweetened by promising highly sought-after government jobs. Jinshan’s cyberoperations team had amplified the message over Chinese social media, and over two thousand students had volunteered so far.

While they’d thought the special winter training would take place at an island base just off the coast, the Chinese military transports actually took them across the Pacific Ocean to Manta, Ecuador. That was one piece of information that the students had not been aware of when they’d signed up. The other was that their military service was indefinite.

The whole world would know soon enough, Lena thought.

The jeep stopped near one of the hangars. A PLA captain walked up and saluted the colonel. Lena squinted as she realized that she knew the man.

Lieutenant Lin.

Now promoted. Captain Lin. She was rarely surprised, but she found this shocking. Her face betrayed nothing, however.

“Good day, Captain,” the colonel said. “What do you have for us?”

Lin looked at Lena and Natesh, but it appeared that he didn’t recognize her. Perhaps it was the scars. Or the two decades of age. “Sir, we are filling up the hangars with supplies, and sending out clothing and other materials to the new personnel.”

“Very well. Is everything on schedule?”

“Yes, sir.”

Now Captain Lin paused when he looked at Lena. She was unsure if he recognized her or if he was just staring at her scars.

“Something wrong, Captain?”

“No, Colonel.”

“Very well, that is all.”

“Yes, sir.”

The man saluted and walked back towards the hangar, where they were unloading the contents of a pallet onto the back of a truck. She saw him turn and glance back at her as he walked.

Lena said, “Is he one of yours?”

The colonel said, “You mean is he one of my commandos? Oh no. He is just a logistics officer. One of the ones who came over with us. Why?”

“No reason,” Lena replied.

14

Panama

Chase and the US Navy foreign affairs officer shared a cab back to the US embassy after they finished the *Farragut* briefing. The Naval officer was only needed to make sure that there was Navy involvement when providing orders to the Navy ship captain.

Chase then traveled to a CIA safe house on the eastern side of Panama City. Several members of Task Force SILVERSMITH were already there, including specialists from the NSA and military cryptologists. There were also two US Marines wearing plain clothes.

Chase shook hands with the Marines, a senior enlisted by the name of Darby, and the unit's commanding officer, Captain Calhoun.

Gunnery Sergeant Austin Darby and Captain Jake Calhoun were members of the US Marine Corps Special Operations Command. The outfit had recently been renamed the Marine Raiders, an homage to the elite Marine Corps units of World War II. In 1942, Raider battalions were involved in combat action against the Japanese in places like the Solomon Islands and Guadalcanal. Today, the Marine Raiders were the Marine Corps' own elite unit within SOCOM, the US Special Operations Command.

Chase had worked with Marine special operators in Iraq. They were used there to train and fight alongside Iraqi special forces in battles against ISIS. Chase considered the Marine Raiders among the elite soldiers of the world. They were much like the SEAL teams he had been a part of.

The CIA briefer sat them down at a table and opened his laptop. After

typing a few keystrokes, he brought up a screen that said OPERATION SILVERSMITH.

"Who comes up with this stuff?" asked the gunnery sergeant.

The CIA man replied, "Actually, for this one…I did."

"Ah."

"Alright, gentlemen, we now have approval to move forward with this portion of SILVERSMITH. Some quick background…" He tapped a key and the screen changed, showing a bar graph. "Over the past decade, China has sold an increasing number of arms to nations around the world, including Latin America. It started off with just nonlethal supplies. Uniforms. Medical aid. But in recent years, they have switched to some more advanced weaponry…"

An image of two Chinese Z-9 helicopters appeared. Then an image of an armored personnel carrier. Then a tank.

"And that has raised some eyebrows. There are two main concerns. First, the Chinese are arming nations that have sometimes-adversarial relationships with the US, like Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia. Also—many of these financial deals didn't make sense."

"What do you mean?" Chase was familiar with parts of the operation, but hadn't been a part of this brief preparation.

The CIA briefer said, "We looked at the finances of these transactions. The Chinese didn't make a profitable deal, in many cases. They sent Venezuela way more APCs and tanks than they were paid for. Now, the Chinese, as a rule, are good businessmen. They don't make mistakes like that, unless it's on purpose."

"What are you saying?"

"We think they saw it as an investment."

Chase frowned. "You mean, like foreign aid? In order to have a good relationship with these countries, so they would be partners in the future?"

The CIA briefer shook his head. "Not just that. We think that they were pre-staging their arms. Putting military equipment over on this side of the pond so they would have easy access later on."

Gunnery Sergeant Darby said, "Clever little bastards."

"A week ago we received signals intelligence that Chinese military units were conducting operations near Manta, Ecuador. Reconnaissance images"—the CIA briefer flipped through a few screen shots of an air base—"showed an increasingly large presence of Chinese personnel, weapons, and transport

aircraft. These are Chinese construction companies plowing the fields, Chinese defense contractors selling the arms, Chinese troops training the Ecuadorian armies.

"Stuff like this has been going on for years, but not in concentrations like this. China is the largest arms seller in the world today. And much of it goes to nations unfriendly to the US. But the number of troops here is abnormally high. And it has raised a lot of concern in Washington. We now suspect that there was at least some Chinese involvement in recent attacks on US interests around the world—this includes the Persian Gulf attacks, the US cyberattack known as the Blackout Attack, and possibly even the Beltway attack."

Chase watched the reaction of the two Marines. He wondered how long it had been since they'd been able to catch up on the news. The mainstream media was a twenty-four-hour billboard for the Beltway attack and the imminent US war with Iran, but there was almost nothing about China. That secret was being tightly controlled by US intelligence.

But Chase knew better. And now that Jinshan's operative was spilling his guts to Langley interrogators, others would too. The Chinese—or Jinshan and his allies—were planning a major military attack on the United States. The wheels were already in motion. The cyberattack on the US satellite and communications network last month, while not crippling, had done an incredible amount of damage.

The American GPS system was still down. Military satellite communications were still down. The US Internet was just now recovering, with billions of dollars of data lost from tech companies' data storage centers. And perhaps the biggest impact—the US economy was plummeting from the shock to the markets. People no longer had confidence that the Internet would be there for them. Perhaps they never should have had that confidence to begin with…

David and the American members of the Red Cell had unwittingly been planning a Chinese invasion of America. If the Red Cell plans were being implemented, then the Iranian attack on the US a few weeks ago was just a diversion, created by Jinshan. And Chase had seen with his own eyes that Lena Chou had been a part of that operation near Bandar Abbas.

After the Beltway attack, nearly eighty percent of Americans, according to the latest polls, supported a war with Iran. But they were being misled. And if Jinshan succeeded, it would be one of the greatest head fakes the world had ever seen.

The CIA briefer tapped his keyboard and brought up a grainy image of what looked like a trailer with a bunch of antennae.

“This is a PLA mobile communications unit. We took this picture last week.”

Chase said, “Where?”

“At the base in Manta.”

Chase said, “I thought the satellites were down.”

“This picture was taken from an Air Force drone. But once we saw the SAM sites get erected, we stopped sending aircraft overhead. That’s when we placed the MARSOC team nearby.”

Chase looked at the two Marine Raiders. “Have you got eyes on them now?”

Captain Calhoun said, “We’ve got a recon team positioned north of the base near Manta.”

“What have they seen?”

“A total of twelve aircraft drop-offs that we’ve witnessed so far.”

“What airframe?”

“Chinese Xian Y-20 military transports. Long-range, big suckers. They look just like Air Force C-17s.”

Chase said, “Twelve aircraft. That’s a lot of supplies. If they were selling arms to Ecuador, it would be a lot more economical to transport by ship.”

“That’s what your CIA guys told us in Colombia.”

“So what did they take off those planes?”

Gunnery Sergeant Darby said, “Not just *what*. *Who.*”

“Excuse me?”

“They took a lot of pallets of stuff off those planes, that’s for sure. But that wasn’t what the big stink has been about. It’s *who* they’ve been unloading off those planes.”

The captain reached down into his backpack and produced a small tablet device. He held it for all to see and scrolled through the pictures.

Chase said, “That’s a lot of Chinese soldiers. How many?”

“Almost fifteen hundred by our last count.”

Chase whistled. “Do we know what unit they came from? Specialty?”

“The CIA guys we’ve been working with in Colombia think some of them might be Leishen Commandos. PLA airborne special forces.”

“That’s a lot of special forces.”

“Yup. They’ve also started sending planeloads of very green-looking

troops. New recruits, it looks like."

Chase said, "Really? That's odd. Why would they do that?"

The CIA briefer said, "We still don't know."

"There were also a few other interesting faces in the mix," the captain said, showing another image.

Chase's world stopped. He tried not to show any outward change in expression, but he felt his face getting hot. He saw the CIA briefer watching him and wondered how much backstory he had gotten.

It was Lena Chou.

The photo showed her walking down the ramp of one of the aircraft, her dark, flowing hair draped over one side of her face. Covering the burns that Chase had left.

"When did she arrive?"

"Two days ago."

"Has this been sent to Langley?"

"No clue. That's you guys' job, remember? As far as I know, you spooks are having just as many problems with comms as we are."

The CIA briefer said, "I'll make sure to take these latest images back. Thank you, Captain."

Calhoun handed over the tablet.

The CIA briefer said, "Gentlemen, there is a piece of hardware that we will refer to as the crypto key located inside that mobile comms unit. This crypto key could help us unlock a lot of mysteries. Right now there are competing theories on China's level of aggression towards the United States. We believe that the Chinese president and highest-level leadership are unaware of what some of their military assets have been doing to cause harm to the United States. By taking this crypto key, our team of experts here in Panama will be able to provide the Chinese president with infallible proof that there is a contingent of rogue operators in the Chinese military and intelligence community. This could help prevent war between the US and China, and possibly stop war between the US and Iran."

Gunny Darby said, "So if we steal this piece of equipment…that's going to tell you what the Chicoms are up to? That what you're telling me?"

Chase nodded. "That's about it, in a nutshell."

"And what are we stealing?"

The CIA briefer said, "A piece of crypto. A big black box. Their key that lets us cut through all their encryption on the Chinese military datalink

network. It's a new system, but we've got an NSA team that can hack into it, if we get that crypto key."

Darby said, "Alright, so we go in, kill all fifteen hundred of them Chinese Special Forces, plus a few Ecuadorians for good measure, and steal that trailer. Maybe I could drive my Ford F-150 down there and hook her up? Then you send down a C-130 and pick us up, and we'll be out of there lickety split. That it? Damn, I'm good at this shit."

Captain Calhoun smiled at his gunnery sergeant. "Please excuse this old man. He's growing senile in his old age."

The CIA briefer said, "ROE—no use of force with deadly weapons, unless in self-defense."

The Marines went silent for a moment.

Captain Calhoun said, "Sorry, maybe I'm missing something, but why is that?"

Chase frowned. "Because they aren't sure if the Chinese are really bad guys yet. Sorry. I know this won't be easy. I'll be coming with you. We'll have nonlethal weapons to take out the men manning the comms unit. The point of this mission is to prevent World War Three. If we go in there with weapons blazing…well, that kind of defeats the purpose."

Calhoun said, "Seems to me like this mission isn't to prevent World War Three, it's to confirm whether it's already started or not."

"Probably an accurate statement," Chase conceded.

The Marines looked at each other. "Alright, how are we stealing it, then?"

Chase said, "I've been trained on how to remove the crypto key box. I just need your help getting in to the trailer."

"Sir, I'm from the Deep South," Gunny Darby said. "I got lots of experience sneaking up on trailers to get to my girlfriends without their dads knowing. You don't have to worry about a thing."

Chase smiled. "Glad to hear it, Gunny."

He winked back. "What's the plan for extraction?"

The CIA briefer said, "It will be a delayed extraction after the mission is accomplished. We recommend a small team of about four of you to go in. You'll steal the device without being noticed. We'll have a way for you to incapacitate the men manning the comms trailer. Their shifts are for four to six hours each, so if you go in during a shift change, you should have about that long before they're discovered."

Captain Calhoun said, "That sounds like wishful thinking."

“It may be. But we’ll have a local asset on the base with a small supply truck going by the comms trailer when we’re ready to get out of there. Once you get the crypto key, you’ll ride in the back of a supply truck for about a mile. That will get you far enough away from the scene that you won’t risk capture. The truck will stop somewhere along the road that no one will be able to see—and drop you off back into the jungle. That team will then hike it back to your larger team’s recon position on the mountain, north of the base. It will then be another few miles to the extraction LZ. We will have a pair of army helicopters waiting in Colombia, assigned to pick you up.”

Chase turned to the briefer. “I thought we talked about this. It can’t be a delayed extraction. It puts us all at unnecessary risk. And the timing might be off.”

The CIA briefer sighed. Chase could tell that he didn’t like giving him this information. Don’t shoot the messenger.

He said, “Mr. Manning, we looked at every option. In this situation, the enemy has air superiority and is likely able to prohibit air and water extraction in the immediate area. As long as you’re able to accomplish the mission undetected to begin with, you’ll still enjoy the jungle terrain’s cover and concealment. You and your team are to travel back up the mountain, undetected, and reconnect with the rest of the MARSOC unit. You’ll then travel on foot to an LZ that’s a safe distance away. It will be out of range and hidden by terrain—so the anti-aircraft batteries they have at Manta won’t be able to shoot down the helicopters.”

“What if they get on foot and chase us? And maybe bring some RPGs? Or MANPADS?” said Captain Calhoun, using the term for shoulder-mounted surface-to-air missiles.

Chase said, “And you said we’ve got…what, four days before the codes are switched on this thing, right? This plan kills a lot of that time. I’m sorry, but this seems too risky. Who the hell thought this up?”

The CIA briefer said, “You’ll have ninety-six hours to get it to us once you remove the crypto key. After that, we don’t think the data will be usable, as the codes will reset. Gentlemen, the JSOC planners have been over all the options. This is the best we’ve got. You’ll have to stay undetected and move fast. We did the calculations and expect you to travel on foot for approximately eight hours. The air extraction process will then get you to Panama City three hours later. It should be enough time.”

Calhoun looked at Chase. “We’ll have to come up with something to help

with escape and evasion if we run into resistance. Let's talk offline." He didn't look happy.



A FEW HOURS LATER, Chase left his hotel and spotted Darby waiting for him across the street. Darby leaned casually against the black metal streetlight pole. A light grey hoodie covered his shaved head, and he had his hands in his pockets. Wraparound sunglasses. Khaki shorts and hiking boots.

As Chase walked outside his hotel lobby, Darby locked eyes with him and gave a slight nod. They joined up in silence and began walking down the street.

"Gunny."

"Mr. Manning."

"You ready?"

"Yup. One of my guys is parked around the block. He'll take us to the airport. We've got a small plane that'll fly us down the coast."

"Sounds good."

It was a two-hour plane ride south, into Colombia. Darby slept the whole way. Calhoun looked like he was going over things in his head. They landed on a tiny little dirt strip in the middle of the night. Glow sticks lined the runway.

The three men got out of the aircraft, and it immediately turned around and took back off, its engine noise fading into the night. They walked through long grass to the end of the makeshift runway. Four Chevy SUVs were parked in a column. The windows were rolled down. It was December, but still a humid seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit in this part of the world.

There were about four men in each vehicle. Chase could see that they all wore jungle camouflage. In the moonlight, he could tell that most had on camo face paint. White eyes stared at Chase.

"Gunny, you guys can change over here." One of the men pointed to the lead vehicle, its rear hatch open. "We've got his stuff ready too."

Someone took one of the glow sticks off the runway and placed it in the trunk of the lead vehicle so they could see their gear better.

"You need boots?" Darby asked.

"No thanks." He had learned the hard way never to break in a pair of

unused boots when on a mission. It was the one article of clothing he had on that wasn't really civilian attire. Darby and Chase hurriedly threw on their gear. Then Chase got in the same vehicle as Darby, and the convoy began rolling.

It was bumpy, mountainous terrain. The car smelled of mint chew. Dip. Every few seconds he could hear someone spitting into an empty plastic bottle.

Darby said, "Mr. Manning, you want some of this?" He held up his tin.

Chase shook his head. "No. Thanks anyway."

Darby shrugged.

"How long until we get there?" Chase asked.

"Shouldn't take us more than an hour to get to where the helo will pick us up," Darby said. "About an hour in the air after that. They'll drop us off in some pretty thick rainforest. It'll be another day's hike after they drop us off. Don't want to get too close, you know."

The vehicles came to a halt. An H-60 was spinning in the field about one hundred yards away. The other Marines got out of their SUVs. They threw on their gear and marched in a column toward the aircraft.



TWO DAYS LATER, Chase saw the Y-20s with his own eyes.

"Goddamn, those things are big."

One of them was on a slow final approach. Dark grey, wings sloped downward. Four engines and a T tail, just like the C-17. Its flight path took it about even in altitude with their mountain location. Chase's chest reverberated as the jet engines drowned out all other noise. The freaking thing was a monster.

They lay in thick jungle brush, watching the airfield from a mountain several miles to the north. Everything was wet, and a light mist hovered above the trees. The sounds of jungle birds and bugs filled the air.

Chase looked through a sniper spotting scope, examining the base. The two Marines who had been serving as the recon team on the hill for the past week lay next to Chase and Gunnery Sergeant Darby. The other dozen men on the MARSOC team were spread out in the forest around them, forming a defensive perimeter.

One of the Marines said to Chase, “Two days ago they started putting up sandbag pillboxes stationed at all four corners of the base. Today was the first time we saw them place anti-aircraft weapons inside. The SAM units were unprotected before that.”

Chase looked at each of the pillboxes. “Looks like they’ve got two 35mm twin guns on the eastern side. And I don’t see anything on the western pillboxes. Just personnel.”

“MANPADS.”

“Got it.”

“Saw them doing training on them earlier. My guess is once they unload some of these recent cargo arrivals, they might put something in there more sophisticated.”

Chase said, “Alright, thanks. What else?”

“Take a look about a mile to the east of the airfield. You’ll see bulldozers and a tent city going up. They’ve got a few semipermanent structures, but most of it’s pretty mobile.”

“Strength?”

“That’s where they all are. About fifteen hundred, I’d say. But they go out in groups into the fields and forest farther over to the east. Lot of training, that’s for sure. We hear small-arms fire about round the clock right now. Three days ago they even were firing off mortars.”

“How much participation from the Ecuadorians?”

“Oh, they’re there alright. They got some general or something who has a nice car and an entourage.”

“Communications center?”

“Just south of the airfield. About three hundred yards from the runway.”

Chase looked at the gunnery sergeant. “Sounds like it would be pretty hard for us to get access to that.”

“I agree,” said the gunny.

“What were they hoping to get in there?”

Chase said, “An important piece of hardware.”

Captain Calhoun said, “When do you want to move?”

Chase said, “The longer we wait, the better their fortifications are going to get.”

Gunnery Sergeant Darby said, “And to be clear—if we can get you into the communications center, would you know what you’re looking for?”

Chase nodded. “Yes. They gave me training on how to identify it and

remove it." He patted a zipped pouch near his waist. "They gave me something that looks like a bottle opener to unlock it. And I've got wire cutters."

"How often do they change out personnel in the comm center?" Chase asked the Marine who had been watching the base.

"About every six hours. Something like that. I've got it written down."

"And how many are in there?"

"Just two at a time."

"So for watch turnover, when the door gets opened, we've got four to worry about."

The gunny gave him a look. "And anybody who sees us walk up to it. Remember, you got a couple of bunkers down there. Those guys have got nothing better to do than look around and see what's out of place."

Chase said, "Then we'll need a distraction."

"We're Marines," the gunny said. "We'd always be happy to blow something up for you."

Chase smiled. "I appreciate that." He frowned. "Do we still have access to the drone?"

"Yeah, but they told us not to use it. Too risky."

Chase rubbed his chin. "You know, maybe I do want you to blow something up after all."

The gunny smiled. "Now you're talking."



THEY WAITED until the next night. The day was spent pulling in extra help from the remaining Marines in the Raider unit and carefully watching the patterns of the base.

There were two valuable bits of work that any reconnaissance unit performed. One was to report precisely what they saw. How many enemy troops? What type of vehicles? Pictures and video were even better. It allowed the experienced analysts at the DIA, CIA, and other agencies to extract information that the untrained eye would miss.

The other important thing recon units did was to take note of *patterns*. How many hours *between* aircraft arrivals? What *times* were the watch turnovers? How *long* did the watch turnovers take? Were there different

numbers of guards at night versus during the daytime?

Since the Blackout attacks of a few weeks ago, military communications had been severely hampered. That meant that there were no pictures or video being instantly streamed back to the collection and analyst teams.

This was why the CIA had sent Chase down here to participate in this operation. He had been trained on what to look for. And based on what he witnessed, he had been briefed on what action to take.

The Marines in this unit were excellent observers. Chase suspected they had a lot of experience over in the sandbox doing just this.

Captain Calhoun had placed two of his Marines near the extraction landing zone to the north. He moved the rest to the top of their observation mountain. From there, they had access to a nearby dirt road that lead to the base. This would be where the small group would get dropped off after stealing the crypto key.

The MARSOC team also had the option of humping it down the other side of the ridgeline and sprinting to the extraction LZ in about an hour if things got too dicey.

Four men infiltrated the Manta base. What could have been a thirty-minute journey took seven hours. Chase, Gunnery Sergeant Darby, and two of the other Marine Raiders walked, crawled, and slid down from their elevated observation point through the jungle brush. Once down the mountain, they stayed concealed while following a stream that ran around the airfield.

It was a balmy eighty-two degrees. The light mist that covered the top of the ridge now grew thicker. This would reduce visibility between the Marines on top of the mountain and Chase's small team of infiltrators. Chase silently cursed himself. As was often the case, the weather would negatively impact their plans.

They didn't speak over radios. If the adversary had been a third-world military unit or some wannabe ISIS group, they might have used headsets and encrypted comms, but the Chinese were a different story. Any radio communications, whether encrypted or not, might alert the Chinese communications personnel that a military unit was operating in close proximity. And that could signal doom.

So they synced their watches and agreed on a timeline. If Calhoun saw that Chase had infiltrated the communications center without any trouble, then he didn't need to do a thing. Just wait for the team of four to make it

back, and then they would all head to the extraction point. The four Chinese communications personnel would hopefully not be found until the Raider unit was loaded onto the Blackhawk and headed north to safety. That was the best-case scenario.

If, however, either Calhoun couldn't see Chase's progress, or the time was after 2300 local and Chase hadn't entered the comm center, Calhoun was to use the drone for its special purpose.

Crawling through the tall grass next to the stream was painfully slow. The sun had set around 1830. That had helped. But there were freaking Chinese and Ecuadorian military all over the place.

Chase's team had made gradual progress once they had gotten near the airfield. If they moved too fast, they risked being spotted. If they moved too slowly, they wouldn't make the timeline.

He looked at his watch. It was 2240. They still had about a one-hundred-yard crawl through the brush until they got close enough to the comm center. From the right angle, they could make it to the communications trailer without being seen by the watch team. The Chinese communication center's duty section turnover the past few nights had been at 2250 local time, plus or minus a few minutes.

The gunny risked a whisper. "We're gonna have to pick up the pace. If we don't make their watch turnover, it will be a lot harder to get inside."

Chase nodded.

They could hear the faint echo of voices in the distance. Laughter. Probably some of the soldiers shooting the shit while on the night shift.

They reached the edge of the jungle brush, to where it fed into the grass cutout of the air base. A few hundred yards away stood the communications center. The building was nothing more than a trailer on cinder blocks. A coil of razor wire about three feet high surrounded the structure. Dozens of antennae and a few dishes protruded up from its roof.

Two Chinese soldiers caught Chase's eye. They spoke in a loud, casual tone and headed for the communications trailer. He looked at his watch. Time: 2251. He glanced up at the ridge. The glare of base lighting made it hard for him to see anything but darkness now. He looked through his observation scope, but its night vision revealed only the layer of mist returning green and black twinkles of scintillation. Chase had no idea if Captain Calhoun was able to monitor their progress. *Shit.* Unless they hurried, Calhoun was going to switch to plan B no matter what. If the

“distraction” occurred *too* early, that would make it much harder for Chase and the men.

The two Chinese soldiers approached the entrance of the communications center.

Chase whispered, “Let’s go.”

The four men rose up from the brush. Each of them carried an MP-7, fitted with a suppressor and a forty-round magazine. Chase and the gunny had their MP-7s secured, however. They brandished suppressed shotguns that were specially designed for the use of US special operations.

The group of four walked up silently behind the two unsuspecting Chinese men who were now knocking on the door of the mobile communications center. Chase and team timed their approach so that they were just behind them at the moment that the door opened.

The Chinese soldier who opened the door saw the two Chinese men who were about to relieve him and his comrade. He also saw four men in dark tactical uniforms jogging towards them, each holding black weapons pointed in his direction.

In the split second before the shotguns began firing, a confused look appeared on his face.

