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THE WORLD IS OUR ICEBOX

SQUAREASOTA

FUTURE FORCE

HELL BANK NOTES

By
Austin McKinley

FLYING CAR BOOKS • SARASOTA

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*To Alan and Jason,
my brothers,
kindred spirits*

HELL BANK NOTES

THE PLAYERS

TENNISION'S TEAM

Adrian Rhodes Operations & Medical specialist. Former Chameleon.

Aleister Cross Executive field officer. Former Chameleon.

Allison Umbriel Medical specialist. Former GSTF.

Antione Burke Demolitions specialist. Former GSTF.

Cassandra Rollins Weapons specialist. Former Iceberg Troop.

Cero Duvv "Dove" Operations specialist. Former ARM.

Grant Tennison Former GSTF Division commander & advisor to Conte Senethis.

Michael Stewart Weapons specialist. Formerly Grant's bodyguard. Former Basmachi.

Noboru Tanaka Executive officer. Former GSTF division commander & Carbonari.

Torben Field Commander. Former Carbonari.

Rusty Intelligence specialist. Former Carbonari.

Stefen De Piro Medical specialist. Maltese Marquis.

TALGAT'S MEN

Aizahn Nurkady Kazakh Colonel, Cade's second in command.

Cade Talgat Kazakh General, military head of Kazakhstan.

Delgado Rodriguez Mercenary. Operations specialist.

Erik Denin Mercenary. Intelligence specialist.

Geil Raikan Flight engineer on TAF Flywheel.

Glenn Tarvis Captain, TAF Flywheel.

Gregory Pope Mercenary. Demolitions specialist.

Sarina Shire Forward gunner on TAF Flywheel.

Tanith Dariel Rear gunner on TAF Flywheel.

CARBONARI

Blue Carbonari commander, Silhouette Cell. Partner Sepp'ca.

Quin Carbonari soldier, China Cell. Partner Sian.

Sepp'ca Carbonari commander, Silhouette Cell. Partner Blue.

Sian Carbonari soldier, China Cell. Partner Quin.

CIEDA

Fu Renshu Deputy Director, CIEDA.

Rhee Jianjun Field agent, CIEDA.

LIBERATION CHURCH

Gray Cardinal Leader of the Liberation Church of Uygur Zizhiqu.

Nur Amat Driver.

Xu Bekri Driver.

OTHER

Benjamin Tate Commander, GSTF.

Cameron Stewart Michael's father, Former GSTF, Former Basmachi.

Christina Tennison Grant Tennison's Daughter.

Conte Senethis Russian Ambassador to the FWC.

Coughlin Pilot, TAF *Little Wing*

Dern Magnan Commentator, "Hushed Voices" alternative news feed.

Eleina Rhodon Cypro-corp Ambassador to the FWC.

Keidice Burke Antoine Burke's wife.

Kendle Burke Antoine Burke's daughter.

GROUPS

NU National Union, the global federal government.

FWC Free World Council, the global legislative body.

GSTF Global Stabilization Task Force, global military enforcement arm.

Cypro-Corp The Cypriot corporation-state

CIEDA Chinese Information, Education and Defense Agency

Carbonari Anti-globalization terrorists

Liberation Church Isolationist Anti-secular movement.

Iceberg Troops Antarctica's National Guard

ARM American Resistance Movement, Anti-technology terrorists.

CHAPTER 1

Michael Stewart looked out the transport window and scowled as it climbed into the air. Below, the city of Petropavlovsk was a ghost town of empty intersections and crumbling high-rise housing projects, in the crosshairs of two active volcanoes. You just didn't live there unless you were a little crazy or overly serious, usually both.

Russia's Kamchatka peninsula should never have been civilized in the first place. It was a wilderness, and only the iron will of communism ever made it otherwise. Petropavlovsk, the pre-fabricated town, was a closed military zone; Russia's answer to Area 51 if it were in Alaska, and if you wanted to do something perhaps a little out-of-the-way, there really were few better places to do it in.

Here the Soviets had housed their Pacific Fleet, stockpiled submarines and ICBMs. It was here the Soviet military famously shot down a civilian airliner from Korea with no less than an American Senator on board, merely because it had bumped the 200 km buffer zone. It was a briar patch of top secret, and the infrastructure for concealment still existed. In Kamchatka, conspiracy was a way of life, one secret after another, layered like a clandestine cake. Naturally, the Global Stabilization Task Force saw every reason to develop the area as a base for its asymmetrical warfare unit.

Earlier in the day, when Michael had reported in to the Rybachiy base of the Global Stabilization Task Force in Kamchatka – home to the Northeast Asia division of GSTF’s special Chameleon Teams, he’d noticed something was very wrong. The base was a spider’s nest of activity, but there was a complete breakdown of the command structure. The only people Michael could find to question were privates too panicked to make much sense.

In the several years since he’d joined the Global Stabilization Task Force, Michael had flourished from a tough and bitter young man into a seasoned soldier. Grant Tennison, the division commander, had just tapped Michael to serve alongside his father Master Chief Cameron Stewart as a member of the GSTF’s elite Chameleon Teams.

Always game to be on the leading edge of any dustup, Michael boarded one of the scrambling GST-180 Boxcars that screamed out over Avacha Bay into the Sea of Okhotsk.

An array of submersible gear and a Deep Sea Rescue Vehicle suspended in a grav hoist filled the Boxcar’s cargo hold. Michael asked around and, finding he ranked the other NCOs on board, went to talk to the pilot.

“The *Ordinator*,” the pilot briefed him en route, “engaged a fleet of Carbonari terrorist raiders while on maneuvers near the Kuril Islands. The enemy fled, Commander Tennison pursued. He destroyed the enemy ships, but the *Ordinator* also went down nearby. We have orders to join the rescue operation.”

The rescuers had intercepted communication traffic from one of the downed Carbonari vessels that Commander Tennison was aboard an Echo Class scanning sub along with several other survivors, and were racing to get there before Carbonari reinforcements arrived.

“Why isn’t the carrier group sending rescuers?”

“They are, but Deep Sea Escape and Rescue is based out of Rybachiy. Crazy, huh?”

The boxcars reached the open ocean, where the *GSS Solon* Carrier Group formed another kind of archipelago, black hulks on a glittering sea. The massive, multi-hulled city-ship – surrounded by a

fleet of arsenal ships, cruisers and frigates – was the home of the National Union’s legislative body, the Free World Council. Fast attack craft swarmed from landing pads beside a protuberant tower.

The designers of the *Solon* originally intended it to house the entire world government, but Federal systems tended to grow, and now three city-ships were staffed in different parts of the world, the *Praesidium* in the Atlantic housing the executive branch, and the *Regula* in the Bearing Sea housing the World Court. These formed a kind of floating capitol, so no one country played host to the seat of government.

The GST-180s headed out near the edge of the continental shelf, where ocean depths reached well beyond the DSRV’s 5000-meter range. It was going to be a near thing.

When the DSRV went into the water, Michael was on its four-man crew. He had trained for underwater rescue with the Chameleon teams.

The markings of the crushed BC01 *Ordinator* flashed briefly in the DSRV’s high power beams as it maneuvered around the wreck. Nestled against the once proud, class-leading heavy cruiser was a small, sturdy – although apparently powerless – Echo class sub modified to suit its Carbonari purpose and marked the *Naumachia*.

Sailors in Atmospheric Diving Suits helped the DRSV and the recompression chambers it carried mate with the disabled enemy ship. The transfer lock sealed and opened, the rescuers stepped into the dark and slowly flooding interior, and worked their way aft.

Michael’s crew reached the control room, where the survivors of both ships sat shivering in the icy water and thin atmosphere. The ordeal had forged temporary allies, and the enemy commanders maintained an air of decorum on the behalf of the surviving crew. Commander Grant Tension, the GSTF Division head to whom Michael had been to report, had filled cups of brackish seawater and proposed a polite toast.

“What are we drinking to?” Tank, the Carbonari captain asked.

“Victory or death. Sometimes both,” Grant replied with an ironic chuckle. “You first,” said Tank good-naturedly.

“No, you.”

“I insist.”

Michael cleared his throat.

“Just in time, son,” Grant took note of his rescuers. “What’s your name?”

“CPO Michael Stewart, reporting for duty, sir.”

Grant’s face fell.

“Cameron’s boy?”

“That’s right, sir.”

“Damn.” Grant pulled him aside. “Afraid I have some bad news. Your father... he...”

Michael didn’t need the Commander to finish. He shook his head, sat on the raised lip of the hatchway.

“CMC Stewart survived, but when we hit the ocean floor...” Grant continued, “He gave his life to help the other survivors aboard the *Ordinator* make the transfer to the *Naumachia*, here.” Grant indicated the vessel in which the *Ordinator*’s crew now stood. “Held the pressure door open with this.”

Grant produced the fractal blade of nanocarb steel, a family heirloom that had belonged to Michael’s father. It was a Turkish yatagan style, its graceful forward curve gleamed in the murky emergency lighting.

“He was looking forward to introducing me to you,” said Michael. “It’ll be an honor to serve under you in his stead.”

“Afraid that won’t be possible, son.”

Michael looked up.

“What?”

“You don’t go back to work for the GSTF. Not after something like this. There’s going to be a category 10 shitstorm over what happened here today, and as I honor your father I want you to stay way the hell away from it.”

As Grant predicted, the GSTF brass forced him to resign over the incident. His superiors reprimanded him for failing to curb terrorist activity in the area, although he’d warned them of the buildup in Carbonari forces that had led to the attack. Grant had

begged for more power and resources, but his superiors had denied him.

Michael returned to Rybachiy with the rescuing crew and buried his father.

Tank, the commander of the impetuous raiders, cut a deal and the Chameleon Teams retained him as an asset. He changed his name to Tanaka. Once he had proven his value – in the strange fortunes that sometimes accompanied a cold war – Tanaka accepted a commission as a GSTF officer, and eventually took command of Grant’s old Team of Chameleons. By then Michael had finished his tour and rotated out. He’d heard a rumor that Commander Tennison had raised the *Naumachia* on the sly and stashed it away for his own inscrutable purposes.

“But I tell you what,” Grant had told Michael, handing him the sword in her darkened control room before the rest of the rescue fleet arrived, “You ever decide to leave the service, look me up. I’ll give you a job.”

CHAPTER 2

*T*he world is completely out of control, Grant thought as security bore down on their position and the node he had attempted to tap continued to prove unresponsive. He could feel time and opportunity slip palpably through his semi-arthritic fingers.

Michael – his bodyguard – blasted chunks out of the control tower doorway to keep the security soldiers at bay. Grant bent his gaunt frame over the virtual retina display and continued to dive into the node.

“Short delay, Michael,” he said, squinted to follow the data stream. “A decent neurohacker could just–” he broke off, struggled with the interface.

“You want me to take a look at it, sir?”

“What do you know about this kind of stuff?” snapped Grant. “Just cover me.”

The trans-atmospheric freighter TAF *Little Wing* blasted low over the Baykonur jump-port’s massive tarmac, threaded the terminal buildings and hangars, and made for the vanishing point of passenger craft flaring into orbit. The voice of the pilot, Coughlin, growled over the technopathic Link:

Coming in hot, you guys ready?

Not quite, Grant answered.

You made the dive or not?

I'm in there, still not finding...

It wasn't that he couldn't crack the encryption, but the local cell kept attempting to provide helpful suggestions and automation that cost him precious moments and his last ounce of patience. *These new networks*, he maintained, *are too smart for their own good.*

The Link was now a nearly ubiquitous piece of technology. An organic interface genetically engineered into the brain, it was an individual's primary connection to the larger world. It enabled comprehensive access to the various networks and amassed colloquia of the human race.

Coughlin over the Link:

What's the problem, old man?

Mistakes were made.

You need to reschedule?

Be nice...

Silence from the *Little Wing*. Grant pulled at the collar of his black flex-armor, spared a glance at his instruments, tapped into the security grid. He could see the military transports skim in on the horizon.

My week's looking full, Coughlin said finally. *Time estimate?*

Few minutes.

Coughlin cursed and came around for another pass. Grant maintained his search through a stack of up, down, strange and charm. Flavors of quarks, piled like a teetering ice cream cone. A quantum computer seemed – not without reason – to do everything and nothing all at once.

And then it was before him – glinting like the needle in a field full of haystacks. The data he was looking for! He began to download it.

“I got it,” one of the soldiers shouted. “Space traffic control's sending the override now.”

Didn't like the sound of that.

Illegal use, Grant's node barked over the Link. *Operation terminated*. With that, his connection snapped shut. It was over. *But did I get enough*, Grant wondered.

Michael fired the last of his plasma bolts and threw the useless weapon at the door.

Grant looked out the control tower window, observed what looked like a whole regiment of troops outside the building, and a hover-ship on the way. Their surface-to-air corkscrewed into the sky after Coughlin.

It's too hot, Grant. Coughlin pulled the *Little Wing* into a steep climb and banked for safety.

Coughlin, don't you bail on me, Grant said, trying not to panic.

Sorry, you're on your own.

Dammit, Coughlin, turn that ship around!

No answer. There had to be another way out.

Michael tossed a flash-bang towards the doorway, knocked the soldiers off their feet with a white pop. But that was the last grenade. The soldiers swiftly regrouped, and rushed in. Michael stepped forward towards the doorway.

"Stand down!" shouted the sergeant. "Lock your hands behind your head, now!"

Michael did, and drew a yatagan fractal blade of nanocarb steel.

The soldiers laughed.

"Hell is that? You think you're gonna hold us off with a sword?"

The sergeant aimed his weapon at Michael. The others followed his lead.

"Son, I advise you to drop that thing!"

Michael stood his ground.

"Drop it! Drop it now!"

It was the contract negotiations that did it, Grant thought. Pushed his buttons; sent him over the edge and into the abyss. As he sat at the side of the Russian Ambassador Conte Senethis – to whom he was ostensibly an advisor – and listened to the talks go sour. The veiled threats and acerbic pleasantries flew across the negotiating table like salvos of flaming arrows to lodge in the ostentatious molding.

Senethis was one of the new breed of upstart Ambassadors Grant couldn't stomach, trying to make a name for himself through Byzantine maneuvering not just on behalf of the country he represented, but for companies and special interests. In a world grown lethargic through media saturation, there was money to make in advocacy – if you could cut through people's compassion fatigue.

"So, what's the plan?" Michael raised a brow as Grant adjusted the black flex armor – a lightweight, thermal-masking, inter-cooled under-suit made of a composite based, shear-thickening nano-material. Grant knew the attire ill fitted his angular old frame, but it also stopped x-rays, gamma rays, and accusing stares.

"You can't go with me Michael. I've explained it already."

"Explain again," said Michael.

Grant looked down on the Kazakh capital of Almaty from the window of his stateroom in the Civic Palace.

"You've been to the same meetings I have. The Baykonur jump-port's one of Russia's most important global transportation hubs, but it's situated in Kazakhstan. The Russian government leases the land from the government of Kazakhstan ever since the Soviet Union disbanded."

"Because like all government entities," said Michael, "it prefers to sink money into outdated systems rather than develop new ones."

"As you say," Grant agreed. "But the lease is up for renegotiation and the Kazakhs are playing hardball. For some reason, it looks like they want to abandon their relationship with Russia in favor of some new player."

"And Ambassador Senethis doesn't know who?"

"Right now it doesn't matter," Grant said. "Talks are up in the air."

“I thought the Governor supported the lease to Russia.”

“Yeah, but one of his advisors – General Talgat, a real pain in the ass – he’s against it. If he convinces the Governor, we could lose the lease at the close of negotiations tomorrow.”

“Unless you come up with some evidence that will legally bind the Kazakhs to continue it.”

Grant tightened the straps on his backpack in response. The various heads of state were dancing around the issue, biding their time. The Ambassadors were only doing the smart thing, the prudent thing, the political thing – but Grant was sick of it. The time for talk was over. He needed to take action to secure victory.

Kazakhstan’s a part of the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Grant thought, along with Kyrgyzstan and Russia itself; A kind of modern day Sino-Soviet Pact, the NATO of the East? Maybe Talgat was looking for a pretense to dissolve that association.

Grant wasn’t sure why Talgat was not inclined to continue their amiable relationship, but he knew one thing – Ambassador Senethis was completely out of his depth. Grant needed something, anything; a new wild card to nudge the negotiations back on their proper course. If his instincts were right, that something was at the jump-port.

“Explain the part where I can’t go with you, sir.”

Grant slid a small biochip – a device containing a copy of the jump-port building base code he had acquired – across the stateroom table to Michael. The size of a fingernail, its biomolecular memristor storage cell activated when passed over a reader in the table. A hologram of an intimidating tower filled the air between them.

“We can’t hack in from outside the jump-port’s firewall. Space Traffic Control is the one place tied most intimately into the jump-port’s shielded network but not habitually staffed. It’s physically isolated from the rest of the jump-port, but artificial intelligence now does all the complicated space-traffic controlling. All I have to do is access the facility’s financial records through the control tower’s interface. And I can do that easier alone.”

“What about security?”

“The security forces are Kazakh, but employed by the Russian government. Ideally, I’d be able to order them around, but this mission has to be non-attributable. We’re operating without a contract now. I have no authority. If I make it an official visit, and the Kazakhs at the negotiating table find out what records I intend to liberate from a Kazakh-run facility, they’ll have the opportunity to change them.”

“As the advisor to the Russian Ambassador, aren’t you strictly forbidden to perform black ops?”

Grant raised an eyebrow.

“I haven’t stayed in this job by waiting for the tools to perform it to fall in my lap.”

“Wouldn’t it be more non-attributable if I were to do the mission for you?”

“I don’t have time to explain to you what to look for. And besides,” He indicated the access shaft he intended to climb, “once inside the traffic control tower, the Area Denial Weapons System would be a death sentence if I didn’t know the codes to disarm them. Once I’m in that restricted area, the security forces will rightly assume that anything it failed to kill will be fair game.”

“I don’t see the problem, sir. I’m supposed to be your bodyguard. I go where you go. If you get killed on this mission, then I haven’t done my job.”

“I absolve you of your duties, son.”

“I don’t accept that, sir.”

Grant smiled ruefully. He too had joined the service at seventeen, against his father’s wishes, of course. In recent years, since becoming a father himself, he had mused there would be no such thing as standing armies if joining them was the kind of thing a parent could forbid. Civilization was built on the backs and blood of foolhardy youth.

“Very well,” said Grant. “Grab your gear.”

The soldiers rushed in. Michael became a motion blur. He flip-kicked the soldier in front, blocked another's attack with the flat of his blade, another with his arm. The soldiers fired their plasma-foils in a fireworks show of dizzying light. Despite the security soldiers' superior numbers and weaponry, Michael slipped through their ranks and wielded his blade with deadly purpose, slicing through guns, armor, and sinew.

He danced, rolled, and flipped, landed blows where the soldiers least expected, crushed pressure points and deadened gun arms. Blood flew in an expressionist painting of violent color.

Grant began to see the way clear to the door, but it was a moment too late. A hover-ship, its weapons bays poised, dropped into view outside the tower window.

Grant, Michael and the security soldiers all stared at it in shock for a frozen moment before it unleashed a storm of plasma fire. Soldiers dove for cover as the rain of plasma and the ozone fume of charred metal filled the air.

In the split second the hover-ship paused to observe the results, Michael stood up.

Grant watched as Michael took one long step onto the control room equipment and threw himself out the shattered window.

He landed on top of the hover-ship, positioned his yatagan and jammed it into the cockpit hinge mechanism. He pulled it out and the cockpit opened, revealing the startled pilot, who only had time to say, “– the hell?!” before Michael threw him from the plane. He sprawled, dazed, on a platform twenty feet below.

Michael dropped into the cockpit and edged the ship nearer the window as Grant backed away from the stunned soldiers.

“A gentleman should never run,” he told them as he hopped into the open canopy, “but under the circumstances...”

Grant settled himself in the cargo space behind the pilot's seat.

“You shouldn't have come with me, Michael,” Grant said.

“Then you'd be dead.”

Grant grunted. “There's not really room in here for two.”

“Sorry sir,” said Michael, “Next time I’ll reserve a full size.”

Michael opened the throttle all the way, the hover-ship’s engines pressed them into their seats as the jump-port shrunk below.

He and Michael had escaped with their lives, and Grant was certain the mission’s success would absolve them of any ramifications. He’d pressed this fight, just as he had in Kamchatka, but this time the outcome would be different. This time they were heroes.

Nevertheless, if he didn’t get this data to the Ambassador in time, Grant supposed his was likely to be one of the last Russian flights to leave Baykonur, official or otherwise.

When Grant and Michael arrived back at the Almaty Civic Palace, the Ambassador’s party was outside the banquet hall, where the close of negotiations was already in progress. The Governor’s family threw down in true Turkic style, with all the finery. Fancy dresses, candelabra, roasted racks of meat – it looked like a victory celebration, but whose? *Any excuse for a party*, Grant thought.

The Governor was an elected official in name only, of course. It was window dressing for a political warlord who had carved out a membership in the National Union. Kazakhstan was still, for all intents and purposes, a feudal fiefdom.

Just outside the banquet hall, at a rather grand negotiating table under a rather opulent chandelier, Ambassador Senethis and the Kazakh delegation were finishing up, each backed by a retinue of soldiers.

“The governor apologizes for his absence,” General Cade Talgat began unapologetically, “but as our negotiations are nearly concluded, he has authorized me to close them in his place. If we observe formalities quickly, we can join him at the banquet.”

He was probably mid-forties – young for a general – with an athletic horseman’s build, but the sharp nose and inscrutable eyes of his Mongol forbears that glowered over his neat goatee made him seem much older.

Colonel Aizahn Nurkady, who invariably followed in his wake, was also present. She was tall, columnar, slightly curvaceous. She wore her jet black hair long like Talgat's, in Kazakh military fashion, the long braid entwined with a metal beaded *arystan*. Its spine of decorative blades glinted dully in the light of the chandelier. Facial tattoos disappeared into the collar of her uniform suggesting mystery beneath.

Grant dragged his mind back to the current dilemma and moved to join them.

"Wait," he said. Everyone turned towards him. Grant brandished a biochip, ready to fill the air with a hologram of incriminating numbers. "As these financial records will prove, your government has been less than honest regarding the terms of our lease of the Baykonur jump-port. You've heavily inflated the value of the land we occupy." Senethis raised his hand, palm out, to Grant and shook his head. Talgat and Aizahn glared at Grant and Michael.

"A fact we'll overlook," Grant continued, "provided you renew our lease for another twenty years at the current rate. Unless you think your other party will still be interested after they see this information."

Senethis turned to Grant, said, "Shut up, Tension! We've already completed negotiations. The Governor has agreed to lease us the land. All we have to do is accept the terms."

Grant looked back and forth between them, not quite understanding what had happened. Senethis drew him aside, a scowl hardening his usually smug, smarmy face.

"The contract is going ahead?" Grant's bewildered voice rang hollow in his own ears.

"And your meddling adds a needless complication," Senethis hissed. "I had this. You should have trusted me."

Grant was about to return fire, but stopped short as an elegant but severe woman swept into the room.

She wore a severe haircut, severe business ensemble, had long dark lashes and a distracting bust. Her marble skin shone in the high mountain sunlight slanting through the civic palace windows,

the model of Hellenic perfection. She had two soldiers in tow whose long robes and mirrored faceplates no doubt concealed severe weaponry.

Grant retreated to the background as Senethis went to engage the new arrivals.

“The Cypro-corp Ambassador, Eleina Rhodon,” Michael hissed in his ear.

“I understand the negotiations were concluded successfully,” her husky alto resonated in the marble chamber. “Let me be the first to offer my congratulations.”

“What’s she doing here?” wondered Michael.

Ambassador Senethis no doubt wondered the same thing, as he rounded on Talgat,

“Have we done something to offend you, General Talgat? Surely you haven’t taken my associate’s little joke seriously.”

“I take everything seriously, Ambassador Senethis,” said Talgat. “It’s good business.”

“These were to be closed negotiations.”

“As long as their outcome was all but settled,” Talgat waved the accusation away with a lazy hand. “But to be honest, I expected something like this. I thought it would be expedient to have Cypro-corp here to explore alternative offers.”

“Let’s sit back down,” said Senethis. “Surely we can resolve this.”

“I don’t like it,” Michael told Grant. “The Cypriots usually conduct this sort of thing on the sly. Why are they putting in a public appearance?”

Grant nodded, watching Eleina’s imposing retinue out of the corner of his eye. He had to agree.

So these were the infamous Kantara Guard, the elite Cypro-corp secret service, Grant thought. He’d heard through his connections that the Kantara Guard used subliminal programming for quick responses, and was in constant communication with an AI node that deployed and instructed them in ways to defeat their foes.

The Node contained protocols covering trillions of contingencies and it achieved instant responses from its soldiers by beaming them subliminal messages. It also provided resonant energy transfer to power the array of electromagnetic gadgetry and weapons the Kantara carried. *Where do you keep such a thing*, Grant wondered.

He recognized Eleina, of course, from Embassy functions. He didn't have to index her on his Link to recall what he knew of her.

Her official bio had her growing up during the last bitter years of the Cypriot split, and its formation into a weak republic that bent to the whims of all the stronger countries in the National Union. She entered the Cypriot National Sentinels and rose quickly through the ranks.

After the corporate takeover, the board of directors instituted the social campaign to re-brand Cyprus. The new owners formed a free trade zone where citizens became shareholders in a new entity – Cypro-corp – while promoting the country's cultural history and identity. Eleina Rhodon retired from military intelligence to take a job on the board's new Committee for Social Engineering, and rose quickly through the company ranks as well, eventually guiding the entire project.

What were they doing here?

Eleina approached him, her face as blank as the faceplates of her guard.

"It appears you've caused quite a problem for your ambassador, Tennison," she whispered in his ear. "Haven't you learned by now there are consequences when you wander off the reservation?"

Grant grunted. Eleina smiled a wide, predatory smile.

"I used to be like you, you know" she said, "wild, unprincipled, weight of the world on my shoulders – unable to let go, to delegate, to see the bigger picture."

"Was this when you were Cypro-corp's head social engineer – architect of what was arguably one of the most brutal pogroms of the century?" Grant snapped.

“True democracy isn’t about morality – it’s about the will of the many,” said Eleina. “Our secure immersion community allows citizen-statesmen to run the country without the need of centralized government infrastructure. Cypro-corp is the world’s first true democracy, the freest society it’s ever known.”

“And as its ambassador – its face,” said Grant, “you filter the perceptions of the self-righteous agoraphobic mob of shareholders. Answerable only to the board, responsible only for profit... that doesn’t sound like a free nation to me.”

“They asked me how a small island could rise to power and turn the world on its ear,” Eleina’s smile never faltered. “I reminded them of England. Democracy is the catalyst of any great society, and that’s what we’ve built in Cyprus. Nations are outdated. Cypro-corp is unified in vision and purpose, to attain a level of prosperity beyond the means of any mere country.”

“From what I hear,” Grant glanced at Michael, “It was as messy as any cultural revolution that came before it.”

“For a man old enough to be my father,” Eleina said, “I would think you’d have grown up.”

“What can I say,” said Grant, “I’ve found my niche.”

“Time’s up, Ambassador Senethis,” General Talgat’s voice from the head table cut through the ambient noise of the room. “I think your offer is – how to put it – hopelessly compromised, and so we are withdrawing ours. Unless you have anything else to add to the proceedings...” Senethis sighed, slid down his chair in defeat. “Then these negotiations are closed. We will no longer partner with Russia. The Cypriots will no doubt gladly engage in honest dealings with my government. In a way, you’ve done us a favor; made our course of action clear. I’m sure once I speak to the Governor –”

“This is a mistake, Talgat,” said Senethis.

Talgat blinked. “Is that a threat?”

There was a disturbance in the banquet hall beyond. Someone screamed. Then a flash, a deafening roar, and the world came unhinged.

CHAPTER 3

The floor heaved; the building shuddered. Cracks appeared in the walls, and dust drifted down from the ceiling. The chandelier detached itself from its elaborate medallion and crashed down on the conference table, sending Senethis sprawling.

All present looked around in apprehension, as Talgat rounded on Grant, his black hair fanning out behind him punctuating his wild look as he raged,

“What have you done?”

“General!” Senethis exclaimed. “You can’t think *we* had anything at all to do with —”

Talgat rounded on Grant, “You wanted to derail the negotiations? Well, you got your wish.”

Grant helped Senethis up. He, Grant and Michael shared a concerned look as a Kazakh soldier staggered through the shattered banquet hall doors, and caused Talgat to shift his penetrating glare.

“General Talgat,” the soldier croaked, “come quickly sir.”

The Kazakhs left hurriedly, leaving a small detachment of soldiers to guard the guests.

We hardly ever get bombings anymore, Grant thought bitterly as he surveyed the smoldering rubble of the ruined palace banquet hall. *That's what all the news-feeds say, anyway*. His gaze drifted from the peaks of the Tian Shan – the Heavenly Mountains that formed the fluid border between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and China to the south – down to the city of Almaty. The thriving metropolis of 7 million buzzed with activity like a stirred hive. Like an anthill deliberately trodden.

The building's open wounds bled black into the sky. Grant tried to suppress his outrage and focus on observing the Kazakh officers. How they handled the next few hours could tell him everything.

General Cade Talgat stood hunched with grief as Aizahn supported him. Her black hair fell in curtains over his, tattoos contorted themselves across her furrowed brow. She was as tough a woman as any man could wish for, in whatever capacity she served him. All the same, Grant saw her fighting back tears. *No shame in that*, Grant thought. *This attack has turned all our worlds inside out*. Ambassador Senethis, his thin shell-shocked face and oily, close-cropped hair smeared with soot, inspected the damage stoically from nearby. He was still under guard and – like Grant – probably still under suspicion.

The Helios Air Platform Ambassador Rhodon had arrived on – *no doubt the Kantara's power source*, Grant thought – had moved to a safer altitude, hovering over the city like a gigantic silver buzzard.

Eleina had looked at him – *right at him* – as the Cypriots rushed her out of the palace, her smile inscrutable, heavy Greek brows knitted above deceptive eyes. *What was that about?*

“We’re trying to recover usable traces of DNA from the Governor’s family and military leaders attending the banquet,” Aizahn was short of breath as she continued, “But it was a genetic device, laced with organic corrosion.”

“Then their Links were destroyed,” Talgat said, his voice distant. She faced away from him, the enormity of the blow only now beginning to sink in.

“We’ll continue to search, but it’s almost certain they were.”

“How’s Dilnara?” Grant asked her.

Dilnara Tulakabay – the governor’s cousin – was still living, though not expected to survive.

Aizahn jerked her head towards the far end of the rubble-strewn ballroom floor where a group of medics worked, intent on a shattered female form: formalwear torn and blackened, open wounds glistened with viscera.

“Nothing more we can do. We can’t repair her body; the genetic damage was too extensive. We managed to preserve some of her memories, but the corruption was so aggressive we couldn’t stop the breakdown of her cells or collect enough synaptic data for a comprehensive AI.” To Talgat she said, “I’m sorry. Dilnara – at least, most of what she was – is gone.”

Grant’s head swam. *The last member of the Governor’s family dead. Their Links destroyed.*

Talgat groped for a seat on a fallen column. Crushed stone fell to the shattered marble floor in a fine trickle.

“An entire dynasty wiped out,” he groaned, “ended in a split second.”

“They weren’t backed up?” Michael whispered the question in Grant’s ear.

“Didn’t believe in it,” Grant hissed back. “They were purists. Spiritualists. No genetic mods, no quantum backups. They called it the arrow’s path – one life, one death.”

Grant shook his head, unsure whether he respected that kind of absolutism or not. *It’s difficult to be a moral person in modern society*, he mused. *One can attempt to avoid the excess it engenders, but neo-luddites can be just as selfish through the inconvenience they cause others.* There was a certain critical mass of obligation; societal norms one could not opt out of in conscience. Failure to back oneself up surely topped the list, but conscience, he found, was a malleable thing. It retained any new shape you forced it to assume.

Talgat raised his face to Aizahn and said, “Show me.”

He stared, unfocused, as she linked him the reconstituted memory. “We found a tissue sample containing pre-existing genetic

modifications,” she added. “So it couldn’t have come from the Governor’s family. We think it’s from the attacker.”

“What’s this the bomber says?” Talgat frowned.

“We can’t make it out.”

“May we?” Grant stepped forward. Talgat considered him a moment, then gave him the link. It wasn’t a memory per se, but a compressed thought file. Grant watched it, and frowned:

Dilnara, one of the governor’s many daughters, excuses herself from the table and stumbles into the darkened hallway to confront the effects of over-imbibing when the sound of distant gunfire drifts to her ringing ears.

As she watches in numb fascination, a scruffy soldier in a mismatched uniform and a red arm band rounds the corner at a run. He fires a sidearm wildly behind him at unseen pursuers as he shoves her out of his way and dashes into the banquet hall.

The revelers scatter and scream as they register his bomb vest, and Dilnara hears but does not recognize the word he shouts before the Civic Palace erupts in a wave of acid energy.

“He says, ‘Constantia.’” Grant told them. “Resolve, in the dead tongue.”

“Carbonari,” Talgat growled.

“Iye,” Aizahn agreed, her lips thin and grim. “That would be consistent with the sample’s genetic mods.”

Talgat tore at his hair in frustration, his face a mask of pain. “The great fools! How many times did I tell them to avoid gathering in a single location? Because of something exactly like this!”

Senethis put a hand on his shoulder. “We all know you did. Nevertheless, they loved life and each other. And they were brave.”

Talgat scowled, “Bravery is doing what you must in spite of danger, not what you want because you’re in denial of it.” He turned, looked out over the city again. “I loved the Governor’s family. Nurzhan, Duiat, Serik, Aiaulym... all of them. If it were up to me, I would break international law, regenerate them, and claim some had survived. I’d kill all of you if I thought I could save them.” Senethis removed his hand, hesitant at this outright heresy.

“But it would be against their superstitions. They’d say it would endanger their souls.”

“And they would want Kazakhstan to abide by the National Union mandate more than their own lives,” Senethis said.

Talgat looked at him, his face set. “So out of love for them, I won’t do that.” He turned to Grant. “You understand these Carbonari – you know their speech.”

“A bit,” Grand nodded, reluctantly.

“What possible motive could the Carbonari have for murdering the Governor’s family?”

“To attack the homeland of the Secretary-General of the National Union,” Grant said, as though it were obvious. “To point out the hypocrisy of a secular federal populist global government being run by a religious demagogue from Central Asia, that’s their usual line.”

Talgat dismissed Grant with a wave of disgust – Grant wasn’t sure if Talgat meant it for him or for the Carbonari mottos he expressed. Senethis shook his head, moved back to the group of outsiders as Talgat gestured to Aizahn, who leaned in close.

Grant did as his friend Dove – a neurohacker – had taught him, and quietly pushed the link Talgat had shared with him.

I want you to use the sample you found. Talgat said to Aizahn.

Her eyes went wide as she absorbed his instructions.

Regenerate the attacker?

Do whatever you have to – whatever it takes to find what cell he came from. Keep it quiet.

An incoming link interrupted them, and Grant quickly closed the connection before they noticed him.

Aizahn cocked her head to the right, listened.

“General, the Ambassador – our Ambassador,” she said with a fleeting glance at Senethis and the *Helios* Platform, “requests a meeting to formulate our response before she meets with the Secretary-General. She says the protocol for the catastrophic loss of the last remaining blood relative is that the mandate passes to the

senior military leader.” She looked meaningfully at Talgat, who sobered. Her breath came a little faster. “You’re the governor, now.”

Talgat stared at the group of international observers, his face pale, but determined.

“I can’t rule in the place of my friends,” he said as he accepted the link. “Not until I’ve avenged their deaths.”