The suppressed shotguns barely made any noise while firing. The silencers were modular units, which added about ten inches to the end of the weapon. They were bulky, but not heavy. The rounds were subsonic. But the quietness of these shotguns wasn’t the reason that Chase and gunny Darby were using them. It was the ammunition.

The ammunition was a type of Taser, developed from an earlier prototype called the Wireless Extended Range Electro-Muscular Projectile (XREP). Taser International created the XREP to be fired from a twelve-gauge shotgun at ranges beyond twenty-five meters.

Chase and Gunnery Sergeant Darby fired their suppressed weapons from less than three meters away. The two oncoming watch standers each took two projectile rounds in the back, while the man who had opened the door took two in the chest.

The shotgun-like shells delivered a powerful blunt impact as their small metal prongs dug into the flesh and triggered the release of electronic energy. The three men’s muscles locked up, and they fell to the ground twitching as thousands of volts of electricity ran through their body.

Darby hopped over the man in the doorway, careful not to touch him, and

found the fourth man walking towards them inside the trailer, saying something unintelligible. Darby fired two more wireless Taser rounds and the man hit the floor, shaking. Behind him, Chase and the Marines were dragging the incapacitated bodies of the men into the communications center, using special rubber gloves to remove the Taser rounds.

The trailer had a single walkway, wide enough for one person to move at a time. Chase quickly worked his way over the rows of electronics, communications equipment, and displays. Dials and knobs, all labeled in Chinese characters.

"There." Chase found the section he was looking for. The crypto key was a large rectangular box made of dark green metal, the size and shape of a DVD player. He took out his tools and began removing it as the Marines bound and gagged the Chinese men on the floor.

Chase checked his watch once more: 2304 local time. Calhoun's diversion could be any moment now.



CAPTAIN CALHOUN LOOKED through his observation scope once more, knowing he wouldn't see anything useful but hoping he would be surprised.

The fog had become so thick that it robbed him of his ability to see the base below. It would take too long and be too risky to move to a lower elevation. And it would take away the Marines' ability to make it down to the road, which the plan stipulated they must maintain access to.

He looked at his man holding the drone. "Launch it."

One of his Marines flipped the switch to turn on the small propeller and then hurled the drone like it was a giant football. The RQ-11B buzzed off into the night, a pound of C-4 strapped to its undercarriage.

They had pre-programmed its flight path. It would travel at five hundred feet above ground level and then make its way down to the runway. The C-4's detonator was set to go off on impact.

Calhoun sighed. "Alright, let's hope this works."



CHASE HAD JUST FINISHED PLACING the crypto keys in his pack when they

heard the explosion. The comm center had no windows, but the radio chatter increased dramatically.

Darby said, “Was that it?”

“Yeah. Must have been.”

“What should we do?”

“Look out the door window. Do you see a supply truck nearby?”

“I don’t see shit.”

Chase walked over to the door and cracked it open, looking around. There was no sign of any vehicle waiting for them like the CIA briefer had promised.

Chase stared down at the Chinese troops. They had all regained their ability to move, but the restraints, gags, and blindfolds kept them docile. He looked up at the gunny. “What do you think?”

“I say we go right back the way we came.”

“In the bush? Back up the hill?”

“We’ll have about five seconds of vulnerability. If they see us, we can make a run for them jeeps. They’re fifty meters away, and one of my Marines here can hotwire it if he has to. But that’s not a good option. You know it.”

“Crawling up through the brush and jungle while they’re alerted doesn’t sound great either.”

The gunny looked at the men. “You sure we shouldn’t…”

Chase shook his head. “ROE. No shooting unless it’s in self-defense.” He frowned. “Hold on, I’ve got something we can use.” He reached into his pack and pulled out a small case with a syringe. It took him about two minutes to inject each man in the ass with a dose of the stuff. The men’s eyes began to flutter and close shut.

The gunny said, “What is that?”

“It’s enough drugs to keep them out of it for several hours. That should buy us time.”

The four men stood at the door, ready with their weapons. Chase said, “Just walk normal until we get into the brush. If we move fast, it’ll catch more attention. Walk normal, and anyone who sees us might not get a good view and overlook us.”

They opened the door and walked through the opening in the razor-wire coil, then around the trailer and back into the long grass. As they crouched down into the prone position, Chase looked out over the runway. A fire truck sprayed water onto the flames. About a dozen men stood around it, staring.

He could see the Chinese troops in the nearest anti-aircraft bunker. There were three of them, each watching the flaming wreckage on the runway.

"Psst. Hey."

A short Hispanic man stood near the trees, outside the illumination near the mobile communications trailer.

The man whispered, "You guys looking for a ride?"

Chase nodded, "Yes, where is it?"

"Come." He waved. The four men followed him around the group of trees. In the darkness, Chase hadn't seen it. But there, parked in grass, was a small covered pickup truck, bags of laundry in the rear.

"Please. We go right now."

The four men piled in back.

"Put the bags on top. They won't check us on the way out. The Chinese are not guarding the gates. Only the Ecuadorians. They don't look at us when we leave. But we must go now."

A minute later, the four men lay in the back of the pickup truck, bouncing as the truck drove through the base, big white laundry bags covering them.

"Okay, we're off the base now. I will drop you off in a few minutes. There is a road up here that will take us near the mountains. That is where I am to leave you. Will that be okay?"

Chase said, "Yes. Thanks."

Ten minutes later, they were once again in the jungle, heading up the mountain. The sound of the truck fading in the distance.

Chase couldn't believe their luck. The distraction had worked perfectly. No one was looking for attackers after the explosion. There were no alarms. People were just watching the flames, curious. Like they didn't know that they were about to be at war…

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The following morning, two battalions of Chinese Special Forces soldiers stood at attention on the flight line outside the Manta base hangar. The Leishen Commandos looked like statues, Lena thought. Strong, tall and disciplined. Everything that a warrior should be.

A company of Ecuadorian regular Army stood at attention next to the Chinese. Behind them all, a few hundred of the new Chinese Junxun recruits rounded out the audience.

A small platform stood in front of them. If not for the investigative team around the drone wreckage, one might mistake this for a parade or decoration ceremony.

It was Lena's idea.

There were a few important lessons that Lena had learned from what happened the night before. One of which, was that the soldiers on the base were woefully unprepared for the conflict that lay ahead. That needed to be remedied.

The Chinese base commander had no question as to who was in charge when Lena showed up. His leadership had given him strict orders to do whatever she said. He had wanted to disperse his men immediately and begin looking for the team that raided the communications compound.

But the Ecuadorian general had intervened. He wanted an investigation completed first. Lena had been in the field, training with the Leishen Commandos. They had sent for her immediately, but it was hours before she arrived back at the base. Hours of lost time.

She needed to contact Jinshan, and inform him of the lost crypto key. She

needed to track down the Americans—she assumed it was the Americans—and attempt to retrieve the stolen equipment. But first, she needed to send a message to the soldiers on this base.

Lena walked up to Natesh. “Are the swarm drones ready?”

“They arrived yesterday afternoon. We’re working to unload them now.”

She looked in the hangar. Captain Lin was there, overseeing some of the logistics personnel as they unpacked the cargo. He stared back at her, a suspicious look on his face. A part of her wanted to walk over there and take care of him right now. But he was not a priority.

The base commander walked up to her and Natesh. “Ms. Chou, I don’t think we have time for this gathering. We need to go after the men who raided our base.”

She raised her hand. “Please be patient, Colonel. We will.”

“But they *stole* our cryptologic key. We must gain it back. If that got into the wrong *hands*—”

“Colonel, have you heard any aircraft? Have your radars picked up any aircraft?”

“No.”

“Then they are on foot, and we have the advantage. We will find them, but first I need to make a statement to the men.”

Two jeeps screeched through the gate and came to a halt just off the platform. The Ecuadorian general and his staff got out. He was fuming, screaming and swearing as he looked at Lena and the colonel.

Lena just watched him, a serious expression on her face. *Perfect timing.*

“What is the meaning of this? Who called my men here like this? You do not give orders to my men. First you crash an airplane on the runway last night, and now you have…what is this, an award ceremony?”

Curious eyes snuck quick glances among the hundreds who stood silently at attention, eager ears waiting to see how the normally restrained Lena would respond.

Lena said, “This is not an awards ceremony, General. Quite the opposite.”

He approached her, standing below the platform, suddenly aware that close to a thousand well-trained Chinese Special Forces troops stood very close to him. His voice grew much quieter. “Well, then, *what* is this?”



BY SUNRISE, Chase's team was joined up with the others under Captain Calhoun's unit.

"We probably didn't need the drone diversion."

Calhoun cursed. "Sorry. I was worried about that. But I figured it was better to stick to the plan. We couldn't see shit up here."

"What's been going on since we left?"

"The sky's cleared up, as you can see. They had a repair crew working on the runway, patching it up. And they moved the drone wreckage over to one of those hangars. The Chinese have been inspecting it all morning. Your girl is with them. The one you said is important."

Chase said, "When did she arrive?"

"Early this morning. Take a look. I have to admit, I was not expecting this…*ceremony*. I thought they would have a search party out for us by now."

"Ceremony?" Chase looked through his scope. "Damn. They must have a thousand men there. What the hell are they doing formed up like that? Why aren't they coming after us?"

Several companies stood at attention in front of a small stage. Lena and a Chinese officer stood on the stage, facing the men. Then a couple of jeeps rolled up and came to a halt right next to the stage.

"Who's that guy?"

"It's the Ecuadorian general," one of the Marines on the recon team answered. "He's been in and out of the base several times since the Chinese have been here."

The Ecuadorian general stood very close to Lena. Neither looked happy. The general crossed his arms, a smug look on his face. Lena turned and began to address the men in formation.

Chase wished he could hear what she was saying.



LENA STOOD with her fingers touching while she spoke, as if she was in prayer. Her voice was strong and carried well over the windless morning.

"Last night, a military special operations team infiltrated our base. They stole something very important. They then set off an explosion on the runway and made their escape."

Lena watched their faces as she spoke. The Chinese soldiers were stoic.

The Ecuadorians and the young Chinese Junxun recruits were squinting and fidgeting in the morning sun.

The Ecuadorian general looked surprised at her words. Perhaps this was the first time he was hearing all the details. Well, it was too late for him now.

Lena continued, “If we are to accomplish our mission here, there can be no mistakes like this again. The time for training is nearing an end. As many of you Leishen must suspect, you would not all have been sent here if this were only a simple training exercise. So what is it, then? Why are we here? And who has infiltrated our base?”

She pointed at the drone wreckage, laid out on a sheet like a crime scene. “That is an American drone. They *attacked* your brothers in arms. Just as the Americans attack peaceful nations all over the world.”

She looked at their faces as they listened. The general was quiet now. Confused, but listening.

Lena said, “China has been oppressed by the West for too long. The Americans cripple us through unfair trade, leaving our families poor and helpless. They invade countries in the name of national security, all the while making their own nation rich by stealing natural resources. The Americans encroach on our territorial boundaries in the South China Sea and fail to recognize all of our territory. They promote religions of hatred. They worship violence and materialism. They demonize our Chinese society that only wishes to bring peace and equality to all of its citizens.

“But China will stand for this no more.

“You soldiers are here because China is seizing its destiny as a great global power. *You* men have become the instrument of this great evolution in our national expansion. You are our *warriors*. Our *pride*. You are the sword that will bring peace to the world, and make China the dominant global force.”

The Chinese commandos didn’t move. They just took it all in. Lena could see the pride in their eyes, though. Every soldier…every *man*… liked hearing that he was *important*. That he was special. *Elite*. Destined for greatness.

Napoleon was right. It was amazing how much one would go through to earn a little piece of ribbon on their chest. Pride was a powerful tool in the commander’s toolbox.

So too, however, was fear.

Lena looked at the Ecuadorian general. “*Unfortunately*, there is not yet the appropriate level of professional attention being paid to our daily duties.

Let what happened last night serve as a reminder. Training is over. From now on, everyone here should consider us at *war*. Conduct yourselves appropriately."

The Ecuadorian general stared at her, confused. She said, "General, I asked you a few days ago to show me your perimeter security posts. You *declined*. You said that you did not have time."

He gulped. "I…" He kept shaking his head. Gone was the machismo.

Lena knew that a few thoughts were making their way through his inferior brain. He was wondering if he had misjudged what level of authority Lena held. He was asking himself to reevaluate why the Chinese needed so many troops here on this base. And he was beginning to feel afraid of what this tall, scarred Asian woman who stood before him might *do*.

"General, this morning your president—the president of Ecuador—pledged allegiance to our cause. In doing so, he promised that Ecuadorian armed forces would serve under the oversight of Chinese military. You should now consider yourself under my command. So I ask you, why were your base security measures so lax? Why did you fail us last night?"

The general's face reddened. He didn't speak.

"What's the matter, General? I will give you all the time you want to answer."

He cleared his throat, gathering his courage. Looking back and forth between Lena and the rows of Chinese commandos. Some of their eyes were no longer looking straight ahead, but at *him*.

The general said, "You are not in charge. I am the general. You are—"

She marched off the platform and slapped him, open-handed, across the face.

He brought his hand up to his cheek, staring back at her in disbelief. Then anger came. He raised his right hand and, in the slowest windup Lena could ever recall witnessing, attempted to strike her face.

It was child's play for her. She stepped to her right and with both hands grabbed his right bicep and the upper left section of his uniform. She gripped, twisted, and turned forward, using his momentum against him. The overweight general was flipped over onto his back, landing faceup on the pavement.

He lay gasping for breath on the ground.

Lena looked up at the Chinese colonel. "Sidearm, please" was all she said.

The colonel's eyes widened, but he complied. His fingers fumbled around at the holster, but then he handed her the weapon.

Lena said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "General, you have chosen to reject the authority of China, and of your own president. As the senior representative of the Chinese government on this base, I hereby find you guilty of treason."

At the sight of Lena holding a handgun to the general's forehead, the Ecuadorian staff began to object. But Lena was too quick.

A single gunshot rang out.

The Ecuadorians' mouths opened. Blood drained from a single hole in the general's forehead.

She then turned to the Ecuadorian staff. "Who's the next in command?"

Two of them actually pointed at the other. She looked at one of them and smiled. "Excellent. Congratulations on your promotion. A warning. *Don't* let this happen again. Now, your government has pledged that your men will report to us. We can confirm with them on the phone later today. But from now on, your men will report up through the Chinese base commander. Is that understood?"

The scared Ecuadorian officer nodded quickly.

"Good."

She turned to the Chinese base commander. "Colonel, if you could please see to it that none of our new Ecuadorian conscripts have second thoughts."

He nodded, still in shock that she had just executed the Ecuadorian general.

Lena turned to the lieutenant colonel in charge of the Leishen Commandos. "Give me two platoons of your men. We have some hunting to do."



"GOOD GOD."

Chase took his eye away from the spotter scope and looked down at the dirt. His breathing was heavy. Who was this woman? She was a monster. How could this be the same person he'd been with in Dubai?

As Chase watched her, she handed her sidearm back to the Chinese officer, turned from the group she was with and began walking with a thin,

brown-skinned man.

Chase searched his memory for the name. Natesh Chaudry. That had to be the American consultant David had worked with on the Red Cell island. The one who was working with Lena and Jinshan.

The pair walked over to the adjacent hangar, where a different group of Chinese soldiers were rolling some type of covered platform out onto the flight line. They threw off the tarp cover, revealing several dozen machines spread out across a flat white surface.

"What are those?" asked Calhoun.

They looked like giant metal spiders. Or…

"They're drones," said Chase.

One of the soldiers next to Lena typed on a laptop computer. All twelve quadcopter drones rose in unison, hovering twenty feet above the pavement. Each of the quadcopters had several round protrusions underneath. Chase had received briefs on these things. They were the newest iteration of weaponized drones. Small quadcopters, controlled by ground troops. They could be used to hold a variety of items. Cameras. Sensors. Bombs.

The drones spread out and began heading toward their mountain.

"Oh shit."

Chase said, "I don't know what kind of sensors those things have, but if they start looking around over here, they could find us pretty quick."

Captain Calhoun called out, "Alright, folks, let's get a move on. We're heading to the extraction LZ right now." The Marines leapt up from their positions and began moving.

Chase kept watching through his scope. They were rolling out a second drone platform, lining it up next to the first.

The last thing Chase saw before he high-tailed it out of there was the second set of drones taking off.

Lena stood fifty meters behind the drones, but she paid them no attention. She was looking through a set of binoculars. They were pointed up into the jungle-covered hills, where Chase and his team were located.

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The drone swarm buzzed overhead, sounding like giant wasps. Chase hoped that the canopy of rainforest might provide some cover. The noise made the group tense.

The Marines were spread out in a column about fifty yards long, half-walking, half-jogging. The men in the front cut through the vines and thick jungle brush with machetes every few feet.

They came upon a muddy road. The first few Marines hunched down on either side, only a few feet into the vegetation. They used hand signals to cross. Quick and quiet. The sun was still high overhead. The mist had cleared away.

But always, that buzzing noise. The drones were up there. Watching.

Captain Calhoun said, “Gunny, how we doing?”

Gunnery Sergeant Dalby tapped the Marine next to him and they both stopped. Darby spread out the map on the second Marine’s back.

“Sir, we have about another hour, and we should be at the LZ.”

“Alright, I’m gonna make the call.”

Darby nodded.

Chase was staying quiet, keeping up while carrying the heavy pack that contained the crypto key.

Calhoun took out his radio and extended the antennae. He typed in a preplanned code. The two US Army H-60s were spinning on a small grass landing strip just over the Colombian border. The Blackhawks were part of the Army’s First Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment. They were part of Joint Task Force Bravo, out of Central America. General Schwartz had requested

two of their aircraft to participate in this highly classified mission.

The crew chief in the lead H-60 had been waiting for the Marine Raider radio signal, notifying them to head to the extraction zone. Within one minute of receiving the notification, they were flying to the landing zone at one hundred and twenty knots. The crew chief also sent a signal back, indicating that they were on the way.

Calhoun heard the reply in his earpiece. He then removed the earpiece and tucked the radio back into his pack. “We’re good. The Blackhawks should be at the LZ in about nine zero mikes.”

They were all breathing heavy. Chase was covered in dirt and grime from crawling through the woods for the past few days. Sweat soaked through his camouflage utilities. He took a swig of water from his CamelBak as he walked.

Chase said, “These drones sound like they’re sticking over us, right?”

Darby said, “Sounds like it.”

“We just need to make it to the LZ,” Calhoun said.

They reached the grass cutout, and the Marines stayed hidden in the trees and brush. The landing zone was only about the size of a large backyard in the suburbs. Barely enough room for the Army helicopter to land, Chase thought.

“How much time?”

Calhoun looked at his watch. “About ten more minutes.”

Chase took out his own map. The LZ wasn’t marked, but he had memorized where it was. The nearest road was about one mile to the east. There was another road about five miles to the west, along the coastline.

Unless the Chinese had access to helicopters of their own, they would have to use the roads to get to them. And they hadn’t seen any helos on the Manta base.

The Marines simply had too great of a head start from their initial position on the hill outside Manta. He tried to reassure himself that they were going to get out of here unscathed.

Chase checked his watch again. The bird should be here any moment. Chase could still hear the damn buzzing overhead, but couldn’t see any sign of drones when he looked up.

Gunnery Sergeant Darby knelt down near Chase. “If the drone had eyes on us and you were the Chinese commander, what would you do?”

Chase thought about it. “I’d first want to make sure that we didn’t

escape.”

“Right. Which means you’d want to deny air coverage and roads, right?”

“Yeah.”

The familiar *whomp whomp whomp* sound could be heard in the distance. It was the Army Blackhawks.

Chase said, “Sounds like our ride.”

“I don’t like it,” Darby said. “If they’ve had drones overhead this whole time, it means they know where we are.”

“If they know where we are, then why haven’t they come at us? Cuz we have a head start?”

Darby said, “I don’t think so. There are too many roads around here that they could have used to catch up.”

“So what, then?”

“Son, I like to hunt in my spare time. I’m a good ole southern boy at heart. You know, during hunting season, before I get my buck, there’s only one reason I won’t take a shot at a deer.”

“And what reason is that?”

“Because I plan to get a better shot by waiting.”

Chase didn’t like the sound of that.

The H-60 Blackhawks came into view. The first aircraft did a single pass, north to south, just above the trees, and then banked hard right, slowing itself down in the turn. The second aircraft followed. The Marines ducked down as the rotor wash blew through the field. The first Blackhawk hovered at about one hundred feet, its nose pitched up slightly. The second circled behind it.

And that’s when the hunters struck.

A lightning-fast trail of smoke shot out from the east, and into the first helicopter. The army aircraft exploded in a yellow-and-orange fireball. Pieces of shrapnel and parts rained down on the forest. The Marines underneath hunkered down, trying to get out of the way. The centrifugal force of the spinning rotors, and the violent explosion, shot out a wave of hot shrapnel in every direction.

The second aircraft began to move forward, expending dozens of bright flares. Then two more missiles shot up towards it, and it too burst into flames, falling to the ground below.

Then there was only fire, scattered throughout the landing zone.



GUNNERY SERGEANT DARBY and Chase were up on their feet as soon as it was over. While the shock of death and destruction incapacitated most people, members of the military's special operations were trained to compartmentalize and react.

The Raider team, which had been hidden and prepping for an air transport, sprung to life. Their heads popped up, searching for enemy threats. They broke into separate teams, fanning out and forming a protective formation based on the most likely threat vector.

Finding no immediate enemy in sight, they turned to Captain Calhoun and Gunnery Sergeant Darby for direction. Calhoun had been struck in the arm by a piece of shrapnel, but he was still mobile. Miraculously, the rest of the Marines were uninjured.

Darby said, "Check for survivors."

A few of the Marines ran over to the helicopter wreckage to see if they could rescue anyone or recover any remains. After a few moments of inspection, the Marine next to the flaming crash site looked at Darby and shook his head. The gunny frowned and waved them to follow him.

Darby said, "We need to go west, now. Those SAMs looked like they were launched from about a mile away to the East. If we go west, there's a road in that direction, and a small village about a mile to the north once we get to the road. We might be able to get vehicles there."

Chase said, "I agree. The Chinese must be on the road to our east. It's going to take forever to hump through this jungle to the west, but it's our only option."

Calhoun nodded, wincing in pain. "Let's move."

Once they were traveling, Calhoun began getting treatment for his shoulder wound. It looked to Chase like something had sliced right through the muscle tissue, about an inch deep. He looked to be hurting pretty bad. But the man working on his shoulder cleaned it and poured a clotting agent powder on it, then taped it up well enough for the bleeding to slow.

Chase said, "Even if we get vehicles, I don't like the idea of being on the roads for too long. I'm going to activate our second option for air extraction."

Calhoun nodded. "Good idea." His face was covered in sweat and dirt.

Chase took Calhoun's radio and made the call, using the code word AUDIBLE in an otherwise innocuous phrase. He repeated the phrase several times until he heard a three-tone reply transmitted back. That indicated that the NSA relay station had picked up the signal. The NSA relay team would

then send a message to a US Navy destroyer, the USS *Farragut*.

The USS *Farragut*'s orders, which Chase had personally delivered to the captain only a few days ago, were to remain in a defined geographic box, a little more than one hundred miles off the coast of Ecuador. They were to loiter in that position in case they were needed as a backup transportation option for Chase and the Marine Raider team. Chase had thought the chances of them actually being called upon were less than five percent.

Turned out he was wrong. He thought about his sister, getting in her helicopter. Would she realize that her mission was to come rescue him? Probably. She'd always been the smartest of the three siblings.

Chase looked at his watch. "Now that I've sent that signal, we'll have about six hours to make it to the backup landing zone."

"We'll have to acquire a few vehicles if we're going to make it there on time," the gunnery sergeant replied.

"Yup."

Chase thought that he would never be as happy to see his sister as when she picked him up in her helicopter today. Then he thought about the chances that someone would have a surface-to-air missile near the next site.

"We're going to have to set up a perimeter of a few miles around the next LZ, to make sure the same thing doesn't happen."

"Got it. There's only one road. We'll separate into three fire teams. One will stay at the LZ. The other two can separate along the road and make sure it stays secure."

They came to a shallow stream. The group crossed it all at once, the water getting only ankle-deep. As the group began to help each other up the bank on the other side of the stream, Chase heard a snap.

The sound could have been confused for a breaking tree branch—except for the fact that one of the Marines collapsed into the stream, facedown. A blur of dark red blood poured out of his back.

Yellow muzzle flashes from the forest behind them, followed by bursts of automatic gunfire. Chase grabbed onto a branch overhanging the stream and pulled himself up the embankment. He then turned around and lay in the prone position, taking stock of their attackers.

A single loud crack to Chase's left turned into an outbreak of return fire. One of the Marines began firing his M240G squad automatic weapon, or SAW, and the tropical forest erupted in noise. Tracer rounds sliced through the air in a flat line over the shallow stream, and into the dark jungle on the

other side.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Chase turned at the noise. Two of the Marines fired grenade launchers toward the attackers and then moved positions.

One of the Marines ran to the stream and grabbed the corpse lying in the water. He slung it over his shoulders, then turned and ran back to cover.

Darby jogged up next to Chase. “Why aren’t those bastards moving in on us? They’re just sitting back there, trying to pick us off from far out.”

“I don’t know. But we can’t stay here and fight. We’ll need to keep moving. What are our options?”

“I could leave a team here, but I’d rather not do that. I could…”

Movement out of the corner of Chase’s eye. Airborne. Chase looked up and tried to make sense of what he was seeing. It looked like a dark grey square, hovering in the air. At first he thought it was a single object. But then he realized that it was the swarm of drones. They had collected together, about a dozen of them flying in close formation.

The drone swarm moved in unison, which created the illusion that they were a single object. The object appeared to be growing larger, and the buzzing grew louder. The drones were flying towards them, Chase realized.

Like they were about to attack.

“*Darby*.”

“What?”

He pointed at the drones.

As Chase looked again, one of them raced towards them and released a cluster of small objects. As each object impacted the surface, it exploded.

The explosions started in the stream. Spouts of water and rock lifting up into the air, and then walking up the bank and into the forest.

The drone was dropping some type of bomblets. Chase covered his head and ears and lay as tight to the ground as he could. Trees exploded and splintered all around them. Two more drones made similar bombing runs. When the cluster bomb attack stopped, Chase looked up and saw men running on the other side of the stream. It was the Chinese attackers, regrouping. Trying to flank them.

A ringing in his ears. He could barely hear anything. *Shit*. He should have put in his earplugs. It was stupid of him not to.

The Marine with the SAW began firing up at the drones. He walked the

tracer rounds into the area where they were flying and began shattering them into pieces. Then the rectangle spread out, as if on command. Either they were programmed to do it, or one of the Chinese controlling it had spread them out as a defensive measure.

Chase looked at Darby, who was surveying his men. He crawled back to Chase. “Two dead. One injured. The captain’s in bad shape.”

“We need to get the crypto key back to the US. The data that’s on here”—he patted his bag, where the crypto key was stored—“is going to save a lot of lives.”

Gunnery Sergeant Darby looked across the stream. In the shadows of the forest, small groups of soldiers advanced to nearer positions.

Chase said, “Let’s go now. If we run, we can make the village…”

“Do you know where you are going?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you know how to get to the LZ on your own?”

Chase shook his head. He knew what the gunny was thinking. “*Don’t*.” Even as he said it, he knew his words would have no effect on the gunnery sergeant.

“If you go now, and we stay and hold them off, you’ll make it. If we all run, they’ll start picking us apart. We’ll be slow and ineffective. The mission comes first.”

“If you guys stay here, you could be killed.” Chase regretted saying it as soon as it came out.

“Son, don’t be stupid. I’m a US Marine. *They’ll* all be killed. Now go.”

Chase turned to go and then stopped. “Listen, just give me a head start. That’s all I need. Then you get your team out of here. Head to one of the villages northwest of here and hunker down near the road. Monitor guard frequency. Once I get to the helicopters, we’ll come pick you guys up.”

“Oorah.” The gunny yelled out the common cheer of the Marine Corps.

“Shut up.”

The gunny smiled.

Chase began running.

17

USS Farragut
200 Nautical Miles Northeast of the Galapagos Islands

Victoria held the fingers and palms of her glove so that they just barely touched the controls of the helicopter. Her heavy steel-toed flight boots were poised with their heels on the deck, angled to be ready to step on the helicopter's foot pedals at a moment's notice. She did this because she wanted to be able to grab the controls instantly, but still needed to let her copilot be the one doing the flying.

Her head moved constantly on a swivel. Looking forward to judge the distance between the hovering Seahawk helicopter and the ship's hangar. Looking down through the glass floor—known as the chin bubble—to judge the altitude to the flight deck. And looking from side to side to gain better awareness in determining their drift.

They were hovering a mere ten feet above their destroyer, the USS *Farragut*. A gigantic USNS supply ship pitched and rolled alongside the *Farragut*. She guessed it was maybe fifty yards away.

They had shot lines only a few moments ago, using guns that reminded her of what they used to shoot free tee shirts out at football games. Her ship had fired, and a soft cloth-covered ball, attached to a line, had traveled in an arc from the *Farragut* and landed on the supply ship.

The two ships were now connected. The supply ship was able to use that first line connection to begin connecting the bigger fuel lines and sturdier supply zip-lines. Deck hands moved pallets and net around the ship with

practiced efficiency.

Beneath her twenty-thousand-pound aircraft, several enlisted men scurried about the flight deck, nervously hooking up the netted pallet to the bottom of the helicopter with a line and hook. It must have been a nerve-wracking job to be those men on the flight deck.

The flying pilot was Lieutenant Junior Grade Juan "Spike" Volonte, her inexperienced copilot. It was his first real vertical replenishment, or VERTREP, evolution. His face was a mess of sweat, and he was making constant overcorrections. As a result, the helicopter looked like it was constantly shaking and shimmying.

Up one foot, and then rapidly down two feet. Sliding to the left three feet, then surging quickly back to the right one foot. Their aircrewman, looking through the floor hatch in the rear of the aircraft, was attempting to make gentle correction calls. But he knew that with a pilot this inexperienced, it was almost useless. The kid just needed more practice.

Victoria's job was to make sure Juan got enough hands-on experience so that he could learn and get better, yet be ready to jump in the split second he made too big a mistake. Basically, she needed to do the same thing she did every other time she flew with these nuggets. Get the mission done without killing anyone.

The way young Juan here was squeezing the black out of the stick, he would be exhausted after a few more minutes.

"Need a break?" she asked.

No response.

"Juan."

"Yes…" He was grimacing. "Yes…boss?"

"Here, let me have the controls for a minute."

"Roger, you have the controls."

"I have the controls."

"You have the controls."

Two things happened. First, the helicopter, which had been lurching all over the place and scaring the shit out of the men below, instantly stabilized into a near-motionless hover. Second, Juan's body sagged into a gelatinous sack of sweat and limp muscle, held to his seat by five tightly connected straps.

"Alright, ma'am, you're hooked up," said her aircrewman in the back of the aircraft.

“Roger, coming up and aft.”

She pulled up with her left hand—just a touch. At the same instant, she put in a tiny bit of forward pedal with her left foot and pulled aft on the cyclic with her right hand. Three distinct movements that got the helicopter to move the way she wanted. But they weren’t a conscious set of actions. With her years of flying experience, the control inputs just came naturally. Victoria just knew what she wanted the aircraft to do, and her body moved in such a way that the helicopter’s nose came up and began moving backwards and gaining altitude.

The aircraft floated up and drifted aft until they were about one hundred feet high, and perched directly in back of the *Farragut*. Two heavy pallets filled with supplies swung from a net below the helicopter. She kept pulling up with her left hand, getting more and more power from the engines as they came out of ground effect. The rotor wash blew a sphere of white sea spray around them as they hovered over the water.

Victoria next moved the cyclic forward an inch to arrest their backward drift. They were now essentially flying in formation with the destroyer, which was itself driving in formation with the large supply ship at her ten o’clock.

Victoria pushed forward with her left foot, and the nose of the aircraft yawed to the left. She moved the cyclic forward and left and pulled a bit more power. Now the helicopter began drifting left, maintaining altitude, and sliding from its perch behind the destroyer on over to a similar spot behind the supply ship.

She maneuvered the aircraft closer and lower to the deck of the supply ship and came to a hover ten feet above the deck.

The aircrewman said, “Okay, you’re in position. Come down. Load’s on deck.”

“Releasing the load.” She pressed the button on her cyclic that opened the cargo hook, allowing the pallets to remain on deck.

“Load’s free.”

Victoria said, “Well, there goes our snail mail. Any bets on how long it takes to reach our families?”

The aircrewman said, “Come up two…one…stead. Okay, they’re hooking up the next pallets now.”

“Roger.”

“Alright, you’re hooked up. Ready to come up and aft.”

She performed the same maneuver as before, effortlessly bringing the

helicopter up and then sliding it over back to her ship. This time she transferred four pallets, bundled up in dark green netting, over to the *Farragut*.

They had several hours of this work to do, and it was one of the more fun exercises in helicopter naval aviation.

"Cutlass 471, *Farragut* Control."

"Go ahead, Control," Victoria responded. She checked the paper attached to her kneeboard, where she logged the current time and fuel. This allowed her to calculate the aircraft's fuel burn and calculate how much remaining flight time they had. They were burning eight hundred and fifty pounds of fuel per hour—about normal.

"Ma'am, OPS just came over and gave me a strange request."

She sighed. Whenever the ship communication began with a warning, it always ended badly for the aircrew. "Let's hear it."

"Boss, I overheard them talking, and it sounds like they want you to fly to South America."

"*What?*"

"Hold on, ma'am."

She looked back down at her fuel gauge and did the quick math. "We'll need to land. When do they need us there? And what are we picking up?"

"OPS says he'll brief you when you land. We're clearing our flight deck of all supplies right now."

"I assume the captain has given his approval?"

"Air Boss, this is OPS."

Victoria paused. It was very odd for him to get on the radios to talk to them while they were flying. "Go ahead."

His voice sounded tense. "Boss, we just got an emergency message telling us to open up the sealed mission brief in the captain's safe. We're to execute these orders as soon as possible."

"Roger. Can you give me any more details?"

"The captain asked that you please head in for a landing so we can discuss."

"Copy that. We're inbound as soon as the deck is cleared."



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Victoria walked in to the port-side hangar, where the operations officer was waiting for her.

She held her helmet under one arm. Her hair and face were wet with sweat. “What’s it say?”

OPS said, “Come with me. Captain’s on the bridge. He wants you to see him first. XO had me tell the pilots. Plug and Caveman read the orders and are in the wardroom getting ready.”

She was happy to hear that. No wasted time. *But ready for what?*

She walked up onto the bridge. The captain was on the port bridge wing, watching the replenishment at sea. The supply ship was still only a few dozen yards away, still hooked up and pumping fuel into the destroyer. Waves crashed into the hull between the two ships, splashing up white water every few seconds.

“Sir, OPS said that we have the go order?”

He turned to face her. “Yes. It sounds like they need you to go be a bus driver for some special operations troops. It didn’t say what for. Just gave a time and a place to be. But they want us to send both helicopters. That going to be a problem?”

“*Both* helicopters?” She thought about that. Dual-helicopter operations from a single-spot ship, like a destroyer, were tricky. Only one aircraft could fit on the flight deck at a time. This meant that when both aircraft returned to the ship, only one of them would be able to land. That helicopter would then need to shut down, fold the blades and tail, and then be traversed into the hangar. That process could take thirty minutes to an hour—during which time the other aircraft would be burning precious fuel, without the ability to land.

She told the captain, “Sir, we can do it. We’ll just have to make sure that one of the other ships in company is designated as our alternate landing spot—I recommend the supply ship since she’s right here and has a big flight deck.”

The captain said, “Fine. OPS, make it happen.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any questions?”

“Sir, I still haven’t read the mission orders.”

“Your other pilot has them.”

OPS said, “Plug. In the wardroom. I’ll show you, boss.”

Victoria said, “Alright, thanks, sir.”

The captain nodded, looking annoyed.

She and OPS left. OPS said, “It’s been one of those days with him.”

“Great.” She’d never met such an emotionally unstable man as the captain. It was unbelievable to her that he had risen this high in the officer corps. “Any idea why?”

“Beats me. I guess because this is changing his plan of the day. He doesn’t like change.”

When they arrived in the wardroom, Plug and Caveman were waiting. They had aviation charts of South America. The Colombia and Ecuador charts were spread out on the tables. The two pilots had rulers, pencils, and yellow highlighters and were quickly marking up the charts.

Plug handed Victoria a manila envelope. “Mission orders are in here.”

She took out the two white sheets of paper and read over them. “It gives us a few checkpoints to hit, and a time to be at the LZ. Other than that, it’s not very detailed.”

“Nope.”

“It says we have to be there in three hours. Can we make that?”

Plug said, “We just got done doing the math. As long as we don’t have any mechanical trouble with the second aircraft, I think we’ll be in good shape.”

She shook her head. “This is crazy.” She looked at the charts. “Show me the landing zone.”

Plug pointed to a spot on one of the charts that showed her the location of the landing zone in Ecuador. It was about fifteen miles inland, just east of a mountain range. It looked like it was in the middle of the jungle.

Victoria read the orders. “It says we’re supposed to shut off our transponder and lights and not make any external communications once we get within fifty miles of the coast. We’re not even supposed to notify Colombia or Ecuador that we’re coming. Expect up to fourteen SOCOM passengers.” She looked up at her maintenance officer. “We’re going to need to get rid of all of our extra weight.”

Plug nodded, a rare serious look on his face. “I already asked Senior Chief and AWR1 to see what they could do to make us lighter and clear out any extra space for passengers. Boss, this sounds like more than a training mission, huh?”

“I would say so.” Victoria turned to OPS and said, “So do you have any idea what this is about? We’re picking up some special operators in the middle of the Ecuadorian jungle?”

“Pretty much. We didn’t get anything else in the radio notification. Just to open up the mission brief and execute as planned. And that it was urgent.”

“Ever seen something like this before?”

“No. But I heard a story once where they sent a helo from a cruiser into the middle of the desert in Saudi Arabia. It picked up some CIA guy wearing a suit and brought him back to the ship. Once they landed, he gave them a time and location in the middle of the Red Sea to drop him off. Sure enough, a submarine popped up, and they did the *Hunt for Red October* thing where they sling him down to the sub.”

“So you think we’re gonna be doing that? Dropping these guys off in a submarine?”

“Well, I don’t think you’re going to be picking up my newest group of ensigns, let’s put it that way.”

“Plug, how far is the trip?”

“One hundred and twenty miles. I told OPS that we’ll need to head east to make sure you’re good on fuel.”

She realized what he meant. “Christ, we don’t even know if I can get fuel there?”

OPS shrugged.

She closed her eyes. “This is so messed up.”

OPS said, “I’ll make sure we close the distance so you’ll burn less fuel on the return leg.”

“And have the TACAN on high power. I’ll be climbing up high to get comms and a good navigational lock once I head back from the beach. But if I don’t find you guys by the time I get to my bingo, I’m turning around and taking an all-expenses vacation back in Colombia.”

“Easy there, Air Boss.”

“I’m serious about the bingo fuel. Don’t screw with me. Close the distance. I don’t mess around with fuel.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The wardroom phone rang. Victoria answered, listened, and then hung up. “Alright, gents, everyone still safe to fly? Any questions?”

They each shook their heads, excited looks in their eyes.

Victoria said, “My aircraft just finished fueling up. Juan’s on his way here. Let’s see if we can wrap up our mission brief in the next ten minutes. Then we’ll roll.”

One hour later, Victoria was headed east over the Pacific at two thousand

feet, with Plug’s helicopter in trail.

18

Lena watched the American Special Forces soldier fall after her bullet hit its mark. She could have taken out many of the others in their unit, but then a few of the Leishen Commandos began firing their automatic weapons, costing her the element of surprise.

That had frustrated her. Lena preferred to work alone. Especially when conducting this type of work. She tapped her ear and spoke into her headset. Now that the Americans knew they were so close, there was no reason to hold off on the drone strike.

"Send the drones to drop their bomb clusters."

The Leishen commander crouched down next to her. "Ma'am, my men are ready to cross the stream upon your command."

"We have air support coming in. Let's soften them up first."

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked through her scope again, searching the far embankment for a target.

There. Two of them were lying down speaking to each other. She had a clear view of one of them…

Him. How was that possible?

Of all the people they could have sent here, why would they have sent Chase Manning? Did they know she would be here?

Her mind raced. She hated coincidences. She didn't believe in them. In her line of work, there were no coincidences. Coincidences were often really preplanned events, and things to be investigated. Or they were timed to have a psychological impact on one's prey. So, was she the prey here?

The thought angered her. Her finger began to depress the trigger. She could end it here by killing him. No compromising emotions. No more thoughts of him in her bed.

But he had let her live.

And burned her, she reminded herself.

She could still see the white curved architecture of the Burj Al-Arab, the rotors of the Iranian UH-1 helicopter, about to take off. She could still smell the disgusting smell of her own skin cooking, burned from the Molotov cocktails Chase had thrown in her direction. As he had climbed up the stairway of the helipad to save his brother, he'd had a clear shot. He could have ended her life. She knew that a man of his talent would not have missed her from that range.

But he had.

It was for the same reason she had spared his life only moments earlier. She had met him in the Skyview bar and had told the Iranian she was with not to harm him. She had just wanted to see him one last time.

So were they now even? It didn't feel like it.

The water in the stream began exploding up again as the drones came in to attack the Americans. The explosions moved from the stream and into the forest. Rapid blasts filled with shrapnel rang through the forest, violent and merciless. They ripped through the trees, where the Americans were firing back at her platoon of Chinese commandos.

When the dust settled, she tried to find Chase again. She moved her telescopic view throughout the area, but couldn't find him. A part of her was…what? *Worried?* She cursed herself. Her emotion was a crutch. She needed to control it better. There was no logic or honor in letting Chase survive because of their past relationship. Too much was on the line.

She tapped the button on her headset. "Hold fire on the airstrike. Hold fire." She looked down at her map. There was a road about two kilometers behind the American position. If she could get there with reinforcements, they could surround them.

Lena turned to the Leishen commander. "A change of plans, Major. Move your men forward immediately. I will fall back and gather the other Leishen Commando platoon. I will take them around in jeeps and flank the Americans. If they run, keep following them and forcing them to me. Let us finish this."

VICTORIA SUCKED MORE water through the straw of her CamelBak. “Cutlass flight, come down to two hundred feet.”

“Two,” came the response from Plug’s helicopter.

Their transponders were already off, fifty miles out from the coast, as stipulated in their mission brief. The two-helicopter formation flew in low—two hundred feet above ground level. It was still daylight, but the hope was that by staying low over uninhabited jungle terrain, they wouldn’t be seen.

She was the lead aircraft. Plug’s helicopter was formed up on her right side, with a fifty-foot separation in altitude and several rotors’ diameter separation.

Victoria looked at Juan, her copilot. He had that deer in the headlights look. When she had briefed them all on the mission, both 2Ps had been excited. Victoria and her crew had gotten back into their helo, which was already spinning on deck, and flown around in circles for thirty minutes above the ship. That was how long it had taken Plug to have the maintenance team get the second bird out of the barn, spin it up, and get airborne. Once both aircraft were flying, they’d quickly formed up and headed to the coast.

They crossed over the coastline and turned south over the triple canopy jungle. A lot of the terrain was mountainous. Nothing crazy, but a lot more hills than Jacksonville, Florida, where their squadron was stationed. They used the navigation charts to keep track of various landmarks and maintain their position.

The navigation wasn’t too bad. They flew close enough to the coastline until the town of Esmeraldas, Ecuador. Then they followed the river south.

“Watch out for power lines,” she said to her copilot. “It would be a shame to fail on our first covert mission with Special Forces because we crashed into electrical wires.”

“Roger” was all Juan said back.

The kid was scared shitless now. Before he had been head down in the chart. Now he was about twenty percent in the chart, and eighty percent looking ahead. That was fine with her. It would help keep them alive.

Victoria said, “There should be a bend in the river up ahead, you see it on the chart?”

“Yup.”

“Is there a bridge next to the bend in the river?”

“Yeah.”

“What direction does it head?”

“The road heads south, then there’s a fork. Looks like a major road according to the map.”

“Yup, that’s the one. We’ll be following the road and taking the fork to the west.”

She leaned forward and looked out her right window. She could see the second MH-60R, hugging her right side. Normally she would tell Plug to give her some space, but she didn’t want to break radio silence. And she knew that for all his faults, he was a damn good pilot.

“There’s the bridge, boss.”

“Looks like major roads in some countries are less impressive than in others.” It was a tiny, single-lane road. But it was paved, and the trees were cut out around it well. So it would be easy to follow.

Victoria banked the large grey aircraft around sharply to begin flying over the road, careful to stay just above the treetops.

“What’s the time?”

“Fourteen twenty-three on the clock.”

“Alright, we need to shave off a little time. I’m going to head due west. The road bends around to the north, but if we head west we’ll be able to intercept it again. Should save us about five minutes. I don’t want to be late. We’re supposed to be at the LZ at fourteen forty-five. Set the timer on the clock on my mark.”

“Roger.”

“*Mark*.”

“Clock set.”

She banked the helicopter hard left and skimmed the dark green treetops. The forest flew by.

This close to the jungle, it felt like they were traveling incredibly fast. They *were*, she reminded herself. The illusion was when they were higher up and appeared to be traveling slowly.

Juan said, “Should be a river, running north south, before we get to the—”

“There it is.”

“Roger.”

“There’s a town to the north, but I think we’re too low to see it.”

“Let’s keep it that way.”

They flew on for another two full minutes, and Victoria was starting to get worried that she had missed the road. Low-level navigation was hard enough. It was harder when you missed a checkpoint or made a mistake.

“There it is.”

She looked at her airspeed indicator. One hundred and twenty knots. They were running late. Only a few minutes, but still. Operations like this were supposed to be right on time.

One hundred and twenty knots was her max range speed. It would use her fuel in the most efficient manner and give her the best chance of making it back to her ship without running out of gas. They would need to travel over one hundred miles to the ship once they picked up their passengers. They needed all the fuel they could get.

Fuel was going to be tight just based on the distance alone. But if the Navy—or whoever had activated this mission—was going with their backup plan, Victoria wondered what kind of trouble they might encounter at the landing zone. The only hint at that was the note on the mission orders to ensure that the helicopters were armed.

“AWR1, is your weapon ready?”

He had a .50-caliber GAU-16 mounted to the rear cabin door. “Locked and loaded, ma’am.”

“Roger.”

She looked at her fuel gauge again. Victoria pulled the collective lever with her left hand and pushed forward on the cyclic with her right. The nose dipped down a bit, and they gained another ten knots of airspeed.

“Picking up the speed a little.”

“Roger.” She loved how agreeable junior copilots could be. She could tell this guy that they were going to fly through a train tunnel and he would probably reply with “Roger.”

Ten minutes later, the landing zone was in sight. It was just an open field near a bend in the road, a dozen or so miles from the coast.

Victoria gradually dialed back the speed by pulling back on the cyclic and letting out power with her left hand. She didn’t want to decelerate too fast. If she did, it risked her wingman overshooting her—or worse, collision. The two aircraft overflew the empty field once, surveying it for obstructions and potential hazards. Victoria took them around and into the wind, landing on a flat spot about twenty yards from the tree line.

As soon as she landed, a man wearing jungle utilities emerged from the

forest, running towards them and waving.

It was her brother.

She had suspected he would be one of the ones here but had been afraid to let herself think about it. She was sure as hell glad to see him.



WHEN CHASE GOT into the helicopter, Victoria told her crewman to hook him up to the comms.

"Victoria, is that you?"

Victoria noticed that her copilot was giving her a funny look. Probably wondering how the hell she knew their new passenger. She had violated the safety brief, failing to mention that she had a conflict of interest on today's mission.

"It's me, Chase. Are you alright? Can we get out of here? Is anyone else coming?"

She looked down at her fuel gauge. Only sixteen hundred pounds of fuel. That was way lower than she was comfortable with, but she could probably have the ship maneuver to get closer once they got high enough to communicate with them.

"We need to go pick up a few others."

She turned around to face him, her expression of worry visible in the section of her face that wasn't covered by helmet or and tinted visor.

"We don't have the fuel."

"Victoria. We *have* to. It's close. The men who were with me are going to get killed or captured if we don't go."

She didn't say anything.

"Your door-gunners are going to need to lay down covering fire. I can help."

Fuck it. "Alright, I can give you about ten minutes. But that's all. And just so you know, we might get wet later because of this."

"Ten minutes should do. It's two miles down the road."

"Where's the landing site?"

"The road."

She shook her head and made sure her external comms were switched to the right frequency. This was more important than radio silence. "Seven-six,

seven-one."

Plug came over the radios. "*Go*."

"We need to make a quick detour."

"Boss, I'm real low on fuel."

"Me too. Ten minutes…and tell AW2 to lock and load."

Another double click of static on the UHF radio told her that he would comply.

As she pulled in power and they gained altitude, the nose dipped forward and they stayed low to the ground, following the road.

Chase said, "Oh, Victoria, one more thing. If you see any helicopter drones around here, let's try and shoot those suckers down. Okay?"

She shook her head. *What the hell was her brother involved in?*

19

Lena's jeep pulled up to the platoon of Leishen Commandos near the Ecuadorian town. She had gone back to the additional platoon of Chinese commandos and directed them along the road to the other side of the forest, near the town. The idea was to surround the Americans. It had taken the second Leishen platoon much longer than expected to get to the road on the other side of the woods.

She appeared to be too late.