Kazakh flags draped empty coffins on a dais in the center of the courtyard of the Almaty civic mausoleum. It was the memory of the Governor’s family that lay in state. Nothing remained of them suitable for anything but cremation en masse. Mourners burned folded bundles of joss paper – ghost money, hell bank notes, to ensure the deceased had wealth in the afterlife. It was a Chinese custom – mock currency printed with historical figures and fanciful denominations. In modern Asian society, it had supplanted the more traditional Kazakh sky burial and prayer flags known as wind horses.

Grant brooded in a shadowed colonnade and watched as the line of visitors including Conte Senethis, the Russian Ambassador – and Grant’s ex-employer – paid their respects. In the end, Russia had lost the jump-port contract to Cypro-corp, chalk up another victory for the trans-national corporation.

“I can’t have you taking matters into your own hands like this,” Senethis had said when he fired Grant. The voice of the younger man still rang in Grant’s ears. “It brings suspicion on the whole country. I’m going to have to let you go.”

They’re always letting go, Grant thought. *The GSTF, everyone.* They were letting it all slip away and the self-serving pups like Senethis were scooping it up and smearing it on the walls. It wasn’t as if the Ambassador hadn’t known what he was planning.

“You’ll regret this, son,” He’d raged at Senethis. “I was doing this job when you were still a nesting doll.”

“That’s probably why your methods are so hopelessly out of date. You’re supposed to help me protect Russia’s interests. Instead, your pooch-screw in Baykonur could ruin us both. It lost us the

jump-port contract. But mark my words, the fallout from this bombing is just beginning. I have to distance myself from these kinds of methods.”

“I didn’t bomb the Governor’s family. You have to know that.”

“Maybe, but that won’t stop me from going down with you if I keep you on.”

Grant wondered how it would have been different if they’d actually used the information he’d risked his life for. Senethis might have fired him anyway, who knew. Grant scowled through the drifting smoke as Senethis sucked up to Governor Talgat, conveying his deepest regrets.

A man approached Grant abruptly from behind.

Michael was at his side in a flash; put the man in a wristlock that made him wince.

Grant laid a hand on Michael’s arm, his voice soft. “It’s all right, Michael, this is a friend. You remember Tank – Commander Noboru Tanaka?”

“The Carbonari defector?”

“Reformed, I assure you,” Tanaka said. “The name’s a normalization of my old handle.”

“The one who killed my father?” Michael gritted his teeth.

“Ah,” said Tanaka.

“Your father was a hero, Michael,” Grant snapped. “He did his duty, saved lives. You dishonor his memory if you blame another soldier for doing his.”

Michael released his grip. Tanaka looked him over, rubbed his wrist. His wry smile cracked deep crow’s feet in skin as burnished and timeless as though preserved in a peat bog.

“That’s a good boy you have, Grant. Former special forces, isn’t he?”

“And a mite overzealous at times, but he comes by it honestly. His father was Cameron Stewart, who served with my regiment in Kamchatka.”

“I remember him from the sub.”

Grant crossed his arms. To Michael he said, “Tank’s a division commander now. Chameleons, right?” He looked to Tanaka, who nodded. “No doubt here with the delegation from the Global Stabilization Task Force although in an unofficial capacity.”

Tanaka nodded, “And you were at the Russian jump-port in Baykonur before... *this*.”

“Ambassador Senethis was renegotiating the lease of the Kazakh land.”

“Indeed? And what were you really doing?”

“As little as possible,” Grant grinned, scratched his grizzled beard. His long service had taught him to be evasive and non-committal.

Tanaka clapped the older man on the back.

“I heard about what happened with the Ambassador. I’m sorry. What are you going to do?”

“Not sure. No job, no direction, but no one to answer to, either. I’ll find a level.”

“Your problem is, you hold on too tight,” Tanaka said. “It’s what got you kicked out of the GSTF.”

“Pardon me if I don’t consider you a paragon of career advice.”

“I consider you a friend, Grant, odd as it is,” Tanaka put a hand on his shoulder. Michael tensed. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have an offer.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Give it time.”

“This have to do with the bombing?”

“Maybe.”

“Figures.”

Grant and Tanaka faced the square, silhouetted against a window of sky.

“Things are harder now,” Tanaka said. “The politicians want to continue to show the progress and potential of globalization, but

the NU is besieged.” Tanaka looked sideways at Grant, who stared him down. “External rebels, trans-nat corporations, treacherous member countries... including Russia.” He waited for Grant to respond, but Grant said nothing. “Did it ever bother you, working for the enemy?”

“There are no more enemies,” Grant said without expression. “The world’s united. As a former external rebel, I’d think you would understand that.”

Tanaka licked his lips.

“Don’t mistake me Grant. I know we’re on the same side. But until the GSTF has broader powers, it may be the losing one. I’ll come to the point. The Secretary-General is in an uproar over the current debacle.”

“Naturally. He’s Kazakh. To the Kazakh people, he’s like a reincarnated god.”

“A belief frowned on by the rest of the National Union, to be sure.”

“Indeed.”

Grant and Tanaka left the mausoleum and Michael shadowed them across Republic Square and down Zheltoksan Street.

“What do you know about the new head of Kazakhstan,” Tanaka asked.

“General Talgat?” Grant shrugged. “Not much. He vowed to hunt down those responsible, but that’s what he has to say.”

“Governor Talgat, now. He’s serious. He’s sworn personal vengeance. He and the Secretary-General are screaming for Benjamin to act.” Tanaka referred to Benjamin Tate, head of the Global Stabilization Task Force.

“Knowing Benjamin, he won’t want to involve the GSTF directly,” said Grant. “I’ve never heard of a Carbonari cell in Kazakhstan.”

“Talgat claims to have traced the attack to a cell somewhere in the Xinjiang province of western China, but he’s been a little vague about how.”

“Mm. The autonomous region, near the Kyrgyzstan border.”

“But Talgat, the Kazakh Ambassador, even the Secretary-General want to hold China responsible for harboring the terrorists.” Tanaka held Grant’s gaze.

“How are they supposed to have gotten here?”

“Alashankou, on the Lanxin railway?”

“Too much security,” Grant said. “It was more likely overland, through the old Torugart Pass.”

“True, traffic through Kyrgyzstan is less carefully checked,” said Tanaka, and they walked on, each lost in the whine of his own neural crossfire.

“The National Union’s a fragile truce, to be sure,” Grant said at last, “and since achieving superpower status, China’s thrown its weight around as much as any of the members. But harbor terrorists? I don’t see it.”

“Old nationalistic habits die hard,” said Tanaka. “It’s still a repressive autocracy, global spirit of cooperation or no. That creates dissidents.” *While the modern world focused on cities*, Grant thought, *China has a lot of undeveloped land*. It was in those places, where people who pursued something other than progress or self-fulfillment were willing to live without convenience, that separatism and differing points of view still held sway. “Such are generally felt to be harmless as long as they remain invisible,” Tanaka continued, “content to wait and plan, but...” he trailed off.

“But if they interrupt the well-oiled clockwork of society,” Grant completed the thought, “well, something has to be done.”

“The Kazakhs are demanding sanctions, embargos, revocation of Free World Council privileges, etcetera. And unless they get them, they’re likely to hold a vote of no confidence in the GSTF and reform their national military.”

“It would tear the NU apart,” said Grant.

“The FWC is meeting now,” said Tanaka. “Any moment they could pass a resolution to send GSTF troops into China. We have to act now to prevent greater bloodshed. Take out the Carbonari before it’s war between the international community.”

“The threat of force keeps unruly nations in line, but if they start to call our bluff,” Grant scratched his chin, “to be honest, I’m not sure it’s a conflict the GSTF can win.”

Tanaka nodded, “We have to ensure it appears the mere possibility of an intervention makes China back down. It’s the only way to maintain a semblance of global order.”

“How does Benjamin want to handle it?”

“He’d rather deal with the Carbonari quietly, preferably in a non-attributable way. But he needs broader powers.”

“I need a drink,” said Grant.

Grant and Tanaka settled on a tavern and left Michael stationed outside. It was an Irish pub – the kind one found anywhere in the world, even Kazakhstan. Dimly lit, rustic, anonymous; places like it were the shining model for global gentrification. The pub had a wide selection of the usual liquors, but when Grant joined Tanaka at the back booth they’d chosen, he carried a pitcher of watery white fluid and two small bowls.

“What’re we drinking?” Tanaka eyed the pitcher dubiously.

“In Kazakhstan, it must be *shubat*. Fermented camel’s milk,” Grant held a finger to his lips, set down the pitcher and bowls, and put a small black cyclotron the size of a hockey puck – a personal firewall and DMZ – on the table behind the candle. Lights on its surface emitted a soft blue glow as it isolated their Link traffic from the rest of the local network, and intercepted any incoming.

No need for anyone to hear us, Grant linked as he slid into the booth.

Tanaka sniffed the *shubat*, and scowled.

Disgusting.

Appropriate.

What’re we drinking to?

Let’s not rush. Grant slouched in the booth. Neither made a move to continue for a long time, but Tanaka waited Grant out. Finally, Grant said,

So you're going to completely disregard the charter.

Tanaka watched Grant over the bowl. *The Order of National Enforcement's clear about this sort of operation. Strictly black flag. Not even Chameleons are this secret. It's going to be an entirely new unit. No ties to anyone. We have Benjamin's full support, he'll supply personnel and equipment, but he....* Tanaka tried not to look rueful.

Benjamin doesn't know you're here, does he?

No. In truth, he and a lot of the GSTF top brass think you were probably involved in the bombing.

You're kidding.

I know better. You and I have been both enemies and allies, and I just know. Honestly, Grant, the way you've carried on, can you blame them?

I suppose not. Grant swirled his *shubat*, sat in silence for a while. Finally, he mused, *who would've thought Ben would get the top slot?*

Well, he's short, Tanaka said. *Something to prove. Just like you. I want you to run this thing, Grant. You're better than I am, and the job's too important.*

How flattering.

It's true.

Who else is attached? Grant smirked.

I've selected some candidates from my division, Tanaka said, and linked the files to Grant. *They're good kids.*

Grant assumed a faraway look as he assimilated them. *Not good enough to go broadside with the Carbonari.*

Tanaka gave him a wry smile. *As I recall, the torpedo was your preferred method.*

Grant smiled grudgingly back.

That's not the point. You can make these kids disappear. You can set them loose in China, but that won't solve the problem.

Your 'never say die' attitude's what I always liked about you.

Sure, I say die. I say it until someone pays attention. That's why you're a division commander, and I'm out of work.

Tanaka fidgeted, annoyed, tired of fencing. He leaned over the table towards Grant.

We know China's a smokescreen. Their culpability is just the surface problem of a world spinning out of control and hiding it, but not everyone's complicit. We need to cut through the chatter and get the politicians back on track.

So Ben thinks he can solve China's Carbonari problem and get Kazakhstan back to the table without the controversy of appearing to publicly involve the GSTF in an internal Chinese matter, Grant shook his head.

An incoming link startled Michael as he stood guard outside. Grant's daughter, Christina Tennison, tossed her chestnut hair over her shoulder, her brown eyes flashed at him. She was about Michael's age, and his impression of her was that she was very glossy, and very symmetrical.

How is he, Michael? She asked.

Taking it hard, I think. It's hard to tell.

I hope he doesn't do anything we'll all regret.

Michael had wanted her of course, ever since he entered Grant's employ. He was sure she maintained at least a passing interest in him as well. For reasons of decorum, and fear of Grant, the two had never spoken of it.

He's talking to Commander Tanaka now, Michael said.

The former Carbonari?

The same.

That's not a good sign.

Speaking of which, this isn't a great time, Michael said as several black cars pulled up to the bar and disgorged Kazakh security officers. *I gotta go,* he said in parting and drew his sword, but found the Kazakhs had already jammed his link.

Back in the bar, Tanaka's eager look held Grant. *This is what you wanted, remember? A blank check to do something constructive; to make a difference.*

And now I just want out of the game, Grant all but snapped. *You're going to need more than GSTF cannon fodder to make this work.*

Be that as it may, Tanaka waved him off, *this is still an opportunity not to let the rules get in the way of what's right.* He set his jaw. *I'll send these kids to die for that, and more.*

Count me out.

Had to try, Tanaka said. He allowed himself a half-smile, pointedly downed his *shubat*, and grimaced. Grant chuckled, and raised his bowl.

He was just about to drink when someone threw Michael through the bar window. Bloodied and dazed, he slid on his back towards their feet. Grant and Tanaka jumped up.

Colonel Aizahn Nurkady – Governor Talgat's right hand – strode into the bar, a plasma crop held ready, backed by a group of armed soldiers who surrounded their table.

"Everybody stay calm," she said. "Get up slowly, hands where we can see them."

The two men stood up, hands on their heads. Both Grant and Tanaka were nearly a head shorter than Aizahn.

"Grant Tennison," she said, her tattoo-ringed gaze flashing, "You're under arrest for espionage and treason against the people of Kazakhstan, for conducting an act of terrorism on Kazakh soil, destruction of property, and murder."

"Murder?"

"The man you're meeting with is an ex-Carbonari," she sneered. "I shouldn't have to spell it out. We have a warrant to freeze your Link and search it for evidence of Carbonari involvement."

"Me, a Carbonari?" Grant almost laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, do you have any idea what I've suffered on their account?"

"Did you want to derail the negotiations so badly you had to join with them to kill the Kazakh Governor's Family?" Aizhan's voice betrayed her rage. "Surely there was another way."

“I thought you were talking about the jump-port,” said Grant. “I was trying to *save* the negotiations, not derail them.”

“Is that an admission of guilt?” Aizahn asked.

Grant looked at Tanaka, “I thought the new Governor liked China for the bombing.”

“I told you,” Tanaka said. “He needs to buy time. He must think if he points the finger at you, he can implicate Russia and drive the process in circles while he pursues China on his own.”

“The Ambassador’s cut you loose,” Aizahn smiled down at him, “no diplomatic immunity anymore.”

“Then this *is* about the jump-port, in a way,” Grant nodded, understanding.

“Shut up, turn around!”

He didn’t turn.

It’s happening again, Grant thought, *me against the world*. The Kazakhs were connecting the jump-port to the bombing and blaming him for everything. Moreover, Senethis had gone along with it. Grant could understand Governor Talgat’s vendetta, but he couldn’t believe the Kazakhs suspected him of Carbonari involvement. It was twice now the Carbonari had screwed him over.

“You couldn’t let it go,” said Grant. “You had to push.”

“Hardly,” Aizahn spat. “We’ve just come to put a sick old horse out to pasture. Ex-GSTF turning tricks for Russia. You’re a disgrace.”

Grant’s eyes narrowed.

When he was a child, Grant used to step on anthills. He’d watch them scurry to rebuild their world when a sudden catastrophe made it stand still. He’d tried to focus on individual ants, to imagine what had brought them to this moment, as each wove individual efforts, innovations, and mad alliances into the vast tapestry of their underground network. He loved to watch what happened when he pulled a thread and it began to unravel.

He imagined this was how God felt – creating catastrophes, impediments, opportunities – just to see what the ants would do. He imagined it was less entertaining to be the ants in question. He imagined it was worse if the ants were to turn on you.

Well, thought Grant. *That does it.*

He grabbed the DMZ off the table and whipped it at Aizahn. It sputtered and gave off a debilitating energy surge. Aizahn and the soldiers reacted in pain, gripped their heads.

Tanaka dove for cover, yanked his plasma-foil from beneath his jacket.

“Dammit, Grant,” he said, “What’re you doing? What was that?”

“You got a better idea?” Grant shot back. “I’m not sleeping in a Kazakh jail.”

Grant charged ahead, engaged Aizahn hand-to-hand, but she blocked his first assault. Tanaka fired into the soldier’s heavily armored uniforms, knocked them back through the air.

“I meant the device,” he shouted.

“Oh,” Grant traded blows with Aizahn. “Those personal DMZs are great around one or two people,” he said, “but in a cluster they create wicked feedback.”

“Good to know,” said Tanaka.

Aizahn, off balance, clipped Grant’s head with the plasma crop. He went down – face bloody, hair singed – but managed to sweep Aizahn’s feet from under her.

“I tried to use one in my first staff meeting as division commander,” Grant returned to a crouch, cold cocked Aizahn while she was down. “Nobody was too impressed then.”

Tanaka stood from cover, surveyed the destruction. The soldiers were down, the bar patrons stared in horror. Grant helped Michael to his feet.

“Better clear out before they regroup. Come on, Michael.”

Supporting Michael between them, Grant and Tanaka staggered through the door and down the shadowed street.

“I never get tired of this kind of thing,” Tanaka said as he and Grant wound their way through town.

“Good to know,” Grant chuckled ruefully, “seeing we’re in this together now.”

“I hope you have an escape route.”

“Are you kidding?” laughed Grant. “We just blew my last chance at one.” In response to Tanaka’s puzzled look, he said, “There’s no clearing my name, I’ve been down that road. There’s no coming back from this.”

“You can’t just keep running away, Grant,” Tanaka told him. “You have to do something about this.”

“You know me, Tank,” Grant said with a self-deprecating smile. “I do both. That’s my style, run and fire.”

“Running only makes you look guilty,” said Tanaka.

Grant kept moving, even though his breath came in ragged gasps.

“I know, but if I’m going to be a scapegoat, all I can do is try to make my martyrdom meaningful. So we’re going to do it my way, with my people.”

“I’m sure Benjamin will be pleased,” said Tanaka.

“He damn well better be,” Grant grinned at him.

CHAPTER 4

The Mediterranean sun glinted off the flagstones of the villa nestled amid the industrial shipyards of the Maltese town of Marsa.

“Wine?” Stefen offered. He was elegant, rakish, with large, sun-darkened hands. His matador hair was tied in a neat band, his doublet embroidered with a coat of arms – the de Piro crest.

“Naturally,” Grant smiled and took the proffered glass. He sat at a small white-clothed table in the villa’s courtyard. He turned to his companion, Dove, a punked-out Native American whose sallow cheeks and sparse, untended facial hair framed a grim mouth.

“When you’re at the villa of the Marquis de Piro,” Grant continued, “a Spanish red from the Ribera del Duero region, probably a Viña Sastre or Vega Sicilia.” Grant turned to his host, “Funny that a maverick Spanish marquis not recognized by the British should prefer the same Spanish wine as the crown of England.”

“Nonsense,” Stefen tilted his glass to examine the wine’s color. “It only means they have better taste in vines than in titles.” He raised his glass. “But first, we toast to old friends who continue to surprise us.”

He and Grant sipped. Dove sat back, scratched at his stubble. Grant swirled his glass.

“Viña Sastre. Very nice.” He set it down.

Stefen De Piro had come up in the world since Grant had met him. A trickster and a mercenary, Grant assumed Stefen must have bought the title of Marquis, or conned someone out of it. His history with Grant went back to when Stefen was an operative in the early days of Grant’s work for ambassador Senethis’s predecessor.

“Who have we here,” asked Stefen. Grant glanced sideways.

“Stefen, this is Cero Duvv – Dove for short – formerly of the American Resistance Movement.”

De Piro doffed an imaginary hat.

“Begun by Native Americans to resist the proliferation of technology and advocate a return to a simpler way of life. So you’re a bona fide ‘Skin, eh? Splendid. I welcome you sir, as one oppressed minority to another.”

Dove stared blankly back.

Grant smirked. “Maltese nobility hardly qualify for victim status, my friend. Dove’s one of our operations specialists.”

“Ah yes, a neurohacker.”

“People throw that word around,” Dove’s lip curled. “Doesn’t mean what it used to.” He toyed with a bear claw slung around his neck.

“Indeed,” Stefen said. “And what does it mean?”

Dove glared at him, appraising. A bemused smile played across Stefen’s face. He wanted a demonstration.

“You cellar wines?”

“Naturally,” he spared a glance at Grant.

Dove leaned forward, holding Stefen’s eyes intently. His pierced eyebrows knitted in intense concentration.

“Do you know the finest wine in your collection? Can you picture it?”

“Of course,” Stefen drawled, beginning to be uncomfortable. Dove sat back, negligent, having seen everything he needed to.

“Seventh rack in the cellar vault. It’s worth half your villa.”

“How clever,” Stefen’s expression was blank. “Should I have my sommelier move it?”

Dove looked away, bored.

“I don’t drink.”

“No, you clearly have other vices to intoxicate you.”

“Not as much as you’d think.”

“Oh?” Stefen’s poker face never wavered.

“Principled neurohackers never misuse their skills,” Dove rankled. “Our community takes a dim view of that kind of abuse.”

“Boys,” Grant interjected. To Dove he said, “Stefen de Piro may be a number of things, but most notably he’s a talented doctor. And I suggest you befriend him, because I have a feeling we’ll need his services.”

Stefen examined his fingernails. “And how were you planning to procure them?”

“Well, he owes me a rather large favor.”

“Which you never tire of reminding me.”

“I know you’re comfortable here. And even if I could still order you, I wouldn’t,” Grant sobered. “But I have to ask.”

“Ah,” Stefen waggled a finger at him. “You’re throwing a party.”

“Big party,” Grant nodded. “Sea, air and land.”

“And you want to use the estate.”

“Title and all the privileges pertaining thereto.”

Stefen cocked an eyebrow, and with only a trace of sarcasm said, “Now that does sound like fun.” The three of them sat in silence as he gazed deeply into his wineglass. Finally, Stefen said, “You’ll want your boat.”

Moisture dripped from the ceiling of a dim, musty cavern as Stefen led Grant and Dove down a long stairway cut into the rock.

“This quay goes back to the Knights of Malta,” he said.

“Any relation?” Grant asked.

Stefen grinned. “Not that I’d admit to, religious sentiment being what it is. Even here, in the former home of the Hospitaller Order, the trappings are unwelcome. In some ways, you could consider them the first transnational corporation. And this, their ignominious end: underground, hunted to extinction.”

The three descended towards a subterranean jetty. Lights along the pier cast patterns on the near wall of a vast chamber lake that extended away into darkness.

“It travels almost a mile underground all the way to the Grand Harbor,” said Stefen.

“It’s a slaver’s wharf,” growled Dove.

“And still useful to those who wish to conceal their activities,” Stefen shot back. “Profit by any means.”

“Don’t mind him,” Grant jerked a thumb at Dove. “He doesn’t want to be here.” He and Dove followed Stefen out along the jetty.

“I had wondered about that,” said Stefen. “As avowed luddites, his tribe wouldn’t be thrilled to know they had an accomplished technocrat among them.” Dove grunted. “Question is,” Stefen continued, “is that all it takes to hold a neurohacker against his will?”

“I don’t know,” Grant made a vague gesture. “Is it?”

“Very well,” Stefen conceded. “We can continue this conversation another time, yes? For now,” he linked an encrypted key signal into the dark.

The light chop lapping at the pier began to roil, as the shadow of something massive began to emerge. Grant felt his hair stand on end, but that might have just been the powerful electromagnetic field.

“Been nearly ten years,” Grant said. “Hope she’s still operable.”

A cloud of steam filled the cavern, obscured them from each other with surprising rapidity.

“Easy, Dove,” Grant’s hand stayed the emergence of an unseen weapon. “We were expecting this.”

“We were?”

“Well, the ‘slip’ still works,” Stefen coughed.

“What’s the slip?” Dove asked.

“Hydrodynamic system,” Grant explained, “a chemical coating we manipulate by electrical stimulus, to keep barnacles and particles off the hull, and to counteract eddies and turbulence buildup.”

“Uh huh.”

“Also acts as a sensor inhibitor, masking all forms of radiation from the ship, cloaking it from surveillance equipment.”

“Right.”

“And when she surfaces, it flash-evaporates in a cloud of steam. Helps mask her silhouette, missile launches and aircraft takeoff.”

“I see,” Dove’s face was expressionless. “You have a submarine.”

“My retirement plan.”

A wide, flat shape surfaced in the cloud. Tiny aqua channels ran its length, drew water off the deck. Its conning tower was so nestled in the hull as to render its profile relative to the water negligible. The steam still hadn’t dispersed as the sub extended a gangplank onto the dock in response to Stefen’s signal.

The three climbed through the open hatch and into the cramped companionway. The ceiling arced low over their heads, the floor grates receded into the black pit of the darkened vessel. Retinas glowed as their Links amplified the available light.

“Takes you right back, doesn’t it? You can feel the ocean in a ship like this. Shame naval officers don’t train in these anymore.”

“Interesting mods,” said Dove. He took in the non-GSTF materials, the ship’s systems downgraded and hardened to their least complicated – as thus, least vulnerable – configurations. “Was she Carbonari?”

“Once upon a time,” said Grant. “She was the *Naumachia*.” He moved aft towards the control room, ran his fingers along the railing. He quoted from memory, “Echo Class Tactical Scanning Submarines are scout vessels designed to employ a series of long-range sensor drones to warn the fleet against incoming vessels, mines, and other dangers. She’s lightly armed for offshore combat with thirteen decks, a payload of eighty conventional cruise missiles, six torpedo tubes, and usually about five fighter planes in her hangar bay. We’ll have to do without those.

“Dove,” he continued, “your first task will be to update her system cells. I want you to eviscerate them and build me a möbius strip of supplemental firewalls and isolated nodes. I know her system’s ten years old, but I do expect miracles. If anyone less than a neurohacker tries to access our onboard network, I want it to cause utter confusion.”

“Don’t we need a crew or something?” Dove said under his breath.

He, Grant and Stefen entered the control room. Its diamond-plated floor sloped towards a circular railed dais circled by several monitoring stations. The floor of the subterranean lake was visible out the main port, overlaid with info-graphics that appeared as the ship came online in response to Grant’s Link.

“That’s the beauty of this class,” Grant shook his head. “Practically run themselves. Just point her where you want to go, the sea is yours.” He leaned on the steering stand, gazed out the forward view port. “She needs a new name.”

Michael leaned back in the passenger acceleration couch as the TAF *Little Wing* blasted into low earth orbit. He was continuing on to Antarctica after they’d picked up Dove and dropped he and Grant off in Malta.

“Sorry I had to bail on you before,” said Coughlin, the pilot. Michael lifted a thin brow. One of Coughlin’s fat hands scratched the back of the other. “There were just too many.”

“It’s all right,” Michael channeled Grant, said what he thought Grant would want said. “We don’t expect you to get shot up on our account.” It was a more charitable sentiment than Michael actually

felt; Grant was more forgiving than he was. It was part of what Michael both respected and feared in the man. Forgiveness and obligation was part of how he leveraged continued services. Coughlin was Grant's contact, as was the woman he'd sent Michael to meet.

"We shouldn't have similar problems in Antarctica," Coughlin said. "There's a bit more room to spread out." Michael watched the sky outside the canopy turn black as the atmosphere opened an apothecary cabinet of stars.

"I never get tired of seeing that. I remember the first time, the day I left Cyprus."

"Yeah, it's interesting. People don't go places anymore. I mean, they still move places for jobs and opportunities, obviously, but they don't travel. Not like it's expensive, not like they can't. It's just, communications and virtual simulations being what they are, nobody bothers. It's truly a small world now. When you can go any time you want, what's the point? But me, I can't get enough of it."

"I know what you mean. When I was a kid, in Nicosia, I wanted to go so bad I could taste it. 'Course I couldn't, so there you have it. We want most what we can't have."

"I thought Cyprus was a utopia – a leader in social revolution," Coughlin smirked, and gave him a wink. As a freight dog, he knew the underside of every society. His kind came in through the cargo doors, and always saw what kind of garbage collected at the base of ivory towers.

Weakened by years of civil war, a failed membership in the NU, and the global financial standards crisis, Cyprus found its international debt bought up by multi-national media companies who called them in, affecting the first hostile private economic takeover of a sovereign nation.

Internet pirates and libertarian fetishists made fantastically wealthy by crafty trade of the information age's most prized commodities had long dreamed of owning their own country – a perfect data haven free from all government interference.

There had been micro-nations and other experiments with the corporation state, but on Cyprus, a perfect storm of economic

conditions finally provided the first real chance; the first truly trans-national company.

Owing to an early, exclusive trade-agreement with the New Mauritius Exploratory Concern – another early adopter of the free trade, national data haven model – Cypro-corp obtained the first pick of scarce industrial minerals like lithium and manganese mined from the sea floor. Cypro-corp’s resultant wealth and emphasis on education formed the basis of its technology boom. Cypro-corp grew across the board in medical training, research, supplies & manufacturing. That eventually led to exclusive patents for various technological advancements, including portable cold fusion tokamak generators – the successful implementation of gene therapies had removed the last carcinogenic complaints to the use of nuclear power – and the Link, of course.

Ironically, the former pirates and advocates of freedom of information became rabidly litigious protectors of their own intellectual properties. It was part of the natural order.

Cyprus’ previous invisibility and its decision to hide its new wealth in countless other data havens across the globe allowed it to grow unchecked until it was beyond the means of even the richest countries to interfere.

The one constant, even in a global society, was that fabulously wealthy and prosperous lands soon attracted the castoffs of every nation around them. When Cyprus made good, a flock of unsuspecting laborers came there looking for a better life, and found a class of ruthless capitalists in a perfect position to put them to work. If America in the nineteenth century had been a melting pot, Cyprus had been a fusion reactor and the blood and sweat of the exploited lit up the grid for years afterwards.

“How’d you get out?” Coughlin asked.

“My father was a GSTF soldier,” said Michael. “He wanted me to join up – once he learned about me. I had other ideas. But once I exhausted my options... well, you’ve seen how it is. I joined up, never looked back.”

“Came around to the old man’s way of thinking, huh?”

“Just a little too late.”

It wasn't every day the new leader of a nation – provincial as it might be – walked through the doors of the Petroleum Club in Almaty. It was a freight dog hangout from way back, and its denizens had seen almost everything. The deregulation of shipping had resulted in a profusion of tramp trans-atmospheric freighters and their equally colorful if not downright piratical crews.

Nevertheless, nearly every head in the place turned as Governor Cade Talgat and Colonel Aizahn Nurkady, along with their ubiquitous retinue of armed soldiers, barged in like a Mongol horde.

"We're looking for a pilot," Aizahn announced, and many of patrons quickly vacated their seats. A hard crew indeed remained at the table where the Governor sat and ordered a round of *shubat*.

"Glenn Tarvis, captain of the *Flywheel*," said a long, unflinching sun-bleached blonde man sitting in the center of the group. He had a scarred face and a thick Australian drawl. "What brings you down here to bulk rate, Governor?" With Tarvis were another man and two women. All but one of the women wore heavy leather flight jackets. One had mirrored contacts. Two gunners and a flight engineer, no doubt, their multi-ethnicity a reflection of the international nature of their business, their cocky demeanor *de rigueur*.

"I need a crew with combat experience," Talgat told them, "as the places I intend to land are liable to be inclement. Full disclosure. Am I in the right place?"

"Depends on what you want to spend," Tarvis said evasively. "Hazard pays extra."

"Good, right to business."

Grant sat forward at the seventeenth century desk in his borrowed office at Stefan's Maltese villa, watching Talgat's link that he still, on occasion, surreptitiously pushed. He linked Dove and the two of them indexed the *Flywheel* crew quick as they could.

Glenn Tarvis had given his name, so Dove did him first. It was easy to build a profile of a person based on their footprint in the immersion community. Dove and Grant read about Tarvis's life in excruciating detail. The winding red scars that covered the side of

his neck and lower jaw, it turned out, were the tokens of a box jellyfish sting when he was younger. The scars had faded some but would probably never go completely away.

Geil Raikan, the good-natured Native Aleutian sitting to Tarvis's right, was his flight engineer. The knockout next to him was *Flywheel's* rear gunner, Tanith Dariel. She was a slim, but less good-natured Hawaiian with roots in the Native American resistance. She tossed her long black hair haughtily.

The woman next to her was Sarina Shire, the forward gunner. She wore cargo shorts and a tank top, had jaw-length hair and mirrored contacts... Grant chuckled. *Now there's something you don't see every day.* She was a New Mauritian. That would explain the lack of outerwear. She probably found the icy climate in Kazakhstan quite comfortable.

"I'm for globalization," Governor Talgat was saying, "but one built on real, socio-economic ties, not the false unity, big government, and gentrification represented by the old order N.U. We have to break China's hold on the world, and stabilize it for the new order of the corporate state."

"I don't care about the corporate states unless they're linking Yuen to my offshore account," Tarvis said bluntly. "I'm just looking to get paid."

"I understand," Talgat said. "It can't be easy for you, with the collapse of the world economy after the murder of a major global dynasty with ties to the Secretary-General of the National Union. Surely jobs are scarce."

"I wouldn't know anything about that, Governor," Tarvis drawled. "Great thing about being a pilot – you don't like rain, you can fly somewhere the weather's nicer."

The Governor and the captain settled on a price and went to inspect the transport.

With its active camouflage system disabled, the clapped-out freighter was the color of dirt – a drab gray-brown, pitted and scratched to the bare metal, with a white underside and yellow lettering below its double-blister canopies that proclaimed it the TAF *Flywheel*. It wasn't pretty, unless you liked the look of chipped, sun-dulled paint and grease stains.

The Governor didn't appear to mind.

Grant frowned. The repairs to his submarine were not quite complete, but he decided he'd better get underway sooner than he'd planned. He had competition.

Cassandra Rollins, a blonde Antarctic Amazon the lack of polar light had rendered translucent, set her vaporizer down on the dash of the modified Cypro-corp MPV and gave Michael a hard look across the cramped cabin.

"Timing's inconvenient," she said, "I was up for promotion." Indeed, in order to get her alone he'd had to join her rescue mission. Antarctica was unforgiving, and a team of Iceberg troops – the local transnational constabulary – had managed to get itself stuck out on the Axel Heiberg Glacier during a storm.

The domes of Amundsen-Scott Station – population more than half a million, now – receded behind them, huddled together in modules like spacecraft. Fusion power supplied ample heating to the polar cities, but their architects continued to build close and claustrophobic. Perhaps it was a psychological preference as much as a practical one.

"I'll have to give up the Kief, too," she gestured at the electric pipe she used to vaporize her designer drug of choice – refined Moroccan hashish, "it's hard enough to get here, I'm guessing it'll be even harder on planet Tennison. Still," she gathered her gleaming blonde hair into a ponytail and pulled it into a fashionable band of malleable metal contained within a constricting EM field and flashed him a sardonic smile, "a deal's a deal."

Cassandra switched the pilot pod's display to terrain mapping as she approached the crevasse where the signal from her team's emergency locator beacon originated. She flipped a switch on the dash, and hydraulic pumps extended. The MPV's tracks bit into blue ice beneath the snow.

"Are you able to leave right away?" Michael continued.

"Don't ask much, do you?" Cassandra laughed with a toss of her long, white-blonde hair.

“Time’s a factor.”

She shouldered a fusion-powered equipment pack, adjusted depth-enhancing goggles and mass-manipulator ski controls.

“Lucky for you my truck can find my team and get them on their way home on its own. You and I are going for a quick ski. Unfortunately, our GPS is going to fail once we get away from the truck. It happens.”

Michael joined her in the back and she handed him a matching set of survival equipment.

“So that’s it? You don’t need to go back for anything?”

“Be suspicious, wouldn’t it? Besides,” she said, her strong jaw clenched, “everything I own fits in a cubby the size of this truck. It’s all trash anyway.”

Grant – listening in by pushing Michael’s Link – suspected there was more to it than that. The timing was more convenient than she let on, her agreement too ready. *She’s running from something*, he realized, *just like before I met her*. He also suspected Cassandra would find her Kief wherever she went, one way or another. Few things were more powerful than human ingenuity in the pursuit of vice.

“Your man can pick us up out on the ice field, can’t he?” Cassandra asked with a grin.

“I suppose,” Michael snapped his boots into skis and tightened the hood on his survival jacket.

Cassandra hit another button on the dash, and hopped out of the vehicle. Michael followed her. Snow swirled with a blinding fury, the wind screaming like a wounded animal.

“Nice day for it,” Cassandra said.

The MPV nosed slowly over the edge of the crevasse until its treads caught on the far side, and then it began its vertical descent. Cassandra shuffled off into the blizzard; let the vehicle continue down into the crevasse on its own. Soon she had disappeared altogether, and Michael hurried to catch up.

Mount Dauban dominated Silhouette, lurked in a tropical haze separated from the rest of the Seychelles' 115 islands by a vast stretch of Indian Ocean. The Seychelles, north of Madagascar had the distinction of being the only chain of granite islands in the world. Their remoteness, coupled with their geographical formations, made them an ideal location for a secret Carbonari installation.

Tanaka struggled through the jungle that covered its slopes, sweating, breathing hard. His techno-cam shifted blue in the dim penetration of light from the forest canopy. He dodged its drifting beams, sought shadow. His techno-cam made him nearly invisible, depending on light conditions.

Interwoven with flexible, nano-reflective tubules and statically charged to repel dirt and particles, techno-cam captured light and bounced it around to the opposite side of the garment. It didn't have to be perfect, the goal was merely to delay visual identification long enough to give the wearer an edge.

Tanaka forced his way through a thick growth of jellyfish trees into an open copse of cocoa-de-mer to discover two Carbonari soldiers with plasma-foils trained on him, red armbands visible.

The roughly tied scraps of cloth probably had their origins in socialist symbolism. The Carbonari were radical leftist guerillas, after all, but had long ago divorced themselves from anything so organized as a party. The National Union considered them terrorists. Tanaka gave them a savage look, as he heard, faintly, a third Carbonari creep up behind him.

Tanaka whirled and punched the soldier at his six, grabbed the man's vest and swung him into a tree. He kicked the plasma-foil out of the hand of the second as he lunged, spun and delivered another kick that knocked his adversary back.

The first soldier forced Tanaka to grapple, backed him against another tree with both hands on his MV-7 rail-shot. They fought for the rifle.

Tanaka tried to knee the first soldier in the groin, but he blocked it with the butt of the gun. Tanaka's patella popped with surprising pain. The second soldier did a backward somersault, and

pulled a small plasma-foil from an ankle-holster. He put it in Tanaka's face. Tanaka released the rifle, resigned.

"Good run," he breathed.

The second soldier removed his headgear, grinned at Tanaka, a tanned genetically-engineered Perseus with close-cropped black hair. His face broke into a smile at Tanaka's obvious recognition.

"Torben! That you?"

The two men laughed, embraced. Sunbeams lanced the jungle clearing.

"Tank, this is Rusty," Torben introduced the third soldier, who was still recovering from his run-in with the tree. He was slighter, with sandy red hair. "Rusty, our man in the GSTF."

"A living legend," said Rusty, finely etched frown lines crinkled as he winced.

"Well, living, at least," Tanaka shook hands.

Tanaka had taken a trans-atmospheric freighter to the island of Reunion, then a small hovercraft north into the Indian Ocean, where he signaled a Carbonari vessel to take him home.

"When I heard the *Oread* had picked you up," Torben said, "I wanted to see for myself. Skills still sharp, even if you are dangerously close to decommissioning."

Tanaka scowled at him, only slightly irritated. "I think you should take me to Sepp'ca now."

In his safe house near Moscow, Grant sat up and took notice. He'd waited for this part. He knew Tanaka's Carbonari handlers believed he was a double, still working for them. He wasn't entirely sure what he himself believed. Grant wanted to believe his friend truly reformed, but when you've stood on the opposite side of a torpedo volley from a man, it was hard to remove all doubt.

It was not to be. Tanaka passed into a black hole, out of Grant's ability to connect.

Sepp'ca – a bear-like soldier in early middle age with a bushy black beard – paced the large granite-carved briefing room around

Tanaka. Across the room was his partner, Blue, a weathered woman still tough and energetic. The leaders of the Silhouette cell had the look of Roman centurions forced to live in the wild – superior but feral.

“We’ve frozen your Link,” Sepp’ca looked at the ceiling, “so your location can’t be traced. Mt. Dauban protects us from orbital eyes.” Blue circled in the shadows. “Your scan shows no serious genetic degradation, but it’s been almost ten years. What’s to convince me you’re still Carbonari?”

“You’ve received my reports,” Tanaka growled. “I performed your tests. All that’s left is to have faith that the bonds of genetics – of brotherhood – are stronger than indoctrination.”

“We believe in both here,” Blue murmured.

“I remember,” Tanaka held Sepp’ca’s gaze in that way he had. “But you know why I’ve come. Do you believe Carbonari could have committed the attack on the Kazakhs?”

“Impossible!” Sepp’ca spat. “If you were still of us, you wouldn’t ask!”

“You know we have no communication with other cells,” Blue said. “We have no intelligence on who may be involved, but Carbonari only strike military targets. It’s the most basic tenet of our movement. Our enemy is the fiction of the National Union. We don’t resort to terror tactics.”

“If you blow up a building,” Sepp’ca went on dogmatically, “you don’t succeed in your cause. Ordinary people just hate you more. No one respects a terrorist, even if his cause is just.”

“The plan of action you’ve proposed would be a huge commitment for the Silhouette Sanctuary, possibly even a debilitating one.” said Blue. “Torben’ll take you to the kitchen cavern while we deliberate,” she put a hand on his shoulder. “Get something to eat; you’ve had a long day.”

His debriefing complete, Torben met him outside the briefing room and led Tanaka through the rock-cut hallways. Spring-fed planters overflowed with tropical vegetation. For a secret military

base, it was surprisingly bright and alive, a fortress paradise. Even after all the intervening years, it still felt like home to Tanaka. He felt right here in a way he hadn't managed to do in any other place he'd been. Nevertheless, an air of foreboding pervaded. The soldiers he passed avoided his gaze and went joylessly about their tasks. Tanaka turned to his escort.

"I remember your mother Cassi, Torben. Is she...?"

"Decommissioned," Torben said.

"*Consensio*," Tanaka replied, in the traditional Carbonari acceptance of duty.

The kitchen was a large, homey cavern with a fire pit grill and long, rough-hewn tables – enough room for the whole cell to cook and eat. It was empty now save for Rusty, who poured coffee into small ceramic-composite mugs.

The three sat at a table, Tanaka with his back to the fire.

"I was a boy when you left," Torben said, "but I remember when you led the *Naumachia* against the entire GSTF fleet in the Sea of Okhotsk. And then survived her sinking."

"It was an unusual time," Tanaka said, sipping from his steaming mug. "I'd just lost my partner, Tige. Probably wasn't entirely in my right mind."

Rusty put plates with small portions of bread and meat on the table.

"I hear you," said Torben. "Rusty and I just lost our partners in an action against the GSTF in New Mauritius."

"*Misericord*."

Rusty sat next to Torben. "Sepp'ca paired us with replacement partners, but those girls..."

"Often happens we lose the women first," Tanaka said to his plate. "Not because they're weaker."

Torben picked at his food. "But you don't see us mounting major offensives against the world government's floating capital. We've been rotated off duty."

“We haven’t seen much progress in the movement since your day,” said Rusty.

“The younger generations are restless,” Tanaka sipped his coffee. “You think the Chinese...?”

“If there is a cell in China,” Torben said, “they might have acted out of turn.”

“And if they’ve broken faith –” Rusty shot him a look.

“That’s why you’re back, isn’t it?” Torben pushed his plate away. “You’re going to use your GSTF channels to find the Carbonari responsible and punish them?”

“We’re forming a group and designing an action,” Tanaka said, “pending final approval from Sepp’ca and Blue. I need equipment, and men capable of operating an Echo-class sub. After the action is completed, they’ll determine whether we return.”

“Does the GSTF know you’re here?” asked Torben.

“Not exactly.”

“We suspected that might be the case,” said Rusty. “And if they give you the green light...”

Torben looked at him. “We want in.”

The guards at Grant’s private Moscow safe house – where he had briefly returned after his stint in Malta – let Michael and Cassandra through without a word. Grant had stayed off the radar, declined to be brought in to the Embassy even to clean out his old office. He assumed it would offer only bugs, interrogation, and possible extradition to Kazakhstan.

As they climbed the stairs to the two-story townhouse, Michael heard voices coming from the open door. A strident, young woman’s tone:

“What kind of choice is that, dad?”

Michael slipped in quietly, Cassandra behind him. Grant sat at a desk with his hands on his temples. Christina paced the area between desk and door.

“I don’t expect,” Grant began, then stopped in frustration. “I tried to teach you not to be afraid to make sacrifices.”

“All that means is you’re willing to sacrifice me,” she said.

“Christina, we’re going into hiding for a very indefinite period of time. Essentially, we will be dead. What kind of life could you have with me?”

“And what if Senethis asks me where you are? What if he doesn’t believe me when I tell him I don’t know?” She planted her palms on the desk and fumed, “Since you’ve worked for the Ambassador, I’ve lost friends that never existed. Friends like Michael. And when you go on a job, I lie awake wondering if you’re—” she broke off, turned away. “So I know what kind of life it is. That’s why it’s not really a choice.” She looked up, saw Michael, ran to him and threw her arms around him.

“Michael - thank god you’re okay!”

Grant cleared his throat, “Michael, come in. How was Antarctica?”

“It’s winter there,” Michael said without enthusiasm. “This can wait, you’re dealing with family.”

“Nonsense,” Grant waved the objection away, “come in.”

Christina wouldn’t let him move right away.

“You knew I wasn’t hurt that bad,” Michael gently peeled her arms from his shoulders.

“I know, but I expected... I don’t know.” She held Michael at arm’s length, as if to reassure herself he was in one piece.

“Christina, please. It’s not professional.”

“Fine,” she said, “be a soldier.” She turned to Cassandra. “Who’s this?”

“Christina, meet Cassandra Rollins, late of the Iceberg Troops,” Grant said, but Christina retreated to the back of the room and glowered at him. “Cassandra and I had a little adventure in the Russian sector of South Pole Station a while back. Had my eye on her career ever since.”

“Waiting for a good chance to bring it to an end, apparently,” said Cassandra.

“Now, now,” said Grant.

“It’s okay, old man,” Cassandra said. “Someone saves your life at great personal risk, you expect to make allowances. Tell you the truth, I’m glad to be out of the South. I hear you have this thing called a world up here. Be nice to see a part of it isn’t white.”

“Even if it shoots at you?” Grant asked.

“Nothing’s free,” said Cassandra.

“Good,” Grant leaned back in his chair, his face blank. Desk and chair adjusted as each remembered one of his several favorite positions. “No job for the Ambassador ever had this kind of finality to it. I’ve called in almost every favor I could ask.”

“But not all,” Michael said.

“We’re not to that point yet but we may soon be,” Grant looked at Michael, “which brings me to you, my friend. As I’ll soon be dead, I’ll no longer require your services as bodyguard.”

Michael was confused. “If this is because of the fight with the Kazakhs, sir, I –”

“No, of course not,” Grant said, impatiently. “But the team needs a squad leader, and I can’t think of a better candidate.”

Michael was silent for a moment. Finally, he said, “I’ve been running since the day I left Cyprus – first to the GSTF, then here. You and Christina are the closest thing to family I have. Where else would I go?”

Michael glanced at Christina. She looked back, raised an eyebrow.

“So,” she said, “how will we be dying?”

Grant looked from his bodyguard to his daughter with suspicion. “Nothing melodramatic.”

CHAPTER 5

Easy City, as the expats – the new breed of global citizens who lived there – called it, was a Megalopolis. Coined sometime in the last century, the nickname was short for “Eastern Seaboard City,” a sprawling special economic zone that stretched from old Beijing to south of Hong Kong. Its spires lined the coast of China in a geometric orgy of light, like a pincushion that graphed to infinity. The city was miles high in places, an endless array of vertical lines and tiny vignettes in incomprehensible number.

Dampers swung, stabilizers countered, surfaces expanded and contracted, wind shear buzzing and humming the eerie hymn of modernity. Each building was a city to itself, complete controlled environments thrust like generation ships into otherwise uninhabitable space.

It was in this morass – where regions, states, even countries ceased to have meaning – that Antoine Burke stood. More specifically, in one of the divisions of one of its many buildings. A hospital. A mental ward. He looked down at his catatonic, wheelchair-bound wife. His teenage daughter, Kendle, stood slightly behind him. A broad-shouldered, muscular man of dark African descent, he had to bend low to hold her fragile hand and tell her,

“I have to go away, Keidice. I’ve been offered a position, and accepting it means taking Kendle away and never seeing you again.”

“Unh,” said Keidice.

“I want you to know we love you, and we’re not giving up hope of you ever recovering. Just,” he blinked, “of ever seeing it happen.” His daughter looked away. “If we’re gone, the GSTF will take care of you. And even if you don’t understand why we have to go, we hope you’ll know it was important.”

Six hours later Grant pushed Antoine’s Link, found him and another recruit from Tanaka’s list in the observation lounge of nearby Roth Quintana Global Air Base. At this time of night, there was very little activity. Except for Antoine, Kendle asleep on his shoulder, and a rangy young man with ruffled blond hair who sat across the intervening row of memory foam benches, the terminal was deserted. Only the hum of the recessed lights shedding stored, UV balanced illumination, his daughter’s deep breathing, and the drip of an automatic coffeemaker broke the eerie silence.

Kendle shifted in her sleep, no doubt exhausted from the massive argument she’d had with her father over why the two of them had to go. She looked innocent and untroubled now as Grant remembered Christina was once. *How it hurt when they changed*, he thought.

Through Antoine he felt rather than heard the trans-fiber windows behind them begin to thrum and vibrate from the approach of an inverse gravitational field as outside, a GST 160A light transport descended towards the landing pad. The young man’s advertisement blue eyeballs watched its progress from beneath furrowed blonde brows. He tugged absentmindedly at his uniform: the same drab black and olive GSTF fatigues Antoine wore. Grant re-checked the file, and confirmed he was older than he looked. *It was always there*, he thought, *sanpaku: too much white around the eyes*.

“What’d you do?” asked Antoine.

“Rented a boat,” he said. “Took my girlfriend cloud climbing. Nice dinner, the usual.”

“Let her hope you’re coming back.”

“I know,” he shifted. Even memory foam couldn’t make him comfortable. “Just couldn’t bring myself to do the other thing.”

“Hard not to think of it as a normal tour yet,” Antoine agreed.

The young man watched him carefully, appraising. “Mm. You ever been?”

Antoine smirked. Behind him, service technicians crawled over the waiting transport, ensuring its various conditions.

“You can free climb a well-formed cumulous using a grav-rig that distributes your weight across the tensile strength of the water vapor in the cloud,” the young man said with growing excitement. “You have to move really slow and careful so you don’t overstress the cloud formation and fall.”

“See? And that’s why not. Heights overstress me.”

“Naw, you can birdsuit and paraglide down if you fall or when you reach the top,” the other man said. “The rig’s onboard node analyses your route, and gives you the most stable hand and foot holds. There are timed competitions, it’s great. We’ll have to go sometime.”

“I don’t wanna be your new girlfriend,” chuckled Antoine.

The blonde man grinned, “But you’re my type.”

An announcer came over the intercom to inform them,

“Flight five seven four is now available on pad eight-one-nine.”

The soldiers got to their feet, hefted their regulation GSTF duffels. Kendle shuffled sleepily behind Antoine as he filed onto the gantry, her hand in his left.

The other man ran one hand through his shock of wind-tousled hair, extended his right to Antoine, and introduced himself.

“Aleister Cross,” he said.

GSTF Flight 574 departed from Roth Quintana Global Air Base on time, boosted to cruising altitude over Easy City, and turned west out over the Indian Ocean en route to the *GSS Praesidium* stationed halfway around the globe in the Sargasso Sea.

However, like many aircraft and ships traveling through that Devils' Triangle of methane hydrates before, it never arrived. The official report listed no survivors. So said the news-feed the passengers downlinked and chuckled over together.

“Damn things’re completely unreliable,” said Adrian Rhodes, a swarthy Greek Chameleon recruit, with a wink at Allison Umbriel – a small-featured GSTF medic. He was compact and catlike, she was soft-set with curly brown hair that fell down her back. The two were already aboard that same transport before Aleister, Antoine and Kendle had joined them.

The five watched the particulars of Grant’s plan to scratch them from history fall into place before the eyes of an uncomprehending public as their host Dern Magnan, his face charming and informal beneath a layer of info-graphics, listed it among the week’s convenient accidents on “Hushed Voices,” an alternative news-feed from the MediaWeb Corporation.

The news-feed also listed the disappearance of a Maltese Marquis – his estate tied up in legal matters. It mentioned the death of the advisor to the Russian Ambassador, his daughter and bodyguard in a car accident outside Moscow early that evening. Late the day before, it continued, Iceberg troops in Antarctica reported two rescuers lost out on the Axel Heiberg Glacier during a storm.

The reason Dern Magnan considered these unconnected accidents convenient was the connection of the parties to Commander Noboru Tanaka, a GSTF division head who also that week mysteriously died.

Either the loss of a number of highly qualified citizens with extensive military backgrounds was a coincidence, or... well, Dern let his audience fill in the blanks.

Grant triple-checked the team’s files.

It wasn’t everyone who could go undercover for good. Some, like Stefen, Dove, Cassandra and Michael, Grant knew from way back – people who owed their positions to his countenance or his silence and who, if they’d thought about it, probably expected to repay the favor like this one day.

Others, like Tanaka's Chameleons, were good men and women with something on their record preventing them from continuing their careers in a normal capacity. Aleister had been in and out of trouble in the service. He was a thrill seeker, but with the skills to back up his bets, usually. This mission would provide him the ultimate in asymmetrical diversion. Antoine had his wife to consider. Adrian's GSTF death benefits would support his widowed mother. Allison, Grant read, had lost a patient under questionable circumstances. While Tanaka was convinced she'd done all she could, the GSTF was not so forgiving. Grant knew what that was like. It was why he was on the run and forced to lead a band of hard-core hell-with-it militants on a suicide mission.

Tanaka had his misgivings about Grant's recruits, too, Cassandra in particular.

"She's proud, willing to go the extra mile for a man who saved her life," Tanaka told him after meeting the weapons specialist, "but favors are a currency that devalues almost instantly. You can only use her so far. If you force her to give up too much, she'll break. But not easily - suddenly and catastrophically. Possibly self destructively if she can't find a way to justify what she'll view as the betrayal of your trust. Most people already would have."

"You make her sound pitiable," Grant argued. "It's not manipulative to count on a person's sense of honor."

"No," said Tanaka, "it's manipulative to abuse it."

The passengers of Flight 574 also watched the highlights of a speech made by Kazakhstan's new head of government. Governor Talgat was still on the news-feed every day, hitting his talking points, lobbying for a corporate reorganization of Kazakhstan's government, and making the case for ostracizing China. He was keeping the memory of the murders fresh in the flighty global consciousness.

"At this trying time in our history," he often said, "we have to eschew the backwards beliefs of the terrorists, and partner with our strong, forward-thinking neighbors. Together we will rise above this tragedy and achieve a unity we never thought possible."

Meanwhile the passengers discussed what Dern hadn't reported – the way Governer Talgat, the Cypro-corp ambassador Eleina Rhodon and the Kazakh Secretary-General of the National Union were pushing the FWC to send troops into China. Eleina Rhodon asserted it was up to the global federal government to make these rogue member nations safe for business and ordinary citizens.

The Echo Class submarine cruised silently along the Eastern Mediterranean, its bay doors open to accept the transport that blasted towards it. Flight 574, despite all assertions to the contrary, landed safely.

Torben met the GSTF soldiers in the hangar bay, and there was a moment of awkward silence across years of animosity as they looked at him – a Carbonari. It began to sink in this was the most unconventional mission any of them had ever undertaken.

“You hungry?” Torben asked. “There’s grub in the galley, but you’ll have to hurry. The briefing’s about to start.”

“We ate on the transport,” Aleister told him.

“Good deal. This way,” Torben led them down a corridor from the hangar bay aft towards the command section of the ship. As the group walked, Torben frowned at Adrian’s feet: his regulation GSTF uniform ended incongruently in star-sided black canvas hi-tops.

“You’re not wearing those on the mission, are you, son?” Torben asked.

“I can feel the ground better in them.”

“Fine, but if you step on a shard of scrap-metal, I’m not going to carry you.”

“I’ll watch where I step.”

The GSTF recruits followed Torben to the chart room – a long, low-ceilinged affair the ship’s new occupants had converted into a briefing area. A circular holographic display glowed at the end of a wedge-shaped info-table.

“Welcome to the *Black Hand*, ladies and Gentlemen,” Commander Tanaka said as he arrived at the head of the table. “I hope everyone got something to eat.”

Grant watched them come in, each a still, courteous deadpan. These weren't the usual loud, obnoxious jarhead douche-bags, kill-crazy for no better reason than they had trained for it. These were quiet, self-motivated spooky types who thought and felt and still pulled the trigger because each had decided in his or her rational mind that it was best for everyone. Grant knew – he'd handpicked them.

The group took their seats around the table – Tanaka handed out the preliminary assignments as discussed when the operatives signed on. There were 11 of them – a single squad – all cross-trained to function in any role but with specific specializations that allowed them to split into two redundant fire-teams.

Operations Specialists – who handled the information warfare – were Dove and Adrian Rhodes. Rhodes was also a medic if it came down to it. He was one of those who had trouble settling on a career, even in the Chameleons.

Weapons Specialists, as the name implied, had specialized weapons training – particularly in the heavier and more exotic varieties used to support the fire-teams. These were Tanaka's Carbonari recruit Torben, and Cassandra Rollins.

The Marquis Stefen de Piro and Allison Umbriel had medical training.

Michael Stewart had the most extensive field experience, so he would serve as the Squad Leader and head fire-team Alpha: Dove, Torben and Stefen. Aleister Cross, the next most experienced GSTF non-commissioned officer and former Chameleon, would be Assistant Squad Leader and head fire-team Bravo: Allison, Cassandra and Adrian.

Antoine Burke (Demolitions) and the former Carbonari, Rusty (Intelligence) filled swing positions assigned to the fire-team conducting a direct action or a reconnaissance mission.

In another era, the group would have been revolutionaries, radicals, and subversives committed to changing their society. Now

Grant had a whole boatload of them with no one to spook but each other. He would have to tread lightly. These you couldn't order around, or outsmart with bullshit patriotism. You had to appeal to their sub-logic, the emotions behind all their decisions – no matter how carefully reasoned or justified – and God help you if they caught you at it.

Grant cleared his throat. Everyone looked at him. He hated speeches, but the crew deserved one to mark the occasion, and they expected it.

“There are moments,” he began, “when history turns on the lynch-pin of the actions of a few men and women. You may not recognize them. They may be – to you – just another mission. But I believe this is one of those moments.

“I believe we have the chance to prevent a great injustice, and speed the world on the way to enlightenment. It will be trying. For all its challenge, there will be little glory or recognition. But I believe it is the right thing, a thing that needs doing. And I believe all of you are equal to it.”

Grant turned the briefing over to Tanaka and stood in the back, observing what he had wrought.

“We have three days till insertion,” Tanaka continued, “so we've got to be slick. This is where we're headed.”

The *Black Hand* appeared on the holographic table, traveled through holographic canals to a holographic body of water beyond.

“The Caspian Sea, by way of the Volga-Don canal, so we have to pass for smugglers before we arrive at the Bosphorus. A few bribes should get us through without any questions.”

Tanaka dealt out paper files.

“Here are your identities. You get hard copies because I want you to get used to committing them to memory without Links. You don't have to eat them when you're finished, but do disintegrate them, please.

“Adrian, you're going to backstop these. Our cover stories need to withstand a level four counterintelligence investigation.”

“Dove, I want you to get with Stefen on developing a system to back up and remove our Links. Our past lives are history. The smugglers we’re impersonating wouldn’t have that kind of wetware. This is obviously a tourist mission, so we want nothing to tie us to any agency, legitimate or otherwise. We’ll back up your info and store it as fully viable AIs in the Cypro-corp data haven. If we survive this, you can have it back.”

“How do I handle operations without an uplink?” Dove asked, churlishly.

Tanaka dusted off an old deck and monocle. “You get in touch with your roots, Kimosabe. It may look old, but it’s been converted to use Link technology.” Tanaka slid it across the table to him, and Dove caught it. “That goes for the rest of you. If we’re going to get along without our Links, we’re going to have to train hard.”

Dove slipped his fingers into the deck’s static sensor finger sheaths, wiggled them experimentally. A self-capacitating inner layer interpreted data from the tiniest finger flick while the eye tracking monocle interface allowed him to navigate the deck’s operating system with a glance. It would take some getting used to.

“Torben and Cassandra,” Tanaka continued, “I want you to develop an exercise regimen for the rest of the crew. They’ll report to you in the hangar bay every morning for calisthenics.” He turned the holographic table off. “That covers the preamble. The rest of you: demolitions, communications, intelligence, you know your gigs. Team leaders, I want reports every four hours. Dismissed.”

“Dove,” Grant got his attention and waved him over as the others filed out. “Walk with me.”

Dove followed him into a shadowed companionway, barely raised an eyebrow when Grant activated one of his personal DMZs.

“You wanted top secret,” Grant said. “This is it, blacker’n black.”

“Good,” said Dove, “the light hurts my eyes.” The two men chuckled.

“I have one more favor to ask of you, my friend,” Grant sobered, put a finger alongside his nose. “Another security measure. You know a commander’s greatest need is up-to-the-minute

information about what's happening on the ground." Dove looked at him stoically, waiting. Grant took a deep breath.

"I've been pushing links like you showed me."

"Grant..."

"I know you said only in emergencies, but surely this," he waved a hand to encompass the boat and beyond, "surely this qualifies. If not now, when is it?"

"If now, when is it *not*," Dove countered. "Justification, Grant."

"This isn't the time for quibbling about ethics. This is the big game; it's time to make our strongest play. So far, I've been able to push links I've already established prior to the attempt. I can even crack new ones, sometimes."

"And what do you propose?"

"When you kill the team's Links, don't kill them all the way. Leave me a back door. I need to be able to monitor situations as they develop."

"You want me to channel them for you?"

"Think of it as a backup plan, another pair of boots in the mud. My experience applied to your combat scenario, if it comes to that."

"I don't doubt it will. And I doubt it would be popular with the crew. But since we're meeting here, buffered by that DMZ," he gestured negligently at the device, "I'm guessing I'm not supposed to tell them."

"You surmise correctly."

"Those aren't that useful you know," Dove nodded at the device, "not against someone like me, anyway."

"They're useful enough."

Dove sighed.

"It'll be difficult to hide it from Stefen if we're to collaborate on the procedure."

"Keep it a strict division of labor," Grant told him. "He's the medical specialist. You're the quantum programmer. Wave a dead chicken over it, I don't care. Just get me eyeballs."

“Promise you won’t use it to ensure security in the women’s shower?”

“I’m an old man, Dove. Have some faith in me.”

Dove gave a hollow laugh, “That’s the problem, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER 6

Dawn picked the clouds off like giant white bison. Having threaded the mythical isles of Ulysses in a little less than a day, the *Black Hand* reached the Bosphorus and cruised through the two-mile wide strait amid a steady stream of other vessels without incident, nothing more than a perfunctory link from the shipping controller marked their passage. After that, they went dark.

Echo Class Scanning Subs used the magnetic field coils at the heart of the ship's magneto hydrodynamic – or MHD – propulsion system to create a highly tuned electromagnetic pulse. It deadened incoming sonar waves, and created distortions and shadows in the reflected image, making the general area seem less dense to a sonar reader, as the returning wave lengths would be longer. The result was the ship's sonar signature appeared to be a density pocket intermixing from deeper water.

As an added precaution, Adrian programmed the ship's scanning drones to operate at the maximum extent of the *Black Hand's* sensor range. The idea was the drones would give the ship a bolstered reaction time to any hostiles it might encounter.

“Come in,” Tanaka answered the knock on the door to his cubby-sized bunk and office space. Grant – sequestered in his own

office – heard Tanaka say. He opened his Link’s existing connection to Tanaka, and listened in.

Michael entered Tanaka’s office and sat on the memory-foam palette, unbidden.

“Something I can do for you, son?” asked Tanaka.

Michael glared at him.

“You probably knew my father, Master Chief Cameron Stewart, was GSTF. I was being transferred to Kamchatka to serve in the same regiment as him. I was going to meet him for the first time, until...” he swallowed. “... until the Battle of Okhotsk.”

Tanaka raised his eyebrows and sat forward at his desk.

“Are we going to have a problem?” Tanaka said, evenly.

“No, sir. You’re my commanding officer, and I respect that. But I thought you should know something about the man you killed.”

“You should understand something,” Tanaka stood up. “I killed a lot of people as a Carbonari. Not because they were bad people, or because they deserved it, but because they were the enemy, and life is the only price high enough to make your enemy pay attention. You see a lot of that in war.”

“I disagree, sir,” Michael stood too, eye to eye with Tanaka.

“Oh? And what is your learned opinion on the subject?”

“I may not have lived through any war worth speaking of, but it’s my observation that human life is a cheap and endless resource. Wars start when leaders put profit before people, and the only thing that checks them is economic collapse. That’s what happened to the Carbonari. When you alienated your financial backers, you became too isolated to present a serious threat. Then you got desperate, and did this.”

“*They* did this, son,” Tanaka fumed. “I work for the GSTF now.”

“Yes, sir,” Michael rasped. “Us and them.”

Both men and Grant nearly flinched when the alarm sounded.

Tanaka ran into the control room, Michael right behind him. The ship's alarm grated in his ears. He looked over Allison's shoulder at the communication interface.

"I'm receiving a call," she told him, pulling her curly brown pleat out of his view, "bearing two one nine, range three hundred forty-seven kilometers. It's the *TAF Flywheel*, requesting permission to land."

Radar-masked missile pods extended from the *Black Hand's* deck, tilted up and locked on.

Grant entered a step behind Tanaka, leaned on the steering stand. "Who's on that freighter?"

"*Flywheel*, this is a merchant ship," she said into the comm. "Who's on that plane that needs to see us?" She listened a moment, said, "It's Governor Talgat, sir."

Grant looked at Tanaka. "The new prince."

"Allow them to land," Grant told Allison, "but maintain missile lock."

"Roger sir, opening hangar bay." Into the comm. panel she said, "*Flywheel*, you're cleared to land. Maintain speed and course."

As the landing platform lowered into the hangar bay, the rotors of the freighter perched atop it barely cleared the doors.

Tanaka and the fire-teams covered its hatch with their weapons. Talgat stepped out, followed by the freighter crew in thick leather flight jackets, and three irregulars. Mean looking, sharp-eyed men with the look of fighting animals on a short leash.

"What kind of reception is this, Tennison?" Talgat took in the bristling nest of potential pulsed energy projectiles.

"You'll have to forgive us Governor Talgat," Grant said. "We weren't expecting you. And the last time I saw *her*," he indicated Colonel Nurkady, "she tried to arrest me."

Nurkady rubbed her jaw. Talgat said,

"She knew you broke into the Baykonur jump-port, and we knew you had Carbonari connections," he indicated Tanaka, "an

understandable confusion. The Secretary-General has vouched for you. I remain skeptical.”

“I’m curious to know how you learned our location,” Grant asked.

“The Secretary-General told me, of course.”

“That’s unlikely,” smiled Grant. “The Secretary-General doesn’t know about us, and no one that does know would have told him.”

“Of course he doesn’t know,” said Talgat. “He can’t know, politically. But when I learned about your mission to deal with the Chinese Carbonari, you’ll understand I had to be a part of it.”

“Bullshit. It’s out of the question,” said Grant.

“It is in the question,” Talgat, dragged himself to full height and leaned towards Grant. His long hair and Mongol jewelry swayed ominously. “Or the Secretary-General will learn about you in a very public and criminal charge-incurring way.”

Grant was nonplussed. “You’re not among Kazakhstan’s finest here, Governor. It won’t do to make threats.”

Talgat surveyed the group. “I don’t need to threaten you, Commander Tension. Your crew’s made up of GSTF milquetoasts, ex-Carbonari meatheads and a Maltese fruit. It’s a cornucopia of incompetence, not a real soldier between them. The privateers I engaged –”

“Mercenaries,” said Grant.

“– have been on the front lines of one engagement or another for the last quarter century. And there’s your lack of adequate air transport,” he gestured to *Flywheel*, “which I thoughtfully provided.”

“We have the one-sixty,” said Tanaka, referring to the transport the GSTF soldiers had arrived on.

“Are you kidding?” scoffed Talgat. “That thing isn’t stealth, well armed or armored. The Carbonari will shoot it down like a paper plane at the first opportunity.”

It was true – Grant had his doubts about the 160, and Coughlin, understandably, was more useful to them if he and *Little Wing* remained in place, as an operating freighter and captain.

“You need me, Commander,” Talgat continued. “I may be the only one here with the will to carry out this mission. And I will carry it out.”

Grant shared a look with Tanaka. “Michael,” he called.

Michael stepped to his side, “Sir.”

“Find these recruits a place to bunk. Mess is in twenty.”

The group muttered with surprise and consternation, but Grant turned and walked from the hangar bay without comment.

Grant entered his office with Tanaka. He had populated it with a collection of nautical imagery. He was pleased to have finally found a use for an old spyglass, a map, a ship in a bottle – trinkets he’d kept far too long. *Modeling, collecting, the study of history – they’re all about the illusion of control*, Grant thought. *Why do we need that?* A broad porthole rode the waterline that bisected sea and sky. He watched it rise and fall.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea,” Tanaka began, “in the interests of security –”

“Of course it’s not a good idea. You know what else isn’t a good idea? You told him where to find us.”

“Grant...” Tanaka began.

“My First damn Officer!” Grant exploded. “You’re setting me up, aren’t you? If the mission backfires, I’m the scapegoat – the rogue element everyone already suspects.”

“Talgat was going to find out anyway,” Tanaka said in a rush. “He had the Secretary-General lean on me. The leader of the Free World Council, Grant. Do you know what that’s like?”

“As a matter of fact, I do!” Grant shouted, “It happened right after I hauled your sorry ass off the sea floor.”

“Things would have been very different if the Carbonari had arrived first,” Tanaka muttered.

Grant paced the room in silence for a long time before continuing, “I thought I knew you better. I thought you didn’t care about political pressure.”

“I swore an oath, Grant.”

“You swore an oath to me first,” Grant rounded on him. “And before that, to the Carbonari. We’re not off to a very good start here, Tank. Was I wrong about you?”

“Look on the bright side,” Tanaka mused. “This way Governor Talgat moves at our pace. We don’t have to worry about him running wild, or bumping into him at the wrong —”

“Don’t try to spin this, Tank,” Grant interrupted. “You’re not a politician.”

“No,” said Tanaka. “I’m a soldier, and a soldier knows how to use his assets. He doesn’t drop a weapon just because it’s dangerous. We can use Governor Talgat. It’s unorthodox, sure. It’s against the rulebook, but isn’t that what this mission’s about? Whatever it takes?”

“Not completely,” Grant scowled, and turned his back on Tanaka. “Nevertheless, we’ll accept his help, keep him busy, and give him every appearance of freedom because I can’t let Governor Talgat or his hired guns out of our custody until the mission’s complete. The operation’s secrecy is more important than its success.”

The two shared a look.

“The question is,” Tanaka said, “what do we do with him once the mission is over?”

“You ask yourself that,” Grant nodded grimly.

“The Black Hand’s magneto hydrodynamic – or MHD – tubes account for the main portion of the ship’s body,” Governor Talgat’s entourage walked alongside one as Rusty gave them the nickel tour. “You’ve heard how cephalopods use a kind of jet propulsion?”

“*Iye*,” Governor Talgat growled impatiently.