"What happened, Major?" she asked the first platoon commander.

"Ms. Chou, the Americans set a trap for my men. Once we were over the stream, they set off explosives and cut down many of us with automatic weapons fire. We were eventually able to push them back, but our forces were greatly slowed. We pursued them through the jungle and to this town. When we arrived, they were getting into two US Navy helicopters."

She cursed, then looked up at him. "You are sure they were Navy?"

"Yes, several of my men are fluent in English. They saw the markings on the side."

"Then what happened?"

"The helicopters picked them up one at a time. The other helicopter was circling and began firing with high-caliber weapons onto our positions in the jungle. We were unable to stop them."

"Which direction did the helicopters head?"

"West, ma'am."

"Out to sea?"

"I would assume, yes. We are very close to the coastline."

She frowned. “This is troubling. I will need to get to the communications center immediately. Let’s go.”



LENA’S JEEP came to a screeching halt right outside the communications trailer.

She knocked hard on the door. An armed guard inside the trailer opened up the spy hole and verified who was on the other side. Improved security measures, she noted. Too little, too late.

She entered the trailer and looked for the senior man. “I need to reach the island. Please patch me through.”

It took about five minutes for her to be on the phone with the duty officer in the Red Cell’s operations center. “I need to speak with Jinshan. Can you connect me?” she asked.

“Please wait.”

Another five minutes until she heard the old man’s voice. “Lena, is this you?”

“I’m afraid I have bad news, Mr. Jinshan.”

“Lena, what is it?”

“Sir, it appears that the equipment we have been using to track our military assets without alerting Chinese leadership may have been compromised. The hardware known as the crypto key has been taken from the mobile communications center in Manta.”

“Taken by *whom*?” Jinshan said.

“We believe that they were Americans. A special forces unit.”

“Are you *sure* that they were Americans?”

She thought of telling him how she knew. That she’d had Chase Manning in her sights. Then she changed her mind. She would never admit that to anyone.

“I’m sure, Mr. Jinshan. I saw several of their faces, and their equipment. And they were picked up by US Navy helicopters. Their first attempt to escape was several hours ago, on another set of helicopters. We were able to shoot those two down.”

The other side was silent. Then Jinshan said, “So it has begun. I had hoped for a more deliberate start.”

“I apologize, sir. But it appears that we must now take action.”

“Please wait one moment, Lena. I must confer with Admiral Song.”

It was a full ten minutes before Jinshan got back on the line. “Admiral Song and I will take care of this from here. You were right to inform me of this, and right to take extreme measures to prevent the crypto key from falling into the hands of the Americans. We are not ready for that level of information disclosure yet.”

“Sir, is there anything else I can do to help?”

“Not now, Lena. Admiral Song is sending a message to his naval units in the Eastern Pacific as we speak. We have an idea of where the crypto key has likely gone. And we will take steps to ensure that it does not go any further.”

20

"Captain in combat," yelled one of the petty officers on watch in the *Farragut*'s combat information center.

The destroyer had just finished conducting its underway replenishment with the supply ship. The "breakaway" song was playing on the 1MC. One of the modern traditions on board many Navy warships was to play a popular song over the ship's speakers as a way to celebrate the successful completions of the replenishment at sea. Today's song was from the Doors.

"Turn that damn song off," said the captain.

"Aye aye, sir."

"OPS. Where the hell is OPS?"

"Here, sir." The ship's operations officer stood behind one of the sonar stations.

"What's the status of the helicopters?"

OPS walked over to one of the computers and changed the display in the center of the CIC. "Sir, they checked off with us about one hour ago. They were out of communications range…here." He moved the cursor from the symbol that represented their ship over to an X with the tag "HELICOPTER OFF STATION."

"And how far from the coast were they?"

"About fifty miles, sir. Air Boss told me that she expected to be back up with us"—he looked at his watch—"any minute now."

The ship's communications officer burst into the room, holding up a clipboard. "Sir! HF radio transmission…" He was out of breath, like he had been running.

“Not now, COMMO.” The kid was still trying to make it up to him that none of their satellite communications ever worked. Ever since the captain had chewed him out in front of the wardroom at dinner that night, he had worked around the clock to try and improve their HF systems, as well as retrain his men. This was probably some incremental fix he had just made, the captain thought.

“Sir, please forgive me, but this is critically important.”

The captain turned. He hated the way this kid talked. Like he’d gone to some snooty Ivy League school. “What is it, COMMO?” he asked, annoyance in his voice.

“Sir, the helicopter, sir. They’re on their way here. Some of their passengers have been trying to reach us with their HF radios since they’re so far away.”

The captain rolled his eyes. “Well, what did they say? Come on, I don’t have all day.”

“Sir, they’ve been *attacked*. They say that Chinese military forces shot at them. They have wounded inbound.”

There were almost fifteen people in the CIC, working at various stations. There was a good deal of chatter on a normal day, but as busy as today was, it was loud.

Until the COMMO made his statement. At that, heads turned, and everyone stared at him.

The captain’s face contorted. “*What?* I thought that they were just supposed to pick up some SEALs or something. What are you talking about? They flew to South America, for Christ’s sake. What the hell are you talking about with *Chinese*?”

The young communications officer shook his head. “I don’t know, sir. The transmission was garbled. They had to use a radio from one of their passengers. It was the aircrewman who sent the message.”

The captain looked at his XO, confused. “What the hell is going on, XO?”

The XO said, “Sir, I’ll have medical personnel standing by for when they get here. Do you think it would be wise for us to increase our weapons posture?”

The captain shrugged. “I mean…I don’t understand what the situation is…I’m not sure that’s needed.”

The XO said, “Sir, I recommend that we increase our weapons posture,

until we know more. Perhaps we should go to general quarters, sir?" The XO looked alarmed. He scanned the room, thinking about what they needed to do.

The sonar operator had his earphones on and was staring at his screen, away from the group. He hadn't heard the commotion. He held up his hand and said, "TAO, sonar."

OPS was the standing tactical action officer and had taken off his headset when the captain had arrived in Combat. He didn't hear the petty officer calling for him.

The captain waved his hand at the group, as if he was annoyed about the unwelcome news. "Fine, XO, if you want to increase our weapons posture, fine. But don't go to GQ. That's too much. I'll be up on the bridge."

"TAO, sonar!" the young enlisted man called out.

The group of senior officers turned. "What, sonar?" OPS asked.

The petty officer's face was white. "Sir, I'm not sure, but I think…"

OPS said, "What is it?"

"Sir, I think I hear…a *torpedo*…"



THE CHINESE SUBMARINE had been following the Americans for several weeks. These attack orders had come much earlier than expected, but the captain had been told to be ready. They were constantly given times and locations of potential attacks, but the orders had never been given. Until now.

"Sir! The orders are from the South Fleet Commander. We are to execute our attack immediately of American destroyer 099 and ships in company."

He grabbed the paper document. "You are sure?" He read it over. It was indeed time.

The Type 093 Shang-class submarine was one of the newest in China's fleet. It was longer than a football field, displaced seven thousand tons when fully submerged, and carried a crew of one hundred and ten enlisted and twelve officers. This particular variant was the G model, which meant that it had a vertical launching system for its YJ-82 anti-ship missile.

The captain had thought those missiles a nuisance when he had watched them being loaded onto his submarine at their home port of Yulin Naval Base. There were many extra safety and security precautions that he had been

responsible for once those missiles were aboard. Now, about to launch four of them, he thanked the heavens that they were aboard.

"Torpedo tubes one and two flooded and doors open, captain."

The captain had personally checked on the accuracy of the targeting solution. While the Colombian diesel submarine was no match for them, removing it from the theater first was the best way to ensure his success.

"Explosion in the water, sir. The Colombian submarine has been hit, sir. We can hear it breaking up and sinking."

The captain nodded. "Good. We must move quickly now."

There were four surface targets he needed to sink. One of them was a highly formidable American Arleigh Burke–class destroyer.

A single-dimensional battlefield was much easier to fight than a multidimensional one. That was what he had learned in countless exercises off the coast of Hainan Island.

The captain pointed at his weapons control officer. "Fire torpedo from tube one. Standby on two…*Fire* torpedo from tube two."

The sound of his men repeating his orders and completing their tasks echoed throughout the small space, followed by a reverberation as the torpedoes launched out of his vessel, and then the high-pitched noise of the running torpedoes, changing frequency as they increased their distance.

He looked at his missile operator. He pointed at him and nodded. "Fire missiles one, two, three, and four."

Now he would see how good this American destroyer really was.



"TAO, sonar, torpedo in the water bearing two-six-five."

The captain looked up from the emergency message. "What did you just say?" He looked at the sonar operator like he had two heads. They had just finished a resupply with the USNS Supply. They were closer to the Galapagos Islands than any other land mass. The most dangerous thing out here was the hippies who wanted to protect the whales and sea turtles. What the hell was this man talking about a torpedo for?

"Explosions in the water, sir," said the sonar operator. A senior enlisted man sat down next to him and put on a headset. "More torpedo noise, sir!"

The XO was not so slow to react. He had been standing behind the

captain. Now he said, “OPS, set GQ immediately. And for God’s sakes, make sure all our air defense is up and operational.”

The captain turned and looked at the XO, annoyed that he was speaking out of turn. “Come on, XO, let’s get up to the bridge.”

The alarm sounded throughout the ship. Steel-toed boots ran on deck plates as the men and women of the USS *Farragut* ran to their battle stations.

As they climbed up the ladder to the bridge, men were yelling and moving quickly throughout the space. The captain walked out to the bridge wing, where the officer of the deck was pointing to something and shouting.

The captain said, “All ahead flank.”

“All ahead flank.”

The captain and the XO joined the OOD on the bridge wing. “What is it?”

“Sir, we just saw what looked like a submarine explosion about six thousand yards out.”

The first indication that missiles were inbound came from the ship’s vertical launch system as it automatically fired three SM-2 surface to air missiles. Guided by the ship’s SPY-1D radar, they attempted to destroy the incoming Chinese YJ-82 anti-ship missiles.

But the YJ-82s had a very low radar cross-section and skimmed the surface of the water at only a few meters of altitude. It took only a few seconds for the YJ-82 to increase its speed to over four hundred knots. Because it was fired from a distance of only two miles, the total time of flight was just over six seconds. Barely enough time for the SM-2s to get off. Only one SM-2 found its target, exploding and sending the Chinese missile into the water.

The last line of air defense for the American destroyer was the Phalanx close-in weapons system (CWIS). The giant Gatling gun sounded like God had just zipped up an enormous zipper. The sound shocked the captain. But the CWIS did what it was intended to do, launching a barrage of armor-piercing tungsten penetrator rounds at the rate of three thousand per minute.

Unfortunately, it only was able to fire for two seconds before impact. That meant that one hundred rounds were fired at the now-nearly-supersonic Chinese anti-ship missile. Only two of the missiles were designated for the Americans. The *Farragut*’s SM-2 surface-to-air missile took out the first. The CWIS exploded the second. But at that range and speed, the shrapnel from the Chinese missile still traveled with an enormous amount of kinetic energy.

Right into the bridge wing of the USS *Farragut*.

21

Plug saw the smoke first.

"What is that?"

Caveman looked up from the tactical display. "What the…?"

It reminded Plug of a volcano. Or maybe more like the footage of all those oil wells burning in the Iraqi desert. A deep black smoke billowed up into the sky, and trailing off to the east.

"You hear from the ship yet?" Plug asked.

"No. I'll call again." Caveman switched to the UHF external frequency that he would be able to reach the ship on.

"*Farragut* Control, Cutlass 476, how do you read?"

Nothing.

The single column of smoke became two. Then four. Plug made a call to the other helicopter. "Boss, you seeing this?"

"Affirm." Her voice sounded strained. "We keep heading there for now."

Plug could see the ships now. A sickening feeling formed in his stomach. The way they sat in the water was all wrong. He counted four ships, each tilted at an odd and deeply disturbing angle.

"Oh my *God*."

Plug aimed his nose at the closest warship. The bow protruded up out of the water. Violent whitewater foamed and bubbled around it as the innards of the hull traded air for seawater. A scatter of lifeboats gathered around it. Frantic, shocked crew looked up at the helicopter as it flew overhead, tilting in a turn.

The FUEL LOW light illuminated on the helicopter's master caution

panel. Plug was expecting it. But the feeling of dread only increased.

"Anybody see *Farragut* yet?"

AW2 Ross, their aircrewman, said, "I don't see her, sir. I only count four. Maybe she got outta here before…?"

Caveman replied, "Or she sank already. Plug, we might want to think about—"

"The needle just swung." He nodded towards the TACAN needle on the digital compass readout. It was tuned to their ship. It was now picking up the navigational beacon from *Farragut*.

"Nine miles. Coming right to three-one-zero. Thank God. I really didn't want to have to ditch this far out."

"You see that FUEL LOW light, right?" Caveman asked.

Plug turned and looked at him, lifting up his visor so the junior pilot could see his expression.

"Just checking."

Plug made the call to the other helo. "Boss, we're picking up Mom on TACAN. Nine miles on a heading of three-one-zero."

"Roger, we've got her on FLIR," came Victoria's response. "She looks like she's going pretty fast, and has damage near the bridge. We'll keep trying to reach her. You land first and get off deck. We'll drop our pax off after you, then I'll let you land and stuff the bird in the hangar."

Plug could see the USS *Farragut* now. "Boss, we're at five hundred and fifty pounds of fuel. You can't be much better."

"Plug, no arguments, please."

Plug said, "Ma'am, we're not going to have time to shut down and fold and stuff one of us in the hangar."

"Yes, you will, Lieutenant. That's going to be the plan."

Lieutenant. She had never called him that before. Aviators went by first names and call signs. She wanted to emphasize that she was in charge. Plug realized that she was afraid he might come up with his own plan.

That got him thinking.

Caveman said, "Two miles, conducting landing checks. Jones, everyone okay back there?"

"Aside from the bleeding, fine, sir."

"Roger." He flipped a few switches and then said, "Landing checks complete."

Plug kept the aircraft at one hundred and twenty knots until a half mile.

He didn’t look at any of his instruments. He just used feel. The site picture of the ship. The rate of closure of the deck. A grey smoke drifted overhead, and it smelled like burnt rubber and chemicals. His hands were slippery with sweat, but the leather gloves gripped onto the controls well.

“*Farragut* Control, Cutlass 476, declaring an emergency. We’re low fuel and have not been able to get you on comms. We’ll be landing and dropping off pax. Some need medical attention.”

He was slow now. Just fifty knots indicated. But with the ship going so fast, it felt much slower.

“Over the deck.”

“Roger.” He kept the helicopter drifting forward in a gentle hover. The flight deck rolled underneath, but he didn’t wait. He knew that the other aircraft was burning fuel above them. Every second longer he took meant a little bit less of a chance that they would survive.

The helicopter dropped into the center of the flight deck with a crunching jolt.

“Whew! That was ugly. Jones, Caveman, get everyone in the hangar. I’ve got the controls. Don’t bother waiting for chocks and chains.”

One of the hangar doors opened up, and one of his mechanics waved at them, his mouth open as he saw the aircrewman carrying a wounded soldier toward the hangar.

Moments later, Plug was alone in the aircraft, rolling side to side with the ship, the rotors turning. The fuel gauge was now less than five hundred pounds. He knew that he would only have a moment. He pulled in power and slid the aircraft up and aft. Then he pedal-turned to the left and nosed it forward.

“Boss, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to disobey you here.”

“Stay near the ship, Plug. You’ll land after I drop off my pax.”

“I’ll try, but I’ll probably need you guys to drop a smoke or—”

“Plug, you listen to me. Keep airborne. I will drop off my pax and then let you get fuel.”

“Not enough time, boss. You know it. One of us is going in the drink. Just do me a favor and pull me out after you guys refuel, okay? I promise I’ll get you one of those girly drinks you like next time we’re in Panama.”

There was only silence for a moment. Then she came on with a quick, resigned reply. “Remember your training.”

He smiled. She was such a machine. He knew how much she cared about

her men. It drove Plug crazy that she was unable to express it. *I mean, life isn't hard. You love someone, you say it. You hate someone, you punch them in the face. You work hard, you play hard*. Plug had done both.

Life had been fun while it lasted. His heart was beating faster. *Shit*…

He found himself talking out loud. "Well, better get this over with."

He turned off the radar altitude hold and slowed his aircraft to a crawl about a mile to the port side of the ship.

"One hundred feet. Ditching checklist. Windows—jettison."

He pulled the red-and-yellow handle, breaking the safety wire. Then he punched the Plexiglas and let it fall to the sea. He looked at the other helicopter. They were on short final now. Just coming over the deck. Good. That meant they would make it. He hoped that this was all worth it.

He was just about to bring the aircraft into a five-knot forward hover when he ran out of fuel.

The noise level decreased dramatically as the number one engine flamed out. His left hand instinctively dropped down the collective lever to preserve the rotational energy of the rotor, and get closer to the ground before the number two engine…

Ah. There it went. Total flameout.

The digital cubes that told him the status of his engines plummeted. He let the helicopter fall, holding the nose slightly forward to retain his forward speed.

It was the quickest autorotation of his life.

"Fifty feet. Flare." He gritted his teeth and clenched his stomach and he brought the nose up, trading off his airspeed for rotor turns—this slowed his rate of descent.

The rotor wash kicked up salt spray over the front window. He looked out the empty side window, watching the dark blue water. Then he looked back at his radiant and moved the cyclic and collective to level himself and squeeze out all of the potential energy of the rotors.

"Twenty feet. Fifteen feet. Ten knots. Ten feet."

The impact was about two seconds before he expected it, and hard. He jolted forward in his seat, restrained by his harness. The force was similar to a ten-mile-per-hour car crash. The helicopter's fifteen thousand pounds crashed into the ocean and immediately filled with water.

To his horror, he felt his feet and legs getting wet. It seemed strange to see the familiar electronics suite get covered with rising dark blue water. Plug

reached up and pulled off both engines to the OFF detent. Then he pushed the rotor brake all the way forward. For a second, he thought the helicopter might maintain its upright position. Then the terrible rollover began.

Helicopters were very top-heavy. Once in the water, the engines and transmission weighed it down, causing the aircraft to roll completely upside down as it sunk underwater. The cool seawater rose up his waist and chest. He remained strapped in to his seat harness. The water kept rising as he tilted sideways, and it covered his neck. Then one final breath before the water covered his mouth and nose and scalp…

Plug held his breath as the world turned upside down and dark. Victoria's last words to him over the radios replayed in his head.

Remember your training.

It didn't seem so silly now. *Grab hold of a reference point. Put your breathing device in your mouth now.*

As the helicopter's generators kicked offline, only a few lights remained on. The world was quiet. He quickly put the underwater breathing device into his mouth with his free hand. He blew out to clear the water out of the mouthpiece and breathed in precious air. Holding on to his seat with his left hand, he felt around for the seat belt latch, which would unlock the five harnesses that kept him strapped in. He didn't feel upside down now. Now, he had no idea which way was up.

His eyes stung from the saltwater and whatever oils were leaking out of the helicopter into the sea. He began to panic because he didn't think he was moving fast enough. If the helicopter sank too deep, he could get the bends.

Click.

He released himself from his straps and began floating to his right, but held his place with his left hand. He reached out where the window was, gripped the empty metal edge, and pulled his body through, kicking for extra propulsion.

A moment of panic as his boot got stuck on the rim of the window, but then he kicked free. Wriggling out of the sinking aircraft, he pulled the black beads around his vest and felt himself rising up to the surface as it inflated with air.



“ON FINAL.”

Victoria leveled off from her turn and aimed her helicopter directly up the long white wake of the destroyer. A grey smoke from the bridge area trailed up into the sky.

“Roger, on final,” came the voice of her young copilot.

They were landing on a smoking, damaged vessel, which had yet to respond to their communications. Not that they had a choice. The bright yellow FUEL LOW light shined on the master caution panel, demanding attention.

Victoria pulled back on the cyclic with her right hand and lowered the collective lever with her left. The speed began to bleed back. She made a radio call over the external comms.

“*Farragut* Control, Cutlass 471, on final, no comms, declaring an emergency. We see that you have received damage. Request you maintain course and speed for five mikes.” She turned and looked out her right window. “And if anyone hears this, we need fuel and our other rescue swimmer.”

Victoria switched frequencies to the VHF channel that Plug and her helicopters were using to communicate. “476, 471.”

Nothing. Plug was in the drink. God, she hoped they were alright.

“Point five miles, landing checklist.”

Juan was already flipping switches and rattling off the steps of the before-landing checklist.

The airspeed indicator slipped below forty knots, but it felt like they were barely closing in on the ship.

Juan said, “They’re booking it.”

“Yeah.” She pushed the stick forward and pulled in more power to close in on the ship.

The ship rolled hard left, white salt spray shooting up and covering part of the flight deck. The rolls were much more intense than normal due to the speed the destroyer was traveling at. They must have been going close to thirty knots.

“Over the deck.”

She caught a glimpse of one of the hangar personnel doors opening, and a face peeking out. Whoever was in there must have heard the sound of the aircraft as it made its way over the back of the ship. Then the face disappeared back in.

She positioned the helicopter over the center of the flight deck and held it hovering. The ship was in another big roll, this time to the right. It was a pattern. Every few seconds, the pendulum swung back and forth in opposite directions. She timed the pattern in her mind, holding the helicopter in a perfect hover, waiting. She kept the aircraft just high enough that the wheels wouldn't get caught by the moving surface beneath them.

There it was.

The roll started coming back in the opposite direction. Victoria timed her power reduction to drop the aircraft right on her landing spot at the exact time that the roll would make the ship even with the horizon. The result was a perfect landing.

They immediately began rolling hard to the left, but the helicopter weighed about seventeen thousand pounds, and physics would keep them in place. Unless the rolls got too severe…

The man who had opened the hangar door came running out, holding the dark metal chains they could use to tie down the helo.

"Fetternut, go help him out please."

Her aircrewman immediately unstrapped and grabbed one of the chains, hooking it to a metal tie-down point on the helicopter and fixing that to a tie-down point on the flight deck.

"Juan, you have the controls. I'm going to go get us fuel."

"Roger, boss. I have the controls."

She unstrapped, carefully moved out of her pilot seat without hitting the flight controls, and slammed the cockpit door shut. Then she walked back to the cabin and looked at the group of wounded soldiers.

She scanned the faces. Chase wasn't among them. He must have already walked into the hangar while she was unstrapping. She gripped the side of the helicopter as the ship rolled back and forth.

"Do they have a doctor on board?" one of the soldiers yelled over the noise of the rotors. His face was caked with dirt and dried blood. His eyes were tired but alert.

"No, but we have corpsmen." Victoria tried to sound out her words so that the man could read her lips.

He frowned. "So do we," he yelled back. "Let's get us to somewhere we can treat the wounded."

There were now several men from Victoria's maintenance crew running out from the hangar wearing headgear and vests, ready to help.

Once inside the hangar, her maintenance chief was waiting at the door, blocking her view. “Ma’am, the command master chief’s been looking for you. We got hit, ma’am.” His eyes were wide. The younger petty officers next to him watched them both, eager to hear the conversation.

The hangar door flopped open as the ship rolled. Whoever had come in last hadn’t secured it. She stood with her legs spread apart wider than normal, her knees bent. It helped her to balance as the ship rolled so much. Why were they still going this fast?

The group of soldiers spread out, sitting in the empty hangar and treating their wounded. One of her younger petty officers ran to go get the ship’s corpsmen and more medical supplies.

Victoria said, “Chief, we need fuel now. We need to go back up. 476 just ditched.” She tried to say it as calmly as possible.

“They *ditched*? Holy shit.” He turned and said, “AD1, go get the fuelies now! Get 471 refueled.” He looked back at Victoria. “Ma’am, it might be hard to get all the ship guys, but we’ll take care of it.”

“Why can’t you get the ship guys?”

“Some of them are still doing damage control. They had a fire around the bridge.”

“I saw that. Was anyone hurt?”

He didn’t answer. “Ma’am, the CMC needs to talk to you. He asked to speak with you immediately when you land.”

“If the master chief needs to talk to me, he can come here. I need to take off again. We need to go…”

Then she saw her brother. He was talking to the same soldier who had been in her helicopter asking about corpsmen.

She tried not to run. A quick walk. They made eye contact and then Chase stood and gave his sister a hug.

She stepped away, nodding, fighting back tears and smiles. “Glad you’re okay.”

Chase grinned. “Glad you came in time.”

“Are you going to tell me what this was all about?”

“I need to, yes. And I need to speak to your ship captain.” He held up a backpack. “We need to get this to Panama as soon as possible. Within the next few days, or it becomes useless. It’s extremely important, Victoria.”

She looked at the bag and then back at her brother. “Alright. I’ll—”

“Airboss.” The ship’s command master chief hurried into the hangar. “A

word please, ma'am."

She looked at her brother and said, "Can you give me a few minutes?"

He nodded.

Victoria and the master chief walked to the corner of the hangar, out of earshot of the others. Enlisted men and women hurried in and out of the hangar, providing aid to the wounded.

Victoria said, "What happened?"

"About an hour ago, we got hit by an anti-ship missile. It struck the bridge and a few spaces forward of the bridge."

"Was anyone hurt?"

He had a funny look in his eye. "Ma'am, it is my duty to tell you that you are now the senior line officer on board. The captain and XO were both killed in the attack."

She shook her head. "*What?*"

"The captain and XO were killed. I checked the lineal numbers. You are now the senior line officer on board. Per Navy regulations, you are now in command of the ship. Ma'am, I suggest you appoint one of your junior pilots to handle any immediate concerns here and follow me to the combat information center, where we can get you up to speed."

Victoria couldn't speak.

Several hours ago, her biggest problem of the day had been hauling cargo beneath her helicopter from the supply ship to her own.

Then a simple radio call had changed everything. She had flown her helicopter into a jungle combat situation, rescued a group of what she presumed were Special Forces, and flown back to find out that her ship and the ships in company had been attacked.

Now she was being thrown into command of a surface ship. She was a helicopter pilot. She wasn't even high-ranking enough to be a commanding officer in her own community.

"Master Chief, are you sure? I mean, am I really the one who—"

The CMC didn't give her time to contemplate it any further.

"Ma'am, respectfully…we're in the middle of an emergency. I assure you that I am doing this by the book. Now I need you to come with me."

She had let her guard down when they'd landed. In the air, she had automatically compartmentalized. She'd blocked out any thoughts that might distract her from making good decisions and completing the mission. She realized she would need to treat this situation the same. She could think about

it later. Right now, she needed to take charge.

"Yes, of course," she said.

Aviate. Navigate. Communicate. The mantra of all pilots. While it took a literal meaning in the air, it applied to everything in life as a metaphor. She needed to prioritize. There were several vital things she needed to accomplish in short order. And she didn't need to be the one to do them all herself.

She looked up and saw her rescue swimmer. "AWR1, go hold the controls for LTJG Volonte and tell him I need to speak with him immediately. Send him to Combat. That's where I'll be."

The rescue swimmer looked at her like she was crazy. He would normally never sit in the pilot's seat, let alone as the only person at the controls of a spinning helicopter. Despite the fact that it was tied down, it was still highly irregular. "Yes, ma'am."

She called to her brother, "Chase, I'll be right back." She left him with a confused look on his face.

"Let's go, Master Chief. Bring me to Combat."



EVERYONE IN COMBAT was wearing their general quarters gear. White fireproof cloth over their heads. Gloves. Sleeves rolled up. Victoria took in their faces. They each looked drained and shell-shocked.

The command master chief began, "OPS, I've informed Air Boss of her new…*status*."

Victoria realized that she had just been part of the most informal change of command she'd ever witnessed. OPS had been the senior officer on the ship until she had landed. He had been in command. Now she was.

He nodded at her. "Welcome back, boss." He looked like hell.

"Can you bring me up to speed?"

"The fires are out, and there is no more flooding. But we lost fourteen personnel, including the captain and the XO. Another ten are injured. We suffered a steering casualty when the bridge got hit. Had some trouble transferring control to Engineering. That's been resolved."

She looked up at the displays. They were traveling at twenty-eight knots. "Why the speed?"

"At first, it was because the captain gave the all head flank order. And

then we had the steering casualty, so keeping this course and speed was our best method of evasive maneuvering."

"And now? Why are you still going this course and speed?"

OPS didn't like the question. "Because a fucking submarine just sank all the ships that were next to us and hit us with a missile. And I'm trying to make sure it doesn't finish us off."

She didn't like the attitude but understood the stress that he was under. That they all were under. She took a deep breath. "Okay. What are your intentions?"

"I'm getting as much distance as I can between us and the location of the attack. I've put out distress calls, but satcom is still down and we haven't reached anyone on any other channels. I *intend* to keep us from getting sunk. We're headed west right now, but I'll turn us north and slow us down soon. We'll listen and try to get a fix on the sub—"

"What do you know about it? Did you have any warning?"

OPS turned to the sonar station. Three sonar technicians were looking at their displays. Two wore headsets covering one ear while they talked. "They can give you a better idea of what they heard. But it happened quickly. We had about two minutes' notice. They picked something up. Transient sounds —torpedoes. We think they sank the Colombian diesel boat first. Then the next thing we knew, we were being attacked. Damage control parties were running around the ship, the lights went out for a bit, and all hell broke loose. Look, I don't need to be judged, alright? I did what I thought was right and got us out of there. As far as I know, none of those other ships made it—"

Victoria said, "We flew overhead. They have people in the water in lifeboats. We'll commence rescue operations once the helicopter gets refueled. And I'm not judging you. I just want to know what happened and then we'll decide what to do next."

He looked surprised to hear that there were survivors.

"Ma'am?" One of the junior officers held out one of the phones.

She took it. "Air Boss." She wondered if she should keep calling herself by that title. She didn't feel comfortable calling herself the captain.

"Boss, it's Juan. What's up? AWR1 said you wanted to talk to me."

She turned from the group in combat and lowered her voice a bit. "Juan, I need you to be in charge back there right now. Get Caveman. Listen, you two are going to be doing the SAR flight to pick up Plug as soon as you're fueled up."

Silence on the other end. Juan and Caveman were junior pilots. They had never flown a Seahawk helicopter without an aircraft commander. But Victoria needed to get things done, and her normal procedures and precautions were out the window right now. Despite the dramatic chain of events, she realized that it still came as a surprise to the young pilot.

"Juan, do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Can you handle it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Tell me what you're going to do when you take off." She decided it might be worth making sure that he wasn't in over his head.

"Uh…I'll…I'll fly opposite direction of the ship's heading. We dropped a smoke. I'll use the SAR checklist to calculate a starting point and then execute a search pattern and—"

"Okay, just checking. You'll do fine. Go pick up our other HAC. We're going to need him. Just ask for green deck when you're ready to take off. I'll get the ASTAC at his station again so you'll have someone on the radio."

"Yes, ma'am."

She handed the phone back to the junior officer and walked over to the three sonar technicians. "Tell me what you know, gentlemen."

The chief sonar tech spoke. "Ma'am, we went over the tapes. It looks like a Han- or a Shang-class. A Chinese nuclear fast-attack submarine. She launched four torpedoes and several surface-to-surface missiles. We've been trying to listen for her now, but with all the noise we're making at this speed, it's kind of hard."

"What would you expect a Chinese sub to do now, Chief?"

"Probably trail us. With as much noise as we're making, she'll be able to track us from pretty far away. She'll probably slow down once we do, so we can't hear her. But my guess is that we've created some pretty good distance. It'll be harder for her to sneak up on us like that again now that we know what we're looking for."

"Sounds right to me. See if you can get air support. We need P-3s or P-8s doing ASW for us immediately."

OPS nodded.

Victoria said, "Here are our priorities: One, stay at a safe distance from where we think the Chinese submarine is. Two, rescue Plug and any survivors from the other ships that were attacked. Three—well, we'll get

more on that once we talk to the special operations team that we just pulled out of Ecuador. Where's the navigator?"

OPS looked down. "She was on the bridge when it happened."

Victoria turned her head, a pained expression on her face. "Sorry. Who's taking her place?"

OPS looked pissed. "I haven't gotten around to staffing yet—"

The junior officer who had handed her the phone earlier picked it up when it rang again. After a moment, he said, "Ma'am, the helicopter is fueled and requesting green deck."

"Granted."

She watched one of the TV screens as her two young copilots, officially unqualified to conduct the mission they were about to embark on, took off, then turned back to OPS. "We need to figure out how long we'll need to pick up all the survivors. And we need to figure out how much time it'll take to get in helicopter range of Panama City. We have to get a piece of equipment there as soon as possible. Any gap in time is going to be taken out of our on-station time in rescuing the survivors from the other ships. Is that clear?"

"Clear."

"Good. You guys crunch the numbers. I need to go talk to the troops we just pulled out of the jungle."

22

Langley, Virginia

David sat in his cubicle at the CIA headquarters building, waiting for the latest update from the USS *Jimmy Carter*. He had grown accustomed to getting updates every hour on the hour.

There it was.

The files in the Top Secret share drive began filling up with photos and other data. He scrolled through them, looking for anything of immediate interest.

A few cubicles down, Susan stood up at her desk. The look on her face was alarming. David hadn't seen her look like that, even after the Iranians had attacked the D.C. Beltway.

"What is it?"

"Did you see the latest information from the *Carter*?"

"I saw that it was uploaded. I haven't gone through all the data yet." He wondered how it was possible that she had.

"They sent a flash summary. Alerting us about something specific. I'm looking at it now. Oh my *God*…"

She raced over to his desk, stopped and turned her head back and forth, looking in each direction. She was trying to decide what to do first. She said, "*Come on*. We need to see General Schwartz."

They walked down the Langley hallway until they reached General Schwartz's office. Susan told his secretary, "I need to see him now."

The secretary nodded. "Go ahead."

They opened the door. He was on his computer. He stood, seeing the urgency on Susan's face. "What is it?"

"Sir, the USS *Jimmy Carter* just intercepted a communication from the Chinese South Sea Fleet."

"What'd they get?"

"Sir, it was sent only to ships that were using the Red Cell crypto key. We believe that the Chinese are in the process of attacking our units operating in the Eastern Pacific. They specifically mentioned US Navy Warship 099, which is the hull number of the USS *Farragut*. We're still verifying, but I would consider this information highly accurate."

The general held up his hand. He dialed a number on his secure phone and put it on speaker.

"Director Buckingham."

"Sir, this is General Schwartz. I have Susan Collinsworth and David Manning in here. We just got an important update, sir. You're going to want to hear it."

The director said, "I hope it's good news. I just heard from our Colombian station chief—the Army Blackhawk that was sent to pick up the MARSOC team hasn't reported in. The MARSOC group had to activate the backup plan—two Navy helicopters from a destroyer off shore."

Susan said, "Sir, if the MARSOC group was able to get the crypto key and is headed out to sea, that may explain the information we just received. The USS *Jimmy Carter* just made some electronic signals intercepts that originated from the Red Cell island. The Chinese South Sea Fleet—this is the command we think is working with Cheng Jinshan—has just commanded a surface action group and a Shang-class submarine to find and sink the USS *Farragut*."

The director said, "So PLA Navy ships and submarines have orders to sink the USS *Farragut*?"

"That's affirmative, sir."

"That doesn't make sense. It would take them a month to travel across the Pacific. How—?"

"Sir, from the intercepts we received, it appears that these units are already located somewhere in the Eastern Pacific."

The director didn't respond at first. After a moment he said, "How did we not already know this?"

Susan said, "With our reconnaissance satellites down for the past few

weeks, it would have been relatively easy for them to make that voyage undetected, sir."

The director sighed. "I'll contact the president. General, please make sure that our SILVERSMITH military units get this information as soon as possible."

"Will do."

The director said, "Hold on. As I think this through…General, this should *not*, I repeat, *not* be put out wide yet. I don't want to start a shooting war between the US and China if it turns out that this is all the work of two rogue Chinese men. If we can still contain this and prevent World War Three from breaking out, I'd like to do that."

The general nodded. "I agree. I'll speak to Pentagon leadership as soon as we're off the phone. We'll keep this information compartmentalized to just the SILVERSMITH Task Force and leadership."

~

USS Ford
500 Nautical Miles West of Chile

FM CNO WASHINGTON D.C.

TO TASK FORCE SILVERSMITH

SUBJ / EMERGENCY WARNING NOTIFICATION

RMKS/1. US MILITARY FORCES IN EASTPAC SUFFERING COMMUNICATIONS OUTAGES. POSSIBLE ATTACK IN PROGRESS ON USS FARRAGUT AND ACCOMPANYING ALLIED VESSELS.

2. SIGNALS INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION INDICATES CHINESE SURFACE ACTION GROUP (STRENGTH UNKNOWN) BELIEVED IN VICINITY OF EASTPAC AND TASKED WITH ATTACKING USS FARRAGUT.

3. SIGNALS INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION INDICATES CHINESE SHANG-CLASS SUBMARINE BELIEVED IN VICINITY OF EASTPAC AND TASKED WITH ATTACKING USS FARRAGUT.

4. FORD CSG SHALL CONTINUE NORTHBOUND AT BEST SPEED

AND RENDEZVOUS WITH USS FARRAGUT. MAINTAIN APPROPRIATE WEAPONS POSTURE AND OPERATE IN ACCORDANCE WITH PREVIOUSLY SPECIFIED RULES OF ENGAGEMENT.

Admiral Manning sat at his desk, reading the high-priority message that his chief of staff had just handed him.

"What do you think, COS?"

The admiral's chief of staff stood across from his desk.

"Sir, it sounds like a shit show up there."

"That's what I think too."

The COS said, "Sir, I understand that your daughter is on the *Farragut*."

Admiral Manning looked up at the Navy captain. "That's right."

The COS looked uncomfortable. "Sir, just let me know if—"

The admiral stood. "I appreciate your concern. I'll let you know if my emotions get in the way of performing my duties."

"Oh hell, sir. I didn't mean it like that. I more just meant—well, if you need anything, sir, just let me know."

The admiral nodded. He realized that this was just one emotionally challenged military man attempting to comfort another. "Sorry. Thanks, COS. I appreciate the gesture." He took a deep breath. "Everyone ready?"

"Yes, sir, they're all waiting."

"Alright, let's get started."

The chief of staff opened the door that lead to the large conference room next door.

"Attention on deck!" A group of thirty or so officers jumped to attention.

It was packed. At the long wooden conference table sat no fewer than five Navy captains and a host of commanders. The CAG, who was in charge of the air wing, and the commodore, who was in charge of the surface and subsurface warfare, sat closest to the admiral. The COs of the ships in company were teleconferenced in, their faces on the projector screen forward of the conference table.

An outer row of chairs surrounded the table. In them, the squadron commanders and staff officers sat shoulder to shoulder, many with notepads in hand, ready to start scribbling at the first hint that their boss would task them with an order.

"Seats," called the admiral as he sat down at the head of the table. Everyone immediately did as commanded.

The admiral looked at their faces. “Ladies and gentlemen, as many of you now know, we may soon be in open hostilities with Chinese warships in the Eastern Pacific. I’ve been briefed on three scenarios. The first, which seems out of the question now, was that China is completely friendly to us and this whole exercise was a waste of time. As of a message I read just a few minutes ago, I now consider that scenario to be ruled out.”

Many of the faces staring back at him nodded. A few looked confused—those were the ones that the information hadn’t gotten to yet.

“The other scenarios are as follows. Either there is a contingent of rogue Chinese military and intelligence personnel who have, without orders from Beijing, executed an attack on United States interests…*or*, there is a far larger and more comprehensive Chinese attack in the works. Because we do not yet know which scenario we are facing, and because we wish to avoid triggering the worse of the two, we must act in such a way to avoid unnecessary hostilities with the Chinese military.”

Admiral Manning watched the faces of the men and women in the room as they digested his words. “Simply said, we do not yet know whether to shoot some of them, or all of them.”

The room was dead quiet. He held up the message in his hand. “They have just attacked the USS *Farragut*. And there are now several ships and at least one submarine headed to finish her off. That can’t happen, team. Not on our watch.”

He looked at the group. “Alright, I want options. When will we be in range with our aircraft?”

CAG said, “Sir, with tankers, we could be in range tomorrow. We’ve got about another forty-eight hours before we’ll be in range without tankers. We’re working with the Air Force to get support for that as we speak.”

“Could we launch the air wing onto shore somewhere and let them operate from there?”

CAG nodded. “Yes, sir, but the intelligence reports we’ve been given are now suggesting possible Chinese surface-to-air missile defenses set up in the area of Manta, Ecuador.”

The admiral rubbed his chin and thought it over. At least thirty faces looked back at him from around the room, waiting for him to speak. Their looks were eager. They all wanted to get in on the fight. He wondered how many of them knew that his daughter was aboard *Farragut*. He smiled inwardly. They all knew. This was a Navy vessel. Nothing was a secret

around here.

“CAG, tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Admiral, the Warfare commanders and I were just discussing this. We suggest launching an E-2D and keeping them out of missile range of Ecuador. We’d be able to set up a link connection with the *Farragut*. We’ll be able to talk with them, share data, and get a sitrep.”

“Approved, what else?”

“Once we either get tanker support or get in range—whichever comes first—we can then launch a pair of Growlers and a pair of F-35s. We could use the Growlers for electronic attack on the Chinese surface ships. This would help prevent them from detecting or launching their missiles on the *Farragut*. The F-35s will be armed and ready to drop bombs and conduct strafing runs on the Chinese ships if needed.”

“Bombs and strafing runs?”

“Correct, Admiral.”

“The F-35s don’t have any anti-ship missiles?”

“There are some prototypes in development, sir. But we don’t have any on board.”

The admiral kept calm. While the news was extremely frustrating, it would have been counterproductive to show anger in front of his men. “Understood.” He turned to the commodore. “Any thoughts, Commodore? What’s the best way to fight those Chinese surface ships from your perspective?”

“Admiral, the *Farragut* has anti-ship missiles it can use. We’re working on getting an Air Force JSTARS to conduct a mission to the area and help us locate the Chinese, without getting too close as to alert them. Once we do that, we’ll be able to go over attack options, if it comes to it.”

“Alright. What about the submarine? What are our plans for that?”

“Sir, I’ve been in touch with the P-8 squadron in El Salvador. They’ve been brought into the fold on SILVERSMITH. They’ve promised to provide as much ASW coverage as possible over the next few days, until *Farragut* gets to Panama. There is a problem, however.”

“What’s that?”

“Sir, the P-8 skipper told me that they don’t have any live torpedoes. Their mission in the area was ASW training and counternarcotic surveillance only.”

“So I have fighters with no anti-ship missiles, and ASW aircraft with no

torpedoes. Very well. I assume that they'll be able to work in concert with the *Farragut* and her helos?"

"Yes, sir. We've had intermittent HF communications with *Farragut* today. We think some of her communications equipment may have been damaged in combat. Once we get the Screwtops up and airborne, we'll be able to relay all this information and confirm plans. It's been easier to speak with the land-based assets, sir. But we're working on it."

The Screwtops was the call sign of the airborne early-warning E-2 squadron, VAW-123. They had recently transitioned from the E-2C to the newer model, E-2D.

"Alright. Get the aircraft launched as soon as possible." He turned to scan the eyes of the men and women around the room. "Make sure everyone on board knows that they aren't to share any of this information with anyone on shore. No unauthorized phone calls, email, or Internet. This place is on information lockdown unless it's official business. That understood?"

"Yes, sir."

The admiral stood up and walked out. In silence, everyone in the room stood at attention until he left.

23

USS Farragut

Victoria walked into the crowded wardroom. No one called attention on deck, but she could feel that pause—that tension that occurs when the seniormost person enters the room. All eyes were on her, as if asking permission for whatever would come next.

She had called for a department head meeting as soon as OPS had come off duty. They had one of the junior officers standing tactical action officer in CIC.

Chase and the soldier she'd been speaking to in the helicopter—she learned he was actually a Marine captain, and would probably detest the term *soldier*—ate sandwiches prepared by the wardroom's CS2. The rest of them sat, waiting for her. A recently retrieved Plug stood in the back of the room.

Juan had picked up a total of thirty-two officers and crew from the various international ships, but they were all recovering in the empty hangar, now converted into an infirmary.

Victoria began, "COMMO, you said you had something to tell me about getting our datalink network up and running."

"Yes, ma'am," the ensign said, "we actually just got a good connection a few minutes before I walked in. We're now linking with an E2-D to the south of us. We still have to set a few things up, but we should be able to have encrypted chat capability with them, and some voice channels, ready within the hour."

She raised her eyebrow. "Did you say E2-D?" That was the newest

carrier-launched radar plane. It provided early-warning and networking capabilities to fleet ships and aircraft. If one of those was flying around in range of them, that meant that a carrier was almost certainly nearby.

"Yes, ma'am."

"To the south? That doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. We're trying to get more information, ma'am. We'll have something for you shortly."

"Alright. Let me know the minute you get any comms. We need them to relay our ASW help request and send more air assets to check for any more survivors near the attack site."

"Roger that."

The chief engineer spoke for a bit about the status of bridge repairs and damage. Then OPS filled everyone in on new staffing, replacing those who were lost in the attack. No one said a word while he spoke. She could see the looks on their faces. People were exhausted from the stress of the last twenty-four hours.

When it grew quiet again, Victoria said, "Listen, I know that everyone is tired and stressed out. Make sure when you aren't on watch, if you don't have anything vital to the mission going on, that you're taking care of yourselves and getting rest. You'll be no use to me if you're so tired that you type in the wrong numbers when we find and attack that Chinese sub. And don't give me any shit about the pilot always being concerned about crew rest." She smiled.

The group smiled back. That was a good sign. People were nodding their heads.

"Plug."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you good to fly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I only have one more helicopter, so please try to keep this one dry, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

"I need you to make sure that the bird is fully outfitted for ASW."

"We're loading MK-54s now, boss. Should be done in another hour."

"Good." She turned to the ship's combat systems officer. "CSO, how is *Farragut*'s ASW readiness?"

"We're using our passive systems to see what we can turn up, ma'am. All of our weapons are ready. No issues."

“Except for the undetected hostile submarine in the area,” replied Victoria. She didn’t mean to sound sarcastic, but it came out that way.

“Yes, ma’am. Except for that.”

“Very well. Keep sharp, everyone. Plug, OPS, please stay. We need to have a conversation with our guests here.” She looked at her brother. Victoria hadn’t bothered to tell anyone on board that Chase and she were related. A few of them had probably seen the hug they’d exchanged in the hangar. But everything else had been strictly professional. She didn’t even have to say anything to Chase. It was just something that they both understood. The environment they were operating in required total focus. Emotion and relationships would have to wait.

When the room emptied, Victoria said, “Chase, what can you tell us?”

He placed the backpack on the table. “We have a very important piece of equipment in here that we need to get to Panama. If you can get me to the international airport there, I can do the rest. But we have a finite amount of time. This thing has an expiration.” He looked at his watch. “We have about seventy-two more hours before it’s no longer useful. I need to get it to members of my team in Panama City with enough time to do something with it. They told me they need about a day. So if you add an hour for me to secure transportation…that gives us a little under forty-eight hours to get me on the ground in Panama City.”

Victoria looked at OPS. “How far away are we from Panama City?”

He said, “I can double-check to give you an exact distance, but roughly eight hundred miles if we go straight there.”

Victoria did the math in her head. “Alright, so we’ll have to steam forty hours at twenty knots. Plug, how far would you be willing to launch at? Three hundred miles away okay? Consider this an emergency.”

“Three hundred should work if the winds aren’t in our face too much.”

She tilted her head. “Okay, let’s call it three hundred miles. That puts us down to a five-hundred-mile trip. Is twenty knots a good assumption?”

A few of the more senior surface officers nodded.

Victoria said, “So we need to head straight toward Panama for twenty-five hours. Then there’ll be flight time. Plug, what’s that?”

“Let’s call it a three-hour flight for simple math.”

“Alright—so you guys would be on deck in Panama City in twenty-eight hours. Will that work?”

Chase said, “It should, yes.”

“This supposes that we don’t have to fight off the submarine on our way there. If that happens—”

The phone rang, and the person closest to the phone answered it. He looked up at Victoria. “Air Boss, it’s for you.”

She walked over and picked it up. “Manning.” She looked up at the group. “OPS, please come with me. The rest of you stay here and keep working on the details of a plan. I’ll be back shortly.”

“What is it?” Chase asked.

She looked him directly in the eye. “The USS *Ford* is contacting us. They’re driving up the western coast of South America.”

Chase smiled. “I was wondering when they’d show up.”



VICTORIA WALKED into the CIC with OPS in tow. The communications officer stood over the central chart table. “Good evening, Air Boss.”

“Good evening. Sounds like you’ve been busy. What have you got?”

“Ma’am, about an hour ago we started getting a datalink connection request. We went through all the procedures, and everything checked out good. Long story short, it was an E-2D Hawkeye, launched from the USS *Ford*.”

“Understood. Now, how is that possible?”

“The USS *Ford* Strike Group is several thousand miles to the south of us. But they’ve launched their airborne early-warning aircraft. We’re now sharing our tracks over datalink via the E-2.”

Victoria looked at OPS. OPS said, “When will they be here? It’s going to be several days at least. Call it a week.”

“We just started chatting with them now, sir. We don’t have voice up yet—it’s all on chat.” Chat was the term for the encrypted instant messenger system the military used to communicate on.

“So? What are you waiting for? Ask them,” OPS said.

“Sir, uh…*Ford* CSG Actual is on chat. He wants to speak with *Farragut* Actual. I…I assume that is the air boss? Is that right, ma’am? I wasn’t sure what to say.”