“Well, that’s basically what the *Black Hand* does. The MHD tubes are powerful electromagnetic coils run by nuclear fusion batteries. They compress great volumes of seawater in superheating and super-cooling chambers. A vacuum chamber vaporizes the

superheated water, steam-powering the ship's generators," Rusty indicated the appropriate tubes.

"The steam then passes into the condensation chamber where it mixes with the super cooled water and is expelled by electromagnetic jets. The expanding of its highly compressed state out of the nozzles at the rear of the ship produces forward motion. But it doesn't stop there."

"I thought it wouldn't," Talgat sighed.

"The ship's basic shape outruns, manipulates and redirects its hydrodynamic signature for extra propulsion. The result is a system with energy efficiency in the high nineties, so the *Black Hand* can operate without re-supplying or refueling for years at a time."

"So what are you supposed to be?" Talgat interrupted.

"I'm the intelligence specialist," Rusty said. "Consider yourself informed."

"What's this?" Sarina Shire – one of the freighter crew – asked, looking with interest at several low vats of writhing marine animals.

"Ah, that." Rusty said. "Extendable fans on the perimeter of the water intake create a hydrodynamic vacuum and funnel the water in. Filters block the intakes from taking in debris, and an electromagnetic pulse frees debris caught in the filters so they don't need cleaning as frequently. But vents in the filters can be opened to allow the Internal Extraction System – which extracts and desalinates the water – to take in sea life." The group looked at him quizzically. "For food," he explained.

"*That's* what we're gonna *eat*?" said Talgat.

Despite its unpromising origin, the cook prepared from the catch an amalgam of swordfish kabobs with garlic and lemon, tuna steaks with orange and rosemary, and marinated grilled sardines on toast.

In the mess hall, Sarina surveyed the room with an unusual point of view. Grant had wanted to listen in on the team's first joint mess, to take the pulse of the newcomers, but had been surprised when he pushed her link and saw the world as she did. A

kaleidoscope of colored forms seemed to describe heat signatures, light waves well into both the infrared and ultraviolet. It was a genetic modification peculiar to employees of the New Mauritius Exploratory Concern and their descendants, unless he was mistaken.

He could recognize her crewmates; he'd assimilated all their files by now. There was Glenn Tarvis, the freighter captain. He sat with Michael and two of the mercenaries, Delgado Rodriguez and Erik Denin. Delgado was a gruff Hispanic with a dramatic gaucho moustache. Erick was wiry, of light-skinned African descent.

"That tattoo on your arm – star and crescent," Delgado asked Michael, "You Muslim?"

"No," said Michael. "It's a long story."

"I like stories," said Glenn.

"Father was a Turkic guerilla; fell in with a bad crowd," Michael said curtly.

"Sword came with that?" Erik gestured with his lips, African style, to the nanocarb steel fractal blade that never left Michael's side.

"It's good to have alternatives," Michael mused.

"Family gatherings must've been a scream," said Glenn. The jellyfish scars on his hard, red face twitched.

"So why not have the tattoo removed, if it makes you so uncomfortable?" asked Delgado.

"Can't," said Michael. "It's genetic."

Sarina moved on.

There was Geil Raikan, their flight engineer, constantly smiling, looking back and forth between Gregory Pope, another of the mercenaries and the GSTF kid, Adrian.

"The problem is," Pope was saying, "you think religion tries to make the truth of the world conform to your emotions and mythology instead of observations. It isn't true."

Pope was studiously nondescript with fine brown hair, an average build, indeterminate ethnicity and unassuming features. He was a human mean.

“No,” said Adrian, “I just think the greatest evils are perpetuated by those who believe they have a monopoly on good. We’re better off without it.”

“But true spirituality, whatever is left,” Pope said, “is consumed and subverted by the mainstream. How can you say you’ve ever truly experienced it?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Adrian twirled his fork. “Either way, the world runs on fallacies, awash in urban legends and perpetrated on the shockingly unobservant.”

“Exactly,” said Pope, “So no matter what you call it, there will always be religion.”

Thankfully for Grant, Sarina declined to sit at the table with the amateur philosophers.

There was Tanith Dariel – *Flywheel’s* rear gunner. Tanith sat with Dove, tossed her long black hair out of her face.

Sarina took her pick and carried her tray to the table where Aleister and Antoine sat with Kendle. Grant was a little uncomfortable to be on the receiving end of their appreciative looks as the men noticed she was not unattractive. Grant saw – sensed – her awareness of self, her reflection in the polished steel tabletop. This heat vision was amazing.

“This seat taken?”

“Help yourself. I’m Aleister,” he said, his blue eyes searching her mirrored ones. “This is Antoine.”

“Hi,” said Antoine.

“You’re part of *Flywheel’s* crew?” asked Kendle.

“Gunner.”

“Heavily armed for a freighter, aren’t you?” Antoine observed, his resonant voice rich and wry.

“Pirates,” she said flatly. “They’re a curse.”

“I crewed a boxcar as a gunner,” Aleister smiled, “a one-ninety, back in my GSTF days.”

“When were those, last week?” she smiled back. Antoine laughed a deep, booming laugh.

“It’s in the past now,” Aleister mused.

“It’s just a job,” said Sarina. “There’ll be another one after it, or there won’t. Nobody does what they were bred for.”

“Easy for you to say,” said Antoine. “Some of us have given up a lot to be here.”

“You’re Mauritian,” said Aleister, intertwining his fingers contemplatively.

“Got the eyes to prove it,” she smirked.

“You’re blind?” Kendle asked.

“All Mauritians are blind,” Antoine said.

“Even the ones who can see,” Sarina gave them a lopsided smile, “The state of our internal politics is legendary. And it looks as if it’s followed me here.” She turned to look behind them at the next table. Delgado’s gravelly voice rose above the rest, said,

“– just what you’re all thinking! Governor Talgat’s the senior military officer on board, and he should command the mission.”

“But he’s Kazakh Guard,” said Allison, who had joined their table, her doe face gaped in shock. “Commander Tennison is former GSTF, and this is a GSTF mission.”

“Have you looked at your GSTF file lately?” Cassandra prodded her food, her pale eyes rimmed with red. “It says deceased. There’s no flag on this ship.” Despite the rigorous psychological modeling Tanaka had done to ensure the team’s compatibility, the two women had taken an almost instant dislike to each other, and the addition of the mercenaries had created yet another variable.

“It’s a question of experience,” Erik, the mercenary, said.

“And Commander Tennison is unquestionably the more experienced officer,” Adrian Rhodes ran a hand through unruly black hair. “If he hadn’t left the service he’d be a Commodore by now, or something.”

“What do you care?” Allison asked Delgado. “You’re just trolling for a bigger cut.”

Pope said, “Long and the short of it is that it’s Tennison’s ship, and he’s not going to give it up unless somebody forces him too.”

The crew looked at each other, unsure where the conversation was going.

Delgado said, “I’m just –”

“Gold is power,” Michael sneered in accusation, “Nothing else matters.”

Stefen approached their table with a bottle of wine and glasses. “My friends, I don’t mean to interrupt,” he said in his soothing baritone, “but are any of you familiar with the Latin phrase, *Domi Militiae*?”

“It means ‘at home and in the field’, right?” Rusty said, brows furrowed.

“And in Roman society, the two concepts were strictly divided. The army wasn’t even allowed in the city.” Stefen set down the glasses. “So the question is, are we at home, or are we at war? You might say we’re at war, but we’re... what, a scant thirty between crew and fire-teams? This boat is our home now, and the one thing our commanders have in common is they won’t be joining us in the field.” He opened the bottle. “It is our duty therefore to make our home a refuge. In that pursuit, I am dedicating a case of very old Vega Sicilia from my private collection in the hopes we can reach an accord.” There was tense silence in the group as Stefen poured. Allison beamed at him, smitten. Geil Raikan, one of the freighter crew, cleared his throat.

“I don’t know what he just said, but I like booze.”

There was general agreement, and everyone took up a glass.

“To our new home,” Stefen raised his, “The *Black Hand*, ladies and gentlemen.”

“The *Black Hand!*” the group intoned, touched glasses, and drank.

“Long may she sail,” said Stefen.

Good old Stefen the con artist, Grant thought, it's good to have him aboard.

Before Dove and Stefen could begin their procedure to remove the Team's Links, the two had to map each individual's consciousness as an autonomous Artificial Intelligence – a backup person – and upload it to the Cypro-corp data haven. The Link facilitated this process by maintaining a real-time neuroinformatic image. The challenge wasn't uploading the information, but disguising its point of origin.

When the source masking was complete, Dove and Stefen assembled the group around an examination chair in the Med Bay. Allison stood by to assist.

“Nothing we've been asked to do so far is brain surgery,” said Dove, “but the next thing we have to contend with is.”

“My colleague and I have developed an injection to kill our Links,” Stefen said. “We go in through the skull. We've already performed it on each other, so it should be relatively safe.”

The crew muttered.

“Should've waited so the Link could assist you when you perform the procedure on us,” Cassandra said under her breath.

“Agreed,” said Governor Talgat.

“Glad to see you appreciate the Catch-22,” Stefen smiled. “Technology is only a tool, my friends. We have others. Your brain will adapt.”

Dove picked up a set of goggles, gestured to the medical chair. “And these visors will perform many of the same functions. Inelegant, perhaps, but –”

“Everyone has to do this,” said Tanaka. “Remember, we're no longer alive. If we're caught or killed we have to be untraceable. That means no downloads, no enhanced memory, and no immersion.”

Cassandra took a deep breath and sat in the chair, her albino fingers clinching the arms.

“If my lovely assistant would be so kind,” Stefen gestured to Allison, who smiled and blushed a little too much as she provided the first of several long needle attachments to his med glove. Cassandra rolled her eyes, and leaned back.

With Dove and Allison monitoring on their visors, Stefen carefully inserted the needle into Cassandra’s skull as the rest of the crew waited nearby.

While Stefen concentrated on the more anatomical aspects of the task, and Allison concentrated on Stefen, Dove copied certain critical RNA subroutines – those related to visual and auditory enhancement and recording – into a hidden sector of the Link where Grant could access them later at his discretion.

It was no simple matter. The Link buffered enough data to store a lifetime of human thought, and was thus the latest step on the ladder to immortality. For obvious reasons, immortality was a luxury the crew of the *Black Hand* would have to give up. One by one, each crewmember took his or her place in the chair, and underwent the procedure. Even Kendle.

The mercenaries were for the most part excepted. Only Sarina, as a Mauritian, had been born with the Link. Originating in the lower echelons of society, the rest of them hadn’t sufficient genetic modifications to be bred with the Link in place.

To have a Link fitted later in life was common, but necessitated a financial stability incongruent with their lifestyle. Nor would an intimate connection with the rest of the world be desirable in their line of work, even if the resources to achieve it were not in question.

“You alright?” Aleister asked Sarina as the two waited their turn. “You didn’t sign up for this. Decision was made before you landed.”

“It may be a relief, actually,” she said with a wry smile. “I’ve often felt a bit overwhelmed by the Link. Be nice to have a more natural head.”

“How will you see?”

“Same way I see you now. New Mauritius engineered my people to see and mine the ocean floor without the aid of lights. Genetically modified synesthesia.”

“That’s when you take one of the more interesting drugs and hear colors, right? Mixes up the senses?”

“My skin perceives heat as light and form.”

“So you don’t use your Link for visual input?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Amazing. You’re *Flywheel’s* gunner?”

“Does it bother you?”

“I don’t know, forward or rear?”

She gave him a withering look that, despite having never seen her own reflection properly, was surprisingly effective.

Antoine turned to Pope, his broad face incredulous. “And you?”

“Never afforded one,” Pope tapped the side of his head. “I’m just here for moral support.”

After the procedure, Kendle found the mercenaries in the crew lounge. She teetered in on too-high heels and smiled at them through too much makeup.

“Here we go,” Erik rolled his eyes. “Shouldn’t you be in the playroom or something, sweetie?”

“As if,” she scoffed. “I’m nearly an adult. I like to do adult things. Like hang out, and drink coffee.” She stomped to the coffee machine, poured herself a tall, black mug full.

“It’s cool, guys,” Pope said kindly. “Let her hang out. What else is she supposed to do?”

“Exactly!” said Kendle. She sat on the arm of Pope’s chair.

“Fine,” said Delgado. “We’re just sitting around here talking about how many people we’ve killed.”

“Oh yeah?” said Kendle. “How many?” She took a sip of the coffee and gagged.

“What’s your security clearance?” asked Erik.

“What?”

“We can’t tell you without clearance,” Delgado grinned uncharitably. “Those are the rules.”

“No way, come on!”

“Actually,” Erik said, “he just thinks your little brain would explode if you knew.”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Watch your mouth, kid,” said Delgado.

“Oh, that’s rich,” she sneered. “You’re a freaking mercenary, talking about how many people you killed and you want me to talk nice?” she started to jump up, but Pope held her back.

“Settle down, we’re all friends here.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Delgado.

“Wow, you have huge muscles,” Kendle cooed, feeling Pope’s arm.

“Uh—” Pope said, shifting uncomfortably.

“Do you have any mods?”

“Nope, I’m an all-natural mutt, kid.” He laughed. “Just the happy byproduct of unselective breeding.”

“Really,” she slid from the chair arm into his lap. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Oookay,” Pope stood up, catching her arm, barely keeping from spilling her onto the floor. “I’m not comfortable with this, here.”

“I’m sorry,” she wailed, “I didn’t mean to... I just wanted to make a friend, right? Someone to be on my side. To keep me safe in case —”

“Well, this isn’t the way, you know.”

“I’m sorry just... tell me what you want. I can be nice to you.” Her finger traced his chest. Delgado laughed.

“Oh God, no...” Pope grabbed her elbow, steered her out of the room. “Let’s get you back where you belong, okay?”

“You can’t, don’t you get it?” she shouted. “No one can!” She tried to jerk her arm away, but Pope held it fast.

“How did you think this was gonna go down, kid?”

She looked from him to the other mercs. “I’m sorry, take me to the principal’s office, whatever you have to do. Just...” her voice was small, that of the child she’d tried to conceal, “just don’t tell my dad, okay?”

“Fine, kid,” said Pope, “have it your way.”

Grant called Antoine into his office. Kendle waited inside.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this,” he sat them both down. “But I’ve received more than one request to have her removed from the ship. She makes the men uncomfortable. You can understand, they don’t want to flirt with a fifteen-year-old. I can’t have this sort of thing happening on my boat.”

“What?” Antoine was aghast. “Kendle, is this true?”

“No, I just—”

“Are you wearing makeup?”

“Cassandra gave it to me.”

“I don’t care if the Secretary-General himself gave it to you!” Antoine exploded. “I told you, you’re too young for all that.”

“Well, who am I supposed to hang out with? It’s not like there are any kids my age on this stupid boat!”

She stormed out the door.

“Kendle don’t you dare... come back here!” He started to run after her, but a look from Grant brought him up short.

“Sir?”

“I understand it’s going to take time for us to adjust to each other, and actually, that’s not why I called you here. My main concern is that she asked them to address their complaints to me and not you.”

“Why would she do that?”

“She knows it’s my boat. I suppose she thought I could kick her off it.”

“Damn. I’m sorry sir. I’ll sort this. You know I appreciate you allowing me to bring her aboard. It wasn’t an easy decision to make, but I still believe her place is with her father, and not some boarding school or orphanage.”

“That may be. But this is a military vessel. I’d say it was no place for her, but it would be the height of hypocrisy, seeing I was unable to prevent my own daughter from accompanying me. But remember, she’s your responsibility, not mine. In the future...”

“I’ll see she respects the chain of command, sir.”

“That’s all I ask.”

The next morning, once crew had a chance to adjust to the loss of their Links, they lined up on the deck for calisthenics. Torben held a soccer ball under one arm.

“Okay, this is a civilized game, remember. No spitting, cussing, or inappropriate touching.”

“Special Forces versus mercenaries, I think,” said Cassandra, her icy smile dazzling. She took the ball from him, and pinned it beneath her foot. Grant watched from the conning tower as she pulled her hair through a metal band and thumbed a button to constrict it. “Now we find out what life without Links is really like,” she said, and threw the ball.

Grant saw Torben approach Governor Talgat on the sidelines, watching the game. He pushed Talgat’s link using the new subroutine Dove had installed, and listened in. It was amazing – more real to him than any immersion experience, voyeuristic fantasy or fly-on-the-wall movie. He *was* Talgat now, hearing with his ears, streaming the echo of his thoughts. It was a little disturbing.

“They’re integrating better than I would’ve thought,” Torben said.

“GSTF, hired men,” Talgat growled, and turned to Torben. “You’re Carbonari, aren’t you?”

“Former,” said Torben. “We’re here for the same reason, Governor.”

Sarina sat on the deck, waited her turn, face lifted to the sun. Aleister missed his kick, chased after the ball. “In all fairness,” he said over his shoulder, “I was terrible at this game *before* the procedure.”

“Did anyone in your cell ever show signs of going rogue?” Talgat asked Torben.

Grant switched perspective to Torben now, felt his hesitation, wariness, resolve.

“They showed signs of stagnation, I would say. Some of my group was restless. Including me, obviously. But we never attacked civilians if that’s what you mean.”

“The odds are stacked pretty high against us,” Talgat said, watching the ball trade sides. “All the precautions we’re taking are simply to survive until the crucial moment. Even if we’re successful, we’ll make enemies in the highest places. We’ll be hunted down and nothing will save us.”

“All due respect, Governor,” said Torben, “I knew this was a suicide mission when I signed on. I think all of us did. But we hope for the best, just like Tank before us.”

“You’re still keeping the faith, Carbonari?” Talgat said with a sideways glance.

Torben looked back, said, “I’m just keeping it somewhere else.”

Grant could tell Torben found no need to explain himself to the Governor. He felt above justification. It was good.

Delgado missed his save, a silent curse on his wind burned lips, and the ball went over the side of the deck and into the water below. Everyone looked down at it.

“We’re sunk, aren’t we?” said Cassandra.

CHAPTER 7

“Good morning, everyone. We may have had a break,” Tanaka said as the fire-teams filed into the *Black Hand’s* chart room.

Grant watched some take seats, while others stood around the chart table.

Tanaka continued, “Late last night, agents from the Chinese Information Education and Defense Agency in Easy City intercepted a group of dissidents they think was planning to join the Carbonari. There’s been a resurgence of interest in freedom fighters after the attack. We think the China cell is trying to benefit from it, gathering new recruits.”

He brought up holograms of the suspects – a hard but unintelligent lot. Tanaka paced the room.

“This is a rash move for Carbonari, who don’t usually accept outsiders. Further evidence the group’s acting out of turn.”

“We’re not ready,” said Delgado, his tone grating. “The crew needs more time to adjust to working without Links.”

Governor Talgat stood up. “Time, however, is our enemy. China’s fueled its rapid development with recklessness and negligence, and my country paid the price. If we fail to undertake this mission, we miss an opportunity not only to lay this crime at

the doorstep of those responsible, but to undermine them utterly and completely.”

“Also,” he turned to Delgado, “I’m paying you.”

The crew looked at each other. Offense, consternation, grudging agreement.

“Tate agrees,” Grant spoke up.

“Benjamin Tate, the GSTF commander?” Pope was impressed.

“Unofficially, of course,” Grant nodded. “He’s under pressure from the Secretary-General.” He gave Governor Talgat a significant look.

“The plan’s a bait-and-switch,” said Tanaka. “Fire-team Alpha is going to pose as arms dealers and potential recruits to track or – if all goes according to plan – infiltrate the China cell.”

Tanaka had taken stock of the mercenaries’ skills and assigned Erik Denin and Rusty as dedicated intelligence specialists to teams Alpha and Bravo. He assigned Pope to Team Alpha as demolitions specialist and Antoine to Team Bravo. Delgado had a specialty in operations, so Tanaka assigned him to team Bravo to support the less experienced Adrian Rhodes. Neither was particularly happy about the arrangement.

“You will be dressed,” Tanaka continued, “to look like the kind of ragtag paramilitaries the Carbonari will expect.

“It’s not much of a stretch,” said Talgat.

Tanaka glared as he continued, “As a further deviation from the norm – and to sweeten the pot – you’ll carry these.” He laid a stumpy black semi-automatic rifle on the table. “PD-ARC plasma-foil repeaters – a compact personal defense weapon with a bullpup configuration very different from the standard issue GSTF MV-7. Electrically fired stacked projectiles, vacuum-sealed ceramic bore. You’ll have a whole case to donate to the cause.”

As the meeting broke up, Grant pulled General Talgat and Aizahn aside.

“I’m allowing you to accompany the team in an advisory capacity against my better judgment,” he said, “to secure the loyalty of your specialists, and to provide what expertise you can. But let

me be perfectly explicit on this point – Michael is in charge. In the event you're cut off from command, he speaks for me. Is that plain?"

"Do you miss being a commander, Tension?" Talgat smirked. "Do you want us to call you sir?"

"You don't have to say it," said Grant, "but this is my boat. So if you expect to make it back to Almaty with air in your lungs, by god you'll think it."

He ducked out of the room, and into the corridor, where he saw Christina follow Michael above decks. Irritated, he listened in.

Christina climbed out of the hatchway in the conning tower, found Michael leaning against the rail, staring out over the water.

"You seen Kendle?" asked Christina. "Antoine's looking for her. It's almost time to go, and she's hiding."

"No," Michael said, distracted.

"Oh. Okay."

"Sorry," he said. "If I see her, I'll make sure she finds her dad."

"Good." Christina joined him at the rail, and the two shared the silence. Finally, Michael said,

"You know the ocean grows wider every year, like it's filling with memories. Like a gigantic data cell storing the tears of the world."

"Sounds like something the old man would say."

"Sorry," Michael said.

"No, don't be sorry."

"I'm not, really, just being polite."

"It's the boat," said Christina, "cramped quarters, always running into one another. It's awkward."

"I don't mind. Just came up here for some air. Plenty for everyone out here."

“Growing up on the *Solon*, I had a flower patch,” she said, “a little place off the hydroponics gardens where no one went. I’ll have to do that here.”

Michael laughed, “Maybe in one of the spare bunks.”

“Yeah.” Christina laughed, too. “Or maybe an occupied one. Imagine if Stefen opened it up?” She imitated his ostentatious manner, “Whatever is this *dirt* doing here?”

“Are we expecting a vampire in our party?” Michael did his own impression. “They’re forced to sleep in the soil of their native land, are they not?” They laughed. Michael hesitated a moment, then asked, “When you said I sounded like the old man, did you mean your old man or mine?”

“It was a compliment.”

“You knew him, right?”

“It was a long time ago. But, yes.”

Grant had forgotten Christina had known Cameron. Michael put a hand on her shoulder; her hair blew in his face. She made no move to leave.

“Was there anything else?” Michael asked.

She looked at him, took a deep breath.

“Michael, you know how I feel about you. Are you going to kiss me at least once before you go and get yourself killed?”

Michael blinked. It took every last milligram of his willpower to say, “I don’t think that would be appropriate, Christina.”

“Appropriate?” her eyes flashed.

“Because of your father.”

“Damn my father,” she shouted, “this is about you and me!”

“You say that now, but you know what happened to my parents.”

“No, what?”

Michael looked back out across the water.

“You probably knew my father was stationed in Cyprus before he was transferred to your dad’s unit in Kamchatka. That’s where

he met my mother. Her family was rich – board members. They didn't approve. When they found out, they pulled strings and got him shuffled off to another post."

"When they found out she was pregnant, they made her get rid of me as well. She gave me up for adoption and never told my father. He didn't find out until years later, after I'd left the foster system, but he got in touch with me. It was because of him I joined the GSTF, and the Chameleons."

Grant sighed. There were many tragic stories that came out of the Cypro-corp social campaign. Michael's family was one such story.

That story was what Michael had been able to glean from the adoption agency and the foster parents he'd fled. *And if it was a bit hopeful and over-romantic*, Grant thought, *well, who could blame him? No one wanted to be unwanted.*

The Global Stabilization Task Force often drew from its member countries the disenfranchised, the poor, the unsuitable. Michael's father had been part of a Turkic Kirgiz guerilla group called the *Basmachi*, or "bandits," and made his way into the service of the global government by the usual accidents of fortune.

"You say I sound like my father," Michael continued. "I don't want to make the same mistakes he made."

"What mistakes?" asked Christina.

"Falling in love above his station," Michael said, gesturing to the air between them. "Nothing good can come of this, Christina."

"Not until you grow a backbone it can't," she said, and stormed off, headed for the hatch. "Goodbye, Michael." She slammed it closed.

Michael turned back to the water, and shook his head.

"Where were you just now," Grant confronted Christina as she stalked back down the corridor.

"None of your business, dad."

"I've told you to stay away from Michael. If you really cared about him, you wouldn't distract him right before a mission. This is

why they used to say it was bad luck to bring a woman aboard ship.”

“That’s not fair, dad,” Christina fumed. “If you want to do something useful, quit worrying about me and Michael and help me find Kendle.”

So, the Burke girl was missing, Grant thought. He’d known allowing her to accompany them was probably a mistake, too. *If it weren’t for Antoine’s expertise...* he pushed, looked for her. She was – in *Flywheel’s* cargo hold.

Geil Raikan, *Flywheel’s* flight engineer, heard it when he entered the hangar deck, and climbed into the freighter. A soft, sobbing sound. He went to investigate, and was surprised to find Kendle, the demolition man’s teenage daughter, crouched in the back.

“Oh, hi,”

“Sorry,” she dabbed her cheeks with the backs of her hands. “I didn’t think anyone would come down here.”

“Well, I pretty much sleep here, so...” Geil said.

“Sorry,” Kendle repeated.

“Look, I have a lot of work to do, so could you...” he was about to tell her to find somewhere else to do whatever, but she looked so pitiful, he caved “...give me a hand, long as you’re hiding out?”

She got up, wiped her face.

He handed her a grease rag, said, “Coveralls’re in the aft bin.”

Kendle watched as Geil wedged himself into a crawlspace, and worked on *Flywheel’s* engine.

“Big fight?” he asked.

“No. Yeah.”

“What’s bugging you?”

“My mom, I guess. We just *left* her to come on this... whatever this is.” She pressed her lips together, gamely trying to control her emotions.

“For me it’s just a job,” said Geil, “but I get the impression there’s a lot of rhetoric flying around. Could you hand me that torque wrench?” She did, and he took it.

“Were you close?”

“I guess. Not so much since the accident. She hasn’t been herself, really.”

“That’s hard,” Geil struggled with the tune-up. “You’re with your dad, though, right?”

“Yeah, but he’s on this mission or whatever.”

“Yeah, well. I’m a just a flight engineer, so I only care about one thing. Know what it is?” She shook her head. “Safety. They think I’m overprotective or paranoid or something, but I don’t care. This damn bird... sorry kid... is so over-modified it’s always on the verge of falling apart. See this rotator housing?” he indicated an engine part with the tool. “I don’t keep it tuned, ship crashes.”

“So you’re like their mom, or something?”

“Excuse me?”

“You tell them to... wear their sweaters, or whatever.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“You make sure they don’t go out unprepared,” she smiled and wiped her face, leaving a large smear of grease.

“I guess so,” Geil laughed, and changed tools. “I haven’t found an idea to latch onto like your dad, or Commander Tennison. Mine’s keeping my crew safe. I’m sure your mom would want that for you.”

“Well, what can I do then?” asked Kendle, her face serious.

Geil handed her the delocalizer. “Tighten down that manifold.” She set to work with determination. “Uh, but don’t break the wrench,” said Geil.

“Okay, mom,” Kendle rolled her eyes and giggled. Geil shook his head and laughed too.

She’s fine where she is, Grant decided, and broke the connection.

The soldiers stepped under the blast door as it opened, and walked out onto the hangar deck.

“I thought you said *he* wouldn’t be joining us,” Cassandra Rollins hissed, turning to Stefen. She nodded at Talgat and Aizahn as they walked over to *Flywheel* ahead of the rest of the group, their long jet-black hair and braided beads blowing behind them in the draft from the engines.

“It appears I was wrong,” Stefen shrugged.

“Not sure I trust Governor Talgat on the mission with us,” Cassandra whispered, and turned to the mercenary Erik Denin. “I know you mercs don’t care, but something’s wrong with him.”

“Of course,” Erik scratched his long chin. “He’s obsessed. But heads of state – especially obsessed ones – pay very well.”

Geil and Kendle emerged from the freighter; Kendle wiped her hands on her coveralls. Antoine dropped his gear, and lifted her easily in his large arms. “Where have you been?”

“Keeping you safe,” she said.

Antoine took in the coveralls, asked Geil, “Do I want to get on this plane?”

“I don’t know about that,” Geil winked at Kendle, his eye disappearing in a good-natured crinkle, “but she was a big help.”

The rest of them clambered aboard.

“Hell, I don’t want to get on this plane,” said Delgado.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Rusty. “We’re only trying to pull one over on eight to twelve highly trained, desperate killers. I give us two-to-one odds against.”

The team hunkered down in the cargo hold, nestled beneath the tandem cockpit and forward gunner. Tanith, the rear gunner, climbed into a ringed turret in back.

“I’ll take that action,” said Aleister.

“Me too,” agreed Delgado, chewing something none of them wanted to guess at.

“I dunno,” said Pope. “Laying odds on our survival is crass, even for mercenaries. I should know.”

“How do you expect to get paid if we all die?” Allison asked Rusty, her soft smile knowing.

“Being right is its own reward,” he said.

They strapped into the flight seating Talgat paid to have installed in the *Flywheel*.

“This is fun,” Geil Raikan said, his eyes roving the crowded hold. “I’m usually in here with the cargo by myself.”

The ship surfaced in a cloud of steam generated by the slip, and the landing platform rose into position.

Glenn Tarvis settled himself in a blister canopy mounted high on his freighter’s nose. He grunted, turned on the new visor interface that didn’t quite give him the 360-degree total view to which he was accustomed, and opened a channel.

“This is Snipe One to control, permission to take off.”

In the control room, Grant leaned on the steering stand.

“Roger, Snipe One, you’re clear for trans-atmospheric insertion. Good hunting.”

Glenn gripped the controls. “Roger that, control.”

Flywheel blasted off from the ship, and made for the stratosphere.

CHAPTER 8

Population density as one traveled east multiplied by an order of magnitude, product of an annual growth rate of over ten percent which, when one was talking about a country the size and population of China, was immense. A change of even one percentage point represented an incredible number of people.

Natural boundaries hemmed China in, part of why it had expanded into the ocean. Part of why China helped create the GSTF fleet. Chinese steel built many of the giant ships that now policed international waters for the global federal government.

High-speed maglev rails connected the cities – the important ones, anyway – through vast stretches of mountainous nothing. For all its overpopulation, China had plenty of land – just none of it very useful. Not until you got east, to the heart of the Han kingdom, to Beijing – Shanghai – Hong Kong.

For the hordes of China's nouveau-riche, Eastern Seaboard City was the only place in the world worth inhabiting. Though everyone recognized it couldn't exist without the people living everywhere else supporting it in a kind of lifestyle pyramid scheme, these were the new values.

The money went to the city and stayed there. Millionaire's clubs found a hundred different ways to burn it while out in the

farmlands, life remained firmly rooted in the previous century. In some places, the century before that.

But those days – the days of the great metal dragon – were coming to a close. *Like my own*, thought Grant as he watched *Flywheel's* approach. The Chinese Zodiac revolved on a 12-year cycle. Each time a sign rolled through, it contained an elemental variable: metal, water, wood, fire, and earth. This year, 2240 – or 4938 on the Chinese calendar – was the year of the metal Dragon. Grant's sign. Only the second he'd seen since he was born 60 years ago, and most likely the last. *What does a sign like that mean exactly*, Grant wondered. Was it the hallmark of another declining empire, struggling to decide how it would be remembered? *Once*, Grant thought, *we were dragons*.

Easy City spread before them like a continent-sized oriental carpet of blazing light. Galaxies of it extended over the curvature of the earth and dropped to some invisible vanishing point below. Illuminated surfaces reflected and redoubled in an incalculable cascade until it seemed there could be no one asleep anywhere.

The buildings were sickeningly high – over 2000 meters, some of them – and waved like marsh grass in a light breeze. An inner-ear correction to get your “sky legs” was one of many genetic modifications available for purchase.

The various strata of the vertical city had names like “Downgate” and “Vertex.” The meeting was to take place at a level whose name in Mandarin translated as “Acclivity.” Not as high as “Pinnacle,” but getting up there.

Michael, Rusty, Talgat, Dove and Adrian familiarized themselves with the interface of an observation booth overlooking a landing pad high in the Acclivity district. Gusts from a thunderstorm below blew rain in every direction.

Deputy Director Fu Renshu of the Chinese Information Education and Defense Agency – a slight man whose heavy eyebrows and salt and pepper moustache gave the impression of something tenacious and feral – introduced Michael to his best field agent, Rhee Jianjun. He was square-jawed and good-looking enough to sell cologne. Both wore nondescript black suits. The men shook hands.

“Pleasure,” said Michael. “You’ll monitor from here with Adrian. Thank you again, Director Fu, for your help in this investigation.”

“It’s Deputy Director. And we’re happy to be of assistance to the GSTF in any way possible,” he said, stroking his moustache. “You know, I’m not sure I’ve ever met GSTF operatives without Links.”

“Part of the sting operation,” Michael explained. “The Carbonari believe we want to join up, so we have to be Luddites too. You can’t fool an unwired brain with high-tech tricks. Have to do this the old-fashioned way... lie.” He patted Fu Renshu’s shoulder familiarly. “Don’t worry, we’re backed up.”

Despite hours of alert waiting and watching through his soldiers, Grant was startled when the Carbonari arrived between peals of lightning. The leaders, a young man and woman, wore red armbands. The two stepped forward to meet the rest of the crew who waited on the landing pad.

“We’re looking for Shearn Cavoto,” the young man said.

“Try a phone book,” Torben gave the coded reply. He’d been chosen to do the talking, as Carbonari could sniff out GSTF a league off.

“You don’t look like your picture,” said the man.

“A necessary precaution,” Torben nodded, “You understand.”

“I’m Sian,” said the man. “This is my partner, Quin.”

He had an artificial physique with wild black hair, stubble on his pointed chin and a hungry expression. She was lean and hard, with undeveloped hips. Her face was narrow – *not unattractive*, Grant thought – but with a long nose, spare eyelashes and lank, boyish hair.

“I’m Cavoto,” Torben nodded to Quin. “We’ve been in touch on the IC.” Actually, it had been Dove, but these details were unimportant.

“You refused to be directed to a local cell group,” said Sian.

“We heard about what you did in Kazakhstan,” Torben agreed. “We want to join the cell responsible.”

“We had nothing to do with that!” shouted Quin. “We would never –”

Sian squeezed her arm, and she relented. “The point is,” he said, “we can’t be sure of each other. I’ve told you before, you can’t simply join up.”

“We have recommendations!” Torben protested.

“All the more reason for you to make yourselves useful locally. We’ve drawn exclusively from our own ranks for three generations.”

“It’s an example of your stagnation,” said Torben. “You need fresh blood, new ideas to accomplish your purpose.”

“You’re not wrong,” Sian grimaced. “I’ll go one step further. Our movement is dying. Since the incident, our patrols have encountered Kazakh troops.” Grant saw Torben’s gaze flick to the observation booth where Governor Talgat monitored them. No doubt Torben was wondering the same thing Grant was. *What were the Kazakhs doing across the border in China?*

“They’re closing in on our position,” Sian continued. “We’ve lost the balance of our actionable partners.”

“*Misericord*,” Torben said, out of distracted habit.

The effect was instantaneous. The Carbonari tensed, suddenly on guard.

“What did you say?” Quin challenged. The fire-team looked at each other, unsure what Torben had said to upset them.