Victoria nodded. “That’s fine. Show me where to type.” They walked over to one of the computer monitors.

FARRAGUT TAO: This is Farragut Actual. Status: Air Boss had to take over as Farragut Actual after CO and XO were KIA in missile strike. Farragut casualties were 14 Dead, 10 wounded. Four ships in company were sunk. 32 personnel from ships in company have been rescued and are on board. All Farragut systems have been restored and are operational. We have taken on 10 personnel from a MARSOC unit, including high-priority cargo. Are you familiar, over?

FORD CSG BWC: FARRAGUT Actual, this is FORD CSG Actual. Sorry to hear about your KIA. Am familiar with MARSOC mission and cargo. Understand priority and destination. State intentions, over.

FARRAGUT TAO: Intend to proceed to Panama City at best transit speed and launch cargo with one member of MARSOC unit as soon as we reach helicopter range.

FORD CSG BWC: Roger, stand by.

Victoria took a deep breath. This was a surreal experience. She looked around the dark, high-tech room. She was commanding a US Navy warship, and sending messages to her father, who was commanding an aircraft carrier strike group.

“What ships are with the *Ford*? I mean, what type of ships? Do you have that up on the board?”

“Yes, ma’am. Looks like they have the DDG-1002, the USS *Michael Monsoor*, riding shotgun. They also have the USS *Mason*, the USNS *Henry J. Kaiser*, and the USS *Detroit*, a littoral combat ship. It’s like a Navy recruiting commercial—they’ve got one of everything.”

Victoria just nodded, too tired to smile. While she waited, she wrote down a list of questions that she had for when FORD started talking again. The chat window became active a few moments later.

FORD CSG BWC: FARRAGUT, until further notice, FORD CSG takes tactical control of your unit.

FARRAGUT TAO: Roger, understand FORD CSG has TACON of FARRAGUT.

FORD CSG BWC: FARRAGUT, be advised, Chinese surface action group headed your way from the west. Additionally, Chinese Shang-class attack submarine believed to be in your vicinity. BOTH surface action group and sub have orders to sink your unit.

Victoria looked at the screen, whispering, “Well, no shit, there’s a Chinese sub. Thanks.”

OPS said, “Do they have a location or number of Chinese surface ships?”

Victoria typed.

FARRAGUT TAO: Interrogative position of hostile units?

FORD CSG BWC: Unknown. Working with reconnaissance assets to search the area. Will pass updated track information to you when able.

FARRAGUT TAO: Roger.

FORD CSG BWC: FARRAGUT, your orders are to stay at current location until FORD CSG gets to your position.

Victoria looked at the screen in disbelief. What was her father thinking? Didn’t they know that the crypto key had to get to Panama City as soon as possible? Plus, if there were ships and submarines out here trying to find her, the last thing she wanted to do was sit around. She needed to plow through and head to Panama.

FARRAGUT TAO: FORD CSG, respectfully—this will not allow us to complete our mission. VIP and Cargo needs to get to Panama ASAP. Waiting at current position not an option. This will also expose us to submarine attack.

FORD CSG BWC: Understood. Was not aware of cargo transfer requirement. Stand by.



ADMIRAL MANNING SAT in a chair on an elevated platform in the rear of a room the size and shape of a movie theater. Yet instead of normal seats, the room was set up similar to NASA mission control. Rows of highly trained Navy personnel worked on computers, gathering information from sensors and eyeballs around the fleet. This room was where the admiral’s watch team ran the carrier strike group. It was the brain. The central command center for billions of dollars of high-tech warfighting equipment and thousands of personnel.

A Navy commander was the head watch stander, the battle watch captain. He stood behind the admiral while the admiral typed from the battle watch captain’s chair.

The battle watch captain’s assistant came up to him, whispering, “Sir, we just got voice communications good uplink and downlink. The admiral can call and speak to *Farragut* on voice, if he prefers.”

The admiral, his ears used to trying to listen in to the whispers of underlings, turned and said, “Yes. I want voice. Which one is it?”

The commander handed him the black plastic phone. “You just press this button here, sir. They should be the only ones on that channel.”

“Thank you.”

He paused, realizing who he was about to be speaking with. “Gentlemen, could you give me a moment?”

The watch standers and his aide stepped out of earshot. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“*Farragut*, this is *Ford* CSG Actual, over.”

“*Ford* CSG Actual, this is *Farragut* Actual, over.”

It was her voice. He wasn’t sure how many people would be listening to the conversation, but he didn’t care. This was the first time he’d spoken to his daughter since his wife’s funeral.

“It’s good to hear your voice, Victoria, over.”

A pause.

“*Ford*, this is *Farragut*, Thank you, sir. You too, over.”

That was the most affection either of their proper etiquette-based personalities would allow.

“*Farragut*, this is *Ford*. I understand that you disagree with the decision to remain on station until *Ford* CSG arrives, over?”

“*Ford*, this is *Farragut*. Affirm, sir. I understand that it would be several days until you are within range of us. The MARSOC team and the intelligence officer with them have a very time-sensitive mission. Their cargo will expire and become useless if it doesn’t reach the shore as soon as possible. This cargo is crucial to bringing an end to this conflict.” She paused, letting that information sink in.

“*Farragut*, this is *Ford*. Understood, over.”

“*Ford*, this is *Farragut*. We’ve done the math, sir. We can’t wait, over.”

“*Farragut*, this is *Ford*. You have four Chinese surface ships and one submarine bearing down on you. We are still several thousand miles away, but are working on plans to provide air support. The odds are against you. I don’t like the risk level, over.”

“*Ford*, this is *Farragut*, sir. Respectfully, sir, I understand the risks involved. But this is the only way to accomplish the mission. I request that you allow us to proceed to Panama at best speed. We will take proper precautions and use the P-8 for air cover, over. Request CSG assistance in

setting up air support."

Admiral Manning stood silent for a full twenty seconds, mulling it over in his mind. What would he do if his daughter were not on that ship? He sighed, knowing the answer, and hating it.

"*Farragut*, this is *Ford*. Proceed as requested. Will work on air support plan, over."

"*Farragut*, Wilco, out."

As the admiral hung up the phone, he looked up at the tactical display, showing red units surrounding the single blue icon that represented the USS *Farragut*. He hoped he had made the right choice.



VICTORIA AND OPS reentered the wardroom and sat back down in their chairs. She got everyone up to speed.

Chase said, "So you're saying that you've got a bunch of Chinese ships and one submarine out there, all looking for us, with orders to blow us out of the water?"

Victoria said, "Unfortunately, that about sums it up, yes."

Chase looked at the ceiling and whistled. "Can you fly me back to shore?"

"I'll do it," Plug volunteered.

A few smiles from the group. Everyone knew the two were trying to make a somber situation more light-hearted with the attempted joke.

Victoria said, "While I appreciate your noble gestures, we need to head northeast. Getting close enough for a helo transport to shore is the only realistic option of getting the cargo to Panama City fast enough. I've instructed the TAO to start heading to Panama City at twenty knots."

She looked at her watch. "What I want to do with the next twenty minutes or so is brainstorm on what tactics we can use to get through unscathed. Thoughts?"

OPS said, "We could turn off all our radars and go completely dark. Try and hide from the Chinese surface ships. As long as they don't have some other way of getting our location, like satellite or something, then that should be good enough for them. But it won't hide us from the submarine. If we're traveling at twenty knots, and the submarine is in between us and Panama,

we’re going to stick out like a sore thumb.”

The ASW officer said, “Ma’am, OPS is right. We need a way to find the submarine.”

“Well, we’re calling in maritime air support. There is a P-8 deployed to El Salvador that should be out here as soon as possible. That should give us protection against the submarine.”

Plug said, “I don’t think they’ll have enough buoys to protect us for five hundred miles.”

“Well, have you got a better idea?”

Plug sat on the couch in the corner of the wardroom. There was a small TV and a bookshelf filled with DVDs. One of the DVDs was a 1996 film starring Kelsey Grammer.

He said, “What if we hid from the submarine?”

The group turned and looked at him. Lots of skeptical eyes. OPS said, “How the hell are we gonna do that?”

Victoria said, “Plug, say more, please.”

“Well, at the risk of admitting that I’m the village idiot…I mean, no one else has any ideas, so…”

OPS said, “Spit it out, man.”

“You guys ever seen the movie *Down Periscope*? You know that scene where the submarine goes right up under the merchant ship and uses it to hide and slip through undetected?”

The group’s skeptical looks got even worse.

Plug persisted, “Look, I mean…I fly over merchant ships all the time out here. This part of the world, about half of ’em are headed east…and if they are, they’re going to the same place we are. *Panama City*. So, well…what if we just, what if we just ‘encouraged them’ to travel really close to our ship? At the same course and speed. Like, *really* close to us. Maybe we could hide from the Chinese then?”

Victoria frowned. She probably had the most ASW experience in the room. She thought it sounded nutty. Her impression was that submariners were like trained K-9 units. They could pick out a million different scents and wouldn’t get thrown off just because two ships got real close together. But she had to admit that she wasn’t *totally* sure that it wouldn’t work…

Victoria said, “Can someone call our sonar tech senior chief in for a moment? If I remember correctly, he started off as a submariner, right? Let’s ask him what he thinks.” One of the junior officers close to the wardroom

phone picked it up and dialed a number to get the senior chief.

OPS said, “We’d have to run it by the *Ford* Strike Group. They have tactical control of us now.”

Victoria said, “For the sake of argument, let’s say for a second that this plan would work. How would we execute?”

The Chief Engineer said, “We could fly prize crews to each of the merchants, and have them make sure that they’re doing what we want.”

Victoria said, “We don’t exactly have a lot of people to spare to become prize crews. And what about the legality of it? Hell, this might be construed as piracy.”

Chase said, “I think we’ve got a bunch of Marines who would love to participate. Right, Captain?”

“Ma’am, I believe the terminology you’re looking for is ‘safety inspection,’” the Marine Special Forces officer said. “It just so happens that the Marine Raiders on board have been trained in these safety inspection procedures. I think that with the right encouragement, we could get a few merchants to happily comply with our navigational recommendations while conducting these safety inspections. Now, some of my men are wounded. But anyone who is up to it would be able to go. Now, our navigational recommendations will be identical to your ship’s course and speed, offset by…well, by whatever spacing you give us.” The Marine gave a charming smile.

She felt like a substitute teacher who was getting taken advantage of by an unruly group of students. “Alright, let’s keep this as a hypothetical for now. But…Chase, Plug, and Captain Calhoun, please make your way up to Combat and start looking into potential merchants that might be good candidates.”

The three men got up and left the room—a little too quick for her taste. Like they’d succeeded in getting away with something and didn’t want her to change her mind. But while there was humor in their excitement, there was nothing funny about a potential Chinese submarine waiting in their path.



JUAN SAID, “I still can’t believe we’re doing this.”

Plug was flying the aircraft. Juan manipulated the FLIR—the infrared

camera in front of the helicopter—so that they could see the merchant ship that they were approaching.

It was a giant.

The hull was painted light blue, with big thick black letters announcing that it was owned by MAERSK LINE. Stacks and stacks of shipping containers filled the deck, six stories high. A long, thin glass walkway towered one hundred feet above the water. It was the bridge. And their target.

Plug said, “Honestly, I’m surprised that we’re doing it too. But we asked the only guy on the ship who had any idea whether it would work, and he thought there was a chance. I mean, no one had any better ideas on how to hide from a submarine. I really just got the idea from a movie. But Senior Chief ended up throwing some big words in there, like broadband acoustic interference and all that. Next thing I know, everyone thinks I’m a genius. I think I’m going to start asking Senior Chief to sit next to me at bars when I talk to chicks. He can make me sound good.”

Juan shook his head. “A genius? Is that what you think you are?”

“No way, man. After today, I would describe us as more like *pirates*.”

Juan shook his head again. “I can’t believe we’re going with your plan. If we don’t get sunk, I owe you a beer.”

“Amen, brother. Alright, I’m coming into a hover right above the port bridge wing. AWR1, are the Marines ready?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll send them down with the rescue hoist once we get into position.”

Plug said, “Alright, I’m making my call. Here goes nothing.” He flipped his communications switch to the external frequency known as bridge-to-bridge, which all mariners used to communicate on.

“Maersk *Atlanta*, Maersk *Atlanta*, this is US Navy helicopter 471, come in, please.”

After a moment, the reply came in a thick New England accent. “Navy helicopter, this is Maersk *Atlanta*, we read you loud and clear. How may we be of assistance, sir?”

“Maersk *Atlanta*, it is my duty to inform you that under the Merchant Marine Act of 1936, your vessel has been declared an asset of the US Navy. Please prepare to be boarded. We’ll be sending down a few advisors on your port bridge wing. Thank you for your help.”

Plug then unkeyed the mike and said on his internal comms circuit, “Arrr, mateys. Commence the boarding.”

AWR1 said, “Sir, you’re in a good hover. Come forward two…one… stead. Alright, lowering the hoist.”

After a few moments, three members of Captain Darby’s MARSOC team were standing on the top of the container vessel’s bridge. They began climbing down a white metal ladder.

Juan saw a door to the bridge open, and the Marines entered. A few moments later, the radio came on again. “Navy helicopter, this is the captain of Maersk *Atlanta*. We have just had a conversation with the Marines. I don’t think that the Merchant Marine Act covers this particular situation. However, I have decided to alter my navigational heading to match up with your Marines’ recommendation.”

“Roger, Captain, your country thanks you.”

Juan kept shaking his head. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

Plug nosed over the helicopter, gaining airspeed. “Alright, let’s head back to Mom and get our next batch of pirates.”



VICTORIA WALKED down the passageway from the wardroom to Combat, carrying her thermos of strong coffee. It was five in the morning. She had only gotten about four hours of sleep, and even that had been interrupted by several phone calls from the tactical action officer.

As she passed various members of the crew, she noticed the different way they looked at her. A new level of respect.

“Morning, ma’am.”

“Good morning.”

“Morning, ma’am,” said the next.

“Good morning,” she replied as she continued to march along in her steel-toed boots.

Vigorous nods, solid eye contact. The way they used to treat the captain, she realized.

The first time she heard them refer to her as captain was when she entered Combat.

“Captain in Combat.”

For a brief second, she thought to chastise the junior officer who had said it. But she found herself instead saying, “Status update.”

The TAO walked over to her. “Hey, boss.”

“Hey. Have our friends snuggled up next to us yet?”

“Affirmative. We now have two US-owned merchant ships in a very tight screen next to our ship.”

“Excellent. Any pushback so far?”

“Nope. I think it helps having armed Marines over there. You sure you don’t want to inform Strike Group?”

Victoria thought about that. She shook her head. “I think this is one of those ‘better to beg forgiveness than ask for permission’ moments. Besides, we already did it. No point in asking now.”

The anti-submarine warfare officer stood over nautical charts next to the chief sonar tech. The ASWO was an ensign who had been a college student at Notre Dame a year ago. Now he was tasked with overseeing a division of enlisted men who would locate a Chinese submarine and prevent it from sinking their ship.

The ASWO said, “Good morning, ma’am. Long story short, we still don’t have contact with the sub. We had a few sniffs last night, but they turned out to be false alarms. The helo launches at zero six hundred, and they’ll begin spitting buoys in certain areas, performing passive searches for us here, and here.” He pointed to a few locations on the chart.

Victoria said, “Alright. What else?”

“OPS asked me to tell you that—”

“Ma’am, Pelican 434 just checked in. On-station time is six plus zero zero.”

“Copy, thanks.” Victoria looked at the tactical display. She turned back to the ASWO. “You were saying?”

“OPS asked me to tell you that he was trying to get us a P-8. Looks like it just checked in.”

“Good, let’s have the P-8 clear out a path for us.”

The P-8A Poseidon was the Navy’s newest maritime patrol aircraft. Primarily used for anti-submarine warfare, it had replaced the aged P-3C Orion. The P-8 was essentially a Boeing 737 outfitted for Navy missions. It could carry thirty percent more sonobuoys than the P-3, as well as torpedoes, infrared cameras, electronic sensors, and even anti-ship missiles.

Most importantly, it was reliable. The 737 airframe was one of the most successful of this generation. The older P-3 had been notorious for breaking down in the chocks. But if the P-8 was scheduled, it would show up ready to

fight.

One hour later, the P-8 had placed sonobuoys all along the *Farragut*'s intended track. In addition, the destroyer used its own sonar to listen for the Chinese submarine.

She nodded to the team in Combat and walked up to the recently repaired bridge. The repairs were being conducted all day long, but only a skeleton bridge team was up there now.

The bridge crew stood in a pitch-black environment. Dawn wasn't for another few hours. Their eyes were adjusted to the low light. They needed to be able to see the most minor detail on the horizon, and any light on the bridge would hurt their night vision, diminishing their ability to see contacts.

"Air boss on the bridge!" someone yelled. That announcement was normally reserved for the captain. The ship's new navigator, who was standing officer of the deck, walked up to her. "Morning, ma'am."

Victoria looked at her watch. It was 0200. She needed sleep. Her head was groggy. "I guess it is morning, isn't it? How's the ship?"

"Doing better, ma'am. They've got all the navigational and bridge helm controls fixed. But there are still a lot of electronics, windows, and parts of the hull that need repairs."

The sound of billowing wind filled the spacious bridge, as many of the windows and doors had yet to be repaired from the missile attack.

"Alright, NAV, thanks. You call me if you need anything."

"Roger, ma'am."

The bridge tactical communications circuit came on with, "Bridge, Combat, is the air boss there?"

"Affirm."

"Please have her rejoin us in Combat. Penguin 434 just got a sniff. *We may have found the Chinese sub*."

24

Juan shot up out of his bed as the alarm went off.

"*General quarters, general quarters, all hands man your battle stations*." The voice on the 1MC didn't sound bored like it had during training a few weeks ago. Now it was alert. Intense. Angry.

Juan had been sleeping in his flight suit. He looked at his watch. Three a.m. One hour before he was supposed to wake up.

He threw on his brown leather boots and began tying the laces.

Plug opened his door and said, "Yo. Dude, we're launching. Boss just called me. They found the sub. Get your shit on and meet me back in the hangar in five. Boss wants us off deck ASAP."

"Got it."

The announcement for flight quarters immediately followed the call to battle stations. He wondered how they had found the sub.

Juan ran through the main passageway of the destroyer until he got to the hangar. AWR1 Fetternut saw him and threw him his helmet. He put it on and fastened the chinstrap, then grabbed his heavy survival vest.

Caveman ran by, giving Juan a thumbs-up. "Hey, man, the bird's already preflighted. External power's on, and I made sure everything is set up in the cockpit. You guys should be ready to go. I'll be down in the LSO shack."

Plug stuck his head outside of the cockpit, "Hurry up!"

The ASWO ran up to Juan, handing him a sheet of paper. "Here! It's the latest we got on the submarine. It's them. The P-8's tracking it now, but they don't have a torpedo."

"*What?* Why not?" Juan shook his head. "Whatever."

“Good luck.” The ASWO jogged back out of the hangar.

Juan saw members of the crew walking in through the hangar door, carrying the engine plugs that kept out seawater.

A minute later, Juan and Plug both strapped into their pilot seats, with AWR1 checking the sonobuoys one last time. Their hands raced over switches and circuit breakers, making adjustments and checking for proper positioning.

Juan went through his checklist. “Seats, belts, pedals, and mirrors—adjusted?”

“Adjusted.”

“Cockpit window emergency releases—aft and shear wired?”

“*Let’s go, let’s go*. We don’t have time for all this,” said Plug. “Shut your door. I’m starting up number two.” Plug slammed his door shut and gripped the number two engine power control lever, thumbing the silver starter button.

Everything happened fast. The high-pitched whine of the General Electric T-700 engine spooling up. The plane captain pointing at the engine and spinning his free hand as he did. Plug started the number two engine, then he removed the rotor brake and throttled the power control levers forward. The rotors began spinning with ferocious speed, and Juan’s heart beat faster as he realized that they were about to go into combat.

“471, Deck, you have amber deck for breakdown, green deck for launch.”

“471 copies.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Juan saw the blue ocean water rising and falling with the ship’s movements. The ship heaved and tilted wildly. The destroyer was racing at twenty-two knots, finishing its turn into the wind.

Plug, gripping the controls, called, “Chocks and chains.”

Juan used hand signals to communicate with the plane captain that they were ready to remove chocks and chains. The plane captain pointed at the two enlisted men standing next to him and signaled them to go in. They sprinted in from each side of the helicopter and removed the chocks and chains as fast as a NASCAR pit crew. Juan could hear the heavy steel chains dragging on the deck as they brought them back in front of the aircraft for inspection. The pilots gave them a thumbs-up, and the enlisted men disappeared inside the hangar.

Juan looked through the windscreen and saw his fellow 2P, Caveman, standing in the LSO shack with his headset on, ready to open the steel trap

that held them in place on the deck.

"Deck, 471, ready to lift."

"Roger, 471, beams open."

Plug said, "Coming up and aft."

The power pull was aggressive. Much more than Juan was used to, or comfortable with. The instruments that measured engine power and torque rose up into the yellow zone, even flickering red for a moment. But Plug knew the limits of the bird. The MH-60 shot up and aft, paused for a nanosecond, pedal turned to the left, and then nosed over, climbing and accelerating. The blue ocean water and grey steel of the ship's hull raced past them.

Plug said, "Get the P-8 on the horn. Check in with them and get the latest info. AWR1, you too—both of you, get all your combat checks, sonobuoy launch checks, and torp launch checks out of the way now. I want to be ready to drop our torpedo the second they tell us they've got a target."

"Roger," said Juan.

"Roger, sir," said AWR1 Fetternut.

"Pelican 434, Cutlass 471, standing by for your updated sitrep."

The P-8 began reading off information on all of its sonobuoys and the latest details of the submarine track.

"Cutlass 471, Pelican 434, how many torpedoes do you have?"

Juan said, "471 has two Mark 54s aboard."

"Roger, Cutlass 471, we are ready to prosecute the sub. We're tracking her passively right now, but she probably knows it. We intend to go active as soon as you're on scene. We'll vector you in for the torp drop."

"Roger, Pelican. ETA twelve minutes."

The double click on the comms was all the response he got, letting him know that the P-8 understood.

Juan triple-checked that all his torpedo launching checklist items were complete and that all of his switches were in the right place.

Plug said, "AWR1, are you listening to their buoys?"

"Yes, sir, I've got 'em tuned up."

"Have you got a track?"

"Yes, sir. You can see it on your screen…*now*."

Juan switched to his ship communications frequency and related all their information back to the ship.

The ship's ASTAC said, "Roger, sir. We're copying everything from

link. Good hunting."

Plug said, "Traffic, twelve o'clock high, no factor."

Juan looked up and saw the grey P-8A flying straight and level. Every few seconds, a barely visible cylindrical object would drop from its underbelly. These were the sonobuoys. Brightly colored mini-parachutes slowed their descent towards the ocean.

When they were within a few miles of the target, Juan made his call to the P-8. "Pelican 434, Cutlass 471, we're ready for your vector."

"Roger 471. We just put our DICASS sonobuoys in the water. We'll be going active shortly."

A few moments later, Juan turned up the knob to hear the sound from the sonobuoy through his helmet audio. An electronic-sounding high-pitched noise emanated from the speakers in his ears. It was the pinging noise from the active buoys.



THE CHINESE SUBMARINE captain stood watching his team of young officers and crew as they did their work. The captain had ordered them to rig for red lighting so their eyes would adjust prior to going to periscope depth. The dim red lighting fit the tense mood of the men.

These men had worked on very little sleep for the past week. Stalking their prey. Executing the previous attacks flawlessly. And now, finishing the kill.

After their initial attack, they had gone deep and silent, listening to the breakup of the hulls from the sinking ships, and tracking the lone American destroyer that had gotten away. The captain had expected the orders to follow it, and destroy the US Navy warship. It had been the primary target, after all. But he hadn't expected the urgency.

Twelve hours after the attack, he had gone up to periscope depth, which had allowed them to establish a satellite link with South Sea Fleet. He had updated the fleet with the battle damage assessment. The response had been immediate.

SINK US NAVY DESTROYER 099. CRITICAL AND TIME-SENSITIVE CARGO ON BOARD MUST NOT REACH MAINLAND. SINK US NAVY DESTROYER 099 PRIOR TO REACHING 200 MILES

OF SHORE, AND WITHIN 48 HOURS OF RECEIVING THIS MESSAGE.

Before receiving those orders, they had been following the destroyer to the northwest, but allowing it to open distance. The captain was worried that if they traveled too fast, the submarine would make so much noise that the destroyer would hear them. The US Navy warship had a helicopter on board. One with a dipping sonar. He wanted nothing to do with it.

But after the orders from South Sea Fleet had come in, the submarine captain had commanded his men to sprint ahead and change course to due north. They lost time while reeling in the towed-array sonar, as that activity limited their speed. Once the towed-array was in, however, the captain was able to use the nuclear-powered submarine's impressive speed advantage to cut off the destroyer's path to land. The US Navy warship's initial travel direction put them farther away from land. If they had cargo on board that they needed to take to shore, they would surely have to turn back east at some point.