“I, uh, I said...” Torben blanked. Sian backed up behind his crew, who raised their MV-7s. The soldiers tensed, not wanting to be the first to fire, but also not wanting to be the second.

“How do you know that word?” said Sian.

“I read it, I...” Torben stammered.

“You’re from another cell!” Sian raged. “I told you we had nothing to do with Kazakhstan. We haven’t broken faith!”

“I promise...” Torben began, but Sian took out a small silver object: a blood-sampling device.

“If you aren’t one of us,” he said, “you don’t know what breaking faith means. It’s our blood!” He brandished the device at Torben, “Take it – *prove* you’re not Carbonari!”

“No, I...” Torben froze in indecision. They were high enough in the clouds hail fell upwards and clattered on the underside of the pad.

Too long! Grant clenched his teeth.

Quin whipped out a plasma-foil and lanced Torben. He went down with a grunt, winged. The fire-team raised their PD-ARCs to cover him, and the Carbonari cut loose. Plasma fire hit Delgado in the opening salvo.

Cassandra leaped to cover Torben. She blasted two Carbonari, her expression cold. Antoine knocked another’s senseless with the butt of his gun. The Carbonari maintained cover fire as individual members leapt from the platform and deployed gliders.

“Bring them down! We need at least one!” Talgat called over his visor from the tower. Grant cycled through the feeds, trying to get a fix on what was happening.

From the observation booth, Adrian saw a glider circle up, MV-7 trained on the exposed group below. Talgat, Michael, Adrian and Rhee Jianjun ran out onto the observation tower’s deck as a group. Rhee thumbed a button, and a forearm-mounted railstorm sprang from the jacket sleeve of his black suit. All three opened fire on the Carbonari glider, but missed.

The Carbonari strafed them, and Rhee dove out of the way. The glider banked towards the soldiers on the pad.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Adrian vaulted the rail and landed on top of the glider. It crumpled, out of control.

Allison gasped as she saw them plummet past the landing pad and hit a ledge below with a heavy crunch. The glider pilot glanced off the ledge, and screamed as he fell into the abyss.

Grant discerned the engine of an approaching ship. Michael heard it too.

“Get cover!”

He rolled as the Carbonari drop ship strafed them with a deafening clap, and rocketed away.

The group gathered themselves. Looking at Antoine, Aleister turned Delgado’s body. He was dead, his tough, leathery face frozen in a look of bewildered annoyance.

Stefen scanned Delgado with his med-glove, but couldn’t do anything for him.

“Glenn, you tracking that ship?” Michael called Flywheel’s pilot over the visor. He exited the stairwell onto the landing pad and followed Stefen down a precarious access ladder to the ledge where Adrian lay far below.

“Roger, what’s your situation?”

“Screwed. We need to evac immediately, tail it.”

“Spinning her up now.”

Adrian lay broken in a pool of blood, right knee at a wrong angle, a bone or two torn through olive skin. Stefen examined him.

“That was pretty stupid, huh?” Adrian winced, and started shaking. He was going into shock.

Michael put a hand on his arm. “You reacted, that’s all.”

Allison joined them and assisted Stefen, shielding Adrian from the hail with her body, the droplets of frozen rain collected, sparkling on her dark hair. The two medics acted quickly, worked to stabilize the breaks and stop the bleeding with nanoclamps. Stefen looked up at Michael shook his head.

“His spine is shattered; he has a compound femoral fracture, and head trauma. I’m not prepared to handle injuries like this. Even if I had him on the ship right now, I can’t..”

Michael looked at Stefen. Adrian’s eyes tracked them both, barely.

“It’s okay,” Adrian said. “I know you can’t help without taking me to a hospital,” he looked over the ledge. “Push me off.”

“No!” Allison looked from Adrian to Stefen.

“I’ll be a liability, compromise the mission.”

“Not going to happen,” said Stefan.

“Even if I survive, I’ll be burned. I can’t go back to the GSTF. Dammit, I gave up everything for this. My mom...” he tried to haul himself to the edge, but collapsed in agony.

Michael put his hand on Adrian’s chest as *Flywheel* hovered overhead. Allison’s hand covered her mouth.

“I’m sorry, kid,” said Michael. “Really sorry.”

Emergency Management Technicians from Easy City’s High Altitude Rescue Team rushed Adrian from a hospital Landing Pad. Grant tried to follow his progress, but Adrian was delirious, and thus not a very good surveillance source.

Grant didn’t agree with Michael’s decision to allow Adrian access to medical facilities, but he could understand it. The team knew the consequences of the security they had sworn to maintain. Survivors led to questions and interrogations their operation could ill afford, but the team wasn’t prepared for two deaths this early in the mission.

This was the job, he thought. Nothing goes smooth. You have to adjust your plans to deal with situations as they develop.

In the operating room, Rhee Jianjun and Fu Renshu watched the doctors. Grant heard part of an argument with a doctor named Liqin when Fu Renshu interfered with the operation she wanted to perform,

“Only enough to save his life,” he told her.

“I can’t do that, director Fu, the Hippocratic –”

“I’m from the Information, Education and Defense agency, my dear,” Fu Renshu’s moustache twitched. Liqin swallowed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means the only reason you’ve ever heard of Hippocrates,” said Fu Renshu, “is because I allowed it. So if you ever want anyone to hear of you again, you’ll do as I say.”

Dove, Grant linked, I need access to Fu Renshu, fast. I have to know what he’s thinking.

Was he going to interrogate Adrian? Did he suspect who they really were?

Dove looked around the transport. No one else watching. Grant was on a private channel.

Are you serious? He asked.

Why shouldn't I be?

He's the deputy director of Chinese Intelligence!

You saying you're not good enough?

No, Dove sighed, *just that it's a huge technological and legal hurdle, and I can't do it fast and dirty without raising a red flag somewhere. I can get you the junior agent, maybe.*

If that's all you can do.

Dove shook his head, played with the safety harness that kept him strapped in the acceleration couch as *Flywheel* sought orbit.

Sure you're not taking this too far, old man?

Don't lecture me about obsession, Grant's venom sizzled over the wireless. *You hack like other 'skins drink.*

Take it easy, Grant. No need to thank me.

I thought you knew what boat you boarded.

Grant made the connection as Fu Renshu bought a cup of coffee from the vending machine in the hallway – a link, a deduction. Rhee Jianjun straightened his black suit.

“So that's what Carbonari look like,” he said.

“Didn't they meet your expectations?” Fu Renshu blew on the steaming cup.

“I'm not sure.”

Fu Renshu took a sip of the beverage and sighed deeply. “God bless the Arab who first dried the husk off a bean and roasted it,” he said. “Civilization owes him as much as it does the inventors of the integrated circuit.” He stroked his moustache. “Clearly this agency is at an informational disadvantage concerning the

Carbonari. I'm authorizing a pursuit of the terrorists, effective immediately."

Rhee Jianjun – almost as immediately in flight gear – walked out onto a private CIEDA landing pad towards a Zephyr hover ship waiting there. It was wide and low, its variable-geometry surfaces poised, as if it were itching to leap into the sky.

Bring back one or two for me to interrogate, Fu Renshu linked him. *Failing that, any information regarding their operation that could help offset this deficiency.*

Rhee Jianjun climbed into the mirrored canopy.

And Rhee, just between us: for the GSTF to engage in black operations is strictly against the Order of National Enforcement. Fu Renshu grinned maliciously. *I'd hate to think anything so unconscionable was going on.*

"Yes, sir," said Rhee. He closed the canopy and ran down his preflight. A holographic display encircled him, and the fighter's interior seemed to disappear as it beamed a 360-degree view directly to his Link. Rhee slid his arms into the control panel gloves, lifted them free of the console, and fired the boosters.

Flywheel rocketed across Mongolia in trans-at flight, leapfrogged the globe at a rarified 120,000 feet. The fire-team climbed into their flex armor – flex armor that would have saved Delgado's life. Over the flex armor, the team donned one-piece techno-cam jumpsuits. They'd tagged portions of the Techno Cam suit to be visible with their visors, to avoid friendly fire. It had been Delgado's suggestion, but he couldn't enjoy the benefits in a body bag at the back of *Flywheel's* hold.

"We're down two operations specialists," Michael said to Dove, "so don't get killed."

Torben and Cassandra assembled the heavy splinter guns Grant had acquired for the occasion. Each loosed a barrage of molecule-splitting particle beams that fractured just about everything they touched into tiny shards of atom-sized sawdust.

Antoine rested with his broad head in his lap. *Praying or napping*, Grant couldn't tell.

Rhee Jianjun's Zephyr blew by them at high speed and the freighter shook with a resounding clap. The crew jumped. Antoine looked up.

"What the hell was that?"

"Looked like an interceptor," said Glenn, and called control, "Sack, you see unfriendlies up here?"

In the *Black Hand's* control room, Grant tracked the ships, one passing the other, on his interface.

"Roger Snipe One," Tanaka called back, "it's a CIEDA fighter, not engaging. He's traveling on your same vector, likely after the Carbonari ship."

"Sure left us in his wake," said Glenn.

Almost to himself, Grant said, "You'll arrive in time for it."

Flywheel entered Xinjiang Province and cruised in low, following a river that led to an area of Chinese forest aglow with radioactive fire.

"Jesus," Michael muttered. The familiar name had lost its religious significance, but was still sometimes the only expletive that seemed appropriate.

Small-arms exchange sprayed from the wreckage when *Flywheel* stopped to hover.

The freighter's belly guns swiveled, laid down covering fire. The team drop-lined to the forest floor and took up positions behind fallen logs and scattered composite materials – all that remained of Rhee Jianjun's Zephyr. Torben and Cassandra hosed the area with their splinter guns, and the Carbonari scattered as their cover disintegrated into shreds. *Flywheel* peeled off.

Finally, the resistance fighters found a barrier the splinter guns wouldn't evaporate – the crash-shielded pilot's compartment. Plasma flew back and forth. Tracers created a latticework, a tapestry of killing threads.

"We didn't murder those Kazakhs!" Sian's voice called out of the darkness.

Governor Talgat shot back, “We know you—”

“Prove it to us!” Michael interrupted, and scowled at Talgat as he signaled his squad to flank. “Take us to your sanctuary.” To Talgat he hissed, “If they’re inclined to talk, we need to keep them talking, not provoke them!”

Quin mewled, “The other cells have already turned against us or you wouldn’t be on this action.”

“You outnumber us,” pressed Michael. “Take us there and —”

“I can’t bring you in without authorization, you know that!” Sian said.

“You sound like a sniveling NU culture slave,” Rusty quoted doctrine. “Where’s your initiative?”

“Initiative’s clearly something you don’t support,” shouted Quin.

“Only if it’s heretical,” said Michael. “Let us help.”

“Help your Chinese colluder and hold your position,” Sian shouted.

“What?” Michael looked at his crew, confused.

“The plane that tracked us from the city. If the pilot’s still alive, shooting at us only endangers him further.”

Grant understood. The Carbonari had shot the Zephyr down when it found their landing zone. Michael did too, he shouted,

“Pilot, you alive?”

“Sorry to say,” Rhee Jianjun’s voice from the wreckage was faint and pained.

An MPV rolled over the hill, and Grant winced as floodlights blasted the area.

It was a modified Cypro-corp design – cheap and utilitarian. Two long bus-shaped bodies, joined at the back by a rotating coupler hatch. Independent twin drives tore a path through the scrub with big tractor tires and roll bar lights cast flashing shadows ahead.

“Our ride’s here,” yelled Sian. “We have him covered until we’re all on. And if your plane comes back, we’ll bring it down too!”

“We’re not letting them go,” Talgat signaled Colonel Nurkady and the mercenaries.

“Hold your position, Governor,” Michael ordered. “We’re here to capture and interrogate. We need to hold off until we can get the drop on them.”

Sian and Quin ran from their foxhole, covered Rhee Jianjun while the other Carbonari jumped in the MPV.

“It’s not too late to let us help you!” Michael shouted. “There are greater forces at work than you’re prepared to withstand.”

Sian climbed into the MPV. “Go back to your cells; China doesn’t need your help.” He pulled the door closed, and the MPV tore off. The team watched it go.

Stefen and Allison pulled Rhee Jianjun out of the wreck, and discovered his right arm was broken, among other internal injuries. The two medics set the break, immobilized it with quickset foam, and prepared their patient for transport.

“We’re following them, right?” said Talgat. Allison pursed her small lips, about to retort, but Stefen silenced her with a look.

“They’ve got to be close,” Aleister looked from Michael to Talgat, “Didn’t take them long to drive here.”

“Carbonari mount constant wide-ranging patrols,” Rusty said. “Could just be that one was in the area.”

Stefen looked up from Rhee Jianjun. “He’s stable, we can move him. But not far.”

Pope said, “We’ll need help if we’re gonna track them on foot.”

Rhee Jianjun blacked out.

CHAPTER 9

Consciousness returned to the body of Adrian Rhodes, and Grant tapped in to look at his surroundings. He was in an Easy City hospital room, and Grant was not surprised to find Deputy Director Fu Renshu by his bedside.

“Am I dead?” Adrian groaned.

“Interesting you should ask,” Fu Renshu answered. “Your GSTF file says you are.”

“Right, but... ow.”

This was not an understatement. Grant had to filter the pain Adrian’s connection transmitted.

“I know you weren’t part of a proper ONE-sanctioned unit,” Fu Renshu sobered. “You want to tell me about that?”

“I’m not one to make big speeches,” Adrian looked down at his extensive injuries, seeming to indicate he could withstand untold amounts of torture. “So let’s just say that’s not going to happen.”

“No one’s questioning your loyalty,” said Fu Renshu. “Or your resolve. I’m trying to help you. They’re thankful now; they let us take you to the hospital. Nevertheless, you’re a security risk. Do you think a rogue operation’ll be willing to bear that risk indefinitely? I can offer you protection.”

Do the right thing, Grant willed him to be silent.

Adrian stared him down. After a long moment Fu Renshu said, "It comes to this. We can regenerate the knee, but your injuries are severe. The longer we wait, the less perfect the operation. Think about that."

Grant was sure withholding medical attention was against National Union law. He logged that away for later use.

Rhee Jianjun, by contrast, woke in a small cave room on a modest wood-frame bed. Someone had patched his injuries. Michael, Dove and Pope watched him, Grant saw.

In answer to Rhee Jianjun's look, Michael said, "You're in a cell at the Liberation church of Uyghur Zizhiqu, a cave near Urumqi, on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert."

"Don't worry. It's not a *jail* cell, that's just what they call 'em," said Pope. "It's a monastery. You've heard of the Thousand Buddha caves? Like that."

"Convenient," said Rhee Jianjun.

"Not really," said Pope. "That's why Governor Talgat hired me. Contacts in the Chinese occult. I know all the best places to hide from an aggressively secular humanist society."

Rhee Jianjun's gaze showed Grant a room hung with berry-dyed fabrics. Generations of the faithful had carved graffiti into the furnishings of smoky, dark wood.

"Stefen was able to knit your arm," Michael continued. "You'll be fine in a few hours, but you should take it easy."

"Hours?"

"This is field medicine," Michael laughed, "not some fancy hospital. Industrial size bone regenerators are expensive."

"And heavy," Pope added.

"So where are the Carbonari now?" Rhee Jianjun asked.

"Probably deep in the mountains already," said Pope. "We'll need the church's help if we're going to track them down. They have trucks on the way. We'll head out as soon as they arrive."

“Which brings us to the question of what to do with you,” said Michael.

“No room for me in the helicopter?” Rhee Jianjun smirked.

Michael shook his head. “If we want to find the Carbonari’s base and not let them see us coming, we have to travel by land.”

Pope said, “You can stay with the church. It’s not a bad life, but probably not the one you had in mind. Or they can take you to town once we’re gone.”

“You’re not in the ferry business,” said Rhee Jianjun.

“We’re not counting heavily on there being an after to this expedition,” said Michael.

“You know what ‘Taklamakan’ means don’t you?” Pope asked by way of an aside. “Go in and you’ll never come out.”

“Nice,” said Michael.

“So the local legend says,” Pope continued. “It’s not true, but it’s colorful.”

“What were the Carbonari talking about?” asked Rhee Jianjun. “They’re *not* responsible for the murders in Kazakhstan?”

“Could be deception; hard to say. Governor Talgat’s convinced of their guilt. We have to play this out.”

“How’d you draw the duty?”

Michael smiled. “Not telling you is my way of hoping there *is* an after.”

“You’re *Basmachi*, aren’t you?” Rhee took in the star and crescent symbol on Michael’s forearm.

“I have *Basmachi* blood,” Michael admitted.

“How does the congregation feel about that?” asked Rhee Jianjun, gesturing to the church surroundings.

Pope shrugged. “It’s not a simple world.”

Rhee Jianjun thought to himself for a moment.

“Fu Renshu sent me to spy on you as much as them. He knows you’re not regular GSTF, or Chameleons.”

Michael began to speak, but Rhee Jianjun waved his explanation away. “Everybody lies,” he said, “The case is more important at the moment.”

“That’s your call?” asked Michael.

“I’m the agent on the ground.”

Michael agreed, “That you are.”

“Which leaves us what to do when it’s closed,” said Dove, speaking up for the first time.

“That’s your specialty?” Rhee Jianjun took him in.

“I can introduce a mirror virus,” Dove said. “Ghost us from your memory. It’s not without side effects. In order to hide it from the operators at CIEDA, it will be quite invasive.”

“But it’ll protect you from any interrogation performed on me?” Rhee Jianjun asked, and Dove nodded.

“One more thing,” Michael said. “I’ve talked to my commanding officer. If there is an after, we want you to provide for the man we left behind in Easy City. Get him into witness protection or something.”

“How will I remember?” Rhee Jianjun raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll write it into the program,” Dove said. “You’ll trust him. He’s trained to throw you at our backstop and you’ll accept it.”

“Fu Renshu won’t.”

“Let us worry about that,” Michael put a hand on his arm. “You know the whole story now, what we’re here to do. It’s about saving China from the Carbonari threat before the world goes to war. GSTF can’t do it.”

“But you can,” Rhee Jianjun nodded, “and I can help.”

“If you agree to our terms. So, what’s it going to be?”

All right then, Grant could almost feel him come to a decision.

“Cost of doing business.”

The team ate a meal of flatbread and fruit, and took in their surroundings. The main church cavern was a forum and

paramilitary staging area cut into the gorge cliff. Modern motifs mixed with hand-hewn neo-classical to harbor an ant mound of initiates who, like the early Christians in the lava cones of the Goreme Valley, had carved a life and a secret community out of ageless stone.

Fresh apricots dried in wicker baskets, *Chang* beer barrels and sacks of *Tsampa* – parched barley meal – lined the storeroom shelves. Rays of dusty dusk light illuminated the rock walls, bounced by mirrors and funneled by optic fibers from collectors above. Stalactite chandeliers looked down from the ceiling, a testament to time and the accumulation of ideas like mineral deposits.

“Participation in their gathering was the price of assistance,” Pope told Rhee Jianjun. “That guy,” he identified an ancient man sitting at the head table. He wore thick woolen robes that, although made in a rough weave, still suggested a rather rakish cut, “he’s their teacher, the Gray Cardinal. Kind of a philosopher-ecclesiast.”

“Charlatan huckster is more like it,” Aleister smirked as he sat down with them.

“You GSTF people just hate religion,” Pope said.

“Religion as a form of personal, private spirituality is fine,” Aleister countered, “but where it becomes the lynchpin for political hatred and exclusion it’s a cancer. There’s nothing it won’t infest.”

“Says a member of the enforcement arm of a junta of godless federales,” Pope muttered.

“About an isolationist conclavist branch of cultists who live with their anti-pope in a cave,” retorted Aleister.

“Keep your voice down,” Pope hissed. He smiled at the church members seated near them. They wore wooden sandals, ragged pants, and silver charms on long strings around their necks that identified them as church members to other initiates. The red sashes they used to bind their oversized saffron tunics at the waist hung with the charm boxes, tweezers, flint and tinder that served as their field kit.

“I’m not saying they’re bad people, they’re just desperate and shady,” Aleister chewed his flatbread methodically, “Makes me nervous.”

Soot-smearred almond-eyed children, huddled near the cave’s entrance, peered out at them from within homespun wool blankets. The children squealed with delight as Michael duplicated their soot markings on his own face with a bit of charcoal: arcs around the eyes bordered by vertical slashes, a caret above the nose.

“It might interest you to know,” Pope continued, “the Liberation church was once part of the Carbonari, or maybe it was the other way around. They split on the whole genetic modification – use of force issue.”

“That *can* be divisive,” Rhee Jianjun agreed. “Plenty of weaponry lying around, though. I assume they’re only for defense?”

“You see that?” Pope pointed out the main cavern opening. A system of dun-colored dwellings carved in the rock walls all around formed hand-hewn escarpments and grottos framed by black peaks.

A river of flat stones lined the way to a pointed altar that presided over the fingers of a clutching valley, and the long lonely track that led out of it. Prayer flags fluttered lethargically, strung high and teased by the torpid air into fleeting life.

“That shrine’s made from funeral ashes,” Pope continued. “Each of the stones in the path leading to it is carved with supplications for deliverance from the triple evils of ignorance, passion, and aggression.”

“Is that supposed to impress me?” Aleister asked.

“What more can you say about a people,” Pope said, “than that they’re willing to shoot you, but they’d rather not?”

“What are you trying to say?” said Aleister, shaking his head.

“The spiritual path’s a hard life in our society,” Pope swirled his *Chang*, “and we only have the one.”

“Well, now I have seen everything,” said Rhee Jianjun. “A god-fearing mercenary. You’re a complicated man, Pope.”

“Aren’t we all?” Pope replied.

After dinner the drums began, resonating in their sinuses.

The group took their cue, and fell in with the congregation who converged to the sonorous beat, taking seats on stone risers around a dais.

Devotees – simply robed in garnet wool – crowded the rough-hewn tiers above them, their arms crossed in comfortable contemplation, lids half closed in the dark and shifting torchlight. Candles and prayer flags covered an altar glistening with simple silver patterns and rough-cut turquoise inlay. Precious, crabbed alpine sticks burned in a ceremonial fire.

The drums stopped.

The Cardinal stood before them and said,

“What is justice?”

The congregation looked at them. The crew looked at each other.

“He expects us to answer,” Pope whispered with relish.

“Justice is adherence to the law,” Michael said, hesitantly.

“Which law?” asked the Cardinal.

“The laws we’ve enacted as a society,” said Rhee Jianjun, “and feel to be just.”

The Cardinal said, “Sounds like a paradox.”

“And believe to be fair, then,” said Allison, her big eyes raked the room.

“Belief is a used up word,” interrupted one of the congregation, clearly regurgitating doctrine. “Everybody believes and nobody believes.”

“We’ll come back to belief,” said the Cardinal. “So is the cause of the Carbonari just?”

“They killed the Governor’s family!” Talgat growled.

“Perhaps,” said the Cardinal. “But is that their cause?”

“Our cause is to stem the un-tempered march towards globalization,” said Rusty, quoting the Carbonari line. “To goad society into a less apathetic acceptance of its fate.”

“We’ll come back to fate,” said the Cardinal, as he turned to Rusty, “But is that *your* cause?”

“I guess we abandoned that cause for another,” Rusty admitted.

“Which?” asked the Cardinal.

Michael said, “To determine whether the China cell has abandoned *their* cause and act accordingly.”

Aleister leaned over to Pope, whispered, “You call this a church service?”

“Wait,” said Pope. “Watch. Listen.”

“Are the Carbonari’s actions always just,” the Cardinal asked Michael, “by your definition?”

“They killed the Governor’s family – my friends!” Talgat interjected.

The Cardinal turned slowly towards him.

“Very well. Now think carefully – have *your* actions in the pursuit of *your* cause always been just?”

“I suppose not,” said Talgat. “So?”

“So can there be justice?” the Cardinal folded his hands and smiled at them.

“Not perfect justice,” said Antoine in a deep, clear tone. “But something has to be done.”

“What?” asked the Cardinal.

“What we believe to be fair,” Cassandra, toyed with a tool from her belt pouch. Her pale skin was ghostlike in the candlelight, like a cavefish.

“That’s what I said,” Allison glared at her.

“But *why* do you believe?” asked the Cardinal.

“Someone has to,” said Aleister, “If not us, then whom?”

“You misunderstand me,” said the Cardinal. “People believe all kinds of intriguing things. Why do you believe what you do?”

No one answered. Torben spoke for them all when he said quietly,

“I’m not sure.”

“That’s why it’s a belief,” said Michael. “It’s the nature of faith to trust in the unseen.”

“And some would say unjustified faith is foolishness,” Pope smiled at Aleister.

“So let me understand,” said the Cardinal. “You pursued your quarry halfway around the globe for a cause you admit is unjust, based on a belief you cannot justify?”

“I suppose we did,” said Michael.

“Is that not – pardon the expression – a crusade?”

Talgat stood up.

“Where’re those trucks?” he shouted. “We don’t have time for this! We didn’t murder anybody and start an international incident. And if we do, it *will* be justice!”

The soldiers looked at each other, embarrassed, confused. The Congregation began to murmur, “Aporia... Aporia...”

The Cardinal motioned for silence.

“Forgive them,” he said. It was unclear whether he spoke to the team or the congregation. “It is our belief that wisdom lies in understanding the finite nature of our convictions. And that God is in the irresolvable.”

“Amen, brother,” said Pope.

“Go in peace,” said the Cardinal, “if possible.”

The multi-role armored vehicles – Tumblers – arrived early the next morning outside the church cavern. The Tumblers were dilapidated six-wheeled sand-colored affairs, their composite hulls cracked and patched. Rusty rail guns perched on their invertible payload bays. Each was able to carry 11 between crew and passengers. The team looked at each other dubiously, but loaded their gear.

Their drivers were Xu Bekri, a wizened older man with the look of a terra cotta warrior, and Nur Amat, a too-young woman, her

long, sun-streaked hair tied back in a leather strap. The two kissed their loved ones goodbye, slung outdated MX-3 railshot rifles over their thin shoulders, and climbed into the Tumbler's pilot pods.

Michael had risen early. He waited by a planter near the entrance to the cave, lost in thought. Grant – watching over the link – followed his gaze down from a wide dirt plaza above yellow parcels of ripening grain, herds of yak and green terraced fields of mustard plants beyond. The Tarem He snaked through the middle of the landscape, sun glinting off its watery back like shifting scales.

Sand striated by darker rock and glacial streams swept in branching patterns, like a geological aorta pumping the lifeblood of the zebra-patterned peaks to the fields and rivers below. Small, stunted trees and sun-dappled terraces formed from avalanches of small black stones.

As Michael's gaze drifted, it returned to a small bloom with a dark black center, like a miniature white sunflower.

“*Saussurea involucrata*,” Pope came up to him.

“Excuse me?” Michael started.

“What you're looking at. Common name's 'snow lotus.' It's a kind of flowering herb. Supposed to have some medicinal properties, but it's quite rare. Only grows wild in the high alpine.”

“So the question becomes,” said Michael, “Do you harvest it, or leave it alone? You may destroy a rare thing, but you may never find another.”

“Boss's daughter, right?” Pope said with a knowing smile. “We're all on borrowed time now, my friend, should've enjoyed it while you could've.”

Grant seethed, wished he could send some sort of feedback pulse, a twinge to tell Michael to forget it. He wasn't even sure if that was how it worked. He stayed in the background.

“Pack up, people,” Michael called to the group just then, “let's do this.”

The Gray Cardinal watched them board. *Like a kind of statue*, Grant thought, *just another carving*, a modern monk amid a mass of moss-covered masonry. Then, to everyone's surprise, he climbed

into the lead Tumbler alongside Nur Amat. His followers looked as if they wanted to rush forward and stop him, but no one dared.

Grant smiled, inspired by the Gray Cardinal's act of... what was it? Support? Supervision? Leadership? Insurance? He wasn't sure, but he almost missed it when Michael snagged a sample of the *saussurea*, and stowed it in his belt pouch.

The Taklamakan. It was the farthest place from any ocean on earth. The central Asian people called it Fury of God, Sea of Death, where disorienting echoes from the singing sands lured unwary travelers from their parties to die among the world's tallest mega-dunes, some over 1700 feet tall.

The team took shifts standing at the rail gun emplacements in the tops of the Liberation church's Tumblers, PD-ARCs trained on the horizon, on constant watch as they rode down the sand-blasted highway.

Michael, Pope, Stefen, Allison, Torben, Governor Talgat, and Rhee Jianjun rode in the first truck with Nur Amat and the Gray Cardinal. Erik joined Xu Bekri, Aleister, Rusty, Cassandra, Antoine, Dove and Colonel Nurkady in the other truck. *Probably on Talgat's orders, to keep an eye on the other team*, thought Grant.

Massive peaks towered in the distance – too huge and hazy to be real – so tall that even now, in midsummer, the snow line still crept halfway down their crenulated slopes.

“The aridity is largely a man-made phenomenon,” the Gray Cardinal told them. “This used to be a fertile land, the breadbasket of the Central Asian Steppe, but the massive effort to graze, farm and feed a skyrocketing percentage of the world's population has reaped a whirlwind of dust.

“To the Uyghurs,” Nur Amat said, “even the name Xinjiang is offensive. ‘New Frontier,’ that's what it means.”

“Naturally, that's what the Chinese would call it,” said the Gray Cardinal.

“The Han Chinese majority, you mean,” Nur’s temper flared at her master. “China’s xenophobic ruling class... when they ‘peacefully liberated’ the area.”

“But to the Uyghurs, separatists, and all true Turks,” Governor Talgat opined, “it is still East Turkistan and always has been.”

“Or Uyghurstan, depending on whom you ask,” said the Gray Cardinal.

“Even though it hasn’t been called any of those on official maps for centuries,” countered Rhee Jianjun.

“The old ways die hard here,” Talgat growled.

“Funny, I thought you were Kazakh,” smirked Allison.

“So you see,” the Gray Cardinal folded his hands in a gesture of peaceful contemplation, “The conflict between the Han and the ethnic Uyghurs is continual.”

“The problem is, the Han see all Uyghur as terrorists,” Nur Amat fumed. “It’s no wonder the Uyghur don’t mind hiding Carbonari.”

“Is it really so bad?” Rhee Jianjun wanted to know.

The Gray Cardinal said nothing.

“So,” Allison leaned over and whispered to Stefen, “Are the Carbonari our only lead? ‘Cause if we do have some doubt whether they were really involved, seems like it might be easier to follow up a different one.”

“We have to clear our primary suspect before we can move on to another,” Stefen told her.

“But time is a factor here, or this team wouldn’t have formed in the first place.” Allison brushed the dark curls out of her face, her soft lips buzzed in his ear. “So since the Carbonari are potentially being framed for the murder, and China blamed for allowing them to proliferate, the question we should be asking ourselves is, who’d want to destroy China?”

“I think you mean who *wouldn’t* want to destroy China,” Stefen whispered back. “It would be a shorter list.”

“But why?”

“Please. China owns half the world, and nobody’s happy about it. Especially the corporate states. China buys up all the debt, including that of trans-nationals like Cypro-corp, putting their state-run trans-nats at a certain advantage in the marketplace.”

“It’s nothing new,” Governor Talgat chimed in, overhearing them. “China’s cultivated its global financial positioning for years while racking up a string of human rights abuses that would make the old-world KGB blush. But don’t take my word for it. Ask Rhee Jianjun,” he gestured at the CIEDA agent.

“It’s true,” Rhee Jianjun said seriously. “Anti-Chinese sentiment is often rooted in socio-economics.”

The team tried not to laugh at his overly sincere response.

Then without warning, Nur Amat swerved off the main track approaching Kashgar and engaged the active camouflage. The team didn’t ask questions. They dismounted from the Tumbler, fanned out and took up covering positions in the tall grass to watch for the cause. The cold Chinese desert stretched brown, flat and useless into a haze of fine dust in every direction, punctuated only by the occasional line of desultory dunes. They didn’t have long to wait.

A long column of People’s Armed Police – the gendarmerie that was the closest thing to an army international treaty allowed China to muster – trundled into view. It came from the direction of the old Taklamakan oil fields – where security forces once held sway at the height of the oil crisis.

The PAP trucks thundered by in a cloud of dust and black exhaust. *Were they still using diesel?* Grant wondered. Fusion power had largely rendered the need for dead dinosaurs finally, blessedly, unnecessary. Then again, China was a bit of a lumbering beast itself.

“The armed police’s patrols never miss a chance to persecute our church,” Nur Amat told them, brushing her hair back from her face, “so we’ve learned to stay hidden.”

The column passed without incident. Either it hadn’t spotted the church’s Tumblers, Grant thought, or it couldn’t spare the time to investigate them.

“Great, just what we need,” said Michael. “What’re they doing here?”

“Must’ve got wind of something big going down,” Pope held the grass slightly aside to look, “that’s practically a whole battalion.”

“You see?” Governor Talgat sneered. “Autonomous region... what a joke. The Uyghurs can’t breathe without PAP interference. Even on a local level, within their own country, China is the enemy.”

“What are the chances,” Michael mused, “the PAP’s presence in the same area we tracked the Carbonari to is coincidental?”

“Not good,” said Rusty.

“Could be Uyghur unrest,” Rhee Jianjun offered, “We see that often.”

“Not often enough,” said Governor Talgat. “Chinese oppression of its ethnic minorities has gone on too long. If only the Turks would unite under one banner—”

“And let us guess,” Michael interrupted, “that banner should be Kazakh blue and gold?”

“Not necessarily,” Talgat grumbled.

Then there was the town – Kashgar – where desertification gave grudging way to scrubland. Once an oasis town, a waypoint on the famous Silk Road famous for selling everything, Kashgar used to be predominantly Uyghur. Now, however, the whole area was little more than ghettos of nomads relocated from the high horse pastures.

Xu Bekri and Nur Amat parked the Tumblers in the dark shadow of a side street, and the group entered Kashgar on foot through the old town. Here horse-carts and bicycles still served as the primary mode of transportation, despite the advances of the outside world.

The team wove through the packed, poplar-lined thoroughfares, hiding their faces behind their technocam hoods – their western ethnicity a dead giveaway in the bustling crowd primarily made up of Turkic Uyghurs. People here hardly lined the streets to greet the spectacle of western visitors as they once had done, but they would

be bound to notice such a large group of outsiders and someone would be bound to mention it to the PAP.

Nur Amat, Xu Bekri and the Gray Cardinal led them to a huge open-air market.

“What are we doing,” Michael put a hand on Nur Amat’s shoulder, “shopping for sandals?”

“Your Carbonari passed through here,” Amat said. “We don’t know where they are, but someone in this city does.”

It was a ramshackle bazaar, no different from any other in central Asia except for its size. It had been the largest and most famous in that region, and its reputation for having anything and everything for sale went back to the days of the Silk Road before the march of progress had leveled it in the name of more upscale – and failed – state-run businesses.

But acres and acres of shanty stalls still clung to solvency, and wound in Islamic geometry down dusty stone alleyways, no doubt owing to a successful sideline in black market goods. All was bustle, noise, argument, sweat, the glory of barter and bargain. For the Uyghur here in Kashgar, the Sunday marketplace was the high point of the week.

“My father used to have a stand here in the market,” Nur Amat turned to face them. “Well, really, over there,” with a glance at the Gray Cardinal, she gestured down a crabbed side street. The harsh midday sun passed through homespun textiles and cast colored shadows on the leather-faced denizens below. “They kicked the Uyghurs out to pave the way for Han-run establishments. Apparently, our businesses weren’t forward thinking enough. Apparently, they’d prefer we were unemployed. The government bulldozed most of the old city for ‘earthquake preparedness.’ They have a name for everything.” Her juvenile stature contrasted oddly with the hollowness in her voice. “Really, it’s a pogrom to cut the influence of the Uyghur population. Weed us out in favor of good, loyal Han – the real Chinese. That’s how they see it.”

“What would you be without our intervention?” Rhee Jianjun rankled, “you Uyghurs are the worst kind of dissidents. You don’t

really do anything on your own, just constantly complain and riot occasionally.”

“We were our own nation, once,” Nur Amat shot back. “But you’ve outlawed our flag, the uttering of the name Uyghurstan – our very identity.”

“Which is why the Uyghurs should join with the rest of the Turkic people,” Governor Talgat said with emphatic gesticulation. “Throw off these artificial divisions and embrace a country of their own.”

“It sounds like you’re espousing empire,” Allison said.

“No, I’m espousing unity. The Turkic peoples share a common culture. Why does the sweat of our labor go to support masters in Beijing, in Moscow, in Tehran and Eastern Europe? This isn’t China. It has no business being China. We don’t belong to these countries. We deserve our own.”

“Cool it, Talgat,” Michael said. “This isn’t a campaign stop.”

“Independence has long been our dream, too,” Nur Amat answered. “But when has a government respected a people’s wishes when there are resources to be had? Beijing still depends on the Taklamakan oil fields and Urumqi steel, and until they go dry, we will never see the eye of our Han masters turn from the desert. Even then, perhaps we will be a buffer zone to them. Who knows? We’ll never be free until we have nothing left to offer them.”

“You dare,” Rhee Jianjun gritted his teeth, “to talk treason in front of a CIDEA representative?”

“What make you think any of us will survive to see the consequences?” Cassandra muttered.

Michael shifted to place himself between Rhee Jianjun and Nur Amat.

“We’re all here to save China in the short term,” he said. “Let’s keep that in perspective.”

The church members went to investigate the huge open-air marketplace and meet with their informants while the team members stayed out of sight. The team waited in an abandoned

shop, watching a vignette of market traffic pass by at the far end of the mud-walled alley. The smell of the market flooded the close quarters: earth and musk and baking naan.

After close to an hour, Cassandra hopped up, wrapped herself in one of the dirty church tunics and approached Michael. Sunlight danced in the dust her boots kicked up.

“Permission to acquire goods and services, squad leader,” she raised an eyebrow at him.

“Forget it,” he said. “We’re supposed to be zero resonance. What you’re proposing is resonance.”

“As a group, yes,” she argued, “but alone I can pass for a backpacking student.”

“One who changed majors a few times,” Allison chuckled.

Cassandra narrowed her pale, ice queen eyes and held the silence a bit too long. Michael weighed his options.

“Go,” he waved her off. “One less to add to the stink in here. Just don’t get photographed.”

“And make Allison jealous?” She all but skipped off. “No way!”

Erik leaned out the door and shouted after her, “See if you can get me a stick of something spicy!”

“You understand about the Uyghurs, don’t you?” Talgat said to Michael. Michael frowned at him, wondering where this was going. “The genetic tattoo,” Talgat explained, and gestured to the star and crescent on Michael’s arm. “You were *Basmachi*. These people are our Turkish brothers. They’re not Chinese; they don’t deserve to be dragged down to the same grave.”

“You’re wrong,” Michael said. “China’s under threat because of the Carbonari cell our Turkish brothers allowed to grow here, don’t forget it.”

“But don’t you see? The GSTF, the entire National Union is a pawn of the trans-nationals. There is no protection to be had that way. The only power lies in alliance with a greater power to mirror its success.”

“I know what this is,” said Michael. “It’s just the old pan-Turkic ambition hitching itself to the rise of the transnational corporations, nothing more.”

“Then why did your father still carry the genetic modification to give you that seal?” Talgat jabbed at the symbol on his arm.

Michael sighed, “I wish I knew.”

“The *Basmachi* started in Byzantium,” Talgat said, “as one of the early *sub rosa* cults of Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt. They were a sect of the Greek Orthodox Church during the Byzantine Empire, and survived through the Ottoman Empire into modern Turkey. The star and crescent is theirs by right, before Islam and the Ottomans co-opted it.”

“I’ve heard all this before,” said Michael. “But the fact the *Basmachi* still use it is just another example of their stubborn refusal to accept the turning tides of history.”

“It’s sad to see so much cynicism in someone so young.”

“Cynicism is all your generation left us,” Michael sneered. “Yes, my father was *Basmachi* – once. He was stationed in Cyprus, but left before I was born. My mother never told him about me. I grew up in the Turkish quarter of Nicosia. I’ve seen the side of the Cypro-corporation state – your ally – that you refuse to see. When he found out he had a son, my father tried to get word to me through the Cypriot *Basmachi* – the Gray Wolves. My father only wanted to know me, to give me a community in his absence.”

“Your father was naïve,” Talgat laughed.

“He was a good man. He didn’t understand how people could be. I started running with the Gray Wolves. They told me it was my duty to infiltrate the Cypro-corp militia – the Kantara Guard, no less, and help them overthrow Cypro-corp rule.”

“But you learned there was no infiltrating the Kantara,” said Talgat, “only assimilation.”
Michael nodded.

“The subliminal conditioning revealed my connection to the *Basmachi*. I barely escaped with my life.”

“Then what?”

“I joined the GSTF as my father wanted. It got me off the island.”

“Unfortunate. After all that, you decide to be a federalist stooge.”

“My father fought to protect our people in the GSTF.”

“Surely you learned something in your time with the Gray Wolves.”

“They taught me to use this,” Michael tapped the hilt of his father’s yatagan sword.

Xu Bekri, Nur Amat and the Gray Cardinal arrived back at the shop where the group hid in less than an hour, and wedged themselves into the small space amid a tense silence that made the team members exchange uncomfortable looks.

“What’d you learn?” Michael’s voice seemed to ring in a well.

“It’s not easy to convince the locals to help,” Xu Bekri told them.

“Did you explain,” Stefen asked, “the threat the international furor over the Kazakh governor’s murder poses to China?”

“We tried,” Xu Bekri said with a significant look at Rhee Jianjun, “but they only said, ‘China? What is China? We are Uyghur. We make our own way here.’”

“I see.”

“Nevertheless,” Xu Bekri smiled. He had their attention now, and he seemed to relish it. “Informants say people from Shumai Steel mill’s emergency response unit were here buying black market medical supplies. This, in itself, is not unusual.”

“Painkillers and such for fun and profit,” Pope explained. The others nodded understanding.

“Indeed,” said Xu Bekri. “But they bought this,” he tossed a vial of gel to Stefen, “Loads of it.”

“Biosynthetic enzyme compounds,” Stefen read the vial. “For use in treating the full-thickness burn wounds inflicted by plasma weapons,” he nodded.

“Couldn’t some mill accidents produce similar injuries?” Allison asked, frowning.

“They could,” Michael saw where his medics were going, “but why would they need to buy expensive black market supplies the mill already stocks through proper channels?”

“To use them off the record,” Aleister agreed.

“It’s not the first we’ve heard of Carbonari involvement at that mill.” Nur Amat said.

“We’ll have to check out the mill,” said Stefen, “starting with the medical unit, and then... what?”

“What indeed,” Michael scratched his chin.

“But that’s not the problem,” Xu Bekri regained their attention. “It’s your woman, Cassandra. We saw the People’s Armed Police take her into custody on our way back here.” He looked at all of them meaningfully.

“Ah, damn it,” Michael moaned.

“It’s always something, isn’t it?” said Aleister. “I suppose we’ll just have to break her out again.”

“And no time to lose,” Nur Amat said.

“Is she in danger?”

Amat shrugged.

“The PAP garrison is far from home, here to put the city under martial law. She’s a beautiful woman. You should get her out before something ugly happens.”

“We’ll split into teams,” Michael decided. “Team Alpha – Dove, Pope, Stefen, Torben and Erik – you’re with me. We’ll search the mill since we still have our Weapons and Operations specialists. Aleister, you’ll take Team Bravo – Rusty, Allison and Antoine – to recover Cassandra. Xu Bekri will drive.”

“I’ll go with them,” Rhee Jianjun volunteered.

“This isn’t your fight,” Michael shook his head. “You’re just after the Carbonari.”

“True, but I can’t help you hack the mill’s node,” Rhee Jianjun shrugged. “So it seems like Aleister could use another gun. Where should we rendezvous once we have her?”

“Donghu Park should be deserted at that hour,” Nur Amat said.

“Fine,” Michael frowned. “Agreed. And if they’ve hurt her...”

Aleister checked the breech of Cassandra’s splinter gun. “I’ll leave a resonance.”

CHAPTER 10

From their satellite reconnaissance, Shumai Iron and Steel's Xinjiang project looked like a grease-caked circuit board the size of a small city, throwing off steam and sparks and generally looking a sickly kind of industrious.

Team Alpha came overland in the church Tumbler, threaded the massive piles of coal and iron ore that surrounded the mill like a demilitarized zone. Night had fallen, but the mill was no less active. They scanned the approach with their visors.

Beyond the mill's security gate, the towering blast furnaces crouched amid their latticework of tresses and roared like dragons, shooting sparks and smoke into the air. They cast a baleful red glare on the dark haze overhead and the vast scaffolding of conveyor systems, tanks, pumps and motors – mandibles that moved fossil food into the mouth of the insatiable behemoth. The furnaces ran all day, all night, continuously, for decades because the only thing that required more energy than running a steel mill was starting one up.

“China still uses a shit-ton of steel,” Pope observed, bouncing with the truck along the rough road, “despite advances in nanotechnology and molecular construction.”

“Is the shit-ton a unit of general measurement?” Allison quipped.

“It is,” Pope smiled, “it means more than 500 million of the usual sort annually.”

China had missed the last revolution, he told them, and was still racing to make up the gap however it could, no matter the cost. The chaos and corruption it brought by headlong growth – allowed to rage unchecked by a weak, decentralized government – had impacted the environment and less industrious individuals heavily. Everyone felt it. Their economy was like a bicyclist careening down one of the country’s famous steep-peaked hills: feet splayed, pedals spinning free, nothing to do but hold on and pray. But not to any god. That would be in poor taste.

“The mill’s state-subsidized,” Nur Amat was able to add, “But run by a Chinese trans-nat. Han majority, of course. The steel industry’s historically cavalier towards the government: they take its money, then turn around and show them just how autonomous they can be. This mill’s no different.”

“Carbonari sympathizers inside?” Rhee Jianjun asked.

“No doubt,” she answered. “There’s a contingent of just about everything in a mill: Uyghur and Han Chinese, communists, separatists, the religious, union organizers. Tensions on every side strained to the breaking point over years of actual and perceived indignities.”

The skip hoist dumped limestone and coke into the top of the furnace. Men in heavy asbestos suits climbed across the steel ladders and catwalks. Sparks flew off hot iron.

“The mill’s highly mechanized,” Nur Amat told them. “Banks of nodes are required to run the place. You can’t unlink those.”

“We just need one to plug into and look for...” Dove’s voice tailed off. “What?”

“We’ll start in reduction control,” Nur Amat said. “That’s unlikely to be high traffic this time of night. We just need a way inside.”

“That’s my department,” Dove said. “Park here.”

The Tumbler stopped in the shadow of a huge heap of iron ore and the team deployed.

“What’s your plan?” Michael asked Dove.

“Artificial scotoma,” Dove said.

“Excuse me?” Governor Talgat growled. He and Aizahn had insisted on accompanying them to the mill.

“The blind spot everyone has, the place where your optic nerve passes through your retina, and the brain fills in the gap,” Dove explained. “If I concentrate, and push on the guard’s links,” he tapped few commands into the deck interface, “I can widen it to include us.” With a sideways glance at Stefen he added, “This is what it means to be a neurohacker, incidentally – to judiciously exploit technology to save lives.”

He was as good as his word. Under the umbrella of Dove’s perception filter, Michael’s fire team moved like ghosts through the industrial moonscape. He, Dove, Erik, Pope, Torben, Stefen, Nur Amat, Governor Talgat and Aizahn Nurkady were able to pass through the security gate and into the mill without the guards seeming to be able to focus on them. The Gray Cardinal opted to stay with the Tumbler.

The furnaces roared, drowning out the noise of the railcars and overhead cranes trundling along their predetermined paths, oblivious to the shadows darting between them, just a few more waves of heat dancing in the thick air.

Grant checked in on the transport.

Sarina crouched by the hatch to her forward gun with Geil and Tanith Dariel, the rear gunner. *Flywheel* sat parked in a clearing of Chinese forest, in the foothills near Kashgar, emitting a dull hum as its electrochromic panels provided active camouflage.

“Why can’t we just blaze in, be decisive?” Sarina wanted to know.

“Circumstances require a little more finesse,” Geil explained.

“I’ve got finesse,” Sarina said. She dabbed perspiration and fanned herself with a towel as the heat exchangers worked time and a half.

The freighter had shadowed the group's position, moved to keep within range of providing air support, waiting until the path ahead was clear.

"Carbonari positions are entrenched against attacks from the air," said Geil, "even if we knew where it was."

"I've a feeling we could quarter the desert for half a year and not find it," Tanith agreed.

"Why," Geil smirked, "you concerned about the outcome of this particular job?"

"Our employer's down there, that's all," said Sarina. "I want to get paid."

"Our employer works for a legitimate government," Tanith countered, "a system's in place."

"Of which we're not a part."

"Still," said Tanith. "You wouldn't be concerned about a certain GSTF soldier with bright blue eyes, would you?"

"They're blue? I mean, no! There's no other reason, okay?" Sarina's mirrored eyes flashed. "Go clean your gun."

Tanith got up, "You clean yours."

"Okay!" Sarina shouted.

"Okay!" Tanith tossed her long black hair, and left. Geil looked from one to the other.

"Low profile," he buried his face in his hands.

Grant smiled in voyeuristic enjoyment.

The foundry was a towering, three story hangar-like structure built over tunnels. Massive ratchet wrenches turned nuts large as a man's waist, powered by pressure from air hoses.

Overhead gondolas hauled tons of equipment, ladles of molten steel and scrap metal from one end of the building to another. Gears shredded an insistent staccato. Shears snapped pieces of finished sheet metal. Slag chips flew like bullet casings. It even *smelled* hot.

Beams of dusty moonlight leaked through the cracked windows of the reduction control center. The fire team overlooked the foundry floor on one side, and the mill yards on the other. Sure enough, there were banks of networked cells just waiting for Dove to plug in and plumb their secrets, any evidence to link the mill to supporting or harboring the Carbonari.

Michael and the rest formed a perimeter and covered the various entrances from and exits to the vast mill complex.

“God, it’s suffocating,” Michael said, staring out over the living metal junk pile of scattered pits and parts, the discarded remnants of trial-by-error and arcane science. Plenty of places to hide. Too many.

“The areas around a mill are practically unlivable because of the smoke, metal dust and airborne pollution,” Nur Amat agreed, “even though modern methods have allowed them to reduce the discharge of air and water pollution by ninety percent. Imagine what it must have been like in the old days.”

“How’d they manage it?”

“Fast and dirty, like always. See that structure?” She pointed to an enclosure above the roof of the furnace building, “They call it the bag house. It uses canvas bags to trap the hot ash and gasses released inside.”

“Then what?”

“Store it underground, or release it into the air somewhere else when no one’s looking. The problem is people who don’t understand the process set all the regulation benchmarks. So not only do they not know what they’re asking for, they don’t know how to stop the steel industry from circumventing their laws.”

“So what do they do with the area around a mill if you can’t live there?”

“That’s where they build mill dormitories to house the workers they ship in from the country,” Nur Amat raised an eyebrow.

Stefen leaned against the console beside Dove and watched him sift through records of steel shipments.

“Find anything?” Stefen asked, his long fingers splayed to support his scarecrow frame.

“Zilch,” said Dove. “If Shumai’s supplying the Carbonari, they don’t do delivery.”

“Pity,” sighed Stefen. He sat in silence for a few moments, then said,

“So, you don’t want to be here. But Grant snaps his fingers and...”

“We have a complex relationship.”

“Enlighten me.”

“I’m trying to concentrate,” Dove focused pointedly on the interface before him.

“But I’m not,” Stefen fiddled idly with his med-glove, cycling through its variable menus. “And I’m bored. Besides, I thought you were a neurohacker; a born reflexive supertasker. Only one of you in forty, am I right? Impress me.”

Dove gave an ironic chuckle.

“My family was in the American Resistance Movement. Grant told you that. The whole tribe was. It’s a decision the elders make. Not much choice for my father, or for me.” Dove finished scanning a subset of files, brushed them away with a gesture. “My entire family was killed in a GSTF raid when I was seventeen. Grant saved me; let me stay with him until things cooled down, and he helped me go back. It’s because of him I became a neurohacker.”

“You went back to the movement?” Stefen raised his eyebrows.

“Had to, or be ostracized from the tribe, the only family I have left.”

“Grant has a habit of befriending his enemies,” Stefen nodded understanding. “But you dropped everything to come on this mission.”

“Well, I never thanked him properly.”

“Interesting,” Stefen lowered his voice confidentially. “You know what I think?”

“If I wanted to.”

“I think you became a neurohacker,” Stefen smiled, “because of a compulsive need for information. And this mission’s as far below the skin – if you’ll pardon the expression – as anyone’s likely to get.”

“Maybe,” Dove ignored the jab. “Why are you so concerned about what Grant has on me?”

“Because I’m beginning to see the signs of information addiction in Grant, just like I see them in you. And it’s bad for all of us.” Stefen let that sink in a moment before he added, “You find anything yet?”

“Nothing,” said Dove. “Wait a second... damn it!” Grant followed Dove’s gaze to a readout on the security sensors that made his blood go hypothermic. “I think the People’s Armed Police tapped my dive,” Dove gestured out the window. “They’re on their way.”

“What?” Michael started.

A shrill air whistle blew five times: danger, in mill code.

The team ran to the windows and looked out. PAP soldiers poured from trucks that had circled the mill, and set up barricades and gun emplacements with frightening speed.

“How can they have?” Michael rounded on Dove. “I thought you were a ghost!”

“I should have been,” Dove shook his head. “Maybe a passive tripwire, something I missed. They must’ve had an eye on this place, just waiting for someone to uplink during off hours from within the firewall before they sprung their trap.”

“We should go,” said Stefen.

“It’s too late,” Michael threw his back to the window. “They have us surrounded. Dove can you use your perception filter again, sneak us through?”

“Too hard,” said Dove. “I’d never be able to fool so many.”

Grant’s stomach sunk at Dove’s admission. *It can’t be over so soon*, he thought, but also, somewhere in the proud uncharitable corner of his subconscious, he felt just the slightest bit reassured about his

failure at the jump-port. *You see*, that bit of stubbornness told him, *Dove doesn't know everything. It can happen to a Neurobacker, too.*

"We'd better lay down some suppressing fire," Erik hissed into the void of Michael's stunned silence. "Stand 'em off a bit or they'll overrun us."

"Guess we should," Michael grudgingly agreed. "Not much chance of getting out of here once we do, though."

"That chance is already gone," Erik replied.

"Roger that," Michael said. "Torben, Dove and I will let it rip. When we do, take the others and move to a flanking position. Pope, see if you can blow something up along the way."

"My pleasure," Pope replied.

"Much as it pains me to say it," Aizahn broke in, "Dove's too valuable to the mission. I'll volunteer to stay and cover." She and Talgat shared a long look. He took her hand, but he didn't contradict her.

"Fine," Michael said. "Dove, see if you can hack us a way out of here. Any secret tunnels we should know about?"

"I already did that recon on the way in, there's nothing."

"You missed the PAP, didn't you?" Michael all but shouted, the strain in his voice apparent. The two glared at each other. "Look again; we'll buy you the time."

"You got it," Dove said between clenched teeth.

"Well boys and girls, it's been nice knowing all of you," Michael waved them off. "See you in Kansas."

"Sorry?" Nur Amat looked confused.

"Never mind," said Michael. "Just give 'em hell."

The team leveled their weapons and prepared to shoot out the tempered glass of the control room windows. Before anyone could pull their triggers, the loud report of a vehicle-mounted railgun sent the whole group diving for cover. Small arms fire followed the artillery, but it was quiet, farther away. The team looked at each other.

“They’re not hitting us, who are they shooting at?” asked Stefen.

“Who’s shooting back?” Michael countered. “Those first shots came from the mill.”

The group peered over the windowsill. It was now a full-fledged firefight.

“Somebody’s exchanging ideas with the PAP from the infrastructure around the blast furnace,” Pope said.

Dove ran a thermal scan. Something barely discernable wavered behind the flickering muzzle flashes. “I can’t see anything,” he said, “just shadows.”

“Area denial systems,” Michael wanted to know, “or flex armor?”

“Neither,” said Dove. “There’s definitely something, but flex armor’s not strong enough to protect against that much heat...” a thought occurred to him.

“Asbestos suits,” Nur Amat confirmed it.

“The mill workers are shooting at the PAP?” It was Michael’s turn to be confused. Nur Amat cocked her head to the side.

“Maybe workers, maybe...”

“Carbonari,” Talgat’s grin showed far too many teeth.

“What?” Michael shook his head.

“Of course,” said Dove. “They hid in with the mill wrights wearing those protective suits. It’s hotter than two deserts in there; no one could look for them without help from their steel worker allies, who wouldn’t have given it.”

Grant’s mind worked at escape velocity. *The PAP must be after the Carbonari, must have known they were there. Their arrival wasn’t because of a mistake Dove made,* Grant realized. *It was just bad timing.*

“They must have stopped here to get medical treatment for their wounded before taking them into the mountains,” Stefen realized, “and they’re still here.”

“Hiding next to the blast furnace,” Erik raised an eyebrow, “bet that was a picnic.”

“Well, we’d better get ourselves a helping,” Governor Talgat readied himself to give covering fire. “Who’s with me?”

“Hold your position,” Michael shouted to him. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Taking a good opportunity to inflict some casualties on the People’s Armed Police,” Talgat said with relish. “If we can help to flank them, both we and the Carbonari can escape.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Michael fumed. “Don’t you see what’s going on here? The PAP has the Carbonari pinned. As pinned as we thought they had us. If the PAP catches the Carbonari, they’ll interrogate them and discover the truth behind the murder. I don’t know if the Carbonari are responsible, but our primary mission objective is to prevent China from becoming an international scapegoat. With the Carbonari in custody, they have that chance. All we have to do is sit tight and avoid any sweeps. This is our ticket home.”

“We both know it goes deeper than that,” Talgat hissed. “If we do nothing, we’ll lose any chance of finding the Carbonari base and eradicating the China cell completely. If the PAP captures them now, we all know they’ll put the whole blame for the incident on this one squad – who we know just came to recruit us – parade them in front of a court and say the state has exacted justice. Then it will return to the status quo in the Xinjiang region.

“China will continue its xenophobic agenda and its criminal neglect, and we’ll never be able to expose those truly responsible for the death of my Governor and his family: the whole Chinese Carbonari cell. We have to aid the Carbonari’s escape now to have any hope of confronting the rest of them later. I don’t know about you,” he surveyed the group, his gaze intense, “but I don’t have a home to return to unless I bring someone’s head with me. We can’t trust the Chinese to accomplish anything here.”

Grant couldn’t figure out what Governor Talgat was after. If the Governor wanted vengeance on the Carbonari, surely this was it. Was he truly not mollified until he wiped all of them out for good? Was he hoping for a way to satisfy his bloodlust and discredit

China in the process – to rob them of the opportunity to police their own dissidents, and save face before the world? To call for sanctions?

Grant willed them not to be taken in, to let the PAP take this group of Carbonari. Their capture would buy his unit the time to find the real culprits, but he knew it was hopeless. Talgat was too convincing.

“Much as it pains me to say it, I think he’s right,” Nur Amat glanced at Michael. “Once they’re caught, the PAP will surely search the building. We should aid in their escape. It will help cover ours.”

“Dammit,” Michael said, “so do I. Fine.” He took a deep breath, looked at his men. Dove, Stefen and Torben were ready to follow his command, Aizahn her commander’s and Pope and Erik those of their employer. “Fine. Torben, let’s light ‘em up.”

Torben stood, leveled his splinter gun at the heavy tempered windows, and dusted them.

The team took up positions and opened fire on the PAP. They chose their targets carefully, taking advantage of the high ground and the momentary confusion as the PAP realized they now had to split their attention between two flanking fronts that boxed them in. The big PAP guns swiveled to meet the new threat.

Michael fired diligently, but Grant – piggybacking his point of view down the rifle’s scope – realized even with the superior elevated position, their combined firepower wasn’t enough to break the PAP lines. Michael realized it, too.

The big guns finally broke through. The furnace towers shattered and collapsed on the backs of the Carbonari, burying them in a tidal wave of white-hot 3000-degree molten iron. They made no sound, but their black faceplates shook violently as their fireproof suits caught fire. The burning metal incinerated them almost instantly.

“What do you want to do?” Dove asked Michael.

“What about air support?” Torben asked, seeing his hollow stare.

“Those big guns would just shoot *Flynwheel* down,” said Michael, “and either way it’d blow our cover. Right now, the PAP doesn’t know we aren’t more Carbonari. We have to get ourselves out of this – if we can.”

The artillery had them dialed in now and chewed away at their cover, keeping them immobilized as more trucks arrived, spewing soldiers like cluster bombs. A shell punctured the outer wall, and blood showered them.

“Jesus!” Michael screamed. Nur Amat’s legs and torso sprawled next to him. Her tattered shirt and the olive skin of her rib cage ended in a bloody mess. Everything that should have been above it was missing. Stefen could see there was no point in inspecting her, medically.

“This was a mistake, Talgat,” Michael shouted over the deafening explosions as debris from the pulverized structure gathered in their hair like caustic confetti. “There’s no way we’re getting out of this. You’ve killed us!”

“Not yet,” Talgat shouted back, “just wait!”

He gave them a knowing grin as the guns faltered, then ceased altogether.

The team squinted through the mortar-holes and saw fire in the town beyond hundreds – no, thousands – of figures. A wave of civilians – some from the mill dormitories, some from the town – advanced on the armed police from behind. The Uyghurs were rioting, looting, tearing through the district on their way to clash with the troops. The mob threw rocks and Molotov cocktails, and brandishing their makeshift weapons, closed with the People’s Armed Police in a nightmare of writhing bodies.

The team stared in horror at the human carnage as the crowd hurled itself against the might of the mechanized police force.

“My god,” Michael stared. “What’s going on?”

“What the Carbonari always failed to inspire, I accomplished easily,” Talgat leered. The group stared at him as he continued, “You didn’t think I came to China with only a group of mercenaries as bodyguards, did you? My special forces were waiting in the city to incite an Uyghur riot on my signal. All we needed was for the PAP

to do something stupid – like attack local industry – for a flash point.”

So that was what Kazakh irregulars were doing in China, Grant thought.

“Clearly Turkic brotherhood is a greater unifier in this region than the mere resistance of global citizenship,” Talgat smirked at Michael and Torben. “Greater than you’d like to believe, perhaps *because* it’s achievable.” He looked at Nur Amat’s remains. “The names of these martyrs will blaze long after China is driven from Turkic territory.”

“Not if they’re all killed,” Michael seethed with anger. “What good is a country if no one’s left to live in it?”

“Should we keep firing, sir?” Erik now deferred to Governor Talgat. “I’m afraid we’ll hit the civilians.”

“Take out their big emplacements,” Michael tried to regain control of the situation. “Don’t let ‘em get a bead on the crowd. We have to keep those guns trained on the mill until we bolt or they’ll shred us before we get half a klik. Then we’ll go see if there are any Carbonari left to have a word with.”

It was true; the gunners were even now cranking their weapons towards what they perceived as a bigger threat – the rioting Uyghurs. Perhaps the thought crossed their minds – even as the team turned their heads into pink mist – how wrong they were. The soldiers’ bodies slumped lifeless on their controls.

“Gunnery are down,” Pope said.

The rioters overwhelmed the police, and the constant red heat of the mill’s furnace and the river of molten metal pouring from it warred with the flickering haze of fire in the distance as the district burned.

“I just thought of something,” said Michael. “Don’t the Carbonari have a truck?”

As if summoned, the Carbonari survivors’ MPV burst from a hidden recess within one of a hundred piles of iron ore and made for the perimeter while the millwrights left alive on the gantry drew the PAP’s fire. Soldiers and civilians dove out of the way as the

MPV smashed through the police barricades, rail guns blazing, and tore off into the smoke and rubble of the burning town.

“They’re making a break for it,” Talgat cried. “Dammit, they’re getting away!”

“I thought that’s what you wanted,” said Michael.

“They’re getting away from *us*,” Talgat replied.

“Let’s clear out!” Dove shouted.

“Okay, move,” commanded Michael.

The team picked up and ran out of reduction control, keeping the mill structures between themselves and the PAP. Once on the shop floor, they ran into the sharpshooters.

A blazing plasma exchange ripped up the already superheated air. Stray shots sliced into the spinning machines, unspooled miles of wire rope. A glowing steel rod jumped its track and ran right through one of the attacking sharpshooters. He screamed, but there was no blood – the metal was hot enough to cauterize the entry point.

The team fought its way free of the mill as production carried on. Automatic crane hooks heaved ladles brimming with molten steel across the wide expanse and poured them, one by one, into a continuous caster. Sirens screamed as the team flashed each other hand signals that all was clear and moved out through the tunnels and into the grounds outside the main foundry.

“Take it slow, ease up there,” Michael warned. “We don’t want to run into any mill personnel, or expose our retreat.”

The group split in two; each took up positions to cover the other’s rearward advance.

“Any guards at the gate?” Michael called out.

“Their perceptions are long past filtering,” said Dove.

The team passed through the gate, stepped over the bodies of the guards, regained the church’s Tumbler – miraculously unmolested – and piled in.

The Gray Cardinal looked up from what might have been meditation, took stock of the group entering the truck. Pope leaped into the pilot's pod.

“Go, Go!” Talgat shouted.

“Give me a second,” Pope said as he familiarized himself with the controls.

“Where is my daughter, Nur Amat?” the Gray Cardinal asked. The team didn't answer at first, and then everyone could tell by the look on his face he understood.

Pope slammed the truck into reverse and it leaped backwards, tossing its occupants. The wheels ran up on the iron ore heaps, threatening to topple them until they were clear. Pope cut the wheels and gunned the motor. The Tumbler did a dusty one-eighty that slammed them in their seats. Pope buried the throttle and the truck reached full speed before it disappeared into the desert night, the hellish glow of the Uyghur riots a thin orange line on the horizon.

CHAPTER 11

Pope's Tumbler made the rendezvous in Donghu Park and barely slowed down to pick up the second truck containing fire-team Bravo, although Governor Talgat complained it cost them time. The place was as dark as Nur Amat had promised, and the second team sat in their Tumbler weary but exultant. Cassandra was in their midst, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed.

Michael and Allison moved to the second truck to treat and debrief team Bravo, and the two Tumblers tore off again.

"It went okay?" Michael asked Aleister.

"No biggie," Aleister shrugged. "Few hundred armed maniacs, couplea flesh wounds, but she still has all her fingers and toes."

Cassandra sat with her head in her lap, rocking to the rough road's uneven rhythm.

"What the hell did they pick you up for?" Michael asked her.

"Do a large group of angry Chinese men need a reason to make off with a girl?" Cassandra snapped.

"They do if it's you," said Allison, patching a plasma graze on Cassandra's pale hip. Cassandra glared at her.

"I was trying to score some Kief, okay? But it's harder to spot a narc in China," she chuckled ironically. "They look the same as everyone else." The group muttered intense exasperation.

Cassandra shook her hair out of her face, “What? I would’ve shared.”

“Settle down, people!” Michael barked. “It isn’t funny.” He turned to Cassandra, said, “If you weren’t already legally dead, you’d be demoted. I don’t know how Grant plans to handle discipline, but I got half a mind to kill you myself. He’s as unlikely to be forgiving.”

“That’s *if* we tell him,” Cassandra purred.

“Big if,” said Michael.

“We can wait and see if we survive the suicide mission, surely,” Pope chimed in on the visor.

“We’re a lot likelier to survive it sober,” Michael said.

“That hasn’t been my experience,” said Cassandra.

“Anecdotal evidence, my dear,” Stefen called.

“Shut up, doc,” Cassandra shot back.

“Shut up, all of you,” seethed Michael. “Let’s just get on with it.”

“Shame,” Antoine shoved Cassandra, feigning sarcasm. “I coulda used those explosives for something important. Instead I used ‘em to spring your junkie ass.”

“What a waste,” Michael agreed. He tried to contain it, but burst out laughing. The others looked relieved. He caught Cassandra’s eye and winked.

“True, they might’ve come in handy down the road,” Aleister chimed in, “but there’s no sense crying over spent C-4.”

“Unless it blows your arm off,” Rhee Jianjun said.

“Yeah, then it’s okay,” said Antoine.

The rest of them nodded and murmured their assent.

The trucks turned south onto the winding Karakoram Highway – the KKH – a steep and treacherous ancient trade route that wound five hundred miles through the mountains into a borderland

that was not strictly China or anywhere else, whose ethnic makeup population charts described as “other.”

Governments liked to quarrel over where the line of control fell in places like this, but it was remote enough armies didn’t bother fighting for it. Grant, observing over the Link, wondered why anyone cared, unless it was a pretense – a football politicians kicked around to maintain the appearance of leadership. Grant had little patience for such things.

“Are you able to follow that Carbonari MPV?” Michael asked Xu Bekri. Bekri shook his head.

“Even if our Tumblers were a match for their trucks, we’ve lost too much ground. We’ll just have to try and track them.”

The team wrapped their faces against the dust and maintained their watches in the rail-gun emplacements. Pope and Xu Bekri stayed, where stark ravines along the Gez river valley permitted, off the main road. The group hid from more PAP patrols, taking side paths and cutting through vast stretches of wasteland.

The vehicles heaved on the uneven gravel, and the team struggled to cover of the valley’s choke points with their weapons. Glaciers slowly carved shear and sooty staircases out of the mountain – icy fillings in the cracked and decaying teeth of the Karakoram.

It was desolate, devoid of life. Not even the occasional nomad now graced a landscape as monochromatic and uninhabited as an alien planet; *a perfect outpost* – Grant thought – *for those against the world.*

Pope kept a wary eye on the loose rock that threatened to break free and tumble down on them around every corner, but even he didn’t have enough time to react when a boulder half the size of their lead vehicle cracked off the cliff-face above.

“Rock!” Michael shouted.

“Go!” Grant screamed in horror. Pope gunned it, but that was exactly the wrong thing to do, because Xu Bekri in the truck ahead of them hit the brakes. Pope smashed into him, pushing their Tumbler forward into the path of the boulder. With a deafening

crash, the boulder ploughed Bekri's truck over the side of the ravine in a shower of sharp rocks.

Grant felt them lurch, roll and crash against the sides of the truck like clothes in a dryer.

The downed truck slid on its top nearly 200 feet down the precipitous slope of the valley. It didn't crunch to a stop until it reached the bed below, where rivulets of melting glacier water ran through the mud.

As the landslide slowed, Torben and Dove jumped out the rear hatch of Pope's truck, took cover behind it and scanned the cliff tops.

"Ambush?" hissed Torben.

"Can't tell," Dove used every filter on his visor's interface, but there were no signs of one. It was no more than one of the frequent landslides that impeded the remote KKH.

The soldiers below crawled gingerly – dazed but miraculously unhurt – from the battered and inverted truck, and took up cover positions.

"Why didn't you stop?" Michael called to the pilot's compartment on his visor.

"Thought I heard something," Pope tracked the cliff face.

"What now?" Michael asked Xu Bekri, surveying the upended vehicle.

"In years past you might have had to push," Bekri told them. He mimed the effort required to right the vehicle. "If you could get it going again. But these trucks are smart."

The team raised their eyebrows and smiled politely. Smart compared to what?

The dilapidated trucks were more nimble than they appeared. The team watched in astonishment, as with Bekri's help, they were able to winch the wheels down on an ingenious inverting hydraulic suspension. The Tumbler didn't appear to care which way was down, as long as you gave it a minute to figure it out.