During the six-hour sprint to the north, his sonar men had lost contact with the destroyer. When they slowed down, they once again brought out the towed-array.

The initial readouts from the sonar room were confusing. None of their sonar contacts had the obvious signature of the destroyer. There was one very suspicious contact that was heading east at high speed, however. The sonar technicians had informed the captain that the contact sounded like a group of ships, with characteristics similar to both a warship and a large merchant.

Without visual confirmation, the captain couldn't be certain that this was his target. The captain didn't want to fire on it until he knew.

Attacking that group of ships would hurt him in several ways. One, it would help the Americans to learn his position. It would also waste his valuable anti-ship weapons. With the war that had obviously just begun, they were now worth their weight in gold. Also, firing his weapons without seeing his target would mean that his chances of success were greatly decreased. And lastly, he didn't want to risk sinking an innocent merchant ship.

The captain instead had positioned their nuclear attack submarine almost directly in the track's path, offset by only a few thousand yards. If all had gone according to plan, that would have allowed him to fire his torpedo right off the bow of the target. It would have been a very easy kill. He sighed. *Would have been…*

The first reports of sonobuoys being dropped had come about an hour

ago.

“Conn, sonar, buoy splash bearing zero-two-five.”

The buoys kept coming. Rows and rows of them, spread out for several dozen kilometers ahead of his target. No surface contacts were nearby. And his sonar operators had not reported hearing any aircraft noises. That could mean only one thing. A maritime patrol aircraft had arrived on station. One that was capable of dropping many buoys and operating at a high enough altitude that the submarine couldn’t hear it. One of the new American P-8s.

The thought was chilling.

Their submarine was now right in the middle of this giant sonobuoy field. It was like treading water in the middle of a school of Portuguese man-o’-war jellyfish that were attracted to movement. As long as his submarine stayed quiet and still, there was a very good chance that they could remain hidden. But if they moved, the deadly sensors would detect the submarine, bringing great pain and danger.

The US warship, or at least the track that he assumed included the US warship, was now only twenty-five kilometers away. Soon the submarine captain would be able to see it with his periscope.

If he was willing to risk getting that shallow.

The only thing worse than a submarine being detected by sonar was a submarine that was visually spotted by an aircrew. He decided to wait. Just be patient, he told himself. Let them get closer.

The executive officer shot the captain a worried look. “Sir, we will need to make a decision soon.”

“Yes. But not yet. We need to—”

The sonar supervisor said, “Captain, buoy splash. *Very close to us this time*.”

“How far away?”

“One is less than one thousand meters, sir.”

The captain swore to himself, but his face remained calm. If they were dropping them that close…

“Come hard right to zero-four-five. Increase speed to all ahead full.”

The echo of repeated commands sounded throughout the space. The captain stood over the tactical chart, one of his junior officers updating it with the latest reports from the sonar team.

He wiped sweat from his forehead. The game had just moved to the next phase.



THE DICASS SONOBUOYS began sending pulses of sound energy out into the deep ocean water. The sound waves expanded in every direction, and bounced back to the buoy when they hit something. That data was then sent from the buoy to the P-8 and MH-60R by radio. Both of the aircraft had sophisticated onboard computers that would analyze the sound data from the buoys, and turn it into valuable information: target distance, course, and speed.

"It's a good ping, sir. We have solid contact." The AW manning the sonar station was the first one to say anything after the pings had gone out.

The O-4 standing over him patted the enlisted man on the back. He then turned to look down the narrow passageway of the aircraft. He pointed at one of the junior officers. "Vector in the helo for torp drop."

The junior Naval flight officer nodded and adjusted his lip microphone. He took a breath and said, "Cutlass 471, Pelican, come left to two-six-five."



PLUG SAID, "LEFT TWO-SIX-FIVE." He yanked the stick to the left, banking the helicopter and watching the heading indicator. Then he leveled it off on a new heading of two-six-five. Plug snuck a look over at Juan's tactical display, checking that they were indeed flying toward the hostile submarine track.

"Cutlass, Pelican, standby for torpedo drop."

Juan said, "Roger, Pelican."

Juan wondered what the Chinese in the submarine were going through right now. All he could see was the same blue ocean racing along a few hundred feet below his feet. But that sub was down there. He shook the thought from his mind. Now he only had one job. Press the button.

"Cutlass, Pelican, come right to three-one-zero."

"Right three-one-zero."

The helicopter banked sharply and then leveled off on the new heading. Adrenaline was pumping through his veins. Juan's eyes scanned all his instruments and then gripped the hand control unit that would allow him to launch the torpedo.

“Stand by for torpedo drop. On my mark. Three…two…one…mark.”

His breathing quickened. Pulse racing, Juan lifted up the small plastic protective cap and pressed the torpedo release button. Immediately, he felt the aircraft shudder with the sudden loss of over six hundred pounds of weight.

AWR1 yelled, “Torpedo away! Good ’chute!” There was a brief pause, and then he said, “It’s in the water.”

Juan made the radio call. “Torpedo is in the water.”

He again listened to the noise from one of the passive buoys, wanting to hear the sound of the torpedo—and what they all hoped would be a good hit.

AWR1 said, “She’s pinging. Executing her initial search.”

Juan could hear it. The Mark 54 torpedo began diving into the water, turning and pinging, looking for its contact.

Plug said, “Alright, Juan, where to now?”

Juan looked at him in confusion. “Huh?” They had just dropped the torpedo. Now it was time for them to wait and listen for it to hit the target.

“Tell me what to do, man. Let’s not sit on our ass.”

Juan thought about it. Plug was right. What if the first torpedo didn’t hit the target? Or what if it was only slightly damaged? They shouldn’t just assume that everything would go according to plan. There was always something they could be doing.

“If I was the submarine, I’d want to get out of there—to change my location. But I would still want to maintain the ability to attack the *Farragut*.”

“Okay, so where does that put him? Where’s he going to go if that torpedo doesn’t sink him?”

Plug looked at his tactical display. If the submarine moved too far to the rear of the *Farragut*, it would have trouble catching up. So that meant…

Juan moved his cursor to a certain spot and placed a waypoint in the system, then tapped a few keys. “*There*. Let’s fly to this waypoint and get ready to drop a buoy.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

~

“*Captain*, torpedo in the water, bearing one-two-zero, range less than two

thousand meters!”

The captain replied, “Begin evasive maneuvers! Launch countermeasures.”

The cascade of voices rang out through the room. Men were yelling and sweating. They sounded afraid. They *were* afraid. So was he.

The crew leaned to one side and held on as the submarine began turning sharply and changing depth.

The XO said, “Captain, I’m afraid we’ve lost the array.”

He winced. “Understood.” The maneuvers had exceeded their speed limits and torn off the towed-array. This was extremely bad news, as it would reduce their sensor capability. But he couldn’t dwell on that now.

The first torpedo pings were several seconds apart. They sounded different than the sonobuoys that had been bouncing off their hull moments ago. These were a different pitch. With each noise, the tension in the crowded compartment grew.

“Captain, the torpedo is pinging faster. It appears to have acquired its target.”

The captain said, “What is the status of the countermeasures?”

One of his junior officers looked up. “Sir, countermeasures away. They just launched, sir.”

The captain watched the navigational readouts. They were racing away from the torpedo, but it was much faster. Still, if they could put enough distance between themselves and the decoy…

The pinging noise grew quieter, and its frequency changed.

“Sir, the torpedo appears to be going after the countermeasures! It is no longer following us,” the sonar technician said, practically gasping with joy. Some of them grinned like silly boys, having evaded death.

“Gentlemen, please mind your stations,” the executive officer bellowed. “This is not over.”

But after a few minutes, it appeared to be. For now.

“Sir, I no longer hear the torpedo. It has run out, sir.”

The captain stood over the tactical plot. They would try to attack him again. He needed to get off his shot.

“Range to target?” asked the captain, his voice slightly above a whisper.

“Sir, the contact is now at ten thousand meters.”

Ten thousand. A lucky number.

“Come up to periscope depth. Flood torpedo tubes one and two. Plug in a

solution.”



“SIR, the torpedo has stopped running. No explosion noises heard.”

The flight deck of the P-8 was deadly quiet.

The mission commander stood arms extended, his hands on the sonar tech’s chair. He said, “Do we still have contact?”

The lead AW listening to the sonar replied, “Stand by, sir”

About thirty seconds went by with nothing but silence. “Well?”

“Sir, we will need to reacquire the target. It appears that we have lost them for now.”

The mission commander said, “Alright, let’s keep listening, then. Don’t let these guys slip through.”

He looked at his tactical display. If the Chinese submarine had evaded towards the *Farragut*, it would be getting dangerously close to its torpedo range.



THE SUBMARINE CAPTAIN SAID, “How long until we’re in range?”

The XO said, “Captain, we’ll be at the maximum effective range of our torpedo soon, but because the towed-array came off, our track estimate is no longer accurate.”

The captain sighed. “Very well. Raise periscope. We will have to confirm visually and use that for our target solution.”

Surfacing with aircraft overhead was extremely risky. But it might be their only chance of successfully attacking the American ship.

“Understood, sir.”



“CUTLASS 471, *Farragut* Control, request status of ASW prosecution.”

“*Farragut*, Cutlass, we’re about to spit a DIFAR and try to reacquire the sub.”

“471, Roger. Pelican, *Farragut* Control, say status.”

The P-8 voice came over the radios. “*Farragut* Control, Pelican, we have negative BDA, and we have lost contact with the sub.”

“Roger, Pelican.”

After a moment of silence, the voice from the P-8 said, “*Farragut*, Pelican, our passive buoys are still picking up noise consistent with the Chinese submarine. Trying to reacquire the track now.”



VICTORIA HEARD THE CALL. She said, “Where is the helo?”

The ASTAC pointed his finger to the radar position. “Right here, ma’am.”

“Is he dipping?”

“Negative, boss. They were going to put a passive buoy there and see if they could reacquire the sub.”

She looked at the helicopter’s position on the chart. If the submarine had evaded by trying to get closer to the destroyer, that meant that the Chinese submarine captain was trying to get off another shot. If he thought he was about to be detected, he would probably fire his weapon soon. She didn’t want that to happen.

It was a chess game. Each one of her moves determined what her opponent might try next. She needed to think several moves ahead, and limit his options.

Victoria walked back over to the sonar table. “ASWO, show me your plot.” She looked at the nautical chart, all marked up with notes from the young officer. Grey pencil marks filled with where they thought the submarine was, based on the latest information.

She looked back at the radar screen, doing the mental math to superimpose where the helicopter was on this nautical chart. She pointed to a position on the ASWO’s plot. Victoria said, “The helicopter is right about here.”

The *Farragut* was barreling right toward that position.

She liked the location the helicopter crew had chosen. If she were the Chinese submarine captain, that’s right where she would have gone after being attacked.

Juan and Plug must have had the same thought. Now there was a good chance that their buoy location would be right on top of the sub. They were going to drop a passive buoy. But what if they went active here instead? They could use the helicopter's dipping sonar. It was one of the most powerful tools in her arsenal. If they started pinging, they could get a great torpedo shot at the submarine again.

But what if she was wrong? What if the submarine had departed away from the destroyer, on the other side of the previous attack location? She thought about that. Then the pinging would still deter it from turning and closing on Victoria's ship.

Victoria said, "Tell the helicopter to dip and go active. *Right now*. And be ready to drop their last torpedo quick if it's right under them."

"Roger, ma'am."

Victoria said, "OPS."

"Yeah, boss?"

"Turn the ship around."

OPS looked confused. "Uh…boss?"

She said, "Reverse the ship's course. *Now*. If that submarine is headed towards us, we're going to walk right into their torpedo. I want to keep our separation. The P-8 and the helicopter are right on top of it. If we can give them more time to hunt, we'll have a better chance of success. If we keep going this direction, we're putting a time limit on how long our air assets have."

"Don't we have to reach the Panama coast by a certain time?"

"OPS, if we don't sink this submarine, we won't reach the Panamanian coast."



"CUTLASS, *Farragut,* Air Boss wants you to dip and start pinging."

"Roger, setting up for dip."

"And she says be ready to drop your torp right away."

Juan said, "Roger, *Farragut*."

The helicopter came in to a hover, lowering its AN/AQS-22 Airborne Low Frequency Sonar (ALFS) into the water. The MH-60R had the most advanced dipping sonar in the world. It was incredibly sensitive, and had

improved detection ranges greatly over previous models.

Plug said, “Are you all set up for the second weapon drop?”

Juan had been ready this time. “Checklist complete. Just waiting to get target confirmation.”

Plug said. “Uhh…I think you’ve got confirmation.”

“Cutlass, Pelican, we have visual contact! Periscope just off your right side.”

Plug said, “Drop it. Drop it now!”

Juan, surprised, hit the button and again felt the shudder of the aircraft as the torpedo let loose.



“CONN, sonar, torpedo in the water, bearing two-three-zero!”

The submarine captain yelled, “Evasive maneuvers. What’s the range?”

“Less than one thousand meters, sir.”

The captain could hear the pinging through the hull. The pinging came loud and fast. It must have been right on top of them.



“I DIDN’T SEE THE ’CHUTE,” said AWR1.

Plug said, “Alright, just listen.” He shook his head. “Shit, I mean, I guess just watch. We can see it right—”

Juan said, “*Farragut* Control, we just dropped our torpedo. We have visual of the sub.”

AWR1 said, “Torpedo’s pinging. Pings getting faster. I think she’s acquired her target. I hear… holy shit. That’s gotta be a hit.”

“471, *Farragut* Control, roger. Please provide BDA.”

The ocean around the periscope transformed into a white web as wide as a football field. The white circle rose into a surge of white water, erupting into the air.

“My god,” said Juan.

The area of water glistened as it became covered with an oil slick, bubbles of air breaking the surface every few seconds.

“*Farragut*, Cutlass, we have visual. Torpedo has hit the sub.”

“Roger, Cutlass. Bravo Zulu.”

25

USS Ford

Admiral Manning stood on the admiral's bridge of the USS *Ford*.

The phone rang. "Sir, this is the battle watch captain. Our Growlers have just finished tanking and are en route to *Farragut*'s position. The F-35s are about thirty minutes behind them. Also, sir, the JSTARS is on station."

"Thank you," was all he said in reply, hanging up the phone.

He looked over at the Zumwalt-class destroyer to their starboard side. It was heaving up and down in the water as they steamed north at close to twenty knots.

The admiral commanded thousands of personnel, and controlled billions of dollars in military assets. Some of the most technologically sophisticated warfighting machines on the planet. But now, with his daughter in trouble, he felt powerless. All he could do was wait.



THE E-8C JOINT Surveillance Target Attack Radar System, or JSTARS, had taken off from Robins Air Force Base in Georgia early that morning. Their mission was supposed to last for twelve hours, with a concentration of the work being done in the Eastern Pacific, just west of Panama.

Two members of the crew were not US Air Force. One was NSA, and one was CIA. Both sat next to each other, the US Air Force major watching their screens. One of his airmen sat next to the two men, managing the

inverse synthetic aperture radar.

The airman said, “Sir, we have four surface tracks bearing two-six-zero for about”—he moved his cursor to measure the distance—“two hundred nautical miles. Based on the ELINT, sir…yup, that’s the Chinese.”

The NSA and CIA men had sophisticated surveillance equipment that canvased huge swaths of the Pacific for electronic signals. The CIA had provided intelligence that there might be a group of Chinese Navy ships headed towards the Panama Canal region, and that they might have had orders to open fire on the US Navy destroyer that was also in the area. The aircraft carrier USS *Ford* had a whole strike group but was still far to the south, so the *Farragut* was pretty much on her own. But no one had been able to pinpoint the location of the Chinese ships.

Until now.

It was a huge game of cat and mouse. Thousands of square miles of ocean. Hundreds of ships headed to and from the Panama Canal Zone at any given time. Both the Chinese and the Americans had their radars off, likely trying to remain hidden from the other until the last minute.

It was a sound strategy. If the ships kept their military surface search radars turned off, the adversary ships would not likely be able to use their passive electronic surveillance equipment to identify them.

Once those military radars were flipped on, however, one could cross-reference the radar track with the knowledge that the military radar had originated from it, then the cat would have found the mouse.

As soon as the JSTARS aircraft had gotten into range, it began operating on the same encrypted datalink network that the E-2 connected to the USS *Farragut* with.

JSTARS, however, had certain highly classified sensors on board that went well beyond normal electronic surveillance measures.

The NSA man said, “Alright, move your ISAR to check out this group here.”

The Air Force man did as requested. Sure enough, the screen showed a pattern of pixels that resembled a group of warships.

“That them?”

“Certainly looks like it to me.”

“Major, recommend you vector in one of those F-18s to take a look.”

A few minutes later, one of the F-18G Growlers flew near the group of suspected Chinese ships, using its onboard camera to take pictures and then

transmit them back to both the JSTARS aircraft and the E-2D.

The CIA man on board JSTARS said, “Yup. Those are Chinese warships.”

The major in the JSTARS aircraft began typing.

JSTARS: FARRAGUT, we have located the four Chinese surface vessels —transmitting their position now.

FARRAGUT TAO: Roger JSTARS, copy tracks.

The major made a call to the pilots flying the aircraft. “Gents, how are we on fuel?”

“About another hour on station, sir, then we’re going to have to return to base.”

The major typed.

JSTARS: FARRAGUT, JSTARS has 1+00 on-station time remaining. Interrogative intentions, over?



VICTORIA SAT in the captain’s chair in the Combat Information Center of the USS *Farragut*. She could read the chat messages between the JSTARS aircraft and OPS, who was again standing TAO. The man had barely slept in the past few days. None of them had. *They can rest when this is over.*

“What’s the range between us and the four Chinese ships?”

One of the sailors standing surface watch replied with the bearing and range.

OPS said, “That’s within missile range.”

Victoria had to make her choice. Normal rules of engagement would prescribe that she not attack, unless in self-defense. And while war had not been declared, the ROE had changed. That much was clear.

The Chinese submarine had attacked them, and sunk three friendly ships. It was a hostile environment. And they now had intelligence that these four Chinese warships were on orders to intercept and attack the USS *Farragut*. Until further notice, all Chinese warships, submarines, and aircraft in this geographic area should be considered hostile.

“OPS, what weapon do you recommend?”

“We’re outside of the SM-2 range. But we have eight SM-6s that are set up for surface-to-surface. They’re new. We could launch them at this range.

But unless you want to illuminate the Chinese ships with our radar, we're going to need help from the JSTARS in making sure that we hit the right target. I'd hate to attack some merchant ship by accident."

Victoria nodded. "I agree. We've got one more hour with the JSTARS on station. How long until we're close enough to Panama City to launch the helo?"

"Based on the three-hundred-nautical-mile range, we've got another three hours at this speed."

Victoria stood and looked at the charts. This was now about how much risk she wanted to take. If they could make it another three hours, she could launch the helicopter and they might get lucky.

If the Chinese kept their radar off, they might never know that the helicopter had taken off, and might never know where the *Farragut* was. Even if they did turn on their radar, the Chinese might confuse the *Farragut'*s radar signature for the numerous other ships that were approaching Panama.

Unless the Chinese had some other means of locating the *Farragut*. If they somehow located the destroyer, they could begin their attack right now.

The Chinese could also fire on the *Farragut*'s helicopter after it took off. Again, that would require them turning on their radars. But if Victoria didn't fire on the Chinese now, that was exactly the risk she faced.

She thought about that for a moment—the Chinese ships turning on their air search radar, and firing God knows how many surface-to-air missiles at their helicopter. It would be a sitting duck.

It was her move. Keep hiding, or attack with the advantage. Kill or risk being killed.

"TAO, aft lookout reports a helicopter off the port beam! It's not one of ours, sir. Lookout says it's got a red star on the side."

"*Shit*," Victoria said. That forced her move. "OPS, get an updated location of the tracks from JSTARS, and fire the SM-6s at will." She had to remind herself to remain calm in front of the men. "Make sure our air defense is ready to go if we get any ESM hits that their missiles are coming."

"Everything is ready, boss."

That helicopter was from one of their ships. It had to be. The *Farragut* had just been located. Now it was a race between the Chinese ships and the *Farragut* to see who could get off their missiles first. Her heart started beating faster as she thought about a slew of Chinese anti-ship missiles heading towards them.

The combat information center was a flurry of activity. Tense officers and crew sprang around the room, going through checklists and double-checking settings.

Then the entire ship quaked as the SM-6s roared out of the vertical launch system, one after the other.



Chinese Destroyer Lanzhou

THE *FARRAGUT* LAUNCHED eight missiles in all, columns of bright white smoke shooting up and arcing away into the distance.

The SM-6, or RIM-174 Standard Extended Range Active Missile (ERAM), was very new to the US Navy's surface-to-surface arsenal. A semiactive missile, it was originally designed for extended range anti-air warfare. It was used to shoot down fixed wing, helicopter, unmanned aerial vehicle, and anti-ship cruise missiles. But the Navy needed a more modern, farther-reaching anti-ship missile. And the SM-6 was it.

The Chinese surface fleet was made up of one Luyang II–class destroyer, the *Lanzhou*, one Luda-class destroyer, and two Jiangkai II–class frigates. All four were controlled by Admiral Song's South Sea Fleet.

The helicopter that spotted the USS *Farragut* was attached to the *Lanzhou*.

Victoria was right. As soon as the helicopter got a visual on the *Farragut*, the aircrew immediately passed that information back to the *Lanzhou*. The captain of the Lanzhou then passed the coordinates on to his ships, with orders to open fire.

As soon as that order was given, he received the first indication that the *Farragut* had beaten him to the punch.

"Captain, we have a missile warning!"

"Battle stations!" the captain shouted. Alarm bells rang and men began running throughout the ship.

"Enemy acquisition radar bearing one-five-zero."

The captain said, "Bring all radars online, and activate our air defense missiles."

The powerful air search radar took a full minute to warm up. When it did,

the men in the *Lanzhou*'s control center were horrified at what they saw.



THE NAVAL FLIGHT officer in the rear seat of the F-18G Growler had been communicating with the JSTARS aircraft as they flew towards the Chinese ships at just under four hundred knots. It had been only a few minutes since they had passed on the imagery of the Chinese vessels, confirming their identity.

His screen lit up as he saw indications of the USS *Farragut*'s starting their attack.

"*Farragut* just launched missiles."

The pilot said, "Roger."

The NFO's hands raced over his tactical controls, as he anticipated what the Chinese ships would do next. Their best bet would be to try and shoot down the American anti-ship missiles. To do that, they would need to turn on their air search radars, identify and track the incoming missiles, and use their own surface to air missiles to shoot them down.

The Growler crew wasn't about to let that happen.

"Activating the ALQ-99s."

"Roger."

The AN/ALQ-99 was the airborne integrated jamming system. Upon activation, the NFO began jamming the Chinese warships' air search radar. With any luck, they would be helpless in defending themselves from the incoming missiles.



"CAPTAIN, we have four…six…no, eight missiles inbound!"

"Shoot them down!"

"Air search radars are still trying to track them…there seems to be interference."

The captain walked over to his air defense station. "Well?"

"Sir, something is wrong. I think we are being jammed."

No one else had time to speak.

Through its datalink, the JSTARS had provided the USS *Farragut* with

precise coordinates on the four Chinese ships. The *Farragut*'s crew had done the rest. They fed in the exact coordinates of each ship, dividing up the targets evenly. Each of the Chinese warships was now targeted by two missiles.

The anti-ship missiles traveled at over three times the speed of sound. As the SM-6s got close to their targets, they switched on their semiactive radar homing, finding their targets and "pinging" them to ensure they each got a precise hit.

Making them even more deadly, the eight missiles used their networking capability to communicate with each other, making sure that each missile had the most precise targeting information possible, and that the targets remained evenly divided up among them.

While the warhead on each missile was only one hundred and forty pounds, the kinetic energy of such a high-speed missile did enormous damage. Two blasts fragmented throughout the center of each ship, one after another. The entire event took a little over forty seconds.

One of the missiles struck the weapons hold on board the *Lanzhou*. It triggered a chain reaction that caused a massive explosion to rip the destroyer apart. The backbone of the ship rose thirty feet from the sea in a surge of white water and then plummeted back down. The *Lanzhou* sank within minutes.

The other three ships were "mission kills." Many of their crew survived, but the weapons systems and power plants were out of commission.

26

USS Farragut

Victoria walked back into the hangar. Behind the closed hangar doors, the helicopter spun on deck, waiting for its lone passenger.

"You alright, sister?" Chase said quietly.

She was a mix of energized and numb from the action. She tried not to think of the lives lost, but of the potential lives saved.

"I'm good. I hope this is all going to be worth it."

He patted her on the shoulder, careful not to embarrass her in front of her men. "I think it will be."