Once the truck lifted itself upright, the team used their visors to link to the other vehicle still topside.

“What do you want to do?” Talgat consulted with Michael over the visor.

“Bekri says we have to backtrack down the valley floor,” Michael shaded his eyes with his hand, “to where the road begins its climb into the mountains.”

“That’s several miles back.”

“I know. Hold position there until we catch you up.”

“You sure we shouldn’t go on ahead? We’re losing ground as it is.”

“No,” Michael waved to emphasize the point. “You don’t know the way, and when we do meet the Carbonari, there’ll be no sense in half-measures. We’ll have to go all in.”

“Well, at least we’re lucky it didn’t happen somewhere the gorge is steeper, or the river deeper.”

“Yeah,” Michael smirked as he climbed back into the Tumbler, “this is luck.”

The elevation and the grade steadily increased. Following the Carbonari’s trail, the reunited team turned off the main road for an even less traveled mountain track. The steep grade and crabbed switchbacks gave the Church’s trucks even more trouble.

“Jesus, what a trip,” Michael said. “They have to do this every time they re-supply? No wonder they’re desperate.”

“Can’t be made except in summer,” Xu Bekri nodded agreement.

“What’s the problem?” Torben asked as the truck ground to a halt again, spinning their giant tires on the loose rock that littered the path. More than once, the passengers had to pile out so Bekri and Pope could negotiate a particularly narrow portion without unbalancing.

Finally, the caravan reached a point where the terrain became too steep for the Liberation Church’s outdated rovers. The Tumblers rolled to a stop at the end of the track where a wall of rock continued at a very improbable angle. It was still maybe a road.

What was definitely an older footpath wound up into the wasteland beyond.

“From here you walk,” Bekri told them.

The soldiers hopped out and shouldered their gear.

Michael extended a hand to the Gray Cardinal.

“Thanks for your help,” But the Cardinal turned and looked at the mountains.

“You haven’t really seen the dragon,” said the Cardinal, “only his tail. Don’t be concerned whether you live or die, my son. The dragon already knows your fate. Ask him.”

Michael’s gaze drifted up to the ice-sharp slopes of the world’s most remote and rugged mountain range, unsure how to take the suggestion.

“Ask him why they don’t have better trucks,” said Rusty, so only Michael, Pope – and Grant – could hear. “You can bet the China cell didn’t walk this part.”

“The congregation has to live underground,” Pope said. “They’re hated, but not as much as the Carbonari. No one else has to go this far into the wilderness to survive.”

“Besides,” Michael added, “that truck just saved your life. Try to show a little gratitude.”

“Hey,” said Rusty, “I’m betting on being dead, remember?”

The Gray Cardinal hopped into the other Tumbler to drive it home. The team waved in parting to he and Bekri, then continued on foot up the faint track into the mountains.

Grant stood in the center of the *Black Hand*’s control room, glared out the view port as the onscreen graphics ticked informatively away. They couldn’t tell him the only thing he really wanted to know.

Tanaka, Christina, and the bridge crew sat at their stations. Grant didn’t notice Kendle, who had taken three tentative steps into the room, until her small voice broke the silence.

“Does anybody know if they’re okay?”

Grant whirled from the steering stand, “What is this child doing in my control room? Get her out of here.”

Christina and Tanaka moved to intercept Kendle at the same time. Tanaka took her arm, tried to guide her out of the door, but she yanked it away.

“My father’s out there fighting for you!” she shouted. “I have a right to know.”

“We’d all like to know that, Kendle,” Grant said testily. “But they don’t call us to chat. They might call us at any point needing our help. We can’t afford to be distracted.”

“Let me handle this,” Christina said to Grant, and steered Kendle away from Tanaka. To Kendle she said, “Come on, honey.”

“This is no place for her,” Grant shot after them.

“I’ll keep her out of the way,” said Christina. She ushered Kendle to a chair at one of the rear stations.

But Grant was distracted anyway. He kept an ear on their conversation via his backdoor link.

“It was open,” Kendle said.

“I know, it’s okay,” Christina sat across from her. “They checked in about four hours ago. Everything’s fine. If it wasn’t, we likely would’ve heard from them. They’re due to check in again soon. You can wait here with me if you like.”

“I just want my dad back. Why did he have to bring me here?”

“I know how you feel. That man, the captain,” Christina indicated Grant, “is my father.”

“Did he bring you here, too?” asked Kendle, awed.

“No, I asked to come,” Christina said. “To be close to him, however it turns out.”

“I wish my dad had left me home. I think he cares more about his job than he does about me.”

Christina fiddled with the control panel. “I’ll tell you something it took me a long time to figure out about my father. Honorable service means figuring out who needs your help the most, which

can be hard for the daughters of great men.” She smiled. “Does that make any sense?”

Kendle shook her head, “Not really, no.”

“No, I didn’t think so,” Christina laughed. Kendle laughed too, and smiled.

Embarrassed, Grant turned his attention back to his soldiers.

Michael’s fire-team passed through harsh high-altitude shadows as they trudged up the gusseted mass of the mountain. They gripped tufts of razor-grass and scattered shrapnel stones, climbed where wind gusted through the gullies and ravines, and scoured the blasted landscape clean of all but the most tenacious lichens.

The group emerged onto a wide plain with a small glassy lake: a high valley fitting of the region’s name, “the roof of the world.” An abandoned village huddled on the far side of the lake. Empty sun-bleached mud brick buildings stacked atop each other in a teetering heap, half covered in the dry, claylike earth. People had tried to live here, unsuccessfully.

The last meager harvest still dried on the rooftops where the former inhabitants had abandoned it. Torn and discarded Yurts and other piles of human debris blew in the strong desert wind.

The team hunkered down in the ghost town on a slope of grain piled in the lee of a broken wall and long since left to rot. They took sips of water, and caught their breath. Past the ruins, the wind heaped an array of colossal sand dunes hundreds of feet high, peaked and imposing as the mountains beyond. Rusty and Aleister scanned the dunes with their visors while Michael watched. The HUD readout showed nothing but barren desolation.

“Still no sign of the base?” Rhee Jianjun stood next to them.

“Nothing,” Rusty, handed Rhee Jianjun a visor. “Lost the tracks a ways back, too sandy. We should’ve spotted their flyers by now.”

Rhee Jianjun took the proffered device, looked for himself.

“It’s almost like they’re hiding in the sand itself,” said Aleister. He ran a hand through his blonde hair in frustration.

Rhee Jianjun lowered the visor. “That’s exactly what they’re doing.” He walked back down to the rest of the group.

“But the sands are constantly shifting,” said Rusty, “blown in from the desert.”

“Dove,” asked Rhee Jianjun, “where the hell are we?”

Dove looked at Michael, who nodded. He connected to a satellite and handed the image it displayed of their position to Rhee Jianjun.

“Link says it’s the Gez Defile.”

“This a live image?” Rhee Jianjun asked.

“Course,” said Dove.

Rhee Jianjun looked at an overhead view, where the desert met the Tian Shan. “Can you wind it back a couple of months?” he asked.

“Just a minute,” said Dove. He tapped out a rhythm in the capacitive air, and the giant dunes in the view crawled back towards the desert in reverse time-lapse. All but one, at the far end of a canyon. Rhee Jianjun unpaired the monocle, and the deck displayed a holograph to all of them via their visors.

Rhee Jianjun pointed out the stationary mountain of sand.

“That’s where they are. Train all your orbital instruments there.”

Allison looked twice, her voice amazed, “*Inside* the dune.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Governor Talgat.

“Satellites don’t lie,” Rhee Jianjun countered.

“Not strictly true,” said Dove, “But I believe this one.”

The group stood and looked across the rooftops of the ruined town. Their visor views magnified the mega-dune in question. It lay across a broad field of equally massive cousins, and at the far end of a constricting canyon – a natural fortress.

The fire-team moved out in response to Michael’s hand signal, and ranged from the town across a bare stretch of pasture – littered with burned-out vehicles and scrap – before the desert resumed in earnest.

Without warning, the sand exploded. Vast plumes of dust cratered out before the booming muzzle report of the canyon's defenses ever reached them.

"Find cover!" Michael shouted, and they dug into the leeward side of a berm that marked the desert's edge.

The team snuck surreptitious views over the top. Flares from the canyon's guns appeared as an odd counterpoint to the shells that strafed the dune in front and rained sand down on them.

"We have to move before they dial us in," Pope shouted.

"The approach's too exposed," said Talgat, and sniffed. "Half a dozen dunes between us and the canyon. We'll never cover the ground before they draw a bead on us."

Cassandra looked around her, where scraps of sheet metal littered the canyon.

"I have an idea."

She ran down the berm, dodged the occasional shell explosion and hauled a six-foot piece of the sheet metal back up to where the team hunkered down. She bent the leading edge into a blunt ramp. Michael smiled as he realized what she was about to do.

"Wish me luck," she winked at him, and dove over the top. She bodysurfed down the broad side of the dune, white-blond hair flying behind her, reaching a surprising speed before she disappeared in a cloud of dust far below. Because of the size of the dune, she had covered several hundred yards, much faster than any of them could run.

"Crazy bitch," Governor Talgat growled.

"I like it," said Michael. He nodded, and the rest of them raced to collect their own makeshift toboggans.

The group crossed the treacherous approach to the Gez Defile, always altered their timing, slid down the gunward faces of the titanic dunes and trudged up the protected slope, platforms of scrap metal held above their heads, to repeat the process and advance. To the ADWS targeting system, they were several twinkling specks lost in small wakes of dust, too fast to track.

Within a surprisingly few minutes, the team reached the canyon mouth. The automated guns swiveled, impotent. Metal ground vainly, trying to target motion that had passed beyond their overlapping fields of fire. The team looked at each other, intoxicated by their cleverness, ready for anything.

It was deathly quiet as they entered the canyon. Carrion birds had settled quickly once the guns were silent, but scattered at the team's approach.

"This isn't right," Rusty said ominously. "We should have met some resistance by now."

Human sharpshooters should have taken up the canyon's defense, but the team took no fire.

They came upon the entrance to the dune base. Its sand-covered bay doors would have been impossible to detect from even a few feet away, except that someone had already blasted them open.

Michael scanned the entrance with his visor, called the *Black Hand*.

"Snipe Two to Sack," he called, "are you seeing this?"

He waited, looked at the others. He called again, "Sack?"

In the control room of the *Black Hand* Grant replied,

"We hear you Michael, please respond."

Tanaka looked up from his instruments.

"Sir, I'm not hearing anything on my equipment. Are you getting something I'm not?"

Grant realized what it must be. If Tanaka wasn't getting Michael's signal, but for some reason his back door connection was still getting through, then someone was jamming their visor uplink. But not completely – whoever it was obviously exploited the same backdoor weakness he was using. A weakness he had built in. The enemy was hacking his team's Links.

Michael tried again, but this time Grant remained silent. He pushed the link that superseded their signal, but got only static.

Grant's clawed hands gripped the control room railing. His gaze bored holes in the view-port, flooded him with a tidal wave of guilt. His people were in trouble, but what could he do? He couldn't reveal what he suspected without admitting his own sabotage.

"Sir?" Tanaka said, "Are you okay?"

"Sorry," said Grant. "I heard a ghost, just wishful thinking."

Michael shot Dove an impatient look, said, "What's going on?"

"I don't know," said Dove. His eyes flashed over the stream of information from his deck. "We lost the uplink."

"Damn," said Michael. "Okay, we go back and re-establish communications."

"No," Talgat interrupted. "We go in!"

"That's not your call, Governor," Michael said. "Grant told us to —"

Governor Talgat strode towards the door. "I didn't come all this way to read from the GSTF playbook. I'm going in." Aizahn followed him and charged her plasma crop, her tattooed face set. The mercs looked from the Governor to Michael unsure who to follow, the one with their survival or their paycheck in hand.

"Damn it!" said Michael.

"Told you," Cassandra whispered to Erik. Michael waved them on.

Inside, it was dark. The only natural illumination came from fused sand skylights in the high ceilings. Curtains were torn, planters uprooted, walls charred and pitted. Bodies with red arm bands littered the floor, hung impaled on wreckage, floated face down in water gardens. Their visors amplified the available light, casting the grim carnage in a grainy green glow. The Carbonari were all dead.

Allison covered her mouth with her hand, "Who... *what* could've done this?"

“Some kind of massive assault,” said Aleister. “Looks like they were defending the place.”

The team advanced through corridors that looked like lacquered slot canyons, stepped over shredded and exploded corpses. Rusty wiped a smear of blood from the glasslike wall with his finger.

“Made from molecularly altered sand, thick and strong enough to withstand bombardment from space.”

“We should try to find the training cavern,” Torben, shared a look with him. “That’s where they would’ve made a stand.”

In the *Black Hand*, the crew passed tense looks around the control room as Tanaka and the crew watched the sub’s stealthed non-emissive displays.

“Twenty minutes overdue for check in,” he said.

“They’d call if they drew fire,” Grant paced the room. Being able to see what his team saw, and not be able to say anything was a side effect he hadn’t considered. He watched in silent horror as the team stepped over the slashed and mutilated corpses of the Carbonari cell. Grant wondered briefly if Quin and Sian – the Carbonari his team had chased all the way from Easy City – were among the dead. Had they made it as far as the base? Had they been and gone? Grant couldn’t see them, but it was no assurance.

“Maybe it happened too fast,” said Tanaka.

“Maybe they’re inside,” Christina said. “The base’s shielding could prevent—”

“Dove’s deck can punch through any shield the Carbonari have,” Grant shook his head.

Tanaka looked at his interface. “Sir! I’m reading a massive energy surge from inside the base.”

“What?” said Grant, startled. “When?”

“Just now. Something’s powering up in there.”

“What does that mean?” Kendle asked Christina.

She looked to Grant, who gripped the rail again and said, “Nothing good.”

The team entered the training cavern amphitheatre: more carnage. Two robed soldiers stood at the center of the room, reflective faceplates bowed over their halberds – pole arms topped with wicked-looking, multi-sided blades. Each was over six feet tall; shining metal laurel wreaths surrounded the mirrored domes – Cypriot Kantara Guard. They flanked a towering device erected in the center of the cavern – an inverted black cone over 3 meters high and covered in blinking lights.

A woman emerged from the shadows. Severe shoulder-length haircut, severe business ensemble. The Cypro-corp Ambassador, Eleina Rhodon.

“It must be Halloween,” she said. “The ghosts are out. I have to ask you, if you’re already dead, will anyone mourn you? Or should I address that solely to the representatives of the GSTF who sacrificed their careers to be here with us today? After all, nobody mourns a Carbonari.”

CHAPTER 12

The group faced the two soldiers and Eleina Rhodon. Michael said, “I take it I’m addressing the Ambassador to –”

“A loyal member of the National Union,” Eleina interrupted, “who would never be mixed up in such a sordid affair.”

“Cypro-corp,” said Rusty.

“I know who she is,” Michael snapped. To the Ambassador he said, “They’ll find this place. You won’t be able to cover up *all* the evidence.”

“Oh, I think we will,” Eleina said, gesturing to the device that dominated the center of the cavern. “This geothermal magnetic injector is poised to punch a hole in the earth’s crust, and turn all this sand to glass. Nothing will be left to cover up. One of the wonderful technologies we developed and sold to the Chinese government.” Michael gripped his weapon, ready for the coming fight as she continued, “In the end, it won’t matter whether the world thinks the Chinese or the Carbonari are responsible. The world will see China as the powerless, flailing dictatorship it is, and fall on them like a plague of frogs. Inspiring global reinvestment,” she gave her Kantara a wicked, almost sensual grin, “in private security. It’s amazing what you can do with magnets.”

“Why haven’t you set it off yet?” Michael asked, grinding his teeth.

Elena smiled. “It’s charging.”

“Who are they talking to?” Erik whispered to Pope, watching the soldiers carefully.

“I’m not sure,” Pope whispered back, “I don’t see anyone.”

“You’re a long way from Nicosia, Ambassador Rhodon,” Michael said.

She gave him the ghost of a smile, “So are you.”

The robed soldiers looked up at them.

“And call me Eleina, please,” she said. “No need to stand on formality – I know you, too. Or the AIs stored in our IC. Allison, Cassandra, Michael,” she purred. “Your death certificates are already filed; along with obituaries that quantify the sum total of your contributions to society. So and so, beloved relative, died. They are survived by, blah blah blah. Which is to say, not much.”

Synapse fire seared Michael’s eyes. Suddenly, he saw inside – sinew, nerve, rods and cones, saw other pairs of eyes staring into him, through him. He saw Eleina, as if she were inside out and upside down, burned into his retinas. Paradoxically, he saw himself through her eyes. Moreover, he saw someone else.

Grant held his breath as Michael – and Eleina – looked right at him.

Michael turned to Torben, his eyes hollow, hypnotized. His hand moved, unbidden, and drew his yatagan sword. When he spoke, it was a combination of his voice and Eleina’s.

“All that’s left to do is trim the fat.”

To the soldiers he barked, “*Prosochi!*” Eleina’s voice, Michael’s mouth. The soldiers leapt into the air, robes fluttering, propelled by jump boots. Energy blasts from their gauntlets tossed weapons and bodies, shredded potted palms and tore curtain hangings. Michael-Eleina fell in with them, swung the fractal blade and said,

“NU members aren’t allowed standing armies, as you know, but ambassadors are allowed a personal guard.” The team scattered and returned fire. Their plasma-charged rounds hit the soldiers without effect.

“We call them Kantara after the castle in northern Cyprus,” Michael-Eleina continued. “They’re not exactly an army, but you’d be hard pressed to see the difference.”

Rhee Jianjun loosed round after round with his arm-mounted rail-storm.

“Everything has a resonance, a vibration,” Michael-Eleina said. “The right frequencies can shred cell walls, boil brains.” A blast knocked Rhee Jianjun aside. The Kantara shifted positions, their halberds ready. One extended curved fractal blades from his gauntlet.

The Kantara waded in, shrugged off plasma charges, delivered multiple blows in rapid succession. The team tried to defend, but the Kantara outmaneuvered them at every point.

Cassandra carpeted one Kantara with her splinter gun, but the beam showered off strong electronegative shielding in dangerous, brittle nanoparticles.

“Forget the splinter guns,” she called, “They’re useless!”

“Don’t let them get between you!” Antoine roared, and landed a powerful blow that caused the Kantara in front of him to drop his halberd.

Allison fired as the other Kantara leapt towards her and sliced her PD-ARC in half with a shower of sparks. She pistol-whipped him with the leftover piece, but he jabbed her in the gut with the blunt end of his staff and she went down.

Erik flew back and hit a wall, blood spattered.

Grant staggered in the control room as Erik’s feed went dead. Christina moved towards him, her arm outstretched, but Grant pushed her away.

Rusty parried Michael’s sword thrust with a flex-armored forearm. Michael recovered with a lightning-fast counter-thrust, and jabbed Rusty in the neck. Rusty hit his knees, clutched the wound. Fountains of blood sprayed between his fingers.

“Rusty!” Torben saw him, but was too far away. He lunged at the nearest Kantara. The Kantara spun, delivered a vicious back kick, and in one fluid motion, cut Torben’s face open with the

fractal blades on his gauntlets. Torben staggered, wiped the blood out of his eyes.

The fire teams followed standard military protocol, but hard-won knowledge passed down over the years wasn't worth a damn on the new battlefield. Each new war was a rebirth. He who followed the wisdom of the last one was doomed to repeat history, as obsolete as British redcoats.

“Split up and draw them off!” Aleister bellowed, assuming command. The group broke and scattered.

Pope hosed the Kantara with gunfire, shouting “This way, worker bee!”

A sonic pulse shook the atrium, flung dust into the air as Pope and Antoine backed in. Antoine circled around a cracked pillar, his broad frame oddly silent.

The Kantara followed Pope, shrugged off the plasma bolts, his halberd ready. Antoine shoved the broken pillar over, his large shoulders straining. It landed with a massive crash, pinned the Kantara underneath.

Pope and Antoine watched, breathing heavily.

A blinding energy discharge blasted them both back in a shower of massive stone fragments.

In the corridor, Michael-Eleina pressed the attack with Michael's yatagan and a fallen halberd she'd recovered. Aleister backed down a side passage, shouted “Eleina!” to draw her attention.

The two circled.

“Magnets, incidentally,” Michael-Eleina continued, “take their name from an ancient Greek province ruled by Magnes, a son of Zeus.”

Aleister attacked and landed some solid blows, but Michael-Eleina twisted to deliver vicious counter-attacks. Fractal sword and halberd whirled with dizzying speed, each move perfectly suited to the small ways Aleister left himself open. Aleister staggered against

the wall, unable to defend against her any longer. Blood ran freely from the wounds on his face.

“Magnesia was the homeland of the early heroes – Jason, Peleus, Achilles,” she said. “Early magnets were called *magnítis líthos*, or Magnesian stones, an appellation attributable to only one thing – their power.” She lunged forward, ready to take Aleister’s head off with the halberd.

Torben and Cassandra dove from the shadows, tackled Michael’s body. The halberd spun across the floor, out of reach. Michael-Eleina jumped to her feet, gripped the sword. The three squared off.

Torben said, “What’d they do, make you eat Wikipedia?”

In an antechamber, a Kantara beat Governor Talgat and Colonel Nurkady back, sliced their guns, and blinded them with a light pulse. Nurkady retaliated with her plasma crop.

The Kantara winged Talgat with his halberd, knocked Nurkady against a wall with a magnetic push. A trickle of blood slipped from her mouth, tracing the line of her tattoo.

“Aizahn!” Talgat cried, dove in front of Nurkady, and shielded her with his body.

“Ambassador Rhodon,” he called with his visor, “my people were not to be hurt! We had a deal!”

I’m restructuring it, Eleina linked back, and turned her thoughts to the fight with Torben and Cassandra in the garage.

“What?” Aleister called, infuriated. “What do you mean you had a deal?”

Grant sensed rather than saw the Kantara jam Governor Talgat in the face, knock him out.

The fight between Cassandra, Torben, and Michael-Eleina ranged across the truck bay.

“*Ochi skono nisteia*,” Michael-Eleina’s voice rang through the base, “*Echo anag praktical!*”

“What are they saying?” Cassandra shouted.

“She said not to kill us too fast,” Torben yelled back. “It’s Cypro-corp Battle Code – a pidgin of ancient Greek and Latin phrases Cypro-corp uses to obfuscate their communications.”

“Can I ask how you know it?”

“You can ask.”

“This one could’ve been a Kantara,” Grant heard Eleina say with Michael’s voice. “He enrolled in the program. It’s good to see we still command a certain amount of loyalty.”

Grant heard Aleister call over the visor, “Dove, we’ve got to figure out what they did to him.”

Grant felt the connection to Dove, where he crouched in a corner of the corridor, focused on his deck.

“I’m trying, but they own the information flow into this place. I’m not sure how they locked me out, but I can’t break through.”

Grant saw Aleister – momentarily recovered – chase the fight down a long, curved stairway.

“Keep trying!”

“I don’t know what to do,” said Dove. “His Link should be completely nonfunctional.” A pointed note, Grant thought, no doubt intended for him. A ghost of a grudge. Dove knew why the Link was still functioning; he just wasn’t sure what to do about it. Neither was Grant. *He’s right*, Grant thought, *it should have been secured*. How could he stop the Cypriot’s manipulation of technology they invented? *Did the others suspect?* Grant realized – to his horror – anything he could see happening in the violated sanctuary, Eleina could, too.

Dove’s fingers hovered over the deck, “Stefen, any suggestions you may have would be helpful.”

Michael-Eleina’s attention shifted to Stefen.

Stefen dragged Rusty into a small, shattered apartment – its spring fed reflecting pools tainted with gore. He leaned the wounded man, who still clutched his own bleeding neck, up against the wall. Stefen sponged away the caked arterial blood with a reusable nanotech sponge, and activated his visor’s x-ray scope, gently lifting Rusty’s flex armor away from the wound.

“I’d hypothesize a magnetic carrier wave resonating occult RNA subroutines,” Stefen called over the visor, “but I grasp at straws.”

Dove’s fingers flew across his deck. “If that’s true,” which he knew it was, “there’s nothing for me to code around. They’re channeling the dead. It’s a direct physical manipulation of the Link. But their AI node has to be too far away for that kind of fine work. And the network in this base is a burned-out wreck. So where’s the signal coming from?”

Rusty’s lips moved, but no sounds came out.

“Don’t try to talk,” Stefen told him. Grant heard Stefen consider anesthetizing Rusty, but decided against it. The team needed him mobile.

Stefen gave Rusty a shot. “Should numb it a bit,” he said.

Rusty nodded his thanks and winced.

“I have to clamp the external carotid before I can see how bad the damage is,” said Stefen. He did so, and frowned. “The cartilage in your neck is fractured. Hold still while I clean it up.”

Stefen switched to his visor’s bronchoscope, and his med glove extended a sensor and manipulators as he sought to remove shreds of flesh from Rusty’s trachea.

Stefen was attempting to close the deeper structures around a drainage tube when he heard the scrape of a boot outside the room.

In the garage, Michael missed Torben with the yatagan, but delivered a brutal kick. Cassandra belted Michael, and he staggered back towards a wrecked MPV. Michael recovered, and lunged for Cassandra, fractal sword flashing. At the last second, Michael summoned all his willpower, and was able to check the blow. It was a fraction of a second slower than it should have been, but that was all Cassandra needed. She sidestepped his attack neatly and threw him off balance towards a large tank of compressed air. The force of Michael’s blow jammed his sword into the tank, which ruptured, taking a chunk of flesh with it.

The tank flew into the nearby maintenance bay, setting off a chain-reaction of volatile chemicals. The equipment and fuel cells

there sparked and exploded, showering the area with metal fragments and globs of battery acid. The blast hurled Michael high in the air and painfully doubled him around an exposed ceiling girder. He landed hard on his back. It took all the wind – and the fight – out of him. Perhaps realizing Michael would be of no further use to her, Eleina released him.

Cassandra picked up the fallen yatagan. Torben looked at Cassandra as if for the first time, impressed.

“You’re kind of a pain in the ass,” he said. “But you’re good in a fight.”

“It’s part of my charm,” she shot back.

Michael lay at Cassandra’s feet, clutched at his belt pouch. She held the sword to his neck, dared him to move.

“Re...” Michael moaned faintly as he gasped for breath.

Cassandra bent close, “What?”

“Repeater,” Michael managed. Torben climbed to his knee, looked at Cassandra.

“What does that mean?”

Dove stopped short. “The Cypriots must have an amplifier. A phantom power receiver that’s juicing them, and jamming us.”

Rousing in the amphitheatre, Rhee Jianjun got dazedly to his feet. He linked,

Where would you put something like that?

Aleister stopped short as he encountered a Kantara dragging Talgat and Aizahn out of the antechamber.

He braced for the fight.

“It’ll be in the cell core, to tap into the whole system. On the bottom level, the most shielded area.”

Rhee Jianjun turned, ran down the corridor.

I’m on it.

The first Kantara entered the bedchamber, his faceplate cracked from Antoine's column. He saw where Rusty leaned against the wall, and headed towards him.

Stefen came from behind. He wrapped a red curtain around the Kantara's head, and swung him with a splash into a carved stone water table. Stefen's arms tightened, trying to hold his enemy under the water.

He gritted his teeth, but the Kantara jerked back, smashed him in the face with his helmet.

Stefen staggered, his nose bloodied. The Kantara righted himself, and shredded the curtain.

Grant turned away, sensed Rhee Jianjun enter the cell core. He saw the shielded compartment, and headed towards it. Grant stifled a cry as a third Kantara, left to guard the repeater, stepped from inside the passageway.

Rhee Jianjun tried to rush him, twisted by, blasting with his rail-storm. The Kantara lashed out, and re-broke Rhee Jianjun's injured right arm. Rhee Jianjun grunted in pain and staggered, still running as the Kantara stalked behind him.

He entered the shielded area and saw the repeater attached to the cell core, but the core hung suspended in an electron plasma field, above a precipitous drop – the base was geothermally powered.

"Oh, come on!" Rhee Jianjun moaned, exasperated. He launched himself over the chasm.

His body passed through the field, but the rail-storm strapped to his broken forearm caught in the energy barrier. He swung, agonizingly suspended by his broken arm and screamed. Sweat poured down his straining face. The Kantara activated his jump boots, leapt after Rhee Jianjun.

The two collided in midair. With a sickening rip, Rhee Jianjun's arm tore loose just below the elbow. Grant could tell it didn't hurt at first. It was just oddly gone. Both bodies passed through the field, crunched into the core with a shower of sparks.

Rhee Jianjun grabbed blindly for the repeater with his left hand, and to Grant's surprise, it detached easily in his grip.

Grant saw Dove belt down the corridor at top speed.

"That's it!" Dove called, "I'm in." Grant felt Dove's almond eyes glaze over and twitch, sensed something of what the neurohacker saw as he generated code at the speed of thought.

Dove called control, "Snipe Two to Sack, we are under heavy assault. It's the Cypriots, Eleina Rhodon is here. Please confirm the presence of a geothermal injector in the base."

Info-graphics confirmed a link with the *Black Hand*. Grant heard Tanaka's voice come back, "Copy, Snipe Two. We're reading _"

But behind the layers of info-graphics, a Kantara struck. Grant watched as the view from Dove's unfocused head hit the floor. The Kantara kicked his deck away, disconnecting it and the feed turned to static.

Grant re-established a connection to Rhee Jianjun as he regained consciousness. A Kantara dragged Rhee Jianjun into the amphitheater – limp and clutching his mutilated arm – and threw him with the others. Someone had sealed the arm with quickset foam, probably preventing him from bleeding to death. *Are the Kantara gauntlets also med-gloves*, wondered Grant.

A countdown still ticked away on the magnetic injector's interface. Apparently, Rhee Jianjun had been too late. Its ultra-capacitors were charged – it had enough power to detonate. The Kantara had obviously rounded up and defeated the remaining team members. The team lay, bruised and bleeding, in the center of the room. Aleister watched Eleina survey her conquest.

"That was exhilarating," she said. "My guards need field testing from time to time." She switched to Cypriot Battle-Code. "*Ton ypo kratisi*," she told the Kantara, indicating Talgat and Aizahn, who were just regaining consciousness. "*Aftin episis*. I have an experiment in mind."

Michael opened his eyes, looked around reflexively. One of the Kantara dragged Governor Talgat to his feet.

“Get away from me!” Talgat struggled, but an unseen force held him rooted to the floor.

“But none of us would be here if not for you, general,” Eleina laughed, calling him by his old rank instead of his new title. “You sold out two countries for a chance at power, killed The Kazakh Governor’s family and blamed China. Honestly, how could the Carbonari have pulled that off without a senior military official’s help? Kazakhstan was a military coup, nothing more. And we know what follows in the wake of a coup.”

Michael moaned as her implication became clear in his fogged brain. He couldn’t move either, invisible bonds held him flat.

“That’s not true!” Governor Talgat seethed. “China held the world’s purse-strings. Even you were powerless against their controlling interest. But now... I helped you crush them, for the good of your company, and my country!”

“What does he mean,” Michael asked. “He said you had a deal?” Eleina ignored him.

“You’ve done well for your people,” she purred in Talgat’s ear. “Inspired them to form their own corporation. I do think you’re on the right track, but you’re unpredictable. Despite your ideals, military men know only one kind of order: theirs. And in light of your role in the murder of the former governor’s family, the new board of directors has asked that you remain our guest for the time being.”

The Kantara bound Talgat and Aizahn with malleable metal shackles.

“I’ll not stand for this treatment,” Talgat fumed. “We’re allies. We want the same thing.”

“You’ve served your purpose,” said Eleina, “and you can continue to inspire your people as a figurehead; the hero who struck a blow for them and freed them from the shadow of the Sino-Russian pact. But they need time to realize their newfound liberty.”

That was it, Grant realized. Talgat foresaw the downfall of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – the end of Sino-Russian dominance in the region, and wanted to throw his country’s fate in with the trans-national companies like Cypro-corp. Talgat had killed the Kazakh governor – a staunch conservative, nationalist, and supporter of the SCO – to make it happen. Unfortunately for Talgat, it was not an alliance of equals.

“These military minds,” Eleina continued, “they think they’re so pure, so much more capable of handling things if only the bureaucracy wouldn’t interfere. But they’re the relics, the un-evolved stuff of unbridled competition, of a blind lust for domination that poisons our ability to cohabitate this planet. You were useful, general, but you’re part of the problem.

“The military, the government, religion – these things aren’t the answer to humanity’s needs. Learning to live *without* them is. Control requires a soft touch. People want the future to be a product they can buy into, which is what we – the corporations – offer them.”

She crouched by Michael. “Talgat wasn’t alone, of course. We have collaborators in the highest positions in Japan, New Mauritius.” She looked over at Rhee Jianjun, “Even China itself. When you have collusion on that scale, can you even call it corruption, or is it merely policy?”

She got up, and looked at Talgat. “But you showed special initiative and creativity, general. You knew to get behind the investigation in order to derail it. Reeducated, you might make a fine Kantara.” She moved her hand as if to caress his face, not quite touching it. “The rest of you helped chase the scapegoat into the desert. In thanks, I give you front-row seats to witness the wrath of god.” She strode away and the Kantara followed, dragging Talgat and Aizahn with them.

“The Carbonari were innocent!” Michael shouted after her, still splayed out on the cavern floor. “China was innocent. What gives you the right?”

Eleina stopped, turned.

“Please. No one’s innocent. You said it yourself, China deserves this. And our shareholders deserve a healthy financial future.”

“You’ll never get away with it,” the ragged gashes on his face contorted with rage. The GSTF will know what you did here.”

Eleina’s body shimmered as her voice cross-faded into a resonant echo.

“My dear, poor, deluded friend, what makes you think I was ever here at all?” She winked out. The Kantara, along with Talgat and Aizahn, continued up the aisle and out the door.

“There goes any chance of us getting paid,” rasped Pope, nursing a bruise as best his limited range of motion would allow.

“I thought you were supposed to protect us from stuff like that,” Michael said to Dove, looking sideways along the floor to where Dove lay bound like the rest of them.

“Must’ve missed something,” he winced. “Clearly there’s some residual functionality in our Links. Cypro-corp has neurohackers on their side, too.”

“I thought true neurohackers weren’t supposed to take sides,” said Michael.

“It’s complicated,” Dove looked away.

In the *Black Hand* control room, Grant cursed and threw his visor down in frustration. Then he picked it back up. Grant called *Flywheel’s* crew, where their freighter sat camouflaged in a copse of Chinese forest.

“Glenn?”

“Roger.” His view showed Grant a desolate landscape. In the distance, a Cypro-corp drop ship lifted off and rocketed east, away from the Gez Defile.

Grant had always known it was likely to end this way, but he had hoped – hoped his people could at least accomplish *something*. But it was not to be. The mission was a failure. The best soldiers he could find had been betrayed and defeated. Time to cut his losses.

“Wind it up,” he called, “we’re pulling out.”

“What?” shouted Kendle.

“Cristina,” Grant gave her a warning look, and Christina put a hand on Kendle’s shoulder but she shrugged it off and cried,

“You can’t!”

Grant turned to her, his voice empty. “That’s it. The injector’s powered up now,” he gestured to the *Black Hand*’s sensors. “We’re registering it from here. They’re gone, honey. They’re gone.”

CHAPTER 13

“Dad, no!” Christina said, “there’s still time. The injector uses a specialized Marx Generator, so it emits an EMP before it detonates. Dove said Eleina Rhodon was there. She’ll have to get clear – well beyond the blast radius.”

“I know that,” Grant said impatiently. “How do you?”

“I read your mission reports.”

Grant realized it shouldn’t surprise him. She was a spy. *Like father, like daughter.*

“What’s an EMP?” Kendle asked.

“Electromagnetic Pulse,” said Grant. “Gamma rays ionize the air. Huge radio waves, power surge, everything gets fried by lightning – only bigger. But her ship’s almost clear now.”

“It’s a *drop* ship,” Christina insisted. “She’s not on it, but Talgat and Nurkady and members of her Kantara Guard are. They require a massive power transmitter in the area. She’ll have a stealthed air carrier here. It’s shielded, just like *Flywheel*, but she won’t take the chance. It’s big and slow, and it’ll take time to land the drop ship on board and get underway.”

Grant remembered the carrier hovering above Almaty – *just before the blast*. Had one of Eleina’s subliminally programmed soldiers been the suicide bomber?

“How do you know?” Grant asked Christine.

“I remember Ambassador Rhodon from embassy functions,” Christina said. “I know how she works. She attends via uplink; she doesn’t go herself. It’s beneath her. She needs that carrier – it’s here. Trust me, dad.”

Grant nodded. *Should have thought of that. Eleina probably wasn’t physically in Almaty, either, back when this all started.*

“It doesn’t matter, though,” Grant said. “Until the injector goes off, the canyon’s area denial weapons systems are still active. That’s too small a window—”

“Dammit, dad, you can’t just abandon them!” Christina shouted, advancing on him. “You love to do this – you get your hands dirty and then you bail. And you tell yourself you’re being strong for accepting their deaths. But you’re not making the hard choices, you’re just assuming your god complex gives you the authority to fold whenever you want. You took everything from these people, always knowing they would fail, and now you’re refusing to go all in.” Christina dragged Kendle in front of him by the wrist. “Well, you may be willing to sacrifice Michael and this girl’s father, but I’m not.”

The fire of her look cowed Grant.

When he didn’t say anything, Christina called Glenn, “The Flywheel can go stick and rudder, right?”

“Yeah, but –”

“Then fire her up,” Christina said. “We’re going to get them out of there.”

“But the ADWS –”

“Will be knocked out by the device”.

“And if our shielding doesn’t work, we’ll be flying blind,” Glenn said. “If we’re flying at all.”

“So?” Sarina said, pointedly.

“Sir?” Glenn asked Grant, awaiting a consensus. Grant looked at his daughter.

“You heard her, soldier.”

“Okay,” Glenn throttled the control stick.

In the amphitheater, Dove’s deck crackled.

“Dove, can you hear me?”

“Barely,” Dove moaned. His fingers fumbled for the monacle interface.

Michael stirred, opened his eyes a crack, and adjusted his visor. It was Christina’s voice.

“*Flynwheel’s* coming in hot,” she continued. “Whatever restraints Eleina has on you will cut out when the device activates. You have to get the others up and moving.”

Flynwheel entered the mountain pass. A wave of anti-aircraft fire arced towards them. Glenn jammed the controls, pitched the ship sideways.

“The canyon’s defenses are active! Guns!” He tore the visor from his face, gaze wide in intense, unblinking concentration.

In the forward turret, Sarina closed her eyes and honed in, feeling the heat of her targets through a specially designed thermal targeting interface. In the rear turret, Tanith steadied her sights and squeezed her triggers. The women clung to their guns like runaway jackhammers, loosing round after round, arm muscles tense and buzzing.

Flynwheel careened into the canyon, exchanging fire with the automated turrets. Glenn weaved her through the resulting explosions.

“Geil, better bring the reactor offline so we don’t have a meltdown.”

Geil complied from his station in the cargo hold below the rotor – he activated the rate limiters and let the tokamak’s superheated plasma spin down.

A huge, hollow sound rang through the amphitheatre. The towering black injector device was active – lights blinking madly, its highly focused geodetic beam magnetically projecting into the earth’s crust, building a chain reaction.

“EMP,” said Michael.

Dove wiggled his fingers and got to his feet. The ground heaved. His ears rang.

“Come on people,” said Dove, “the shackles are off. Let’s move.”

Rhee Jianjun cradled his stump, stared at where his forearm used to be. Michael carried Rusty in a fireman’s lift, and when Grant touched his Link, the connection was hazy, indistinct. *What had happened to him?*

Aleister and Cassandra helped Allison and Torben. Stefen, Antoine, Pope and Dove brought up the rear. The team staggered down the corridors, stepped over the dead. The whole cavern shuddered; dust cascaded from the ceiling. They stumbled on.

Glenn dodged *Flywheel* down the canyon, racing the electromagnetic shockwave. The canyon’s anti-aircraft guns stopped as the wave hit them. In the cockpit, lights sputtered out.

“There go the avionics. Continuing on rotor power,” said Glenn. “Shielded batteries are still alive. Good old girl, bless your redundant control systems.”

Then, with a deafening roar, the canyon floor erupted in a volcanic mushroom cloud. Lava spewed, rock shattered. *Flywheel* faltered, but stayed in the air, cleared the column of fire as the ground melted below them.

In the cockpit, Glenn did his best to steer around the airborne chunks of white-hot stone and magma.

“Geil,” he said, “she’s sluggish. Looks like the electric motors have stopped working. You’ll have to winch open the cargo door. And wind that reactor back up, we’re going to need it.”

Dove, Michael, and the others stared in horror as they emerged atop the farthest mega-dune from the base they could reach. The electrified ash plume was now nearly a dozen miles high, lightning seeming to shoot out of the shredded ground as the Gez Defile collapsed into a fiery caldera.

“It’s the end of the world,” said Dove, unable to tear his gaze from the massive sparking column of molten earth’s blood.

“Save it!” shouted Michael over the tumult.

Flywheel appeared out of the heat haze, kicked up a torrent of dust, hovered low between them and the fire. Geil reached a hand, and helped them one by one into the cargo hold.

In her forward turret, Sarina blasted the bits of volcanic pumice that flew at them like projectiles. The smaller ones seared pinholes in *Flywheel*’s composite armor.

One hit Cassandra in the thigh. She winced and pulled it out, burning her fingers. It landed on the deck and caught fire.

A rock the size of a small car got close enough for them to smell before Sarina blasted it into a shower of embers.

“Not bad for a blind woman, huh Cross?” Sarina linked.

“You don’t hear me complaining,” Aleister replied. “Keep shooting, lady.”

The last few climbed aboard and collapsed in a heap on the deck. Geil hosed out the fire with the onboard extinguisher.

“We’re on, Tarvis,” Dove told Glenn, “please go.”

Glenn yanked back on the control stick, nearly telescoping their spines. *Flywheel* careened upwards as the ground receding beneath them descended into fiery oblivion.

Inside, Allison cleaned Rhee Jianjun’s arm, gave him a shot for the pain, and in her soft voice, assured him Easy City doctors could regenerate it. Stefen examined Michael, his med-glove exploring sensory pathways and nerve clusters as he repaired the damage to Michael’s face and hands.

“How is he,” Aleister asked, watching Michael for signs of movement, hostile or otherwise. But Michael sat still and let Stefen work.

“I’m completely at a loss,” said Stefen. “It shouldn’t have been possible without a Link, but hypnosis or suggestion doesn’t explain it. Must be something we missed.”

“You misunderstand me,” Aleister crossed his arms. “Is he safe?”

“Oh, I think so. I’d theorize the trigger, like much of Cypro-corp’s other technology, requires proximity to their power transmitter. Their information was gathered not from Michael, but from our stored data. He’s as safe as ever, except around Cypriots.”

“We lost,” said Cassandra, “in spite of everything.”

“I can’t believe we’re not dead,” said Rusty, his voice a hoarse whisper.

“Yeah, pay up on that, by the way,” Aleister, picked the dried blood out of his hair.

“You’ll get your money,” Rusty croaked.

“I told you not to talk,” Stefen snapped. “If you talk before I get you back to the med bay for some proper regeneration, you could force a blood clot into your brain.”

“I can’t believe Governor Talgat,” Allison said, her mouth a thin scrawl. “He killed the Governor’s family.”

Pope nodded. “Cypro-corp was on the rise, and he wanted in.”

“Played us and the Carbonari and all of China for patsies,” said Antoine, his broad face clenched in quiet rage.

“Well, not all of us,” said Cassandra, her gaze haughty. “I always said he was rotten.”

“Power and prominence,” Aleister mused. “I guess we really are that simple, sometimes.”

“It’s like Michael said,” Geil Raikan cleaned and racked their weapons, looking at the spot where Michael sat in his acceleration couch. “War is about economy, never ideology. Poor countries go

to war to get rich. Rich countries go to war to stay rich. Everything else is sanctification.”

“I’d be disillusioned,” said Pope with a lopsided grin, “but I’m already a mercenary.”

Antoine chuckled ironically, said “We had him right there the whole time. We could’ve ended this.”

“Why couldn’t you have discovered he was a traitor,” Stefen turned to Dove. “Read his mind, the same way you did—”

“Because it’s something on principle we don’t do.” Dove barely looked up – he was engrossed in his deck. “You said it yourself, too much information is dangerous. Neurohackers can walk through almost any door, but the ones you choose say something about you. Besides, wasn’t it more interesting this way?”

“I’m not sure Delgado and Erik would agree,” Stefen said coldly.

“It doesn’t matter, this would’ve gone down the same if we hadn’t come.” Aleister shook his head. “At least we tried.”

“We still lost,” said Cassandra.

“Maybe not,” Dove whispered, and stroked the air with his deck interface almost lovingly. “This thing is only partly the new biotech. It must be seriously shielded, but...” He pressed a button.

A static-strewn Eleina Rhodon appeared before them. Her voice, though corrupted, still said quite audibly,

“We have collaborators in the highest positions in Japan, Mauritius, even China itself.”

The team looked at each other, taking a moment to realize what the recording meant.

“We have to get this to the authorities in Beijing right away,” said Michael. “If we can get them to see this, we may still have a chance. Glenn,” he linked the pilot. “Take us back to the *Black Hand*. Dove, get Grant. Rhee – we can’t just show up in the capitol. We need to set up a meeting through channels.”

Dove said to Rhee Jianjun, “I never could’ve hacked in if you hadn’t pulled that amplifier. Or talked to our ship.”

“Still,” Rhee Jianjun smiled, obviously enjoying the effect of the painkiller, “that’s a pretty good deck, there.”

Dove looked it over. “They really don’t make them like they used to.”

The team looked out the windows as *Flymbeel* banked away from the field of fire below and raced on.

Flymbeel landed on the deck of the *Black Hand* as it cruised along the surface of the Caspian Sea. The shell-shocked troops disembarked as the launch pad lowered into the hangar. Kendle ran to her father. Rhee Jianjun stood by as Sarina and Aleister hugged, in spite of themselves. Grant and Tanaka looked on as Christina rushed into Michael’s arms.

“Thank god you’re okay!” she said. Michael pulled away. “I heard what happened,” she told him. “It’s not your fault. The old man doesn’t blame you, and neither do I.”

Michael looked at his benefactor, as if for the first time.

“How the hell would he know?”

Michael stalked over to where Grant and Tanaka spoke in hushed tones.

“I need to talk to you, sir,” Michael interrupted.

“Of course, son,” said Grant. “In just a—”

“Right away.”

Tanaka stood aside as Grant and Michael moved off together. Christina followed at a distance.

“What’s on your mind, Michael?” Grant frowned.

“I’m not sure,” Michael said. “But I could see it – like I was hovering, helpless above my own brain when Ambassador Rhodon and her Cypro-corp crypto-monkeys hacked my Link. It should have been dead. You know what I saw? You, looking back at me.”

Christina stepped forward, looking from one of them to the other.

“You know I grew up in the Cypro-corp state,” Michael continued. “Ran with a bad crowd, did my mandatory service. If I

had known what they were doing to me..." he trailed off. "But I never felt used until now. I've got nothing to hide from you – you should know that by now. I don't care if you needed to take a peek, but you should know it almost got us all killed."

"Is this true, Dad?" Christina joined in. "Did you do me, too?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Grant set his jaw.

"Of course not. Killing the Links was the plan, why would you hamstring that out of some crazy need to spy on us? I won't tell anyone else what you don't know, but I'll tell you this," Michael nodded at Christina, "You're going to give us your blessing."

"Or what?" Grant seethed. "I'll not be dictated to—" Then he saw the way Christina was looking at Michael, and fumed. "I knew this would happen when I let you join the mission."

"Why do you think I wanted to join it?" said Christina. She looked almost sorry for him. "And you let me. So deep inside, I think you know this is how it has to be."

"Christina—"

"Let it go, Dad. You already know you can trust us, so there's no reason to object. There's no going back. This is our world now; let us make the best of it. No more secrets."

"Fine," Grant growled. "But what I don't know also saved you. If we hadn't been able to reconnect—"

"Don't fool yourself, sir," Michael gave a hollow laugh. "It was a two-way street. Christina saved our lives. Glenn, Geil, Sarina, and Tanith saved us. You... you just got in the way."

Michael and Christina turned and walked away together, hand in hand. A look passed between them as they stopped in a shadowed alcove of the hangar bay for what little privacy it offered.

"Talk about falling in love above my station," Michael said, still charged from the confrontation. Christina shook her head.

"We played his game before, but now... I don't care what my father says. We earned this."

She kissed him for a long moment.

“I brought you something,” Michael took the crushed remains of the *Saussurea involucrate* from his belt pouch and gave it to her. “For the garden you’re going to plant in Stefen’s bunk.”

“It’s a pulp,” she laughed.

“It’s been through a lot, but you can’t get one of these just anywhere. I think it’s salvageable.”

She looked into his eyes, touched his face with a soft hand. Michael pulled away. “You’re smushing it,” he said.

Christina shushed him, “We can regenerate the herb.”

She kissed him again.

Grant looked darkly at Michael and Christina as he and Tanaka discussed with Rhee Jianjun the next leg of the mission.

“Are you ready to make good on your promise?” Tanaka asked him.

“I’ll regret not remembering this,” said Rhee Jianjun. He still cradled his bandaged arm. “Seems like someone should.”

“We’ll remember how you helped us today,” Tanaka told him.

“And what you’re going to do for our man Adrian when you get back to Easy City,” said Grant.

“I’m ready to throw the switch when you are,” Rhee Jianjun nodded his head.

Dove said, “I’ll write the virus.”

Liqin – the surgeon who’d saved Adrian – knocked on the doorframe of his hospital room and entered. His eyes drifted and locked on her.

“I’m so sorry, Mister Kuelling,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“Mykal Keulling,” She double-checked his chart. “You know your name, right?”

Your false identity Grant all but shouted mentally as he observed over the Link.

“Right,” said Adrian. “I meant, what are you sorry for?”

“Your knee,” she said. “There was a man from CIEDA here. He wouldn’t let me...” she trailed off. “He made me stop before I’d regenerated it completely.”

“Oh, that,” Adrian frowned. “Don’t sweat it. I know he’s a hard case.”

“Are you in much pain?”

“Yes,” said Adrian, “but you know what would help?” He gave her a weak smile. She laughed, nervous.

“I think I know where this is going.”

“When I get out of here,” said Adrian, “I know a place that administers a great caffeine drip.”

“Is that your way of asking me out for coffee?”

“It is.”

“Then I’d better write a prescription,” she entered her Link number on a data pad and gave it to him.

“See,” Adrian moved his knee experimentally, “getting better already, miss...”

Liqin smiled.

Delgado Rodriguez and Erik Denin – their AIs, anyway – looked around the chart room at the group gathered there. The team could see them through their visors, a projection of the programs running on *Black Hand’s* onboard network.

“Damn it,” said Erik. “We’re dead, aren’t we?”

Dove nodded.

“There was nothing we could do,” Allison blinked her large eyes.

“It was bound to happen to someone,” said Delgado.

“We recovered your AIs, brought you back,” Dove replied, “to say we’re sorry. Are you okay with it?”

“Do we have a choice?” said Erik.

“As you know,” Grant folded his hands, “We’re not overflowing with recruits. You were our Intelligence and Operations specialists. We wanted to give you the opportunity to stay running – remain aboard and keep working with the team as part of our think tank. If you agree.”

The two considered the proposal a moment.

“I don’t know about Delgado,” said Erik, “but I was never expecting a backup. So I guess I’m grateful.”

Delgado sighed. “What needs doing?”

Tanaka took the question as his cue to commence the briefing.

“We’ve obtained evidence that Cypro-corp and Governor Talgat conspired to kill the Kazakh Governor’s family and frame the Carbonari, and by extension, China. The objective was to chart a new course for Kazakhstan under Governor Talgat’s direction.”

“That rings true,” Erik said.

“You’ve seen the mission report,” Tanaka continued. “The world thinks China used a weapon of mass destruction on its own people. The Chinese think they’ve been attacked. We have to act fast to prevent a war.”

“Commander Tennison has set up a meeting with the Chinese Ambassador by way of his Russian contacts. We can’t risk the usual lines of communication. We need to get this information into their hands safe and direct.”

“I’ll go myself,” said Grant.

“You shouldn’t risk it,” Delgado said. “None of you should. There has to be another way.” He and Erik discovered they could confer in quantum states.

“Let us do this favor for you, sir,” Michael begged Grant, “Remember Baykonur.”

“Come on, Dad,” Christine chided him. Grant looked from his daughter to Michael, then around the table, and nodded grudgingly.

“We have an idea,” said Erik.

The Russian embassy was in the heart of the Chaoyang Sky Town district in northern Beijing – an uninspired, stair-stepped nanocarb filing cabinet of atmospheric containment that squatted near a domed-in park. It was here Conte Senethis had agreed to set up a meeting between the Chinese Ambassador, his delegation, CIEDA, and Grant’s operatives. Not in the embassy building itself, but in the park under a small round Chinese gazebo. The mostly-deadened hum of twenty-four hour traffic washed in from the streets beyond the trees.

The Chinese Ambassador was a round humorless man, like an unenlightened Buddha with an unflattering haircut – as if every extra pound had also been added, metaphorically, on his shoulders. He never spoke to them. He just stood there, flanked by his retinue of uniformed aides, and let Senethis do the talking for him.

There’s someone who knows how to delegate, thought Grant.

“We’re part of a tactical unit,” Michael began, not sure where he was going, “tasked with uncovering the truth behind the Kazakh Civil Palace bombing.”

“Are you GSTF?” Senethis wanted to know.

“Not exactly. We’re a hybrid group of soldiers, mercenaries, freighter crew, even Carbonari. I guess you’d call us free agents.”

“The Carbonari are investigating themselves, now?”

“We – the Carbonari among us anyway – never really believed they were involved, except as scapegoats,” Michael went on, his voice gaining strength and conviction. “We tracked a cell – the one Governor Talgat claimed was responsible – to their hideout in Xinjiang Province. Cypro-corp soldiers had wiped it out.

“We learned that Governor Talgat himself was behind the Civic Palace bombing and framed the Carbonari in an effort to change his country’s course from alliance with China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to Cypro-corp and other trans-nats and countries that have an interest in seeing China smeared so they can escape its financial hold.

“He thought he could achieve pan-Turkic unity by allying with Cypro-corp, and using the corporation state model. Cypro-corp’s representative Eleina Rhodon turned on him, captured him, and set

off the geothermal injector to cover her tracks. We barely escaped with the proof.”

At a gesture from Michael, Dove played the recording. The team listened again as Eleina Rhodon admitted the existence of a conspiracy and Talgat’s involvement in it.

Ambassador Senethis was the first to break the silence that followed.

“How can we believe a story this far-fetched?”

“You believed in Grant Tennison.”

“I thought this reeked of his involvement. He’s alive, then?”

“Can’t confirm or deny that.”

“I suspected as much,” said Senethis. Louder, and to the night at large, Senethis said, “You should’ve stayed hidden, old man.”

“He’s not here,” said Michael

“He can hear me.” Senethis surveyed the surrounding air. “I know Grant.”

“Perhaps,” said Michael. “But we speak for him.”

“If the GSTF learns you’re alive they’ll hunt you down.”

“What else is new?” Michael smiled pleasantly.

“If you cared about that,” Michael said between clenched teeth, “you wouldn’t have thrown Commander Tennison to the wolves.”

“He shouldn’t have taken unilateral action,” Senethis spat. “It was strictly against his job description. He was an advisor to a diplomat – he was supposed to be untraceable. Instead, he was reckless. Well, I’ve warned the Chinese to take everything you say with a very large grain of salt.”

“But we have the evidence – right here.”

“Grant’s way of doing things is out of fashion,” Senethis said. “Appearances must be kept up. Collaboration is the word of the day.”

“Doing the right thing for your people is never obsolete,” said Michael. “And if the governments won’t do it, or the trans-nats, then we will.”

“You must be joking. Who, the GSTF?”

“No,” Michael said flatly, “*us*.”

“Well,” Senethis smirked, “not in China you won’t. Not this time.”

The team glared at the Chinese delegation and beyond, to the people in the park and the pedestrian traffic on the street beyond. A sea of stoic, black-haired faces stared back or glanced over, or passed by without curiosity. Perhaps this homogeneity was why China took so long to rise from its slumber, why communism still held the sway it did. It was hard for individualism to take hold when its contradiction – one’s sheer insignificance – was forever staring one in the face. Face after face after face. No wonder saving face was such a crucial thing in Chinese culture. One truly had very little of it to spare.

“You know what we went through to bring you this, and you don’t know an escape hatch when you see one?” Aleister boiled over. “China can go to hell, they don’t want our help.”

But is it the Chinese people who don’t want it, Grant wondered, or their leaders? Were there collaborators in the Chinese trans-nats, working to corporatize their own government? Was Senethis a shareholder? Who could say?

Grant knew China wouldn’t use the evidence, would rather suffer direct attack by the combined economic might of the world’s special interests than admit weakness and victimization by a frame job. The crew of the *Black Hand* would release the information wherever they could, but it wouldn’t fuel a change in public opinion unless China ran with it. If they didn’t – if they were determined to hang themselves – no one was going to deny them the rope. Grant didn’t know whether that was honorable or not. It was certainly stubborn.

It reminded Grant of the old story of the Chinese man who became stuck in river mud and, afraid of losing face, refused to call for help for over four hours, even though he had a perfectly operable Link. It took a team of rescuers another seven hours to free him, because he was too embarrassed to undo his pants.

Prideful, Grant thought. *Arrogant. Defensive. Like a great stone wall.* The walls were telling when you considered it, from the old Great Wall to the courtyards of traditional houses. As if mere wishing could expunge the world outside those barriers. Once again, China was isolated from the rest of the world. Ultimately, their isolationism would be their undoing. Extreme xenophobia. Perhaps justified, perhaps not, but crippling all the same. *The world*, Grant thought, *is too small for walls, for hegemony, anymore.*

“You fool,” Michael said to Senethis, “you have no idea what you’re condemning them to.”

“Maybe so,” said Senethis. “But at least it comes from an official source.”

At a signal from Senethis, PAP soldiers emerged from behind the trees surrounding the gazebo, poured in through the park dome’s entrances.

“Arrest them,” Senethis oozed with relish.

Michael smiled.

“We wouldn’t be much of a black ops unit,” he said, “if we didn’t pick up a few tricks.”

Michael nodded to Dove, and the whole team blinked out – all but Rhee Jianjun, who held a biochip containing the evidence, their rejected olive branch.

“So, we still lost,” said Cassandra.

Flywheel was already on its way home, its engines rasping the rarified trans-atmospheric air as the team commiserated over bureaucratic shortsightedness.

“I don’t care what Eleina Rhodon says, I still think bureaucracy is going to be the downfall of our society,” Cassandra continued, twirling her still-empty Kief pipe. “Lawyers feed a system that begets more lawyers, increasing exponentially until it’s a tidal wave poised to drown us. Bureaucracy doesn’t protect us from bad people; it only prevents honest people from breathing.”

“Part of what our team was created to circumvent,” Michael gave her a wan smile.

Certain beliefs and values were systemic, enough to drag even the biggest dragon out of the sky. Beyond a certain point, you couldn't save a country from itself.

“We were always going to lose this one,” Dove said. “It was only a matter of how. But we survived, and that may be an even bigger problem for our enemies.”

The device going off and vaporizing all the bodies left in the Gez Defile meant they were free – presumed dead. Free to continue to act. The team looked at each other, wondering how difficult it would be in the future to maintain that condition.

Michael and Christina watched the newsfeed aftermath together in Michael's quarters, and Grant watched them. He hadn't watched the embarrassing part; he'd just tuned in to confirm his suspicion. Christina's head rested on Michael's shoulder, her chestnut hair fanned across his chest.

Grant ached for more uncomplicated days, when his daughter was his own, her affection undivided. He sighed and turned his attention to the Mediaweb coverage she and Michael watched on the wall interface. There was nothing else he could do. *Not now*, he thought. The opportunity had left him behind.

“Hushed Voices with Dern Mangan” reported the detonation of an illegal geothermal injector, purportedly by Chinese authorities as an overreaction to dissidents. But was that what really happened, or were the Chinese just trying to cover up the fact they allowed dissidents to obtain a weapon of mass destruction, even if all they managed to do with it was destroy themselves?

Arguments and shoe thumping in the NU chambers; the Security Council had literally buried China in sanctions and embargos in a vain effort to appear in control of the situation. But a rumor had surfaced that seemed to throw suspicion on Cypro-corp and a vast conspiracy of trans-nationals and National Union members - that Cypro-corp actually detonated the device in an effort to frame China and the Carbonari for the attack in Kazakhstan. Hardly credible, but it helped to reduce the threat level

to sanctions and inspections to which the Chinese and Cypro-corp both agreed.

“I love a good conspiracy,” Dern winked at the camera, “especially one without any evidence to back it up. Of course, Cypro-corp categorically denies any involvement.

“In fact,” said Dern, “a crowded lecture hall in the Academie Nicosia actually cheered Ambassador Rhodon and declared her a national hero – again – for her role in exposing Chinese corruption and complicity with the Carbonari.”

“There will always be religion,” Michael said, echoing Pope, “because people will insist on living by unjustifiable theories.”

A clip showed Eleina Rhodon as she looked benevolently out at the cheering, undulating sea of humanity from a raised podium, surrounded by sycophants and backed by flags.

On closer examination of the newsfeed, Grant was shocked to see Governor Talgat and Colonel Nurkady standing behind Eleina Rhodon.

“Cade Talgat,” said Dern Magnan, “newly promoted Governor of Kazakhstan, is enjoying Cypro-corp hospitality. He’s been a strong advocate of Kazakh alliance with the transt-nat, and it looks like he got his wish.” Dern leaned into the camera, asked, “Are we witnessing the end of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization? Or is he merely stopping off at a state occasion to justify a trip to visit world-famous Phinikoudes Beach?” Dern let his audience fill in the blanks.

The *GSS Presidium* Carrier Group plowed through the waves of the Sargasso Sea. Under the water, the portholes that studded the *Presidium*’s bulbous bow sparkled in the green-filtered rays of sunlight.

An undersea panorama cruised by the Admiral’s dining hall. GSTF Commander Benjamin Tate – short, with a neat little goatee and a growing bureaucrat’s paunch – headed the table. Grant Tension brooded next to him. The officers dined with the dead on white linen, candles captured in champagne bubbles. Grant laughed

to himself – if these company men only knew what it was like to see their rituals from the other side.

Following a mission, GSTF officers left empty chairs for the men – and women – lost. *A rather macabre tradition*, Grant thought. *Not for its morbidity, but for its ersatz grief*. After all, an army is in the business of killing men – their own, the enemy's, unfortunate civilians. Where did it end? What if the geothermal injector had gone off in a more populated area? Were would they have found the seating capacity? Sometimes there was very little difference between tradition and bad habit.

Grant knew none of that mattered, not to the people in power. *But what about the economic waste of war*, he wondered. What could one person contribute economically with his or her life if a spendthrift society didn't squander it? Society wouldn't do so if it weren't profitable. Was death merely a loss leader?

It was as Michael said, someone – member countries? Trans-nats? – was getting rich, spending people like ghost money. Joss paper. Worthless currency with made up denominations, useful only to the deceased. *We say we place a high value on them*, Grant thought, *as a society. Really, we're burning hell bank notes – all of us, myself included*.

The thought of Michael stirred up more angry resentment.

“Where did I go wrong?” Grant said aloud. “My daughter's seeing my bodyguard. That can only end badly.”

“Let them be, Grant,” Tate said with a vague wave of his hand. “You can't control every damn thing. I know you love that boy like a son. In this upside-down world, that someone can find the optimism to love is a small miracle. Eat your steak.”

Grant stifled a retort. *Benjamin's probably right*. Probably why Benjamin had the job as head of the GSTF, and Grant was an outlaw – presumed dead and un-mourned. He needed perspective. *After all*, he thought, *our nations, our planet, around which everything seemed to revolve – when seen from a distance was nothing more than another wandering star*.

He shared a look with Tanaka. Was that what it had been? A control issue? He'd been so desperate to monitor everyone; he'd almost gotten his team killed. Moreover, obviously, it wasn't even

effective. Governor Talgat had hidden his true intentions from Grant despite Grant's near-constant surveillance. Was it possible he had known about Grant's extra pairs of eyes?

"So where do we stand, sir?" Tanaka asked, across the table from Grant.

"Well, the super-national tango is in full effect," said Tate, looking out the underwater window. "It's a regular incident. Sanctions and the confiscation of China's debt holdings and securities mean the government in the Beijing district will be destabilized and weakened for consumption by – I mean, 'partnering with' – Cypro-corp. What happened with that CIEDA agent? Rhee Jianjun, was it?"

"That's right," said Tanaka. "Deputy Director Fu Renshu condemned his actions and demoted him. You have to wonder at his motivation. Was he in on the Cypro-corp plot, or was he just mad that Rhee Jianjun didn't help to expose us?"

"We'll maintain him as an asset," said Grant. "His memory of us is ghosted, but can be reactivated at a time of our choosing."

"And the man you left behind?" Tate asked. Grant winced. A push, and he saw Adrian enter a small, shabby apartment – in Easy City's Downgate district from the looks of it – and sigh.

"Settling in to the CIEDA witness protection program," said Grant. "He's a good sort – he won't actually talk. He's trained to milk their hospitality and throw them at our backstop."

"We are sorry about that," said Tanaka.

"Your problem," shrugged Tate, "not mine."

"There's still a lot to do, Benjamin," Grant said seriously. "A lot left undone."

"I want to be perfectly clear about something, Tennison," Tate said. "I'm indebted to you for your recent service, and it's good to have you back in the fold, so to speak. Nevertheless, if the existence of your operation is ever proved, I'll deny all knowledge. And I'll have no choice," he speared a piece of prime rib. "I'll have to hunt you down. You understand, don't you?"

“We had 29 active volcanoes in Kamchatka, Ben,” Grant said. “We know how to stay on our toes.”

Grant switched his attention to Michael’s new quarters, several decks above and towards the center of the massive ship, where Michael prepared, a similar – if humbler – meal in the galley.

It was a small dormitory unit, situated in a close, quiet corridor with a lift on either end designed for obscure, mid-level crewmembers. The quarters on the *Praesidium* were modular and more utilitarian than those on the *Solon* had been, Grant thought. She was a military ship in every respect. The enlisted lived like dogs while the officers enjoyed every comfort.

The tradeoff was their new quarters were on an obscure mid-level of the ship, an area not often traversed, so no one was likely to question their occupation. The team had the hallway and the rooms off it to themselves, and the accommodations, although basic, were luxurious compared to those available on the *Black Hand*.

The rest of the group – sixteen in all – crammed into the miniscule living area Michael was to share with Aleister Cross, his new roommate. Pairs had claimed the small private berths and baths, two flanking each shared common space along the hall. The team – including Christina and Kendle – ranged around Michael and Aleister’s kitchenette, media couch, and over-occupied a circular dining booth.

Although in the time since the team had formed they had worked their way through Stefen’s initial wine offering, it turned out Pope was a fellow onerophile, and never traveled without a case or two of his favorites.

Stefen tilted his wineglass above the white tablecloth they had found to grace the small table, and examined the color of the liquid. The group gathered around, awaited his verdict. He inserted his nose in the blown-glass snifter, inhaled and exclaimed,

“*Exquisito!* A challenging grape. Thick skinned, mellow. Quite old. Of excellent quality if I may say so,” he nodded in deference to Pope, raised his glass and sipped. “Complex, fruity, but structured.

Cool climate. I'd say South African. A Cabernet from the oak-aging casks of Vergelegen, the pressing of twenty-one seventy eight."

Pope revealed the label. It read, "Anno 1700, Vergelegen, cabernet sauvignon, South Africa, 2178"

The team broke out in raucous applause.

"Thank you," Stefen said, taking a bow, "you're too kind."

Tanith rolled her eyes.

"You always have the answer for everything, don't you?"

"My dear Tanith, of course I do," Stefen grinned.

"Unbelievable," Aleister said, his chin in his hand.

"Do another," Allison clapped.

"Please, I didn't bring that much on board." Pope took the bottle to the cluster of crystal goblets and poured each of them a measure of the crimson liquid.

Stefen raised a glass.

"*Domi Militique*," he intoned. Everyone touched glasses and echoed his toast.

Kendle watched enviously as her father savored the wine.

"Dad, can I have a sip?"

"No."

"*Da-ad!*"

"No, Kendle! Dammit, I told you once."

"But dad, I helped with the helicopter!"

"What do you want, a medal? I said no!"

"I've spoken with Commander Tennison," Michael said. Everyone quieted down, looked over to where he stood in the galley, chopping vegetables. "There was talk of disbanding the group, as our primary mission objectives have expired. But resuming our old lives would be extremely difficult, and it was felt that some among us might have unfinished business. With Cypro-corp, and the idea we could conscientiously address the stickier

points of GSTF policy. So we have Benjamin's countenance if we decide to continue as a unit."

"Sounds like good work," Aleister said, grinning at Sarina.

"And like most good work," Sarina ran a hand through her hair and gave him a wry smile back, "I'm sure we'll find an unending supply of it."

"What about our AIs," Cassandra asked, "in Cyprus's data haven? Can we get them back?"

"Let them remain," said Pope, "as a testament to who we were, like they do for anyone who's ventured into uncharted territory."

Glenn winked, the angry jellyfish scars danced, "Then I think we'd better make it a mission priority to liberate some fine French reds."

Everyone laughed and nodded general agreement. Michael looked at them, the corner of his mouth jerked in the momentary micro-expression of a lopsided smile.

"Good enough for me," he said.

Grant agreed.

The world was out of control. *And how can you fix it*, Grant wondered. *You can't*. He wished the world would just make sense. No success was good enough, everything was unfinished.

Grant realized that unless by accident of fate you became one of the authors of history, you couldn't control the text. You couldn't change it. Nevertheless, you could make notes in the margins. Moreover, those notes could influence the next manuscript. Not bad, as legacies went.

Perhaps it was time to let go. A little.

At least his team had accomplished *something*. They may not have saved China, or cleared their names exactly, but they had survived. They were free. The people who mattered knew the truth. In addition, they had work to do – what amounted to a fresh start. For today, it was enough.

Life was loose ends, chaos and confusion. *So why are we so ill adapted to it*, Grant wondered. Adaptation to a chaotic environment

supposedly precipitated the development of our species' intelligence in the first place. *So why are we seemingly hardwired to resist the unavoidable?* All order trended to chaos. Survival instinct should preclude an objection to disorder. One had to learn to live in chaos.

He and his people had to rely on each other, and be happy with partial victories. When it came down to it, they didn't fight for a cause. Not even, in the heat of battle, to defeat an enemy. They fought to protect each other – teammates, family and friends. The little group, who had come through fire, desert and death together, was as good as both now. Survival did that. *After all*, Grant thought, *what is family but shared blood?*

He felt good about his team. Even – it surprised him to realize – trusted them. His de facto children. Perhaps it was time to close the back door connection for good.

I'll get Dove to deactivate it, he thought, as he switched off. *First thing tomorrow.*

THE END