"Be safe. Good luck."

Chase grabbed his pack, which contained the Chinese crypto key, and walked over to the helicopter's aircrewman.

The two of them opened up the small hangar door and walked into the rear of the helicopter.

Victoria watched them take off through the hangar door's small porthole. As the MH-60 Seahawk flew into the air, she said a silent prayer that they would land without incident.

"Captain."

One of the ship's ensigns stood behind her.

"Please don't call me that."

"Sorry, ma'am. Um, Air Boss, OPS asked me to tell you that the USS *Ford* will be within helicopter range of us by tomorrow afternoon. They're asking that we close their position, and provide status updates."

“Alright, thanks. I’ll be right there.”

27

CIA Safe House, Panama

Chase sat in the kitchen as NSA and CIA team members worked on their computers in the next room. They had a lot of sophisticated gear. Big servers. Lots of wires. When Chase arrived, they immediately hooked up the crypto key and got to work.

One of the CIA guys walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table across from Chase. He had a slight smile on his face.

Chase said, “So? What’s the verdict? Have you guys been able to get anything from it?”

He nodded. “Oh yes. They’re sending it all up to D.C. now.”

“What’s the story?”

The guy looked behind him and then back at Chase. He leaned in. “The short of it is that it looks like our rogue theory was right on. They’ve got Chinese military assets from the south region that are a part of this thing, but that’s *it*. It’s limited to them. So we can deduce from that information that, aside from Jinshan, the only other bigwig who is involved is this Admiral Song.”

“So that’s good, right? So now what?”

“I’m afraid that’s above our pay grade, buddy. For you and me, we sit and wait.”

Chase took a swig from his plastic water bottle. He got up and walked over to the window, looking at a small patch of Pacific Ocean.

~

DIRECTOR BUCKINGHAM STOOD in the Oval Office. The president, the national security advisor, and the chairman of the joint chiefs were each there.

Sheppard was fuming, pointing his finger at the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff and the CIA director. “That ship should have requested permission to fire before attacking those Chinese naval vessels. This is outrageous. Only the president can authorize something like this. Now you people have opened up a real can of worms.”

The chairman of the joint chiefs said, “I would remind the national security advisor that the USS *Farragut* was attacked first, and that several friendly naval vessels were lost in that attack. The *Farragut* acted in self-defense, which is her right.”

The NSA said, “How do we know that the Chinese ships weren’t there for peaceful reasons? And you don’t know that the Chinese submarine was the one that attacked. That’s speculation.”

Director Buckingham said, “Charlie…”

“Don’t start, Sam. You’ve wanted this to be about the Chinese this whole time. Mr. President, this is outrageous. It’s Iran that we should be worried about. This nonsense about China has gotten out of hand. And now they’ve finally gone too far and started a shooting war. With no proof of Chinese wrongdoing.”

Director Buckingham said, “That’s where you’re wrong. The SILVERSMITH team was able to recover one of the crypto keys from Manta, Ecuador.” He handed the president a folder. “Sir, we now have hard evidence that proves that two Chinese nationals are responsible for this, and several other hostile acts over the past few weeks. Cheng Jinshan and the Chinese South Sea Fleet commander, Admiral Song. Together, they’ve organized a rogue military and intelligence operation that included the Red Cell, instigated Iranian-US hostilities, and attacked the US in multiple instances.”

The NSA’s mouth dropped. “When did you get a crypto key? Why wasn’t I told about this?”

The director shot the NSA an icy gaze. “It was determined that you didn’t need to know.”

Sheppard nearly exploded. “What? How dare you? Mr. President, I demand that—”

The president held up his hand. “That’ll be enough, Charlie.”

The NSA said, “Sir, this just doesn’t feel right. I don’t think you should trust this information. The director…”

The president stood and the NSA grew quiet. “Charlie, what do you mean when you say it doesn’t *feel* right?”

“Uh. Sir. It just…the Chinese wouldn’t do this. It just doesn’t seem like they would—”

The president said, “Charlie, first of all, you aren’t listening. Director Buckingham just said that this wasn’t the work of Chinese leadership. This was the work of two rogue individuals. And secondly, I have no use for people that come to me and tell me that intelligence doesn’t *seem* right or *feel* right. I want *facts*. Not *feelings*.”

“Mr. President, it’s just that—”

“Charlie, let me give *you* some facts. I’ve just read the most interesting report from the FBI. It seems that prior to accepting this post, you’ve done extensive work for companies with ties to Mr. Cheng Jinshan. Were you aware of that?”

The NSA went white. Director Buckingham had been wondering when the president would do this.

“Who told you that? Mr. President, did the CIA tell you that?” The NSA glared at the CIA director. “Mr. President, you can’t believe everything you hear. There are people here who would like nothing more than to see you go down in flames. But I’m one of the loyal ones. You can’t listen to them—”

“Charlie, we’re done. You’ve been moving forward your own agenda and ignoring the professional intelligence services for too long. At the very least, you’ve been giving me advice that’s less than stellar. At worst…well, I’ll let the Department of Justice handle that. But either way, your services are no longer required. Please vacate the White House.”

The NSA’s mouth was open. It took him a moment, but he finally got up and walked out the door.

The president read through the rest of the report on Jinshan. He looked up at the CIA director and said, “You’re sure about all this? There’s no way that this could be wrong?”

The CIA director nodded. “Sir, we have excellent intelligence. This was all the work of two people: Cheng Jinshan and Admiral Song. The Chinese president, and Politburo leadership as far as we can tell, were all left in the dark. The crypto key that our Special Forces team recovered shows historic data for all of Admiral Song’s rogue military units. That includes

communication signals from a Chinese submarine in the Persian Gulf, right at the time of the attacks there. We've corroborated this with other signals intelligence, and it looks like the rogue Chinese elements have been trying to push us into a war with Iran. They've been building up troops in Ecuador. All these factors together point to the veracity of David Manning's testimony about the Red Cell."

The president shook his head. "Unbelievable."

The chairman of the joint chiefs said, "Sir, I've spoken with my counterpart in the People's Liberation Army. He has assured me that China has no hostile intent towards the United States. He couldn't explain why any Chinese South Sea Fleet units were located in the Eastern Pacific. He has agreed to stand down Chinese military assets' defensive postures. We've seen corresponding activity that verifies that. Ships pulling into port, fewer fighter aircraft flights. That sort of thing. Our Pacific theater assets are all on alert."

"So we're not at risk of starting World War Three, after we just sunk a sub and four Chinese Navy ships? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Sir, from what I can tell, the Chinese want very badly to de-escalate. They were shown the preliminary evidence that Director Buckingham mentioned, and they realize that this was their fault. The Chinese don't want any further aggression."



CIA DIRECTOR BUCKINGHAM and General Schwartz sat in a private meeting room at the embassy of the People's Republic of China in northwest Washington, D.C. The official communication would take place between the US president and the Chinese president and include high-level State Department personnel. But that official meeting was still being set up. This was the unofficial communication. And it couldn't wait.

Their meeting was with the Chinese ambassador in D.C., and by secure video feed, with a Politburo member they were certain was loyal to the Chinese president. Director Buckingham went out of his way to ensure that no Chinese intelligence representatives were invited into the room. He was too worried that Jinshan would influence the proceedings.

The discussion took about an hour. It was late at night in Washington. The Chinese Politburo member asked for a ten-minute recess when the

Americans were done speaking. He did his best not to sound upset, although it was easily the most difficult conversation of his professional career.

After the recess was over, they re-joined the call.

The Politburo member said, “We are gravely concerned about this matter. I am to assure you that China’s senior leaders were quite unaware that this was taking place. We are very upset that military action has been taken. These military actions occurred without the knowledge or consent of the Chinese military leadership, including the president.”

The CIA director said, “The United States would like to keep our relationship with China positive. We understand that these actions were not the result of Chinese-sanctioned activities.”

The Chinese Politburo member said, “I have been authorized by the highest levels of my government to ask if there is any way that we might find a mutually beneficial resolution, and keep these conflicts…confidential?”

Director Buckingham said, “I’m afraid *that* is not possible. You can hang that on Jinshan if you like, but lives were lost. We will not keep this conflict secret from the American people, or from the world.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now, what about Iran, and any Americans who might be on the Red Cell island? We want resolution on those matters as soon as possible. We request that China immediately contact the Iranian regime and enlighten them on Jinshan’s actions there. Specifically regarding Jinshan’s part in the assassination of Ahmad Gorji. We want China to pressure Iran into standing down its military, and ensuring that no further hostilities occur.”

The Chinese Politburo member nodded. “Yes, of course. We will contact the Iranian leadership immediately.”

“And the Red Cell—the Americans that are being held on your island base in the South China Sea? We demand that they be released immediately as well.”

“Please give us a day to look into this. Again, this is most disturbing for us. A complete breakdown of trust in our chain of command. We need to take these rogue leaders into custody and then ensure that the personnel under their command conduct no further illegal actions. That will take a matter of hours. Once that occurs, we will ensure that any Americans that they had in custody are released.”

The CIA director nodded. “That sounds acceptable.”

“The president of China will call your president tonight. He wishes to

personally pass on this message. He wishes no harm to our relationship. These actions were not the actions of the Chinese people. They were the misguided actions of…as you have said, rogue persons. If there are truly any Americans on that island, they will be released immediately."



Guangzhou, China

JINSHAN AND ADMIRAL Song were in the middle of their lunch when the call came. They sat on the enclosed balcony of Jinshan's tower penthouse. The view of the hazy cityscape stood in front of them as they dined on seafood and white wine.

"Mr. Jinshan, you have an urgent call."

He waved over his assistant, taking the encrypted phone and putting it to his ear.

Admiral Song had been discussing their military options. Song was nervous. It had been almost twelve hours since they had heard from the four ships and one submarine that were to attack the USS *Farragut.*

Jinshan listened to the voice on the call. "You are sure? When?" Jinshan looked at his watch. "That was more than *two hours ago*. Why am I just getting this information *now*?" He looked at Admiral Song in disbelief. He held his hand to cover the receiver and told the admiral, "*They know*."

"Who? The Americans?"

Jinshan shook his head. Song's eyes went wide.

The front door burst open and commotion erupted in the next room.

A group of nearly a dozen uniformed military police stormed into the dining area. Jinshan's own three bodyguards looked at him nervously, not sure of what to do. They were clearly outnumbered and outgunned, and likely wanted nothing to do with a confrontation with the People's Liberation Army.

The highest-ranking officer in the group of military police looked at the two men eating lunch and announced, "By order of the general secretary of the Communist Party of China, you are both under arrest."

Admiral Song stood up. "What is the meaning of this? This is preposterous. What is the charge?"

Jinshan didn’t say anything. The military police quickly surrounded the two men and placed them in handcuffs.

The military police officer said, “Treason.”



THE CHINESE Y-20 jumbo transport plane landed at the Manta airport runway just like all of the others, with one exception.

This one wasn’t expected.

The Chinese PLA captain who was in charge of the airfield’s flight operations called his superior, but he couldn’t be reached. So the captain cleared the aircraft for landing and sent out a team to taxi it in to the nearest hangar. He and his men watched it from the control tower with curiosity.

As the rear ramp went down, he was surprised to see a platoon of fully armed military police walk off and begin separating into groups, heading to different parts of the base, their leader shouting and pointing as they marched.

“Sir, there is the colonel,” one of the men said, the only one in the control tower to speak.

Indeed, the base commander had driven up to the aircraft in a jeep, with two other vehicles behind it. The military police filled them, and the small convoy raced off to the other side of the runway, where the barracks were located.

The military police were to arrest only one person on the base. The others were to stand down and await further orders. They were all to be recalled to China within the week, according to the senior ranking officer of the military police unit.

“*Where is she*?” the military police captain asked the base commander. His men had searched her quarters, but they were empty.

“The last report that I received on Lena Chou was that she was in her quarters with the Indian man.”

The base commander spoke the truth. Just like he was told, he had kept a close eye on her as soon as he had received the call from Beijing. One of his trusted lieutenants had been watching them this morning, and he was told to notify the base commander of any unusual activity.

They called the lieutenant over. The one that had been watching her from

his own office window.

"Where are they?" demanded the military police captain.

"Sir, Miss Chou and Mr. Chaudry were in Captain Lin's trailer this morning. I saw them go over there about an hour ago. I have been watching them as instructed. I did not see them leave."

"Captain Lin?" the military police captain said.

The colonel said, "What of him?"

The military police captain was thinking that a Captain Lin was the one who had contacted them, letting the PLA military police know that Ms. Chou was the one they were after, and where she was located.

"Nothing. Where is his trailer?"

The man pointed to another trailer fifty meters away. "The last one in that column. He bunks with three other logistics officers."

The military police vehicles raced over there, and a team of them entered. One of the men who went in came out a moment later. He looked like he would be sick.

The military police captain said, "What's wrong with you? Are they not in there?"

The man shook his head.

Furious, the military police captain pushed by him and into the trailer.

Captain Lin lay on his bed. Blood running out of his mouth. A knife jammed into his chest.

The military police captain swore profusely and walked outside. After a few more minutes of arguing, the military police force was instructed to fan out and search the base.

Their efforts were fruitless. Lena Chou was gone.



DAVID READ the headline of the *New York Times* with delight.

IRAN-US Stand-Down as China Negotiates Truce

At the bottom of the front page, which would have been below the fold on an actual print version of the newspaper, was another headline.

China returns 18 Americans, apologizes to US—Rogue Chinese intelligence mastermind arrested

Chase walked up to his brother's cubicle. "Pretty wild, right?"

David said, “There will be massive repercussions.”

“When does it say that the Americans are coming home from the island?”

“They’re in Korea now. It says that they’ll be transferred to the States within twenty-four hours.”

Chase looked proud. “You did great, David.”

“Thanks. You too.”

“Are you going to go back to In-Q-Tel?”

David looked around his CIA office space. “I don’t know if I can.”

“What, like they won’t let you?”

David shook his head. “No, I mean—there’s nothing that compares to the work they do here. It’s invigorating, being a part of something like this. The work the people at the CIA do…it really saves lives, and protects our country. It’s just so…”

“Fulfilling?”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

Chase nodded. “I get it. You don’t feel like the research you were doing was the same.”

David looked over at the group of CIA analysts a few desks down. Their normally serious faces were all smiles. They were gathered at a single desk, enjoying their morning coffee and basking in their recent victory.

The intelligence collection and analysis that they conducted lead to massive global decisions. The SILVERSMITH team had, in less than a week, stopped a war. It had freed American hostages. And it had saved American lives from a Chinese attack.

Most importantly, the intelligence community, including the NSA, DIA, and CIA, had illuminated the *truth*. In a world of ever-increasing moments of espionage and disinformation, it was these dedicated patriots that had saved the day.

David knew that preventing the US-Iran war was only part of it. Jinshan’s group had tricked the US and Iran into attacking each other, yes. But their real objective was much larger. By uncovering Jinshan’s plot, millions of lives might have been saved.

David still wasn’t sure if it would have been possible—but Jinshan was going to launch a Chinese invasion on the United States. Many of the other members of the SILVERSMITH team laughed at the idea. It wouldn’t have been achievable, they had argued. But a few weeks ago, they might have said the same thing about Jinshan’s other terrible achievements. David knew in

his heart that his CIA team had prevented a large scale invasion on the United States of America.

Chase nodded to the *New York Times* article on David's screen. "Does it say what's going on in the Persian Gulf now?"

David read, "American and Iranian forces are both being ordered to stand down, as it now appears that many of the recent regional hostilities were triggered by a massive deception. Sources close to the White House are saying that rogue CIA agent, Lisa Parker, is now believed to have been working with Chinese billionaire Cheng Jinshan. These same sources say that there is now credible intelligence pointing to Jinshan as the one who ordered the assassination of Iranian politician Ahmad Gorji, the event that provoked the Iranian attacks on US military assets in the region. Incredibly, Jinshan also appears to have been the primary communicator responsible for the Iranian sleeper cell's attack on the Washington, D.C., Beltway. Chinese diplomats have apologized profusely for these actions, which they claim were conducted in secret, without the knowledge or consent of Chinese leadership."

Chase shook his head. "This is crazy."

"I know."

The brothers sat in silence for a moment. Finally Chase said, "You said you might not be able to go back to In-Q-Tel. So what, then?"

"I've actually been talking to Susan about sticking around here."

"As an analyst?"

"Yeah."

"Cool."

"But first, we plan on taking some vacation. Lindsay, the kids, and I."

"Nice. Where at?"

David shrugged. "Henry Glickstein has a beach home near Destin, Florida. He's down there now and offered to let us stay there. We might take him up on it."

David could see his brother reading the article in the paper. "You're looking for her, aren't you?"

Chase glanced at his brother. "Did it say anything?"

"No. She's still missing."

"They won't find her. Not if she doesn't want to be found."

Susan walked over to David's desk. "Good morning, Mannings. Congratulations again on saving the world."

~

VICTORIA FELT good getting back into the cockpit again. It had only been eight days since she had last flown, but that was too long for someone like her.

She aimed her aircraft straight at the giant grey floating city on the horizon. She could see two helicopters in orbit on the starboard side of the carrier. They were in between cycles, she knew. The brief window for helicopters to take off, land, and refuel before the jets needed the flight deck.

She adjusted her lip mike and checked that she had the right frequency before she made her call.

"Tower, Cutlass 471 is five miles on your 170, inbound for pax drop-off."

"Roger, 471, we got ya," came the full southern accent on the other end. She presumed that it was the air boss on the carrier. He would be a Navy commander, most likely a jet pilot. His job was to oversee every aspect of active flight operations on the carrier's flight deck and close-in airspace.

She checked her airspeed. One hundred and twenty knots. "Coming down to two hundred feet."

"Roger, two hundred feet," replied Juan.

He had a renewed confidence in his tone—and why not? In the last week, he had gotten more actual over-water SAR rescues than any Navy helicopter pilot she'd ever met. He'd also sunk a nuclear submarine in combat.

He was a little upset by that, he had confided to her. She would need to pay attention there. There was no glory in killing, she had told him. But there was honor and justice in protecting others. He had done the right thing.

The external radio circuit came on with the tower voice again. "Cutlass 471, Charlie spot three—you're cleared to land on spot three. Just follow the wands, Princess."

"471, Charlie spot three." Well, she guessed everyone knew she was coming. She shouldn't be surprised that he used her call sign, Princess.

Victoria also noticed that he gave her extra instruction since she wasn't one of the helicopters based on his carrier.

Helicopters from single-spot ships that weren't used to operating around aircraft carriers were like rural persons who found themselves driving through New York City. It was a busy, shocking atmosphere, and there was little room for error. The air bosses on the carriers usually didn't have any tolerance for helicopters that weren't familiar with their procedures. But most

helicopters weren't piloted by their boss's boss's boss's daughter.

They landed on the carrier's flight deck, and two flight deck personnel wearing yellow shirts and head gear came running in from each side to tie the aircraft down with chocks and chains.

Victoria said, "Unstrapping. You have controls."

"I have the controls," Juan echoed.

She got out of the helicopter and followed one of the white shirts over the carrier's expansive flight deck. Everyone who worked on the flight deck wore different color shirts and helmets, which denoted their job type. White shirts were part of the air transfer officer's unit, responsible for logistics flights and passenger transfers.

She was always surprised by how large and stable the carriers were. She could barely tell they were at sea. It was just flat, huge, and motionless. Compared to one of the small destroyers that she landed on, it was like landing on a real airport on land.

They entered the superstructure door and she took off her helmet, holding it by the sweaty chinstrap as they climbed up the stairs.

"If you'll follow me, ma'am, I'll take you to see your fath—um…the admiral."

Victoria smiled. "Thank you."

Her legs were cramping by the time they reached the admiral's bridge, nine flights of stairs up from the flight deck. The white shirt opened the door, and Victoria saw her father for the first time in a long time.

The admiral's bridge was an expansive room with shiny blue laminate floors. Bright daylight shined in through the Plexiglas windows that wrapped around on three sides of the room. Almost no furniture, save a few treadmills and an admiral's chair.

The admiral was surrounded by a small group of men. The admiral and a Navy captain next to him both wore khaki flight suits. The captain's name tag just said "CAG." Victoria knew that to mean Commander, Air Group. He was the head of all aviation units on the ship. A commander wearing a khaki uniform stood next to them. He had on a SWO pin. Victoria surmised that this would be the replacement for the USS *Farragut*'s late ship captain. A submariner lieutenant stood a few feet behind the group.

"Gentlemen, please excuse us," Admiral Manning said quietly.

The group of officers thanked the admiral, and nodded in respect to Victoria as they walked out of the room.

Victoria’s face was like a stone, save a lone tear that streaked down her cheek.

Seeing the tear, her father pulled her close, embracing her. They didn’t speak for nearly thirty seconds. The only sound was her sniffles.

When they separated, he held her shoulders, looked at her in the eyes and said, “I’m so very proud of you.”

She gave quick nods, regaining her composure but not yet trusting herself to speak. She wiped away a few more tears, smiling and embarrassed.

“You saw the commander who just left. He’ll be your new ship captain for now, until Big Navy can tell us what the long-term plan is.”

“Alright. Thanks.” A part of her was disappointed that her brief tenure as a ship captain was over. Another part of her was relieved. She might finally be able to get more than two hours of sleep without getting an emergency phone call.

They spoke about nothing for a few moments. He asked about the flight over. About the performance of her crew and helicopter detachment over the past week. She didn’t tell him that Chase had been the one she’d flown off the ship. She would, eventually—if he didn’t find out on his own first. But now didn’t seem like the right time.

She looked at her digital watch. “I should probably get going. The cycle will be starting up again, right?”

Her father nodded. “I could always tell them to go land somewhere else. My daughter’s visiting.”

She laughed. Then she looked serious. “I love you, Dad.”

They embraced one last time, and he said, “I love you, too.”

She left and found the white shirt and the SWO commander waiting outside the room for her.

As the group marched down the stairs, Victoria felt an incredible satisfaction. She had been faced with the ultimate test of a military officer. She had lead men in combat, and proven herself up to the task. And the pride in her father’s eyes told her that she had served with honor.

<<<< THE END >>>>

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

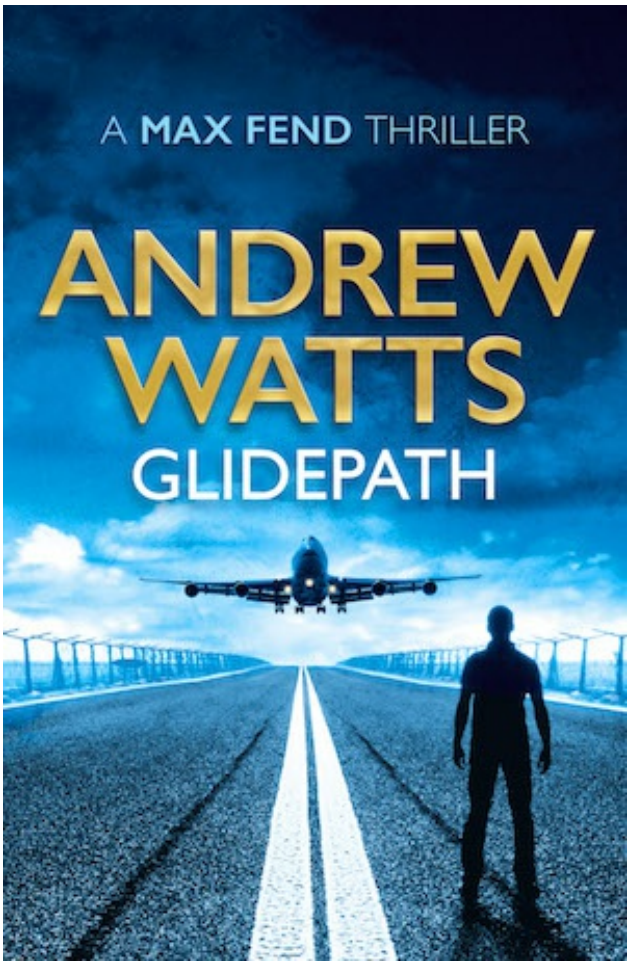
Hello Readers. This is Andrew Watts. I began my career as a US Navy pilot. Today I'm a USA TODAY bestselling author. Hopefully, you have enjoyed my work.

What's next?

My vision is to have The War Planners series end up between six and nine books long, when it is all said and done. I plan to launch one book in the series every six months until the story is finished. (Sign up HERE for a notification when the next book launches.)

I also write the Max Fend series, which has been rocketing up the charts, and has garnered rave reviews.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Watts graduated from the US Naval Academy in 2003 and served as a naval officer and helicopter pilot until 2013. During that time, he flew counter-narcotic missions in the Eastern Pacific and counter-piracy missions off the Horn of Africa. He was a flight instructor in Pensacola, FL, and helped to run ship and flight operations while embarked on a nuclear aircraft carrier deployed in the Middle East.

Today, he lives with his family in Ohio.

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